

CHAPTER
1



Children in an increasingly urban world

The day is coming when the majority of the world's children will grow up in cities and towns. Already, half of all people live in urban areas. By mid-century, over two thirds of the global population will call these places home. This report focuses on the children – more than one billion and counting – who live in urban settings around the world.

Urban areas offer great potential to secure children's rights and accelerate progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Cities attract and generate wealth, jobs and investment, and are therefore associated with economic development. The more urban a country, the more likely it is to have higher incomes and stronger institutions.¹ Children in urban areas are often better off than their rural counterparts thanks to higher standards of health, protection, education and sanitation. But urban advances have

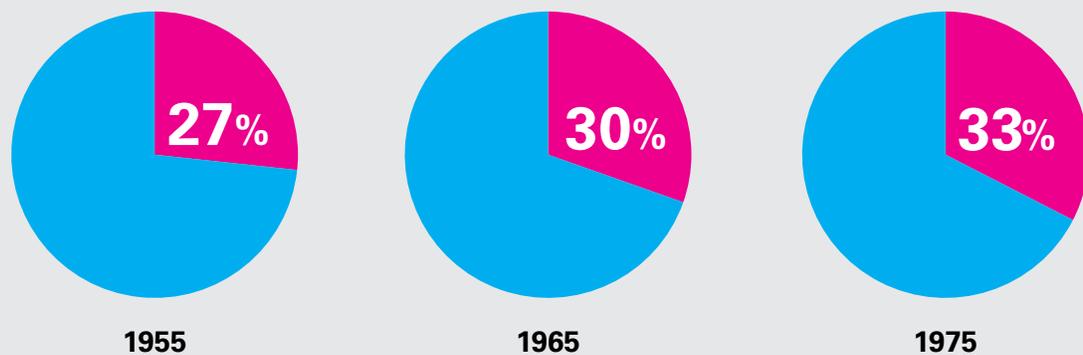
been uneven, and millions of children in marginalized urban settings confront daily challenges and deprivations of their rights.

Traditionally, when children's well-being is assessed, a comparison is drawn between the indicators for children in rural areas and those in urban settings. As expected, urban results tend to be better, whether in terms of the proportion of children reaching their first or fifth birthday, going to school or gaining access to improved sanitation. But these comparisons rest on aggregate figures in which the hardships endured by poorer urban children are obscured by the wealth of communities elsewhere in the city.

Where detailed urban data are available, they reveal wide disparities in children's rates of survival, nutritional status and education resulting from unequal access to

Figure 1.1. Almost half of the world's children live in urban areas

World population (0–19 years old)



services. Such disaggregated information is hard to find, however, and for the most part development is pursued, and resources allocated, on the basis of statistical averages. One consequence of this is that children living in informal settlements and impoverished neighbourhoods are excluded from essential services and social protection to which they have a right. This is happening as population growth puts existing infrastructure and services under strain and urbanization becomes nearly synonymous with slum formation. According to the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), one city dweller in three lives in slum conditions, lacking security of tenure in overcrowded, unhygienic places characterized by unemployment, pollution, traffic, crime, a high cost of living, poor service coverage and competition over resources.

This report focuses mainly on those children in urban settings all over the world who face a particularly complex set of challenges to their development and the fulfilment of their rights. Following an overview of the world's urban landscape, Chapter 2 looks at the status of children in urban settings through the lens of international human rights instruments and development goals. Chapter 3 examines some of the phenomena shaping the lives of children in urban areas, from their reasons for coming to the city and their experience of migration to the challenges posed by economic shocks, violence and acute disaster risk.

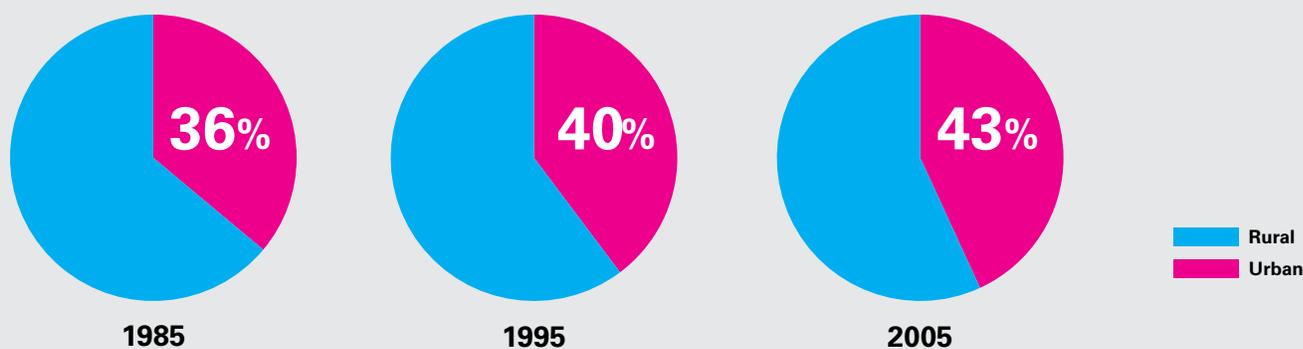
Clearly, urban life can be harsh. It need not be. Many cities have been able to contain or banish diseases that were widespread only a generation ago. Chapter 4 presents examples of efforts to improve the urban realities

that children confront. These instances show that it is possible to fulfil commitments to children – but only if all children receive due attention and investment and if the privilege of some is not allowed to obscure the disadvantages of others. Accordingly, the final chapter of this report identifies broad policy actions that should be included in any strategy to reach excluded children and foster equity in urban settings riven by disparity.

An urban future

By 2050, 7 in 10 people will live in urban areas. Every year, the world's urban population increases by approximately 60 million people. Most of this growth is taking place in low- and middle-income countries. Asia is home to half of the world's urban population and 66 out of the 100 fastest-growing urban areas, 33 of which are in China alone. Cities such as Shenzhen, with a 10 per cent rate of annual increase in 2008, are doubling in population every seven years.² Despite a low overall rate of urbanization, Africa has a larger urban population than North America or Western Europe, and more than 6 in 10 Africans who live in urban areas reside in slums.

New urban forms are evolving as cities expand and merge. Nearly 10 per cent of the urban population is found in megacities – each with more than 10 million people – which have multiplied across the globe. New York and Tokyo, on the list since 1950, have been joined by a further 19, all but 3 of them in Asia, Latin America and Africa. Yet most urban growth is taking place not in megacities but in smaller cities and towns, home to the majority of urban children and young people.³



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Population Division.

In contrast to rapid urban growth in the developing world, more than half of Europe’s cities are expected to shrink over the next two decades.⁴ The size of the urban population in high-income countries is projected to remain largely unchanged through 2025, however, with international migrants making up the balance.⁵

Migration from the countryside has long driven urban growth and remains a major factor in some regions. But the last comprehensive estimate, made in 1998,

suggests that children born into existing urban populations account for around 60 per cent of urban growth.⁶

Poverty and exclusion

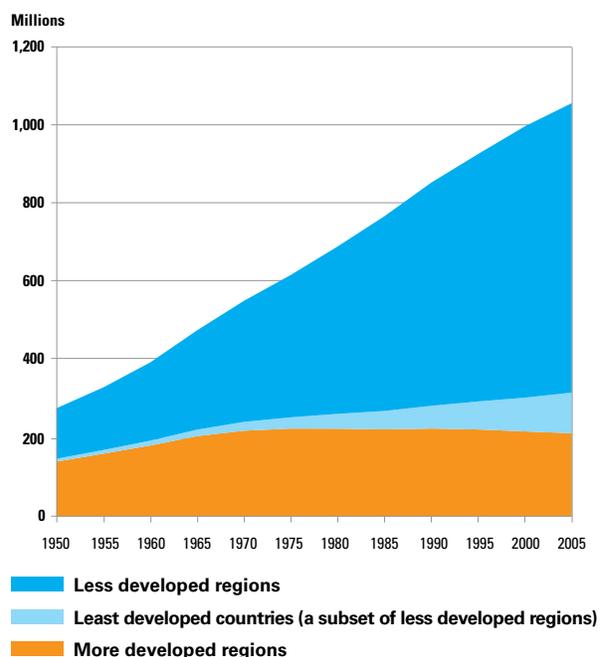
For billions of people, the urban experience is one of poverty and exclusion. Yet standard data collection and analysis fail to capture the full extent of both problems. Often, studies overlook those residents of a city whose homes and work are unofficial or unregistered – precisely those most likely to be poor or suffer discrimination. Moreover, official definitions of poverty seldom take sufficient account of the cost of non-food needs. In consequence, poverty thresholds applied to urban populations make inadequate allowance for the costs of transport, rent, water, sanitation, schooling and health services.⁷

Difficult urban living conditions reflect and are exacerbated by factors such as illegality, limited voice in decision-making and lack of secure tenure, assets and legal protection. Exclusion is often reinforced by discrimination on the grounds of gender, ethnicity, race or disability. In addition, cities often expand beyond the capacity of the authorities to provide the infrastructure and services needed to ensure people’s health and well-being. A significant proportion of urban population growth is occurring in the most unplanned and deprived areas. These factors combine to push essential services beyond the reach of children and families living in poor urban neighbourhoods.

Physical proximity to a service does not guarantee access. Indeed, many urban inhabitants live close to

Figure 1.2. Urban population growth is greater in less developed regions

World urban population (0–19 years old)



Source: UNDESA, Population Division.

schools or hospitals but have little chance of using these services. Even where guards or fees do not bar entry, poor people may lack the sense of entitlement and empowerment needed to ask for services from institutions perceived as the domain of those of higher social or economic rank.

Inadequate access to safe drinking water and sanitation services puts children at increased risk of illness, undernutrition and death. When child health statistics are disaggregated, it becomes clear that even where services are nearby, children growing up in poor urban settings face significant health risks. In some cases, the risks exceed those prevalent in rural areas.⁸ Studies demonstrate that in many countries, children living in urban poverty fare as badly as or

worse than children living in rural poverty in terms of height-for-weight and under-five mortality.⁹

Children's health is primarily determined by the socio-economic conditions in which they are born, grow and live, and these are in turn shaped by the distribution of power and resources. The consequences of having too little of both are most readily evident in informal settlements and slums, where roughly 1.4 billion people will live by 2020.¹⁰

By no means do all of the urban poor live in slums – and by no means is every inhabitant of a slum poor. Nevertheless, slums are an expression of, and a practical response to, deprivation and exclusion.

Social determinants of urban health

Stark disparities in health between rich and poor have drawn attention to the social determinants of health, or the ways in which people's health is affected not only by the medical care and support systems available to prevent and manage illness, but also by the economic, social and political circumstances in which they are born and live.

The urban environment is in itself a social determinant of health. Urbanization drove the emergence of public health as a discipline because the concentration of people in towns and cities made it easier for communicable diseases to spread – mainly from poorer quarters to wealthier ones. An increasingly urban world is also contributing to the rising incidence of non-communicable diseases, obesity, alcohol and substance abuse, mental illness and injuries.

Many poor and marginalized groups live in slums and informal settlements, where they are subjected to a multitude of health threats. Children from these communities are particularly vulnerable because of the stresses of their living conditions. As the prevalence of physical and social settings of extreme deprivation increases, so does the risk of reversing the overall success of disease prevention and control efforts.

The urban environment need not harm people's health. In addition to changes in individual behaviour, broader

social policy prioritizing adequate housing; water and sanitation; food security; efficient waste management systems; and safer places to live, work and play can effectively reduce health risk factors. Good governance that enables families from all urban strata to access high-quality services – education, health, public transportation and childcare, for example – can play a major part in safeguarding the health of children in urban environments.

Growing awareness of the potential of societal circumstances to help or harm individuals' health has led to such initiatives as the World Health Organization's Commission on Social Determinants of Health. Its recommendations emphasize that effectively addressing the causes of poor health in urban areas requires a range of solutions, from improving living conditions, through investment in health systems and progressive taxation, to improved governance, planning and accountability at the local, national and international levels. The challenges are greatest in low- and middle-income countries, where rapid urban population growth is seldom accompanied by adequate investment in infrastructure and services. The Commission has also highlighted the need to address the inequalities that deny power and resources to marginalized populations, including women, indigenous people and ethnic minorities.

Source: World Health Organization; Global Research Network on Urban Health Equity.



A woman and child walk among the ruins of a low-income neighbourhood alongside a new residential development in Abuja, Nigeria.

Impoverished people, denied proper housing and security of tenure by inequitable economic and social policies and regulations governing land use and management, resort to renting or erecting illegal and often ramshackle dwellings. These typically include tenements (houses that have been subdivided), boarding houses, squatter settlements (vacant plots or buildings occupied by people who do not own, rent or have permission to use them) and illegal subdivisions (in which a house or hut is built in the backyard of another, for example). Squatter settlements became common in rapidly growing cities, particularly from the 1950s onward, because inexpensive housing was in short supply. Where informal settlements were established on vacant land, people were able to build their own homes.

Illegal dwellings are poor in quality, relatively cheap – though they will often still consume about a quarter of household income – and notorious for the many hazards they pose to health. Overcrowding and unsanitary conditions facilitate the transmission of disease – including pneumonia and diarrhoea, the two leading killers of children younger than 5 worldwide. Outbreaks of measles, tuberculosis and other vaccine-preventable diseases are also more frequent in these areas, where population density is high and immunization levels are low.

In addition to other perils, slum inhabitants frequently face the threat of eviction and maltreatment, not just by landlords but also from municipal authorities intent on ‘cleaning up’ the area. Evictions may take place because of a wish to encourage tourism, because the country is hosting a major sporting event or simply because

the slum stands in the way of a major redevelopment. They may come without warning, let alone consultation, and very often proceed without compensation or involve moving to an unfeasible location. The evictions themselves cause major upheaval and can destroy long-established economic and social systems and support networks – the existence of which should come as no surprise if one ponders what it takes to survive and advance in such challenging settings. Even those who are not actually evicted can suffer significant stress and insecurity from the threat of removal. Moreover, the constant displacement and abuse of marginalized populations can further hinder access to essential services.

Despite their many deprivations, slum residents provide at least one essential service to the very societies from which they are marginalized – labour. Some of it is formal and some undocumented, but almost all is low-paid – for example, as factory hands, shop assistants, street vendors and domestic workers.

Slums: The five deprivations

The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) defines a slum household as one that lacks one or more of the following:

- **Access to improved water**
An adequate quantity of water that is affordable and available without excessive physical effort and time
- **Access to improved sanitation**
Access to an excreta disposal system, either in the form of a private toilet or a public toilet shared with a reasonable number of people
- **Security of tenure**
Evidence or documentation that can be used as proof of secure tenure status or for protection from forced evictions
- **Durability of housing**
Permanent and adequate structure in a non-hazardous location, protecting its inhabitants from the extremes of climatic conditions such as rain, heat, cold or humidity
- **Sufficient living area**
Not more than three people sharing the same room

URBAN DISPARITIES

On average, children in urban areas are more likely to survive infancy and early childhood, enjoy better health and have more educational opportunity than their counterparts in rural areas. This effect is often referred to as the 'urban advantage'.

Nevertheless, the scale of inequality within urban areas is a matter of great concern. Gaps between rich and poor in towns and cities can sometimes equal or exceed those found in rural areas. When

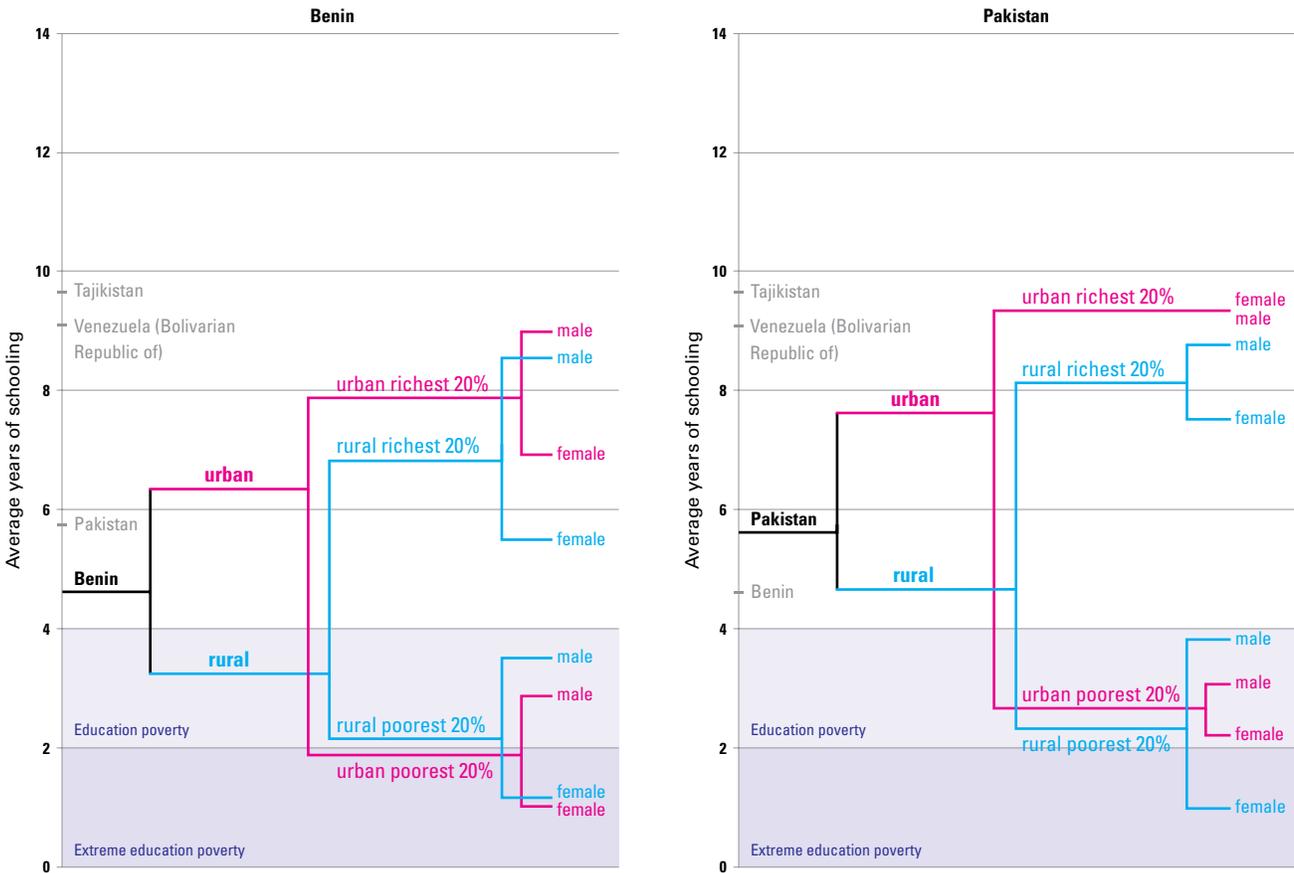
national averages are disaggregated, it becomes clear that many children living in urban poverty are clearly disadvantaged and excluded from higher education, health services and other benefits enjoyed by their affluent peers.

The figures below, called 'equity trees', illustrate that, while vast disparities exist in rural areas, poverty also can severely limit a child's education in urban areas – in some cases, more so than in the countryside.

In Benin, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), the education gap between the richest 20 per cent and the poorest 20 per cent is greater in urban than in rural areas. The gap is widest in Venezuela, where pupils from the richest urban families have, on average, almost eight years more schooling than those from the poorest ones, compared with a gap of 5 years between the wealthy and poor in rural areas. In Benin, Tajikistan and Venezuela, children

Figure 1.3. Educational attainment can be most unequal in urban areas

Average years of schooling among population aged 17–22, by location, wealth and gender



Source: UNICEF analysis based on UNESCO Deprivation and Marginalization in Education database (2009) using household survey data: Benin (DHS, 2006); Pakistan (DHS, 2007); Tajikistan (MICS, 2005); Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) (MICS, 2000).

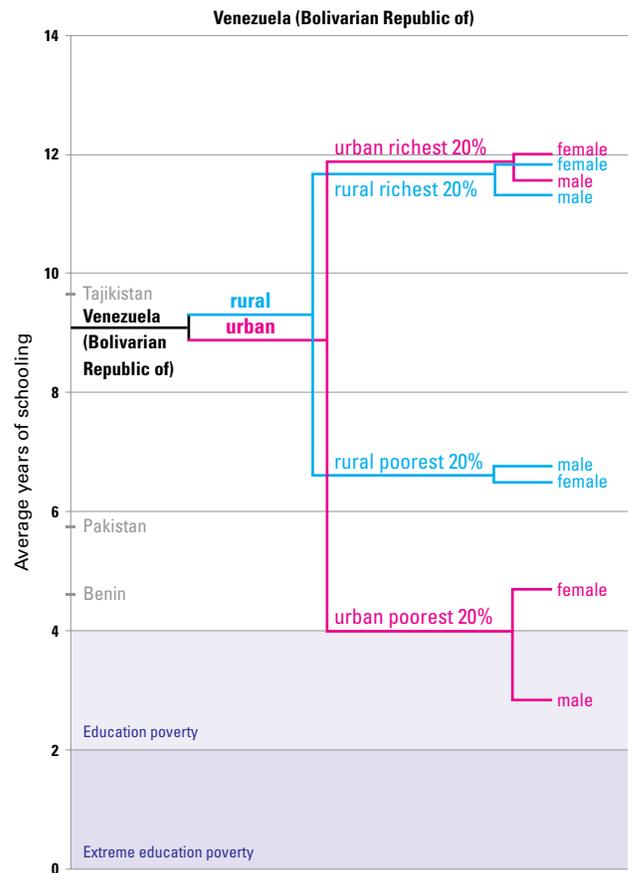
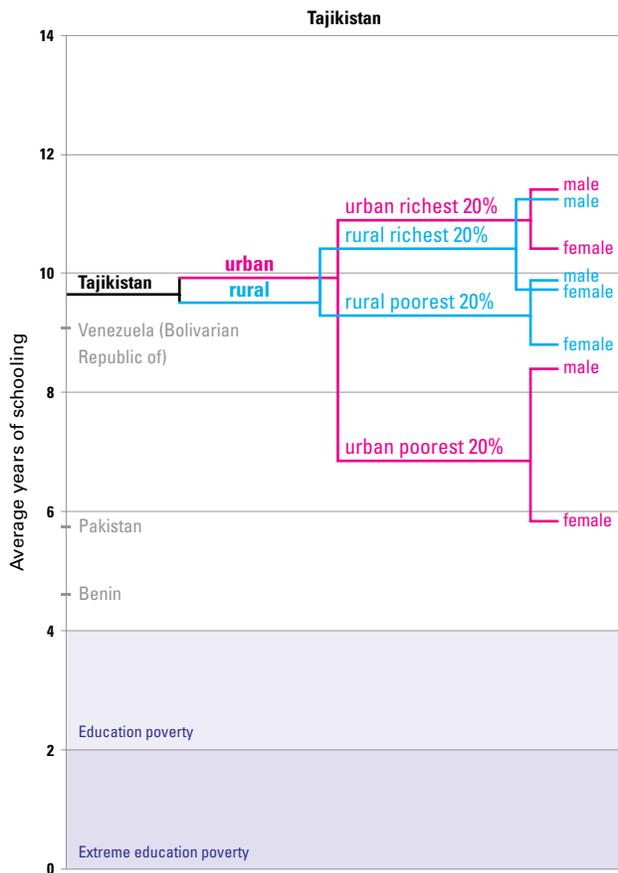
from the poorest urban households are likely to have fewer years of schooling not only than children from wealthier urban households but also than their rural counterparts.

Some disparities transcend location. Girls growing up in poor households are at a great disadvantage regardless of whether they live in urban or rural areas. In Benin, girls in urban and rural areas who come from the poorest 20 per cent

of the population receive less than two years of schooling, compared with three to four years for their male counterparts and about nine years for the richest boys in urban and rural settings. In Pakistan, the difference in educational attainment between the poorest boys and girls is about three years in rural areas and about one year in urban areas.

The gender gap is more pronounced for poor girls in urban Tajikistan. On average,

they receive less than six years of education, compared with almost nine years for poor girls in rural areas. But the gender gap is reversed in Venezuela, where the poorest boys in urban areas receive the least education – less than three years of schooling, compared to four and a half years for the poorest girls in urban settings and about six and a half years for the poorest boys and girls in rural areas.





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Children juggle to make money on the streets of Salvador, capital of the eastern state of Bahia, Brazil.

Meeting the challenges of an urban future

Children and adolescents are, of course, among the most vulnerable members of any community and will disproportionately suffer the negative effects of poverty and inequality. Yet insufficient attention has been given to children living in urban poverty. The situation is urgent, and international instruments such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and commitments such as the MDGs can help provide a framework for action.

The fast pace of urbanization, particularly in Africa and Asia, reflects a rapidly changing world. Development practitioners realize that standard programming approaches, which focus on extending services to more readily accessible communities, do not always reach people whose needs are greatest. Disaggregated data show that many are being left behind.

Cities are not homogeneous. Within them, and particularly within the rapidly growing cities of low- and middle-income countries, reside millions of children who face similar, and sometimes worse, exclusion and deprivation than children living in rural areas.

In principle, the deprivations confronting children in urban areas are a priority for human rights-based

development programmes. In practice, and particularly given the misperception that services are within reach of all urban residents, lesser investment has often been devoted to those living in slums and informal urban settlements.

For this to change, a focus on equity is needed – one in which priority is given to the most disadvantaged children, wherever they live.

The first requirement is to **improve understanding of the scale and nature of urban poverty and exclusion affecting children**. This will entail not only sound statistical work – a hallmark of which must be greater disaggregation of urban data – but also solid research and evaluation of interventions intended to advance the rights of children to survival, health, development, sanitation, education and protection in urban areas.

Second, development solutions must **identify and remove the barriers to inclusion** that prevent marginalized children and families from using services, expose them to violence and exploitation, and bar them from taking part in decision-making. Among other necessary actions, births must be registered, legal status conferred and housing tenure made secure.

Third, a sharp focus on the particular needs and priorities of children must be maintained in urban planning, infrastructure development, service delivery and broader efforts to reduce poverty and disparity. The international Child-Friendly Cities Initiative provides an example of the type of consideration that must be given children in every facet of urban governance.

Fourth, policy and practice must promote partnership between the urban poor and government at all its levels. Urban initiatives that foster such participation – and in particular those that involve children and young people – report better results not only for children but also for their communities.

Finally, everyone must work together to achieve results for children. International, national, municipal and community actors will need to pool resources and energies in support of the rights of marginalized and impoverished children growing up in urban environments. Narrowing the gaps to honour international commitments to all children will require additional efforts not only in rural areas but also within cities.



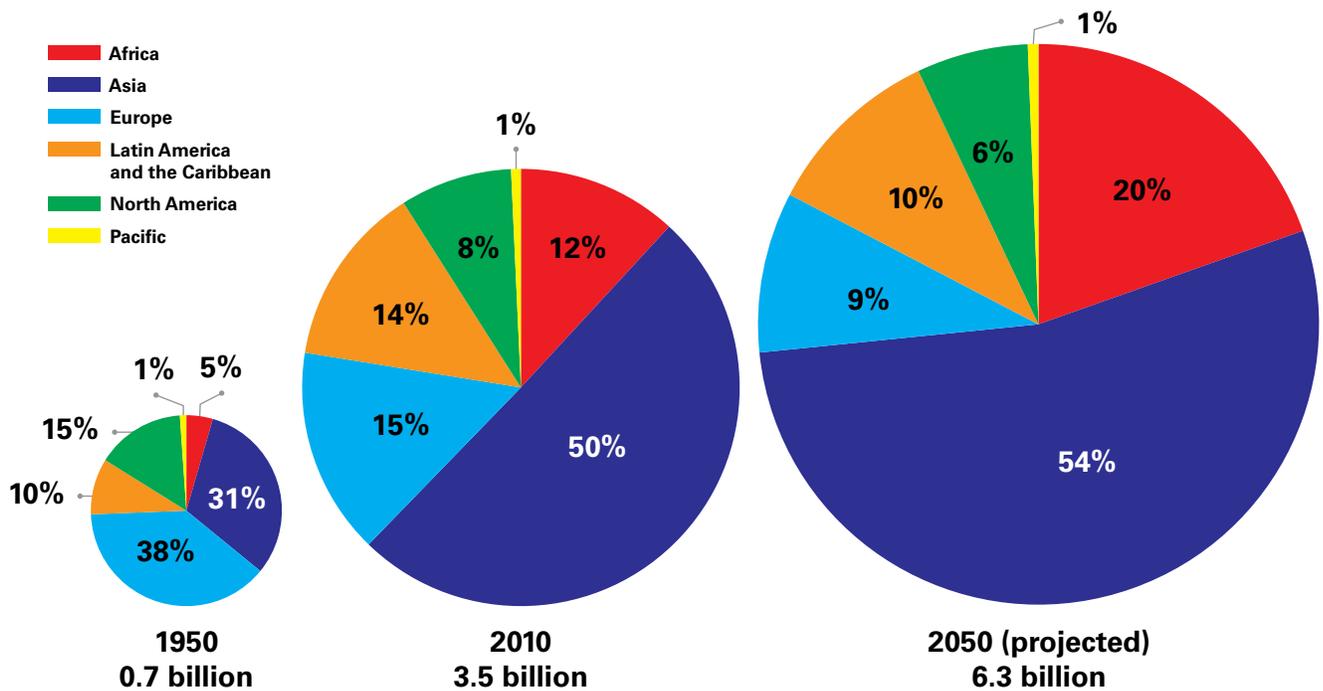
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Children put their sprawling slum on the map – literally. The data they have gathered about Rishi Aurobindo Colony, Kolkata, India, will be uploaded to Google Earth.

Clearly, children’s rights cannot be fulfilled and protected unless governments, donors and international organizations look behind the broad averages of development statistics and address the urban poverty and inequality that characterize the lives of so many children.

Figure 1.4. Urban populations are growing fastest in Asia and Africa

World urban population 1950, 2010, 2050 (projected)



Source: UNDESA, Population Division.

URBAN (AREA)

The definition of 'urban' varies from country to country, and, with periodic reclassification, can also vary within one country over time, making direct comparisons difficult. An urban area can be defined by one or more of the following: administrative criteria or political boundaries (e.g., area within the jurisdiction of a municipality or town committee), a threshold population size (where the minimum for an urban settlement is typically in the region of 2,000 people, although this varies globally between 200 and 50,000), population density, economic function (e.g., where a significant majority of the population is not primarily engaged in agriculture, or where there is surplus employment) or the presence of urban characteristics (e.g., paved streets, electric lighting, sewerage). In 2010, 3.5 billion people lived in areas classified as urban.

URBAN GROWTH

The (relative or absolute) increase in the number of people who live in towns and cities. The pace of urban population growth depends on the natural increase of the urban population and the population gained by urban areas through both net rural-urban migration and the reclassification of rural settlements into cities and towns.

URBANIZATION

The proportion of a country that is urban.

RATE OF URBANIZATION

The increase in the proportion of urban population over time, calculated as the rate of growth of the urban population minus that of the total population. Positive rates of urbanization result when the urban population grows at a faster rate than the total population.

CITY PROPER

The population living within the administrative boundaries of a city, e.g., Washington, D.C.

Because city boundaries do not regularly adapt to accommodate population increases, the concepts of **urban agglomeration** and **metropolitan area** are often used to improve the comparability of measurements of city populations across countries and over time.

URBAN AGGLOMERATION

The population of a built-up or densely populated area

containing the city proper, suburbs and continuously settled commuter areas or adjoining territory inhabited at urban levels of residential density.

Large urban agglomerations often include several administratively distinct but functionally linked cities. For example, the urban agglomeration of Tokyo includes the cities of Chiba, Kawasaki, Yokohama and others.

METROPOLITAN AREA/REGION

A formal local government area comprising the urban area as a whole and its primary commuter areas, typically formed around a city with a large concentration of people (i.e., a population of at least 100,000).

In addition to the city proper, a metropolitan area includes both the surrounding territory with urban levels of residential density and some additional lower-density areas that are adjacent to and linked to the city (e.g., through frequent transport, road linkages or commuting facilities). Examples of metropolitan areas include Greater London and Metro Manila.

URBAN SPRAWL

Also 'horizontal spreading' or 'dispersed urbanization'. The uncontrolled and disproportionate expansion of an urban area into the surrounding countryside, forming low-density, poorly planned patterns of development. Common in both high-income and low-income countries, urban sprawl is characterized by a scattered population living in separate residential areas, with long blocks and poor access, often overdependent on motorized transport and missing well-defined hubs of commercial activity.

PERI-URBAN AREA

An area between consolidated urban and rural regions.

MEGACITY

An urban agglomeration with a population of 10 million or more.

In 2009, 21 urban agglomerations qualified as megacities, accounting for 9.4 per cent of the world's urban population. In 1975, New York, Tokyo and Mexico City were the only megacities. Today, 11 megacities are found in Asia, 4 in Latin America and 2 each in Africa, Europe and North America. Eleven of these megacities are capitals of their countries.

Megacities, 2009 (population in millions)

1 Tokyo, Japan (36.5)	12 Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana, United States (12.7)
2 Delhi, India (21.7)	13 Beijing, China (12.2)
3 Sao Paulo, Brazil (20.0)	14 Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (11.8)
4 Mumbai, India (19.7)	15 Manila, Philippines (11.4)
5 Mexico City, Mexico (19.3)	16 Osaka-Kobe, Japan (11.3)
6 New York-Newark, United States (19.3)	17 Cairo, Egypt (10.9)
7 Shanghai, China (16.3)	18 Moscow, Russian Federation (10.5)
8 Kolkata, India (15.3)	19 Paris, France (10.4)
9 Dhaka, Bangladesh (14.3)	20 Istanbul, Turkey (10.4)
10 Buenos Aires, Argentina (13.0)	21 Lagos, Nigeria (10.2)
11 Karachi, Pakistan (12.8)	

Sources: UNDESA, Population Division; UN-Habitat.

METACITY

A major conurbation – a megacity of more than 20 million people.

As cities grow and merge, new urban configurations are formed. These include **megaregions**, **urban corridors** and **city-regions**.

MEGAREGION

A rapidly growing urban cluster surrounded by low-density hinterland, formed as a result of expansion, growth and geographical convergence of more than one metropolitan area and other agglomerations. Common in North America and Europe, megaregions are now expanding in other parts of the world and are characterized by rapidly growing cities, great concentrations of people (including skilled workers), large markets and significant economic innovation and potential.

Examples include the Hong Kong-Shenzhen-Guangzhou megaregion (120 million people) in China and the Tokyo-Nagoya-Osaka-Kyoto-Kobe megaregion (predicted to reach 60 million by 2015) in Japan.

URBAN CORRIDOR

A linear 'ribbon' system of urban organization: cities of various sizes linked through transportation and economic axes, often running between major cities. Urban corridors

spark business and change the nature and function of individual towns and cities, promoting regional economic growth but also often reinforcing urban primacy and unbalanced regional development.

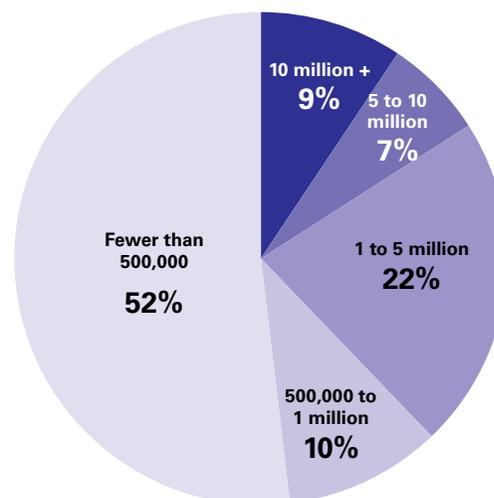
Examples include the industrial corridor developing between Mumbai and Delhi in India; the manufacturing and service industry corridor running from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to the port city of Klang; and the regional economic axis forming the greater Ibadan-Lagos-Accra urban corridor in West Africa.

CITY-REGION

An urban development on a massive scale: a major city that expands beyond administrative boundaries to engulf small cities, towns and semi-urban and rural hinterlands, sometimes expanding sufficiently to merge with other cities, forming large conurbations that eventually become city-regions.

For example, the Cape Town city-region in South Africa extends up to 100 kilometres, including the distances that commuters travel every day. The extended Bangkok region in Thailand is expected to expand another 200 kilometres from its centre by 2020, growing far beyond its current population of over 17 million.

Figure 1.5. Half of the world's urban population lives in cities of fewer than 500,000 inhabitants
World urban population distribution, by city size, 2009



Source: Calculations based on UNDESA, *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2009 revision*.