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Urban Regeneration in the context of UN-Habitat's Flagship Programme 'Inclusive Communities – Thriving Cities'

CLARIFICATION NOTE

This note provides additional clarifications to the Report of the Executive Director on normative and operational activities of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme for the period July–December 2023¹, focused on the Flagship Programme 'Inclusive Communities – Thriving Cities', discussed during the First Session of the Executive Board (6th to 8th of May 2024) and related Ad Hoc Working Group on Programmatic, Budgetary and Administrative matters^{2, 3}

This document frames urban regeneration within the broader context of inequality trends, followed by the description of the various existing instruments to address inequality responding to regional and national contextualisation, and focusing specifically on urban regeneration. The Annex of this clarification note showcases successful inspiring practices on urban regeneration led by governments and UN-Habitat, around the world.

Structure

1. Addressing poverty and growing inequality
2. Urban regeneration conceptual framework
3. Way forward
4. Annex: project experiences

1. Reducing poverty and the growing inequality

Reducing inequality remains a primary focus for most countries worldwide but the focus has shifted in recent decades. While global inequality has decreased, disparities within countries and cities have grown⁴, driven by technological advancements, globalization, and unequal access to opportunities. This income disparity manifests in unequal access to basic services such as

¹ [english_5_Inclusive_Communities_EB.pdf](#)

² [Follow-up Actions - 2024 First Session of the Executive Board.pdf](#)

³ [english_5_Inclusive_Communities_EB.pdf](#)

Addison, T., Pirttilä, J., Tarp, F. (2019) Is global inequality rising or falling? Policy Brief 2019/2. Helsinki: UNU-WIDER.

electricity, clean water and health services. In cities, the rising housing cost, lack of adequate infrastructure in certain areas and limited job opportunities exacerbate the inequality gap. These growing disparities are also reflected in increasing spatial segregation among neighbourhoods. The urban-rural divide in many parts of the world further intensifies these challenges, deepening inequality across regions.

Governments worldwide are implementing policies, programmes and projects to address multifaceted challenges of national, regional and urban inequality. These efforts vary in scale and approach, from policies to comprehensive processes to specific interventions. Redistributive policies and measures, such as social welfare, employment laws and access to adequate housing policies, multi-level governance, land policies, inclusive zoning and value capture mechanisms - play a key role in fostering social justice, ensuring that local communities benefit from urban investments.

In addition to these policies, governments promote large, medium and small-scale transformation processes to improve urban environments and foster inclusive development of cities and communities. Efforts such as urban revitalization, renewal, restoration and regeneration aim to create and revive declining urban areas through socio-economic and physical-environmental interventions.

Urban revitalisation⁵, widely implemented in the 1960s, focused on addressing urban decay, especially in brownfield sites, often through demolition, redevelopment, and rehabilitation. In the 1970s, urban renewal⁶ became a key strategy to address physical decay of urban areas, with emphasis on deteriorating infrastructure and housing. By combining heritage preservation and slum clearance, it aimed to improve living conditions and accommodate the rapid population growth.

By the late 1990s, urban regeneration⁷ gained more prominence, reflecting an evolved understanding of integrated and inclusive development. This vision incorporated both cultural and natural heritage preservation into previous efforts, focusing on enhancing existing physical and socio-economic assets. The goal was to ensure that investments would directly benefit the local community and promote shared prosperity. Alongside large-scale processes, small-scale interventions such as urban rehabilitation (restoration of infrastructure) and redevelopmentⁱ (new constructions on a previously developed sites) have been implemented by governments. These targeted interventions remain essential for improving urban environment and ensuring quality infrastructure.

While these interventions and strategies gained varying levels of attention over time, they continue to be implemented globally according to the local needs and are very much city, country and region specific. As urban challenges evolve, new strategies, refined methods and enhanced processes emerge, building on lessons from the past to promote continuous improvement and tailored made solutions for different regions, countries, cities and communities.

2. Understanding Urban Regeneration

Building on a comprehensive and consolidated body of interdisciplinary knowledge on urban regeneration, UN-Habitat alongside relevant like-minded institutions and professionals around the world understands that urban regeneration is in essence a process that “preserves, protects and enhances socio-economic conditions, natural heritage and tangible and intangible” social and “cultural heritage”⁸, as highlighted in paragraph 38 and 97 of the New Urban Agenda. As noted

⁵ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/B0080430767044429>

⁶ https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-94-007-0753-5_3128

⁷ Roberts, P. *Urban Regeneration*. (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2017). doi:10.4135/9781473921788.

⁸ The New Urban Agenda pp 38, (United Nations publication, 2016).

above, the exact terminology used (regeneration, renewal, revitalization) continues to vary from context to context.

2.1 Urban Regeneration Related Concepts

Urban regeneration has been defined in literature as a comprehensive, area-based⁹ and multi-agent collaborative planning process that improves the physical, environmental and socio-economic conditions of an urban area and links the generated benefits to the wider urban fabric of the city¹⁰. In particular, urban regeneration focuses on underutilized land or distressed urban areas, aiming to bring back their functionality and vibrancy. Globally, the term urban 'regeneration' has evolved over time and across regions¹¹.

According to the local context, urban regeneration strategies can have similar objectives, yet adopt different approaches¹². These strategies encompass a range of interdependent initiatives, including restoration of heritage buildings, rehabilitation of environmentally degraded areas, activation of public spaces, revitalisation of underutilised land and distressed urban areas.

The understanding of urban regeneration is also shaped by the language of research or policy documents in each country. In France, various urban regeneration strategies are referred as 'renovation', likely influenced by the financing programme "*Programme National de la Rénovation Urbaine*"¹³. In countries such as Nigeria, Kenya, India and Bangladesh, urban renewal has prioritised infrastructure improvements, urban management and the integration of sustainable urban practices. In the UK, urban regeneration strategies are often called 'urban renewal', despite the evolution of its concept and practices. This differs from the urban renewal process that took place in North American cities during the mid-20th century, which focused on physical redevelopment.¹⁴

2.2 Urban Regeneration Entries and Thematic Focuses

Urban regeneration strategies often involve adaptive reuse of obsolete urban infrastructure, brownfield repurposing, rehabilitating existing housing stock, enhancing energy efficiency in renovated buildings, and restoring natural environment.

Any urban regeneration process typically involves three key urban assets¹⁵:

- i. **Land:** a valuable resource for municipal governments, particularly for revenue generation. Planning the regeneration of under-utilised urban land requires comprehending the city's land ownership regime. Local governments and planners use regulatory tools such as land-use planning, zoning regulations, and land readjustment to control land use;
- ii. **Community:** participation allows communities to express their needs and provide valuable local knowledge for informing decision-making; and
- iii. **Environment:** underused urban land, often located near water bodies, former industrial corridors, or disaster-prone areas, pose challenges due to past land uses and potential contamination. Consequently, it is crucial to view environmental aspects as integral components in designing sustainable urban regeneration projects.

⁹ Area-based approaches have common defining characteristics: they are geographically targeted, and adopt a multi-sectoral and participatory approach, as defined in Parker, E., Maynard, V. Humanitarian response to urban crises: a review of area-based approaches. (2015)

¹⁰ [Urban Regeneration and Viruses: Learning from Past and Present Health Crises | UN-Habitat \(unhabitat.org\)](#)

¹¹ Palen, J., *Gentrification, Displacement, and Neighborhood Revitalization* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1984)

¹² [Urban Regeneration and Viruses: Learning from Past and Present Health Crises | UN-Habitat \(unhabitat.org\)](#)

¹³ France, Programme Nationale de Renovation Urbaine (2024)

¹⁴ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305900610000747#sec0065>

¹⁵ Amirtahmasebi, R., Orloff, M., Wahba, S., & Altman, A. (2016). Regenerating Urban Land: A Practitioner's Guide to Leveraging Private Investment. World Bank, Washington, DC. <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-0473-1>

Notably, integrated urban regeneration processes encompass various strategies and have different entry points, according to the specific needs of an urban area. Common thematic areas include but are not limited to:

- **Housing, infrastructure and service provision and rehabilitation**

Provision of new and rehabilitation of deteriorated or decaying housing, infrastructure and services is essential to ensure good living conditions and preserve the urban fabric. Improving existing structures helps reduce the need for new land consumption and urban sprawl, reducing costs and promoting more compact urban development. This process increases the stock of adequate housing, making it accessible to a broader range of residents. Additionally, housing rehabilitation offers an opportunity to move towards more resource-efficient systems, such as energy-saving installations, water reuse, and recycling facilities.

- **Historic restoration, preservation and conservation**

In declining historic urban areas, heritage-led urban regeneration encompasses strategies to restore and preserve urban fabric and architectural landmarks while enhancing urban infrastructure. This includes the restoration of deteriorating buildings - both private and public - and improving urban infrastructure such as train lines, water installations, and public spaces. Although these strategies primarily target the built environment, when integrated into the urban regeneration process, they can also stimulate tourism, create jobs, reduce poverty, boost the local economy, foster social cohesion, and empower local communities.²⁷

- **Environmental restoration, recovery and preservation**

In deteriorated natural environments, ecosystem-led urban regeneration employs strategies to strengthen biodiversity protection and climate resilience. Restoring and recovering ecosystems are not only essential for preserving natural resources that support life but also for enhancing cities' adaptive capacity to climate hazards. In coastal areas, mangrove restoration can protect residents from sea level rise, while protecting ponds, lagoons and agricultural land, ensuring continued livelihood activities and generating socio-economic benefits. In the inner city, river regeneration can enhance the blue-green network, connecting public spaces and expanding recreational areas. This approach creates opportunities for urban farming, additional income sources, enhanced greenery, improved urban health, reduced flood risks, and the development of local eco-industries and waste recycling facilities.

- **Public space re-activation**

The strength of urban regeneration lies in its capacity to generate a positive impact in the social relation, identity and governance of targeted areas. This can only be possible through strong participation and civic engagement. Within urban regeneration, reactivation considers the social and relational dynamics that the strategies can activate¹⁶. For instance, by repurposing underutilised land into recreational spaces, urban regeneration can attract diverse groups, leverage community identity, attract markets and boost local economy.

While these strategies provide an overview to exemplify different urban regeneration mechanisms and entry points, it is important to note that the spectrum of urban regeneration is vast and evolving. In essence, urban regeneration - as advocated by UN-Habitat - leverages existing local assets to promote inclusion, sustainability and resilience, in line with paragraphs 38 and 97 of New Urban Agenda, which emphasize the need to preserving the cultural and natural heritage and highlighting the role of traditional communities in transformation initiatives.

¹⁶ Fanzini, D., Venturini, G. (2022). Urban Reactivation. In: Reactivation of the Built Environment. SpringerBriefs in Applied Sciences and Technology. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-16069-1_2

3. Way forward

The preparation of the next Strategic Plan of UN-Habitat presents a crucial opportunity to redouble the efforts of the Agency in the work of reduction of spatial inequality and inclusive prosperity, linked to Sub-programmes 1 and 2.

The integrative nature of the Flagship programme “Inclusive Communities – Thriving Cities” has successfully linked policy, planning and finance, to contribute to the achievement of SDGs by national and local governments, in high-priority topics for the Agency such as social inclusion, adequate housing, service delivery, economic development and climate action.

Going forward, the programme will further develop normative products that integrate the possibility of regional, national and local contextualization of tools and processes, strengthen and build partnerships, and continue to support national and local governments through technical assistance, with the objective of reducing inequalities and advancing inclusive prosperity. The focus on adequate housing, infrastructure and services will ensure alignment with UN-Habitat’s core mandates and strategic focus of the forthcoming Strategic Plan 2026-29.

ANNEX: CASE STUDIES

1. National experiences

To effectively address urban inequality and promote shared prosperity, various countries have developed and implemented noteworthy policies, programmes and interventions tailored to their contexts. These experiences offer lessons and insights on how different Member States have developed policies, programmes and initiatives to reduce inequality and promote inclusive prosperity through urban transformation.

1.1 Seoul, South Korea: Urban Regeneration Programme

Focus: sustainable management system, community-led process

Since 2013, Seoul Metropolitan Government has implemented a residents-led model of urban regeneration aimed at promoting bottom-up processes through effective communication and collaboration with communities. This approach focuses on aligning projects with local needs and priorities while establishing a sustainable regional management system. Prior to initiating projects, the city invests in capacity-building to identify potential areas and engage residents. The creation of the Urban Regeneration Support Centre, which integrates experts, officials, and community members, further supports this model. The centre plays a critical role in mediating between the public and private sectors in pursuing bottom-up approaches.¹⁷

1.2 Muharraq, Kingdom of Bahrain: Pearling Trail Urban Regeneration Project

Focus: cultural heritage, tourism

The Pearling Trail Urban Regeneration Project in Muharraq¹⁸, Bahrain, aimed at preserving and revitalizing the historic Pearling Trail, a UNESCO World Heritage site. This project highlights Bahrain’s pearling heritage while simultaneously improving the urban environment. The regeneration efforts included the restoration of historical sites, enhancements of infrastructure, and the creation of integrative displays to educate visitors about the pearling industry’s significance to Bahraini culture.

Funded by the national government with additional support from UNESCO and other cultural organizations, the project followed a collaborative approach involving government bodies, urban

¹⁷ <https://www.urbanagendaplatform.org/best-practice/seouls-people-centric-urban-regeneration-project-model-sustainable-urban-growth>

¹⁸ Naseeb, Haifa Tawfeeq, Jongoh Lee, and Heejae Choi. 2021. "Elevating Cultural Preservation Projects into Urban Regeneration: A Case Study of Bahrain’s Pearling Trail" *Sustainability* 13, no. 12: 6629. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13126629>

planners, and heritage experts. The Pearling Trail regeneration has led to improved infrastructure, increased tourism, and a stronger sense of community engagement. By integrating cultural preservation with urban revitalization, the project has not only enhanced the historical value of the site but also contributed to economic development and sustainable urban growth.

1.3 Durban, South Africa Warwick: Junction Urban Renewal Project

Focus: socio-economic development, informal economy

The Warwick Junction Urban Renewal Project in Durban¹⁹, South Africa, was designed to address the challenges faced by street traders in a key transport node. The project focused on improving infrastructure and trading conditions for approximately 20,000 traders, mostly women, by relocating them to a new market area and providing financial training. It involved establishing a Department of Informal Trade and Small Business Opportunities, collaborating with health and informal trade departments.

The intervention resulted in the creation of permanent stalls, enhanced safety, and improved facilities, including childcare and sanitation. The Warwick Junction now supports up to 8,000 traders, served 450,000 daily commuters, and has become a popular tourist attraction. This project demonstrates how underutilized urban infrastructure can be transformed to serve the needs of local communities, particularly those in the informal economy.

1.4 France: National Programme for Urban Renovation

Focus: multi-level governance, neighbourhood transformation

In France, the national agency ANRU finances and coordinates the implementation of transformation initiatives as part of the 'Programme National de Rénovation Urbaine' (PNRU). The agency operates within a multi-level governance framework, connecting national, regional and local authorities to localize the policies. ANRU emphasizes local participation by actively engaging residents and local business from the planning stages through implementation and long-term management.

Through the 'Observatoire National de La Politique de la Ville' (ONPV), ANRU identifies priority neighbourhoods for intervention. The PNRU has transformed 600 neighbourhoods, by reconstructing deteriorate structures, rehabilitating social housing, installing public facilities, and renovating public spaces²⁰. The initiatives are tailored to the local contexts and encompass a range of topics such as urban agriculture, public education, job creation, ecological transition, and social integration.

1.5 Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Porto Maravilha Project

Focus: historical city centre, port revitalization

The Porto Maravilha Project is a major urban transformation initiative in Rio de Janeiro's port area, developed by the City of Rio de Janeiro with various stakeholder support. The project was launched in 2009 with the aims to recover the economic, touristic and residential potential of the historic centre. The initiative an area of 500ha, featuring important attractions with two museums, the Olympic boulevard, Pier Maua, and cultural pavilions.

The project involved comprehensive infrastructure reconstruction, prioritization of active mobility, cultural promotion. Key achievements include substantial enhancements in urban infrastructure and public spaces, increase in housing stock, revitalization of key historical landmarks, and improved city connectivity. Through integrated planning and active community involvement, the

¹⁹ Dobson, Richard and Caroline Skinner. 2009. Working in Warwick: Including Street Traders in Urban Plans. Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal <https://aet.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Working-in-Warwick-Including-Street-Traders-in-Urban-Plans-By-Richard-Dobson-Caroline-Skinner.pdf>

²⁰ Agence Nationale pour la Rénovation Urbaine, "Accueil," accessed September 3, 2024, <https://www.anru.fr/>.

Porto Maravilha Project demonstrates how inclusive and integrated initiatives can drive shared prosperity.

2. Project examples by UN-Habitat

UN-Habitat supports cities worldwide in fostering shared prosperity through inclusive and sustainable initiatives. Projects address diverse areas such as adequate housing, historic city centre, basic services, culture and heritage, rural-urban linkages, environmental resilience, job creation and economic development. According to the local context, a combination of different strategies may be combined in the process.

2.1 Shuangjing Subdistrict Regeneration, Beijing, China | Focus: inclusive governance

The Shuangjing Subdistrict Regeneration project in Beijing, China, addresses overcrowding, limited public spaces and insufficient age-friendly facilities in densely populated area. Developed by UN-Habitat in partnership with local stakeholders, the initiative aims to enhance community resilience through inclusive governance.

Key components of the project include improvements in cultural promotion, mobility and public space revitalization. A participatory process engages residents and stakeholders through community committees and digital platforms. Design workshops involving diverse groups, such as children, the elderly, and migrants, have transformed underutilized spaces into active community centres.

The project has already enhanced accessibility through barrier-free renovations in buildings and community centres, and the establishment of 'Warm Houses' providing support and services for disabled individuals, fostering better integration and communication.

2.2 Central Riyadh Regeneration, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia | Focus: socio-economic development

The Central Riyadh Regeneration (CRR) project is a transformative initiative aimed at revitalizing the heart of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. A key component of this endeavour is the Central Riyadh Socioeconomic Strategy, led by UN-Habitat and supported by the Central Arriyadh Development Company (CADC) and the Saudi Arabia Public Investment Fund. Through this collaborative effort, the project seeks to foster inclusive communities and create dynamic, thriving urban spaces in Central Riyadh.

The CRR programme aims to enhance the urban environment in the region and improve the quality of life for all. It targets 20 districts with goals including improved city management, infrastructure, public spaces, and participatory socio-economic development. The Programme emphasizes socioeconomic growth, heritage preservation, affordable housing, and enhanced quality of life, thereby potentially advancing multiple sustainability goals including SDGs.

2.3 Nairobi Rivers Basin Regeneration, Nairobi, Kenya | Focus: environmental resilience

The Nairobi Rivers Basin Regeneration Programme leverages existing local knowledge and expertise to drive socio-economic and environmental transformation. Through its 9 goals, the programme applies urban regeneration as an engine for socio-economic, and environmental transformation in the city: Habitat restoration and biodiversity, Sustainable water resource management, Waste management, Food and agriculture, Place and community, Economic transformation, Climate resilience, Health and wellbeing, and Community engagement. The program fosters open participation and partnerships to address challenges and enhance social cohesion.

It aims to create a sustainable, resilient river system, improve basic services, generate livelihood opportunities, and enhance connectivity and green spaces, contributing to local economic development and environmental well-being. In the long run, this is expected to contribute to local economic development, better urban health, enhanced environmental wellbeing and climate resilience.

2.4 Microsoft Datacentre Community Development, Sweden | Focus: inclusive and sustainable neighbourhood

The Microsoft Datacentre Community Development Programme aims to enhance socio-economic and environmental resilience of neighbourhoods where datacentre is established. Developed in partnership with UN-Habitat, this initiative integrates inclusive and sustainable planning into the establishment of new data centres to ensure that these facilities positively contribute to the local community.

The programme engaged local representatives and stakeholders in a participatory process, leading to the development of a set of recommendations and an action plan. Focusing on creating inclusive, sustainable and resilient communities, this programme directly advances seven SDGs.

The long-term goal of the Microsoft project is to build global practices based on local learnings and initiatives to develop more sustainable approaches to urban planning around datacentres and other industrial complexes.

2.5 Parque de La Equidad Park, Cancun, Mexico | Focus: public space

Cancun's rapid urbanization, driven by tourism, has led to deep spatial and social inequalities. The Strategic Projects Agency of the State of Quintana Roo (AGEPRO) partnered with UN-Habitat to develop the Parque de La Equidad, a 16-kilometre linear park that crosses three of the main avenues of the city. This project aims to improve infrastructure, services, and facilities for more than 200,000 people.³³

Three components are central to the initiative: an urban regeneration masterplan, land-value capture mechanisms, and a conceptual design guide for the public space. The project prioritizes sustainability, inclusivity, and accessibility and was conceived through a participatory planning process that integrated stakeholders from a wide range of social sectors, and local inhabitants.

2.6 Urban Integral Operations (OUIs), the Caribbean | Focus: integrated planning

The Urban Integral Operations (OUIs) initiative, led by UN-Habitat, focuses on enhancing living conditions in vulnerable neighbourhoods thorough integrated planning in Latin America. This initiative aims to develop shared visions for sustainable in Costa Rica, Cuba, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador.

The OUIs process includes a diagnostic assessment to identify the potential areas of interventions. This follows by defining long-term goals and needs of residents into the planning. The outcome is a detailed, strategic, and implementable programme. The initiative has promoted collaborative decision-making and produced comprehensive urban plans that meet local needs while supporting sustainable development goals. By integrating diverse perspectives and coordinating efforts, the OUIs have contributed to more fostering inclusive and sustainable development.
