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Sub-Saharan Africa is modernising fast, changing the dynamic between town and countryside. What is the best way to manage the impacts on rural and urban communities? An EU-funded project is collecting data that helps policymakers make wise choices for inclusive development.

Kigali, the capital of Rwanda © Jytte Agergaard

Rural and urban regions in Africa are feeling the impact of rapid change. Bigger, more efficient farms need fewer workers, while new infrastructure and services mean that more people live in towns and cities. But do these trends also increase poverty?

To find out, a team of African and European researchers is studying how changes in rural and urban populations, and in economic dynamics, are interconnected in Sub-Saharan Africa. Focusing on case studies of four very different countries – Cameroon, Ghana, Rwanda and Tanzania – the RurbanAfrica
project is showing how rural-city connections can impact poverty and development.

“There is huge interest from African governments in understanding this topic,” says project coordinator Jytte Agergaard of the University of Copenhagen. “There is major population growth in Africa, along with movement between regions – managing rural-urban migration well can make countries better off.”

Research is needed, she adds, because a lot of policies for Africa are based on a fear of urbanisation, compounded by a mistaken view of how migration works. “Policymakers and academics often see it as a one-way flow from rural areas to cities, but in fact the environments are interlinked.”

Three years into the project, RurbanAfrica has found that the case study countries have followed similar approaches to agriculture, with broadly similar outcomes – modernisation, but lower levels of farm employment.

However, patterns of urbanisation have varied widely between the countries. This can partly be linked to different policies and economic styles, partly to different historical legacies, says Agergaard.

And although urban poverty is often blamed on rural to urban migration, the project’s studies suggest that poor planning is the real culprit. There is strong population growth and mobility within large cities – and many inhabitants are second- or third-generation city-dwellers.

Despite their different economies, there are steps that all governments in these countries can take, RurbanAfrica makes clear. Better-coordinated policies, centralised land data and more detailed information about household income can improve services and opportunities across the region.

Working with stakeholders

To learn what matters to stakeholders – while creating awareness of the project’s work – the research team began with meetings involving national and local policymakers, regional researchers and civil society organisations.

The team focused on changes to people’s lives through four themes – changes to agriculture, livelihoods in rural areas, transformations of cities and access to services. These were chosen to create a broad overview of rural-city dynamics.

For a more detailed view of the project themes, the team then carried out field studies in the four countries studied, investigating questions prompted by the meetings.

In each country, they studied one small and one major city, along with two to three rural regions that were becoming integrated into global and national networks through commercial crop production.

The project’s findings have been published in policy briefs as well as more detailed policy briefings, study reports and working papers. All are available on the RurbanAfrica website. Further stakeholder meetings are planned, possibly leading to further publications.

Finally, project members have been sharing their results in conferences in the sub-Saharan region and internationally, with their own conference due in Copenhagen in January 2016. “There is also interest in our work from the OECD and UN HABITAT,” says Agergaard.

On a more personal level, European partners have gained experience and understanding of African countries, along with awareness of how varied they are, she says; African partners have had a rare opportunity to strengthen East-West links.
“This project would have been difficult without the FP7 framework. It was helpful in making new networks and connections.”

Arusha, secondary city of Tanzania

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Project:
African Rural-City Connections

Project Acronym:
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