



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.

The Australian capital, Canberra, will from 2020 be the first in the Asia-Pacific region to produce or purchase the equivalent of their total electricity consumption from renewable sources. It is also among the many cities around the world who promote zero-emissions transport by providing fast-track lanes and free parking for electric vehicles.

To overcome space limitations to building new renewable generation capacity, some urban authorities even invest in projects outside of their own jurisdictions, using economies of scale to drive down the costs. Melbourne helped finance the construction of a 39-turbine wind farm some 180 kilometres north-west of the city centre. The project now supplies town halls, bank branches and street lighting around the city.

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. 92% of the population of Asia and the Pacific are exposed to levels of air pollution that pose a significant risk to their health. India is home to 22 of the 30 cities worldwide with the highest pollution levels. For China alone, the health costs amount to 1.4 trillion USD, the report says.

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, like what the Seoul Metropolitan Government is doing. We have the necessary means to pursue energy transition. All we need is the political and institutional will to make the transition into reality.”

Says Adib: “If Beijing sets a renewable energy target, it’s to considerably improve the quality of life in the city and to avoid spending more than 10% of the city’s GDP on health costs caused by 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.”

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.”

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’s report shows that 70% of all cities are already affected by the impact of climate change 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.”

Keeping the energy infrastructure working, once the flood or storm arrives, is essential to secure continued operation of rescue services, hospitals and information systems. The Kashiwa-no-ha Smart City district in Japan installed a storage facility that can ensure vital services to the community in case of disaster, including a large-scale lithium-ion battery and a solar PV system that can supply 60% of the community’s normal electricity consumption for three days. “Asia-Pacific is the most disaster-prone-region in the world. Energy systems based on decentralised renewable generation are more flexible and resilient to those central shocks which are becoming more frequent with climate change. Our report shows that cities understand that,” explains Adib.

Participation at the Local Level Makes the Difference

In recent years, the number of community energy projects using renewable sources have surged in various parts of the world. Although community energy is frequently associated with Northern European countries such as Denmark and Germany, such projects are emerging in other parts of the world including Thailand and Japan. This trend confirms that democracy is just as important as a driver for the energy transition as climate change.

“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>

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