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PROGRAMME COMMITTEE

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FAO Green Cities Initiative

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Today, 57 percent of the world's population lives in cities, and this percentage is expected to rise to 68 percent by 2050. Rethinking urban planning and design becomes imperative to the transition from holding cities accountable for environmental degradation to recognizing their potential as engines for green growth. Balancing urban development and ecosystem services requires an integrated approach that considers both human well-being and environmental health.
- To support cities in their journey towards more resilient and sustainable development, FAO launched, in 2020, the Green Cities Initiative (GCI) to help generate tangible improvements in the health and well-being of people and the surrounding environment in 1,000 cities around the world by 2030 by strategically integrating urban and peri-urban forestry, urban agriculture and bioeconomy into the fabric of urban life.
- This document summarizes the vision, progress in implementation and next programmatic milestones of the GCI.
- Several actions, such as pilot projects, baseline studies, capacity development and visibility activities have already been implemented under the three GCI thematic areas: urban forestry, urban agriculture and bioeconomy. The GCI is progressively increasing its geographical scope with the aim of further structuring networking and technical support activities, including city-to-city cooperation, the growth of a global community of practice to inspire cities to learn from each other, and the potential set up of the GCI Facility and the Direct Beneficiary Grants Programme to support concrete actions on the ground.
- At its 27th Session, the Committee on Forestry (COFO) invited Members to join the GCI and recommended FAO to develop capacity-building programmes and tools and to provide technical assistance for increasing the resilience, health and well-being of urban and peri-urban dwellers, improving the sustainability of agrifood systems, and supporting sustainable urban development.
- A strong programmatic approach, coupled with recognition schemes for green cities and adequate financial resources for capacity development and innovation, are imperative for the worldwide success of the initiative.

GUIDANCE SOUGHT FROM THE PROGRAMME COMMITTEE

- The Programme Committee is invited to take note of the progress made in the FAO Green Cities Initiative.

I. Background

1. Cities are major contributors to climate change but are also vulnerable to its effects, and they are therefore at the frontline of cross-sectoral and interconnected challenges. City expansion and global challenges are threatening the ability of local administrations to provide residents with access to adequate water, food, energy sources and sanitation facilities, increasing the vulnerability of communities to health-related problems and increasing inequality in urban contexts.
2. Sustainable urban development has become crucial, with cities set to play a central role in shaping future consumption and production patterns. If urban challenges are left unaddressed at the local level, they may escalate into global threats that spill across national borders, directly affecting the daily lives of billions of people.
3. The interconnection between urbanization, climate challenges and the pressure on urban and peri-urban natural ecosystems underscore the need for cross-sectoral and innovative solutions. Despite their crucial role, local governments are often insufficiently recognized as key players and thus are not adequately supported by national governments with policy and regulatory instruments. In addition, they often have limited financial and technical capacities to face these challenges.
4. Urban planners and local governments are increasingly recognizing the potential of urban agriculture, forestry and multifunctional green infrastructure as tools for climate resilience, health and well-being. Achieving this, however, requires an integrated approach that considers human well-being, environmental health and an appropriate balance between urban development and preservation of the goods and services provided by natural ecosystems.

II. Scope of the FAO Green Cities Initiative

5. The FAO Green Cities Initiative (GCI), which was launched by the Director-General at the 75th UN General Assembly in 2020, promotes an integrated approach by incorporating urban and peri-urban forestry, agriculture and circular bioeconomy into urban planning. The aim of this flagship initiative is to create sustainable, resilient urban environments by enhancing the adaptive capacity of cities to address climate challenges, facilitating multistakeholder partnerships to share resources and expertise, and promoting participatory planning and community involvement.
6. The GCI envisions vibrant, inclusive cities in which green and productive spaces enhance biodiversity, climate resilience, social cohesion and economic prosperity, bridging the gap between urban and rural areas. By 2030, the initiative aims to improve the health and well-being of people in 1,000 cities by integrating urban and peri-urban forestry, agriculture and bioeconomy into urban development. A multifunctional green infrastructure approach offers a wide range of benefits, including water purification, air quality improvement, biodiversity enhancement, and community engagement. These help mitigate urbanization's negative impacts and increase cities' resilience to climate change.
7. The GCI focuses on empowering local governments, civil society and small and medium-sized enterprises by providing tools, education and support to implement green urban adaptation strategies. The initiative promotes multi-level governance and participatory approaches, prioritizing the most vulnerable populations. It also fosters a global community of practice for knowledge exchange and cooperation, enhancing the ability of local decision-makers to design and implement sustainable urban strategies. By scaling up support and bridging technical capacity gaps, the GCI seeks to turn the vision of sustainable, resilient cities into a reality, promoting economic, social and environmental benefits globally.
8. The GCI aligns with FAO Programme Priority Areas (PPAs), particularly those focused on creating a *better environment*, including BE1: *Climate Change Mitigating and Adapted Agrifood Systems*, BE2: *Bioeconomy for Sustainable Food and Agriculture*, BE3: *Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services for Food and Agriculture*, and BE4: *Achieving Sustainable Urban Food Systems*. By promoting resilient, low-carbon development, the GCI addresses climate challenges and supports the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and international climate finance goals. The initiative

is grounded in the principles of the New Urban Agenda¹, which advocates environmentally sustainable urban development, improved urban ecosystems, and disaster risk reduction. It also aligns with regional and global frameworks such as Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, and the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

9. The GCI emphasizes the importance of integrating green infrastructure into urban planning, contributing to several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities), which highlights the role of urban forests and green spaces. The initiative promotes a cross-sectoral approach that supports multiple SDGs, fostering sustainable urban development tailored to local contexts. The GCI's approach underscores the need for cities to prioritize urban and peri-urban forests in their agendas, enhancing the connection between people and nature and addressing the challenges posed by rapid urbanization while fostering sustainable rural-urban relationships.

III. FAO's comparative advantage

10. Modern city challenges are addressed by various UN agencies, the World Bank, intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, and other organizations through various urban initiatives. While networks such as Local Governments for Sustainability² and the Cities Climate Leadership Group (C40)³ and UN agencies like the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and UN Habitat have developed green cities programmes, FAO stands out as the only UN agency with extensive expertise in urban forestry, agriculture and food systems. FAO supports all pillars of sustainable urban development identified in the New Urban Agenda, helping city policymakers plan and implement innovative green initiatives. The organization facilitates collaboration between national and local governments, ensuring urban greening policies are aligned and assisting in the integration of FAO's areas of expertise into urban planning. With its mandate and multidisciplinary capacity, FAO is uniquely positioned to mainstream integrated multifunctional green infrastructure into urban development.

IV. Implementation arrangements and partnerships

11. The FAO Forestry Division is leading the GCI, in collaboration and coordination with a working group and other coordination mechanisms involving various FAO units across FAO headquarters as well as Decentralized Offices. These units deal with urban agriculture, bioeconomy, urban food systems and other relevant areas of work.

12. The Green Cities Initiative was discussed during the 27th Session of COFO in July 2024. The Committee invited Members to join the FAO Green Cities Initiative and to promote knowledge transfer through active participation in regional technical networks. The Committee also recommended FAO to develop capacity-building programmes and tools and to provide technical assistance for increasing the resilience, health and well-being of urban and peri-urban dwellers, improving the sustainability of agrifood systems, and supporting sustainable urban development.

13. To foster multiplier effects, activities are carried out in collaboration with partners with proven experience and expertise in key aspects related to urban development, including a reinforced partnership with UN agencies working on urban issues, collaboration with city networks, and the mobilization of universities and research centres. Key partners include, among others, UN agencies (UNEP, UN Habitat, the UN Economic Commission for Europe), City Networks (Latin America and the Caribbean City Food Network, Local Governments for Sustainability, C40Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy), non-governmental agencies (Rikolto, Arbor Day Foundation) national

¹ <https://habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda/>

² <https://iclei.org/>

³ <https://www.c40.org/>

governments, academia (Politecnico di Milano, University of Bologna) and international financial mechanisms (the Global Environment Facility[GEF], and the Green Climate Fund[GCF]).

V. Achievements to date

14. Since its inception, the GCI has been working with cities in different parts of the world to embrace sustainable practices, share solutions and success stories, and demonstrate resilience to urban challenges. Several actions have been implemented, such as pilot projects, baseline studies, capacity development, and visibility activities. Three hundred cities are already benefiting from GCI activities, including through partnership programmes such as Tree Cities of the World⁴. Activities in the different areas are detailed below.

Knowledge sharing and networking

- a. In 2022, FAO, in collaboration with Politecnico di Milano and the African Centre for Cities, held a series of training workshops with the aim of enhancing the capacity of 12 African cities to integrate urban forestry, urban agriculture, and urban food systems in urban and territorial planning. The goal is to develop plans to improve the resilience, health and well-being of urban dwellers.
- b. In 2023, FAO developed a regional action programme for Africa based on national and city-level multistakeholder consultations in 30 African cities. The programme provides a framework, analyses the most pressing urban challenges, and identifies priority responses in GCI areas. The results of the analysis are being used as evidence to mobilize resources.
- c. In July 2024, FAO has launched the Green Cities Network to support and facilitate exchanges among cities that are actively addressing their urbanization challenges by integrating urban and peri-urban forestry, urban and peri-urban agriculture, and bioeconomy.

Technical assistance

- a. The Green Urban Oases Programme⁵ supports urban communities in drylands by helping them building their policy and technical capabilities to design and implement integrated urban forestry and urban greening strategies. This is done through engaging multistakeholder engagement and integrating these strategies into urban and territorial policies, governance, and planning for large-scale implementation. Currently, a project funded by Italy is supporting activities under the Programme in Jordan, Mongolia, Namibia and Tunisia.
- b. With the support of GEF and GCF, FAO is supporting countries (Algeria, Chile, and Zimbabwe) in formulating and submitting project proposals for a total amount of around USD 12 million under the GEF-8 Sustainable Cities Programme and in implementing GCF Readiness projects (Chile and Eswatini).
- c. In the framework of the European Union's Horizon 2020 Programme, FAO is one of the partners of the CONEXUS project, which aims to strengthen international cooperation on nature-based solutions and ecosystem restoration between Latin America and Europe.
- d. Several smart-farming projects are ongoing (Honduras, Uzbekistan, Viet Nam, Zambia) to facilitate efficient and sustainable value chains for safe and nutritious vegetable products and optimize for-profit and business opportunities by improving national capabilities.
- e. FAO has implemented Technical Cooperation Programme (TCP) projects related to the Green Cities approaches in countries including, among others, Cameroon, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Dominica, Kenya, Madagascar, Rwanda, Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe.
- f. The box below provides some examples of GCI projects and activities.

⁴ [Tree Cities of the World](#)

⁵ [Green Urban Oases Programme](#)

Examples of GCI projects and activities, including promising practices

- **Kigali (Rwanda)** has been engaged in urban tree-planting that spanned the entire city.
- **Ndjamena and Massakory (Chad)** invested in climate-resilient water management in urban forestry.
- In **Colombo (Sri Lanka)**, the GCI has strengthened urban agriculture through the establishment of greenhouses and the installation of garden equipment and water-efficient systems.
- **Kampala (Uganda)** introduced crop cultivation and tree-planting along riverbanks, enhancing agricultural outputs and green spaces.
- **Yaoundé (Cameroon)** developed systems to prevent food loss and apply sustainable waste management practices in urban gardening.
- In **Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire)**, FAO partnered with BioDAF (a company specializing in wastewater treatment) to transform food waste into valuable resources like animal protein (by raising black soldier fly larvae) and biofertilizers for agriculture.
- In **Eenhana (Namibia)**, FAO is supporting the implementation of an urban forestry greening project, including tree-planting, the setting up of nurseries, and awareness-raising activities, thus promoting urban biodiversity, contributing to adaptation measures for extreme weather events, and improving quality of life throughout recreation spaces and active lifestyles.
- In **Ulaanbaatar (Mongolia)**, a pilot project inspired by an integrated planning approach is working to improve existing green spaces, including through the planting of native tree species, spring-water protection, and small-scale infrastructure for visitors.
- In **Roseau (Dominica)**, the GCI complemented two government-sponsored projects, the national reforestation and beautification project and the plant-one-million-trees project, through reforestation following the devastation and loss of forest cover caused by Hurricane Maria.

Awareness-raising

- a. FAO promoted the FAO GCI during a side event at the 11th World Urban Forum in Cracow, Poland, in June 2022.
- b. The FAO GCI Team participated in the ECOSOC Youth Forum in April 2023 to present their work and shared the outcomes of three Climathon events held in the Sahel Region (Burkina Faso, Niger, and Senegal). At these events, local youth groups worked on developing innovative proposals for sustainable urban development.
- c. The 2nd World Forum on Urban Forests, co-organized by FAO, was held in Washington DC, USA, in October 2023, gathering over 1,200 experts and practitioners from 60 countries.
- d. In July 2024, a GCI special event on 'Multifunctional green infrastructures, a solution to urban challenges' was organized during the 27th Session of COFO to launch the FAO Green Cities Initiative Network⁶.
- e. The first-ever Green Cities Awards were presented in July 2024 to celebrate local cities and authorities that have shown a high level of achievement in the areas of urban and peri-urban forestry, agriculture and bioeconomy on the two themes selected for 2024: *youth engagement* and *innovation*. The cities of Mendoza in Argentina and Newcastle in the United Kingdom received the Awards.

Resource mobilization

- a. To date, the GCI has mobilized around USD 5 million from the following funding sources: the Multi-Disciplinary Fund (MDF) (USD 0.5 million), the Flexible Multi-partner Mechanism (FMM) (USD 1 million), and the Government of Italy (USD 3.3 million for two projects).

⁶ <https://www.fao.org/forestry/committee-on-forestry/world-forest-week-side-events/green-cities-initiative/en>

- b. The FAO GCI team also benefits from in-kind contributions, such as the secondment of two experts from the government of France. It will soon receive a Junior Professional Expert funded by the Government of Italy.

VI. Milestones for 2025–2026

15. The GCI is progressively increasing its geographical scope with the aim of further structuring networking and technical support activities, including city-to-city cooperation, the growth of a global community of practice to inspire cities to learn from each other, and the development of a GCI Facility and the Direct Beneficiary Grants Programme to support concrete actions on the ground. The main areas of work are detailed below.

Knowledge management

- a. The FAO Green Cities Network is expanding as a global community of practice aimed at fostering city-to-city cooperation, cross-cutting partnerships, and data analysis to build sustainable urban environments. The network's goal is to engage 300 cities by 2025, 600 by 2028 and 1,000 by 2030. Participating cities will accelerate their environmental transitions, share achievements and challenges, and gain visibility. A GCI discussion forum will amplify city voices, facilitate collaboration, and connect diverse professionals to share knowledge and best practices.
- b. The CGI is developing a digital platform and toolbox as a global hub for network members, offering resources like spatial data, guidance documents and learning modules to support collaboration and knowledge exchange. Additionally, FAO is establishing a recognition scheme for cities to be designated "FAO Green City". This scheme will acknowledge cities' sustainability efforts in urban and peri-urban agriculture, forestry and circular bioeconomy. It will be based on existing standards, such as the Tree City of the World Programme, and will include benchmarks for urban agriculture and bioeconomy.
- c. Cities will create context-specific roadmaps outlining tailored actions for sustainable development, supported by FAO and its partners. This structured process will guide cities in implementing integrated, innovative approaches to urban agriculture, forestry and agrifood systems transformation.

Technical assistance

- a. FAO, with the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, will soon launch the project "GCI in Action for Africa". This USD 3 million project will assist ten cities in five African countries to identify and develop bankable investment projects tailored to their context that will support adaptation to climate shocks and leverage the multiple benefits offered by mainstreaming urban and peri-urban forestry, urban and peri-urban agriculture, and bioeconomy practices.
- b. The GCI will also be one of the five thematic priorities included in the framework of FAO GEF-8 Small Grants Programme. The aim is to catalyse sustainable urban solutions by promoting the adoption of green technologies and collaborating with local communities to improve the quantity and quality of urban forests and green spaces in and around participating cities. The focus countries of this work will be Bosnia and Herzegovina, Chile, Cook Islands, Guyana, Kenya, Marshall Islands, Nicaragua, and Tajikistan.

Awareness-raising

- a. FAO will host the biannual Green Cities Conference and GCI promotional meetings to bring together international experts, city representatives and other stakeholders to share experiences and explore innovative solutions for greening cities. During the conference, GCI awards will recognize cities' achievements in areas like innovation and climate action, encouraging others to follow suit.
- b. The GCI will also focus on raising awareness about the benefits of urban forestry, agriculture and green infrastructure through various communication initiatives, promoting

the GCI globally, engaging new cities and partners, and highlighting best practices to strengthen urban–rural linkages.

Resource mobilization

- a. Interest in GCI projects is growing at scale, leading to an increase in the number of requests for technical support from city leaders and FAO Country Offices; thus, the continued success of the GCI will require a significant increase in financial resources. Requests for assistance range from pilot activities and quick-win projects to larger-scale interventions. To support this, the GCI team is developing a long-term resource mobilization strategy, focusing on establishing high-level partnerships and attracting public and private investment, including through public–private partnerships. Key components of this strategy are the development of the GCI Facility, aiming to scale up technical assistance and capacity development, and building a transformative multi-year programme with a dedicated secretariat.