

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 energy sector contributes 58% in the city’s greenhouse gas emissions,” says Horacio Rodriguez Larreta, Mayor of Argentina’s capital Buenos Aires. The America’s 4th largest metropolitan area is the home for nearly 16 million people. “We consider renewable energy as one of the most effective mitigation strategies against climate change by promoting the decarbonisation of the energy matrix. At the same time it provides a strong social consensus due to its co-benefits such as reducing environmental impacts, improving energy security and boosting the economic and social development,” Rodriguez Larreta explains.

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."

Even for Buenos Aires, air pollution calls for a fast development of renewable energy. Last year, activists climbed the 23 meter high statue located in front of the Argentine congress in Buenos Aires and placed a respirator mask on it putting a flashlight on the city's bad air quality and the lack of a proper measuring system. "We are overcoming numerous technological and legal barriers which will allow a greater participation of renewable not least at the local level, which is a key factor in achieving the ambitious goals of reducing emissions," says Horacio Rodriguez Larreta.

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." In 2017 the Coastal Niño was the worst to hit South America since 1925 leaving approximately 178,000 people homeless in Peru alone. More than 2,500 kilometers of roads were destroyed and an estimated 1.1 million people have been directly affected by the floods. Rainstorms and floods of this magnitude are likely to happen all over the South American continent.

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. Says Horacio Rodriguez Larreta, Mayor of Buenos Aires: “Renewable energy production reduces the risks and strengthens the electricity grid in a changing climate scenario, and, in the case of distributed generation, it contributes to the reduction of the load on the transport and energy distribution systems.”

Participation at the Local Level Makes the Difference

“We also see that renewables contribute to the socio-cultural transformation to reaffirm individual and collective commitment in environmental care and particularly in the fight against climate change”, says Rodriguez Larreta. “The promotion of renewables even generates opportunities for public-private collaboration.”

“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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