

The indigenous  
experience  
of urbanization

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The world has long had cities and towns, and there have long been urban populations, but it was only in 2007 that the United Nations (UN) calculated that, for the first time in history, the world's population had become more urban than rural. But while the majority are now acknowledged to live in an urban world, it is still often assumed that indigenous peoples are not included: the common image is of isolated communities cut off from the modern world, largely disengaged from the challenges and advantages of the urban future. Yet this is not the reality for the thousands of indigenous people who migrate to towns and cities every year, nor for the many more who have lived for generations in urban areas. This chapter looks at a real but hidden issue in global policy – the impacts of urbanization on indigenous peoples.

While urbanization can provide major opportunities for indigenous well-being and organization, the city can also be a challenging, alienating and frightening experience, particularly for migrants, threatening their identity in the process. As Michael Dodson, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Social Justice Commissioner for Australia, has put it, '[R]emoved from the land, we are literally removed from ourselves.' Despite these issues, however, indigenous migration to cities has persisted and established urban indigenous communities continue to expand. The UN Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) calculates that in many countries more than 50 per cent of the indigenous population now live in towns and cities. Indigenous urbanization has been driven by the search for a new life in a context of rural poverty, land grabbing, conflict and challenges, the agency notes:

*'Over the last three decades, they have moved from their traditional lands towards urban areas partly seeking opportunities for education and employment, partly because of human rights abuses and violations in particular to their land rights and partly for cultural survival.'*<sup>1</sup>

Urban indigenous identity is perhaps the most important but also most complex of the challenges of the urban indigenous experience,

as it is linked to the very concept of indigeneity. At an international level and in most national contexts, indigenous peoples are those groups or individuals who self-identify as 'indigenous' – this is how population figures are typically generated within national surveys or censuses. Many elements of self-identification of indigeneity become more complex and fluid in urban areas, however, including aspects such as the occupation of communal lands, links to ancestral territories and the preservation of traditional cultural practices. These aspects can be particularly challenging in cities as indigenous community members may feel unwilling to self-identify in order to 'fit in', particularly among indigenous youth. As a result, urban indigenous populations may become officially invisible if they prefer not to self-identify due to stigma and marginalization within the dominant urban society. This in turn can mean that authorities fail to recognize the existence of the urban indigenous population and that national indigenous development programmes, if they exist, will remain focused on rural communities while the growing challenges of indigenous peoples in cities are overlooked.

Finally, it should be noted that the context also depends on the degree of urbanization in a particular country. In countries with indigenous communities plus a relatively high level of urbanization, particularly where this urbanization has taken place over a longer period, there is usually more experience of urban indigenous issues – in Australia, for example, where urban indigenous policies have existed for decades. Latin America, too, is highly urbanized and home to a number of megacities which concentrate more than 10 million inhabitants – often with a significant presence of indigenous peoples. The urban indigenous experience in these larger urban centres is distinct from that in small towns. The other factor is the proportion of indigenous or minority peoples in an urban area, particularly in smaller urban settings in remote regions such as areas of India and China, where indigenous peoples are the majority in their region. In these areas, when they are often also the majority in the urban setting, their experience is very different from the experience of an indigenous person who belongs to a minority in a large urban setting.

## Increased international attention

Despite a strong focus over the last decades on the process of world urbanization and its impacts on different population groups, the situation of indigenous peoples in urban settings only began to reach international attention recently. It was not until 2007 that the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues first hosted a special meeting on the urban situation of indigenous peoples. According to UN-Habitat, the urbanization of indigenous peoples is the result of two processes: (i) cities growing to engulf indigenous settlements, making their ancestral lands part of the urban space; and (ii) migration by members of indigenous peoples to towns and cities for various reasons. The main difference between these two is based on the relationship that the communities have to the land they occupy. When indigenous land is overtaken by urban space, the indigenous community may continue to live on ancestral lands, although now in an urbanized setting. In the case of forced or voluntary migration, on the other hand, indigenous individuals are in-migrants like other new arrivals to the city. Both groups are frequently exposed to discrimination, however; according to UN-Habitat: 'generally, both indigenous rural-urban migrants and long-time indigenous "urbanites" tend to be marginalized and discriminated against by dominant population groups'.

Common factors that lead to the movement of indigenous peoples from their lands and territories and towards cities include poverty, environmental factors, conflict, the absence of basic services and inadequate legal protection over ancestral lands. In Chile, for instance, 34 per cent of the national indigenous population live in the metropolitan area of the capital Santiago, and have been there for decades since mass exodus from rural areas occurred during the military regime of Augusto Pinochet. More recently, the indigenous Bedouin of the Negev (*Naqab* in Arabic) desert region of Israel are being forcibly urbanized by the Israeli government to allow their ancestral lands to be developed, with the result that their traditional lifestyle of land-based semi-nomadic pastoralism is being replaced with landless, labour-force-led urbanization.

Indigenous migration to urban areas may also

be initiated by indigenous peoples themselves, motivated by opportunities for improved employment, health, housing, education, political participation or other benefits that they may lack in their own territories. The rural-urban internal migration of the Māori, for instance, began after the Second World War, when they started to migrate in greater numbers than ever before. Now, 70 per cent of Māori individuals reside outside their traditional lands.

What is important, however, is to recognize the diversity of urban indigenous experience and the possibilities as well as the risks cities present. 'The impacts of urban areas on indigenous peoples vary greatly,' according to Elsa Stamatopoulou, Chief of the Secretariat of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. 'Some are able to adapt and improve their situations considerably without loss of cultural identity; in other cases, indigenous peoples are subject to discrimination, exclusion and violence.'

So, whether indigenous peoples are moving to urban areas with hopes for a new life, escaping hardship in rural areas or have already lived in urban areas for generations, what is the evidence of the impacts of the urban experience on indigenous peoples in terms of health, progress and social well-being?

## Specific impacts of urbanization on indigenous peoples

Urbanization as a process can affect indigenous peoples either directly or indirectly, in positive and negative ways. Impacts can also vary by group: indigenous women, children and young people may be particularly negatively affected by the new urban environment in terms of, for example, access to safe housing, water and sanitation, personal security and alienation. The most direct impact, or certainly the most readily measurable, is through urban poverty – most of the indigenous peoples who migrate or relocate to urban areas end up in the low-income informal settlements that dominate cities and towns in Latin America, Asia and Africa. In these areas they have limited access to good quality urban housing, healthy food, clean water and health services. Even in Australia, with a long tradition of indigenous urbanization, urban Aboriginal people are often forced to choose between

homelessness or overcrowded, low-income accommodation. Urban areas often lack the benefits of traditional healthy lifestyles, such as indigenous foods and medicines, with unhealthier alternatives such as processed foods and drinks taking their place. Indigenous peoples can also face more exposure in urban settings to infectious diseases and environmental pollution, including exposure to sexually transmitted diseases, particularly for indigenous women.

But on the positive side urban areas can provide access to better schools, improved health services and enhanced living conditions. There may also be better opportunities for indigenous women to study and have careers. Towns and cities can even be spaces for the renovation and maintenance of indigenous identity. In Chile, the Mapuche and Aymara communities initially denied their identities on arrival to the city, but gradually there was a shift from 'negative ethnicity' to 'positive ethnicity', with the urban areas facilitating indigenous organizations, educational groups and political associations.<sup>2</sup>

Indirectly, urban development processes can affect indigenous peoples by encroaching on indigenous territory, in the process displacing them to urban areas. The process of urbanization can also push resource extraction processes into indigenous territories and create widespread environmental destruction, undermining indigenous livelihood sources and creating a range of health issues in these communities. Urbanization can also threaten indigenous livelihoods by reducing access to materials for their art and cultural work. For example, artisanal pottery, which enabled some Batwa to earn some outside income or barter with other communities, is no longer viable because the basic raw material is now being used to produce bricks. People who used to buy their pots now use plastic containers.

Indirectly, urbanization can also have very positive impacts for indigenous peoples. Urban communities can bring resources to indigenous areas through tourism, sales of indigenous goods in urban centres or even international support for indigenous artisans and cultures. For example, the international Fair Trade movement has strong links with indigenous communities throughout the world and supports indigenous cooperatives

to sell their crafts and products to mostly urban citizens in Europe and the USA. Urban areas provide communication facilities that allow indigenous peoples to engage with the rest of the world about their situation. In Brazil, for example, the Mundurucu people began an 'auto-demarcation' campaign of their ancestral land around the Tapajós River in 2014, in response to the government's failure to do so ahead of the construction of two mega-dam projects on the river. The community had consistently protested against the dam projects, which they say will flood ancestral lands and displace their native communities. The government claims the dam projects are necessary to provide energy to the region's growing urban centres. Both Amazon Watch and major news channels covered the story and supported the indigenous campaign.

Most evidence on the urban indigenous experience is from countries with a long history of urbanization, often accompanied by indigenous extermination or active policies of assimilation such as the United States, Canada and Australia. For example, Aboriginal Australians have a long and unhappy experience of urbanization – forcibly taken from their lands at the time of the notorious policies of assimilation, Aboriginal Australians have experienced the worst of all aspects of urbanization: from the mid-nineteenth century they were isolated from their culture and traditions, introduced to alcohol and drugs, and not given access to decent jobs or education. The consequences of this history of forced displacement to urban settlements is still seen today, with high rates of alcoholism and drug dependence among Aboriginal youth and poor health compared to non-Aboriginal Australians across a wide range of health outcomes, including diabetes, maternal nutrition, heart disease and various lifestyle-related health problems.

The urban experience of Australian Aboriginal peoples is mirrored in many other settings. Canadian First Nations peoples suffered a very similar fate to that of Australian Aboriginal peoples. Historically nomadic or in small settlements in remote areas, living sustainably with the land, they were forcibly displaced and 'civilized' in assimilation programmes largely designed to 'westernize' First Nations peoples.



By 2011 the Canadian census recorded that ‘off-reserve Aboriginal people constitute the fastest growing segment of Canadian society’, with 56 per cent based in urban areas.<sup>3</sup>

The impacts of this process in Canada have been profound. Urban First Nations communities in Canada live in much worse conditions than other urban groups. A recent study explored worrying evidence that indigenous women are over-represented among new HIV infections and street-based sex workers.

Comparing indigenous and non-indigenous sex workers, they found that First Nations indigenous women were three times more likely to have HIV than other sex workers and had a high prevalence of inter-generational sex work. This finding illustrates the long-term effects of destructive attitudes and policies towards indigenous peoples – with impacts that continue despite changes in policies.<sup>4</sup>

It is notable that data on the impacts of urbanization is much scarcer in regions such as



**Left:** A Maasai boy watches the construction of a new road outside Arusha, Tanzania. *Panos/Frederic Courbet*

areas they find themselves living in low-income and vulnerable settlements in the urban areas. This brings with it other problems associated with urban life. Video diaries recorded by urban indigenous women in Shillong talk of their fight to gain access to appropriate services and their struggles with issues such as domestic violence and alcohol.

Another important study looked at the urbanization and assimilation of Hmong in Laos into Lao culture and society, and the consequent impacts on indigenous identity and culture. The authors found that Hmong in Laos are undergoing rapid urbanization, aided by the aggressive relocation policies of the Lao government. Forced contact has obliged Hmong to adapt to aspects of Lao culture, resulting in social and cultural upheaval.<sup>5</sup>

Among the most difficult impacts of urbanization on indigenous peoples are the long-term impacts of displacement from traditional lands and cultures. Indigenous peoples, perhaps more than any other group, struggle to feel at home in cities and may experience racism even in poorer urban communities with other recent migrants. There is evidence that this has an impact on recent indigenous immigrants and can affect young indigenous peoples growing up in urban areas to the extent that they do not want to self-identify as indigenous in their new settings. Some evidence suggests that this stigma can also mean that indigenous peoples begin to regard themselves and their physical difference as a problem. For instance, a study of positive body image that looked at inter-ethnic and rural–urban differences among an indigenous sample from Malaysian Borneo found that urban indigenous women had a significantly more negative body image than either rural indigenous women or other urban women.<sup>6</sup>

Urban areas can be home to centres of cultural learning, for both indigenous peoples and other urban residents. This can be supported or destroyed by national governments. One positive example from 2014, linked to Argentina's participation in the International Conference of

Asia, where the majority of urban people live and which has the highest proportion of indigenous peoples globally. However, a study in Shillong in northern India highlights the health problems of the urban indigenous communities particularly for women. Meghalaya state is a rapidly urbanizing state in north-east India, home to indigenous people mostly belonging to the Khasi-Jaintia and Garo tribes. The study highlights that, while rural indigenous health indicators are worse, when indigenous peoples migrate to urban

Indigenous Peoples, was the inauguration by the President of the *Salón de los Pueblos Originarios* (Salon of the Indigenous Peoples) in the National Government House. In neighbouring Brazil in the same year, the closing of a former indigenous museum (*Aldeia Maracanã*) in Rio de Janeiro that had become a centre for indigenous culture and ideas was brought to international attention when planning officials forcibly evicted an indigenous community occupying the site next to Maracanã stadium.

### **Moving towards a culturally inclusive urbanization**

In terms of overall impacts of urbanization on indigenous peoples, the evidence from multiple settings suggests that indigenous peoples, until now, have experienced a complex mix of negative factors while positive impacts have emerged when the urban indigenous communities have become stronger and more organized.

Urban areas can also potentially provide more opportunities for indigenous peoples to improve their lives and rural indigenous peoples often migrate to urban areas in search of these opportunities. Unfortunately, in many settings urban opportunities are not readily available to indigenous peoples, particularly for recent urban migrants, and they may find themselves in informal settlements and working in low-paid, often hazardous occupations.

The positive aspects of urban life can include better access to services such as housing, education and health, but for indigenous peoples these services must be accessible in cultural as well as geographical terms. In most urban settings indigenous peoples find services difficult to access due to stigma and lack of cultural appropriateness.

Entrenched attitudes towards indigenous peoples can have long-term impacts on them and their situation in urban areas and this forms a significant challenge for policy makers wishing to make a better life for urban indigenous communities. A critical challenge in this regard is the support of both urban society and government. Recognizing these challenges, in 2014 the government of Canada announced an improved urban strategy with two streams of work focused on urban partnerships and

capacity building. Similar initiatives elsewhere give important guidance on how governments can approach and support urban indigenous well-being. In Chile, for example, the government has launched a programme of support to end inequality between indigenous and non-indigenous Chileans called 'development with identity'. In Port Augusta in Australia, an evaluation of urban indigenous initiatives concluded with the advice to create long-term, culturally appropriate 'listening services', flexible and without a 'one size fits all' approach. Both programmes highlight the importance of training government staff to be more listening, reflexive and respectful of other cultural views.

Evidence also suggests that a critical way to improve life for urban indigenous peoples is through initiatives to support and sustain their identity. This is most successful when indigenous communities come together and organize themselves. One interesting initiative in Argentina, Chile and Nigeria uses radio to support urban indigenous peoples to 'maintain home languages; gain access to health, education, and employment information; greet friends and relatives; and re-create traditional culture under circumstances of modern pressures, but also to open up opportunities'.<sup>7</sup>

The creation, or recreation, of a 'positive' urban indigenous identity is a critical element, particularly for indigenous young people, who can feel allied to their culture but also alienated by it in the face of the globalized modern city or town. Indigenous organizations become critical in this context: Māori 'edgewalkers' in the Pacific navigate this delicate intersection between indigenous tradition and urban society, and studies show that being comfortable with a pluricultural identity can be key to urban indigenous well-being.

As a final point it is worth noting that urbanization seems to be the future for people everywhere, and it is worth reflecting that towns and cities have always served as homes for disenfranchised groups in search of inclusion and diversity. Different ethnicities coexist in many major cities around the world – with many people of various religions, cultures and languages living together and learning from each other.

London, a global city with an extraordinary

array of ethnic and religious diversity, is one example of a major urban centre that has managed to achieve a relatively cohesive urban society while being enriched by its mix of different cultures. The experience of urbanization for indigenous peoples, too, could be just as positive as they bring their heritage to urban areas. Fundamentally, the challenge is not urbanization itself but the overall structural attitudes of society towards indigenous peoples. While the urban experience of indigenous peoples to date has not been positive, there is no reason why well-governed cities and towns should not be able to integrate indigenous peoples in a way that benefits them and the wider urban society. There are already many cities around the world trying to develop policies to overcome long-standing prejudice and historical attitudes. At the same time, there are many indigenous groups and individuals fighting for their inclusion in urban areas. Our urban future will be richer for the inclusion of indigenous peoples in our towns and cities. ■

## Endnotes

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