Cities are hubs for ideas, commerce, culture, science, productivity, social development and much more. At their best, cities have enabled people to advance socially and economically. With the number of people living within cities projected to rise to 5 billion people by 2030, it’s important that efficient urban planning and management practices are in place to deal with the challenges brought by urbanization.

Many challenges exist to maintaining cities in a way that continues to create jobs and prosperity without straining land and resources. Common urban challenges include congestion, lack of funds to provide basic services, a shortage of adequate housing, declining infrastructure and rising air pollution within cities.

Rapid urbanization challenges, such as the safe removal and management of solid waste within cities, can be overcome in ways that allow them to continue to thrive and grow, while improving resource use and reducing pollution and poverty. One such example is an increase in municipal waste collection. There needs to be a future in which cities provide opportunities for all, with access to basic services, energy, housing, transportation and more.

Half of humanity – 3.5 billion people – lives in cities today and 5 billion people are projected to live in cities by 2030.

95 per cent of urban expansion in the next decades will take place in developing world

883 million people live in slums today and most them are found in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia.

The world’s cities occupy just 3 per cent of the Earth’s land, but account for 60-80 per cent of energy consumption and 75 per cent of carbon emissions.

Rapid urbanization is exerting pressure on fresh water supplies, sewage, the living environment, and public health

As of 2016, 90% of urban dwellers have been breathing unsafe air, resulting in 4.2 million deaths due to ambient air pollution. More than half of the global urban population were exposed to air pollution levels at least 2.5 times higher than the safety standard.

By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums

By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons

By 2030, enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management in all countries

Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage

By 2030, significantly reduce the number of deaths and the number of people affected and substantially decrease the direct economic losses relative to global gross domestic product caused by disasters, including water-related disasters, with a focus on protecting the poor and people in vulnerable situations

By 2030, reduce the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, including by paying special attention to air quality and municipal and other waste management

By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities

Support positive economic, social and environmental links between urban, peri-urban and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning

By 2020, substantially increase the number of cities and human settlements adopting and implementing integrated policies and plans towards inclusion, resource efficiency, mitigation and adaptation to climate change, resilience to disasters, and develop and implement, in line with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, holistic disaster risk management at all levels

Support least developed countries, including through financial and technical assistance, in building sustainable and resilient buildings utilizing local materials

Substantial progress has been made in reducing the proportion of the global urban population living in slums, though more than 1 billion people continue to live in such situations. Urgent action is needed to reverse the current situation, which sees the vast majority of urban residents breathing poor-quality air and having limited access to transport and open public spaces. With the areas occupied by cities growing faster than their populations, there are profound repercussions for sustainability.

Between 1990 and 2016, the proportion of the global urban population living in slums fell from 46 to 23 per cent. This progress was largely offset by internal population growth and rural-urban migration. In 2016, just over 1 billion people lived in slums or informal settlements, with over half (589 million) living in East, South-East, Central and South Asia.

The proportion of urban residents who have convenient access to public transport (defined as living within 500 m walking distance of a bus stop and within 1,000 m of a railway and/or ferry terminal) remains low, particularly in developing countries. Based on data from 227 cities from 78 countries in 2018, on average, 53 per cent of urban residents in all regions had convenient access to public transport, from a low of 18 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa to a high of 75 per cent in Australia and New Zealand. In some regions that have low access to public transport, informal transport modes are highly prevalent and in many cases provide reliable transport for the majority of urban populations.

Globally, urban areas are expanding at a faster rate than their populations. Between 2000 and 2014, areas occupied by cities grew 1.28 times faster than their populations. Closely related to this trend is that the urban densities of cities have been declining, creating profound repercussions for environmental sustainability at the local, regional and global scale. Better management of urban growth will be crucial in order to guarantee sustainable urbanization.

Globally, 2 billion people do not have access to waste collection services and 3 billion people lack access to controlled waste disposal facilities. With increasing urban populations and the existence of consumer-oriented economies amid rising income levels and rapid urbanization, it is estimated that the total waste generated in the world will double from nearly 2 billion tons in 2016 to about 4 billion tons by 2050. While from 2010 to 2018 the proportion of solid waste collected was about 81 per cent globally, in sub-Saharan Africa it was only 52 per cent.

In 2016, 9 in 10 people living in urban areas still breathed air that did not meet the World Health Organization’s air quality guidelines value for particulate matter – that particulate matter 2.5 microns or less in size (PM2.5) not exceed an annual mean of 10 micrograms per m3 or a daily mean of 25 micrograms per m3 – and more than half of the world population experienced an increase in PM2.5 from 2010 to 2016.

Most cities have struggled to ensure that their populations have convenient access to open public spaces (defined as spaces within 400 m walking distance of their residence). Based on data from 220 cities in 77 countries in 2018, only 21 per cent of the population had convenient access to open public spaces. However, these results do not necessarily mean that there is an inadequate share of land dedicated to open public spaces in these cities, but rather that their distribution across urban areas is uneven.

National urban policies are policy strategies that specifically respond to the urbanization challenges of today. As of the beginning of 2019, 150 countries had developed such policies, and almost half are already implementing them.