Cities in Asia, 2012: Demographics, economics, poverty, environment and governance

Bharat Dahiya

Urban Environmental Management, School of Environment, Resources & Development, Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), Bangkok, Thailand

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A B S T R A C T

This paper is a summary and update, where feasible, of the United Nations first-ever report on The State of Asian Cities 2010/11. With 42% of its population in cities in 2010, Asia is urbanising rapidly; its cities are highly productive and generate an estimated 80% of the region’s GDP. Despite the sustained economic growth of Asian economies in the recent decades, urban poverty, inequality, slums, poor urban environmental quality and liveability, worsening disaster risks and effects of climate change pose major development challenges. While decentralization has helped widen the scope of urban governance, greater attention is needed to enhancing transparency and accountability in decision-making, planning and governance of smaller cities and towns, infrastructure investments, and city-to-city learning.

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Introduction

This paper is a summary and update, where feasible, of the United Nations first-ever report on The State of Asian Cities 2010/11 (UN-HABITAT, 2010a). A regional complement to the State of the World’s Cities report published biennially by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (or UN-HABITAT), the State of Asian Cities (henceforth the Report) reviews and documents the current state of cities, and related trends in inclusive and sustainable urban development, throughout the Asia–Pacific region.

The Report was prepared jointly by UN-HABITAT and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), in partnership with United Nations Environment Programme and United Cities and Local Governments – Asia–Pacific Regional Section. The Report was globally launched during the World Habitat Day celebrations on 4 October 2010 in Shanghai, China. The Asia–Pacific launch of the Report was organised at the 5th Asia–Pacific Urban Forum on 23 June 2011 in Bangkok, Thailand.

At the outset, a brief introduction to the Asia–Pacific region will be helpful to the reader. Asia is the largest region, with 30% of the global land mass and 60% of the world’s population. Given its vast geographical expanse, Asia–Pacific is perhaps also the most diverse region in terms of society, culture, economy, environment and human settlements. The region’s 58 countries and territories have been grouped into five geographic sub-regions: East and North-East Asia, South-East Asia, South and South-West Asia, North and South-West Asia, and the Pacific. They feature a wealth of diverse soci-

1 Formerly at UN-HABITAT, this author conceptualised the Report, coordinated its preparation, and wrote its overview and key findings (as its Chapter 1). For the most part, material in this paper has been written afresh. However, in the interest of precision, some statements from the Report have been reproduced. Where this occurs, quotation marks have been used and page numbers given. In any context, the reader is encouraged to return to the original Report for access to the most complete analysis and for data: it is available at http://www.unhabitat.org/pmss/IsitItemDetails.aspx?PublicationID=3078.

2 It is worth noting here that by now UN-HABITAT, with its partners, has prepared three other ‘state of regional cities reports’, two on African cities and one on Arab cities; see UN-HABITAT (2008b, 2010e, 2012).

3 See UN-HABITAT (2010c).

4 By geographic sub-region, the countries and areas of Asia and the Pacific are: East and North-East Asia (EEA): China; Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPR Korea); Hong Kong, China; Japan; Macao, China; Mongolia; Republic of Korea; South-East Asia (SEA): Brunei Darussalam; Cambodia; Indonesia; Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR); Malaysia; Myanmar; the Philippines; Singapore; Thailand; Timor-Leste; Viet Nam. South and South-West Asia (SSWA): Afghanistan; Bangladesh; Bhutan; India; the Islamic Republic of Iran; Maldives; Nepal; Pakistan; Sri Lanka; Turkey; North and Central Asia (NCA): Armenia; Azerbaijan; Georgia; Kazakhstan; Kyrgyzstan; the Russian Federation; Tajikistan; Turkmenistan; Uzbekistan. Pacific: American Samoa; Australia; Cook Islands; Fiji; French Polynesia; Guam; Kiribati; Marshall Islands; Micronesia; Federated States of Micronesia (F.S.); Nauru; New Caledonia; New Zealand; Niue; Northern Mariana Islands; Palau; Papua New Guinea; Samoa; Solomon Islands; Tonga; Tuvalu; Vanuatu. See UNESCAP (2011, pp. 280-281).
eties and rich cultures that are rooted in its long history. In terms of economic development, the Asia–Pacific region is constituted of low-, lower-middle, upper-middle and high-income economies, and its natural environment shows a varied picture, with tropical and temperate climes, and some of the world’s most arid and water-rich biomes, not to mention the tallest mountain systems (the Himalayas), the Tibetan and Deccan plateaux, and the gigantic valleys and deltas of the Brahmaputra, Chao Phraya, Ganges, Indus, Irrawaddy, Mekong, Narmada, Red, Yangtze and Yellow rivers, to name a few. With regard to human settlements, Asia–Pacific is host to highly urbanised countries such as Australia, Japan and Singapore, and others much less urbanised, such as Cambodia, Papua New Guinea and Sri Lanka (see Fig. 1).

The Report is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 presents an overview and key findings (written by this author). Chapters 2–6 focus on demographic trends, economy, poverty and inequality, urban environment and climate change, and urban governance, management and finance in Asian and Pacific cities. To aid the reader, these five chapters also feature a list of ‘quick facts’ and ‘policy points’. In the following five sections of this paper, the key findings of the Report’s Chapters 2–6 have been summarised. The last section provides a perspective on the future of Asian cities.

Urbanising Asia

The Report’s Chapter 2, Urbanising Asia, reviews urban demographic trends and the diversity of urbanisation patterns in Asia–
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