

# The return of the city-region in the New Urban Agenda: another global imposition on southern cities?

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## Outline:

The **city-region** concept is back in the New Urban Agenda of SDG 11 and is now proposed to shape urban development across the globe.

But there is a lengthy track-record of debate on this concept – with a key conclusion being that context and ‘place’ is all-important.

What now for city-regions in those parts of the world (global south) where the goals of the NUA really need to have traction?

SDG 11 and the NUA give the global development agenda a distinctive and **city-centric** concept of development which is also place-based, scalar and with local emphasis.

It has also brought **planning** back into the spot-light, distinctively as state-led; multi-scalar; strongly spatial; and with cities as drivers of wider development processes.

Planning is cast as **'territorial'** (urban **and** territorial planning): "...realizing economic, social, cultural, and environmental goals through the development of **spatial** visions, strategies and plans..." (UN Habitat Guidelines)

**The city-region concept (analytical + normative model) fits into this new urban and territorial framing of development.**

**NUA** Paragraph 96 refers to the city-region: ‘We will encourage the implementation of sustainable *urban and territorial planning*, including *city-region* and metropolitan plans...’

**UN Habitat NUA Urban and Territorial Planning Guidelines (2018):**

**“A city-region is:** The area within which the connections between one or more cities and the surrounding rural land are intense and functionally (economically, socially, politically and geographically) connected. These areas are typically 80-100 km across and occupy up to 10,000 km<sup>2</sup>.”

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## The city-region concept:

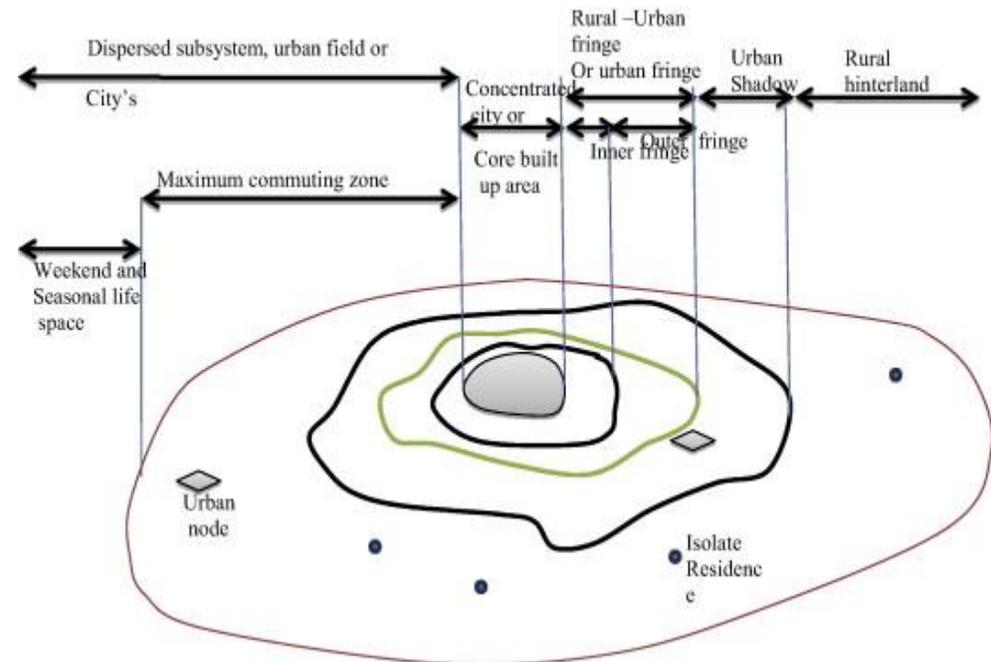
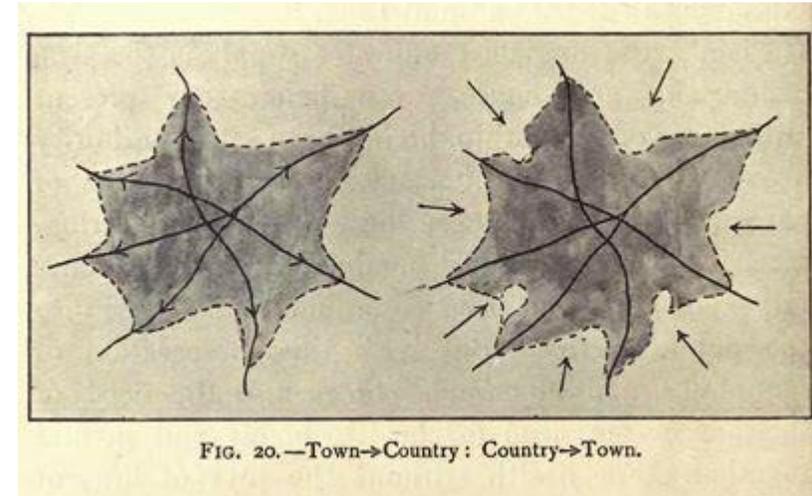
Patrick Geddes: British biologist turned planner - 1915

Adopted as a model for European regional planning in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Assumed that the economy of a town and its hinterland could be defined by fixed geographical boundaries and planned according to local government powers and functions aligning with these.**

A nested hierarchy of city-regions could provide a 'balanced' settlement system – controlled by the state at various scales.

Also called a 'territorial' approach to planning as it is based on land definition.



## Rejection of the city-region territorial approach to planning: 1990s-

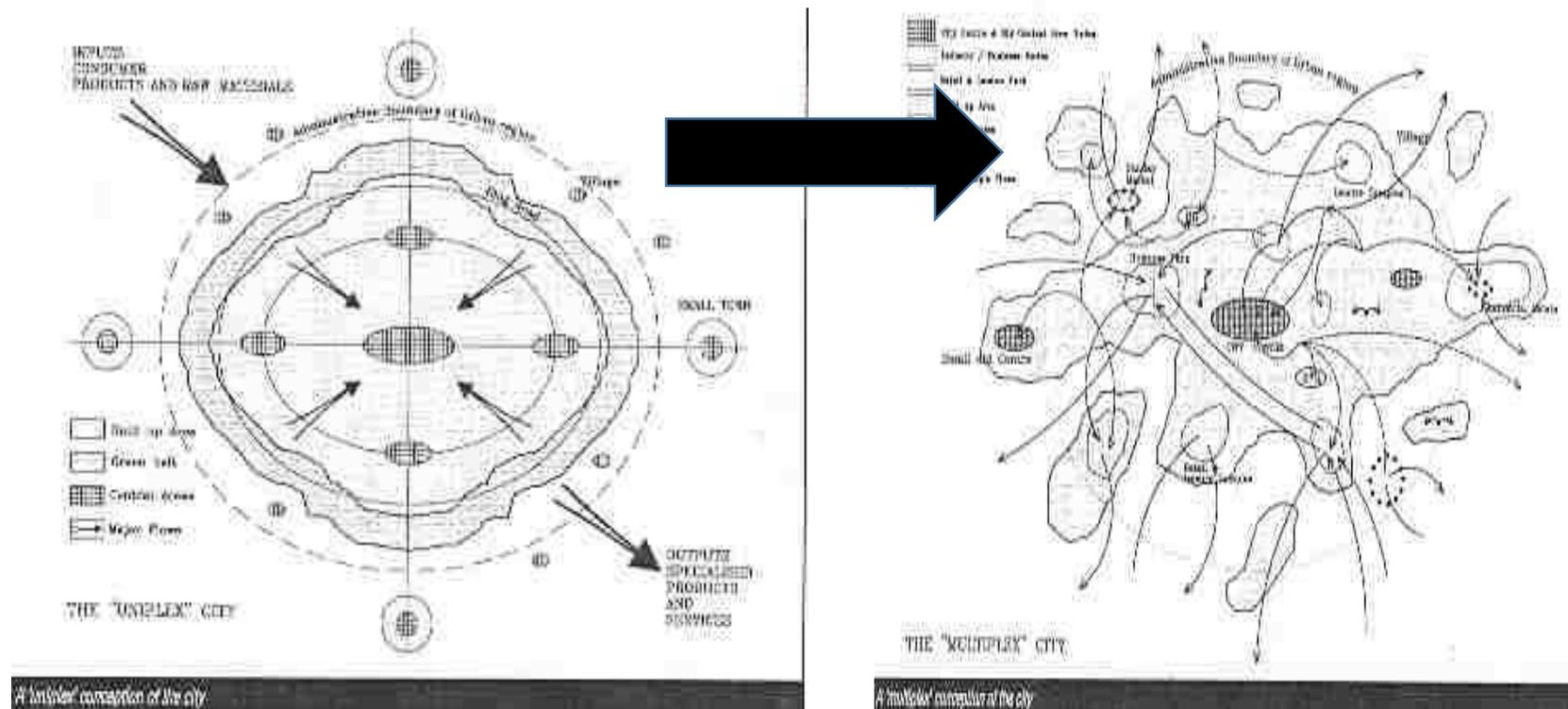
A new critique from regional space economists (Scott, Storper, Amin) arguing for recognition of much wider and global economic linkages shaping urban economies:

- globalization challenges the power of nation states to control cities and regions.
- In this new 'post-national' age, the region can no longer be considered as a territorially fixed and bounded unit amenable to top-down state planning and management.
- City-regions able to capitalize on the agglomeration of leading international economic sectors are more likely to function as the motors of the new global economy.
- Policy needs to recognize cities' multi-scalar economic networks and global economic competitiveness; hence policy must consider relationally networked space rather than territorial and administrative geographies

Hence **urban-regional network** was pitted against **urban hierarchy and bounded territories** in what was called the **territorial/relational divide** or the **network vs territory debate** (Painter, 2010).

# The regional economist critique strongly influenced planning from the 1990s

Urban policy must consider how cities are driven by *relationally networked space* rather than *territorial and administrative geographies*. Economic forces are much stronger than the state in managing urban change.



'We need new ways of thinking about both cities and societies, as open systems, social milieux and symbolic identities. We need to move away from the comprehensive planning of spatial arrangements'

**A shift from the uni-plex to the multi-plex city.**

Graham and Healey (1999) Relational concepts of space and place. European Planning Studies.

## Late 2000s: territory comes back

Acknowledgement of multi-scalar and global networks which link urban-regional economies... but:

- The state is weaker/different but has not disappeared.
- Space, place and territory are still important.
- territory and network can be complementary, or overlapping or competing, in different configurations of state/space
- Bob Jessop's (2008) '**territory-place-scale-network**' understanding of socio-spatial relations which take into account '**...historically specific** geographies of social relations..... and explores **contextual and historical variation** in the structural coupling, strategic coordination, and forms of inter-connection among the different dimensions of the latter'.

**Back to the New Urban Agenda of SDG 11 and its associated planning guidelines**

## **What the NUA city-region model claims to achieve:**

**“City-region and metropolitan level (territorial) plans can...:**

...foster economic development by promoting regional economies of scale and agglomeration, increasing productivity and prosperity;

...strengthening urban-rural linkages to develop rural areas and improve urban food security;

...address social and spatial disparities and promote spatially coherent territories and ‘balanced’ regional development;

...achieve environmental sustainability and adaptation to climate change”.

Based on a set of assumptions which simply do not hold in many parts of the global south (and perhaps beyond).

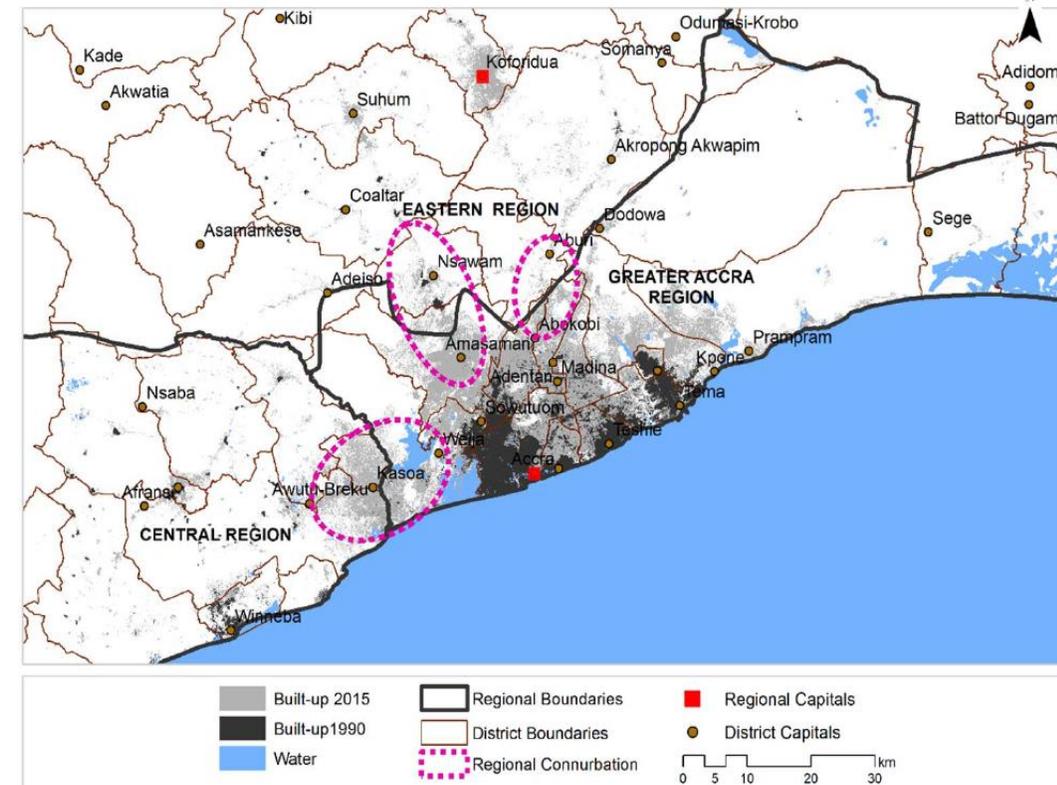
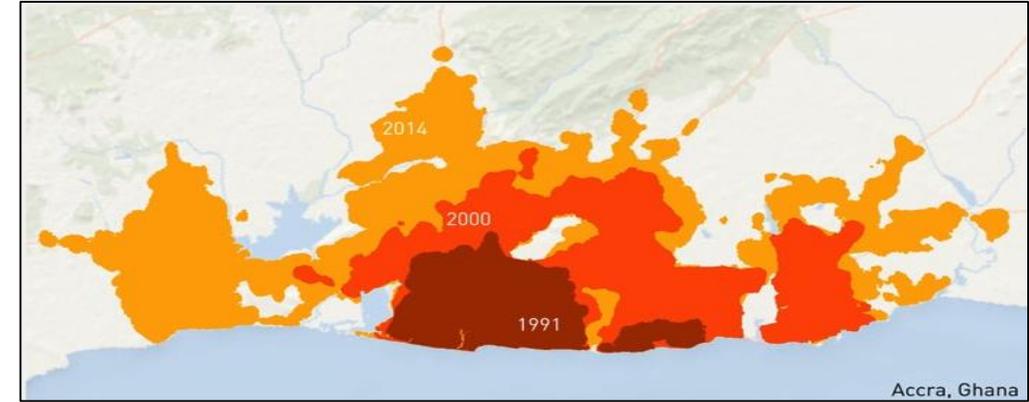
## Evidence from Africa.

Does the city-region align with city administrative boundaries and governance capacities?

Accra (Ghana):

- Expanded by 5,5x from 1991-2014
- Ongoing annual expansion rate of 6%
- Covered by 20 Districts and 4 different Administrative Regions.
- Four different spatial plans.
- Development ignores plans anyway.

Agyemang et al *Cities*, 2017



# **Can a city-region territorial plan promote regional economic development, productivity and prosperity?**

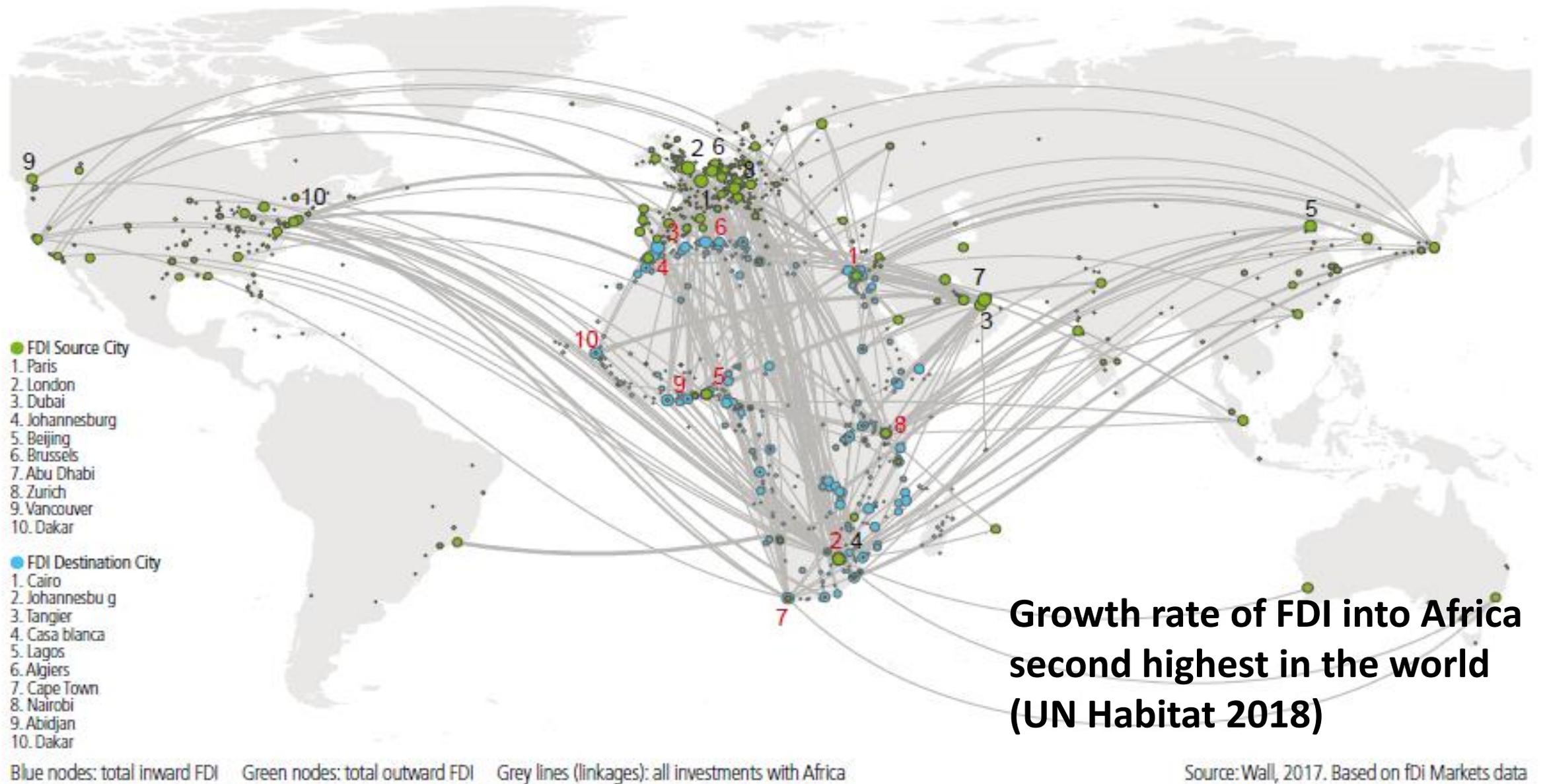
Assumptions about the power of spatial planning over economic forces..

African urban economies highly connected – across national boundaries and globally.

Food economy example: small Kenyan town of Kisumu relies on local / national / international supplies including fish supplies from China.

**Any city-region planning must take account of the networked economy of cities - almost absent in the NUA and planning guidelines.**

## Map 2.2. All FDI from global cities into African cities (2003-2016)



**Increase urban-rural linkages in the city-region – to support small farmers, improve food security and promote ecological resilience.**

Relationship between cities and their regions important but... in Africa:

- Rural economic transformation and rural urbanisation already happening but also leading to labour displacement;
- Diversifying rural economies and urban-rural connections leading to greater inequalities;
- Increased urban-rural linkages a ‘two-edged sword’;
- Urban food supplies inevitably come from local, regional and global sources – diverse food supplies critical for a resilient food system.

Planning urban-rural linkage is highly context specific with linkage inevitably multi-scalar.

## **The city-region concept and the danger of the ‘local trap’....**

‘Scale theory’ in political and economic geography – tendency to assume there is inherent benefit in the *local scale* which outweighs other scales.

Assumption that ‘the local’ is inherently good. Conflates scale with outcome (sustainability, justice etc). Scale is a strategy, not an outcome in itself.

Scale is socially produced and a relational concept.

Possibility of planning at the city-region scale is contingent and dependent on which actors can exercise power at this level.

**The critical importance of contingency, context and path dependency in considering if and how planning at the city-region scale is relevant.**

Jessop (2008): 'territory-place-scale-network' in the territory-network debate.

Healey (2009): "the concept of city-region emerged in Europe in response to particular institutional re-configurations, it is not a well-developed package which can be inserted into a government system, not an empty vessel which can be applied everywhere".

## Hence the new UN Habitat Planning Guidelines ignore:

- several decades of regional economic thinking (and the territory vs network debate);
- the ongoing globalized nature of the economy;
- the huge variation in the nature and economies of towns and cities across the globe, their links to rural areas, and their institutional strength and capacities.
- the Eurocentric nature of the city-region model and its application; and
- The danger of yet another northern concept on rapidly growing and changing southern cities.

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