

The world's population is increasingly concentrated in urban settlements, presenting both opportunities for and challenges to sustainable development. Cities drive economic and social development as hubs of commerce, transportation, communication and government. But rapid, unplanned urban growth can lead to an expansion of urban slums, exacerbating poverty and inequality, hampering efforts to expand or improve basic infrastructure and deliver essential services, and threatening the environment. By anticipating urban growth, countries can plan for future change and ensure that urbanization remains a positive force for sustainable development

1. From mostly rural to mostly urban

The world has urbanized rapidly since 1950 and projections indicate that it will continue to urbanize in the coming decades. In 1950 the world was mostly rural: more than two-thirds of people lived in rural settlements and less than one-third in urban settlements. In 2014 just over half of the global population was urban. This distribution is expected to shift further towards urban areas over the next 35 years so that, by 2050, the world's population will be one-third rural and two-thirds urban, roughly the reverse of the situation in the mid-twentieth century (figure 1).^{1,2}

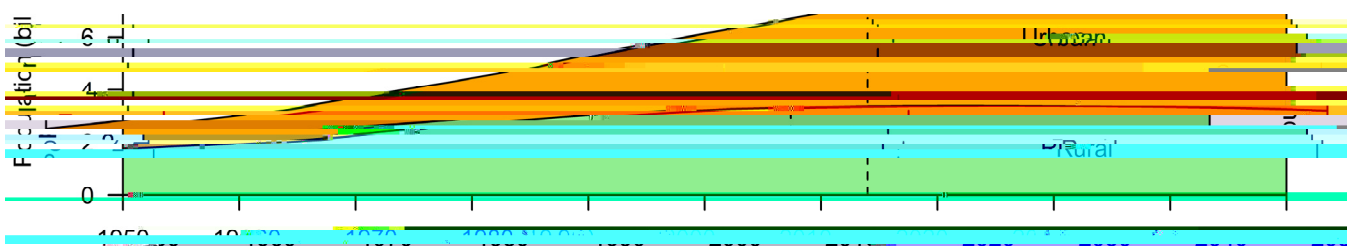
Global urbanization has been driven by rapid growth of

the urban population, concurrent with stagnating growth of the rural population. The global urban population has increased by a factor of five, from 0.7 billion in 1950 to 3.9 billion in 2014. It is expected to increase by another 60 per cent by 2050, when 6.3 billion people are projected to live in urban settlements. The global rural population is ceasing to grow. It is projected to reach a peak of just under 3.4 billion shortly after 2020 and to decline thereafter to 3.2 billion in 2050.

A growing number of countries are becoming highly urbanized, with a majority of their populations concentrated in urban settlements. In 1950, among 233 countries or areas just 15 per cent had levels of urbanization greater than 60 per cent and only 6 per cent were more than 80 per cent urban. Estimates indicate that around half of all countries or areas in 2014 were more than 60 per cent urban, and the level of urbanization exceeded 80 per cent in 25 per cent of countries or areas. By 2050 nearly 70 per cent of countries or areas in the world are projected to be more than 60 per cent urban and 38 per cent will be at least 80 per cent urban.

The number of countries that are predominantly rural is declining over time. Just 63 of 233 countries or areas were less than 40 per cent urban in 2014, down from 157 countries or areas in 1950. By 2050, just 27 countries or areas are projected to be less than 40 per cent urban, half of which are small islands or territories with well under 2 million inhabitants.

Figure 1. The world's urban and rural



Data source: United Nations (2014) *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2014 Revision*

Figure 2. Percentage urban in 233 countries or areas, estimated for 1950 and 2014, and projected to 2050



The designations used in this map are in accordance with the Convention on the High Seas, the Convention on the Exclusive Economic Zone and the Continental Shelf, the Convention on the Law of the Sea, and the Convention on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone, and the Convention on the High Seas, the Convention on the Exclusive Economic Zone and the Continental Shelf, the Convention on the Law of the Sea, and the Convention on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone.

Data source: United Nations (2014) *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2014 Revision*

2. The levels and pace of urbanization vary widely across regions and countries.

Northern America and Latin America and the Caribbean are the most urbanized regions, with 80 per cent or more of their populations residing in urban settlements in 2014. Europe, with 73 per cent of its population living in urban

Despite the projected global rural population decline, many countries – particularly in sub-Saharan Africa – are expected to continue to see substantial rural population growth in the coming decades. Niger is