



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

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ABSTRACT

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*¹(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.²

The Report was prepared jointly by UN-HABITAT and the zUnited 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.³ 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 Central Asia, and the Pacific.⁴ They feature a wealth of diverse soci-

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 (ENE)*: 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).

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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 number/s 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/listItemDetails.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).



Fig. 1. The Asia-Pacific Region. Based on cartographic information from www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/profile/escap.pdf. Source: UN-HABITAT (2010a, p. 5).

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,⁵ and its natural environment shows a varied picture, with tropical and temperate climates, 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).

⁵ "The classification of countries into income groups is from the World Bank. The World Bank divides countries according to their 2009 gross national income (GNI) per capita, calculated using the World Bank Atlas method. Group classifications are: low income (\$995 or less); lower-middle income (\$996-3945); upper-middle income (\$3946-12,195); and high income (\$12,196 or more). **Low-income countries:** Afghanistan; Bangladesh; Cambodia; Democratic People's Republic of Korea; Kyrgyzstan; Lao People's Democratic Republic; Myanmar; Nepal; Tajikistan; Solomon Islands. **Lower middle-income countries:** Armenia; Bhutan; China; Georgia; India; Indonesia; Kiribati; Maldives; Marshall Islands; Micronesia (Federated States of); Mongolia; Pakistan; Papua New Guinea; the Philippines; Samoa; Sri Lanka; Thailand; Timor-Leste; Tonga; Turkmenistan; Tuvalu; Uzbekistan; Vanuatu; Viet Nam. **Upper middle-income countries:** American Samoa; Azerbaijan; Fiji; the Islamic Republic of Iran; Kazakhstan; Malaysia; Palau; the Russian Federation; Turkey. **High-income countries:** Australia; Brunei Darussalam; French Polynesia; Guam; Hong Kong, China; Japan; Macao, China; New Caledonia; New Zealand; Northern Mariana Islands; Republic of Korea; Singapore." (all figures in US\$; emphasis original; UNESCAP, 2011, p. 281).

In reviewing and documenting the current state of cities, and trends in inclusive and sustainable urban development in the Asia-Pacific region, the Report makes use of the latest information available, and includes a selection of good practices and examples in boxed items, and a short statistical annex. The preparation of the Report has also drawn on the rich knowledge of a broad range of specialists, and peer reviews by experts. The Report uses the urban demographic data from the *World Urbanization Prospects 2009* (United Nations, 2010) and socio-economic and other data from a variety of sources. A short *Statistical Annex* includes selected latest data on: urban demography from the *World Urbanization Prospects 2009*; slums and related issues from the *State of the World's Cities 2010/2011* report (UN-HABITAT, 2010b); and urban water and sanitation coverage from the *2010 Update of the Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation* (WHO & UNICEF, 2010).

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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