

# **SPOTLIGHT ON THE CITIES**

**Improving urban health  
in developing countries**



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**World Health Organization**

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# Introduction

This publication is about the health of the poor in the fast-expanding cities of the poorer countries of the world. The subject is immensely important, fascinating, and verging on tragedy. Yet until recently it was largely ignored. Most people were simply unaware of the gravity of the situation. For city and national governments already facing tough challenges, and with little money, there is no incentive to search for undiagnosed difficulties, until they simply cannot be ignored any more. The facts themselves are frequently unknown because so often the poorest communities in the cities concerned are unmapped in a statistical sense and lack official recognition; when demographic data and morbidity statistics are collected, those for poorer areas tend to be grossly under-recorded and are quickly lost in city averages, diluted by the returns from more prosperous neighbourhoods. At times there seems to be a conspiracy of silence about health in urban districts, particularly those that are unserved or underserved.

But the story is not without hope. It is full of human interest, testifying as it does to a quiet, unselfish courage, particularly among women bringing up children in great poverty. Moreover, much help can be provided at modest cost, as many successful local initiatives have proved. The next major hurdle is to apply the lessons of these initiatives much more widely, moving towards universal health coverage in the poorest urban communities. It is not new knowledge that is needed so much as new awareness and the determination to apply what is already known. What is required is inherent in the principles of primary health care. Indeed the Declaration of Alma-Ata of September 1978 specifically mentions urban as well as rural development (1). Similarly the WHO Global Strategy for Health for All by the Year 2000 refers explicitly to urbanization and its attendant problems (2). If many people in the World Health Organization and elsewhere saw rural poverty as the top priority in the early 1980s, nobody should ignore the equally urgent (and in

some respects sharply different) problems of urban poverty in the 1990s.

The aims of this publication, therefore, are to:

- alert people to the scale, nature, urgency, and near desperation of the predicament of the poor in many cities of the world;
- advocate a fundamental shift in health care priorities and strategies in the cities, from simply trying to do more of the same to applying primary health care principles in practice. This is a message not only for ministries of health, but equally for city hospitals and medical schools, the medical profession, city health departments, and political leaders at the city and national levels;
- explain some of the key characteristics of successful action to improve urban health, as reflected in actual local experience: for example the indispensable elements of community involvement and intersectoral action;
- focus attention upon the urgent need to raise one's sights from successful pockets of action to comprehensive coverage: unless this is done (and done quickly) there is simply no hope of action on an adequate scale.

Government plans and programmes must be prospectively oriented—in other words, based not only on a good knowledge of prevailing conditions and problems, but also on the way they are expected to evolve in the future. Thus, Chapter 1 gives some facts, figures, and trends related to urbanization. These speak for themselves, but “numbers do not tell the whole story and no amount of statistics or reports can convey the true feeling and the real dimension of the destitution and even abjectness under which large populations in many cities of the world are forced to live. Only exposure to that destitution and direct observation of it can create the awareness and motivation required for dedicated involvement” (3).

Hence, this publication is addressed to a wide range of political leaders and managers responsible for the health and social welfare of low-income, underserved urban populations; health workers at different levels; city planners; and international and nongovernmental organizations and funding agencies concerned with the problems of the urban poor in developing countries.

Preparing a document for publication is usually harder than one expects, and there is always satisfaction in its completion. But no other publication we have been involved with has left us with quite



the same feelings about the urgency of its message, or the same sense of the privilege of being associated with a human endeavour of the highest importance. The urban poor not only need help, they have the right to ask it from all of us, and they must not ask in vain.



## Chapter 1

# Health and the urban crisis

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Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the main emphasis in community health in developing countries was on extending health service coverage in the rural areas, hitherto largely unserved but containing 85% of the population. During that period, relatively little attention was paid to the urban situation, which was fast deteriorating with the continued migration of people to the towns (4).

However, since the beginning of the 1980s, authorities throughout the world have become increasingly concerned with the great public health problems found in the cities.

The 1980 Rome Declaration on Population and the Urban Future (5,6) pointed out that “in the next two decades, the world will undergo, as a result of the urbanization process, the most radical changes ever in social, economic and political life”. However, far from constituting an indication of social development and of economic and cultural progress, the chaotic, unbalanced and uncontrolled growth of urban centres has become a source of major concern for political leaders, social planners, and administrators, especially in the developing world. The Rome Declaration therefore castigated the inadequacies, in most cities of the world, of “virtually every service amenity and support required for tolerable urban living”.

### Urban growth

The world population is expected to reach 6122 million by the year 2000 and 8206 million by 2025 (Table 1), an increase of 26% between 1985 and 2000 and a further 34% between 2000 and 2025.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all figures in this section are based on the projections prepared by the United Nations Department of International Economic and Social Affairs.

Table 1. Estimated and projected total, urban, and rural population, by region or area, 1970-2025 (millions)<sup>a</sup>

Region or area	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2025
<b>World total</b>												
total	3 693	4 076	4 450	4 837	5 246	5 678	6 122	6 559	6 989	7 414	7 822	8 206
urban	1 371	1 564	1 764	1 983	2 234	2 525	2 854	3 220	3 623	4 050	4 488	4 932
rural	2 322	2 512	2 685	2 854	3 012	3 153	3 268	3 339	3 366	3 364	3 334	3 274
<b>Developed regions</b>												
total	1 047	1 095	1 137	1 174	1 210	1 244	1 277	1 305	1 331	1 355	1 377	1 396
urban	698	753	798	839	877	915	950	983	1 011	1 039	1 063	1 087
rural	350	341	338	335	333	329	327	323	320	316	313	310
<b>Developing regions</b>												
total	2 646	2 981	3 313	3 663	4 036	4 434	4 845	5 254	5 658	6 059	6 446	6 809
urban	673	811	966	1 144	1 357	1 610	1 904	2 237	2 612	3 011	3 425	3 845
rural	1 973	2 171	2 347	2 519	2 679	2 824	2 941	3 016	3 046	3 048	3 021	2 964
<b>Africa</b>												
total	361	413	479	555	645	751	872	1 008	1 158	1 313	1 468	1 617
urban	81	101	129	165	210	268	340	426	528	642	766	894
rural	280	312	350	390	435	482	532	582	630	671	702	722
<b>Eastern Africa</b>												
total	106	122	143	166	196	231	272	320	373	429	484	537
urban	11	15	21	30	42	57	77	102	133	168	206	246
rural	95	107	121	136	154	173	195	218	240	261	278	291
<b>Middle Africa</b>												
total	40	45	52	60	69	79	92	106	122	138	154	170
urban	10	13	16	21	27	35	44	55	67	81	95	110
rural	30	33	36	38	41	45	48	52	55	57	59	60
<b>Northern Africa</b>												
total	83	94	108	123	140	158	176	193	211	228	245	261
urban	30	36	43	52	62	75	89	104	120	137	154	172
rural	53	58	65	71	78	83	87	89	91	91	90	89
<b>Southern Africa</b>												
total	26	29	33	37	42	48	55	61	69	76	84	91
urban	11	14	16	20	23	28	33	39	45	52	60	67
rural	14	15	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	24	24
<b>Western Africa</b>												
total	106	123	144	169	199	235	277	327	383	442	501	558
urban	19	24	32	42	55	73	97	126	163	205	251	300
rural	87	99	112	127	143	161	181	201	220	237	250	259

<b>Americas</b>	total	510	560	613	668	726	785	844	901	959	1 017	1 072	1 124
	urban	330	374	423	475	530	586	642	699	755	812	868	923
	rural	180	186	191	194	197	199	201	203	204	205	204	201
<b>Latin America</b>	total	283	321	361	405	451	499	546	594	642	689	735	779
	urban	163	198	236	279	325	372	420	467	515	563	610	656
	rural	121	124	125	125	126	126	127	127	127	127	125	123
<b>Caribbean</b>	total	25	27	30	32	35	38	41	44	48	51	55	58
	urban	11	14	16	18	21	24	27	30	33	36	40	43
	rural	13	14	14	14	14	14	14	15	15	15	15	15
<b>Central America</b>	total	68	80	92	105	119	134	149	164	179	194	209	223
	urban	37	46	56	66	79	92	105	119	134	149	163	178
	rural	31	34	36	39	41	42	44	45	45	46	45	45
<b>Temperate South America</b>	total	36	39	42	46	49	52	55	58	61	64	67	70
	urban	28	31	35	38	42	46	49	52	56	59	62	64
	rural	8	8	7	7	7	7	6	6	6	6	5	5
<b>Tropical South America</b>	total	154	175	198	222	248	275	301	327	354	380	405	429
	urban	86	107	130	156	184	211	239	266	293	319	345	370
	rural	68	68	67	66	64	63	62	61	61	60	60	58
<b>Northern America</b>	total	227	239	252	264	275	287	297	307	317	327	337	345
	urban	167	176	186	195	204	214	223	231	240	249	258	267
	rural	59	62	66	68	71	73	75	76	77	78	79	79
<b>Asia</b>	total	2 102	2 354	2 584	2 818	3 058	3 304	3 549	3 775	3 982	4 180	4 365	4 535
	urban	503	595	688	791	915	1 066	1 242	1 444	1 670	1 908	2 151	2 397
	rural	1 599	1 759	1 896	2 027	2 143	2 239	2 306	2 330	2 312	2 272	2 214	2 138

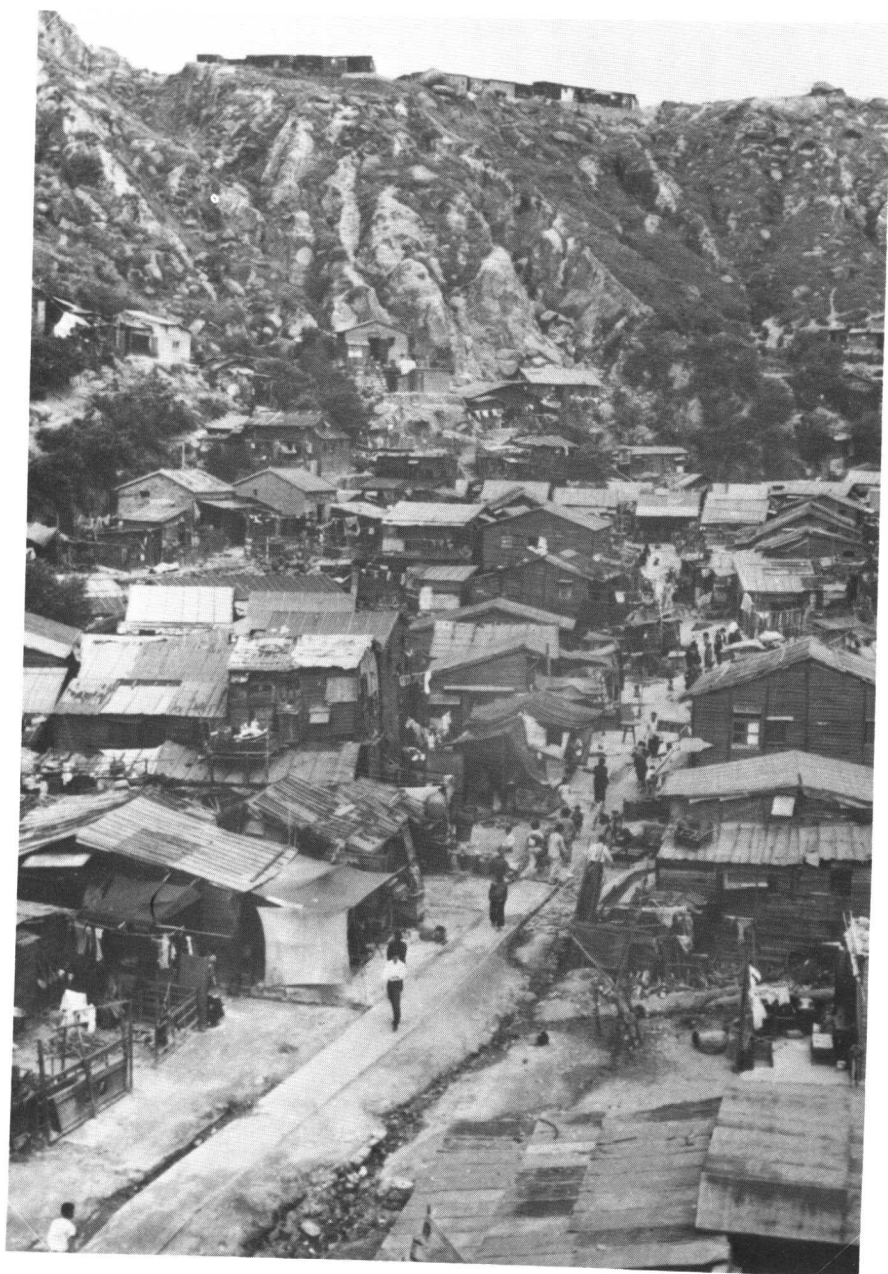
<sup>a</sup> Source: United Nations (7).

Table 1. (continued)

Region or area		1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2025
East Asia													
	total	986	1 096	1 176	1 250	1 324	1 399	1 475	1 539	1 589	1 634	1 679	1 721
	urban	266	302	331	357	391	433	485	547	618	692	770	849
	rural	721	794	846	892	933	967	990	992	971	942	909	872
China													
	total	831	927	996	1 060	1 124	1 190	1 256	1 311	1 355	1 396	1 436	1 475
	urban	167	187	203	219	241	272	315	367	431	499	570	645
	rural	664	740	793	841	883	917	941	944	924	897	866	830
Japan													
	total	104	112	117	121	124	127	130	132	133	133	133	132
	urban	74	84	89	92	95	98	101	103	105	106	106	106
	rural	30	27	28	28	29	29	29	29	28	27	27	26
Other East Asia													
	total	51	57	63	69	76	83	89	95	101	105	110	114
	urban	24	31	38	46	55	63	70	76	82	88	93	98
	rural	27	27	25	23	22	21	20	19	18	17	17	16
South Asia													
	total	1 116	1 258	1 408	1 568	1 734	1 905	2 074	2 236	2 394	2 546	2 686	2 814
	urban	237	293	358	434	524	633	757	898	1 052	1 215	1 381	1 548
	rural	879	965	1 050	1 135	1 209	1 272	1 317	1 339	1 341	1 330	1 304	1 266
Southeastern Asia													
	total	288	324	361	400	439	480	520	557	593	627	659	688
	urban	58	71	87	105	127	154	184	219	256	294	334	374
	rural	230	253	274	295	312	326	335	339	337	333	325	315
Southern Asia													
	total	754	849	949	1 056	1 165	1 277	1 387	1 491	1 592	1 689	1 777	1 855
	urban	147	181	220	267	322	388	466	553	652	756	863	968
	rural	607	668	728	789	843	889	921	938	940	932	914	886
Western Asia													
	total	74	85	98	113	130	148	168	188	209	230	250	271
	urban	32	41	51	62	75	91	107	125	145	165	185	205
	rural	42	44	48	51	54	57	60	63	64	65	65	65

# Europe

Europe	total	459	474	485	492	499	506	512	517	520	521	523	524
	urban	306	326	340	352	363	374	385	393	400	406	412	417
	rural	153	148	144	140	135	131	128	123	119	115	111	107
Eastern Europe	total	103	106	109	112	115	118	120	123	125	127	129	131
	urban	55	60	65	69	73	77	80	84	87	89	92	94
	rural	48	46	44	43	42	41	40	39	38	38	37	37
Northern Europe	total	80	82	82	83	83	83	84	84	84	84	84	84
	urban	66	69	70	71	72	73	74	74	75	75	76	76
	rural	14	13	12	12	11	10	10	9	9	9	8	8
Southern Europe	total	128	134	140	143	146	149	152	155	156	157	158	159
	urban	72	78	84	89	94	99	104	108	112	116	119	122
	rural	56	56	55	54	52	50	49	46	44	42	40	37
Western Europe	total	148	152	154	154	155	156	156	155	154	153	152	150
	urban	113	119	121	123	124	126	127	127	127	126	126	125
	rural	35	33	32	31	31	30	29	28	28	27	26	25
USSR	total	242	253	265	279	292	304	315	326	337	348	358	368
	urban	137	152	167	183	197	211	222	234	245	256	264	273
	rural	105	101	98	96	95	93	92	92	92	93	94	95
Oceania	total	19	21	23	25	26	28	30	32	33	35	36	38
	urban	14	15	16	18	19	20	21	23	24	26	27	29
	rural	6	6	7	7	8	8	9	9	9	9	9	9
Australia/New Zealand	total	15	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27
	urban	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
	rural	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Melanesia	total	3	4	4	5	5	6	7	7	8	9	9	10
	urban	0	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	3	3	4	4
	rural	3	3	3	4	4	5	5	5	5	6	6	6
Micronesia/Polynesia	total	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	urban	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1
	rural	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0



A typical shanty town on the fringe of a sprawling city

WHO (9717)



The urban population of the world, which was estimated as 1983 million in 1985, is likely to reach 2854 million by the year 2000 (an increase of 44%) and 4932 million by 2025 (a further increase of 73%) (7).

United Nations estimates suggest that, from 1975 to 1980, 54.3% of the total population increase in the developing regions was urban.<sup>1</sup> It is anticipated that, in the period 1995–2000, 71.5% of the increase will be in urban areas and only 28.5% in rural areas. Urban growth is in fact expected to increase as rural growth decreases to the point where, between 2000 and 2025, the rural population in developing countries will actually decrease in absolute terms (Table 2). Cumulative percentage changes anticipated in the urban and rural populations of the developing countries up to the year 2025 are shown in Fig. 1.

Urban areas in the developing regions are expected to grow over the last quarter of this century at an annual rate almost 3.7 times that expected in rural areas: an average rate of 3.48% per year versus 0.92% per year. During this period, the average annual urban growth rate will remain fairly constant (3.4–3.5%) while the rural growth rate will drop by 50% (see Table 2).

Table 2. Average annual urban and rural growth in developing and developed countries<sup>a</sup>

Period	Developing countries		Developed countries	
	urban (%)	rural (%)	urban (%)	rural (%)
1970–1975	3.7	1.9	1.5	–0.5
1975–1980	3.5	1.6	1.2	–0.2
1980–1985	3.4	1.4	1.0	–0.2
1985–1990	3.4	1.2	0.9	–0.1
1990–1995	3.4	1.0	0.8	–0.2
1995–2000	3.4	0.8	0.8	–0.1
2000–2005	3.2	0.5	0.7	–0.2
2005–2010	3.1	0.2	0.6	–0.2
2010–2015	2.8	0.0	0.5	–0.2
2015–2020	2.6	–0.2	0.5	–0.2
2020–2025	2.3	–0.4	0.4	–0.2

<sup>a</sup> Source: United Nations (7).

<sup>1</sup> Developing regions include all countries and other territories in Africa, Asia (excluding Japan), South and Central America and Mexico, and Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand).