

# Cities, not nation states, will determine our future survival. Here's why



Most nation states have failed to deal with the major global challenges of our era. In their place, cities are stepping up.

Image: REUTERS/Edgar Su

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Nation states are looking increasingly outdated and even dangerous. Some of them are outright belligerent, and threatening catastrophic war. While some nation states are exhibiting neo-imperial tendencies, most are [waning in power and influence](#). The 369 year experiment in nation-building is [coming unstuck](#) with most nation states failing to deal with the major global challenges of our era, including climate change, forced migration, terrorism, pandemics and more.

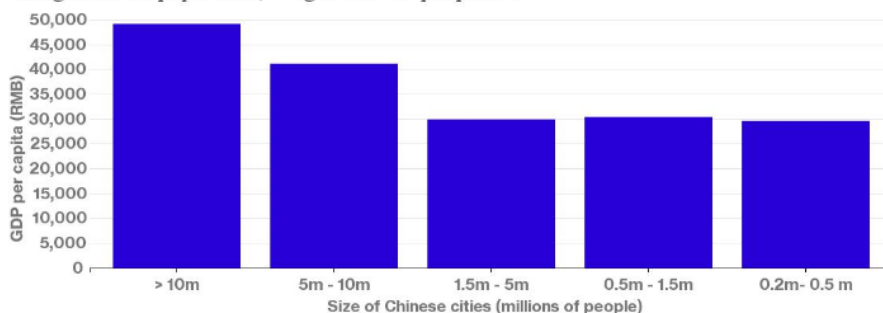
Cities, not nation states, will determine our future survival. Why? To start, [half of humanity currently lives in one](#), in sharp contrast to most of human existence when less than 1% of the global population congregated in settlements. And urbanization is set to continue: two thirds of the world's population will be urban dwellers by 2030. Today cities power over two-thirds of global GDP: they are marvels of innovation and engines for prosperity. Cities are [open, plural and cosmopolitan](#) while nation states are [closed, nativist and parochial](#).

The good news is that many cities are stepping up at precisely the moment when nation states are falling behind. There are already [over 200 inter-city networks](#) around the world that are agitating for a [new urban agenda](#). One of the most prominent, [United Cities and Local Government](#) seeks to promote connectivity between cities and agitate on behalf of them. A new coalition called the [Global Parliament of Mayors](#) is also urging cities everywhere to take advantage of the devolution revolution. After all cities no longer need to wait and ask for permission to exert their urban sovereignty.

But the world's 50,000-plus cities will need to do much more than swap good ideas if humanity is to survive this century. At the very least, they need to take immediate action to reduce carbon emissions (since [they generate over 70%](#) of them) and reduce resource consumption (because they ingest [75% of the world's resources](#)). They will also need to take urgent steps to reduce other risks, including income inequality, unemployment, criminal violence and more.

### Big Cities Are More Productive

The greater the population, the greater GDP per person



Source: OECD, based on data from National Bureau of Statistics of China

\*Growth numbers from 2006-2010

Bloomberg

Image: Bloomberg

With help from one of the most formidable city networks, the C40, some of them are starting to decarbonize and invest in renewable energy and integrated public transportation. A newly minted [Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy](#) brings together more than 7,100 cities across 119 countries to take practical steps to harness the power of renewables. It is the world's largest coalition of mayors and leverages a wide range of players to scale-up city action.

A first step to empowering cities - especially their mayors, civic leaders and citizens - is to ensure they have access to basic information. They not only require data on the risks they face, but on how they themselves are adapting. A handful of global cities in North America and Europe are hyper-connected and data rich. But the vast majority of the cities in the Americas, Africa and Asia suffer from a critical information shortfall. This is especially alarming considering that [90% of all future urban population growth](#) will be taking place in these latter regions.

Data visualizations can help take the pulse of our cities, offering new ways to understand what challenges cities face and how they can adapt. At [this year's Annual Meeting in Davos](#) and at [TED2017](#) we exhibited a digital platform that helps close the information gap. The Earth Timelapse tracks climactic and human-induced risks - from [refugee flows](#) to [terrorism](#) - on a planetary scale over the past three decades. We've identified a few lessons that can help shape the next generation of data-driven tools to convert awareness into action.

## Personalize the platform

Most sensible people agree that climate change and other human-induced threats are affecting the planet. But virtually everyone - climate change fundamentalists and deniers alike - have trouble visualizing how climate change will affect their own neighborhoods. It turns out that city-based visualizations really hit home when users can see what is occurring, distinctly, at home. This was most clearly the case when showing sea level rises wiping out Vancouver, Miami, The Hague and Shanghai.

*Shanghai's turbo-urbanization - 1984-2016*

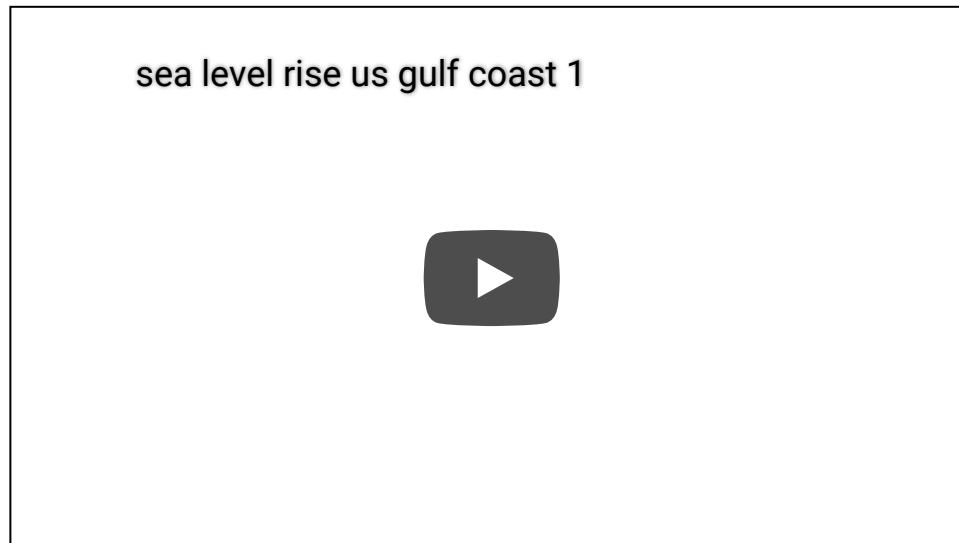
shanghai urbanization



## Predict the future

Most people tend to value present conditions over future ones. This a hard-wired condition called "hyperbolic discounting" and can be traced to our ancestors who lived, quite literally, one day at a time. What that means is we tend to be complacent about future risks. The Earth Timelapse dashboard offer some glimmers into tomorrow's landscapes. Other data visualizations, including the [fragile cities platform](#) also featured at Davos, also offer predictions about the future well-being of cities around the world.

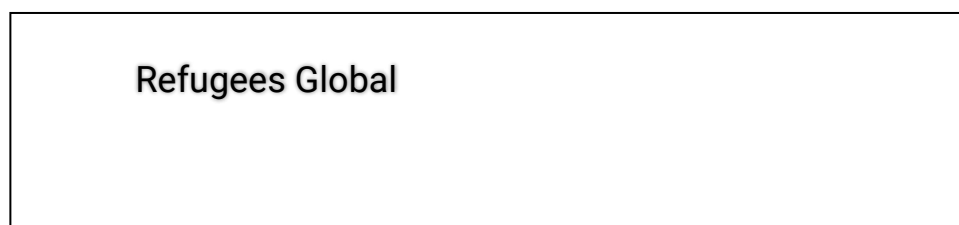
*Rising sea levels in Florida - 0C-4C*



## Set the data free

It took centuries to generate comprehensive data on nation states. Not surprisingly, there is nowhere near the same level of detailed information on cities. Much of the information that is available is hard to access, and held privately. Where possible, data visualizations should be opened up to the public. In addition to making information available online, it is important to get these tools into museums, universities and schools around the world, maximizing understanding of the risks and opportunities confronting our cities.

*Global refugee flows - 2000-2016*





## Identify solutions

There is considerable pessimism about whether we can improve the health of our cities. The visualizations highlight the endogenous and exogenous risks we have witnessed in the past and are likely to face in the future. It is important also to include curated stories of "success," where once fragile cities turned things around. For instance there are marvelous stories of how municipal planners, business and civil society groups have invested in solar and wind energy, and these should be celebrated.

*Expansion of wind and solar power in the US - 1984-2016*

us solar wind



Ultimately, every data visualization has strengths and weaknesses, and it is important to be open about their limitations and assumptions. We disclose our methods and data sources, of

course, and recognize that there are always new and better indicators and ways to present information. Data visualizations offer insights into how to prepare for urban risks and mitigate climate stress. In this information saturation age, it is more important than ever to distinguish signal from noise.

*The Earth Timelapse involves many partners including Climate Central, Google, Igarapé Institute, NASA, NREL, Oxford Martin, UNHCR, USGS, and the CREATE Lab.*

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