

WHY SOCIAL EQUITY MATTERS IN CITIES' RESPONSE TO CLIMATE CHANGE

*Cities are one of the major contributors to climate change. At the same time, the whole urban ecosystem and the people living in cities are severely impacted by the consequences of climate change. Often, **vulnerable groups are disproportionately affected in climate crisis**. Therefore, finding solutions that allow cities to adapt to climate change and minimize their emissions in an equitable way is crucial. **UP2030 adopts a holistic approach of integral climate and socially inclusive planning** to support the ecological, economic and social sustainable development of the 10 participating cities. Let's find out more about its action plan towards climate-neutral and socially innovative cities.*

CITIES AT THE CENTER OF CLIMATE CHANGE

For decades, scientists have been warning about the impact human activities have had on the climate since industrialization. Yet, 2023 is expected to be the hottest year on record. In the first half of the year, extreme weather caused by climatic breakdown has already brought intensified heat waves to all regions of the world, draught and floods have destroyed millions of homes, vital ecosystems have been devastated. Today, we are on the brink of passing the 1.5-degree-mark in global temperature rise compared to pre-industrial levels, which would make our damage to the climate soon irreversible.

Cities are the center of innovation and economic growth worldwide, accounting for 80 % of the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP). At the same time, they are growing often uncontrollably, with 70 % of the world's population to be expected to live in urban areas by 2050. While cities are expanding, their impact on the global climate is growing with them. Today, they account for over 70 % of CO₂-emissions and **their constant demand in energy is using up over two-thirds of our planet's resources**.

With this, **cities are drivers of climate change but are also severely affected by its consequences**. Sea level rise, urban heat islands, water scarcity and droughts, poor air quality and the spread of diseases are all connected to global warming and jeopardize the whole of human existence in cities.

CLIMATE CHANGE DISAPPROPORTIONALLY AFFECTS VULNERABLE GROUPS

Often, those most affected by these consequences of climate change are the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups of the population, like the elderly, women, children, or communities without equal access to economic and natural resources, infrastructure, medical services and so on.

City planning that disregards such factors of social inequalities is prone to create technologies and processes that are not socially sustainable. As a consequence, the gap between privileged and less-privileged groups in cities only becomes bigger, existing inequities are strengthened or new inequities emerge. When it comes to sustainable urban transformation, it is therefore key to keep in mind that technological innovations are not sufficient to address climate change adequately, and that sustainability is not merely about ecological or economic performance.

“It isn't enough to perform isolated actions and focus on technology alone when thinking about climate neutral cities. **Urban transformations should think about social sustainability and leave no one behind of this process**” explains **Trinidad Fernandez**, who is coordinating the project as a whole and works as a senior scientist at Fraunhofer IAO.

THE CITIZENS ARE AT THE HEART OF CLIMATE ACTION

They way and level of impact of how climate change affects the people living in cities differs among social groups. To plan climate actions in our cities that are effective, the citizens must be given the possibility to participate in the design of city plans, public policies and the implementation of measures. Integrating the social aspect in urban transformation pilots and responding to the needs and realities of the citizens is fundamental. – In the end, the citizens are the ones using the inventions.

Moreover, citizens can give first-hand insights in how climate change affects them and their city in the various ways and levels of social contexts. They can identify what is wrong or missing in urban structures and what they need to cope with the consequences of climate change.

Most importantly, by including the citizens as stakeholders, we can ensure their acceptance, use, and understanding of the implemented measures. For climate actions in cities to work, the cooperation of the user is the key for success, as many climate change adaptation measures rely on behavioral change.

“We should not just work for and with nature, but also for and with our citizens. They are indeed at the heart of our cities.”, states Trinidad Fernandez, “The citizens hold in their hands the possibilities to drive the behavioral and social change necessary for the proper functioning of many of the solutions that support climate change adaptation and mitigation.”

The question then should be how to connect climate action in cities with social justice.

INTEGRATED CLIMATE PLANNING FOR MORE CLIMATE JUSTICE

A holistic approach of integrated climate planning that is intentionally inclusive in its plans and policies is the answer. Integrated climate planning actively seeks synergies between mitigation and adaptation objectives and local social, economic and ecological priorities of different relevant sectors of urban development (economic growth, clean air, energy security, housing, access to services, etc). By adding a socially inclusive component to this approach, we can provide climate action plans for cities that support all citizens, especially those most in need.

UP2030 aims at reinforcing the connection between climate actions and social justice in city planning thus holistically supporting the ecological, economic and social sustainable development of the participating cities. In the project, we are therefore looking at **8 European and 3 non-European cities to identify their needs, obstacles, and driving forces on the path towards neutrality.**

Instead of proposing isolated actions, the project takes a multileveled cross-sector approach that also considers factors of social inequalities and climate justice in the developing strategies of sustainable transformation. Together with local actors, visions are designed to address innovation and climate action in an integral way. Finally, a roadmap leverages into concrete actions that support climate-neutral and integrated urban planning in cities, implementing socio-technical tools in each of them.

Sources

[Climate Action in Cities - Overview 2020 \(eib.org\)](#)

[The Future of Cities | European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#)

[Scientists deliver ‘final warning’ on climate crisis: act now or it’s too late | Climate crisis | The Guardian](#)

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