

Towards Green Growth: Achieving Sustainability in Cities and Human Settlements

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Towards Green Growth: Achieving Sustainability in Cities and Human Settlements

Kariuki Muigua*

Abstract

This paper critically examines the need to achieve sustainability and human settlements. It argues that achieving sustainability in cities and human settlements is key in fostering green growth. The paper explores the idea of green growth and its benefits. Further, the paper suggests measures towards achieving sustainability in cities and human settlements for green growth.

1.0 Introduction

Achieving sustainability has become an urgent global concern in the wake of mounting problems facing the planet including environmental challenges such as climate change, pollution, and loss of biodiversity together with issues of poverty, increasing disparity between societies and the tensions brought by social inequalities¹. It has been noted that humanity is facing multiple interlinked environmental, social, economic and health challenges – the climate change crisis, pollution, biodiversity loss and the extinction of species, deforestation, land degradation, increased incidents of environmental disasters, widening gaps between rich and poor, backlash to women's rights, lack of decent jobs and new emerging zoonotic diseases². In light of these challenges, achieving sustainability has emerged as an ideal towards establishing harmony between humanity and nature³.

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¹ Giovannoni. E., & Fabietti. G., 'What Is Sustainability? A Review of the Concept and Its Applications.' In: Busco, C., Frigo, M., Riccaboni, A., Quattrone, P. (eds) Integrated Reporting. Springer, Cham. Available at https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02168-3_2 (Accessed on 03/07/2024)

² United Nations Development Programme., 'Triple Planetary Crisis' Available at https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2022-11/UNDP-Triple-Planetary-Crisis-Infographic_0.pdf (Accessed on 03/07/2024)

³ United Nations Environment Programme., 'The Triple Planetary Crisis: Forging a New Relationship Between People and the Earth' Available at <https://www.unep.org/news->

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The ideal of sustainability entails creating and maintaining the conditions under which humanity and nature can exist in productive harmony to support present and future generations⁴. This ideal has been embraced as the global vision for development under the Sustainable Development agenda. The concept of Sustainable Development aims to promote development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs⁵. It aims to enhance sustainability by promoting environmental conservation, economic development and social progress⁶.

The United Nations *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*⁷ provides an integrated approach to development that takes into account environmental, economic, and social considerations. It provides a roadmap towards sustainability through through 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)⁸. The SDGs are the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all⁹. They seek to address the global challenges facing humanity including those related to poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace and justice¹⁰.

One of the key approaches towards achieving the Sustainable Development agenda is fostering green growth¹¹. The concept of green growth seeks to foster socially inclusive

[andstories/speech/tripleplanetary-crisis-forging-new-relationship-between-people-and-earth](#) (Accessed on 03/07/2024)

⁴ United States Environmental Protection Agency., 'What is Sustainability.' Available at <https://www.epa.gov/sustainability/learn-about-sustainability> (Accessed on 03/07/2024)

⁵ World Commission on Environment and Development., 'Our Common Future.' Oxford, (Oxford University Press, 1987)

⁶ Fitzmaurice. M., 'The Principle of Sustainable Development in International Development Law.' *International Sustainable Development Law.*, Vol 1

⁷ United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1., Available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf> (Accessed on 03/07/2024)

⁸ Ibid

⁹ United Nations., 'Take Action for the Sustainable Development Goals' Available at <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/> (Accessed on 03/07/2024)

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ African Development Bank Group., 'Climate and Green Growth Strategic Framework: Projecting Africa's Voice' Available at

economic growth and development path that is low-carbon, climate-resilient, and resource efficient; and maintains and enhances biodiversity and ecosystems¹². The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development seeks to attain green growth through various approaches including making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable¹³.

This paper critically examines the need to achieve sustainability and human settlements. It argues that achieving sustainability in cities and human settlements is key in fostering green growth. The paper explores the idea of green growth and its benefits. Further, the paper suggests measures towards achieving sustainability in cities and human settlements for green growth.

2.0 Green Growth

Green growth has been defined as an ideal aimed at fostering economic growth and development while ensuring that natural assets continue to provide the resources and environmental services on which our well-being relies¹⁴. Green growth has been described as a new revolutionary development paradigm that sustains economic growth while at the same time ensuring climatic and environmental sustainability¹⁵. It focuses on addressing the root causes of environmental challenges while ensuring the creation of the necessary channels for resource distribution and access to basic commodities for the impoverished¹⁶.

https://www.afdb.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/african_development_bank_-_climate_change_and_green_growth_policy.pdf (Accessed on 03/07/2024)

¹² Ibid

¹³ United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1., Op Cit

¹⁴ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development., 'What is Green Growth and How can it Help Deliver Sustainable Development?' Available at <https://www.oecd.org/greengrowth/whatisgreengrowthandhowcanithelpdeliverustainabledevelopment.htm> (Accessed on 03/07/2024)

¹⁵ United Nations., 'Green Growth' Available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?menu=1447> (Accessed on 03/07/2024)

¹⁶ Ibid

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The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) defines green growth as low carbon, resource efficient and socially inclusive approach towards development¹⁷. UNEP further notes that in a green economy, growth in employment and income are driven by public and private investment into such economic activities, infrastructure and assets that allow reduced carbon emissions and pollution, enhanced energy and resource efficiency, and prevention of the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services¹⁸. Green growth aims to respect biodiversity, conserve natural resources and promote good working conditions¹⁹. The green economy also means limiting greenhouse gas emissions by removing fossil fuels from our consumption²⁰.

Green growth can therefore be understood as a development approach that seeks to deliver economic growth that is both environmentally sustainable and socially inclusive²¹. This idea emphasizes that economic growth is of central importance for development and poverty reduction and that achieving environmental sustainability and social inclusion are equally important and necessary to ensure that economic development is sustainable over the long term²². It has been opined that green growth consists of four fundamental underlying dimensions²³. It entails *efficient and sustainable use of resources*, including energy, water, land, and materials²⁴; *protection of natural capital* and recognition of the limits of Earth system processes²⁵; *green economic opportunities* for

¹⁷ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Green Economy' Available at <https://www.unep.org/regions/asia-and-pacific/regional-initiatives/supporting-resource-efficiency/green-economy> (Accessed on 03/07/2024)

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Green Growth: Definition, Issues and Implementation., Available at https://www.google.com/search?q=achieving+green+growth&oq=achieving+green+growth&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOTIHCAEQIRifBTIHCAIQIRifBTIHCAQMQRifBTIHCAQQIRifBTIHCAUQIRifBTIHCAAYQIRifBTIHCAcQIRifBTIHCAgQIRifBTIHCAkQIRifBdIBCDc1NDFqMGo3qAIAAsAIA&sourcei_d=chrome&ie=UTF-8 (Accessed on 03/07/2024)

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Global Green Growth Institute., 'Green Growth in Action: Attaining Green Cities' Available at https://gggi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Green-Growth-in-Action-Attaining-Green-Cities_reduced-size.pdf (Accessed on 03/07/2024)

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid

investment, trade, employment, and innovation; and *inclusive growth*, which ensures access to basic services and resources, health and safety, social equality, and social protection(Emphasis added)²⁶.

Green growth has been described as the optimal choice for our future²⁷. It is now a widely embraced concept with an increasing number of countries taking steps to adopt green growth as the primary and essential model of national development for the long-term²⁸. It has been noted that greening growth is necessary, efficient and affordable²⁹. Inclusive green growth has been described as the pathway to Sustainable Development³⁰. Green growth builds on the broad concept of Sustainable Development and provides a pathway that seeks to achieve growth targets and development objectives in a more efficient, sustainable and resilient manner³¹.

3.0 Sustainability in Cities and Human Settlements: Opportunities and Challenges

Cities have been described as hubs for ideas, commerce, culture, science, productivity, social, human and economic development³². Cities have enabled people to advance socially and economically through creation of jobs and providing opportunities³³. It is estimated that currently, more than half of the world's population lives in cities³⁴. By 2030, it is projected that 6 out of 10 people will be urban dwellers³⁵. Further, by 2050, it is

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ The World Bank Group., 'Inclusive Green Growth: The Pathway to Sustainable Development' <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/368361468313515918/pdf/691250PUB0Publ067902B09780821395516.pdf> (Accessed on 03/07/2024)

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ African Development Bank Group., 'Green Growth' Available at <https://www.afdb.org/en/topics-and-sectors/initiatives-partnerships/green-growth-initiative/background> (Accessed on 03/07/2024)

³² United Nations., 'Sustainable Cities and Human Settlements' Available at <https://sdgs.un.org/topics/sustainable-cities-and-human-settlements?page=1%2C3> (Accessed on 03/07/2024)

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Monitoring Human Settlement Indicators., 'A Short Guide to Human Settlements Indicators Goal 11+' Available at <https://www.local2030.org/library/296/A-short-guide-to-Human-Settlements-Indicators-Goal-11.pdf> (Accessed on 03/07/2024)

³⁵ Ibid

estimated that the figure will have risen to 6.5 billion people; representing two-thirds of all civilization³⁶. With more than half of humankind currently living in cities and the number of urban residents growing by nearly 73 million every year it is estimated that urban areas account for 70 per cent of the world's Gross Domestic Product and has therefore generated economic growth and prosperity for many³⁷.

Taking into account the increasing rural to urban migration and the rapid growth of cities in the developing world, it is clear that cities face a myriad of problems that may hinder planned growth and development³⁸. It has been noted that to date, the trend towards urbanization has been accompanied by increased pressure on the environment and accelerated demand for basic services, infrastructure, jobs, land, and affordable housing, particularly for the nearly 1 billion urban poor who live in informal settlements³⁹. As a result of the high concentration of people, infrastructure, housing and economic activities, it has been observed that cities are particularly vulnerable to climate change and natural disasters impacts⁴⁰.

The location of many urban areas with large populations and critical economic assets in high-risk zones contributes to the increased attention given to impacts in urban areas of disasters induced or enhanced by climate change⁴¹. In addition, it has been observed that in most cities in developing countries, the size and vulnerability of informal settlements, generally built in unstable areas such as coastal zones, flood-prone planes and ravines, and geologically unstable slopes, greatly increases their vulnerability to climate change

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ United Nations., 'Sustainable Cities and Human Settlements' Op Cit

³⁸ Monitoring Human Settlement Indicators., 'A Short Guide to Human Settlements Indicators Goal 11+' Op Cit

³⁹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities' Available at <https://www.unep.org/explore-topics/sustainable-development-goals/why-do-sustainable-development-goals-matter/goal-11> (Accessed on 03/07/2024)

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Bigio. A., 'Cities and Climate Change' Available at <https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/wbcitiescc.pdf> (Accessed on 03/07/2024)

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and natural disasters⁴². Further, the impacts of climate change including droughts and rising sea level and more frequent and intense natural disasters in rural areas will likely generate an additional influx of people to cities who often become permanent dwellers thus increasing the vulnerability of cities to climate change and natural disasters⁴³. The effects of climate change have costly impacts on cities' basic services, infrastructure, housing, human livelihoods and health⁴⁴. At the same time, cities are a key contributor to climate change, since urban activities are a major source of greenhouse gas emissions⁴⁵. It is estimated that urban areas are responsible for 70 percent of global carbon dioxide emissions, with transport, buildings and infrastructure being among the largest contributors⁴⁶.

It is therefore imperative to achieve sustainability in cities and human settlements. According to UNEP, there is a strong link between the quality of life in cities and how cities draw on and manage the natural resources available to them⁴⁷. It has been opined that building urban resilience is crucial to avoid human, social and economic losses while improving the sustainability of urbanization processes in order to protect the environment and mitigate disaster risk and climate change⁴⁸. Further, it has been asserted that sustainable cities and human settlements combine greater productivity and innovation with lower costs and reduced environmental impacts, while providing increased opportunities for consumer choices and sustainable lifestyles⁴⁹.

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Cities and Climate Change' Available at <https://www.unep.org/explore-topics/resource-efficiency/what-we-do/cities-and-climate-change> (Accessed on 03/07/2024)

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities' Op Cit

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Ibid

4.0 Achieving Sustainability in Cities and Human Settlements for Green Growth

The rapid growth of cities and human settlements has resulted in urbanization being described as among the most significant global trends of the 21st century⁵⁰. It has been noted that urbanization is not only a demographic or spatial phenomenon but a force which if steered and deployed correctly can help the world to overcome some of its major global challenges such poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, climate change, fragility and conflict, which are all fundamental targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development⁵¹. Embracing green growth in cities is an urgent priority for addressing the environment and climate emergency⁵². It has been argued that the world's cities have a critical role to play in supporting global sustainability and climate change ambitions and the realization of green growth pathways⁵³. While urban areas are at the forefront of national and global wealth accumulation, it has been pointed out that they must urgently address their unsustainable planetary footprint in order to achieve green growth⁵⁴.

SDG 11 under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development seeks to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable⁵⁵. It sets out several targets towards realizing this goal including ensuring access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrading of slums⁵⁶; providing access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons⁵⁷;

⁵⁰ Monitoring Human Settlement Indicators., 'A Short Guide to Human Settlements Indicators Goal 11+' Op Cit

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² Global Green Growth Institute., 'Green Growth in Action: Attaining Green Cities' Op Cit

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1., Op Cit

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ Ibid

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enhancing inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management in all countries⁵⁸; strengthening efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage⁵⁹; reducing the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, including by paying special attention to air quality and municipal and other waste management⁶⁰; providing universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities⁶¹; and supporting least developed countries, including through financial and technical assistance, in building sustainable and resilient buildings utilizing local materials⁶². Achieving these targets is key in fostering sustainability in cities and human settlements towards green growth.

The *New Urban Agenda*⁶³ adopted by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) further lays out standards and principles for the planning, construction, development, management and improvement of urban areas. The New Urban Agenda highlights linkages between sustainable urbanization and job creation, livelihood opportunities and improved quality of life, and it insists on incorporation of all these sectors in every urban development⁶⁴. The New Urban Agenda identifies five main pillars of implementation towards achieving sustainability in cities and urban areas which are: national urban policies, urban legislation and regulations, urban planning and design, local economy and municipal finance, and local implementation⁶⁵. It has been described as an accelerator towards achieving the SDGs particularly SDG 11 which aims to make

⁵⁸ Ibid

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ Ibid

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), 'The New Urban Agenda' Available at https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/12/nua_handbook_14dec2020_2.pdf (Accessed on 07/07/2024)

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Ibid

cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable⁶⁶. It has been noted that while the challenges that cities, towns and villages face in different countries are varied, the New Urban Agenda is designed to be universally applicable⁶⁷. It presents a long-term vision and sets out priorities and actions, in addition to providing tools that can be applied at the regional, national, subnational and local levels, allowing governments and other relevant stakeholders to meet context specific urban needs and challenges⁶⁸. It is imperative to implement the New Urban Agenda in all countries in order to achieve sustainability in cities and human settlements.

At a continental level, Africa Union's *Agenda 2063*⁶⁹ acknowledges the challenge related to rapid urbanization in Africa and estimates that more than two thirds of the African population will be living in urban centres by 2063⁷⁰. It notes that the growth in urban population has many implications including spatial planning; access to housing; provision of basic services; job creation; economic and social development⁷¹. Agenda 2063 seeks to realize modern, affordable and liveable habitats in Africa⁷². According to Agenda 2063, African cities will be well planned with modern mass transit systems, while rural communities will be connected to the rest of the economy through road, energy, mobile communication networks, water, sanitation and hygiene systems⁷³. Agenda 2063 also seeks to ensure that every citizen has affordable and sustainable access to quality basic services such as decent affordable housing, access to adequate and clean water and sanitation, transport and other services⁷⁴. It is imperative to actualize Agenda 2063 in order to achieve sustainability in cities and human settlements in Africa for green growth.

⁶⁶ Ibid

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ Ibid

⁶⁹ Africa Union., 'Agenda 2063: The Africa we Want' Available at https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/33126-doc-framework_document_book.pdf (Accessed on 04/07/2024)

⁷⁰ Ibid

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² Ibid

⁷³ Ibid

⁷⁴ Ibid

5.0 Conclusion

Achieving sustainability in cities and human settlements is a key priority towards green growth. In order to realize this goal, foster green human settlements⁷⁵. Green human settlements create opportunities to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions as well as utilize ecosystem services to address vulnerabilities and risks⁷⁶. Further, it has been noted that natural ecosystems in human settlements can enhance climate change adaptation and mitigation capabilities such as when trees provide a cooling effect as well as absorb carbon dioxide while also reducing disaster risks such as when mangroves serve as a buffer against strong winds and storm surges⁷⁷. Green human settlements are therefore key towards green growth.

It has been pointed out that human settlements globally are being affected by multifaceted climate hazards that are both intensifying and increasing in frequency⁷⁸. As a result, human settlements must adapt and build resilience⁷⁹. It is therefore imperative to strengthen the resilience of cities and human settlements to climate change and natural disasters by building resilient infrastructure, resilient services and communities, and improving risk management and response to crises⁸⁰. Building urban resilience is crucial to avoid human, social and economic losses while improving the sustainability of urbanization processes and is thus needed to protect the environment and mitigate disaster risk and climate change⁸¹.

⁷⁵ UN-Habitat., 'The Resilient and Green Human Settlements Framework' Available at <https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2023/06/resilient-and-green-human-settlements-framework-2023.pdf> (Accessed on 04/07/2024)

⁷⁶ Ibid

⁷⁷ Ibid

⁷⁸ Sharm El-Sheikh Adaptation Agenda., '2030 Adaptation Outcomes for Human Settlements' Available at <https://climatechampions.unfccc.int/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Human-Settlements-1.pdf> (Accessed on 04/07/2024)

⁷⁹ Ibid

⁸⁰ Ibid

⁸¹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities' Op Cit

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In addition, it is also necessary for all countries to embrace and promote sustainable urban development⁸². Sustainable urban development takes into account social sustainability, economic growth, and environmental conservation⁸³. It has been noted that by getting urban development right, cities can create jobs and offer better livelihoods, increase economic growth, improve social inclusion, promote the decoupling of living standards and economic growth from environmental resource use, protect local and regional ecosystems, reduce both urban and rural poverty and drastically reduce pollution⁸⁴. This goal can be realized through addressing the specific challenges of urban poverty and access to infrastructure, promoting integrated and innovative infrastructure design and service delivery, and ensuring resilience to climate change and disaster risk reduction⁸⁵. It is also vital to promote sustainable energy and transport systems in cities and human settlements⁸⁶.

Finally, it is imperative to embrace effective urban planning⁸⁷. Properly planned, well governed, people centered, and compact cities and human settlements not only generate lower levels of greenhouse gases – but can also increase productivity, and reduce the capital and operating costs of basic urban infrastructure and services⁸⁸. It has been pointed out that public spaces are at the core of well-functioning cities⁸⁹. They are key drivers of social and economic development by supporting mobility, productivity, social interaction, recreation and public engagement, all of which improve the liveability and prosperity of cities and human settlements⁹⁰. It is therefore vital for cities to build and

⁸² United Nations., 'Sustainable Cities and Human Settlements' Op Cit

⁸³ UN-Habitat., 'Sustainable Urban Development in Africa' Available at <https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/download-manager-files/Sustainable%20Urban%20Development%20in%20Africa.pdf> (Accessed on 04/07/2024)

⁸⁴ Ibid

⁸⁵ Ibid

⁸⁶ Ibid

⁸⁷ UN-Habitat., 'Inclusive and Sustainable Urban Planning: A Guide for Municipalities' Available at <https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2014/07/A-guide-for-Municipalities-Inclusive-and-Sustainable-Urban-Development-Planning-Volume-1.pdf> (Accessed on 04/07/2024)

⁸⁸ UN-Habitat., 'Sustainable Urban Development in Africa' Op Cit

⁸⁹ Ibid

⁹⁰ Ibid

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maintain urban green spaces⁹¹. It has been noted that the quality of life in cities is influenced positively by a range of significant roles that urban green spaces play⁹². Building and maintaining urban green spaces requires careful planning and sound knowledge on how nature and biodiversity can be integrated in a city's limited space⁹³. Resource efficiency is also at the heart of proper urban planning⁹⁴. Resource efficient cities and human settlements combine greater productivity and innovation with lower costs and reduced environmental impacts, while providing increased opportunities for consumer choices and sustainable lifestyles⁹⁵. It is therefore necessary to build resource efficient cities and human settlements by promoting energy efficiency in the building sector, embracing sustainable waste management, fostering sustainable urban transport, ensuring water supply and waste water treatment and enhancing urban ecosystem management⁹⁶.

Achieving sustainability in cities and human settlements is an ideal that should be actualized towards green growth.

⁹¹ Council for European Studies., 'Urban Green Spaces: Combining Goals for Sustainability and Placemaking' Available at <https://www.europenowjournal.org/2021/05/10/urban-green-spaces-combining-goals-for-sustainability-and-placemaking/> (Accessed on 04/07/2024)

⁹² Ibid

⁹³ Ibid

⁹⁴ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities' Op Cit

⁹⁵ Ibid

⁹⁶ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Sustainable, Resource Efficient Cities-Making it Happen' Available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/1124SustainableResourceEfficientCities.pdf> (Accessed on 04/07/2024)

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