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**T**oday, one out of every two people lives in a town or city. This year's World Water Day, celebrated on 22 March, focused on the challenges of providing water and sanitation to urban residents.

Across the world, urbanisation (meaning the growth of towns and cities) has been associated with improved human development, rising incomes and better living standards. People move to cities for all sorts of reasons: they might get better housing or better jobs, or may have access to the kind of infrastructure and education that is not available in rural areas. However, with growing cities also comes growing problems.

As far as water and sanitation is concerned the greater concentration of people can make it easier to provide services, however, more people also means more pollution. Cities require large volumes of freshwater and, in turn, have a huge impact on freshwater sources.

In Africa, nearly 40% of people live in towns and cities. African cities are growing faster than any other in the world.

The largest city, Cairo, in Egypt, is already home to around 11 million people. Lagos, in Nigeria, is the second largest, followed by Kinshasha (Democratic Republic of Congo) and Luanda (Angola). Interestingly

though, most of the growth is taking place in the continent's smaller cities (those with less than half a million residents). By 2050, half of the continent's population will be urban dwellers.

## HELPFUL WEBSITES

- World Water Day <http://www.world-waterday.org/>
- State of African Cities (<http://www.unhabitat.org/pmss/listItemDetails.aspx?publicationID=3034>)
- UNEP South Africa water profile ([http://www.unep.org/dewa/Portals/67/pdf/South\\_Africa.pdf](http://www.unep.org/dewa/Portals/67/pdf/South_Africa.pdf))
- Department of Water Affairs' My Water page ([http://www.dwa.gov.za/dir\\_ws/DWQR/default.asp?PageID=7&PageHeading=My%20Water](http://www.dwa.gov.za/dir_ws/DWQR/default.asp?PageID=7&PageHeading=My%20Water))
- Wikipedia's page on urbanisation (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urbanisation>)



Millions of people in Africa live in informal areas or slums.

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More than 11 million people call Cairo home, making it the largest city in Africa.

The problem is that many of these people end up in informal areas or slums, where conditions are generally poor, and people receive little or no basic services. In addition, informal housing (i.e. shacks) are vulnerable to disasters such as floods or fires. Lack of water also causes the outbreak of diseases such as diarrhoea or cholera. It is estimated that up to 60% of Africa's urban population is not connected to the public water system. This means they either get their water from unprotected sources (like rivers) or buy their



Photothèque Société des Eaux de Marseille

Often poor city dwellers are forced to buy water from private vendors which can be up to 100% more expensive than public water piped to richer residents.

water at extremely expensive rates from private water vendors.

Much has already been done to improve the situation. Between 1998 and 2008, more than a billion urban citizens gained access to improved drinking water while around 800 million gained access to basic sanitation. Unfortunately, the world's population is growing too quickly, undermining the progress of rendering services. In Africa alone, it is estimated that half a billion people will be added to the urban population within the next 25 years.

There are thus many challenges in cities. In the words of Dr Joan Clos, Executive Director of UN-HABITAT: "As cities expand, we must improve our urban planning and management in order to provide universal access to water and basic services while ensuring our cities become more resilient to the increase effects of climate change."

In South Africa, water and sanitation in towns and cities is the responsibility of local or regional municipalities. Country-wide, around 88% of South Africa's population now have access to at least basic water services. Just over 70% of people have access to basic sanitation (like a VIP toilet).

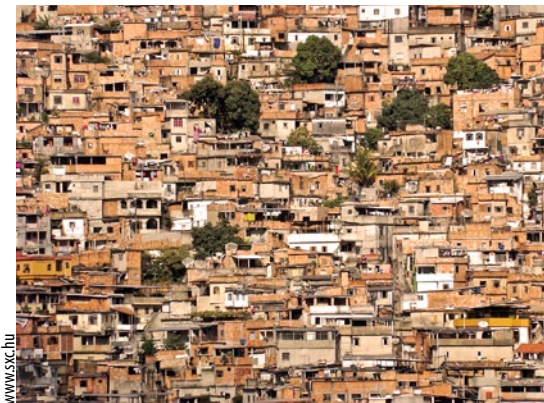
Around nine out of ten people in the metros have access to at least basic levels of water. Services in the large metropolitan services are generally better than those in smaller towns, although the Department of Water Affairs' Blue and Green Drop systems for water and wastewater treatment

## WATER FOR CITIES: FACTS AND FIGURES

- Every second, the urban population grows by two people.
- Around 3,3 billion people live in cities – 828 million of them in slum areas (i.e. informal settlements).
- By 2030 every second person in Africa will live in a city. By 2050, the number of people living in cities is expected to reach 6,4 billion.
- One out of four city residents worldwide live without access to basic sanitation facilities.
- Close to a third of people living in urban areas in the developing world do not have piped water at home.
- Poor urban people often have to buy water from private vendors – usually at escalated costs.
- In Africa, 40% of people live in urban areas (close to 400 million people). This figure is growing by 3,4% a year, making Africa the fastest urbanising continent in the world.

services is helping to put things right, and there are towns that perform well despite their smaller size and limited human and financial capacity.

Infrastructure backlogs remain a challenge (with additional pressure being put on existing services through population growth and migration from people from rural areas to towns). At the same time, upgrading and maintenance of new and old infrastructure needs to be undertaken, which require further significant investments. □



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Today, more than 3 billion people around the world live in cities.