CHARACTER OF URBANIZATION FATE OF MEGACITIES: COMPARING RUSSIAN URBAN DEVELOPMENT AND AFRICAN CASE

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(Abstract)

1. Urbanization is a worldwide phenomenon, and Africa is no exception. However, the continent occupies a special place in the global economic and social arena. The same can be said about the process of urbanization in Africa: while replicating with varying degrees of accuracy many tendencies inherent to other countries, this process, however, reveals a number of specific features that are peculiar to the African context.

2. While in Russia the problems have different nature it is nevertheless interesting to see how urbanization patterns developed there and draw some conclusions for African urban development. The vast territory of Russia plays a key role in forming its settlement patterns. For a long time the development of new territories was literally taking away resources from urbanization.

3. During the Soviet period, the number of cities and the urban population grew rapidly. After the 1917 revolution, urbanization became more vigorous, driven by industrial development and related processes. This period is characterized by the growth in the number of cities and an increase in the share of the urban population in the country. The characteristics of urbanization in the Soviet period include the outpacing growth of large cities, the formation of urban agglomerations, the spread
of urban lifestyle to the countryside, the emergence of a significant number of so-called "closed cities", mostly belonging to the defense industry. Overall, during the Soviet period, the number of cities increased five-fold, and the share of the urban population grew from 18 to 73.1%. In the post-perestroika period, Russia's urban population fell by about 3 million people, which was mainly due to the processes of depopulation.

4. Today, the main problems of Russian cities include the rapid growth of the largest agglomerations (Moscow, St. Petersburg, and some others) due to the mass migration, including that from the CIS countries, a decrease in the living standards and cultural and educational status of urban residents, the deterioration of urban environment, worsening environmental problems, the critical situation in small towns, especially single-industry ones, and other negative phenomena. This is the range of issues that should be addressed by Russia in the foreseeable future.

5. African case is very much opposite to that of Russia. Currently, the African continent is experiencing a phase of quantitative and qualitative demographic changes. In 1990, two-thirds of the African population lived in rural areas, but by 2030, 760 million Africans, or more than 50% of Africa's population, will live in cities. By 2050, the continent's urban population will exceed 1.2 billion people - more than the entire population of the West.

In absolute terms, the population of major cities will increase most significantly in the coming years. They will account for over one third of the total increase in Africa's urban population.

In 1950, Africa had only two cities with the population of more than 1 million people - Cairo and Alexandria. In 2010, there were 50 such megacities. At that, the average number of inhabitants of the African megacities was 2.8 million,
while the entire population of these cities exceeded 144 million. By 2015, there will already be 59 megacities on the continent.

6. The largest absolute contribution to the growth of the urban population in the coming years will be made by Kinshasa, the capital of the DRC (more than 4 million people), Lagos, the largest city in Nigeria (+3.6 million), and Luanda, the capital of Angola (+2.3 million), while the population of Cairo, which is currently the largest city in Africa, will grow by only 1.5 million.

7. In addition to the accelerated growth of megacities, in Africa there is a tendency for the formation of large urban systems that concentrate around one, two or three major cities and gradually pull surrounding towns and the countryside into their orbit of influence. This process has a strong synergistic effect: adding up the numbers, in this case the populations of towns and cities, leads to important qualitative changes in their development, which manifests itself in an accelerated socio-economic growth of urban areas and their simultaneous isolation from the rest of the country or group of countries.

8. The process of urbanization is usually accompanied by an increase in per capita income and the development of industry and economy in general. This trend has been observed in Europe, North and Latin America and in much of Asia. However, Africa, unlike other regions of the world, has not demonstrated this trend in all countries and for all time periods. Particularly negative in this regard was the period from 1970 to 1995. During this period, Africa’s urban population grew on average by 4.7% annually, while per capita GDP declined by 0.7% per year. This inverse relation between indicators of urbanization and per capita income is a unique phenomenon even for the world’s poorest countries.

Africa experienced a destructive process of structural adjustment, which was imposed on the continent. At the same time, the accelerated growth of African
cities was not accompanied by an increase in industrial production, as it was the case in the developed countries of Europe and America.

9. In this connection, in the 1980s – 1990s, fairly widespread became the concept of "pseudo-urbanization", or "false urbanization". Despite all its inconsistency, the process of urban growth in Africa stimulates socio-economic development, albeit in distorted and non-traditional forms, and cities themselves, amid limited material, financial and other resources, are becoming a sort of "outposts of growth".

10. At the same time, the trend we see in Africa towards urbanization in the absence of economic growth can be partly explained by distorted incentives that encourage workers to move to the city in order to receive subsidies and other social benefits rather than to have an opportunity to find a better paying job.

11. What lay at the heart of rural-urban migration in Africa was not just economic attractiveness of cities, but also, to a large extent, factors pushing people out from the countryside, including widespread farm bankruptcies, land scarcity, and the relative and absolute overpopulation in agrarian communities, as well as natural disasters.

Furthermore, wars and civil unrest on the African continent for decades have been forcing millions of people to flee to cities.

12. Urbanization processes in Africa under the conditions of weak economy, high rates of population growth and high population mobility increasingly acquire crisis outlines.

The crisis has affected almost all aspects of life in African cities - employment, education and health, food and welfare benefits, environment and the access to urban social services, and many other areas.
The problem of widespread urban poverty has come to the forefront in all its complexity and severity.

13. However, the rapid growth of the urban population leads to an increase in the proportion of people of working age in cities, i.e. of potential workforce. The workforce in African cities is growing rapidly, which provides cheap labor for the economy, including its informal sector.

14. Indeed, there exist upper layers of the informal economy linked to the modern sector of the economy (small business, etc.), which form social groups that are transitional to modern social groups.

Cities also contribute to improving the quality of labor by educating and training it.

15. However, the process is increasingly taking the form of a crisis. Youth is in a particularly difficult situation. Most of the urban unemployed (50-75%) are people under 25 years of age. Young specialists – recent graduates – who have difficulties finding suitable jobs are also lumpenized.

16. Marginal masses of urban residents are involved in riots and unrest of the general urban population, which have become ubiquitous on the continent. The events of 2011-2014 in Arab countries may repeat themselves in Sub-Saharan Africa.

17. Mounting contradictions in African urbanization and a peculiar intersection of traditional and modern, internal and external factors determine the need for a radical transformation of many components of the socio-economic structure of African countries, as well as of their position in the world economic system.
18. In this sense, extensive cooperation between BRICS countries and African states can have a positive effect on solving the problem of megacities, and facilitate their transformation. Such cooperation can contribute to Africa’s economic development, including the development of industrial production drawing on its huge workforce, improving social infrastructure, and raising the level of education and health care. Africa and African megacities possess the potential for qualitative and quantitative development and for overcoming current socio-economic difficulties.