

United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification input to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF)

Accelerating the recovery from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at all levels” with a special focus on SDG 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities

Key messages

- Land resources – soil, water, and biodiversity – provide the foundation for the wealth of our societies and economies. They meet the growing needs and desires for food, water, fuel, and other raw materials that shape our livelihoods and lifestyles. However, the way we currently manage and use these natural resources is threatening the health and continued survival of many species on Earth, including our own.
- Land is the operative link between biodiversity loss and climate change, and therefore must be the primary focus of any meaningful intervention to tackle these intertwined crises. Restoring degraded land and soil provides the most fertile ground on which to take immediate and concerted action.
- Land and ecosystem restoration will help slow global warming, reduce the risk, scale, frequency, and intensity of disasters (e.g., pandemics, drought, floods), and facilitate the recovery of critical biodiversity habitat and ecological connectivity to avoid extinctions and restore the unimpeded movement of species and the flow of natural processes that sustain life on Earth.
- Restoration is needed in the right places and at the right scales to better manage interconnected global emergencies. Responsible governance and land use planning will be key to protecting healthy and productive land and recuperating biodiverse, carbon-rich ecosystems to avoid dangerous tipping points.
- The deep inequalities exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and other cascading crises highlight the importance of sustainable urban development. Thus, land and ecosystem restoration of urban and peri urban areas is essential and urgently needed to strengthen the resilience of cities and its surrounding spaces in responding to current and future crises.

Building sustainable and green urban and peri urban areas

Today, more than half the world’s population live in cities. By 2050, an estimated 7 out of 10 people will likely live in urban areas. Cities are drivers of economic growth and contribute more than 80 % of global GDP. However, they also account for more than 70 % of global greenhouse gas emissions. If well-planned and managed, urban, and peri-urban development can be sustainable and can generate inclusive prosperity.¹ The deep inequalities exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and other cascading crises highlight the importance of sustainable urban development.

¹ <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/cities/>

From the early days of the pandemic, cities have been on the frontline of COVID-19. The spread of the virus globally through travel, trade and mobility meant that many of the first detected infections appeared in urban areas. The key determinants of risk for urban residents are inequality, inadequate housing, and lack of access to clean water, sanitation, and waste management. Aggravating conditions, such as high levels of air pollution, have also played a role in exposing marginalized communities to more severe impacts.

Cities and urban areas generally have dense populations in which the natural environment has been transformed into a built environment governed by complex social and economic interactions. The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the risks that climate change, habitat destruction and consumer and travel behavior's pose not only to environmental health, but to public health as well.

Urban transport and industries emit greenhouse gases and contribute significantly to air and water pollution. Cities also generate huge amounts of solid and liquid waste, which ends up in landfills, wetlands, and the ocean. The deterioration of vegetation cover as metropolitan areas extends beyond urban boundaries (urban–rural interface) have led to habitat loss and the intermingling of animal and human environments, contributing to an increase in zoonotic diseases, where viruses are transmitted from animal species to humans. Limiting atmospheric and environmental pollution and fighting environmental degradation, ecosystem deterioration and deforestation, should be part of a long-term response that builds resilience against pandemics into urban planning.

Nature based solution for urban/ peri-urban settings

Efforts to make cities greener and more sustainable are gaining momentum around the world. Nature-based solutions for water treatment, temperature control, and flood mitigation are practical options when decommissioning or replacing ageing urban infrastructure. Protecting and restoring nature is extremely cost-effective when planning and designing new urban and peri-urban developments.

Investment needs for urban infrastructure at a global level are estimated at USD \$4.5-5.4 trillion per year, which translates into an estimated funding gap of USD\$350 billion per year compared to current levels of infrastructure investment. Nature-based solutions for infrastructure are 50% cheaper than traditional man-made infrastructure and provide 28% added value — including decarbonisation of the built environment, climate resilience, land value capture and job creation.²

Thus, many urban greening activities are effective strategies to address both the challenges of COVID-19 and the long-term threats posed by climate change while at the same time bringing people together for a common purpose, providing for shovel-ready jobs (e.g., soil preparation, engineering, tree planting) as well as more permanent employment opportunities (e.g., maintenance, management).

Many cities retain great ecological and biodiversity potential. Urban greening can be an effective way to engage communities in making their cities more livable and sustainable. Vegetated and riparian corridors within and around cities for example create buffer zones for recreation as well as migration corridors for wildlife. Wetlands and restored waterways are important hydrological connectors in and around cities that help control floods, regulate seasonal flows, and provide clean drinking water to urban residents. To mitigate the emergence and spread of future infectious diseases and enhance long-term health and resilience, emphasis in land use and environmental planning should be put on preserving and restoring blue-green networks and landscape corridors across regions.

Territorial and Landscape Planning for a sustainable urban and peri-urban development

The areas immediately surrounding towns and cities are often seen as transitional – neither fully urban nor completely rural. While providing vital services to the core urban area, such as food, water, and recreation as well as housing and transport links for commuters, these areas are also susceptible to further urban expansion and artificialization.

To avoid unplanned urban grow and poor infrastructure development territorial planning could be employed as an administrative tool for rational land allocation and the development of green and blue

² <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/01/climate-change-cities-nature-based-solutions-wef23/>

infrastructure to strengthen urban rural linkages. This typically involves relevant local authorities coordinating sectoral plans as a coherent unit and engaging with relevant stakeholders in zoning decisions that balance artificialization with the preservation of farmland and natural areas.

Effective territorial planning can reshape the form and function of urban-rural linkages to generate economic growth and secure employment while addressing the needs of vulnerable groups. Territorial planning can also encourage the development of shorter and more efficient supply chains that reduce pressures on land resources further afield. Peri-urban areas are often well positioned as distribution points for regional produce and value-added commodities that supply lucrative city markets. Other measures to strengthen sustainable urban-rural linkages include the development of more efficient transport and energy infrastructure, payments to peri urban farmers for ecosystem services, and the certification and labeling of regionally produced goods, including favorable local procurement policies for government offices, schools, and hospitals.

Urban land governance: putting people front and centre

How land is governed in urban or peri-urban areas depends on a network of actors and relationship dynamics. When designing urban restoration initiatives, it is essential to involve the local community – i.e., those who benefit directly, who will be most affected, and on whom success depends. In some cases, national governments may devolve more power and financial resources to local authorities to fund and support participatory urban greening initiatives. Municipal governments and local administrations are better able to ensure that their communities are fully engaged in the planning, implementation, and maintenance of these greening activities.

Women and youth can play a major role in urban greening. They are often involved in informal and local food markets, and many are engaged in urban agriculture to boost food and nutritional security as well as household incomes. Ensuring they have more secure tenure and resource rights, and improving their access to credit and services, can help create valuable employment opportunities for women and inspire new entrepreneurship. Greater control of finance and technology would also result in greater equity and empowerment for women in urban areas. Urban areas are a magnet for youth and can be a springboard for engaging in restoration. By 2030, about 60% of urban residents will be aged under 18.³ These young people can lead the next generation to create greener and more sustainable urban environments. Urban restoration projects, supported by educational and school programs, not only educate youth about environmental and sustainability issues but provide them with the training and skillsets needed to pursue meaningful work or become ecopreneurs.

Policy recommendations

- Produce stronger evidence on green and sustainable urban spaces for climate change adaptation and mitigation and raise awareness on how nature-based solutions can contribute to urban/peri-urban policy objectives.
- Establish a strong business case by estimating financial returns and local benefits of green urban spaces and incentivize nature-positive investments and projects with tax breaks and smart subsidies while regulating harmful interventions.
- Improve coordination and collaboration across departments and organizations in designing and carrying out policy frameworks directly or indirectly targeting urban/peri-urban restoration or greening projects and support more transformative change by creating new or adjusting existing planning tools that support nature-based solutions with compensation tools.
- Consider socio-environmental justice and social cohesion when implementing urban/peri-urban restoration or greening projects by using integrated governance approaches that consider an integrative and transdisciplinary participation of diverse actors.

³ United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, 2022. The Global Land Outlook, second edition. https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/2022-04/UNCCD_GLO2_low-res_2.pdf

- Create capacities at local level for maintaining the nature-based solutions realized throughout their lifecycle, fostering a sense of responsibility in local populations that may in turn ignite collaboration and inclusiveness among different cultural and age groups.