

The challenges and opportunities of the IPCC's Special Report on Climate Change and Cities

A practitioner's perspective.
Professor Debra Roberts (CLA Chapter 5)



So, what is special about this Special Report?

A report with a very human face - the places where the **majority of us we live, work and play** and for many – aspire to a better life.

Cities concentrate people, money, power, politics and infrastructure - places where the urgency of the **climate change challenge meets societal agency**. We win or lose the climate change battle in the world's cities.

Will be the first IPCC report that has to engage with the implications of **temperature goal overshoot**. How will overshoot play out in cities, in informal settlements, in livelihoods stretched across rural-urban areas?

BUT....the multitude of pressures - including political instability, poverty, unemployment, conflict, informality, biodiversity loss, migration, limited resources...means that **climate change is not always a priority**.

Action, action, action



Our business is **implementation**.

The focus should be the "**what**" and "**how**" to ensure an actionable report

Do **not need an encyclopedia** of everything that we know about cities and climate change science.

Prioritise the **most policy/practice relevant** aspects of the climate change challenge and response in cities.

Assess **feasibility and effectiveness of responses** across different contexts, scales, timelines - social, political and institutional.

Clarify the **financial requirements of local level action and development co-benefits** and the costs of inaction.

Address the Global Assessment- Local Reality gap



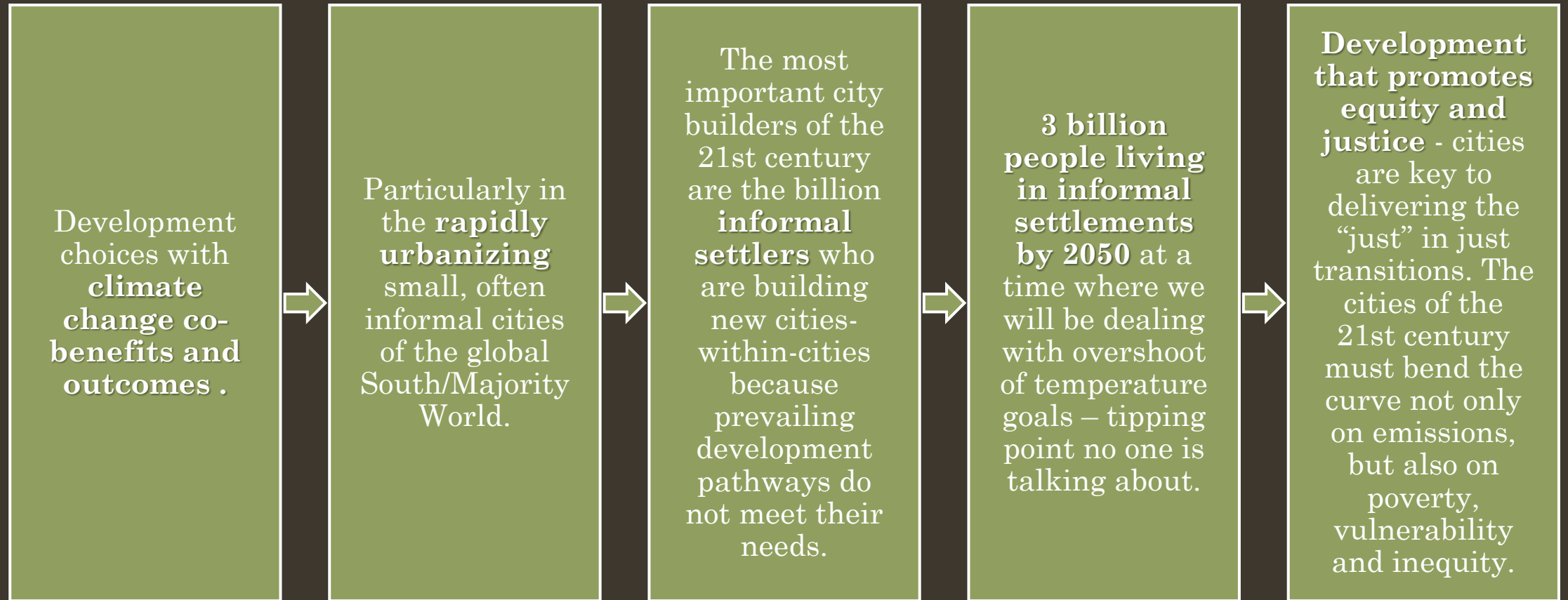
The **IPCC process** involves a series of sanitised and clinical discussions in formal surroundings.

Far **removed from** standing in a track between informal houses with running sewage and walking over exposed power cables that kill children.

Critical to tell a scientific story that resonates with the **everyday experiences** in cities around the world.

A clear focus on the **cities of the global South/Majority World** where the bulk of urbanisation is happening and development is a priority.

Development + Climate Change



Success needs to be measured in terms of human wellbeing and development performance

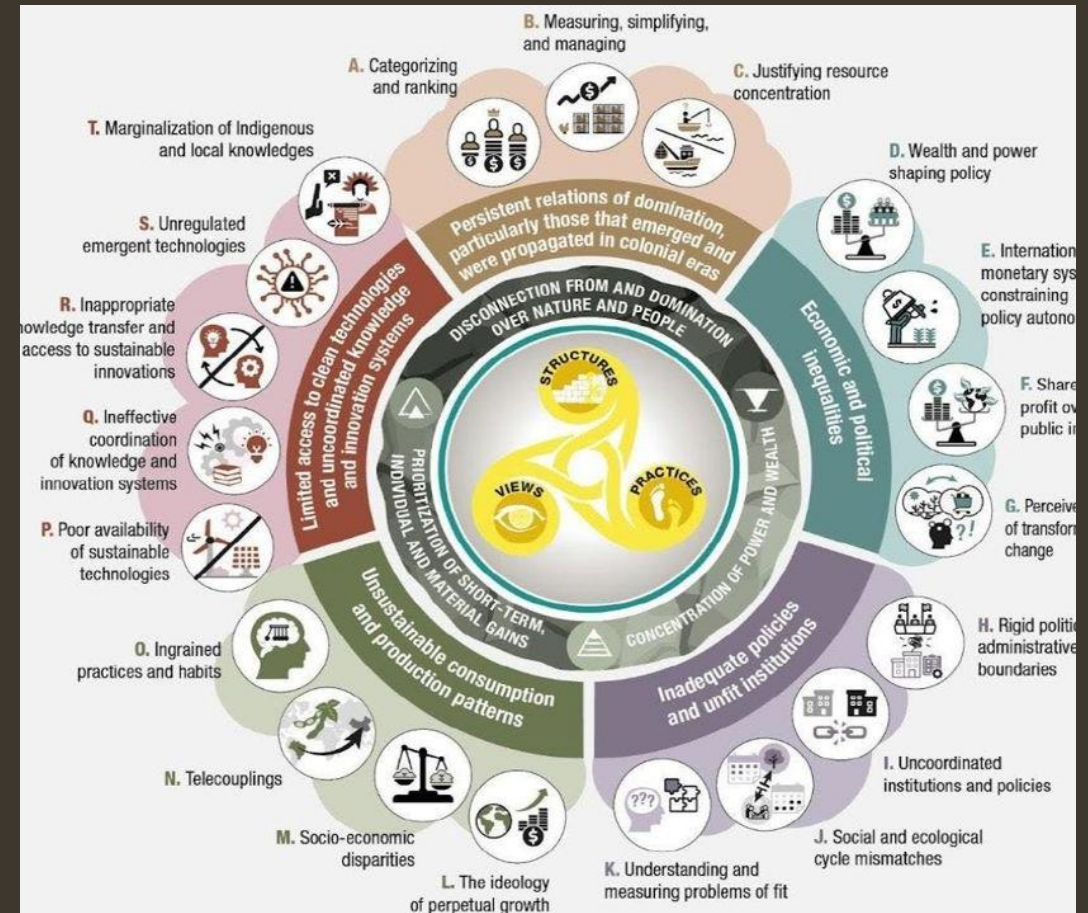
Can't be politically blind/naive

- While much of the climate change discourse is anchored around extreme and chronic events, cities recover more easily from floods, droughts and storms than they do from **political and economic shocks**.
- Political priorities will **almost always trump** scientific priorities.
- Need to understand the **political economy** of cities as that influences how they respond to the climate change challenge.
- What happens in a city is **not always controlled** by people and decisionmakers within the city.
- Need for **political scientists** in the assessment



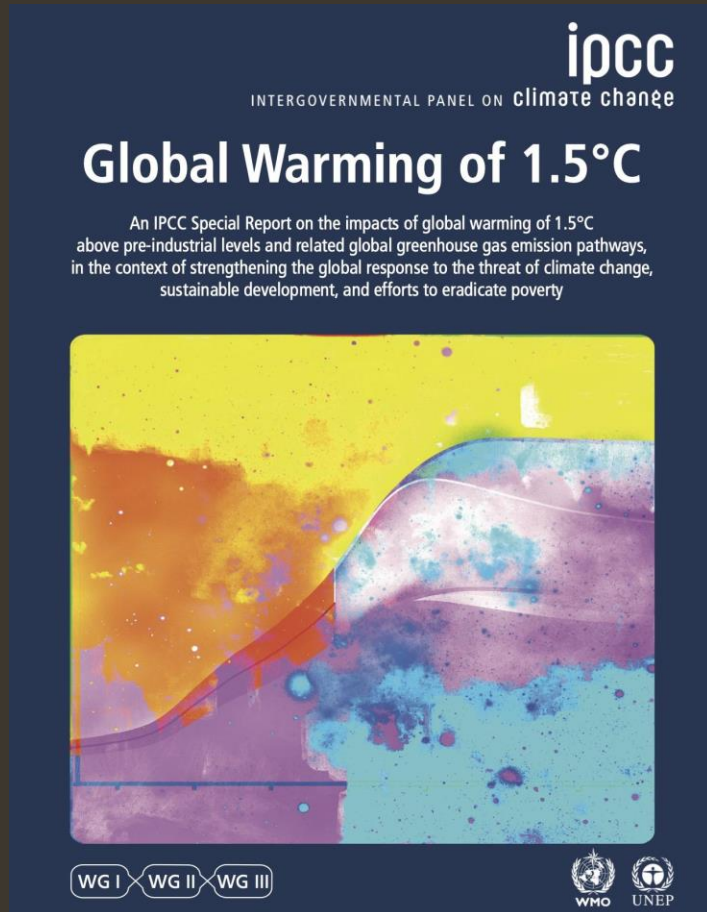
IPBES* (2024) Transformative Change Assessment

- **IPBES Transformative Change Assessment (2024):** has a no holds barred assessment of the challenges and barriers to transformative change.
- Includes “**persistent relations of domination, particularly those that emerged and were propagated in colonial eras**”, “**political and economic inequalities**”, “**inadequate policies and unfit institutions**”.
- **IPCC at the crossroads.** Needs to assess these political aspects of implementation if it is to remain relevant and not be made **irrelevant by the IPBES assessments**.



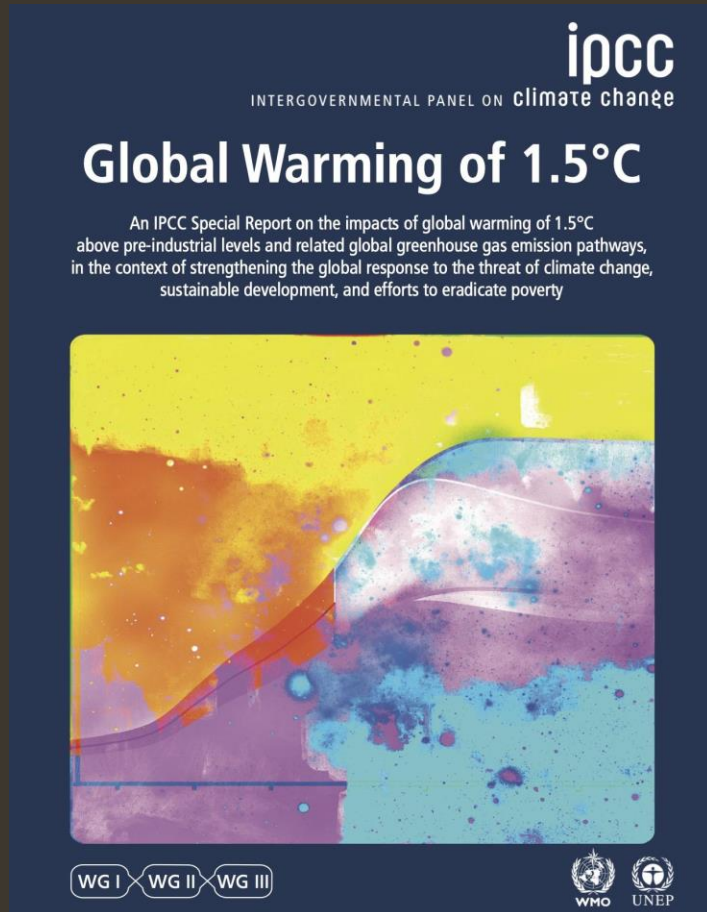
SPM Fig. 3

Radical Reality – face the new challenges



- Need to grapple with the dissonance of pursuing a target of limiting global warming to 1.5°C and the **reality that we are already almost there.**
- Need to look at an **expanded risk landscape** which includes irreversible change e.g. nature-based solutions are not effective or have limited efficacy.

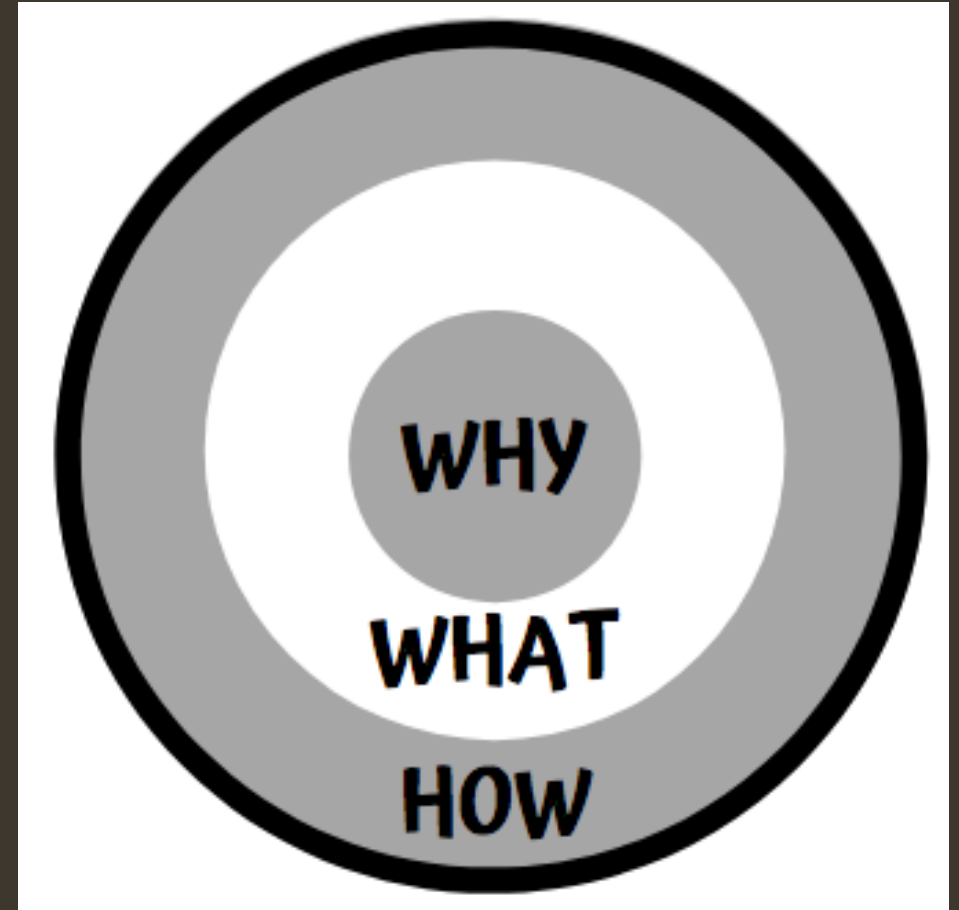
Radical Reality – face the new challenges



- *“Planning for more than 2°C of warming is a necessary and pragmatic response to a potentially catastrophic failure of national and international climate policy...”*
(Brooks *et. al.* 2019)
- We need a **new plan A** for urban areas that is fit for purpose in suboptimal world where the global targets are not met and that helps avoid cities becoming the world’s largest stranded assets.

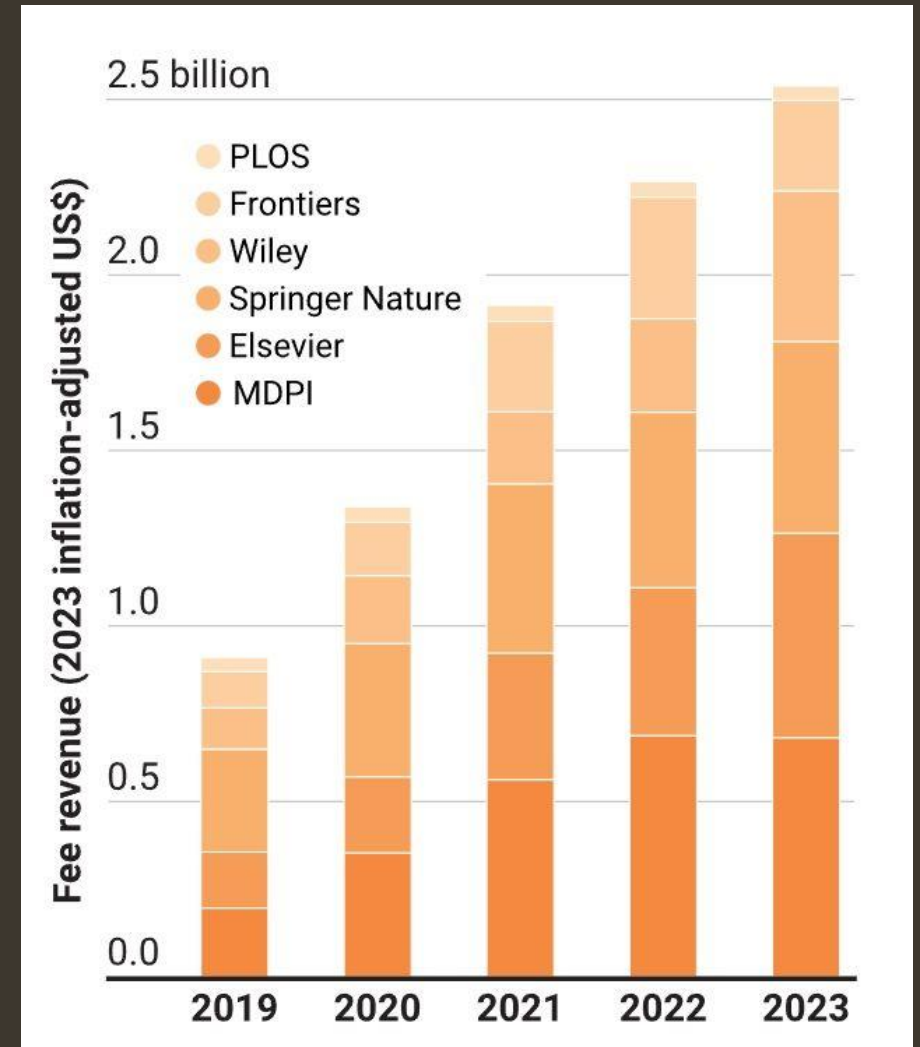
Prioritise the “What” and “How”

- **Can't keep doing the same thing** if we want different outcomes
- There is a need to move to the **"What" and "How"** and rather than generating finer details and greater certainty on the "Why". Which means much greater focus on implementation.
- Need a **Theory of Action (how? is this realistic?)** as well as a Theory of Change.
- Need to acknowledge that **practice is often well ahead of what is reflected in the scientific literature**. The 'latest science' does not always fully capture current activities, progress at the practitioner level, or the lived experience of local and Indigenous communities.



Prioritise the “What” and “How”

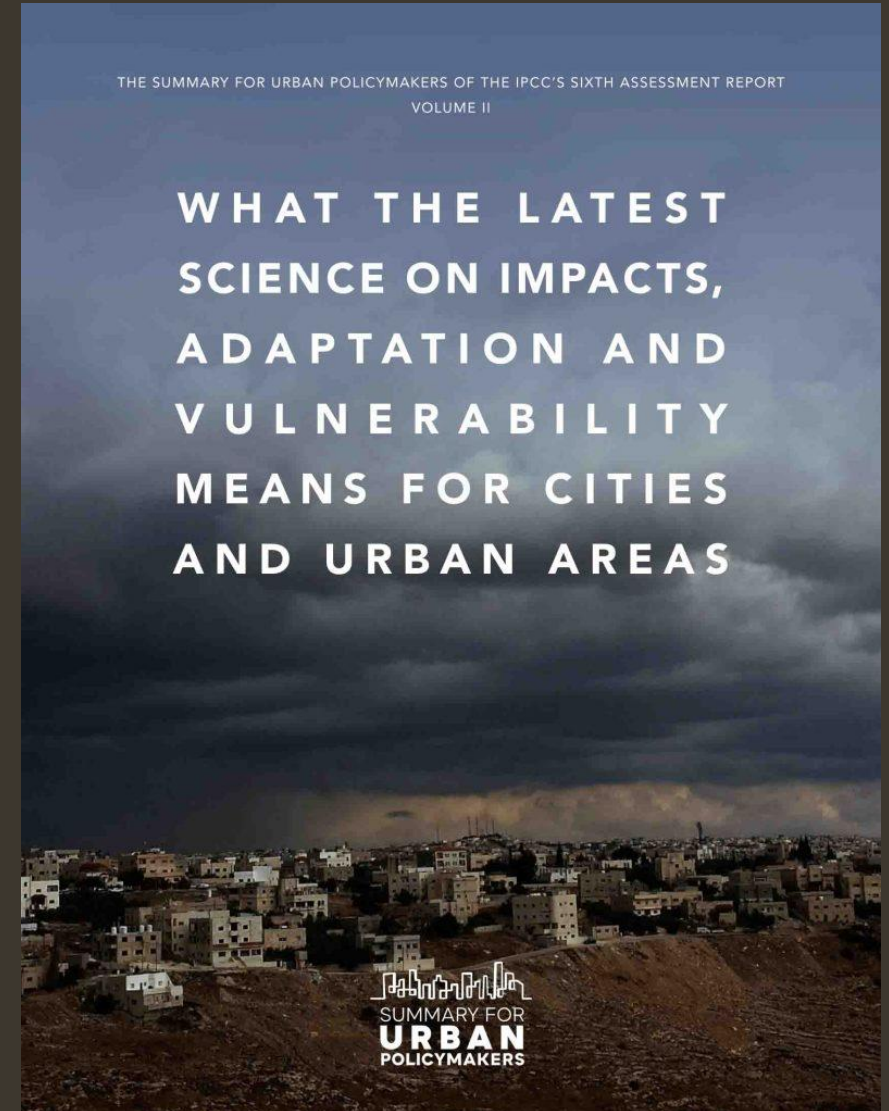
- Means a further expansion of what is **"relevant" literature** to be assessed, and much more willingness to look beyond models (especially IAMs) and to the **real-world dynamics and limits of action**.
- The IPCC acknowledges the challenge posed by the enormous and growing literature: “The volume of publications relevant to climate change has been growing exponentially, roughly doubling in volume with each IPCC cycle. . . This **poses ever increasing challenges for author teams**.”



Based on Haustein et. al. 2024

Critical moment

- SR Cities will mark a **critical political moment** – shining the scientific spotlight on the world's cities at a time when there is increasing international attention on local level action: Urban Ministerials at COP27; COP28; COP29; Local Climate Action Summit and CHAMP pledge at COP28 in 2023; Cities and Regions Summit 2024 at UNEA6.
- **Critical scientific moment** as a global assessment process will focus on the most local of action – urbanisation as we enter an **era of overshoot**.
- Critical moment to continue to **work with outside partners** to increase accessibility (e.g. previous Summary for Urban Policy Makers (SUP) process from AR6) to ensure that the science gets into City Halls around the world.
- Critical moment to think about what is next for the **IIASA-Japan Research Project on City Governance**.



Report structure



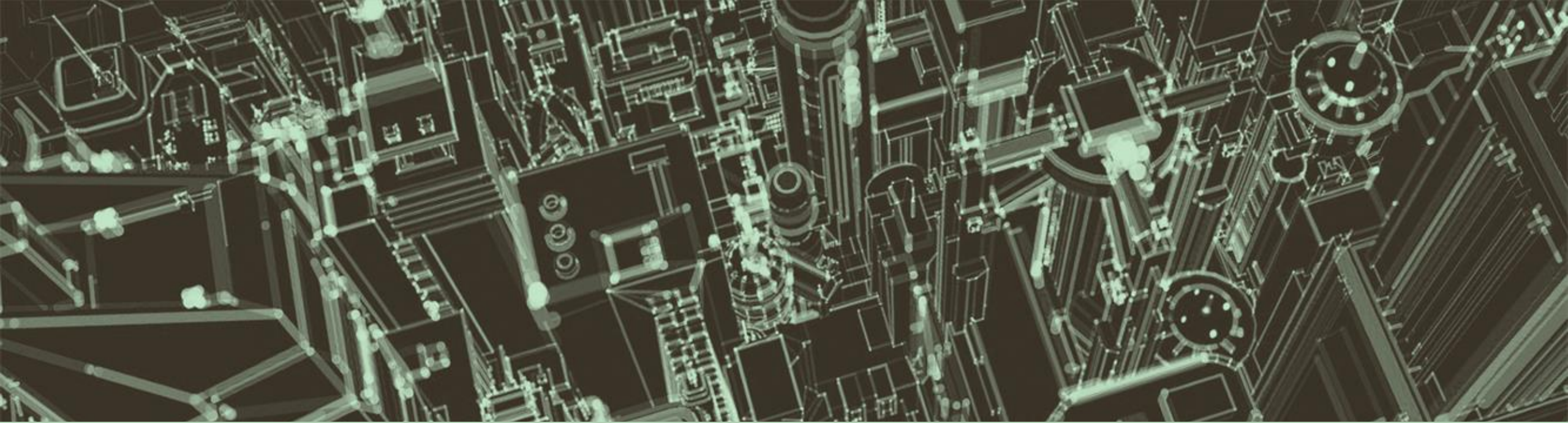
- **Chapter 1:** Cities in the context of climate change: framing of the report (**Context and key concepts**)
- **Chapter 2:** Cities in a changing climate: trends, challenges and opportunities (**Why**)
- **Chapter 3:** Actions and solutions to reduce urban risks and emissions (**What**)
- **Chapter 4:** How to facilitate and accelerate change (**How**)



But the report
only flies if.....

Chapter 5: Solutions by city
types and regions.

Pulls the why, what and the
how together into a coherent
story and puts it in the
hands of practitioners and
policymakers to create
momentum for action.



Thank you

debra.roberts@palebludot.co.za

