Sub-Saharan Africa needs to create roughly 15 million jobs a year to keep pace with its expanding workforce, but rapid urbanisation has yet to deliver the sustained economic growth needed to meet that challenge, the World Bank Group said in a report released on October 29.

The region is projected to add 748 million urban residents between 2025 and 2050, bringing its urban population to 1.7 billion. Whether that growth translates into more productive businesses and better employment will depend largely on how governments plan cities, provide transport and infrastructure, and manage the expansion of smaller towns, the report says.

The report, *Sub-Saharan Africa's Urban Awakening: Catalyzing Economic Growth and Job Creation*, argues that urbanisation can help economies move towards more productive manufacturing and services. But cities cannot fulfil that role if workers struggle to reach jobs, businesses lack suitable locations to expand and new settlements grow faster than the infrastructure needed to support them.

The scale of the challenge is already evident. Sub-Saharan Africa added more than 181 million urban residents between 2014 and 2024, yet its real gross domestic product per capita remained stagnant at around $4,370, according to the report. It says the region's cities have not generated the sustained economic growth that has accompanied rapid urbanisation in other parts of the world.

"Much of the urban infrastructure needed for Sub-Saharan Africa's future cities has yet to be built," Paschal Donohoe, the World Bank Group's managing director and chief knowledge officer, said in the report's foreword. Decisions made now about where and how cities grow, he said, could shape productivity, jobs and private investment for decades.

Transport is among the main constraints identified by the report. Poor connections between residential areas and employment centres can limit workers' access to jobs, while restrictions on land use and development can prevent businesses from locating close to workers, suppliers and markets.

The pressure is expected to intensify as cities spread into surrounding areas. The report projects that 71% of future urban population growth up to 2050 will take place beyond the current boundaries of Sub-Saharan Africa's cities, underscoring the need to prepare for expansion on their outskirts.

In many places, development on the urban periphery has been informal and poorly planned, making it harder and more expensive to provide roads and basic services after settlements have spread. Without advance planning, governments risk locking in patterns of growth that leave communities poorly connected to employment and economic activity.

The World Bank recommends planning road networks and reserving land for essential infrastructure before new development takes hold. It also calls for better public transport and more affordable housing in established urban areas, so workers can reach jobs more easily and businesses can benefit from access to a larger labour force.

The challenge extends beyond major cities. Sub-Saharan Africa has 15,162 towns, many of which receive limited attention despite their potential to support trade, logistics and employment.

Towns located along transport corridors, near borders or close to major markets could attract businesses and connect producers to wider markets. Others have fewer advantages for commercial growth and may benefit more from investment in education, health and skills that help residents access jobs elsewhere.

The report urges governments to target investment according to the economic opportunities of individual towns rather than apply the same development approach everywhere.

Financing and local governance will also determine whether these changes are possible. The World Bank recommends improving property tax collection through digital mapping and billing systems, making transfers from central governments more predictable, and attracting private capital through partnerships with public authorities.

“Africa’s urban transformation will deliver on its promise only if cities have the institutions and resources to manage growth effectively,” Mark Roberts, the World Bank’s lead urban economist and lead author of the report, said. Stronger governance, predictable financing and greater accountability are essential to improve infrastructure, attract investment and create better jobs, he said.

The report warns that population growth alone will not generate the employment the region needs. With hundreds of millions more people expected to live in urban

areas by 2050, decisions on transport, land, housing and investment will help determine whether expanding cities become productive centres of economic activity.