What is urbanisation?

As the world’s population increases, urban areas continue to grow. In some regions, people are moving from rural to urban areas at very high rates.

**Urbanisation**

Urbanisation is the growth and expansion of urban areas and involves the movement of people to towns and cities. The earliest cities emerged about 5000 years ago in Mesopotamia (part of present-day Iran, Iraq and Syria). Originally these cities depended on agriculture. In 1800, only 2% of people lived in urban areas, 98% of the population still lived in rural areas, dependent upon farming and livestock production.

However, as cities grew and trade developed, urban areas became centres for merchants, traders, government officials and craftspeople. By 2008 the number of people living in urban areas had increased to 50.1 per cent, and in 2010 the figure had risen again to 50.5 per cent (see figure 2). The rate of growth has varied in different regions (see figure 1).

**Uneven urbanisation**

Urbanisation has not occurred evenly across the world. Some countries are predominantly rural, such as Cambodia and Papua New Guinea (populations 85 per cent and 87 per cent rural respectively), whereas others are almost completely urban, such as Belgium and Kuwait (97 per cent and 98 per cent urban 125 respectively). South America is becoming one of the most urbanised regions in the world and currently has a population of around 385 million people. It is estimated that, by 2050, 91.4 per cent of its population will be residing in urban areas.

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**Figure 1 | The growth in urban populations over time**

**Figure 2 | Percentage of population living in urban centres, 2010**
Coastal urbanisation

People have lived on coastlines for thousands of years. Often at the mouth of rivers, coastal settlements became centres of trade and commerce and quickly grew into cities. Today, about half the world’s population lives along or within 200 kilometres of a coastline. This means about 3.2 billion people live on only 10 per cent of the Earth’s land area (see figure 4).

Countries that have over 80 per cent of their population living within 100 kilometres of a coastline include the United Kingdom, Senegal, Portugal, Belgium, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Tunisia, Greece, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Sri Lanka, Japan, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Australia and New Zealand.

Figure 4 | Cape Town in South Africa is a city located on the coast

COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING ACTIVITIES IN YOUR BOOK

REMEMBER...
1. Define *urbanisation* in your own words.

EXPLAIN...
2. How has urbanisation changed from 1950 to the present?
   How is this different around the world?
   What is expected to happen in the future?

3. Explain how figure 1 shows that urbanisation has varied in different regions of the world.
   Which two regions have the greatest rural population?

DISCOVER...
4. Look at figure 2, which shows the population in urban areas. Identify and name the three countries with the highest and the three with the lowest percentage of people living in urban areas. Write a description of the general pattern shown in the map.

THINK...
5. Rural areas are where most food is produced. What are two possible outcomes for food production if urbanisation continues?

6. Think about Cape Town in figure 4, what are some advantages and disadvantages to the natural environment when cities and towns are located on the coast?