**URBANIZATION SITUATION IN KYRGYZSTAN**

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*One-fifth of the world’s population today lives in the 600 largest cities, which account for more than half of global GDP. By 2025, these cities will be home to a quarter of the world’s population, and they will produce more than 60% of global GDP[[1]](#footnote-1). The population of cities in emerging economies is expected to double between 2000 and 2030, from 2 to 4 billion people, and their built-up area will triple in size, from 200,000 to 600,000 square kilometers[[2]](#footnote-2).The rapid growth of cities and urban population bring both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, cities are drivers of economic growth and development, concentrating opportunities for businesses and people. On the other hand, urban infrastructure often fails to keep pace with demand, leading to a deterioration of living conditions and such problems as environmental degradation, a shortage and poor quality of public services, the rise of disease and health risks, and so on. This is clearly apparent in the megacities of Asia and the world.*

Urbanization is also becoming a major challenge for Kyrgyzstan, which is experiencing economic and demographic growth. Today, the region’s population exceeds 6 389 500[[3]](#footnote-3). The country is rural: only about one-third of Kyrgyzstan's populations live in urban areas. The average population density is 69 people per square mile (29 people per km²).

In Kyrgyzstan, urbanization followed industrialization. The latter, in turn, followed the railways, which were built to provide access to local resources. Railways appeared in Kyrgyzstan in the early 20th century, first in the south (for coal mines and oil fields) and then in the north. In 1941-1942, about 30 factories were moved to Kyrgyzstan and partly diverted to military production. They were located mainly in Chui Oblast and Bishkek. That period also saw the construction of first large irrigation channels, which led to an increase in agricultural production.Most cities and towns of Kyrgyzstan were established under Soviet rule, when the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, Kyrgyzstan had mostly agrarian-industrial economies with a predominantly rural population. In 1991 a process of de-industrialization began in the country, resulting in a decline of urban population. The transformation of rural communities into towns between 1991 and 2012 often was not followed by the creation of adequate urban infrastructure and conditions for their economic development.

Kyrgyzstan did not have a well-formulated policy on urbanization in the post-Soviet period. The government’s main efforts were aimed at managing the economic crisis the country had found itself in after the rupture of ties within the unified Soviet economic complex.Kyrgyzstan during the transition period failed to implement a comprehensive industrial policy, which resulted in reduction decrease in industry’s share of national GDPs. In fact, Kyrgyzstan has experienced so called “false urbanization,” when there is a sharp increase in the populations of major cities, driven by surrounding “poverty belts” where thousands of families live without being officially registered, but limited economic opportunity.

Despite their significance, most small towns in Kyrgyzstan are isolated from the main drivers of socio-economic activity due to the country’s natural and environmental conditions. Meanwhile, a growing burden is falling on the capital city, Bishkek, where approximately 25% of the country’s population lives.

The region’s urban infrastructure is straining under the demographic bur-den without the necessary fiscal support and investment: rapid deterioration of public utility networks and facilities; technological backwardness of the sector, including poor implementation of innovative energy-saving technologies and measures; inadequate non-budgetary funding of utility modernization projects.

In general, the lack of a comprehensive urbanization policy increases the risk of ”false urbanization”: rapid urban population growth not accompanied by a similar rate of job creation, which in turn imposes excessive pressure on the urban infrastructure, employment and social capital, as well the environment.

 Urbanization challenges derive mainly from high population growth concentrated in a few cities. These pressures are intensified by shrinking employment opportunities in rural areas due to limited land and water resources. Migrants from rural areas mostly settle in large cities, where urban housing, infrastructure and employment opportunities are not meeting the demand from new residents. These issues are aggravated by the limited electricity supply in most densely populated areas and high transportation costs.

Another major challenge of urbanization stems from the limited supply of land and energy resources of the region, which makes extensive agricultural growth unfeasible in the long term. Kyrgyzstan has vast water resources but little land for cultivation. Kyrgyzstan has managed to diversity of economies and resolves their food-supply issues to various degrees.

Kyrgyzstan faces the task of transitioning from agrarian-industrial to an industrial-agrarian development model, which in turn requires cities to play a bigger role as drivers of economic growth and industrialization.

The limited opportunities for agricultural growth have resulted in high rates of internal and/or external migration in country. Internal migration consists mainly of the flow of surplus labor from rural to urban areas.

Besides, country needs to deepen structural reforms, particularly in the development of the processing industry in order to overcome the long-term development challenges in the socio-economic sphere. This will require not only a financial investment, but to a much greater extent - a new knowledge and technologies, access to new markets and most importantly - the new institutions of governance that will be responsible for policy development and implementation of development projects. Thereby, such institutions of governance should be built not only on the basis of the central government, but should rely more on local governments and business structures of specific territories, economic regions and cities. These new actors will need an adequate capacity in order to act as drivers for growing interstate cooperation.

The key problem of urbanization in Kyrgyzstan is that the configuration of cities and spatial development policies remain largely confined to the Soviet paradigm. Thus, cities are viewed primarily as (1) centers of narrowly focused industrialization (as opposed to integrated and outward-oriented), and (2) administrative and cultural centers. In general, the Central Asian region, however, has significant development potential, particularly since it is located between the fast-growing economies of East Asia and Europe[[4]](#footnote-4). Central Asia could become a hub for the trade of technologies, goods and capital, but cities are not yet equipped to play this role.

The ultimate goal of urbanization and spatial development policies should be not just a quantitative increase in urban population, but a radical shift in spatial structure and function. This requires developing urban infrastructure and increasing the absorption capacities of cities through expanded housing, social facilities, job creation, etc., as well as improving their governance.

In predominantly rural, policies focused on supporting agriculture may have obvious advantages such as rural employment and income. However, the development of small enterprises in rural areas cannot provide a leap forward in innovative industrial development. Other challenges for major cities include over population, environmental degradation and strained infrastructure.

In these circumstances, urbanization policies in Kyrgyzstan should be focused on strengthening the linkages between large cities on the one hand and small and medium-size ones on the other hand. In addition to alleviating the issues related to demographic growth and migration, this could also contribute to qualitatively new and spatially balanced economic growth.

The prospects for connecting major, medium and small cities are based on the following premises:

First, the majority of towns in Kyrgyzstan are small and medium-sized cities (20 out of 22). They account for about one-third of the region’s urban population (39%). Moreover, the population of small and medium-size towns is growing at relatively high rates (averaging 4.8%).

Second, SMCs (small and medium sized cities) are better integrated with urban-type settlements and act as a buffer for the outflow of workers from rural areas. The relevance of small and medium-size cities will grow in light of the further diversification of regional economies, which will result in a significant increase in the relative size of industry, construction and services and a smaller share for agriculture.

Finally, as part of agglomerations most SMCs function as typical incubators for small business and private entrepreneurship in processing industries. They can promote a close-knit integration of agricultural and industrial production and create conditions for the development of household businesses.

High rates of demographic growth and migration will continue to stimulate urbanization in Kyrgyzstan in the medium term. Economic zones could be established where industrial and labor resources are concentrated to spear-head national economic growth and spatial development.

Urbanization policies in the country must also be focused on achieving sustainable development, which means expanding economic opportunities, ensuring environmental sustainability and reducing inequality and poverty. In general, revamping the role of cities requires a comprehensive and forward-looking strategic framework.

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1. Urban world: Mapping the economic power of cities. McKinsey Global Institute Report. March 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Planning, Connecting, and Financing Cities—Now: Priorities for City Leaders. 2013. Washington, DC: World Bank. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Population -Official statistics.[www.stat.kg](http://www.stat.kg). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Urbanization in Central Asia: Challenges, Issues and Prospects. Analytical Report 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)