



## Policies on spatial distribution and urbanization have broad impacts on sustainable development

### 1. Policies on spatial distribution and urbanization are essential for achieving inclusive and sustainable development

In an increasingly urban world, policies on the spatial distribution of the population and on urbanization can contribute to a better and more sustainable future for all. Urban growth relates to the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. Consequently, Government measures to promote sustainable urbanization and population redistribution are key to a successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 on sustainable cities and communities stresses the role of integrated policies and plans for making cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. In addition, the New Urban Agenda<sup>2</sup> reiterates the importance of Government measures to implement inclusive and effective urban policies for sustainable urban development.

**The spatial distribution of the world's population continues to change.** In 2000, around 47 per cent of the world's population lived in urban areas, a proportion that had increased to 55 per cent in 2018 (United Nations, 2018a). By 2030, the global share of the urban population is projected to rise further to 60 per cent. By then, one third of the global population is estimated to be living in cities with at least half a million inhabitants.

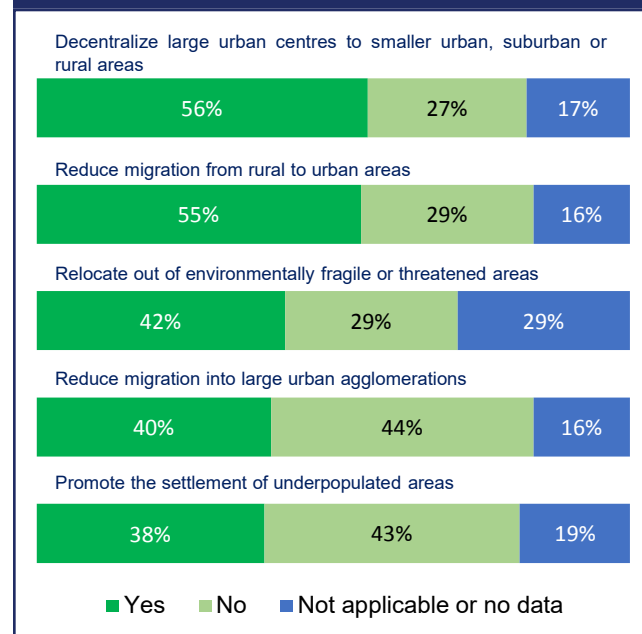
**The level and pace of urbanization vary considerably across countries and regions.** The proportion of population residing in urban areas, which is highest in high-income countries, is projected to grow from 77 per cent in 2000 to 84 per cent in 2030. Middle-income countries, which started off at lower levels of urbanization, experienced more rapid urbanization during recent decades. In middle-income countries, the share of the urban population is projected to increase from 42 per cent in 2000 to 59 per cent in 2030. In low-income countries, the share of the population living

in urban areas is projected to grow from 26 per cent in 2000 to 38 per cent in 2030. Africa and Asia are experiencing faster urbanization than other regions.

### 2. Most Governments report having policies to encourage population redistribution

Three quarters of Governments with available data in 2019 reported that they had encouraged the spatial redistribution of their populations in the past five years through at least one of five specific policy measures.<sup>3</sup> More than half of Governments reported that they had adopted measures to promote decentralization from large urban centres to smaller urban, suburban or rural areas (56 per cent) or

Figure 1. Proportion of Governments with specific policy measures to encourage population redistribution in the past five years, 2019



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019). *World Population Policies 2019*. Available from: [www.un.org/development/desa/pd/themes/population-policies](http://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/themes/population-policies). Note: Based on 86 countries with available data.

measures to reduce migration from rural to urban areas (55 per cent). Forty per cent of Governments reported taking measures to reduce migration towards large urban agglomerations, and a similar proportion reported having measures to promote settlement of underpopulated areas (38 per cent) or to relocate population out of environmentally fragile or threatened areas (42 per cent) (figure 1).

### 3. The vast majority of Governments have policies to support rural development

**Eighty-seven per cent of Governments reported that they had promoted rural development in the past five years through at least one of five specific policy measures.** This high proportion notwithstanding, it is concerning that about half of the Governments that had not taken any of the five measures had a majority of their population residing in rural areas in 2015. In terms of specific measures (figure 2), around three-quarters of Governments had taken measures in the past five years to increase access to markets for farm products (77 per cent), to increase access to information and communications technology in rural areas (74 per cent) or to create employment in rural areas (73 per cent). Around half of Governments indicated that they had taken measures to provide incentives to establish or

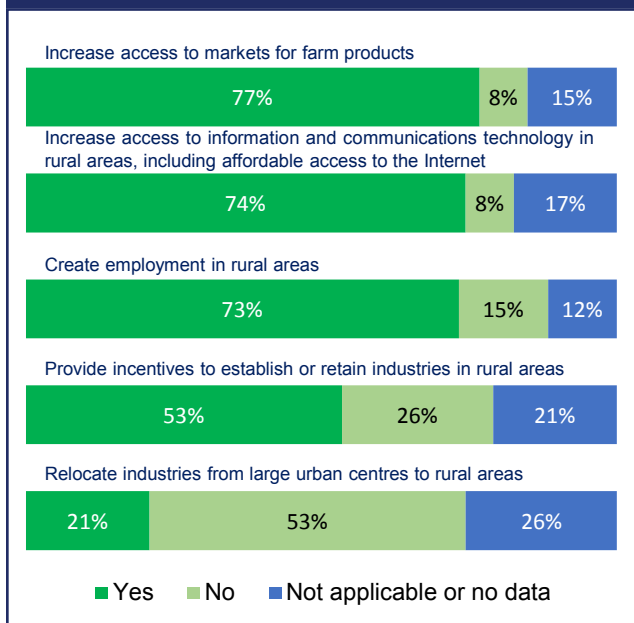
retain industries in rural areas. By contrast, only one fifth of Governments reported taking measures to relocate industries from large urban centres to rural areas.

### 4. Most Governments report taking measures to improve the living conditions of the urban poor

**Eighty-seven per cent of Governments indicated that they had taken at least one of five specific policy measures in the past five years to improve access to basic services and infrastructure for the urban poor.** These policies were especially widespread in low-income countries, among which all but one Government reported that they had taken at least three of the five specific measures to improve living conditions of the urban poor.

**In 2019, a majority of Governments reported taking specific measures in the past five years to ensure access to basic services for the urban poor.** Seventy-seven per cent of Governments reported taking measures to increase access to safe water and sanitation, 73 per cent to increase access to essential health care services and 71 per cent to secure access to basic education. Many Governments also reported taking measures to ensure access to adequate, safe and affordable housing (58 per cent) and to secure land tenure (47 per cent) (figure 3).

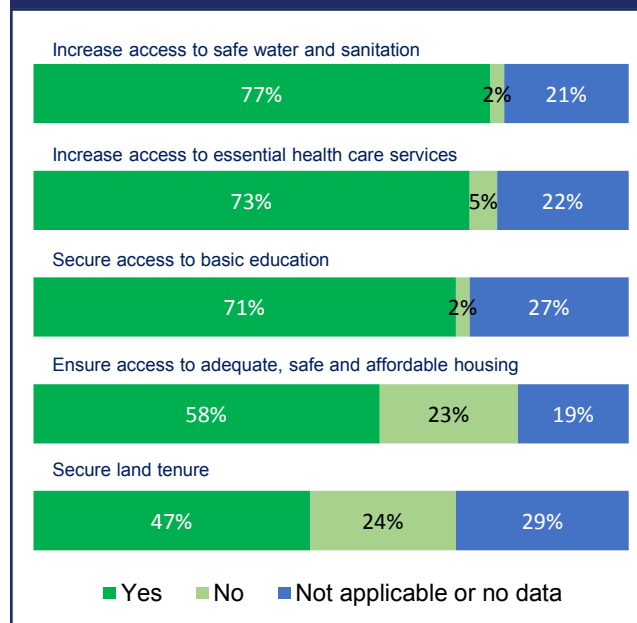
**Figure 2. Proportion of Governments with specific policy measures to promote rural development in the past five years, 2019**



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019). *World Population Policies 2019*. Available from [www.un.org/development/desa/pd/themes/population-policies](http://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/themes/population-policies).

Note: Based on 86 countries with available data.

**Figure 3. Proportion of Governments with specific policy measures to improve living conditions of the urban poor in the past five years, 2019**



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019). *World Population Policies 2019*. Available from [www.un.org/development/desa/pd/themes/population-policies](http://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/themes/population-policies).

Note: Based on 86 countries with available data.

## 5. A large majority of Governments report promoting sustainable urbanization

**In 2019, more than two thirds (69 per cent) of Governments reported having a national policy, programme or strategy to promote sustainable urbanization (figure 4).** Governments in Africa and Asia, where much of the growth in the urban populations is projected to take place in the coming decades, were more likely to have a national policy, programme or strategy to promote sustainable urbanization than in other regions. Around three-quarters of Governments with available data in sub-Saharan Africa, in Central and Southern Asia, and in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia reported having a policy, programme or strategy to promote sustainable urbanization.

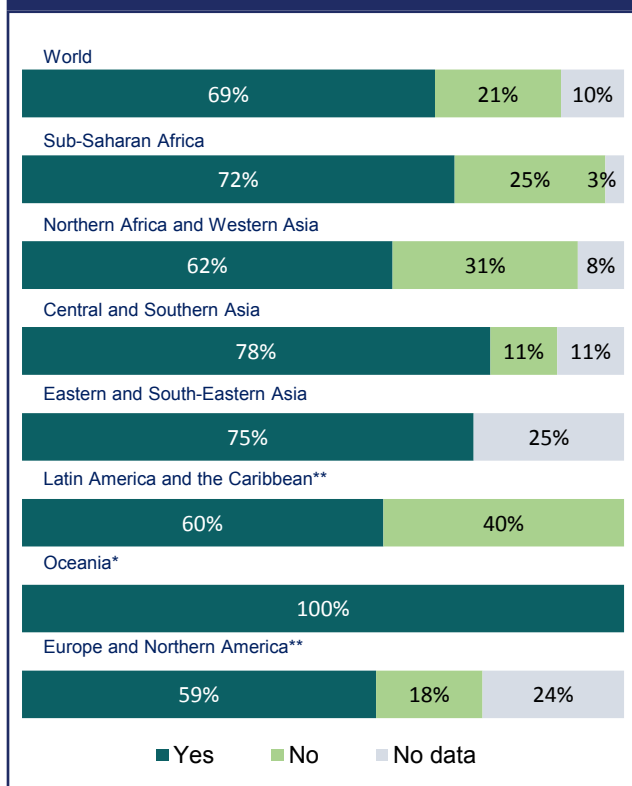
**Policies to improve the sustainability of large urban centres are widespread.** More than 9 out of 10 Governments with available data in 2019 reported taking at least one out of eight specific policy measures

in the past five years to improve the sustainability of large urban centres. Thirty per cent of Governments had taken all eight measures (figure 5). Around one fifth of Governments indicated they had taken less than three of these measures, while six per cent of Governments had not taken any of the eight measures in the past five years or did not provide any data. The latter group consisted of Governments of middle-income or low-income countries which, taken together, comprised less than five per cent of the world's cities (26 of 548) with at least one million inhabitants in 2018.

**Many Governments reported taking specific policy measures to improve the sustainability of large urban centres, most frequently to improve road safety and promote public transportation.** Eighty-four per cent of Governments with available data in 2019 reported that in the past five years they had taken measures to improve road safety and reduce road traffic accidents and 74 per cent reported to have taken measures to increase the availability of public transport.

**In 2019, a majority of Governments reported that they had taken specific measures in the past five years to improve the environmental sustainability of large cities.** The most common measures taken to improve the environmental sustainability of large

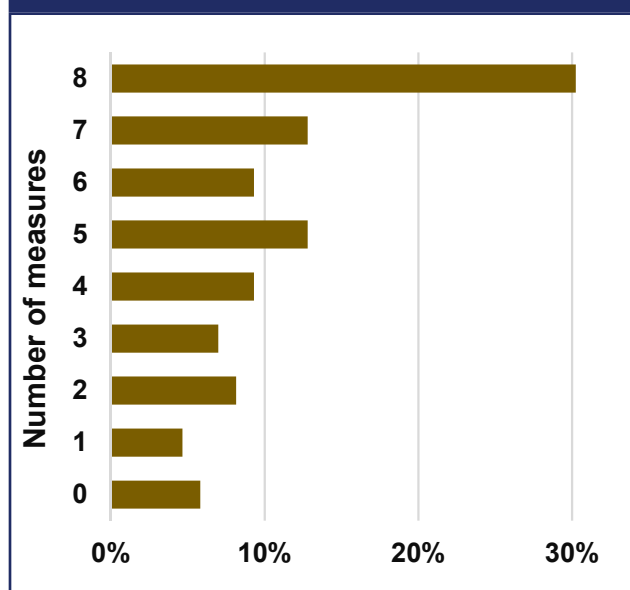
**Figure 4. Proportion of Governments with a national policy, programme or strategy to promote sustainable urbanization by region, 2019**



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019). *World Population Policies 2019*. Available from [www.un.org/development/desa/pd/themes/population-policies](http://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/themes/population-policies).

Note: Based on 86 countries with available data. Regions with less than 50 per cent country coverage are denoted with an asterisk (\*). Regions for which data are available for less than 50 per cent of countries and for less than 50 per cent of the total population are denoted with two asterisks (\*\*).

**Figure 5. Proportion of Governments with policy measures to improve sustainability of large urban centres in the past five years, by number of measures, 2019**



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019). *World Population Policies 2019*. Available from [www.un.org/development/desa/pd/themes/population-policies](http://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/themes/population-policies).

Note: Based on 86 countries with available data.

cities included measures to improve solid waste management systems (71 per cent of Governments) and to increase access to green and open public spaces (69 per cent). Moreover, 63 per cent of Governments reported instituting more stringent environmental regulations for industries, 62 per cent took measures

to increase energy efficiency in housing or buildings, 58 per cent promoted increased reliance on cleaner fuels and technologies at the household level, and 50 per cent introduced more stringent pollution limits for motor vehicles.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>.

<sup>2</sup> Adopted at the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III), held in Quito, Ecuador, in October 2016; <https://habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda/>.

<sup>3</sup> Data on national policies, programmes and strategies related to the spatial distribution of the population and urbanization were collected through the module on population ageing and urbanization (module I) of the United Nations Twelfth Inquiry among Governments on Population and Development (United Nations, 2018b). The analysis is based on data for 86 countries that replied to module I of the Twelfth Inquiry. The data refer to 2019 and reflect the information provided by the responding government entities. These responses have not been validated through other sources (United Nations, 2019).

## Sources

United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2018a). *World Urbanization Prospects 2018*. Available from [www.un.org/development/desa/pd/themes/urbanization](http://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/themes/urbanization).

\_\_\_\_\_ (2018b). *United Nations Twelfth Inquiry among Governments on Population and Development*. Available from <https://un.org/development/desa/pd/themes/population-policies/inquiry12>.

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