



Chief Executive Board for Coordination

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UN System-Wide Strategy on Sustainable Urban Development

prepared by the High-Level Committee on Programmes
under the leadership of UN-Habitat

Introduction

1. At its 36th session held at IFAD, Rome, the High-Level Committee on Programmes (HLCP) of the Chief Executive Board (CEB) approved the proposal to develop a system-wide strategy for sustainable urban development, for consideration at HLCP's 37th session. This should build upon an earlier analytical work and ensure alignment with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and other relevant global agreements as well as reflect several global policy developments. HLCP called for a time-bound, consultative inter-agency process through an HLCP task team and requested UN-Habitat to lead a consultation process through an HLCP task team. Since HLCP carried out its earlier analytical work in 2016, the General Assembly adopted the *New Urban Agenda* (GA/Res/71/256) and the resolution on *Repositioning the United Nations development system* (GA/Res/72/279) to ensure greater coherence across the UN system to better support Member States achieve the SDGs (Agenda 2030). At its 6 June 2018 session, the *Senior Management Group* recognized urbanization as a "mega trend," and called upon UN-Habitat to facilitate cooperation among agencies to advance UN system-wide coherence for sustainable urbanization. The mandate of the task team is to prepare a paper that will guide how the UN system coordinates its efforts to assist Member States to harness the opportunities and meet the challenges of rapid urbanization for the attainment of the SDGs and other global agendas.
2. To carry out its mandate, agencies participating in the task team completed a brief survey on sustainable urban development. In their responses, agencies clarified how they are addressing urban issues and what they view as the major challenges to working in cities. They also indicated what strategies they plan to implement to ensure they can fulfill their respective mandates in a rapidly urbanizing world.
3. The paper follows the logic of the annotated outline approved by HLCP at its 36th session, beginning with a consolidated overview of the potential sustainable urbanization holds as a transformative force for the attainment of Agenda 2030. In keeping with the spirit of HLCP analytical work, the paper then considers frontier issues that will impact on sustainable urbanization. The subsequent two sections highlight the intended outcomes that can be achieved with greater coherence across the

United Nations system and the means of implementation afforded by the key drivers of sustainable urbanization as endorsed by Member States in the New Urban Agenda. The concluding sections are forward looking. They suggest how the UN can more effectively assist Member States harnessing the opportunities of sustainable urban development by organizing efforts collectively to advance aspects of urban data, policy, partnership and financing. They also contain recommendations for utilizing the reform processes and Strategic Results Groups of the United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) to advance UN system-wide coherence for sustainable urban development. The paper concludes with suggestions about the role of UN-Habitat in the implementation of the system-wide strategy and promotion of sustainable urban development, and the role of HLCP going forward.

Section 1: The Potential of Sustainable Urbanization as a Transformative Force

4. This section retains the sequencing of the earlier analytical work of HLCP and is organized roughly along the sequential logic of the SDGs. As with the interlinkages between their targets, there is an overlapping correspondence between each of the SDGs and the subsections below; therefore, strict correlations and categorizations have been avoided deliberately.

The Spatial Dimension of Poverty

5. While poverty has fallen dramatically at the global level, urban poverty continues to grow in many countries. Urban poverty is characterized by low incomes, low levels of access to justice, housing, water, sanitation, education and health services, as well as to hunger and malnutrition. Almost half the world's children live in urban areas, many residing in formal settlements, and an estimated 300 million live in slums. Poverty also has a strong spatial dimension, with high concentrations and entrenched marginalization in specific locations. Though many of these challenges also affect rural dwellers, the price of food, health services and education are usually higher in urban areas, often outpacing their income gains. Even when such services are available, they may be unaffordable and inaccessible to the poorest, disproportionately affecting children and their families. This is frequently exacerbated by a lack of opportunities for food self-sufficiency and fragmented informal social safety nets. Urban livelihoods are highly dependent upon monetary income, and therefore upon predictable income, which is particularly scarce in informal economies. This makes the poorest households especially vulnerable to internal and external economic factors outside their control. Spatial inequality manifests itself in the different experiences and opportunities that people can have and the rights that they can exercise: access to adequate housing, clean drinking water, sanitation, pollution free living environments, domestic energy, transport, health, education, culture, safety and public space. Yet no country in the world has reached middle income status without urbanizing. Cities presently account for 80 per cent of the world's gross domestic product (GDP)¹. Many developing countries have witnessed high economic growth rates of over 7 per cent per year since 2010, and most of this growth is concentrated around industrial activities of towns and cities, with employment opportunities similarly located. Cities, as the main sources of industrial and high-technology employment, can still be pathways out of poverty. It is often true that the poorest and

¹https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/McKinsey/Featured%20Insights/Urbanization/Urban%20world/MGI_urban_world_mapping_economic_power_of_cities_full_report.ashx

most vulnerable lack the skills required for high-tech employment. Nevertheless, if cities are planned and managed correctly, they have considerable power to address poverty at the national level.

Health and Wellbeing

6. Health gaps in cities are increasing due to poor access to health services, inadequate housing, food and nutrition insecurity, malnutrition and obesity, problems with water safety and availability, inadequate sanitation and solid waste disposal services, air pollution, traffic congestion, road safety, epidemics of both communicable and non-communicable diseases and occupational health problems and accidents at work. Poor dietary habits are among the leading risk factors for global deaths and global disease burden.² Besides overweight and obesity, child and maternal undernutrition are also among the top risk factors for the global burden of disease.³ These risks are even bigger in urban settings due to poverty and unequal access to healthy food. The proximity of people living in environmentally poor conditions increases the risk of and vulnerability to maternal mortality, infectious diseases such as tuberculosis (TB) and vaccine-preventable diseases. This is further exacerbated by the congestion and high population densities that often characterize most cities providing an environment for epidemics. Cities especially in developing world are fast becoming hotspots for cholera and other communicable diseases with children mostly affected. Young children are especially susceptible to diseases. They lack immunization coverage and adequate child care facilities and, in the absence of public and green spaces, have limited options for play and leisure. Further, urban environmental pollution is a problem that is particularly egregious to children's physical and cognitive development; 300 million children live in areas where air pollution exceeds the WHO recommended guidelines by more than six-fold. Cities also bear a large and increasing share of the global HIV burden. Deaths due to road traffic crashes account for a high number of mortalities for children between 10-19 and this is more visible in the urban context. All the same, well-planned and managed urbanization offers many opportunities for increasing collaboration between urban planners, health and non-health actors, to reduce health inequalities and increase wellbeing. Fostering education and awareness raising, leveraging traditional knowledge and facilitating participatory processes is equally critical to ensure wider access to health care and wellbeing. Changes in the built and social environments, such as more walkable or bikeable cities and more green space have demonstrable impacts on reducing many non-communicable and infectious diseases, improving environmental conditions, air-quality and traffic incidents. Leadership shown by cities through engaging urban planners and health professionals, has resulted in successes in areas such as reducing obesity, tobacco use, as well as cases of tuberculosis.

Women and the City

7. For women and girls, urbanization is often associated with greater access to education and employment opportunities, lower fertility rates and increased independence. Yet, women's equal 'right to the city' is still far from being realized, especially among lower-income women. This is evidenced, for example, by women's lack of personal safety when using public transport; the frequent discrimination they suffer as workers in public spaces; their limited land and property ownership; and the disproportionately detrimental consequences of the lack of services on their

² Global Burden of Disease, 2016 Risk Factors Collaborators, 2017.

³ Global Burden of Disease, 2016 Causes of Death Collaborators, 2017.

health and well-being.⁴ Those living below the poverty line tend to concentrate in the low-wage, low-skilled jobs in the informal sector and experience more insecurity and vulnerability to violence, including sexual violence, both in the public space, and within the household. Moreover, women in poor communities often do not enjoy the same rights to land, infrastructure and adequate housing. However, the greater cultural diversity found in urban areas can provide an enabling environment to question social norms, promote equal rights, overcome gender stereotypes that hold women back and perpetuate gender discrimination against women, girls and youth in general. Furthermore, cities may offer better social and physical infrastructure, including access to justice, sexual and reproductive health, as well as opportunities for practicing sports, recreation and cultural activities. There are also growing opportunities in cities for women to access fairer wages and engage equally in the labor market, including in high-skilled or leadership positions. Though few cities have mainstreamed gender into their policies, the increase in women's representative role in local governments—both at the political level and in technical departments—has begun to combat discriminations and inequality and raise the bar for expectations of gender parity.

Urban (In)equality

8. In many cities there is a growing concentration of overlapping forms of social exclusion and marginalization of homeless persons, immigrants, ethnic minorities or indigenous people, young people at risk, LGBTIQ communities, minorities, women-headed households, older persons, persons with disabilities and unemployed and underemployed populations. Unfortunately, racism, discrimination, xenophobia, homophobia and intolerance are being exacerbated by populism. As long as large proportions of urban populations are socially and economically excluded they are vulnerable to violence, stigma and discrimination, sometimes as a result of heavy-handed responses by police forces. For youth in particular this can mean self-harm or crime. At an extreme this may involve the trafficking of guns, drugs, and trafficking in persons. In addition, intolerance contributing to violent extremism and terrorism can have drastic consequences on communities. This said, many cities are combatting exclusion and promoting economic, social, and cultural rights, with regards to adequate housing, education, tenure security and water and sanitation as well as sexual rights. A human rights-based approach to urbanization is vital to make cities work for people as places of equal opportunity for all, where people can live in security, peace and dignity. It is also gaining more traction in many cities and countries and city governments, which, through their autonomy, networks and proximity to populations, are increasingly effective in combating discrimination and integrating social cohesion into sustainable urban development strategies.

Infrastructure and Connectivity

9. Cities and regions are more and more interconnected, not only through their physical infrastructure such as transportation, power and communication facilities, but also to distant and multiple locations through financial capital, resource flows and commodity chains. The landscape of urbanization is rapidly changing, affecting the scale, rate, location, form and function of human settlements. This is true between regions, across the rural urban continuum and within the same city. Spatial inequalities in cities and across territories perpetuate other forms of social, economic, political and cultural inequalities with the poorest and marginalized populations mostly affected and which in turn could lead to social tensions and eventual violence. Placing people at the core of planning policies and

⁴ UN Women (2018), *Turning Promises into Action: Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*.

strategies is essential to tackle spatial, economic and social inequalities as well to enhance the livability of the urban environment, building on the diversity of cultural activities and urban heritage and promoting tailored, place-based planning solutions. Cities that are better connected with each other, with their regions and with the rest of the world can add to productivity growth, mutually beneficial trade of good and services and more effective and accessible service delivery. The benefits of agglomeration, when combined with smart industrial and economic policies, open opportunities to enhance human well-being and prosperity. However, cities and towns must also ensure that their citizens equally benefit from agglomeration factors—that networks of roads and infrastructure reach low income settlements, that urban spaces also provide the poor with productive opportunities and that regulations allow them to be service providers as well, including adequate infrastructure for markets. Cities may also need to tackle issues such as over-capitalization of housing and land speculation that heavily impact affordability in cities and the rights of citizens to an adequate standard of living and housing. By being physically, socially and economically connected, the expected growth in cities can be better distributed among all stakeholders, including low-income communities. Urbanization, though balanced territorial policies, can transform territories, bringing services and infrastructure within reach of the rural poor. As cities constitute a common space for a diversity of actors, with corresponding impact on the resources available to those actors, it is essential that cities be built for citizens, investors and visitors alike, with special consideration for the special needs of the poor and most marginalized populations.

Housing and Slums

10. In much of the developing world urban expansion is increasingly beset by informality, whether due to lack of planning and/or affordability measures. 880-some million slum dwellers suffer from poor sanitation, inadequate access to clean water, food insecurity, lack of educational facilities, poor health, crime, unemployment, insecure tenure and overcrowding.⁵ Meanwhile, speculative behavior and inadequate financial regulation triggered a financial crisis that have led to the foreclosure on millions of homeowners, evictions and homelessness as well a shortage of housing even for the middle class. Speculative behavior in many countries continues to finance urban expansion beleaguered by poor street and infrastructure connectivity, excessive mobility and high rates of resource use. Moreover, decades of considering housing as a commodity and not as a human right, coupled with a lack of infrastructure planning and a gap between policies and the realities of housing markets, has led to an increase in housing demand which has exacerbated housing unaffordability.⁶ Unfortunately, neither the public nor the private sector have been able to provide affordable housing for the poor at the scale that the current crisis requires. More than half of city space is composed of residential areas. Despite and indeed because of this, urban housing brings an opportunity for social, economic and spatial integration. In recent years approaches to housing policies have expanded beyond criteria of affordability to include, inter alia, security of tenure, accessibility, habitability, cultural adequacy and access to healthy food. When appropriately planned and designed, housing can contribute to optimal densities that enhance the benefits of agglomeration including proximate livelihood opportunities, reduced infrastructure costs, preservation of public space, and better public and non-motorized transport. However, it is essential that urban expansion does not infringe upon the legitimate land tenure rights of people including, inter alia, residents of informal settlements, local smallholder farmers and indigenous peoples. Community-based slum upgrading processes

⁵ <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2018>

⁶ [source from Christophe Lalande]

build upon informal settlements' human, social and cultural capital as a driving force to gradually upgrade services and improve living conditions in urban neighborhoods.

Crime and Violence

11. Cities are host to significant levels of multi-layered crime and violence, including extortions, robberies, drug and human trafficking, sexual violence, violent extremism which can lead to terrorism, and the criminal depredation of urban spaces and infrastructure perpetrated by gangs, organized criminal groups, armed individuals and militias, and sometimes even state security and law enforcement agencies themselves. They affect overwhelmingly the most deprived urban communities, where city governments and law enforcement agencies fail to fulfill their public security role, while richer sections of society resort to private security provision, often operating outside of legally-defined boundaries.⁷ Disadvantaged children living in cities are among the most vulnerable, facing heightened risk to exploitation, violence, crime, and drugs. Cities play a crucial role in maintaining law and order. Integrity in law enforcement entities is a prerequisite for public trust, and for maintaining peace and security; local police forces and local governments must be aware of the eroding risks associated with corruption and should initiate appropriate responses to address these risks. Abuses of power carry potential for radicalizing youth and pushing them towards violent extremism. As such, cities need to consider implementing anti-corruption policies to ensure the integrity and human rights compliance of their law enforcement forces. To achieve meaningful and sustainable solutions to violence, cities must tackle its root causes and through integrated preventative strategies. Multi-stakeholder and multi-disciplinary initiatives at the city government level have resulted in increased community engagement and support mechanisms that extend the reach of law enforcement, improve response to criminal incidents and include close cooperation with civil society to prevent armed violence. These initiatives also tackle dimensions of urban life critical to creating safer public spaces and environments, including job-creation, education, culture, health and access to justice.

Agglomeration and Efficiency

12. In developing countries, where the second urbanization wave is well under way, cities are facing the need to invest on a massive scale in new urban infrastructure to meet the rapidly growing needs of expanding populations and economies. In 2012 it was estimated that 60% of the built environment required to meet the needs of the world's urban population by 2030 still needed to be constructed⁸. In light of the already enormous infrastructure backlog facing many growing cities, this is an alarming figure. A very dynamic system is emerging in which the form and functioning of cities is being determined by institutional and corporate decisions and choices, which are sometimes corrupted by vested interests, thereby limiting individual choices. This complexity requires solution-driven approaches that bring together all these actors, their processes and the impacts of individual and institutional decision-making. Fortunately, urban agglomeration allows cities to lever proximity and scale for greater productivity and innovation at lower costs. In fact, well planned urbanization is a cost-effective mean of extending infrastructure and services across an entire nation, improving the living standards, productivity and overall wellbeing of the whole population. The concentrated

⁷ UN-Habitat, *Global Report on Human Settlements 2007: Enhancing Urban Safety and Security*, Earthscan, London, 2007.

⁸ Fragkias, M et al. (2013). A Synthesis of Global Urbanization Projections. In T. Elmqvist et al (Eds.), *Urbanization, Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services: Challenges and Opportunities*. Netherlands: Springer

demand for goods and services in a limited area allows urban areas to combine greater productivity and innovation with lower costs. With the right degree of innovation and entrepreneurship, synergy in infrastructure development, management and service delivery can reduce overall material consumption while at the same time improving the well-being of citizens.

Natural Resources and Ecosystem Health

13. Urbanization can produce environmental challenges associated with intensive and inappropriate land uses, resource and energy consumption, and rising difficulties in ensuring efficient and sustainable food systems. When not well planned and managed, urbanization can even increase environmental health hazards, damage ecosystems and deplete natural resources. The material flows—of people, goods, food and environmental and other services and waste—required by cities’ functioning draw deeply on their hinterlands, complicating and blurring the transition between urban and rural areas. In many ways these transactions are depleting critical resources—fresh water, nitrogen, phosphorus, arable land—and endangering the survival of other species and indeed viability of entire ecosystems. However, the concentration of traditionally compact, mixed-use cities can limit the overall spatial footprint of urban development, allowing for the preservation of valuable peri-urban agricultural land and habitat in which countless, often unacknowledged, ecosystem services are delivered. Furthermore, the economies of scale inherent to cities make possible reduced per capita rates of resource use and energy consumption, large-scale reuse and recycling of materials. When combined with a policy environment that enhances urban-rural linkages, cities can even champion sustainable food production and consumption systems. Urbanization is a process that can transform territories, connecting human settlements across the urban-rural continuum, including small market towns, intermediate cities and main urban centers, and ensuring access to adequate and affordable housing, basic services and infrastructure to all. In this way cities offer fertile ground to put the circular economy into practice.

Climate Change, Natural Hazards and Disaster Risk Reduction

14. Cities are both significant contributors to and victims of climate change. They are generally high consumers of energy and producers of pollution. In fact, the IPCC, in its 2018 special report, has identified urbanization as one of the four megatrends that need to be addressed to achieve the target of limiting the average global temperature increase to 1.5 degrees.⁹ At the same time, urban areas are inherently more vulnerable to risks and stresses, as set out in the Sendai Framework, brought about by climate change and natural hazards due to their high concentrations of population and economic activities. This is exacerbated by the fact that cities are frequently located in low-lying coastal areas, with particularly vulnerable populations often living on outright hazardous land. Nevertheless, many cities are extremely well positioned to affect both mitigation and adaptation measures. Cities that are compact and achieve a mix of residential and commercial uses offer reduced per capita rates of resource use and greenhouse gas emissions as compared to other non-urban settlement types. Moreover, cities’ economies of scale and propensity to innovate make possible the use of renewable energy, recycling of solid waste and—particularly with information communication technologies (ICTs)—the detection, forecasting, and delivery of early warnings of natural disaster to policymakers. Even more importantly, when they incorporate nature-based solutions into their design and management, urban systems can benefit from multiple ecosystem

⁹ <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>

services including carbon sequestration, local climate regulation, storm water capture and water and air purification.

Migration

15. Human mobility, whether forced or not, has historically shaped urbanization. However, its development potential can only be harnessed with policies and frameworks that ensure that migrants, irrespective of their status, are able to integrate into and contribute to their communities. Migrants are disproportionately affected by spatial inequality, tend to settle in poorer areas with inadequate housing and limited access to land. It is therefore important that urban governance and national urban policies consider the effects of and needs of migrants in order to ensure inclusive and prosperous cities. If no one is to be left behind, cities and urban areas must be inclusive in their policies and service provision from health to housing and from social protection to education. However, decisions related to migration are often state-led, which limits the ability of cities to act. Higher levels of government need to empower cities as first responders to migration by providing them with the necessary legislative frameworks, competencies and financing. Countries need cities with the capacity to leverage the potential of cultural diversity and ensure social cohesion. To achieve this, a whole-of-government approach to migration governance is essential, including at the local level with a view to enhancing both horizontal and vertical policy coherence.

Cities in Crisis, Displacement, Resilience and Peacebuilding

16. Global crises are increasingly complex and multi-dimensional. They are cyclical, recurrent, interconnected across geographical and regional boundaries and increasingly protracted. They are also increasingly urban in nature: as cities are exposed to an ever-wider variety of hazards they are accumulating more and more risk. Countries in fragile settings have very high rates of urbanization—fueled often by crisis-related displacement. Extreme weather events, conflicts, forced evictions and land grabbing are displacing growing numbers of people—internally displaced (IDPs) and refugees—across and into urban areas. In fact, cities have become the preferred choice of IDPs, and refugees, with 80 % of the 38 million internally displaced persons¹⁰ (IDPs) as well as 60 % of the 22 million refugees residing in urban areas¹¹, hoping for better livelihood opportunities, housing and shelter, safety as well as access to services. Cities often lack the capacity to respond to demands for infrastructure, housing and livelihoods, particularly when the shocks are acute. This is particularly true for secondary cities that had weak urban management capacities and systems to begin with. In crisis situations, inequalities in access to services, housing, and livelihood

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