
GLOBAL SETTLEMENT TRENDS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Situation: Water supply and quality, global warming and climate change, safety and security, environmental degradation, and poverty and economic instability, among other issues, are most pronounced for humans in the places where they live: settlements. These issues are converging rapidly as people concentrate in cities.

Last summer, the number of people living in cities exceeded the number living in rural areas for the first time. Of the planet's six-plus billion people, more than three billion now live in cities, of which one billion live in urban slums.

Twenty years from now, the total global population is forecast to increase to over eight billion, of whom five billion will be living in cities, two billion of them in slums. Nearly all of this growth will be located in the cities of developing countries.

The current annual urban population growth of 80 million people is equivalent to the population of Germany. Of that total, there will be an annual increase in slum dwellers the size of Holland and Belgium put together -- 35 million.

The United Nations estimates that only 5 percent of new development in cities is actually planned; in many cities, 70-80 percent of residents are thought to be living in unplanned areas. These are usually the poorest inhabitants, who often find themselves in poorly built slums, located in risk-prone areas, with poor services.

In many parts of the world, the problem is exacerbated by a shortage of trained professionals to manage settlement change. Even the principles guiding understanding of how cities grow have tenuous connections to context. Growth is largely focused in developing countries, but many of the theories of how cities function are rooted in developed countries.

Implications for Humanitarians:

- The doubling of urban populations in the coming years will lead to a three-fold increase in urban land area
- Much of this physical expansion will be located in low-lying, risk-prone areas, in many cases along vulnerable coastlines where rising sea levels may have wide-scale impacts
- Urban areas are thus likely to become the location of future disasters
- Disasters/crises accelerate and exacerbate the urbanization process, and
- Urban displacement, while poorly known at present, raises a number of methodological and conceptual issues, chief among them how to define "Harm's Way," how to keep people out of harm's way, and how to reduce risk among those forced to live there.