

The Bellagio Initiative

Briefing Summary

September 2012

Urbanisation as a Threat or Opportunity

David Satterthwaite and Diana Mitlin

Urban centres now include more than half the world's population and most of its economic activities. They are projected to house almost all the world's growth in population up to 2030 and beyond. How well urban centres and their governments serve their inhabitants has enormous implications for wellbeing and development. How they are managed in relation to resource use, waste management and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions also has enormous implications for whether dangerous climate change will be avoided.

Urbanisation is often seen as a problem for development yet all the world's wealthiest nations are predominantly urban and almost all urbanisation among low- and middle-income nations is associated with economic growth. The world's largest cities are heavily concentrated in the world's largest economies. The more urbanised nations in Africa, Asia and Latin America generally have the highest life expectancies and lowest infant and child mortality rates. The nations with the worst health and living conditions among their urban populations are generally the least urbanised.

Urbanisation is often seen as the main driver of ecological damage and human-induced climate change. But among the world's wealthiest cities with the highest living standards, per capita greenhouse gas emissions vary by a factor of ten or more. There are cities and city districts that show how urban concentration can delink a high quality of life from unsustainable levels of consumption and the ecological damage and greenhouse gas emissions these cause.

Several key issues are raised by an increasingly urbanised world.

When and where is living and working in urban areas associated with good health and a lack of deprivation?

It is mostly more urbanised nations that have the best indicators for health, fulfilment of civil rights, democracy and freedom from deprivation. But the extent of the association between better health and higher levels of urbanisation depends heavily on the quality, competence and accountability of urban governments. There is often an urban advantage (over rural areas) in living conditions where there are competent, accountable urban governments and an urban disadvantage where there are not.

The clustering of people, enterprises, transport systems and their wastes provides many potential advantages for a healthy city because of returns to agglomeration in the provision of infrastructure, services, regulations and spaces for citizen and community engagement. It is cheaper per person to provide piped treated water, sewers, drains, healthcare, emergency services, schools, policing – and to ensure health, safety and pollution standards are met in homes and workplaces. But this same clustering has many disadvantages if local governments do not provide services or needed regulations. Around one in seven of the planet's population live in informal settlements or overcrowded tenements in urban areas. Urban governments often have antagonistic relationships with the inhabitants of informal settlements, even though the urban economy depends on them. In these settlements, there is often no provision of public services – no water piped to their homes, no connection to sewers, no electricity, no storm and surface drains, no collection of household wastes, no public healthcare or emergency services and often even no schools. There is

usually no or only intermittent policing. No public space for recreation or children's play. No secure tenure. No safety nets. Many such settlements are not recorded in city surveys or registered on city maps. It is common for infant, child and maternal mortality rates among their inhabitants to be 20 or more times what they should be; also for half of the children to be stunted.

The association between urbanisation and unsustainable levels of resource use or degradation (such as loss of soil, forests, biodiversity) and anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions

Here the focus is on cities in high-income nations and some in middle-income nations. Urbanisation can be seen as the most serious driver of human-induced climate change (and of most other kinds of ecological damage). But cities can be where high living standards are delinked from high GHG emissions. The clustering of population and enterprises in cities also provides potential advantages for more energy-efficient buildings, more recycling or reuse of waste heat and solid or liquid wastes and reducing the need for private automobile use. It is not urban dwellers or particular cities that are driving increasing GHG emissions but high consumption patterns from wealthy households. But what is an urban issue is that cities can offer a high quality of life with average per capita GHG emissions that are low enough to avoid dangerous climate change.

There are two paths by which urbanisation in low- and middle-income nations becomes associated with wellbeing and opportunity.

The first is through more accountable and competent city and municipal governments; the second through changes driven by representative organisations formed by low-income groups that local governments come to accept and then support. Both require some level of support from national governments. Examples of the first path have been most evident in many Latin American nations over the last three decades or so. What has underpinned this is democratisation (in most nations from dictatorships) and decentralisation, much of it driven by citizen and civil society pressure. Urban governments got more power and resources and often stronger local revenue bases – and more accountable structures – for instance as mayors and city councils came to be elected.

Government support for upgrading informal settlements became the norm. In many cities, new channels for citizen and community engagement were set up. These factors help explain why the proportion of the urban population with good-quality water, sanitation and healthcare increased in recent decades, even in informal settlements. They also help explain the wave of innovation in city governments in this region in more participatory and accountable governance.

The second path is most evident in 13 nations where there are national federations or networks of 'slum'/shack-dwellers and in six nations where there are city federations. All the federations have savings groups as their foundation, with most savers and savings managers being women. Many federation savings groups are engaged in initiatives – negotiating land and building houses, upgrading their settlement, building community toilets, setting up community policing. All work to provide documentation on the informal settlements in which they live (that so often get left out of city surveys and maps). All are also offering local government partnerships and where they work together, the scale of what can be achieved increases greatly.

Both these paths are notable for their emphasis not only on improving material conditions but also on changing relationships between city government and those living in informal settlements. In the second path, the organisations and federations formed by 'slum'/shack-dwellers and the strategies they chose to engage with local governments were important for this. These two paths are also notable for the focus of support being for locally driven initiatives in which low-income groups have influence – and in the second path, a more direct engagement. So they are also examples of development pathways that conform more closely than most to the promotion of wellbeing.

Only through more competent and accountable local governments that have the resources and commitment to serve the public good and provide more opportunities and voice for their low-income populations can urban problems be addressed at scale. More inclusive forms of local government can also address what today seem like intractable problems – including providing both opportunity and voice to youth to draw in their energy and innovation. Meeting 'the needs of the present' can

Urbanisation as a Threat or Opportunity

also include attention to urban forms that combine high living standards with lower GHG emissions. For the successful and expanding cities in the global South, how their transport and residential developments house and serve their middle- and upper-income groups has large implications for future GHG emissions – for instance, are they housed in well-built energy-efficient accommodation with efficient appliances and well served by public transport or living in energy-inefficient homes in low-density suburbs with high private automobile use?

Perhaps the critical issue for international agencies, philanthropic organisations and national governments in regard to making cities centres of opportunity and wellbeing for their low-income populations is how to identify and support the local processes that move in this direction. It is difficult for international agencies to work direct with grassroots organisations and local governments and ensure good use is made of their support (with full reporting on its use). But progress on wellbeing in urban areas depends on this. There are examples of intermediary institutions that can do this – for instance, the Urban Poor Fund International of Shack/Slum Dwellers International and the Asian Coalition for Community Action (ACCA), both of which support grassroots organisations to undertake initiatives and develop partnerships with local governments. Both recognise the need to set up and support city funds and national funds that are fully accountable to urban poor groups – and to external funders. If only 1 per cent of official development assistance could learn how to support representative organisations of the urban poor to work with their local governments, the proportion of the world for whom urban areas are centres of wellbeing and opportunity would increase dramatically.

Bellagio Initiative

The Future of
Philanthropy and
Development in the
Pursuit of Human
Wellbeing

Credits
David Satterthwaite and
Diana Mitlin, 'Urbanisation
as a Threat or
Opportunity in the
Promotion of Human
Wellbeing in the 21st
Century', Bellagio
Summary, Brighton: IDS

For full details on this
publication, visit:
www.bellagiointitiative.org

© Institute of Development
Studies, 2012.

The Bellagio Initiative is a series of global consultations to produce a new framework for philanthropic and international development collaboration in pursuit of human wellbeing in the 21st century. The project is led by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), the Resource Alliance and the Rockefeller Foundation.

