Introduction

Peering into the Dawn of an Urban Millennium

In 2008, the world reaches an invisible but momentous milestone: For the first time in history, more than half its human population, 3.3 billion people, will be living in urban areas. By 2030, this is expected to swell to almost 5 billion. Many of the 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* in preparation for this growth.

While the world's urban population grew very rapidly (from 220 million to 2.8 billion) over the 20th century, the next few decades will see an unprecedented scale of urban growth in the developing world. This will be particularly notable in Africa and Asia where the urban population will double between 2000 and 2030: That is, the accumulated urban growth of these two regions during the whole span of history will be duplicated in a single generation. By 2030, the towns and cities of the developing world will make up 80 per cent of urban humanity.

Urbanization—the increase in the urban share of total population—is inevitable, but it can also be positive. The current concentration of poverty, slum growth and social disruption in cities does paint a threatening picture: Yet no country in the industrial age has ever achieved significant economic growth without urbanization. Cities concentrate poverty, but they also represent the best hope of escaping it.

Cities also embody the environmental damage done by modern civilization; yet experts and policymakers increasingly recognize the potential value of cities to long-term sustainability. If cities create environmental problems, they also contain the solutions. The potential benefits of urbanization far outweigh the disadvantages: The challenge is in learning how to exploit its possibilities.

In 1994, the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development called on governments to "respond to the need of all citizens, including urban squatters, for personal safety, basic infrastructure and services, to eliminate health and social problems . . . ."' More recently, the

◀ *The intensity of urbanization can clash with age-old customs and traditions. The traffic dodges a cow, while street vendors vie with modern shops in this busy Mumbai, India, intersection.*
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▲ *An elderly man outside his home: a traditional hutong in Beijing, China. The white character on the wall indicates that the building is scheduled for demolition to make way for "urban development".*
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United Nations Millennium Declaration drew attention to the growing significance of urban poverty, specifying, in Target 11, the modest ambition of achieving by 2020 "a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers".[2]

UN-Habitat's Third World Urban Forum, as well as its *State of the World's Cities 2006/7*, successfully focused world interest on the deteriorating social and environmental conditions of urban localities.[3] The process of globalization has also drawn attention to the productive potential of cities and to the human cost. Yet the enormous scale and impact of future urbanization have not penetrated the public's mind.

So far, attention has centred mostly on immediate concerns, problems such as how to accommodate the poor and improve living conditions; how to generate employment; how to reduce cities' ecological footprint; how to improve governance; and how to administer increasingly complex urban systems.

These are all obviously important questions, but they shrink in comparison with the problems raised by the impending future growth of the urban population. Up to now, policymakers and civil society organizations have reacted to challenges as they arise. This is no longer enough. A pre-emptive approach is needed if urbanization in developing countries is to help solve social and environmental problems, rather than make them catastrophically worse.

The present Report thus attempts to look beyond current problems, real, urgent and poignant though they are. Yet, it is also a call to action. The Report tries to grasp the implications of the imminent doubling of the developing world's urban population and discusses what needs to be done to prepare for this massive increase. It looks more closely at the demographic processes underlying urban growth in developing areas and their policy implications. It specifically examines the consequences of the urban transition for poverty reduction and sustainability.

It surveys the differing conditions and needs of poor urban women and men, and the obstacles they face as they strive to claim their rights and realize their potential as productive members of the new urban world.

Although mega-cities have received most of the attention, conditions in smaller urban areas call for even greater consideration. Contrary to general belief, the bulk of urban population growth is likely to be in smaller cities and towns, whose capabilities for planning and implementation can be exceedingly weak. Yet the worldwide process of decentralizing governmental powers is heaping greater responsibility on them. As the population of smaller cities increases, their thin managerial and planning capacities come under mounting stress. New ways will have to be found to equip them to plan ahead for expansion, to use their resources sustainably and to deliver essential services.

One of the Report's key observations is that poor people will make up a large part of future urban growth. This simple fact has generally been overlooked, at great cost. Most urban growth now stems from natural increase (more births than deaths) rather than migration. But wherever it comes from, the growth of urban areas includes huge numbers of poor people. Ignoring this basic reality will make it impossible either to plan for inevitable and massive city growth or to use urban dynamics to help relieve poverty.

Once policymakers and civil society understand and accept the demographic and social composition of urban growth, some basic approaches and initiatives suggest themselves. These could have a huge impact on the fate of poor people and on the viability of the cities themselves. Throughout this Report the message is clear: Urban and national governments, together with civil society, and supported by international organizations, can take steps now that will make a huge difference for the social, economic and environmental living conditions of a majority of the world's population.

Three policy initiatives stand out in this connection. First, preparing for an urban future requires, at a minimum, respecting the rights of the poor to the city. As Chapter 3 shows, many policymakers continue to try to prevent urban growth by discouraging rural-urban migra-tion, with tactics such as evicting squatters and denying them services. These attempts to prevent migration are futile, counter-productive and, above all, wrong, a violation of people's rights. If policymakers find urban growth rates too high, they have effective options which also respect human rights. Advances in social development, such as promoting gender equity and equality, making education universally available and meeting reproductive health needs, are important for their own sake. But they will also enable women to avoid unwanted fertility and reduce the main factor in the growth of urban populations—natural increase.

Secondly, cities need a longer-term and broader vision of the use of urban space to reduce poverty and promote sustainability. This includes an explicit concern with the land needs of the poor. For poor families, having an adequate piece of land—with access to water, sewage, power and transport—on which they can construct their homes and improve their lives is essential: Providing it requires a new and proactive approach. Planning for such spatial and infrastructure requirements, keeping in mind poor women's multiple roles and needs, will greatly improve the welfare of poor families. This kind of people-centred development knits together the social fabric and encourages economic growth that includes the poor.

Similarly, protecting the environment and managing ecosystem services in future urban expansion requires purposeful management of space in advance of needs. The "urban footprint" stretches far beyond city boundaries. Cities influence, and are affected by, broader environmental considerations. Proactive policies for sustainability will also be important in view of climate change and the considerable proportion of urban concentrations at or near sea level.

Thirdly, population institutions and specialists can and should play a key role in supporting community organizations, social movements, governments and the international community in improving the nature and form of future urban expansion, and thus enhancing its power to reduce poverty and promote environmental sustainability. A concerted international effort at this critical time is crucial to clarify policy options and provide information and analyses that will support strategies to improve our urban future.