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Item 5(d) of the provisional agenda
Activities of the network of the Geneva UN Charter Centres for sustainable Housing and Smart Sustainable Cities

Activities of the Geneva UN Charter Centres of Excellence

Summary

The present document outlines the role and relevant work of the Geneva UN Charter Centres of Excellence in promoting sustainable housing and urban development, supporting the implementation of the Agenda 2030, Guidance for the implementation of the *Geneva UN Charter on Sustainable Housing* and the *Place and Life in the ECE-Regional Action Plan 2030*.

The document compiles reports and abstracts from six Centres of Excellence, assessing progress towards the achievement of the 2030 Agenda; presenting initiatives to promote youth homelessness prevention, regional action plans, city diplomacy for urban resilience, local data cultures for sustainable housing, integrating of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into urban planning as well as exploring challenges and potential solutions for financing SDGs.

It serves as a background document for the panel discussion organized by the Centres during the Committee session on their relevant activities.

The Committee is invited to take note of the information provided.

Introduction

1. In response to rapid urbanization, climate change, and growing social inequalities, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land-Management, its subsidiary bodies and its network of Geneva UN Charter Centres of Excellence[1] focus on fostering sustainable urban development and housing policies. Guided by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), these initiatives are aimed at aligning urban

[1] UNECE Charter Centres of Excellence homepage: https://unece.org/housing/charter-centres

policies and practices with global sustainability objectives, promoting resilience in housing and infrastructure, fostering social inclusion, enhancing data-driven urban governance, addressing climate change impacts, and strengthening international cooperation among cities.

2. The subsequent collection of reports in this document, authored by various Centres of Excellence, illustrates relevant research and activities being undertaken by the Centres to address the above challenges:

(a) In chapter I, the report from the Centre of Excellence on Smart Sustainable Cities at The Glasgow School of Art, United Kingdom, explores how cities can address the challenges of the Anthropocene—an era where human activities significantly alter the planet. It reflects on progress made towards Agenda 2030 and the SDGs, highlighting the need for systemic approaches in urban planning to ensure cities remain resilient and sustainable as we enter the second half of the 2030 timeline;

(b) The report in chapter II from the Centre of Excellence on City Diplomacy at Columbia Global Centers | Paris, France, explores how "city diplomacy" fosters international cooperation to boost economic resilience and manage global risks, emphasizing the role of cities in addressing shared challenges through collaboration;

(c) In chapter III, the report from the Centre of Excellence on Youth Homelessness Prevention at York University, Canada, focuses on youth homelessness and the importance of preventative measures. It advocates for early intervention strategies to prevent youth from falling into chronic homelessness, aligning these efforts with the broader goals of the SDGs and UNECE's regional commitments to create inclusive and sustainable urban communities;

(d) The report in chapter IV from the Centre of Excellence on Sustainable Finance for Cities and Infrastructure at LIUC Business School, Italy, identifies key challenges in financing the SDGs, such as limited cooperation, weak governance, and insufficient private sector involvement. It proposes solutions including stronger partnerships and improved planning to address these gaps;.

(e) In chapter V, the report from the Centre of Excellence on Smart Sustainable Cities and Sustainable Urban Development at the University of Geneva, Switzerland, reflects on the significance of local data cultures in housing sustainability. It argues that beyond technical infrastructure, transforming data practices within housing organizations is crucial to align with the SDGs and adapt to a data-driven world;

(f) The report in chapter VIby the Centre of Excellence on Sustainable and Resilient Settlements in Tirana, Albania, highlights the challenges of integrating SDGs into urban planning in the Albanian context, including governance fragmentation, emigration, and insufficient local data. The Centre calls for stronger policies, enhanced regional cooperation, and the use of digital tools to address these challenges. It emphasizes the need to align urban development with the SDGs, particularly in promoting sustainability and resilience in Albanian cities and regions.

3. Together, these reports underscore the need for integrated, strategic efforts in urban planning and collaboration to build sustainable, resilient, and inclusive cities. Central to these efforts are the Geneva UN Charter Centres of Excellence, which play a crucial role in implementing the Geneva UN Charter on Sustainable Housing and the Regional Action Plan for 2030 Place and Life in the ECE[2]. These Centres act as platforms for research, capacity-building, and best practice dissemination in sustainable housing, smart cities, and urban development. By operating at both national and international levels, they help bridge gaps in knowledge, policy, and practice, driving progress in housing and urban sustainability.

4. Finally, it is important to highlight the role of the Forum of Mayors in this context, given the value of building city-based networks that support best practices. While the Pact for the Future will provide top-down guidance and insights for achieving the SDGs and targets, a complementary 'bottom-up' approach driven by cities is equally crucial. Such grassroots efforts can help energize and 'turbocharge' the implementation of sustainable urban development goals, ensuring a more dynamic and collaborative path forward.

[2] Place and Life in the ECE – A Regional Action Plan 2030: ECE_HBP_2021_2-E.pdf (unece.org)

I. Are we contributing to a benign Anthroposystem in our Cities?

A reflection on progress with Agenda 2030 in the territories of the UNECE with six years to go[3].

5. At the turn of this century, the Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen suggested that we are no longer living in the Holocene geological era, but had entered the Anthropocene, a new geological epoch in which humankind is altering the planet and its systems.[4]

8. There are countless ways in which humankind is bringing about these changes that are cumulative, accelerating and altering planetary systems with dire consequences for humankind and all life on the planet. Once any set of variables causes interaction with others, a system is in play where actions working together as an interconnected and complex network can bring about changes and outcomes that are often unpredicted and can be irreversible.[5]

6. If humans, by our actions, are bringing about discrete, cumulative and complex changes, we are, in effect, curating by accident or design an Anthroposystem that has been gathering momentum. There have been warnings for decades, but finally, there is near universal understanding and acceptance that these changes are disrupting the Earth's systems with toxic complications for human and natural ecosystems. This existential pre-occupation for humanity concerns the pace and reversibility of these changes and whether, by human intervention, this Anthroposystem can be moderated to make it tolerable to human and natural ecosystems, and even make it benign.

7. This section opens with a focus on "Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" (Agenda 2030), the Sustainable Development Goals and Targets it introduced (SDGs), and research, policy and action based on it.[6] We have now passed the halfway point in the journey to 2030 since the adoption of Agenda 2030 in 2015 and this is therefore an appropriate point to reflect on the journey so far and raise some halftime questions as we enter the second period to 2030.

8. With the Paris Agreement and Habitat III as starting points, the case study reflects on the work of the UNECE Committee of Urban Development, Housing and Land Management in support of Agenda 2030 in anticipation of the adoption of the Pact for the Future at the UN General Assembly in September 2024.[7] The case content has been selected to provide more granular insight into the realities of enacting the SDGs in cities.

Agenda 2030 and the SDGs

9. "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" (Agenda2030) was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in October 2015.[8] Agenda 2030 was a key text presented to, and adopted by, the Parties at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP21) in Paris on 12 December 2015. The Paris Agreement was signed formally on Earth Day, 22 April 2016 at the United Nations Headquarters in New York[9] and was entered into force in November 2016 after ratification by 55 countries responsible for at least

[3] Author: Prof B M Evans PhD, the Glasgow Urban Laboratory, a UNECE Centre of Excellence in Smart Sustainable Cities

[4] Paul J Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind", *Nature* 2002 available at https://www.nature.com/articles/415023a accessed 29 August 2024
Paul J Crutzen, "The Anthropocene" in *Earth System Science in the Anthroposcene: Emerging Issues and Problems*, Eckart Ehlers & Thomas Kraft (editors), Springer, pp 13-18

[5] Oxford Dictionary of English

[6] *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,* UN General Assembly Document A/RES/70/1, October 2015, Accessed August 23, 2024 https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n15/291/89/pdf/n1529189.pdf

[7] Pact for the future Available at https://www.un.org/en/summit-of-the-future Accessed August 29, 2024

[8] On 25 September 2015, the 193 countries of the UN General Assembly adopted the 2030 Development Agenda titled "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development." This agenda has 92 paragraphs.

[9] Available at https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement Accessed August 29, 2024

55% of global greenhouse gas emissions.[10] The Paris Agreement is a legally binding international treaty on climate change.[11]

10. Agenda 2030 is a "supremely ambitious and transformational vision" [12] to be achieved through global action based on the three pillars of Sustainable Development – economic, social and environmental. Given that documents adopted by the UN and its agencies must reach consensus agreement among member states, Agenda 2030 is a remarkable achievement in international diplomacy. Arguably, from a global perspective, it is the principal instrument currently in force that can and does, inform and underpin action in support of Sustainable Development to combat climate change and it provides a common and universally accepted language and framework for partnership, communication, implementation and action.

11. To the credit of those who drafted it, Agenda 2030 is a concise document comprising a preamble, a declaration and a schedule of 17 Sustainable Development Goals with 169 Targets. It commits the UN and its signatories to advancing the five "Ps" (People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership) and to "working tirelessly for the full implementation of this Agenda by 2030".[13] This paper is interested in exploring examples of research, implementation, outcomes and lessons learned from action contingent on the Agenda's principles and goals.

12. The language of Agenda 2030 is clear and urgent in tone with little use of conditional tenses. Anyone with experience of the UN, its agencies and committees, will understand how challenging it is to achieve consensus on any use of language that is unambiguous in intent, positive in tone and affirmative in commitment to action. In this respect alone the Paris Agreement and Agenda 2030 are a testament to the process by which these were brought into play. Agenda 2030 touches on every aspect of life, economy, society and species on the Planet and because of its internationally adopted legal mandate and widespread support, it gives agency to member states, their regional governments and cities, to become involved in, and prosecute advancement of, the Agenda and the Goals to work towards common outcomes that will contribute to meetings Targets locally, nationally and globally. This is easier said than done. "All countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership, will implement this plan."[14]

13. From the outset, the SDGs were presented, communicated and discussed using a visual identity made up of the individual graphic icons for the 17 SDGs illustrated as a matrix. This was an effective mnemonic to imprint the SDGs in the collective consciousness and served well (and still does) as an identifier. But it gives little insight into the interactive and systemic action required and a circular logo was adopted to help signify this dynamic reality. (Fig.1, Fig.2)

[10] Trevor Nace, *Earth Day 2016: A Historic Day for Earth's Future* available at https://www.forbes.com/sites/trevornace/2016/04/12/earth-day-2016-historic-day-earths-future/a Accessed 23 August 2024

[11] The agreement was open for signature from April 22, 2016 to April 21, 2017 and was entered into force as an international treaty in November 2016. The agreement is legally binding and universal, and it was the first time almost all the world's nations agreed to cut greenhouse gas emissions. The agreement operates on a five-year cycle, with each country submitting an updated national climate action plan (NDC) every five years. NDCs outline the actions countries will take to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to rising temperatures. Available at https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/paris-agreement Accessed August 29, 2024 The Paris agreement text is available at: https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english_paris_agreement.pdf Accessed 23 August 2024

[12] Agenda 2030 Articles 2 and 7

[13] Agenda 2030 Declaration Article 2

[14] Agenda 2030 preamble.

Fig.1 The SDGs as a grid (UNDESA)

Fig.2 The SDGs as a wheel (UNDESA)

14. As work began in earnest in the dedicated pursuit of individual SDGs, ever more complicated diagrams were developed to communicate the complexity of interactions between the SDGs such as UN-Habitat's infographic about SDG 11 (Fig.3). By the time of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the overarching importance of the systemic nature of forces influencing the SDGs was abundantly clear and communicated in the Secretary-General's Policy Briefs along with the stark message that the pandemic as a global event had significantly delayed progress with the SDGs.[15] (Fig.4).

Fig.3 SDG 11 interactions (UN-Habitat)

[15] UN Covid Policy Briefs
Available at
https://unsdg.un.org/resources/shared-responsibility-global-solidarity-responding-socio-economic-impacts-covid-19
Document
https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/26456SGReportSocioEconomicImpactofCovid19.pdf

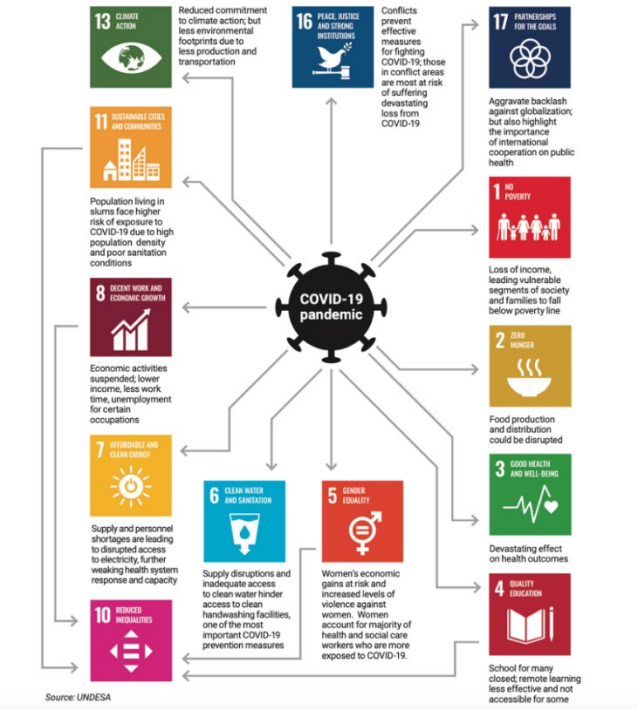

Fig.4 COVID-19 Pandemic had a negative effect of progress with the SDGs (UNDESA)

15. Urbanism is an integrative discipline that seeks to design and deliver intentional positive outcomes for the city rather than succumb to entropy in the system.[16] To a researcher, policy adviser and practitioner in urbanism, there are key passages in the text in support of putting Agenda 2030 into operation for cities, and building procedures for their implementation, delivery, outcomes and monitoring. There is a clear message that encourages the integrative and systemic nature of design and urbanism: "On behalf of the peoples we serve, we have adopted a historic decision on a comprehensive, far-reaching and **people-centred** set of **universal and** transformative Goals and targets." (Article 2) and "These … universal goals and targets … are integrated and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development." (Article 5) [17]

16. As an urbanist, these phrases, with author's emphasis, are an invitation to put people, and the agency they have from the communities, cities and governments that represent them, at the centre of delivering Agenda 2030 working locally for community benefit coincident with global action for humanity and life on the planet. It is a manifestation of the aphorism "think global, act local".[18] It puts redemption in our hands, and invites systems thinking. The case study described here for the UNECE looks at this in practice, building on the significance and legacy of Habitat III that acted as an accelerant in the implementation of Agenda 2030 before the COVID-19 pandemic acted as a break.

The century of the city: Habitat III & the new urban agenda

17. "One in every ten people lived in urban areas a century ago … by 2050 … almost three-quarters of the world's population will call urban areas home".[19]

[16] Brian Evans, "Urbanism is the path to urbanity", *Here & Now*, AoU Journal No.5, Spring 2015

[17] Agenda 2030, Articles 2 and 5

[18] The phrase "*think global, act local*" is thought to have originated with Patrick Geddes, a Scottish urban planner and conservationist in the early 20th century. The phrase is used in many contexts, including: environmental challenges, where it's more effective to reduce your own energy consumption than wait for global action and International Marketing where brands need to be globally consistent while also having local reach.

[19] Neal R Peirce, Curtis W. Johnson and Farley M Peters, Century of the City no time to lose The Rockefeller Foundation, 2008, p7

Paul Swinney and Elli Thomas, *A Century of Cities: Urban Economic Change since 1911*, Centre for Cities (2015)

18. In the first years of the 21st century, this trend and its consequences, became a central preoccupation in the collective consciousness and a primary focus of attention for the United Nations. In 2008, the Rockefeller Foundation captured this zeitgeist in the provocatively titled work Century of the City: No time to lose published following their 2007 urban summit with an ambition to reach a global audience.[20] This simple title captured the essence of the proposition in a phrase and added an attention-grabbing strapline to convey urgency in addressing the issues before us.

19. The book, a collection of essays, factual, polemical, informative and timely, was ultimately a call for global leadership to confront the challenges faced by the prevailing direction of travel. It is a seminal work and had three aims: a simple, concise expression of a complex trend in human habitats; a need for urgency in understanding and facing the consequences of this trend; and a convincing call for enlightened global leadership to address the complexities of this paradigm shift in human living with its consequences for human and planetary systems. Arguably it achieved all three.

20. Every 20 years, the United Nations stages a global conversation to produce a 'report card' on the human habitat. These vicennial world conferences began in Vancouver 1976, continued in Istanbul in 1996, with the third in Quito in 2016. Habitat III was configured to embrace and advance Agenda 2030 to address climate change and, in recognition of the rural to urban shift, the Secretary-General signaled a change in emphasis for H-III to focus on cities, with the express intention of developing a new manifesto for action expressed as the New Urban Agenda.[21] This became the fountainhead for, and principal driver of, Habitat III.

21. The New Urban Agenda aimed to be a concise, action-oriented, forward-looking, and universal framework of actions for housing and sustainable urban development.[22] As part of the preparation for Habitat III, the Secretary-General asked each of the five regional Commissions of the UN to produce a report on trends affecting the cities of their region. The brief was two-fold: to identify trends in cities of the region between Habitat II (1996) and Habitat III (2016), and to speculate about the continuation of these trends towards 2030, the time horizon adopted for Agenda 2030.

22. The UNECE has 56 member states extending in scale from the three continental countries of Canada, the United States and the Russian Federation to the three microstates of Andorra, Monaco and San Marino together with 50 states of Western and Eastern Europe, and Eurasia. The UNECE territory encircles the Arctic Ocean and extends across the northern hemisphere from Vancouver, Canada to Vladivostok, Russia and is home to 17% of the world's population. The Regional Report was commissioned jointly by the UNECE, the European office of UN-Habitat, and the Habitat III Secretariat. The report was submitted in evidence to Habitat III, adopted by the UNECE and published in 2017.[23]

23. The UNECE territories have over 260 cities of 500,000 or more population with six megacities – Moscow, Istanbul, Paris, London, New York and Los Angeles.[24] The report's findings and conclusions may be summarised briefly as follows:

The Shift from the Industrial City to The Knowledge City

24. Since 1976, there has been a paradigm shift from industrial cities where the means of production is based on primary and secondary industries (extraction of raw materials and manufacturing) to knowledge cities where the means of production is predicated on tertiary industries (science, technology, tourism and place). The research identified this trend across the territories of the UNECE and give clarity to the proposition of post-industrial as a transition away from one state or type of city to an urban outcome as yet undefined. The search for this outcome has been a pre-occupation of many cities across the UNECE for decades. (Fig.5)

[20] Neal R Peirce, Curtis W. Johnson and Farley M Peters, Century of the City no time to lose

[21] The new urban agenda is available at https://habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda/ Accessed 20 August 2024

[22] The new urban agenda https://habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda/

[23] The UNECE Regional report for Habitat III Available at
Final Report Published 2017:
https://habitat3.org/documents-and-archive/preparatory-documents/regional-reports/
Submitted to the Habitat III Conference:
https://habitat3.org/documents-and-archive/preparatory-documents/regional-reports/

[24] Megacities are considered to be cities with a population of over 10 million. Characteristics of megacities include population, large surface areas, and extensive transport systems. Important global cities that are key in the economic system.

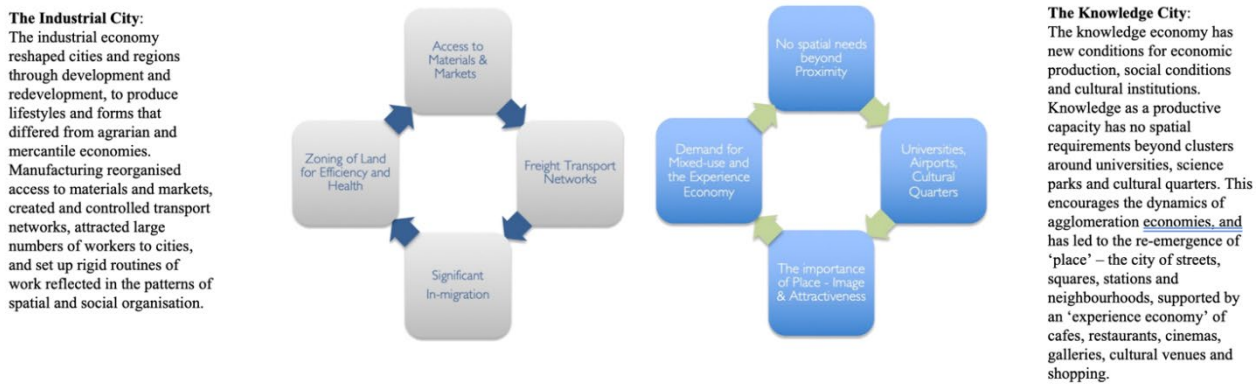

Fig.5 The Industrial – Knowledge Transition (Glasgow Urban Lab)

25. This predominant trend is real and demonstrable, but not universal. Not every city will be able to make this transition and there are systemic cycles for cities in transition in the 21st century that generate radically different, and at times dispiriting, outcomes.

26. This analysis casts the soubriquet post-industrial as an urban purgatory where redemption is represented by smart sustainable cities [25] and perdition by shrinking sprawling cities. This imperfect metaphor helps us understand the likely destination for successful and declining cities today. Research for the UNECE Regional Report produced written descriptors for various positive and negative urban cycles – shrinking, sprawling, compact, resilient – that were later published with accompanying system cycle diagrams.[26]

2.2. A trend to urban concentration and the "Jet Age – Net Age paradox"

27. The forces driving the industrial to knowledge transition have caused urban concentration. A predicted centrifugal force in cities leading to dispersal of activity and hollowing out of cities described by Cairncross in the Death of Distance, Mitchell in City of Bits: Space, Place, and the Infobahn and Kasarda in Aerotropolis has not come about.[27] Instead, The huge growth in affordable air travel in the period 1996-2016 together with the onset of fast and interconnected internet (the internet of things) has compounded urban concentration through a concentrating centripetal force.

28. The jet-age of fast cheap air travel combined with the net-age of fast digital access have reinforced urban concentration in successful cities but can lead to urban sprawl and urban shrinking in those less fortunate. The death of distance (with remote rather than home working) and the dispersed city of bits (where internet access rather than physical access predominates have not come about. Face to face contact remains important in the knowledge and experience economy. The global-local paradox is real. The more similar and inter-connected we become, the more we value local distinctiveness.

2.3. Few megacities, clusters of knowledge cities and the rise of northern metacities clusters

29. The term metacity is used to describe the extremely large metropolitan centres (of a scale order different to megacity) with populations of 20 million or more such as Tokyo (37mio), Shanghai (25mio), Lagos (21mio),

[25] Smart sustainable cities. Further information available at
Website
https://unece.org/housing/smart-sustainable-cities
Document
https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/SSC%20nexus_web_opt_ENG_0.pdf
Accessed 25 August 2024

[26] UNECE Regional report for Habitat III pp 66-69

[27] Aerotropolis: The Way We'll Live Next by John Kasarda and Greg Lindsay
The Death of Distance 2.0: How the Communications Revolution Will Change Our Lives (2001) by Frances Cairncross
City of Bits: Space, Place, and the Infobahn (1996) by William J. Mitchell, MIT Press

Sao Paulo (22mio), Mumbai (25mio), Seoul (25mio).[28] The UNECE territories have six megacities but as yet no metacities although some come close. However, the combination of mobility and communication that has accelerated urban concentration has also led to the clustering of cities, where cities within a one-hour travel distance of one another can combine to share scale of economic activity. These polycentric clusters and powerhouses of economic activity were described as supercities by the report's authors.[29]

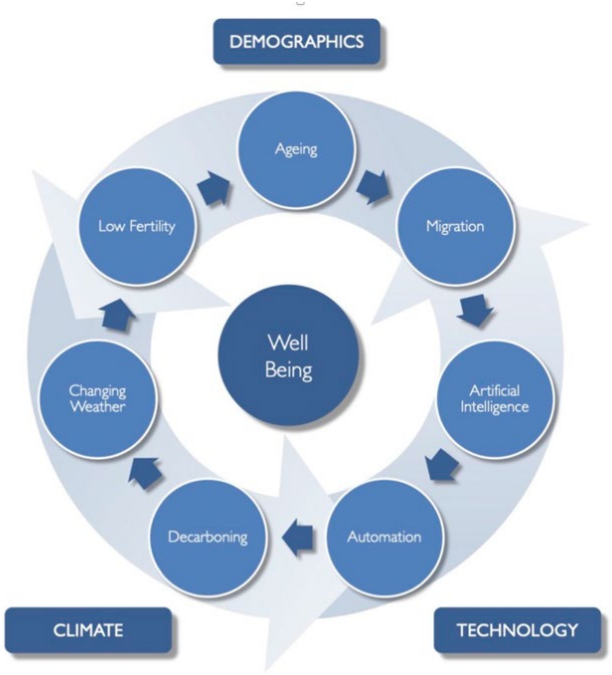

Fig.6 A benign or toxic cycle of change (Glasgow Urban Lab)

A basket of systemic trends combining in different ways in different cycles of cities

30. Ageing, fertility, migration, climate change, automation and artificial intelligence combine in systemic ways that create cycles that move at different rates and different combinations in different cities. (Fig.6). These can become self-fulfilling cycles and once embarked on can accelerate and become irreversible.[30]

31. These trends stimulate different cycles in cities, some of them are negative, shrinking or sprawling, and some are positives compact, resilient and competitive cities. (Fig.7) In some cities transition is driven by social, economic and environmental advantage, for others a degree of subvention and encouragement in the transition process is required. With others more existential challenges are present. As Swinney and Thomas have pointed out there are risks associated with attempting to replicate past success.[31] The cities that have made, or are making,

[28] see for example: The Metacity: A Conceptual Framework for Integrating Ecology and Urban Design B. McGrath S.T.A. Pickett Challenges 2011, 2, 55-72; doi:10.3390/challe2040055

[29] Brian Evans, Pietro Elisei, Orna Rosenfeld, Gulnara Roll, Amie Figueiredo and Marco Kleiner (2016), Habitat III – Toward a New Urban Agenda disP – The Planning Review, 52:1, 88-91, DOI: 10.1080/02513625.2016.1171052

[30] The trends are discussed in the Regional Report and the cycles are described in RR at pp 6-69 and they were developed as circular system diagrams that were not included in the final report but were subsequently published in other research and developed in diagrammatic form see *Scotland's Urban AGE: Aberdeen, Glasgow and Edinburgh in the Century of the City* (2018) https://www.burnesspaull.com/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/12368/Urban_Age_Full_Report_w.pdf

[31] Swinney pp9-11 and p20
https://commission.europa.eu/eu-regional-and-urban-development/topics/cities-and-urban-development/city-initiatives/smart-cities_en#what-are-smart-cities
Document
https://www.centreforcities.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/15-03-04-A-Century-of-Cities.pdf
Richard Florida in Bloomberg
https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-03-12/why-some-u-k-cities-thrive-while-others-decline

the industrial to knowledge transition are those that can demonstrate willingness and capability for reinvention with clear progress towards SDG targets. Those that cannot, present risks to themselves and to progress with Agenda 2030.

32. In most urban systems in the advanced, developed and developing economies of the UNECE all three sub-types are present and therefore hinder, to varying degrees, overall progress of the system towards Agenda 2030 goals and targets. Understanding of, and radical action in, shrinking and sprawling urban subsystems will be essential for delivery of the SDGs and any escalation of the pace of their delivery. To achieve this will require a more sophisticated understanding of urban systems and how intervention may be brought about for the whole urban system, not just the individual city.

33. These changes are very clear in certain cities and help to inform why all cities might aspire to being smart and successful, but not all can without significant intervention and a more radical appraisal of what makes cities failing and what change can be brought about in their fortunes. These trends have produced stars and have also produced duds where the cities and their communities feel left behind engendering alienation and despair in their people. Many of UNECE member states experience this dichotomy and the debate it stimulates is particularly prominent in the USA and the advanced economies of Europe (UK, France, Germany) stimulating discord and unhelpful political discourse.

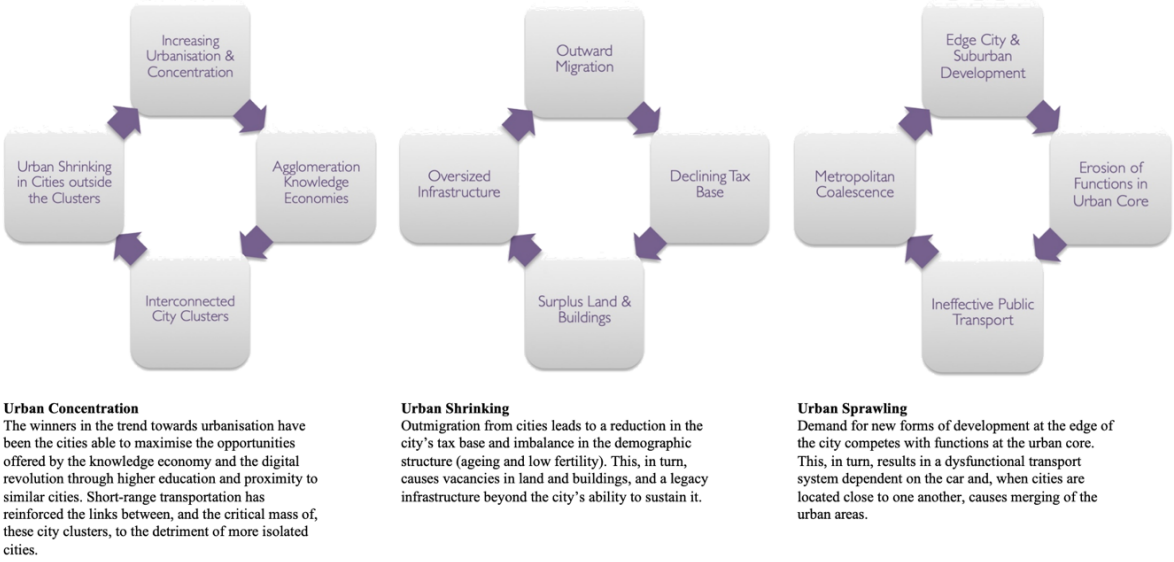

Fig.7 Concentration, Shrinking and Sprawling City Cycles (Glasgow Urban Lab)

34. Taking forward the findings of the H-III Regional Report lies with the UNECE's Committee for Urban Development, Housing and Land Management (CUDHLM). It is important to note in passing, a significant Committee initiative preceded the publication of Agenda 2030 and the preparation of the Regional Report. The Geneva UN Charter for Sustainable Housing was adopted by the Committee in 2013.[32] With core principles of Environmental protection, Economic effectiveness, Social inclusion & participation, and Cultural adequacy, the Geneva Charter stimulating a great deal of interest and support among member states, and the Committee determined that this work should be congruent with action aligned through the Goals and Targets of Agenda

The EU
https://commission.europa.eu/eu-regional-and-urban-development/topics/cities-and-urban-development/city-initiatives/smart-cities_en#what-are-smart-cities
https://new-european-bauhaus.europa.eu/index_en

[32] Geneva UN Charter for Sustainable Housing
Homepage: https://unece.org/housing/charter
Document: https://unece.org/DAM/hlm/charter/Language_versions/ENG_Geneva_UN_Charter.pdf
Implementation Guidance:
https://unece.org/DAM/hlm/documents/Publications/Charter_Guidance_with_cover.pdf

2030 and the Regional Report's findings. This was achieved though expert best practice groups in regional meetings and conferences.[33]

35. Progress with this work stimulated an intent to be more explicit in references to Agenda 2030 goals and targets to assist member states and their cities through recent initiatives including:

a) People-smart sustainable cities: that highlights how different cities have different capacities to cope with crises arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and how the economic effects of lockdown have disproportionally affected different cities as well as different groups of the population with the most vulnerable groups of society suffering most. [34]
b) #Housing2030: Effective policies for affordable housing in the UNECE region developed within #Housing2030, a joint international initiative of UNECE, UN-Habitat and Housing Europe, exploring housing affordability challenges and existing policy instruments for improving housing affordability in the UNECE region and the exchange and dissemination of good practices in best practice among countries and cities of the UNECE[35].
c) Place and Life in the ECE – A Regional Action plan for 2030: that brought city trends and housing trends into alignment with Agenda 2030, SDGs and the UN Geneva Charter and principles.[36] (Fig.8)
d) Development of indicators[37]: This work has been accompanied by the development of two networks to help localise the work for cities within member states.
e) The Geneva UN Charter Centres

[33] Expert Group Meetings convened in Milan, Italy on 29 May 2015, Geneva, Switzerland on 8-10 July 2015 and Brussels, Belgium on 21-22 September 2015.
VIENNA CONFERENCE
Promoting access to adequate, affordable and decent housing for all through the implementation of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, the New Urban Agenda and Geneva UN Charter on Sustainable Housing, CONFERENCE REPORT 12-13 April 2018
Homepage: https://unece.org/housing-and-land-management/events/vienna-conference-sustainable-housing-promoting-access
Vienna Message:
https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/hlm/Meetings/2018/04_12/Documentation/Message_of_the_Vienna_Conference_12_April_2018.pdf
Conference Document: https://unece.org/DAM/hlm/documents/Publications/2018_Vienna_Conference_Report.pdf
GLASGOW CONFERENCE
Homepage: https://unece.org/housing-and-land-management/events/unece-conference-city-living
Glasgow Message: https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/hlm/Meetings/2019/09_12-13_Glasgow_Conference/Glasgow_Message.pdf
Concept Note: https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/hlm/Meetings/2019/09_12-13_Glasgow_Conference/GCCL_Concept_Note.pdf
[34] Smart sustainable cities
Website
https://unece.org/housing/smart-sustainable-cities
Document
https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/SSC%20nexus_web_opt_ENG_0.pdf
[35] #Housing 2030 Research
Homepage: https://unece.org/housing-and-land-management/publications/housing2030-study-e
Document: https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/Housing2030%20study_E_web.pdf
[36] Place and life in the ECE
Webpage
https://unece.org/housing/regional-action-plan-2030
UNECE Report Approved Document
https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/ECE_HBP_2021_2-E.pdf
Published Document
https://unece.org/housing-and-land-management/publications/place-and-life-ece-regional-action-plan-2030
https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2022-07/Place%20and%20Life%20in%20the%20ECE_web_0.pdf
[37] UNECE Set of Core Climate Change-related Indicators and Statistics
https://unece.org/statistics/publications/CES-set-of-core-climate-change-related-indicators
Document
https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/CES_Set_Core_CCR_Indicators-Report.pdf

f) Forum of Mayors[38]: This granularity brings the SDGs closer to people, communities, neighbourhoods and cities where outcomes can be effected and aggregated.

36. Following the evolution of this work, it is clear that there is an interrelated and systemic relationship between the 17 SDGs and whereas the pursuit of a particular SDG though specialist expertise is to some extent inevitable, it cannot be undertaken in isolation. Action and work in pursuit of a specific SDG with particular targets is sound in terms of Agenda 2030, but also requires understanding and balancing of effects on other SDGs and, in systems terminology, may mean that the best action in pursuit of an individual SDG target maybe suboptimal in terms of the specific, but with a better outcome for the overall result. Systemic interaction is important but often implicit or little understood. (Fig.9)

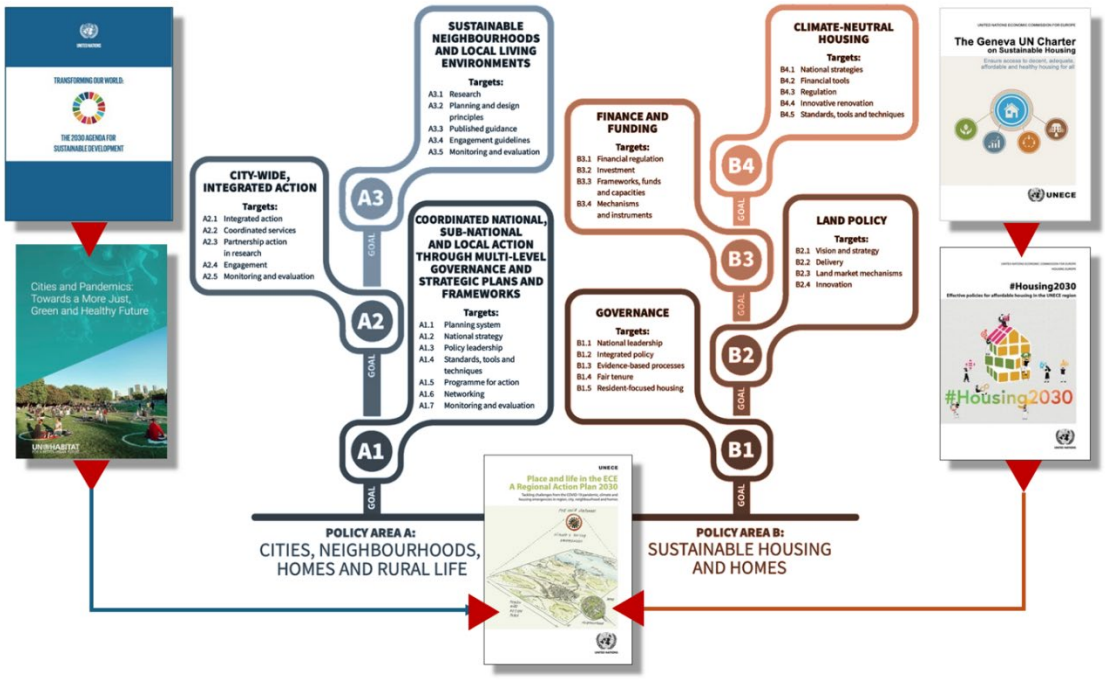

Fig.8 Place & Life in the ECE: A Regional Action Plan 2030

Integrated Policy Action (UN-Habitat/UNECE/Glasgow Urban Lab)

[38] UNECE Forum of Mayors https://unece.org/forumofmayors
Forum of Mayors own website https://forumofmayors.unece.org/

Fig.9 The complexity of SDG checks and balances within the city space (UNDESA/Glasgow Urban Lab)

Conclusions and reflections

37. "Cities are where the Climate Battle will largely be won or lost", UN Secretary-General [39]

41. "We believe the best way to tackle climate change is through reducing energy use and waste and using local spaces to grow food that bring immediate practical benefits to local people.", SouthSeeds, Social Entrepreneur and Community Climate Activist, Glasgow [40]

38. As one of five commissions of the UN responsible for Regional Development, the UNECE has, at the halfway point to 2030, made huge steps forward in understanding, coordinating, promoting and advocating the implementation of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs within and across its member states. Working with UN-Habitat and other partners, CUDHLM has documented and disseminated strategic urban challenges and solutions across the region.

39. Through a number of actions, publications and advice, the Committee has brought into register research on cities and on housing and has developed an action plan with policies, goals and targets for coordinated implementation. It has done this consensually with members states through developing and guiding the formulation of Charters and Declarations. The Committee has acted creatively to inform and empower cities across the region and their appetite to participate in the delivery of Agenda 2030 through the development of two co-created networks to assist members and it has worked to overcome the delays to the 2030 Agenda brought about by the COVID pandemic.

40. This work has informed an understanding of the complexities of Agenda 2030 SDGs and their interactions and brought into sharp focus the need for a better systems understanding of the interactions that is not yet in place. Goals, principles, targets, and indicators are undoubtedly necessary and useful tools. They tell us where we are going, what we have achieved and where, but do not inform us how to confront and overcome challenges

[39] Speech by UN Secretary-General António Guterres to the C40 World Mayors Summit in Copenhagen, UN Secretary-General António Guterres
https://unfccc.int/news/guterres-cities-are-where-the-climate-battle-will-largely-be-won-or-lost
[40] Place Story in the Final Report of the Place Commission for Glasgow, 2023
https://www.glasgow.gov.uk/media/13325/Place-Commission-Final-Report/pdf/Place_Commission_Final_Report.pdf?m=1722594080153

in order to escalate action. The Secretary-General has rightly avowed to accelerate and “turbocharge” the implementation of the SDGs through the Pact for the Future. But more work will be required to develop better tools for understanding the systemic interaction of actions pursuant on delivery of SDGs and also assist the understanding of working with differing types of cities where some, by their nature and circumstances beyond their control, are going in a direction of travel opposite to that of Agenda 2030 where ill-informed intervention can replicate old habits in the interest of short term economic benefit for example the opening of new licenses for carbon extractive industries such as fracking and further oil exploration and development.

41. We can expect willing from the proto-knowledge people-smart sustainable cities and expect push back from those who feel left behind. Systems tools need to be developed to embrace both groups of cities or the promise of Sustainable Development as defined by Agenda 2030 will be inhibited.Figuring out how the Anthroposystem can be made benign to human and natural ecosystems such that all can embrace it remains the biggest challenge to the turbocharging process. It requires a system that has the elegance, simplicity, promise and accessibility of the Agenda 2030 mission document that works for all, not just some. New systems tools are required to work with progress towards outcomes in real time that show where interactions between SDG/Ts complement or inhibit one another.

42. It is suggested that the network of UNECE Centres of Excellence, working through the Secretariat and in concert with the Forum of Mayors, seek to coordinate knowledge of existing systems tools that can be assembled and augmented, probably through AI, to establish a common platform that could be accessible across the cities of the UNECE to pool and share data. This would require engagement with large private sector technology companies. The aim might be to engage with open-source technologies, international partners and avoid seeking the perfect system, in order to develop simple available tools that have the clarity and commonality of Agenda 2020.

43. The changes foreseen through the Pact for the Future will require, at the very least updates and amendments, and will need systems thinking, design thinking and an inversion of the process – in order to see out from communities as well as in from governments. Action at speed is required to confront the climate, housing, and biodiversity emergencies and why we need such enhanced systems.

II. Opportunities and challenges of city diplomacy for urban resilience[41]

44. Over the last few decades, international city-to-city collaboration has been increasingly acknowledged by both scholars and practitioners as instrumental in bolstering urban economic resilience to a wide array of risks. At the same time, empirical evidence suggests that municipal governments' generalized lack of "city diplomacy risk" awareness can considerably hinder this potential. The City Diplomacy Lab will present at the 85th session of the Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management the preliminary results of its research aimed at providing an overview of this issue in the UNECE region and beyond, offering a framework of analysis and pragmatic recommendations for consideration by cities and national governments.

45. The concept of urban resilience marked the emergence and evolution of international cooperation between local governments, known under the name of city diplomacy. Indeed, although the term "resilience" was not explicitly mentioned, it can be identified as one of the aims of the International Union of Cities, the first worldwide network of local governments created in 1913 in Ghent on the margins of the World's Fair. Summoning his peers from around the world, the then mayor of the Flemish city Emil Braun tasked such collaboration to "deliberate [...] on the major problems that arise from the universal nature of the conditions of present-day life, which are more or less the same everywhere.”[42]

[41] Authors: Lorenzo Kihlgren Grandi and Cecilia Emma Sottilotta, *City Diplomacy Lab, Geneva UN Charter Centre of Excellence on Sustainable Urban Development and City Diplomacy*

[42] United Cities and Local Governments. (2013). *1913•2013. 100 years: Testimonies*. UCLG. https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/libro%20centenario-web%20(1).pdf

46. The two world wars and the process of decolonization made the first decades of this practice particularly focused on the concepts of solidarity and technical assistance toward the cities most in need. Since the 1990s, however, the rise of economic globalization and neoliberalism led more and more cities to explicitly integrate their goals of economic growth and job creation within both bilateral and multilateral cooperative relationships[43]. Eventually, the synthesis between the "moral good" of the origins and this second stage marked by "self-interest" emerged following the 2015 introduction of Agenda 2030. Among the growing number of internationally active local governments, the United Nations' call for international collaboration for the joint goals of humanity has indeed been received with particular enthusiasm. Accordingly, a holistic approach to city diplomacy has been spreading, finding its main driver in the pervasive perception that urban communities share major sustainability challenges and opportunities with their peers across the world.

47. Today, therefore, an essential component of city diplomacy consists of cooperation for economic resilience. At the same time, the widespread adoption of participatory and multi-stakeholder approaches to local governance has led to frequent involvement in international partnerships by academia, businesses, and start-ups.

48. Despite the fact that it is now a well-established phenomenon, international cooperation for economic resilience is, to date, largely lacking comprehensive frameworks taking into account both its opportunities and risks for local governments and actors. If, since the 1990s, there has been a wide academic production on the driving economic role of cities in international economic flows, the risks related to such positioning have been largely overlooked. The newly introduced concept of "city diplomacy risk"[44] frames and categorizes a vast array of international relations-connected challenges for local authorities that include but exceed the traditional definition of "political risk," e.g., "the negative impact on the profitability of an investment caused by circumstances ascribable either to adverse unforeseen changes [...] in the domestic or international political arena, or to governmental policy choices affecting an international investor's property rights"[45].

49. This lack of academic literature is matched by an often inadequate regulation of city diplomacy risk at both national and global levels. Local and national governments, therefore, find themselves forced to date to deal with the emergence of such risks on a trial-and-error, case-by-case basis.

50. Building on the concept of “city diplomacy risk”, City Diplomacy Lab’s researchers are developing a policy brief based on research conducted in the United States, Germany, and Japan. The document will define the potential and risks to urban economic resilience associated with the wide range of actions that fall under the term city diplomacy. It will also provide a framework for city and local governments to assess their own city diplomacy risk. Finally, the brief will contain a set of proposals for the attention of UNECE member states to guide their cities in developing international cooperation that strengthens economic resiliency without exposing the local–and national–economic systems to risks related to international interactions.

III. The case for youth homelessness and homelessness prevention in the UNECE region[46]

51. Youth homelessness intersects with various social, economic, and environmental challenges, closely linked to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Geneva UN Charter on Sustainable Housing (the Charter), and 2021’s Place and Life in the ECE – A Regional Action Plan 2030 (the RAP). This brief is intended to demonstrate the imperative of taking immediate and comprehensive action to prevent and address youth homelessness as a critical step in realizing the goals laid out in these frameworks.

[43] Amiri, S., & Kihlgren Grandi, L. (2021). Cities as Public Diplomacy Actors: Combining Moral “Good” with Self-interest. In C. Alexander (Ed.), *Frontiers of public diplomacy: Hegemony, morality, and power in the international sphere*. Routledge.

[44] Kihlgren Grandi, L. (forthcoming), “Localising political risk. A framework for analysing political risk associated with city diplomacy”, in Campisi, J., Meissner, H., and Sottilotta, C.E. (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Political Risk*.

[45] Sottilotta, C. E. (2017). *Rethinking political risk: Concepts, theories, challenges*. Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

[46] Authors: Amanda Buchnea and Emily Kellway; Editors: Melanie Redman and Stephen Gaetz

52. To begin, background information on homelessness in the UNECE region is provided, introducing the case for homelessness prevention, and rationale for prioritizing those in greatest need. Youth under the age of 25 are specifically identified as a priority population for preventing and addressing homelessness. Youth homelessness and prevention are then connected to relevant considerations from the SDGs, the Charter and the RAP. Examples of significant efforts to combat homelessness throughout the UNECE region are presented, outlining the critical role these initiatives play in achieving our collective goals for homelessness prevention. By integrating youth-focused strategies into these broader homelessness prevention efforts, we can create solutions that ensure all young people have access to stable housing and supportive environments, aligning with UNECE goals for equitable and inclusive development, as outlined in the 2030 Agenda.

Homelessness in the UNECE region

53. Homelessness is a complex and multifaceted problem that has become a pressing issue across the UNECE region. Globally, approximately 150 million people are homeless, and more than 1.8 billion people lack adequate and affordable housing (UN General Assembly, 2019). Within UNECE countries, the levels and experiences of homelessness vary considerably, with the issue being defined and measured differently from country to country. However, finding sustainable solutions to ensure access to housing for all, and particularly for those in need of deeply affordable housing, remains a significant challenge in every Member State (UN General Assembly, 2019).

54. The issue of homelessness is rooted in the violation of human rights, inequitable access to resources, and structural and systemic issues. Recent rises in the number of individuals and families can be traced to a series of interrelated impacts associated with climate change, forced migration, displacement from conflict, the housing and cost of living crisis, and more (UN General Assembly, 2015, 2019; UNHCR, 2024). Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive and equitable approach, recognizing that diverse factors cause people's experiences of homelessness, and that homelessness is experienced differently by different population groups.

55. For example, people with citizenship status may face different barriers to accessing and maintaining stable housing than someone who is a new immigrant or refugee (UN General Assembly, 2019). In countries such as Canada, Australia and the United States, homelessness disproportionately impacts Indigenous peoples who have experienced historic and ongoing negative impacts of colonization, including forced displacement, which put them at greater risk of experiencing homelessness (Peters & Christensen, 2016). Similarly, racialized groups and people of sexual and gender minorities are particularly at-risk of homelessness due to systemic discrimination in both public policy, community practice interventions, and interpersonally due to stigma within their families and/or communities (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, n.d.).

56. Recognizing the complexity and diversity of both the causes and experiences of homelessness, there is no single program or policy intervention that can meaningfully address the full scope of the issue. Rather, systemic change is required to evaluate the conditions within a given state that cause or perpetuate homelessness as a social phenomenon, and to develop new policies and practices that are responsive to and informed by the needs and priorities of the population(s) who are experiencing homelessness.

Responding to homelessness: Emphasizing prevention and youth homelessness

57. There are two general approaches to responding to homelessness through government policies and interventions. Governments can react to homelessness through crisis response policies and interventions that address the emergent, immediate and most visible needs of people experiencing homelessness. The alternative is to prevent people from experiencing homelessness in the first place and to ensure that those who lose their housing are given timely and effective support to ensure they return to housing and do not become homeless again (Gaetz & Dej, 2017).

58. The crisis approach currently dominates most UNECE Member States' approach to addressing homelessness, including in Canada where investments into homelessness tend to skew toward providing emergency shelters, drop-in or day centres, and soup kitchens. However, these services are typically very costly, and can easily become overwhelmed when events drive up the need for support, such as an influx of refugees fleeing violence and persecution, a natural disaster, or extreme weather events.

59. These crisis responses fail to address the root causes of homelessness, and far too many people can become entrenched in long-term (chronic) homelessness, often cycling between other public emergency systems including hospitals and prisons (Gaetz et al. 2016a). This reactive approach is unsustainable and insufficient for

ending homelessness. Crisis responses are frequently humanitarian in nature and do not address the myriad rights violations that accompany homelessness, such as the right to adequate housing and right to life. The focus therefore should shift toward more preventative approaches, not only for moral reasons—such as reducing the trauma people experience and enabling them to lead fulfilling lives—but for economic reasons and the overall prosperity and well-being of UNECE Member States.

60. Homelessness prevention is less widely adopted, yet has become of greater interest in many countries that have realized the impossibility of ending homelessness through a primarily crisis-driven response. There have been numerous attempts to define homelessness prevention, most of which are linked to the public health model of primary, secondary and tertiary prevention. The Canadian definition of prevention describes these areas as:

a) Primary prevention: Working upstream to reduce risk and prevent people from becoming homelessness in the first place

b) Secondary prevention: Intervening early to minimize the risk that people will become entrenched in long-term (chronic) homelessness

c) Tertiary prevention: Providing supports to get people out of homelessness and reduce the risk they will return (Gaetz & Dej, 2017).

61. Preventing people from experiencing homelessness and ensuring they do not become mired in chronic homelessness requires universal policies and programs to reduce risk of homelessness at a population level (e.g., support for families with children, income assistance for people with disabilities and seniors, access to public education and training to secure well-paying jobs).

62. Prevention must also include carefully tailored policies and programs that address risk factors experienced by specific groups, which should be developed in collaboration with those who experience greater risk of homelessness (e.g., supports for refugees, transition supports for people leaving public systems such as prisons, health care facilities and child protection services) (Gaetz et al., 2017). At the service-level, prevention initiatives need to be responsive to the individual needs of people experiencing or at risk of homelessness to navigate their unique set of circumstances, and take into account their personal strengths and risk factors.

63. There is perhaps no greater example of the need for homelessness prevention than experiences of youth homelessness. The journey into homelessness often begins much earlier in life than our policies and programs are designed to address. In Canada, youth homelessness is defined as “young people between the ages of 13 and 24 who are living independently of parents and/or caregivers, but do not have the means or ability to acquire a stable, safe or consistent residence” (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2016).

64. The age mandate of this definition is significant. Despite over 40% of homeless youth having their first experience of homelessness before the age of 16, most youth-serving homelessness programs in Canada are not available to anyone under the age of 16 or 18 (Gaetz et al., 2016b). Canadian statistics on youth homelessness also show that youth who first experience homelessness at a younger age (e.g., under 16 years old) have much poorer outcomes in their health and well-being.

65. Youth homelessness can be directly tied to the population of adults who experience homelessness. In recent years, national homelessness data in Canada revealed that about 50% of all people experiencing homelessness reported that their first experience occurred when they were young people before the age of 25 (Infrastructure Canada, 2018; 2022). Therefore, without adequate support to prevent and exit homelessness early on, young people can become entrenched in a cycle of housing instability and homelessness, negatively impacting their health, wellbeing, ability to participate in education or the job market, and their overall engagement in society (Gaetz & Dej, 2017). The data indicates that public policies and interventions are far too late and inadequate to meaningfully address youth homelessness, leading to the perpetuation of chronic adult homelessness.

66. Much of the response to homelessness was developed with adults in mind, however it is crucial to recognize that the causes and experiences of youth homelessness are distinct. For example, both compared to adults and other root causes of homelessness, youth are more likely to experience homelessness due to family breakdown (Infrastructure Canada 2018, 2022). They are less likely to have educational or work experience to lean on, simply because of their age, and can often face age-based discrimination in the rental market. Additionally, youth have unique developmental needs that must be considered. Responses to youth homelessness must therefore differ from those addressing adult homelessness, with age-appropriate solutions targeting the root causes and working upstream (Gaetz et al., 2018).

67. Building off of the Canadian definition of homelessness prevention previously mentioned, the prevention of youth homelessness refers to housing-led policies, practices and interventions that provide developmentally

appropriate supports designed to stabilize housing, enhance well-being, keep young people connected to their communities, increase attachment to education and employment and enhance social inclusion through strengthening relationships between youth and family members as well as other meaningful adults in their lives. This is achieved through the following areas of focus:

a) Primary prevention: Reducing inflows into homelessness by taking upstream proactive steps to stop young people from becoming homeless in the first place.

b) Secondary prevention: Intervening early to reduce the risk that youth who experience homelessness for the first time will transition to long-term or chronic homelessness.

c) Tertiary prevention: Providing appropriate supports to reduce the likelihood that youth who exit homelessness will return to it (Gaetz et al., 2024).

68. Children and youth who are homeless are recognized as experiencing violations of their rights under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). This was articulated in UN General Comment No. 21 (2017) on Children in Street Situations, published by the Committee on the Rights of the Child after consulting with children, youth, and civil society representatives and sharing a draft with Member States for review.

69. The document sets forth specific objectives to clarify the obligations of Member States, provide guidance, and identify the implications of the CRC articles specifically for children and youth who are experiencing homelessness (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2017). Research and advocacy at the national and supranational levels has pointed to the need for systemic policy changes, such as increasing the age at which care leavers can receive support from child protection services, providing equitable social benefits to youth, preventing evictions, and offering support in spaces young people frequent, such as schools (Gaetz et al., 2018).

70. In this section we have demonstrated the importance of prevention in responding to homelessness and why a focus on youth homelessness is inherently linked to a comprehensive homelessness prevention approach. We will now turn to the implications of guiding frameworks for the UNECE in relation to homelessness prevention and youth.

Connecting the response to youth homelessness with the SDGs, the Charter and the RAP

71. In 2015, at the United Nations General Assembly, the UN established 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as the cornerstone of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Adopted by all 192 UN Member States, these goals serve as "a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future." Since then, the SDGs have been taken up by nation states, municipalities, universities, nonprofits, the private sector and many other groups to demonstrate the ways in which their efforts contribute to achieving these global targets.

72. While the UNECE’s focus on sustainable housing prioritizes SDGs 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 15, and 17, all SDGS are interdependent and indivisible. As such, sustainable, accessible, and socially inclusive communities must also be concerned with addressing poverty, food insecurity and inequality. These connections are especially apparent when viewing the SDGs through the lens of youth homelessness prevention. Despite the omission of homelessness as an explicit target or indicator, the SDGs have direct and indirect implications for this work.

73. Youth homelessness is a severe form of poverty and social exclusion, often tied to intergenerational poverty and disproportionately affecting women and gender-diverse individuals. Its roots lie in structural factors, including rising economic and social inequality, further exacerbated by systemic racism and colonialism. This aligns with key Sustainable Development Goals, such as SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

74. Youth homelessness severely impacts access to basic necessities like food, water, sanitation, and health services, hindering both physical and mental well-being. Without a safe, stable living environment, young people struggle to meet these essential needs, disrupting their education and long-term goals, including securing decent, well-paying work. This situation directly affects progress on key Sustainable Development Goals such as SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

75. Addressing youth homelessness must consider the impacts of climate change on global habitability and affordability. Extreme weather, natural disasters, agricultural challenges, and rising sea levels are creating climate refugees who need access to sustainable and affordable housing. Solutions to climate change, therefore, must be both accessible and affordable for young people most at risk of homelessness, aligning with key Sustainable Development Goals like SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and

Infrastructure), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 (Life Below Water), and SDG 15 (Life on Land).

76. Youth homelessness stems from systemic injustices that demand equitable access to justice, legal identity for all young people, and participatory decision-making at all institutional levels. Criminal systems must address the cycle between state institutions and homelessness. Achieving good governance, equitable communities, and just institutions requires strong partnerships across various sectors and active youth participation, aligning with SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

77. Also in 2015, the Geneva UN Charter on Sustainable Housing was endorsed by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. The Charter is a non-binding document designed to assist Member States in providing decent, adequate, affordable, and healthy housing for everyone. The Charter contributes to the implementation of the relevant Sustainable Development Goals related to Cities and Human Settlements and the UN HABITAT Global Housing Strategy Framework, focusing on four major principles: environmental protection, economic effectiveness, social inclusion and participation, and cultural adequacy (UNECE, 2015).

78. These principles are closely linked not only to the risk factors that contribute to homelessness for individuals and populations, but also to the realities of how people experience homelessness. While the Charter mentions homelessness and highlights the need for special consideration for marginalized, disadvantaged, or vulnerable groups, it is crucial that Member States prioritize these groups in their efforts. As discussed, homelessness is and will continue to rise with the impacts of worsening changes to the global climate, requiring housing and homelessness responses be well-attuned to the need for environmental sustainability (United Nations General Assembly, 2019).

79. The current crisis-oriented approach to homelessness runs counter to economic effectiveness, while prevention offers an opportunity to fulfill people's rights to adequate housing and take the pressure off of costly emergency services (Gaetz & Dej, 2017). Homelessness is also an extreme form of social exclusion that demands the development of participatory and inclusionary responses to housing challenges that do not further marginalize people who are at risk of and experiencing homelessness. Relatedly, cultural adequacy calls on Member States to be responsive to the unique needs and priorities of local communities, rather than advancing policy frameworks and practices that perpetuate systemic discrimination and racism (UNECE, 2015). By focusing on those in greatest need, Member States can advance toward a more sustainable housing environment and make more equitable and impactful progress in achieving the goals associated with these four main principles.

80. In 2021, the UNECE put forward "Place and Life in the ECE – A Regional Action Plan 2030: Tackling challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic, climate and housing emergencies in region, city, neighbourhood and homes" (the RAP), which sets forth several policy goals and targets, as well as potential actions Member States could pursue. Monitoring homelessness, improving social inclusion, and addressing the housing needs of the most marginalized populations are raised as important national and sub-national (city and/or neighbourhood) goals and areas for action (UNECE, 2021a). Indeed, the need to prevent and address homelessness is perhaps most acutely felt at the sub-national level of direct service provision and community/urban planning.

81. While the links to youth homelessness and prevention are evident with a close reading of the SDGs, the Charter, and the RAP, we cannot assume that the general pursuit of these frameworks will fully address youth homelessness or homelessness writ large. To bridge this gap, we must explicitly prioritize youth homelessness, shedding light on the experiences of the most marginalized and socially excluded individuals and families. Adopting an equitable approach is crucial, ensuring that efforts support all youth within Member States, irrespective of legal status. By articulating these goals clearly and explicitly, we enhance our ability to effectively realize the objectives of these frameworks.

Examples of efforts to combat homelessness in the UNECE region

82. Many countries and collectives of Member States across the UNECE region have recognized homelessness as a growing issue and understand that addressing it is essential to achieving many of the previously stated economic and social goals. Below are a few examples of initiatives to combat homelessness in the UNECE region. While many of these efforts have been successful in terms of advocacy, shared objectives, and progress, prioritizing populations that are most marginalized, including youth, and emphasizing homelessness prevention will be crucial to fully meet their intended goals.

83. In 2021, EU Member States and other stakeholders issued the Lisbon Declaration & the European Platform on Combating Homelessness (EPOCH), pledging to work jointly towards ending homelessness by 2030. As the

foundation for EPOCH, the declaration was signed by all 27 EU Member States, the Commission, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee, several European NGOs, and other stakeholders. The signatories agreed that a housing-led approach is the most effective way to tackle and prevent homelessness, emphasizing the need to understand the impact on vulnerable groups such as children, youth, women, single parents, older persons, migrants, and ethnic minorities (European Commission, 2021).

84. They also highlighted the importance of reliable data collection, particularly on youth homelessness, for systematic comparison and monitoring at the EU level, and acknowledge the importance of homelessness prevention throughout (European Commission, 2021). Both the focus on youth homelessness and prevention are important cornerstones of the work that needs to be done, although accountability measures should be put in place to ensure that these priorities are put into practice, rather than simply a stated goal.

85. Across the UNECE region, The movement towards the Right to Adequate Housing is gaining momentum, recognizing and progressively realizing this right (UNECE, 2021b). This movement adopts a human rights approach, emphasizing the importance of ensuring access to safe, affordable, and healthy housing for everyone. Countries like Canada are leading this effort with initiatives such as their National Housing Strategy Act, which legislates the progressive realization of the right to adequate housing. This act underscores Canada's commitment to making housing a fundamental right and addresses homelessness through comprehensive strategies that target systemic housing issues (Government of Canada, 2019).

86. Other countries in the UNECE region are also taking steps to implement policies and frameworks that prioritize housing as a human right, acknowledging its critical role in achieving social equity and sustainable development. While this movement shows great promise in terms of preventing homelessness, the declaration of the right to adequate housing is just one step forward, and mechanisms must be put in place to ensure that this right is realized in practice. The right to adequate housing must also be available to all, ensuring it is not limited to those with legal status.

87. Federal homelessness strategies within UNECE countries have been developed in response to the pressing issue of homelessness, with numerous Member States crafting national strategies tailored to their specific needs. For example, Canada's National Homelessness Strategy, Reaching Home, focuses on reducing homelessness by making strategic investments in community-based initiatives. This strategy emphasizes the goal of supporting the most vulnerable Canadians in securing safe, stable, and affordable housing while aiming to prevent and reduce chronic homelessness across the country (Infrastructure Canada, 2019).

88. However, to support those most vulnerable, including youth, effective strategies must detail the mechanisms by which they are both focusing on prevention and prioritizing dedicated youth-focused approaches. This can be achieved either by integrating youth initiatives within broader federal homelessness strategies or by adopting a standalone youth homelessness strategy, similar to Ireland's approach. Regardless of the method chosen, efforts must go beyond merely naming youth as a priority group, and instead demonstrate their commitment to adopting evidence-based approaches specifically focused on youth homelessness prevention to ensure meaningful impact.

89. The Toronto Centre of Excellence advancing youth homelessness prevention theory and practice has garnered significant attention from researchers and policymakers over the past decade, with innovative approaches emerging across the UNECE region and beyond. Many of these strategies, studied in Canada, were initially pioneered in Europe and Australia (Gaetz et al., 2018). The Toronto Centre of Excellence (TCE) focuses on producing research and facilitating knowledge exchange between Member States to support meaningful efforts in addressing homelessness, with a particular emphasis on prevention and prioritizing youth.

90. Under the TCE, the federally-funded Making the Shift Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab has provided funding to 39 research projects in Canada focused on various aspects of youth homelessness prevention, which will be concluded by 2025. This networked research initiative is arguably the largest investment in youth homelessness prevention research in the world and has resulted in the development of a substantial evidence base to support policy and practice in Canada and beyond. Some practice innovations supported through Making the Shift include early interventions such as The Upstream Project and Reconnect, Family and Natural Supports programs and approaches, and Housing First for Youth. Results and implications of the research will be featured at the upcoming Prevention of Youth Homelessness International Conference in Toronto (February 24-26, 2025). Knowledge mobilization and international collaboration will continue to advance this work through the TCE in the coming years.

Conclusion

91. The work of the Toronto Centre of Excellence on Youth Homelessness Prevention at York University exemplifies the necessity of addressing youth homelessness through a preventative, holistic and integrated approach. Youth homelessness represents a critical issue that intersects with various social, economic, and environmental challenges. Preventing and addressing youth homelessness is also the responsibility of Member States that have signed onto the Convention of the Rights of the Child and is essential for tackling the larger and growing issue of long-term, chronic homelessness.

92. By connecting our efforts to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Geneva UN Charter on Sustainable Housing and the Regional Action Plan 2030, we underscore the importance of preventing youth homelessness across the UNECE region, and how prioritizing youth homelessness prevention as a shared goal is critical to achieve the ambitious targets of the 2030 Agenda. As we move forward, the Toronto Centre of Excellence will continue to advocate for youth homelessness prevention and invites other Member States to join us on this journey. By working together to prevent youth homelessness, we not only move towards a future where every young person has a safe and stable place to call home, but we are working towards a healthier, more equitable future for all.

IV. Financing SDGs: a review of challenges and mitigation strategies[47]

93. With the decline in natural resources and environmental quality, coupled with ongoing economic growth, the global community has increasingly recognized the need for sustainable development (Barua, 2020). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), introduced by the United Nations in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda, represent a worldwide commitment to tackling the most pressing economic, social, and environmental challenges. Comprising 17 goals and 169 specific targets, the SDGs strive to create a more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable future for all, emphasizing the interconnectedness of economic growth, environmental protection, and social well-being.

94. While sustainable development is often narrowly defined as economic growth alongside nature conservation and environmental preservation (Harris & Roach, 2013), it encompasses many more dimensions that must be considered. Achieving these goals will require a significant increase in global development funding, scaling from "billions" to "trillions," highlighting the current financing gap (Clark et al., 2017; Barua & Chiesa, 2019; Doumbia & Lauridsen, 2019).

95. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda estimates that achieving the 17 goals will require an annual investment of $5–7 trillion, revealing a yearly financing gap of about $2.5 trillion between current funding and what is needed (UNCTAD's World Investment Report 2014; ECOSOC Chamber, 2018; Niculescu, 2017).

96. According to the G20's Green Finance Synthesis Report, approximately $90 trillion will be needed over the next 15 years to meet global sustainable development objectives, underscoring the importance of significant contributions from cross-border capital inflows, including private sector investments (Green Finance Study Group, 2016). In terms of infrastructure, a 2019 World Bank report indicates that the costs for new SDG-related infrastructure in low and middle-income countries (LMICs) could range from $637 billion (2% of GDP) to $2.74 trillion (8% of GDP), depending on spending efficiency and service quality.

97. Given the significant investment gap that persists, numerous challenges hinder the mobilization of sufficient financing for the SDGs, as highlighted by various academic studies and reports from practitioners. Table 1 outlines the major challenges identified in the existing SDG-related literature and proposes potential ways-out to mitigate these issues.

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Table 1. Challenges and potential way-out to finance SDGs

Challenges	Potential way-out
Lack of cooperation	Greater cross-country cooperation
Less engaged private sector	Increased cooperation between the public and private sector
Difficulty in organizational integration	Facilitating the non-governmental development organization sector
Communication and outreach gap	Better communication framework
Lack of proper planning	Adequate planning and preparation
Lack of stakeholder willingness	Increase stakeholder interest and role-play
Slower and non-inclusive economic growth	Making growth equitable and inclusive
Unavailability of reliable data	Ensure reliable data availability
Poor governance and political balance	Training and developing skilled human resources, increasing transparency and accountability in financing and investments
Public policy and regulatory disincentives	Regulatory incentives to SDG financing

Source: Author's elaboration

98. A key challenge in financing the SDGs is the lack of cooperation between developed and developing countries. Developed nations are often criticized for not providing timely and sufficient Official Development Assistance (ODA), causing delays in funding and slowing SDG progress. Similarly, developing countries also sometimes show a lack of cooperation, further hindering efforts to achieve the goals (Shibli, 2018).

99. Stronger collaboration between developed and developing countries, as well as among developing nations, is essential to mobilize more financial resources for the SDGs. This can be achieved through formal and informal discussions, including bilateral and multilateral dialogues, conferences, and symposiums focused on SDG financing (Almassy et al., 2015; Islam, 2017).

100. A second challenge in financing the SDGs is the limited participation of the private sector, with public funds and ODA being the main sources of funding. Private sector contributions remain minimal, largely due to high costs, lack of incentives, and insufficient public-private partnerships (Blended Finance Taskforce, 2018). Financial institutions often prioritize profit over social outcomes, leaving an estimated $1 trillion in private equity underutilized for SDGs (Beal et al, 2018). Underdeveloped financial markets also hinder SDG investments (Gambetta et al., 2019). To boost private sector involvement, it is essential to align SDG goals with also private sector interests (Beal et al., 2018; ECOSOC Chamber, 2018). Strengthening public-private partnerships is key, and multilateral organizations like the UN can offer policies and incentives to encourage investments.

10. Collaborative financing, such as that by the International Finance Corporation in developing nations, has proven effective. Strategies include creating social business opportunities with financial returns, reducing investment risks, enhancing institutional capacities, preventing market failures, and developing clear standards and regulatory environments that promote innovative financing and SDG-focused leadership (Morris, 2018; UN, 2018). A notable example of this is the project for universal electrification in Myanmar by 2030, where the World Bank Group employed a comprehensive, coordinated approach to mobilize necessary resources.

102. Moreover, the poor governance in many developing countries, marked by corruption, political instability, and lack of transparency, hampers the efficient use of resources (Patterson, 2015). Strengthening governance through training skilled personnel and improving transparency and accountability in financing is crucial. These measures would reduce corruption and mismanagement, leading to more effective SDG implementation.

103. The 17 SDGs also require an integrated, cross-sector approach, challenging organizations to move beyond traditional roles. Many institutions, however, are specialized in specific tasks, making cross-sector collaboration costly and difficult to implement. NGOs in developing countries already play a key role at the grassroots level, addressing critical areas such as health, education, water, sanitation, and poverty eradication (Alam, 2018). The success of the SDGs depends on the commitment of diverse stakeholders but shifting political and economic priorities often hinder progress. For example, the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Agreement reflects how changing policies can disrupt global efforts. Limited investment from financial institutions further exacerbates the issue, as they often prioritize other areas (Beal et al., 2018). To boost stakeholder engagement, greater awareness and collaboration programs involving communities, businesses, and governments are essential (Gambetta et al., 2019; Wasis, 2017).

104. Another important challenge for SDGs is the communication gap between policymakers and stakeholders, especially between developing and developed countries, leading to information gaps and hindering financing efforts (Risse, 2017). To address this, improved communication systems and microlevel reporting are needed. Governments, with UN support, could implement training programs and streamline communication to enhance data flow and collaboration (Begashaw & Shah, 2017).

105. Many developing countries were unprepared for the SDG agenda and continue to struggle with planning and financing the necessary investments. Most have yet to integrate SDG goals into their national budgets and strategies. A potential solution consists in creating dedicated SDG planning units to coordinate efforts across national and international bodies (Gambetta et al., 2019; Alam, 2018).

106. The SDGs face further challenges due to inequality, capital shortages, and economic vulnerabilities in developing nations. A key issue is the knowledge gap between developed and developing countries, making country-specific financing strategies difficult. Introducing tailored targets based on economic status and focusing on reducing income inequality could make SDG goals more achievable (OECD, 2012).

107. The lack of timely and accurate data hinders understanding of SDG financing needs, especially in developing countries where reliable data systems are often missing (Lucci, 2015). This absence of quality data is a major barrier to SDG progress. To address this, developed countries and organizations like the UN could provide frameworks and technology to improve data management, crucial for tracking progress and informed decision-making on SDG financing (UNDP, 2017).

108. In summary, financing the SDGs presents significant challenges, particularly due to the massive funding gap, limited private sector involvement, and governance issues in many developing countries. While public funds and ODA remain key sources of financing, they are insufficient to meet the annual $5–7 trillion investment needed. Enhancing cooperation between developed and developing nations, increasing private sector participation through public-private partnerships, and improving governance and transparency are essential strategies to bridge the funding gap and achieve a sustainable and equitable future.

V. The Importance of Local Data Cultures for Housing Sustainability[48]

109. This policy brief outlines the importance for institutions of allocating resources and attention towards the diagnosis and improvement of the “local data cultures” of institutions engaged in the challenges related to housing in the ECE area. Its core argument is that, in order to improve the pursuit of housing sustainability, improvements of technical infrastructure must be coupled with action on such “cultures” – the more immaterial components of housing-related data work. However, it also clarifies that in order to properly design such intervention there is still the need of better understanding and benchmarking of these “cultures”.

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The challenges of housing and the role of data

110. Access to decent, affordable and sustainable housing is widely acknowledged as a key necessary precondition for human well-being. The issue is so widespread that some estimates put the number of people lacking access to affordable housing at 1.2 billions, and the number of dwellers of informal settlements (i.e. illegally built dwellings usually born out of lack of access to legal housing) at 1 billion.

111. The ECE region faces significant challenges related to affordable housing and informal settlements:

a) In the EU, average rents were almost 25% higher at the end of 2023 compared to the start of 2010, while the average cost of a house was nearly 50% higher in mid-2023 than in 2010.[49]

b) 17.1% of the EU population live in overcrowded houses, and 10.3% spend more than 40% of their income on rent.[50]

c) 47% of young Europeans between 18 and 34 are forced to live with their parents, and only 17% of students and young people have access to student housing.[51]

d) At least 900,000 people are homeless in the EU on any given night.[52]

e) According to UN-Habitat, an estimated 50 million people lived in informal settlements across 20 ECE member States as of 2007.[53] UNECE notes that problems of informal settlements have not been systematically addressed, and responsibilities often remain fragmented[54].

112. To tackle these issues, the UN Sustainable Development Goal 11 emphasizes the need for inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities and human settlements.[55] The UNECE Committee on Housing and Land Management has also called for a comprehensive approach integrating urban planning, housing, and land management policies.[56] These challenges underscore the urgent need for coordinated action across the ECE region to ensure access to affordable, adequate housing for all residents and to address the persistent issue of informal settlements.

113. The deprivations entailed by affordable housing challenges and informal settlements impact negatively economic, health and social prospects. Also, as the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, it dramatically complicates containment policies. Most countries address the challenge through two main objectives: (a) the provision of direct aid (generally public housing stock and/ or financial assistance), regulated by legally-defined criteria; (b) the management of informal settlements, towards either their demolition or formalisation (i.e. upgrade, legalisation and incorporation into urban infrastructures). These two objectives are addressed by various agencies at different administrative levels for each country; this tends to fragment the housing domain under multiple administrative responsibilities.

114. Increasingly, governments have realised that software-based decision support systems can help the fulfilment of those two objectives. Such systems require to collect and manage large amounts of diverse data. Allocating housing aid requires constantly updated and verified data on applicants (family composition, sociodemographics, income and financial history, health history, current housing condition, etc.), housing stock (such as location, maintenance status, energy consumption, etc.), housing prices, national income levels. In turn, management of informal settlements requires data such as: dwelling location, structural features, status, connection with urban infrastructure (roads, electricity, water, sewers, etc.), current occupancy and so on.

115. If data is of high quality, properly stored, efficiently retrieved, and easily shared among stakeholders, it can be quickly aggregated, leading to more accurate, faster, and efficient decision-making. On the other hand, when these features are lacking, decision-making suffers, resulting in suboptimal outcomes. This issue is especially evident in situations where there is high demand for housing combined with limited institutional capacity and resources, though it is also a common challenge in developed countries.

[49] https://pes.cor.europa.eu/article/affordable-housing-needs-europe-europe-needs-affordable-housing
[50] https://pes.cor.europa.eu/article/affordable-housing-needs-europe-europe-needs-affordable-housing
[51] https://pes.cor.europa.eu/article/affordable-housing-needs-europe-europe-needs-affordable-housing
[52] https://pes.cor.europa.eu/article/affordable-housing-needs-europe-europe-needs-affordable-housing
[53] https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/hlm/sessions/docs2008/informal.notice.1.pdf
[54] https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/hlm/sessions/docs2008/informal.notice.1.pdf
[55] https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/Formalizing_the_Informal_Challenges_and_Opportunities_of_Informal_Settlements_in_South-East_Europe.pdf
[56] https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/hlm/sessions/docs2008/informal.notice.1.pdf

116. A crucial factor shaping these features in an organization is represented by the “local data cultures” of the organisations themselves. "Local data culture" refers to how an organization handles its data. It includes the ways people think about, use, and share information. For example, in a housing agency, the local data culture might determine whether employees prioritize collecting detailed information about applicants' income or focus more on their current living conditions.

117. Local data cultures can be understood as the unwritten rules that guide how employees work with data. In a city planning department, these unwritten rules might influence whether staff regularly update maps of informal settlements or only do so when specifically requested. These rules shape what people consider important data, how they treat it, who can access it, and what tools they use. For instance, in a public housing authority, the local data culture might dictate that only senior managers can access sensitive financial information about tenants, while all staff can view basic occupancy data.

118. Local data culture can be thought of as the unseen "operating system" that governs how an organization manages its data. Just as a computer's operating system dictates how software functions, a local data culture shapes how data is handled. In a housing nonprofit, for instance, this culture might promote data sharing with partner organizations to enhance services, while a government agency might emphasize data privacy, restricting external access.

119. This culture influences every aspect of data collection, management, and use—often without conscious awareness. Employees might automatically anonymize certain resident data before internal sharing or instinctively double-check income details from applicants simply because "that's the way it's always been done."

120. Local data cultures can be functional, when they are aligned with the organization’s objectives and goals and effectively help their pursuit; or dysfunctional, when they are mis-aligned with the organization’s ojectives and goals and hinder their pursuit (but may be serving other needs, such as the employees’ comfort). In this latter case, they must be addressed to improve the efficiency in attaining the organization’s objectives.

121. Local data cultures are dynamic and spread in two primary ways. Most often, they spread quietly, with people simply copying what others do. For example, a new employee might observe their colleagues consistently double-checking housing applicant data with phone calls and begin doing the same without being explicitly instructed. Less frequently, data cultures spread more openly through formal training or written policies. For instance, a housing department may have a policy requiring all tenant complaints to be logged in a specific database within 24 hours.

122. People are often unaware that they are part of a data culture; it simply becomes "the way things are done." For instance, staff may continue using paper forms for specific tasks even when digital alternatives exist, simply out of habit. This ingrained behaviour can run deep, making it difficult to change. When new ideas challenge these established practices, resistance is common. For example, if a manager introduces a new app for tracking maintenance requests, long-time employees might resist, insisting their old spreadsheet system is sufficient.

123. Different parts of an organization may develop distinct data cultures. For instance, the finance team might be highly focused on data privacy, while the community outreach team may prioritize information sharing. This divergence can hinder the organization’s overall efficiency. When these varying data cultures are not aligned within the organization or with broader objectives, achieving goals such as sustainable housing becomes more difficult. For example, if the tenant services department fails to share data with the maintenance team, resolving issues in public housing could be delayed. Often, efforts to improve an organization’s data management are directed at enhancing hardware/software infrastructure and providing training. However, skills alone are just one aspect of data culture.

Addressing problems in data cultures

124. Social sciences show that cultures function as systems in equilibrium, where interconnected components reinforce one another. Once stabilized, data cultures often resist change, making isolated attempts to address individual problems ineffective. In such cases, more systemic approaches are necessary, requiring a deep understanding of the system being addressed. However, our current understanding of data cultures is still developing. Without clear methods to analyze them, efforts to change these cultures may be inconsistent and reliant on subjective views rather than evidence-based strategies.

125. The challenge of transforming housing organizations’ local data cultures to align with Agenda 2030 objectives is threefold. Firstly, it is crucial to develop a solid, shared model of local data cultures within the

housing domain that is sufficiently generalizable. Secondly, this model must then be translated into accessible language and popularized within institutions and organizations using appropriate tools.

126. Regarding the first point, because data cultures are inherently "local," they often develop idiosyncratically and can vary significantly across agencies, scales, and geographical settings. Therefore, a viable model of data culture may need to take the form of a set of descriptive "dimensions" that account for this variability. Data work is nuanced, encompassing a wide variety of practices and technologies, and it is also highly situational—concrete work performed by individuals interacting with machines, usually through routines learned by practice or imitation. Additionally, it can involve strong unconscious or semi-conscious elements that are difficult to capture through surveys.

127. Thus, if the objective is to identify shared “dimensions” of data work, such identification should be investigated primarily through observation and ethnographic approaches. This requires the researcher to be inserted in the organisation. Because of the situated and idiosyncratic nature of the object of observation, it would be best to investigate the largest possible variety of agencies, institutions, scales and contexts. This variety reduces the risk of missing important shared dimensions of the model. We need different levels of development, different scopes, different governance structures, different levels of IT maturity etc.

128. This requires institutions to open their doors to researchers to perform such observational duties, possibly cyclically in order to account for evolutions. This is not a trivial matter. Studying bureaucracies can pose significant obstacles to social research, due to matters of trust and to the perception of a negative cost/benefit ratio for the studied organisations. This poses in turn the question of increasing the awareness of organisations (and institutions above them) with respect to the importance of data cultures to attain sustainability goals. The next recommendation deals with one possible response to this need.

129. Regarding the second point, the notion of data culture needs a wide popularisation to be brought to the attention of policymakers, which is a necessary condition for it to exercise a concrete impact at the level of the individual organisation and, with it, at the national level. This popularisation should begin at the level of individual organisations. Yet, a top-down imposition of evaluations (for instance, driven by governments on organisations) is likely to be met with strong resistance by staff and middle-management, as reputation and political capital would be at stake for the officers responsible for such organisations in case of negative outcomes of the assessment. Conversely, a bottom-up approach, where individual organisations are engaged individually, would require either massive localised training and assessment efforts, which are likely to be considerably expensive and beyond the means of developing countries, in which the need is more acutely felt.

130. Developing an always-accessible on-line website or mobile app appears a desirable solution to encapsulate these requirements. These features should increase the likelihood of the tool to be at least engaged with by housing organisations. After deployment of the tool, its availability should be communicated - ideally by International Organisations (IOs) - in public occasions, soliciting the interest and curiosity of organisations. The low barrier of entry to the tool, along with the need to interpret and contextualise its outcomes, could drive institutions to get more engaged with the concepts related to local data cultures. In turn, this could drive institutions to leverage external expertise (such as that offered by IOs or academia engaged with such topics) alongside IT professionals to design concrete interventions in areas identified as potentially problematic. In this way, social sciences, engineering, computer science, and policy could potentially establish a virtuous circuit.

131. Although slower than other types of transitions, this grassroots engagement is more likely to cultivate and nurture well-aligned local data cultures within housing organizations, rather than imposing them. The full benefits of innovative technical solutions—such as unified databases, fine-grained data collection tools, advanced methods of aggregation and interpretation, and flexible database structures—will be accessible only if the individuals working with them share their underlying cultural values. True social justice in a data-driven world can only progress if local data cultures are in harmony with global sustainability frameworks.

VI. Integrating Sustainable Development Goals into urban planning: Challenges, insights, and innovations from Albania's context[57]

132. Urban planning is crucial in achieving SDGs, promoting the social, economic, and environmental dynamics in the urban area. Albania, as a country in transition, is facing its own challenges of socioeconomic challenges, which also include the integration of the SDGs into their urban planning practices. In this regard, the Center of Excellence in Albania, through a collaborative network where POLIS University, CoPLAN Institute for Habitat Development, and Observatory of the Mediterranean Basin-OMB has played a crucial role in integrating SDGs into urban practice. The model on sustainable urban development, as proposed in the document, considers the very essence of taking into consideration a series of elements and factors that outline the situation and analyze critical problems encountered during the implementation of SDGs in Albania.

Key Challenges in Integrating SDGs into Urban Planning in Albania

133. Despite Albania's commitment to the 2030 Agenda, integrating SDGs into urban planning faces significant challenges due to structural issues in effective implementation. While Albania's institutional framework for urban planning is evolving, a fragmented governance system limits coordinated SDG progress. There is a strong need for better coordination, particularly among government agencies, municipalities, and local governments, to align urban planning efforts with national policies and SDG goals.

134. Additionally, a major challenge remains the lack of disaggregated data, which is crucial for tracking progress toward SDG targets. Local monitoring capabilities remain insufficient, and national monitoring systems, such as those from the Institute of Statistics in Albania (INSTAT), do not always capture local-level data. This gap makes it difficult to monitor specific indicators and develop targeted interventions at the city level. Improving localized data collection is essential for better aligning urban planning with SDG goals and ensuring effective progress at both national and local levels.

135. Another significant challenge in Albania is the issue of emigration, migration, and the depopulation of medium-sized cities, which exacerbates spatial disparities. A comparison of Balkan countries' progress toward the SDGs highlights these challenges, particularly emigration. Albania, with one of the highest emigrant populations in the Balkans, pointed out in Table 2, experiences notable economic and social impacts from this demographic shift, including regional imbalances. Stronger policies are needed to address both migration and territorial cohesion, ensuring urban planning and sustainable development are inclusive and equitable across the region.

Table 2. Emigration and Population Drop in the Balkans (2020-2050)

Country	Total number of emigrants	Emigrant share of total population	Projected population decline, 2020-2050
Albania	1,207,032	41.9%	-15.8%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1,653,056	50.1%	-18.2%
Montenegro	153,009	24.4%	-6.2%
North Macedonia	658,264	31.6%	-10.9%
Serbia*	147,593	7.1%	-6.7%

[57] A note by Center of Excellence in Albania, Based at Polis University & Co-Plan

Source: Kondan, Silviu (2020): Southeastern Europe Looks to Engage its Diaspora to Offset the Impact of Depopulation. Migration information

136. Achieving sustainable urbanization will be impossible without focusing on medium-sized cities in development strategies aligned with the SDGs. Territorial coherence and equality between urban and rural areas are essential to fulfill SDG 11, Sustainable Cities and Communities. Many Albanian municipalities lack financial autonomy, limiting their ability to mobilize resources for the SDGs. Low revenue generation restricts their capacity to fund eco-friendly infrastructure and services, hindering the achievement of goals like SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation).

137. To address these challenges, Albania needs a comprehensive long-term strategy focused on sustainable development at the local level. Current development plans are inconsistent with SDG goals due to policymakers prioritizing short-term financial gains over long-term sustainability. Strengthening the governance framework and creating more coherent policies are essential for developing a national vision that goes beyond immediate economic concerns. While some documents measure the relevance of SDGs, stronger governance is needed to align these efforts with a long-term, sustainable national strategy.

Table 3

Relationship between NSDI II pillars and the SDGs framework	
Foundation: Consolidating good governance, democracy and the rule of law	SDG 16
Pillar 1: Ensuring economic growth through macro-economic and fiscal stability	SDGs 8, 17
Pillar 2: Ensuring growth through increased competitiveness and innovation	SDG 9
Pillar 3: Investing in human capital and social cohesion	SDGs 1–6, 10
Pillar 4: Ensuring growth through connectivity, the sustainable use of resources and territorial development	SDGs 7, 9, 11–15

Source: Corporate Social Responsibility in Albania (2018)

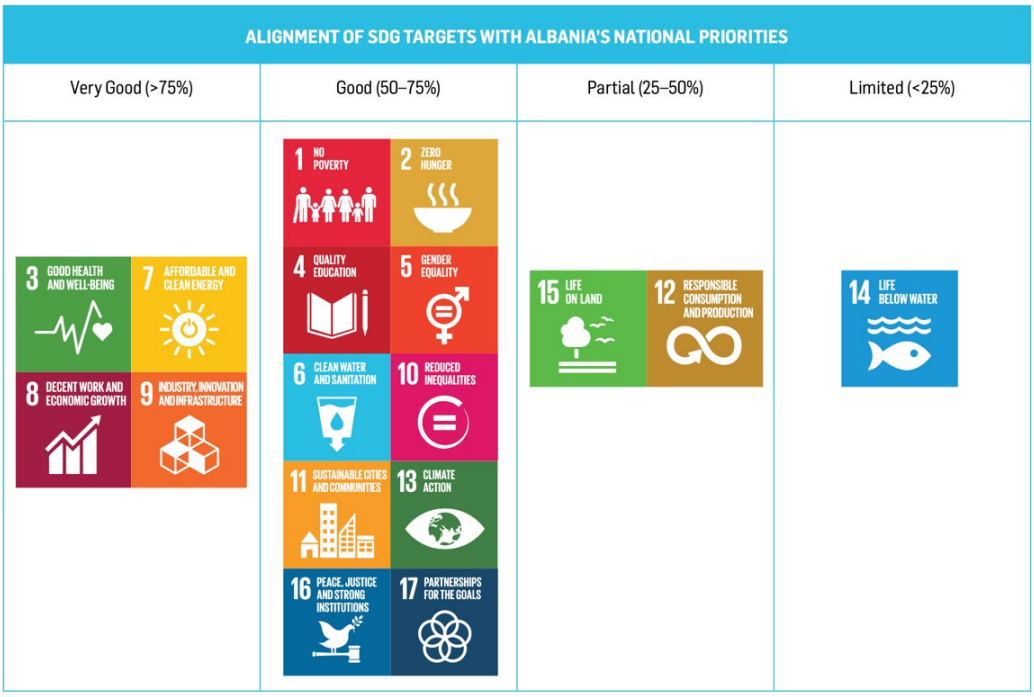
138. Greater emphasis should be placed on integrating digital tools and data systems. While there has been progress in using technologies like Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and simulation models for real-time monitoring and planning in urban development, more can be done. These technologies allow cities to assess the long-term impacts of planning decisions, particularly in areas like mobility and transport (SDG 9). By leveraging these tools, cities can better align their urban planning efforts with sustainable development goals.

Insights and Innovations from Albania's Approach

139. Despite many challenges, Albania has made significant progress toward integrating the SDGs through strong coordination among government agencies, civil society, and academic institutions. As outlined in "The Voluntary National Review for Albania," which summarizes the country's progress from 2015 to 2017, Albania has demonstrated a firm commitment to the SDGs and has made advances in global development areas through a globally relevant agenda. However, there are still improvements that can be made to further align development efforts with SDG goals.

140. Building on Albania's progress in integrating SDGs, there is a clear need to further strengthen efforts through regional and global collaboration. The Centre of Excellence has played a crucial role in these discussions, engaging in international forums, workshops, and projects that promote sustainable urban development. These initiatives encourage regional cooperation, help local governments develop financial autonomy, and provide urban planners with the digital and analytical tools necessary to address sustainability challenges, ultimately advancing Albania's alignment with global development goals.

Figure 10



Source: Corporate Social Responsibility in Albania (2018)

Conclusion

141. Albania's experience illustrates both the potential and challenges in integrating the SDGs into urban development and planning. The Centre of Excellence aims to play a key role in advancing this integration by providing valuable insights, ideas, and methods that can serve as a model for other cities and regions. Through fostering a collaborative approach, it supports the pursuit of sustainable urban development and encourages cities to align their practices with the Sustainable Development Goals.

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