



## WHY THE WORLD NEEDS AN URBAN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL<sup>1</sup>

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In June 2013, three major reports on the post-2015 development agenda were issued, by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, and the Global Compact.<sup>2</sup> All three reports agree that the post-2015 development agenda needs to focus on sustainable development and finish the job of ending extreme poverty in all its forms. Each report underscores the importance of cities and urban development,<sup>3</sup> but they differ markedly in how they propose to address urban issues in the design of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Only the SDSN proposes a stand-alone urban goal, while the other reports suggest that urban challenges be addressed as part of sectoral goals and targets. The UN Secretary General's report to the General Assembly,<sup>4</sup> issued in July 2013, also highlights the importance of sustainable cities and the positive role of SDSN members and partners in paving the way forward towards a post-2015 agenda.

This note outlines the case for a stand-alone urban SDG. It explains why alternative approaches that treat urbanization as a "cross-cutting" issue and spread urban issues across separate goals for infrastructure, social services, and environmental sustainability would fail to mobilize cities or address the essential role that urbanization must play in sustainable development.

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<sup>1</sup> Note prepared by the SDSN Thematic Group on Sustainable Cities. Supported by UN-Habitat, UCLG, Cities Alliance, and ICLEI.

<sup>2</sup> Available at: [www.unsdsn.org](http://www.unsdsn.org), [www.post2015hlp.org/](http://www.post2015hlp.org/), and [www.globalcompact.org](http://www.globalcompact.org).

<sup>3</sup> In this document we use the terms "cities" and "urban areas" interchangeably to denote metropolitan areas and all urban centers that have economic or political importance.

<sup>4</sup> Available at: [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/68/202](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/68/202).

## URBANIZATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Urbanization will be the defining trend over the next several decades, especially in East Asia, South Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, where the bulk of extreme poverty is concentrated. Cities, in these and other regions, will play a central role in the ability of nations to achieve sustainable development. Today, half the world's seven billion people live in cities. By 2030 there will be over one billion more urban residents and for the first time ever in many parts of the world the number of rural residents will start to shrink. Between 2010 and 2050, the urban population will grow significantly, by 2.5 to 3 billion people, increasing the urban share to two-thirds of the world's population.

Urbanization has the ability to transform the social and economic fabric of nations. Cities are responsible for the bulk of production and consumption worldwide, and are the primary engines of economic growth and development. Roughly three-quarters of global economic activity is urban, and as the urban population grows, so will the urban share of global GDP and investments. The right to development for low-income and middle-income countries can only be realized through sustainable urbanization that addresses the needs of both rural and urban areas.

It must also be recognized that cities are home to extreme deprivation and environmental degradation with one billion people living in slums. In many countries the number of slum dwellers has increased significantly in recent years, and urban inequality is deepening.

The dynamism of cities represents a major sustainable development opportunity. By getting urban development right, cities can create jobs and offer better livelihoods; increase economic growth; improve social inclusion; promote the decoupling of living standards and economic growth from environmental resource use; protect local and regional ecosystems; reduce both urban and rural poverty; and drastically reduce pollution. Sound urban development will accelerate progress towards achieving SDGs, including the end of extreme poverty.

On the other hand, mistakes made in managing urban growth are very hard to undo. Infrastructure investments, urban land-use systems, and layouts are literally cast in stone – with impacts that may be difficult to alter for many decades. Without adequate management and investments, slums may expand, and cities may fail to generate the jobs necessary to improve livelihoods. As a result, inequalities, exclusion, and violence may increase. Countries may fail to decouple economic development from resource use, and cities may fail to provide economic opportunities to surrounding rural areas and become vulnerable to climate and other environmental changes.

Cities around the world are struggling to accommodate their rising populations and address the multi-dimensional challenges of urban development. If current trends continue, few countries stand to reap the benefits of sustainable urban development. The stakes are high. How the SDGs address the urban challenge and how cities promote a shift away from “business as usual” is of paramount importance to the post-2015 development agenda.

## WHY THE WORLD NEEDS AN URBAN SDG

A dedicated and stand-alone urban SDG will accomplish the following:

1. **Educate and focus attention on urgent urban challenges and future opportunities:** The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have successfully educated leaders and the public about important dimensions of extreme poverty. The SDGs must similarly educate leaders and the public and focus their attention on the urgent challenges and opportunities of sustainable urban development from 2015 to 2030, in order to improve the lives of slum dwellers, provide access to basic infrastructure services, protect local and regional ecosystems, and ensure resilience.

The need to educate leaders and the public on re-imagining sustainable urban development pathways is particularly urgent because “cities as usual” will not suffice. Despite strong track records of many local governments, cities in general are not well equipped to address emerging urban challenges. They are under-resourced and disempowered. Many lack the competencies needed to address the complex multi-sectoral challenges they face. Poor cities are contending with rising populations, inadequate infrastructure and basic services, and increasing pollution. Many rich cities face challenges of shrinking populations, a shrinking economic and livelihood base, aging infrastructure, and the need to meet lifestyle aspirations within planetary boundaries. Unless these challenges are addressed many poor and rich cities could lock themselves into an unsustainable and unlivable future.

2. **Mobilize and empower all urban actors around practical problem solving:** The challenges and opportunities presented by urbanization are complex and context-specific. Success will require practical problem solving. The SDGs must mobilize all urban actors, including local authorities, mayors, urban NGOs and community organizations, universities, businesses, and national authorities to respond to the challenge and opportunity of global urbanization. A dedicated urban SDG is needed to mobilize all of these urban stakeholders to act in concert.

In the absence of a dedicated goal, the SDGs are unlikely to promote the improvements in governance needed by both rich and poor cities alike. Today, local authorities, businesses, and community organizations that should be working together to address urban challenges are often at loggerheads and acting in isolation. Outcomes of academic studies on urban sustainability don't always reach decision-makers. A dedicated urban SDG will highlight the challenges and opportunities of urban governance that must be addressed if cities are to prosper. Such a goal will empower city governments, and support inclusiveness by empowering community organizations and a broad range of urban stakeholders to demand sound governance. It will mobilize public-private partnerships, and help build a bridge across the rural-urban divide.

3. **Address the specific challenges of urban poverty and access to infrastructure:** The characteristics of urban poverty differ in several ways from rural poverty. In urban settings, the extreme poor must pay for food, water, fuel, housing and other basic needs that typically cost less in rural areas. While \$1.25 per day may be a good definition of extreme poverty in largely rural areas, this threshold is often too low in cities. Likewise, several indicators for access to and use of basic infrastructure services have been designed for rural settings and are not suited for an urban context. These definitional and measurement issues have major policy implications. They point to the need for a dedicated urban SDG to sharpen the focus on better ways to address urban poverty, access to infrastructure and basic services, housing and security of tenure, and the institutional arrangements needed to fund, implement, and track progress in meeting these objectives.

Well-run cities are proven fighters of poverty. An urban SDG will enable an integrated approach to improving the lives of the urban poor, particularly slum dwellers. The MDGs showed the benefit of focusing on slum dwellers, but despite improvements in the lives of millions, increased urbanization and a rapidly growing poor urban population has resulted in an increase in the overall number of slum dwellers worldwide. An urban SDG is needed to more systematically address the dynamic nature of urbanization, create opportunities for change for the urban poor, such as targeted investment in slum areas, and create a space for their engagement and participation in local decision-making and institution building.

4. **Promote integrated and innovative infrastructure design and service delivery:** The challenges faced by cities are interconnected and must be dealt with in an integrated manner. Innovative infrastructure design, modern technology solutions, and smart systems offer tremendous opportunities for improving access to basic services and lowering their cost, increasing efficiency, reducing per capita consumption of environmental resources, and reducing pollution. These opportunities can only be seized through integrated infrastructure planning processes that span multiple services: water and sanitation, energy, transport, broadband communications, and housing. Integration must occur at the city level and will be promoted by a dedicated urban SDG.
5. **Promote land use planning and efficient spatial concentration:** The spatial concentration of urban areas is a unique characteristic that enables economies of scale and scope, efficient delivery of services, and effective use of amenities. However, urban land use is often growing more rapidly than urban populations, leading to an urban density decline in many parts of the world.

Good spatial planning can minimize urban land use footprints and increase the efficiency of service provision. Well-planned, mixed-use, and compact cities generally offer higher levels of well-being at lower levels of resource use and emissions. An urban SDG is needed to converge land-use planning with economic development, livelihood creation, and the delivery of sustainable transportation, energy, water, and communications infrastructure. An urban SDG will promote effective and integrated management of cities, suburban, peri-urban, and exurban areas, as well as effective management of urban ecosystems and rural development.

6. **Ensure resilience to climate change and disaster risk reduction:** Cities are responsible for the majority of global greenhouse gas emissions, as well as much of the activity to reduce such emissions. At the same time they are particularly vulnerable to temperature rise, flooding, rising sea levels, and extreme weather events. Integrating resilience planning and disaster risk reduction into city management and infrastructure design requires site-specific strategies and city-level targets that are best promoted through an urban SDG.

## WHAT WOULD AN URBAN SDG MEAN FOR DIFFERENT STAKEHOLDERS?

**Local governments.** Many local governments have a strong, positive track record of promoting sustainable development. An urban SDG will support these efforts and provide higher visibility with national governments, donors, and private sector investors. An urban SDG will support local governments in taking decisive action to implement multiple targets that cut across sectors and institutions, with the support of national governments, international agencies, and, most importantly, local agents of change from the private and civil society sectors, universities, and common citizens.

**National governments.** An urban SDG will provide an opportunity to establish coherent national policies for urban issues, promote regulatory frameworks, facilitate investment planning, and coordinate multiple sectoral interventions. National governments will be called on to support local/city governments in achieving urban targets and will benchmark and monitor national and city-level progress in meeting them, enabling more effective SDG implementation.

**Private sector.** The private sector – ranging from household enterprises to transnational corporations – will rally around an urban SDG to: promote the financing and delivery of infrastructure, goods, and services; enhance urban governance; and strengthen measures to reduce climate and disaster risk.

**Civil Society.** Cities are the crossroads where diverse cultures meet and are therefore prime locations for demonstrating innovative social and cultural institutions. An urban SDG will open up a space for engagement and participation in local decision-making, cultural exchange and understanding, and enable civil society to connect with the informal and community sector. It will provide a framework for demanding better governance and increased accountability.

## THE WAY FORWARD

The case for an urban SDG is extremely strong. It will mobilize cities and promote the integration of the economic, social, environmental, and governance dimensions of sustainable development. Such a systems approach to urban development offers the best chance of seizing the opportunities presented by rapid urbanization and avoiding its potential pitfalls. A coordinated effort via an urban SDG could transform the lives of vast numbers of urban dwellers, across a wide range of countries with very different income levels.

An urban goal and its targets must be carefully framed to address key issues. It must be universally applicable, while permitting an adaptable set of indicators to accommodate differing development stages (e.g. rapidly growing small cities and more stable, or shrinking, large cities) in all parts of the world. The urban goal must be limited in scope to remain manageable and implementable by 2030, and must be mirrored by coordinated regional interventions to address the specific challenges of rural development. The SDGs proposed by the SDSN have been designed to respond to these needs.

The SDSN Thematic Group on Sustainable Cities will work with other actors interested in sustainable urban development to promote an urban SDG and to think through the framing and implementation of such a goal, based on city and national experiences. It is also available to brief interested member states, United Nations agencies, multilateral and bilateral agencies, local government associations, NGOs, and other stakeholders on the sustainable development opportunities and challenges in the world's cities. To inform the broader debate on the post-2015 development agenda, the SDSN is working with a number of cities in major world regions to better understand challenges and to think through solutions in operational detail. For questions about the urban SDG work please write to [info@unsdsn.org](mailto:info@unsdsn.org).

## COMMON QUESTIONS ABOUT AN URBAN SDG

### **1. Why aren't important urban issues like health and education included in the urban SDG proposed by the SDSN?**

Though many cities deliver education and health services to their populations, the SDSN proposes to address health and education through universal national goals. Regardless of where a child is born, he or she should have access to high-quality education. Likewise, universal health delivery requires integration at the national level, with the nature and quality of services provided not distinguishing between populations within a country.

### **2. Won't an urban SDG promote separation between urban and rural areas?**

Some argue that distinct urban and rural goals would draw an artificial separation between urban and rural areas. Yet, sustainable development challenges and governance and institutional arrangements in many countries differ significantly between rural and urban areas. Hence, separating these goals is sound from an analytical, institutional, and operational perspective. Experience from countries across all income levels suggests that strong urban-rural linkages, especially around economic development, employment, and regional infrastructure and ecosystem services, are important to achieving sustainable development outcomes and ending extreme poverty. An urban SDG would support these processes and attempt to bridge this limiting dichotomy.

### **3. Isn't an urban goal too broad and unmanageable?**

Some fear that an urban goal would become too broad and therefore unmanageable in implementation. This concern is valid. For this reason the SDSN proposes to limit the scope of an urban goal to the issues that require an urban lens, and careful integration with other urban challenges. Major issues like health, education, food security, and decarbonizing the energy system are best managed through dedicated goals that apply to entire countries, and can be complemented by the urban institutional arrangements and capacities that are built to deliver an urban SDG.

### **4. What about the fact that there are different definitions of urban?**

A related argument against an urban goal is that the world lacks a universal definition of what constitutes an urban area, and that as a result an urban SDG would be ill conceived. It is true that definitions for urban and rural areas differ across countries, partly for historical and cultural reasons, but with increasing urbanization, the lower bound of population sizes for cities will tend to converge. Within the urban SDG framing, there is no strict need for countries to adhere to an exact "urban" definition to implement and measure progress against national and city-level targets and indicators.