Briefing

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Policy pointers

The international community must seriously invest in building the data capacities of urban actors, including local authorities — especially in less-resourced cities — to ensure they can implement the New Urban Agenda (NUA) and other global development agendas.

Overseeing agencies must help city governments and communities integrate existing data collection processes — including community-led mapping and enumerations — into NUA objectives to better connect with sustainability targets and achieve wider stakeholder buy-in.

Identifying innovative and creative ways of collecting data, including the use of indirect measures of sustainability, is essential to inform city-level policy and investments where large data gaps exist.

Local government, research centres, communities and private entities must work together to ensure continuity in cities' capacity to collect and analyse data, encourage data sharing and maintain expertise outside political cycles.

Narrowing the data gap to the achieve the New Urban Agenda

The New Urban Agenda (NUA) is one of the major global frameworks seeking to inform urban development policies and practice. As the focus shifts to implementing this ambitious agenda, decision makers must pay more attention to the accessibility and inclusivity of tools for monitoring progress and how well they inform decision making at the local level. An IIED/UN Environment Programme (UNEP) review and assessment of city-scale indicator frameworks has revealed significant gaps between the availability and quality of data and the requirements of indicators and tracking tools. But with the right support and resources and through innovative partnerships and creative data methods, cities and their communities can begin to actively engage in implementing the objectives of the NUA for more sustainable, resilient and liveable urban futures.

Implementing the New Urban Agenda: where are we now?

Launched at the 2016 HABITAT III Conference in Quito, the New Urban Agenda (NUA) seeks to inform urban policy and practice in the context of global sustainability and resilience. Highlighting cities' transformative power in realising global economic, social, environmental and climate goals, the NUA sets out key recommendations for more sustainable, inclusive and resilient urban growth for prosperous and more liveable cities. In 2018, the 9th World Urban Forum (WUF) brought together stakeholders to discuss the practicalities of localising and actioning the NUA's objectives, shifting the focus to designing the processes and tools for its implementation.

Most of the actions needed to achieve the NUA will be at the city level. So, although national governments developed and negotiated the NUA objectives, municipal and local governments will play a central role in coordinating, managing and leading implementation. As with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Sendai

Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 (the Sendai Framework) and Paris Climate Agreement, developing clear frameworks that can assess current conditions, identify opportunities and gaps, and draw the necessary information to provide clear policy signals will be key to realising the NUA. It is crucial that these tracking and monitoring tools are accessible and relevant to all cities and their communities. Using participatory approaches to identify tools will give all urban stakeholders the opportunity to shape processes, engage with NUA implementation and buy into its objectives. A central part of achieving more sustainable, inclusive and resilient cities, these participatory approaches will also help ensure no one is left behind.

Existing global indicators

There are already several standardised indicators for assessing local-level sustainability and resilience. While these metrics are important for comparing sustainability performance between cities, they are less useful as practical planning tools. Global urban indicators are often modelled

on the requirements of large and well-resourced cities, making them inaccessible for secondary urban areas and many capital cities of the global South. Determined and negotiated on a global level, standardised indicators are not easily adaptable to local contexts and do not take into account the varying quality of available data and data collection capacity.

Cities will need to identify innovative and creative ways of collecting data

Many urban systems today are supported by large, well-functioning informal processes. Relying solely on formal data, indicators are often misrepresentative and omit key information on the contribution and impact of informal urban functions. This is particularly relevant in cities where large proportions of low-income residents live in informal settlements with little or no access to basic and public services. For example, transit networks often consist of semi-informal buses and routes. Local authorities do not usually collect data on or recognise routes and passenger traffic for these informal transit modes in official surveys. As a result, key information on a large portion of a city's transport networks is left out of formal planning processes. Integrating informal functions into city-level sustainability and resilience planning contributes to decisions and policies that are inclusive, well informed and representative of the needs and priorities of all urban dwellers.

Filling the urban data gap

Many studies recognise the lack of robust and reliable local data for tracking the global agendas, including the NUA.[1] But few go into detail about how to connect informal and local processes to tracking frameworks to make these frameworks more relevant and usable. For many cities, it will take years to achieve the capacity they need to effectively use globally set standardised indicators. And time is running out. In the global South, high rates of urbanisation, migration, population growth and climate change are triggering important development and environmental issues in the largest cities. In addition, the expansion of large urban centres into their surrounding areas and growing size of secondary cities is causing as many (if not more) important development issues. These smaller municipalities are less equipped than large urban centres, with fewer resources to manage the impacts of rapid population growth.

The 2019 IIED/UNEP review and assessment of more than 20 existing city-scale indicator frameworks, supported by Cities Alliance, revealed significant gaps between available data and the requirements of existing indicator frameworks and tracking tools.[2] Focusing specifically on indicators that are relevant to the NUA's third transformative commitment — environmentally sustainable and resilient urban development — the review identified the nine most common priority areas[3] for measuring environmental sustainability in cities: municipal solid waste, transport, land use, fresh water, energy and emissions, pollution, ecosystems, biodiversity and disaster risk reduction. For each priority area, we identified three to six 'first tier' indicators from existing frameworks that cities could use to generate a minimum benchmark of environmental sustainability.[4] This formed the basis of a simple and scalable framework for cities to:

- Understand the principles of urban environmental sustainability and resilience

- Assess their existing capacity to collect and analyse the data needed to use these three to six first-tier indicators, and

- Identify where gaps in data capacity exist and where to prioritise capacity-building efforts.
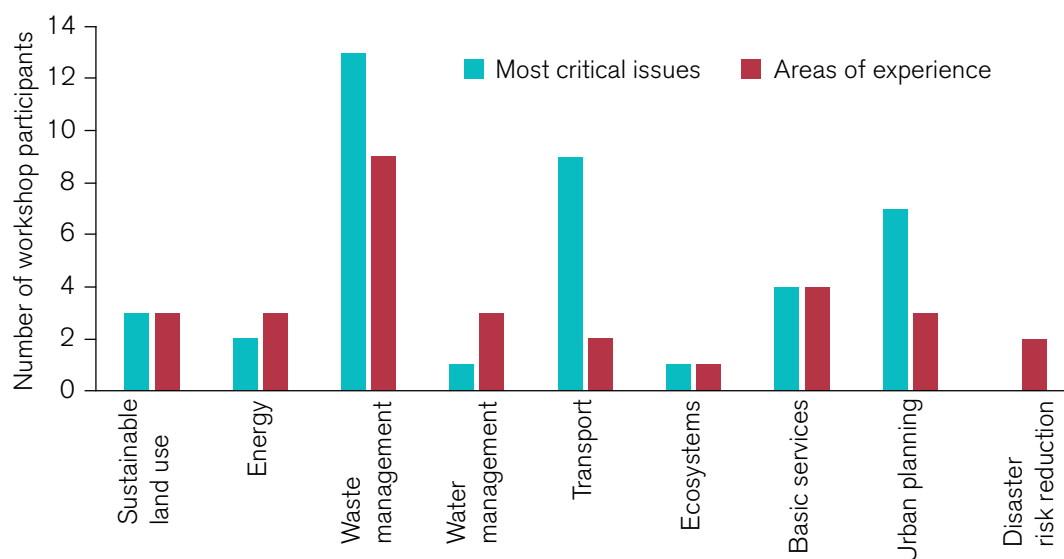
We then held two regional consultative workshops — in Asia (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia) and sub-Saharan Africa (Kigali, Rwanda) — with key urban stakeholders from municipal government, urban planners, academia and civil society to assess the relevance of the standardised indicators identified in our review. Based on their own experiences and city contexts, participants commented on the relevance and usability of the indicators for each priority area.

We found that even at their most basic, neither the first-tier indicators selected nor the data required to use them were appropriate or reflected the local capacities of the cities represented. A survey of workshop participants at the Kigali workshop revealed that the biggest data gaps were in waste management, transport and urban planning (see Figure 1).

Steps to meeting the capacity gap

For cities to successfully implement the NUA and achieve sustainable development and climate goals, we must narrow the gap between the urban data needed to effectively inform policy decisions and the data already available. This will require supporting cities on two fronts.

The first is **increasing cities' capacity to collect and analyse data**, so they can use evidence-based and globally comparable urban indicators. As well as being an important step towards better urban management, using these tools can provide an accurate framework for understanding what sustainable and resilient urban growth looks like. Doing this would require identifying general priority areas for achieving environmentally sustainable

Figure 1. Workshop survey: needs vs capacity

This illustrates what urban planners and city authorities (workshop participants) identified as the most critical issues in their city versus their areas of experience and capacity in that sector. While solid waste management is clearly a major issue, the largest capacity gap exists in planning for transport.

and resilient cities, where the major data gaps exist and then directing efforts and resources to these gaps. Developing partnerships between city authorities and local and international research centres will help improve capacity and ensure continuity and central databases.

The second is **identifying and mapping more innovative and creative ways of understanding sustainability that incorporate informality**. Local governments and urban communities must lead the way in defining the methods used to track progress, based on the context, environment and capacity of their own cities. Cities will need to identify innovative and creative ways of collecting data (such as neighbourhood and community-led data gathering initiatives) to inform local policies and investments for more sustainable and resilient cities (see box 1).

Urban indicators for all

Metrics should fundamentally help stakeholders pinpoint problems and identify a sense of direction for how to improve them. Existing methods for tracking global agendas have placed too much emphasis on standardised metrics that are prescriptive rather than supportive, driven by data rather than outcomes. As a result, they have left behind many local authorities and urban stakeholders who cannot use them. Although improving cities' ability to use standardised urban indicators remains central to achieving sustainable development, cities also need to be able to use the data and information they already have to understand where problems

and opportunities exist. Implementation frameworks for the NUA must take this into account and help cities integrate and align existing data sets with NUA objectives.

The IIED/UNEP review recommends methods for developing a framework that will allow municipal governments and urban stakeholders to map key urban sectors and scalable approaches to understand and assess sustainability in their cities. These are based on global urban indicators which, while not useful as practical planning tools, local governments can use to define what is important to measure in their cities and to dissect complicated and interlinked systems into more manageable categories.

Box 1. Thinking creatively: two examples

Standardised indicators often rely on expensive and high-end data collection methods. So, using such indicators in cities with high degrees of informality only gives half the picture. Advances in technology and key partnerships between local authorities, research centres and communities are bridging this gap.

Digital Matatus is a collaborative effort to collect data on informal transport systems using free mobile technology in Nairobi, Kenya.[5] City residents use free GPS software on their phones to map out the different bus routes and stops, producing maps of the network, which are also available for free.

In Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, local authorities and planners organised **walking tours** with university students, transport and data experts from local universities and other planners to collect data on traffic and transport to inform upcoming discussions. The authorities are now exploring potential partnerships with universities to house basic data collection training courses for local urban planners and students, with universities also housing data analysis expertise for city data.

Box 2. Integrating community data into formal processes

Achieving the NUA objectives will require working with communities to co-produce solutions that integrate local data efforts and effectively address the needs and priorities of the urban poor. Slum Dwellers International (SDI) launched 'Know Your City' — a major campaign to integrate community-collected data into formal planning and development processes — at the 9th WUF to help ensure decisions are inclusive, co-produced and address the needs and priorities of local communities.[6] Supported by SDI, organised urban poor groups have been collecting vital information on their local areas for decades to improve living conditions and support effective planning.

Local authorities and urban communities already collect vital information on their cities and local areas (see box 2) and many urban planners and local governments use their own indicators and metrics to assess public service delivery in the context of urban planning and development. By aligning these processes with NUA and other global agenda objectives, cities can more cost-effectively translate the information they already collect to inform sustainability and resilience objectives. They can also make clear links between progress in improving access to basic services and achieving more sustainable and resilient cities and vice versa.

Tagging onto existing processes can generate more buy-in and develop city-level ownership of the NUA. By clearly identifying and communicating how sustainability and resilience contributes to improved public service delivery, access and quality of basic services, and citizen wellbeing is key for city authorities to generate buy-in from other urban stakeholders including community groups and private citizens.

Information is power

City governments and other urban stakeholders can use indicators and data as a political tool to influence change by identifying gaps in data and capacity. Leveraging the global commitment to achieving the NUA local sustainability targets, they can use both the indicators and data to highlight where they most need to invest resources and effort to galvanise change and transform their cities and communities. At the same time, stakeholders can use data and indicators as tools to assign responsibility. For example, where data are lacking or show that urban services or functions are not performing, stakeholders can use this information to raise concerns with city governments.

Private, government and community urban stakeholders need to form more open and willing partnerships under the common agenda of achieving better cities for all to bring together formal and informal data collection processes. Integrating these different data processes that can inform the priority areas for achieving the NUA's third transformative commitment is as relevant to increasing cities' capacity to collect data as developing and resourcing new capacity.

What next?

The IIED/UNEP review and assessment was an important step in identifying how cities can start to measure progress in sustainable urban development. As well as providing context to draw out what cities should be measuring and to start developing realistic processes for doing this, it helped articulate how cities can practically contribute to reporting and tracking to make clear policy proposals for improving environmental sustainability and resilience.

But cities need support in mapping and coordinating how formal and informal data processes can inform other local, national and international agendas — including the SDGs, the Paris Agreement and the Sendai Framework. Vertical integration with national government and horizontal integration between city agencies is important to ensure a more comprehensive response and avoid duplication of work. It will also ensure that the NUA is achieved on time via locally sensitive and inclusive implementation frameworks that support the delivery of more resilient and sustainable cities across the world.

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Knowledge Products

Cities Alliance
Cities Without Slums

Notes

[1] United Nations Human Settlements Programme (2017) New Urban Agenda. United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III), Ecuador. / [2] Norodom, A and Confiado, A (forthcoming) Implementing the New Urban Agenda: a review of city-scale metrics for environmental sustainability and resilience. IIED, London. / [3] This was determined by identifying which sectors were referenced the most often across the indicator-based frameworks reviewed. These priority areas were further validated at the two regional workshops held. / [4] See note 2 for full list of indicator-based frameworks reviewed. / [5] www.digitalmatatus.com / [6] http://knowyourcity.info

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