

Mid-term Review of the New Urban Agenda

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The New Urban Agenda and the 2030 Agenda

The United Nations General Assembly held the High-level Meeting on the Midterm Review of the New Urban Agenda (NUA), under the theme “Delivering Sustainable Urbanization for All - Accelerating and Scaling Implementation of the New Urban Agenda to 2036 together,” at UN Headquarters in New York on 16 and 17 July 2026. The meeting was informed by the report of the UN Secretary-Generalⁱ and adopted a political declaration.ⁱⁱ

But before focusing on this meeting, it is important to remind ourselves that the New Urban Agenda was adopted on 20 October 2016 at the Habitat III Conference in Quito, Ecuador, just one year after the 2030 Agenda was adopted. Yet, the NUA missed a major opportunity to fully align itself with the most comprehensive global sustainable development framework. While the 2030 Agenda set out a bold, universal vision grounded in human rights, measurable targets, gender equality, digital inclusion, environmental protection, financing for development, and peacebuilding, NUA incorporated only parts of that ambition. As a result, it became a strong but incomplete blueprint for sustainable urbanization. Cities are where most SDG challenges and solutions converge – from poverty and housing to climate resilience and economic opportunity – which makes the gaps even more striking. The NUA could have been the operational arm of the SDGs in urban spaces, but instead remained a principle-based document without the full power of the 2030 Agenda behind it.

What exactly was left out? Several core elements of the 2030 Agenda did not make their way into the NUA: a human-rights-based framework, measurable targets and indicators, a clear financing model, gender mainstreaming, digital transformation and data governance, broader environmental commitments beyond climate, and peace, justice, and urban fragility (SDG 16). Each of these omissions matters. Without rights language, vulnerable urban groups remain insufficiently protected. Without indicators, progress cannot be measured. Without financing, cities cannot implement what is envisioned. Without gender and digital inclusion, urban development risks reinforcing existing inequalities. And without peacebuilding, the NUA overlooks the reality that many cities are affected by violence, displacement, and instability. Had the NUA fully absorbed these elements from the 2030 Agenda, it could have become a far more powerful, actionable, and transformative framework for the global urban agenda.

ⁱ [Progress in the implementation of the New Urban Agenda Report of the Secretary-General](#)

ⁱⁱ [Political Declaration to Renew Commitment and Accelerate the Implementation of the New Urban Agenda](#)

The Midterm Review

The midterm review of NUA in 2026 showed that some meaningful progress has been made across social inclusion, housing, urban prosperity, environmental resilience and multilevel governance – yet the gaps created by the Agenda’s original omissions remain visible. Despite many good examples we have heard from the participants - UN member States, UN entities and stakeholders - implementation has not kept pace with the scale and complexity of today’s urban challenges. Housing inadequacy now affects up to 3 billion people, slum populations have grown by 120 million since 2016, and climate-related displacement reached 46 million people in 2024. While countries have expanded access to electricity, water, sanitation, public transport and digital connectivity, these gains remain uneven and deeply unequal. Implementation has not kept pace with the growing scale and complexity of housing and urban challenges, and the global housing crisis has deepened, not diminished. Cities are innovating – from nature-based solutions to gender-responsive planning and large-scale slum upgrading – but they still face severe financing and capacity constraints. The NUA has generated momentum, but not at the speed or scale required.

The Role of stakeholders in the preparation and at the Midterm Review High-Level Meeting

Non-governmental stakeholders played a far more prominent and structured role in the 2026 midterm review of the NUA than previously, reflecting a deliberate shift toward inclusive, multi-actor governance. According to the Secretary-General’s report, more than 1,300 participants from 115 countries took part in the global NUA learning series, with civil society, academia, community groups, professional associations, youth networks and private-sector representatives actively contributing through dialogues, surveys and write-shops. UN-Habitat received 120 stakeholder survey submissions and engaged 144 participants in collaborative drafting sessions, ensuring that lived urban experiences – from informal settlement organizations to disability advocates and women’s groups – directly shaped the evidence base of the review. The Political Declaration further elevates this role, recognizing non-governmental actors as “important partners and co-creators” in sustainable urban development and calling for their meaningful participation in planning, implementation and monitoring. Together, these processes signal a growing recognition that the NUA cannot be delivered by governments alone: its success depends on the knowledge, innovation and accountability that non-governmental stakeholders bring to the table.

The Way Forward

Looking ahead, the next steps have been defined in the political declaration, which responds with a stronger, more explicit commitment to human rights, gender equality, digital inclusion, climate resilience, and multilevel governance. It reaffirms the right to adequate housing, recognizes homelessness as an affront to human dignity, and calls for inclusive, age- and gender-responsive urban policies. It also expands the NUA’s scope by explicitly linking it to global frameworks such as the Paris Agreement, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, the Sendai Framework, the Sevilla Commitment, and the Doha Programme of Action. Importantly, it acknowledges that urban challenges are now shaped by conflict, displacement, digital divides, climate impacts, and widening inequalities, and insists that there can be no sustainable

development without peace. This is a notable evolution: the original NUA barely addressed peace, conflict, or fragility, yet these issues now define the lived reality of millions of urban residents.

Still, the midterm review showed how much stronger the NUA could have been had it fully absorbed the architecture of the 2030 Agenda when it was adopted in 2016. The NUA still lacks measurable targets, a financing framework, gender mainstreaming across all commitments, digital governance, biodiversity and circular economy integration, and SDG 16's peace and justice lens. These omissions continue to limit its impact. The Secretary-General's report highlights that progress is difficult to quantify without indicators; cities struggle to implement commitments without predictable financing; and digital exclusion remains one of the fastest-growing urban inequalities. The Political Declaration begins to correct these gaps – especially on human rights, gender equality, digitalization, and peace – but the next decade must go further. Had the NUA incorporated these elements from the 2030 Agenda from the start, it would today be a far more powerful, actionable, and transformative framework. The opportunity now is to finally align the NUA with the full ambition of the SDGs, ensuring that sustainable urbanization becomes measurable, financed, inclusive, resilient – and truly capable of leaving no one behind.

The Author

Branislava Balac, one of SF's newest Fellows, is an international consultant with extensive experience in sustainable development. As a Chair of the Committee on Human Settlements, she established partnerships to advocate for the agenda on human settlements and Agenda 21, and was involved in preparations of the new sustainable urban agenda at the HABITAT III conference. Branislava worked at Columbia University in New York as an international scholar and had authored and co-authored a number of books and scientific articles. The opinions expressed are her own.

ABOUT STAKEHOLDER FORUM

Stakeholder Forum for a Sustainable Future (SF) is a not-for-profit international organisation working to advance sustainable development at all levels. For more than 25 years, SF has been a bridge between stakeholders of all kinds and the international intergovernmental forums where sustainable development, and in particular the environment and issues related to its good governance, are debated, global goals are established, and strategies are mapped out. Our work aims to enhance open, accountable, and participatory decision-making and good governance for sustainable development through the continuous involvement and participation of stakeholders in these forums, and in the action that flows from their work.

To this end, we work with a diversity of stakeholders globally on international policy development and advocacy; stakeholder engagement and consultation; media and communications, and capacity building - all with the ultimate objective of promoting progressive outcomes on sustainable development through an open and participatory approach. In consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) since 1996, SF also works with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) under an MOU to expand the engagement and participation of the Major Groups and other Stakeholders in the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) and HLPF processes.

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