

## Defining urban contexts

The definition of an urban setting varies from one context to another; it is usually agreed upon by governments at national level. However, there are a number of elements that constitute an urban setting that can be adapted and applied across contexts<sup>1</sup>:

- **Urban:** An urban setting can be defined broadly on the basis of population density, concentration of administrative bodies and infrastructure and a diverse set of livelihood and income generation activities. Urban areas will be characterized by high population density when compared to other areas. While some cities are defined by municipal boundaries, many urban centers have not been designated as such. They are usually characterized by the presence of administrative structures such as government offices and courts and a relative concentration of services such as hospitals and financial institutions such as banks. In an urban setting, the forms of livelihood and income generation activities will be diverse and unlike rural areas not bound mainly to agricultural production. If the area in question fits some if not all of these basic characteristics, it can be regarded as urban.
- **Peri-urban:** Traditional definitions of peri-urban are tied to proximity to urban areas. Areas that are located on the outskirts of cities or large urban areas but retain rural characteristics such as substantial reliance on agricultural production are generally considered as peri-urban. It is important to note that peri-urban areas are not merely those which are close to cities and may include areas that are not neighboring urban centers. Peri-urban areas are those which are characterized by a mix of rural and urban characteristics.
- **Rural:** Relatively low to no presence of administrative structures and government services and other infrastructure. Livelihood activities are predominantly centered on agricultural production.

There are often national differences in the characteristics that distinguish urban from rural areas. For national purposes, as well as for international comparability, the most common unit of classification for urban and rural locations cited by the United Nations is the size of the locality, or if this is not possible, the smallest administrative division of the country (UNSD Statistical Databases; <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/databases.htm>). It is, however, recognized that distinctions between urban and rural settings based solely on population size do not always offer categories such as inner city, suburb and peri-urban and other categories such as tenure type, household type, social class, race, age, gender or level of education.<sup>2</sup>

World Vision has found it useful to incorporate the social dimension along with geographic and population based characteristics to help understand and define the urban context. The table below presents these characteristics. Each of the characteristics was chosen for its significance in

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<sup>1</sup> Center of Expertise for Urban Programming (2013) Urban Guidance Notes. World Vision International

<sup>2</sup> ibid

differentiating the ‘urban’ from what is traditionally labelled ‘rural’. While such characteristics can also exist in practice in rural communities, a rural community that increasingly displays these characteristics can be described as becoming increasingly urban.<sup>3</sup>

Physical	Economic	Human	Political	Environmental
Ongoing construction of buildings or major development of infrastructure or industry	Primarily non-agricultural labour and industry	Population size, density and overcrowding	Close proximity to political leaders and authorities	Majority of land occupied or in use; limited open spaces
Changing land use from agricultural to commercial and residential	Presence of informal, cash-based trades and services	Diversity of cultures, ethnicities, languages, religions and identities	Territory governed through municipalities or similar administrative entities	Pollution and traffic-congestion issues
Presence of slums, shantytowns, shacks or other poorly constructed and informal housing	The poor are subject to price fluctuations and have limited coping strategies	Presence of unregistered migrants and/or displaced persons	A high need for integrated land use and strategic planning to meet the needs of local residents	Volume of waste and limited waste management create environmental hazards

Table1: Characteristics for identifying increasingly urban contexts

<sup>3</sup> Center of Expertise for Urban Programming (2016) Making Sense of the City: Developing Evidence through Action Research and Learning. Revised Ed. World Vision International