

## History of Urbanization and Proliferation of Slums in Kenya

The process of urbanization in Kenya is still an evolving phenomenon. However, it has proceeded at a tremendous pace over the past four decades, especially after political independence in the early 1960s. In 1962, for example, only one Kenyan out of every 12 lived in urban centres; where market centres, towns, municipalities and cities with a minimum population of 2000 people are classified as urban centres<sup>1</sup>. However, by 1999, the proportion of the urban population had increased to 34.5 per cent affirming that *one* out of every *three* Kenyans currently live in urban areas. Moreover, this percentage is expected to increase to 50% per cent by the year 2015. It is also noteworthy that during the 1989-1999 inter-censal period, the country's urban population has more than doubled by increasing from 3.88 million to 9.90 million that represents an increase 155%. Over the same period, the number of urban centres has also risen from 139 to 194 representing a 40% increase (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Distribution of Urban Population in Kenya by Size of Urban Centre, 1948 - 1999**

Size of Urban Pop. (Thousands)	1948		1962		1969		1979		1989		1999	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Over 100,000	1	6	2	6	2	4	3	3	6	4	20	10
20,000 - 99,999	1	6	2	6	2	4	13	15	21	15	82	42
10,000 - 19,999	2	12	3	9	7	15	11	12	19	14	18	9
5,000 - 9,999	3	18	11	32	11	24	22	24	32	23	23	12
2,000 - 4,999	10	58	16	47	25	53	42	46	61	44	51	27
Total Number of Urban Centre's	<b>17</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>139</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>194</b>	<b>100</b>
Total Urban Pop. (Millions)	0.28		0.75		1.08		2.31		3.88		9.90	
Total Country Pop. (Millions)	5.4		8.6		10.9		15.3		21.4		28.7	
Urban Pop. as % Of Country Pop.	5.1		7.8		9.9		15.1		18.1		34.5	

**Source:** Compiled from Kenya Population Censuses 1948 – 1999

Besides, the *urban population primacy* of Nairobi, the capital city and Mombasa, the second largest town has fallen over the past three decades. Thus, whereas both cities accounted for 70% of the entire urban population in 1969, their combined proportionate share dropped to 29% in 1999.

The critical point to note however that is the proportionate share of urban population is set to rise and the growth of urbanization will continue in the new millennium. Hence, granted urbanization is *inevitable*, the main challenge at present is not that of slowing-down urbanization, but learning how to cope with rapid urban growth. Appreciation of this behooves all stakeholders in Kenya to re-direct their collective energies and meager resources in devising urban management strategies that are capable of addressing the *extant problems* and *the utilization of the opportunities* created by the '*inevitable and irreversible*' phenomenon.

<sup>1</sup> The urban population comprises people living within market centers, towns, municipalities and cities that have a minimum population of 2000 or more inhabitants. This includes both the people located in the **core urban** and **peri-urban** areas of such urban councils and market centers (see p.(xxx) of Vol. I of the 1999 Population and Housing Census).

Among the urban challenges that will require the concerted attention of the government, local authorities, the private sector, local communities, civil society and development partners are: inadequate shelter, slum upgrading and tenure regularization in informal settlements, unemployment, delinquency, crime, unavailability of clean water, inadequate drainage and sanitation, lack of adequate public transport and environmental degradation, urban poverty, etc.

Kenya is currently faced with rapid deterioration of living conditions in human settlements in the urban areas, a situation that has been worsened by high population growth rates, widespread poverty, escalating costs of housing provision, socio-economic reforms (especially the Structural Adjustment Programmes) and shifts in Government's role from direct intervention to facilitation, among others. These have resulted to a huge shortfall in housing supply with need estimated at 50,000 units per year while production stands at about 30,000 units annually.

The acute shortage of urban housing and the problem of inadequate shelter have manifested themselves in the rapid formation and growth of informal settlements and tenement structures matched by deficiencies in the supply of the most basic infrastructure and public facilities required for humane habitation. Most urban areas of Kenya are divided between comparatively well-off suburbs and the disadvantaged poor living in slums and informal settlements. It is estimated that more than half of Kenya's urban population now live in slums and informal settlements, implying that over five million urban residents live in slums and informal settlements with deficient housing and infrastructure.

**For further information, please contact:** Mr. Sharad Shankardass, Spokesperson, Ms. Zahra Hassan, Press & Media Liaison, Press & Media Relations Unit, Tel: (254 20) 7623153/7623151/7623136, Fax: (254 20) 7624060, E-mail: [habitat.press@unhabitat.org](mailto:habitat.press@unhabitat.org),  
Website: [www.unhabitat.org](http://www.unhabitat.org)