



ACHIEVING URBAN FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD

AN URBANIZING WORLD

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In the next quarter century, the population explosion that characterized much of the 20th century will be replaced by another dramatic demographic transformation: urban population growth of an unprecedented scale. The urban population in the developing world is expected to double to 4 billion by 2025, accounting for about 90 percent of global population growth. In contrast, rural population will grow slowly and stop when it reaches 3 billion. China and India epitomize the huge shifts underway. China, now two-thirds rural, will become predominantly urban in the next 25 years, and the 600 million people projected to live in urban India by 2025 will approximate the combined total population of the United States, Russia, and Japan. By 2015 the number of cities in developing countries with 1 million or more residents is expected to reach 400, more than quadruple the number of such cities in 1975. While forecasts of city sizes are subject to error, some large cities, such as Dhaka, are projected to grow by 1 million or more persons per year for the foreseeable future.

PERSPECTIVES ON URBAN GROWTH

Experts in a number of disciplines are concerned about these projections of rapid urban growth. Many demographers warn that cities will be unable to accommodate large population increases—a fear similar to the one voiced a generation ago about global population growth. For these Malthusians, world population growth must be managed by reducing unwanted fertility in urban areas of developing countries and among potential migrants living in rural areas. Unwanted fertility can be reduced most directly by improving access to modern methods of contraception. Reducing fertility is essential because urban populations are particularly skewed toward peak reproductive ages between 15 and 40. Most migrants move to the city between the ages of 12 and 29.

Some public health specialists raise different concerns. They see the poor health conditions suffered by now-developed countries in Europe and North America during 1875–1900, the period of most rapid urban growth, as a possible fate of developing countries. Despite comparatively modest population growth and great economic progress, industrializing cities in the late 19th century experienced higher mortality levels than did rural areas. Urban health services and sanitary infrastructure could not keep up with the demand generated by in-migration. Given such a precedent, these specialists believe, it behooves developing-country governments to increase budgetary allocations to the health sector, direct public health resources toward urban centers

in accordance with exceedingly rapid growth rates, and maintain adequate urban water and sewage systems.

Environmentalists too worry about large, modernizing cities in poor countries because these cities contribute to the destruction of the world's ozone layer. Modern urban systems require a great deal of energy, and the consequent emissions of carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, and nitrogen oxide from fossil fuel combinations blanket the earth, trapping excess heat and leading to global warming, climate change, rising sea levels, change in vegetation, and severe weather events such as El Niño. To limit such damage, environmentalists call for innovations in urban planning that would reduce the dependency on motor vehicles—the primary polluting agent in cities—and on air-conditioning. Also of growing concern to environmental scientists is the heavy toll on human life taken by floods and other natural disasters in ecologically fragile zones. Colonialists established large cities of the developing world along routes most suitable for trading, usually coastal areas. They did not choose these locales for their environmental safety standards, nor for their ability to accommodate millions of new residents. Nor has a sensitivity to the possibility of disaster guided the development of these cities.

Political scientists commonly view rapid city growth with some alarm because they believe that unmanageable city sizes can lead to civil violence, a weakening of the state, growing radical religious fundamentalism, revolution, and a general deterioration in the quality of urban life. The World Bank predicted in 1990 that urban poverty would become the most significant and politically explosive problem in the next century. Current estimates of urban poverty in developing countries lend credence to such claims. The United Nations (UN) concluded in 1996 that more than 500 million urban residents in less-developed countries, or almost 30 percent of the world's urban population, were living without adequate shelter.

REGIONAL PATTERNS

Future urban population change in the developing world is likely to pose different challenges in different regions. Latin America, for instance, has already reached the urbanization level of the developed world, with three-quarters of the population living in cities and towns. As manufacturing plants move to increasingly distant places—in cases such as Mexico City and São Paulo as far as 200 kilometers from the metropolitan center—urban populations will become more geographically dispersed and encroach on agricultural land. Despite this urban



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sprawl, virtually all cities in the region that currently contain 2 million residents or more likely will have to absorb at least an additional million residents by 2025.

In most large cities of Africa, the population is increasingly moving to unplanned settlements on the periphery where land is cheapest. In contrast to Latin America, however, this horizontal expansion does not involve job relocation, and it reduces the efficacy of major urban infrastructure such as piped water, electricity, sewerage, and roads. The projected average annual growth rate of the urban population in Africa during 2000–20, 3.9 percent, portends that settlements will only deteriorate, particularly in the absence of sustained economic growth. Of equal concern to some commentators is the proliferation of “urban villages” of 200,000 to 400,000 residents, large towns and small cities that typically lack the most basic amenities for a decent standard of living. The UN anticipates that in 2020 60 percent of urbanites in Africa will reside in cities with fewer than 500,000 residents, making urban development planning for small locales a continued priority.

The challenge facing China and India is one of magnitude: the rapid urbanization that will occur in these two countries during the next quarter century is unprecedented in terms of numbers. Moreover, in South Asia—as in Sub-Saharan Africa—urban growth has been fueled less by economic dynamism than by rural poverty and continuing high fertility, a pattern likely to continue in the immediate future. In contrast, urban population change in more prosperous Southeast Asia has been distinguished by dynamism, resulting in the blurring of rural-urban boundaries as major expressways and railroad lines radiate out from urban cores, giving rise to new towns, industrial estates, and other urban forms in areas hitherto agricultural.

POLICY OPTIONS TO MANAGE URBAN GROWTH

For governments that wish to manage urban population growth in the future, three policy options have received priority attention.

Population Control

Contrary to conventional wisdom, urban growth in developing regions has stemmed more from natural increase (an excess of births over deaths) than from rural out-migration. This pattern is likely to continue in the near future. To control population, therefore, particular emphasis should be given to measures that provide women in urban areas and potential migrants in rural areas with the means to regulate fertility. This strategy has been implemented effectively, for instance, by PROFAMILIA, the national family planning agency of Colombia. In 1980 Bogotá’s population was expected to number 11.7 million in 2000, but current estimates indicate 8.6 million residents, the difference being due mainly to rapid fertility decline. By contrast, efforts to reduce city sizes by

restricting migration have largely failed, even under the most coercive regimes (with the exception of South Africa under apartheid).

Improved Urban Management and Governance

Many scholars accept that rapid urban growth in the developing world is inevitable but do not accept dire predictions of its consequences. These optimists maintain that city governments with good management capabilities can absorb large population increases without diminishing human welfare or the quality of the environment. The key is a commitment to undertake and sustain policies that, among other things, maintain infrastructure, increase productivity of the labor force, and alleviate poverty. A frequently cited example of success is Curitiba, a city in Brazil that has avoided the degradations experienced in most other developing-country cities of comparable size by implementing low-cost public transport as an alternative to cars, preserving green spaces, promoting multisectoral planning, and introducing other sound urban management measures.

Effective urban governance is an additional mechanism by which cities can overcome population pressures. Though good governance practices for cities have been articulated only recently and not yet been implemented fully anywhere, they include engaging nongovernmental actors—communities, civic groups, private contractors—in meeting basic needs; decentralizing decisionmaking authority and control of municipal resources to local indigenous groups; and making city governments more responsive to local needs, more accountable for actions, and more transparent with respect to financing.

Balanced Growth of Manufacturing and Agriculture

Studies show that urban growth rates rise when developing countries favor urban manufacturing over rural agriculture. Rural-to-urban migration is heavier when well-paying jobs are plentiful in urban industry but scarce in village farming and when rural laborers cannot obtain desirable prices for their goods. An unexpected outcome of the structural adjustment programs of the 1980s, which raised the price of food for urban consumers, has been slower urban growth in many countries than was anticipated 20 years ago. In the future, governments themselves conceivably can manage the pace of urban growth by promoting equitable economic policies between urban and rural areas.

Managing the ongoing rapid urban growth in developing countries, and avoiding the bleak vision of the pessimists, is possible only if governments act energetically on a number of different fronts: reducing urban poverty and inequity, helping women achieve their fertility preferences, improving urban infrastructure, removing bias against rural-based agriculture, and building good governance. ■

For further reading see United Nations Center for Human Settlements, *An Urbanizing World: Global Report on Human Settlements, 1996* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for HABITAT, 1996).

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