

Sustainable Urbanisation through the Lens of Planetary Health: Balancing Modern Health and Well-being with City Growth

Pallavi Pathak

Professor, School of Management Sciences, Varanasi

(Email: pallavipathak@smsvaranasi.com)

ABSTRACT

Urbanisation is rising globally, transforming cities into centres of economic opportunity, innovation, and social progress. However, rapid and often unplanned urban growth has also resulted into environmental degradation, climate-related risks, public health challenges, and socio-economic inequalities. This paper explores how the Planetary Health framework can inform sustainable urbanisation by integrating all three pillars of environmental sustainability, economic resilience, and social well-being into urban planning and governance.

The study adopts a systematic review of interdisciplinary literature coupled with examples from Indian cities, Indore, Surat, and Pune, to examine sustainable urban practices related to green infrastructure, waste management, sustainable mobility, renewable energy, inclusive public spaces, and participatory governance. The analysis shows that cities adopting integrated planning, nature-based solutions, and active citizen engagement are better positioned to enhance public health and promote inclusive economic development.

The paper is aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 3, SDG 11 and SDG 13. The paper proposes the HARMONY Framework representing Healthy Communities, Adaptive Governance, Resource Efficiency, Mobility and Green Infrastructure, Opportunities for Inclusive Growth, Nature-Positive Development, and Youth and Community Participation as an integrative model for fostering resilient and inclusive cities. The study contributes to the emerging discourse on urban planetary health by offering a holistic framework to guide policymakers, urban planners, and researchers in designing cities that support both human flourishing and environmental sustainability.

Keywords: Inclusivity, Planetary Health Framework, Social Well-being, Sustainable Urbanisation, Waste management

INTRODUCTION

Rapid urbanisation has become a defining feature of the twenty-first century, creating opportunities for economic development while simultaneously posing significant challenges to environmental sustainability, public health, and social equity. As cities continue to expand, the need to harmonize urban growth with the well-being of people and the preservation of natural ecosystems has become increasingly urgent. Sustainable urbanisation offers a holistic framework for addressing these interconnected challenges by integrating environmental stewardship, inclusive governance, resilient infrastructure, and human-centred urban planning.

This paper explores how sustainable urban development can promote healthier, more inclusive, and resilient cities without compromising economic progress. It examines the relationship between urban planning, green infrastructure, sustainable mobility, waste management, affordable housing, and access to healthcare and public spaces in improving the physical, mental, and social well-being of urban populations. The study also highlights the role of smart technologies, renewable energy, and citizen participation in enhancing urban resilience and supporting evidence-based decision-making.

Very often urban development has often prioritised infrastructure over health and sustainability. But drawing upon contemporary literature and selected case examples from Indian cities, particularly Indore's achievements in waste management and urban cleanliness, the paper illustrates how integrated planning and community engagement can contribute to sustainable city development. The discussion is anchored in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), emphasizing the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration among policymakers, urban planners, public health professionals, and local communities.

SUSTAINABLE URBANISATION

Sustainable urbanisation directly hits all three pillars i.e. Nature - green space, air quality, Economy—urban growth and Society—health, well-being, equity. At present it is highly relevant globally in the form of SDG 11. Health is being given importance in all policies discourse. Rapid urbanisation is transforming cities into engines of economic growth, innovation, and social development. However, unplanned urban expansion has intensified environmental degradation, climate vulnerability, public health risks, and socio-economic inequalities. While urban development has traditionally prioritized infrastructure and economic growth, contemporary research emphasizes the need for people-centred and environmentally sustainable cities. Guided by the Planetary Health Framework, which recognizes the interdependence of human health and the Earth's natural systems, this paper examines how sustainable urbanisation can simultaneously promote healthy populations, resilient ecosystems, and inclusive economic development.

The paper is conceptually anchored in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). It argues that urban sustainability should be viewed as a multidimensional process that balances environmental conservation, economic resilience, and human well-being rather than focusing solely on physical infrastructure. Findings suggest that cities adopting integrated governance, citizen engagement, and nature-based solutions demonstrate greater resilience to environmental and public health challenges.

The study contributes to the growing discourse on sustainable urban development by proposing a holistic framework that aligns urban planning with health, environmental stewardship, and social equity. The findings offer practical implications for policymakers, urban planners, and researchers seeking pathways towards inclusive, resilient, and healthy cities in rapidly urbanising economies.

RESEARCH GAP

Although sustainable urbanisation has received considerable scholarly attention, much of the existing literature examines environmental sustainability, economic growth, and urban infrastructure independently. Comparatively fewer studies adopt a **Planetary Health perspective**, which recognizes the interconnectedness of ecological integrity, human health, and social equity in shaping resilient urban systems. This paper addresses this gap by synthesizing these dimensions into a holistic conceptual framework for sustainable urban development.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

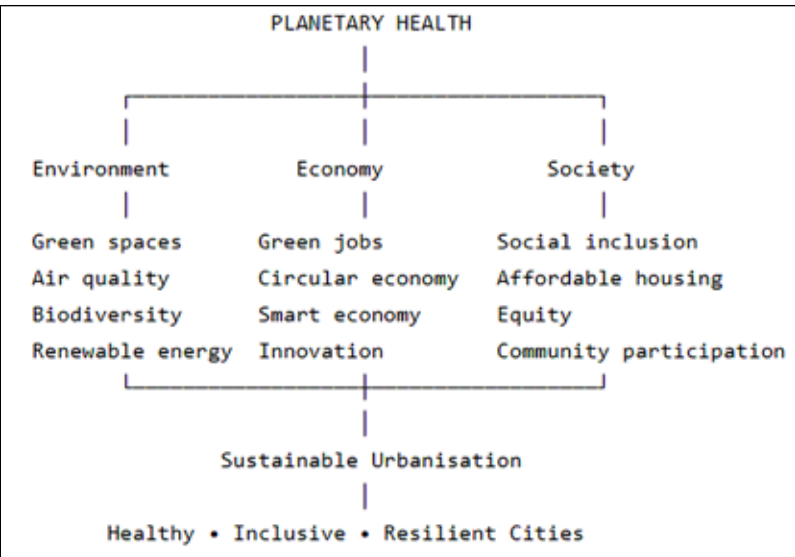


Fig. 1: Conceptual Framework

OBJECTIVES

1. To examine sustainable urbanisation through the Planetary Health framework.
2. To analyse the relationship between urban planning, environmental sustainability, and human health.
3. To identify best practices from selected Indian cities.
4. To propose an integrated framework for healthy and resilient urban development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainable Urbanisation

Sustainable urbanization focuses on integrating ecological, economic, and social well-being through collaborative governance. Key challenges include policy fragmentation and implementation gaps, addressed by emerging strategies like data-driven planning, circular economy principles, and trans-scalar frameworks.

Main Themes in Sustainable Urbanism

Sustainable urbanism has evolved into a multifaceted field that prioritizes the harmonization of urban growth with ecological preservation, social equity, and economic resilience. (Howard, 2025). Central to this discourse is the “eco-city” concept, which seeks to promote sustainable development across urban infrastructure, services, and community life at various scales, from districts to entire metropolitan regions (Joss, 2015). Modern scholarship emphasizes a transition toward well-being-oriented metrics, moving away from traditional growth-centric models. This holistic approach is supported by the integration of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary frameworks, which are necessary to manage the inherent complexity of urban systems (Bibri, 2021). Furthermore, the inclusion of creative city factors and cultural infrastructure serves as an increasingly recognized pathway for fostering sustainable development and rural revitalization (Kamran et al. 2023).

Key Challenges in Implementation

The pursuit of sustainable urban development is hindered by significant structural and procedural barriers. A primary challenge involves the effective coordination of innovation and planning across diverse policy sectors and urban scales (Joss, 2015). Many regions suffer from a lack of adequate legal frameworks, insufficient academic study of urban law, and a failure to implement or enforce existing regulations (Alarcón Zambrano & Márquez, 2019). Additionally, scholars note that urban planning often struggles to translate theoretical sustainability models into concrete, ground-level practice (Howard, 2025). The complexity of these issues is compounded by the need for consensus among diverse, multilevel stakeholders, making it difficult to achieve integrated management of planning, development, and environmental goals (Campos-Sánchez et al., 2018) (Howard, 2025).

Emerging Strategies and Practices

- To address these challenges, the planning community is adopting more collaborative, participatory, and data-driven approaches (Vargas-Hernández & Zdunek-Wielgołaska, 2019). Emerging strategies identified in recent research include:
- Data-driven planning: Utilizing computational and technological strands to inform urban practices, often described as data-driven smart sustainable urbanism (Bibri, 2021).
- Circular economy: Applying circular principles to urban spatial planning to optimize resource use (Howard, 2025).
- Trans-scalar governance: Implementing frameworks that integrate decision-making across local, regional, and national levels (Joss, 2015) (Howard, 2025).
- Nature-based solutions: Incorporating ecological security patterns and greenways to enhance urban livability and climate resilience (Howard, 2025) (Beatley, 2012).
- Participatory mechanisms: Engaging communities and diverse stakeholders directly in the planning process to ensure social inclusiveness goals (Vargas-Hernández & Zdunek-Wielgołaska, 2019) (Campos-Sánchez et al., 2018).

These strategies are often informed by global best practices, such as those found in European cities, which emphasize energy conservation, public transit improvements, and the use of “green audits” to hold government bodies accountable (Beatley, 2012) (beatley, n. d). Strategic planning is increasingly viewed as a visionary, educational process that must be continuously evaluated through robust indicator systems (Campos-Sánchez et al., 2018).

Planetary Health

Planetary health examines the interdependent relationship between human health and Earth’s natural systems. Current threats include environmental degradation and climate change, necessitating interdisciplinary, solution-oriented approaches to restore planetary stability and secure long-term human well-being.

Core Concepts in Planetary Health

Planetary health is a transdisciplinary field centered on the fundamental recognition that human health and the health of the planet are inextricably linked. (Mago et al., 2024) (Sheina et al 2022) (Talukdar et al, 2024). It posits that human survival and well-being depend upon the stability and function of natural systems (Seltenrich, 2018). Emerging from environmental and holistic health movements of the 1970s and 1980s, the concept gained significant academic traction following the 2015 *Lancet* Commission report (Prescott et al. (2019).

Key Conceptual Pillars Include:

- **Interconnectedness:** Health is defined as a state of complete physical, mental, social, and ecological well-being, where personal health is inseparable from the health of the environment (Prescott et al. (2019) (Mago et al., 2024).
- **Natural limits:** The field evaluates how human activity modifies Earth's systems and where the planet's natural boundaries lie (Cole, 2019) (Seltenrich, 2018).
- **High-level wellness:** This framework views health as an integrated, dynamic state of potential for individuals, communities, and the planet, requiring sustainable stewardship of natural resources (Prescott et al. (2019).

Main Threats to Planetary Health

Humanity's ecological footprint has expanded rapidly, leading to the "Anthropocene," an epoch defined by profound human alteration of global systems (Seltenrich, 2018). This exploitation has historically provided benefits like increased life expectancy, but these gains are now threatened by the collapse of the very natural systems that supported them

The Primary Threats Identified Include

- **Climate change:** Rapid industrialization, urbanization, and population growth drive environmental degradation, exacerbating extreme weather and existing health vulnerabilities.
- **Environmental pollution:** Air and water pollution, alongside exposure to toxic chemicals, contribute significantly to non-communicable diseases and global mortality (Mago et al., 2024) (Shoji et al., 2025).
- **Systemic disruption:** Human-caused perturbations to natural systems—such as those impacting the microbiome have cascading effects on social, political, and economic stability (Prescott et al. (2019) (Seltenrich, 2018).
- **Global crisis:** The cumulative impact of these disruptions is now driving a global humanitarian crisis, where approximately 23% of global deaths are linked to environmental factors (Mago et al., 2024) (Sheina et al 2022).

Proposed Solutions and Future Directions

Addressing planetary health requires a "Great Transition" involving collaborative, cross-sectoral, and interdisciplinary action (Mago et al., 2024) (Sheina et al 2022). Because the current crisis is global in scope, solutions must integrate diverse voices, including marginalized populations, across all geographies, genders, and cultures (Prescott et al. (2019).

Proposed strategies include:

- **Educational reform:** There is an urgent need to incorporate planetary health into higher education curricula, particularly for health professionals, to prepare them for future environmental challenges (Trombetta et al., 2023) (Shoji et al., 2025).
- **Policy and advocacy:** Healthcare providers are encouraged to act as advocates for patients and future generations by promoting sustainable development and challenging systemic barriers like medical authoritarianism (Prescott et al. (2019) (Mago et al., 2024).
- **Research and interdisciplinary cooperation:** Enhanced investment in research is necessary to better understand the complex interactions between human health and the environment, facilitating more effective, evidence-based interventions (Mago et al., 2024) (Talukder et al., 2024).
- **Global initiatives:** Collaborative frameworks, such as the São Paulo Declaration on Planetary Health, serve as calls-to-action for governments, the private sector, and civil society to implement deep, urgent changes (Sheina et al 2022).

HEALTHY CITIES

There is no single “best” example because different Indian cities excel in different aspects of sustainable urbanisation. However, if you are looking for a city that is widely recognized for its integrated approach, **Indore** is often considered India’s leading example.

Indore (Best Overall Example)

Indore has consistently ranked among India’s cleanest cities under the Swachh Survekshan survey due to its comprehensive approach to sustainability.

Why it stands out

- Excellent solid waste management with near-complete door-to-door waste collection.
- High levels of waste segregation at source.
- Composting, biomethanation, and recycling of municipal waste.
- Public participation through awareness campaigns.
- Cleaner public spaces and improved sanitation.
- Expansion of green spaces and water conservation initiatives.

Key sustainability pillars

- Environmental sustainability
- Citizen participation
- Effective municipal governance
- Circular economy practices



Fig. 2: Clean and Environment friendly Indore



Fig. 3: Waste Segregation

Among Indian cities, **Indore** is widely regarded as the best example of sustainable urbanisation due to its integrated waste management system, active citizen participation, efficient municipal governance, and commitment to environmental sustainability. Its success demonstrates how coordinated policy implementation and community involvement can make urban development both inclusive and environmentally responsible.

Surat (Best for Urban Planning & Disaster Management)

Highlights:

- Efficient Bus Rapid Transit System (BRTS)
- Smart City initiatives
- Strong flood management after the 2006 floods
- Digital governance
- Improved public health systems

Mysuru

Known for:

- Cleanliness
- Heritage conservation
- Sustainable tourism
- Parks and green infrastructure
- Efficient municipal services

Pune

Strengths include:

- Public transport improvements
- Cycling initiatives
- Renewable energy adoption
- Participatory budgeting
- Strong educational and innovation ecosystem

Auroville (Model Sustainable Township)

Although not a conventional city, Auroville demonstrates:

- Renewable energy use
- Rainwater harvesting
- Sustainable architecture
- Organic farming
- Community-based governance
- Ecological restoration

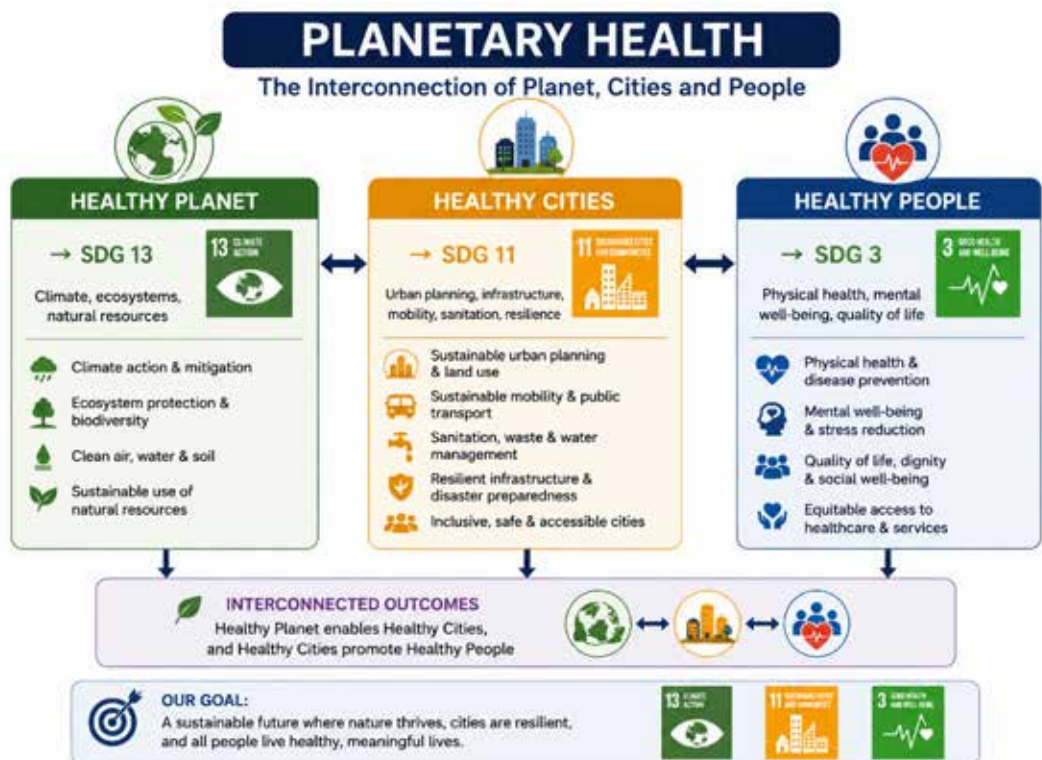
Table 1: Comparison of smart cities

City	Major Strength	Sustainability Focus
Indore	Waste management	Cleanliness, circular economy, governance
Surat	Transport & resilience	Smart infrastructure, disaster management
Mysuru	Heritage & sanitation	Liveability and tourism
Pune	Innovation	Mobility, citizen participation
Auroville	Ecological living	Renewable energy, sustainable communities

We can say Indore is the best example because it integrates environmental management, citizen engagement, and effective urban governance whereas **Surat** is the best example of sustainable transport and urban resilience to show a broader understanding of sustainable urbanisation.

Sustainable Development Goals

The trio of SDGs **3, 11 and 13** connect human well-being, sustainable cities, and climate resilience.

**Fig. 4: Planetary Health through the lens of SDGs**

SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-being: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages. Urbanisation directly affects physical and mental health through air pollution, water quality, sanitation, housing, mobility, noise, green spaces, healthcare access and social connectedness. Sustainable cities should therefore be designed as **healthy environments**, not merely efficient infrastructure systems.

SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. This is the **core SDG** for your paper. It encompasses sustainable urban planning, affordable housing, public transport, waste management, green/public spaces, heritage protection, disaster resilience and participatory urban governance.

SDG 13 – Climate Action: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts. Urban areas are major contributors to emissions but are also highly vulnerable to heatwaves, flooding, water stress and extreme weather. Sustainable urbanisation must incorporate climate mitigation, adaptation, renewable energy, nature-based solutions and climate-resilient infrastructure.

In the nutshell SDGs 11, 13 and 3 or Sustainable Urbanisation + Climate Resilience + Human Health & Well-being leads to Healthy, Inclusive and Resilient Cities



Fig. 5: Interplay of Sustainable Urbanisation

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a systematic review of contemporary literature published between 2015 and 2026, complemented by comparative case studies of Indian cities, including Indore, Surat, and Pune. The review analyses sustainable urban planning practices related to green infrastructure, sustainable mobility, waste management, renewable energy, affordable housing, digital governance, and public health. The selected case studies illustrate how integrated planning, community participation, and evidence-based governance contribute to healthier urban environments while supporting economic productivity and social inclusion.

A Systematic Literature Review was done taking into consideration many smart cities of the world. Among Indian cities with sustainable urbanisation, three model cities were especially focussed upon - (Indore, Surat, Pune). The detailed comparison is given below:

Table 2: Comparative Case Studies

Dimension	Indore	Surat	Pune
Primary sustainability strength	Waste management & sanitation	Urban mobility & climate resilience	Sustainable mobility & liveability
SDG 3 – Health & Well-being	Cleaner surroundings, sanitation, waste reduction and improved urban hygiene contribute to healthier living conditions.	Public transport, sanitation, green spaces and improved urban services support public health.	Focus on walking, cycling, public transport and healthier streets can reduce pollution and improve active mobility.
SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities	Strong municipal service delivery, source segregation, waste processing and citizen participation. Indore's municipal corporation reports nearly 100% segregated door-to-door collection and multiple processing facilities.	Integrated urban planning and transport; BRTS is designed to connect public and non-motorised transport with land use. (Surat Municipal Corporation)	Metro expansion, public transport, cycling infrastructure and integrated land-use-mobility planning. (PMRDA)
SDG 13 – Climate Action	Waste-to-resource practices, urban greening and cleaner public transport contribute to lower environmental impact.	Particularly strong potential through electric buses, with the municipal corporation reporting substantial fuel and GHG savings from its electric-bus fleet. (Surat Municipal Corporation)	Climate action increasingly linked to sustainable transport, non-motorised mobility and reduction of vehicle dependence.

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Dimension	Indore	Surat	Pune
Circular economy	Very strong – segregation, composting, bio methanation, material recovery and scientific waste processing.	Moderate-strong – integrated waste management alongside broader resource-efficiency initiatives.	Moderate – growing emphasis on resource efficiency and climate-oriented urban planning.
Sustainable mobility	Improving through electric and CNG buses. (Press Information Bureau)	Very strong – BRTS + electric buses + multimodal integration. (Surat Municipal Corporation)	Very strong – Metro + cycling + walking + public transport integration. (PMRDA)
Citizen participation	Very strong – citizen behaviour and participation are central to its waste-management model. (IMC Indore)	Strong emphasis on people-centred urban services and participation. (Surat Municipal Corporation)	Participatory and community-oriented mobility and neighbourhood initiatives.
Resilience orientation	Sanitation, waste, water management and urban service resilience.	Particularly strong – infrastructure and mobility planning have evolved alongside the city's rapid growth and environmental risks.	Increasingly climate-focused through climate action planning and resilient mobility infrastructure.
Distinctive lesson	Behaviour + governance can transform urban cleanliness and resource management.	Economic growth can be combined with large-scale sustainable mobility and urban infrastructure.	A knowledge/IT city can transition toward integrated, low-carbon and active mobility.
Best conceptual fit	Resource Efficiency / Circular Economy	Resilient Urbanisation	Healthy & Low-carbon Mobility

Integrated Planetary Health Model

The HARMONY Model for Sustainable Urbanisation

H – Healthy Communities

A – Adaptive Governance

R – Resource Efficiency

M – Mobility & Green Infrastructure

O – Opportunities for Inclusive Growth

N – Nature-Positive Development

Y – Youth and Community Participation

The study adopted a systematic review of interdisciplinary literature supported by comparative case insights from Indian cities, including Indore, Surat, and Pune, to examine sustainable urban practices related to green infrastructure, waste management, sustainable mobility, renewable energy, inclusive public spaces, and participatory governance. The analysis demonstrates that cities adopting integrated planning, nature-based solutions, and active citizen engagement are better positioned to enhance public health, strengthen climate resilience, and promote inclusive economic development.

Anchored in the principles of Planetary Health and aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and SDG 13 (Climate Action), the paper argues that sustainable urbanisation should be understood as a multidimensional process that harmonizes ecological integrity, economic vitality, and social equity. Building on the synthesis of existing evidence, the paper proposes the HARMONY Framework comprising Healthy Communities, Adaptive Governance, Resource Efficiency, Mobility and Green Infrastructure, Opportunities for Inclusive Growth, Nature-Positive Development, and Youth and Community Participation - as an integrative model for fostering resilient and inclusive cities. The study contributes to the emerging discourse on urban planetary health by offering a holistic framework to guide policymakers, urban planners, and researchers in designing cities that support both human flourishing and environmental sustainability.

CONCLUSION

The paper concludes that sustainable urbanisation extends beyond infrastructure development; it requires creating cities that are environmentally responsible, socially inclusive, economically vibrant, and conducive to human well-being. Achieving this balance is essential for fostering resilient urban ecosystems capable of supporting present and future generations. The study offers practical insights for policymakers, planners and researchers seeking pathways toward inclusive and sustainable urban futures.

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