



# A Ghanaian twist to urban sprawl

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## ABSTRACT

With its inception in urban studies in the 1930s, the notion of urban sprawl was institutionalised and globalised. However, urban sprawl research has mostly focused on developed countries compared with the situation in African countries. To address part of this gap, this paper appraises urban sprawl in Ghana, using Ejisu a peri-urban area of Kumasi as a case study in order to understand its characteristics, causes and effects on urbanites and urban functionality. Household and physical surveys, agency interviews and document reviews were used. Findings indicate that urban sprawl in Ejisu has spatial and aspatial characteristics, and is occurring in the absence of basic infrastructure services such as water and sanitation, and has become an extra yoke on urban planning agencies who are already faced with limited personnel and logistical capacity.

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## 1. Introduction

It has been established that urban sprawl has become a major public policy issue in recent years (Sudhira and Ramachandra, 2007; Brueckner and Helsley, 2011) although its conceptual ambiguity remains unresolved (Wilson et al., 2003; Angel et al., 2007). There are those (e.g., Galster et al., 2001; Bhatta et al., 2010) who argue that the meaning of urban sprawl is often 'lost in a semantic wilderness'. According to this view, there are alternative and simultaneous uses of urban sprawl to describe patterns and causes of land use behaviours, processes of land development, and the consequences of land use behaviours. Thus, in many cases, urban sprawl is used as a condition and a process (Galster et al., 2001). Others have described it focusing on different dimensions such as a geographical phenomenon where there is low density leapfrog development (Nechyba and Walsh, 2004; Pirotte and Madre, 2011); a transportation slump where there is dominance of, and increasing reliance on automobiles (Nechyba and Walsh, 2004); and an economic phenomenon where economic activities are geographically spread out (Anas and Rhee, 2006). While critics consider urban

sprawl as a wasteful type of urban growth (Osborn, 1965), its adherents argue that it is a natural expression of growing cities and has the capacity to create opportunities for urbanites to benefit from lower land values and housing prices (Glaeser and Kahn, 2004). Given these ambiguities and contentions, it perhaps seems reasonable to argue that urban sprawl is just a conjectural fuss and a development gimmick.

However, in reality, urban sprawl is breeding many urban development challenges, including unsustainable land development, pollution, and environmental degradation (Anas and Rhee, 2006; Brueckner and Helsley, 2011). The urban sprawl phenomenon, driven by the agenda of low land values at peri-urban communities, desire of urbanites to flee urban blight (e.g., traffic, noise, crime) at the city centre and seek greener and quieter living environment at the periphery, and improved transport system, is characterised by unlimited outward expansion, leapfrog development, rapid suburban growth, and increasing reliance on automobiles (Nechyba and Walsh, 2004). In the face of this complex argumentation, Cobbinah and Amoako (2012) and Sudhira and Ramachandra (2007) report that urban sprawl is inconsistent with controlled development and management of urban land. Cobbinah and Amoako (2012) conceptualise urban sprawl as a non-contiguous and unplanned expansion of cities, depicted by low density physical development and the absence of basic municipal infrastructure (e.g., sanitation) often beyond the peripheries.

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**Table 1**  
Global urbanisation dynamics.

Geographical region	Population ('000)				Urbanisation Level (%)				Urbanisation Rates (%)		
	1950	2000	2010	2050	1950	2000	2010	2050	1950–2000	2000–2010	2010–2050
World	745495	2858632	3558578	6252175	29.44	46.69	51.60	67.18	2.69	2.19	1.41
Developed countries	441845	881344	957251	1127222	54.47	74.14	77.45	85.93	1.38	0.83	0.41
Developing countries	303650	1977289	2601326	5124953	17.64	40.08	45.96	64.11	3.75	2.74	1.70
Asia	245052	1392232	1847733	3309694	17.46	37.44	44.37	64.36	3.47	2.83	1.46
Europe	280602	514545	536611	591041	51.27	70.80	72.69	82.17	1.21	0.42	0.24
Latin America and the Caribbean	69264	393619	465246	650479	41.38	75.49	78.84	86.62	3.48	1.67	0.84
Northern America	109667	247911	282480	395985	63.90	79.13	81.99	88.61	1.63	1.31	0.84
Oceania	7907	21924	25857	40346	62.38	70.43	70.66	73.05	2.04	1.65	1.11
Africa	33004	288402	400651	1264629	14.36	35.56	39.19	57.70	4.34	3.29	2.87

Source: Adapted from Cobbinah et al. (2015a,b), UNDESA/PD (2012).

Presently, in developing countries of Africa and Asia, urban sprawl remains a critical hurdle for urban planning and economic development of cities (Sudhira and Ramachandra, 2007; Owusu, 2013; Cobbinah et al., 2015a). Deficiencies in urban planning coupled with rapid urbanisation – concentration of population in towns and cities – in developing countries have created conditions that call for immediate efforts by governments, and local agencies to respond to urban sprawl and promote healthy urbanism. While attempts to address the issue of urban sprawl are frequently pursued, they are largely focused on developed countries (e.g., Galster et al., 2001; Wilson et al., 2003; Nechyba and Walsh, 2004; Bhatta et al., 2010; Brueckner and Helsley, 2011; Piroette and Madre, 2011) compared with the situation in African countries (e.g., Simon et al., 2004; McGregor et al., 2006; Mattingly, 2009; Cobbinah and Amoako, 2012). Unfortunately, ongoing and future growth of global urban population would largely occur in developing countries, particularly those in Africa (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs/Population Division [UNDESA/PD], 2012), with considerable land use changes resulting from urban sprawl (Sudhira and Ramachandra, 2007). For instance, Africa is expected to become a home to nearly quarter (1.3 billion) of the world's urban population by 2050 (UNDESA/PD, 2012; Cobbinah et al., 2015a). Given the threat of, and relatively limited appreciation of, among others, urban sprawl, it is understandable that the disparity between the progress achieved in the efforts towards urban sustainability and the rate at which a more functional urban environment is being created is so marked across African cities (see UNDESA/PD, 2012; Cobbinah et al., 2015a; Cobbinah and Darkwah, 2016a) that it has often been a subject of discussion and concern for many international organisations such as United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UN-HABITAT) (see UN-HABITAT, 2014).

As international interest in urban development in Africa grows, the need for a critical analysis of the present situation of urban sprawl in African cities emerges. In many contexts, it has become necessary to evaluate existing local conditions and deficiencies with respect to urban sprawl, and to relate them to the growing literature on the phenomenon worldwide. Unless these deficiencies in terms of limited understanding of, and research into urban sprawl, as well as conditions of urban sprawl such as its characteristics, causes and effects, are addressed, present urban planning and management shortcomings may continue to persist in urban Africa. To address these concerns and this gap in past research, this paper essentially appraises urban sprawl situation in Ghana. It uses Ejisu, a rapidly growing peri-urban community of Kumasi – the fastest growing city in Ghana (Ghana Statistical Service [GSS], 2012) – as a case study, in order to understand how the phenomenon differs in peri-urban areas of rapidly growing cities in terms of: (i) characteristics; (ii), causes; and (iii) effects on urbanites and urban functionality.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Urban sprawl and urbanising cities in developing countries: a focus on Africa

The first use of the term 'sprawl' by Earle Draper, one of the first city planners in South-eastern USA, in 1937 during a national conference of planners instigated and substantially accelerated debate and discussion on urban sprawl (Black, 1996). The result has been a proliferation of research and publications, in most of which urban sprawl is contextualised largely within a developed country setting (Black, 1996; Galster et al., 2001; Nechyba and Walsh, 2004; Brueckner and Helsley, 2011), with those in Africa where the consequences seem dire focusing on sub-urbanisation and peri-urbanisation (e.g., Simon et al., 2004; McGregor et al., 2006; Mattingly, 2009; Cobbinah et al., 2015b). In many ways this is true for, as some researchers (e.g., Konadu-Agyemang, 2001; Sudhira and Ramachandra, 2007; Cobbinah and Amoako, 2012; Owusu, 2013) point out, most cities in developing countries of Africa and Asia are spreading beyond their geographical boundaries, engulfing peri-urban communities, transforming land uses and generating waste and pollution. As presented in Table 1, urbanisation levels in developing countries, though less urbanised compared with developed countries, are swelling, with the trend expected to continue in the foreseeable future. In this case, it is somewhat unsurprising that cities are expanding and spreading beyond their administrative jurisdictions.

Unfortunately, within many of these cities, urban planning is failing, and planning efforts are appalling (Cobbinah et al., 2015a; Cobbinah and Darkwah, 2016b). And yet despite the fact that urban planning challenges have always existed (UNDESA/PD, 2012; UN-HABITAT, 2014), only a relatively small proportion of the burgeoning literature has been directed towards the question of urban sprawl in African countries, although often discussed in different contexts such as peri-urbanisation and sub-urbanisation (see Simon et al., 2004; McGregor et al., 2006). Without an understanding and research into the dynamics and ramifications of urban sprawl, it may be difficult, if not impossible, for African cities to achieve compact and sustainable land development, and promote healthy urbanism.

Clearly, there is literature on urban development in Africa. Mabogunje (1990) and Njoh (1998, 2004) for example, have been writing on urban planning and governance in Africa for some time, and have been joined by others in recent years (e.g., Briggs and Yeboah, 2001; Watson, 2009; Obeng-Odoom, 2009; Okpala, 2009; Adarkwa, 2011; Cobbinah et al., 2015a). The international community has stimulated further activity, most notably from the UN-HABITAT whose report 'State of African Cities' has opened an important avenue for a debate and a discussion on the future of

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