Saint Peter's University High School Model United Nations

Commission on Population and Development (CPD)

Topic A: The Challenges of Rapid Urbanization

Introduction

Our world is an increasingly urban world. The explosive growth of urban settlements throughout the 20th century continues in the 21st, with over 50% of the global population now living in cities.[1] This figure is projected to increase, to over 70% by 2050.[2] While the rate of urban growth has been falling, it continues to outpace rural growth rates (Figure 1)[3]. In absolute numbers – both in land area and population – cities are getting bigger. The process through which cities grow is referred to as urbanization and the rapid pace of urbanization holds challenges for both city residents and the globe as we struggle to meet 2030 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 – to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.[4] These challenges are exacerbated by the fact that urbanization rates are highest in lesser developed regions of the world.[5] In fact, the fastest growing cities tend to be located in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (Figure 2). As growth rates outpace the ability of cities in lower-income countries to make the necessary planning and financial investments to absorb increasing populations, cities can become more crowded, unhealthy, polluted, and unequal.
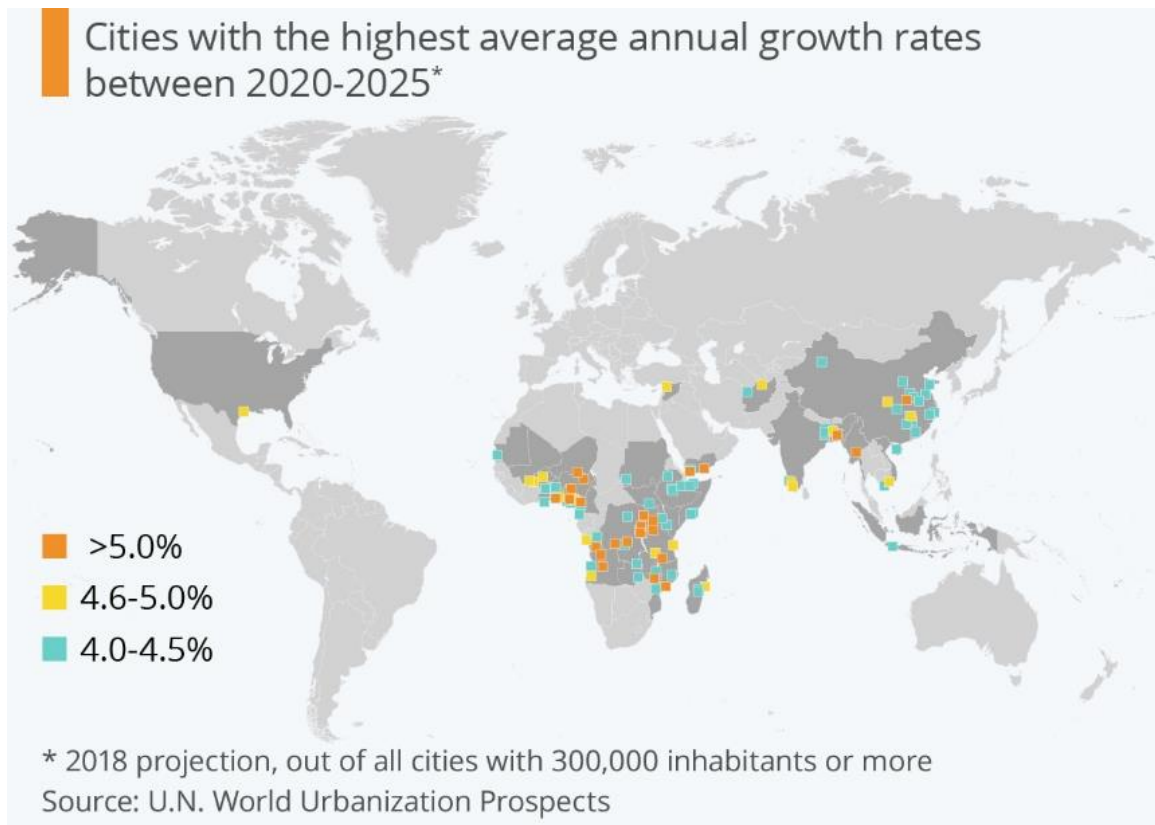
Figure 1

TABLE I.1. TOTAL, URBAN AND RURAL POPULATIONS AND THEIR AVERAGE ANNUAL RATES OF CHANGE, FOR THE WORLD AND DEVELOPMENT GROUPS, SELECTED YEARS AND PERIODS, 1950-2050

Development group	Population (billions)						Average annual rate of change (per cent)				
	1950	1970	1990	2018	2030	2050	1950-1970	1970-1990	1990-2018	2018-2030	2030-2050
Total population											
World	2.54	3.70	5.33	7.63	8.55	9.77	1.89	1.83	1.28	0.95	0.67
More developed regions	0.81	1.01	1.15	1.26	1.29	1.30	1.07	0.64	0.34	0.17	0.03
Less developed regions	1.72	2.69	4.18	6.37	7.26	8.47	2.23	2.21	1.50	1.09	0.77
Urban population											
World	0.75	1.35	2.29	4.22	5.17	6.68	2.95	2.63	2.18	1.69	1.28
More developed regions	0.45	0.67	0.83	0.99	1.05	1.12	2.06	1.04	0.64	0.46	0.34
Less developed regions	0.30	0.68	1.46	3.23	4.12	5.56	4.02	3.82	2.83	2.03	1.50
Rural population											
World	1.79	2.35	3.04	3.41	3.38	3.09	1.37	1.30	0.41	-0.07	-0.45
More developed regions	0.37	0.33	0.32	0.27	0.24	0.17	-0.48	-0.27	-0.58	-0.95	-1.61
Less developed regions	1.42	2.01	2.72	3.14	3.14	2.92	1.75	1.52	0.51	0.00	-0.37

Source: World Urbanization Prospects, 2018

Figure 2
Fastest Growing Cities in the World

Cities with the highest average annual growth rates between 2020-2025*

■ >5.0%
■ 4.6-5.0%
■ 4.0-4.5%

* 2018 projection, out of all cities with 300,000 inhabitants or more
Source: U.N. World Urbanization Prospects

There are multiple areas in which rapid urbanization has resulted in challenges to sustainable development. Rapid increases in population and land areas give cities little chance of making the infrastructure investments necessary to create healthy neighborhoods.[6] The result can be lack of access to safe housing, electricity, potable water, and sanitation.[7] In turn, these can lead to the rapid spread of communicable diseases, as was certainly the case of the coronavirus pandemic of 2020.[8] Rapid urbanization can also result in social exclusion and inequality. People migrating to cities are often met with prejudice and exploitation and the concentration of people in poor, crowded slums prevents full participation in civic life.[9] This helps explain why over two-thirds of the world's population have experienced an increase in inequality since 1980.[10]

The environmental impact of rapidly expanding cities is also significant. Studies show that the physical extent of urban areas is growing much faster than their population.[11] As cities grow, they also sprawl outwards, consuming environmentally sensitive lands and making them more vulnerable to the effects of climate change.[12] According to Un-Habitat:

"The combined threat of rising sea levels and storm surge in coastal cities could result in the loss of more than one trillion dollars each year by 2050. Destruction of existing infrastructure, property and assets caused by tropical cyclones or flooding are among the

most visible impacts of such losses, but the damage caused by the secondary threats of disease, displacement, increased crime and civil unrest should not be discounted."[13]

Lack of proper regulation or treatment of urban pollution means that rapidly growing cities are also contributors to sources of climate change.

Current Situation

There are two major strategies for minimizing the negative impacts of rapid urbanization. First, member states have attempted to slow the growth of cities through the redistribution of populations to less developed areas of the country.[14] One way this can be accomplished is through the decentralization of government functions to outlying areas – developing new centers of opportunity to take the pressure off existing cities.[15] National governments have also taken steps to reduce migration from rural areas.[16] The second major strategy is to increase the capacity of cities to absorb rapid growth in a more sustainable way. Such efforts include building the planning capacity of local governments, increased financial investments in infrastructure, and better enforcement of regulations.[17] Improvements in both of these strategies will be necessary to help meet the SDG targets.

In 2016, the United Nations adopted the New Urban Agenda (NUA) – an effort that lays out a 20-year vision for sustainable urban development.[18] UN-Habitat developed the SDG Cities program in 2020 to offer "a systematic way to support cities become sustainable and resilient by connecting a value chain of data, inclusive, evidence-based strategic planning, strengthened capacity of local institutions and the development and financing of high impact projects."[19] Recent evaluations of efforts to alleviate the effects of rapid urbanization clearly show that not enough is being done. One of the major obstacles is financing. For example, it is estimated that $57 trillion in global infrastructure investment is required to meet the 2030 targets.[20] Yet, there has been a consistent shortfall in the funding available for urban development programs.[21] Many city governments also continue to struggle with the planning expertise and resources needed to accommodate rapid growth.[22] To help combat this, UN-Habitat has produced the *New Urban Agenda Illustrated Handbook* – a series of publications and online courses to aid local government planners in their work.[23] However, although a number of cities are using this resource, implementation is often hampered by lack of support from national governments.[24]

Questions to Address

- How can the UN help elevate the focus of national governments to address rapid urbanization?
- What more can be done to support and encourage the redistribution of population away from rapidly growing cities?
- How can we better encourage the adoption and use of urban planning strategies and investments that limit the negative impacts of rapid urbanization?

Topic B: Impacts of Ageing Populations

Introduction

The world is becoming older. Since 1950, advances in health care and nutrition have significantly extended the life expectancy of most populations while economic development has led to declining birth rates.[25] As fewer people are born and more are living longer, the median age of the population has increased.[26] The impact of these changes varies and depends on what stage of the *demographic transition* a country is currently positioned. The demographic transition model captures how societies change by examining their birth and death rates over time. The model identifies four stages. The first is when both birth and death rates are high, resulting in little population growth and relatively low life expectancy. In stage 2, death rates begin to decline with advances in healthcare and disease prevention, but birth rates continue to be high. In stage 3, the birth rate begins to fall until the final stage where both rates are low. (Figure 3.)[27] The greatest population growth occurs in stages 2 and 3. Most developed countries are in stage 4, typified by low birth rates and ageing populations. Less developed countries are still in the middle stages – experiencing high growth rates.

Figure 3

Source: UNEP
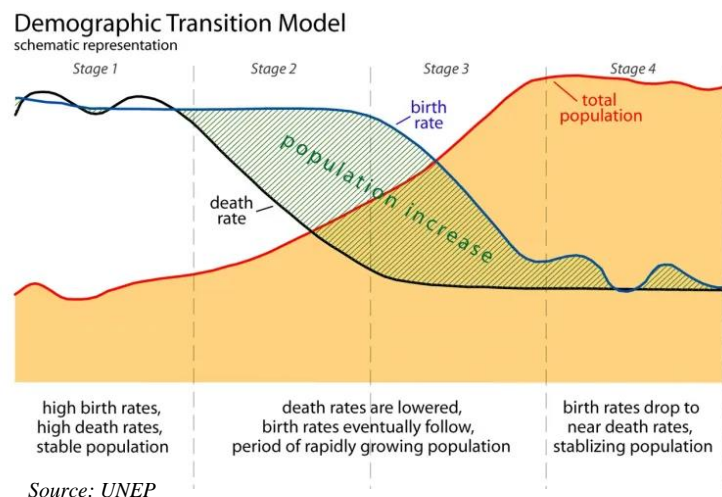
As countries develop, they move through a period of benefitting from a "demographic dividend" where a larger proportion of the population reaches working-age, relative to both older and younger cohorts.[28] This is thought of as the ideal situation for development, as economic growth can occur with proportionately fewer resources going to education and elderly care. Many less developed countries are currently experiencing this dividend.[29] As countries reach the end of the model, however, they experience a greater proportion of older people – meaning the elderly population is being supported by fewer and fewer working age people. This is the situation of many highly developed economies in Nart America, Europe, and East Asia.

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These relative shifts in age cohorts are illustrated in a "population pyramid" – a graph that shows population numbers of different age cohorts by sex. Before countries begin to develop, the graph has a very wide base (lots of young people) and a very narrow peak (very few old people). As they develop, the pyramid widens until eventually the pyramid resembles more of a column. Figure 4 presents a prediction of what the global population pyramid will look at by 2100. The model shows significant growth in the population aged 60 years and older.[30]

Figure 4

The Demography of the World Population from 1950 to 2100

Shown is the age distribution of the world population – by sex – from 1950 to 2018 and the *UN Population Division*'s projection until 2100.
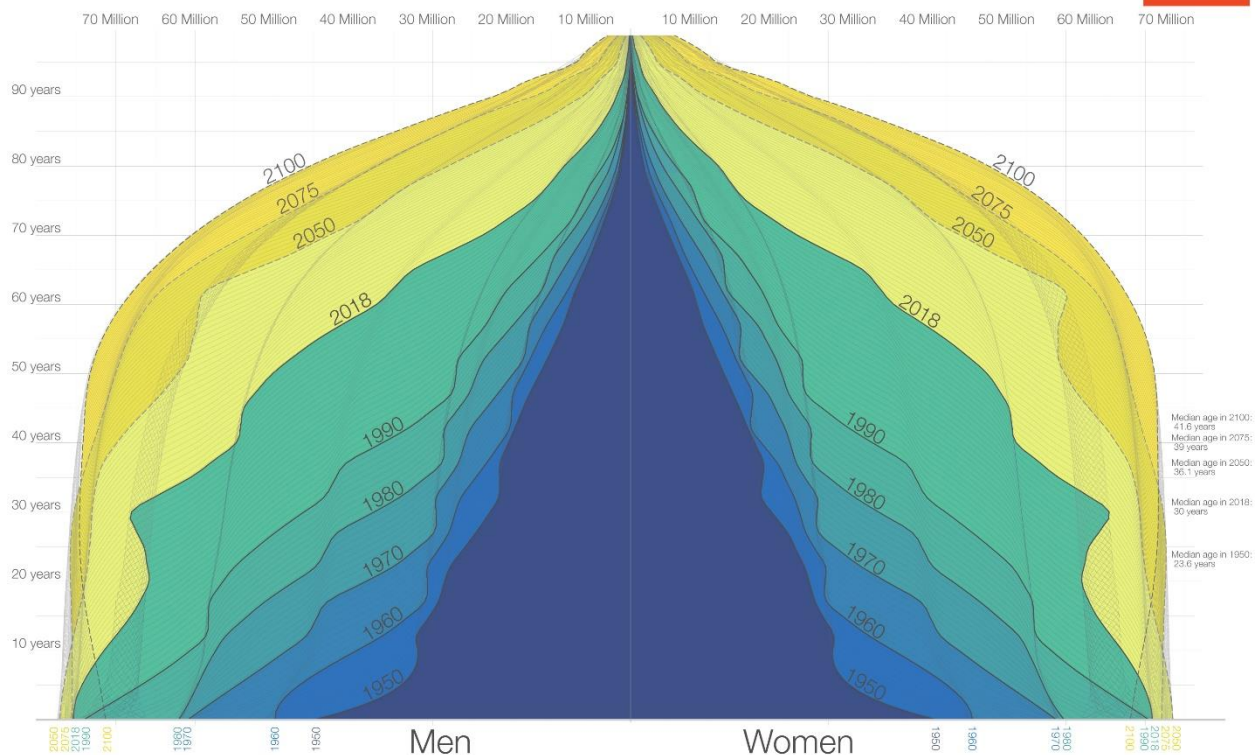
Data source: United Nations Population Division – World Population Prospects 2017; Medium Variant.
The data visualization is available at OurWorldinData.org, where you find more research on how the world is changing and why.

Licensed under CC-BY by the author Max Roser.

Current Situation

Societies with ageing populations face many challenges as well as opportunities. As people age and leave the workforce, they become more dependent on their savings, on family support, and/or on government assistance.[31] In cases where people have been unable to save or where government assistance is sparse, older people can become impoverished.[32] Even where social safety nets exist to help support the elderly, the relative decline in working-age population can lead to substantial government deficits and debt as more money leaves public pension systems than enters it.[33] Older people are also greater consumers of healthcare services, and the costs of those services tend to outpace growth in income.[34] Nevertheless, it's important to not view

ageing populations as a "problem". In fact, the increase in global median age can be viewed as a great success:

> "Population ageing signals our extraordinary collective success in improving living conditions for billions of people around the world. Better sanitation and medical therapies, greater access to education and family planning, and strides towards gender equality and women's empowerment have all contributed to, and in some cases benefitted from, the steady move from high to low levels of fertility and mortality. These advances have ushered in an era where rapid population growth is slowly coming to an end, accompanied by a gradual but permanent shift towards older ages."[35]

Older people themselves still contribute to economies through paid work and also through unpaid work such as childcare and financial assistance within families.[36]

Figure 5:

Percentages of Governments, globally and by region, that adopted specific ageing-related policy measures during the five years prior to data collection (roughly 2014-2018)
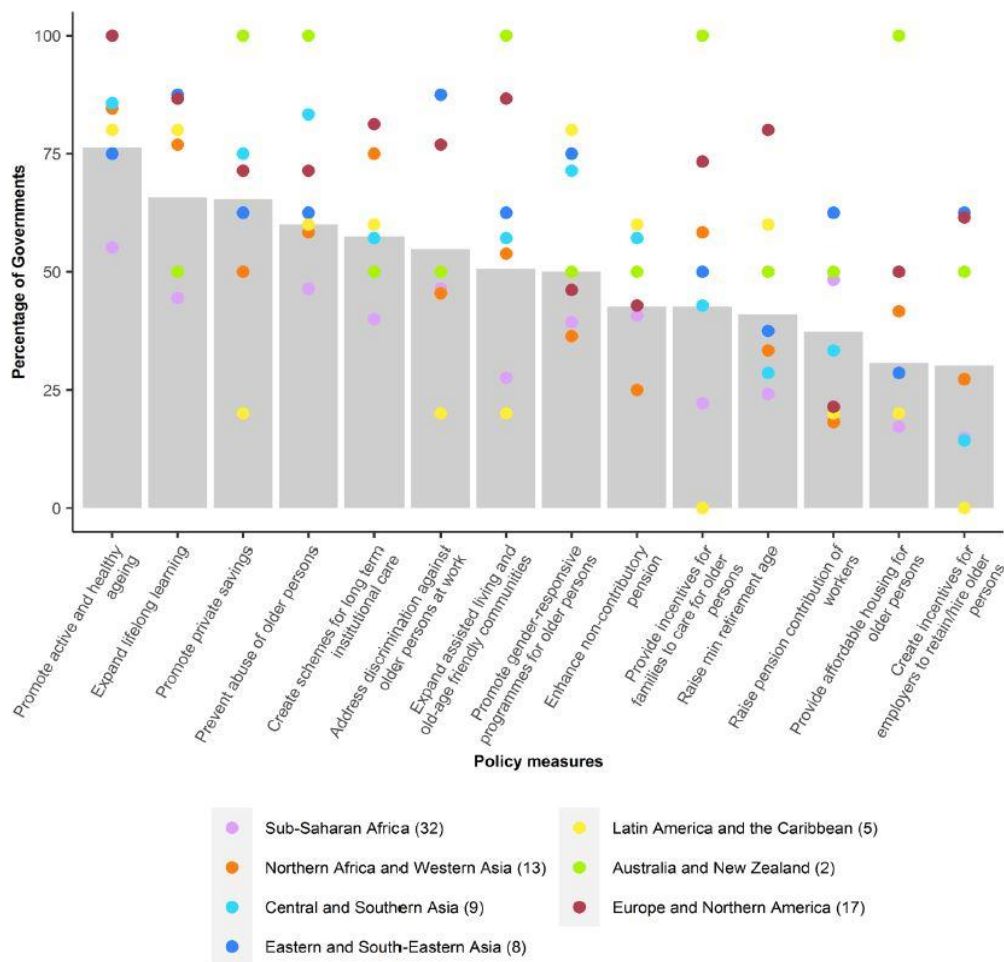
National governments have implemented a number of policies to address an ageing population (Figure 5).[37] As the graph illustrates, countries in the regions of Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and Northern Africa/Middle East tend to be among the lowest adopters of ageing policies. This is unsurprising given the relatively low age median in many of these countries.[38] Nevertheless, least developed countries need to make the most of the time and resources created during this current period of the demographic dividend in order to meet the challenges of an ageing population that will manifest in a generation or two.[39] The United Nations can play a role in distilling the lessons from countries already in the final stage of the demographic transition, helping less developed countries prepare for growth in ageing populations, and creating and disseminating policy guidelines for all member states.

Questions to Address

- How can the United Nations call more attention to the coming demographic shift to an ageing population?
- What lessons can be learned from countries that are currently dealing with large populations of older people?
- What tolls and resources do less developed countries need to begin planning and implementing policies for ageing populations?

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[4] "Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable." United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal11#targets_and_indicators , Accessed 12 December 2024.

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[10] *World Cities Report 2020*, p. 20

[11] Ibid, p. 16

[12] *World Cities Report 2024: Cities and Climate Action*, United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat): Nairobi, Kenya, 2024.

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[16] Ibid, p. 1

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[23] *The New Urban Agenda*, United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UN-Habitat), Nairobi, Kenya, 2020, p. xvi.

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[25] "Ageing", Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/ageing-1, Accessed 14 January 2025.

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[29] *Policy Brief No. 161: On the path to an older population: maximizing the benefits from the demographic dividend in the least developed countries*, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, August 2024, p.1

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[32] Ibid.

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