

Sustainable Urbanization and New Urban Agenda

21 April 2022

INFORMAL SUMMARY

The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) convened a special meeting on “[Sustainable Urbanization and the New Urban Agenda](#)” on 21 April 2022. High-level representatives from Member States, the UN system and civil society joined the in-person meeting. The special meeting provided a platform for Member States to review select aspects of the New Urban Agenda based on the findings of the 2022 Quadrennial Report of the Secretary-General on the Implementation of the New Urban Agenda. The special meeting contributed to the revitalization of the New Urban Agenda by helping to identify the gaps in implementation and by promoting better coordination among the UN system entities in supporting implementation.

The President of ECOSOC issued a “[Presidential Summary](#)” to share the key messages from the meeting. The President of ECOSOC delivered a [statement](#) to share the key messages from the ECOSOC Special Meeting at the high-level meeting of the General Assembly on the New Urban Agenda on 28 April.

OPENING

At the opening, President of the Economic and Social Council, and President of the General Assembly, the Deputy Secretary-General and the President of the UN Habitat Assembly delivered statements.

The consideration of progress on the New Urban Agenda by the Economic and Social Council on 21 April, to be followed by the General Assembly on 28 April, within their respective mandates, demonstrate the high-level of coordination between the two bodies and commitment to scale up efforts to deliver for people. The discussions on sustainable urbanization and the New Urban Agenda in the meeting were framed within the context of the COVID-19 response and recovery and other global challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened and made more visible existing inequalities and created new vulnerabilities within and among all regions of the world. Cities have been instrumental in the response to the pandemic, and they offer solutions for a sustainable and resilient recovery. Smart Cities could improve quality of life and promote sustainable, equality, equity and inclusion. Women must play a key role in local decision-making. The New Urban Agenda must guide efforts to address inequalities in urbanization around the world.

The UN development system was praised for their support to countries to overcome the crisis, to deliver a solid health and humanitarian response and to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda as part of recovery efforts. The Local2030 Coalition for the Decade of Action was given as an example that has been instrumental in mobilizing the support of national governments, private industry, local governments, and various non-State organisations together with the UN system to coordinate action at the local level to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs. The implementation of the New Urban Agenda requires a comprehensive effort that brings together all stakeholders, including urban development professionals. The impacts of climate change on cities and critical infrastructure were emphasized. UN-Habitat was called on to work with relevant stakeholders to explore the role of data, science, technology and innovation in mitigation and adaptation to build resilient cities.

SETTING THE STAGE

The Executive Director of UN Habitat presented the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of the New Urban Agenda. She noted that during the reporting cycle (from 2018 to 2022), only 30 countries submitted progress reports on the implementation of the New Urban Agenda. These numbers indicate the

limited uptake of the New Urban Agenda, and the limited capacity to implement and report on the New Urban Agenda. An assessment of the progress of key areas of the New Urban Agenda was presented. Upgrading slums and addressing the housing affordability crisis remain of highest importance, as progress on lifting urban populations out of slum conditions has slowed down in recent years. Cities are greatly affected by greenhouse emissions and pollution, but the environmental benefits of well-planned compact cities are not yet adequately utilized to address these. The implementation of the New Urban Agenda in countries in post-conflict and post-disaster situations has been lacking and Member States are urged to reposition the New Urban Agenda to better address these. Finally, the implementation of the New Urban Agenda continues to be impeded by inadequate financing, with limited reform of local revenue generation and restrictive national frameworks for borrowing money. She underscored that the Quadrennial Report urges us to position the transformative commitments and key drivers of the New Urban Agenda, as concrete tools to enable countries to achieve the SDGs, as well as to protect our planetary ecosystems.

ROUNDTABLE 1: IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NEW URBAN AGENDA, BASED ON THE 2022 QUADRENNIAL REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL INCLUDING HOW IT IS ADDRESSING RISING INEQUALITY”

The first roundtable provided 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 speakers included Mr. Charles Hinga Mwaura, Principal Secretary of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development (Kenya); Ms. Ines Sanchez de Madariaga, Professor of Urban Planning, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid and Director of the UNESCO Chair on Gender; Dr. Luis Nava Guerrero, Mayor of Queretaro (Mexico); Ms. Leilani Farha, Global Director, THE SHIFT, and former UN Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing, Canada; and Ms. Smurti Jukur, SPARC – Society for the Promotion of Area resource Centres and SDI - Slum Dwellers International, India.

The roundtable participants recognized the New Urban Agenda, as a roadmap for sustainable urbanization. The need for long-term planning, that is cross-sectoral, was highlighted. Multisectoral collaboration was considered key for the implementation of the New Urban Agenda.

Addressing inequalities requires access for all to adequate and affordable transportation, housing, energy provision, education and health, public space, water, sanitation and employment. While the provision of affordable and dignified housing should be a tool to address inequality, the commodification of housing has become a major driver of inequality. Private wealth has grown at the expense of marginalized groups. The exclusion of the poor needed to be addressed. In this regard, Governments were called on to commit to a human rights-based approach in the implementation of the New Urban Agenda.

Cities need to address the specific needs of women, who often provide unpaid care work in addition to working in the formal and informal economies. The New Urban Agenda was considered instrumental for promoting gender equality, and has stimulated good practices such as gender impact assessments of plans, slum upgrading targeting women, gender provisions in land-use legislation; safety audits of public space and transport; addressing violence; gender indicators and sex-disaggregated data; engagement of grassroots women and engaging women in decision-making.

The Valencia Declaration on Gender and Sustainable Urban Development in the Post-Pandemic, adopted by the Advisory Group on Gender Issues (AGGI) to the Executive Director of UN-Habitat in 2021, was highlighted, which provides recommendations on improved organizational structures for gender expertise; participatory and engagement mechanisms for grassroots women’s movements; updating of policy and regulatory frameworks that are gender-responsive; and adequate funding for gender mainstreaming. Member States were called on to make nominations to the Advisory Group on Gender Issues (AGGI) to the Executive Director of UN-Habitat.

Financing was at the heart of many of the contributions in the meeting. On the one hand, inadequate financing was reported as a major impediment to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. On the other hand, financialized land and housing markets have challenged the implementation of the New Urban Agenda. Moving forward, traditional funding mechanisms, such as expanding loans and mortgage-based housing systems, need to be balanced with enhancing endogenous revenue collection and pro-poor financing mechanisms, such as direct cash transfers. Urban sprawl is fueled by poor planning and land speculation and has shown to be costly to provide adequate services for. The housing sector could offer opportunities, by creating jobs while providing affordable housing and dignity for people.

The need to work together with civil society was highlighted. Social movements, such as the Slum Dwellers International and others, have demonstrated that the urban poor are key development partners, as well as key contributors to policy design and urban planning, and can manage their own transformative change when supported well. The poor need to be acknowledged as and engaged in the implementation of the New Urban Agenda and help hold States accountable.

Member States expressed their commitment to the NUA and shared good practices in the implementation of the New Urban Agenda. These included the creation of smart cities; housing policies and programmes; green and sustainable mobility; carbon neutrality initiatives; programmes for social inclusion; and gender-responsive policies and programmes. Participants also referred to a number of initiatives, including the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy and the Habitat Professional Forum. The need to address the impact of the pandemic, as well as other challenges such as natural disasters, was highlighted. The implementation of the New Urban Agenda must also be beneficial to rural areas to reduce inequalities.

ROUNDTABLE 2: UN SYSTEMWIDE STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINABLE URBANIZATION TO ASSIST MEMBER STATES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NEW URBAN AGENDA

The second roundtable provided 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. Ms. Maimunah Mohd Sharif, Executive Director of UN-Habitat, moderated the roundtable. Speakers included H.E. Eng. Basim Bin Yacob Al Hamer, Minister of Housing, Kingdom of Bahrain; Dr. Zsuzsanna Jakab, Deputy Director-General, World Health Organization; Ms. Gillian Triggs, Assistant Secretary-General, Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); Ms. Olga Algayerova, Executive Secretary, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE); and Mr. Robert Piper, Director, United Nations Development Coordination Office (DCO).

The UN system highlighted their work supporting the implementation of the New Urban Agenda: at global level the Future of Cities Task Force and the Local 2030 Coalition for the Decade of Action were the two key ongoing processes. Common country analysis and UN cooperation frameworks were considered as entry points for the implementation of the New Urban Agenda.

The roundtable highlighted how the diverse structural and social challenges cities are facing in the context of urbanization are linked with the UN mandate. These challenges included, inter alia, migration, growing population, health, and data collection, as well governance and budgeting. Furthermore, a holistic approach consisting of early warning systems for disasters, data collection and forecasting as well as institutional and technical support in tackling the impacts of climate change were stressed. The reduction of urban sprawl remains a key challenge, both across developed and developing countries. Concern was also raised about the commitment to the NUA among Member States, suggesting the need for stronger mobilization.

Healthy Cities and Age-friendly Cities were mentioned among the well-established initiatives with successful outcomes since the adoption of the New Urban Agenda. Nevertheless, the needs of the ageing population, women and persons with disabilities must be better taken into account.

It was underscored that rural and urban must be seen in a much more integrated way as part of one economic, social and political ecosystem. Panelists recognized that capacities of local governments must be improved, through decentralization, enhanced human capacities and technical expertise, and augmented disaggregated data. The UN Regional Commissions could play an enabling role in building such capacities, through their involvement in localizing the SDGs, including through the Voluntary Local Reviews. Furthermore, UN country teams and the close cooperation with UN-Habitat could strengthen efforts in accelerating the 2030 Agenda and to identify pilot countries for initiatives.

The linkages between healthy cities and healthy citizens were stressed in view of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Health needs to be better integrated in urban and territorial planning and be at the centre of urban development efforts. Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic must be institutionalized and positive responses to the pandemic, such as reclamation of public spaces for people, must be harnessed. Shared lessons learned, such as the joint publication of the WHO and UN Habitat on “Integrating Health in Urban and Territorial Planning”, has yielded guidance in this respect for governments as concrete support to implement the New Urban Agenda. Technical support for the implementation of regional and national responses linked to the Urban Health Initiative was called for aiming at promoting programmes at local and municipality level.

The New Urban Agenda also provided an impetus to the Fast-Track initiative “Ending the AIDS Epidemic initiative” launched by UNAIDS, UN-Habitat, the City of Paris and the International Association of Providers of AIDS Care (IAPAC) in December 2014, as the risk and vulnerability to HIV was stated often higher in urban than rural settings.

Reference was made to the UN’s Global Compact on Refugees which recognizes the vital role of cities, and in turn, cities demonstrated their commitment at the first Global Refugee Forum held in December 2019. Cities are at the forefront of accommodating displaced people. “Equal access for all” to essential services for refugees must be included in urban planning, budgeting, and programmes. Moreover, host communities need to be supported as well, and more attention is needed for reconstruction and restoration of post-conflict areas. Inclusion was underlined as key strategic direction for UNHCR and the New Urban Agenda to follow-up on including stronger involvement of Mayors, city administrations and local leaders to respond to these needs in pragmatic and innovative ways. Recommendations also included innovative and scaled-up financial solutions to protect vulnerable groups and enable access to economy, education and policy level to follow the commitment to “leave no one behind” and strengthen the resilience of urban areas. Strong coherence of UNHCR's strategic policy with both the Global Compact on Refugees, and the New Urban Agenda is needed.

NEXT STEPS

In his closing remarks, the ECOSOC President underscored that the follow-up and review of the New Urban Agenda must have effective linkages with the follow-up to and review of the 2030 Agenda to ensure coherence. He stressed that UN-Habitat is being asked to take on more work, facilitating the implementation of the system-wide strategy for sustainable urbanization at global, regional, and country level, to assist us in the implementation of the New Urban Agenda, yet adequate resources were not availed for such work. Member States were urged to consider this during the High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on the New Urban Agenda on 28 April. In addition to this event, the following upcoming events were also highlighted:

- Madagascar, in collaboration with UN-Habitat, is convening a special event on “*Affordable Housing*” on 27th April.
- Poland will be hosting the Eleventh Session of the World Urban Forum from 26 to 30 June 2022 in Katowice, Poland, under the theme “*Transforming our cities for a better urban future*”.