

# **A Commons Approach to Sustainable Cities and Human Settlements**

## **Commons Action for the United Nations and the Commons Cluster For the Open Working Group on the Sustainable Development Goals Monday January 6, 2014**

An SDG on sustainable cities and human settlements should focus on the need to provide access to basic services for all people and to meet all of their basic human needs. It should target in particular those living in informal communities and slum areas. It should include and target rural areas and settlements as well.

More than 70% of those facing extreme poverty live in rural areas. They tend to make their living from subsistence agriculture and are largely concentrated in small towns and villages. Still they often lack access to such basics as electricity, sanitation, clean water, adequate shelter, and sustainable agricultural practices, etc. They typically have multiple needs that are still not being and must be met.

We need to develop and include an integrated, multi-sectoral community based approach to development in rural as well as in urban communities while striving to integrate the 3 aspects of sustainable development in the SDGs. This would then help us to stem the tide of rural to urban migration and the further concentration of people moving to and living in slums as well.

Efforts could also be made to pair towns, villages and rural areas for mutual benefit and to develop regional networks of service providers to support the development process.

Indeed it was stated during SDG 6 that by 2020 70% of the world's population would reside in urban cities. And the EU said during the UNPFII in 2013 that 80% of the population would reside in Asia and Africa by 2050. These statistics need to be discussed and more understanding developed so that populations that are to be effected and affected can prepare and be alerted. A full inclusive study detailing the findings that led to the above statements should be done based upon a commons perspective to address such questions as:

1. Why are populations migrating in such massive numbers over the next 7 - 37 years?
2. What migration routes will be taken?
3. How are people being prepared?

4. What will happen to those who do not migrate and what will be expected of them?

Poverty is also linked to lack of representation and empowerment. Citizen participation and dialogue is needed to avoid and develop solutions to common problems. Original Nations representing Indigenous Peoples provide a good model for such participatory problem-solving and long-term citizen-led planning processes.

New approaches to the use of technologies in combination with traditional practices can be a good model when basic understandings held by Original Peoples provide the mandate for resource use. We cannot grow, or rather build, houses on the resources needed for food production. Governance from a city focused view should be reviewed in favor of a more pragmatic sustainable view.

Human Affect has partnered with 52 Indigenous Peoples Nations and have embarked on implementing Sustainable Model City Villages. The initiative empowers the people's themselves in developing sustainable living that is inclusive of their traditional, cultural, learning, health, science, agriculture, and farming practices.

The Global Ecovillage Network has also worked with thousands of villages around the world to demonstrate and develop into some of the most sustainable communities on earth. An Ecovillage Design Curriculum has been developed that can provide the basis for exceptional training programs that are already being held around the world.

See: [www.gaiaeducation.org](http://www.gaiaeducation.org) and [www.ecovillage.org](http://www.ecovillage.org)

Supportive mechanisms that empower sustainable learning and access to technology and development that is non-invasive would greatly assist in reaching the international sustainable city goals.

### **Sustainable Community Planning Processes are Urgently Needed**

The international community has repeatedly agreed, starting in Rio in 1992, that every country and community should develop a Local and National Sustainability Plans. While efforts have been made to do this in more than 106 countries, far less have or are still implementing them, though a global network has now been formed to support this. See: [www.ncsds.org](http://www.ncsds.org)

Perhaps somewhat more than 20,000 cities have developed local agenda 21 or sustainable community plans. But this is just a drop in the bucket compared to the

several million communities that are found on Earth. A goal should thus be set or a statement made in the chapeau on the need to help and support all countries and communities (whether rural, urban or even suburban) in fully implementing their Local and National Strategies for Sustainability; and to ensure that all of these Strategies are based on achieving the Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs), Agenda 21, the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, and all of the other sustainable development agreements and goals.

In particular we want to draw attention to Chapter 28 of Agenda 21 and its commitment to provide international financial support to implementing sustainable development at the local level and to sustainable community planning processes around the world, which has never been forthcoming and still needs to be provided.

However the dominance of political and economic schematics now in use do not always serve sustainable visions; and the need to give meaningful decision making to Original peoples is a must. Some equity for the 500 years of destruction of their life sustaining resources thus has to be a foundational beginning for moving forward.

All countries and most communities must be provided with the resources and support needed to develop and implement their strategy plans and effective periodic review processes need to be organized and held. In addition, all local strategies should be linked with national strategies which should be linked as well with the SCP Action Plans, and with programs on Education for Sustainable Development at the local, national, regional, and global levels, based upon synergy, coherency, and collaboration throughout.

Indeed the SDGs, Targets and Indicators need to be developed and implemented at the local as well as national level; and Councils and planning processes can provide an excellent way to ensure that this is done as well as integrated from the local to the state to the regional and on up to the global level.

An SDG target could focus on the number of people who take an active part in the decisions of how their cities should develop, along with the degree of education that enables them to do this knowledgeably.

One of the best approaches for improving access to basic services while reducing the urban footprint is demonstrated in 100+ cities that have adopted and are implementing the Urban Environmental Accords developed in San Francisco for World Environment

Day in 2005. See: [www.sfenvironment.org/urban-environmental-accords](http://www.sfenvironment.org/urban-environmental-accords)

Quite a number of cities and countries have also been working with the Global Footprint Network to determine their Ecological Footprint. Now an effort is underway to use this analysis in select cities, and countries, to determine how each community can make better choices to live within the carrying capacity of the earth.

See: [www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/page/case\\_stories](http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/page/case_stories)

### **Commons Rent and Land Value Tax Policy for Sustainable Cities and Human Settlements**

Commons rent can provide an equitable, effective and sufficient source of public finance for sustainable cities and human settlements. Cities can mobilize both public and private sector resources by properly harnessing the incentives of taxation policy. Taxing land and natural resources while untaxing production can provide the finances needed to provide affordable housing for all, capacity to fund infrastructure, eradicate poverty, and to develop compact, walkable and energy efficient cities.

Commons rent is the surplus value or unearned income created by society as a whole and which thus results in increasing land prices. The value of Commons Rent, 25 to 30% of GDP in many countries, increases as development proceeds. It is thus a valuable resource that rightly belongs to and ought to be collected by the community and should then be used to ensure that public services can be provided and basic human needs met while transitioning to a sustainable future and community.

An SDG on cities and human settlements ought to include the adoption of new tax policies that get the incentives right and provide the resources needed to transition to a sustainable future and achieve all of the SDGs, targets and indicators as a whole.

### **The Cities and The Earth System**

The approach to managing the resources and use of our Earth System, implies not only a global approach based on the knowledge we have today about the functioning of this Earth system as a whole; but also the input of each State for its maintenance along with action and planning at the local level. At this level the cities, where over 50% of the world's population live, play a central role in the management and use of the Earth system. Any solution that wishes to have results should intervene in these "Hot Spots" of influence on the Earth System.

Although we recognize that local commons influence the global system, unlike the global commons the management of the local commons requires a different approach.

While the UN can set some normative guidelines, we should be mindful that no single government or inter-governmental mechanism at the global level can effectively tackle the complex and diverse challenges of managing the local commons. Hence careful consideration should be given to Ostrom's suggestion for a polycentric approach, where key management decisions are made as close to the scene of events and the actors involved as possible.

So it is our intention that the project of applying and recognizing the Earth System as a Natural Intangible Heritage of Humanity is a process that must involve cities in a central role as an intermediary level of organization between citizens, states, and the international order.

### **The Legal Support for a Sustainable Economy**

Over the past few decades the scientific community has greatly enhanced its understanding of the global environment – how it functions as a unique, self-regulating system and how it is being impacted by human activities. This growing knowledge of the Earth's System is based on the holistic understanding of complex systems and can not be grasped by a specialized analysis of its different components.

Unfortunately, the progress humanity has made since the industrial revolution is now pushing the Earth out of the relatively stable status of the Holocene era - the only state of the Earth System that we know with certainty can support complex human civilizations and is now causing us to exceed a number of "Planetary Boundaries".

It is thus imperative that the Earth System Boundaries and the management thereof be included in the SDGs as a cross cutting issue with the targets and indicators relating to all of the various SDGs based upon the need to determine and develop "a safe operating space" for humanity. A commons approach to development must then be developed where-in all people become conscious stewards/managers of the Earth System and commons resources.

**For more information please see:  
[www.CommonsActionfortheUnitedNations.org](http://www.CommonsActionfortheUnitedNations.org)**