

1. Introduction

Urbanization is reshaping societies, economies, and the environment globally. In 2008, the urban population surpassed the rural population for the first time, reaching 55% by 2018 and projected to rise to 68% by 2050. This growth, primarily in Asia and Africa, is expected to add 2.5 billion people to urban areas, with India, China, and Nigeria leading the trend.

Despite urban expansion, regional disparities persist. Asia hosts 54% of the global urban population but has a lower urbanization rate compared to other regions. Africa, predominantly rural, is set for rapid urban growth, while Latin America and the Caribbean show uneven urban distribution.

Urbanization trends vary, with some cities in the Global North experiencing population decline due to economic shifts, while megacities grow, especially in developing regions. Smaller cities in Africa and Asia are expanding rapidly. Meanwhile, the global rural population remains significant at 3.4 billion but is expected to decline to 3.1 billion by 2050.

Urbanization trend



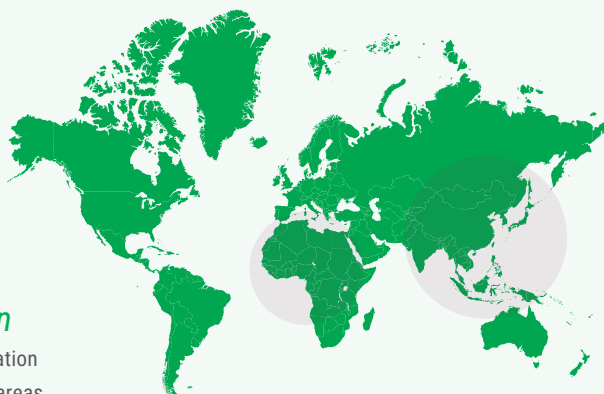
55 per cent
of the global population
lived in urban areas



projected to rise to **68 per cent**
by 2050



2.5 billion
people estimation
add to urban areas
by 2050



Asia accounted for the largest share of the world's urban population at **54 per cent** in 2018

China, India and **Nigeria**

India alone is expected to add **416 million** urban dwellers, followed by China with **255 million** and Nigeria with **189 million**

Asia and **Africa** accounting for nearly **90 per cent** increase



Today, the global rural population is at **3.4 billion**



Expected to decline to **3.1 billion** by 2050

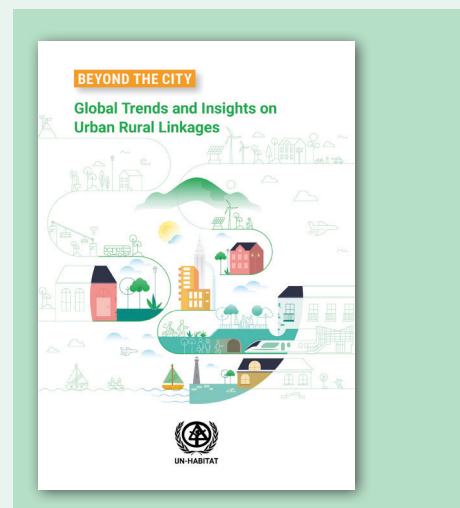
Managing urban growth is critical, particularly in low-income countries where informal settlements are rising. Strengthening urban-rural linkages (URLs) is crucial for sustainable development. Economic, social, and environmental ties between urban and rural areas can drive inclusive growth, job creation, and climate resilience.

Policies must address the widening urban-rural divide, particularly in border regions facing environmental and economic challenges. International frameworks like SDG 11.a.1 and the African Union's Agenda 2063 emphasize integrated territorial planning. See a catalogue of UN-Habitat work and services on urban-rural linkages in the annex.



Traffic congestion in Shanghai, China © Julius Mwelu/UN-Habitat

This report, **Beyond the City: Global Trends and Insights on Urban-Rural Linkages**, is based on extensive UN-Habitat research, global publications, and a structured survey of UN Member States. Contributions from experts across multiple sectors, along with case studies, provide replicable strategies for strengthening urban-rural linkages.



2. Exploring urban-rural linkages



A Mozambican cyclist carrying coal at sunrise vividly illustrates the essential economic dimension of urban-rural linkages © Adobestock

Urban and rural settlements interact in two key ways. Territorial urban-rural linkages occur between neighboring urban, peri-urban, and rural areas, involving shared governance, resource management, and infrastructure planning. Flow-based urban-rural linkages (telecoupling) connect distant regions through the exchange of people, goods, and services, such as food, water, and energy, fostering global interconnectedness beyond direct geographical proximity.

Defining Urban-Rural Linkages

Several definitions of urban-rural linkages have been coined by organizations, professionals and other actors.

However, more research will improve comparisons of how countries define urban-rural linkages, add to best practices, and address challenges across sectors like transportation, agriculture, and housing.

Engaging varying stakeholder perspectives and tracking evolving definitions in response to trends such as digital transformation and climate change will help refine strategies and improve integrated development.

UN-Habitat defines urban-rural linkages as ***the reciprocal and repetitive flow of people, goods, and financial and environmental services between specific rural, peri-urban and urban locations.***





Aerial view of greenary allotment in Switzerland © Adobe Stock/Mario

In the pursuit of sustainable development, understanding the intricate relationship between urban and rural areas is crucial. The interaction between these two settings has significant implications for economic growth, social well-being, and environmental sustainability.



**Therefore,
how, and why
do urban-
rural linkages
matter?**

Interdependence for Sustainable Development

Recognizing the intricate interdependence between rural and urban areas is essential for economic growth, social well-being, and environmental sustainability. Below are some dimensions of these interdependencies.

Environmental dimension

As rural communities move to urban areas for employment opportunities, goods and services, cities often rely on nearby rural areas for natural resources like food, water, and energy. Natural resources, such as rivers, wildlife, and green spaces, transcend rural-urban boundaries. Protecting resources in one area helps support the environment in the other. Practices such as sustainable farming methods, reducing deforestation, and transitioning to clean energy, sustainable waste management, have significant benefits for both urban and rural regions.



Economic dimension

Rural areas supply urban populations with food, raw materials, natural resources, and tourism opportunities, while urban areas provide markets, services, and employment opportunities for rural populations. Food producers in rural areas supply agricultural goods to feed urban populations, while urban markets and food companies provide vital sales channels for these rural producers.



Social dimension

Family and cultural ties link people across the rural-urban spectrum. Social and cultural exchanges frequently occur between rural and urban areas, as people migrate for work or education, spreading cultural influences in both directions. Solutions that improve life for rural populations often have positive effects on urban populations as well.



3. Understanding the Complexity of Urban-Rural Interactions



Shangtian Village in Songyang, China 2019 © UN-Habitat/Julius Mwelu

Sustainable development requires a nuanced understanding of the complex interactions between urban and rural areas. Definitions of "urban" and "rural" vary across countries, influencing data comparability and policy decisions.

To address this, international organizations have developed the Degree of Urbanization (DEGURBA) methodology, which provides a globally harmonized approach to classifying settlements without replacing national definitions.



<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/fr/web/degree-of-urbanisation/information-data>

Peri-urban areas play a crucial role in linking urban and rural spaces by supplying food, managing waste, and supporting infrastructure needs. However, they also face significant challenges, such as competition for resources and environmental pressures from urban expansion.

Additionally, as mobility and digital services integrate rural areas into broader economic networks, the traditional urban-rural divide is increasingly blurred. Recognizing these evolving interconnections is essential for balanced and inclusive development policies.

4. Emerging Issues in Urban-Rural Linkages

Urban-rural linkages (URLs) have evolved over the past two decades, with increasing emphasis on sustainability, technology, and infrastructure. Several emerging trends highlight the changing landscape of URLs:

Sustainability and Climate Resilience

There is a growing emphasis on sustainable urban-rural linkages, including localized food systems, emission reduction through improved transport connectivity, and renewable energy projects in rural areas.



Rural Tourism Growth

The rising demand for nature-based and cultural experiences has increased interest in rural tourism, supporting local economies and revitalization efforts.



Technological Advancements

Digital innovations are fostering collaboration between urban and rural communities, improving access to education, healthcare, and business opportunities.

Continued Rural-to-Urban Migration

While balanced development remains a goal, migration to cities continues due to education and employment opportunities. However, events like the COVID-19 pandemic temporarily reversed this trend.



Infrastructure Investments

Governments are enhancing transport and infrastructure to improve rural-urban connectivity, promoting economic integration and reducing poverty.



Distant Rural Linkages

Beyond nearby rural areas, urban demand increasingly shapes distant rural economies, particularly in agriculture, timber, and energy supply chains.



Urban Activities Expanding into Rural Areas

E-commerce, logistics hubs, and industrial development are integrating urban functions into rural spaces.



Recognition of Ecosystem Services

Urban areas increasingly acknowledge the critical ecosystem services provided by rural regions, such as carbon sequestration, biodiversity conservation, and water management.



Rural Industrialization

Economic diversification in rural areas is strengthening urban-rural ties by generating employment and reducing migration pressures.



Floating market in Mekong Delta, Vietnam © Adobestock

5. A timeline of Global processes shaping the Urban-Rural Linkages Discourse

For the past 40+ years there have been several major processes such as international conferences, forums and other platforms that have contributed to increased awareness and attention to the connections between urban and rural areas and communities.

The conversations at these events have evolved to match the changing dynamics between cities and rural areas. Below are some of the global processes and events that have shaped the discourse on urban-rural linkages:



Adoption of SDGs and COP21 recognized the need for integrated development across urban and rural areas to achieve climate and development objectives.

SDGs and COP21

2015



Launched to promote sustainable food systems and urban-rural partnerships, emphasizing governance, equitable access, and waste reduction.

Milan Urban Food Policy Pact

2015



UN Habitat III Conference

2016

The New Urban Agenda recognized the importance of integrated territorial development and urban-rural linkages, setting guidelines for sustainable urbanization.

Adoption of resolution on urban-rural linkages and release of guiding principles on enhance urban-rural linkages, fostering integrated territorial development.

1st United Nations Habitat Assembly

2019



Highlighted the importance of technological advances and inclusive growth for bridging urban-rural disparities.

Global Climate Action Summit and UN HLPF

2018



Supported strengthening connections between cities and rural areas, advocating for balanced territorial development and intersectoral cooperation.

World Urban Forums

2002-Present



The forums provided platforms to share best practices and promote sustainable rural transformation amidst urbanization through diverse topics, site visits and thematic sessions.

International Forums on Urban-Rural Linkages

2019/2021/2023



At the UN-Habitat Assembly, Member States adopted a resolution on urban-rural linkages in 2019, alongside the release of the Guiding Principles of urban-rural linkages. In 2023, a resolution on biodiversity and resilient cities was adopted, further reinforcing the importance of urban-rural linkages in addressing global sustainability challenges.

Highlighted the need for coordinated action to transform food systems, emphasizing rural infrastructure, small towns, and cross-sectoral partnerships.

UN Food Systems Summit

2021



2nd United Nations Habitat Assembly

2019&2023



Called for engagement with subnational governments and cities to integrate biodiversity concerns into urban and territorial planning.

CBD COP Agreement

2022



Resolution adopted in 2022, reported in 2024 to enhance understanding of urban-rural linkages, address land degradation, and promote sustainable land use.

UNCCD-COP Agreement

2022/2024



Establishment of a center focused on research, policy dialogue, and capacity development for urban-rural dynamics in Africa.

Launch of the First Center for Urban Rural Linkages in Africa

2023



6. Thematic perspectives on urban-rural linkages

The Urban-Rural Linkages Framework for Action, based on the 2019 Guiding Principles, outlines 11 entry points—governance, planning, investment, empowerment, and knowledge, economic development, social services, infrastructure, food systems, environmental management, and resilience to conflict and disasters.

Following the launch of the URL-GP, thematic papers explored these entry points, with key studies on food systems, nutrition, and territorial development. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the URL Program analyzed the crisis's impact on urban-rural interactions, contributing to resilience and recovery efforts. Since 2022, URLs have gained broader attention across various thematic areas and partners.



This chapter examines governance, metropolitan management, urban villages, smart villages, local agency in the food systems, land administration, intermediary cities as hubs of URL, food systems governance and sustainable agriculture initiative through thematic lenses and case studies, providing insights for policy and planning.

It underscores the importance of strong governance at all levels—from rural villages to metropolitan areas—to ensure coordinated and inclusive development. Ten expert contributions offer diverse perspectives on these thematic lenses.



An elderly woman using technology in a rural setting. This image touches on several key themes: smart villages leveraging technology, empowering communities, and bridging the urban-rural divide through digital inclusion and improved quality of life © Adobestock

7. Insights on urban-rural linkages from select countries

This section presents a review of urban-rural linkages (URL) across select countries, drawing on data from a survey and supplementary desk research. The analysis encompasses a total of 21 countries from all regions globally. This geographic scope allows for a detailed understanding of how different regions perceive and address the complexities of urban-rural dynamics in the context of sustainable development.

The findings underscore a critical need for capacity building, technical assistance, and cross-sectoral collaboration to effectively implement integrated urban-rural strategies. Such support is vital for fostering an enabling environment where urban and rural areas can thrive in synergy, ultimately contributing to more balanced and sustainable development outcomes.

Urban-Rural Linkages and the SDGs



Urban-rural linkages (URL) are increasingly recognized as key to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Countries like Algeria and the United States integrate URL across all 17 SDGs, while Finland, Nigeria, and Moldova highlight their impact on 11 SDGs. Many nations emphasize URL's role in SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), along with SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), and SDG 13 (Climate Action).

This variation underscores the need for tailored strategies that optimize urban-rural integration across diverse national contexts to enhance sustainable development outcomes.



Awareness of the UN-Habitat resolution

In 2019, UN Member States adopted a resolution to enhance urban-rural linkages (URL), emphasizing their integration into development policies to foster economic, social, and environmental connections. UN-Habitat has since supported countries through technical assistance, capacity building, tools, and advocacy.

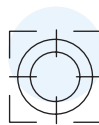
An analysis of awareness shows that nine countries, including Algeria, the Czech Republic, Finland, Nigeria, and the United States, recognize the resolution and have integrated URL into policies on energy, food, biodiversity, and climate. Other countries, such as Colombia and Zambia, have undertaken URL-related initiatives despite limited awareness.

This presents an opportunity for stronger advocacy and outreach to bridge knowledge gaps, strengthen policy frameworks, and promote urban-rural integration as a key driver of sustainable development.



Opening session of the Second session of the UN-Habitat Assembly In Nairobi, Kenya on the 5th June 2023 © UN-Habitat

KEY HIGHLIGHTS BOOKLET



Evolving Thematic Focus of Urban-Rural Linkages (2000–2022)

Thematic areas of urban-rural linkages have expanded significantly over time, with increasing attention to food security, agriculture, transportation, infrastructure, intermediary cities, environmental issues, land, natural resources, and inclusive finance.

Limited focus, with only six countries prioritizing food security and four countries emphasizing communication.

2000-2005

- A surge in attention across all themes, except for conflicts and disasters, coinciding with the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

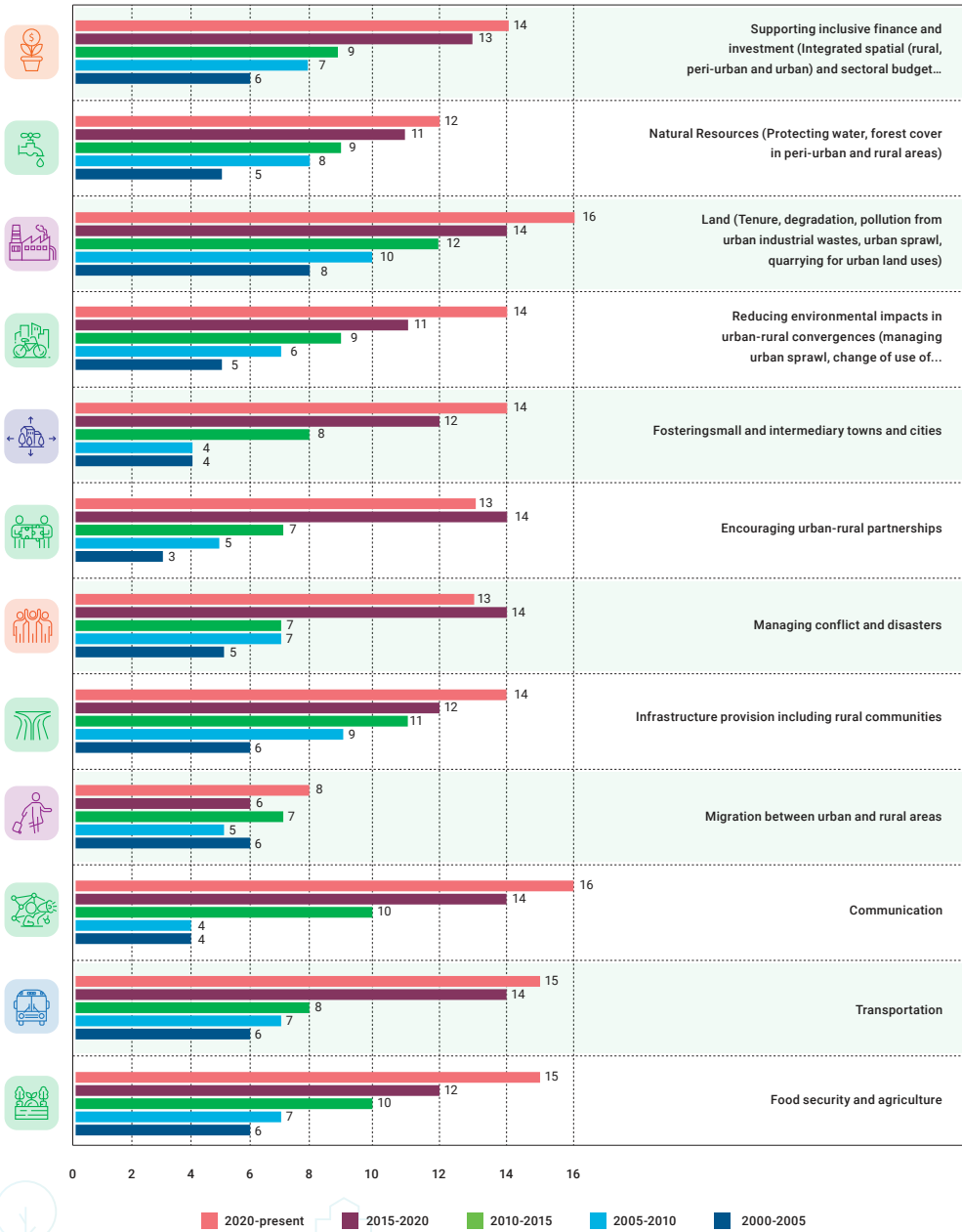
2015-2020

- Continued emphasis on food security, agriculture, infrastructure, communication, and inclusive finance, reflecting post-pandemic recovery efforts.

Post - 2020

- The rise in **communication** focus **post 2020** (from four to 16 countries) underscores the role of digital connectivity in urban-rural integration.

Similarly, **food security and agriculture** have gained prominence, aligning with sustainable food systems and regional development strategies. While progress is evident, disaster and conflict management remain under-emphasized, despite their growing relevance in climate resilience and geopolitical stability. A more comprehensive approach is needed to fully integrate urban-rural linkages into national development strategies.



Thematic Focus of Urban-Rural Linkages



Approaches to Strengthening Urban-Rural Linkages (2000–2022)

Countries have adopted various strategies to enhance urban-rural linkages, particularly through political reforms, policy integration, governance, infrastructure provision, and financing.

2000-2005

- Only four countries integrated Urban-Rural linkages into national urban policies.

2010-2020

- Gradual rise in infrastructure provision, territorial planning, and governance, though financing and budgeting declined from 10 to eight countries before the pandemic.

Post 2020

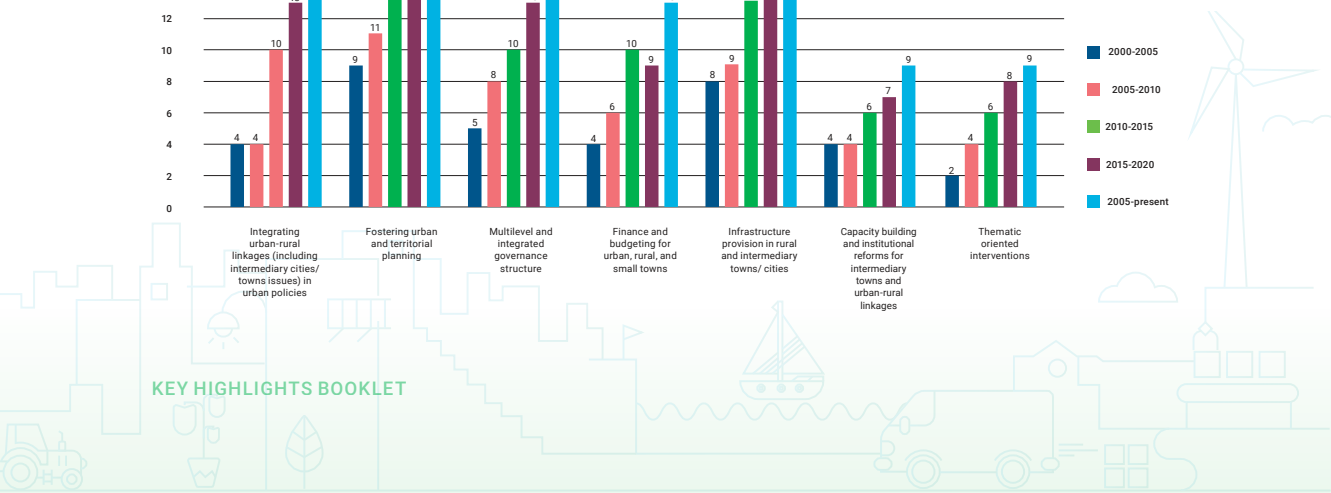
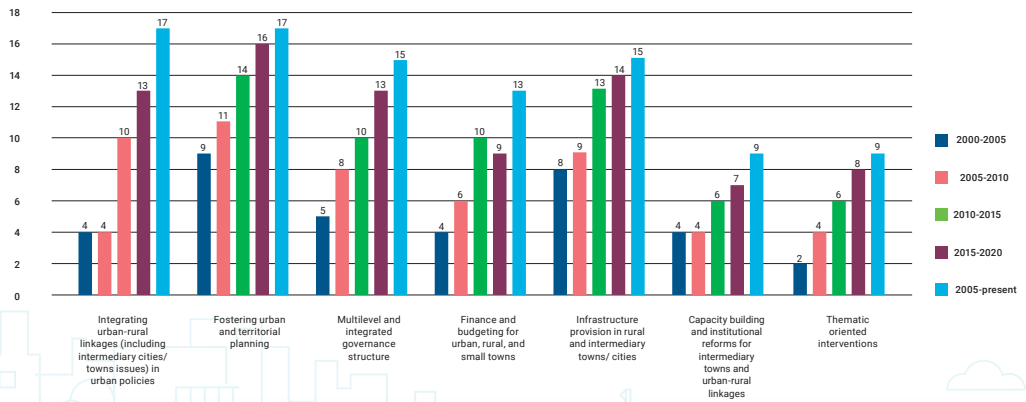
- 16 countries incorporated urban-rural linkages into national policies.

15 countries adopted multi-level governance and infrastructure provision.

13 countries implemented financing and budgeting initiatives, reversing the earlier decline.

12 countries pursued political reforms, while six countries enacted legal frameworks to support urban-rural initiatives.

While progress has been made, capacity building and institutional reforms remain underdeveloped, presenting a key opportunity for UN-Habitat and partners to enhance national capabilities. The renewed post-2020 focus on urban-rural linkages aligns with global frameworks like the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda, emphasizing the need for sustained financial and institutional support to ensure long-term impact.





Policies and strategies addressing urban-rural linkages

16 out of the 21 countries have policies, strategies, or frameworks to support urban-rural linkages. For example, **Honduras** is implementing the Land Use Plans of Sula Valley, San Pedro, and the Central District. **Zimbabwe** also implements two policies: **Zimbabwe** National Human Settlements Policy, and the Presidential Rural Development Programme. One of the principles of the **Philippines** National Urban Development and Housing Framework emphasizes “the need for spatially and ‘sectorally’ integrated settlements”



Policies fostering intermediary cities

10 countries have policies to enhance the role of intermediary cities in strengthening urban-rural linkages. For example, Finland is implementing the [intermediary towns](#) program (*Seutukaupunkiohjelma*). In **Algeria**, in addition to revision of the National Territorial Development Plan (SNAT) and the

urban planning law, Algeria is embarking on creation of new urban centers (intermediate satellite cities) to promote close links between urban and rural areas. More countries including **Czech Republic**, **Israel** and **Romania** are also implementing policies to promote intermediary cities.



Governance of urban-rural linkages

Most policies supporting urban-rural linkages are concentrated at the national level, highlighting the need for stronger local-level frameworks or addressing gaps in local capacities. These policies include national urban policies, development strategies, and economic plans, which often lack sufficient localization.

However, an inspiring national level policy example is **Chile's** Rural Development National Policy, which integrates all governance levels by assigning specific roles to each, ensuring more effective and coordinated implementation. This approach underscores the potential for more inclusive governance, where both national and local actors contribute to strengthening urban-rural linkages.

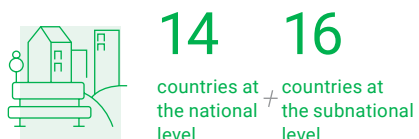
Lithuania has relevant policies exclusively at the national level, indicating a centralized approach to urban-rural linkages.

Countries like **Algeria, Azerbaijan, Colombia, the Czech Republic, Eswatini, Honduras, Israel, Mauritius, Moldova, Romania, the United States of America, Zambia, and Zimbabwe** have established relevant policies at both national and subnational levels, reflecting a relatively more decentralized effort in addressing these linkages.

However, local-level policies are limited in these countries, which could indicate one of two possibilities: either there is strong local-level implementation of national or subnational policies, or there is a significant gap in policymaking at the local level.

Requests for Assistance on Urban-Rural Linkages

Countries have identified key areas where they need support to strengthen urban-rural linkages at national and subnational levels:



Intermediary City Linkages

14 countries need support at the national level, and **16 countries** at the subnational level, emphasizing the role of intermediary cities in resource sharing and accessibility.



Financing

17 countries at the national level and **16 at the subnational** level require assistance, highlighting the need for financial mechanisms to sustain urban-rural integration.



Support for Small and Intermediary Towns

16 countries at both levels recognize their role as economic and service hubs for sustainable integration.



Multi-Level Governance

14 countries need support at the national level, and **13 at the subnational level**, showing a need for coordinated governance frameworks.





18

countries at the national level

+

14

countries at the national level

Urban and Territorial Planning

18 countries at the subnational level and **14 at the national level** require planning frameworks tailored to local contexts.



15

countries at both levels

National Urban Policy Implementation

15 countries at both levels seek guidance on translating national policies into local actions.



15

countries at the national level

+

07

countries at the national level

Urban Policy Review

15 countries at the national level need assistance, compared to seven at the subnational level, indicating a focus on updating national policies.



18

countries at the national level

+

16

countries at the national level

Tools and Guidelines

18 countries at the national level and **16 at the subnational level** require practical methodologies for effective policy implementation.



15

countries at the national level

+

18

countries at the national level

Capacity Development

15 countries at the national level, and ****18 at the subnational level**, reflecting a greater need for local governance strengthening.



Zuma Rock, Niger State, Nigeria. 30 October 2008 © Mark Hillary/ flickr

8. Strategic pathways for Advancing Urban-Rural Linkages

Strengthen Institutional Frameworks

There is a need for governments to establish or strengthen institutional frameworks to enhance urban-rural linkages. This could include creating dedicated departments or agencies, formulating comprehensive policies and legislation, and promoting cross-sectoral coordination.



Promote Integrated Planning

Urban and rural development should not be planned in isolation. Integrated planning can lead to coordinated development and efficient use of resources.



Enhance Infrastructure Connectivity

Improved infrastructure connectivity, especially transportation and digital infrastructure, can significantly enhance urban-rural linkages. It can facilitate the flow of goods, services, and information, leading to economic and social benefits along the continuum.



Foster Knowledge Sharing and Capacity Building

Encourage the exchange of knowledge, best practices, and innovative solutions through global platforms such as the International Forum on Urban-Rural Linkages. Invest in capacity building to equip local communities, policymakers, and practitioners with the necessary skills and knowledge on urban-rural linkages.



Leverage Community Participation

Engage local communities in decision-making processes related to urban-rural linkages. Their insights and participation can lead to more effective, context-specific, and sustainable outcomes.



Promoting Urban-Rural Linkages (URL) for Climate Resilience and Sustainability

Strengthening urban-rural collaboration can enhance ecosystem services, such as biodiversity conservation, water management, and carbon sequestration. Integrated strategies include green infrastructure, agroecological practices, and community-driven projects that contribute to climate action, biodiversity, and land management—aligning with the Rio Conventions (UNFCCC, CBD, and UNCCD).



Integrating Youth in Urban-Rural Development

Youth play a key role in bridging urban and rural divides through technology, entrepreneurship, and advocacy. They drive economic integration via agri-tech startups, eco-tourism, and digital platforms connecting rural farmers with urban markets. Their mobility fosters knowledge exchange, and their activism strengthens food security and climate resilience.



Increase Investment

Allocate sufficient financial resources for strengthening urban-rural linkages. This includes considering various sources of finance to support implementation of initiatives that foster urban-rural linkages. For example, national and subnational co-financing, private sector investment, and public-private partnerships.



Monitor Progress

Establish mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of strategies implemented to strengthen urban-rural linkages. This will help in identifying areas of improvement and adjusting strategies as needed. For instance, these can also be aligned as indicators for the Sustainable Development Goals.



9. Annex: UN-Habitat work on urban-rural linkages

EXPANDING KNOWLEDGE



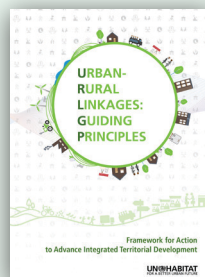
Norms and standards

Thematic guidance on urban-rural linkages on:

- » nutrition
- » food systems
- » biodiversity
- » land
- » transportation
- » urban policy



Policy briefs and other technical materials



Developed through a participatory process of **130+** stakeholders from **40+** international institutions

ENHANCING CAPACITY

15+ training workshops on URL linkages virtually and in-person in **7** countries, bringing together over **500** diverse stakeholders

Training Workshops



3 compendia of case studies have been developed covering **60+** case studies from **58** countries globally

Sharing Best Practices



ADVANCING ADVOCACY & PARTNERSHIP EFFORTS



Events

Active participation in international forums, conferences, and summits focused on urban-rural linkages.



Newsletters



TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Extensive support provided to **13+** countries in addressing URL

UN-Habitat has worked with:


- » Governments
- » Local authorities
- » Civil society organizations
- » Stakeholders

& Partnered with:

- » Academia
- » Think tanks
- » Development agencies



Norms and standards



Beyond the City: Global Trends and Insights on Urban-Rural Linkages - Key Highlights Booklet

This Key Highlights Booklet is a summarized version of the Global Trends and Insights on Urban-Rural Linkages Report. The booklet provides a concise overview of the evolving relationship between urban and rural areas, emphasizing their growing importance in sustainable development. It also explores global events, frameworks and processes that have contributed to strengthening urban-rural linkages (URLs), while highlighting emerging issues in urban-rural linkages.

Drawing on survey responses from Member States, the booklet synthesizes how URLs are incorporated into national and subnational frameworks and showcases diverse global actions aimed at enhancing these connections.

This resource not only serves as a quick source of knowledge on the state of urban-rural linkages but also proposes actionable recommendations for advancing integrated and inclusive development across urban and rural landscapes.

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