

Spatial Patterns and Trends of Ghana's Contemporary Urbanization: Polarization Reversal or Urban Primacy?

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Extended Abstract

Ghana's population has increased significantly since the 1921 when formal census was introduced. Along with the increased population has come the increasing concentration of the population in settlements with 5000 or more people, which are defined as urban centres in Ghana. In 1921, 7.8 percent of the population lived in urban centres. This had risen to 23.1 percent by 1960 to 32 percent in 1984, and to 43.8 percent in 2000 (GSS 2005a, 2005b). Even though various United Nations (UN) and other international agency reports indicate that most countries in sub-Saharan Africa will have over 50 percent of their total population living in urban centres by 2030, Ghana is projected to reach this threshold well before 2030. It is projected that by 2010, 51 percent of Ghana's total population would be living in urban centres.

The rapid rate of urbanization in Ghana represents a major redistribution of population, with significant implications for national development. Already evident in urban areas of Ghana are the effects of rapid urbanization manifesting in socio-economic, environmental and institutional challenges for urban residents and local authorities (Yankson 2006). As a result of these challenges, the functional leadership role of cities much documented in the literature on Western developed countries' urbanization experience is inadequate in the context of Ghanaian cities. For instance, while migrants continue to pour into Accra, the city is unable to meet their aspirations through improved income-earning opportunities, higher urban living standards in terms of modern infrastructure, housing among others. At the same time, rural areas of the country lose tremendously as youthful potential labour sources are depleted and no significant incomes are transferred home from the city. The result is that the Ghanaian city is gradually being over extended in its supply of social and technical infrastructure while agricultural incomes in the hinterland fall together with a declining market and labor shortcomings (Anipa and Aryeetey 1992).

A look at the growth rates of the fifteen largest urban centers in Ghana for the period 1960-2000 reveals the skewed nature of urban growth in the country. Ghana's urbanization spatial patterns and trends indicate high concentration of the urban population in a few metropolitan areas, notably Accra and Kumasi. Accra and Kumasi accounted for over 34% of the total urban population in 2000, although there were over 350 urban centres in Ghana. Over the last three decades, the contribution of Accra and Kumasi to urban growth has continued to far exceed all other centres indicating continuous concentration of productive investments in these metropolitan areas.

Besides, the rapid growth of Accra and Kumasi is engendering rapid peri-urban expansion resulting in the growth of several rural areas into small and medium-sized towns. While the number and population of small and medium-sized towns have increased, the trend does not indicate polarization reversal but rather deepen of urban primacy. The implications of the urban spatial patterns and trends are explored in the paper.

The predominant development and growth of one or two cities both in terms of economic activities, investments and population have largely been perceived as undesirable. The paper argued that primacy causes inefficient and inequitable distortions to the national political economy as well as diseconomies of scale in the primate city itself. This is because such a situation tends to stifle growth of other secondary urban centres or impede a process of broad-base socio-economic development which benefits a larger proportion of the national or regional population. A fairly balanced urban settlement hierarchy is preferred as it facilitates effective linkage of local producers to national and international markets, and thus enhancing production and incomes and; distribution of services at reduce costs due to improvement in access and proximity of services. More importantly, the absence of primacy but rather a fairly balanced urban hierarchy tends to produce alternative attractive zones to potential rural-urban migrants, which thereby reduces demographic and other pressures on the large towns and cities.

The paper concludes on an optimistic note that if properly managed, urbanization could promote the rapid socio-economic development of Ghana. Ghanaian cities and towns can be engines of economic development and centres of cultural innovation, social transformation, and political change. Though cities can pose social and environmental challenges, they are essential elements of human economic and social organization. Urban areas with their physical infrastructure and, large and diverse populations, are places where entrepreneurs can get things done. It is estimated that in developing countries, urban areas account for about 60 percent of total GDP with just one-third of the total population. Certainly in Ghana, it is estimated that the two main urban centres, Accra and Kumasi, account for well over 20 percent of the country's GDP (GoG/MLG&RD 2011).