Establishing a Sustainable Development Goal on Cities

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Multi-level governance, when taken seriously, requires transverse elements, and a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) on Cities should be one of them. Besides addressing rapid urbanization and its impact on sustainable development, a stand-alone SDG on Cities will bring political benefits to the post-2015 development agenda. It will empower local governments within the post-2015 framework; encourage nation-states to strengthen vertical policy integration and disaggregated monitoring; foster local alliances in sustainable development (SD) domains other than climate change; and enhance the visibility of SDGs at societal level. Therefore, the present policy brief explicitly supports the current campaign for an SDG on Cities, as initiated by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), UN-Habitat, and several local government associations.

The following pages explain what we consider to be essentials of an SDG on Cities. The 'soft power' of global goals will rely on the ability of different actors to recognize and to appropriate them as a political tool. Therefore, the Rio+20 call for goals that are "easy to communicate" and "limited in number"[1] should also apply to the targets comprised by each goal.

Local administrations, citizens and media should be able to easily grasp what an urban SDG is about, even if this means giving up 'comprehensiveness' in favour of a few representative, exemplary *targets*. These targets, on the other hand, should have benefits across more than one SD dimension, and they should – as far as possible – be within the responsibility of local decision makers.

■ **Message 1:** Establish an urban sustainable development goal. It will support the empowerment of local actors within the post-2015 agenda.

■ **Message 2:** Use the guiding idea of "inclusive, resilient, and connected cities."

■ **Message 3:** Consider urban aspects throughout the overall SDG framework.

1. Proposing a Stand-alone SDG on Cities

The need to address the megatrend of urbanization within a future global development framework has been recognized by three reports submitted to the UN Secretary-General this year, who then addressed this issue in an important paragraph of his report[2] to the General Assembly. These contributions recognized specifics of "the urban dimension" that are crucial for sustainable development – among them the concentration of population and economic power, potential efficiency gains, and the influence of cities on rural areas. However, only one of the aforementioned reports, authored by the SDSN, concluded that there is a need for a stand-alone SDG on urban areas.

The following arguments support this conclusion, but propose to operationalize it in a different way. They emerged from a dialogue project on the applicability of global targets in local discourse, undertaken by IASS and JBB throughout 2013 in the Colombian capital, Bogotá. Colombia, as the 'homeland' of SDGs, provides an illustrative point of departure where we can see that urban centres like Bogotá or Medellín become drivers of transformation beyond the nation al framework. They have the power to forge and transform nation-wide political discourse. Addressing urban citizens through targets of immediate local relevance to them can foster overall societal SD awareness (more detailed results on this will be published in March 2014).

The preliminary outcome of the project was commented and complemented by city practitioners and academics from around the globe, who convened in Potsdam in October 2013 to discuss priorities for an urban SDG. For the sake of brevity, this policy summary will not unfold the full range of considerations that underpin the recommendations.[3] It reflects the view of the authors, not necessarily the views of all discussants involved.

[1] United Nations (2012): The future we want – General Assembly Resolution A/RES/66/288, § 246.

[2] United Nations (2013): A life of dignity for all: Accelerating progress towards the Millenium development goals and advancing the United Nations development agenda beyond 2015. Report of the Secretary-General, § 94.

[3] On the Bogotan dialogue project: see www.jbb.gov.co/conversatorios. On some of the underlying systematic

2. Sustainable Cities: Inclusive, Connected, and Resilient

SDG headlines should be sufficiently broad to provide guidelines for different social realities, and yet specific enough to indicate global priority areas for development. The formula "inclusive, resilient, and connected cities," employed by SDSN, meets both criteria. It also indicates political opportunities for transformative urban development inasmuch as the terms encompass important *areas of local responsibility*, an aspect that is key to selecting priorities. The targets should also address topics that are already politically relevant (either consensual or contested) in discourses on city development.

Equality has been broadly recognized as one of the preconditions for achieving peace and prosperity within planetary boundaries, and as the necessary complement to growth-induced poverty reduction. Inequalities are, of course, not an exclusively urban matter, and an SDG framework should take nation-wide socioeconomic inequalities, and urban-rural disparities, into account. However, there are important *inner*-urban inequalities that might be masked by mere city averages and "urban vs. rural" disaggregation of data. Cities, it is true, provide prosperity and opportunities for people, but by doing so they also disproportionally increase the influence of the wealthy and powerful, and exclude and deprive many of their inhabitants, which can have particularly severe implications in an environment where every basic need must be paid for. Due to their immigration dynamics, cities bundle and magnify a country's inequalities. Absolute poverty is more severe in rural areas, but there is greater inequality in cities.[4] Our Bogotá dialogue tables confirmed this general observation and also pointed towards two key issues in which urban decision makers have a say: spatial segregation, and the deprivations of the informal sector. The first challenge is relevant for

most cities around the world, and the second for the vast majority of developing and emerging countries. Both should be incorporated within an urban SDG.

Connectivity (of people) is necessary for reducing inflated agglomeration costs and freeing the productive potential of citizens. As part of communication, connectivity is also an end in itself. We therefore find mobility infrastructures at the very heart of almost every existing development policy and comprehensive post-2015 proposal, and often close (though of course not limited) to the topic of urban areas. Within an urban SDG, however, we think that the major benefit of connectivity should be captured not through an overall increase of infrastructure, but through measurement of its effectiveness and climate impacts, thus interacting with the dimensions of inclusiveness and resilience respectively. Reducing average travel time within a city and the modal share of private cars can be good proxies for what we ought to achieve in both rich and poor cities, especially when combined with an overall reduction of spatial inequalities. It furthermore concerns political areas of immediate local responsibility, with high potential for inter-urban comparison and diffusion of best practices.

Resilience has become a powerful guiding idea for urban researchers, networks, and decision makers in recent years. We think that this aspect deserves to be encouraged by an SDG framework, and that it can be supported by more than mere meta-targets on governance (such as "climate change adaptation strategies in place"). Soils represent a critical variable in socio-ecological urban systems on which many others depend. As providers of vegetation and with their role in water filtration and evaporation, they are essential for urban climate, especially for the reduction of the

heat island effect. They also are (or at least should be) under the direct control of urban planning. Countering the trend of soil sealing is a challenge for both growing and stagnating urban areas. It is assumed that such a policy will have positive implications not only for climate change resilience but also ecosystem connectivity and overall quality of life. It also relates to a potential increase in urban soil productivity, which can be part of the enhancement of city-region food systems, including urban agriculture.

This enhancement would be our second recommendation for a priority area on resilience, as it reduces the vulnerability to long-distance transport shortages and fluctuating world market food prices, and contributes to urban-regional economic and social integration. It might also help to address resource awareness in Northern cities, which are required to revise their consumption patterns within a post-2015 development framework.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL: INCLUSIVE, CONNECTED, AND RESILIENT CITIES. ILLUSTRATIVE TARGETS

Target formulation	Exemplary Indicator(s)	Estimated data availability	Dimensions targeted**	Communicative potential
1. Increase* access to public space and services*	▪ Percentage of citizens living within 300 m of public open areas (headline indicator); … from public transport stops; … from medical service units ▪ Percentage of children living within 300 m of public schools	good	**Inclusiveness**, health, education, productivity, resilience, connectivity	high
2. Increase* the share of informal sector workers with social protection*	▪ Old age pension recipient ratio above retirement age ▪ Sickness benefit rate	medium	Productivity, **inclusiveness**, health	medium
3. Reduce* travel time	▪ Average trip time per capita (disaggregated by income group, area of residence)	medium	**Connectivity**, productivity, inclusiveness, (climate)	high
4. Limit* the use of private vehicles	▪ Percentage of passenger-kilometres travelled by motorized private transport or ▪ Number of motorized vehicles per capita	good	Climate, health, **connectivity**	high
5. Maintain or increase* the rate of green areas	▪ Percentage of parks, green spaces, open areas and play grounds in a built-up area or ▪ Green area (hectares) per 100,000 population	good	**Resilience**, health, climate	high
6. Measure the share of regionally grown food in urban citizens' diet	▪ Percentage of locally consumed selected crops (e.g. grain, vegetables) that are cultivated within a 100 km radius ("100 km diet")	—	Urban–rural integration, productivity, **resilience**, identity	medium

* Level of ambition ("by x %") to be defined locally   ** Main dimension in **bold** letters

4 Sheridan Bartlett, Diana Mitlin & David Satterthwaite (2012): Urban Inequalities. Accepted under the "Addressing Inequalities" Global Thematic Consultation, October 2012. Available at: http://www.worldwewant2015.org/node/296028.

3. Six Targets for Sustainable Cities

3.1. Increase access to public space and services

Urban inequality has spatial dimensions that vary in importance between different societies: informal settlements and their precariousness; people living in risk-prone areas; gated communities; uncontrolled increases of rents or land prices; unequal coverage of health and mobility services, etc. Within an urban SDG, it is pertinent to address inclusion via an exemplary target that does not cover all of these factors equally, but is linked to several of them.

Urban public space is at the heart of a city; it allows people to perceive and negotiate differences, assert their identities, and access resources. Public space often serves recreational purposes and includes green areas (which are also important for the resilience dimension). Its management and maintenance are the responsibility of urban policy makers, who can make use of various taxation and business models to finance it, communalize the private benefits of ground rents, and thus indirectly increase urban equality. Synergies with the connectivity dimension derive from the aspiration to reduce distances between people and services.

Among the European Common Indicators [5] the headline indicator, *'percentage of citizens living within 300 meters of public open areas'* provides an interesting example for measuring accessibility. Our Bogotá dialogue showed that this can also be of highest relevance to emerging megacities in the Global South. Constructing such indicators often requires Geographical Information Systems, but their use has already become integral to spatial planning practice and knowledge.

3.2. Deliver social protection to informal sector workers

This target alludes to the idea of national social protection floors addressed in Rio+20, i.e., necessary provision of minimum social insurance standards for all citizens. Its fulfilment. is not entirely within the power of urban administrations. However, these administrations often control how national social security mechanisms are deployed, and they also have a say in how to support the informally employed through formalization, market integration, capacity building, and so on. Both developing and emerging countries have recently witnessed an exponential expansion of the informal sector. That said, this process should not be neglected in OECD countries either. Its contribution to overall productivity – not only in Bogotá, but in most cities of the world – is enormous, and people employed in these sectors need greater inclusion.

Due to the overlapping concepts of informality (both as a coping and a business strategy) and the highly uneven availability of data, estimating the sizes of informal units within the economy is not an easy task, nor is comparing "social protection" between diverse legal arrangements. However, the work done by the International Labour Organization (ILO) both on measuring informality [6] and on the global extension of social security [7] seems to provide a basis for agreeing a representative indicator within the post-2015 agenda.

3.3. Reduce travel time

An indicator with clear implications for the wellbeing of citizens and for economic performance is travel time. It has a stable positive correlation with the performance of the mobility systems (speed), and a negative correlation with urban distances, thus indirectly allowing for estimations of mixed use, residential densities, and the like. Indirectly, it relates to urban form and alludes to more compact cities, which bring additional energy and resource efficiency gains. *Average travel (trip) time per capita* is a number with a clear message, which can be effectively employed by urban decision makers. When disaggregated for social groups or spatial units, it allows for further description of inclusiveness.

The target also highlights the fact that mobility is a human need to access services, communication, and so on, rather than an end in itself, at least not in urban settlements. For urban dwellers, mobility means getting to where they want and need to be quickly and comfortably. This third target is therefore closely aligned with the first one. Environmentally, it is mostly a 'no regret' option, as travel speed within cities cannot be increased, exclusively and exponentially, through fossil-fuel dependent infrastructure like highways. We recommend, however, to further emphasize the environmental dimension of city transportation, as done by the following target and, additionally, in Section 5.

3.4. Limit the use of private vehicles

The modal split, i.e., the share of different modes of transport in overall travel, is widely employed in both national and urban statistics. Public transport is the mode that requires the most attention from policy makers and urban developers, and increasing its share would certainly be a valid objective in many urban contexts. Among the other transportation modes, though, both cycling and walking are even more sustainable, and promoting them is socioeconomically beneficial. It therefore seems advisable to use the *'share of trips by motorized private transport'* as a negative headline indicator that should be decreased.

A sustainable city, paraphrasing a former mayor of Bogotá, is not a city where poor people use cars, but where the rich use public transport. However, the extent to which this transport is low-carbon, and whether Bus Rapid Transit or Metro systems are the best solutions, are issues that require different answers in different contexts. More importantly, the greenhouse gas intensity of mobility systems is not always covered by urban statistics around the world, and the general carbon intensity of cities can be addressed through local disaggregation of data under a respective SDG on Energy (see Section 5).

3.5. Green the cities

As explained in Section 2, a resilience concept that works in different ecological realities (humid and arid, flat and mountainous, etc.) could address the critical variable of urban soils. This is also a topic in which local governments (should) have significant influence via planning and zoning. Unfortunately, data on the amount of impervious surfaces are often not under the control of urban administrations, and lack comparability and fine-tuning. We therefore suggest considering *green areas as a proxy* for unsealed surfaces. Green areas are mostly publicly owned or at least accounted for, so the annual availability of this classic 'environmental indicator'[8] should be within reach. It overlaps with the headline indicator for the 1st target, but focuses on the overall benefit for the urban system's climate, air quality, and water circulation. This target could also build on numerous regional 'green cities' initiatives and networks. It offers win-win scenarios encompassing risk reduction, health improvement, and the overall attractiveness of a city. That said, it is an objective that is not easy to achieve, as the establishment and maintenance of green infrastructure requires top-down control and bottom-up participation.

3.6. Measure the share of regionally grown food in urban citizens' diets

Enhancing urban-regional food systems requires securing soil functions, individual basic needs, and regional market integration. A bigger share of regionally cultivated food in urban citizens' diets will reduce the footprint of cities (especially the wealthy ones) and increase food security for residents (especially the poor). It can also contribute to more equitable relationships between cities and rural areas.

Indirectly, it will enhance the ecosystem support for cities themselves. This win-win scenario between cities and adjacent rural areas is often hampered by trade or transport schemes that are regulated at national and international level. They can 'flood' local markets with food products from abroad, thereby making it difficult for local producers to compete. Cities, however, can influence these relationships, e.g. by facilitating distribution (markets for local farmers), strengthening the supply side (regional agreements on land use), and raising consumer awareness and organizational capacity.

The promotion of a '100 km diet' would be a positive target with high communicative potential relating to regional identities and giving urban prosperity a more ecological flavour. There are encouraging experiences from a variety of locations such as Shanghai and Toronto. The experience from Bogotá demonstrates that the topic of food sovereignty is highly politically sensitive and can mobilize regional actors, e.g. local farmers. In some African regions, basic survival depends on local food production and marketing. Unfortunately, only a few cities around the world have begun to monitor their resource flows in terms of nutrition. This suggests that we should make the measurement of food production and consumption a target in itself. By 2030, such a policy would improve comparability and would allow not only for new target setting but would be likely to have already triggered awareness and action.

4. Consider Additional Urban Aspects throughout the SDG Framework

Our policy brief makes the case for a specific urban SDG. At the same time, urban aspects are of cross-cutting nature, and so are relevant to all possible SDGs. Thus, on the one hand, the choice of targets within an urban SDG should be limited to a few, communicable, simple numerical targets that can be used and influenced by local administrations, and which are communicable to and by urban citizens and the media. Even if the selected targets differ from those proposed in this briefing, there will always be aspects that need to be 'sacrificed' for the sake of exemplarity and brevity. On the other hand, additional aspects, as outlined below, are relevant for cities as economic engines, centres of social integration, and drivers of ecological responsibility. For this reason, they should be reflected under other SDGs wherever possible.

Within the framing chosen in this paper, the most notable omissions seem to be (1) the low-carbon economy, (2) resource use and waste reduction, (3) infrastructural development, and (4) disaster risk reduction. Some brief remarks on these four aspects will close our proposal.

Ad (1) Stimulating a low-carbon economy will be a task central to several of the expected SDGs, foremost that on Energy. Our proposed targets on connectivity aim at a specific contribution of cities, by reducing travel distances and fossil fuel mobility. However, we suggest that national targets on renewable energy sources should be disaggregated by place[9] in order to monitor the local supply to urban areas. Energy efficiency differentiated by sector could look at housing as a main urban potential for reducing CO_2 footprints. The efficacy of national energy policies will benefit from a closer look at (and collaboration with) cities.

Ad (2) National resource efficiency targets would be most desirable within the post-2015 agenda. They could be disaggregated by location for critical materials such as cement and sand, where urban demand is crucial. In addition, wastewater treatment and reuse of solid materials are specifically urban topics as well, due to the intensive metabolism of city systems. Responsibilities of cities in this regard, also vis-à-vis the countryside, will have to play a crucial role in sustainable development and need to be addressed under respective goals, i.e., on Production and Consumption.

Ad (3) Many cities in developing countries lag behind in providing critical infrastructures such as roads, drainage, garbage disposal, hospitals, or internet connectivity; many cities in so-called developed countries lag behind in modernization and renewal of these infrastructures. We think that infrastructures are a means rather than an end, and should be stimulated via specifications of the respective goals (e.g. on Health, Water). When doing so, however, disaggregation by place should stimulate cities to examine those infrastructures through the lens proposed at present: Are they truly inclusive, connective, and resilient?

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[8] *See early Local Agenda 21 pilot study by "The Cities Environment Reports on the Internet (CEROI)" and their indicators lists, available at:* http://www.ceroi.net/ind/indicat.htm. *For the Global City Indicators Facility, green areas are a supporting indicator for good urban planning:* http://cityindicators.org/themes.aspx

[9] *A useful suggestion made by the High Level Panel for all goals. See United Nations (2013):* A new global partnership: Eradicate poverty and transform economies through sustainable development. The report of the High-level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

(4) An important part of the resilience debate centres around mitigating the risk of disasters and focuses on the populations that are most exposed and vulnerable to those risks. We think that attempts to mitigate environmental risks could well be addressed by setting national targets for establishing area information and emergency plans. Cities will have a prominent role in this because they concentrate a large proportion of the population within a relatively small space. Urban planning will and should profit from incorporating redundancy of functions and diversity of actors within response strategies to locally specific dangers such as droughts, floods, or earthquakes. Participation will be crucial to achieve this. The shift in the Bogotá discourse on water vulnerability during the last few years gives a powerful example of this general truth.

5. Key messages

■ Message 1: Establish an Urban Sustainable Development Goal

Cities are hubs of creation, communication, national trend-setting, and transformation. The dynamism of cities holds important keys to offering better livelihoods, decoupling economic growth from environmental resource use, protecting local and regional ecosystems, and improving social inclusion. To unleash these potentials, we need to take local decision makers and citizens seriously and address them through an appropriate, stand-alone SDG. This SDG should not spell out 'the sustainable city,' but instead trigger action at selected points of intervention. In this way, it will achieve high social visibility not only for inner-urban SD issues, but for the overall idea of sustainable development goals. Moreover, it will motivate national governments to support local authorities in achieving urban targets and to monitor national- and city-level progress.

■ Message 2: Make "inclusive, connected and resilient cities" the guiding idea

Local governments have already raised their voices. Some of their most important associations have joined the campaign for an urban SDG. The SDSN formula of inclusive, connected, and resilient cities does justice to the three dimensions of sustainable development by interweaving them. Meaningful targets will reduce spatial and socioeconomic inequalities and improve the quality and sustainability of transport and urban form (compact city, mixed use). They will combat systemic risks at their roots, and counter traditions of urban planning that do not leave enough room for nature and exaggerate the division of labour between urban and rural areas. Smart targets on inclusion, connectivity, and resilience will reduce long-term agglomeration costs and make cities more productive and attractive.

■ Message 3: Go for exemplary targets and indicators that can be influenced by local decision makers

Targets need to be of simple numeric character and easy to grasp for both decision makers and the broader public. They should make use of data that are already compiled at urban levels or have the potential to be so within a reasonable timespan. We suggest targets to improve access to public open areas and services, support workers within the informal economy, reduce average travel time and the use of private cars in urban transport, make cities greener, and account for the availability of regionally produced food. These targets offer points of leverage to address complex challenges that most cities face, such as urban climate, health, productivity, and social justice.

■ Message 4: Consider urban aspects throughout the overall SDG framework

Classical infrastructure challenges such as wastewater treatment and affordable housing will remain crucial to development. They are complemented by new priorities such as energy and resource efficiency, which are particularly important in view of planetary boundaries. The 'resilience' challenge includes making people less vulnerable to future emergencies. Relevant SDGs, such as on Energy, Water, Production and Consumption, or Disaster Prevention, should therefore disaggregate data for urban areas, and pay particular attention to monitoring their development. ■

Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS) e. V.

Founded in 2009, the IASS is an international, interdisciplinary hybrid between a research institute and a think tank, located in Potsdam, Germany. The publicly funded institute promotes research and dialogue between science, politics and society on developing pathways to global sustainability. The IASS focuses on topics such as sustainability governance and economics, new technologies for energy production and resource utilization, and Earth System challenges like climate change, air pollution, and soil management.

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