Seeing Homelessness through the Sustainable Development Goals

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Introduction

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals are a powerful mechanism for spurring nations to make progress towards shared goals. They generate collaboration, funding, definition, targeting, and measurement for many social problems, such as poverty and sanitation for all. Yet homelessness is not explicitly mentioned in the Sustainable Development Goals. Thus, the global movement to end homelessness is missing major opportunities to jointly define, measure, and coordinate efforts to end homelessness. Meanwhile, the pandemic has both heightened our awareness of our interconnectedness, and has underscored the important role of data in solving homelessness. Cities with good homelessness measurement were able to more quickly pivot and address homelessness during the health crisis.

In the following pages, we outline why 'seeing' homelessness through definition and measurement is more important now than ever, and the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead in solving homelessness globally through the Sustainable Development Goals. We show where progress has been made to date with a detailed account of the events leading to the first-ever United Nations resolution on homelessness, adopted by the Economic and Social Council in June 2020. This paper outlines the importance of building on this Resolution, especially its call to Member States "to harmonize the measurement and collection of data on homelessness to enable national and global policymaking" and new partnerships that have been established to plan for and conduct better global homelessness data collection.

About the Sustainable Development Goals

In June 2014, after two years of negotiations, the United Nations (UN) formally adopted the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, subsequently known as the 2030 Agenda. These goals build on previous plans like the Millennium Development Goals and together chart an ambitious plan to drive integrated and sustainable development across all UN Member States (Dodds et al., 2016). The goals and their indicators may seem repetitive, but they are designed to interlink and reinforce each other. Indeed, a key principle of sustainability is that solutions connect across social, economic, and environmental spheres and the Sustainable Development Goals reflect this principle (Fowler, 2009). See Table 1 for all 17 goals (United Nations, 2021).

Table 1: United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

Goal 1	End poverty in all its forms everywhere
Goal 2	End hunger, achieve food security and improve nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
Goal 3	Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all
Goal 4	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all
Goal 5	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
Goal 6	Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
Goal 7	Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
Goal 8	Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
Goal 9	Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
Goal 10	Reduce inequality within and among countries
Goal 11	Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable
Goal 12	Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
Goal 13	Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
Goal 14	Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development
Goal 15	Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
Goal 16	Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
Goal 17	Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

Source: The United Nations

Each of these goals has a set of aligned indicators or 'targets', for a grand total of 169. These targets are more specific and aim for measurability. For example, Goal 1, 'End poverty in all its forms everywhere' notes its Target 1.1 as "By 2030, eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than $1.25 a day" (United Nations, 2021a). Member States then report their

national progress towards the various goals and targets during their Voluntary National Reviews. Local governments are also increasingly reporting on their progress via Voluntary Local Reviews. The UN's Secretariat collates and reports global progress on the Sustainable Development Goals and their targets. For example, the UN notes against Target 1.1:

> Poverty reduction progress since 2015 has been set back further by COVID-19 and the extreme poverty rate rose in 2020 for the first time in over 20 years. The COVID-19 pandemic is set to increase the number of poor in 2020 by between 119 and 124 million people, causing the extreme poverty rate to rise for the first time in a generation, from 8.4% in 2019 to 9.5% in 2020 (United Nations, 2021a).

Further, the global SDG indicator framework has an overarching principle of data disaggregation that supports the objective of 'counting the unaccounted.' Namely:

> Sustainable Development Goals indicators should be disaggregated, when relevant, by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability and geographical location, or other characteristics.

Though by no means perfect, the Sustainable Development Goals and their measurable indicators are clearly a powerful mechanism, and indeed the only truly international mechanism, for spurring nations to make progress towards shared goals. Yet there is one major problem: the exclusion of homelessness.

Homelessness is Missing from the Sustainable Development Goals

Homelessness is completely absent from all 17 Sustainable Development Goals and their 169 indicators. This jeopardises the ultimate success of nearly all the Goals. If we are, as a global community, to end poverty, ensure healthy lives for all, ensure sanitation for all, and make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, and resilient, we must explicitly address homelessness. Homelessness is "one of the crudest manifestations of poverty [and] inequality" (United Nations, 2019) and is present in every country around the world to some degree. Hearkening back to old management maxims, we know that 'what gets measured gets done.' Without explicit mention of homelessness in the Sustainable Development Goals, our neighbours who are experiencing homelessness around the world will continue to be ignored, unattended to, and "left behind" (United Nations, 2018) in the global push for progress. The Institute of Global Homelessness, alongside many critical partners, aims to fill this gap.

Defining and Measuring Homelessness

It has been noted by the homelessness sector for decades that there is no commonly agreed upon definition for homelessness. Perhaps this lack of consensus is one of the factors that led to the exclusion of homelessness in the current set of Sustainable Development Goals. The Institute of Global Homelessness addressed this gap in 2015, working with leading academic researchers to develop a global framework for conceptualising and measuring homelessness. The result was a flexible framework "that national and local definitions can be set in relation to, so that it can be clarified which of the subcategories are included and which are not in various policy conversations, service planning efforts and enumerations" (Busch-Geertsma et al., 2016, p.126). See Table 2 for the complete framework.

Table 2. Global Framework for Homelessness

Category		Subcategory	
1	People without accommodation	1 (a)	People sleeping in the streets or in other open spaces (such as parks, railway embankments, under bridges, on pavement, on river banks, in forests, etc.)
		1 (b)	People sleeping in public roofed spaces or buildings not intended for human habitation (such as bus and railway stations, taxi ranks, derelict buildings, public buildings, etc.)
		1 (c)	People sleeping in their cars, rickshaws, open fishing boats and other forms of transport
		1 (d)	'Pavement dwellers' – individuals or households who live on the street in a regular spot, usually with some form of makeshift cover
2	People living in temporary or crisis accommodation	2 (a)	People staying in night shelters (where occupants have to renegotiate their accommodation nightly)
		2 (b)	People living in homeless hostels and other types of temporary accommodation for homeless people (where occupants have a designated bed or room)
		2 (c)	Women and children living in refuges for those fleeing domestic violence
		2 (d)	People living in camps provided for 'internally displaced people' i.e. those who have fled their homes as a result of armed conflict, natural or human-made disasters, human rights violations, development projects, etc. but have not crossed international borders
		2 (e)	People living in camps or reception centres/temporary accommodation for asylum seekers, refugees and other immigrants
3	People living in severely inadequate and/or insecure accommodation	3 (a)	People sharing with friends and relatives on a temporary basis
		3 (b)	People living under threat of violence
		3 (c)	People living in cheap hotels, bed and breakfasts and similar
		3 (d)	People squatting in conventional housing
		3 (e)	People living in conventional housing that is unfit for human habitation
		3 (f)	People living in trailers, caravans and tents
		3 (g)	People living in extremely overcrowded conditions
		3 (h)	People living in non-conventional buildings and temporary structures, including those living in slums/informal settlements

Source: Busch-Geertsma et al., 2016.

The Institute of Global Homelessness has piloted this definitional framework in its 13 'Vanguard Cities.' The Vanguard Cities are a pioneering cohort of communities on six continents comprised of Adelaide, Australia; Brussels, Belgium; Bengaluru, India; Chicago, USA; Edmonton, Canada; Glasgow, Scotland; Manchester, England; Little Rock, USA; Montevideo, Uruguay; Rijeka, Croatia; Santiago, Chile; Sydney, Australia; and Tshwane, South Africa. These cities have each used this framework to define homelessness and set specific goals towards reducing or ending homelessness. The framework has resonated in all areas of the globe. The Vanguard Cities were able to use the framework according to their local contexts, selecting the categories that represented the manifestations of homelessness in their communities.

When properly applied, definitions can be transformative. Once defined, the number of people who are in each category can be calculated, interventions can be effectively targeted, the overall success or failure of addressing homelessness can be tracked, and governments and the homelessness sector can ultimately be held responsible for maintaining the issue instead of resolving it. Therefore, we do not just want data for data's sake, we want data for change – data helps us to create successful solutions and shows us what good looks like.

The collaborative effort to include homelessness in the Sustainable Development Goals

The importance of collaboration when tackling homelessness has been well evidenced on both the national and international scale – one key example of this in operation is the UN's NGO Working Group to End Homelessness (WGEH). The WGEH was founded in 2017 and is comprised of approximately 30 organisations, including the Institute of Global Homelessness, who are "committed to advocating for the alleviation and eventual elimination of homelessness, at the United Nations, in collaboration with global platforms to end homelessness, and academic centers" (2020, p.2-3)

After three years of collaborative and steady efforts to raise awareness of homelessness at the UN, the Commission on Social Development selected 'Affordable housing and social protection systems for all to address homelessness' as the Priority Theme of their 58th Session. The Institute of Global Homelessness and other members of the WGEH participated in the Expert Group Convening on the Priority Theme (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019), a critical preparatory meeting organised by UN DESA and UN-Habitat leading up to the 58th Session. There, IGH's global framework for defining homelessness and the need for global homeless measurements were discussed. Several members of the Institute of Global Homelessness' Advisory Committee moderated and presented at key high-level panels at the 58th Session itself, which took place from 10 to 19 February 2020 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020).

The Institute of Global Homelessness further partnered with the NGO Committee on Social Development to plan and conduct the Civil Society Forum, the main channel by which NGOs contribute to the Priority Theme, on 14 February 2020. Colleagues from the Vanguard Cities attended and served as panellists to share strategies to address homelessness from India and Uruguay, and to ensure that the perspective of the lived experience of homelessness was heard.

This was the first time in more than 30 years that homelessness was the primary focus of a UN commission. It was a watershed moment in the efforts to elevate homelessness as an issue worthy of deep attention by the UN. As a result of the Commission's 58th Session, Member States drafted a resolution on the priority theme that was later fully adopted by the UN's Economic and Social Council in June 2020.

The resolution underlines the fact that homelessness is mainly driven by structural causes and discusses various intersections with poverty, climate change, health, and human rights. It states with concern that our children and young people are particularly vulnerable to homelessness. The resolution notes that homelessness "needs to be addressed through urgent national, multilateral and global responses" and describes homelessness using very similar language to The Institute of Global Homelessness' framework. The resolution states:

> … depending on national context, [homelessness] can be described as a condition where a person or household lacks habitable space, which may compromise their ability to enjoy social relations, and includes people living on the streets, in other open spaces or in buildings not intended for human habitation, people living in temporary accommodation or shelters for the homeless, and, in accordance with national legislation, may include, among others, people living in severely inadequate accommodation without security of tenure and access to basic services.

The resolution then makes several specific calls on Member States. It calls for "comprehensive, intersectoral national strategies and specific policy interventions to address homelessness" that go beyond affordable housing policies alone. It calls for better collection of disaggregated data on homelessness and "to harmonize the measurement and collection of data on homelessness to enable national and global policymaking." It highlights the importance of the Statistical Commission in creating measurable indicators and targets for the Sustainable Development Goals. Overall, the resolution is a touchstone that our global movement can point to as we continue to advocate for homelessness to be included on the international development agenda.

The next key tasks are for academics, policymakers, and sector leaders across Member States to partner and build on this resolution. One example of this is the continued proactivity of members of the WGEH in advocating for homelessness to

be included in additional resolutions and declarations, so that there is an ever-expanding body of language within the UN driving action on homelessness. Another example is that more Member States and local municipalities could report on homelessness and housing in their Voluntary National Reviews and Voluntary Local Reviews. Yet another example is the partnership, through a Memorandum of Understanding, between the Institute of Global Homelessness and the UN's Human Settlement Programme (UN-Habitat). The partnership will work to operationalise key components of the Resolution. This has translated into mainstreaming the issue of homelessness, its definition, and data across different high-level fora (e.g., World Homelessness Day Roundtable in October 2020; the ECOSOC Youth Forum Side Event in April 2021; High Level Political Forum Side Event on "Homelessness, SDG 1 and Sustainable Recovery from COVID-19" in July 2021). Together, we will also provide technical assistance and capacity building to Member States who are developing and implementing the "comprehensive… strategies… and policy inter-ventions" on homelessness. The key challenge is that there is no consistent approach to data collection across different contexts. We will jointly convene stakeholders to help plan for and conduct better global homelessness data collec-tion, and work in partnership with the UN's Statistical Commission to draft potential indicators and targets on homelessness for the Sustainable Development Goals.

Seeing homelessness during the pandemic

Since the resolution was passed in June 2020, homelessness became widely acknowledged as a public health issue during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic had a disproportionate impact on people experiencing homelessness, and what has been particularly interesting is that many of the solutions discussed before the crisis – the need for collaboration, definition, and measurement – became more apparent and vital in practice during the pandemic.

'Seeing' homelessness has never been more important than during the pandemic – the cities with the best data on homelessness were able to create strategies more quickly during the crisis. In the United Kingdom, for example, the 'everyone in' strategy was developed, which saw 90% of people known to be experiencing street homelessness given accommodation within two weeks. In total, more than 37 000 people in the UK were sheltered during the pandemic. The key to this success was data; local governments collected the data that enabled them to move quickly to get 'everyone in' to temporary accommodation and save lives. If they did not first 'see' homelessness by enumerating people out in the street, encampments, and shelters then they would have lost valuable time in searching for people to move to safe accommodation.

Elsewhere, we saw that the pandemic created greater collaboration opportunities than ever before: colleagues in Tshwane, South Africa and Santiago, Chile, established collaboration among a broader group of stakeholders. They were able to bring homelessness, health, and law enforcement together to develop collaborative strategies for how to handle the crisis and serve those living on the streets. Those relationships have continued beyond the crisis. Moreover, colleagues in Brussels, Belgium were able to use the pandemic as an advocacy opportunity, creating a petition to protect and house people experiencing homelessness that dozens of organisations signed onto. Communities that had strong political will, data, and resources were able to make the *most* progress, but we saw progress in all cities that had committed to work collaboratively to define and address homelessness.

Conclusion

We are determined not to let the resolution end with pretty words alone or the lessons learned from the pandemic go to waste. Together with our partners, we are now using the resolution to drive action within the UN and its Member States.

Defining and measuring homelessness are critical tools in helping homelessness be 'seen' by governments and then tended to, via informed and targeted action. Definitions and measurement of issues such as homelessness and poverty will never be one hundred percent perfect or accurate. We must also continue to be wary of the power of definitions to exclude or stigmatise, the danger of measurement to obscure issues or be used for political talking points, and the risks of data being co-opted for harm, such as in the case of criminalising homelessness. However, despite the imperfections and risks, definition and measurement are critical building blocks to progress. While being aware of the pitfalls of both, we should actively and transparently use common definitions and measurements, and reiterate, refine, and improve them over time.

We welcome all collaboration to start by 'seeing' homelessness and by naming and measuring it through the Sustainable Development Goals. Behind the words and behind the numbers are our neighbours, human beings who each deserve a place to call home and the foundation by which they can realise their full human potential. We join in solidarity with them to bring their experiences into the halls of governments, working together to achieve the promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and truly 'leave no one behind.'

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