

# **LIVELIHOODS, URBANIZATION AND THE RURAL-URBAN INTERFACE IN AFRICAN GROWTH-BASED ECONOMIES: THE CASE OF BOTSWANA**

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## **Summary**

Urbanization is both a result and an expression of social and spatial transformation processes which, themselves, are part of economic growth and modernization. The case of Botswana and its booming economy shows that urbanization does not always involve a loss of rural attitudes and lifestyles. On the contrary, urban-rural linkages remain well established and even function as safety reserves for urban dwellers whose livelihoods are at risk. Also, new vulnerability patterns emerge in the rapidly growing urban centers. The article describes how sound macro-economic performance and rural-urban transition do not necessarily reduce vulnerability or mitigate social fragmentation and polarization in the cities.

## **1. Introduction: Urbanization and Growth-based Macro-economic Performance**

Rapid urbanization is one of the social and spatial patterns of non-western economies experiencing growth. This is partly due to the fact that well-performing economies are usually closely inter-linked with each other on a global scale, and within the globalizing network of flows urban agglomerations play a vital role as centers of production, distribution and consumption, and as focal points of power and command as well as places of creativity, research, innovation, and training. Urbanization, meaning a quantitative growth of urban population, but also including a considerable change of lifestyles, living circumstances and welfare conditions, does not necessarily reduce

social vulnerability or increase sustainability of livelihoods. Even under conditions where economies stabilize or grow, urbanization may lead to social polarization, livelihood uncertainties or deteriorating living conditions. In part, urbanization may be based on heavy natural population increase in the cities themselves; mostly, however, urban growth in developing countries is still largely due to in-migration from rural areas. A shifting livelihood context from a rural to an urban setting does not automatically lead to a loss of rural attitudes or value systems, because, to maintain food and economic security, migrants often rely on rural assets despite the presence of "modern", urban lifestyles. This is true not only for households living in remote or secondary urban settlements, but also for those who live in cities which are the nodes of a national or even global economic network. A well established rural-urban interface can especially be found in sub-Saharan Africa, and strong rural-urban interrelations remain existent even when economies transform from poor performance to fruitful development.

However, in sub-Saharan Africa there are only a very few nations whose economies perform well in terms of GNP/GDP or income growth, increasing formal sector employment, or a rise of the Human Development Index (HDI). Among African nations, Botswana may truly be spoken of as a boom economy. GDP growth rates lay at over 10% per year in the 1980s, and are still around 5% p.a. at the turn of the century. For over 15 years, Botswana's annual GDP growth ranked 4<sup>th</sup> worldwide, surpassed only by China, the Republic of Korea, and Thailand. The HDI lay around 0.7 in the 1990s and was one of the highest in Africa; however, it has dropped sharply since because of a rapid HIV-induced decrease in life expectancy. Still, the country belongs to the upper middle income group in World Bank terms, and its economic growth has continued into the twenty-first century. The economic boom is based on the mining sector—Botswana is the world's largest producer of gem diamonds. A stable, democracy-based political environment and a solid fiscal situation with long periods of positive trade balances have helped to maintain the extraordinary high growth rates. Because, on average, diamonds contribute over 70% to total exports, the government tries to emphasize diversification of production, support the services sector, and facilitate foreign investment by deregulating the monetary market.

## **2. Urbanization and the Rural-urban Interface in Botswana**

Most of the government's economic efforts and the majority of foreign investments not related to the mining sector are targeted on the urban centers. Botswana is not an ideal model of urbanization processes in Africa, because most of its population of some 1.6 million still live in rural areas. Estimates of the size of the urban population vary considerably. Depending on settlement definition, between some 35 to 48% of the total population were officially classified as "urban" in 1997. However, the growth rates of urban settlements lie between 5 and 10% per year and are among the highest in sub-Saharan Africa. The cities are still very small compared to those in most other African countries, but their pace of growth is almost unmatched on the continent. The largest urban settlement is Gaborone. The city was designed on the "drawing-board" in the early 1960s to become the capital of the newly independent Botswana. The planners had estimated that the city's final size would reach around 20 000 inhabitants in 1990. This figure was reached in 1970, and today Gaborone is the home of almost 200 000 people.

In Gaborone and Francistown, Botswana's second largest city, most migrants from rural villages move to degraded housing areas which show signs of slum or squatter existence. The residents of these areas have been described as "small farmers, herdsmen and unwed mothers" which clearly indicates both the former and the current socio-economic background of many urban households in Botswana. Although most in-migrants now work on a cash-earning basis in the urban formal or informal sector, a considerable number of these households continue to engage in farming activities. A lot of migrants still look upon the city only as their second home, their true home being the village where they were born. In a survey conducted by the author, many migrants indicated that they had always planned, and would still like, to move back as soon as possible although they had already been in the city for decades. In fact, in order to secure a living in the urban setting, many in-migrants preserve rural attitudes, and close linkages to the home villages of migrants remain present and active for many years. There are several reasons for this:

1. Normally not all family members migrate at once. Usually, only a few members of rural households, mostly adult men or adolescents, move initially to the cities. If migrants are married, they may be followed by their spouses and children a couple of years later. In most cases, the household will be divided, with some members of the family remaining in the village and others living on their own in town. Members who have migrated not only face a "new way of life" in town but must also cope with the fact that the rest of their family, household or clan probably live hundreds of kilometers away. Many of the migrants *wish* to keep in touch with those left behind in the home village.
2. But maintaining strong bindings to the rural areas is also an absolute *necessity*. In the cities, the overall cultural, social and economic setting changes, and as has been mentioned above, a dominant feature of the urbanization process is not so much the increasing number of people living in the urban centers but a qualitative transition from a subsistence to a cash-orientated economy. This transition, along with disruptions caused, e.g. by social networks breaking up, is leading to a destabilization of livelihoods especially of those who do not receive enough monetary income. In Botswana, declining entitlements and vulnerability patterns closely follow *economic* household conditions; vulnerability is mainly an expression of an economic entitlement failure because, e.g. political structures and the justice system are, contrary to the situation in many other African countries, relatively stable, democratic, and not so much biased in favor of certain elites. Although many migrants have moved to town in order to find employment and send remittances or goods to their home village, a considerable number of them have difficulties in generating enough income to survive in the cities, let alone to support their families back home. Deprived of direct access to rural in-kind income such as food produced on a subsistence basis, and pushed into an almost entirely commodified, monetary market economy, it becomes vital for the new urban residents to have cash available. But it is also extremely beneficial if they can rely on rural assets to safeguard their livelihoods in the cities. Instead of supporting their families in the countryside, many urban dwellers fall back on rural assets for their own well-being in town. One element of what has often been called "ruralization" of the African city is the fact that rural assets serve as safety valves for urban dwellers. The maintenance of rural-

urban linkages and of rural assets as an emergency reserve is almost ubiquitous in sub-Saharan Africa. Sometimes this process of ruralization has been described as something totally new, based on the assumption that African cities were not under rural influence earlier in the century and have never before been part of intense urban-rural interactions. This assumption is wrong. Cities in sub-Saharan Africa have *always* been somewhat ruralized (as will be pointed out in the case of Botswana below), and social groups affected by this process actually live in, as Gugler put it, dual worlds—the rural sphere and the urban society. By maintaining close ties to the home villages, rural attitudes are nourished and kept alive in the cities despite the existence and influence of what might be called "typical" urban lifestyles.

3. It could be argued that nations with a growth-based economy which is increasingly embedded into a westernized, global network also become rapidly urbanized and lose their traditional rural-based characteristics. While the first is true (fast urbanization does take place), the latter may not necessarily be the case in all societies, and can certainly not be observed in Botswana. The Botswana society has always been basically rural and experiences urbanization and the emergence of cities as something very new. Rural lifestyles are always valued as natural and obvious even in urban surroundings which are heavily biased by westernized or globalized conditions. In Botswana, cities in a modern sense are very young. Only two towns, Francistown and Lobatse, date back to colonial British influence. Most of the urban settlements in Botswana were founded as new towns in the 1960s to 1980s. The traditional, pre-colonial Tswana settlements were large villages with often more than 10 000 inhabitants. These settlements had housing functions and were the centers of agricultural activities, but they also served as commercial and political nodes for large regions. From some of these agro-towns, Tswana chiefs exercised control of their states. The towns were functionally divided into overlapping economic, social and administrative units (wards), and the pattern of their socio-spatial differentiation was based on social rank, kinship and tribal membership and showed clear traits of contemporary intra-urban structures. These ward divisions are still recognizable today, and most functions have remained intact. They have even been transferred from the traditional agro-towns to many housing quarters of the new cities. The agro-towns acted (and still act) as growth centers and sources of diffusion and, in general, combined a lot of functions which we would today possibly divide into "rural" and "urban". Many of these agro-towns are now officially classified as "urban" and serve as primary or secondary centers within the settlement system of Botswana, but a clear definition as "city" from a geographical viewpoint remains impossible because many rural elements are still present, too. With the structure and functions of these agro-towns as part of its culture, the Tswana society—which has been confronted with what we call urbanization only for the last few decades—still easily preserves traditional rural attitudes and a rural value system under modern urban conditions.

### **3. A Short Note on Urban Policies and Economic and Social Developments in Botswana**

In an effort to meet the needs of low-income population groups and rural-urban

migrants, the Botswana government introduced a special self-help housing scheme to reduce the economic pressure on urban vulnerable households induced by housing expenses. A lot has also been done to provide space for foreign investment in the industrial and services sectors. Town planning in Botswana very much stands in the British tradition of a more or less strict structural and functional separation of different intra-urban settlement areas.

In general, high-density quarters for low-income households are spatially set apart from medium- or low-density areas for medium- or high-income groups. Due to a sound public fiscal situation and skilful manpower, the planning and construction process in Botswana is relatively efficient and, for the medium- and high-cost sector, kept pace with the quickly growing demand for plots and houses.

In the low-cost and self-help sector, however, demand has always been much higher than supply, which led to heavy over-population of most urban site-and-service or self-help quarters. Over 50% of all urban housing plots have been developed under the governmental self-help scheme, but still, over-population and spatial separation have contributed to a process of growing segregation and social polarization in the cities.

The growing cities also are the nodal points of economic development, and economic progress and set-backs are reflected in the urban society. For the past years, the emergence of a new social middle class could be observed in the urban centers. Members of this middle class could benefit directly from economic growth in Botswana. Employment opportunities have grown faster than the labor force, and the expanding public and the more and more diversified private sectors have encouraged rural-urban migration or have offered promotion prospects to those who received advanced school education and/or vocational training.

Non-traditional exports (i.e. products from other than the agricultural or mining sectors) increased from less than 10% to almost 30% of all exports in the 1990s, and most non-traditional export goods were actually produced in the urban centers. Unfortunately, the diversification efforts proved not very viable, which is mainly due to a small domestic market and unstable market conditions in the region. Vehicle assembly may serve as just one example: In Gaborone, a Hyundai assembly plant had to close down after less than two years of production, leaving hundreds jobless.

In the traditional livestock sector, newly constructed abattoirs in Francistown and Maun currently run at less than half their capacity. Obviously, the generally effective macro management and the sound economic development have led to expectations which markets could not fulfill.

As most new industrial developments and external investments are located in the urban centers, the cities are directly affected by output reductions or closures, and in the cities it is not the newly established middle class, but rather the low-income groups, who are hit hardest by these trends. Urban labor markets have expanded, but this expansion, at present, seems unsustainable, resulting in unsustainable livelihoods for many urban households.

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### Biographical Sketch

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