Chapter 6: Urban environments

6.1 The nature of urbanisation

The growth of towns and cities which leads to an increasing percentage of a country's population living in urban settlements is called **urbanisation**. Urban settlements (towns and cities) differ from rural ones (hamlets and villages) in terms of (Figure 6.1):

- their economies – they make a living from manufacturing and services rather than agriculture
- their size – they are larger in population and extent
- their densities of people and buildings which are generally high
- their way of life.

Figure 6.1: *A modern central city landscape*

Figure 6.2 shows how the level of urbanisation (the percentage of the population living in urban settlements) varies across the globe. In general terms, it is the middle-income countries (MICs) and higher-income countries (HICs) that show the highest levels of urbanisation. The lowest levels are found in Africa and South-East Asia.

Towns and cities are growing in number and size all over the world. While the world's population is increasing fast, the urban population is increasing even faster. Figure 6.3 shows that the world population more than doubled between 1950 and 2000 but that the urban population more than trebled. Today, the rate of urbanisation has been such that half the world's population is now living in urban areas.

Introduction

This chapter is about towns and cities. Worldwide, the process of urbanisation is changing where and how people live and work. For many, urbanisation brings benefits, but there are also serious costs such as congestion, discrimination, pollution and poor housing. Perhaps these costs are greatest in LIC cities. Despite their overall prosperity, HIC cities also have their challenges. These include reducing the amount of deprivation and reviving worn-out parts of the built-up area. At the same time, however, important new developments are taking place around the edges of HIC cities.

See Figure 5.9 on page 121 which shows the changing balance in the world's population. Clearly we have now reached the point where just over half the world's population lives in urban areas.

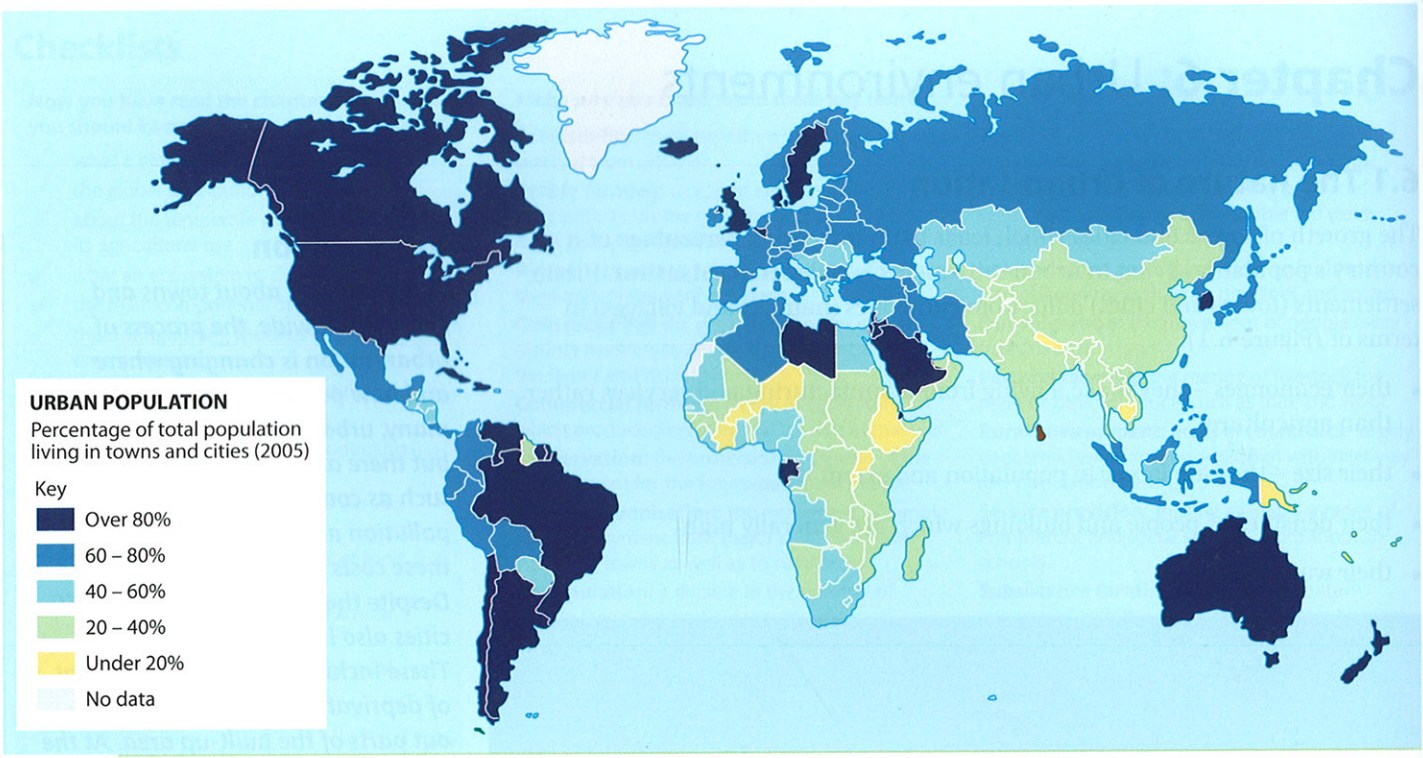

Figure 6.2: *Global distribution of urbanisation, 2005*

What is significant about present-day rates of urbanisation is the difference in the speed of growth between the cities in the higher-income countries (HICs) and those in the lower-income countries (LICs). The rate of city growth is much higher in the LICs (Figure 6.4). Present trends are expected to continue. However, the overall level of urbanisation remains higher in HICs.

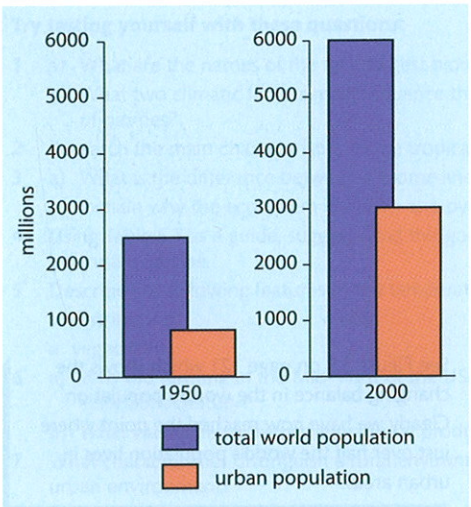

Figure 6.3: *World and urban population growth*

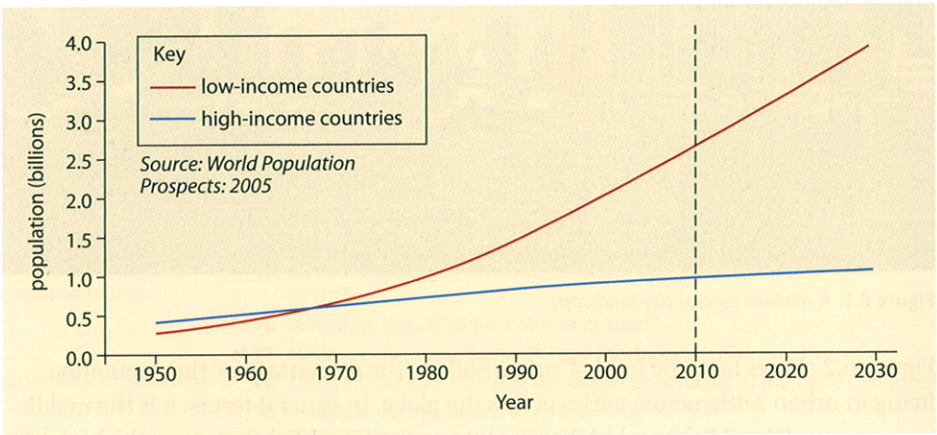

Figure 6.4: *Urbanisation in LICs and HICs, 1950 – 2030*

High rates of urbanisation are occurring in LICs because:

- most new economic developments in these countries are concentrated in the big cities
- push and pull factors are leading to high rates of rural-to-urban migration
- cities are experiencing high rates of natural increase in population.

In HICs, the rates of urbanisation are much slower for the simple reason that a large proportion of the population is already living in towns and cities. The built-up areas of towns and cities continue to grow. Because of modern transport and communication, the urban way of life is gradually spreading into rural areas. In fact, the countryside and its settlements are experiencing what is referred to as **rural dilution**.

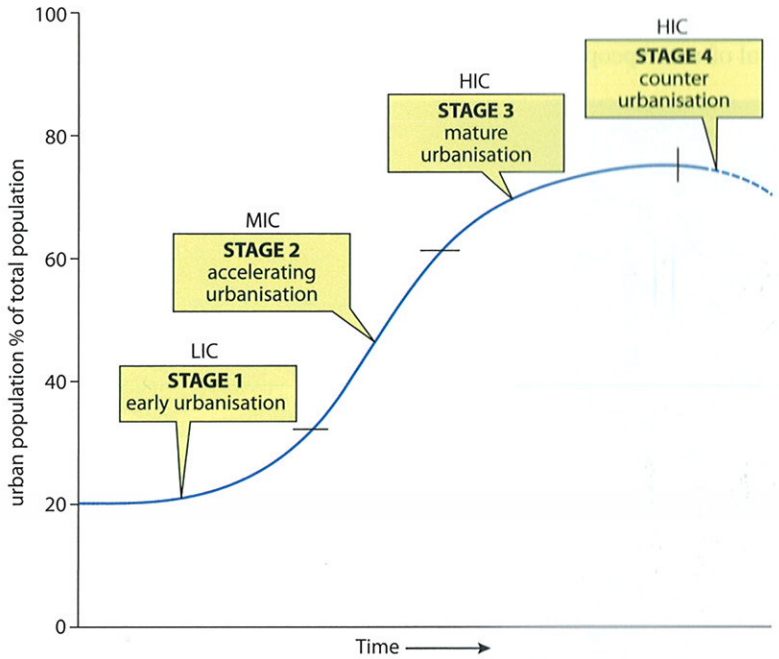

Figure 6.5: *The urbanisation pathway*

These differences between LICs and HICs encourage us to think of an urbanisation pathway. The pathway shows how the level of urbanisation changes over time (Figure 6.5). Countries become more urban as they develop economically. They gradually move from being an LIC towards becoming an HIC. A country starts at a very low level of urbanisation (Stage 1), but there comes a time when the rates of economic development and urbanisation speed up (Stage 2). Later, as the pace of economic development slows, so too does the rate of urbanisation (Stage 3). The level of urbanisation begins to flatten out, often when roughly two-thirds of an HIC's population is living in urban settlements. As shown by Figure 6.5, the pathway takes the form of an S-shaped curve. The curve may begin to drop as **counterurbanisation** gains in strength.

It is important to remember:

- that not all countries will progress very far along the pathway
- that countries will vary in terms of their speed along the pathway. The speed will be largely controlled by the pace of economic development.

Urbanisation processes

Urbanisation is a process of change that converts rural areas, regions and countries into urban ones. That change also involves a number of other processes that affect the built-up areas of towns and cities as they grow.

Urban settlements first appear as a result of **agglomeration**. That is the concentration of people and economic activities at favourable locations such as at river crossing points, estuary mouths or close to a mineral resource (coal, iron or oil). In early times, defence was an important locational consideration. As towns grow, so they expand outwards by a process known as **suburbanisation**. This

adds to the built-up area, but the building densities are generally lower than in the older parts of the town (Figure 6.6). The creation of these new suburbs made up of houses, places of employment and services is encouraged by:

- improvements in transport that allow people to move easily between the new suburbs and the town centre
- overcrowding, congestion and rising land prices in the older parts of the town
- a generally decline in the quality of the residential environment near the centre
- the arrival of more people (mainly from rural areas) and new businesses.

What do you think it is that appeals to those people who choose to live in the suburbs?

Figure 6.6: *Suburban sprawl*

As a result of these two processes – agglomeration and suburbanisation – some towns grow into cities. Towns and cities located close to another sometimes join together into one vast continuous built-up area known as a **conurbation**. As we shall see on the next page, this scaling up in the size of urban settlements does not end there.

As urban settlements continue to prosper and grow, a new process sets in. People start to move out of the town or city altogether and to live instead in smaller, often mainly rural settlements. These are often called **dormitory settlements**, because many of the new residents only sleep there. They continue to have links with the town or city they have left. They **commute** to the same place of work and continue to make use of urban services, such as shops, colleges and hospitals.

As cities and conurbations continue to grow even bigger, a rather different process sets in. Rather than just moving out to suburbs and dormitory settlements, people and businesses move further out either to smaller towns and cities or to rural areas. This process is known as **counterurbanisation**.

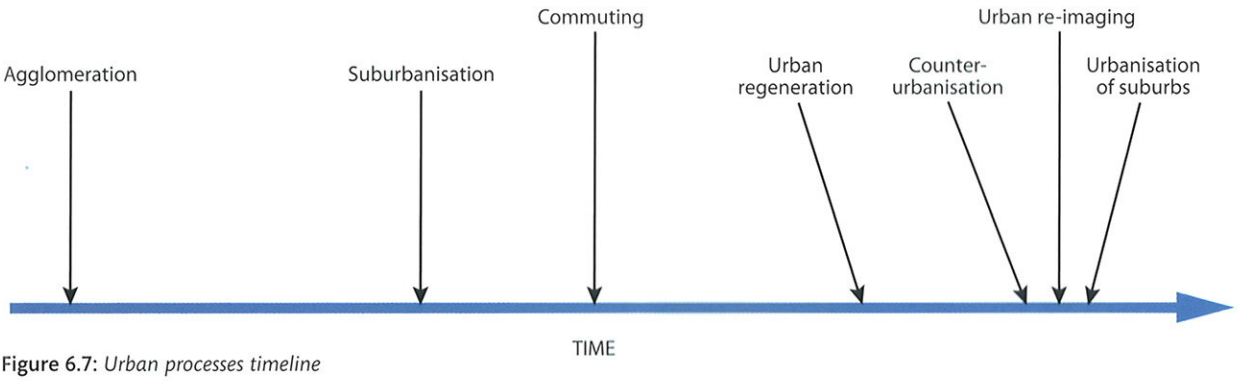

Figure 6.7: *Urban processes timeline*

In this section we have looked at a number of different processes. They can be put in a time sequence (Figure 6.7). This sequence can be married up with the urbanisation pathway (Figure 6.5 on page 147). In the early stages of the pathway, urbanisation mainly involves agglomeration and suburbanisation. In the later stages, although both agglomeration and suburbanisation continue, decentralisation and counterurbanisation become more important.

Two new processes have begun to appear in HIC cities. They are:

- **urban regeneration** – this involves re-using areas in the old parts of cities abandoned as people and businesses have moved out to the suburbs or beyond. This process has allowed the **re-imaging** not just of city centres but of whole cities (see Part **6.8**). A well known example of this is the regeneration of the deserted docklands and warehouses of London into upmarket offices and residential apartments.
- **urbanisation of suburbs** – suburbs are typically areas of low density development. Today, however, as rural space is being eroded by urbanisation, governments are keen that more use should be made of suburban areas. Vacant building plots and open spaces are being developed; large detached houses are being replaced by flats and maisonettes. No longer are suburbs being protected as just residential areas. Shops and other services are being located in the suburbs. In short, suburban densities are being raised to an urban level.

Other well-known urban regeneration schemes in the UK include:

- Salford Quays, Manchester
- Cardiff Bay, South Wales
- Bradford, Yorkshire.

The emergence of megacities

The maps for 1970 and 2000 show great changes in the world's 'top ten' cities (Figure 6.8). In 1970, half were in HICs and half in LICs. By the year 2000, only two of the ten were found in HICs. Not only has the global distribution changed dramatically, but so too has the total number of people living in our largest cities. In 1970, the figures ranged from 16.5 million (New York, then the biggest city in the world) to 6.5 million (Calcutta). By 2000, the most populous city was Tokyo with 26.7 million people. The population of New York, rated number ten in 2000, had fallen slightly to 16.3 million.

The size of big cities is another feature of world urbanisation. For many years the **millionaire city** (a city of more than one million people) was considered a big city, especially since in 1900 there were only two – London and Paris. Now there are about 400 (Figure 6.9).

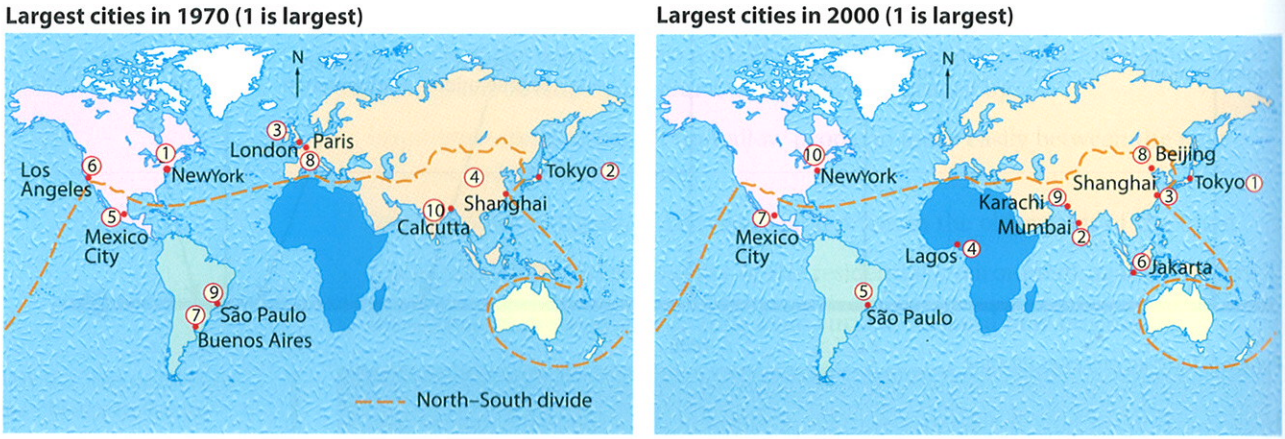

Figure 6.8: *Global urban growth*

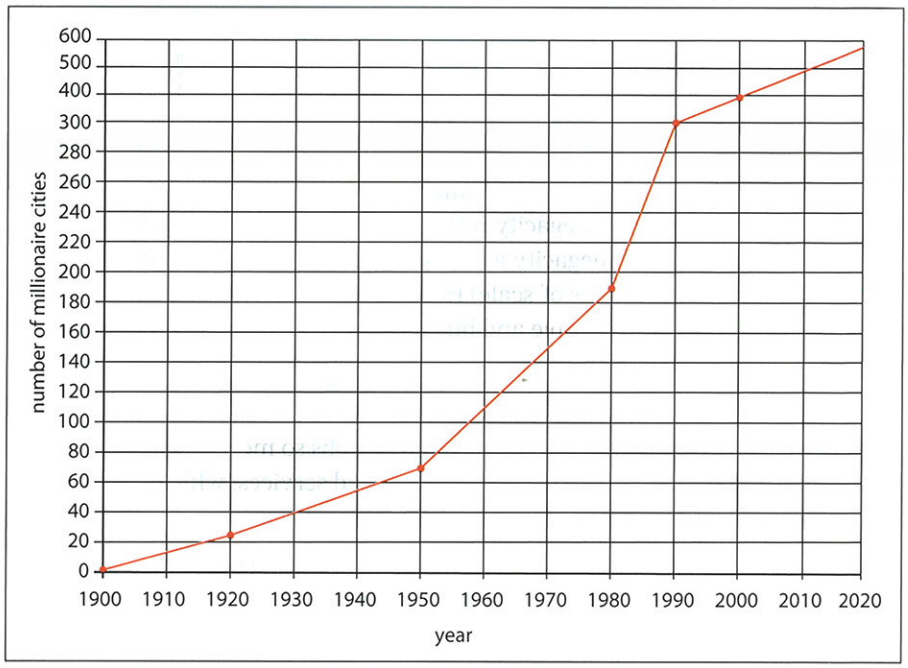

Figure 6.9: *Growth of millionaire cities (1900–2000)*

Study Figure 6.9. Describe the trends in the growth in the number of millionaire cities during the 20th century.

More recently, the term **megacity** has been used to describe cities with populations of over 10 million. In 1970 there were just four of these, but by 2010 there were 24 of them. The United Nations estimates that by the year 2015 there will be nearly 30 megacities, over half of which will be in Asia.

What are the reasons for the growth of these megacities? Figure 6.10 shows four main factors being involved:

- **economic development** – this is the driver of all economic growth and urbanisation. Presumably megacities are produced by a fast and sustained rate of economic growth.
- **population growth** – given the size of these cities, there must be high rates of population growth. Large volumes of rural-urban migration among young adults, plus high rates of natural increase are needed to explain the size of these cities. Young people will be drawn to live in these cities by the 'buzz' of feeling close to 'where it is all happening'. There is kudos and 'street cred' to be living and working in such 'cool' places

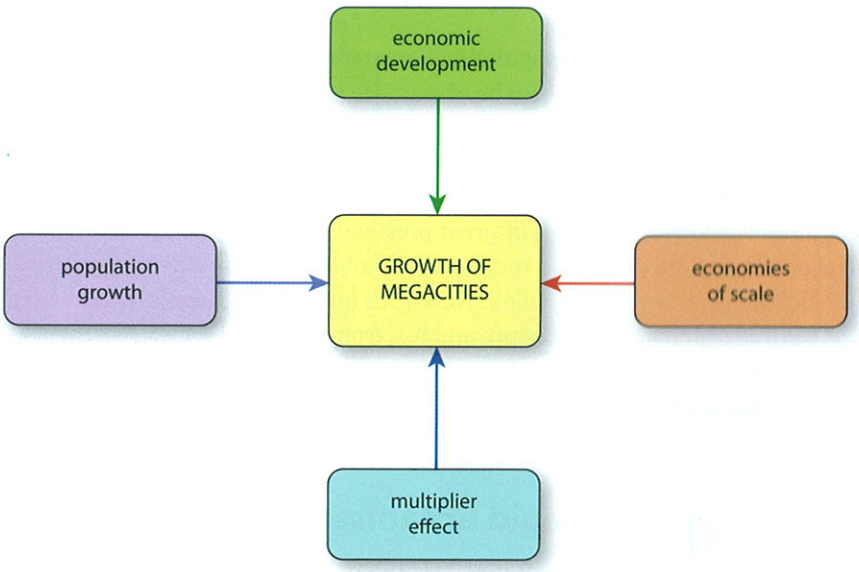

Figure 6.10: *Factors encouraging the growth of megacities*

- **economies of scale** – there are advantages to be gained from cramming as much as possible into one megacity rather than into a number of smaller cities. Since distances within a megacity are less than between smaller cities, there are financial savings (economies of scale) to be made in terms of transport. Communication between people and businesses will be easier (another economy)
- **multiplier effect** – with cities, success leads to more success. Once a large city is prospering, it gathers a momentum which will carry it forward. So it will lead to more prosperity and growth. There are more jobs so more people come which means there are more people who need goods and services, which creates more jobs and so the cycle goes on.

Being located in a megacity has a powerful attraction to both people and businesses. However, there is a downside. All of the problems described in Part **6.2** over the page are present in megacities and are probably even more acute. However, probably their worst aspect is to be seen at a national level. Megacities grow and prosper at the expense of towns, cities and regions elsewhere within the country. Megacities become powerful **cores** that create large **peripheries** around them.

Can you think of any other downside to the growth of megacities?

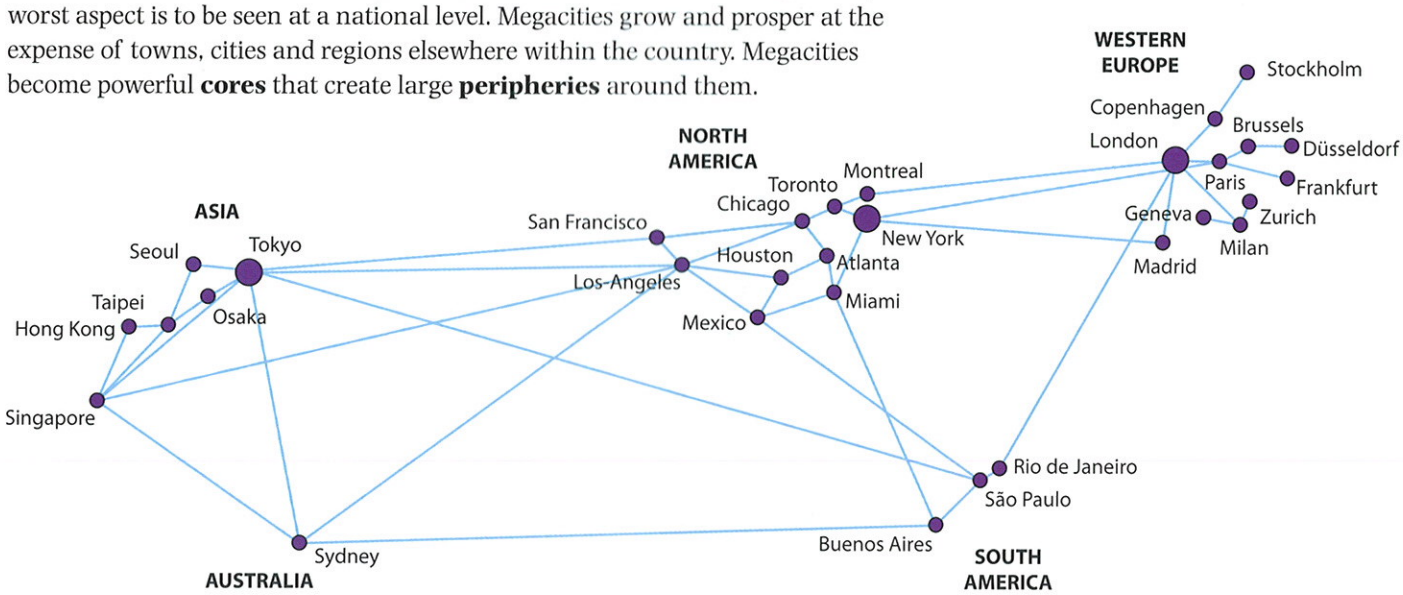

Figure 6.11: *Distribution of global cities*

Global or world cities

Megacities are urban areas with populations greater than 10 million. **Global** or **world cities**, on the other hand, can be of any size. At present there are 31 such cities (Figure 6.11). They all have populations over 1 million and seven of them are megacities (Buenos Aires, Hong Kong, Mexico City, New York, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Seoul). What distinguishes a global city from a megacity? Global cities are recognised worldwide as places of great prestige, status, power and influence. All global cities are critical hubs in the growing global economy. There are three 'top dog' global cities. They are London, New York and Tokyo. These are the financial centres of the global economy and it is from this that they derive their power and influence. Each of these three cities is the hub of a network of smaller global cities. Four global cities are located outside these three networks – Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Buenos Aires and Sydney, all in the Southern Hemisphere.

What is the difference, if any, between a megacity and a world city?

6.2 The problems of rapid urbanisation

Just check that you understand the main causes of rapid urbanisation, namely:

- high volumes of rural-urban migration
- high rates of natural population increase
- a quickening rate of economic development.

The world is rapidly becoming urbanised, and the pace of urbanisation is greatest in LICs. For example, the population of the city of São Paulo in Brazil grew from 7 million in 1970 to an estimated 20 million in 2010. Covering an area of 8000 km², it is now the second largest urban area in the Americas. Here, as elsewhere in the developing world, this rapid and often unplanned growth has created a range of problems, mainly because of the speed at which it has occurred.

- **Housing** – Much of the rapid growth of LIC cities has been caused by people moving in from rural areas or other parts of the country. When they arrive, there is nowhere for them to live, especially as many are looking for cheap, low-cost housing. Millions of people live in what were meant to be temporary **shanty towns** or **squatter settlements** (for more information see Part **6.5**). Even for those with money, the demand for housing exceeds supply. As a result, housing is expensive relative to people's wages and salary. In general, because of poor transport, the most sought-after housing is close to the city centre with its shops and places of work.
- **Access to water and electricity** – It is commonly the case that the provision of basic services does not keep up with the growth of population. As a consequence, not all parts of the built-up area are provided with running water, sanitation or electricity. Many people have no option but to rely on fires for cooking and lighting, and on polluted streams for water and sewage disposal.
- **Traffic congestion and transport** – The provision of proper roads and public transport is another aspect of city life that lags behind the growth in population. As a result the transport systems in the city are overloaded and overcrowded, and traffic congestion is a major problem for everyone – rich or poor. The high numbers of vehicles also causes high levels of atmospheric pollution in cities, many of which suffer regularly from smog (a mixture of smoke and fog).