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# The New Urban Agenda – a Challenge or an Opportunity for Polish Cities?

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**Abstract:** The New Urban Agenda annexed to the United Nations Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 23 December 2016 requires new urban rules and regulations. It implements Sustainable Development Goal 11 aimed to make cities more inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. From a global perspective, it is the first such comprehensive project related to urban areas in the world and which develops and affirms previous global actions. From the perspective of Polish cities, the implementation of the particular points of the New Urban Agenda could be a challenge and an opportunity at the same time. The main assumptions of the document seem to be quite difficult to achieve. They address both the issue of environmental sustainability and resilient urban development and the problems of planning and managing urban spatial development. The issues raised include city planning, spatial design, financing, management, providing goods and services, social inclusion, cohesion and many other areas. In the conditions of constantly changing law, lack of proper financing and organizational problems that Polish cities have to face, it seems that it will be difficult to implement the New Urban Agenda in Poland successfully.

**Keywords:** The New Urban Agenda, Sustainable Development Goals, sustainable development, cities, urban development

**JEL codes:** R58, Q01, Q56

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## 1. Introduction

According to the UN, “today, more than half the world’s population lives in cities. By 2030, it is projected that 6 in 10 people will be urban dwellers” (UN General Assembly, 2016). Hence, there is no denying that cities are becoming more and more important for the global social and economic development. This issue has been the subject of interest of scholars, local and state governments, social organizations and other groups involved in the functioning of urban areas for several

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decades. The role and importance of cities on the global map has been studied and discussed by a number of researchers, from Castells and Harvey to Friedmann, Florida, Jacobs, Krugmann, Sassen, and many others. City-level authorities are increasingly important in the global economic game, which was emphasized in Barber's famous book "If Mayors Ruled the World" (2013). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that international organizations and departments began to pay a lot of attention to urban issues. Their large-scale unprecedented efforts in this area led to the publication of the document entitled "New Urban Agenda annexed to the United Nations Resolution" adopted by the General Assembly on 23 December 2016 (UN General Assembly, 2016).<sup>1</sup> The idea behind this document, the whole consultation process and its final form are the result of the work of thousands of people and organizations from the whole world. Consequently, the document was created that is of a universal character and applies to all cities in the world.

A question arises whether Polish cities may become its active beneficiaries. Is it necessary to implement its assumptions in a cohesive manner, refer to it directly in the process of shaping the development policy, or whether other strategic documents on the regional and national level should first of all transpose its goals into Polish reality, thus providing local governments with a point of reference for their own activities? The main aim of this paper is to determine the crucial points of the document with reference to Polish circumstances and to point out the main challenges and opportunities in the implementation process.

## **2. From Sustainable Development Goals to the New Urban Agenda (NUA)**

A number of different global strategic documents concerning the issue of urban development have been published over the last 40 years. As Satterthwaite notes, "four of them – the Healthy Cities Movement, Local Agenda 21, Participatory Budgeting and Make My City Resilient – included clear, simple and relevant guidelines for urban governments" (2016: 2). These documents were, and, to a large degree, are the foundations for formulating a strategy of the development of urbanized areas around the world. Satterthwaite also performs a kind of time and functional

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<sup>1</sup> This document was also translated into Polish. The translation into Polish was provided by the Ministry of Economic Development of Poland and published on <http://habitat3.org>. It should be pointed out, however, that this translation is inaccurate at times. Some terms, such as „affordability”, „resilience” or „disposal”, are sometimes used in the wrong context, and the application of their numerous Polish equivalents is not always substantiated. Moreover, there are some editorial errors in the document.

delimitation of periods of the development of the thought on the city and on the ways of managing its components. He distinguishes nine trends in the evolution of the strategic approach to urban space and he locates them in time. They include: (1) Late 1960s/1970s: Housing by People, (2) 1970s: The New Urban Agenda at Habitat I, (3) 1980s: The Healthy Cities Movement, (4) 1980s: New urban agendas, (5) 1990s: Co-production at scale, (6) 1990s: Participatory budgeting, (7) 1992: Local Agenda 21, (8) 1990s–today: Really bottom-up urban development, (9) 2010–today: Making cities resilient: my city is getting ready (Satterthwaite, 2016: 3-4). The above classification may be supplemented by the creation trend “Smart sustainable cities”, which is parallel to “Making cities resilient.” The expression “Smart sustainable city” itself, promoted by, among others, Höjer and Wangen, may be understood, based on “the Brundtland definition”, as a “city that meets the needs of its present inhabitants, without compromising the ability for other people or further generations to meet their needs, and, thus, does not exceed local or planetary environmental limitations and where this is supported by ICT (information and communication technologies)” (Höjer and Wangen, 2015: 100). Hence, it is yet another stage in the evolution of cities as separate organisms, creating their development on the basis of modern tools.

It is difficult, however, to compare highly developed Western cities with those located in developing countries. Infrastructural, social, spatial and environmental differences place them at opposite poles. Thus, it is even a bigger challenge to undertake global initiatives in order to improve the quality of life of urban residents and to enhance the inclusive and safe development of cities. This challenge was once again taken up by the United Nations, which began to prepare a document entitled „Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (UN General Assembly, 2015). It was adopted at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit on 25 September 2015. Its main part includes 17 goals referred to as Sustainable Development Goals, concerning issues such as hunger, poverty, education, equality, affordability (of water, housing, energy), innovation, climate, justice, etc. The adoption of the 2030 Agenda marked the end of the 15-year period following the implementation of the Millennium Declaration. Connection paths of these documents, of their time and formal implications, and the process of the formation of the final agenda itself are presented by Dodds et al. (2016). In their work, they focus on the strategic, social and economic mechanisms that have led to the establishment of SDGs, including “the global financial crisis, the death and rebirth of sustainable development, the Rio+20 and the UN Development Group’s work” (Dodds et al., 2016).

From the point of view of this paper, it is goal no. 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable – that is of key importance. Within its framework, seven targets to be achieved by 2030 were set. They concern, among other things, housing affordability, transportation systems, safety, urban planning, cultural and natural heritage, inclusion or risk reduction. The targets were formulated in quite a general way as only the desired direction of changes was determined. However, their indicators carry specific values, which may be the subject of comparisons, analyses and verification. For example, for goal 11, which states that: „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”, the following indicators were proposed: “Proportion of urban solid waste regularly collected and with adequate final discharge out of total urban solid waste generated, by cities” and “Annual mean levels of fine particulate matter (e.g. PM2.5 and PM10) in cities (population weighted)” (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg11>). Therefore, they are specific, measurable tools that can be used to monitor the implementation of SDG-11. The proposed set of targets and measures, however, is a general tool for implementing the assumptions of this goal. Its full operationalization was formulated at the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, which took place in Quito, Ecuador from 17-20 October 2016. It was the first UN global summit on urbanization since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, where world leaders adopted the New Urban Agenda (<http://habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda/>). The document was endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly at its sixty-eighth plenary meeting of the seventy-first session on 23 December 2016. The primary idea behind the creation and adoption of this document was „to set global standards of achievement in sustainable urban development” and work out a new model of thinking about the city and urban management. Jane Jacobs’ demand, formulated in late 1950s, once again became popular. She said that: „Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.” (Jacobs, 1961: 238).

The origin of the NUA and the evolution of its form were discussed by, among others, Parnell (2015) and Evans et al. (2016). Parnell points at “key individuals and institutions that shaped the Habitat Agenda, notable shifts between habitat agreements and the process of setting the Agenda”. He emphasizes that the wide consultation process and the participation of almost 200 national governments and a number of interest groups led to the establishment of a universal

document the assumptions of which are commonly known and which, ultimately, will be implemented at the national level.

The content of the document, however, which is typical of the outcome of work of many interest groups, is based on far-reaching compromises and which connects problems of totally different countries, has a very declarative character and includes a number of general statements.

### **3. The main assumptions of the New Urban Agenda**

The whole document was divided into two main parts: 1. Quito Declaration on Sustainable Cities and Human Settlements for All and 2. Quito Implementation Plan for the New Urban Agenda. In the first part, a vision of the desired condition of cities by 2030 was presented. It focused on such areas as: cities' functions, the availability of resources (water, sanitation, housing, public spaces, greenery), citizens' security and safety in the context of nutrition, health, education, infrastructure, energy, air quality and livelihood, social participation, gender and age equality, economic growth, disaster risk reduction and management, the protection, conservation and restoration of ecosystems. The operationalization of the vision was supplemented by "principles and commitments" and by a "call for action". It is particularly that last element that is of no small importance. Apart from an actual call for action, it includes an expression that is characteristic of the whole content of the document, i.e.: „We adopt this New Urban Agenda as a collective vision and political commitment to promote and realize sustainable urban development, and as a historic opportunity to leverage the key role of cities and human settlements as drivers of sustainable development in an increasingly urbanized world" (UN General Assembly, 2016: 6). It seems that such an expression in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a statement of the obvious and confirms the phenomena that have been discussed in the literature for years. At the same time, it somehow legitimizes changes in the contemporary world and, perhaps, opens global opportunities for all kinds of urban units and emphasizes their importance as drivers of sustainable growth.

The second part of the paper, which addresses the issue of the implementation of the Agenda, is much more extensive. Its principal components are „Transformative commitments for sustainable urban development" and terms and conditions of "Effective implementation". Transformative commitments for sustainable urban development include: social inclusion and ending poverty, urban prosperity and opportunities, urban development. The issues of

sustainability, resilience, inclusion, affordability, equality and participation are constantly emphasized. It is also stressed that national governments and regional and local authorities play a very important role in the creation of effective conditions for the implementation of the Agenda both in terms of policies and strategies, as well as current operational activity. A lot of attention was paid to the issue of spatial planning and territorially integrated cooperation. Cost effectiveness and the efficient use of resources are determined by factors such as „urban form, infrastructure and building design”, and a number of “territorial systems integrate urban and rural functions in frameworks of the urban-rural continuum”. These phenomena, along with the challenges that urban areas have to face, may be key to their further, dynamic development. The Agenda points out that it is cities and urbanized areas that are drivers of growth at the moment.

The part concerning effective implementation is the answer to the commitments included in the document. Its division into individual elements is a kind of hierarchization of recommended practical tools. Special emphasis was put on “building the urban governance structure: establishing a supportive framework and planning and managing urban spatial development” (UN General Assembly, 2016: 30 et seq.). As a result, the following hierarchy of key action areas was proposed: 1) national urban policy, 2) urban legislation, rules and regulations, 3) urban planning and design, 4) urban economy and municipal finance, 5) local physical implementation (UN Habitat, 2017). They were addressed in the operational supplement to the NUA, i.e. Action Framework for Implementation of the New Urban Agenda, which includes the operational guidelines for the implementation and evaluation of the agenda (UN Habitat, 2017). As it was emphasized in the introduction to the document, it is „a fairly clear picture of what cities should aim for, generally, and what they need to get there” (UN Habitat, 2017: 1). Such content of the document and the preparation and adoption of an operational document may make the NUA become a specific constitution of urban strategies, particularly owing to its universality, comprehensiveness and, paradoxically, high degree of generality, which favors individual, local implementation.

#### **4. The implementation of the New Urban Agenda in Polish cities**

As far as the implementation of the NUA in the world is concerned, first national initiatives and

critical publications appear.<sup>2</sup> By analyzing the whole of the document and referring its provisions to Polish legal and organizational framework regarding urban management and current administrative practice, we may indicate some key areas that the document particularly concerns. The catalogue presented below is not complete, which is, firstly, due to the fact that the Agenda was published a short time ago and there are no operational guidelines and good practices as regards implementation yet, and, secondly, because Polish local governments of all levels have insufficient knowledge of how it works, what its key assumptions are and how it may be implemented. The most important areas of the potential opportunities and challenges related to the implementation of NUA include: 1) the existing system of managing national development, 2) legal framework of spatial planning, including prospects of changing it, 3) the involvement of local governments of different levels, especially commune councils, in the activity aimed at planning in functional areas, special purpose cooperation, integrated planning, 4) urban regeneration activity, including the legal framework of this process, 5) the organizational framework of the functioning of Polish local governments, 6) the condition of the natural environment in Polish cities and its implications for the ecological security of residents.

The first of the abovementioned areas concerns the system of national development. It follows the provisions of the act of 6 December 2006, based on the document entitled “Principles of National Development”, adopted by the Council of Ministers on 27 April 2009. It is a set of integrated long- and midterm plans and policies in the key areas for national development (Journal of Laws of 2016, item 383 with further amendments and Principles of national development... 2009). The most important documents in the system are the “National Spatial Development Concept 2030” (*Koncepcja Przestrzennego Zagospodarowania Kraju - KPZK 2030*, 2011) and the “National Urban Policy 2023” (*Krajowa Polityka Miejska - KPM 2023*, 2015). They were both formulated at the time when the NUA had not been prepared yet. In the scale of Poland, however, it is those documents that chart the strategic directions of spatial development in general and of the development of urban areas. In some points, they are consistent with the assumptions of the Agenda, although it must be admitted that they are, to a large extent, just universal principles, which are in line with the contemporary trends in the management of cities and urban areas and

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<sup>2</sup> The implementation activity may be followed on a daily basis on the website of the Agenda and UN Habitat <http://nua.unhabitat.org/list.htm#>. No initiatives concerning Poland have been mentioned there yet (as of 23 June 2017). A brief overview of the most important opinions included in critical publications was presented in the concluding part of this paper.



which are the answer to challenges that these areas face. The following components of the KPM deserve special attention: environmental protection and climate change adaptation, city transport and mobility, and spatial development. What could be added to the updated version of this document, making it more consistent with the NUA, are definitely social issues, especially those related to inclusion, equal rights, fighting discrimination, and social equality and justice. Challenges connected with differences between and within urban areas, social stratification, increasing inequality and inharmonious development should also be dealt with more broadly. KPZK 2030, the document defining the strategy of national spatial development in six main areas, also emphasizes the role of issues addressed in the NUA. Just like in the case of the KPM, one might expect more reference to social issues, although its other components deal with the problems of space and spatial development quite thoroughly, addressing, for example, the issues of environmental protection, improving risk resilience, protection from extreme climate phenomena, or the efficient system of spatial planning (KPZK 2030, 2011).

Another area of potential opportunities and threats related to the implementation of the NUA is the existing law concerning spatial planning in Poland and the prospects for changing it. The present act on planning and spatial development of 27 March 2003 (Journal of Laws of 2017, item 1073 with further amendments) and the draft code of urban construction cover the whole sphere of spatial planning in the country. A detailed analysis of the draft code of urban construction and of changes in other legal regulations in the area of environmental protection, construction, or regional and local development, would help to determine the degree to which they would contribute to the effective implementation of the NUA. At the present stage of consultation between ministries, it is difficult to answer this question as some changes have not been specified yet. At the same time, the preliminary examination of the draft code lets us conclude that its general assumptions, e.g. the principle of high-density housing development, reducing its transport intensity and preferring brownfield projects to greenfield investments (Ministry of Infrastructure and Construction 2016), may be conducive to the effective implementation of the goals of the NUA, all the more so because the NUA proposes that the activity in the areas of „urban legislation, rules and regulations” and „urban planning and design” should be key implementation tools (UN General Assembly, 2016: 7 et seq.). However, it will be the finally adopted detailed regulations and the administrative practice that will become the actual indicators of the growth of Polish cities in a spirit of the ideas of the NUA.

The sphere of urban regeneration, including its legal regulations, was singled out as a special area of activity connected with the implementation of the NUA. According to the currently binding act, urban regeneration is defined as “the process of improving derelict or dilapidated areas, in a comprehensive manner, through integrated efforts aimed at the local community, space and economy, territorially concentrated, taken by the stakeholders of regeneration on the basis of the commune’s regeneration program.” The *sine qua non* criterion for delimiting a derelict area to be regenerated is the accumulation of social problems (*Act on regeneration*, art. 2 and further). It is thus a complex process, which combines activities in the spatial, economic, and social sphere, and, in some cases, in the environmental one. Therefore, it is a natural tool for the implementation of the NUA goals in Polish conditions. It seems that local governments’ ongoing work on the preparation and implementation (connected with monitoring, evaluating and updating procedures) of urban regeneration programs may be a sufficient tool for making cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

An obvious question arises as to whether and to what extent cities will be able to use this opportunity. The NUA assumptions are implemented incidentally, without any broader awareness of what the document is really about. Our talks with the representatives of a few dozen self-governments in Greater Poland shows that local administration officials (including the representatives of top authorities) do not know that this document has been drawn up and they do not show interest in it. This leads us to the next issue.

The sphere indicated as the key area concerns the issue of the organizational framework of the functioning of Polish local governments. They face some significant barriers, such as organizational structures in administration, the competences of local government employees and of elected officials (councilors, borough leaders, mayors, presidents), and the method of financing and financial independence of local government units. One of the most extensive diagnoses of these problems is provided in the work prepared by Małopolska School of Public Administration, entitled “*Narastające dysfunkcje, zasadnicze dylematy, konieczne działania. Raport o stanie samorządności terytorialnej w Polsce*” (“The Increasing Dysfunctions, Basic Dilemmas, Necessary Action. The Report on the Condition of Local Government in Poland”) (Bober et al., 2014). According to this report, Polish local governments display high administrative inefficiency and professional incompetence, are slow to cooperate with other local government units, and misperceive issues related to growth, planning processes and strategic management (Bober et al.,

2014, 41 et seq.). The accumulation of negative phenomena makes local governments less interested in new initiatives (especially those which do not involve obtaining new sources of financing). The NUA may be classified as one of such projects, especially as the state administration and government departments do not undertake any promotional activities.

What poses the biggest challenge, however, is the last of the abovementioned areas – the condition of the natural environment in cities and the resulting implications for the ecological security of urban residents. Despite access to the basic indicators of the quality of life from the point of view of infrastructure (sanitation, sewage system, electricity), thriving economy (very low unemployment rate, steadily increasing average salary), freely available social services (education, health protection), the condition of the ecosystem in Polish cities, especially when it comes to air quality, is far from satisfactory.<sup>3</sup> In autumn and winter, the constantly updated information on air pollution (for example, on the website of the Inspectorate of Environmental Protection – the Chief Inspectorate and its regional branches) provides data about the excessive concentration of particulate matter PM10 and PM2.5 and of other dangerous substances. In many points, the NUA stresses the necessity of improving air quality in order to minimize threats to city dwellers' ecological security, including those related to their health and life. In this context, the Agenda brings up the issues of the organization of transport, power generation, sustainable consumption, environmental risk management, etc. Although there are some active strategic programs in Poland (air protection programs, low emission programs, sustainable transport schedules, so-called anti-smog acts), this area still calls for strong organizational, financial and educational support. It refers both to the issue of low emission and to the share of energy from renewable resources in the gross final consumption of energy in the country. In this context, the NUA may be a set of recommendations rather than the actual description of the target state of affairs which could be quite difficult to achieve in the foreseeable future. However, it may be an important point of reference, which should not be ignored in the area of activities aimed at improving the environmental condition of cities.

Summing up the discussion on the potential of the implementation of the NUA in Polish cities, we should raise a few practical issues, which are a notable proof of the limited influence of

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<sup>3</sup> In this context, the NUA also addresses the issue of urban heat islands and noise (UN General Assembly, 2016: 11), and threats of natural disasters, such as earthquakes, extreme weather events, flooding, subsidence, storms etc. (UN General Assembly, 2016: 12).

this document. There are an insufficient number of widespread informational and promotional activities related to the functioning of the NUA. Only a few organizations dealing in this area operate in Poland. An example of such an institution is a non-governmental organization - UNEP/GRID Center –Warsaw, which is a Department of the National Foundation for the Environmental Protection), involved in SDG Partnership “*Razem dla środowiska*” (“Together for the Environment”). The text of the NUA itself has been published in Polish only recently, and the translation financed by the Ministry of Development has not been properly verified in terms of contents and language. This may indirectly reflect the relatively low importance that the state authorities attach to this document. None of the initiatives launched by Poland is presented on the website or promotional materials of the UN when it comes to the practical implementation of the UN, which may be a pattern to follow for other member states of the organization. As there is no top-down information on this document and on the transformation of its assumption into the development goals of regions and cities, it is practically not implemented at all at the local government level in Poland.

## 5. Conclusion

When considering the opportunities and challenges related to the NUA, one cannot ignore some critical voices raised against this document. They were formulated both at the stage of long preparations for the final United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) in Quito in October 2016, and, after the document’s final content became known (criticism was less severe at this stage as the document was published quite a short time ago). For example, Kaika notes in Environment and Urbanization that if the document itself, together with its assumptions, as revolutionary as they are, is implemented „within this old framework”, it will be only a half measure or, as she refers to it - „immunology” (Kaika, 2017). It will make citizens resistant to further symptoms and effects of deepening inequality and degradation, at the same time making them less sensitive to these negative phenomena. Critics focus on the lack of actual applicability of the document. A change in the way of thinking about cities and their space cannot be limited to their new vision and proposals concerning their future, at the same time being based on the previous „policy and methodological framework.”

Before the final version of the document was adopted, Buckley and Simet commented on

its content a similar vein, although they were slightly less critical (Buckley and Simet, 2015). They pointed out that it may contribute to a true and deep change of cities - „perestroika”. The key to change would be the use of the endogenous resources of cities. Changes in urban regulations and in the subsidy model make it possible to achieve the desired benefits without using additional resources. Other experts that expressed their opinions on the challenges of the NUA and its potential deficiencies include, among others, Zoomers et al. (2017) and Roseland and Spiliotopoulou (2016).

The potential threats and opportunities related to the implementation of the NUA which have been discussed in this paper partly reflect the quoted authors’ doubts whether the process will be successful. Although it would be unreasonable to expect that yet another global document would lead to the modification of, for example, spatial planning systems or national development strategies, one should bear in mind a strong message that such documents convey. They reflect some worldwide trends, resulting from wide compromises and consensuses, which, firstly, determine the way of thinking about cities and urban areas, and, secondly, are a kind of diagnosis of problem areas and a general strategy of handling them. Therefore, it seems that Poland, as a developed country, should be a driving force in this respect, following the current global trends and trying to put them into practice in the best possible way

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## THE NEW URBAN AGENDA – A CHALLENGE OR AN OPPORTUNITY FOR POLISH CITIES?

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*Nowa Agenda Miejska – szansa czy wyzwanie dla polskich miast?*

*Streszczenie*

Nowa Agenda Miejska (NUA) stanowiąca załącznik do rezolucji ONZ przyjętej przez Zgromadzenie Ogólne w dniu 23 grudnia 2016 r. wprowadza nowe regulacje w zakresie zasad funkcjonowania ośrodków miejskich i terenów zurbanizowanych w ogóle. Realizuje 11 Cel Zrównoważonego Rozwoju, postulując, aby miasta stały się bardziej inkluzywnymi, bezpiecznymi, odpornymi i zrównoważonymi. Z perspektywy globalnej NUA jest pierwszym tak kompleksowym projektem odnoszącym się do terenów zurbanizowanych na całym świecie, rozwijającym i sankcjonującym wcześniejsze działania o charakterze ogólnoświatowym. Z punktu widzenia polskich miast wdrożenie poszczególnych punktów NUA może stanowić jednocześnie wyzwanie i szansę, bowiem główne założenia dokumentu wydają się być wymagające. Odnoszą się zarówno do kwestii rozwoju zrównoważonego i odporności (rezyliencji) terenów zurbanizowanych jak i do planowania i zagospodarowania przestrzennego. Podejmują kwestie planowania miast, kształtowania przestrzeni, finansowania, zarządzania, dystrybucji dóbr i usług, włączenia społecznego, spójności i wielu innych. W warunkach zmian otoczenia prawnego, niedostatków w zakresie finansowania i problemów organizacyjnych z jakimi mierzyć się muszą jednostki miejskie w Polsce, skuteczne wdrożenie założeń NUA wydaje się być zagrożone.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Nowa Agenda Miejska, Cele Zrównoważonego Rozwoju, zrównoważony rozwój, miasta, rozwój terenów zurbanizowanych

**Kody JEL:** R58, Q01, Q56

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