

PRESIDENTIAL SUMMARY **of the ECOSOC Special Meeting on**

Sustainable Urbanization and the Implementation of the New Urban Agenda *(21 April 2022)*

The Economic and Social Council convened a Special Meeting on “Sustainable Urbanization and the Implementation of the New Urban Agenda” on 21 April, including two roundtables on ‘Implementation of the New Urban Agenda, based on the 2022 Quadrennial Report of the Secretary-General including how it is addressing rising inequality’ and ‘Harnessing UN Reforms to support Member States in the Implementation of the New Urban Agenda’. I am pleased to share the key messages and recommendations that emerged from our discussions:

- Member States and invited speakers acknowledged that the New Urban Agenda (NUA) continues to provide a **robust pathway** towards more equitable and sustainable cities. Cities play a pivotal role in achieving all SDGs, offering the opportunity to address the SDGs in an integrated way, and with a long-term perspective. The meeting also highlighted how the COVID-19 Pandemic has further reconfirmed the role of cities and the relevance of the NUA, while stressing the urgency of addressing inequality, climate change and health.
- The meeting highlighted that the NUA is relevant across regions, and levels of urbanization, with regional difference but strong and consistent commonalities. In particular, the NUA offers concrete guidance on the tools to address complex urban issues, work across sectors and ensure impact. It thus acts as an enabler for SDGs achievement.
- The meeting also learned how the United Nations system is mobilising through the System-wide Strategy on Sustainable Urbanization and the relevance of the NUA for the mandate of UN entities was clearly confirmed.
- The New Urban Agenda offers in particular specific and transformative guidance on addressing inequality, by leveraging the value of cities for more inclusive urban development. However, despite the urgent call of the NUA to leave no one, and no place behind, cities continue to be marked by **extreme inequalities**. Urban planning and development often reach only those that are already well off and urban land markets are captured by political elites. The urban poor often pay far higher costs for a poorer level of service than urban residents who are better off. **It is exceedingly expensive to be poor.**
- The **financing** of the New Urban Agenda is caught in a **contradiction**. On the one hand, the real estate sector represents the biggest economic sector globally, with enormous revenue and profits. On the other hand, local governments report to be restrained by limited funding. Urban areas are generators of enormous economic value, but cities are unable to tap into this economic potential to provide urban services for all. Housing has become geared primarily towards financing for the higher end of the housing market with limited focus on financing for affordable housing, rental subsidies, and public housing. Despite **enormous financial investment** in housing projects, slums continue to grow. In many countries, affordable housing is enabled through **mortgage-based housing systems**, but these are not reaching the poorest.

- It is critical to acknowledge that the funding gap in implementing the New Urban Agenda goes beyond external funding from multilateral agencies or banks. Cities need to enhance their **endogenous financing** through tools such as land registration, tax reform, among others. Local governments should be enabled to take loans for critical projects, yet must be made aware that outside financing and borrowing poses a potential liability.
- The implementation of the NUA is impeded by the **lack of long-term planning**, and the challenges around short-term election cycles. **National Urban Policies** should be utilized as effective tools to ensure the long-term vision of sustainable urban development is aligned across time and through levels of governments. These should be supported by adequate urban planning approaches which address inequality and its multiple drivers, reduce spatial segregation and are up to date and fit for purpose. The participation of slum dwellers, women and marginalised groups is essential to ensure policies address the concrete needs of urban residents.
- To accelerate the implementation of the NUA, the capacities of local governments must be improved, through decentralization, enhanced human capacities and technical expertise, and augmented disaggregated data. The UN Regional Commissions play an enabling role in building such capacities, through their involvement in **localizing the SDGs**, and by assisting governments in preparing **Voluntary Local Reviews**.
- The provision of affordable housing remains a key priority, while the pandemic has made the challenge more visible and urgent. This challenge should be envisioned as an **opportunity to create much needed jobs as** the local production of housing can catalyse job training and economic benefits across the supply chain.
- **Homelessness** is on the rise. Displacements have continued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, despite calls by the international community to halt evictions, such as expressed in resolution A/RES/76/133 on “inclusive policies and programs to address homelessness and include in the aftermath of COVID-19”. Member States are urged to develop holistic programmes cutting across sectors, including disaggregated data on demographics related to homelessness and addressing the structural and circumstantial drivers of homelessness.
- To address pervasive urban inequality, local **non-governmental organizations, civil society, and grassroots organizations** need to be fully acknowledged as genuine development partners. Participatory policies must be expanded.
- It is imperative that the implementation of the NUA does not widen the existing **urban-rural gap**. Urbanization affects all human settlements and policy must go beyond an “urban” versus “rural” discourse, to focus rather on urban-rural interlinkages, supply chains, and agricultural development that are paramount in issues such as food security.
- National and local governments have progressed significantly in initiating **Smart Cities** programs. However, participants cautioned that smart cities must be people-oriented, inclusive and accessible for all their inhabitants. Smart city development must be accompanied by enhanced data collection, which is necessary to assess impact of climate change, develop early warning systems for disasters, among others. Member States asked for institutional and technical support to build resilience.

- **Reducing urban sprawl** remains a key challenge, both across developed and developing countries. Fuelled by financialized land markets, urban sprawl poses threats to biodiversity, and is linked to transmission of zoonotic diseases such as Covid-19. Priorities for many governments remain to achieve more efficient land use, through urban brown field redevelopment, urban regeneration, and the effective protection of open green spaces.
- The Covid-19 pandemic re-exposed the **link between cities and health**. Health needs to be better integrated in urban and territorial planning. Lesson 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. Collaboration between UN-Habitat and WHO has yielded guidance in this respect for governments to refer to.
- **Women** are disproportionately disadvantaged in cities, with high rates of informal employment, exposure to gender violence, and often burdened as primary caretakers at home. More resources must be allocated to **promote gender equality and women's empowerment at the local level**.
- As acknowledged in the Quadrennial Report, **urban displacement** is increasing. The UN's Global Compact on Refugees recognises the vital role of cities, and in turn, cities demonstrated their commitment at the first Global Refugee Forum held in December 2019. The deteriorating humanitarian situation in Ukraine highlighted the importance to focus on urban crisis and urban displacement. In recent years, there has been a shift in assisting displaced people from national government to include local governments, who are often the direct recipients, but also have local institutions that can be harnessed and bolstered. It is imperative that **host communities** are supported as well, and more attention is needed for **reconstruction** and restoration of post-conflict areas.
- The implementation of the NUA directly supports the reform of the development system of the United Nations. It enables integration across SDGs, fosters multistakeholder collaboration, creates incentives for diverse UN entities to work in partnership. By tackling urbanization more deliberately, UN entities can more readily pursue their development and humanitarian mandates enhancing local impact. The joint activities of UN-Habitat with sister agencies highlight the potential of coordination and collaboration, while the urban perspectives from UNHCR, WHO, UN Regional Commissions, DCO, UNAIDS further illustrate the contribution of the NUA to multiple UN mandates.
- **Multilateral cooperation** is important to accelerate the New Urban Agenda and the United Nations is increasingly engaging with cities and their networks, with several initiatives targeted to cities and involving them directly or through existing cities networks.
- The efforts by the UN development system to respond to the challenges of sustainable urbanization through policy update and innovative programming are also exemplified by the **ongoing interagency processes** around the UN Task Force on Future of Cities, and the Local 2030 Coalition for the Decade of Action, geared to change the way the UN does its business with cities and in relation to the New Urban Agenda.
- Implementing the NUA requires the **mobilization of the entire development eco-system**, including governments (national and local), the private sector, multi-lateral organizations, and civil society. UN's global network of Resident Coordinators can play an important coordinating role in

this regard. UNDCO is prioritising sustainable urbanization as an area of focus and is ready to support countries in this effort in collaboration with UN-Habitat and UNCTs.

- Whether the New Urban Agenda achieves a ‘breakthrough’ or a ‘breakdown’ in the final 14 years of its implementation depends on how Member States respond to the challenges outlined in this meeting and more broadly in the Quadrennial Report. With only 30 countries that submitted progress reports on the implementation of the New Urban Agenda, during the reporting cycle 2018-2021, Member States are urged **to hold themselves accountable** to the commitments made in the New Urban Agenda and position the transformative commitments and key drivers of the New Urban Agenda as concrete tools to enable countries to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.
- Member States called upon UN-Habitat to continue and expand its support to the implementation of the NUA, addressing local demands, responding more vigorously to urban crisis, expanding capacity building, and engaging to help countries to tackle the challenges posed by urbanization, across all regions. They also called upon the United Nations Development System to enhance its coordination as cities need integrated and coordinated support for effective progress in this field.
- With urbanization as a global ‘mega trend’, the President of the Economic and Social Council recognized that the **mandate of UN-Habitat** has increased substantially. As the UN System and Member States have called upon UN-Habitat to take up more work to accelerate the implementation of the NUA, Member States are urged to consider this matter during the High-Level Meeting of the General Assembly and beyond.