



**UNITED  
NATIONS**

**HSP/EB.2023/14**



**UN-HABITAT**

**United Nations  
Human Settlements  
Programme**

Distr.: General  
19 September 2023  
Original: English

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**Executive Board of the United Nations  
Human Settlements Programme  
Third session of 2023**  
Nairobi, 28–30 November 2023  
Item 7 of the provisional agenda\*

**Report of the Executive Director on the analysis of the  
principal obstacles to the implementation of the New Urban  
Agenda by Member States**

## **Principal obstacles to the implementation of the New Urban Agenda by Member States**

### **Report of the Executive Director**

#### **I. Introduction**

1. The present report has been prepared pursuant to the decisions adopted by the Executive Board at its first session of 2023 (HSP/EB.2023/7), in which the Executive Board requested that the Executive Director provide a report analysing the principal obstacles to the implementation of the New Urban Agenda faced by Member States, to be submitted to the Executive Board at its third session of 2023.

2. It is now established that the world is behind on achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. For Sustainable Development Goal 11 specifically, more than half of the indicators assessed in the *SDG 11 Synthesis Report 2023: Rescuing SGD 11 for a Resilient Urban Planet*, presented at the high-level political forum in New York in July 2023, are currently “far from target”, and the report contains calls for urgent action to rescue Goal 11.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, there are indications of gaps in engagement and capacities to implement the New Urban Agenda, particularly in rapidly urbanizing regions. This is mirrored in the low level of reporting by Member States on the New Urban Agenda, making it difficult to comprehensively assess global progress.

3. Responding to these issues and building on the momentum of the high-level meeting to assess progress in the implementation of the New Urban Agenda, convened by the President of the General Assembly in April 2022, the Executive Board decided at its first session of 2023 (see document HSP/EB.2023/7) to request that the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) deliver a report on the principal obstacles to the implementation of the New Urban Agenda by Member States, including consideration of any potential challenges to reporting, capacity-building, advocacy and outreach activities.

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\* HSP/EB.2023/10.

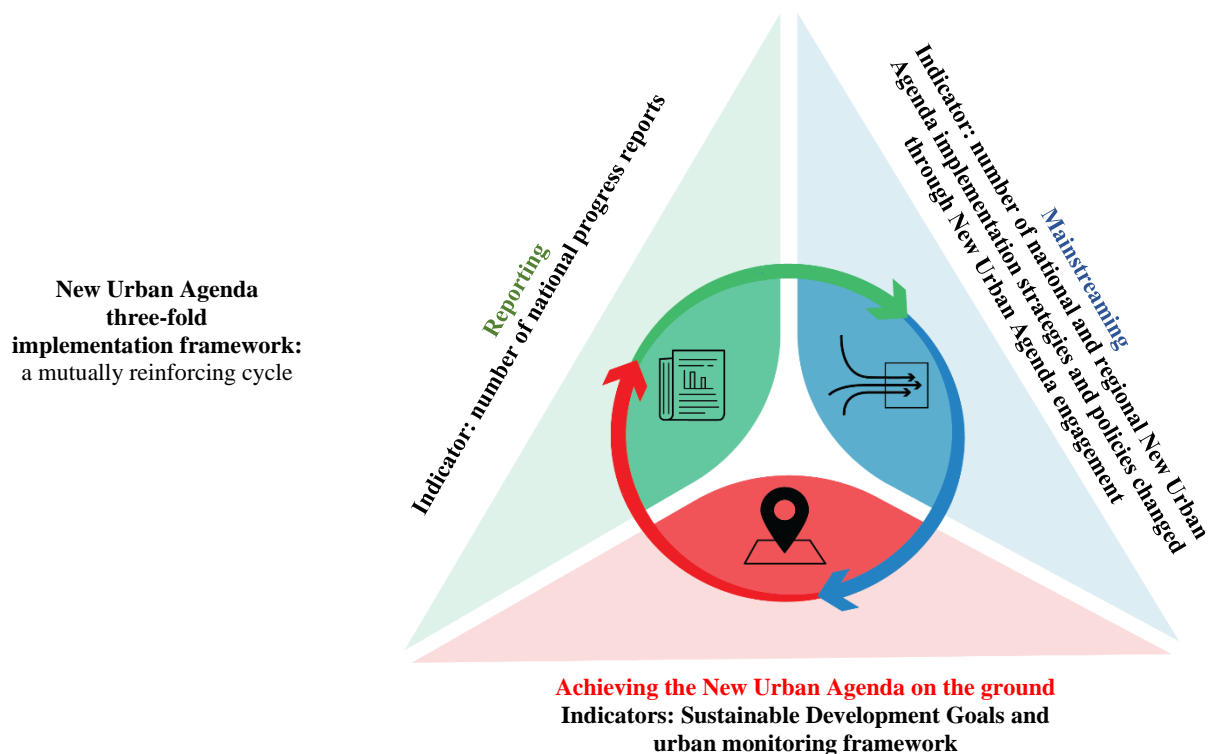
<sup>1</sup> United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), *SDG 11 Synthesis Report 2023: Rescuing SDG 11 for a Resilient Urban Planet* (Nairobi, 2023).

## II. New Urban Agenda implementation framework

4. National and local governments and other actors need to take specific measures to achieve the vision and commitments of the New Urban Agenda. There are three broad steps required for this (see figure 1). First, the Agenda needs to be mainstreamed into or reflected in national and subnational policies, strategies and investments. Second, action is needed to accelerate progress towards achieving the vision of the Agenda and its transformative commitments. Third, progress towards the Agenda needs to be monitored and reported, including as a means of strengthening further mainstreaming and implementation going forward. While the three stages are essential to any New Urban Agenda implementation cycle, approaches will vary considerably depending on context-specific priorities, capacities and processes for urban development. In addition, the three steps are neither mutually exclusive nor strictly chronological.

Figure 1

**New Urban Agenda three-fold implementation framework**



5. Regardless of the nature of implementation, effective reporting to track and analyse progress in the implementation of the New Urban Agenda is central in order to adjust the implementation strategies at the regional, national and subnational levels. Simple indicators can be used to track progress on the three ways to strengthen the implementation of the Agenda. With regard to mainstreaming the implementation of the Agenda into policymaking, it is possible to track national and regional Agenda implementation strategies and the number of policies that have changed because of engagement with the Agenda. To track progress in achieving the Agenda on the ground, the extensive system of indicators for the Sustainable Development Goals and the stand-alone New Urban Agenda indicators framework have now been integrated into the global urban monitoring framework of UN-Habitat, making it easier for all countries to seamlessly report on both global agendas with less duplication of efforts. With regard to reporting on the New Urban Agenda, the number of national reports on the Agenda serves as a direct indicator. In addition, it would be useful to monitor references to the implementation of the New Urban Agenda in reports on other global agendas (e.g. voluntary national and local reviews of progress against the Sustainable Development Goals, the urban content of the nationally determined contributions towards the Paris Agreement, etc.).

6. The following section reviews key obstacles to the New Urban Agenda implementation cycle, namely mainstreaming, achieving results on the ground and reporting, based on a review of evidence from national reports as well as additional sources.

### III. Obstacles to mainstreaming New Urban Agenda implementation

7. A necessary step towards implementing the New Urban Agenda is its integration or mainstreaming into national and subnational policy, planning and financing frameworks. Several regions have engaged in efforts to adapt the New Urban Agenda to a regional context, including the regional implementation strategies of Latin American and the Caribbean, Europe, Asia and the Pacific and Africa.<sup>2</sup> Some countries, including Kenya, South Africa, Spain and Sweden, have also developed their own national New Urban Agenda implementation strategies as part of mainstreaming the Agenda into their national contexts. Similar efforts have been made by professional associations such as the Canadian Institute of Planners, which established a committee in 2017 to communicate the goals of the Agenda to Canadian planners to help promote its mainstreaming and implementation. Despite these efforts, there is limited evidence to suggest that mainstreaming of the New Urban Agenda has happened at scale so far.

8. A review of available evidence reveals a number of key constraints affecting the mainstreaming of the New Urban Agenda into existing national and local plans, policies and strategies, including the following:

(a) Despite the comprehensive scope of the New Urban Agenda, there is no framework for prioritization of defined agreed indicators for measurement at the time of adoption;

(b) The high-level and aspirational nature of the New Urban Agenda does not have consultatively agreed corresponding implementation targets, indicators and a monitoring plan;

(c) The relative prioritization of other global agendas and frameworks is considered to be more urgent relative to the New Urban Agenda in national and local policymaking processes;

(d) Policymakers at various levels and other stakeholders have gaps in their awareness and understanding of the New Urban Agenda and its key role as an accelerator of the Sustainable Development Goals and other global agendas;

(e) There is perceived competition between the New Urban Agenda and Sustainable Development Goal 11 on making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable;

(f) Frequent changes in national, subnational and local government leadership and institutions have led to policy discontinuities and institutional memory losses, disrupting efforts to prioritize the New Urban Agenda;

(g) Language is an obstacle to mainstreaming and implementation, as many of the tools that support implementation, monitoring and reporting require proficiency in English.

9. Nevertheless, a strong engagement at the second session of the UN-Habitat Assembly, as evidenced in the resolutions adopted, as well as an earlier reaffirmed commitment to the New Urban Agenda by 87 Member States at the high-level meeting to assess progress in the implementation of the New Urban Agenda in April of 2022,<sup>3</sup> organized by the President of the General Assembly, indicate a growing understanding of the importance and potential of sustainable urbanization to deliver on global agendas.

### IV. Obstacles to achieving New Urban Agenda commitments on the ground

10. Addressing the obstacles to mainstreaming the New Urban Agenda is important, but the ultimate test is the impact of the implementation of the Agenda on people and communities. It is indicated in the *SDG II Synthesis Report 2023* that the world is off track in making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. This suggests obstacles to implementing the Agenda, given that it is the main implementation framework of the urban component of the Sustainable Development Goals. An extensive review conducted during the preparation of the report of the Secretary-General on progress in the implementation of the New Urban Agenda

<sup>2</sup> Bharat Dahiya and Ashok Das, *New Urban Agenda in Asia-Pacific: Governance for Sustainable and Inclusive Cities*, Advances in 21st Century Human Settlements (Singapore, Springer, 2020); *Regional Action Plan for the Implementation of the New Urban Agenda in Latin America and the Caribbean* (United Nations publication, 2018); Economic Commission for Africa, *A Harmonized Implementation Framework for the New Urban Agenda in Africa* (Addis Ababa, 2020); “The Urban Agenda for the EU”, available at [www.urbanagenda.urban-initiative.eu/urban-agenda-eu](http://www.urbanagenda.urban-initiative.eu/urban-agenda-eu).

<sup>3</sup> See [www.un.org/pga/76/wp-content/uploads/sites/101/2022/06/Final-HLM-on-NUA-PGA-Summary.pdf](http://www.un.org/pga/76/wp-content/uploads/sites/101/2022/06/Final-HLM-on-NUA-PGA-Summary.pdf).

(A/76/639-E/2022/10) (the 2022 quadrennial report) and of the *SDG 11 Synthesis Report 2023* identified several cross-cutting obstacles to achieving the New Urban Agenda on the ground that have been substantiated by national reports on the Agenda.

11. For many countries, gaps in effective multi-level governance alignment, including limited policy integration and appropriate institutional capacity at all levels, is a significant obstacle to realizing New Urban Agenda principles on the ground. For example, Malaysia reports gaps in coordination between government agencies and other stakeholders, while Cameroon highlights challenges in coordination among different ministerial departments and thus low coherence across interventions. A lack of clarity on leadership and oversight on New Urban Agenda implementation constrains effective integration, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

12. Limited effective planning and management of urban and territorial spatial development, including inadequate regulatory frameworks, is another key obstacle to achieving New Urban Agenda principles on the ground. For example, while Kenya struggles with disharmony in the laws that govern urban areas, Malawi faces incoherent legal and policy instruments. Botswana, meanwhile, reports a lack of planning oversight and coordination of urban planning across its local authorities. The Spanish Urban Agenda<sup>4</sup> highlights the obstacle of inflexible urban plans that are excessively formalized and require more than four years to revise, with an average of one to three years needed just for amendments.

13. Implementation is further challenged by insufficiently inclusive and participatory approaches to urban planning and management. For example, Nigeria reports that the tenure rights of slum dwellers are an obstacle, while Malawi notes concerns about insufficiently institutionalized structures for community and citizenship participation. Lebanon faces inequalities in housing rights for Muslim women in terms of its gender-based inheritance laws, which are the result of exclusionary practices and institutions. The Urban Agenda for the Basque Country 2050<sup>5</sup> reports that the lack of focus on the reality of women's lives has resulted in urban development processes that have bred gender inequality. During a national urban forum in Rwanda on the New Urban Agenda in 2019,<sup>6</sup> concerns were expressed that representative bodies were not yet proportionally representative of society, and that women and youth were underrepresented.

14. Insufficient financing to realize the New Urban Agenda principles on the ground is another significant obstacle, which has different dimensions. During the high-level meeting to assess progress in the implementation of the New Urban Agenda in April of 2022, the President of the Economic and Social Council stated that the financing of the New Urban Agenda remained a major obstacle to address urban inequalities. In addition, as stated by the President of the General Assembly during the same meeting, extraneous development aid could not possibly fill the current financing gap and it was therefore important to stress obstacles to endogenous financing. According to the Subregional Action Plan for the Implementation of the New Urban Agenda in the Caribbean, weak property taxation, in part caused by limited urban data and monitoring capacity for enforcement, limited the potential for local revenue generation. This finding was supported by evidence from Peru, where the insufficient collection of property taxes, owing to outdated urban cadastres, and calculations based on tariff values make it difficult to finance urban development.

15. Many countries also mention a lack of technical capacity as an obstacle to realizing the New Urban Agenda principles on the ground. While developed countries typically have around one urban planner for every 1,000 to 3,000 people, developing countries typically only have one planner for approximately every 80,000 people.<sup>7</sup> It is indicated in the Subregional Action Plan for the Implementation of the New Urban Agenda in the Caribbean that a lack of trained urban planning professionals and a lack of programmes with an integrated focus on multisector and multilevel planning processes for sustainable development are major obstacles. This is supported by a 2018 survey of the architectural profession in Commonwealth countries,<sup>8</sup> which found a lack of sufficient

<sup>4</sup> See [www.aue.gob.es/en/what-spanish-urban-agenda](http://www.aue.gob.es/en/what-spanish-urban-agenda).

<sup>5</sup> Environment, Territorial Planning and Housing Department of the Basque government, "Bultzatu 2050: urban agenda for the Basque Country". Available at [www.euskadi.eus/contenidos/informacion/bultzatu\\_2050/es\\_def/adjuntos/bultzatu\\_2050/agenda\\_urbana\\_en.pdf](http://www.euskadi.eus/contenidos/informacion/bultzatu_2050/es_def/adjuntos/bultzatu_2050/agenda_urbana_en.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Mathias Spaliviero and others, "Third national urban forum: Rwanda 2019, implementing the New Urban Agenda". Available at [gsgi.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/FINAL-NUF\\_Rwanda\\_v06.pdf](http://gsgi.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/FINAL-NUF_Rwanda_v06.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> UN-Habitat, *World Cities Report 2022: Envisaging the Future of Cities* (Nairobi, 2022).

<sup>8</sup> Dik Jarman, Peter Oborn and Joseph Walters, "Planning for rapid urbanization: survey of the architectural profession in the Commonwealth", 2018. Available at [https://issuu.com/comarchitect.org/docs/caa\\_survey\\_of\\_the\\_architectural\\_pro/6](https://issuu.com/comarchitect.org/docs/caa_survey_of_the_architectural_pro/6).

professional capacity, particularly in the most vulnerable communities and nations and those urbanizing the fastest.

16. A review of New Urban Agenda national progress reports clearly indicates that the urgent pressures of climate change and related crises have overwhelmed the capacity of governments, forcing them to respond and react without adequate capacity to focus on a systemic implementation of the Agenda. As discussed during the most recent World Urban Forum, held in Katowice, Poland, in 2022, and during the second UN-Habitat Assembly held in Nairobi in 2023, the increasing scale and complexity of crises require an innovative approach to the implementation of the New Urban Agenda, which seizes the opportunity of crisis response for more transformational change, as illustrated in the response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.<sup>9</sup>

17. It is noted in the *SDG11 Synthesis Report 2023* that the slow, stagnant and at times deteriorating effort towards achieving the targets of Sustainable Development Goal 11 is exacerbated by growing urban inequality and spatial fragmentation across regions. The local New Urban Agenda implementation strategy of Sweden acknowledges that inequality in cities is increasing, not only in low-income countries but also in high-income countries in Europe.<sup>10</sup> This requires a further focus on more effective integrated solutions to overcome those inequalities. UN-Habitat is exploring options through its normative and operational work, such as the flagship initiative on urban regeneration.

## V. Obstacles to reporting on New Urban Agenda implementation

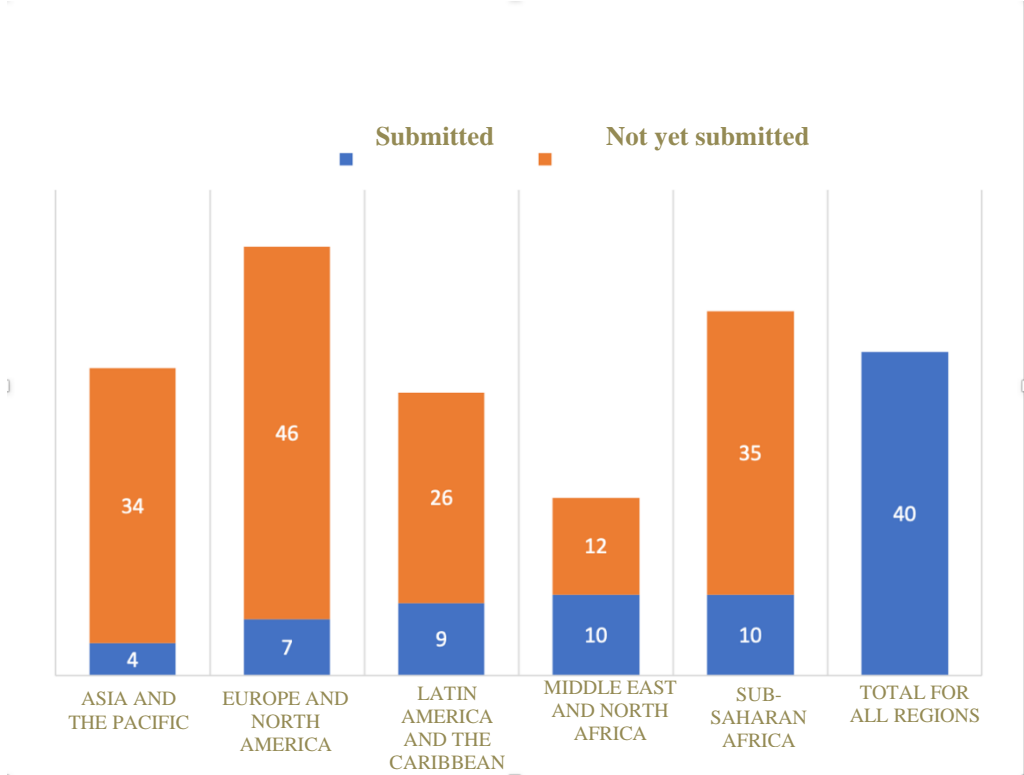
18. Countries and cities face significant obstacles in monitoring and reporting progress in the implementation of the New Urban Agenda. Only 25 countries submitted progress reports on the implementation of the Agenda during the prior reporting cycle (2018–2021) in time to be considered for the 2022 quadrennial report. As of August 2023, 40 countries had submitted progress reports on the Agenda,<sup>11</sup> with many received in the period between the release of the 2022 quadrennial report and the high-level meeting on the New Urban Agenda (see figure 2). As is outlined in the report of the Executive Director on the progress in the implementation of the New Urban Agenda and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (HSP/HA.2/5), action is needed to increase both the quantity and the quality of reporting for the next reporting cycle.

<sup>9</sup> UN-Habitat, *Cities and Pandemics: Towards a More Just, Green and Healthy Future* (Nairobi, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Elin Andersdotter Fabre, *Local Implementation of the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda: Towards a Swedish National Urban Policy* (Global utmaning, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.urbanagendaplatform.org/>.

Figure 2  
Current reporting status, by region, as at August 2023



19. In reporting on the implementation of the New Urban Agenda, countries face many of the same well-known obstacles to evidence-based reporting at local and national levels. An analysis of local government efforts to implement the New Urban Agenda revealed that most staff have limited skill sets and capacities to monitor and report on the New Urban Agenda effectively,<sup>12</sup> in addition to a lack of relevant data infrastructure to support the collection, processing, interpretation and visualization of urban data, especially with a high level of disaggregation.

20. As the reporting on Sustainable Development Goal 11 illustrates, there are still significant gaps in relevant data. The global urban monitoring framework, endorsed by the Statistical Commission in 2022, is designed to fill those gaps. Countries that use localized approaches for data collection employing the urban observatory model have a higher propensity for reporting on New Urban Agenda/Sustainable Development Goals using more current and appropriately disaggregated data.<sup>13</sup> Still, a deeper connection between the goals of the New Urban Agenda and the priorities of local practitioners are needed. Most national statistical offices have expressed concerns about the substantial number of indicators that need to be collected, even though there has been almost no increase in the level of resources to fund data work in the seven years since the New Urban Agenda was adopted in 2016. The dual burden of the high number of indicators and the persistent lack of funding is further compounded by the challenges of coordinating the different partners of the urban data ecosystem, such as governments, civil society, the private sector and the public.

21. While most national progress reports described advances in their national urban policies, very few countries have used the New Urban Agenda reporting process to initiate, evaluate or update their own national urban policies. The reporting guidelines for the New Urban Agenda, which were formulated in response to General Assembly resolution 71/256, called for national habitat committees and national urban forums to be involved in reporting on the Agenda. However, of the countries that submitted national reports, only one reported using its national urban forum to review the implementation of the New Urban Agenda. A positive example is Rwanda, which used its third national urban forum in 2019 to review the implementation of the New Urban Agenda.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> UN-Habitat, “From agenda to action: implementation of the New Urban Agenda across global contexts” (forthcoming).

<sup>13</sup> See [https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/06/status\\_of\\_human\\_settlement\\_statistics.pdf](https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/06/status_of_human_settlement_statistics.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Mathias Spaliviero and others, “Third national urban forum: Rwanda 2019, implementing the New Urban Agenda”.



22. According to the *Global State of National Urban Policy 2021*,<sup>15</sup> only 60 per cent of countries recognize national urban policies as key to achieving the New Urban Agenda. However, the types of data on urbanization that are required to formulate an effective national urban policy are strongly related to the indicators of the global urban monitoring framework. This allows for natural synergies between national urban policy processes and reporting on the New Urban Agenda. Moreover, reporting is of limited value if it is not embedded in processes that help stakeholders reflect on and learn from its messages.

## VI. Supporting New Urban Agenda implementation

23. Since 2016, UN-Habitat has supported Member States in addressing obstacles in mainstreaming the New Urban Agenda into national and subnational policies and planning frameworks, in translating its principles into positive impact for people and communities and in reporting on its implementation. This is aligned with relevant General Assembly and UN-Habitat Assembly resolutions, and the related priority resolutions of action, including on housing, climate, localization of the Sustainable Development Goals and smart cities. It also takes into account the recommendations for accelerating the implementation of the New Urban Agenda outlined in the report of the Executive Director on progress in the implementation of the New Urban Agenda and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (HSP/HA.2/5) presented earlier in 2023 during the second session of the UN-Habitat Assembly.

24. To address the challenges to mainstreaming identified in the present report, UN-Habitat will, in addition to aligning its programming and technical support with the above priorities, focus on more accessible and locally contextualized normative tools and services. This includes the digitalization of tools and associated products for online learning to ensure they are relevant to all levels of government and stakeholders, with a focus on local governments and the practitioners of urban planning to address the disconnect between global, national and local knowledge and practice. UN-Habitat will also continue to leverage its work on national urban policies to advance New Urban Agenda mainstreaming. UN-Habitat is developing new guidance on how to effectively use national urban forums to support reporting on the New Urban Agenda.

25. In order to address the challenges of translating the principles of the New Urban Agenda into positive impact on the ground, identifying and addressing the capacity gaps of both institutions and individuals, in both the public and private sector, remains critical. UN-Habitat will continue to implement its capacity-building strategy informed by resolution 1/3 of the UN-Habitat Assembly, entitled “Enhancing capacity-building for the implementation of the New Urban Agenda and the urban dimension of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”. This builds on its efforts to strengthen awareness and capacities through several guiding documents and platforms, such as *New Urban Agenda Illustrated*,<sup>16</sup> “Leading change: delivering the New Urban Agenda through urban and territorial planning”,<sup>17</sup> and the Urban Agenda Platform.<sup>18</sup>

26. To address the challenges related to reporting on the implementation of the New Urban Agenda, UN-Habitat is working on ways to harmonize the indicators frameworks of the Sustainable Development Goals, the New Urban Agenda and other global agendas and to lower the reporting burden by including the option to provide updates on previous national reports. This may also include a scaled roll-out of the global urban monitoring framework through the provision of technical assistance and capacity-building. UN-Habitat will also provide guidance on ways Member States can use the implementation of the New Urban Agenda, and report on its benefits, in their implementation of and reporting on other global agendas (e.g. the Sustainable Development Goals, voluntary national reviews, nationally determined contributions and the Paris Agreement).

27. The Urban Agenda Platform website created by UN-Habitat can be further tailored to function as an accessible and user-friendly vehicle for all urban stakeholders in support of mainstreaming the New Urban Agenda into national and subnational policies and planning frameworks, translating principles into positive impact for people and communities and reporting on the implementation of the Agenda. The Platform already hosts a database on best practices, and provides access to tools and guidance, the UN-Habitat Learn website and multiple reports on the implementation of the New Urban Agenda shared by Member States and other stakeholders. UN-Habitat will further develop the Urban

<sup>15</sup> See <https://unhabitat.org/global-state-of-national-urban-policy-2021>.

<sup>16</sup> See <https://unhabitat.org/the-new-urban-agenda-illustrated>.

<sup>17</sup> See <https://unhabitat.org/leading-change-delivering-the-new-urban-agenda-through-urban-and-territorial-planning>.

<sup>18</sup> See [www.urbanagendaplatform.org/](http://www.urbanagendaplatform.org/).

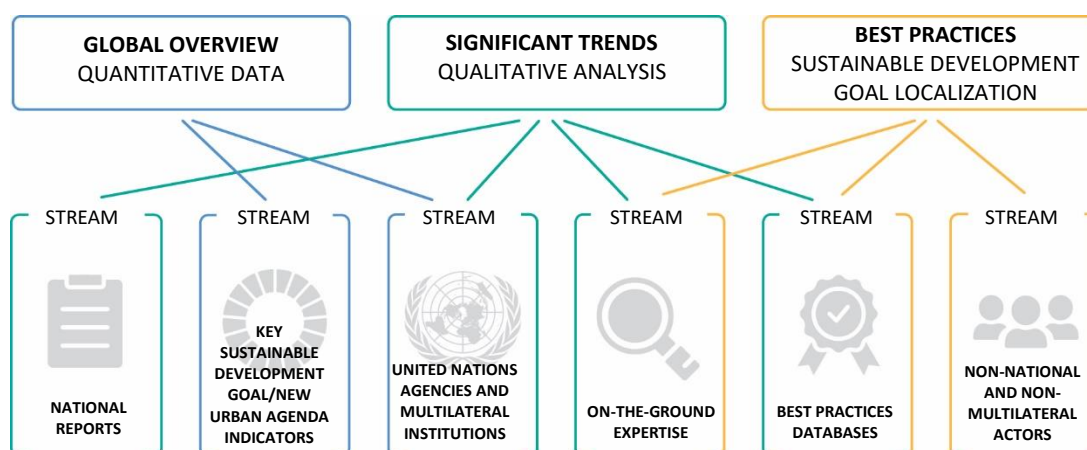
Agenda Platform, using earmarked funding, as a user-friendly vehicle for knowledge-sharing, learning and reporting.

## VII. Road map to the next quadrennial review of the implementation of the New Urban Agenda in 2026

28. As is outlined in the New Urban Agenda, the 2026 quadrennial review of the Agenda is a mid-term review that is critical in order to take stock of the progress made and the challenges faced in the implementation of the Agenda since its adoption and to identify further steps to address them. The 2026 quadrennial review will therefore need to rely on more granular data and evidence to assess the progress of the New Urban Agenda, as well as integrate findings from an evaluation if there needs to be a course correction in the objectives or pathways of the Agenda.

29. The preparations for the next quadrennial review of the New Urban Agenda in 2026 will consist of four distinct phases, beginning with a two-year period during which information will be collected from the six input streams, defined in the reporting methodology set out below (see figure 3). In addition to national and regional reports, the 2026 review will draw on sources such as the global urban database linked to the global urban monitoring framework, reports and practices shared on the Urban Agenda Platform and inputs from all urban stakeholders. Following the reporting period, these inputs will be used to inform the drafting of two reports: an extended report providing a global overview, significant trends and best practices related to the implementation of the New Urban Agenda, and a more condensed official version for the report of the Secretary-General in 2026.

Figure 3  
Six streams of the reporting strategy



30. Furthermore, the 2026 reporting cycle will employ an incremental, open and transparent reporting approach through which analysis and engagement with stakeholders and partners along the six streams will occur throughout the reporting period, starting in 2023. This implies that significant events and multilateral forums should, from now until the end of the reporting cycle, offer appropriate opportunities to report on the New Urban Agenda. Furthermore, UN-Habitat encourages the submission of substantive updates to previously submitted national progress reports. The deadline for submission of national reports to be considered for the 2026 quadrennial report is the third quarter of 2025.

## VIII. Conclusions

31. The implementation of the New Urban Agenda faces a considerable number of obstacles, as set out in the present report. The urgency and benefits of accelerating the New Urban Agenda's implementation are well recognized. During the second session of the UN-Habitat Assembly, more than 40 per cent of representatives from both the African and Latin American and Caribbean regions spoke to the challenges of implementing the New Urban Agenda in their plenary statements.

32. Furthermore, significant commitments towards getting back on track with regard to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and implementing the New Urban Agenda were made



during the high-level meeting of the General Assembly on the implementation of the New Urban Agenda. Five areas of commitment were derived from statements of 87 Member States and seven recommendations on action and policy guidance were elevated (see document HSP/HA.2/5). These serve as important directions for strengthening the implementation and impact of the New Urban Agenda.

33. Addressing the obstacles to the implementation of the New Urban Agenda outlined in the present report requires scaled and deliberate interventions at the regional, national and subnational levels. UN-Habitat has a central role to play in this regard, building on its existing support for the implementation of the New Urban Agenda. However, the obstacles are many and significant, which highlights the need for increased UN-Habitat support for the implementation of the New Urban Agenda in both the current strategic plan (to 2025) and beyond (2026–2029). The urgency derives from the critical need to accelerate progress with regard to Sustainable Development Goal 11. Strengthening the progress of the New Urban Agenda, as the main implementation framework, also means accelerating efforts to achieve Goal 11 while also enabling the achievement of many other Sustainable Development Goals.

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