

# The State of Asian and Pacific Cities 2015

Urban transformations  
Shifting from quantity to quality





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Shifting from quantity to quality

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HS Number: HS/071/15E  
ISBN: (Volume) 978-92-1-132681-9

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A bridge on the Pearl River, Guangzhou  
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Design and Layout by PFD Media Group | London, UK

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# Foreword



It gives me great pleasure to introduce this second *State of the Asian and Pacific Cities* report which, like our 2010/11 publication on this region, is the outcome of close cooperation, in a true One-UN spirit, between UN-Habitat and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for

Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP).

The current report is very timely, indeed, since the Asia and Pacific region finds itself in a period of very rapid change. Therefore, this publication attempts to shed light on the unfolding demographic, economic, societal and environmental trends and the associated challenges faced by the region's governments, the business sector and civil society.

It is also a timely publication in the light of the forthcoming third United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Development (Habitat III), scheduled for 2016. It is hoped that this report's findings will assist Asian and Pacific nations in their national and regional preparations for the Habitat III Conference.

Over the past decades, globalisation, foreign direct investments and private sector-led initiatives have all combined to create rapid economic growth and even more rapid urban development in Asia and the Pacific. This has generated both benefits and drawbacks.

On the positive side, parts of Asia and the Pacific have become the factories, laboratories and travel destinations of the world - in the process lifting millions of people in the region out of poverty.

But there is also a darker side to these advancements. The transformations have come at considerable environmental costs, while the massive reduction in income poverty has not always addressed other dimensions of poverty, such as inadequate housing, or lack of access to safe water and sanitation. All these remain major unaddressed problems throughout the region.

Moreover, whereas various coalitions of the public and private sector have, over time, made many Asian and Pacific cities highly competitive in the global economy, this has often happened at the expense of central

governments' traditional roles in assuring domestic equity, equality and sustainability. Consequently, a significant share of Asia and Pacific populations remain exposed to low wages, inhuman work conditions, and poor living environments.

Comprehensive public sector-led urban planning has, in general, also weakened in the pursuit of economic growth and it would now be prudent for the region's governments to start reviewing their urban, social and environmental governance modalities to determine what reforms will be required to guide developments into more desirable and sustainable future directions.

The above matters and others are explored in-depth in the present report, thanks to the commendable inter-agency cooperation between ESCAP and UN-Habitat that facilitated its preparation.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Joan Clos". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end.

**Joan Clos**

Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and  
Executive Director of the United Nations Human  
Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)



# Foreword



Following the successful *The State of Asian Cities 2010/2011*, I am pleased to present this second edition, *The State of Asian and Pacific Cities 2015*.

Like its predecessor, this report is the outcome of a partnership between ESCAP and UN-Habitat, without which the enormous undertaking

of reviewing and analysing urban development trends in Asia and the Pacific would not have been possible.

The speed and scope of urbanisation in the Asia and Pacific region is unprecedented. It is projected that by 2018 half of the region's population will be living in urban areas. Currently more than two billion of the region's total population live in cities and towns – with one billion more likely to be added by 2040.

The Asia and Pacific region is undergoing tremendous change, in which cities are playing a critical part. The region has become a global economic centre of gravity, this emergence largely driven by globalisation and trade liberalisation. Most of this wealth has been generated in and around its cities. Cities are now clearly at the epicentre of the region's development, and its future development prospects.

But the Asia-Pacific region is no longer just a global manufacturer; it is increasingly host to centres of research, creativity and innovation. Newly emerging and mostly urban-based middle classes have become a major social, economic and political force, creating demand for higher-quality goods, services, infrastructure and a better quality of life. This is driving creative thinking and solutions about how to sustainably meet the needs of the largest urban agglomerations in human history.

While urbanisation has contributed positively to lifting millions of people out of poverty, unacceptable numbers of people continue to live in slums, earn insufficient incomes and live in vulnerable and unhealthy environments. Current economic models are not providing a sufficient basis for inclusive and sustainable development. Transformation of the urban economy requires new visions and partnerships spanning national and local government, as well as the private sector and civil society. This report addresses those opportunities.

The region's cities face immense environmental challenges. Unchecked exploitation of natural resources is no longer sustainable or without irreversible costs. An increasing number of cities are facing multiple crises of liveability, illustrated by pollution and declining air quality. Even the region's most impressive urban façades can mask high levels of vulnerability.

In meeting these challenges new multi-level and collaborative governance modalities are required. Local government has a key role to play, but often lacks capacity and authority to act. Current revenue sources are also woefully insufficient to meet the long-term financing needs of infrastructure and other capital investments.

Clearly, there is much to be done to harness the great opportunities of our urban future. But little can be achieved without adequate information. Effective policies for spatial management, economic growth, poverty reduction and environmental protection require accurate, relevant, and accessible data. The region needs no less than an urban data revolution to meet that goal.

The current report was developed with the post-2015 development agenda in mind. It also addresses key regional concerns, to be discussed at the sixth Asia-Pacific Urban Forum, and which will inform the New Urban Agenda, to be formulated at the Third United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III), to be convened in 2016. It provides an analytical knowledge platform for evidence-based policy and planning around the three dimensions of sustainable development, including their integration, plus a critical fourth dimension: urban governance. ESCAP is committed to play a leadership role in these efforts for a more sustainable regional and global future.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Shamshad Akhtar'.

**Shamshad Akhtar**

Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP)

# Acknowledgements

The current report, *The State of Asian and Pacific Cities 2015*, reviews and analyses key trends in urban development throughout the region. It follows the publication of *The State of Asian Cities* in 2011 but goes further in evaluating the most recent urban data from The World Urbanisation Prospects 2014, as well as reflecting on the rapid change taking place in the region's towns and cities. Its timing furthermore contributes to the post-2015 development agenda and to regional preparations for the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, to take place in Quito, Ecuador, in 2016.

*The State of Asian and Pacific Cities 2015* was conceived jointly by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission (ESCAP). From UN-Habitat, it was prepared under the direction of Alioune Badiane, Director of the Programme Office and from ESCAP initially under the direction of Rae Kwon Chung, former Director, Environment and Development Division.

The conceptualisation and the coordination of this report was undertaken by Jos Maseland of the Technical Advisory Branch of UN-Habitat in Nairobi and Donovan Storey of the Sustainable Urban Development Section of ESCAP in Bangkok. In the coordination of all activities they were assisted by Kyungkoo Philip Kang, Economic Affairs Officer, in Bangkok, and Katharina Rochell, Human Settlements Officer, in Nairobi. Kioe-Sheng Yap was the overall substantive and principal author, assisted by research associates Matthew Sarsycki and Witchaya Pruecksamars. Banashree Banerjee contributed to the drafting of Chapter 5 on urban governance and management.

From ESCAP, special thanks go out to the following staff members and interns for the substantive reviewing of successive drafts of the report: Lorenzo Santucci, Ram Tiwaree, Natalja Wehmer, Alberto Isgut, Andres Montes, Fernando Preminda, Mari Sawai, Saori Miyake, Tiyani Yang, Seungji Choi, Inhye Kong, Duncan Munro and Jihyun An. Statistical data and information was supplemented by Eric Hermouet and

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