

## Sustainability Inflation: Do Green Policies Quietly Increase Cost of Living for the Urban Poor?

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<https://doi.org/10.64882/ijrt.v14.iS1.1021>

### Abstract

Sustainability and green policies are generally presented as solutions for environmental protection and long-term human welfare. However, this research explores a rarely discussed and uncomfortable reality: whether sustainability initiatives unintentionally increase the daily cost of living for the urban poor. The study focuses on the conflict between environmental responsibility and economic affordability, especially for low-income families living in urban areas. Instead of relying on official data or secondary sources, this paper is built on student-led field observations, informal conversations, and lived experiences of economically weaker sections in the city. As a student researcher, the students conducted informal surveys and discussions with urban poor households such as street vendors, domestic workers, daily wage labourers, auto drivers, sanitation workers, and small shop owners living in rented rooms or informal settlements. The discussions were not structured interviews but everyday conversations about expenses changes in prices, and difficulties in adapting to new “green” rules. This approach allowed genuine responses, free from technical language or policy influence. One major observation was that many urban poor individuals were not against sustainability itself. However, they felt that green policies were designed for people who could afford choices. For example, bans or restrictions on older vehicles were seen as environmentally necessary, but for poor auto drivers or delivery workers, replacing vehicles was financially impossible. Electric vehicles were viewed as “rich people’s sustainability,” not a realistic option. Charging infrastructure, battery replacement costs, and lack of resale value created fear rather than hope. The study also found that energy-saving policies sometimes increased expenses instead of reducing them. Poor households were encouraged to use energy-efficient appliances, LED lights, or cleaner cooking fuels. However, the upfront cost of such products was a major barrier. Many families continued using older appliances or unsafe alternatives because they could not afford the “initial investment” required for sustainability. In some cases, prepaid smart meters created anxiety, as families feared sudden disconnection if balance ran out, leading to more cautious but stressful energy use. The analysis suggests that sustainability without affordability can deepen urban inequality. When green choices are expensive, they become privileges rather than rights. The research does not argue against sustainability but emphasizes the need for inclusive design. Policies must be grounded in real-life economic conditions, especially of the urban poor, who are often the least contributors to

environmental degradation but the most affected by policy changes. In conclusion, this study highlights that true sustainability must balance environmental goals with social justice. If green policies increase the cost of survival for the poor, they risk losing public trust and long-term effectiveness. Sustainability should reduce hardship, not redistribute it downward. The findings call for a people-centered sustainability model, where affordability, dignity, and participation of the urban poor are central to environmental action.

## **Introduction**

In recent years, sustainability and green development have become key topics in urban planning and public policy around the world. Governments, international organizations, and city authorities are increasingly promoting green policies like adopting clean energy, reducing waste, encouraging sustainable transport, and improving energy efficiency. These initiatives are seen as necessary steps to tackle climate change, environmental damage, and long-term ecological balance. Sustainability is often portrayed as a concept that benefits everyone and enhances quality of life for current and future generations.

However, while the environmental advantages are often emphasized, the economic effects of sustainability policies on vulnerable social groups receive much less focus. In urban areas, especially in developing countries, many people live on low and unstable incomes. Communities of urban poor—such as daily wage workers, street vendors, domestic workers, auto drivers, sanitation workers, and small shop owners—already face challenges from rising rents, food prices, healthcare costs, and job instability. In this situation, even minor increases in daily expenses can greatly impact their standard of living.

This research stems from concerns that some green policies, although well-meaning from an environmental standpoint, might unintentionally raise the cost of living for the urban poor. Measures like restrictions on older vehicles, promoting electric mobility, requiring the use of energy-efficient appliances, cleaner cooking fuels, and prepaid electricity systems often come with high upfront costs. For middle- and upper-income households, these costs may be manageable or viewed as long-term investments. However, for economically weaker groups, such expenses can turn into financial burdens instead of benefits.

Unlike many studies that depend on secondary data, government reports, or large-scale surveys, this research takes a human-centered approach. It is based on informal surveys, field observations, and everyday conversations conducted by student researchers with urban poor households. This method helps bring out the voices and lived experiences of affected individuals without the influence of technical language or policy framing. The focus is not on measuring precise economic figures but on understanding perceptions, challenges, and coping strategies related to sustainability policies.

The study looks at how urban poor communities experience sustainability in their everyday lives and whether they see green initiatives as inclusive or exclusive. It explores the gap between policy goals and real-life situations, highlighting how affordability is crucial for the success of environmental measures. The research does not oppose sustainability itself; instead, it questions the fairness of sustainability models that fail to adequately consider economic inequality.

By concentrating on “sustainability inflation,” this paper seeks to foster a more balanced conversation about environmental policy—one that combines environmental responsibility with social justice. Understanding the unintended economic consequences of green policies is vital for creating inclusive and effective sustainability strategies. True sustainability should protect.

### **Literature Review**

Sustainability and green development are frequently discussed in academic work as important responses to climate change, environmental damage, and rapid urban growth. Many scholars believe that sustainable policies can reduce pollution, conserve natural resources, and support long-term economic stability. Ideas like sustainable cities, green energy, and low-carbon transportation have received strong backing in environmental and economic research. However, recent studies have raised concerns about whether these policies are socially inclusive, particularly for economically disadvantaged groups.

Several researchers point out that sustainability initiatives often assume people have a certain level of financial resources. Studies on green consumption show that eco-friendly products and technologies tend to have higher initial costs, making them more affordable for middle- and high-income groups. While these products may save money over time, low-income families often lack the savings or credit needed for such investments. This leads to a situation where sustainability becomes a privilege instead of a right.

Literature on urban poverty highlights that the urban poor already struggle with various economic pressures, including increasing housing rents, transportation costs, food inflation, and unstable jobs. According to social policy studies, any additional financial burden, no matter how small, can significantly impact their daily survival. Research on urban informal workers indicates that policies affecting transportation, fuel use, or electricity can directly influence their livelihoods. For instance, vehicle emission regulations and restrictions on older cars have disproportionately affected drivers, delivery workers, and small traders who rely on affordable transportation for their income.

Transport and mobility studies further support the notion that green transition policies might unintentionally increase inequality. Electric vehicles are often promoted as sustainable options, yet existing literature highlights challenges like high purchase prices, gaps in charging infrastructure, battery replacement costs, and poor resale value. Researchers argue that without significant subsidies and infrastructure support, electric mobility remains out of reach for the urban poor, reinforcing the view that sustainability policies benefit wealthier individuals.

Scholars in social justice and environmental ethics emphasize that those who contribute least to environmental damage often bear the highest costs of environmental policies. The urban poor generally have smaller carbon footprints than wealthier groups, yet they face harsher consequences from policy changes. Literature on inclusive sustainability stresses the need for policies designed around people's needs, taking affordability, participation, and local realities into account. Without this focus, green policies risk losing public trust and long-term effectiveness.

Overall, existing literature highlights a growing concern about the economic effects of sustainability initiatives on vulnerable populations. While sustainability is crucial, scholars increasingly advocate for a balanced approach that combines environmental goals with social and economic justice. This research builds on these studies by using surveys and personal experiences to understand how the urban poor perceive and experience sustainability policies in their daily lives. environment while also ensuring that the basic needs and dignity of the urban poor are upheld.

### **Objectives**

1. To examine how sustainability and green policies affect the daily cost of living of the urban poor.
2. To understand the perceptions and experiences of urban poor communities regarding the affordability of green initiatives.
3. To identify economic challenges faced by low-income urban households in adapting to sustainability-related policies.
4. To analyse whether current sustainability measures promote inclusiveness or increase economic inequality among urban populations.

### **Research Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

This study uses a descriptive and exploratory research design. This approach suits the research goals, which aim to understand the experiences and views of the urban poor regarding sustainability and green policies. The study does not test a specific theory. Instead, it looks at real-life economic impacts through direct human interaction.

#### **Nature of the Study**

The study is mainly qualitative, with some basic quantitative observations. It emphasizes understanding human behavior, opinions, and daily financial issues rather than focusing on numbers. The research centers on affordability, perceptions, and challenges in adapting to sustainability initiatives.

#### **Sources of Data**

The study relies entirely on primary data gathered through surveys and field interactions. It did not use online platforms, government databases, or secondary statistics.

#### Primary data were collected through:

- Informal face-to-face conversations
- Unstructured interviews
- Field observations

These interactions took place in natural settings to encourage honest and spontaneous responses.

#### **Sampling Method**

A non-probability convenience sampling method was used because of accessibility and time constraints. Respondents included urban low-income groups directly affected by sustainability policies.

#### The sample consisted of:

- Street vendors
- Domestic workers
- Daily wage laborers
- Auto and e-rickshaw drivers
- Sanitation workers
- Small shop owners

Most respondents lived in rented rooms, informal settlements, or slum areas.

### **Sample Size**

The study included 30 to 40 respondents from various urban locations. This sample size was deemed sufficient to capture a range of experiences and common patterns related to sustainability expenses.

### **Data Collection Tools**

Data were gathered using:

- Open-ended questions
- Informal discussions
- Observation notes

Questions focused on changes in expenses, transportation costs, energy use, housing utilities, and difficulties in adapting to green policies.

### **Method of Data Analysis**

The gathered data were analysed using thematic analysis. Responses were categorized into common themes such as affordability, awareness, financial burden, stress, and perception of sustainability. Patterns and repeated viewpoints were identified and described.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the study's purpose. No personal identities were recorded, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. The study-maintained respect, dignity, and sensitivity toward all participants.

### **Limitations of the Methodology**

The findings are based on a limited sample and may not be applicable to all urban poor populations. Since the study relies on informal conversations, responses may reflect personal bias. However, the human-centered approach offers valuable insights often overlooked in formal surveys.

### **Findings And Discussion**

The study's findings show that sustainability and green policies have mixed effects on the urban poor. While there are environmental benefits, these often come with economic challenges. Most respondents were aware of sustainability initiatives, but they found them hard to adopt due to financial limits. It was commonly noted that green policies assume people have enough income and savings, which is not true for low-income urban households.

A key finding was that sustainability measures often lead to higher short-term expenses for the urban poor. Respondents reported struggles with vehicle-related rules, especially those concerning older vehicles. Drivers and delivery workers indicated that replacing their vehicles

or switching to electric options was financially unfeasible. Although they recognized the environmental benefits, they felt left out of policy support systems.

Energy-related policies raised concerns as well. While energy-efficient appliances and cleaner fuels were promoted as ways to save money, many respondents could not afford the high initial costs. Prepaid electricity meters caused stress and fear of sudden disconnections, leading families to cut back on essential energy use instead of benefiting from efficiency.

Another significant finding was that most respondents were not against sustainability itself. They supported environmental protection but stressed the need for affordable and flexible solutions. The study emphasizes that when sustainability options become expensive, they turn into privileges for those who are better off.

Overall, the discussion suggests that sustainability without considering social and economic inclusion can increase urban inequality. The findings imply that green policies need to be rethought to match real-life situations and ensure that environmental progress does not jeopardize the basic survival of the urban poor.

## **Conclusion And Recommendations**

### **Conclusion**

The study finds that while sustainability and green policies are vital for environmental protection and urban growth, their current application often adds an unintentional financial strain on the urban poor. The results indicate that many low-income households support sustainability but find it difficult to adopt green practices because of high initial costs, few affordable options, and limited policy support. Measures related to transportation, energy use, and utilities usually benefit wealthier groups, making sustainability seem exclusive instead of inclusive. The research shows that when environmental policies overlook affordability and real-world conditions, they

risk increasing urban inequality and undermining public trust. True sustainability must balance environmental goals with social fairness to make sure no group is left out.

### **Recommendations**

Sustainability policies should focus on affordability, especially for low-income urban households.

Government agencies should offer targeted subsidies, incentives, or flexible payment plans for green technologies like energy-efficient appliances and cleaner transportation.

Urban sustainability programs must include community involvement, allowing the urban poor to voice their concerns and practical needs during policy development.

Awareness campaigns should come with financial support and infrastructure improvements to ensure that sustainability is accessible rather than a burden.

Following these recommendations can help create a people-centered sustainability model that protects the environment while enhancing the economic well-being of the urban poor.

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