



## Why Movements about the Environment and Social Justice Need to Focus on Cities

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By 2035, 75% of the world's population will live in cities. The quality of life cities foster and the environmental protections they promise to future generations will shape the future of the human race and the planet. Yet cities are facing major challenges due to climate change, air quality issues, energy security, water scarcity, poverty, and rising social inequities. The health and resilience of the urban environment depends on how such challenges are tackled.

### Opportunities and Challenges

Significant opportunities – and serious challenges – must be addressed to create just, sustainable, and healthy cities. On the one hand, cities can bring about increased efficiencies in the use of natural resources and the delivery of public services. Urban landscapes can generate a small carbon footprint if appropriately designed and managed. Because economic and social interactions allow cities to generate dynamic markets and innovations in ideas, technologies, and social arrangements, they can be generative and productive, improving human and environmental health and wellbeing.

But cities also face serious risks and challenges. Cities consume natural resources and pollute water, soil, and sky. Cities are places of extreme inequality, where dire poverty exists close to excessive wealth, where public health crises persist in full view of those who have the means to solve them, and where some people have only limited access to clean water, pure air, and nutritious food, while others enjoy them in abundance. Social and economic disparities are increasing in cities from Atlanta, Georgia to Capetown, South Africa. Housing needs remain unmet for more than 100 million people worldwide, and cities increasingly grapple with ever more serious health concerns. Infectious disease outbreaks are predicted to occur with increasing frequency and severity due to changes in climate and the ways people live and travel.

### Urban Problems Require Holistic Solutions

Increasingly complex urban challenges cannot be successfully addressed in isolation. Homelessness will not be solved by social workers or even nonprofit housing developers. Public health depends on far more than the absence of disease and access to health care. Social equity requires urbanites have ample access to quality housing, education, and jobs – building the confidence to make investments in the future. Furthering environmental justice also means more than cultivating alternative energy sources; it must include equal access to clean air and water. Clearly all of these challenges require interrelated solutions – and evermore so to meet the needs of cities' most vulnerable residents. It is no longer adequate to believe that each can be tackled on its own.

Historically, the environmental movement has focused on the damages done to our natural resources and landscapes, and ignored ways in which urban living can further environmental degradation. Urban infrastructure must be addressed, including sewage treatment plants and incinerators, water treatment facilities, and power generation plants. Additionally, access to public space, green parks, and healthy nature must be assured. Climate change threatens cities from New Orleans to Jakarta, even as droughts and water shortages pose security risks for nations around the globe.

Often, threats are worse for communities of color and people with low incomes or other disadvantages. Globally, increasing urbanization has consigned more than a billion people to informal settlements that often lack basic services as well as access to clean air, water and sanitation. For example, more than 2.4 billion people do not have access to clean toilets. Neither the environment nor human communities are well served when such deficits are ignored by forms of environmentalism that privilege protecting “natural landscapes”

over ensuring healthy built environments for everyone.

## **Towards Healthy, Just, and Productive Urban Environments**

New approaches to environmental and social justice must be developed if tomorrow's challenges are to be met. Cities and citizens must grasp new opportunities for imagining, building, and sustaining healthy and equitable cities. Here are some ways to start:

- Focus on providing clean water, clean air, and appropriate sanitary infrastructures to all residents. People with access to such basics will be more resilient in the face of disease, disasters, and political upheavals.
- Address the environmental injustices suffered by the poorest urban communities – injustices likely to get worse as climate change unfolds.
- Along the lines of the “Reinvent the Toilet Challenge,” foster engineering innovations as well as finance and transportation improvements to ensure clean toilets and appropriate sanitation in urban communities in developing countries.
- Design and develop quality public landscapes that foster cultural diversity along with ecological health (as has been done by Aga Khan in Cairo and Kabul).
- Work to maintain infrastructure, not just invent new systems and technologies.

As such undertakings occur, citizens and policymakers must gain better understandings of the likely impacts of current and anticipated climate and societal changes – especially the ways they will affect people who are left out of public decision-making processes that affect them. This means considering cities holistically, as natural and lived environments, and it will require combined efforts from scientists, professionals, and advocates. All of them must work together, drawing insights from many fields and disciplines to build a new movement for urban environmental justice. We need to build better cities and encourage healthier forms of urbanization all over the world.