

Cities and the Sustainable Development Goals

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Although they have been adopted by national governments, the globally agreed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are fundamentally relevant to local and city-level actors. This briefing sheet documents why cities and local governments are crucial for the successful implementation of the SDGs.

Key messages

- The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are 17 global objectives adopted by all parties of the United Nations to guide efforts towards eradicating poverty and addressing sustainable development worldwide by 2030.
- Considering that cities represent half of the world's population and two-thirds of the global economy, it can confidently be said that the SDGs have been adopted in an urban world. It is for this reason that action at the city-level is crucial, and the likelihood of the SDGs being successful is considerably greater if local and regional governments are sufficiently empowered.
- The SDGs have recognized the transformative power of urbanization with a dedicated goal (SDG 11) focused on cities and human settlements, which represents a pivotal first step to empowering cities. However, the role of urban actors extends to all 17 SDGs, meaning that local government achievements on urban targets will productively complement the entire SDG framework.
- Particularly during the last two decades, cities have been the drivers of innovative sustainable development at the local level. When it comes to the SDGs, it is clear that not all countries or cities will work at the same speed or have had the same starting point. Ambitious and innovative cities that have been pioneers in sustainable urban development will push and lead this Agenda and provide an example for cities in need of support.

How are the SDGs related to cities?

The "[2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#)" was finalized during the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit in September 2015. The core component of the Agenda is the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): 17 cross-cutting goals which will guide global action and investment for sustainable development over the next 15 years.

Although it was nations that met in New York to establish the 2030 Agenda, the thematic areas covered by the SDGs – ranging from poverty eradication to climate change reduction, economic growth, inequality, higher education, and employment – are fundamentally relevant to urban areas. More than 50 percent of the world's population now lives in cities, which are growing at the rate of 60 million



people per year. This growth has had a profound impact on the global economy, as approximately 70 percent of the world's economic activity now occurs in urban areas. These trends make it clear that urban areas are the central economic, political, and social hubs of the 21st century.

Local and subnational governments have already been engaging with the majority of the thematic content covered by the SDGs, but they cannot meet the scale of the challenges to sustainable development forecasted within the 2030 Agenda without the support and enabling frameworks from national governments and international agencies. In this regard, the SDGs are coming into force at exactly the right time. Because even though local governments are increasingly being recognized for their accomplishments as champions for sustainable development, they require capacity and resources to ensure that further urban development is well-organized and equitable. Whether or not local governments are sufficiently empowered will determine whether the SDGs succeed or fail.

City-level engagement with the SDGs and 2030 Agenda

1. To what extent does the 2030 Agenda consider city-level action?

Because urban areas are the backdrop for much of the thematic content of the SDGs, cities will be fundamental to the implementation of all 17 SDGs. This is reflected in their mention in paragraph 45 of "Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", which commits UN Member States to "work closely on implementation with regional and local authorities", and is a positive indication that the significance of local government action will be taken into account in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

SDG 11: The UrbanSDG

Sustainable Development Goal 11, also known as the UrbanSDG, aims to "*Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable*". It is a truly transformational element of the 2030 Agenda, being the only goal that is location-specific at a manageable scale. Cities can provide the much needed interlinkages and integrated approaches across sectors and goals, given that a city represents a microcosm of all the other SDGs. The inclusion of SDG 11 represents a pivotal first step towards the integration of sustainable urban development into the global framework for action, and will upscale the

effect that local and subnational governments can have in making contributions to the achievement of the SDGs.

That SDG 11 has been adopted is a reflection of the many decades of accomplishments within urban sustainability that have been made by ambitious local and subnational governments and their advocates. The past decade has seen various local and regional government organizations act as multipliers for local action. ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability, for example, can trace its activism back to the spirit and vision of "Local Agenda 21" which was enshrined in the Chapter 28 of the Agenda 21 adopted at the UN's Earth Summit in 1992.

2. Why an urban SDG?

A major obstacle to global sustainable development in an urbanized world is that urban policy is far too frequently pursued in a disintegrated manner. Urban issues advocates were concerned that this pattern would continue in the 2030 Agenda, particularly because opponents to a stand-alone urban SDG argued that the challenges facing urban areas could be addressed as a by-product of national-level goals on poverty, employment, education, and energy. In order to ensure that this narrow view of how cities impact space and resource use did not influence the 2030 Agenda, the *UrbanSDG* Campaign – a collaborative international effort which multiplied the advocacy efforts of ICLEI and a diverse range of other partners with an interest in urban issues – worked tirelessly to ensure the inclusion of local and regional perspectives in the SDGs.

That the *UrbanSDG* Campaign was able to influence the content of the SDGs reflects the fact that the creation of the 17 goals has been regarded as an unparalleled participatory policy process. To craft the content of the SDGs, a 30-member Open Working Group (OWG) of the General Assembly was tasked with preparing a proposal that incorporated the perspectives and experience of relevant stakeholders from civil society, the private sector, and the scientific community. It was within this framework that the *UrbanSDG* Campaign was able to make its critical contributions.

Why are the SDGs relevant to local and subnational governments?

The SDGs are an unprecedented opportunity for local governments to develop practical solutions to challenges that have proven to be problematic and divisive for

national governments. For those local governments that have been pioneers in sustainable urban development, the SDGs provide a platform that will allow them to push the pace of progress even further while providing leadership for those cities that are only now beginning to engage in sustainable urban development, and for whom the SDGs offer a blueprint for action. All over the world, local leaders are working together to drive measurable, reportable, and verifiable progress within sustainable development.

The dedication of Goal 11 to cities and human settlements ensures that urban issues will be featured within the integrated structure of the SDGs, which will support local governments in taking actions that cover multiple targets and cut across thematic areas: poverty measure at the urban level, safety in mobility in urban areas, and urban consumption and waste are just a small sample of the cross-cutting issues that have been officially identified within the SDG framework. These issues are all immediately relevant to the responsibilities and operations of local and subnational governments, who are likely to see their access to development funds and support from other levels of government increase because of the high-profile of the SDGs.

Giving voice to local and subnational governments at the United Nations

Prior to the founding of ICLEI - Local Governments for Sustainability in 1990, cities did not widely discuss sustainable development or the threats of climate change, nor did they have a representative voice in international climate discussions. Since then, the advocacy efforts of ICLEI and other associations of local and regional governments have been bringing the experience and perspectives from the local level into global debates at the United Nations. This means getting the recognition of local and subnational authorities as relevant governmental stakeholders in the three main UN Convention processes related to sustainability emanating from the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, where local authorities were included as one of the nine Major Groups of Agenda 21.

How can city-level actors help make the SDGs a success?

1. Cities are where both local and global challenges must be addressed

Given that urbanization is now a global-scale process, future of the planet depends on how cities grow, function,



and respond to stress. By getting urban development right, cities can accelerate progress towards achieving the SDGs by creating jobs and offering better livelihoods; improving social inclusion; promoting the decoupling of living standards and economic development from environmental resource use; protecting local and regional ecosystems; alleviating both urban and rural poverty; and drastically reducing pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. Because the global impacts of climate change are most visible locally, cities will serve as the indicator of progress within the SDGs.

2. Cities can mobilize key actors

For the SDGs to be successful, action must be cross-cutting and inclusive. Efforts from national governments, the private sector, universities, civil society, and common citizens must be coordinated and comprehensive. Bringing these diverse groups together can be a difficult task, particularly when they have been working in isolation for so long; yet local governments are well situated to help guide public understanding of the complex sustainability challenges laid out in the SDGs. By working in concert with various actors, local leaders can implement effective public policies, promote the financing and delivery of sustainable infrastructure, goods, and services, and support inclusiveness and enhance sound multi-level governance.

3. Local governments are often pioneers in sustainable development

As urban areas have continued to grow in recent decades, local governments have gradually had to assume more responsibilities related to the provision of basic services within cities. This increase in responsibility, however, has often not been matched by consistent financial and institutional support from national governments. Nonetheless, local governments have developed resourceful and creative projects to best serve their citizens: many of the world's pioneering sustainability initiatives – e.g. bus rapid transit (BRT) in Bogotá, Colombia, waste management programming in Curitiba, Brazil, energy saving in Freiburg, Germany – all originated as local responses to complex challenges.

4. Cities are hubs for innovative and ambitious ideas

Over the past two decades, cities have been the incubators for movements to improve resilience and sustainability. Cities are the testing ground for transformational new concepts such as the “sharing economy”, which, through peer-to-peer sharing of access to goods and services, address urban challenges (such as density, transportation, and housing) in a manner that is re-shaping our living spaces and social fabric. Innovation and ambition will continue, and will have a direct benefit to sustainable development: cities all over the world are working to offer desirable conditions – such as clean air, sustainable mass transit, expansive green spaces, and safe communities – that attract people. In the knowledge economy, capital follows people, and people want to live in the types of cities which have already been proactive in the thematic areas that are set out by the SDGs.

5. Cities and regions are centers of economic activity and resource flows

In addition to centers of demographic growth, cities and metropolitan regions are dynamic centers of economic activity and vast resource flows. As such, cities and

metropolitan regions comprise the world's most complex “nexus” of social, political, economic and ecological systems. It is now more recognized than ever before that the way forward must be an integrated approach to development and resource management, and processes oriented to facilitate enabling frameworks for local and regional governments should be prioritized accordingly by the nations.

6. If cities change, so does the world

The global urban transition provides both risks and opportunities: cities are responsible for at least 70 percent of total worldwide greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and are vulnerable to the projected consequences of these emissions. When considering the anticipated scale of urbanisation over the next 15 years, as well as the fact 60 percent of the area that will be occupied by cities in 2030 is yet to be built, local governments have considerable motivation to make the SDGs a success. If local governments and other urban actors are sufficiently empowered by nations and international actors, cities can prove to be the places where the 2030 Agenda's goals for sustainable development are linked and achieved.

Further Reading

- European Commission (2013) COM(2013) 280 final: Empowering Local Authorities in partner countries for enhanced governance and more effective development outcomes. Online. (https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/communication-local-authorities-in-partner-countries-com2013280-20130515_en_4.pdf)
- Florida, R. (2015) 11 Reasons the UN Should Make Cities the Focus of Its Forthcoming Sustainable Development Goals. Online. (<http://www.citylab.com/work/2014/04/11-reasons-un-should-make-cities-focus-its-new-sustainable-development-goals/8896/>)
- GIZ and ICLEI (2014) Operationalizing the Urban NEXUS: towards resource-efficient and integrated cities and metropolitan regions. Eschborn, Germany. Online. (<http://www.iclei.org/urbanexus>)
- United Nations (2015) Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Online. (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>)



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