Why do cities matter on the global stage?

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In what is now an urbanized world, cities are critical focal points for investment, trade, communication, commerce, production and consumption. With over half the global population already living in urban areas, growing to an estimated two-thirds by 2050, cities are centres where larger political and economic outcomes are determined. It is typically within and across cities that change at the state level takes place.

Cities are magnets for in-migration by those seeking a better life, as well as loci for problems that arise from rapid economic and demographic shifts. However, these global trends, combined with insufficient capacity, resources and good governance in many developing countries, have resulted in the deepening of urban poverty and the proliferation of slums that today are home to nearly one billion people worldwide.

As a result of these developments, some states are increasingly unable to exercise coherent control over their territories and peoples, allowing for the proliferation of local and international criminal networks. State institutions are increasingly undermined by non-state actors such as gangs and vigilante groups, which impose informal social governance and justice systems within localized "governance voids". While these groups can support social cohesion, they more often corrupt social capital and hasten social fragmentation.

The consequences of these developments are communities in which an increasing portion of the population, especially youth, is excluded from society. These groups may turn to illicit, criminal and violent activities, contributing to an overall sense of community insecurity. In marginalized urban communities, disease, crime, vandalism, drugs, pollution and lack of basic services add to the lack of safety and security.

How these urban issues are managed will determine what kind of impact urbanization will have on the global population. These problems are not restricted to the

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developing world; as despair turns to anger, as global mobility and communications increase, more and more cities face the risk of becoming targets of extremism that can foment in isolated and impoverished urban areas. ●