

Backgrounder

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Slum in Buenos Aires, Argentina.
Credit: Jimmy Baikovicius via Flickr (CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED)



Climate action for equitable cities

Why urban climate action must urgently link low-carbon development and resilience

More than one billion people live in slums that have substantial deficits in governance, housing and basic services. About 750 million people earn less than US\$2 per day. This implies that large numbers of people in cities lack the means to adapt to a changing climate. At the same time, two-thirds of all cities are in locations that are highly exposed to climate impacts. It is critical that those developing and deploying integrated approaches consider **exposure, hazards and vulnerability** as entry points for low-carbon development:

1. Tackling exposure is defined by the IPCC as the presence of people; livelihoods; environmental services and resources; infrastructure; or economic, social or cultural assets in places that are vulnerable to climate risks. A good example of an approach that simultaneously tackles exposure, responds to housing and basic service needs, and propels low-carbon development is 'climate-smart'

urban redevelopment, where land-use plans can be used to concentrate population expansion in less exposed parts of a city in a way that also reduces emissions (for example, through improved urban planning or mixed land use where the need to commute is reduced).

2. Climate hazards — such as droughts, floods and heatwaves — can cause injury, have health impacts and lead to loss of life, as well as cause damage to and loss of property and income. Nature-based solutions are good examples of interventions that can reduce the likelihood of hazards and mitigate CO₂. For instance, urban green space can counteract urban heat island effects, increase carbon storage, and improve biodiversity and social interaction.²

3. Tackling vulnerability involves reducing the possibility of being adversely affected by the impacts of a changing climate. This means

VITAL STATISTICS

- Cities produce 80% of the emissions that cause climate change
- The majority of cities are located along coasts and rivers with extensive populations that are vulnerable to climate change
- Global investment in urban mitigation outstrips investment in resilience by over fifty times.¹

WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

Policies and initiatives aimed at mitigating greenhouse gas emissions and those designed to enhance resilience for cities are often developed and deployed in silos. This is a major impediment to sustainable and equitable urban development.

Global investments in urban mitigation outstrip investments in resilience by over fifty times.¹ However, this presents a big opportunity to plug resilience financing gaps through 'integrative approaches' that might leverage mitigation finance to deliver resilience co-benefits for the urban poor.

There is an urgent need to integrate adaptation and mitigation initiatives in order to avoid harmful trade-offs. Installing mitigation infrastructure that considers climate impacts can reduce the risks facing urban communities. Equally, actions to enhance resilience that are low-carbon can ensure urban mitigation gains, avoiding carbon-intensive trajectories. Mitigation and resilience investments must be focused on redressing social and economic inequalities for equitable results and in order to enhance the adaptive capacity of low-income communities in particular.

enhancing people's capabilities to adapt to climate extremes and variability. A good example of reducing vulnerability is the provision of subsidies to the urban poor for the installation of micro-infrastructure for renewable energy (for example, solar power) or building materials for insulation in informal settlements to enhance their resilience without the need for more expensive higher-emitting energy sources.

Equity, effectiveness and justice through co-production

Integrated solutions that simultaneously address poverty and inequality while building climate resilience and reducing emissions must be tailored to the institutional, cultural and biophysical contexts of the cities in which they are to be deployed.³ Critically, this includes ensuring that the benefits of integrated approaches are felt equitably and include the urban poor. There is growing support for processes of integrated climate action that rely on 'co-production' to deliver just and impactful interventions. Co-production refers to structured approaches that seek to explore and reframe complex problems through dialogue and knowledge sharing between different stakeholder groups.³

Integrated climate action in practice: Villa 20 Buenos Aires

Villa 20 is an informal settlement in Buenos Aires, Argentina, which is undergoing a participatory reurbanisation process. The process is being coordinated by the Institute of Housing of the City of Buenos Aires — Instituto de Vivienda de la Ciudad — but each project stage includes processes allowing consensus-based decision making by community members.

With funding from the International Climate Initiative of the German Government (IKI), the Transformative Urban Coalitions project has established an 'Urban Lab' that complements the upgrading process in Villa 20 with new ideas, connecting decarbonisation with efforts to improve housing and build climate resilience. Diverse stakeholder groups have co-produced alternative practices and upgrading interventions, such as using nature-based solutions that respond to heat island effects, improvement of air and water quality, noise reduction, CO₂ capture and greater control of stormwater run-off management. The next phase will focus on how these lessons can be translated into upgrading processes in other Argentinian cities.⁴

Looking ahead

We have launched a new programme focused on co-producing action research focused on mitigating greenhouse gases, building resilience and responding to longstanding development deficits. We are undertaking this in three ways:

We recognise that the impacts of climate change fall heavily on informal and low-income urban communities, and that the complexities of these impacts across basic services and infrastructure remain poorly understood. **We are working to strengthen the evidence and recognition of the disproportionate impacts of climate change and risks on low-income, unplanned and informal urban communities.**

Secondly, low-income and informal settlements are often excluded from climate action. Integrated climate action led by communities can boost city-wide resilience and reduce the risk of high-carbon development, while addressing structural and spatial urban inequalities. **We are co-producing action research and supporting interventions that connect climate action (adaptation and decarbonisation) with efforts to tackle urban poverty, inequality and injustice at scale.**

Finally, given the unequal opportunities for urban stakeholders, particularly from low-income and informal communities, to participate in climate decision-making processes, multi-stakeholder climate action, including financing, must prioritise urban equity and the inclusion of politically excluded groups. **We are working with partners to enable pathways to effectively govern and resource equitable climate action in low-income and informal urban communities.**



Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges. We support some of the world's most vulnerable people to strengthen their voice in decision making.

SOUTHERN VOICES

"Individual affiliates, the SDI, all of us, we are faced with the climate change emergency, and I think, individually, we are using different methods, responses, engagements in responding to this... in most cases, I think the community, specifically those residing in informal settlements, are continuously being marginalised. And I think in the same process vulnerability scales widen and issues of climate injustices and inequality also widen."

— Participant in an exchange between SDI members in Zimbabwe and Kenya about climate action for informal settlements.

¹ Naran, B, Fernandes, P, Padmanabhi, R, Rosane, P, Solomon, M, Stout, S, Strinati, C, Tolentino, R, Wakaba, E, Zhu, Y and Buchner, B (2021) Global Landscape of Climate Finance 2021. Climate Policy Initiative.

² Schmidt, K and Walz, A (2021) Ecosystem-based adaptation to climate change through residential urban green structures: co-benefits to thermal comfort, biodiversity, carbon storage and social interaction. *One Ecosystem* 6: e65706. <https://doi.org/10.3897/oneeco.6.e65706>

³ Barcena, A and Bahadur, A (2023) Co-producing urban resilience solutions: the role of power and politics. IIED, London. iied.org/22191iied

⁴ IIED, State of the cities marks phase two of Transformative Urban Coalitions. www.iied.org/state-cities-marks-phase-two-transformative-urban-coalitions

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FIND OUT MORE

Our work on climate action for equitable cities is being undertaken by the climate action for equitable cities team at IIED. Find out more about our work at www.iied.org/climate-action-for-equitable-cities-working-informal-communities-develop-low-carbon-resilient

