

Policy briefing UN Open Working Group 11
Sustainable Cities and Human Settlements: Sustainable Mobility and the Post-2015 development agenda

After ten hearings from March 2013 to February 2014, the Co-Chairs of the Open Working Group (OWG) issued a list of 19 'focus areas' from which member states will probably derive 8-12 SDGs. On April 18, the Co-Chairs of the OWG reduced this list of "focus areas" to 16. In all iterations of these working documents, a focus area on "inclusive, safe sustainable cities and human settlements has remained. Focus areas on water and sanitation, health, food security, gender seemingly enjoy universal support among member states as measured by their OWG testimonies and other public statements. A stand-alone goal on sustainable cities and human settlements has not yet received the kind of support that other Focus Areas have received.

Vital spatial issues – resource efficient use of land, and comprehensive community building combining housing, schools, parks, water/sanitation, streets and sidewalks -- are an unnatural fit for any but a stand-alone SDG on sustainable cities and human settlements. Extremely important issues such as transport and resilience have already been cut from the list of possible stand-alone goals; the focus area on sustainable cities remains a vital refuge for these to be addressed. **A stand-alone goal to "build inclusive, safe, sustainable cities and human settlements" is vital to address issues of equity, climate change, and sustainable mobility.** It is also an essential part of a successful strategy to mainstream sustainable transport across other possible goal areas as recommended in the 7th OWG session.

While most UN member states agree that urbanization is an important global trend, there has not been agreement on how to address it in the SDGs. The debate around "inclusive, safe, sustainable cities and human settlements" revolves around whether the issue would be better served by a stand-alone goal (achieving sustainable cities and human settlements) or by targets integrated into the other non-urban goals (as yet unarticulated).

The proposed goal "build inclusive, safe, sustainable cities and human settlements," meets the UN criteria for a goal. It is action-oriented, concise, easy to communicate, aspirational, global in nature and universally applicable. It is also critically important in a transformational agenda for sustainable development, and growing in relevance. Global urbanization is an undeniable megatrend. Today, 5 of 10 people live in cities and by 2030, 6 of 10 people will live in cities with the remainder residing in smaller human settlements. *Moreover, unchecked, the world's cities are expected to more than double in physical size by 2030.*

A goal to "build inclusive, safe, sustainable cities and human settlements" embodies a people-centered approach that catalyzes and reinforces strong linkages between urban and rural places and integrates the provision of public and private goods systematically and efficiently. Potential targets that a sustainable cities and human settlement might encompass, illustrating action orientation, global nature and universal applicability include:

1. Providing access to affordable and accessible transport for shorter, safer and healthier commutes;
2. Enhancing urban planning that promotes youth participation, gender equality, compact cities and healthy rural settlements;
3. Strengthening resilience to reduce the loss of lives, assets, housing and infrastructure to natural disasters;
4. Preventing slums by ensuring equitable access to affordable, durable housing, basic services and land tenure security; and
5. Ensuring access to public space for safe, connected communities and public services.

The absence of a stand-alone goal on sustainable cities and human settlements in the SDG framework would entirely neglect the key issues of the built environment: resilience, urban planning and sprawl, slums and affordable housing, public space, and transport and access for all to employment, education, health, food, and opportunity.

Failing to focus on the built environment or resilience through a stand-alone goal on cities would also undermine efforts to achieve other goals: if we don't get cities and human settlements right and set the stage for future growth, it will be extremely difficult – and prohibitively expensive – to address other key issues such as water, health, gender, education, and employment.

Some have raised concerns that a stand alone goal on cities and human settlements will diminish support for rural areas, but a focus on sustainable cities and human settlements will strengthen rural-urban linkages. Cities can provide ready markets for rural agricultural producers and support rural economies. Cities can provide rural areas access to critical services such as hospitals and schools. Moreover, when they succeed in limiting urban sprawl, sustainable cities can allow nearby agricultural land to remain intact, strengthening the health of rural areas, overall food security, ecosystem services and resilience.

Spatial issues cannot be mainstreamed under other SDGs. Among all the other constituencies supporting the other likely SDGs (e.g., water, health, food security and gender), there is not a single viable proposal for spatial systems and their important components (e.g. thoughtfully coordinated and designed housing, transportation, public space, and related service delivery). With cities set to more than double spatially by 2030, the manner in which they expand cannot be haphazard. Space-blind goals, targets and policies are not going to work. Sustainable service delivery and sustainable development depends on getting the built the environment right in human settlements, both rural and urban. A stand-alone goal to “build inclusive, safe, sustainable cities and human settlements,” is vital for effective progress on sustainable development.