POPULATION & SOCIETIES

Half the world's population is urban

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Today, more than half the world's inhabitants live in a town or city, while in 1900 the proportion was just one in ten. Though rural dwellers outnumber city dwellers in Africa and Asia, urban growth is rapid on these continents and by 2030 the majority of their population will be urban. After an overview of global urbanization trends and the likely future rankings of the world's largest urban agglomerations, Jacques Véron examines how urban growth in Southern countries is affecting their development.

Today, more than half of humankind lives in towns and cities. From below 30% in 1950, the global proportion of urban population crossed the 50% threshold in 2007 and, according to the United Nations, will top 60% by 2030 [1]. The planet now has 3.3 billion urban dwellers, four and a half times more than in 1950, and by 2030 the urban population is projected to reach 5 billion, equivalent to the total world population in 1987.

#### ◆ Africa and Asia are less urbanized than the other continents

The degree of urbanization varies between continents. The most developed – Europe, North America – are also the most urbanized, with three-quarters of inhabitants living in urban areas. Though less industrialized, Latin America is also highly urbanized (78%) (Figure 1 and Table 1). In Africa and Asia, on the other hand, rural dwellers form the majority, though by 2030 they should be outnumbered by city dwellers, thanks to the rapid pace of urbanization. Within a few decades, most of the world's major cities will be located on these highly populated continents.

Though Asia is not yet highly urbanized, it is home to two-thirds of humankind and to almost half of the world's city dwellers. China and India between them account for more than a quarter of the global urban population.

Over the period 1950-2005, the urban population grew at an annual rate of below 1.4% in the developed countries, compared with 3.6% in developing countries. The highest rates were recorded in Africa (4.3% per year on average) and the lowest in Europe (below 1.2%).

Figure 1 - Proportion of urban dwellers in 2007 by continent
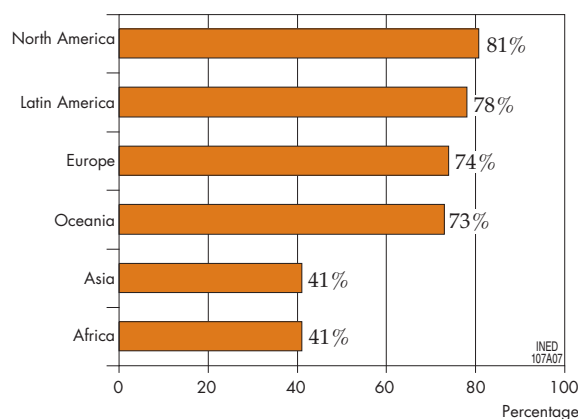
(J. Véron, *Population & Societies*, no. 435, INED, June 2007)

Source: United Nations [1]

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Urban growth was also rapid in Asia and Latin America, with annual rates of 3.4% and 3.3% respectively over the period.

The history of cities and their growth dynamics provide additional clues for understanding urbanization patterns, and help to explain, for example, why some of the world's biggest cities are found in countries where urbanization is otherwise limited. This is the case for Pakistan, where urban dwellers represented 35% of the total population in 2005, but whose largest city, Karachi, with almost 12 million inhabitants, is the world's 13th largest urban agglomeration.

◆ A growing number of expanding megacities

Persons qualified as urban dwellers live in urban areas that range from medium-sized towns to urban agglomerations of more than ten million inhabitants, though their lifestyles may be radically different.

In 2005, the urban population was spread more or less equally between cities of more than and less than 500,000 inhabitants (Table 2). The demographic weight of the largest urban agglomerations – those with more than 10 million inhabitants – has increased sharply over the last thirty years, rising from 3.5% of the total urban population in 1975 to 9.3% in 2005. In 1975, only three cities belonged to this category (Tokyo, New York and Mexico City), while in 2005 their number had risen to twenty (Table 3). Almost 300 million people lived in these megacities on that date, almost six times more than in 1975.

The proportion of the urban population living in cities of between 500,000 and 10 million inhabitants changed little between 1975 and 2005, though the number of cities in this category doubled over the same period, from 420 to 849. In fact, it was multiplied by two or more in all sub-categories: 500,000 to 1 million inhabitants, 1 to 5 million and 5 to 10 million.

According to the United Nations 2005 revision, there were 20 urban agglomerations with more than 10 million inhabitants in 2005. Though the largest, Tokyo, is in a developed country, most are to be found in developing countries (Table 3). China and India, where the proportion of urban population is lower than average for developing countries, nevertheless have five of the world's largest agglomerations: Shanghai and Peking (Beijing) in China, and Bombay (Mumbai), New Delhi and Calcutta (Kolkota) in India.

◆ Does population growth drive urban expansion?

It is in the developing countries that cities are expanding most quickly. It is generally assumed that rapid urbanization is driven by rapid population growth, both

Table 1 - Total population and percentage urban on different continents

	1950	2007	2030
	Total population (millions)		
North America	172	339	405
Latin America and Caribbean	167	572	713
Europe	547	731	707
Oceania	13	34	43
Africa	221	965	1,518
Asia	1,398	4,030	4,931
World	2,535	6,671	8,317
	Percentage urban		
North America	64	81	87
Latin America and Caribbean	42	78	85
Europe	51	74	80
Oceania	61	73	75
Africa	15	41	54
Asia	15	41	55
World	29	50	61

Note: the figures for 2030 correspond to the medium variant of the United Nations projections

(J. Véron, *Population & Societies*, no. 435, INED, June 2007)

Source: United Nations [1]

Table 2 - World urban population by number and size of urban agglomerations in 1975 and 2005

Size of agglomerations	1975	2005
10 million inhabitants or more		
Number of agglomerations	3	20
Population (millions)	53.2	292.6
Percentage urban	3.5	9.3
5 to 10 million inhabitants		
Number of agglomerations	15	30
Population (millions)	117.2	204.5
Percentage urban	7.7	6.5
1 to 5 million inhabitants		
Number of agglomerations	163	364
Population (millions)	316.8	713.2
Percentage urban	20.9	22.6
500,000 to 1 million inhabitants		
Number of agglomerations	242	455
Population (millions)	170.0	318.2
Percentage urban	11.2	10.1
Fewer than 500,000 inhabitants		
Number of agglomerations	– (*)	– (*)
Population (millions)	858.7	1,622.0
Percentage urban	56.6	51.5

* The number of small and medium-sized agglomerations is very large and no accurate figures are available.

(J. Véron, *Population & Societies*, no. 435, INED, June 2007)

Source: United Nations [5]

directly through natural growth in the urban population, and indirectly due to rural exodus in response to growing demographic pressure in rural areas. More than four-fifths of the differences in the urban population growth rate from one region of the world to another correspond to differences in the total population growth rate.

Rapid urban growth in developing countries may also be a catching-up process to make up for a previous lag in the urbanization process. However, comparing urbanization rates in the United States and India over the long term shows that the proportion of urban dwellers not only starting increasing much later in India than in the United States, but also at a much slower pace [2].

In fact, compared with developed countries, developing countries are characterized by faster total and urban population growth combined with a lower proportion of urban population. If we accept the idea of "urban transition", i.e. a universal model of urbanization that begins with slow growth followed by an ac-

celeration, and ends with a progressive stabilization of the proportion of urban population in a country, then we can say that this transition is less advanced in these countries. The stage of transition is also a factor affecting urban dynamics, since urbanization tends to accelerate the fertility decline and hence to slow down population growth. But it can be difficult to distinguish the factors behind urban growth which are due to generalized demographic trends, linked, for example, to the country's level of development, and those which arise from the country's specific settlement history. In Argentina, where more than 90% of population was urbanized in 2005, some 32% of the country's entire population – and 36% of urban dwellers – live in the city of Buenos Aires. In Brazil, less than 10% of the population live in São Paulo, the country's largest urban agglomeration, though the city has more inhabitants than Buenos Aires.

◆ **Is urbanization holding back development?**

Nathan Keyfitz [3] found it hard to imagine successful economic, political and social development in a country with no cities. The economic historian Paul Bairoch, who also linked the "progress of civilization" with the expansion of towns and cities, later considered that this hypothesis of a positive and mutually reinforcing

Table 3 - Urban agglomerations with more than 10 million inhabitants in 1975 and in 2005, and projections for 2015 (population in millions)

1975		2005		2015 (projection)	
Tokyo	26,6	Tokyo	35,2	Tokyo	35.5
New York	15.9	Mexico City	19.4	Bombay	21.9
Mexico City	10.7	New York	18.7	Mexico	21.6
		São Paulo	18.3	São Paulo	20.5
		Bombay	18.2	New York	19.9
		New Delhi	15.0	New Delhi	18.6
		Shanghai	14.5	Shanghai	17.2
		Calcutta	14.3	Calcutta	17.0
		Jakarta	13.2	Dhaka	16.8
		Buenos Aires	12.6	Jakarta	16.8
		Dhaka	12.4	Lagos	16.1
		Los Angeles	12.3	Karachi	15.2
		Karachi	11.7	Buenos Aires	13.4
		Rio de Janeiro	11.5	Cairo	13.1
		Osaka-Kobe	11.3	Los Angeles	13.1
		Cairo	11.1	Manila	12.9
		Lagos	10.9	Peking	12.8
		Peking	10.8	Rio de Janeiro	12.8
		Manila	10.7	Osaka-Kobe	11.3
		Moscow	10.7	Istanbul	11.2
				Moscow	11.0
				Guangzhou	10.4

(J. Véron, *Population & Societies*, no. 435, INED, June 2007)
Source: United Nations [5]

The "ruralization" of African cities

Though Africa has a relatively low proportion of urban population (41%), its cities are growing rapidly. The United Nations is forecasting annual urban growth of more than 3% up to 2030 (compared with 4.4% between 1950 and 2000) and a percentage urban of around 53% by that time. But some African cities are no longer able to meet the needs of their inhabitants and of the rural-urban migrants that are swelling their ranks. The structural adjustment plans imposed by international financial institutions have reduced the purchasing power of city dwellers and cut welfare spending, notably in education and health.

This deterioration of urban living conditions has led to a "ruralization" of the cities, as urban dwellers revert to village lifestyles. Informal and agricultural activities are developing, and workers in these sectors include not only persons without wage employment, but also those who have a job but do not earn enough to live decently [8]. As a result, many urban dwellers – in secondary towns and cities especially – make their living partly or entirely through agriculture. Housing difficulties are also prompting the development of rudimentary dwellings around the edges of cities, sometimes very similar to those found in the villages.

[8] Alain Dubresson and Jean-Pierre Raison, *L'Afrique subsaharienne, une géographie du changement*, Armand Colin, 1998.

interaction between urbanization and economic development was not applicable to developing countries today [4]. He has qualified the urbanization of developing countries as "urban inflation". Of course, it is easy to point up the problems facing cities, such as poor public transport, housing shortages or inadequate infrastructures, in poor countries especially, but it is more difficult to conclude that the urbanization process itself holds back all forms of development. Nonetheless, in the poorest countries, where the population is still growing rapidly, it may indeed be true that urbanization has become independent of economic growth, i.e. that, among other things, migration to the city is totally unrelated to urban labour market demand. As urban growth is also driven by a surplus of births over deaths, a low level of urban development delays the demographic transition while sustaining high urban birth rates.

The problems of integration encountered by newly-arriving urban migrants, in Africa especially, have been clearly demonstrated (see Box). These difficulties concern not only access to the labour market and to housing, but also union formation. The problems of overcrowding in many Southern cities, the high pollution levels and the growing number of people living in shantytowns – thought to total around one third of the world's city dwellers – are all apparent signs of a conflict between urbanization and development. But closer analysis reveals urban dynamics that are often very complex. For example, as demonstrated by Marie-Caroline Saglio-Yatzimirsky, the shantytown of Dharavi in the heart of Bombay, India, home to a million people in an area of three square kilometres, is actually a city within the city, with its own organization and structure, that is integrating new migrants and diversifying its activities, initially based on leather working, to maintain its position on the international market [2].

Some say that the cities of the developed world are also in crisis, as evidenced by the problems of social exclusion, spatial segregation, and the growing numbers of marginalized individuals living in severe economic insecurity. But are these problems exclusively urban, or are they simply more "visible" in cities where populations are large? To what extent are the problems of the American ghettoes or the French "*banlieues*" specifically urban? As Jacques Donzelot says: "the fact that social problems are concentrated in certain urban zones proves that there is a problem *in* the city but not *of* the city" [6]

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The world will become increasingly urbanized over the coming decades, though there will still be more than three billion rural dwellers in 2030. Much has been said about the need to achieve a true balance between urban and rural areas, notably to halt, or at least slow down, the rural exodus, though the nature of this exodus has never been clearly defined. The "urban bias", i.e. the higher availability of amenities and public facilities for inhabitants of towns and cities, is unlikely to disappear, especially in a context where the political weight of urban dwellers is growing as their numbers increase. The scale of inequalities between town and country, in access to electricity and water for example, varies from one world region to another, though rural areas are strongly disadvantaged in this respect [7]. For reasons both of efficacy, i.e. to limit the number of rural-urban migrants, and of equity, rural zones must not be left out of development.

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ABSTRACT

Half of the world's inhabitants (3.3 billion people) now live in towns and cities. And most of the world's urban dwellers live in developing countries, where populations are largest. Indeed, one in two live in Asia, home to two-thirds of humankind. Over the last fifty years, urban populations have been growing much faster in poorer countries than in the richest ones (4.3% per year on average in Africa, 1.2% in Europe), and 15 of the world's 20 largest cities are in developing countries. While urbanization is historically a driver of economic and social progress, the rapid urban expansion in Southern countries, and the housing, employment and transport problems associated with this growth appear to be holding back their development.