



Demographic Change : Urbanization

The Future Is Urban

From 2008, the majority of people on Earth will be living in cities and towns. By 2030, over 4.6 billion people will be urbanites. How we cope with the social and environmental challenges of our urban future will shape the 21st century.



A street market in Lagos, the Nigerian "megacity" that grows by around 275,000 people each year (Photo: Reuters)

When most people look at Lagos, they see chaos. Nigeria's megacity is known for overpopulation, crime, poor infrastructure, and pollution. In The Economist's most recent livability ranking, Lagos came in third-last among the world's 132 biggest cities.

When Harvard architect Rem Koolhaas looks at Lagos, however, he sees the future, or to be more precise, the world's urban future. According to UN figures, more than half of the world's population, some 3.3 billion people, will be living in cities from 2008 on. At least a billion of the world's urbanites, however, live in slums. If UN predictions are correct, four out of five city dwellers will live in developing countries by 2030.

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Given these trends, Koolhaas says that those who want to know what city life will be like in the future should not look at rich, well-run megacities like Tokyo. "Lagos is not catching up with us," Koolhaas says. "Rather, we may be catching up with Lagos."

Growing pains

If Lagos is indeed a glimpse of the future, there is cause for concern. An estimated two thirds of the city lives below the poverty line. Despite the city's bustling marketplaces and vibrant music scene, decades of steady population growth and government neglect have left Lagos an infrastructural nightmare. Only thirty percent of the city's families have

access to running water. Bad roads, smoldering piles of garbage, crime, and corruption are all perennial problems, and the city still lacks a functional public transit system.

The Nigerian government and city planners are addressing these problems, but they face an uphill battle, particularly if the population continues to swell. Like Shanghai and Los Angeles, Lagos is facing wave after wave of migrants. Annual population growth in Lagos State is around 275,000 people, which includes the children of migrants. The UN says that most population growth in cities now comes from newborns rather than from migration .



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Despite these problems, however, cities will remain synonymous with opportunity for the millions of people who migrate to them each year. Urbanization also represents chance to improve living conditions and follow a more sustainable path of development .

"I think there is reason to be optimistic about megacities in the so-called developing world," says Molly O'Meara Sheehan, senior researcher at the Worldwatch Institute. "Mumbai, for instance, has recently launched a plan to address poverty and related problems in 63 large cities. Sao Paulo has been the source of a lot of creative thinking in urban policy over the years."

At their best, big cities can provide services more efficiently than urban sprawls. Manhattan, New York's most-populous borough, ranks among the most sustainable urban areas in the United States due to its efficient public transport and waste disposal.

Resizing growth

There is, however, a misleading aspect to all these big city statistics. In the coming decades, most urbanization will occur in towns and urban areas of less than one million people. Even today, only five percent of the world's population lives in cities of ten million or more people, while thirty percent live in urban areas of fewer than a million.

"One of the problems is that these [smaller] cities are less well-known and less studied than the megacities, which tend to be centers of media and academia," says Sheehan.

The very definition of "urban" varies from place to place. In Japan, cities of 50,000 or more are recognized as urban, while the Peruvian government considers a town of 100 as urban. But however

urbanization is defined, there is general agreement that there will be billions more people living in towns and cities by 2050.

Time will tell whether or not Lagos is the future of the city. As architect Koolhaas notes, no matter what the future has in store, humans usually manage to adapt. Koolhaas has seen the local skills, self-organization, and improvisation that helps the city's 10 million inhabitants survive despite poverty, poor administration, funding shortfalls, and countless other obstacles. It is still people, not cities, that shape the world's future.

editor: Valdis Wish

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