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