



Urban informality and inequality: a global call for climate justice

Report from the organising partners

Introduction

Cities have a pivotal role in addressing the climate crisis. In the global south, the urban poor are especially vulnerable to the present and forthcoming impacts of climate change. During COP26, overall, the need for local action has been acknowledged. However, for many, the conference has been a disappointment when it comes to translating this need into clear commitments, channeling support towards where it is the most strategic and needed. Cities struggle to obtain global funding for adaptation, leaving them with the burden to find their own ways to tackle climate action and poverty reduction.

This report summarises the key messages and priorities for action that emerged from the contributions of speakers and the organising partners during the session *Urban Informality and Inequality: a global call for climate justice* that took place during the 26th Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC - COP26 (02 Nov. 2021) as well as a previous session: *Innovation for Inclusive, Resilient and Climate-Neutral Cities* during the Innovate4Cities Conference (12 Oct. 2021).

Partnering

Cities Alliance, the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF), UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and the British Academy (BA) partnered to deliver strategic considerations on *how to best serve the local authorities and communities on the frontline of climate change and, in particular, those living in informal settlements* - shedding light on the matter at the international level.

A two-fold process

This joint venture convened a total of 18 contributors from around the world who shared considerations on the nexus between climate resilience, urban poverty and informality. A first event was organised and held entirely online, during the Innovate4Cities Conference. This initial conversation culminated during the hybrid event held in Glasgow, and online at COP26. International speakers and audience members from local and city governments, central governments, research communities and civil society discussed climate justice. The



importance of taking account of the cumulative risks created by conditions of urban informality, inequality and climate vulnerability in developing effective responses to climate change served as a starting point. The panel of practitioners from diverse areas explored the role that researchers, civil society actors, city governments and policy-makers can play in strengthening local action for sustainable climate justice. The overall objective of this two-fold process is to identify key messages and priorities in the areas of advocacy, policy and research to effectively support climate actions.

At I4C Conference

The opening remarks were made by Anaclaudia Rossbach and Arne Janssen from Cities Alliance. It was stressed that projections regarding informal settlements alert for a major increase in the coming decades, reaching potentially 50% of the total urban population. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the areas that are being left behind and require better attention. Local action is central for society to both mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change. Therefore, transforming the trends regarding informality and inequality towards more resilience at the city level is a substantial part of the global challenge to be tackled.

At COP26

The keynote speech was delivered by Yvonne Aki-Sawyer, Mayor of Freetown, Sierra Leone and CLGF member. Freetown showcases the many more stories of cities facing rapid urbanisation in the global south. In a short space of time, the capital city of Sierra Leone faced much population growth, due in part to the civil war and Ebola outbreak, but also influenced by climate change. The agriculture-based economy is seriously impacted by rainfall and has caused people to move to cities to seek alternative employment. Land access is an issue with the function of land tenure held by the central government. This has contributed to a rapid growth of informal settlements, where poverty breeds poverty and additional environmental issues and vulnerabilities emerge. Mayor Aki-Sawyer is addressing the situation through direct dialogue with citizens: prioritising sanitation in the hard-to-reach communities; recognising that informality is not just about informal settlements, but also low incomes, lack of road infrastructure and connectivity. The goal is not to do away with informality, but to work in partnership and ask people at grassroots levels how they want these new communities to look. Highlighting the realities of informality and inequality in cities, the keynote depicts opportunities of working with marginalised communities vulnerable to climate change to achieve climate justice.

Key messages

The individual contributions shared during the two events complemented and built on each other. Key messages for advocacy, policy and research can be extracted. The advocacy and policy messages tend to overlap; therefore, those categories have been grouped. Research messages follow.



Advocacy and Local government policy:

- It is impossible to separate people from climate change. In other words, the climate crisis is connected to the development challenge.
- “Nothing for us without us”: How to transform people’s lives without the people? When regarded as actors more than merely beneficiaries, citizens are more likely to engage and support urban interventions in their neighborhoods - as well as to hold decision-makers accountable.
- Informality delivers many things that are vital for people living in cities. Slum upgrading has potential because much harm can be done by disrupting informality.
- Work with people, as well as nature - nature-based solutions - as it is people who live in nature.
- To reduce our societal climate footprint while addressing informality is possible. Gender, climate, waste, migration, etc. are all interrelated issues and can be addressed as such - i.e. informal waste pickers, often women, already reuse and recycle and can support a systemic shift towards more circular systems.
- It is essential that local and regional governments commit to systematic change in the coming decades, when we will see the greatest social and economic changes.
- We know where we want to be in the future: in a +1.5°C world, with no poverty, no hunger, access to adequate housing and health; and no one is left behind. Implementing the international agendas, i.e. UNFCCC, Agenda 2030 with the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda (NUA) will take partnerships that also consider the urban poor.
- The only way forward is to make resilience part of the solution for the problems we are facing.

Academic research:

- City data, especially about informal areas, has great value. Even when collected informally, much can be done with this information about informality. Informal settings are accessible, flexible and responsive, and are fundamental to how informal settlements and sectors operate.
- To produce more informed knowledge about informality and engage with the informal sector to respond to climate change requires an integrated approach, one that learns from experience, avoids harm and engages in the co-production of knowledge.
- Climate responses need to work with informality instead of attempting to eradicate it. Furthermore, in addressing climate mitigation and adaptation, these approaches should not be more unjust than the justice that they do.
- Strengthening action for climate justice means leaving no one behind. Building partnerships between local and national governments, formal and informal settlements is key.
- There are different ways in which the formalised institutions can collaborate informally with structured citizens groups. The intertwined and integrated political processes, interests and struggles can be intimidating but they are part of the dynamics to be better understood.



- The science of climate change includes not just the changes in the weather but also the impacts on the most fundamental aspects of our daily lives, hence the relevance of climate urbanism, adaptive responses, nature-based solutions, etc.
- In order to bring urban science, sustainability science and climate science together, with a strong focus on inequality and inclusion, understanding of sustainability, resilience, and climate should be reframed - without that it is difficult to bring voice, agency and evidence to deliver climate resilience development.
- Key learnings from experience deserve to be shared broadly. For example, to provide security of tenure in cities, or to work with the informal economy does not mean that safety standards will be ignored, there are ways to implement them less rigidly.

An encompassing message that stands out from the conversations is that climate justice in cities is *dramatically underfunded*. “We have a climate emergency; we try to move fast, but finance is not moving fast”, said Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr.

Emerging priorities

To strengthen engagement with researchers, policy makers and the community, priorities regarding advocacy, local policy and research started to emerge. They can be encapsulated in the following statements:

Advocacy at the international level:

1. Raise awareness on what informality actually means, looks like and how it is reinforced/ reproduced in cities of the global south.
2. Acknowledge the centrality of/ mainstream the informality agenda and its interconnectedness with the climate crisis.
3. Call for more and better design of funding mechanisms to address climate justice.
4. Strengthen climate action at city level around the world.
5. Provide dedicated strengthening platforms to give voice to the informal.

Local government policy:

1. Develop policies to upgrade slums when possible; relocate only when necessary.
2. Provide the space for civic activism and work invariably in partnerships with local communities of citizens for the planning, implementing and monitoring of improvements in informal areas.
3. Integrate informal areas in city-wide planning and service delivery processes.
4. Make sure the solutions chosen are firmly rooted in scientific evidence.
5. Unlock/ attract/ raise financing at the local level and ensure that all service providers such as waste keepers, caregivers or environmental regenerators receive adequate revenues for their contributions.



Academic research:

1. Develop data collection methods, including georeferenced and analytical tools that can be accessible and instrumental for marginalised, vulnerable, or informal communities to self-organise, based on evidence.
2. Proactively look at the future and provide strategic and factual advice to policy towards climate justice. For example:
 - a. Conduct more research on climate action to increase global understanding of the root causes and effective approaches to address urban inequality while mitigating and adapting to climate change.
 - b. Identify the policy gaps that tend to engender unintended consequences that ripple into more vulnerability.
 - c. Support a better understanding of the contexts in which multi-level governance schemes are beneficial, as well as the costs/ requirements for success.
3. Conduct more multidisciplinary and integrated research to bring urban, sustainability and climate science together.
4. Co-production of knowledge is key in planning and knowledge development. It can generate pathways to equality across the world and local/national governments, civil society and the research communities have a role to play in tackling the challenges of knowledge co-production.
5. Provide evidence for financing opportunities and needs to ensure better integrated and coordinated action between city/local governments and national governments, with civil society, the research community and the urban poor to tackle climate change sustainably.

Last but not least, all the contributors stressed the importance of collaboration through *meaningful partnerships* and integration across sectors - including with financing actors. This is vital to ensure the effectiveness of planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of climate interventions in urban areas.

Moving forward

With this report, the partner organizations hope to provide readers with relevant hints to engage in comprehensive action. The messages and priorities listed build on the current knowledge, experiences and shared understandings of what the complexity of addressing climate change entails in informal and unequal societies. We believe that the construction of the next steps of this road map towards climate justice in cities can only be a broad collaborative journey nested in science, action and participation. The partnership between Cities Alliance, CLGF and UKRI is a materialization of this realization. Based on our experience, we can only encourage the creation of many more similar joint ventures to create prosperous, equitable and climate-resilient cities worldwide.



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References and additional resources:

Both sessions' recordings as well as the names and bios of the contributors are available online.

- Contributors' bios:
 - Bios of the 8 contributors at I4C: <https://www.citiesalliance.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/I4C%20Contributors%27%20bios.docx.pdf>
 - Bios of the 13 contributors at COP26: <https://www.citiesalliance.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/Speakers%20and%20Bio%20-%20COP26%20-%20A%20Call%20for%20Climate%20Justice.docx.pdf>
- Recording of the session at the I4C conference: <https://www.citiesalliance.org/newsroom/events/innovation-inclusive-resilient-and-climate-neutral-cities>
- Recording of the session at COP26: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iz5XiNVI-ig>
- News about the partnership and the events:
 - On Cities Alliance's website: <https://www.citiesalliance.org/newsroom/news/spotlight/calling-climate-justice-cities-cop26>
 - On UCLG's website: <https://www.clgf.org.uk/whats-new/news/clgf-at-cop26/>
 - On BA's website: <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/programmes/just-transitions/>