The Importance of City Leadership in Leaving No One Behind

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To transform our world, we must transform its cities," emphasized UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon in 2016, the year the UN's member states embarked on implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The inclusion of a separate goal—SDG 11—calling for "inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable" cities marked a major shift from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), where urban areas received limited attention. The subsequent launch of the New Urban Agenda, adopted in 2016 at Habitat III,[1] saw countries reaffirm their commitment to sustainable urbanization and set a new global standard for urban development.

Together, these two global governance frameworks recognize and elevate the importance of cities to sustainable development. National governments increasingly acknowledge the need for place-based policies and investments, and recognize that success on the SDGs means getting urbanization right.

SDG 11 was a breakthrough, clearly establishing the significance of cities to the 2030 Agenda. A dedicated goal, however, risks limiting the perspective of national governments and other stakeholders. Current implementation is struggling to avoid the pitfalls. Cities matter far beyond the confines of SDG 11, both because of the interdependencies between that goal and other SDGs and because cities are places where the agenda's lofty aspirations must

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1. United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development in Quito, Ecuador, on October 20, 2016.

be translated into progress felt by real people living in real communities. Cities often form much of the frontlines but have too little of the mandate to advance overall SDG progress.

In particular, urbanization will have essential implications for achieving one of the most revolutionary and challenging aspects of the 2030 Agenda: the imperative to "leave no one behind." Already home to more than half the world's population, cities will grow by 2.5 billion people by 2050. Almost all that increase will take place in developing countries in Africa and Asia. While overall poverty has declined in the world, the urban share of overall poverty has increased,[2] which means that as the world urbanizes, the world's poor also are urbanizing. Successfully leaving no one behind will require attention to this dynamic. This chapter grapples with two major questions to inform this discourse.

To What Extent Are the Left Behind in Cities?

Urbanization in developing countries has accelerated in recent decades. The least developed parts of the world sustained the highest urban growth rates between 1995 and 2015, with Africa urbanizing the fastest.[3] The trends show no sign of slowing down. Between 2014 and 2025, the global number of megacities[4] is projected to grow from nineteen to twenty-seven, of which twenty-one will be in developing countries.[5]

Urbanization and Poverty

Historically, increases in urbanization have been linked to economic growth and increased development, marked by economic shifts from agriculture to more productive sectors. The experience of the United States and Europe made it natural to expect increases in city populations as industrialization produced growth.[6]

Today, the link between national income and urbanization has weakened. There is general acknowledgement, for example, that urban and industrial development in Africa are disconnected.[7] The policy shifts that accompanied industrialization in Western developed economies—which resulted in worker benefits and protections, investments in human capital and infrastructure, and greater productivity—are largely absent in many of Africa's growing cities, which are

2. World Bank and IMF (2013).
3. UN-Habitat (2016).
4. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs defines mega-cities as urban agglomerations having over 10 million inhabitants.
5. Ball and Linn (2014).
6. Glaeser (2014).
7. UNECA (2017).

dominated by informality and severe gaps and disparities in connectivity and mobility.[8]

This growth in urban populations also raises concerns about the intersection of poverty with environmental considerations. In general, increasing population density within geographically compact cities can be beneficial, particularly in reducing traffic-related pollution and increasing energy efficiency. However, if handled poorly, rapid urbanization, accompanied by urban sprawl, could be a recipe for expansive slums and environmental degradation. As migration due to climate shifts gains momentum, cities may have to absorb from 20 to 200 million more people. Yet while the urban population in the developing world is projected to double in size by 2030, the land area covered by cities will triple.[9]

More broadly, up to 70 percent of urban residents in the Global South may be underserved, lacking access to basic services such as housing, water, waste management, and transportation.[10] The cities in the Global South expected to grow the fastest have the least financial resources per capita to manage the growth.[11]

Two of Africa's most populous countries, Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), currently have the largest numbers of extremely poor people in the world, and are projected to retain those rankings in 2030.[12] Half of Nigeria's population lives in cities, as does more than 40 percent of the population of the DRC. Exactly how many of the relevant poor people in these two countries live in urban areas is unclear, but in 2016, the UN estimated that 55 percent of Africa's urban population lived in slums. This gives an indication of the extent of the problem.[13]

Two cities illustrate the pace of change. In 1960, Lagos, Nigeria, had a population of 200,000 people. Today, while the specific number is debated, some estimates put the population of its metro area at almost 20 million. This is a 100-fold increase in just sixty years. Kinshasa, the capital city of the DRC, grew at an average annual rate of 5.1 percent between 1984 and 2010.[14] With a current estimated population of 12 million, it is expected to become the largest city in Africa by 2030, home to 21 million.

These trends signal that attention must be paid to the shifting relationship between urbanization and poverty. "To reach the furthest behind first,"[15] countries must clarify not only who those people are but where they live.

8. Lall and others (2017).
9. Angel and others (2010).
10. Beard and others (2016).
11. UN DESA (2014).
12. Kharas and others (2019).
13. United Nations (2016).
14. IBRD and World Bank (2018).
15. UNGA (2015).

Too Little Data

The urban challenge of people being left behind is complicated by the fear that urban poverty in the Global South is poorly measured and may be significantly underestimated.[16] Household surveys such as the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), which have been conducted for decades, provide policymakers with an attractive standard for comparison across countries and time, two key dimensions for benchmarking progress on the SDGs. But DHS surveys are conducted at the national level and often have sample sizes too small to disaggregate geographically.[17]

For example, one recent study used DHS data to analyze the progress of cities on reaching the SDGs.[18] Because of the limited scope of DHS data, just eight targets and ten indicators could be measured, and only twenty cities[19] met the criteria for periodicity. When narrowing to just the targets and indicators for SDG 11, three developing country cities[20] had data available for only half the indicators, and even those had challenges of comparability and quality.

The other traditional measurement option, and a more common source, is census data. While availability is more widespread, many national governments do not provide detailed data to local authorities. Moreover, the typical ten-year gap in data collection limits its usefulness for measuring progress.[21] While researchers often attempt to extrapolate trends from national data, it is difficult to create a holistic picture of urban environments. Lack of a globally accepted definition of "urban" complicates the exercise.

The pervasive informality of many economic relationships in urban areas in developing countries poses additional challenges. A recent study compared independent estimates and official census figures of the number of people living in Nairobi's Kibera slum, and found discrepancies that ranged from 18 to 59 percent.[22] Such differences are likely not unusual.

Household surveys and census data are not the only sources or means to

16. Mitlin and Satterthwaite (2013).

17. Levy and others (2015).

18. Lucci and others (2016).

19. Cities selected for analysis by the ODI that met their criteria include: Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire; Accra, Ghana; Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; Bamako, Mali; Bogota, Colombia; Brazzaville, Republic of Congo; Conakry, Guinea; Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; Harare, Zimbabwe; Jakarta, Indonesia; Kigali, Rwanda; Kinshasa, DRC; Lima, Peru; Lusaka, Zambia; Manila, Philippines; Maputo, Mozambique; Mumbai, India; Nairobi, Kenya; Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso; and Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

20. These cities were: Bogota, Colombia; Mumbai, India; and Nairobi, Kenya.

21. Levy and others (2015).

22. Lucci and others (2017).

measure the realities of urban life. Government ministries, civil society organizations, and local governments all have useful and relevant data. Much of it is not public, and often it is siloed and fragmented. Collecting and curating it is a challenge. Making it useful will require a concerted effort and innovative approaches.

Too Little Attention

While challenges with data accessibility, quality, and definition at the local level may seem like a technical problem, these issues go to the heart of the global commitment to reach the most difficult first. The case can be made that when it comes to rapidly growing places, especially in developing countries, national and global leaders are not adequately equipped to understand just how many people are being left behind. As urban growth rates accelerate, this situation is likely to worsen. The risk is that the poor will become increasingly invisible, at least in a statistical sense. Not just left behind, they may be left out altogether.

To the extent that countries have provided specific data on vulnerable populations in their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) presented at the UN, they have focused almost exclusively on distinctive personal characteristics, such as sex, age, disability, and race. In 2018, no country's VNR combined the data from their "leave no one behind" analysis with an examination of the physical location of those populations and/or locally-led efforts to reach them.[23]

National governments must urgently begin to clarify, through their VNRs and data systems, exactly where people are getting left behind, especially in their main urban corridors. Greater investment and increased capacity in government statistical offices, both national and local, to collect and analyze city-level data are critical and must be encouraged. The expense and time necessary to conduct household surveys, however, necessitates a call to action to leapfrog beyond business-as-usual approaches.

Launching a global partnership for local development data would help mobilize political attention and investment at a scale and speed consistent with the pace of growing urban populations. Such a partnership could provide a platform for stakeholders from national governments, municipal governments, technology companies and start-ups, investors, civil society, and academia to combine their expertise; uncover and analyze local data focused on the poorest and most vulnerable; and assess its national and global implications.

A partnership can steer the resources and expertise of such initiatives to cities most in need, targeting initiatives to urban areas experiencing the fastest growth rates in low-income countries. A key first step might also include creating a data

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23. Kindornay (2019).

floor for cities, building the capacity to track a small set of people-centered metrics relevant to poverty, nutrition, education, water and waste, accessibility, pollution, jobs, and violence, as well as equity. This could help drive necessary data investments, facilitate identification of the geographic location of gaps in progress, and highlight potential policy interventions.

More broadly, a number of emerging data initiatives could be linked to help deliver higher quality urban-level poverty data at a faster rate. A new poverty mapping initiative with leadership from the World Bank and several data research institutes seeks to maximize the use of satellite, mobile phone, and social media data while respecting privacy boundaries. The World Council on City Data (WCCD) is implementing ISO 37120 certification for sustainable development of communities, and has mapped its indicators against the SDGs. Other indices, such as the Social Progress Index and the city-level indices being created by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), are also engaging with cities to provide additional insights.

Is SDG 11 Enough for Cities?

SDG 11 is the primary entry point for cities into the 2030 Agenda, inserting them into the discourse of a global agreement among nation-states and helping integrate commitments from the New Urban Agenda, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, and the Paris climate accord into their local plans. This is a welcome development, given the evolutions in local and multi-level governance that will be necessary if countries are to make substantial progress on these global agendas.

The targets within SDG 11 are especially attentive to the spatial characteristics of a healthy city, calling for adequate housing, accessible transport and green space, resilience to disasters, and participatory planning. It provides a basis for clarifying and focusing attention on the balance of power, responsibility, and accountability among national and other levels of government.

National Governments Need to Leave No City Behind

As national governments follow through on the commitment in the UN declaration to "work closely on implementation with regional and local authorities," that engagement should closely examine the potential for empowering local and municipal governments to address the inefficiencies or ineffective delivery of services that constrain progress.[24] In this respect, SDG 11 commits national governments to leave no city behind.

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24. Abraham and Hingorani (2018).

The UN declaration never explicitly assigns specific responsibilities to local governments. (Local authorities, after all, are not signatories to the agreement.) At the same time, the implicit understanding of their necessary participation has given rise to "localization." The term has been used to mean different things in different contexts. For some people, it refers to the ownership of city governments in achieving Goal 11. Other definitions refer to the disaggregation of data to measure inequality below the national level, or to the discrete responsibilities of local governments within the agenda based on the services over which they have primary jurisdiction.[25]

For example, estimates suggest 65 percent of the SDG agenda is dependent upon subnational leadership and investment.[26] This framing implies parceling out pieces of the agenda owned by local governments and assigning them partial accountability for those portions.

Yet the most common use of localization emanates from UN consultations prior to the agreement, where "'localizing' is the process of taking into account subnational contexts in the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, from the setting of goals and targets, to determining the means of implementation and using indicators to measure and monitor progress."[27] Yet even this leaves unsaid who is doing the work and what the concrete steps are, while implying bottom-up and top-down actions.

Some national governments are working with their municipal governments to localize in this way. Both Germany and Japan, for example, have singled out local adoption of the SDGs as key to their national SDG strategies, and are providing financial support or technical assistance to cities. Local planning and budgeting for Accra is based on guidelines incorporating the SDGs created by Ghana's national development planning commission.

Yet these countries remain the exception. Most national governments have struggled to fit a robust role for city and subnational levels of government into their SDG implementation. An analysis of three years of the VNRs reported by countries to the United Nations, detailing their plans and progress on the SDGs, found that local and regional governments had been directly consulted less than 50 percent of the time.[28] Relatively few countries include examples of SDG implementation at the local level or local assessments of progress in their VNRs.

25. UCLG (2014); Lucci (2014).
26. Cities Alliance (2015).
27. Fernández de Losada (2014).
28. UCLG (2018).

City Governments: Leaving No Goal Behind

Around the world, it is emerging as common practice that mayors, city managers, and municipal officials are adapting and applying the complete SDG agenda to their local realities.

From the perspective of these leaders, SDG 11 is narrow. They see, and their citizens experience, the immediate effects of policy related to the many aspects of the 2030 Agenda, from poverty, health, and education to housing, safety, sanitation, and air pollution. The effects of climate change, environmental degradation, injustice, and lack of democratic participation are not just national or global; they are also local concerns.

While previously lacking the terminology of the SDGs, local leaders have targeted various aspects of the goals for decades. As urban areas have grown, increasing both in physical size and power, their leaders are increasingly expected to take on the full range of issues. The SDGs provide a globally accepted and vetted framework to tie together their work across these different dimensions.

At one level, the movement by city leaders to apply the SDGs can be seen as a reflection of a shift in power from the national to the local, a pattern becoming known as the "new localism."[29] In an era where national governments are struggling with political divisions and service delivery, today's local leaders are earning reputations as the ones to tackle and make progress on social problems by being pragmatic, solutions-oriented, and adept at aligning the interests of local stakeholders to a common purpose.

In one view, city leadership on the SDGs is another manifestation of this shift. The move by cities to use the SDGs as a local blueprint for development has, in many instances, occurred organically. Their leadership has found value in the framework reflecting the strategies and vision they have set out, and in linking their local actions to a movement for global progress.

But in almost all cases, city governments lack authority or agency over key parts of the SDG agenda. This varies considerably from country to country, depending on decentralization of revenue-generating and regulatory power and on types of governance structures. Even in the United States, where city governments enjoy a high level of autonomy, the full range of SDGs are generally not under their managerial control. Los Angeles city government, for example, does not have jurisdiction over the local public health or education systems.

29. Katz and Nowack (2018).

From Seventeen to Three

Although governance structures differ by country, only the largest municipal governments tend to have a bureaucracy analogous to national governments, which generally have enough ministries to divide the seventeen goals and cover the entire landscape. In many national governments, multiple ministries may be implicated in joint work to advance a single SDG. In most municipal governments, the opposite is likely to be true: one office or division would have leadership responsibility on multiple SDGs.

While city leaders may not own or have capacity to cover all parts of the agenda, their citizens still view them as responsible for its many parts. That was the message from fourteen cities in the vanguard of localizing the SDGs recently convened by the Brookings Institution at the Rockefeller Bellagio Center. Municipal leadership can outline an inclusive and comprehensive vision that provides the basis for building political will and attracting attention, investments, and partnerships, giving it a sense of power and urgency because of the direct effect on local lives. The SDGs offer the promise of a common language to engage their constituents, as well as other stakeholders and levels of government, in a holistic vision of community well-being with a common purpose and common measures of progress.

For the cities that met in Bellagio, the key to adapting the SDGs is the three-way focus on human and social development; equitable economic growth; and environmental protection and action on climate change. Rather than perfect fidelity to the seventeen goals, 169 targets, and 232 indicators measured at the national and global level, they view the critical imperative as simultaneous progress on social, economic, and environmental dimensions. The SDGs are integrative, uniting existing city plans and strategies so progress on one dimension is not made at the expense of another.

This tripartite lens forces cities to seek policy solutions and initiatives that link considerations of vulnerability and marginalization to infrastructure, jobs, environmental degradation, safety, justice, and climate adaptation. At the local level, the interdependence of the SDGs comes to life: ending homelessness or reducing slums, for example, entails addressing issues related to poverty, shelter, mobility and accessibility, jobs, education, physical and mental health, and environmental justice.

Cities are well-positioned to play an essential role in actualizing policies and initiatives that grapple with this interdependence, one of the most challenging aspects of the SDGs. They can be laboratories for developing and implementing innovations to solve multiple problems at once, an approach becoming known as "multi-solving,"[30] which benefits from starting small and experimenting in a defined setting.

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30. Sawin (2018).

Documenting and Elevating Local Leadership

Cities interested in using the SDGs typically start by aligning their city strategies, plans, and priorities against the goals, testing the national SDG targets for relevance to their local realities, and calibrating them to local development aspirations. They then identify indicators and sources of data to measure their performance and progress. There is variability and flexibility across cities' approaches. No officially determined or universally accepted SDG targets for local purposes exist. There is also no formal set of indicators, nor an official forum, for reporting on local SDG progress.

In 2018, New York City pioneered the first-ever Voluntary Local Review (VLR). Structuring the report in the format of the VNRs submitted by member states to the UN, it provided a credible link to the official follow-up and review parameters outlined in the UN declaration. The idea of a common city-level reporting template, at once flexible for local needs yet consistent with the official reporting process, has found broad appeal and is sparking a burgeoning movement worldwide. Cities as diverse as Helsinki, Kitakyshu, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, Medellin, and Durban are now undertaking or considering a VLR.

There is no definitive accounting of the number of cities attempting to localize the SDGs. At scale, localization efforts could have significant impact, especially on accessing the most vulnerable and hardest to reach. Cities are self-propagating their own localization efforts through peer-to-peer relationships, exhibiting a high degree of innovation and flexibility as they take on the agenda. This deserves more attention and support from national governments, international organizations, and the official architecture of SDG follow-up and review.

Several actions can build upon recent momentum. A first step would be for member states to offer some type of official standing to the VLRs, incorporating them into formal UN processes at the annual High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). This would provide additional incentives to scale up city-specific reporting on the SDGs. VLRs might be integrated into a country's VNR, for example.

The capacity and standing of Local 2030, an initiative launched under the purview of the UN Deputy Secretary-General, should also be strengthened and formalized to stand as the unequivocal focal point for leveraging UN development system efforts to strengthen delivery by city and local governments on the SDGs. The breadth and scale of city activity on the SDGs will resist centralized approaches to manage and aggregate it, so Local 2030's strategy of building out a network of local hubs is a welcome approach to enable scaling. It could usefully organize the regional commissions and appropriate offices within UN agencies to identify opportunities for cities to benefit from data and analytical support and SDG-linked financing opportunities.

The Global Taskforce for Local and Regional Governments, led by United

Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), provides a critical complement by spearheading diplomatic efforts to ensure city participation and voice within the UN and other global governance processes. This representation is important on global policy issues that overlap with local government interests. The power of their collective representation should provide a basis for building partnerships with member states and donors willing to champion the local SDG agenda. Such collaborations could be strengthened by launching a broader alliance with member states and UN agencies, resulting in stronger connections to the official UN SDG architecture, or by creating a high-level commission that can elevate the business case and value proposition for city-specific and local implementation of the "leave no one behind" agenda.

The Global Taskforce can also help integrate the SDGs into city-to-city networks such as C40 Climate Cities, ICLEI (Local Governments for Sustainability),[31] and the Global Covenant of Mayors. This city-to-city diplomacy will be critical to helping more cities integrate the SDGs into their local planning.

Conclusion

Leading the level of government closest to their citizens, mayors and city officials have natural incentives to be concerned about their most vulnerable and marginalized residents. They hear directly from constituents about improvements or regressions in their community. The proximity turns issues like homelessness and slums, for example, from statistical abstractions into tangible and visible realities that offer a painfully regular reminder of the indignity of deprivation.

Within individual cities, those deprivations exist side-by-side with prosperity. Cities are places where the rich and poor physically intermingle, sometimes in adjacent neighborhoods, bound together by place and economic and social relationships. Inequality takes on a visible human face.

In that context, it is no surprise that mayors are increasingly vocal about an agenda that promotes fairness, inclusion, and equity, encouraging systemic changes that extend beyond services that simply enable the most marginalized to escape deprivation. Their collective agendas bear this out. For example, while the participants of the OECD's Champion Mayors initiative have set priorities that include delivery of education, health, and housing for the most vulnerable, they also include increased and inclusive opportunities for jobs and other labor issues; accessible infrastructure with greater climate resilience for all; and planning and investment targeted specifically to disadvantaged areas. In 2018, the leaders' statement of the Urban 20, a group of mayors from G20 countries using their combined voice to influence the G20 agenda, emphasized delivering

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31. Founded in 1990 as the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI).

"opportunities, safety and equality for all," and highlighted issues such as gender equity as a key concern.

Local leaders often define success as weaving together diverse groups and neighborhoods into a cohesive social fabric that promotes equality of opportunity. Their instincts are supported by evidence that social cohesion promotes resilience. This takes on added importance as cities become the destination for 60 percent of refugees and 80 percent of internally displaced people.[32]

The admonition to "reach the furthest behind first" in the UN declaration generally puts poverty, often extreme poverty, at the center of the "leave no one behind" debate. Most analytical approaches still build out an MDG-plus accounting, using basic indicators of human dignity to track it. City leaders are pushing to widen that aperture in the broader context of the SDGs, insisting on including the imperative to address inequality. As they pursue the 2030 Agenda, they will need support from above and below. Cities frame the global frontier in the fight for fairness.

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