Towards a More Equal City

The World Resources Report: Towards a More Equal City focuses on helping cities in rapidly urbanizing regions alter their development trajectories as demand for infrastructure and services grows. This series of research papers and case studies examines whether providing equitable access to core urban services and infrastructure, like housing, water, sanitation, energy, and transportation, leads to more economically productive and environmentally sustainable cities. Expert authors from around the world examine sector-specific approaches that have worked already and explore how these practices can help other cities make better choices.

With the world’s urban population expected to increase by about 60 percent by 2050, we have an opportunity to build cities where everyone can live, move and thrive. There is an emerging global consensus that we must work towards cities that provide a high quality of life for all.

But achieving this outcome is not guaranteed. It requires a new vision of how to build and manage urban areas. The decisions cities make today are crucial because they could lock us into a cycle of low productivity, poverty and environmental degradation for the rest of the century and beyond.

Without equal access to core services for all residents, cities may not be able to achieve the higher quality of life, economic productivity and environmental sustainability that we all desire.

The World Resources Report
The World Resources Report is the flagship publication of World Resources Institute and has been published in various formats since 1986. Each edition focuses on one aspect of the Institute’s work. The latest report to be published comprised a series of research papers and a synthesis report (in press) on Creating a Sustainable Food Future. Earlier reports have covered climate adaptation, poverty, and environmental change and human health, among other issues.
Why Urbanization Is Different Now

Current trends in urbanization vary from those in the past in four key ways:

1. The highest rates of urbanization are in sub-Saharan Africa and South and Southeast Asia

Imagine the entire population of China and India moving into cities by 2050. The global urban population is rising at an unprecedented rate: about 2.5 billion more people are expected to be living in cities in just over three decades, and more than 90 percent of that increase will occur in Asia and Africa. By mid-century, estimates show that 52 percent of the world’s total urban population will be living in Asia and 21 percent in Africa.

2. Urbanization is now happening in more low-income countries

Urbanization is increasingly occurring in lower-income countries. In 1960, very few low-income countries were highly urbanized, but by 2014 many more low-income countries were undergoing rapid urbanization. Many of the countries that have experienced urban growth and economic stagnation are in sub-Saharan Africa.

3. The share of poor people living in urban areas is on the rise

While the poverty rate is falling globally, a higher proportion of the poor than ever before is now living in cities. From the perspective of city governments, this represents a significant challenge because the absolute number of the urban poor is increasing. The graphic shows this trend in India, where data is available, but this pattern is also found in other countries of the global south.

Note: Example trend based on data from India.
4. Cities in the global south have the fewest resources per capita

Cities in the global south that are expected to experience the greatest increases in population have the fewest financial resources per capita to address these challenges. This makes it increasingly difficult for cities to provide access to core services for all residents. As many as 70 percent of city residents in the global south are under-served, lacking access to one or more core services. In 2012, more than 482 million urban residents lacked access to modern fuels and 131 million lacked access to electricity. In 2015, 140 million urbanites did not have reliable, clean water. City leaders face a tension between meeting the immediate and growing demand for services and making longer-term decisions that shape the built environment.

When large segments of the urban population suffer from inadequate access to core services, there are economic and environmental consequences. Inadequate service provision undermines people's ability to be economically productive, and challenges them to fend for themselves in inefficient and costly ways that often harm the environment. This issue is universal, affecting much of the population in cities in the global south. It presents a challenge, but also offers the opportunity to develop new approaches to providing services that are more affordable, reach more people and are less environmentally damaging than traditional solutions developed in the global north.

Our research examines whether approaches that prioritize the urban under-served will bring economic and environmental benefits to everyone in the city. A series of sector-specific working papers – on housing, energy, the informal economy, urban expansion, water access, sanitation solutions and transportation – explore how cities can provide growing numbers of residents with secure and affordable access to core services.

Sector-specific approaches are a start, but they are not enough. To build thriving cities, we need policies that transcend siloed thinking and piecemeal solutions.

In a preliminary analysis at the city scale, we found that urban transformation encompasses some common features: a strong coalition of urban change agents with a shared vision that successfully addresses a seminal problem and unleashes a cycle of positive change; the availability of financial resources to implement ambitious reforms; and long-term political commitment. Through a series of more in-depth, city-level case studies we ask the question: Is it possible to learn from these cases and use this knowledge to help other cities usher in their own transformation?

Equitable access as an entry point to sustainable cities

Our research highlights practical approaches to providing equitable access to core services as a means to transform cities. As work on the series unfolds, we aspire to create a social and political movement of urban change agents working towards this outcome, even as the path is different for every city. We invite thought leaders, government, the private sector and civil society to imagine cities that can be better for everyone.

About WRI Ross Center for Sustainable Cities

WRI Ross Center for Sustainable Cities helps create accessible, equitable, healthy and resilient urban areas for people, businesses and the environment to thrive. Together with partners, it enables more connected, compact and coordinated cities. The Center expands the transport and urban development expertise of the EMBARQ network to catalyze innovative solutions in other sectors, including water, buildings, land use and energy. It combines the research excellence of WRI with 15 years of on-the-ground impact through a network of more than 240 experts working from Brazil, China, Ethiopia, India, Mexico and Turkey to make cities around the world better places to live. More information at www.wrirosscities.org.

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Funders

We deeply appreciate the following donors for their generous financial support of World Resources Report: Towards a More Equal City.

United Kingdom Department for International Development
Stephen M. Ross Philanthropies
Denmark Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Ireland Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
United Nations Development Programme