

Foreword

Small and medium-size towns in Kenya are a major challenge. In 1999, there were 34 towns with a population of between 20,000 and 200,000 residents. Today, there are probably about 50 such towns. Indeed, these towns summarize the challenges that Kenya face in its development process. The towns are the transition from a rural society to an increasingly urbanized one, accompanied by a redefinition of all forms of economic and social operations—a space for ethnic intercourse occasioning new forms of governance; the opportunity for a new society and new political and business elites to emerge. In short, towns are the epicentres of economic and social development, areas where the actors and the values of the future Kenya are defined—as much as but in a different manner from the way this happens in large metropolitan areas.

Yet, little consideration is given to these small and medium-size towns. Their administrative boundaries remain ambiguous, often extending into vast rural areas. They have financial and human resources, but these are too limited to face the challenges of rapid development and rarely allow them to go beyond day-to-day management of affairs. The central government and development partners are heavily involved, but more often than not, their intervention is limited to certain tasks—water projects, infrastructure, health—without really helping the administrators in implementing urban development that mainstreams all the functions, areas and social groups that constitute a town. Additionally, it is clear that the actual town develops in a rather different manner from what its administrators originally anticipated, and at a much faster rate. Furthermore, the majority of its inhabitants live in ‘unplanned settlements’, often without access to the most essential services.

It must be emphasized that there is very little information available on the dynamics of small and medium-size towns with regard to the challenge that they pose. It is for this reason that the Embassy of France in Nairobi supported a research project jointly with the French Institute for Research in Africa (IFRA), together with Nairobi, Moi and Maseno Universities. This project studied 19 medium-size towns throughout the country, using a homogeneous questionnaire. In addition to this monographic approach, interviews were held in selected towns with elected leaders (councillors) and local administrators (town clerks) on their vision about challenges in managing their towns, and on the manner in which they envisioned the steps they would take in response to these challenges.

This publication makes a preliminary synthesis of these two processes. It confirms the magnitude of the stakes in terms of development and at the same time, the extreme difficulty in finding relevant information to illustrate these challenges and to propose means of tackling them. In September 2006, under the patronage of the President of Kenya, Nairobi will host the fourth continental meeting of local government administrators and elected leaders from African countries, *Africités*. This will certainly be an opportunity for Kenyan decision-makers to compare their experience in this domain with that of other African countries. It is my hope that this publication will provide fodder for the discussions to be held in this forum.

However, this is clearly just a single step towards a much longer-term objective of better understanding the situation, the evolution, trends and the economic, political and social development challenges that small and medium-size towns in Kenya face. The latter (challenges) calls for a long-term scientific work in which Kenyan universities and their foreign partners must embark on without delay.

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