

Socio-Economic Pathways to Urban Climate Resilience:

Exploring Governance and Incentives for Equitable Climate Action in Global South Cities

Sipho Felix Mamba, *UNESWA*

Nosizo Mthupha, *Deputy Prime Minister's Office, Mbabane, Eswatini*



2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents a comprehensive exploration of socio-economic pathways to urban climate resilience in the cities of Mbabane and Manzini, Eswatini. The study focuses on understanding how governance frameworks and socio-economic incentives can foster equitable climate action, particularly among marginalized communities within urban settings.

Eswatini's urban areas are increasingly vulnerable to climate-related shocks, including severe heatwaves, unpredictable rainfall, and flooding. These hazards pose significant threats to urban infrastructure and essential services, disproportionately affecting the informal sector, which constitutes a vital part of the urban economy. Current climate resilience initiatives predominantly target rural areas, leaving urban populations—especially those engaged in informal livelihoods—underprioritized. Recognizing the urgent need to address these vulnerabilities, this study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of socio-economic incentives such as financial assistance, capacity-building programs, and community initiatives in enhancing resilience among individuals and small businesses in the informal sector.

The research employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative techniques to provide a holistic understanding of urban climate governance in Eswatini. Data was gathered through structured household questionnaires and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, including municipal officials, community leaders, and informal sector representatives. This methodological triangulation enhances the reliability and depth of the findings.

Key findings reveal that while 82.4% of respondents perceive socio-economic incentives as effective, a significant proportion (68.6%) of informal traders reported receiving no support from municipal authorities. Barriers such as lack of legal recognition, limited access to information, and complicated application processes hinder effective utilization of available resources. Moreover, strong community engagement emerged as a critical factor enhancing the effectiveness of socio-economic incentives, with 53.4% of respondents identifying community participation as pivotal for resilience-building. This underscores the need for inclusive governance mechanisms that allow marginalized voices to be heard.

The findings also highlight gender disparities in perceptions of the effectiveness of incentives, with men more likely to report positive impacts than women. This emphasizes the need for gender-sensitive approaches to ensure equitable access to resources and support. Additionally, the study identifies substantial gaps in governance frameworks, particularly in their ability to integrate informal sector needs into urban planning. Over 80% of urban dwellers are unaware of existing climate resilience policies, indicating a disconnect between institutional efforts and community engagement. Key barriers reported by informal sector dwellers include exclusion from formal planning processes, complicated bureaucratic procedures, and insufficient community support, which disproportionately affect women and economically active age groups (25-59 years).

To enhance urban climate resilience in Eswatini, the study recommends several actions. First, municipal councils, in collaboration with the National Disaster Management Agency (NDMA), should embed participatory planning mechanisms to ensure that interventions reflect community priorities. Second, there should be collaboration with traditional leaders to co-design resilience programs that incorporate indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices. Third, local governments should facilitate urban forums that promote collaboration across sectors, enabling

informal sector actors to connect with resilience practitioners. Furthermore, integrating socio-economic incentives into urban planning instruments and providing targeted training for municipal staff can enhance institutional capacity. Finally, launching public awareness campaigns and integrating resilience education into schools and vocational programs will foster community understanding of climate risks. This research underscores the critical need for a strategic recalibration of governance approaches in Eswatini to prioritize inclusivity, decentralization, and community empowerment. By addressing identified barriers and fostering collaboration among stakeholders, Eswatini can enhance its urban resilience, ensuring that vulnerable communities are adequately supported in the face of climate change. The study's findings contribute valuable insights for policymakers aiming to build a more equitable and sustainable urban future.

The study concluded that while socio-economic incentives hold significant potential to enhance urban resilience in Eswatini, their effectiveness remains uneven across informal sectors in Manzini and Mbabane. Limited public awareness, fragmented institutional support, and low levels of community engagement continue to hinder the full realization of resilience-building efforts. Despite the existence of municipal frameworks and strategic plans, many urban dwellers—particularly those in informal settlements—remain disconnected from formal resilience initiatives. Cultural relevance, social networks, and participatory governance emerged as critical enablers of success, yet these elements are not consistently integrated into policy and practice. Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

Recommendations for Action

1. Institutionalize Inclusive and Participatory Urban Governance

Municipal councils, working in partnership with the National Disaster Management Agency (NDMA), should embed participatory planning mechanisms into urban resilience strategies. By actively involving informal sector dwellers in the design and monitoring of initiatives, local authorities can ensure that interventions reflect community priorities and foster long-term ownership.

2. Integrate Cultural and Indigenous Knowledge into Resilience Frameworks

To enhance local relevance, municipal councils should collaborate with traditional leaders to co-design resilience programs that incorporate indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices. This approach strengthens community trust and ensures that strategies are socially grounded and widely accepted.

3. Strengthen Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration and Urban Networks

Local governments, in coordination with NGOs, should facilitate urban forums and stakeholder mapping exercises that promote collaboration across sectors. These platforms enable informal sector actors to connect with resilience practitioners, share resources, and co-create solutions tailored to urban challenges.

4. Enhance Institutional Capacity and Policy Coherence

NDMA, together with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, should lead efforts to integrate socio-economic incentives into urban planning instruments such as the Integrated Development Plan (IDP). Concurrently, municipal staff should receive targeted training to improve technical capacity and inclusive governance practices.

5. Promote Awareness, Education, and Adaptive Learning

Municipal councils, supported by the Ministry of Education and Training, should launch multilingual public awareness campaigns and integrate resilience education into schools and vocational programs. Establishing feedback systems will also help communities evaluate and adapt resilience strategies over time.

Recommendations for Future Research

- Future studies should explore the long-term impact of socio-economic incentives on resilience outcomes in informal urban sectors across different regions of Eswatini.
- Research should investigate the role of informal institutions and social networks in shaping adaptive behaviors and community cohesion during climate-related shocks.
- Comparative studies between urban and peri-urban areas could provide insights into spatial variations in resilience and inform location-specific strategies.
- Further inquiry into the gendered dimensions of resilience in informal sectors is needed to ensure that interventions are equitable and inclusive.
- Evaluations of existing municipal policies should be conducted to assess their effectiveness in supporting informal sector resilience and identify areas for reform.