



UNFPA on Sustainable Cities

The seventh session of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals will deal among other themes with Sustainable cities and human settlements. In a world of increasing urbanization and decentralization, how urban areas promote and protect basic human rights and provide services for their populations – both current and future – will have an enormous impact on the realization of human rights for all.

Urbanization is often associated with developmental challenges such as the spread of slums; infringements on fragile or fertile agricultural lands; pressures on infrastructure such as essential health and education services, and so on. But despite its many challenges, growing urbanization offers social, economic and environmental benefits to be harnessed by people-centered and human rights-based forward-looking policies. This note elaborates on the challenges and opportunities that urbanization presents for sustainable development.

Key urbanization trends

🔥 **Over a half of the world population is now living in urban areas.** This share will continue to increase significantly over the next decades. According to projections by the UN Population Division, by 2050, about 67% of the world population will live in urban areas. Currently 50% of urban dwellers live in cities of fewer than 500,000 inhabitants, compared to just 10 percent in megacities of over 10 million, and while the proportion in megacities is expected to increase somewhat in the next decades, the large majority will continue to live in secondary and tertiary urban areas.

🔥 **Urbanization is a universal phenomenon but presents regional specificities.** Latin America is highly urbanized with more than 70 percent of its population being urban. Asia is almost half urban and rapidly increasing. Sub-Saharan African is about a third urban, and countries such as Burundi, Chad and Malawi have low overall urbanization levels but the rate of urban growth is very high. Low current levels of urbanization should not be cause

for ignoring fast-paced current and future urbanization rates; indeed, they should be seen as an opportunity, if the right decisions are made about how cities in these countries grow.

Urban poverty and inequality

🔥 **Urban poverty is universally lower than rural poverty, although it is rapidly growing in many places.** Urban areas offer diverse livelihoods and opportunities for social interaction, participation and empowerment. Yet, the growth of urban inequality is leaving significant segments of the population cut off from the prospective benefits of urban life.

🔥 **Urban inequality increasingly means that the poor, particularly those in urban slums, are denied access to basic education and health, including sexual and reproductive health services.** Maternal mortality indicators for the urban poor are often comparable to those of the rural poor – yet many continue to think that poverty and lack of access are

predominantly rural. Service infrastructure needs to be developed to address the needs of urban slums while at the same time providing coverage and access to rural residents.

♦ **Ensuring the protection, rights and integration of rural-urban migrants is essential for effective urbanization** that meets the needs of all urban residents and guarantees everyone is lifted from poverty.

Cities and young people

♦ **Adolescents and youth account for a large proportion of urban growth.**

Urban areas hold great appeal for young people given their social and economic opportunities, yet young people are residing in slums with little access to education and health services, including access to sexual and reproductive health. Many adolescents also live in urban areas without either parent; support structures and measures to ensure social support, safety and rights are vital. Ensuring access to education, health, services and employment for youth is vital for the urban agenda, and could make a difference between capitalizing on a demographic dividend or taking a road leading to a youth crisis of unemployment and disempowerment.

Gender issues in urbanization

♦ **Gender based violence must be a critical focus in urban areas.** In open spaces with little public or private security services, the risks of violence are high, and these places tend to be in low-income areas. Good infrastructure in low income areas can make a huge difference to women and girls' security.

♦ **Access to land, as well as security of tenure on that land, is one of the most important areas of concern** in ensuring that cities provide for the poor. Women and marginalized groups are consistently deprived of their full rights to property ownership and inheritance, including of land

and housing. This creates vulnerability for widows and for women who have never been married (an increasing number), and also dissuades people with insecure property rights from leaving in advance of natural disasters or conflict.

Data and urban planning

♦ **Effective urban planning can provide for the poor, women and the most marginalized** to live in greater dignity and security by ensuring access to health services, education, and more active participation in their communities' social, economic and political life.

♦ **Integrating population dynamics and data into national development is necessary for proactive planning for urbanization.** Expanding approaches to projecting the growth of individual cities would be a particular boon to evidence-based policy making and planning, including for climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction.

Urban governance and accountability

♦ **Some of the most successful global models of participation have emerged out of local urban governance, particularly participatory budgeting.** Scale-up of these models, which include process components such as broad inclusion, open access and transparency, but also outcome components such as defined institutions and a dedicated budget, can provide a roadmap for improving governance worldwide and ensuring the empowerment and participation of youth and marginalized groups.

To learn more about UNFPA's position and key asks in the post-2015 development agenda we invite you to review UNFPA's paper "**Empowering People to Ensure a Sustainable Future for All**".

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