

Why are secondary cities important?

Secondary cities are home to 75% of the world's population who live in rural areas and urban settlements of less than 500,000 people. They produce less than 40% of world GDP but provide most of the resources needed to support the functioning and development of the world's largest cities that produce some 60% of Global GDP.

While there is no universal definition of a secondary city, they will likely have a population or economy ranging in size between 10% and 50 % of a nation's largest city. This may range from a few hundred thousand to several million people.

Apart from their size, more important is their function and geographical location in a national system of cities. The way cities are connected to each other and to their rural hinterland provides a guide to the nature of the national urban system shaping the flow of materials, goods, services and people among it.

It is estimated that if the efficiency of secondary systems of cities were to improve, the GDP of many poor cities and rural regions could triple. The Cities Alliance (CA) notes that countries which have a more distributed system of secondary cities not dominated by one mega city tend to have lower levels of regional development disparities, higher levels of national productivity and income per capita.

The Joint Work Programme on Equitable Economic Growth (EEG), commissioned by the CA, finds that improved access to public goods and services can and do have a positive impact on EEG by creating job opportunities and life chances for the working poor.

This series of city related policy and information briefs draws on lessons learned from cities and infrastructure work carried out by Triple Line over the past five years. It is intended to contribute to more sustainable, inclusive and climate-resilient cities that generate equitable economic growth opportunities for all by identifying market-driven solutions to urbanisation challenges and strengthening democracy and decentralisation processes through capacity building of government agencies at national, regional and city levels.

Secondary cities have an important role to play as hubs of economic, government, cultural and education activities within national systems of cities. They are also beginning to play increasingly important roles as cities adopt circular economy principles in the way supply chains function. Within a network of cities, secondary cities play a vital role in linking smaller cities, towns and regional areas to their rural hinterlands and large metropolitan or regional economies. Without integration into a national system, secondary cities risk being neglected leading to inequalities as large cities capture the attention and most of the investment.

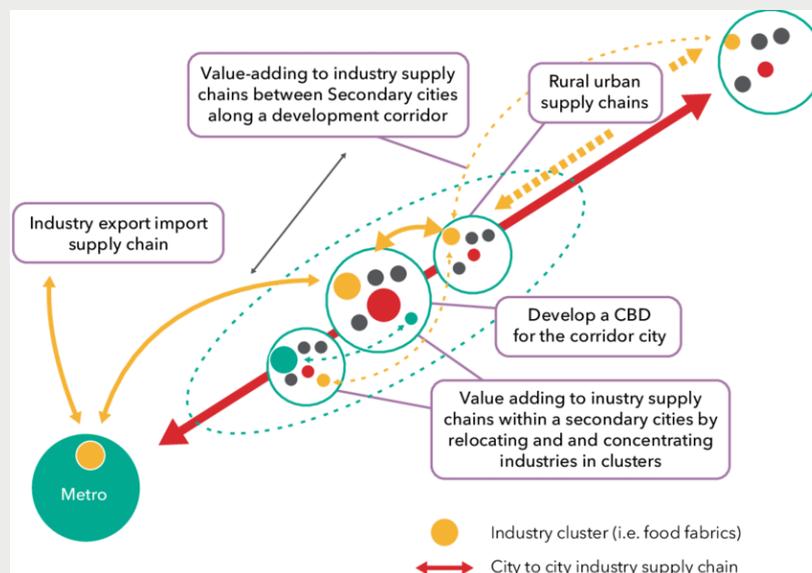
Challenges of integrating secondary cities into a national system of cities

- High rates of urbanisation together with the linked need for strategic infrastructure to create a system of cities.
- Lack of built environment professional design and construction capacity to create the required service infrastructure for rapidly growing cities.
- Lack of administrative, financial and environmental professional capacity.
- Lack of a strategic vision for the cities system along with a methodology for identifying the necessary infrastructure for integrated economic and social development with high environmental standards.
- How to go about integrating secondary cities into a national system of cities that are productive, inclusive and sustainable.
- Lack of a shared approach to governance that is collaborative and uses common administrative systems.
- Lack of a common approach to mapping of material and resource flows through cities to enhance the development of the circular economy.
- Lack of an integrated approach to physical, fiscal and participatory planning, management and development to achieve equitable outcomes, particularly for people living in informal settlements.
- Lack of an investor friendly enabling environment to support and create innovation, jobs and opportunities.
- Need for appropriate developmental partnerships with donors, investors and civil society.

Collaboration between secondary cities can compensate for competitive disadvantages. Governments should create infrastructure to improve connectivity within systems of cities to take advantage of shared resources and capacity while reducing dependence on larger cities.

A diagram showing how it is possible to connect systems of secondary cities along a national or international economic and trade development corridor.

Source: Cities Alliance/Brian Roberts (2019)



Examples of systems of cities

The Ethiopia Urban Expansion Programme that began in 2013 as a collaborative effort between the Ethiopian Ministry of Urban Development and Construction and the Marron Institute of Urban Management at New York University to enhance the capacity of 4 regional capitals in anticipation of their growth due to urbanisation. A year later, the programme was later increased to an additional 14 cities. Together they built some 500km of arterial roads linking urban peripheries, creating 26,000 new jobs.

In Kenya, Ghana and Bangladesh, service sectors with good prospects of investment for promoting equitable economic development for both formal and informal businesses have been identified.

Cities that can work together collaboratively are better able to improve their developmental prospects and leverage investment resources to create equitable and sustainable development. Critical to the success of systems of secondary cities is an ability to work together to devise strategies that all cities buy in to. In addition, civil society stakeholders also need to accept the strategies. Facilitation skills are important to achieve this level of involvement, support and approval.

Another critical factor is the ability of cities to raise finance. This is only possible with a favourable credit rating.

What should cities do?

- Lobby national government regarding the benefits of secondary city systems.
- Lobby other cities to work together with national government to create an integrated approach to secondary city development.
- Cities within a strategic system should conduct an integrated mapping of the flow of resources and materials through the system of cities to create and develop the circular economy.
- With other cities in the integrated system, develop a common set of building and planning regulations.

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