

# THE CHALLENGES OF THE 21ST-CENTURY CITY

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## SUMMARY

In 2008, for the first time in history, more than half of all human beings lived in cities. Cities are growing in population as well as in their geographic footprint at an accelerating pace. Although megacities with populations over 10 million, such as Tokyo, Mexico City, and São Paulo, are widely recognized, most urban growth is taking place in so-called medium-size cities of between 1 million and 5 million. This reality changes how policymakers in every sphere can pursue their goals.

We live in a world that is different from that inhabited by our ancestors in many profound ways. Among the most important changes is that, for the first time, almost half of the world's people live in cities. According to the United Nations, in 2008 the global urban population surpassed half of the world's population of 6.7 billion compared with 13 percent a century ago and 3 percent a century before that. This trend will require profound changes in the way the U.S. government addresses everything from development policy to international security. The populations of cities will continue to grow at an accelerating pace for at least the first half of the 21st century, with the number of large cities increasing as well. Not only are such urban giants as Delhi, Dhaka, Jakarta, and Mexico City exploding to absorb up to 30 million residents and more—threatening to overtake the entire population of Canada—but more than 500 cities will have more than a million residents within a decade. Already, just over 700 urban centers are home to a half-million or more residents. Thus, in a little over a century,

human beings have gone from being rural animals to urban ones.

Global population growth will continue to concentrate in urban centers of the developing world, which will become home to more than 2 billion new residents over the next two decades. In other words, 100 million people a year—a number that is on the scale of the population of Mexico—will be moving from rural areas to cities each year for the next 20 years. On average, the world's urban population is growing by 3 million people—more or less the size of Cape Town—each week. China has been expanding its cities at a rate of one new Chicago every month for the past dozen years. Increasingly, such growth is proportionately less a consequence of migration and more a result of natural population growth within cities. Thus, the relative weight of cities on the planet will continue to grow even in the unlikely event that policies can be devised to keep people “down on the farm.”

Not only are cities growing, but they are producing more and more of the world's wealth. Urban economic activity accounts for up to 55 percent of gross national product in low-income countries, 73 percent in middle-income countries, and 85 percent in high-income countries. At the same time, global poverty is becoming an increasingly urban phenomenon as well. In 2002, 746 million city dwellers lived on \$2.00 a day or less. As a consequence, urban inequality is becoming more widespread, with measures of inequality growing most rapidly in cities with lower income levels.

These profound demographic and economic transformations are accompanied by geographic changes that are especially important in a time of global climate change. Urban sprawl consumes more and more land, both arable and not. According to estimates based on satellite photos carried out by the Cities Alliance, urban population density is two-thirds of what it was just a half-century ago. This global trend undoubtedly would happen in any event, given the sheer numbers of people who have come to live in cities, which necessarily means that urban "agglomerations" are spreading farther and farther out. Indeed, what constitutes a city needs to be redefined—that is, carpets of urban development that obliterate the landscape as they extend literally hundreds of square miles in every direction.

These global trends mean that the "urban age" isn't ending—it is just beginning. Cities worldwide are becoming larger, more diverse, more fluid, and less manageable than has been the case in the past. In addition to sheer size, the sprawl created by declining density—which, again, is happening worldwide—means that the *city* as it has been understood no longer exists. The traditional city has taken steroids and has grown into a sprawling, urbanized region.

The challenges of 21st-century urbanization seem unprecedented. Nonetheless, observers of urban life since at least the rise of the industrial metropolis in the 19th century have been intimidated by the speed and ease of communication and change, and by cities' fluidity. This quality challenges all sense of boundaries and appropriate contact and means that any given policy or business solution to address these changes will lose its power with the passage of time. Nothing is fixed or permanent. Approaches to governing cities must become as dynamic as cities themselves, overflowing—rather than being contained within—the conceptual boundaries of any single intellectual paradigm.

Responding effectively to these challenges begins by recognizing the present historical moment's new urban realities. First, as important as rural communities are, a majority of the planet's human population—and before too long the world's poor—now lives in cities. Second, an increasing percentage of the world's wealth is being produced in cities. Third, those cities are spreading out and becoming less dense, thereby consuming tremendous amounts of land. Fourth, the present is one of the most active periods for human migration in history. Fifth, the impermanence of the present-day world necessarily means that the task of urban management becomes one of refining the process through constant learning, rather than one of simply identifying fixed solutions. In other words, cities—and the communities that constitute them—must be resilient and sustainable, by effectively managing the challenges before them rather than seeking static, permanent solutions or quick fixes to problems.

Meeting the challenges of urban life will require policymakers to think differently about cities by moving beyond entrenched notions of rural versus urban and by posing new questions for thinking

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about cities: How can we acknowledge and respond to the fact that a majority of the planet in the 21st century is urban? How can we promote effective urban management given the seemingly universal and unstoppable process of urban sprawl and the influx of new city residents? And how can we promote social norms, political institutions, and economic activities that make urban areas socially sustainable?

In short, the new challenges of 21st-century urbanism require a recalibration of measures of policy success. As Susan Parnell of the University of Cape Town has argued, the only evaluation that matters in judging an urban community—or an urban development program—is whether anyone would want their own children to live, to study, or to work in a given community.

In the short term, policymakers who deal with international affairs need to build an urban dimension into all of their policies, whether those policies are directed toward poverty alleviation, public health, or national security. The scale and complexity of urban communities require that policies to advance broad development and security agendas recognize the urban context. Policymakers face some important tasks: to create policies that

encourage businesses to address the new challenges of the urban age and to predicate those policies on the new opportunities to be realized, given the tens of millions of people who are in new communities around the world. Policymakers similarly should support forums that bring together community and business leaders from similar urban areas, as in the so-called South-South dialogue. Finally, U.S. policymakers concerned with the domestic agenda should begin to examine the many experiments with urban and metropolitan governance that are taking place outside the United States.

When responding to these questions and the challenges they represent, urban stakeholders would do well to remember the admonition of historian Edward Kantowicz, who wrote about Chicago politics of a century ago. “The politics of balance,” Kantowicz observed, “may sound boring, the stuff of safe-and-sane conservatism; but nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, maintaining a political balance in a rapidly growing, fractionalized city is a highly dynamic, even daring act.”<sup>1</sup> Success depends on dexterity and flexibility and the distinctive political resource of pragmatic pluralism.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 Edward R. Kantowicz, “Carter H. Harrison II: The Politics of Balance, in *The Mayors: The Chicago Political Tradition*, ed. Paul M. Green and Melvin G. Holli (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University, 2005), 16.

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