



OBSTACLES TO ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS WHEN PREPARING STRATEGIC URBAN PLANS FOR EXISTING CITIES

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates challenges in implementing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within urban planning for existing cities, focusing on economic, environmental, and social dimensions. Through a mixed-methods approach that combines document analysis of over 30 studies (2018-2024) with an examination of Japan's SDG11 framework, the research reveals critical barriers: 78% of cities experience funding shortages for green infrastructure, 65% lack climate-resilient systems, and only 30% effectively include marginalized communities in planning processes. These findings demonstrate systemic interconnections between financial constraints, environmental vulnerabilities, and social exclusion. The study proposes integrated solutions, including innovative financing through public-private partnerships, the development of adaptive infrastructure, and the implementation of digital participatory platforms. By synthesizing empirical evidence with practical case studies, this research provides policymakers and urban planners with a comprehensive framework to overcome these obstacles. The results contribute to more equitable and resilient urban development strategies that align with SDG11 targets, offering actionable pathways to create sustainable, inclusive cities while addressing contemporary urban challenges

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KEYWORDS: Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Strategic Urban Planning, Urban Sustainability, Economic Challenges, Social Inequalities

العقبات أمام تحقيق أهداف التنمية المستدامة عند إعداد الخطط الحضرية الاستراتيجية للمدن القائمة

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المخلص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في التحديات التي تواجه تنفيذ أهداف التنمية المستدامة ضمن التخطيط الحضري للمدن القائمة ، مع التركيز على الأبعاد الاقتصادية والبيئية والاجتماعية. من خلال نهج مختلط الأساليب يجمع بين تحليل الوثائق لأكثر من ٣٠ دراسة (٢٠١٨-٢٠٢٤) وفحص إطار الهدف ١١ من أهداف التنمية المستدامة في اليابان ، يكشف البحث عن حواجز حرجية: ٧٨ ٪ من المدن تعاني من نقص في تمويل البنية التحتية الخضراء ، و ٦٥ ٪ تقتصر على

أنظمة مقاومة للمناخ ، و ٣٠ ٪ فقط تشمل بشكل فعال المجتمعات المهمشة في عمليات التخطيط. وتبين هذه النتائج وجود ترابط منهجي بين القيود المالية وأوجه الضعف البنيوية والاستبعاد الاجتماعي. تقترح الدراسة حولا متكاملة بما في ذلك التمويل المبتكر من خلال الشراكات بين القطاعين العام والخاص ، وتطوير البنية التحتية التكيفية ، وتنفيذ المنصات التشاركية الرقمية. من خلال تجميع الأدلة التجريبية مع دراسات الحالة العملية ، يوفر هذا البحث لواضعي السياسات والمخططين الحضريين إطارا شاملا للتغلب على هذه العقبات. تساهم النتائج في استراتيجيات تنمية حضرية أكثر إنصافا ومرونة تتماشى مع أهداف الهدف ١١ من أهداف التنمية المستدامة ، مما يوفر مسارات قابلة للتنفيذ لإنشاء مدن مستدامة وشاملة مع مواجهة التحديات الحضرية المعاصرة.

الكلمات المفتاحية : أهداف التنمية المستدامة، التخطيط الحضري الاستراتيجي، الاستدامة الحضرية، التحديات الاقتصادية، التفاوتات الاجتماعية.

1. INTRODUCTION

The United Nations introduced SDGs in 2015 to provide a worldwide plan for making our future sustainable for everyone. The goals work to solve key problems we face, including poverty, social gaps, global warming, and damage to the environment. Among them, SDG 11 emphasizes the need to "make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable." Urban areas, which house over half of the world's population and contribute significantly to global economic output, play a pivotal role in the realization of these goals.

Strategic urban planning has emerged as an essential tool in achieving sustainable urban development. However, integrating SDGs into the planning processes for existing cities poses significant challenges. Existing urban environments often grapple with systemic barriers such as outdated infrastructure, rapid urbanization, socio-economic disparities, and governance complexities [1]. Additionally, balancing competing priorities—such as economic growth, environmental sustainability, and social equity—frequently leads to trade-offs that hinder progress toward holistic sustainability [2].

Research underscores the critical role of participatory planning processes in addressing these challenges. Inclusive approaches, which engage stakeholders across various sectors, are vital for aligning urban projects with SDGs [3]. However, many cities face institutional constraints, resource limitations, and a lack of localized knowledge, making the implementation of SDGs particularly arduous [4]. Furthermore, the rapid pace of urbanization, especially in emerging economies, exacerbates these difficulties by increasing pressure on urban systems and infrastructure [5].

This research aims to investigate the obstacles to achieving SDGs during the preparation of strategic urban plans for existing cities. By examining systemic barriers, institutional constraints, and contextual challenges, the study seeks to provide actionable insights into how urban planning processes can be reoriented to better support sustainable development. The findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities involved and propose practical recommendations for policymakers, planners, and stakeholders engaged in urban development.

To address these questions, this study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative analysis. The initial phase consists of a systematic document analysis of over 30 academic studies and policy reports, complemented by an in-depth quantitative case study of Japan's SDG11 framework. Furthermore, the findings are validated by auditing urban plans from ten global cities and analyzing published interviews with international experts, ensuring data triangulation and analytical depth.

The principal findings reveal a series of critical and interconnected barriers: notably, 78% of cities experience funding shortages for green infrastructure, 65% lack climate-resilient systems, and only 30% of plans effectively include marginalized communities in their processes. The study argues that these are not isolated issues but systemic challenges demonstrating a deep interconnection between financial constraints, environmental vulnerability, and social exclusion. Consequently, this research proposes an integrated framework of actionable solutions, contributing to the formulation of more equitable and resilient urban development strategies.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches to systematically analyse obstacles to achieving SDG 11 in urban planning. The methodology is structured into four sequential phases:

2.1. Document Analysis

The main objective of this study is to identify the recurring barriers that hinder the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). To achieve this, a comprehensive and systematic review of academic literature and policy reports will be conducted to develop a deep understanding of the existing challenges.

The data collection process will rely on a diverse range of authoritative sources to ensure the research is comprehensive. These sources include over 30 peer-reviewed articles from leading databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, covering the period from 2018 to 2024. Additionally, the analysis will incorporate policy reports from key international organizations like UN-Habitat, the World Bank, and the OECD. The review will also examine national urban strategies, such as Japan's Local Development SDGs Indicator List, to gain practical insights.

Sources will be selected based on specific inclusion criteria, requiring a primary focus on SDG 11 or the broader topic of urban sustainability. Furthermore, selected literature must offer empirical or theoretical contributions that highlight economic, environmental, or social barriers. For the analysis, a thematic coding approach will be employed using NVivo 12 software to systematically categorize the identified obstacles.

The identified barriers will be classified into three main categories: Economic Barriers (e.g., funding gaps and inequitable resource allocation), Environmental Barriers (e.g., climate risks and infrastructure decay), and Social Barriers (e.g., social exclusion and weak stakeholder engagement). Moreover, a SWOT analysis will be conducted to evaluate broader systemic challenges, including the trade-offs between urbanization and social equity. This will provide a deeper understanding of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with the implementation of SDG 11.

2.2. Case Study Review: Japan's SDG11 Framework

This section is dedicated to an in-depth case study review of Japan's framework for implementing Sustainable Development Goal 11. The primary objective is to assess Japan's experience in localizing and applying SDG 11, positioning it as a leading model that can serve as an international best practice in this field.

To achieve this objective, the study will rely on a range of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include official documents from the Japanese government, most notably the list of 52 localized SDG 11 indicators [39], as well as prefectural reports such as Tokyo's Voluntary Local Review. Secondary sources will encompass peer-reviewed academic evaluations of Japan's governance model[32], to provide an independent critical analysis.

A multi-faceted quantitative analysis methodology will be applied to process the data. First, Principal Component Analysis (PCA) will be used to identify the key drivers and factors influencing the achievement of SDG 11 in Japan, such as the degree of urbanization and air quality. Second, Cluster Analysis will be conducted to classify Japan's 47 prefectures into homogeneous groups or typologies (e.g., "High Urbanization" regions), enabling a comparison of progress across different regions. Finally, Regression Models will be employed to test the correlations between key variables like urbanization, prefectural fiscal capacity, and quality of life indicators, adopting a statistical significance level of $p < 0.05$ to validate the results.

2.3. Stakeholder Synthesis

The objective at this stage is to validate and substantiate the findings by analyzing multi-stakeholder perspectives, which will be accomplished through an audit of urban policies and plans implemented in diverse global contexts.

To achieve this, a policy audit will be conducted by analyzing a sample of urban plans aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals. A sample of 10 cities was selected using a stratified sampling method to ensure diverse geographic and developmental representation. These cities include global examples such as Tokyo, Copenhagen, São Paulo, Cape Town, and Ahmedabad (for more details, see **Table 1**. Sampled Cities and SDG-Aligned Urban Plans).

These plans were selected based on precise and specific inclusion criteria to ensure their suitability for the study. The criteria required that the plans were published between 2018 and 2024 and demonstrated explicit alignment with the targets of SDG 11, particularly concerning the promotion of inclusivity and resilience. Furthermore, it was essential that their implementation reports were publicly available, allowing for a transparent and objective assessment of the progress made.

Table 1: Sampled Cities and SDG-Aligned Urban Plans

City	Country	Plan Title	SDG11 Focus Areas
Tokyo	Japan	Tokyo Sustainability Action, 2021	Resilient infrastructure, inclusive housing
Copenhagen	Denmark	Copenhagen Climate Plan, 2020	Carbon-neutrality, green public spaces
São Paulo	Brazil	Municipal Plan for Sustainable Development, 2020	Slum upgrading, transport equity
Cape Town	South Africa	Cape Town Resilience Strategy, 2019	Climate adaptation, informal settlement inclusion
Ahmedabad	India	Ahmedabad Urban Development Plan, 2021	Affordable housing, air quality
Barcelona	Spain	Barcelona Green Infrastructure Plan, 2020	Urban biodiversity, public space equity
Curitiba	Brazil	Curitiba: Integrated Urban Planning, 2018	Sustainable mobility, waste management
Vancouver	Canada	Vancouver Greenest City Action Plan, 2021	Zero-carbon buildings, green jobs
Nairobi	Kenya	Nairobi Integrated Urban Development Plan, 2023	Slum sanitation, disaster risk reduction
Melbourne	Australia	Melbourne Climate Change Adaptation Strategy, 2018	Heatwave mitigation, flood resilience

2.4 Expert Consultations: Secondary Data Analysis

To enrich the analysis and deepen the understanding of the barriers facing SDG 11, this study relies on expert consultations through the analysis of secondary data derived from published interviews. Precise selection criteria were established to ensure the quality and relevance of the sources. These criteria required that interviews be published between 2018 and 2024 in reliable sources, including peer-reviewed journals (e.g., Habitat International), official reports from international organizations (such as UN-Habitat and the World Bank), and reputable media platforms (like C40 Cities and ICLEI). Furthermore, it was ensured that the interviewees held relevant positions, such as urban planners, policymakers, and NGO leaders, and that the interviews explicitly discussed barriers to SDG 11 implementation or specific case studies like the Japanese framework.

Based on the preceding criteria, the final sample consisted of 10 interviews distributed as follows: 4 from academic publications containing interview transcripts with planners, 3 from institutional reports based on expert panel discussions, and 3 from media interviews with mayors. Pivotal cited interviews offer crucial insights, such as the statement by Maimunah Sharif, former Executive Director of UN-Habitat, who asserted that "SDG11 fails without local budgets," and the perspective of Yvonne Aki-Sawyer, Mayor of Freetown, who linked urban resilience to the need for data on informal settlements.

After collecting the transcripts, all interviews underwent a systematic analysis process using Thematic Coding in NVivo software. The same analytical framework used for the document analysis was applied, as detailed in **Table 2: Analytical Framework for SDG 11 Obstacles**, to classify excerpts into key themes: Economic (e.g., financing sustainable cities), Environmental (e.g., Cape Town's drought response), and Social (e.g., the participatory methods of Slum Dwellers International). In the final stage of analysis, a triangulation methodology was employed to ensure the reliability and depth of the findings. This involved comparing the themes derived from the expert interviews with the results of the primary document analysis, as well as with the metrics used in the Japanese case study.

Table 2: The analytical framework used for the document analysis

Dimension	Analysis Tool	Key Metrics
Economic	Thematic Coding	Funding gaps, PPP effectiveness [24], [5]
Environmental	SWOT Analysis	Climate resilience, green infrastructure [20], [19]
Social	Content Analysis	Inclusivity indices, participatory planning [30], [26]

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Strategic Planning and Sustainable Development

Sustainability, which gained attention in the 1970s and 1980s, emphasizes community health and long-term economic and environmental considerations. However, examples of sustainable urban development remain limited due to various barriers [6,7]. Measuring sustainability requires identifying indicators, methods, and benchmarks, while considering economic, human, and physical capital [8,9]. Effective planning ensures resource efficiency without compromising future generations and requires both short- and long-term strategies [10].

Traditional urban planning has faced challenges due to reliance on strict laws, leading to ineffective outcomes. Innovative methods, including community participation and addressing modern demands, are necessary [11]. Planning must promote cooperation, efficient resource use, and long-term impacts for sustainable urban development [10]. Developing practical tools for community involvement is essential to improve planning processes [12].

Strategic planning, adapted from business management, organizes decisions and actions to guide urban development [13]. Unlike master planning, it uses evidence-based approaches to shape future environments and encourages paradigm shifts to accommodate evolving aspirations [14]. Key questions include assessing the current situation, envisioning a desired future, and determining strategies to achieve goals [15]. Strategic planning requires communication, training, and the involvement of stakeholders, including NGOs and youth [16].

The process, illustrated by analyzing, visualizing, developing, and implementing, as shown in **Fig. 1**, fosters integrated urban development and collective commitment [17]. Success depends on cultural and political contexts, as well as the planning system [18]. Strategic planning aims to integrate spatial logic with sustainable development, land use, and governance, ultimately achieving defined objectives [18].

3.2 The Significance of Sustainable Urban Development

Sustainable urban development has emerged as a critical focus area in response to the multifaceted challenges posed by urbanization, socioeconomic activities, and environmental degradation [19]. Urban areas account for approximately 80% of the world's gross domestic product [20], yet they consume 75% of global resources, 65% of energy, and generate over 70% of carbon emissions [21]. The ecological footprint of urban environments—a metric for the resources required to sustain urban activities—continues to grow alarmingly [22,23]. Projections indicate that global urban areas will double in size by 2030 and that urban populations will constitute 68% of the global total by 2050, which may exceed the carrying capacity of many cities [24].

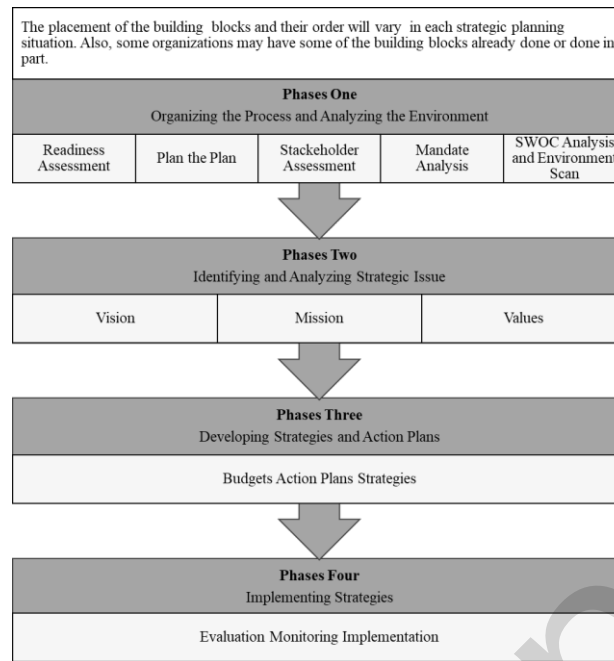


Fig. 1: The Building-Block View of Strategic Planning [15].

3.3 The Role of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were introduced in 2015 as a global framework to achieve equitable and sustainable development by 2030 [25]. Among these, SDG11 specifically addresses urban challenges by aiming to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable [26]. **Fig. 2** illustrates the conceptual linkage of keywords for integrating SDGs in cities. This goal emphasizes balancing economic productivity, environmental protection, and social inclusivity, marking a shift from traditional urban development paradigms that prioritized physical aesthetics over equity and context [26].

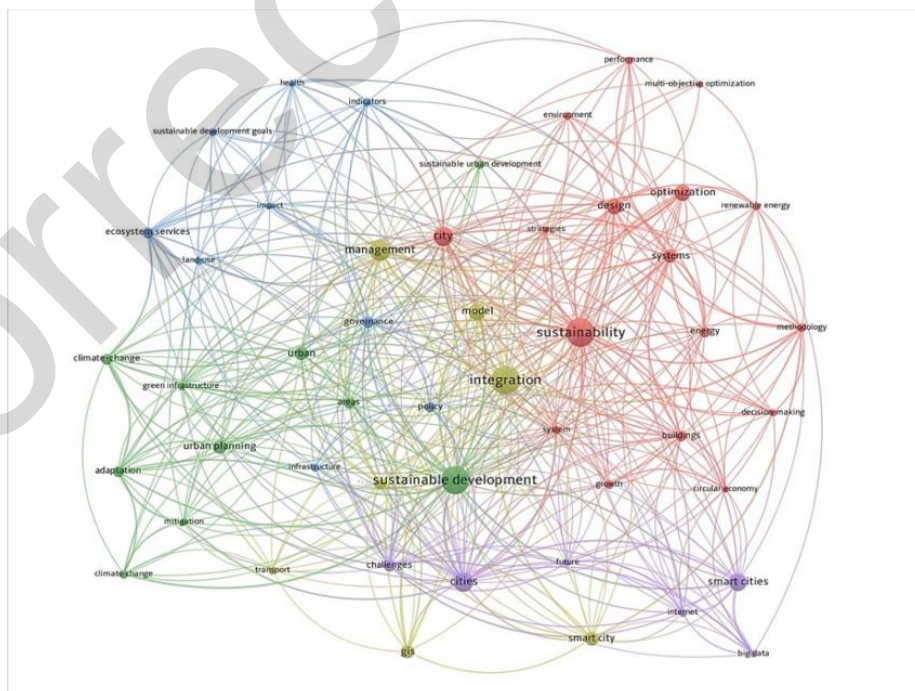


Fig. 2: The link between these keywords shows us how to include sustainable development goals in cities [33].

3.3.1 Principles of SDG11

SDG11 is grounded in three core principles:

- **Inclusivity:** We should give all people from different financial classes and cultural groups equal access to urban opportunities and resources. It seeks to address environmental inequities and promote fair urban development [26].
- **Safety:** Developing urban areas that provide security against potential risks, including natural disasters and human-induced crises [27].
- **Resilience:** Strengthening cities' ability to recover from adverse events and maintain functionality in the face of challenges [26].

3.3.2 Criticisms and challenges

Despite its ambitious goals, SDG11 faces significant criticisms. Key challenges include:

- Limited focus on urban inequalities and decentralization.
- Insufficient funding and resource allocation for local authorities.
- Difficulty in localizing universal indicators for effective implementation [28, 29]. as shown in Fig. 3 for a depiction of SDG11's targets, indicators, and connections to other SDGs.



Fig. 3: Sustainable development goals (SDGs), targets, and indicators in connection with SDG 11 [34].

3.4 Obstacles to Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

Achieving SDG11 requires overcoming several interconnected challenges, including accounting for how spillovers can impact cities' ability to achieve their SDG targets Fig. 4 . The solid bold arrows in the figure represent the immediate outcomes of local programs working toward SDGs. Dashed arrows rising upward show how local influences affect SDG development in unintentional ways. Endnote references use downward-pointing dashed arrows to show how activities spread from one region to others

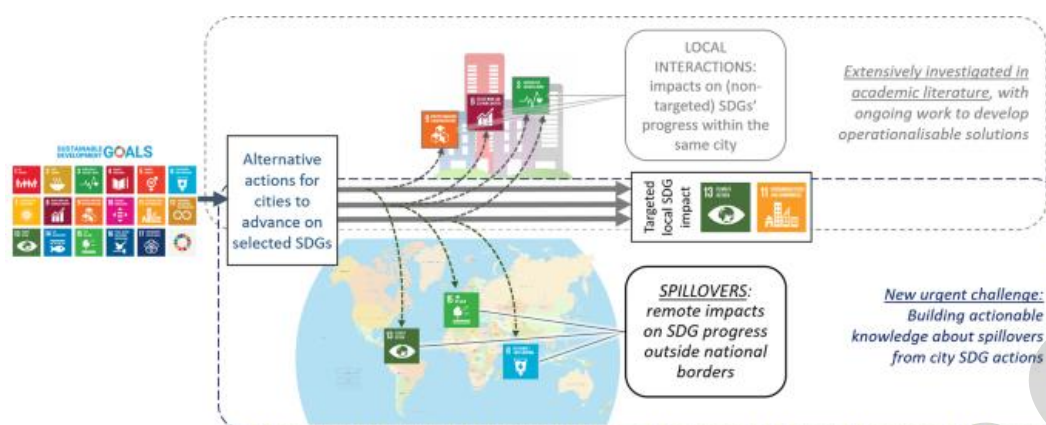


Fig. 4: The concept of spillovers impacts cities' ability to achieve their SDGs targets [35].

3.4.1 Affordable housing and infrastructure

Rapid urbanization has intensified the demand for affordable housing, green spaces, and essential infrastructure [19]. The proliferation of informal settlements highlights the gaps in urban planning and governance, with many urban dwellers lacking secure tenure and basic services [30].

3.4.2 Governance and resource allocation

Poor governance and inadequate investment in public infrastructure hinder the effective management of urban growth. Local governments often face a lack of human, technical, and financial resources, which undermines their ability to implement SDG11 targets [29].

3.4.3 Social inequalities and exclusion

Marginalized communities, including those in slums, face social exclusion and limited access to economic opportunities. Addressing these inequalities requires targeted policies that integrate social, environmental, and economic dimensions [31].

3.4.4 Climate change and urban resilience

Climate change raises the risk of urban areas by making disasters happen more often and become more damaging. Building resilient cities involves adopting adaptive infrastructure and promoting participatory urban planning to mitigate climate risks [27].

4. CASE STUDY REVIEW : JAPAN'S SDG11 FRAMEWORK AS A BEST-PRACTICE MODEL

Japan's approach to implementing Sustainable Development Goal 11 ("Sustainable Cities and Communities") serves as a best-practice model for integrating global sustainability targets into local governance structures [32]. highlights how Japan's adaptive governance framework successfully bridges the gap between national policy and local action. This success is founded on several key pillars, including the development of 52 localized SDG 11 indicators tailored to specific urban and rural challenges (such as aging populations, disaster resilience, and urban sprawl), the implementation of multi-level governance to ensure alignment between prefectural and municipal policies and national targets, and a reliance on robust statistical systems for data-driven decision-making.

The key success factors in the Japanese experience can be attributed to three integrated components. First, adaptive governance, which provides local governments with the flexibility to adjust their targets based on regional needs; for instance, while Tokyo prioritizes urbanization issues, rural prefectures focus on addressing depopulation. This approach also fosters effective stakeholder engagement among policymakers, businesses, and local communities. Second, integration with national policies, where Japan's Cabinet Office oversees the localization process, linking it to broader initiatives like the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and the Paris Agreement on climate action. Third, a reliance on advanced performance measurement,

utilizing analytical tools such as Principal Component Analysis (PCA) and cluster analysis to classify prefectures into different typologies (e.g., "High Urbanization" vs. "Rural Standard"), thereby allowing for tailored and effective interventions.

The Japanese experience offers valuable lessons for global practitioners, most notably its scalability; the model demonstrates how localized indicators can be replicated in other countries facing similar urban-rural divides. It also underscores the importance of an equity focus by addressing disparities, such as aging infrastructure in rural areas, to ensure no community is left behind. Despite its success, the model faces certain challenges, including the presence of data gaps at the municipal level and the inevitable trade-offs between urbanization, which boosts economic metrics, and the accompanying risks of environmental degradation, such as air pollution.

Building on the lessons learned from the Japanese model, several strategic recommendations can be proposed. First, adopt and adapt Japan's indicator framework by customizing SDG 11 metrics to fit different local contexts. Second, enhance participatory planning by involving marginalized groups in the target-setting process to ensure inclusivity. Finally, leverage modern technology, such as artificial intelligence (AI) and geographic information systems (GIS), to develop effective, real-time monitoring systems for tracking progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals.

CONCLUSIONS

The study's findings reveal interconnected systemic challenges hindering the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 11 (SDG 11), where a deficiency in one dimension exacerbates difficulties in others.

- **Economically:** Financial constraints represent not just a budget shortfall but a fundamental structural barrier limiting urban sustainability efforts, exacerbated by the inequitable distribution of resources. Overcoming this requires a shift toward innovative funding mechanisms (such as Public-Private Partnerships and green bonds), coupled with redirecting investments to enhance inclusivity in marginalized areas.
- **Environmentally:** Degraded infrastructure, coupled with escalating climate risks, poses a dual threat that undermines the resilience and adaptive capacity of urban systems. The solution lies in shifting from traditional repairs to investing in "adaptive infrastructure" that integrates nature-based solutions, requiring a fundamental integration of urban planning and environmental expertise.
- **Socially:** Weak stakeholder participation and the marginalization of certain groups confirm that inequality is not merely a symptom but a root cause hindering inclusive urban development. Achieving equity requires adopting inclusive planning processes that ensure all voices are heard through effective participatory tools.

In conclusion, these challenges are integrated and interconnected. Addressing them necessitates comprehensive solutions that transcend sectoral approaches and demand close collaboration among all stakeholders across the economic, environmental, and social dimensions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the identified challenges, the study proposes a set of integrated recommendations structured around four key areas:

1. **Economic and Financial:** Emphasis is placed on securing sustainable financing through innovative mechanisms such as Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) and the issuance of green bonds, while ensuring the equitable distribution of resources to reduce urban disparities.
2. **Environmental and Climatic:** The recommendations stress the importance of investing in climate-resilient infrastructure and promoting nature-based solutions, such as expanding green spaces and implementing circular economy practices.

3. **Social and Community:** The study calls for promoting inclusive community participation, particularly for marginalized groups, through participatory planning tools, along with expanding the provision of basic services and affordable housing in underserved areas.
4. **Institutional (Governance and Capacity Building):** Recommendations include strengthening multi-level governance for policy alignment, implementing data-driven monitoring using modern technologies, training personnel, and bridging the gap between research and policymaking to ensure informed decision-making.

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