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The State of the Cities

Why, and how, the Commonwealth must address the challenge of sustainable urbanisation

Introduction

The Commonwealth embraces all dimensions of today's urban challenges. Its ranks include global cities such as Mumbai with its 19 million inhabitants, and Malé, which with a population of just 111,000 is the largest city in the rapidly urbanising small island state of Maldives, threatened by rising sea levels. What happens in our fast expanding cities in this generation will shape the future of the Commonwealth. That is why the Kampala Communiqué from the 2007 Commonwealth People's Forum (CPF), building on the workshop run by Built Environment Professions in the Commonwealth (BEPIC), called on Commonwealth member states and the Commonwealth Consultative Group on Human Settlements (CCGHS) to prepare a report on the state of Commonwealth cities. This paper provides a summary of the key findings of ComHabitat's forthcoming report, 'The Commonwealth's Urban Challenge: Scoping the State of the Commonwealth Cities'.

A Rapidly Urbanising Commonwealth

Today just over one-third of the population of the Commonwealth lives in urban areas. This is less than the global figure, which is roughly 50 per cent. However, the Commonwealth's urban population is growing by 65,000 people a day—that is, over 23.5 million a year. In 17 Commonwealth countries the annual urban growth rate is 3 per cent or more, well above the global average of 2 per cent. This urban growth reflects the youthful age structure of cities. It is also fuelled by rural to urban migration and the redefinition of the boundaries of urban areas.

The Commonwealth's urban population is growing by 23.5 million a year

Thus, while at present there are about three-quarters of a billion people living in Commonwealth urban areas, by 2025 UN projections suggest the figure will be almost 1.2 billion. In India, the Commonwealth's most populous country, the level of urbanisation remains quite low at about 30

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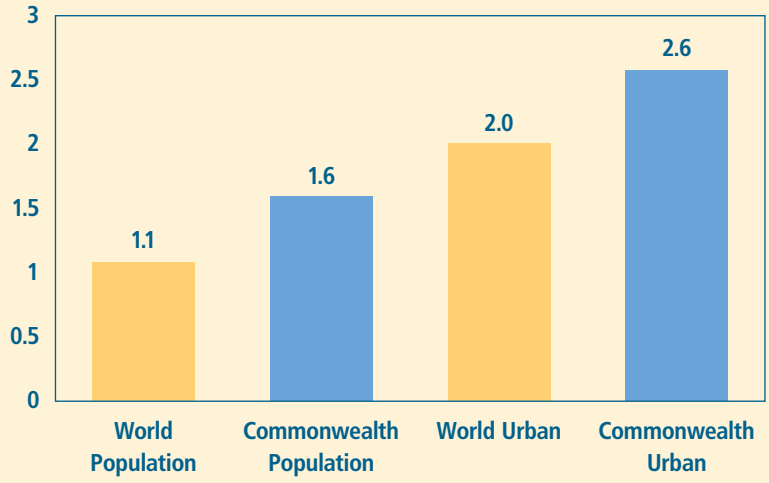
Figure 1: Annual Growth Rates (% per annum 2005-2010)



Source: UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2008)

per cent, but this is expected to increase to over 55 per cent in the next 40 years. Urban growth rates of 4 per cent a year, as found in Kenya, The Gambia or Solomon Islands, to cite some examples, mean that their urban population will almost double by 2025.

Thirty-two of the Commonwealth's 76 'million-plus cities' are expected to more than double in size between 2000 and 2025, with Abuja, Dar es Salaam, Kampala, Klang, Mombasa and Nairobi all growing by more than 160 per cent. However, most of the urban growth will be in smaller cities, and some of the small island countries face staggering scales of urban growth in the period—for example, over 200 per cent in Maldives, 180 per cent in Solomon Islands and 175 per cent in Vanuatu.

'Slumurbanisation'

Almost half of this annual urban growth occurs through slums. The number of Commonwealth slum dwellers is growing by around 10 million a year, and by 2010 over 400 million Commonwealth citizens will be living in a slum. In Commonwealth urban areas one in two is a slum dweller, a higher ratio than in the rest of the world. The situation is especially acute in countries where there are already high levels of slums but also high rates of urbanisation. Table 1 (below) has

Table 1: Clusters of Countries Based on Slums and Urban Growth

	Low % slums (<10%)	Medium % slums (10–50%)	High % slums (>50%)
High urban growth (>4%)		Solomon Islands, Vanuatu	The Gambia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania
Medium urban growth (2–4%)	Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia	Namibia, Trinidad and Tobago	Bangladesh, Belize, Botswana, Cameroon, Ghana, India, Lesotho, Nigeria, Pakistan, Zambia
Low urban growth (<2%)	Antigua and Barbuda, Australia, The Bahamas, Barbados, Canada, Grenada, Guyana, Malta, Nauru, New Zealand, St Kitts and Nevis, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Samoa, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Tonga, UK	Dominica, Jamaica, St Lucia, South Africa	Kiribati, Seychelles

been compiled from UN data, although information on slums for Cyprus, Maldives, Mauritius, Sierra Leone, Swaziland and Tuvalu was not available.

The Commonwealth's Goal on Human Settlements is Off-track

In May 1999, at its first meeting, held in Nairobi, the Commonwealth Consultative Group on Human Settlements adopted the goal, 'Demonstrated progress towards adequate shelter for all with secure tenure and access to essential services in every community by 2015'. In 2009, over 700 million people were living in the Commonwealth's urban areas. Between 2005 and 2010 the forecast is that urban population growth will exceed rural rates in all but two of the Commonwealth's member countries (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2008).

The goal adopted in 1999 is not being achieved, as demonstrated when broken down into its constituent parts and examined, as follows:

'… progress (by 2015) towards adequate shelter for all …'

The number of citizens living in slums has grown by about a quarter in just eight years, from 321 million in 2001 to probably over 400 million in 2009. The precise figures, which are partly calculated from projections, are less important than the trend. The situation is getting worse, not better, and unless changes can be made quickly and at scale, the situation in 2015 will be much worse than in 1999. Table 2 (below) demonstrates the extent of the problem among Commonwealth countries.

Population growth means that even where a country has made progress in reducing the proportion of its citizens without improved sanitation or water, the actual number of persons without access to these vital aspects of shelter has increased. For example, India reduced the proportion of people without access to improved sanitation from 77 per cent to 72 per cent between 2000 and 2007, but in 2007 there were over 27 million more people without access than there were in 2000.

Table 2: Commonwealth Progress on Slums

Status	Country
On Track: Countries experiencing rapid, sustained decline in slum growth rates in urban areas and/or those with low slum prevalence.	Sri Lanka
Stabilising: Countries starting to stabilise or reverse slum growth rates but which need to monitor progress to ensure sustained reductions.	Trinidad and Tobago, South Africa
At risk: Countries experiencing moderate to high slum growth rates but also having moderate incidence of slums that require remedial policies to reverse growth in numbers of slum dwellers.	Botswana, India, Jamaica, Namibia
Off track: Countries with already high slum proportions, facing rapid, sustained slum growth rates and which require immediate, urgent action to slow down or reverse slum trends.	Bangladesh, Cameroon, The Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia

Source: UN-Habitat (2006, p. 42–43)

'… with secure tenure …'

Insecure tenure is one of five elements in the UN-Habitat definition of a slum. Tenure is a complex matter—in many situations, rather than being simply either 'secure' or 'insecure', it is on a continuum ranging from 'fully secure in perpetuity' to 'highly insecure' (UN-Habitat 2003, p. 60). The Geneva-based Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions conducted global surveys of forced evictions in 1998, 2002, 2003 and 2006 and has produced reports on a number of Commonwealth countries. While forced evictions are not a purely urban phenomenon, those living in informal settlements are especially vulnerable. The growth of informal settlements suggests that more Commonwealth citizens are in insecure tenure today than was the case in 1999.

Many Commonwealth commitments have a 'slum dimension' including education, health, gender, human rights

'… access to essential services …'

Two indicators used in monitoring progress on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) can be used as proxies for access to services. These are under-five mortality rates and the primary education completion rate (percentage of the age group). There is a general picture of progress on both indicators across most of the Commonwealth. However, the national data hides differences between the situation in the slums and the rest of the country. For example, in 2002 the under-five mortality rate in the slums of Nairobi was 151 per 1,000 live births, compared with an average of 62 for the city as a whole and just 13 for rural Kenya (African Population and Health Research Center 2002, p. xvi).

'Slumurbanisation' and the MDGs

The slum issue is fundamental to many Commonwealth commitments, for example, education, health, gender and human rights all have a 'slum dimension'. Very often the slums will also be the locations most vulnerable to hazards linked to extreme weather, such as flooding or hurricanes. Hazards mitigation strategies need to have a 'slum dimension' too. Reversing this slum dynamo is essential if progress is to be made on the MDGs. As Kofi Annan, the former UN Secretary-General, argued, '… the international community must concentrate more of its efforts on improving the lives of the urban poor if the Millennium Development Goals are to be achieved … Without a renewed commitment to the needs of our urban era, matched by resources, the world's urban transition will see a further expansion and entrenchment of slums, and the spread of urban ills …' (UN-Habitat 2006).

Children from homes that lack improved drinking water and sanitation services miss school more frequently due to a combination of poverty, poor health and lack of hygiene. Girls not only suffer illness because of the lack of water and sanitation, but also often share the physical and time burden of queuing for and carrying water. If the Commonwealth can improve the state of its cities, it can deliver on other key goals. However, if the cities continue on their present trajectory, the social, economic and environmental costs will be long-lasting.

Sprawl, Climate Change, Congestion and Waste

It is not just that the population of cities in the Commonwealth is rising inexorably, but in many the

physical extent of built up areas is growing even faster. Unregulated settlement expansion and increasing reliance on cars have encouraged cities to sprawl at lower and lower densities. Low density growth has impacts that involve the loss of agricultural land, loss of natural habitats, higher per capita infrastructure charges, less cost-effective public transport and higher energy consumption due to the longer travelling distances that result.

Political leadership and the skills of professionals within the Commonwealth can make a vital difference

The spread of the cities at today's rates has implications for food security. In Sub-Saharan Africa since the mid-1980s local agriculture has struggled to respond to rising urban demands for food. Urban expansion typically reduces the amount of food production on peri-urban land. Increasing separation between producers and markets makes food more expensive, exacerbating urban poverty. Multi-storey buildings can make traditional ways of preparing food difficult to sustain (UN-Habitat 2008b, p. 34). Urban sprawl also impacts on forests, which have an important role in regional and global ecology and climate.

Cities and climate change

Urban development decisions now need to address the climate change agenda. The United Nations Development Programme (2007) has cited building standard regulations as an area that could yield great savings in CO_2 emissions linked to energy use, while emphasising that 'enforcement matters as much as the rules' (p. 137). Political leadership and the skills of professionals within the Commonwealth can make a vital difference. Canada is a country that has high greenhouse gas emissions. Overall it generates 20 tons of CO_2 per person per year. However, the figure for Toronto, a city which adopted a greenhouse gas reduction target back in 1989, is only 9.6 tons per person (UN-Habitat 2008a, pp. 135–136). Cities contribute the most numerically to emissions, but can actually be more energy efficient than other forms of settlement if well planned.

Rising sea levels pose a particular threat to coastal cities. The Center for International Earth Science Information Network (2009) has identified areas that are adjacent to the coast and less than 10 metres above sea level. It terms this land the Low Elevation Coastal Zone (LECZ). No fewer than 707 Commonwealth urban settlements contain land within the LECZ, and in 2000, 72.5 million urban residents lived within the zone.

Congestion, transport and infrastructure

Transport accounts for about one-seventh of CO_2 emissions (World Bank 2009, p. 191). Congestion and gridlock undermine a city's economic performance, while also creating air pollution that impacts on health and general quality of life. Vehicle ownership is increasing very rapidly in much of the developing world—the World Bank (2009, p. 144) quotes a figure of 15–20 per cent annually. When this rate of increase is combined with today's high rates of urban growth, the transport situation of many Commonwealth cities looks very problematic.

Transport and infrastructure are important for inclusiveness. Efficient traffic management can save lives and reduce accidents; street lighting and paving can have a real effect on safety and security. Road accidents and deaths have been going down in developed countries but are rising in developing countries, with 90 per cent of the world's annual

road accident deaths occurring in low- and middle-income countries (World Bank 2009, p. 191).

Infrastructure needs to be maintained. In many Commonwealth countries, urban infrastructure dating from the colonial period is now in need of renewal or upgrading. As Alam (2009) has noted, 'One problem faced by local government is the tendency of politicians to prefer rural areas. Funds are often diverted to unviable projects in rural areas to appeal to large rural vote banks, and therefore urban infrastructure is often neglected, although this could be self-financing' (p. 31). Asset management represents an important set of professional skills that can prevent assets becoming liabilities.

The Commonwealth can become a leading partner in making urbanisation more sustainable

So Should We Try to Halt Urban Growth?

Climate change and slum-based poverty are being exacerbated by today's urban growth. Yet, paradoxical as it may sound, their solution depends on urban growth. The reason why cities grow is because they offer economic and social advantages. Attempts to impose a ceiling on the growth of cities like Mumbai have failed, and arguably stoked slum growth. The UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, has written that cities 'present real opportunities for increasing energy efficiency, reducing disparities in development and improving living conditions in general' (UN-Habitat 2008a, p. iii). It is not only very large cities that can succeed; cities work at every level. Local and regional governments need to embrace economic development policies that involve analysing strengths and weaknesses in their areas, spotting opportunities and building partnerships. There needs to be an urban dimension to economic policy and an economic dimension to local government policy.

The World Bank (2009) argues that policies seeking to 'slow the massive migration to cities, decongest the largest cities in the developing world by establishing new cities, and make the biggest cities centers for cleaner high-technology activities … all represent a potentially costly misreading of the market forces that drive the spatial transformations for economic development' (p. 141). The aim should not be to try to halt or reverse the urbanisation of the Commonwealth, but to plan and manage the process better.

A Way Forward

The longer the urban growth of the Commonwealth is ignored, the more difficult and expensive it will be to fix. Ransford Smith, Deputy Secretary-General of the Commonwealth (2009), has noted the value of 'sharing information (data, analysis, policy and programming intentions); promoting and consolidating joint work (data collection, analyses) missions, evaluations, management and accountability' and 'promoting local mobilisation, participation, monitoring and assessment' (p. 67).

The Commonwealth is in a unique position to become a leading partner in the global task of making urbanisation more sustainable. No other international agency is so well placed to make the connections between global and local action, governments, professions and civil society. ComHabitat's forthcoming report on the state of Commonwealth cities recommends the following actions:

- The Commonwealth should establish formal co-operation with UN-Habitat to work together on the State of Commonwealth Cities and set up a

'State of Commonwealth Cities' contact point in each country to help access national data and national urban policy.

- The Commonwealth Consultative Group on Human Settlements should take ownership and political leadership of the initiative, ensuring it is given a high profile and widely disseminated nationally. Actions in this context include mobilising all relevant ministries (not just ministries of housing) to play an active role in providing data and disseminating lessons, and ensuring that future Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings are briefed on progress.

- The importance of improving urban planning and management in the twenty-first century needs to be reflected in the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation. The pace of urban growth means time is not on our side—the longer it takes to recognise the importance of investing in effective urban management, the greater the scale of the problems and the more difficult it will become to fix them, for example to retro-fit solutions to gaps in infrastructure.

- Commonwealth professions and civil society organisations also need to work more closely together to share insights and information, and in particular to explore the ways that the urban forces described in the ComHabitat report impact on key areas like health, environment, forests and climate change. The Commonwealth People's Forum needs to address this urban dimension, but the urgency of the issues calls for more cross-cutting events between CPF meetings.

- Support action research by the Commonwealth Local Government Forum's Network of Inclusive Cities and Commonwealth professional organisations involving systematic analysis of city-level data and information as an evidence base for practical initiatives to improve the lives of city dwellers and the sustainability of cities in the Commonwealth.

- At national level, each Commonwealth country should scope the scale and nature of the urban challenges that it faces—economic, social, environmental and in governance. This would be the basis for building and implementing a strategic response and sharing it with local governments, which are key to so many aspects of urban management. Knowledge networks could be created through the CCGHS, enabling South to South exchanges of know-how as well as other forms of mutual support.

- The Commonwealth Secretariat can be the means to link the monitoring of urban conditions to the review of the Millennium Development Goals. This would help Commonwealth ministers as a whole—not just those with a housing or town planning brief—to recognise that reaching the goals is closely intertwined with targeted action on poverty alleviation in urban areas.

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