

# Addressing informality for equitable urban resilience

This poster provides insights into the role of informality in urban resilience and equity. It is aimed at the international community of urban development practitioners, resilience planners, and policy-makers. These insights were compiled by a working group of the Southern Africa Resilience Academy (SARA), with the objective of making visible and reframing the complex roles informality plays in urban resilience. In challenging preconceived notions of informality, we hope to inform international and national efforts to identify more equitable, resilient, and sustainable pathways for urban development with particular attention to the challenges faced in the Global South.

**Urban social-ecological resilience:** a city's capacity to absorb, adapt to, or even transform in the face of shocks and crises without negative impacts on human well-being or nature's ability to function. Resilience can be provided both by urban ecosystems, such as when wetlands absorb water after heavy rains and prevent flooding, and by society, such as when people rely on social support networks during economic crises or unemployment.



## Day to day urban life entails multitude of transactions across informal and formal places and activities

**Informality is inextricable from our every-day urban lives:** We purchase a mango from a street hawker, we catch a ride in an unregistered taxi, we ask a favor of a cousin in a business office to facilitate a permit to build our home. Legal, illegal or somewhere inbetween, informal transactions are part and parcel of urban fabric. We often think of informal parts of the city as lacking in basic services and struggling to catch up with the "formal" city, but **the informal is just as much part of what makes the daily operations of a city work.** In many ways it is the city; it often constitutes the majority of urban space, involves the majority of urban populations, and contributes significantly to urban economic activity!



## Cities depend on informality to function and thrive!

Informality is often considered a challenge for cities to solve, and informal activities and informal settlements can pose problems for sanitation, safety, services, and human wellbeing. The challenges do exist, and are formidable. But **informal activities also fill urban gaps and meet basic needs:** Waste pickers are moving solid waste off the streets and into recycled products; and food hawkers and urban gardens are addressing food insecurity for vulnerable residents. Affluent households also benefit from informal services, by relying on domestic workers to meet childcare needs, and installing unlicensed boreholes to access free groundwater. **Cities' sensitivities to global economic shocks are mitigated by the vibrancy of informal entrepreneurship.** Informality is both a challenge and opportunity for urban resilience and equity.



## Ignoring informality erodes resilience

As cities confront more dynamic and uncertain futures, it will become more essential to discover constructive and equitable ways of engaging with informality, in all its forms. Defining what is in and what is outside the domain of planning for resilient cities is a critical and necessary step. In doing so, it is fundamental to ensure that the diversity of informal places, activities, and institutions are not excluded. **Cities that only focus on what falls within the formal, regulated spaces in resilience planning risk increased conflict, loss in trust, expanded vulnerability to hazards and deepened social inequity.** Further, planners of urban resilience may miss the opportunity to harness the innovations and entrepreneurship emerging from informal spaces and activities that can go far in supporting more just urban futures.



## Confronting inequity and injustice is critical if informality is to be leveraged for urban resilience

In democratic contexts, formal systems are set up to guarantee equal and fair treatment of citizens. When they fail and unjustly exclude people from access to formal services and opportunities, **informal activities, institutions, and places often arise to address unmet needs.** However, both informal and formal activities unjustly externalize risks, resulting in unfair allocations of

burdens and benefits in both. Urban resilience planning will succeed only by confronting and addressing these injustices, through negotiation, deliberation, and inclusion. Demographic growth, climate change and other realities imply real limits to the capacities of all actors in complex urban systems, demanding new partnerships and alliances.

