

## THE SCALE, SPEED AND LOCATION OF URBAN CHANGE

It is often stated that urban growth in Africa, Asia and Latin America is explosive, unprecedented and out of control. For instance, "...it is in the Third World that the urban explosion is taking place"<sup>21</sup> and the "...health and well-being of literally hundreds of millions of men, and especially women and children, are threatened by an urban population explosion in the developing countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America."<sup>22</sup> These are typical of the kinds of general comments made about urban change in Africa, Asia and Latin America. A paper in *Foreign Affairs* in 1996 was entitled "The exploding cities of the developing world"<sup>23</sup>. An article in *Newsweek* in 1994 talked about Asian mega cities running riot, driven by explosive economic and population growth.<sup>24</sup> It is also often assumed that not only is rapid urbanization taking place all over Africa, Asia and Latin America but that it will continue. For instance "Unrestrained rural-to-urban migration has caused rapid urban growth in all countries in the developing world and is expected to continue."<sup>25</sup> Most of this is untrue or at best partially true. The predictions are unlikely to come true.

### MYTH 4: "Mega-cities are growing rapidly and will dominate the urban future"

The latest census data show that there are far fewer mega-cities than had been expected and that they contain a small proportion of the world's population. Most proved to have several million inhabitants less than had been expected in 2000. Many of them are growing slowly with more people moving out than in,<sup>26</sup> some are losing population. In addition, more decentralized patterns of urban development are apparent in many nations, which suggests that fewer mega-cities will develop and that most of those that do will be smaller.

Mega-cities are generally defined as cities with ten million or more inhabitants. By concentrating such large numbers of enterprises and people, they do present particularly challenging difficulties both for ensuring that their populations' needs are met and for good environmental management (including keeping down air pollution and limiting ecological impacts on their region).

But:

- There are relatively few of them; by 2000, there were 16 mega-cities. This is much less than had been anticipated;
- These 16 mega-cities had less than 4 percent of the world's population;
- They were heavily concentrated in the world's largest economies (as discussed earlier);

<sup>21</sup> Davidson, Joan, Dorothy Myers and Manab Chakraborty (1992), *No Time to Waste: Poverty and the Global Environment*, OXFAM, Oxford, page 109.

<sup>22</sup> WHO, WHO Press Release WHO/47, 17th November 1989

<sup>23</sup> Linden, Eugene (1996), "The exploding cities of the developing world", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 75, No. 1, January/February, pages 52-65.

<sup>24</sup> *Newsweek* May 9 1994, page 37

<sup>25</sup> Linares, Carlos A. (1994), *Urban Environmental Challenges*, WRI Issues in Development, World Resources Institute, Washington DC, page 1.

<sup>26</sup> They continue to grow because their rate of natural increase is larger than the rate of net out-migration

- Most were much smaller in 2000 than had been anticipated. For instance, Mexico City had 18 million people in 2000<sup>27</sup> - not the 31 million people predicted 25 years ago.<sup>28</sup> Calcutta had around 13 million by 2000, not the 40-50 million predicted during the 1970s.<sup>29</sup> Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Seoul, Chennai (formerly Madras) and Cairo are among the many other large cities that, by 2000, had several million inhabitants fewer than had been predicted;
- Most have life expectancies and provision for piped water, sanitation, schools and health care that are well above their national average – even if the aggregate statistics for each mega-city hide significant proportions of their population who are living in very poor conditions;
- Their populations are often over-stated because the figures given for their populations are for the population in large metropolitan areas or planning regions which include many rural settlements and separate urban centres. For instance, population figures for most of China's large cities are not for the city but for the 'municipality' that is much larger than the city. This confusion between local government area and city area explains why the city of Chongqing sometimes appears as the world's largest city with a population of 30 million. But this is the population in Chongqing municipality which covers 82,400 square kilometres (about the size of Austria or of all of the Netherlands and Denmark combined); the city population is around 6 million.

If London wanted to 'boost' its population, it could easily re-establish itself among the world's largest cities by following the example of the largest Chinese cities and having more extensive boundaries. This could be achieved if the Greater London Authority was able to convince the national government that a new London municipality be created, incorporating neighbouring counties such as Surrey, Kent, Essex, Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Berkshire – although one suspects there would be a certain reluctance on the part of most people living in these counties to such a change.

Many of the world's most economically successful regions have urban forms that are not dominated by a large central city, with new enterprises developing in a network of smaller cities and greenfield sites – for instance in Silicon Valley and Orange County in California and Bavaria in Germany<sup>30</sup> and in the network of cities in Southeast Brazil that have attracted much new investment away from Sao Paulo.

In all high-income nations and many middle and low income nations, smaller cities have a growing capacity to attract a significant proportion of new investment away from the largest cities. In the many nations that have had effective decentralisations, urban authorities in smaller cities have more resources and capacity to compete for new investment.<sup>31</sup> This suggests that successful economies may produce more decentralized patterns of urban development in the future with less development

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<sup>27</sup> Garza, Gustavo (2002), *Urbanisation of Mexico during the Twentieth Century*, Urban Change Working Paper 7, IIED, London.

<sup>28</sup> United Nations (1975), *Trends and Prospects in the Population of Urban Agglomerations, as assessed in 1973-75*, Population Division, Department of International Economic and Social Affairs, ESA/P/WP.58, New York.

<sup>29</sup> Brown, Lester (1974), *In the Human Interest*, W. W. Norton and Co., New York.

<sup>30</sup> Castells, Manuel and Peter Hall (1994), *Technopoles of the World: The Making of 21st Century Industrial Complexes*, Routledge, London and New York, 275 pages.

<sup>31</sup> Although most nations have had some form of decentralization over the last 10-15 years, the extent to which decentralization helps to underpin more decentralized patterns of urban growth depends on the extent of this decentralization, including the extent to which resources and capacity to raise revenues and invest in infrastructure have been decentralized from national or provincial/state authorities to urban authorities.

concentrated in very large cities. Advanced telecommunications systems have helped underpin more decentralised patterns of production which, in turn, means more decentralised patterns of urban development. The exceptions are the large cities that can adapt or that are successful at retaining a role as command and control centres for global corporations and the producer services they require.<sup>32</sup>

What we do not know is whether the trend towards more decentralised urban patterns will manifest itself through huge sprawling urbanised regions or through networks of connected compact cities with well-managed surrounds. In part, this also depends on what urban policies are implemented. It also remains to be seen whether the smaller cities that have attracted new investments away from Mexico City, Sao Paulo, Beijing, Shanghai, New York and Calcutta become very large cities or in turn lose out to another generation of successful smaller cities.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Sassen, Saskia (1994), *Cities in a World Economy*, Pine Forge Press, Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi, 157 pages.

<sup>33</sup> See Bourne, L.S. (1995), *Urban Growth and Population Redistribution in North America: A Diverse and Unequal Landscape*, Major Report 32, Centre for Urban and Community Studies, University of Toronto, Toronto, 41 pages for a discussion of this in relation to the United States.