

Harare: City research brief

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The African Cities Research Consortium (ACRC) is a collaborative research programme seeking to tackle complex urban challenges in the continent's rapidly changing cities. ACRC aims to generate robust insights and evidence that will help improve the living conditions and urban services for all city residents, particularly for disadvantaged communities.

ACRC's research integrates political settlements thinking with city systems analysis, to understand the dynamics underpinning infrastructure and service challenges in cities. Targeted analysis of specific urban development domains provides deeper insights into how sectoral shortcomings can be overcome and residents' needs addressed.

Harare is one of 12 African cities in which ACRC is engaging community organisations, researchers, practitioners, key state actors and non-state agencies, to co-produce knowledge and evidence to advance urban transformation.



Key findings

The ACRC research process in Harare has focused on four domains: [land and connectivity](#); [informal settlements](#); [neighbourhood and district economic development](#); and [structural transformation](#). Two key components of the conceptual framework underpinning the study informed analysis of these domains: city of systems and political settlement analysis. A number of potential strategic interventions were also identified, with the aim of addressing domain-specific structural problems blocking urban transformation in Harare.

Our key findings and their implications for urban reform in Harare are:

- > **Harare city's infrastructural subsystems are under pressure, causing spatial planning constraints and urban land management fragility.** Institutional capacity should be strengthened to restore Harare's urban land management systems.
- > **The number of informal settlements in Harare is surging, with manifold gaps in infrastructure systems.** This underlines the need for a deliberate commitment to an inclusive informal settlement upgrading framework in the city.
- > **Harare is undergoing reverse structural transformation, with informality constituting a significant constraint on economic growth.** An overarching city spatial transformation programme could strategically trigger change by attracting investment.
- > **Despite a steady growth in Harare's informal economy, there has been limited corresponding official investment to regularise informal economic activities** and strengthen the productivity, profitability and institutional capacities of both informal workers and household microenterprises (HMEs).

Research summaries

City of systems

Structural failures severely constrain Harare's infrastructure systems. While the system failures could be traced to internal capacity and governance challenges within the council, dynamics at the national scale have significantly contributed to the challenges through the deepening macroeconomic crisis in Zimbabwe. Centre–local political tensions also account for service delivery constraints in Harare.

Although informal systems provision arrangements are typically discouraged and criminalised in Harare, infrastructure gaps have resulted in informal services provision models across different systems. Whereas contingent relationships across systems appear strongly mediated by the finance system, domain–system interactions are also evident. Land and connectivity issues seem to trigger wide-ranging impacts on how physical systems operate and whether city authorities recognise them. Informal processes of land access invariably produce contested systems. However, infrastructure systems do not always neatly align based on land access mechanisms. The urban politics of Harare, thus, occasionally interferes with how systems evolve, operate and are governed.

Political settlement

Zimbabwe's political settlement is transitional and semi-settled, with a ruling coalition still in formation and riddled with intra- and inter-elite contestations. The ruling coalition's political heartland is in Zimbabwe's predominantly rural and Shona-speaking centre, and still enjoys support from several wards and constituencies – particularly peri-urban settlements in Harare metropolitan province. This ruling coalition bloc is about 43% of the voting population, while the opposition bloc is traditionally stronger in urban areas and enjoys the support of around 34% of the voting population. The possibility of a contingently loyal or undecided bloc of about 17% nationally means that partisan alignment is volatile.

At the Harare city level, the opposition bloc is dominant and controls the elected wing – albeit with close contests in at least 20% of the wards. Yet as the leaders' bloc retains national power and has a base in the city – close to 30% of the voting population – this leaves Harare subject to vertically divided authority, often making it difficult for the opposition bloc's administration to succeed in the seat of government. Tensions

abound between appointed and employed officials (such as the town clerk), various ministerial departments and agencies with responsibilities in the city, and elected officials.

A readily discernible power distinction in Harare relates to the formal versus informal power structures. Despite the pervasive power contestations, there is convenient collaboration across the political divide when it comes to rents. An informal arrangement around the division of power and rents exists due to the ability of either party to stall progress on contracts and projects. As far as one can tell, the contestations in Harare are not ideologically driven or informed by different policy choices, as the significant political actors in Harare are yet to demonstrate a clear local government agenda linked to a citywide urban transformation programme.

Domains

> Land and connectivity

Urban land management systems in Harare are encountering major constraints due to institutional capacity failures, multiple land authorities, corruption, physical planning failures and macroeconomic instability. The net effect of these challenges has been to proliferate informal land access processes, leading to pervasive unregulated land allocations.

Informal peri-urban settlements, disconnected from a range of city infrastructure systems, are compounding urban land administration systems with weak land/property sales, leasing and taxation systems. There are also growing debates around ineffective environmental management, with a particular focus on the erosion of and encroachment onto wetlands that worsen the effects of climate change, particularly in terms of water security.



Potential land and connectivity intervention

Harare's land management functions are under stress. Internal institutional failures at management level lead to widespread informal land access procedures. These, in turn, have undermined the potential for land value capture and triggered environmental concerns.

We recommend restoring Harare's urban land management systems through city-oriented interventions focused on relevant competence strengthening at local, provincial and central government levels.

> Informal settlements

Despite the growth of land and housing informality, Harare lacks a solid commitment to an inclusive and comprehensive slum upgrading practice. Recurrence of evictions and demolitions in Harare at the height of Covid-19 attest to this complexity. Housing and land informality continues to grow in Harare, leading to an influx of peri-urban informal settlements. Classic examples include Caledonia and Churu Farm in the east and Stoneridge in the south, which are among the study sites for this research.

The domain constitutes a tightly contested space, with politics and opportunities for rents influencing these contestations. Despite electoral victories by the opposition party in Harare, the ruling party has a significant presence in peri-urban settlements. Exclusionary urban planning practice is marked by episodes of evictions and demolitions that often peak outside election seasons.

Potential informal settlements interventions

Existing approaches to slum upgrading have been disjointed and limited in scope and scale. More focus is on legality, without meaningful participation by stakeholders or consideration of their institutional experiences and priorities. As such, slum upgrading projects in Harare stand to benefit from a more inclusive and comprehensive model.

We therefore recommend a participatory action research project that will be linked to one of the ongoing city- and state-led regularisation programmes or projects that bring together different stakeholders' experiences and priorities. **We recommend integrating community knowledge with other professionals and development stakeholders to reimagine the urban transformation agenda.**



> Neighbourhood and district economic development

Our study examined the informal economy and HMEs in Harare within the context of their operations, the barriers they face and how their productivity, profitability and contribution to local economies can be enhanced. Wage-level restrictions, macroeconomic instability, high unemployment, widespread poverty, low capital outlays, and the malfunctioning and/or absence of institutionalised welfare systems, among other things, have forced many people to engage in HMEs.

HMEs in Harare, as with many other cities in sub-Saharan Africa, have taken different guises and forms, blurring the dichotomy between formality and informality, and legality and illegality. HMEs face many further obstacles, including: low capital and limited access to credit; absence of and/or dilapidating critical infrastructure (such as roads, water, electricity); inadequate institutional support; constricted operating environment (due to statutory requirements and often prohibitive government policy, laws and regulations punctuated by violent repression, surveillance, sustained evictions and containment); inadequate labour and social security protection; low-profit margins; high competition; lack of security; and general uncertainty. The informal economy and HMEs have a significant and often underappreciated role in poverty reduction, job creation, income, livelihood, food security, economic empowerment (especially of women micro-entrepreneurs) and national/local economies.

Potential neighbourhood and district economic development intervention

There is a pervasive informal economy in which SMEs are disconnected from formal arrangements. They operate with minimal or no state support, undermining the potential for enhanced productivity. **We recommend reviewing the informal economy policy and regulatory frameworks, strengthening the capacities of HMEs and membership-based HME associations.** We also encourage key stakeholders to engage in an adaptive and iterative process of co-producing knowledge, priorities and solutions at different scales.

> Structural transformation

Our study investigated the patterns of structural transformation in Harare and sought to identify drivers and constraints within the city context. It framed structural transformation as the shift of economic activities from low to higher productivity or transitioning towards industrialised economies. Research findings indicate significant levels of reverse structural transformation, attributed to a rise in Harare's informal economy and contested centre-local politics.

Potential structural transformation interventions

Reverse structural transformation is occurring, attributable to, among other factors, the absence of an overarching urban transformation vision, an upsurge in the informal economy, and the wider macroeconomic and political dynamics prevailing in Zimbabwe. Challenges associated with full formalisation and inadequate short-term policy measures to increase productivity within targeted informal sector enterprises are limiting sector growth.

First, **we recommend crafting an overarching vision for Harare in the form of a spatial transformation programme** to guide urban growth, attract investment and catalyse economic development. Second, **we also recommend short-term policy measures to increase productivity within targeted informal sector enterprises**. The quest for full-scale formalisation as an imperative policy goal currently seems unrealistic. It would, however, be feasible to implement short-term measures that can harness low-skill-biased digital technologies to upgrade the skills of workers and provide seed support to enhance the productivity of firms in the informal sector. Such an increase in productivity will motivate formalisation.



About this brief

This brief was produced by ACRC's Harare team to outline research findings and potential interventions, in preparation for the final city uptake workshop in the programme's Foundation Phase (2022-23).



ACRC is funded by UK International Development. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the UK Government's official policies.

Photo credits: Dialogue on Shelter / Know Your City TV

Photo information (by order of appearance): 1. shops in Churu Farm - a typical economic zone for informal settlements in Harare; 2. Stoneridge informal settlement - firewood is the main source of energy for cooking in such settlements; 3. Stoneridge informal settlement - household shallow wells are the most common source of water for households; 4. Caledonia informal settlement - brickmoulding is an economic activity undertaken by most men; 5. Crowborough Farm - focus group discussion with community leaders during ACRC primary data collection.

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