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# Urbanization and Sustainable Development in the Arab Region

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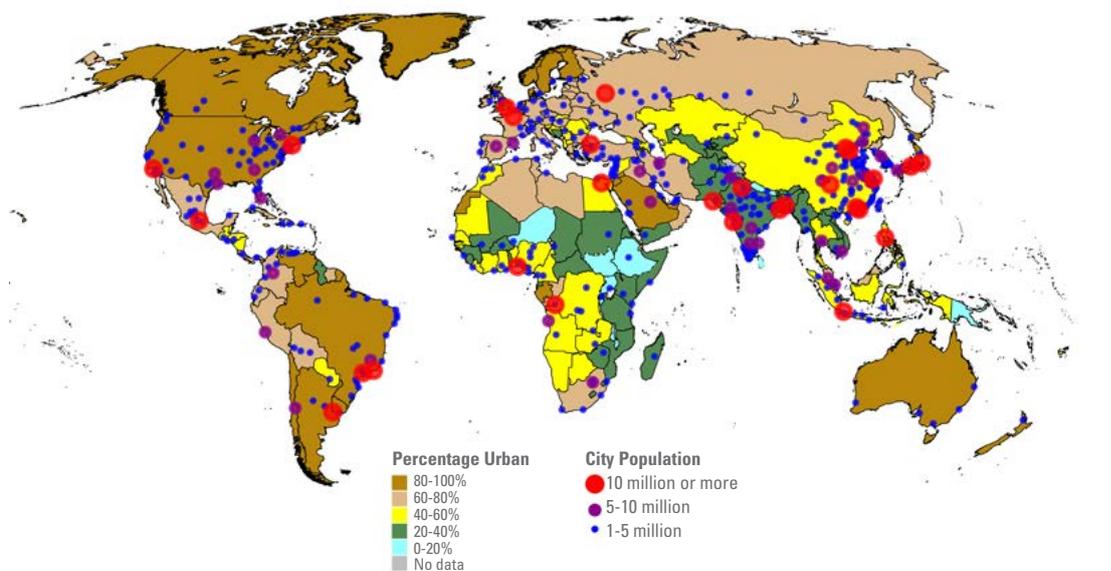
## 1. The new urban agenda: towards more inclusive, safe, sustainable and prosperous societies

centres are perfectly positioned to increase the exchange of goods and services and produce economies of scale and agglomeration, which can contribute to economic growth and social development.

Throughout history, urban areas have provided a dynamic conduit for the production and exchange of goods and services. Urban centres have always contained a market place where consumers and producers meet, exchange their outputs, and obtain better information on the products available and what distinguishes them from other products. Given that they are proximate to all factors of production and benefit from mass transportation systems and the concentration of services, urban

The world urban population grew from 746 million in 1950 to 3.9 billion in 2014.<sup>1</sup> This relatively rapid process of urbanization is likely to continue in the future. In 2014, 54 per cent of the world's population lived in urban areas, a proportion that is expected to reach 66 per cent by 2050.<sup>2</sup> Asia is home to 53 per cent of the world urban population, despite being a predominantly rural region, followed by Europe at 14 per cent and Latin America and the Caribbean at 13 per cent.<sup>3</sup> There are currently over 25

Figure 1. Percentage urban and urban agglomerations by size class, 2014



Source: From "World Urbanization Prospects-The 2014 Revision". <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/DataQuery/>. The site was accessed on November 2015. UN DESA, Population Division © 2015 United Nations. Reprinted with the permission of the United Nations.

urban agglomerations with populations above 10 million throughout the world, notably in developing countries (figure 1).

With this rapid growth in urban areas, major new challenges have emerged, including an increase in urban poverty and unemployment; the growth of slums and peri-urban areas; a rise of gated cities and the lack of public spaces; the overburdening of basic urban infrastructure; considerable disparities between urban and rural areas; and the significant impact of urban agglomerations on the climate.

The growing challenges accompanying rapid urbanization call for collective action at national, regional and global levels to ensure that cities continue to promote economic growth and prosperity for their inhabitants in an environmentally sustainable manner. Adequate rules and regulations need to be put in place to ensure accessibility and equality of access. Urban design should prioritize equality of access for all and provide citizens with smooth accessibility to the means of production as well as the exchange of goods and services in an efficient and optimal manner. Systematic efforts should continue to be made to ensure that basic urban services are provided to all urban dwellers, bearing in mind that the unit cost of service provision tends to be lower in concentrated urban areas than in dispersed rural ones.

In an effort to render cities more inclusive and optimize their role as drivers of economic growth and social development, the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) is working with various national, regional and global partners to formulate a new urban vision, which is not only fully inclusive but also sustainable, resilient and safe.

The United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) will be held in Quito, Ecuador, in 2016. The

aim is to encourage United Nations member States to adopt a new global urban agenda and reinvigorate the global commitment to sustainable urbanization. This new agenda will build on the Habitat Agenda issued at Habitat II, held in Istanbul in 1996, which emphasized adequate shelter for all, with the notion of sustainable human settlements driving development in an urbanizing world. In an inclusive and participatory process, Habitat III will attempt to secure renewed political commitment for sustainable urban development, assess progress achieved over the last two decades and identify new and emerging challenges (box 1).

Habitat III will be the first United Nations global summit after the adoption of the post-2015 development agenda and, possibly, a new climate change agreement, which the twenty-first session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, taking place in Paris from 30 November to 11 December 2015, aims to achieve.<sup>4</sup>

Habitat III will offer a unique opportunity to discuss the important challenge of how cities, towns and villages are planned and managed, and their role as possible drivers of sustainable development. The new urban agenda to be considered and adopted is expected to go well beyond the 1996 Habitat Agenda by addressing the new urban challenges facing the world. It will make use of developments in technology and accrued knowledge, and will promote a new model of urban development that integrates all facets of sustainable development to foster equity, welfare and shared prosperity, and addresses the means to mobilize the global community to achieve these goals. With suitable policies and the necessary commitments and actions agreed upon at the national, regional and global levels, cities and towns can act as effective and efficient drivers of sustainable economic and social development.

**Box 1. Main targets of Habitat III**

The third United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) will take place in Quito, Ecuador, from 17 to 20 October 2016. The United Nations General Assembly decided to convene the Habitat III Conference to reinvigorate the global commitment to sustainable urbanization, and to focus on the implementation of a New Urban Agenda, building on the earlier Habitat Agenda emanating from the Habitat II Conference that took place in Istanbul in 1996. Through an inclusive and participatory process, Habitat III will aim to secure renewed political commitment for sustainable urban development, assess accomplishments to date, address poverty, and identify and address new and emerging challenges. According to UN-Habitat, Habitat III will:

- Rethink the Urban Agenda: by embracing urbanization at all levels of human settlements, more appropriate policies can embrace urbanization across physical space, bridging urban, peri-urban and rural areas, and assist governments in addressing challenges through national and local development policy frameworks;
- Integrate equity to the development agenda: equity becomes an issue of social justice, ensures access to the public sphere, extends opportunities and increases the commons;
- Foster national urban planning and planned city extensions;
- Decide how relevant sustainable development goals will be supported through sustainable urbanization;
- Align and strengthen institutional arrangements with the substantive outcomes of Habitat III, so as to ensure effective delivery of the New Urban Agenda;
- Revise and renew the mandate of UN-Habitat to ensure that it is fit for its purpose: UN-Habitat is ready to join efforts with government stakeholders to promote a new model of urban development for the twenty-first century.

**Source:** UN-Habitat, About Habitat III: The New Urban Agenda. Available from [www.habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda](http://www.habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda).

## 2. The relevance of the New Urban Agenda to the Arab world

These same goals of inclusion, resilience, safety, prosperity and sustainability are of paramount significance to Arab cities and the Arab region as a whole, which is urbanizing at a rapid pace. In 2010, the population of Arab countries was 357 million, 56 per cent of whom lived in cities; by 2050, these countries will be home to 646 million people, 68 per cent of whom will live in cities.<sup>5</sup> The urban population in Arab countries grew by more than four times from 1970 to 2010 and will more than

double again between 2010 and 2050. Table 1 illustrates the average annual rates of change of the urban population in Arab countries and compares these regional rates with world average rates. The table shows, for example, that in the period 2010-2015, 16 of 22 Arab countries were estimated to have a higher average annual rate of change than the world average. Similarly, in 2014, as many as 18 of 22 Arab countries had a higher urban population share than the world average (table 2).

Like other regions, the Arab region is experiencing the natural transformative force of urbanization. However, unlike other regions,

**Table 1.** Average annual rate of change of the urban population in Arab countries, 2000-2030 (percentage)

Location	2000-2005	2005-2010	2010-2015	2015-2020	2020-2025	2025-2030
World	2.27	2.20	2.05	1.84	1.63	1.44
Algeria	2.63	2.87	2.77	2.26	1.77	1.33
Bahrain	5.50	7.08	1.71	1.77	1.28	1.00
Comoros	2.42	2.60	2.67	2.71	2.81	2.98
Djibouti	1.49	1.49	1.60	1.52	1.35	1.18
Egypt	1.74	1.68	1.68	1.75	1.79	1.86
Iraq	2.88	2.54	3.01	2.79	2.68	2.43
Jordan	2.23	4.49	3.79	1.26	1.79	1.56
Kuwait	3.74	5.31	3.63	2.29	1.99	1.75
Lebanon	4.31	1.84	3.18	-0.57	0.81	0.64
Libya	1.70	1.73	1.13	1.64	1.37	1.13
Mauritania	4.52	4.04	3.54	3.20	2.88	2.62
Morocco	1.62	1.89	2.26	1.92	1.68	1.41
Oman	3.03	2.86	8.54	2.17	1.53	0.96
Palestine	2.40	2.69	2.81	2.75	2.61	2.41
Qatar	6.72	15.38	6.02	1.63	0.95	0.74
Saudi Arabia	4.35	2.25	2.10	1.81	1.34	1.02
Somalia	3.85	3.75	4.06	4.05	3.99	3.86
Sudan	2.77	2.62	2.54	3.02	3.14	3.21
Syrian Arab Republic	2.78	4.09	1.37	3.59	2.27	2.09
Tunisia	1.54	1.38	1.38	1.28	1.12	0.94
United Arab Emirates	6.81	14.64	2.87	2.32	1.82	1.61
Yemen	4.72	4.29	4.03	3.76	3.40	3.00

**Source:** Country data compiled from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), (n.d.). Available from <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/DataQuery/>.

**Table 2.** Percentage of population in Arab countries at mid-year residing in urban areas: selected years

Location	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2014	2020	2030
World	29.6	33.7	36.6	39.3	42.9	46.6	51.6	53.6	56.2	60.0
Algeria	22.2	30.5	39.5	43.5	52.1	59.9	67.5	70.1	73.4	77.4
Bahrain	64.4	82.3	83.8	86.1	88.1	88.4	88.5	88.7	89.1	90.0
Comoros	6.6	12.6	19.4	23.2	27.9	28.1	27.9	28.2	29.0	31.5
Djibouti	39.8	50.3	61.8	72.1	76.0	76.5	77.0	77.3	77.8	79.2
Egypt	31.9	37.9	41.5	43.9	43.5	42.8	43.0	43.1	43.8	46.7
Iraq	35.1	42.9	56.2	65.5	69.7	68.5	69.0	69.4	70.2	72.4
Jordan	37.0	50.9	56.0	60.0	73.3	79.8	82.5	83.4	84.8	86.6
Kuwait	61.5	74.9	85.7	94.8	98.0	98.1	98.3	98.3	98.4	98.6
Lebanon	32.0	42.3	59.5	73.7	83.1	86.0	87.2	87.7	88.4	89.6
Libya	19.5	27.3	49.7	70.1	75.7	76.3	77.6	78.4	79.6	81.8
Mauritania	3.1	6.9	14.6	27.4	41.3	49.2	56.7	59.3	62.6	66.9
Morocco	26.2	29.4	34.5	41.2	48.4	53.3	57.7	59.7	62.6	67.0
Oman	8.6	16.4	29.7	47.6	66.1	71.6	75.2	77.2	79.7	82.8
Palestine	37.3	44.0	54.3	62.4	67.7	72.0	74.1	75.0	76.4	78.8
Qatar	80.5	85.3	88.4	89.4	92.8	96.3	98.7	99.2	99.5	99.7
Saudi Arabia	21.3	31.2	48.7	65.9	76.6	79.8	82.1	82.9	84.1	85.9
Somalia	12.7	17.3	22.7	26.8	29.7	33.2	37.3	39.1	42.0	47.3
Sudan	6.8	10.7	16.5	20.0	28.6	32.5	33.1	33.6	35.0	38.8
Syrian Arab Republic	32.7	36.8	43.3	46.7	48.9	51.9	55.7	57.3	59.7	63.8
Tunisia	32.3	37.5	43.5	50.6	57.9	63.4	65.9	66.6	67.9	70.6
United Arab Emirates	54.5	73.5	79.8	80.7	79.1	80.2	84.1	85.3	86.8	88.5
Yemen	5.8	9.1	13.3	16.5	20.9	26.3	31.7	34.0	37.5	43.2

**Source:** Country data compiled from UN DESA, (n.d.). Available from <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/DataQuery/>.

in several Arab countries, the process of urbanization is being accelerated and made more complex by war, crises and consequent displacement and migration, posing considerable challenges. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the region is witnessing globally unprecedented rates of refugees and displaced persons, mainly as a result of recent events taking place in Iraq, Libya, Somalia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, entire cities in several countries have been destroyed in the course of crises and armed conflict. People's lives have been devastated and the social fabric has been unravelled in many places. Cities and countries neighbouring conflict areas have tried to accommodate the influx of millions of refugees and displaced persons with insufficient means to provide housing or other social services. These developments have exacerbated an already difficult situation in many countries, arising from the growth of suburbs and peri-urban areas, overcrowded slum areas, overstrained urban infrastructure, and often rising social tensions and spatial exclusion.

The last few decades have also witnessed the unprecedented growth of informal settlements, including in urban peripheries. The encroachment of urban areas on agricultural lands often threatens already scarce water and natural resources and overburdens the existing urban infrastructure which, in many cases, is not able to accommodate the sharp increase in demand for services. The status of urbanization and cities in the Arab region has thus

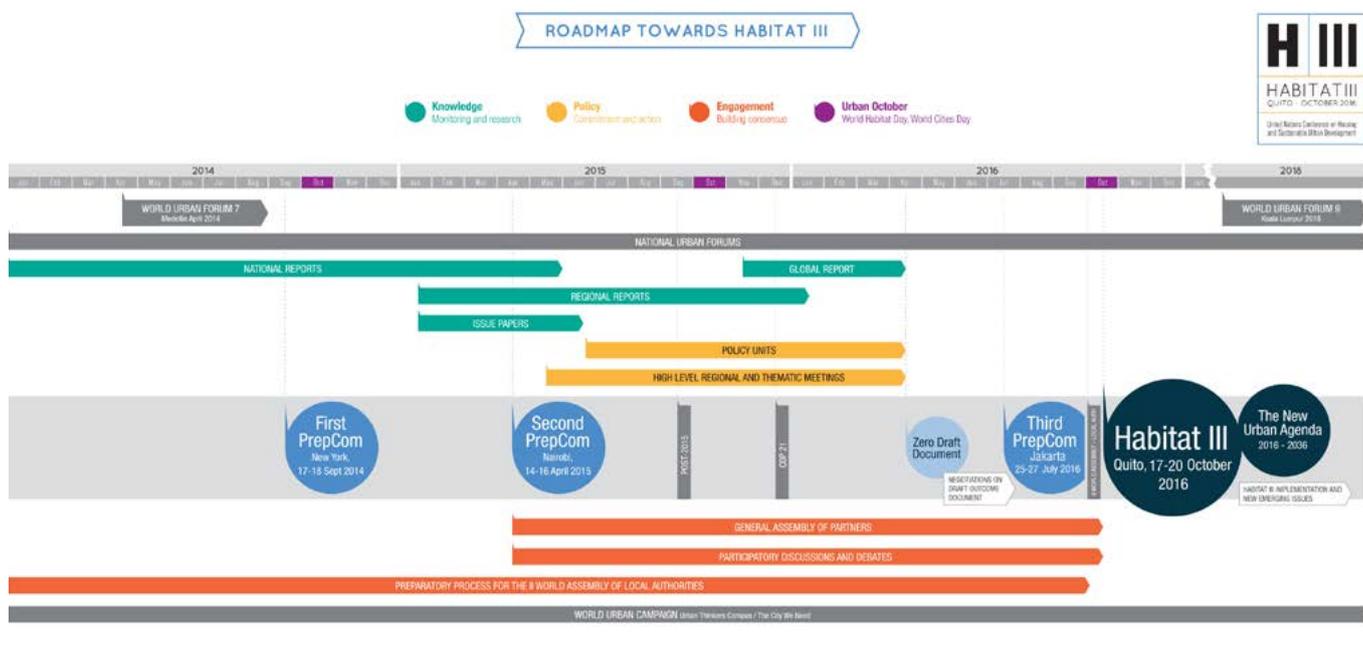
changed dramatically since Habitat II was convened two decades ago.

Income and distributional disparities between rural and urban areas and within cities, together with the rise of gated cities, inadequate infrastructure and insufficient provision of services, often complicate the situation further. Major urban challenges have emerged in the region over the past few years, including issues related to equity, equality, social cohesion, sustainability, decent and adequate housing, governance, and the provision of adequate urban services and public spaces. In addition, further emphasis has been placed on the right to the city and the displacement and return of refugees. A new consensual approach to housing and urban development is thus needed in the Arab region to meet the needs and aspirations of its people in terms of inclusiveness, resilience, sustainability, social cohesion and prosperity.

### 3. The regional dimension in the preparations for Habitat III: a window for regional action

Given the relevance of the regional dimension in the preparations for Habitat III, the role of United Nations regional commissions was recognized by the General Assembly, through its resolutions 67/216, 68/239 and 69/226; by ECOSOC, through resolution 2012/27; and by the Governing Council of UN-Habitat, through resolution 24/14. In these resolutions, the five regional commissions were requested to contribute to each stage of the preparatory process, including

Figure 2. UN-Habitat road map towards Habitat III



Source: This graphic has been provided by the Habitat III Secretariat. Available from [www.habitat3.org](http://www.habitat3.org). Accessed November 2015.

through the preparation of regional reports, contributions to a global report, convening of regional consultative meetings and the utilization of their regular sessions to provide inputs to the process. In line with these mandates, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) has actively supported the preparatory process for Habitat III both regionally and globally.

ESCWA and the UN-Habitat Regional Office for Arab States (ROAS), in cooperation with the League of Arab States, are leading the regional preparations for Habitat III. Efforts are being made to bring other regional partners on board, including the Arab Towns Organization and civil society organizations. A road map of activities has been developed jointly by ESCWA and ROAS, in close consultation with the Habitat III secretariat, and includes the preparation of national and regional reports, a set of regional consultative expert group meetings and United Nations inter-agency

meetings, as well as awareness-raising campaigns. These national and regional consultative processes aim to reflect emerging urbanization trends and the accompanying challenges in the region and to identify best practices, which will ultimately feed into the global process (figure 2).

#### 4. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and inclusive cities

The United Nations Sustainable Development Summit, held in September 2015, witnessed the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The summit’s outcome document – agreed after several rounds of intergovernmental meetings – pledges that “no one will be left behind” and calls for a “just, equitable, tolerant, open and socially inclusive world in which the needs of the most vulnerable are met.”<sup>7</sup>

The proposed new development agenda builds on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and seeks to complete what was not achieved by the MDGs. At the same time, it goes far beyond the MDGs by setting out a wide range of economic, social and environmental objectives alongside traditional development priorities, and aiming for more peaceful, better-governed and inclusive societies. To do so, the agenda contains deep interconnections and cross-cutting elements across its goals and targets. It is guided by the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and is grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international instruments, such as the right to development and the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development.

Of the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) and 169 targets proposed in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, goal 11 specifically concerns cities and human settlements, with particular emphasis on the need to make them inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable (box 2). It emphasizes universal access to adequate, safe and affordable housing

and basic services; the provision of sustainable transport systems; and slum upgrading. It also calls for inclusive and integrated urban planning and management, and for measures to protect cultural and natural heritage. In addition, goal 11 aims to reduce adverse urban environmental impacts, with a special emphasis on air quality and waste management. It further calls for universal access to green and public spaces, with a focus on vulnerable social groups.

Lastly, the 2030 Agenda proposes the means of implementation to be adopted as an integral part of the 17 SDGs. For goal 11, this means strengthening national and regional development planning with a view to strengthening socioeconomic and environmental links among urban, peri-urban and rural areas; formulating and implementing integrated policies to promote inclusion, resource efficiency, climate change mitigation and adaptation, and disaster risk management at all levels; and providing financial, technological and other support to least developed countries.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) (2015), *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2014 Revision, Highlights, 2014*. Available from <https://esa.un.org/wup/Highlights/WUP2014-Highlights.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> The Conference of the Parties aims to achieve a new international agreement on the climate, applicable to all countries, to keep global warming below 2°C. See *What is COP21/CMP11 – United Nations Conference on Climate Change*.

Available from [www.cop21.gouv.fr/en/learn/what-is-cop21/](http://www.cop21.gouv.fr/en/learn/what-is-cop21/).

<sup>5</sup> UN-Habitat, *The State of Arab Cities 2012/2013: Challenges of Urban Transition*, Kenya, UN-Habitat, 2012, p. xiii. Available from [www.unhabitat.org/jo/en/inp/Upload/134359\\_OptiENGLISH\\_StateofArabCities\\_Edited\\_25\\_12\\_2012.pdf](http://www.unhabitat.org/jo/en/inp/Upload/134359_OptiENGLISH_StateofArabCities_Edited_25_12_2012.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> The highest numbers of refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees (refugees and IDPs) and stateless persons of concern to UNHCR registered by the end of 2014 were approximately 11.6 million Syrians, 4.1 million Iraqis, 2.9 million Sudanese and 2.3

million Somalis. These fall under the concern of UNHCR, whereas Palestinian refugees and IDPs fall under the responsibility of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). See UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2014, 2015*, pp. 49-52. Available from <http://unhcr.org/556725e69.html>

<sup>7</sup> United Nations, *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (n.d.), preamble and para. 8. Available from <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>.

## Box 2. Sustainable development goal 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

11.1 By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums;

11.2 By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons;

11.3 By 2030, enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management in all countries;

11.4 Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage;

11.5 By 2030, significantly reduce the number of deaths and the number of people affected and substantially decrease the direct economic losses relative to global gross domestic product caused by disasters, including water-related disasters, with a focus on protecting the poor and people in vulnerable situations;

11.6 By 2030, reduce the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, including by paying special attention to air quality and municipal and other waste management;

11.7 By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities.

11.a Support positive economic, social and environmental links between urban, peri-urban and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning;

11.b By 2020, substantially increase the number of cities and human settlements adopting and implementing integrated policies and plans towards inclusion, resource efficiency, mitigation and adaptation to climate change, resilience to disasters, and develop and implement, in line with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, holistic disaster risk management at all levels;

11.c Support least developed countries, including through financial and technical assistance, in building sustainable and resilient buildings utilizing local materials.

**Source:** United Nations, Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, pp. 21-22 (n.d.). Available from <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>.

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