

Getting it Right: Policies for Urban Transformation

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A New Scale in Urban Growth: Making it Work for People

The world has yet to come to grips with one of the most critical transformations of the 21st century – urbanization and urban growth in developing countries. The Mediterranean Population Forum (Barcelona, 11-12 December 2007), which focused on Demographic Transitions, Inequalities and Development, provided an opportunity to review ongoing trends and to discuss what needs to be done about inevitable massive growth in the towns and cities of developing countries.

The expected increases in the world's urban population are dramatically illustrated in Chart 27, which shows absolute increments in different world regions between 1950 and 2030. This provides a vivid demonstration of the fact that most future urban growth will occur primarily in some of the world's most populous and poorest countries, especially in Asia and Africa. Indeed, in little more than a generation, the world's developing regions will double the size of their urban population.

The scale of this coming urban growth is unprecedented. Some people talk about urban and slum growth in Africa, Asia or Latin America as if they were simply a repetition of the process experienced by developed countries during the industrial revolution! That is not correct! The urban transition in developing countries is telescoping time, needing just a few decades to do what took a century or more in the industrialized countries. More importantly, the huge de-

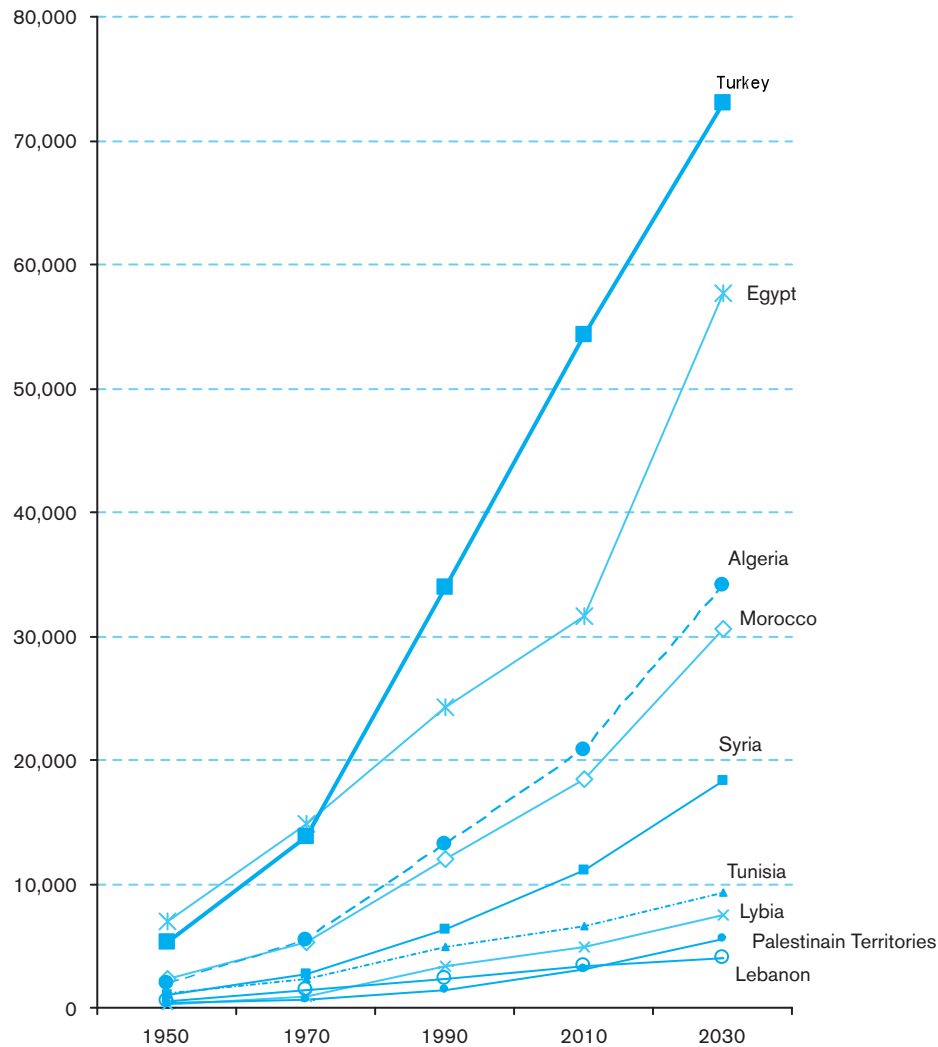
mographic dimensions of present urban and slum growth have no parallel in history.

Needed: A Radical Change in Policy Outlook

This ongoing urban transition has the potential to be very positive for the resolution of poverty and for sustainability, or it may multiply poverty, human misery and environmental degradation. What will actually happen depends on decisions that are taken now. Many policymakers in developing countries have been wringing their hands over the urbanization process. They would like to prevent it, or at least slow it down. Given the way that demographic and economic trends are converging in the developing world, this is not going to happen. Positive and proactive attitudes towards urban growth, however, could bring about a win/win situation in which social and environmental problems are minimized, the ability of cities to attract investment is maximized and the quality of life for all is improved. Although there has been some controversy about this in the past, it is now accepted that cities have much greater potential for economic growth, for the absorption of labour and for the reduction of poverty than rural areas. Moreover, the same advantages of proximity and concentration help make it much simpler and cheaper to provide the urban population with services and amenities. The reduction of poverty is actually fastest in countries that urbanize more rapidly. This has led one of the world's leading experts on poverty to state that the only problem with urbanization is that it's not fast enough (Ravallion, 2007).

What's Happening in the MENA Region?

The Southern and Eastern countries of the MENA region are also in the throes of a massive urban transi-

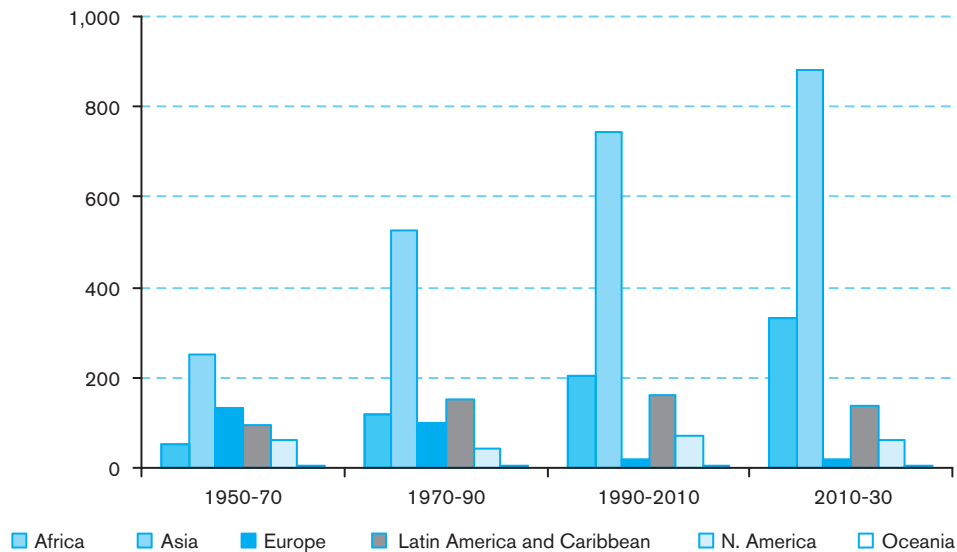


tion. Indeed, according to official UN data, this region will experience an increase of some 85 million people during the 2010-2030 period alone. Chart 28 presents dramatic evidence of urban growth in several countries of that region. In absolute terms, Turkey and Egypt stand out as countries that are experiencing the biggest urban growth, followed by Algeria and Morocco. At the other extreme, Lebanon, Libya and the Palestinian Territories have had much slower urban growth. As elsewhere, official policy in those countries of the MENA region experiencing rapid urban growth has tended to be increasingly negative. Between 1996 and 2005, the number of countries in the region that want to reduce rural-urban migration has jumped from 50% to 100% (United Nations, 2006). What policymakers are actually saying is that they would like to stop urban growth and they believe that preventing migration would accomplish that. However, most ur-

ban growth is now due not to migration but to natural increase. Moreover, efforts to stop rural-urban migration rarely work unless extreme measures are used, simply because people realize that they have more chances of improving their lives in cities. But the point is that negative attitudes towards urban growth makes urbanization unnecessarily problematical and contributes to the social and economic problems of the region, instead of helping to solve them.

The Starting Point: Addressing the Housing Needs of the Poor

One piece of information that is rarely considered in urban planning manuals is the fact that the largest social group in any developing country city is composed of poor people. Actually, the poor are often a



majority! Nevertheless, their needs are hardly ever given serious consideration because the city is planned mainly for those who generate production and those who consume on a large scale. Thus, despite their numbers, the poor are generally left to fend for themselves.

This is particularly damaging in the area of housing. In most developing countries – and this is true also of many countries within the MENA region – the negative attitudes of policymakers towards the urban poor make it much more difficult for them to obtain secure housing in a decent neighbourhood. Since they are not welcomed anywhere, and since they cannot compete in inflated and speculative land markets, the poor inevitably end up invading and settling precariously in all the wrong places – on distant urban fringes, steep hillsides, river banks and other areas subject to natural disasters, in watersheds and ecological preserves and on toxic lands.

The form and location of slum growth inevitably deepens and perpetuates urban poverty. It prevents people from gaining access to what the city has to offer. The sprawling settlements of the poor in all the wrong places have a direct impact on their health and on their ability to access services of any kind. Not taking a proactive attitude towards the needs of the poor makes it much more difficult to make any improvements to the city, or to the living conditions of its population. Just putting in an access road or providing channels for water and sewage is likely to require tearing down existing homes once slum settlements have been established.

Creating a Win/Win Situation

But the lack of a proactive approach to housing for the poor also has far-reaching and lasting repercussions that go beyond the lives and welfare of the poor themselves. It hampers the improvement of a city's infrastructure and services, as well as the quality of its environment. In turn, this foils attempts to attract investments and thus to create jobs and to improve the economic and social conditions of the population. In short, not taking a proactive attitude towards the needs of the largest social group ends up having negative impacts on the urban environment, the urban economy and the quality of life for all.

Improving access to land and housing for the poor requires political will, vision and the revitalization of long-range planning (which the neo-liberal model has tried to bury), based on good information and projections as to probable future growth. It also requires collaborating with neighbourhood associations and organizations of the urban poor (OUPs), who have often proved to know more about how to resolve their needs than planners and politicians.

It is often said that it is difficult to provide land for the poor because urban land is unavailable. Experts disagree strongly with that. The problem isn't lack of land but dysfunctional land markets and lack of good policies. In order to provide for the needs of the poor, the functioning of urban land markets needs to improve. As a result of exploitation and collusion between speculators and politicians, the poor often end up pay-

ing more for a piece of land or for a bucket of water than other people. Thus, lack of good regulation and transparency increase poverty.

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Let's Get Real on Housing for the Poor

Good solutions are realistic solutions. There is no point in putting up showcase housing projects that cannot be replicated on a large scale. What can be provided in a sustainable way is minimally-serviced land on which people initially build their homes, even if at first these are precarious shelters that will be gradually improved over time. Contrary to popular opinion, poor people do have resources and with, proper financing structures, most investments can be repaid over time.

The technical problems for such solutions are not insurmountable. The biggest problem comes from the inertia of political systems that are geared to immediate results – within the limits of politicians' mandates. What are required here are a long-term vision and a revolution in political mentality – in order to accept urban growth as beneficial and then, to prepare adequately for it.

Reducing the Ecological Footprint of Cities

Proactive attitudes are also needed in order to reduce the size of the ecological footprint of the cities. The sustainable use of urban space is critical in that respect. There are several things that can be done with urban space in order to enhance sustainability. The first is to plan urban growth with the environment in mind, avoiding the invasion of fragile lands, reducing sprawl and energy use, and minimizing the size and impact of the urban blot.

Unfortunately, recent studies show that, world-wide, cities are decreasing in density. That is, cities use up more and more space, not only because they have more

people, but also because people are using more space per person. Much of this has to do with improved transportation, especially the greater use of automobiles. The elites of the developing world prize the commodity and the social status of private automobiles and they use their influence to make governments invest in roads. This greatly diminishes their ability to improve mass transportation and, since only a minority have access to cars, it generates increasing inequity while also expanding the size of the urban blot.

Most urban sprawl in developing countries comes from something that is now being called "peri-urbanization." This is basically an uncontrolled and leapfrog expansion of the urban periphery that greatly contributes to environmental damage and to urban sprawl. Fuelled simultaneously by land speculation, by the land needs of the poor and by globalized firms that seek large expanses of cheap land outside city limits, peri-urbanization is facilitated by the absence of administrative entities that can effectively coordinate the social, economic and environmental problems that affect the city and its hinterland. The result is a rapid and often inappropriate expansion of the urban blot. A visionary and participatory administrative city-region entity that takes a broad view of urban issues is critical.

Cities in a Globalizing World

Finally, even the most ingenious urban policies and orientations are worthless without sound financial backing. Cities need resources to plan for infrastructure and services and they need to generate employment on a scale sufficient to ensure the livelihoods and welfare of a rapidly-growing population. In recent years, the combined influences of decentralization and globalization have provided cities, particularly smaller cities, with exciting new opportunities as well as enhanced responsibilities. Not all of them have the same capacity to take advantage of this historical moment. The gap between responsibility and capacity may be most significant precisely in smaller and medium-sized cities. Smaller cities in the context of globalized decentralization policies have greater flexibility and more room to manoeuvre in preparing for the form, direction and characteristics of rapid urban growth. Some of these cities have done well in selling their comparative or locational advantages, in expanding incomes and reducing poverty in the context of globalized economic competition. However, most city managers traditionally know nothing of the economy of the city they administer.

Identifying and understanding the comparative and locational advantages of an urban agglomeration and building upon them is an art form that is rapidly gaining in importance. Generating a stable investment climate that stimulates private sector investment and business development is as important at the local as at the national level. A growing body of knowledge highlights the fact that a favourable investment climate includes social and environmental amenities.

Efficient local governments that can show vision and administrative capacity, allied to transparency and good governance, can make a difference in attracting investments and in generating fiscal resources that can be used to improve the living conditions of all. This leads to an urban win/win situation. Showing an ability to meet the land and housing needs of the poor, as well as an effective concern with the sustainable use of urban space, is an important part of the city's reputation and its attraction for potential investors.

The Time is Now!

The international community has not paid urbanization nearly the amount of attention it deserves. International organizations can help to legitimize the efforts of OUPs and their contribution to the resolution of intra-urban problems. They can also generate strong advocacy for attitude changes and for better governance. They can help generate the political motivation as well as the resources needed for good planning. This includes updated information and analyses as well as training in the use of spatial planning techniques and tools.

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The social and environmental future of the developing world depends very much on decisions taken to help orient massive urban growth. The time to act is now. Trying to rectify unsustainable urban processes is much more complex and much more expensive than getting it right from the outset.

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