

Experts from UN-Habitat, World Bank, WHO, European Commission, tech companies and citizen science groups convene to improve air quality and public space monitoring in European cities

Brussels, 23-24 June - UN-Habitat organizes an Expert Group Meeting to discuss on Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) indicators on air quality in cities and access to public spaces, with a specific focus on Europe.

The meeting is organized in collaboration with the European Commission, under the EU-funded project “URBAN 2030 - Monitoring and reporting of the urban and territorial dimensions of SDGs”.

The workshop aims to improve methodologies and data coverage for Europe, and can provide inputs for the upcoming revision of the SDG indicators at the UN Statistical Commission.

On the air quality indicator, experts from the World Health Organization, the European Environment Agency and the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission will present recent development and latest research. Citizen science initiatives from Brussels and around Europe will explain their criticism on the current approaches to measuring air quality and their contribution to improving measurements.

How to measure access to public space, and who actually uses public space are the main questions debated on the second day of the Expert Group Meeting. Experts from UN-Habitat and the European Commission will present the state of the art of the public space indicator for the SDG monitoring. While there is a validated approach to measure access to green public spaces using satellite imagery, it is more difficult to define other public spaces. The World Bank will present recent research on how to identify public space through remote sensing; the tech companies OpenStreetMap and Digital Globe will present their approach in measuring and monitoring public space in open maps and satellite images; and finally, the city of Vienna will contribute with a social spatial analysis on who actually uses public space that is often designed by men for men.

Background:

To measure air quality in cities in the European Union, there are currently three main data sources: measuring stations, interpolating measuring stations, and remote sensing. In addition, there are initiatives on crowdsourcing of citizen-driven local measurements.

Intersecting pollution with population grid is a next step to determine the level of exposure for people. There are also derived indicators such as life years lost due to air pollution.

On measuring public spaces in Europe, the European Commission has recently completed research on measuring access to green areas in Europe’s cities.

As a next step, it is necessary to extend the research to non-green public spaces which is a complex endeavour. One of the challenges is that public spaces are complex and of different typologies, often closely linked to texture of the urban fabric. Another aspect for discussion is the question of publicly used space, which can be privately owned. Moreover, the quality, safety, access to public space are not easy to be measure and require fieldwork.

Furthermore, the actual use by population groups and their satisfaction with public spaces is an important social and equity question.