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Analysing African urban data: refining the arguments and the (mis)understandings of end users: a response to Turok

Deborah Potts

As Turok notes towards the end of his paper responding to my own and Fox's, 'there is considerable scope for improved information and research on the dynamics of urbanisation in Africa'. This is certainly true. There is, nonetheless, much information to be had from careful 'watching' of African urban census data. Analysis of such data (rather than reliance on databases such as the World Urbanization Prospects) provided indications that the pace and level of urbanization in many countries in the late 20th and early 21st century were often overstated. Now that the availability and regularity of censuses has improved, it has become a little easier to refine urban analysis by, for example, assessing which types of urban settlements are growing most vigorously and the impacts of urban definitions. Sometimes, where a rapid rise in the urban population share is reported, such analysis indicates that much of this growth must be accounted for by smaller urban settlements. This, in itself, is useful information with socio-economic implications. Were full lists of urban settlements published by statistical authorities one could do more but there are other data with which one can attempt triangulation to further the analysis. As discussed in my paper, labour force data can provide an indication of the extent to which urbanization levels as recorded in the census are reflected in shifts out of primary occupations. Comparing these with countries in other regions or elsewhere in Africa provides possible insights into differential urbanization processes.

Turok's response picks up on some of these themes. However, it misses some nuances in my analysis. For example, there is some simplification of the implications of the ways powerful users of African urban data increasingly tend to use those data as economic proxies. In crude terms, their new message is 'the more urban, the better', and that rapid urbanization means rapid structural change towards a more 'modern' sectoral composition of the economy. This means that problematizing urban data has policy relevance. However, this is a two-way street - we also need to evaluate the data 'choices' of policy makers. Turok's view that 'basic measurement flaws and inaccuracies' are the source of the 'glaring errors' in how organisations interpret African urban data misses an important element of my argument. That is that African censuses can actually be useful. Yet policy makers sometimes misrepresent

African urban trends not *because* of the census data but *in spite* of it: they choose to ignore useful data. The Rwandan example is particularly obvious.

My paper also discusses issues deriving from urban definitions at the lower end of the urban hierarchy. Turok's response focuses on these. However, he is incorrect to claim that I say that some definitions are 'inappropriate'. Not only do I not use that word, but I note that '[t]here can be good reasons for [definitional] ... differences and a universal definition is probably neither possible nor desirable'.

There are some other misrepresentations of my paper in Turok's response. The *in situ* urbanization I refer to usually relates to individual centres passing numerical population thresholds rather than settlements 'merging' (and definitely not to towns merging). My analysis does not show that 'agricultural occupations dominate the urban economies in four countries'; rather it shows that they account for far more employment than a purely 'economic' reading of urbanization might suggest. Turok makes a, not unreasonable, argument against adding further complexity to urban definitions by including a criterion related to economic activities. Nonetheless, as my paper notes, several Asian countries, which have all the 'African' issues about informality and multiple livelihoods that he claims make this too difficult, do this, and evidently feel that this acknowledgement of the link between specialization of labour and 'urban' is important.

Turok makes a couple of points in relation to the paper by Fox et al that suggest possible misunderstandings of my work. First, in my 2011 paper on Nigeria, I never claimed its urbanization had 'stalled'; instead I argued that the available evidence was that the rate at which it was becoming more urbanized from around 1990 to 2006 was much slower than was usually being stated. For the 31 largest cities my analysis used 2006 census data, but the paper also made extensive use of data published by Africapolis. Since my paper was published, however, the Africapolis researchers have substantially revised those data, stating that the 2006 census was more reliable than they originally judged, and that their urban population estimates for Nigeria and analysis of those data were wrong in some respects. In particular, they re-classified millions of people previously categorised as rural, as urban, in the four 'multi-polar' regions Turok mentions. Nonetheless, their revisions for most other West African countries 'did not yield any major surprises' and do 'not challenge ... the major

trends' they earlier identified (OECD/SWAC 2016:17) which were generally for lower levels of urbanization than many projections assumed. Second, Turok notes that it is argued that if 'natural increase' in Nigerian cities 'continues', then urbanisation proceeds. This is incorrect when urbanisation means an increase in the proportion of the population defined as urban, as specified in my paper. In the absence of migration, urban natural increase would have to exceed rural natural increase for urbanisation to occur – not impossible, but exceedingly rare today. There may also be some misunderstanding here about net migration trends. I have never argued that Africa's weak urban economies *generally* lead to, or indeed are likely to cause, a *cessation* of urbanisation. Perhaps understandably there has been much interest in census analyses which have found net out-migration from individual African cities or even (occasionally) entire urban networks (in aggregate). However, these situations remain exceptional as I always emphasise; the more general pattern found tends to be that *net* in-migration continues but at a lower rate than predicted or often assumed, therefore slowing (not stopping) urbanization.

OECD/SWAC 2016, Urbanisation dynamics in West Africa 1950-2010: Africapolis I, 2015 Update, West African Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris.

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