Secondary Cities in Low-Income Asia: Demography and Risk

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1 Urban Demography of Low- and Middle-Income Asia

2 Smaller Cities and Environmental Risks: India

3 Conclusions
Urban Challenges in the 21st Century:

Urbanization in Poor Countries  Large increases in world population lie ahead; almost all growth to occur in the cities and towns of poor countries. Today’s urban dwellers, and those of the future, will live mainly in small and medium-sized cities.

Some small municipalities are located in large urban agglomerations; others are disconnected from national networks and economic growth.

Decentralization  National governments transferring responsibilities into hands of state and municipal governments, which typically lack resources and all manner of bureaucratic expertise.

Extreme-event risks  As global warming takes hold, the consequences (floods, droughts) will be borne by city and town dwellers as well as rural villagers. Yet national climate adaptation plans typically ignore urban areas of all sizes and the urban poor.

Sustainable Development Goals and the Sendai Framework  How will urban progress be measured and monitored—especially outside capitals and large cities?
New National Governmental Systems: Decentralization

- National governments are passing to lower-level tiers of government important functions, responsibilities, and (sometimes) revenue-raising authority and inter-governmental transfers.
- Powerful notion of moving government “closer to the people,” in theory improving responsiveness
- Municipal and “state” governments increasingly important in setting policies and programs — but often poorly resourced and under-staffed
- Small and intermediate-size cities: thinner revenue bases, less ability to impose growth-elastic taxes, more dependent on transfers
Almost all poor countries collect spatially-specific population and socioeconomic data via population censuses. But few poor countries systematically analyze and distribute spatially-specific data to their local governments and civil society.

Smaller-city governments especially handicapped by the lack of basic data for planning and at-risk estimation.

Latin American countries, the prominent exception: Detailed, easily accessible data seen as essential to good governance. Mexico, Brazil, Uruguay, and other examples.

This view gaining adherents: India after its 2011 census making major efforts to put settlement-specific data on the web—as we will illustrate.
Discussion Draws From:


and from on-going NSF-funded research with Deborah Balk, Bryan O’Neill, Bryan Jones, Leiwen Jiang and others comparing urbanization in Mexico, India, and the United States.
Urban Demography of Low- and Middle-Income Asia
The Urban Evidence Base
Too dependent on the UN and national-level statistics

- The Sustainable Development Goals will be monitored sub-nationally
- Environmental and climate risks vary enormously within countries
- But settlement-specific data on populations at risk seldom made available in any accessible form
- The demographic basics—fertility, mortality, health, age structure, education—are not available or not tabulated at the level of cities, to say nothing of neighborhoods within cities
- But census data exist at these levels—they have been left unexploited in the vast majority of poor countries.
Agglomerations of 300,000+ Population in Developing Asia

UN Population Division (2014), population given in thousands

Agglomerations of 300,000+ in 2015
Asian Urban Population by Agglomeration Size: Smaller Places Matter!

- >10m: 41.37%
- 5-10m: 11.90%
- 1-5m: 9.15%
- 500k-1m: 21.20%
- 300k-500k: 10.16%
- <300k: 6.24%
UN Projections Sensible? How to Interpret the Meaning of “Agglomeration”? 

[Graph showing urban population distribution by region and year, with sections for Central Asia, Eastern Asia, South-Eastern Asia, Southern Asia, and Western Asia. Each region has a bar chart indicating the percentage of total urban population in different agglomeration sizes (<300k, 300k-500k, 500k-1m, 1-5m, 5-10m, >10m) across years (1950, 1975, 2000, 2030).]
Smaller Cities and Towns Near Jakarta
Night-time lights imagery—proxy for urban land cover/economic activity
Large and Small Cities in Punjab Province, Pakistan
Night-time lights and Google Earth geo-locating—and NSO population counts

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Smaller Cities and Environmental Risks: India
Number of Urban Places, by City/Town Population Size
Settlement-level population data, all municipalities and census towns!
Distribution of Population, by City Size

The graph shows the distribution of population across different city size classes. The x-axis represents the total population in size class (000s), while the y-axis represents the city size class (000s). The data indicates a significant concentration of population in smaller city size classes, with a sharp decline as the city size increases.
Number of Children under 6, by City/Town Size
Number of Illiterate Women, by City/Town Size

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Urban Dwellers at Risk: Low-Elevation Coastal Zone

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Cyclone Risks: Urban Settlements in the Pathway
Conclusions: To Highlight Smaller Cities and Towns, Emphasize the Powerful SDG theme of “Inclusive Development”

- Help to **disaggregate and map** population census and related data, to highlight status of small urban places. Technical barriers can be overcome, with international assistance.
- Focus attention on the **environmental risks** settlements are facing across the size spectrum.
- Where possible, **disaggregate socioeconomic data within cities**.
- Use **satellite imagery**—night-time lights, LandSat, new sensors—to monitor change in urban landcover between population censuses.