

## Unleashing the Potential of Urban Growth

(Not for release before 27 June 2007)

In 2008, for the first time in history, more than half of world population, 3.3 billion people, will be living in urban areas. This number is expected to swell to almost 5 billion by 2030. In Africa and Asia, the urban population will double between 2000 and 2030. Many of these new urbanites will be poor. Their future, the future of cities in developing countries, the future of humanity itself, all depend very much on decisions made *now*.

### Peering Into the Dawn of the Urban Millennium

Urbanization—the increase in the urban share of total population—is inevitable, but it can also be positive. No country in the industrial age has ever achieved significant economic growth without urbanization. Cities concentrate poverty, but they also represent poor people's best hope of escaping it. Cities create environmental problems, but they can also create solutions. Concentrating population in cities can contribute to long-term sustainability. The potential benefits of urbanization far outweigh the disadvantages. The challenge is learning how to exploit its possibilities.

Cities have pressing immediate concerns including poverty, housing, environment, governance and administration; but these problems pale in comparison with those raised by future growth. Reacting to challenges as they arise is no longer enough: cities need pre-emptive policies.

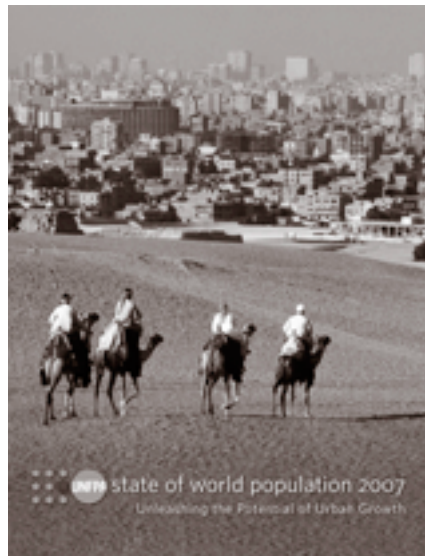
This Report looks beyond current problems: It is a call to action. It examines the implications of impending urban growth and discusses what needs to be done, with specific attention to poverty reduction and sustainability.

Although attention has been focused on mega-cities, most urban growth will be in smaller towns and cities. Their capacities will need considerable strengthening to meet the future challenge.

Action now by governments, civil society and the international community can make a huge difference to social, environmental and living conditions. The Report makes two

observations: Poor people will make up a large part of urban growth, and most urban growth comes from natural increase rather than migration. Once this is understood, three initiatives stand out:

- Accept the right of poor people to the city, abandoning attempts to discourage migration and prevent urban growth.
- Adopt a broad and long-term vision of the use of urban space. This means, among other things, providing minimally serviced land for housing and planning in advance to promote sustainable land use, looking beyond the cities' borders to minimize their "ecological footprint".
- Begin a concerted international effort to support strategies for the urban future.



#### CHAPTER 1

### The Promise of Urban Growth

The growth of cities will be the single largest influence on development in the 21st century. Yet little is being done to maximize the benefits of urban growth or reduce its harmful consequences. The Report urges analysis and pre-emptive action: The changes are too large and will happen too fast to allow planners and policymakers simply to react.

Today's urbanization is characterized by its scale and its concentration in developing countries. Between 2000 and 2030, Asia's urban population will increase from

1.36 billion to 2.64 billion, Africa's from 294 million to 742 million, and that of Latin America and the Caribbean from 394 million to 609 million.

Today's cities are the main beneficiaries of globalization, but few generate enough jobs for the people who seek them. Women, minorities and the poor lose out, but most urban migrants still prefer the new life to the one they left behind.

Mega-cities of more than 10 million have not grown to the sizes predicted in the 1970s. More than half the urban population live in cities of 500,000 or less. Urban problems are, in principle, easier for smaller cities to solve but have not been addressed. Many urban people, especially women, are no better off than poor rural people, especially in cities of 100,000 or fewer.

Policymakers generally have been unwilling to accept urban growth and have tried to prevent it by discouraging migration. Such policies are ineffective, reducing housing for the poor and therefore promoting the growth of slums. Though countries vary, most urban growth is the result of natural increase rather than migration. Migration actually has a positive impact on cities.

## CHAPTER 2

### *People in Cities: Hope Countering Desolation*

The battle to reach the Millennium Development Goals, halving extreme poverty by 2015, will be waged in the world's slums. Cities demonstrate clear advantages in reducing poverty. Yet these potential advantages are not being realized in practice, because cities, trying to discourage migration, have neglected the poor and ignored their potential. As a result, poverty is growing faster in urban than rural areas today. A billion people live in slums, 90 per cent of them in developing countries.

Poor people live unhealthy lives. Urban slums are overcrowded and airless, often in polluted and dangerous environments, lacking clean water and sanitation. Life in these conditions increases stress, especially for women—who are largely responsible for food, water, sanitation and household management—and the likelihood of violence. Improving urban housing can have a huge impact on poverty and well-being.

Urban life offers many possibilities for women and girls, but few in poor households can take advantage of them. Girls are the first to miss or drop out of school, and most women's employment is in the poorly paid, unstable and unregulated "informal sector".

Cities are more open to women's social and political participation, and self-reliant community groups can help poor women negotiate the obstacles to empowerment and a better life; but they need the support of government and international organizations.

Health services are better overall in cities, but poor women are less likely to have access to them and are more exposed to unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS, and gender violence. Priority for women's empowerment increases overall well-being, promotes human rights and opens urban policy options.

Urbanization brings cultural change, much of it positive, but it is not uniform or seamless. Inequalities are more visible and conflicts are more acute. Urban life opens possibilities for new cultural identities, including religious ones, but also increases insecurity, rootlessness and the potential for violence and crime.

The individual successes and failures of young people will be decisive for the future of development, yet political processes rarely reflect their priorities. Many grow up in poverty, denied the urban advantages of education, health care and employment opportunities. These conditions perpetuate poverty, insecurity and frustration, and increase the potential for violence.

Older people, too, are an increasing proportion of the urban population. As with other groups, urban life offers them opportunities, but frequently excludes the poor and others unable to take advantage of them.

Addressing the large gaps between urban potential and reality means first accepting urban growth and reacting positively to it. This, in turn, calls for advocacy and political commitment. Governments should work with Organizations of the Urban Poor and non-governmental organizations to take advantage of urban growth.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Rethinking Policy on Urban Poverty*

Official positions have often opposed urban expansion and failed to support the non-governmental organizations that ease the process. This is a failed strategy, based on faulty assumptions. Urban migrants are making rational decisions. They need support to escape from poverty and, in the process, contribute to both urban and rural economic growth.

Inadequate shelter is at the core of urban poverty: A roof and an address in a habitable area are a first requirement and will particularly benefit women. It is the first step to a better life.

Left to fend for themselves in a disorganized and merciless land market, the poor have occupied available land and put up whatever shelter they can. Retrofitting these slum and squatter settlements with infrastructure and services is impractical, but so is providing fully-serviced housing.

A workable policy must anticipate future growth as well as address present needs. Providing minimally serviced land goes to the heart of the matter. With secure tenure, street access, water, sanitation, waste disposal and power, poor people will do their own building, simple at first but improving over time.

This is not a perfect or an easy solution. It requires a proactive approach to urban governance. In particular, it calls for more regulation of land supply than many cities are currently willing to provide; but it is workable, especially in smaller cities with more access to land, if they have strong support from central governments and the international community. Crucially, this approach recognizes the interests, the contribution and the human rights of the poor.

#### CHAPTER 4

### *The Social and Sustainable Use of Space*

Urban growth has been assumed to be detrimental in itself, but density is potentially useful: Its usefulness depends on how cities grow.

Urban space is increasing faster than urban population. Urban growth today is land-intensive: By 2030, developing countries will triple their urban land area, industrialized countries by 2.5 times. Preferences for suburban living have contributed to and may accelerate this trend.

The other main contributor to urban sprawl is peri-urbanization: the establishment of economic and residential activities in transitional zones between countryside and city, where land and labour are cheaper and less closely regulated. Globalization, which favours large facilities on large tracts of land, encourages the process. Although peri-urban areas can suffer some of the worst consequences of urban growth, including poverty, pollution and environmental degradation, they provide employment and other key functions for urban areas, such as food, energy, water and building materials.

There is no consensus about urban sprawl, except that it is not sustainable in its current forms. The issue will not resolve itself: There is no invisible hand to order urban growth. Countries may have to revive the urban and regional planning functions which structural adjustment and breakneck globalization have put on the back burner. Rather than utopian master plans, the need is for realistic

planning which accepts urban growth as inevitable and operates in a regional rather than a strictly urban context. A “city-region” approach, reaching out to, and coordinating current urban and local governments, would address social and environmental as well as economic concerns, including the essential contribution of the urban poor.

#### CHAPTER 5

### *Urbanization and Sustainability in the 21st Century*

The benefits of urbanization will emerge as the result of the right approaches in anticipation of urban growth. These approaches cannot be simply local. A broader framework for integrating local strategies is the concept of global environmental change (GEC), which is the sum of local, regional or national environmental challenges and their impacts.

GEC impacts are long-term, which means that local and immediate environmental concerns get more attention; yet policymakers who are aware of the interactions between local and global, short- and long-term effects, can mitigate their cities’ environmental impact and increase resilience to GEC.

One key issue, land cover use, is covered in Chapter 4. The other is climate change. Cities can trigger changes in ecosystems far beyond their boundaries. The size of this “footprint” varies with affluence: Poorer cities’ impact tends to be local and regional, more affluent ones can be global.

Climate change will affect poor countries, cities and individuals more severely, most noticeably in health-related conditions and water supply. This is partly because they lie mostly in the tropics, but also because poverty reduces urban resilience to natural crises and disasters.

Many great cities, and, overall, 13 per cent of urban population, are on sea-coasts or at the mouths of great rivers. Sea level rise as a consequence of climate change could make some areas uninhabitable. These include many fast-growing cities focused on economic growth rather than on protecting themselves against climate change.

Adapting to the varied impacts of climate change calls for foresight and responses suited to local conditions and resources. Cities are beginning to exchange experiences and build local capacity; these networks could become politically influential.

Cities need a broad perspective on climate change and their part in it. Long-term thinking and proactive planning has the best prospect of mitigating the effects of climate change.

## CHAPTER 6

### *A Vision for a Sustainable Future: Policy, Information and Governance*

Urbanization offers the opportunity to reduce poverty and gender inequality and promote sustainable development; but failure to correct unsustainable practices and prepare for coming growth could have the opposite effect.

Better urban governance implies both government responsibility and partnership with civil society, responding effectively to local needs. Today, it implies a planning and policy horizon extending beyond current needs.

Local governments are traditionally the public sector's weakest link. But, with decentralization of economic activity and government, and the rise of local civil society, more is expected of them. Smaller cities, with more than half of urban population, have the advantage of flexibility, but are weak in resources, information and technical capacity.

International organizations can help by making the case for proactive policies, accepting the inevitability of change and the contributions of the poor to the urban future. They can point out the futility of trying to prevent migration; and they can also point out the positive way to reduce urban growth rates, that is, by reducing poverty, promoting women's empowerment and gender equality and improving reproductive health services, especially for the poor.

Cities need better sociodemographic information to help them make decisions. Many of the poor and the recently-arrived are effectively invisible to urban administrators, and are therefore deprived of services, because they have no recognized address or existence in the city. Participation by Organizations of the Urban Poor can help fill some of the information gaps, but civil society also needs better information to be most effective.

Central governments and international donors have not yet fully understood the importance for administrators and policymakers in smaller cities of accurate, timely, suitably disaggregated information, easily available in a standardized form. Cities also need trained professionals at the local level to make the best use of available information.

UNFPA and population experts can make a great contribution in this area, permitting smaller cities to make the most of their potential in promoting sustainability and the reduction of poverty.

For more information

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### *Growing Up Urban*

The youth supplement, *Growing Up Urban*, a companion to *The State of World Population 2007*, features the stories of young women and men growing up in cities of the developing world, where the population under 25 is often more than half the total.

It profiles young people from seven cities in developing countries. Their stories give a sense of the lives of young women and men and the opportunities, pressures and risks of modern urban living: as migrants who have left the countryside to work and make their home in the cities; as community organizers fighting for better housing and services in the margins of cities; as victims of sexual abuse and violence; even sometimes as perpetrators of violence themselves; as young women freed from traditional gender roles and discrimination; and as urbanites involved in music and culture, as an escape from urban poverty and insecurity, and a celebration of life.

The theme of violence common to almost all the stories is not a matter of chance; in any city, in any part of the world, it is hard to find young people living in poverty who have not been touched by sexual abuse, the effects of criminal activity or random violence.

Young people have a right to a life free from violence. They also have a right to decent housing and sufficient food; to education, employment and health care; and to be involved in urban decision-making that will affect the course of their lives.

Such an agenda is achievable, if cities prepare themselves to absorb and sustain projected population growth. Cities must focus on the poor and above all invest in young people's education, employment opportunities and access to health services, including sexual and reproductive health services, and should facilitate their participation in urban decision-making. Young people can break the cycle that hands on poverty from generation to generation and can contribute to long-term sustainable urban development—if cities, countries and the international community are willing to help them.

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The full report and this summary, in English, French, Spanish, Russian and Arabic, may be found on the UNFPA website, [www.unfpa.org](http://www.unfpa.org), along with news features.