In the wake of rapid urbanization in Africa, the importance of intermediary cities in strengthening urban-rural linkages is growing exponentially. Accordingly, on the 21st of January 2022, UN-Habitat and the Urban Cities and Local Government of Africa (UCLGA) undertook a webinar titled “The Role of Intermediary Cities in Strengthening Urban-Rural Linkages Amid Rapid Urbanization in Africa”.

The event focussed on intermediary cities as key in bridging the gap between urban and rural communities and strengthening these linkages by promoting good governance, policy integration and coherence, partnership, efficiency, and resilience to climate change. The event is part of a series of dialogues related to reviewing institutional frameworks to support integration of the rural-urban continuum and national economic development by connecting rural markets and systems of larger cities. This webinar serves as part of preparations ahead of the Africities Summit, which will bring together more than 5000 representatives of local governments in Kisumu in May 2022 to discuss the above-mentioned topics in further detail.

The webinar was attended by up to 100 participants from different stakeholder groups, including government, civil society, academia, and international organizations. The participants and panellists displayed a wide array of knowledge and experiences in several thematic topics related to urban-rural linkages, as demonstrated by the active dialogue, interesting questions as well as insightful perspectives and recommendations.

**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

1. Urbanization in Africa has been characterized by less densities in comparison to other regions; however, small, and intermediary cities grow faster than large cities. This is evident, for example, in Western African countries; the region with the most rapid urbanization trend in Africa, 60% of the urban population live in secondary cities which are often near large cities and along transport corridors whereas only 40% live in metropolitan areas. In Africa at large, 57% of the urban population live in cities with less than half a million inhabitants.

2. There is an urgent need to rethink how to manage rapid urbanization in Africa.

Focusing on intermediary cities along with other human settlements in the continuum of space and defining how the places are connected is a stepping stone towards sustainable urbanization. Intermediary cities are significant in structuring the urban network and connecting the local and regional to the continental and global levels. This necessitates the urgent need for urban and sectoral policies to reflect the growing importance of intermediary cities in policy and planning decisions. All these contributes to efforts to leverage opportunities of urbanization in Africa towards achieving the New Urban Agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals and the transformative vision of Africa 2063.
3. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that reliance on world markets in provision of goods and services wasn’t sustainable after the global lockdowns which interfered with the spatial flow of people, commodities and services. This necessitates the need to focus on localizing production near the consumers particularly for the food systems, building materials and other basic requirements. Intermediary cities provide this opportunity to localize production as they link the rural areas to major urban areas. The pandemic has also shown how relevant the universal access to healthcare services is in Intermediary cities and how restrictions to mobility between urban and rural areas can affects sectors of the economy, including food security.

4. Currently, some intermediary cities in Africa are lagging in terms of basic services, infrastructure and capacities in governance, planning, policy, maintenance of infrastructure among others. This should not be the case because when empowered, these cities can play a critical role in enhancing the balance of territorial development, linking urban and rural communities by acting as service centres for rural and urban populations, and playing a major role in accessing goods and services. Integrated governance of the territory that leaves out no space along the continuum is key, and intermediary cities would play a central role in ensuring the rural voices are incorporated and trust between the people and leaders is built.

5. There is a need for continued coordinated partnerships among the stakeholders in the continuum of human settlements (UN agencies, governments, civil society, private sector) and a strong governance system. This will necessitate production of coherent policies and enhance management of integrated development plans, thus, empower intermediary cities to perform well in their role as a connector between urban and rural areas. The East African community in particular needs to be empowered with the correct policy frameworks to achieve required outcomes.

6. There should be a focus on the importance of mainstreaming food systems in local policy and planning in intermediary cities to enhance urban-rural linkages. Food systems depend on both urban and rural areas, and intermediary cities play a vital linkage role between urban markets and rural producers. Local food governance mechanisms ought to be designed effectively to be multi-sectorial, multi-level and multi-actor to achieve inclusive engagement and urban-rural linkages. The key challenge of the food governance gap between national and local government can be addressed through policy integration and partnership.

7. A Moroccan case study highlights that the intermediary cities in Africa reflect unique parameters compared to the metropolitan areas. This is in regard to sustaining life and the ecosystem, that is, sense of belonging, more resilience compared to metropolitan areas, key players for agricultural food security and natural landscape. These unique parameters should be prioritized in the policy and governance mechanisms of intermediary cities.

8. Amid global climate change and the negative impacts not leaving out any space in the continuum of settlements, adaptation to climate change is inevitable. Intermediary cities offer an opportunity to implement climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts taking into consideration the heterogeneity in climate change data and the rapid changing nature of growth of human settlements. On the positive side, the non-complex nature of intermediary cities as compared to larger cities is a plus aspect for promoting climate change reforms in intermediary cities.

9. Each individual city should be treated as an actor within the system and network of urban centers. This connectivity between the system of cities can be achieved by applying a system-based thinking approach and analyzing various relevant indicators.
which includes the Connectivity Index Analysis. It is also important to understand the formal and informal economies better and invest in relevant tools such as hard infrastructure (roads, electricity) and soft infrastructure (governance, data, digital). These contribute to enhancing the connectivity, encouraging collaborative governance between cities and the achievement of equitable economic growth of cities.

10. In order to enhance urban rural linkages through intermediary cities, it is essential to initiate the use of the Regional and Territorial Plans as a major planning tool through national visions and strategies. Strong national visionary documents and development plans help cover the gap between policies. For instance, in Kenya, the County Government Act 2012 provides a formulation for 5-year county integrated development plans and 10-years national spatial plans that help in narrating development accordingly. The spatial plan in part contributes to enhancing a balance between rural and urban areas, including the sustainable utilisation of natural resources.