

Executive Director's Introduction



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UN-Habitat has been sounding the alarm on the threat facing cities from climate change for decades. The publication of the *Global Report on Human Settlements 2011: Cities and Climate Change* was a landmark, but our work on the complex and fast-moving intersection between the twin challenges of the climate crisis and rapid urbanization long precede this. With every year, however, the message has become more urgent as the impact of climate change worsens while concrete action to address it lags far behind. From rising sea levels to urban heatwaves, the human, economic and environmental costs are becoming too high—and are only set to increase in future. This report shows that almost no urban resident will be unaffected, with billions of people subjected to hotter temperatures or exposed to the risks of flooding and other threats.

Yet, climate change impacts are unevenly distributed within urban areas. Those most at risk from climate change are also those already facing persistent and chronic structural inequalities. Informal settlements and slums—typically situated in environmentally sensitive areas and lacking in protective infrastructure—often bear the brunt of climate-related disasters or extreme events. At the same time, the less visible effects of power imbalances, hierarchies and discrimination are compounding the vulnerability of the most marginalized individuals and communities. Women, children, people with disabilities, older people, migrants, minorities and Indigenous Peoples, among others, are not only more exposed to risk in the first place, but also less likely to receive support once a shock does occur. Accelerated transformation of slums and informal settlements, as well as addressing the needs of the most vulnerable territories in cities is thus a priority.

Of course, while the danger cities face from climate change is considerable, their dominant role in generating emissions must also be addressed. Cities have been routinely blamed, with some justification, for perpetrating the climate crisis due to the carbon-heavy patterns of consumption and production that urban areas can create. This, however, is only part of the picture. As this report shows, cities are already proving that it is possible to urbanize in a way that benefits, not harms, the planet. From electrified transport networks to energy-efficient buildings, ecosystem restoration to recycling, there are a range of paths we can pursue that will help curb the negative effects of urbanization while offering safer, healthier and more liveable cities for those living in them. Local and regional governments are already leading the way through action for climate adaptation and mitigation.

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It is especially urgent to put in place the right urban policies, legislation and finance to leverage housing and basic services as key instruments through which climate action is enabled. Promoting energy-efficient and durable housing and construction has tremendous potential to advance climate action. Investing in basic services especially energy, water and sanitation and transport with a view to mitigate and adapt to climate is essential. It is equally critical to ensure that urban land is used to maximize its social, economic and ecological functions for more compact growth that improves energy consumption, affordability, economic value and accessibility in cities. These vast opportunities that cities offer to achieve broader global goals for climate change are too often overlooked and untapped. It is time to unlock this potential.

At the same time, caution is needed in accelerating climate adaptation and mitigation efforts in cities to avert unintended and exclusionary consequences. When protective disaster infrastructure is constructed in cities, poor households, and those living in informal settlements and slums may find themselves evicted or more exposed if such communities are not factored into the design. Further, sustainable buildings and construction measures may be expensive and compromise affordability. The phenomenon of “green gentrification” and the exclusionary effects of rising house prices that it can bring in its wake is one such case. This is why the planning and implementation of both adaptation and mitigation measures must be locally-led, with those traditionally sidelined from decision-making given centre stage. While climate action requires urgent global solidarity, it must also involve critical stakeholders at the local level. Developing improved mechanisms for dialogue and identification of solutions with civil society and grassroots organizations is key. Ultimately, a people-centred approach is key, placing social aspects and inclusion at the centre of climate action in cities and beyond.

In this regard, while much of the contents of this edition of the *World Cities Report* is sobering, there is also cause for optimism. It offers a comprehensive overview of what needs to be done at the international, national and local level to achieve the change needed to respond adequately to the climate crisis. While the work required is wide-ranging, from revitalized, multi-stakeholder governance frameworks to a significant increase in both the quantity and quality of finance available to fund city-led climate action, the benefits this will bring could be truly transformative. Indeed, the push to achieve climate resilience cannot be separated from the agenda of sustainable cities and human settlements as envisioned in the New Urban Agenda and Sustainable Development Goal 11.

What is clear is that climate change is already upon us. For those city dwellers caught on the frontline of the various catastrophes playing out in cities—houses destroyed by cyclones, roads melted by extreme heat, entire settlements inundated in flood water—denial or delay is not an option. We already have the solutions to act, should we so wish. As documented in this report, with the right will and resources, cities and communities are already proving their ability to deliver innovative, inclusive and scalable approaches to climate resilience that point the way forward to a thriving urban future. We do not need to wait for a silver bullet to be invented: instead, drawing on the prescriptions in these pages, and together through stronger coalitions, we can and we must have the courage to take action today for the sake of present and future generations.