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[ijirset@gmail.com](mailto:ijirset@gmail.com)

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# Emerging Trends of Urbanization in Nepal

Lal Bahadur Oli

Lecturer, Centre for Economic Development and Administration (CEDA), Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur,  
Kathmandu, Nepal.

**ABSTRACT:** This paper aims to explore about the number of urban centers, population size and percentage share of urban population, spatial distribution of urban centres by province and ecological region and the emerging town/cities in Nepal. This study is mainly based on secondary information. The data are analysed by using descriptive method. Urbanization is the physical expansion of urban areas which is regarded as one of the most prominent demographic and socioeconomic development characters of nation. In Nepal, there has been continuously changing the definition of urban areas over the time. In the period of last six decade the number of designated urban areas in the country has increased from 10 with 2.9 percent population of the total population in 1952/54 to 293 with 62.61 percent population of the total population in 2017. Likewise, distribution of urban centers varies by ecological region and provinces in Nepal. Currently, several new town/cities are emerging in Nepal around Highways and road like East west Highway (Mahendra Highway), Madan Bhandari Highway, and Middle Hill Highway (Pushpa Lal Highway) which are more likely to expand in coming years.

**KEYWORDS:** Urbanization, urban center, Spatial, Province, municipality, urban population.

## I. CONCEPT OF URBANIZATION

Urbanization is the physical expansion of urban areas. It is closely linked to modernisation, industrialisation, and the sociological process of rationalisation. It is regarded as one of most prominent demographic and socioeconomic development characters of nation. Similarly, urbanisation is defined as the process of settlements being changed into township thereby the number of inhabitants increase in these conglomerations (Bhattarai, Acharya, Paudel and Paudel, 2019). Lampard (1955) defined urbanization as a process of becoming urban or a process by which villages turn into towns and towns develop into cities. (Subedi, 2014). Similarly, it is a process, which results in the growth of population living in towns and especially in large cities. The urbanization process is associated with scientific and technological development, which changes with the way of life (Krishnaiah and Ramanaiah: 2001 as cited in Mani, Chanda and Dilshi, 2015). Thompson and Lewis defined urbanization as the process whereby an increasing country's population comes to live in cities and it is linked to rapid growth of population, industrialization, infrastructure and economic development is generally known as urbanization (Chapagain, 2008). Similarly, UNEPA (1996) defined urban area as having administrative unit, concentration of population, non agricultural occupation, and availability of urban infrastructural facilities (Chapagain, 2018)

In Nepal, there has been continuously changing the definition of urban area over the time. Nepal largely practices the population size criteria to declare urban areas. In 1952/54, population over 5000 was used as basis for declaring a region as urban area and it was known as "Prominent Settlement". In 1961, the urban area was denoted by term "Sahar". Urban areas were defined as an area of at least 50000 population urban environments (High School College, judicial and administrative unit, market, communication facilities, mills and factory). In 1962, "Nagar Panchayat Act" was introduced. According to this Act, population of at least 10000, local urban administration unit and local government unit were required to do for the urban area to be declared "Nagar Panchayat". In 1976, amendment of this Act took place which changes the criteria which was at least 9000 population. From 1961 to 1990, the Nepali term "Nagar Panchayat" was used to refer urban areas (municipalities). After 1990, the term "Nagar Panchayat" has been replaced by the term Nagarpalika. In the year 1990, Municipality Act was introduced which replaced the term "Nagar Panchayat" by the term "Nagarpalika". This Act also states the population to be at least 9000 or more inhabitants. Similarly the Municipality Act 1992 and Local Self Governance Act, 1999 recognize further subdivision in existing municipalities. According to these Acts, Municipalities has been recognised into three categories namely Nagarpalika (Municipality), Upa Mahanagarpalika (Submetropolitan) and Mahanagarpalika (Metropolitan) on the basis of population size annual revenue and level of urban

facilities available in the urban centers. Mahanagarपालिका has been recognised as a municipality with a minimum population size of 300,000, annual revenue of at least Rs. 400 million, and adequate urban facilities (infrastructure facilities for international sports events, universities, specialised services etc.) and an area that has already received the status of an Upamahanagarपालिका. Likewise an Upamahanagarपालिका has been recognised as a municipality with population size of at least 100,000, annual revenue of at least NRs. 100 million, adequate urban facilities (an infrastructure for national and international sports events, city halls, etc) and an area that has already received the status of a Nagarpalika. A Nagarpalika (Municipality) requires population size of at least 20,000 in the Terai and 10,000 in the Hill/Mountain regions, annual revenue of NRs. 5 million in the Terai region and NRs. 500,000 or more in the Hill/Mountain regions and minimum urban facilities (Paudel, 2013). The latest legal instrument Local Government Operation Act, 2074 has also recognised the classification of municipalities. According to this Act, municipalities are also classified into three categories namely Nagarpalika (municipality), Upamahanagarपालिका (sub-metropolitan city) and Mahanagarपालिका (Metropolitan city) on the basis of level of physical infrastructure and minimum urban facilities available in the municipalities, minimum population size and amount of average annual revenue of last five years in municipalities.

Nepal is one of the least urbanized countries in the world and South Asia although the process of urbanisation is growing rapidly now. According to the 2011 census only 17.1% of Nepal's population resided in 58 designated urban areas. Similarly, the Constitution of Nepal (2015) has declared the country as a Federal Democratic Republic with seven Provinces. It is further divided into 753 local levels including 460 Rural Municipalities, 276 Municipalities, 11 Sub-metropolitan cities and 6 Metropolitan Cities in Nepal (CBS, 2019).

In this context, this paper aims to explore about the number of urban places, population size and percent share of urban population, distribution of urban centres by province and ecological region and the emerging towns/cities in Nepal.

## II. METHOD AND MATERIALS

The study focuses to explore the trends and pattern of urbanization in Nepal. The study has drawn data and information from secondary sources collected from the central bureau of statistics. The other required data and information are obtained from various publications such as relevant books, official reports, journals, and web-based materials. All those collected data are tabulated and analysed by using descriptive method.

## III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Number of Urban Places, Population Size and Percent Share of Urban Population in Nepal

It is observed that both number of urban centers and urban population has gradually increasing in Nepal. The urban population has been growing more rapidly than rural population in the country. Urban centers have become highly attractive to the population (Table, 1).

**Table 1**  
**Number of Urban Places, Population Size and Percent Share of Urban Population, 1952/54-2017**

Year	Number of Urban Places (Municipalities)	Urban Population	Urban Population as Percentage of Total Population
1952/54	10	2,38,275	2.9
1961	16	3,36,222	3.6
1971	16	4,61,938	4.0
1981	23	956,721	6.4
1991	33	16,95,719	9.2
2001	58	32,27,879	13.9
2011	58	45,23,820	17.1
2017*	293	167,40,732	62.61

Source: CBS, 2014, 2019 and Regmi, 2018, \* Based on data of population census, 2011



Table 1 shows the number of urban areas, population size and percent of urban population. In the period of last six decade the number of designated urban areas in the country has increased from 10 in 1952/54 to 293 in 2017. Similarly the urban population size has increased from 238275 in 1952/54 to 25, 23,820 in 2011 and it is estimated that it has become 16740732 in 2017 based on population census, 2011.

There is changing scenario of urban growth in Nepal. In the year, 1952/54 the urban population was only 2.9 percent of the total population under 10 prominent settlements in Nepal. In population census, 1961 the urban population was 3.6 percent of the total population and there were sixteen urban areas. Similarly in the year 1971 the urban population was 4.0 percent of total population. In the census 1981, the number of urban centers reached to 23 and urban population was 6.4 percent of the total population. During the period of 1981 to 1991, the number of urban centers reached to 33 and urban population was 9.2 percent of total population of Nepal. Likewise the urban population of Nepal was 13.9 percent of total population under 58 urban areas in 2001. According to the 2011 census only 17.1% of Nepal's population resided in 58 designated urban areas. After 2011, the number of urban areas increased rapidly. Now there are 293 urban areas Nepal with 62.61 percent of total population. It is clearly observed that changes in percentages of urban population and number of urban centers have been steadily increasing since seventies.

### Spatial Distribution of Urban Centres by Province in Nepal

The Constitution of Nepal (2015) has declared the country a Federal Democratic Republic with seven Provinces. Urban population size and the number of urban areas vary by provinces in Nepal (Table 2).

**Table 2**  
**Urban Centres by Province in Nepal, 2017**

Province	Number of Urban Centres			
	Municipality	Sub metropolitan	Metropolitan	Total
Province 1	46	2	1	49
Province 2	73	3	1	77
Bagmati Province	41	1	3	45
Ganaki Province	26	-	1	27
Lumbini Province	32	4	-	36
Karnali Province	25	-	-	25
Sudurpashchim Province	33	1	-	34
Nepal	276	11	6	293

Source: MoFALD, 2014

Table 2 shows the number of urban centres by Province. It is observed that Bagmati province has higher position in urban development in Nepal. There are 45 urban centers including three metropolitan city namely Kathmandu, Lalitpur, Bharatapur and one submetropolitan city namely Hetauda. It is followed by province 2 where 77 urban centers are located including one metropolitan city namely Birgunj and three sub metropolitan cities namely Kalaiya, Simara and Janakpur. In the Province 1 there are 49 urban centers including one metropolitan city namely Biratnagar and two submetropolitan cities namely Dharan and Itahari. Similarly 36 urban centers are located in the Lumbini province including four sub metropolitan city namely Nepalgunj, Tulsipur, Ghorahi and Butwal and 27 urban centers are located in Gandaki province including one metropolitan city namely Pokhara. Likewise, there is least number of urban centers in Karnali province where only 25 urban centers are located. This shows a vast spatial unevenness in the distribution of urban centers by province in Nepal.

### Spatial Distribution of Urban Centres by Ecological Region in Nepal

It is clearly found that there is close relationship between Population concentration and landscape in Nepal. Lowland or plains are more densely settled than hilly area and mountain in the country. In this context urbanization is largely associated with population concentration rather than general population distribution (Subedi, 2014).

Out of three ecological regions, about half of the total numbers of urban areas are located in the Terai region due to the high population concentration, industrialization, available of fertile land, in-migration, compact settlement, physical infrastructure and socio-economic development activities. There are few numbers of urban areas in mountain region in Nepal due to rugged topography, low population size, scatter settlement, out-migration and lack of development infrastructure. Generally the number of urban centers has been gradually increasing during period between 1952/54 to 2017 (Table 3).

**Table 3**  
**Distribution of Urban Centres by Ecological Region in Nepal**

Ecological Region	Number of Urban Centres							
	1952/54	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011	2017(2074 BS)*
Mountain	-	-	-	-	-	2	2	33
Hill	5	8	7	9	13	27	27	97
Terai	5	8	9	14	20	29	29	163
Nepal	10	16	16	23	33	58	58	293

Source: CBS, 2014 and MoFALD 2074,

\*Data are calculated on the basis of the classification of districts of Nepal by Local Government Operation Act as five categories: mountain Districts, Hill Districts, Kathmandu valley Districts, Inner Terai Districts and Terai Districts. Kathmandu valley Districts are included in Hilly region and Inner Terai Districts are included in Terai region.

Table 3 shows that there were no urban centers in mountain region until population census of 1991 in Nepal. In the population census year, 2001 and 2011 only two urban centers were located in mountain region, however the number of urban centers has increased in 2017 and it reached to 33 urban centers. Likewise the number of urban centers has been gradually increasing in hilly region. During the period of 1952/54 to 2017, the number of urban centers has reached from 5 to 97 in the Hilly region. Similarly; there were only five urban centers in the 1952/54 in the Terai region whereas the number of urban centers has reached to 29 in 2001 and 163 in 2017.

This shows a vast spatial unevenness in the distribution of urban centers by ecological region in Nepal. Therefore it needs immediate policy attention to harmonize the regional distribution of urban centers.

#### Spatial Distribution of Urban Population by Ecological Regions

Urban population distribution is also uneven by the ecological region in Nepal. Table 4 shows the spatial distribution of the urban population by ecological regions. Till the census of 1991 there was not any urban center in the Mountain region. Similarly, in the period of 1952/54 to 2001, share of urban population was more in hilly region. Share of urban population in hilly region was 82.6 percent in 1952/54 which reduced to 51.2 percent in 1991. In the year 2001, it increased to 53.2 percent. In the year 2014 Terai has the largest proportion of the urban population and 53.9 percent of the urban population lives in different categories of municipalities in Terai. Likewise, Hilly region has 43.8 percent of the urban population and the share of Mountain is minimal at 2.3%. Mountain region has lowest share of urban population due to fact that it only has a few municipalities as well as a smaller population size in those municipalities (Subedi, 2014).

**Table 4**  
**Distribution of Urban Population by Ecological Regions, 1952/54-2011**

Ecological Region	Urban Population (Percent)						
	1952/54	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2014
Mountain	-	-	-	-	-	1.4	2.3
Hill	82.6	69.7	65.0	51.8	51.2	53.2	43.8
Terai	17.4	30.3	35.0	48.2	48.8	45.5	53.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: CBS, 2003 & 2014

**Emerging Towns/Cities in Nepal**

In recent time, several numbers of the rural settlements are developing as urban centers in Nepal especially around Highways and road like East west Highway (Mahendra Highway), Madan Bhandari Highway, and Middle Hill Highway (Pushpa Lal Highway) which are more likely to expand in coming years. Moreover, Government of Nepal has announced the establishment of several new towns or urban centers around these highways. Similarly, Government of Nepal restructured the local level which created 293 urban centers in 2016. This design is much more likely to develop urban centers rapidly. After 2010 Government of Nepal has announced the establishment of several towns in the Hills and in the Terai region. The announcements include new towns in the Middle Hill Highway, Smart Cities, new towns in Terai, Satellite city, new town in Hulaki Highway, and Mega Cities (Subedi, 2020). An overview of the new urban centers as announced by government of Nepal has been given in the following table.

**Table 5**  
**Description of New Urban Centers Announced by Nepal Government, 2017/18.**

New towns in the Middle Hill Highway (Puspahal Highway)	Phidim (Panchthar), Basantapur (Terhathum), Khurkot (Sindhuli), Bairani Galchhi (Dhading), Burtiban (Baglung), Dumre (Tanahu), Chaurjahari (Rukum), Rakamkarnali (Dailekh), Saphebagar (Achham), Patan (Baitadi), Bheri Ganga (Surkhet), Bhingree (Pyuthan)
New towns in Terai	Katharia (Rautahat), Ishorpur (Sarlahi), Sambhunath (Saptari), Balwa (Mahottari), Gadhawa (Dang)
New towns in the Hulaki Highway	Gaurigunj (Jhapa), Rangeli (Morang), Manhara (Mahottari), Brahmapur (Sarlahi), Bholapur (Rautahat), Mahagadhimai (Bara), Bardaghat (Nawalparasi), Belauri (Kanchanpur), Bhajani (Kailali)
Smart City	Nijgadh (Bara), Lumbini (Kapilbastu), Palungtar (Gorkha), Dhankuta, Mirchiya (Siraha), Chandrapur (Rautahat), Kavre, Bharatpur (Chitwan), Waling (Syanja), Tulsipur (Dang), Dullu (Dailekh), Amargadhi (Dadeldhura), Tikapur (Kailali)
Satellite City	Gothatar (Kathmandu), Thimi (Bhaktapur), Saibu-Chobhar (Lalitpur), Suryabinayak, Gundu-Balkot (Bhaktapur), Lamatar (Lalitpur) Tokha (Kathmandu)
Mega City	Biratnagar, Kathmandu valley, Birganja-Jitpur-Simara, Pokhar valley, Butwal-Siddharthanagar, Nepalgunja-Kohalpur, Dhangadhi-Attariya.

Source: Subedi, 2020

**IV. CONCLUSION**

Nepal is one of the least urbanized countries in the world although the process of urbanisation is growing rapidly now due to the rural to urban migration, criteria of urban areas declaration and political decision. Basically Nepal largely practices the population size criteria to declare urban areas. In the period of last six decades the number of designated urban areas in the country has increased from 10 in 1952/54 to 293 in 2017. Similarly, urban population has increased from 2.9 percent of total population in 1952/54 to 17.1 percent of total population in 2011 and 62.61 percent of total population in 2017. Urban population size and the number of urban areas vary by ecological region and provinces in Nepal. It is observed that Bagmati province has higher number of urban centers compared to other provinces whereas Karnali has least number of urban centers. Similarly, about half of the total numbers of urban centers are located in the Terai region whereas mountain region has least number of urban centers. With regard to population size by ecological region, mountain region has lowest share of urban population in 2014 whereas Terai region has highest share of urban population. Currently, several numbers of the rural settlements are developing as urban centers in Nepal especially around Highways and road like East west Highway (Mahendra Highway), Madan Bhandari Highway, and Middle Hill Highway (Pushpa Lal Highway) which are more likely to expand in coming years. In the period of latest decade, Government of Nepal has announced the establishment of several towns/cities in Nepal as new towns in the Middle Hill Highway, Smart Cities, new towns in Terai, Satellite city, new town in Hulaki Highway, and Mega Cities.

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