

THE FUTURE OF CITIES

Saint Peters University High School Model United Nations
2025 Conference Theme



A Conference on Cities

The lived experience of humanity is increasingly an urban one. Currently, more than half of people in most countries live in cities (Figure 1). By 2050, it is estimated that this will be the case in most of the world (Figure 2). The data show that most of this growth has occurred in last 100 years and accelerated in the past 50 (Figure 3). The rapid growth of cities presents myriad challenges for humanity – environmental, socioeconomic, health, cultural, and political. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 seeks to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.

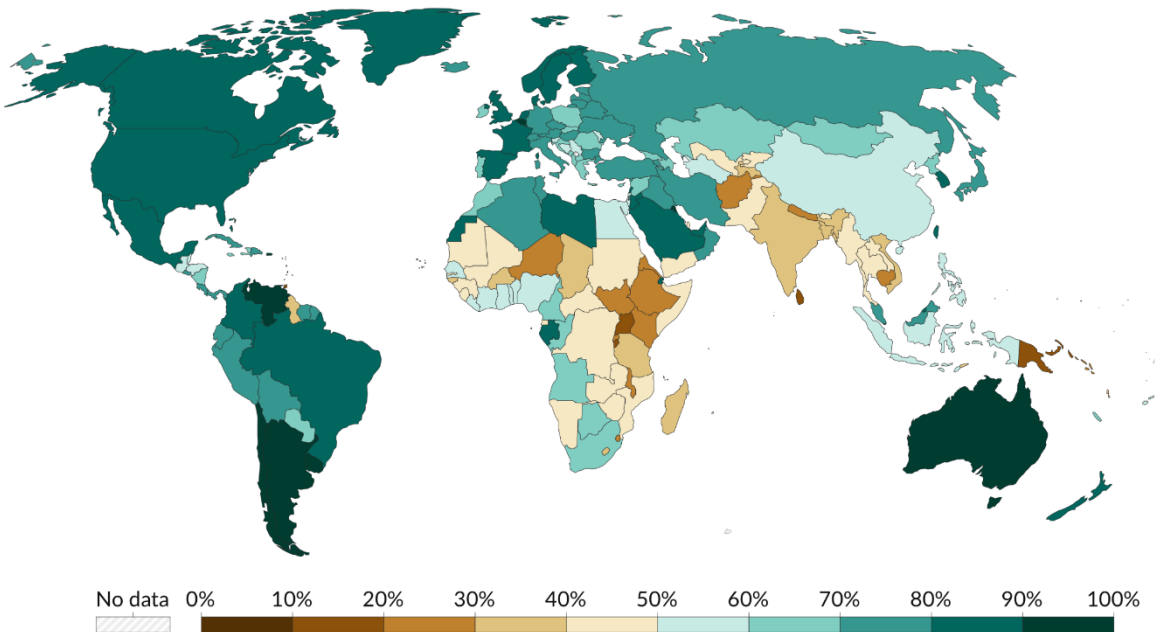
SPUHS MUN 2025 is asking delegates to grapple with complex and fascinating issues through its annual conference theme of The Future of Cities. One topic in each committee will focus on the theme, debating such issues as preparing cities for climate change, agricultural production in cities, and participatory budgeting. Delegates will have the opportunity to THINK BIG and create a workable agenda for meeting the targets of SDG 11.

Figure 1

Share of the population living in urban areas, 2023



Share of the total population living in urban areas, given as estimates by HYDE until 2023 and UN projections through 2050, using the median fertility scenario for future urbanization trends.



Data source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2018); HYDE (2023)

Note: Because the estimates of city and metropolitan areas are based on national definitions of what constitutes a city or metropolitan area, cross-country comparisons should be made with caution.

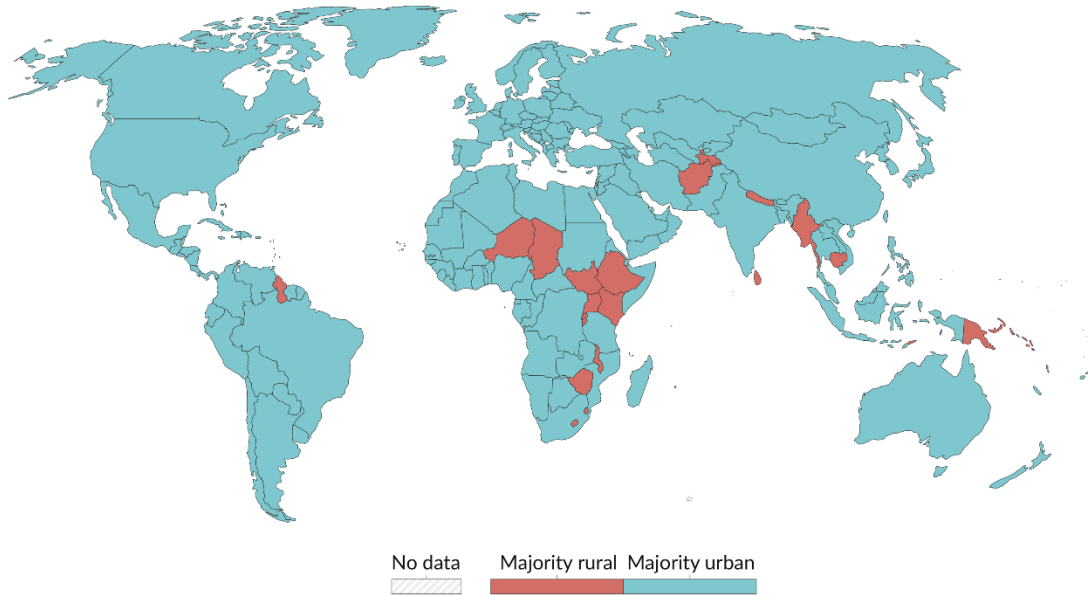
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Figure 2

Do more people live in urban or rural areas? 2050

'Majority urban' means that over 50% of the population resides in urban areas, whereas 'majority rural' means that at most 50% live in urban locations.



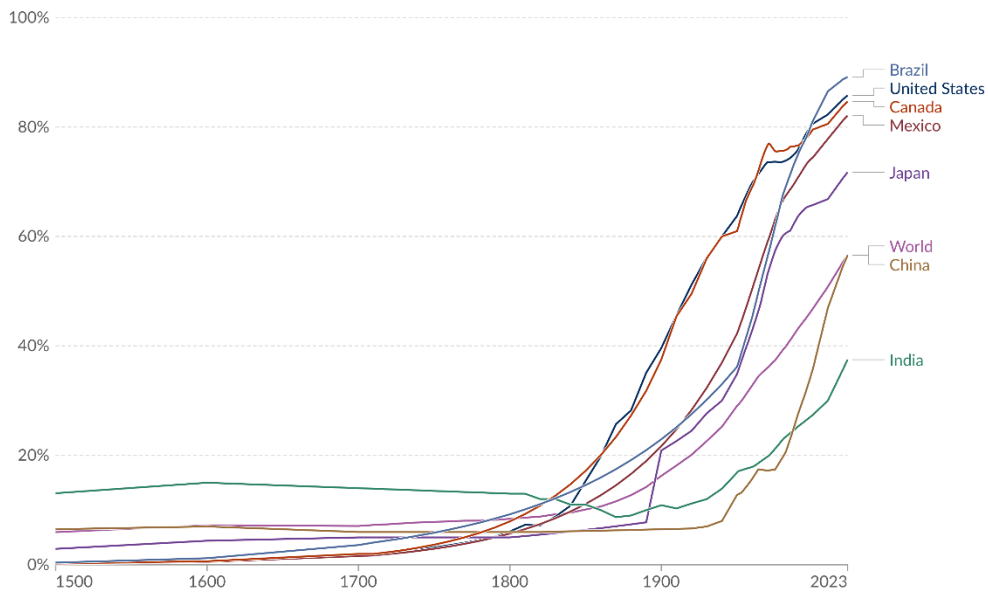
Data source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2018); HYDE (2023)

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Figure 3

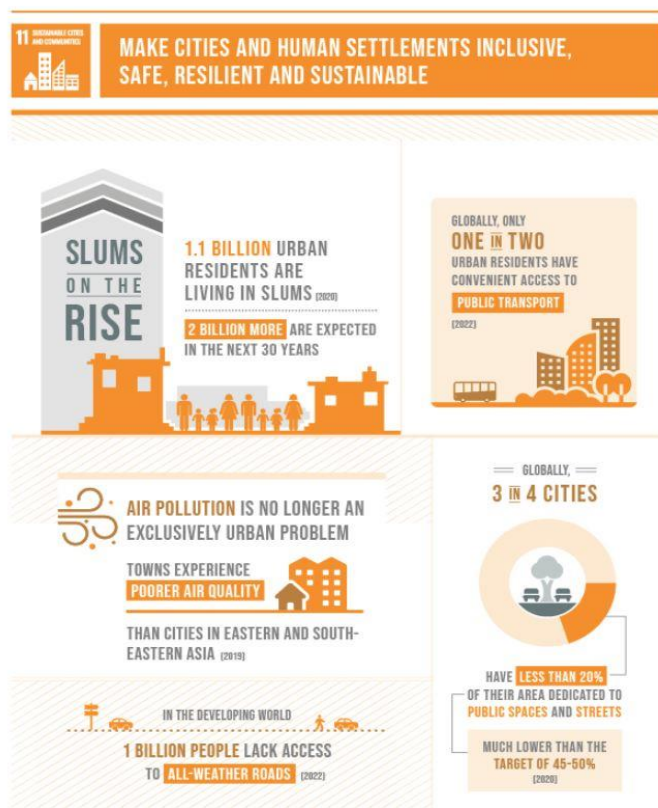
Share of the population living in urbanized areas, 1500 to 2023



Data source: HYDE (2023)

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Figure 4



THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS REPORT 2023: SPECIAL EDITION- UNSTATS.UN.ORG/SDGS/REPORT/2023/

Sustainable Development Goal 11

The General Assembly adopted SDG 11 with the recognition that the prospects for meeting the overall development goals must address the environments in which most of humanity is now living. Some of the challenges that brought a UN focus to cities are illustrated in Figure 4.¹ The SDG sets a number of ambitious targets that must be achieved by 2030 (Sidebar).² This focus on cities accelerated with the adoption of the New Urban Agenda (NUA) in 2016.³ The NUA created a number of guidelines and areas of work that aimed at helping cities better serve their residents with a focus on developing their economic dynamism and their resilience to the environmental and social challenges created by high-density life and work.⁴ The NUA has served as the underlying framework for much of the work of UN bodies in the past decade.

SDG 11 Targets

11.1 By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums

11.2 By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport

systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons

11.3 By 2030, enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management in all countries

11.4 Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage

11.5 By 2030, significantly reduce the number of deaths and the number of people affected and substantially decrease the direct economic losses relative to global gross domestic product caused by disasters, including water-related disasters, with a focus on protecting the poor and people in vulnerable situations

11.6 By 2030, reduce the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, including by paying special attention to air quality and municipal and other waste management

11.7 By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities

11.a Support positive economic, social and environmental links between urban, peri-urban and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning

11.b By 2020, substantially increase the number of cities and human settlements adopting and implementing integrated policies and plans towards inclusion, resource efficiency, mitigation and adaptation to climate change, resilience to disasters, and develop and implement, in line with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, holistic disaster risk management at all levels

11.c Support least developed countries, including through financial and technical assistance, in building sustainable and resilient buildings utilizing local materials

The Challenges and Opportunities of Cities

Cities present a number of challenges as well as opportunities that impact the ability of the United Nations to meet all of its Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Cities are microcosms that intensify both the negative and positive aspects of people living and working together. SPHSMUN deals with a number of these opportunities and challenges through the work of its various committees.

Poverty and Food Insecurity

The dense populations of cities can amplify the effects of poverty. Residents can have difficulty finding jobs that cover the costs of urban living. Gaining access to affordable housing, transportation, and healthcare can help lift people out of poverty, but also require investments of political will and financial resources. The **Commission on Population and Development (CPD)** will discuss how to manage the challenges of rapid urbanization. Unlike poor people in rural areas – who can meet nutritional needs through subsistence agriculture – the urban poor often live in “food deserts” without easily accessible or affordable food. The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** will investigate ways that cities can boost agricultural production to meet the needs of residents and reduce hunger.

Political Rights and Inclusion

Cities have historically been places of artistic and political expression. The right of citizens to express dissent is protected in international humanitarian law (IHL). Many governments have been curtailing access to public spaces and restricting rights of assembly within them. The **Social and Humanitarian Committee (SOCHUM)** will examine how public spaces can be established and protected as places of assembly and dissent. Residents should also have a say in how their cities are governed and how city funds are spent. The **Economic and Financial Committee (ECOFIN)** will look at the practice of participatory budgeting - a process in which residents get to determine priorities and fund projects that directly benefit their communities.

Destruction of Neighborhoods and Infrastructure

Many cities have been all but destroyed by conflicts among and within member states. The destruction of residences, schools, hospitals has a severe impact on urban populations to meet the needs of daily living – subjecting them to hunger, disease, and displacement. The **Security Council** will debate ways to protect civilian infrastructure in conflict zones – and prevent combatants from using them for military purposes. Neighborhoods can also be destroyed through unregulated growth in construction. Historic urban landscapes contain many cultural treasures that risk being lost due to rapid development. The **United Nations Economic, Social, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)** will discuss ways of helping cities preserve their historic neighborhoods, while using them as a resource for economic and cultural development.

Environmental Impacts

Cities both contribute to climate change and are impacted by it. Urban areas are a significant source of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions through energy consumption as well as through production in the transportation, manufacturing, and construction industries. At the same time, many cities are located in coastal or other environmentally sensitive areas, making them particularly susceptible to climate hazards. The **United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA)** will look at how cities can reduce their carbon footprint as well as adapt to become more resilient in the face of a changing climate. City residents also suffer from the effects of poor sanitation. Growth in neighborhoods has outpaced the ability of cities to build sewers and many residents are left to informal ways of disposing of human waste. Poor sanitation leads to the spread of disease as well as a host of other social and environmental ills. The **World Health Assembly (WHA)** will examine how to create safely-managed sanitation systems in the world's cities.

Cities as Laboratories of Change

The good news is that many cities have not been idle in dealing with these challenges. Whether it's the use of rooftops as community gardens or the restoration of green spaces and wetlands, city governments have developed a host of creative and effective solutions to ameliorate the problems of urbanization. In all of the SPUHSMUN committees, delegates will learn about the innovative ways cities are endeavoring to meet the 2030 SDGs. There is a great opportunity for the world as a whole to benefit from the dynamism of cities and the United Nations can play a central role in sharing and supporting these strategies to be adopted. The work you will do at SPUHSMUN 2025 will help make the United Nations more relevant and effective in dealing with the myriad challenges presented by urbanization and help assure a brighter future for cities and their residents.

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¹ “Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.” United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal11#targets_and_indicators , Accessed 15 January 2025.

² *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/70/1, 2015, p. 24

³ “The New Urban Agenda”, Habitat III - 17-20 October 2016, The United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, <https://habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda/>, Accessed 15 January 2025.

⁴ Ibid.