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Article

# What Evidence Informs Urban Policy in East Africa, and How Does It Get There?

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## Abstract

This study examines the flows of evidence that inform urban policy in three rapidly urbanizing East African countries: Tanzania, Kenya, and Ethiopia. Using a broad definition of evidence that encompasses data, scientific knowledge, experiential insights, and contextual understanding, the research traces how different types of evidence move between local, national, and regional policy actors through three critical urban policy themes: multi-level governance and fiscal devolution, industrial strategy, and informality. The findings reveal significant disconnects between evidence generation and policy formulation. This is attributed, in part, to innate difficulties in integrating the diverse set of ethnographic data from informal economies and settlements into urban development modalities driven by national governments. The study also points to co-evolved evidence ecosystems in which national governments rely on evidence from international consultancies and multilateral agencies that favour quantitative, macro-economic data suitable for large-scale infrastructure projects. The research suggests that realizing Africa's urban potential requires not just better data, but fundamentally reformed evidentiary processes that enable bottom-up knowledge to inform top-down planning. This includes new platforms for multi-level evidence exchange, embedded urban policy advisors, and enhanced regional capacity for evidence synthesis.

**Keywords:** urban policy; evidence-informed policy; East Africa; urbanization; multi-level governance; industrial strategy; informality; policy networks; knowledge systems

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## Introduction

Urbanisation on the African continent is taking place late, fast and at low levels of per capita income (Lall et al., 2017; OECD, 2025). The African Union's (AU) *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want* identifies the continent's demographic megatrend as an, "Opportunity...[for a] positive turn around" (AU, 2015), an idea supported by some academics and multilateral agencies and reiterated at the inaugural Africa Urban Forum in Addis Ababa in 2024 (Parnell and Pieterse, 2014; AU, 2024; UNECA, 2024; OECD, 2025). Others have framed the makeshift infrastructure, services and economic activities of rapidly evolving African cities as "unproductive", hemorrhaging of economic opportunities (Collier, 2016) and sources of social and environmental risks (Adam and Madell, 2013; Dodman et al., 2017; IPCC WG2, Ch.9, 2023).

Aided by technological innovation, the quantity and quality of data from African countries have improved significantly over the past decade, supported in places by the emergence of citizen science (Allen, 2021; Elias et al., 2023; Turok and Visagie, 2025). Over the same decade urbanisation formed a growing theme in dialogues and debates within the UN General Assembly, reflecting the inclusion of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 in the 2030 Agenda and Habitat III's New Urban Agenda in 2016. This focus, and the emergence of data, addressed "structural silences in the production of urban knowledge over many [preceding] decades" (Revi, 2025, p. 119). In theory, the foregrounding of urbanisation and the emergence of data should inform planning and make it easier to trace the impact of urbanisation on sustainable development. In reality, urban planning in Africa remains a challenge and discerning the socio-economic impact of urbanisation remains difficult. Assumptions

that the institutions and modalities through which evidence will inform policy will spontaneously emerge have been shown to be misplaced (Jaglin, 2014; Lopes 2024; Robinson et al., 2025).

This study set out to better understand the relationship between evidence and sustainable urban development in three East African countries. Applying a broad definition of evidence that included data as well as scientific, experiential and contextual knowledge (Adams and Sandbrook, 2013; Oliver and De Vocht, 2017), it traced flows of evidence between policy actors in the region. This focus on evidentiary pathways in East Africa was replicated in a study of the agricultural sector in Benin (Thoto et al., 2025) and the health sector in South Sudan (Ali et al., 2025). The collective intention was to better understand Evidence Informed Policy (EIP) in multilateral systems on the African continent, with a view to enhancing the evidence-policy ecosystem (Espey et al., 2025).

## Methodology

The study applied mixed methods to trace flows of qualitative and quantitative evidence in Tanzania, Ethiopia and Kenya, three rapidly urbanising countries and the three largest economies in the East African region. Recognising the implausibility of describing all evidence flows or every aspect of urban policy in the region, the focus was on three aspects identified in the literature as being important to sustainable cities in Africa: multi-level governance (Rode and Floater, 2014; Cartwright et al., 2018; Amani et al., 2019; Lameck, 2023; African Union, 2024; Haas et al., 2024); urban-industrial linkages (Turok, 2014; Henderson, 2005; Goodfellow and Huang, 2022; Kyule and Wang, 2024); and informality in its broadest sense (Brown and McGranahan, 2016; Thieme, 2018; Dovey and Kamalipour, 2017; UN-Habitat, 2024).

The first phase of research reviewed policy documents between 2015 and 2025 in the three countries for references to the three themes and to identify policy actors that were generating the evidence under the three themes.

The second phase of the research took advantage of the inaugural Africa Urban Forum convened by the African Union and hosted by the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia in September 2024. Through a review of the planning documents, the three-day programme and the various drafts of the final declaration it was possible to appraise both the evidence being applied and the institutions supplying it, in the compilation of the *Declaration on Sustainable Urbanisation for Africa's Transformation* that emerged from the inaugural Africa Urban Forum (AU, 2024).

The third phase of research involved a special reconvening of the Tanzanian Urbanisation Laboratory (TULab) - a "citylab" focused on National Urban Policy in Tanzania - for the first time since 2020 (Culwick et al., 2019; Cartwright, 2024). At the reconvened TULab in Dar es Salaam in February 2025, members were asked to describe how the evidence generated by the TULab between 2017-2020 in support of Tanzania's National Urban Policy had impacted the country's policy in the intervening period in Tanzania. The deliberations and reflections of the reconvened TULab enabled deeper insights regarding Tanzania's urban policy environment and comparisons with Kenya and Ethiopia.

## Urbanisation and Urban Policy in Tanzania, Kenya Ethiopia

Drawing from the phase one literature review it was estimated that in 2025 Tanzania, Kenya and Ethiopia contributed just over two thirds of the 13-country East African Region's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (World Bank Data, 2025). All three countries are experiencing rapid urbanisation and doubling of per capita income (adjusted for purchasing power of parity) between 2010 and 2020 (Table 1), but have significantly different urban governance, industrialization and informality histories.

**Table 1. Demographic and economic data - Tanzania, Kenya, Ethiopia.**

	Tanzania	Kenya	Ethiopia
<b>Independ. year</b>	1961	1963	1947

<b>Population in 2025 (million)</b>	73	57.5	135.5
<b>Urban population % (2025)</b>	31 - 37	31.9	24.0
<b>Urbanisation rate % (2025)</b>	6.2	4.2	5.4
<b>Life expectancy at birth</b>	67	64	68
<b>Population living in informal settlements % (2020)</b>	41	55	64
<b>GDP \$ billions (PPP) (2025)</b>	294	538	630
<b>GDP \$ billions nominal (2025)</b>	87.5	132	125
<b>GDP growth rate (2025)</b>	6.0%	4.9%	7.2%
<b>GDP per capita nominal (2025)</b>	\$1,300	\$2,549	\$1,120
<b>Dominant economic sector</b>	Services	Services	Agriculture
<b>Extreme poverty headcount ratio (\$3 pppd, PPP) (2021)</b>	49%	45%	43%

Source: UNDESA (2025), World Bank Data (2025), IMF 2025.

A notable feature of the data is just how disparate it is, even within each country. Population size, GDP and growth rates for the respective countries vary across UN agencies and between UN agencies and the International Monetary Fund for example. The origins of the discrepancies lie in the adoption of different geographical boundaries, different definitions (of “urban” for example), variances in sampling and the variability within national data and accounting systems (Jana, 2025).

#### *Multi-Level Governance*

In June 2014, the African Union tabled the *Charter on the Values and Principles of Decentralisation, Local Governance and Local Development*, a charter that entered into force in January 2019, but which has had limited impact on legislative and fiscal devolution on the continent.

In Tanzania, the enduring legacy of the Arusha Declaration (1967), the country’s hallmark policy framework after independence, has seen obdurate concerns about “urban bias” and neglect for the agricultural sector even in the face of rapid urbanisation. In recent years these concerns have been used to counter the scope for rapidly expanding urban areas populated by economically ambitious young people, to foment political opposition. Tanzania’s Presidents Office - Regional Administration and Local Government (PO-RALG) has had a draft National Urban Development Strategy since at least 2010, but this strategy has never been formalised. On the contrary, under the rule of Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party since 2015, the administration has undertaken aggressive centralisation of revenue and planning into the President’s Office (PO) and the Ministry of Finance and Planning (MoFP) (Lameck, 2023). The undermining of local authority took place despite a “Population and Housing Census” in 2022, the sixth census since 1964, reporting ongoing growth of the urban population and the percentage of the population living in urban areas, and 76% of this urban population being under the age of 35 (MoFP/ TNBS, 2022). The World Bank rates Tanzania’s “Overall Statistical Performance” (OSP) at 69.9% (World Bank, 2025b) but centralisation renders urban data difficult to come by in Tanzania and definitions of ‘urban’ and estimates of the urban population are disputed. The Census reported the population of Tanzania’s primary city, Dar es Salaam, at 5.4 million in 2022, but this is difficult to verify and some estimates placed the population of Dar es Salaam as high as 8.5 million in 2025 (Worrall et al., 2017; Cartwright, 2019; Peter and Yang, 2019; World Population Review, 2025).

Tanzania’s lack of an effective multilevel governance policy to serve rapidly growing cities, and Dar es Salaam in particular, combined with the centralisation of revenue collection, investment and

planning remains at odds with the received wisdom of how to coordinate service delivery and unlock the socio-economic potential of the country's urbanisation (TULab, 2019, 2025; World Bank, 2021; Lameck, 2023). Academics, civil servants and policy advisers in Tanzania complain about untimely and unreliable transfers of funds to local authorities and the duplication and uncoordinated service delivery activities of different national ministries and state-owned utilities operating under "sector plans" (Lameck et al., 2023; TICG, 2024; TULab, 2025; Hante, 2025, personal communication).

The assumption in Tanzania's draft Urbanization Review is that Tanzania's cities will continue to be developed through nationally coordinated infrastructure and transport systems such as Dar es Salaam's Bus Rapid Transit system (World Bank, 2021). The limits to this approach were established in the TULab's deliberations (Cartwright, 2019; 2024) and in response local governments in Tanzania were allowed to recruit their own civil servants and raise more of their own revenue (URT, 2021, 2022). Effective devolution of administrative power has remained piece-meal, as was revealed in the wake of the 2025 elections. Urban local councils in Tanzania still depend on central government for the bulk of their funding and there are very few mechanisms in place to ensure accountability and transparent decision making in urban local councils (TICG, 2024).

Ethiopia's multi-level governance architecture is tightly coupled with the country's history and stands in contrast to that of Tanzania. Ethiopia designated a relatively devolved federal structure when the country emerged from civil war in the mid-1990s. This system includes nine regional states designed to accommodate Ethiopia's 93 mother tongues and 98 ethnicities. This "ethnic federalism" coexists with and "neo-customary tenure" that relies heavily on local authorities despite National government retaining nominal control of all Ethiopia's land (Lavers, 2018). Devolution through federalism is codified in Ethiopia's third Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP III – 2021 to 2025) and has been credited with sustained economic growth and human development and one of the highest rates of public investment in infrastructure (public investment as a % of GDP) in the world (World Bank Data, 2025). Both decentralisation and devolution have been challenged by the emergence of Addis Ababa. With a population 10 times larger than Ethiopia's next biggest city, the capital's development serves as the flagship of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's (elected in 2018) pledge to transform the country's cities into places that are, "Clean, green and conducive to residents' well-being" (African Business, 2024; Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). The Federal Government's centralised development of Addis Ababa and the concentration of infrastructure investment in the capital has been the source of ongoing land conflicts in regions adjacent to Addis Ababa and the Tigray region (Kefale 2010; Adugna, 2011; Alem, 2021; Faguet et al., 2021). The Prime Minister's modernization vision is manifest in the eye-catching "Corridor Development" and "Riverside" projects that have seen the creation of an upmarket boulevard linking the airport to the CBD (Haile, 2024).

Ethiopia's history of one-party state and *Derg* military rule, followed by what officials call the "Home-grown Economic Reform Agenda" (FDRE, 2020) initially restricted the flow of evidence from foreign institutions into urban policy. However, the corridor projects draw heavily from Global North transport theory (Venables, 2007; Girma and Mulatu, 2025) and boast safe pedestrianization, electrically powered public transport, upgraded sanitation systems and high-tech buildings. Financing for the Federal Government's projects in Addis Ababa is deemed "untransparent" by civil society organizations but has required increasing reliance on property taxes and leasing land to private investors (AfDB, 2022).

The presence of UNECA and African Union headquarters in Addis Ababa has provided a platform for international agencies. In 2008 the World Bank funded the Urban Local Government Development Project with performance based "matching funding" to 19 secondary cities and IGC now has a bespoke Ethiopian office. Reliance on Ethiopia's Central Statistical Agency represents a weakness for urban policy in Ethiopia. The Agency has not conducted a Census since 2007 due to conflicts and concerns about safety, and the World Bank's "Overall Statistical Performance Indicator" scored Ethiopia at 60.7% in 2023, the lowest of the three countries (World Bank, 2025b). The paucity of Ethiopia's urban policy agenda was exposed when the Federal Government agreed to host the

inaugural Africa Urban Forum in 2024. The hosting had to be supported by UN-Habitat and a makeshift organizing committee after it emerged that the Federal Ethiopian Government did not have a team of urbanists to curate the appropriate content or programme.

Kenya has had a devolved governance and fiscal system comprising 47 autonomous County Governments, 43 Municipal Councils, 62 Town Councils and three City Councils, since 2010. Decentralisation was Constitutionalised following electoral violence in 2007-2008, itself a function of longstanding centralisation under the “bureaucratic and executive state” that enabled election rigging (Branch et al., 2006, p.13). Whilst precipitated by a domestic crisis, once Kenyans decided they wanted devolved government and effective multi-level government arrangements the international community was quick to support them. The World Bank managed a multi-donor trust fund supported by Denmark, European Union, Finland, Sweden, United Kingdom and the United States. Unsurprisingly, given the role of the international community and the opportunity to design policy from first principle, Kenya’s urban policy aligns closely with the World Bank’s notion of international best practice (Khaunya et al., 2015, World Bank, 2016). Two independent constitutional bodies were created, the Commission on Revenue Allocation and the Intergovernmental Budget and Economic Council to oversee “Equitable Share” transfers to counties, making these transfers more predictable and less prone to political interference.

### *Industry-Urban Linkages*

Industrial strategy remains the flagship policy in most African countries. The continent’s industrial ambition should be enhanced by the concentration of infrastructure, capital, entrepreneurship, labour and technology in urban spaces, not to mention growing urban demand for industrial sector outputs (Cloete et al., 2019; MoFP, 2025). The lack of infrastructure and reliable electricity in particular, combined with the rise of China as the global manufacturing super-power, have frustrated the industrialisation efforts of African countries.

In Tanzania, industry comprised 28% of the country’s GDP in 2023 but that was largely due to construction. Manufacturing’s share of GDP has remained at just 8% since the 1990s despite numerous programmes designed to boost the sector (AfDB, 2024). Between 2015 and 2017, the United Kingdom’s Overseas Development Institute (ODI), with support from the World Bank and Dar es Salaam based consultants, advocated for Special Economic Zones and Export Processing Zones as the core of Tanzania’s industrial strategy (Kweka, 2018). The country’s Third Five Year Development Plan (FYDP III) drew from TULab evidence to shift from traditional SEZs towards “urban industrial hubs” in cities such as Dar es Salaam and Mwanza (MoFP, 2025). The 2025 Integrated Industrial Development Strategy (IIDS), updated in 2025 by the Department of Trade and Industry, does not have a conventional reference list making the origins of evidence used in the strategy difficult to trace. The IIDS does reference an UNCTAD publication in 2022, compiled using research by the AfDB and an array of UN agencies (UNU-WIDER, World Trade Organisation, UNWomen, UNCTAD, World Bank) as well as the World Economic Forum and consultancy reports from Boston Consulting Group and the International Growth Centre (MoI, 2022). To the extent that the IIDS relied on evidence that was generated within Tanzania, this evidence was provided by the Bank of Tanzania, National Ministries and Councils and energy and water utilities. The IIDS cites the need to increase agricultural productivity to “reduce living costs of urban dwellers” (DTI, 2025, p.23), but links between urbanisation and industrialization are not expressly established. On the contrary, much of Tanzania’s actual industrial focus has centred on commodity exports, and cities such as Mwanza remain dependent on gold mining exports, while the gas fields at Songo Songo, first drilled in the 1970s, continue to divert national economic attention away from rapidly growing cities.

In Ethiopia industrial strategy is led by Ministry of Industry (MoI) and relies heavily on UNCTAD and AfDB support (Oqubay, 2018). The policy takes advantage of China’s Belt and Road Initiative and the formation of Industrial Parks that are managed either by the national Industrial Parks Development Corporation or private companies (Gebre-Egziabher and Yemeru, 2019; Gebrehiwot, 2021; Goodfellow and Huang, 2021). The industrial sector contributes 28% of the

country's GDP, behind the agriculture and services sectors, but manufacturing in Ethiopia has remained at around 8% of GDP (UNCTAD, 2024). A presentation by Ministry officials ahead of the launch of the revised industrial strategy in 2025, lamented the "lack of information among different stakeholders (firms, civil servants)...lack of coordination among the different government institutions" (MoI, 2022, p. 4). The presentation itself was compiled by the global advisory Dalberg<sup>1</sup> and contained references to the "Atlas Model of Economic Complexity", a Harvard Business School tool for assessing analysing trade patterns and identifying manufacturing opportunities. Very few explicit links between industrialisation and urbanisation feature in Ethiopia's industrial strategies.

Kenya's Vision 2030 sought to transform the country to "newly industrializing, middle income" status by "moving the economy up the value chain" (Republic of Kenya, 2018). Industry contributed 16.8% of Kenya's GDP in 2023. The construction sector has supported a nominal growth in industry, but the industrial sector contributes less to Kenya's growth than either agriculture or services (World Bank, 2016). In line with the continental trend, the manufacturing sector's share of GDP declined from 9.3% in 2016 to 7.6% in 2023. This was despite Government strategies aiming for 20% by 2030 (SDIP, 2024)<sup>2</sup>. Much of the State Department for Investment Promotion material on industry and manufacturing continues to be focused on "Special Economic Zones" and "Export Processing Zones" (61 in total) some of which have received acclaim: Nairobi Gate Industrial Park, Athi River, while Konza Techno City represents a new "ultra-modernist" town to "escape the chaos of city life" 60km south of Nairobi. These plans say little on the potential to focus manufacturing sector work on the needs of rapidly growing urban spaces (Kyule and Wang, 2024). County Aggregation and Industrial Parks (CAIP), launched in 2024, seek to add value to existing value agricultural chains but do not mention urban markets.

### *Informality*

That "informal" work is the predominant mode of economic activity in many African cities is well documented (Jaglin, 2014; Parnell and Pieterse, 2014; Brown and McGranahan, 2016), but industrial strategy has very little bearing on urban citizens operating in the informal sector and looking for improved service delivery and economic opportunity in the three countries (Diao et al., 2016). Data on African economies tend to under-report informal economic activity and service delivery and conflate "informality", the "hustle" and "makeshift" economic activities (Thieme, 2018; Thomson et al., 2020). The same is true for informal shelter provision and slums that arise when urbanisation rates outpace the ability of governments to provide serviced land and housing (Morrison, 2017).

Many urban Tanzanians operate unregistered enterprises, drawing from Tanzania's community-based NGOs, donor organisations and neighbourhood associations (*mtaas*) for support and information (Kyessi, 2005; Diao et al., 2016; McGranahan et al., 2016ab). Within the NGO and donor network, Economic and Social Research Foundation (ESRF), Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI) and its country-based affiliate the Centre for Community Initiatives (CCI) and the Tanzanian Urban Poor Federation (TUPF), UN-Habitat and the World Resources Institute generated qualitative and quantitative evidence on informality for the TULab 2017-2019. Similarly, WaterAid Tanzania has used digital technology to gather real-time data on water access and infrastructure failures (WaterAid Tanzania, 2023). Mzumbe, Ardhi and Dodoma Universities have a growing number of urbanists and urban studies units working on informality, some in collaboration with Global North universities (Robinson et al., 2025). The evidence generated by these actors holds the potential to link top-down infrastructure provision to bottom-up research reflecting the needs and affordability of urban residents, evidence that could enhance the viability of infrastructure finance (Jenkins et al., 2015; Jean-Baptiste et al., 2019; Lameck et al., 2023). In a rare collaboration with the State, the Dar es Salaam Metropolitan Development Project (DMDP) gathered water and sanitation

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<sup>1</sup> <https://dalberg.com/our-experience/supporting-ethiopia-ministry-industry-accelerate-economic-growth/>

data in the city's extensive informal settlements as part of donor funded research enabling better tailored investment in water infrastructure (URT, 2023). Collaborations such as these that combine ethnographic data from informal settlements with and financial data required for investment cases, remain the exception in Tanzania

The *Derg* regime suppressed civil society in Ethiopia until 1991, and the country has less information on informality than either Tanzania or Kenya. The focus of academic and civil society research has historically been on the rural population's struggle with droughts and famines and supported by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization and the Stockholm Environment Institute. Urban research is emerging, supported by the UN-Habitat office, an EU-funded Ethiopian Cities Association, the Ethiopian Institute for Architecture, Building Construction and City Development at Addis Ababa University, and the Ross Centre for Sustainable Cities (part of the World Resources Institute) which has advocated for links between urbanisation, climate resilience and industrial strategy. Smaller, more independent NGOs such as The Urban Centre in Addis Ababa produce a range of propositional material and a radio station dedicated to airing a range of urban issues.

The Federal Government has engaged 'slum upgrading' since the 1970s, predominantly through the provision of housing and with little regard for local practice. Addis Ababa's authorities have used GIS and drone technology to map informal settlements but have struggled to integrate the bottom-up evidence emerging from NGOs and incidences of slum housing remain high (79%) (UNCTAD Stats, 2023; Orbital Africa, 2024). In Addis Ababa, urban civil society has been galvanized by rapid top-down infrastructure roll outs and the fact that over 70% of the Ethiopian population continue to live in "slums" according to UN-Habitat data. The "Corridor" project required the forceful relocation of 11,000 inner-city residents to the urban periphery. The Federal government described these as "short term...disruptions" but there is no timeframe for the reintroduction of displaced citizens or a commitment to take their hard-won livelihoods into account (Ethiopian News Agency, 2014). A United Kingdom funded appraisal of the Addis Ababa "Corridors" project warned against the focus on "maps and numbers in long PDFs and not ... places and real people who are the most affected when undesired impacts happen" as well as the "poor application of existing best practice guidance in development corridors results in poorer outcomes for people and nature" (Juffe-Bignoli et al., 2024).

Kenya has a long history of engaging urban informality and a mature NGO sector working in informal settlements. Organisations such as Kounkuey Design Initiative (KDI) and Shining Hope for Communities (SHOFCO), in collaboration with UN-Habitat, have been central to community-based data collection in Kibera and the advancement of appropriate sanitation technologies in informal settlements (UN-Habitat, 2020). The work of civil society organisations in Kenya has tended to engage urban informality, whether in the labour market or human settlements, as a given feature of urban life. The evidence emerging from this work has been quantitative, qualitative and richly ethnographic. It has, however, proven difficult to integrate with government programmes focusing on modernization, land titling for tenure security and "improved water sources" that see informality as something to be eradicated through formalization (McGranahan et al., 2016a; World Bank, 2024). Kenya's National Urban Policy (NUP) released in 2016, was bolstered by World Bank's Kenya Integrated Devolution and Urban Support Program and the Kenya Urban Support Program (KUSP) (2018-2023). The KUSP was focused on tenure formalization required to support the revenue generation by county governments. The programme delivered 25,105 land titles in 80 informal settlements across 15 urban areas, provided 1.6 million women with access to improved water resources, prepared 57 Urban Integrated Development Plans and 49 Spatial Development Plans and undertook capacity building across all counties (World Bank, 2024a).

**Table 3. Status of three urbanisation themes in the three East African countries.**

	<b>Mult-level governance</b>	<b>Urban-industrial-climate</b>	<b>Informality and innovation</b>

<b>Tanzania</b>	MLG progress through policies that enable LGAs to raise their own revenue, but stalled National Urban Policy and continued centralisation of revenue and budget allocation and large infrastructure projects.	Shift away from export oriented SEZs for everything but oil and gas in favour of “urban industrial hubs” for manufacturing. University and think tank involvement in evidence formulation, but the MoFP still relies heavily global development agencies such as World Bank, GIZ, SIDA and consultants.	Growing recognition of informality in state-sanctioned NGO activity. Emerging ability of the state to engage informal water provision in Arusha and involve informal communities in enumeration.
<b>Ethiopia</b>	Long-standing commitment to federalism and cities and towns, but little capacity to resolve land conflicts generated by expanding cities with anything other than top-down decrees. National focus on Addis Ababa has challenged devolution. Centralised investment in infrastructure has been impressive but generated land conflicts. Hosting of the AU’s inaugural Africa Urban Forum in 2024.	Commitment to modernization of Addis Ababa and Industrial Parks for manufacturing and work creation, but declining manufacturing and no alignment of urban needs with industrial output. Low levels of university and think tank involvement in evidence formulation.	State efforts to upgrade and remove urban informality rather than collaborate with informal service providers. Limited capacity to integrate formal and customary tenure regimes in expanding cities.
<b>Kenya</b>	Effective MLG since 2010 with ongoing efforts to strengthen local revenue generation and accountable transfers of national budgets.	Declining manufacturing and continued industrial focus on exports as opposed to cities. University and think tank involvement in evidence formulation.	Longstanding NGO engagement with urban informality but difficult to insert qualitative data into urban planning. Focus on tenure upgrades in informal settlements and extensive NGO support for informal dwellers.

## Urban Policy ‘Evidence Actors’ in East Africa

Much of the EIP literature on Africa laments the quality of the data, citing a lack of granularity, temporal lags, standardization and definitional issues and the absence of data for sub-national governments as impediments to the adoption of evidence in urban policy (Jones et al., 2014; Haas et al., 2024; Jana, 2025). More, more-readily-available and better quality evidence would unambiguously be good for urban policy in Africa, however very little is known about the origins of the evidence that does get used in policy. There have been critiques of “policy mobility” (Ward and Cochrane, 2012) and the adoption of urban planning theories - “travelling ideas” - from the Global North and their “generally disastrous effects” (Watson, 2014) but little consideration given to why certain ideas have landed so easily and consistently in urban policy formulation on the continent or why it has proven so difficult to apply the available data on informality, for example, in the allocation of budgets for slum upgrading.

To consider these questions, and more specifically, the pathways through which evidence does, or does not, move into urban policy in East Africa it is first necessary identify “knowledge actors and policy makers” at three different tiers, drawing from Espey et al. (2025).

### *Regional Actors*

At the regional (East African) scale, evidence regarding infrastructure and the economic opportunity that accompanies urbanisation tends to be circulated through the respective publications of the multi-lateral institutions operating in the region - UN-Habitat, UNECA, the African Union, African Development Bank (AfDB) and the OECD’s Africa Urban Dynamics reports. UNECA, the AU, OECD, and the AfDB do not have dedicated teams looking at urbanisation in Africa, but draw on African researchers, consultants and NGOs in gathering evidence. The East African Community (EAC), with a secretariat in Arusha, does not exert influence over urban policy or evidence actor on urban matters – noting that Ethiopia is not formally a member. The EAC does release trade data, but the last available policy or strategy publication from EAC was released in 2018, reflecting systemic challenges for the continent’s economic communities. The urban evidence gathered by multi-lateral agencies in the region has influenced the themes adopted by the regional actors but has historically struggled to influence the investments made by AfDB or the allocation of budgets by national governments.

The ICLEI (Local Governments for Sustainability) network has, similarly, been instrumental in raising awareness and occasionally conducting research on environmental issues in its member cities, but has not been particularly influential over the themes adopted by UNECA or the investments made by AfDB or national governments. In contrast, UN-Habitat has a storied history of leading regional evidence on shelter and human settlements. By playing a critical role in ensuring the inaugural Africa Urban Forum took place, UN-Habitat was able to ensure that its bottom-up case study came under consideration in the conference’s declaration. More generally, UN-Habitat has been able to leverage its multi-level span to generate evidence and raise awareness of the human settlement issues.

The African Union has largely been a consumer and sometimes distributor of urban policy evidence but is not actively involved in generating evidence. The urban theme sits within the Political Affairs, Peace and Security Portfolio Department within the African Union’s organogram. That the work theme has just a single contracted staff member working on urbanisation is conspicuous against the backdrop of the regional demographic megatrend.

Given the nationalist-turn within the countries that have historically funded research on the continent, the role of regional actors should take on new importance in generating EIP. Both UNECA and the African Development Bank are seeking to fill this gap, and have commissioned research on urbanisation in recent years. However, there is a particular need for regional actors to standardise the ways in which evidence is gathered and reported – including the way in which sectors are defined, the definition of a ‘city’ (in terms of density and population size) and ‘informal settlements’

and the manner in which greenhouse gas emissions are measured. In addition, the evidence from cities is still largely “missing” and bottom-up evidence struggles to find its way into regional policy in anything other than anecdotal examples (Jean-Baptiste et al., 2019), while the national ministries overseeing urban development in the three countries tend not to take the evidence circulated by the regional actors into budget allocations or governance innovations.

### *National Actors*

At the national scale the bulk of the evidence in circulation is provided by international consultancies that have been established to meet this need. The International Growth Centre (IGC), Dalberg, Boston Consulting Group, Adam Smith Institute and Price Waterhouse Coopers, sometimes working in partnership with in-country consultants and occasionally with academics operating on short-term contracts, offer evidence services designed to meet the needs of the Presidencies and Finance Ministries responsible for macro-economic policy, infrastructure programmes and urban development where local authorities remain weak. The evidence they produce is tailored towards this audience and its needs and it is unsurprising that this evidence discounts data from sub-national entities and NGOs, let alone the informal sector.

The increasing prevalence of bilateral infrastructure deals between the three countries and China has not been characterised by publicly available evidence and warrant further research (Goodfellow and Huang, 2022).

When invited by national governments, Cities Alliance has played a role in supporting the formation of National Urban Policies across the region, but most of these policies have no influence over fiscal devolution. The World Bank’s Urbanisation Reviews were effective in diagnosing urban challenges and outlining the investment case for urban infrastructure such as Bus Rapid Transit systems, but both international consultancies and the World Bank rely heavily on the data held by national statistical agencies. Kenya and Tanzania’s national statistical agencies have significantly more capacity than Ethiopia’s, but Tanzania’s National Bureau of Statistics is still vulnerable to political interference according to World Bank appraisal (World Bank, 2025b) and census data in Ethiopia and Tanzania tends to under-estimate the scale of urbanisation.

In theory State Owned Entities are meant to collaborate with both national ministries and local governments in sharing evidence and devising plans for the extension of services to cities. SOEs also have an important role in gathering and applying household data on the consumption of, and willingness to pay for, services. In practice, SOE decision making is often autonomous, based on data that is internal to their operations such as cost of capital and internal rates of return, rather than gathered from their customers (Lameck et al., 2023). In-country donor programmes such as GIZ, JICA and SIDA, have played important roles in commissioning evidence and in translating research on local revenue collection and the strengthening of local authorities for example, into training programmes.

### *Local Actors*

At the local scale evidence generation and use is spread more diversely across government entities, private companies, NGOs and universities. In Tanzania Jean-Baptiste et al. identified the role of local experts (“*fundis*”) in guiding the adoption of water and sanitation technologies (Jean-Baptiste et al., 2019). Local authorities in the three countries, however, tend to generate conspicuously little evidence of their own, unless supported by donors or one of the ‘organised local government’ groups such as C40, UCLG and ICLEI. In these instances, it is typically consultants and local academics that generate the research. Research projects tend to focus on health, food, non-grid energy feedstocks and informal income generating activities and accordingly produce data that are not easily translated into financialised budget allocations and investment decisions. In Tanzania and Kenya researchers, often in collaboration with government departments and better-resourced Global North Universities and NGOs such as WEIGO, generate urban evidence of both ethnographic and quantitative nature. These actors report a struggle inserting this evidence into the urban policy deliberations taking place

in national government (Croese et al., 2016; TULab, 2025). In Ethiopia, government-academy partnerships are less common, despite a 1993 National Science and Technology Policy calling for a “triple helix” of partnerships between public, private sector and academic actors and associated support from the Swedish-based International Organisation for Knowledge Economy and Enterprise Development (IKED).

Kenya has a vibrant NGO sector and hosts UNEP and UN-Habitat. Both the technical and social implications of devolution have received support and critiques from civil society and the academy. Strathmore University academics analyse the fiscal implications of devolution cautioning about the implications for the salary bill, while others have highlighted the marginalization of minority ethnic groups in the devolution process (Mamdani, 2025).

## Tracing Evidence Flows into Urban Policy

### *Multi-Level Governance and Fiscal Devolution*

The devolution of budgets and planning to capacitated local authorities as a means of harnessing the benefits of urbanisation provides the rationale for the AU Charter of 2014 (AU, 2014; Turok, 2014). It runs counter, however, to the centralising trends that have shaped African governance under colonial and post-independence rule (Jaglin, 2014; Bekker et al., 2021; Haas et al., 2024) and the evidence that currently finds its way into urban policy reflects this centralisation.

One of the consequences of this evidentiary bias is the inability of national governments to frame urbanisation as an economic opportunity. Nowhere is this more evident than in the inaugural African Urban Forum’s Addis Ababa Declaration (AU, 2024) which calls on African states to “Encourage national governments to put in place transparent mechanisms for sharing public financial resources in order to ensure that investment and operations costs of managing urban development are met” ... but then offsets this call with the phrase, “Ensure that the impact of inward cities migration is mitigated through appropriate interventions at City, Region and Country level.” (1.vii). The result, inevitably, is the inability to validate and integrate the multiple bottom-up initiatives that keep cities functioning despite a lack of investment, and the related difficulty to connect the investment that is made with the existing socio-economic fabric of cities.

This study offers insights into why devolution has proven so difficult: urban policy has co-evolved with flows of evidence and the evidence actors that serve urban governance by national entities. In seeking to advance urban policy, the same national entities have engaged the evidence producers that are adept at engaging nation states - the World Bank, Cities Alliance and international advisories geared to supporting finance ministries and presidencies. In their support for national urban policy, these actors tend to focus on large-scale infrastructure provision and centralised urban planning with an emphasis on macro-economic impacts, budget allocations and attracting foreign direct investment.

In parallel to these efforts NGOs have expounded appropriate technologies and the lived reality of urban populations in informal settlements with a swathe of ethnographic evidence. This evidence, often granular, highly context specific, more qualitative than quantitative and central to the economic aspirations and capabilities of urban Africans, has proven incongruous with national plans and difficult to assimilate. Seen in this context, the thrust towards Urbanization Reviews and NUPs between 2015 and 2019 was the symptom of national governments looking to signal alignment with global discourses on urbanisation and devolution but reticent about local authority. These national urban policies were well intended. However, the evidence used to inform these policies reflected imagined urban futures rather than the lived-realities of urban people working and living in urban areas. It is unsurprising, then, that these policies proved difficult to implement. If the recent developments in Addis Ababa provide an exception to this observation, that is due to disproportionate investment by the Federal Government and it remains to be seen if this investment can unlock bottom-up socio-economic development or be sustained and maintained.

### *Industrial Strategy*

Headline data reveal that the three East African countries are urbanizing but struggling with declining industrial productivity and competitiveness and stagnant manufacturing sectors, despite numerous programmes aimed at value addition and the linking of urbanisation and industry (AfDB, 2024). The emergence of China as the global manufacturing hub provides a partial explanation, but it is also true that Tanzania, Kenya and Ethiopia lack the transport and energy infrastructure required to sustain a growing manufacturing sector. Instead, they have defaulted to exporting low-value raw commodities as a function of weak bargaining power and convenience (Kaboub, 2024; UNCTAD, 2024). For national governments the ring-fenced construction of Special Economic Zones (SEZs), ports, airports and new towns is easier than the provision of clean energy, water and sanitation and inner-city mobility in ways that would strengthen existing value chains and enable urban citizens, many of them residing informally, to pursue manufacturing enterprises (Kihiko, 2018; Cloete et al., 2019). This is particularly the case given that this provision would require a hybridization of socio-technical systems to combine new service delivery infrastructure with pre-existing modalities of service provision (Jaglin, 2014; Cirolia and Pollio, 2024).

This default mode of industrialization has not been good for socio-economic progress in East African countries, but its persistence can be understood as a product of the evidentiary flows that shape industrial strategy in the region. Centrally coordinated industrial strategy tends to rely on logics and evidence that is distinct from both urban policy and the lived reality of urban residents. The Addis Ababa Declaration after the 2024 Africa Urban Forum did not mention manufacturing, barring a tangential reference to the “potential of housing sector (job creation, industrial development, revenue generation) embedded in a green industrialization and economy framework” (AU, 2024, 3,iii). Industrial strategies that do not receive, and cannot impute, evidence generated by rapidly evolving cities pass up the potential to connect existing value chains with expanding urban markets in the region and they fail to connect the enterprise of urban residents with industrial development. Similarly, National Urban Policies that draw on a distinct set of evidence to that informing industrial strategy miss the economic opportunities associated with urbanisation. The irony is that centrally co-ordinated urban policy should make links with industrial strategy easier. However, national governments are easy landing-pads for evidence that advocates for large commodity extraction projects and the associated mega infrastructure and trade deals that tend to bypass cities and urban realities as a matter of expedience. The same commodities provide the resource taxes on which many African governments, and incumbent political parties, still depend. This is a difficult outcome to counter, but the local authority in Tanga City, Tanzania, claims to have drawn from the TULab (2017-2020) by encouraging greater collaboration between the Ministry of Lands and PO-RALG and supporting “integrated industry in every region” rather than SEZs (Mshinda, 2025, personal communication).

### *Informality*

With regards to informality, work by NGOs such as WIEGO and SDI and academic institutions has generated a growing body of evidence on informal service delivery, make-shift work and the varied nature of this work in all three East African countries. NGOs and academics working on and with informality have called on national and local governments and development partners to pay closer attention to the informal sector and develop the ability to discern those aspects of this sector with which collaborations would be developmental and complementing of state efforts. UN-Habitat has supported these NGOs and provided an important conduit for this work to be adopted by global policy discourses. It was UN-Habitat’s role that resulted in the UN-Assembly of June 2023 (Nairobi, Kenya) adopting the *Global Action Plan for Slum Transformation*.

Various efforts have sought to take this discourse from the United Nations back to national and local governments in the three African countries. Slum Dwellers International’s (SDI’s) *Know Your City* website, has collected data from slums in 15 African countries (including 13 slums in Kenya, the most for a single SDI country), and pointed out the imperative of using data from informal

settlements in urban plans (SDI, 2025). SDI has been explicit in its pursuit of “Strengthened collaboration between slum dwellers and government in the planning and implementation of citywide development” and in looking for “improved evidence of impact generated by community-led learning, monitoring and evaluation” (SDI, 2025). WIEGO has forged links with the Fairtrade Foundation in Europe to foreground the distribution of benefits in value chains. The type of information emerging from this work is often qualitative, contradictory and inconsistent and does not make for easy policy inference. For example, urbanization comprised of rural–urban migrants who cannot afford formal housing or secure employment, not only presents a challenge to national governments seeking “regimented and orderly [cities] in a geometric sense” (Roy, 2005) but is often perceived as threatening to officials charged with urban policy (Ramakrishnan, 2013; Morrison, 2017; Potts, 2018).

Formal public authorities have struggled to assimilate this evidence into planning and budget allocation decisions that depend on conventional data metrics of (for example) a home address, a tax number or a utility bill. Local authorities could, in theory, take advantage of their proximity to forge partnerships with informal sector NGOs and community groups. The process of engaging is, however, expensive and politically risky for local authorities with a limited mandate and budget, and the available examples depend on individuals or institutions that can skilfully reconcile the evidence incompatibilities. For national government in East Africa, it is seemingly too difficult to reconcile notions of ‘citizenry’ and ‘rights to the city’ that are advanced by NGOs and academics engaging informal residents, with the interests of finance ministries and local authorities concerned with secure tenure and land value capture (Ramakrishnan, 2013). The result is evidence that “... simply hangs in the ether” unable to find any traction in the formal urban planning process (Seddon, 2011).

Unable to decipher and assimilate the evidence on informality, national governments and their agencies default to phrases such as “upgrade”, “appropriate technology” and “pro-poor” or “inclusive” development without engaging the qualitative content of the evidence or the lived reality of informal urban residents (Croese et al., 2016). Tanzania’s Urbanization Review, intended for the Ministry of Finance and Planning, is typical of national level policy on informality in the region in calling for, “More ... done to formalize and foster the informal sector [and ].... support the growth and formalization of the informal sector” (World Bank, 2021).

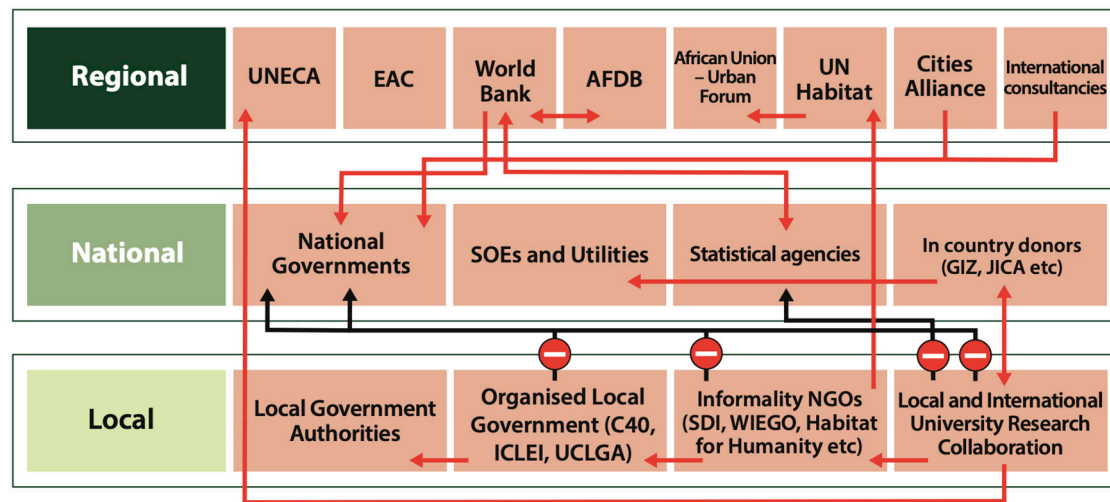
Unsurprisingly, formalisation without engaging the evidence on the causes and the modalities of urban informality, tends to fail. Both urban entrepreneurs and informal settlement services providers lament the difficulty in accessing state and financial sector support, and many people in the informal sector, especially where they have carved out hard-won livelihoods, are reluctant to engage government programmes (Kaika, 2017; Jean-Baptiste et al., 2019; TULab, 2019). The Addis Ababa Declaration of 2024 calls on the finance sector to extend its investment to “low income groups” for housing (AU, 2024, 3.ii), but unless this call addresses the disconnect between the types of evidence that financiers value and require – the “evidentiary bar” set by financiers (Committeri and Spadafora, 2013) - and the evidence emerging from informal communities, it too will fail.

The disconnect between nationally formulated urban policy and the available evidence on informality misses the chance to harness what has become the lifeblood of urban livelihoods for the majority of the urban population in East Africa. Among other things, it explains why it has proven so difficult to collect revenue from the urban economy, which in turn undermines the ability to provide services and perpetuates informality (Haas et al., 2024).

## Discussion

The study traced the flow of evidence about urbanisation and urban development. The focus was on three rapidly urbanizing East African countries and three particular themes of urban policy: multi-level governance, industrial strategy and informality. Understanding evidentiary flows offers insights into why certain modes of urban development prevail while others struggle to gain traction, regardless of their intrinsic merit.

Figure 1 highlights the predominant flows (and no-flows) of urban policy evidence between actors at different scales in the three countries.



**Figure 1.** Stylised flow of evidence between urban policy actors in East Africa, depicting the predominant flows and barriers created by the institutional and political nature of urban policy development in the region. Source: Author.

Given that national governments and SOEs retain a significant role in urban development in the three East African countries, the generally low levels of evidence sharing between urban researchers at universities and national ministries and SOEs, is remarkable. “Triple helix” notions of innovation draw on collaborations between tertiary education centres, government and business but such collaborations rest on the sharing of evidence (Pieterse, 2014; Saad et al., 2008; Singh et al., 2021). This study detected a dearth of the type of evidence and evidence sharing that might drive the type of urban development that builds on existing enterprises and lived realities, not to mention the ability to pay for infrastructure and services.

Urban development, especially if it is to be linked to industrial strategies and regional value chains, relies on evidence and evidence sharing across the region. In this sense, the African Union’s very low level of evidence generation or sharing when it comes to urban policy is conspicuous, and the void of evidence emerging from the East African Community (EAC) is problematic. The AU’s 2024 Africa Urban Forum should be seen as an effort to reform this, but the planning process for the inaugural Urban Forum revealed the AU’s limited capacity to generate and systematically cohere the evidence that regional industrialisation and development requires, in the manner of economic unions elsewhere in the world.

A growing flow of urban policy evidence between international consultancies, multilateral development agencies and national governments was clear from this research. This evidence is tailored to the views and priorities of Presidencies and Finance Ministries, with a bias towards the quantitative and financial information required for mega-infrastructure projects are commodity extraction. The sharing of evidence between NGOs working at the local level, donor agencies and academic institutions takes place in parallel to the evidence flows informing national ministries. While some of the evidence on informality finds its way into the policy briefs of international organisations such as SDI and UN-Habitat, it has proven difficult to assimilate the types of evidence from towns and cities themselves into policy, or from NGOs, academics and donor-funded research programmes working on informality into the national urban policies being advanced by presidencies and finance ministries.

Self-evidently, the evidence that is used in urban policy is determined by the type of evidence familiar to the entities responsible for urban development. Despite policies to the contrary, urban

development in Tanzania remains centralised and the evidence informing urban development is tailored to the needs of Tanzania's national entities – it tends to be highly quantitative, aggregated evidence focused on large scale infrastructure. Ethiopia's urban governance is both more complex and decentralised than Tanzania's, and Kenya has had a more devolved and decentralised urban development framework than either Tanzania or Ethiopia since 2010. Nonetheless, recent developments in Addis Ababa have been driven by the Federal Government and based on the same types of evidence as those applied in Tanzania – with very similar outcomes. In Kenya, despite one of the most vibrant NGO sectors on the continent, investment flows into towns and cities are shaped by the same evidentiary biases and disconnects as Ethiopia and Tanzania. This observation provides insight into the support for Bus Rapid Transit systems, the construction of SEZs and the demarcation of new towns, rather than the more complex hyper-local task of upgrading existing taxi operations, informal settlement upgrading, and creating the urban networks of energy, transport and water infrastructure that would enable manufacturing.

It is also true that fiscal responsibility, whether at national or local level introduces biases towards standardised, easily costed, financial data at the expense of ethnographic data and grounded theory that explains how urban residents format their livelihoods or even how they generate revenue. It is easier for governments at all scales to raise finance, allocate public expenditure and set attainable timeframes for these developments, than to engage the evidence from established urban communities, many of which have emerged beyond the reach of formal planning processes and are not reflected in dated Census surveys. As such, an abundance of seemingly important evidence on urban livelihoods in informal settlements, ecological buffers, service delivery innovations and construction materials, that is produced by NGOs and researchers working on informality is largely lost to urban policy formulation.

The tracing of evidentiary bias onto the centralised institutional architecture that governs urban policy in East Africa helps to explain the obduracy of urban development modalities and outcomes that are deemed by many to be problematic (Watson, 2014; Bekker et al., 2021; Oates and Sudmant, 2024). The proliferation of SEZs, ports and airports, BRTs and new towns might have begun as a mismatch between the data emerging from cities and the type of data that is usable by national entities responsible for urban development. It has since, however, co-evolved through reciprocity dynamics driven by profit seeking companies interacting with public institutions into an operating system that is difficult to change.

Is this a novel insight? Undergraduate students are taught Foucault's observation that evidence is always shaped by power relations and that certain knowledges are "subjugated" (Foucault, 1980). In this sense it is unsurprising that the evidence used in forming urban policy in East Africa is truncated to fit the logics of the government entities overseeing urban development, or that consultancies have emerged to generate this knowledge. Equally, development has long been understood as the product of a narrow set of ideas - a "dumbing down" – to accommodate the type of information (void of complexity and nuance) that bureaucracies can process (Vatn and Bromley, 1994; Kahneman, 2003; Wachsmuth et al., 2016). The truncation of evidentiary flows becomes a particular problem, however, when it leads to misguided outcomes from formula-based budget transfers, the allocation of scarce investment capital into the wrong region of a city or an inappropriate technology (Seddon, 2015), or when mega-infrastructure projects fail to generate catalytic multipliers due to a lack of integration into the existing socio-economic fabric. In this sense, truncated evidentiary flows, and particularly "subjugated knowledges" around urban informality, should be seen as an underlying cause of the inability of East Africa's cities to unlock the full potential of its urbanisation megatrend. Unless remedied, East Africa's cities will remain valued as zones of commodity exports and mega-infrastructure projects, but not as economically, culturally and ecologically diverse spaces.

More effective urban policy in the region depends not just on improvements in the quality of sub-national data and evidence, but better circulation and adoption of the evidence that is available. Specific attention is required to the ways in which evidence travels both vertically and horizontally

between local, national and regional evidence actors, with emphasis on new assimilations of bottom-up information.

Countering the forces that bias truncated evidence flows and sub-optimal outcomes from urbanisation is not easy. Nascent efforts on the continent will have to be acknowledged and funded. These include platforms that allow in-country academics, NGOs, local authority leaders and national government officials to interact and exchange ideas; two-way flows of evidence between local and national governments would address the biases introduced by top-down national urban policies in their current format (Bekker et al., 2021); the African Mayoral Leadership Initiative (AMALI) that links city political leads with each other and with academic evidence in pursuit of more sustainable urban development (ACC, 2025); citizen science that enriches urban policy and ensure more effective allocations of resources; the work of the Rift Valley Institute in bringing “local knowledge to bear on social, political and economic development” in East and Central Africa (RFI, 2025); the Africa Evidence Summit, co-hosted by Network of Impact Evaluation Researchers in Africa (NIERA) and the Center for Effective Global Action focussed on “better data for decision making”; the African Contact Group on Enhancing Collaboration to Improve Statistics for the Post 2015 Development Agenda (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2024); and the Good Governance Africa publication *Africa in Fact* (GGA, 2025).

In a similar vein, urban policy advisors could be in situ to the urban spaces they aim to improve, to enable links between top down quantitative evidence and bottom up qualitative evidence. In Tanzania, specifically, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation has chosen to work ‘in cities’ rather than ‘on cities’ as a means of gathering new data and enhancing the efficacy of their programmes in an innovation that holds potential for new evidentiary flows. Regional actors such as the World Bank, AfDB, the African Union and Cities Alliance could draw on evidence from a greater variety of sources and from the local scale, learning from UN-Habitat that has retained access to local evidence through its in-city affiliates and which plays an important role in linking the evidence from a variety of sources and scales. The collaboration between UN-Habitat and Shelter Afrique and UNWomen, for example, has begun addressing the investment biases that emerge from existing configurations of evidentiary flows. The African Development Bank has committed to increasing the money the Bank spends in cities and towns (Adesina, 2024). However, the evidence base through which to do this could be enhanced (Haas et al., 2024). This is required if regional value chains are to be harnessed to provide the goods and services that rapidly growing urban centres will demand, and if the previously distinct priorities of climate change, industrialization and urbanization are to be integrated. The Economic Communities under the African Continental Free Trade Area have a particularly important role to play in both generating and assimilating new evidence to this ends.

The African Union which currently answers to and implements the decisions of the African Union Assembly composed of the heads of the 55 member states, will have to adopt a more proactive role on the politics of devolution and the role of cities envisaged in Agenda 2063 (AU, 2015). Underpinning this challenge are the meagre contributions of African Union member states to the operations of the African Union – just a third of the African Union’s budget is provided by member states - reiterating the dependence on international contributions and entrenching many existing dependencies and evidentiary pathways.

Collectively, these and similar efforts could shore-up the Agenda 2063’s Africa Economic Platform which has convened just once since inception in 2016 (Nepad, 2025). The need is investment in platforms and processes that can draw on, and make sense of, a wider canon of quantitative and qualitative evidence supported by efforts to ensure that this expanded canon flows more easily between regional urban policy actors. The focus on this aspect of EIP is a prerequisite for addressing the evidentiary biases and evidence truncations that impede African countries from realizing the full benefits of urbanization.

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