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
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. 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.

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.

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.

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