The State of Asian Cities 2010/11

UNITED NATIONS
ESCAP
Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

UN HABITAT

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HS Number: HS/162/10 E
ISBN: (Volume) 978-92-1-132274-3

Cover image:
Shanghai, China. With Pudong's skyscrapers in the background, early risers come to the Bund for their morning exercises.
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Design and Layout by MJS
Nairobi | Kenya

Acknowledgements

This first-ever *State of Asian Cities 2010/11* report (the Report) reviews and documents the trends in inclusive and sustainable urban development throughout the Asia-Pacific region. The preparation of the Report has drawn on the latest data, good practices and examples, the rich knowledge of a broad range of specialists, and peer reviews by experts.

The Report was prepared jointly by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT) and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). From UN-HABITAT, it was prepared under the direction of Daniel Biau, Director of the Regional and Technical Cooperation Division (RTCD) and Toshi Noda, Director of the Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific. From ESCAP, it was prepared under the direction of Yap Kioe Sheng, Chief, Poverty Reduction Section and Adnan Aliani, Chief, Sustainable Urban Development Section. The conceptualization and coordination of the Report was undertaken by Bharat Dahiya, Human Settlements Officer of the UN-HABITAT Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific. Technical advice was provided by Natalja Wehmer and Karin Andersson of ESCAP; Surendra Shrestha, Director, Strategic Resource Mobilization/Special Initiatives, Dechen Tsering, Deputy Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific, and Hanna Uusimaa, Focal Point and Junior Professional Officer, UN Environment Programme (UNEP); and Mayor Kim Bum Il, President, Krishna Prasad Jaishi, Co-President, Jatin V Modi, Co-President, and Peter Woods, Secretary General of the United Cities and Local Governments – Asia-Pacific Regional Section (UCLG-ASPAC).

Chapter 1, The State of Asian Cities: Overview and Key Findings, was written by Bharat Dahiya. Dinesh Mehta wrote Chapter 2 – Urbanizing Asia, Chapter 3 – The Economic Role of Asian Cities, and Chapter 4 – Poverty and Inequality in Asian Cities jointly with Meera Mehta. In this he was assisted by Sangeetha Raghuraman and Kinjal Pillai. Brian Roberts and Xuemei Bai drafted Chapter 5 – Urban Environment and Climate Change. Aprodicio Laquian was the author of Chapter 6 – Urban Governance, Management and Finance. The Statistical Annex features the latest urban data available from the UN *World Urbanization Prospects 2009*; latest slum related data from the *State of the World's Cities 2010/11* and the water and sanitation data from the *2010 Update of the Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation*.

The following also contributed to the Report with reviews of earlier drafts and/or boxed items: Karin Andersson, Victor Ban, Desra Hilda Defriana, Rudolf Hauter, Sachiyo Hoshino, Sharadbala Joshi, Abhay Kantak, Alain Kanyinda, Jacob Kurian, Lajana Manandhar, Jos Maseland, Jan Meeuwissen, Thierry Naudin, Pushpa Pathak, Angela Pinzon, Lalith Lankatilleke, Chris Radford, Lowie Rosales, Mariko Sato, Tunnie Srisakulchairak, Anna Stabrawa, Danai Thaitakoo, Bernadia Tjandradewi, Natalja Wehmer, Belinda Yuen and Jinhua Zhang.

The earlier drafts of the Report were reviewed by the following groups of experts:

- *Expert Group Meeting* held at the UCLG Asia-Pacific Regional Congress, Pattaya, Thailand on 14 July 2008: Charlie Bae, Israel Cruzado, Koen DeWandler, Sushil Gyewali, Hae-Doo Lee, Nimit, Hansa Patel and Chamniern Vorratnchaiphan.
- *Habitat Seminar* held at the World Urban Forum – 4, Nanjing, China on 3 November 2008: Mayor Hilmy Mohammed, Wahyu Mulyana, Prafulla Man Pradhan, Wicaksono Sarosa and Bang Anh Tuan.
- *Expert Group Meeting* held at Chiang Mai, Thailand on 1-3 June 2009: Daniel Biau, Shabbir Cheema, Atsushi Deguchi, Koen DeWandler, Rudolf Hauter, Abhay Kantak, Jos Maseland, Toshi Noda, Sneha Palnitkar, Ranjith Perera, Marivel Sacendoncillo, Wicaksono Sarosa, Donovan Storey, Bernadia Tjandradewi, David Villeneuve, Haryo Winarso and Belinda Yuen.

Thierry Naudin undertook the editing. Additional editorial support was provided by Peter Marcotullio and Robert Sullivan.

UN-HABITAT and ESCAP thank the CEPT University and CITYNET for their support.

Administrative support was provided by Sayaka Azuma De Castro and Rujiraporn Polchai.

UN-HABITAT is grateful for the financial support provided by the Government of Norway.

Design and layout by Michael Jones Software, Nairobi.

Foreword

It gives me great pleasure to introduce this *State of the Asian Cities* report. The first in a series to be published every other year, it is intended as a platform for debate and a handbook for action. In view of the breadth and complexity of the urban challenges faced by the Asia-Pacific region, this report is the result of a cooperative effort between UN-HABITAT, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG).

The report throws new light on current issues and challenges which national and local governments, the business sector and organised civil society are facing. On top of putting forward a number of recommendations, this report testifies to the wealth of good, innovative practice that countries of all sizes and development stages have accumulated across the region. It shows us that sustainable human settlements are within reach, and that cooperation between public authorities, the private and the voluntary sectors is the key to success. This report highlights a number of critical issues – demographic and economic trends, poverty and inequality, the environment, climate change and urban governance and management. It is our hope that it will stimulate new thinking and fresh approaches to inclusive, sustainable urban development in the Asia-Pacific region.

In the region, as in the rest of the world, cities today act as the engines of national growth and prosperity. The spectacular economic momentum of the past two decades has turned Asia into one of the main engines of global prosperity, and Asian cities into prominent symbols of this success. In a closely related development, over one half the world's urban population now lives in Asian-Pacific cities – but so do the majority of the world's slum dwellers. This is despite the fact that the region has managed to improve the lives of an estimated 172 million slum dwellers between the years 2000 and 2010. For this remarkable achievement, which exceeds the slum-related Millennium Development Goal in terms of both numbers and deadline, a number of Asian countries must be commended, but significant efforts must be maintained and become more widespread.

Although the Asia-Pacific population is not expected to become predominantly urban before 2026, two complementary types of spatial urban configuration are already emerging. Megacities are the most visible by-product of the combined dynamics of the international economy and urbanisation. Nowhere is this phenomenon more pronounced than in Asia. As urban expansion and new patterns of economic activity have fed on each other, novel configurations have emerged, such as mega urban regions, urban corridors and city-regions. This is an unprecedented challenge in human history, as these new urban regions require deep reform of existing urban management practices and institutions. It is incumbent on national governments and local authorities in the region to gear themselves up to provide appropriate support and guidance to the development of these new types of conurbation if they are to meet the environmental challenges caused by economic growth, changing consumption patterns, demographic pressure and climate change.

These efforts should not overlook the second distinctive feature of the Asia-Pacific region, where urbanisation is broad-based rather than concentrated in just a few cities. Smaller cities and towns with populations under 500,000 have together maintained a share of about half of the region's urban population in recent decades, testifying to their demographic momentum. Therefore, policymakers must also pay attention to smaller urban settlements, enabling them to enhance their role in national and local development.

Amid the remarkable transformations of the past two decades, the need for proper governance has been increasingly felt. In this crucial regard, the region's commitment is best exemplified by the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on Housing and Urban Development (APMCHUD). Its first three biennial sessions in New Delhi, Tehran and Solo have enabled the member states to clarify and promote urban agendas in critical areas like planning, management and finance.

This welcome development must, however, take a number of burgeoning urban problems highlighted in this report into account to ensure that they receive all the attention they deserve across the region. These must be urgently addressed as the challenges of demographic pressure and climate change become ever more daunting. Solving the problems of considerable urban poverty and inequality, the need for affordable housing, safe drinking water, sanitation, transportation and livelihoods for ever-expanding urban populations, regardless of settlement size, all require vision and leadership.

These matters are explored in depth in this important report, thanks to the commendable inter-agency cooperation which, true to the One UN spirit, has presided over its preparation. I would like to convey my appreciation and grateful thanks to all our partners for sharing their expertise, wisdom and sense of vision with us during the preparation of this report.

Joan Clos i Matheu
Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director
United Nations Human Settlements Programme
(UN-HABITAT)

Foreword

On behalf of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), I am pleased to introduce the first State of the Asian Cities Report. In a region that is undergoing immense demographic, economic, social and environmental change, this Report reviews key trends and identifies emerging and critical issues related to urbanization and urban development in Asia and the Pacific.

While Asia and the Pacific has had long history of cities, rapid urbanization in the region started in the late 1980s and 1990s, with trade liberalization, globalization and the resultant rapid economic growth. Urban areas now account for over 80 percent of the region's GDP. Many of the region's cities have become centres of international trade and commerce and hubs for regional and international connectivity. As economies mature and become more knowledge centred, Asian cities are also becoming globally important centres of education, culture and innovation.

Rapid urbanization has also led to major social changes. Economic growth and urbanization have provided opportunities for social mobility and for breaking traditional roles for women and men. It has resulted in the creation of a large educated middle class that has disposable income and is information savvy and globally connected.

While cities have extensively contributed to the region's development, we still need to address four interconnected challenges if our cities are to become inclusive and sustainable. The first challenge is the unprecedented scale and pace of urbanization. Urban population in the region will increase by around 700 million in just over 15 years. This challenge is complicated by the emergence of often unplanned mega urban regions along transport corridors, which often cross jurisdictional boundaries of local and sub-national governments.

The second challenge relates to the externalization of environmental costs of rapid economic development and urbanization. As a result our cities face concurrent environmental risks associated with a lack of basic infrastructure and services; air, water and ground pollution due to industrialization; and intensive resource use and waste generation because of mass consumption.

Being globally connected also means that cities have become ever more vulnerable to the impact of global financial, food and energy shocks. Globalization has led to an increase in disparities. Those with access to information and capital have benefitted more from globalization, while those without access have benefited less or have lost out. Urbanization of poverty and increasing disparities in cities is the third challenge that the region faces. While in some countries, absolute poverty in urban areas still remains a problem, increasingly inter-personal and inter-regional disparities in income and in access to services and opportunities are emerging as a key developmental challenge.

The fourth challenge relates to climate change. The report points out that over 50 percent of Asia-Pacific's urban residents live in low lying coastal zones or flood plains and are at risk from extreme weather events such as floods and typhoons that can wipe out years of development and poverty eradication in a matter of days. The frequency and intensity of these and other climate related disasters will increase. While natural disasters affect both the rich and the poor it is the poor who suffer most because they often live in vulnerable housing and settlements. Increased natural disasters are becoming a new driver for urbanizing poverty.

To make our cities inclusive and sustainable, we need to address economic growth, environmental sustainability, poverty reduction and resilience to climate change and other shocks in tandem. We can do this by improving the environmental and social quality of our economic growth and urbanization, adopting approaches that promote social equity, inclusiveness and green growth. This requires that we take a fresh look at how cities are managed. The Report advocates that view cities as "systems" that require integrated approaches to urban planning, management, financing and governance.

While the challenges that confront our cities are daunting, they are not insurmountable. The Report discusses some of the many innovative approaches, programmes and policies that central and local governments, civil society organizations and the private sector have undertaken to address these challenges. Our cities are hubs of innovation and creativity. Our task as policy makers is to create an enabling environment to harness this vibrancy and energy to transform our cities into centres of opportunity for all, including for our children and their children.

The outcomes of this report and way forward on many of these issues would be discussed at the Fifth Asia-Pacific Urban Forum which ESCAP and its partners, within and outside the United Nations system are convening in June 2011. In keeping with our firm belief that solutions to the region's urban problems will be found in the region's cities, the theme of the Fifth Asia-Pacific Urban Forum is "Cities of Opportunity: Partnerships for an Inclusive and Sustainable Future." We hope that many additional emerging and critical urban issues would be identified at the Forum and would guide the preparations for the next State of Asian Cities Report.

The State of Asian Cities Report and the Forum are good examples of partnership between UN agencies under the concept of One UN at the regional level. On behalf of ESCAP I would like to thank our partners, UN HABITAT, UNEP and UCLG-ASPAC in preparing this report. We hope that other additional partners will join ESCAP and UN HABITAT in preparing the next report.

Noeleen Heyzer
Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations
and Executive Secretary of ESCAP

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