Urbanization in the Less Developed Countries

live, the government made it almost impossible for rural residents to migrate to towns or cities. As recently as 1985, more than 77 percent of Chinese people still lived in the countryside; today the rural population is nearer 50 percent.

China is now rapidly making up for lost time. Having decided that towns and cities can be engines of economic growth within a communist system, the Chinese government not only relaxed enforcement of its residency laws but drafted plans to establish over 430 new cities. Between 1980 and 2010 the number of people living in cities in China more than tripled, from 190 million to 636 million, and the number of cities with a population of three-quarters of a million or more increased from 20 to 133 (Figure 4).

In the world’s developed countries, levels of urbanization are high and have been for some time (Figure 5). United Nations figures show that Belgium and Iceland are 90 percent or more urbanized, while Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States are all more than 75 percent urban. Despite low rates of urbanization, especially when compared to the less developed countries, the urban population in the developed countries is still expected to rise to more than 86 percent by 2050.

![FIGURE 4 Guangzhou, in southern China’s Pearl River Delta, has experienced phenomenal growth (from 1.0 million people in 1950 to 10.9 million by 2025) and is projected to become one of the 25 largest metropolitan areas in the world by 2025. The construction cranes in CITIC Plaza in the growing Tianhe District of Guangzhou are building new skyscraper offices, apartment complexes, a train station, a metro station, and a sports stadium.](image-url)
Levels of urbanization are also very high in many of the world’s newly industrializing economies (NIEs) (Figure 5). Brazil, Mexico, Taiwan, Singapore, and South Korea are all at least 75 percent urbanized. And compared to the developed countries, their rates of urban growth are also high.

In other less developed countries rates of urbanization are even higher. Jakarta, Indonesia, for example, grew from 1.4 million to 9.2 million between 1950 and 2010 and is expected to reach 10.9 million by 2025. Likewise, Lagos, Nigeria, a city of less than 300,000 in 1950, reached 10.6 million in 2010 and is projected to have a metropolitan population of 15.8 million by 2025 (Figure 6). Delhi, Mumbai, and Kolkata (India), São Paulo (Brazil), Dhaka (Bangladesh), Mexico City, and Shanghai (China) are all projected to have metropolitan populations in excess of 20 million by 2025 (Table 1).

Many of the very largest metropolitan areas are growing at annual rates of 4 percent or more each year. To put the
Urbanization in the Less Developed Countries

Rural-to-urban migration involves impoverished rural residents migrating to the larger towns and cities in search of a better life. These people are driven by the desire for employment and the prospect of access to schools, health clinics, piped water, and the kinds of public facilities and services that are often unavailable in rural regions. Overall, the metropolises in the less developed countries have absorbed almost nine out of ten of the 2.2 billion city dwellers added to the world’s population since 1970.

Rural migrants have moved to cities out of desperation and hope, rather than being drawn by actual jobs and opportunities (Urban View 2 entitled “Fleeing the Countryside for Life in the City in Africa”). Because of the disproportionate number of teenagers and young adults in these migration streams, an important additional component of urban growth has followed—high rates of natural increase of the population. In most less developed countries the rate of natural increase in cities exceeds that of migration. On average, about 60 percent of urban population growth in the less developed countries is due to natural increase.

Political and environmental circumstances can also promote urban growth. Wars in Africa have caused countless refugees to flee to cities. After civil war broke out in Cote d’Ivoire (Ivory Coast) in 2002, hundreds of thousands of people fled areas of conflict for the cities of Abidjan, Grand Bassam, and Yamoussoukro. Refugees from Sudan, Somalia, Congo, and Ethiopia have left the refugee camps in Kenya for its capital, Nairobi. Many people fleeing war-torn areas have refused free humanitarian assistance in crowded and squalid refugee camps and risked persecution and marginalization in cities in the hope of a better life. Instead, many refugees experience exploitation, harassment, prostitution, rape, and dreadful living conditions. In Mauritania, Niger, and other countries...

FACTORS PROMOTING URBAN GROWTH

The factors promoting urban growth vary within and between different parts of the world. In sharp contrast to the experience of the world’s developed countries, where urbanization was largely an outcome of economic growth, urbanization in the less developed countries has resulted from demographic growth that preceded economic development.

The more rapid decline in death rates compared to birth rates—part of a Demographic Transition in the less developed countries—is a fairly recent trend that has generated large increases in population well in advance of any significant levels of industrialization or rural economic development. In rural regions this has produced fast-growing populations in places that face problems with agricultural development. This has been described as urbanization by implosion in which in-place population growth is happening, almost unnoticed, in villages and the countryside across vast stretches of rural India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, China, Nigeria, and other less developed countries. These high-density rural regions have population densities that exceed 1,000 persons per square mile—the threshold for defining urban settlements.

situation in numerical terms, metropolitan areas like Dhaka and Delhi are adding up to half a million people to their populations each year: nearly 10,000 every week, even with deaths and out-migrants. It took London 190 years to grow from half a million to 10 million inhabitants; New York took 140 years. More recently, Mexico City, São Paulo, Buenos Aires, Kolkata (Calcutta), Rio de Janeiro, Seoul, and Mumbai all took less than 75 years. Now megacities such as Dhaka, Delhi, and Lagos take about half that time to grow from half a million to 10 million people (Figure 7).

In Mauritania, Niger, and other countries...
Urbanization in the Less Developed Countries

a reciprocal arrangement in which the urbanization that was driven by economic growth in turn stimulated further economic development. The various attempts made during the last 60 years to disentangle this relationship and explain urbanization and "underdevelopment" in the less developed countries can be grouped into three categories.

Modernization Theories: The Developmental Approach

In the 1950s ideas about the development of the less developed countries were based on extrapolations of the European experience. This developmental approach prescribed an economic transition along a continuum of progress from a "traditional" rural society toward a "modern" urban industrialized one. Models, such as Rostow’s stages of economic growth, informed the developmental approach. This model shows the five

THEORIES OF URBANIZATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Historically, an association has existed between urbanization and economic development: Countries with higher levels of urbanization tend to have higher levels of economic development (Figure 8). What is not as clear is the direction of causality—the extent to which economic development promotes urbanization, or urbanization promotes economic development. In the developed countries, although urbanization was largely an outcome of economic development, it was a reciprocal arrangement in which the urbanization that was driven by economic growth in turn stimulated further economic development. The various attempts made during the last 60 years to disentangle this relationship and explain urbanization and "underdevelopment" in the less developed countries can be grouped into three categories.

For her entire 60 years, Fatima Yadik, a mother of 12 and grandmother to 18, had lived a nomadic life in the northern part of the Central African Republic with her husband, children, and the family’s long-horn cattle, which kept them constantly on the move. One day, her camp of Peuhl nomads was attacked by bandits who killed her husband and all the other men and then stole their cattle. Bandits often target Peuhl people because they own livestock.

Terrified, Fatima fled south with her children to the town of Yaloké. After settling in the town, the family survived by collecting and selling firewood. But Fatima realized that for her children to have a future, they needed to go to school. “Until now, none of my children have gone to school,” she said, “but now that we no longer have any cattle, they will have to find jobs, and they need to go to school to prepare.”

But years of conflict and violence had devastated the already fragile education system in the Central African Republic. Many schools had been looted or damaged, and the teachers had moved to the capital city, Bangui. So a group of Peuhl parents formed a small NGO called Association Mboscuda and, together with other parents, they built the Fraternité School. The school now has more than 600 students, and Mboscuda helps pay for teachers and runs campaigns to encourage Peuhl parents to send their children, especially the girls, to school.

FIGURE 8 Urbanization and economic development, 2009.

along the southern edge of the Sahara, deforestation and overgrazing in conjunction with government inaction have forced people to move to the cities as the expanding desert has overtaken whole villages.
successive stages through which less developed countries must pass in order to achieve economic convergence with the developed ones (Figure 9).

Similarly, Myrdal’s notion of *cumulative causation* saw growth in the less developed regions following the patterns of urbanization experienced by Europe during the Industrial Revolution. Economic growth in one region would trigger strong demand for food, consumer goods, and other manufactures that local producers could not satisfy. This demand would create the opportunity for investors in less developed regions to establish a local capacity to meet the demand; entrepreneurs would take advantage of the cheaper labor and land there. If strong enough, these *spread effects* could enable less developed regions to develop their own upward spiral of cumulative causation.

Myrdal’s influential model was followed by others who used a similar logic. Hirshman’s model described *trickle-down effects*. Perroux highlighted the importance of the *propulsive industries* that are characteristic of regions with high rates of economic growth, such as the textile industry in England during the Industrial Revolution. As the propulsive industry grows, it attracts other related industries, generating a set of *agglomeration economies*. A *growth pole* is formed and an urban growth center develops. These ideas are shown spatially in Friedmann’s core-periphery model. The model shows an urban core of economic advantage and growth, surrounded by nearby agricultural areas that are in the process of development due to their proximity to the core, and a distant stagnant or declining periphery (Figure 10).

Although these kinds of development models have informed public policy and practice in the past, they are now regarded as too simplistic. They perpetuate the myth of “developmentalism,” that all countries and regions—despite differences in their political, cultural, technological, and other characteristics—are on the same economic growth trajectory to become “modern” urban industrialized societies. A major weakness of developmentalism is that it fails to appreciate that the prospects for late starters are different from those of places that enjoyed an earlier *initial advantage* free from effective competition and limiting precedents. People in the less developed cities and countries must compete in a crowded field and overcome barriers that were created by the success of some of the early starters in Europe and North America. Most problematic for the modernization theories, though, was the indisputable evidence that the pattern of urbanization in the less developed countries was not following that of the developed countries—urban growth was not producing the expected boost in economic development.