

THE URBANIZING WORLD

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Summary

Urbanization is an important process in the development of human society. The more developed countries have already achieved a high level of urbanization and have entered a stage of mature urbanization. The less developed countries are just accelerating their pace of urbanization and are in a stage of expanding urbanization. The number of urban population in the poor and less developed countries overtook that of the more developed countries in the early 1970s. By the year 2025, every four out of five urban population will be in currently less developed countries. Rapid urbanization in the developing countries has already resulted in widespread unemployment, poverty, and housing shortages. Due to limited natural resources on the earth, it is impossible that the world's urban population could enjoy a similar life style of high consumption as in developed countries. The development of an equitable, urbanized, and prosperous world needs a new form of technology and fundamental changes in the life styles of rich countries. The article discusses the idea of moving toward a less energy-intensive urban form and progress in cleaning the urban environment.

1. Introduction

In 1899, Max Weber showed in his *The Growth of Cities in the Nineteenth Century* that urbanization was the most remarkable social phenomenon in the nineteenth century. By 1999, looking at the rapid urbanization of both the developed and developing countries of the twentieth century, it could be said that urbanization was an even more remarkable phenomenon than in the previous century. In the year 1800, only 3% of the world's population lived in urban areas. In the year 1900, only 5.5% of the world's population lived in cities with 100 000 or more population and 13.6% lived in places with 5000 or

more population. By the year 1994, 44.8% of the world's population lived in urban areas and the total urban population was over 2.5 billion; some 0.87 billion of these were in more developed regions and 1.65 billion were in less developed regions. It is clear that the whole world, both rich and poor countries, has been increasingly urbanized. Various urban areas have become the home of many people. Such development has intertwined with economic development and social change and has important implications for the sustainability of the world economically, socially, and ecologically.

This article will examine the concepts, trends, and problems of urbanization in the world and is divided into six sections. Section two will discuss the concepts of urbanization and its implications for development and sustainability. Section three will examine urbanization trends in the past and look into the future based on estimations and projections by the United Nations in 1995. Section four will discuss the key urban problems in the developing countries where the pace of urbanization is most rapid. Section five considers the issues of building sustainable cities in the context of increasing pressure on resources and environment. The idea of the compact city and the successful case of Xiamen city in the People's Republic of China in cleaning its environment are examined in detail. The final section concludes the main findings of the article.

2. Urbanization Process

Urbanization is an important process in the development of human society. Put simply, urbanization refers to the increase in the proportion of population living in urban areas. This may be achieved by the increase in the numbers of urban areas and the size of each urban area. It is associated with industrialization in the industrial society and the expansion of the service economy in the post-industrial society. New urban forms may appear in the era of information and service society based on information technology, Internet, communications and transportation networks. But it is unlikely that human society will undergo a de-urbanization process and that most people will move back and live in small rural settlements again in the near future. Some cities and world cities with global importance in particular will continue to assume the greatest importance in the world system.

Urbanization is the result of increasing scales of industrial and other non-agricultural activities. Population, production, and consumption are concentrated in cities for two main reasons. Firstly, cities are usually advantageous locations of various economic activities offering quality infrastructure, and a high quality of material and cultural life. Secondly, due to scale and agglomeration economies, an initial investment project in a rural area will expand and the area later may become an urban area. As a result, more and more non-agricultural activities and population will be located in urbanized areas.

Many developed countries have completed the transition from agricultural society to industrial/post-industrial society while many developing countries are still in the initial stage of such transition. The necessary condition for such transition is an increase in agricultural productivity to produce surplus agricultural products. Low agricultural productivity and ever-increasing rural population in many developing countries are

main reasons for their low levels of urbanization. Some countries such as Singapore may be able to achieve a high level of urbanization without a large and advanced agricultural sector by importing agricultural products from the world market.

Urbanization not only means the spatial concentration of population and economic activities but also means a new way of life—urbanism—different from the traditional way of life in rural society. Urbanism refers to the conditions of life associated with living in cities that emphasize competition, achievement, specialization, superficiality, anonymity, and independence. Economically, the urban way of life means a high level of material satisfaction. Urban people tend to consume more energy and resources. As the urbanization continues in many developing countries, some scholars doubt whether many people in these countries can achieve levels of consumption similar to developed and highly urbanized countries such as the United States. In 1994, 76% of the American population lived in urban areas. The total population of the United States accounted for 5% of the world's population but used one-third of the world's nonrenewable resources and 26% of gross planetary product. On the other hand, 79% of the world's population lived in less developed countries but they used only one-seventh of the nonrenewable resources and 17% of gross planetary product. It is of great concern whether the earth is able to support all the population in the world with living standards as high as in the United States if many developing countries also achieve a high level of urbanization and development. At the current level of resource flow, only 15% of the world's population could be supported at such a high living standard and nothing would be left for the remaining 85% of the world's population. Without dramatic changes in resource utilization and adjustment in patterns of high mass consumption, there will be great stress on the environment as well as world peace and security.

Urbanization promises to bring people a high level of living standards. It also calls for urgent action to balance the expanding urban population with the environment. The next section will examine the trend of urban population growth in the world.

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Biographical Sketch

Jianfa Shen is an associate professor in the Department of Geography and Resource Management at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. He received his B.Sc. and M.Sc. degrees from East China Normal University in Shanghai in 1983 and 1986 respectively and his Ph.D. from the University of London (London School of Economics and Political Science) in 1994. He is a member of the Hong Kong Geographical Association, fellow of the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers and its Study Group on Population Geography and Study Group on Quantitative Methods, correspondent members of the Commission on Modelling Geographical Systems, Commission on Population and the Environment, and the Commission on Monitoring Cities of Tomorrow of the International Geographical Union.

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