

Our urbanizing world

The world's population is increasingly concentrated in urban settlements, presenting both opportunities for and challenges to sustainable development. Cities drive economic and social development as hubs of commerce, transportation, communication and government. But rapid, unplanned urban growth can lead to an expansion of urban slums, exacerbating poverty and inequality, hampering efforts to expand or improve basic infrastructure and deliver essential services, and threatening the environment. By anticipating urban growth, countries can plan for future change and ensure that urbanization remains a positive force for sustainable development

1. From mostly rural to mostly urban

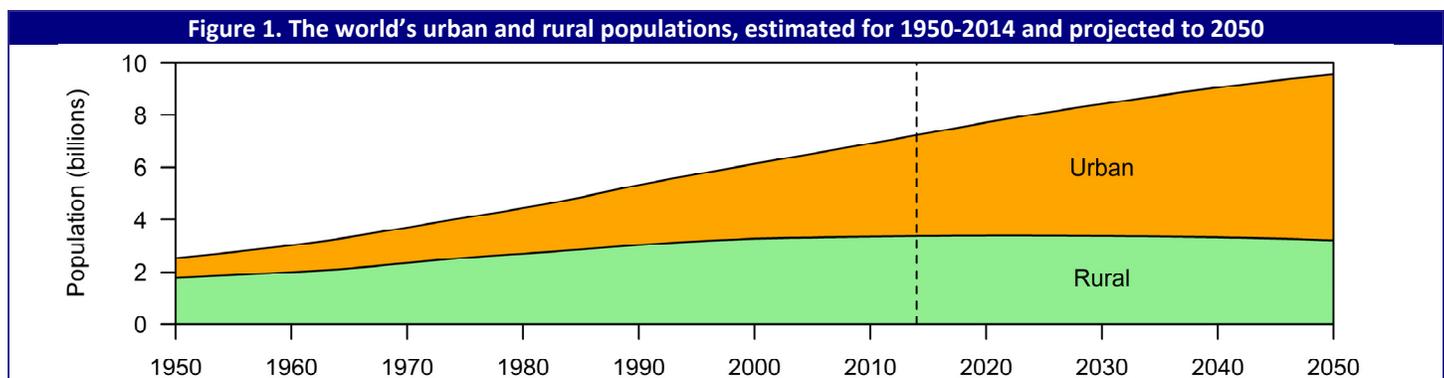
The world has urbanized rapidly since 1950 and projections indicate that it will continue to urbanize in the coming decades. In 1950 the world was mostly rural: more than two-thirds of people lived in rural settlements and less than one-third in urban settlements. In 2014 just over half of the global population was urban. This distribution is expected to shift further towards urban areas over the next 35 years so that, by 2050, the world's population will be one-third rural and two-thirds urban, roughly the reverse of the situation in the mid-twentieth century (figure 1).^{1,2}

Global urbanization has been driven by rapid growth of

the urban population, concurrent with stagnating growth of the rural population. The global urban population has increased by a factor of five, from 0.7 billion in 1950 to 3.9 billion in 2014. It is expected to increase by another 60 per cent by 2050, when 6.3 billion people are projected to live in urban settlements. The global rural population is ceasing to grow. It is projected to reach a peak of just under 3.4 billion shortly after 2020 and to decline thereafter to 3.2 billion in 2050.

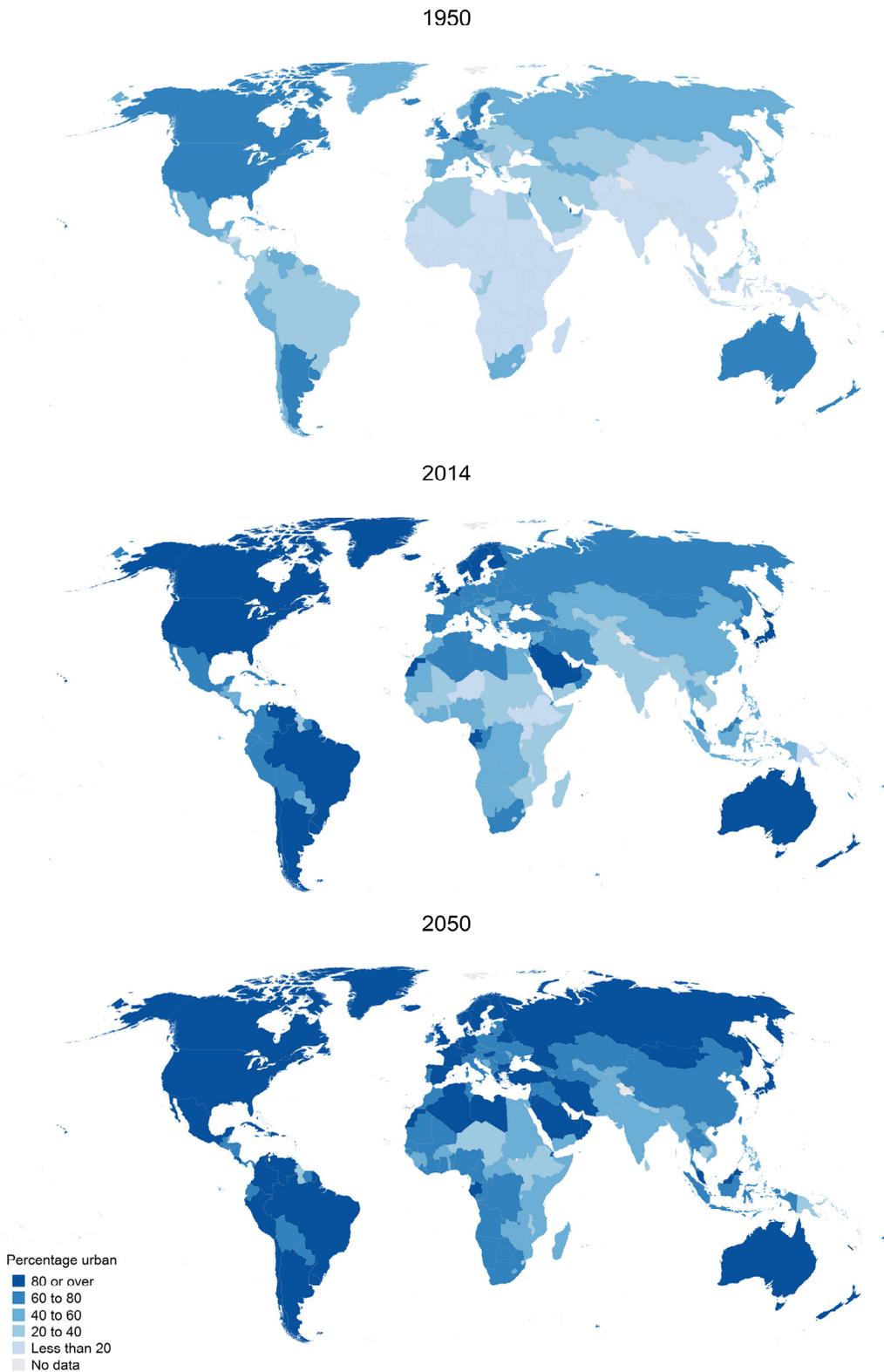
A growing number of countries are becoming highly urbanized, with a majority of their populations concentrated in urban settlements. In 1950, among 233 countries or areas just 15 per cent had levels of urbanization greater than 60 per cent and only 6 per cent were more than 80 per cent urban. Estimates indicate that around half of all countries or areas in 2014 were more than 60 per cent urban, and the level of urbanization exceeded 80 per cent in 25 per cent of countries or areas. By 2050 nearly 70 per cent of countries or areas in the world are projected to be more than 60 per cent urban and 38 per cent will be at least 80 per cent urban.

The number of countries that are predominantly rural is declining over time. Just 63 of 233 countries or areas were less than 40 per cent urban in 2014, down from 157 countries or areas in 1950. By 2050, just 27 countries or areas are projected to be less than 40 per cent urban, half of which are small islands or territories with well under 2 million inhabitants.



Data source: United Nations (2014) *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2014 Revision*.

Figure 2. Percentage urban in 233 countries or areas, estimated for 1950 and 2014, and projected to 2050



The designations employed and the presentation of material on this map do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

Data source: United Nations (2014) *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2014 Revision*.

2. The levels and pace of urbanization vary widely across regions and countries.

Northern America and Latin America and the Caribbean are the most urbanized regions, with 80 per cent or more of their populations residing in urban settlements in 2014. Europe, with 73 per cent of its population living in urban areas in 2014, is expected to be more than 80 per cent urban by 2050.

Africa and Asia remain mostly rural, on the whole, with 40 per cent and 48 per cent of their respective populations living in urban areas in 2014. Both regions are projected to urbanize faster than other regions over the coming decades, reaching 56 per cent and 64 per cent urban by 2050. Nevertheless, Africa and Asia are expected to remain the two least urbanized regions of the world.

Regional aggregates tend to obscure a great deal of heterogeneity in the level of urbanization across countries within regions. In 2014, 19 per cent of the countries or areas in Africa were more than 60 per cent urban, and three (Gabon, Réunion and Western Sahara) were more than 80 per cent urban. Among the European countries with at least 500,000 inhabitants, levels of urbanization in 2014 ranged from as low as 40 per cent in Bosnia and Herzegovina to as high as 98 per cent in Belgium. **The most urbanized countries or areas in Africa were more than twice as urban as the least urbanized countries or areas in Europe.**

3. The percentage urban is projected to increase in nearly all of the world's countries or areas between 2014 and 2050, but substantial heterogeneity will persist.

By the middle of the twenty-first century, nearly half of the 58 countries or areas in Africa are expected to be at least 60 per cent urban. Although no country or area of Africa is projected to have less than 25 per cent of the population residing in urban settlements by 2050, nine will be less than 40 per cent urban, including some of the region's most populous countries, such as Ethiopia and Uganda.

Among the 51 countries or areas of Asia, about half were at least 60 per cent urban in 2014, and one-quarter were at least 80 per cent urban. Continued urbanization will bring more Asian populations among the highly urbanized in 2050, when 69 per cent of countries or areas are projected to be at least 60 per cent urban and 41 per cent to be at least 80 per cent urban. Just three Asian countries – Cambodia, Nepal and Sri Lanka – are projected to remain less than 40 per cent urban in 2050.

Oceania is and will remain the world's most heterogeneous region, where levels of urbanization above 80 per cent in places like Australia and New Zealand contrast with those below 20 per cent in places like Papua New Guinea and Samoa.

Among the most urbanized countries or areas in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2014 were Anguilla (100 per cent urban), Guadeloupe (98 per cent) and Uruguay (95 per cent). Trinidad and Tobago and Montserrat were the least urbanized, each with around 9 per cent of their population residing in urban settlements. Projections indicate that by 2050, more than three-quarters of the 48 countries or areas in the region will be at least 60 per cent urban and close to half will be at least 80 per cent urban.

By 2050, all but five countries or areas in Europe are projected to be at least 60 per cent urban, and three of the remaining five – Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Faroe Islands, and the Republic of Moldova – will be more than 50 per cent urban. All of Northern America and half of the 48 countries or areas in Europe are expected to be at least 80 per cent urban in 2050.

4. The urban areas of Africa and Asia will absorb nearly all of the projected growth of the world population.

Of the 2.5 billion new urban dwellers anticipated by 2050, 90 per cent will live in Africa and Asia.

Just three countries – India, China and Nigeria – together are expected to account for more than one-third of global urban population growth. Seven other countries – the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, the United Republic of Tanzania, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan, and the United States of America – are projected to contribute more than 50 million additional urban dwellers each by 2050 and will constitute together another 20 per cent of the growth of the global urban population.

5. The world's rural population is increasingly concentrated in developing countries of Asia and Africa.

Urban population growth is nearly universal, but the world is split with respect to rural population change: 36 per cent of countries or areas saw a decline in the number of rural dwellers between 1990 and 2014, while 61 per cent saw their rural populations grow (figure 3).

Projections indicate that around two-thirds of countries will experience reductions in the size of their rural populations between 2014 and 2050. Proportionately, Japan is projected to have the largest rural population loss: the rural population in 2050 will be 71 per cent smaller than in 2014, followed by the Netherlands (64 per cent reduction), Bulgaria (54 per cent reduction), and Belarus (51 per cent reduction). 52 countries or areas are expected to see their rural populations decline by at least 30 per cent between 2014 and 2050.

Despite the projected global rural population decline, many countries – particularly in sub-Saharan Africa – are expected to continue to see substantial rural population growth in the coming decades. Niger is anticipated to experience the largest rural population growth in proportional terms, nearly tripling its rural population by 2050 with the addition of 30 million rural dwellers. The rural populations of Uganda, Burundi, Zambia, Chad and Malawi are projected to more than double between 2014 and 2050 as well.

6. Governments must implement policies to ensure that the benefits of urban growth are shared equitably and sustainably.

The Rio +20 Conference outcome, “The future we want”, recognized that cities can lead the way towards economically, socially and environmentally sustainable societies, but that a holistic approach to urban planning and management is needed to improve living standards of urban and rural dwellers alike.

Sustainable urbanization requires that cities generate better income and employment opportunities; expand the necessary infrastructure for water and sanitation, energy, transportation, information and communications; ensure equal access to services; reduce the number of people living in slums; and preserve the natural assets within the city and surrounding areas.

NOTES

¹ Estimates of the urban and rural populations, percentage urban, and rate of urbanization are from *World Urbanization Prospects: the 2014 Revision*, available from www.unpopulation.org.

² The estimates of the proportion of the population that is urban are based on national statistics. Because there is no common global definition of what constitutes an urban settlement, the urban definition employed by national statistical offices varies widely across countries. Readers should keep in mind the heterogeneity of the urban definition across countries when interpreting the estimates and projections presented here.

Figure 3. Average annual rates of urban and rural population growth, 1990-2014*

