

Cities Lead Fight against Climate Change and for Renewable Energy, Global Report Reveals

“It might come as a surprise to some, but it is a pattern that we now find everywhere in the world: Cities are driving the transition towards renewable energy. They understand that renewables mean less lung and heart diseases, more local jobs and relief for the municipal budget,” says Rana Adib, REN21’s Executive Secretary, at the presentation of their first *Renewables in Cities 2019 Global Status Report (REC-GSR)* in Paris. “If cities alone were to decide, today’s climate and energy politics would look totally different.”

“Fossil fuel centered economies make it difficult for national governments to put climate concerns front and center, with the result that globally we are not on track to meet the Paris Agreement. This truth is hard to face. The *Emissions Gap Report 2019* that our partner UNEP releases today shows the harsh reality: countries collectively fail to stop growth in global greenhouse gas emissions. The gap between targets and reality is only growing. Deeper and faster cuts are required now, and cities can take climate action into their own hands,” says Rana Adib.

By November 2019, almost 1,200 jurisdictions and local governments in 23 countries had declared a state of climate emergency. Almost 10,000 have already adopted carbon emission reduction targets, many of which linked to renewable energy, notes the newly released report.

First ever Global Stock-taking of Cities’ Efforts to Transition to Renewable Energy

Many countries still expect that the implementation of 100% renewable energy systems will take several decades. Yet, there are plenty of cities in the world that already today source 100% of their electricity from renewables. Now, they are taking steps to expand their ambitions to get rid of fossil fuels in heating, cooling, transport and industry.

Kasese in Uganda is one of them and has committed to 100% renewable energy by 2020 already. The people of Kasese are known as the Banyarwenzururu which means people of the snow. “Our identity is rooted in the presence of the snow caps on mount Rwenzori. However, in the last decades the snow caps have been receding due to climate change. By choosing to champion renewable energy interventions at municipal level, Kasese Municipality hopes to conserve its peoples’ cultural heritage while making its contribution to climate change mitigation,” outlines the Mayor of the city, Godfrey Kabbyanga.

Renewables could Save Millions from Premature Death

“An important message from the report is that many cities understand that they are directly suffering from the burning of fossil fuels. Shifting to efficient and renewable energy systems is the only way out,” notes Adib.

One of the most powerful motivations is air pollution. Particles and other air pollutants from fossil fuels literally asphyxiate cities. They barely measure a fraction of the diameter of a human hair, but according to studies by the World Health Organisation, their presence above urban skies is responsible for millions of premature deaths and costs billions.

Mr. Ban Ki-Moon, former UN Secretary General and Chair of Korea's National Council on Climate and Air Quality underlines the link between burning of fossil fuel and citizens' health. "Unsustainable and reckless consumption of energy has led to concerning levels of air pollution, making it the fourth-largest threat to human health and the single biggest environmental health risk that we face today. Against this background, transition to a cleaner and more sustainable energy model is no longer a choice but a must. Cities can spearhead progress in combating air pollution, by implementing creative policies and incubating innovative ideas. We have the necessary means to pursue energy transition. All we need is the political and institutional will to make the transition into reality."

The burden of disease attributable to particulate matter in air is heaviest in low- and middle-income countries, particularly in the South-East Asia, Eastern Mediterranean, Western Pacific and African regions where the widespread use of polluting fuels and technologies for basic daily needs, such as cooking, heating and lighting have the highest level of household air pollution.

Many Cities in Developing Countries are Leaders in Renewable Expansion

"We can say that many benefits from renewables are the same all over the world," explains Adib. "But there are also differences. For cities in the developing world, renewable energy is the only way to expand energy access to all inhabitants, particularly those living in urban slums and informal settlements and in suburban and peri-urban areas."

Cape Town has the highest electrification rate in South Africa but thousands of households are in areas which are un-electrifiable because the land is illegally occupied or situated in a flood prone or restricted area. Poverty often causes households to not use electricity for part of the month. "While efforts to deliver housing are ongoing there is significant informality. Open flame technologies like candles and paraffin stoves are used. Devastating shack fires occur periodically causing deaths, injuries and displacement. Solar home systems are a safe and affordable alternative", explains Dan Plato, Mayor of Cape Town.

Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme, Inger Andersen, believes that "by avoiding resource depletion and pollution, and creating jobs, renewable energy is a common sense engine of social and economic development. As our cities expand, those built on a strong renewable energy base will thrive."

However, in many cities in developing countries, existing energy governance, market rules and access to finance still represent a major barrier to accelerate the development of renewables.

Renewables make Cities Resilient

Data in the report reveals that increased prosperity and living standards in cities cause a sheer insatiable hunger for energy. REN21 shows that 70% of all cities are affected by the impact of climate change already today. Says Adib: "If cities don't do something about the way they produce and use energy, they are going to wreak their own destruction. It's that simple and they know it. And with more than one billion people worldwide living in urban slums and informal settlements, the poorest will be the hardest hit. Storms would simply sweep them away. What cyclone Ida did to Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Malawi in spring this year, is likely to happen everywhere and more often in the future."

Keeping the energy infrastructure working, once the flood or storm arrives, is essential to secure continued operation of rescue services, hospitals and information systems. Businesses and industry invest in renewable energy to avoid disruptions. "We as a city in the global South are disproportionately affected. Collapsing transport and energy systems due to extreme weathers will cost us billions," explains Mxolisi Kaunda, Mayor of Durban, South Africa. "An energy system based on distributed and decentralised generation is more flexible and resilient to those central shocks which are becoming more frequent with climate change. That is why we in Durban have decided to go for it."

Participation at the Local Level Makes the Difference

“Another advantage of renewable energy is that it gives citizens a role in shaping the infrastructure,” says Mohamed Sefiani, Mayor of Chefchaouen in Morocco. “In our city, settled in a UNESCO national park, civil society has been actively working on environment and energy issues for decades. Selected officials, companies, representatives of the civil society worked together on a priority plan for sustainable energy.” “Cities can actively drive the fight against climate change at national and global level. They are able to tap into opportunities that other levels of government do not have, including a more direct relationship with local citizens and businesses,” notes Germany’s Minister for Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety, Svenja Schulze. “Citizen engagement and public pressure have raised cities’ level of ambition on renewables in many places around the world, reaping economic, social and environmental benefits.”

“Yet, it is important to emphasise that even the world’s largest cities with the most decision-making structure cannot replace national governments and their responsibility in fulfilling their commitments under the Paris Agreement. As the climate crisis unfolds, no one can hide,” Adib concludes.

The *Renewables in Cities 2019 Global Status Report* is the first in what is to become an annual stock-taking of the world’s cities transition to renewable energy. It aims to make data available, more standardised, easier to evaluate and compare. “We expect that it will be an important tool to document developments and consequences of the transition to renewable energy worldwide,” says Adib.

About REN21

REN21 is the only global community of renewable energy actors from science, academia, governments, intergovernmental organisations, NGOs and industry. We provide up-to-date facts, figures and peer-reviewed analysis of global developments in technology, policies and markets to decision-makers. Our goal: encourage and enable decision-makers to make the transition to renewable energy happen – now.

Regional Fact Sheets can be downloaded here: <https://rebrand.ly/ren21cities>

Media contact: Laura Williamson, Communication and Outreach Manager (+33 6 03 06 02 58)
communication@ren21.net