

Living in an Urban World

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Living in an Urban World

1. Introduction

We all live in the city! Such a claim could easily be made by the denizens of the 21st century. If we look beyond the strictly numerical demographic and spatial data relative to urbanisation processes, it becomes obvious that almost all individuals who today inhabit Planet Earth are in some way influenced and concerned by the urban phenomenon. They may live in a city themselves, be dependent upon a city for their income - as is the case for most agricultural workers in rural areas, go to a city occasionally to make use of urban equipment and services - health, education, public administration, banking, or others; they may have family ties or other links to city dwellers, consider moving to a city as seasonal or permanent migrants, depend financially on money remitted by family members, or be influenced by the media - radio, television, and more recently the Internet - that flourish in cities and are beamed throughout the inhabited world.

It is true of course that the new information technologies have profoundly modified the balance between rural and urban regions. The global economy has also changed power relationships, and political and administrative decentralisation processes are creating new decision-making centres. But when all is said and done, cities continue to be a driving force in local, regional, national and international development.

To understand the evolution of the contemporary world and how it affects urban dynamics, as well as the role of cities in the South and their players - populations, rulers, entrepreneurs, associations, etc. - we must examine various aspects of these phenomena, ever mindful of the rapidity of territorial changes, and of the growth of socio-economic inequalities between the regions of the world, as well as within each country and each urban society.

2. The growth of cities - general trends and diversity

Before looking at the statistics relative to the urban environment, let us consider the following statement highlighted by the UN-HABITAT-backed City Mayors internet platform:

"Some 923,986,000 people, or 31.6% of the world's total urban population, live in slums; some 43% of the urban population of all developing regions combined live in slums; some 78.2% of the urban population in the least developed countries live in slums; some 6% of the urban population in developed regions live in slum-like conditions.

The total number of slum dwellers in the world increased by about 36% during the 1990s and in the next 30 years, the global number of slum dwellers will increase to about two billion if no concerted action to address the challenge of slums is taken."

These few words express the essence of the issue.

In both territorial and demographic terms, the world is becoming more and more urban. This process now affects above all the developing countries in Asia and Africa, and Latin America to a somewhat lesser degree. The rate of urban growth in many countries in the South continues to be high, and invariably leads to a serious degradation of living conditions for the majority of city dwellers. The figures quoted in the UN study speak for themselves: depending on the level of poverty in each country, between two and four city dwellers out of five live in slums, with significant consequences for their own lives and the lives of coming generations: precarious conditions now, uncertainty as to their future existence.

Let us take a quick look at the situation (according to World Bank data for 2004¹):

	Urban population				Population in urban agglomerations of more than 1 million			Population in largest city		Access to improved sanitation facilities			
	millions		% of total population		% of total population			% of urban population		% of urban population		% of rural population	
	1980	2002	1980	2002	1980	2000	2015	1980	2001	1990	2000	1990	2000
World	1,741.3 s	2,953.1 s	39 w	48 w	.. w	.. w	.. w	18 w	16 w	75 w	81 w	27 w	38 w
Low Income	348.3	763.1	22	31	..	..	..	17	18	58	71	20	31
Middle Income	785.9	1,438.9	39	53	..	..	..	18	15	75	82	29	43
Lower middle income	629.7	1,190.5	35	49	16	18	21	16	13	72	81	28	42
Upper middle income	156.2	248.4	66	75	..	..	..	29	26	..	..	..	64
Low & middle Income	1,134.2	2,202.0	32	42	..	..	..	18	16	68	78	24	36
East Asia & Pacific	288.6	701.8	21	38	..	..	..	13	9	61	72	24	36
Europe & Central Asia	249.2	301.0	59	64	16	18	20	15	15	..	..	..	..
Latin America & Carib.	231.8	401.1	65	76	29	32	32	27	24	85	86	41	52
Middle East & N. Africa	83.4	177.2	48	58	21	22	24	30	26	..	94	..	72
South Asia	201.1	392.9	22	28	8	12	14	9	11	52	66	11	21
Sub-Saharan Africa	80.2	227.8	21	33	..	..	..	27	26	75	76	45	46
High Income	607.1	751.1	73	78	..	..	..	18	18	..	..	..	..
Europe EMU	209.5	237.3	73	78	26	27	27	17	16	..	..	..	..

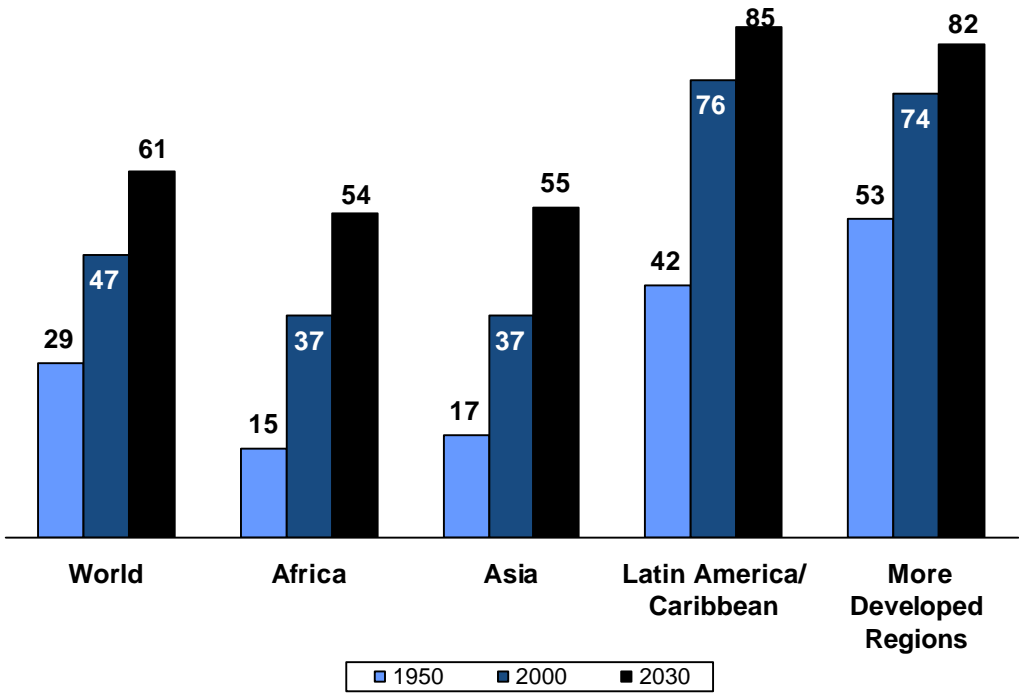
¹

http://www.worldbank.org/data/wdi2004/pdfs/Table3_10.pdf

Trends in Urbanization, by Region

Urban Population

Percent



Source: United Nations, *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2003 Revision* (medium scenario), 2004.

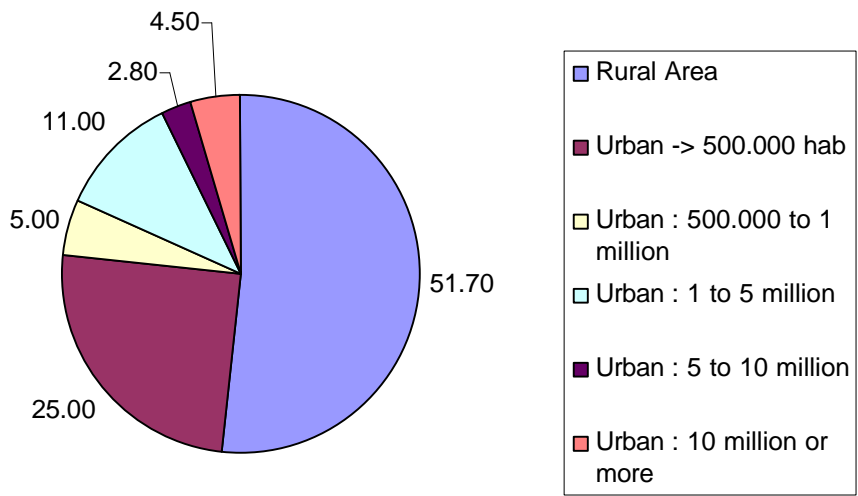
Suffice it to say that in 1800 a mere 3% of the world's population lived in an urban environment, a proportion that rose to 14% in 1900 and to 30% in 1950. In the year 2000, 47%, i.e. almost half of the 6055 million inhabitants of the world, were city dwellers - 76% in the developed countries and 40% in the less developed ones. Globally, this proportion is likely to reach 60% by 2030, due primarily to urbanisation in the developing world. This trend goes hand in hand with an explosion of metropolitan centres of over one million inhabitants. Worldwide, there were 12 such cities in 1900, 83 in 1950, and 411 in 2000.

Nevertheless, the UN Population Division in 2003 confirmed that a majority of the current three million city dwellers - who will become five million by 2030 - still live in small or medium-sized urban agglomerations: In the developing countries, of 100 city dwellers, 16% live in a megalopolis of over 5 million inhabitants, 24% in a metropolis of one to five million, 9.4% in an agglomeration of 500.000 to one million inhabitants, and 50.5% in cities of less than 500.000 inhabitants.

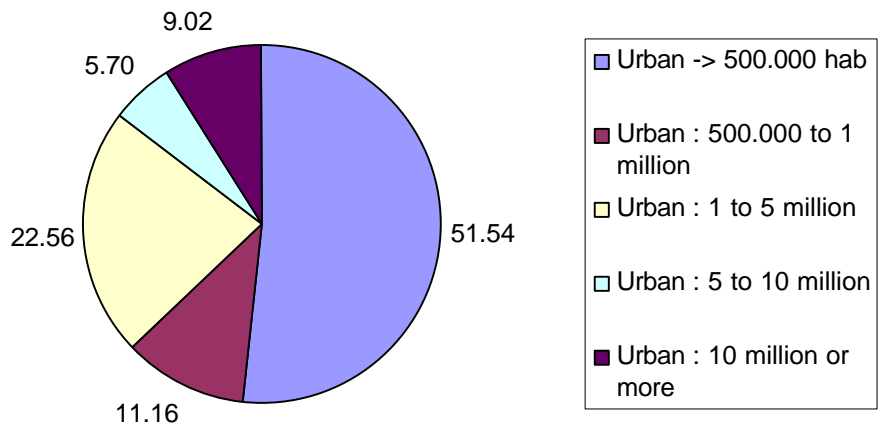
TABLE 6. POPULATION DISTRIBUTION OF THE WORLD AND DEVELOPMENT GROUPS, BY AREA OF RESIDENCE AND SIZE CLASS OF URBAN SETTLEMENT, 1975, 2000, 2003 AND 2015

Development group	Area of residence and size class of urban settlement (number of inhabitants)	Population (millions)				Percentage distribution			
		1975	2000	2003	2015	1975	2000	2003	2015
World.....	Total	4 068	6 071	6 301	7 197	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	Urban area	1 516	2 857	3 044	3 856	37.3	47.1	48.3	53.6
	10 million or more	65	251	283	358	1.6	4.1	4.5	5.0
	5 million to 10 million	131	167	175	269	3.2	2.7	2.8	3.7
	1 million to 5 million	333	659	695	914	8.2	10.9	11.0	12.7
	500,000 to 1 million	179	291	316	358	4.4	4.8	5.0	5.0
	Fewer than 500,000	808	1 489	1 575	1 957	19.9	24.5	25.0	27.2
	Rural area	2 552	3 214	3 258	3 341	62.7	52.9	51.7	46.4
More developed regions.....	Total	1 047	1 194	1 203	1 230	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	Urban area	704	882	896	952	67.2	73.9	74.5	77.3
	10 million or more	42	85	87	101	4.1	7.2	7.2	8.2
	5 million to 10 million	62	48	53	62	5.9	4.0	4.4	5.0
	1 million to 5 million	147	208	212	218	14.1	17.5	17.6	17.7
	500,000 to 1 million	71	78	77	83	6.8	6.5	6.4	6.8
	Fewer than 500,000	381	463	467	487	36.4	38.8	38.8	39.6
	Rural area	344	311	307	279	32.8	26.1	25.5	22.7
Less developed regions.....	Total	3 021	4 877	5 098	5 967	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	Urban area	813	1 974	2 147	2 904	26.9	40.5	42.1	48.7
	10 million or more	22	165	196	257	0.7	3.4	3.8	4.3
	5 million to 10 million	69	119	121	207	2.3	2.4	2.4	3.5
	1 million to 5 million	186	451	484	696	6.2	9.2	9.5	11.7
	500,000 to 1 million	108	213	238	275	3.6	4.4	4.7	4.6
	Fewer than 500,000	427	1 026	1 108	1 470	14.1	21.0	21.7	24.6
	Rural area	2 208	2 902	2 951	3 063	73.1	59.5	57.9	51.3

World Population 2003



Less developed regions - Urban population 2003



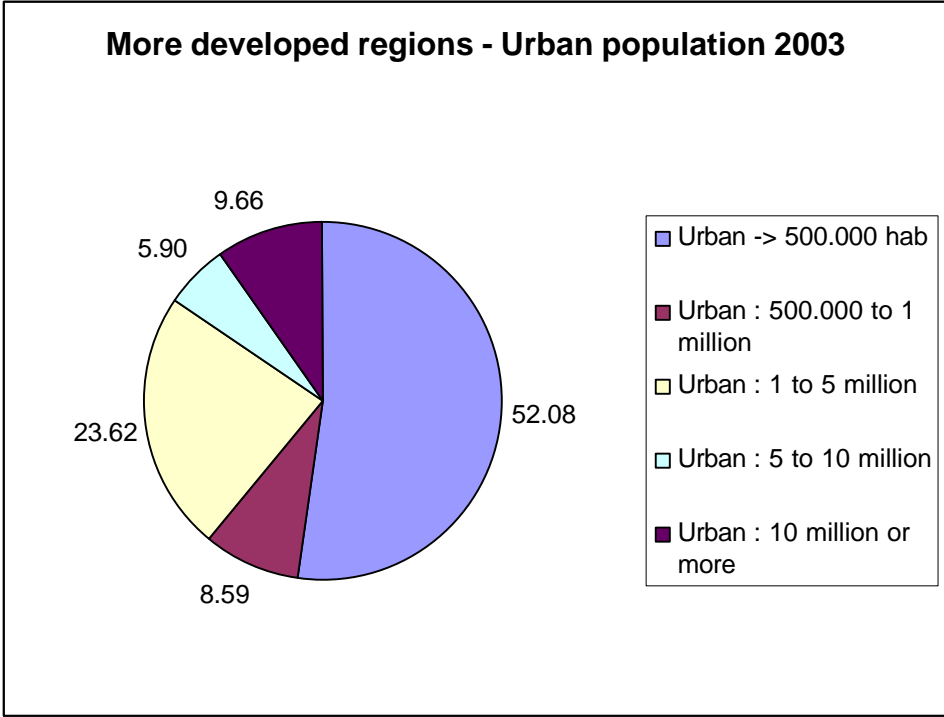
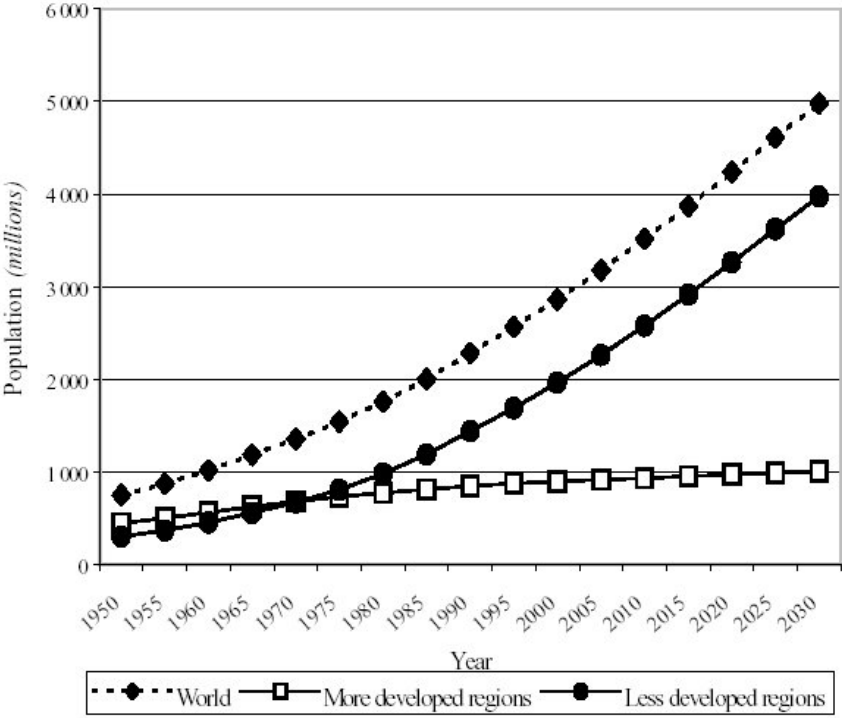
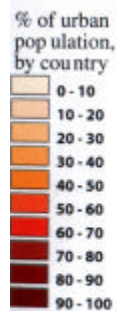


Figure 1. Estimated and projected urban population in the world, the more developed and the less developed regions, 1950-2030

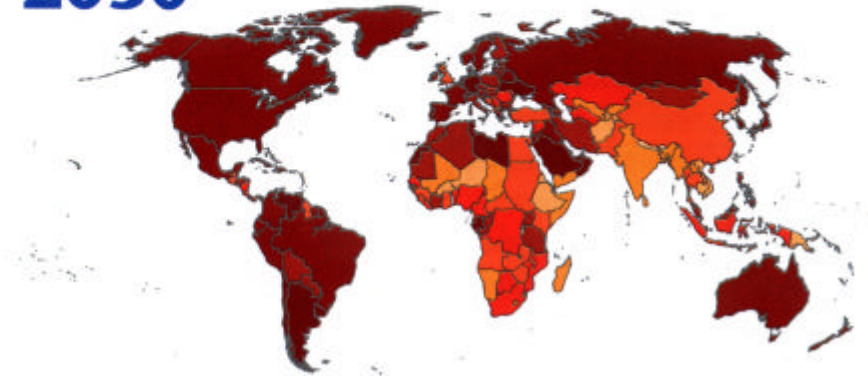


URBANIZATION

Source: World Population Prospects: The 1999 Revision, United Nations Population Division



2030



Translating the diversity of the urban context, and its globalising dynamics

The situations that characterise the present-day world are highly diverse. Still, this should not keep us from pinpointing certain major trends and defining them in the following synthetic terms:

1. Urbanisation is a multi-dimensional and continuous process of change that affects and has affected the entire world over several centuries
2. The high rate of demographic growth one observes in developing countries goes hand in hand with a massive transfer of rural populations towards urban regions
3. The level of urbanisation differs between countries and continents. It is particularly high in Europe, North America and South America (over 75%)
4. Africa and Asia have remained mainly rural (in 2000: 37.2% and 37.5%); here the high rate of urban growth (3.66% and 2.6% as against a world average of 2.05% between 2000 and 2010) represents a serious problem in terms of territorial planning, environmental conservation, and social and economic organisation
5. In every developing country one can establish a correspondence between poverty level and size of the rural population on the one hand, and the scope and speed of urban growth: generally speaking, the poorer and more rural a country is today, the faster

- will be the rate of its urban growth and the more serious the problems it will have to face tomorrow
6. High speed urbanisation, as it occurs in developing countries, leads to:
 - a. Inadequate correlation between needs of city-dwellers and the infrastructures and services they are provided with
 - b. Deterioration of material and environmental conditions of life in society
 - c. A worrying increase in economic and social disparities within urban societies, and between urban and rural societies, to the detriment of the latter
 - d. An expression of social segregation in spatial terms leading to ever-stronger territorial fragmentation, with well-equipped affluent residential and business areas, and precarious habitat zones (slums, favelas, etc.), in which over half of the city population lives under "survival" conditions
 - e. Inadequate urban and regional planning policies, incapable of solving the problems facing a majority of the population.

Mitigation and possibilities of coherent urban development

Among syndromes (as clusters of core problems) defining the questions to overcome in term of a sustainable development² two deal more particularly with the urban context:

- the "favela syndrome" as a form of "socio-ecological degradation through uncontrolled urban growth", characterised by strong negative impact in the following areas: soil degradation, fresh water scarcity and global development disparities
- the "urban sprawl syndrome" as the "destruction of landscapes through the planned expansion of urban infrastructures", characterised by soil degradation, climate change, loss of biodiversity, fresh water scarcity.

After three years of urban research in the field, our initial vision of urban expansion, differentiated above all by the degree of planning which opposes uncontrolled urban growth to planned expansion, has been fine-tuned in response to the complexity of urbanisation as both process and socio-spatial context.

We can now add the following analytic elements:

- 1) The global nature of the changes that affect contemporary societies makes it impossible to simply oppose cities in the North (well-planned) and cities in the South (informal and uncontrolled); however, there are still significant differences between their territorial and human organisation

² The concept of "syndrome mitigation" emerges from the NCCR N-S (National Centre of Competence in Research North South) which aims through international scientific partnership to "mitigate the syndromes of global change". More details on the webpage of NCCR N-S : <http://www.nccr-north-south.unibe.ch/>

- 2) All cities have planned and well-managed sectors, and sectors that are left to their own devices; all cities in both the North and the South are affected by a redistribution of tasks between the public and the private sectors, by growing social and economic disparities and greater poverty (the trends are the same but the proportions differ)
- 3) As stated by the Postdam experts (Gaia 10 n° 2, 2001), cities in the South are subject to a recurring concentration of core problems that slow down their development: strong demographic growth, precarious habitat, water pollution and scarcity, health risks for urban dwellers, policy failure
To this we might add several socio-urban dimensions that are often overlooked: petty crime, insecurity and violence, the economic marginalisation of the underprivileged classes, growing poverty, corruption and clientelism
- 4) The reorganisation of the world fosters planetary links, which benefit regions and cities with more efficient organisation, infrastructures and services. In the third world this acts in favour of the larger agglomerations at the expense of the smaller elements in the urban network (metropolisation process)
- 5) Over and above this diagnostic, we see that explanatory factors are often accompanied by lacking resources – financial and economic, but also human and institutional, making it difficult for local and regional governments to respond to all the needs that must be met for balanced urban development.
- 6) Due to these shortages, priorities established by urban decision-makers are often inadequately coordinated at national, regional and local level, and give rise to policies relative to territorial planning, economic promotion, social protection and the extension of infrastructures and services that clearly benefit those who are better off.

In spite of these seemingly pessimistic conclusions, there are many areas of potential development that should allow us to meet the challenges of sustainable urban development

- 7) In both the North and the South cities focus problems as well as potential. They represent a concentration of people, of public and private institutions, businesses, universities and research centres, of financial services and political , with tremendous power to put to work in the interest of urban or even regional bodies (cities should be seen as a driving force behind regional and national development)
- 8) Although infrastructures, equipment and collective services may be inadequate and too scarce in view of the great needs of a constantly expanding population, they undeniably represent an added value for city dwellers in comparison to the situation in rural regions. Alongside the hope of a higher income, they are the main magnet

- that draws immigrants (better education and training, health care and "modern" leisure activities)
- 9) The precarious conditions of urban integration and daily life that afflict the overwhelming majority of poor city dwellers generate, by choice and necessity, new forms of solidarity-based community organisation that present a true alternative to more traditional territorial and social management solutions
 - 10) In the South, the integration of 50% to 80% of the city population is informal. The "informal sector" offers little or no security. On the other hand, it testifies to great individual and social drive, and to a spirit of initiative and adaptation to urban conditions among those we will call the true "city builders"
 - 11) Cities, whatever their size, are real platforms for intermediation between local, regional, national or even international dynamics based on a relationship that, if it is well understood and skilfully employed by the relevant players (urban, rural, local and national), may be profitable to everyone in a win-win perspective
 - 12) The globalisation of international trade and exchange has a favourable impact on the cities of the South, via the decentralisation of decision-making centres and new possibilities available to urban players
 - 13) Southern metropolitan centres function as "hubs" that connect national urban networks to a worldwide movement, with possible positive effects such as job creation and the accumulation of growth in the developing countries.
 - 14) Cities in the South are characterised by the social and cultural intermingling of various populations. This in turn gives rise to great cultural, social and economic creativity which radiates beyond the spatial and demographic limits of the given city
 - 15) To conclude, the future of the cities in the South will to a large extent depend upon the political, economic and social capacity of urban decision-makers to address the great issues of territorial planning and social organisation, keeping in mind that sustainable urban development is only possible through interaction with the other syndrome contexts, and through concerted reflection and action between social, economic and institutional partners, both internal and external, with a view to positive global change.