

Urbanization: Emerging Challenges and a New Global Urban Agenda

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INTRODUCTION

URBANIZATION IS ONE OF THE most momentous global trends of the twenty-first century. Cities are now home to more than half of the world's population, their numbers growing continuously. By 2050, two-thirds of the world population will be living in urban areas. Cities also generate around 80 percent of the global gross domestic product (GDP).¹

For the first time in history, urbanization has become an integral part of strategic discussions on the sustainability of our planet. *Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development*—the UN roadmap for achieving sustainability—has recognized urbanization as a driving force for development and prosperity. The *New Urban Agenda (NUA)*—which was adopted last year in Quito at the Third United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III)—has defined a clear action plan for advancing development through urbanization. The key question facing policymakers and practitioners interested in urban leadership and management is how to achieve “sound urbanization,” given that urbanization often outpaces the capacity of governments

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and local authorities to control it.²

Urbanization is one of the most affordable and accessible policy tools that leaders can use to achieve peaceful, inclusive, and sustainable development. Unfortunately, it has not been fully utilized at all levels of governance. For so long, much of the policy debate about urbanization has been derailed by a number of factors, including an overreliance on a narrow, sector-specific approach, such as housing, infrastructure, or governance. For urbanization to be transformative, it has to be addressed from an integrated and coordinated perspective. Second, insufficient attention has been given to the consequences of urbanization gone wrong, such as slums and informal settlements, ghettos, pockets of urban poverty next to vibrant city centers, and social strife and conflict. Third, not enough emphasis has been placed on the importance of a coordinated relationship between national and local governments to achieve sustainable development.

Based on the normative and operational work that UN-Habitat has carried out with its partners around the world, it is evident that urbanization, when well-planned and managed, leads to prosperity and development. Even in times of crisis, whether created by conflict or natural disaster, the principles of urbanization are useful in ensuring a peaceful transition from crisis to development. The purpose of this article is threefold: First, it analyzes the relationship between urbanization and development, specifically sustainable development. Second, it provides an overview of global urban trends and how they affect the world's major regions. Third, it outlines urbanization dynamics and challenges, as well as the strategies embraced by UN-Habitat—the UN agency specialized in sustainable urban development—to address them.

URBANIZATION (AND SUSTAINABLE) DEVELOPMENT

Urbanization has been a catalyst for progress in developed countries for the last three centuries. Indeed, the maxim that cities are engines of economic growth and development dates back to the Industrial Revolution. The economic history of the twentieth century also points to a mutually reinforcing relationship between urbanization and economic progress.³ Today there is a greater appreciation of the inextricable link between urbanization and economic development: no country has ever achieved middle-income status without a significant proportion of its population being urban. As such, cities have become a positive and potent force for sustainable economic growth, development, and prosperity. They are drivers of innovation, consumption, and investment in both developed and developing countries.⁴ Cities have emerged as economic powerhouses that play an increas-

ingly dominant role in the global economy. And as engines of growth, cities have contributed to the economic recovery of many countries.⁵

In addition to advancing economic progress, urbanization provides the foundation and momentum for global change. Cities are taking the lead in addressing many global chal-

lenges of the twenty-first century that also call for solutions at the local level, including people-centered, inclusive socioeconomic growth, environmental gov-

ernance, and climate change. There is growing awareness of the important role that urbanization plays in limiting environmental degradation and spurring the development of mitigation and adaptation strategies to deal with climate change, such as improved urban planning and design measures.

At the national and community levels, urbanization can support peace-building and stabilization efforts through more efficient and equitable access to resources—especially to land, housing, education, health care, employment, and other basic services and infrastructure. A specific example of UN-Habitat's work in this field is the Future of Afghan Cities Programme, currently undertaken by UN-Habitat and its development partners to strengthen the Afghan government's capacity to formulate and implement a new national framework for urban development.

Another example is the program on inclusive security of land tenure led by UN-Habitat with its partner, the Global Land Tool Network. The program started land reform initiatives in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which have strengthened the management of land disputes, thereby contributing to a reduction in land-based violence.⁶ UN-Habitat applies the same principles in its humanitarian work, especially when it involves protracted conflict, by using inclusive territorial and spatial planning, tenure security, and more equitable access to basic services—primarily water, sanitation, and shelter. In an integrated system within the UN, this enables the refugee and internally displaced persons (IDPs) communities, as well as host communities, to smoothly transition from crisis to peaceful rehabilitation and development. With the current challenges of mass migration, these remain crucial principles to uphold.

Nevertheless, unplanned and uncontrolled urbanization can have adverse effects on development, particularly in the rapidly urbanizing regions of the world, where policy and technical capacities are inadequate. In many cities,

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unsustainable and inequitable patterns of urbanization put people at risk, create unnecessary costs, and perpetuate fragmentation and insecurity. In fact, it

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is widely recognized that the current urbanization model negatively affects the urban fabric and virtually all forms of settlements. UN-Habitat warns that the current model of urban-

ization, characterized by zoning, gated communities, sprawl, low share of public space, and enhanced private car use, is anchored in a culture of short-term economic benefit, often driven by private interests without adequate public policy interventions. It is also associated with unchecked consumption and production practices. Not only does this model compromise the sustainability of cities, but it also poses a threat to sustainable development globally.

Environmentally, the current urbanization model incentivizes low-density suburbanization, which is mostly driven by private interests—facilitated in part by dependence on car ownership—and exacerbates climate change and food insecurity. It is estimated that by 2030, as the urban population of developing countries doubles, the land area covered by cities will triple.⁷ Such urban expansion is not only wasteful, but also intensifies land and energy consumption and leads to increased greenhouse gas emissions. In fact, over the past two decades, this unsustainable urban expansion has already altered the ecological systems of many cities.⁸

Socially, the current model of urbanization generates multiple forms of inequality, exclusion, and deprivation, hampering inclusive development. The model creates spatial inequalities and divided cities typified by gated communities, slums, and poor neighborhoods. On the one hand, there is a significant youth bulge in the rapidly urbanizing regions of the world, accompanied by an obligation for cities to meet youth-specific needs. On the other hand, there is an increasingly aging population in many developed economies that will require special attention and care from the global community.

Economically, the current model of urbanization is unsustainable due to the existence of widespread unemployment, especially among youth, and the predominance of unstable, low-paying, and largely informal jobs. This situation creates economic hardship, unequal access to urban services and amenities, and poor quality of life. Moreover, economic vibrancy of a city is derived from the proximity of services and people, which is lost with less density and zoning.

While urbanization offers significant benefits as a catalyst for progress

and positive change, it also contains a number of risks; it can both drive and hinder sustainable development. Urbanization is therefore best understood as a transformative force, the impacts of which depend on how well it is managed. If well planned and managed, urbanization can play an integral role in inducing positive social transformation by fostering social integration, inclusion, and cohesion, even in rural areas.⁹ This can be observed in a number of advanced economies that are highly urbanized and have higher incomes, lower poverty levels, stronger and more resilient institutions that enable economies to withstand global shocks, enhanced democratic accountability, women's empowerment, and technological innovation.

GLOBAL URBAN TRENDS BY WORLD REGIONS

Over the past few decades, we have witnessed unprecedented urban growth. As noted in the UN-Habitat *World Cities Report 2016*, the average number of people moving to cities each year has increased from 57 million between 1990 and 2000 to 77 million between 2010 and 2015.¹⁰ There has also been a marked rise in large cities and megacities, particularly in the low- and middle-income regions of the world.¹¹ The number of such cities has doubled from 22 large cities and 14 megacities in 1995 to 44 large cities and 29 megacities in 2015. On the whole, these cities exert a considerable influence on the global economy. They are, however, neither home to a majority of the urban population, nor are they the fastest growing urban centers. Small- and medium-sized cities—those with less than one million inhabitants—are the fastest growing urban centers and account for 59 percent of the global urban population.¹²

Interestingly, the increased concentration of populations in urban areas is not evenly spread around the globe. Different regions exhibit different patterns of urbanization. As briefly described below, each major region of the world displays distinct and unique patterns in terms of the degree, pace, and nature of urbanization. Each is expected to urbanize further over the coming decades.

ASIA

Asia has by far the highest number of people living in urban areas compared to other regions. According to the *World Cities Report 2016*, over two billion people in Asia live in urban areas. As urbanization becomes increasingly associated with economic growth and development, the increase in urban populations is no longer the development scourge it was once feared to be. The region, which

is home to 53 percent of the world's urban population, is currently at a tipping point and thus about to become predominantly urban.¹³ Asia is a global economic powerhouse, accounting for nearly a third of world economic output.¹⁴ The economic hubs of the region are almost entirely urban-based; Asian cities are thriving with investments, infrastructure, innovation, and competitive impetus. These cities have become critical nodes in the system of global accumulation and regional development. In China, for instance, the economic transformation is driven by urbanization and industrialization, and the top 10 Chinese cities account for 20 percent of the country's GDP.¹⁵

NORTH AMERICA, EUROPE, AND OCEANIA

These three regions are highly urbanized; by the mid-twentieth century, the majority of their populations resided in cities. Today, North America, Europe, and Oceania have 82 percent, 74 percent, and 70 percent of their populations residing in urban areas, respectively. The urban growth rate in these regions is the lowest compared to other world regions; however, various cities in the United States are still experiencing relatively high levels of population growth.

AFRICA

Africa has the lowest share of urban population at 41 percent, but it is the most rapidly urbanizing region. Its current urban growth rate is nearly 11 times higher than that of Europe. The region's rapid urbanization is driven largely by a natural increase in population, rural-urban migration, spatial expansion of urban settlements through the annexation or reclassification of rural areas into urban areas, and in some countries, adverse events such as conflicts and natural disasters.¹⁶ The high urban growth rates signal a major challenge to cities hoping to build and sustain adequate infrastructure. Limited resource bases and high poverty levels also present difficulties for the provision of public services.

LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

This is the second most urbanized region in the world, with 80 percent of the population residing in urban areas. While urban areas in the region continue to face challenges such as spatial segregation, congestion, and crime, there is a growing awareness of the transformative power of urbanization. This is partly due to the increased influence of mayors and cities in driving social, political,

and economic advancements. Evidence also suggests that poverty reduction has been associated with urbanization and social inclusion.

URBANIZATION DYNAMICS AND CHALLENGES

Cities across the world have been rapidly changing over the past few decades. These shifts have been taking place in a period of increasing global trade and are largely associated with the process of globalization. In its analysis of urban development over the past two decades, the *World Cities Report 2016* highlights some of the issues arising from the changing dynamics in urban areas.¹⁷ The analysis provides

an overview of the most important urban issues that played out during the last 20 years—since the Habitat II conference in 1996—and makes a strong case for revisiting the urban agenda due to various structural challenges and setbacks.

These issues fall into two categories: persistent and emerging issues. The former includes 1) urban growth, 2) changes in family patterns, 3) growing populations living in slums or other informal settlements, and 4) the challenge of service provision in many cities. Closely tied to these are newer trends in urban governance and the financing of cities. In the second category are emerging urban issues that have increased in global importance over the last two decades. They include 1) rising inequality and exclusion, 2) climate change and environmental degradation, 3) rising insecurity, and 4) an upsurge in international migration.¹⁸ These are largely associated with the adverse impacts of globalization and the poor management and governance of cities.

INEQUALITY AND EXCLUSION

The redistribution of wealth and opportunities, which has historically been characteristic of urban areas, has stalled in many regions. As a result, cities are becoming increasingly divided by visible and invisible borders, often manifested in segmented spaces as well as in the fragmentation and differentiation of populations. In many developing countries—especially in Africa—slums are some of the most evident expressions of inequality. This urban divide stigmatizes and excludes large groups of the urban population from a socially and economically productive life, depriving them from personally and economically gratifying

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lives. Moreover, the proliferation of gated communities over the last two decades is symptomatic of the increasing inequality in cities across the globe. These communities often lead to a disproportionate and more intense consumption of public space, privatization of urban space, increasing polarization, and even segregation based on income and social groups. This is the antithesis of what UN-Habitat envisions for prosperous cities.

In line with the City Prosperity Initiative, UN-Habitat calls on cities to create physical space for all through land regulations, planning, and housing; socioeconomic space for all by facilitating frameworks and decent work opportunities; and civic space for all through the effective recognition of rights and cultural diversity.¹⁹ It is also of crucial importance to create spaces that welcome

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and engage women and girls, who face a range of specific barriers and vulnerabilities. Furthermore, young women and men must be given opportunities for engagement in

political and economic processes. UN-Habitat has successfully installed “One Stop Youth Centers,” offering youth-led spaces for both engagement in governance and improvement of livelihoods. One of the most successful of such centers is the Kimisagara One Stop Center in Kigali, Rwanda. Established in 2009, it has served over 300,000 youth with daily services to date, including job training, health care, and communication technology training and access. Accessibility for and inclusion of persons with disabilities in urban development are also of crucial importance.

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CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION

Environmental issues are some of the greatest challenges for cities in the world today. They have many adverse impacts and the potential to inhibit the achievement of sustainable development. Urbanization leads to fundamental changes in production and consumption patterns, which when associated with dysfunctional urban forms and city structures, often result in the degradation of environmental resources, higher levels of energy consumption, and greenhouse gas emissions. Cities currently account for 60–80 percent of energy consumption and generate as much as 70 percent of the human-induced greenhouse gases, mainly through fossil fuel consumption for energy supply and transportation.²⁰ With the anticipated intensification of risks caused by global warming in the

years ahead, climate change has emerged as a central issue on urban agendas. UN-Habitat is supporting over 50 cities in 25 countries by addressing mitigation and adaptation challenges, developing tools and trainings, and implementing pilot projects. Some of the projects include helping women groups to switch to more efficient fuels in South Africa; enabling vulnerable coastal communities to relocate to safer locations in Senegal; helping cities to design and expand bus rapid transit systems in Indonesia; and promoting greener buildings in Brazil.

INSECURITY AND OTHER URBAN RISKS

Today, cities face safety and security risks whose complexities and manifestations have been enhanced by the globalized nature of cities. Crime and violence; terrorism and urban warfare; and disease and pandemics are issues undermining the long-term sustainability of cities. Globalization has been accompanied by an upswing in organized transnational crime; it has expanded illicit opportunistic structures and, concomitantly, created new ones.²¹ Cities—owing to their social, political, and economic centrality—have increasingly become vulnerable to acts of terrorism. Such acts are severely disruptive to cities and attain high levels of visibility, increasing the risk of future attacks. Advances in digital technologies and the Internet have been accompanied by increased risks originating from the cybersphere. Overreliance on digital technology and electronic service delivery have heightened the vulnerability of cities to hacks and cyberattacks, which are reported to occur as frequently as every 30 seconds and are estimated to cost businesses as much as \$400 billion a year.²² In recent years, health risks have also been compounded as witnessed in the outbreak and subsequent virulent spread of Ebola fever in West Africa in 2013 and 2015, particularly in underserved slums of major coastal cities.

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RISE IN INVOLUNTARY MIGRATION

The past two decades have been characterized by a surge in forced migration across international borders. Europe, for instance, has become a destination of large-scale involuntary migration in recent years, owing to conflicts in the Middle East and Northern Africa, particularly Syria. The flow of forced migrants to European cities is occurring against the backdrop of economic malaise and a fight against terrorism. As a result, there is a rise of negative sentiments toward immigrants.²³ All the while, past experience would suggest that Europe stands to gain from immigration—especially in light of its aging population and low

birth rates—since migrants can contribute to the economic and social advancement of their host countries.²⁴ Furthermore, protracted crises in many countries have made the search for durable solutions for refugee settlement more pressing, leading to a need for long-term planning of settlements and a solution to other relevant issues of the “humanitarian-development nexus.”

PREPAREDNESS FOR TRANSITION

Most cities in the world are grossly unprepared to address these multidimensional challenges. Cities typically lack adequate financing and human capacity for effective planning and management. They also have limited legal powers and often fail to create appropriate institutional structures. These, among other factors, conspire to weaken and constrain most cities’ capacities for effective governance and their ability to address some of the challenges related to urbanization.

The process of urbanization is relentless. As cities grow, so do the challenges they face. One positive byproduct of these transformations is a sharpened global focus on cities. Urbanization has emerged as a key issue in international development policy. On the one hand, this has largely been driven by an increased appreciation of the positive contribution and potential opportunities associated with cities and, on the other hand, by the significant repercussions that processes and activities in urban areas have on the global environmental system and on the attainment of sustainable development.

In recent years, multilateral processes have given prominence to the role of cities as drivers of sustainability. In 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was unanimously adopted by the UN General Assembly. It recognizes the vital role cities play in addressing sustainability issues through Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11, which calls for making “cities and

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human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.”²⁵ Furthermore, the global community saw the necessity of revisiting the urban agenda adopted in 1996. This was driven by the need for a new coherent ap-

proach to urban policy and a framework that would effectively address persistent and emerging challenges and take advantage of the opportunities offered by urbanization, as well as contribute to the realization of the SDG. In fact, besides SDG 11, many of the 2030 Agenda goals have a strong urban component.

THE NEW URBAN AGENDA

In 2016, a milestone in global urban policy was achieved when the New Urban Agenda (NUA) was adopted in Quito as the outcome of the Habitat III conference. The unanimous endorsement of the NUA by member states and a strong participation by stakeholders from the private sector, civil society, indigenous groups, local communities, academia, and government are strong indications of political commitment and ownership of the agenda.²⁶

While the NUA is a response to some of the persistent and emerging challenges described above, it does recognize the achievements made since the previous UN conferences on human settlements—Habitat I in 1976 and Habitat II in 1996—and since the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals in 2000. It further takes into account the major international agreements that include urban components, such as the Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the third International Conference on Financing for Development; the Paris Agreement adopted under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change; and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction.

Looking forward, the NUA charts the course and provides a roadmap to guide sustainable urban development globally over the next 20 years. These commitments are geared toward social inclusion and ending poverty, ensuring sustainable and inclusive urban prosperity and opportunities for all, and promoting environmentally sustainable and resilient urban development. Most importantly, the NUA conveys a strong affirmation that “sustainable urban development is a critical step for realizing sustainable development in an integrated and coordinated manner at the global, regional, national, subnational, and local level.”²⁷

In terms of implementation, the transformative commitments set out in the NUA will require enabling policy frameworks at all of these levels. An integrated approach to sustainable urbanization by various actors, as well as enhanced coordination and coherence in this area, are crucial to its implementation, which will contribute to the implementation and localization of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In this regard, the NUA provides a framework for the integrated delivery of many SDGs at the urban level, as it addresses substantive areas partially covered, or not covered at all, by the 2030 Agenda—in particular, additional means of implementation and localization.²⁸

UN-HABITAT AND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NEW URBAN AGENDA (NUA)

Per the draft outcome of Habitat III, the NUA encourages UN-Habitat and other actors

to generate evidence-based and practical guidance for the implementation of the NUA and the urban dimension of the SDGs, in close collaboration with member states, local authorities, major groups and other relevant stakeholders, as well as through the mobilization of experts.²⁹

UN-Habitat envisions the implementation of the NUA through five strategic areas of intervention.

NATIONAL URBAN POLICIES (NUPs)

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Many national governments do not have NUPs that provide a general framework to orient interventions in urban areas so as to ensure quality urbanization. The NUA is an urgent call for national governments to assume their responsibility in the process of urbanization through the establishment of NUPs. UN-Habitat thus considers a deliberate government-led approach to deal with the often disjointed dynamics of urban centers within national systems of cities to be fundamental for sustainable urbanization; this should also include strategic territorial regional planning frameworks with clear, healthy urban-rural linkages. UN-Habitat, therefore, recommends the adoption and implementation of NUPs to achieve an enhanced synergetic connection between the dynamics of urbanization and the overall process of national development. UN-Habitat is already supporting the development of NUPs in several countries, including Cameroon and Rwanda. In Rwanda, for instance, UN-Habitat supported the processes that led to the adoption of its National Urbanization Policy in 2015.³⁰

URBAN LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

Urbanization should be based on the rule of law. Unfortunately, not enough emphasis has been placed on the importance of urban legislation by policymakers in recent years. Urbanization without rules and regulations tends to be ad hoc, resulting in major challenges, as described above. There must be a better formulated and transparent legal framework that is responsive to real needs and actual capacities and that takes into account available resources, especially regarding security of tenure and land use—with specific attention to the allocation of

private versus public space. The transformative power of urbanization can be facilitated by such frameworks that are based on accountability and the rule of law, have clear implementation mechanisms, and are enforceable. Moreover, the success of the NUPs is dependent on laws and regulation as a framework for action, implementation monitoring, and evaluation. For instance, UN-Habitat has supported the Government of Ecuador in developing a legal strategic framework for promoting sustainable land planning and management for territorially balanced urban development so that municipalities have the necessary tools to optimize their land use.

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INTEGRATED URBAN AND TERRITORIAL PLANNING AND DESIGN

Urban planning and design is an essential technical part of the urbanization process. It refers to the physical layout of buildable plots, public space, and their relationship to one another. According to UN-Habitat, the amount of land allocated to public space and services in developing countries is often insufficient, and street patterns and the shape of cities are poorly designed. Improving access to adequate public spaces for the most vulnerable urban residents is a powerful tool used to promote inclusion and combat discrimination and insecurity. If we get urban development right, cities become centers for creating jobs, promoting social inclusion, and protecting local ecosystems. Overall, proper urban planning supported by adequate laws makes cities more compact, efficient, and people-oriented—and thus integrated, well-connected, equitable, and sustainable.

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FINANCING URBANIZATION

One of the novelties of the urban paradigm shift in the NUA is the recognition of the contribution that the process of urbanization can provide to the national economy. Urbanization should not be regarded as a cost, but rather as an investment, because the cost of urbanization is minimal compared to the value it can generate. Cities require adequate financial frameworks and governance systems for sound municipal finance mobilization. Endogenous job creation and strategic investments will ensure sustainable finance and can generate a virtuous financial circle, as well as help improve competitiveness.

For example, UN-Habitat, alongside its partners, is currently implementing the UN Joint Programme on Local Governance and Decentralized Service Delivery in Somalia. Beyond ensuring that communities have equitable access to basic services through local government entities, the program has improved financial management and enhanced local governments' revenue generation capacities. In Hargeisa, revenue collected from property tax increased three-fold—from approximately \$265,000 in 2008 to over \$1 million in 2015.³¹

LOCAL PHYSICAL IMPLEMENTATION

There is an increasing appreciation for the importance of ensuring the local implementation of global agendas for development. UN-Habitat, in line with imperatives of urban growth and expansion, has been promoting a proactive approach to urban planning and placing emphasis on interventions in areas such as planned city extensions, infills, land readjustment programs, and public space. UN-Habitat's Achieving Sustainable Urban Development Program in the Philippines, for instance, is supporting planned city extensions programs, the formulation of city extension conceptual plans, and the implementation in four pilot cities: Cagayan de Oro, Iloilo, Silay, and Zamboanga.

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CONCLUSIONS

Urbanization is inevitable and is increasingly becoming a global phenomenon. Regardless of scale, cities across the globe are becoming more connected and urban dynamics are continually being transformed by economic, cultural, demographic, technological, and political changes that have been taking place across the planet, often with unintended consequences. As shown in this paper, global phenomena are increasingly resulting in local pressures that call for renewed thinking and a resolve to find solutions to emerging issues.

The current challenges posed by urbanization have global ramifications and, if left unaddressed, have the potential to hinder the achievement of sustainable development, since urbanization affects all human settlements. Achieving sustainable urban development depends on the way urbanization is planned and managed and on the manner in which this transformative force is leveraged to “provide the setting, the underlying base, and the momentum for global change.”³²

The recently adopted NUA provides the prerequisite to support a paradigm shift toward a sustainable model of urbanization that responds to differentiated

needs, challenges, and opportunities of cities and regions. UN-Habitat's five strategic areas of intervention offer a framework for the integrated delivery of the NUA and many SDGs at the urban level. Their implementation has the potential to positively shape the future of cities and ensure sustainable development by supporting efficient economic growth, making sure cities are socially inclusive, and promoting shared prosperity in an environmentally sustainable manner. International frameworks, such as the SDGs, the Paris Climate Agreement, the NUA, and their respective follow-up mechanisms, provide us with an opportunity to gather this global momentum and devise strategies for implementation, monitoring, and review. In that context, it is crucial to create alliances for implementation on the ground, making full use of partnerships with a variety of stakeholders and local actors to help formulate solutions.

From my personal experience as Deputy Executive Director and Assistant Secretary-General at UN-Habitat over the last five years, and as a former mayor, I am convinced that it is implementation that counts most and that this will be the measure of success for our strategies. We should use our political influence to mobilize local and international communities for city development with a long-term perspective. Mayors and other political actors need to reach out for both human and financial investment opportunities and to make the right long-term decisions about the allocation of their resources. Mayors in particular play a crucial role in serving citizens and often have to deal firsthand with the crosscutting nature of the implementation process, balancing tradeoffs and searching for win-win solutions.

As leaders today, we are capable of maximizing the opportunities that urbanization as a human-made construct offers us to deal with these global challenges and ensure sustainable socioeconomic transformations for citizens around the world. We should develop informed, evidence-based policies and enhance our capacity to implement them. We should further strengthen our governance mechanisms and partnership platforms for implementation and learn from one another. Finally, it is crucial to remember that only an inclusive urbanization process can deliver sustainable outcomes and that people's participation in the process of defining challenges and designing solutions is a powerful tool for implementation. We should ensure that all global and local strategies and policies are serving their purpose: improving the lives of the people we serve. 

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