

## Rethink the City: Facts, Global Community and Pressing Urban Challenges

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# Rethink the City:

New Approaches to  
Global and Local  
Urban Challenges

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# Rethink the City: New Approaches to Global and Local Urban Challenges

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## Rethink the City Massive Open Online Course

Participate in Rethink the City MOOC on the EdX platform or at

[www.online-learning.tudelft.nl/courses/rethink-the-city-new-approaches-to-global-and-local-urban-challenge/](http://www.online-learning.tudelft.nl/courses/rethink-the-city-new-approaches-to-global-and-local-urban-challenge/)

Ch.2 Rethink the City Course

# Global community and Pressing Urban Challenges





Rethink the City supports the co-production of knowledge through collaborative efforts of the global community. Its ambition to broaden the academic study of urban challenges to underrepresented geographies is reflected in its form: A free, online course inclusive to all, regardless of location or background. However, despite its benefits, online education has evident setbacks. This chapter seeks to shine a light on various issues faced by this unconventional academic curriculum and what kind of measures were taken to overcome them.

Keywords:

**Co-creation, co-production, online education, platforms, digital learning, participation**

Written by the editorial team:

**Dr. Luz María Vergara, Anja van der Watt, Dr. Igor Pessoa  
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TV Antivirus Sales & Repair Center

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कालिका १४, काठमाण्डौ ११ पिकचर

SAMSUNG | Galaxy  
The Kathmandu Electronics

Image by Luz Maria Vergara

## Introduction

Recent higher education service paradigms have demonstrated a shift in seeing students as consumers to students as co-creators, co-producers, or participants in the development of meaningful educational experiences (Deng, R., & Benckendorff, P., 2021). The primary learning experience of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) is found in the discussions and interactions between learners and the course staff and in the amount and quality of material and knowledge created during the course's duration. Under a co-production paradigm, knowledge is perceived as a shared resource, which is jointly generated and publicly owned' (Miller et al. 2006, p. 14). Learners are considered active collaborators, working with the course staff to co-create a body of knowledge through discussions, assignments, peer exchange, and feedback. This co-production is a prominent feature in *Rethink the City: New Approaches to Global and Local Urban Challenges* as between 2018 and 2021, students created 10.479 graphics, 79% of which received comments from other students or the course team.

Using the case of the online course *Rethink the City*, this chapter brings to light this relationship: the creation of new knowledge through the collaborative effort of a global community and the course staff. More particularly, we want to know what the features of the global community are; and how this community contributes to the creation of new knowledge in order to better understand local and global urban challenges. To that purpose, this chapter later discusses the characteristics of the *Rethink the City* participants and conducts a qualitative and quantitative study of the final assignments produced between 2017 and 2021 in six successive course runs. For the study, we evaluate the students' final project, which consists of a visual essay identifying the key local urban challenges in a given location and the suggested solutions that address them. We analyzed 902 assignments and organized them in an excel database based on the location of the urban challenge presented, the module in the course they most closely reflected, and keywords based on the titles provided.

In the following sections we will first describe the educational experience of the MOOC, then discuss how we understand inclusive global learning as a process with specific characteristics and challenges. Thirdly, we will explain how inclusive and global co-creation of knowledge is done through the MOOC and finally we will draw some conclusions and speculate on what form the course could take in the coming years.

## The educational experience of the Rethink the City MOOC

The Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) *Rethink the City: New Approaches to Global and Local Urban Challenges* was produced by Delft University of Technology's Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment. The course seeks to gradually develop a critical perspective on local urban challenges in the Global South, while also reflecting on the relationship between global theories and local embeddedness. The course is part of the TU Delft Extension School's online portfolio and is available on the EdX platform. *Rethink the City* has conducted six iterations since 2017, reaching 29.047 learners from 184 countries across the world.

The course is divided into three themes: spatial justice, housing provision and management, and urban resilience. Each topic follows the same structure: a short theoretical lecture by a senior researcher, three case studies presented by PhD candidates, two practitioner testimonials, and two practical exercises. During the course, participants learn how to develop a critical approach to understanding their own urban environments and how to translate this knowledge into analytical tools and innovative urban solutions.

Recognizing the drawbacks of online education as compared to traditional classroom instruction, the course team created several methods to bridge the gap by providing online spaces where students could engage and learn from one another. Building a learning community is important for addressing aspects of conventional education that are difficult to mimic online, such as face-to-face classroom activities or fieldwork (Shapiro et al., 2017).

For this objective, three key tools were used: first, the course was a TU Delft pioneer in using the platform Sketchdrive, which allows students to submit visual content and offer feedback to one another's work in the form of comments or drawings. A second tool used by the course is the virtual forum incorporated in the EdX platform, which became the primary communication channel between the course team and the learners. This forum is intended for day-to-day interactions as well as holding debates on various issues. While these two platforms are the primary means of engagement throughout the course, a Facebook page was created to foster a feeling of community beyond the course's formal duration. With over 3500 followers, the Facebook page has supported a worldwide online community outside the edX platform.

*Rethink the City* has been edited and updated over the six-course versions to give a comprehensive learning experience: a course about frontline urban challenges requires continual revision to be relevant and up to date. Although the learning experience has improved over time, there are still significant challenges to overcome in online education, such as more equitable grading and assessment



methods, more personalized instructor-learner interactions, and socioeconomic and language barriers that continue to limit equal access to online education (Moreno Pessoa et al. 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought forward the ongoing popularisation of online education. The abrupt change from classrooms to virtual environments showed the relevance of having high-quality, stimulating, and engaging online educational experiences. Given the long-term consequences of these new educational settings in higher education, the lessons and information from MOOCs or comparable formats are more important than ever in refining online methods and fostering blended experiences.

## Inclusive Global Trends and Challenges

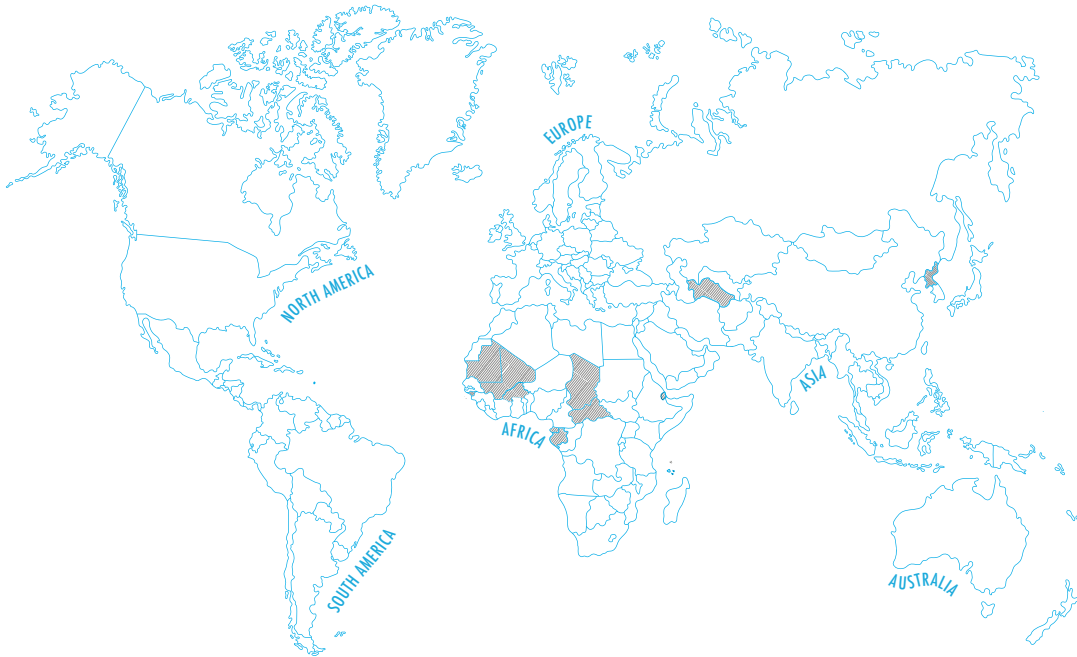
As this course intends to broaden the academic study of urban challenges to underrepresented geographies, it was important to involve a diverse and global student demographic which reflects this. *Rethink the City* attempts to offer a level playing field for learners irrespective of circumstantial factors, as well as ensuring user safety to some degree. Students over the runs have represented a vast array of nationalities and cultures, adding invaluable insight into the regions they tune in from. The following section of the essay examines the formation of the global community before discussing how the team has attempted to overcome socio-economic, geographical, cultural, language, and infrastructural obstacles to inclusive learning.

## Towards an inclusive, global community

Following the nature of MOOCs, its entirely digital format allows the content to reach a wider audience than an in-person course would otherwise be able to do, resulting in a global demographic (Weinhardtta & Sitzmann, 2019). The first six runs of the *Rethink the City* MOOC saw learners representing 184 countries spread across six continents (see Figure 1 on the next page) extending far beyond those who live in close geographical proximity to, or can regularly travel to, the host institution. The community is first formed in threads on the course forum through informal introductions as their first assignment of each run. Members are encouraged to maintain these connections through ‘groups’ on social media platforms, offering a way of linking alumni from all over the world. As well as heated discussions on urban development topics, educational, professional and networking opportunities are often shared on these groups. This network continues to expand each year and is used as a digital meeting point enabling the continuation of inter-peer relationships after the completion of a run.



Image by Caroline Newton



**Figure 1: Student participation across 6 continents**

Shaded areas represent nationalities that were not selected. Note that island states are not visually represented in the graphic, and a proportion of the learners did selected 'unknown' geography rather than their country of origin.

By nature of open access, this community is considerably more inclusive than that of conventional, tertiary education. Being completely free to enroll in, it is technically accessible to everyone with a smart device and adequate internet connection. Costs of university education have long been criticized for being ineffective at addressing educational inequality through its unaffordability (Flavin, 2017). With the average university course in the Netherlands costing between 1.040 and 2.083 EUR annually for EU/EEA students and between 6.000 and 20.000 EUR for non-EU/EEA students, affordable courses like *Rethink the City* offer an alternative or complementary route to notoriously expensive university courses while providing participants with high-quality education, often still led by accredited teachers representing internationally recognised institutions (Mastersportal, 2022).

On a social level, by having a relatively loose program with only provisional internal deadlines, learners can experience flexibility around their varied lifestyles and prior commitments, reducing the need to compromise other aspects of life for education. The first three runs, in 2017, 2018, and early 2020, were “instructor-paced,” which was the closest format to classroom teaching, also with the biggest student uptake totaling over 20 thousand enrollments. With defined assignment deadlines and recorded feedback sessions that could be viewed at any time, there was no need for scheduled meetings or live broadcasting. This drastically opened up the audience base to learners living in time zones which do not comply with that of the course team, and provided the learner with agency to study where and when it suits them. This level of freedom was increased further in April 2022 with the “self-paced” version, which eliminated

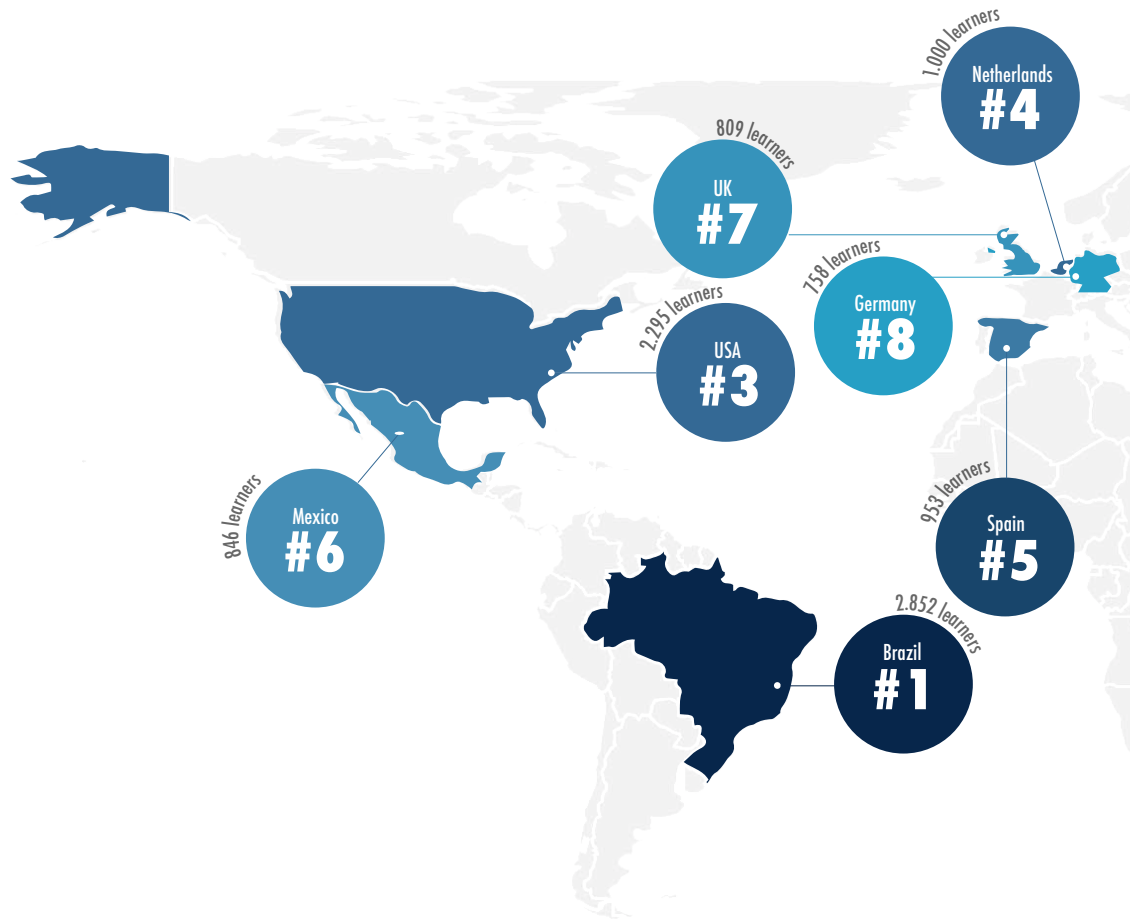


Figure 2: Top 10 participants nationalities from runs 2017-2021

internal deadlines and provided a foundation for self-driven learning. Although this meant that the intensity of interactions were less, inter-peer communication was sustained by assignments requiring students to provide feedback on at least one other's work in order to pass.

## Overcoming the limits to inclusivity

*Rethink the City* attempts to offer a level playing field for learners irrespective of circumstantial factors, as well as ensuring user safety to some degree. The key data retrieved from learners included: gender, age, location, and level of education. Like most MOOCs, the course assumes a base level of academic knowledge from secondary education and above. Learners can enroll irregardless of their academic status, and there is no need for an assessment in order to be accepted.

Despite the course's vast demographic reach, there is a weak correlation between national populations and learner enrollment. The MOOC is accessible for learners through the EdX platform, whose reach is unrelated to the country's size or to how engaged a population is in the themes covered in *Rethink the City*. The number

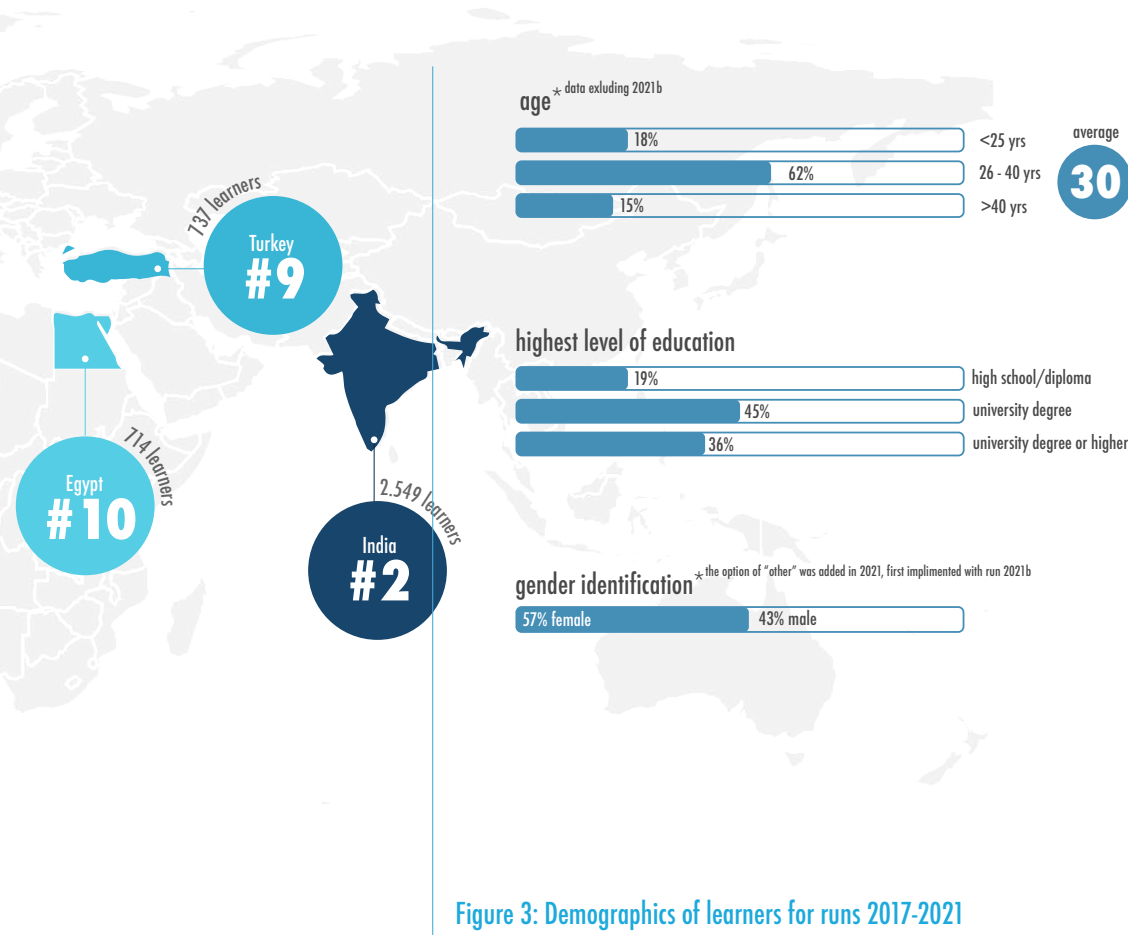


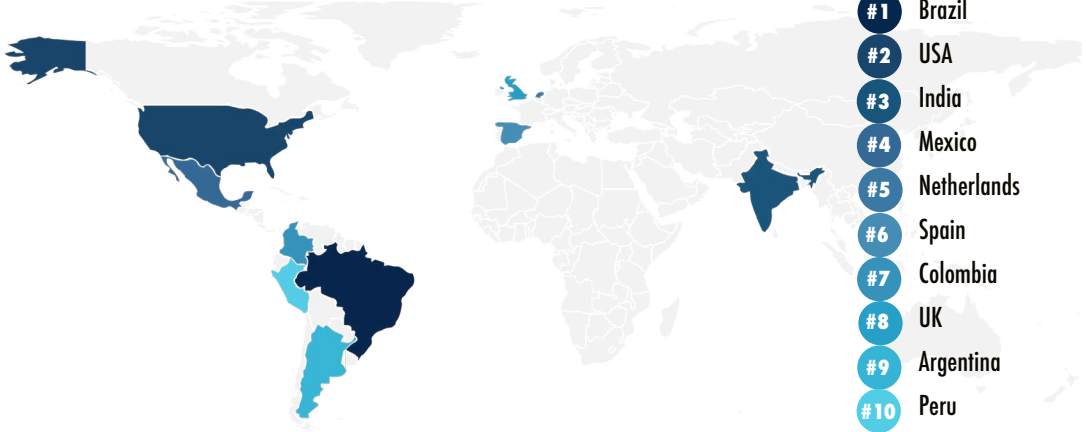
Figure 3: Demographics of learners for runs 2017-2021

of enrollments is likely to be connected to the EdX platform's popularity in specific nations in contrast to other online learning platforms, as well as geopolitical, cultural, or social circumstances.

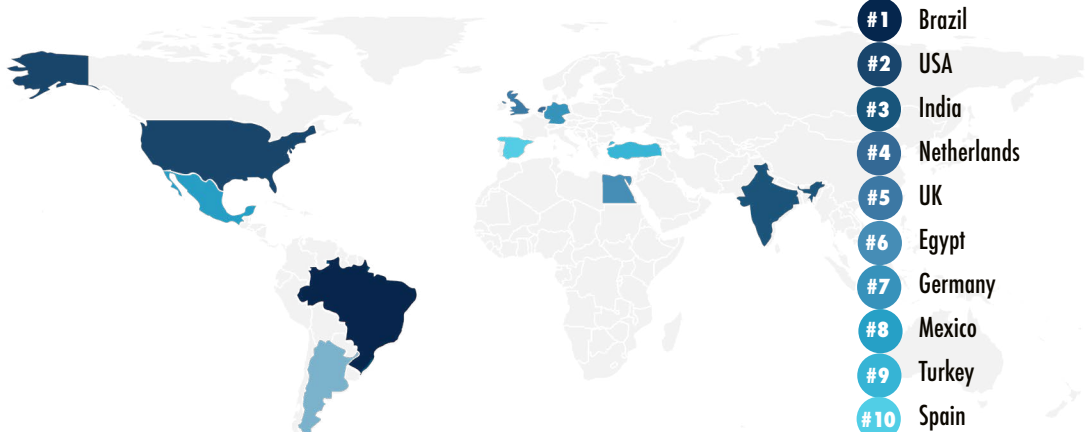
Unsurprisingly, countries such as India, US and Brazil, ranking second, third and sixth most populous countries world wide, together represent almost one third of the total learners. However, other countries are less well represented considering their size (UN DESA, 2022). Indonesia, Pakistan, Nigeria, Bangladesh and Russia ranking fourth, fifth, seventh, eighth and ninth in the world population chart respectively, together they amount for only 4.3 percent of the learners. In terms of gender distribution, it is encouraging to see that people identifying as females or "other" have represented over 50% for each of the runs: a trend now reflected in traditional institutions, too (UNESCO, 2021).

Cultural and political differences, in addition to providing depth of knowledge and understanding among peers, can be a deciding factor in whether someone enrolls in the course or not; and, if enrolled, can be both a powerful motivator or a barrier to the quality of their learning experiences. Preset ideologies or cultural expectations may restrict what a learner chooses to express in their work and could limit a student's confidence to engage honestly and inquisitively with certain debates,

2017



2018



2020a

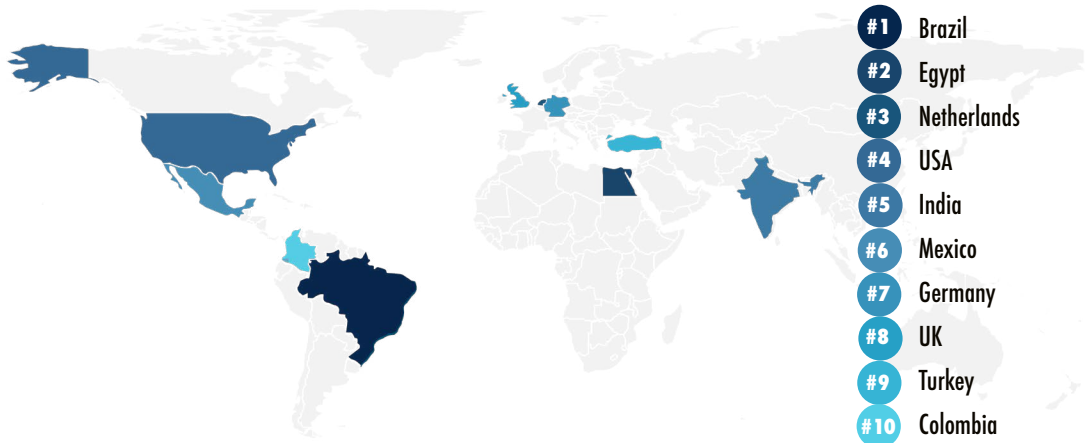
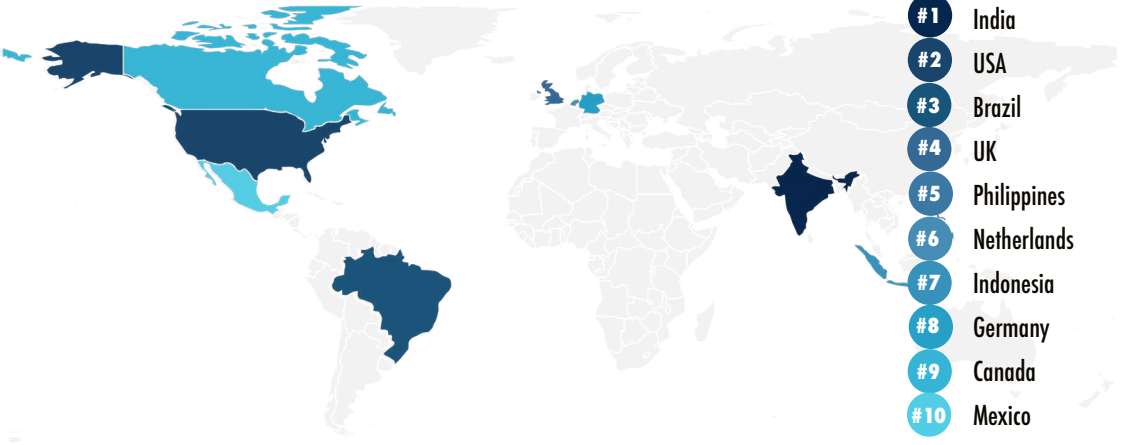
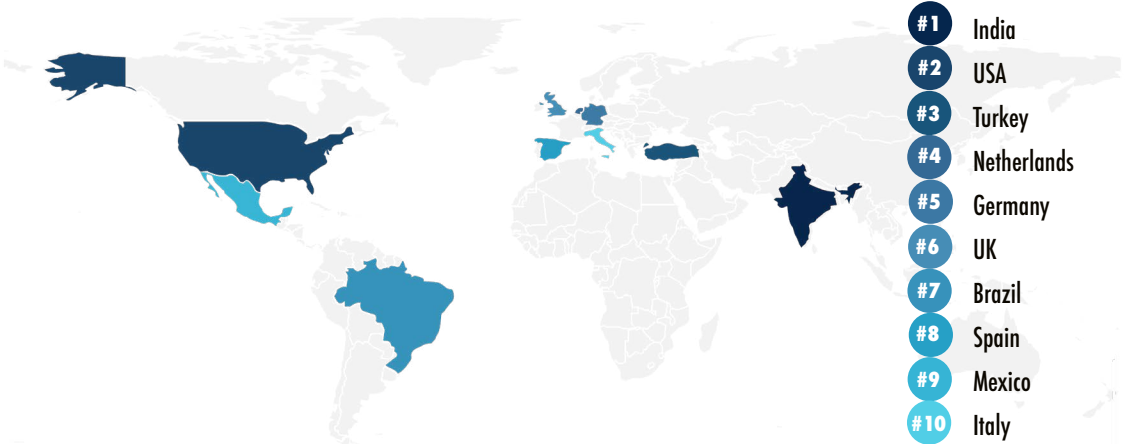


Figure 4: Top 10 participating countries per run

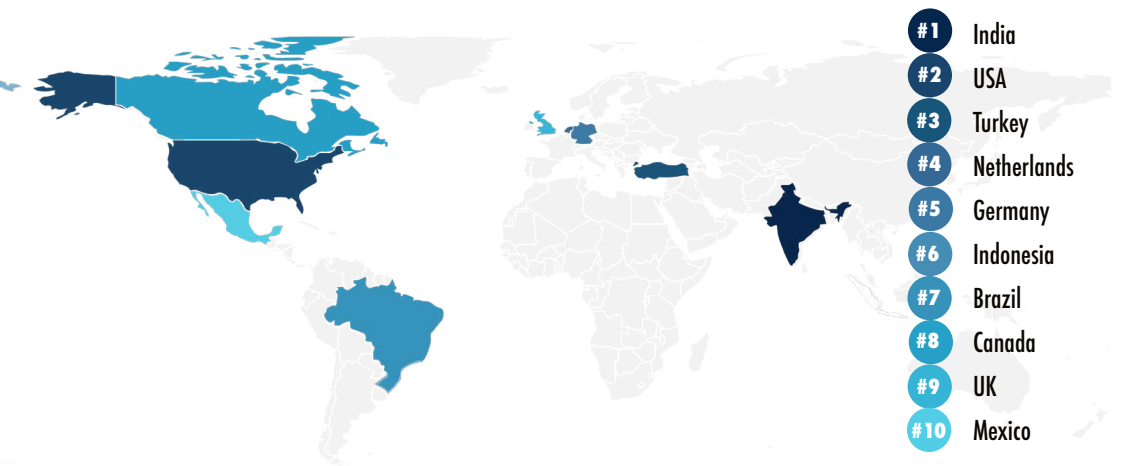
2020b



2021a



2021b





Rooftop view, Morocco. Image by Anja van der Walt



especially during peer-to-peer exchanges on the forum. This is especially true for certain sensitive topics discussed in the course, such as gender, religion, political views, or sexual orientation, which, if communicated openly, might represent a risk to the student in certain settings. Through allowing students to pick their own username or pseudonym, anonymity is an option for those who want their identity to remain anonymous: this can bolster unilateral learner participation without inter-peer bias. To avoid further dangers in terms of accountability of behaviours, forum moderators make sure that comments are screened for any potentially offensive or abusive language from learners.

An interesting case which posed a challenge to inclusion is that of China: being the most populous nation in the world in 2022 and representing the largest number of internet users globally at 1.02 billion, it accounts for 0.01% of enrolled learners in the *Rethink the City* course (Statistica, 2022b). Restricted access to an internet connection evidently stifles the ability for people to take online courses. In a few exceptional cases, for example, in countries where the internet is censored or has restricted access, learners have been impeded or prohibited from legally accessing the EdX platform or must use VPNs.

In addition to demographic inequalities, language has been another obstacle to inclusivity, and multiple efforts have been made to overcome language barriers and regional reach. A majority of the videos, transcripts and assignments are set to English by default as it is considered to be the language of science (Crystal, 2003). With Spanish being the primary language for communication across the global population (World Population Review, 2022), all videos have been transcribed into Spanish with the hope to encourage larger participation from Spanish-speaking countries, particularly in Latin America. In February 2020, the geographic module MENA (Middle East and East Africa) module was released in collaboration with EDRAAK - an Arabic MOOC platform - and saw that its content was translated to Arabic. A previous effort in 2018 attempted to increase reach to students throughout other parts of Africa through the African Urban Challenges module in 2018. This focused specifically on pressing issues in the African continent. It is difficult to predict whether the content should be translated into a vast array of languages, with the number of people using the English language increasing with time in parallel with technology making it easier than ever to translate online content. Internet translation tools and browser plugins have already achieved instantaneous web page translations: yet these are not without faults (De Vries et al, 2018). In line with the advancement of such technologies, the future looks bright in terms of lessening the linguistic barriers posed to online learning. In the next section, we will discuss the opportunities and limitations of digital, online learning in a global climate.



Children on their way to school. Image by Caroline Newton

## The digital divide

A pressing and ongoing challenge with any online education is disparities of data infrastructure. Whereas in much of the Global North including the Netherlands where the course was conceived, fast internet connection is taken for granted, this is not the case in many other regions. In April 2022, only 63% of the world population had access to the internet: of this, 92.6% was being accessed through a mobile device (Statistica, 2022a, 2022b). 90% of the population in developed nations have regular access to the internet in comparison to Least Developed Countries (LDCs), standing at 27% (ITU, 2021). The divide is also prominent between the rural and urban communities, with urban dwellers being twice as likely to use the internet as those in rural locations globally (ITU, 2021b). This is even greater for the continent of Africa, with 50% of urban dwellers being online regularly, compared with only 15% of the rural population (ITU, 2021b).

MOOCs can penetrate national borders, yet are evidently unable to break through infrastructural barriers countries may face. One way *Rethink the City* has been able to overcome some of the digital disparities is through its ability to be followed using smart phones and other mobile devices, which are more widely available than PC or laptop access: over 83% of the world population owns a smartphone (Statistica, 2022c). It aims to be user friendly to those without reliable internet connection through having a video-lecture library where videos can be downloaded as and when internet access is available, reducing the dependency on constant or reliable connection. Additionally, assignments do not require access to specific hardware or software aside from a browser, giving the learner the option to submit plain text to avoid the need to use expensive equipment such as cameras. Undoubtedly, tools can impact the visual quality of a submission and therefore influence to what degree it is considered of “good quality”. Online courses strive to bridge this divide, with digital tools such as Sketchdrive allowing a more standardised format for submissions.

## 2018-2021 Global and local urban challenges: building a non-conventional source of knowledge

Confronting traditional, top-down approaches to education, *Rethink the City* is a course that has been co-produced, evolving iteratively over time. After each run, the course team scans its content to assess its relevance and to ensure its terminology gets updated where applicable. It is co-curated by learners themselves, with the forum embedded on the EdX platform acting as a discussion ground for students to express their ideas, thoughts and concerns regarding the content openly and democratically, often with these ideas being fed back into the course itself. The objective behind this communal co-curation is for learners to help build a course that they can feel ownership over, inspire future learners, and experience a feeling of connection to the larger *Rethink the City* community. An optional end-of-run survey that captures anonymous learner reflections and constructive feedback enhances the possibilities for continuous improvement. This intentionally means that the course is continuous dialogue, with its trajectory being guided collectively by the team, students and current affairs, considering a multitude of world views.



**URBAN  
RESILIENCE**



**SPATIAL  
JUSTICE**



**HOUSING PROVISION  
& MANAGEMENT**

The course material was divided into three thematic modules that examined urban issues through the lenses of spatial justice, urban resilience, and housing provision and management. These interconnected and interdependent concepts served as the course's backbone, integrating theoretical methods with real-world case studies. Between 2018 and 2021, learners uploaded 902 final assignments where they presented, analysed and provided solutions for these challenges.

The final assignment consists of a visual essay in which learners develop a critical analysis on a specific urban challenge of their choice. The visual essay considers the presentation of the problem, its analysis with theories and case studies and perspectives to tackle it. The essay conveys the message in a poster using a combination of images and texts. At the end of the six runs, we gathered 361 final assignments related to spatial justice, 327 about urban resilience and 208 about housing provision and management. Besides the connection to the main thematic modules, the assignments did not consider a predefined content, meaning that the learners were free to choose the location, urban challenge and topics addressed in their visual essay. The overview of the keywords of the assignments (see Figure 5) shows the main thematic topics (e.i., housing, urban resilience and spatial justice and injustice) but also specific subjects such as “right” in relation to the right to the city and the right to housing, “water” and “floods” in connection to the climate crisis and the management of natural resources. The predominance of urban challenges in contrast to the rural environment was evidenced in the relevance of the words “cities” and “city”. Among the other themes covered by a larger number of students were “gentrification,” the role of “communities” in urban planning, and the concept of “informality” in housing and public space.



Figure 5: Wordcloud showing the most frequently used keywords in all final assignments between 2017-2021

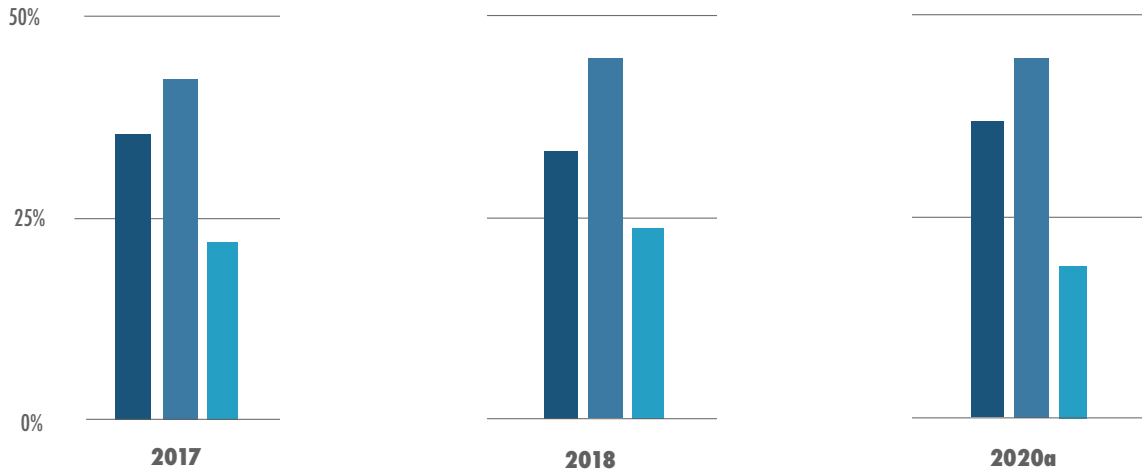
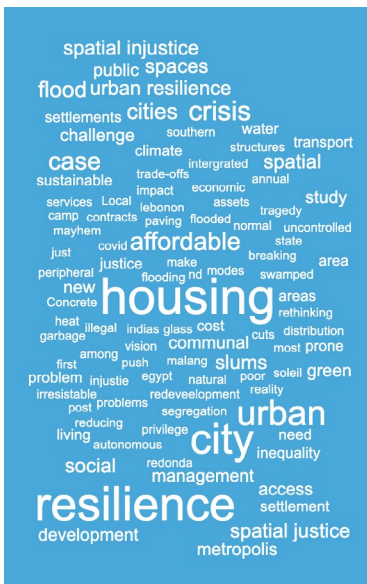
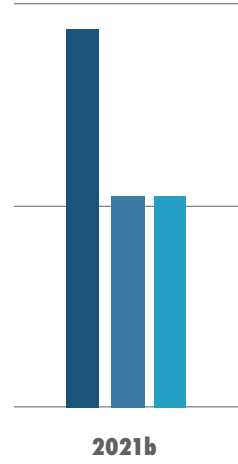
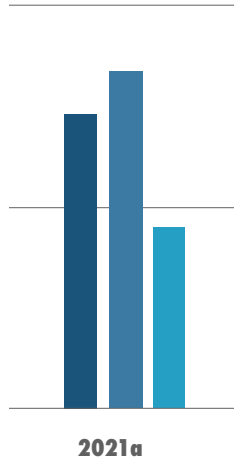
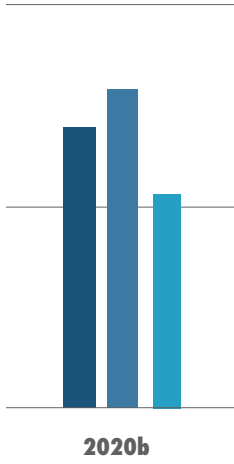


Figure 6: Percentage of main topics chosen for final assignments per year



Figure 7: Wordcloud for keywords used in final assignments per year



- highest number
- Brazil
  - India
  - Mexico
  - Ecuador
  - Turkey
  - Colombia
  - Chile
  - Peru
  - USA
  - South Africa
  - Spain
  - Argentina
  - Egypt
  - Italy
  - Greece
  - UK
  - Canada
  - Philippines
  - Venezuela
  - Paraguay
  - Indonesia
  - Uruguay
  - Germany
  - Nigeria
  - Ethiopia
  - Jordan
  - Taiwan
  - Thailand
  - Bolivia
  - France
  - Ghana
  - Guatemala
  - Uganda
  - Zambia
  - Australia
  - Bogota
  - Lebanon
  - Portugal
  - Bangladesh
  - Iran
  - Ireland
  - Netherlands
  - Nicaragua
  - Pakistan
  - Dominican Republic
  - Russia
  - Singapore
  - China
  - Costa Rica
  - El Salvador
  - Iraq
  - Israel
  - Kenya
  - Mozambique
  - Panama
  - Poland
  - Puerto Rico
  - Romania
  - Vietnam
  - Ivory Coast
  - Japan
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  - Guwahati
  - Haiti
  - Honduras
  - Hungary
  - Latvia
  - Macdonia
  - Malaysia
  - Malta
  - Mauritius
  - Namibia
  - Netherlands
  - Papua
  - New guinea
  - Qatar
  - Serbia
  - Somaliland
  - South Korea
  - South Sudan
  - Sri Lanka
  - Sudan
  - Yemen
  - Zimbabwe
- lowest number

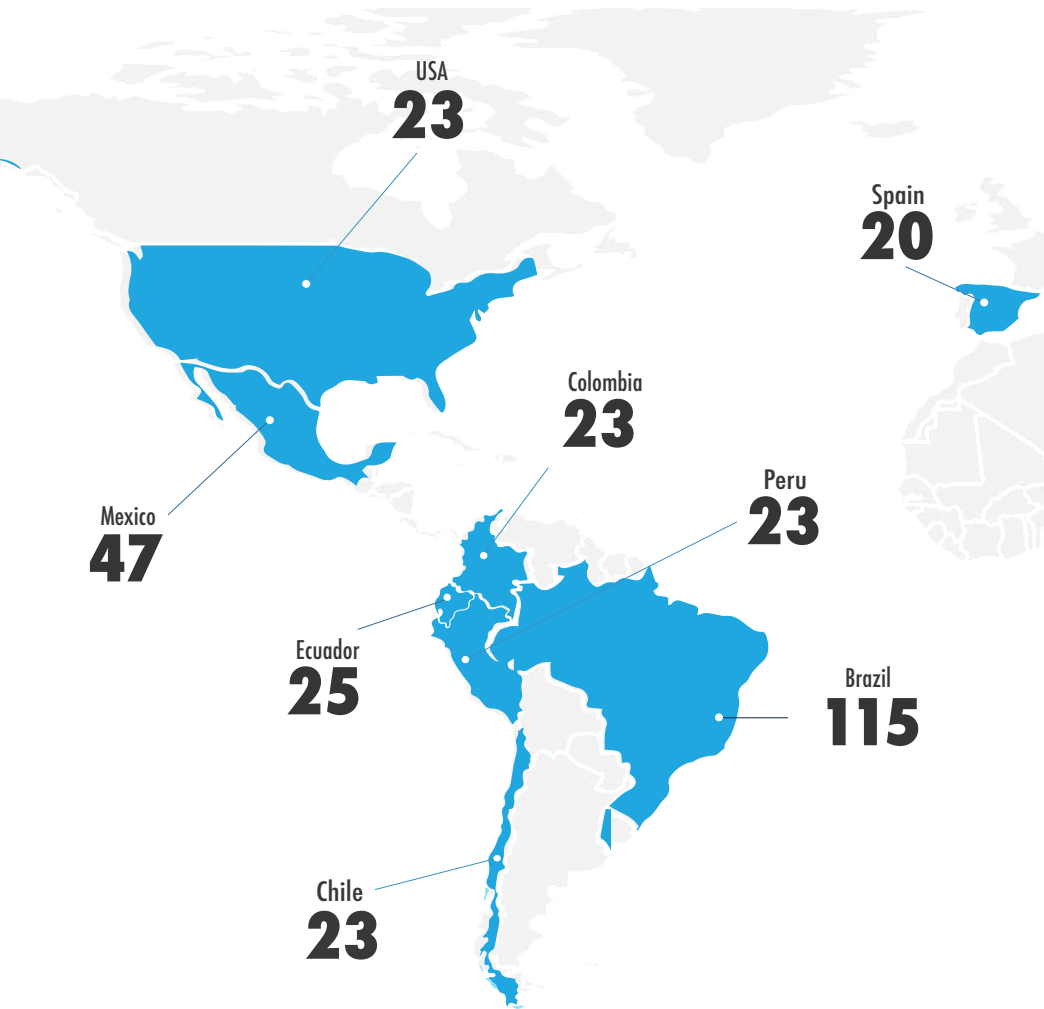
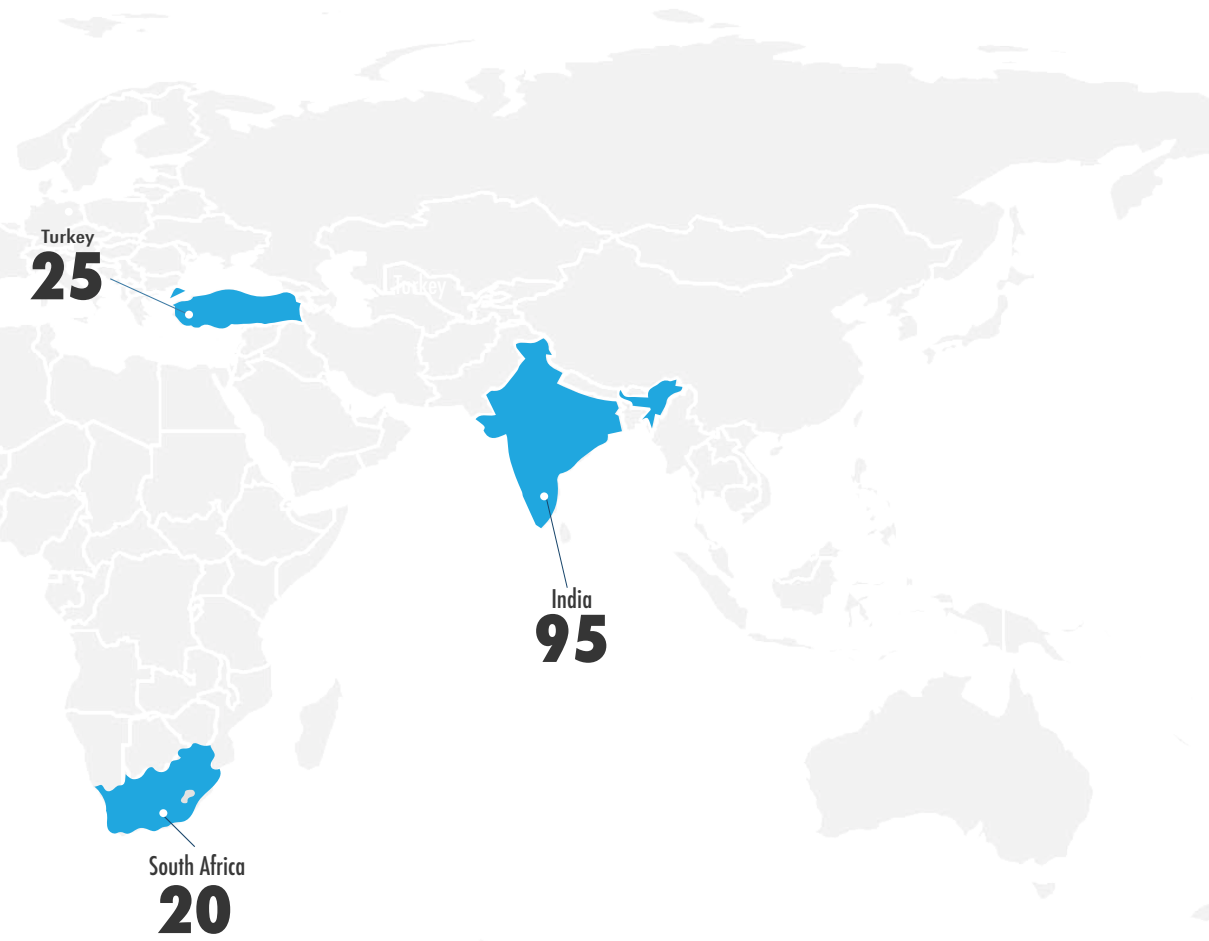


Figure 8: Map showing countries that are the subject of 20 or more final assignment submissions  
 A total of 100 countries were the subject of final assignments between 2017-2021 (left)





Because the assignments were uploaded to a shared platform, the course content was enriched with the participants' local experiences. As seen in Figure 8, learners supplied unique urban issues from cities and locations in 99 different nations, with Brazil (116) and India (112) dominating, followed by Mexico (53), Turkey (28), and Ecuador (24). Colombia, Peru, Spain, Chile, the United States, and South Africa each had more than 20 submissions. This delivers not only a large multitude of issues in terms of quantity, but also an original collection of case studies that are frequently unseen or undocumented. The fact that these challenges were chosen by the learners based on their own experiences provided a rich and unique source of information filtered via the participants' local lenses rather than the course team's. Assignments described the political situation in Yemen city from the perspective of conflicts and resilience; the problem of spatial justice of South Sudan refugees who fled the civil war and moved to refugee camps in Uganda; the garbage crisis in Colombo, Sri Lanka; and the growing housing deficit in Bolivia, to name a few topics and geographic locations.

The emergence of these types of cases provides an opportunity to reflect on the way knowledge is produced and reproduced in education. In the classrooms, students learn from successful experiences, often labelled as best practices chosen by the lecturers. Cases are selected because they are highly documented, being an important and validated source of knowledge. However, the same cases are often reproduced and taught over time, sometimes without a reflection of their relevance for the students' context. The 'best practices' that are well-known and widely disseminated tend to be northern-centric, providing lessons and experiences often too far away from the reality of southern countries and localities. As pointed out by Amirahmadi (1992) textbooks glorified western history, culture and achievements and ignored those of the non-Western societies producing a distorted picture of human history. The inclusion of non-conventional experiences can complement and diversify the body of knowledge, providing perspectives to

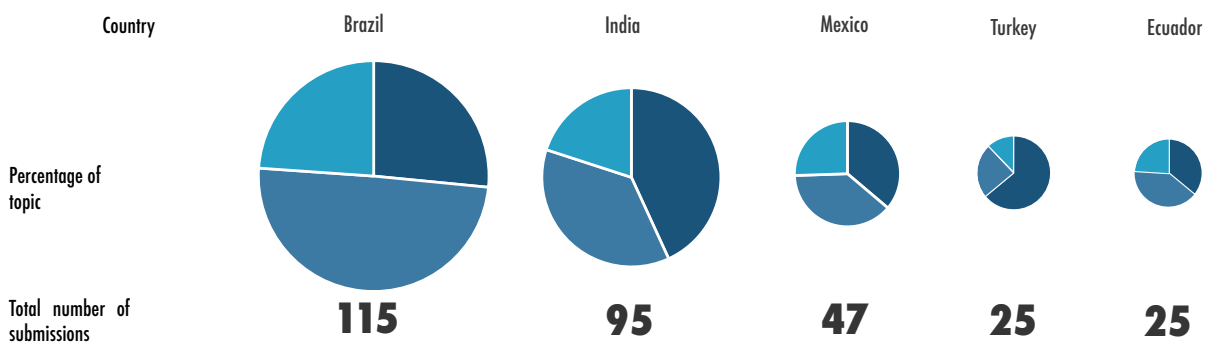
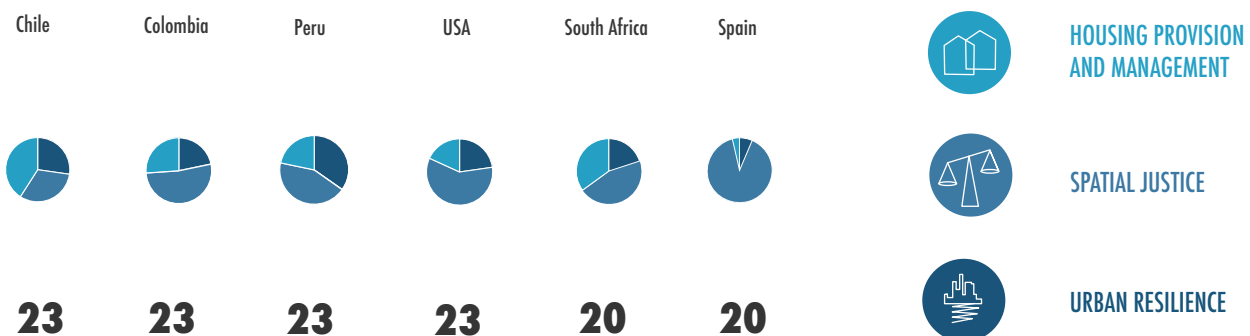


Figure 9: Pie charts demonstrating the distribution of core topics chosen per country in submitted final assignments

learn and extract lessons closer to different political, economic, and sociocultural realities. This can also be extrapolated to urban planning practices, where the transfer of models, processes, policies, or regulatory frameworks from Europe, the US, or UK has been part of a long history in planning in the global south (Watson, 2009).

Diving into the local approaches, the analysis of assignments per country provides insights for the global-local relationship. Figure 9 shows a comparative analysis of the thematic topics in countries with more than 20 assignments. We observed that the percentage distribution of the subjects varies by country and, in certain cases, is considerably different from the general distribution, where 41% are largely spatial justice concerns, 36% are urban resilience, and 23% are housing provision and management. In countries like Spain, US, Brazil and Colombia spatial justice challenges are more predominant, and in the case of Spain, they account for almost 70% of the submissions. Challenges of spatial justice in Spain are related to gentrification and the impact of tourism in cities like Madrid and Barcelona, mobility and the negative effects of cars in these cities, and citizen participation considering the voice of minorities. Urban resilience challenges are relevant in India and Turkey, representing 68% in the latter. In the case of Turkey these challenges are mainly connected to the management of natural disasters, particularly to the earthquake hazards, followed by migration and forced relocation. Housing challenges acquire more relevance in countries like Chile and South Africa. In Chile they are related to the need for adequate housing, particularly the quality of the social housing and the access to housing for migrants.

This analysis does not intend to provide an accurate picture or diagnosis of the urban environment in these countries; rather, it aims to provide some suggestions of the difficulties that are significant to local voices, in this case, *Rethink the City* MOOC participants. Students and instructors co-created a body of knowledge with alternative views to urban challenges, emphasising local voices and adopting techniques that foster cross-learning in an attempt to transcend the north-south divide.



## Conclusion

*The Rethink the City* MOOC has provided a unique learning experience for a global community of learners. Since its inception in 2017, the course has been offered six times and has reached 29,047 learners from 184 countries. One of the key components of the course has been fostering a sense of community among these learners, which has proven to be both important and challenging.

One of the defining features of the *Rethink the City* MOOC is its emphasis on co-creating knowledge. More than 10,000 often graphical reflections on urban challenges have been created through various exercises and activities. This approach to knowledge production contrasts with the use of established Western theories or best practices. Instead, the course showcases attempts to address urban issues from a wide variety of contexts, including both the “traditionally represented” geographies (e.g., Brussels) and the “underrepresented” geographies world (e.g. Lebanon, Chile).

This emphasis on co-creation and the inclusion of diverse perspectives is essential in decolonising knowledge production. As Mitova (2020) points out, “we live in an epistemically colonial world” where the dominant ideas about what constitutes knowledge and sensible ways of knowing are still heavily influenced by Western perspectives. By providing a platform for sharing diverse perspectives and experiences, the *Rethink the City* MOOC challenges this dominant narrative and encourages learners to think critically about how knowledge is produced and disseminated.

Furthermore, using participatory and interactive methods in MOOCs like *Rethink the City* contributes to the decolonisation of knowledge. By providing opportunities for learners to engage with the material and each other in more active and collaborative ways, *Rethink the City* has fostered a more inclusive and equitable learning environment. This approach allows learners from the majority world to shape the course’s direction and the knowledge produced rather than simply being passive recipients of information. This example shows that the potential for MOOCs (like *Rethink the City*) to contribute to the decolonisation of knowledge is significant. By promoting diverse perspectives and the inclusion of the majority world in the creation of new knowledge, MOOCs, in general, can help challenge dominant Western narratives in academia and urban studies. In doing so, they can play a small but essential role in the further decolonisation of the production of knowledge.

In addition to promoting decolonisation, the co-creation of knowledge can also improve the knowledge's quality and relevance. By involving a wide range of voices and experiences, the course can provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of urban challenges and potential solutions. This approach also allows for incorporating local knowledge and expertise, often overlooked in mainstream discussions of urban issues.

Overall, the *Rethink the City* MOOC offers a unique learning environment that challenges dominant narratives and encourages the co-creation of knowledge by promoting decolonisation and the inclusion of diverse perspectives.



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