

Megacities in Asia: development dynamics and path dependencies in urban fringe areas

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More than half of the world's population is living in cities at present. While the assumed rate of urbanisation in industrialised countries will only increase slightly to 78%, i.e. 1,087 million people, in emerging economies an estimated 57% of the total population, probably more than 3,845 million people, will be living in cities by 2025. Megacities have particular significance in this world-wide process of urbanisation. Beyond different definitions, megacities (i.e. metropolises with a population of over 5, 8 or more than 10 million inhabitants) up to now have shown unknown dimensions of quantitative growth; however, other factors such as high population concentrations, infrastructure, economic power and capital are new. The same holds true for the excessive and partially self-energising acceleration, simultaneousness and overlapping of different development processes.

In the context of global change – understood as global environmental change as well as global socio-economic and political change – megacities affect global change just as profoundly as global change can affect megacities. In Asia, radical spatial, social and political structural changes in mega-urban areas are associated with the economic rise of the whole region since the mid-1980s, connected with (1) accelerating migration processes, (2) growing proportions of secondary and tertiary activity as well as extensive development of transport and communications infrastructure connected with growing global interdependence, (3) improvements in health care and education, expanding economic middle classes, socio-economic disparities as well as growing poverty and crime rates, (4) excessive spatial expansion, partly in connection with the emergence of informal settlements and slums, (5) loss of governability and control, leading to more unregulated processes which take place informally or illegally.

In spatial terms, the highest development dynamics take place in inner city and urban fringe areas. Urban fringe areas of fast growing agglomerations are considered to be among the hotspots of urban transformation as they are areas that are still not fully urbanised but will be so in the foreseeable future. Here, the development trajectories of future urbanised areas depend on decisions made at a very early stage by different actors and stakeholders (path dependency). Many of the current processes leading to land use change can become irreversible and can lead to an unsustainable development. Once a certain trajectory is followed and the transformation in these fringe areas crosses the threshold beyond which the economic costs of reversal rise exponentially, reversal becomes unviable. Hence, political decision making processes in these areas require substantial attention at an early stage.