SDG LENS

Monitoring Sustainable Development in Eastern Europe & South Caucausus

SPOTLIGHT REPORT ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SDG 11: SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES

IN THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS

11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES

Authors have chosen to remain anonymous for security reasons.

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INTRODUCTION

Cities are complex systems uniting people within a specific territory for work, life and recreation. Belarus is one of the most urbanized countries in the Eastern European region. As of 1st January, 2022, the level of urbanization was 78.1%, meaning that three times more people in the country live in cities than in rural areas[1]. Many Belarusian settlements face a 'shrinking cities' trend - a decrease in the population. The national capital Minsk is among the few cities whose population is growing.

Urban population in Belarus

	2009	2019	2022
Urban population	7 064 529	7 299 989	7 232 095
Total population	9 503 807	9 413 446	9 255 524
Share of urban population	74,33%	77,55%	78,14%

Source: https://president.gov.by/ru/belarus/numbers/facts

SDG 11 calls for our cities to become **safe, common, environmentally sustainable and resilient to climate change and natural disasters**. SDG 11 addresses the quality of housing, access to public transport, preservation of cultural and natural heritage, stakeholder engagement in urban governance, disaster risk reduction, efficient use of urban space and effective urban planning, and environmental quality in cities.

SDG 11 is closely related to other strategic goals: social and environmental policies, responsible production and consumption, and public administration. Therefore, sustainable urban development is impossible without progress in other areas of economic and social development.

15 national-level indicators help to track and measure progress towards SDG 11 in Belarus. Most of them correspond to generally accepted international indicators, though some of the indicators have been adapted, taking into account the national specifics and the available data.

The data for 13 indicators is collected by the National Statistical Committee[2]; the evaluation methodology for 2 indicators is still under development. The global ranking for achieving all the SDGs in 2022 describes Belarus' progress towards SGD 11 and urban sustainability as «remaining challenges and moderate improvement»[3].

TRENDS in urban development in Belarus:

1. Development of urban planning documents
2. Maintenance and upgrade of the urban infrastructure
3. Increase of building density
4. Improvement of the housing stock, including energy efficiency standards
5. Green areas development
6. Smart city development
7. Monitoring of urban environment
8. Development of system of waste separation and management
9. Reconstruction of historical heritage

CHALLENGES of urban development in Belarus:

1. Urban sprawl
2. Gaps in development of large and small cities
3. Aging of engineering and transport infrastructure
4. Sectoral approach to planning (lack of integration)
5. Low energy efficiency
6. Shrinking of green-blue spaces
7. Lack of city data
8. Low level of innovations
9. Lack of stakeholder engagement

TARGET 11.1

BY 2030, ENSURE ACCESS FOR ALL TO ADEQUATE, SAFE AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND BASIC SERVICES AND UPGRADE SLUMS

The quality of the living environment affects all of us, which puts the housing sector at the core of national social and urban policy and the country's sustainable urban development. The SDG 11 Global Report[4] notes that decent housing "contributes to the stability, security and empowerment of people and communities, leading to improved health and economic growth." The COVID-19 pandemic particularly emphasized the importance of planning, and the sanitary and psychological aspects of residential buildings and the surrounding environment.

The national SDG Target 11.1. addresses housing availability and adequacy reflected in the indicators of homelessness and the proportion of people who live in non-appropriate living conditions. Although Belarus shows positive results with regard to the SDG 11.1 target and its indicators, the data is not disaggregated by sex and age. It does not allow for analysing and addressing gender aspects and the interests of vulnerable groups concerning housing[5].

More than 70% of residential buildings in Belarus are concentrated in cities. In 2021, the country's housing stock consisted of over 1.5 million residential buildings with a total area of about 267.7 million square meters[6]. From 2018 to 2021, the construction of new residential dwellings displayed constant growth. Nevertheless, in 2022, this trend decreased. More than 70% of the total area of the national housing stock is multi-family residential buildings[7]. However, lately, the share of individual, single-family dwellings has started to grow. Today, housing availability and quality problems persist. At the end of 2021, about 616,022 families (including single citizens) required improvement in their living conditions. Homeless people remain a vulnerable group whose interests need to be taken into account in the context of urban development.

Fig 1. Energy efficient residential building in Hrodna.

Quantitative indicators of housing availability do not fully reflect the actual housing quality. About 80% of the country's housing stock does not meet contemporary energy efficiency standards, although steps are being taken to address the problem. Energy efficiency ratings A+, A, B and C[8] are applied to all buildings designed or reconstructed from 2021. According to official sources, 99.9%[9] of the multi-store apartment buildings constructed in 2021 meet **energy efficiency standards**, although their energy efficiency rating is not specified in the statistics. Buildings with an energy supply from electricity sources – 'electric houses' – were erected in several cities as well as pilot energy-efficient multi-story buildings (Fig. 1). Official energy efficiency requirements do not apply to individual detached houses; a high proportion of individual housing stock shows poor environmental performance.

A growing problem for Belarus is the so-called 'under-repair' housing stock – buildings which exceeded their terms for major renovations. For multi-story apartment buildings, renovation costs are covered by the national budget (within available limits). From 2010 to 2021, the number of renovated buildings doubled, from 1.4 to 3.4 million sq. m. per year. However, these measures are not enough to resolve the **quality problems** of housing stock. Moreover, standard renovation technologies do not improve the environmental performance of buildings. The renovation of individual houses is covered by the residents – owners or tenants – themselves. While the financial mechanisms to support individual housing renovation are missing, and the market for affordable energy-efficient, environmentally friendly materials and construction services is underdeveloped, the quality problem of 'under-repaired' individual homes is likely to grow. Since a large proportion of the residents of private houses are retired people, mostly women with a limited income, the problem also has a gender dimension.

Most of the residential buildings are still not adequately adapted to the needs of people with disabilities. New rules for access to and the use of multi-apartment buildings, coming into force from 2023, are aimed at increasing **inclusiveness** and improving access for all groups[10].

At present, the design and construction of residential buildings do not take into account the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and adaptation to climate change.

TARGET 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

National indicator SDG 11.2. – *the proportion of the population with convenient access to public transport, disaggregated by sex, age and disability* – reflects the **accessibility of public transport**, although it does not address safety issues and the environmental impacts of transport systems. Nonetheless, the national statistics do not disclose gender dimensions to the access to public transport, relating to age, place of residence and disability status.

Indicator 11.2.: Share of the population with access to public transport disaggregated by gender, age and disability

Share of the population living within 15 min distance from a public transport stop, % of total population

Age	0-17	18-24	25-54	55-59	60 and older
2016	90.2	92.2	89.9	84.9	85.1
2021	85.5	90.2	86.6	84.2	84.2

Source: National SDG portal

A large proportion of the Belarusian population uses public transport regularly. Over the years, Belarus has demonstrated a high level of public transport accessibility (85.7% of the population in 2021)[11], and constant efforts to improve the quality of service. Several cities installed electronic information screens and developed mobile applications with public transport timetables. At the same time, the public transport fleet in cities needs maintenance and deteriorates in the absence of funding, and public transport stops and vehicles are not equipped for people with limited mobility.

Road safety shows improvement. Mortality in road traffic accidents in 2021 decreased by 10% compared to 2016.

The spread of electric public transport remains slow, except for Minsk. The growing use of electric buses will positively impact the air quality and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Traditional transport infrastructure is approaching its technical limits and limits of its use. Integrated approaches to urban planning and transport planning may provide innovative solutions, which have been successfully tested in several Belarusian cities by international projects concerned with sustainable urban mobility. Several remarkable improvements in city transportation since 2016 include the expansion of cycling networks (Fig. 2), the redevelopment of transport-free zones, and the introduction of charging stations for electric vehicles.

Fig 2. Cycling lane in Polatsk

The further necessary steps include spreading environmentally-friendly technologies, promoting successful practices (e.g. in electric and public transport), the improvement of the legislative base and financing mechanisms for sustainable mobility.

TARGET 11.3

BY 2030, ENHANCE INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE URBANIZATION AND CAPACITY FOR PARTICIPATORY, INTEGRATED AND SUSTAINABLE HUMAN SETTLEMENT PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT IN ALL COUNTRIES

International recommendations for sustainable urban planning suggest that countries move towards smart growth, curbing excessive territorial expansion and regulating building density. In Belarus, the progress on Indicator 11.3.1.

Fig 3. Modern residental neighbourhood "Novaya Borovaya" in Minsk (newbor.by)

can only be assessed by fragmentary data, since the statistics reflect the regional centres only. Since 2016, both the area and population of these cities have changed insignificantly, although not proportionally. In most cities, the built-up in-built areas tend to grow, while the population decreases, causing a gradual fall in urban population density. Privileged 'estate belts' are formed around large cities, while mass housing construction with a high population density continues in peripheral 'sleeping districts'. In several cases, new multi-storey neighbourhoods are constructed outside the city borders (Fig. 3).

Reconstruction projects in the inner post-industrial areas (brownfields) are extremely rare. The growing practice of introducing new single buildings into existing neighbourhoods ('sealing development') often causes urban conflicts and may contradict other SDGs on housing comfort, health and social justice.

There are no official statistics on the indicator reflecting *"the proportion of cities which have structures in place to ensure the direct participation of civil society in urban planning and urban management"*. The country has an official practice for citizens' appeals concerning planning decisions[12], formally defined mechanisms for informing citizens and conducting public hearings on the development of Master Plans, detailed urban plans and networks of green public areas. International development projects stimulated the creation of working groups involving stakeholders in urban planning and management and developed recommendations on effective public involvement[13]. Nevertheless, permanent and effective stakeholder participation platforms and practices in cities are still lacking. The active involvement of citizens in urban discussions remains rare; today, this practice has almost ceased due to the restriction on civil society actions and the decline of international cooperation.

Indicator 11.3.1: Correlation between growth of building areas and the growth of population

	Brest		Viciebsk		Homiel		Hrodna		Minsk		Mihilyow	
	2016	2021	2016	2021	2016	2021	2016	2021	2016	2021	2016	2021
Population (trends)	↑	→	↑	↓	↑	↑	↑	→	↑	→	↑	↑
Building (trends)	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	→	↑	↑	→	→	→	→
Building areas per capita (м² per capita)	123,6	168,5	67	142,4	85,9	142,7	147,8	164,7	46,4	45,4	120,2	165
Correlation between building areas growth and the growth of population (trends)	→	↑	↑	↑	↑	→	→	→	→	→	→	→

Trends in population growth and growth of building areas

↑ increase

→ no remarkable changes

↓ decrease

Correlation between building areas growth and the growth of population:

↑ growth of building areas with decrease of population

→ growth of building areas correlate with the population growth

Source: National SDG portal

TARGET 11.4

STRENGTHEN EFFORTS TO PROTECT AND SAFEGUARD THE WORLD'S CULTURAL AND NATURAL HERITAGE.

Since 1992, four historical and cultural heritage sites in Belarus were included in the UNESCO World Heritage List: the Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park, the Mir Castle Complex, the Struve Arc and the Architectural and Cultural Complex of the Radziwill Residence in Nesvizh (Indicator 11.4.1.2). More than 1.5 thousand architectural monuments are currently under state protection. The national statistics do not reflect the distribution of heritage sites by city. The progress and effectiveness in preserving cultural and historical heritage almost entirely depend on the availability of national funds allocated for these purposes. Indicator 11.4.1.1 displays a gradual decrease in budget spending on culture and heritage protection. Experts note that the effectiveness of preservation efforts can be improved by: integrating special requirements for construction and other actions within areas of cultural and historical value into building legislation; a mandatory consideration of new challenges such as climate change; developing public-private partnerships for heritage protection.

TARGET 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.

Belarus has never introduced an emergency status due to large-scale natural disasters or the spread of COVID-19.

The economic damage of climate change to human health and urban infrastructure is not officially estimated, notwithstanding its obvious growing impact. Many cities face regular street flooding during the period of intense rain showers in the summer. Temperature transitions through 0^0C, which have become more frequent in the winter season, accelerate the wear and tear of road surfaces, the municipal water supply and sewerage networks. Climate change increases the likelihood of accidents within infrastructure, especially in older engineering and transport infrastructure requiring modernization.

Belarus has developed the National Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction in accordance with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction for 2015-2030. In 2019, the Strategy's implementation programmes for the national regions and Minsk were approved[14]. Promoting and financing innovation in housing and municipal services is essential for adaptation to climate change in cities.

TARGET 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.

Today, 100% of the Belarusian population regularly uses municipal services for s**olid waste disposal** (Indicator 11.6.1.1). Separate waste collection is organized in several places. There is an overall tendency of an increase in solid municipal waste.

The emissions of **atmospheric pollutants** from stationary and mobile sources fell by 4% from 2016 to 2021[15]. The air quality in settlements (with automatic measuring stations) can be described as very good, good and moderate; the periods with satisfactory, poor and very poor air quality are decreasing. The AirMQ.by project involves the public in monitoring the air quality in cities. Public monitoring sensors, installed in 36 communities, show good to moderate air quality. IT solutions may help to expand the public air monitoring system across other urban areas.

TARGET 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.

Public spaces are lands occupied by streets, squares, driveways, river banks, boulevards, parks and other urban areas, access to which is open to everyone. The development of green public spaces in cities provides a higher quality of life, reduces the urban heat island effect and improves air quality. Indicator 11.7.1 reflects the **total area of urban green spaces** in common use. However, information on safety and accessibility by sex, age and for persons with disabilities is not provided. According to national statistics, since 2016, the area of open areas and public spaces in Belarusian cities has almost halved, with the exception of Minsk. The current planning practices prioritise the development and improvement of 'official' parks, abandoned spaces and river banks. Ecosystem-based solutions aimed at preserving biological and landscape diversity at all levels, and improving the quality of public green spaces throughout the city are rarely used. Thus, while new green spaces in cities can contribute to positive statistics, they can be empty, failing to acquire the functions of public space.

TARGET 11.8

SUPPORT POSITIVE ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL LINKS BETWEEN URBAN, PERI-URBAN AND RURAL AREAS BY STRENGTHENING NATIONAL AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLANNING.

Planning regulations for sustainable regional and urban development are reflected in a number of national documents, including the National Strategy for Sustainable Development up to 2035, and the Directive on Architectural, Urban Planning and Construction Activities (soon expected to come into force). The ongoing reform of legal documentation in urban planning aims to establish mandatory requirements for urban development projects, their strategic environmental assessment (SEA) and necessary public discussion. The recent international technical assistance projects took several essential steps towards mastering new strategic planning tools, including regional strategies for sustainable development and roadmaps for integrated spatially-oriented development. Several regions and districts pioneered new approaches for preparing or updating their strategic documents. Seven pilot cities prepared Green Urban Development Plans up to 2040. More than 50 Belarusian cities joined the Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy and developed Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plans (SECAPs).

At the same time, recent years have demonstrated several negative tendencies in planning. The territorial, socially-oriented approach to planning is being weakened, with priority given to economic interests and industrial development. The country does not have a national urban development strategy and does not actively apply scientifically-based international recommendations. Insufficient funding of urban development actions at the national and regional level is one of the main obstacles to strengthening positive economic, social and environmental links between urban, suburban and rural areas.

The decreasing interest in sustainable urban development and a green economy can be linked to, among other things, the weakening of international cooperation. The technical and economic standards of urban planning projects do not take SDG 11 indicators into account. This complicates the assessment of the quality of territorial and urban planning and does not allow for measuring and monitoring the effectiveness of urban planning documents according to SDG 11 criteria. Overall, there is no system in place for collecting and processing urban data related to SDG 11 progress at the local level. It is also difficult to get access to official national statistics on urban development. The practice of territorial and urban planning does not address several essential contemporary issues such as climate risks, opportunities for using ecosystem solutions, and social aspects of inclusiveness and gender equality.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE COMMUNICATION AND MONITORING OF SDG 11

An **integral approach** is needed to accelerate progress towards SDG 11. The **national indicators** for SDG 11 need to be further developed and amended based on national specifics and the international indicators for green urban development. This will stimulate more effective analysis and assessment of urban problems and opportunities. Regularly prepared infographics and information bulletins will support effective communication. These materials can present statistical information and other materials from open sources, according to the global indicators of SDG 11. The factual information needs to be supported by expert analysis and assessment, focusing on the people's needs and explaining current and future risks, including climate change impacts.

Effective regional and urban planning requires the collection, **storage and management of unique data** reflecting the spatial characteristics of Belarusian cities and urban systems. Urban data should have a regional affiliation and reflect regional differences and specifics such as population, socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, socio-economic status, etc.), quality of the living environment (technical parameters of the housing stock, access to and quality of public services), and quality of the natural environment. Methodological support needs to be provided to create accessible informative online urban platforms in GIS format.

Technical guides and standards for innovation and best practices (e.g. ecosystem solutions and climate risk assessment) for urban infrastructure need to be prepared and distributed among practitioners. Professional training and curricula should contain information about risks, innovative solutions and stakeholder communication and public (residents') involvement.

The improvement and implementation of **integrated assessments of urban development and investment projects** (EIA and SEA) through the introduction of SDG-linked performance indicators will allow for assessing the impact of urban decisions on SDG 11 and other SDGs.

It is necessary to support **educational platforms on sustainable urban development and urban sustainability laboratories** for development and implementation of innovations and traditional technologies, addressing environmental, social, economic and cultural factors.

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