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**SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT BULLETIN NO. 4
BRIDGING THE URBAN DIVIDE
IN THE ESCWA REGION**



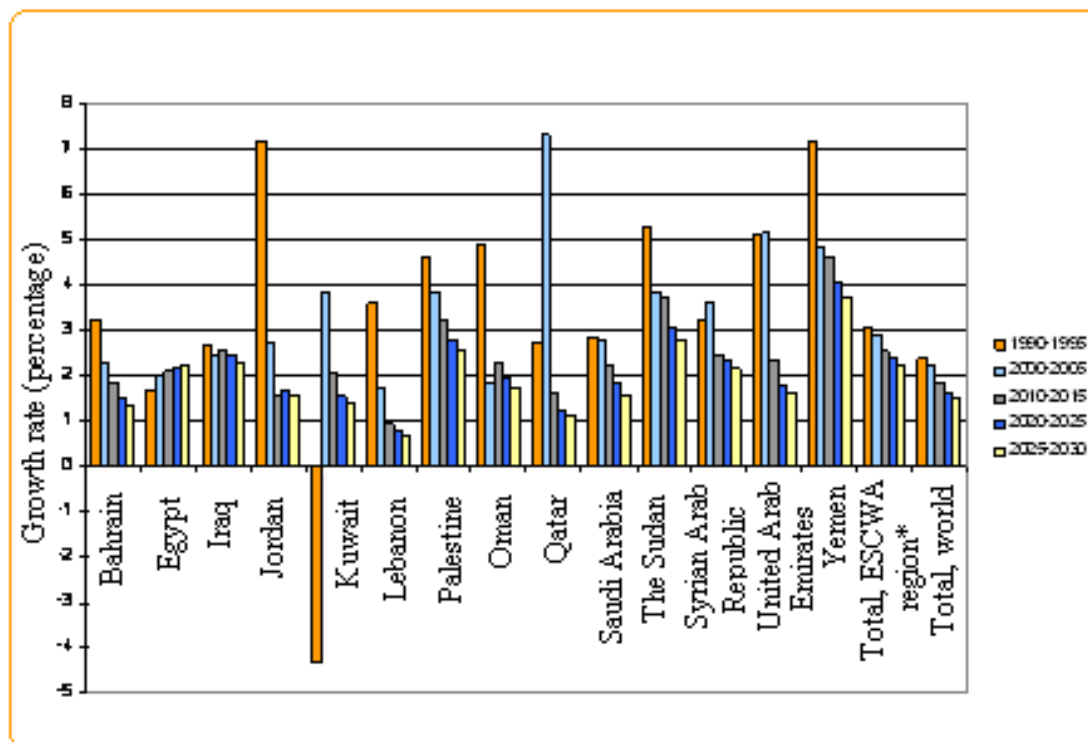
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The urban age

While a century ago, less than five per cent of the world's population lived in urban areas, by 2008 that share had exceeded 50 per cent and by 2050 it is estimated that it will reach 70 per cent, representing some 6.4 billion people.¹ Most of this spectacular urban growth is taking place in developing country regions, such as Western Asia. In fact, as can be seen in figure I, the average urban annual growth rate in the ESCWA region was not only higher than the corresponding average world rate during the period 2000-2005, but is expected to remain higher in the next few decades.

Figure I. Urban population growth rates, ESCWA region



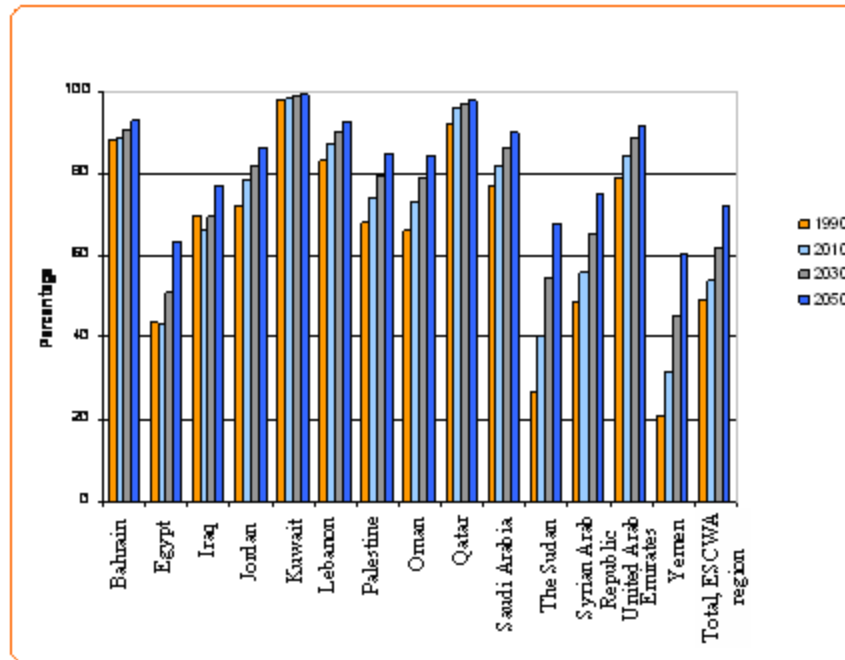
Source: Adapted from United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), Population Division, World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision and World Urbanization Prospects: The 2009 Revision, available at: <http://esa.un.org/wup2009/unup/>.

* Based on estimates from DESA, 2009.

As figure II shows, the urban population is already remarkably high in most ESCWA countries, including Kuwait (98 per cent of the total population), Qatar (96 per cent), Bahrain (89 per cent), Lebanon (87 per cent), United Arab Emirates (84 per cent) and Saudi Arabia (82 per cent). Urban population growth is forecast to continue to accelerate in most countries in the ESCWA region during the first half of this century. The share of the urban population in the ESCWA region as a whole is expected to rise from 54 per cent in 2010 to 72 per cent in 2050.

¹ UN-HABITAT, *Global Report on Human Settlements 2009*, Earthscan, London, 2009.

Figure II. Percentage of urban population relative to total population, ESCWA region



Source: DESA. 2009, op. cit.

The urban divide in the region

Rapid urban growth in the ESCWA region has created key development challenges and opportunities. The main social challenges are rising levels of urban poverty; urban unemployment; increasing demand for adequate and affordable housing; and adequate provision of urban infrastructure and services. Although poverty rates in the region tend to be higher in rural areas, there have been significant increases in urban poverty in many countries as a result of the inability of towns and cities to generate sufficient jobs, adequate housing and services to keep up with the rapid rate of urbanization.

At the same time, urban dwellers have greater potential access to jobs and services, because economies of scale and agglomeration make it cheaper to provide them to large numbers of people concentrated in urban areas than to dispersed rural populations. However, this ‘urban advantage’ is only available to those who are actually able to access adequate housing, services and jobs. For a large number of urban residents in the region, this urban advantage is never realized due to a series of key financial, institutional and managerial constraints that prevent municipal and national authorities from providing adequate urban infrastructure, shelter, services and employment.

This has given rise to an *urban divide* between those who ‘have’ and those who ‘have not’. Effective Government action – at both municipal and national levels – is urgently required to bridge this urban divide in the ESCWA region. This is essential, not only to promote social development, social cohesion and social justice, but also to address the socio-political strife and civil discontent currently taking place in the Arab world. As will be shown in this Bulletin, the Social Development Division at ESCWA has recently taken a number of initiatives to identify policy options for bridging this urban divide in the region.

ESCWA holds a major expert group meeting to bridge the urban divide in Western Asia

“Some 22 million people in developing countries managed to leave slums each year for the past decade. But this meaningful achievement is not nearly enough. During the same period, the total number of people living in slums jumped from just over 776 million to more than 827 million. Conditions in slums are a violation of human rights. The children who have no clean water to drink, the women who fear for their safety, the young people who have no chance to receive a decent education have a right to better, and we have a responsibility to do better [...] All people should have the opportunity to work for a better future”.

Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General, message to the Fifth World Urban Forum, (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 22-26 March 2010).

The urban divide between those who ‘have’ and those who ‘have not’ is reflected most vividly in the sharp contrast that exists in many Western Asian cities between luxurious apartment buildings on the one hand, and the rising number of slums on the other hand. As can be seen from table 1, it is estimated that the total slum population in the eight ESCWA member countries for which data are available increased by 22 per cent between 1990 and 2005, with even sharper rises in several countries.

The international debate on the challenges of rapid urbanization and the urban divide was initiated during the Fifth World Urban Forum (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 22-26 March 2010). As a regional follow-up to this debate, a major expert group meeting (EGM) on bridging the urban divide in the region was held by ESCWA (Beirut, 25-26 November 2010).

The EGM brought together experts from national Governments, regional and international organizations, academia, civil society and the private sector. It paid particular attention to the spatial dimension of the urban divide in the ESCWA region and explored development interventions taking place at the district, city and national scales *vis-à-vis* strategies aimed at inclusive urbanization, social equity and economic balance. As will be elaborated in the next section of this Bulletin, the meeting also examined promising national interventions to promote balanced urban development in the region and discussed the challenges to their effective implementation.

The EGM was structured upon three thematic pillars, focusing on (a) unbalanced national growth and the challenge of inclusive development; (b) urban dualities and the role of urban planning and management; and (c) urban poverty and targeted development initiatives. Besides the three thematic papers presented by key researchers, a number of experts delivered presentations on national or urban development strategies, pro-poor development initiatives and upgrading of informal settlements. Participants discussed experience at the national level in Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, as well as case studies of Aleppo, Alexandria, Amman, Khartoum and Sana’a. In addition, a special session was dedicated to discussing the outline of the forthcoming *State of Arab Cities Report*, to be published by UN-HABITAT in 2012 (with contributions from ESCWA and other regional organizations) and which will be submitted to the Sixth World Urban Forum, due to be held in the ESCWA region in 2012.

Participants agreed that rapid urbanization can be reconciled with effective national poverty reduction strategies, provided that appropriate policies and institutional mechanisms are in place. This calls for Governments to assume a central role in leading the urban development process and to prioritize social approaches to urban development. Participants also noted the vital role of spatial planning which, when accompanied by social integration and institutional reform, can be very effective in addressing urban divisions and inequalities. They also emphasized the need to upgrade slums, design public space, develop infrastructure and improve the access of low-income groups to public transportation and basic social services.

“The urban divide is the face of injustice and a symptom of systemic dysfunction. A society cannot claim to be harmonious or united if large numbers of people cannot meet their basic needs while others live in opulence. A city cannot be harmonious if some groups concentrate resources and opportunities while others remain impoverished and deprived”.

UN-HABITAT, 2008, State of the World's Cities 2010/2011:
Bridging the Urban Divide.

The meeting put forward a set of specific recommendations addressed to ESCWA member countries, United Nations agencies (including ESCWA), regional institutions and non-governmental organizations. ESCWA was particularly called upon to support member country Governments through the provision of policy options to better integrate vulnerable urban groups into the broad development process, in addition to promoting the exchange of good practice on inclusive urban development. Further information about the meeting is available at: <http://www.escwa.un.org/information/meetingdetails.asp?referenceNum=1352E>.

“Governments need to assume a central role in leading the urban development process and to adopt sustainable and „socially determined patterns” of urban development driven by a genuine concern for social and human wellbeing and a desire to maximize people’s choice and ability to access available and new opportunities”.

EGM on Bridging the Urban Divide in the ESCWA Region: Towards Inclusive Cities (Beirut, 25-26 November 2010).

TABLE 1. TOTAL URBAN SLUM POPULATION, SELECTED ESCWA MEMBER COUNTRIES

Country	Urban slum population		
	1990	2001	2005
Egypt	14 086 925	11 761 704	5 405 326
Iraq	6 824 582	9 026 243	9 692 492
Jordan	387 750	623 494	718 812
Lebanon	1 142 000	1 601 500	1 756 720
Saudi Arabia	2 385 108	3 609 342	4 070 289
The Sudan	5 707 584	10 106 860	13 913 793
Syrian Arab Republic	628 609	891 523	981 945
Yemen	1 787 400	3 109 569	3 802 848
Total	32 949 958	40 730 235	40 342 225

Source: Adapted from Millennium Development Goals Database/United Nations Statistics Division.

National spatial interventions to promote balanced urban development

ESCWA member countries have increasingly recognized the need for spatial and socio-economic strategies to promote balanced national urban development. Several countries have therefore formulated and begun to implement strategic plans aimed at promoting a more equitable allocation of resources between different regions and sectors of the national economy. A number of concrete examples are as follows:²

² These examples are extracted from a forthcoming ESCWA report entitled *Bridging the Urban Divide in the ESCWA Region: Towards Inclusive Cities*. Greater detail on each example can be found in the report.

Bahrain



One of the main goals of the *Bahrain National Plan 2030*, launched in 2005, is the promotion of balanced national development. The Plan calls for measures to accelerate economic growth in secondary towns; guide local authorities and potential developers towards economic opportunities; address the growing housing needs in the country; protect natural and heritage resources; and develop tourist areas. It pays particular attention to developing international standards of infrastructure and state of the art connective technologies. It also defines new industrial areas and identifies key projects that enhance productivity, diversify local economic production and promote economic growth.

Iraq

The Iraqi Government – in close collaboration with international development partners – has focused on local participatory development in defining priority spatial interventions across several governorates in the country. The *Local Area Development Programme* – jointly formulated by the Iraqi Ministry of Planning and Development Cooperation and seven United Nations agencies – has provided substantial input to the preparation of the Ministry's strategic five-year budgetary plan. The objectives of the Programme tie in with national economic recovery efforts in terms of attaining balanced growth in all regions.

Lebanon

Lebanon's *National Physical Plan* was initiated in 2005 by the Lebanese Council for Development and Reconstruction. It has been developed according to three main goals: national unity, balanced regional development and sustainable use of resources. Its key specific objectives include: (a) territorial management around existing cities and major urban centres; (b) the involvement of all regions in national economic development; (c) national distribution of major public facilities in an integrated manner; (d) an efficient transportation network to strengthen the unification of national territory; (e) ensuring that urban development complies with the local characteristics of each region; and (f) sustainable management of water resources and solid waste.



Oman

With a view to promoting balanced regional growth, Oman has initiated a long-term development plan, entitled the *Oman National Spatial Strategy*. It aims to provide a land use framework for socio-economic development at both national and regional levels, in accordance with the national economic vision as set out in *Oman 2020*. The Strategy is also designed to promote geographical balance through the equitable distribution of development programmes between regions, balanced urban growth, rural development and the promotion of public-private partnerships.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's *National Spatial Strategy* was approved in 2000 and sets the legal framework for national spatial development. With the aim of rectifying past trends of interregional disparity, the Strategy stresses the need for balanced national urban development processes, together with the maintenance of economic efficiency and social equity. It addresses a wide range of challenges, including the reduction of the disparity in levels of development between leading and lagging areas, and the promotion of a spatially balanced urban system that can accommodate the projected increase in population while generating new jobs and economic opportunities.



Syrian Arab Republic

Efforts to promote balanced national development can also be observed in the Syrian Arab Republic. Interestingly, however, the Syrian Arab Republic has not elaborated a national spatial plan. Instead, it has opted to invest in regional spatial planning and in setting a spatial development framework for each region. These regional planning frameworks emphasize decentralization, public-private partnerships and close coordination between line ministries.

ESCWA publishes a major report on bridging the urban divide in Western Asia

ESCWA will soon publish a major report entitled *Bridging the Urban Divide in the ESCWA Region: Towards Inclusive Cities*. The report highlights the multiple forms of polarization occurring at the urban, national and regional levels, including unequal access to basic services and employment opportunities, and spatial stratification on the basis of income, ethnicity or place of origin. It underscores the experience of selected countries and cities in adopting spatial development strategies aimed at bridging existing inequalities and promoting inclusive urbanization.

The report also looks at the gaps between the intended goals of national policies and their actual implementation. It argues that systematic responses to the demographic, socio-economic, environmental and political challenges faced by cities in Western Asia are yet to be articulated. The report formulates a comprehensive framework for action based on common guiding principles and policy options for the consideration of local and national authorities.

The five guiding principles are as follows:

1. National Governments should re-assume a central role in leading and regulating spatial development processes and in guiding private sector interventions, including the provision of housing, infrastructure and key urban services.
2. Bridging the urban divide also requires Governments to promote balanced national development, notably through the effective economic integration of leading and lagging areas; spatially targeted policies to stimulate growth in lagging areas; spatially-blind social policies; and spatially connective policies based on investment in road infrastructure and public transportation.
3. Inclusive urban development must be accompanied by participatory governance, based on the principles of sustainability, subsidiarity, equity of access to urban resources, efficient public service delivery, transparency, accountability and civic engagement.
4. Proactive Government responses to key urban problems and challenges should focus on integrated planning approaches that ensure complementarity of spatial planning processes on the one hand, and socio-economic, cultural and environmental priorities on the other hand.
5. The establishment of appropriate institutional and legislative mechanisms is required to ensure that national policies aimed at balanced urban development are implemented effectively at the appropriate level of Government.

The process of institutionalizing inclusive development principles in urban policy formulation and implementation would imply a fundamental shift in the way that cities are planned and managed. For this to happen, the report also identifies five key policy options: (a) investment in institutional development and capacity-building at all levels (local, subnational and national); (b) promotion of public learning and the sharing of experience at all levels; (c) collaborative, bottom-up urban planning processes to better respond to local needs; (d) reform of exclusionary planning practices, regulations and administrative procedures in ways that respond to the public interest and regional balance; and (e) commitment to a “right-to-the-city” framework through a range of targeted spatial and non-spatial policies that address the root causes of poverty and social exclusion, such as slum improvement, infrastructure development, improved access to public transportation and basic social services, and increased participation.

The report stresses that the effective implementation of an inclusive urbanization agenda requires political will and commitment to balanced development. In addition, it requires comprehensive institutional reform to ensure that the required development initiatives are implemented at the appropriate administrative level in a participatory and inclusive manner. Unless these essential ingredients are in place, spatial interventions are likely to remain fragmented and unable to respond effectively to the needs of the majority of urban dwellers and their right to the city. The report concludes with a strong appeal for “*social justice, without which our cities will be at eminent risk of social crisis, revolt and civil uprising*” .