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WASHINGTON DC, MARCH 25-29, 2019



## THE NATIONAL URBAN POLICY AS A FRAMEWORK FOR MANAGING URBAN EXPANSION AND LAND USE CHANGE IN MALAWI

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**Paper prepared for presentation at the  
“2019 WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY”  
The World Bank - Washington DC, March 25-29, 2019**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Malawi has experienced rapid urbanization since independence with 15.3% of the national population living in urban areas in 2008. Estimates by the National Statistics Office (NSO) indicate that 30 % of the population in the country will be urban based by 2030, escalating to 50 % in 2050.

Rapid urbanisation coupled with limited technical and financial capacity among urban development institutions has contributed to unregulated urban growth among others. Government has in the past implemented Rural Development programmes in an attempt to manage urbanization by reducing rural urban migration. .

This paper looks at these programmes and the impact they had on managing urbanization and the lessons learnt from their implementation. The paper concludes that sustainable urbanization can only be achieved through the implementation of a proper guiding framework like the National Urban Policy.

### **Key Words:**

National Physical Development Plan; National Urban Policy ,Secondary Centres;  
Rural Growth Centres, un regulated urban expansion. Urbanisation;



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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Malawi has experienced rapid urbanization since independence. Whereas the level proportion of the national population living in urban areas of 15.3% in 2008 is lower than neighbouring countries, the annual urban population growth of 5.3% is much higher than the national growth of 2.8% per year. Such a growth puts Malawi among the fastest urbanizing nations at a global level. Estimates by the National Statistics Office (NSO 2008) indicate that by 2030 and 2050 about 30% and 50% respectively of the population of Malawi will be urban based. I

Urbanisation has potential to contribute to the economic growth of cities and to create wealth and opportunities for the urban population through its multiplier effects. In Malawi, however, gains associated with urbanisation are not optimized due to the mismatch between the high rate of urbanisation and the capacity of local councils to manage the urbanisation growth. Consequently, urbanisation is resulting in environmental, economic and social changes which negatively affect livelihoods and the growth of the economy. Rapid urbanisation coupled with limited technical and financial capacity among the lead urban development institutions is responsible is contributing to the challenges being faced by the four major cities. Some of the challenges include: informal and irregular urban growth and sprawl; inadequate, ageing infrastructure and services, weak urban-rural linkages and weak resilience to disasters and climate change induced shocks.

Informal and irregular urban growth and sprawl is one of the major challenges for the cities in Malawi and it has resulted in the expansion of unplanned urban growth in the outskirts of cities and rural areas. Customary land that was meant for agriculture production and rural settlement development is being converted to urban uses including low and high density housing, commercial and industrial uses. Lilongwe, the capital City for example has seen developments especially of low income housing and light industry on customary land, depriving the owners of land for cultivation and settlements. People are selling their land to generate income while others are forced to sale when they are surrounded by these urban uses. This means that there is a reduction in the total hectarage of land for subsistence and commercial agriculture and rural settlements as households are being displaced when they sale their land to accommodate this expansion. It is important to mention that agriculture is the mainstay of Malawi's economy accounting for 39% of Growth Domestic Product (GDP), 85% of the labour force and 83% of foreign exchange earnings and food security for the country. It is therefore crucial to formulate and



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implement policy frameworks which will create a strong symbiotic relationship between urban and rural areas. This is essential for enabling benefits of urbanisation to reach rural inhabitants (markets for agriculture produce, jobs, value addition) and for urban areas to benefit from rural areas (food production, labour). Weak linkages between urban and rural areas derail transformation and growth of agriculture and rural development and contributes to food insecurity in urban areas.

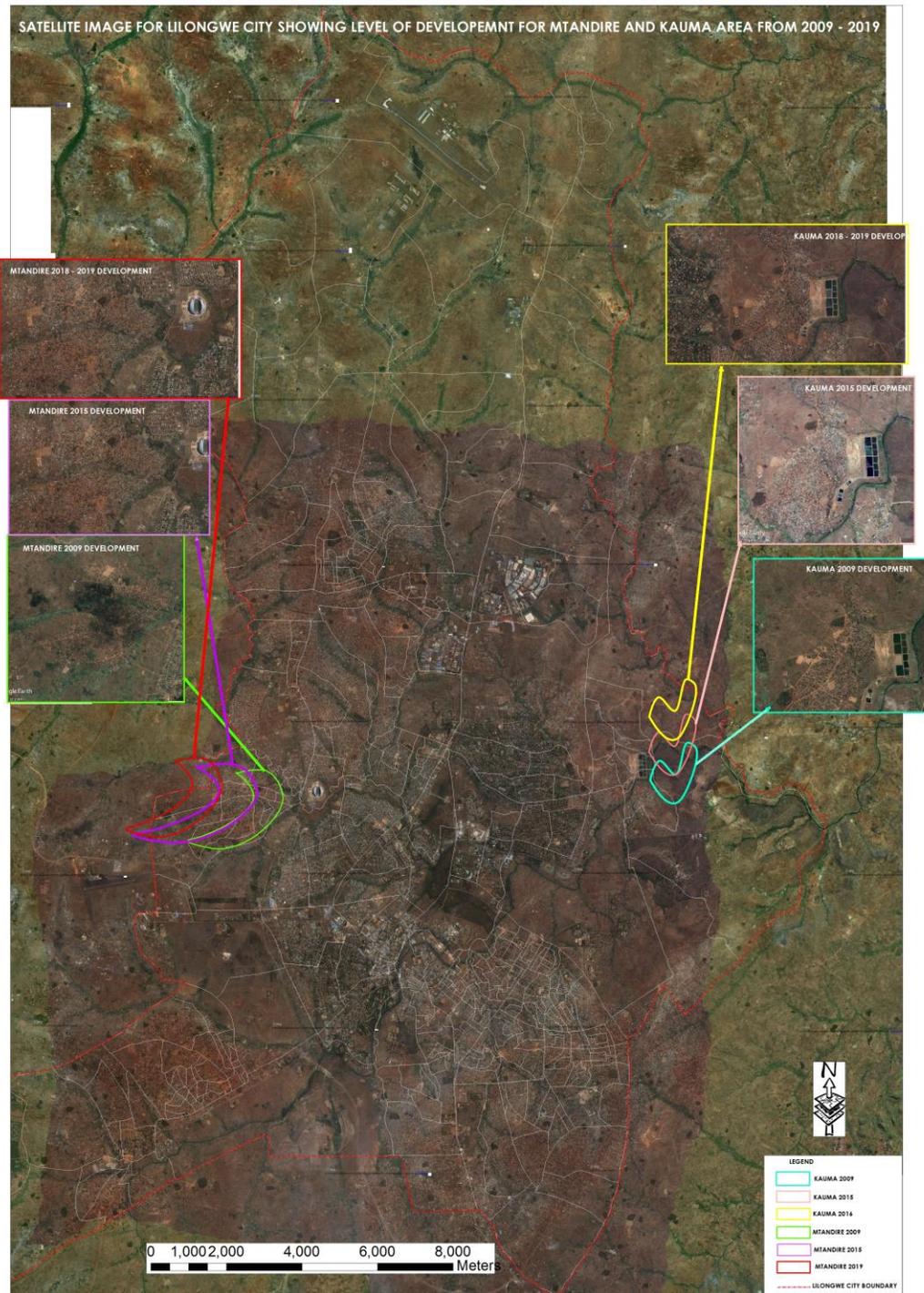
## **2.0 URBANISATION AND LAND USE CHANGE**

The rapid urbanization process has resulted in urban poverty, growth and expansion of informal settlements and poor infrastructure and basic service delivery, in this case affordable housing and serviced land for the urban poor among other challenges. This is because people who are moving to cities in search for better living conditions are and jobs fail to find jobs and cannot afford to pay for housing in the established housing areas. Informal settlements in the urban fringes are their only hope since land is cheap as compared to land within the city boundaries. With time, these settlements have been extending more into customary land which was initially used for agriculture and rural settlements. These unplanned settlements are in two forms: slums, without security of tenure and poor infrastructure and services and settlements by the affluent communities who are escaping congestion in the city. The latter take up large parcels of land per household. Since this growth is taking place without guidance from the planning authorities, the percentage of land that is being converted to urban uses is increasing each year as the urban population continues to grow, reducing land for agriculture use and rural settlements. The figure below shows the unregulated growth of Kauma and Mtandire informal settlements in Lilongwe city between 2009 and 2018.



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**Figure 1:** *Unregulated urban expansion of Mtandire and Kauma informal settlements in the City of Lilongwe between 2009 and 2019*



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According to the national statistics office, over 60 percent of live the urban population live in informal or low income housing areas where service delivery is very poor and poverty very high. The population in these areas continues to grow at rates of above 7% per year compared to the national urban growth rate of 5.2% per year. The trend now is that there are industrial, commercial and recreational uses that are coming up in these areas. Since there is no control of where the different uses can be developed, there is conflict in the uses with incompatible uses developing next to each other.

This development means that the rural areas are not benefitting positively from urbanisation since they are being deprived of their land instead. This trend has continued and will continue if measures to manage urbanisation sustainably are not going to be put in place in Malawi since the urban population continues to escalate as indicated in the table and graph below.

**Table 1: Level of urbanisation from independence to 2008**

| Years | National Population. | Urban Population. | % Urban Population. |
|-------|----------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| 1966  | 4039583              | 260,000           | 6.0                 |
| 1977  | 5547460              | 555,000           | 8.0                 |
| 1987  | 7988507              | 857, 391          | 10.7                |
| 1998  | 9933868              | 1,435,436         | 14.4                |
| 2008  | 13,029,498           | 1,881,010         | 15.3                |

*Source: Malawi Situation of Urbanisation report, 2015*

### 3.0 PAST GOVERNMENT EFFORTS TO MANAGE URBANIZATION

According to the Urbanisation Review Report by the World Bank, urbanisation in Malawi was viewed as a problem because it was associated with challenges being faced by the major cities and it was felt that the solution was to create growth centres which would reduce the rural urban migration. Government then embarked on implementation of development programmes which were aimed at creating growth centres which would decentralize the concentration of the population including; the Rural Growth Centres Project ,Secondary Centres Development Programme and the National Physical Development Plan which created a hierarchy of urban centers throughout the country.



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## 3.1 Rural Growth Centres Programme

A rural grow centre is developed to provide goods and services to its own population as well as those from its area of influence in order to create a balanced socio-economic development of the area. The overall objective of the programme was to improve economic opportunities and social conditions in these centres in order to reduce the migration of people from rural areas to the four major centres of Blantyre, Lilongwe, Mzuzu and Zomba and manage urbanisation.

The government of Malawi first implemented the rural growth centres programme from 1977 and 1992 with financial support from the Germany Government and the European Commission which saw the development of 14 centres. The programme was commenced again in 2005 where four centres of Jenda, Malomo, Chitekesa and Monkey Bay were developed. The centres were provided with infrastructure, social and economic services so that they should act as focal points of development in remote and underdeveloped areas in all the regions of the country. This would lead to the improvement of the local economy living conditions in these areas and their catchment areas. The development of the second phase of these centres was preceded by the preparation of an Urban structure plan and detailed layout plans to ensure orderly and coordinated development and optimum use of land. Facilities provided included, produce markets, agro processing. The figures below show the some of the physical developments at Jenda, which was one of the recent Centres.





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*Source : Local Development Fund*

It should be noted that despite the physical transformation of the centres in terms of road networks, provision of social services and improved economic development, the level of attraction population to the centres was very minimal because the centers failed to create sustainable employment to sustain and attract a significant amount of people to make a difference in the population increase of the major centres. This was mainly because there was very little in terms of industrial investments which could have created more jobs. The study mentioned that the Tomato processing factory which was constructed was not opened and there were no employment opportunities in the area after the construction was completed. A study that was done by Manda(2014) for the Local development fund to assess the impact of the project showed that the significant number of people that were employed was during the construction of infrastructure where 1087 jobs were created, however, only 30 percent of those employed had migrated from other areas.

### **3.2 Secondary Centres Development Programme**

The Secondary Centres Development programme was implemented between 1985 and 2005 to reduce the rural urban migration through the development of small and intermediary towns. The centres were distributed in all the three regions of the country and included Mzuzu and Karonga in the Northern region; Kasungu Dedza and Salima in the Central Region and Luchenza, Mangochi, Liwonde and Balaka in the Southern Region. The approach was to improve infrastructure and service provision in these centres in order to attract investment. This was going to lead to creation of jobs and the growth in the economy. Improvement of the road networks within the centres and between centres to improve connectivity was another primary aim of the project. This improved the transportation system so that these centres acted as a link between rural areas and the larger town.



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Just as with the rural growth centres, the expectation was that rural population would then be attracted to these small and intermediary towns instead of the major cities was not achieved. It was observed through the study of population growth in these centres that the increase in the population was not as significant as it was anticipated.

### 3.3 National physical development plan

In 1987, after carrying out a central place survey throughout the country, Government came up with a National Physical Development Plan (NPDP) which is a national spatial framework meant to guide the implementation of physical and economic developments in the country. Through this plan, centres were identified and classified in different levels and developed as centers of attraction through the provision of basic incentive. The understanding was that this could stimulate social and economic development in these centres which would then trickle down to the surrounding hinterland.. It was the objective of this plan to facilitate the promotion of a more spatially balanced economic growth in order to ensure optimal distribution of productive activities and population (NPDP 1987).

The plan was also intended to achieve the following objectives:

- To provide a spatial framework for the economic coordination and implementation of sectoral programmes and development programmes;
- To promote the development of a system of urban and rural settlements and a hierarchy of service centres that will be in conformity with the location of natural and human resources and permit the provision of infrastructure on an economic basis.

It was envisaged that the implementation of the plan would create urban growth centres of various sizes which would attract the population away from the 4 major cities of Blantyre, Lilongwe, Mzuzu and Zomba. The plan classified urban centres into the following levels: National Centre, Regional Centres, Sub regional Centre, District Centre/Main Market Centre each with corresponding services

However, according to the Situation of Urbanization Report (2013) this objective was not achieved and population continued to trickle to the major cities of Blantyre, Lilongwe, Mzuzu and Zomba. This was evidenced by 41.1 % of total migration being recorded in these cities as was recorded by the NSO in 2010.



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## 4.0 LESSONS LEARNT FROM PREVIOUS EFFORTS

It should be noted that although the implementation of the Rural Growth centres programme, the secondary centers programme and the hierarchy of centres under the National Physical Development Plan did not achieve the primary goal for their implementation the following lessons can be drawn from their implementation:

- Infrastructure and service provision is key to physical and the economic growth of an area: all the areas transformed from ordinary rural centres to urban centres with an influence in their catchment area due to the modern infrastructure that was provided
- Public participation is key to the success of the project; the infrastructure that was provided during the first wave of rural growth centres was not utilized because the people were not consulted on their priorities. On the other hand, people from Jenda indicated that they required a bust station, ta road, and a market as part of the programme and these are being utilized and making a difference in the area.
- Establishment and investments in industries within growth centres is the major source of source employment opportunities which is key is of the major factors for attracting population to a growth point.
- Urbanization can be managed sustainably only when a number of issue are at play. The Rural development strategies only concentrated on decentralization of population to growth centres without considering the other shortfalls that are contributing to urbanisation of poverty in the country.

## 5.0 OTHER CHALLENGES TO ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE URBANISATION

It should be understood that sustainable urbanization can only be achieved when a number of factors are in play which currently seem to be falling short of being adequate. The Malawi National Habitat Report (2015) identified the following as challenges that are hampering sustainable urbanization, which in turn are contributing to the informal urban expansion:

### 5.1 Poor Planning and Urban Management

Urban planning and management is key to managing urbanisation and achieving sustainable urban development. Preparation and implementation of spatial frameworks at national regional



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as well as local level ensures that each parcel of land is zoned for a suitable use and is being put to maximum use. Although spatial plans are prepared at local level, implementation and enforcement is a challenge in Malawi due to inadequate technical and financial capacity. With the SDGs placing a greater emphasis on the sustainable management of cities, urban Local Government Authorities will require financial empowerment and adequate human capacity to meet planning and other obligations to their citizens. Furthermore, to achieve the New Urban Agenda, the country needs to prioritise urban development issues in the country's overall development strategies.

This gives room to encroachment on undeveloped parcels of land regardless of their zoning. It is this kind of illegal development that is creating uncontrolled urban expansion into rural areas having started growing from the edge of the city boundaries

## **5.2 Weak urban governance and poor coordination of urban development activities**

Malawi has been affected by weak urban governance as characterised by poor coordination of urban development and management, weak legal and regulatory frameworks, lack of streamlined participation of different stakeholders. Many government institutions, sector ministries and departments at national and subnational levels undertake urban development roles without clear coordination and/ or a guiding regulatory framework. This has led to gaps in, or overlapping of institutional mandates and implementation conflicts. As result, monitoring of the implementation of the approved physical development plans is not being done in some areas with institution feeling that is not their mandate, compounding the problem of illegal developments, increasing the expansion of urban land uses outside the city boundaries.

## **5.3 Inadequate capacity to deliver urban infrastructure and services.**

The limited capacity of local governments to efficiently deliver infrastructure and services remain a prime challenge for meeting sustainable urbanization. The capacity challenges relate to human resources (quantity and quality of relevant personnel), low level of financial resources at the local government level and weak urban finance mechanisms/institutions that will support infrastructure investment. As a result, there is a mismatch between the rate of urban population growth and infrastructure and service provision. Relevant to this paper is the lack of serviced land for the for urban development especially for the low income groups. There is also limited supply of affordable housing which the low income groups can rent let alone



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## **5.4 Limited economic opportunities and urban poverty;**

There is widespread poverty in urban and rural areas in Malawi and this is more pronounced in urban areas where the population has no support system. Despite its cities and urban areas being hubs for innovation and growth, they continue being concentrations of poverty and unemployment with most urban benefits accruing to higher income groups. There are no jobs to meet the demand especially with the fast rate at which the urban population is growing resulting in urbanisation of poverty. The dimensions of urban poverty are reflected in insecurity, homelessness, vulnerability to shocks, violence, unemployment and inadequate basic urban services such as water, sanitation, access roads and poor quality of housing.

It is against this background that the Malawi government embarked on the formulation of a National Urban Policy. It is envisaged that the implementation of the National Urban Policy will resolve the multiple challenges to the attainment of sustainable urbanisation in the country including the unregulated urban expansion.

## **6.0 THE NATIONAL URBAN POLICY AS A TOOL FOR SUSTAINABLE URBANISATION**

The urban policy seeks to create an enabling institutional and legal framework for developing an efficient urban system and for the equitable and sustainable development of urban settlements of various sizes in order to harness the increasingly important role of urbanisation in local and national economic development. Having identified and analysed the challenges that are contributing to the countries' failure to achieve sustainable seven priority areas were identified. Out of these, the following areas whose implementation and management will contribute to the achievement of sustainable urbanization and reduce the problem of unregulated urban expansion and land use change.

### **6.1 Integrated Planning and urban development**

Implementation of this policy priority area will promote the development of compact built forms that optimize use of limited resources and counter urban sprawl. It is advocating for local authorities to embrace forward planning which is critical in the achievement of plan led urban development, delivery of serviced land for housing and quality urban infrastructure and services in a cost-effective manner. Integrated planning will promote optimum use of land for sustainable urban development. Among other things this area will promote the development of compact neighborhood which will control urban sprawl.



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Development control and management mechanisms will be strengthened to ensure that the plans and standards that will be developed are implemented and complied with to achieve the desired results. .

## **6.2 Urban Governance and coordinated urban development.**

In order for the implementation of programmes under integrated urban development make an impact and indeed for the goals of the national urban policy to be achieved, to work there is need to improve governance and coordination. Effective urban governance and management system is prerequisite for regulated and coordinated urban growth and development. It is one of the aspirations of government under this policy to promote collaborative efforts, in planning and implementation of urban development programmes. Through this, institutions in the urban development and human settlement sector will be accountable, transparent and responsive to citizenry and as a resulting in improvement in service deliver.

It is envisaged that effective urban governance will enhance inclusiveness and efficiency in urban land administration and management. Consequently, this will promote sustainable physical, social and economic development at the same pace as the urban population is growing.

## **6.3 Shelter, infrastructure and services.**

As has been explained earlier, when there is shortage in the supply of the basic services required by the citizenry, the look for alternative means to satisfy the need, and in most cases, these are not sustainable in every aspect. It should be noted that access to housing, infrastructure development and service provision is the foundation of sustainable urban development. B making these available and accessible to all income groups the demand for such services will be met and address some of the challenges that come about with rapid urban population growth

Efficient financing of urban infrastructure and services is key to achievement of sustainable urban and national development. This priority area will promote the provision of affordable serviced land for housing for the urban poor to prevent the proliferation of informal settlements and illegal developments which as has been pointed out are the cause of illegal expansion and land use change. It will promote efficient financing and implementation of urban infrastructure and services.

## **6.4 Competitive and inclusive urban economic development.**

As the cities and urban areas are growing in terms of population and size, it is important for the economy to grow at the same pace. An efficient and productive urban economy is key to wealth creation and competitiveness of urban areas at local as well as international level. A city that has potential for



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economic growth will attract both local and international investors. It is important to note that a vibrant urban economy is a source of job creation which can improve the living condition of the urban population especially the low income. Urban poverty can be reduced by fostering industrialization and local economic development which is anticipated as a source of job creation. Economic empowerment will be key to the transformation of urban areas since an empowered population can contribute positively to the sustainable growth of cities with an improved purchasing power. They can afford to settle in designated areas there by reducing unregulated urban expansion and growth of unplanned settlements.

## 7.0 CONCLUSION

As the urban population and or cities become more urbanized urban expansion is inevitable, however, this should be done in a coordinated manner so that we can strike a balance between the demand for land required for both urban and rural functions. It is crucial to understand that there is need to create a symbiotic relationship between these two entities since their development and success is interlinked.

Based on the lessons learnt from the implementation of the Rural Growth centres programme National Physical Development Plan, and the Secondary Centres Development Programme, sustainable urbanization will be can only be achieved when a number of issues which together contribute to the challenges

By promoting sustainable national urban planning, good governance and creating an enabling environment for sustainable urbanization, the Malawi National Urban Policy will promote optimum use of land and contribute to improved urban development planning and management. It is crucial that technical, human and financial resources to be made available at all levels to ensure that the strategies that have been put forward in the policy are implemented. Monitoring and enforcement of the implementation of programmes emanating from the policy will be key to the achievement of the aspirations of government. It is along these lines that the policy will contribute to the development of compact cities and control the expansion of urban land uses so that agricultural land is preserved and rural settlements are not displaced.

Monitoring the implementation of this policy will provide new insights on the contribution such a framework can make in ensuring sustainable urbanization and proper regulation of urban growth to curb the unregulated growth and expansion of cities and urban centres.



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