

**Foundation pour un Centre pour le Developpement Socio-Eco-Nomique  
(Centre for Socio-Eco-Nomic Development, CSEND), Geneva**

ECOSOC accredited with special consultative status to the United Nations<sup>1</sup>

**Statement Submitted by CSEND<sup>1</sup>**

**“AGEING & DIGITAL LITERACY IN CITIES - What Do We Know  
from VLRs Regarding SDG 11 and SDG 3 Implementation?”**

**At the occasion of the UNECE Ministerial Meeting on Urban Development, Housing and  
Land Management and the eighty-second session of the Committee on Urban Development,  
Housing and Land Management at the Palais des Nations in Geneva, Switzerland,  
On 6-8 October 2021.**

**Theme of the Ministerial Meeting:**

**“Affordable, adequate, and resilient housing in liveable cities, including cities which face  
extreme weather conditions”**

When measuring the gaps regarding transition to sustainable development, it is of key importance to focus on SDG #11 in order to specifically assess development made at the sub-national level. Such a bottom up assessment complements the top down national policy direction and reveals the opportunities and challenges in managing a subnational territory.

Affordable, adequate and climate resilient housing is an integral part of the 2030 Agenda and its Target 11.1, states “By 2030, ensuring access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums”. Digitalisation and digital access are critical in public communication and for on-going participation of the citizens in decision making that affect the daily lives of its residents, especially the older persons who are facing an increasing number of impediments to have their voices heard.

A roadmap for implementing the SDG 11 is highlighted by the fact that two targets outline the means of implementation, i.e., Target 11.A and Target 11.B.

Target 11.A. Support positive economic, social and environmental links between urban, peri-urban and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning

Target 11.B. By 2020, substantially increase the number of cities and human

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<sup>1</sup> Prof Lichia Yiu, President, CSEND, Geneva & Prof. Raymond Saner, Director, DiplomacyDialogue/CSEND, Geneva;, 1

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.

Localising these two targets will require policy coherence with the other SDGs and coordinated effort in supporting the participation and voices of *all* stakeholders.

### **Urbanisation and Leaving No One Behind**

Since 2007, more than half of the world's population live in cities, and this share is projected to rise to 60 per cent by 2030.<sup>2</sup> The absolute number of people living in slums or informal settlements grew to over 1 billion and an estimated 3 billion people will require adequate and affordable housing by 2030 around the world.

50 million people in the UNECE region live in inadequate housing (Economic Commission for Europe, 2021)<sup>3</sup>. This demand for affordable, adequate and resilient housing is relatively small compared to Eastern and South-Eastern Asia (370 Mio), Sub-Saharan Africa (238 Mio), and Central and Southern Asia (227 Mio). Nevertheless, persistent shortages of affordable, adequate and resilient housing combined with ageing population will amplify existing challenges concerning the wellbeing, social inclusion and access to public services for all.

The necessity for a transition to smart and sustainable cities, i.e., digital technology enabled city governance, is urgently needed for “Build Forward Better” in the post-COVID-19 pandemic time as declared by the UNECE. Artificial intelligence and ICT technology can increase resource efficiency and effective allocation required for city planning, management and provision of public services. The “hyper” digitalised cities demand social and institutional innovation to prevent unintended exclusion and discrimination and to enable effective participation and meaningful inclusion for all members.

Technology and evidence-based decision making can improve policy performance and daily

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<sup>2</sup> According to UN Statistic Commission, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2019/goal-11/>

<sup>3</sup> Regional Policy Brief on Building Urban Economic, Resilience during and after COVID-19 in the UNECE Region (Note by Secretariat). <https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/ECE%20HBP%202021%20INF.5%20Regional%20Policy%20Brief.pdf>

lives of the citizens. However, the risks of leaving behind older persons, poor people, women and other groups marginalised because of their lack of digital access and literacy is high if no proactive corrective measures are put in place. A policy brief on “Ageing in the Digital Area” by the UNECE Population Unit provided an excellent analysis and policy recommendations of safeguarding digital inclusion and access.<sup>4</sup> An excellent checklist to assess the maturity of UNECE countries or cities in safeguarding the digital rights of the older persons is available in this UNECE Policy Brief on ageing.

### **Aim of the CSEND Statement**

CSEND’s statement intends to raise two basic questions:

- Whether the rights, wellbeing and access to digital based resources of older persons are sufficiently addressed by the existing digital policies of the national and subnational administrative units?
- Whether related monitoring is put in place to oversee the relevance and impact of the digital policies at the time of transiting to smart and resilient cities?

### **Links between SDG 11 and SDG 3: A Quick Scan**

According to a brief analysis of the 2021 HLPF VNR sessions by the Earth Negotiation Bulletin (ENB), participants paid particular attention to three major issues. One of these issues is related to the digital divide. According to the ENB report, “the digital divide, particularly with regard to education (is important), as only those with internet access were able to continue their schooling during pandemic-related school closures”.<sup>5</sup>

It is disheartening to note that the same divide can be observed with regard to public health information and services for older persons. Only those with internet access were able to acquire COVID-19 related information even though health information is critical to the survival and health of the older persons. To meet the goal of SDG 3, i.e., good health and wellbeing for all, digital access and inclusion of all marginal groups, especially the older persons, need to be made a priority when implementing SDGs.

The Digital Divide has affected many older persons in the UNECE regions, especially those who are poor or suffer from cognitive impairment. Yet, the lack of access to the digital world has

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<sup>4</sup> [https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/PB26-ECE-WG.1-38\\_0.pdf](https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/PB26-ECE-WG.1-38_0.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> HLPF Discusses 42 VNRs, Stumbling Blocks to 2030 Agenda (2021) <https://sdg.iisd.org/news/hlpf-discusses-42-3-vnrs-stumbling-blocks-to-2030-agenda/>

implications for different aspects of life and daily functioning of the older persons, from social engagement to personal functionality essential for healthy and active ageing.

A 20 years gap exists in Europe between average life expectancy and average healthy life expectancy (European Handbook for SDG Voluntary Local Reviews, 2020)<sup>6</sup>. With many UNECE countries entered Ageing Society with 16% or 17% of the population older than 65 years old of age, this gap between average life expectancy and average healthy life expectancy needs to be one of the top policy priority concerns. Promotion of healthy and active ageing needs to include digital access and digital literacy of the older persons for obvious reasons.

Municipalities are the most suitable actors to bridge the digital divide, implementing local initiatives to increase digital literacy and participation, especially in certain geographic areas targeting vulnerable groups (Kiss, 2017)<sup>7</sup>. Digital literacy: “refers to the skills required to achieve digital competence, the confident and critical use of information and communication technology (ICT) for *work, leisure, learning and communication*. Digital literacy is underpinned by basic technical use of computers and the Internet” (European Handbook for SDG Voluntary Local Reviews, 2020. p. 265; italic added).

### **Voluntary Local Review 2021 & Tracking Progress**

Cities, regions and provinces are now also partaking in the voluntary review process during the annual HLPF meetings in July at the UN headquarters. These subnational administrative units report on their own implementation and monitor the progress of the SDGs through Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs). These VLR reports are available at the UN DESA SDG Knowledge Platforms.<sup>8</sup>

According to the UN-Habitat, the global movement towards Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) is growing exponentially. Cities, local and regional governments worldwide are using VLRs to track and report on SDG progress. UN-Habitat views VLRs as powerful accelerators of the process of localizing the Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>9</sup> Through periodic reviews and peer-to-peer learning, it can be expected that progress in implementing SDGs in general and SDG 11

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<sup>6</sup> European handbook for sdg voluntary local reviews  
[https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC118682#:~:text=The%20European%20Handbook%20for%20SDG,Voluntary%20Local%20Reviews%20\(VLRs\).](https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC118682#:~:text=The%20European%20Handbook%20for%20SDG,Voluntary%20Local%20Reviews%20(VLRs).)

<sup>7</sup> Kiss, Monika. 2017. “Digital Skills in the EU Labour Market.” <https://doi.org/10.2861/451320>.

<sup>8</sup> Voluntary Local Reviews, <https://sdgs.un.org/topics/voluntary-local-reviews>

<sup>9</sup> VOLUNTARY LOCAL REVIEWS, <https://unhabitat.org/topics/voluntary-local-reviews>

can be accelerated by the participating cities and provinces.

Since our last report on the VLRs that were made available during the 80th session of the Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management (2019), the number of cities and regions making their respective VLRs public has increased visibly. The VLRs documented on the UNDESA SDG Knowledge Hub portal have reached 15 in 2020 and 2021 respectively from the low number of 2 (2016) and 5 (2017). However, not all of the VLRs in 2019 were documented on the UN DESA repository.

An analysis was carried out by CSEND in August this year focusing on the specific targets related to digital provisions for the older persons, i.e., SDG Target 11.1 and SDG 11.A. The Table Below presents the findings of this mapping analysis based on the data included in the VLRs presented by the UNECE cities. This group of cities included: Asker Municipality (Norway); Gladsaxe Municipality (Denmark); Helsingborg City, Malmö City and Stockholm City (Sweden); Helsinki (Finland).

### **Mapping the digital inclusion of the older persons in Some UNECE cities**

“Digitalisation and smart use of technology in societal development will be an important frame for facilitating steps of change in (the) transformation process (Asker Commune, Norway, 2021, VLR p.44).

Digitalisation has become the backbone infrastructure for implementing the triple transformations called for by the 2030 Agenda. One of the ways to help countries and cities make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable *for all* (SDG 11) is to support an inclusive and just digital transition. While recognising that investment needed for increasing the broadband coverage and other land-based infrastructure will be substantial and could go beyond the means available to many cities and human settlements in rural areas. It would be more responsible to explore innovative solutions which are based on shared and public facilities to ensure fuller access to digital services and opportunities.<sup>10</sup>

For older persons, such access is about security, participation and giving voice to their increasingly large, diverse and potentially vulnerable group of the population. Therefore, it is hypothesised that ageing support has been mainstreamed into the local digital policy due to the

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<sup>10</sup> <https://sdgs.un.org/topics/voluntary-local-reviews>

widespread digital responses to the COVID-19 disruptions and will be found in the 2021 VLRs presented by the six cities or municipalities which represented the capital cities (Helsinki and Stockholm) and small municipalities (Asker, Malmo, Helsingborg, and Gladsaxe).

Table 1 lists the specific targets contained in SDG 11 and the one most relevant for this CSEND analysis. Review of the existing VLRs listed above focused on the 3 SDG 11 targets and keep in mind other linked targets concerning age, care, wellbeing etc.

<b>SDG #11</b>	<b>Targets</b>	<b>Under review by CSEND</b>
11.1	By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums	Yes
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	No
11.3	By 2030, enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management in all countries	No
11.4	Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage	No
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	No
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	No
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	No
11.A	Support positive economic, social and environmental links between urban, peri-urban and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning	Yes
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	Yes
11.C	Support least developed countries, including through financial and technical assistance, in building sustainable and resilient buildings utilizing local materials	No

Table 1: Listing of SDG #11 targets and the ones selected for CSEND VLR analysis

Table 2 presents the findings of the mapping exercise. The following questions were asked:

Q1: Did the objective/purpose statement explicitly mention the ageing population or older persons?

Q2: Are SDG 3 and ageing mentioned in the VLRs? Has wellbeing of their older persons been given special attention with interventions?

Q3: Are SDG 11 and selected targets, i.e., Targets 11.1, 11.A, 11.B mentioned in the VLR? Are action measures mentioned?

Q4: Is digitalisation a focus point of the VLR? Are inclusion and support of older persons suffering from low digital skills specifically addressed?

Table 2: Mapping the reported policy priorities regarding the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 3 & 11 by the cities and regions in the ECE region who submitted and presented their Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) to the High-Level Political Forum in July 2021 available on the UN DESA portal.

Cities	Q1	Q2		Q3				Q4	
	Objectives (including Ageing)	Q2a SDG #3	Q2b SDG #3	SDG #11	SDG #11.1	SDG #11.A	SDG #11.B	Digital & Digitalisation	Inclusion Support of Elders
Stockholm, Sweden	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N
Helsinki, Finland	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
Asker, Norway	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y	Y
Malmö, Sweden	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y	N
Helsingborg, Sweden	Y	Y	N <sup>(1)</sup>	N	N	Y	N	Y	N <sup>(1)</sup>
Gladsaxe, Denmark	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N/Y <sup>(3)</sup>	N <sup>(2)</sup>

Legend: ■ not mentioned, ■ mentioned, ■ mentioned but not linked to older persons

Notes: (1) youth oriented; (2) for circular economy use by companies and professionals; (3) telemedicine

To prepare VLRs at the city level requires a major effort and substantial resources. The Opening Statement of the Voluntary Review of Gladsaxe, Denmark (2021) states,

“Our aim here is not to give an exhaustive review based on our complete reports on the quantitative data and qualitative cases, but rather to present our approach and give a few examples from practice as well as data in order to focus attention to our general approach. .... It presents a

transformational strategic approach which has succeeded in mobilizing the organisation and local community in promising ways driven by political leadership, strategic management and local action within and outside the organisation. (p.4)

In the same spirit, the comparative analysis presented in Table 2 intends to map the direction and strategic thinking in mainstreaming ageing in the localisation of the 2030 Agenda with its 17 SDGs and 169 Targets. As part of the mainstreaming process, digitalisation must take the needs of the older persons into consideration in terms of access to digital goods and services, digital inclusion through active support and improving digital skills, digital participation and protection of human rights. While cities like Helsinki (Finland) and Asker (Norway) made explicit commitments, other cities made clear the needs for adopting digitalisation for services delivery but were less direct or explicit in terms of the special needs of the older persons.

Recognising the pivotal role of cities in localising SDGs and creating a sustained impact that will lead to systemic transformation in regard to how the societies define their social relations, organise production capacities and reduce negative environmental externalities. It will make sense that VLRs, like VNRs, serve as both a monitoring tool and an institutional learning tool. The latter function may even supersede the former when “triple” transformation needs to be engineered concurrently. Little precedents are available for such a major and ambitious undertaking. Cities and countries alike need to proceed through “cycles of learning by doing”. The preparation of VLR and presentation of this review need to be part of the learning process.

Ageing into senior age of 80 years old is unprecedented. How to support healthy and active ageing represents an additional process of learning and social innovations so as to maintain intergenerational equity and wellbeing for all. Providing targeted treatment of the digital needs of older persons and reporting in a disaggregated manner will be the first step to untangle this complex demographic evolution. Hence, it is the motion of CSEND to mainstream digital access and digital literacy of the older population into digital policy and digitalisation plan of the local authority and to monitor progress in this regard by including a dedicated section of the VLR to this topic.

**Motion #1:**

CSEND proposes to mainstream ageing in the Voluntary Local Review with a dedicated chapter to monitor and ensure that equitable digital access and literacy programmes for older persons are integral 8

parts of the local and national digital policies. Voices and participation of the older persons are supported with digital means in the consultation and decision-making process of the local development. Extra care should be given to the older persons in regard to cybersecurity and violence.

**Motion #2**

CSEND proposes to provide digital means for enabling and safeguarding the participation of all age groups, especially the young and the older persons during the consultation and decision-making process of the local development planning.

**Motion #3**

CSEND proposes the provision of extra care and services to older persons in order to ensure cybersecurity and prevent cyber violence against older persons.

**Motion #4**

CSEND proposes the development of a joint VLR reporting template for the cities of the UNECE region to ensure alignment with the SDGs and enhancing interoperability of data.

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Submitted by the Centre for Socio-Eco-Nomic Development (CSEND)  
An UN ECOCOC accredited thinktank with special consultative status

### **Additional References**

Compilation of Voluntary Local Reviews is available at the portal of Local 2030: Localising The SDGs, accessible at <https://www.local2030.org/vlrs>

Kiss, Monika. 2017. "Digital Skills in the EU Labour Market." <https://doi.org/10.2861/451320>.