

Economic and Social Council
Special Meeting
Sustainable Urbanization and the Implementation of the New Urban Agenda

Concept Note
(21 April 2022)

The United Nations Economic and Social Council will convene a special meeting on “sustainable urbanization and the implementation of the New Urban Agenda” on 21 April 2022. The three-hour meeting will be organized as two, 90-minute roundtables: (i) one on the Implementation of the New Urban Agenda, based on the 2022 Quadrennial Report of the Secretary-General on this topic,¹ including how it is addressing rising inequalities; and (ii) a second on the UN systemwide strategy for sustainable urbanization to assist Member States in the implementation of the New Urban Agenda.

The special meeting will complement the High-Level Meeting of the General Assembly on the Implementation of the New Urban Agenda (HLM), confirmed for 28 April 2022. The key messages from the ECOSOC special meeting will be presented by the President of ECOSOC to the General Assembly at the HLM in April 2022.

Sequenced in this way, the special meeting will enable Member States to review the implementation of the New Urban Agenda through the lens of ECOSOC, identifying challenges in eliminating inequality and assessing UN system support, including ECOSOC functional commissions and other subsidiary bodies. This may offer opportunities for a forward-looking discussion at the General Assembly High-Level Meeting on how to fill in gaps and accelerate implementation, building upon measures to respond to COVID-19 and get on track to reach the SDGs by 2030.

The special meeting will constitute a creative mechanism for ECOSOC to fulfill its procedural responsibility as mandated by resolution 71/235 of the General Assembly, which “requested the Secretary-General to report on the progress of the implementation of the New Urban Agenda every four years, with the first report to be submitted to the General Assembly through the Economic and Social Council in 2018, in accordance with paragraphs 166 to 168 of the Agenda”.

Roundtable One: Implementation of the New Urban Agenda, based on the 2022 Quadrennial Report of the Secretary-General including how it is addressing rising inequality.

The General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report on the progress of the implementation of the New Urban Agenda every four year and called upon relevant organizations

¹ The report has been issued as [A/76/639-E/2022/10](#). The report was prepared in consultation with over 40 partners, including non-governmental organization, academics, and the private sector and with total 53 United Nations entities.

of the United Nations system to ensure that no one, and no country is left behind in the implementation of the outcome of the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development held in 2016.²

Over the last two years, the implementation of the New Urban Agenda has been taking place in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Cities have been the epicentre of the health emergency. They have led the pandemic response measures and will play a key role in the recovery. The pandemic deepened existing inequalities and created new vulnerabilities reversing progress towards the attainment of many of the Sustainable Development Goals.

In much of Sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa, Middle East, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing spatial, economic, and social inequalities within large and intermediate cities. Slum formation remains a major challenge with an estimated 1 billion people lacking adequate housing, basic services, land tenure security, proximity to transport, and digital access. Informal, unplanned settlements are often located in areas vulnerable to extreme weather events exacerbated by climate change. People living in informal settlements constitute upwards of 50% of the total urban population and are deeply embedded in the urban economy and social fabric of the city. Yet they are rarely included in decisions about urban policy, planning, and the delivery of urban basic services, as called for in the New Urban Agenda.

Throughout North America and Europe, the pandemic has deepened historical inequalities within cities large and small. The health safety measures instituted by public authorities impacted negatively on lower-income households, racial minorities, and women. Many were unable to work from home. Few could manage home-based schooling. Most carried on as frontline worker susceptible to the coronavirus. While many cities instituted rental support and moratoria on evictions, low-income households and especially racial minorities and women, continue to lack residential security. The homeless populations have significantly increased and now occupy the streets and public spaces of major metropolitan areas. Housing remains unaffordable to lower-income and, increasingly middle-income households. Overcrowding by residents, and related strategies to reduce per person rents, poses significant health risks. While coincident of environmental sustainability and climate action, stimulus packages introduced in North America and Europe are not yet sufficiently designed to address multiple forms of inequality.

The Roundtable seeks to provide Member States with an opportunity to review key findings of the 2022 Secretary-General Report, including identification of major areas of progress and gaps and giving due consideration of the universal theme on inequality that has been made more extreme during the pandemic with challenges particular to the Global South and to the Global North. The Roundtable will comprise geographically diverse and gender-balanced representation of Member States, representatives of vulnerable communities, invited experts, as well as resource persons from the Secretariat.

² The 2022 Quadrennial Report of the Secretary-General on the Implementation of the New Urban Agenda (2022 Report) is prepared pursuant to paragraph 3 of ECOSOC resolution 2017/24 and in accordance with General Assembly resolution 71/235.

Roundtable Two: UN Systemwide Strategy for Sustainable Urbanization to assist Member States in the implementation of the New Urban Agenda

The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) estimates that roughly 55% of global population lives in urban areas and projects that by 2050, this figure will rise to 68%³. Most of the urban population growth will take place in South Asia, South East Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Most cities in these regions are ill-equipped to harness the productive capacity and meet the needs of their populations at present, and face serious challenges doing so as the population of their cities grows. Regions that are fully urbanized will experience the effects of an aging populations including a decline of those in productive years and demands on social services associated with the increase of those in their senior years. All regions will need to design cities for the future that reduce carbon emissions, promote social equality, generate gainful employment, and ensure prosperity for all.

Cognizant of these trends and mandates of the General Assembly,⁴ the Chief Executives Board (CEB) in 2019 endorsed the UN systemwide strategy for sustainable urbanization. The strategy provides a whole-of-system approach for the United Nations to support efforts by Member States to harness the opportunities and mitigate the challenges of urbanization. The strategy draws upon the transformative commitments of the New Urban Agenda to demonstrate the co-benefits of sustainable urbanization to multiple sustainable development goals, as well as to SDG 11 on cities and communities, and to the Nationally Determined Contributions of the Paris Agreement. It demonstrates the importance of the key drivers of the New Urban Agenda (national urban policy, inclusive urban planning, coordination of levels of government, local government capacity, and urban finance) to the realization of sustainable urbanization.

Rather than introduce new structures, the systemwide strategy calls upon UN entities to further the reforms of the development system and management of the United Nations by utilizing inter-agency platforms at global, regional, and country levels. At global level the United Nations has advanced urban issues through the Executive Committee endorsing the Secretary-General's Action Plan on Land and Conflict and the Action Plan on Displacement; through the Senior Management Group establishing the UN Task Force on Future of Cities informing the Report of the Secretary-General on Our Common Agenda; and through the Inter-Agency Standing Committee launching initiatives on inclusive urban planning in countries in post-conflict situations.

Under the leadership of the Deputy Secretary-General, the United Nations Sustainable Development Group has monitored the implementation of systemwide strategies including those on sustainable urban development. It endorsed the Local2030 Coalition co-chaired by UN-Habitat and UNDP with the active engagement of Development Coordination Office, associations of local authorities, professionals, private businesses, other UN entities, as well as Member States.

³ World Population Prospects

⁴ A/RES/72/226: “Invites UN-Habitat, ...to collaborate with other United Nations programmes and entities, Member States, local authorities, and relevant stakeholders, as well as through the mobilization of experts, to contribute to a United Nations system-wide strategy and continue generating evidence-based and practical guidance for the implementation of the New Urban Agenda and the related dimensions of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.”

Using these and other global inter-agency platforms, individual UN entities are entering into cooperation agreements with UN-Habitat to further the urban dimensions of their respective mandates as called for by the UN systemwide strategy. These include collaboration with UN DESA to support the Statistical Commission to establish the Global Urban Monitoring Framework, and bilateral cooperation frameworks with UNDP (climate and resilience), UNODC (urban safety), UNICEF (child-friendly cities), and WHO (urban planning and public health), among others.

In each of the regions, the Regional Collaborative Platforms (RCP) – chaired by the DSG with Regional Economic Commissions and UNDP as vice-chairs -- have incorporated sustainable urban development in annual action plans, issue-based coalitions, and knowledge hubs, as well as in the inter-agency mechanisms that review UN Cooperation Frameworks. Working with Member States, each of the Regional Economic Commissions have played an active role in engaging the UN development system and local governments to promote sustainable urban development, including in the annual Regional Forums for Sustainable Development

Regarding country-level implementation of the UN systemwide strategy for sustainable urban development, UN country teams have made progress integrating urban dimensions on equality, economic transformation, climate action, and peace building. However, very few UN country teams include urban development explicitly in their respective Common Country Analysis and UN Cooperation Frameworks. To strengthen a whole-of-system approach at country level, the Development Coordination Office, UN-Habitat, and select UN resident coordinators will in 2022 promote joint urban programming by UN country teams.

The Roundtable will provide opportunities to discuss the UN systemwide strategy on sustainable urban development and review global and regional coordination mechanisms as well as emerging initiatives at country level to advance the strategy to assist Member States in implementing the New Urban Agenda. The Roundtable will comprise geographically diverse and gender-balanced representation of Member States at national and local level, resident coordinators and UN Country Team Members, regional commissions, invited experts, as well as resource persons from the Secretariat.