

The Degree of Urbanisation Explained Simply

27 January 2026

Transcript

Narrator: Worldwide, our homes and neighbourhoods are clustered into cities, towns and semi-dense areas, and rural areas. Each unique in their size, shape, services and characteristics. Their diversity reflecting the complexity of human life.

In a changing and increasingly challenging world, it is essential to accurately delineate these areas if development initiatives are to be successful. We therefore introduce the Degree of Urbanisation. A novel method to classify every such settlement or area on the planet within the urban-rural spectrum.

The methodology, tools and data described here are fully endorsed by the United Nations and have been adopted by an increasing number of countries worldwide.

Now, let's take a step back and think about human habitation.

Our presence on the Earth is visible from space, carved in intricate patterns. The precise reasons why people settle in particular locations are many, complex and diverse, as are the characteristics that develop in those cities, towns and rural areas. Are they densely or sparsely populated? Are they aligned to specific geographical features or infrastructure?

Consider any city-region on the planet. Where is the urban centre, as opposed to the suburban or peri-urban districts? Conversely, in the rural landscape, how do we distinguish villages from dispersed rural areas? What defines these varied locations, and where does the border lie between them?

And why is it important to understand this? To answer this question, we need only look at the lived experience of people residing in these areas. Data clearly shows that access to basic needs varies enormously from one area to another. The same tendency is observed across many demographic and socio-economic indicators, as well as related phenomena, such as the experience of natural disasters. Ultimately, for any form of development assistance to be effective, and for it to be an efficient use of resources, it must be highly targeted and appropriate to specific locations and communities.

This is only possible if such areas are accurately identified and delineated. The challenge is how to enable people at ground level to use and benefit from this insightful data, to be able to produce results rapidly with minimal training so they can influence decision-making.

To that end, the Degree of Urbanisation tools are intuitive and simple to operate, requiring only basic GIS skills and population data. Following clear, concise instructions to run one or a sequence of tools, this method will rapidly classify any area on the planet into the appropriate urbanisation category based on population distribution and density.

The Degree of Urbanisation complements existing national frameworks and definitions of urban-rural communities. It provides a consistent, standardised framework for reporting and monitoring progress against the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, noting that many of the

indicators contained within these goals explicitly require data to be framed within the urban and rural context.

There is, however, one missing component for realising the full potential of this methodology. You.

You are the expert in your local area. You understand the region and are likely to have more detailed data than the global baseline provided with the tools. So, we invite you to use the open tools to implement this methodology with your data, to tell new stories and drive the strategies of the future making an impact in your local reality.

In other words, you bring the wisdom.

Follow the link for detailed guidance and training on how to access the resources and supporting data. If you would like to contact the team about any aspect of the programme or your specific training needs, you can do so by emailing the team.