

## **Youth in an Urbanizing World: Asian Perspectives<sup>1</sup>**

### ***Introduction***

This is an outline of an *in-the-works* chapter on **Youth in an Urbanizing World: Asian Perspectives** for inclusion in the World Youth Report, 2007. The outline gives a flavour of the scope of the chapter which aims to examine the role of the youth in Asia's growing cities and towns. The starting point of the chapter is that urbanization – a phenomenon associated largely with rural-urban migration – makes extraordinarily large impacts on the economy of cities, their socio-economic profile, environmental status, and physical organization. Urbanization creates opportunities and challenges on the one hand, and gives rise to different forms of stresses and risks, on the other hand. Youth are a significant component of the urbanization process. The issue that the chapter will address is: in what ways do the 'youth' – particularly the migrant youth, influence the city's socio-economic and environment profile, and in what ways are they impacted by the city? Further, depending on the availability of data from Asian countries, it will also present the profile of the youth and respond to two main propositions: (i) do the urban youth deserve a discrete treatment; are specific interventions for the urban youth needed? and (ii) in what ways can the youth be empowered to take advantage of the positive aspects of urbanization – opportunities that the cities offer, and likewise, in what ways can they be pulled away from their exposure to disruptive influences e.g., crime, violence and the like?

There are four sub-themes that appear relevant to the Chapter. There are:

1. Nature and structure of the urbanization process in Asian countries: to what extent is the process of urbanization migration-induced or migration-loaded?; and is the urbanization process 'youth' driven and youth-dominated?
2. Impact of urbanization on cities – has urbanization affected the pattern of living, structure of occupations and livelihoods, income distribution and access to services?; has the process bypassed or excluded certain population segments from the

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<sup>1</sup> The emergence of mega-cities-home to millions of people-is another direct consequence of economic growth and of the shift from agricultural to industrially based economies. Today, one in three Asians lives in a city, and this number will have increased to one in two by 2020. It is argued that young people are more likely to move to cities in order to gain economic opportunity, lowering the average age in cities in comparison to rural areas. This massive urbanization increased the pressure on environment and required infrastructure in cities, calling for proper city planning.

Scope of the chapter comprises the role of young people in rural-urban migration; livelihood for youth in the cities; the influence of economic development on the lives in slums; infrastructure needs for youth development; and youth participation in city planning.

*Regional Expert Group Meeting on Development Challenges for Young People, Bangkok, March 2006.*

mainstream development? Are the youth included or excluded in the development process?

3. Risks and stresses faced by the urban youth.
4. Options and alternatives for addressing the problems of the youth

### ***Preliminary Facts and Observations***

Youth forms 14-20%<sup>2</sup> of Asia's total population. Applying these proportions to Asia's **urban** population would place the numbers of the urban youth between 190-270 million.

As urbanization gains momentum in Asian countries – the United Nations predicts that the level of urbanization will rise from the current level of 39.9% to 54.5% by 2030 (UN: The 2003 Revision) the numbers of the youth will increase to about 460 million by the year 2030. Even with a decline in the proportion of population in the 15-24 age-group (World Population Prospects: The 2000 Revision), the overall size of the urban youth population will still be large to be either ignored or given marginal attention. Further, given the levels of education among youth (See Table ) and given the activity rates in the age group of 15-24 years, (India Table), the youth have a potentially large impact on the growth, poverty education, and MDG goals and objectives in Asian countries.

Asia's urban transition is extraordinary for several reasons. One is the size of urban population which is currently estimated at 1.56 billion or 49.3% of the world's total urban population and 68.9% of the urban population of the developing world. It is expected to increase to 2.31 billion by 2030. A second feature of Asia's urbanization is the declining average annual growth. The United Nations predicts the average annual growth rate to decline from 2.67% (2000-05) to about 1.76% by 2025-30. Although such a decline is consistent with the world-wide trends, the fact that such a decline is occurring at a relatively low level of urbanization raises important issues regarding the demographic structure of Asia's population. Will Asia's urbanization level begin to stabilize at a comparatively lower level?

A third feature is the rise and dominance of mega-cities. In 1950, there were 8 urban agglomerations (> 5 million) of which two (Tokyo and Shanghai) were in Asia; in 2000, the UN identified 42 such cities of which 19 were in Asia. Fourth: Asia's urban transition is highly differentiated (see Table), and is impacted by the primacy of China and India which account for 54.4% of Asia's total urban population and 37.6% of the developing world's urban population. China's urban transition is particularly noteworthy; what is extraordinary is the planned shift towards cities and towns as may be seen from the following Box. In comparison, India's level of urbanization will barely touch 41% by 2030 (United Nations: The 2003 Revision (see Graph: China and India).

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<sup>2</sup> The Republic of Korea has the lowest proportion of (14.3%) of population in the age group of 15-24 years, while Vietnam has the highest (20.8%).

**Box 1**

China has entered a period of fast growth in urbanization. Chinese experts predict that by 2050, urban population is likely to reach 1.0-1.1 billion with urbanization level soaring up to over 75% and urban sector contributing over 95% of the national economy.

*Quote from Li 2003, Anthony Yeh and Jiang Yu , China Urban Sector Strategy Review: 2005*

Migration is an important component in the process of Asia's urbanization. Anywhere between 20-30% of urban population growth is contributed by rural-urban migration. Age-specific rural-urban migration data are not yet available; Indian data in 1991-2001 suggests that 29.9% of the total rural-urban migrants are in the 15-24 age-group. Migrant youth are an important factor in shaping cities and towns.

The process of urbanization that Asian countries have experienced have important implications for the youth.

- (i) the combined effect of the increasing levels of urbanization and declining average growth rate (explained, in part, by a fall in rural-urban migration and in part, by a decline in fertility rates) on the size of the youth population;
- (ii) the impact of 0-15 age-group population<sup>3</sup> on the size of the youth population in Asian cities and towns;
- (iii) youth population in mega-cities – is the proportion of the youth higher in mega-cities compared to small and intermediate-sized cities and towns? Are the problems of the youth concentrated in large cities or dispersed in different sizes of cities?

Youth play an important part in urban economic growth. While data on their contribution to economic growth/GDP is not available nor is it likely to be available, the fact that there is a positive correlation between urbanization and GDP (see graph) would tend to suggest that the youth contributes to the growth process. Even on historical comparisons and analysis, there is enough evidence to suggest that the migrant youth are not “the multitude of people whom one sees thronging the city streets, sidewalks, and back alleys – the petty traders, street vendors, coolies and porters, small artisans, messengers, barbers, shoe-shine boys, and personal servants” (Reynolds 1969: 91). Research and literature on the urban informal sector is conclusive in that rural-urban migrants of which youth forms a significant part are not petty traders and shoe-shine boys, but they belong to diverse activities, that they are not a “sector of last resort”, nor are they a symptom of underdevelopment.

The process of urbanization in Asia like in other regions, has been accompanied by the spread of poverty and deprivation. Slums account for 30-40% of population in many Asian cities and similarly, poverty incidence ranges between 12-40%. Other supplementary data e.g., percentage of households without water and sanitation facilities in the premises

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<sup>3</sup> This ranges between 21% (East Asia) to 33% for (South Asia).

indicate large scale deprivation. The youth are severely stressed on account of the non-availability of services, inadequate incomes to be able to support themselves, and insecurity of tenure. The UN-HABITAT notes that poverty underlies the lives of the majority of the world's children and youth. – “In many informal settlements, which shelter the majority of young people in many cities, the appalling living standards, inadequate shelter and non-existent services, rarely offer adequate social structures”. It adds: “Poverty has an alarming impact on the lives of children and young people and has been associated with social exclusions”.

The two publications viz. Youth, Poverty and Conflict in Southeast Asian Cities, and Youth Explosion in Developing World Cities (Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars) provide a sketch of the stresses and risks that face the urban youth. According to Yap Kieo Sheng, absence of social controls and the crises in criminal justice are affecting youth in particular because “they lack benchmarks for social behavior”. The UN-HABITAT observes that rapid urbanization, the huge youth population, and the impacts of globalization are leading to a breakdown in norms and values. Migration from rural to urban areas, combined with economic and social hardships, is leading to changing community and family structures. The traditional nuclear family is replaced by a multitude of family types, such as single-parent families. This has weakened traditional family values, affecting early childhood education that is so crucial for social and individual development. It has also threatened subsequent integration of young people into society at large.

The urban youth places direct demands, on the one hand, on educational infrastructure and labour market, and shelter and services on the other. The inflexibility of the labour market and educational infrastructure in Asian economies to effectively absorb the youth and the deficits in shelter and services produce negative responses, and are said to drive the youth towards crime and violence.

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*This is an **in-the-works** paper. I attach a brief questionnaire seeking information on the role and profile of the urban youth in Asian countries. In addition, if there is any evidence on any aspect of youth development in cities/towns that are known to you, please will refer them to me. Thanks.*

*Om Prakash Mathur  
Professor, Urban Economics and Finance  
National Institute of Public Finance and Policy  
18/2, Satsang Vihar Marg, Special Institutional Area  
(Near JNU), New Delhi 110 067. INDIA  
Tel: 91-11-26569303, 26569780, 26563305, 26961829, 26963421  
Fax: 91-11-26852548, 26512703  
Email: [opm@nipfp.org.in](mailto:opm@nipfp.org.in) & [om\\_mathur@yahoo.com](mailto:om_mathur@yahoo.com)*