

Progress and Challenges in the Asia-Pacific Region 1

The region is experiencing the greatest migration of people in history, as various factors compel rural populations to pursue employment and a better quality of life in cities and towns that are, as a result, growing at unprecedented rates, largely because of the dynamism of industrial and service sectors. Coping with these dramatic shifts in human habitation in ways that protect the well-being of all of these people and that protect the environment requires intelligent and equitable strategies that optimise the use of all available resources: physical, human, and financial.



Working to ensure that adequate housing and basic services are available to all people in the countries of the world, UN-HABI TAT promotes coherent policies and planning that enable the involvement of the people themselves, as well as government agencies, civil society organisations, the private sector, international aid agencies, etc., in a coordinated, cooperative effort. UN-HABI TAT brings its knowledge, expertise, and experience to help accomplish this. As a UN Programme, UN-HABI TAT is able to assist with more effective and better coordinated action within countries, because it is a pan-national entity, belonging to all UN member states and

dedicated to human well-being, equitable social and economic development, and a healthy human habitat on a global level.

In 1997, UN-HABI TAT the “city and shelter agency” of the UN system opened its Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific (ROAP-Fukuoka) in Fukuoka, Japan, to play an expanded and more timely role in bringing such needed expertise and financial assistance to help less economically developed countries in the region cope with the enormous and complex challenges posed by rapid urbanisation in the context of a globalising world.

The scale, diversity and dynamism of the Asia-Pacific Region

Stretching from Iran in the west to the Pacific Islands in the east, the highly diverse and populous Asia-Pacific region has made, and is continuing to make, remarkable economic progress. With an overall land area of 21.4 million sq km, the region is home to 3.7 billion human beings, some 56 percent of the world's population of 6.6 billion.

A rich mosaic of cultural, geographical, and economic diversity, the region comprises some 39 countries located either on the Asian mainland or on islands and archipelagos in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Thirteen are extremely poor, or least developed, countries, such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Maldives, Nepal, the Solomon Islands, and Timor-Leste. Some of these least-developed countries are also recovering from military and/or civil conflicts. Twenty are relatively poor, or low-income, countries, such as China, Indonesia, India, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Thailand; and six are very rich, or high-income, countries, such as Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and Singapore. Of the countries with the ten largest international currency reserves, seven are in this region with a total of more than US\$3.4 trillion of reserves in mid- 2007.



With unmanaged urbanisation, poverty persists, and slums and squatter settlements proliferate.

For nearly twenty years, this region has been regarded as the engine of global economic growth. Countries, such as the Republic of Korea, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and, to a lesser extent, the Philippines, enjoyed very impressive

growth in the decade prior to the Asian financial crisis of 1997. While South Korea, Singapore, and Malaysia have rebounded to earlier levels, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines are recovering more slowly. But over the past decade, other countries in the region, including giants, such as China and India, and medium-sized countries, such as Pakistan and Vietnam, have been recording very impressive growth rates with China having the second largest economy and the fastest economic growth rate in the region.

Cities, economic growth, and urbanisation

The region's overall economic dynamism particularly that of China and India has resulted in urbanisation on a scale and at a speed never seen before in recorded history. China and India together accounted for more than one-third of the increase in global urban population from 1995-2005. Today, these two countries' share of the world's and of the region's urban populations stands at 26 and 53 percent, respectively.

With 43 percent of the world's urban population of 3 billion (2005), the region is poised to undergo further rapid urbanization. The Asia-Pacific is the second-fastest urbanising sub-region in the world with annual urbanisation rates at around 3.4 percent, after Sub-Saharan Africa, which is urbanising at about 4.6 percent. By 2030, 54.5 percent of people in the Asia-Pacific region will be living in cities and towns, and Asia will account for more than half of the world's total urban population. An often overlooked positive impact of urbanization is that it lowers birth rates. Clearly this will be crucial to curbing population growth in India and China as well as other in other developing countries in the region.

The first 'metacity', or city of over 20 million inhabitants, emerged in the Asia-Pacific region in the mid-1960s, when Tokyo's population passed the 20 million mark. Today, with a population of 35 million, Tokyo continues to be the world's only 'metacity', but by 2020, Mumbai, Delhi, Dhaka and Jakarta, along with Mexico City, Shanghai and Sao Paulo will have reached this gigantic size. At present, 11 out of 20 of the world's mega-cities

(those with over 10 million people) are in this region with five in the South Asia subregion alone. Surprisingly, however, the world's the largest cities account for only 4 percent of the world's total population and only 9 percent of its urban population. Currently, more than 53 percent of the world's urban population lives in cities of less than 500,000 inhabitants. In the Asia-Pacific region, it will be these smaller, often newly emerging towns and cities that will be absorbing at least half of the incoming rural migrant population.



A lack of effective urbanisation policies causes the urbanisation of poverty.

The increased wealth resulting from industrialisation and urbanisation has enabled many developing countries in the region to invest in modernising their infrastructure. Between 1990 and 2003, the annual growth rate of gross capital formation was about 7.9 percent in the Asia-Pacific region as a whole and about 6.4 percent in South Asia. The Asia-Pacific region continued to have the highest investment rate in the world at 38 percent of GDP in 2003. By contrast, investment in Sub-Saharan Africa averaged only 19 percent of GDP.

The economic success of the Asia-Pacific region is beginning to translate into improved standards of living, as confirmed by the region accounting for the greatest reduction in global poverty. But the region still faces huge, complex, and urgent challenges.

Chaotic growth of cities and towns

In the vast majority of cases, the cities in the developing countries of the region have not effectively planned their land use, nor developed their land supply, infrastructure, and services networks fast enough to cope with the constant influx of poor people. While many large cities, such as Bangkok, Jakarta, Manila, and Mumbai, have prepared numerous master plans over the last two decades, these have never been successfully implemented. In the meantime, urban expansion has proceeded in a chaotic manner, making the installation of urgently needed transportation (especially public transportation), water supply, sewerage networks, electricity, and communications ever more complicated and unaffordable.

The combination of this ongoing rural-to-urban migration and the natural growth in the urban population has provided a huge labour pool to fuel economic growth and to increase profits for local and foreign employers. But city managers and urban planners have found themselves confronted with a range of perplexing and persistent problems, including the proliferation of slums and squatter settlements.

Persistent poverty and the proliferation of slums and squatter settlements

In fact, the economic and social achievements in the region in recent decades have tended to hide the actual unevenness of the distribution of income and economic opportunities, the quality of governance, and the degree of citizens' participation in political decision-making. All too often low labour costs have driven the huge economic gains, giving the rural and urban poor only a modest share of the bonanza, leaving many to live a 'hand-to-mouth' existence. Consequently, even after migrating to urban areas, many people remain very poor, resulting in what has been called the 'urbanisation of poverty'.

Even in the older, larger cities where more financial and technical resources are available, authorities have been unable to meet the burgeoning demand for low-cost housing and basic services, such as water, sanitation, electricity, and drainage. When the poor arrive in cities, they have to seek shelter in slums by putting up their own shacks or by buying or renting them from others. The result is extremely crowded inner city slums and vast squatter settlements on the city's periphery with little or no services.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the usual official response to squatters and slums was eviction, but such evictions were politically costly and only left poorly-housed, low-income communities with no houses at all. Because of international concern and UN covenants on housing rights in recent decades, authorities in most large cities have been gradually extending some basic services, such as water, sanitation, and electricity to such settlements.

This more constructive response has come about partly for political reasons and partly because city authorities have become more aware that they will never be able to provide alternative housing to so many poor households. Now, many municipalities have begun to see that it is more sensible to improve slums than to destroy them and further impoverish already very poor and innocent people.



Many of the urban poor have to break laws just to earn a living.

In newly emerging towns and cities, the situation is even worse than in the big cities. Most new towns only have very rudimentary basic infrastructure upon which to expand service networks. Furthermore, they have little urban managerial experience, nor the capacity to deal with the social and environmental problems created by fast-rising populations. The result is not only haphazard growth and an upsurge in slums, but also almost a total absence of basic urban services for poor slum dwellers to maintain an acceptable standard of personal hygiene and public health, or to engage in productive activities.

In absolute numbers, the Asia-Pacific region still has the largest share of the world's slum population, accounting for 581 million people, or more than half the global total.

Environmental deterioration and its impact on health, especially poor people's health

Cities and towns in most developing countries of the region are experiencing many and increasingly serious environmental problems resulting from infrastructure shortfalls, as well as from rising levels of air pollution and the contamination of water and soil resources from the unregulated disposal of liquid and solid wastes.

In 2002, only 70 percent of the urban population in Asia had access to piped water. This leaves huge numbers of the urban poor relying on polluted wells or being forced to purchase water at 4-to-8 times the cost of piped water enjoyed by middle- and high-income groups. In South Asia and East Asia, the proportion having access to basic sanitation was 67 and 69 percent, respectively, as of 2003. As a consequence, the very poor are preyed upon by waterborne diseases ranging from dysentery, intestinal worms, and hepatitis to cholera and typhoid. Because of the economic obstacles that prevent the poor from obtaining proper and timely treatment, such diseases claim hundreds of thousands of lives every year, especially children's.



Before

After



It is more sensible to improve slums than to destroy them.

Inadequate drainage and wastewater disposal systems are also contributing to groundwater degradation, to the pollution of rivers and canals, and to the spread of mosquito-borne diseases, such as dengue fever and malaria, which also claim the lives of hundreds of thousands of mainly poor people. At the same time, the widespread practice of dumping untreated solid waste in unprepared landfill sites contributes to groundwater and soil pollution, as well as to the uncontrolled generation of methane, a highly-inflammable greenhouse gas that is harmful to human health.

In the cities of Asia, ambient air pollution is rising alarmingly, as industrial, household, and motorised transport emissions increase and as dependence on fossil fuels persists. The intense marketing of private cars, coupled with inadequate public transportation systems, is causing ever more dependence on private vehicles. Since 1990, there has been a fourfold increase in the number of motor vehicles in China and Thailand, reflecting a common trend in the region as a whole. In very large cities, such as Bangkok, Jakarta, and Manila, where much city development has been ad hoc, insufficient and dysfunctional road and street networks cause horrific traffic jams that turn the cities into open-air gas chambers for pedestrians and residents. Over the last 10 years, the concentration of pollutants in China's air has increased by 50 percent and is now home to 16 of the world's 20 most polluted cities.¹

Most of these emissions, together with the methane from unmanaged landfill, contribute to global warming, a disaster already beginning to take its toll in many parts of the region.

Clearly, developing countries in the region face a fundamental choice in the way they urbanise. They can mimic the highly industrialised countries and go through a dirty, wasteful development phase that creates an enormous legacy of pollution with its related health burden and death toll. Or they can leapfrog over some of the disastrously costly stages passed through by many industrialised countries by incorporating environmentally-friendly policies into their development processes, such as adequate public transportation systems and cleaner, energy-efficient technologies.



The December 2004 tsunami demonstrated the vulnerability of human settlements in low-lying coastal areas.

Increasing vulnerability to natural disasters

The Asia-Pacific region is one of the most disaster-prone areas in the world. Typhoons, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods, mudslides, and droughts are some of the most recurrent. The vast majority of the region's countries experience severe earthquakes and have incurred great losses of human life in the past. Of the 116 earthquakes with death tolls of 1,000 or more that occurred worldwide between 1900 and 2005, 62 happened in the region, accounting for 75 percent of the total death toll of 2.2 million.

With increased urbanisation, deforestation, and the expansion of settlements onto flood plains, coastal wetlands, and steep hills, urban vulnerability has risen dramatically in recent decades. The high casualty rates and destruction of buildings associated with recent earthquakes, such as the ones that hit northern Pakistan (October 2005), Iran and Afghanistan (December, 2003), and India (2001), were due to poor construction standards and to inappropriate development.

The vulnerability of cities, towns, and villages in low-lying coastal areas and on islands and archipelagos was brutally demonstrated by the December 2004 earthquake off the coast of northern Sumatra that caused a tsunami that claimed an estimated total of 250,000 lives there and in countries as far away as Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and India. Such settlements are also exposed to the long-term threat of rising sea levels, resulting from global warming. Several island states in the region, such as the Maldives in the Indian Ocean and Tuvalu, Fiji, Samoa, and the Cook Islands in the Pacific are among the most vulnerable places on earth to the climate change, resulting from global warming.

Inequitable development fuels rural-to-urban migration and civil conflict

Despite successful programmes in the Republic of Korea and Japan four decades ago, land reform has not been pursued earnestly by most other countries in the Asia-Pacific region. So most villagers have very small land holdings and the numbers of landless households is on the rise. Consequently, though most countries have registered significant to impressive economic growth with the gradual modernisation or industrialisation of their agricultural sector, domination by urban elites of domestic markets and particularly export markets, working hand-in-hand with politicians and officials, has meant that far too little of the huge economic gains have been reaching the villagers themselves.

Not enough has been done to inform, empower, and assist rural populations to organise and network to negotiate collectively for better prices from urban wholesalers and exporters for their produce and processed products. Nor has enough been done to



The 2005 earthquake in Pakistan destroyed 76 percent of the housing stock in North West Frontier and Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

help villagers to be more innovative and adaptable in their agricultural production to keep pace with rapidly changing and diversifying domestic and global markets.

In short, many small-scale and landless farmers have been driven out of the rural economy by the predominantly urban domestic and global market forces. In most countries, this has triggered a strong and continuing flow of poor rural people to the towns and cities, resulting in the “urbanisation of poverty”.



For the poorest of the poor, each day is a desperate struggle for survival.

The glaring contrast between the meagre survival consumption of urban (and rural) poor, on the one hand, and the conspicuous extravagance of the urban elites on the other, is another source of bitter social and political division. In some countries in the region, such as Nepal and the Philippines, this has led to the political and social alienation of large sections the rural population and to long-standing civil conflict with resulting violence, loss of life, and severe economic loss on all sides, further exacerbating rural and urban poverty.

Wars and civil conflicts

Asian and Pacific countries have endured the scourge of wars, civil unrest, and insurgencies almost continuously since the Second World War. Cities, towns, and villages have continued to be the primary targets of invaders and insurgents alike. Political, ethnic, and religious hostilities have all too frequently been characterized by violence against people, their housing, and the infrastructure, especially in the crowded cities. In this way, wars and civil conflicts have reduced huge sections of such countries' rural and urban populations to homelessness and destitution.



Conflicts have reduced populations to homelessness and destitution.

Countries, such as Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia in Indochina, are still struggling to reconcile internal social rifts and to rid themselves of the man-made hazards, such as landmines and chemical-weapons residues left over from civil wars and foreign invasions. More recently, the fledgling governments of Afghanistan and Timor-Leste have been facing similar problems in rebuilding shelter and infrastructure for returning urban populations, as well as for new city-bound migrants from rural areas.

In the case of Afghanistan, efforts at political reconciliation and physical reconstruction have been very difficult, because of the continuing conflict in both rural and urban areas.

In other countries, such as Nepal and Sri Lanka, internal conflicts and separatist movements have raged for decades. The third most populous country in the region, Indonesia, has also been reaping a bitter harvest of ethnic and religious bloodletting, resulting from transmigration policies imposed during its long period of military rule. All of this violence and destruction of public and private property has helped to prolong poverty and destitution in cities, towns, and villages.



In Afghanistan, reconstruction has been hampered by continuing conflict.



In Nepal, a lack of rural development triggered a long rebellion in the countryside.