

## **World Cities Day 31 October 2019**

### **Introduction**

In 2013, the United Nations (UN) designated 31 October as annual World Cities Day.<sup>1</sup> The day is intended to promote interest in urbanisation and cooperation in meeting the challenges it brings.<sup>2</sup> In 2019, the theme of the day is how innovation and technological progress can be used to promote sustainable development in cities.

This briefing first provides background on the growth of cities and the challenges and opportunities this presents. It then considers what the UN means by sustainable development, and the framework which the UN has adopted to promote it. The briefing next looks at the possible impact of new technologies. Finally, it summarises the UK approach to promoting sustainable global urban development.

### **Growth of Cities**

In 2018, 2.2 billion people lived in cities worldwide.<sup>3</sup> However, the UN has said that 1.4 million people move to cities every week, and that the population of the world's cities will double by 2050.<sup>4</sup>

There are challenges and opportunities presented by urbanisation.<sup>5</sup> Amongst the challenges, the UN includes the provision of housing, infrastructure, food, education, jobs and safety, as well as protecting the population's health and environment. Considering opportunities, the UN say that cities have been drivers of innovation, industry and creativity. Illustrating the impact of cities, despite occupying only 2% of the earth's land space, they are responsible for:<sup>6</sup>

- 70% of economic output, as measured by GDP.
- 70% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions.
- 70% of total waste.
- Over 60% of global energy consumption.

### **Sustainable Development Goals**

The UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by all UN member states in 2015.<sup>7</sup> Their overall aim is to eliminate global poverty and other deprivations, while at the same time improving health and education, reducing inequality, boosting economic growth and preserving the environment.

SDG 11 focuses on sustainable cities and communities.<sup>8</sup> The UN has considered ways of measuring progress on this goal.<sup>9</sup> First, it looked at the proportion of the global urban population living in slums. Between 1990 and 2016, this fell from 46 to 23 percent. However, the UN has said that because of the growth of urban populations over this period, the total number of people living in slums remained at around 1 billion. Another measure suggested that nine out of ten urban dwellers worldwide breathed air

which did not meet the World Health Organization's air quality guidelines for particulate matter.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the UN found that, between 2010 and 2016, for more than half the world's population air quality of this measure deteriorated. The UN also looked at inequality, finding that inequalities in cities have risen since 1980, with the world's largest cities also being the most unequal.<sup>11</sup>

In 2016, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) selected 20 cities in Asia, Africa and South America and considered their progress towards the SDGs.<sup>12</sup> The ODI did not report the number which were on track to meet the SDGs by the UN target date of 2030. However, it said that a majority of cities would require a "revolution" in progress to meet some of the targets and indicators measured, including, for example, universal access to piped water. For several cities on some indicators, such as access to adequate housing, the ODI found that trends were worsening rather than improving. On the other hand, it stated that over half of the cities were on track to make it at least half way towards some of the targets, for example universal access to secondary education.<sup>13</sup> The ODI also noted a "huge data challenge" in making assessments of progress against the targets, and called for improvements in countries' capacities to produce, coordinate and analyse data.<sup>14</sup>

## **New Urban Agenda**

In 2016, all member states adopted the UN's new urban agenda. The UN described this as a framework to "set the world on a course towards sustainable urban development by rethinking how cities are planned, managed and inhabited".<sup>15</sup> The agenda itself argued that if cities are well-planned and well-managed, they can be "the source of solutions to, rather than the cause of, the challenges that our world is facing today".<sup>16</sup> The agenda included several levels of commitments, including:

- A "vision" that cities and settlements should be developed in such a way that "all persons are able to enjoy equal rights and opportunities, as well as their fundamental freedoms".<sup>17</sup>
- A number of "principles" which state how the vision will be achieved. For example, one states that urban development should be environmentally sustainable. The agenda said that this could be achieved by, for example: the use of clean energy in urban development; "protecting ecosystems and biodiversity"; promoting sustainable consumption and production; and reducing disaster risks.<sup>18</sup>
- A series of "commitments" which provide more detail about how urban development should proceed. They include commitments aimed at ending poverty, promoting social inclusion, providing "opportunities for all" and ensuring environmental sustainability.<sup>19</sup>
- A framework for implementing the agenda, including a description of how states can cooperate more closely and share knowledge of innovations.<sup>20</sup>
- A system for following up and reviewing progress on the agenda.<sup>21</sup>

## **Cities and New Technologies**

New technologies will, according to the UN, play a major role in how cities develop and how they contribute to, or detract from, sustainable development.<sup>22</sup> For example, it said that new modes of transport such as self-driving and electric vehicles and drones will require "fundamentally different approaches to urban planning". It also stated that artificial intelligence, virtual reality and the 'internet of things' "present efficiency and communications opportunities requiring new governance frameworks".

A paper commissioned by the Department for International Development (DFID) considered the role of technology in urban settings.<sup>23</sup> It described how technology might be a force for good, for example in

allowing more precise health and transport planning, and facilitating communication between citizens and administrators. However, it also set out how technology might, if misused, lead to undesirable outcomes. For example, it might lead to a situation whereby “control centres dictate when and where activities should take place”.

### **Smart Cities**

A 2019 book by academics Claudio Coletta et al explored the concept of “smart cities”.<sup>24</sup> It included a summary of technologies which contribute to smart cities in areas such as government, transport, energy, waste, environment and buildings. Examples included: intelligent transport and smart travel cards; smart energy grids and lighting; dynamic waste collection routing; flood management sensors; and building management systems.<sup>25</sup> The DFID paper commended such initiatives, but noted that they might be harder to apply in the developing world, and even more so in “fragile” or conflict-affected cities.<sup>26</sup>

Coletta et al noted the ethical problems which might arise from the large volumes of data being collected, such as issues of privacy and the possibility of hacking or data breaches.<sup>27</sup> The book also explored reasons why smart city technologies have not been adopted more quickly. It said that these included an aversion to risk, a lack of trust in the technologies and a lack of skills to implement them.<sup>28</sup>

### **UK Approach**

In 2018, the Government launched the global future cities programme.<sup>29</sup> It said that the aim of the programme was to “help 19 cities across 10 countries develop sustainably, by assisting with transportation, urban planning and resilience [against natural disasters]”.<sup>30</sup> The Government committed £80 million to the initiative, and said it would last until 2021 or 2022.<sup>31</sup> It stated that, as well as promoting sustainable and inclusive growth, Global Future Cities would “open up opportunities for international business, including the UK”.<sup>32</sup>

In the business case for the programme, the Government said that it would align with the UN’s new urban agenda, and would also contribute to the UK’s work towards SDG 11.<sup>33</sup> The first project undertaken as part of the programme is, the Government stated, “providing critical support for Cape Town to better maintain water and sanitation related infrastructure”.<sup>34</sup>

The UK is also supporting sustainable urban development in Burma, Uganda and Zambia through the cities and infrastructure for growth programme.<sup>35</sup> The Government said that this was providing “direct technical assistance” on urban planning worth £165 million between 2016 and 2022. The Government stated that the scheme would be expanded to include other countries in Africa and Asia.<sup>36</sup>

### **2019 Review**

Considering progress towards the SDGs in the UK, the Government published a review in June 2019.<sup>37</sup> Under SDG 11, it noted a number of initiatives which supported the goal of sustainable cities. These included, for England:<sup>38</sup>

- On transport, the 2018 inclusive transport strategy and the 2019 future of mobility: urban strategy.<sup>39</sup>
- On air quality, the clean air strategy.<sup>40</sup>

- On housing, the 2017 housing white paper.<sup>41</sup>
- On building communities, the integrated communities strategy green paper.<sup>42</sup>

The progress review also noted some remaining challenges.<sup>43</sup> These included: delivering affordable housing; reducing homelessness and rough sleeping; and promoting inclusive communities.

Considering the theme of technology, in 2018 the then exports minister, Baroness Fairhead, cited the Manchester development ‘MediaCityUK’ as an example of what smart cities of the future might look like.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>1</sup> United Nations General Assembly, ‘[Resolution: Implementation of the Outcome of the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements \(Habitat II\) and Strengthening of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme \(UN-Habitat\)](#)’, 5 February 2014, A/RES/68/239, p 4.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations, ‘[World Cities Day: 31 October: Home](#)’, accessed 9 October 2019.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations, ‘[The World’s Cities in 2018—Data Booklet](#)’, 2018, p 3. This figure is based on cities containing at least 500,000 inhabitants. In the same booklet, the UN variously refers to cities as containing at least 300,000, at least 500,000 or at least 1 million people (ibid, pp 1, 2–3, 7–9 and 10). It also provides data on ‘megacities’ with more than 10 million inhabitants (ibid, pp 2, 5–7). The booklet contains further data on city populations and how they are projected to change over time.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations, ‘[World Cities Day: 31 October: Message](#)’; and ‘[World Cities Day: 31 October: Home](#)’, accessed 10 October 2019.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations, ‘[World Cities Day: 31 October: Home](#)’, accessed 9 October 2019.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Habitat III, ‘[The New Urban Agenda](#)’, accessed 10 October 2019.

<sup>7</sup> United Nations, ‘[Sustainable Development Goals](#)’, accessed 10 October 2019.

<sup>8</sup> United Nations, ‘[Sustainable Development Goals: Goal 11: Make Cities Inclusive, Safe, Resilient and Sustainable](#)’, accessed 10 October 2019.

<sup>9</sup> United Nations, ‘[Sustainable Development Goal 11: Progress and Info \(2019\)](#)’, accessed 10 October 2019.

<sup>10</sup> ibid.

<sup>11</sup> United Nations, ‘[World Cities Day: 31 October: Background](#)’, accessed 10 October 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Overseas Development Institute, ‘[Projecting Progress: Are Cities on Track to Achieve the SDGs by 2030: Executive Summary](#)’, October 2016.

<sup>13</sup> ibid, p 4.

<sup>14</sup> ibid, pp 4–5.

<sup>15</sup> United Nations, ‘[World Cities Day: 31 October: Background](#)’, accessed 10 October 2019.

<sup>16</sup> United Nations Habitat III, ‘[New Urban Agenda](#)’, 2017, p iv.

<sup>17</sup> ibid, pp 5–7.

<sup>18</sup> ibid, pp 7–8. Separately, the United Nations argued that a majority of cities with more than 500,000 inhabitants were at a “high risk of exposure” to at least one of six types of natural disaster: cyclone; flood; drought; earthquake; landslide; or volcanic eruption (United Nations, ‘[The World’s Cities in 2018—Data Booklet](#)’, 2018, p 9).

<sup>19</sup> United Nations Habitat III, ‘[New Urban Agenda](#)’, 2017, pp 11–22.

<sup>20</sup> ibid, pp 22–40.

<sup>21</sup> ibid, pp 40–2.

<sup>22</sup> United Nations, ‘[World Cities Day: 31 October: Home](#)’, accessed 9 October 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Alison Brown, ‘[Topic Guide: Planning for Sustainable and Inclusive Cities in the Global South](#)’, Evidence on Demand for the Department for International Development, 1 January 2015, pp 50–1.

<sup>24</sup> Claudio Coletta et al (eds), ‘[Creating Smart Cities](#)’, 2019.

<sup>25</sup> ibid, p 2.

<sup>26</sup> Alison Brown, ‘[Topic Guide: Planning for Sustainable and Inclusive Cities in the Global South](#)’, Evidence on Demand for the Department for International Development, 1 January 2015, p 41.

<sup>27</sup> Claudio Coletta et al (eds), ‘[Creating Smart Cities](#)’, 2019, pp 225–6.

<sup>28</sup> ibid, p 228.

<sup>29</sup> Cabinet Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office, ‘[Prosperity Fund Global Future Cities Programme](#)’, 19 September 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Cabinet Office et al, ‘[The Prosperity Fund: Annual Report 2017/18](#)’, 15 November 2018, p 11.

<sup>31</sup> Cabinet Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office, ‘[Prosperity Fund Global Future Cities Programme](#)’, 19 September 2019.

- <sup>32</sup> Cabinet Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office, [Prosperity Fund Business Case: Global Future Cities Programme](#), 19 September 2019, p ii.
- <sup>33</sup> *ibid*, p xi.
- <sup>34</sup> Cabinet Office et al, [The Prosperity Fund: Annual Report 2017/18](#), 15 November 2018, p 11.
- <sup>35</sup> Department for International Development, [Voluntary National Review of Progress Towards the Sustainable Development Goals](#), 26 June 2019, p 145.
- <sup>36</sup> *ibid*.
- <sup>37</sup> Department for International Development, [Voluntary National Review of Progress Towards the Sustainable Development Goals](#), 26 June 2019.
- <sup>38</sup> *ibid*, pp 137–40. The transport and clean air strategies apply UK-wide. The paper also set out additional initiatives in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland: *ibid*, pp 140–5.
- <sup>39</sup> Department for Transport, '[The Inclusive Transport Strategy: Achieving Equal Access for Disabled People](#)', 8 July 2019; and [Future of Mobility: Urban Strategy](#), March 2019.
- <sup>40</sup> Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs et al, '[Clean Air Strategy](#)', 14 January 2019.
- <sup>41</sup> Department for Communities and Local Government, [Fixing Our Broken Housing Market](#), 7 February 2017, Cm 9352.
- <sup>42</sup> Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, [Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper](#), 9 February 2019.
- <sup>43</sup> Department for International Development, [Voluntary National Review of Progress Towards the Sustainable Development Goals](#), 26 June 2019, pp 146–7.
- <sup>44</sup> Department for International Trade, '[Minister Baroness Fairhead's Address to the GREAT Festival of Innovation on the UK's Leadership in Smart Cities](#)', 28 March 2018.

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