Urban Trends

The twentieth century is remarkable in many ways, not the least of which from the standpoint of human settlements is the unabated concentration of population in urban places. When the twentieth century began, 150 million people lived in urban settlements, representing less than 10 percent of the world’s population. When the century draws to a close, the world’s urban population will have increased twentyfold to 2,926 million, accounting for almost half of the world’s population. Overall, the present century has witnessed the rapid and sustained urbanization of human societies and this has been dramatic since 1945 when World War II ended. During the postwar period, a long period of stability in Great Power relationships has been conducive to the twin processes of population explosion and attendant urbanization, especially in developing countries.

By 1995, Africa and Asia were at highly comparable levels of urbanization, with about 35 percent of their population being classified urban (Table 1). Yet both continents stood for high concentrations of the world’s population, most notably in Asia, which accounted for 60.4 percent and 46.3 percent, respectively, of the world’s total and urban population. Indeed, Asia accounted also for the lion’s share (47.5 percent) of the world’s population in 1 million cities and had 143 1 million cities. Asia had, as well, 13 of the world’s 23 mega cities of at least 8 million inhabitants each. The striking feature of the urban future is that although both Africa and Asia are at less than half the level of urbanization as the other regions, their potential for rapid urbanization, along with their huge demographic weight, does raise serious ramifications for development policy in the decades ahead. Both continents are merely at levels of urbanization achieved by the United Kingdom and North America more than a century ago. They are about to enter
the phase of rapid urbanization as the new century is about to dawn (Figure 1). The two most populous countries in the world - China and India - are both located in Asia. In 1995, China had an urban population of 360 million, representing 30 percent of the total population, with India’s corresponding figures at 250.8 million and 27 percent. The extent and speed of how these two Asian countries urbanize will have a large bearing on the urban future of that continent.

On a global scale, three major urban trends have been observed at the end of the present century. First, contrary to most predictions, population growth rates slowed for many cities in developing countries. The largest cities in these countries grew markedly more slowly in the 1980s than in the previous two decades. Second, the world is less dominated by super large cities than had been forecast. Less than 5 percent of the world’s population lived in mega-cities in 990. The dire prediction of cities such as Calcutta and Mexico City growing to gigantic urban conurbations of 30 to 40 million inhabitants each has not materialized. Third, the links between urban change and economic, social and political change are not clear. Notwithstanding the overwhelming and pervasive extent of urban problems, the relationships of the growth of cities and their ability to manage urban problems are not established. Some large and rapidly growing cities have been well managed and serviced, whereas some of the worst physical conditions have beset small towns (UNCHS, 1996).

As the third millennium is about to begin, several tendencies appear to loom large in shaping its urban future. In the first place, the progressive urbanization of the globe
will appear certain. In fact, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, it has been estimated that more than half of the world’s population will be living in urban settlements. This will signal the advent of the urban century and with it, the heightened roles of cities. The second dimension is the growing interaction between urbanization and globalization. Globalization is a multifaceted process of drawing countries, cities and people ever closer together through increasing flows of people, goods, capital, services and ideas. Certain cities, namely, world cities, have come to the fore because of the special functions they perform in the new global economy, with an emphasis on the refined division of labour and comparative advantage. The third characteristic of the urban future is the likely continued devolution of powers and responsibilities to local authorities and civic society, a process that began in the 1990s when traditional modes of urban governance were found wanting and old institutions could not adequately deal with the old and new urban problems.

Globalization

The world today is not only more urbanized but obviously richer than it was fifty years ago. During the period 1950-92, world income increased from $4 trillion to $23 trillion and in per capita terms it more than tripled. Private investment flows to developing countries increased from $5 billion to nearly $160 billion between 1970 and 1993. Nonetheless three-quarters of these flows went to 10 countries, mostly in East Asia and Latin America (UNDP, 1995:14). In fact, in many countries in the world, per capita income multiplied several times since 1960, with the gains most substantial since the 1980s.
The rapid integration of economies worldwide through globalization has been most notable since the early 1980s because of a convergence of three mega-trends, reflecting structural adjustments and epochal change. The first was the precipitous drop in the prices of primary commodities and oil, an occurrence that has had a far-reaching and adverse impact on the economies of many countries in the developing world which had traditionally relied on the export of these for their national income. The sharp blow on the economies was especially felt in developing countries in Africa, Latin America and elsewhere, but briefly in Southeast Asia. The second trend, to some extent as an outcome of the first, was the ascendancy of capital, transnational capital in particular, as a new driving force in economic growth. The new game in economic development is open competition in a country or city’s ability to attract foreign direct investment (FDI). Capital always seeks the most profitable locales for investment and countries/cities are making factors of production attractive to entice FDI. The third trend, which reinforces the former two tendencies, is bound up with new waves of technological innovations. There have been breathtaking advances in information technologies often referred to as an “information revolution” including computer, electronics, robotics and telecommunications. It also has covered other fields such as new technologies in material science and biotechnology. They have facilitated new production processes, revolutionized business transactions and encouraged creativity. Taken together, some scientists have viewed this cluster of innovations as the beginning of the fifth long-wave of technological change. A knowledge-intensive and new techno-economic paradigm is said to have arrived, challenging the Fordist mass production paradigm of massive
resource utilization and scale economies of standardization. In the global economy born of these mega-trends, a borderless economy has become a new cornerstone (Lo, 1994).

In a globalizing world, countries and cities are increasingly linked in interdependent and interlocking relationships. Some cities having key functions to play in the global system of finance, transport, telecommunications, services and production are called world or global cities. They are command foci, financial centres, management headquarters and transport/communication hubs, whose influences stretch across the region and, ultimately, the world. The contemporary world can be pictured to be a functional urban system, with world cities commanding different functions and one overlaying on another (Lo and Yeung, 1996). While world cities are important in their own right and in a changing political world order in which national boundaries fail to stop cross-border flows of capital, people and ideas, subregional economic cooperative entities have emerged. Called growth triangles, some neighbouring territories involving several countries have sought creative economic cooperative development by maximizing on their varied factor endowments. The best examples of successful growth triangles in Asia are the ones known as Southern China, with the participation of Hong Kong, Guangdong, Fujian and Taiwan and SIJORI, involving Singapore, Johor (Malaysia) and Riau Island (Indonesia). These two growth triangles are centred, respectively, on the world cities of Hong Kong and Singapore. A variant of this theme of subregional development is what some scholars call region-states, meaning sound economic development focused on some regions which may be parts of a country or involving several countries (Ohmae, 1995). Furthermore, another spatial expression of rapid
economic development in the new global economy is urban corridors, which have been observed to be in an inverted-S form in East Asia and in some other forms in Europe and elsewhere (Lo and Yeung, 1996).

Cities having been engines of growth and leading in the creation of national wealth, now occupy a special place in the global era. Many cities account for a considerable proportion of the nation’s GDP; for instance, in 1990 Barcelona held 7 percent of its country’s GDP, and Sydney (19 percent), Seoul (23 percent), Bangkok (43 percent) and Tokyo (18 percent) were no less dominant. Some of these and other large cities of the world saw their GDP soar by more than 1,000 percent in the period 1970-90. In the post-cold war globalizing economy, cities are prospering in the competitive world system within the context of a new paradigm based on incrementalism, entrepreneurship and markets (Savitch, 1996). As a matter of fact, there is no shortage of experts who question the usefulness of the nation-state itself in the face of recent global changes. The nation-state, so it is argued, has lost much of its control and integrity, being the wrong unit to handle the newer circumstances (Kennedy, 1993:131; Ohmae, 1995).

However, globalization has not been a boon to all cities. The truth is that while globalization has brought new opportunities and created wealth for some cities, it has at the same time heavily marginalized others. The marginalized city may be found in any region of the world, should it find itself outside the cyberways, not having the requisite information infrastructure, or otherwise not being able to plug into the new global economy. To be more specific, globalization debars the bulk of Africa from gaining access to world society’s productive processes. The greatest challenge is to
demarginalize most African countries and cities when their options are severely constrained by the forces of globalization (Mittelman, 1996:18).

Under the forces of globalization, there is a certain convergence of cities in all parts of the world at different stages of economic development. Four commonalities appear to characterize these cities (Cohen, 1996). First, urban unemployment remains high, reaching 15 percent in France, 22 percent in Spain, 10.6 percent in Buenos Aires, and 7.2 percent in metropolitan Lagos. This explains the phenomena of ‘area boys’ - unemployed, able-bodied men, possibly drug dependent, in Lagos and “parking boys” in Nairobi (Rakodi, 1997). Second, urban infrastructure suffers from inadequate maintenance in developed countries, such as the failed water and sewer systems in Chicago and Washington and electricity blackouts on the eastern seaboard. Nevertheless, in developing countries lack of or inadequate infrastructure investment has led to widespread problems in water supply, urban sanitation and transport facilities. The predicament confronting the urban poor in cities in developing countries is especially acute (Menedez, 1991; Yeung, 1991). Third, the deteriorating urban environment has troubled cities worldwide. In cities in developed countries, a growing awareness of urban environmental sustainability has been spurred by public debate and the emergence of ‘green’ groups but a basic weakness lies in the lack of clear environmental governance. The priorities in cities in developing countries lie more in economic growth accompanied by rapid urban expansion in a relatively short period and, as such, along with the general lack of environmental infrastructure, pollution and other environmental problems are more severe. Fourth, accentuated social conflict has become an emergent problem in cities, resulting in part from keener competition for jobs and
from a freer flow of people between countries. Globalization also has generated international flows of labor and all types of migrants in the recent decades. In cities in industrialized countries, new immigrants and minority groups have generated new political and social pressures on the urban scene. In cities in developing countries, urban crime has become a political issue in some cities, such as in Rio de Janeiro, Medellin and Lima (Gilbert, 1996). Poverty in many of these cities is compounded by class and ethnic loyalties, particularly in Africa and Asia.

Changing Roles of Cities

The age of globalization is one of prosperity as well as distress, of opportunity as well as contradictions. The differential access to world wide capital flows and new technologies has widened the gap between the rich and the poor, the informed and the uninformed. The United Nations has estimated that 600 million people in the cities and towns in the world are homeless or live in life-threatening situations. Rural-urban migration is still proceeding on an unprecedented scale. There is also a trend towards feminization of poverty (UNCHS, 1996). Nevertheless, the roles that cities can play are positive and critical ones and they surely have the potential of improving the quality of life in cities around the world.

Cities have the potential to civilize or brutalize their citizens, as nurturing of culture and apposite values, coupled with goal-directed policies, can make a difference. From the earliest times, cities have been equated with civilization and they have been conveyors of human culture through the centuries. Cities are agents of economic change
and social transformation. In an globalizing and urbanizing world, the roles of cities are even more critical as more people live in them and as technology and telematics have created new circumstance for humanity. To be sure, urbanness and global interconnectedness are two elements that strongly caricature our contemporary cities.

The cultural role of cities in our present times cannot be over emphasized. Easier access to technology, information and global connections has the potential of making city life more culturally rich, cosmopolitan and diverse. Cities can become cauldrons of creativity, ideas and activities. Yet as more people of different backgrounds intermingle and are juxtaposed in residence, they are also prone to conflicts and even violence. When traditional bonds of harmony are loosened, the recent experience in Bosnia, Burundi and Somalia has demonstrated their cataclysmic consequences. In China, which opened its doors again to the outside world in 1978 and which is in the throes of two historic transitions from a rural, agrarian society to an urban, industrial one, and from a command economy to one based on market principles, the situation has been depicted as follows:

Cities would become a tinderbox of tensions, with growing numbers of poor living in proximity to an increasingly rich elite that manipulated the laws and systems to its benefit. The gap between coastal and interior provinces would grow, as would differences between city and countryside and between men and women (World Bank, 1997:98).
From another perspective, cities in the information age can be international cultural centres. Globalization and the production of new urban spaces have led to the realization of many contemporary urban mega-projects in Pacific Rim cities and elsewhere. Vancouver’s Pacific Place, Yokohama’s Minato Mirai 21 and Shanghai’s Lujiazui are eminent examples. They are symbols of gleaming enclaves of urbanity that will stand up well into the twenty-first century. They are the epitome of the forces of globalization and international integration through transnational corporations and have put into physical form the processes of economic and cultural interconnections, flows, linkages and interdependencies (Olds, 1995).

The political role of cities of today is going through a reexamination and debate. In part, this has stemmed from the inefficacy of what they are supposed and charged to do. Many cities in the developing world are not capable of providing basic urban infrastructure services. In part, their very own legitimacy has been questioned because of rapidly changing governance structures. The relationship between the government and civic society has been changing rapidly and this should be reflected in the ways how a society manages its collective interests. Traditional urban governance has been losing its relevance in view of the transnational nature of many of cities’ activities. The global flows of capital, information, technology and services do not respect national boundaries. Indeed, the contest of power between nations/cities and international entities (particularly transnational corporations) has become a new arena in which many key decisions concerning development policy are played out. The globalizing reality is such some cities no longer are effective containers for activities and decisions that affect them. The current move is to seek to define more effectively urban governance by involving
more stakeholders, forming partnerships, devolution of authority and so on. One of the
greatest challenges in this respect is to evolve effective urban-region governance, as
region-states are emerging as cohesive and coherent economic units of development in
many parts of the world.

Economically, cities will continue to be efficient engines of growth and theatres of
wealth accumulation. Some cities, of course, are more efficient than others. In fact,
some cities are marginalized by globalization as new production processes pass them
by. The marginalization has resulted in the foremost contradiction of our time, in that
nations/cities integrated in the global division of labour are prospering, whereas those
excluded from it suffer slow or declining economic growth. However, the winds of
change can blow in ways and speeds that can catch politicians and planners off guard.
The ongoing financial crises in Pacific Asia since 1997 have severely rocked the region
to its very foundation and have occurred in the fastest growth region in the world. The
pros and cons of economic globalization have been amply revealed in the painful
experience in Asian countries. Mismanagement of macro-economic policy, in our
current information age, could trigger an sweeping overnight storm in the financial
centers of the region. The slow adjustment and recovery process in Asia aside, some
serious questions have been posed how, for the good of humankind in the future, some
regulatory mechanisms should be devised to bear on, for example, global transactions
in currencies, rather than leaving them entirely to marketforces.

Finally, contemporary cities have habitually depended for their survival and
sustenance continuing massive flows of materials and energy. Where these flows have
become out of kilter, the sustainability of cities has come into the picture. In this regard, nations/cities in developed and developing countries tend to take polarized positions. At the risk of generalization, the former which have developed patterns of heavy energy and material consumption have advocated a more stringent approach towards issues, such as energy use, protecting the ozone layer, global warming and gas emission. On the other hand, the latter have taken upon themselves a more immediate task to ‘catch up’ in development and, often saddled with a debt burden, are less ready to adopt environmentally friendly policies (Yeung, 1996). It has been argued that environment protection and economic development are not mutually exclusive. Ecodevelopment has been championed by many environmentally-minded individuals as the way forward in the future. The urban environment is already seriously fouled in some developing countries and if sustainable cities are not actively promoted and developed, humankind will face even more formidable problems in the next century. In the future 85 percent of the world urban population will inhabit the cities of the developing world. The conundrum is that cities most in need of developing a sustainable environment are those that serious lack funding even to attend to basic infrastructural needs, let alone tending to their environment.

Preparing for the Urban Future

After two millennia of development, humankind is at a crossroads. Never before have more people lived in cities, towns and hamlets in the world, absolutely and relatively. This trend is going to accelerate as the twenty-first century unfolds. It will be an urban century, buttressed by forces of globalization and integration.
As the Singapore information minister recently remarked, in the next century, the most relevant unit of economic production, social organization and knowledge generation will be the city (UNCHS, 1996:24). Cities will be nuclei of economic production, some destined for domestic consumption while others are geared for the world market. Such differentiation is based on the functions of the city, which will determine its importance, centrality and fame among its peers. World cities will be especially influential in shaping the development of the global economy. Technological advances and easy access to information will enable cities to evolve more efficient ways of economic production, capitalizing on the cheapest sources of materials and maximizing profits. As ever more people live in urban settlements, the ecological relationship between city and countryside should be accorded attention. In particular, feeding urban inhabitants in large cities is an issue that has generated some debate in countries such as China and India, where the potential of massive rural-urban population transfers are enormous and, with growing affluence and the rapid loss of arable cropland, the pressure on feeding teeming millions in the cities will grow. Nonetheless, the biggest economic challenge is how against the background of increasing prosperity, nations and cities in lagging regions can be brought into the mainstream of development.

In terms of social organization, cities of the future will have more freedoms and constraints. Greater freedom will be extended to individuals and institutions because they will be networked electronically. Wired interactions will supplement face-to-face contacts. This will also affect urban lifestyles as people can work at home, shop by computers and travel with smart cards. The well heeled are likely to have property and
business interests in several cities/nations, and the family is similarly dispersed out of preference. Citizens in these cities are prone to ‘think globally and act locally’.

Indeed, social organizations and political institutions face the challenge of having to capture the loyalties of people who are oriented in highly diverse ways. The above perhaps applies most pertinently to people in the higher echelons of society. As cities of tomorrow are socially polarized between and within them, the urban poor will face an uphill battle of keeping their body and soul together when they lack the skills and education to avail themselves of jobs requiring special training and experience.

Managing mega-cities will be trying when governments face horrendous financial constraints. Nonetheless, the clamour for greater participation and democracy will see greater attention and more resources being devoted to nongovernmental and community-based organizations. In short, cities of the future have the opportunity of reorganizing themselves socially and institutionally, but the obstacles that lie on their way must be removed first.

In the information age that has just begun, cities act as generators, processors and depositories of knowledge. Knowledge is generated by research, discovery and innovation. As knowledge is a highly valued resource, cities will be in competition to generate knowledge. Thus information technology will be a principal emphasis in university curricula and R&D. However, more broadly, investment in basic and applied research will not be spared if cities can afford it, for it will be the holders of new knowledge and technological inventions that the power and authority of future cities will lie. It can therefore be foreseen that knowledge industry, science parks, technological
development zones, technopolises and others will be further developed in cities of the future.

As humankind prepares for a new century and a new millennium, what appears certain is the inexorable trend towards a higher degree of urbanization and globalization. It is uncertain what the global trends will lead people towards. Kennedy (1993:349) nonetheless has this to say about the future:

What is clear is that as the Cold War fades away, we face not a ‘new world order’ but a troubled and fractured planet, whose problems deserve the serious attention of politicians and publics alike.

This may not be the most optimistic prognosis of the future, but it is a sombre message for us not to underestimate the difficulties ahead. With the knowledge and wisdom humankind has inherited from our ancestors and with new technologies and resources that will come at our disposal, there is no reason to believe that we are less prepared than any time in the past to face our urban future that is at once a window of opportunity and a daunting challenge.
References Cited

In Michael Cohen et al., Preparing for the Urban Future.


Kennedy, Paul (1993), Preparing for the Twenty-first Century.


Rakodi, Carole (ed.) (1997), The Urban Challenge in Africa.


_____ (ed.) (1996), Global Change and the Commonwealth. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong.