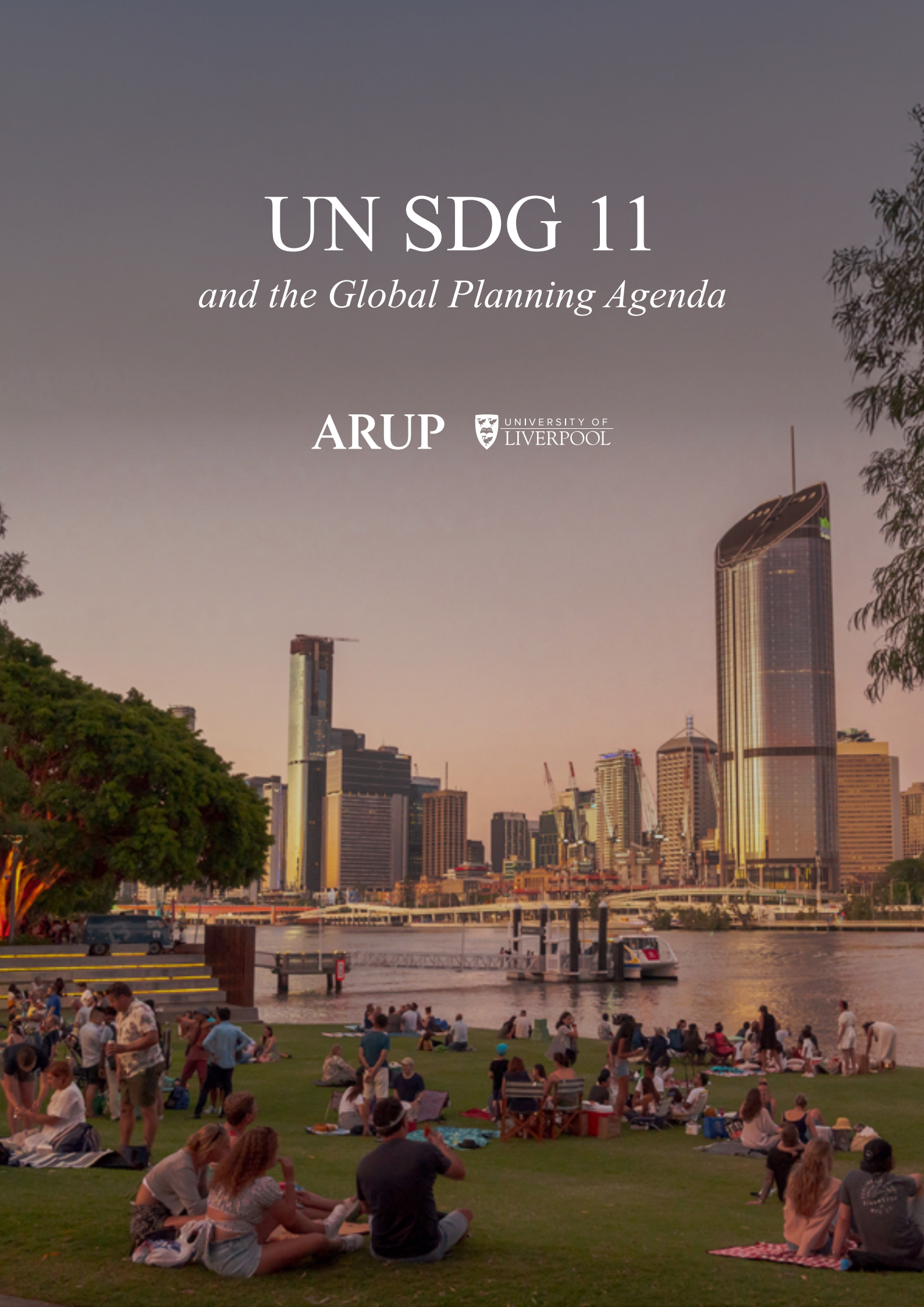


UN SDG 11

and the Global Planning Agenda

ARUP



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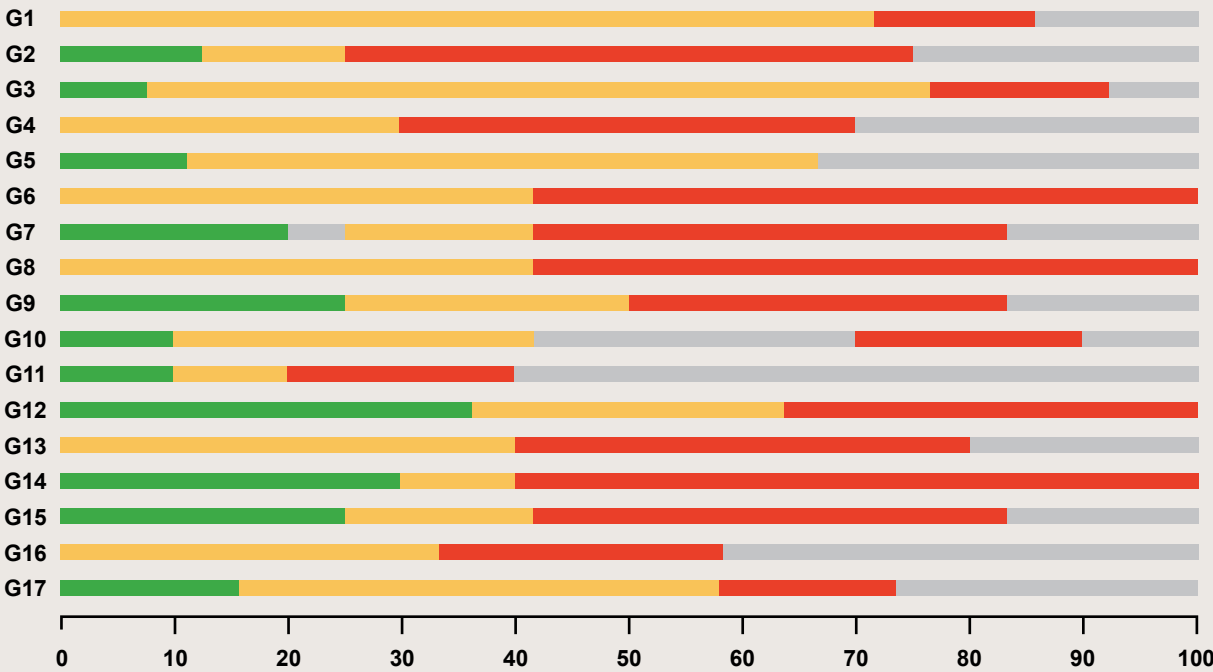
Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of a joint research project between Arup and the University of Liverpool (UoL) regarding the effects of United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 11 (UN SDG 11) on planning across international contexts.

This comprehensive research has adopted a variety of methods including a literature review prepared by the UoL, a survey distributed to the Arup Town Planning Network globally, interviews with planning practitioners and institutes in different global regions, and a panel discussion with the presidents of three planning institutes held at the Royal Town Planning Institute’s (RTPI) Planning Conference, 2025.

The findings of the literature review indicate that urbanisation and the adoption of SDG 11 by the United Nations highlights the growing importance of sustainable and inclusive cities in the face of rapid urban growth. With over half of the global population now living in urban areas, SDG 11 is seen as a central goal for planning efforts worldwide, aiming to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. These goals are also promoted by other frameworks such as the International

Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning (IGUTP) and the New Urban Agenda (NUA). But the application of all these statements of intent and their goals faces challenges due to their non-binding nature and reliance on diverse stakeholders across sectors. Additionally, the mid-point review of progress towards the SDGs revealed that SDG 11 faces the greatest data gaps and insufficiencies of all the SDGs (see Figure 1 below). This is particularly the case in developing countries, although local and regional governments are increasingly involved in Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) to track implementation. Considering this context, the motivation for this research was to develop a fuller appreciation of what is happening ‘on the ground’ as regards the influence of the global agenda for planning on planners in different parts of the world.



Taking stock of SDG progress at the midpoint

A reality check of the progress made on the SDGs at the mid-way point towards 2030 reveals significant challenges. The latest global-level data and assessments from custodian agencies paint a concerning picture: of the approximately 140 targets that can be evaluated, half of them show moderate or severe deviations from the desired trajectory. Furthermore, more than 30 per cent of these targets have experienced no progress or, even worse, regression below the 2015 baseline. This assessment underscores the urgent need for intensified efforts to ensure the SDGs stay on course and progress towards a sustainable future for all.

- On track or target met
- Fair progress, but acceleration needed
- Stagnation or regression
- Insufficient data

Figure 1:
SDG Progress at the midpoint (2023). Source: United Nations (2023).

Five key messages

Findings from the surveys, interviews and panel discussion further reveal variations in the understanding and application of SDG 11 across regions.

Based on the research undertaken, explicit application of the SDGs remains rare, however it is more common in some developing countries. Planning systems in Africa and Asia have shown the highest levels of formal adoption of SDGs into policy, while Europe and North America demonstrate lower levels. In North America, the current political regime makes any explicit reference to sustainability challenging. Most planners report that SDG 11 is implicitly integrated into their work, particularly through alignment with

professional codes of conduct. There are different levels of commitment across the public and private sector, with central governments leading in the explicit use of SDG 11, while private sector clients show the highest rates of non-application. Local governments tend to mirror central governments' trends, whereas not-for-profit organizations exhibit more mixed approaches.

The conclusion of this report identifies the following key messages from the research:

- 1

Implicit application is often the mode of influence of SDG 11 on planning systems and practices
- 2

Cases of explicit application/ linking of the SDGs to spatial development and planning systems also exist
- 3

Capacity for data collection and monitoring is strong in many places but does not always translate into application on the ground
- 4

Engagement with the SDGs and NUA can be driven by different motivations including concerns with image and reputation
- 5

Application can reflect a combination of top down and domestic bottom up and horizontal approaches

The findings of this research are important for planners for a number of reasons, as summarised below.

It is clear that the collection of indicators and more formal means of application are only part of the story when it comes to exploring how global agendas and goals influence planners. Planners and planning systems do a lot of valuable work in helping to deliver global sustainability goals which often transcends what such indicators can capture. Planning is about context-dependent processes and pathways to action as well as final outcomes. Understanding and exploring these dimensions can improve understandings of what planners do, and how planning needs to work more effectively in the delivery of the sustainability goals promoted by the global agenda for planning.

Whilst some places may demonstrate broad consistency or even conformity with the goals of the global urban sustainability agenda and the SDGs, this is not necessarily due to an explicit application of the global agenda or an attempt to follow it. The application of global objectives often takes place through a complicated multilevel and multi actor process that can include global agencies, national governments, regional and local governments, and demands from citizens. Acknowledging this is important because planners often sit at the interface or the ‘sharp end’ of such processes as these play out in specific places. As a result, planners need to be given adequate and appropriate capacity and support if they are to deliver the sustainable planning agenda on the ground.

Examples of explicit application are particularly important because they can provide a means of demonstrating the value of planning, in a context where politicians and citizens are increasingly looking for measurability. Highlighting how planning is helping to deliver positive change against global sustainability goals provides another means of underlining its relevance and legitimacy as a tool for improving the quality of life and places in different global regions.

The motivation for considering global goals and agendas can vary from place to place. Motivations can include reinforcing domestic planning agendas, delivering better planning outcomes on existing issues, rhetorical promotion of previous policy decisions, or concerns with external reputation. Regardless of whether it is being applied explicitly or implicitly, the global planning agenda is important as it provides planners with a framework and a narrative for global best practice sharing.

Application of SDG 11 and agreements such as the NUA also matters for the future development of the planning profession. The panel discussion noted that planning students and the future generations of planners have an excellent understanding of the true meaning of sustainable planning, and by embedding the language of SDG 11 into our planning systems now, there is an opportunity to resonate more with younger generations and potentially attract them to the profession.

Finally, the findings of the research are important to planners as they reveal that whilst much emphasis in the SDG agenda has been placed on the collection of indicators, it is not always clear that strong data collection will necessarily lead to stronger application. Converting knowledge of conditions into action to improve them and work towards global urban sustainability goals also requires attention to be paid to the capacity and position of planning and planners to deliver change on the ground. This final finding once again reinforces the value of adopting an application perspective which explores the *performance* of the ideas and policy goals articulated by the global agenda as well as collecting indicators which seek to measure *conformance* with this agenda.

Section 1

Introduction

Planning in an increasingly urbanised world

We plan in an increasingly urbanised world. Global connections between populations, ideas, environmental challenges and planners proliferate.

These connections are linked and increasingly drawn together in formal and informal planning processes. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) illustrated below, act as a clarion call for the connectedness of targets for sustainability and indicators of planning performance within this urbanising world. SDG 11 has particular relevance to planning with its focus on cities and human settlements. The role of the SDGs and especially SDG 11 in shaping planning practice is, however, not well understood. This report explores how planning professionals across the world interpret, understand and implement the SDGs in their diverse contexts.

According to the United Nations (UN) (2023, p.34), over half of the global population currently resides in urban areas, a rate projected to reach 70 per cent by 2050. The reality of our ‘urban century’ has brought renewed attention to urbanisation and the development of cities and regions across the globe. Though cities and urban regions are seen as being key sites of development and economic and social progress, they also face many challenges surrounding their environmental impacts and social equity.

For example, ‘Approximately 1.1 billion people currently live in slums or slum-like conditions in cities, with 2 billion more expected in the next 30 years’.

In 2015, the UN adopted a 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with 17 SDGs. The SDGs emerged through political consensus following several decades of work on sustainability internationally and following previous declarations at the Earth Summit (1992), the Millennium Summit (2000), the Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development (2002) and most significantly the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (RIO+20) (2012), following which a 30-member Open Working Group was set up to identify the SDGs. These interconnected goals, ranging from eradicating poverty to tackling climate change, aimed to chart a course towards a more sustainable and equitable future for all. The interconnections within the SDGs are recognised by the UN, who state that ‘ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests.’ (UN, n.d.). Amongst the goals SDG 11, which commits the signatories to making ‘cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable’, is often seen as the most planning-related goal – though as discussed below, many of the other goals are also relevant and related to planning.



Figure 2:
The UN SDGs (Source: United Nations)

The SDGs are also reflected in other UN initiatives such as the International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning (IGUTP) adopted in 2015. The IGUTP are intended to be ‘a framework for improving global policies, plans, designs and implementation processes, which will lead to more compact, socially inclusive, better integrated and connected cities and territories that foster sustainable urban development and are resilient to climate change’. Meanwhile in 2016 the New Urban Agenda (NUA) was adopted by nearly 170 countries, committing the global community to acting in the face of the challenges of urbanization.

Such agreements and ‘statements of intent’ constitute a global agenda for planning. Whilst indicators, such as those for the SDGs provide some evidence of the impact of this agenda, there is little direct evidence about how planning professionals perceive the role of the SDGs in their practice.

Overview of Research

Aim: The purpose of this report is to explore whether SDG 11 and other statements of intent such as the NUA are making a difference to town planning and development outcomes ‘on the ground’. It aims to understand how the global agenda for planning is influencing town planning practice across the globe and how town planning is, or is not, delivering this agenda. This is a particularly important question for planners, given that SDG 11 faces the greatest data gaps and insufficiencies of all the SDGs (see Figure 1 in the Executive Summary).

Research process: The research was conducted in two phases.

- *Phase 1* comprised a literature review and a survey of planners within Arup’s global town planning network.
- *Phase 2* comprised a series of interviews with planners across the globe including professional planning institutions, private practitioners and academics. The draft findings were also presented at the RTPI National Planning Conference 2025, and discussed with panellists from America, Ireland and the UK.

The outcomes of Phases 1 and 2 are presented within this report, along with key recommendations. The next section of this report considers the state of contemporary knowledge from the literature.

Section 2

Literature Review

Steps towards the Global Agenda for Planning
- an evolving place for planning in the global sustainability agenda

The growing focus on urban issues in the international development agenda, has seen the importance of planning in helping to deliver sustainable development receive increasing attention over recent decades.

As Reyes et al. (2020) demonstrate (Figure 2), the 20-year cycle of UN-HABITAT conferences in particular has contributed to this, focussing attention on issues such as informal settlements (1976), the right to shelter and promotion of sustainable communities (1996), and most recently, as noted above, with the adoption of the NUA at the HABITAT III conference (2016), with the goal of making cities more inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.

Alongside such major conferences and political agreements, there has been continuing analysis and reflection on the role that planning can and should play and how it needs to evolve to contribute to the achievement of such goals. Stiffler (2021, p. 425) notes how ‘At the first World Urban Forum in Vancouver in 2006, UN-HABITAT argued for a reinvented urban planning that fostered inclusion, built bottom-up

consensus, and adopted a comprehensive approach going far beyond traditional master planning’. A particularly valuable contribution to this debate came in 2009 with the publication of the report Planning Sustainable Cities: Global Report on Human Settlements 2009 which assessed ‘the effectiveness of urban planning as a tool for dealing with the unprecedented challenges facing 21st century cities and for enhancing sustainable urbanization’ (UN-HABITAT 2009, vi). This argued that ‘future urban planning must take place within an understanding of the factors shaping 21st century cities’. The report also emphasised that in meeting these challenges much could be learnt from innovative international planning approaches, from strategic spatial planning through to participatory processes and social justice-oriented master planning.

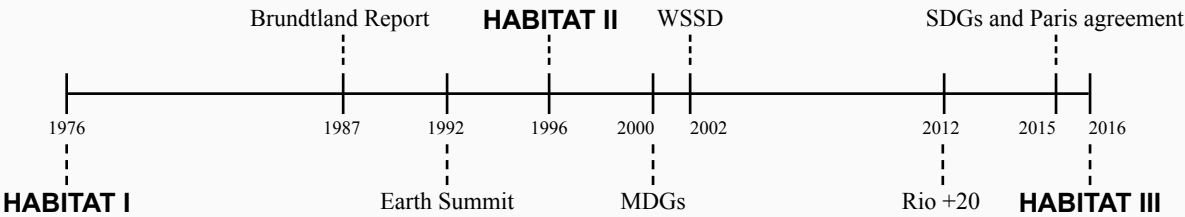


Figure 3:
The Timeline of UN-HABITAT and Sustainable Development Conferences (1976-2016). Source: Reyes et al. (2020, p. 338)

In thinking about how planning might respond to contemporary and future challenges, the report cast an eye back over the evolution of modern planning in the 19th and 20th centuries and how it was disseminated around the world. It noted that ‘Planning innovations must be shaped by the context in which they occur’ and that ‘there is no one model or system of urban planning that can be applied in all parts of the world’. This does not mean that it is not possible to generalise about ‘urban planning ideas and concepts’, but rather that ‘the way in which these might be used will be highly dependent upon contextual factors’ (UN-HABITAT, 2009, pp.211-212). This dynamic, and sometimes tension, between what can be termed ‘universalism’ and ‘context-dependency’ in planning models and ideas is relevant to reflection on, and evaluations of, the influence of the global agenda for planning (e.g. the SDGs and NUA) on planning in different places. It raises key questions like ‘How relevant are the policy goals and planning models promoted by the GAP to planning and development in different places?’ and ‘Are they having an influence – if so how, and if not why?’.

The above questions matter for the achievement of the SDGs and for planning, for as Graute et al. (2018, p.4) note, ‘cities are affected by the entire 2030 Agenda, as the bulk of SDG action (e.g. Goals 3, 6, 7, 11, 12, 13) tends to be located in urban areas, which in the end, host the majority of the global population’. Many of these goals have planning implications in terms of how land is organised and managed. The relevance of SDG 11 to ‘Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable’ is self-evident and a number of its specific sub-targets (11.a, 11.3 and 11.7) explicitly mention planning (see Figure 4).

- 11.1 By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums
- 11.2 By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons
- 11.3 By 2030, enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management in all countries
- 11.4 Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage
- 11.5 By 2030, significantly reduce the number of deaths and the number of people affected and substantially decrease the direct economic losses relative to global gross domestic product caused by disasters, including water-related disasters, with a focus on protecting the poor and people in vulnerable situations
- 11.6 By 2030, reduce the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, including by paying special attention to air quality and municipal and other waste management
- 11.7 By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities
- 11.a Support positive economic, social and environmental links between urban, peri-urban and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning
- 11.b By 2020, substantially increase the number of cities and human settlements adopting and implementing integrated policies and plans towards inclusion, resource efficiency, mitigation and adaptation to climate change, resilience to disasters, and develop and implement, in line with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, holistic disaster risk management at all levels
- 11.c Support least developed countries, including through financial and technical assistance, in building sustainable and resilient buildings utilizing local materials

Figure 4:
SDG 11 Goal 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. Source: The Global Goals (2015).

Another dimension of the SDGs which creates a potential role for planning is that ‘When applied to a specific geographical area or territory, most of these goals are relevant and hence overlap’ (Graute et al. 2018, p.4). This is notable given that coordinating policy goals as they relate to places, and interact, in territorial terms, is an aspiration of more expansive views of planning (e.g. some versions of spatial planning). Planning’s role as a facilitator of deliberation on policy decisions which affect spatial development may also prove to be valuable, as delivery of the SDGs is seen as requiring broad stakeholder ownership of the goals (accepting that the extent to which planning effectively performs this role varies in different contexts).

This role for planning is reflected in other UN initiatives such as the IGUTP which were adopted in 2015 and are intended to be ‘a framework for improving global policies, plans, designs and implementation processes, which will lead to more compact, socially inclusive, better integrated and connected cities and territories that foster sustainable urban development and are resilient to climate change’ (UN-HABITAT, 2015, p.1). The IGUTP have the following stated goals (UN-HABITAT, 2015, p.1) (Figure 5):

- To develop a universally applicable reference framework to guide urban policy reforms.
- To capture universal principles from national and local experience that could support the development of diverse planning approaches adapted to different contexts and scales.
- To complement and link to other international guidelines aimed at fostering sustainable urban development.
- To raise the urban and territorial dimensions of the development agendas of national, regional and local governments.

Figure 5:
Goals of the International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning. Source: UNHABITAT (2015).

They are intended for use ‘through the multiscale continuum of spatial planning’, across every level from supranational down to the neighbourhood (UN-Habitat, 2015).

The IGUTP document sets out 12 key planning principles and 114 recommendations, in 5 main sections addressed to 4 key stakeholder groups - national governments, local authorities, civil society associations and, professional planning associations. In keeping with wider concerns of the 2030 Agenda, there has been an attempt to localise the Guidelines. Global conferences and launch events have been held in different countries, with the document translated into 11 languages to aid dissemination in different parts of the world. The Guidelines were downloaded over 100,000 times in the year following their publication.

The year after the publication of the IGUTP, the urban dimension of the international sustainability agenda was further emphasised by the conclusion of the UN-HABITAT III process and adoption of the NUA at the UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (HABITAT III) in Quito, Ecuador, (UN-HABITAT, 2017). For Stiftel (2021, p.421) the NUA is ‘a hard-fought diplomatic achievement’ and ‘an ambitious roadmap for the future of urbanization globally, built around five pillars: national urban policies, urban legislation and regulations, urban planning and design, local economy

and municipal finance, and local implementation’. The Signatories of the NUA recognised that planning has a role to play stating (UN-HABITAT, 2017, p.21, Para. 72) that:

We commit ourselves to long-term urban and territorial planning processes and spatial development practices that incorporate integrated water resources planning and management, considering the urban-rural continuum on the local and territorial scales and including the participation of relevant stakeholders and communities.

UN-HABITAT (2018, p.6) notes that ‘Some 33 points in the NUA spotlight the contribution expected from planning and managing urban spatial development’. The NUA Quito Implementation Plan also contains a significant section on ‘Planning and managing urban spatial development’ which acknowledges the IGUTP (UN-HABITAT, 2017, p.24, para. 93) and develops an extensive list of aspirations for, and sets out a model of, planning.

Garschagen and Porter (2018, pp.118-119) also note how the implication of the NUA is that ‘improvements of planning frameworks and institutions are not only considered necessary in countries with weak planning systems and poor law enforcement, but also in countries with strong institutions, given the manifold new challenges posed by climate change, globalization, demographic change and other pressures’. This is then an authentic global agenda, not one limited to particular kinds of countries (developed or developing), or parts of the world (global ‘north and south’). For Stiftel (2021, p.422) ‘In the past, urban planning was often far from central in UN approaches to sustainable development, so The Agenda reflects dramatic change in UN confidence in planning’. There is therefore much which is positive for planning, which is why we argue here it is possible to talk of a global agenda for planning’. This also reemphasises the importance of the questions trailed earlier - ‘How relevant are the policy goals and planning models promoted by the global agenda to planning and development in different places?’ and ‘Are they having an influence – if so how, and if not why not?’. As the agenda moves from formulation of policies towards implementation, these questions direct our attention to whether the global agenda for planning is being applied, or whether the it is facing any implementation ‘gaps’.

From Formulation to Application – how can progress be monitored?

Debates about the orientations of the policy statements and documents that constitute the global agenda for planning (SDG 11; IGUTP; NUA etc.) and the planning models it promotes are related to the question of whether it will make a material difference to planning and urbanisation on the ground. One issue to note is that statements of intent like the NUA, and guidelines like the IGUTPs, are effectively non-binding in nature and rely on stakeholders across scales and sectors embedding these goals into their own strategies and decision-making. A key question for Satterthwaite (2018, p.121-122) is thus, ‘do UN Conferences where the representatives of national governments approve a long list of non-binding commitments actually produce change to meet these commitments?’. Though as Garschagen and Porter (2018, p.117) note, ‘The NUA is legally non-binding, yet has been endorsed by the UN member states through a General Assembly decision’. This imbues it with a certain legitimacy as a global framework of consensus for domestic action (Robin, 2016). The monitoring of progress towards the SDGs has a whole architecture of frameworks and indicators associated with it. So as regards monitoring of the impact of the global agenda for planning different approaches can be used.

Indicator based approaches – chasing data, searching for meaning

The UN has created indicators to provide evidence in relation to the SDGs. They set up the Open Working Group, which responded to paragraphs 245-251 of the Rio+20 The Future We Want declaration. Paragraph 250 is the most significant and quoted in full below.

250. We recognize that progress towards the achievement of the goals needs to be assessed and accompanied by targets and indicators, while taking into account different national circumstances, capacities and levels of development.

Source: Sustainable Development Goals: Knowledge Platform (n.d.)

The UN, therefore, identified the desire for targets and indicators that were nationally contingent, but enabled an over-arching assessment of progress (or not) towards the goals. However, whilst the SDGs were agreed in 2015, it took two further years for the General Assembly of the UN to adopt the global indicator framework.

The SDG Indicators were developed by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs). The indicators are not presumed to be definitive over time, with formal opportunities, at the UN level, to review the evidence underpinning the indicators taking place in 2020 and 2025. In addition, under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, member states are encouraged to provide complementary evidence and indicators at the regional and national level. To support national statisticians the UN provides an e-Handbook on the SDG indicators.

How does the UN measure progress on the SDGs?

With over 230 unique indicators across the 17 SDGs, they paint a multifaceted picture of global development, encompassing social, economic, and environmental dimensions with both qualitative and quantitative insights.

For instance, Indicator 1.1.1, ‘Proportion of the population living below the national poverty line,’ helps monitor progress towards Goal 1: No Poverty. Similarly, Indicator 3.a.2, ‘Mortality rate for newborns within the first 28 days of life,’ sheds light on progress towards Goal 3: Good Health and Well-being. These offer quantitative indicators of key attributes within the SDG.

The intended strengths of SDG indicators lie in their universality and measurability. They enable countries to compare progress, identify best practices, and hold themselves accountable to the agreed-upon goals. By disaggregating data by income, sex, age, and other key characteristics, they aim to ensure no one is left behind. However, challenges remain. Data gaps and inconsistencies present obstacles, particularly in developing countries. The complex interplay between goals and targets necessitates a holistic approach, moving beyond individual metrics to understand the bigger picture. Regular review and refinement of indicators are crucial to ensure their continued relevance and effectiveness.

At the same time the NUA was emerging, through the UN-HABITAT III (Quito, Ecuador) (UN-HABITAT, 2017), and a range of lobbyists came to influence SDG 11. Barnett and Parnell (2016) argue that this lobbying sought to define the very premise of what is urban and that it was intrinsically a solution to sustainable development.

The success of the campaign for an Urban SDG is the outcome of a concerted mobilization overseen by international networks of local government organizations such as United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) and ICLEI - Local Governments for Sustainability, in collaboration with UN-organizations such as the Cities Alliance.

It has also involved university-affiliated groups, such as the Mistra programme coordinated by the Swedish Foundation for Strategic Environmental Research; networks of climate change governance, such as the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group; and commercial actors such as the Urban Land Institute, an international network representing real estate capital. The approval of the Urban SDG is a product of a fluid alliance of interests and organizations that generated a coherent pro-urban discourse through which to assert the importance of cities in future development policy agendas.

Barnett and Parnell, 2016



Barnett and Parnell’s (2016) concern is not that lobbyists per se have influenced SDG 11, not that there is a link to the NUA specifically, but that these visions are not clearly articulated in the SDG, and hence ‘it is likely that the conflicts of interpretation hitherto masked in the period of campaigning for an Urban SDG will become more explicit in future’ (Barnett and Parnell, 2016). Here, the concern relates to both the conceptual underpinnings of what constitutes ‘urban’, with a response from those studying ‘Southern urbanism’ most notably likely (critique that NUA is too focussed on the global north) and the diversity of urban environments globally (and their divergent spatial and temporal trajectories) to which the SDG applies.

Crucially to our discussion, Caprotti et al. (2017) build on Barnett and Parnell (2016) to provide a conceptual critique of SDG 11 as a measurable entity. Their concern relates to both the extent to which the urban can be accurately captured using data, and concern that a focus on the indicators within the SDG will render certain aspects of the NUA as political priorities, whilst side-lining other urban attributes which are of equal (or greater) significance.

The UN and its member states therefore have mechanisms for tracking the progress towards the SDGs, much of which depends on gathering data in the form of indicators. However, some of the SDGs and their ‘localisation’¹ have proven to be less easy to monitor in this way than others. SDG 11 is to ‘Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable’. Within SDG 11 there are 10 targets with 15 indicators in total. As shown in Figure 6, and of particular relevance to planning, however, it seems to be Goal 11 on sustainable and resilient cities and human settlements which faces the greatest insufficiency of data to monitor progress.

¹ SDG localization is seen by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as requiring leveraging relationships ‘*and close partnerships with Local and Regional Governments (LRGs), cities and municipalities, LRG Associations, civil society, and private sector institutions*’.

Target		Indicator	
11.1	By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums	11.1.1	Proportion of urban population living in slums, informal settlements or inadequate housing
11.2	By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons	11.2.1	Proportion of population that has convenient access to public transport, by sex, age and persons with disabilities
11.3	By 2030, enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management in all countries	11.3.1	Ratio of land consumption rate to population growth rate
		11.3.2	Proportion of cities with a direct participation structure of civil society in urban planning and management that operate regularly and democratically
11.4	Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage	11.4.1	Total per capita expenditure on the preservation, protection and conservation of all cultural and natural heritage, by source of funding (public, private), type of heritage (cultural, natural) and level of government (national, regional, and local/municipal)
11.5	By 2030, significantly reduce the number of deaths and the number of people affected and substantially decrease the direct economic losses relative to global gross domestic product caused by disasters, including water-related disasters, with a focus on protecting the poor and people in vulnerable situations	11.5.1	Number of deaths, missing persons and directly affected persons attributed to disasters per 100.000 population
		11.5.2	Direct economic loss attributed to disasters in relation to global domestic product (GDP)
		11.5.3	(a) Damage to critical infrastructure and (b) number of disruptions to basic services, attributed to disasters
11.6	By 2030, reduce the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, including by paying special attention to air quality and municipal and other waste management	11.6.1	Proportion of municipal solid waste collected and managed in controlled facilities out of total municipal waste generated, by cities
		11.6.2	Annual mean levels of fine particulate matter (e.g. PM2.5 and PM10) in cities (population weighted)
11.7	By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities	11.7.1	Average share of the built-up area of cities that is open space for public use for all, by sex, age and persons with disabilities
		11.7.2	Proportion of persons victim of physical or sexual harassment, by sex, age, disability status and place of occurrence, in the previous 12 months
11.a	Support positive economic, social and environmental links between urban, per-urban and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning	11.a.1	Number of countries that have national urban policies or regional development plans that (a) respond to population dynamics; (b) ensure balanced territorial development; and (c) increase local fiscal space
11.b	By 2020, substantially increase the number of cities and human settlements adopting and implementing integrated policies and plans towards inclusion, resource efficiency, mitigation and adaptation to climate change, resilience to disasters, and develop and implement, in line with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, holistic disaster risk management at all levels	11.b.1	Number of countries that adopt and implement national disaster risk reduction strategies in line with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015 – 2030
		11.b.2	Proportion of local governments that adopt and implement local disaster risk reduction strategies in line with national disaster risk reduction strategies
11.c	Support least developed countries, including through financial and technical assistance, in building sustainable and resilient buildings utilizing local materials	None	

Figure 6:
Indicator Suite for SDG 11 - Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.
Source: Authors, adapted from UN.

At the time of writing in August 2025, a significant monitoring gap remains in the implementation of the NUA. Only 48 out of 194 UN Member States globally submitted their first National Progress Reports, and only 9 countries have submitted a second report for the current reporting cycle. The average length of the reports is 105 pages, with the longest report from Indonesia comprising 266 pages and the shortest from the Dominican Republic with only 11 pages (Urban Agenda Platform, 2025). This in itself is a cause for concern, given that monitoring gaps have previously resulted in SDG indicators being at risk of being removed from the SDG global database. For example, in 2023 SDG indicator 11.3.2 (relating to levels of civic participation in urban planning) was at risk of being dropped from the global database due to a lack of sufficient data. Efforts have since been made to save the indicator by improving data collection, and it currently remains part of the SDG framework.

The issues discussed above mean there is also a need for bottom-up perspectives on how much progress is being made. The UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development encourages member states to carry out regular and inclusive progress reviews at both national and sub-national levels, and major groups and stakeholders, including local authorities, to report on their efforts towards implementation (para. 79 and 89 respectively). In line with these provisions, local and regional governments are increasingly participating in sub-national reviews of SDG implementation, known as Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs). Such reviews showcase their efforts, share best practices, and identify challenges

in achieving the SDGs. According to the latest UN’s SDGs report there have been over 200 VLRs thus far. These reviews have played a role in enhancing various aspects of localizing the SDGs, including data innovation, planning, policy coherence, project development, and financing (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2023, p. 49).

Despite the growing number of VLRs, the adaptation of the SDG goals to local contexts and their implementation at the regional and local levels have proven to be much more complex. Reporting on their experience of supporting the integration of the SDGs into local policy and urban monitoring efforts in Bristol, UK, Fox and Macleod (2023) remind us that the localisation of the SDGs is a political process and is not necessarily driven by local and regional governments as often assumed by International Agencies. According to the authors, while local and regional governments play a significant role as stakeholders, their responsiveness tends to be oriented towards local constituents rather than distant global agencies. They also note that despite emerging from an international participatory process, the SDGs have been primarily developed by technocrats. As a result, they remain largely unfamiliar to city officials and the general public. Thus, they contend that integrating SDGs into local perspectives and actions requires a deeper level of ‘translation’ that goes beyond simply raising awareness.

Awareness, however, is only the first of a four-step process of localisation which also includes advocacy, implementation and local monitoring, according to a range of reports, guidelines, training materials, and other resources produced by the UN and other organisations (Fox & Macleod, 2023; Leavesley et al., 2022) aimed at assisting local governments and stakeholders in understanding and implementing the SDGs at the local level. These stages are also fraught with challenges. Levealsely et al. (2022), noted that high-level support, organisational alignment, and coherent messaging were important to initiate engagement with SDGs; however, they also found the process of localisation to be resource intensive and technically complex. This is problematic as local authorities often face resource constraints and capacity limitations, including technical expertise shortages

and administrative challenges. They also argue that local integration of the SDGs involves a process of structural and cultural change; however, this can be challenging in local authorities where political factors, such as competing priorities, power dynamics, and rigid governance structures are in place (Fox & Macleod, 2023; Valencia et al., 2019). Finally, many cities face challenges in effectively monitoring the SDGs. According to Fox and Macleod (2023, p. 529), these challenges stem from: a) the unsuitability of template indicators, b) inadequate structures and capacity for data collection, and c) insufficient resources to develop a customized framework aligned with the Goals.

What is really going on with the Global Agenda for Planning? – adopting an application perspective

The discussions above underline the challenges of simply adopting top-down indicators to gauge the impacts of the global agenda for planning and processes like SDG localisation. As noted by Fox and Macloed (2023) integrating SDGs into local perspectives and actions requires a deeper level of ‘translation’ that goes beyond simply raising awareness and the same is true of the policy orientations of the NUA and the IGUTP. Though the gathering of data on specific urban conditions may allow the impacts of such strategies to be inferred - e.g. if progress is made towards some of their goals, it does not really directly explore the influence their policy principles may have had on planning and/or the delivery of the goals – i.e. whether the progress towards, or divergence from, the goals may be due to other factors.

Responding to such issues, Andreas Faludi argues that strategic frameworks and concepts can be said to have been ‘applied’ where the ideas and policy messages they articulate have ‘shaped the minds’ of actors involved in further planning processes and play ‘a tangible role in the choices of the actors’ to whom they are addressed (Faludi, 2000, p.306). To facilitate their application, ‘so conceived, such documents often need to undergo further elaboration, entailing among others the making of new institutional arrangements’ (Faludi, 2003, p.1). The application perspective is thus about ‘evaluating strategic planning documents by their ‘performance’ in shaping ongoing action, rather than by the ‘conformance’ of outcomes to intentions stated therein’ (Faludi, 2003, p.1).

As regards the global agenda for planning, an application perspective can complement indicator-based ‘conformance’ approaches, by offering a way of qualitatively exploring the actual influence of the goals and ideas articulated in statements of intent such as the SDGs and NUA. This perspective requires an engagement with those who are developing and applying planning policy and proposals across ‘the multiscale continuum of spatial planning’ described by UN Habitat. This can enable a better picture to be built of the ‘global reach’ of UN goals and respond to calls for the strategies such as the NUA to ‘recognize the need for highly contextualized and locally-grounded policy responses’ (Reyes et al., 2020, p.359). Any influence detected can then be interpreted as ‘explicit application’ - where planning measures and reforms have been undertaken in direct response to the global agenda; or as ‘implicit application’ - where planning measures and reforms which might conform with the global agenda (e.g. SDG 11) have been enacted, but not necessarily as a direct response to it (Sykes et al., 2023, pp.191-192).

This review has outlined the emergence of a global agenda for planning through a range of processes which have unfolded over recent decades notably since the 2010s with the adoption of the 2030 SDGs, and other documents like the NUA, IGUTP. It has also explored questions around how this agenda and its impact are being followed up and monitored. It has identified that an application perspective can help explore questions about what is really happening with the global agenda - for example, ‘How relevant are the policy goals and planning models promoted by the global agenda to planning and development in different places?’ and ‘Are they having an influence – if so how, and if not why not?’. An approach to evaluation which can begin to address such questions using an ‘application’ and ‘performance’ perspective was explored.

Section 3

Approach and methods

Taking a multi-method approach to understand the role of SDGs in planning

To understand how planning practitioners perceive the global agenda and the role of the SDGs in planning, a multi methods approach was undertaken, comprising:

- i. a survey of the Global Arup Town Planning network;
- ii. interviews with planning practitioners and planning institutes across the globe; and
- iii. a panel discussion with the presidents of the American Planning Association (APA), the Irish Planning Institute (IPI) and the RTPI.

The survey of the Global Arup Town Planners received 44 responses.

Interviews were undertaken with planning practitioners working in diverse sectors and roles and institutes from 15 countries. The interviews followed a semi-structured

format with discussion covering: the background of the interviewee; the role of major international agreements, goals and agendas in planning; the role of the SDGs in planning; SDG 11; SDG indicators; and the future role of the SDGs. Following the research ethics review for the project undertaken at the University of Liverpool, in the practitioner interviews respondents are anonymised and information which would have allowed specific places and individuals working in those places to be identified is redacted.

During the RTPI National Planning Conference 2025, a panel discussion was held with the presidents of the APA, the IPI and the RTPI. The three panellists shared their reflections on the draft report, and provided insights from their own regions and experiences.

- Planning Institutes**
Australia (PIA)
New Zealand (NZPI)
Hong Kong (HKIP)
South Africa (SACPLAN)
United Kingdom (RTPI)
- Planning Professionals**
Brazil
Colombia
Malaysia
Uzbekistan
Indonesia
USA
Saudi Arabia
Ghana

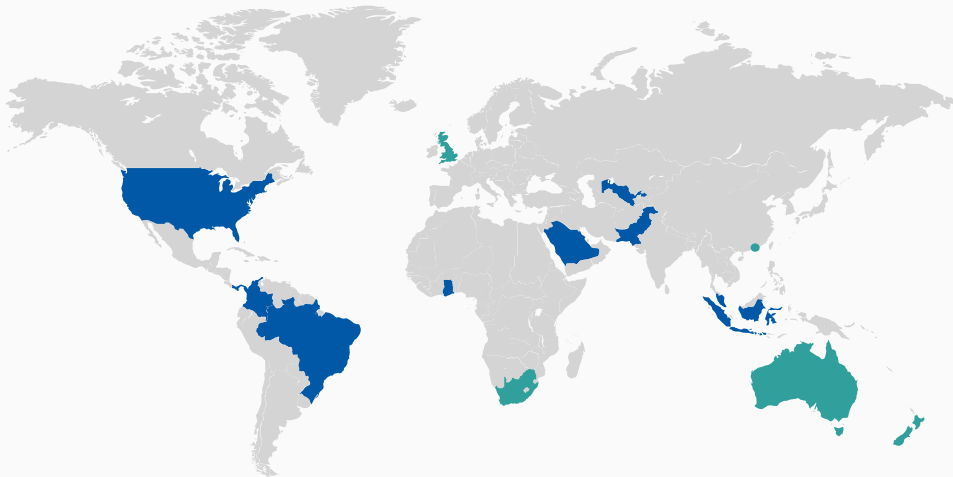


Table 1: Countries and types of interviews conducted

Section 4

Evidence

Survey of the Global Arup network members

A survey was distributed to Arup's Global Town Planning Network to assess the level of understanding and application of SDG 11 among planners globally.

A total of 44 responses were received across five regions including Africa, Asia, Australia and Oceania, Europe, and North America. Of these regions, 55% of the responses were received from Europe, mostly from the London Office, while only 2% and 7% were received from Africa and North America respectively. Asia and Australia and Oceania each contributed 18% of the responses.

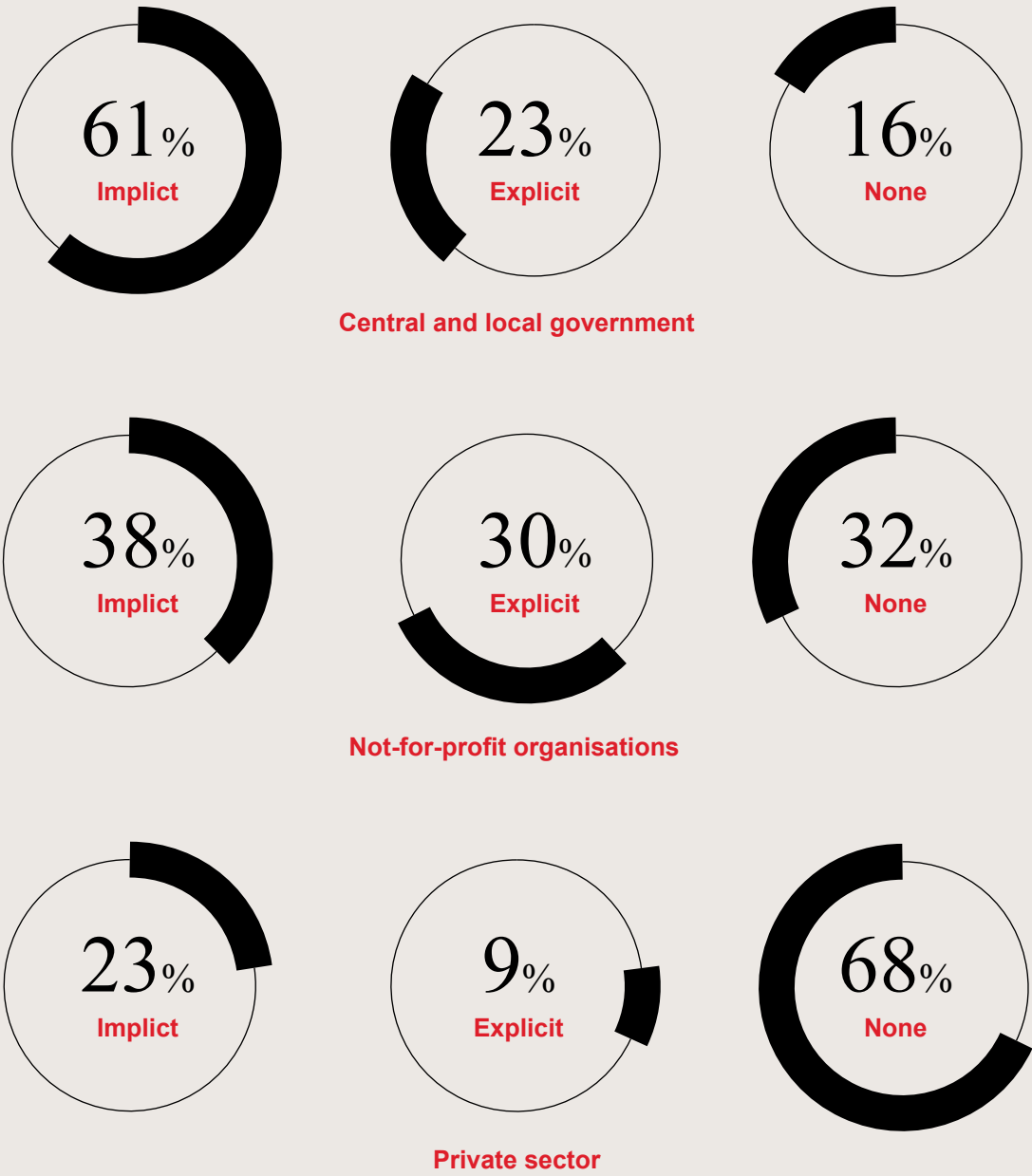
The majority of respondents have worked with local governments as their clients but have had less experience working with not-for-profit organisations. There was also an even split between planners who have worked with central government and those who have worked with the private sector. Although the survey results represent a diverse range of planner types, it is important to note that the summary below is only indicative due to the uneven distribution of responses. The key findings from the survey are as follows:

- Respondents from the African office showed strong understanding of SDG 11's role, detail, and indicators, followed by Asia, Australia and Oceania, Europe, and North America. Most respondents were familiar with SDG 11 without a deep understanding, and only two responses indicated no awareness of the goal.
- Most respondents believe that SDG 11 has been implicitly embedded in their daily project work, with the professional code of conduct already aligning with the principles of SDG 11. Only 3

responses expressed that SDG 11 was explicitly used as an indicator for projects, and 5 responses showed no application of SDG 11 in projects.

- Responses indicated that 52% of private sector clients did not include any application of SDG 11 in their projects, while 45% implicitly comply with its principles. Only one case in North America reported explicit application of SDG 11 in private sector projects.
- Central government clients tend to incorporate more application of SDG 11 in their project work through practices and outcomes, with 61% showing implicit application and 23% reporting explicit application.
- Local government clients received similar perceptions to central government clients, with 61% of respondents believing that local government projects implicitly applied SDG 11 and 18% perceiving explicit application.
- For not-for-profit clients, respondents reported a relatively even split in the application of SDG 11 in their project work, with 48% indicating implicit application, 32% reporting non-application, and 16% noting explicit application.

Overall, the level of understanding of SDG 11 among town planners was found to be higher in the Africa and Asia offices compared to other regions. There was a high level of implicit application of SDG 11 in project work across the board, with the highest rates of non-application found in Australia and Oceania and Europe, especially in London. Whilst Arup town planners mostly work with local government clients, central government clients tend to incorporate the highest explicit application of SDG 11 in their projects. Conversely, private sector client projects showed the highest rate of non-application.



Section 5

Interviews

Interviews with planning institutes

Interviews with planning institutes

Semi-structured interviews were held between October and December 2024 with planning institutes, stretching across diverse regions. Interviewees included representatives from the:

- Planning Institute of Australia (PIA)
- Hong Kong Institute of Planners (HKIP)
- New Zealand Planning Institute (NZPI)
- South African Council for Planners (SACPLAN)
- and Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI)

Open questions were discussed with the interviewees, seeking answers specific to their regions. The questions focused on the global agenda that affects planning in each location, the impact of SDG 11 on planning, the use of SDG 11 indicators, and the potential future role of SDG 11.

The Australian context

The interviewee noted that the Australian government’s approach to urban settlement and population planning has varied under different political leaderships. Among international agreements, the Paris Agreement holds particular significance because of its net-zero commitments and cascading sectoral responsibilities. The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR, 2015) has also been widely used in natural hazards planning, with agencies such as the New South Wales and Queensland Reconstruction Authorities and the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) aligning their efforts with the Sendai Framework and relevant SDGs in terms of disaster planning and climate adaptation. However, the SDGs, although relevant to planning policy and practice, have not been explicitly incorporated into national planning policy. According to our interviewee, current engagement with the SDGs tends towards the ‘here and now’ and towards narrow interpretations, particularly around housing. The SDGs occasionally influence objectives but they are not explicitly linked to specific planning initiatives. However, the existence of SDGs is important to maintain awareness of wider sustainability agendas, with particular relevance emerging in biodiversity conservation amid national reforms towards net-positive biodiversity outcomes. The interviewee notes that:

SDG 11 has not so much a formal role, but it is very influential in the development of national urban policy. Australia has an intermittent culture of showing national leadership around urban and settlement and population planning.

Australia’s planning policy currently remains dominated by housing supply concerns due to the existence of a national target of 1.2 million new homes within five years. This supply-side focus often prioritises quantity over sustainability. The PIA has advocated for stronger integration of the SDGs into planning policy, believing it is essential for initiating discussions over quality since their use would compel policymakers to consider local contexts much more rigorously.

The Hong Kong context

Since 1997, when the Planning Department of the Hong Kong SAR Government (HKSARG) initiated a study on sustainable development, called Sustainable Development for the 21st Century – sustainable development has been an important government goal. Nowadays, the Environment and Ecology Bureau of the HKSARG drives the territory’s sustainability effort, in close collaboration with the Planning Department. The Hong Kong 2030+ strategy, which sets out the broad directions for Hong Kong’s long-term future, has sustainable development as the overarching goal. Nonetheless, despite significantly shaping the territory’s policy, international agreements and the SDGs are only implicitly applied to policy. The Smart, Green and Resilient (SGR) strategy exemplifies this approach, institutionalising climate action and the SDGs across planning policy frameworks, though without formally embedding them into specific policies. Frameworks such as the Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM) and Building Environmental Assessment Method (BEAM) Plus have also been widely used to enhance development sustainability and support the government’s goal of achieving carbon neutrality by 2050.

The HKIP actively promotes the integration of sustainable development principles into its members’ professional practice. Recognising education (among its members and the wider community, including children and young people) as a fundamental driver of change, the Institute emphasises knowledge dissemination as a means to embed sustainability considerations into wider policy and practice.

According to the interviewee, the most significant challenge to achieving carbon neutrality is Hong Kong’s power supply, which is the biggest source of carbon emissions. However, given the territory’s high-density urban pattern which enables them to have an efficient infrastructure, there are good chances of achieving high savings on energy and carbon demand on the path to carbon neutrality. Other issues relate to the territory’s ageing population, ageing buildings with high maintenance costs, lack of social housing and very high property costs. The government is seeking to address this with a larger supply of land for housing and a wider range of subsidized housing types e.g. private sector participation schemes and youth hostels.



The New Zealand context

National policies in New Zealand’s planning system are subject to change according to political parties in government and they primarily focus on domestic issues, such as the cost of living and housing shortages, alongside climate change which is an international obligation. The planning system is quite heavily regulated and prescriptive and engages with international agreements and agendas primarily through indirect incorporation into domestic legislation and frameworks, rather than their formal adoption. Thus, the SDGs are absent from day-to-day planning work and lack structured application in practice, as reflected in New Zealand’s failure to produce a National Voluntary Review reporting on SDG implementation for several years.

Notwithstanding, SDG 11 is widely seen as the most significant for planning, although several other indicators have held particular relevance lately, such as SDG 6, which informs water quality management; SDGs 7 and 9, which align with renewable energy expansion; and SDGs 14 and 15, which support biodiversity protection efforts.

New Zealand’s National Policy Statement on Urban Development drives housing supply targets, but critics argue that there is too much focus on housing numbers and the way the planning system is structured. The Statement sets out that developments should be permitted if they do not cause major harm or if they have sufficient impact management in place, making it difficult to steer development as part of a long-term, more comprehensive strategy. To this end, while the SDGs offer a valuable framework, their adoption without clear implementation pathways risks superficial compliance rather than transformative change.

The South African context

Historic governance systems have profoundly shaped urban planning in South Africa, with the country experiencing three distinct regimes over the past century: colonial rule, apartheid, and the post-1994 democratic era. The legacies of segregationist policies continue to influence spatial inequalities, necessitating ongoing legislative and policy reforms to redress past injustices. International agreements, particularly the NUA and the SDGs, therefore, hold particular significance for South Africa and form an integral part of the country’s current spatial development framework. The National Department of Human Settlements, established in 1999, operates under strong influence from SDG 11 and currently drives the Integrated Human Settlements Programme to align national development with the SDGs. Also, the country’s recently adopted first National Spatial Development Framework has a five-year vision extending to 2030 that incorporates both the NUA and SDGs, including specific provisions for local municipalities. SDGs related to poverty alleviation and infrastructure development, particularly water and electricity provision, remain crucial given the persistent deprivation in historically marginalised communities. The interviewee states that

(SDG 11) It’s critical, because we come from the background where we had unplanned settlements. We still have unplanned settlements that are mushrooming both in the rural areas and the urban areas, explained by our internal migration trends within the country. So, I believe that it becomes very much important, in a sense, that it helps us shape the growth and development of our cities, particularly at local government level to ensure that.

Despite these efforts, rapid urbanisation over the last decades-with migration from former homelands and rural areas worsening housing shortages and informal settlement growth-has created complex challenges. Many formally employed low-to-middle income earners remain priced out of urban housing markets, creating sprawling commuter settlements and severe traffic congestion. Furthermore, the enduring effects of apartheid geography, such as fragmented urban forms and unequal access to services, remain entrenched and manifests in unequal access to education, particularly in early childhood development, creating literacy deficits that further exacerbate the country’s youth unemployment crisis.

Key pieces of legislation such as the National Development Plan (NDP), the Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act (SPLUMA), and various reconstruction and transformation strategies aim to dismantle systemic disparities. These measures are underpinned by five core planning principles: (i) spatial justice; (ii) sustainability, aligned with SDG 11; (iii) efficiency in resource allocation; (iv) optimal land use; and

(v) resilience to climate change and economic shocks. Notwithstanding, while national government departments must demonstrate SDG implementation in their annual performance plans, there are no formal incentive mechanisms to encourage their use. This means that, at local government level, implementation challenges persist, particularly in rural municipalities with limited capacity.

The UK context

The approach to planning and sustainability in the UK is shaped by multiple international agreements, including the SDGs, the NUA, the Paris Agreement, the Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR, 2015). Among these, the Paris Agreement holds particular significance due to its legally binding nature, directly influencing planning policy and the built environment. While other frameworks, such as the SDGs, lack binding obligations, they remain influential in guiding national and local planning strategies.

SDG 11 is explicitly embedded in UK planning policy, particularly within devolved administrations, and they are recognised as interconnected and relevant to planning practice. As examples, Scotland’s National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) explicitly links its deliverables to SDGs 7, 11, 12, and 13; Wales’ Wellbeing of Future Generations Act legislates seven wellbeing goals aligned with the SDGs, requiring their consideration in local governance and planning. This approach has been recognised by UN Habitat as exemplary, and; at a local level a good example is Bristol’s One City Plan (Bristol City Council, 2023) which aligns its six thematic areas with SDG targets, setting year-by-year objectives until 2050. The interviewee also recognises the value of SDG 11 globally:

Internationally, it (SDG 11) provides a really good framework for collaboration on common work stream in terms of, for example, global campaigns and knowledge exchange around specific topics such as housing provision, which is something that is very much a global challenge. It also provides some legitimacy for implementation because the SDGs have been recognised by most governments worldwide.

The RTPI actively integrates the SDGs into its operations, demonstrated through initiatives such as an e-learning module for planners, SDG-aligned awards criteria, and references within its International Strategy 2021–2030 (RTPI, 2021). Despite this engagement, resourcing constraints, particularly within Local Authorities, pose challenges to effective implementation.



Interviews with practitioners

Brazil

The SDGs are widely known and explicitly adopted by local and national governments in planning in Brazil. It was agreed by both sets of interviewees that, in contrast, the NUA is less well known. Though it is rich in content and progressive in values, it lacks the structured clarity of the SDGs, making it harder for policymakers to apply. As the interviewee notes:

the SDGs are very well structured and very simple to understand and very clear. And it's a set of 17 objectives and targets and indicators et cetera. But the new urban agenda is more narrative and it's very long. It's a very long document and it repeats itself very much and it doesn't have a clear structure. So, it's not easy to use, you know. It's more complex. It's very rich, it's good in its richness and its comprehensiveness, and also in its approach, it's very humane. It's very progressive, but it's so long and complex and unstructured that you have to make a big effort to understand it in its whole.

The interviews unveiled differences in the ways that cities (major state capitals in Brazil) engaged with international agreements and frameworks. In one city, frameworks like the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR, 2015) were considered relevant, with the SDGs and the NUA already providing comprehensive guidance, but in the other city the SDGs were considered the only relevant international agreement that was used.

Some city governments have institutionalised the SDGs in their planning, and they are monitored and used in promoting public engagement and performance showcasing. However, one interviewee reported that policymakers in the city where they worked used the SDGs primarily as a rhetorical tool to legitimise decisions that have already been made - particularly in the revision of the municipality's Master Plan. They also highlighted that terms like 'urban intelligence' or 'smart city', are used more for their 'appeal' rather than their substance. According to the interviewee:

Over the last three years, when discussions about the new Master Plan began (led by business interests and the real estate sector) we, the technical staff, had very little say in the process. We were essentially just brought in to rubber-stamp a plan we hadn't even been part

of shaping. What stood out to us was how the SDGs themselves suddenly started being used to justify changes to the Master Plan. It's all about optics - seeing the pretty little icons, the colourful graphics, the neat little numbers, and claiming that a given policy aligns with them, even when there's no evidence it'll actually achieve those goals. The SDGs just became a symbol, detached from real impact.

(translated from Portuguese)

Even where SDG monitoring is sophisticated and well-resourced, implementation remains the biggest challenge. This limited implementation is due to the complexity and scale of urban issues; technocratic planning approaches with limited dialogue with grassroots groups; and local political dynamics that hinder technically-sound strategies. The municipality in question where the interviewee works, is divided into smaller local authorities, which have a high degree of autonomy. According to the interviewee, these structures [the local authorities], are very necessary because the city cannot be managed in a completely centralised manner. 'It's impossible!' But they are very exposed to local politics and dynamics, and local businesses et cetera that make the implementation of specific projects and programmes more difficult.

When there is agreement regarding the need for intervention (for example in relation to inequality) there may remain disagreement about how to address it, with some actors showing indifference due to vested interests. Nonetheless, the consensus suggests that reducing inequality is essential for sustainable urban development.

In another city the mayor is required to produce an overview of quantifiable metrics for assessment of their goals, within 90 days of taking office. This structured approach to the evaluation of policy progress could be explicitly linked to the SDGs, but at present is not. An interviewee from an alternative city saw metrics as being significant for promotional tools for the city rather than actual monitoring of policy, with technical staff required to gather data, whose accuracy politicians are unconcerned about. The department where the interviewee works was originally designed as an independent public agency but has become heavily politicised in recent years, with encroaching political oversight and agency leading to limited accuracy in results and implementation.

Colombia

For a major city in Colombia, the SDGs, particularly SDG 11, became a central framework in its territorial planning. The interviewee emphasised that SDGs align with Latin America’s pressing needs (e.g., poverty eradication, zero hunger, climate action), making them a natural fit for local policy. The city’s Masterplan explicitly links its 7 strategic objectives to the SDGs, ensuring alignment with global agendas while addressing local challenges. The interviewee also explained that the indicators help them understand how issues are being measured:

The SDGs give us the opportunity to work, for example, with other countries to see how things are being done, how the indicators are being created, how to standardize the way we measure them. The problems or objectives that the SDGs set out are objectives that are true for all of Latin America. ... That’s like the first perception I have. So, we made a direct association, almost like we have 7 objectives in our territorial planning plan.

(translated from Spanish)

The interviewee explained that the SDGs have been used to legitimise the establishment of an ‘environmental border’ to contain urban expansion into rural/ecological zones and limit the city’s ecological footprint, despite pressure from real estate interests.

The SDGs have been incorporated into the municipality’s planning framework, which has enabled the municipality to increase density rules in new high-capacity transport corridors; create multifunctional hubs co-locating social services to reduce care burdens on women; and create tools for land value capture.

A robust tracking system has been created to link the masterplan objectives to SDG-aligned indicators (e.g., green space per capita, public transport access), in a well-resourced multidisciplinary team equipped to monitor the SDGs and advise other departments.

Their previous masterplan was in place for 21 years. When they started working on the other masterplan, they were at a crucial moment to be able to make the link between the SDGs and the land use plan clear.





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Malaysia

The State has a framework which follows the SDGs and this is filtered down to cities. This means that at the planning level the SDGs are strongly considered; however, since development is conducted by the private sector, green certification becomes extremely important as a way to improve targets and help cities attain more compliance with the SDGs.

So, at the federal level there is a low carbon cities framework that has been put in place by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Sustainability. This is a voluntary framework. So, it is no doubt more resilient and environmental sustainability focused, but it has filtered very strongly into the local plans that we see.

The interviewee could not answer about monitoring, but when it came to implementation, they explained that most development in Malaysia is in big cities. This means that while they can impose more strict regulations or environmental standards, smaller cities, which need to attract investments, tend to be less demanding when it comes to more sustainable developments. As they put it,

...at the end of the day, everyone's in, you know, in it to do some form of business. So, local authorities generate revenue through planning approval and the more development there is, the more taxes they can collect. There is a bit of pressure, an added pressure too for the smaller ones to attract investment.

Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan has been on a journey of alignment with the SDGs since 2016, when key national reforms focused on sustainable development and economic growth were launched. In 2018, the government approved 16 national SDGs along with indicators to monitor progress. A National Action Strategy for 2017-2021 was created as a roadmap for SDG implementation, and subsequently the country signed a Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework with the UN for 2021-2025. In 2023, Uzbekistan developed a national Development Strategy to 2030, with a commitment to annual evaluations ensuring alignment with UN SDGs, which interviewees consider as indicative of progress.

The sustainability agenda in Uzbekistan is currently moving forward with increasing pace, and I believe that in the next few years we can expect clear and positive progress in this direction.

Recent legislative developments include the protection of drinking water, enhancement of green infrastructure, and preservation of agricultural lands. National urbanization projects focus on affordable housing, sustainable transport, waste management, and climate change adaptation, with greater

public participation in planning. The principles within the SDGs have been co-opted with cultural permutations with particular emphases. This is particularly important in avoiding the erosion of community connections in traditional neighbourhoods through implementing standardised urban design.

While the general principles of SDG 11 and NUA are clear and reasonable, their applicability can differ across national, regional, and local contexts. Each country needs its own internal layers of adaptation suited to different cities, regions, or climate zones.

To monitor progress towards SDG 11, Uzbekistan has identified its own national indicators, including access to public transport and economic losses from natural disasters. However, challenges remain, including the absence of a unified data system and the need for reliable, accessible data infrastructure. While the indicators and most initiatives come from government levels, feedback from ground-level reports and expert consultations are also integrated into policy development. International organizations like the World Bank and Asian Development Bank promote SDG principles, though challenges arise when global concepts conflict with national norms, as seen in urban development projects.



Indonesia

In Indonesia the SDGs are seen as one of the most important agreements. Indonesia has a national level plan, the Indonesia Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (IBSAP), which controls how development complies with national resources like biodiversity and natural resources, aligned with the SDGs.

Why, because by following the terms and conditions of this agreement, we are trying to reform our planning system systematically from the top level to the local level, especially by adding strategic environmental assessment.... When we start a city plan now (for every 20 years) we revise it by conducting an Environmental Impact Assessment study first, in which the indicators of environmental impact assessment follows those agreed or arranged by the SDGs agreement.

This approach to detailed engagement with the SDGs can be seen in a recent change in responsibility, with one minister now having oversight of all SDGs. This is also the case for economic strategy, with all areas now required to have Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) that explain the logic for granting or refusal of land use rights and building permits. However, there are examples where this hasn't happened, such as the lack of an EIA for moving the capital city to Borneo Island.

Interest in sustainability goes beyond the SDGs (though they remain relevant), for example interest in the NUA or the Sustainable City Index (which uses the SDG indicators). Indonesia wants to use the Index to comply with SDGs, in part because the SDGs are important for international investment, national investment and corporate governance (company shares are published with SDG compliance details).

There are several important agreements. The government has been interested in the NUA for a couple of years now, the World Bank team is producing a draught of how the National Urban Policy can relate to the NUA.

The growing significance of sustainability is permeating planning education, with planning professionals now needing to have sustainability training, and the Association of Schools of Planning in Indonesia (ASPI) including SDGs in the curricula.

Whilst the SDGs were all considered relevant (in particular SDGs 1-4 and 11), there was acknowledgement of weaker progress for some SDGs, such as water and sanitation, particularly outside Java Island. Yet, there was also recognition that the SDGs missed other key issues, such as local culture.

Sometimes development needs to go against local culture, for example in the far east of Indonesia (Papua), where people perceive that the government is going against local culture.



USA – Smaller city in north

Many of the SDG issues are framed around the developing world, but the interviewee felt this doesn't reflect the issues in their city. They noted that whilst an SDG target may have been met, this doesn't mean that there aren't problems (e.g. they do need to clean the river up, but everyone has access to clean water so they meet the SDG).

There is connection to the Paris Climate Agreement in the work that the local government is doing. Every new building has to be certified as 'green', and there are Environmental Policies and Transport Policies which seem to correspond to the Paris Agreement. However,

I don't know that I can draw direct causal link. As polarised as we are in the US today, politically when you have something like the Paris Climate Agreement it becomes a kind of litmus test for the Democratic Party voters and elected officials and controversial for their Republican counterparts.

There is a consensus between planners and politicians about urbanism with sustainable growth, so there is little debate about the principles (e.g. enhancing walkability). The NUA is more significant in the contexts that the interviewee was familiar with. This has followed retrofitting suburbia (land values have risen significantly, then

introducing public transportation, there is now a lot of interest in how to convert land into 'highest and best use') and transit oriented urbanism (for example a new refurb development at greater density that is linked to a Bus Rapid Transit line that will connect the metro and downtown).

Historically planning has been devolved to the county / lowest tier, but now migration is more frequent, some states (bi-partisan level) have sought to bring down the cost of housing across the state (because development was widely uneven) 'no one can shirk the responsibility towards providing for housing for the workforce.' This occurs across the culture wars distinctions.

The interviewee felt that planners share ideas directly across the world, through things like Urbanist Twitter / Urbanist Threads and local/national non-profits (e.g., Strong Towns). The APA does provide information each week, and there are national conferences which helpfully disseminate information. Certified planners are also required to do CPD, however there is little direct information from the major international organisations for practicing planners.

Mediterranean country

Most regulations and planning culture come from the European Union or funders in Europe. There is a historic colonial legacy which underpins some planning practice, but planners often engage with others within the EU (both practically and in legislation), which leads to sharing lessons. The country only rarely signs other international agreements, but they follow European law.

There is nothing binding on planners or governments to these international networks, so it's very difficult to get information and use it consistently.

I've never heard of a politician refer to the SDGs. I'm not sure if they know that they exist. Which is alarming. But that's the reality of the situation and that's partly why we are where we are.

The SDGs are considered normal 'good practice' and as such don't directly shape how planners act, though they do include many of the principles in their practice and through their influence to shape policy.

I don't feel like the development goals as they are offer anything substantial to a planner and they don't offer something that I shouldn't already know. As a planner, you know, UN or not. So those are kind of the goals and principles that as planners, we should adhere to anyway. Whether they come from the UN or whether they come from somewhere else.

We try to follow them from, you know, each of us from our capacity as a planner, as a decision maker, as a kind of policy development policy expert. However, we're not required to do so.

The inclusion of SDGs occurs through planners shaping policy rather than national consensus. However, the interviewee also felt that the EU tended to direct national policy, in essence because of a lack of resources at the national scale to create policy. Yet, these goals were only embedded in practice if a national politician really cared:

We just follow whichever is statutory is because we don't have the resources to proactively seek those you know pieces of policy and make them part of our national agenda. So, they kind of all fall into our laps and we are required to then respond to them and then they tend to become national policy.

Someone needs to make them a priority. We are bound by political decisions, so if it doesn't come from a political level then it's very difficult for us to make them a priority. You know, ahead of everything that we have on our plate and we need to deliver on a national level. So, you know if our Minister doesn't think that something is important, it's very difficult for us.

There are a million things that we should be taking into account, but we're just not because again, we don't have the resources to do so. So, it doesn't become a priority. Maybe some new methods need to be evaluated to actually incentivise countries to make those things a priority.

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA)

A data collection infrastructure is in place in KSA, with observatories collecting information across the country. UN Habitat also has a presence in the country and has been involved in various processes of reflection and data gathering in relation to planning and development.

There is attention to the ranking of KSA in terms of SDG progress. There has been a recent ‘slip back’ with KSA progressing in the ‘SDG ladder’ until 2024, when they fell from 94th in the world for SDG progress to 104th. A motivation to respond to global agendas comes from this. The KSA has asked UN Habitat to come with a mitigation plan across all ministries to improve performance against the SDGs and ‘definitely one of them is Goal 11’. But there is also some reticence to share data that might put progress being made in a less positive light and affect rankings of the country and cities within it.

Most of the development and planning agenda has been about meeting domestic needs. But there is also attention to efforts to tailor global agendas to the context of what is happening in the KSA and wider Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and African regions e.g. getting attention to desertification on to the global agenda. Also, in the context of renewable energy and how KSA will deal with their image on the renewable energy side when it comes to the production of oil, since they are one of the biggest producers.

The role of individuals in disseminating Global Principles was also noted as in the following quote:

Change is coming, from the people who left this country, who went to study abroad and they came back. They are not happy at all with the way the cities and their country is developing . And they are now everywhere in the country. And they put a lot of pressure on the decision makers to change. This is, I believe, the core reason behind the changes that are here.





Ghana

Urbanisation is growing rapidly across the African continent which is a very young continent. Ghana reflects this with a need for better planning to accommodate the growing population and address issues like transportation, housing, jobs, food security, improved environmental quality, sanitation, water supply and other amenities. Migration to the urban centres continues to be a critical trend that development actors have to grapple with. The aspiration is to plan towards dealing with current issues, but also the anticipated and projected ones. As well as the global agenda and the SDGs there is also the African Union agenda. The rate of urbanisation meant that there was considerable matching of issues between the planning in Ghana and Africa and all the aspirations which are captured under the SDGs.

Planning in Ghana itself was described as being ‘largely rooted in the colonial heritage’, however, the legislative environment was also shaped by the interface between this and the local context, both in historical terms and more recent history.

Post independence, the evolution of the political space has tended to influence planning. As democracy has become more rooted in the country, there has been a consensus that with an increasingly stable democracy there is a need for decentralisation. There have been more conscious efforts to take planning closer to the people, transfer the planning regime to the local authorities,

and give them more powers to determine what is good for the community. As a result, the interviewee commented that ‘we can now say that planning is a much more decentralised enterprise. Moving away from what used to be the Planning Ordinance of 1948.’ There are now two principal pieces of legislation, the Local Governance Act of 2016 and the Land Use and Spatial Planning Act of 2016 and these ‘are very much intentional about decentralising planning’ with ‘Considerable emphasis on [a] participatory approach.’

The interviewee highlighted two issues that need to be considered surrounding the SDGs and global commitments – awareness, and what concrete steps are being rolled out to respond to them. It was noted that the drivers for greater commitment towards achieving more inclusive and safe urban space ‘may not necessarily be solely attributed to the SDGs.’ Their contribution is critical, but the interviewee commented that ‘the drivers are SDGs plus different adaptation considerations’. Other important drivers in Ghana include the Ghana Urban Forum. This is a high-level forum organised by the Ministry of Local Government, which is essentially responsible for planning. This gathers input in terms of what is required to meet the Urban Agenda and what is required to drive towards the SDGs. The government has been ‘pretty consistent for the past eight years or so’ on this and ‘every two years there is this critical

high-level commitment of the government towards bringing home the SDGs beyond the high level’. There are also domestic investment initiatives such as the Zongo Development Fund which was created to address the needs of the Zongo community in Ghana including in deprived urban communities (Zongo communities are poor and deprived neighbourhoods, often occupied by migrants).

Inclusive and safe cities are also being promoted through the government’s commitment to providing affordable housing. This has seen programmes aimed at easing the housing situation ‘of the very poor people in urban areas’ and there have been some successes though ‘the cost of housing delivery often means that they’re largely priced out to a considerable extent.’ As a result ‘the original beneficiaries in mind may not necessarily benefit from it’. In the past the interviewee noted that development in urban growth was ‘always going ahead of planning and one of the reasons was lack of funding to even roll out some of the most basic finances of a planning entity’. There is now the new planning legislation mentioned earlier and funding from the Ghana Infrastructure Investment Fund to strengthen planning activities across the various District Municipal and Metropolitan Assemblies.

There is also a connection through UN representation in Ghana which works, for example, through the UN-Habitat office in Ghana, together with the National Development Planning Commission to monitor Ghana’s

performance on the 17 SDGs and in their various targets and indicators. The latter office reports directly to the President. This demonstrates a commitment to the SDGs and that some of these things are beginning to rise in importance with dedicated funding – for example, targeted regeneration for the poorest parts of the cities. A new Multidimensional Poverty Index has also been launched.

The process of reforming planning and development is a long term one. For example, since 1999 Ghana has conducted its own diagnostic analysis to see what needed to be done differently to improve the planning and land administration systems. The interviewee commented – ‘So it is Ghana’s own ingenuity to trigger some of these changes’.

International agencies have also been in the background such as the World Bank and other development partners such as the Department for International Development (DFID) in the UK, and the Canadian foreign aid agency. This kind of partnership was funding driven because programmes needed to be financed. There are instances where changes were made in direct response to the global agenda positioning of these kinds of development partners. Country level led initiatives have to partner with global level entities to help with their implementation, though the initial positioning and prescription of what action to take originated in the country.

On the latter point, another dynamic that should not be overlooked is that of citizen pressure. The interviewee thus commented that another reason for change is ‘the growing enlightenment and awareness of citizens in the political landscape and the increasing opportunities to demand downward social accountability’. Here it was suggested that ‘in listening to the people’ the state will ‘tailor interventions to address their challenges, and of course, if in the process it aligns with existing global commitments and all that is fine.’ The interviewee also reflected

that the process ‘is almost like a three-way sort of citizen driven national level initiatives, but also global level influence’. When considering the global agenda, the interviewee remarked too that ‘if you look at the targets, the indicators... these are things every rational person who is in that sort of situation would agitate for’. A citizen may have ‘demanded improved services because he read a global [policy] maybe yes, but [this may also be] a natural rational response’ though we should not ‘understate the influence of these global level’.



Armenia

In Armenia, the SDGs, particularly SDG 11, and the NUA have had only limited influence on national planning and development practice. While Armenia has formally endorsed international sustainability agendas, these commitments are not systematically reflected in public policy or institutional behaviour. Responsibility for urban development is fragmented across various ministries and agencies, and although individual departments may address related topics, such as energy efficiency, climate adaptation, or green procurement, these are rarely framed explicitly in relation to SDG 11 or the NUA.

The Committee on Urban Development, Ministry of Territorial Administration, and Ministry of Finance each engage with parts of the agenda, often in response to requirements from international partners such as the World Bank or the IMF. However, there is no coordinated national vision, no common narrative that aligns sectoral actions with the country's international obligations. Initiatives are often perceived as technical or administrative tasks, disconnected from broader development goals or public expectations. This lack of integration extends to the planning system itself, where reforms or new standards are seldom justified in terms of global sustainability frameworks. Urban planning continues to operate on the basis of internal policy logic rather than global commitments.

We don't have a universal and generic high-level picture about what, as a country, we have promised to our society and to the international community... There is no holistic picture of where we are going, what we want to achieve, where we are successful, where we lag behind.

A major barrier to implementation is the general lack of awareness and understanding of these agendas among key stakeholders. Government officials, private sector actors, and even NGOs often do not fully grasp the content or strategic relevance of SDGs. Many perceive sustainability as a technical or donor-driven issue, not as a framework for development planning or investment. In this context, global goals are often treated as abstract obligations rather than practical tools. There is also no active public communication from the government to explain how international commitments connect to national priorities, urban development programmes, or local benefits.

I don't blame the United Nations for not setting the tone, but they can do much more. The same goes for national agencies and policymakers - the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of Environment, the Committee on Urban Development. The same for well-known scientists, and even politicians. Unfortunately, it's just not on the agenda of stakeholders. Not yet.

Nevertheless, one of the most promising developments in recent years has come from the private sector, particularly commercial banks and investment institutions. Motivated by the global rise of ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) standards, financial actors in Armenia have started exploring how sustainability can be incorporated into their risk frameworks and lending strategies. This shift offers an opportunity to build momentum for more sustainable urban development, provided the link to SDG 11 is made explicit and supported by regulation and incentives. However, awareness among other segments of the private sector, such as architecture, construction, and engineering, remains low, and there is a general lack of professional education and dialogue around sustainability standards.

Panel discussion at the National
Planning Conference, 2025

At the RTPI National Planning Conference in October 2025, the authors of this report presented draft findings and held a panel discussion with the presidents of the APA, IPI and RTPI.

This session allowed each leader to provide reflections from their region. The panellists were asked two key questions:

- 1. Do you have any reflections from your own regions?
- 2. Looking forward, how can we best ensure the application of SDG 11 by planners?



United States of America

The president of the APA noted that sustainability is a key component of what the APA promotes and educates on, and it is considered a key element of what they deem ‘good planning’. It was noted that the current political environment under Donald Trump means that reference to sustainability itself has become very challenging. However, whilst they cannot explicitly reference SDG 11, the principles of the goal are still what planners in America strive for:

We’re in an interesting political environment in that being able to say even some of these things right now with the current administration is not possible. However, these principles that create safe, inclusive, resilient communities are what we all strive for.

Drawing on her experience as the Planning Director of Greensboro, North Carolina, the president of the APA reflected on the impact of Hurricane Helene, a devastating cyclone that hit the Southeastern United States in late September 2024. She noted how the communities and settlements in North Carolina are beginning to recover and rebuild, and they are implicitly striving towards the principles of SDG 11.

Whilst the communities are not directly referring to the global framework of the SDGs, they are seeking to embed a resilience against future natural disasters and to create successful cities for the future.

So, the concepts and the goals themselves are what we as planners have promoted, and work with our communities to achieve. It’s recognizing them as part of the wider global framework, is perhaps where the disconnect is.

When asked about how we can best ensure the application of SDG 11 by planners in the future, the president commented that her great hope is in the future generations of planners. She observed that planning students in America are passionate about sustainability, and she hopes they have the ability to change the political needle so that we focus on what is good for communities. She noted that these students are well educated in sustainable planning, and how to apply it in a more explicit and direct way.

Ireland

The president of the IPI commented that whilst reference to the SDGs in Irish planning policy is mostly implicit rather than explicit, it remains a core part of what planners do. In 2000, planning legislation in Ireland was amended to mandate that for a planning permission to be granted, it must be sustainable. He also noted that sustainable development is a key part of what is taught in Irish planning schools. The president noted that there are some instances of explicit reference to the SDGs, including in the national planning framework, as well as several regional economic strategies and development plans. However, where the SDGs are explicitly referenced, it is done so in a generic ‘cookie cutter’ or ‘tick box’ way.

If we’re going to properly use the same language and metrics for sustainability globally, then we need the same sustainability goals and tests. As planners we understand the concept of sustainability and we really understand how to do it, but we actually aren’t looking at it. If we’re going to have a common language across all jurisdictions, both in the developing and developed world, we need to share what it is that’s important in terms of the goals and how to measure them.

When asked about how we can best ensure the application of SDG 11 by planners in the future, the president noted that localisation is key, alongside empowering local communities to understand the benefit of the SDGs. He specified that if the goals are to become a common language for planners, then a toolkit is needed which shows them how to apply them in a meaningful way rather than a box-ticking exercise. He noted that planning institutes have a key role to play in this process, both in creating learning resources but also recognising and rewarding examples of best practice. He agreed with the notion that planning students are well versed in sustainable development, and they provide a refreshing viewpoint from which we can all learn.

We have to show planners how to practically implement the goals. When you champion the goals and make a feature out of them, it makes them easy for planners to engage with.

UK

The president of the RTPI noted that the institute has a strong alignment with the SDGs, and is very much involved with the UN-Habitat. However, she also noted that the SDGs are not being implemented evenly across the four nations of England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. For example, whilst Scotland makes explicit reference to the SDGs in their National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4), the English National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) makes only implicit reference to the principles of SDG 11. There are examples of local authorities within England that are making positive progress in terms of explicit reference to the SDGs in their planning frameworks, and these include Bristol City Council and Southend on Sea.

The president also noted that the RTPI’s learning module on SDG 11 is currently being refreshed, with new content to be made available in 2026.

When asked about how we can best ensure the application of SDG 11 by planners in the future, the president noted that the answer is in localisation and taking it back to grass roots empowerment of communities. She stated that the role of the RTPI is to give their members the knowledge and resources to apply the SDGs, for example through their online learning module. Data collection is also important and needs to be improved in collaboration with the government.

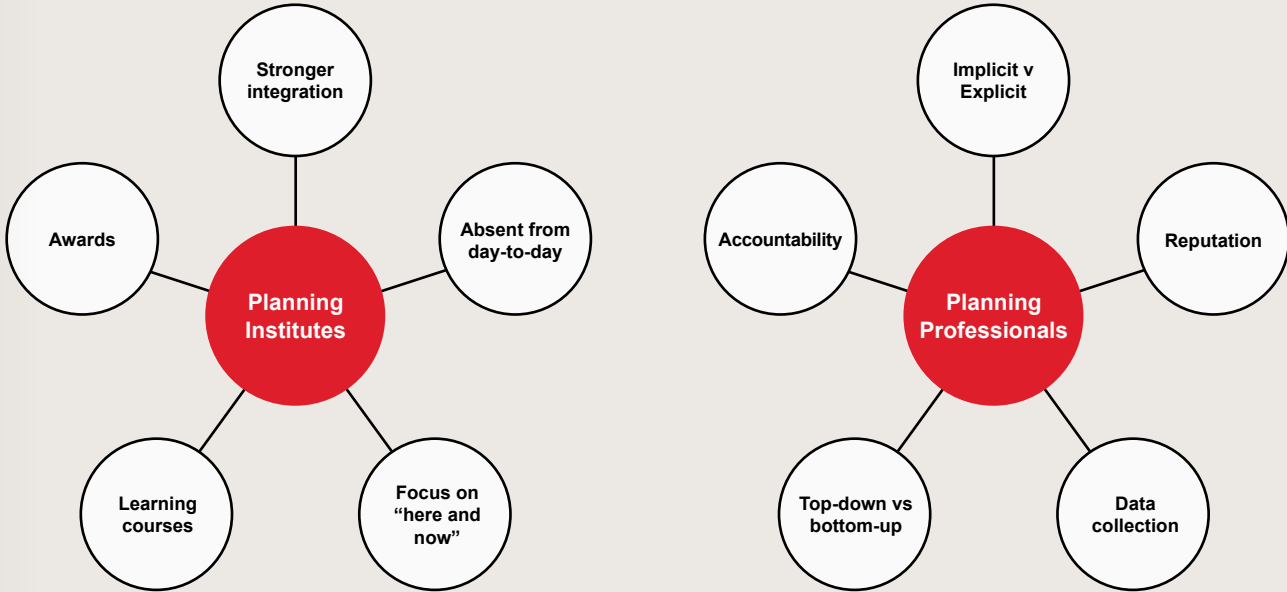
Section 6

Conclusion

The findings of this report provide a rich snapshot of the awareness of and response to SDG 11 in different countries and planning systems.

A key message to emerge from the various components of the project which echoes themes in the literature review and other studies, is that the application of global goals and principles in different settings and planning systems is a very context-dependent and varied process.

The findings also confirm the value of exploring and interpreting the influence of the global agenda for planning from an application perspective which allows the subtleties and differences in awareness and response to elements such as the SDGs and NUA in different places to be teased out. The key messages of the research reflect the diversity of experience and practice that the adoption of the application perspective reveals.



Key observations

Key message

1

Implicit application is often the mode of influence of SDG 11 on planning systems and practices

The survey indicated that across the Arup Town Planning network, the level of awareness and understanding of the UN SDGs reflects this variety.

The level of understanding of SDG 11, for example, among town planners was found to be higher in the Africa and Asia offices compared to other regions. Most respondents were familiar with SDG 11 and felt that it was typically implicitly embedded in their daily project work and existing professional codes of conduct rather than being more explicitly applied. The level of explicit response and application was particularly low in North America and London. Central and local government clients tended to incorporate more application of SDG 11 in their project work through practices and outcomes, though this is mainly implicit application. Conversely, private sector client projects showed the highest rate of non-application. This point was supported by a number of interviewees who noted that central and local government departments are often responding to both political pressures and the demands of their constituents.

The theme of implicit application also emerged from the interviews with planning institutes and planners, as well as the panel session at the National Planning Conference 2025. In Australia it seems that, though the SDGs were seen as relevant to planning policy and practice, they have not been explicitly incorporated into national planning policy even if they occasionally influence objectives linked to specific planning initiatives. The PIA has advocated for stronger integration of the SDGs into planning policy, believing it is essential for initiating discussions over quality since their use would compel policymakers to consider local contexts much more rigorously. In Hong Kong the concern with sustainability predates the SDGs and whilst strategies such as the Hong Kong 2030+ have sustainable development as the overarching goal and significantly shape the territory's policy, international agreements and the SDGs are only implicitly applied to policy. It is a similar picture in New Zealand where international agreements and agendas primarily exert influence through indirect incorporation into domestic legislation and frameworks, rather than their formal adoption. Thus, the SDGs

are absent from day-to-day planning work and lack structured application in practice. Whilst they may offer a valuable framework, their adoption without clear implementation pathways risks superficial compliance rather than transformative change.

In the north American context it was noted that many of the SDG issues are framed around the developing world, which can overlook issues facing their city (e.g. they do need to clean the river up, but everyone has access to clean water so they meet the SDG). Interestingly the NUA was seen as more significant in the contexts that the north American interviewee was familiar with, and can be related to issues faced in mature and developed planning contexts – e.g. retrofitting suburbia. The president of the APA also noted that the current political regime in America is a significant hinderance to any explicit application of the SDGs. By contrast in Brazil, it seemed that the SDGs were more important than the NUA. In Malaysia it was commented that the Urban Agenda is much less used (and lesser known) because it does not allow for straightforward operationalisation, like the SDGs.

One reason for implicit rather than explicit application was well captured by a quote from the Mediterranean country:

‘I don’t feel like the development goals as they offer anything substantial to a planner and they don’t offer something that I shouldn’t already know. As a planner, you know, UN or not. So those are kind of the goals and principles that as planners, we should adhere to anyway. Whether they come from the UN or whether they come from somewhere else’.

In essence, one reason for implicit rather than explicit response to the global agenda in some contexts is that the SDGs are considered normal ‘good practice’ and as such don’t directly shape how planners act, even if they do include many of the principles in their practice and through their influence to shape policy. There are also other transnational/supranational settings that can influence planning. Again, in the Mediterranean country it was noted that in this part of the world most regulations and planning culture come from the European Union or funders in Europe and that the country only rarely signs other international agreements, but they follow European law. In contrast, with the elements of the global agenda for planning ‘there is nothing binding on planners or governments to these international networks, so it’s very difficult to get information and use it consistently.’

However, in Indonesia there is recognition that the global agenda for planning goes well beyond the SDGs, with a particular interest in the NUA:

‘There are several important agreements. The government has been interested in the NUA for a couple of years now, the World Bank team is producing a draught of how the National Urban Policy can relate to the NUA’.

Key message

2

Cases of explicit application/linking of the SDGs to spatial development and planning systems also exist

Despite the strong prevalence of implicit application in many global settings, there are also cases where the SDGs and other elements of the global agenda have been more directly incorporated into planning systems and their goals and instruments.

In South Africa, for example, international agreements, particularly the NUA and the SDGs, form an integral part of the country's current spatial development framework. The Integrated Human Settlements Programme aligns national development with the SDGs and the recently adopted first National Spatial Development Framework has a five-year vision extending to 2030 that incorporates both the NUA and SDGs, including specific provisions for local municipalities. In the UK, the Paris Agreement on climate change holds particular significance due to its legally binding nature, but it was suggested that SDG 11 is explicitly embedded in UK planning policy, particularly within devolved administrations – for

example, Scotland's National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) explicitly links its deliverables to SDGs 7, 11, 12, and 13. Yet despite this formal engagement, resourcing constraints, particularly within Local Authorities, pose challenges to effective implementation. This notion was supported by the president of the RTPI who noted that application varies significantly across the regions of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In Ireland, the president of the IPI noted that there are examples of explicit application in national, regional and local policies however they generally follow a generic, 'cookie cutter' approach with little advice on practical application.

In Brazil, the SDGs are widely known and explicitly adopted by local and national governments in planning, particularly in the major metropolitan region where the interviewee was situated. In contrast, the NUA is lesser known, though it is rich in content and progressive in values. It lacks the structured clarity of the SDGs, making it harder for policymakers to apply.

In Colombia there was explicit application as the SDGs, particularly SDG 11, became a central framework for one major city's territorial planning. The SDGs align with Latin America's pressing needs (e.g., poverty eradication, zero hunger, climate action), making them a natural fit for local policy and the interviewee commented that 'The SDGs are, the formal materialization of problems that we all already knew we had and that we knew we had to solve.'

In Malaysia, the State has a framework which follows the SDGs and this is filtered to cities. This means that at planning level the SDGs are strongly considered; however, since development is conducted by the private sector, green credentials certification becomes extremely important as a way to improve targets and help cities attain more compliance with the SDGs.

Indonesia also has a national level plan that controls how development complies with national resources like biodiversity and natural resources, and this is aligned with the SDGs. SDGs on poverty, infrastructure and innovation (SDGs 1-4) are the most important for the Indonesian Government, and then 11 for planning (sustainable cities).

These findings indicate that developing countries are often more reliant on the SDGs to inform their planning policies and therefore explicit application is more common. Some emerging nations do not yet have mature planning systems and are more reliant on SDGs to provide a framework of purpose. There is therefore a global need to support the use of SDG11, to provide a common framework and direction for everyone, particularly those countries without national frameworks and who rely on it more for developing policy.

Key message 3

Capacity for data collection and monitoring is strong in many places but does not always translate into application on the ground

In some cases, effort has been put into institutionalising the SDGs and creating infrastructure and teams for monitoring progress on SDG-related targets.

However, even where SDG monitoring is sophisticated and well-resourced, implementation remains the biggest challenge.

As part of implementing SDG 11, Uzbekistan has identified 11 national indicators to monitor progress toward creating sustainable cities and communities. They include: access to public transport, the share of the urban population living in inadequate housing, economic losses from natural disasters as a percentage of GDP, budget allocations for preserving cultural and natural heritage, and others. Detailed data on these indicators is provided by The Statistics Agency under the President of Uzbekistan.

In the KSA, monitoring is following all the guidelines of the Global Urban Monitoring Framework related to the NUA and SDG 11 – e.g. the 78 targets of the UMF of this urban monitoring framework and trying to locate them by district and by governorate. But it was suggested that while much investment has been made to improve things ‘on the ground’ in cities many of the targets being pursued ‘are not really being very much linked to the SDGs targets, they are not really growing in the same direction.’ In South Africa, while national government departments must demonstrate SDG implementation in their annual performance plans, there are no formal incentive mechanisms to encourage their use.

In Colombia, a robust tracking system has been created to link the masterplan objectives to SDG-aligned indicators (e.g., green space per capita, public transport access).

Key message 4

Engagement with the SDGs and NUA can be driven by different motivations including concerns with image and reputation

According to one of the Brazilian interviewees, the SDGs have started to gain more prominence over the last three years, but primarily as a rhetorical tool, used to legitimise decisions that have already been made.

This can lead to superficial application and the use of SDGs as promotional tools rather than instruments for monitoring or for public policy. They also noted that monitoring and implementation are hindered by a decline in institutional capacity and mismanagement of human resources.

In the KSA, the motivation to improve performance against the benchmark of the SDGs has emerged as monitoring data suggests a slipping back in league tables on SDG realisation, following the publication of the results for 2024. Also, in the context of renewable energy and ‘how Saudi Arabia will deal with

their image on the renewable energy side when it comes to the production of oil, since they are one of the biggest producers’.

Conversely, in America, the current political regime has become a driver for avoiding explicit reference to the SDGs and sustainability.

Key message

5

Application can reflect a combination of top down and domestic bottom up and horizontal approaches

Another finding of the research is that the motivation for considering global goals and agendas can vary from place to place and be driven both by top down and bottom-up dynamics, or a combination of these.

Sometimes global planning goals such as SDG 11 and those contained in the NUA are welcomed as a way of reinforcing domestic planning agendas and delivering better planning outcomes on planning issues which had already been identified as requiring action. Sometimes the adherence to global goals is also driven by other factors. In one case it seems that the use of SDGs was a kind of badging exercise designed to rhetorically promote the measures being taken by a particular city. Another motivation for taking elements of the global agenda seriously was a concern with global appearances and how a particular country's performance on sustainability would be viewed externally.

On a national level the decision-making process in Uzbekistan's urban and environmental planning, for example,

can be described as a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches. Different international institutions such as the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, EBRD and others promote the use of core principles from SDG 11 and NUA. However, their projects sometimes face serious challenges on the ground, as some concepts are developed without fully considering the country's legal norms and approved planning regulations. One interviewee noted that:

'While the general principles of SDG 11 and NUA are clear and reasonable, their applicability can differ across national, regional, and local contexts. Each country needs its own internal layers of adaptation suited to different cities, regions, or climate zones'.

In the KSA, the government's Vision 2030 firstly reflected an aspiration to improve living standards for citizens but there were a lot of targets to set the scene globally. One of the responses to the global agenda in the KSA seems to be about tailoring global agendas to the context of what is happening in the KSA and wider region e.g. getting attention for desertification onto the global agenda. The role of individuals in

disseminating global principles was also noted as in the following quote: 'That change is coming from the people who leave or left this country who went to study abroad and they came back. They are not happy at all with the way the cities and their country is happening.'

In Ghana the rate of urbanisation meant that there was considerable matching of issues between planning in Ghana and Africa and all the aspirations which are captured under the SDGs. However, it was noted that the drivers for greater commitment towards achieving more inclusive and safe urban space 'may be not necessarily be solely attributed to the SDGs'. Inclusive and safe cities are also being promoted through the government's commitment to providing affordable housing.

Another dynamic in the Ghanaian case was that of citizen pressure. The interviewee commented that another reason for change is 'the growing enlightenment and awareness of citizens in the political landscape and the increasing opportunities to demand downward social accountability'. The interviewee also reflected that the process 'is almost like a 3-way sort of citizen driven national level initiatives, but also global level influence'. In Colombia there are attempts to combine the SDG framework with grassroots innovation, interdepartmental collaboration, and strict monitoring to ensure accountability.



Section 7

Final Word

Why this is important for planners

This research has explored the application of SDG 11 and the wider global agenda for planning in different countries and planning systems around the globe. It has revealed a diversity of practises and varying levels of awareness and commitment towards application of key elements of the global agenda.

What is clear is that the collection of indicators and more formal means of application are only part of the story when it comes to exploring how global agendas and goals influence planning in any given context. Acknowledging this is important to planners and recognises that the valuable work they do in shaping places and communities. Addressing different development and environmental challenges often transcends what such indicators can capture.

The research has revealed that in some places, whilst there may be broad consistency or even conformity with the goals of the global agenda and its components such as the SDGs, this is not necessarily due to an explicit application of the global agenda or an attempt to follow it. In some cases, existing planning ideas and principles, and existing development and planning challenges, mean that planners and planning systems were already responding to similar themes and objectives as those which are articulated through the global agenda for planning. It is also clear that the application of global objectives takes place through a complicated multilevel and multi

actor process. This can involve some top-down elements deriving from the goal setting and sometimes funding packages of global agencies, domestic processes of planning reflection reform led by national governments, and increasingly, demands from citizens for more sustainable development and planning outcomes such as good quality housing and a clean environment. Acknowledging this is important because planners often sit at the interface or the ‘sharp end’ of such processes as these play out in specific places. As a result, planners need to be given adequate and appropriate capacity and support if they are to deliver the sustainable planning agenda on the ground.

There are also cases where there have been more explicit attempts to link planning reforms and policy to the SDGs and the NUA. This is particularly common in developing countries, including those that do not yet have a mature planning system. Sometimes explicit reference is made to the SDGs in national legislation and planning policy as well as regional, metropolitan and local plans and strategies. Such explicit references are important because they can provide a means of demonstrating the value of planning, in a context where politicians and society are increasingly looking for measurability. Highlighting how planning is helping to deliver positive change against global sustainability goals provides another means of underlining its relevance and legitimacy as a tool for improving the quality of life and places in different global regions.

Regardless of whether it is being applied explicitly or implicitly, the global planning agenda is also important as it provides planners with a framework and a narrative for global best practice sharing. In this regard, the findings suggest that planners would benefit from a stronger toolkit from the institutes and good practice examples to empower them to deliver. Championing the goals and making it easier for planners to engage via a toolkit will help ensure more sustainable development and planning.

Taking into account the international dimensions of planning and the wider planning goals promoted by SDG 11 and agreements such as the NUA also matters for the future development of the planning profession. Interestingly, a common point of agreement in the panel discussion at the National Planning Conference 2025 was that planning students and the future generations of planners have great potential to implement SDG 11. They were seen to have an excellent understanding of the true meaning of sustainable planning, and the ability to be passionate advocates of the SDGs in their careers. By embedding the language of SDG 11 into our planning systems now, there is an opportunity to resonate more with younger generations and potentially attract them to the profession.

Finally, the findings of the research are important to planners as they reveal that whilst much emphasis in the SDG agenda has been placed on the collection of indicators, it is not always clear that even a well-developed data capacity and indicator collection infrastructure will necessarily lead to stronger application on the ground. Even where SDG

monitoring is sophisticated and well-resourced, implementation remains the biggest challenge. No matter how sophisticated and potentially useful (particularly in light of recent discussions to remove certain indicators from the global SDG database), data collection in itself does not constitute delivery of the global sustainability agenda. Converting knowledge of conditions into action to improve them and work towards global urban sustainability goals also requires attention to be paid to the capacity and position of planning and planners to deliver change on the ground. This final finding once again reinforces the value of adopting an application perspective which explores the performance of the ideas and policy goals articulated by the global agenda as well as collecting indicators which seek to measure conformance with this agenda. Understanding what is really happening and supporting the role of planners and planning in delivering the global sustainability agenda will require more in depth and qualitative and intensive studies to complement the wider and more extensive data collection taking place as part of the formal structures of SDG monitoring and initiatives being undertaken by UN agencies.



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