

Case Report

# Rethinking Urban Policy: From Global Standards to Local Solutions - Tailoring Urban Growth: Lessons from Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt's National Urban Policies

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## Abstract

This paper offers a critical appraisal of the UN-Habitat National Urban Policy (NUP) framework through a comparative case study of Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt, grounding its arguments in a close reading of policy documents and institutional reviews, as well as a contextual analysis of on-the-ground challenges and opportunities. Motivated by rapid urbanization, mounting informality, environmental stress, and region-specific pressures, such as political instability in Lebanon, refugee inflows in Lebanon and Jordan, acute water scarcity in Jordan, and massive metropolitan growth in Egypt, the study interrogates whether a globally framed NUP can adequately respond to highly differentiated national and sub-national realities. Using a tripartite comparative method, the paper traces each country's NUP development and implementation trajectory (Lebanon's protracted process since 2005/2010, Jordan's 2018–2022 formulation, and Egypt's 2017–2020 program), highlights recurrent weaknesses such as top-down design, limited engagement with demographic dynamics, poor data and monitoring systems, unclear local fiscal space, fragmented governance, and the sidelining of informal settlements, and identifies context-specific pressures that expose the framework's limitations, including frequent cabinet turnover and fiscal crisis in Lebanon; refugee-driven service burdens and water stress in Jordan; and scale, informality and institutional fragmentation in Egypt. The evidence indicates that while the NUP offers useful organizing principles for inclusive, resilient, and sustainable urbanization, its one-size-fits-all approach risks reinforcing existing inequalities and implementation gaps unless it is adapted to local realities. The paper concludes by arguing for a recalibrated approach: making NUPs more context-sensitive, integrating demographic and fiscal diagnostics, strengthening local capacities and meaningful community participation, and adopting spatially coherent territorial planning to translate global goals into locally effective and equitable urban outcomes.

## Keywords

National Urban Policy, Urban Governance, Informality, Territorial Planning, Institutional Capacity, Urban Resilience, Middle East and North Africa, Comparative Urban Policy

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## 1. Introduction

Urbanization is not just a local phenomenon but a significant global trend. With over 55% of the world's population living in urban areas, projected to rise to 68% by 2050, the need for effective urban policy and planning is more pressing than ever [1]. With more than half of the world's population now residing in urban areas, the need for effective urban planning and sustainable development has never been more pressing. With its comprehensive approach, the UN-Habitat Urban Policy framework is a global solution to this global challenge [2]. The UN-Habitat Urban Policy Framework aims to be a local initiative and a global force shaping our cities' future. This initiative is about creating cities and inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable communities. It provides guidance and a platform for national and local governments to take the lead in shaping their urban landscapes. Therefore, it should empower governments to make a real difference in their citizens' lives, recognizing their crucial role in implementing the framework. The UN-Habitat Urban Policy Framework ought to be a beacon of hope, offering a path towards a brighter, more sustainable urban future [3].

The development of UN-Habitat's National Urban Policy (NUP) involves a structured process to promote comprehensive and sustainable urban development. This process starts with a thorough urban assessment covering demographics, economy, infrastructure, housing, environment, and governance. Stakeholder consultations, including government, local authorities, civil society, the private sector, academia, practitioners, and communities, are crucial to gathering diverse perspectives and identifying key urban issues and priorities. This is followed by the policy formulation phase, which starts with a vision for urban development aligned with national goals and international commitments, such as the SDGs [4], and sets specific objectives to guide the NUP. A comprehensive policy framework outlines strategic directions, principles, and guidelines for land-use planning, housing, transportation, infrastructure, the environment, resilience, and social inclusion. This phase also involves assessing various policy options and strategies, using international best practices and innovative approaches tailored to the country's context.

Developing the NUP involves thoroughly reviewing urban laws and institutions to identify gaps and inconsistencies. The review helps recommend reforms to ensure effective policy implementation. At the same time, it aims to strengthen national, regional, and local institutional capacities for efficient urban management, including developing technical skills, fostering inter-agency collaboration, and establishing clear governance structures. An in-depth action plan tailored to the implementation process should specify activities, timelines, responsible parties, and required resources. Priorities are determined by feasibility, urgency, and potential impact, with monitoring and evaluation frameworks to track progress, measure outcomes, and adjust strategies as needed. Financial planning focuses on resource mobilization, including domestic budgets,

international aid, partnerships, and innovative financing. Cost-benefit analyses are used to optimize resource allocation and ensure efficient financial management. Effective communication and public engagement are crucial for raising awareness of the NUP. Securing political commitment and leadership is essential for endorsement and adoption, often requiring parliamentary approval. Pilot projects and demonstration initiatives are undertaken to test policy interventions and highlight successful outcomes, paving the way for scaling up.

*Despite its promise, the NUP In Kenya, the NUP framework has been used in Nairobi to guide slum upgrading programs and improve access to basic services, whereas, in India, NUP has helped cities like Mumbai promote strategies for managing congestion and supporting economic growth through better infrastructure; however, it has been applied in countries like Brazil, where innovative housing policies and community engagement initiatives in favelas (informal settlements) have aimed at improving living conditions. Furthermore, the framework has guided cities such as Copenhagen, Denmark, and Vancouver, Canada, to leverage technology and green solutions to reduce carbon emissions and enhance urban life. Moreover, in conflict and post-conflict zones, the framework focuses on urban reconstruction and peacebuilding; for example, in Syria, the policy has been used to guide rebuilding efforts in cities like Aleppo, prioritizing both physical infrastructure and social cohesion [11].*

The NUP framework should not be a one-size-fits-all solution but a versatile tool tailored to the specific needs and challenges of different regions. For instance, in Africa, it focuses on improving living conditions in rapidly growing cities, addressing informal settlements, inadequate infrastructure, and urban poverty [5, 6]. In Asia, the policy supports cities in managing the pressures of high-density populations, aiming to improve public transportation systems, reduce environmental impact, and promote economic growth [7]. In Latin America, the emphasis is on fostering social inclusion and reducing urban inequalities through innovative housing policies and community engagement [4, 8]. In Europe and North America, where urbanization is more established, policies focus on sustainability and smart city initiatives, leveraging technology to improve urban life while reducing carbon footprints [6, 9]. In the Middle East (ME), the policy addresses the challenges of conflict and post-conflict reconstruction, aiming to rebuild cities that promote peace, stability, and long-term development [10].

Nevertheless, while the NUP framework shows promise, it faces significant criticisms, particularly its top-down approach and insufficient involvement of key decision-making players. This exclusion and abstraction weaken the framework's inclusivity, prioritizing economic growth and infrastructure development over social equity, environmental sustainability, and resilience. Such an imbalance often worsens inequalities and

accelerates environmental degradation in urban areas, particularly in developing countries where political instability, inconsistent policy priorities, and a lack of robust accountability mechanisms further hinder effective implementation [8]. NUP's reliance on predefined indicators and targets can overlook the specific needs for context sensitivity at regional and local levels and for diverse urban populations, particularly those in poor or informal settlements, which house many of the world's urban populations. These communities often lack access to basic services, job opportunities, and secure land tenure, making them vulnerable to the negative impacts of rapid urbanization; there is concern that the NUP outcomes may reinforce the existing situation.

Given these concerns, a critical assessment of NUP's outcomes is necessary to evaluate whether NUP's support has effectively integrated the framework to foster comprehensive, sustainable urban development. This evaluation should consider NUP's real-world impact, particularly its role in promoting inclusive, resilient growth across regions facing unique challenges. Participatory research methods focusing on the voices of marginalized communities would provide a more nuanced understanding of the framework's successes and shortcomings. A shift towards more context-sensitive, participatory urban planning that empowers local communities and balances economic, social, and environmental priorities is essential for achieving genuinely sustainable and equitable urban development on a global scale.

The following section shall examine the experiences of countries that have received support from the UN-Habitat's NUP framework to understand better the tangible impacts and effectiveness of these urban development strategies. This analysis will provide valuable insights into how well the NUP framework addresses the unique challenges across regions and whether it effectively promotes inclusive, sustainable, and resilient urban growth. Consequently, the selected case studies from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries that have benefited from NUP support offer a rich ground for evaluating the framework's success and identifying best practices that can be replicated in other contexts.

## 2. Case Studies Selected Criteria

While Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are interesting cases with urbanization rates of around 84% and 86%, respectively, and offer excellent examples of the challenges and opportunities of urban development policies, neither country was supported by the UN-Habitat's NUP framework. In contrast, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt have the advantage of NUP support, making them exemplary cases for assessing NUP effectiveness. They stand out as compelling cases to assess the effectiveness of NUP due to their diverse urban challenges, policy development efforts, regional relevance, and international collaboration.

*Both KSA and UAE have harsh desert climates that exacerbate environmental issues, such as water scarcity and high*

*energy consumption. Urban areas face challenges related to sustainability and reducing carbon footprints. Rapid population growth strains infrastructure and public services, requiring continual upgrades and expansion to meet demand. Nevertheless, both are committed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and possess a clear vision to diversify the economy and reduce dependence on oil. Huge investments in urban development, technology, and smart-city know-how, along with efforts to transform cities into cultural and entertainment hubs, offer opportunities for economic diversification and enhanced quality of life for residents [12].*

Selected countries offer valuable case studies for assessing the effectiveness of the NUP due to diverse urban challenges: "infrastructure deficits, refugee integration, rapid urbanization, policy development and implementation efforts" with UN-Habitat support, regional relevance, the MENA context, and international collaboration, e.g., World Bank and regional banks. Their experiences provide crucial insights into NUP's impact and inform global urban policy. By evaluating the implementation and outcomes of their NUPs, insights into successful way-forward strategies for promoting sustainable urban development and addressing unpredictable urban challenges in similar contexts worldwide could be gained.

Comparative analysis of these countries' NUPs, focusing on specific policy instruments (e.g., land management, housing policies, public transportation strategies), can reveal best practices and areas needing improvement. This includes evaluating the effectiveness of institutional frameworks, financial mechanisms, and monitoring systems in achieving stated NUP goals. Furthermore, analyzing the role of different stakeholders in policy formulation and implementation is vital to understanding the successes and failures of each NUP. A comprehensive assessment across Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt can contribute significantly to developing more robust and effective national urban policies globally, particularly in contexts facing similar socio-economic and environmental pressures.

### 2.1. Lebanon

The Lebanon National Urban Policy (NUP) initiative, supported by UN-Habitat, began development in early 2010, even though the initiative started at the end of 2005. The process was part of a broader effort by UN-Habitat to assist countries in developing comprehensive urban policies to address the challenges of rapid urbanization and promote sustainable urban development [13]. The Lebanon NUP was formulated with various stakeholders, including government agencies, local authorities, civil society organizations, and international partners. The policy aims to address key urban challenges such as infrastructure deficiencies, informal settlements, and the impact of the refugee crisis while also focusing on resilience, sustainability, and inclusive development.

The preparation of Lebanon's NUP has faced several significant challenges, compounded by the country's unique socio-

political and economic context. Lebanon has a history of political instability, which severely impacts the ability to plan and implement long-term policies [14]. Between 2005 and 2020, the country experienced 12 cabinets, resulting in frequent government changes that disrupted policy continuity and implementation. During this time, the infrastructure was significantly outdated and insufficient [15]. The country hosts a huge number of Syrian refugees, making it the country with the highest per capita concentration of refugees in the world [16]. This influx has put immense pressure on urban infrastructure, housing, and public services, leading a substantial portion of Lebanon's urban population to live in informal settlements.

*Beirut suffers from chronic electricity shortages, with daily power cuts ranging from 3 to 12 hours, and only about 8% of the population has access to improved sanitation facilities, highlighting the urgent need for infrastructural upgrades [15]. Approximately 53% of urban dwellers are estimated to reside in these areas, which often lack basic services such as clean water, sanitation, and electricity. Integrating these settlements into formal urban planning poses a significant challenge [17].*

Urban areas in Lebanon face significant environmental challenges. Beirut, for instance, suffers from high levels of air pollution, often exceeding the World Health Organization's recommended limits [18]. Additionally, the country is highly vulnerable to natural disasters, such as floods and earthquakes, which exacerbate urban environmental issues [19]. Accurate data were essential for effective urban policy, yet Lebanon faces significant deficiencies. The lack of reliable urban data and statistics hampers the ability to make informed decisions. Fiscal deficits, which stood at around 11% of GDP in 2019, limit the availability of financial resources necessary for comprehensive urban policy development [20]. The assessment's findings highlight the main challenges and opportunities below.

### 2.1.1. Challenges

- 1) The findings of the NUP highlight that Lebanon's political instability and ongoing economic crises create significant hurdles for effective urban planning and policy implementation. The capital, Beirut, has been particularly impacted by these issues, complicating efforts to establish a cohesive urban development strategy.
- 2) The NUP identifies that Lebanon's urban infrastructure is often outdated and insufficient to accommodate a growing population. Challenges such as power shortages, inadequate waste management systems, and inefficient public transportation persist and require urgent attention and investment.
- 3) The NUP findings indicate that Lebanon's status as a host country for many refugees further strains urban resources and infrastructure. The challenge of integrating refugees into urban areas while fostering social cohesion

remains a critical issue that requires comprehensive policy frameworks.

### 2.1.2. Opportunities

- 1) This UN-Habitat-supported initiative, identified by the NUP, strengthens Beirut's resilience through improved infrastructure, disaster preparedness, and urban governance, strategically enabling urban revitalization.
- 2) The findings from the NUP emphasize the potential of urban renewal initiatives aimed at rebuilding and modernizing cities, such as Beirut. These projects present opportunities for economic growth and improved urban living conditions, with initiatives like the Beirut Digital District to transform the city into a technology hub.
- 3) The NUP underscores the importance of community-driven urban development, with local NGOs and civil society organizations playing a vital role in urban planning and providing social support services. This focus on participatory governance offers opportunities to enhance the effectiveness and inclusivity of urban policies.

### 2.1.3. Conclusion

The NUP for Lebanon has notably overlooked the critical aspect of population dynamics. During the formulation phase, there was an evident lack of focus on demographic trends and the evolving needs of the population. This oversight means the policies do not adequately address the shifting age structures, migration patterns, and population growth rates that are essential to planning sustainable urban development. Incorporating a comprehensive analysis of population dynamics is crucial to creating responsive, adaptive urban policies that meet the future demands of Lebanon's urban and rural areas.

Lebanon's NUP falls short of fostering the development of a spatially coherent territory that promotes a balanced system of human settlements. The current framework focuses on cities and towns along the urban-peri-urban-rural continuum, yet fails to ensure an integrated approach to territorial development. This lack of spatial coherence led to uneven development, with some areas experiencing rapid urbanization while others remain underdeveloped. A more balanced and inclusive territorial development strategy is needed to ensure that all regions benefit from urban policies, promoting equitable growth and reducing regional disparities.

A significant gap in Lebanon's NUP is its failure to address the concept of local fiscal space adequately. Local governments often struggle with limited financial resources, which hampers their ability to implement and sustain urban development initiatives effectively. The NUP should prioritize creating mechanisms to enhance local governments' fiscal capacity, ensuring they have sufficient resources to fulfill their responsibilities. This includes exploring innovative financing options, improving local revenue generation, and ensuring equitable distribution of national funds. Strengthening local fiscal space is essential to empowering local authorities to drive sustainable urban development and improve their communities'

quality of life.

*Despite its promise, the NUP framework has come under criticism for its top-down approach, which excludes key players. This prioritization of economic growth over social equity and environmental sustainability worsens inequalities, especially in developing countries that need robust implementation mechanisms. Predefined indicators neglect the context-specific needs of diverse urban populations, particularly vulnerable communities in informal settlements lacking basic services and secure tenure.*

## 2.2. Jordan

Jordan's National Urban Policy (NUP), developed with UN-Habitat support from 2018 to 2022, addresses urbanization challenges through collaborative stakeholder engagement, including government, local authorities, civil society, and international partners to promote sustainable, resilient, and inclusive urban development [21]. It tackles infrastructure deficits, housing shortages, and population growth pressures.

The development of Jordan's NUP has faced several challenges deeply rooted in the country's socio-political and economic context. Jordan has a history of geopolitical tensions and economic instability, which complicates the implementation of long-term urban policies. The influx of Syrian refugees since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war has significantly impacted the country, increasing the demand for housing and public services and straining urban infrastructure [16]. As a result, many urban areas in Jordan have seen a rise in informal settlements, where residents often lack adequate access to basic services.

Urban areas in Jordan, especially densely populated cities like Amman, face several environmental challenges. The country deals with high air pollution and water scarcity, worsened by rapid urban growth and climate change. Despite the urgent need for data-driven urban policies, Jordan struggles with data gaps that hinder effective planning and decision-making. Urban planning in Jordan requires coordination among multiple stakeholders, including various government agencies and local authorities. However, bureaucratic inefficiencies and overlapping responsibilities can complicate efforts to create a coherent and unified urban policy. The assessment's findings highlight the main challenges and opportunities below.

### 2.2.1. Challenges

- 1) Jordan has been significantly impacted by the influx of refugees, particularly from Syria. Due to the large refugee population, cities like Amman and Irbid face increased pressure on housing, infrastructure, and public services.
- 2) Jordan is one of the most water-scarce countries in the world. Urban areas struggle with ensuring an adequate and reliable water supply, exacerbating challenges related to urban sustainability.

- 3) Rapid urbanization and the refugee influx have led to housing shortages, increasing the demand for affordable and adequate housing solutions.

### 2.2.2. Opportunities

- 1) Key initiatives include developing integrated urban plans incorporating refugee settlements into the broader urban fabric, promoting social cohesion, and equitable access to resources. These plans often involve infrastructure upgrades, improved public transportation, and the creation of shared public spaces.
- 2) Jordan's NUP, developed with UN-Habitat's support, focuses on sustainable urban development, infrastructure improvement, and economic diversification to create resilient and inclusive cities.
- 3) Urban areas increasingly emphasize sustainable construction and green building practices. Initiatives such as the Jordan Green Building Council promote environmentally friendly, energy-efficient building standards [22].
- 4) The government, supported by UN-Habitat and other international partners, promotes sustainable livelihoods and economic opportunities for both refugees and Jordanians, mitigating the potential for social tension and fostering economic integration. This often includes vocational training programs, micro-finance schemes, and support for small and medium-sized enterprises.

### 2.2.3. Conclusion

The NUP for Jordan does not respond to population dynamics and does not focus on demographic trends and needs during the formulation phase. So, the plan's strategies for sustainable urban development need to include crucial components for addressing the challenges posed by Jordan's specific population growth patterns and spatial distribution. This omission weakens the NUP's overall effectiveness in achieving urban sustainability targets, particularly in inclusive and sustainable urbanization. A revised approach incorporating demographic projections and needs assessments is vital to ensure the NUP adequately supports the long-term well-being of Jordan's urban population.

Jordan NUP must address a spatially coherent territory with a balanced human settlement system. Cities and towns along the urban, suburban, and rural continuum are also a focus of the Jordan NUP. Subsequently, the plan needs a comprehensive strategy to manage urban sprawl and promote sustainable growth across all areas. Insufficient attention is paid to the interconnectedness of urban, peri-urban, and rural areas, leading to potential imbalances in resource allocation and service provision. A holistic approach is needed to ensure development initiatives contribute to a spatially balanced and integrated territorial system. The absence of a clear framework for coordinating development across different administrative levels further exacerbates these challenges.

The NUP does not address local fiscal space; it ensures that

local governments have the resources to carry out local-level activities. However, a lack of clarity on how resource allocation is determined and the extent to which local governments have autonomy in budgeting and spending raises concerns. Further analysis is needed to assess whether the resources provided are sufficient and ensure effective local service delivery. The NUP should explicitly address local fiscal space, specify mechanisms for transparent resource allocation, decentralize fiscal powers, and build local government capacity to manage their finances effectively.

### 2.3. Egypt

The Egypt National Urban Policy (NUP) initiative, supported by UN-Habitat, began development in 2017 and concluded in 2020 as part of a broader strategy to enhance urban governance and promote sustainable urban development in response to the challenges posed by rapid urbanization [23]. The formulation of the Egyptian NUP involved collaboration among various stakeholders. The policy aims to address critical urban issues such as inadequate infrastructure, housing shortages, and the impact of population growth while prioritizing resilience, sustainability, and equitable urban development.

The development of the NUP has faced several significant challenges due to the country's socio-political and economic conditions. Egypt's history of political change and economic instability has made the creation and implementation of long-term urban policies difficult. Since the 2011 revolution, the country has experienced shifts in leadership, impacting the consistency of policies. Additionally, Egypt is experiencing rapid urban expansion, particularly in cities like Cairo, which puts pressure on existing infrastructure and services. The growing population has led to the expansion of informal settlements, where millions of residents lack access to essential services.

Egypt's densely populated urban areas, especially Cairo, face serious air pollution and are vulnerable to flooding and rising sea levels. A lack of comprehensive urban statistics and fragmented governance due to administrative obstacles and overlapping responsibilities hinder effective urban planning and the development of a cohesive national policy. Additionally, rapid urbanization and the presence of informal settlements requiring basic infrastructure make these challenges worse. Limited access to clean water and sanitation, along with inadequate waste management systems, harms public health and damages the environment. Investing in sustainable urban infrastructure, like public transportation and renewable energy, is essential.

However, more effort is needed due to financial constraints and poor coordination among government agencies. Solving these interconnected issues needs a comprehensive approach that boosts institutional capacity, improves data collection and analysis, and involves communities more in urban planning. Without major reforms and ongoing investment, Egypt's urban areas are in a fragile state, risking residents' well-being

and hindering sustainable growth.

#### 2.3.1. Challenges

- 1) With an urbanization rate of approximately 43%, Egypt's major cities like Cairo and Alexandria face significant pressure from rapid population growth. Cairo, in particular, has a population exceeding 20 million, leading to challenges like traffic congestion, pollution, and inadequate housing [24].
- 2) Egypt's urban population live in informal settlements. These areas often lack basic services such as clean water, sanitation, and electricity, and are prone to hazards like flooding and disease outbreaks.
- 3) Rapid urban growth has outpaced infrastructure development. Many urban areas suffer from inadequate transportation networks, insufficient water supply, and inefficient waste management systems.

#### 2.3.2. Opportunities

- 1) Egypt's completed NUP represents a significant step towards modernizing its urban landscape. The NUP incorporates strategies to manage urban sprawl and protect valuable green spaces, promoting environmental sustainability and improving the quality of life for Egyptian citizens.
- 2) The construction of a new administrative capital east of Cairo is a flagship urban development project. This project aims to alleviate congestion in Cairo, provide modern infrastructure, and serve as a model for sustainable urban planning.
- 3) Egypt is committed to achieving the SDGs, particularly Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). Initiatives include developing eco-friendly housing, implementing renewable energy projects, and improving public transportation systems.

#### 2.3.3. Conclusion

The NUP for Egypt should take into account the country's population dynamics. Egypt's NUP does not adequately consider demographic trends and needs during diagnosis. This oversight significantly undermines the effectiveness of policies, leading to urban planning and development strategies that fail to align with the realities of a rapidly growing, changing population. Failing to address population dynamics, such as internal migration patterns and age structures, results in inadequate provision of housing, infrastructure, and essential services. As a result, the NUP's projected outcomes, particularly improved living standards and reduced urban sprawl, are unlikely to be achieved, perpetuating existing urban challenges and creating new ones. A more comprehensive approach is needed to integrate demographic data and projections into urban policy formulation and implementation.

The NUP must consider a well-planned territory with a balanced human settlement system. It should encompass cities

and towns across Egypt's urban, peri-urban, and rural areas. The plan's effectiveness in promoting sustainable urban development and addressing the challenges of rapid urbanization across different settlement types is currently in question. A more integrated approach that recognizes the interconnectedness among urban, peri-urban, and rural areas is crucial to ensuring a balanced, well-planned national urban policy. The lack of such an integrated perspective could worsen existing inequalities and hinder the achievement of sustainable development goals in Egypt.

Additionally, the success of the NUP depends on effective implementation mechanisms and strong monitoring systems. The absence of clearly defined responsibilities, adequate funding, and a strong institutional framework to oversee and enforce the plan's provisions weakens its potential impact. Capacity building at all levels of government, from national to local, is essential to ensure that the goals of the NUP are put into action on the ground. Without such capacity, there is a high risk of fragmented and ineffective implementation, ultimately undermining the plan's objectives. A comprehensive evaluation framework, including quantitative and qualitative indicators, is needed to monitor progress, identify challenges, and make necessary adjustments to the policy over time. This iterative approach, incorporating regular reviews and adaptive management strategies, is crucial to ensuring the long-term effectiveness of the NUP in fostering sustainable and equitable urban development in Egypt.

### 3. Results

The research findings indicate that while the UN-Habitat National Urban Policy (NUP) framework provides a comprehensive structure for urban governance, its practical application in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is significantly hindered by a "one-size-fits-all" approach. The analysis of NUP implementation in Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt reveals critical gaps between global standards and local realities, particularly concerning political instability, demographic shifts, and resource management.

#### 3.1. Comparative Analysis of Urban Challenges and NUP Focus

The diagnostic phase of the NUP in all three countries identified severe structural and socio-economic challenges. However, the resulting policy frameworks often prioritized long-term strategic goals over immediate, context-specific crises.

*Table 1. Egypt's Key Urban Indicators and Challenges.*

| Indicator     | Egypt                                     |
|---------------|---|
| Urban Context | Rapid urbanization; informal settlements. |

| Indicator       | Egypt   |
|-----------------|---|
| Key Stressors   | Population growth, high density, and pollution.                                       |
| NUP Shortcoming | Prioritized urban productivity and mega-projects over upgrading informal settlements. |

*Table 2. Lebanon's Key Urban Indicators and Challenges.*

| Indicator       | Lebanon  |
|-----------------|--|
| Urban Context   | Post-conflict recovery; high refugee density.  |
| Key Stressors   | Political instability (12 cabinets in 15 years); chronic infrastructure failure (electricity). |
| NUP Shortcoming | Failed to account for political volatility and lack of reliable data.                          |

*Table 3. Jordan's Key Urban Indicators and Challenges.*

| Indicator       | Jordan  |
|-----------------|---|
| Urban Context   | Resource scarcity (water); refugee influx.                                |
| Key Stressors   | Water scarcity and high housing demand due to the Syrian refugee crisis.  |
| NUP Shortcoming | Insufficient focus on resource management (water) and demographic shocks. |

### 3.2. Country-Specific Findings

#### 3.2.1. Lebanon: Governance and Data Deficits

The analysis reveals that the effectiveness of the NUP in Lebanon was severely compromised by political instability and a lack of reliable data and fiscal space, respectively, as follows: -

- 1) The frequent turnover of governments disrupted policy continuity, rendering long-term planning ineffective. The NUP framework assumed a stable governance structure that does not exist in the Lebanese context.
- 2) A critical finding is the absence of accurate urban data and statistics. The NUP relied on estimates that failed to capture the granularity of the demographic shifts caused by the refugee crisis, leading to policies that were ill-equipped to address the strain on housing and basic services.
- 3) The results indicate a failure to address "local fiscal

space." Municipalities lack the financial autonomy to implement NUP directives, and the policy offers no clear mechanisms for local revenue generation or for the equitable distribution of national funds.

### 3.2.2. Jordan: Resource Scarcity and Demographic Pressure

In Jordan, the results highlight a misalignment between demographic dynamics, spatial incoherence, and water security, respectively, as follows: -

- 1) The research finds that the NUP formulation did not adequately integrate demographic trends, specifically the rapid population spikes driven by forced migration. Consequently, strategies for housing and service provision lagged behind actual demand.
- 2) The policy lacked a comprehensive strategy for managing urban sprawl across the urban-rural continuum. The findings show insufficient attention to connectivity between urban centers (such as Amman) and peri-urban areas, leading to imbalanced resource allocation.
- 3) While infrastructure was a focus, the NUP did not sufficiently prioritize water conservation strategies critical for one of the world's most water-scarce nations.

### 3.2.3. Egypt: Productivity/Mega-Projects vs. Informal Settlements

The findings for Egypt show a split between modernization goals and the reality of informal urbanization, demographic oversight, and governance fragmentation, respectively, as follows: -

- 1) Despite an urbanization rate of approximately 43%, the NUP's top-down approach emphasized economic growth and new development (e.g., the New Administrative Capital) over the urgent upgrading of informal settlements where a vast portion of the population resides.
- 2) Similar to Lebanon and Jordan, the NUP failed to account for internal migration patterns and changing age structures. This oversight resulted in housing and infrastructure plans that do not align with the actual needs of the rapidly growing low-income population.
- 3) The findings indicate that overlapping responsibilities among government agencies hindered effective implementation. The NUP failed to resolve these administrative bottlenecks, resulting in fragmented urban management.

### 3.2.4. Cross-Cutting Failures of the NUP Framework

The synthesis of data from the three case studies reveals three systemic failures in the application of the UN-Habitat NUP framework in this region:

- 1) Neglect of Population Dynamics: In all three cases, the

diagnostic phase lacked a rigorous analysis of demographic trends (migration, age structure, growth rates). This resulted in static policies applied to dynamic populations, undermining sustainability targets.

- 2) Lack of Spatial Coherence: The policies failed to foster a balanced system of human settlements. There was a consistent lack of integration between urban, peri-urban, and rural development strategies, exacerbating regional disparities and unchecked urban sprawl.
- 3) Undefined Local Fiscal Space: A major finding is the universal failure to define and secure local fiscal space. While the NUPs mandated local implementation, they did not provide the necessary financial decentralization or autonomy, leaving local governments with mandates but without the means to implement them.

## 4. Discussion

The findings from this comparative analysis of National Urban Policy (NUP) implementation in Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt reveal significant insights into the challenges and limitations of applying standardized urban policy frameworks in diverse socio-political contexts. This discussion examines these findings in relation to existing literature, identifies broader implications for urban governance, and suggests directions for future research.

### 4.1. Contextual Implementation Challenges

The case studies demonstrate that, despite its comprehensive theoretical foundation, the UN-Habitat NUP framework faces substantial implementation challenges in the MENA region. These challenges align with the critique of "policy transfer" in urban planning, where standardized models often fail to account for local institutional capacities and political realities. In Lebanon, the NUP's effectiveness was severely constrained by political instability and governance fragmentation, as well as by "splintering urbanism" in conflict-affected contexts, which undermines coherent policy implementation. The frequent government changes created a policy environment that was fundamentally incompatible with the NUP's assumption of stable, long-term planning horizons.

Similarly, Jordan's experience highlights the tension between standardized policy frameworks and acute resource constraints. The NUP's insufficient attention to water scarcity, a critical issue for one of the world's most water-stressed nations, reflects the "infrastructural blindness" of many global urban policies. This oversight is particularly significant given that water security is increasingly recognized as a fundamental determinant of urban resilience in arid regions. The framework's generic infrastructure focus failed to prioritize Jordan's specific resource management challenges, revealing a critical gap in context sensitivity.

Egypt's case further illustrates the disconnect between global policy models and local realities. The NUP's emphasis

on mega-projects like the New Administrative Capital, while neglecting informal settlements where the majority of urban residents live, resonates with the analysis of "worlding" practices in global South cities. This approach prioritizes internationally recognizable symbols of modernity over addressing the everyday realities of informal urbanization, potentially exacerbating spatial inequalities, a phenomenon well-documented in studies of urban policy in rapidly urbanizing contexts.

## 4.2. Theoretical Implications

These findings contribute to broader theoretical debates about urban policy transfer and the limits of standardized approaches to urban governance. The consistent failure of the NUP framework to adequately address population dynamics across all three countries challenges the technocratic assumptions underlying many global urban policies. This aligns with "ordinary cities" approaches that recognize diverse urban trajectories rather than imposing standardized models. The NUP's top-down methodology, with its predefined indicators and targets, proved ill-equipped to handle the demographic complexities of refugee influxes, rapid urbanization, and informal settlement growth that characterize these contexts.

The spatial incoherence identified across all three case studies, particularly the lack of integration among urban, peri-urban, and rural development strategies, highlights a fundamental limitation of the NUP's territorial approach. This finding emphasizes the need to understand urbanization as a process that extends beyond administrative city boundaries. The NUP's failure to foster balanced territorial development reflects a broader challenge in urban policy: reconciling place-based approaches with the relational nature of contemporary urbanization.

The fiscal dimension of implementation challenges further contributes to theoretical discussions about urban governance and decentralization. The consistent failure to define and secure local fiscal space across all three countries underscores the gap between policy mandates and fiscal realities, a central theme in the literature on multilevel governance. The NUP's assumption that local governments could implement ambitious urban agendas without corresponding fiscal decentralization reflects a mismatch between institutional design and the realities of polycentric governance.

## 4.3. Comparative Regional Perspectives

When contextualized within broader regional trends, these findings reveal both common patterns and distinctive challenges in MENA urban governance. The refugee crisis's impact in Lebanon and Jordan aligns with how forced migration reshapes urban governance in the region, creating exceptional demands that standardized policy frameworks are ill-equipped to address. However, Egypt's different trajectory, characterized by state-led mega-projects rather than crisis response,

highlights the diversity of urban policy approaches within the MENA region, challenging monolithic regional characterizations.

The environmental challenges identified across all three countries, air pollution, water scarcity, and vulnerability to climate change, reflect broader regional trends. However, the NUP's limited effectiveness in addressing these issues suggests that global frameworks may need to be more explicitly tailored to the MENA region's specific environmental vulnerabilities, which are among the world's most severe climate change impacts.

## 4.4. Limitations and Methodological Considerations

This study has several limitations that warrant acknowledgment. The comparative case study approach, while valuable for generating contextual insights, limits generalizability to other contexts. Additionally, the focus on three countries within a single region, while appropriate for the research questions, may not fully capture the diversity of NUP implementation experiences globally. The reliance on policy documents and secondary data also means that the study captures formal policy frameworks more than the informal practices and negotiations that shape implementation on the ground.

## 4.5. Future Research Directions

First, there is a need for longitudinal studies that track how NUP frameworks evolve and adapt over time in response to implementation challenges. Such research could provide valuable insights into the dynamics of policy learning and adaptation in diverse governance contexts.

Second, comparative research across regions could help determine whether the challenges observed in the MENA context are unique or reflect broader patterns in global urban policy implementation. Particularly valuable would be studies comparing MENA experiences with those in other regions facing similar challenges, such as refugee influxes, resource scarcity, or rapid urbanization.

Third, research that centers the perspectives of marginalized communities, particularly residents of informal settlements and refugee populations, could provide critical insights into how urban policies are experienced on the ground. Such participatory approaches would complement the study's institutional focus and help bridge the gap between policy design and lived realities.

Fourth, there is a need for further research on innovative financing mechanisms to address the fiscal space challenges identified in this study. Exploring models of fiscal decentralization, municipal finance, and public-private partnerships that have proven effective in similar contexts could provide valuable lessons for policy reform.

Finally, given the increasing recognition of climate change as a critical urban challenge, future research should examine

how urban policy frameworks can be better integrated with climate adaptation and mitigation strategies. This is particularly urgent in the MENA context, where cities face some of the most severe climate risks globally.

## 5. Recommendations and Findings

The NUP framework addresses the challenges of global urbanization. The framework emphasizes inclusive, resilient, and sustainable development by tailoring its approach to specific regional needs. While it successfully facilitates urban planning by guiding land use, housing, and transportation, its top-down approach and limited community involvement present barriers. Case studies from Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt reveal that political instability, refugee influx, and infrastructural deficits hinder implementation. The reliance on predefined indicators often overlooks the unique needs of informal settlements, exacerbating inequalities and failing to address rapid urban growth in many regions adequately.

It's important to note that the 'one-size-fits-all' approach of the NUP framework, while well-intentioned in providing a universal urban planning model, is not the most effective way to address the complex and varied challenges that different regions face. Urbanization is a highly localized process influenced by specific social, political, economic, and environmental factors that differ widely across countries and cities. The NUP can overlook critical local conditions by applying a standardized framework, undermining its effectiveness in fostering sustainable and inclusive urban growth.

For instance, in Lebanon, rapid urbanization is compounded by significant political instability and a refugee crisis, placing overwhelming pressure on urban infrastructure and services. The blanket approach of the NUP does not adequately account for Lebanon's complex political dynamics, including frequent government changes that disrupt long-term policy continuity. The framework also falls short in addressing the needs of Lebanon's large refugee population, many of whom live in informal settlements with limited access to basic services. These unique challenges call for a more adaptable, policy-responsive approach to the country's socio-political context rather than relying on generalized urbanization models.

Similarly, in Jordan, water scarcity is a critical issue that is exacerbated by climate change and an influx of Syrian refugees. A standardized approach that focuses broadly on infrastructure development might not prioritize Jordan's acute water resource management challenges, leaving gaps in policy effectiveness. Jordan's urban planning needs a more focused strategy on water conservation, sustainable resource allocation, and climate-resilient infrastructure development, which a generalized framework may not fully address.

Egypt presents yet another example of a one-size-fits-all model struggling to meet the needs of its rapidly expanding urban population. In cities like Cairo, home to millions of res-

idents living in informal settlements, the NUP's top-down approach may prioritize economic growth and modernization projects, such as the construction of a new administrative capital. However, this focus can sideline the pressing need to upgrade informal settlements, improve basic service delivery, and address overcrowding. A more localized urban policy would prioritize inclusive growth that targets these specific areas of concern.

In addition, the diverse economic capacities of countries further reveal the limits of the widespread approach. The NUP often encourages ambitious infrastructure and sustainability projects, but countries with limited financial resources or weak local governance structures may struggle to implement such policies effectively. For example, while wealthier nations or regions can more easily adopt smart city initiatives or invest in cutting-edge public transportation systems, less developed regions with constrained budgets may need to focus more on affordable housing, basic infrastructure, or service delivery. The framework's heavy reliance on predefined targets and international best practices may also marginalize local priorities, particularly in regions where informal economies and settlements dominate.

Ultimately, the NUP framework's one-size-fits-all strategy risks promoting urban development that prioritizes global standards over local realities. To create more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable cities, urban policies must be context-specific, responsive to each region's unique challenges, and informed by local communities' voices. It is crucial to shift towards more flexible, participatory urban planning, where local governments and stakeholders are empowered to shape policies that reflect their needs, capacities, and aspirations. This adaptive model would ensure that urban development is sustainable and equitable, providing tangible benefits for all urban residents, especially the most vulnerable populations.

## Abbreviations

|            |  |
|------------|--|
| GDP        | Gross Domestic Product                   |
| KSA        | Kingdom of Saudi Arabia                  |
| MENA       | Middle East and North Africa             |
| ME         | Middle East                              |
| NGO        | Non-Governmental Organization            |
| NUP        | National Urban Policy                    |
| SDGs       | Sustainable Development Goals            |
| UAE        | United Arab Emirates                     |
| UN-Habitat | United Nations Human Settlements Program |

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## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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## Biography



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## Research Field

**Bassem Fahmy:** Sustainable urban development, National urban policy and governance, Strategic spatial planning, Smart and resilient cities, Informal settlements and urban inclusion, Mega projects planning and management, Urban regeneration and redevelopment, public space and mobility planning, Built environment and climate resilience, Regional and metropolitan development.