What does global urbanisation look like, and does it matter?

Ten years ago, in 2007, the world crossed a key threshold. In that year, for the first time in human history, more people lived in urban areas than rural areas. In 2017 global urbanisation continues and around 55% of the world population lives in towns and cities.

Top spot
For decades Tokyo was the world’s largest megacity. In 2015 the World Bank reported that the Pearl River Delta in China, with a population of 42 million, had overtaken Tokyo as the world’s largest urban area. The Pearl River urban area includes Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Foshan and Dongguan and is China’s manufacturing heartland. Your iPhone or smartphone was probably made there. China’s urban population grew by around 200 million in the 10 years up to 2015. In its World Cities Report in 2016, the UN Human Settlements Programme identified 29 megacities, up from 14 in 1995. Almost 80% of them are in Asia.

Definition problems
It’s worth noting the difficulty of identifying the world’s largest urban areas. The accepted definition of a megacity — a population of over 10 million — is complicated by the issue of where the boundary or edge of a city lies. Using the administrative boundary of Greater London yields a population of about 8.6 million. A wider definition to include contiguous urban areas beyond the boundary (often called the
metropolitan area) increases the population to 13.9 million and makes it a megacity. The Pearl River Delta urban area is a megalopolis: a more or less continuous urban sprawl created by the merger of once separate cities. Thus lists of world megacities often contradict each other because different definitions are used.

More to come

One of the most interesting aspects of global urbanisation is the extent to which some global regions are not yet urbanised. As the graph shows, this is true even in Asia and more especially in Africa. These two low-urbanisation continents will be the origin of most population growth in the future. By 2050, there are likely to be an additional 1.4 billion Africans and 1.1 billion Asians. Many of these new people are likely to be urbanites. The UN expects a global urban population of 6.3 billion by 2050. This is equivalent to the total world population reached as recently as 2003.

Does urbanisation matter?

Cities are key drivers of the world economy, with the 600 largest cities accounting for 60% of global GDP. Millions of rural–urban migrants have found better, if still difficult, lives in cities. However, rapidly growing cities can have their problems. In Africa, 38% of the urban population lives in slum housing and the scale of this problem is only likely to grow. Cities need resources — food, water, energy — which have to be sourced from surrounding rural areas, further afield or from overseas. As well as this, they are concentrated sources of pollution and health risk. Much of the twenty-first century is likely to be concerned with managing an increasingly urban world.

Questions

1. Is living in an urban area always the same? In the UK there are sprawling cities like Birmingham, Manchester and Glasgow as well as smaller free-standing cities like Nottingham, Norwich and Leicester. All are smaller than London. Are some of these cities more appealing than others, and if so, why?
2. Look at the graph. Is there a relationship between level of development and level of urbanisation? Can you explain the relationship?
3. To what extent is continued urbanisation a positive development in Africa, the world’s poorest continent?

Further research

You can read the World Bank’s recent report East Asia’s Changing Urban Landscape here:
http://tinyurl.com/j6upeyo
The UN World Cities Report 2016:
http://tinyurl.com/hw56nme
Every few years the UN produces a statistical analysis of global urbanisation trends:
https://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/

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