

Agenda 2030 and its Public Space Target: from Chore to Asset

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Abstract

In 2015, all UN member States have solemnly endorsed Agenda 2030, containing 17 sustainable development goals and 169 targets. One of them, 11.7, reads as follows: “By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities “. Often, member states regard reporting on such commitments as distracting chores. But for “space professionals” and for the Biennial of Public Space, the “public space target” can be a formidable asset in providing depth and encouraging local, national and international commitment to its implementation.

Keywords: MDGs, SDGs, public space target, public space target indicators

I recall sitting in a packed conference room at the United Nations Office in Nairobi, Kenya, on a September day of nineteen years ago. The occasion was the announcement of the adoption by the United Nations General Assembly of the Millennium Development Goals, and my reason for being there was that I was working for the then United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat). At the time, after having been responsible for the Centre’s research and policy development functions and later on for the initial steps in setting up and organizing the UN Conference on sustainable urban development, I was working mainly on establishing an institutional and operational link between the United Nations and local governments, recently unified under the banner of the United Cities and local Governments organization still known as UCLG.¹

¹ Later on this connection developed into the “Millennium Cities” concept, but this experience would require a separate narration.

I remember feeling very encouraged by this decision. The broad United Nations system had been characterized by a ferocious internal competition for a dwindling amount of multilateral resources for development co-operation. Now, and for the first time, the heads of State of all member states had decided to step into the new Millennium with a unified platform with clear development objectives. Tasks were to be easily attributable to each of the UN's main programmes and agencies which would have acted as global leaders in a reinvigorated effort, hopefully backed up by a renewed enthusiasm for development cooperation funding.

The Millennium Development Goals, or MDGs as they came to be referred to in short, were only seven in number. By the year 2015, the global community agreed to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality; Improve maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; and develop a global partnership for development

The rationale for the MDGs had been articulated by a Harvard academic contracted by the then Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan. It was based on a loose re-interpretation of President Roosevelt's "four freedoms" mentioned in his 1941 inauguration speech as freedom from want, freedom from hunger, and freedom from fear. The agenda was certainly not revolutionary, but it was supported by the conviction that goodwill and the spirit of international co-operation ushered in by the very creation of the United Nations in 1947, in addition to a good dose of self-interest, could be resuscitated in an unprecedented effort at the dawn of the twenty-first century. As pointed out by many critics, the MDGs presented several faults. One of them was that they ignored the issue of inequalities within countries: the adjective "all" adopted by the MDG general philosophy took care of glossing over this problem. Another issue was the faulty formulation of some of the goals themselves. For example, sustainability was formulated as "environmental sustainability" alone: a glaring oxymoron, as we cannot conceive of making the environment "sustainable" without seriously looking into equally important economic, cultural and social aspects.

Looking from the point of view of professionals who justly emphasize interdisciplinarity but are explicitly devoted to the physical and spatial aspects of development, the MDGs also had very little to offer. Despite the evidence that our spaceship earth was to become an urban planet, no attention was devoted to how to fix existing urban realities and plan the cities of the future, and how to design sustainable living environments.

One solitary mention of something remotely linked to physical urban configurations was, however, hidden into the environmental sustainability goal, and read as follows: “Have achieved by 2020 a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers”. No mention was made of the need to prevent slum formation while addressing the problems of a small percentage of people living in slums and sub-standard urban settlements, nor how this specific problem could be handled (whether by transferring slum dwellers to new locations, relocating them to the countryside where they came from, or by installing pipes and basic sewerage in their existing locations; “significant improvement” is a fairly loose concept.) However, the Millennium Project, set up by the UN to develop implementation strategies for the MDGs and led by the American economist Jeffrey Sachs, did devote one of its ten task forces to the topic.²

Before the expiry of the 2015 deadline for the vast majority of the MDGs, the United Nations started discussing what could be the “successor system” to the MDGs. And in 2015 the General Assembly (United Nations, 2015) adopted a broader and more ambitious compact, also projected to a 15-year horizon.

After a fairly extended and largely participatory process involving civil society actors in addition to UN member states, this compact was finally composed of seventeen global goals and 169 targets, all of them to be reached by 2030. Together, under the unifying title of Agenda 2030, they came to be known as the “Sustainable Development Goals”, or SDGs. However cumbersome, a listing of the seventeen SDGs can offer a good idea of the range of objectives they cover. They are: 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere; 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture; 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages; 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all; 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls; 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all; 7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all; 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all; 9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation; 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries; 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable; 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns; 13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts; 14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development; 15. Protect,

² Those interested can refer to the “A Home in the City” report mentioned in the references.

restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss; 16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels; and 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

The SDGs have not escaped severe reviews. One criticism is their compartmentalization: although each of them covers a legitimate and important area of action, they correspond to a conventional division of labour between sectors, e.g. health, education, the environment, and so on. This vanifies the very foundation of a space-based approach to development, which is typically “horizontal” and interdisciplinary. A second criticism is that most of their targets are either very timid or very vague in their formulation. However, there are also positive features that can help define the SDGs as a step forward if compared to their predecessors, the MDGs.

The first difference from the MDGs is that while the former had subsumed sustainability as one of its main seven objectives, Agenda 2030 was entirely focused on sustainable development³.

A second novelty introduced by the SDGs was the urban dimension, embodied in SDG 11 (*Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable*). For a number of reasons (Garau 2019), development studies and policies had undervalued the transformational nature of urbanization. This point of view changed with the popularity received worldwide by an inherently meaningless but powerful statistical observation: for the first time in history, the majority of the world’s population was living in areas classified as urban. Curiously, a much more powerful statistical reality still goes largely unnoticed: according to the United Nations, by the middle of the present century the entire growth of the world’s population will have to be accommodated by cities; and 96 per cent of it will be in the cities of the developing world. This means that the hopes of saving the planet

³ Although the General Assembly resolution that launched Agenda 2030 did not contain a definition of sustainable development save for the usual reference to its “three dimensions” (economic, social and environmental), one would not like to forget the historic definition coined by the famous “Our Common Future” report that also introduced this term to the world: “sustainable development is the kind of development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

from environmental disaster will depend on the settlement and consumption patterns of 2.3 billion people who will be added to the developing world's existing cities.

This consideration confers special importance to urban public space. The sustainability imperative of compact urbanization, repeatedly emphasized in the *New Urban Agenda* (United Nations 2016), means that denser urban living will have to be accompanied by sufficient supplies of green and open space that people can enjoy and share on a collective basis. In fact, UN-Habitat has gone as far as to state that future urbanization should be "public-space led".

A third novel feature is to be found within SDG 11 itself. Apart from the target on public space, which will be examined further on, SDG 11 introduced a target committing to supporting *positive economic, social and environmental links between urban, peri-urban and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning*. This merits a notation, insomuch as physical planning had been until then a rather unwelcome topic in development policy, partly due to a neo-liberal distaste for regulatory practices. Planning was re-introduced as a valuable tool for urban development largely by virtue of UN-HABITAT's leading role in the preparatory process of the third Habitat Conference in 2016.

Last but not least is target 11.7 on public space, which commits signatory states to provide, by the year 2030, "universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities".

This target is especially relevant to the event for which this call for papers was made, the fifth edition of the Biennial on Public Space. Yet not many of the very people who frequent the "Biennale" and who devote time and energies to the improvement of public urban space in their respective cities or from their respective organizations are quite aware of its existence. And the few who are often tend to regard this target, as well as similar UN proclamations, as nice statements of intent that a global international body cannot refrain from making, but that have little to bear with the so-called "real word".

However, one could easily turn this reasoning upside down. Although they do not have the compulsory nature of an international convention or treaty, the SDGs are the product of a long and largely transparent negotiating process freely engaged in by UN member states and subsequently solemnly and publicly endorsed by the same States in a General Assembly resolution (United Nations 2015). Seen from this point of view, the tendency to consign these agreements to oblivion cannot be excused by virtue of their non-obligatory status, but simply –and sadly– by the habit of ignoring one's own obligations. And when they are reminded about them, for example by official invitations

to report on their implementation, governments often regard such tasks as distracting and fastidious chores; and particularly, one may add, those States who are aware of having taken no action to foster their implementation.

Things do not need to be this way. First of all, all SDGs can be seen as a collective right of all citizens. It is citizens who policy commitments are meant for; and it is citizens who can, and must, pretend that their governments live up to them.

Secondly, SDG targets such as this one can become an asset in that they can provide a meaningful basis for defining urban policies and measuring their impact over time. Moreover, their universality means that there will be remarkable opportunities for comparing progress, and therefore learn from, and take advantage of, policies and approaches implemented by other actors worldwide – communities, local governments and their associations, international agencies, professionals, and a variety of stakeholders.

There is also a third element: the relevance of target 11.7 to the Biennial of Public Space. In addition, the 11.7 target is an important asset for the Biennial of Public Space itself because it lends universal and official support to the Biennial's goal of facilitating the improvement of public space in all of our cities. Moreover, the target is more explicit than the Biennial itself has ever been on objectives to be reached, including its *Charter of Public Space*. The Biennial is the only recurring event of an international calibre devoted to public space. Therefore, it is best suited to capitalize from this asset and take up the challenge.

The challenge is a major one, but at least it is formulated in clear and succinct terms (and this is an asset in itself). That green and public spaces should be safe, inclusive and accessible is easy to understand and to accept. Public space can have additional qualities, such as attractiveness or abundance of amenities. However, these three key attributes can apply to all the public spaces we define as such, from streets and sidewalks to public libraries and at the same time function as reliable performance indicators. A public park that is closed to the public is not even a public space.

The Biennial and its partners would also do well to focus on suitable indicators for measuring progress towards the 2030 “public space target”.

Work done so far at the international level has identified two indicators for the target.⁴ The first one, labelled 11.7.1, is “the average share of the built-up area of cities that is open space for public use for all, by sex, age and persons with disabilities”. The second one (11.7.2) is defined as

⁴ For details, see <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg11>

“the proportion of persons victim of physical or sexual harassment, by sex, age, disability status and place of occurrence, in the previous 12 months”.

One can see how more work is required in identifying meaningful indicators to assess progress in achieving the target. With regard to 11.7.1, it is not quite clear what “average share” actually means. Also, the simple share of open space for public use is a purely quantitative indicator that might even lead to false assumptions about the quality of public space provision. For example, the lowest the ratio of residents over automobiles on the road (not quite and indicator of sustainability), the higher the surface of public space for accommodating motor vehicles (e.g. roads, highways, parking spaces) is likely to be. Moreover, a disaggregation of this crude result by sex, age, etcetera might pose a few problems –how does one measure *the use of public space by sex?*

In view of this, it might be useful to think of more meaningful indicators for target 11.7.

First, the subject (“green and public spaces”) would need to be defined. Providers and users in different contexts will naturally have different views on this. However, a useful list of the spatial elements that can be classified as public space can be found in internationally known publications such as the Charter of Public Space (Garau P., Lancerin L., Sepe M. 2015), as well as in the Global Public Space Toolkit (UN-Habitat 2016). Once public space elements are defined, they could be conveniently documented for a given urban delimitation with the help of a simple matrix built around the target’s attributes of universal accessibility (safety, inclusiveness, and accessibility itself) and the categories of users who are especially affected by the lack of safe, inclusive and accessible green and public spaces (women, children, older persons and persons with disabilities). Thus, each urban delimitation could be given a “report card” based on the degree of adherence existing public spaces provide.

In addition, the “universal” placed in front of “access” has a strong meaning. The authors of the final text probably meant that “universal” to mean “in all countries”. But space professionals can also interpret it in an equally significant way: public space of a good quality should be available everywhere, and – we might add- particularly in those areas of the city where services of various kinds are lacking.

The Biennial of Public Space is to this day the only recurrent international rendezvous entirely devoted to public space. Since its inauguration in 2011 it has attracted a growing number of local, national and international partners. It has collected a relevant number of good practices worldwide. It has produced internationally normative work, such as the Charter of Public Space. The Biennial also inspired others to follow its example. After 2011, the American Planning

Association set up a Public Space Biennial of the Americas. More recently, the city of Bogotá established a Biennial of Public Space, which will hold its first edition later this year.

It stands to reason, therefore, that the Biennial should become an international reference point and a strong partner in turning the “public space target” from a potential chore for central bureaucracies into a strong asset for mobilizing new energies – citizens, local authorities, stakeholders committed to improving public space. This can work in both ways. The international community will be comforted in finding a new partner in the arduous task of implementing the SDGs. And the public space community will find new enthusiasm in knowing that their work will also feed into a global effort to plan and design better cities, improve the quality of urban life, and helping save this imperilled planet of ours.

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