Cities that Work

IGC

The Practitioners' Handbook

Evidence-based, practical guidance for managing rapid urban growth in developing countries

DIRECTED BY

LSE · Addis Ababa University · LUMS · University of Oxford



Photo: Instants / E+ via Getty Images

ABOUT THIS HANDBOOK

Overview

This handbook is a **one-stop resource** for urban practitioners seeking evidence-based, practical guidance on managing rapid urban growth in developing countries.

It begins with the bigger picture: **why cities matter for economic growth** and what makes cities work for businesses.

It then explores key dimensions of urban development, starting with a city's most valuable asset, **urban land**, and how its use shapes cities. It examines the infrastructure and services – **housing, transport, water and sanitation** – needed to support growing populations, followed by the **municipal finance and governance** systems underpinning effective delivery.

Finally, it introduces the **Cities Spatial Model**, a practical tool for assessing the spatial impacts of policies and investments.

Drawing on global research and first-hand policy experience, these resources highlight the policy options and trade-offs that determine whether cities become engines of growth or sources of congestion, contagion and exclusion. Readers can follow the handbook's progression or jump straight to the topics most relevant to them.

IN THIS HANDBOOK

Contents

01	Why do cities matter for growth?	3
02	Land rights	4
03	Land use planning	6
04	Affordable housing and informal settlements	8
05	Urban mobility and connectivity	10
06	Water and sanitation	12
07	Solid waste management	14
08	Municipal finance	16
09	Urban governance	18
10	Using the Cities Spatial Model	20

SECTION 01

Why do cities matter for growth?



VIDEO

Watch the video ↗



POLICY TOOLKIT · JANUARY 2026

Making cities work for business

Victoria Delbridge, Tim Dobermann, Muskan Jain and Juliana Oliveira-Cunha

Read the policy toolkit ↗



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SECTION 02

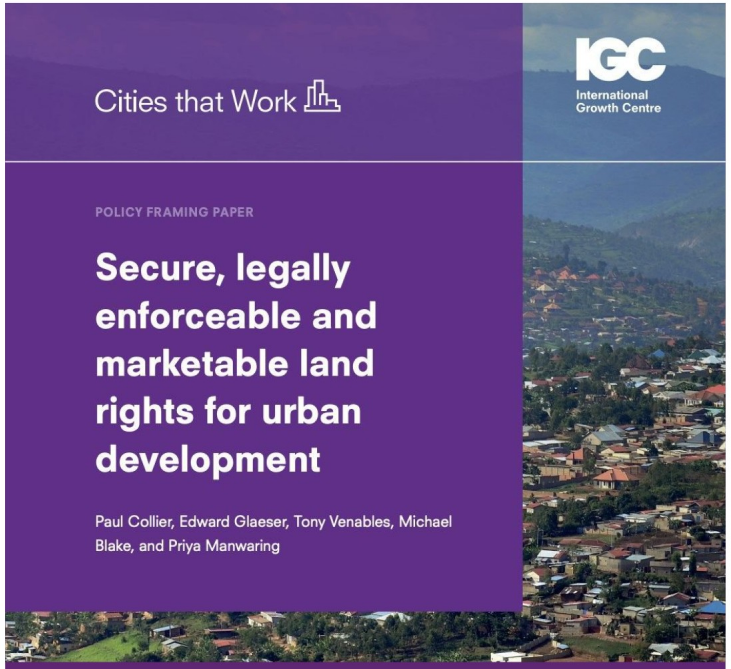
Land rights

Land rights shape how cities grow. When land can be planned, serviced, invested in, traded, and taxed, it becomes the foundation of a more productive and liveable city.

THIS SECTION ASKS

- How can stronger land rights improve urban productivity and liveability?
- Is informal tenure necessarily insecure?
- What are the trade-offs between different approaches to strengthening land rights?
- What institutions are needed to make land systems work?
- How can governments overcome political resistance to reform?

Land rights



POLICY FRAMING PAPER

Secure, legally enforceable and marketable land rights for urban development

Paul Collier, Edward Glaeser, Tony Venables, Michael Blake and Priya Manwaring

Read the policy toolkit ↗

Read the policy paper ↗



CASE STUDY

Land tenure regularisation in Rwanda ↗



FORTHCOMING

The role of informal land rights



Photo: LUIS TATO/AFP via Getty Images

SECTION 03

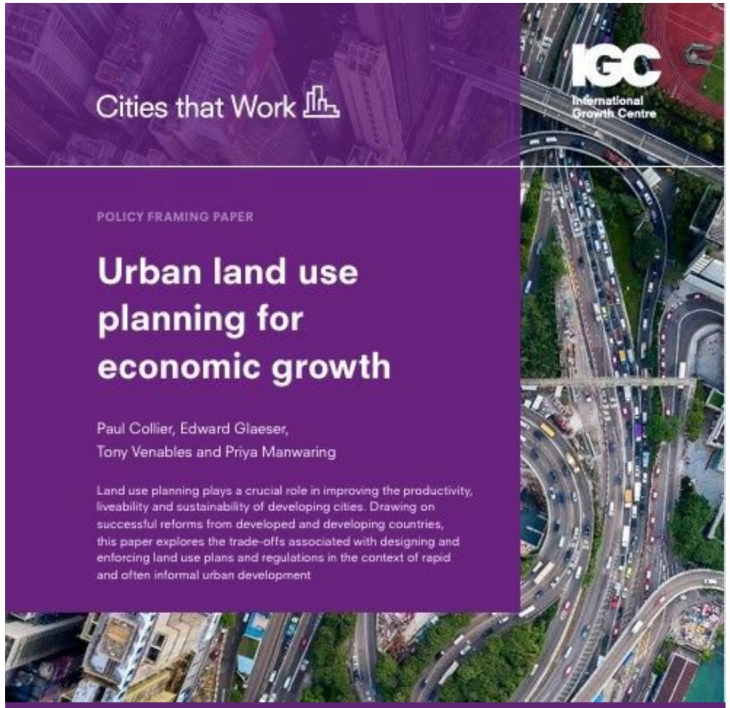
Land use planning

Land use planning shapes where people live, where firms locate, how infrastructure is provided, and how easily residents can access jobs, services, and social networks.

THIS SECTION ASKS

- How can cities plan proactively for rapid urban growth and expansion?
- How should urban land be divided between public space and private development?
- How prescriptive should land use regulations be, and where should they remain flexible?
- How can planning and regulation support density, affordable housing and access to jobs?
- What institutions, financing mechanisms, and enforcement capacity are needed to turn plans into reality?

Land use planning

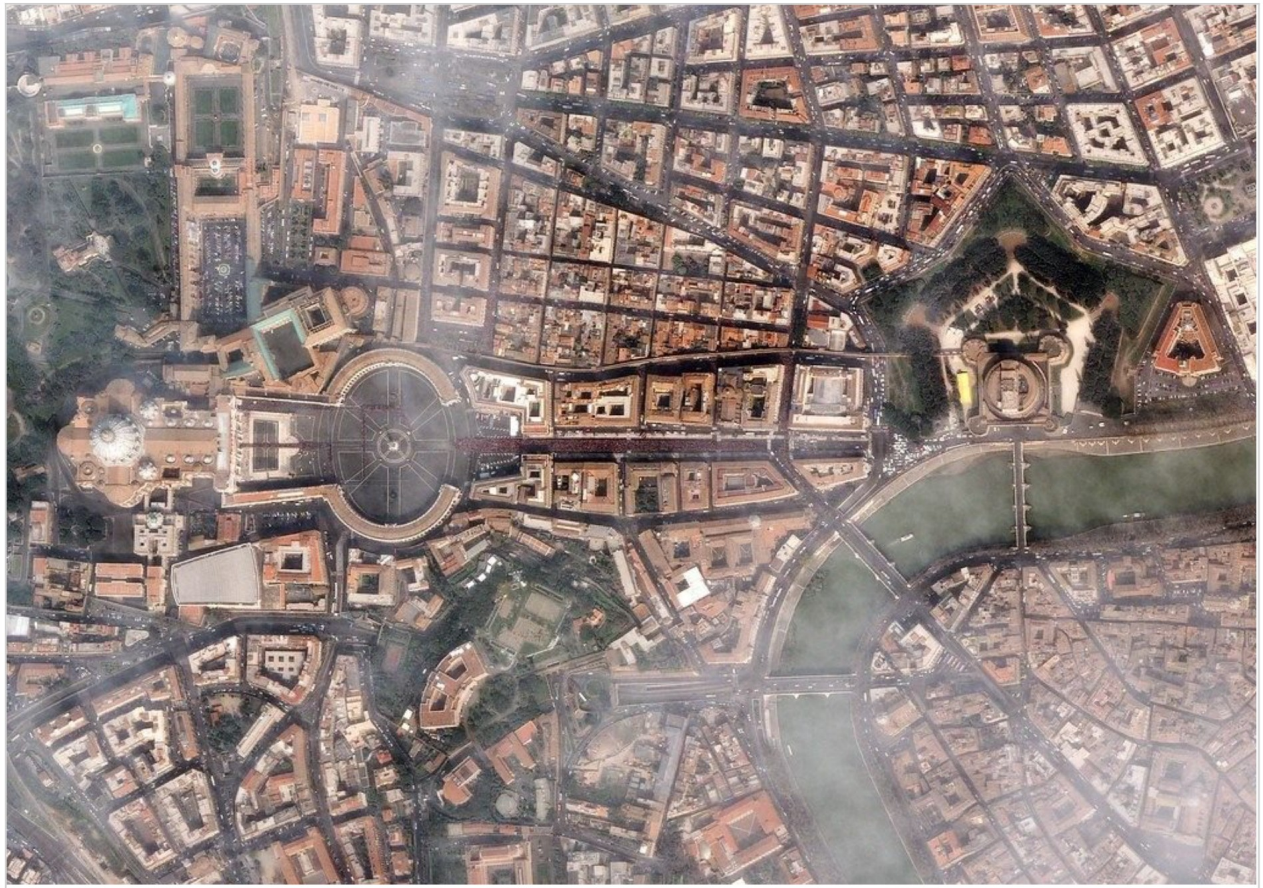


POLICY FRAMING PAPER

Urban land use planning for economic growth

Paul Collier, Edward Glaeser, Tony Venables and Priya Manwaring

Read the policy paper ↗



FURTHER READING

Economics meets land use planning ↗



Photo: SAIDU BAH/AFP via Getty Images

SECTION 04

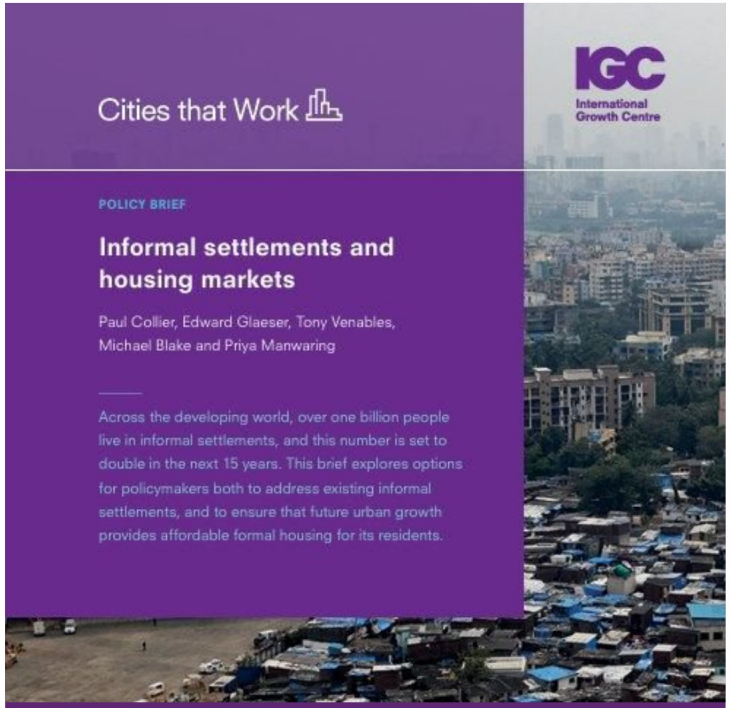
Affordable housing and informal settlements

Many fast-growing cities face a deep affordable housing challenge: formal housing is often too expensive, too scarce, or too far from jobs and services for low-income households to access.

THIS SECTION ASKS

- What barriers are making formal housing unaffordable, and how can governments reduce the costs of land, construction, and approvals?
- When should governments use housing subsidies, and how can these be designed to avoid inflating prices or crowding out unsubsidised housing?
- When should informal settlements be upgraded in situ, redeveloped, or relocated? How can livelihoods and social networks be protected?
- How can affordable housing and settlement upgrading be financed and delivered at scale?

Affordable housing and informal settlements



POLICY BRIEF

Informal settlements and housing markets

Paul Collier, Edward Glaeser, Tony Venables, Michael Blake and Priya Manwaring

Read the policy toolkit ↗

Read the policy paper ↗



FURTHER READING

Can subsidies effectively tackle housing affordability? ↗



Photo: HemantMandot via Getty Images

SECTION 05

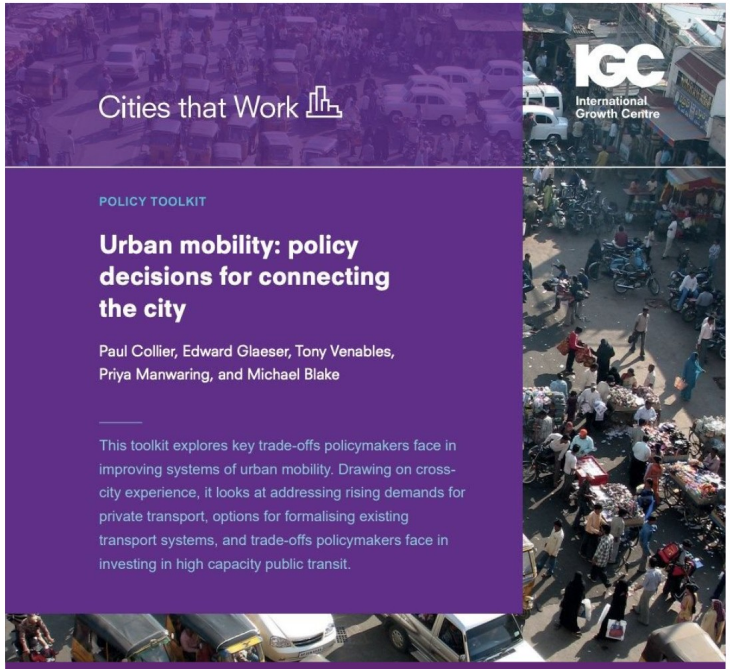
Urban mobility and connectivity

Cities create opportunity by bringing people, firms, goods, and services closer together. But this only works when people can move across the city safely, affordably, and reliably.

THIS SECTION ASKS

- How can governments manage congestion while maintaining access to jobs and services?
- What are the trade-offs between different public transit options?
- How should informal transport providers be integrated?
- How should transport infrastructure be financed and maintained without creating unsustainable public liabilities?
- When should projects use conventional public procurement or public–private partnerships, and how should risks be allocated?

Urban mobility and connectivity



POLICY TOOLKIT

Urban mobility: policy decisions for connecting the city

Paul Collier, Edward Glaeser, Tony Venables, Priya Manwaring and Michael Blake

Read the policy toolkit ↗

Read the policy paper ↗



FURTHER READING

Procurement and PPPs in the transport sector ↗



POLICY BRIEF

Financing and funding of public transport infrastructure ↗



CASE STUDY

Lagos transport reform ↗



Photo: EyeEm Mobile GmbH / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images

SECTION 06

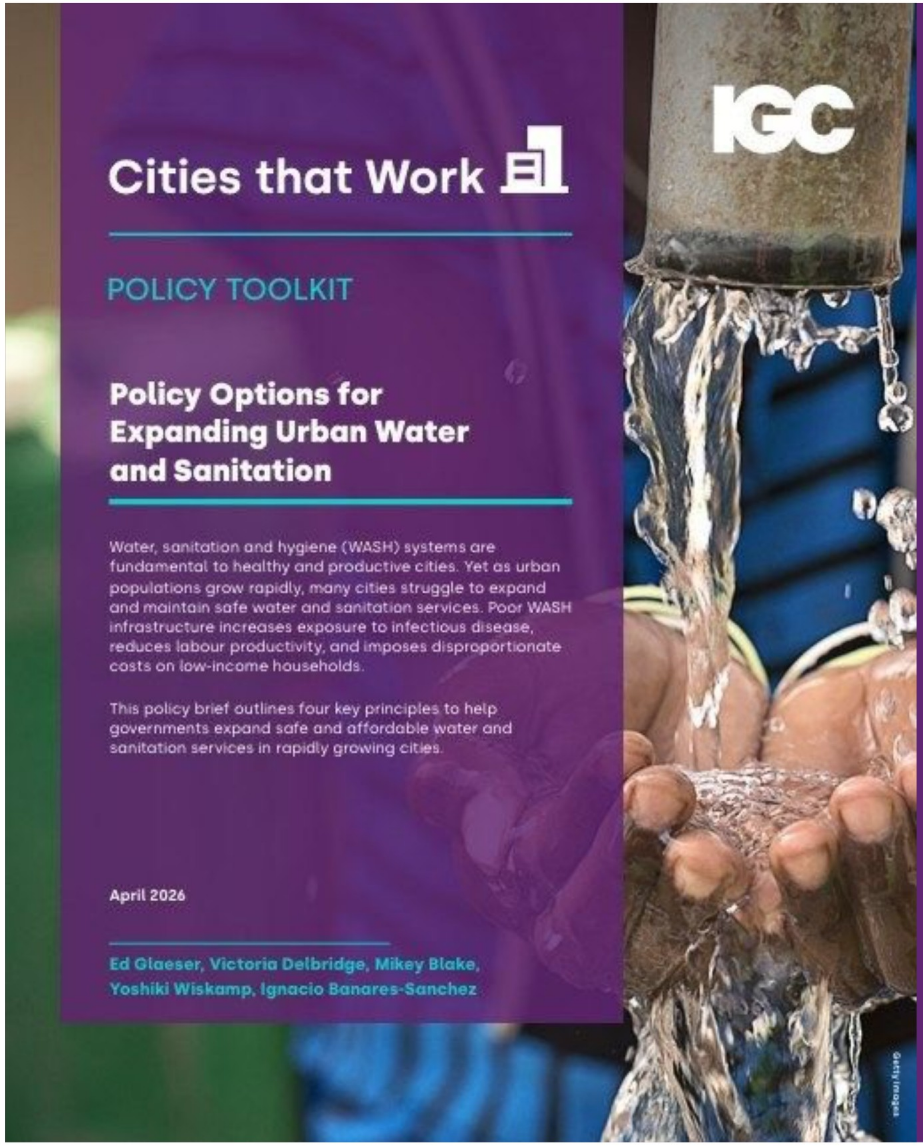
Water and sanitation

Density allows people and firms to share ideas, specialise, and innovate – but without clean water and sanitation, density also increases the spread of disease and pollution.

THIS SECTION ASKS

- Which water and sanitation technologies are best suited to different urban contexts?
- Who should provide services, and how should public, private and informal providers be regulated?
- How should infrastructure, household connections and ongoing maintenance be financed?
- How can governments encourage households to connect to and maintain improved services?

Water and sanitation



POLICY TOOLKIT · APRIL 2026

Policy options for expanding urban water and sanitation

Ed Glaeser, Victoria Delbridge, Mikey Blake, Yoshiki Wiskamp and Ignacio Banares-Sanchez

Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) systems are fundamental to healthy and productive cities. Yet as urban populations grow rapidly, many cities struggle to expand and maintain safe water and sanitation services. Poor WASH infrastructure increases exposure to infectious disease, reduces labour productivity, and imposes disproportionate costs on low-income households.

This policy brief outlines four key principles to help governments expand safe and affordable water and sanitation services in rapidly growing cities.

Read the policy toolkit ↗ Read the policy paper ↗



Photo: ISSOUF SANOGO/AFP via Getty Images

SECTION 07

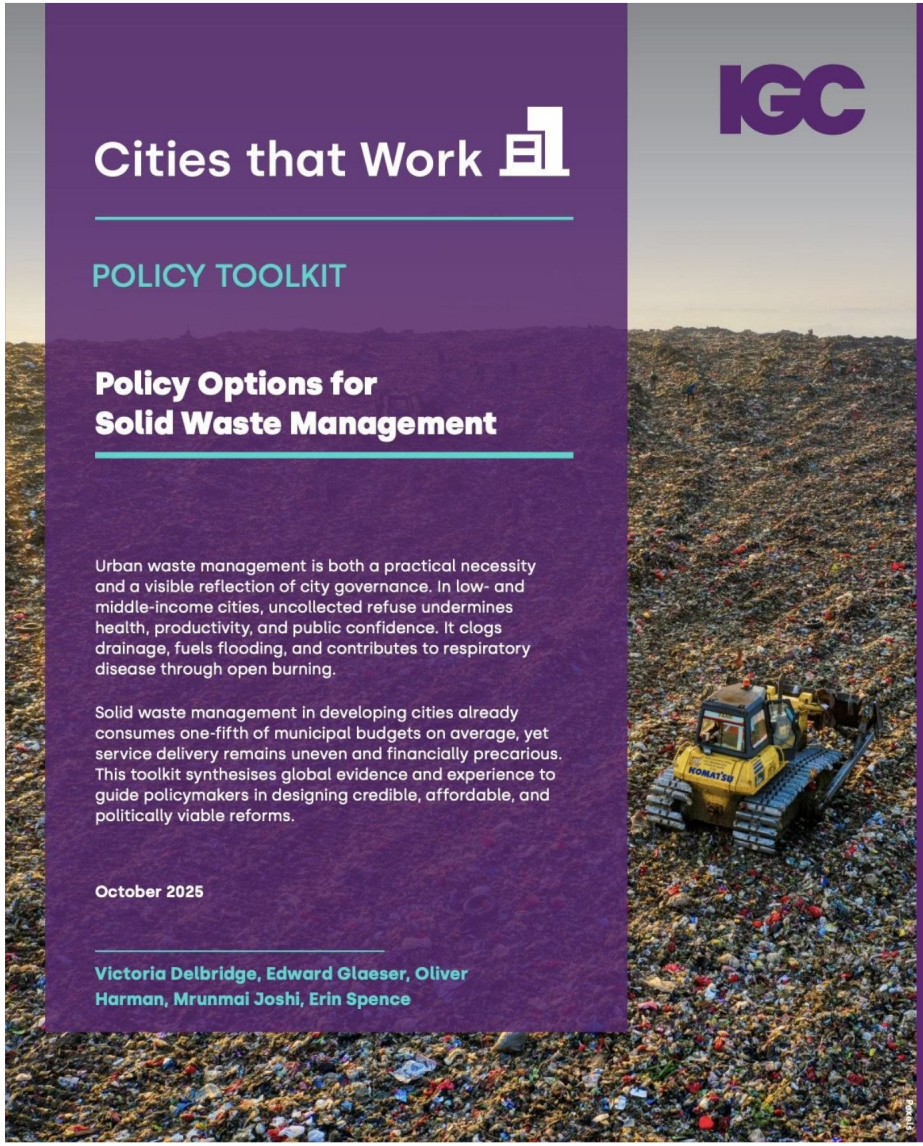
Solid waste management

Solid waste management is one of the clearest signs of whether a city works. Uncollected waste blocks drains, worsens flooding, and encourages open burning – affecting health and the environment.

THIS SECTION ASKS

- Which waste storage, collection, transport, and disposal systems are suited to local conditions?
- Who should deliver waste services, and how can public, private, and informal providers be effectively coordinated and regulated?
- How can cities improve compliance through enforcement, public awareness, and trust?
- How should waste management be funded while balancing cost recovery, affordability, and incentives to reduce waste?

Solid waste management



POLICY TOOLKIT · OCTOBER 2025

Policy options for solid waste management

Victoria Delbridge, Edward Glaeser, Oliver Harman, Mrunmai Joshi and Erin Spence

Urban waste management is both a practical necessity and a visible reflection of city governance. In low- and middle-income cities, uncollected refuse undermines health, productivity, and public confidence. It clogs drainage, fuels flooding, and contributes to respiratory disease through open burning.

Solid waste management in developing cities already consumes one-fifth of municipal budgets on average, yet service delivery remains uneven and financially precarious. This toolkit synthesises global evidence and experience to guide policymakers in designing credible, affordable, and politically viable reforms.

Read the policy toolkit ↗ Read the policy paper ↗



Photo: Dinodia Photo / The Image Bank Unreleased via Getty Images

SECTION 08

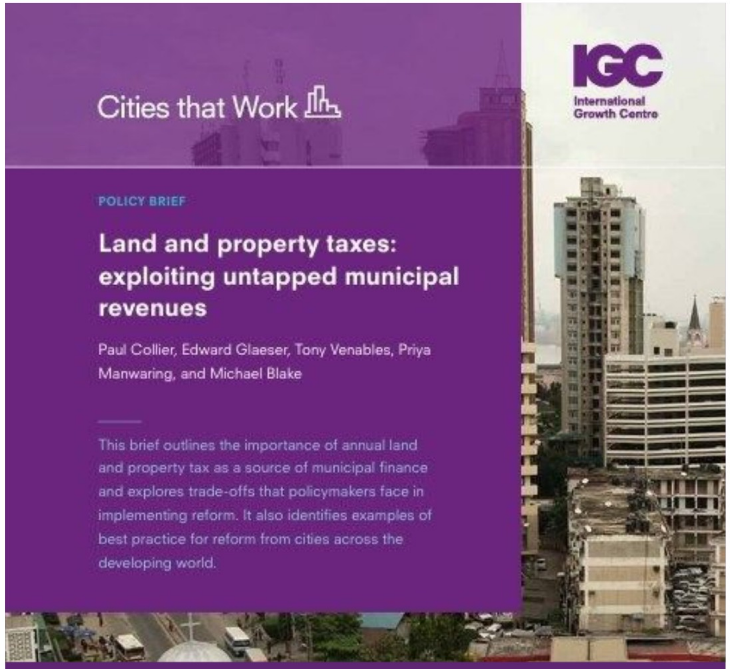
Municipal finance

Land-based revenues are often an untapped source of municipal finance that can encourage more productive land use and recoup some of the value created by public investment.

THIS SECTION ASKS

- Which land-based revenue tools are most appropriate at different stages of urban development?
- How should land and property be identified, valued, and brought onto the tax base, without placing unfair burdens on poorer households?
- How can cities improve collection and compliance?
- How can land-based taxes and charges discourage vacant or underused land?

Municipal finance



POLICY BRIEF

Land and property taxes: exploiting untapped municipal revenues

Paul Collier, Edward Glaeser, Tony Venables, Priya Manwaring and Michael Blake

Read the policy toolkit ↗

Read the policy paper ↗



FURTHER READING

Air rights in Brazil ↗



FINAL REPORT

Considerations for land value capture in Amman ↗



POLICY BRIEF

Considerations for a vacant land tax in Kampala ↗



Photo: Per-Anders Pettersson via Getty Images

SECTION 09

Urban governance

Cities do not work through good ideas alone. They need institutions that can make decisions, coordinate across agencies, use data and procure effectively.

THIS SECTION ASKS

- How can departments, agencies, and other levels of government be coordinated around shared outcomes?
- How should accountability be divided when responsibilities overlap?
- What should the city deliver directly, and when should it work with private or other external partners?
- How can data and research support better decisions, track delivery, and identify what works?

Urban governance



POLICY PAPER · OCTOBER 2020

Designed to succeed: Building authorising environments for fast-growing cities

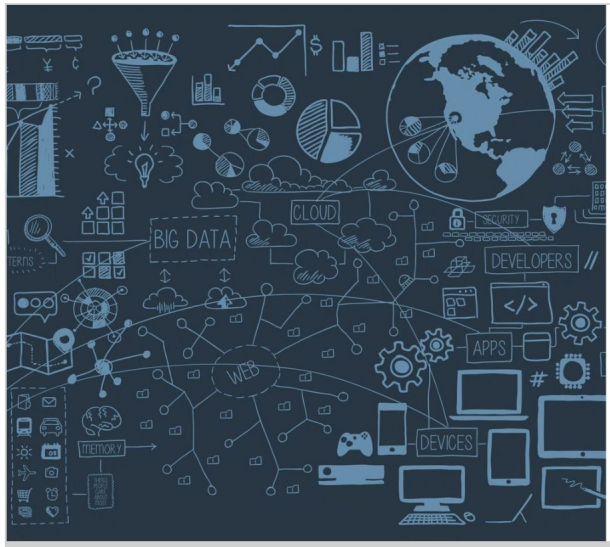
Paul Collier, Edward Glaeser, Anthony Venables, Astrid R.N. Haas and Shahrukh Wani

Read the policy paper ↗



CASE STUDY

Cape Town's data and research reforms ↗



FORTHCOMING

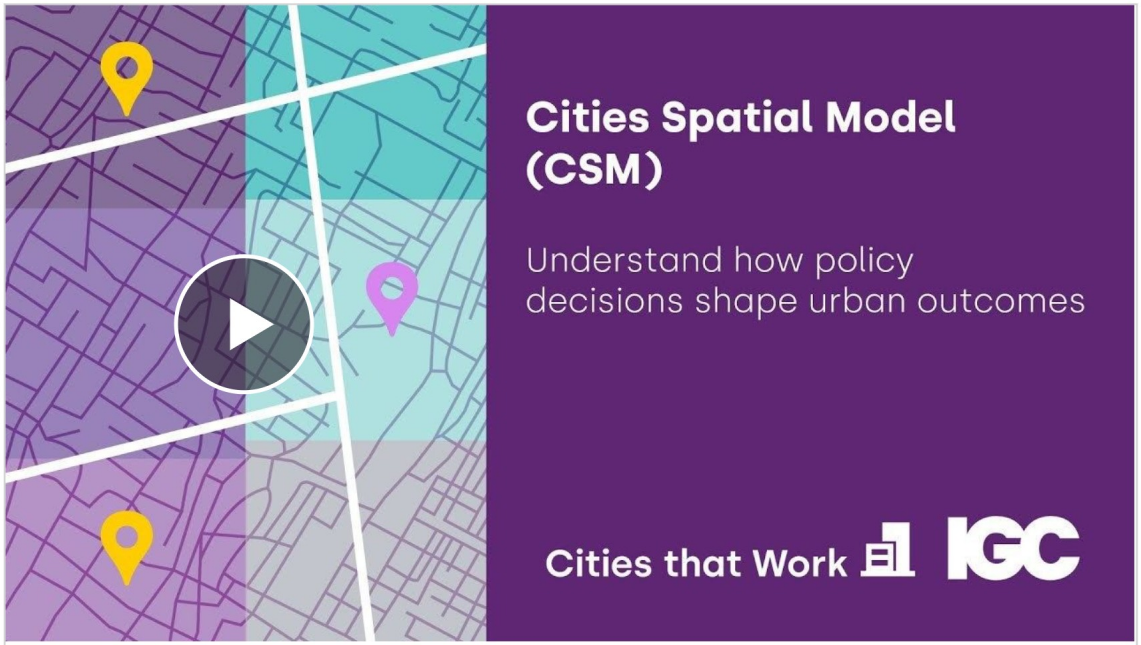
Data for decision making

SECTION 10

Using the Cities Spatial Model to guide urban investments and policy decisions

Cities are complex, interconnected systems: an investment or policy change in one area can reshape where people live and work across the city.

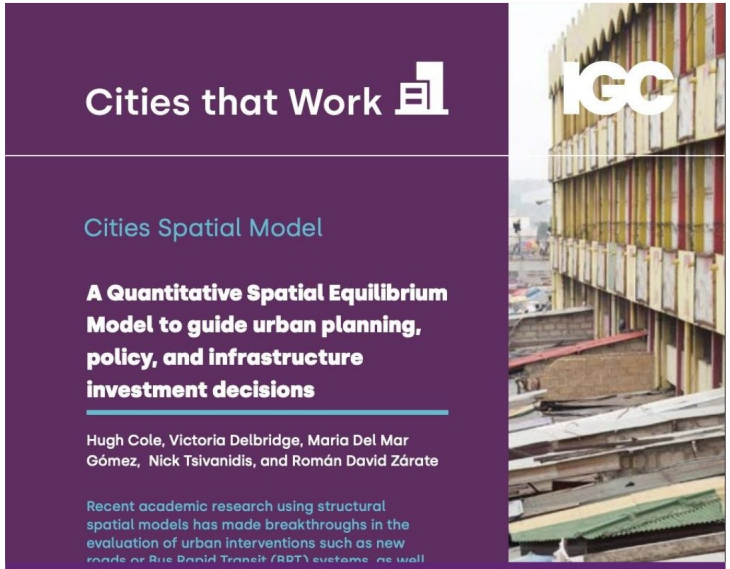
The Cities Spatial Model adds a practical way for governments to move from the stock of evidence to city-specific analysis. It helps policymakers simulate the wider effects of place-based policies – on commuting, jobs, wages, housing costs, productivity, and welfare – so they can compare options and direct scarce resources towards the investments with the greatest benefits.



VIDEO

Watch the video ↗

Cities Spatial Model

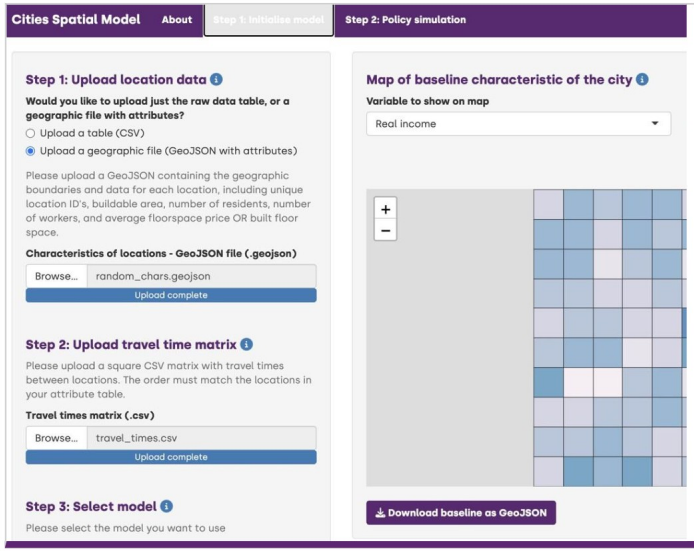


POLICY TOOLKIT

A quantitative spatial equilibrium model to guide urban planning, policy, and infrastructure investment decisions

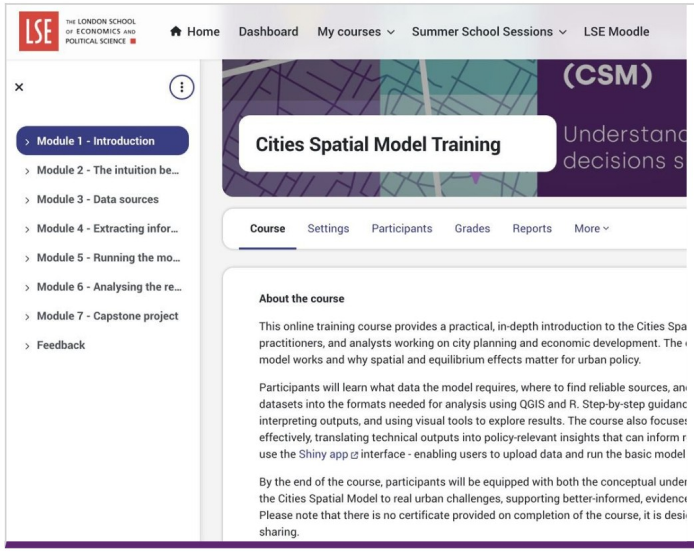
Hugh Cole, Victoria Delbridge, Maria Del Mar Gómez, Nick Tsivanidis and Román David Zárate

Read the policy toolkit ↗



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Try the app ↗



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Access the online training ↗

Acknowledgements

In addition to the authors of the individual papers, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to all current and former members of the Cities that Work (CtW) Council, including Edward Glaeser, Paul Collier, Tony Venables, Jennifer Musisi, Omar Masud, Nasir Javed, Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr, Mohammed Adjei Sowah, Naison Mutizwa-Mangiza, Patricia de Lille and Craig Kesson, for their valuable insights, guidance, and contributions over the years.

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Together, their contributions have helped ensure that the handbook brings together rigorous economic research and practical policymaking experience to provide accessible, evidence-based guidance for cities across the developing world.

About Cities that Work

Cities that Work helps policymakers make better decisions in fast-growing cities. By translating economic research and practical insight into clear urban policy guidance, CtW supports governments to design reforms that can unlock sustainable economic growth, improve living standards, and make cities more productive, inclusive, and liveable.

To find out more, visit theigc.org/initiatives/cities-work or contact us at citiesthatwork@theigc.org.

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