The trend is inescapable: more and more people in the developing world are living in the cities. By 2020, the number of people living in developing countries will grow from 4.9 billion to 6.8 billion. Ninety percent of this increase will be in rapidly expanding cities and towns. More than half the population of Africa and Asia will live in urban areas by 2020. More than three-quarters of Latin Americans already do.

Growth in urban poverty, food insecurity, and malnutrition and a shift in their concentration from rural to urban areas will accompany urbanization. Although the magnitude and speed of change vary by country, data covering more than half the developing world’s population indicate that:

- The proportion and number of poor people living in urban areas grew during the 1980s and 1990s in seven of eight survey countries, including India and China. (Because data are not available, poverty also serves as a reasonable indicator of food insecurity here.) By the early 1990s, the cities of these eight countries alone were home to more than 140 million poor people, up from about 120 million 5 to 10 years earlier.

- From the early to the mid-1990s, the urban share of malnourished children also increased in 11 of 15 countries for which data are available. The total
number of malnourished children in urban areas increased in 9 of the 15. Almost 10 million malnourished children in these countries live in urban areas, up from about 7 million in earlier years.

**Urban Food Insecurity and Malnutrition: Issues and Policies**

A number of factors will affect the future shape of urban food insecurity and malnutrition. Because urban dwellers must buy most of their food, urban food security depends mostly on whether the household can afford to buy food, given prices and incomes. High per-unit costs of food result from inefficient urban food-marketing systems and the fact that the poor usually can buy only small quantities of food at a time rather than in bulk. Macroeconomic policies are also important. Inflation, depreciation in the exchange rate, and the removal of key consumer or producer subsidies can all push prices up. Policies to improve urban food security must therefore seek to improve market efficiency and maintain stable prices.

Logically, income security is also crucial to food security for urban dwellers. Yet with little human or financial capital, the poor are forced to take casual, insecure jobs. These jobs often experience seasonal ups and downs, just as in rural areas. For example, demand for construction workers can decline drastically during the rainy season. Garment workers may be laid off when the holiday rush dies down. With their abundance of labor, but often little else, the poor find competition for jobs is fierce.

To lift the poor from poverty, programs and policies should concentrate on creating jobs and on increasing the capacity of the poor to find and hold more-secure, higher-paying jobs or to expand their own businesses and generate new jobs. Governments, communities, and the private sector should cooperate to provide the elements for private sector success, much of which depends on a capable, if not extensive, government. At the same time, targeted income or food programs and more general social security and unemployment programs will continue to be necessary to provide for those who are left behind or who cannot work, including the elderly and the sick. Programs may also need to address issues of land and housing security, as secure tenure helps ensure that the poor do not lose their investments in tangible assets or in social networks.

However, efforts to improve urban livelihoods must go beyond a focus on urban jobs. Urban and rural lives are intertwined through goods, services, and people. In many cities, a majority of urban dwellers depend indirectly on agriculture for their livelihoods, through employment in food transport, retailing, and processing. Survival strategies may involve maintaining links with a home community in rural
areas, through a plot of land or continued connections with family. Policies for improving urban livelihoods, then, must take into account the complexity of urban–rural links and recognize that rural conditions affect urban livelihoods as well.

Urban food security may also have a more direct link with agriculture. Even in large, congested cities, the urban poor may have a home garden or raise small animals as part of a coping strategy. This urban production, often done by women, can complement household incomes and improve the quality of urban diets. Urban planners and local governments should consider how to incorporate environmentally sound urban agriculture in their plans.

Of course, food security is not enough for good nutrition. A healthy household environment and good care and feeding practices are essential as well. The threats to good nutrition for both adults and children in urban areas differ from those in rural areas. The most substantial threats to health of the poor in the cities come from flimsy and overcrowded housing amid filthy conditions—uncollected garbage, unsafe water, overflowing sewers—and from the inability of the poor to get good health care. Even when health facilities are available, the poor often have no access to these services because of an inability to pay. According to UNICEF and the World Health Organization, for example, globally less than 20 percent of the urban poor have access to safe water, compared with 80 percent of the rich. Poverty and inequality are clearly major determinants of health and nutrition outcomes in the city.

Potentially harmful changes in diets also accompany urbanization. Because urban dwellers often face time constraints and have greater exposure to advertising and easier access to supermarkets and fast-food vendors, they often consume more processed and prepared foods. The typical urban diet results in higher levels of some micronutrients and animal proteins than the rural one, but it also means higher intakes of saturated and total fat and sugar and lower intakes of fiber. Combined with a sedentary lifestyle, this diet increases the risk of chronic diseases, including obesity. The public health sector faces a significant challenge in trying to overcome the malnutrition and poor health caused by poverty at the same time it responds to diseases associated with wealth and industrialization.

Challenges to child nutrition come from this unhealthy physical environment and from inadequate caring and feeding practices. Urban women end breastfeeding two to three months earlier than rural women, perhaps depriving their children of needed nutrients and reducing immunity. Women in urban areas also often work outside the home, which may mean they have less time and more difficulty in caring for their children. Policies to promote child nutrition in urban areas should focus not only on increasing incomes, especially women’s, but also on encouraging good feeding and caring practices, including provision of easily accessible quality child care for those mothers who work. Good caring practices are
possible even for the poor—as they frequently depend more on knowledge rather than income levels—and have been shown to counter the effects of low income on nutritional status.

The greatest difference between solutions to food and nutrition insecurity in rural and urban areas is probably that in rural areas development can often be addressed through broad-brush interventions affecting agriculture, which drives the rural economy. While agricultural growth may also help to reduce urban food insecurity, the income sources in urban areas are more diverse, as are underlying causes and actors in the urban environment. Effective policies and programs will require a holistically conceived response that coordinates actions across actors and levels—from the household (to raise incomes, for example), to the community (to install a water system), to far beyond (to promote labor-intensive growth by the government).

In any case, the most effective, relevant policies will emerge from a system of governance that firmly connects the needs of the poor to a politically responsive local government that has the technical and institutional capacity to act. Programs should work to strengthen the poor’s ability to organize, make demands, and affect local authorities and to strengthen the municipality’s understanding of its responsibility to respond.

**Urban Food Insecurity and Malnutrition: Why Worry Now?**

Some argue that concern about urban poverty is misplaced—that rural areas continue to hold most of the poor, food insecure, and malnourished and that they will for many years to come. Many analysts and governments seem complacent because their countries are not industrialized or highly urban. As we look to 2020, is such complacency justified? Clearly not.

First, the experiences of the industrialized world clearly show that developing countries are simply not going to “urbanize” themselves out of poverty. Governments and development agencies must take seriously the shift in poverty, food insecurity, and malnutrition from rural to urban areas. Second, in highly urbanized regions such as Latin America, the geographic center of poverty has *already* shifted: in these countries more poor people *already* live in the cities than in the countryside. Finally, even in countries that are still highly rural and where rural poverty predominates, millions of poor people live in cities. These people deserve not to be forgotten.

The perception that urban poverty exists only in industrialized countries is not matched by reality. In Mozambique, for example, with a poverty rate of 69 percent, 2 million poor people live in urban areas, more than the number of urban poor in highly urbanized Colombia and more than half the number of urban poor in much more populous Indonesia.
Even in highly rural countries, then, urban poverty, food insecurity, and malnutrition are problems of today, not tomorrow. For the sake of the millions of hungry and undernourished people living in cities today, as well as for the sake of those millions who may be forced to live there tomorrow, governments, development agencies, and communities must act now. They must work forcefully, confidently, and reasonably to promote policies, including those that promote rural development, to confront the rising specter of urban poverty, hunger, and malnutrition and so achieve the 2020 vision of sustainable food and nutrition security for all.