



# Cities: The Drivers of Sustainable Human Development and Prosperity

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While green buildings, by their most obvious definition, address environmental impacts, they also have wide implications for human health, safety and productivity. Well-ventilated green schools can reduce instances of asthma in students. Green offices with day lit spaces boost employee productivity and attendance. Patients feel faster in green hospitals with views to nature.

As we plan for the future of our planet, it is imperative that we consider the effects of development on both the environment and human populations. A city is only truly sustainable if it uses natural resources efficiently while still fully meeting the needs of its inhabitants and a decent standard of living.

Recently, the UN Human Settlements Program (UN-HABITAT) launched its “[State of the World’s Cities Report 2012/2013](#)” which addresses the prosperity of cities. According to the report, the first step to achieving prosperity is to define the goal: What does prosperity mean in 2012? This is a difficult question to answer given the vast disparity of living conditions throughout the world. Additionally, it is imperative that the definition of prosperity today consider the needs of future generations. To this end, UN-Habitat developed a “[City Prosperity Index](#),” which translates the five dimensions of prosperity identified by UN-Habitat—productivity, infrastructure development, quality of life, equity and social inclusion, environmental sustainability—into measurable indicators (see page 15 of the report). This definition of the prosperous city is consistent with the principles of a [smart](#), [sustainable](#) and [just](#) city.

Cities are ideal vehicles for mitigating the effects of and adapting to climate change. Local governments have greater flexibility to create effective policy solutions and are more likely to pursue innovative and creative strategies than their national counterparts. In addition to being better suited to address sustainability, UN-HABITAT identifies cities as a remedy to global crises, such as the financial and democratic crises that characterize conflicts plaguing all regions of the globe. If cities are a remedy to global crises, policies are the mechanism by which cities achieve prosperity.

The “State of the World’s Cities Report” outlines multiple policy best practices aimed to improve the prosperity of cities, including sustainability measures:

“Environmental sustainability offers cities huge scope for the balanced economic growth that can pave the way to prosperity. This includes opportunities for new types of employment and investment, poverty alleviation and reduced inequity together with new types of infrastructures and services” (82).

The report identifies construction projects as having the greatest potential for green job creation in urban areas compared to renewable energy, waste and recycling, and urban transport programs. Currently employing more than 111 million people worldwide, the construction industry supports approximately on average 5-10 percent of total employment per country. This figure rises to 75 percent in developing countries (84). Green construction is rapidly accelerating its market share globally, compared to conventional construction, and has the potential to support both job creation and job retention through the retrofitting of existing buildings and construction of new development to support growing urban populations.

For more examples of how sustainable design, construction and operations are driving social inclusion and urban prosperity, please see the [United Nations Environment Program Sustainable Building and Climate Initiative’s report](#).



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