

Developing nations are now catching up, in a shift that is creating monumental problems for the world's poorest people. It will be necessary to build the equivalent of a

city of one million people — a new Calgary — every week for the next 45 years to absorb these urban citizens.

The new city dwellers will need services and amenities from water and electricity to homes, schools and health care. They will also bring

with them difficult environmental and social problems — urban sprawl, power and transportation shortages, garbage and countless other issues.

A Canadian legacy

Canada has long played an important role in global urban issues. Vancouver played host 30 years ago to the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, called Habitat, the first UN forum to look at what was needed to respond to growing urban populations. The 1976 conference attracted the likes of Mother Teresa, anthropologist Margaret Mead and futurist Buckminster Fuller.

Canada by this time had started emphasizing the importance of linking global environmental threats with urbanization, says Peter Oberlander, who was then the federal deputy minister for urban affairs and remains one of Canada's most prominent urban thinkers. "Canada said to the UN, 'If you are serious and you want to do something about the threat to the environment... you must deal with human settlements.'"

The Vancouver conference led to the creation of the United Nations Commission for Human Settlements, what is now UN-Habitat, the Nairobi-based agency for urban matters. Now, 30 years later, Canada has once again taken centre stage on the issue by hosting thousands of municipal officials, government representatives, planners, academics, business people and activists from June 19 to 23 at UN-Habitat's World Urban Forum (WUF) in Vancouver, the third biennial meeting of its kind.

In the keynote address to open the forum, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper told delegates that "urbanization is a powerful, irresistible phenomenon" and healthy cities are the key to the world's future.

"Throughout history, great cities have been a hallmark of successful societies," he said, adding that Canadian cities with their diversity "are widely recognized as among the best in the world" but remain "works-in-progress."

The Government of Canada has made strengthening the country's cities a top priority, he said, through measures such as investing \$16.5-billion in infrastructure projects, addressing the growth of violent crime related to gangs, guns and drugs, and helping to encourage public transit and provide affordable housing. "We will continue working to make our cities safer, cleaner and more prosperous than ever."

Charles Kelly, a Vancouver businessman who was the forum's commissioner general, says the world must pay attention to urbanization because of its potentially harmful impact on the environment worldwide. Kelly's own passion for city issues has its roots in that first Habitat conference in Vancouver, where he played an organizing role. "This was the early days of what has sometimes been characterized as the human tsunami, the mass movement of people to cities, and a very substantial number of those people into slums," he says. "Since Habitat, the problems of human settlements not only have persisted, they have multiplied manyfold in size, scope and complexity."

To Kelly, it's no accident that the recent WUF was held in Vancouver. The city, which will also host the 2010 Winter Games, has become internationally recognized as a showpiece of urban livability and has won awards for its environmental efforts and long-range planning.



Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper speaks at the opening session of the World Urban Forum in Vancouver: "Urbanization is a powerful, irresistible phenomenon."

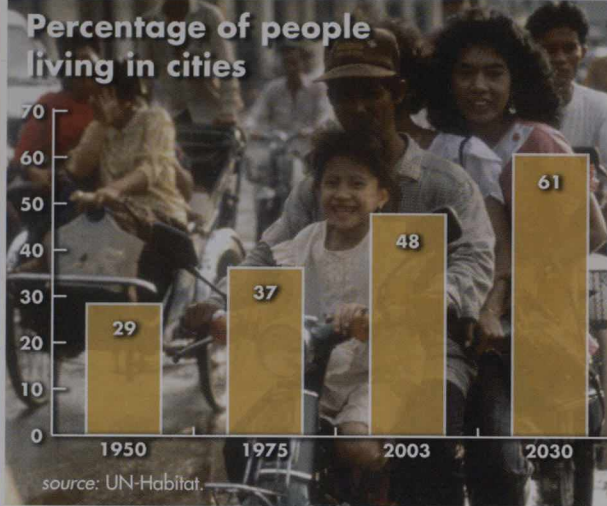


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