



# HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

#HLPF #SDGs #GlobalGoals [sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/2020](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/2020)

## Building better after COVID-19 and acting where we will have the greatest impact on the SDGs:

### Bolstering local action to control the pandemic and accelerate implementation

*(Most closely related SDGs: SDG 9, SDG 11, and SDG 17)*

**Thursday, 9 July 2020, 9:00 AM - 10:30 AM**

#### Secretariat Background Note

### Introduction

The Political Declaration adopted at the 2019 SDG Summit<sup>1</sup> reaffirmed the critical role of cities, local authorities and communities in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It committed to empowering and supporting them for pursuing the 2030 Agenda. Their active engagement will be key to realize SDG 11 on making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable and its targets and indicators.

If current trends continue, by 2050 cities will host approximately 70 % of the world's population and produce 85 % of global economic output<sup>2</sup>. While rapid urbanization poses challenges, cities also offer the opportunity to achieve multiple SDGs. It has been estimated that 65% of the SDG targets need to be delivered by local authorities and actors<sup>3</sup>. Numerous cities and regions have already incorporated the goals in their planning and many are conducting Voluntary Local Reviews of SDG implementation (VLRs).

### Successes and challenges

When cities have properly working institutions and efficient infrastructure they are the locus of productivity and economic growth, providing employment opportunities and access to services. Yet,

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<sup>1</sup> 2019 Political declaration of the high-level political forum on sustainable development convened under the auspices of the General Assembly, A/RES/74/4

<sup>2</sup> Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General, Global Sustainable Development Report 2019: The Future is Now – Science for Achieving Sustainable Development, (United Nations, New York, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> UN Sustainable Development Solution Network (2016) Getting Started with the SDGs in Cities. A Guide for Stakeholders <http://unsdsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/9.1.8.-Cities-SDG-Guide.pdf>



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uncontrolled urbanization and urban sprawl creates adverse effects on the quality of life, including the environmental quality at the local, regional and global levels. In 2016, 9 in 10 people living in urban areas still breathed air that did not meet WHO air quality guidelines. 2 billion people still do not have access to waste collection services and 3 billion people lack access to controlled waste disposal facilities<sup>4</sup>.

The COVID-19 pandemic has added unprecedented challenges for cities, including pressure on their health care, education and safety systems, and disproportionately affected vulnerable groups. Billions of people were told to stay at home as a preventive measure. However, around 1.8 billion people, or more than 20 percent of the world's population, lack adequate housing, including around 1 billion people living in informal settlements or slums<sup>5</sup>. Social distancing and access to adequate and clean water and toilets, elude these communities. Many slum residents work outside the formal sector with unstable incomes, minimal savings and no social protection, and have lost their livelihoods as cities shut down. Other negative impacts include instances of disproportionate use of force to ensure lockdowns, non-transparent distribution of humanitarian equipment, internal migrants being stranded in large cities, violations of human rights and disempowerment of vulnerable people.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the important role of local governments as the provider of services closest to people. The recovery phase from the pandemic will represent an opportunity for all levels of government to build back more inclusive, equal, resilient and sustainable societies, as laid out in the 2030 Agenda, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030.

## Interlinkages, synergies and trade-offs

Urban policy decisions have extraordinarily far-reaching impacts in poverty alleviation and reduction of inequalities, and in ensuring access to energy, transportation, waste management, food supply, water

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<sup>4</sup> 2019 Special edition: progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals; Report of the Secretary-General, E/2019/68

<sup>5</sup> UN-Habitat: COVID-19 Key Messages on Informal Settlements:

[https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/03/english\\_final\\_un-habitat\\_key\\_messages-covid19-informal\\_settlements.pdf](https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/03/english_final_un-habitat_key_messages-covid19-informal_settlements.pdf)



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and sanitation, education, health care and others, not just for urban populations but also for the surrounding peri-urban and rural areas<sup>6</sup>.

Examples of synergies and trade-offs in urban policies are numerous. For instance, achieving SDG 13 on climate action will require changes in cities since urban areas are responsible for up to 70 per cent of worldwide greenhouse gas emissions. Expanding transportation infrastructure without increasing GHG emissions is a challenge for many cities. Designing smart and low-emission cities requires densification of cities with adequate, affordable housing and mixed zoning to facilitate short commutes. Increasing public transportation while shortening the commuting distances can simultaneously contribute to reduced air pollution levels and hence public health, while minimizing cities' carbon footprints<sup>7</sup>. However, COVID-19 pandemic has caused severe drops both in demand and provision of public transport as well as grave losses of revenue for service providers, calling for new policy measures for sustainable urban transport.

## Recommendations for action: Mechanisms and partnerships to accelerate progress

**While mitigation of COVID-19 pandemic has become an urgent focus in many cities and regions,** response plans should consider how actions can have a positive multiplier effect for all dimensions of urban resilience, including accelerating climate and air quality actions to lower pollutants, improving health, and reducing vulnerabilities of communities. Economic aid packages should increase productivity and economic growth, reduce urban inequalities, diversify economies and incentivize sustainable solutions. Investments in health care should leave no one behind and reduce all types of inequalities. Engagement with communities should build trust and confidence and support innovations, while guaranteeing the safety of inhabitants. Potential economic green stimulus packages can boost improved urban infrastructure, smart buildings, clean energy, and green public transport. Governments at all levels need to ensure that their response plans prepare for, and respond to disease outbreaks, especially in

<sup>6</sup> Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General, Global Sustainable Development Report 2019: The Future is Now – Science for Achieving Sustainable Development, (United Nations, New York, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> United Nations, 2019; Global Conference on Strengthening synergies between the Paris Agreement on climate change and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Conference Outcome:

[https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/25236un\\_bookletsynergies\\_v2.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/25236un_bookletsynergies_v2.pdf)



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informal settlements and slums. Communities should be empowered to self-organize and identify their needs. They should be supported in their pursuit of innovative low-cost solutions.

**Sustainable cities will not arise organically – evidence-based, participatory and efficient urban planning is at the heart of liveable, smart cities.** Inclusive and participatory planning, together with all relevant stakeholders, can help ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable are met and that context-specific synergies and trade-offs are addressed at the planning phase. Appropriate indicators and disaggregated data are essential to improve evidence-based decision-making at all levels.

**While there is a growing recognition that local authorities and actors must play a key role in SDG implementation, this is not always matched with requisite decision-making authority.** Greater decentralization of functions to local authorities to support their efforts to deliver on the SDGs should also address the issue of “unfunded mandates” which is hindering progress against all SDGs.

**Partnerships between national and local governments and communities in implementing the SDGs should be enhanced.** Member States should involve local and regional governments in the policy-making process, as well as in voluntary national reviews. Efforts should be made to facilitate partnerships, including with Local Government Associations, encourage peer learning among city mayors and among small and medium-sized cities and promote collaboration between cities and academia.

## Guiding questions

- How can the SDG framework support response to and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and strengthen preparedness for future pandemics at the local level? How have urbanization challenges changed, and what are the implications of the pandemic for urban planning, resilience strategies, deployment of technologies for connectivity? How to secure financing for the recovery?
- What are the innovative actions and partnerships that cities, local authorities and rural communities are undertaking in their SDG implementation? How can we ensure that local actions are truly transformative?
- What actions can countries take to ensure that SDG implementation at the sub-national level is effectively reported and monitored in national efforts, including VNRs? How can sub-national and local



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reviews support SDG implementation and what mechanisms could ensure coherence among sub-national and national actions?

- What type of capacity building and support is required to ensure that cities, local authorities and rural communities are empowered to implement the SDGs?
- How can developing countries better manage the surge of urbanisation to make cities more productive, sustainable and equitable thus enabling attainment of SDGs?
- What is the role of science, technology and innovation in the transformation to sustainable and equitable urban systems, which also incorporate and address informality and help overcome the digital divide?