Beyond a World at Seven Billion: The Naïveté of Large Numbers
by Michele Acuto

International theorists and commentators nowadays are quite accustomed to, as Charles Tilly put it in a landmark text for political science, “big structures, large processes, huge comparisons.” Yet attention to the inherent complexity of these large phenomena is often lacking in this “big picture” mentality. One might call this a naïveté of large numbers that fronts the vast majority of op-eds, articles, and even books published today for an internationalist audience. Large numbers, meaningful though that they might be, very often hide contrasting trends, small revolutions, and everyday challenges. They provide comfort for the grand assumptions of state diplomats and for the generalizations of international relations, but frequently become the object of discussions rather than the starting point for more nuanced analyses. This is most evident, I would argue, in current discussions of the worldwide demographic boom and the accompanying urbanization that are changing our global landscape at a dramatic pace.

A key issue emerging in international politics for both academics and practitioners is that of population: humanity now numbers seven billion. While demographics have long remained on the sidelines of many international processes, global population came under the spotlight after the United Nations Population Fund (UNPF) — somewhat fictitiously — set October 31, 2011 as the day marking another billion-threshold for humanity. As a UNPF report put it, the problems and possibilities in a world of seven billion are of paramount importance to a plethora of key questions currently setting the international debate. For instance, overpopulation and high fertility rates have a direct influence on cross-cutting challenges such as those of development, poverty, or human rights. Likewise, growing numbers also impact the manageability of climate change or the response to transnational health crises such as pandemics, while compounding problems with infrastructural flexibility, housing, and fair access to basic welfare services. Furthermore, the surge in global population has also led several commentators to wonder how it will impact the crises already vexing the fragile state of the global economy. The report set all this out in a fairly optimistic light by stressing the extensive possibilities that a world at seven billion brings about. It is necessary, it pointed out, not to approach this development as an insurmountable challenge but,

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more importantly, to understand the pervasive impact of population growth across the varied spectrum of factors affecting human security. To do so, however, it is imperative to step beyond the dominant rhetoric. The UNPF report has the potential to do that, but much of the impetus for analysis and policy that links micro-processes to macro-trends needs to come from academia and policy makers that are otherwise often prey to the naïveté of large numbers.

This point is well illustrated by the limits of another fast-emerging concern: urbanization. International political discourse is increasingly concerned with the importance of the city in the 21st century landscape. The commonplace line generally goes: humanity is projected to see two-thirds of the world’s population living in cities by 2050; this, in turn, should make cities a central issue for global governance. Yet that mantra is continuously recycled with little insight. Most media coverage tends to consist of rankings and lists of “global” cities and key urban centers, or of vignettes, almost always drawn from China, India, and sometimes Brazil, depicting a seemingly unstoppable move of inhabitants from the countryside to the city. This fairly superficial attention, while highlighting the issue, keeps us from delving further into what this momentous trend might mean. The media and much of the more popular academic literature have in fact pushed for sensationalism on the “urban age” at the expense of less glamorous but more refined studies such as those concerning the challenges of urban safety that the UN-Habitat has been championing through its Safer Cities program or the water sanitation initiative.

Cities now are, as Thomas Rohlen underscores in relation to Asia, the “locus of giant new problems for public management.” These challenges tell us that it is simply not enough to take the expansion of cities at face value. The intricacies of these big numbers need to be critically unpacked. The urbanization of poverty, for example, represents one of the fundamental challenges of the present day, as gaps in governance and growth of unregulated settlements foster the proliferation of slum dwellers, which now account for almost thirty-two percent of the world’s urban population. Crammed shantytowns and uncontrolled suburban ghettos have burgeoned everywhere around the globe as more and more people suffer from lack of shelter and poor housing conditions, which in turn spark other threats to human wellbeing such as poor sanitation, health pandemics, terrorism, and urban violence. Yet urban poverty and marginalization are not solely a problem of the Global South as is often assumed. Much of the urban studies literature suggests that contemporary metropolises in both developing and developed countries are confronted with the challenge of social polarization, represented by splintering urban structures that separate people by socio-economic status, geographic location, and everyday access to even the most basic facilities of today’s modern cities.

Similarly, poverty and social marginalization are not self-standing problems. On the contrary, addressing them entails engagement with other key contemporary challenges, such as climate change mitigation and prevention, and management of the security infrastructure of our cities. The British riots of 2010, the 2005 Banlieue clashes, or the chronic violence faced by megacities like Los Angeles, Mexico City, or Rio de Janeiro are but some of the examples of this. And this complexity is not merely domestic: new waves of international mobility across states and continents are fuelling urbanization
from afar, as in the case of rising metropolises like Dubai, where almost ninety percent of the population is foreign born. As a consequence, the sheer complexity of the social composition of urban populations is also increasing.

Therefore, when we open the “black box” of the 21st century city, we are confronted with a plethora of diverse, pervasive, and yet closely intertwined challenges that test not only our general appreciation of urbanization, but also our understanding of the city as a crucible of social and technical dynamics. Like the issue of urbanization, the demands and facets of demographics are manifold, interconnected, and multi-scalar. The population boom rhetoric, in this sense, hides complex micro-processes, such as the issue of aging in fast-growing nations with large developmental problems, or in the case of shrinking economic giants like Japan, Europe, and to a relative extent even China in the next few decades that will have to cope with shifting social and welfare demands.6

Similar to the analytical limits in most coverage of urbanization, which focuses primarily on the phenomenon rather than its human consequences, the questions about contemporary demographic issues cannot be satisfactorily answered by “big picture” or state-based analyses alone. Migration and temporary cross-border mobility are shaping the face of metropolises worldwide, with demographers and statisticians at all governmental levels reinventing how to model population statistics, political constituencies, and labor markets.7 So as much as we should delve further into the complexity of a humanity that has become predominantly urbanized, the seven billion figure need not become the primary object of the discourse. Rather, as it enters the discussions of policy makers in the months and years ahead, the extent of population growth should be but the beginning of a far more comprehensive conversation. Y

– Adeel Ishtiaq served as Lead Editor for this op-ed.

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3. The extent and nature of this centrality, however, is insufficiently scrutinized: little international literature is currently available to those trying to understand the impact of urbanization for world politics, and equally limited are the accounts that try to bridge the gap between international and urban studies on this matter. An exception to this is Mark Amen, Noah J. Toly, Patricia L. McCarney and Klaus Segbers (eds.), *Cities and Global Governance*. (London: Ashgate, 2011). I have elsewhere discussed this more at length in Michele Acuto, “Gorillas in Our Midst,” *Alternatives* 35, no.4 (2010): 425-48.