

BORDER CITIES IN AFRICA

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Introduction

Border cities play a key role in African social and economic exchanges (Nugent, 2012). Their development during the colonial era is explained by the entanglement of political and economic factors rooted in administrative and fiscal logics – whether arising from the need to find the most convenient site for the location of a colonial or regional capital, or from the imperative to regulate the movement of people and goods (Asiwaju, 2021). While some border cities acquired their significance from the channelling of human flows, such as labour migrants, displaced persons, and refugees (Büscher & Mathys, 2019), others grew up along roads and railways at the points where these crossed colonial and post-colonial borders (Soi & Nugent, 2017).

Border cities also developed around the opportunities for trade that borders presented, especially in the decades following independence, when the financial returns from smuggling multiplied. The liberalisation of national economies in the 1980s, and, more recently, the growing demand in manufactured and agricultural goods that accompanies urbanisation have further increased the economic importance of these agglomerations across the continent (see Chapter 15 in this volume). Located at the interface of two states, they now serve both as local collection centres for agricultural production and as transit points for major intra-regional flows (Walther, 2012).

Political and economic dynamics are not exclusive and have been interwoven in complex ways. Hence, the founding of administrative centres often stimulated trade in settlements located across the borderline. Displaced peoples and migrants have often converged on administrative centres because of the greater personal security that these afford. Some border cities embody more of one dynamic than another. This is also true of cities that face each other across the line: for example, N'Djamena has grown by virtue of its role as the capital of Chad, while Kousséri's more modest expansion in Cameroon is almost entirely a consequence of the possibilities for trade that its neighbour presents.

Against this background, the goal of this chapter is to provide a systematic analysis of the role played by border cities in Africa. Building on our own research in West and East Africa, we argue that border cities are the ideal place to observe the “centrality of the margins”

(Nugent, 2019), that is the importance of peripheral centres for state-building and regional integration. After discussing the colonial origins of African border cities, we focus on post-colonial developments and examine their current specificities. Our analysis suggests that border cities make a crucial contribution to the process of integration, thanks to their ability to foster local, national, and international interactions. The last part of the chapter discusses several obstacles that limit cross-border urban development, and which policies could be implemented.

Colonial legacies

The development of border cities has everything to do with colonial logics that were as much fiscal as administrative in nature (Soi & Nugent, 2017). Other things being equal, the choice of a colonial capital, such as the ports of Mogadishu on the Indian Ocean or Accra on the Gulf of Guinea, was based on existing infrastructure and connectivity. This also meant that capitals did not necessarily stand in any geographical proximity to the borders that were defined at the close of the 19th century.

In Africa's inland river systems, colonial logics were rather more conducive to the emergence of border cities. Colonial regimes had a penchant for locating capitals along rivers because they were more readily accessible by boat before the advent of the railway and all-weather roads (Hoag, 2013) and, in the Sahel, provided enough water for a growing population. As it happened, colonial powers also found rivers to be a convenient instrument for partitioning territory (see Chapter 7 in this volume). The combined effect was that a number of Africa's colonial capitals were located along rivers that also constituted the international border. Such was the case with Bangui in the Central African Republic (CAR), Brazzaville in the Congo, Gaborone in Botswana, Léopoldville (now Kinshasa) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Maseru in Lesotho, and N'Djamena in Chad. There, what was located on the other side of the river was not another city, but a rather peripheral region without any great demographic weight.

The exception was where river settlements represented nodes within a system of regional markets. In these instances, the creation of an administrative centre on one side of the border would often stimulate the demand for goods in markets on the opposite bank. In the Belgian and French Congo, the decision to locate Léopoldville and Brazzaville opposite each other arose from the simple geographical reality that the Congo River afforded the optimal means of transportation for both colonial powers. The chosen location was at the point where the river became navigable – that is above the falls. The river was relatively narrow at this point, although wide enough for the two regimes to maintain a safe distance, while the existence of the Malebo Pool made the waters there much less turbulent. The twin capitals were created according to administrative convenience, but they developed on the basis of close economic and cultural ties (Gondola, 1997; Stewart, 2000).

Aside from the siting of capital cities, colonialism was also conducive to the creation of secondary cities that were located along borders. Early colonial states sought to balance the books by controlling key chokepoints along internal trade routes and then taxing the commodities that passed through (Howard, 2014). Even before the borders were properly demarcated, military and administrative posts were established which did not necessarily reflect what existed on maps and in treaties. Many of these subsequently developed into full-fledged administrative centres, such as Kayes in Mali, Malanville in Benin, or Saint-Louis in Senegal. East Africa provides many examples of colonial centres built upon precolonial settlements,

colonial posts based on previous trade posts, and colonial borders following precolonial frontiers, as between Uganda and Rwanda.

Where competition between the Europeans was intense, there was often a tit-for-tat process of creating administrative posts. This “mirroring” dynamic is apparent from the Great Lakes region where fierce competition between Belgium and Germany led to the establishment of colonial posts along what became the Congo–Rwanda border (Mathys, 2014). Hence the Congo Free State’s establishment of Cyangugu was a direct response to the German occupation of Shangi, while the creation of Goma was a riposte to the creation of a German post at Gisenyi. These particular administrative posts evolved into substantial towns, whose relationship was based on administrative imperatives as well as the need to channel labour and regulate trade.

Post-colonial developments

In the post-colonial period, divergent economic policies created the incentives to engage in cross-border trade and thereby generated the phenomenon of border cities that thrived on contraband. Several factors contributed to their spectacular development.

The first was the collapse of a number of federations in the decade on either side of independence in the early 1960s, yielding a multiplicity of independent states pursuing competitive economic policies. Whereas the former French colonies in West Africa (with the exception of Guinea) and in Equatorial Africa remained tied to France through adoption of the *Communauté financière africaine* (CFA) franc, the former British and Belgian colonies established their own central banks and independent currencies. The latter became overvalued when governments responded to economic constraints by simply printing more banknotes. Among the most extreme instances were those of Ghana in the 1970s and Zaire (now the DRC) from the 1980s until the fall of Mobutu Sese Seko in 1997 (Aryeetey & Fenny, 2017).

Secondly, the larger states generally sought to build national industries from behind tariff walls and based on subsidies derived from a range of taxes on export crops, thereby necessitating the creation of harder borders. For the micro-states that enjoyed access to the sea, industrialisation was not a realistic option, but the re-export of consumer goods certainly was. This provided an incentive for traders to establish themselves in close proximity to the borders (Nugent, 2002), channelling contraband goods into neighbouring territory and dispatching cash crops in the opposite direction (Golub, 2012; Walther & Koné, 2018). The rulers of the micro-states along the West African littoral – notably The Gambia, Benin and Togo – had no incentive to discourage the contraband economy, which brought in Customs revenue and secured livelihoods for much of the population (Igué & Soulé, 2005; Bost, 2007). Hence there was a coincidence between popular livelihood strategies based on cross-border trade and the fiscal interests of the states in question.

Thirdly, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) oil price hikes in the 1970s led to an acute economic crisis in a number of countries. Ironically, the countries that benefited from the oil price hikes, most notably Nigeria, opted to subsidise petrol prices for their own populations, which provided an additional stimulus to engage in smuggling. Along the Nigeria–Benin border, relatively expensive Nigerian manufactured goods, by comparison with those entered through the Beninois port of Cotonou, and subsidised petroleum prices created the ideal conditions for the development of a contraband economy (Nwosu, 1996). In Zaire under Mobutu, low producer prices for cash crops, a

worthless currency, and consumer shortages were accompanied by the decomposition of the national economy and the elaboration of dense networks of international exchange (Larmer et al., 2021).

Border cities developed a close relationship with their counterparts in neighbouring countries, and these were, in turn, linked into a truly international trade in minerals and cash crops (Bennafla, 2002). Whereas the thinking behind economic nationalism had envisaged development radiating outwards from the capital, by the early 1980s Africa's main cities were often in a decrepit state, whereas urban centres closer to the border were often booming due to their strategic role in regional trade. The era of Structural Adjustment removed some of the economic rents that resulted from overvalued currencies and consumer shortages, but it did not alter the underpinning logics of cross-border trade. Indeed, trade liberalisation and regional integration often provided a spur to commerce in border regions (Walther, 2008, 2014; Soi & Nugent, 2017; Titeca, 2009).

Today, African borders cities continue to play a key role in the integration process, at the local, national, and international levels (OECD, 2019a). Locally, border cities feature a dense environment for interaction between traders, farmers, civil servants, religious leaders, and civil society representatives, even though regulatory, cultural, linguistic, and currency differences may separate them (Titeca, 2012). The specialised and complementary skills available in urban centres have specific benefits for those who live or do business there. These agglomeration economies present in all cities are of particular importance to border areas, in so far as borders are seen as a resource to be drawn on for trade or cooperation purposes (Kuépié et al., 2016).

At the national level, many border cities are located at a considerable distance from decision-making centres. Igué (1989) called these areas the “national outskirts” to draw attention to the development of clientelism standards and practices independent of those in place at the national level. The geographical distance between border cities and the main centre of power is often synonymous with political marginalisation. This can be seen in the lack of public investment in health services as well as roadway and education infrastructure (OECD, 2019c). This situation poses major problems for national cohesion. Separatist or violent extremist movements often feed on the marginalisation – actual or perceived – of border areas to spread their ideas among local populations, as in northern Mali and north-eastern Nigeria (Radil et al., 2022).

Internationally, border cities serve as hubs for the transportation and trade networks that connect African countries to each other and to global markets (Niang, 2013). Their role as a crossroads facilitates the circulation of people and of goods that would not find markets at the local or national level (Walther, 2014). This has led to the development of transportation and communications infrastructure designed to encourage the fluidity of regional interaction such as bridges, docks, warehouses, and border posts managed independently or jointly by national governments.

Size and growth of border cities

Africa is experiencing urbanisation on an unprecedented scale. The share of the African population who lives in an urban agglomeration of more than 10,000 people has increased from 24% to 57% from 1980 to 2025 (OECD et al., 2025). This process of urbanisation, which is being fed by high birth rates and heavy migration, has resulted in an increase in the number of urban centres. There are 9,520 urban agglomerations in

Africa in 2025, as compared with fewer than 750 in the early 1960s, when many African countries became independent. This rapid increase in the urban population has also led to an increase in the size of urban centres: 106 agglomerations have more than one million inhabitants in 2025, including Lagos and Nairobi with a population of 16 million people each (OECD et al., 2025).

Africa's urban population varies significantly according to distance from borders (Walther et al., 2020a). In 2025, urban agglomerations with more than 10,000 inhabitants located less than 20 km from a border account for more than 39 million of Africa's 829 million urban dwellers (5%). Agglomerations located 50 km and 100 km from a border account for 137 and 238 million inhabitants, respectively (17% and 29% of the urban population, see Figure 16.1). At the same date, 40% of urban agglomerations are less than 100 km from a border, 24% less than 50 km, and 10% less than 20 km. The average urban population increases with distance from borders, rising from 40,840 inhabitants at 20 km to

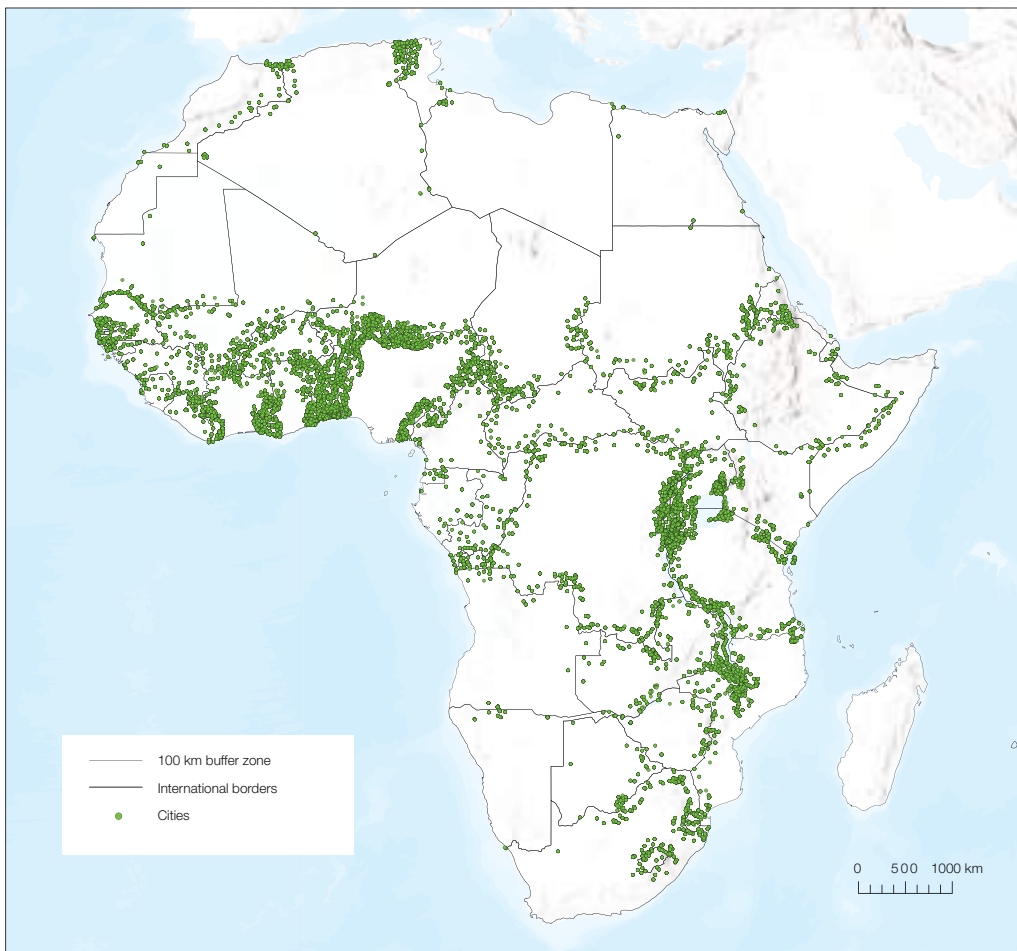


Figure 16.1 Urban agglomerations located within 100 km of a border, 2024.

Source: Olivier Walther based on OECD et al. (2025)

over 62,000 inhabitants at 100 km, while the African average is over 87,000 inhabitants (Table 16.1).

The rate of growth of African urban agglomerations tends to decrease over time, as urbanisation progresses in most countries (OECD et al., 2025). While the annual compound growth rate on the continent was 3.0% between 2020 and 2025, it is projected to decline to 1.7% between 2045 and 2025. Border cities follow the same trend. Yet, the growth in border agglomerations has been consistently higher than in other urban centres in the region in recent decades. In West Africa, for example, average growth rates show that regions within 50 km of a border are generally the most favourable for urban population growth, estimated at 5% annually between 2010 and 2020 (Walther et al., 2020b).

The overall demographic growth of border agglomerations shows great geographical disparities due to the fact that these centres are highly susceptible to economic and political change. Import bans, differences in exchange rates, or border closures affect them much more quickly than other agglomerations that are less dependent on international trade. As a result, the populations living in border agglomerations are far more likely to experience rapid variations in employment and livelihoods than those in other urban centres (Dobler, 2009). In West Africa, those who grow particularly fast are often located near agricultural fronts, such as in western Ghana, or on the Gulf of Guinea between Nigeria and Benin, as well as on Nigeria's eastern borders with Cameroon. Low or negative growth rates are observed in border regions located far from major transport routes, as in western Côte d'Ivoire (OECD, 2019b).

The influx of refugees can result in rapid urban growth, as along Chad's borders with Sudan and the CAR or in the Great Lakes region, where conflicts have been a major factor in the growth of border agglomerations since the Rwandan genocide of 1994. In 2025, Goma is estimated to have a population of 1.77 million people, against 145,000 in 1990 according to Africapolis (OECD et al., 2025), the great surge coming from people escaping the fighting in rural North Kivu. Across the Rwandan border, Gisenyi's population has grown from 21,000 to 1.47 million over the same period. In South Kivu, the relative order of magnitude is similar: whereas the agglomeration of Bukavu in DRC is estimated to have a population of 832,000, the population of the agglomeration of Cyangugu in Rwanda is estimated at only 63,000 by Africapolis.

Armed conflict and refugee flows explain spatial disparities across the DRC–Rwanda border: while Gisenyi's urban area has remained relatively stable from the late 1980s to the mid-2010s, Goma has considerably expanded and densified (Pech et al., 2021). For the Rwandan authorities, it has been important to contain the fighting in DRC, which might partially explain why the demographic growth has been significantly slower in Cyangugu and Gisenyi.

Table 16.1 Urban population according to its distance from borders, 2025

	<i>20 km</i>	<i>50 km</i>	<i>100 km</i>	<i>>100 km</i>	<i>All</i>
Population	39,346,358	137,138,750	238,053,543	591,209,569	829,263,112
Average population	40,840	60,122	62,269	103,776	87,108
Median population	19,380	19,722	20,007	20,988	20,657
Number of cities	964	2,281	3,823	5,697	9,520

Source: OECD et al. (2025)

A more common pattern is one in which refugees have been formally registered with the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and been moved into camps. Whereas camps are based on the logic of cordoning off the refugee population, the first pattern has been more conducive to the growth of permanent cities.

Density and morphology of border agglomerations

The density of African urban agglomerations shows significant national and regional variations, reflecting specific patterns of land use. Generally speaking, urban density is slightly higher in West Africa (6,049 inhabitants per km² in 2025) than in the rest of sub-Saharan Africa (5,426). These differences are due to the fact that East and Central Africa count numerous extended agglomerations, such as Bujumbura in Burundi, Mbale and Bunagana in Uganda, Bafoussam in Cameroon, and Sodo Town and Hawassa in Ethiopia, where urban density is comparatively lower than in more compact cities elsewhere on the continent (OECD et al., 2025).

Similar regional variations can be observed among border agglomerations: the density of urban agglomerations located within 20 and 50 km of a border (4,905 and 4,937 inhabitants per km² in 2025) is lower than the continental average (5,426). In West Africa, however, the density of border agglomerations is higher than the average for the region's urban centres and decreases with distance from the border. It varies from an average of 8,260 inhabitants per km² at 20 km to 7,976 inhabitants per km² at 100 km in 2025, reflecting the specific demographic characteristics of border urban centres in this region.

From a morphological perspective, border agglomerations have specific features. Contrary to appearances, the national centres that make up these agglomerations were often duplicated or relocated after colonial partition, rather than having been separated by current borders (Soi & Nugent, 2017). Twins do not always look so similar despite the fact that they share the circumstances of their conception – and much the same could be said of border cities in Africa where the siblings in question assume different shapes and sizes. Where cities do face each across the line, they have generally not had their backs turned to one another but have emerged out of mutually embedded relationships. This partly reflects the limitations of state initiatives to manage space and partly the skill with which populations have woven their livelihood strategies around the existence of borders. In the majority of cases, African border cities are “duplicated” rather than “partitioned” (Buursink, 2001), although this is often complicated by the fact that settlements have themselves relocated after the creation of a border – typically from one riverbank to the next – creating an illusion of partition.

These cross-border agglomerations emerged without a concerted development plan and remain very dependent on each other. For example, the recession effecting Nigerian urbanites in the late 2010s had a very direct impact on used vehicle vendors in Cotonou, Benin (Reuters, 2017). The size and functions of the centres of these cross-border agglomerations vary a great deal, especially when a political capital is adjacent to another urban centre. The population of the agglomeration of N'Djamena in Chad (2.0 million) is 14 times greater than that of Kousséri in Cameroon (145,000; see Figure 16.2), and the agglomeration of Lomé has a population ten times the size of that of Aflao in Ghana (3.4 million vs. 338,000) in 2025, according to Africapolis.

The map of the road network along the Togo–Ghana border clearly shows the marked discontinuity in urban planning (Figure 16.3). While the Lomé/Aflao built environment is continuous along the coast, the Togolese section has a much denser and more structured

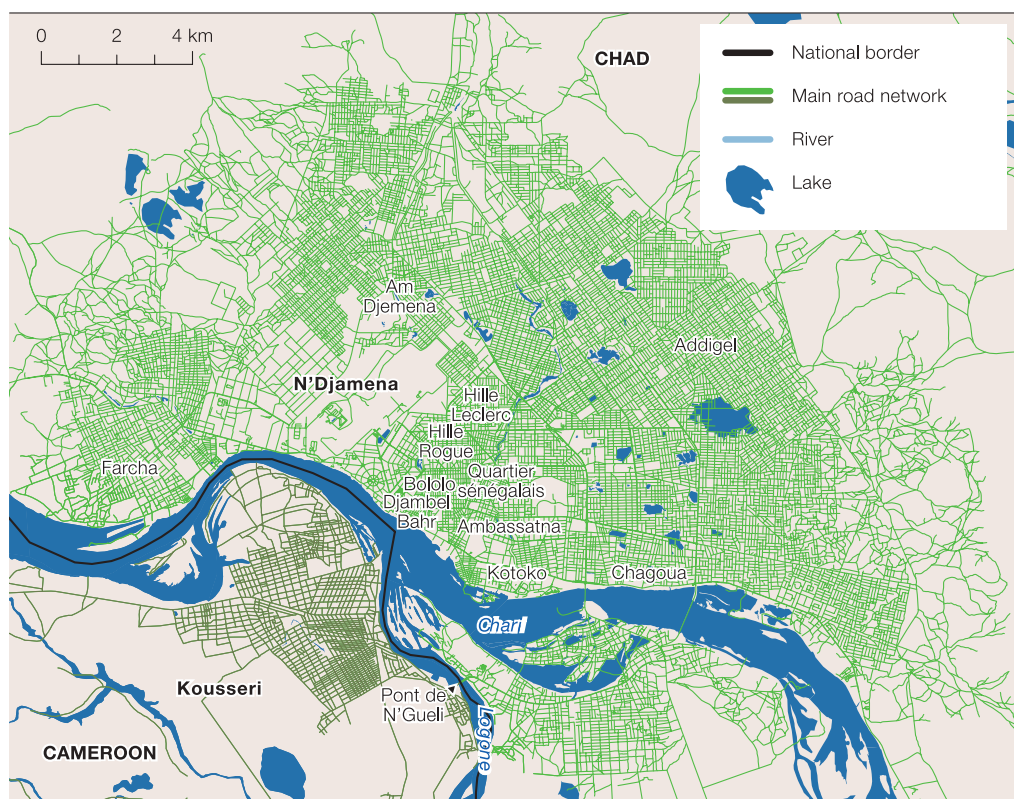


Figure 16.2 The N'Djamena–Kousséri cross-border agglomeration (Chad–Cameroon), 2018.

Source: Olivier Walther based on OECD (2019a)

road system than does the section within Ghana, where many of the transportation routes are not paved and settlement is much more informal. The territorial discontinuity is more marked north of the coastal lagoon, where high density and wide avenues on the Lomé side contrast with the collection of small towns separated by small agricultural parcels on the other side of the border.

This situation has its roots in a historical context dating back to the end of the 19th century. Lomé was originally built by the Germans based on a rigid urban grid which separated the colonial administrative sector from the other previously built commercial districts. After the Second World War, the French colonial administration expanded the original grid. Urban growth on the Ghana side was more organic in nature, starting from the pre-colonial port used by European and African traders. Today, it is being driven by a trend of cross-border commuting, where people work in Lomé, but sleep in newly constructed rental accommodation in Aflao which is cheaper (Nugent, 2021).

Central Africa provides the only example in the world of two capital cities that face onto each other. Kinshasa, capital of the DRC, and Brazzaville, capital of the Republic of Congo, together constitute a vast urban agglomeration of more than 14 million people in 2025 according to Africapolis (OECD et al., 2025), which makes it significantly larger than Greater London or Greater Paris. There are also five other cases where a capital city is located on an

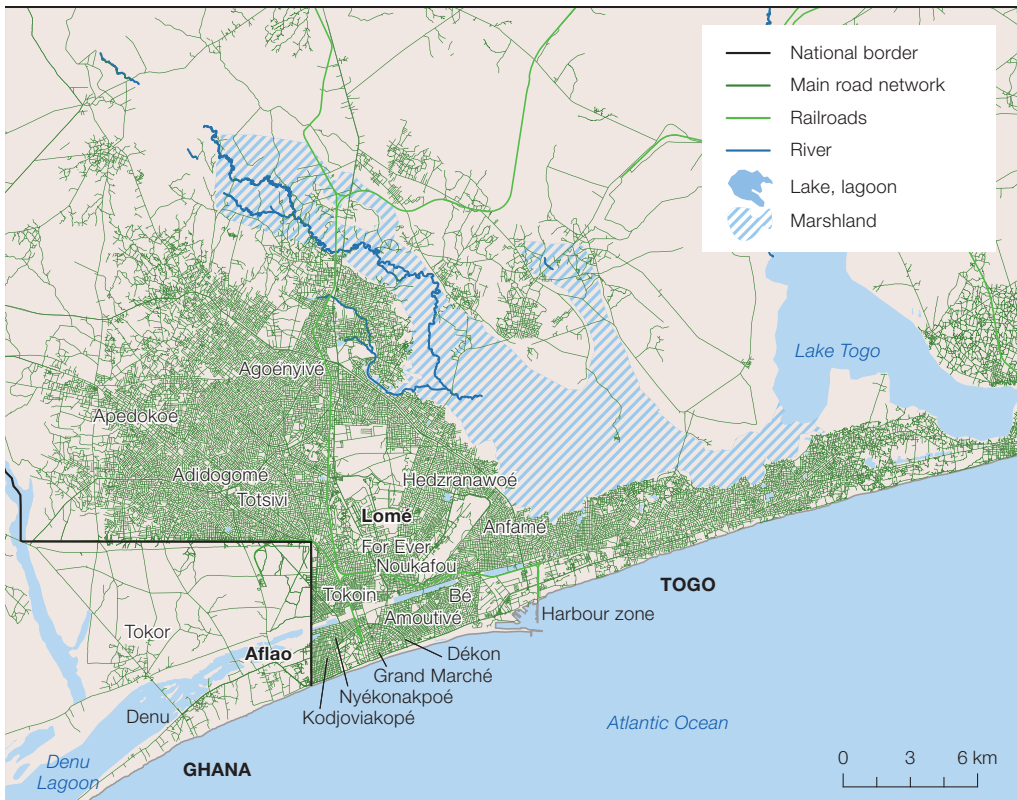


Figure 16.3 The Lomé–Aflao cross-border agglomeration (Togo–Ghana), 2018.

Source: Olivier Walther based on OECD (2019a)

international border: Lomé in Togo, Bangui in the CAR, N'Djamena in Chad, Maseru in Lesotho, and Gaborone in Botswana. In the case of Gaborone, the issue of twin cities does not arise because the South African side of the border is essentially devoid of population. But in each of the other cases, there are cities of some size located across the line, whose existence owes something to the more substantial neighbour. Hence, the market at Kousséri in Cameroun has provisioned N'Djamena on the opposite bank of the Chari River. There is a similar relationship between Zongo in the DRC and Bangui that face each other across the Congo River (Figure 16.4).

Then there are many more cases where secondary cities, which may also be regional capitals, meet at an international border, such as Goma and Gisenyi in the DRC and Rwanda, respectively. In some cases, twin towns share the same name – such as Busia-Uganda and Busia-Kenya, Moyale-Ethiopia and Moyale-Kenya, or Kerawa-Cameroun and Kerawa-Nigeria. This is a clear indication of a historic connection between neighbouring settlements that may have constituted a single settlement before the border was drawn or have emerged as a response to its existence. But even where cities might bear distinct names, or have changed their names, the bonds between one town and the other are often extremely strong – typically based on notions of a shared history, kinship and self-interest.

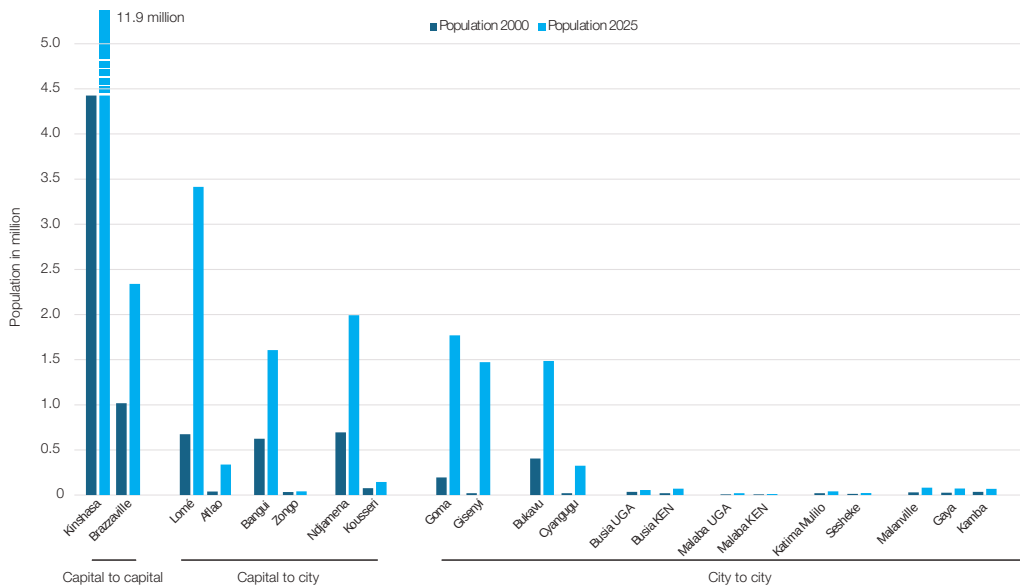


Figure 16.4 Population of select twin cities in Africa, 2000 and 2025.

Sources: Authors based on OECD et al. (2025), and national censuses (Busia-Uganda: 2000 and 2009, Busia-Kenya: 1989 and 2019, Malaba-Uganda: 1999 and 2025, Malaba-Kenya: 1999 and 2023)

Infrastructure and accessibility

In recent decades, African countries have come to embrace regional integration agendas that seek to achieve a better integration into the global economy through large-scale investments in infrastructure and tariff reductions (Nugent, 2018). In the process, the trade across borders has assumed new dimensions. Bridge crossings, railheads, and trucking stops are helping to give some established border agglomerations a new lease of life, while leading to the emergence of others. A good example of the transformative power of infrastructure is on the border between Namibia and Zambia where the bridging of the Zambezi River in 2004 has led to a substantial increase in traffic from the Zambian Copperbelt along the transport corridor to Walvis Bay. The new bridge has created a boom-town effect in Katima Mulilo (Namibia) and to a lesser extent in Sesheke (Zambia) on the opposite side of the river (Zeller, 2009).

The picture is more mixed at the border between Zambia and the DRC where the Copperbelt itself straddles the boundary (see Chapter 10 in this volume). Chililabombwe, which is set back from the border, is located at the northern railhead of the Zambian railway. The population of its urban agglomeration is estimated to have risen from 48,055 in 1990 to 120,400 in 2025 (OECD et al., 2025). An improved road leads from Chililabombwe to Lubumbashi, the largest city in the southern DRC. Set hard against the border, on the DRC side, is Kasumbalesa whose growth in recent years has derived from its position along a vital trade corridor that handles around 500–600 trucks a day. The perennial delays at the border crossings, here and elsewhere, have created opportunities for people selling services of various kinds.

Connective infrastructure has not merely been important for extractive industries and for long-distance trucking of consumer goods, but equally so for more localised cross-border trading networks. Some traders who specialise in sourcing cheaper goods from China have

set up well-stocked stores at the border. Hence, the Namibian border town of Oshikango has experienced its own mini-boom based on shoppers crossing through the Angolan border town of Namacunde to acquire commodities more cheaply from Chinese stores (Dobler, 2008).

It matters that taxes vary significantly between one African country and the next. Hence, the Rwandan state taxes petroleum significantly more than its counterpart in the DRC, which creates an incentive to spirit it across the border. As a result, Goma in the DRC has prospered from the substantial border trade more than Gisenyi, where the sale of petroleum products is heavily controlled and taxed by the Rwandan state (Lamarque, 2014). While Goma might be seen as disorderly by comparison with its Rwandan twin, it is also seen as a place of more abundant opportunities.

Yet, despite providing economic opportunities for petty traders, border delays and bribes also contribute to reduce the market area of many African border cities (OECD, 2019d). In West Africa, for example, recent studies suggest that a one-hour wait at a border post reduces the potential market of border cities by 14% (Walther et al., 2020b). In the Dendi region between Benin, Niger and Nigeria, for example, the combined population market of eight border cities would increase by one third if there were no waiting at the borders. Removing roadside checkpoints would also greatly improve the road accessibility of border cities, particularly for some urban centres located on the Gulf of Guinea (Walther et al., 2020b).

Obstacles to cross-border urban development

African border cities face various obstacles that limit their contribution to the regional integration process. Functionally, few of them have received investments worthy of their strategic importance. Most lack the infrastructure needed to develop as both centres of local innovation and regional commercial hubs. This double constraint is expressed locally by urban development that is largely spontaneous and by a lack of markets, storage facilities, and urban roads as well as medical, social, and educational facilities. Border cities also suffer from a lack of upkeep on the road and rail infrastructure connecting them to the rest of the nation and neighbouring countries. The lack of productive, socio-educational, and business investment typical of border cities considerably reduces the potential for agglomeration economies created by urban concentration. It also amplifies the negative effects of distance at the national level and imposes considerable constraints on regional trade at the international level.

Institutionally, the main obstacle to the development of border cities is the low financial capacity of local and regional governments (OECD et al., 2025). While legal and institutional decentralisation has reached an acceptable level in some countries, the tools and financial means needed to implement them are still limited. Low levels of economic independence and poor collection rates combined with a tendency to refrain from increasing taxes during election cycles are making the situation worse. Consequently, local governments lack the means to make the decentralised investments that could help them realise their urban and cross-border potential.

Cross-border urban development is also constrained by the fact that municipal authorities are actively discouraged by states from communicating directly with one another. Twinning arrangements between municipalities that share similar issues are extremely rare on the continent and most cooperatives initiatives continue to happen “from below,” between informal traders for example. The lack of institutional agreements between cities separated by national boundaries in Africa contrasts with other regions of the world, such as Western

Europe, where regional integration has developed both above and below the state, through supranational institutions and city-to-city frameworks (Decoville et al., 2013).

In recent years, cross-border cooperation has also become increasingly threatened by political insecurity. The situation is particularly worrying in West Africa, where cross-border cooperation programme had been implemented in the 2010s, thanks to the lobbying efforts of the Council of Local Governments (CCT) of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA). A number of Integrated Transboundary Development Schemes (SATI) had been funded to foster cross-border cooperation among local and regional governments in Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and Niger (see Chapter 30 in this volume). These efforts have been compromised by the emergence of violent extremist organisations in the Central Sahel and Lake Chad basin, two regions that before the mid-2010s were recognised as having the greatest potential for cross-border cooperation (OECD, 2017).

Perspectives

This chapter suggests that border cities play a crucial role in the process of regional integration in Africa. Often created for fiscal and administrative reasons by colonial powers, their recent development was much encouraged by import bans, inefficient administrative processes, and other non-tariff barriers between independent African countries. As a result of their strategic location, border cities tend to have a unique profile. Their economic importance is explained less by their demographic weight than by the presence of merchants specialising in regional trade. Border towns are also subject to erratic growth that follows the often-unpredictable evolution of regional trade. Periods of economic boom are followed by long periods of decline. Finally, border towns are denser than others, which again reflects the preponderance of economic activities concentrated within their markets.

The social and economic importance of border cities contrasts with the general lack of interest shown by states and international institutions in their urban development. Despite some recent initiatives such as One-Stop Border Posts (OSBPs), border cities that are not state capitals suffer from a chronic lack of investment in terms of road infrastructure, medical services, or formal educational facilities (OECD, 2019b). Cross-border cooperation initiatives rarely rely on urban centres to promote regional governance, despite the common problems shared by cross-border agglomerations, such as transport, pollution, waste management, and residential expansion (Nchito & Mwale, 2020). In this respect, the health centre shared by Warokuy in Burkina Faso and Wanian in Mali since 2011 remains an exception on a continent where spatial planning continues to be driven by national priorities (Box 16.1).

Box 16.1 Border cities are central to health cooperation

In West Africa, health facilities are rarely located in peripheral regions. An exception is the Ouarekuy-Wanian health centre built by Burkina Faso and Mali in 2006 following a conflict related to natural resource management involving border communities. The reconciliation process undertaken under the aegis of elected municipal officials resulted in local populations identifying health as a priority area for investment in the region.

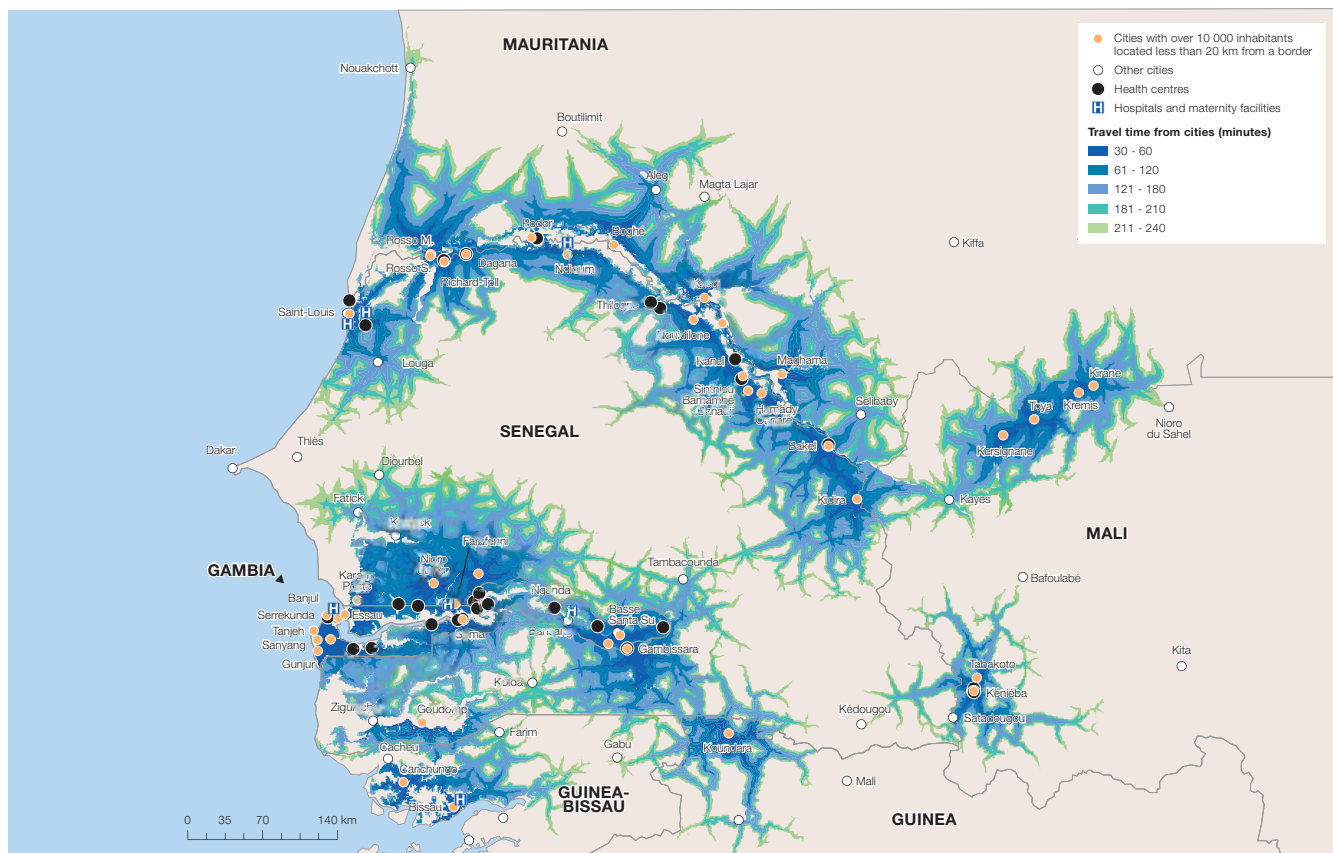


Figure 16.5 Senegambia's health facilities, cities and road accessibility, 2018.

Source: Olivier Walther based on OECD (2019c)

The United Nations Capital Development Fund's (UNCDF, 2017) Local Cross-Border Initiative (LOBI) programme identified an alternative approach, according to which existing infrastructure is strengthened by providing some health units in border areas with more specialised medical equipment and personnel. This option was suggested for the health centres of Labbezanga (Mali), Tin Akoff (Burkina Faso), and Petelkolé–Chatoumane (Niger) in the Liptako–Gourma region.

These initiatives assume that cross-border infrastructure serves a larger population base than that identified by national health systems. Border populations' accessibility to health infrastructure depends on a number of factors, including the existence of quality transportation networks as well as a lack of delays in crossing borders and conducting roadside checks (see OECD, 2019d). By comparing the spatial distribution of the urban population with the distribution of health facilities, it is possible to identify several regions where health services could be improved through closer collaboration between the countries in the region. Along the Senegal River, for example, most high-level health facilities are located on the Senegalese side, while on the Mauritanian side there are almost none from Rosso to Bakel (Figure 16.5).

This asymmetry is made even more problematic by the fact that there are very few roads crossing between the two countries, which considerably limits the theoretical population base of border cities. Along the Gambia River, most health infrastructure is located in The Gambia rather than Senegal. Road access between the two countries is better than in the Senegal River Valley, in particular to the north, which increases the number of people that could potentially be reached from the border. In the eastern part of the region, cities in Mali close to the border separating Mali from Mauritania lack health centres and hospitals of regional scope.

The significance of border cities justifies the need for development policies suited to their specific features to be implemented by states and their regional and international partners. Such place-based policies should support urban growth and the formation of cross-border urban regions at different scales (OECD, 2017, 2019a).

At the local level, development policies should foster the potential benefits of urban density by supporting the establishment of development plans that maximise intra-urban interaction. High urban density could potentially reduce the costs of transportation and communications, foster innovation, and make larger numbers of agricultural and manufactured products more widely available. Actors could more easily exploit agglomeration economies if cities were to develop in concert with neighbouring border cities. The rapid population growth and urban sprawl seen today in African border cities should encourage national governments and their partners to invest in supporting these dynamics if they wish to make the most of agglomeration economies.

At the national level, development policies should focus on reducing the distance separating border cities from other hubs in the urban network so as to minimise the inconvenience associated with their geographical marginalisation. From that perspective, the development of border cities goes hand in hand with national policies aimed at fostering national cohesion and providing services throughout the national territory. Policies should more actively encourage the development or maintenance of paved roads connecting border cities to the

rest of the country, and to other major regional centres. In West Africa, for example, several key border cities, such as Kayes and Kidal in Mali, Sebba in Burkina Faso, or Assamaka and Bilma in Niger, are still poorly connected to the national road network.

At the international level, development policies must continue to reduce the friction generated by African borders. This can be achieved by facilitating the mobility of goods, people, capital, and ideas over long distances. The transportation corridors, dry ports, joint border posts, free trade zones, and pipelines currently implemented by regional organisations and national governments should be accompanied by investments that benefit the actors who live in, pass through, or use border cities locally. While local populations and traders make a living from maintaining pricing and taxation differences across countries, major operators have a vested interest in harmonising regional trade (Zeller, 2009). These operators share the interests of the regional organisations who promote such infrastructure, while local traders and civil servants responsible for controlling the border generally oppose it.

Development policies should consider the fact that border cities are a place where local populations live, a needed hub for traders, and a mandatory stopover for major players in the global market (Dobler, 2016). Consequently, such development policies cannot be limited to promoting free-trade zones and regional transportation corridors, which mainly enhance formal trade between urban centres instead of promoting local development.

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AGRO-PASTORALISTS IN AFRICAN BORDERLANDS

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Introduction

As communities that combine crop farming with raising livestock, agropastoralists have played a vital role in both economic survival and cultural identity in the borderlands of Africa for a long time. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2018, p. 2) describes pastoralist livelihoods as “a way of life based on livestock production,” which often involves seasonal movement and shared management of natural resources. In agropastoralists systems, the strategies for mobility and mixed production are influenced by environmental factors and are supported by strong social institutions. Turner and Schlecht (2019) point out that agropastoralism not only helps with subsistence but also fosters social bonds through the collective use and negotiation of shared ecological spaces.

However, in recent years, agropastoralists in African borderlands have faced mounting challenges such as climate change, population growth, land degradation, and environmental shocks that have intensified competition for land, water, and grazing areas. This competition led to localised tensions that often cross international borders, particularly in the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and the Great Lakes. These areas are now seen as critical hotspots for cross-border conflict. For instance, a recent analysis by the OECD (2022) shows that in West Africa, nearly 10% of all victims of violent political events since the late 1990s lived within 10 km of an international border. This underscores the concentration of conflict in these frontier zones.

This chapter focuses particularly on the experiences and vulnerabilities of agropastoralists of African borderlands. It explores the drivers of farmer–herder conflict, the governance gaps that escalate such tensions, and the challenges posed by disconnected national policy responses to inherently transboundary dynamics. While agropastoral communities commonly cross borders, national states respond within limited jurisdictional space. As Debos (2016, p. 79) points out, “the inward-looking approach of most governments has not addressed the root causes of conflict; it has instead intensified tensions in border areas.”

Several case studies detail the ways in which agropastoralists conflict is affected by an intersection of regional, national, and local factors. In the Sahel, for instance, land expansion into customary grazing routes and climate change effects have led to increased community