10 ways to make our cities liveable by 2030

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This is part of a series on the Global Goals for Sustainable Development, in collaboration with the Stockholm Resilience Centre. This article focuses on goal 11 – Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

The biggest migration in the history of our species is unfolding. In the 15 years between now and the completion of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2030, urbanization will move into overdrive.

India, China and Nigeria will likely account for 37% of projected growth in urban populations between 2014 and 2050. The speed at which people are moving to cities means that we need the equivalent of a new city of 1 million people every five days. It is unsurprising, then, that cities get their own goal: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.
Given the scale of expected growth, this is a remarkable opportunity to develop thriving, healthy, liveable cities with low pollution, integrated transport systems and low emissions. Unfortunately, the most popular model for urban expansion is the least sustainable of all: North American urban sprawl.

Cities are the action arm of civilization. They are engines of creativity and innovation. They are dynamic, complex, evolving systems but these dynamics can produce unintended or unforeseen outcomes.

To me, the following 10 items are the essential ingredients required to achieve thriving, prosperous cities.

1. **Empower cities:** More financial power should be delegated to cities in proportion to their responsibilities. In addition, it is important to recognize their rightful place in policy processes and implementing SDGs. Current implementation strategies emphasize country, regional and international approaches, without much focus on cities. Challenge cities to adopt the goals – and compete and cooperate to achieve them.

2. **National level support:** It is important to realize urban issues are not the responsibility of local government alone. The aggregated social and economic power and environmental impacts of cities are often comparable to that of entire nations, but their potential cannot be properly tapped without support. Having a place in the national government institutional structure is essential.

3. **Integrate new migrants and other vulnerable populations into the urban fabric:** In China alone, there are 250 million people termed the “floating population” who come to cities to work but often without adequate social security or healthcare support. These people are often systematically discriminated against by cities’ bureaucracies. Adopt a people-centred approach to urbanization, nurturing a sense of belonging and enhanced participatory governance.

4. **Beyond city limits:** Ensure policies and management decisions at the city level take into account the regional and global context and interactions.

5. **Coordinated long-term vision:** As cities grow and new cities emerge, we need a coordinated long-term vision of urban development. Unrealistically ambitious outlooks and over-competition results in redundant infrastructure and inefficient resource use.

6. **Prepare for future risks:** Cities need to be prepared not only for the risks arising from global phenomena such as climate change, but also those arising from local processes. For example, numerous cities sit on deltas, and many of the world’s deltas are sinking as a result of extraction and the concentration of high-rise buildings.

7. **Implementation and accountability:** Many cities suffer from air and water pollution, where local officials prioritize economic development over environmental quality; or worse, corruption is rife and officials are bribed to ignore regulations. Enhancing implementation of environmental regulation and reducing corruption will have a dramatic effect on the liveability of cities.

8. **More science in planning and decision-making:** We do not have a full grasp of how cities as a complex system behave and respond to intervention. For example, decisions about
transport can affect housing, industry, energy consumption and health in unexpected ways. Unintended adverse consequences can be minimized through closer collaboration on science and urban policies. Moreover, the main urban research institutes are in wealthy countries. The most rapid urbanization will happen in Africa and Asia. We need more urban research institutes in these areas linked to local and national policies.

9. Nurture cultural innovation: Cities are centres of rapid cultural innovation. Evidence shows that cultural shifts in cities, e.g. “Cycling is cool” or “Wasting food is a shame”, have the potential to deliver significant sustainability outcomes within and beyond cities.

10. Facilitate city-to-city learning: Cities learn from each other more than from anything else. However, engagement in such peer learning can be constrained by local capacity, and this is where upper-level government and international organizations can help. In doing so, we must recognize that solutions are not one-size-fits-all. It is also important to recognize that learning and sharing doesn’t have to be uni-directional.

800 years ago, the Chinese poet Lu You wrote *Time in the poem*, about the profound effort required to compose a great poem, which goes far beyond mere wordsmithing skills. Similarly, creating the sustainable cities of the future will require profound thinking to appreciate the advantages of a deeper complex-systems approach to urbanization.

**Have you read?**

- The sustainable development fight will be won or lost in our cities
- How achievable are the Sustainable Development Goals?

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**Image:** Hong Kong skyline is seen from the Peak, in Hong Kong. REUTERS/Paul Yeung

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