

Future Urban Sustainability: Lessons Learnt From the SDGs and Perspectives for a Post-2030 Agenda

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Abstract

Given the current challenges of global environmental change and other pressing issues, cities—along with other urban actors—must intensify and expand their efforts to operate within planetary boundaries and advance sustainability agendas. As we move toward the period beyond 2030, it will be crucial to establish and meet goals that reduce ecological impacts, advance social justice and inclusion, and avert further environmental degradation. The limitations of the existing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) should serve as a basis for deepening structural and conceptual discussions on what a future framework might entail. Against this backdrop, we, as editors of the thematic issue, invited articles that make three central contributions to highlighting the significance of cities and urban actors: First, by examining different global urban experiences, the articles explore how tensions, contradictions, and synergies of the SDGs unfold in urban contexts. Second, they shed light on the challenges and requirements urban actors encounter when translating the SDGs into local action. And third, they put forward ideas for overcoming existing barriers in shaping a post-2030 sustainable development agenda. This editorial categorizes some of the existing tensions in current SDG implementation and outlines ways to conceptualise a post-2030 agenda from an urban perspective.

Keywords

2030 Agenda; cities; municipalities; SDGs; sustainable cities; urban development

1. Introduction

When the 2030 Agenda with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was launched in 2015, the United Nations (UN) presented it as a decisive political framework for achieving sustainable development on a global scale. The recognition of cities as key actors in the 2030 Agenda—particularly, but not only, through the inclusion of SDG 11—has been widely regarded as a significant milestone compared to previous global frameworks, such as the Millennium Development Goals. However, considering the ongoing dramatic global environmental change and increasing socio-spatial inequalities, among other urban challenges, cities and other urban actors need to broaden their efforts. Looking ahead to the post-2030 era, they must set and achieve targets for reducing their environmental impact, promoting justice and inclusion, and preventing further planetary harm (Bai et al., 2022; Rockström et al., 2023). It is therefore timely to critically analyse the lessons learnt from the SDGs and to develop perspectives for a post-2030 agenda from a distinct urban standpoint.

2. Current State of Global and Urban Sustainability and the SDGs

Developments such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the erosion of democratic norms in many countries, as well as growing scepticism toward multilateralism and supranational regulation, raise questions about the striking power of the SDGs and their underlying approach of “global governance by goal setting” (Biermann et al., 2017; Hickmann et al., 2024). Additionally, critiques of the 2030 Agenda have been voiced concerning the SDGs’ general lack of transformative impacts (Hickmann et al., 2024), their alignment with economic growth paradigms (Eisenmenger et al., 2020; Hickel, 2019), as well as their technocratic and managerial approaches to sustainability (Brand et al., 2021). These critiques are echoed in hard data: The 2025 UN progress report states that of the 135 measurable targets (of a total of 169), only 18% are on track, while the majority of targets show insufficient progress (31%), stagnation (17%), or even regression (18%) to levels below the baseline of 2015 (UN, 2025). The last years marked record-high global greenhouse gas emissions and continued biodiversity loss, an unmistakable signal that many efforts towards sustainability are falling short. The UN Secretary-General has responded with a call for accelerated action, stressing that “in a world of unprecedented wealth, knowledge and technologies, the denial of basic needs for so many is outrageous and inexcusable” (UN, 2024). The evaluation of SDG 11 demonstrates less regression compared to other goals; yet progress remains especially weak on housing affordability, access to basic municipal services, climate-resilient infrastructure, and civil society participation in urban planning (UN, 2025). At the same time, its urban emphasis has advanced SDG localization, fostered new coalitions and indicator systems, and in some cases influenced municipal budgeting and planning processes (Koch et al., 2023; Krellenberg et al., 2019; Valencia et al., 2019).

Even though these developments could raise the question of whether a post-2030 agenda is expedient at all, we argue that the current state of global environmental degradation, as well as increasing social conflicts, urgently calls for a global sustainability agenda that extends beyond 2030. The shortcomings of the SDGs should be learnt from to enrich broader structural and conceptual debates in this regard.

In this context, the thematic issue seeks to make three key contributions that foreground the role of cities and urban actors: First, drawing on experiences from cities in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Europe, the collection of articles assesses the tensions, contradictions, and synergies of the SDGs as they materialize in urban settings.

Second, the articles address the constraints and needs faced by urban actors in localizing the SDGs, and third, they offer suggestions for moving beyond current obstacles in the post-2030 period.

3. Key Tensions in Urban SDG Implementation

This thematic issue, along with existing literature, highlights four key tensions in local SDG implementation which hold critical relevance for a post-2030 agenda. By unpacking these tensions, the articles collectively shed light on the limitations of the current framework and the need for a more coherent as well as context-sensitive approach beyond 2030. The following thematic tensions structure the analytical core of this thematic issue.

3.1. *Municipal Agency vs. Structural Dependency*

The relationship between cities and nation states varies by context. Despite growing municipal engagement—visible, for instance, in the rise of voluntary local reviews (VLRs)—the capacities of cities to implement transformative change remain constrained by structural dependencies on national legal frameworks, funding mechanisms, and political dynamics (Krellenberg et al., 2019). As such, cities occupy a dual role: operating as subordinate levels of governance while simultaneously emerging as potential counter-powers capable of advancing conflictive or confrontational political agendas (Bullmann & Gitschmann, 1985). This tension crystallizes also in sustainability governance, where cities have, at times, positioned themselves in direct opposition to national policies.

In this context, Partzsch (2025), for instance, examines how VLRs can function as instruments of local environmental sustainability even if they are not a priority at other political levels such as the EU, nation states, and regions. Through applying a multi-level governance perspective on the “green goals” of the 2030 Agenda, the article shows how municipalities are occasionally leading the way in environmental action both horizontally, with site-specific measures, and vertically, with multi-level measures. Ferlicca (2025), on the other hand, explores the role of national urban policies (NUPs) in localizing the 2030 Agenda. Her analysis of Argentina’s NUP reveals significant limitations, including weak governance coordination, limited policy innovation despite international support, and high vulnerability to political transitions. Nevertheless, the study argues that when designed with attention to existing institutional arrangements and realistic implementation pathways, NUPs can serve as valuable vehicles for SDG localization.

3.2. *Standardizing Sustainability vs. Emphasizing Local Specificities*

The 2030 Agenda is underpinned by a strong belief in evidence-based governance, with global indicators serving as the primary means for monitoring progress toward the SDGs. At the local level, indicator-based assessments of SDG implementation are similarly considered an appropriate means to manage urban sustainability (Michalina et al., 2021). However, the selection and contextualization of sustainability indicators is a complex endeavour and nation states as well as municipalities struggle to adjust and use these global indicators as tools to measure sustainability on their respective levels. Therefore, a tension between standardized sustainability indicators, which help to achieve comparability on the progress of the SDGs, and specifically defined sustainability indicators, which monitor local sustainability measures and which align

with existing urban strategies, is visible (Klopp & Petretta, 2017). Practices such as “cherry-picking,” hence, prioritizing some SDGs while neglecting others (Forestier & Kim, 2020), stand against one-size-fits-all indicator sets, which overlook the contextual specifics of a city. Furthermore, indicators and data viewed in isolation make it difficult to assess the interrelationships between different SDGs.

The contributions in this thematic issue illustrate how local actors negotiate and adapt to these constraints. Busch et al. (2025) show how participatory approaches can generate neighbourhood-level SDG indicators and integrate them into socially oriented urban renewal programs. Hofmann et al. (2025) demonstrate how participatory approaches can not only support local monitoring, but also provide the baseline for identifying synergies and negotiating priorities between different targets. Furthermore, through mapping contextualised risks associated with unsafe sanitation, the authors demonstrate that it can be a strength to conceptualize SDG interconnectedness through the synergies and trade-offs between different dimensions. Moreover, Peters and Liedloff (2025) reflect on the long-term processes and multiple challenges of defining and adapting local SDG indicators to measure inputs, outputs, outcomes, and impacts within the German national framework.

3.3. Data Availability vs. Data Gaps

Closely linked to the question of localizing indicators are tensions around data availability and gaps, as well as emerging possibilities of using new kinds of data sources, which can provide useful tools for SDG implementation. While the 2030 Agenda places strong emphasis on quantification, the pitfalls of this approach are clearly visible. This is evident not only at the global level, where no data is yet available for 34 of the 169 targets, but also at the local level, where the lack of disaggregated data, varying standards of data generation, and the mismatch between data collected at local and national levels—including a lack of measuring externalizations and spillover effects—become visible (Engström et al., 2021). Here, Peters and Liedloff (2025) point out that the availability of data for cities is not only relevant in terms of timeframes and coverage but—given their limited resources—also in relation to cost issues.

In addition, advances in digital technologies and novel data sources offer potential for improving SDG monitoring (Kharrazi et al., 2016; Koch et al., 2023), yet they also introduce governance challenges, including risks related to privacy, surveillance, and corporate influence (Koch & Beyer, 2025). The close genealogy of the discourses of smart cities, sustainable cities, and climate-neutral cities and their relations has been described in the article by Beretta and Bracchi (2025), who subsequently argue for a stronger consideration of justice dimensions.

3.4. Transformation vs. Green Growth and Neoliberal Continuity

A fourth tension concerns the frequently mentioned critique of the SDGs and their hardly unfolding transformative approach due to their embeddedness within a pro-growth perspective, particularly visible in SDG 8 “Decent work and economic growth.” Proponents of green growth, who consider a decoupling of economic growth from environmental impacts possible, stand in opposition to advocates of post- and de-growth approaches (Lerpold & Sjöberg, 2023). While this contradiction does not stem from a specific urban perspective, it affects SDG implementation in cities. Kaika (2017) states that the New Urban Agenda, which is based on the SDGs, fosters techno-managerial solutions, and Weber (2017) points to the risk that the 2030 Agenda ultimately promotes a contested neoliberal model of capitalist development. While

acknowledging these critiques, others consider the SDGs as “important, if imperfect” and “an unprecedented global effort...to avert catastrophic and irreversible global warming” (Perry et al., 2021).

In this thematic issue, the tension between the SDGs with their neo-liberal tendencies and rather top-down approach in its development and application on the one hand, and the transformative potential of grassroots urbanism on the other hand, is described by Vergara-Perucich and Arias-Loyola (2025). Their analysis shows how community-led initiatives can foster economic autonomy, solidarity, and political advocacy, challenging the dominant development logic incorporated into the current 2030 Agenda. Furthermore, Beretta and Bracchi (2025) show how the sustainable city paradigm depicted in SDG 11 is increasingly coupled with neoliberal and smart city discourses and ultimately embedded in imaginaries of the climate-neutral city.

4. Conceptualizing a Post-2030 Agenda From an Urban Perspective

Discussions on a post-2030 agenda have started, with most authors favouring the reform and realignment of the SDGs over their outright rejection in a post-2030 world. These discussions are embedded in wider global developments which have not been directly part of this thematic issue but will have fundamental impacts on cities. They include the rapidly rising use of artificial intelligence (AI) for sustainability—contrasted with concerns about the sustainability of AI, and related debates on governance, safety, and the privacy of data and citizens, as well as vast natural resource consumption (Francisco & Linnér, 2023). Furthermore, recent studies highlight the impact of geopolitics on sustainable development (Nguyen et al., 2023), emphasizing the links between conflict and unsustainability that merit stronger engagement with approaches to peace-centered sustainable development through concepts such as the social and solidarity economy (Lopera-Arbeláez & Richter, 2024).

Ideas for SDG reform include a post-2030 agenda with fewer but clearer goals (e.g., Cernev & Fenner, 2024), a more systematic prioritization supported by SDG interaction analysis including their networks and underlying mechanisms, as well as the development of science-based targets (Pradhan, 2023). Zwitter et al. (2025) argue that non-material aspects of human flourishing, such as cultural, psychosocial, and community-based aspects, should be more strongly considered and specified through localized goals and indicators in the post-2030 agenda. To overcome the divide between green growth and post-growth approaches, Fioramonti et al. (2022) propose a so-called well-being economy that focuses on human and ecological well-being instead of material growth as the guiding principle for the post-2030 agenda.

Moreover, we consider it paramount to retain an explicit urban focus, as cities will play an increasingly decisive role in global sustainability. Specific post-2030 urban goals are, among others, considered by Fuso Nerini et al. (2024), who put forward that variable time horizons need to be defined. For SDG 11, they suggest, for example, by 2040 universal access to cooling services in housing and by 2050 green, digital, electric, sustainable cities in line with net-zero emission objectives. Bai (2024) argues for explicit global targets for cities and businesses, which would help empower cities to do more and avoid cherry-picking. While the UN member states need to address the failures of the SDGs in terms of insufficient funding, lack of accountability, and the gap between rhetoric and action when establishing a post-2030 agenda, it is indispensable to consider also the experiences and lessons learnt from urban science in implementing the SDGs (Bai, 2024).

The authors of the articles in this thematic issue contribute to these ongoing debates with different lessons learnt for the post-2030 agenda.

4.1. Anchoring Multi-Stakeholder Participation

Several articles of this thematic issue highlight that local perspectives on SDG implementation forefront the need to recognize the plurality of actors and actions at the core of sustainable development, and therefore, develop stronger mechanisms for anchoring participation and ownership in implementation processes. This includes a stronger focus on the multiple actors in informal settlements (Hofmann et al., 2025) and grassroots organizations and coalitions (Vergara-Perucich & Arias-Loyola, 2025) and aligns with the demand by Widerberg et al. (2023) for better networked multi-stakeholder partnerships. They also emphasize that any sustainable development agenda needs to place principles and practices of justice and equality at the core (Beretta & Bracchi, 2025; Hofmann et al., 2025; Vergara-Perucich & Arias-Loyola, 2025).

4.2. Understanding Localization as a Non-Linear Process

Furthermore, the articles in this thematic issue contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the meaning and requirements of localization. Hofmann et al. (2025) and Busch et al. (2025) propose innovative and grounded methodologies for understanding the relationality, interconnectedness, and procedural nature of SDG implementation, and for subsequently prioritizing actions considering specific urban contexts. The example of sanitation by Hofmann et al. (2025) highlights the necessity of intentionally foregrounding goals that are often non-prioritized (see also Barberà-Mariné et al. (2024) for the case of environmental goals). The long-term perspective by Peters and Liedloff (2025) argues that any monitoring and decision-making has to be carried out systematically and strategically integrated into broader national frameworks.

4.3. Offering Cities Capacities and Resources to Maneuver

The articles also unpack the need for further resourcing of local institutions as well as for holding them accountable (Partzsch, 2025). They emphasize that this resourcing should not only be understood in financial terms but also in terms of capacity building and technical support, while highlighting the role of collaborations with international agencies (Ferlicca, 2025). Any form of resourcing becomes particularly pertinent in the absence of political will. This matters especially in situations of conflicts between national governments, who act as signatories to the SDGs, and local urban actors, who are the implementors of most goals (Ferlicca, 2025), or in situations of structural neglect and marginalization of certain urban populations and their initiatives (Vergara-Perucich & Arias-Loyola, 2025).

5. Conclusion

In synthesis, the thematic issue contributes to efforts of accelerating urban SDG implementation and negotiating a post-2030 urban sustainability agenda by highlighting four inherent tensions and how they are being assessed and negotiated across different geographic contexts and by diverse actors. The articles emphasize the importance of adopting localized as well as justice-oriented perspectives and they provide lessons that contribute to streamlining monitoring processes, ensuring greater coherence and local adaptation of indicators in multi-stakeholder collaborations.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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