

South Sudan urged to turn rapid urban growth into engine for jobs and recovery

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South Sudan’s rapidly expanding cities could become powerful drivers of economic recovery, job creation and long-term resilience if supported by coordinated investment and stronger urban planning, according to a new national urbanization review launched this week.

The report, *Cities as Anchors of Recovery and Resilience*, highlights how urbanisation is reshaping one of the world’s youngest nations and argues that cities must play a central role in future development strategies.

Although South Sudan remains one of the least urbanised countries globally, urban growth is accelerating at an unprecedented pace. Since independence in 2011, the country’s urban population has increased from approximately 1.7 million to 2.6 million people, driven by displacement, climate pressures and economic migration.

However, much of this growth has occurred without adequate planning or infrastructure investment, placing increasing pressure on already stretched services, transport networks, water systems and local institutions.

The report warns that without intervention, rapid urban expansion could deepen existing challenges. Yet it also presents a more optimistic scenario: if managed effectively, urbanisation could become a catalyst for economic transformation, improved service delivery and greater social stability.

“South Sudan’s urban transition is an opportunity not to be missed in generating jobs, fostering resilience, and improving the lives of the country’s population,” said Charles Undeland, World Bank Group Country

Manager for South Sudan.

Cities as development projects

For project professionals, the findings reinforce the growing importance of urban development as a programme rather than a collection of individual infrastructure projects.

The report identifies a series of interconnected investments needed to support sustainable urban growth, including water and sanitation systems, drainage infrastructure, urban roads, public lighting and transport networks.

These investments are not only intended to improve living conditions but also to stimulate local economies and create employment opportunities.

A particular focus is placed on labour-intensive public works and market infrastructure that can generate jobs while improving urban functionality. In fragile and developing economies, such programmes often provide both immediate employment benefits and long-term economic value.

Urban growth creating new project opportunities

The review highlights several priority areas where strategic investments could have the greatest impact.

Expanding access to basic services remains a critical challenge. Many rapidly growing urban communities lack reliable access to clean water, sanitation and essential infrastructure, limiting economic activity and affecting public health outcomes.

Improved urban connectivity is also seen as a key enabler of growth. Investments in roads, transport corridors and marketplaces could strengthen links between producers, businesses and consumers while supporting local entrepreneurship.

The report further emphasises the importance of strengthening land governance and urban planning systems. Land disputes, unclear ownership structures and unplanned development continue to create barriers to investment and infrastructure delivery.

For project leaders, these challenges highlight the need for integrated planning approaches that combine infrastructure development with governance reform and institutional strengthening.

Building stronger urban institutions

One of the report's central recommendations is the need to strengthen the capacity of national and local authorities responsible for managing urban growth.

Without stronger institutions, even well-funded infrastructure projects risk delivering only limited long-term benefits. The review therefore calls for greater investment in urban management capabilities, planning systems and data collection.

Improved urban data is viewed as particularly important. Reliable information on population growth, infrastructure needs and service delivery gaps can help governments prioritise investments and make more informed project decisions.

In many developing economies, the availability of accurate urban data is increasingly recognised as a critical factor in successful project delivery and long-term urban resilience.

A roadmap for recovery

South Sudan continues to face significant economic and development challenges, but the report suggests that urbanisation may offer one of the country's most important opportunities for recovery.

Vice President Dr James Wani Igga described cities as increasingly important to the country's future development and called for greater alignment among government and development partners to support implementation of the proposed reforms.

The report's recommendations effectively create a roadmap for a long-term programme of urban transformation, combining infrastructure investment, institutional reform and economic development initiatives.

For the project management community, the findings provide a reminder that some of the world's most significant future projects will not be individual buildings or infrastructure assets, but the creation of entire urban systems capable of supporting growth, resilience and opportunity.

As South Sudan's cities continue to expand, the challenge will be ensuring that growth is guided by strategic planning and targeted investment rather than driven by necessity alone. If successful, urban development could become a foundation for greater stability, stronger local economies and thousands of new jobs in the years ahead.