The urban lens: An accelerator of poverty eradication and prosperity

Interconnected approaches to address poverty, hunger, health and well-being, gender equality, resilient infrastructure and innovation

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Panel

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Background

In an increasingly urban world, cities – those who govern, live and work in them – have an important role to play in eradicating poverty and fostering equitable prosperity for people and planet. As more people migrate to cities in search of a better life and urban populations grow, the challenges and opportunities of a 21st century urban world as reflected in SDGs 1, 2, 3 5 and 9 are characterised by livelihood creation, poverty, inequality, informality, basic services, connectivity, air pollution and interdependent urban and rural areas.

The challenges are manifold and interconnected. Despite the massive wealth and value generated in cities, roughly one quarter of the world's urban population – almost 900 million people – lives and works in slums. This estimate does not include people in inadequate or unaffordable housing (defined as costing more than 30 per cent of total monthly household income). It does not reflect either how women and men suffer the consequences in different ways - leading to exclusion and lost opportunity for both women and society in general. In all cities, high inequality – both income and opportunity – threatens economic growth and human development. Low-income and secondary cities are unable to attract investment necessary for infrastructure development, job creation, productivity, innovation and environmental sustainability. Revenues in cities often

remain low and unpredictable, undermining the ability to support the well-being of a healthy, skilled and productive workforce. The inability to provide economic opportunity to growing urban populations has led to widespread informality. In most developing regions, informal employment represents more than half of non-agricultural employment. As population growth outpaces available land, cities expand far beyond their formal administrative boundaries, and they do it not only in developing regions. Unfortunately, a low value for the ratio of land consumption to the population growth is not necessarily an indication that urban dwellers are faring well, as this can indicate a prevalence of overcrowded slums. In 2014, around half the global urban population was exposed to air pollution levels at least 2.5 times higher than maximum standards set by the World Health Organization. This challenge to human and environmental health causes illness and millions of premature deaths annually and it also aggravates climate change.

However, over the past decade, the statement that "cities are the engines of economic growth" has been often repeated and that is because for each of these challenges, the urban lens offers opportunities. We know that improved access to public goods and services generally benefits the poor. We also know that it strengthens the fundamental prerequisites for growth and productivity, enabling economies of agglomeration and scale. Widespread access to public goods, transport and services, including to social services such as education, is determinant of poverty eradication, equitable prosperity, the empowerment of women and girls and human and environmental health. Public space is essential to the livelihoods and productivity of informal workers; as well as to the health, well-being and safety of communities. Urban and territorial planning can enable the interconnections between population dynamics, labour markets, infrastructure needs, public transport access, gender responsiveness, food security, resource-saving and climate and environmentally friendly development and ultimately equitable livelihoods and prosperity. The interdependencies between rural and urban areas become particularly apparent in regard to migration movements, multi-local livelihoods, ecosystem services; as well as increasing flows of goods, resources, capital and information. Here again balanced integrated urban and territorial planning from a functional and systemic perspective, beyond administrative boundaries, is a paramount tool to achieve mutually-reinforcing urban rural linkages.

Whether or not the convergent implementation of SDGs contributes to addressing major human challenges depends to a great extent on planning, implementation and monitoring strategies that have integration and interlinkages as foundations. The 2030 Agenda, as well as the Paris Climate Change Agreement and the New Urban Agenda should mark the political will for sustainable human development embedded in integrated and interlinked approaches. The multi-dimensional and interconnected challenges and opportunities, as well as the multi-stakeholder partnerships so inherent to cities are key vectors for accelerating the integrated implementation of the SDGs through multi-scale and cross-sectoral solutions.

Side event outcomes: Questions addressed and topics raised during the debate

The diverse multi-stakeholder panel shared views on the following *key questions:*

- How does the urban lens support policy coherence and cross-sectoral approaches to accelerate the implementation of SDGs 1, 2, 3, 5 and 9 and other global agendas such as New Urban Agenda and the Sendai Framework?   What are the key elements of enabling institutional, policy and financial frameworks for this?
- What do interventions in cities teach us about participatory approaches, particularly for the poor and disadvantaged? And about multi-stakeholder partnerships?

- What can the urban lens do to support data disaggregation, qualitative approaches to metrics and citizen-driven data?
- What is missing in terms of means of implementation and monitoring mechanisms to unleash the full potential of the urban lens?

Main points raised by the panel included:
- The SDGs are multidimensional and cross-cutting. SDG11 is not the only SDG that relates to cities. If cities do not work for their people – and hence for the transformational targets included in many other SDGS – then cities are simply broken and not working. For cities to succeed, they must work across all sectors of their communities and for everybody. SDGs 1,2,3,5 and 9 under review at the 2017 HLPF are closely tied to cities. Addressing urban issues requires coherence and hence a cross-cutting urban lens across all SDGs can facilitate policy coherence.
- The area of disaster risk reduction is an important example of a thematic area with clear impact on cities whose planning mechanisms often times are not sufficiently anchored in local contexts. From a different yet complementary perspective, local and territorial development strategies should also encompass disaster risk reduction considerations.
- The Minister of Cities and the National Council for Cities of Brazil are examples of institutional frameworks geared at enabling public policy coherence across the board, as well as national frameworks to address urban matters.
- The magnitude of investment in urban infrastructure that will be required over the next 15 years to serve an increasing urban population cannot be underestimated and will require new modalities of intergovernmental transfer, as well as of collaboration between the public and private sectors.
- Cities have the ability to be more flexible and escape the more formal structures of national governments to address the challenges faced by their communities and maximise the potential of opportunities. Cities can often times witness practical arrangements between neighborhoods groups and the private sector that would not be achievable with similar flexibility at national level.
- Accelerating the implementation of all SDGs with policy coherence and cross-sectoral approaches will not happen without: the inspiration and passion of people, ownership of the SDGs at the local level, awareness of critical enablers and barriers for implementation and the full engagement of sub-national governments and civil society.
- National governments and national institutional, policy and financial frameworks should support and enable the SDGs implementation work that is already taking place at local level driven by sub-national governments. The importance of financial support and fiscal transfers commensurate with the implementation responsibilities of sub-national governments cannot be sufficiently underscored.
- Sub-national government networks are developing global, regional and national systems of "localisation" to contribute to awareness raising, alignment of work plans, learning exchange and local monitoring and reporting.
- Following the model of the *National Voluntary Reviews* presented by UN Member States, sub-national government networks have undertaken a global initiative assessing the level of involvement of their constituency in the monitoring process. Under the coordination of the Global Task Force of Local and Regional Governments, this has crystallised in the Report of Local and Regional Governments to the 2017 HLPF on the Way towards the Localisation of the SDGs. There are around 400.000 subnational governments in the countries that are presenting Voluntary National Reviews in the 2017 HLPF,

representing over 5.2 billion people. If adequate resources, competencies and ownership are ensured, their ability to reach local communities, play a catalytic role in local development and provide many of the basic services and rights related to the 17 Goals will be enormous. Yet, at the moment only 37 of the 63 national reports analysed mention sub-national government participation in monitoring mechanisms.

- Urban labs anchored in multi-stakeholder partnerships and direct engagement of civil society are bringing excellent results, for instance in Latin America in areas such as improving access to housing or designing rental housing program.
- Policy coherence cannot be achieved without data coherence. When looking at cities, data collection is a process of learning about rights and identifying who is left out.
- Territorial disaggregation of data and indicators relevant to local contexts in complement to global indicators are essential factors for data coherence.
- The work towards global indicators for urban matters faces specific challenges such as for instance understanding and agreeing on where does the urban space start and end or how do we measure accessibility to public space in different cultural contexts.
- The adagio "not one size fits all" is particularly relevant to monitoring mechanisms and metrics for cities. The City Prosperity Initiative (CPI) elaborated by UN-Habitat to support national and subnational governments in their monitoring efforts is based on the understanding that problems and priorities vary dramatically from one city to another. With a holistic approach on the basis of 72 indicators, the CPI can help track how different factors are interacting, identify what specific areas are presenting issues and isolate pitfalls.

The *rich discussion between panelists and participants* touched upon critical topics such as:
- The complementarity between the 2030 Agenda as the global agenda for sustainable human development and the New Urban Agenda as a thematic framework.
- The need to invigorate political momentum around the implementation of the New Urban Agenda.
- The risks of forcing sub-national governments to re-invent the wheel for the implementation of the many different post-2015 frameworks (2030 Agenda, New Urban Agenda, Paris Climate Agreement, Sendai Framework) and discard their experiences, successes and lessons from Local Agenda 21.
- The essential step forward brought by the New Urban Agenda as a global action-oriented framework that revisits urban challenges and opportunities in a 21st century context.
- The centrality of informality, inequality and land to urban transformation and the nature of "interconnectors across SDGs" of these three aspects.
- The need to dismantle negative narratives around informality and apply approaches that integrate informality into the city.
- The urgency around resource-mobilisation and long-term investment.
- The imperative of improving civil society engagement in the SDGs implementation and follow-up & review processese.
- The shocking lack of reflections on localisation, territorial dimension of the 2030 Agenda and interconnection with SDG11 during the first week of official sessions of the 2017 HLPF.