

State of Charter Cities

NON





The Future of Development

Empowering new cities with better governance to lift tens of millions of people out of poverty.

The Charter Cities Institute is a non-profit organization dedicated to building the ecosystem for charter cities by:

- Creating legal, regulatory, and planning frameworks;
- Advising and convening key stakeholders including governments, new city developers, and multilateral institutions;
- Influencing the global agenda through research, engagement, and partnerships.

Executive Summary

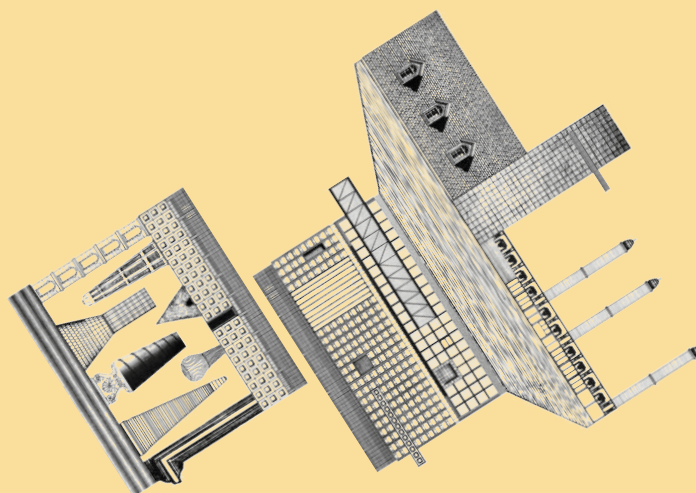
The state of charter cities is strong. Building new cities with new rules to accelerate economic growth and strengthen state capacity in the face of rapid urbanization throughout the Global South presents an extraordinary opportunity to alleviate poverty. First introduced to the world in 2009 by Paul Romer, charter cities offered a promising new mechanism in the fight against global poverty. The Charter Cities Institute, founded in 2017, has led a resurgence in interest in charter cities over the past several years. Charter city projects are under construction and governments around the world are acting: the charter cities moment has arrived. This report first reviews both the past and present of the charter cities movement, and then lays out a vision as to where this movement is headed.

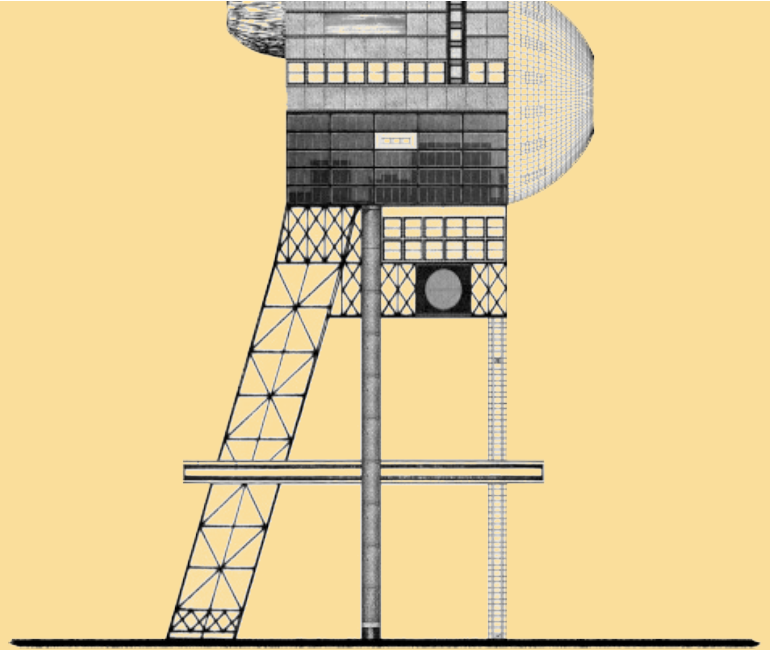
First, as momentum continues to grow, it is worth taking stock of how the charter cities movement arrived at this moment. The past decade has seen growing engagement from a wide variety of stakeholders in countries around the world, as well as the growth of new, innovative approaches to charter cities that iterate on past successes and learn from past mistakes.

Moving beyond the past, the present is an exciting time. Charter city projects continue despite the challenges posed by COVID-19. Governments and other stakeholders are increasingly interested in how charter cities can help drive development in the first majority-urban century in human history. Momentum is growing and CCI is working diligently to transform that momentum into on-the-ground and legislative successes.

Lastly, the future is the most exciting of all. The next few years will see the first charter city projects mature and attract residents and businesses. New governments will adopt charter cities legislation and sign concession agreements. Charter cities will be on the agenda of principal institutions within the international development community. CCI will continue to grow and expand our abilities to support the development of new charter cities, the passage of charter cities legislation, the publication of scholarly and engaging research, and the distribution of informative and conversation-driving media. The future is not without its risks and challenges, but we at CCI are confident that such challenges can be overcome.

Charter cities are an idea whose time has come. We invite you to continue building the charter cities ecosystem alongside us.





Introduction

Why charter cities?

Charter cities capture the cost-effectiveness of new urban development and relieve stresses on existing cities, while also incorporating deep reforms to governance to improve economic outcomes and bolster state capacity.



The world is entering its final phase of urbanization. While most high-income countries are already highly urbanized, low- and middle-income countries are now undergoing a wave of rapid urbanization. By 2050, the world's cities will be home to an additional 2.5 billion residents, 90% of whom will live in Africa and Asia. The scale of urbanization over the next three decades in India (416 million), China (255 million), and Nigeria (189 million) provides a window into just how massive this current wave of urban migration truly is.¹

With annual infrastructure financing gaps in the hundreds of billions, most governments throughout the Global South are simply unequipped to handle the strain this wave of urbanization will place on their cities to provide adequate housing, employment, transportation, and other urban services.² And at the same time, especially in Africa, countries are seeing urbanization without industrialization. Historically, industrialization and rising productivity accompanied urbanization as people left agricultural work for higher-paying jobs in cities. Now, people are moving to cities in great numbers, but there is no corresponding industrial boom.³ Instead, many are trapped living in slums and working in the informal sector, with

no reasonable expectation of seeing their income rise substantially over their lifetime.⁴

Sustainable Development Goal 11 calls for cities that are inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.⁵ On their present course, most growing cities of the Global South do not and will not meet these objectives. This pattern can be reversed, but new approaches and new urban spaces will be needed to supplement the work being done in existing cities. Infrastructure can be provided on a much more cost-effective basis in new urban spaces, ahead of human settlement, than in existing cities.⁶ Hundreds of these new cities are being built worldwide, but few are combined with the institutional reforms necessary to generate sustained economic growth and strengthen state capacity.⁷

Charter cities capture the cost-effectiveness of new urban development and relieve stresses on existing cities, while also incorporating deep reforms to governance to improve economic outcomes and bolster state capacity. However, charter cities should not be viewed as prospective islands of prosperity, but as catalysts for nationwide reform and economic growth.

This process has played out in China since 1980 through its special economic zones. Deep reforms were introduced in China's first four SEZs that proved tremendously successful at kick-starting economic growth, most notably in Shenzhen.⁸ These reforms were then introduced all throughout China over the next several decades, fueling China's meteoric economic rise and the elevation of over 800 million people out of extreme poverty.⁹ In 1980, Shenzhen was a collection of villages home to 100,000 people.¹⁰ Today it is a gleaming metropolis of over 20 million. Building charter cities that replicate just a fraction of that success in low-income countries around the world today would be an incredible humanitarian achievement.

As the charter cities movement has grown in strength over the past several years, two distinct strains of thought on charter cities have emerged. The first, discussed above

and throughout this document, targets low-income countries and is focused on spurring catch-up growth and building state capacity. A second approach to charter cities instead targets high-income countries (or enclaves within low- and middle-income countries) and remote workers. This second strand is more focused on pushing the frontier of governance and policy experimentation, rather than poverty alleviation or catch-up growth as primary goals.

While CCI is supportive of all charter city efforts, our focus is on the low-income setting. Our value as a non-profit organization is to advocate for and conduct research on charter cities to showcase their potential as a powerful tool to help end global poverty. We work to provide "public goods" for governments and city developers, including drafting model legislation, regulations, and policy guides, convening relevant stakeholders to strengthen the movement, and conducting original and collaborative research on charter cities and related topics.

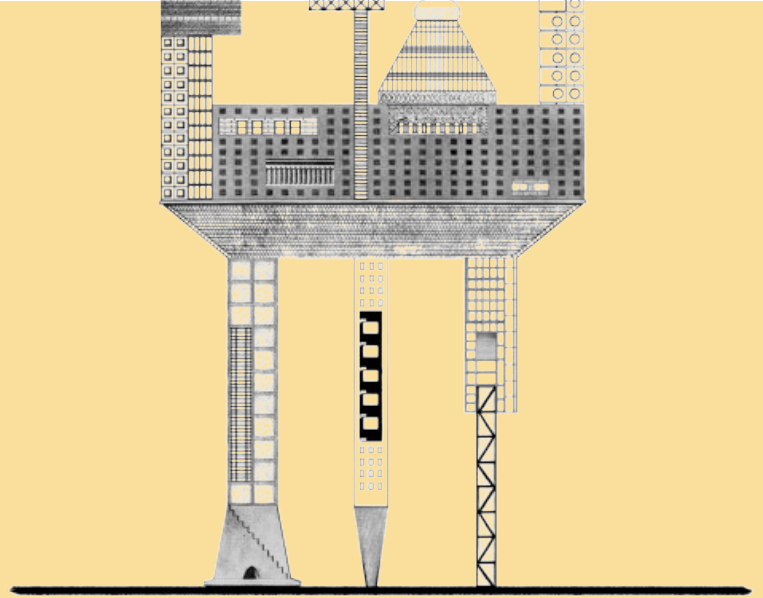
Through these activities, the Charter Cities Institute is building the ecosystem for charter cities. We believe charter cities have immense potential to lift tens of millions of people worldwide out of poverty within the next several decades. This document will provide a brief overview of how the charter cities movement arrived at this moment, current developments in the field, and what the future holds for charter cities.

Ciudad Morazán

BOX 1

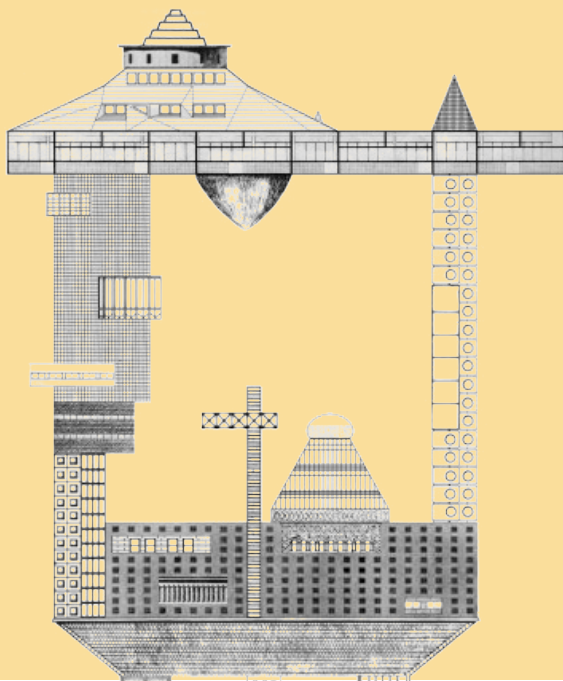
Ciudad Morazán, a ZEDE located in Honduras' main manufacturing region near the city of Choloma, is targeting light industry and creating a safe, affordable community for ordinary Hondurans. Over \$100 million in investment has been planned to support the development of medical equipment and pharmaceutical production, in addition to other industries, housing, and infrastructure. The first residences and commercial spaces are under construction. CCI provided input on the formation of Ciudad Morazán's legal language across several regulatory domains, including labor, business registration, and commercial arbitration.





Retrospective

Over the last two years, however, momentum to create charter cities has accelerated. New charter city projects are moving forward and governments are interested in adopting charter city legislation.



In 2009, economist Paul Romer introduced charter cities in a now-famous TED Talk.¹¹ For Romer, institutions are the primary determinant of economic outcomes and explain the vast divergence in living standards that have emerged between wealthy and poor countries over the past several centuries. Romer theorized that if you could effectively “import” good institutions into a low-income country, its economic performance would improve. But introducing substantive reform at the national level is a difficult political task, whereas reform at the subnational level is more achievable and was already familiar to countries that employed special economic zones. To ensure that a charter city was governed effectively, Romer proposed having a well-governed high-income “guarantor” country (Canada, for instance) administer the city. Romer would have two opportunities to actualize charter cities, although neither was ultimately successful.

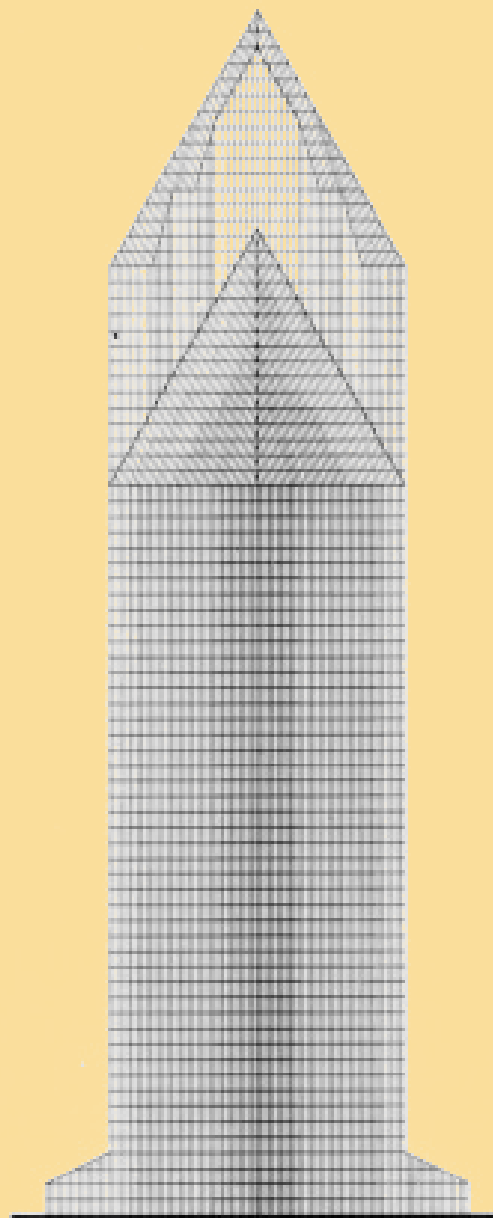
First, Romer went to Madagascar as then-president Marc Ravalomanana was interested in pursuing the creation of a charter city. However, shortly after their meeting, protests broke out over an unrelated land deal with Korean auto manufacturer Daewoo. The

protests turned violent, with security forces opening fire on protestors in Antananarivo, the capital, and Ravalomanna was ultimately forced out of office, ending the possibility of a Malagasy charter city.¹²

Romer then pursued the development of charter cities in Honduras after being invited by government officials that saw his TED Talk. Legislative action quickly followed their meeting, creating special development regions (Regiones Especial de Desarrollo or REDs) and an oversight commission headed by Romer and other development experts. However, after the Honduran government signed a private agreement to develop a charter city without consulting the commission, Romer withdrew his involvement in Honduras. Shortly thereafter, the RED legislation was declared unconstitutional. New legislation creating Zones for Employment and Economic Development (Zonas de Empleo y Desarrollo Económico or ZEDES) was later adopted, however, it would take several years for any ZEDE projects to emerge.¹³

Following these two failures, momentum surrounding charter cities slowed. Romer had largely led the effort to create charter cities singlehandedly, and so there was little institutional backing to continue advocating for them after he moved on to other projects. There was a brief resurgence of interest in charter cities, and specifically refugee cities or zones, at the height of the 2015 refugee crisis. Oxford professors Paul Collier and Alexander Betts were strong advocates for the Jordan Compact, an agreement creating special economic zones in Jordan where displaced Syrians could legally work.¹⁴ Former Zaatari refugee camp director Killian Kleinschmidt, former UN Human Rights Council President Joachim R  cker, and special jurisdiction expert Michael Castle Miller advocated and continue to advocate for zone-based approaches to humanitarian crises.¹⁵ Ultimately, limited progress was made in this area.

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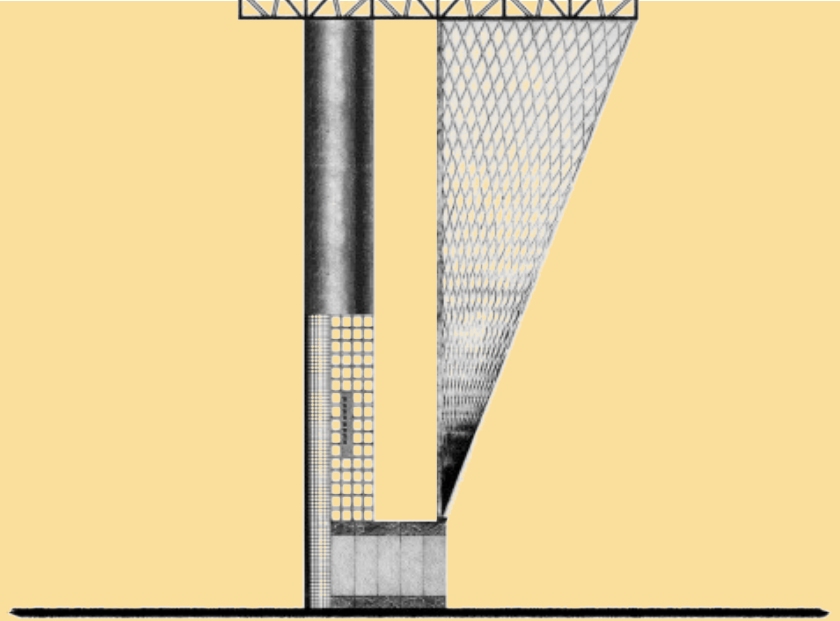


Enyimba Economic City

BOX 2

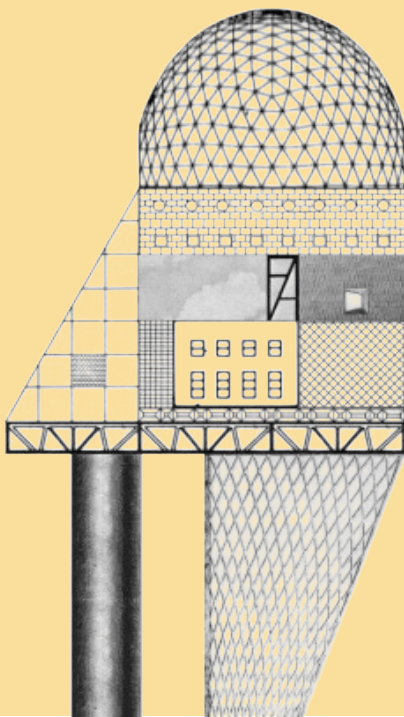
Charter cities are advancing in Nigeria. Enyimba Economic City (EEC) is a new city development in Abia State focused on industrial development that is targeting 1.5 million residents and the creation of 700,000 jobs. Enyimba has secured status as a free trade zone, as well as support from the state government. EEC represents a true public-private partnership between an urban developer and a host government, with the African Development Bank pledging \$430 million to the project, and the Nigeria Export-Import Bank extending credit facility to Abia State in support of the project. CCI assisted the Enyimba Economic City team in drafting its regulatory framework. These city regulations have since been approved by the Nigerian Export Processing Zones Authority and officially promulgated on Nigeria's gazette.





Current Developments

Charter cities, and new cities more generally, have extraordinary potential to help countries meet the Sustainable Development Goals.



Charter cities and charter city-like projects are pressing forward. To date there are no charter cities, however, there are what could be described as charter “towns.” If successful, these charter towns can serve as a proof of concept for charter cities and could even scale themselves to become proper cities. More generally, new cities are being built worldwide, although most are being developed with very little devolved authority or autonomy, or sometimes with no elements of governance reform at all. If this continues, it would be a tragic missed opportunity, as these new cities would then still possess all of the poor governance issues that currently plague existing cities.

In an increasingly decentralized world, the political, fiscal, and administrative devolution of powers embedded in charter city reforms is a crucial precondition for these new city developments to achieve success. The trend towards decentralization also makes charter cities an attractive vehicle for meeting the Sustainable Development Goals. Implementing economic reform, providing public services, and building infrastructure is difficult for resource-starved governments facing surging populations and extraordinary

public demand. By crowding in investment and engaging in public-private partnerships to better leverage private sector resources, charter cities can help fill the gaps often left by a resource-constrained public sector.

Three new ZEDE projects, at “charter town” scale, have emerged in Honduras over the past two years, including Próspera, Ciudad Morazán (see Box 1), and Orquidea.

Próspera, located on the island of Roatan, is focused on attracting remote workers, on tourism, and on experimenting with innovative policies and novel governance structures. Entrepreneur Sean Pawley is founding a new bank in Próspera, utilizing its advantageous regulatory system to dramatically improve international payment systems, which currently make doing business in Honduras very difficult. New construction at Próspera will create over 1,300 jobs over the next several months, with a target of 10,000 residents by 2025.¹⁶

Orquidea, located in southern Honduras, is a newly formed ZEDE based around agri-processing, although additional information about Orquidea remains limited.¹⁷ Additional ZEDE developments have been proposed, but have yet to be approved by the requisite governing body.

Earlier this year, Talent City, Nigeria was announced by tech founder Iyinoluwa Aboyeji. Aboyeji plans to make Talent City, located just outside of Lagos in the Lekki Free Trade Zone, Africa’s principal tech hub. Talent City aims to replicate the successes of Silicon Valley, Shenzhen, Dubai, and Bangalore with the physical and regulatory infrastructure needed to support, rather than stifle, entrepreneurship and innovation. Although construction has not yet begun, Talent City has the backing of some of Nigeria’s most notable tech founders and venture capital executives.¹⁸

In Somaliland, Dubai-based port operator DPWorld is leading a \$442 million USD upgrade of the port at Berbera, including a new special economic zone. CCI, in

partnership with members of Somaliland civil society, has prepared a report on how this new investment could be leveraged to create a new charter city.¹⁹ Although Somaliland is stable, democratic, and de facto independent from Somalia, it continues to lack international recognition. A successful charter city in Somaliland would undoubtedly bolster the state’s case for international recognition.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo presents yet another opportunity for charter cities. As a major source of critical minerals needed in the production of high-technology products, charter cities can facilitate the DRC’s moving up the resource processing value chain while also fostering supply chain relationships with the United States and Europe. Hubert Kabasu Babu Katulondi, former governor of Kasai Occidental Province, coauthored a report with CCI on how charter cities could support development, greater economic security, and stronger trade relationships for the DRC.²⁰

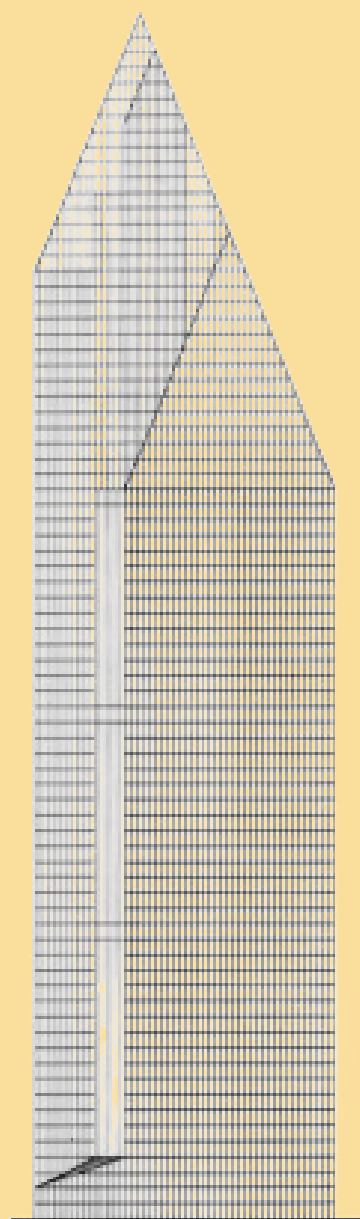
There are additional new city projects and legislative efforts, including in West Africa, East Africa, Southern Africa, South America, and the Caribbean, that CCI is working with in varying capacities that we look forward to being able to share over the next several months and years.

There are presently hundreds of new city projects worldwide in addition to those described above. Asia is home to the greatest number of new cities, with several hundred emerging in China over the past two decades alone.²¹ However, new cities can be found around the globe and are taking on a variety of forms, ranging from economic projects focused on industry and finance to highly planned new capitals to emergent cities that were entirely unplanned.

Port City, Colombo is a new city being built in Sri Lanka as a part of China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Constructed on reclaimed land and expected to house 80,000 residents, Port City will enjoy devolved governing authority as a special economic zone and international

financial center.²² The Guyanese government is planning to build a new city to support its newfound energy industry.²³ The Indian government wants to build eight new cities to ease the burden of the country's rapid urbanization.²⁴ Egypt is building nearly two dozen new cities, including a new capital.²⁵ Rendeavour, Africa's largest urban developer, is building new cities in Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Zambia, and the DRC.²⁶

New cities are being built, led by both the private and public sectors, with immense potential to help address issues like rapid urbanization, stagnant economic growth, limited state capacity, climate change, migration, and others. Cities are the topic of discussion across research disciplines, policy debates, and multilateral agendas, but new cities are only just entering these conversations. Charter cities, and new cities more generally, have extraordinary potential to help countries meet the Sustainable Development Goals and the challenges identified above. The disproportionate economic impact of COVID-19 on the Global South has further exacerbated these challenges and bold new ideas are needed today to help set these countries back on track for the 2030 Agenda.²⁷ Charter cities touch on a majority of the SDGs and applications of the charter city model in China, Dubai, Singapore, and elsewhere have proven successful. Maximizing the ability of new cities (ideally as charter cities) to reach these objectives, however, requires a rich ecosystem of knowledge sharing and coordination across city developers, governments, multilateral institutions, financial institutions, researchers, and other stakeholders that must be continuously built. CCI is dedicated to building this ecosystem.



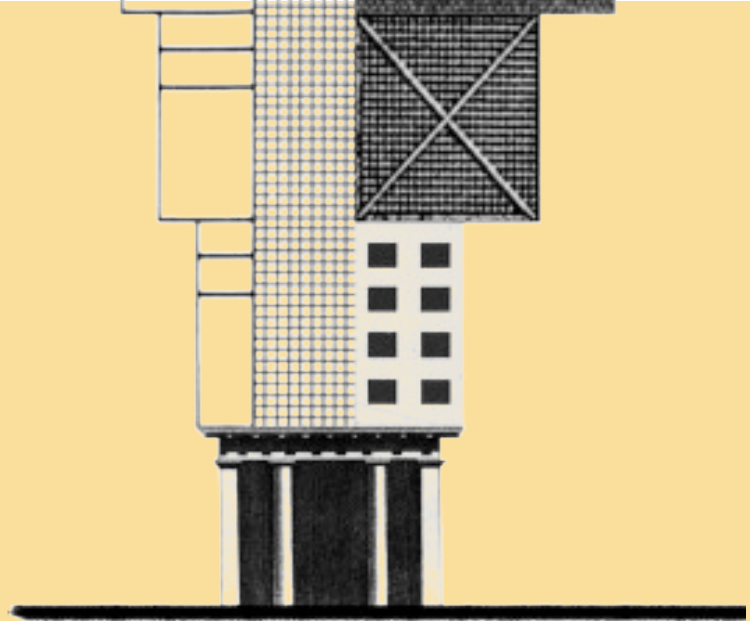
Nkwashi

BOX 3

In Zambia, construction is progressing on Nkwashi, a new satellite development of Lusaka, and the first residents are moving in. Nkwashi is centered around a new university campus focused on STEM education, and is also targeting remote and knowledge workers, with a long-term population goal of 100,000. Additionally, CCI is expanding our on-the-ground presence in Zambia to build support for charter cities legislation under President Hakainde Hichilema's new administration.

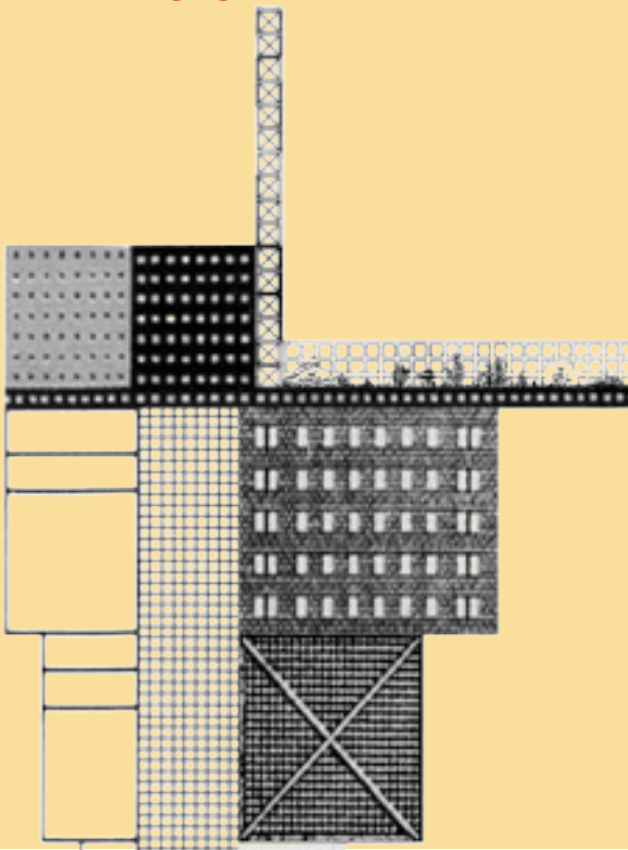
This on-the-ground presence includes a new CCI regional office in Lusaka, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Zambian Development Agency (ZDA) to advise on reforming Zambia's special economic zone legislation, and an MOU in the process of being formalized with the Zambian Institute for Policy Analysis and Research (ZIPAR) to jointly draft a white paper that provides specific policy recommendations pertaining to the SEZ legislation.





The Future

New cities are being built, governments are interested in creating charter cities, and favorable socioeconomic and technological trends for charter cities are emerging.



The future for charter cities is bright. New cities are being built, governments are interested in creating charter cities, and favorable socioeconomic and technological trends for charter cities are emerging. At the same time, there are still binding constraints that must be addressed.

The number one constraint facing charter cities is awareness. Much remains to be done to spread knowledge of charter cities, and to effectively communicate what they are and why they matter in humanity's first truly urban century. Conversations about charter cities today also differ from those had by Paul Romer and must be accordingly differentiated, as CCI advocates a different model. We have found that relevant stakeholders are receptive to the idea of charter cities once they can be substantively engaged and educated about what charter cities are and what they can achieve.

Groundwork is being laid that will place charter cities onto the international development agenda, with greater and greater buy-in from multilateral institutions, development banks, academics, and other stakeholders. However, this process takes time and large, bureaucratic institutions are notoriously slow at adopting new ideas. More

engagement, research, and proof of concept will be needed before institutions such as the African Union, World Bank, and United Nations begin to officially include charter cities as an action item in their agendas.

Charter cities also face financing obstacles. Any given charter city project pairs substantial upside for investors with non-trivial failure risk. De-risking charter cities with support from development finance institutions, partnerships with major anchor tenants, and other proactive efforts are necessary. Charter cities are long-term projects and represent a new type of asset class, with early-stage financing posing the greatest risk to investors. Charter cities must also be affordable for prospective residents. Far too many new cities cater to local elites and ignore the largest possible resident pool, the millions of low-income people moving to cities in search of economic opportunity for themselves and their families.

Identifying and securing land for charter cities presents unique obstacles as well. New city developers must find locations that will allow a charter city to thrive economically, while also being financially, politically, and technically feasible. Developers will face tradeoffs over land prices, proximity to existing cities and infrastructure, access to trade networks, urbanization trends, and more. There are many good locations for new cities left in the world but identifying them is not a straightforward exercise. Developers may also face significant challenges when acquiring this land, including unclear or disputed land rights, pre-existing land users, financing acquisition, and more.

Beyond these constraints, there are also important opportunities that will support the creation of charter cities. In our increasingly multipolar world, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the G7's Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative offer competing visions for the future of development and infrastructure deployment. Charter cities can be a useful tool in the B3W toolkit if given this

opportunity. China has already built out new cities under BRI, including Port City, Colombo in Sri Lanka and the Khorgos dry port on China's border with Kazakhstan.²⁸ Migration also continues to be a contentious political issue that charter cities can help provide a partial solution for. The existing refugee camp system is wholly inadequate to meet the needs of refugees in a world where return to the home country is unlikely and economic opportunity is needed. Not to mention, migration flows are set to get worse in the upcoming decades as climate change, associated droughts, and political conflicts (as in Syria, Afghanistan, and Ethiopia) continue unabated. Introducing charter city elements to the refugee resettlement system could greatly improve socioeconomic outcomes for refugees.²⁹ If the United States and Europe are to remain relatively closed to refugees and lower income immigrants, they must do more to stimulate economic growth and build capacity in sending countries, which charter cities can help support.

The spread of remote work presents a tremendous opportunity for charter cities like Próspera, Talent City, and Nkwashi, whose principle selling points are their digital infrastructure. However, the spread of remote work also presents opportunities for charter cities to target the services sector on a much bigger scale, as India has done in recent decades.

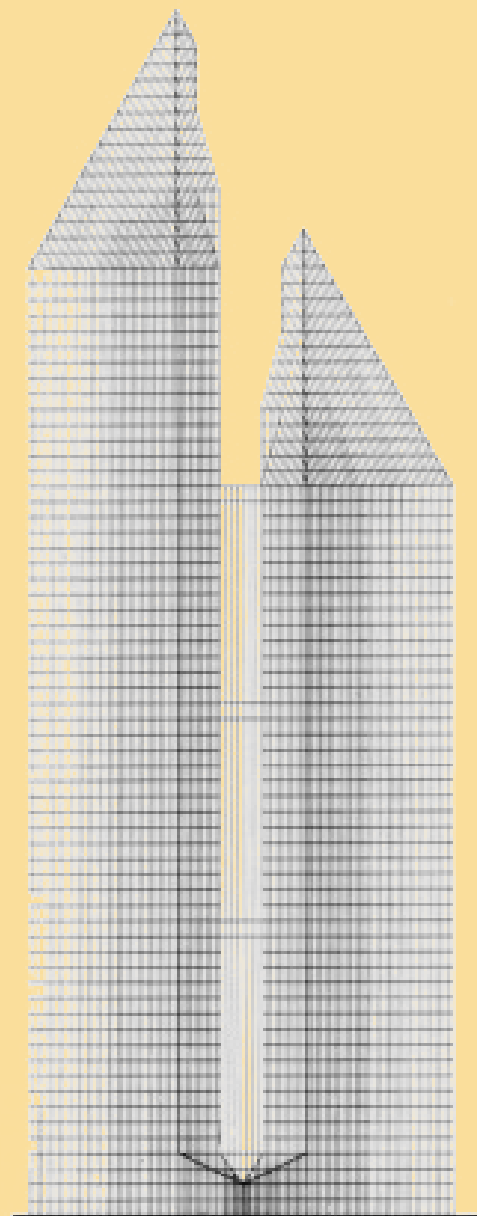
New free trade agreements and regional trading blocs also present opportunities for charter cities. The entry into force of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement and Trans-Pacific Partnership, as well as the greater integration of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, among other agreements and blocs, will all fuel demand for new urban centers and industry. As trade patterns shift and

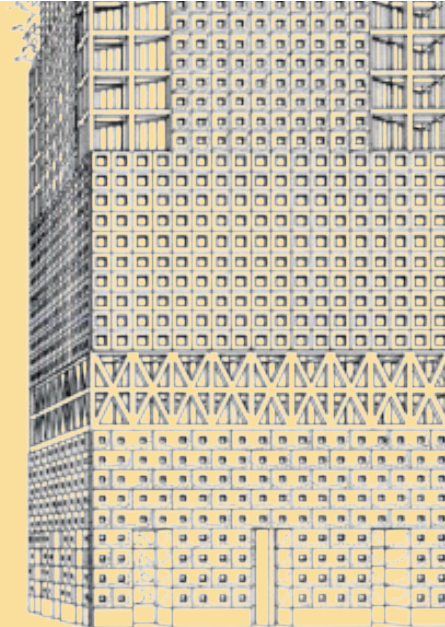
trade volumes grow, new transportation infrastructure and industry can be coupled with governance reform and urban development via charter cities.

As we move towards a world where people, power, and resources are increasingly concentrated in megacities rather than dispersed more evenly across a nation's territory, cities are likely to demand greater political authority than before.³⁰ In this new global environment, charter city-type reforms can help many countries that might otherwise struggle to attract investment and talent transition to this new reality and, by doing so, bolster their competitiveness.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has stirred millions around the world to realize that many of the institutions they've taken for granted have become sclerotic and ineffective, in both high- and low-income countries. A successful charter city can serve as a lightning rod for reformers to point to and serve as laboratories for locally driven policy experimentation. Institutions are the fundamental determinant of economic growth, and charter cities are a powerful tool for institutional reform.

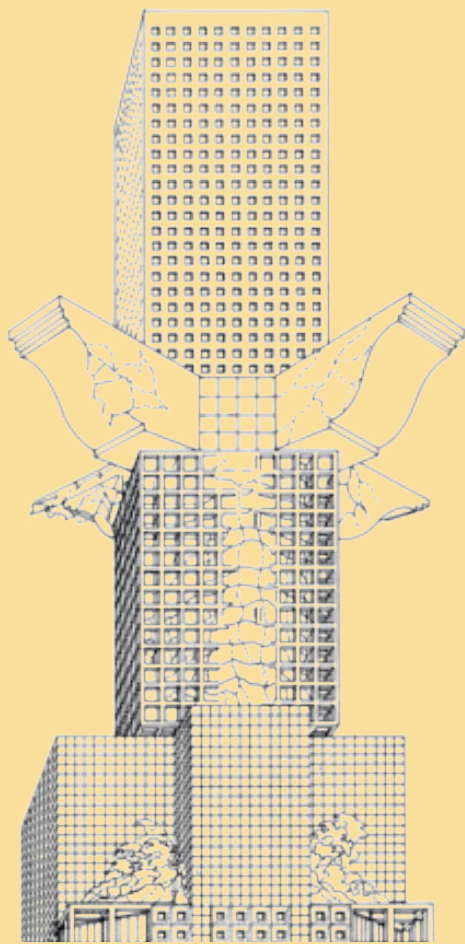
Despite notable challenges, the future for charter cities is incredibly promising. Governments are interested in charter cities and there is action on the ground. There are socioeconomic trends favorable to charter cities that will only grow stronger over the coming decades, and the ability of charter cities to tackle many different development challenges at once makes them an attractive policy tool to accelerate progress towards the SDGs.





Conclusion

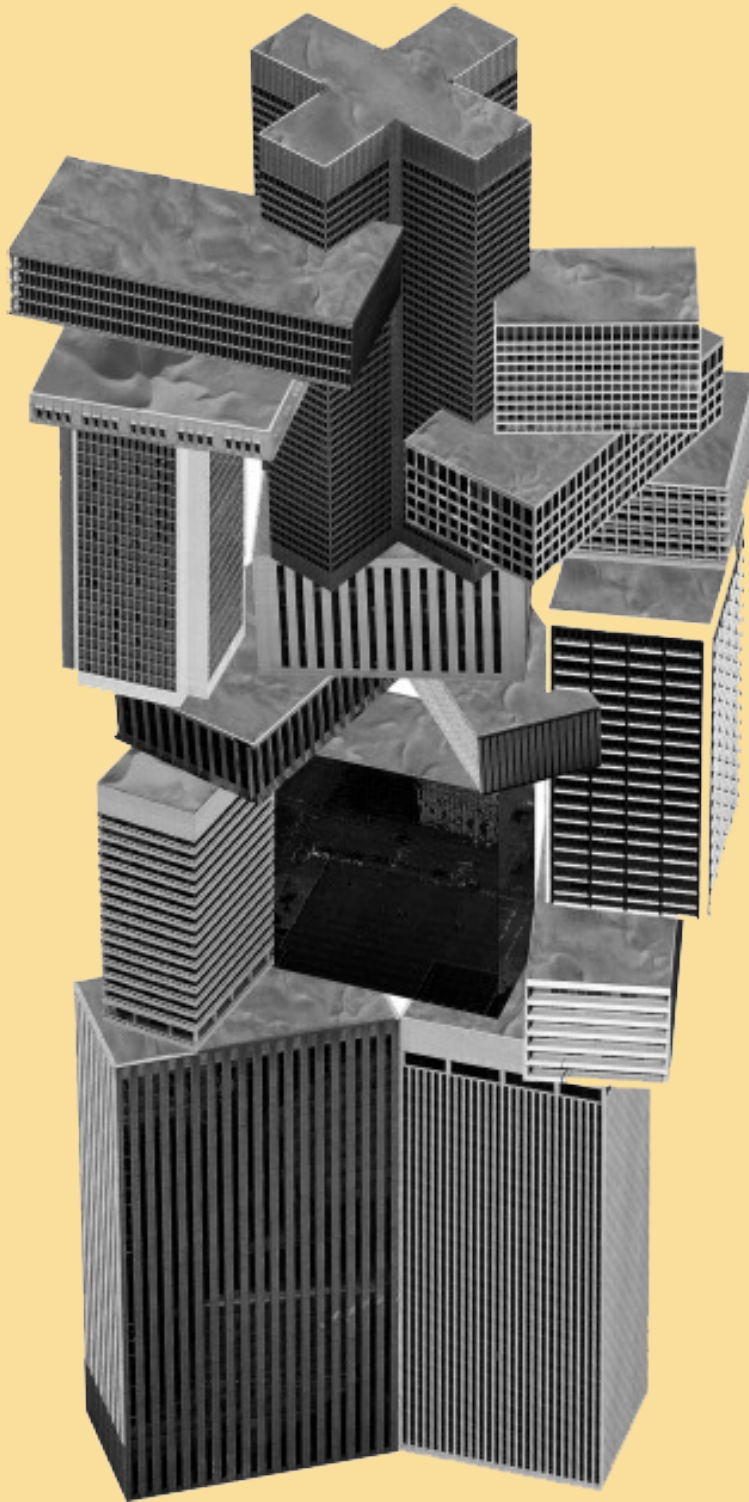
The state of charter cities is strong. On multiple continents, charter city projects are underway, and governments are pursuing charter cities as a strategy to facilitate national development. The charter cities movement itself has fully recovered from early setbacks and is now stronger and reaching more stakeholders than ever before. While the future poses real, but manageable, challenges for charter cities and city developers, there are socioeconomic trends favorable to charter cities that will only grow stronger over the coming decades. The ability of charter cities to tackle many different development challenges at once makes them an attractive tool for development, backed up with decades of evidence from China, Singapore, and elsewhere. We at the Charter Cities Institute are strongly optimistic about the future of the movement and hope that you will continue working with us to build the ecosystem for charter cities and in turn lift tens of millions of people out of poverty.



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