



African Statistical Agencies Need a Shared Subnational Data Protocol

A Policy Brief by the Urban2063 Coalition

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a Shared Subnational Data Protocol
Arindam Jana

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Prologue

This policy brief was prepared by the African Centre for Cities (University of Cape Town) as part of South Africa's hosting of the Group of Twenty (G20). The G20 is organised around three core pillars - *solidarity, equality and sustainability*, and the five main objectives - *inclusive growth, employment, and less inequality; critical minerals; reform of the global financial architecture; artificial intelligence & innovation; and food security*, urbanisation, as one of the most important meta drivers of the 21st Century is absent. Thus, under the auspices of the ACC, an Urban2063 Coalition was formed to focus the G20, and especially the African Union, deliberations on the links between these pillars and objectives and the trajectory of Africa's rapidly growing cities over the next decade.

The stakes attached to Africa's urbanisation, and the prospects of the roughly 900 million people that will be living in African cities in 2035, could not be higher. As "grand living laboratories", African cities could offer new modes of planning, financing, insurance, construction and manufacturing to a global economy seeking to shift from extraction and pollution to circularity and regeneration.¹ This is critical for the African Union's *Agenda 2063* which envisages urbanisation as an "Opportunity ... [for a] positive turn around" in which "cities and other settlements [become] hubs of cultural and economic activities, with modernized infrastructure, and people have access to affordable and decent housing including housing finance together with all the basic necessities of life such as, water, sanitation, energy, public transport and

ICT".² Should the goal of sustainable urbanisation fail, Africa's rapidly evolving urban spaces will default to becoming a source of ecological and social instability, a liability rather than an asset to the global economy.

In order to foster an evidence-based debate across the African continent and with its global partners, the Urban 2063 Coalition produced 8 Policy Briefs on the following topics. The first four briefs are diagnostic and the last set of four is propositional.

1. Demographic and socio-economic data that underpins the urbanisation megatrend;
2. Prevailing fiscal status of African cities and the scope for attracting finance;
3. Linkages between African urbanisation and climate change;
4. Links between trade, industrialisation and urbanisation in Africa;
5. Policy recommendation number one: encourage Multilateral Development Banks to establish a dedicated lines of credit to National Development Banks for subnational lending
6. Policy recommendation number two: anchor the G20 international trade and finance agenda in initiatives that drive structural transformation in African cities;
7. Policy recommendation three: Global financial reform requires a paradigm shift that places African cities at the core; and
8. Policy recommendation four: Improve the quality and reliability of sub-national data through a shared protocol across African Statistical Agencies.

¹ Pieterse, E., (2024), Panel Discussion on Infrastructure Finance at the Africa Urban Forum, Addis Ababa, September 2024.

² African Union (AU), (2015), *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want*.

MESSAGE 4: Action is required to improve the quality and reliability of sub-national data through a shared protocol across African statistical agencies. This is a precondition to revalue the size and shape of African urban economies and can improve revenues and the risk profile of African cities.

Background and Rationale

Africa's rapid urbanisation necessitates significant investment in infrastructure and services to ensure that the positive socio-economic outcomes associated with urbanisation are guaranteed for both current and future urban residents in Africa. The African Development Bank (AfDB) estimated an annual funding requirement of \$130 billion-170 billion for infrastructure, largely concentrated in urban centres.³ While African cities currently contribute over 50% of the continent's GDP, despite existing infrastructure deficits and service delivery challenges, a comprehensive understanding of urban economic activity remains constrained by deficiencies in sub-national data systems.

This potential for transformative progress is significantly hindered by a fundamental challenge: the scarcity of reliable, comparable, standardised, and sufficiently granular sub-national data. Existing statistical frameworks, primarily oriented towards national aggregates, fail to adequately capture the complexities of urban life, particularly the informal economy and makeshift neighbourhoods where livelihoods are conducted.⁴ As urbanisation rapidly reshapes the continent's demographic and economic landscape, this data deficit impedes effective urban planning, investment attraction, urban management and service delivery.⁵

Enhancing the quality and reliability of sub-national data, particularly urban data, through the implementation of a shared protocol across African statistical agencies is imperative to accurately assess the scale and characteristics of African urban economies, thereby improving revenue generation potential

and mitigating investment risks associated with African cities.

Notably, this is not a new idea. The African Charter on Statistics was adopted by the AU in 2009 to underscore the critical importance of reliable and harmonised statistical systems as a separate theme within the Agenda 2063 framework.⁶ It explicitly acknowledges systemic challenges, including resource constraints, methodological inconsistencies, and weak institutional frameworks, which hinder effective data collection across the continent. The Charter advocates for adherence to international standards and emphasises the need for adequate funding and professional independence to ensure the production of accurate, comparable and timely statistics. Its principles—such as quality, transparency, dissemination and coordination—provide a robust framework for addressing these challenges while fostering public trust in statistical systems. Despite its ambitious vision⁷, progress in implementing the charter has been uneven. According to the AU, as of 2022, only 26 of 55 member states have ratified the charter, limiting its impact.⁸

The Urban Data Crisis

While the empirical evidence of urban growth is irrefutable, the capacity to fully comprehend, measure and govern both existing and emerging urban centres remains inadequate. National Statistical Offices (NSOs), often grappling with limited resources and capacity constraints, struggle to accurately capture and represent the socioeconomic parameters of urban life.⁹ This results in a pronounced and pervasive urban data deficit, which severely hampers the ability to assess progress against established global frameworks such as the

3 Haas, A. R., Cartwright, A., Garang, A., & Songwe, V. 2023. From Millions to Billions: Financing the Development of African Cities. African Development Bank Group.

4 Ohnson, F., & Yu, S. 2022. The Long Shadow of Informality: Challenges and Policies. The World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-1753-3>; Alfors, L., Barrett, J., Pillay, V., Rogan, M., von Broembsen, M., & Skinner, C. 2018. Policy brief prepared for the Labour Caucus in the Jobs Summit Small and Micro-enterprise Support Working Group by the Institute for Economic Justice (IEJ). Jobs Summit Policy Brief Series Stream 3.

5 African Development Bank Group. 2020. Private Sector Development Strategy: 2021-2025. African Development Bank Group.

6 African Union. 2009. African Charter on Statistics. https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36412-treaty-african_charter_on_statistics_eng.pdf

7 Lehohla, P. 2008. Statistical development in Africa in the context of the global statistical system. Statistical Journal of the IAOS: Journal of the International Association for Official Statistics, 251-2, 27-45. <https://doi.org/10.3233/SJI-2008-00678>

8 African Union. 2022. List of Countries which have signed, ratified/acceded to the African Charter on Statistics. https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36412-sl-AFRICAN_CHARTER_ON_STATISTICS_0.pdf

9 The World Bank. 2021. World Development Report 2021: Data for Better Lives. The World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-1600-0>

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the New Urban Agenda, as well as continent-specific frameworks such as AU's Agenda 2063.

This data deficit is fuelled by a few deficiencies:

- **Insufficient data granularity:** Aggregate data often masks significant intra-urban disparities and spatial inequalities in access to essential services, housing conditions and economic opportunities. This lack of granularity acts as a barrier to the formulation of targeted interventions and the implementation of effective infrastructural upgrading strategies;
- **Methodological inconsistencies:** The use of varying definitions and methodologies across different nations creates significant obstacles to comparability and policy coherence at both regional and continental levels. Further, also within nations, the siloed processes of collecting and analysing data adds to the complexities of generating policy-relevant evidence;
- **Temporal lags:** Existing data collection cycles are often too infrequent to capture the rapid pace of urban change, particularly in areas experiencing peri-urban growth and informal settlement expansion. This hinders proactive planning and the ability to respond rapidly to emerging challenges;
- **Inadequate capture of the informal economy:** Standard statistical methods often fail to accurately reflect the substantial contribution of the informal economy, which plays a vital but often obscured role; &
- **Capacity constraints and technological lags:** Inability to use, and speak to, new forms of data collection (e.g. satellite imagery, mobile phone usage, various digital modes of access), which are essential for digital optimisation of urban planning and management.

The consequences of this multidimensional data deficit are far-reaching. Decision-making across a wide spectrum of stakeholder groups is compromised by incomplete or inaccurate information. This can lead to the misallocation of scarce resources, the implementation of ineffective policies and a failure to fully realise the immense potential of African cities. We explore two, especially important, dimensions: underestimating real economic activity and value, and

the cost implications for capital needed to expand urban infrastructure networks.

Underestimating Urban Economic Value: The Overlooked Engine

The economic value of African urban areas is systematically underestimated due to inadequate statistical frameworks that fail to accurately capture the diverse and complex nature of urban economic activities, especially informality and social labour. According to WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing), inclusive cities necessitate recognition of the substantial contributions of informal workers to urban economies. Without adequate data to capture these activities, municipal authorities underestimate both the scale of their economies and their potential tax base. WIEGO further contends that to effectively reduce urban poverty, cities must support informal workers by restructuring urban planning, zoning, regulations, laws and policies to incorporate the working poor, which initially requires a comprehensive understanding of their economic contributions via enhanced data collection.¹⁰

The informal sector, notwithstanding challenges related to adequate health and safety standards, constitutes a significant portion of economic activity and resilience—a fact reiterated by numerous studies over time.¹¹ The resultant statistical invisibility due to outdated methodologies thus results in significant policy blind spots as well as skewed and inaccurate representation of economic activity, flows and value, and weakened governance. Calls emerging from AU forums like the African Urban Forum in 2024, for “productive cities”, implicitly demand better data to understand and support all forms of economic activity, formal and informal. Accurately measuring the urban economy is fundamental to revaluing Africa's cities as true engines of growth.¹²

Data Deficits in Urban Infrastructure: Inflating the Cost of Capital

The vast infrastructure financing gap exists partly because investors lack sufficient information to accurately assess risks and returns in African urban contexts. Studies suggest that poor infrastructure has resulted in a 40% loss in productivity and up to a two percentage point reduction in annual national economic growth across African countries (Haas et al., 2023). Yet, mobilising capital for infrastructure development

10 Chen, M. A., & Carré, F. J. Eds. 2020. *The Informal Economy Revisited: Examining the Past, Envisioning the Future*. Routledge.

11 Guven, M., & Karlen, R. 2020. Supporting Africa's urban informal sector: Coordinated policies with social protection at the core. World Bank Blogs. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/african/supporting-africas-urban-informal-sector-coordinated-policies-social-protection-core>; Sinha, N., Inchauste, G., & Narayan, A. (Eds.) 2024. *Levelling the Playing Field: Addressing Structural Inequalities to Accelerate Poverty Reduction in Africa*. The World Bank; African Development Bank Group. 2020. *Private Sector Development Strategy: 2021-2025*. African Development Bank Group.

12 African Union. 2024. *Africa Urban Forum on Sustainable Urbanisation for Africa's Transformation: Declaration*. https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/44056-doc-AFRICA_URBAN_FORUM_DECLARATION_English.pdf

remains challenging due to the perception of high risk, often inflated by the absence of reliable data.

Research by the African Centre for Cities (ACC) highlights that “[...] debates about how to finance African infrastructure reflect an important and well-rehearsed argument that the key to addressing the infrastructure finance gap, thereby unlocking Africa’s infrastructure challenge, is overcoming the mismatch between investor expectations and the actual risk/return profile of infrastructure programmes and projects.”¹³ This mismatch is directly related to information asymmetries that could be addressed through improved statistical capacity.

Part of the challenge stems from inconsistent definitions of what constitutes “urban” across different African countries. For example, Angola defines urban areas based on infrastructure and population density while Benin uses a simple population threshold of 10,000 inhabitants. This inconsistency has been a longstanding conceptual issue and its implications studied at length in different contexts.¹⁴ It creates fundamental problems for comparative analysis and policy alignment. Recent World Bank research using a statistical “dartboard method” suggests that “[...] Sub-Saharan Africa is more urbanized than commonly realized”, highlighting how methodological differences can lead to significantly different conclusions about urbanisation rates and patterns.¹⁵

Standardising urban definitions through a shared statistical protocol would create a foundation for more accurate economic valuation and infrastructure planning across the continent. But moving beyond the definitional challenges, the actual dearth of urban data directly increases the cost of financing essential infrastructure – water, sanitation, energy, transport, housing. Investors (Development finance institutions (DFIs), private equity, banks) rely on data for risk assessment (African Development Bank Group, 2020; Haas et al., 2023). Lack of reliable urban data creates uncertainty, thus increasing perceived risk, as argued in studies by ACC, UN-Habitat, and UNECA (UN Economic Commission for Africa). Specifically:

- a. **Market and financial risk:** Uncertain demographics and economic activity make revenue projections for

service delivery projects unreliable. Poor data on property values and business activity undermines municipal creditworthiness assessments, crucial for accessing World Bank or AfDB supported municipal bonds or loans;

- b. **Operational risk:** Lack of detailed spatial data (e.g. on land tenure, existing infrastructure, settlement patterns) increases the risk of unforeseen project implementation challenges and cost overruns; &
- c. **Information asymmetry:** Investors face higher costs simply to gather the basic information needed for due diligence, which official statistics should ideally provide.

This elevated risk perception forces investors to demand a higher risk premium, leading to:

- a. **Higher borrowing costs:** Making vital projects more expensive or unviable;
- b. **Reduced investment appetite:** Particularly from the private sector, hindering blended finance models promoted by World Bank and AfDB; &
- c. **Focus on ‘safer’ bets:** Investment may flow only to the largest cities or sectors where data is marginally better, neglecting secondary cities (a focus area for Cities Alliance) and critical basic services.

In summary, the AfDB has highlighted that financing urban infrastructure in Africa is complicated by rapid population growth, low per capita income, limited revenue collection, and centralised infrastructure delivery - all of which combine to render conventional city-scale fiscal strategies woefully inadequate.¹⁶ This assessment is exacerbated by data deficiencies that make it difficult to accurately evaluate cities’ financial health and economic potential.

Research by the ACC on municipal financing in 10 African cities indicates that both financing and funding approaches are highly context-specific, dependent on the local legislative institutional and economic environment.¹⁷ Without reliable data on these contextual factors, cities struggle to develop appropriate financial strategies and often default to overly

13 Cirolia, L. R., Pollio, A., & Pieterse, E. 2022. Infrastructure financing in Africa: Overview, research gaps, and urban research agenda. African Centre for Cities & Alfred Herrhausen Gesellschaft; Pieterse, E., & Cirolia, L. R. 2022. Mainstreaming Sustainable Infrastructure Investment: Synthesis and Reflections. African Centre for Cities & Alfred Herrhausen Gesellschaft.

14 Uchida, H., & Nelson, A. 2010. Towards a New Measure of Urban Concentration. UNU WIDER Working Paper Series, 29, 1–16.

15 Combes, P., & Gobillon, L. 2015. The Empirics of Agglomeration Economies. In Handbook of Regional and Urban Economics Vol. 5, pp. 247–348. Elsevier B.V. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-444-59517-1.00005-2>; Combes, P., Gorin, C., Nakamura, S., Roberts, M., & Stewart, B. 2023. An Anatomy of Urbanization in Sub-Saharan Africa. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper Series, 10621. <https://doi.org/10.1596/1813-9450-10621>

16 African Development Bank. 2022. The State of Urban Governance in Africa: AfDB Sustainable Urban Development Action Plan (SUDAP). African Development Bank Group; African Development Bank Ed. 2024. Driving Africa's transformation: The reform of the global financial architecture. African Development Bank.

17 Haas, A.R.N. & Löffler, G. 2025. Municipal finance: Crosscutting report. ACRC Working Paper 2025-28. Manchester: African Cities Research Consortium, The University of Manchester. https://www.african-cities.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/ACRC_Working-Paper-28_March-2025.pdf

conservative approaches that fail to maximize their revenue potential.

A Shared Protocol for Standardised Urban Data

The 2009 African Charter on Statistics established important foundational principles for statistical development on the continent, including coordination and cooperation among statistics authorities to ensure “[...] quality and harmonious statistical information.” The Charter further states that “[...] African statistics shall be internally coherent over time and allow for comparison between regions and countries [...] It shall employ internationally recognised and accepted concepts, classifications, terminologies and methods.” Clearly, at the time, the importance of sub-national data was not on the agenda.

These principles should be extended to sub-national data through a shared subnational protocol that could bear numerous positive outcomes:

- Improved comparability across cities, enabling benchmarking and peer learning;
- Enhanced credibility with investors, development partners and national governments;
- Reduced duplication of efforts and more efficient resource utilisation;
- Greater ability to track progress toward SDGs and Agenda 2063 goals at the city level; &
- Better integration of urban data with national statistical systems supporting coordination of national development efforts.

What would the elements of an effective Urban Data Protocol include? Building on the African Charter on Statistics, a specific protocol should standardise definitions, methodologies and data collection practices across national statistical agencies. It should explicitly address the measurement of informal economic activities and spatial dimensions of urban development. Further, these definitional paradigms should align with international standards (such as those established by the UN Statistical Commission) while reflecting pan-African realities.

Key characteristics of such a protocol should include:

- Standardised definitions of urban boundaries and intra-urban zones;
- Common methodologies for measuring formal and informal economic activities;
- Agreed approaches to spatial data collection and analysis;
- Harmonised indicators for infrastructure coverage, quality and performance;
- Consistent methods for population estimation and demographic analysis;
- Shared standards for data quality, validation and publication; &
- Coordinated schedules for data collection and dissemination.

Such a protocol would not replace but rather complement (and strengthen) national statistical systems. It would provide a framework for generating consistent, comparable urban data while allowing for adaptation to local contexts.

Overcoming the challenges discussed above require a coordinated, pan-African effort, building on existing capacities and partnerships. The proposed protocol for sub-national (urban) data should be spearheaded by NSOs, but critically involves a broad coalition that includes but is not limited to:

- a. City and local governments - as key data users and generators of administrative data. Their capacity building is essential, often supported by Cities Alliance and World Bank programmes;
- b. Ministries - ensuring national policy alignment;
- c. Academic institutions - for methodological rigour and innovation;
- d. Civil society- for ground-truthing and capturing community perspectives;
- e. Regional bodies (African Union Communities, Regional Economic Communities, AfDB, UNECA) - to foster harmonisation, political will, and leverage initiatives like UNECA's African Centre for Statistics (ACS) and the AfDB's Strategy for the Harmonization of Statistics in Africa (SHaSA)¹⁸;
- f. International partners (World Bank, AfDB, UN-Habitat, Cities Alliance, bilateral development agencies): Providing technical assistance, financial support and sharing global best practices. The World Bank's support for digital government transformation (GovTech) and the AfDB's STATCAP programme, which supports statistical systems in developing countries, are crucial enabling platforms.

¹⁸ United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. 2016. The African Centre for Statistics: Better Statistics for Better Development Outcomes. <https://repository.unece.org/bitstream/handle/10855/23550/b11579882.pdf>; African Development Bank. 2009. Strategy for the Harmonization of Statistics in Africa. African Development Bank Group.; African Development Bank Group. 2017. Strategy for the Harmonization of Statistics in Africa 2: 2017-2026. African Development Bank Group.

Based on the analysis presented in this brief, ACC propose the following recommendations to improve the quality and reliability of sub-national data across Africa:

1. **Development of a pan-African urban statistical protocol:** Building on the African Charter on Statistics, a specific protocol for urban statistics should standardise definitions, methodologies, and data collection practices across national statistical agencies. This protocol should explicitly address the measurement of informal economic activities and spatial dimensions of urban development. Further, these definitional paradigms should align with international standards (as established by the UN Statistical Commission, for instance) while reflecting pan-African realities;
2. **Investment in technical capacity:** National statistical offices require significant technical capacity building to implement modern data collection techniques. The AfDB and World Bank should expand programmes specifically targeting urban statistical capacity;
3. **Leveraging technology for data collection:** Mobile technologies, satellite imagery and big data analytics offer new opportunities to collect urban data at lower costs. A continental framework for technology adoption would accelerate progress;
4. **Public-private partnerships for data:** Private sector actors already collect substantial data about urban activities. Structured data-sharing agreements between governments and private entities could rapidly improve urban data availability;
5. **Strengthening the urban-national statistical relationship:** Local governments need greater

authority and capacity to collect, analyse and use urban data, working in coordination with national statistical offices rather than in parallel; &

6. **Promoting accessibility, knowledge sharing and usability through open data platforms:** Enabling wider use of urban data will not only reinforce validation mechanisms, but also encourage participation of citizens and citizen organisations to effectively engage with cities.

Concluding Remarks

The urban data challenge in Africa is not merely technical but fundamentally economic and developmental. As discussed in this brief, the lack of reliable, granular and comparable data at the city level undermines our understanding of urban economies, distorts infrastructure investment decisions and increases the perceived risks and costs of urban finance.

Urgent action is required to improve the quality and reliability of sub-national data through a shared protocol across African statistical agencies. This is a precondition to revalue the size and shape of African urban economies and can improve revenues and the risk profile of African cities. Without this foundation, African cities will continue to be undervalued, underfinanced and unable to fulfil their potential as engines of sustainable and inclusive development.

As highlighted at the 2024 African Urban Forum, the decisions made today about African cities will shape the continent's development trajectory for generations to come. Ensuring these decisions are based on robust evidence and accurate data is not optional but essential for realising the transformative visions of Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals.

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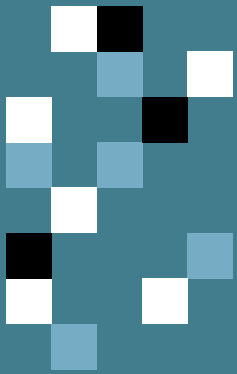
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About the authors of this series

Anton Cartwright is an economist focussed on Africa's urban transition, infrastructure and services, green finance and the interactions between environmental degradation and poverty alleviation. He is an associate at the [African Centre Cities](#) (ACC) at the University of Cape Town, a Fellow of the Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership (CISL) at Cambridge University (UK) and was a Lead Author on Chapter 4 of the [IPCC's Special Report on of 1.5°C](#) of warming released in 2018. He led the [New Climate Economy's](#) Special Initiative, the [Coalition for Urban Transition's](#) work in Tanzania and Ghana and was a lead author of South Africa's Just Urban Transition framework in 2023. He is the founding Director of the advisory firm Econologic, and [Credible Carbon](#) South Africa's first voluntary carbon market registry.

Astrid R.N. Haas is an Austrian-Ugandan independent feminist urban economist. Her work bridges research and practice, with a focus on supporting cities to develop strategies and governance systems for financing public infrastructure and services, including climate finance. Her expertise lies in shaping funding and financing mechanisms that embed gender-responsive planning and policies into municipal finance to ensure cities are inclusive and equitable from the outset. She currently serves as Chair of the Board at the Mawazo Institute, is a Research Associate at both the African Centre for Cities (University of Cape Town) and ODI as well as a Fellow for the African Urban Lab (African School of Economics). Her academic background includes an MSc in Public Financial Management from SOAS, University of London, and an MA in International Economics and International Development from Johns Hopkins University. For more information: www.urbanasti.com

Arindam Jana is based at the African Centre of Excellence for Inequality Research at the University of Cape Town (UCT). Trained as an economist, Arindam's scholarship lies at the intersection of urban, spatial, and information economics. His ongoing work in Africa tries to understand how different types of data can be used to interpret complex city-level problems like multidimensional inequality and its spatiality, emergent forms of urbanisation, and wealth accumulation. Prior to UCT, Arindam was based at the Indian Institute for Human Settlements, where he was instrumental in the setting up of its Urban Informatics Lab, and leading numerous projects related to the dynamics of urbanisation in India.



About the Urban2063 Coalition

The Urban2063 Policy Brief Series forms part of a larger initiative led by the African Centre for Cities, University of Cape Town focused on foregrounding the importance of sustainable urbanization as central to Africa's structural transformation in line with the vision of Agenda 2063. During 2025, the work of the Urban2063 Coalition is focused on the deliberations of the G20, with specific focus on the Urban 20 outcomes.

The Urban 2063 Coalition is comprised of contributing partners that include: African Centre for Cities, African Climate and Development Institute, Association of African Planning Schools, ARUP – Africa Region, Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership (Africa chapter), Centre for Sustainability Transitions – Stellenbosch University, Climate KIC, Club of Rome (Africa Section), Urban Futures Studio – Utrecht University, Women in Employment Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), World Resource Institute (WRI), Overseas Development Institute (ODI) & GSM Association (GSMA).

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