

**SPEECH BY PROFESSOR PETER KAGWANJA, PRESIDENT OF THE AFRICA POLICY INSTITUTE (API) AND FORMER ADVISER TO THE GOVERNMENT OF KENYA ON REFORM AND STRATEGY DELIVERED DURING THE 2024 BEIJING FORUM ON “SWIFT RESPONSE TO PUBLIC COMPLAINTS” CO-HOSTED BY THE CHINESE ACADEMY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES (CASS), THE CHINA MEDIA GROUP (CMG), THE CPC BEIJING MUNICIPAL COMMITTEE AND THE PEOPLE’S GOVERNMENT OF BEIJING MUNICIPALITY, IN BEIJING ON DECEMBER 19-20, 2024.**

Excellencies,

Distinguished Guests,

Friends,

Ladies & Gentlemen.

Good Morning, zǎo shang hǎo

There is no better time to think urban than today as we gather in this great historic City of Beijing. We thank and congratulate the co-hosts of the highly successful Beijing Forum on “Swift Response to Public Complaints” including the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), the China Media Group (CMG), the Communist Party of China (CPC) Beijing Municipal Committee and the People’s Government of Beijing Municipality. In recent years, the Beijing Forum has emerged as a feast of ideas on urban governance where experts and policy makers share insights and lessons and explore new innovative and practical solutions. While the forum has been held under the permanent theme of “People’s City, Better Future”, this year’s focus on “Modernizing for People-Centered Urban Governance” is particularly pertinent. The theme captures the aspirations of humanity for a new model of people-centered urban renewal that integrates justice, equity, welfare and co-prosperity as critical facets in the making of “the World We Want”.

The future of the world, we now know, is decidedly urban. According to the United Nations, urbanization is one of the four “demographic mega-trends” along with population growth, aging, and international migration. Today, 55% of the world’s population is living in over 10,000 cities. Our cities and towns are growing bigger, new ones emerging and old ones merged or renamed to meet the demands of a rapidly rising urban population. It is projected that four out of every five people in the world will most probably be living either in old or new cities by 2050.

It is also evident that urbanization has two-faces: one, the beautiful face of expanding opportunities and high-quality services aided by new technologies in the digital age; the other, the ugly face of unprecedented challenges of consumerism and climate change. In this context, the problem of the twenty-first century is simply and squarely that of creating smart cities that integrate planning, construction and management as a framework of swift and efficient delivery of services and response to the demands and complaints of citizens. Although Cities today occupy only 2% of the world’s total land area, they contribute to 70% of the global GDP, over 60% of global energy consumption, 70% of Greenhouse Gas Emissions and 70% of global waste, according to UN-Habitat.

The growth of cities is inextricably linked to modernization and societal progression. The modernizing of the urban space is a powerful tool for sustainable development and poverty eradication. However, there is no “one-size-fits-all” model for the modernization of cities. Indeed, the ‘modernization-equals-Westernization’ formula is a myth that has no place in the emerging multipolar world! Instead, like the proverbial coat of many colours, the modernization of urban governance must reflect the diversity of cultures and civilizations.

In the case of China, the modernization of Beijing is, discernibly, following a distinct path that flows from the ancient wellsprings of the Chinese civilization and the strategies of its modern heirs. In his writings, statements and guidance to the Communist Party of China (CPC), President Xi Jinping has rightly stressed that “accelerating the development of a new type of urbanization that puts people at the core” is pivotal to “accelerating the modernization of China's system and capacity for governance.”

This idea of urbanization as a motor of modernization and human progress is rooted in China's Reform and Opening-up policy, which has enabled China to lift over 850 million people up from poverty and spurred the phenomenal growth of its mega-cities. The result is a people-centered, service-oriented and collaborative model of smart city governance, with four crucial lessons:

First is the integration of planning, construction and management processes, creating a seamless and integrated delivery of services to residents as the hallmark of the smart city of the 21st century.

Second is the creation of digital urban governance to strengthen risk prevention and increase operational efficiency and management, thus propelling the rise of digital economy and sustainable urban governance.

Third is fidelity to the principles of small-scale, gradual and sustainable development in urban renewal and transformation. The idea is to preserve the historical heritage, enhance the quality of public service delivery and spur industrialization to achieve high-quality development of cities.

Finally, is the urgency to put urban governance firmly in the hands of the people, including their social governance structures and grassroots organizations. Public participation, dialogue and consultation are the pillars of a new “Whole-of-city” and “whole-of-government” approaches to urban governance.

The lesson of this beautiful story of Beijing's urban renewal is clear: If well-planned and well-managed, urbanization can be a powerful tool for people-centered modernization in developed and developing countries alike.

This lesson is important for Africa, the world's least urbanized continent, which together with Asia, is home to nearly 90% of the world's rural population. But all this is changing. Accelerated South-South cooperation and investments in new technologies and infrastructure is turning Africa and the Global South into the new global frontier of rapid urbanization. China, India and Nigeria

alone will account for 35% of the projected growth of the world's urban population by the middle of this century.

Africa and China need to deepen global solidarity and South-South cooperation to achieve the ideals of the United Nation's New Urban Agenda as a shared vision for a better and more sustainable urban future. In the post-COVID era, this is necessary to speed up the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) particularly SDG 11 on making cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable spaces of co-governance, co-development and co-prosperity. In this regard, the initiatives of the Global South such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) must be part of the equation in anchoring social inclusion, poverty eradication and climate-friendly and resilient urban development.

As I conclude, in the current multipolar era, where power is increasingly diffused and no one civilization or nation dominates the governance of global affairs, the smart city must become the cornerstone of a new global community of shared future for humanity.

Thank You, Xiexie