On the Influence of Urbanization on the Situation in Africa

The rapid urbanization in Africa, taking place in recent years, is essentially a new factor. It presents a danger to the stability inside the countries of this continent, which, in many cases, is underestimated.

Africa is undergoing major demographic changes, under the influence of many factors: the search for new economic opportunities and prospects, the movement of people, due to conflicts and the hardships of rural life, etc. As a result, the urban population of the continent is growing very rapidly, by 15–18 million people annually. In the 1990s, 65 percent of Africans lived in rural areas, but by 2025, more than half of the population will be living in cities. By 2030, the number of these residents will have doubled, reaching 760 million people, which exceeds the current number of urban residents of the entire Western Hemisphere.

In East Africa, the twofold increase in the urban population will happen in the next nine years - from the current 50.6 to 106.7 million people by 2017.

Three giant metropolis of Africa – Cairo, Lagos and Kinshasa – are growing rapidly, and now are the largest in the world. If in 2007, 11.9 million people lived in Cairo, 9.6 million lived in Lagos and 7.8 million lived in Kinshasa, by 2015, the number of inhabitants in these cities will increase to about 13.4, 12.4 and 11.3 million, respectively. The forecasts indicate that by 2025, Kinshasa will become the largest metropolis on the continent, with a population of 16.7 million people.

Since more than 40% of Africans are under the age of 15, the cities have turned into overcrowded centers of unemployed youth, a kind of “explosive” mixture that fuels crime, drug trafficking, the inflow of personnel into gangs, strengthens links with transnational organized criminal groups and extremists, and increases political instability. Its influence is felt by virtually every country of the world. For example, the slums in Nairobi (Kenya), Abuja (Nigeria), Johannesburg (South Africa), Kinshasa (Democratic Republic of Congo), and Douala (Cameroon) are mostly areas closed to the local law enforcement bodies. Acceleration of the urbanization process will entail a further escalation of this situation and security issues.

Having the highest urban population growth rates, Africa has the lowest urban economic development indicators. For this reason, the urbanization in Africa, unlike other regions of the world, does not contribute to the growth of the gross national product, and generally does not lead to an increase in welfare. This comes in contrast with the generally accepted theory that the process of urban sprawl contributes to the creation and access to new jobs, public services and social security.

Everyday life in urban poverty brings more serious risks than in the countryside. In the city, people are much more dependent on having daily cash income. They feel the fluctuations of market prices more sharply, especially for food. Rural residents can produce a certain amount of food themselves, which they can use in times of economic crises.
Governments in many countries consider the slums as illegal settlements, and do not want to spend money on the development of municipal infrastructure there. The politicians avoid these as well, because they know that in helping slum dwellers, they will not gain any benefits in public prestige. The local authorities seek primarily to finance clearly resonant political projects, situated outside the poor neighborhoods.

Statistics often do not describe the material abyss, which this category of people lives in. Poor people in the African countries are those who live on $1-2 a day. In this case, however, many other expenses are not taken into consideration. Thus, while a rural resident can obtain fuel, building materials, some food, water and other necessary things for living from the surrounding lands, essentially at no cost, the city dweller must pay for all these things.

As a result, in many African countries, the poorest 20% of the urban population live worse than the poorest 20% of the rural population. By the estimated data, by 2020, 300 million urban residents will be living in areas without sewage, and about 225 million will have no access to safe drinking water. This situation is exacerbated by the spread of diseases and the lack of food, which increase the risk of instability of the situation and vulnerability of cities, in terms of their security. We can cite some examples that these problems have led to - in 2007-2008 mass disorders in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Senegal and Mauritania, the “Arab Spring” in Tunisia in 2011 and the subsequent events in Libya, Egypt and other countries of the region, caused by increases in food prices, clothing and gasoline. Under conditions of constantly growing food costs, such riots can be repeated in many other states.

The vulnerability of the urban population is also due to higher levels of violence in places where they live, being influenced by generally weak social bonds. However, violence and insecurity in cities are not influenced directly by the process of urbanization. This is explained by the rather weak local and national government institutions and their limited presence in the economic life. At the same time, there are some other factors that have particular impacts on individual regions. These are such things as increasing drug trafficking, particularly in West Africa, cross-border flows of political and economic immigrants, climate change and resource scarcity, which generate ethnic conflicts in East Africa.

In general, these processes show low legitimacy of repressive state institutions and distrust towards the police and authorities. For example, a study of the situation of the member countries of the Organization for Economic and Social Development showed a weak relationship between urbanization and violence. However, in Africa, the high economic instability, the struggle for resources, weak government, and hence the resultant inability of governments to respond to the immediate needs of the people, play a key role in increased violence.

A particular danger in these conditions is the activation of radical and terrorist organizations among the urban population in Africa. Big crowds in public places, megacities, create favorable conditions for the mass processing of the population. This is the place where terrorist groups can replenish their ranks. This is explained by the great numbers of socially disaffected youth, ready to respond to calls to join various gangs and extremist groups, to participate as armed mercenaries in the conflict zones and jihadists.

In this regard, it is safe to say that in the coming years, issues of instability in cities will occupy an increasingly prominent place in the policies of authorities of many countries (especially in the African region), aimed at ensuring their interests and security. The usual approaches, especially forced ones, will not work here. Decisive actions should be taken to strengthen the activities of local authorities, for more effective educational and preventive work, and also to create the conditions and opportunities for unemployed urban youth, along with solving of problems of slums in cities.

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