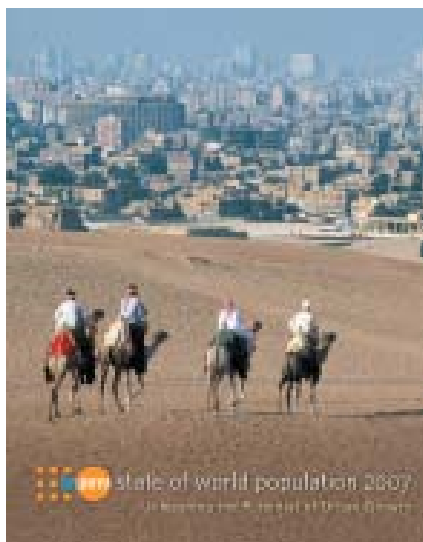


The State of the World Population 2007: Unleashing the Potential of Urban Growth

The year 2008 is a landmark in world demographic transition. For the first time in human history, more than half of the world population (3.3 billion) will be living in urban areas. Urban population in Asia and Africa is projected to double between 2000 to 2030. The towns and cities in the developing world would account for 80% of the global urban humanity during the same period. Identifying the challenge of rapid urban growth, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has released 'The State of World Population 2007' (SOWP 2007)(1).

This 108 page document breaks many myths associated with urbanization. It challenges the belief that urbanization hampers the growth, as traditionally urbanization has always been thought to be associated with poverty, slums, crimes and social disruption. The report mentions that mega-cities have overshadowed the need and demands for development in smaller urban habitations. Secondly, many policymakers try to prevent rural to urban migration which is not only futile and counter-productive but may also be a violation of people's rights. It also makes a note that most urban growth now stems from natural increase (more births than deaths) rather than migration. The report explores some hitherto unknown aspects of urbanization and tries to underline its potential to contribute to the growth of a nation. It adds how urbanization ensures the empowerment of women by better opportunities for education, access to health care, legal services, less gender discrimination and higher employment opportunities(1).



SOWP 2007 provides a comprehensive view of both positive and negative aspects of urbanization. In the last chapter, this report recommends few solutions for the existing obstacles in urban development; emphasizes an immediate need for policy intention and planning for the proper development. The report has an annexure on a number of urban development related indicators for all the countries in the world, for comparison.

COMMENTARY

The report is a good attempt to reflect and highlight the growth potential of urbanization. Majority of the issues described in the report deserve the attention of the readers, policy makers and planners. However, the report deals with urban people in general whereas in reality, urban areas have highly discrepant population varying from 'well-to-do' areas to very poor people living in the slums. Even amongst the poor living in the slums, significant disparities exist(2). Attention on urban poor and their problems would have enhanced the quality of this report.

India has one of the fastest growing urban populations with 285 million (28%) people living in urban area (Census 2001). This is expected to reach 432 million (40%) in 2021. Rapid urbanization has unfortunately outgrown the development pace, and a large proportion (43 million) live in substandard conditions of slums(3). All development related indicators, including those of health, are poor for slum dwellers. Part of the reason is that the urban averages mask the condition of urban poor and thus they had never been focus of the planners and policy makers. It is the time that slums are accepted as a reality and efforts are made to provide better quality of services for urban poor. Considering these facts, The Government of India launched Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission

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(JNNURM) on Dec 3, 2005(4). This program aims to encourage reforms and fast track planned development of 63 identified cities with focus on efficiency in urban infrastructure and service delivery mechanisms, community participation, and accountability of urban local bodies towards citizens. JNNURM has two submissions of 'Urban Infrastructure and Governance', and 'Basic Services to the Urban Poor'(4). However, even two and a half years since its inception, the scenario remains unchanged for the urban poor.

India is about to launch National Urban Health Mission (NUHM) in 2008(3). NUHM is expected to provide better public health facilities for the urban population with special focus on urban slums.

CONCLUSION

Urbanization is a desirable reality for the development of a nation. Efforts should be made to streamline the development plan for the cities, including plan for urban poor, on a countrywide basis. Well planned urbanization is a significant contributor to the prosperity of the people and the nation whereas a poorly planned urban city is prone to poor living and health conditions. Developing nations should direct their efforts urgently in this direction and the time to act is now.

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