



Policy Brief

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Navigating urban expansion: Viable options for sustainable cities in Tanzania

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Abstract

Tanzania's urban population is growing rapidly, threatening the sustainability of the country's cities and towns. To address these challenges, this study examined the adequacy and effectiveness of current frameworks for urban development in Tanzania with a focus on Dodoma, the national capital city. It found that Tanzania has multiple frameworks relevant to urban sustainability in place, but implementation is constrained by many factors, including lack of

institutional coordination and limited financial and human resources. Based on the findings, the study recommends establishment of a dedicated Urban Coordination Authority, review of outdated policies, and the strengthening of institutional capacity, monitoring and evaluation plans and enforcement mechanisms.

Introduction

What is a sustainable city?

A sustainable city refers to an urban area that is designed to balance the economic, social and environmental dimensions of development so as to meet the current and future needs of its population without causing ecological harm (UN-Habitat 2016; Li 2024). As such, sustainable cities are viewed as both drivers and products of socioeconomic development, as they ensure that urban growth is inclusive, resilient and future proof. Given their importance for development, “Sustainable Cities and Communities” is included as Goal 11 of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The status of urban development in Tanzania

Tanzania’s urban population is growing at a rapid pace, placing significant pressures on housing, infrastructure, services and the environment. In response, the Government has developed national frameworks with the objective of promoting sustainable urban growth, including the National Environmental Policy (2021), the National Human Settlements Development Policy (2000) and the

updated National Land Policy (2023).

However, despite the existence of these frameworks, urbanisation challenges are growing. The expansion of informal settlements, poor waste management and drainage systems, limited green spaces, traffic congestion and environmental degradation all threaten the sustainability of Tanzania’s cities and towns. To address these challenges, this study examined the adequacy and effectiveness of current frameworks for the development of sustainable cities in Tanzania, with a focus on Dodoma, the national capital city, which has been growing rapidly since 2016 following the official move of Government functions to the city.



Photo credit: Rashid Hamis Kindamba

Methodology

Guided by urban resilience and systems thinking theories, the research employed a cross-sectional case study design using a mixed methods approach. Data were collected between April and June 2025. Both primary and secondary data collection methods were used. The methods included: a document review, focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews at national and local levels, and a household survey questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered to 482 randomly selected households across 16 of the 41 wards of Dodoma City, which had been stratified into central business district (CBD), urban and peri-urban wards to examine the challenges facing different areas of the city.

Quantitative research methods were applied to investigate the status of urban services and the challenges for effective implementation of policies, laws and regulations related to the attainment of a sustainable city. Qualitative methods were used to examine what, how and why existing frameworks are not effective so as to understand factors and actors that facilitate or limit sustainability initiatives.



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Key Findings

The study identified a series of challenges that affected the implementation of Tanzania's current frameworks for the development of sustainable cities. These include:

Lack of effective institutional coordination

Urban development in Tanzania involves multiple central ministries, local government authorities (LGAs) and non-state actors, yet collaboration is often weak, leading to duplication of efforts and fragmented policy implementation.

Limited financial and human resources

Effective implementation of sustainable city initiatives is constrained by limited financial capacity due to competing national priorities and reliance on donor support. Most LGAs depend on soft loans and donor supports with limited revenues from own sources.

A shortage of skilled professionals (such as urban planners, environmental experts, data analysts and engineers) within LGAs and implementing institutions constrains project design, implementation and long-term maintenance of urban initiatives.

Inadequate awareness and knowledge

Many stakeholders at both national and local levels lack adequate training, exposure and awareness of sustainable city frameworks, green technologies and inclusive planning approaches. For example, the household survey found that two in three households (66.4 percent) in Dodoma City were not aware of laws related to urban sustainability. This gap leads to poor planning, weak enforcement of regulations and limited adoption of innovative solutions.

Lack of effective monitoring

Lack of robust monitoring and evaluation (M&E) mechanisms makes it difficult to assess progress toward sustainability targets or ensure accountability in framework implementation.

Limited institutional mandates

Some agencies and local authorities have restricted jurisdiction or limited autonomy in decision-making, which hinders effective implementation since many sustainability initiatives require cross-cutting authority.

Lack of implementation strategies

Some frameworks lack practical strategies, action plans and localised guidelines, which creates a gap between framework formulation and on-the-ground implementation.

Inadequacy of frameworks

Some existing frameworks and policies are outdated and do not comprehensively cover contemporary aspects of sustainable cities, such as climate resilience, social inclusion, clean energy and other green technologies.

Conflicting priorities

Most LGAs prioritise immediate service delivery (roads, water and healthcare) over long-term sustainability. This conflict undermines the integration of sustainable development objectives into local planning.

Status of sustainable city indicators in Dodoma

Major issues threatening the sustainability of Dodoma City include poor drainage systems, informal settlements and waste management. Lack of green/open spaces and affordable housing and limited use of clean energy sources also undermine the sustainability of the city.



Photo credit: man Nsamila

Policy Recommendations

To address the challenges identified which hinder the development of sustainable cities in Tanzania, the study offers the following policy recommendations for the consideration of Government stakeholders at the national and local levels.

1 Enhance institutional coordination

Establish a national Urban Coordination Authority (UCA) to reduce duplication, delays and conflicting interests in the design and implementation of urban sustainability initiatives.

2 Increase and diversify financial sources for sustainable cities

Develop a National Urban Investment Strategy to identify financing gaps, prioritise bankable projects and map funding sources, such as public budgets, private-public partnerships, municipal bonds, climate finance, donor grants and land value capture.

Pilot municipal revenue reforms, for example, property tax collection, service fees and retention of locally raised revenue.

3 Strengthen human resources capacity

Improve the technical skills and institutional knowledge for urban sustainability across all implementing bodies. This could be achieved through the development of national urban capacity building programmes or the introduction of continuous professional development for key personnel in sustainable city planning and implementation, such as planners and environmental officers in LGAs.

4 Review existing urban sustainability frameworks

Review and revise legislation/regulations that constrain LGA legal authority to implement urban sustainability initiatives (e.g., planning approvals, revenue retention, public-private contracting).

Introduce legal frameworks for integrated urban planning (in areas such as land use, transport,

waste and utilities) that mandate cross-sectoral coordination.

Review and update policies, laws and regulations to cover all dimensions of sustainability, including climate resilience, non-motorised transport, social inclusion, affordable housing and green infrastructure.



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Conclusion

Tanzania has frameworks for urban sustainability in place, but the meaningful implementation of city initiatives depends on effective coordination, adequate financing, sufficient technical capacity, inclusive participation, and the monitoring and enforcement of policies and programmes. By enhancing these aspects of the country's existing frameworks, the Government will accelerate the development of Dodoma and cities and towns throughout the country as resilient, socially inclusive, economically prosperous and environmentally friendly urban centres.

References

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