



Aspen Institute | Germany

Future Cities Go Glocal

Social Justice and Social Participation

social justice urban infrastructure digitalization affordable housing climate resilience social participation public transport gender equity decentralization knowledge exchange accessibility migration integration youth engagement human dignity inequality data protection urban planning community cohesion skills development environmental justice housing affordability social mobility clean energy water access disability inclusion participatory governance labor markets digital literacy entrepreneurship spatial segregation sanitation city diplomacy intercontinental

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Policy
Recommendations

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

Future Cities Go Glocal is a project by the Aspen Institute Germany that aims to promote exchange between city stakeholders from Berlin, New Delhi, Nairobi, and Mexico City to share best practices, create new networks, and develop policy recommendations for sustainable and inclusive urban development. Urban spaces all over the world face partly similar challenges, and closer cooperation at the city level is needed to provide joint leadership and solutions for issues such as climate change, energy security, migration, social justice, and inadequate infrastructure. By bringing together experts from four different countries, the project directly addresses these challenges. It invests in intercontinental exchange at the local level and, in doing so, strengthens city diplomacy by positioning cities as global actors with distinct local perspectives while fostering knowledge exchange and practical cooperation. This is particularly significant at a time when dialogue and coordinated action at the national level are becoming increasingly constrained.

In its second project year, the project convened 20 participants from Mexico, India, Kenya, and Germany to address the topic of social justice and social participation. Between November 2025 and June 2026, the second cohort met in over 15 virtual workshops as well as during a five-day delegation visit to Berlin. The study trip, held between February 24th and 28th 2026, conducted site visits to see best practices

and solutions, engage with policy makers and explore opportunities for reform.

This included a reception at the Berlin Senate Chancellery, an exchange at the Berlin House of Representatives, as well as a meeting with the Committee on Housing, Urban Development, Building and Local Government of the German Bundestag. Further practical insights were provided by a visit to Housing First Berlin, the Berlin-Brandenburg Public Transport Authority (VBB), La Red Berlin, CityLAB Berlin, and initiatives such as Be an Angel e.V. Throughout the online and offline program, participants deepened their understanding of some of the most pressing demands of socially just cities and equal participation in current urban contexts: gender equity, accessibility, education, healthcare, housing, political participation, and meaningful engagement in social life.

In addition to a general exchange of practical experiences, the project also seeks to influence the broader policy conversation at a local and digital level. As such, the group developed policy recommendations, generating new ideas and practical solutions for building more just, inclusive and resilient urban societies. The ensuing consensus of recommendations reflects the diverse personal experiences, expertise, ideas, and opinions of each participant in the group. The project is supported by the Stiftung Deutsche Klassenlotterie Berlin.

PREAMBLE

Urban spaces shape the everyday lives of countless people: In 2025, around 45 percent of the world's population lived in cities, 36 percent in towns, and 19 percent in rural areas.¹ Looking ahead, most of the world's population growth is expected to take place in urban areas, with cities projected to account for around two thirds of global population growth by 2050, while most of the remaining growth will occur in towns.² As urbanized populations grow, so does the diversity of lived realities within shared urban space. Yet, urban environments often fail to reflect these diverse needs.

The rapidly changing nature of cities and the wide range of competing needs often make it difficult for decision makers to meet the interests of every group equally. However, urban spaces can also serve as fertile ground for innovation and creative problem solving. They offer opportunities to test, refine, and eventually transfer or scale new projects, concepts, and policies. Yet, cities often do not receive the recognition or capacities needed to address the many intertwined challenges faced by actors across multiple disciplines, from urban planners and architects to elected politicians, NGOs, citizen initiatives, scientists, and city administrations. This makes it essential to approach urban development as a holistic process, guided by strong coordination and interdisciplinary collaboration

across sectoral, cultural and geographic boundaries.

Against this background, questions of social cohesion, participation, and justice have become increasingly urgent and deeply intertwined in urban societies. Growing income inequality, discrimination, low social mobility, corruption, and declining trust place mounting pressure on the foundations of open and inclusive communities, fueling polarization and weakening democratic stability. These dynamics become especially visible in cities, where unequal access to affordable housing, mobility, public space, and public services often overlaps with spatial segregation and the concentration of disadvantage. Housing affordability continues to be one of the key urban challenges. Recent data from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs indicates that between 1.6 and three billion people are affected by different forms of inadequate housing, including 1.12 billion people living in informal settlements and slums. Meanwhile, across 124 countries, households spend an average of 31 percent of their income on housing, highlighting the significant financial burden associated with securing adequate housing.³ Access to urban infrastructure is similarly uneven. In 2023, only six out of ten urban residents worldwide had convenient access to public transport,

and only four out of ten could reach an open public space within a walking distance of 400 meters.⁴

Meaningful participation in urban governance remains limited as well. According to data published by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs in the Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025, only 19 percent of 152 cities across 50 countries demonstrated "a high level of direct civil society participation in urban planning and management". Whereas 35 percent fell into the low participation category, 18 percent into the medium participation category, and 29 percent reported very limited or no participation at all.⁵ This limited participation is also reflected in public perceptions. Across OECD countries, only 41 percent of respondents in 2023 considered it likely that they could effectively voice their opinions before a local government decision affecting their community. Among lower-educated respondents this share fell to 39 percent, compared with 47 percent among more highly educated respondents.⁶

At the same time, global crises such as climate change, armed conflict, migration, and far-reaching technological transformations are reshaping urban life and placing additional strain on social cohesion. Digitalization, in particular,

can expand access to information, education, and public services. However, it can also deepen existing inequalities through new forms of exclusion as well as unequal visibility and voice in the digital sphere. In 2024, 2.6 billion people were still offline worldwide, and only 65 percent of women with access used the internet compared with 70 percent of men.⁷ As urban populations continue to grow and diversify, cities face the challenge not only of distributing opportunities more fairly, but also of creating credible conditions for meaningful participation in social, economic and democratic life.

In this context, cooperation between cities is gaining strategic importance. As political coordination at the national level faces growing constraints, cities are increasingly emerging as diplomatic actors in their own right, able to translate shared urban challenges into durable forms of cooperation and collective problem solving. The recommendations developed in this project therefore also speak to the value of city diplomacy and long-term urban partnerships.

The project was guided by the overarching concept of social justice, understood as the principle that all people should have equal rights, opportunities, and fair treatment regardless of factors such as

¹ Following the United Nations report "World Urbanization Prospects 2025: Summary of Results" (2025), "cities" are densely populated areas with at least 50,000 inhabitants and a density of at least 1,500 inhabitants per km², while "towns" are population clusters of at least 5,000 inhabitants and a density of at least 300 inhabitants per km². "Rural areas" comprise areas with a population density below 300 inhabitants per km², as well as denser areas that are not classified as cities, towns, or semi-dense areas.

² United Nations, World Urbanization Prospects 2025: Summary of Results, World Urbanization Prospects 2025, United Nations, 2025, p.5, <https://population.un.org/wup/> (accessed April 19, 2026).

³ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025, New York: United Nations, 2025, p. 30, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2025/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2025.pdf> (accessed April 19, 2026).

⁴ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025, New York: United Nations, 2025, p. 30, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2025/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2025.pdf> (accessed April 19, 2026).

⁵ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025, New York: United Nations, 2025, p. 31, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2025/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2025.pdf> (accessed April 19, 2026).

⁶ OECD, OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions – 2024 Results: Building Trust in a Complex Policy Environment, OECD Publishing, 2024, p. 53, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9a20554b-en> (accessed April 19, 2026).

⁷ International Telecommunication Union (ITU), Facts and Figures 2024, ITU, 2024, <https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/facts-figures-2024/> (accessed April 19, 2026).

race, economic status, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or ability, and emphasizing human dignity, equality, solidarity, and equal access to resources, participation, and opportunities.^{8,9} The second Future Cities Go Glocal cohort has identified three key target areas around social justice and social participation that require immediate and strategic action: 1. Inclusive Urban Infrastructure; 2. Education, Skills, and Economic Mobility; 3. Social Integration and Urban Democracy.

Following the discussion in the cohort, the group decided to cluster the three subtopics based on the analytical framework of policy fields. While these areas are presented as distinct fields of action, they are closely interconnected and continuously shape one another. It is therefore essential to consider them not in isolation, but as part of a broader, and interdependent framework. At the same time, a number of cross-cutting issues run through all three areas, giving rise to both substantial challenges and important opportunities for progress.

Artificial intelligence and digitalization are increasingly shaping urban governance, public services, and opportunities for participation. Digital tools can improve access to information, strengthen communication between institutions and residents, and support more responsive and data-informed decision making. They can also help identify needs earlier, reduce administrative barriers, and make urban systems more

accessible and efficient. At the same time, digital transformation can deepen existing inequalities where access to digital infrastructure, digital literacy, and institutional responsiveness is uneven. Algorithmic bias, exclusionary design, unequal visibility, and concerns around data protection and surveillance can reinforce patterns of marginalization rather than reduce them. Beyond these structural issues, the deliberately addictive design of many digital platforms disproportionately affects vulnerable groups, deepening existing inequalities.¹⁰ The use of artificial intelligence and digital tools in urban contexts must therefore be guided by transparency, accountability, accessibility, and strong safeguards for privacy and non-discrimination. Digital innovation should not replace political judgment or human responsibility but instead support more inclusive and equitable forms of urban planning and participation.

Inclusivity is a core condition for socially just and participatory cities. In the context of this publication, the concept of inclusivity is understood in line with the definition proposed by the United Nations in the Report of the World Summit for Social Development (1995)¹¹ and refers to the creation of urban societies in which all people are able to take part in social, economic, political and cultural life on equal terms, regardless of gender, class, economic background, disability, age, race, origin, religion, migration history, language, or family model. For the

cohort, inclusive urban development means more than formal access. It requires that institutions, public spaces, services, and participation formats are designed in ways that recognize different lived realities and reduce structural barriers to belonging and engagement. This includes the perspectives of persons with disabilities, migrants and refugees, economically disadvantaged communities, and groups exposed to racism, gender-based discrimination, or other forms of exclusion. Inclusive cities treat diversity as a social reality that must be reflected in planning, representation, and decision making. Without such an understanding of inclusivity, efforts to strengthen participation risk remaining selective and reproducing existing inequalities.

Ecosystems, Climate Resilience, and Climate Justice are fundamentally connected to social justice and social participation in cities. Climate change, the widespread loss of biodiversity, rising temperatures, environmental degradation, and unsustainable patterns of resource use increasingly shape urban life and carry serious social and economic consequences. Cities account for 80 percent of global energy consumption, 50 percent of solid and liquid waste production, and 70 percent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions.¹² At the same time, about 19 percent of the urban population still do not have access to safely managed water and 35 percent

still lack sanitation services.¹³ Urban energy systems also continue to rely heavily on fossil fuels, further contributing to global warming, while access to affordable, sustainable and reliable energy remains uneven. Questions of water access, energy access, and climate-adapted living conditions must therefore be considered together. This includes whether people can afford and access adequately climate-controlled homes, workplaces, and public facilities during periods of extreme temperatures. These pressures are not experienced equally. Women and marginalized groups in particular often face unequal access to resources, economic participation, and decision-making, while climate-related and environmental pressures further reinforce these inequalities, limit their ability to shape urban development, and leave them more exposed to environmental and economic shocks.¹⁴ Addressing climate resilience in cities therefore also means addressing justice, inclusion, and participation.

Continuous monitoring and evaluation are essential for ensuring that inclusivity and participation move beyond aspiration and become measurable in practice. Policies and interventions may appear successful on paper while failing to reach those who face the greatest barriers in everyday urban life. Monitoring helps assess not only whether measures are implemented, but also whom they reach, exclude, and why. It enables

⁸ UN News, "World Social Summit 2025: A Chance to Put People First," in: UN News, February 10, 2025, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/02/1160301> (accessed May 11, 2026).

⁹ United Nations General Assembly, Promoting Social Integration through Social Inclusion, Resolution 78/177, December 19, 2023, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4037768> (accessed May 11, 2026).

¹⁰ European Parliament, Report on the Implementation of the UNESCO Convention on the Diversity of Cultural Expressions in the EU's External Action: Explanatory Statement, October 27, 2023, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2023-0340_EN.html (accessed May 8, 2026).

¹¹ United Nations, Report of the World Summit for Social Development, Copenhagen, 6–12 March 1995, A/CONF.166/9 (New York: United Nations, 1995), chap. I, annex II, para. 66.

¹² International Union for Conservation of Nature, Cities and Nature, Issues Brief, October 2023, <https://iucn.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/iucn-issues-brief-cities-and-nature-final-2.pdf> (accessed February 12, 2025).

¹³ Joint Monitoring Programme, Progress on Household, Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene 2000–2022. Special Focus on Gender, United Nations Children's Fund and World Health Organization, 2023.

¹⁴ Encompass HK, How Marginalised Groups Are Disproportionately Affected by Climate Change, Earth.Org, <https://earth.org/marginalised-groups-are-disproportionately-affected-by-climate-change/> (accessed February 13, 2025); United Nations Development Programme, Getting Women Involved in Managing Cities. SDG Local Action, <https://sdglocalaction.org/women-managing-cities/> (accessed February 17, 2025).

an assessment of whether participation formats are accessible, whether services are used equally across different groups, and whether urban policies are reducing or reinforcing disparities over time. This requires both quantitative and qualitative approaches, incorporating disaggregated data, community feedback, and attention to lived experiences. Used well, monitoring and evaluation strengthen accountability, reveal blind spots, and allow institutions to adapt measures where necessary. In this sense, they are not merely technical instruments, but a vital part of democratic and socially just urban governance.

Berlin, Nairobi, New Delhi, and Mexico City stand out as fast-growing urban areas with many shared challenges. Growing income inequality, lack of integration, discrimination, and low social mobility threaten the foundations of open and inclusive communities. The growing role of digitalization offers both opportunities and risks, influencing urban planning, accessibility and resource management. The cities' rich diversity drives innovation but also increases complexity, further influencing their responses to

the challenges of the 21st century. Despite their different economic and geographical circumstances, all four cities present fertile testing grounds for new ideas and solutions for the city of tomorrow.

These challenges, though daunting, are not insurmountable. To guide city policy makers confronting challenges related to social justice and social participation, the urban actors engaged in this project have formulated recommendations that recognize the influence of these cross-cutting issues. These recommendations aim to provide urban stakeholders with actionable strategies and tools to address complex urban challenges and build cities that are not only functional and resilient, but also democratic, inclusive, just, and future-oriented. These recommendations can serve as starting points for new solutions and should be adopted, taking into account local, cultural and political circumstances. Through collaboration and innovative solutions, the project envisions cities as global leaders in shaping a more equitable and sustainable future.



INCLUSIVE URBAN INFRASTRUCTURE

Inclusive urban infrastructure is a central condition for social justice and social participation in cities. It determines whether people can meaningfully access the spaces, services, and opportunities that urban life depends on, from housing and mobility to education, healthcare, care services, and economic participation. Beyond resource access, it also shapes whether residents can move safely through the city and engage fully in social and democratic life. As cities grow and face increasing environmental, social and financial pressure, the question is not only whether infrastructure exists, but who can access it, under what conditions, and whose needs are reflected in its design. Infrastructure gaps can deepen existing inequalities and turn basic access to the city into a daily challenge.

These dynamics become evident particularly in public spaces, where accessibility, safety, and usability shape the extent to which urban infrastructure enables participation in everyday life. Public spaces shape social cohesion,¹⁵ but access remains highly uneven: globally, only 40 percent of urban residents can reach an open public space within a

convenient walking distance of 400 meters, a figure that drops below 30 percent in the least developed countries.¹⁶ For women and other marginalized groups, access is shaped not only by distance or formal availability, but also by whether spaces are experienced as safe. Data from OECD countries indicates that nearly one in three women report feeling unsafe walking alone at night in their neighborhoods, compared to one in five men.¹⁷ These figures show that safety is a structural requirement for equal access to the city.

The same logic applies to accessibility. For the 16 percent of the global population living with disabilities, the built environment often functions as a barrier rather than an enabler of independence.¹⁸ Accessibility gaps remain significant. Globally, as of 2022, only 57 percent of buildings, 52 percent of playgrounds, and 51 percent of museums were wheelchair-accessible.¹⁹ Mobility and accessibility determine whether residents can reach the services, opportunities, and spaces that make urban life possible. Many urban areas remain designed around private car use, limiting access for residents whose needs were



¹⁵ UN-Habitat, Global Public Space Toolkit: From Global Principles to Local Policies and Practice, Nairobi: United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 2015, pp. 4, 127, <https://unhabitat.org> (accessed May 4, 2026).

¹⁶ United Nations Statistics Division, Sustainable Cities and Communities, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2024/Goal-11/> (accessed May 27, 2026).

¹⁷ OECD, Society at a Glance 2024: OECD Social Indicators, Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024, 114, <https://doi.org/10.1787/918d8db3-en> (accessed May 4, 2026).

¹⁸ Mikaela Patrick, Annamae Muldowney, Shivani Gupta, and Iain McKinnon, Inclusive Infrastructure and Cities: A Global Comparison Report, Global Disability Innovation Hub, 2024, p. 10, https://cdn.disabilityinnovation.com/uploads/images/Global-Comparison-Report-_compressed-1.pdf?v=1741160423 (accessed May 4, 2026).

¹⁹ International Disability Alliance, "Accessibility Is Not Just about Disability": Inclusive Infrastructure in Focus at GDS 2025, April 2025, <https://www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org/blog/%E2%80%999Caccessibility-not-just-about-disability%E2%80%99D-inclusive-infrastructure-focus-gds-2025> (accessed May 4, 2026).

not considered in the design of streets, stations, public buildings, and last-mile connections. Inclusive design is therefore a condition for civic rights and social participation.²⁰

Similar patterns of exclusion are evident in access to housing and basic services, highlighting how infrastructure deficits can reinforce broader social inequalities. At present, roughly 100 million people are without shelter, while around 25 percent of the global population live in conditions that endanger their health, safety, and wellbeing.²¹ Adequate housing is a foundation for access to education, employment, healthcare, public services, and community life. In the UNECE region alone, at least 100 million low- and middle-income people are housing cost overburdened, spending more than 40 percent of their disposable income on housing.²² Rising rents, low housing quality, rapid urbanization, the financialization of housing, migration, climate change, and demographic change continue to intensify these pressures,²³ especially for vulnerable and low-income groups.²⁴

These inequalities are increasingly shaped not only by physical infrastructure deficits, but also by the administrative and digital systems through which urban services are accessed and governed. Administrative and digital access are central to inclusive urban infrastruc-

ture. As cities rely more heavily on digital platforms, data systems, and online procedures to manage services, access to information becomes closely linked to access to the city itself. Digital tools can improve transparency, coordination, and identification of infrastructure gaps. However, they can also create new barriers when platforms are difficult to use, data is fragmented, information is not available in accessible formats, or residents lack the digital connectivity, documentation, or institutional trust needed to navigate public systems. Inclusive urban infrastructure therefore depends not only on physical investment, but also on administrative capacity, secure and interoperable data, and clear institutional responsibilities that improve access to public services.

At the same time, the inclusiveness of urban infrastructure is shaped by environmental conditions, which influence whether cities remain healthy, safe and accessible places to live. As of 2022, 19 percent of urban populations worldwide lacked access to safely managed water services,²⁵ while 97 percent of cities in low- and middle-income countries exceed safe pollution levels, contributing to an estimated 7 million premature deaths each year.²⁶ Clean air, potable water, sanitation, green spaces, and safe public environments are basic conditions for physical and mental wellbeing, but they are often least available in

neighborhoods already facing social and economic disadvantage. Urban environmental management must therefore be understood as inseparable from justice and inclusion, because where environmental burdens and weak infrastructure overlap, public space becomes less accessible, health risks increase, and the ability of residents to respond to urban change is unevenly distributed.

In the context of this publication, inclusive urban infrastructure refers to the physical, social, digital, and administrative systems that allow all residents to take part in urban life safely, affordably, and with dignity. This includes streets, parks, public transport, housing, community facilities, digital platforms, and basic services, but also the governance structures through which these systems are planned and managed. Inclusive infrastructure must therefore respond to

different patterns of need and use, including those of women, children, older persons, persons with disabilities, migrants, low-income residents, and communities facing social or spatial exclusion. The recommendations developed in this field aim to strengthen the ability of cities to assess existing gaps, improve access to essential services, and plan infrastructure in ways that reflect everyday experiences more accurately.

²⁰ Patrick et al., *Inclusive Infrastructure and Cities*, pp. 10, 23.

²¹ United Nations Human Settlements Programme, *Housing*, <https://unhabitat.org/topic/housing> (accessed May 4, 2026).

²² United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, United Nations Human Settlements Programme, and Housing Europe, *#Housing2030: Effective Policies for Affordable Housing in the UNECE Region*, Geneva: United Nations, 2021, https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021/12/housing2030_study_e_web_1.pdf (accessed May 4, 2026).

²³ United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, United Nations Human Settlements Programme, and Housing Europe, *#Housing2030: Effective Policies for Affordable Housing in the UNECE Region*, Geneva: United Nations, 2021, https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021/12/housing2030_study_e_web_1.pdf (accessed May 4, 2026).

²⁴ United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, United Nations Human Settlements Programme, and Housing Europe, *#Housing2030: Effective Policies for Affordable Housing in the UNECE Region*, Geneva: United Nations, 2021, https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021/12/housing2030_study_e_web_1.pdf (accessed May 4, 2026).

²⁵ Statista, *Drinking Water Coverage of Urban and Rural Populations Worldwide in 2022*, by Water Source, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/278660/drinking-water-coverage-in-urban-and-rural-regions-worldwide/> (accessed May 4, 2026).

²⁶ World Bank Group, *Pollution*, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/pollution> (accessed May 4, 2026); The Clean Air Fund, *Cities and Air Pollution*, <https://www.cleanairfund.org/theme/cities/> (accessed May 4, 2026).





INCLUSIVE URBAN INFRASTRUCTURE

LOCAL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Urban local bodies should conduct regular safety, inclusivity and accessibility audits of infrastructure and social usage of public spaces – streets, parks, transit steps, markets etc. – and make the results publicly available.

Action Points:

- ▶ Within a three-year period, local and regional governments should assign administrative units responsible for public infrastructure, for example planning and construction authorities, to conduct the audits on a regular basis, based on previously defined and periodically reviewed criteria aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, in collaboration with third-party or independent auditors and representatives from civil society and socially disadvantaged groups.
- ▶ As part of the audit process, local planning bodies should conduct an annual survey among citizens to appraise the current status of public spaces, capture the perception of inhabitants, and collect civic data, in addition to analyzing existing data (e.g. remote sensing), and publish the results as open data on an accessible platform/website.

2. In the short to medium term,²⁷ urban local bodies should plan and implement neighborhood-level essential care facilities, considering the perspectives and needs of children, women, elderly people, and people with disabilities, drawing inspiration from experiences with care blocks.

Action Points:

- ▶ Within three years, social bodies in each city, in collaboration with civil society organizations, should establish or, where already existing, expand community centers and/or networks with a focus on childcare facilities, but also on affordable sports, cultural and food offers for families, vulnerable groups, and especially women, enabling them to access employment while ensuring their children are getting educated in a safe environment.
- ▶ Within two years, the Secretary of Social Development or Welfare (or equivalent function) in each city should define and map neighborhood-level essential care needs and identify existing community centers that can be upgraded or transformed into neighborhood-level essential care facilities and provide training for the existing workforce on inclusivity principles.

²⁷ For the purposes of this paper, “short term” refers to up to approximately 1–2 years, “medium term” to approximately 3–5 years, and “long term” to developments expected from around 5–10 years onward.

DIGITAL POLICY RECOMMENDATION

3. In the short term, to enable better urban planning and social innovation, urban local bodies should develop open, interoperable digital platforms, enabling secure sharing of non-personal, disaggregated data across key sectors (such as the environment, streets, and public spaces) and basic services (such as health, housing, and transport), while ensuring citizen data is protected.

Action Points:

- ▶ Within one year, each city’s Chief Digital Officer and its administration (or equivalent body), in collaboration with selected institutions and national government agencies, should set up pilot projects to develop a digital platform including Data-Governance-Guidelines, while partnering with local and regional start-ups and accelerators to establish “Data Labs” as pilot sites, alongside the organization of joint hackathons to test and further refine the platform.
- ▶ Within six months, every department of city government (such as the departments for environment, streets, public spaces, health, housing, and transport) should assign a data officer to collect and collate data and coordinate the development of the platform housed/managed by the city’s Commissioner/Mayor/Executive.

INTERNATIONAL POLICY RECOMMENDATION

In the short term, the city governments of Berlin, Nairobi, New Delhi, and Mexico City, should set up a board composed of city government representatives and other relevant stakeholders from all four cities to develop a joint program on community led urban accessibility and transport innovation that facilitates cross-city exchange and policy learning with the medium to long term goal to leverage funding for public and private accessibility pilot projects on the local level.





EDUCATION, SKILLS, AND ECONOMIC MOBILITY

Education, skills development, and economic mobility are central conditions for social justice and social participation in cities. They are closely connected: education enables residents to acquire skills, skills shape access to labor markets and decent work, and economic mobility determines whether people can improve their social and economic position over time. This is particularly important in urban contexts, as cities account for more than 70 percent of global GDP²⁸ and concentrate employment, services, knowledge, innovation, and educational opportunities.²⁹ Yet the opportunities generated in cities are not automatically accessible to all residents. Poverty, discrimination, insecure legal status, low educational attainment, language barriers, disability, and spatial segregation can all limit access to education, training, networks, and labor markets. Where access to education, skills, networks, and decent work is uneven, cities can reinforce disadvantage across generations and neighborhoods.³⁰

Economic mobility is particularly important for social justice and social participation because it forms a central component of broader social mobility. It concerns whether people are able to improve

their economic position and convert education, skills, and work into more secure life chances, while social mobility more broadly describes the possibility of moving between social or economic positions over time.³¹ As such, social mobility is not only an economic concept, but also a measure of how credibly a society provides equal opportunity. Where social mobility is limited, life chances are more strongly shaped by circumstances of birth, including family background, neighborhood, education, gender, migration history, race, disability, or access to social protection. This weakens social cohesion, undermines trust, and reinforces perceptions that social and economic systems are closed to certain groups.³²

The barriers to social mobility are therefore not only individual, but structural. Marginalized groups often face structural barriers that individual effort alone is rarely sufficient to overcome. For people with an immigration background, these may include language barriers, limited recognition of qualifications, unfamiliarity with education systems and labor markets, discrimination, or administrative obstacles.³³ More broadly, evidence on social mobility points to persistent barriers that influence whether people are able to

translate talent, effort, and aspiration into real opportunities.³⁴ For cities committed to social justice, this means that education, skills, and economic mobility must be addressed as interconnected foundations of equal participation.

Education is widely recognized as a key driver of reducing inequality, expanding opportunity, promoting gender equality, and strengthening inclusion, as reflected in Sustainable Development Goal 4, which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all.³⁵ In cities, education systems shape access not only to knowledge, but also to social networks, language acquisition, digital skills, civic participation, and future employment. The transition from education into work is another critical point at which urban inequality can either be reduced or reproduced. The ability of residents to acquire relevant skills and enter decent work determines whether cities can turn economic growth into broader social progress. This is also reflected in the global development agenda: Sustainable Development Goals 4, 8, and 9 emphasize quality education, decent work, economic growth, innovation and infrastructure as interconnected pillars of inclusive

and sustainable development.³⁶ However, progress toward decent work remains uneven. According to the Sustainable Development Goal 8 framework, improvements in unemployment reduction and financial inclusion have been weakened by the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing structural challenges. Productivity growth, employment gains, and labor protections have slowed or partially reversed, with particularly severe effects for vulnerable groups and lower-income countries.³⁷ Access to decent work is central to social justice because labor income remains the main source of income for most households. Employment therefore strongly influences living standards, individual security, and the ability to participate in social life. Productive employment, fair working conditions, and social protection can reduce inequality and strengthen inclusion, while precarious, informal, unsafe or poorly paid work can trap people in cycles of insecurity.³⁸

At the same time, economic mobility increasingly depends on whether residents can participate in digital and technological transformation. Digitalization can expand access to information, education, public services, entrepreneurship, and new forms of employment. It can also

²⁸ United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), Urban Economy, <https://unhabitat.org/economy> (accessed May 8, 2026).

²⁹ Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Inclusive Growth in Cities, <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/inclusive-growth-in-cities.html> (accessed May 8, 2026).

³⁰ OECD, 2026.

³¹ Britannica, Social Mobility, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-mobility> (accessed May 8, 2026).

³² Council of Europe (CoE), Draft Report on Fostering Social Mobility as a Contribution to Social Cohesion, European Committee of Social Cohesion, CDCS (2011) 4, February 3, 2011.

³³ Deutschlandfunk, "Bildungsmonitor 2024: Sprachkompetenz und Eltern Sind der Schlüssel," in: Deutschlandfunk, 2024, <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/migration-schueler-integration-bildung-sprachkenntnisse-100.html> (accessed May 8, 2026).

³⁴ OECD, A Broken Social Elevator? How to Promote Social Mobility, OECD Publishing, June 18, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264301085-en> (accessed May 8, 2026).

³⁵ United Nations (UN), Goal 4: Quality Education, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4> (accessed May 8, 2026).

³⁶ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), The Sustainable Development Goals, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals> (accessed May 8, 2026).

³⁷ UN DESA, Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal8#progress_and_info (accessed May 8, 2026).

³⁸ International Labour Organization (ILO), International Labour Organization, <https://share.google/fCLvvxi8vUI8zO7C0> (accessed May 8, 2026).

support innovation and help cities respond more effectively to changing labor market needs. On the other hand, unequal access to digital infrastructure, digital skills, and institutional support can deepen existing inequalities. As economies shift toward AI-driven production and innovation, disparities in connectivity, education, and skills risk reinforcing socioeconomic divides and leaving less advantaged communities further behind.³⁹ Digital exclusion is therefore not only a technical issue, but a question of social justice and economic participation. If digital transformation is not accompanied by accessible training, inclusive design, affordable connectivity, and fair labor market institutions, it may expand opportunities for some while creating new barriers for others. This is especially important in urban contexts, where digital systems in-

creasingly shape access to education, employment services, administrative procedures, business opportunities, and public information. Residents who lack digital literacy, stable internet access, documentation, language support, or trust in institutions may face difficulties using services that are formally available but practically inaccessible. Innovation and entrepreneurship can contribute to inclusive local economic development when embedded in supportive ecosystems that reach beyond already privileged groups. Cities therefore need approaches that connect education, vocational training, digital literacy, entrepreneurship support, and decent work strategies in ways that reflect different lived realities and reduce structural barriers to participation.

³⁹ UN, Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 2015, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4061662> (accessed May 8, 2026).





EDUCATION, SKILLS, AND ECONOMIC MOBILITY

LOCAL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. In the short term, urban local bodies should establish one-stop centers to simplify business processes (integrating registration, licenses, permits, payments, and grievance redressals) through physical offices that provide personal one-to-one support as well as digital communication.

Action Points:

- ▶ Within one year, urban local bodies, in cooperation with the economic departments (or equivalent), the chambers of commerce, and the local authorities responsible for business services and regulation, should conduct a user needs assessment and a mapping exercise of all existing business-facing processes across the city administration (registration, licensing, permits, payments, and grievance redressal) to identify which departments are involved, what the current touchpoints are, and where the key bottlenecks lie, before any center is designed.
- ▶ Within one year, urban local bodies, in cooperation with the economic (development) department (or equivalent), the chambers of commerce and the local authorities responsible for business services and regulation, should design and implement a physical and centrally located low-cost pilot with limited services, integrate existing departments or offices offering these services into the one-stop centers' functions, and expand it in the following five years based on the lessons learned.

2. In the short to medium term, urban local bodies should promote a future skills and problem-solving mindset among learners (children, adolescents, and young adults) by establishing local innovation spaces that offer project-based learning programs and provide access to digital tools and mentorship through partnerships with schools and private actors.

Action Points:

- ▶ Within one year, the education department (or the department responsible for innovation and technology) of the city government should establish partnerships with schools, non-profits, and private initiatives through memoranda of understanding (or similar agreements) to provide venues and equipment to conduct the project-based learning programs.
- ▶ Within one to three years, the city's education and/or social/family/digitalization department, building on consultations with stakeholders, should develop a curriculum, identify suitable locations for local innovation spaces, and establish a framework to finalize partnerships.

DIGITAL POLICY RECOMMENDATION

3. In the short to medium term, urban local bodies should support cooperative projects of schools and civil society organizations which design and deliver digital literacy, safety and critical thinking programs for all primary education institutions to equip students with the tools and knowledge to navigate online spaces safely, provided as freely accessible online resources that schools can adopt voluntarily with guidance and support.

Action Points:

- ▶ Within one to two years, these digital literacy programs should be complemented through a common effort by school authorities, NGOs, media, and volunteers, providing intergenerational learning projects and courses in which teenagers teach and support elderly participants, to encourage practical engagement and reinforce safe, responsible use of online spaces.
- ▶ Within six months, the responsible government level (federal or state), with consultation of city governments as well as other stakeholders (police, schools, and cyber-crime units), should set up a project to design an online interactive learning program for schools to teach digital literacy and online safety to be rolled out nationally.

INTERNATIONAL POLICY RECOMMENDATION

In the short term, the city governments of Berlin, Nairobi, New Delhi, and Mexico City, together with NGOs, should launch a 24-hour online innovation hackathon for young entrepreneurs from different social backgrounds, focusing on expanding economic opportunity and social mobility for youth and young adults from vulnerable, underserved communities, supported by cross-sector experts and social media ambassadors, with winning teams receiving international visibility and privately funded rewards for project implementation.





SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND URBAN DEMOCRACY

Social integration can be understood as “individuals from diverse backgrounds and communities [coming] together to form cohesive social networks. This concept is significant as it fosters inclusion, mutual understanding, and collaboration. Effective social integration can enhance societal stability and contribute to the overall well-being of communities.”⁴⁰ In this publication, “social integration and urban democracy” is understood as the interplay between inclusive social relations and democratic urban governance. It encompasses key areas such as migration and integration, social participation, participatory governance, civil society engagement, trust in institutions, community cohesion, and digital inclusion as an essential dimension of equal access to information, participation, and public life in increasingly digital societies. Social cohesion enables cooperation, mutual support, and collective wellbeing by strengthening the sense of connection within communities. It underpins the social fabric that allows societies to withstand economic, political and social pressures.

Across all four countries, concerns about declining social cohesion are linked to increasing political polarization, weakening social ties, and widening inequalities. Addressing these challenges requires both a better understanding of the mechanisms and structural factors

that drive exclusion as well as action across all levels of society.⁴¹

At the local level, municipal governments play a key role in this effort due to their close connection to communities. They shape the spaces and institutions that foster social interaction, including volunteer initiatives, neighborhood networks, associations, and sports clubs. Their proximity to residents also provides a deeper understanding of local social dynamics and enables more effective responses to emerging challenges. As a result, urban governments often serve as the primary level at which measures to promote social cohesion are designed and implemented.

OECD evidence from more than 40 neighborhood initiatives shows that local cohesion policies respond to overlapping forms of disadvantage, including weak labor markets, low educational attainment, poverty, inadequate housing and infrastructure, spatial segregation, and social fragmentation. Policy responses include community grants, civic engagement programs, participatory initiatives, co-design processes, targeted social services, and investments in public space and community facilities. This highlights that local governments strengthen social integration not only through formal policy design, but also by enabling everyday infra-

structures of encounter, participation, and support within neighborhoods.⁴²

Against this background, ensuring that citizens have a meaningful voice in decisions that affect their lives is a key component of democratic governance. Inclusive participation improves the quality and legitimacy of policy-making. However, participation must be more than formal consultation: it requires accessible formats, transparent communication, feedback on how input is used, and evaluation of the process.⁴³

Yet, meaningful participation in urban governance remains limited. A 2024 survey of 152 cities across 50 countries found that only 19 percent of cities demonstrated strong civil society participation in urban planning and management, while 18 percent showed medium participation, 35 percent low participation, and 29 percent very limited or no participation.⁴⁴ This shows that participation structures often remain insufficiently institutionalized, particularly

where marginalized groups face barriers to information, representation, and decision making.

These participation gaps are closely connected to trust in political institutions. According to the 2024 OECD Trust Survey, 53 percent of respondents believe the political system does not sufficiently allow people to influence government decisions. The evidence shows a clear relationship between perceived influence, participation opportunities, and institutional trust: where people feel excluded from decision making, trust declines.⁴⁵ Across 30 countries, 44 percent of respondents report low or no trust in their national government, and many also express doubts about governments’ ability to address complex, long-term challenges. The largest trust gap exists between those who feel they have a say in government decisions and those who do not. Strengthening meaningful participation is therefore essential

⁴² Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Area-Based Initiatives to Transform Neighborhoods, February 2026, https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2026/02/area-based-initiatives-to-transform-neighbourhoods_1ab30ded/d85ef103-en.pdf (accessed May 11, 2026).

⁴³ Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), OECD Guidelines for Citizen Participation Processes, September 2022, https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2022/09/oecd-guidelines-for-citizen-participation-processes_63b34541/f765caf6-en.pdf (accessed May 11, 2026).

⁴⁴ United Nations, The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025: SDG 11.3.2, 2025, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2025/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2025.pdf> (accessed May 11, 2026).

⁴⁵ Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Exploring New Frontiers of Citizen Participation in the Policy Cycle, October 2024, <https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/about/programmes/reinforcing-democracy-initiative/Exploring-New-Frontiers-of-Citizen-Participation-Discussion-Paper.pdf> (accessed May 8, 2026).

⁴⁰ UNESCO, Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4, <https://www.unesco.org/uk/query-list/s/423400> (accessed May 8, 2026).

⁴¹ United Nations, Visions for an Inclusive Society, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2009, <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/compilation-brochure.pdf> (May 8, 2026).

for improving both democratic legitimacy and institutional resilience.⁴⁶

Digital transformation adds another dimension to social integration and urban democracy. Digital tools can expand access to information, enable new forms of civic engagement, and support participatory planning processes. At the same time, digital tools can reproduce inequalities where access to devices, internet connectivity, digital literacy, accessible design, language support, and institutional trust are unevenly distributed. In 2025, almost three quarters of the world's population were online, while 2.2 billion people still lack internet access, primarily in low- and middle-income countries.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Exploring New Frontiers of Citizen Participation in the Policy Cycle, October 2024, <https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/about/programmes/reinforcing-democracy-initiative/Exploring-New-Frontiers-of-Citizen-Participation-Discussion-Paper.pdf> (accessed May 8, 2026).

⁴⁷ International Telecommunication Union (ITU), Measuring Digital Development: Facts and Figures 2025, 2025, https://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-d/opb/ind/d-ind-ict_mdd-2025-3-pdf-e.pdf (accessed May 11, 2026).

The recommendations in this field therefore focus on strengthening the local conditions that enable meaningful civic engagement, institutional trust, and inclusive decision making. This includes reinforcing the physical, social and digital infrastructures through which residents can participate in shaping urban policies and democratic processes. In doing so, cities can strengthen not only social cohesion, but also the legitimacy and resilience of urban democracy.





SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND URBAN DEMOCRACY

LOCAL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. In the short to medium term, to improve social integration and democracy, urban local bodies should strengthen and diversify participatory tools to better include the experiences and needs of different stakeholder groups, in particular socially vulnerable groups.

Action Points:

- ▶ Within one to two years, city planning authorities should establish and finance a city-level social innovation lab, taking place every one to two months, with in-person workshops that convene stakeholders from the private, non-profit, academic and public sectors – alongside affected beneficiaries – to co-create, present, and prototype solutions to local social and ecological challenges, supported by dedicated municipal funding.
- ▶ Within one to five years, to better understand the specific needs of socially vulnerable groups and people with disabilities, each city's planning agencies should conduct user-experience research in partnership with third-party organizations such as non-profits or start-ups, hold empathy workshops, and organize interdisciplinary and intersectoral design-thinking workshops to translate these insights into urban planning decisions.

2. In the short term, urban local bodies should establish one-stop welcome hubs for immigrants, also accessible online, to support documentation processes and access to public services, while ensuring effective interdepartmental coordination across city administrations.

Action Points:

- ▶ Within two years, urban local bodies (in collaboration with NGOs and volunteers) should set up physical offices in central locations such as mobility hubs (airports, train, and bus stations) and develop complementary digital tools including a mobile app, a newsletter, and an AI-powered chatbot to provide accessible information and support for documentation processes and access to public services.
- ▶ Within two to three years, urban local bodies should issue a formal service charter committing to time-bound delivery of all services offered through the welcome hub, supported by visual journey maps, displayed at the hub and online with AI integration.

DIGITAL POLICY RECOMMENDATION

3. To ensure accountability, urban local bodies should establish a publicly accessible information platform that transparently shows how the municipal budget is being used and reports on key deliverables, with updates provided in a regular and timely manner.

Action Points:

- ▶ Within six months, the finance departments of city governments should (where not yet existing, not user-friendly, or not time-sensitive enough) develop a user-friendly standardized budget template, conduct trainings for the employees on how to collect and enter the data into the template, and collect the data from relevant departments who are implementing the schemes in a timely manner.
- ▶ Within one year, urban local treasuries should enhance transparency and citizen engagement in setting up a platform, which should include interactive budget visualizations and an AI-powered chatbot to answer questions about specific budget items, as well as organize an annual competition where citizens/citizen groups present how local funds are used, with prizes directed to benefit local community projects.

INTERNATIONAL POLICY RECOMMENDATION

On an annual basis, the city governments of Berlin, Nairobi, New Delhi, and Mexico City should organize a rotating online ideas marketplace, bringing together local authorities, civil society, community innovators, and academic institutions in a dynamic TED-style format to showcase bold and experimental approaches to social inclusion and urban democracy, while establishing a joint digital platform and public podcast series to facilitate continuous cross-city exchange, policy learning, and civic engagement.



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