

Assessment of Planned Urbanization and Rural Settlement Policy Implementation in Post-Genocide Rwanda (2018–2024)

*Peter M. Ngau

<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-2802-9368>

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Abstract

The paper examines the Post-War Rwanda Government's management approach to urbanization and rural settlement development. Through an End of Term Evaluation of the Second Urban and Rural Settlement Sector Strategic Plan (2018/19–2023/24), the paper seeks to understand what worked well, what did not, operational experience, opportunities, and challenges. The evaluation applied a theory of change approach to examine the effectiveness and impact of the policy and institutional framework in relation to its goals, inputs, and implementation actions. The findings provide evidence that Rwanda's policies and management approach to urbanization and rural settlement development have largely achieved the set priorities and targets. However, aspects of the approach remain controversial and contested both domestically and internationally.

Keywords: Planned urbanization and rural settlements, Imidugudu (grouped villages), agglomeration, urban sprawl, urbanization hierarchy, theory of change, one stop center, land use planning, informal settlements

INTRODUCTION

During the 2010s and 2020s, Rwanda emerged as a recognised leader in urban management in Sub-Saharan Africa. This achievement is striking given the country's earlier trajectory. Between independence in 1962 and the early 2000s, human settlement planning was not treated as a central development priority. Limited planning capacity and weak policy attention contributed to the expansion of unplanned settlements and widening spatial inequality, with the City of Kigali increasingly dominating the national urban system. In rural areas, settlement patterns were marked by scattered homesteads and progressive land fragmentation. These conditions intensified social and economic pressures linked to population growth and land scarcity—tensions widely identified as major contributors to the instability that culminated in the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi.

In the post-war period, the Government of Rwanda adopted a fundamentally different approach to development, placing land use

planning and settlement restructuring at the heart of national transformation. Over the last two decades, government investment and engagement with development partners in the sector have expanded steadily. The central policy assumption underpinning this approach is that Rwanda's socio-economic challenges—especially poverty, inequality, and limited economic diversification—can be addressed through improved land management, more efficient settlement patterns, and sustained economic growth. To operationalise this strategy, Rwanda established an extensive framework of policies, laws, spatial plans, and institutions at national and sub-national levels.

This policy architecture includes long-term development visions and spatial strategies such as Vision 2020, Vision 2050, and the National Land Use Development Master Plan (first adopted in 2011 and revised in 2020). It is complemented by medium-term implementation instruments, including the Economic Development and Poverty Reduction Strategies (EDPRS I and

*Corresponding author:

Peter M. Ngau Principal, College of Architecture and Engineering, University of Nairobi

Email: peterngau@gmail.com

II), the National Strategy for Transformation (NST I and II), the National Urbanisation Policy (initially adopted in 2008 and revised in 2023), and successive Urbanisation and Rural Settlement Sector Strategic Plans (URSSSP I, II, and III). Implementation is translated into action through funded Annual Work Programmes and monitored through both backward- and forward-looking Joint Sector Reviews.

Despite measurable progress and international recognition, Rwanda's model of planned urbanisation and rural settlement development remains ambitious and contested. While the country has achieved improvements that compare favourably with many peers in Sub-Saharan Africa, key policy instruments—especially the *Imidugudu* villagisation programme and the Kigali Master Plan—have generated sustained debate domestically and internationally. This coexistence of visible planning gains and persistent controversy raises critical questions about the effectiveness, sustainability, and inclusiveness of Rwanda's settlement transformation agenda.

This paper assesses Rwanda's post-war approach to managing urbanisation and rural settlement development over the past two decades. In Rwanda, planned urbanisation is not treated as a demographic trend to be accommodated but as a deliberate instrument for national and regional transformation—supporting the country's ambition to become an upper-middle-income country by 2035 and a high-income country by 2050. Yet, systematic evidence on how well these policies have performed, particularly under the most recent Urbanisation and Rural Settlement Sector Strategic Plan (2018/19–2023/24), remains limited.

Since 2013, Rwanda has implemented two major URSS strategic plans: URSSSP 2012/13–2017/18 and URSSSP 2018/19–2023/24. Toward the end of the second plan period, the Government of Rwanda and UN-Habitat commissioned and conducted an End-of-Term Evaluation. This paper presents findings from that evaluation. Using a theory of change approach, it analyses the sector's performance by examining the relationship between policy goals, resource inputs, implementation actions, and observed outcomes. The assessment is designed to identify what worked well, what did not, and which operational

lessons, opportunities, and challenges should inform future policy and planning.

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews key theoretical debates on the links between urbanisation and rural development. Section 3 describes Rwanda's policy and institutional context for settlement transformation. Section 4 outlines the evaluation methodology grounded in the theory of change. Section 5 presents the evaluation findings. Section 6 discusses emerging opportunities and challenges for planned urbanisation and rural settlements. Section 7 concludes.

THEORY

Theoretical Debates and Development Pathways

The relationship between urbanisation and rural development has long been central to development discourse. Historically, the debate can be divided into two broad phases: the era of classical development theories (1930s–mid-1980s) and the period of contemporary or new regional development approaches (1990s–present).

The earlier body of theory sought to explain patterns of industrialisation, spatial organisation, and regional growth. Foundational contributions included central place theory (Christaller, 1933), growth pole theory (Perroux, 1955), circular cumulative causation (Myrdal, 1956), stages of economic growth (Rostow, 1960), core–periphery theory (Friedmann, 1966), unbalanced growth (Hirschman, 1967), and disequilibrium theory (Schumpeter, 1973). These frameworks focused primarily on production location, trade, and distribution systems, grounded in the Fordist mass production model dominant in Western economies. Development was assumed to be anchored in major industrial cities, particularly in Europe and North America, with diffusion toward peripheral regions and emerging cities in the Global South.

In developing countries, a parallel debate emerged between advocates of urban-biased development strategies and proponents of rural-centred development (Lipton, 1977; Rondinelli, 1978; Chambers, 1983; Friedmann, 1988). Critics argued that excessive urban bias distorted national development, diverted resources from agriculture, and deepened rural poverty.

From the mid-1970s to 1990, however, eight High Performing Asian Economies (Japan, Hong Kong, Republic of Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand) demonstrated that rapid urbanisation combined with sound macroeconomic management, human capital investment, technological upgrading, and market-friendly industrial policies could produce rapid and relatively equitable growth (World Bank, 1993). Their experience reshaped development thinking by illustrating that urbanisation, when properly managed, could underpin structural transformation.

Simultaneously, Fordist mass production in the West entered crisis due to global competition, declining productivity gains, and wage stagnation (Storper & Scott, 1992). This transition gave rise to new regional development approaches emphasising flexibility, innovation, and networks. Since the mid-1980s, new frameworks have emerged, including industrial districts, learning regions, technopoles, development corridors, export processing zones, city-regions, regional branding, science parks, and smart cities/regions. Many of these approaches adapt earlier planning concepts but repackage them under contemporary labels. Examples in Africa include spatial development initiatives in South Africa, agricultural and logistics hubs in Rwanda, and industrial parks in Kenya.

Unlike earlier production-centric theories, these newer approaches are shaped by political economy, technological change, deindustrialisation, social capital, and global networks. They emphasise flexible specialisation rather than mass production, innovation ecosystems rather than centralised factories, and multi-scalar governance rather than top-down control.

International development institutions have played a central role in promoting planned urbanisation as a pathway to middle-income status. The World Bank and UN-Habitat argue that effective urban policy, decentralisation, and governance reforms can enhance growth and equity. Since 2016, initiatives such as the National Urban Policy Programme have supported countries, including Rwanda, in aligning urban development with the New Urban Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. Although empirical research shows a positive correlation between urbanisation

and GDP growth in developing countries, the causal direction remains debated, and wealth distribution is often uneven. Nevertheless, many governments view urbanisation as a strategic instrument of economic transformation.

Following the famines of the 1980s, development partners reemphasised agriculture and rural development. UN-Habitat's Urban-Rural Linkages framework promotes integrated territorial development by treating urban and rural areas as a continuum rather than separate spheres. International organisations, including IFAD, AfDB, EU, USAID, FAO, AGRA, and JICA, have promoted value addition, market integration, and private-sector-led agricultural growth. In Rwanda, initiatives such as value chain development in coffee, tea, and dairy, post-harvest improvements, and the Improving Market Systems for Agriculture in Rwanda (IMSAR) programme aim to strengthen competitiveness and inclusivity.

While flexible production systems have generated growth in parts of Asia, many African and Latin American economies remain highly unequal. Vanessa Watson (2014) cautions African governments against adopting "urban fantasies" such as large-scale smart or eco-city projects disconnected from local realities. She argues that such projects risk deepening inequality if they neglect the needs of low-income urban residents.

The Rwandan case, therefore, offers a critical opportunity to examine how contemporary urban and rural development theories are applied in practice.

Policy Context and Institutional Framework

Rwanda's post-1994 transformation marked a profound shift in development ideology. Pre-genocide narratives framed the country's challenges primarily in terms of overpopulation and land scarcity. After 1994, the government reframed the problem as one of poor planning, inefficient land use, and inadequate settlement patterns that constrained diversification.

This shift culminated in Vision 2020 (2000, revised 2012), which set out a long-term strategy for socio-economic transformation.

Vision 2020: Foundational Policies and Legal Framework

Early 2000s reforms established key policies shaping urbanisation and rural settlement. These included the National Human Settlements Policy (2004, revised 2009), Draft National Urban Policy (2006), EDPRS I (2007–2011), National Urban Housing Policy (2008), and the first National Land Use Development Master Plan (NLUDMP) in 2011. Supporting legislation included urban planning laws, building regulations, condominium law, and land law.

The Rural Settlement Policy (*Imidugudu*)

In 1996, the government adopted the *Imidugudu* policy, requiring rural households to relocate to grouped village settlements. Initially designed to resettle returning refugees, it evolved into a long-term restructuring of rural settlement patterns. The government argued that dispersed settlement wasted land and limited service provision.

The programme has been controversial. Critics cited forced displacement, land expropriation, reduced agricultural productivity, and limited community ownership (Human Rights Watch, 2001). Others, including a USAID-commissioned study (2015), found that many residents preferred grouped settlements due to improved access to services, infrastructure, and markets.

The programme also facilitated land optimisation in a densely populated, hilly country by concentrating settlements on ridges while reserving valleys for agriculture. Subsequent reforms recommended strengthening community participation and adopting context-specific rather than uniform implementation.

Urbanization Policy

Urban policy advanced significantly under EDPRS I and II. The 2011 NLUDMP established a national spatial framework. Kigali Master Plan (2013) and district-level plans followed.

Under EDPRS II (2013–2018), additional policies were adopted: the National Urbanisation Policy (2015), the National Housing Policy (2015), the Informal Settlement Upgrading Strategy (2017), the Green Secondary City Roadmap (2015), and the National Sanitation Policy (2016). The Urbanisation Policy emphasised four pillars: coordination, densification, conviviality, and economic growth.

Figure 1 illustrates the spatial layout of the Integrated Development Programme (Model Village), highlighting the functional organisation of residential, economic, and communal facilities within Rwanda’s grouped rural settlement

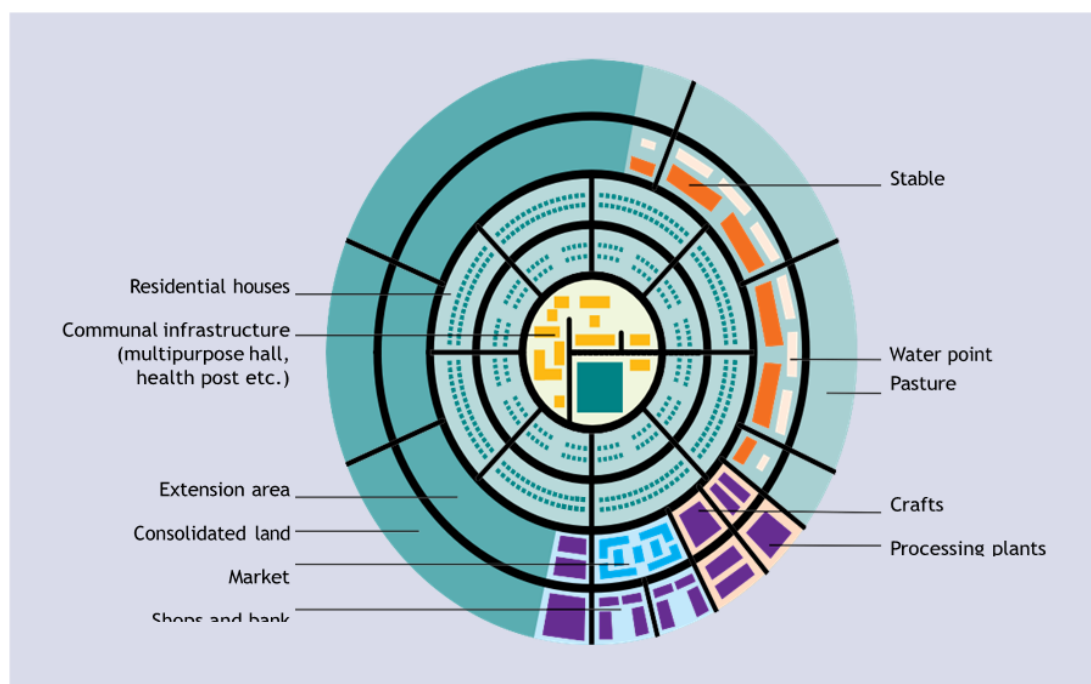


FIGURE 1
Integrated Development Programme- Model Village
Source: Rwanda Housing Authority (RHA), 2020

framework.

Vision 2050 and Strategic Transformation

In 2017, Rwanda launched Vision 2050 and the National Strategy for Transformation (NST1, 2017–2024). Vision 2050 aims to achieve upper-middle-income status by 2035 and high-income status by 2050, targeting GDP per capita of USD 4,036 and USD 12,476, respectively.

Urbanisation is central to this vision, with targets of 50% urbanization by 2035 and 70% by 2050. Urban growth is structured around a hierarchy: Kigali, three satellite cities, eight secondary cities, district towns, and rural centres. Despite progress—from 18.4% urbanization in 2020 to 27.9% in 2022—growth remains below the annual rate required to meet targets.

NST1 prioritised economic transformation, social transformation, and governance reform, explicitly linking accelerated urbanisation to economic growth.

Revised National Land Use and Development Master Plan (2020–2050)

The revised NLU DMP aligns spatial planning with Vision 2050 and green growth principles. Key features include:

- i. Limiting Kigali’s population to 3.8 million to prevent over-concentration.
- ii. Establishing three satellite cities (Rwamagana, Muhanga, Bugesera)

forming a “Golden Triangle” with Kigali.

- iii. Expanding eight secondary cities (Nyagatare, Musanze, Rubavu, Rusizi, Karongi, Huye, Kirehe, Kayonza) to serve regional and cross-border functions.
- iv. Promoting in-situ urbanisation to manage migration.
- v. Reducing rural settlement dispersion.
- vi. Addressing urban sprawl through agglomeration and consolidation.

The plan recognises land scarcity and seeks optimal allocation through spatial and economic analysis.

Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the proposed urbanization hierarchy and spatial structure for Rwanda by 2050, highlighting Kigali as the primary metropolitan center supported by satellite cities, secondary cities, district towns, and emerging rural–urban centres.

Green Growth and Climate Policy

Rwanda has integrated climate resilience into its urbanisation strategy. Key policies include:

- i. National Environment and Climate Change Policy (2019)
- ii. Nationally Determined Contributions (2015, updated)
- iii. Rwanda Green Building Minimum Compliance System (2019)

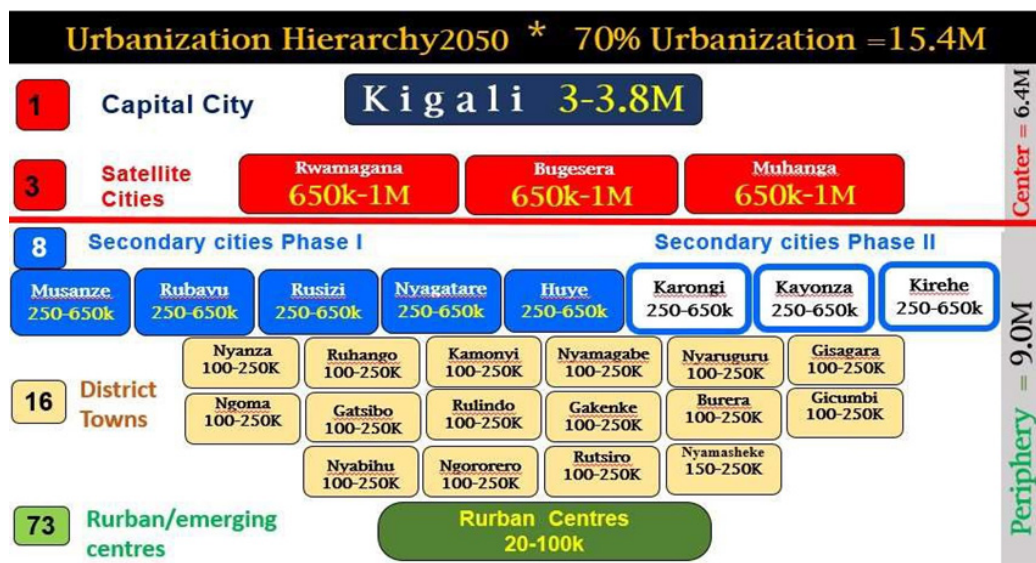


FIGURE 2
 Rwanda: Urbanization Hierarchy by 2050 - Recommended Option
 Source: National Land Use Development Master Plan, 2020.

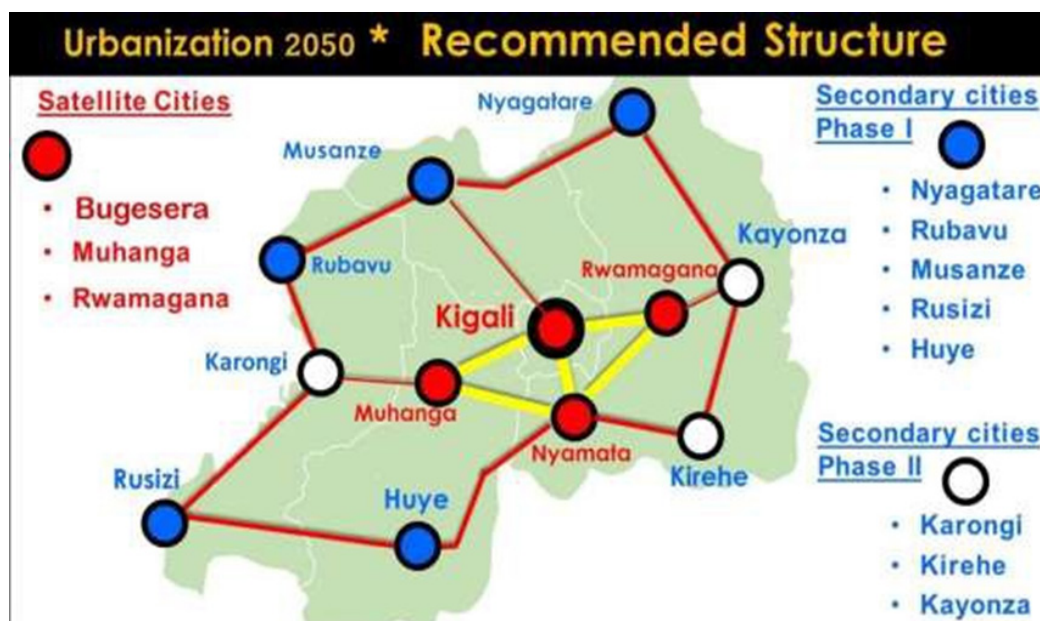


FIGURE 3
Rwanda: Urbanization by 2050 – Positioning of major cities
Source: National Land Use Development Master Plan, 2020.

- iv. National Circular Economy Action Plan (2022–2023)
 - v. Green Growth and Climate Resilience Strategy
- The Rwanda Green Investment Fund (2022) finances clean energy, sustainable mobility, climate-smart agriculture, and circular economy initiatives. Rwanda ratified the Paris Agreement in 2015 and aims for carbon neutrality by 2050.

Socio-Economic Trends

Between 2002 and 2022, Rwanda’s population rose from 8 million to 13.2 million. Urbanisation increased significantly, poverty declined from 78% (1994) to 38% (2017), life expectancy rose, and fertility rates fell. GDP per capita (PPP) increased from \$750 (2002) to \$2,410 (2022). Kigali’s urban primacy has declined modestly, suggesting gradual decentralisation.

Land tenure regularisation has covered over 10.3 million parcels. Access to electricity, water, and sanitation has improved markedly. Informal settlement upgrading has achieved service levels above many Sub-Saharan African peers.

Major infrastructure investments include airports, stadiums, waterfronts, and tourism zones. Performance contracts (imihigo) institutionalise monitoring and accountability. Economic growth remained strong, exceeding 8% annually in 2022 and 2023, while improvements in

health outcomes and gender representation were observed.

Table 1 shows the changing population, urbanization, and wellbeing in Rwanda from census results in 2002, 2012 and 2022.

Institutional Framework

The Urban and Rural Settlement Sector (URSS) operates within a multi-stakeholder structure comprising government agencies, local authorities, development partners, private sector actors, civil society, professional bodies, and research institutions.

Stakeholders are categorised by influence and interest:

- i. High influence/high interest: government ministries and agencies requiring close engagement.
- ii. High influence/latent interest: investors, cities, and communities requiring continuous consultation.
- iii. High interest/latent influence: development partners and knowledge institutions providing resources and expertise.
- iv. Low influence/low interest: local associations and NGOs are important for sustainability.

Figure 4 presents the stakeholder matrix of the Urban and Rural Settlement Sector (URSS), categorising actors according to their level of

TABLE 1
Changing Population, Urbanization and Life Expectancy in Rwanda

Census Year	Population (Mio)	Pop. Growth Rate %	Urbanization level %	Urbanization rate %	CoK share of urban pop. %	CoK growth rate %	Per Capita \$ (PPP)	Life expectancy (Years)	Fertility Rate
2002	8.0	1.8	16.78	4.6	54.5	9.4	750	51.2	5.5
2012	11.7	2.5	17.00	4.5	61.5	9.0	1,430	64.5	4.0
2022	13.2	2.4	27.90	4.2	62.3	4.2	2,410	69.6	3.6

Source: Rwanda Population and Housing Census, 2002, 2012, and 2022

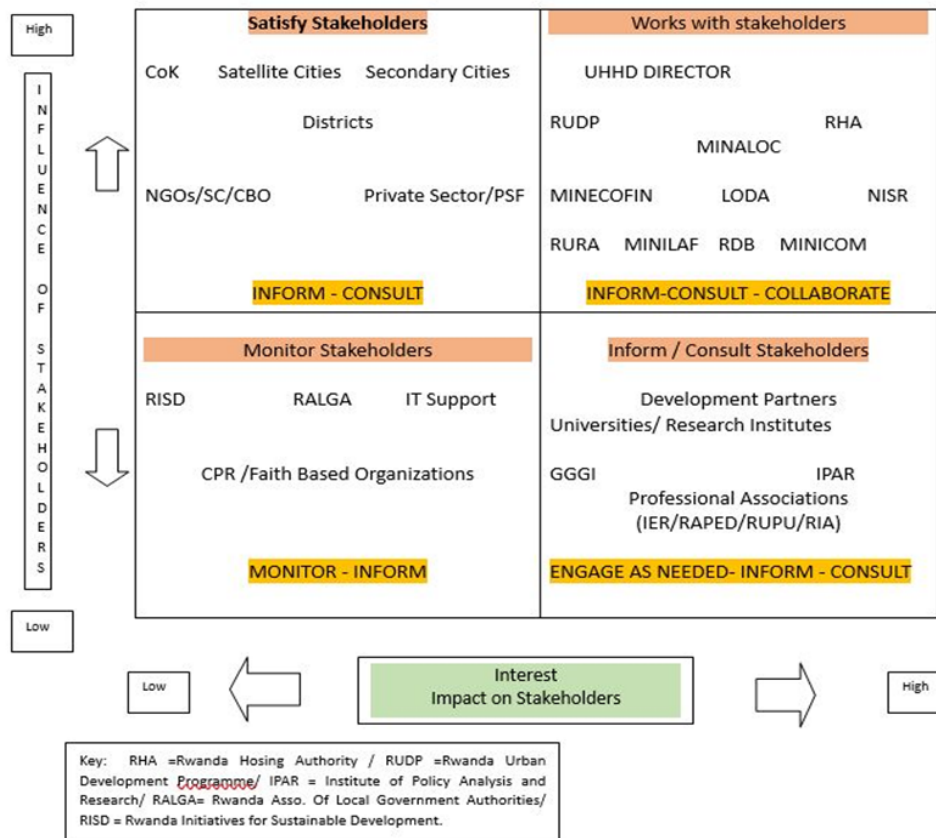


FIGURE 4
URSS Institutional Framework

Source: Author’s compilation based on URSSSP stakeholder analysis (2024).

influence and interest in the implementation of settlement and urbanisation policies.

Sector Strategic Plans

The first URSS Strategic Plan (2012/13–2017/18) prioritised:

- i. Integrated urban and rural settlement management

- ii. Development of secondary cities
- iii. Affordable housing supply

The second URSSP (2018/19–2023/24) expanded objectives to include integrated land management, universal housing access, private sector competitiveness, government asset management, and institutional capacity

strengthening. Eight sector priorities addressed planning integration, secondary city development, settlement upgrading, affordable housing, informal settlement improvement, construction sector competitiveness, asset management, and regulatory compliance.

The plan included results frameworks, monitoring systems, and financing mechanisms.

Rwanda’s approach reflects an ambitious synthesis of classical and contemporary development theories. It combines spatial planning, agglomeration strategies, rural restructuring, green growth, and institutional reform. While controversies persist—particularly regarding settlement consolidation and risks of inequality—the country demonstrates a deliberate attempt to manage urbanisation as a tool of structural transformation.

RESEARCH METHODS

Theory of Change And Evaluation Approach

This evaluation applied a Theory of Change (ToC) framework to assess the performance of Rwanda’s Urbanisation and Rural Settlement Sector

Strategic Plan (URSSP) 2018/19–2023/24. The ToC approach served two main purposes. First, it established a structured framework for change (Rogers, 2014; UN-Habitat, 2018) that examines the logical relationships among policy objectives, inputs, implementation actions, outputs, outcomes, and long-term impacts. Second, it guided empirical data collection to test whether planned interventions plausibly contributed to observed results (UN-Habitat, 2023).

The ToC model used in this evaluation is presented in **Figure 5**. It illustrates how resources (inputs) and sector interventions (activities), implemented under URSSP guidance, generate outputs (services and products), contribute to short- and medium-term outcomes, and ultimately support long-term sector impact. The arrows in the diagram show the causal linkages between actions and intended objectives.

Data Collection Methods

The evaluation used mixed methods to ensure triangulation and reliability. Data were collected through:

- Document review

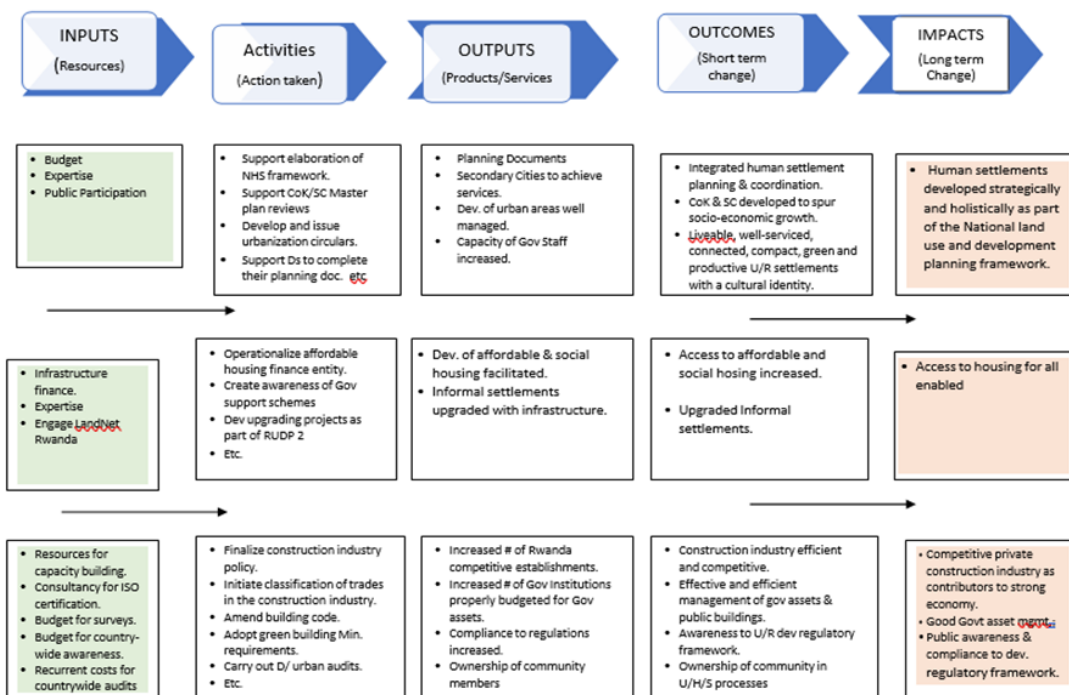


FIGURE 5
Theory of Change Model for URSSSP 2018/19–2023/24
Source: Author’s Theory of Change evaluation framework (2024)

- National and sub-national performance surveys
- Key informant interviews
- Focus group discussions
- Field observation

Stakeholders were identified through sector stakeholder analysis. The Ministry of Infrastructure (MININFRA) provided a comprehensive list of institutions involved in joint sector planning and reviews. Additional documentation and insights were obtained from UN-Habitat, development partners, civil society organisations, professional bodies, academia, and private sector representatives.

Document analysis focused on strategy implementation, operational experience, achievements, challenges, and emerging opportunities at both national and sub-national levels. Field observations were conducted over 11 days (12–23 February 2024) to validate reported progress and observe infrastructure and settlement conditions.

Survey Instrument

A structured questionnaire was administered via KoboToolbox. Sixteen respondents (out of a target of 20) completed the survey using purposive sampling. Participants included:

- 9 national-level government experts (heads of key institutions)
- 7 sub-national government experts (one district per province)

The survey assessed progress toward URSSP targets, identified implementation challenges, evaluated perceived outcomes and impacts, and gathered recommendations for the next planning cycle. The evaluation drew directly on the URSSP Results Chain, the Logical Framework, the Monitoring and Evaluation systems, the Review Reports, and the Management Information System (MIS).

Interviews and Stakeholder Engagement

Face-to-face interviews were conducted across major stakeholder categories:

Government:

- 5 Programme Officers at MININFRA

Development Partners:

- UN-Habitat

- World Bank
- European Union
- Agence française de développement (AFD)
- ANABEL (Belgium)
- GIZ

Civil Society:

- Rwanda Women Network
- Rwanda Association of Local Government Authorities
- Transparency International Rwanda

Professional Associations and Academia:

- Institution of Engineers of Rwanda
- Rwanda Institute of Urban Planners
- University of Rwanda, School of Architecture and Built Environment

Private Sector:

- Rwanda Private Sector Federation
- Kigali Bricks Ltd

Respondents evaluated the URSSP according to relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability, impact, and coherence. Of 50 scheduled appointments, 35 were completed (70% response rate).

Ethical Considerations

The evaluation received institutional authorisation from MININFRA in coordination with UN-Habitat. Participation was voluntary. All respondents were informed of the study's purpose and provided verbal consent. Confidentiality was assured, and findings are reported in aggregated form.

Methodological Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. Purposive sampling limits generalisation beyond selected stakeholders. Self-reported assessments may introduce response bias. The short fieldwork period restricted longitudinal observation. Finally, while the ToC framework strengthens internal logic analysis, attributing observed outcomes solely to URSSP interventions is constrained by broader socio-economic dynamics.

RESULTS

Results of End-Of-Term Evaluation

Table 2 shows progress made towards NST1 and URSSP performance targets between 2018/19 and

TABLE 2
Progress Towards URSSP Performance Targets 2018-2023

Sector/NST Outcomes	Sector Indicators	Baseline 2018/19	Target 2022/23	Status 2023/24
Integrated Human Settlement Planning and Coordination	Districts with urban plans prepared	4	27	23
	Districts using BP-MIS	6	30	30
Cities/Towns developed to spur socio-economic growth	% population living in urban areas	18.4	33	27.9
Livable, well-serviced, compact, green settlements	% rural households in planned green settlements	55.8	76	65.4
	Households relocated from high-risk zones (cum.)	3,048	34,248	45,131
Access to housing for all	Affordable housing units constructed (cum.)	56	15,047	2,600
	% urban population in informal settlements	62.6	54	61.3
Government asset management	Sq. meter office space constructed/acquired	16,400	49,400	117,476
Budget Execution Performance	Total Sector Budget (Billion RwF)	18.6	–	48.6
	Budget Execution (Billion RwF)	17.9	–	50.3
	Execution Rate (%)	96	–	103.6

Source: Compiled from MININFRA, BL-JSR, and EICV Reports, 2024

2023/24. The table shows the indicators as aligned to NST1 and URSSP Priority Areas/ Outcomes.

Planning and Institutional Progress

Substantial progress was recorded under Sector Priority 1 (Integrated Human Settlement Planning and Coordination). Districts with prepared urban plans increased from 4 to 23 (against a target of 27). All 30 districts now use the digital BP-MIS system, up from six in 2018/19. This expansion has strengthened transparency, reduced processing time, and improved regulatory compliance.

National investment in industrial infrastructure—including Special Economic Zones in Kigali and Bugesera and eight industrial parks in secondary cities—has supported spatially balanced development. Rank-size analysis of Kigali, Gisenyi,

Musanze, and Huye indicates a slight reduction in Kigali's primacy (from 3.5 in 2012 to 3.2 in 2022), suggesting gradual progress toward a more polycentric urban system.

The urban population share increased from 17.3% (2018/19) to 27.9% (2022/23), reflecting continued urbanisation and progress toward the SDG 11 objectives.

Rural Settlements and Risk Reduction

The percentage of rural households living in integrated, planned, green settlements increased from 55.8% to 65.4%. Relocation from high-risk zones significantly exceeded targets (45,131 households relocated, against a target of 34,248), thereby reducing vulnerability to floods and landslides.

Programmes implementing the National Human Settlement Upgrading Strategy and National Housing Policy advanced through partnerships. Participatory housing and urban renewal schemes were piloted successfully, and two large upgrading projects benefited approximately 60,000 residents during the URSSP period.

Housing and Informal Settlements

Affordable housing delivery (2,600 units) fell short of the cumulative target (15,047 units), reflecting constraints on private-sector capacity and financing. Although frameworks leveraging private investment are operational, industry capacity to scale high-quality supply remains limited. The percentage of urban residents living in informal settlements declined only marginally (from 62.6% to 61.3%), indicating persistent structural housing challenges.

Government Assets and Financial Performance

Government asset management showed significant improvement, with the construction or acquisition of office space exceeding targets (117,476 sq. meters against a target of 49,400). This reflects expanded institutional capacity and improved public infrastructure.

Budgetary performance remained strong throughout the URSSP period. Sector allocations increased substantially, and the average execution rate reached approximately 100%, demonstrating high financial discipline and implementation efficiency.

Stakeholder Perspectives

Stakeholders across government, development partners, civil society, academia, and the private sector broadly acknowledged significant achievements. Respondents highlighted progress in affordable housing facilitation, informal settlement upgrading, hazard risk reduction, and major public infrastructure projects such as the Prime Minister's Office complex and Gahanga stadium.

Public offices at national and sub-national levels were widely recognised for improved cleanliness, organisation, and digital integration. Enhanced information management systems and the nationwide rollout of OSC services have improved development management and ease of doing business.

Overall, the evaluation demonstrates substantial institutional and infrastructural progress under the URSSP 2018/19–2023/24. While housing affordability and private sector capacity remain key challenges, Rwanda has strengthened planning systems, improved risk management, expanded digital governance tools, and maintained strong financial execution, laying a solid foundation for the next phase of spatial and sectoral transformation.

DISCUSSION

The evaluation confirms that Rwanda's urbanisation and rural settlement strategy is ambitious, spatially structured, and institutionally coordinated. However, it remains constrained by capacity limitations, financing gaps, and emerging climate risks. The following discussion synthesises the principal cross-cutting issues arising from the implementation of the National Land Use and Development Master Plan (NLUDMP) and related sector strategies.

Cross-Sectoral Coordination and Spatial Alignment

Rwanda treats urbanisation as a deliberate instrument of economic transformation, consistent with growth-pole theory (Perroux, 1955) and spatial hierarchy approaches (Friedmann, 1966). The NLUDMP (2021) formalised a national settlement hierarchy, introduced Satellite and additional Secondary Cities, and revised rural settlement policy to protect farmland and natural resources by reducing dispersed grouped villages. This reflects intentional spatial restructuring to balance agglomeration with territorial sustainability.

Institutional mandates are clearly assigned: MININFRA coordinates the Urbanisation Sector, MINALOC oversees rural settlements, and land use planning authority was transferred to the National Land Authority (NLA). While this clarifies responsibilities, effective cross-sectoral alignment remains a challenge. Investment coordination largely occurs through consultative platforms such as the Sector Working Group, but a more formalised mechanism is required to ensure that infrastructure, land use, housing, and environmental decisions are consistently aligned with NLUDMP priorities.

Ambiguity in urban–rural classification criteria further complicates accurate measurement of urbanisation at national and sub-national levels (World Bank, 2017). This affects resource allocation and monitoring. Without clearer designation standards and aligned investments, settlement sprawl risks undermining the polycentric development model envisioned in the NLUDMP.

Empowerment of Satellite Cities, Secondary Cities, and District Towns

The effectiveness of Rwanda’s polycentric model depends on empowering Satellite Cities (SatCs), Secondary Cities (SCs), and District Towns (DTs). Although One Stop Centres (OSCs) and the Building Permit Management Information System (BP-MIS) are operational nationwide, local governments remain understaffed and affected by high turnover. Capacity gaps in planning, engineering, and environmental management constrain development control.

Friedmann (1966) argued that regional nodes must be institutionally and economically strengthened to counterbalance dominant cores. In Rwanda’s case, if newly designated centres lack adequate fiscal autonomy, skilled personnel, and infrastructure investment, Kigali’s dominance may persist despite formal decentralisation. Strengthening local revenue generation, professional staffing, and public–private collaboration is therefore essential to transform designated growth nodes into genuine economic pull factors.

Managing Accelerating Urbanisation and Climate Resilience

The expansion of the urban hierarchy created transitional gaps in programming and service provision, particularly in newly designated cities. Institutional restructuring—especially the transfer of planning functions from the Rwanda Housing Authority (RHA) to the NLA—introduced temporary delays. Infrastructure deficits remain visible in several Satellite and Secondary Cities.

Settlement sprawl and informal land conversions continue to reduce agricultural land and increase exposure to environmental hazards. This highlights the need to integrate climate risk and vulnerability assessments systematically into spatial planning. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2023) projects intensifying flooding and

heavy precipitation in Africa under 1.5°C of warming, with Eastern Africa facing ecosystem loss, food insecurity, increased disease burden, and economic disruption. For Rwanda, climate resilience must become integral to settlement planning.

Current limitations in geospatial data constrain evidence-based decision-making. Improved data generation, accessibility, and integration into local planning systems are necessary. Expanding capacity for nature-based solutions (NBS) can help maintain ecosystem functionality and reduce hazard exposure. Formal coordination between urbanisation and environmental institutions is critical to mainstream resilience within spatial investment decisions.

Integrated, Livable, and Inclusive Settlements

Rwanda has made notable progress in utility provision and access to services. However, qualitative dimensions of settlement development require stronger emphasis. Persistent challenges include waste management, sanitation systems, limited private-sector engagement, and inadequate monitoring of urban indicators. High staff turnover in OSCs further constrains effective development management.

Human-centred planning approaches stress inclusive and participatory urban design (Chambers, 1983). Civil society and professional associations have highlighted the need for gender-sensitive public facilities, parks, sanitation amenities, and opportunities for urban agriculture. Integrating public space development and livelihood-supporting urban agriculture can enhance social inclusion and food security while strengthening resilience.

With district planning frameworks largely established, the next phase of reform should focus on urban design quality, livability, and participatory governance rather than purely quantitative spatial expansion.

Affordable Housing and Informal Settlement Upgrading

Housing remains one of the most complex constraints within Rwanda’s urban transformation. Limited private financing capacity, lengthy project preparation periods, and weak incentives for rental investment have constrained supply. Although

the Urban Housing Development Fund (UHDF) supports mortgage disbursement, affordability barriers persist. Subsidisation mechanisms are not consistently targeted to the lowest-income groups. The absence of a fully operational social housing framework remains a significant policy gap. Future sector strategies should prioritise establishing a social housing stock under the Rwanda Housing Authority leadership, supported by City Management Offices. Strengthening housing cooperatives and participatory financing models can reduce reliance on expropriation and enhance inclusiveness.

Hirschman's (1967) theory of unbalanced growth suggests that bottlenecks in complementary sectors can constrain broader development. Rwanda's housing challenges illustrate this dynamic: spatial planning has progressed faster than the housing market's capacity to deliver affordable supply. Legal and taxation reforms to stimulate rental housing investment are therefore essential. Informal settlement upgrading must also incorporate climate resilience to enhance adaptive capacity.

Strengthening Public and Private Sector Capacities

High construction material costs, limited technical skills, regulatory non-compliance, and insufficient project management capacity remain systemic challenges. Shortages of qualified architects and planners at local levels, combined with high turnover, weaken institutional continuity. Professional associations are still consolidating their roles, and low practitioner registration undermines quality assurance.

Addressing these gaps requires coordinated skills development, certification mechanisms, and stronger regulatory enforcement. Collaboration among MINICOM, WDA, MINEDUC, RDB, and RHA is necessary to enhance workforce competencies and regional competitiveness. Implementation of the Rwanda National Circular Economy Action Plan and Roadmap should be strengthened to promote sustainable construction practices.

Storper and Scott (1992) emphasise that flexible production systems depend on skilled labour networks and institutional learning. Without sustained investment in human capital within

the construction and planning sectors, Rwanda's urban transformation may be constrained by capacity deficits.

Management of Government Assets

The evaluation identifies weaknesses in the management of government assets, including incomplete databases of public facilities. Growing demand for office space reflects expanding government functions but also reveals inefficiencies in asset utilisation. Empowering City Management Offices to strengthen district-level asset portfolios could enhance public life, support social housing initiatives, and facilitate SME development. Improved asset management aligns with broader governance reforms under Vision 2050 and the National Strategy for Transformation.

Climate Risks and Development Sustainability

Climate vulnerability represents a cross-cutting threat to Rwanda's development trajectory. IPCC (2023) projections of intensified flooding, ecosystem degradation, food insecurity, and water and energy risks directly affect settlement planning and infrastructure durability. Integrating climate resilience into urbanisation strategy is therefore foundational to sustaining development gains. Spatial planning must align with ecosystem protection, disaster risk reduction, and low-carbon growth to prevent climate hazards from reversing poverty reduction achievements.

Rwanda's experience demonstrates the potential of coordinated, state-led spatial planning to guide national transformation, consistent with growth-pole theory (Perroux, 1955) and spatial restructuring models (Friedmann, 1966). However, institutional capacity, cross-sectoral coordination, housing affordability, and climate resilience remain critical frontiers. The central challenge is not the absence of frameworks, but ensuring effective implementation through empowered local governance, inclusive housing systems, strengthened professional capacity, and integrated climate adaptation.

CONCLUSION

This paper evaluated Rwanda's post-genocide management approach to planned urbanisation and rural settlement development, focusing on implementation of the Urbanisation and Rural

Settlement Sector Strategic Plan (2018/19–2023/24). Rwanda has made substantial progress in institutionalising spatial planning, strengthening urban governance, upgrading informal settlements, and advancing integrated rural settlement policies. Urbanisation levels have risen, infrastructure provision has improved, and institutional mechanisms such as OSCs and digital permitting systems have enhanced transparency and efficiency.

Nonetheless, a dynamic tension persists between ambitious national transformation objectives and implementation constraints. Investments in Satellite and Secondary Cities have begun to moderate Kigali's primacy and strengthen the urban hierarchy, yet capacity gaps, financing limitations, and uneven service provision remain. The Imidugudu programme offers land-use efficiencies in a densely populated context, but debates regarding flexibility, community ownership, and local adaptation continue.

Rwanda's experience shows that coordinated, state-led planning anchored in long-term visions such as Vision 2050 can produce measurable transformation. Sustaining this trajectory will require deeper integration of climate resilience, private sector capacity development, inclusive service provision, and participatory governance.

Overall, Rwanda provides an important case of structured spatial transformation in Sub-Saharan Africa, illustrating both the potential and complexity of aligning ambitious national development frameworks with local implementation realities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

i. Strengthen Sub-National Institutional Capacity

Enhance administrative autonomy, technical staffing, and fiscal capacity of Satellite Cities, Secondary Cities, and District Towns, prioritising retention of qualified professionals.

ii. Formalise Cross-Sectoral Coordination

Establish stronger mechanisms to align land use planning, infrastructure investment, climate policy, and economic strategies with NLUIMP objectives.

iii. Expand Affordable Housing and Rental Supply

Improve subsidy targeting, strengthen housing cooperatives, harmonise taxation frameworks, and incentivise rental market development.

iv. Integrate Climate Resilience into Settlement Planning

Embed climate risk mapping, nature-based solutions, and disaster risk reduction in urban and rural planning processes.

v. Promote Inclusive, People-Centred Urban Development

Prioritise public spaces, sanitation facilities, urban agriculture, and gender-responsive amenities to enhance social sustainability.

vi. Modernise Environmental and Waste Management Systems

Mainstream circular economy principles and modern waste management in urban infrastructure planning.

vii. Introduce Context-Sensitive Rural Settlement Approaches

Adopt a flexible, case-by-case implementation of the Imidugudu programme that reflects ecological and socio-economic diversity.

viii. Strengthen Monitoring and Longitudinal Impact Evaluation

Incorporate robust long-term evaluation frameworks to better assess causal impacts of sector interventions.

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