

Green means ‘to grow’. But does ‘growth’ mean to be green?

According to the Wikipedia, there are 63 shades of green. Forest green, jungle green, tea green, asparagus green, army green, rifle green, Paris green, Persian green are some of them. Green is not a primary color. It is the result of a mixture of yellow and blue, or yellow and cyan. Etymologically the word *green* finds its origin in the Old English verb *growan*, which means “to grow”[1]. Most frequently used to describe elements of nature, it has also been recently used to qualify some cities around the world. But what are the characteristics that a city needs to have to be classified as green? Before trying to answer this question, let’s check some facts:



- Half of humanity – 3.5 billion people – lives in cities today.
- By 2030, almost 60 per cent of the world’s population will live in urban areas.
- 95 per cent of urban expansion in the next decades will take place in developing world.
- 828 million people live in slums today and the number keeps rising.
- The world’s cities occupy just 2 per cent of the Earth’s land, but account for 60-80 per cent of energy consumption and 75 per cent of carbon emissions.
- Rapid urbanization is exerting pressure on fresh water supplies, sewage, the living environment, and public health.
- But the high density of cities can bring efficiency gains and technological innovation while reducing resource and energy consumption[2].

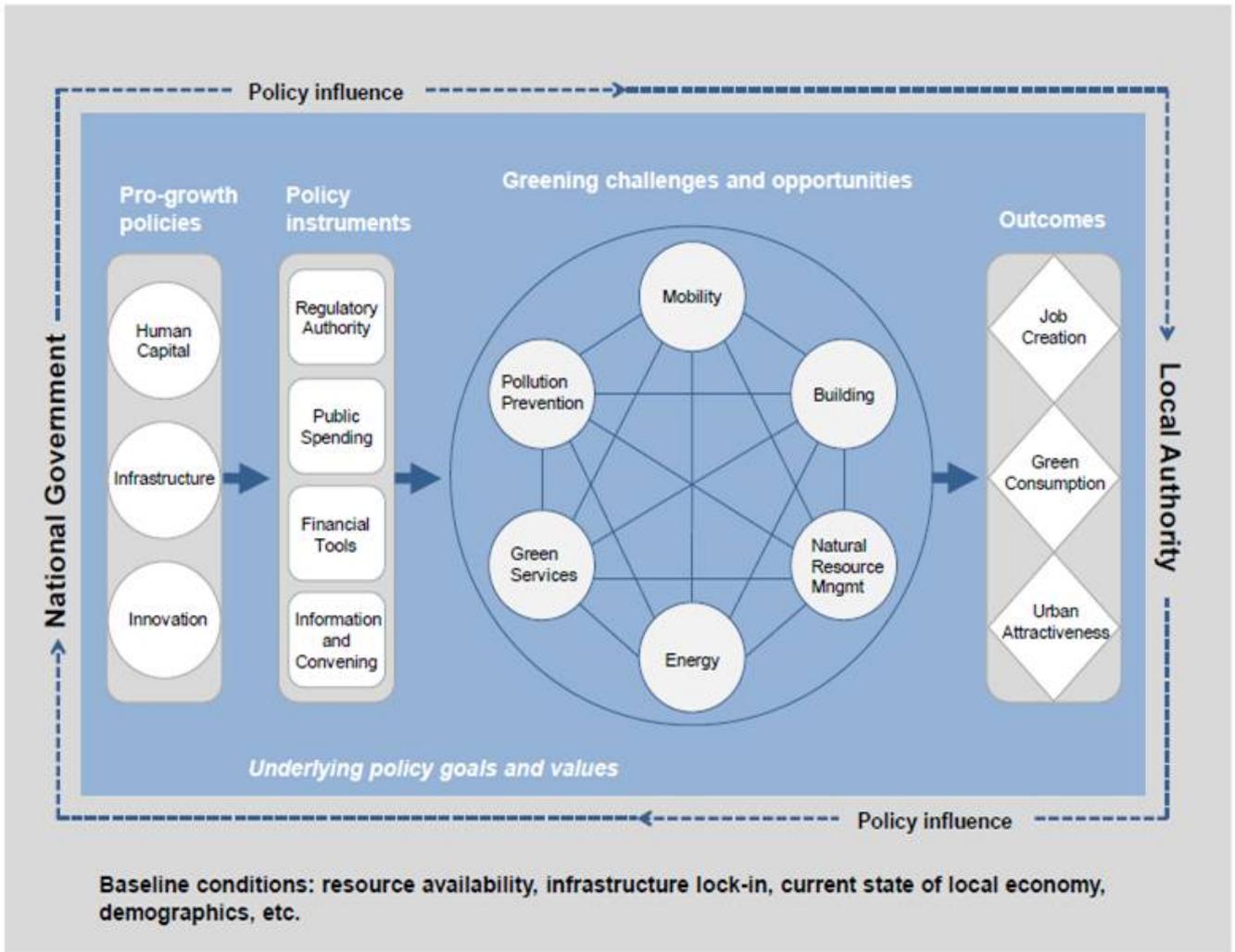
The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) brings some clues of what a city needs to be considered green. The main features are: control of diseases and their health burden; reduction of chemical and physical hazards; development of high quality urban environments for all; minimization of transfers of environmental costs to areas outside the city; and ensure of progress towards sustainable consumption (UNEP *apud* Satterthwaite 1997) [3]. Freiburg, famous for its sustainability policies, is mentioned in the sectoral ‘Green Economy’ report on cities and is pictured as an example of city that developed pioneer initiatives towards a better environmental performance (*‘Freiburg, a city of 200,000 inhabitants in Germany, has a long tradition of sustainable building and investment in recycling and it reduced CO2 emissions per capita by 12 per cent between 1992 and 2003 (Duennhoff and Hertle 2005)’*).

The International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) is one of the main active organizations that seek to build Sustainable Communities and Cities by enabling local governments achieve justice, security, resilience, viable economies, and healthy environments. From ICLEI’s perspective, examples of urban sustainable practices are energy efficient buildings, renewable energy, efficient distribution of clean water and waste, green transport schemes, congestion charging and clean air zones[4].

A working paper published by Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) – ‘Cities and Green Growth: A Conceptual Framework’ – includes economic variants in the institutional definition of urban green growth:

‘Urban green growth means fostering economic growth and development through urban activities that reduce negative environmental externalities, the impact on natural resources and the pressure on ecosystem services. The greening of the traditional urban economy and expanding the green urban sector can generate growth (through increased supply and demand), job creation and increased urban attractiveness. These effects are in part the result of stronger interactions at the urban level among economic efficiency, equity and environmental objectives’[5].

Figure 12. Framework for urban green growth



Source: <http://www.oecd.org/regional/regionaldevelopment/49330120.pdf>

Is green really a synonym of growth when we think about sustainable cities? Urban green growth is possible if the right elements and policies are combined, according to the OECD. UNEP and ICLEI identify rapid urban population growth and urban sprawl as two big challenges for sustainable cities. So is urban growth an enemy of green cities, or can it foster sustainable and innovative practices and well-being? Is there a size limit to be green?

photo by: [JoshuaDavisPhotography](#)

