



# ADVANTAGE OR PARADOX?

The challenge for children  
and young people  
of growing up urban

unicef 

for every child

# Acknowledgements

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## OVERVIEW

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Approximately a decade ago, the world officially became a majority urban planet. Along with urbanization a great deal of human progress has come to pass, including great leaps in child survival and development. Aggregate statistics regularly show that on average, compared to their rural peers, urban children have access to better essential services such as health care and education, water and sanitation, energy and better outcomes.

This is in part due to factors associated with the so-called ‘urban advantage.’ On average, urban households earn higher incomes, benefit from improved infrastructure, have improved knowledge and reside in greater proximity to services.

A closer look at the evidence, however, suggests that not all urban children are benefiting equally, and that the urban advantage for children is perhaps an overgeneralization. Unplanned urbanization, which is taking place in many parts of the world, is leading to sprawl and low urban population density, undermining the advantage of proximity that is a key component of the urban advantage. Informality and insecure residential status are leaving many urban households excluded from government-provided services. The quality of urban services for the marginalized and disadvantaged is often poor. Environmental and health hazards, such as air pollution, unprocessed waste and wastewater, pollution and poor air quality can heighten the risk of disease. Urban dwellers living in informal conditions often have a lower resilience to shocks and stressors such as natural hazards (including those exacerbated by climate change) or economic turbulence. These factors often leave the poorest urban children at a considerable disadvantage compared to their more affluent urban peers, and sometimes even compared to their rural counterparts.

This is the ‘urban paradox’: though urban residents on average enjoy better access to services and opportunities, a substantial part of the urban population is being left behind. The presumed urban advantage is not available to all. Poverty, previously predominantly a rural phenomenon, is becoming increasingly urban. As more and more children live in cities and towns, it is becoming increasingly critical to understand the prevalence of the urban paradox and the extent to which it is masked by the narrative of the urban advantage.

To better understand this issue, UNICEF examined the best available international evidence for 10 selected indicators of child well-being drawn from the most recent Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) and Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) from 77 mostly low- and middle-income countries. These indicators cover environmental health, health care and identity, education and knowledge, and survival and physical growth outcomes. Much of the analysis focuses on comparing rural and urban populations and comparing the top and bottom wealth quintiles for these populations.

The analysis has some limitations. The survey data in this report are given as observed. Since surveys are usually designed to be representative at the national level or larger administrative levels, the analyses can reach the limit of the surveys’ statistical power when comparing quintiles within urban and rural populations. In particular, small gaps between groups may fall within the uncertainty range of the samples surveyed. Furthermore, the definition of an urban area is decided by each country’s statistical office, and definitions therefore vary significantly from country to country. These limitations should be kept in mind when interpreting the results in this report.

The report's key findings are as follows:

1. The average country exhibits a clear urban advantage on all 10 indicators of child survival and well-being.
2. The size of this aggregate urban advantage varies across indicators.
3. Urban averages can mask large inequities within urban areas.
4. Inequities also exist in rural areas, and there is no evidence that urban wealth disparities are consistently larger than those in rural areas.
5. Urban wealth disparities diminish with economic development.
6. Much of the urban advantage disappears if we control for wealth.
7. In a number of countries, the poorest and most vulnerable urban children fare worse than their peers in rural areas.
8. Urban wealth disparity gaps are larger in Africa than in other regions.
9. Urban inequality can take different shapes – from only the wealthiest moving ahead to only the poorest being left behind.
10. Maternal education, like household wealth, is an important correlate of child welfare in urban and rural areas alike.

The purpose of this report primarily is to describe urban inequality as observed – within the limits of methodology and available data. In doing so, it raises questions regarding where the observed inequalities come from and what can be done to overcome them. Although the report does not intend to answer those questions, a number of important implications for policies and programmes can be drawn from its results. These include:

- The urban setting has to become an integral part of programming for children.
- Capacities of inclusive urban planning must be further developed on all levels of government – national, regional and local.

- The development of urban systems has to accelerate to keep pace with ongoing rapid urbanization.
- Solutions have to be found for the lack of financial resources needed to improve urban systems and to increase equity within urban areas.
- Better data and better use of existing data are needed to understand the true dimension of urban inequity.

Turning the urban paradox experienced by millions of children and young people into an urban advantage is a key challenge for cities and towns across the world. Now is the time to step up efforts in this area. The 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)<sup>1</sup> and the New Urban Agenda<sup>2</sup> that emerged in 2016 from Habitat III (the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development that takes place every 20 years)<sup>3</sup> both set ambitious goals for the world's urban areas. By the time of Habitat IV in 2036, a whole new generation of young people will have grown up in urban areas. The deprivations or advantages they experience in childhood and adolescence will critically influence their prospects in adulthood.

The cost of inaction is high: almost 90 per cent of the world's children and adolescents live in Africa and Asia, which are urbanizing rapidly. Today, approximately 1 billion people are estimated to live in slums, the worst form of informal settlement, and hundreds of millions of them are children under 18. Based on current trends, those numbers are likely to triple by 2050.<sup>4</sup> In the absence of new models targeting the urban poor, inequity in child health may widen and an increasing number of urban children will be shut out of overall progress.<sup>5</sup>

Scaling up urban programming for children and young people is now a global imperative in all regions.

# KEY FACTS AND TRENDS ON URBANIZATION<sup>6</sup>

## Urban population

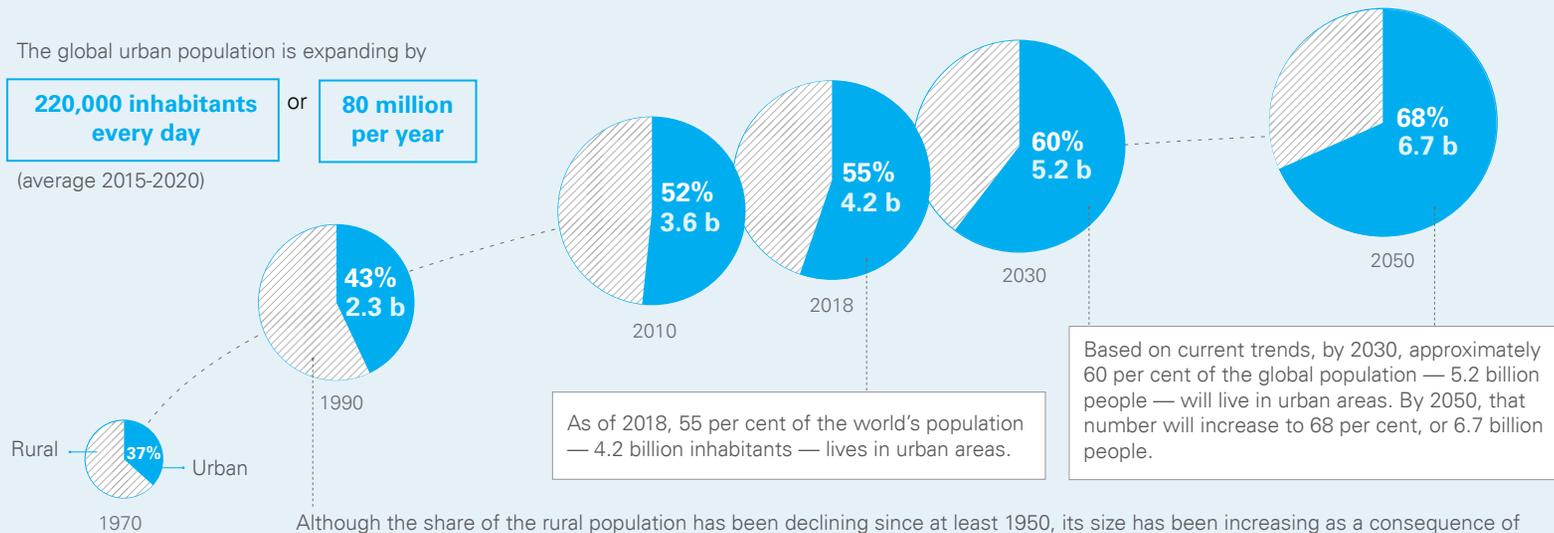
The global urban population is expanding by

**220,000 inhabitants every day**

or

**80 million per year**

(average 2015-2020)

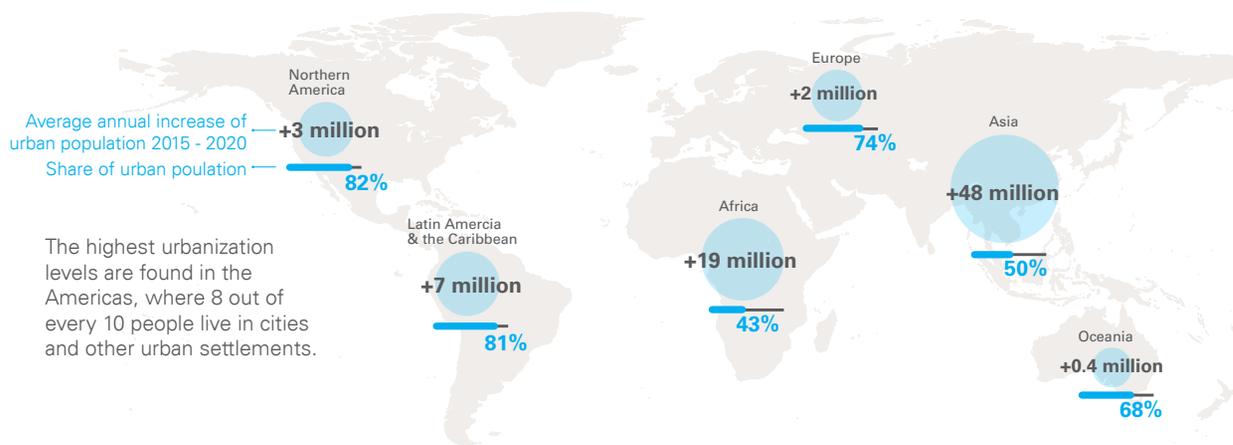


As of 2018, 55 per cent of the world's population — 4.2 billion inhabitants — lives in urban areas.

Based on current trends, by 2030, approximately 60 per cent of the global population — 5.2 billion people — will live in urban areas. By 2050, that number will increase to 68 per cent, or 6.7 billion people.

Although the share of the rural population has been declining since at least 1950, its size has been increasing as a consequence of the fast-growing total population. The rural population is estimated to peak in 2021 at 3.4 billion people.

## Urbanization levels by region



The highest urbanization levels are found in the Americas, where 8 out of every 10 people live in cities and other urban settlements.

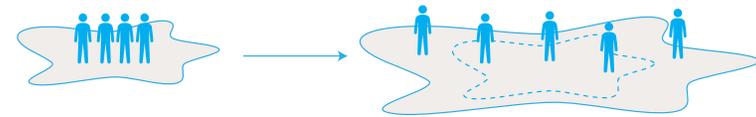
Africa and Asia have the lowest levels of urbanization. In 2018, half of Asia's population and 43 per cent of Africa's live in urban areas. However, both regions are urbanizing rapidly.

Asia is currently adding 48 million people annually to its urban population, more than all other regions combined. Africa's urban population is the fastest growing, with an average annual rate of urban growth of 3.7 per cent from 2015-2020 – adding around 19 million persons to its urban population every year.

Increase urban population 2018 - 2050



Development of cities

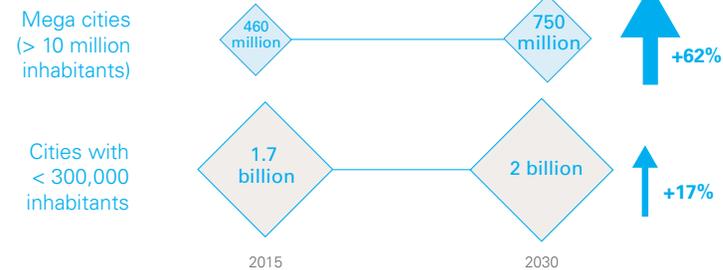


Cities' areas are growing faster than their population, reflecting decreasing population density and larger spread.<sup>7</sup> Much of the growth in the cities is currently taking place in an unplanned fashion, characterized by fragmented urban development, inadequate infrastructure, increased pollution and waste, lack of climate resilience, low compactness and walkability, congestion, and poor quality housing.

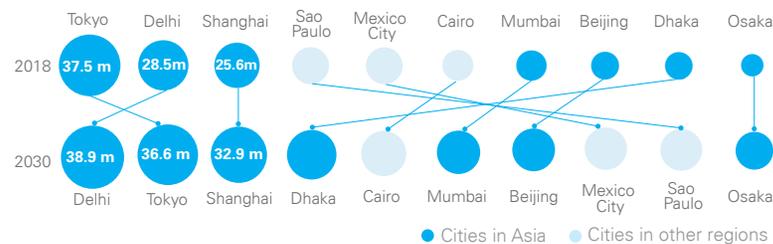
Urban population by size of settlement

Half of the world's urban population lives in cities with half a million or more inhabitants. Megacities, with over 10 million inhabitants, are the fastest growing urban settlements.

The population of megacities is predicted to increase by 290 million (62 per cent), from 460 million in 2015 to 750 million by 2030. Over the same period, the population in cities with less than 300,000 inhabitants will increase by almost the same amount, although this will represent an increase of only 17 per cent (from 1.7 billion to 2 billion).

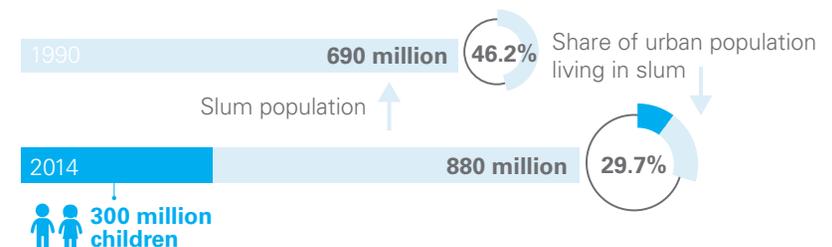


Megacities



Asia in particular will experience rapid growth of large megacities. Currently, the world's three largest cities are in Asia: Tokyo (37.5 million), Delhi (28.5 million) and Shanghai (25.6 million). By 2030, seven out of the 10 largest cities in the world will be in Asia: Delhi, Tokyo, Shanghai, Dhaka, Mumbai, Beijing and Osaka. Many of these cities are at risk of increased flooding due to climate change.

Slum population



While the share of the urban population living in slums fell from 46.2 per cent in 1990 to 29.7 per cent in 2014, the number of people living in slums has actually risen. The world's slum population has increased by 25 per cent over that same period, from 690 million in 1990 to 880 million in 2014 – 300 million of those being children (there is no estimation available for the number of children in 1990).<sup>8</sup>



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