

Forum: The Economic and Social council

Issue: Investigate how rapid urbanization contributes to social inequality and propose strategies for inclusive urban development

President: Samuel Kay

Assistant presidents: Chloe Ma, Morton Ma

Introduction

Since the industrial revolution between the 18th and 19th century, the development of cities into suburbs has expedited and accelerated vastly due to the advancement of technology that people had never encountered before. Nowadays, over 55% of the world's population resides in urban areas, and it has been projected to rise to 68% by 2050. Although the benefit of urbanization is non-negligible – driving innovation and economic growth, its rapid and often under-planned expansion has deepened social inequalities, leaving marginalized communities behind this rapid sprawl.

The consequences of uncontrolled urban growth are severe. Gentrification, driven by real estate investment, displaces long-standing communities as neighborhoods that are revitalized for wealthier demographics. Spatial segregation entrenches social divisions; in cities such as Johannesburg and São Paulo, gated communities exist juxtaposed to informal settlements lacking clean water or electricity. Meanwhile, overburdened infrastructure, from congested transit to underfunded schools, fails to meet the needs of growing populations, particularly in the Global South. These challenges are exacerbated by climate change, as poor urban planning leaves vulnerable districts exposed to flooding, heatwaves, and other natural disasters.

Hence, this issue demands urgent international attention. The UN's Sustainable Development Goal 11 "*Sustainable Cities and Communities*" and the New Urban Agenda outline frameworks for inclusive

development, yet implementation remains uneven. Successful cases, such as participatory urban planning in Medellín, Columbia, and Singapore's public housing model, demonstrate that equity-centered policies can mitigate inequality. These cases underscore the critical truth that urbanization can, in fact, be a force for equity when policies prioritize people over unchecked expansion.

By 2050, urban areas will add 2.5 billion people, with 90% of this growth occurring in Asia and Africa. Without systemic change, urbanization risks becoming a driver of division rather than a ladder of opportunity.

Definition of Key Terms

Urbanization:

Refers to the process by which large numbers of people become permanently concentrated in relatively small areas, forming cities.

Social inequality:

Refers to the unequal distribution of power, privileges, and resources among individuals and groups in a society. It is a concept that has been debated by philosophers and scholars throughout history and is often characterized by differences in social class, status, and political influence. Social inequality can be seen in the disparities between those who hold positions of power and those who are marginalized or disadvantaged. This concept is studied extensively in the field of social sciences, particularly by anthropologists who examine the experiences of vulnerable and marginalized populations.

Urban development:

Refers to the process of improving and expanding urban areas through infrastructure, housing, and services to meet the needs of growing populations. This process is influenced by various factors such as

economic growth, demographic changes, cultural dynamics, and political decisions that shape the spatial organization of cities.

Urban Divide:

The spatial and economic segregation within cities, where wealthier and poorer populations live in distinct neighborhoods with unequal access to services and opportunities.

Land and property rights:

Legal recognition and security of tenure for residents, particularly important for vulnerable populations to prevent displacement and exclusion

Urban Agglomeration:

The concentration of people and economic activities in cities, which can generate economic benefits but also exacerbate inequalities if not managed inclusively.

Spatial Segregation:

Spatial Segregation refers to the physical separation of different groups within a given space, often based on certain characteristics.

Background

Economic inequality:

As rapid urbanization tends to increase an intense competition for job and housing, it is often pushing low-income families and individuals into informal and harder living-conditions and a very thin-regulated (poor) living conditions and limited access to basic services such as education, healthcare, sanitation, and fine water. This segregation highlights obvious economic and social inequalities within urban areas with a great contrast between the wealthy and the poor.

Social Fragmentation and Exclusion:

There is a potential for urbanization (urban growth) to gradually become social fragmentation, where different social, ethnic, or economic groups become either physically or socially isolated from each other. This huge segregation will foster distrust, reduce social cohesion, and increase crime and violence, especially when the government and law enforcements are weak.

Major Parties Involved

Slum Dwellers International (SDI)

The SDI is a grassroots federation that operates in 32 countries, empowering slum communities to map settlements, negotiate land rights, and self-build. In Nairobi, the SDI's Muungano wa Wanavijiji alliance halted evictions in Kibera by partnering with the government to install water points and toilets. In Mumbai, SDI's Pune Night Schools provide education to children of construction workers displaced by luxury towers. SDI's Paani Patrika (water receipts) system in India forces municipalities to recognize informal water vendors as legitimate service providers. While SDI's bottom-up approach has secured housing for 2 million people, it faces pushback from corrupt local officials and developer lobbies.

UN-Habitat

UN-Habitat's flagship slum-upgrading program in Kenya installed water kiosks serving 100,000 residents, reducing cholera rates by 40%. Partnering with Kenya's Athi Water Board, it pioneered a "pay-as-you-fetch" system managed by community co-ops. However, the project's \$10 million cost—funded by the EU and World Bank—highlighted donor dependency; when funding lapsed in 2022, 30% of kiosks failed. UN-Habitat's "Participatory Slum Upgrading Programme" (PSUP) in 40 cities has similarly mixed results: praised in Medellín, Colombia for cable-car-linked libraries but stalled in Kinshasa due to

political instability. Critics argue UN-Habitat over-relies on pilot projects without securing national budget commitments.

BRAC Urban Development Programme

BRAC, the world's largest NGO, runs low-cost sanitation and women's cooperatives in Dhaka's slums. Its "Community Thrift Centers" provide microloans to 500,000 women for home upgrades, while "WASH blocks" (water-sanitation-hygiene hubs) serve 1.2 million. BRAC's "One-Stop Crisis Centers" in 12 cities offer legal aid against evictions, winning a 2023 UN Public Service Award. Yet scaling remains a challenge—only 15% of Dhaka's slums have BRAC coverage, and land mafias routinely sabotage its projects. BRAC's data-driven advocacy pressures the government but faces bureaucratic delays in policy implementation.

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

Minha Casa, Minha Vida (2009 –)

Brazil's Minha Casa, Minha Vida (translated to “My House, My Life”) programme was launched to tackle the country's severe housing shortage through mass construction of affordable homes. The program constructed over 4 million subsidized units, with prices as low as \$10,000 for low-income families, while creating 2.5 million construction jobs through public-private partnerships. Although it successfully housed 16 million people and inspired similar programs across Latin America, the initiative faced significant challenges including corruption scandals that diverted funds, poor construction quality in some developments, and the unintended consequence of reinforcing spatial segregation because 60% of units were built in peripheral areas lacking employment opportunities and transportation infrastructure.

Kibera Slum Upgrading Project (2003 – 2011)

The Kibera Slum Upgrading Project was a collaborative effort between the UN-Habitat and the Kenyan government to improve living conditions in Nairobi's largest informal settlement – Kibera. The project focused on infrastructure improvements like water kiosks and paved roads, while pioneering community participation through resident-led design of new housing clusters and innovative 30-year land leases. Although it achieved notable successes in reducing cholera rates by 40% and establishing a model for in-situ upgrading, the initiative only reached 5% of Kibera's population due to budget constraints and inadvertently displaced some of the poorest residents to worse settlements when they couldn't afford the upgraded units. This experience highlighted both the importance of community engagement in urban development and the challenges of scaling up localized solutions while maintaining affordability for all income levels.

Possible Solutions

Efforts to Promote and Implement Redistributive Taxation

Involved experts and credible parties such as the UN Habitat and BRAC Urban Development Programme could collaboratively examine methods for optimum taxation. Optimum taxation should have a redistributive nature by disproportionately taxing those of high socioeconomic status and redistributing the tax revenue in the form of investments to the poor. Involved parties could collaboratively explore methods of implementing optimum redistributive taxation in different areas of the world to improve equity and allow member states to better support the marginalized through the form of investments, subsidies, or other financial methods.

Encouraging and incentivizing investment into affordable infrastructure

International organizations and representatives of the marginalized communities should collaboratively call for improved investment into affordable infrastructure to ensure the basic needs of those living in urban areas. When encouraging investment, involved parties and member states should support these efforts for improved infrastructure and investment as a whole by providing incentives for various entities to improve social equity.

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