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# Urbanisation

People have moved from the countryside to cities for millennia, but the speed and scale in which urbanisation is happening today present a blend of challenges and opportunities.

Although urbanisation has peaked in the global north and slowed in mega-cities, it continues apace in low and middle income countries. In the future much of the growth in the urban population will likely take place in mid-size cities in Asia and Africa. Large-scale migrations from rural areas will power much of this growth, with natural population increases also contributing to it.

Many cities already face challenges such as overcrowding, pollution, resource constraints and inadequate infrastructure, as urban poverty. However, the rapid pace of urbanisation in the global south presents challenges far different from older, slower growing cities in the global north. For instance, the rapidly growing Lagos and the Beijing-Tianjin-Heibei megalopolis will have to deal with the lack of clean water, whereas inhabitants of London or San Francisco face massive rental rates.

At the same time, cities present unique opportunities in terms of social and economic development and sustainable living. Cities are becoming laboratories for change, in part because of less gridlocked governance. Many cities such as Barcelona are acting on issues like climate change and resilience and smart infrastructure and driverless cars more rapidly than nations are. The informal economy in cities of the global south is instrumental in building resilience and creative solutions to problems. With such a high proportion of the population concentrated in one tight space, interventions in cities can be more effective in reaching out to a large number of people.

Urbanisation also affects the parts of a country outside the cities by draining the labour force from the countryside. In the long-term, the impact of urbanisation on cultural attitudes and education will be further uncertain, such as the impact of fragile, uprooted identities on social cohesion; or the loss of linguistic diversity and subsequent paucity of ideas and understanding.

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## Implications

- As cities grow in size and number, infrastructure could be strained to breaking point. Effective public and private sector planning is therefore needed to manage growth and to prepare cities for the future. Megaprojects, for example, will no doubt be needed to build city infrastructure, support new trade flows, (airports, sea ports) and address education, health, security and employment demands. New approaches to development may play a role, for example through embracing and building on informal systems. Population growth and urbanisation are likely to increase pressure on supplies of food and fresh water at a time when climate change will make it harder to grow food crops in some regions.
- Urbanisation concentrates populations, potentially making them more vulnerable to the effects of natural disasters, disease and deliberate acts of violence. As most urban areas are in coastal regions, cities are also likely to be particularly vulnerable to rising sea levels. As such, urbanisation can act as a force multiplier, augmenting the vulnerabilities created by other issues like water scarcity, communicable diseases and poverty.
- Cities are laboratories for sustainability and innovations too. The fabric of the city, with its people, buildings, commerce, and transportation networks, promotes relationship formation, business creation, and game-changing

ideas. Innovative design is helping to strengthen urban economies and spur invention in cities across the world. [1]

Footnotes:

1. [American Institute of Architects \(2013, September\).](#)

## Current trajectory

- In 2011, for the first time in history, more than half the world's population lived in cities. [1] In 2000, 47% of the world's population was urban and by 2014, 54% of the world's population resided in urban areas. [2] This is projected to grow to 66% by 2050. Migration forms a significant, and often controversial, part of this urban population growth.
- The number of mega-cities (over 10 million inhabitants) has nearly tripled since 1990. By 2030, 41 urban agglomerations are projected to house at least 10 million inhabitants each, according to the UN. Tokyo is expected to remain the world's largest city in 2030 with 37 million inhabitants, followed closely by Delhi where the population is projected to rise swiftly to 36 million. [3]
- Of the world's regions Africa and Asia remain mostly rural: as of 2014 only 40% and 48% of their respective populations were living in urban areas. Nevertheless, the fastest growing urban agglomerations are medium-sized cities and cities with less than 1 million inhabitants in Asia and Africa, such as Oyo in Nigeria and Zhujin in China. [4]

Footnotes:

1. [World Economic Forum \(2014, August\).](#)
2. [United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division \(2014\) - World Urbanization Prospects - The 2014 Revision.](#)
3. [United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division \(2014\) - World Urbanization Prospects - The 2014 Revision.](#)
4. [United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division \(2014\) - World Urbanization Prospects - The 2014 Revision.](#)