

Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals (OWG)

Statistical note for the issue brief on:

Sustainable cities and human settlements

(draft, 6 January 2014)

1) Main policy issues, potential goals and targets

In the Report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda¹, it is recognized that urbanization matters because inclusive growth emanates from vibrant and sustainable cities, the only locale where it is possible to generate the number of good jobs that young people are seeking. Good local governance, management and planning are the keys to making sure that migration to cities does not replace one form of poverty by another.

The Rio+20 Outcome Document, "*The Future We Want*", in its paragraph 134, argues that if they are well planned and developed, including through integrated planning and management approaches, cities can promote economically, socially and environmentally sustainable societies.

In the Report of the Secretary-General (A/68/202) of July 2013, meeting the challenges of urbanization is recognized as one of the key transformative and mutually reinforcing actions that apply to all countries that will be required to bring to life the vision of the development agenda beyond 2015. Accordingly, some 70 per cent of the world's population will live in cities by 2050. Urbanization poses the challenge of providing city dwellers with employment, food, income, housing, transportation, clean water and sanitation, social services and cultural amenities. At the same time, living in cities creates opportunities for the more efficient delivery and use of physical facilities and amenities. Rural prosperity, land management and secure ecosystem services should form an integral part of sustainable urbanization and economic transformation. (para. 94)

Finally, it is recognized that a Sustainable Development Goal on sustainable cities would be universal, transformative and integrated. In the quest for sustainable development, a focus on cities and human settlements is unique because it foregrounds space and place as well as the subsidiarity of local government. Cities constitute the arena where action is concretized.

2) Conceptual and methodological tools

Within the MDG framework, progress in sustainable cities and human settlements is monitored under Goal 7 (Ensure environmental sustainability). Under the goal, there is a specific target of "achieving by 2020 a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers" known as Target 7D. However, Target 7D does not capture a full concept of sustainable cities and human settlement. The measurement is wide ranging and there is a need for an integrated approach and concerted action be taken to ensure that any indicator framework for sustainable cities and human settlements are not narrowly defined.

¹ http://www.un.org/sg/management/pdf/HLP_P2015_Report.pdf

UN-Habitat has a long experience of monitoring the situation of slum since Habitat II Conference in 1996, while developing methodological tools applicable to household surveys, population and housing censuses, community profile, expert opinion and policy analysis.

The WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) for Water Supply and Sanitation is the official United Nations mechanism tasked with monitoring progress towards the MDG Target 7C, which is to: "Halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking-water and basic sanitation". The WHO/UNICEF JMS, in collaboration with UN-Habitat, has worked on the harmonization of methodological tools associated with water and sanitation.

3) Existing and new indicators

In the current MDG monitoring framework, the proportion of people living in slums has been monitored by at least one of the five proxy characteristics: 1) lack of access to improved water, 2) lack of access to improved sanitation, 3) overcrowding, 4) non-durable housing or 5) lack of security of tenure. The first four dimensions measure physical feature of slum conditions, focusing on the circumstances that surround slum life, depicting deficiencies and casting poverty as an attribute of the environments in which slum dwellers live. The fifth dimension—security of tenure—considers legality, which is not easy to measure or monitor, since the tenure status of slum dwellers often depends on *de facto* or *de jure* rights—or lack thereof. Given the absence of globally comparable data on security of tenure, UN-Habitat and partners have developed a methodology to measure it across countries and regions.

It should be noted, however, the aforementioned five characteristics do not capture the full nature of sustainable cities and human settlements. Progress has been made to develop indicators relevant to assess city sustainability such as public space and urban expansion. For instance, land allocated to street and other street components were measured in more than 100 cities and were used to prepare the publication “Streets as Public Spaces and Drivers of Urban Prosperity”, launched in November 2013. Progress has also been made in other sectors relevant to sustainable development such as safety, mobility, resilience and air pollution reduction, cultural heritage and urban revitalization, energy and green space.

Furthermore, UN-Habitat developed a City Prosperity Index, a tool to assess the cities’ prosperity across five dimensions: 1) productivity; 2) infrastructure development; 3) environmental sustainability; 4) quality of life; 5) equity; 6) social inclusion, 7) urban form and structure including streets and public spaces.

4) Data requirements, challenges and limitations

At the international level, UN-Habitat and its partners have a long history of data collection, monitoring and reporting in the area of sustainable cities and human settlement. Since 1996, the Global Urban Indicators Database has been regularly updated addressing key issues such as shelter, environment, social development, economic development and governance, with a specific focus on the Millennium Development Goals, particularly, its Target 7D on the improvement of slum dwellers.

The data collection mechanism has been through the establishment of urban observatories at the national and local levels, within a collaborative effort between UN-Habitat and its partners, particularly National Statistics Offices (NSOs), ministries responsible for urban

issues, city and metropolitan authorities and the research community. This integrated system of partners work toward the collection of reliable, locally relevant and internationally comparable data on urban conditions and trends to inform all levels of policy making and the development of indicators that reflect priority issues within urban areas.

The main challenge in the development of indicators relevant to track progress on sustainable cities and human settlements is defining city boundaries. Cities rely mostly on data at different levels which vary according to each country's geographical administrative divisions: municipalities (ex: municipal budget data, birth, death records, etc), districts (police records, etc), metropolitan areas (transport data), enumeration areas (census) and others linked to administrative divisions. The challenge is to aggregate data from all these different types of areas.

It is encouraging that the development of GIS provides a platform that allows to overcome this challenge. The ability of GIS to combine both spatial and socio-economic data helps to generate meaningful information in a short time. By providing decision makers with reliable and accurate information, GIS analysis will enable cities to prioritize issues and channel their attention to those parts of urban areas that are most neglected. New approaches and methodologies to assess sustainability of cities are being developed, tested, and used in several cities.

5) Conclusions

Based on existing information on sustainable cities and human settlements, it is desirable to set numerical targets that will balance ambition as expressed within goals with reality. These targets shall be sufficiently realistic, operational and time-bound. They should be results-oriented in terms of sustainability of cities, and sufficiently specific as to clearly relate to public and policy concerns. As recommended in the report “*Realizing the Future We Want for All*,”² (para. 102) by the UN System Task Team, it is indispensable to resist any unnecessary complexity. Indicators should be clearly linked to the targets, measurable over time using data collected in countries in a cost effective and practical manner, help inform policy and be clear and easy to communicate to the general public and civil society.

Goals and targets on sustainable cities and human settlements should build on existing mechanism data collection and analysis at the city level, such as local urban observatories which build upon urban monitoring capacity through a network of stakeholders with the common aims: to create sustainable urban monitoring systems; to strengthen local capacity for the development and use of indicators; and to promote local ownership of indicator systems.

² http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/untaskteam_undf/untt_report.pdf