



UN WATER

WATER AND URBANIZATION



UNITED NATIONS



Urbanization in Asia. On the left is Karial slum, one of the urban slums in Dhaka. One billion people—one out of three urban dwellers—are living in slum conditions. UN Photo/Kibae Park

Urban areas are expected to absorb all of the world's population growth over the next four decades, as well as accommodating significant rural-to-urban migration. The vast majority of these people will be living in overcrowded slums with inadequate, often non-existent, water and sanitation services.

Safe drinking water systems and adequate sanitation that effectively disposes of human waste will be essential to ensure cities and towns grow sustainably. Extending these services to the millions of urbanites currently unserved will play a key role in underpinning the health and security of cities, protecting economies and ecosystems and minimising the risk of pandemics.

Challenges

For the first time in history, more than half of the global population live in towns and cities. By 2050, that proportion is expected to rise to two-thirds. Population growth is happening fastest in urban areas of less developed regions, with the urban population estimated to grow from 3.9 billion people today to 6.3 billion in 2050.

Even though water and sanitation access rates are generally higher in urban areas than rural, planning and infrastructure have been unable to keep pace in many regions. Today, 700 million urbanites live without improved sanitation, contributing to poor health conditions and heavy pollution loads in wastewater, and 156 million live without improved water sources.

Opportunities

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New Urban Agenda

In December 2016, world leaders adopted the [New Urban Agenda](#), which sets a global standard for sustainable urban development, and will help rethink planning, management and life in cities. The New Urban Agenda is roadmap for building cities that can serve as engines of prosperity and centres of cultural and social well-being while protecting the environment. The Agenda also provides guidance for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and provides the underpinning for actions to address climate change.



Facts and figures

- In 2017, more than half of the global population live in towns and cities. By 2050, that proportion is expected to rise to two-thirds. ([UN-DESA, 2014](#))
- The urban population estimated to grow from 3.9 billion people today to 6.3 billion in 2050. ([UNESCO, 2012](#))
- Globally, two out of five people in rural areas use piped water supplies. ([WHO/UNICEF, 2017](#))
- Four out of five people in urban areas use piped water supplies. ([WHO/UNICEF, 2017](#))
- 39% of the global population (2.9 billion people) use a [safely managed sanitation](#) service. Most of these people (3 out of 5) live in urban areas. ([WHO/UNICEF, 2017](#))
- In sub-Saharan Africa, three out of five people with basic handwashing facilities live in urban areas. ([WHO/UNICEF, 2017](#))
- The global urban population is estimated to grow from 3.9 billion people today to 6.3 billion in 2050. ([UNESCO, 2012](#))

Find out more:

[WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Program for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene \(JMP\) – 2017 Update and SDG Baselines](#)
[UNESCO \(2015\): World Water Development Report 2015: 'Water for a Sustainable World'](#)

[UN-Habitat](#)

[UN-Habitat: New Urban Agenda](#)

[UN Environment: Urban Issues](#)

[World Water Day 2011: Water for cities](#)
