

Building African cities that cope with climate shocks—experts outline what it will take

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The international climate change negotiations began almost three decades ago when many were still hesitant to accept that human activities were changing the planet. Now the [scientific evidence](#) is

unequivocal. Climate change is a major threat to our well-being, the health of the planet and the ecosystems we rely on.

But there's a very large gap between what the science calls for and the actions that have been taken to date. The window of opportunity to secure a livable, equitable and sustainable future for all is closing rapidly.

For those working on African city sustainability, the mountain to climb is particularly high. [Seventy percent](#) of African cities have [high vulnerability](#) to [climate](#) shocks.

Africa is the [fastest urbanizing](#) region in the world. This fast-growing and highly vulnerable urban population is experiencing [climate change](#) impacts first-hand. We are all too aware of the devastation caused by climate-related disasters like [Cyclone Idai](#), which hit southern Africa in 2019. Just this one cyclone led to over 1,000 fatalities and affected over 3 million people.

Recently the catastrophic flooding in Libya claimed close to [4,000 lives](#).

Unless [drastic changes](#) occur in how energy is produced and consumed in African cities, carbon emissions will rise as these cities develop and build infrastructure. This is already happening. The [2022 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Working Group III report](#) revealed that Africa contributed [11%](#) of greenhouse gas emissions growth since 1990.

It is therefore not surprising that the eyes of the world are on Africa's urban areas. The question is whether they will develop in emissions-heavy ways that undermine natural systems and increase inequities, or in low-carbon ways that are nature-positive and reduce inequality.

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, [global greenhouse gas emissions](#) must begin dropping within the next three years in pathways that limit warming to [1.5°C](#). These pathways require immediate action. Rapid and deep emissions reductions must happen throughout the next three decades.

Without limiting carbon emissions, securing climate finance and enabling a free flow of knowledge and technology into Africa, the opportunity to build climate-resilient African cities may be lost. And [fossil fuels](#) will continue to power development for years to come.

There are some signs of progress. The [US\\$8.5 billion](#) pledged by the US, the UK, Germany, France and the EU to help South Africa transition away from coal is an example. But this is well below what is required to effect such a change.

Our [work](#) at the [interface](#) of [science](#) and practice within African cities over more than three decades has revealed that:

- African cities are central to the global fight against climate change
- more resources are needed for African cities to mitigate and adapt to climate change and its attendant shocks
- Africans need to re-envision what climate resilient development means within unique African city contexts, and apply resources accordingly.

Here we outline calls to action which, if heeded, will bring the continent closer to a climate resilient future.

Limit carbon emissions while adapting to climate change

It is our view that Africa should be acting ambitiously, aiming to reduce [carbon emissions](#) to limit global warming to [1.5°C](#), while adapting for a potential global warming level of 3°C.

Many African cities are already taking great strides. [Through the Covenant of Mayors in Sub-Saharan Africa initiative](#) over 360 sub-national governments have pledged their commitment to these crucial issues. Notably, 107 of these cities have formulated specific targets and plans to tackle climate change. What is needed now is finance to implement these plans at scale.

Not enough finance is flowing to African urban areas. In 2020 only [US\\$30 billion flowed to Africa, which is about 12% of what is needed](#). And in 2017/2018 sub-Saharan Africa received only about [US\\$3 billion or 0.8% of global urban climate finance](#).

In June 2023 heads of state met in Paris to discuss a new global financing pact, and many African countries expressed frustration that international climate finance promises had not been fulfilled. Solutions were also offered, such as the [African Development Bank's initiative on channeling Special Drawing Rights to multilateral development banks](#) to help rebuild livelihoods affected by climate change and other global challenges. But big questions still remain about how cities themselves will be able to access—directly—the climate finance needed to enable climate resilient development.

The ICLEI Africa network's [Sustainable Finance Centre](#) is tackling this issue head on, by providing the knowledge brokering services needed to bridge divides and fill gaps that prohibit city-scale projects from progressing from concept to financial close and implementation.

Build climate resilient urban areas in context-

appropriate ways

Africa's urban areas need to respond to the urgent need for development in a way that is equitable and minimizes emissions, but also builds [climate resilience](#) to unavoidable losses and damages and minimizes mal-adaptation.

This resilience building will look different in different locales, and there is a growing database of good practices that are inspiring change. For example, in Freetown and Kampala, [ICLEI Africa](#) is working to deploy clean cooking solutions to about 3,000 households and businesses in target informal settlements. This is to reduce these communities' exposure to household air pollution, decrease deforestation for fuelwood, and reduce time burdens that are predominantly shouldered by women who collect fuelwood or charcoal for [cooking](#).

Re-envision what a resilient African city is

Given the unique context of the continent and the broad ranging challenges and opportunities it offers, African policymakers need to pause and re-imagine what resilient, low carbon African cities would look like.

African cities must meet the needs of a culturally diverse population. Policymakers need to direct resources, solutions and finance in ways that allow the continent to thrive.

Climate change requires a whole-of-society response. Without a thriving urban Africa, global climate change ambitions will never be met. This is the moment to rethink the African city.

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