

Global trends in city population growth

Across the world, high-income countries have the highest shares of people in cities and their commuting zones but that proportion is growing faster in poorer countries.

An increasing share of the world's population lives in cities and their commuting zones (FUAs). Between 1975 and 2015, the population living in FUAs increased from 2.1 billion (or 51.5% of the world population) to 4.9 billion (53.7%) (Figure 4.7). FUAs with a population above 5 million experienced the fastest growth. Based on elaborations on global population projections made by the European Union (EU) (Jones et al, forthcoming), these large FUAs are projected to continue to grow by 180% over the next 30 years, mostly driven by low-income countries, which are experiencing fast population growth. According to such projections, the population will increase in cities of all sizes globally but growth in small FUAs will occur at a slower pace. The population of FUAs between 50 000 and 250 000 inhabitants is expected to remain practically stable but the population of those between 1 and 5 million inhabitants is projected to grow by around 46% over the next 3 decades, reaching 1.5 billion by 2050.

The share of people living in cities and their commuting zones changes significantly across income levels, being significantly larger in high-income countries, compared to other income groups. While 71% of the population in high-income countries live in FUAs, this rate drops to 34% in low-income countries (Figure 4.8). The average city size varies depending on the income level of the country. When moving from high- to low-income countries (i.e. from the left to the right of Figure 4.8), the population share in FUAs between 250 000 and 1 million inhabitants halves (from 17% to 8%). In contrast, the average share of people living in FUAs with less than 250 000 people increases from 7% to 11%.

Many countries have experienced sizeable shifts in the geographic distribution of their population in the past decades, in particular less urbanised countries, where many towns transformed into cities and metropolitan areas. Between 2000 and 2015, the total world population living in FUAs has increased by 1.3% per year (21% over the whole period). Low-income countries experienced the fastest growth of cities and their commuting zones, in those countries, the population has increased by 3% per year (or about 55% across the period), while OECD countries grew by 0.83% per year (13.2% over the whole period) (Figure 4.9). During the same period, cities and their commuting zones grew fastest in Sub-Saharan Africa by 3% annually (or about 52% across the period), reflecting both the general high population growth in that region and growing urbanisation. On the other hand, the slowest growth was observed in Central Asia and Europe, where the total FUA population increased by 0.55% per year (or 8% over the whole period).

While FUAs have been growing faster than other places in OECD countries, around one in five FUAs has been shrinking since 2000. Population decline in FUAs was particularly pronounced in Latvia and Lithuania, where all FUAs lost population. In countries, such as Hungary, Japan, Korea and

Slovenia, about half of all FUAs have recorded population loss since 2000 (Figure 4.10 to Figure 4.12). The “shrinking cities” phenomenon brings unprecedented challenges to policymakers and it is projected to become even more pressing in the coming decades. According to recent estimations (Jones, B. et al), 35% of all FUAs (20% in OECD FUAs) is expected to experience population decline between 2020 and 2050.

Definition

Delineation of cities and their commuting zones: This section documents population trends of cities and their respective commuting zones for the entire world. For such global analysis, cities and commuting zones were consistently delineated without relying on any local administrative definition and using gridded population data only. Details on the gridded FUA delineation method are provided in Moreno-Monroy, Schiavina and Veneri (2020).

Classification of countries by income levels: According to the World Bank, low-income economies are defined as those with a gross national income (GNI) per capita of USD 1 025 or less in 2018; lower-middle-income with a GNI per capita between USD 1 026 and USD 3 995; upper-middle-income economies with a GNI per capita between USD 3 996 and USD 12 375; high-income economies with a GNI per capita of USD 12 376 or more.

Sources

OECD (2020), *World Cities Tool (database)*, OECD, Paris, <http://www.worldcitiestool.org/>.

Jones, B. et al. (forthcoming), *Projecting Global Population Grids to 2100*, Publications Office of the European Union.

Reference years and territorial level

2000-15, estimated FUAs (eFUAs).

Further information

EU-OECD (2020), *Cities in the World: A New Perspective on Urbanisation*, OECD Urban Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/d0efcbda-en>.

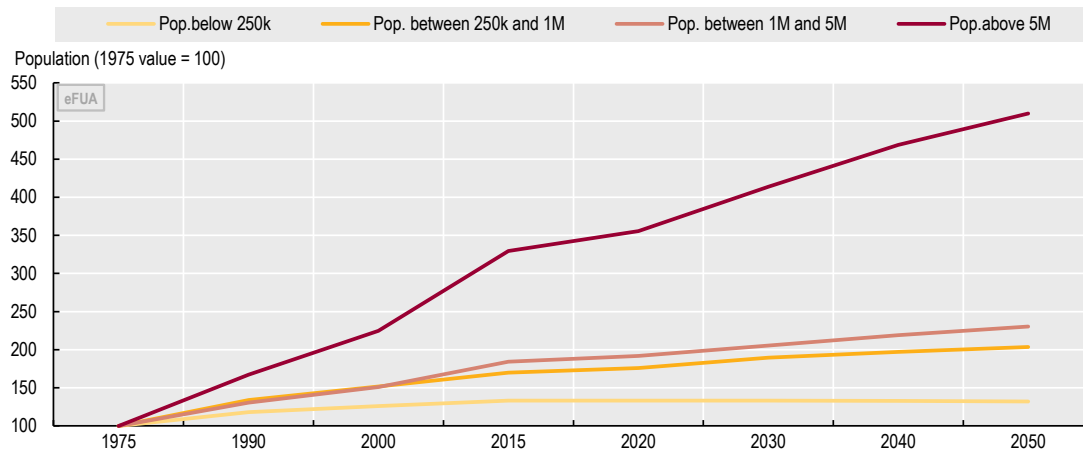
Moreno-Monroy A.I., M. Schiavaina and P. Veneri (2020), “Metropolitan areas in the world. Delineation and population trends”, *Journal of Urban Economics*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jue.2020.103242>.

Figure notes

Figure 4.8 and Figure 4.9: NA: North America; ME & NA: Middle East and North Africa; LA & C: Latin America and the Caribbean; E & CA: Europe and Central Asia; EA & P: East Asia and the Pacific, SSA: Sub-Saharan Africa.

4.7. Changes in global population in FUAs, 1975-2050

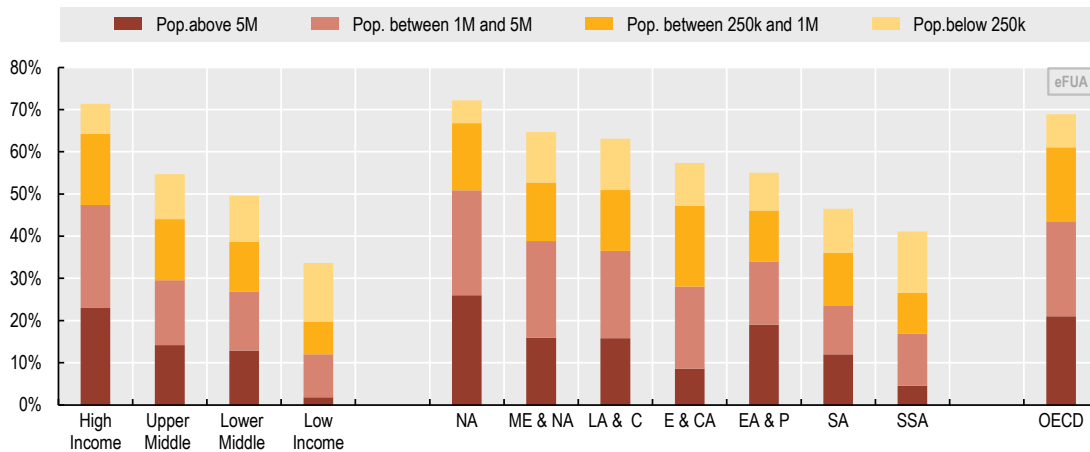
Total population (in millions)



StatLink <https://doi.org/10.1787/888934190609>

4.8. Functional urban areas by countries' income and region, 2015

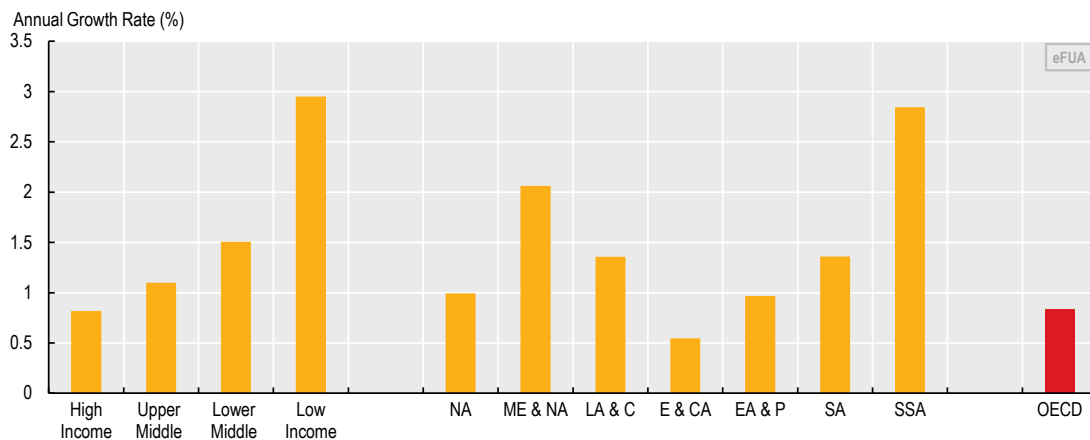
FUA population as a percentage of the total population



StatLink <https://doi.org/10.1787/888934190628>

4.9. Annual metropolitan population growth by countries' income and region, 2000-15

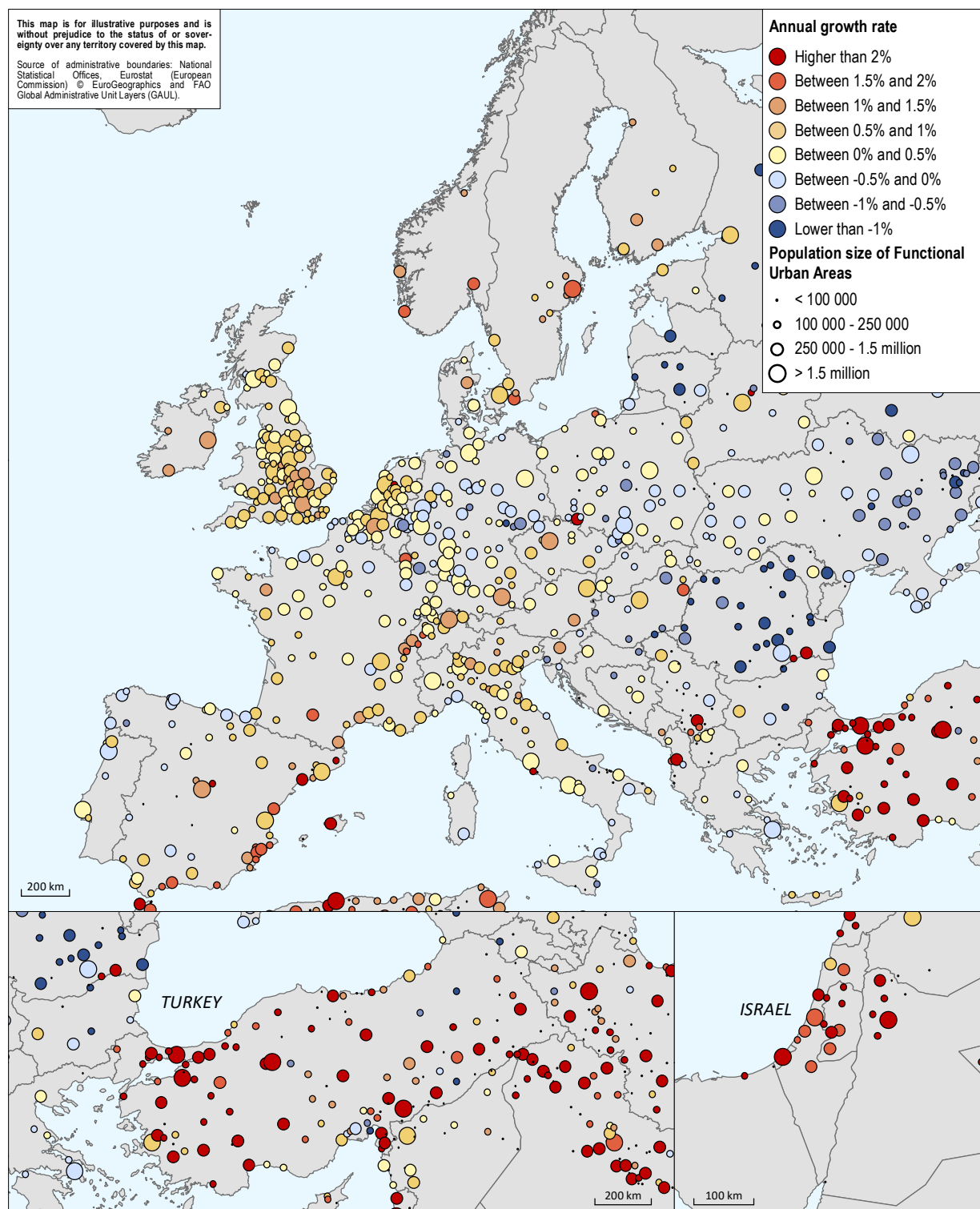
Annual average population growth rate in FUAs



StatLink <https://doi.org/10.1787/888934190647>

4.10. Population growth and size in metropolitan areas: Eurasia and Africa

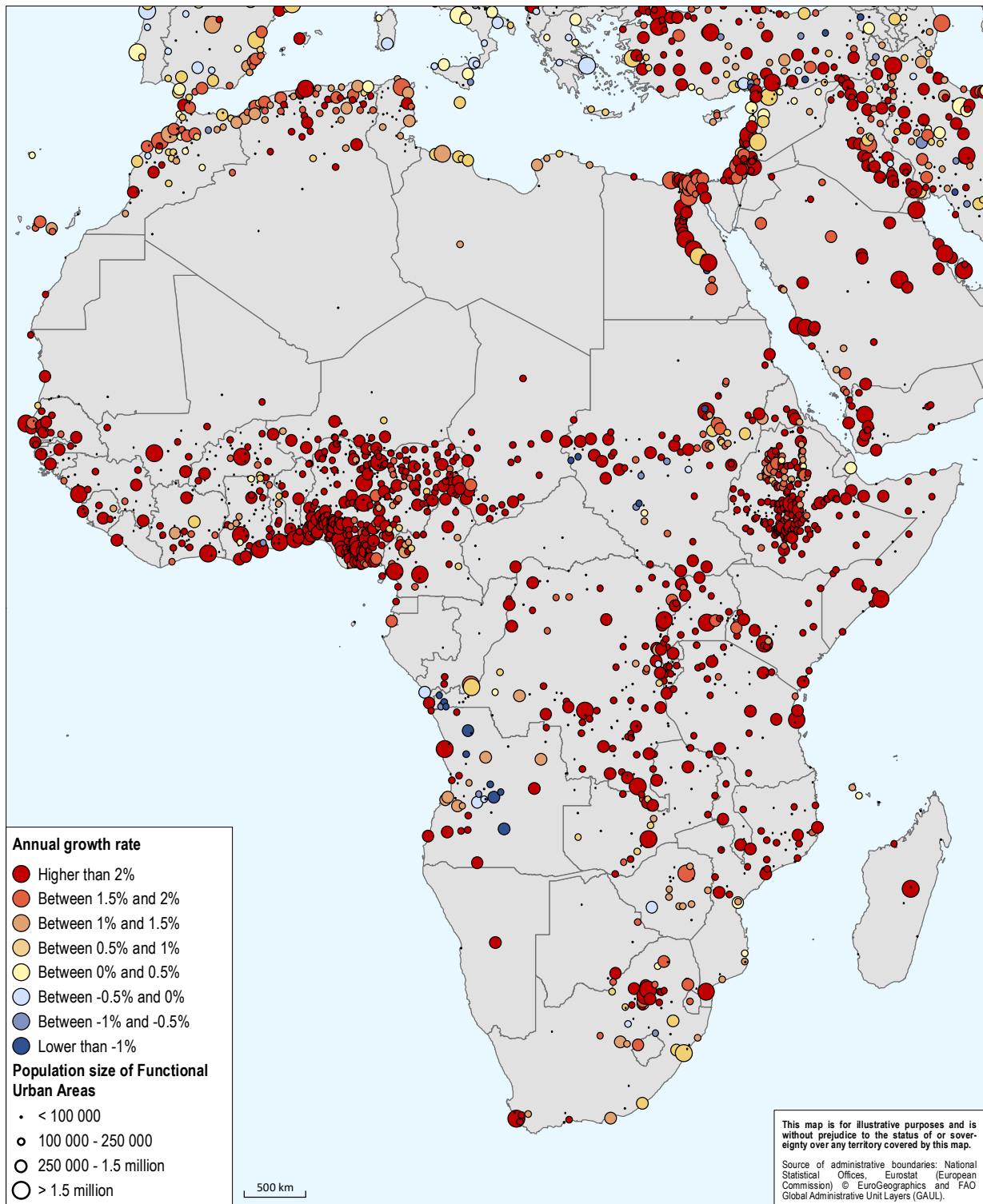
Annual population growth between 2000 and 2015, population size in 2015



StatLink <https://doi.org/10.1787/888934190666>

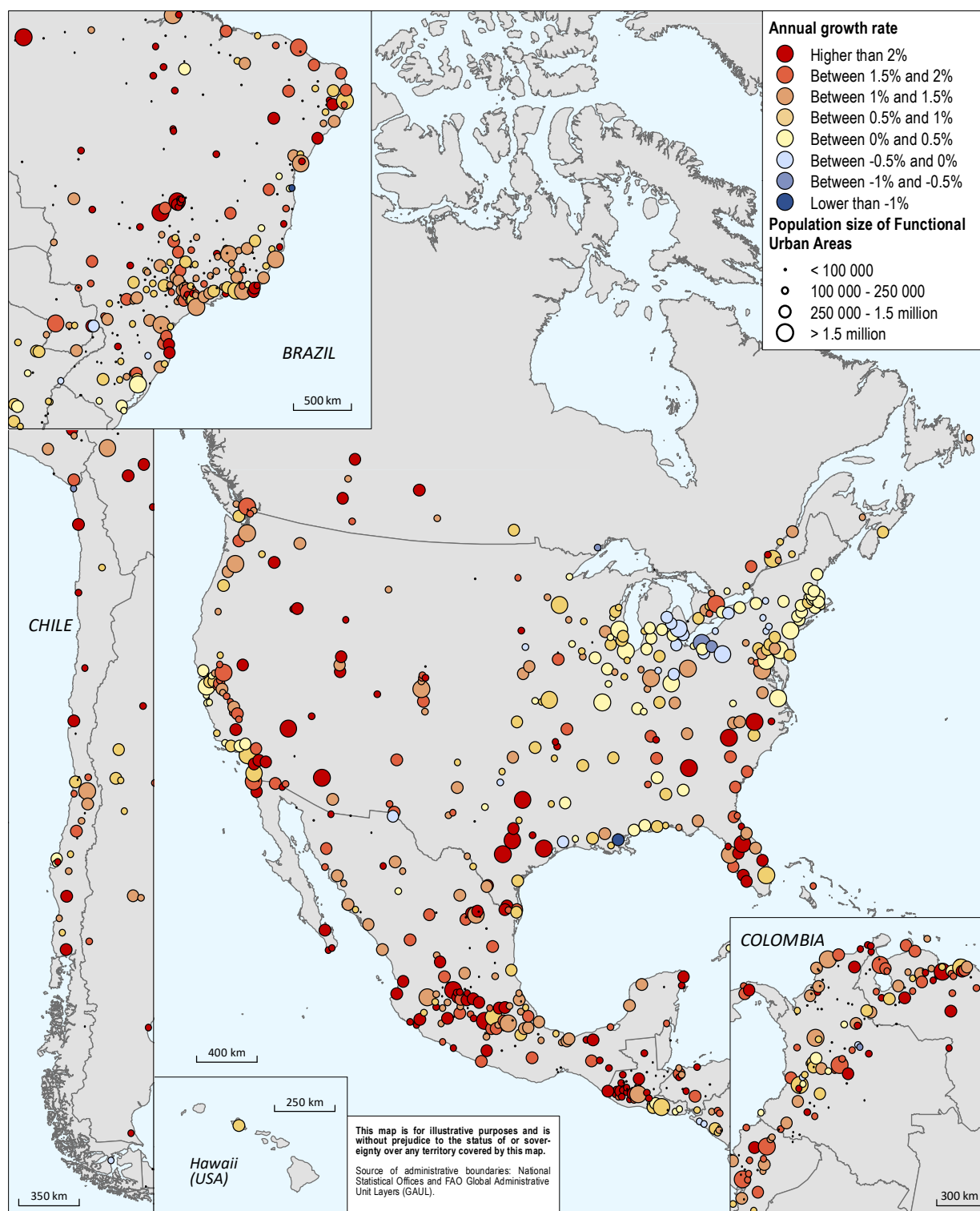
4.10. Population growth and size in metropolitan areas: Eurasia and Africa (cont.)

Annual population growth between 2000 and 2015, population size in 2015



4.11. Population growth and size in metropolitan areas: North and South America

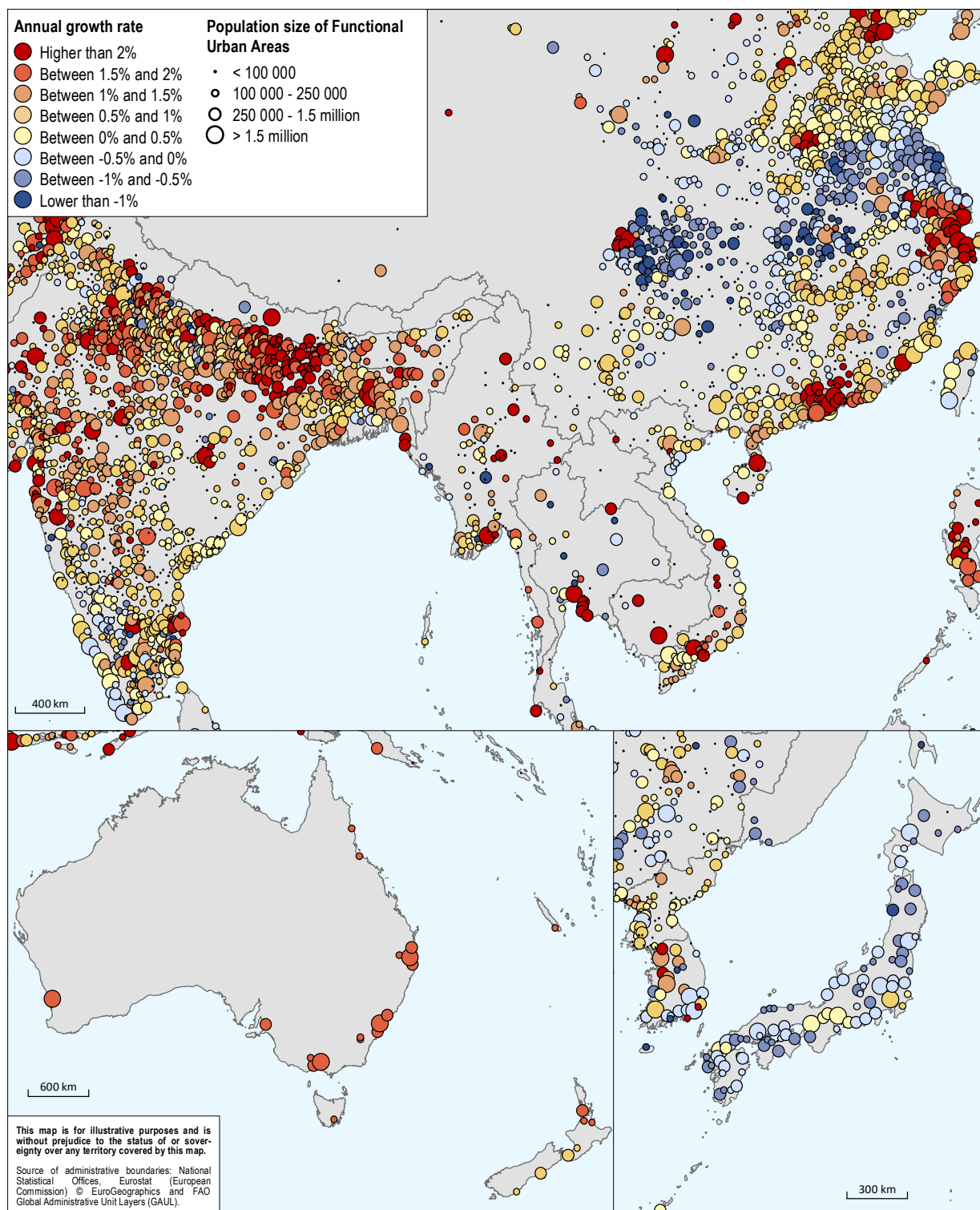
Annual population growth between 2000 and 2015, population size in 2015



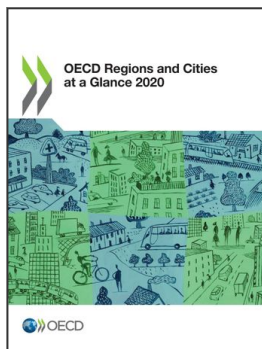
StatLink <https://doi.org/10.1787/888934190685>

4.12. Population growth and size in metropolitan areas: Asia and Oceania

Annual population growth between 2000 and 2015, population size in 2015



StatLink <https://doi.org/10.1787/888934190704>



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