



“Africa Goes Urban – How to Support a Sustainable Transition?”

Dinner Discussion hosted by Global Perspectives Initiative and Alfred Herrhausen Gesellschaft, Quartier Zukunft Berlin, 1 October 2019.

Agenda 2063, the pan-African vision for the continent’s structural transformation, embodies the continent’s political priority for socio-economic development: An economic shift towards high productivity sectors of manufacturing and modern services, as Dr Edlam Yemeru (Chief of Urbanisation Section, UNECA) elucidated during our dinner discussion “Africa Goes Urban – How to Support a Sustainable Transition?”.

According to Prof. Edgar Pieterse (Director, African Centre for Cities), the dominant narrative of Africa as a rural continent is highly misleading: Africa currently scores the fastest rate of urbanisation in the world, with its urban population accounting for 40% of the total – an amount higher than the entire European population. This fact comes with its own opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, uncontrolled and unplanned urban development, also referred to as “urban sprawl”, quickly leads to environmental degradation, ill health and a number of negative social effects. On the other hand, “if they are well planned and managed, African cities can really be engines of growth and transformation”, stresses Dr Edlam Yemeru.

The Role of Politics

According to Prof. Edgar Pieterse, paying attention to Agenda 2063 is essential for European actors who want to contribute positively to Africa’s urban transition: Future-oriented urban infrastructure needs to be affordable and sustainable, which implies that economies are put on a low carbon and environmentally friendly footing. Development finance for infrastructure must therefore not perpetuate harmful solutions such as the promotion of coal energy and vehicle use, which in turn needs to be ensured through consequent political regulations.

Supporting local governments

While boosting job creation is a top priority for African heads of states, its dimension remains predominantly national – just like urban policies. As Ingrid-Gabriela Hoven (Head of Department for Global Issues, Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development) explains during the discussion: “What we are struggling about is a governance issue, because the most controversial point we negotiate is the relationship between central governments and local communities.”

Many African mayors are highly committed to making their urban spaces more sustainable, yet their engagement is often not supported by their national government. Consequently, urban governors lack the access to finance and consultancy that would help them implement respective policies.



Breaking the Silos

Breaking the silos in international development cooperation remains a largely unaddressed challenge, and the field of urbanisation is no exception: “The institutional challenge is that we see a lot of African governments not really prepared to deal with urbanisation as a set of interrelated issues”, so Prof. Edgar Pieterse.

Moreover, adds Dr Edlam Yemeru, sector silos in international development cooperation do not adequately integrate urban and spatial planning into those investments. Integrating urban planning into economic sector strategies is therefore key to prevent such “lost opportunities” through a precise leverage of funding.

Opportunities for German Business

Ingrid-Gabriela Hoven points out that Africa’s urban population will more than double during the next 25 years, which implies the construction of 130 new cities of the size of Berlin.

Construction materials thus have to be recyclable, locally produced and have a minimal carbon dioxide balance. Moreover, mobility systems in cities need to be fully reorganised in order to be compatible with international climate goals.

Sebastian Granow (Head of Asset Management Africa, Siemens) emphasised that “we cannot take a blueprint from Europe or the Western world and just paste it into African cities because their dynamics are fundamentally different.” Yet, he underscores that Africa offers numerous investment opportunities that would induce inclusive economic growth – a great chance for German industry with its history and quality standards. Siemens, for instance, is committed to mobility solutions, centralised and decentralised energy supply, and health care through Siemens Healthineers. In this context, Siemens cut 50% of carbon emissions in Johannesburg, South Africa by cooperating with local firms that offered the necessary country-specific knowledge. The pool of reliable local partners is huge, underlines Sebastian Granow, and so is their ambition to contribute to sustainable urban transitions in partnership with European actors.

Conclusion

Africa’s urban development offers great fields of action – this point was agreed upon among the participants. Not only big global players like Siemens, but also medium-sized companies have been working on, for instance, new mobility concepts for years. Those are highly needed, especially in growing African cities. As Ingrid-Gabriela Hoven concluded: The achievement of our global climate goals depends on the future of our cities, most notably in Africa.