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Perspective

Measuring Progress in Equitable Urban Sustainability: Six Key Questions from European Cities

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Abstract: There is mounting evidence and concern that humanity is failing to equitably meet social needs while overshooting the Earth's ecological boundaries. Efforts to monitor progress towards equitable urban sustainability have expanded significantly over the years; however, challenges remain in comprehensively assessing and comparing the progress made in different settings. To stimulate critical thinking and guide capacity-building efforts, we assessed the main dimensions and indicators used to monitor urban sustainability and equity in a selection of European cities. We analysed city reports to identify major recurring underlying themes, which we framed as guiding questions, and suggested areas for further development. The purpose was not to highlight the strengths and limitations of specific cities' efforts. Our critical assessment identified several areas that require attention: the need for the more explicit use of theories or conceptual frameworks to select dimensions and indicators and to frame problems (and subsequently to guide intervention design); the standardisation of indicators; and improved data availability, reliability, and disaggregation to support data capturing, reporting, and comparability across settings. Despite meaningful progress, further efforts are needed to strengthen cities' capacities to measure, monitor, and report on equitable urban sustainability. These efforts should be complemented with educational initiatives to foster the socio-cultural and behavioural changes necessary to achieve more equitable, sustainable, and healthy urban environments.

Keywords: urban sustainability; social equity; indicators; monitoring; policy frameworks

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1. Introduction

Over the past several decades, there has been growing awareness of the interconnectedness between human development and ecological sustainability, alongside increasing concern and scientific evidence regarding the detrimental impact of human activities and social metabolism on Earth's systems [1–3]. There are a number of frameworks that attempt to demonstrate this. For instance, the Planetary Boundaries framework illustrates how humanity is overshooting the planet's ecological boundaries [1,4]. Similarly, the Doughnut Economics framework [5] illustrates how we are overshooting the planet's ecological

boundaries by consuming resources at unsustainable levels, whilst simultaneously failing to meet fundamental social needs [6,7]. There is also a growing recognition that the concept of sustainability—which has traditionally focused on the interplay between the environment, the economy, and societal relations—must also integrate well-being and justice at its core [8].

Cities face increasing pressure to find effective and equitable ways to respond to climate change, manage resources, and improve health for all residents. Urban planning is considered a key driver of the necessary transformations to create more sustainable, resilient, inclusive, and healthy urban environments, and cities increasingly strive to design and implement sustainable interventions that also meet citizen's needs. In addition, monitoring and evaluating the design and implementation of policies and interventions is essential to optimise their outcomes and impacts. In this regard, indicators are considered to be valuable instruments that enable the measurement and comparison of data across cities, countries, and sectors. Also, the selection of which indicators to use carries important implications for research, policy, and practice. The range of indicators used to monitor progress in these areas has significantly expanded over recent decades [8–11]. However, some scholars have critiqued these efforts for relying on reductionist quantitative indicator systems to capture complex social and natural processes, and for the limited consensus surrounding the frameworks that underpin such measurements [12].

In more recent years, a number of new initiatives and tools have been developed. For instance, the United Nations (UN) developed a global monitoring framework to support and streamline city-level progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), incorporating city-specific indicators [13]. However, the application of the different UN-SDG indicator frameworks has revealed a number of limitations and inconsistencies, making them challenging for cities to effectively implement and use [9]. Moreover, given the heterogeneity of urban ecosystems—each characterised by distinct metabolic processes—the local interpretation and assessment of these findings are essential to guide the appropriate design, implementation, and evaluation of urban interventions and policies [14,15]. In response, many cities have developed Local Voluntary Reviews [16] to monitor their own particular progress towards achieving the SDGs, which include locally relevant and adapted indicators.

In addition, the Thriving Cities Initiative further exemplifies a collaborative network of committed cities working to adapt the Doughnut Economics framework to their individual urban contexts [17,18]. These efforts are guided by local priorities and data availability and result in the creation of 'city portraits' [17,18]. While these collective efforts are important and encouraging, accurately assessing and comparing progress towards equitable and sustainable outcomes—both within and across urban contexts—remains extremely challenging. Strengthening this capacity remains an urgent priority [9,10,15,19].

To stimulate critical thinking on how to build comprehensive urban indicator systems, and to strengthen this capacity at the city level, we aimed to assess the main social and ecological dimensions and indicators used to monitor equitable urban sustainability across a selection of European city indicator reports, published over the past decade. The intention was to identify major underlying themes, which we presented in the form of guiding questions, along with some suggestions for potential ways forward in these areas for different cities to consider.

The purpose was not to specifically highlight the strengths and limitations of specific cities' efforts, which would require a comprehensive review, nor did we propose a universal set of indicators to use. The six questions were developed through an iterative thematic analysis of selected city reports, using a pragmatic selection process guided by the availability of data and our own perspectives. Given the inconsistencies in reporting across cities,

we adopted a thematic synthesis approach, organising insights around each question which emerged through the work—and drawing on examples where information was available and from the relevant scientific literature. Themes/guiding questions were discussed and refined collaboratively by the authors to ensure internal coherence and practical relevance. Given the exploratory nature of this work, formal inter-rater coding was not applied. City reports were considered for inclusion based on the following criteria:

(i) A population between 500,000 and 5,000,000 inhabitants, with a defined metropolitan area.
(ii) Has formed part of at least two relevant city networks—at least one environmental and one social—to demonstrate commitment to addressing eco-social challenges. The relevant city networks considered are as follows:
    - WHO European Healthy Cities Network: A wide-ranging, internationally recognised network of cities committed to prioritising health within governmental economic, social, and political agendas.
    - ICLEI—Local Governments for Sustainability: A global network of over 2500 local and regional governments committed to sustainable urban development. Operating in more than 100 countries, it engages municipalities and organisations to promote sustainable development in each territory.
    - EU Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy: A voluntary alliance of local governments committed to implementing the EU's climate and energy objectives, aligned with the goals of the Paris Agreement through concrete local climate plans.
    - Eurocities: The main network of major European cities, with a focus on key social and economic issues, such as inclusivity and local economies.
(iii) The development of a Local Voluntary Review and/or the attempt to apply the Doughnut Economics framework to the local level.

For background information, 16 cities across nine countries met the selection criteria: Brussels, Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Berlin, Stuttgart, Dresden, Düsseldorf, Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Malaga, Vienna, Warsaw, Helsinki, Stockholm, and Gothenburg.

To identify relevant documents/reports, we conducted several exploratory searches using Google Advanced Search, Google Scholar, and relevant organisational websites over a two-year period (2023–2024). The search strategy employed the following keywords: "city", "ecological", "social", "indicators", "report", and "sustainability".

Based on our critical assessment of the identified reports, and combined with insights from the scientific literature, we distinguished six main considerations regarding these cities' efforts to measure and monitor equitable urban sustainability. We presented these six considerations as guiding questions that emerged through this exercise, and suggested potential ways forward to better inform future efforts to develop more comprehensive approaches and shared metrics that are sensitive to local realities.

2. Six Key Questions

2.1. Are Cities Using Similar Theoretical Frameworks to Define and Measure Dimensions of Equitable Urban Sustainability?

We identified inconsistencies in the selection of dimensions used to represent and monitor equitable urban sustainability across city reports. This variation has important implications for the practical and policy approaches adopted by decision-makers in their efforts to work towards sustainability and equity at the urban level. For instance, when designing an intervention to address a specific dimension, it is essential to articulate a clear Theory of Change to guide the intervention, ensure alignment with overarching policy

objectives, and define the pathways leading to the intended outcomes. Equally important is fostering a shared understanding among stakeholders involved in the process [20–23].

We also observed a lack of explicit theoretical frameworks used to justify the selection of the ecological and social dimensions of equitable urban sustainability. This absence may partly explain the variation and inconsistency in the dimensions selected for monitoring across cities. Both issues may stem, at least in part, from a limited theoretical and transdisciplinary understanding among stakeholders of the interconnected nature of pressing social–ecological challenges at global, national, and city levels, as well as a limited understanding of their impacts, and how to unpack and operationalise these complexities in practice. While this is undoubtedly a difficult task, efforts have been made to try to address this. Notably, as mentioned, the Doughnut Economics framework [5] attempts to simplify some of the complexity surrounding the eco-social crisis by presenting a set of core ecological and social dimensions to consider at the global level. This framework has contributed to strengthening the general awareness and understanding of these challenges. However, its practical application remains limited. The framework does not sufficiently define or categorise the interconnected nature of these challenges and how each dimension interacts with others, particularly at the national or city level. This limits its utility for monitoring and implementation purposes. Similar critiques have been raised regarding the scalar translation of frameworks such as Planetary Boundaries, which face challenges in defining thresholds or boundaries that are both scientifically valid and policy-relevant at the urban level. It is also important to acknowledge that the Doughnut Economics framework was not originally designed for urban contexts. As a result, cities have been adapting it to their own settings, with Amsterdam being the first city to feature in the general methodological guide [17,18]. Since then, many cities—including Barcelona (Spain) and Glasgow (Scotland), amongst others—have attempted to apply this model to different degrees to their context [18]. In the case of Amsterdam, however, whilst the ecological dimensions still correspond to the Planetary Boundaries [1,5], the social dimensions have been reinterpreted into four new dimensions: Health, Connected, Empowered, and Enabled. However, their theoretical alignment with the SDGs or any guiding conceptual framework is not clearly demonstrated in the city's report [6,17,18].

Another recent conceptual framework has been developed, which integrates transdisciplinary perspectives and frameworks to advance the understanding of equitable and sustainable urban well-being [21,22]. The authors state that it can be used to guide the design and evaluation of urban public policies, comprehensive assessments, and monitoring efforts across multiple socio-ecological dimensions of sustainable well-being for all within diverse urban contexts [21,22]. Further efforts are required to apply this framework to inform monitoring strategies in different urban contexts, and to enable meaningful comparisons of urban performance; however, it offers a useful starting point. Therefore, this remains a critical area for continued research and development.

2.2. Are Cities Measuring the Same Indicators per Dimension? If Not, How Can We Better Standardise Certain Indicators Across Different Contexts?

In addition to the diverse selection of dimensions identified in the city reports, we observed considerable variations in the indicators selected to represent those dimensions. Also, there was a general lack of standardised indicators. While some variation is to be expected—given the heterogeneity of urban contexts—this lack of consistency poses challenges for accurately assessing, monitoring, and comparing progress across cities.

Many scholars and practitioners argue that standardisation is useful to assess and compare data, contexts, and policy options. Standardised indicators can help synthesise and simplify complex issues, enable the benchmarking of certain indicators, and support in-depth comparative analyses and strategic decision-making [12]. Others, however, point

to important methodological limitations, contending that standardised indicators may fail to capture the particular cultural, political, and institutional characteristics of different urban contexts, and emphasis the need for indicators to be locally meaningful and context-sensitive [12].

Despite these valid concerns, further efforts could be made to standardise certain indicators—where appropriate—to support comparative urban analyses and mutual learning. For example, biodiversity (loss) is frequently included as an ecological dimension in city reports; however, the specific indicators used to measure urban biodiversity vary widely across countries and regions, limiting comparability [8]. In one Gothenburg indicator report, indicators included "Proportion of well-maintained meadows and pasture", "Area of protected nature", "Area of natural grasslands", and "Area of deciduous forests" [24]. In contrast, Barcelona's draft city portrait report proposed indicators such as "Biodiversity of butterflies", "Bee population", "Urban woodland species", and "Amount of connected green spaces" [25].

The City Biodiversity Index—also known as the Singapore Index on Cities' Biodiversity—offers a promising example of a tool designed to evaluate and monitor urban biodiversity conservation efforts through a self-assessment process based on each city's individual baseline. The index covers a broad range of indicators that can be adapted to local contexts while still enabling comparisons across cities [26]. As such, it illustrates how standardised indicators can be combined to measure biodiversity management and governance. Naturally, a pragmatic approach is required—one that balances the need for comparability with the importance of contextual specificity.

2.3. To What Extent Are Political and Theoretical Considerations Affecting the Framing of Equitable Urban Sustainability, as Well as the Selection of Dimensions and Indicators?

Alongside the use of theories and frameworks to select dimensions and indicators (see Questions 1 and 2), it is also important to acknowledge how different institutional and collective perspectives, socio-cultural values, and ideologies shape the framing of urban sustainability and equity. These factors influence not only the selection of frameworks and indicators, but also the type of evidence that is prioritised, the allocation of power and resources, and the scope of political action undertaken to advance climate justice and urban equity. This framing is embedded in broader political, cultural, and social systems, and is reflected in the terminology employed, the definitions applied, and the types of data chosen for collection, analysis, and reporting [14,20,21,27,28]. These dynamics are evident, for instance, in ongoing debates around green growth versus degrowth as competing pathways for achieving rapid energy decarbonisation [29–31]. These debates are shaped by divergent ideologies and entrenched notions of 'progress' and 'development', reflecting fundamentally different views on what is feasible, and how to pursue more equitable and sustainable transformations.

Furthermore, our critical assessment found that other relevant aspects of urban sustainability and equity are not routinely captured in city indicator reports. For example, although energy is frequently measured as an eco-social dimension [8], and despite the inclusion of "Ensuring access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all" within the SDGs [32], energy poverty is not routinely measured [33]. Some cities have begun to address this gap and to explore its links with health inequalities, but such practices remain the exception rather than the norm [34]. To support greater comparability and granularity in urban data, cities could collaborate through open-data platforms and work towards shared standards for data collection and reporting, while maintaining space for local adaptation.

Similarly, precarious employment is often overlooked [35]. While many city reports include indicators related to "work", "working conditions", "employment status", or

"employment rates" [17,25,36–38], few assess job (lack of) quality in a multidimensional way. The Employment Precariousness Scale (EPRES), for example, is a validated tool that measures six dimensions of precarious employment—'temporariness', 'disempowerment', 'vulnerability', 'wages', 'rights', and 'exercise rights'—using multiple proxy indicators, and has been widely recommended to be incorporated to monitor job quality [39,40]. However, despite its application in numerous national, regional, and local studies, EPRES is not yet integrated into any official statistical systems for systematic measurement [40]. Again, this remains a critical area for practical development.

Another underrepresented area concerns civic awareness and participation in urban activities and environmental protection. Although these dimensions are critical for advancing sustainability and social equity, they are not commonly included in indicator frameworks. Notable exceptions include, for instance, a Stuttgart indicator report that includes the "number of educational programmes that related to ecological sustainability" [36].

Addressing these gaps requires strengthening research capacities—including new measurements, monitoring efforts, and forms of evidence generation—to enhance the measurement and visibility of urban inequalities. It also calls for greater awareness and understanding of the politics of science and measurement, including the roles that different actors play in shaping knowledge production and indicator development. Collectively, these efforts can support more inclusive and reflective approaches to urban monitoring and policymaking—helping to bring critical issues to the forefront and informing more effective and just interventions.

2.4. How to Foster Better Measurement of All Stages of an Urban Intervention, as Well as Its Outcomes

The design and implementation of transformational, intersectoral policies are essential to deliver more equitable and sustainable urban outcomes on-the-ground [10,41]. However, many city reports tend to monitor either certain (and often different) stages of an urban intervention's pathway or only the final outcome of interest. As a result, different indicators are chosen to measure progress in that area, which in turn limits the comparability of the results across cities (see also Questions 2 and 3). Recent research reviewed the SDGs and UN-Habitat indicator frameworks to assess the extent to which they can adequately measure the different stages of the processes that produce urban health outcomes. The authors also found that many of the SDG indicators assess outcomes, rather than the structural policies and interventions required to deliver them [9].

To effectively monitor the effects and impacts of interventions over time, it is important to first distinguish between the different stages of an intervention, and to select the appropriate indicators for each stage. For example, in the case of a carbon mitigation policy aimed at reducing CO_2 emissions, a robust monitoring approach would involve selecting a range of indicators that not only measure the final outcome of interest (e.g., CO_2 emission levels) but also track progress along the causal pathways (e.g., the design and implementation of CO_2 emission-reduction policies), aligned with the selected Theory of Change.

The observed inconsistencies are likely linked, in part, to a limited conceptual understanding of cause–effect relationships, certain political and theoretical factors that affect the framing of social and health equity challenges (see also Question 1 and 3), and a lack of capacity to comprehensively evaluate policy design and implementation [20,23]. Addressing these gaps will require greater efforts to enhance both conceptual and operational capacities for urban monitoring.

2.5. How Reliable, Comprehensive, and City-Specific Are the Collected Indicator Data?

Our analysis also revealed a lack of reliable and consistent data available to produce and monitor certain indicators in and across cities over time. This scarcity increases the risk of measurement errors and leads to misleading conclusions about differences across cities and/or the associations between urban environments and certain outcomes [11].

In addition, due to the lack of data availability at the urban scale, some city reports rely on data recorded at the municipal, regional, or county level. This appears to be the case when local institutions lack jurisdiction over particular social policy areas. For example, in Valencia's local SDG monitoring efforts, a substantial number of education-related indicators are reported, but the data are aggregated at the regional level [42]. In such cases, ensuring that institutions or higher levels of government with authority over a specific area are responsible for disaggregating data at the local level could improve the precision of evaluations and enhance urban monitoring efforts. In turn, this would contribute to more effective and efficient policy design and resource allocation tailored to the specific needs of cities.

2.6. Is Equity Being Appropriately Measured and Monitored in Cities?

Our assessment found that many city reports consider social equity as one or more dimensions of urban sustainability. For example, in the Thriving Cities' city portrait reports that have adapted the Doughnut Economics framework, social equity and gender equity are considered to be two distinct social dimensions [17,18]. Again, this distinction has important implications for the selection of indicators in relation to each dimension to monitor urban equity, as discussed in Questions 1 and 2. However, the concepts of equity and inequality—which are linked to fairness and justice within and across societies—are in fact cross-cutting, and should be addressed within and across all ecological and social dimensions, as appropriate. For example, following the Social Determinants of Health perspective [43], gender is only one of multiple axes of inequality that influence health outcomes in different social groups. Therefore, intersecting axes of inequality should be measured across a range of relevant dimensions—such as income, employment, education, etc.—to comprehensively assess urban equity. Quantifying intersectional inequalities is important to uncover systemic patterns of advantage and disadvantage in certain settings, yet this is not simple to conduct [44]. In practice, there is often limited disaggregated data available to be able to conduct such types of analyses [44]. Once again, this remains a critical area for research and practical development.

As highlighted in Questions 1 and 3, the lack of consensus on how to define and measure social equity likely stems from a limited conceptual understanding of the causal pathways, leading to inequitable outcomes. Additionally, political and theoretical considerations influence how these urban inequalities are framed, interpreted, and addressed. Also, each eco-social dimension should aim to include a range of disaggregated indicators as appropriate to capture the multifaceted nature of equity. In addition, by using intersectionality-informed quantitative methods and refining data collection approaches, researchers can move beyond analysing axes of inequality separately. This would help to generate empirical evidence that displays and monitors urban inequalities over time, which can be used to inform policies [44]. This is essential not only for assessing progress towards more equitable distributions of urban interventions, but also for ensuring that such interventions do not create or exacerbate spatial and social inequalities within and across neighbourhoods and districts. For example, new urban greening regeneration projects implemented in under-invested neighbourhoods can unintentionally contribute to green gentrification—a process whereby demographic and socioeconomic shifts occur as a result of increased prices, leading to the displacement and replacement of working-class and

ethnic-minority residents living in these neighbourhoods. As a result, these changes can lead to inequitable access to green urban spaces [45–51]. Without the thoughtful selection of equity-sensitive indicators, such unintended consequences may go unnoticed, undermining the transformative goals of urban sustainability policies.

Moreover, some research has shown that not all relevant available indicators measuring progress towards the SDGs are spatially disaggregated, which conceals important information about urban inequalities [9]. In addition, many cities and countries worldwide still face significant challenges in conducting equity-oriented monitoring and analyses, and guidance for this has been developed [52]. These limitations are partly due to the limited availability of transparent and reliable sociodemographic and health data—disaggregated by relevant social groups and geographical units—as well as the absence of data on eco-social, economic, and political determinants [43,52,53] (see also Question 5). Nevertheless, there are some positive examples worth highlighting. The city of Barcelona, for instance, regularly reports on social and health equity using a wide range of indicators disaggregated by gender, age, socioeconomic status, and city district. These data allow for the identification of differences in health outcomes by social groups across the city, and are used to inform the design, implementation, and monitoring of effective equity-oriented public health policies [53,54]. Nevertheless, more work is urgently needed to strengthen the capacity of cities to monitor, measure, and report on urban inequalities in different settings. Doing so is essential to ensure that urban transitions are not only sustainable but also socially just. In summary, these critical reflections aim to stimulate critical thinking and support the more effective monitoring of progress towards achieving more just and sustainable urban environments within the European context.

This assessment identifies a number of underlying themes, which we present in the form of guiding questions, along with some suggestions for potential ways forward in these areas for different cities to consider. This thematic assessment does not constitute a comprehensive systematic review of the grey literature or of all of the indicators used in all European cities. Also, we acknowledge the limited geographical scope of the cities included, which reflects the availability of relevant and accessible documentation rather than an attempt at comprehensive pan-European coverage. Nevertheless, the findings underscore the importance of addressing these key challenges when measuring, monitoring, benchmarking, or evaluating progress towards urban sustainability and equity. These issues are relevant across diverse European settings and may also resonate with urban contexts globally. Future research could build on this work by expanding the sample of cities, deepening methodological analysis and comparative insights, and further operationalizing the six guiding questions in diverse urban contexts. These questions may also help guide local governments in strengthening their indicator frameworks, support researchers in advancing evaluation methodologies, and inform international actors—such as UN-Habitat—in their efforts to facilitate more harmonised sustainability monitoring across cities.

3. Conclusions

Effectively measuring, monitoring, and evaluating urban transformations—including the development of appropriate eco-social indicators—pose both theoretical and practical challenges. To enhance this capacity, our critical assessment of selected European city reports identified a number of key areas for consideration in future monitoring efforts. These include the more explicit use of theories or conceptual frameworks to guide the selection of eco-social dimensions and indicators, and to frame urban problems (and subsequently guide intervention design). Stronger efforts are also required to standardise certain indicators while also improving data availability, reliability, and disaggregation

to enhance data collection, reporting, and comparability across settings. Taken together, the six questions highlight persistent gaps in conceptual frameworks, indicator selection, data governance, and the integration of equity. Addressing these dimensions in a more coordinated way could support the development of monitoring systems that are not only more comprehensive, but also more just and context-sensitive. These efforts could be further complemented through participatory measurement processes, which can enhance local relevance, increase knowledge sharing, foster stakeholder engagement, and guide the development of interventions that are more responsive to residents' needs. In addition, more educational efforts are needed to engage diverse stakeholders and increase social awareness of the interconnected nature of geopolitical, ecological, economic, and socio-cultural drivers of the environmental degradation, natural resource exploitation, and persistent social and health inequalities that our planet and cities are struggling with. These diverse activities could help to foster the necessary socio-cultural and behavioural changes to work towards creating more equitable, sustainable, and healthy urban environments.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UN	United Nations
EPRES	Employment Precariousness Scale

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