



11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES
AND COMMUNITIES



SDG 11

Sustainable cities and communities

Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

The Arab region is one of the most urbanized worldwide, with 75 per cent of its inhabitants expected to be living in urban areas by 2050.¹ Although Arab cities are vibrant centres of economic, cultural and social activity, unplanned urbanization spurred by the relocation of people owing to poverty, climate change and conflict is placing immense pressure on cities and their surrounding environments. Unplanned urbanization has exacerbated poverty and inequality, outpaced the supply of affordable housing, segmented land markets, and led to the proliferation of slums and disadvantaged neighbourhoods that have no adequate access to basic services, infrastructure and green public spaces. These factors and the recent COVID-19 pandemic, along with other crises, have deepened the exclusion and vulnerability of groups who were already at risk of being left behind.

Despite significant differences in the political and socioeconomic contexts of Arab countries and cities, they share common urban issues such as a limited decentralization of decision-making processes, large youth populations demanding equal socioeconomic opportunities and decent jobs, vulnerability to climate change (food and water insecurity, and environmental risks), and the destabilizing impact of political turmoil and conflict.² A systemic, integrated and inclusive approach to urban planning and governance, aligned with SDG 11 and the global New Urban Agenda, represents the best response to those critical societal issues. Priorities include addressing inclusive and sustainable urbanization, adequate and affordable housing, climate change adaptation, air quality, waste management, sustainable and accessible transport, access to basic services for all, accessible green and public spaces, and protection of cultural and natural heritage.



Impact of COVID-19 on SDG 11 in the Arab region

The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated existing uneven spatial development, both within cities and between rural and urban areas. This is related to inequalities in capacity and resources of local and regional governments to cope with such a crisis. The situation was much more difficult in fragile and conflict-affected countries, owing to a lack of hospital beds and testing capacities, than in the richer Gulf countries or in Maghreb and Mashreq middle-income countries. Some countries had the capacity to implement measures to contain the

virus, such as the smooth crisis management developed by Jordan, virtual doctors and sanitizing robots in the United Arab Emirates, and the domestic production of masks and tests in Morocco.³

Cities with long-standing development gaps and challenges have confronted increased pressures as a result of lower revenue and financial resources, weak local governance structures, lack of digital access and connectivity, ill-equipped or under-resourced frontline health-care workers,

¹ UNDP, *Arab Human Development Report*, 2022.

² UN-Habitat, *National Urban Policy: Arab States Report*, 2017.

³ OECD, *COVID-19 crisis response in MENA countries, 2020*; and ESCWA, *Policy advocacy for building urban economic resilience during and after COVID-19 in the Arab region*, 2022.

poor infrastructure, and inadequate housing.⁴ For instance, cities like Aleppo and Homs, in the Syrian Arab Republic, have been greatly impacted by the loss of around two thirds of their medical workforce, and the destruction of the health infrastructure owing to the ongoing war in the country. Yemen has also seen a substantial part of its health facilities destroyed by the war. In the Sudan, after years of conflict and hardship, Darfur has only one health facility per 15,000 persons.⁵

High rates of COVID-19 infections in informal settlements, refugee camps, and poorly designed and overcrowded migrant worker dormitories and centres coincided with weak service provision, including of safe drinking water and sanitation, clean energy, and health services. This has posed significant challenges in countries hosting high numbers of refugees, such as Lebanon, where approximately one third of refugees lived in poverty prior to the outbreak of the pandemic,⁶ as well as in countries where the percentage of the urban population living in slums is above 50 per cent, such as in the Comoros, Mauritania and the Sudan.⁷

The pandemic increased domestic and medical waste generation and hampered waste recycling

programmes implemented by local authorities and stakeholders. The use and disposal of personal protective equipment (PPE) and health-care items resulted in an increase of unrecycled packaging materials and associated environmental degradation, exacerbating existing challenges to waste management and plastic pollution in Arab cities.

Nevertheless, the pandemic has triggered new partnerships at the city level between local stakeholders (including local authorities, the private sector, civil society and academia) and with national institutions. These partnerships have played a crucial role by providing food and medical supplies, implementing public health measures (such as contact tracing and testing), and conducting vaccination campaigns.⁸ **Consequently, the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the importance of empowered local governments and of local multi-stakeholder partnerships for building back better,** demonstrating the significance of public participation in decision-making processes, in line with the principles of inclusive and sustainable urbanization and of participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management (SDG target 11.3).



4 UNDP, Arab Human Development Report, 2022; OECD, COVID-19 crisis response in MENA countries, 2020; and ESCWA, Policy advocacy for building urban economic resilience during and after COVID-19 in the Arab region, 2022.

5 ESCWA, COVID-19, Conflict and Risks in the Arab Region: Ending Hostilities and Investing in Peace, 2020.

6 OECD, COVID-19 crisis response in MENA countries, 2020; and ESCWA, COVID-19, Conflict and Risks in the Arab Region: Ending Hostilities and Investing in Peace, 2020.

7 ESCWA, Data Portal for the Arab Region. Accessed on 19 January 2023.

8 UN-Habitat, Global Compendium of Practices on Local Economic and Financial Recovery. Building Urban Economic Resilience during and after COVID-19, 2021.



Measures taken by Arab Governments

- 1. Although Arab countries have been adopting policies to improve the sustainability of their cities, the economic slowdown resulting from the COVID-19 crisis and the war in Ukraine has increased the challenge on implementing and financing SDG 11.** Most countries adopted fiscal stimulus packages to overcome the negative impact of the pandemic, but more reforms are needed to secure sustained fiscal resources, including at the local level.
- 2. Responding to an increase in urban poverty rates caused by the economic slowdown during the pandemic, Arab Governments implemented various measures to support vulnerable groups.** This included increasing conditional and unconditional cash transfers, extending social safety nets to cover street vendors, informal workers and people with disabilities, and creating job and income opportunities for vulnerable groups in countries such as Egypt, Iraq, Morocco, and the State of Palestine.⁹
- 3. Some measures were also launched to support small and medium enterprises (SMEs),** the latter being an economic and social pillar of Arab cities. These included stimulus packages with initiatives targeting companies in Gulf countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates), a moratorium on repayments of interest by SMEs in Iraq, postponed repayments of SME loans in Jordan and Morocco, subsidised loans for SMEs in Lebanon, and support funds for SMEs in the State of Palestine and Tunisia.¹⁰
- 4. Arab Governments boosted the digitization of public services** and expedited actions towards sustainable smart cities. In that respect, and although not directly linked with the pandemic and other crises, 14 Arab countries have either built new sustainable smart cities or are in the process of transforming existing cities. For example, in January 2021, it was announced that the construction of new towns in Bahrain would henceforth be green and smart, in accordance with SDG 11, by using environment-friendly materials, providing open green areas, and planting trees along streets. In 2020, the Moroccan Government launched a national project to support cities in preparing and designing urban resilience strategies, and in addressing the priorities of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 through adequate action plans that complement the “Cities without slums” national programme launched in 2004. To date, 59 of 85 cities in Morocco have been declared without slums.
- 5. Several Arab cities strived to maintain their cultural activities during the pandemic, shifting them to the digital sphere.** For example, Rabat organized its annual Spring Festival online for the first time, in collaboration with non-governmental organizations and the private sector, registering high social media interaction. Similarly, the city of Ramallah in the State of Palestine live streamed a number of events on the occasion of Ramadan.¹¹ Moreover, museums in several Arab countries developed their online presence; however, the limited digitization of museum collections prior to the pandemic, and a lack of information technology resources, limited the scale of the activities offered online.¹²

⁹ OECD, COVID-19 crisis response in MENA countries, 2020; and UN-Habitat, Global Compendium of Practices on Local Economic and Financial Recovery. Building Urban Economic Resilience during and after COVID-19, 2021.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ UCLG Culture Committee, Culture, cities and the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020.

¹² UNESCO, Museums around the world in the face of COVID-19, 2020.

6. Smart digital solutions deployed in Arab cities have also supported public health systems in enhancing the safety of inhabitants and in limiting the spread of COVID-19. Arab Governments mobilized location-based contact tracing applications and devices to monitor individuals who tested positive for the virus, and to limit their contact with others. Online platforms were also used to support continuity of work and learning, and mobile phone

applications were deployed to send awareness-raising messages to the public. As a temporary measure, some Arab countries adopted online education techniques to ensure continuity of the learning process, and to limit the spread of the virus among students at schools and universities.¹³ However, vulnerable groups and people living in areas with no access to digital services were unable to benefit from those smart digital solutions.



Most at risk of being left behind

The following groups were identified in the 2020 edition of the Arab Sustainable Development Report as facing an elevated risk of being left behind. Consequently, they must be awarded special attention in efforts to achieve SDG 11 in Arab countries.



The poor and less well-off have been squeezed out of many housing markets by prohibitive land and property prices, forcing them into informal settlements with limited or inadequate access to essential services. The situation is even worse in cities of countries experiencing conflict. For instance, most of the original populations displaced from Syrian cities have returned and are living in damaged houses because of a lack of other alternatives. Furthermore, the poor often lack access to open, clean and green public spaces, which are frequently concentrated in wealthy neighbourhoods.



Informal workers and migrant workers have limited access to social protection coverage, have low and unstable income, and are concentrated in low-productivity jobs requiring physical presence with no possibility of working remotely. Moreover, the restrictions and confinement measures imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic added greater pressures on informal and migrant workers' activity.¹⁴



Rural-urban migrants, urban refugees, internally displaced persons, and people living in slums or inadequate dwellings face discrimination, and are more vulnerable to the negative impacts of climate change, including disasters. Furthermore, a lack of reliable access to basic services, such as electricity and water, in informal human settlements and disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods was acutely felt by such communities during COVID-19 lockdowns.

¹³ ESCWA, *Smart sustainable cities and smart digital solutions for urban resilience in the Arab region. Lessons from the pandemic*, 2021.

¹⁴ OECD, *COVID-19 crisis response in MENA countries, 2020*; and ESCWA, *Smart sustainable cities and smart digital solutions for urban resilience in the Arab region. Lessons from the pandemic*, 2021.



Vulnerable groups and people living in areas that have no access to digital services or Internet connections have not been able to benefit from the smart digital solutions deployed during the pandemic, which highlights the necessity of ensuring digital rights for all, leaving no one behind.



People with disabilities frequently face greater risks of social and economic isolation, including obstacles to their participation in labour markets, attendance of social events, and enjoyment of green spaces owing to weak accommodation of their requirements. Creating inclusive spaces for persons with disabilities would also benefit other vulnerable groups, as well as older persons and children.



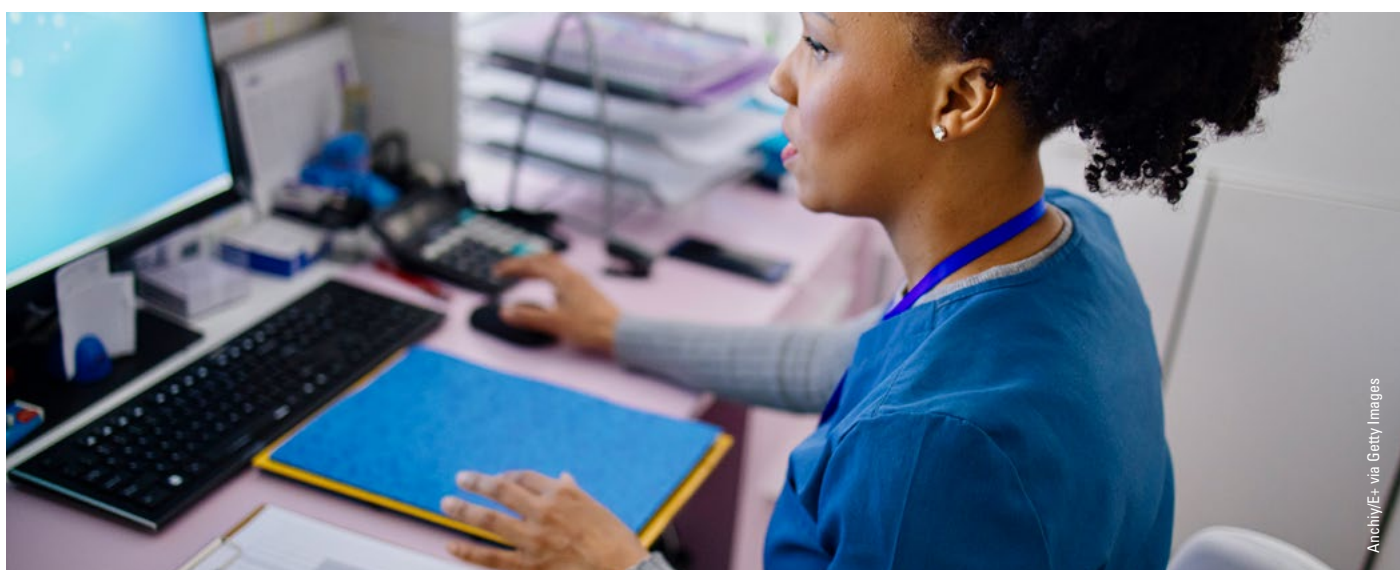
Women and girls suffer from heightened mobility limitations owing to instability, conflict or a lack of accessible, reliable and safe transport and public spaces, impacting their access to employment and participation in public life. The pandemic and associated lockdowns aggravated women's social isolation and may have led to increased harassment in public spaces.



Women have been on the frontlines of the pandemic. They are more likely to bear the responsibility for caring for ill family members, thereby impacting their capacity to enjoy their right to education and to work outside the home, among other limitations.¹⁵



Regarding affordable and accessible housing in cities, **cultural and social norms, prevailing customary laws, and barriers to accessing information inhibit women's exercise of property and land ownership rights.**



Anchity/E+ via Getty Images

¹⁵ OCHA, *A crisis within a crisis: fighting gender-based violence (GBV) during COVID-19*, June 2020; and UN-Women, *COVID-19 and ending violence against women and girls*, 2020.



Policy recommendations for ensuring an inclusive recovery and achieving SDG 11

To achieve SDG 11 and realize its promise of building sustainable and resilient cities and local communities, the Arab Sustainable Development Report 2020 identified recommendations to **strengthen people-centred urban planning and integrated spatial policies**, to **build a better urban governance framework**, and to **ensure the sustainable management of natural resources**. Those recommendations, in addition to strategic directions for incorporating human rights-based approaches, remain relevant to Arab countries' efforts to build back better in the post-COVID era and bolster urban resilience against future shocks.

Introduce, strengthen, and prioritize people-centred and inclusive urban planning:



- Connect rural and urban development strategies, and subnational and national urban policies, to enhance their complementary and address the needs of diverse populations equally and adequately.
- Build an integrated and inclusive urban governance framework by empowering local governments and authorities, push for decentralization and local resource mobilization, and prioritize public participation and citizen engagement in decision-making.
- Invest in healthy cities through multisectoral approaches to strengthen synergies between urban, health and environmental sectoral policies, and foster the development of smart applications to enhance inclusivity in transportation, health, education and other services.

Enforce and protect housing, land and property rights for all, including vulnerable groups:



- Adopt land management strategies at the city and national levels, and enhance equitable access to natural resources, including land, among various social groups and communities.
- Eliminate discriminatory laws, enforce access to justice for all, reform land titling, and simplify registration mechanisms for protecting against displacement and eviction.
- Prioritize land management in reconstruction efforts in conflict and post-conflict countries to ensure citizen-led recovery and reconstruction; further engage young people, women and women-led organizations in the protection of natural and cultural heritage; and restore damaged heritage.

Invest in cities accessible to all, and ensure urban sustainability and economic resilience through new regulation and technical expertise:



- Make cities and human settlements physically accessible to all by retrofitting buildings, and improve the accessibility of public transport, infrastructure and green areas.
- Build, maintain and modernize infrastructure in a smart and orderly manner, and promote investment hubs within municipalities to support business and investment opportunities, to diversify the local economy, to improve the resilience of the local business environment, and to achieve urban economic resilience.
- Regulate public and private transport and provide financial support to clean energy and nature-based solutions.
- Ensure the safety and mobility of women, and their protection against harassment in public spaces.

Enhance the collection of reliable, comparable and disaggregated urban data at the national and local levels to support evidence-based decision-making, and to anticipate and recover from shocks that prevent sustainable urban development:






- Build cities' data capacity to facilitate reporting to national statistical systems, and allocate financial resources for municipalities to monitor urban development.
- Establish local and national urban observatories on sustainability issues, and increase the use of smart technology, geographic information systems (GIS), satellite imagery and big data.
- Support international and regional cooperation by consolidating partnerships between national and subnational governments, local authorities, international organizations and other stakeholders, including the private sector, civil society and academia, to share information, knowledge and best practices so as to support evidence-based decision-making on urban issues.





Key facts on SDG 11

Indicators	Arab region	World
11.1.1  Living in slums Proportion of urban population living in slums (%)	31.22% (2018)	24% (2018)
11.5.1  Displaced persons Internally displaced persons, new displacement associated with disasters (per 100 K new cases of displaced persons)	17.7 (2020)	306.9 (2020)
11.6.2  Particulate matter Annual mean levels of fine particulate matter (population-weighted) in urban locations (PM2.5 annual mean levels of fine particulate matter)	58.7 mg/m³ (2017)	45.5 mg/m³ (2017)

Source: Arab SDG Monitor. Accessed on 15 December 2022.

