Article

The challenges of sustainability in urban planning (the metropolis of Tehran)

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Abstract: Rapid population growth and inadequate adherence to scientific and managerial principles in urban planning have intensified numerous challenges, pushing major Iranian cities toward instability. Tehran, as the capital and one of the most urbanized regions in the country, faces significant sustainability threats that require immediate attention. These challenges are not unique to Tehran but represent a broader issue faced by rapidly urbanizing cities worldwide, particularly in developing countries. Addressing such challenges is critical to fostering sustainable development on a global scale. While urban sustainability has been extensively studied, limited research has focused on the indicators of urban instability and their tangible impacts on sustainable urban planning. This study aims to bridge this gap by identifying and analyzing key factors contributing to urban instability across economic, environmental, and social dimensions, with Tehran serving as a representative case. The findings reveal that economic instability is driven by uncertainty in economic policies, fluctuating housing prices, non-standard housing conditions, income disparity, unemployment, and cost of living pressures. Environmental instability is exacerbated by climate change, urban heat islands, floods, transportation mismanagement, energy insecurity, pollution, and insufficient green infrastructure. Social instability arises from limited social interaction, unequal access to services, weak community participation, social harms, and diminished urban safety and welfare. By framing these local challenges within a global context, the study underscores the interconnectedness of these dimensions and highlights the necessity for integrated, evidence-based approaches that combine local insights with global best practices. The findings aim to contribute to the broader discourse on sustainable urban development by offering actionable insights and strategies that can be adapted and implemented in other rapidly urbanizing cities. This research serves as a guide for policymakers, urban planners, and stakeholders worldwide, emphasizing the importance of holistic and resilient urban strategies to address the multifaceted challenges of sustainability and instability.

Keywords: urban sustainability challenges; urban instability indicators; sustainable urban planning; Tehran; global sustainable development

1. Introduction

Since 2007, urban centers have become the predominant habitats for humanity. For the first time in history, more than half of the world's population resides in urban areas, a number that continues to rise rapidly (Niemets et al., 2021; United Nations, 2014). Urban populations are facing chronic and emerging challenges, with sustainability and instability among the most pressing concerns (UN Habitat, 2022). By 2050, urban environments will need to accommodate an additional 2.6 billion people, significantly intensifying economic, environmental, and social pressures (Girma et al., 2019; Razia and Ah, 2023). While urbanization has often been linked

with socio-economic development, it also brings substantial challenges, including environmental degradation, social inequality, and economic instability—challenges that are especially acute in developing countries (Niemets et al., 2021; Serbanica and Constantin, 2023).

Sustainable urban development has emerged as a global priority, emphasizing integrated approaches to balance environmental, social, and economic dimensions. The widespread adoption of sustainable cities is critical to achieving long-term urban resilience and global sustainable development goals (Serbanica and Constantin, 2023). However, while sustainability indicators have been widely studied, limited research has focused on urban instability indicators—factors such as policy uncertainty, environmental hazards, and social inequities—and their tangible impacts on sustainable urban planning. Understanding these instability indicators is essential to addressing the root causes of unsustainable urban development and proposing effective solutions.

Tehran, as the capital of Iran and a rapidly urbanizing metropolis, exemplifies the challenges faced by cities experiencing rapid growth and inadequate urban planning. With a population exceeding 9 million and a dynamic socio-economic and environmental landscape, Tehran confronts significant sustainability threats, including air pollution, climate change impacts, housing shortages, and social segregation. These challenges, compounded by economic pressures and governance issues, not only threaten the city's sustainability but also reflect broader issues faced by other rapidly urbanizing cities globally (Boostani and Sadeghiha, 2022; Zhang et al., 2023).

This study seeks to bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks of sustainability and the practical realities of urban instability by identifying and analyzing key indicators of instability in Tehran across three dimensions: economic, environmental, and social. The research aims to provide actionable insights that can guide local and global strategies for sustainable urban development, using Tehran as a representative case. By contextualizing these challenges within a global framework, the study underscores the interconnectedness of local and global sustainability efforts and highlights the need for integrated, evidence-based approaches to urban planning.

The paper is organized as follows: The next section provides a comprehensive review of the theoretical foundations, focusing on sustainability and instability indicators. The methodology section outlines the approach used to identify and analyze the challenges in Tehran. The results and discussion section presents the findings, categorizing them into economic, environmental, and social dimensions. Finally, the conclusion discusses the broader implications of the study and provides recommendations for policymakers and urban planners.

2. Theoretical foundations

Since the mid-twentieth century, the acceleration of industrialization and urbanization has driven significant socio-economic and environmental transformations worldwide (Heidari et al., 2023; Niemets et al., 2021). This era of rapid change has brought unprecedented challenges, including population growth, urban expansion, and increased pressure on natural and human systems. Urbanization processes have led to detrimental consequences, such as the conversion of agricultural

lands into built-up areas, loss of biodiversity, disruptions in hydrological processes, and increased greenhouse gas emissions (Benti et al., 2022; Girma et al., 2019). These issues are compounded by socio-economic disparities, including growing inequality and weakened social cohesion, particularly in developing countries.

Urban planning plays a pivotal role in addressing these challenges by balancing the three dimensions of sustainability: environmental, economic, and social. Environmental sustainability focuses on preserving natural resources, mitigating climate change, and minimizing pollution (Santos and Ribeiro, 2013). Economic sustainability emphasizes growth, cost-effectiveness, and long-term financial stability. Social sustainability, often overlooked, addresses issues of equity, justice, and quality of life, ensuring inclusivity in urban planning processes (Farhadikhah and Ziari, 2021).

Globally, cities face common sustainability challenges, yet the specific context and characteristics of each city shape the severity and nature of these challenges. For instance, in cities like Shenzhen, China, environmental sustainability challenges such as flooding, pollution, and inadequate public facilities dominate (Zhang et al., 2023). In Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, social sustainability issues, including land tenure insecurity and limited civic participation, create significant instability (Benti et al., 2022). Tehran, as a rapidly urbanizing metropolis, encounters a unique combination of challenges that reflect its political, cultural, and geographical context. These include severe air pollution, social segregation, and economic policy uncertainties, which underscore the need for tailored urban planning solutions (Boostani and Sadeghiha, 2022).

Tehran's challenges are intrinsically linked to broader global issues, such as climate change and urban resilience. The city has experienced the adverse effects of rapid urbanization, including the proliferation of heat islands, water resource depletion, and insufficient green infrastructure (Niemets et al., 2021). Moreover, socio-economic challenges, such as inadequate access to social services, weakened community ties, and heightened inequality, exacerbate instability. These issues highlight the interconnectedness of environmental, economic, and social dimensions and the need for a holistic approach to urban sustainability.

To frame these challenges, this study adopts a conceptual framework that integrates the three dimensions of sustainability with specific instability indicators. **Figure 1** illustrates this framework, highlighting the relationships among the economic, environmental, and social dimensions of urban instability. Economic instability includes factors such as policy uncertainty, fluctuating housing prices, and unemployment. Environmental instability is driven by climate change, pollution, and inadequate green infrastructure. Social instability encompasses limited public participation, social segregation, and diminished community cohesion. The framework is both conceptual and functional, serving as a tool to bridge theoretical concepts with practical applications.
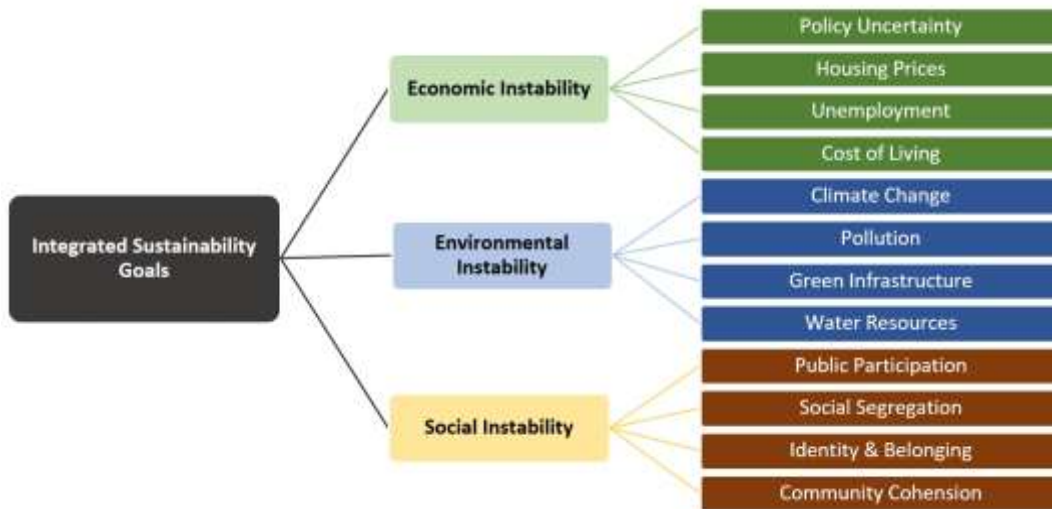
Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the research.

This model was developed by synthesizing insights from the existing literature on sustainability frameworks and adapting them to the specific context of Tehran. While it draws on established theories of urban resilience and instability, it introduces unique modifications to reflect the multi-dimensional challenges faced by Tehran. The framework's originality lies in its holistic approach, explicitly linking the instability indicators to the broader goals of sustainable urban planning and resilience. By contextualizing these dimensions within Tehran's socio-political and environmental landscape, the framework provides a comprehensive basis for analyzing and addressing the city's unique challenges.

The conceptual framework demonstrates that addressing these dimensions requires a comprehensive approach that combines local insights with global best practices. While environmental and economic dimensions have been extensively explored in previous studies, this research places particular emphasis on the social dimension, addressing gaps in the literature. Social sustainability in Tehran is characterized by challenges such as reduced neighborly relations, lack of identity and belonging, and limited public participation in urban governance. Drawing comparisons with other cities, such as Addis Ababa and Shenzhen, further underscores the unique and context-specific nature of Tehran's social sustainability challenges (Benti et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2023).

This study highlights the critical importance of integrating environmental, economic, and social dimensions to effectively address urban sustainability challenges. By situating Tehran's unique challenges within the context of global discourses and adapting a conceptual framework tailored to its specific conditions, this research aims to provide meaningful contributions to the field of urban planning and sustainability.

3. Methodology

This study employs a systematic, descriptive-analytical approach to investigate urban instability in Tehran, integrating data collection, indicator categorization, and analytical evaluation into a cohesive framework. The data collection phase relied on

secondary sources, including municipal policy documents, statistical reports, and peer-reviewed literature. Policy documents provided foundational insights into Tehran's urban planning and governance, while statistical datasets offered quantitative data on critical urban challenges. Peer-reviewed literature, sourced from databases such as Scopus and Web of Science, enabled a broader contextual understanding and facilitated benchmarking against cities like Shenzhen and Addis Ababa. To ensure transparency and rigor, the PRISMA framework guided the selection process, prioritizing high-quality, relevant, and recent publications that aligned with the study's focus on urban sustainability and instability.

In the subsequent phases, instability indicators were identified and systematically categorized into three dimensions: economic, environmental, and social. Economic indicators, such as policy uncertainty and fluctuating housing prices, highlighted financial pressures affecting urban stability. Environmental indicators, including climate change and urban heat islands, reflected ecological vulnerabilities. Social indicators, such as limited public participation and social segregation, emphasized challenges undermining community cohesion. Thematic analysis facilitated logical categorization and alignment with the conceptual framework. The analysis phase combined descriptive and comparative methods, contextualizing Tehran's challenges within a global framework and revealing interconnections among the three dimensions. Ethical considerations, including data transparency and proper citation, underpinned the methodology, while triangulation mitigated the limitations of relying on secondary data. This structured approach, illustrated in **Figure 2**, establishes a robust foundation for addressing the multi-dimensional nature of urban instability in Tehran.
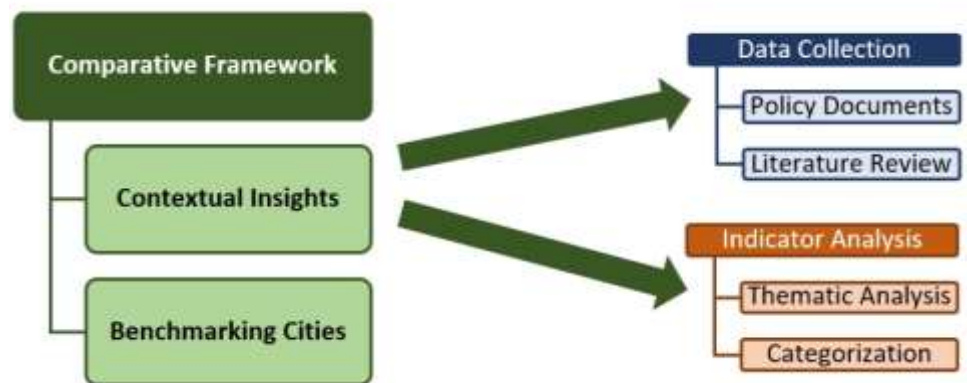

Figure 2. Methodology framework.

Data collection formed the foundation of this study and relied on secondary sources, including urban planning and policy documents, statistical datasets, and peer-reviewed literature. These documents were carefully selected to ensure their relevance to urban sustainability and instability in Tehran. Key sources included comprehensive urban development plans and municipal reports from Tehran's local authorities, national statistical databases, and global urban indices. To provide depth and diversity, peer-reviewed articles were extracted from academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Document selection followed predefined criteria,

emphasizing recent publications (within the last decade) and their applicability to Tehran or comparable urban centers. The PRISMA framework was utilized to enhance transparency and replicability in the data collection process.

The scope of the research

This research focuses on Tehran, the capital of Iran and the center of Tehran Province, which is home to an estimated 9.43 million residents within the city and approximately 16 million people in the Greater Tehran metropolitan area as of 2022. As one of the most populous metropolitan areas in the Middle East and a hub of political, economic, and cultural activities, Tehran serves as a focal point for urban challenges and opportunities. The city spans 730 km^2 and contributes to 40% of Iran's gross domestic product, underscoring its critical role in the nation's development.

Despite its importance, Tehran faces significant challenges in achieving urban sustainability. The city grapples with high population density, aging infrastructure, and environmental crises, including severe air pollution and inadequate water and sewage systems. Housing 20% of Iran's population and hosting over 2 million automobiles, 30,000 industrial units, and 134 industrial zones, Tehran is emblematic of the pressures of rapid urbanization. Tehran's unique geopolitical and cultural significance also makes it a compelling case for studying urban instability. By investigating Tehran, this research aims to contribute to the broader discourse on sustainable urban planning, offering insights that can inform policy and practices in other densely populated, rapidly urbanizing metropolitan areas globally.
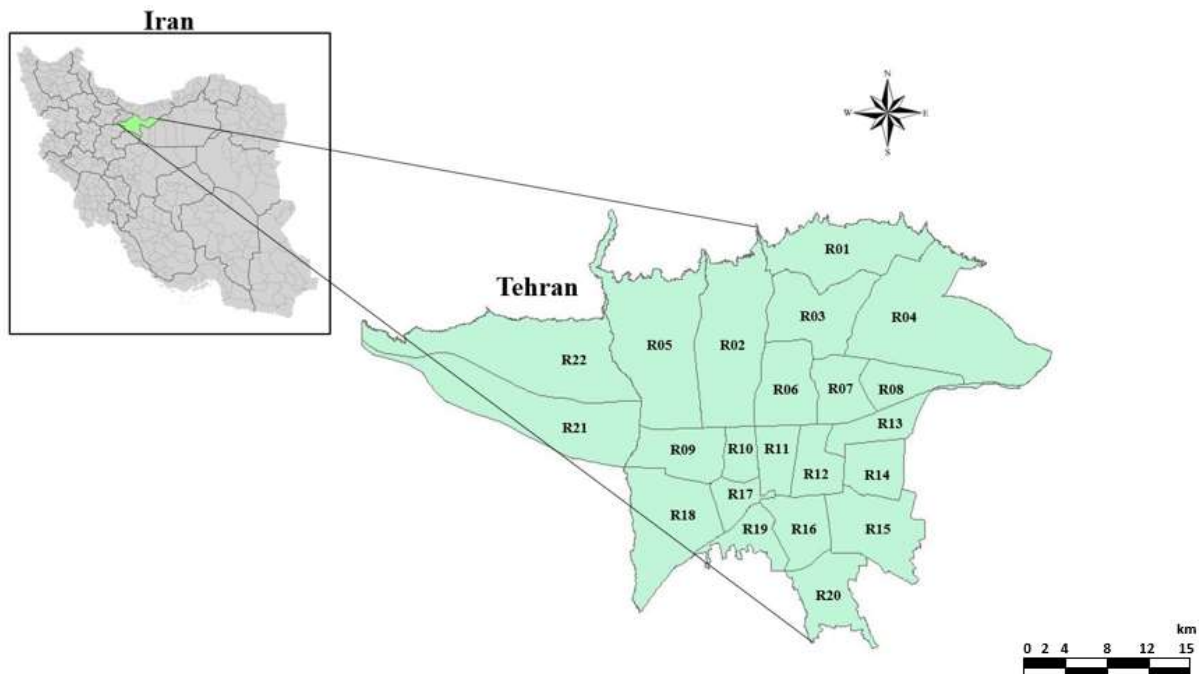

Figure 3. Research area location.

4. Result

4.1. Economic dimensions of urban instability

Tehran's economic landscape presents significant challenges that exacerbate urban instability. Policy uncertainty, characterized by frequent changes in governmental directives, undermines investor confidence and disrupts long-term planning for critical infrastructure projects. Housing affordability is another pressing issue, with fluctuating prices driving vulnerable populations toward informal housing arrangements, often lacking essential services. Rising costs of living further compound these issues, leaving many households unable to meet basic needs, thereby deepening socio-economic disparities. Income inequality, evident in the stark contrasts between affluent and underserved neighborhoods, intensifies marginalization and limits upward mobility. Persistent unemployment, particularly among youth and marginalized demographics, weakens economic growth and fosters migration pressures. These intertwined economic challenges mirror global patterns observed in cities like Shenzhen, where rapid growth has heightened affordability crises and strained urban systems.

Table 1. Key economic indicators contributing to urban instability.

Indicator	Description	Impact
Policy Uncertainty	Frequent policy changes affecting investor confidence	Reduces long-term planning and infrastructure development
Housing Prices	Volatility reducing affordability	Forces vulnerable populations into informal housing
Costs of Living	Rising expenses for goods and services	Strains household finances and increases poverty
Income Inequality	Disparities in income distribution	Exacerbates socio-economic divisions and marginalization
Unemployment Rates	Persistent unemployment in key demographics	Weakens economic growth and drives migration pressures

4.2. Environmental dimensions of urban instability

Environmental degradation significantly undermines Tehran's urban sustainability. The city's air pollution levels rank among the highest globally, driven by vehicle emissions, industrial activities, and insufficient public transportation infrastructure. The absence of adequate green spaces exacerbates urban heat islands, amplifying localized temperature extremes and worsening the effects of climate change. Water resource management remains a critical issue, with over-extraction and inefficient systems leading to persistent scarcity. Similarly, ineffective waste management practices pose ecological risks, straining the city's livability. These challenges parallel those faced by Addis Ababa, where inadequate urban planning contributes to severe environmental vulnerabilities.

Table 2. Key environmental indicators contributing to urban instability.

Indicator	Description	Impact
Air Pollution	High pollution levels caused by vehicles and industries	Increases public health risks and decreases livability
Green Space Deficit	Limited green spaces intensifying urban heat islands	Amplifies localized climate impacts

| Water Scarcity | Over-extraction and insufficient water systems | Strains resource sustainability |
| Waste Management | Inadequate disposal systems causing ecological risks | Reduces ecological health and urban resilience |

4.3. Social dimensions of urban instability

Social challenges in Tehran reflect systemic gaps in inclusivity and equity. Limited public participation in urban decision-making processes weakens policy effectiveness and responsiveness, hindering the city's ability to address citizen needs comprehensively. Social segregation, marked by unequal resource allocation and infrastructure quality, exacerbates disparities between affluent and marginalized communities. Furthermore, the erosion of community cohesion—evidenced by declining social trust and a diminished sense of identity—compounds the city's social fragmentation. These social dynamics echo broader global patterns, highlighting the urgency for inclusive urban policies that prioritize equitable access and community engagement.

Table 3. Key social indicators contributing to urban instability.

Indicator	Description	Impact
Public Participation	Limited engagement in decision-making processes	Increases public health risks and decreases livability
Social Segregation	Unequal resource allocation between communities	Exacerbates inequities and marginalization
Community Cohesion	Weak social ties and diminishing sense of belonging	Fractures urban community and increases fragmentation

5. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal the multi-faceted nature of urban instability in Tehran, emphasizing the interconnectedness of economic, environmental, and social challenges. Each dimension highlights systemic issues that demand an integrated and tailored approach to urban planning.

Tehran's economic instability, marked by policy uncertainty, volatile housing markets, and rising costs of living, parallels challenges in other rapidly urbanizing cities like Shenzhen. However, Tehran's unique geopolitical context and entrenched socio-economic disparities intensify these issues. Policy instability discourages long-term investments, especially in critical infrastructure, while housing affordability challenges and income inequality marginalize vulnerable populations. Comparative analysis with Shenzhen underscores the shared nature of economic volatility, yet Tehran's structural economic dependencies call for highly localized strategies, including policy reforms and targeted affordability measures.

Environmental degradation is another defining aspect of Tehran's urban instability. Severe air pollution, inadequate green spaces, and water scarcity reflect ecological vulnerabilities exacerbated by aging infrastructure and inefficient management systems. Unlike Addis Ababa, where urban sprawl drives resource strain, Tehran's challenges stem from entrenched inefficiencies and limited ecological planning. Air pollution remains a critical public health concern, while the absence of

sufficient green infrastructure amplifies urban heat islands and ecological stress. Solutions must include expanded public transportation networks, stricter pollution controls, and urban greening initiatives. Insights from Addis Ababa highlight the value of community-based resource management approaches, which could complement Tehran's policy-driven environmental reforms.

The social dimension of instability highlights systemic issues such as limited public participation, social segregation, and weakening community cohesion. A lack of inclusivity in decision-making processes diminishes policy responsiveness and exacerbates inequalities. Social segregation, fueled by uneven resource distribution, reinforces disparities between affluent and underserved communities. Furthermore, diminishing community identity fragments the social fabric, creating additional barriers to cohesive urban planning. These challenges mirror patterns in other global cities, but Tehran's cultural and political complexities necessitate localized solutions. Empowering communities through participatory governance frameworks and equitable resource distribution can help address these issues effectively.

The interdependence of economic, environmental, and social challenges underscores the need for a holistic urban planning approach in Tehran. For instance, addressing housing affordability could simultaneously mitigate economic disparities and reduce the ecological impact of informal settlements. Investments in green infrastructure can enhance environmental resilience while improving social well-being. The study highlights that fragmented solutions are inadequate for addressing Tehran's challenges, emphasizing the need for cross-sector collaboration and integrated strategies.

This research contributes to the global discourse on urban sustainability by offering a comprehensive analysis of urban instability indicators and their interconnections. While comparisons with cities like Shenzhen and Addis Ababa provide valuable insights, Tehran's unique geopolitical and socio-economic context demands tailored interventions. Policymakers must focus on long-term planning, community engagement, and coordinated cross-sector efforts to address these complex challenges. Future research should explore primary data collection and longitudinal analyses to evaluate the effectiveness of proposed interventions and extend the applicability of these findings to other urban contexts.

Table 4. Comparison of urban challenges across cities.

city	Economic Challenges	Environmental Challenges	Social Challenges
Tehran	Policy uncertainty, volatile housing prices, rising costs of living, income inequality, unemployment	Severe air pollution, inadequate green spaces, water scarcity, inefficient waste management	Limited public participation, social segregation, weakened community cohesion
Shenzhen	Rapid economic growth causing affordability crises, high housing prices, income disparity	Rapid urbanization causing pollution, resource strain, limited green areas	Increased migration pressure, reduced social stability, challenges of inclusivity
Addis Ababa	Low economic base, high unemployment, limited industrialization, informal economic activities	Urban sprawl, deforestation, insufficient infrastructure for waste and water management	Marginalized populations, lack of community engagement, urban-rural divide

6. Conclusion

Urban instability in Tehran is characterized by deeply interconnected economic, environmental, and social challenges, reflecting the complexities faced by rapidly urbanizing cities. Economic instability, driven by policy uncertainty, fluctuating housing prices, and unemployment, disrupts long-term planning and exacerbates socio-economic disparities. Environmental challenges, including severe air pollution, water scarcity, and inadequate green infrastructure, highlight ecological vulnerabilities compounded by aging systems and inefficient management. Social instability, marked by limited public participation, social segregation, and diminished community cohesion, further fragments the urban landscape and undermines resilience. Addressing these dimensions requires integrated, cross-sector solutions that transcend isolated interventions.

A comparative analysis with Shenzhen and Addis Ababa underscores shared challenges among rapidly urbanizing cities, such as economic volatility and ecological strain. However, Tehran's unique geopolitical and cultural context necessitates tailored strategies. Establishing stable policy frameworks to enhance investment confidence, implementing sustainable urban planning practices to mitigate environmental impacts, and fostering inclusive governance models to empower marginalized communities are critical priorities. Investments in green infrastructure, affordable housing, and public transportation networks present significant opportunities for addressing the multifaceted challenges of urban instability.

The findings contribute to the global discourse on urban sustainability by bridging theoretical frameworks with practical applications. Analyzing instability indicators within Tehran's context provides actionable insights that can inform urban planning strategies in other cities confronting similar challenges. The conceptual framework developed offers a valuable tool for integrating local insights with global best practices, fostering resilient and sustainable urban environments.

Future research should address the reliance on secondary data by incorporating primary data collection methods, such as surveys and stakeholder interviews, to validate and enrich findings. Longitudinal studies are essential for evaluating the long-term impacts of proposed interventions and refining strategies for achieving sustainable urban development. Advancing this research will support policymakers and planners in navigating the complexities of urban sustainability, fostering resilience and equity in cities worldwide.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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