Sustainable cities and communities

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Target 11.a: Support positive economic, social and environmental links between urban, peri-urban and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning

Key messages:

1. **Global effort.** Supporting positive links between urban, peri-urban and rural areas goes beyond the local level. The High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) could be instrumental in promoting global cooperation on this target.

2. **Interlinkages.** Strong links exist between Target 11.a and SDG 15 ('Life on land') and goals targeting poverty, hunger, water and sanitation, energy, and infrastructure. National and international interventions on this target should take these interlinkages into account

3. **Integrated approach.** Realizing Target 11.a requires overcoming institutional fragmentation and rigidity as well as overlapping jurisdictions between urban, peri-urban and rural actors and sectors. National governments should create policy space within which issues affecting overlapping jurisdictions can be addressed.

4. **Place-based approach.** Geographies of poverty and territorial inequalities are at the heart of the SDGs. The poverty agenda requires an approach that addresses changing land use in both peri-urban areas and fast-growing emerging towns and small urban centres.

5. **Target competing claims and land grabbing.** Target 11.a requires improved land governance; more transparent land negotiations; free, prior, and informed consent from landholders; and respect for existing land rights of marginalized people, including customary rights.

Introduction

Over half of the world population is currently living in cities, and this is expected to rise to 70 per cent by 2050. Urban sprawl is changing landscapes and livelihoods in peri-urban and rural areas. Peri-urban areas offer new opportunities for innovation and agricultural niche markets, but their expansion also puts pressure on open areas and green spaces. Deficient planning, particularly in the Global South, jeopardizes access to basic services for growing numbers of slum dwellers at the peri-urban fringe, threatening the overall goal of leaving no one behind. The ecological footprint on rural areas, including from distant places, is at odds with global efforts to protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems (SDG 15).

Global effort

Due to globalization and development of information and communication technologies, urban-rural linkages are no longer restricted to cities and their immediate hinterland. The expansion of soy and oil-palm plantations illustrates that material flows between urban and rural areas now occur over long distances, stretching urban-rural linkages across the globe. Also immaterial flows of ideas (e.g. consumer preferences) and remittances may have profound effects on rural and peri-urban landscapes. Promoting positive urban-rural linkages therefore requires concerted efforts not only at local, but also at global level. Some global city networks already recognize and work on this (e.g. ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability). The High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) could play a steering role in facilitating and integrating such global efforts.

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Interlinkages

The SDGs are integrated and indivisible. This is particularly clear when tackling the challenges of marginalized slum dwellers at the peri-urban fringe, who are facing disproportionate health risks due to epidemics, pollution, and deficient access to clean water and sanitation (SDG 3 and 6). A lack of access to employment and decent work (SDG 8) and reliable infrastructure to gain such access (SDG 9) threatens the achievement of SDG1 ('No poverty'), SDG2 ('End hunger') and SDG 4 (access for all to quality education). Tackling the fragmentation and deficient planning of peri-urban areas, particularly in the Global South, is key to making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable (SDG 11) and ensuring access for all to justice, decision-making, legal identity, and information (SDG 16). Implementing Target 11a and 11.6 ('Reduce the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities') specifically requires alignment with the goal to conserve terrestrial ecosystems (e.g. forests) and inland freshwater resources (SDG 15) that are key to urban drink water supply. This requires urgent and significant action to reduce the degradation of natural habitats, halt the loss of biodiversity and, by 2020, prevent the extinction of threatened species (Target 15.4) as well as the integration of ecological and biodiversity values into planning processes (Target 15.9).

Integrated approach

Enhancing positive urban-rural linkages and ensuring the links with other goals and targets asks for integrated urban-rural governance conducive to sustainable urbanization. Integrated urban-rural governance has the potential to foster spatial inclusion, linking rural areas, people and enterprises with emerging and established urban centres that can provide services, access to markets and non-farm employment. It would thus facilitate equity of access to services (SDG 1, 6 and 7) and economic opportunity for inhabitants of economically weaker regions (SDG 10), and favour the creation of regional food systems comprising urban, peri-urban and rural landscapes (SDG 2). The FAO Food and Cities Initiative and ICLEI Local Governments for Sustainability are examples of such planning approaches. The HLPF could be instrumental in promoting such integrated approaches throughout the UN system. Achieving integrated urban-rural governance requires overcoming institutional fragmentation and rigidity and overlapping jurisdictions between urban, peri-urban and rural actors and sectors. This challenges vested political and economic interests and appeals to the adaptive and learning capacities of the governance actors involved.

Place-based approach

More people are coming to live in cities, but what the world is fundamentally witnessing in the 21st century, is unprecedented rural-urban transformations. In order to comprehend and manage these changes, the many different spatial and in-between forms of rural and urban need to be considered. A place-based approach that looks beyond city boundaries in order to detect the emergence of urban spaces and urban living, and how they are embedded in and connected to rural spaces, will provide a necessary feedback to ongoing governance reforms that address economic, social, and environmental links. An explicit geographic focus shall build on local conditions and advantages and in so doing aims to increase resilience and reduce regional inequalities (SDG 10).

Target competing claims and land grabbing

Increasing urbanization threatens to dispossess marginalized people in peri-urban and rural areas in three ways. First, the growing urban population and changing food habits boost global food demand. This causes 'food-insecure' governments such as China and the Gulf States to pursuit farming land in the Global South to outsource their food production, potentially displacing people without title deeds. Second, increasing land pressure occurs in peri-urban zones where hardly any space is left for 'regular' urban expansion. Land prices are rising due to increasing demand for land by enterprises seeking to expand their business, the urban well-off in search for 'green' residences close to the cities, and international migrants who use their remittances to buy land close to urban centres. Third, dispossession of peri-urban communities may occur due to land acquisition by the State for large infrastructure investments such as roads, bridges and railways. Compensation schemes may be in place, but insufficiently to compensate people for travelling larger distances or loss of economic opportunities. Tackling these threats requires improved land governance and spatial planning, based on more transparent land negotiations; free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) from landholders; and respect for existing land rights, including customary rights.

Acknowledgements

Further reading

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