

# BAKU DIALOGUES

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# Implementing Azerbaijan's New Urban Agenda

## The Case for Transformative Policymaking

*Anna Soave*

We live in a time of profound and rapid transformation. Trends and multifaceted challenges that have been gradually evolving in the past decade appear to be converging towards radical changes in the urban realm, driven by global geopolitical shifts, cultural dynamism, uneven socio-economic progress, the disruption of labor markets reshaped by the digital revolution, and emerging technological and scientific advancements. All these are, to make matters more even complex, topped by the drive to “go green” due to the increasing evidence of our overuse of finite natural resources and the vulnerability of our ecosystem to climate crisis, and thus to our own wellbeing.

Azerbaijan's comprehensive “Strategic Road Maps,” approved in 2016, set the basis for the country's aspirations towards the sustainability and competitiveness of its economic structure through the development of the non-oil sector and its human capital. The more recent policy and reform framework, titled “Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for Socio-Economic Development,” which was endorsed in 2021, spells out clean-cut priorities for the country aimed at stimulating the growth of its economy, fostering a dynamic, inclusive, and socially-just society, promoting the balanced development of the regions, encouraging innovation and creativity, guiding the return of internally displaced people (IDPs)

*Anna Soave is Head of UN-Habitat's Country Office in Azerbaijan with more than 25 years of international experience with a particular focus on post-conflict contexts, low-income informal settlements, and dilapidated historic neighborhoods. The views expressed in this essay are her own.*

to their areas of origin in the liberated territories, and promoting decarbonization.

### *National Urban Policy*

For Azerbaijan to achieve a more inclusive, balanced, and resilient socio-economic growth across its regions, including, most notably (given the topic of this article), resilient, sustainable, and inclusive “future-ready” cities, stakeholders agree that the country urgently needs to take two critical moves. First, to establish an enabling and interdisciplinary policy framework to improve coordination among different sectors and ministries. Second, to establish innovative collaboration platforms with the private sector and expert partners to address the country's current and projected urban challenges. In this way, it ought to be able to maximize the opportunities offered by urbanization whilst mitigating potential adverse externalities.

A National Urban Policy (NUP), which Azerbaijan does not currently

have, offers governments and policymakers such a framework and, at the same time, a mechanism for implementation. A NUP is a coherent set of decisions derived through a deliberate, government-led process of coordinating and rallying various actors for a common vision and goal that will promote more transformative, productive, inclusive, and resilient urban development in the long term.

Developing a NUP for Azerbaijan is expected to improve coordination and policy coherence between different sectors, compelling institutions to collaborate and share critical data. Establishing incentives for more sustainable, greener, and people-oriented approaches and practices, while strengthening urban-rural linkages through a more optimal allocation of resources, will help reduce urban and administrative disparities within and among regions, and thus support the operationalization of the country's long-term development framework spelled out by the “Azerbaijan 2030” document.

*A National Urban Policy (NUP) for Azerbaijan is a key to achieving more inclusive, balanced, and resilient socio-economic growth across its regions, including resilient, sustainable, and inclusive “future-ready” cities.*

Contextually, the NUP will also reflect the ongoing substantial investments in the physical and ecological recovery of the country's liberated territories (Karabakh and East Zangezur), which is critical for the resettlement of tens and ultimately hundreds of thousands of IDPs to their areas of origin, as well as the country's new ambitious commitment to fully explore its renewable energy potential.

The crafting of a NUP directly involves urban-related actors at all levels: the central government, local authorities, ministries and agencies, financing institutions, the private sector, academic institutions, registered civil society organizations, and so on. Such a collaborative and multi-stakeholder approach amply resonates with UN-Habitat's New Urban Agenda and United Nations member states' commitment to the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in particular SDG11 ("Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable").

In view of the series of consultation workshops taking place as part of the NUP undertaking, this paper would like to anticipate six forward-looking directions and crosscutting issues that Azerbaijan's NUP could explore to create tangible public value. While they should not be considered exhaustive, they can help stakeholders to determine the scope, drivers, and goals of the much-needed National Urban Policy for Azerbaijan.

### *Cross-Cutting Approaches and Principles*

A "Strategic Visioning for the Future" workshop held at ADA University in June 2024 kick-started the process to collaboratively identify the long-term intentions of the urban policy in alignment with Azerbaijan's national development agenda and its multilateral commitments. Ideally, Azerbaijan's NUP Vision will be able to embrace some, if not all, of the following eight cross-cutting approaches and principles.

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*Forward-looking and innovative.* Leveraging international experience and know-how to improve current policy and approaches that will enable the adoption of good urban planning and city management practices and new technologies more rapidly ("leapfrogging"). It should consider the country's aspiration to acquire regional influence in sectors that have the potential to positively impact demographic pull-factors, national and foreign investments, "green jobs," and future urban growth patterns.

*Equitable and inclusive.* Focused on poverty reduction and improving the quality of life in urban settlements that provide opportunities for all, aiming to eradicate the persistence of spatial socio-economic and environmental inequalities, particularly in rural villages and towns.

*Effective and adaptable.* Helping decisionmakers to seize opportunities and mitigate risks, enhancing resilience and adaptability to changing circumstances, as, for example, the reopening of borders and/or the inauguration of new regional connections (as security considerations allow). Contemporary urban policies should be able to evolve based on new evidence, ensuring they remain relevant and effective. Regular assessments can

identify areas for improvement and provide evidence of the policy's impact.

*Evidence-based and informed.* Leveraging technology, such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and data analytics, to enhance spatial mapping and enable more efficient and effective urban management of Baku and cities and towns located in other parts of the country. Academic research, case studies, and best practices from other cities and countries can provide valuable insights on what has worked elsewhere and how similar strategies can be adapted to local contexts.

*Coherent and mission-oriented.* Ensuring that urban policies are aligned with Azerbaijan's national and regional development goals, as well as international commitments (e.g. the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda), and focused on achieving specific, ambitious goals that address major societal challenges.

*Interdisciplinary and participative.* Fostering cooperation and partnerships between different levels and sectors of the Azerbaijan government, the private sector, academia, and other local stakeholders (e.g., registered civil society organizations) to ensure a

well-coordinated, coherent, and transparent urban policymaking process. With sufficient engagement from local communities during consultations, the resulting policy ought to stand a better chance of reflecting citizens' actual needs, thereby achieving extra attention and support.

*Relevant and sustainable.* To make sure that policy directives are relevant to the context and the needs of the country but also implementable by harnessing adequate inter-sectoral funding for effective policy implementation, ensuring that growth does not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their needs and aspirations.

*Building capacity and consensus.* By engaging practitioners and experts in public platforms where participants can share knowledge, good practice, and experiences. To this end, Azerbaijan's State Committee on Urban Planning and Architecture (SCUPA) has already successfully organized two National Urban Forums and will be hosting in Baku the thirteenth World Urban Forum (WUF13) in 2026.

### Connecting the Dots

In furtherance of the foregoing, Azerbaijan should inform its urban policymaking by taking into account six forward-looking directions. The first is what we call *connecting the dots*, namely enhancing the role of secondary urban centers in Azerbaijan's future development prospects.

Over the past 20 years, Azerbaijan has maintained a highly urbanized rate of 54 percent, characterized by marginal demographic growth and a persisting disparity between cities. As the political, cultural, and commercial capital of the country, Baku hosts over a quarter of its population (2.6 million), followed by the industrial city of Sumgayit (427,600, recorded by the State Statistics Committee) and the historic city of Ganja (330,700), while the rest of the cities and towns have less than 100,000 inhabitants each.

Despite progress, rural areas are still lagging behind. "Rebalancing the spatial distribution of socio-economic growth continues to be a key government policy goal," as the Asian Development Bank (ADB)

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put it in its mid-2024 *Azerbaijan National Urban Assessment* document, "which can only be achieved over time via a massive decentralization of investments. Baku is slated instead to continue its accelerated growth, boosted by the 2040 Master Plan and its investment program. Secondary cities still display constrained local economies, limited infrastructure, and aging built environments."

An Azerbaijan NUP will need to build consensus on how to implement integrated and more balanced territorial development plans, encouraging better connectivity and cooperation between cities and towns, enabling a better flow of people, products, services, and information, and strengthening supply chains—while taking full advantage of the competitive opportunities of their geographical location and enhancing their commercial, industrial, cultural, historic, social singularities, proximity to transportation corridors, and tourism potential.

The production of reliable spatial data would allow decisionmakers to prioritize investments and readjust policies and strategies as and where required. Any efforts towards administrative decentralization and financial devolution would have to be complemented by providing

capacity development to municipal governments and local health and education institutions.

Such measures would help to reduce urban and territorial disparities while increasing the role of small and intermediate cities and towns in enhancing food security and nutrition systems, strengthening human capital through youth upskilling and vocational training (TVET), and providing improved infrastructure including high-speed internet access that can encourage the setup of start-ups and small-medium enterprises (SMEs) as well as the multiplication of tourism initiatives in rural areas.

### The Right Kind of Future

The second urban policymaking direction involves *fostering a prosperous, sustainable, and inclusive future* for Baku and the Absheron Peninsula. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, the metropolitan area of Baku has experienced a profit-driven construction boom, especially in the real estate sector, which has dramatically transformed its urban skyline, land use, and density patterns, but also the extent of its built-up area and the quality of life of its citizens.

This has resulted in a number of acknowledged multi-faceted and interrelated challenges. One is the gentrification of the capital's traditional and low-income residential neighborhoods, where rundown and overcrowded two-floor buildings have been relentlessly torn down to make space for beautification projects, upmarket residential towers, glazed office buildings, shopping malls, and glitzy new hotels.

Another is the inefficient land usage and unplanned low-density urban sprawl across the Absheron Peninsula, where many homes and summer houses have been built over what is still listed as agricultural land.

A third is a high level of informality due to the population influx from the regions, lack of affordable and social housing, and decades of ineffective urban development control.

A fourth is the urgent need to retrofit and even reconstruct the deteriorating prefabricated *khrushchevki* housing blocks constructed in the 1950s and early 1960s.

A fifth is the inadequate and underfunded public transportation system, compounded by regular traffic jams in the city center and

along the city's main axes, which costs commuters and businesses valuable time and money.

A sixth is pressure on branding Baku as the main tourist destination in the region and location for international mega-events, which risks exceeding the capital's carrying capacity and negatively affecting residents.

A seventh is elevated levels of air pollution and land and lake water contamination, which affect human health, the economy, and the ecosystem.

And an eighth one is the insufficient attention provided to the mobility needs of children, women, older persons, and people with physical disabilities.

The new Baku Master Plan 2040, conceived by the Berlin-based architectural firm Albert Speer + Partner GmbH (AS+P) and approved in late 2023, charts an ambitious post-industrial transition towards a polycentric capital city supported by regional urban centers (Alat and Mardakan) and sub-centers strategically located at the edge of central Baku, improved connectivity with Sumgayit, a wider and more efficient public transportation system, a new impetus towards environmental protection,

remediation of contaminated land and lakes, the establishment of new public open spaces and "Hybrid Green Corridors," and the safeguarding of the capital's cultural and historical assets located downtown, within its Special Protection Zone. The Plan is designed to boost Baku's economic and cultural dynamism within a framework that enhances its livability, environmental sustainability, and inclusivity.

The success of these objectives depends on the government's capacity to mobilize the required \$55 billion funding envelope from public and private capital, as well as the political readiness of its local administration to direct investments toward human-centered and sustainable development. A clear pro-poor policy regarding the phased upgrading of underserved and low-income areas, along with the systematic regularization of selected informal settlements, could significantly alter the trajectory of Baku's metropolitan expansion, offering the chance to reduce spatial inequalities in line with SDG10 ("Reduce inequality within and among countries"), and help to preempt further unplanned growth and the loss of precious land that should be instead earmarked for public facilities and critical infrastructure. The planned rail station in Khirdalan Municipality on the

line extending to Sumgayit, for example, will have a transformative impact on this area, immediately improving access to jobs and services for thousands of families living in informal situations.

The early engagement of the designated authorities in policymaking will play an important role in the drafting of a set of Detailed Plans for the priority development areas indicated by the Master Plan 2040, where targeted investments could favor, for example, higher urban densities along transit-oriented development (TOD) axes.

### *Affordable Housing*

The third urban policymaking direction involves *improving access to decent and affordable housing while harnessing the full potential of the sector's value chain for growth*. Home ownership is very important for people in Azerbaijan. Statistics collected in 2023 indicated that over 96 percent of single-family detached homes and over 88 percent of apartments are privately owned. This represents a substantial shift from the 39 percent recorded in 1990, which in turn reflects the impact of successful housing privatization programs since the elimination of the state monopoly in the construction sector.

However, challenges remain, especially related to the maintenance of multi-family apartment buildings. The privatization of the apartment units built during the Soviet period—some dating back to the 1950s and aging very poorly—has transferred the burden of their maintenance to the owners, many of whom cannot afford essential upkeep of common services and spaces, let alone costly renovations. Hence, many households throughout the country live in dilapidated (and often hazardous) housing blocks serviced by deteriorating utilities. To complicate matters, the authorities have also acknowledged the fact that many of the high-rise buildings that were built since the 1990s may not comply with prevailing urban planning norms and standards, raising concerns over health and safety issues, including their physical solidity, in a country that is seismically active and in which many areas are prone to landslides during flash floods.

Although the real estate market in Baku has been growing steadily over the past two decades and overcrowding has been reduced, surveys indicate that there is a persistent disconnect between average salaries and housing pricing. The supply and demand mismatch, exacerbated

by the influx of IDPs, internal migrants, and foreign residents (and visitors), is affecting both the homeownership and rental markets, in particular for young households struggling to get on the property ladder.

Even properties constructed on plots without building permits or property deeds are becoming more expensive. The rental market remains underdeveloped, with many vacant apartments purchased as investment properties or inhabited by “ghost” tenants because landlords often prefer not to register rental contracts, effectively leaving tenants legally unprotected. Also, many do not feel the need to update their residence status, which contributes to distorting official population statistics and hampers the proper forecasting of basic service needs.

The country’s housing priorities are focused on ensuring that all Azerbaijani citizens have access to safe, decent, and affordable housing. Over the years, the government has taken a number of steps to alleviate the market pressure and address the population’s most pressing housing needs by improving the supply of affordable housing units in high-rise buildings through the State Housing Construction Agency (MIDA) at low-rate mortgage

loans. From 2000 to 2022, capital investment in housing averaged 7.3 percent, reduced to 5.7 in 2022 and 5.2 percent in 2023.

According to the State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan, the state built approximately 24,000 subsidized housing units in 2023, which represents an increase of 4.6 times compared to 1998. Also, recent data provided by the State Service on Property Issues showed positive progress in real estate registrations, thus addressing the severe administrative backlog that made the news in mid-2023 of homeowners in Baku and Absheron who possess municipal sale documents but cannot obtain a formal deed from the real estate register. In the meanwhile, SCUPA is investing in systematizing the issuance of construction permits through an electronic permit portal and strengthening building control.

In line with the New Urban Agenda, a comprehensive NUP should underline the social and ecological function of land, emphasizing the strong connection between poverty reduction and housing, land, and property (HLP). The NUP could help to reposition ‘Housing’ properly at the center of government policy in Azerbaijan, including its commitment to SDG11.

This could be done by focusing on at least six short and medium-term priorities: *one*, reducing the fragmentation of the institutional responsibilities related to the housing sector across multiple ministries and departments; *two*, recording the de facto land use changes from agricultural to residential and fast-tracking the registration of real estate property; *three*, investing in the upgrading and functionality of services, infrastructure, and open spaces of selected informal and under-serviced settlements to deliver adequate living standards and their spatial integration in the wider city, while protecting vulnerable citizens (including IDPs who may decide not to return to their areas of origin in the liberated areas of the country) against forced and arbitrary evictions; *four*, diversifying and expanding housing finance solutions for the delivery of affordable housing in favorably-located land, including loans for individual homes’ improvements; *five*, enabling and actively supporting private investments and the support of external partners for the rehabilitation and retrofitting of dilapidated multi-storey residential blocks, which could include establishing Private-Public Partnerships (PPPs) with Housing Associations; and *six*, improving the collection, analysis,

dissemination, and monitoring of spatial data on demographics, land, informality, and housing that can support a better understanding of the sector and offer the grounds for evidence-based forecasting and decisionmaking on public and private investments.

A longer-term policy directive could look into the transformative impact that enhancing the capacity of the housing value chain can play in the development of the entire sector and its contribution to the country's sustainable socio-economic growth. This is particularly the case given the substantial housing and infrastructure investments that the Azerbaijan government is making in the liberated areas to provide sustainable, dignified, resilient, and safe housing for all returnees—an essential component of the Vision of *Agenda 2030* to “leave no one behind”

Components of the housing value chain include improving the release of land for affordable housing and the timely provision of bulk infrastructure in planned extension of cities; encouraging the competitiveness of local industries to increase the domestic supply of construction materials and equipment reducing the environmental footprint of the sector;

and enhancing building standards by requiring Certifications in Seismic Resistance, Disability Access and Fire Safety.

In the same way, introducing “Green Certifications” can go a long way in improving energy efficiency, sustainable construction practices, and public awareness; and encouraging reuse processes that contribute to the circular economy, sector investments in innovation, and the adoption of emerging cutting-edge technologies in the construction industry—in line with Azerbaijan's commitments to SDG9 (“Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation”).

The widening of job opportunities through upskilling is also critical to the enhancement of the housing value chain. An overarching urban policy should also look into supporting the establishment of technical colleges offering vocational training for skilled and unskilled workers; developing the capacity of sector-wide as well as niche professionals; and imposing strict workplace health and safety standards and monitoring mechanisms to reduce hazards and fatal accidents in building sites.

## Resilience

The fourth urban policy-making direction involves *mainstreaming climate and disaster resilience into urban planning to future-proof Azerbaijani cities*. UNECE's 2023 Azerbaijan Environmental Performance Review (EPR), recognizes the country's progress in setting the conditions necessary for implementing the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Since the earlier EPR, Azerbaijan has updated its environmental policy framework, established cross-sectoral governance and institutional structures, and updated its environmental legislation.

Identified priority issues that relate to the urban sphere include the reinforcement of the environmental legal framework; strengthening environmental impact assessment (EIA) mechanisms; boosting strategic planning and implementation efforts to address air, water and soil pollution, and biodiversity loss; facilitating public participation in decisionmaking on environmental matters; enhancing access to environmental information; improving the strategic management of water

resources; and enabling waste recovery and recycling at source.

Azerbaijan's commitment to transition to a lower-carbon economy has been given an exceptional impetus in the lead-up to its chairing COP29. Keen to promote its strategic green energy projects to a captive global audience, Azerbaijan announced its intention

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to reduce emissions by 40 percent by 2050 as a voluntary commitment and is investing in a “Net Zero Emission” zone in the regained territories. The government's drive to “go

green” appears to be already positively influencing several sectors, including some of the worst greenhouse gas emitting “offenders” like transportation and construction where more accountable practices are emerging.

International experience shows that quality of education, skills building, innovation, and technology are essential for countries to leapfrog on the green transformation agenda and contribute to SDG13 (the one that links the 2030 Agenda with the COP process, placing the latter under the overall umbrella of the former). The main

challenge to fostering green growth is about how to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation and GHG emissions—particularly in the mindset of urban decisionmakers.

An overarching urban policy can have a strong role in enhancing the development of institutional capacity to create effective standards, regulations, and control; and establishing incentives for financing that can foster greener practices and investments in the construction sector—starting from certifications. The government has the unique opportunity to establish and deploy tools such as outcome-oriented procurement to achieve its ambitious goals.

An intersectoral urban policy can ensure that today’s attention to environmental resilience and sustainability in cities will be sustained in the long term by promoting the greening of urban infrastructure and public services. Its national scope can ensure that current efforts to improve, for example, solid waste management practices

in Baku are duly expanded to the country’s other cities and towns, developing the institutional, technical, and financial provisions to build much-needed transfer stations and landfill sites.

Similarly, cross-sectoral policy considerations on the management of water resources in urban settings could determine whether precious drinking water (the FAO indicates that Azerbaijan is among the 20 countries in the world that suffer most from water shortages) should be used for technical purposes, including agricultural usage, car washing, street cleaning, and park irrigation.

Improved local urban planning and targeted solutions that would help to mainstream climate change action and improve social and environmental equity between neighborhoods include: *one*, curbing low-density greenfield development in favor of brownfield and infill development within the city; *two*, applying nature-based solutions that will minimize the impact of flash-floods, particularly

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whether precious drinking water (the FAO indicates that Azerbaijan is among the 20 countries in the world that suffer most from water shortages) should be used for technical purposes, including agricultural usage, car

in low-income settlements; *three*, preventing the location of new settlements in hazard-prone areas to reduce people’s exposure to hazards and avoid future evictions or resettlement; *four*, mitigating the urban “heat island” effect by decreasing the number of vehicles on the roads, improving the design of buildings and choice of materials, introducing innovative materials, increasing tree cover over streets and sidewalks, multiplying greenery and water points in public spaces, introducing heat mitigating paint for roofs, and stripping out any unnecessary concrete and asphalt; and *five*, leveraging the capacity of urban forests, parks, and gardens to act as “carbon sinks,” absorbing carbon from the atmosphere.

Accordingly, the NUP could even determine the parameters for Azerbaijani cities to develop their own individual Climate Action Plans.

### Urban Health

The fifth urban policymaking direction involves *recognizing the value of healthy communities at the center of thriving and resilient cities*. The World Health Organization (WHO) and UN-Habitat recommend that health

and health equity should be central to the governance and planning of urban areas. However, health is largely absent in the policy narratives that shape master planning, housing, and transportation. A clear urban health focus could compel the relevant government institutions to collaborate in dealing with the multi-faceted linkages between health and poverty.

One of the main aspects to be addressed in urban settlements is people’s living conditions, which are affected by incidences of overcrowding, insufficient ventilation, poor sanitation, domestic hazards, toxic construction materials, substandard/unsafe housing structures, and noise that can disproportionately impact the well-being of older persons, women and girls.

Environmental factors also play a critical role in affecting people’s health, in particular those susceptible to asthma and other chronic respiratory diseases. Unfortunately, a wide range of areas in Baku remain afflicted by air pollution, and severe water and land contamination inherited by oil and chemical industries dating back to the Soviet period, which did not practice adequate environmental safeguards and are located dangerously close to human settlements.



Despite drastic remediation efforts and significant improvements, the legacy of industrial pollution still poses challenges. Stepping up commitments through a well-targeted policy would encourage collaborative action between urban planners, experts from the Ministries of Emergency Situations, Digital Development and Transportation, Ecology and Natural Resources, and research institutes to develop a concerted “Clean Air Action Plan” for Baku, Sumgayit, and a couple of other cities.

The distance between homes and public health facilities, poor road conditions, and physical barriers, such as highways, railways, and rivers, also affects people’s access to health. Improving road networks, strategizing the location of health services and public transportation routes, and offering reliable digital connectivity in both urban and rural areas will help to overcome the spatial inequalities that are at the forefront of the government’s regional and urban priorities.

Spatial considerations that can foster health and health equity in cities include the creation of better-connected places within the city that support healthy lifestyles, open-air physical activities, with local amenities and safe spaces

accessible to all, including children, women, older persons, and those with disabilities. Planners, designers, and real estate developers have a critical role in offering more socially inclusive and interactive places that can improve the overall quality of life for citizens, thus contributing to SDG3 (“Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages”).

Lastly, road safety is also a recognized matter of public health concern, as emphasized in the country’s ambitious State Program of Azerbaijan Republic on Road Safety for 2019-2023. Overall, the country has seen a radical improvement in the public transport system and road infrastructure in comparison to a decade ago, but with nearly 1,640 traffic accidents recorded in 2022 (52 percent resulting in fatalities)—of which 87 percent occurred within urban settlements and 40 percent between a vehicle and pedestrians—there is still scope for improvements.

A strong urban policy would help the government to reduce health vulnerabilities through the dissemination of data on harmful emissions, community involvement, and sustained action on how to decrease cardiovascular health risk and chronic kidney disease, which are increasingly associated with

exposure to heat waves. Hence, many cities have already developed a “Heat Action Plan” as part of their climate strategy, making the best use of cutting-edge technologies to enhance their geospatial data collection capacity so that they can produce accurate thermal imaging maps and reliable heat modeling scenarios.

### *Green Urban Mobility*

The sixth urban policymaking direction involves designing *green policies that encourage sustainable and people-centered urban mobility*. A steady increase in car ownership, along with decades of conventional urban planning and policies that prioritized car movements, under-investments in public transportation, the ill-advised dismantling of Absheron Circular Rail and tramway infrastructure in 2004, and the scattering of roles and responsibilities in this sector between multiple agencies, are at the core of the mobility challenges that Baku citizens face in their daily commutes and other urban travel activities. Outside of the capital, the limited share of railway transport and a relative lack of diversity in transportation means have also played a role in the excessive dependence on road transport for passengers and goods—ultimately

creating economic inefficiencies and bottlenecks.

As a result of structural reforms carried out not long ago, the Ministry of Digital Development and Transportation has implemented systematic measures to ensure the sector’s sustainability, reliability, safety, and compliance with modern standards—including expanding the use of information and communication technologies (ICT).

In an effort to improve the efficiency of public transport services, in 2023 the ministry created a digital twin of Baku, which is used to plan the latest infrastructure projects and optimize regular routes. Customized mobile applications have been launched to improve ticketing across the metro and bus network as well as electronic payments for street parking. The Baku Master Plan 2024 foresees a considerable increase of metro and suburban railway stations serving the capital and the surrounding Absheron Peninsula.

Also, since the announcement that Baku would host COP29, several overdue initiatives were finally launched—including the remodeling of the public space in front of the May 28 Metro Station (located in the heart of the city) the

purchase of a new fleet of electric buses, tightening the regulations of the taxi sector, establishing a network of bike lanes and bus routes, and the introduction of micromobility equipment.

Outside the capital and the Absheron peninsula, the government is investing heavily in the improvement of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway line that connects the Trans-European and Trans-Asian railway networks (Azerbaijan is indispensable to the optimization of the Middle Corridor), expanding the new Baku International Sea Trade Port, upgrading the capital's air cargo facilities, and rebuilding the damaged network of roads and highways in newly-liberated Karabakh and East Zangezur.

Cities around the world are adopting urban planning principles that prioritize mixed-use development, pedestrian-friendly spaces, and public transportation. This shift away from car dominance in the public realm is part of a broader movement toward making cities more sustainable, livable, and equitable. In Azerbaijan, this

transformation requires a combination of courageous policy changes, infrastructure investments, and a cultural shift that the NUP could support by advancing the understanding that mobility and traffic are two different problems and have different solutions.

Mobility is solved by investing in mass public transit and the equitable use of public space, whereas metro-

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politan traffic can only be addressed effectively by restricting the use of cars. Infamously, many capital cities that have invested in the past in wider roads suffer some of the world's worst traffic jams because "induced demand" tends to exaggerate

the benefits and underestimate the costs of building more roads. Car-centric cities tend to see also an increase of suburban sprawl.

From an urban policy point of view, car use restrictions can take many forms, and their applicability and success depend on contextual factors, public acceptability, and political will. The most obvious solutions are to increase parking restrictions in the public realm but also in private spaces. Today, many

urban regulations in other countries restrict or charge for the number of parking spaces new buildings offer. Another form of car use restriction used in other countries is the application of congestion charges in city centers, whose revenue can be invested in increasing the effectiveness of the public transport system.

People-centered mobility policies would not only mandate accessibility standards for all new public transport and infrastructure projects, but would also imply a radical overhaul of how the public realm is designed and managed. In many cities in other countries, local administration bodies and citizens are working together to rethink the shared use of streets and squares to favor social connectivity, economic growth, and environmental sustainability. The establishment of car-free pedestrian zones and low-speed zones in residential neighborhoods can also yield numerous benefits, including the reduction of road fatalities.

Mainstreaming inclusivity in city planning also implies the design of safer and better-conceived public spaces, high-quality sidewalks, and street-level safe pedestrian crossings that are accessible to all, including children, older persons, parents with baby strollers, and people with disabilities—particularly

wheelchair users and those with visual impairments.

An urban mobility policy aiming to be people-centered will encourage what we call the "mixity of uses," but also proximity and walkability within each neighborhood. This would allow residents to reach daily necessities and services, such as work, shopping, education, healthcare, and leisure by a short walk, bike ride, or public transit ride from any point in the city (as per the "15-minute city" concept).

Additionally, an urban mobility policy aiming to be people-centered will need to be "child responsive" and promote participatory design processes of public spaces and amenities. Children walking and playing outdoors alone should not be exclusive to rural areas, or memories of a distant past, but should be an indication of a safe, healthy city. There are numerous indications that this is already taking place in various neighborhoods in Baku.

### *Leaving No One, and No Place, Behind*

The formulation and implementation of urban policies are pivotal in shaping a sustainable future for our cities and making the

most of their potential. By adopting evidence-based, inclusive, and forward-looking approaches, policymakers can address the multifaceted challenges of urbanization. The integration of sustainability, technological advancements, and community engagement ensures that urban policies not only meet the immediate needs of the population but also pave the way for positive transformation.

As cities continue to evolve, urban policies must remain dynamic and responsive, fostering innovation and collaboration across all sectors

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and disciplines. Ultimately, the success of urban policymaking lies in its ability to create vibrant, equitable, and sustainable cities that enhance the quality of life for all residents, and thus, as the UN slogan goes, “leaving no one and no place behind.” Through continuous learning and adaptation, urban policies can serve as powerful tools for driving positive change and achieving long-term urban development goals and, in turn, contribute to the fulfillment of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including its climate action component. **BD**

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**COP29**  
Baku  
Azerbaijan

# COP29 Presidency Academic Partner and Host of COP29 Presidency Scientific Council



ADA University is proud to serve as the Academic Partner of Azerbaijan's COP29 Presidency. We are equally proud to serve as the host institution of the COP29 Presidency's Scientific Council, which is Co-chaired by Rector Hafiz Pashayev.

Both before, during, and after COP29, ADA University will host and organize scores of high-level and expert conferences, panel discussions, keynote lectures, and other types of COP-29-related events.



Members of the ADA University faculty, together with our Institute for Development and Diplomacy (IDD) colleagues, will participate in various COP29 activities, and many of our students will serve as volunteers during the conference.