



Reimagining Urban Governance in Asia and the Pacific

Driving Change to Build a more Sustainable, Resilient and Inclusive Future

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Activating the transformative potential of urban governance to drive equity, sustainability, and resilience in Asia and the Pacific

KEY MESSAGES:

A well-designed city vision today can have a profound and lasting impact on the quality of life for both current and future generations. Leadership must be visionary, supported by actions grounded in good governance and whole-of-society approaches, leveraging innovation and agility, while fostering people-centered institutions to anticipate risks and navigate uncertainties in urban environments.

In parallel, a governance approach that is present-responsive and future-ready - people-centered, nature-conscious, and outcome-driven - while also being anticipatory, adaptive, and agile is essential for cities to build resilience and foster the innovation needed to thrive amidst today's interconnected pressures. Without this capability, cities risk being unable to respond effectively to the complex challenges that define urban life in Asia and the Pacific region, limiting their potential to foster inclusivity, strengthen resilience, and drive sustainable growth.

These governance capabilities can provide a pathway for cities in the region to advance sustainable development and close the gap in achieving the SDGs. They can enable UNDP and other development partners to effectively support substantial impact across Asia and the Pacific.

This Policy Brief reflects on the discussions, experiences and recommendations that emerged from the High-Level Policy Dialogue, "Leadership for the Future: Enhancing Urban Governance Practices for Sustainable, Resilient, and Prosperous Cities in Asia and the Pacific", organized by UNDP in collaboration with ESCAP, UN-Habitat, and the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) on October 15, 2024, in Bangkok, Thailand ([UNDP, 2024](#)). The brief reviews governance practices in the Asia and Pacific region, emphasizing the critical role of leadership and the need for anticipatory, adaptive, and agile urban governance models to facilitate urban transformation. It provides an initial understanding and suggestion of a theory

of change aimed at achieving transformative urban development, and seeks to foster interest across city governments, development partners, and other stakeholders. Additionally, the brief explores preliminary recommendations for collaborative efforts to close the gaps in SDG implementation, promote actions and knowledge exchange among authorities at the local level, and support a shared vision for equitable, sustainable, and resilient cities in the Asia and Pacific region.

Context

The Asia and Pacific region has made significant progress over the past three decades, establishing itself as a global leader in economic growth and human development. This progress includes consistent economic expansion and transformative achievements in reducing poverty, advancing health and education, and improving living standards for millions across the region ([UNDP, 2024](#)).

Yet, despite these accomplishments, persistent inequalities and vulnerabilities remain, with many communities facing ongoing insecurity and deprivation. Rapid urbanization, compounded by climate change, biodiversity loss, and varying governance capacities, creates complex risks to human security, sustainable development, and resilience. Recent disruptions, including COVID-19, the cost-of-living crisis, and geopolitical tensions, have further exacerbated these challenges ([ESCAP et al. 2023](#)).

In this context, governance is pivotal: as cities confront escalating challenges, the capacity of governance systems to adapt, mitigate vulnerabilities and achieve sustainable outcomes hinges on leadership that is both effective and inclusive. Traditional governance approaches—often siloed, reactive, rigid, and top-down—are increasingly misaligned with today's complex and evolving urban demands and may even exacerbate existing challenges.

UNDP has taken a leading role in redefining this landscape, championing an **Anticipatory, Adaptive, and Agile Governance** model ([UNDP, 2020](#)) that emphasizes responsiveness, resilience, and future-readiness in urban areas. In collaboration with Arup and in partnership with ESCAP, UN-Habitat, and others, UNDP is supporting cities across Asia and the Pacific to

navigate complex urban pressures and drive transformative, people-centered change.

Past and future trajectory: a theory of change

Since 2019, Asia and the Pacific region has shifted from predominantly rural to predominantly urban, a significant demographic milestone that marks a transformation in urban development priorities ([ESCAP/CED\(8\)/2](#)).

As noted at the High-level Policy Dialogue on Enhancing Urban Governance Practices in Asia and the Pacific by Mr Christophe Bahuet, UNDP Deputy Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific and Director of the Bangkok Regional Hub: "*Asia and the Pacific is a continent of big cities, and it is now well recognized that the success of these cities—and indeed, the entire region—depends largely on how cities expand and are managed. Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific primarily relies on the progress made in urban areas. The absolutely crucial role of urban governance and effective city leadership can significantly influence urban development, setting the course for sustainable progress in the region.*" (ESCAP, Bangkok, 15/10/2024).

A diverse and challenging landscape

With over 50% of Asia and the Pacific's population now residing in urban areas—representing 54% of the global urban population—the region's cities have become major engines of economic growth, generating over 80% of the regional GDP (UNEP, 2024). These urban centers are not only hubs of productivity and prosperity but also drive technological innovation, social progress, and infrastructure development, enhancing access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities.

However, cities across the Asia and Pacific region exhibit vast disparities in economic, social, and infrastructural development, with stark contrasts often existing side by side. For example, Singapore's GDP per capita is more than 50 times that of Timor-Leste (World Bank, 2023).

As urbanization accelerates at varying rates across diverse contexts in the region, many cities struggle to keep up with rapid and often unplanned expansion, intensifying longstanding challenges such as urban poverty, environmental degradation, and social inequality. In 2018, approximately 650 million people in the region lived in informal settlements, the highest globally, with the number of megacities projected to reach two-thirds of the world's 49 by 2025, further intensifying these pressures. This rapid growth exacerbates issues related to affordable housing, infrastructure, mobility, energy, social inclusion and equity, and digital rights ([ESCAP et al., 2023](#)).

With the urban population expected to rise from 2.5 billion in 2025 to 3.5 billion by 2050, cities will face mounting pressures to address critical social, environmental, and economic sustainability challenges ([ESCAP/CED \(8\)/2](#)).

Local governments, especially in less developed cities, often lack a long-term vision to urban planning and face limited resources and capacities to meet the rising demand for urban services and socio-economic needs while preserving the rights of future generations. These disparities are further amplified by converging crises and risks, such as economic instability, climate impacts, forced-displacement, fragile agricultural systems, and resource scarcity ([UNDP, 2023](#)).

These pressures place additional strain on urban systems, deepen social inequalities, and heighten vulnerabilities—especially regarding crucial resources like water ([ESCAP et al., 2023](#)).

Without coordinated efforts to close these divides, inequalities within and between cities will likely persist, undermining inclusive growth, resilience, and regional stability. Reducing these disparities is critical to achieving a more equitable and sustainable urban landscape across Asia and the Pacific.

Root causes

The **root causes of these multiple stressors and risks** are interlinked and can be categorized into four core areas:

- **Unplanned and Inequitable Urbanization:** The uneven distribution of

resources, including green spaces, healthcare, affordable housing, transportation, water and sanitation, creates disparities that reduce urban resilience and disproportionately impact children, women, and marginalized communities. In Asia and the Pacific, 80% of those living on less than USD 2 per day are women and girls (ESCAP, Bangkok, 15/10/2024).

- **Climate Change and Environmental Degradation:** The region suffers from severe air and noise pollution, climate-induced hazards like heat waves and flooding, and degradation of natural resources, with Asia and the Pacific housing 25 of the world's most polluted cities. Climate-related economic losses already total USD 780 billion annually (Lin Yang, Deputy Executive Secretary for Programme at ESCAP, ESCAP, Bangkok 15/10/2024).
- **Social Behavior and Unsustainable Economic Growth:** Unsustainable social behaviors such as consumption patterns, lifestyle choices, and social exclusion—significantly influence urban dynamics. When these are overlooked, urban planning can fail to foster inclusivity, resulting in unequal access to essential resources and services further enhancing social behaviors and environmental degradation. Additionally, a focus on unsustainable economic growth prioritizes short-term gains over long-term sustainability.
- **Weak Urban Governance and Limited Access to Finance:** Governance is often siloed, with limited transparency and collaboration across government, private sector, civil society, and communities, leading to inefficiencies and misaligned priorities. Additionally, local governments frequently face limited resources and capacity to address the current and growing demand for urban services. The Asian Development Bank estimates that for further developing Asia it will need to invest \$1.7 trillion annually in infrastructure through 2030 to sustain economic growth, alleviate poverty, and address climate risks (Lin Yang, Deputy

Executive Secretary for Programme at ESCAP, ESCAP, Bangkok 15/10/2024).

Together, these pressures pose serious threats to the region’s development ambitions and undermine progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) ([UNDP, 2023](#); [UNESCAP 2023](#)).

Without integrated interventions to address these gaps and support cooperation, disparities both between and within cities are likely to persist, undermining inclusive growth and regional stability. Narrowing these divides is essential to creating a more equitable, sustainable and resilient urban landscape across the region.

Areas of action

The complex and diverse challenges facing Asia and the Pacific cities underscore the urgent need for integrated, coordinated strategies that can address both the immediate and long-term demands of urbanization. To shape equitable, sustainable and resilient futures, action should focus on four interconnected areas:

Socio-Economic: Cities must prioritize inclusive social policies that expand affordable housing, improve access to essential public services, and actively involve communities in decision-making and foster social cohesion. Promoting green economic growth through sustainable infrastructure such as public libraries, local job creation, and circular economy initiatives can address socio-economic disparities while enhancing environmental resilience and innovation.

Built and Spatial: Investments in green and blue infrastructure, such as urban parks, permeable surfaces, and nature-based solutions, are vital for mitigating climate impacts and improving public health. Enhancing energy efficiency in buildings, encouraging mixed-use developments, and expanding public transportation networks can reduce carbon emissions and improve access to services and quality of life for all residents.

Climate and Environment: Cities must integrate climate adaptation and mitigation strategies into urban planning to reduce vulnerability to extreme weather events and environmental degradation. Strengthening urban ecosystems, advancing air and water quality standards, and prioritizing low-carbon urban solutions, such as renewable energy, are essential to ensure environmental sustainability, well-being and economic growth.

Governance and Finance: Effective and inclusive governance acts as the “connective tissue” necessary for transformative change. Transparent, integrated planning and implementation processes that involve diverse stakeholders—including local communities, academia, civil society, and the private sector—ensure the effectiveness of urban policies reflecting the needs, aspirations and innovations of all communities. Innovative financing mechanisms, such as green bonds, public-private partnerships, blended finance, tax incentives, and international climate funds, are critical to mobilize the resources needed to build resilient infrastructure and support inclusive urban projects.

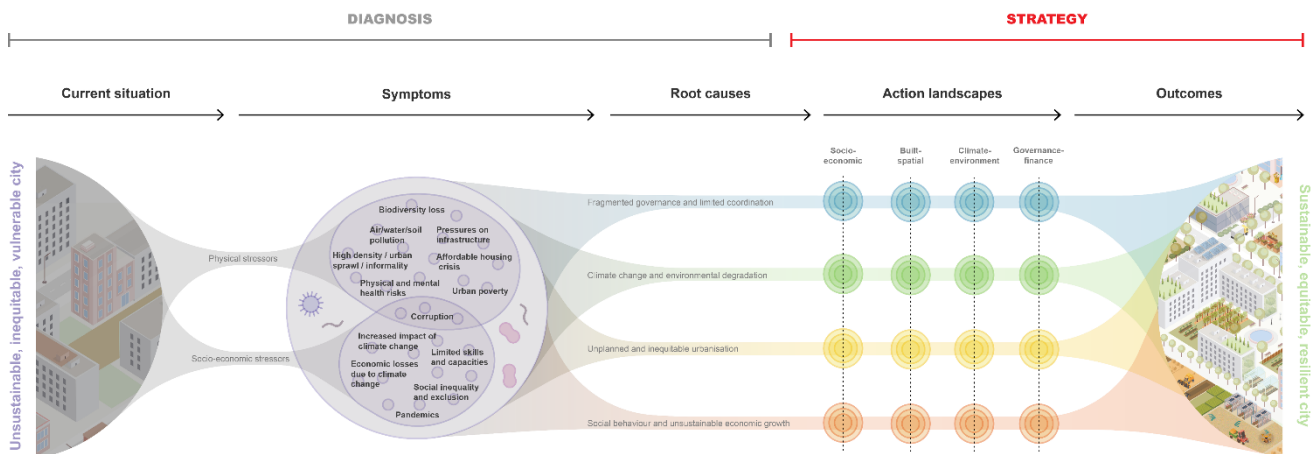


Figure 1. Theory of Change: Shaping Sustainable, Equitable and Resilient Urban Environments Arup, 2024.

By embracing these interconnected areas of action, cities across the region can not only meet immediate urban challenges but also foster sustainable, inclusive growth that will carry the region into its next stage of development.

Effective delivery of these actions requires collaboration among multiple stakeholders, government entities, UN agencies, civil society, the private sector, and local communities. Governance serves as the connective tissue that connects these diverse actors, providing the necessary infrastructure for coordinated efforts and facilitating transformative change.

The need for transformative urban governance models

Traditional governance systems and policymaking frameworks often lack the attributes needed to effectively address the complex and rapidly evolving challenges of Asia and the Pacific cities, and they struggle to keep pace with the innovations needed to tackle these issues. For instance, within current policymaking processes, the approval, implementation, and regulation of new solutions can take months or even years, creating delays that prevent cities from responding effectively to urgent needs.

The multi-dimensional challenges facing cities demand new governance models that not only respond swiftly to current issues but also anticipate future changes. These models must equip cities to effectively promote and manage sustainable, equitable and resilient urban transformations.

Governance for the Future: Anticipatory, Adaptive and Agile Capabilities

UNDP has taken a leading role in advancing the Anticipatory, Adaptive and Agile Governance model ([UNDP 2020](#)), in collaboration with other UN agencies and development banks, such as ESCAP and the Asia Development Bank, to support more resilient, responsive, and future-ready governance across Asia and the Pacific.

This model is designed to address the multi-layered, complex, and rapidly evolving challenges of today's world by fostering governance systems that can anticipate emerging developments and embrace

uncertainty, develop strategy and experimentation and adapt to society's changing needs in real time (2023 ESCAP-ADB-UNDP SDG Partnership Report).

Also, this model can play an instrumental role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and advancing the region's development.

"The Anticipatory, Agile and Adaptive Governance approach refers to the ability of institutions to adapt to changing circumstances through responsive and iterative policymaking."

"Anticipatory, Agile, and Adaptive Governance" is a forward-looking model that prioritizes people and outcomes, emphasizing inclusivity, flexibility, and innovation. The core value of these principles lies in enabling national and subnational governments to respond to challenges with precision and speed, fostering an inclusive environment conducive to innovative solutions.

Anticipation refers to the ability to foresee potential challenges, opportunities, and changes in the environment with sufficient time to prepare for them.

Adaptation involves the ability to adapt to new information, changing conditions or shifting priorities by adjusting strategies and plans.

Agility denotes the speed and efficiency with which systems or institutions can respond to new information, unexpected events or shifting priorities, without major disruption.

[2023 ESCAP-ADB-UNDP SDG Partnership Report](#)

This approach provides a significant departure from more traditional or legacy governance approaches. Characterized by siloed structures, reactive responses, rigidity, overly prescriptive and top-down decision-making, these legacy approaches often fail to address the complexities and interconnectedness of today's urban environments ([ESCAP, ADB, UNDP 2023](#)).

Such traditional systems are not only ill-equipped to tackle current and future challenges; they can also exacerbate existing issues. Their inability to adapt to the dynamic

nature of the operating environment risks entrenching the status quo, leading to deteriorating socio-economic and environmental outcomes. By maintaining these outdated approaches, cities hinder their capacity for innovation and progress and are likely to negatively impact the socio-economic and environment health of its inhabitants and the broader region.



Figure 2: [ESCAP 2023](#).

Embracing new urban governance models is vital for unlocking potential, fostering inclusive decision-making, and enhancing collaboration.

The core value of such approach lies in enabling governments to respond to challenges with precision and speed, while fostering a sustainable, equitable and resilient urban environment that enables innovation and forward-thinking solutions.

Good Practices from the Region

Regardless of the many differences and complexities within the region, numerous examples of local initiatives and pilots are already actively exploring new urban governance attributes. These initiatives include, but are not limited to:

Inclusive and People-centered governance tools

- **Traffy Fondue (Bangkok, Thailand).** Crowdsourcing platform designed to address urban issues through public input. The platform transformed the previously bureaucratic, lengthy, paper-based process of submitting complaints to the Governor,

into a real-time, GIS-based online platform. Since its launch in June 2022, Bangkok Metropolitan Authority has received over 720,000 complaints, resolving 79% and significantly reducing response and resolution times from 2 months to just 2 days—all without additional management costs. (Governor Chadchart Sittipunt, Bangkok, ESCAP, Bangkok, 15/10/2024)

- **Namaste Mayor App (Dhangadhi Sub Metropolitan City, Nepal)** is a grievance redressal platform developed in collaboration with UNDP that has resolved over 300 public complaints since its launch. The local administration has also improved transparency in municipal procurement by expanding notices to digital platforms, leading to better service quality and cost management. (Mayor Gopal Hamal, Dhangadhi Sub Metropolitan City, Nepal ESCAP, Bangkok, 15/10/2024)
- **SIGLAT (Baguio, Philippines)** The Livability Index and SIGLAT (the city's youth innovation hub), reflect the city's commitment to fostering collaboration and driving urban innovation. The city's efforts to promote a circular economy and engage its residents in decision-making processes ensure that Baguio's growth is not only resilient but also responsive to the needs of its diverse communities. (Vice Mayor Faustino Olowan, Baguio, Philippines ESCAP, Bangkok 15/10/2024)
- **Safetipin App and She Rises Framework for Gender-Inclusive Cities (India).** The application uses crowdsourced data to assess the safety of urban spaces, particularly for women. Its success has led to the development of the She Rises Framework for Caring Cities, which aims to promote gender-inclusive urban planning and design principles. ([ESCAP et al. 2023](#))

Built and spatial environments

- **Settlement to Suburb Program (Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea)** The National Capital District (NCD), is growing due to rural-to-urban migration. The NCD lacks control over key services like land

administration, public transport, and housing, which are managed by other national government departments. Urban expansion has impacted traditional indigenous villages, leading the city to launch initiatives such as the Settlement to Suburb Program and the Modernization of Motu Koitabu Villages. These programs aim to improve informal settlements and indigenous villages by upgrading infrastructure and social amenities to match or exceed those in planned urban areas. (Governor Powes Parkop, Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, ESCAP, Bangkok, 15/10/2024)

- **Liveable Hanoi (Hanoi, Viet Nam)** is a coalition of non-governmental organizations dedicated to enhancing the livability of Hanoi. The initiative focuses on two main areas: fostering an inclusive city and expanding public spaces. One flagship project involves repurposing a large brownfield site into an inclusive public area, initially managed by the municipality with limited success. Now re-envisioned through a collaborative approach, the project actively engages local communities in co-designing a welcoming public space featuring a communal playground. (Le Quang Binh, Coordinator For a Livable Hanoi, Viet Nam, ESCAP, Bangkok 15/10/2024)
- **Future-ready and integrated Urban Planning (Singapore).** The Urban Redevelopment Authority of Singapore has developed a comprehensive urban planning system that emphasizes long-term planning and anticipates future needs. Since its first UN-backed structure plan in 1971, Singapore has aligned resources and effective tools to implement, monitor, and enforce its urban development policies. Central elements of this approach are the visioning exercises, planning scenarios, and commitments transcending political cycles, and critically citizens' participation and early engagement through consultations and awareness programs, and partnerships with academia and developers, ensuring broad support for the country's urban goals. *"By involving the public in planning, we better understand needs and aspirations to shape*

the future together" (Lim Eng Hwee, Chief Executive Officer, Urban Redevelopment Authority, Singapore, High-level Policy Dialogue | *Enhancing Urban Governance Practices in Asia and the Pacific*)

Climate and resilience

- **Real-Time Urban Flood Forecasting and Warning System (Shanghai, China):** Shanghai's real-time urban flood forecasting and warning system is an example of leveraging digital innovation for disaster risk reduction. The system utilizes advanced data analytics and hydrological modelling to provide timely and accurate flood warnings, enabling more effective flood management and minimizing the impacts of flooding events on the city. ([ESCAP et al. 2023](#))
- **Decarbonizing Yokohama.** In Japan, Yokohama is targeting a 50% reduction in GHG by 2030. Key initiatives include fully decarbonizing the MM21 (Central Business District) by 2030 through renewable energy adoption, LED lighting upgrades, and a carbon offset system, collectively reducing city emissions by 10%. Yokohama plans to transition its port to carbon neutrality, addressing an additional 40% of emissions generated in the city. This will involve a public-private partnership (PPP) to transport renewable energy from an offshore wind farm to port operations using battery tankers—the first of their kind globally. (Dr. Takeharu Yamanaka, Mayor of Yokohama, ESCAP, Bangkok 15/10/2024)
- **Livelihoods Improvement of the Urban Poor Communities (Bangladesh)** To enhance urban resilience and reduce poverty, Bangladesh, in collaboration with the UNDP, the UK's FCDO, and the Government of Bangladesh, launched the five-year *Livelihoods Improvement of the Urban Poor Communities (LIUPC) Project* (2018–2023). This initiative focuses on locally led adaptations to improve the livelihoods of urban poor communities. The flagship *project* is enhancing the lives of over 4 million climate-vulnerable urban residents in 19 Bangladeshi cities through inclusive, climate-smart strategies. Key

initiatives include community-led adaptation projects, small-scale climate-resilient infrastructure, adaptive livelihoods, access to finance for home resilience, larger social housing solutions, and women empowerment. This approach allows women to engage with local decision-makers, fostering governance-based responses to community needs. (<https://www.undp.org/bangladesh/projects/livelihoods-improvement-urban-poor-communities.org>)

Finance

- **Transfer of Development Rights (India)** The use of Transferable Development Rights (TDRs) as a land-based financing instrument for urban development. In cities like Ahmedabad and Pimpri-Chinchwad in India, TDRs have been used to increase the Floor Area Ratio (FAR) along transit corridors, promoting denser development and efficient land use. ([ESCAP et al. 2023](#))
- **Pensions and Providence Fund financing (Bhutan)**. Long term stable and predictable financing is key in developing large scale infrastructure. In Bhutan an innovative finance mechanism was put in place by the National Pension and Provident Fund of Bhutan, which has invested in the 126 MW Dagachhu Hydroelectric Project, taking a 15 per cent equity stake, contributing to materialize the investment ([ESCAP et al. 2023](#))
- **Financing green investments through Public Private Partnerships**. In December 2023, at COP 28, Allied Climate Partners (ACP), the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS), and Temasek announced a green investment partnership aimed at addressing climate finance gaps and enhancing the bankability of sustainable infrastructure projects in Asia. The investment vehicle will leverage blended finance from philanthropic, public, and private sectors to fund green infrastructure projects in renewable energy, EV infrastructure, sustainable transport, and water management. It aims to deliver on

carbon reduction, job creation, and community resilience goals by providing advisory, technical assistance, and sustainability management to support project viability. (<https://www.mas.gov.sg/news/media-releases/2023/acp-ifc-mas-and-temasek-establish-a-green-investments-partnership-in-asia>)

Partnerships

- **Yokohama** has fostered collaborations with various Asian cities for over a decade to promote climate change initiatives. Notable support includes solar power technology in Bangkok, Thailand; plastic waste processing technology in Metro Cebu, Philippines; and energy diagnosis technology in Da Nang, Viet Nam. Additionally, Yokohama played a central role in the Yokohama Declaration, which aims for the decarbonization of Asian cities, involving 44 mayors, governors, and government officials. (Dr. Takeharu Yamanaka, Mayor of Yokohama, ESCAP, Bangkok 15/10/2024)

Recommendations

The following five interconnected governance capabilities will enable cities of different sizes and characteristics to seize the opportunities of urban transformation and manage challenges emerging from the current urban landscape and emerging risk clusters for the region in a way that promotes equity, sustainability, and prosperity.

- *Strengthened integrated urban governance: multilevel and multistakeholder*

Bridging the disconnect between national development policies and local implementation is essential to foster innovative and targeted solutions for the most pressing development challenges at the city level. This involves creating platforms for collaboration between national, regional, and local governments and stakeholders to ensure coherent policy alignment, and resource allocation.

- *People-centered and inclusive urban development.*

Actively engage citizens and communities—including youth, women, migrants, persons with disabilities (PWDs), the elderly, and other marginalized groups—in shaping and monitoring solutions that impact their urban living environments. An example could be how UNDP have used Social Innovation Platforms (SIP) that support countries in Asia and the Pacific in integrating systems thinking and innovative governance practices in urban development. This approach ensures that urban development reflects diverse needs and priorities, fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility among residents.

- *Anticipatory, adaptive, and agile urban planning.*

Implement planning, service delivery, and risk management systems that are anticipatory, adaptive, and agile. Leverage innovative methodologies such as foresight, systems thinking, and scenario modeling, alongside engaging digital ecosystems and creative data tools, to support participatory decision-making and collaborative planning processes that enhance responsiveness to emerging challenges.

- *Align public and private capital flows.*

Facilitate the alignment of public and private capital flows to finance integrated development interventions. This alignment should enhance urban resilience, promote sustainable development, and foster social cohesion by leveraging diverse funding sources, and innovative financing models, including impact investing, increased local revenue, green bonds, and public-private partnerships.

- *Cultural Preservation and Economic Opportunities.*

Emphasize the importance of cultural preservation in sustainable urban development to create economic opportunities, foster social cohesion, and safeguard cultural heritage. Integrate

cultural considerations into urban planning and development strategies to enhance community identity and promote tourism and local economic activities.

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