

EXPLAINER

A Plan for Making Cities Competitive, Environmentally Sound and Socially Equitable



The GrEEEn Cities initiative explores ways to combine urban planning with environmental management to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. Photo: ADB.

The GrEEEn Cities Initiative brings together policies, strategies, sector plans, regulations, financial incentives, technologies, governance institutions, civil society, and private sector interventions.

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Introduction

Between 2010 and 2050, Asia's population is anticipated to double in size to 3.2 billion, at which point two-thirds of the population will live in cities. As urban migration skyrockets, the "livability" of many cities plummets.

Urban areas increasingly face intense pressure on their physical infrastructure. Cities also suffer under rapid environmental degradation, inadequate service provision, and increasing exposure to pollution of air, land, and water, as well as traffic congestion, poor transport choices, and exaggerating spatial segregation and social inequality.

The GrEEEn Cities Initiative of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) is helping cities adapt to these

pressures and, looking forward, work to ensure a balance of economic competitiveness, environmental sustainability, and social equity in future development of livable cities.

What are GrEEEn Cities?

GrEEEn Cities endeavor to become thriving, environmentally sound, and structurally efficient cities that provide economic opportunities to residents regardless of social standing. The overarching Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11—or "[making] cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable"—and the inclusion of this "urban goal" among the 17 SDGs underscore the broadly recognized transformative role of cities for sustainable development.

Scaling down and translating global goals and targets to the city level is critical to their achievement. Convergence of top-down international goals with bottom-up urban transformations can only be achieved through integration of specific indicators into the design of investments at the city level. The formulation of a GrEEEn City Action Plan (GACP) provides a mechanism for coordinating partnerships in urban planning, financing, and implementation linked to the integration of indicators for urban transformation through cross-sectoral initiatives.

What sets the process in motion?

It begins with the GrEEEn Cities Operational Framework (GCOF), a platform that enables the unfolding of various institutional and technical "compartments" to respond to citizens' vision of livability for their cities. The GCOF is a framework that guides the transformation of a city from its existing status quo toward becoming a livable city. It is a combination of processes, activities, and actions leading to the preparation of a GCAP and identifying options for Urban Management Partnerships (UMPs).

What factors are taken into account during the assessment phase?

The GCOF is sequenced to begin with the urban profile, a diagnostic review of the status quo of the city with a business-as-usual assessment for understanding the baseline. Assessments are conducted along the elements identified under the 3E pillars of economy, environment, and equity based on available secondary data and other existing reports including master plans for the city.

The elements under each of the 3E pillars need to be analyzed and tailored to the individual city context with a relative emphasis on those that align with the city's vision and key assets identified through stakeholder consultations. The analysis and synthesis is reiteratively conducted and confirmed through visioning and SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis to arrive at a shared vision.

The urban profile ensures that the assessments take into consideration existing urban realities and the future needs of the growing urban population. It identifies the city's key assets and drivers of urban

growth, outlines existing urban conditions, and evaluates future patterns of urbanization and potential pathways for cities' development. It takes into consideration the "enablers," such as the political and legislative dimensions of urban development that are critical in the creation of an enabling environment, the governance and management platforms, and the institutional structures that are the mechanisms for implementation.

The analysis of the enabling environment comprises the regulatory, institutional, capacity, and resource frameworks. Socioeconomic factors and the environment, natural resource consumption, resilience to climate and disaster risks, technologies for low-carbon growth, and financial resource flows of a city are assessed and its natural and revenue-generating assets are identified, along with other enablers, such as national strategic priorities, policies, institutional mechanisms, and partnerships with civil society and the private sector, with which the city is able to maximize its asset advantage.

The 3E criteria are established for prioritizing investments and actions to improve the efficiency of urban services and the sustainability of urban infrastructure. The city's comprehensive urban profile thus serves as the basis for identifying the actions that are required to bring about the transformation of the city.

What elements are under the 3E pillars?

For economy:

- competitiveness;
- service delivery efficiency;
- infrastructure, asset management, operation, and maintenance;
- financial innovation;
- public-private partnership;
- revenue generation; and
- entrepreneurship and job creation.

For environment:

- natural resource efficiency;
- low-carbon technology;
- climate resilience; and
- disaster risk management.

For equity:

- inclusiveness;
- accessibility;
- affordability; and
- resilience.

The GCAP is a result of a citizens and stakeholder participatory process starting with a vision for livability to be achieved over time through strategic investments in plans, programs, and projects. Planning initiatives and actions under the 3E pillars promotes integrated urban development efforts and co-benefits through smart investments.

What are Urban Management Partnerships and why are they essential?

Partnerships are efficient tools of learning leading to mutual gains, particularly for cities where "demonstrations" trigger significant long lasting positive impacts. The UMP is a formal vehicle for engaging local stakeholders and creating social, economic, and environmental value. It is a forum in which roles are rationalized and commitments are made. The complexity of the urban realm and the large number of interconnected partners make the use of a partnership vehicle particularly critical to success. Even though the typical roles of public, private, and civil society partners are widely known, all cities—and indeed all partners—are different. A forum for cooperation allows for negotiations to unfold, trade-offs to be made, and packages of risks and rewards to be tailored to suit the needs of each participant.

What enables GrEEEn Cities?

Enablers are mechanisms and systems that include policies, strategies, sector plans, regulations, financial incentives, technologies, governance institutions, civil society, and private sector interventions. These all make different sectors in GrEEEn Cities work in concert. Asset management tools; financing mechanisms; performance monitoring and indicators; and smart information and communication technologies are key to achieving livable cities.

How can cities in Asia turn green into GrEEEn?

They can start doing things differently instead of doing different things. Decision makers recognize the potential of green growth and the need to move toward livable cities, but only a limited number of cities have implemented green growth strategies and the results vary widely.

The following six takeaway lessons are suggested ways to go beyond “green” by improving the quality of life for all

- Learn from current conditions and approaches.
- Unbundle the 3Es at the city-region level to internalize risks and capture opportunities.
- Recognize the fourth E: enablers—harnessing the power of partnerships.
- Use decision support systems for informed decision making and effective investments.
- Promote asset management as a platform for sustainability and resilience.
- Partner for better ways of green infrastructure financing.

Call to Action

The main vehicle for this is the GCAP, a new decision-making approach that defines the initiatives and actions necessary to achieve goals and targets for a livable city.

To date, seven cities in Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam have formulated and are implementing GCAPs.

Half the world's 23 megacities are in Asia, and many of these have expanded far beyond their carrying capacity.

Urban areas face the challenge of absorbing millions of new inhabitants while introducing sustainable growth policies that alleviate increased congestion, air pollution, and housing shortages.

ADB's GrEEEn Cities Initiative is helping cities address these challenges and become economically vibrant, structurally sound, and environmentally conscious urban spaces that embrace inclusivity.

Achieving this requires efforts across the board, with the government, private sector, and civil society joining forces toward livable cities.

Resources

[GrEEEn Solutions for Livable Cities](#)

[Hue GrEEEn City Action Plan](#)

[Enabling GrEEEn Cities: An Operational Framework for Integrated Urban Development in Southeast Asia](#)

[Melaka Green City Action Plan](#)

Related links

Summary: [GrEEEning Hue - A Path to Sustainable Urban Development](#)

Summary: [An Action Plan for Green Growth in Viet Nam's Vinh Yen City](#)



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Sonia Chand Sandhu, an environmental engineer and climate resilience and sustainability specialist, has over 27 years of international development experience in environmental sustainability, resilience, and integrated institutional solutions for the management of multisector infrastructure operations at ADB, the World Bank (South Asia and Africa), and in the private sector.

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Ramola is with the Urban Development and Water Division. She supports ADB's urban sector development with a focus on integrated development for Livable Cities.

She co-led the preparation of the framework for National Urban Assessments and the Inclusive Cities toolkit under ADB's Urban Operational Plan 2012-2020, and co-led ADB's GrEEEn Cities Initiative in Southeast Asia to develop GrEEEn City Action Plans. Ramola is interested in engaging with people to take ownership for shaping their cities, and exploring the interface between urban development, urban-rural linkages, and regional integration.

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