

Zambia

Towards the Just City in Africa

*Equitable Access to
Public Goods and
Services to Informal
Settlements*

Imprint

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Background

Kitwe, situated in Zambia's Copperbelt Province, covers approximately 777 square kilometres and is the country's second most populated district as well as the most inhabited in the province. With a population of 661,901, the city has grown rapidly over 30% since the 2010 census, when it recorded 517,543 residents. This demographic surge has elevated Kitwe's status to a category 2 town in Zambia's urban hierarchy, underscoring its strategic importance as one of the nation's fastest-growing urban centres.

The city's expansion is closely tied to its role as a mining hub and the economic opportunities that attract rural-to-urban migrants. Nationally, Zambia's urban growth rate averages 4.2% annually, and Kitwe exemplifies this trend with its dynamic population increase. More than 60% of its residents live in informal settlements, reflecting the city's evolving urban landscape and the diverse ways communities adapt to rapid urbanization. These settlements, alongside more formal neighbourhoods, highlight Kitwe's dual character as both a centre of economic opportunity and a space of ongoing social transformation.

Kitwe's trajectory mirrors broader patterns of urban growth across sub-Saharan Africa, where cities are expanding quickly and reshaping national economies. Its position as a major mining and industrial hub makes it central to Zambia's development, while its demographic momentum signals both the promise and complexity of urbanization in the region. As Kitwe continues to grow, it stands as a critical example of how urban centres can drive national progress while shaping the future of inclusive and sustainable city development.

1. Challenges and Conflict

Kitwe's rapid urban growth has created a city of contrasts, where formal neighborhoods enjoy relatively stable services while informal settlements remain marginalized. The most pressing challenges are as listed below:

- **Overburdened infrastructure and unequal service distribution:** Public services such as water supply, sanitation, healthcare, and education are stretched far beyond capacity, leaving informal communities underserved and vulnerable. This imbalance is compounded by unequal service distribution, where wealthier areas benefit from better facilities while poorer, peripheral settlements are neglected. The preferential treatment of wealthier areas perpetuates systemic inequality, undermining social cohesion and reinforcing patterns of exclusion that hinder inclusive growth and resilience.
- **Land tenure insecurity:** Many residents in informal settlements occupy land without formal recognition, which not only limits their access to public services but also prevents them from securing housing finance or investing confidently in

their homes. This insecurity perpetuates instability and hinders long-term development.

- **Limited government capacity:** Local authorities in Kitwe face significant constraints that hinder their ability to deliver equitable services. Resources are often insufficient to match the pace of urban growth, leaving critical infrastructure projects underfunded or delayed. Beyond financial limitations, governance challenges such as corruption, mismanagement, and political interference further weaken institutional effectiveness.
- **Ecological degradation:** The physical expansion of settlements into environmentally sensitive areas has led to environmental degradation, with pollution and unsafe living conditions threatening health and quality of life. These risks are particularly acute in places like Luyando, where proximity to mining land and dump sites exposes residents to hazards.
- **Social invisibility:** Marginalized groups including women, youth, and persons with disabilities are

often excluded from urban planning and decision-making processes. Their voices remain unheard, and their needs overlooked, reinforcing the perception of informal settlers as “urban invisibles.”

2. Solutions and Approach

In response to the mounting pressures of rapid urbanization, Kitwe has embraced a **multi-stakeholder approach** through the establishment of the **Kitwe Urban Development Forum**. This platform brings together diverse actors such as local government, NGOs, academia, unions, and community representatives to foster dialogue, inclusivity, and advocacy for equitable service delivery. By uniting these voices, the forum ensures that the needs of marginalized communities are not overlooked but instead placed at the center of urban development discussions. Key actions include:

- **Community engagement:** Residents, particularly women, have actively appealed for improvements in water access, sanitation facilities, and waste collection points. Their participation underscores the importance of grassroots involvement in shaping solutions that directly respond to lived realities.
- **Policy advocacy:** Regular meetings with Kitwe City Council provided opportunities to address pressing infrastructure concerns such as drainage systems, bridges, and market shelters. By fostering consistent dialogue, civil society

and community representatives can ensure that local authorities remain accountable, transparent, and responsive to citizen needs.

- **Legalization efforts:** Advocacy efforts aimed to secure formal recognition for communities like Luyando, enabled them to access public services and gain legitimacy within the city's planning framework. Alongside this, capacity building initiatives including workshops and training sessions equipped stakeholders with the skills and knowledge needed to engage meaningfully with policymakers, strengthening their ability to influence urban governance.
- **Collaborative partnerships:** Through sustained engagement with NGOs, the private sector, and international partners such as Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and UN-Habitat, local initiatives benefit from mobilized resources, technical expertise, and exposure to global best practices. As a result, communities gain access to improved infrastructure, innovative solutions, and capacity-building opportunities.

3. Next Steps

To achieve a Just City in Kitwe’s informal settlements, the following actions are needed:

- **Improved Urban Planning:** The urban planning must integrate informal settlements into the city’s development framework, ensuring that essential services such as water, sanitation, electricity, and transportation are extended to all residents. This requires not only technical planning but also political will to recognize informal communities as legitimate parts of the urban fabric.
- **Land Tenure Security:** Providing formal titles or long-term leases will empower residents with stability, unlock access to housing finance, and encourage investment in durable housing. Secure tenure also strengthens community identity and reduces vulnerability to displacement.
- **Infrastructure Investment:** This should prioritize upgrades in underserved areas, focusing on water supply, electricity, roads, and waste management. Such investments not only improve living conditions but also stimulate local economic activity and reduce health risks.
- **Community Participation:** Ensure residents are embedded in decision-making processes. Residents should not be passive recipients of development but active partners in shaping solutions. This ensures that interventions reflect local needs and enhances sustainability by fostering ownership.
- **Policy Reform:** This is crucial to support affordable housing, equitable service delivery, and the protection of vulnerable groups such as women, youth, and persons with disabilities. Stronger governance frameworks can reduce corruption and ensure resources are directed where they are most needed.
- **Innovation and PPPs:** Encourage sustainable building methods, public-private partnerships, and technology-driven urban planning.

Ultimately, the goal is to ensure that the so-called “urban invisibles” are no longer excluded but recognized as full citizens entitled to equitable access to public goods and services. By embedding inclusivity, sustainability, and innovation into urban governance, Kitwe can serve as a model for equitable city development across Zambia and sub-Saharan Africa.

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The Just City Project showcases compelling stories of urban transformation across African cities, illustrating how communities, local governments, and civil society are working together to build more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable urban spaces. Through case studies from Zimbabwe, Cameroon, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia, the project captures diverse urban realities and innovative responses emerging from rapidly changing city contexts.

Each case study follows a clear journey from challenge to change, examining the forces shaping each city, the key urban issues and affected communities, and the strategies used to address them. By highlighting outcomes, lessons learned, and links to wider regional and global agendas, the collection offers practical insights and inspiration for advancing just urban development across Africa and beyond.

Further information on this topic can be found here:

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