

The Cities Challenge

Empowering women* as active shapers of sustainable urban development

Designing cities that work for women will make cities safer, healthier, more vibrant, and more pleasant to live in for everyone.¹*

When it comes to women*s specific needs regarding urban development, new and participatory approaches are needed to include them in decision-making processes, make them part of the design processes of their neighbourhoods and contribute to gender equality. In the past, urban planning cemented the segregation of space, so that public space was predominantly reserved for men and private space for women*. As a result, women* are often still excluded from participation and decision-making processes in urban development in many places as well as in decision-making processes at local and (inter)national level.

There are about 6.0 million elected members of local government advisory bodies. Less than 2.2 million (36%) are women.²*

The **Cities Challenge ideas competition** promoted the community-based approach of so called ‘Urban Living Labs’ to test innovative ideas for sustainable and inclusive neighbourhoods in GIZ partner countries. The needs of women* and children are at the centre of the interventions. In urban development in particular, women* often have a unique function in their communities, making them strategic partners for climate action, social equality, and to Leave No One Behind. With the Cities Challenge, the Sector Project Cities together with its partners UN-Habitat and Cities Alliance sought to emphasise the role of empowered women as active shapers of sustainable development and as change agents in societies.



The two cycles of the Cities Challenge (2019-2023) – eight Urban Living Labs were realised.

The Sector Project Cities invited colleagues working in urban projects in partner countries of German development cooperation to propose ideas for sustainable urban development addressing the needs and potentials of women*, children, elderly people and men to shape their own environment. Together with the local population, diverse measures for inclusive and

¹ Arup (2022): Cities Alive – Designing cities that work for women. [Link](#).

² UN Women (2022): Women's representation in local government: A global analysis. [Link](#).

sustainable urban development were planned and implemented. The experiences earned via the Urban Living Labs were then incorporated into needs-based and effective local urban development policies. The motto of the first round was Cities Challenge: 2030 Agenda meets Urban Climate Action (2019-2021), whereas the second edition (2.0) set the focus on Building Vibrant and Resilient Neighbourhoods (2021-2023). In both editions, four so-called Urban Living Labs were chosen and equipped each with a budget of originally 100,000 €.

Cities Challenge 2030 – Guardians of the Hill in San Pablo



*Zoila Moro, Member of the Guardians of the Hill in San Pablo, Portoviejo, Ecuador:
'What mobilises people is social action.'*

The Urban Living Lab in Portoviejo, Ecuador of the Cities Challenge 2030 (2019-2021) initiated the 'Guardians of the Hill' in the hilly San Pablo district. The Guardians are a women-led civil society initiative aiming to make San Pablo more resilient to climate hazards while promoting social inclusion. Like Zoila Moro, the Guardians are dedicated to the participation of women* and their promotion as local actors for climate protection and disaster risk management.

Natural hazards are gender neutral; but the impacts are not [...]

Women are disproportionately affected by disasters in several outcomes, including life expectancy, unemployment, labour force re-entry, and relative asset losses.³*

In particular, the Guardians champion the participation of women* and their role as local actors in climate activities and disaster risk management, by:

1. **Fostering resilient and sustainable urban development:** The effects of climate change and urban development are increasingly threatening San Pablo and its residents. Creating more urban green allows for increased rainwater infiltration even during heavy downpours, stabilises the ground and mitigates the risk of landslides and flooding. As a Guardian of the Hill, Zoila Moro approaches her neighbours directly and encourages them to rearrange plants on their block and build orchards, terraced slopes, eco-paths as well as playgrounds. The creation of gardens on slopes changes the urban environment of the San Pablo neighbourhood in a sustainable and environmentally friendly way.
2. **Raising awareness of disaster risk:** The Guardians set up neighbourhood risk and emergency committees, where they run training sessions that improve the ability of San Pablo's citizens to recognise risk situations caused by climate change, take self-protection

³ GFDRR (2021): Gender Dimensions of Disaster Risk and Resilience. [Link](#).

measures, and help during evacuations. A digital app, developed by the Guardians supports this work and explains prevention and response measures for various hazards, such as fires or landslides. As part of the municipal risk management system, female leaders like Zoila Moro are involved in community-based disaster management and pandemic monitoring, such as COVID-19.

3. **Preventing violence against women***: A strong focus was also placed on preventing violence against women*, an issue which was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Guardians set up neighbourhood risk and emergency committees and use a self-established community early warning system in efforts to prevent gender-based violence and crime.

The women* of San Pablo show how important it is to hear the voices of all residents, especially the vulnerable, in urban development when it comes to transforming cities in a sustainable, resilient, and successful way. When women* like Zoila Moro become advocates of changes, they mobilise people, inspire action and create a resilient and liveable neighbourhood for all.

Cities Challenge 2.0 - Transforming the lives of women* in the Gorer Kanda Slum



*Suma Begum, resident of one of the informal settlements of Satkhira, Bangladesh:
'I hope that through this project my family can recover from the bad shortage situation, and I dream of building a nice house.'*

Central to the success of the Cities Challenge 2.0 was a commitment to feminist development policy, putting women* and children at the centre of urban development. The 'Enhancing Resilience of Urban Poor' (ERUP) project in Bangladesh, funded by the Cities Challenge 2.0, has been instrumental in transforming the lives of women* in informal settlements in Bangladesh, specifically in the Gorer Kanda slum in Satkhira.

Despite women's significant role in Bangladesh's garment industries and a rising employment rate, they face inequality in the job sector, bear a double burden due to primary responsibility for household activities and are more susceptible to climate risks.*

The initiative sought to empower marginalised communities and reduce the adverse impacts of climate change, particularly in the context of rapid urbanisation. The integrated approach of ERUP positively impacted the lives of women* in informal settlements like Suma Begum, by:

1. **Empowering Women* Through Sustainable Practices**: ERUP aimed to empower individuals to enhance their self-sufficiency while addressing the challenges of climate

change. Suma Begum's story exemplifies the project's success. After experiencing a flood in a distant rural area, she was forced to migrate. Ending up in Gorer Kanda slum in Satkhira, she became a beneficiary of the project. Under the guidance of project staff, she embraced innovative solutions such as home-based vegetable cultivation, including rooftop and vertical gardening. These practices not only provided her with a source of nutritious food and income but also helped cool her home during the hot season.

2. **Knowledge and Economic Empowerment:** Suma Begum, like many others, gained substantial knowledge in horticulture through the project. This expertise bases on her previous work in agriculture and thus reflects an appreciation of her skills. It not only improved her family's nutrition but also allowed her to stabilise her life economically.
3. **Savings and Financial Stability:** Suma Begum participated in a savings program initiated by the project, where she saved an amount of 900 taka. This functions as a basis for financial security, allowing her to address family needs, such as medical expenses.
4. **Awareness and Girls Empowerment:** ERUP's awareness events addressed climate change and gender inequality, combating early marriages in rural Bangladesh, and enhancing respect for girls' choices.
5. **Community Building:** ERUP benefited 150 families and 900 individuals, establishing a 'Sales Cum Display Centre' for locally grown produce. This promoted economic opportunities, solidarity, and collaboration in the community.
6. **Replication and Expansion:** The success of the ERUP project has also inspired other initiatives, such as the UMIMCC II project, to adopt the idea. This replication demonstrates the potential for sustainable, community-based solutions to improve the lives of women* in informal settlements while addressing climate change challenges.

The approach of promoting small-scaled urban agriculture has played a crucial role in empowering women* in informal settlements like Suma Begum by equipping them with sustainable practices, knowledge, and economic opportunities. It not only improved their living conditions but also fostered community resilience and inspired further initiatives in the region.

Reflecting success: Cities Challenge impact on gender-inclusive urban development

In conclusion, the Cities Challenge, particularly through its Urban Living Labs, has emerged as a pivotal force in promoting gender-inclusive urban development aligned with the Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), especially but not exclusively in Portoviejo, Ecuador (Cities Challenge 2030) and Satkhira, Bangladesh (Cities Challenge 2.0). By prioritising the needs of women* and children, the competition has fuelled innovative and sustainable approaches in GIZ partner countries, illustrating how urban planning can empower women* as active contributors to resilient and vibrant communities. The Cities Challenge 2030 and 2.0, exemplified by the initiatives in Portoviejo, Ecuador, and Satkhira, Bangladesh, showcase the transformative impact when women* are actively engaged in decision-making processes, climate resilience, disaster risk management, and economic empowerment. The success stories of Zoila Moro and Suma Begum underscore the importance of listening to the voices of all people, especially vulnerable groups, to achieve truly sustainable, resilient, and inclusive urban development. This gender competition celebrates the Cities Challenge's role in amplifying the influence of empowered women* as catalysts for positive change in societies. It signifies a crucial step towards realising SDG 5 and towards a more just, equitable and feminist development of our cities.