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MOVING GOVERNANCE SERIES #4:

# MAKING CITIES WORK FOR PEOPLE: URBAN GOVERNANCE IN PRACTICE

**Cities play a central role in global development.** They create opportunities and drive innovation, but they also concentrate inequality and climate risks. With urban populations rising fastest in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, demands on basic urban services, housing and infrastructure are growing rapidly.

This makes urban governance – **how cities are planned, managed, and financed** – more critical than ever to

ensure inclusive, resilient, and sustainable urban development that meets the needs of all residents, especially marginalised groups and those most at risk.

At Helvetas, **we work on good urban governance** so that urban residents know how decisions are made and are included in these processes, municipal funding is used transparently and responsively, and services and infrastructure reach those who need them most.



## INTRODUCTION

**The world is urbanizing** – and fast. By 2050, nearly 70% of the global population will live in towns and cities, with the most rapid growth happening in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. This urban shift brings both immense opportunities and urgent challenges. Cities drive 70% of global GDP and serve as hubs of innovation and connectivity. Yet they also concentrate poverty, inequality, and environmental risk.

**The absolute number of people living in urban poverty is rising.** As of 2022, more than 1.1 billion people – nearly one in four urban residents – lived in informal settlements without secure housing or basic services, and with heightened exposure to floods, landslides and other climate-related hazards. The steepest increases are in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Despite this, governance in many cities fails to adequately include or serve those living in informal and underserved areas.

**Strengthening urban governance is therefore essential,** not only to manage urban growth, but to ensure that cities are inclusive, resilient, and equitable. Governance determines whether residents can participate in decisions, access services and infrastructure, and be protected from growing risks. Helvetas supports cities not only to be inclusive, but also to plan responsibly, spend public money transparently, and make decisions that communities can trust.

In both humanitarian and development contexts, Helvetas contributes to building cities that are:

- **Inclusive:** strengthening local governance so no neighbourhood or resident is left behind.
- **Sustainable:** supporting access to basic rights such as water and food and building climate resilience.
- **Prosperous:** creating opportunities for all, especially marginalised groups, through strengthening local economic development.

Together, these efforts **help foster more resilient cities,** where institutions are responsive, risks are better managed, and all residents can thrive despite ongoing urban and climate-related pressures.

This publication highlights Helvetas' approach to urban governance. Drawing on our longstanding presence and governance expertise, we work with municipal governments, civil society, the private sector and academia to foster accountable institutions, inclusive planning, and meaningful participation. The following pages present experiences from three cities in Tanzania, Bolivia, and Nepal, all part of our Moving Governance programme.

## WHAT DO WE MEAN

### BY URBAN GOVERNANCE?

**Urban governance is about how cities are planned, managed, and financed** – how decisions are made, resources allocated, and responsibilities shared. It is also about who has power and influence, and how relationships between different actors shape outcomes.

**Cities are diverse and dynamic.** Reaching consensus is more complex, and decision-making often involves navigating sensitive issues such as land tenure, informal settlements, or uneven access to services. These challenges are political as much as they are technical, especially where municipal resources are limited, or where certain communities are routinely excluded.

**Inclusive, responsive, and transparent urban governance** is essential for managing urban growth fairly. This means creating genuine opportunities for all residents to participate, including those usually left out, such as residents of informal settlements, migrants, women, youth, and people with disabilities. Participation only leads to change, however, if municipal authorities are genuinely responsive and open to change.

**Helvetas strengthens urban governance by:**

- working with municipal authorities, civil society organisations, the private sector and community groups.
- focusing on inclusive participation, improving collaboration across actors and sectors, and
- supporting more effective urban planning and service delivery, by building local capacities and supporting organisational development.

**Urban challenges don't fall neatly into sectors** – housing, jobs, water, and climate are all connected. That's why we help different actors work together across issues rather than in isolation. We promote cross-sectoral collaboration – for example, around food systems or climate resilience – by strengthening platforms for government, civil society, the private sector, including informal actors, to work together beyond silos.

**National frameworks also matter.** Where cities have the authority and resources – through decentralisation, national urban policies, municipal revenue and effective data systems – they are better able to respond to residents' priorities, especially in fast-growing and underserved areas.

**Ultimately, urban governance is shaped by politics.** Competing interests and incentives determine what is possible. Understanding these dynamics helps identify both the enablers and blockers of change and find opportunities where momentum for inclusion and accountability already exists.

## TANZANIA: MAKING LOCAL DECISIONS

### MORE TRANSPARENT AND

### ACCOUNTABLE IN SINGIDA

Tanzania is urbanising rapidly. The shift from rural to urban areas is putting pressure on land, housing, services, and governance. Singida, a regional capital in central Tanzania of around 240,000 people, reflects these dynamics. The city has grown quickly in recent years, facing challenges in land use, service delivery, and public participation.

Through the Sauti na Nafasi (“Voice and Space” in Swahili) project, Helvetas supports more inclusive and accountable urban governance by building stronger connections between residents and municipal authorities. The project focuses on creating spaces where residents can shape local development and hold leaders to account.

Two key platforms have been established across the municipality:

- Social Accountability Monitoring (SAM) committees, which enable residents to track public resources, monitor service delivery, and engage with local officials.
- Youth Forums, where young people can raise their priorities, organise campaigns, and discuss issues with municipal leaders.

Both platforms are inclusive by design, with active participation of women, youth, and people with disabilities. They are framed as supporting, not competing with, municipal efforts – making them easier for authorities to accept and sustain.

The project was guided by Political Economy Analysis (PEA), which mapped key actors, incentives, and where influence lies. This ensured that the platforms worked with existing power structures and engaged influential figures such as the Land Commissioner, Mayor, and Regional Commissioner.

Participation is further supported by community awareness campaigns and the use of digital tools, such as WhatsApp, expanding access and maintaining engagement beyond physical meetings.

#### Key Lesson

Participation lasts when it fits with how local politics actually works. In Singida, by working with political incentives and showing residents how public money is used, the project strengthened both citizen voice and the credibility of local decision-making. In Singida, we used a Political Economy Analysis (PEA) to map these dynamics and design the project accordingly.



Younger people in Singida have highlighted the importance of public space for sport and other activities in the Youth Forum; this is one such public space in Singida.

## BOLIVIA: DATA AND DIALOGUE FOR

## EVIDENCE-BASED POLICYMAKING

Bolivia has experienced rapid urbanisation over recent decades, with 70% of its 12 million people now living in cities. Growth has often outpaced planning systems, especially in intermediate cities like Sucre and Tarija, where rising demand for housing, services, and infrastructure has created new governance pressures. Informal settlements have expanded, and weak data systems make it difficult for cities to plan and respond effectively. Through the CORE Urban project, Helvetas supports more resilient and inclusive cities by improving how urban data information is collected, shared and used for policy-making.

One key initiative is the City Observatory in Sucre, which collects, analyses, and shares data across six key areas: quality of life, governance, inclusion, land use, planning, and resilience. The Observatory brings together local government, academic institutions, civil society organisations, and the private sector to create a shared understanding of urban challenges and priorities. The Observatory provides a platform for more transparent and participatory urban management. It offers reliable data for inclusive and accountable planning, and serves as a platform for dialogue across sectors.

The main challenge in Sucre was that public information was often outdated or hard to access. By generating

reliable indicators and training local stakeholders to use them, the Observatory has made planning more transparent and allowed more meaningful dialogue between government and communities.

Although still in its early stages, the City Observatory has begun providing training, analysis, and policy support to local stakeholders. Its first indicators will be released in 2025. The Observatory is already proving to be a useful tool not only for generating data, but also for fostering collaboration and dialogue across sectors and governance levels.

### Key Lesson

Data can be a powerful driver of inclusive urban governance when it is politically credible, co-owned by diverse actors, and used to foster dialogue across sectors. Reliable information helps people see what is happening in their city, hold leaders to account, and plan for the future. In Sucre, the Observatory made planning more transparent and trustworthy by sharing the same facts with everyone. It was designed not just to generate evidence, but to build trust and foster collaboration between government, academia, civil society, and the private sector.



The report from on the 'state of the city' from Sucre's City Observatory

## NEPAL: MAKING SURE NEW TOWNS

### INCLUDE COMMUNITY VOICES

Nepal is one of the fastest-urbanising countries in South Asia, a trend accelerated by its transition to a federal state. Many newly formed municipalities are still building their administrative capacity. They face challenges in planning, coordination, and service delivery, particularly in areas with poor infrastructure and limited community engagement.

Through the Urban Futurescape – Hamro Sahar project, Helvetas supports more inclusive and participatory urban governance in small and medium-sized towns. The project focuses on strengthening collaboration between municipalities and community-based organisations (CBOs), to improve local planning processes and services.

Rather than creating new forums, the project works through existing settlement-level committees to embed community voices in Nepal's seven-step planning process. This alignment with legal frameworks increases local legitimacy and trust, while ensuring participation feeds directly into formal municipal processes.

A distinctive feature of the project is its partnership with Kathmandu University. Together, we applied social network analysis – a research method that maps relationships between actors – to examine how municipal

officials, community leaders, and marginalised groups interact. The analysis revealed significant gaps: municipal officials had weak or non-existent connections to peri-urban and marginalised groups. These insights allowed the project to adapt its participation strategy, closing communication gaps, building new channels of representation, and strengthening trust between local governments and communities.

#### Key Lesson

Evidence-based tools can transform participation strategies in rapidly urbanising areas. In Nepal, working with a research organisation to apply social network analysis revealed where governance connections were weakest, and how some groups were completely left out of discussions. By fixing these gaps, the project supports municipal councils in ensuring that decision-making is more balanced and fair, and residents feel that their voices were respected.



Vision-building exercise: Municipal officials and representatives from community-based organizations collaboratively envisioning how they see their town developing in the coming years.

## CONCLUSION:

### GOVERNING THE URBAN CENTURY

The world has entered an urban century. By 2050, nearly 70% of the global population will live in cities, with the fastest growth in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. This shift brings immense opportunity – but also deepening risks of inequality, exclusion, and climate vulnerability. How cities are governed will determine whether they become engines of resilience and inclusion, or drivers of fragility and division.

The experiences from Tanzania, Bolivia, and Nepal underline that while there is no one-size-fits-all model, certain principles are clear. Urban governance must be politically informed, grounded in local realities, and supported by both institutions and communities. In Singida, citizen voices gained traction when platforms were aligned with political incentives. In Sucre, data became a tool for trust when it was co-owned by diverse actors. In Nepal, social network analysis revealed representation gaps and guided adaptation.

These cases highlight that urban governance is never just technical. It is about trust, incentives, and shifting

power in ways that open space for marginalised voices. Done well, it allows cities to adapt to rapid growth, manage risks, and deliver more equitable outcomes. Further, the examples show that good urban governance is not just about inviting people to meetings. It is about building trust, making decisions openly, and using funding and municipal revenue fairly so that residents believe in their local authorities. When this happens, cities are better prepared to grow, respond to risks, and create fairer outcomes for everyone.

As urban populations rise most sharply in secondary and fast-growing cities across Africa and Asia, the need for inclusive and resilient governance becomes ever more urgent. The opportunity now is to apply these lessons more widely – by supporting participatory planning, investing in municipal capacities, fostering collaboration across actors, and harnessing data to build accountability. In doing so, cities can move beyond being sites of risk and inequality to become places where institutions are trusted, and all residents have the chance to thrive.



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Anny Luisa Vargas, Director of Territorial Planning and Mobility for the City of Sucre (right) discussing urban challenges with Beatriz Lizarazú, leader of the CORE URBAN Project Helvetas, Bolivia. They are at the Tintamayu viewpoint, which used to be a garbage dump and today is a green area that has been recovered by the project

