



UN HABITAT

THE STATE OF ARAB CITIES 2012

CHALLENGES OF URBAN TRANSITION

POPULATION OF ARAB CITIES TO DOUBLE BY 2050

Kuwait, 6 May 2012: The urban population of the Arab States, which already quadrupled between 1970 and 2010, will more than double to 438.6 million by 2050, warns UN-Habitat's new report, *The State of Arab Cities 2012: Challenges of Urban Transition*.

The Arab region, home to 357 million people in 2010, is one of the more urbanized regions of the world, with 56 per cent of its population (over 200 million) living in cities. By 2050, the region will be home to 646 million people, with 438 million urban dwellers. The Gulf countries now experience the region's most rapid total population growth, while the Southern Tier countries (Comoros, Djibouti, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Yemen) are the fastest urbanizing countries.

"According to UN-Habitat's latest research, urbanization has been driven by economic development, migration to the oil-rich states, eco-migration caused by worsening droughts, and conflict displacements of people", says Dr Joan Clos, UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN-Habitat. "These trends all cause immense demands for urban infrastructure, housing and social services which must be addressed through national urban planning."

As of 2010, there were 7.4 million registered refugees in Arab countries, most of them Palestinians and Iraqis living in Jordan and Syria; 9.8 million internally displaced persons, mostly in Iraq, Lebanon, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria and Yemen; and 15 million international migrants in the Gulf countries.

The proportion of sub-standard housing varies from country to country, but in Mauritania and the Southern Tier countries, especially Somalia and Sudan, between 67 and 94 per cent of the urban residents live in slums. In the Maghreb and Mashreq, low-to-middle-income groups tend to live in informal settlements that are of decent quality and connected to infrastructures but that lack land title. In the Gulf countries it is especially the housing conditions of low-income expatriate workers that present a major challenge.

Despite these urban population pressures, services, infrastructure, health and educational attainment are generally better in cities than in rural areas. However, unemployment and poverty are growing urban phenomena. One of the region's major challenges is the need to provide gainful employment to its young people. With 60 per cent of the population below 25 years of age, Arab countries should seriously reinforce their efforts to provide employment opportunities for their young people, whose current unemployment rates vary from 11 per cent in Kuwait to 35 per cent in Morocco while even higher rates prevail in some of the Southern Tier countries.

The Arab States have made significant progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals, particularly in the areas of health and education, despite the 1990s and 2000s limited economic growth, the recent global economic crisis, and continuing conflicts in the region. However, across the Arab world, around 18 per cent of residents still live under each country's national poverty line.

The high demand for infrastructure and affordable housing, combined with unnecessarily complex urban governance systems, has stretched the ability of most Arab governments to provide serviced urban residential land. Despite some countries' significant progress in regularizing the urban informal settlements and eradicating the urban slums that had proliferated in the closing decades of the 20th century, there is still a serious shortage of affordable housing in most countries. This is to a large extent due to lack of housing financing mechanisms, except for the highest income levels, that have hindered the production of formal affordable housing for lower- and middle-income households.

Source: UN-DESA, 2009

The recent events that became known as the "Arab Spring" were mostly an urban phenomenon. Cities across the Arab region became the central meeting ground for popular calls for better governance, more effective economic

management, greater transparency and more freedom. But what is less often understood is that the Arab Spring is really a call for social reform and urban policies that can deliver adequate living conditions for rapidly growing young and poor urbanites. Too many Arab societies continue to suffer under unacceptably high levels of urban poverty and under-development while, at the same time, urban innovations are being introduced with dazzling speed in others.

In most Arab countries, youth makes up the vast majority of the population. These youths demand access to gainful employment and affordable housing as the two most basic requirements for starting families of their own. But youth unemployment is very high in the Arab region and the chances of finding affordable housing is a dim prospect for many urban youths too. These two trends converge in Arab cities in an explosive mixture that has fuelled the region's social unrest over the past year.

All Arab States are currently at a historic crossroad in their political, social and economic evolution. The challenges will mostly be encountered in the region's cities because that is where the hardships of the transition from traditional rural majorities to urban mass-societies are most visibly and painfully laid bare. Since few Arab governments had prepared for the rapidly rising urban household formation rates associated with young populations, impoverished and disoriented urban youths have now become one of the region's key political and social issues.

The Arab States are now a region of cities and will continue to become more urban, day by day. The associated confrontation between urbanity and modernity can only be resolved by the region itself and governments will therefore have to effect the very political, socio-economic and urban policy reforms that can be espoused by their rapidly growing and mostly young urban societies.