

Traditional Institutions and Sustainability of African Cities and Communities

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Abstract

The future of Africa is widely said to be urban in extant studies, and by 2050, the continent's urban population will have doubled to about 2.5 billion. However, the Smart City Index Report for 2024, produced by the International Institute for Management Development (IMD), shows that only nine of these African cities are sustainable. The factors for the unsustainability of the other African cities and communities include disproportionate population growth rate, poor planning, inadequate infrastructure and resources, traffic congestion, poor waste management, limited access to essential services, youth bulge, crimes and criminality, gender inequities, and vulnerability of the environment to climate change. Addressing these challenges requires a sustainable urban development approach, prioritising inclusive growth, environmental resilience, and innovative solutions as recommended by the global Sustainable Development Goals (Agenda 2030), the African Union's Agenda 1633 ("The Africa We Want"), and even the African Union's Charter on Values and Principles of Decentralisation, Local Governance and Local Development (2014). This paper focuses on the traditional institutions' roles in making these African cities and communities sustainable beyond the modern and predominantly Western methods of urban governance across the continent today. The paper problematises traditional institutions as those structures and knowledge systems that the African peoples depended upon before coming in contact with modernity but still find relevance today, having been transmitted across many generations. These institutions are increasingly brought to cities from rural communities by streams of urban migrants. They help people to build resilience against the social, economic, political and environmental challenges of urban living. The paper advocates for African urban communities to more actionably integrate these traditional institutions into urban management regimes. Four critical areas of attention were identified to show how this could be done: (i) giving traditional title holders more official roles in urban governance, (ii) deploring the resources of traditional African institutions for dealing with emergent social, economic, political and environmental problems in cities and communities, (iii) injecting more African values into the urban management protocols, and (iv) mainstreaming gender in the application of African traditional institutions in urban governance. The paper argues that COVID-19 in 2020 left behind some lessons that could be built upon. Unable to get help outside their immediate communities, many turned to traditional institutions for support services and became counted among those who survived the pandemic. In the post-COVID years, life has become too expensive in many African cities. This forces many urban dwellers to rely more on the indigenous African knowledge system to sustain themselves and calm their ruffled urban constituencies. What is left now is for African urban managers to factor the lessons of Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) into their governance systems equally by injecting more ideas from traditional African institutions into their governance processes. However, urban managers and city dwellers need better education on integrating modern and traditional institutions to promote the sustainability of African cities and communities. Development agencies must support this capacity-building efforts to ensure that more African cities achieve sustainability.