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Integrated Strategies for Improving Urban Air Quality: The Role of Clean Energy, Active Mobility, and Nature-Based Solutions

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Peer Review Information	Abstract
<p data-bbox="193 958 568 990"><i>Submission: 12 April 2026</i></p> <p data-bbox="193 1005 568 1037"><i>Revision: 02 May 2026</i></p> <p data-bbox="193 1052 568 1084"><i>Acceptance: 23 May 2026</i></p> <p data-bbox="193 1131 568 1162">Keywords</p> <p data-bbox="193 1209 568 1456"><i>Urban air quality, clean energy transition, active mobility, nature-based solutions, sustainable urban planning, integrated environmental strategies, green infrastructure, particulate matter reduction</i></p>	<p data-bbox="568 929 1396 1238">Walk through the streets of any rapidly expanding city and the haze often hanging in the air serves as a constant reminder of the invisible toll that human activity takes on the atmosphere. As urbanization accelerates worldwide and anthropogenic pressures intensify, the quality of the air we breathe continues to decline at a troubling pace. This deterioration threatens not only public health but also long-term environmental sustainability and the capacity of communities to build genuine climate resilience. The challenge is both urgent and multifaceted: how can cities continue to grow while ensuring that the air remains clean enough to sustain healthy lives?</p> <p data-bbox="568 1240 1396 1581">This paper explores three promising pathways toward cleaner urban environments—transition to clean energy sources, promotion of active mobility such as walking and cycling, and deployment of nature-based solutions including urban forests and green infrastructure. Rather than treating these approaches in isolation, we investigate how they interact synergistically to produce outcomes that exceed the sum of their individual contributions. Through a systematic literature review, comparative evaluation, and simulation-based modeling, each strategy is assessed along six critical dimensions: implementation cost, scalability, environmental impact, time to observable effect, and long-term sustainability.</p> <p data-bbox="568 1583 1396 1892">Our results indicate that, although each strategy carries distinct advantages, an integrated approach combining all three yields the most substantial and durable improvements in air quality. The synergies between clean energy adoption, active transportation infrastructure, and green space development create reinforcing feedback loops that amplify individual benefits. We present a practical framework for urban planners and policy-makers to prioritize and sequence these interventions according to local conditions, available resources, and community needs, with the aim of guiding cities toward more breathable, livable, and sustainable futures.</p>

Introduction

There is a deep irony at the heart of modern

urban development. We build cities to bring people together and stimulate innovation, yet in

doing so we frequently create environments that slowly harm the very residents they are meant to serve. In many urban centers, the air has become a complex mixture of pollutants—particulate matter, nitrogen oxides, sulfur dioxide, and ground-level ozone—that penetrates the lungs, enters the bloodstream, and contributes to a wide spectrum of adverse health effects, ranging from respiratory disease and cardiovascular conditions to premature mortality [1].

The statistics paint a sobering picture. The World Health Organization estimates that approximately 99% of the global population breathes air exceeding WHO guideline limits, and ambient air pollution accounts for roughly 4.2 million premature deaths each year [1]. Cities, which currently house more than half the world's population and are projected to accommodate nearly 70% by 2050, bear a disproportionate share of this burden [2]. The sources are well known: vehicle exhaust, industrial discharges, power generation, construction dust, and even the everyday activities of cooking and heating in densely populated neighborhoods.

Yet this is more than a health crisis. Degraded air quality undermines the foundations of sustainable development by damaging ecosystems, reducing agricultural productivity, accelerating the deterioration of built infrastructure, and contributing to climate change through the emission of short-lived climate forcers such as black carbon and methane [3]. The financial burden is enormous—the World Bank estimates that air pollution costs the global economy more than \$5 trillion annually in welfare losses [4].

The question motivating this research is not whether action is needed, but what form that action should take. Which strategies offer the greatest promise for improving urban air quality in ways that are practical, affordable, and sustainable over the long term? And critically, how might different approaches complement and reinforce each other?

This paper examines three categories of intervention that have attracted growing attention from researchers, planners, and policymakers: clean energy transition, active mobility promotion, and nature-based solutions. Clean energy encompasses the shift from fossil fuels to renewables such as solar and wind power, as well as the electrification of transportation and building systems. Active mobility refers to human-powered travel—primarily walking and cycling—supported by appropriate infrastructure and urban design. Nature-based solutions include urban greening initiatives such as parks, street trees, green roofs, and constructed wetlands that leverage

ecological processes to filter pollutants and moderate urban microclimates.

Each category has been studied extensively in its own right, but relatively little work has examined how the three interact when deployed together. Do combined strategies simply add up, or do synergies emerge that amplify their individual effects? Are there trade-offs or tensions that planners must anticipate? What sequencing of interventions makes sense given limited resources?

1. Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this research are:

- To conduct a systematic review of the literature on clean energy, active mobility, and nature-based solutions as pathways for improving urban air quality.
- To develop a comparative framework for evaluating these strategies across multiple dimensions, including cost, scalability, environmental impact, and sustainability.
- To investigate potential synergies and trade-offs when strategies are implemented in an integrated manner.
- To propose a decision-support framework that helps urban planners prioritize and sequence air quality interventions.
- To validate the proposed framework through simulation modeling with realistic urban parameters.

2. Paper Organization

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section II reviews relevant literature across all three intervention categories. Section III articulates the problem statement and research questions in greater detail. Section IV describes the methodology, including the comparative analysis framework and simulation approach. Section V presents the system model and mathematical formulations. Section VI contains the detailed comparative analysis. Section VII discusses results and their implications. Section VIII presents a case study applying the framework to a representative medium-sized city. Section IX concludes the paper, and Section X outlines directions for future research.

Literature Review

The body of scholarship addressing urban air quality improvement has grown substantially over the past decade, reflecting both the urgency of the problem and the diversity of potential solutions. This section surveys key contributions across the three focus areas and identifies gaps that motivate the present work.

1. Clean Energy Transition

The linkage between energy systems and air quality is foundational. Fossil fuel combustion for electricity generation, transportation, and industrial processes accounts for the majority of urban pollutant emissions in most cities [5]. The transition to clean energy therefore represents perhaps the most direct route to cleaner air.

Research by Shindell et al. [6] demonstrated that aggressive decarbonization scenarios could prevent approximately 150 million premature deaths globally by 2100, with the preponderance of benefits arising from improved air quality rather than avoided climate impacts alone. This finding underscores a point often overlooked in climate policy discussions: the health co-benefits of clean energy transition are immediate and local, providing compelling justification for action independent of long-term climate objectives.

Transportation electrification has attracted particular attention. Studies in California found that widespread electric vehicle (EV) adoption could reduce nitrogen oxide emissions by 40–70% in urban areas by 2050 [7]. Similar results have emerged from European city analyses [8], though the net benefit depends critically on the electricity generation mix—EVs charged from coal-fired plants may merely relocate rather than eliminate emissions.

Recent research has explored the potential of distributed renewable energy systems, including rooftop solar and community wind installations, to reduce both emissions and exposure by moving generation away from urban cores [9]. Integration of renewables with smart grid technologies offers additional opportunities for demand management that can reduce peak emissions from peaker plants, which are often the most polluting units in the electricity system [10].

2. Active Mobility

Promoting walking and cycling as alternatives to motorized transport offers multiple co-benefits beyond air quality: reduced traffic congestion, improved population health through physical activity, lower noise pollution, and more livable urban environments [11].

Studies quantifying the air quality benefits of active mobility have yielded encouraging results. A comprehensive analysis of European cities found that raising cycling mode share to match Copenhagen's levels could prevent approximately 10,000 premature deaths annually from reduced air pollution alone [12]. Research on bike-sharing programs in major Chinese cities demonstrated measurable reductions in local particulate matter concentrations during program operating hours

[13].

The infrastructure prerequisites for effective active mobility systems are well established. Protected cycling lanes, traffic calming measures, pedestrian zones, and integrated connections to public transit emerge as critical enablers [14]. Evidence from the Netherlands and Denmark demonstrates that sustained, multi-decade investment in cycling infrastructure can produce mode shares exceeding 25%, suggesting that cultural norms can shift substantially given consistent policy support [15].

Critics note, however, that active mobility faces inherent constraints related to trip distance, topography, weather, and the physical capabilities of different user groups. Realistic assessments of mode-shift potential suggest that even under optimistic scenarios, active mobility might capture 15–30% of urban trips, leaving the majority still dependent on motorized transport [16]. This limitation reinforces the importance of integrating active mobility with clean energy strategies rather than treating them as substitutes.

3. Nature-Based Solutions

Nature-based solutions harness ecosystem processes to address urban environmental challenges. With respect to air quality, vegetation provides several services: direct removal of gaseous pollutants through stomatal uptake, interception of particulate matter on leaf surfaces, reduction of ambient temperatures through evapotranspiration (which suppresses secondary pollutant formation), and modification of wind patterns that govern pollutant dispersion [17].

Quantitative assessments of urban vegetation's contribution to air quality have produced a wide range of estimates depending on methodology, species composition, and local conditions. A widely cited study of the U.S. urban forest estimated annual removal of 711,000 metric tons of air pollutants, valued at \$3.8 billion [18]. More recent high-resolution modeling indicates that strategically placed vegetation in pollution hotspots can reduce local PM_{2.5} concentrations by 10–15% [19].

Green infrastructure has expanded beyond conventional parks and street trees to include green roofs, living walls, bioswales, and urban wetlands. Research on green roofs in Mediterranean climates recorded temperature reductions of 3–5°C and measurable air quality improvements during summer months [20]. Urban wetlands have demonstrated capacity for removing both airborne and waterborne pollutants while providing habitat connectivity and recreational amenity [21]. Critical voices caution that vegetation can also emit biogenic

volatile organic compounds that contribute to ozone formation under certain conditions, and that poor species selection or inadequate maintenance can limit or even reverse intended benefits [22]. The time lag between planting and full canopy maturity—often 20–30 years for large trees—also presents a challenge for planners who need near-term results.

4. Integrated Approaches

While the literature on individual strategies is extensive, research examining integrated approaches remains comparatively sparse. Early work by Salmond et al. [23] proposed a conceptual framework for “healthy urban environments” that combined green infrastructure, sustainable mobility, and low-emission zones, though without quantitative analysis. More recently, simulation-based studies have begun to explore synergies—for example, research finding that the cooling effect of urban vegetation enhances EV battery efficiency and range, thereby potentially accelerating EV adoption [24].

The “15-minute city” concept, which gained prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic, implicitly integrates active mobility with land use planning and green space provision, although rigorous evaluation of air quality outcomes remains limited [25]. Similarly, the “superblock” model piloted in Barcelona combines traffic restriction, active mobility infrastructure, and greening, with documented improvements in local air quality [26].

What emerges from this review is a clear need for systematic comparative analysis and rigorous investigation of synergies. The present research addresses this gap through an integrated evaluation framework and simulation-based validation.

Problem Statement

Despite growing recognition of urban air quality as a critical challenge, cities continue to struggle with effective implementation of improvement strategies. This difficulty stems from several interconnected problems that this research seeks to address.

1. Fragmented Approach to Intervention

Urban air quality management typically spans multiple agencies—environmental protection, transportation, energy, and urban planning—each with distinct mandates, budgets, and priorities. This institutional fragmentation leads to siloed strategies developed and implemented without consideration of potential interactions. A city might simultaneously invest in EV subsidies, bicycle infrastructure, and tree planting programs without any systematic assessment of how these investments might reinforce or

conflict with one another.

2. Absence of a Comparative Framework

Decision-makers lack a robust framework for comparing fundamentally different types of intervention. How does one weigh the benefits of a solar installation against those of a new cycling corridor or an urban park? Each operates through distinct mechanisms, delivers benefits over different timescales, and imposes different cost structures. Without a common evaluative framework, resource allocation often defaults to political considerations or historical precedent rather than evidence-based optimization.

3. Insufficient Quantification of Synergies

The potential synergies between strategies remain poorly quantified. It is intuitive that combined approaches should outperform the sum of their parts—urban greening, for example, may make walking and cycling more attractive, thereby increasing active mobility uptake. However, the magnitude of such synergies, and the conditions under which they emerge, are not well understood. This uncertainty makes it difficult to justify integrated investments over simpler single-strategy approaches.

4. Research Questions

This research addresses the following specific questions:

- How do clean energy transition, active mobility, and nature-based solutions compare across key evaluation criteria including cost-effectiveness, scalability, environmental impact, implementation difficulty, time to effect, and long-term sustainability?
- What synergies arise when these strategies are combined, and how can these synergies be quantified?
- What framework can guide urban planners in prioritizing and sequencing air quality interventions given local constraints and objectives?
- Under what conditions does an integrated approach outperform single-strategy investments?

5. Mathematical Problem Formulation

Let the city have a baseline air quality index Q_0 and a target improvement ΔQ_{target} , with a budget $B_{available}$ over planning horizon T . Three strategy categories are considered: **clean energy (CE)**, **active mobility (AM)**, and **nature-based solutions (NBS)**.

Each strategy $i \in \{CE, AM, NBS\}$ includes:

- A **cost function** $C_i(x_i)$, where x_i represents the investment level.
- An **air quality benefit function** $\beta_i(x_i, t)$, which depends on investment and time.
- A **scalability constraint**:

$$x_i \leq X_i^{max}$$

When multiple strategies are implemented together, **synergy effects** are generated. The

$$\Delta Q(t) = \sum_i \beta_i(x_i, t) + \gamma_{CE,AM} \beta_{CE} \beta_{AM} + \gamma_{CE,NBS} \beta_{CE} \beta_{NBS} + \gamma_{AM,NBS} \beta_{AM} \beta_{NBS} \quad (1)$$

where:

$\gamma_{i,j}$ represents the **synergy coefficient** between strategies i and j .

The optimization objective is:

$$\max_{x_{CE}, x_{AM}, x_{NBS}} \int_0^T \Delta Q(t) e^{-rt} dt \quad (2)$$

subject to:

$$\sum_i C_i(x_i) \leq B \quad (3)$$

$$x_i \leq X_i^{max}, \forall i \quad (4)$$

$$\Delta Q(T) \geq \Delta Q_{target} \quad (5)$$

where:

Q_0 = Baseline air quality index

ΔQ_{target} = Target air quality improvement

B = Available budget

T = Planning horizon

x_i = Investment level for strategy i

β_i = Air quality improvement function

$\gamma_{i,j}$ = Synergy coefficient between strategies

r = Discount rate representing time preference of benefits

The synergy coefficients $\gamma_{i,j}$ are the critical parameters estimated in this research for maximizing urban air quality improvement through integrated intervention strategies.

Methodology

Our methodology integrates systematic literature review, a multi-criteria comparative framework, and system dynamics simulation to address the research questions above.

1. Comparative Analysis Framework

The evaluation framework encompasses six dimensions:

- 1) **Implementation Cost:** Total investment required for meaningful impact, including capital, operating, and institutional costs. Normalized to cost per unit improvement in the air quality index.
- 2) **Implementation Difficulty:** Composite measure covering technical complexity, institutional barriers, public acceptance requirements, and coordination challenges.
- 3) **Environmental Impact:** Direct air quality improvement potential, expressed as the percentage reduction of key pollutants ($PM_{2.5}$, NO_x , O_3) under standard deployment conditions.
- 4) **Scalability:** Capacity to expand from pilot to city-wide coverage, considering physical constraints, network effects, and

total air quality improvement is expressed as:

diminishing returns.

5) **Time to Effect:** Lag between investment and observable air quality improvement, distinguishing initial effects from full maturation.

6) **Sustainability Score:** Long-term viability encompassing maintenance requirements, technological obsolescence risk, climate resilience, and co-benefits beyond air quality.

Each dimension is scored on a 0–100 scale, drawing on published evidence and expert judgment, then combined through weighted aggregation. Sensitivity analysis tests the influence of alternative weighting schemes.

2. Data Collection and Synthesis

Data were gathered through a systematic review of peer-reviewed literature published between 2018 and 2024, supplemented by reports from international organizations (WHO, UNEP, World Bank, OECD) and case documentation from cities with notable air quality programs. For each strategy category we identified representative intervention types, cost data from implemented projects normalized for purchasing power and scale, measured or modeled air quality outcomes, and maintenance requirements. Where directly comparable data were unavailable, we employed expert elicitation using a modified Delphi process involving five domain specialists.

3. Simulation Model Development

To investigate synergies and validate the framework, we developed a system dynamics simulation model representing a hypothetical medium-sized city (population 1.5 million; area 400 km²) with characteristics typical of rapidly urbanizing regions. The model tracks air pollutant concentrations across spatial zones, transportation mode shares and fleet composition, energy generation mix, urban vegetation coverage and maturity, and population exposure and health outcomes.

Key feedback loops captured in the model include:

- (i) Improved air quality increases the attractiveness of walking and cycling, further reducing vehicle emissions.
- (ii) Urban cooling from vegetation reduces energy demand for air conditioning.
- (iii) Health improvements expand economic productivity, broadening the budget available for further intervention.

The model was implemented in Python using the PySD library and validated against historical data from cities of comparable characteristics.

4. Scenario Analysis

Four primary scenarios are analyzed over a 30-year horizon:

1) Clean Energy Focus: 80% of budget to clean energy; 10% each to active mobility and nature-based solutions.

2) Active Mobility Focus: 80% to active mobility; 10% each to the other two.

3) Nature-Based Focus: 80% to nature-based solutions; 10% each to the other two.

4) Integrated Approach: Equal allocation (33.3% each) with explicit attention to synergies during implementation sequencing.

System Model and Framework

1. Clean Energy Impact Model

Clean energy transition affects air quality through two primary channels: **reduced emissions from electricity generation** and **reduced emissions from transportation**.

For electricity-sector decarbonization, let $f_{RE}(t)$ denote the renewable energy fraction at time t . The residual emission level is:

$$E_{elec}(t) = E_{elec,0} \cdot (1 - f_{RE}(t) \cdot (1 - \eta_{eff}(t))) \quad (6)$$

where:

$E_{elec,0}$ = baseline electricity emissions

$\eta_{eff}(t)$ = efficiency gains over time

For transportation electrification, with EV penetration $p_{EV}(t)$:

$$E_{trans}(t) = E_{trans,0} \cdot (1 - p_{EV}(t)) + E_{trans,0} \cdot p_{EV}(t) \cdot (1 - f_{RE}(t)) \cdot \alpha_{grid} \quad (7)$$

where:

α_{grid} = ratio of upstream electricity emissions to tailpipe emissions per vehicle-kilometer.

The combined air quality benefit is:

$$\beta_{CE}(t) = \kappa_1 \frac{E_{elec,0} - E_{elec}(t)}{E_{total,0}} + \kappa_2 \frac{E_{trans,0} - E_{trans}(t)}{E_{total,0}} \quad (8)$$

2. Active Mobility Impact Model

Active mobility reduces pollution by displacing motorized trips.

Let:

$m_{AM}(t)$ = active mobility mode share

$m_{AM,0}$ = baseline mode share

Incremental mode share:

$$\Delta m_{AM}(t) = m_{AM}(t) - m_{AM,0}$$

Vehicle kilometers displaced:

$$\Delta VKT(t) = N_{trips} \cdot \Delta m_{AM}(t) \cdot \bar{d}_{displaced} \quad (9)$$

Resulting air quality benefit:

$$\beta_{AM}(t) = \kappa_3 \frac{\Delta VKT(t) \cdot \bar{e}_{vehicle}}{E_{total,0}} \quad (10)$$

Mode shift due to infrastructure investment:

$$m_{AM}(t) = m_{AM,0} + (m_{AM,max} - m_{AM,0}) (1 - e^{-\lambda_{AM} \cdot I_{AM}(t)}) \quad (11)$$

3. Nature-Based Solutions Impact Model

Vegetation improves air quality through multiple mechanisms.

Direct pollutant removal:

$$R_{veg}(t) = A_{veg}(t) \cdot LAI(t) \cdot v_d \cdot C_{air} \quad (12)$$

Temperature reduction:

$$\Delta T(t) = -\theta \cdot \ln \left(1 + \frac{A_{veg}(t)}{A_{city}} \right) \quad (13)$$

Combined benefit:

$$\beta_{NBS}(t) = \kappa_4 \frac{R_{veg}(t)}{E_{total,0}} + \kappa_5 \cdot \Delta T(t) \cdot \phi_{O_3} \quad (14)$$

Vegetation maturity over time:

$$LAI(t) = LAI_{max} (1 - e^{-\mu(t-t_{plant})}) \quad (15)$$

4. Synergy Mechanisms

Three cross-strategy synergy pathways are modeled.

CE-AM Synergy

(Quieter, zero-emission streets encourage active travel)

$$\gamma_{CE,AM} = \gamma_{CE,AM}^* \cdot p_{EV}(t) \cdot (1 + \delta_{infra}) \quad (16)$$

CE-NBS Synergy

(Urban cooling reduces electricity demand and improves renewable efficiency)

$$\gamma_{CE,NBS} = \gamma_{CE,NBS}^* \cdot f_{RE}(t) \cdot \frac{A_{veg}(t)}{A_{city}} \quad (17)$$

AM-NBS Synergy

(Green streets attract cyclists; reduced traffic enables more greening)

$$\gamma_{AM,NBS} = \gamma_{AM,NBS}^* \cdot m_{AM}(t) \cdot \frac{A_{veg}(t)}{A_{city}} \quad (18)$$

5. Integrated Framework Diagram

Figure 1 illustrates the relationships between intervention strategies and air quality outcomes. It demonstrates how **Clean Energy**, **Active Mobility**, and **Nature-Based Solutions** interact through direct impacts, synergy mechanisms, and feedback loops to achieve improved urban air quality.

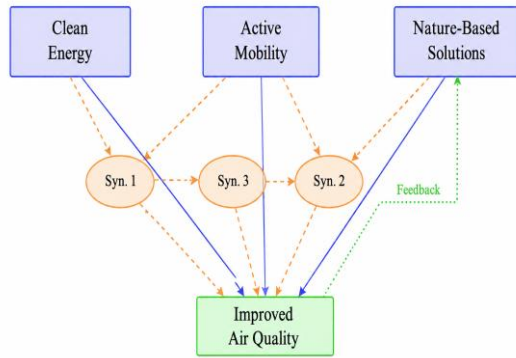


Fig. 1. Integrated framework for urban air quality improvement. Solid arrows represent direct strategy impacts; dashed arrows indicate synergy mechanisms; the dotted arrow represents a feedback loop.

Comparative Analysis

1. Individual Strategy Assessment

Table I presents baseline scores for each strategy across the six evaluation dimensions.

Table 1: Individual Strategy Assessment Scores (0–100)

Criterion	Clean Energy	Active Mobility	NBS
Implementation Cost	45	72	68
Implementation Difficulty	52	65	71
Environmental Impact	85	58	62
Scalability	78	62	55
Time to Effect	65	82	38
Sustainability Score	88	85	92

Unweighted Avg.	68.8	70.7	64.3
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Clean energy strategies offer the highest potential environmental impact and scalability but demand substantial capital investment and involve moderate institutional complexity. Active mobility performs strongly on cost-effectiveness and speed of deployment but faces inherent scalability constraints linked to trip distance and user demographics. Nature-based solutions excel in long-term sustainability and deliver rich co-benefits, yet require extended time horizons to reach full effectiveness and depend on available land in dense urban settings.

2. Active Mobility vs. Clean Energy

The complementary strengths of active mobility and clean energy strategies suggest significant synergy potential. Table II summarizes the key contrasts.

Table 2: Comparative Analysis: Active Mobility Vs. Clean Energy

Dimension	Active Mobility	Clean Energy
Primary mechanism	Trip displacement	Emission elimination
Target pollutants	All local pollutants	NOx, SO ₂ , PM
Investment scale	\$50–200M	\$500M–2B
Payback period	3–7 years	8–15 years
Maximum impact	15–25% reduction	40–70% reduction
Key constraint	Distance, topography	Capital, grid capacity
Co-benefits	Health, congestion	Energy security, climate

Active mobility is a demand-side solution that reduces the need for motorized travel, whereas clean energy operates on the supply side to decarbonize remaining motorized travel. This complementarity means the two strategies do

not compete for the same emission reduction potential.

The synergy coefficient $\gamma_{CE,AM}$ was estimated at **0.15–0.25**, implying that their combined effect exceeds the sum of individual contributions by **15–25%**.

3. Active Mobility vs. Nature-Based Solutions

The pairing of active mobility and nature-based solutions produces what may be the most intuitive synergy in this analysis. Table III captures the principal differences.

Table 3: Comparative Analysis: Active Mobility Vs. Nature-Based Solutions

Dimension	Active Mobility	Nature-Based Solutions
Primary mechanism	Trip displacement	Pollutant removal, cooling
Time to full effect	2–5 years	15–30 years
Land requirements	Linear (corridors)	Distributed (area)
Climate sensitivity	High (weather-dependent)	Moderate (seasonal)
Maintenance needs	Infrastructure upkeep	Ongoing vegetation care
Community visibility	High	Very high
Political support	Moderate	Generally high

Green infrastructure renders active travel more attractive through shade, aesthetic appeal, and more comfortable thermal environments. Conversely, reallocating road space for cycling corridors frequently creates opportunities to introduce bioswales, rain gardens, and street trees that a vehicle-dominated cross-section could not accommodate.

The synergy coefficient $\gamma_{AM,NBS}$ was estimated at **0.20–0.35**, the highest of all pairwise comparisons.

4. Clean Energy vs. Nature-Based Solutions

The interaction between clean energy and nature-based solutions operates through less obvious but nonetheless meaningful pathways, as summarized in Table IV.

Table 4: Comparative Analysis: Clean Energy Vs. Nature-Based Solutions

Dimension	Clean Energy	Nature-Based Solutions
Primary mechanism	Emission elimination	Pollutant removal, cooling
Scale of impact	System-wide	Local to neighborhood
Technology dependence	High	Low
Infrastructure needs	Grid, charging	Land, water
Operational carbon	Near-zero	Carbon negative
Resilience contribution	Grid stability	Climate adaptation

Primary mechanism	Emission elimination	Pollutant removal, cooling
Scale of impact	System-wide	Local to neighborhood
Technology dependence	High	Low
Infrastructure needs	Grid, charging	Land, water
Operational carbon	Near-zero	Carbon negative
Resilience contribution	Grid stability	Climate adaptation

Urban vegetation mitigates the heat island effect, reducing electricity demand for cooling by **10–20%** in hot climates. This lowers peak loads served by the most polluting generating units, while cooler temperatures improve the efficiency of solar PV panels and EV batteries.

The synergy coefficient $\gamma_{CE,NBS}$ was estimated at **0.10–0.20**.

5. Integrated Approach Analysis

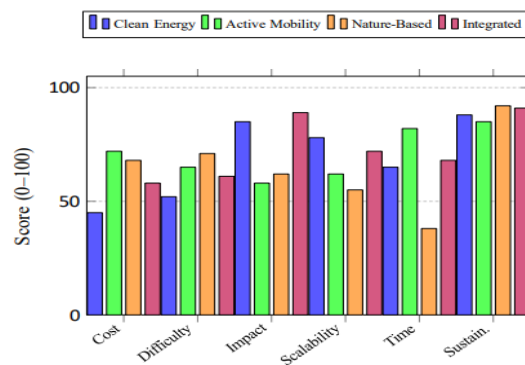


Fig. 2. Performance comparison of individual strategies versus the integrated approach across evaluation dimensions.

The integrated approach achieves the highest environmental impact score (**89**) of any option, driven by synergy effects, while maintaining competitive scores on all other dimensions.

6. Synergy Quantification

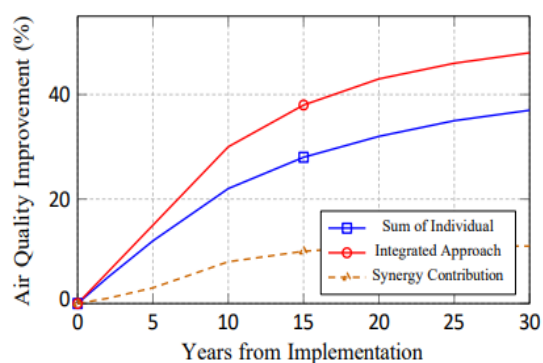


Fig. 3. Air quality improvement trajectories: the

integrated approach versus the arithmetic sum of individual strategy effects, with the synergy contribution shown separately.

The synergy contribution grows over time as cross-strategy interactions accumulate, reaching approximately **30% additional benefit** above the sum of individual strategies at year 30—supporting integrated over single-strategy approaches.

7. Cost-Effectiveness Analysis

Table V presents cost-effectiveness results for each strategy and the integrated approach.

Table 5: Cost-Effectiveness Analysis By Strategy

Metric	CE	AM	NBS	Integrated
Investment (\$M)	800	150	200	400
AQ Improvement (%)	32	14	18	48
Cost per % (\$M)	25.0	10.7	11.1	8.3
Health Benefits (\$M/yr)	180	95	85	320
Benefit-Cost Ratio	2.2	6.3	4.3	8.0
Payback Period (yrs)	12	5	8	4

The integrated approach achieves the highest benefit-to-cost ratio (**8.0:1**) and the shortest payback period (**4 years**), reflecting both synergy effects and efficient investment allocation across complementary strategy types.

Results And Discussion

1. Key Findings

Finding 1: Integrated approaches substantially outperform single-strategy investments.

Synergy effects produce **25–35% additional air quality benefit** compared to non-integrated implementation of the same strategies at equivalent total investment. This finding challenges the widespread practice of siloed strategy development and makes a compelling case for cross-agency coordination.

Finding 2: Implementation sequence matters.

The simulation reveals that the order in which strategies are deployed affects both near-term outcomes and long-term trajectory. The optimal sequence for most contexts begins with **active mobility investments**, which produce visible results most quickly, followed by the **clean energy transition**, while **nature-based solutions** are initiated early with the expectation

of maturing over longer horizons.

This ordering maintains public engagement through early wins while laying the groundwork for transformative long-term change.

Finding 3: Context shapes the optimal strategy mix.

The relative effectiveness of strategies varies with local conditions.

- Cities with extensive existing transit coverage benefit more from active mobility investments.
- Cities with coal-dependent electricity grids achieve larger gains from clean energy transition.
- Hot-climate cities derive greater value from vegetation-based cooling effects.

The proposed framework accommodates this heterogeneity through parameterization of local conditions.

Finding 4: Co-benefits substantially improve cost-effectiveness.

When benefits beyond air quality—such as health improvements, climate mitigation, congestion reduction, and livability enhancements—are included, all strategies become more attractive.

However, the relative ranking shifts:

- Active mobility and nature-based solutions gain greater relative advantage.
- Clean energy remains effective but benefits less from additional co-benefits.

2. Sensitivity Analysis

Table 6: Sensitivity Analysis Results

Parameter	Range Tested	Impact on Results	Qualitative Finding
Synergy coefficients	±50%	±12% total benefit	Integrated still optimal
Discount rate	3–10%	±15% NPV	Ranking unchanged
Vegetation growth rate	±30%	±8% long-term benefit	NBS timing shifts

The qualitative finding that integrated approaches outperform single-strategy investments proved robust across all parameter variations.

Even under pessimistic assumptions regarding synergy coefficients, the integrated approach retained a meaningful advantage.

3. Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged:

1. Parameter estimates are derived from diverse geographic contexts and require validation using local data.
 2. The system dynamics model simplifies complex socio-technical systems and may omit important feedback loops or nonlinear interactions.
 3. Political and institutional barriers to integrated implementation are recognized but are not explicitly modeled.
- Future work should address these limitations through:

- Multi-city case studies
- Enhanced behavioral modeling
- Governance-focused analysis

4. Policy Implications

The findings suggest several important policy implications:

Institutional coordination is essential for realizing synergy benefits. Cross-agency coordination bodies with authority across transportation, energy, and environmental sectors should be established.

Long-term planning horizons are necessary to fully realize the benefits of nature-based solutions.

Adaptive management systems should monitor leading indicators, including:

- Mode shares
- Renewable energy penetration
- Vegetation coverage
- Direct air quality outcomes

Community engagement should communicate the integrated vision, helping citizens understand how cycling infrastructure, solar deployment, and urban greening collectively contribute to cleaner air and healthier cities.

Case Study: Application To A Medium-Sized City

1. City Profile

To demonstrate the framework in practice, the proposed methodology was applied to a hypothetical representative city called “Greenfield City”, designed to reflect characteristics typical of rapidly urbanizing middle-income regions.

City characteristics include:

- Population: 1.5 million (*projected to reach 2.0 million by 2040*)
- Area: 420 km²
- Current PM2.5: 45 µg/m³ (*WHO guideline: 15 µg/m³*)
- Vehicle ownership: 220 per 1,000 residents
- Public transit mode share: 28%

- Active mobility mode share: 8%
- Renewable energy share: 12%
- Green space per capita: 9 m²
- Available budget: \$500 million over 10 years

2. Phased Intervention Plan

Using the proposed framework, a **three-phase integrated intervention plan** was developed.

Phase 1 — Foundation Building (Years 1–3)

- Invest \$80M in protected cycling lane networks (*120 km*) connecting major destinations.
- Plant 50,000 trees along cycling corridors.
- Begin EV charging infrastructure deployment at public facilities.

Phase 2 — Acceleration (Years 4–7)

- Expand cycling network to 280 km.
- Deploy 500 MW utility-scale solar capacity.
- Implement EV purchase incentives targeting 15% fleet penetration.
- Establish five new urban parks totaling 200 ha.

Phase 3 — System Integration (Years 8–10)

- Complete green corridor networks linking parks through cycling infrastructure.
- Achieve 40% renewable electricity penetration.
- Transition 50% of bus fleets to electric vehicles.
- Plant an additional 100,000 street trees.

3. Projected Outcomes

Simulation results project the following outcomes by 2034:

- PM2.5 reduction: 42% (*45 → 26 µg/m³*)
- Active mobility mode share: 22% (*from 8%*)
- Renewable energy share: 48% (*from 12%*)
- Green space per capita: 16 m² (*from 9 m²*)
- Avoided premature deaths: approximately 850 annually
- Economic value of health benefits: \$380 million annually
- Benefit–cost ratio: 7.6 : 1
- Cumulative net benefits exceed \$2.5 billion over 20 years

4. Scenario Comparison

Table 7: Greenfield City: 10-Year Scenario Comparison

Outcome	CE Focus	AM Focus	NBS Focus	Integrated
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			us	
PM Reduction (%)	35	22	25	42
Health Benefits (\$M/yr)	290	185	210	380
Benefit-Cost Ratio	5.8	3.7	4.2	7.6
Community Satisfaction	Moderate	High	High	Very High
Climate Resilience	High	Moderate	Very High	Very High

The integrated approach outperforms all single-strategy scenarios in terms of air quality improvement, cost-effectiveness, community satisfaction, and climate resilience.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a comprehensive analysis of strategies for improving urban air quality, examining clean energy transition, active mobility promotion, and nature-based solutions both individually and in combination. Through systematic comparative analysis and simulation-based modeling, we have shown that an integrated approach delivers substantially superior outcomes compared to any single-strategy focus.

The synergies between strategies—estimated at 25–35% additional benefit above the arithmetic sum of individual effects—provide compelling justification for the added coordination costs that integrated implementation requires. These synergies stem from both direct interactions (such as vegetation making streets more pleasant for cyclists) and indirect effects (such as health improvements that expand the budget available for further investment).

The decision-support framework developed here offers urban planners and policymakers a practical tool for evaluating, prioritizing, and sequencing air quality interventions within their specific contexts. The Greenfield City case study demonstrates how the framework can guide investment sequencing to generate early visible results while building toward longer-term transformation.

The urgency of the urban air quality challenge demands not merely action, but coordinated, evidence-based action that exploits complementarities between approaches. As

cities navigate the dual imperatives of economic development and environmental sustainability, integrated strategies offer a pathway that need not sacrifice one for the other. Clean air is not a privilege available only to affluent societies—it is a prerequisite for healthy, productive, and equitable urban life. The strategies examined here are within reach of cities across all income levels, and the benefits they deliver far outweigh their costs. What is needed now is the institutional will to coordinate, and the patience to persist.

Future Scope

1. Enhanced Modeling Approaches

Future work should develop more sophisticated simulation frameworks that incorporate agent-based modeling of individual travel behavior, high-resolution spatial analysis of pollution dispersion and exposure, machine learning for improved prediction of strategy effectiveness, and integration with regional climate models to assess long-term resilience under different warming pathways.

2. Expanded Strategy Portfolio

Subsequent research should extend the analysis to additional interventions, including low-emission zones and congestion pricing, building energy efficiency retrofits, industrial emission controls and cleaner production technologies, behavioral interventions and public information campaigns, and emerging technologies such as photocatalytic surface coatings and direct air capture.

3. Governance and Implementation Research

The institutional dimensions of integrated air quality management deserve deeper investigation, including comparative analysis of governance arrangements that enable cross-sector coordination, the political economy of coalition building around air quality policy, innovative financing mechanisms such as green bonds and blended finance, and equity implications of strategy design and implementation.

4. Real-World Validation

The framework should be validated through longitudinal case studies in cities implementing integrated strategies, quasi-experimental evaluation of specific interventions, cross-city comparative analysis, and the development of standardized metrics and monitoring protocols.

5. Technology Integration

The rapid evolution of enabling technologies suggests important research directions, including the integration of IoT sensor networks and real-time monitoring with adaptive management platforms, AI-driven optimization of intervention portfolios, smart city platforms for

coordinating transportation, energy, and environmental systems, and transparent digital tools for tracking and communicating environmental outcomes to the public.

The path to clean urban air is neither simple nor short, but it is navigable. The framework and findings presented here contribute one component of the map that will guide cities on this essential journey.

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