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## Small and medium-size towns in the context of urbanization and development process in Kenya

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### Introduction

The definition of a town or an urban centre is not similar in all countries. Every country has its own way of defining an urban centre. The most commonly used index in Africa is the population size, which also varies from one country to another. In Kenya, for example, any settlement of more than 2,000 people is designated as an urban centre.<sup>1</sup> Even after deciding which settlements are urban, defining their spatial contexts still remains a problem to date. This is because administrative boundaries used to define an urban centre may not necessarily be the best way to distinguish between urban and rural, especially in terms of their character. Furthermore, the rural–urban divide is becoming blurred. Livelihoods are becoming multi-local, with both rural and urban components. And as households diversify their livelihood sources, “urban” sectors (e.g. rural non-farm employment) are now common in rural areas while “rural” sectors (e.g. urban agriculture) are a common feature in urban areas (Owuor, 2006).

Similarly, what constitutes the population sizes and spatial contexts of small and medium-size urban centres is both elusive and inconclusive. Like in many African countries, there is no official definition of a small, medium-size or a large town in the hierarchy of urban settlements in Kenya. However, the Kenya’s population census reports have consistently classified urban centres into various categories of population sizes, but with no clear indication which category or categories constitute large, medium-size and small towns, respectively. Without an

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official definition, small and medium-size towns may be of different population sizes and may belong to different levels of the urban hierarchy. Which level one should focus on depends partly on the historical, social, economic and geographic structure of the country and partly on the development policies being pursued.

As such, the four dominant towns in Kenya (Nairobi, Mombasa, Kisumu and Nakuru<sup>2</sup>) can be considered as large urban centres. All other settlements in the urban hierarchy are therefore arguably small and medium-size towns. But based on their population sizes a further distinction can be made between small towns on the one hand and medium-size towns on the other hand. For example, based on the 1999 population census, we consider urban centres with a population of up to 50,000 people as small towns, while those with a population of between 50,000 and 200,000 people as medium-size towns. However, the distinction between them is not self-evident and may vary from year to year.

Given the nature of urbanization process in Africa where the capital cities and a few towns have for a long time dominated the urban hierarchy, small and medium-size towns should be recognized as a unique category of urban centres, for example, from the large urban centres. Regardless of their varied sizes, in terms of area covered and population living in them, a large majority of small and medium-size towns in Kenya have more-or-less similar characteristics. They are basically administrative, trading and market centres with limited industries, employment opportunities and infrastructure.

Although they have a relatively small role in sub-national and national production, they play an important role as centres where goods and services are available to the inhabitants of their hinterland and as centres through which the rural population have most of their links to the sub-national and national sectors of the economy. Furthermore, except for the built-up area, a large part of their boundaries and population are rural in character. As a result, they have a combination of urban and rural socio-economic characteristics and they generally perform functions found in both urban areas and the countryside.

## Urbanization process in Kenya

Whereas this section presents the general trends of urbanization in Kenya, it is important to point out that the demographic, social, economic and political variables have impacted greatly on the urbanization process, resulting in varied urbanization levels, trends and patterns at both the provincial and district levels (Kenya, 2004). Urbanization in Kenya has a long history in the coastal region but a short history in the interior parts of the country (Nelson, 2000; Obudho, 1999; Were & Wilson, 1984). The interior parts did not have an urban tradition in the western definition until during the colonial period. The pattern, which today exists predominantly, reflects the development of British colonization rather than the African settlement patterns. Also reflected in the distribution and growth of urban population is the socio-economic policies which have been pursued by the Government of Kenya since independence.

The urban population growth has been increasing since independence. The share of the urban population increased from 7.8 per cent in 1962 to about 20 per cent in 1999. Rapid urbanization is, therefore, a post-independence phenomenon reflecting the high rates of rural to urban migration during the same period. Despite the high rate of urbanization in Kenya, the proportion living in urban centres is still relatively low within a global context.

At the time of Kenya's first population census in 1948, there were 17 urban centres with an aggregate population of 285,000 people (Table 1). The urban population was proportionately small (5.2 per cent of the total) but disproportionately concentrated in Nairobi and Mombasa (73.9 per cent of the total urban population) with the majority of the urban dwellers being non-Africans. By 1962, the number of urban centres had doubled to 34 and the urban population increased to 671,000 people. This represented an urbanization level of 7.8 per cent. The urban growth rate stood at 6.3 per cent per year.

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*Table 1: Trends of urbanization in Kenya, 1948–1999*

Year	Kenya popn. ('000)	No of urban centres	Urban popn. ('000)	% urban	Urban growth (%)	Nairobi popn. ('000)	Nairobi growth	Nairobi in % urban growth	Primacy index
1948	5406	17	285	5.2	–	119	–	41.7	1.05
1962	8636	346	71	7.8	6.3	227	4.6	33.8	1.40
1969	10943	47	1076	9.9	7.1	506	12.2	47.0	1.55
1979	15334	91	2314	15.1	7.7	828	4.9	35.7	1.40
1989	21444	139	3864	18.0	5.2	1325	4.7	34.1	1.62
1999	28159	179	5429	19.3	3.4	2083	4.5	38.4	1.97

*Source:* Compiled from the 1948, 1962, 1969, 1979, 1989 and 1999 Kenya Population Census Reports.

The growth of urban centres both in numbers and population accelerated after independence when Africans were allowed to migrate to the urban areas without any legal and administrative restrictions (Obudho & Owuor, 1994). The urban population grew to 1 million in 1969, growing at the rate of 7.1 per cent per annum. In 1969 this represented 9.9 per cent of the total population with Nairobi and Mombasa accounting for 67 per cent of the total urban population.

By 1979, the overall level of urbanization had risen to 15.1 per cent with 91 urban centres and an urban population of 2.3 million. Nairobi and Mombasa accounted for 51 per cent of the total urban population. Although the urban population increased from 2.3 million in 1979 to 3.8 million in 1989, the growth rate was only 5.2 per cent compared to 7.7 per cent in the previous decade. With 139 urban centres, the 1989 population results indicated that 18 per cent of the population resided in urban areas. Nairobi and Mombasa accounted for 46 per cent of the total urban population. In 1999, about 20 per cent of the population lived in urban areas, of which more than half were in Nairobi, Mombasa, Nakuru and Kisumu. The urban growth rate reduced further to 3.4 per cent but the number of urban centres increased to 179.

As a consequence, the urban primacy index<sup>3</sup> has shown an upward trend between 1979 and 1999 indicating that most of the Kenyan urban population lives in Nairobi. This means that the other three large urban centres (Mombasa,

Kisumu and Nakuru) grew less than the small and medium-size towns. This also implies that the Government of Kenya's efforts to redirect the population to small and medium-size urban centres seem not to have yielded the expected results. Nairobi continues to be the major urban centre for socio-economic and political activities in Kenya.

However, the apparent deceleration of population growth rates in the larger urban centres in favour of small and medium-size urban centres is an indication that policy to enhance the growth and performance of small and medium-size towns need to be pursued vigorously to redirect the potential urban population to these centres (Kenya, 2004; Kenya, 1996). It is true that the numbers and populations of small and medium-size towns have shown an upward trend over the years (Tables 2 and 3) and will continue to do so in future. In fact, contrary to the expectations, highest population growth rates occur not in the capital city of Nairobi but in small and medium-size urban centres (Obudho, 1993). This can be attributed to boundary changes, reclassification from rural to urban of small agglomerations, reduction in rural-urban income gap, increased costs of living in Nairobi as well as to an increasing rural to urban migration, but to the small and medium-size towns.

It is clear from Tables 2 and 3 that the majority of the urban centres in Kenya have a population of less than 10,000 people but their contribution to the total urban population has been minimal. For example, in 1989 their contribution to the total urban population was only 11 per cent. This phenomenon has long been in existence in Kenya. However, the proportion of these urban centres with a population size of less than 10,000 people has been reducing from 80 per cent in 1962 to 60 per cent in 1999. While this has been happening, the proportion of urban centres of population size between 10,000 and 100,000 people has increased from 15 per cent in 1962 to 37 per cent in 1999. Whereas urban centres of more than 100,000 people have been fewer in number, they contribute over 50 per cent of the total urban population. In terms of growth, the population growth rate of towns with a population of less than 10,000 people have been significantly higher than that in towns of 100,000 people and over.

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*Table 2: Distribution of urban centres by number and size group, 1962–1999*

Size of urban centre	1962		1969		1979		1989		1999	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
100,000+	2	5.9	2	4.3	3	3.3	6	4.3	5	2.8
20,000–99,999	2	5.9	2	4.3	13	14.3	21	15.1	33	18.4
10,000–19,999	3	8.8	7	14.9	11	12.1	19	13.7	34	19.0
5,000–9,999	11	32.4	11	23.4	22	24.2	32	23.0	33	18.4
2,000–4,999	16	47.4	25	53.1	42	46.5	61	43.9	74	41.4
Total	34	100	47	100	91	100	139	100	179	100

*Source:* Kenya (2004)

*Table 3: Distribution of urban centres by population and size group, 1962–1989\**

Size of urban centre	Population			
	1962	1969	1979	1989
100,000+	523 075	756 359	1 321 566	2 371 158
20,000–99,999	61 707	79 582	568 099	822 971
10,000–19,999	44 005	685	149 756	257 755
5,000–9,999	69 862	71 396	154 181	232 259
2,000–4,999	49 002	81 886	122 094	194 554
Total	747 651	989 908	2 315 696	3 878 697

*Source:* Compiled from the 1948, 1962, 1969, 1979 and 1989 Kenya Population Census Reports.

\* Data for 1999 does not reflect the existing core urban population. What is provided by the Central Bureau of Statistics and used in various reports is a list of population of “municipalities”, “town councils” and “other urban centres”, with no consideration of the size of the towns and of their limits. Furthermore, the list does not tally with the data provided by Kenya (2004) on distribution of urban centres by number and size group (see Table 2).

Given the above trend, the process of urbanization is proceeding much faster than the country’s national planners are sometimes prepared to admit and consequently, seriously plan for. The high rate of urbanization in Kenya has been added to the long list of potentially devastating development problems that must be addressed. The continued growth of the large urban centres and the high rate

of urbanization in general has led to problems such as: urban poverty; lack of urban services, especially to the urban poor; poor provision of urban services; considerable strain in the existing urban infrastructural facilities; women and street children; urban unemployment; urban transportation problems; displaced persons; urban crime; proliferation of slums and squatter settlements; and urban environmental degradation (Agwanda *et al*, forthcoming; Obudho, 1999; Owuor, 1995; Obudho & Owuor, 1994).

The fundamental problem is that the urban population is growing very fast while the economic growth and development transformations necessary to support it and enhance the quality of urban life and provision of services is not occurring at the same rate. The need for sustainable urban and regional planning policy for Kenya is an urgent priority given the fact that population growth (and therefore the high urban growth rate) has outpaced economic growth.

Rather than execute plans, what seem to exist are general government policies and strategies on urbanization, which, more often than not, are lacking in details. Furthermore, there appears to be a lack of clear, carefully coordinated and focused urban and regional planning programmes, policies or strategies. Programmes, policies or strategies, which favour the growth of large urban centres without distributing spatial planning and development to small and medium-size urban centres, will only enhance core-periphery dichotomy. There is an urgent need for the government to integrate small and medium-size urban centres into the wider urban, regional and national development planning.

### **The (potential) role of small and medium-size towns in development**

Urban studies have tended to focus on the capital and other large cities, whilst rural development projects often do not even mention the small and medium-size towns where the project administration and services on which the rural areas depend are mostly located (DFID, 2003). Though they have been objects of little research and attention, small and medium-size towns play an increasingly important role in urban, regional and national development and will continue to do so. The

most obvious indication of their importance is their rapid rates of population growth, paralleled by being vital nodes for rural and regional development; administrative, service and trading functions; employment creation and income-generating activities; economic recovery; and national development.

Small and medium-size towns fulfill an important role in integrating urban and rural functions into a national spatial system. They are part of both the local or regional economy and rural areas where they are located and the national urban hierarchy. The urban centres provide important linkage effects down the spatial hierarchy to farms and villages and upward to large urban centres (Wescott & Obudho, 1982). They are likely to make trickling down process more effective during diffusion of innovations and transmission of economic stimuli down or up the settlement systems. The development of small and medium-size towns is essential for agricultural growth and modernization, industrial and commercial development and strengthening intersectoral linkages. They function as mediators of forward and backward linkages to local production. In particular, dynamic small and medium-size urban centres endowed with efficient physical, social and organizational infrastructures constitute a major requirement for attracting private sector participation in the local and regional economy both for industrial and commercial development.

By serving as focal points of production, distribution, trade, services, jobs, local government and non-governmental organizations, small and medium-size towns can contribute greatly towards the achievement of balanced spatial development and national spatial integration. Dynamic small and medium-size urban centres can also serve as a powerful instrument in restraining migration to already problem-ridden large urban centres. The development of small and medium-size towns is a key aspect of the current rural–urban balance strategy in Kenya, which aims at promoting an urban system that supports rural development and generates employment opportunities for non-agriculturally based rural workers. The main objectives of the strategy are to avoid the excessive concentration of population in Kenya's large urban centres; promote vigorous growth of small urban centres through the development of agriculture; foster productive linkages

between agriculture and other sectors of the economy; and bring renewed economic growth to all regions of the country so that the undeveloped regions can share in the general growth of the economy.

It is important to note that several recent developments have provided many opportunities for enhancing the role of small and medium-size towns in the development process. Some of these include:

- Growing urban poverty and unemployment in larger cities.
- Declining or closing of job opportunities in the industrial sector.
- Declining job opportunities in the government sector.
- Withdrawal of parastatals and private monopolies, and greater commitment to trade liberalization, creating new opportunities for local entrepreneurship and small enterprises outside the traditional centres of power.
- Increasing emphasis given to agriculture development, especially food production.

By building their capacities and those of their local authorities, small and medium-size towns can play a greater role in efficient service provision to the increasing population, poverty reduction, the attainment of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and equitable development. Most of the population depend on goods and services offered in small and medium-size towns. Thus, most of the service provision (i.e. education, hospitals) needed to meet the MDGs are or should be located in these urban centres. Furthermore, urbanization problems of the larger cities are bound to reduce significantly and investments redirected into these towns as a result of the availability of infrastructure.

In Kenya, the government has recognized in its various policy documents, the importance of small towns not only in helping curb the mass inflow of people into the larger urban centres, but also help promote the development of such towns and their hinterlands (see boxed text). However, much of this recognition has remained an illusion as little emphasis is given to these urban centres, not only in form of infrastructure development, but also in terms of availing adequate information about these towns to investors and other parties that might be

interested in the towns in various ways. There is a virtual dearth of information base on these towns thereby casting them into the development shadows of the larger cities.

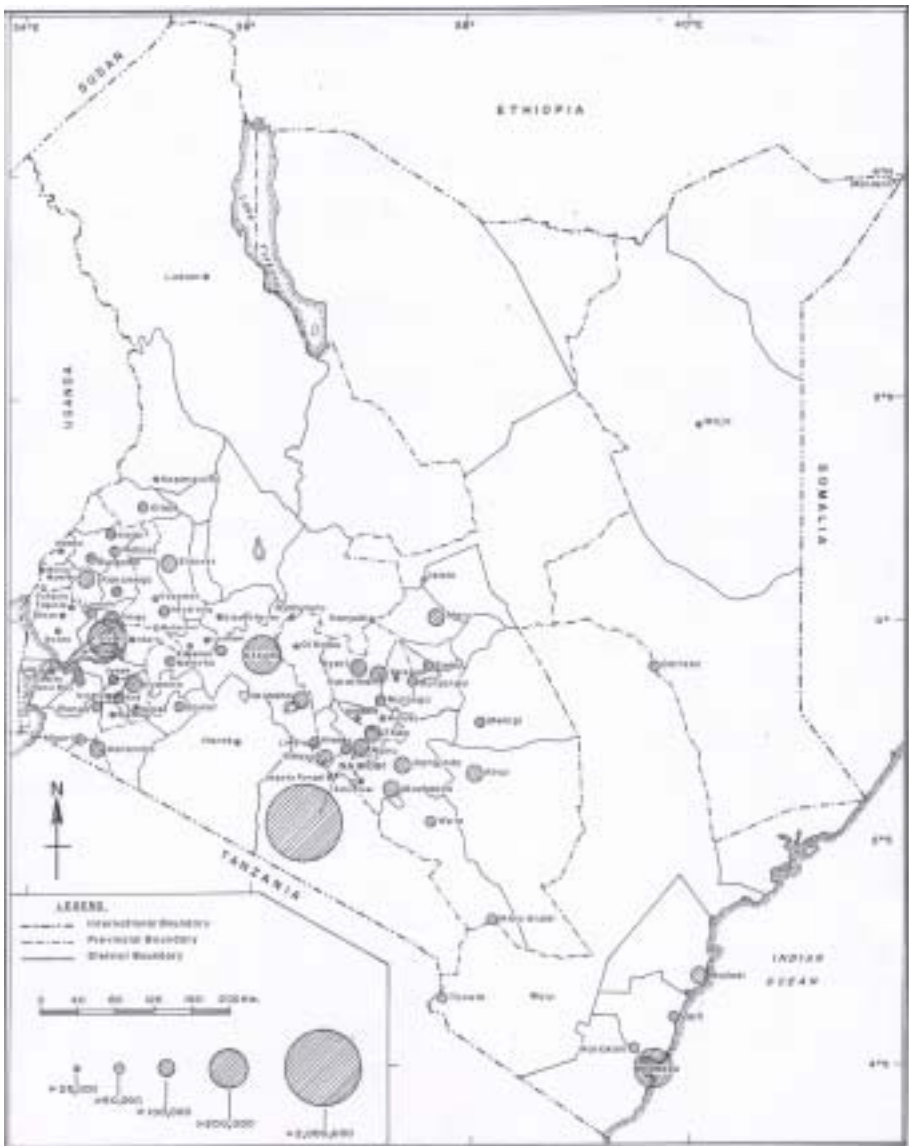
**Spatial distribution policies adopted by  
the Government of Kenya**

The spatial distribution policies adopted by the Government of Kenya during various development plans since 1974 have had as their major objective the reduction of the rate of population growth in major cities (mainly Nairobi and Mombasa) and slowing down the pace of rural to urban migration through promotion of small and medium-size urban centres (Kenya, 1996). Some of these policies include: (1) growth-pole/growth-centre approach; (2) selective dispersal and selective concentration strategy; (3) service centres strategy; (4) rural trade and production centres; (5) District Focus for Rural Development (DFRD) strategy; (6) growth with distribution policy; and (7) rural-urban balance strategy. The government realized that the concentration of all economic, social and political life in the two main urban centres has the danger of economic and political gulf being created between them and the rest of the country.

*Endnotes*

1. Although during the 1989 population census, 76 centres with a population of less than 2,000 people were classified as urban because of their potential for future growth (Kenya, 1994).
2. Each of these towns has a 1999 population of more than 200,000 people: Nairobi (2,143,254), Mombasa (665,018), Kisumu (322,734) and Nakuru (231,262) (Kenya, 2004). Nakuru has grown rapidly in the recent years due to a range of factors including migration from the local hinterland and other parts of Kenya; a “cosmopolitan” character and favourable climate; the availability of various services and a relatively low cost of living; and the intensive sub-division of former large co-operative farms (Majale & Albu, 2001).
3. Primacy index is the ratio of the population of the largest urban centre to the combined population of the next three largest urban centres.

Urban centres in Kenya by population size, 1999



*Small and medium-size towns in Kenya*

*Main street to Kitale town*



*A shop in Homa Bay town*

