

# Shaping the global agenda to maximize city leadership on the SDGs

The experiences of vanguard cities

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## A city-specific SDG perspective

As countries adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, the inclusion of a separate goal on urbanization (SDG 11)—to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable—was hailed as a breakthrough, establishing the significance of cities to the 2030 Agenda.

Four years in, it is clear that cities matter beyond the confines of SDG 11. Interdependencies between SDG 11 and the other SDGs ripple throughout the agenda. Even more importantly, mayors and local government officials are forming the frontlines of SDG implementation, translating the agenda's lofty and sometimes abstract aspirations into progress felt by real people living in real communities.

These local leaders are adapting the goals and targets set at the national level to their own local realities, though a universally accepted set of local metrics and indicators does not exist. They seek to advance the entire range of SDGs, as all of the SDGs matter for their constituents, even if they don't have direct authority over every issue.

During a three-day gathering from April 3-6, 2019 at the Bellagio Rockefeller Center, senior government officials from 14 cities worldwide that are in the vanguard of localizing the SDGs, provided their perspectives in sharing a city-specific agenda for scaling local SDG implementation and refining high-value practices began to emerge. This brief reflects the policy implications of mayoral and city leadership on the SDGs based on their experiences and guidance, with associated recommendations to help accelerate and deepen progress on the SDGs at the local level.

## Forming the frontlines of SDG implementation

**Cities are at the forefront of innovation worldwide in implementing the 2030 Agenda, and city leadership will play a central role in the agenda's success.**

As the level of government closest to its citizens, local governments are well-positioned to transform the ambition and loftiness of the SDGs into concrete realities that are meaningful to real people. Their efforts complement and add to the efforts of national governments on the 2030 Agenda. The innovative practices shared by the cities in Bellagio demonstrate adaptability and pragmatism. This goes beyond SDG 11, which tasked national governments with getting urbanization right; these city leaders are translating the wide-ranging SDG framework to their local realities. By adapting and fitting the agenda to their local context, priorities, and capacity, these cities demonstrate that the holistic SDG framework represents the solution set for their communities.

**Mayoral leadership and commitment enable accelerated and serious localization of the SDGs. Institutionalization, however, will be instrumental to its effective implementation.**

Committed mayors and other elected officials ensure that appropriate capacity and attention are directed toward local SDG implementation. However, assuring that work extends beyond political election cycles requires finding ways to institutionalize the SDGs into city governments and overall governance. This may depend on models of governance where multiple stakeholders hold joint ownership of the agenda, and align or harmonize measurement to inform collective impact and an understanding of what works.

**Taking local implementation to scale will depend upon strengthening the value proposition for cities and developing city-specific analysis, tools, and financing models.**

Cities are not direct parties to the agreement, and serious local implementation is unlikely to achieve meaningful scale if perceived as a compliance exercise or just another reporting requirement. Cities are joining this movement because they see value in the common language, not just between themselves but across sectors; investment in and use of data and evidence-based policymaking; improved alignment among multi-sector stakeholders; creation of public-private partnerships; and access to new types of financing associated with the SDGs. Increasing the spaces for sharing of best practices, challenges, and innovations, with city-specific tools and products, will be critical. Limited city-specific research and analysis currently exists, and there is no active facilitation of city-to-city dialogues or platform for curated, city-specific information that shares and showcases implementation efforts.

## **Elevating the value proposition of adapting the SDGs**

**For cities, a key value proposition is the holistic and simultaneous focus on the three major dimensions of the 2030 Agenda: human and social development, equitable economic growth, and environmental protection and action on climate change.**

There is variability in how city leaders are localizing the targets and setting priorities from the SDG framework. Rather than perfect fidelity to 17 goals or 169 targets, these vanguard cities derive the most value from

integrating the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, forcing themselves to make progress on multiple dimensions at once (or, at minimum, ensuring that progress on one does not come at the expense of others). They enable alignment with and benefit from the New Urban Agenda, the Paris climate accords, and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. The cities at Bellagio view the SDGs as integrative rather than something new: their city leaders are already working on issues of equity and inclusion, social cohesion, economic growth, democratic participation, and climate change and environmental sustainability. The SDGs provides a way to tie these issues together into a vision of community well-being that integrates and highlights their interdependence.

**For many cities, a key step in localizing the agenda is to align existing city strategies and plans against the SDGs, connecting their local vision to a global consensus.**

Many cities draw from preexisting strategies and priorities to get started. The process of alignment can be flexible and take different forms—sometimes with internal staff, sometimes consultative with external stakeholders. It generally results in a map that links local priorities to the SDGs, which may highlight or elevate clusters or targets that are particularly relevant to their local context. Linking local plans and progress to a global agenda has proven to be valuable and compelling to constituents, stakeholders, and potential partners.

**While cities find commonalities among the issues that they are respectively prioritizing, they found value in each city prioritizing based on its own local context and needs.**

Cities cited issues they have in common such as homelessness and adequate shelter, quality and inclusive jobs, accessibility and mobility, infrastructure, safety from violence, and air pollution. However, they counseled against attempting to develop a city-specific set of standard SDG goals or issues that all cities would pursue—they felt the power in applying the framework depends upon crystallizing local priorities to fit each respective context.

## Measuring and communicating progress

**Seriously committed cities strive for transparent accountability, using relevant indicators and datasets to measure their progress.**

Leadership cities strive to maintain the timebound, outcome-based ethos of the 2030 Agenda by publishing and measuring their performance with quality data. The cities in Bellagio were skeptical about attempts to standardize a set of city targets or indicators that would be applicable to each of their specific contexts. Instead, they suggested identifying a small subset, or a data floor, that might be common to all cities pursuing the SDGs. They recognized a healthy tension between *comparability* across cities, which helps spur innovation and share lessons, and *customization* to their local realities, which enables internal coordination and performance management. SDG cities are at the cutting edge of developing evidence-based policy, and the cities at Bellagio highlighted an

urgent need for donors and others to increase investments in local data.

**The Voluntary Local Review (VLR) is emerging as an important tool that could help quickly propagate widespread local adoption of the SDGs.**

The innovation pioneered last year by New York City based on the Voluntary National Reviews submitted to the UN by member states is sparking a worldwide movement, with cities and municipalities globally moving to develop their own VLRs. Cities are being innovative in their processes and uses for a VLR, targeting different audiences and undertaking VLRs at different junctures of their SDG localization. The cities in Bellagio strongly urged maintaining flexibility regarding the format and process of a VLR to enable widespread adoption and use, but suggested that a set of widely accepted principles could guide cities and maintain the tool's credibility. Regional and even national differences in the format and content of a VLR should be welcomed, and encouraging an ecosystem of providers to offer support will be more constructive than attempting to centralize and standardize.

**The value of a VLR comes from the process as much as the product.**

Putting together a robust VLR benefits from engagement with different internal offices and leadership, and serves as a useful tool to break down siloes and enable staff to assess the city's progress and come up with interlinked solutions. Similarly, engagement with external stakeholders during the development of a VLR can catalyze new partnerships and contributions to SDG priorities. Clarity and honesty about gaps and lagging performance will enable maximum learning, and must be part of the core

principles for a VLR. Using VLRs as the basis for city-to-city exchange may promote honest presentation of challenges.

## Using the SDGs to improve city-wide governance and collaboration

### **Local SDG success requires strong city governance, not just city government.**

Cities governments do not have the capacity nor resources to achieve the SDGs locally on their own. The SDGs offer a platform for new models of city governance, to enable coordination, partnerships, and new ways of working among multiple community stakeholders, including local businesses, civil society, and universities. This requires a shift in mindset and a collaborative spirit, and can prove useful in overcoming the inherent fragmentation among different sectors within the city. In some cases, universities have been an important nexus, both for coordinating efforts and partnering with city leadership. The SDGs may also prove useful in promoting coherence among multiple levels of government, given that cities' jurisdiction is limited on particular issues. Developing, refining, and maximizing the impact of these models will accelerate SDG progress.

### **The substance and approach of the SDGs should be part of a local narrative describing a city's vision for its constituents.**

Even among the cities in Bellagio, the SDG branding is not often part of the key political messages and priorities articulated to constituents by their political leaders. Yet the substance and interdependency of the SDGs are core to expressing the concerns of their constituents and promoting their solutions.

“Sustainability” is the basis of a 21st century vision for a city, defining how a city competes for people, business, and tourists. For the Bellagio cities, the definition of sustainability means the long-term viability of community, which includes issues of equity, social cohesion, democratic participation, peace, and justice integrated with environmental protection and climate action. At the same time, the SDG branding can be a powerful engagement tool for residents and specific audiences, such as youth. The role of the media is also important, both for tracking/communicating progress and advancing a narrative.

## Financing implications and opportunities

### **Mapping the city budget against SDG priorities, while illustrative, is a limited tool for identifying a city's leverage points to drive SDG progress. Integrating the SDGs into the budgeting process is more powerful, as it forces multiple stakeholders to understand and grapple with the interdependence of the SDGs.**

City budgets may be inflexible, given their major areas of responsibility, and may also depend on resources from the state or national government. The cities in Bellagio suggested that it is the *policies* related to budget area(s) that provide cities the leverage for catalyzing progress on their SDG priorities. In this way, the SDGs are useful for optimizing existing resources, even when the possibility of adding new resources is limited. The SDGs also provide an excellent platform to experiment with outcomes-based budgeting and/or participatory budgeting.

**Collective city action on procurement can be a powerful tool for shaping markets and accelerating investments that will drive progress.**

Certain cities are already changing their procurement policies to reflect their priorities within the SDGs. The Bellagio cities recognized that collective or coordinated purchasing policies, even among a small network of cities, could shape the market in powerful ways, given the aggregate scale of their purchasing. There was significant appetite to pursue individual and collective initiatives on procurement.

**New financing opportunities based on SDG adoption would be a powerful incentive.**

Cities are eager to understand how their commitments to the SDGs at the local level can unlock new streams of financing, but find it difficult to access information and knowledge about what might be available or under consideration by investors, credit rating agencies, and public and private financiers. Concerted efforts to increase engagement between the finance community and cities pursuing the SDGs, and improve information and capacity on these opportunities, were recommended and desired.

**Cities would benefit from catalytic resources to ensure their localization efforts achieve maximum impact.**

Size of city staff and/or population are not delimiting factors, as cities of all sizes are pursuing the SDGs. However, many cities would benefit from seed investments in staff, tools, or technical assistance to enable their efforts. Cities pointed out the power of models where local philanthropy or other stakeholders have seeded new staff within city government or hired coordinators to manage partnerships among different stakeholders. Small

investments of this sort have had significant impact.

## Leveraging city-to-city collaboration and shifting the global architecture

**The global architecture can better support successful *delivery* of the SDGs by cities, as well as their collective *diplomacy* in global policy fora.**

The experts representing cities in Bellagio were excited to have an informal space to share best practices, challenges, and innovations. They experienced great value in learning from one another directly, as practitioners and policymakers from a city-specific perspective, rather than being convened as subjects for research, advocacy, or academic pursuits. They distinguished between the research, tools, and sharing of lessons that will help strengthen their capacity to *deliver* on the SDGs, and the importance of partnerships and platforms that will enable their *diplomacy* and their voice, to inform and influence the global policy deliberations and decisions that affect their ability to deliver. They counseled against creating a new global city-to-city SDG network similar to C40 Cities or 100 Resilient Cities, instead recommending leveraging these and other existing partnerships to advance the SDG agenda. The group recognized the important diplomatic role of the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments and the leadership of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) in promoting the participation of cities within the SDG architecture, and the potential of the Local 2030 initiative to enhance local delivery of the SDGs. They suggested clarifying the vision and comparative advantages among key organizations and networks, by

differentiating their mandates between delivery and diplomacy and by strengthening their capacity to maximize city-to-city engagement and collective expertise.

## Recommendations

Recommendations for additional research, gatherings, and diplomatic interactions emerged to help scale and deepen the advancement of the SDGs at the local level. While these suggestions will inform Brookings research and support for community-level implementation of the SDGs, recommendations were not specific to the Brookings Institution. They included:

### Widespread adoption of the VLRs.

VLRs are catching on quickly as a key tool to enable city-level implementation, and there is a significant opportunity to scale the creation of VLRs by cities and local governments worldwide. Each city should have flexibility to do a VLR at its own respective level and pace.

- **Development of a widely accepted set of principles guiding VLRs.** While barriers to entry should remain low, VLRs can maintain a basic level of credibility through a set of principles that guide different approaches, uses, and audiences for a VLR. The group developed a working set that Brookings will refine and share with key partners.
- **Collective action to promote adoption of VLRs.** Networks such as the Global Taskforce and Local 2030 provide useful fora for cities to encourage each other to undertake VLRs. New York City has proposed that a declaration could be useful to generate VLR commitments from additional cities and introduce the idea of a VLR to other networks and

institutional partners. Giving an official standing of VLRs within the UN architecture of SDG follow-up and review would help.

- **An ecosystem approach for providing tools, support, curriculums, and trainings, and sharing of practices for cities interested in undertaking a VLR.** This would entail encouraging partnerships and leadership from a range of providers, especially those with regional authority and expertise, to better meet regional and national differences and approaches. Such a decentralized approach will facilitate rapid scaling. Financial resources should be made available.
- **Use of VLRs to accelerate respective cities' progress and access financing opportunities.** The credibility and value of doing a VLR may be enhanced by having peers review VLRs together in appropriate settings – this may be especially helpful for ensuring honesty about challenges and gaps. External analysis that tiers VLRs into different levels of ambition and clarity could help keep barriers to entry low yet reward high performers, potentially enabling VLRs to be useful tools as the basis for SDG prospectuses for investors. Research institutions or civil society can play a key role.

### High-quality, curated city-specific research, tools, knowledge, and gatherings that are easily accessible and usable.

Cities serious about pursuing the SDGs locally struggle to find tools and approaches that have been successful in other venues, and tested and vetted by other cities. Different options or ideas included:

- **An online research platform** with material designed specifically for city and local governments, and curated for applicability and usefulness, to make it as easy as possible to identify high-quality tools applicable to a city’s specific needs.
- **Increased exposure to financing opportunities** related to SDG implementation. This may include:
  - A portal/knowledgebase of options.
  - Trainings or support on developing specific opportunities, such as SDG bonds or impact investing products.
  - Gatherings or roundtables between key mayors/senior city officials with corporate leaders/private investors, to explore more concretely how to develop/manage transformational partnerships and/or investment models.
- **Collective action and sharing of best practices on procurement policies.** This may include development of a common platform for sharing procurement policies, as well as creation of alliances where cities are leveraging the collective purchasing power reflective of key priorities.
- **Additional analysis and tools related to localizing SDG data and indicators,** including additional case studies and elevation of successful practice from other cities. Exploration of a data floor common to all cities undertaking the SDGs, and/or elevating the applicability of World Council on City Data’s selection of SDG-aligned indicators from the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) 37120 “Sustainable Cities” certification (or other

existing measurement platforms), was also mentioned.

- **Development, dissemination, and use of a toolbox of proven approaches that cities can employ for different purposes.** Samples included:
  - *17 Rooms:* Adapting the UNGA 2018 Rockefeller Foundation/Brookings convening to the local level could provide a compelling platform for promoting ownership of the local agenda among different stakeholders
  - *Solutions Summits:* Scaling up local examples to provide a platform for local innovation and enterprises
  - *MyWorld:* Adaptation of the MyWorld survey to engage youth
  - *Venture Funds:* Template for developing local public-private venture funds to seed new scalable initiatives.

**Leveraging of key networks engaged in city-to-city engagement, city diplomacy, and development of a collective urban agenda.**

This would help develop/distribute tools and research, as well as elevate city leadership in advancing the SDGs. This would entail:

- **Greater mainstreaming of the holistic and interdependent dimensions of the SDG agenda into issue-specific networks,** linking together issues of climate, inclusive growth, violence, democratic participation, and others to reflect the integrated nature of the global SDG agenda. Engagement with C40’s Inclusive Climate Action and Food Systems Network is a good example.
- **Expanded diplomacy to elevate the role of cities in SDG global governance** and appropriate processes at the UN, G-20,



and other global governance fora. There was recognition that the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Government should continue to play a key leadership role, and suggestions that it could benefit from increased resources/capacity and the partnership of key UN member states.

- **Higher profile in overall SDG governance at the UN.** Suggestions included finding ways to incorporate VLRs into VNRs, and/or securing a commitment for ongoing and regular opportunities for city leaders to present VLRs during official High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) proceedings. For the second HLPF at the head-of-state level during UN General Assembly in 2023, there was a proposal to ensure that mayors and VLRs are officially part of every country's delegation.
- **Maximizing opportunities provided by the political calendar** to convene, elevate political leadership, and share innovations and best practices related to localization of the SDGs. Key opportunities in 2019 include:
  - Urban 20, May 20-22, Tokyo
  - U.S. Conference of Mayors Annual Meeting, June 28-July 1, Honolulu
  - HLPF Ministerial, UN ECOSOC, July 16-19, New York
  - Global Taskforce side event at SDG Summit, UNGA, September, New York
  - C40 Mayors Summit, October 9-12, Copenhagen
  - UCLG World Council and World Congress, November 11-15, Durban

## SDG Leadership Cities: Details of inaugural meeting

April 3-6, 2019, in Bellagio, Italy, the Global Economy and Development Program of the Brookings Institution convened an inaugural meeting of SDG Leadership Cities, bringing together senior government officials from 14 cities that are global leaders in applying the SDGs at the local level.

The objective was to advance a city-specific perspective and consensus on localizing the SDGs by:

1. Enabling peer exchange to share best practices and innovations, and troubleshoot mutual challenges;
2. Defining a shared policy and research agenda to help city leaders worldwide scale and deepen local progress on the SDGs;
3. Strategizing how city-to-city engagement and networks can elevate the importance of city-level leadership in advancing the SDGs.

Others in attendance included representatives from the United Nations Foundation, C40 Cities, and United Nations Global Compact and Local2030. Grateful appreciation was extended to the Rockefeller Foundation for granting the use of the Rockefeller Bellagio Center for this gathering.

Throughout the gathering, participants offered suggestions and recommendations for scaling local implementation of the SDGs worldwide, which are captured in this policy brief. In addition, to reinforce their own efforts to advance the SDGs locally, the SDG Leadership Cities that attended Bellagio committed to:

- **Meet three times over the next 18-24 months**, with Brookings support, to continue to share best practices, solve mutual problems, and develop tools

helpful in achieving local progress on the 2030 Agenda. Subsequent meetings will be hosted by a member city to allow for deeper analysis of that city's approach and engagement with city stakeholders. Additional cities and organizations may be invited to participate.

- **Integrate messages about their SDG commitments into public remarks** made by their mayors and other senior city leaders, especially when speaking to global audiences.
- **Promote SDG localization with peers and within their city-to-city networks**, encouraging more cities to use the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs and their data-driven outcomes as a framework for local progress.
- **Continue deepening their work on data and evidence**, strengthening their capacity to measure their local progress on the SDGs and understand how their cities are performing, and using their successes and gaps to mobilize new partnerships, initiatives, and analysis.
- **Consider undertaking a VLR**, to transparently demonstrate alignment of city strategies and policies against the SDGs and communicate progress and challenges.
- **Share their practices**, challenges, and innovations with others to support and reinforce this agenda.

## Participants

**Ms. Penny Abeywardena**, Commissioner, New York City Mayor's Office of International Affairs

**Ms. Erin Bromaghim**, Director of Olympic and Paralympic Development, Los Angeles Mayor's Office of International Affairs

**Ms. Kaysie Brown**, Head of Policy Planning, UN Foundation

**Mr. Chris Castro**, Director of Sustainability & Resilience and Senior Advisor to the Mayor, City of Orlando (video)

**Mr. Grant Ervin**, Assistant Planning Director & Chief Resilience Officer, City of Pittsburgh

**Mr. Nicholas Gharbi**, Principal Advisor, Madrid City Council

**Dra. Diana Alarcón González**, Chief Advisor and Foreign Affairs Coordinator, Mexico City

**Ms. Alex Hiniker**, Program Director, New York City Mayor's Office for International Affairs (video)

**Mr. Christian Hübel**, Head of Strategic Initiatives, Office of the Mayor, City of Mannheim

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