

Innovative Urban Governance

Research Cluster Framing Paper
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The AUL is a research center at the African School of Economics-Zanzibar focused on rapid urbanization across Africa.

OUR WORK

RESEARCH

We conduct frontier research on African urbanization, currently focusing on four research clusters: Urban Expansion & the Periphery; Innovative Urban Governance; Urbanization & Industrialization; and Cities, Culture, & Technology.

TRAINING

We provide short trainings and capacity building programs to the current generation of city officials, urban planners, and municipal leaders.

EDUCATION

We provide longer-term educational programs to the next generation of city builders, planners, and urban leaders.

1. Motivation

Cities have historically acted as testing beds for experiments in innovative governance. For example, the Classical Age of ancient Greece was characterized by over 1,000 independent city-states, each with its own system of governance (Kito, 1991: p. 11). While some, like Athens, pioneered early forms of democracy, others, such as Sparta, developed oligarchic or militarized structures. In the 14th century, the revival of urbanization in Europe saw a flourishing of different models of sovereignty, including centralized states, city leagues, such as the Hanseatic League, and independent city-states (Spruyt, 1994). The vast diversity of governance systems during these periods enabled the combined forces of variation and selection to work their evolutionary magic over time, incrementally converging on more effective governing institutions better fit to a given environment.

The end of the Thirty Years War in 1648 and Treaty of Westphalia recognized centralized state authorities as the primary sovereign entities, weakening other forms of sovereignty (Spruyt, 1994). The French Revolution accelerated this shift, replacing local governance autonomy with centralized states and national-level citizenship (Kohn, 2020). The global Great Depression of the 1930s reinforced state intervention in the economy, a trend solidified during World War II (1939-1945) when governments took control of production, resource allocation, and military mobilization. This centralization persisted in the post-war era as the newly born discipline of development economics focused on the need for the central state to mobilize and allocate resources in a ‘big-push’ to promote industrialization.

Since the 1970s, decentralization has re-emerged as a response to increasingly localized governance challenges, economic and political liberalization, and changes in international development strategies (Rodinelli et al., 1983; Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2006). In fact, by the end of the 1990s, decentralization “began sprouting everywhere,” (Faguet, 2003: p. 1). Estimates suggest that over 80% of the world’s countries were implementing decentralization in some form. This trend reached across geography and national income brackets. However, modern reforms tend to allocate authority to the provincial or regional level, rather than the municipal level (Hirschl, 2020). As we enter a period of increasing global power competition and instability in the global order, local governments—especially cities, where approximately 56% of the world’s people live and 80% of the world’s GDP is generated—have an important role to play in addressing local governance challenges (World Bank, 2022).

The situation in Africa has hitherto paralleled these global trends. There is a rich history of free and independent city-states across the continent dating back to the precolonial era, with numerous examples of autonomous urban centers that thrived through trade, cultural exchange, and local governance structures (Elhanafy, 2025). For example, along the Swahili Coast, city-states such as Kilwa, Mombasa, and Zanzibar flourished from the 10th century onward, leveraging their strategic positions along Indian Ocean trade routes to develop sophisticated mercantile economies and cosmopolitan cultures (Burton, 2017). In West Africa, cities like Timbuktu, Gao, Djenné, and Kano emerged as hubs of commerce and scholarship, benefiting from trans-Saharan trade networks and serving as centers of Islamic learning (Hunwick, 1999).

However, European colonization was a major disruptor of African systems, especially around urban governance, social life, and economic vibrancy in cities. Colonial administrations imposed centralized rule, often dismantling or marginalizing existing urban governance structures in favor of direct control from European capitals (Mamdani, 1996). Indigenous urban political institutions were either co-opted into colonial bureaucracies or replaced altogether, undermining local autonomy and disrupting long-established networks of trade and governance (Lugard, 1922). Additionally, colonial policies favored extractive economic models that redirected resources toward European markets rather than local development, stunting the growth of African cities as self-sustaining political and economic entities (Rodney, 1972).

The post-independence era saw African states inherit these highly centralized systems, with national governments maintaining tight control over their cities in order to assert central sovereignty, control resource flows, and promote national unity (Herbst, 2000). However, from the late 20th century onward, decentralization policies began to take hold, mirroring global trends toward local governance. In many African countries, structural adjustment programs of the 1980s and 1990s pushed for the devolution of power, yet many cities still have little autonomy to mobilize taxes, freedom to decide on spending, or ability to borrow money through municipal bonds to invest in infrastructure (Resnick, 2020).

More recently, the resurgence of urban power across Africa—driven by rapid urbanization, technological advancements, and shifting global economic dynamics—has created new opportunities for cities to assume increased governance authority. Many African communities have strong traditions of self-governance at the local level, especially in rural and peri-urban areas, towns, and secondary cities that have too often been ignored by colonial administrations, post-independence African governments, or foreign aid flows (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2006: p. 3). With African cities poised to undergo major transformations over the coming decades, it is more important than ever before that municipal governments across the continent can support and represent their fast-growing populations.

In many ways, Africa is creating space for innovative urban governance through decentralization, innovative within-city governance arrangements, and spatially targeted, place-based policy interventions. While decentralization efforts have granted cities varying degrees of authority, the precise nature of their relationship with national governments remains contested, affecting their ability

In some African cities, colonial authorities enforced spatial urban policies designed to segregate racial groups. For example, in Nairobi, the colonial government used the Nairobi Municipal Committee (NMC) regulations and the Land Acquisition Act to seize land and demarcate distinct residential areas for Europeans, Asians, and Africans (Elhanafy, 2023).

to drive economic development and policy innovation. At the same time, many cities function as complex, multi-actor environments where governance is dispersed across public, private, and informal institutions, necessitating a deeper exploration of polycentric governance models. Finally, SEZs and new cities offer unique opportunities to trial alternative governance structures at a small scale, pinpoint successful policy innovations, and scale up those successes more broadly. Yet their effectiveness and broader implications remain underexplored, especially in the African context.

The Innovative Urban Governance (IUG) research cluster at the Africa Urban Lab (AUL) aims to deepen our understanding of how cities can act as laboratories for governance experimentation, institutional reform, policy entrepreneurship, and economic transformation across Africa, recognizing that governance structures play a critical role in shaping urban development outcomes. The IUG's research agenda is guided by three overarching themes:

- 1. Cities & the State**

- 2. Polycentric Urban Governance**

- 3. Special Economic Zones and New Cities**

2. Research Themes

2.1 Cities & the State

The relationship between the city and the state is affected by institutional structures, political incentives, and the historical evolution of governance arrangements. Cities are embedded within national political and economic systems, but their relative autonomy varies across contexts. The degree to which cities can govern independently and experiment with localized policy depends on the balance of authority between central and local authorities. Decentralization can take three common forms: deconcentration, delegation, and devolution. At one end of the spectrum, cities act as administrative outposts of the central state; at the other, they function as powerful political entities capable of complementing, contesting, or even circumventing national authority (Brenner, 2004; Sellers & Lidström, 2007).

Deconcentration refers to the relocation of central personnel, offices, and equipment, from the capital city to secondary cities, towns, and villages. The chain of command radiates from the center downwards and those local offices report upwards according to the same political and administrative hierarchy that existed before reform (Faguet, 2023: p. 5). While the government may be closer to the people, this doesn't always result in more consultation or citizen involvement in issues of local government, especially when lines of administrative accountability typically run upwards to the central government.

Delegation occurs when the central government shifts responsibility for managing the delivery of some public services to organizations outside the existing government bureaucracy. Delegation may change some aspects of reporting and accountability but typically involves public officials looking upwards for instruction and evaluation (Faguet, 2023: p. 5). For example, Senegal's Agence de Développement Municipal (ADM), a semi-autonomous agency under the Ministry of Local Governance, finances and coordinates municipal projects such as sanitation and road construction (Resnick, 2014). However, while municipalities benefit from ADM's technical expertise and financial resources, they lack full control over project selection or implementation, limiting their autonomy in shaping urban development priorities.

Devolution shifts resources from central to subnational governments—including regional or city governments—who acquire independent authority to utilize those resources. Subnational governments may acquire powers such as the ability to raise local taxes, to spend revenue as they wish, and to hire and fire personnel who deliver public services or work in government administration. Devolution tends to be the most comprehensive power transfer from the central state to the city. However, its success often depends on the political will of the central government to relinquish control and the capacity of local institutions to effectively manage their newfound authority.

Decentralization primarily takes place on two margins: political decentralization and fiscal decentralization. Political decentralization directs accountability downwards by giving citizens the ability to elect local government officials and influence the practice of local governance (Dick-Sago, 2020: p. 5). Political decentralization through delegation and/or devolution introduces the potential to create a vibrant local-level political process. Local governments may also be better able to acquire information about the needs of their constituents and set incentives to effectively respond to those needs, fostering local accountability rather than passive upwards gazing (Smoke, 2003: p. 11).

Fiscal decentralization occurs when the central government grants subnational governments the authority to raise revenue and allocate spending. However, central governments are often better equipped to tax mobile factors, such as skilled labor, or to manage complex tax instruments, like VAT or corporate taxes. Consequently, at any level of development, local governments' spending needs far exceed their tax-raising powers. To bridge this gap, central governments often share revenues with local governments through formula-based allocations (e.g., based on population or poverty levels) or by returning revenues to the regions where they were raised. The extent of these transfers as a proportion of local government budgets varies widely, from 10% of local revenues in Switzerland and Iceland, to more than 90% from intergovernmental transfers in Uganda (Faguet, 2023: p. 23). Across Africa, intergovernmental transfers tend to make up the largest part of local government budgets.

The appearance of fiscal decentralization (local governments spending a high fraction of total tax revenue) may differ from the reality (that spending is allocated by the central government without local government having any freedom to choose how to allocate it). Municipal reliance on revenue transferred from above, even if those transfers are not conditional, will likely lead to accountability and political discussion being directed upwards. True devolution requires some degree of genuine fiscal decentralization. Efforts to promote decentralization to local and city governments, often backed by the force of legal reform or even constitutional change, can still be undermined by 'jealous' central governments anxious to avoid losing powers.

Urban decentralization is less common than state, provincial, or regional decentralization. In fact, by the end of 2019, among 195 national constitutions, only 23 assign municipalities the right to levy local taxes and only 9 refer to self-governing municipalities (Hirschl, 2020: p. 36).

A survey of decentralization experiences shows that as long as revenue transfers from the central government are transparent, stable and predictable, they have a positive impact on subsequent reductions in poverty (Jutting et al., 2004).

In Africa, decentralization has taken many forms, with varying degrees of success, characterized by a gap between formal legal provisions and practical implementation. Many African governments have enacted decentralization policies that grant cities legal autonomy but fail to transfer real power and resources. For example, Zambia pursued numerous rounds of decentralization in 1980, 1991, 2013, and 2019. The National Decentralization Policy of 2013, for example, covered a wide range of reforms, decentralizing revenue collection, control of human resources, and decision-making authority. A 2019 survey showed that nothing of substance had changed by 2019 as the central Ministry of Local Government failed to cede actual autonomy to local councils (Resnick et al., 2019).

Similarly, Article 176 2(B) of the 1995 Constitution of Uganda devolves fiscal and administrative functions from the central to the local government, intended to enhance public service delivery. This was further consolidated in the Local Government Act of 1997, which clarified local government functions and granted greater autonomy (Madinah et al., 2015). In Kampala, formal procedures for urban planning were decentralized to the purview of Kampala City Council. The legal requirements are clear and research shows there is sufficient capacity in the Kampala city government to implement them, but competing authority with the national government has undermined the Kampala city government's level of local authority.

In 2009, the central government of Uganda exerted pressure on the Minister of Local Government to end the investigation of 48 commercial buildings that violated planning codes (Goodfellow, 2013). After Kampala and other cities were won by opposition political parties, the central government started backtracking on decentralization and local autonomy. In 2009, the central parliament—dominated by President Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM)—passed the Kampala City Act, which stripped the city council of many of its powers, granting them to the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA). The elected office of mayor became a ceremonial position, while the executive director of the KCCA, appointed directly by the president, gained executive authority in Kampala (Madinah et al., 2015).

As cities grow in economic and political significance across Africa, they are increasingly central to struggles over governance authority (Hirschl, 2020). The way power is distributed between cities and states shapes not only service delivery and policy innovation but also the broader political dynamics of a country. In some cases,

Ivanyna & Shah (2012) find that countries in Africa—with the exception of Ethiopia—have the lowest levels of political, administrative, and fiscal decentralization in the world. The average population size of local government units is also five times larger in sub-Saharan Africa compared to other regions of the world (p. 8).

decentralization has empowered local governments to better respond to citizen needs, while in others, it has led to 'pre-mature loadbearing' and reinforced existing patterns of political patronage and fiscal dependence. Understanding these varied experiences is crucial for improving urban governance in Africa and informing broader debates about the role of cities in state-building and economic transformation. It remains to be seen whether African cities will gain greater autonomy and how they will use it.

Sample Research Questions

- **What forms of decentralization are being implemented, how has this varied across and within African countries, and how has this affected urban governance in practice?**
- **How do prevailing theories of urban governance apply to African cities?**
- **How do political incentives shape the willingness of central governments to devolve power to cities?**
- **To what extent does fiscal decentralization translate into meaningful local autonomy in African cities?**
- **How do historical governance structures influence contemporary decentralization outcomes?**

2.2 Polycentric Urban Governance

Cities are dense, diverse, and dynamic. The challenges and opportunities associated with urbanization place unique demands on city governments, which require the involvement of multiple stakeholders and institutions at different levels. In African cities, these complexities are further compounded by rapid population growth, socio-economic disparities, and the widespread presence of informal urban spaces. Some scholars argue that polycentric governance models enable cities to more effectively address the challenges of urban governance (Ostrom et al., 1961). Polycentricity emphasizes the existence of multiple, overlapping centers of authority that can respond to the diverse and often conflicting demands of urban populations.

One of the core features of polycentric governance is the recognition that cities are made up of heterogeneous communities, each with distinct needs and priorities. When preferences for goods and services are diverse across the country or city but similar in a particular location, such as a neighborhood, then they are often better provided at the lowest possible level. Not only do the needs of African cities vary substantially from one to the other, but even within the city, demands for public services vary greatly depending on the economic, social, and spatial characteristics of different neighborhoods. Such examples may include rules about car parking, garbage collection, and street lighting.

Polycentric governance decentralizes responsibility, giving a more active role to local governments that may be better informed about the wants and needs of the local population (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2000). Government officials in cities may have highly specific knowledge of local preferences through talking to residents and using services themselves (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2007: p. 7). Subsidiarity is particularly important when local information is crucial to produce goods and services, or when information is expensive or difficult for central government to obtain (Faguet, 2023: p. 20).

The principle of subsidiarity posits that, “decisions should always be taken at the lowest possible level, or closest to where they will have their effect, for example in a local area rather than nationally,” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). As cities in Africa grow rapidly, local governments are often better equipped to address urban issues at the neighborhood level, where they have direct access to local knowledge, allowing for more efficient and effective service delivery.

For example, in Freetown, Sierra Leone, a polycentric approach to urban governance has allowed local communities to address issues related to deforestation and land degradation, especially in areas occupied by informal settlements. Following the deadly landslides of 2017, the city government obtained a loan for a large-scale tree re-planting project to help secure hillsides around the city (World Bank, 2018). Working with community-based organizations and NGOs throughout the city, the project has planted thousands of new trees with a relatively high uptake rate, improving environmental health throughout the city. The polycentric approach allowed planters to selectively sow plants that were better suited to particular locations, contributing to the project’s success.

By allowing local governments the authority to make decisions based on localized information, they are thus better positioned to mitigate externalities and address urban problems more effectively. Urbanization generates a variety of unintended consequences that affect broader social, economic, or environmental systems. In the case of Freetown (above), for example, unorganized urban expansion led to encroachment on vulnerable environmental areas, heightening environmental risk. The costs of degradation are not only borne by exposed households, but also by the broader community, due to the additional strain placed on infrastructure and public resources. By decentralizing decision-making authority, local governments can implement targeted land-use policies, strengthen enforcement mechanisms, and engage communities in sustainable urban planning practices. This allows them to internalize the costs of environmental externalities and develop proactive strategies to balance urban growth with ecological sustainability.

Furthermore, decentralization of urban governance through subsidiarity not only facilitates more localized decision-making but also enables better coordination among various actors, including those at the neighborhood, municipal, state, and international level. As cities grow in size and complexity, coordinating policies across multiple governance levels becomes essential for ensuring that urban challenges are addressed in an integrated way, especially when issues transcend neighborhood and municipal boundaries. Inter-state highways, for example, are better managed by the central government while local roads can be well-managed by city-level government and neighborhood-level associations.

Finally, polycentric governance models can also create opportunities to capitalize on economies of scale. By pooling resources, knowledge, and capacities across different levels of government, as well as between public and private sector actors, cities can achieve cost savings and improve the efficiency of service delivery. For example, in the United States, since 1999, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has partnered with local authorities to run the Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System (IAFIS)—a central fingerprint database for the investigation of crime maintained by a single central authority. This generates economies of scale, whereby the value of the service increases the more fingerprints are registered.

In the Regent area of Freetown, unregulated urban expansion onto the hills below Sugar Loaf Mountain has led to widespread deforestation, decreasing the stability of the land (Trenchard, 2018). When severe rain storms hit in 2017, one hillside collapsed, killing over 1,000 people and displacing about 6,000.

Ostrom et al. (1961) offer the following definition of “polycentricity”: “Polycentric connotes many centers of decision-making which are formally independent of each other. Whether they actually function independently, or instead constitute an interdependent system of relations, is an empirical question in particular cases” (p. 831).

Despite the potential advantages, polycentric urban governance in African cities faces significant challenges. Fragmentation of authority can lead to conflicts of interest, overlapping responsibilities, freeriding or shirking, and inefficiencies, particularly when clear coordination mechanisms are not in place. For example, in some African cities, local authorities may be responsible for certain services, such as waste collection, while national agencies oversee environmental regulations or infrastructure development. If there is no coordinated strategy or mechanism to align their efforts, these agencies might implement policies that conflict with each other or ignore local needs, leading to gaps in service delivery or poor quality of public goods.

Furthermore, pre-mature loadbearing—which occurs when government authorities or other actors are given responsibilities that are greater than their capacity to fulfill—can lead to ineffectiveness at lower levels. For example, one survey in Uganda compared what villagers wanted with what government officials thought they wanted (Afzar et al., 2006). Researchers discovered no link between household demands, public official’s knowledge of those demands, or allocation of resources at the district level. At lower levels, there was some weak relation, but even local government officials had little idea what public services local residents wanted (Afzar et al, 2006: p. 243). Capacity constraints and insufficiently developed processes can thus undermine the impact of decentralizing responsibility, or in some cases, actively make service provision worse.

In many African cities, power imbalances between different governance centers—such as between local authorities and national governments—can also hinder effective collaboration. For example, in Kampala, Uganda, the national government has periodically exerted pressure on local authorities, undermining the autonomy of urban governance. This is best illustrated by the central government’s enactment of the Kampala City Act in 2009 (as mentioned above), which stripped the city council of many of its powers and granted them to the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA), appointed directly by the president (Haas, 2022; Madinah, 2023).

Ultimately, African cities face uniquely complex challenges as they undergo rapid growth. Polycentric governance, with its emphasis on multiple, overlapping centers of authority, holds the potential to address the diverse needs of urban populations by enabling localized decision-making and better coordination across different levels of government.

Case studies find that decentralizing responsibility for service provision is rarely accompanied by measures to ensure effective capacity for planning, budgeting, implementation and monitoring in local governments (Robinson, 2007: p. 15).

However, the fragmentation of authority, inadequate capacity at local levels, and center-local political tensions can pose significant obstacles to its effectiveness.

It is important to better understand how subsidiarity can improve urban service delivery by more effectively integrating local knowledge. Additionally, investigating how power imbalances between local and national authorities can be addressed will be crucial for ensuring that local governments have the necessary autonomy to make decisions that align with the needs of their communities. A more comprehensive understanding of polycentric governance will ultimately help create more resilient, adaptive, and inclusive urban policies that can effectively respond to the dynamism of African cities.

Sample Research Questions

- **What are the most effective intra-city and/or metropolitan governance arrangements?**
- **What are the key barriers to effective urban governance, given the density, diversity, and dynamism of cities?**
- **How can communities get involved in urban governance?**
- **Are the demands of African cities unique?**
- **How are regulations and governance arrangements in African cities performing? What can be done to improve them?**

2.3 Special Economic Zones & New Cities

Special economic zones (SEZs) are defined as, “demarcated geographic areas contained within a country’s national boundaries where the rules of business are different from those that prevail in the national territory,” (Farole & Akinici, 2011: p. 3). Recognizing that nation-wide reform and/or infrastructure provision may be difficult given budgetary, organizational, and capacity constraints, SEZs typically offer a mix of duty-free imports of capital goods and industrial inputs, income and corporate tax reductions, and easier access to land and public utilities such as water and electricity within a delimited and usually small geographic area.

SEZs are typically designed to attract foreign investment and firms with the goal of stimulating job creation, boosting exports, and fostering industrial development. By concentrating multiple firms within a specific geographic location, an SEZ may help generate agglomeration externalities, or firm-level productivity gains. To maximize these benefits, successful SEZs require four key institutional and governance attributes:

1. **Autonomy:** SEZs operate best when managed as autonomous agencies under a board of directors that includes both public and private sector members. In some cases, these government agencies have transitioned into corporate entities, granting them greater flexibility in hiring, firing, and employment practices (UNECA, 2022: p. 57).
2. **Diversity:** Effective governance requires the inclusion of senior policymakers from all relevant ministries, as well as a high-ranking political figure from the office of the head of state. Additionally, at least “one senior, seasoned civil service technocrat (ideally at the cabinet or permanent secretary level) in (or retired from) a Ministry interacting with business,” should be involved to navigate the practical limits of government capabilities (Farole, 2011: p. 184; Dube et al., 2020). Representatives of firms that are investing and trading in economic zones should also participate.
3. **Authority:** SEZ regulators are most impactful when their board reports to the highest level of government, such as the President or Prime Minister. This ensures that zone managers have authority to induce cooperation and coordination across other ministries, departments, and agencies (UNECA, 2022: p. 54).
4. **Efficiency:** A one-stop-shop should be established to streamline administrative processes, allowing investors to acquire all the necessary permits to operate and resolve issues without reference to ministries or other government departments. Buy-in from the different government departments and ministries is necessary (Dube et al., 2020).

African governments generally have a poor track record of developing SEZs. The first SEZs in Africa were set up in the 1970s, including Liberia in 1970, Mauritius in 1971, and Senegal in 1974 (Zeng, 2015: p. 10). Inspired by success in China, many more African countries launched SEZs in the 1990s (Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Uganda, Zimbabwe) and 2000s (South Africa, Zambia, Tanzania) (Farole, 2010: p. 4). Today, some countries (Egypt, Ethiopia, South Africa, and Tanzania) are expanding their SEZ programs, launching new programs (DRC, Botswana, and Gabon), and overhauling their pre-existing SEZ legal frameworks (Tanzania, Ghana, and Malawi). The number of SEZs in Africa increased from 20 in 1990 to 237 in 2020. Currently, 38 African countries have SEZs while more are planned elsewhere (Rodriguez-Pose et al., 2022: p. 459).

Roads, drainage, sewers, and power supply are often better provided in African SEZs than in the rest of the economy, but remain poor compared to non-African zones (Farole, 2011). These problems often stem from the government's lack of resources or the zone authority's inability to persuade or compel other line ministries, such as transport and power, to build infrastructure inside the SEZ or connect it to the national grid or road network. In some cases, these ministries also prevent SEZs from utilizing private suppliers of electricity, telecommunications, transport, or water to preserve their own market share (Watson, 2001).

SEZs too often are not explicitly paired with urbanization, and are typically too small in size to meaningfully impact urban growth in practice. However, following its 'reform and opening up' under Deng Xiaoping, the Chinese government intentionally coupled SEZs with urbanization (Dercon et al., 2019). This powerful combination led to the greatest humanitarian miracle of the post-World War II era, with 850 million Chinese people lifted out of poverty between 1978 and 2010 because of Deng's market-oriented reforms first implemented within SEZs (Mason and Lutter, 2020). By pairing zones with urbanization, Chinese SEZs helped kickstart rapid rates of economic growth and generated large, positive spillovers across a range of outcomes, including productivity (Lu, 2021), employment (Zheng et al., 2015), wages (Zheng et al., 2015), investment (Wang, 2013), human capital (Lu et al., 2023), and GDP growth (Alder et al., 2016).

SEZs in other countries where zones were not paired with urbanization have fared much less well. For example, studies on the spillovers of Indian SEZs find no significant positive spillover effects (Engman et al., 2007; Alkon, 2018), so too with Cambodian SEZs (Warr and Menon, 2016). Research on African SEZs suggests they largely fail to generate positive spillovers as well (Farole, 2011; Farole and Moberg, 2014). In none of these locations have SEZs been explicitly linked with urbanization, as they were in China.

Given Africa's rapid demographic transformation, there is immense opportunity to pair governance and policy experimentation (often within SEZs) with the expansion of existing cities and the development of new cities. In fact, there is a global wave of new city construction underway. Between 2000 and 2020, 159 new city projects have been announced across the globe (each aiming for a population of at least 100,000 people), compared to 126 in the entire period from 1945 to 1999. Only six of these are in the Global North, compared to 50 in East Asia and the Pacific, 49 in the Middle East and North Africa, and 43 in Sub-Saharan Africa.

One particularly notable example is the city of Shenzhen, authorized in 1980 as one of China's first special economic zones. Over 40 years, it grew from a "handful of fishing villages with a population of around 100,000...[to] a metropolis of 20 million residents" (Mason & Lutter, 2020: p. 16).

In Africa, new cities are under construction in Rwanda (10), Egypt (9), Nigeria (7), South Africa (4), Morocco (4), and Algeria (4), among others (Klaus, 2023).¹ These new city projects typically envisage the provision of all necessary urban infrastructure for cities to flourish, including roads, electricity, water and sanitation facilities, and social infrastructure like schools and hospitals. Although new cities are proliferating rapidly, the subject has received little scholarly and policymaking attention. Consequently, there has been no evidence-based guidance on how governments and stakeholders should manage new cities' construction and governance.

New cities create an opportunity for innovative forms of government. Traditionally the construction of new cities and SEZs was done by the public sector. The government wrote the legal framework, acquired the land, developed the SEZ, and relocated officials from a central ministry to offer on-site permissions and licenses, and to facilitate customs clearance of SEZ imports and exports. SEZs are also often structured around delegation, whereby the managing authority of the SEZ is a special entity set up by the government or devolution whereby regional governments are empowered to run SEZs (as in China and India).

However, the New Cities Map finds that new city projects are increasingly utilizing private and public-private arrangements. This contrasts with the largely public-led new cities after the end of World War II. Evidence shows that the use of public-private partnerships to build new cities grew by 2.8% per decade since 1945 (Thompson et al., 2023). These findings align with existing qualitative research, which highlights the privatized nature of recent projects. In more recent decades, the private sector has started taking responsibility for land-use planning, construction, and provision of internal city or SEZ infrastructure such as roads, drainage and sewers, and power.

Some projects have even experimented with fully private SEZs. In Ethiopia, for example, The Eastern Industrial Zone (EIZ) was developed and managed by a private Chinese company (Giaannecchi & Taylor, 2018). The Government of Ethiopia is not a shareholder in the EIP, but from the outset has given the project significant political support with frequent visits from the President and ministers (Zhang et al., 2018).

1. Data from the New Cities Map (NCM), the most comprehensive database on contemporary new cities. The NCM was designed to make new cities research and policymaking easier for social scientists and policymakers by collecting extensive information on every new city since 1945, including location, management, motivation, finances, and governance. This dataset is available at www.newcitiesmap.com.

In the past twenty years, more new city projects have been announced in the Global South than during the entire period from 1945–1999—159 compared to 126 (Klaus, 2023). Three regions have outpaced all others: East Asia and the Pacific (50), the Middle East and North Africa (49), and Sub-Saharan Africa (43).

From 1940–1950s, about 10% of new city projects relied on public-private partnerships (PPPs); this increased to about 30% of projects by the 2000s (Thompson et al., 2024). Many new city projects in North America are led by the private sector, but “Global South countries were 10.8% less likely to structure new cities as fully private projects” (p. 26).”

The ‘developer-manager’ model holds that the construction firm that develops an SEZ or new city should also be responsible for managing them after construction. While the government may face political incentives to develop a particular area or industry with an SEZ or new city, the private sector developers will be guided by profits and losses (Moberg, 2017: p. 44). Because the developer leases or owns the land, they are incentivized to create an effective administration and provide public goods to increase economic activity and raise the value of that land. Infrastructure construction and provision of basic services can be paid for from gains in land value (Romer, 2010).

Projects which combine governance innovation with new city construction are sometimes called charter cities. Charter cities have been defined in terms of their “special jurisdiction,” whereby a city government is delegated authority by a host country to write new laws of governance for an existing or prospective city (Mason and Lutter, 2020). Some view charter cities as an extension of SEZs, increasing “its size to the scale of a city and expanding the scope of its reforms,” (Cao, 2019: p. 721).

Charter cities are premised on devolving more responsibilities locally to city managers to allow them to innovate, implement policy reforms that promote economic growth (e.g., liberalized labor law, streamlined taxation, expedited dispute resolution, and transparent land administration), create a more efficient administration (e.g., quickened business registration, permitting, licensing, and approvals), and, in turn, create an enabling business environment that fosters increased investment, entrepreneurship, and employment growth.

This intersection of SEZs, urbanization, and new cities offers fertile ground for policy experimentation and innovative governance. While SEZs have long been deployed as economic policy tools, their integration with urban development across Africa can unlock untapped economic potential. Future research should investigate the institutional frameworks that enable successful SEZs to drive broader economic spillovers, including the role of autonomy, public-private collaboration, and governance structures. Additionally, comparative studies between African SEZs and their counterparts in China, India, and other emerging markets could offer insights into best practices and potential pitfalls.

A charter city authority may be granted powers such as business and property registration, customs clearance, land use management, public service provision, fiscal policy implementation, tax enforcement, and immigration regulation.

As new cities continue to emerge across Africa, research should also examine how these developments can be structured to foster inclusive economic growth. Additionally, the evolving role of charter cities as an extension of SEZs warrants deeper inquiry into their legal, economic, and political feasibility. By bridging the study of SEZs and new cities, scholars and policymakers can better understand how spatially targeted, place-based governance reforms can contribute to long-term economic transformation.

Sample Research Questions

- **What is the legal framework governing SEZs?**
- **How successful have SEZs been in practice, how has success varied across and within African countries, and what are the underlying mechanisms leading to these varying outcomes?**
- **What are the reasons for new city construction across sub-Saharan Africa?**
- **How will new cities impact economic and social development in Africa?**
- **What role do public and private developers have in the construction of new SEZs and new cities and how does this help explain the subsequent success or failure of these SEZs and new cities?**

3. Conclusion

Cities have long been sites of governance experimentation, where new policies, institutional arrangements, and service delivery models can be tested before being scaled up more broadly across an entire country or region. Urban environments have historically served as laboratories for political, economic, and administrative innovation. From the city-states of ancient Greece to the commercial hubs of the Hanseatic League, and from Shenzhen's Special Economic Zone to contemporary experiments with new cities and decentralization, cities have consistently pushed the frontier of governance.

Unlike national governments, which often face rigid bureaucratic constraints and slower decision-making processes, cities can be more flexible and responsive to local needs. This makes them ideal spaces for piloting new approaches to service delivery, economic development, and institutional reform. Oftentimes, once innovative policies and institutional arrangements have proven to be successful in cities, they can then be applied to the national level or to other contexts.

For example, the Shenzhen SEZ was a particularly influential laboratory for reform in China. While China was still a centralized and socialist economy, Shenzhen pioneered market-oriented reforms related to land acquisition, the price system, labor and financial markets, and enterprise reform. From 1980 to 2008, Shenzhen's GDP increased from \$4 million to \$114.47 billion, with an average annual growth rate of 26.9 percent (Yuan et al., 2010). Reforms were first tested in Shenzhen and then scaled up nationally or applied to other cities after proving to be a success, demonstrating the viability of SEZs to allow countries to experiment with new policies (Brautigam & Tang, 2014).

In Africa, governance experimentation is particularly relevant due to the continent's rapid urbanization, demographic trends, economic shifts, and evolving political environments. Many African cities operate within governance frameworks that are hybrid, blending formal state institutions with informal governance structures and community-led initiatives. This mix creates space for experimentation at multiple levels, within municipal governments—especially through polycentric governance and public-private partnerships—and in autonomous or semi-autonomous zones such as SEZs and new city developments.

Across the continent, some cities are already testing new approaches to fiscal and political decentralization, including participatory budgeting and municipal financing. Others are embracing polycentric governance, where municipal authorities, informal institutions, civil society groups, and private actors collaborate to improve service delivery. Special economic zones and newly planned cities also offer controlled environments to pilot alternative regulatory and administrative arrangements.

Despite the potential of governance experimentation in cities, challenges remain. Political resistance from central governments, institutional capacity constraints, coordination failures, pre-mature loadbearing, and financial limitations often hinder cities from fully realizing their potential. Additionally, not all governance experiments succeed, and some may have serious unintended consequences, such as reinforcing inequalities or creating governance fragmentation. Understanding what works, under what conditions, and why is essential for scaling up successful models. Research can play a pivotal role in helping guide such projects, pinpointing best practices and common challenges, and disseminating this knowledge to other projects, cities, countries, and regions.

As African cities continue to grow in size and significance, their role as governance innovators will become even more important. Their ability to experiment with institutional models, policy frameworks, and participatory approaches offers new strategies for addressing complex urban challenges. By systematically studying these emerging urban governance models, policymakers and researchers can identify best practices. Ultimately, the innovations emerging from African cities today have the potential to help chart the course for more adaptive and inclusive governance across the continent and beyond.

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