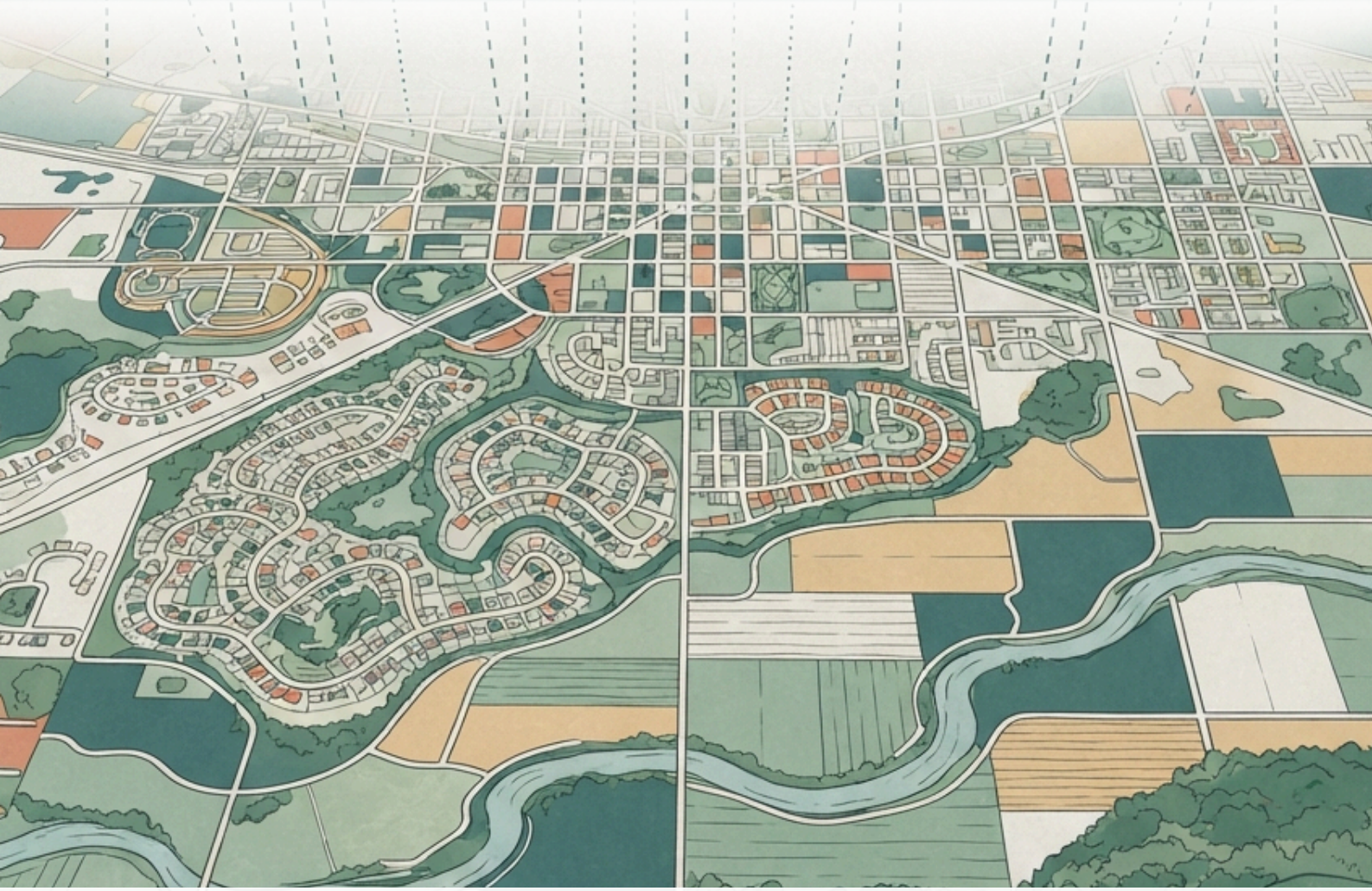
MENTORSHIP KNOWLEDGE SERIES

Local Planners and Global Goals: Accepted but not Absorbed

Repositioning the profession for SDG 11, the New Urban Agenda and the Planning Guidelines, towards 2030 and beyond



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Knowledge for Better Cities

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Disclaimer & Credits

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The article is an independent contribution and its views, interpretations, and recommendations do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of ISOCARP nor Cities Forum.

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Slum in Serekunda, The Gambia

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Summary

Evening stroll on Baku's waterfront during World Urban Forum 13 in Azerbaijan

Summary

Caught between global indicators and local budgets, short political cycles and communities demanding a say, many city and regional planners feel less like agents of the global agenda than like the ball in its machine.

Urban planners and designers working with local communities across diverse, place-specific contexts in both the Global South and North appear to have an ambivalent at times love–hate relationship with the Sustainable Development Goals and the complementary New Urban Agenda, or at least with the mechanisms and resources available for localizing their targets and indicators. Many are passionately committed to a place-positive implementation through local urban plans and projects; others are indifferent, and some are openly hostile to "political" goals set above their heads as subject-matter experts. Caught between global indicators and local budgets, short political cycles and communities demanding a say, many planners feel less like agents of the global agenda than like the ball in its machine. A decade after the frameworks' adoption by the United Nations, and with fewer than four years remaining before the initial 2030 horizon, this article asks why this ambivalence emerged and argues that the love-or-hate question is now the wrong one: the task is to move beyond it, repositioning the profession from object to instrument of localization, towards 2030 and beyond.

Situating the analysis within contemporary planning theory, this thought-piece interrogates the genuine interest and capacity of planning institutions and practices to operationalize these global agendas together with the International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning, the profession's own instrument under conditions of deepening socio-spatial inequality, accelerating climate disruption, fiscal austerity, displacement and rapid technological transformation: conditions in which persistent implementation gaps expose the tension between global normative ambition and local institutional reality. Drawing on the 2026 political reviews of SDG 11 and the New Urban Agenda, a critical reading of scholarly and policy assessments, and original survey data read against the profession's own evidence, it finds that the binding constraint lies less in what planners know how to do than in political will, institutional continuity and statutory authority. On that evidence, it makes the theoretical case for planning as a mediating institutional practice bridging global frameworks and localized action through participation beyond tokenism, structural capacity development, and adaptive reform of the planning systems planners actually work within. Achieving sustainable, and ultimately regenerative, urban development requires not only political leadership and technical expertise but a reassertion of planning's normative and institutional excellence in shaping just and resilient urban futures.

List of Abbreviations



Mogadishu in Somalia, seen from the Indian Ocean

List of Abbreviations

CBCD	Community-Based Capacity Development
ECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council
EU	European Union
GIS	Geographical Information System
HLPF	High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development
IG-UTP	International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning
ISOCARP	International Society of City and Regional Planners
NUA	New Urban Agenda
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RDG	Regenerative Development Goals
RTPI	Royal Town Planning Institute
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UN DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
UN-Habitat	United Nations Human Settlements Programme
VLR	Voluntary Local Review
WUF	World Urban Forum



Introduction

Aerial view from Hanoi's Pan Pacific Hotel, Vietnam

Introduction

> *"So much need, so few resources, so little time. In many parts of the world, there will continue to be too few planners, and they are likely to have to fill many roles. Despite this, each and everyone should seek to make a difference. Mindsets matter. Planners and their professional associations need to have iron in the soul."*
>
> CLIFF HAGUE (2018), IN LEADING CHANGE: DELIVERING THE NEW URBAN AGENDA THROUGH URBAN AND TERRITORIAL PLANNING, UN-HABITAT

Prepared as a contribution to the Cities Forum's Mentorship Knowledge Series, this article examines the evolving role of urban planning and design and of the planners and designers who practise it in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with particular emphasis on SDG 11 on Sustainable Cities and Communities. Adopted by the United Nations in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda, SDG 11 is the first standalone urban goal, positioning cities and communities, urban and rural alike, as place-based arenas for integrated inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable development. Its normative framework is reinforced by complementary global instruments notably the International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning (IG-UTP, 2015) and the New Urban Agenda (NUA, 2016) which together articulate a renewed commitment to integrated, territorial approaches to development.

The article contributes to ongoing debate on the future role of planning and planners in sustainable and regenerative development: it identifies priority areas for action and sets out practical recommendations for strengthening planning systems, professional capacities and collaborative networks. Particular attention goes to participatory planning processes and their role in translating global commitments into locally relevant outcomes that are climate-resilient, socially just and nature-based. The broader aim is a more unified and more widely recognized "planners and placemakers" position in support of an accelerated, localized implementation of the New Urban Agenda: one that makes fuller use of the IG-UTP in pursuit of SDG 11 and related place-specific targets, and that shifts the love–hate balance towards better understanding and stewardship of the global normative planning framework that already exists.

The article concludes by proposing three priority clusters for localising the global planning agenda: fostering meaningful public participation, building planning capacity at scale, and reforming planning systems to be adaptive and context-sensitive. These three clusters are interconnected: none works without the other two.

Let's get this straight from the get-go: most city and regional planners and everyone in the adjacent denominations, from urban planners and urban designers to placemakers and spatial and territorial planners simply acknowledge the emerging global policy frameworks as a complement to the traditional national planning systems they work within. Those national systems are not ours to love or hate; we inherit them. Some are worse than others, and none is so perfect that it can withstand the times without periodic review and reform.

The global agendas are different in one respect, and it is their unique selling point: for the first time in history, a planner in Santiago de Chile can love or hate SDG 11 as much as a planner in Mumbai the same goal, the same indicators, the same gap between commitment and delivery. Box 1 offers a few love-and-hate snapshots from around the globe.

Box 1 LOVE & HATE SNAPSHOTS



Closure of ISOCARP's 61st World Planning Congress on 4 December 2025, hosted by Riyadh metropolitan city and attended by around 1,200 urban planners and designers, discussing pathways to more sustainable cities and regions. (Source: ISOCARP, 2025)

"The United Nation's New Urban Agenda has created a playbook for planning advocates. It opens possibilities for building inclusive, integrated urban planning in countries where planning has been top-down and limited in scope. Yet it raises concerns about ignoring the power of industry and imposition of global ideas inappropriate to national contexts. Success will require strengthened capacity building for the urban professions, and sensitivity in adapting global best practices to national contexts."

Bruce Stiftel Professor Emeritus, Georgia Institute of Technology, School of City and Regional Planning, USA

"I feel encouraged [by the SDGs/NUA/IG-UTP] in my personal capacity as a planning practitioner and practice professor, however, as (voluntary) Secretary General of ISOCARP, I realised that many colleagues in both the global North and South were either indifferent or rather sceptical towards the SDGs/NUA/IG-UTP, for a variety of reasons."

Frank D'hondt Secretary General ISOCARP 2019–2025, Belgium/Greece

"I think that the New Urban Agenda is very important for awareness, but I cannot confirm that it has changed urban planning. To talk about Sustainable Development Goal number 11 as the central focus for urban planners is, quite bluntly, BS. A lot of the Sustainable Development Goals are about urban values: safe water, nature and land, economic development, or whatever. It's all about that. It's not only about SDG 11, and I see that in many meetings and conferences a lot of vice mayors of the world

just talk about SDG 11 as if that is all there is. And I think then you really don't understand what planning is about, while 99 out of 100 of my colleagues are not aware of the New Urban Agenda or the Sustainable Development Goals."

Martin Dubbeling Past President ISOCARP, The Netherlands

"The strategic roadmap proposed by NUA has been substantial in the evolution and trajectory that the profession of urban planning and urbanism has taken globally over the last decade. Its principles as leaving no one and no territory behind, endorsing sustainable and inclusive urban economies with focus on environmental caring, and a particular attention lately on urban community resilience have been accelerated in a way with fresher urban perspectives."

Pia Carrasco McGill University Brasília, Brazil

"The New Urban Agenda and Sustainable Development Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) have had a strong influence on how Australian cities and regions approach planning. These global frameworks have provided a language and structure for integrating sustainability and inclusivity into policy and practice. Across all levels of government, planning strategies now reference SDG 11 targets, particularly in relation to affordable housing, climate resilience, and sustainable transport."

Jua Cilliers President, Commonwealth Association of Planners; Board Director ISOCARP, Sydney, Australia

"The evolution of the planning profession in line with the principles of the New Urban Agenda ... planning practice, especially in Poland, where I have the most experience, is actually evolving quite rapidly, moving from purely regulatory planning to comprehensive planning socio-economic and environmental visions for the city should be translated into the spatial development model for the city. So, we are trying to integrate and go beyond mere urban design or spatial regulation. I can say that the New Urban Agenda and Goal 11 of the SDGs have significantly influenced our work."

Piotr Lorens City Architect, Gdańsk, Poland

"Since the adoption of the New Urban Agenda (NUA) in 2016, the profession of urban planning has undergone a notable transformation, reflecting a renewed commitment to sustainable, inclusive, and resilient urban development. The NUA emphasized the need to reinvent urban planning as a transformative discipline capable of addressing complex and interlinked urban challenges. In response, planning practice has evolved beyond its traditional focus on spatial design and land use management to embrace a multidimensional approach that integrates environmental, social, economic, and governance considerations. The NUA has thus served as both a catalyst and a guiding framework for redefining urban planning as a transformative practice one that not only manages physical space but also shapes the social, economic, and ecological future of humanity."

Hope Magidimisha-Chipungu Planning Professor, KwaZulu-Natal University; Board Director ISOCARP, Durban, South Africa

Quotes borrowed from 'ISOCARP at 60' publication (2025), with the exception of the first two quotes, taken from Stiftel's article titled 'Planners and the New Urban Agenda: will we lead the agenda, or will the agenda lead us?' and D'hondt's response in Town Planning Review (2021).



CHAPTER 1

The Global Framework for Sustainable Urban Development

Rue de la Cigogne in downtown Brussels, Belgium

The Global Framework for Sustainable Urban Development

> *The adoption of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 marked a significant recognition that many of the world's most pressing challenges ultimately converge on people's quality of life and environmental well-being, and it gave the world a shared roadmap for advancing a more sustainable future albeit a very anthropocentric one.*

> *Implementing the NUA contributes directly to the integrated realization and localization of the 2030 Agenda, SDG 11 included: the goal calls for cities and human settlements that are inclusive, accessible, resilient and well-governed, while the NUA translates that call into the spatial qualities planners can actually work with compact, mixed-use, well-connected, vibrant and nature-based.*

> *The IG-UTP advance integrated, participatory and place-based approaches, stressing coordination among actors, sectors and levels of government, framing urban and territorial planning as a governance instrument for more equitable, efficient and sustainable outcomes across the urban–rural continuum.*

> *The principles and objectives these frameworks carry enjoy wide support more love than hate but acting on them depends on institutional capacity, financial and technical resources, governance arrangements and place-specific conditions.*

1.1 SDG 11: Positioning Cities and Human Settlements at the Center of Sustainable Development

Before 2015, cities and other human settlements along the urban–rural continuum featured in a range of international agendas, yet they held no explicit place within global development goals. The adoption of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 marked a significant recognition that many of the world's most pressing challenges ultimately converge on people's quality of life and environmental well-being, and it gave the world a shared roadmap for advancing a more sustainable future - albeit a very anthropocentric one.

Cities concentrate economic opportunity, innovation and essential services; they also cluster some of the most complex development challenges, from social and economic inequality and climate vulnerability to infrastructure deficits and the shortage of adequate, affordable housing. SDG 11 answered this by reinforcing the urban and territorial dimension of sustainable development, setting out a broad vision that spans adequate housing, sustainable mobility, inclusive public space, disaster resilience, cultural her-

ance lies equally in its cross-cutting character: the goal is tightly interwoven with those on climate action, poverty reduction, health, equality and governance (see figure below).

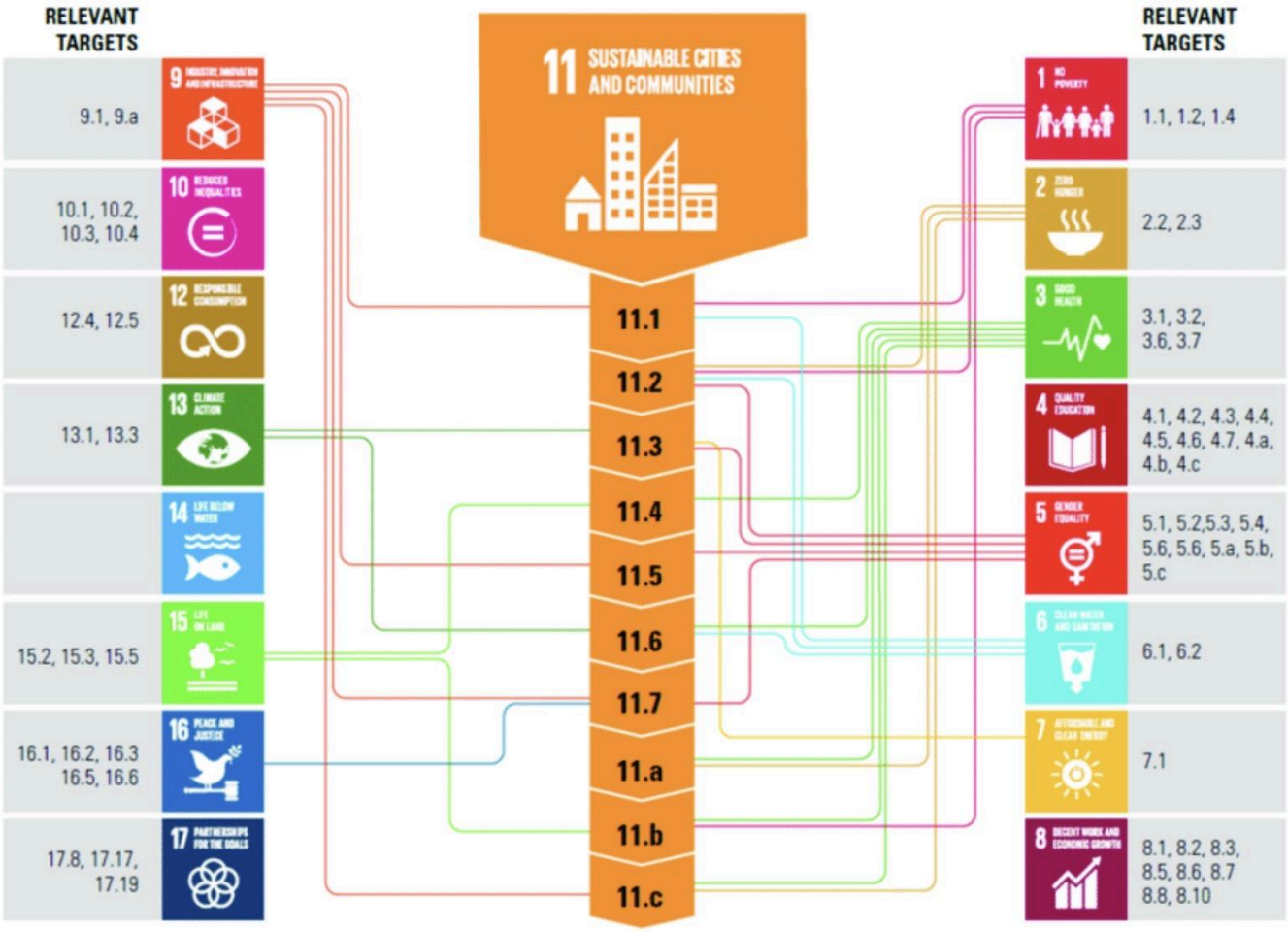


Figure 1. SDG 11 is related to all other SDGs. (Source: Gaia Education)

But direction and indicators are not delivery. Translating SDG 11's objectives into concrete action across diverse territorial contexts depends on institutional and planning instruments, and on data and knowledge systems able to carry a global commitment down to the scale at which settlements are actually shaped.

1.2 The New Urban Agenda and the International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning: Tools to Implement SDG 11

SDG 11 establishes a universally shared vision and a set of measurable targets for sustainable urban development, but vision and metrics do not by themselves guide implementation across diverse territorial contexts. Two instruments adopted alongside the 2030 Agenda carry particular weight here: the New Urban Agenda (NUA) and the International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning (IG-UTP). Together they supply the normative and operational foundation for translating global commitments into

planning practice while remaining, by design, frameworks that guide local action rather than prescribe universal solutions.

Adopted at the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) in Quito in 2016, the New Urban Agenda offers a comprehensive framework for managing urbanization as a driver of sustainable development, on the premise that urbanization well planned and well managed can be a powerful instrument of development in countries at every income level. It promotes cities grounded in social inclusion, participation, environmental sustainability, economic prosperity, resilience and effective governance.

Implementing the NUA contributes directly to the integrated realization and localization of the 2030 Agenda, SDG 11 included: the goal calls for cities and human settlements that are inclusive, accessible, resilient and well-governed, while the NUA translates that call into the spatial qualities planners can actually work with compact, mixed-use, well-connected, vibrant and nature-based. Beyond the physical development of cities, the NUA recognizes the interdependence of urban challenges and argues for integrated approaches that address the social, economic, environmental and spatial dimensions of development together. It calls for alignment across policy perspectives, planning instruments and levels of government, so that responses are coherent rather than merely concurrent. Urbanization, on this reading, is no longer a demographic or territorial phenomenon to be accommodated, but a strategic opportunity to advance broader development objectives and improve people's well-being.

The International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning translate this vision into planning practice and in fact preceded it. Approved by the UN-Habitat Governing Council in April 2015, the IG-UTP set out twelve universal planning principles, elaborated through 114 recommendations, for improving planning and management at every scale: from neighbourhood and city to regional, national and transboundary levels (see Figure 3). Universal here means a shared frame of reference rather than a template the approving resolution explicitly calls on member States to use and adapt the Guidelines to their own conditions. The IG-UTP advance integrated, participatory and place-based approaches, stressing coordination among actors, sectors and levels of government, and they frame urban and territorial planning not merely as a technical tool for managing growth but as a governance instrument for more equitable, efficient and sustainable outcomes across the urban–rural continuum.

Taken together, the three instruments form a structured global framework for sustainable urban and rural development, with a clear division of labour: SDG 11 defines the outcomes to be achieved and monitored, the New Urban Agenda sets the strategic vision for managing urbanization, and the IG-UTP supply the principles and guidance for well-planned place-based development. Collectively they express an unusually broad international consensus that urban and territorial planning is a key mechanism for addressing contemporary urban challenges a consensus that is normative rather than binding, which is precisely why its localization depends on the institutional and professional capacities this article goes on to examine.

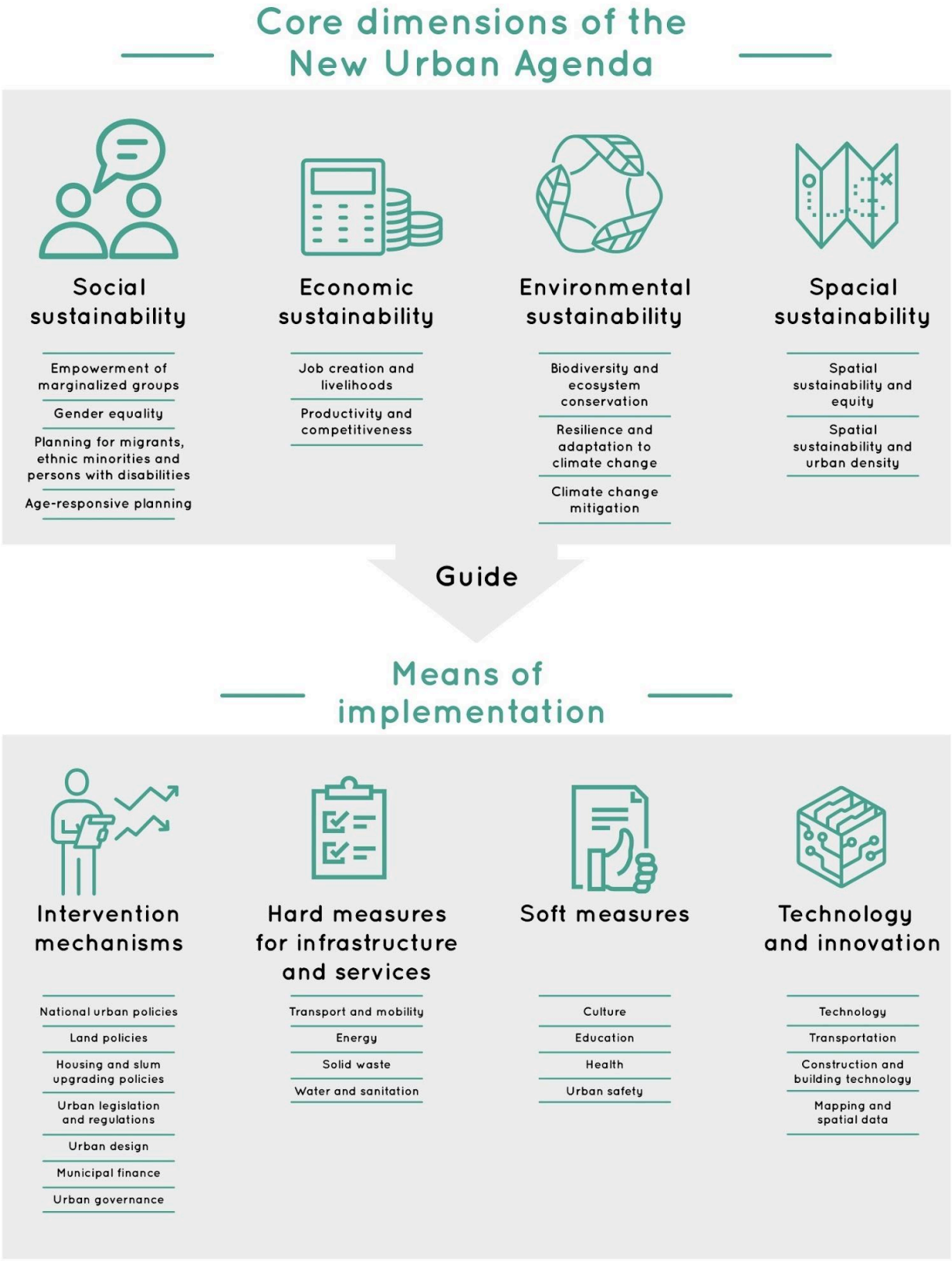


Figure 2. The contents of the (illustrated) New Urban Agenda. (Source: UN-Habitat, 2020)

The Guidelines: 12 Key Planning Principles with 114 Recommendations

To orient and guide decision-makers in developing or reviewing urban and territorial policies, plans and designs through an integrated planning approach, the Guidelines are structured along 12 key planning principles and 114 recommendations in 5 main sections and addressed to the 4 stakeholder groups. An abridged version of the 12 guiding principles can be found below:

	URBAN POLICY AND GOVERNANCE
1	Urban and Territorial Planning is an integrative and participatory decision-making process that addresses competing interests and is linked to a shared vision, an overall development strategy and national, regional and local urban policies.
2	Urban and Territorial Planning promotes local democracy, participation and inclusion, transparency and accountability.
	URBAN AND TERRITORIAL PLANNING FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
	Urban and Territorial Planning and Social Development
3	Urban and Territorial Planning primarily aims to realize adequate standards of living and working conditions for all through social inclusion and cohesion, recognizing the distinct needs of various groups.
4	Urban and Territorial Planning is a precondition for a better quality of life and successful globalization processes that respect cultural heritages and cultural diversity.
	Urban and Territorial Planning and Sustained Economic Growth
5	Urban and Territorial Planning provides an enabling framework for new economic opportunities, regulation of land and housing markets and timely provision of adequate infrastructure and basic services.
6	Urban and Territorial Planning provides a mechanism to ensure that sustained economic growth, social development and environmental sustainability go hand in hand to promote better connectivity at all territorial levels.
	Urban and Territorial Planning and the Environment
7	Urban and Territorial Planning provides a spatial framework to protect and manage the natural and built environment of cities and territories, including their biodiversity, land and natural resources.
8	Urban and Territorial Planning contributes to increased human security by strengthening environmental and socioeconomic resilience, enhancing mitigation of, and adaptation to, climate change.
	URBAN AND TERRITORIAL PLANNING COMPONENTS
9	Urban and Territorial Planning is a continuous and iterative process, grounded in enforceable regulations, that aims to promote more compact cities and synergies between territories.
10	Urban and Territorial Planning aims to facilitate and articulate political decisions based on different scenarios. It translates those decisions into actions that will transform the physical and social space and will support the development of integrated cities and territories.
	IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING URBAN AND TERRITORIAL PLANNING
11	Implementation of spatial policies and plans requires political leadership, appropriate legal and institutional frameworks, efficient urban management, and improved coordination, consensus-building approaches to respond coherently and effectively to current and future challenges.
12	Effective implementation and evaluation of Urban and Territorial planning requires continuous monitoring, periodic adjustments and sufficient capacities at all levels, as well as sustainable financial mechanisms and technologies.

Figure 3. The 12 planning guidelines of the International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning. (Source: UN-Habitat, 2015)

Alongside other instruments from the same period notably the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (March 2015) and the Paris Agreement on climate change (December 2015) these documents aim at a strategic, structured and holistic approach to sustainable urban development. The whole architecture, in fact, was assembled in eighteen months: Sendai, Planning guidelines, the 2030 Agenda, Paris, then Habitat III in Quito.

However, their adoption has also exposed a persistent tension between global ambition and local reality. If workable global frameworks already exist, and if the IG-UTP Handbook has already shown how to tie them to the review and reform of national and regional planning systems (UN-Habitat, 2018) see figure below why does implementation remain so difficult in practice? Chapter 4 returns to planning system reform in detail.



Figure 4. Planning system diagram in the IG-UTP Handbook. (Source: UN-Habitat, 2018)

The principles and objectives these frameworks carry enjoy wide support more love than hate but acting on them depends on institutional capacity, financial and technical resources, governance arrangements and place-specific conditions. The distance between global aspiration and delivery on the ground is among the defining challenges of contemporary planning, and it poses the question this article takes as its own: how can international commitments become context-sensitive action that answers to the needs and priorities of the communities and territories where they are finally expected to land with impact that is sustainable, if not regenerative?



CHAPTER 2

Political Review of the Urban Sustainability Framework

Shanghai's North Bund seen from the Huangpu river, China

Political Review of the Urban Sustainability Framework

> *SDG 11 is seriously off track. Roughly 1.1 billion people about a quarter of the world's urban population lived in slums or informal settlements in 2024, and on current trajectories that figure could exceed 1.2 billion by 2030. The ambition remains valid; delivery does not match it.*
>
> *The frameworks are sound; the constraint is not planners' know-how but the absence of political will, institutional continuity, and financial resources to act on what is already agreed.*
>
> *The challenge, in short, is no longer to define a shared vision for sustainable cities; it is to build the institutional, technical and collaborative machinery that connects global aspiration to local reality.*

A decade has passed since the Sustainable Development Goals and the International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning were adopted, and close to a decade since the New Urban Agenda followed. These frameworks have established shared international reference points for sustainable urban development, improved the availability of comparable information, and supplied indicators against which progress can be monitored. Ten years in, the institutions that adopted them owe themselves a candid review and so does the international community of planners and designers that has been asked to deliver on them.

Start with the IG-UTP. Governing Council resolution 26/8 of 2017 encouraged UN-Habitat to help member States review their urban policies and planning frameworks against the Guidelines, and the resulting stocktake, *Implementing the International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning 2018–2020*, appeared in 2021. It remains, as far as we have been able to verify, the most recent dedicated implementation review.

Read together with the wider literature, the record supports a double-sided conclusion. The Guidelines have proved a broadly accepted and genuinely useful normative framework for integrated, inclusive and sustainable planning, and they have shaped the New Urban Agenda as well as national planning debates. Their traction has nonetheless been limited by their non-binding character, by uneven awareness and localization, by weak institutional and fiscal capacity, by fragmented governance, and by the familiar distance between plans and their execution. The implication for the next phase is that promoting the principles is no longer the binding constraint: what matters now is embedding them in national urban policies, legislation, institutions, budgets, professional capacity and accountable local delivery. That next phase has yet to acquire a reporting rhythm. No dedicated IG-UTP implementation review has appeared since 2021 most likely a consequence of UN-Habitat's monitoring capacity being drawn towards SDG 11 and

the New Urban Agenda, and partly of the governance reform that replaced the Governing Council, the body to which the Guidelines' reporting mandate was originally addressed. For an instrument whose stated priority is institutional embedding, five years without a review is itself a finding.

The 2026 session of the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), held in July, conducted in-depth reviews of SDGs 6, 7, 9 and 11, together with SDG 17 under the arrangements set by ECOSOC for the current review cycle. The SDG 11 review drew on the Secretary-General's annual progress report, the statistical assessment prepared by the UN Statistics Division, UN-Habitat's SDG 11 Global Report 2026, and the independent global assessment published by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, a network operating under the auspices of the Secretary-General. It was further informed by the key messages of the SDG 11 Expert Group Meeting convened by UN DESA and UN-Habitat in January 2026.



Figure 5. At the UNGA on 16 July 2026, Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed noted, "The Sustainable Development Goals will be delivered at the local level, or they'll not be delivered at all." (Source: unhabitat.org/news)

Read from a planning perspective, the review carries nine messages.

THE DIAGNOSIS

1. SDG 11 is seriously off track. Roughly 1.1 billion people about a quarter of the world's urban population lived in slums or informal settlements in 2024, and on current trajectories that figure could exceed 1.2 billion by 2030. The ambition remains valid; delivery does not match it.
2. Housing has become the defining SDG 11 crisis. Some three billion people are estimated to lack adequate housing, the slum and informal-settlement population among them. The review's implicit conclusion is blunt: there are no sustainable cities without a resolution of the housing crisis.
3. Urbanization is not the problem; unplanned and unmanaged urbanization is. More than half of humanity already lives in urban areas and the share is expected to approach 70 per cent by 2050. What is at stake is therefore not whether cities grow, but whether that growth is anticipated, serviced and governed.

1.1B
people in slums or informal settlements, 2024

3B
people lacking adequate housing worldwide

~70%
of humanity projected to be urban by 2050

CAPACITY, AGENCY AND MONEY

1. Planning and urban governance have measurably improved. Planning capacity and institutional frameworks are stronger than a decade ago, even where outcomes remain inadequate. The machinery is getting better; it now has to be used far more effectively and at a far greater scale.
2. Local and regional governments are recognized as essential rather than peripheral. The Goals will be delivered locally. The implication for planners is direct: national governments can set frameworks, but cities and regions produce the spatial outcomes.
3. Finance remains among the tightest bottlenecks. Targets unmatched by implementation capacity and by municipal fiscal and borrowing capacity are declarations, not plans.

WHERE OUTCOMES STILL LAG

1. Public space is emerging as a serious concern. Across the cities monitored, only about 17 per cent of urban land is allocated to streets and open public spaces, and roughly 46 per cent of residents have convenient access to open public space within 400 metres down from 48 per cent in 2020. Public space has to be planned as essential urban infrastructure, not treated as land left over.

2. Sustainable mobility is improving, but not quickly enough. Convenient access to public transport rose from 53.2 per cent in 2020 to 61.5 per cent in 2025, yet many cities still depend on low-capacity bus services with significant gaps in safety and reliability, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and other rapidly growing regions.

3. Climate disruption, inequality and urban development have to be addressed together. Implementation can no longer proceed "one Goal, one sector, or one institution at a time" which is, in effect, the strongest available argument for integrated city and regional planning.

What these messages collectively reveal is an implementation gap that is not primarily technical but political and institutional. The frameworks are sound; the constraint is not planners' know-how but the absence of political will, institutional continuity, and financial resources to act on what is already agreed.

The Political Declaration adopted at the General Assembly's high-level meeting on the mid-term review of the New Urban Agenda (16–17 July 2026) therefore sets the direction of travel toward 2036 and Habitat IV, rather than opening a fundamentally new agenda.

Read alongside the HLPF's in-depth review of SDG 11 the same month, the message is consistent: the underlying vision of SDG 11 and the New Urban Agenda remains sound, but it is not being delivered fast enough. The coming decade calls for fewer new commitments and far more attention to housing, local government capacity, integrated spatial planning, finance, data, climate mitigation and implementation at scale.

This strengthens rather than weakens the case for planners and placemakers. The review and the declaration between them name precisely the terrain on which the profession works spatial planning, housing, land, infrastructure, public space, metropolitan coordination and local governance as the terrain on which the global agenda will either be localized into durable, regenerative outcomes or stall.

Several provisions of the HLPF Political declaration speak directly to planning practice. Two are worth setting out in full.

> *Article 15 "We recognize towns, cities, local and regional authorities as key partners and co-creators, contributing to the implementation and localization of sustainable urban development in an integrated manner, and stress the importance of empowering them with adequate mandates, resources and capacities."*

> *Article 38 "We call upon national, subnational, regional, municipal and local authorities, international and civil society organizations, the private sector, and academic, research and professional institutions to strengthen implementation and monitoring of the New Urban Agenda, including by: treating implementation of the NUA and the 2030 Agenda as inseparable from localization, with local and regional authorities as key partners, co-creators and implementers; advancing*

> *participatory governance in which civil society particularly grassroots and community-led organizations helps co-design, implement and monitor urban policies and improve the delivery of housing, basic services and related amenities; and improving professional capability across delivery mechanisms, including planning, architecture, engineering, finance, sustainability, climate adaptation and production of knowledge and evidence for quality urban development."*

For all that these provisions affirm the centrality of local governments, grassroots communities and planners to localized delivery, they leave the harder question open: what and who continues to prevent the narrowing of an implementation gap that is substantial and, in places, still widening?

The premise here is that the primary obstacle is not a missing policy framework or a missing planning principle, but the difficulty of operationalizing the ones we have within tangled institutional, political, social, economic and territorial realities with planners and placemakers "pinballed" between them.

The gap cannot be pinned on a single factor or a single actor. It is produced by the interaction of several: fragmented governance, uneven institutional capacity, limited data systems, sharply differing geographic and economic contexts, weak cross-sectoral coordination, and the difficulty of building meaningful participation across divergent societal ideologies and realities. Taken together and taken with their respective actors these dimensions show how demanding it is to translate a global sustainability agenda into planning processes that are locally relevant, genuinely implementable and capable of delivering what the frameworks promise.

The challenge, in short, is no longer to define a shared vision for sustainable cities; it is to build the institutional, technical and collaborative machinery that connects global aspiration to local reality. We read the 2026 political review as both sobering and encouraging yet conspicuously silent on the present and future role and capacity of professional planners and designers. We would rather cast those professionals as the flippers on the table: the levers that aim the ball SDG 11 and the NUA toward regenerative, place-positive outcomes, provided they can reach more and better resources, above all in the Global South. Understanding where planning professionals actually stand today is the necessary first step, and it is the subject of the section that follows.



CHAPTER 3

Expert Review of the Urban Sustainability Framework

Urban Expo 2025 nearby Seoul's National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, South Korea

Expert Review of the Urban Sustainability Framework

The SDG 11, NUA and IG-UTP texts identify planning as the instrument for delivering sustainable urbanization, which raises both the standing and the budget claims of a profession that spent decades treated as regulatory overhead.

The main obstacle to implementing SDG 11 and the New Urban Agenda is political will and institutional continuity rather than planners' technical expertise. Global South planners integrate SDG 11 more into daily practice and place far more confidence in bottom-up planning as a bridge, even while judging the implementation gap to be wider.

The SDGs and the NUA define desirable outcomes without adequately confronting the political economy that determines who controls land, capital and decision-making.

Developing local and grassroots planning capacity is therefore not an add-on to applying international guidelines it is the mechanism by which they get contextualized at all.

3.1 Matching Political Review with Expert Review

Setting or revising the economic targets and indicators of the SDGs without consulting economists would be unthinkable; the same holds, self-evidently, for the environmental and social ones. Yet when it comes to the place-specific spatial and territorial indicators embedded in SDG 11 and the related goals and the New Urban Agenda, the international community and, by extension, all of us seems unsure who the relevant experts even are, let alone how to consult them. The vacuum is filled competitively: a multidisciplinary array of "expert groups" now claims the role, not only qualified urban and territorial planners, or city and regional planners.

Through the Habitat Professionals Forum (HPF), UN-Habitat consults a broad spectrum of "human settlement professionals" sometimes, and inaccurately, called "built environment professionals" on matters within its mandate. The Forum brings together professional organizations claiming expertise across, among other fields, territorial planning, architecture and landscape architecture, engineering, land surveying, housing, geography, urban law and real estate. More recently "urban professionals" has surfaced as an alternative umbrella term, which only compounds an already considerable confusion about who, exactly, is responsible for SDG 11, the NUA and other place-positive targets and indicators. Box 2 sets this out in more detail.

Box 2 WHO ARE THE EXPERTS?

In this paper, "the experts" means people with formal spatial planning and/or urban design qualifications and field experience a deliberately bounded definition, for reasons this box sets out.

This article repeatedly uses titles such as urban planners and urban designers. Related titles include territorial or spatial planners and city and regional planners, alongside the less common placemakers. All are earned through university study and qualifications, typically at master's level, with placemaking best understood as a specialization within urban design. The primary distinction runs between planners and designers loosely, the two- and three-dimensional "place experts," both concerned with improving the quality of place-specific communities and ecosystems across the urban–rural–wildlife continuum.

Our survey referred to urban practitioners, and others use similarly diffuse labels urban specialists, even urban professionals. These are umbrella terms spanning a range of more formal academic disciplines: architects and landscape architects, engineers, surveyors, heritage specialists, urban economists, environmental scientists, mobility experts, GIS specialists, real-estate specialists and community-engagement specialists a spread that reflects the genuinely multidisciplinary challenge of shaping quality places for all living species.

The authors value every one of these underlying specializations. We nonetheless hold that a qualification and demonstrated professional experience as practitioner, researcher, or both in one of the formal planning and design titles named above should be treated as the anchor of the field. On that view, when we urge political decision-makers to "consult the experts," we mean, first, the holders of those formal qualifications a group in real need of stronger recognition and support, precisely to prevent its dissipation into newer but emptier identities such as "urban professional."



Figure 6a. A planner working with residents to upgrade an informal settlement through collaborative planning and placemaking.



Figure 6b. Planners in a mixed public-sector team gathered around a regional plan, digital and paper side by side, the city visible through the window.

Cities Forum the platform that brought this article's authors together is likewise a global, multidisciplinary body of experts working across the breadth of sustainable urban development, and the authors accordingly hold academic and professional credentials in one or more of the disciplines named above. What defines our contribution, however, is a particular lens: multidisciplinary expert advice viewed through territorial cohesion and quality, applied across the full urban–rural and wildlife spatial spectrum of life on earth, in the spirit of the International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning.

It should not be overlooked that professional planning bodies helped shape the New Urban Agenda, which goes much of the way to explaining why they endorse it. The International Society of City and Regional Planners (ISOCARP) campaigned throughout the Habitat III process and reads the Agenda as a mandate for the profession the document commits signatories to strengthening urban planning capacity and to training planners. The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI), with roughly 27,000 members the largest planning association and an institutional member of ISOCARP, entered a partnership with UN-Habitat in 2026 to press for planning systems to be resourced as core infrastructure for the Agenda and the SDGs, and runs member learning on SDG 11. The Canadian Institute of Planners, the American Planning Association and the Commonwealth Association of Planners have taken comparable positions.

There is, in short, a straightforward professional interest at work, and it is worth naming rather than concealing. The SDG 11, NUA and IG-UTP texts identify planning as the instrument for delivering sustainable urbanization, which raises both the standing and the budget claims of a profession that spent decades treated as regulatory overhead. Endorsement is therefore nearly costless and institutionally useful a fact that should temper how much weight the profession's own enthusiasm is asked to carry as evidence.

It is against this backdrop, and in the hope of informing the political representatives of the international community through the UN system while accepting that the UN will always consult its member states first, and its planners only indirectly that we ran our own survey. It is deliberately modest in scope, reach and duration, and aims to capture the multidisciplinary diversity of views on the what, why, how and who of implementing SDG 11, the NUA and the IG-UTP. By reading its findings against comparable bottom-up expert surveys, we hope to reach conclusions robust enough to argue for a more genuinely professional approach to the way the international community monitors and reviews place-positive SDG targets and indicators, now and in the years to 2030 and beyond.

3.2 Takeaways from our Survey

Complementing the political review in the previous section, we conducted a limited survey among "urban practitioners" (as defined in Box 2) inside and beyond the Cities Forum network. It was distributed via Google Form, remained open from 16 May to 11 August 2026, and generated 47 responses.

Respondents clustered in Western Europe (10 respondents, 21%) and sub-Saharan Africa (10, 21%), with smaller shares from North America (7, 15%), the Middle East and North Africa (6, 13%), South Asia (5, 11%), Central and South America (2, 4%), Eastern Europe (2, 4%), Oceania (1, 2%) and unspecified regions (4, 9%). By sector, private-sector practitioners formed the largest group (19, 40%), followed by the public sector (13, 28%), international organizations (8, 17%) and academia (7, 15%).

Two features of this sample bound what follows. First, no respondents were recorded from East or South-East Asia regions that, with the rest of Asia, account for roughly 54 per cent of the world's urban population and for the largest single concentration of slum dwellers anywhere. The findings below therefore speak for a European, African and North American practitioner community rather than a global one. Second, with 47 self-selected responses, a single respondent moves any figure by roughly two percentage points. We present the results as descriptive and indicative a pulse-check to be read alongside the more systematic evidence of the literature review, not a statistically representative account of the profession.



Figure 7. Polling views on SDG 11/NUA/IG-UTP among city and regional planners.

The four scaled items were designed to move from the individual to the institutional and back to the local: how far respondents personally integrate SDG 11 into daily practice; how prepared they feel to operationalize global frameworks; how large they judge the gap between global agreements and local institutional delivery; and how far community-based planning can bridge that gap. From global norm to local capacity, they trace the same arc as this article's central argument. All four used a five-point scale, where 1 indicates the lowest and 5 the highest level of the attribute in question.

The barriers item asked respondents to select two or three constraints from a fixed list spanning political, institutional, financial, technical and social factors, so that relative ranking rather than absolute endorsement would emerge. A three-part capacity item asked respondents to rate their own institution on climate adaptation and mitigation, equitable access, and interdisciplinary and participatory practice the three themes invoked most consistently across the NUA, the IG-UTP and the SDG 11 targets reviewed in the previous section. Two open-text questions closed the survey, asking what single change would most strengthen planning's contribution beyond the 2030 horizon, and how respondents would themselves define the planner's role in achieving just and resilient cities.

Read individually, the four scaled items describe a profession that rates itself moderately engaged: a mean of 3.4 on integrating SDG 11 into daily practice and 3.5 on preparedness to operationalize global frameworks. Both sit just above the mid-point of the scale, which is a modest self-assessment rather than a confident one. The perceived implementation gap divides respondents more sharply than any other item: 60% (28 respondents) judge it significant or very significant while 19% (9) judge it low, around a mean of 3.6. On the size of the problem it is being asked to solve, in other words, the profession does not agree. Confidence in community-based planning as a bridging mechanism is the most positive result in the set, at a mean of 4.1.

Those last two findings should be read side by side rather than as cause and effect. At the level of individual respondents, we found no association between judging the gap large and placing greater confidence in community-based planning. The gap is widely held to be real and community-based planning is viewed favourably, but the two do not track each other person by person and with 47 responses this is an absence of detectable association rather than evidence that the two are independent.

Grouping respondents into Global North and Global South – not including Asia – a pattern emerges across all four scaled questions (on a 1–5 scale):

TABLE 1 MEAN SCORES BY MACRO-REGION (1–5 SCALE)

Integration of SDG 11 into daily practice	3.52	3.11
Preparedness to operationalize global frameworks	3.48	3.39
Size of implementation gap	3.78	3.39
Community-based planning as a bridge	4.57	3.67

Across all respondents, the two most frequently selected constraints were lack of political will (51%) and short-term political cycles (49%), ahead of poor inter-institutional coordination and insufficient funding (43% each) and weak regulatory frameworks (32%). Technical and capacity-related barriers ranked well

behind: limited technical capacity (19%), rapid or informal urbanization pressures (15%) and limited community governance (13%).

Respondents, in short, locate the primary obstacle in political will and institutional continuity rather than in what planners know how to do. The open-text responses reinforce this directly: several distinguished explicitly between planning capacity, which they judged largely adequate "what planners have truly become good at" and implementation capacity, where decision-making power sits with actors other than planners.

Global South respondents report more day-to-day integration of SDG 11, greater preparedness, and simultaneously a larger implementation gap: they are working with the frameworks more actively and are more clear-eyed about the shortfall between ambition and delivery. They are also considerably more optimistic that community-based, participatory planning can close that gap. Global North respondents report lower integration, perceive a smaller gap, and are the more reserved group on whether participatory planning offers a way through.

The barriers each group selects help explain the divergence. Among Global North respondents, short-term political cycles led (61%), followed by lack of political will and insufficient funding, tied at 50%, with weak regulatory frameworks a minor concern (17%). Among Global South respondents, lack of political will led (52%), followed by short-term political cycles, weak regulatory frameworks and poor inter-institutional coordination, all at 43%, with funding trailing at 39%. Global North respondents, in other words, describe a resourcing-and-continuity problem within institutions they regard as basically well regulated; Global South respondents describe a political-will-and-regulatory problem that funding alone would not solve.

The institutional capacity ratings are, at pooled level, the least dramatic finding in the survey. All three items climate adaptation and mitigation, equitable access, and interdisciplinary and participatory practice cluster around "moderate," with interdisciplinary collaboration rated marginally the most favourably. Nothing registers as either a crisis or a clear strength. Read at this level alone, the result looks consistent with the barriers ranking: institutions short of political mandate and continuity rather than of know-how.

Disaggregated by sector, the picture changes. Public-sector respondents the group closest to the institutions actually responsible for delivery rated their own institution lowest on all three items: climate adaptation and mitigation (mean 2.5), equitable access (2.8) and interdisciplinary and participatory practice (2.6). Respondents from international organizations rated the same three items highest (3.3, 3.1, 3.6), with academia (3.3, 3.1, 3.1) and the private sector (3.3, 3.0, 3.2) close behind. Public-sector respondents also cited insufficient funding and short-term political cycles as their two leading barriers (both 69%), and reported the lowest confidence of any sector in community-based planning as a bridge (3.9, against 4.4 for international organizations and 4.2 for the private sector). This qualifies the pooled reading rather than overturning it. For private-sector and international-organization respondents, the diagnosis holds cleanly: capability is broadly adequate, political conditions are the constraint. For public-sector respondents, both problems are reported at once the weakest institutional capacity and the heaviest dependence on funding, continuity and political will. The group with the clearest view of delivery is the least optimistic about it, on every measure the survey took.

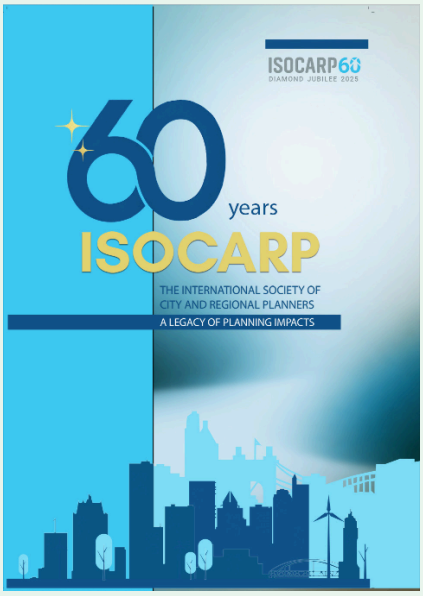
The two open-text questions add a further layer, and the sector differences in them are pronounced. Public-sector respondents gave the most pragmatic, resource-focused answers, calling for funding, political backing and institutional recognition "the need for funding and knowledge is critical now more than ever." Private-sector respondents supplied the largest and most process-oriented set, repeatedly urging a shift away from indicator-heavy frameworks towards fewer and stronger levers: multi-level governance and inter-institutional coordination. Many separated planning capacity from implementation capacity explicitly, one describing planners' actual decision-making power as "very limited ... even planners in public bodies." International-organization respondents offered the most consistent structural framing, favouring formal, legally binding mechanisms making sustainability commitments "legally compulsory" paired, somewhat in tension, with calls for a stronger bottom-up approach. Academic and research respondents gave the most conceptually developed answers, framing the problem in systems terms and arguing for a shift from static, target-based plans to adaptive resilience frameworks, with attention to procurement and contracts.

On the planner's role, private-sector respondents reached for mediating metaphors "the chess players of cities" usually paired with a note on constraint: "a very important role but limited because of institutional capacity to materialize their work." Public-sector answers used more service-oriented language, describing planning as a "critical but also vulnerable profession" and planners as "frontrunners in helping cities to be resilient." International-organization respondents were governance-focused and blunt, one referring directly to institutional corruption. Academic respondents again theorized most, placing planners between policy ambition and the built reality people actually inhabit a more granular statement of the implementation-capacity argument running through the rest of the survey.

On these findings, the main obstacle to implementing SDG 11 and the New Urban Agenda is political will and institutional continuity rather than planners' technical expertise. That holds at pooled level, and it holds most emphatically among the respondents closest to delivery though they, uniquely, report a capacity deficit alongside it. Geographically, Global South respondents integrate SDG 11 more into daily practice and place far more confidence in bottom-up planning as a bridge, even while judging the implementation gap to be wider.

These patterns can be complemented by those reported by the International Society of City and Regional Planners (ISOCARP) in its own assessment of the profession (Box 3).

Box 3 WHAT ISOCARP'S MEMBERS REPORT



No representative survey of the planning profession exists. In its absence we draw on a recent survey conducted by and among members of the International Society of City and Regional Planners (ISOCARP), a global association of more than 700 experienced planners and planning institutions from over ninety countries. Marking the Society's sixtieth anniversary in 2025, the survey asked members how far their own country's planning system aligns with the principles, targets and indicators of the SDGs, the New Urban Agenda and the IG-UTP.

Between roughly a quarter and just under two-fifths of respondents reported alignment across the three domains surveyed, with SDG 11 consistently scoring a few points above the NUA:

ALIGNMENT RATED "EXTENSIVE" OR "SIGNIFICANT"

National urban policy	35.4%	31.8%
National planning association's goals, policies and training	28.6%	24.2%
Education and training adequate to prepare professionals	38.1%	34.4%

The more consequential way to read this table is by its complement. Roughly two-thirds to three-quarters of respondents judged their country's national urban policy, their own professional association's programmes, and the education and training pipeline as not extensively or significantly aligned with the global frameworks. That verdict comes from members of an international planning society among the most globally engaged and framework-literate segment of the profession, and therefore the group most

likely to see alignment where it exists. These figures should be read as an upper bound rather than a typical case.

Two patterns within the table are worth noting. Education and training score highest of the three domains, and national urban policy higher than the associations' own goals and programmes meaning respondents judge the professional pipeline more favourably than the policy system it feeds, and their own institutions least favourably of all. And the consistent SDG 11 premium over the NUA suggests the Goal has penetrated national frameworks somewhat more deeply than the Agenda built to deliver it plausibly because SDG 11 comes with indicators and a reporting cycle that the NUA lacks.

Complementary interviews conducted in late 2025 show a similarly divided appraisal of the impact of SDG 11 and the NUA on domestic planning practice. Respondents from Australia, Belgium, Poland, South Africa and Venezuela described considerable and occasionally transformative influence; others reported little discernible effect. The accompanying analysis notes that where such influence exists it is frequently implicit rather than explicitly attributed to the global frameworks.

Based on Kalfouni B. & Chatterji T., in *ISOCARP at 60*, 2025.

Read alongside our own survey, the two exercises measure different things and point the same way. Ours asked practitioners what obstructs implementation, and returned political will and institutional continuity. ISOCARP asked how far national systems have actually absorbed the frameworks, and returned: for most respondents, not far. A framework that has not been embedded in national urban policy, in professional training or in the associations' own programmes is unlikely to survive a change of political cycle which is precisely the barrier our respondents ranked at the top.

Adjacent evidence does exist, and it does capture practitioner experience with SDG 11, the NUA and the IG-UTP it simply was not designed to. Four bodies of work are worth mentioning:

1. **Voluntary Local Review studies** growing academic literature examines how cities that produced VLRs actually went about it, usually through interviews with municipal officers. This is where the candid accounts are: SDG alignment performed retrospectively by mapping existing plans onto goals, reporting sustained by a single motivated officer, indicator data simply unavailable at city scale (UN-Habitat, 2021). One caveat: cities that publish a VLR are self-selected volunteers, typically better resourced and more internationally networked than the average municipality, so this literature describes the committed end of the distribution rather than its middle.

2. **National Urban Policy evaluations** these sometimes incorporate practitioner interviews, and they are consistently more critical than global monitoring reports partly because they are commissioned to identify what is not working, and partly because they are not written for an intergovernmental audience (OECD, 2024).

3. **Academic case studies of SDG localization** three findings recur. Awareness of SDG 11 is moderate among senior and internationally facing planners and low among staff handling day-to-day development control. Awareness of the IG-UTP is low almost everywhere outside the UN-Habitat orbit. And the frameworks are invoked far more often for legitimation and in funding applications than as a source of decision criteria. This last point deserves emphasis: it means the global agendas frequently function as justification for decisions already taken rather than as inputs that change them. We offer these three as a reasonable synthesis rather than an established finding the underlying studies are too heterogeneous in method, scale and setting to pool (Valencia e.a., 2019).

4. **Indicator monitoring** the SDG 11 Global Report series, the SDG progress reports and the 2026 mid-term review of the New Urban Agenda belong in a different category. It measures outcomes, not practitioner assessment, and cannot substitute for either.

Taken together, these sources point in the same direction as our own survey while approaching from the opposite end: they observe what practitioners do with the frameworks rather than asking what they believe about them. The convergence is the useful part. Practitioners report political will as the binding constraint; the case-study literature finds the frameworks used mainly to legitimize decisions rather than to shape them. Both describe an agenda that has been formally accepted without being institutionally absorbed.

3.3 AI-assisted Synthesis

Asked whether the planning profession has a position on the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda, a large language model (ChatGPT) answers that "there is no single 'urban-planner position' against nor in favour of the SDGs or the New Urban Agenda." It then reports, on its reading of the published record, a substantial critical literature across planning, geography, development studies and political economy holding that the SDGs, and SDG 11 in particular, together with the NUA, are too vague, too technocratic, too urban-centric and too weak on power and implementation.

We report this exercise for what it is: a fast, structured probe of how the critique is aggregated and framed in widely indexed sources, not a literature review. Its output is unreproducible, uncited, and weighted towards Anglophone, well-indexed scholarship which in a paper concerned with Global South practice is a limitation worth stating plainly. What the probe does supply is a serviceable map, and the arguments on it are real, longstanding and traceable to named scholarship. Sorted into families, they run as follows:

1. **Framing and depoliticization** the agendas are aspirational rather than operational; they translate fundamentally political questions into technical ones; and they invite box-ticking in place of transformation. This is the post-political critique applied to global development frameworks (Swyngedouw, 2018).

2. **Measurement** indicators compress complex urban conditions into numbers, and what is measured comes to define what is pursued an indicator-driven governance that rewards reporting over outcomes (Engebretsen & Greenhalgh, 2025).

3. **Universalism and scale** the frameworks risk exporting a single model of the "good city"; the NUA can be read as excessively urban-centric within an urban–rural continuum it claims to span; and globally set targets can cut across local democratic priorities (Watson, 2016).

4. **Political economy** 'sustainable development' can carry an unexamined growth imperative; green redevelopment can and does displace the residents it is meant to serve; and the agendas systematically underestimate what money and state capacity determine (Anguelovski, 2022).

The common thread is a single proposition, and it is the one planners should sit with: the SDGs and the NUA define desirable outcomes without adequately confronting the political economy that determines who controls land, capital and decision-making.

It would be misleading to read any of this as an argument against sustainability, compact cities, affordable housing, accessible public transport or climate action. Most of these critics support those objectives strongly. Their objection is to how the global agendas frame and govern them.

Prompted for the opposite case, the same probe returns an equally coherent set, which condenses to five claims: the SDGs and NUA help planners to think holistically rather than sector by sector; to plan spatially rather than as a series of disconnected projects; to foreground social equity rather than GDP-growth alone; to integrate climate and environmental limits into urban development; and to strengthen the political legitimacy of planning by tying local decisions to internationally recognized objectives. To these the underlying arguments add the more concrete gains the profession has actually banked: a global mandate for planning, explicit backing for public space, public transport and informal-settlement upgrading, and a shared vocabulary that makes cross-border collaboration and transnational planning possible at all.

Both sets are defensible, which is the finding. The useful question for planners is therefore not whether the SDGs and the NUA are good or bad, to be loved or hated the framing this paper opened with, and the one that has kept the profession circling. It is how planners can use them as a platform while guarding against their known weaknesses: vagueness, technocracy, indicator-driven governance and inattention to local power.

That position is available, and it is neither endorsement nor rejection: supportive but critical. Use the frameworks as a platform for progressive planning, and interpret them through local democracy, spatial justice, ecological limits and community knowledge. Situating this stance within contemporary planning theory is the subject of Box 4; what it means for practice is taken up in the concluding section.

Box 4 CONTEMPORARY PLANNING THEORY

On the prompt "Situate the lack of implementation of SDG 11/NUA/IG-UTP within contemporary urban and territorial planning theory", a large language model (DeepSeek) provides the following points for reflection:

1. **The "Glocal" Dilemma** contemporary planning theory stresses the interdependence of global agendas and local action. Yet the implementation gap points to a persistent difficulty in translating global norms and targets such as SDG 11 into locally relevant strategies. In practice, universal policy frameworks are often introduced from the top down, while cities and territories differ widely in institutional capacity, political priorities, economic structure, and socio-spatial realities. The result is a recurring mismatch between global ambition and local feasibility.

2. **Informality and the limits of conventional planning** the persistence and expansion of informal settlements challenge planning models built around formal regulation, zoning, and state-led control of urban growth. Policies linked to SDG 11, such as slum upgrading, require planning approaches that are more adaptive, incremental, and inclusive. Contemporary theory increasingly recognizes that informal urbanization is not a deviation from urban development but a central feature of it, demanding planning frameworks that engage with informal processes rather than simply seek to replace them.

3. **Integrated versus sectoral planning** the NUA/IG-UTP call for integrated urban and territorial planning, implying coordination across housing, transport, land use, environment, infrastructure, and economic development, as well as across levels of government. However, urban governance remains largely fragmented and sectoral in many contexts. Contemporary planning theory has therefore moved towards systemic, relational, and cross-scalar approaches, but implementation remains constrained by institutional silos and weak coordination mechanisms.

4. **Governance, participation and legitimacy** effective implementation depends not only on technical design but also on governance quality, institutional strength, and meaningful participation. Weak institutions, corruption, political instability, and the exclusion of marginalized groups undermine the inclusive and equitable outcomes promised by SDG 11 and the NUA. Contemporary planning theory emphasizes deliberation, co-production, and democratic legitimacy, yet these principles are often difficult to operationalize in contexts marked by inequality and low trust.

5. **Resources, capacity and distributive justice** implementing SDG 11 and NUA commitments requires substantial financial, technical, and human resources, which are unevenly distributed across countries and cities. Contemporary planning theory increasingly engages with questions of urban finance, redistribution, and justice under conditions of scarcity. This highlights that implementation gaps are not merely technical deficits but also reflect deeper political and structural inequalities.

Overall, three theoretical positions can be distinguished regarding global urban sustainability frameworks, and they are not equally persuasive:

1. **Weak position** implementation has failed because of insufficient capacity, finance, and political will. This is the conventional institutional explanation. It is partially correct, but it remains superficial because it treats a structural problem as if it were simply an input shortage.

2. **Stronger position** there is an inverse relationship between the universality and adoptability of these frameworks and their implementability. Their broad consensus, flexibility, and non-binding character made unanimous adoption possible in 2015–16, but these same features limit enforceability. On this reading, the implementation gap is built into the architecture of the framework itself.

3. **Strongest, and most controversial, position** these frameworks function mainly as instruments of legitimation for UN-Habitat's institutional mandate, for the planning profession's claim to relevance, and for national governments seeking sustainability credentials without redistributive commitment. From this perspective, non-implementation is not an accident but part of their normal political function.

Overall, contemporary planning theory offers a rich explanation of why global urban norms often fail to translate into practice. What remains notably limited, however, is empirical testing of these claims against the perspectives and behavior of practitioners. Concepts such as decoupling, ceremonial conformity, and conflicting rationalities describe what planners may do, but they are still rarely examined directly through field evidence. This creates a clear opportunity for research: a practitioner survey designed around these mechanisms could help distinguish between implementation failure due to capacity constraints and non-implementation as a product of institutional or political decoupling.

The mechanism everyone overlooks: the planning system itself. Both the machine-generated reviews above and, to a large degree, our own survey respondents pass lightly over the most concrete implementation mechanism of all: the statutory planning systems planners actually work within. Weak regulatory frameworks did register as a barrier in our survey 43 per cent among Global South respondents but it ranked mid-field, well behind political will, and neither the AI-probes nor the professional discourse treats the planning system as the central variable. The omission is significant, because the instruments most planners use daily, enshrined in national planning law, were designed for problems that no longer exist, by states pursuing purposes the global frameworks now disavow.

The deficit is specific and statutory. Many planning acts contain no land-value-capture mechanism, no municipal borrowing authority, no land-assembly power, no metropolitan tier and critically no climate duty. An enabling act written in 1947, 1965 or 1976 has no statutory purpose corresponding to climate adaptation or decarbonization. A planner can cite SDG 11 in a report; she cannot refuse a permission on a ground the enabling act does not recognize. Box 7, in the next section, takes up the case for critically reviewing and reforming these systems in alignment with the emerging global normative framework.

This is why planning system reform is not a technical exercise but a political one. It requires governments to cede control, empower local authorities, and embed climate duties in statutory frameworks. The next

chapter takes up this challenge in detail, proposing adaptive planning systems as one of three priority clusters for localising the global planning agenda.

Reform, however, cannot mean transplanting a template. In "Rethinking Planning Systems: A Plea for Self-Assessment and Comparative Learning", D'hondt e.a. (2020) argue for rethinking planning's role in larger development goals and reforming planning systems in the places that need it most. Their central claim is that general orientations for planning reform can partly transcend context, but only if the generalizable principles include principles of contextualization and learning: comparative learning underpins the search for general principles, and applying those principles locally triggers further comparative learning in turn. Developing local and grassroots planning capacity is therefore not an add-on to applying international guidelines it is the mechanism by which they get contextualized at all.

Stiftel (2021) reached a complementary verdict on the New Urban Agenda itself. He argued that the NUA has real potential to elevate planning's profile and spread its "reinvention" as inclusive, bottom-up and integrative yet the document carries clear roots in a government-centred, modernist practice of planning that theorists have spent decades discrediting, and any global template for planning risks tone-deafness to the particularities of individual countries. In the same article he weighed corporate power, the new regionalism and the growth of Southern theory as standing contests to the twentieth century's dominant planning paradigms contests planning must answer if it is to serve today's cities and regions.

Returning to the 'ISOCARP at 60' publication, Stiftel and Enlil (2025) drawing on the survey and interviews reported in Box 3 distil these tensions into six questions:

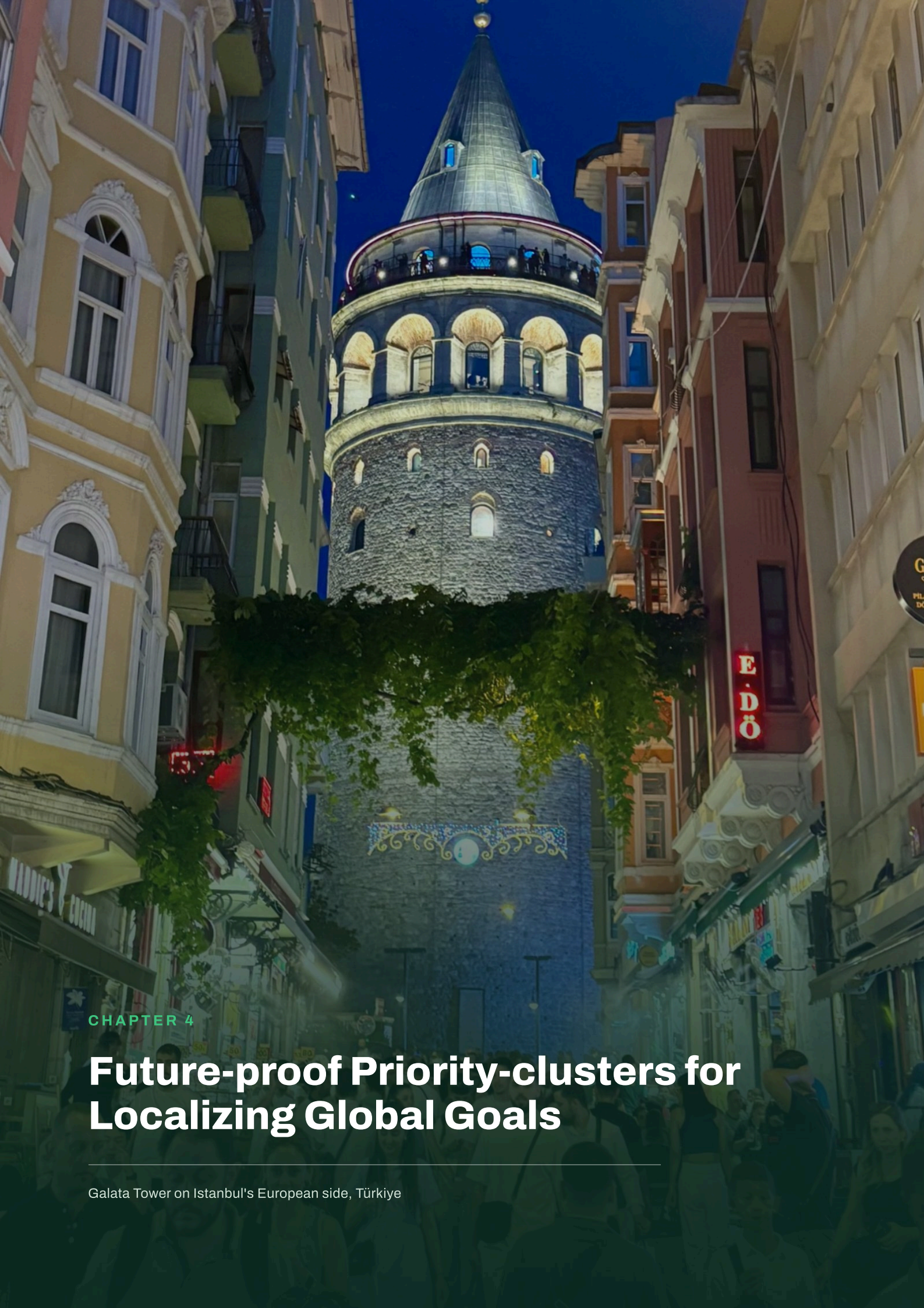
1. With the immense and growing power of multinational corporations to effectively dictate urban development patterns, can the government-centred approach to planning laid out in the NUA succeed?
2. Does the emphasis on professional planning action leave sufficient room for the civil-society-driven urban change now prevalent in Africa and South and South-East Asia?
3. Is there an adequate workforce of capable planners in the fastest-growing regions of the world?
4. Can any universal roadmap for planning succeed everywhere, especially in the Global South?
5. Will small cities and rural areas have the capacity to meet the NUA's demands?
6. Can the necessarily deliberate, evidence-based pace of planned action keep up with lightning-fast change driven by climate, urban heat, war and civil unrest?

Their article offers answers, or clues to answers, as do ours and the surveys beneath them. The shortest honest answer to most of the six is no and yet planners keep the aspiration alive by working to close the global–local divide, which is perhaps the most accurate one-line description of the profession's current condition.

The debate on localizing global planning targets is thus shifting from love or hate to something more useful: what exactly planners can contribute to implementing current and future global targets and indicators,

looking past 2030 toward the NUA's 2036 horizon and beyond an alignment question in its own right, since the SDGs expire in 2030 while the Agenda runs to 2036 and the IG-UTP, usefully, carries no expiration date at all. Planners are also coming to clearer terms with how universal guidelines apply in place-specific contexts.

The final section draws these threads into a select number of strategic priorities for current and future global planning targets.



CHAPTER 4

Future-proof Priority-clusters for Localizing Global Goals

Galata Tower on Istanbul's European side, Türkiye

Future-proof Priority-clusters for Localizing Global Goals

> *City and regional planning is the connective tissue that can integrate SDG 11, the NUA and the IG-UTP with the other relevant Goals, across the entire urban–rural–wildlife continuum, instead of walling off "the urban" as a new silo.*

> *Understood properly, participation is continuous engagement across every stage of planning: identifying challenges, analysing local conditions, and formulating, designing, implementing and evaluating plans and projects.*

> *Capacity development is no magic bullet against spatial injustice. It is, however, a necessary condition for accelerated, localized implementation of SDG 11, the NUA and the IG-UTP.*

> *The planning system, national and subnational, is therefore the stage on which all the components of the IG-UTP and the complementary normative frameworks SDG 11, the NUA, the Paris Agreement and the Sendai Framework either come together or fail to.*

Linking the political and expert reviews above, we advocate a more integrated approach to monitoring and evaluating place-based SDG targets and indicators, built on better-coordinated political and expert review. In the spirit of strategic planning, such a mechanism can only work if it concentrates on a selected number of place-positive targets the ones genuinely critical to inclusive, sustainable territorial development and management, rather than the full indicator inventory.

We speak deliberately of an emerging global planning agenda: planning is the connective tissue that can integrate SDG 11, the NUA and the IG-UTP with the other relevant Goals, across the entire urban–rural–wildlife continuum, instead of walling off "the urban" as a new silo. To that end we propose three priority clusters as milestones on the road to 2036 and beyond.

4.1 Priority-cluster 1: Public Participation Beyond Consultation

Participation by stakeholders and by the public at large must become the centrepiece of localized implementation wherever a planning process leads to binding, place-shaping regulation. Planning, on this view, is an inclusive, collaborative and people-centred process by definition, not by concession. The point is already inscribed in the monitoring framework itself: SDG Indicator 11.3.2 measures the "proportion of cities with a direct participation structure of civil society in urban planning and management that operate regularly and democratically." A dedicated indicator means participation is no longer treated as optional; it is a necessary condition for sustainable cities and communities.

Recognizing participation's importance does not make it meaningful. One reason the gap between global aspiration and local implementation persists is that, in many contexts, participation is still reduced at best to consultation conducted after the main decisions have been taken a procedural requirement rather than a mechanism with real influence on outcomes. Box 5 sets out the rungs of participation below and above consultation.

Box 5 PARTICIPATION LADDER

Sherry Arnstein's 'participation ladder' had eight rungs grouped into three bands, ordered by how much power citizens actually hold over the decision (Arnstein, 1969).

ARNSTEIN'S LADDER OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Band	Rungs
Non-participation	Manipulation · Therapy
Degrees of tokenism	Informing · Consultation · Placation
Degrees of citizen power	Partnership · Delegated power · Citizen control

The load-bearing claim is her own: participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless. The ladder measures authority, not process quality so a beautifully facilitated workshop that changes nothing sits on rung four, and its excellence is irrelevant to the ranking. That's why the framework has survived nearly six decades of methodological improvement in engagement practice: it asks the one question better methods don't answer. Rung five, placation, is the rung planners should worry about most: advisory committees and co-design panels where residents genuinely participate and power-holders retain the decision. It looks like partnership and functions as legitimation.

Adaptive revision for Global South countries adds rungs for state neglect and self-management, recognising that in much of the world the problem isn't a state monopolising decisions but a state absent altogether while residents build the city anyway (Choguill, 1996). Many other scholars claim that participation only works when the parties genuinely need each other, all affected interests are present, and dialogue meets conditions that prevent power from distorting it (Healey, 1997). A recurrent critique from other scholars is that this borrows Habermasian ideal-speech conditions that no planning process satisfies, so it prescribes what would work if power were absent from a situation defined by power (Flyvbjerg, 1998). Some argue that consensus is the wrong target: conflict over land and rent is real and legitimate, and processes that manufacture agreements suppress the dissent through which change happens (Mouffe, 2000). On this reading, Arnstein's top rungs are less important than whether a process lets disagreement register and remain visible. This connects directly to the post-political critique from earlier in this article a

framework built for consensus will not surface distributive conflict, and distribution is the whole substance of SDG 11.

For slum-upgrading specifically, the operative theory is co-production: residents supply data, labour, land knowledge, and legitimacy that the state cannot generate; the state supplies trunk infrastructure, tenure, and finance. Neither side controls the outcome, which puts it outside Arnstein's vertical logic altogether. This is also where participation solves the evidence problem discussed earlier: community enumerations produce the settlement-level data that SDG 11 indicators demand and national statistical systems can't supply.

SDG 11.3.2 asks for the proportion of cities with a direct participation structure in urban planning and management that operates regularly and democratically. Read that against the ladder: it counts the existence of a structure, which is rung three or four. A city with a statutory consultation procedure that changes nothing scores identically to one with participatory budgeting and devolved authority.

Community participation in urban planning has been described as "a pathway to achieving SDG 11 through community-led action" (UN-Habitat, 2026). Yet SDG Indicator 11.3.2, which measures the "proportion of cities with a direct participation structure of civil society in urban planning and management that operate regularly and democratically" remains one of the least-reported indicators. Data indicates that fewer than 30% of countries have reported on this indicator, and it has been at risk of removal from the SDG Global Database. The gap between what the indicator measures and what meaningful participation requires is itself a measure of the framework's limitations.



Figure 8. Participatory visioning workshop as input to Hargeysa's new Urban Plan, Somaliland. (D'hondt, 2019)

Understood properly, participation is continuous engagement across every stage of planning: identifying challenges, analysing local conditions, and formulating, designing, implementing and evaluating plans and projects. Communities are not consulted on proposals; they co-create them. Participatory workshops, shared-vision and co-design sessions and related collaborative methods must therefore do more than collect opinions they must create channels through which communities contribute knowledge, everyday experience and local priorities. Integrating that knowledge strengthens the legitimacy of urban interventions and raises the odds that solutions actually answer local challenges.

Hard questions follow. Who actually participates? Do the processes represent the real diversity of a territory's communities and stakeholders? How much influence do participants have over final decisions? And most fundamentally how can global sustainability agendas be translated into locally relevant action if the communities they are meant to benefit have no hand in shaping their implementation?

The task, then, is not to multiply participatory processes but to rethink their purpose: participation as a strategic mechanism connecting global sustainability principles with the knowledge, needs and aspirations of each territory and the communities inhabiting it. The planner's role expands accordingly from org-

anizer of consultations to strategic mediator between global agendas and local realities: facilitating dialogue among institutions, communities and other stakeholders, building trust, and ensuring international commitments become planning processes that are meaningful, context-sensitive and locally legitimate. This is the mediating institutional practice this article has argued for throughout, exercised at street level.

Two conditions are attached. First, digital tools from participatory GIS to AI-assisted scenario modelling must empower what might be called human territorial intelligence without importing personal or collective surveillance and control; a participatory process that residents distrust technologically is not participatory. Second, our own survey counsels realism: public-sector respondents, the group closest to delivery, expressed the lowest confidence of any sector in community-based planning as a bridging mechanism. Participation cannot be asked to substitute for the funding, continuity and mandate those same respondents identified as their binding constraints it works alongside them or not at all.

Approached this way, collaborative and participatory planning also opens the door to the incremental fulfilment of human rights and allied concepts such as the Right to the City the principle that those who live in a place should shape and reshape it. And it lays the foundation for community-based capacity development for community-led, intergenerational planning and placemaking, in the spirit of the International Participatory Charter for Urban and Territorial Development a global framework launched at WUF 12 in 2024 by the UN Habitat Professionals Forum to embed inclusive community engagement directly into city planning and crisis recovery (HPF, 2024); see figure below.

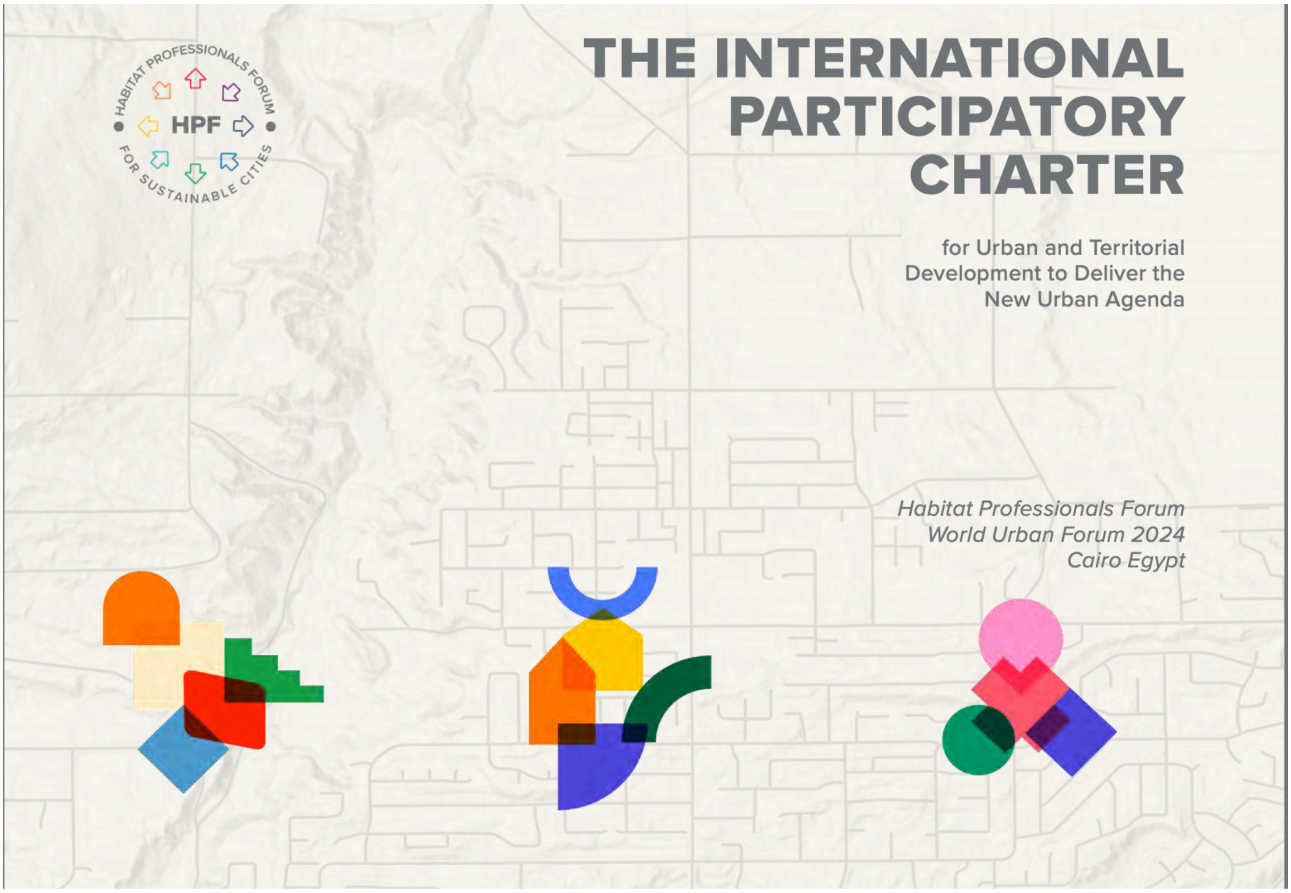


Figure 9. Cover of the International Participatory Charter, HPF. (Source: HPF, 2024)

4.2 Priority-cluster 2: Planning Capacity Development

Capacity development is well recognized by the international development community and by member States through the New Urban Agenda as a critical means of implementation for sustainable urban development. It works at three levels at once: strengthening individuals, organizations and institutions, and equipping policy-makers and urban practitioners with the skills and knowledge to understand the complexities underpinning urbanization, make well-informed decisions, and monitor and report on progress. Yet while many cities have undergone substantial social, economic, spatial and physical transformation, the human and administrative capacities of municipal and local governments have not kept pace (UNESCAP, 2015). The effectiveness of municipal government is routinely stymied by inadequate local capacity in urban planning and regulatory control, finance, administration and service delivery (Avis, 2016).

The capacity gap is not merely technical but institutional and political. As the Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies has argued, "the gap between commitment and delivery remains enormous and persistent" because it is "fundamentally a capacity gap: a deficit in the skills, systems, institutional arrangements, and political competencies required to translate international commitments into local action" (IHS, 2026). This diagnosis is particularly acute in the Global South, where local governments often lack the fiscal, technical and human resources to translate global commitments into local action. The capacity deficit is not evenly distributed, it is most severe in the places where urbanisation is fastest and the need for planning is greatest. Capacity development must therefore address not only individual skills but also organisational structures and governance arrangements. The NUA's mid-term review confirms this diagnosis, noting that "capacity gaps continue to hinder effective planning, service delivery, and project implementation" (UN-Habitat, 2026).

Depending on actual needs, capacity development can span every sector and area of interest from data collection and processing through policy development to implementation and stakeholder engagement and can take many forms: training, e-learning, on-the-job learning, city-to-city exchange and more. Whatever the format, an effective intervention is rooted in understanding the gaps and needs, and in iterative development of materials and tools as lessons accumulate. The NUA calls for strengthened knowledge exchange on science, technology and innovation; partnerships among urban and territorial stakeholders, research and tertiary-education institutions and technology industries together with working science–policy interfaces can ignite the ideas, methods and approaches that individual institutions cannot generate alone.

Capacity development is no magic bullet against spatial injustice. It is, however, a necessary condition for accelerated, localized implementation of SDG 11, the NUA and the IG-UTP and in the absence of any comprehensive worldwide "capacity audit," recent surveys and studies suggest the already wide capacity gap is widening further, most critically in the Global South, compounded by eroding international commitment to address it structurally. The message from Baku (WUF 13) to New York (HLPF '26) is consistent: moving from commitment to action will stand or fall on partnerships and capacity.

Just as planning is more about the process than the plan, capacity development needs a process-led, strategic approach to be efficient and effective; Box 6 sets out the underlying theory.

Box 6 THE THEORY BEHIND CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

Capacity development is "the process through which individuals, organizations and societies obtain, strengthen and maintain the capabilities to set and achieve their own development objectives over time" (UNDP, 2009). The term won out over the older capacity building after years of debate in the development community, and the distinction is more than cosmetic. Building implies constructing something new from the ground up, to a preconceived design, on the assumption that no capacities yet exist when in reality every individual, organization and society already has capacities to start from (OECD, 2006). It also connotes a one-off intervention typically training, or training of trainers that supports only the first steps of creating capacity, where what is needed is a continuous process of strengthening and maintaining it over time (UNDP, 2009).

Knowing the elements of capacity development is one thing; applying them in real contexts is what creates change. Planners and planning institutions can follow a structured cycle to turn the components into action assessing existing capacities and needs, designing the response, implementing it, and evaluating and adjusting as lessons accumulate. The figure below visualizes the key steps.

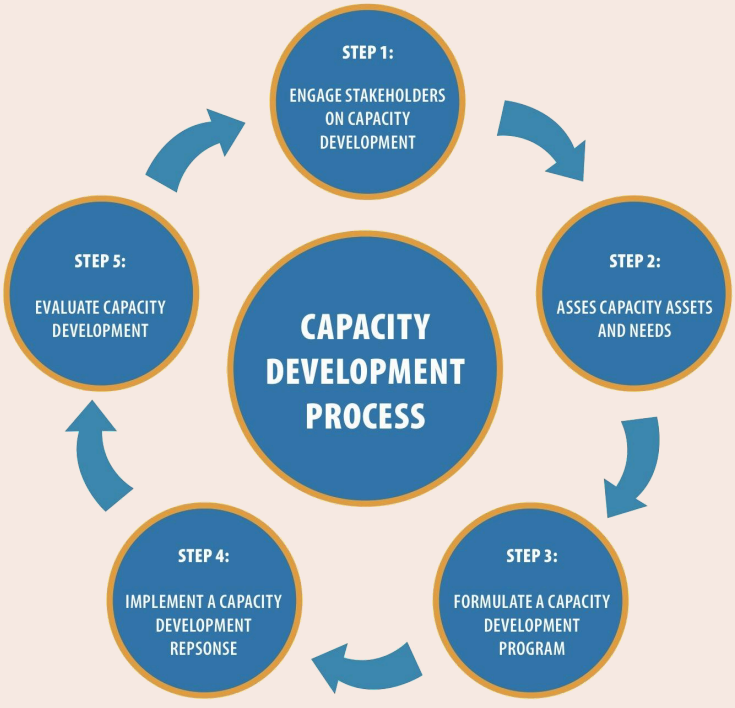


Figure 10. The capacity development cycle. (Source: UNDP, 2009)

Followed as a cycle rather than a checklist, these steps let planning and other organizations make steady progress that combines strong structures, skilled people and sustainable resources. External expertise

has a role at each step but consistent with the definition above, its job is to tailor the process to context and long-term goals, not to substitute for the local capacities the process exists to strengthen.

Community-Based Capacity Development (CBCD) strengthens a community's skills, knowledge, systems and resources so that its members can identify, manage and solve their own place-based problems sustainably. Instead of outside organizations doing things for a community, CBCD works with it to build long-term local leadership and self-reliance. Its key elements are community participation (Priority cluster 1), local ownership, skill and knowledge building, and improved local and regional governance structures. ISOCARP's Global Planning Aid, launched with Planning Aid Scotland at WUF10 in Abu Dhabi in 2020, is built on exactly this premise: connecting professional planning know-how with grassroots communities to empower "poor and marginalised people" and reinforce participatory planning capacity. The launch was a call to action rather than an operational programme the task since has been to build momentum, develop training packages and partnerships, and give the idea an organizational foundation.

Looking beyond traditional professional boundaries and state institutions beyond attempts to micro-manage land use, and beyond the discredited top-down technocratic masterplan a new set of skills for planning and managing urban and territorial development comes into view:

1. **Analytical and cognitive skills** recognizing where opportunities and constraints lie, and how they relate to structures of power.
2. **Communication, negotiation and inclusion skills** listening, questioning, synthesizing, summarizing and searching for solutions.
3. **Stakeholder- and community-engagement skills** fostering and enabling participation by all place-specific stakeholders and the public at large.
4. **Strategic action skills** leadership in developing and sharing a territorial development vision.
5. **Management skills** developing strategic plans, implementing projects, establishing partnerships, and managing the budgets and funding of participatory planning and delivery.
6. **Monitoring and learning skills** difficult situations are not turned around by old routines; monitoring and learning are the engine of innovation.

These (non-limitative) skills are what the New Urban Agenda's own capacity commitments presuppose notably its pledge to strengthen the capacity of national, subnational and local governments "to work with women and girls, children and youth, older persons and persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and local communities, and those in vulnerable situations, as well as with civil society, academia and research institutions ... enabling them to participate effectively in decision-making about urban and territorial development" (NUA, para. 148 and D'hondt, 2023).

Data, territorial intelligence and the planner as translator: among the genuinely new skills of the capacitated planner is the ability to navigate and make sense of existing spatial data and to generate what is

missing in order to understand the past and present of a place before proposing its future. Mastering human- and planet-friendly artificial intelligence as a complement to human intelligence, toward what we have called territorial intelligence, sits at the core of this skillset.

Implementation of the international frameworks depends heavily on information: data underpin context-specific proposals, implementation monitoring and outcome evaluation, and they strengthen transparency and accountability along the way. But measuring cities remains hard, and the issue is not producing more data. It is ensuring that information is reliable, current, comparable, available across spatial scales, accessible to different users, and robust enough to integrate with other sources. Data do not generate better decisions on their own; they create value only when transformed into meaningful evidence for planning.

Nor is knowledge production the monopoly of public institutions. Communities increasingly generate information about their own territories through community mapping, citizen-generated data, participatory GIS and community observatories enriching the understanding of urban dynamics and capturing local knowledge that conventional sources overlook. Interoperability then becomes critical, because territorial issues are interconnected: housing, mobility, climate, services, public space and economic development cannot be understood in isolation, and information systems must communicate across sectors and institutions to form a coherent evidence base. Interoperability also makes information more useful to communities themselves, strengthening their capacity to participate which loops this cluster back to the first.

The planner's role evolves accordingly: from user of information to translator between data and decision-making integrating multiple sources of evidence, interpreting complexity, and converting technical knowledge into insights that institutional decision-makers and local communities can both act on. The challenge is no longer to produce more urban data, but to build open, interoperable and participatory information ecosystems that turn evidence into more inclusive decisions, stronger accountability, and genuinely localized implementation of the global agendas.

4.3 Priority-cluster 3: Adaptive Planning Systems

The IG-UTP Handbook (UN-Habitat, 2018) defines a functional planning system as the localized, multi-tier and multi-partner governance framework for formulating, developing and improving urban and territorial policies, plans, designs and implementation processes, in pursuit of more compact, socially inclusive, vibrant, connected and climate-resilient cities and territories. Just as important is what the definition implies: a planning system is the combined performance of planning in theory and planning in practice the statute book and the street, judged together. The planning system, national and subnational, is therefore the stage on which all the components of the IG-UTP and the complementary normative frameworks SDG 11, the NUA, the Paris Agreement and the Sendai Framework either come together or fail to.

We call this cluster adaptive planning systems deliberately: the goal of a review is not a once-and-done modernization but a system with the capacity to keep adjusting to new evidence, new risks and new obligations without requiring a generational rewrite each time. That is the property most current systems lack.

The reasons a review may be necessary vary by context, but three recur. Many countries operate planning systems old enough to predate the challenges of a rapidly urbanizing twenty-first century, and the political-

economic and social contexts they were written for no longer exist. In many others, the system governs only formal development while most actual urbanization happens outside it a system that regulates the minority of what gets built is not, functionally, a planning system. And often a single entry point a sectoral issue, a weak process, a failing instrument is what exposes the need, prompting a move from ad-hoc fixes and SWOT exercises toward systematic, forward-looking adjustment.

The statutory deficit identified in the previous section is not abstract. Many planning acts were written in a different era, before climate change was a policy concern, before informal settlements housed over a billion people, before cities were recognised as central to sustainable development. A planning act drafted in 1947, 1965 or 1976 has no statutory purpose corresponding to adaptation or decarbonisation. As the UN's mid-term review of the NUA acknowledges, 'fragmented governance, limited stakeholder participation and inadequate urban data constrain evidence-based decision-making and accountability' (UN-Habitat, 2026). Planning system reform is not a technical exercise but a political one: it requires governments to cede control, empower local authorities, and embed climate duties in statutory frameworks.

Reform also requires peer learning and city-to-city exchange. The IG-UTP Handbook emphasises that planning system reform must be context-sensitive, but it also acknowledges that comparative learning is essential for identifying general principles that can be adapted locally. There is no single template for reform, but there is a shared process of learning, adaptation and iteration that can guide it.

Any one of these is reason enough to start; Box 7 takes up the alignment of outdated national systems with the emerging global framework.

The international frameworks promote integrated planning because urban challenges are complex, interdependent and cross-sectoral; both the NUA and the IG-UTP press for governance capable of holding the social, environmental, economic and spatial dimensions of development in one frame. Practice runs on a different logic. Cities operate as interconnected systems, but the institutions governing them remain sectoral separate mandates, budgets, planning horizons and performance indicators. The fragmentation obstructs coordination and, more fundamentally, disables responses to problems that do not respect departmental boundaries.

The SDGs themselves make the disconnect visible: progress on each SDG 11 indicator is bound up with climate action, health, inequality, governance and economic development, and the frameworks acknowledge these interdependencies yet the institutional structures asked to deliver them rarely mirror that logic of integration. Breaking down institutional, sectoral and disciplinary silos is therefore not an aspiration but a precondition. Governments need to be understood as integrated systems of actors operating across sectors and scales; cities as systems in which a decision taken in one sector lands in many others. A holistic perspective is what lets planners and decision-makers find synergies, manage the unavoidable trade-offs between policy objectives honestly, and design responses matched to the complexity they face.

Integration is vertical as well as horizontal. Global agendas set a shared direction, but regulatory, financial and institutional responsibilities are distributed across national, regional and local government. Implementation therefore depends on coordination between levels as much as across sectors the multi-level governance without which shared objectives never become coherent local action. This is also where

the statutory deficits identified in the previous section bite hardest: no amount of coordination goodwill substitutes for a metropolitan tier, a borrowing power or a climate duty that the enabling act does not contain.

The planner's strategic role and the limit of replication: within such systems the planner's role becomes strategic rather than regulatory: beyond preparing plans and administering land use, planners facilitate co-ordination among institutions, disciplines, sectors and stakeholders with divergent interests building shared visions, fostering dialogue, and articulating the knowledge, resources and capacities that no single institution commands. Yet even where coordination works, policies cannot simply be replicated across contexts; their success turns on how well they answer the specific characteristics, capacities and priorities of each territory.

Which returns the paper to its central question, now in operational form: if the global sustainability frameworks are designed to be universally applicable, how are they meaningfully translated into radically diverse local realities? The three clusters together are our answer. Participation supplies the local knowledge and legitimacy (cluster 1); capacity development supplies the people and institutions able to act on it (cluster 2); and adaptive planning systems supply the statutory and governance machinery through which both can operate (cluster 3). None of the three works without the other two which is why we present them as one agenda rather than a menu.

Box 7 REALIGNING NATIONAL PLANNING SYSTEMS WITH THE GLOBAL FRAMEWORKS

Because the SDGs, the NUA and the IG-UTP are by design global and universal, they do not and cannot address national and subnational planning systems as such. It falls to planners to carry these ideas into multi-level systems rooted in local territorial and governance contexts: national, subnational and local planning systems are what connect the dots the NUA and IG-UTP sketch out. No two systems will do this the same way. Different urban and territorial issues, different political, economic and legal orders, and different cultures and value systems each shape a planning system differently and every system carries the path dependencies and limited autonomy its governance context imbues it with.

International comparison suggests that a functional planning system contains at least three interdependent components: plans (including policies and designs), legislation and finance (UN-Habitat, 2018). Most observers would by now agree that planning cannot be reduced to plan-making, and that the coordinative power of plans has often been overestimated. Yet the converse holds too: spatial policies without plans forfeit coordinative opportunities, and stating common goals through spatial organization achieves little without links to budgets and to the harder institution of law. The three components stand or fall together which is precisely why the statutory deficits identified in the previous section (no land-value capture, no borrowing authority, no climate duty) disable the other two components as well.

Reviewing and reforming planning systems is complex and slow, and many countries have no national system in place to reform at all. But today's social and environmental challenges are too large to wait for perfect system reforms the perfect is the enemy of the good. Cities and local authorities should therefore

be encouraged to act in the absence of (functional) national systems, with whatever legal, financial and planning means they already command. And communities with their trained and "barefoot" planners, in the spirit of the barefoot doctors who brought basic care where no formal system reached should equally be encouraged to act in the absence of a just local planning system (D'hondt, 2019).

A reform effort structured by a theory of change links inputs (legislation, digital tools, stakeholder funding) and activities (drafting new district plans, streamlining approvals) to outputs (codified rules, simplified pathways), driving short-term outcomes (faster decisions, transparent processes) and long-term impacts (sustainable growth, affordable housing, resilient communities) as illustrated in the figure below.

The review methodology itself examines the existing planning approaches, instruments and other components of the system in place, identifying gaps, deficiencies and opportunities, and establishing the baseline from which reform proceeds. A planning constituency that understands its own system's weaknesses is far better equipped to translate an assessment into a roadmap for reform. UN-Habitat has developed an indicative methodological approach for such reviews, but each country or city can organize its own, informed by international experience and adapted to local practice.

The political opening is current. The Baku Call to Action, adopted at WUF13 in May 2026, calls for "integrated and systems-based planning approaches that embed housing within broader territorial and urban frameworks" and for "implementation of national housing strategies, with clear pathways, measurable targets, and strong monitoring and reporting mechanisms" (World Urban Forum, 2026). Read alongside the 2026 Political Declaration on the New Urban Agenda, this is a mandate for planning system reform in all but name. Planners should use it to advocate statutory changes that enable rather than constrain integrated, participatory and climate-responsive planning.

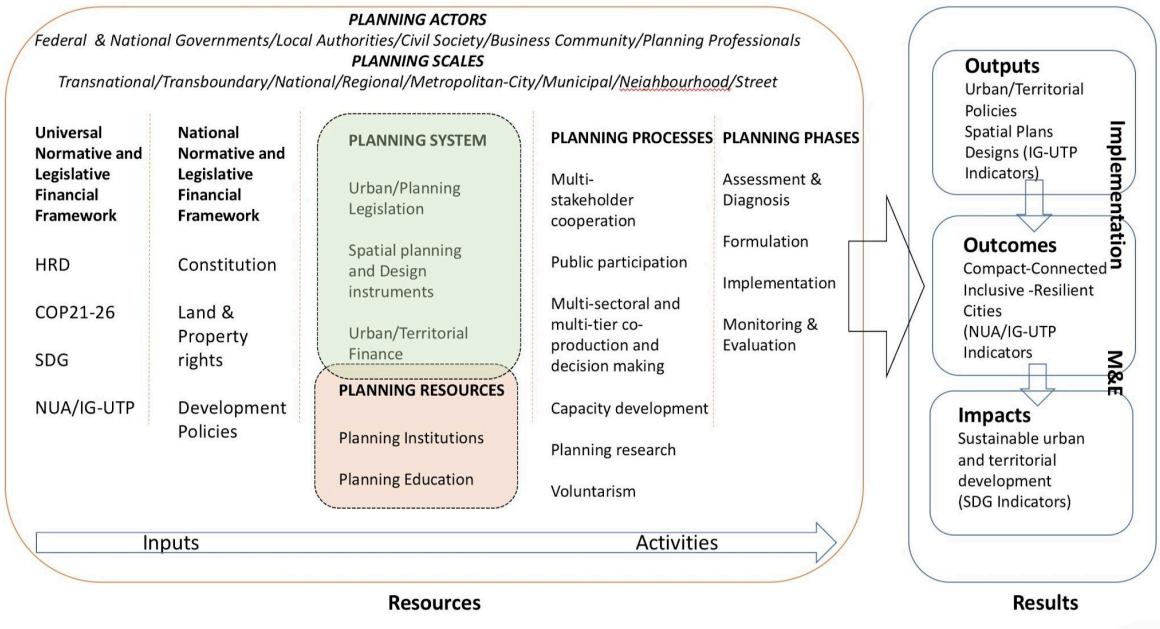


Figure 11. Proposed alignment of national planning systems with the global policy frameworks, applying a theory of change (inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, impacts). (Source: D'hondt, 2016, unpublished)



CHAPTER 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

"Tri-bulance" in Cristo Rey, a new town adjacent to New Clark City serving as an emergency hub for Manila, the Philippines

Conclusions and Recommendations

Planners can be the flippers: the fixed points of leverage that keep the ball SDG 11, the New Urban Agenda, the Guidelines in play and aim it, strike after strike, toward regenerative, place-positive outcomes.

Six findings emerge from setting the 2026 political reviews against the profession's own evidence.

1. **The frameworks and the diagnosis are sound – even in absence of a more representative survey.** The HLPF review, the mid-term Political Declaration and our own respondents converge. The love–hate question that opened this article is, by the evidence, obsolete the profession's real division is not over the frameworks' worth but over the size of the implementation gap, on which our respondents split 60/19.

2. **The constraint is not planning knowledge.** Practitioners rank political will and short political cycles far above technical capacity; the case-study literature finds the frameworks used for legitimation more than for decisions; and the ISOCARP survey finds two-thirds to three-quarters of members reporting national systems unaligned. Three independent sources, one verdict: the agenda has been formally accepted without being institutionally absorbed.

3. **The group closest to delivery is the most constrained.** Public-sector respondents reported the weakest institutional capacity, the heaviest dependence on funding and continuity, and uniquely the least confidence in participatory remedies. Any credible capacity strategy starts there, not with the profession at large.

4. **The statutory layer is the overlooked mechanism.** Enabling acts without land-value capture, borrowing powers, land assembly, metropolitan tiers or climate duties cannot deliver frameworks that presuppose all five. A planner can cite SDG 11 in a report; she cannot refuse a permission on a ground the act does not recognize. Planning-system reform is where global norms either become enforceable or remain ceremonial.

5. **The reporting architecture has decayed exactly where it matters.** The IG-UTP the one instrument written for planners, and the only one without an expiry date has had no dedicated implementation review since 2021. What is not reviewed is not resourced.

6. **Binding beats possibly aspirational and the precedent already exists.** The Paris Agreement moved energy; nothing equivalent has moved land. The EU's non-binding "no net land take by 2050" objective, unlegislated after fifteen years, shows both the appetite and the hesitation. A binding global convention on sustainable land use, with a defined role for qualified planners, is the logical escalation.

From these six, the recommendations write themselves: revive the IG-UTP review cycle and pair every political review with an expert review; direct capacity funding structurally at public planning institutions in the Global South; make statutory reform not plan-making the priority theatre for the profession's advocacy through a shared New Planning Agenda and ethical charter; and open negotiations toward a binding land-use convention as the centrepiece of the road to Habitat IV in 2036 and whatever Regenerative Development Goals succeed the SDGs.

Hence we suggest the following roadmap towards the suggested RDGs:

By 2030 Salvage & Measure

No new frameworks; concentrate on the place-positive targets that can still move (housing, public space, transport access), institutionalize the political-plus-expert review mechanism, restart IG-UTP reporting, and run the practitioner surveys that would let the 2030 stocktake include, for the first time, evidence from the people doing the work.

By 2036 Rebuild the Machinery

The decade of statutory reform: planning acts with climate duties and fiscal powers; the New Planning Agenda and ethical charter adopted by the professional bodies and brought to Habitat IV as the profession's collective offer; Global Planning Aid at operational scale; capacity funding locked into public institutions in the fastest-urbanizing regions.

Beyond 2036 Regenerate

The successor framework as Regenerative Development Goals, anchored in a binding land-use convention with the IG-UTP, the instrument that never expires, as the continuity thread across all three horizons.

A roadmap needs complementary workplans for and by the main actors. From the evidence assembled in this article the political reviews, the ISOCARP findings, our own survey and the three priority clusters we distil recommendations for three distinct actors.

FOR INDIVIDUAL PLANNERS & PLACEMAKERS

- Invest in continuous professional development climate adaptation, equity and data analytics foremost and stay current with research, policy and practice.
- Practise participation beyond tokenism and consultation: facilitate processes in which residents co-create rather than react, with deliberate outreach to marginalized and indigenous communities.
- Work as translator between data and decisions: use technology and data to inform planning while keeping digital access equitable.
- Plan regeneratively and adaptively: flexible frameworks and scenario methods that absorb changing conditions rather than shattering against them.
- Integrate gender-responsive approaches into all stages of planning, from data collection through design and implementation.

FOR THE PROFESSION & ITS ASSOCIATIONS

- Establish the unified position this paper has argued for the New Planning Agenda and its ethical charter and carry it jointly through ISOCARP, the Habitat Professionals Forum and national institutes, rather than in parallel.
- Scale community-facing capacity initiatives such as Global Planning Aid from launch to operation, pairing professional know-how with grassroots leadership.
- Advocate statutory reform where it counts: enabling acts with land-value capture, municipal borrowing, land assembly, metropolitan tiers and climate duties.
- Extend planning's remit to peace-positive practice, and institutionalize regular practitioner surveys so the profession's own evidence base outgrows the indicative samples available today, including ours.

FOR GOVERNMENTS & THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

- Fund the capacity development boost structurally, not project by project directed at the public-sector institutions closest to delivery, which reported the weakest capacity and the least confidence in participatory remedies alone.
- Reform and resource planning systems as core public infrastructure, with governance frameworks that empower local agencies and enable integrated, multi-level planning.
- Diversify financing land-based finance, impact investment, public-private and community-led mechanisms so implementation capacity matches the targets already adopted.
- Localize the global agendas deliberately, and negotiate the binding land-use convention that would give all of these teeth.

The recommendations above are addressed to three sets of actors because the evidence demands it: the constraint sits mostly with actors other than planners, and a conclusion that pretended otherwise would contradict this paper's own survey. But that division of labour should not be read as the profession waiting its turn.



Figure 12. The pinball table is the implementation landscape, the ball carries the global agendas, the bumpers are the barriers our survey identified, and the planners are (at) the flippers.

For most of the decade since the frameworks were adopted, planners have been the ball in the machine pinballed between fragmented governance and short political cycles, between global indicators and local budgets, between communities demanding a say and enabling acts written before climate change had a name absorbing every impact of the implementation gap while controlling almost none of its causes. Planners can be the flippers: the fixed points of leverage that keep the ball SDG 11, the New Urban Agenda, the Guidelines in play and aim it, strike after strike, toward regenerative, place-positive outcomes. A flipper does not choose the trajectory alone; it works within a tilted table it did not design, and it is powerless unless something feeds it energy statutory reform, structural capacity funding, a seat at the review table alongside the member states. Supply those, and the mediators, translators, conveners and reformers this article has described are already in position. Because the honest lesson of a pinball machine is that flippers alone never win the game; but without them, every ball drains.



Bios & Stories

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ATHENS, GREECE / EUROPE

Frank J. D'hondt is a freelance senior city and regional planning advisor based in Athens, Greece, working mainly with United Nations agencies including UN-Habitat, UNOPS, UNDP and UN DESA in more than 20 cities and countries worldwide. He served as (voluntary) Secretary General of the International Society of City and Regional Planners (ISOCARP) from 2019 to 2026, and currently co-chairs the Capacity Development chapter of the Habitat Professionals Forum and the World Urban Pavilion of the Urban Economy Forum. A mentor at Cities Forum, he is the author of two UN-Habitat publications: *Visioning as a Participatory Planning Tool: Learning from Kosovo Practices* (2012) and the *Handbook to the International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning* (2018). He writes regularly for planning journals and magazines, speaks at international planning conferences, and lectures at universities in Europe and beyond.

FRANK'S STORY WITH THE GLOBAL GOALS

"When I graduated as a city and regional planner from a Belgian university in 1987 having first 'mastered' geography in 1985 there were no SDGs, no New Urban Agenda, no universal planning guidelines. My planner's compass was the Club of Rome's groundbreaking 1972 report The Limits to Growth, with its warning that the Earth's physical limits could not sustain exponential growth far into the twenty-first century. The year I graduated, the Brundtland Report Our Common Future gave the world the concept and soon the vocabulary of sustainable development. Five years later, at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, Agenda 21 and its local chapter, Local Agenda 21, turned that concept into a programme; the Millennium Development Goals of 2000 turned the programme into the UN's first structured, time-bound targets; and the MDGs in turn begat the SDGs, with SDG 11 as the new kid on the block pun intended. My own convers-

ion came later than the frameworks did. It took my professional engagement in the Occupied Palestinian Territory from 2012 onward to transform me into a passionate advocate of the global agenda, through collaboration with the South African chair of the editorial group drafting the very first international planning guidelines the IG-UTP which I was applying in practice well before their formal approval in April 2015. Five months after that approval, on 25 September 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted the SDGs. Around the same time I drafted a 400-page handbook linking the Guidelines to the SDGs, of which UN-Habitat ultimately published a 40-page distillation. In October 2016 I attended and contributed to the Habitat III conference in Quito, crowned by the adoption of the New Urban Agenda which points readers to the IG-UTP in its paragraph 93. Over the decade since, I have devoted more than 80 per cent of my professional time to advocating, operationalizing and implementing the SDGs, the NUA and the IG-UTP in more than twenty countries, mainly as a freelance planning expert working through UN agencies UN-Habitat, UNOPS, UNDP and UN-DESA and through voluntary leadership roles in the international planning associations such as ISOCARP, ECTP and HPF. Throughout, I have argued for a committed approach to the global planning agenda, against the indifference of many colleagues and the hostility of some. The compass has changed since 1972; the needle, for me, has not."



Nada Soliman

CAIRO, EGYPT / MIDDLE EAST & NORTH AFRICA

Nada Soliman is an architect and urban planner with an international background in urban strategy and sustainable urban development. She holds a MSc in Urban Management and Development from the Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies (IHS), Erasmus University Rotterdam. With experience across the MENA region and Europe, she has contributed to projects in community development, heritage conservation, placemaking, and urban transformation. Her work focuses on how planning, policy, and the built environment can shape more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable cities. She is committed to advancing urban approaches that connect social impact with long-term spatial and environmental value.

NADA'S STORY WITH THE GLOBAL GOALS

"The SDGs played an initial role in shaping my understanding of urban development and gradually became an important reference in my academic and professional journey. Through my studies and work in Egypt, the Netherlands, Ukraine, and Kenya, I explored how sustainable development principles can be translated into local urban contexts. My work has particularly engaged with SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities, through areas such as urban planning, heritage conservation, community development, placemaking, and climate resilience. These experiences have strengthened my interest in connecting global agendas with local realities and using planning and design to contribute to more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable cities."



Luisa Alcocer Rubio

MEXICO CITY, MEXICO / LATIN AMERICA

Luisa Alcocer Rubio is an urban philosopher and social sustainability consultant working at the intersection of people, policy, and place across Latin America, Europe, and the Middle East. A member of ISOCARP since 2023, she was nominated a Young Leader at the Urban Futures conference in 2024, and she participated in the ECOSOC Youth Forum at the United Nations Headquarters in 2025. Her work advocates for more sustainable communities and equitable cities, using the Sustainable Development Goals as a framework to identify opportunities, guide action, and measure meaningful outcomes. Alongside her consulting practice, Luisa is committed to knowledge-sharing and capacity building. She has delivered masterclasses through Mexico's national architecture institutions and trained hundreds of public-sector professionals internationally, translating global sustainability frameworks into practical approaches to urban and territorial development.

LUISA'S STORY WITH THE GLOBAL GOALS

"I have always been interested in one central question: how do the places we live in shape our opportunities, relationships, and quality of life? That curiosity first took me into philosophy and sociology, where I became interested in how societies organize themselves and how institutions influence everyday life. Later, through the Erasmus Mundus 4-Cities programme, I studied urban development across Brussels, Vienna, Copenhagen, and Madrid. Moving between cities and contexts made something very tangible to me: cities are not just physical spaces. They are systems where policy, inequality, mobility, climate, governance, and community all meet. That is why SDG 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities feels particularly close to my work. But I have also learned that sustainable cities cannot be achieved through SDG 11 alone. The SDGs reinforce one another: reducing inequality, addressing climate risks, strengthening institutions, and building partnerships are all part of creating places where people can genuinely thrive. In Lima and Callao, I worked on transit-oriented development strategies related to accessibility, densification, land value, and socioeconomic conditions. It connected SDG 11 with SDG 10 Reduced Inequalities and made me think more deeply about a question I continue to carry with me: when cities improve, who benefits from that change, and who might be left behind? In Mexico, my work on social housing, disaster risk, and climate adaptation connected sustainable urban development with SDG 13 Climate Action. It showed me that climate resilience is not only an environmental issue; it is also about housing, institutions, public policy, and the ability of communities to adapt. I have also come to see SDG 17 Partnerships for the Goals as fundamental. Most urban challenges are too complex for one institution or discipline to solve alone. This became especially clear through my participation in the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in 2025 as a Youth Representative. Being part of that space allowed me to see sustainable development from a different scale, connecting local realities with global conversations. It reinforced my belief that participation should be more than representation. People need meaningful opportunities to influence the decisions that affect their lives. That idea also shapes how I work today. I enjoy bringing different people and disciplines together, facilitating conversations, translating between technical and institutional perspectives, and helping turn complex challenges into shared strategies. For me, the SDGs are not seventeen separate goals. They are a reminder that sustainable development is interconnected. My own contribution lies in those connections: between people and institutions, policy and implementation, and global ambitions and the everyday realities of cities."



Evelin Raico

LIMA, PERU / SOUTH AMERICA

Evelin Raico is an architect and urban planner with over seven years of international experience in urban planning, sustainable development, spatial analysis, and project management. She holds a Master's degree in Territorial and Urban Planning and has worked with UN-Habitat, WWF, and public institutions on projects related to sustainable urban development, climate resilience, mobility, and the SDGs. Her work combines strategic planning, spatial data analysis, and urban development to support evidence-based urban policies and more resilient, inclusive, and adaptive cities. Her current interests include urban resilience, planning systems, climate adaptation, spatial data management, and the application of systems thinking to urban governance.

EVELIN'S STORY WITH THE GLOBAL GOALS

"My work with the SDGs has been a thread running through different stages of my career. I first got involved with SDG 11 through WWF Peru, where I worked on measuring SDG 11.3.1 across 100 cities and saw firsthand how global goals can become useful tools for understanding what is happening on the ground. During my Master's in Italy, I continued exploring these connections through the Planning for the Global Urban Agenda track and my research on climate action plans. More recently, with UN-Habitat, I supported the monitoring of SDG 11.2.1 across cities worldwide. These experiences have made me increasingly interested in the space between global agendas and local realities, and in how data, planning and knowledge can help turn the SDGs into something more tangible for cities and the people who live in them."



Olivanta Mwenda

NAIROBI, KENYA / SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Olivanta Mwenda is an urban designer and developer based in Nairobi, Kenya, with experience working across government, policy, and community organisations on climate-resilient public space design, participatory planning, and gender-responsive urban development. She holds a Bachelor of the Built Environment in Urban Design and Development from the Technical University of Kenya and a Postgraduate Certificate in Environmental Impact Assessment and Audit. Her work has focused on translating community insights into actionable urban strategies, with a particular interest in how urban planning and design can address inequality and build more inclusive cities.

OLIVANTA'S STORY WITH THE GLOBAL GOALS

"My journey into urban planning began not in a classroom, but on the streets of Nairobi, observing how people navigated their city, where they gathered, and who was left out of public space. I grew up in a city where inequality is written into the urban fabric, where some neighbourhoods have tree-lined streets and others lack basic sanitation. That curiosity led me to study Urban Design and Development at the Technical University of Kenya. My academic training gave me technical skills in GIS, site analysis, and master planning. But it was my undergraduate thesis that fundamentally shifted my understanding of what planning could be. I spent months in Silanga Village, Kibera, one of Nairobi's largest informal settlements, researching the gender-based dimensions of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) facilities for women. Through surveys and interviews, I listened to women describe their daily struggles: the long walks to collect water, the lack of privacy in sanitation blocks, the fear of violence after dark. That experience taught me that urban design is never neutral it either includes or excludes, protects or endangers. It also introduced me to SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation) and SDG 5 (gender equality), and showed me how global frameworks can become tools for understanding local realities. After graduating, I worked across different sectors. At the National Housing Corporation, I saw how housing shapes lives. Behind every map and data point were real families whose daily realities depended on where and how they lived. The Architectural Association of Kenya taught me the power that professional associations have to shape a better built environment and how sustainability frameworks need to be communicated clearly to be adopted. At the Kilimani Community Foundation, I learned that everyone who lives, works, or plays in a place has a stake in how it is planned, and that planning can become a tool for equity when these voices are genuinely included. Today, I work on co-creating climate-adaptive public spaces through participatory planning, bringing together the technical skills, policy understanding, and community engagement I have developed along the way. Across these experiences, I saw how the principles of SDG 11 inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities were not abstract goals but urgent, everyday realities for the communities I worked with. What drives me is the belief that African cities can be shaped by African knowledge, grounded in local practices, community agency, and a commitment to justice. I see my role as a bridge: between communities and policymakers, between local experience and global frameworks, between what is and what could be. I am particularly drawn to the SDG 11 framework because it recognises that cities are not just built environments they are sites of opportunity, exclusion, resilience, and hope. Through this collaborative article, I hope to contribute to a conversation about how planning can truly serve all urban residents, especially those who have been systematically left out of decision-making."



Ricky Wijaya Umar

JAKARTA, INDONESIA / ASIA-PACIFIC

Ricky Wijaya Umar is an architect and a master's graduate in spatial planning from Radboud University. His professional background combines cross-sector and multidisciplinary experience in architecture, consulting, and participatory urban design. He currently works at Cities Forum as an urban governance consultant, focusing on collaborative governance, publications, and knowledge exchange, while also helping to build networks and outreach in Indonesia. His approach is shaped by Topoethic, a co-design and knowledge-sharing platform he founded, which connects urban strategies, design visuals, practical adaptation and resilience solutions through collaborative decision-making.

RICKY'S STORY WITH THE GLOBAL GOALS

"I grew my perspective as a planner between two worlds: an architect in Indonesia and a spatial planner in the Netherlands. In Jakarta, I learned to read the city practically, from what I saw and felt every day. But I also learned what I did not see. I did not see the policies behind the problems. I designed buildings and spaces, but I was not yet aware of how important policy is in making those designs matter at city scale. In Nijmegen, that changed. I learned to read the same city through policy and processes. My studies taught me how designing the vision plan is reached not only through technology, but through governance. So now, I use these global frameworks as lenses and levers. Lenses to see more clearly what is at stake in a plan. Levers to push for designs and processes that give people equality and involvement over the decision making. My focus on SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) shaped my final architecture project in Indonesia, where I designed a homeless shelter not just as a building, but as a safe, dignified space that could protect people from the street, support their daily needs, and connect them to education and services. Also, I studied ten cities around the world for their sustainable mobility plans in my Master's thesis. Then it grew into SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), as I realised that sustainable cities mean little if they do not move further into collaborative governance, reduce inequalities especially in decision-making, and build transparent, inclusive, resilient and accountable institutions."



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Complementary Online Sources

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