

Section I: Background

As the world industrialized and countries became more interconnected, people naturally gravitated toward urban centers to seek economic opportunities through the process of urbanization. The pace of urbanization has rapidly increased in recent years, and approximately 55 percent of the global population now lives in cities.¹ Urbanization has variances in speed and density across geographical regions. Recent data concludes that the fastest growing cities are in the global south, primarily in Africa and Asia. Furthermore, the density of cities also varies across regions, as Asia is known for incredibly dense cities, while African cities tend to be more spread out. Regardless of the size or shape of cities, they are powerful economic drivers and produce 80% of global GDP.²

However, one of the greatest challenges facing countries that are currently urbanizing is creating opportunities for sustainable development to occur. Ensuring that sustainable development can occur is essential to both the current standard of living as well as future generations, as cities are both the heaviest contributors to and the most affected by climate change.³ Urban residents must also receive equal access to economic opportunities, given that cities are primarily the products of economic growth. Thus, the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals have taken these concerns into mind, and SDG 11 focuses specifically on “sustainable cities and communities.”⁴ Given these challenges and needs, governments must balance different aspects of development to effectively guarantee sustainable development in cities. As development continues, governments must keep the following issues in mind. While these are not the only possible effects of urban development, they are primary concerns that should be addressed.

Section II: Environmental Concerns

Rapidly developing cities have disproportionately large environmental impacts. In fact, cities are responsible for producing 60% of the world’s emissions and account for 78% of energy

¹ <https://population.un.org/wup/Publications/Files/WUP2018-Report.pdf>

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<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/urbandevelopment/overview#:~:text=Globally%2C%20over%2050%25%20of%20the.1.5%20times%20to%206%20billion.>

³ <https://www.unep.org/explore-topics/sustainable-development-goals/why-do-sustainable-development-goals-matter/goal-11>

⁴ <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/cities/>

consumption.⁵ A lack of proper energy and transportation infrastructure and planning has made city development inefficient, which has contributed to increased emissions and limited the ability of governments to implement more sustainable solutions, such as green energy.⁶ Rising demand for energy and transport in these cities as their population rises also contributes to the issue. Environmental stresses are also compounded by habitat loss due to the expansion of cities and increased urban demand for rural resources. Furthermore, a lack of infrastructure has also made many cities more vulnerable to the effects of climate change, such as floods, heat events, and weather disasters. Unfortunately, the poorest and least-prepared countries are the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

To address this, the U.N. Environmental Programme has implemented the Joint Work Programme to ensure that cities take environmental concerns into account when planning expansion, especially those in developing countries. Other international bodies also exist to help solve the issue. For example, the Paris Accords are a series of measures designed to help the international community reduce emissions to prevent the acceleration of climate change. Part of the Paris Accords includes the Green Climate Fund, which is designed to divert funds from more prosperous countries to countries with more financial needs.⁷ However, more solutions are needed.

Luckily, cities are essential to a solution for mitigating the effects of climate change. When used in conjunction with legislation, efficient planning can help solve environmental effects of urbanization. Given that growth is inevitable, delegates should prioritize efficient planning to help prevent any negative consequences. Ensuring that cities can be developed more efficiently and preventing urban sprawl will be crucial to reducing habitat loss and decreasing emissions from transportation. Even mitigating existing urban sprawl will be helpful, as systems such as public transport will indubitably reduce emissions.⁸ On a micro level, constructing new buildings with more effective ventilation and insulation can help reduce energy usage. Besides planning techniques to reduce existing sources of climate change, countries should also consider how to reduce its effects. Finding ways to implement this planning for all countries, not just the

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<https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/climate-solutions/cities-pollution#:~:text=Cities%20are%20major%20contributors%20to,cent%20of%20the%20Earth's%20surface.>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/nov/17/cities-climate-change-problems-solution>

⁷ <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/paris-climate-agreement-everything-you-need-know>

⁸ <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/cities-as-solutions-to-climate-change/>

countries with the most resources to, will be incredibly beneficial to the work of the committee. Cities are places of untapped potential, and if given the chance, will be essential to fighting climate change.

Section III: Infrastructure Development

Due to the rapid growth of cities, many governments, both in developing and developed countries, have not been able to upgrade their infrastructure at a sustainable rate. Cities are currently growing too fast for development to keep pace with, and almost one billion people across the world live in informal settlements, such as slums, in cities. Slums are defined as informal settlements with inadequate infrastructure and housing that cannot protect against weather or provide safe housing for their residents.⁹ Slums are also characterized by a lack of services, meaning that those living in slums lack access to healthcare and sanitary water as well. They are primarily a result of rapid migration to cities that are unable to provide infrastructure to such a large influx of people. Low incomes in these settlements mean that their people are often not provided for by their governments. Thus, providing affordable, high-quality housing can be a difficult task for governments with no financial or physical ability to do so. The disorganization in slums can also create challenges in regulation, as housing springs up too fast for planning to occur.¹⁰ Furthermore, poor slum-dwellers tend to lack the political power to change their condition without external forces at play.

The prevalence of these inadequate living conditions is not meant to be the norm. Under the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, the international community agreed to guarantee the right to basic dignities like safe housing.¹¹ However, these conditions are hard to achieve for countries without the means to do so. Thus, despite the complexity of solving the issue, the U.N. has taken steps to alleviate slum living conditions. U.N. Habitat has helped to establish the Participatory Slum Upgrading Programme, or PSUP, which is responsible for upgrading slum housing to improve infrastructure and access to sanitation. Solutions such as these are a potential first step towards solving this aspect of the issue.

Besides existing programs, a number of solutions exist and could be explored. Since the lack of sanitation is one of the main drivers of health issues in slums, delegates should consider

⁹ <https://www.citiesalliance.org/themes/slums-and-slum-upgrading>

¹⁰ <https://www.oecd.org/dev/pgd/46837274.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CESCR.aspx>

ways in which clean water and health can be accessed in these areas. For example, improving vaccination programs could save lives from being lost to transmittable diseases that fester in these areas. And, since the Covid-19 pandemic took such a large toll in areas where people were unable to quarantine, preventing another pandemic from happening is also a primary focus of health concerns. Past health issues, building more roads and simply improving homes to protect them from weather will lead to drastic improvements in the living standards of these areas. As the committee works to improve overall urbanization, it should keep the least fortunate city residents in mind.

Section IV: Ensuring Equity

While cities are primarily the result of a desire for economic success and do produce rapid growth, that success is often not spread out equally across city residents. The gap is so pronounced that in Africa, the top 10% makes 30x more than the bottom 50% does. While income inequality is the most extreme in Africa, specifically South and Central Africa, this also applies to other regions of the world. In the Middle East, India, and some parts of Latin America such as Brazil, the top 10% makes 20x more than the bottom 50%.¹² Covid-19 has exacerbated this as global unemployment has risen. Another concern is income inequality between countries, as those living in North America and Europe tend to have much higher incomes than other regions of the world. Despite this, though, inequality even plagues the most prosperous countries, and the world's largest cities are those with the highest proportion of income inequality. The main root of income inequality is hard to determine, but the consensus is that the proportionally large amount of unskilled laborers who migrate to cities versus a small percentage of highly skilled workers that concentrate wealth has contributed to this inequality. As cities become more unequal, areas with higher inequality experience high crime rates and more health issues, which also poses a challenge to planners who seek to create further development.¹³

Since the issue of inequality affects both the richest and poorest countries, a holistic solution is necessary to solve it before it continues to stunt economic growth in cities. To this end, the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals have helped to provide a framework for

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<https://wid.world/document/income-inequality-in-africa-1990-2017-wid-world-issue-brief-2019-06/#:~:text=Africa%20has%20the%20highest%20gap,inequality%20regions%20such%20as%20the>

¹³ <https://blog.euromonitor.com/the-worlds-largest-cities-are-the-most-unequal/>

sustainable growth. More specifically, Goal 10 seeks to reduce inequality, both financially and socially.¹⁴ Using this goal, the U.N. has helped to alleviate income inequality through the Covid-19 Response and Recovery Fund, which delivers aid to the most vulnerable populations in countries who need it. Notably, one of the main priorities in the Response and Recovery development framework is creating a framework for continued development, not just immediate recovery.¹⁵

As the committee explores themes of inequity in urban areas, this theme of long-term growth for all members of the population is important to consider. Solutions passed by the committee should take into consideration the socioeconomic differences between groups living in cities and seek to alleviate these issues. One way to alleviate this is by addressing social exclusion of low-income groups, such as the distinction between formal and informal sectors of work. Long-term solutions can also be explored, such as improving access to infrastructure and education for the entire population. These can also include social services and potential benefit programs for low-income populations. However, given macro-level income inequality across entire countries, the committee should also ensure that solutions are applicable to all countries and actively seek to decrease the hierarchy of the developed versus the developing countries. Ultimately, bringing the benefits of a strong economy to all income groups is essential to creating sustainable growth within cities.

Section V: Final Notes and Questions to Consider

One main theme that has become evident in the process of urbanization is that issues do not exist in a vacuum. Environmental concerns intersect with equity concerns, as the poorest are the hardest hit by climate change.¹⁶ Building infrastructure intersects yet again, as better infrastructure would help protect against disasters, but a lack of equal distribution of quality infrastructure plagues development. These issues are also present across the globe, as urbanization is a global trend that every country must become accustomed to. The chairs hope that solutions will account for a comprehensive range of effects of urbanization, and would like to provide the following set of questions to consider in your research:

¹⁴ <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/inequality/>

¹⁵ https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_framework_report_on_covid-19.pdf

¹⁶ <https://yaleclimateconnections.org/2020/07/what-is-climate-justice/>

1. How can solutions intersect different effects of urbanization?
2. What are ways to bridge the financial gap between different countries when implementing solutions?
3. How can growth happen while reducing emissions?
4. How can cities be planned to minimize environmental harms?
5. What role does building infrastructure play in ensuring sustainability?
6. What steps can be taken to provide equitable access to infrastructure and social services in cities?
7. Which areas are the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change?
8. How has the pandemic affected the poorest demographics?
9. How can long-term growth reduce income inequality?