

Urbanization and Development Dynamics in Bungoma County, Kenya (1963-2024): A Historical Perspective.

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ABSTRACT

The process of urbanization in Kenya is an evolving phenomenon. However, it has proceeded at a tremendous pace over the past four decades, especially after political independence in the early 1960's. Prior to the European colonization, most Kenyan's were rural dwellers, except for those in the coastal regions that had a long pre-existing urban tradition. Urbanization in Kenya kicked off way earlier around A.D 700 at the coast when Arabs and Persians settled in places like Lamu, Malindi, and Mombasa. Bungoma, the main town, also called Bungoma, started out as a trading post in the early 20th century and basically became the face of urbanization and growth in the whole county. Employing the theory of modernization and dependency together with historical research design, the study examines the challenges of urbanization in relation to socio-economic development in Bungoma County. The results reveals the relationship of urbanization and economic development, where growth of commercial and industrial activity such as Webuye pan paper mill and emergence of trading centers have led to massive growth of the county. It also explains how key drivers of urbanization such as health, education and infrastructure have contributed to the growth of Bungoma County at Large. The study concludes that economic developments in Bungoma was factored by Webuye pan paper and vibrant centers which continue to be key engines of urbanization in the county. While the factory led to industrial urbanization, trading centers supported commercial and service-led urban growth, fueling the country's spatial and economic transformation.

Keywords: Colonization, socio-economic development, urbanization, urban growth.

INTRODUCTION

Urbanization is predominantly the process by which towns and cities are formed and became larger as more people begin living and daring in central areas (Aliyu & Amadu, 2017). Bungoma's development origin seemed tied to the socioeconomic situation of the communities around it. What is considered to be the birth period of Bungoma was the decade following 1920. According to historical records, it is after the Berlin conference in 1885 that the British began taking a keen interest in Uganda. The arrival of the railway provided the backbone for the evolution of the trading center. Right from the start, it became a makeshift camp for railway workers, mostly Asians with some European technicians mixed in (Munoko, 1975).

Urbanization is critical in fulfilling the sustainable development. It is associated with better employment and education opportunities, better health, and greater access to social services and opportunities for social and cultural activities. In the long term, urbanization is expected to significantly impact the quality of life. Notably, it has been projected that nearly all global population growth by 2030 will be by cities. Urbanization is not a merely modern phenomena but rapid and historic transformation of human economic social roots on global scale where predominantly rural culture is being rapidly replaced by predominantly urban culture (Ramanna, 2021). With the increase of urbanization globally, the article becomes critical in analyzing the impact of urbanization in relation to socioeconomic development in Bungoma County.

Statement of the Problem

Urbanization is often idealized as a catalyst for socio-economic development, promising improved living

standards, enhanced infrastructure, and increased economic opportunities. The growth of urban areas is expected to facilitate better access to services, education, and employment, thereby lifting populations out of poverty. However, this ideal does not translate into reality, particularly in Bungoma County, where the dynamics of urbanization have not necessarily led to the anticipated socio-economic advancements.

The reality on the ground in Bungoma County paints a stark contrast to the ideal of urbanization. According to the latest National Poverty Index (2016), Bungoma has a poverty rate of 35.7%, indicating that nearly half of its population lives below the poverty line. This high poverty rate suggests that urbanization in the region has not effectively addressed the economic challenges faced by its residents. It is against this backdrop that the article sought to examine the impact of urbanization in relation to socio-economic development in Bungoma County from 1963 to 2024.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was anchored on modernization and dependency theory. Modernization theory describes that shift from how things used to work in traditional societies to the kind of setup we see in Western countries today. In 1960, Rostow came up with this theory suggesting that if underdeveloped countries brought in modern production methods like adopting advanced industrial technology their economies would get stronger, and that would push them towards real development. The whole idea behind it is that when countries modernize economically, it triggers other kinds of development, like changes in how their societies work and how they are governed. There is a direct link between this theory and socioeconomic development because it shows how economic growth can spark social shifts, like education, health, urbanization and democracy. Each stage of development represents progressive improvements in living standards, productivity and institutions. This theory is relevant as it offers a model to analyze how economic, social and political changes since independence have shaped urbanization and development. It lays out how communities moved away from just farming for themselves towards selling crops commercially, how cities grew around that, what institutional changes happened through devolution, and the ongoing shift towards industrialization and more modern ways of living though it also points out some real obstacle that keep full modernization from taking hold. Marxist colonial theory is highly relevant in analyzing Bungoma's urbanization and socio-economic development as it shows how colonial structures shaped towns like Bungoma as extractive nodes, no autonomous cities. This whole piece basically lays out why Bungoma is stuck in this cycle of underdevelopment, dependency and inequality. It points to how neo-colonial economic ties keep shaping the way county urbanizes even now.

Dependency theory by Andre Gunder (1960), explains the idea that underdevelopment in the Global South isn't some internal problem it's actually the result of historical exploitation and being locked into a dependent relationship with the Global North. The theory basically says poverty in developing nations comes from being forced into the global capitalist system on unequal terms, not from lacking capacity or resources. Dependency argues that the world is split into two groups, core nations, which are industrialized capitalist powers, and periphery nations, which are either colonies or used to be, and they are basically there to supply raw materials and cheap labor. This theory is relevant to the current study as it helps explain urbanization and socio-economic development in Bungoma County. His take on the metropolis-satellite relationship shows how Bungoma's economy was set up during colonial times, designed to feed external markets rather than serve what people there needed. Towns like Bungoma emerged as trading posts for cash crops, mainly sugarcane and maize, but they never became real industrial centers. That created this whole pattern of dependent urbanization that's hard to shake.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Barrios (2006), undertook a study on urbanization where urbanization rate is actually outpacing both the global and Asian averages, especially after the country shifted its economic approach starting in 1978. The rapid urban growth has gone hand-in-hand with serious economic expansion. Since 1978, China has been hitting an average annual real GDP growth rate of 9.43 way ahead of other Asian nations and the worldwide average for the same stretch. Over in Morocco, 60 percent of people now live in cities compared to just 35 percent back in 1970. Fast forward to 2050, nearly three quarters of the country's population will be living in cities. The study of china's

urbanization was relevant to the current research article as it examined how planned infrastructure investment, industrialization, and rural-urban migration can transform a region's economy. Further it guided the researcher to assess why cities like Mombasa, Nairobi and Nakuru have concentrated moderate urbanization compared to Bungoma.

Saddique (1995), examined the impact of social service infrastructure a case study of Rwanda. Rwanda has been moving very rapidly to expand health service delivery. It has basically sped up how much progress the country has made on health indicators, in lining matters towards health millennium development goals. They have dumped significant resources into building and fixing up primary care centers and district hospitals so people can access healthcare even if they are way out in remote areas. Kenya for instance has kept designing and rolling out policies meant to get more people covered and connected to modern healthcare basically to attain long term objectives of health for all. This study was pertinent to the current study as it offers models for scalable health facility distribution in Bungoma's growing urban centers avoiding overreliance on a few central hospitals.

Hailand's research work analyzed the education history of England. Birmingham as first a town and then from 1889 a city has long been prominent in educational history of England. At present the biggest local educational authority in England, has won a reputation for being innovative and progressive, but the city has long shown itself a pilot for educational advance. In 1900 Birmingham had a new civic university, the first such in the city. According to Firman (1991), Convention literature on the economic development of Japan places a premium on the role of education in the modernization of Japan. Education is credited with a number of positive contributions that facilitated economic development in the early stages. This findings were relevant to the current article as it examined how urbanization has led to development of education in Bungoma County.

In another study, Berger (2011), assessed the impact of urbanization in infrastructural development where Kenya has registered mixed fortunes by realizing substantial achievements in infrastructure. The royal Dutch Airline partnership helped make Kenya Airways into one of the top carriers in the region. The railway line that runs from Mombasa on the Indian Ocean coast all the way to Malaba at the Kenya-Uganda border and then fur beyond Rwanda and Burundi plays a key role in the region's connectivity. The study of infrastructure development is pertinent to this study because it shows how investing in transport can really shift industrial growth and urban development patterns in Bungoma County

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research was grounded in pragmatism research philosophy. Historical research design was used to guide the study. The target population included county employees, business people, non-governmental organization and the general public. The sample size of 210 was reached upon content saturation. The study used purposive and snowball sampling techniques in selection of respondents. Data collection methods included interview schedules and focus group discussion. Document analysis guide was used to collect both archival and secondary data. Archival data was collected from Kenya National Archives whereas secondary data was sought from official reports, published and unpublished thesis, books, journal article, newspapers, library sources and online sources. Qualitative research techniques were used in data analysis. Qualitative data was analyzed based on themes and presented through narratives and verbatim quotations.

FINDINGS

Urbanization and Economic Development

After the Berlin Conference the British declared their interest in Uganda by opening way through the construction of Kenya Uganda railway. The rail road's arrival provided the back born for evolution of the trading center. Bungoma became a camping place for the railway constructors who consisted mainly of Asians and a few Europeans and by 1927 the first shops were constructed (Berma, 1990).

Following the achievements of independence in 1963, Western Kenya experienced many fur reaching and significant economic and social changes. The economic and social innovations of that era were built upon the

inherited colonial structure. After 1963, many small scale enterprises were started in rural western Kenya most especially in Bungoma (Amunga, 1977). Before 2000, Bungoma had high poverty levels of around 60 percent mostly because everyone relied on farming and conditions were rough. According to 2009 census, it dropped to about 53 percent, and by 2019, it fell further to around 45 percent due to social programs and better access to services (KNBS, 2010).

Urbanization and Education

After independence in 1963, Bungoma turned into one of the strategic counties in western Kenya, benefiting from the government and missionaries pouring resources into schools. In the early 1990s, missionaries were filtering into western Kenya, Bungoma included, especially after the construction of the Kenya Uganda railway and given how well-positioned the area was and the fertile land (Mireri, 2006). In a focus group discussion, members noted,

The friends Quakers church established a strong presence in western Kenya particularly in Webuye and its surroundings. They founded mission churches and school as part of their evangelical and social work. Schools such as Bokoli Friends Primary, Matulo friend's primary, Friends Kibisi secondary were constructed. (Idris Kala, Resident, Webuye, 25th June 2025)

The study advances that friend's missionary society was the most prominent in Webuye. Their greatest contribution was in education, where they pioneered formal schooling, established a network of friends-sponsored schools, trained teachers and produced local leaders. This laid the foundation for Bungoma's high literacy levels and strong tradition of mission-based education.

Urbanization and Health

After World War 1, post-world war policy emphasized on provision of health services to everybody and both preventive and curative medicine were given due recognition. This led to the rise of dispensaries, child welfare centres and the creation of sanitation division in medical department (Anderson, 2008). In 1990s, district hospitals were established such as Bungoma District Hospital became the big referral center for the whole district. According to an informant,

Bungoma district hospital which is now upgraded to level 6, offers services to the larger Bungoma community. People come from interior areas to get medical services and more so from neighboring counties such as Busia and Kakamega. This is because some of the services are not offered in level one and level two health facilities. With the upgrading, the hospital has significantly helped the community because as per now they don't need to travel all the way to Eldoret or Nairobi. Other small facilities in the region liaise with the county to provide best services to its people (Bramuel Wafula, 25th January 2025).

Similarly, Bungoma County has become a major health services hub across western Kenya, pulling in patients not just from the county itself but from surrounding areas and even Uganda. The main urban areas, especially Bungoma town, have built up a network of health facilities from big referral hospitals to specialized clinics, mission hospital and private medical Centre.

Housing and Infrastructure Development

Devolution in 2010 shifted water, sanitation, irrigation and housing responsibilities to county government and immediately home quality began improving through county incentives. From 2013, early rural electrification efforts began reaching household and many schools even in the interior regions (Oguso, 2015). Major expansions were realized from 2013-2025 where through the government initiative that was launched in 2015 by Kenya Urban Roads Authority, the annuity model was a public private partnership initiative to build, manage and maintain urban roads(Wanjala,2023).

It is noted that before 2010, water services in Bungoma were intermittent, sanitation was largely rudimentary, with household level solutions predominating. It is only through devolution that clean water access rose from 60

percent to 85 percent and sanitation coverage to 75 percent thanks to boreholes, treatment plants, piped network, and sewer upgrades in major towns. Farmers also opted to use irrigation methods that aimed at increasing crop yields from 20-39 %. Through the national government, the county invested over 300million in county water projects benefiting 3,000,000-5,000,000 residents by 2020 (Oguso, 2015).

Demographic Shift and Social Mobility

Increasing migration has raised concerns about rural youths abandoning agriculture, and the implication for agricultural production and food security. The food and agricultural sector is still the largest employer of young people (Yeboar, 2018), but I increasing rural-urban migration rates (UN Habitat, 2018).

According to 2019 census, its estimates show a dramatic rise in Bungoma's resident population. In 1979 the urban population was 503,935, in 1989 it increased to 679,146. In 1999 it rose to 1,011,524. an increase was also noticed in 2009 where the population was at 1,375,063. In 2019 it was at 1,670,570 and thereafter projected at 2023 to be at 1,786,973. In a focus group discussion, a member narrated the following,

Rural-urban migration from Webuye to Nairobi is driven mainly by lack of employment opportunities in rural areas, coupled with perception of better livelihoods in Nairobi. Webuye, once an industrial hub due to the pan paper Mills, experienced economic decline after the factory's collapse, leaving many youths jobless. This has accelerated migration, particularly among youth people seeking work in the informal sector in Nairobi (FDG at Webuye in Bungoma 25th June 2025.)

Based on the above information youth migration from Webuye to Nairobi is reshaping the whole dynamic of both places. In rural areas, the exodus leads to reduced agricultural productivity, an aging population and slowed economic development. Migrants, however send money back home, they keep social connections alive and possible eventual return flows that support families and communities.

Urbanization and Governance During Devolution

Bungoma County is a core function in the county government as provided for under schedule four of the Constitution of Kenya 2010. It encompasses the organization of land use, infrastructure development, environmental protection and public space design. The role of county government in urban planning is to develop spatial plans, integrated urban development strategies, and local physical blueprints (CIDP, 2023-2027). Service delivery is a central responsibility of the county government under devolution. For Bungoma County specifically, it comes down to making sure people get accessible, efficient, and fair public services. The county runs health facilities from level 2 up to level 5, including Bungoma County Referral Hospital, Webuye sub county Hospital, and various dispensaries. They also provide maternal health services, immunization programs, disease surveillance, health promotions, and run community health volunteer initiatives (County Government of Bungoma, 2021).

To ensure rapid urban development, the county has put up strategic urban planning framework to deal with challenges of urbanization. One of the framework is the Bungoma County Urban Development Policy from 2021, which basically lays out the vision for urban areas that are well-organized, sustainable and livable urban areas (County Government of Bungoma, 2023).

In an oral interview, an informant noted,

Bungoma County government is closely working with the National government to ensure efficiency and development. Many policy framework have been put in place to ensure significant progress in development. The aim of the county as per now is dealing with infrastructural development and social services. Many schools and hospitals have been created both public and private institutions. Roads are continuously being upgraded every day as the county is working on linking the interior roads connecting them to the major urban ones. (Peter Nyukuri, Principle administrator urban planning, 2nd May 2025. Bungoma).

Similarly, devolution has accelerated urbanization in Bungoma by shifting planning, revenue and service delivery responsibilities to the county that has produced faster local investment and new jobs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends Strengthen collaboration between faith-based organisations and government in delivering education and health services by expanding public funding and regulatory support to accredited mission institutions and Increase public investment in essential services like education, health and agriculture to restore capacity lost under SAPs.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that urbanization has been the main engine of socio-economic progress in Bungoma by boosting education, healthcare, and housing markets. The findings reveal that as the town grew, the trade services and small businesses, opened up jobs and increased household income. Moreover, urbanization brought in younger, more diverse populations, which promoted education opportunities, gender participation, and cultural integration. To accelerate further socio-economic development, the County should therefore adopt coordinated spatial planning frameworks that integrate land use, housing and infrastructure development.

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