

*Urban green growth and importance to cities in Asia*

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**What is urban green growth and why it is important to cities in Asia?**

Governments around the world are now seeking for the effective and continuous efforts to implement appropriate strategies and policies to address the proceedings with worries over worldwide economic crisis and the intensified warnings that society is violating various planetary limits or ecological limits (Assembly, 2012). Green growth is part of economic development whereby the environmental degradation can undermine human well-being through various ways such as floods which can severely damage infrastructure, buildings, and farmland that consequently have high monetary effects on society (Svetlana et al., 2015). Over the years, policy makers have focused on actions that could facilitate green growth to cities as a means for catalyzing renewed economic growth and balancing environmental sustainability.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines urban green growth as a cohesion that facilitates both sustainable development and economy growth that lessens environmental impacts (OECD Factbook, 2013). Consequently, over a long-time frame, the reduction in the environmental impact will generate wealth (Simon & Leck, 2015). As such green growth is a positive interaction between economic efficiency and environmental objectives that is stimulated through urban policies and programmes in order to reduce negative environmental externalities.

The economic growths are driven by innovation, knowledge creation, human capital and investment in infrastructure (OECD Annual Report, 2009). The development of cities is characterized by continuous rapid urbanization that leads to unprecedented growth of industries (such as manufacturing) and increase in vehicles. This growth will contribute tremendously towards extraordinary urban sprawl and unpredictable environmental impacts. Thus, cities and urban communities will progressively turn into the essential focal point of governance balancing between economic growth, conflict over natural resources and environmental impacts. As such, urban green growth is pivotal as it has been estimated that 1.4 billion more people will live in cities with an increase from 45% in 2011 to 64.4% in 2050 (*Goal 11: Sustainable cities and communities* | UNDP). This scenario is similar to the strong urban shift due to progressive economic growth and urbanization that has further outpaces population growth in various developing countries such as Asia. However, achieving sustainable green growth is a big challenge, and among them are:

***(i) Green economy possibilities***

A rational and efficient land-use policy practices by the cities are crucial for green economy. A properly planned high-density area served by good transport links could also increase labor productivity and facilitate the uptake of creative solutions. The cities local and special area plans should contain detailed physical characteristics, including disaster vulnerability maps. This is to enable decision-makers for forming informed decisions on the types of economic and social activities that are allowed in specific localities. To increase the livability of a city and green of its environment, cities should create more public green and blue spaces (e.g., public beaches, riverbanks etc.). Besides that, a city green economy requires a public-transit oriented transportation system where the use of mass transit transport is improved for decreasing the number of private vehicles users.

Additional to that, cities in Asia should capitalize on its abundant sunlight and its growing solar panel manufacturing industry to increase the utilization of renewable energy. Apart from solar energy, biomass from agriculture or waste also provides a potential source of reliable energy. Based on statistics, 60-80% of cities budget is spent on solid waste management and therefore, the cities should adopt an innovative Waste Industry Plan to promote a better waste management regime as well as circular economy (Sreenivasan et al., 2012). The circular economy is where the existing extracted resources are continuously recycled and reused within the economy with minimal input of new raw materials into and minimal output of waste materials. On that account, addressing issues within the full cycle of waste can create new job and investment opportunities.

### ***(ii) Availability of reliable data***

Governance of environmental data is one of the most commented challenges in the study. There is a limited access to the sharing of these data between inter or intra departments. Nevertheless, green initiative can only be partially implemented with the lack of complete datasets and statistical information. The access to data is challenging despite high data availability, which in Malaysia it has become an area of concern among data users. In most circumstances, the legal framework is fragmented and poses an obstacle to availability of an increased open data as well as to sustained publication. Minor fees charged for data requests is inefficient and also act as a barrier (Zijlstra, Vaira, & Boothe, 2017). The absence of shared data is impeding the development of effective indicators. Additionally, this is a challenging issue as there is no single agency that is able to synchronize the large amounts of data from the various institutions. The collection of data on sustainable growth at the state or local level has been scant and data open to public is neither difficult to analyses nor user-friendly.

### ***(iii) Mainstreaming capacity building via cross departmental collaboration***

Public issues such as environmental and social are usually resolved efficiently by interaction among government organisations to improve effectiveness of their actions. This is usually referred to as cross-departmental collaboration that can be defined as “any joint activity by two or more agencies that is intended to increase public value by their working together rather than separately” (Bardach, 1998). Cross departmental collaboration is usually observed to boundary spanning management and takes different forms, depending on whether they are mandated by law, based on a formal agreement, or voluntary (Ouchi, 2019). However, there is limited cross-departmental collaboration and limited opportunities for different levels of government to share ideas and knowledge, especially pertaining to sustainable development and green growth. Various government agencies that involve different tiers of Government machinery need to practice collaboration to share and coordinate resources such as information, capabilities and authority to resolve challenges or arising issues by implementing policies together. Besides that, many scholars have identified capacity building as an imperative mechanism for equipping city stakeholders to build urban resilience and it is a critical element for improving responses to shocks be it form an economic or environmental challenges at the national, state and city level (Brown et al., 2012; Hardoy & Ruete, 2013). Thus, there is a strong need to identify creative ways of scaling up capacity building in order to equip city authorities to advance green growth.

#### ***(iv) Engaging the people***

There is a limited engagement effort with the people on the ground to ensure that any green initiative is undertaken for sustained green growth. The public participation is inhibited by the lack of capacity within the government departments, and also civil servants' lack of exposure to public relation as well as 'fear' to engage with people (Wamsler et al., 2020). In addition, public engagement is not a common practice in cities in Asia where the general public may not be furnished with adequate information and abilities to engage constructively in public consultation sessions. However, there are progressive cities in Asia that has introduces initiatives as a stepping stone for education departments to also incorporate green practices in academic syllabus as research shows that schools that embrace an ecological centre of focus demonstrate better academic performance across and over the educational programmes (*Document Display | NEPIS | US EPA*).

#### ***(v) Opportunity for public financing***

Revenues generated by cities around the world are deficient as the versatility of the revenue bases is constrained and most of the cities are often assisted financially by national or state governments through grants (Jonga, 2012). Thus, local governments or cities have limited financing sources, where there is an extensive dependency on land development. This restricts the functions of the government and promotes an extensive land development. Moreover, there is a lack of knowledge and information within the government entities regarding the various funding sources at private, national and international levels for funding opportunity to encourage green financing initiatives. This could also be indirectly related to the limited acknowledgement of Public-Private Partnership opportunity that emphasizes on both cities and private entities cooperate to address the balance between economy and the environment. Despite the available opportunity in Public-Private Partnership, it is emphasized by many research that the Public-Private Partnership objective and process in cities is a tool for infrastructure development (Ahmad et al., 2018) and as such the function of this partnership need to be revised and refined to suit the need for enabling green growth initiatives in cities.

## **Conclusion**

A sustainable and livable city is achievable only when the city manages to balance between both uncertain economy and environmental externalities in a resilient manner. This article concludes that integrating various elements in the policy context will facilitate the strategies to achieve urban green growth. The ultimate goal is the full realization of urban green growth

policies, which is custom-made based on respective city milieu that fits the character of the city. Eventually, this would enable outcomes leading to an efficient consumption of natural resources, climate resilience, green innovative economy and social inclusiveness.

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