

**MYTH 6: “The speed of urban change in poorer nations is unprecedented with new cities mushrooming everywhere and with Africa, Asia and Latin America having the fastest growing cities”**

The scale of urban change over the last fifty years is unprecedented. But the speed of urban change in low and middle income nations is not unprecedented. There are many historical precedents of nations with faster increases in their levels of urbanization than most of those taking place in recent decades in low and middle income nations. Many high income nations underwent periods when they had greater increases in their level of urbanization over a 30 year period than that experienced by most low and middle income nations. For instance, the level of urbanization in Japan increased from 24 percent in 1930 to 64 percent in 1960; that in the UK went from 37.1 percent to 60.6 percent between 1850 and 1880.<sup>40</sup> The change in the level of urbanization in low and middle income nations between 1950 and 1975 was comparable to that in Europe and North America between 1875 and 1900.<sup>41</sup> The rates of net rural to urban migration required to achieve these increases may have been greater in Europe and North America in the late 19th century than in low and middle income nations from 1950-1975 in view of the fact that the rates of natural increase in rural areas were probably higher than those in urban areas at that time.<sup>42</sup>

In addition, some of the most rapid increases in levels of urbanization in recent decades have not been in Africa, Asia and Latin America but in Europe. Very few countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America have had increases in their levels of urbanization that compare with that in Lithuania between 1959 and 1989 (from 39 percent to 68 percent) or Belarus (from 31 to 66 percent urban in these same years) or Finland or Norway between 1960 and 1990.<sup>43</sup> Although sub-Saharan Africa is generally considered to be a region experiencing very rapid urbanization, several African nations have among the smallest increases in their levels of urbanization in recent decades (including Rwanda, Zambia and Somalia). However, as noted earlier, some caution is needed in making generalizations for sub-Saharan Africa because there is no recent census data for many nations.

**Perhaps surprisingly, new cities are not mushrooming everywhere.** Most of the largest urban centres in Europe, Latin America, Asia and North Africa today have been important urban centres for centuries. Of the 388 cities in the world that had more than a million inhabitants by 2000, more than three fifths were already urban centres 200 years ago, while more than a quarter have been urban centres for at least 500 years.<sup>44</sup> It is perhaps surprising that North America and sub-Saharan Africa stand out as having most ‘new cities’ among the world’s largest cities today. These are cities that now have more than a million inhabitants but had not been founded or did not exist as urban centres by 1800

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<sup>40</sup> Bairoch, Paul (1988), *Cities and Economic Development: From the Dawn of History to the Present*, Mansell, London, 574 pages

<sup>41</sup> Preston, Samuel H. (1979), "Urban growth in developing countries: a demographic reappraisal", *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 195-215.

<sup>42</sup> Davis, Kingsley (1973), "Cities and mortality", International Population Conference, International Union for the Scientific Study of Population (IUSSP), Vol.3, pp. 259-282.

<sup>43</sup> UNCHS (Habitat) (1996), *An Urbanizing World: Global Report on Human Settlements, 1996*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York.

<sup>44</sup> These statistics almost certainly considerably understate the extent to which the world’s largest cities today have long been important urban centres. This is related to the incompleteness of historic records for city populations, despite the efforts of scholars such as Tertius Chandler and Paul Bairoch to fill this gap.

**Not all the fastest growing cities are in low and middle income nations:** It is often assumed that the world's most rapidly growing cities are concentrated in Latin America, Asia and Africa. But several cities in the United States were among the world's most rapidly growing large cities between 1950 and 2000. Nairobi, Kenya's capital, is often held up as an example of a particularly rapidly growing city – but both Miami and Phoenix in the United States had larger populations than Nairobi in 2000, although all three were small settlements in 1900. The population of Los Angeles was around one tenth that of Calcutta in 1900, yet in 2000 it had about the same number of people in its metropolitan area.

**Figure 2: The distribution of the world's urban population in 2000**

