

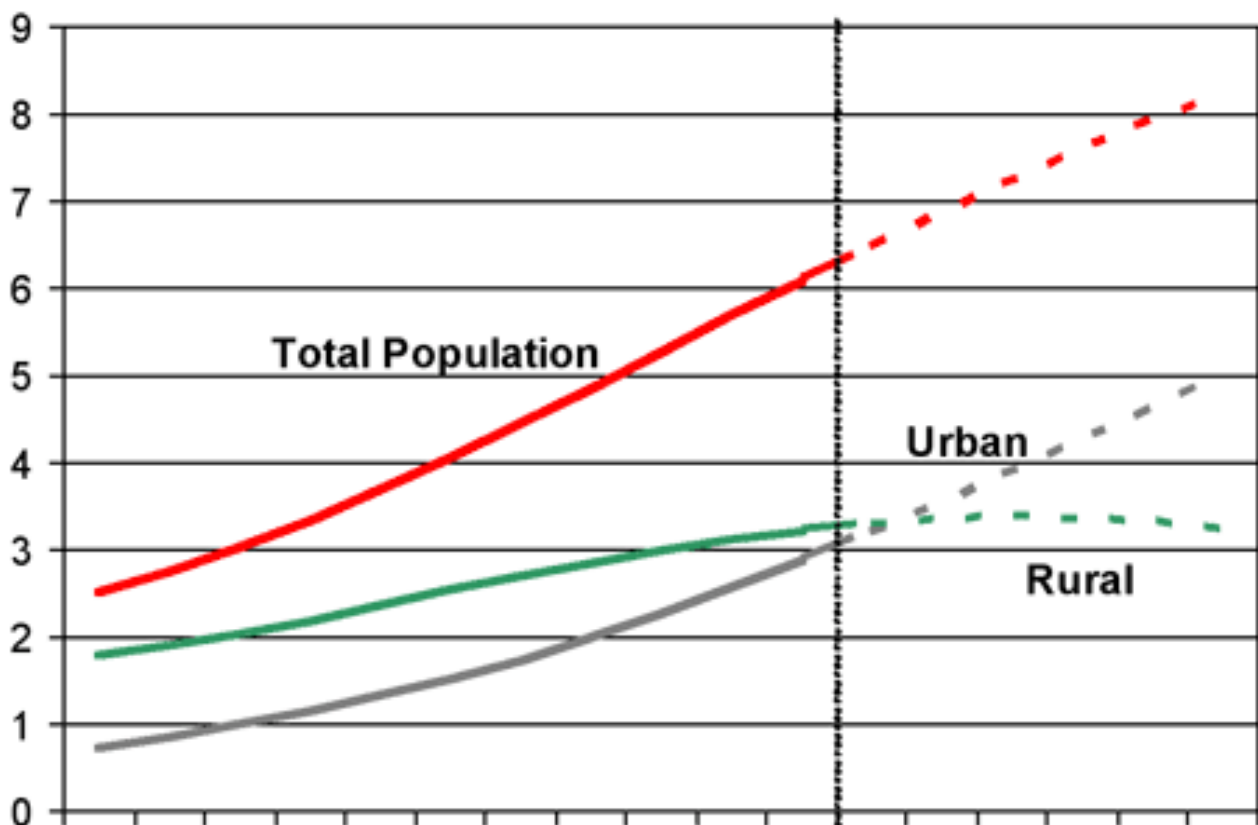
Our urban future

Robin Hambleton outlines the global challenges facing city leaders

More people now live in urban areas than in the entire history of the world. More than that, it is now the case that the urban population outnumbers the rural. In 2005 most of the 6.5 billion people on the planet lived in rural areas – roughly 3.3 billion rural and 3.2 billion urban. In 2007 – demographers argue about the precise date - the urban population of the world overtook the rural.

More to the point, the population projections for the planet suggest that the world urban population is set to rocket. As shown in the graph the overall population of the world is set to climb from 6.5 billion in 2005 to 8.2 billion in 2030. By then five billion people (or 61% of the world population) will live in urban areas. This is a staggering increase of 1.8 billion in the world urban population in a comparatively short space of time. Are we ready?

Figure 1 World Population Growth Source: United Nations World Urbanization Prospects, <http://esa.un.org/unup/>



The short answer is 'no'. In a new book, *Governing Cities in a Global Era*, Jill Simone Gross and I bring together contributions from urban scholars from across the world to examine the challenges now facing city leaders. Some observers take the view that the forces of globalization require urban leaders to emulate each other in trying to attract inward investment. In order to maintain their competitive position in a winner-takes-all world, so the argument goes, cities have to become servants of private capital. 'Get out there and pave the way for the private sector or the jobs will go elsewhere' seems to be the mantra of many urban management consultants.

The authors in our book argue that this is out of date thinking. Sure, cities need to ensure they are attractive places to live and work if they are to enjoy economic prosperity, but many now realize that it is the distinctiveness of their city that holds the key to success. Thus, innovative mayors and city managers now spend much of their time enhancing the 'people climate' rather than the 'business climate' of their city.

Striving to be like everywhere else sounds like a losing strategy if you are trying to attract talented wealth creators. These professionals – sometimes dubbed the ‘creative class’ – clearly do not want to live in ‘could be anywhere’ urban areas. They seek locations that support a diversity of cultural and lifestyle options.

Governing Cities in a Global Era. Urban Innovation, Competition and Democratic Reform examines urban change in all continents – it examines social and demographic trends, provides case studies of urban innovation, considers the modern role for government and offers a range of cross-national comparisons. What are the key lessons from this global analysis?

First, place matters. Today’s global forces map onto an uneven terrain of politics and power, and this unevenness remains even in an era of hyper connectivity. Contributors to our book show how globalization produces new centers and margins within the global economic system. Cities occupying strategic nodes within this system are advantaged. They become magnets for people, investment, resources and power. Cities outside these flows are disadvantaged and can spiral into decline. City leaders therefore need to tune their strategies carefully to the local regional and national context.

Second, more and more cities can expect to experience ‘dynamic diversity’ by which we mean the very rapid arrival in a city (or part of a city) of very large numbers of people from other countries. In Toronto, for example, immigrants comprise more than 44% of the population, and in parts of some cities – in Europe and elsewhere – most of the residents are newly arrived. This dynamic diversity can stimulate economic and cultural vibrancy but it can also create significant challenges – not least for those leading and managing the local governments. Cities in different countries are pioneering a variety of approaches to inclusive planning and management.

Third, there is enormous scope for cross-national policy exchange in relation to urban problem solving. Despite the existence of powerful global forces driving sameness and homogenisation, it is clear that communities in different places are responding in different ways to current challenges. Individual cities and communities can learn from each other. This is not to advocate a global search for ‘best practice’ – there is no such thing. Rather it is to suggest that we can develop much more sophisticated approaches to cross-national lesson drawing. Universities can play a crucial role here not just in evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of alternative approaches but also in helping stakeholders identify ‘relevant practices’ – that is, urban innovations that are tuned successfully to local culture and context.

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