



United Nations  
Economic Commission for Africa



**A regional  
approach to  
leveraging  
urbanization for  
Africa's structural  
transformation**





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# Foreword

Africa is undergoing a rapid transition to urbanization and will soon become the region with the highest rate of urbanization in the world. It is reshaping the social, economic, environmental and political landscape on the continent from local to regional scales. While the management of urban growth has often been relegated to the local level, or dealt with as a siloed sector, such approaches are no longer sufficient to manage the associated challenges while harnessing the multiple advantages of urban development. In order to respond effectively to urbanization, Africa will need strategic, cross-sectoral and multi-scale approaches with effective policies and institutions, together with planned coordination between local, national and regional actors. Cities not only offer considerable potential to drive local and national growth and transformation, but also can be gateways for regional integration in Africa.

African countries will have to recognize the critical role of cities and human settlements in their policy responses to urbanization. Whether it enables or hinders structural transformation will depend on how the policies are planned, managed and governed. The long-term continental vision is acknowledged in Agenda 2063; The Africa We Want of sustainable and inclusive cities and human settlements. In addition, other regional frameworks, such as the African Com-

There is compelling evidence that the potential of urbanization to bring about economic growth in Africa remains untapped and undercut by considerable barriers such as deficiencies in infrastructure and services, poor planning and design, unreliable electricity supply, poor communications and connectivity, underdeveloped labour specialization and poor links between enterprises and innovation centres. At the same time, the economies of scale needed for productive secondary and tertiary sectors are undermined by small national populations, the small size of African cities, barriers to regional connectivity and a failure to leverage the large markets available from regional integration. Optimizing the agglomeration benefits of urbanization for inclusive economic transformation through comprehensive and integrated planning is therefore one of the greatest challenges facing Africa today. Nevertheless, regional and subregional planning for integrated transport corridors and improved economic integration provides some room of optimism.

Considerable opportunities exist to leverage urbanization, but they require deliberate, effective and proactive policies and strategies. As a late-urbanizing continent, Africa has a unique opportunity to steer urbanization towards inclusive and sustainable growth. This requires the

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