

Environmental Justice in the Global South: Investigating the Links Between Green Space Decline and Respiratory Health Disparities in Mumbai and Cairo

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Introduction

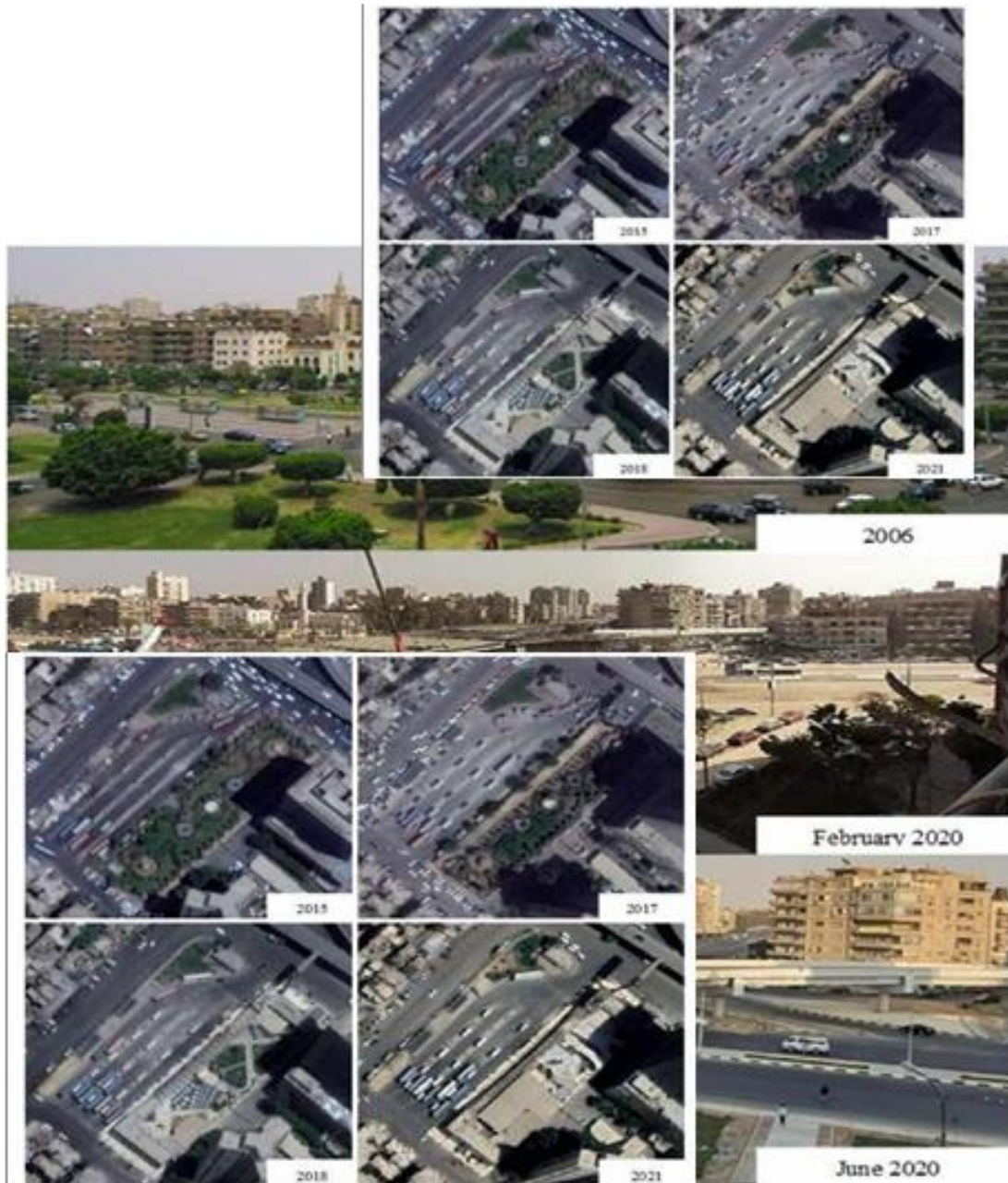
“Urban green spaces are all urban land covered by vegetation of any kind.”

- (Urban green spaces and health. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2016) The WHO’s last updated definition of urban green spaces aimed to ensure enough vegetation in development zones to prevent health issues linked to environmental degradation. However, the lack of mandated per capita allotment gives governments an out, especially in the Global South, where deforestation and ecosystem attacks are justified in the name of development. This has created deep inequalities, where access to green space and, by extension, good health, is reserved for certain classes, despite many nations framing health as a human right. This research explores green space loss in Cairo and Mumbai, aimed at exposing the farce of sustainability in unequal urban landscapes.

Cairo’s Silent Heat Crisis: How the War on Trees Deepens Urban Inequality

During the exceptionally hot summer of 2023, the Egyptian government initiated prolonged energy blackouts affecting densely populated districts in Cairo for up to four hours daily. Concurrently, extensive tree removal occurred even in heritage- rich neighborhoods devoid of active development projects. This convergence of infrastructure failure and environmental degradation provoked widespread alarm across social media, broadcast media, and environmental organizations by June 2024, with the wide observable obliteration of green areas hand-in-hand with historical sights (Hassan, 2024). Data from Salma Nasr Eldin (2024) indicate that from 2013 to 2023, Cairo lost approximately 1.06 million m² of urban tree cover, primarily due to road widening, commercial construction, and progressive desertification, with nationwide urban greenery losses exceeding 5 million m². Notably, tree felling persisted in areas such as Zamalek without official construction, suggesting non- infrastructural motivations (Nasr Eldin,

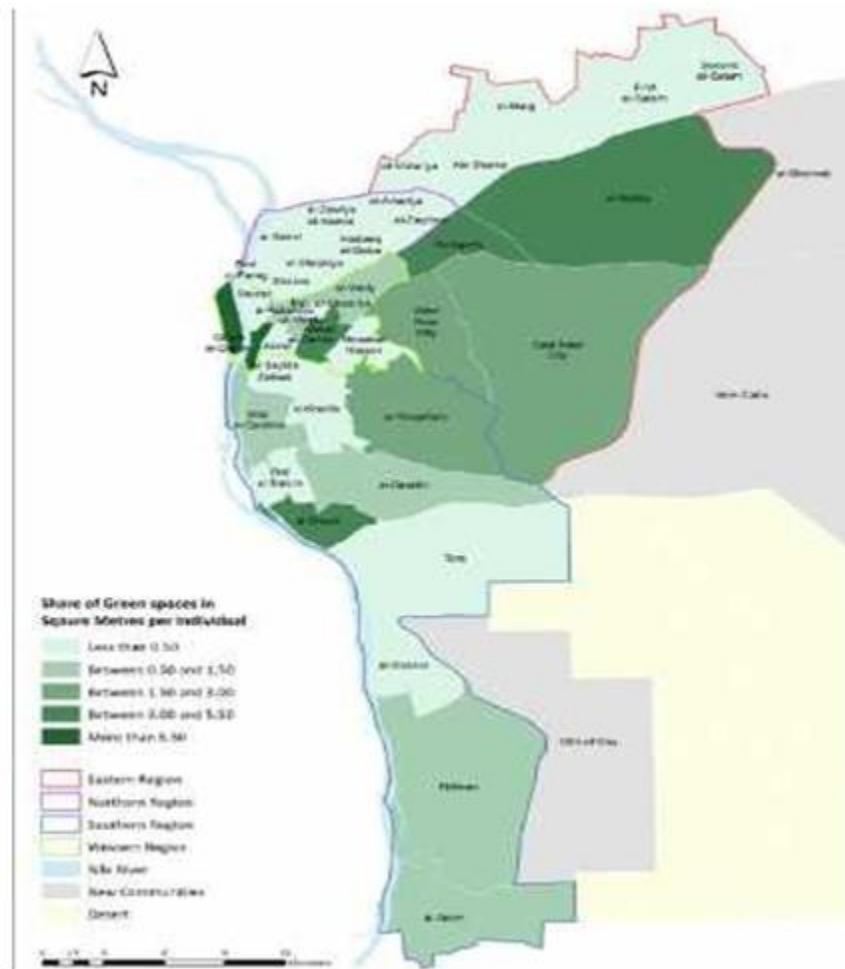
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While unverified rumors circulated among residents about illicit timber trafficking, possibly to Israel, no evidence has substantiated these claims.

Instead, scholars such as Reham El Morally argue that widespread tree removal reflects a

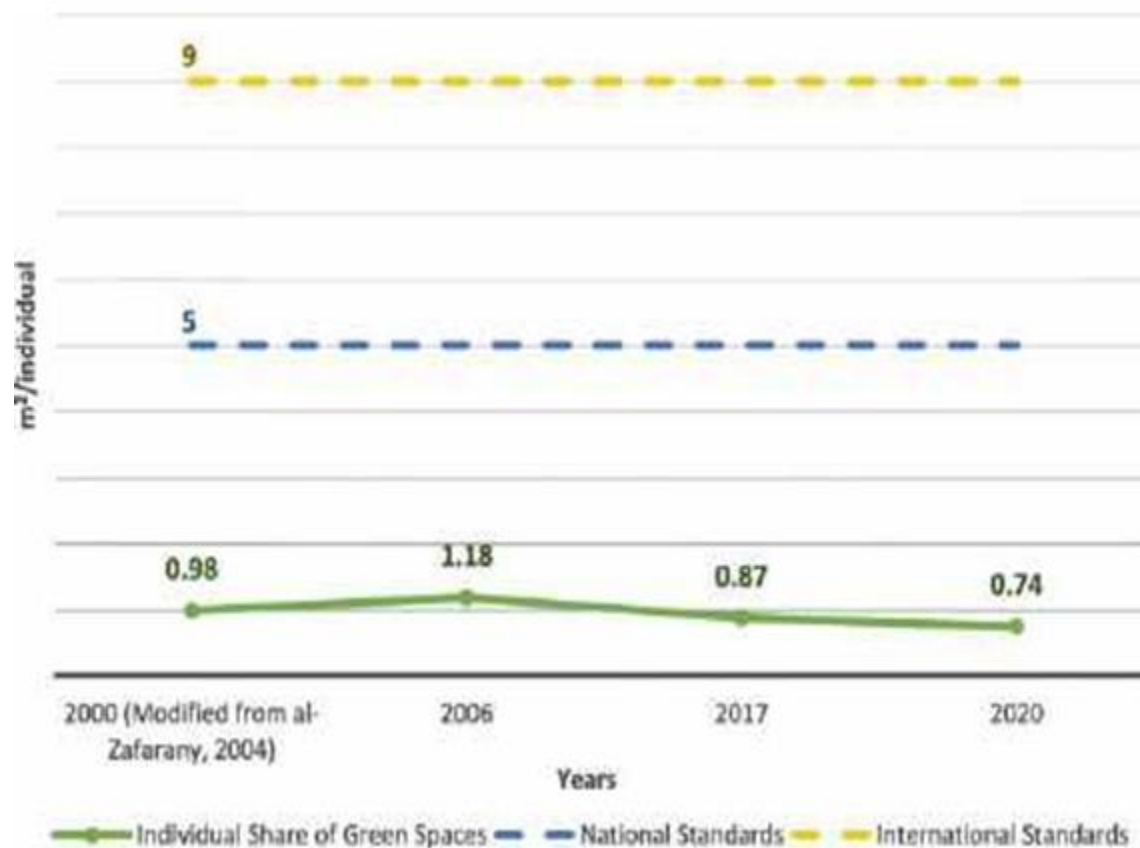
deliberate state strategy to deter public congregation, or most probably adding more commercial space, turning it into profit-oriented areas. By eliminating shade, in a city where temperatures often reach 45 °C, and simultaneously widening streets and removing sidewalks, authorities render outdoor assembly increasingly unviable (El Morally, 2023). In their study on Urban Heat



Island (UHI) formation in Greater Cairo, Athukorala and Murayama (2021) show how the removal of mature trees has intensified UHI effects. Using remote sensing data, they document an increase in impervious surfaces from 564 km² to 869 km² between 2000 and 2019, with nighttime temperatures rising by more than 2 °C. This loss of canopy cover deprives over ten million residents of natural cooling and exacerbates heat-related stress (Maher & Fouad, 2024).

Green space access in Cairo is sharply stratified along class lines. As of 2022, 22 of the city's 37 districts, home to two-thirds of its population, had less than 0.50 m² of green space per person, with some, like al-Matariya, as low as 0.01 m² (Aly & Dimitrijevic, 2022). In contrast, affluent

areas like Gharb al-Qahira, Maadi, Nozha, and Heliopolis exceeded 3 m². Nationally, green space per capita ranges from 0.74 to 1.65 m², far below the WHO’s 9 m² minimum (Hassan, 2024). Meanwhile, massive green infrastructure is concentrated in the New Administrative Capital’s gated zones, such as the Green River Park and New Central Park, together covering 2,509 ha, triple the size of Central Park (Maher & Fouad, 2024). These serve elites while neglecting older districts, deepening environmental exclusion (Aly & Dimitrijevic, 2022). Tree canopy over 35% can lower midday temperatures by up to 6 °C (Abdelmejeed & Gruehn, 2024), but such cover is absent in poorer areas, intensifying exposure to heat, pollution, and illness. Globally, Southern cities like Cairo receive only half the cooling benefits of green spaces, reinforcing environmental injustice (Li et al., 2024; Keleg, Watson, & Salheen, 2022).



These patterns highlight an urgent need for equitable urban greening. Interventions must prioritize the preservation of mature trees, ensure neighborhood-level distribution of green spaces, and foster inclusive governance with broad stakeholder engagement.

Without such measures, Cairo risks a bifurcated urban future, where deprived districts face escalating heat, pollution, and health crises, while privileged enclaves enjoy environmental

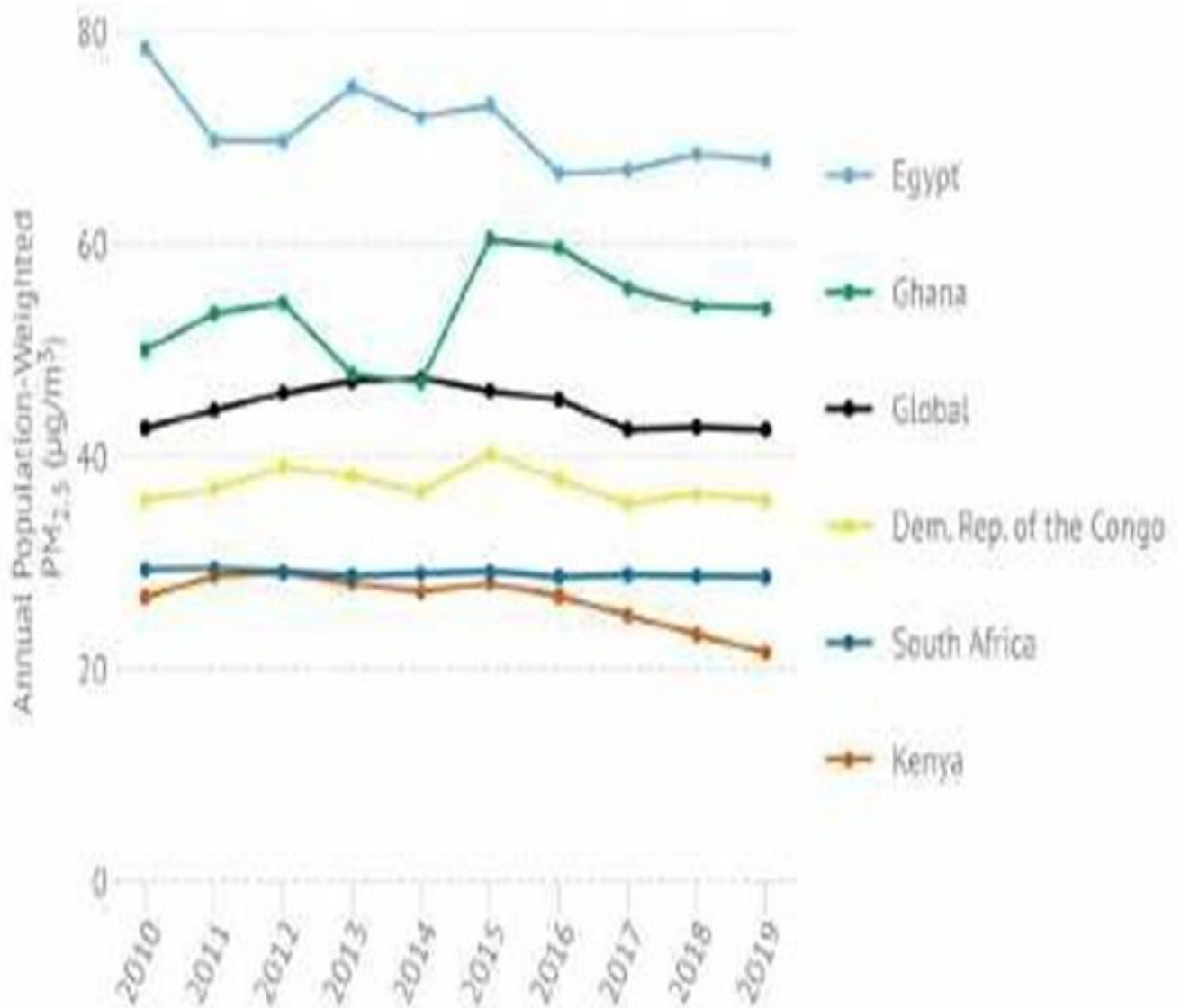
comfort. As the literature makes clear, equitable greening is not just an environmental or aesthetic concern, but a public health imperative demanding immediate policy action.



Environmental Decline and Public Health in Cairo: The Respiratory Cost of Green Space Loss

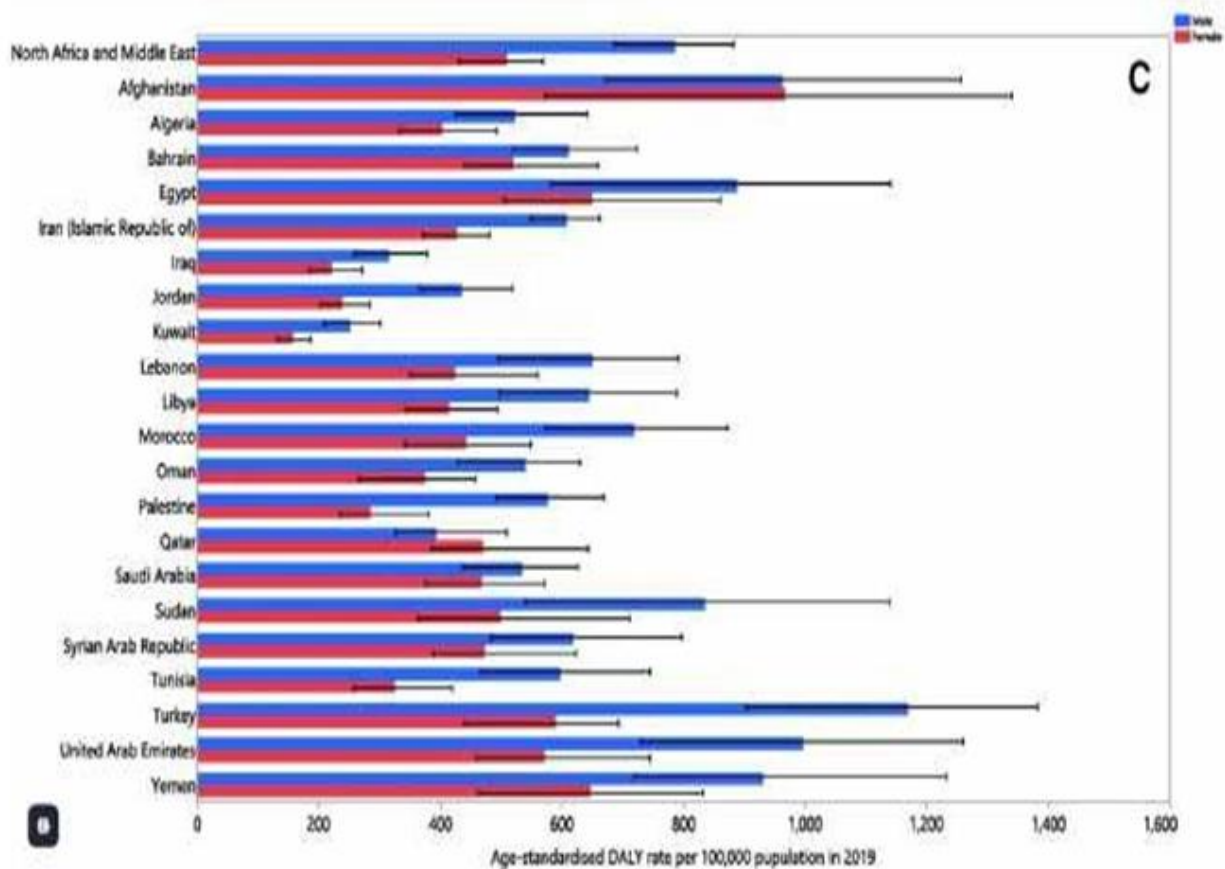
Cairo’s hot, arid climate, often exceeding 35 °C, coupled with rapid urbanization, has led to a dramatic increase in the urban heat island effect. The city experiences daytime temperature differences of up to 7.8°C, driven by a sharp reduction in vegetative order (Abutaleb et al., 2015; Qureshi et al., 2024). Annual PM_{2.5} concentrations have consistently exceeded WHO’s guidelines. State of Global Air data show Egypt’s PM_{2.5} staying in the order of 70–80 µg/m³ between 2010 and 2019. This heavy particulate pollution, mostly from traffic, industry, and waste burning, caused an estimated 90,600 premature deaths in Egypt in 2019. The chart below, from State of Global Air, shows the persistently high PM_{2.5} levels in Egypt (blue line). These

levels have only slowly decreased, even with global trends. The data suggest significant health effects in Cairo, which has long been ranked as one of the world’s most polluted cities.



Pollutants in Cairo (PM_{2.5}, NO₂, SO₂) are caused by heavy traffic, industry, and burning. The highest death toll on the continent was mostly from Egypt, as it is considered one of the most polluted metropolitan areas in the world. Noncommunicable diseases account for about 82% of all deaths and 67% of premature deaths in Egypt. COPD and asthma are on the rise as well.

Egypt had the largest increase in COPD prevalence and the third-largest increase in COPD disability-adjusted life years worldwide between 1990 and 2019 (Feizi et al.,2022).



COPD and asthma: The problem of chronic lung disease is growing in Cairo. Researchers link much of this increase to air pollution exposure. For instance, GBD data show that ambient PM_{2.5} is the second-leading risk for COPD after smoking. Egypt’s rise in COPD cases corresponds with its highly polluted urban air (Feizi et al., 2022).

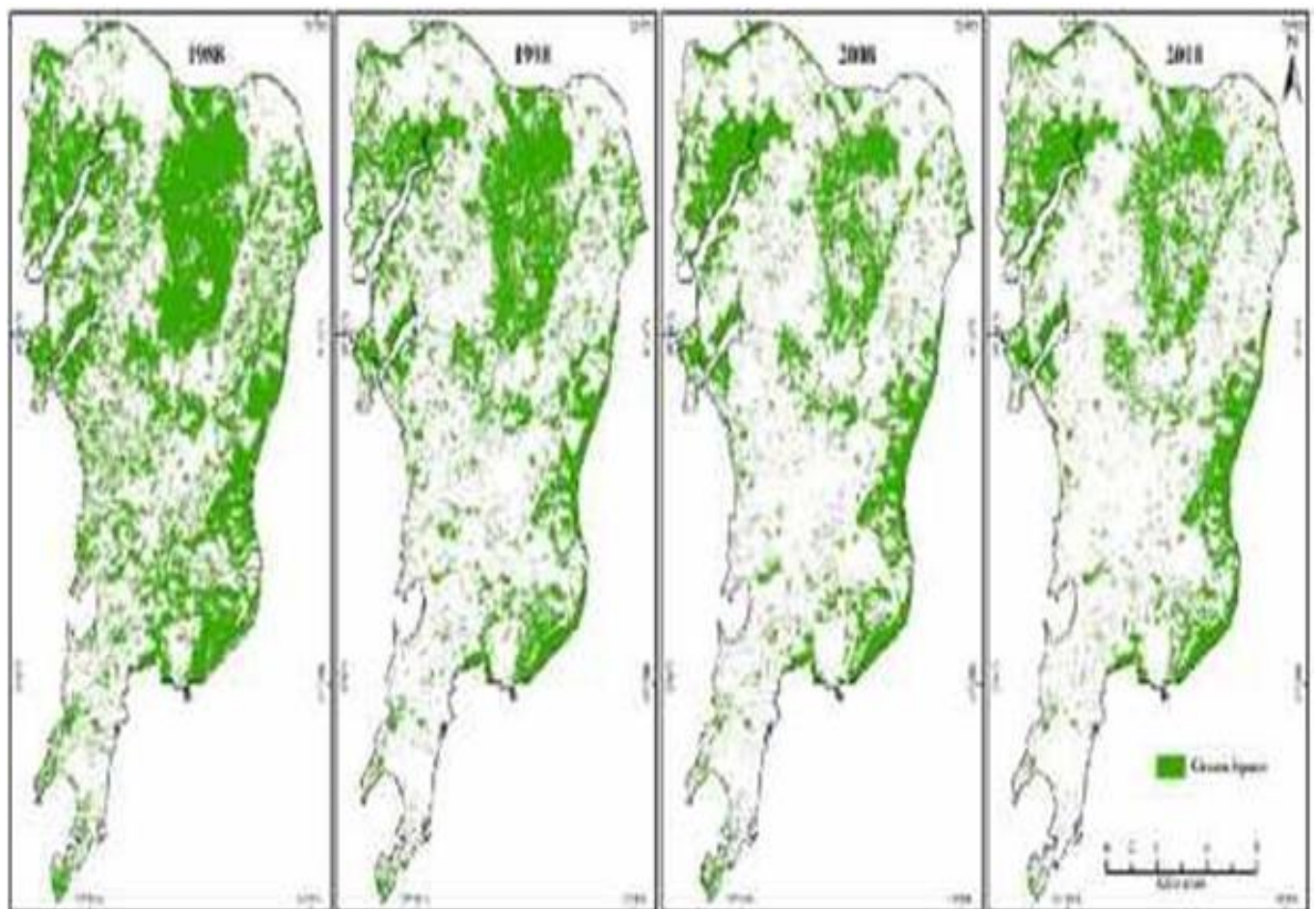
Acute respiratory infections: Hospital data from Cairo reveal a significant number of asthma and bronchitis cases. While exact trends are limited, modeling studies suggest that even brief spikes in SO₂ and NO₂ from vehicles and industry lead to noticeable increases in asthma and COPD hospital admissions (Heger et al., 2019).

Vulnerable populations: Children and the elderly are the most affected. WHO analyses emphasize that polluted urban air significantly raises pediatric asthma and pneumonia rates. The evidence shows a connection between Cairo's environmental changes and its respiratory health issues. Decreasing green spaces and increasing air pollution have gone hand in hand with a rise in lung diseases. Many studies highlight that exposure to airborne particulates is closely related to the rates of asthma and COPD (Feizi et al., 2022). This overlap of environmental and health

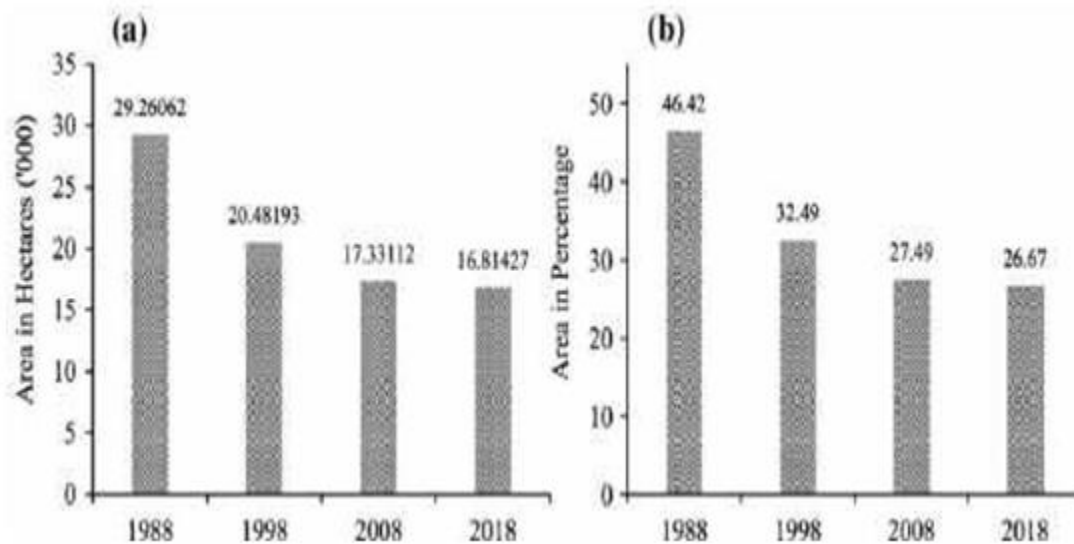
data strongly indicates that the loss of green space and high air pollution are major factors in the increasing rates of respiratory diseases in Cairo.

The Politics of Urban Green Spaces in Mumbai

The political dynamic changes have correlated with the depletion of green spaces in Mumbai. The metro car shed project was sanctioned in 2014 under the BJP-led Maharashtra government led by Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis. In 2019, when Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray led the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) coalition, which included the Shiv Sena, Congress, and NCP, to take political power, the project was relocated to Kanjurmarg, as saline, unused land (Choudhury, 2022). However, a split within the Shiv Sena resulted in a new coalition led by Eknath Shinde and supported by the BJP. One of their earliest implemented policy reversals was to reinstate the metro car shed project at Aarey.



Map representing the reduction of green spaces in Mumbai from 1988 to 2018)



Charts representing the depletion of green spaces in Mumbai from 1988 to 2018, in land coverage in hectares and percentage, respectively.

In October 2019, when the Bombay High Court dismissed multiple petitions on Friday against the tree cutting, just as Mumbai entered the weekend and Dussehra holidays. The timing became an advantage for project proponents, as the Supreme Court registry remained closed, preventing immediate escalation of the case (Bhathena, 2022). In this brief period, over 2,141 trees were cut within a span of 48 hours. This rapid felling followed mass protests, and the end of Section 144. The Supreme Court of India intervened and issued a temporary halt on October 7, 2019, on further tree felling. However, the damage had already been inflicted during the High Court’s open window.

The marginalised Warli, Kokna, and Varli Adivasi communities that resided in and around Aare.y While they had rights under the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996, and the Forest Rights Act, 2006, their claims to land were overlooked (Menon, 2019). They were not allowed to attend EIA public hearings, and their testimonies were rarely used in project evaluations. Not only did the depletion of their forest habitat disrupt their economic livelihoods, but it also took away their cultural and religious attachments to the land. The community would now be more likely to be prone to flooding due to Aare.y being situated in the Mithi River basin. It was about conservationism and crony capitalism for the elite and protection for the poor.

One of the main defence points put forth by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) and the Mumbai Metro Rail Corporation Limited (MMRC) was the transplantation of trees to

make up for the loss of green space in Aarey; However, on-site evaluations by environmental activist Zoru Bhatena demonstrated that the transplanted saplings had meagre survival rates, due to inadequate aftercare and unsuitable relocation (Bhatena, 2022).

Deforestation and Disease: Mumbai’s Worsening Respiratory Burden

Virus	Primers and probes	Seque
Seasonal influenza A	Forward	GAC
	Reverse	AGG
Pandemic influenza A H1N1	Probe	TGC
	Forward	GCA
Influenza type B	Reverse	GTG
	Probe	CYA
Rnase P	Forward	TCC
	Reverse	CGG
hMPV	Probe	CCA
	Forward	AGA
RSV	Reverse	GAG
	Probe	TTC
<i>Streptococcus pneumoniae</i>	Forward	GTC
	Reverse	CAG
<i>Haemophilus influenzae</i>	Forward	CTG
	Reverse	ACC
<i>Staphylococcus aureus</i>	Forward	CGG
	Reverse	GIT
<i>Klebsiella pneumoniae</i>	Forward	TCC
	Reverse	TGA

RSV: Respiratory syncytial virus, hMPV: Human metapneumovirus

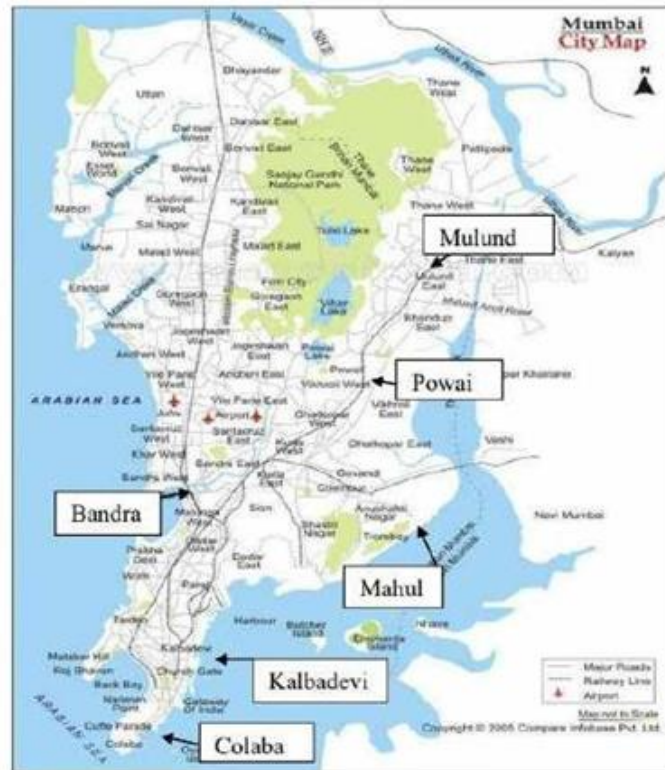
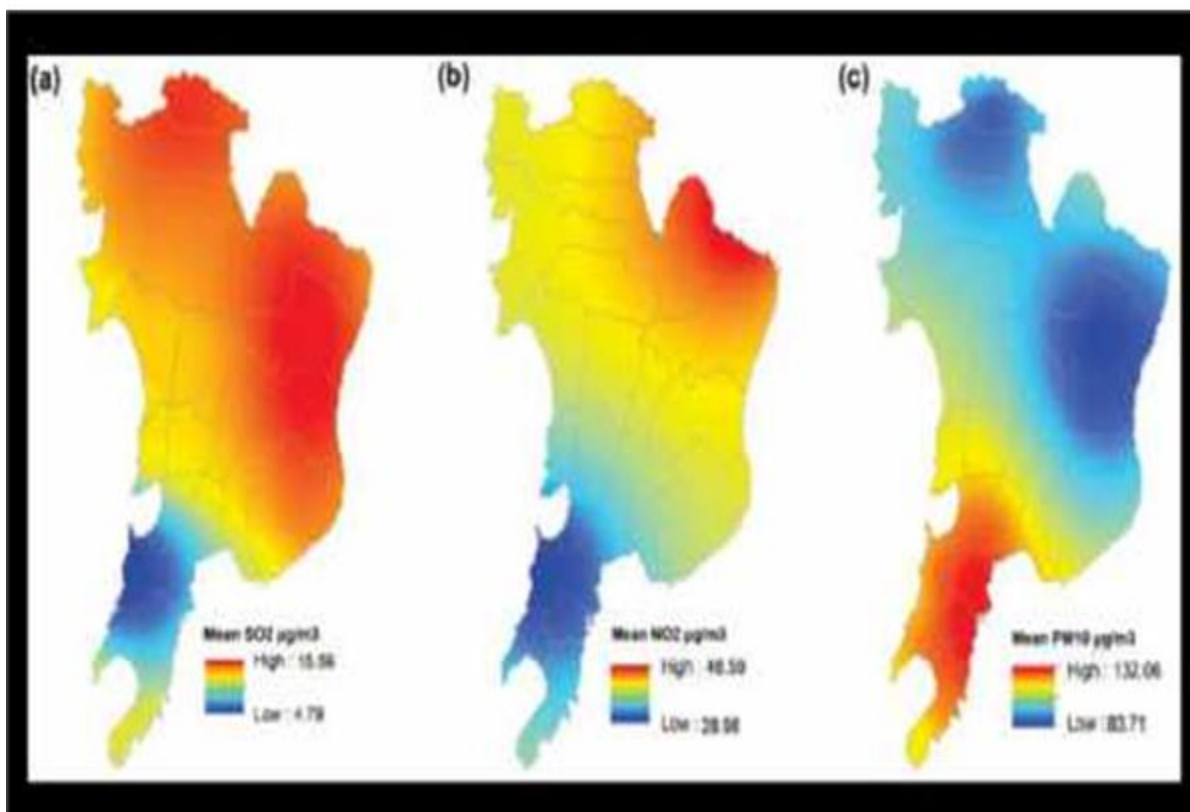


Figure 2.1(a): Air Quality Monitoring Locations at Mumbai City

AAT CTT TGT CGG TAC ACG AIA TTC TTC ACG
 CGT AAT GAG ATT TCA GTA GAT AAT ACA ACA
 GCG TGG CGG TAG ATC TAA GTCAIA
 TTC AGC TCC GCC ACA AAG GTA

Greenspace calculated through NDVI (Normalized Difference Vegetation Index) has been associated with asthma prevalence, especially in areas with high PM₁₀ levels. Mumbai’s poor air quality and the consequent respiratory disease management challenges are often overshadowed by more tangible effects of climate change, such as seasonal flooding. Moreover, when compared to the national capital’s AQI level, Mumbai is frequently perceived as a more sustainable city, despite its AQI exceeding safe limits. Surveillance of acute respiratory infections in Mumbai it is observable that climate change affects both virus stability and host immunity. RT-PCR tests in such regions may show higher viral loads (Chavan et al. 2015).

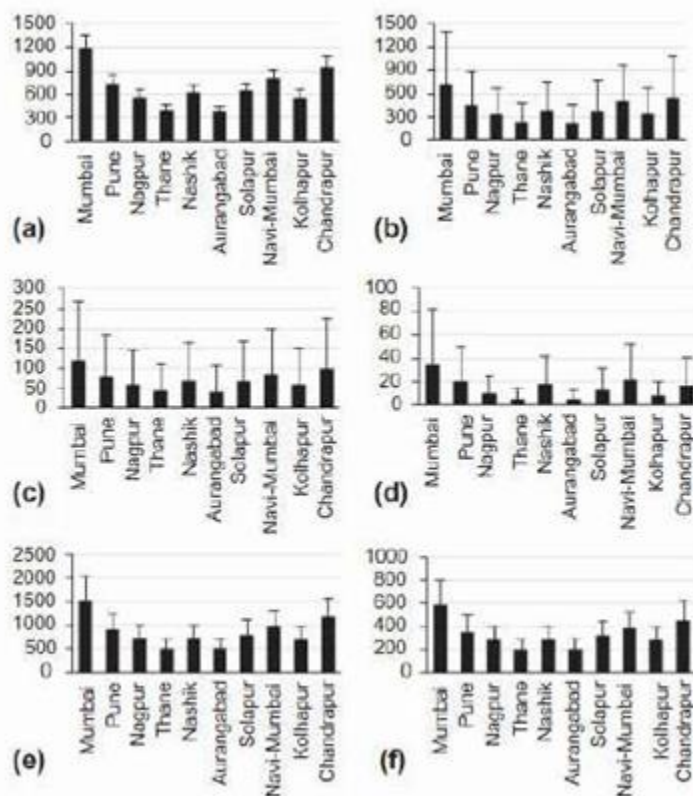
Variations in ambient temperature and humidity can alter viral RNA stability, host immune responses, and the efficiency of viral polymerase activity, all of which impact transcription (Carlson et al., 2022). Deforestation and urban expansion increase human-wildlife interfaces, creating novel zoonotic spillover opportunities for viral pathogens, while also changing vector dynamics. In bacterial pathogens like *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, *Haemophilus influenzae*, *Staphylococcus aureus*, and *Klebsiella pneumoniae*, warmer and more humid environments promote bacterial persistence in the environment and nasopharyngeal colonization in humans (Wu et al., 2016). On a molecular level, the nucleotide chains link through phosphodiester bonds between the 3'-hydroxyl and 5'-phosphate groups of sugar moieties in nucleotides. These linkages are essential for the stability of the viral genome and are sensitive to thermal degradation, making them highly reactive to climate variability, causing them to mutate (Carlson et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2016; Chavan et al., 2015).



The temporal trends in Mumbai show fluctuating levels of disease incidence corresponding closely with pollution peaks, particularly in years where PM₁₀ concentrations were at their highest (Nanavare, 2024). The maximum number of cases across all categories occurred in 2006, coinciding with peak PM₁₀ concentrations in Mumbai that year; this was following the 2005 floods in Mumbai that had significantly altered local ecosystems (Maji et al., 2016). The Warli

community also reports a decline in traditional forest-based healing practices and an uptick in respiratory infections. A study by Menon (2019) highlights the constitutional violation of environmental rights in such urban development initiatives, where Adivasi voices were systematically excluded from planning processes. Despite constitutional protections under the Forest Rights Act (2006), tribal access to forest resources continues to diminish, with 78% of Adivasi households in north Mumbai reporting increased medical expenses due to pollution-induced illnesses by 2022 (Choudhury, 2022).

Figure 7. Annual average ENC in one million of population of (a) TM, (b) CM, (c) RM, (d) COPD (hospital admission), (e) HARD, and (f) HACD in different urban cities in Maharashtra.



The charts have illustrated a profound association between air pollution and increased morbidity and mortality related to respiratory and cardiovascular diseases in Mumbai. Health conditions such as total mortality (TM), cardiovascular mortality (CM), respiratory mortality (RM), and COPD hospital admissions have been directly correlated with deforestation for integrating infrastructure (Maji et al., 2016). This irrefutable link between the decreasing green space allocated area and adverse health conditions is often misrepresented and depicts an obfuscated image to the citizens to lure in a false sense of safety when dealing with the climate crisis, while silencing vulnerable communities.

Policy Recommendations for Addressing Environmental Health Inequities

These reforms support SDGs 3, 10, 11, and 13, targeting health equity, reduced inequality, sustainable urbanization, and climate resilience.

1. Urban Ecological Equity Act (UEEA), 2025

This legislation mandates a minimum of 9 m² of accessible green space per capita, in line with global health benchmarks (World Health Organization [WHO], 2010). It emphasizes the creation of Green Health Overlay Zones in ecologically and medically vulnerable wards, prioritizes urban rewilding, and ensures NDVI-based monitoring of green cover (Nanavare, 2024). Additionally, it safeguards tribal land rights under the Forest Rights Act (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2006), reinforcing ecological stewardship by indigenous communities.

2. Amendment to the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986

An amendment to the existing Environment (Protection) Act is recommended to embed Health Impact Assessments (HIA) within all Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs), with a focus on respiratory disease burdens in low-income settlements (Maji et al., 2016). It calls for the designation of No-Go Ecological Commons in forested tribal regions (Menon, 2019), sets climate risk thresholds, and introduces veto power for Gram Sabhas under the PESA Act (1996) to strengthen democratic ecological governance.

3. Greening Cairo, Equally. Amendment to “Vision 2030”

To tackle Cairo’s heat crisis and green space inequality, “Vision 2030” must adopt a Neighborhood Green Equity Index, ensuring 3 m² of greenery per capita in all districts. Halt tree removal in dense areas and launch a public forestry program to preserve canopy cover and reach 35% coverage. Prioritize greening older neighborhoods over gated projects. A cross-ministerial task force with civil society should oversee this. Launch a grassroots campaign encouraging residents to plant on balconies and near homes, supported by free seedlings and water-saving kits. Greening is vital for climate justice and public health as Cairo faces rising heat.

4. Launching Ambitious Green Cairo through EBRD

The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development program (2025-2027) is recommended to look into Cairo's shrinking green spaces and respiratory health problems. The initiative seeks to turn Cairo into a sustainable city by expanding vulnerable neighborhoods such as Helwan through prioritizing clean transport projects and reducing pollution. (Yousef, 2025)

Conclusion

This research underscores how unregulated urban expansion has intensified environmental degradation, reduced green cover, and deepened health inequities in adversely targeting vulnerable populations. These patterns reflect broader Anthropocene dynamics, marked by the “Great Acceleration” in human activity and urban-industrial growth since the 1950s (Singh, 2023). The resulting socio-ecological fragmentation, therefore, demands urgent policy interventions to realign urban development with principles of sustainable development practice and equitable access to green infrastructure.

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