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11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES



Arab cities on the frontline: advancing SDG 11 amid escalating crises

Background note

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The present background note was developed by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), and the World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism).

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inhabitants will live in cities by 2050, with urbanization rising from 25% to 61% since 1950

3 major pressures

Rapid urbanization, conflict-driven displacement, and climate change

Severe damage from conflict

Housing, infrastructure, schools, hospitals hit and destroyed

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inhabitants living in slums, informal settlements or inadequate housing

- Three out of four inhabitants of the Arab region will reside in cities by 2050. Since 1950, the urbanization rate has risen from 25 to 61 per cent in the region,¹ reflecting the increasing centrality of cities in providing access to services and economic opportunities.
- Progress towards SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities) in the region is primarily impeded by a structural mismatch between rapid urbanization, intensified by conflict-related displacement, poverty in rural and remote areas and climate change, and the limited capacity of urban governance at the local level, including urban planning and housing policies, to achieve sustainable urban development at scale.
- Protracted conflicts in Arab countries have caused extensive destruction of the built environment and housing stock. Damage to infrastructure, public spaces and essential facilities, including schools and hospitals, in addition to mass displacement, has exacerbated inequalities in access to basic services.
- Arab cities are primary destinations for people displaced by conflict, placing added strain on urban areas already burdened by inadequate infrastructure. This intensifies challenges including housing shortages, expansion of informal employment, limited accessibility for persons with disabilities, older people and families with young children, as well as the overexploitation of natural resources and environmental degradation.
- Although progress has been made in disaster preparedness and in aligning national urban policies with the global New Urban Agenda, significant policy gaps remain in advancing sustainable cities and more resilient communities in the region. Priorities include affordable housing and access to basic services for all, climate change adaptation, better air quality, improved waste management, sustainable transport, green and public spaces, universal accessibility, and protection of cultural and natural heritage.
- Despite the centrality of safe and affordable housing to urban development and social inclusion in Arab cities, housing policies across the region have struggled to meet the needs caused by rapid urban growth, displacement, and rising land and construction costs. Structural deficits in housing supply and affordability persist, with informality, overcrowding and substandard living conditions persisting in many cities.

¹ . ESCWA, *Demographic trends in the Arab region: 1950–2030, 2025*.

1. Baseline assessment

The present baseline assessment examines progress towards SDG 11 across key dimensions for which data are sufficiently available at the regional level, including access to adequate, safe and affordable housing and the prevalence of slums and informal settlements (SDG target 11.1); access to public transport and urban mobility systems as a determinant of social inclusion (SDG target 11.2); environmental pressures affecting urban areas, such as air pollution, waste management and water scarcity (SDG targets 11.6 and 11.b); and the impact of conflict and displacement on cities, including infrastructure damage, service disruption and increased disaster and vulnerability risks (SDG target 11.5).

Indicators show that challenges remain in achieving SDG 11 by 2030 in the region. Regarding safe and affordable housing (SDG target 11.1), the Arab SDG Monitor indicates that 20.9 per cent of the population was living in slums, informal settlements or inadequate housing in 2022, a proportion similar to that of 10 years ago (20.6 per cent in 2016).²

This regional average, however, masks important subregional differences, as evidenced by recent UN-Habitat reports:³

- North Africa recorded one of the most significant reductions, with the share of the urban population living in slums falling from around 32 per cent in 2000 to 17 per cent in 2024, reflecting sustained investment in slum

upgrading, prevention, and large-scale public housing programmes in countries such as Algeria, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia.

- In the other Arab countries, the proportion of the urban population living in slums declined from 27 per cent in 2000 to 18 per cent in 2022, with pronounced disparities. While high-income countries in the Gulf have negligible slum populations, rates remain above 40 per cent in conflict-affected contexts such as the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen, with neighbouring countries such as Iraq and Lebanon also hosting refugee camps and informal settlements that place acute pressure on urban systems.

By 2022, only about half of the urban population in the region had convenient access to public transport, limiting mobility, especially for women, children, people with disabilities and older persons with specific access requirements. In 2020, the proportion of the urban population with convenient access to public transport varied considerably from 8 and 10 per cent in Baghdad and Amman, respectively, to 62 and 79 per cent in Doha and Marrakesh (Morocco), respectively. Cities in middle-income countries tend to have better public transport coverage, with 48 per cent in Tunis compared with 41 and 39 per cent in Dubai (United Arab Emirates) and Kuwait, respectively, and 36 per cent in Alexandria (Egypt) versus 21 per cent in Bahrain. This reflects high dependency on private cars in Arab high-income countries.⁴

2 . ESCWA, *Arab SDG Monitor*; ESCWA, *Arab Sustainable Development Report*, 2024.

3 . UN-Habitat, *Regional housing sector analysis and strategic directions in Arab States* (forthcoming); UN-Habitat, *State of Arab cities report* (forthcoming).

4 . ESCWA, *Arab Sustainable Development Report*, 2024; UN-Habitat, *The State of Arab Cities Report 2022*, 2023.

Environmental pressures further constrain progress towards sustainable cities and communities, including poor air quality, inadequate waste management systems,

and water scarcity. Structural urban challenges have largely persisted over the past decade, directly challenging progress across all SDG 11 targets.

2. Escalating impact of conflict

Ongoing conflicts

Protracted conflicts have reversed development gains and deepened urban vulnerabilities

Since 2023

Escalations (Gaza, Lebanon) have intensified pressures and produced regional spillhovers

Weakened cities

Reduced capacity for economic growth, social cohesion, and environmental resilience

Protracted regional conflicts have intensified urban challenges, reversing development gains and deepening vulnerabilities in Arab cities. Escalations since late 2023, including the devastating war in Gaza, have affected Lebanon, particularly since 2024, and produced broader regional spillovers through 2026, further weakening cities' capacity to serve as engines of inclusive economic growth, social cohesion and environmental protection.

A. Impact on housing, the built environment and infrastructure

Conflict-affected countries have experienced widespread destruction of housing stock, transport corridors, water and sanitation networks, and energy infrastructure. In Gaza, the scale of urban destruction has been unprecedented in recent years, with large-scale destruction of homes, roads and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)

infrastructure, rendering entire areas uninhabitable. Similar patterns of destruction and displacement have re-emerged in southern Lebanon, where airstrikes and evacuation orders in early 2026 have affected residential neighbourhoods, transport infrastructure and the provision of municipal services, further risking already fragile urban systems and local governance capabilities. The loss of housing and basic infrastructure, combined with limited reconstruction capacity, has exacerbated overcrowding, informality and housing shortages in urban areas across the region.

B. Impact on healthcare, education and social services

Conflicts have severely disrupted access to essential social services in cities. Healthcare facilities and schools have been damaged, destroyed or rendered unusable, particularly in Gaza, undermining access to healthcare,

education and public health services. These disruptions increase vulnerability among urban populations, especially children, older people, persons with disabilities and displaced households, while placing additional pressure on already constrained urban service systems in host cities.

C. Impact on displacement and host cities

Conflict-driven displacement to urban areas has intensified with current escalations in the Arab region, amplifying pressures on cities. The region has produced over 15 million refugees, accounting for more than 35 per cent of the global refugee population,⁵ with the majority remaining in the region. Since early 2026, escalating hostilities have led to a marked deterioration in the humanitarian situation.⁶ Lebanon alone recorded over 1 million internally displaced persons in March 2026 (one out of five inhabitants),⁷ gathered in collective shelters or already overcrowded neighbourhoods, significantly increasing demand for housing, water, electricity and waste management services in urban areas.

Cities such as Beirut, Amman, Erbil and Aden continue to absorb displaced populations under severe fiscal constraints, contributing to overcrowding, the expansion of informal settlements, and heightened competition for jobs and basic services in vulnerable host communities. In this context, Jordan provides an illustrative example and represents a relative outlier in the region, having begun to move

beyond temporary humanitarian responses by integrating displaced populations into national and municipal housing, services and social protection systems. Meanwhile, urban recovery and service restoration efforts in conflict-affected contexts such as Iraq, Palestine, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen remain essential for voluntary, safe and dignified return.

D. Impact on urban governance and long-term planning

The cumulative effects of protracted and currently escalating conflict further weaken urban governance and long-term planning. Municipalities face declining revenues, damaged assets, and rising operational costs at a time when emergency response and shelter provision dominate expenditure priorities. As conflict intersects with climate risks, economic instability and constrained humanitarian access, cities face cascading shocks. Conflict-affected urban areas are simultaneously exposed to rising temperatures, water scarcity and food insecurity, intensifying risks for low-income residents, displaced populations and informal workers. These trends increase the need for recovery-oriented, risk-informed and inclusive urban strategies that bridge humanitarian response, reconstruction and long-term development. The work of the United Nations across the region highlights that area-based, locally led and data-driven recovery approaches are essential to restoring urban functionality while strengthening resilience to future shocks.⁸

5 . ESCWA, *Demographic trends in the Arab region: 1950–2030*, 2025; ESCWA, *Arab Sustainable Development Report*, 2024.

6 . United Nations Development Programme, *Military escalation in the Middle East: economic and social implications for the Arab States region – Assessment*, 2026.

7 . International Organization for Migration, *Escalation in the Middle East and beyond: mobility report (31 March – 07 April 2026)*, 2026.

8 . UN-Habitat Regional Office for Arab States, *Overview 2021*, 2022.

3. Policy responses for accelerating SDG 11 in the Arab region

The urbanization of the Arab region is taking place in diverse contexts, ranging from high-income metropolitan areas to rapidly expanding cities with limited resources, as well as fragile and conflict-affected urban settings. Arab cities however face common pressures from demographic trends, climate change, environmental stress and governance challenges. Crises and conflicts intensify pressures on cities, driving displacement, disrupting services, worsening housing shortages and straining public finances. Achieving SDG 11 therefore requires a common regional vision underpinned by differentiated and locally grounded pathways, as follows:



Place cities at the core of sustainable development, by recognizing cities as primary engines for economic growth, service delivery, social cohesion, climate action and environmental resilience, and by systematically embedding urban priorities within national development plans, sectoral policies, recovery frameworks and financing mechanisms, with clearly defined roles and resources for local governments.



Promote integrated urban planning that articulates land use, housing, infrastructure, transport, accessibility, economic activities, access to essential services and environmental management, avoiding fragmented responses during periods of instability.



Strengthen local governance in national urban policies, by overcoming persistent obstacles related to limited decentralization, unclear or overlapping mandates among different levels of government, constrained fiscal autonomy of municipalities, weak municipal revenues and insufficient technical capacity at the local level, enabling municipalities to respond to diverse local priorities, including continuity of basic services during periods of crisis. Improved multilevel coordination is also critical to align sectoral policies, such as housing, transport, health, environment and food security, across national and local levels.



Build municipal capacity for inclusive and adaptive urban management, by investing in local budgeting, gender-responsive planning, and the active engagement of vulnerable groups, including women, persons with disabilities and older people. Capacity-building can support municipalities in managing the provision of affordable and healthy goods and services in low-income neighbourhoods and informal settlements, while supporting local producers and inclusive urban communities.



Institutionalize urban observatories to inform evidence-based decision-making processes, with local data systems tracking housing needs, access to essential services, environmental pressures, and demographic and socioeconomic trends in both stable and crisis-affected contexts. This includes generating disaggregated data to better understand urban-rural linkages, supply chains and vulnerabilities affecting basic needs and services across the urban-rural continuum.⁹

⁹ . Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Strengthening urban food systems in the North Africa and Near East region: linking spatial dynamics and politics to improve food security and nutrition (forthcoming); FAO, *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World*, 2023.



Localize SDG 11 through voluntary local reviews as a practical entry point for Arab cities to align local priorities with national and global frameworks, enhancing transparency and accountability, and fostering policy coherence across development, recovery and resilience agendas.



Strengthen preparedness, response and recovery in housing systems, applying “build back better” principles in post-disaster and post-conflict reconstruction to reduce future systemic risks and improve housing and socioeconomic resilience.



Advance healthy cities to improve well-being and social cohesion, addressing pollution, overcrowding, public health risks, impacts of climate stress and mental well-being, which are intensified by conflict-related shocks.



Mobilize financing and partnerships for sustainable urban development through innovative financing mechanisms, public-private partnerships and coordinated donor support, aligning action from Governments, city networks, donors and international partners around practical implementation pathways. This approach can support integrated, area-based interventions that link infrastructure, services, livelihoods and environmental sustainability, enabling both recovery from crisis and long-term urban transformation.

