

# UNDERSTANDING THE DIVERSITY OF URBAN CONTEXTS

The urban contexts in which planning occurs differ across the world. This chapter examines the following dimensions of urban diversity: urbanization and demographic trends; city size and spatial forms; level of economic development and poverty; and vulnerability to natural and human-induced hazards. Each of these dimensions and its planning implications are discussed with respect to developed, transitional and developing countries. The underlying premise of this chapter is that urban planning initiatives are unlikely to succeed without an adequate understanding of the diversity of urban contexts.

## URBANIZATION AND DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

The world began experiencing unprecedented rates of urbanization in the early 20th century. Urban growth rates averaged 2.6 per cent per year between 1950 and 2007. This period witnessed a quadrupling of the world's urban population from 0.7 to 3.3 billion, thus increasing the level of urbanization from 29 per cent in 1950 to 49 per cent in 2007 (Table 2). Perhaps more noteworthy is that in 2008, the proportion of the world's population living in urban areas exceeded 50 per cent. This trend is expected to continue, as 70 per cent of the world's population is expected to live in urban areas by 2050.

The world's urban population growth rate has slowed down to 1.8 per cent per year. While the level of urbanization in developed countries had reached 50 per cent more than half a century ago, this level will not be attained in developing countries until 2019.

### Developed countries

The process of urbanization is much more advanced in the developed regions of the world. About 74 per cent of the population lives in cities (Table 2). Urban population growth is low – the average growth rate between 1975 and 2007 was 0.8 per cent and this is expected to decline to 0.3 per cent between 2025 and 2050. International migration accounts for about one-third of urban growth in developed countries. Another demographic feature is the rapidly aging population, as indicated by the increasing proportion of the population aged 60 and above.

### Transitional countries

A major demographic trend in transitional countries is the negative population growth rate experienced by several cities. It has been observed that 75 per cent of Eastern European cities witnessed a decrease in their population between 1990 and 2005. This was due to increased migration to the European Union, negative economic trends, rising rates of mortality and decreasing fertility rates. The collapse of the Soviet Union contributed to the decline in urban population and affected many aspects of urban living. Another demographic trend experienced during the last few decades is the rapidly aging population.

### Developing countries

About 44 per cent of the population of developing countries lives in urban areas (Table 2). This is expected to grow to 67

Region	Urban population (million)					Percentage urban				
	1950	1975	2007	2025	2050	1950	1975	2007	2025	2050
World	737	1518	3294	4584	6398	29.1	37.3	49.4	57.2	69.6
More developed region	427	702	916	995	1071	52.5	67.0	74.4	79.0	86.0
Less developed region	310	817	2382	3590	5327	18.0	27.0	43.8	53.2	67.0
Africa	32	107	373	658	1233	14.5	25.7	38.7	47.2	61.8
Asia	237	574	1645	2440	3486	16.8	24.0	40.8	51.1	66.2
Europe	281	444	528	545	557	51.2	65.7	72.2	76.2	83.8
Latin America and the Caribbean	69	198	448	575	683	41.4	61.1	78.3	83.5	88.7
North America	110	180	275	365	402	63.9	73.8	81.3	85.7	90.2
Oceania	8	13	24	27	31	62.0	71.5	70.5	71.9	76.4

Table 2

## Global trends in urbanization, 1950–2050

Source: UN, 2008, pp3–5

per cent by 2050. The average annual urban population growth rate was 3.1 per cent between 1975 and 2007. This is expected to decline to 2.3 per cent for the 2007 to 2025 period, and 1.6 per cent for 2025 to 2050. As shown in Figure 2, developing regions – particularly Africa and Asia – are experiencing the fastest rate of urbanization. This can be attributed to high levels of natural increase and an increase in rural-urban migration. An important demographic trend in developing countries is the high proportion of young people (15–29). By 2030, 60 percent of those living in urban areas of developing countries will be under the age of 18.

## Planning implications of urbanization and demographic trends

The urbanization and demographic trends described above have a number of very important implications for the future of urban planning. The most significant of these are briefly examined below.

The statistics showing rates and levels of urban growth and the demands associated with these can be very daunting. In some context, this has formed the basis for the negative disposition towards urbanization. Urbanization should be seen as a positive phenomenon and a pre-condition for improving access to services, economic and social

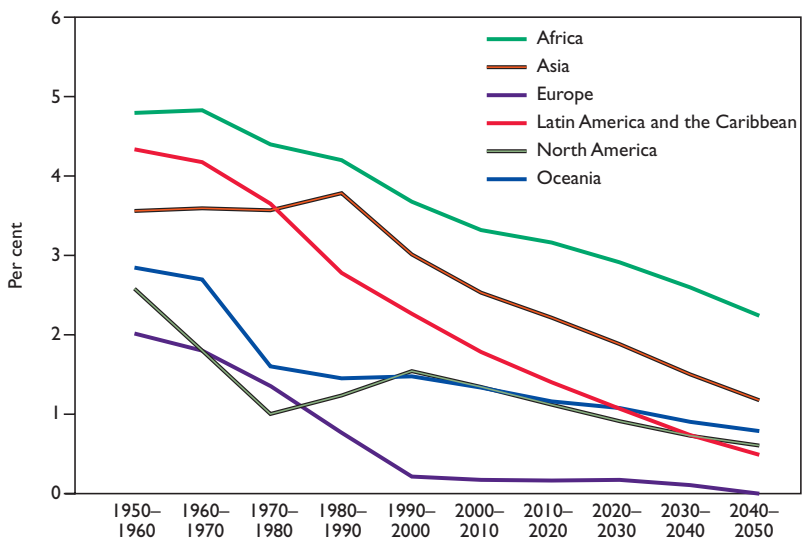


Figure 2

## Average annual rate of change of urban population

Source: UN, 2008



**Urban planning will have to pay attention to the needs of the youthful population**

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opportunities, and a better quality of life for a country's population.

Urban planning in developing countries, particularly in Africa and Asia, needs to respond to the rapid pace of urbanization. Among the most significant challenges of urban planning today and in the next few decades is how to address the housing, water supply and sanitation needs of a rapidly urbanizing population. Urban planning will also need to adequately manage the urban development process, as unmanaged or chaotic urban growth is a significant obstacle to sustainable urban development.

Urban planning in developing countries will have to pay attention to the needs of the youthful population. While the youth can form the most energetic and innovative segment of the population, if unemployed, they can be a source of social disruption. Planning for a youthful population places particular demands on urban development in terms of the need for education and training facilities, as well as investment in sports and recreational facilities.

The planning challenges arising from urban shrinkage in both transitional and developed countries range from determining how to meet the cost of under-used infrastructure, to identifying alternative uses for abandoned social facilities, huge swaths of vacant housing units as well as commercial and industrial facilities. Planning for an ageing urban population requires innovation, as a rapidly ageing population places increased demand on healthcare, recreation, transportation and other facilities for the elderly.

Increasing waves of international migration have meant that urban areas are increasingly becoming multicultural. Urban planning will need to seek the right

balance between cultural groups seeking to preserve their identity in cities and the need to avoid extreme forms of segregation and urban fragmentation. Conflicts around religious buildings, burial arrangements, ritual animal slaughter and building aesthetics are issues which urban planners increasingly have to tackle.

## CITY SIZE AND SPATIAL FORMS

The world's urban population of 3.3 billion is unevenly distributed among urban settlements of different sizes. Fifty-two per cent of the world's urban population resides in cities and towns of less than 500,000 people. A similar picture is painted for developed and developing countries, as 54 and 51 per cent of their urban population, respectively, live in such cities. As cities experience demographic growth, they tend to expand spatially. One consequence of this process is the merging of previously non-adjointing towns and cities. The physical expansion of urban areas either through metropolitanization, peri-urbanization or urban sprawl presents a major challenge for urban planning in all parts of the world.

### Developed countries

Collectively, about 63 per cent of the urban population in developed countries is concentrated in intermediate and small size cities, with just 9.8 per cent residing in megacities. A common thread running through cities in developed countries is that urban densities have been declining, thus contributing to the problem of urban sprawl. The problem of urban sprawl has been more severe in North America, where, as far back as the early-1900s, a significant segment of the population owned cars. The problem is less severe in Western Europe, where rates of car ownership that had been attained in the US in the 1930s were not reached until the 1970s.

### Transitional countries

The transitional countries have only one megacity – Moscow (10.4 million) – and no urban agglomeration with a population between 5 and 10 million. The centralized decision-making structure permitted the state to establish compact, highly dense cities with functional public transport systems. The absence of real estate markets ensured the allocation of land use by the state instead of free market mechanisms. Collectively, these features produced densely-



**Increasing waves of international migration have meant that urban areas are becoming multicultural**

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packed and highly regulated cities with dominant centres. The political and economic reforms initiated in the 1990s are gradually altering this structure.

## Developing countries

While developing countries contain 14 of the world's 19 megacities, only 8.4 per cent of their urban population resides in such cities. A greater proportion of the urban population (61.4 per cent) lives in cities of less than one million inhabitants. Developing countries are also experiencing problems related to peri-urbanization. In particular, peri-urbanization has contributed to the escalation of infrastructure and service delivery costs. A distinguishing feature in city growth in developing countries, particularly in Latin and Africa, is urban primacy. This poses complex planning challenges, particularly because of its tendency to contribute to problems such as urban sprawl, congestion and environmental degradation.

## Planning implications of city size and spatial form

Despite the demographic importance of small and intermediate cities, urban planning efforts in developing countries have focused disproportionately on the problems of large metropolitan areas. If small and medium cities are to fulfil their potential, then they should form part of the urban planning agenda for developing countries in the 21st Century.

Urban sprawl – be it suburbanization in North America, peri-urbanization in Africa, or metropolitanization

in Asia and Latin America – are all products of either inappropriate or ineffective planning regulations. Issues that planning will have to address in this regard include: the many social, economic, physical and environmental problems, including upgrading of informal peri-urban settlements; provision of public transport and other trunk infrastructure; as well as effective planning and governance in cooperation with adjoining local authorities.

A key issue that 21st century urban planning in developing countries will have to contend with is the increasing levels of informality associated with contemporary urban patterns.. Formalization processes often have destroyed livelihoods and shelter, and have exacerbated exclusion, marginalization and poverty in developing world cities. For urban planning in developing countries to be relevant and serve the greater good, it must identify innovative ways of dealing with informality.

## URBAN ECONOMIC CONTEXTS

Global urbanization is taking place within the context of the worst economic recession since 1945. The current global recession has several implications for urban areas. First, global economic growth is expected to shrink by 1.3 per cent in 2009. This implies that less funding will be available for urban development and capital projects. Second, higher levels of unemployment are envisaged in various sectors of the economy, but particularly in finance, construction, automotive and manufacturing industries, as well as in the tourism, services and real estate sectors – all of which are closely associated with urban areas. The global unemployment rate for 2008 was 6 per cent. This is expected to increase to 7.1 per cent in 2009. Third, following the increase in the rate of unemployment, poverty levels are expected to rise. Furthermore, the global economic crisis could exacerbate income inequality.

## Developed countries

Problems such as poverty, homelessness, crime, and other social pathologies are re-emerging in developed countries. In addition, developed countries are suffering their worst recession since World War II, as economic growth is expected to contract by 3.8 per cent in 2009. The worsening economy has seen unemployment in many developed countries rise to its highest level in recent times, with very negative consequences on the economies of urban areas. Income inequality within developed countries has been widespread



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since the mid 1980s. This has affected most countries, with large increases observed in Canada and Germany.

### Transitional countries

The period of transition from centrally-planned to market-based economies has been associated with dramatic increase in the levels of poverty, unemployment, and inequality within former communist countries. With the start of the economic recovery, unemployment rates began to decline since 2000. These gains could be eroded by the current global economic crisis. For instance, in the Commonwealth of Independent States and Baltic states, economic growth is expected to shrink by 5.1 and 10.6 per cent respectively, in 2009. Unemployment across the region is also on the rise. In Latvia and Lithuania, the unemployment rate for February 2009 was 14.4 and 13.7 per cent, respectively. With an unemployment rate of 8.1 per cent in January 2009, Russia is facing its highest rate since March 2005.

### Developing countries

Rapid urban growth in developing countries, particularly in Africa and Asia will be taking place within a context of a relatively weakened economy. Although the global economic crisis has its roots in developed countries, its impacts will be felt on the urban economies of developing countries as well. Economic growth in developing countries is expected to fall from 6.1 per cent in 2008 to 1.6 per cent in 2009. Apart from exacerbating unemployment and poverty, the slump in

economic growth could severely reduce the availability of financial resources for state-initiated urban development programmes. The decline in economic growth could undermine the ability of developing countries to achieve the MDGs. Economic recession in developed countries may affect the flow of foreign direct investment, official development assistance and remittances to developing countries.

Urbanization in developing countries is taking place amid increasing levels of urban poverty, one of whose spatial manifestations is the proliferation of slums. Over a third of the urban population in developing countries resides in slums. Related to this is another major urban economic trend in the developing world, which is increasing inequality.

### Planning implications of urban economic contexts

The twin problems of urban poverty and the proliferation of slums should be at the top of the planning agenda in many developing countries. Urban planning should strive to reduce poverty through pro-poor programmes that emphasize equity, participation and social justice. Planning can address the problem of slums and informal settlements through upgrading programmes, which entail the provision or improvement of infrastructure and basic services such as water, sanitation, garbage collection, storm drainage, street lighting, paved footpaths and streets.

With few exceptions, levels of intra-urban inequality across the world have been increasing. Urban planning can address the issue of inequality through redistributive policies that give priority to low-income groups and areas. The provision of schools, basic health services, water supply and sanitation in poor neighbourhoods will, in the long-run, contribute to reducing the level of inequality within cities. In cities of developed countries, urban planning will have to contend with the spatial manifestations associated with the various forms of social exclusion and marginalization that migrants and other minority groups face.

Many countries are experiencing economic uncertainty and decline on account of the ongoing global recession. This implies that less funding will be available for state-initiated urban development programmes. In developing countries, urban development programmes such as slum upgrading and prevention projects, as well as urban regeneration and poverty reduction initiatives, will be adversely affected. So too will the achievement of the MDGs. All of this reinforces the need for governments to act in partnership with civil society and private sector actors – both formal and informal – on urban planning issues.

In an era where formal employment opportunities across the world are dwindling due to the global economic recession, urban planning can play a key role in facilitating livelihoods through local economic development. Local economic development is a community-empowering, participatory process in which local governments, local communities, civil society, as well as the private and public sectors work together to stimulate and improve the local economy of a given area. Urban planning could also create the enabling conditions for employment to thrive by adopting more flexible land-use management or zoning systems that allow mixed land uses, as opposed to mono-functional zoning that seeks to segregate different activities.

## LOCATION AND VULNERABILITY TO NATURAL AND HUMAN-MADE DISASTERS

Cities are highly vulnerable to the effects of natural and human-made disasters due to a complex set of interrelated processes. Since 1975, there has been a fourfold increase in the number of recorded natural disasters. While all continents report more natural disaster events, on average, the rate of increase has been highest for Africa, where a threefold increase in natural disaster events has been experienced in the last decade alone. Human-made disasters have seen a tenfold increase from 1975 to 2006, with the greatest rates of increase being in Asia and Africa.

Location is a major determinant of the type and frequency of natural hazards a city may experience. Eight of the 10 most populous cities are located on earthquake faults, while 90 per cent of these cities are in regions vulnerable to destructive storms (Table 3). Due to their favourable location, coastal areas are densely populated and have large concentrations of economic activities. However, populations within coastal areas are at risk from sea level rise and extreme weather events such as tropical cyclones and flooding – all associated with global warming.

### Developed countries

Flood, wind storms, earthquakes and volcanoes are the most common forms of natural disasters affecting developed countries. The human impacts of natural disasters vary remarkably between developed and developing countries. While economic loss in absolute terms is high in developed countries, human loss is low. This is a result of the high levels of investment in disaster mitigation. Developed countries account for less than 10 per cent of the world human loss due to natural disasters. In 1999, the US reported two to three times as many natural disasters than Bangladesh; yet, Bangladesh experienced 34 times more deaths. The distinguishing characteristic is the high technical capacity for early-warning systems, disaster preparedness and risk reduction in the developed world, all of which are lacking in many developing countries.

City	Population (million)	Disaster risk					
		Earthquake	Volcano	Storms	Tornado	Flood	Storm surge
Tokyo	35.2	X		X	X	X	X
Mexico City	19.4	X	X	X			
New York	18.7	X		X			X
São Paulo	18.3			X		X	
Mumbai	18.2	X		X		X	X
Delhi	15.0	X		X		X	
Shanghai	14.5	X		X		X	X
Kolkata	14.3	X		X	X	X	X
Jakarta	13.2	X				X	
Buenos Aires	12.6			X		X	X

Table 3

Ten most populous cities and associated disaster risk, 2005

Source: Chafe, 2007, p116

## Transitional countries

Some of the countries in East and Central Europe have difficult topographies and are located in areas that place them at risk to natural and human-induced disasters. Many of the countries are landlocked, sit on, or are surrounded by, steep mountains that are frequently disturbed by seismic activity, heavy rains, avalanches, landslides, and earthquakes. Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo suffered from serious flooding in November and December 2007. Human-induced disasters, such as the massive explosion at an arms depot in Albania in March 2008, also tend to occur more frequently in this region.

## Developing countries

Developing countries have experienced the fastest rate of increase in the incidence of natural and human-made disasters over the last three decades. Since these countries are rapidly urbanizing, they face increased risks in the future from natural disasters. Cities in developing countries suffer disproportionately from the impacts of natural disasters. This is a function of the inability of authorities to manage pre- and post-disaster situations. Consequently, natural disasters tend to claim more lives than in developed countries. Indeed, 98 per cent of the 211 million people affected by natural disasters between 1991 and 2000 resided in developing countries. While economic losses in absolute terms are low in comparison to developed countries, they are 20 times greater as a percentage of GDP.

## Planning implications of vulnerability to natural and human disasters

Land-use planning can serve as a valuable tool for mainstreaming disaster risk reduction into urban development processes. Land-use planning provides a framework within which interventions to partner local actors for risk mapping and community resilience building can be undertaken. This includes partnerships between municipal governments, community groups and the private sector. Familiar planning tools such as zoning, community participation, Geographic Information Systems, and information and education programmes are all essential to mainstreaming risk reduction into the land-use planning process.

Urban planning can play an integral role in developing building codes that ensure safety standards in components of the built environment. Most countries have building codes

aimed at ensuring that construction meets a minimum standard of disaster resilience. However, in some cases, codes might not be as appropriate as they should be. A major challenge that planning is likely to face is enforcing adherence to building codes, particularly in developing countries.

Urban planning can play a major role in protecting critical infrastructure and services such as electricity, water and sanitation, telecommunications, transportation systems and health services. Protecting such vital infrastructure and services will influence response and reconstruction capacity and minimize secondary and indirect losses, such as the disruption in the flow of goods and services in the period after a disaster has struck a city.

Urban planning can contribute to post-disaster rehabilitation of human settlements, as municipal authorities and local governments are best placed to coordinate reconstruction efforts. Partnerships with community groups and international development and humanitarian agencies are necessary in post-disaster planning. Post-disaster situations, particularly in developing countries, offer urban planning a unique opportunity to rethink past development practices, improve the sustainability of human settlements and effectively prepare communities against risks.

In order to cope with the effects of climate change through rising sea levels, cities all over the world, but especially in developing countries, will need to implement innovative adaptation and mitigation strategies. Urban planning can contribute to implementing some of these strategies. Adaptation for cities entails such diverse actions as increasing the resilience of infrastructure, changing the location of settlements, and implementing practices that enhance sustainable development. Mitigating climate change



**Urban planning can address the issue of inequality through redistributive policies**

through reduction of greenhouse gas emissions in cities requires immediate action, alongside adaptation. These are areas where urban planning holds very good promise.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

For urban planning to effectively respond to the diversity of urban contexts, it is important that urbanization is viewed as a positive phenomenon. Besides planning for rapid urban growth, planning will have to pay greater attention to small and medium size cities. Urban planning will need to respond to the youth bulge observed in many developing countries, shrinking cities, rapidly ageing population and multi-

culturalism in both developed and transitional countries. Twenty-first century urban planning in developing countries will have to address the twin problems of poverty and slums, as well as contend with increasing levels of informality. A consequence of the current economic recession is that funding for state-initiated urban and infrastructural projects will become scarce. This in turn underlines the need for governments to act in partnership with civil society and private sector actors on urban development. Finally, in all parts of the world, but especially in developing countries, urban planning can serve as a valuable tool for mainstreaming disaster risk reduction into urban development processes.