

Sustainable Development Goal 11

*An Expert Group Meeting in preparation for HLPF 2023:
Accelerating the recovery from the coronavirus disease
(COVID-19) and the full implementation of the 2030
Agenda for Sustainable Development at all levels*

Bilbao, Spain, 8-9 February 2023

Concept Note

1. Introduction

The theme of the 2022 HLPF is “Building back better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”. The 2023 HLPF will have an in-depth review of Sustainable Development Goals 6 on clean water and sanitation, 7 on affordable and clean energy, 9 on industry, innovation and infrastructure, 11 on sustainable cities and communities, and 17 on partnerships for the Goals. The forum will consider effective and inclusive recovery measures to address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic across all Sustainable Development Goals and the integrated, indivisible, and interlinked nature of the Goals.

In preparation for the review of SDG 11 – and its role in advancing sustainable development across the 2030 Agenda, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Sustainable Development Goals (UN-DESA/DSDG), United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNPD) together with other partners, are organizing an Expert Group Meeting (EGM) in Bilbao, Spain on 8 – 9 February 2023.

The objective of the meeting will be to take stock of where we are in terms of progress towards SDG 11; to consider what has changed since the SDG was last reviewed in 2018, including in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic; to share knowledge about success stories, good practices and challenges; to identify particular areas of concern; and to suggest ways forward in terms of policies, partnerships and coordinated actions at all levels.

These discussions will help inform the HLPF, assist in planning its sessions, and help to identify collaborations and programmes of work on SDG 11 going forward from 2023. The workshop will be held in conjunction with an Expert Group Meeting aimed at reviewing the first draft of the SDG 11 Synthesis Report 2023, organized by UN-Habitat, and will benefit from the participation of several experts working on both processes and build on the existing analysis. The review of SDG 11 will also feed into the High-level Political Forum on sustainable development to be held under the auspices of the General Assembly at the level of Heads of States and Governments in September 2023, also known as the SDG Summit of 2023.

2. *SDG 11*

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide an unprecedented opportunity to align global, national and subnational priorities and engage stakeholders at the local level in efforts to achieve sustainable and inclusive development. Sustainable Development Goal 11 that aims at making “cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable” is composed of 10 targets and 14 associated indicators. These targets (see annex below) range from ensuring access to decent and affordable housing and upgrading slums to providing access to public transport and safeguarding the cultural heritage of the world.

Cities will also play a key role in advancing several other SDGs. According to some estimates¹, two-thirds of the Sustainable Development Goals can only be achieved by action at the local and regional levels. Urban policy decisions can have far-reaching impacts across all the SDGs, including eradication of poverty and hunger, reduction of inequalities, climate mitigation and adaptation, promotion of safety and good governance and in ensuring access to quality education and health care, clean water and sanitation, affordable energy, transportation, sustainable waste management, and technology infrastructure. Given their proximity to local constituents, ensuring that local governments can implement the SDGs will ensure that the SDGs can be met nationally and globally.

3. *Framing the issues*

The cities of the world have been in the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic with dwindling economic activity, overburdened health care systems, and inadequate resources. While traditionally urbanization has brought with it many benefits such as increased employment and reduction in poverty, the pandemic unmasked to many the deep divides within our societies and brought to the fore the multidimensional inequalities existing in our communities. In many places, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated urban poverty. While traditionally the vast majority of the people living in extreme poverty live in rural areas, there is growing evidence that the pandemic was particularly hard on poor urban households. The job recovery rate has also been much lower for urban workers than for rural workers.²

The COVID-19 pandemic also resulted in major changes in the patterns of migration within and between countries, although the patterns vary across the globe and research is still needed to assess longer-lasting impacts. During early phases of the pandemic, reports of an ‘urban exodus’ emerged with speculation that the trend would persist after the COVID-19. The unexpected and unprecedented magnitude of the reverse migration of workers from urban to rural areas induced by the pandemic, especially in developing countries, also took a toll on their communities of origin.³ However, the magnitude of these changes and their longer-lasting impacts are varied. An early

¹ OECD: A Territorial Approach to the Sustainable Development Goals: Synthesis report; https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/e86fa715-en/1/2/1/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/e86fa715-en&_csp_=6d42c3e04d6f0b50b2439e764fde242b&itemIGO=oecd&itemContentType=book#section-d1e5574

² World Bank. 2022. Global Economic Prospects, January 2022. Washington, DC: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/36519>

³ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations: Reverse migration to rural areas of origin in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic; <https://www.fao.org/3/cb4712en/cb4712en.pdf>

OECD analysis, for example, does confirm an outward shift in housing demand from city centers, but this shift has been limited to large cities of over 1,5 million inhabitants⁴. In Australia, the shift from capital cities in favor of regional areas is expected to diminish over time and return to the pre-COVID status quo by 2023-24.⁵ The Expert Group Meeting will assess what changes in urban planning, governance and policy making are needed in order to transform our urban areas towards sustainability and increased quality of life in this rapidly changing landscape.

Since SDG 11 was last reviewed at the HLPF in 2018, the COVID-19 pandemic has not been the only crisis testing our cities. Impacts of climate change, natural disasters and conflicts are often felt strongest in cities, adding to other strains such as tight local and national budgets. At the same time, as stated in the Katowice Declared Actions of the World Urban Forum 11, held in 2022, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that substantial change is possible in the short term, but the challenge is in delivering long-term and sustainable change. Urban leaders “must move from incrementalism and work to achieve fundamental shifts in urban environments, systems of governance and forms of habitation, in line with human rights treaties”.

The SDG framework can provide a flexible tool for supporting cities in these fundamental shifts. Target 11.b, for example, aims at substantially increasing the number of cities and human settlements adopting and implementing integrated policies and plans towards inclusion, resource efficiency, mitigation and adaptation to climate change, and resilience to disasters. Progress towards this target has been promising. Between 2015 and 2021, the number of countries reporting the existence of such strategies nearly doubled, from 51 to 98⁶. Considering all the countries reporting, the average share of local governments that have adopted such strategies increased from 51 per cent in 2015 to 66 per cent in 2021. The intersecting challenges faced by cities in the past few years highlight the need for multi-hazard approaches to such resilience plans. The Expert Group Meeting can address how local, regional and national governments can be supported in using these plans for ensuring a holistic take in resilience-building and risk management in order to better withstand future shocks.

The Expert Group Meeting will also aim at addressing the key interlinkages between SDG 11 and all the other goals, particularly the goals under review at the 2023 HLPF, namely SDG 6 on water, SDG 7 on energy, SDG 9 on infrastructure and industrialization, and SDG 17 on global partnerships. For example, in 2020, about one in four urban dwellers lived in slums or informal settlements, often with no access to clean water, sanitation or electricity. Cities also account for more than 70 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions. The Expert Group Meeting will consider policy recommendations and concrete actions that would lead to ensuring access to basic services and improved quality of life to city dwellers around the world while massively decarbonizing cities through investments in low-carbon energy and transport systems, reduction of

⁴ OECD: Changes in the geography housing demand after the onset of COVID-19: First results from large metropolitan areas in 13 OECD countries; <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/9a99131f-en.pdf?expires=1669891292&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=FF1AD7A80A52C358685777E4D3D8F422>

⁵ Australian Center for Population: Migration between cities and regions; <https://population.gov.au/sites/population.gov.au/files/2021-09/the-impacts-of-covid-on-migration-between-cities-and-regions.pdf>

⁶ UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA): SDG Progress Report 2022; <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2022/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2022.pdf>

urban sprawl, and nature-based solutions for urban cooling and disaster risk management, among others.

As a positive force, since the last review of SDG 11 in 2018, cities and regions around the world have accelerated the production of their own reviews of SDG implementation called the Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs). These VLRs are inspired by the Voluntary National Reviews produced and presented at the HLPF by national governments. While the VLRs hold no official status, the process of undertaking these sub-national reviews is providing multiple benefits to the entities engaging in them and to SDG implementation at large. These VLRs can also help to reinforce vertical coherence and complement and contribute to the national Voluntary National Reviews of SDG implementation. The Expert Group Meeting will aim at distilling some of the key messages arising from the VLRs. Participants will also consider policy recommendations on how these reviews can be utilized to the fullest to benefit wider progress towards the SDGs in the future.

4. Key questions

Stock taking:

1. What is the status of progress on the SDG 11 targets and indicators, as well as other urban-related targets?
2. How do the multiple crises affecting cities intersect (climate, pandemics, natural/man-made disasters, conflicts) and what does that mean for their response and urban resilience as a whole?
3. What is the role of Voluntary Local Reviews and what stories do they tell us of the current landscape in our cities?

Challenges:

4. How do we drive urban economic, housing and transport recovery, as well as increase the quality of life and meaningful participation in our communities, in times of tight local and national budgets?
5. What are the ways for scaling up good practices from leading cities in order to achieve wider global impacts?

Opportunities:

6. What can be done to ensure a multi-hazard approach to local resilience-building? What is the role of disaster risk reduction strategies in this?
7. How do we best utilize the Voluntary Local Reviews to accelerate global progress towards the SDGs?

5. *Contribution to HLPF 2023*

The knowledge and insights of experts from across the world will be crucial to addressing these above questions, and will also help:

- Provide substantive inputs into the thematic reviews at the 2023 HLPF and help inform its outcomes;
- Identify cases from regions and specific countries (including those that are conducting or have conducted Voluntary National Reviews) that illustrate challenges or highlight innovative practices;
- Suggest effective presenters for the specific sessions at the HLPF, as well as contributors to blog posts, e-discussions and other activities leading up to the HLPF;
- Contribute to preparations for the SDG Summit in September 2023; and
- Influence collaborations and programmes of work going forward from 2023.

6. *Participation and organization*

The EGM is part of a broader review of SDG 11, including specialized reports from various agencies and think tanks. Some of these inputs will also feed into the EGM.

Participation at the EGM will be by invitation. A limited number of experts from think tanks, academia, NGOs, the private sector and Governments will be invited. Experts from the UN system and other international organizations will also be invited to participate.

UN-DESA/DSDG, UN-Habitat and UNDP will prepare the event in consultation with other key UN entities. DESA/DSDG will also coordinate across other DESA divisions.

Individual sessions at the EGM will address specific themes. The mode will be interactive, with all participants encouraged to speak openly and informally.

The EGM will be conducted in English. All presentations/papers/remarks will be made available online.

ANNEX 1: SDG 11 Targets

11.1 By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums

11.2 By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons

11.3 By 2030, enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management in all countries

11.4 Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage

11.5 By 2030, significantly reduce the number of deaths and the number of people affected and substantially decrease the direct economic losses relative to global gross domestic product caused by disasters, including water-related disasters, with a focus on protecting the poor and people in vulnerable situations

11.6 By 2030, reduce the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, including by paying special attention to air quality and municipal and other waste management

11.7 By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities

11.a Support positive economic, social and environmental links between urban, peri-urban and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning

11.b By 2020, substantially increase the number of cities and human settlements adopting and implementing integrated policies and plans towards inclusion, resource efficiency, mitigation and adaptation to climate change, resilience to disasters, and develop and implement, in line with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030, holistic disaster risk management at all levels

11.c Support least developed countries, including through financial and technical assistance, in building sustainable and resilient buildings utilizing local materials.