

MYTH 5: “More than half the world’s population live in cities”

The latest census data shows that the world was less urbanized in 2000 than had been expected. The date at which the world’s urban population grows to exceed that of its rural population has been delayed; this transition had been expected in the late 1990s but is now predicted to happen around 2007. The world’s urban population in 2000 had 270 million people fewer than had been predicted twenty years previously.³⁴ As a later section describes in more detail, many nations had much slower urban population growth rates than anticipated during the 1980s and 1990s, in part because of serious economic problems. For most nations, urban population growth rates also dropped due to falling fertility rates. For some, it was also because of rising mortality rates. By the late 1990s, this included large and growing levels of mortality from HIV/AIDS. This is particularly apparent in certain sub-Saharan African nations with high levels of infection and the absence of drugs to control it. This problem is reshaping urban trends in many nations.³⁵

The world’s urban population may soon come to outnumber its rural population but this is not the same as half the world population living in cities because the proportion of people in cities is considerably below the proportion living in urban centres. There are thousands of settlements in Africa, Asia and Latin America (and also North America and Europe) that are classified by their national governments as urban centres but which lack the economic, administrative or political status that would normally be considered as criteria for classification as a city.³⁶

Perhaps too much is made of the fact that soon, more than half the world’s population will live in urban areas. The figures for the proportion of the world’s population living in urban areas are strongly influenced by how ‘urban centres’ are defined in the large-population nations. If India chose to use Sweden’s definition for urban centres, most of India’s population would become urban and the world would already have more than half its population living in urban areas (see Box 1).

³⁴ See United Nations (1982), *Estimates and Projections of Urban, Rural and City Populations, 1950-2025; The 1980 Assessment*, Department of International Economic and Social Affairs, ST/ESA/SER.R/45, New York, compared to 2001 Assessment (United Nations 2002, op. cit.)

³⁵ Potts, Deborah (2001), *Urban Growth and Urban Economies in Eastern and Southern Africa: an Overview*, Paper presented at a workshop on African Urban Economies: Viability, Vitality of Vitiation of Major Cities in East and Southern Africa, Netherlands, 9-11 November, 19 pages plus annex to be published in D. Bryceson and D. Potts (eds), *African Urban Economies: Viability, Vitality or Vitiation of Major Cities in East and Southern Africa*.

³⁶ There is no agreed international definition as to what is a ‘city’ although the term city implies more than a small urban centre with a few thousand inhabitants.

BOX 1: The different definitions used for 'urban centres'

The urbanisation level for any nation is the proportion of the national population living in urban centres. So it is influenced by how the national government defines an 'urban centre'. For instance, most of India's rural population lives in villages with between 500 and 5,000 inhabitants and if these were classified as 'urban' (as they would be by some national urban definitions), India would suddenly have a predominantly urban population rather than a predominantly rural population. Each nation uses its own criteria for defining urban centres (or for distinguishing them from other settlements). In virtually all nations, official definitions ensure that urban centres include all settlements with 20,000 or more inhabitants. However, governments differ in the size of smaller settlements they include as urban centres – some that include all settlements with a few hundred inhabitants as urban; some that only include settlements with 20,000 or more inhabitants. This limits the accuracy of international comparisons, because in most nations, a large part of the populations lives in settlements that fall into this range. By its 1996 census, 17.5% of Egypt's population lived in settlements with between 10,000 and 20,000 inhabitants which had many urban characteristics, including significant non-agricultural economies and occupational structures. They were not classified as urban areas – although they would have been in most other nations. If they were considered urban it would make Egypt much more "urbanised" and would bring major changes to urban growth rates.³⁷ If the Indian or Chinese government chose to change the criteria used in their censuses to define urban centres, this could increase or decrease the world's level of urbanisation by several percentage points. And there are good reasons for thinking that the current criteria used in China considerably understate the size of its urban population.³⁸ Revisions by, for instance, the Nigerian or Brazilian census authorities could significantly alter Africa's or South America's level of urbanisation. In some nations, revisions in their urban definitions are partly responsible for changes in their urban growth rates and levels of urbanisation.³⁹ What all this adds up to is that the world's level of urbanisation is best understood not as a precise figure (47.7% in 2001) but as a figure somewhere between 40% and 55%, depending on the criteria used to define urban centres.

It would be interesting to explore the reasons for the outliers in Figure 1 – for instance why Thailand, Namibia, Slovenia and Finland appear relatively unurbanized for their levels of per capita income while Armenia, Congo Republic, Jordan, Venezuela and Lebanon appear more urbanized than expected. But this may be more to do with differences in the urban definitions than differences in the relationship between urbanization and economic development.

³⁷ Denis, Eric and Asef Bayat (2002), *Egypt: Twenty Years of Urban Transformations*, Urban Change Working Paper 5, IIED, London.

³⁸ UNCHS (1996), *An Urbanizing World: Global Report on Human Settlements, 1996*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York.

³⁹ See Afsar, Rita (2002), *Urban Change in Bangladesh*, Urban Change Working Paper 1, IIED, London.