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AFRICAN TOWNS: THE SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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African urban studies emerged shortly before World War II (e.g. Hellman 1935; Wilson 1942), as social scientists began to realise that the almost exclusive emphasis, in African social research at the time, on *rural* life was both intellectually and politically one-sided. Sizeable towns had for centuries been a feature both of the continent's coastal societies and of various parts of the interior; many more had been founded since the Scramble for Africa and — largely on the basis of the migratory influx of rural-born Africans — were already rapidly expanding as administrative, commercial and industrial or mining centres.

It was the time when now classic anthropological monographs on Africa were being written — but the study of African social change, even in a rural setting, was still largely relegated to afterthoughts, after the 'main book'. African urban life posed enormous problems of analysis to its early researchers, whose first field-work experience had normally been rural. The urban situation appeared to them as of a bewildering complexity — not unlike the experience of the urban migrants whom they followed to town from their respective rural homes. How could social research begin to capture that immense heterogeneity of regional, ethnic and cultural origins, and to see patterns of repetitive, institutionalised social relations within the towns and between the towns and the rural communities that fed them with people and food? Anthropology had recognised that African village life was to a considerable — if initially exaggerated — extent organised in enduring, localised, culturally fairly homogeneous and corporate groups, which were largely conceptualised in a kinship idiom; in these groups, individuals were tied together through the converging effects of: multiplex and interdependent roles, a sense of community (as enforced by both ritual, a shared world-view, traditional politics and ethnic identity), and interlocking economic interests to be pursued within a limited rural space. If most of this seemed to be lacking in the emergent African urban society, what then constituted its structural features? Admittedly, general sociology had already offered dichotomies (such as Durkheim's mechanical/organic solidarity; or Toennies's *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft*) that helped to impose a first ordering on the African urban data. But specifically urban interpretative models deriving from other, more urbanized continents were still in the process of being formulated for the first time. Only in the 1920s and '30s North Atlantic² urban life itself — the very cradle of the social sciences — was being explored and subjected to empirical sociological generalisations that highlighted the unique nature of urban mass society in the industrial modern world (e.g. Burgess 1925).

The initial rural bias in African social studies, moreover, reflected both the demographic realities of African territories, and the preoccupations of Europeans as a dominant group in the colonial situation — a state of affairs which still has many parallels in contemporary South Africa. Virtually ever since the creation of modern

¹ I am indebted to Rice Bergh and Gerti Hesseling for comments on an earlier draft.

² I.e. North American and Northwestern European.

states in Africa, administrators have worried about urban influx control, building regulations, sanitation, crime, and the threat an urban *Lumpenproletariat* (or whatever racist equivalent term was employed) would pose to the political status quo; by contrast, how much more manageable African village society appeared to be! Also colonial industrialists, with the freedom accorded them by the administrators, found it eminently profitable to regard even Africans in towns as displaced villagers — whose labour power had to be produced and reproduced in distant villages at no cost to the urban capitalist sector, who therefore had to be considered as bachelors without financial responsibilities beyond keeping up their own personal labour power, and who (ideally) were only tolerated in town, under minimal conditions of housing and income, for so long as their labour could be directly subjected to industrial exploitation.³ It all chimed in with charitable and Christian-missionary stereotypes of the deplorable, uprooted, morally-disorientated rural stranger, in the (African) city which attracted all the negative connotations of Babel, Sodom and Gomorra, — such a far cry from the Arcadian image of Christian life around the rural missions in Africa.⁴

If urban researchers could increasingly resist these ideological pressures as derived from Western interests, they could often not resist some professional vicarious identification with African rural life.⁵ For a long time, towns would continue to be seen as, for Africans, *the wrong place to be in*.

In addition to these ideological problems the emergent African urban sociology found practical difficulties on its way. In the towns, the African inhabitants were subjected (more directly and more effectively than in most village settings) to the humiliating systems of administrative and police control, spatial segregation and economic exploitation typical of colonialism and industrial capitalism (cf. Gluckman 1971). While this brought them geographically close to social researchers, it tended to create strong social and administrative boundaries difficult to cross except by the most indirect types of social research. Right up to the end of the colonial period, prolonged participant observation on the basis of the researcher's co-residence, commensality and proficiency in an African language — however much a standard technique of long standing in rural social studies — remained an exception in African urban studies. Instead, urban researchers tended to work from their offices and to largely rely on African assistants and on survey techniques. Meanwhile, the other side of this medal was that the European populations of African towns in the colonial era managed, for obvious reasons of political dominance, to keep social researchers away from their own ornate doorsteps. It was only gradually, and partly after Independence, that the social sciences built up an analytical and theoretical understanding of the nature of colonial domination and of the roles of social research in that context; and until today the urban elites of European extraction in Africa have constituted a relative blind spot in the sociological literature.

³ Cf. Meillassoux 1975; Gerold-Scheepers & van Binsbergen 1978.

⁴ For a typical, if rather sophisticated, early statement of the missionary position, cf. Merle-Davis 1933. For views on actual conditions prevailing among migrant workers, see, for instance, van Onselen 1976, 1978, and the other contributions to Phimister & van Onselen 1978.

⁵ As late as the 1960s, Gutkind had to advocate that the 'one-visit-to-an-urban-area-approach' be abandoned (1968).

The adoption of quantitative research methods did have a certain advantage. It acknowledged, and rendered visible, the broad statistical aggregates that (as regional and linguistic clusters, occupational groups, emergent social classes and status groups, and as religious, political, ethnic and recreational voluntary associations) make up the backbone of urban society in the first place. Already the simple decision to use a questionnaire approach meant that the classic units of study of rural-based anthropology (village, kin group, clan, 'tribe') were replaced by the human *individual*: the respondent who, as urbanite or urban migrant, appeared to form the basic constituent *atom* of urban social life, with all sorts of attributes (sex, age, income, personal migration and labour history, etc.) which it was considered meaningful to assess in great detail. The subsequent exponential growth of quantitative methods in general sociology, as well as the emphasis on methodological individualism in the 1960s, only reinforced this trend in African urban research.

Such survey approaches may bring out relevant social-structural attributes of individuals as exponents of broad social-structural aggregates, but they are not particularly suited for the identification and analysis of *social relationships* of a more subtle and personal nature, nor do they throw in relief the evolution of such relationships over time. Yet it is primarily in a context of enduring social relationships that individual attributes acquire their actual, varying sociological significance. For instance, the townsman's⁶ 'cash income' features in virtually every urban survey. The meaning of the amounts stated and proudly reported becomes however very problematic indeed, once we realise that the money involved is earned, shared, distributed, invested, donated, dissipated, augmented, dissimulated, subjected to inter-gender dynamics, insured, exchanged for prestations⁷ in kind, or alienated, as the case may be, in very complex social processes that certainly do not stop at the (none too unambiguous) confines of the urban household. On the contrary, the urban migrant's network of financial transactions involves — in addition to neighbours, friends, and townsmen of the same ethnic and regional origins — both formal and informal sectors of the urban economy, rotating credit associations, the interaction (for housing, employment, patronage, political support) of people from various classes, as well as those 'back home', in the villages and the small home-towns of origin. Against this background, 'cash income' as an entry in a questionnaire, even assuming (and on what grounds?) that any figure stated is formally correct and complete — is only a very first step in assessing patterns of consumption, poverty, unemployment, clientship and entrepreneurship, in short: urban survival and its strategies. These more complex underlying aspects are not *per se* beyond the grasp of quantitative methods, but participant observation has proven to yield much richer and more profound insights on this point.

To regard the African townsman as a social atom and nothing more means yielding to stereotypical conceptions that stripped the social dimension off Africans — in an attempt to reduce them to the powerless, resourceless pawns, without past

⁶ Throughout my argument treated as male for stylistic convenience only.

⁷ '...[T]he action of paying, in money or service, what is due by law or custom, or feudally; a payment or the performance of a service so imposed or exacted; also, the performance of something promised' — Onions 1978: 1663.

nor future, that colonial bureaucrats and capitalists hoped they could become.⁸ However, it is precisely in the specific social relationships of African town life that lie the roots of economic, cultural and political organisation through which urban migrants have managed to survive in an initially inimical environment. And usually these forms of urban social organisation, far from copying pre-existing rural or North Atlantic models, were forged by townsmen in the course of fascinating processes of trial and error. The towns of Africa are truly laboratories of sociological experiment and innovation. It is also here that we can begin to understand how — more in general — African townsmen have proudly shaped their ethnically and linguistically converging forms of urban life, moulding the multi-ethnic influx of migrants into a viable urban society where formal and informal norms of conduct, patterns of experience, and sources of identification and mobilisation, are widely shared across ethnic and regional divisions. On these bases they have selectively and creatively negotiated the cultural heritage and social ties that refer to their rural backgrounds, and have asserted themselves in the face of the modern state and municipal authorities.

Still, one needs both the quantitative and the qualitative approach. Survey techniques have turned out to be particularly useful when they have approached the townsman at the crucial point of transition: when he is in the process of crossing over from the rural situation and of *becoming* a townsman — in other words, with regard to the process of *urbanisation*. Admittedly the urban migrant turns out to be received and incorporated in a viable structure of urban social relations — without which he could hardly find an urban foothold in the first place; however, it could not be denied that in taking leave from his rural social environment he asserted himself as an individual, reshuffling and redefining, if not tearing loose, his rural relationships, entering a new world for which his rural upbringing had but ill prepared him. Here a study of individual characteristics, attributes and attitudes such as could be measured by a questionnaire in a formalised interview setting does make sense.

Urbanisation studies, for decades a dominant field in African urban studies, have however been somewhat slow to shed their original, misplaced wonder as to what Africans ‘were for goodness’ sake *doing*’ in towns — implying that they had better stay ‘at home’: in the villages for which classic anthropology had after all devised such convenient analytical and methodological approaches. Likewise, the emphasis on urban migrants’ individual attributes, motivations and aspirations (in short the ‘social atom’ element) in survey-based urbanisation studies, may not have taken sufficient distance from the capitalist/colonial ideological constructs concerning African townsmen as indicated above. There is a hitherto little explored connexion here: between questionnaire surveys and methodological individualism (as a rather too obvious context in which to interpret the findings of such surveys), on the one hand (cf. van Binsbergen 1977), — and, on the other, the politically and economically desirable image of the fragmented, atomised urban man, the worker in mine barracks and highly policed ‘compounds’, the loner whose dependants are unwelcome in town and therefore officially denied out of all existence, the client of bureaucratic agencies of the colonial and post-colonial state. Questionnaires, if administered in a sophisticated manner, may provide us with profiles of aggregate individuals, but they are not the most obvious or valid instruments to understand, let alone share in, the

⁸ For a related critique of the ‘atomized’ African townsman, cf. Mitchell 1960.

eagerness, warmth, pride and dignity of African town life, its capacity for social and cultural experiment and political protest and mobilisation.

Qualitative research has shown the importance of enduring relationships which (a) provide an ethnically- or regionally-based reception structure for arriving migrants, (b) identify and access economic opportunities and administrative/political support, and (c) maintain social control among urban migrants both within the urban situation and as regards the continued observance of both economic and symbolic obligations towards the rural home. All this is part and parcel of the individual process of becoming a townsman, as well as of the institutionalised structure of town life.

In this light, urbanisation not so much precedes, but in itself forms but one specific aspect of, the *urbanism* with which it is so often contrasted: the social-structural and cultural arrangements that allow people to be townsmen, to identify as such, and to maintain, together with other townsmen, the imperfect order of town life. Along these lines urban sociology has come to appreciate town life in its own right, with its own cultural and organisational dynamics, its own creativeness. The African townsman is not a free (and stray) social atom but a participant in cross-cutting personal and group relations that shape and give meaning to his urban life, and link it with the life of a household, kinsfolk both in town and in a rural area of origin, a personal network of friends, neighbours and colleagues, an ethnic group, a professional organisation, a religious body, a political party and its leaders, the nation as a whole.

In half a century, and attempting to keep pace with the spectacular urban growth in Africa, African urban sociology has consolidated itself as a viable sub-discipline along lines which — for reasons of space — can only be indicated here in the most cursory way.⁹ The initial preoccupation with urbanisation (a logical bridge to that other sub-discipline, African migration studies) has broadened to a more comprehensive study of the forms, structures and processes of urban society. Within the subject, ‘the struggle for the city’¹⁰ can be said to have revolved on the question as to how much of a rural and traditionalist framework researchers were allowed to discard in their approach to African urban phenomena — and this battle was won (perhaps prematurely so, see below) by those who insisted on studying the city as a social field in its own right.

Also in other ways the sub-discipline has undergone significant changes. In terms of its personnel one can point to a substantial number of senior African researchers in this field, and in general to the emergence of fully-fledged urban researchers, whose first research commitment has been to the city and not to a rural area. In terms of content there has been an impressive accumulation of insights.¹¹ Still in the 1960s,

⁹ Among the unavoidable major omissions of the present introduction and its bibliography, one of the least deserved ones concerns francophone contributions to African urban sociology; I may direct the reader to such useful overviews as: de Saint Moulin 1978; Haeringer 1983; and Barbier & Le Bris 1985.

¹⁰ Cf. Cooper 1983; but there the struggle for the city is not between academi-cians, but between the state, capital and migrant workers.

¹¹ E.g. Mitchell 1966; Miner 1967; Gutkind 1974; Parkin 1975; Peil & Sada 1984.

Schwab could express amazement at the low level of theoretical sophistication in this field (1967). Since, significant advances have been made in this respect, for instance with regard to urban ethnicity (e.g. Mitchell 1970; Cohen 1969, 1974), urban kinship (Epstein 1981), and urban social classes (Lloyd 1974). The concept of the *social network*, and the formal methods propounded to study them, threw much light on inter-personal, optional and sometimes evasive dynamics of urban social relationships, and the ways in which these shaped kinship, economic, ethnic and political relations both in town and between the town and the rural home (Mitchell 1969). Especially in the initial euphoria of network analysis this approach was suggested to offer a definitive answer to the question as to what constituted, in the urban social process at the face-to-face level, the structural equivalents of the enduring social relationships that constitute African village life. The sociological implications (in terms of class, proletarianisation, consciousness, mobilisation and protest) of the economic role of African cities (cf. Epstein 1958 — among many others) were further thrown in relief when under the influence of Marxist approaches they could be seen as the major loci from where industrial capitalism as a dominant mode of production was propagated in the periphery of the world system. Studies of urban-rural relations, including the continued partial reliance of urban migrants on their village and small-town homes and on the latter's economy and symbolic order, came to be understood in a framework of the articulation of modes of production and the incomplete proletarianisation of these migrants (van Binsbergen 1981: ch. 7).

Along similar lines, *women's* predicament (Little 1973) could be understood in terms of their access to production and circulation in town, highlighting the specific forms of male appropriation and control which the urban situation either imposed upon women or helped women to escape. Concentrating on urban women's economic activities, house ownership and economic support networks, her comparative analysis shows that women develop gender-specific patterns of social relationships on these points, and that their range of alternatives is rather narrower than it is for urban men — with clear implications for urban housing policy.

Another aspect of African towns which had received much initial attention gradually became less prominent a topic: *urban voluntary associations* (Little 1965). These were somehow comparable to network relations in that they appeared to constitute a typical urban, optional, achieved, one-stranded form of social organisation, with obvious applications in the ethnic and economic fields. However, the essential difference is that voluntary associations tend to take a formal organisational shape, acquiring an existence far more external to the individual actor, and with possibilities of mobilisation and collective action that are per definition lacking in the personal network. In fact, association studies of African towns have continued until today but under new headings — headings that specifically signal the major voluntary associations in which African townsmen engage: Christian churches (and Islamic brotherhoods), political parties, women's organisations (and to an apparently lessening extent ethnic and regional associations). These formal organisations are of course also to be found in rural Africa, weaving into village social structures, but their contribution to the social structure is greatest in town. It is there that they continue to provide major settings for the interaction between townsmen at the urban grassroots level on the one hand, and the modern state and broad international cultural and ideological movements on the other. In these respects voluntary organisations may well be regarded as microcosms where basic features of

the macrocosm of modern society¹² are made available at the grassroots level, for townsmen to familiarise themselves with, to experiment with, and perhaps to apply to their own benefit (Parkin 1966). These associations, therefore, are among the major mechanisms of the penetration of the colonial and post-colonial state in urban settings — but also the cradles of nationalism and the struggle for Independence.

However, as the sub-discipline has acquired a definite shape around accumulated insights and debates, much remains still to be done on the theoretical level. Let me merely indicate two personal hobby-horses.

In modern African studies, the unmistakable trend towards inter-disciplinary convergence on a regional or continental basis appears to go somewhat at the expense of theoretical and methodological inspiration from the main-stream of the discipline. I suspect that general sociology by now has learned rather more, and rather more subtle things, about the urban experience, the nature and evolution of formal organisations in state and industry, the political and symbolico-cultural processes of civil mass society under an electronic technology and a consumer-orientated commodity industry, than is reflected in current urban sociology in Africa. Preoccupations with power, control, class, adaptation, survival, material improvement, emancipation, protest, liberation and identity, such as provided the intellectual and political motors behind much of the sub-discipline's achievements in Africa, may be profitably blended with an awareness of the cultural dynamics through which, foremost in Africa's rapidly growing cities, popular culture — even if thoroughly affected by international electronic commoditisation — is now offering creative syntheses between the African tradition and the modern state. Much of the existing African urban sociology would leave one with the impression that African townsmen are rather less sophisticated and complex, and rather more obsessed by the demands of material and political survival, than their counterparts in the North Atlantic are; I am not convinced that this reflects a difference in reality, and not just between the respective researchers.

While this prompts further exploration of the more symbolic aspects of urbanism, one could, ironically, suggest that, in the sub-discipline, the 'struggle for the city' has been a little too successful. Gluckman's (1960: 57) famous adage '*the African townsman is a townsman*'¹³ was timely, but it also helped to bring about the situation that, even today, the interpenetration of rural and urban life, whilst a central datum of African sociology, also remains one of its great puzzles. There is reason to believe that sociologists of African towns have still not sufficiently problematised the urban/rural dichotomy; in stead, they have tended to endow that dichotomy with a rigidity and the pretence of explanatory power that is rather defeated by the pragmatic ease with which African townsmen themselves are moving all the time between the rural and the urban poles of their existence. Urban migrants manage to keep up rural ties and often return to rural residence. Townsmen pattern their family life, their production and consumption, somehow after cultural (e.g. kinship, patronage, ritual) notions deriving from their distant homes. And urban ethnicity, although far from a

¹² Such as: bureaucratic structures and the authority that underpins them, formal status hierarchies, and the legal and organizational uses of literacy; cf. Tiger 1967.

¹³ And not a displaced villager or tribesman — but on the contrary 'detrribalized' as soon as he leaves his village (Gluckman 1945: 12); the latter date shows that these ideas have percolated in African urban studies long before 1960.

restaging of rural life and certainly not based on ‘primordial attachments’, has turned out to be a much more comprehensive and enduring phenomenon than merely a situational labelling exercise in the recruitment of network partners (as suggested in Mitchell’s and Epstein’s early studies on the Zambian Copperbelt). Rural culture never functions in an unselected and untransformed capacity in an urban environment (Mitchell 1956), but the rules and mechanisms of the process of urban/rural continuity are still far from clear. Nor is this only a question of specific ethnic groups: also the nature of the (conceptual, interactional) boundaries between urban ethnic groups needs to be much problematised and drawn within the proper, situational perspective. For there is unmistakably a coalescence, across urban ethnic groups, of neo-traditional cultural notions in the field of kinship, sexual relations, law and order — so that also in multi-ethnic situations terms of oral contracts, marriage problems, sexual offences, sorcery accusations etc., can be discussed and even taken to court. This is also an aspect of urbanism, but one that is so often continuous¹⁴ with rural conditions that Gluckman’s adage would have to be taken with a pinch of salt.¹⁵

The initial pretensions of African urban sociology, of covering the entire field of urban Africa, gave way to a more modest share of the African urban space, leaving substantial pieces of territory to such adjacent disciplines as urban geography, urban demography, urban planning, urban environmental studies — or sharing with them. Urban history (no doubt absorbing much of the urban sociology of an earlier vintage) seems about to emerge as a subject in its own right, while it seems only a matter of time before the study of urban housing and housing needs breaks out of its sociological strait-jacket. And while African urban studies are thus diversifying, African urban sociology in the narrower sense would seem to be less in the middle of Africanist debate than it was one or two decades ago.¹⁶ Now that academically ‘the

¹⁴ Southall (1961: 6f) points out that in this respect there are significant differences between African towns.

¹⁵ Cf. Mayer 1962; Epstein 1967; Parkin 1969; Banton 1973; for an African critique, however, Magubane 1973.

¹⁶ For useful bibliographies of African urban studies, cf. O’Connor 1981; Peil & Saga 1984: 351-77. Some superficial impression of the present state of the art can be gleaned from the authoritative *Africa Bibliography 1985* of the International African Institute (Blackhurst 1986). Among 3463 entries listed (including 146 collective volumes), 60 (2%) are explicitly in the field of African urban studies — a somewhat disappointing but conservative figure, which perhaps reflects a selective orientation on the part of the International African Institute (in the sense that pragmatic studies in the fields of planning and development may have been under-represented), and certainly does not take into account the many references to African urban phenomena in works of a more general nature: on the state, courts, political parties, churches etc. The explicitly urban studies can be further broken down as follows:

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struggle for the city' is over (and now that, out there in reality, the African towns themselves have also developed metropolitan skylines), the urban phenomenon is certainly much more taken for granted, and rather than in its totality inspiring new fundamental research, has come to serve as an inconspicuous background for part studies on kinship, women, the informal sector, political patronage, etc.

Also, there has been a shift in inspiration, away from problematics primarily defined in terms of sociological theory and detached urban/rural comparisons, and towards pragmatic issues. Although an awareness of 'social problems' and their political implications has always been part of African urban studies, it is particularly in recent years that academic knowledge on African cities has come to function, and to justify itself, within a framework of municipal administration, town planning, and development co-operation.

	urban sociology*)	other urban studies	total
Africa general	3 [2]		
North Africa	14 [0]		
sub-Saharan Africa (except South Africa)	12 [1]		
South Africa	7 [2]		
total	36 [5]	24	60

*) defined as in the present argument; entries give the number of separate publications listed (articles, books, and contributions to collective volumes); among these, numbers between brackets [] indicate books.

Considering the extent to which contemporary sub-Saharan Africa is urbanized, the figure of three books and a dozen articles (disregarding South Africa) does suggest that the dynamism and enthusiasm that attended this subdiscipline in the 1960s have considerably diminished in the 1980s.

As regards the topics dealt with in the specifically sociological publications, these fall in the following broad clusters: (a) general; the relative nature of the rural/urban distinction; migration, capitalism and the state; women in town; social classes; unemployment; social relations among migrants; (b) additional topics for North African entries are: symbolic significance of cities; segregation; urbanization, including spontaneous urbanization; work and housing; housing needs of women; leisure time activities; (c) and for South Africa: urbanization; influx control; segregation; migrant women; gangs; views on causation among urbanites.

Here other disciplines take the lead. Urban sociology may claim to have access to African townsmen. A detached but sympathetic study of their social relationships and of the urban social structure as a whole, has enabled this discipline to understand these townsmen's predicaments, their conscious choices and preferences as well as (sociologically rather more relevant) the largely unconscious structural constraints of their social action. However, such insights at the grassroots level — even if arrived at by sound methods and presented without an excess of sociological jargon — carry relatively little weight in the world of planners and bureaucrats. And even *development*, the main organisational and financial setting of Africanist research today, is not primarily defined, implemented, funded nor evaluated in terms of the central orientation of urban sociology: the urban social process, involving personal relationships *and* social-structural categories, urbanisation *and* urbanism, relations between townsmen and the state and rural-urban ties.

That orientation, however, remains eminently relevant to whatever urban situation in Africa, illuminating it — by virtue of the methodological and theoretical insights accumulated in this field —, and lending recognisable features and a voice to townsmen who otherwise would be scarcely represented in decision-making arenas. By their very nature, towns also house the elites; but while these have been touched by African urban sociology, its major subjects are urban migrants, squatters, the urban poor. Improvising, enterprising, challenging, these people are somehow at the fringe of the governmental, legal and political structures, and of the attending middle-class and bureaucratic values. It is no exaggeration to claim that they are also among the forces that even post-colonial African governments are most afraid of, and are most bent on controlling — preferably with minimal negotiation. In this context urban sociology will continue to form not only a potential source of inspiration, but also part of the academic and political conscience, of the urban planners and administrators whose reports and actions have an increasing impact on urban Africa.

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