

**PRESS RELEASE**

**Equitable future cities hold answers to pollution, climate and nature breakdown**

**Nairobi, 18 November 2021** – Global cities are key to overcoming the climate crisis, biodiversity loss and pollution. A new vision of future cities is detailed in a report released today by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the UN Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat).

The [\*Global Environment Outlook for Cities report: Towards Green and Just Cities\*](#) identifies urbanization as one of the main drivers of environmental change and calls for urgent action to achieve net-zero circular cities that are resilient, sustainable, inclusive, and just. Emphasizing the links between social and ecological calamities, the report lays out pathways to overcome the main social-political lock-ins that perpetuate both inequality and climate change.

“In the aftermath of COP26, we remain off track from the path to a sustainable future. The scale of the challenge means no single actor can fix this alone. To tackle climate change, nature loss, and pollution in cities, co-creation of greener and more equitable cities is an imperative for city leaders, urban planners, local communities, national institutions, scientists, the private sector and civil society,” said Joyce Msuya, Deputy Executive Director of UNEP.

Through a review of existing literature and multiple case studies, the report shows how environmental degradation affects the physical and mental health of people living in urban centres, particularly hurting women, children, and the elderly. To achieve effective and just solutions for particular contexts, the report calls for decision making and planning processes that are inclusive of those that are typically excluded.

“We urgently need to include more voices in meaningful and effective decision-making. While these green and equitable cities may not exist yet, we need strong leadership at the city scale and the right enabling policies and development commitments at national and international scale to ensure urban centres are both fair and sustainable,” said Maimunah Mohd Sharif, Executive Director of UN-Habitat.

Infrastructure is a crucial factor transforming cities, which can lock in environmental and social impacts for decades. These can include, for example, the carbon emitted due to a poorly planned roads system or the potential effects of gated green spaces on public health. Consequences of such physical infrastructure are the result of inertia:

- among local decision makers with a propensity for non-transparent top-down decision-making and budgeting;
- in traditional approaches to urban planning which perpetuate social inequities and high greenhouse gas emissions;

- due to limitations imposed on cities by national institutions, such as a limited ability to decarbonize their vehicle fleet when control of the electricity grid lies exclusively with state or federal government.

The report underlines how the COVID-19 pandemic showed the importance of a healthy planet for a healthy population and looks at the opportunities presented by recovery.

“Economic stimulus responses to COVID-19 at all orders of government must be focused on green and just solutions and promote sustainable and resilient urban planning, focusing on areas such as upgrading slums, providing clean efficient energy, and healthier mobility, including mass transit, walking and cycling. All this can be achieved if we stop investing public money in fossil fuel technologies and redirect it to renewable energy plans and projects,” said David Miller, former Mayor of Toronto, Canada, and Director of International Diplomacy, C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, Coordinating lead author of the first chapter.

The report points out that while cities of the Global North have contributed most to climate change and biodiversity loss, they have the resources to adapt to some of their consequences, while the Global South bears the brunt of the impact. To drive progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, the report calls for more support to cities in the Global South for climate change mitigation and adaptation actions.

“Cities across sub-Saharan Africa will continue to face a range of climate-related challenges over the coming decades, along with resource depletion and socioeconomic inequalities. Some of these will undermine our ability to address the impacts of climate change and rapid urbanization,” said Maria-Helena Jose Correia Langa, Mayor of Mandlakazi, Mozambique, and co-ordinating lead author of the first chapter. “Systemic efforts in disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation must be enhanced by community engagement in the planning process, including women and youth.”

Many cities are already taking concrete positive steps. [30 cities](#) that are part of the [C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group](#) reportedly curbed emissions by 22 per cent on average by 2019. Berlin, London and Madrid have lowered emissions by 30 per cent and Copenhagen has reached 61 per cent. In Argentina, Rosario combined [informal settlements rehabilitation](#) with [a low-emission strategic plan](#) and an [Urban Agriculture Programme to achieve multiple benefits](#). Achieving such transformations at a deep scale continues to be an ambition for future cities in the years to come.

## **Notes to Editors**

### **About GEO-6**

Since the inception of the Global Environment Outlook in 1995, the process has been expanded, refined and applied to a wide range of different products, resulting in a family of global, regional and thematic reports and publications. Each has its own purpose, process and identity but is unified by the participatory and co-creative nature of the Global Environment Outlook approach. Alongside the main GEO publication (most recently, GEO-6), there are typically three major advocacy products, aiming to

communicate the scientific analysis in the main GEO report to various audiences. These key groups include Youth, Business, and now Cities and Local Governments.

GEO for Cities aims to inform, engage and support dialogue among city decision makers and other actors involved in urban issues. The GEO-6 report identified urbanization as one of five main drivers of environmental change and looked at the impact on cities and city residents of related challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. The GEO for Cities examines these issues and presents solutions that can lead to environmentally sustainable and just cities.

### **About the United Nations Human Settlements programme (UN-Habitat)**

UN-Habitat is the United Nations agency for human settlements. It has programmes in over 90 countries that support people in cities and human settlements and focus on socially and environmentally sustainable cities and towns.

### **About the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)**

UNEP is the leading global voice on the environment. It provides leadership and encourages partnership in caring for the environment by inspiring, informing and enabling nations and peoples to improve their quality of life without compromising that of future generations.

### **UNEP@50: A time to reflect on the past and envision the future**

The 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, Sweden, was the first-ever UN conference with the word “environment” in its title. The creation of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) was one of the most visible outcomes of this conference of many firsts. UNEP was created quite simply to be the environmental conscience of the UN and the world. Activities taking place through 2022 will look at significant progress made as well as what’s ahead in decades to come.

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