



# RESEARCH REPORT

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT  
COMMISSION (SDC)

ENSURING SAFE AND SUSTAINABLE  
URBANIZATION IN DEVELOPING  
COUNTRIES

DERIN ŞENER



## Basic Overview of the Issue

Among developing countries, the latest rates of urbanization are observed, and over 90% of future urban population growth will occur in low- and middle-income countries. Urbanization holds the potential to unlock economic development, accelerate innovation, and create access to services, but all too often it occurs without adequate planning, infrastructure, and regulation. As a result, serious challenges such as overcrowded informal settlements, inadequate housing, unsafe water and sanitation systems, traffic congestion, air pollution and greater risk of climate-disaster exposure are plaguing fast-growing cities in large parts of the developing world.

The other is unregulated urban sprawl leading to slums and marginalized neighborhoods, often built on unsafe soil, with little access to basic services, including health care, schooling and clean energy. Such conditions not only perpetuate poverty and inequality, but also fuel environmental devastation and public health crises. In a large number of cities around the globe, lack of infrastructure resilient to shocks and governance structures that fail at least all but the most privileged of their citizens endanger lives and reduce long-run prospects for development.

Safe and sustainable urbanization is critical for the attainment of several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular for one of them: Goal 11 — Sustainable Cities and Communities. It asks for a composite, whole-systems approach that advocates equitable land use, resilient infrastructure, climate-aware planning and inclusive economic growth. This means empowering local authorities, increasing access to affordable housing, investing in green public transport, and ensuring urban developments leave no one behind.

## Explanation of Important Terms

### *Urbanization*

Urbanization is the process by which more and more people leave the countryside to live in cities

### *Sustainability*

Sustainability is defined as meeting the needs of the present without compromising

the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

### *Developing Country*

A developing country is a country with a relatively low standard of living, an undeveloped industrial base, and a moderate to low Human Development Index (HDI).

### *Slum*

A slum is defined as a very poor and crowded area of a city.

### *Green Energy*

Green energy is any energy type that is generated from natural resources, such as sunlight, wind, or water.

### *Industrialization*

Industrialization is the process of developing industry in countries.

### *Urban*

A human settlement of a substantial size, where the number of people per square kilometre is fairly high.

### *Rural*

Rural is defined as any geographic area that is located outside towns and cities, a countryside.

### *United Nations Sustainable Development Goals*

The Sustainable Development Goals are goals adopted by the United Nations in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by 2030, all people enjoy peace and prosperity.

## **Detailed Background of the Issue**

### *Challenges and Global Responses to Rapid Urbanization in Developing Countries*

Urbanization — the migration of a greater number of people into cities hoping for better opportunities — has shrunk even faster than before in the developing world. Cities in countries throughout Africa, Asia and Latin America are experiencing rapid growth as people

seek access to jobs, education, health care and improved quality of life. But the rate of urbanization, in much of the developing world at least, has created grave problems, because cities are growing faster than governments can prepare for them. This has resulted in the growth of informal settlements or slums, unchecked neighborhoods without water, electricity, sanitation, transport utilities or legal status, where millions live in crowded and unsafe housing. These settlements are often outside of government planning systems, depriving residents of any protection from being evicted, from natural disasters or violence. Unfortunately, these unsafe conditions reach far beyond the U.S. as over 1 billion people worldwide live in them. Inadequate drainage, waste management and health services leave these communities vulnerable to disease outbreaks and natural disasters. Rapid urbanization can also cause environmental destruction, as roads, factories and farms often mean the dismantling of forests, rivers and farmland that reduces biodiversity and devastates food systems. The global community has initiated numerous projects to enhance urban environments for all inhabitants. Sustainable Development Goal 11 along with the New Urban Agenda aims to transform urban areas into safer, more inclusive, and sustainable environments. India's Smart Cities Mission together with Africa's Agenda 2063 aim to upgrade infrastructure systems while enhancing urban living conditions for every citizen. Funding shortages combined with poor governance create problems while marginalized groups including slum dwellers, women, and youth receive inadequate attention. These issues have decelerated advancement. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed numerous vulnerabilities inherent in informal settlements. The increasing urban migration in developing areas demands joint efforts from local and international leaders.

## Urban Governance and the Role of Local Authorities

The role of local governments remains a frequently neglected element in sustainable urbanization dialogues. Numerous developing nations place the management of housing, waste, transportation, and public services in the hands of city-level authorities who frequently operate without sufficient funding, autonomy, or expertise to respond effectively. The centralized nature of urban governance systems often results in sluggish local decision-making processes that fail to address community needs effectively. The presence of ineffective governance frameworks often results in both corrupt practices and inefficient service. Building responsive, inclusive, and resilient cities demands the enhancement of local

authorities' capabilities through improved training programs, resource allocation, and community involvement. International development programs have shifted their focus to empower municipal governments for direct challenge mitigation regarding this problem

## Major Parties Involved

### *India*

India is one of the fastest urbanizing countries, and by 2031, India's urban population is predicted to be over 600 million. While urbanization has driven economic growth, it has also resulted in increased informal settlements, poor sanitation and higher environmental risks. In India, the government has undertaken several large programs to foster sustainable and inclusive urbanization, including the Smart Cities Mission and AMRUT (Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation). India is critical to providing scalable models of urban planning to other developing countries.

### *Brazil*

With its massive population, Brazil is Latin America's largest country, and living in the shadow of its sprawling cities, the region's true urban challenge lies in the management of so-called informal settlements, or "favelas." Fast urban growth in cities like São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro has overburdened housing, sanitation and transportation systems. For instance, Brazil made its efforts to balance development with sustainability clear with the Minha Casa Minha Vida housing program and municipal-level initiatives involving green infrastructure. Through its community-based development experiences and urban inclusion practices, Brazil is a highly engaged participant in global dialogues on urban policy.

### *Nigeria*

With cities like Lagos booming into megacities, Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, is going urban at light speed. But urban development has been mostly informal leading to the proliferation of slums, poor transportation networks and lack of access to clean water and sanitation. Nigeria's cases and trajectories of urbanization are emblematic of international challenges of safe and sustainable urbanization, as Nigeria figures significantly in urbanization trends for the Sub-Saharan Africa region.

## *Indonesia*

In Indonesia, urbanization where Java and Sumatra are seeing massive urban transformation. Though urbanization has translated into economic benefits, air pollution, traffic congestion and sensitivity to climate disaster (as in Jakarta flooding) have become real threats. The government of Indonesia is in fact trying to decentralise urban growth with the relocation of its capital Jakarta and development of resilient infrastructure. Indonesia promotes climate-adaptive urbanization and inclusive city planning on international stages.

## *China*

Now a global power, some of China's recent history of rapid urbanization holds important lessons for developing countries. The International Network of Chinese Urban Planning and Design Professionals (INUPDP) cites the model city as a source of inspiration for Iraq, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines, and espouses its principles in development cooperation and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects. Nevertheless, China is struggling with pollution and social inclusion and is both a case study in and an actor on the main stage of urban development around the world.

## ,Chronology of Important Events

Date	Description of Event
<b>October 16th, 1975</b>	UN-Habitat was established, focusing on sustainable urban development, especially in developing countries.
<b>December 14th, 1992</b>	This joint program by UN-Habitat and UNEP helped cities in Africa, Asia, and Latin America improve urban governance, reduce pollution, and develop better infrastructure.
<b>June 14th, 1996</b>	World leaders met in Istanbul to commit to “sustainable human settlements” and “adequate shelter for all.” This was the first time governments formally recognized the need to include local communities
<b>October 20th, 2008</b>	Cities and Climate Change Initiative (CCCI) - Launched by UN-Habitat to support cities—especially in developing countries—in becoming more climate-resilient.
<b>September 25th, 2015</b>	The UN’s 2030 Agenda introduced SDG 11: “Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.”
<b>October 20th, 2016</b>	Quito, New Urban Agenda Adopted at Habitat III, this global agreement provided a 20-year vision for sustainable urbanization. It focused on affordable housing, public transport, participatory planning, and urban resilience

## Relevant International Documents

[United Nations Resolution on 23 December 2016 for declaring the adaptation and presenting a brief overview of the principles agreed by parties in the Habitat III conference. \(A/RES/71/256\)](#)

### [The New Urban Agenda, October 20, 2016, Habitat III Conference](#)

A new approach on urbanization adopted by the United Nations that include establishing many new policies such as including local NGOs in the urbanization process.

[United Nations General Assembly resolution on 19 December, 2024 for the implementation of the outcomes of the United Nations Conferences on Human Settlements and on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development and strengthening of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme \(UN-Habitat\). \(A/RES/79/214\)](#)

## **Past Attempts to Resolve the Issue**

There have been various attempts to address urbanization issues, but still, they have not been enough to cause a major impact. Especially UN-Habitat and the World Bank have initiated many projects intending to improve infrastructure and housing in urban areas. For example, through the collaboration of the European Commission (EC), UN Habitat launched the Participatory Slum Upgrading Program(PSUP), which was implemented in 190 cities. The program originally aimed to expand to many more cities as well. Yet, the program did not achieve the success that the UN hoped for. Eventually, due to lack of funds, rapidly increasing population, and incompatibility among governments and the officials of the program, the issue had proven itself too strong to be overcome by only external aid.

Additionally, as the world's largest multilateral financier of Urban development, the World Bank has also launched various programs and campaigns to ensure sustainable urbanization. Many of these projects were focused on developing nations that have significantly high levels of population growth. Although some of the campaigns have been successful, they have not yet been able to address the issue fully. One of the main reasons why the funding of the World Bank was not enough to overcome the issue is the high rates of population growth in developing countries and the uncollaborative approach of many governments towards the World Bank officials.

Finally, one of the most important attempts to consider in order to solve this issue is the Habitat III agenda adopted by the UN in 2016, during the conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development. Unlike other past attempts, instead of providing states with only funding and minimal supervision, this agenda proposed the adaptation of a framework that proposed the collaboration of not only the governments of different developing nations



but the assistance of local NGO's as well. Although the inclusion of the local NGOs and a multilateral framework was promising, this attempt has not been able to tackle the issue. Because the necessary diplomatic dialogue had not been able to be maintained, a binding framework was never drafted by the UN.

## **Solution Alternatives**

Ensuring the sustainable urbanization of developing countries requires a cooperative and multilateral approach. First and foremost, through the past attempts to resolve the issue, it has been demonstrated that providing funding only is not enough to tackle the issue. However, this does not change the fact that funding is still essential to addressing the problem. Nevertheless, ensuring international cooperation is critical for solving the issue.

In order to ensure international cooperation, steps should be taken to establish a multilateral framework among developing countries. This can be achieved by ensuring diplomatic dialogues between developing nations through international summits mediated by the UN. This could also be accomplished by the formation of a collaborative partnership treaty between developing countries that will set precautionary legal frameworks against corruption for preventing corrupt governments from taking advantage of the situation, as well as ensuring collaboration.

Additionally, one of the main obstacles that developing states face after receiving external financial aid from organizations like the World Bank is being able to use the funds properly to orchestrate a good urbanization plan or manage the recently urbanized area after the construction. Therefore, attracting foreign investors from developed nations to invest in and manage real estate and infrastructure projects in developing countries is essential since the foreign investors are experienced in successfully using funds to orchestrate and manage real estate and infrastructure projects. One way to attract foreign investors to developing nations is by taking measures for developing nations to adopt policies that aim to create favorable economic standards, such as reducing nationwide tariffs or establishing low-tax economic zones. Furthermore, to handle this, steps should be taken to form regional economic agreements between developing and developed countries that set special economic privileges between the countries to further enhance economic engagement and lead the investors from the developed nations to invest in the developing ones. However, respecting the sovereignty of developing nations is crucial while

implementing this. Therefore, the drafting of any possible economic agreement or treaty in question should be done with the guidance of the UN.

Finally, for ensuring sustainable development using clean energy sources and eco-friendly technologies, green infrastructure and technologies are also necessary. Thus, to ensure sustainable development, a legally binding regulatory framework regarding sustainable urbanization could be jointly established by developing nations and the UNEP in order to prevent environmental harm caused by urban development.

## Useful Links

UN Habitat's annual report on urbanization and sustainable usage of energy:

<https://unhabitat.org/annual-report-2023>

UN Sustainable Development Goal number 11:

<https://www.globalgoals.org/goals/11-sustainable-cities-and-communities/>

United Nations University (UNU) on making cities more sustainable and resilient:

<https://unu.edu/ehs/series/5-ways-make-cities-more-sustainable-and-resilient>

Inter-governmental conference explores sustainable urbanization in developing countries:

<https://www.theigc.org/sites/default/files/2023-01/Delbridge-et-al-Growth-brief-October-2022.pdf>

Demonstrates the risks of rapid urbanization in developing countries:

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