



11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES



MODERATORS

James Anderson and Tony Pipa

November 2020

The 17 Rooms initiative is convened by the Brookings Institution and The Rockefeller Foundation to stimulate near-term cooperative actions to advance the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This document summarizes insights and actions that emerged from the working group discussions in Room 11 during the 17 Rooms 2020 flagship process. The text was independently prepared by the Room's Moderators and participants, in response to the common question asked of all Rooms in 2020: "In light of recent crises linked to COVID-19, systemic racism, and other urgent challenges, what are 1 to 3 actionable priorities over the coming 12-18 months that address near term needs while also making a decisive contribution to protecting or advancing your Goal's 2030 results? What actions can members of your Room take to advance these priorities?" Corresponding documents prepared by all the other Rooms are available [here](#), alongside a synthesis report prepared by the 17 Rooms secretariat.

Context

Mayors and local governments have performed well at the frontlines of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has positioned them to be key leaders – both nationally and globally – in shaping an inclusive recovery. Their response during the acute crisis gave the world a formidable demonstration of their role protecting residents as well as acting as the last line of defense against misinformation.

There is consensus among the participants of Room 11 that local leaders are – and must remain – focused on “building back better” in response to these crises. This is as true of the response to the public health and economic emergencies wrought by COVID-19, as it is of these leaders’ need to grapple with the social crisis highlighted by issues of systemic racism and police brutality.

Mayors and other local leaders must address an ever-growing list of issues amid the pandemic, from dwindling resources to tensions with national governments. The SDGs can serve as a model for facing these challenges and elevating the collective agenda of equity and sustainability, connecting their local priorities to a global community of peers and stakeholders collectively committed to supporting and reinforcing each other’s efforts.

The group identified three key themes and two action steps to work toward:

Overheard

“The existential threat to mayors is an existential threat to the SDGs. And I really feel that coming out of this is the need for us to recognize that we need to protect subnational government, because that’s the channel through which the SDGs will actually be implemented.”

Key themes

- 1) We need to recognize the significance of local leadership to advancing the SDGs in COVID-19 era. Without mayors, the SDGs are not achievable: Local leaders are implicated in 68 percent of the SDG targets. We need to strengthen the **agency, capacity, and resources** of mayors to carry out that significant role:
 - a. **Representation:** Cities are not just locations for policy interventions or spaces for action, they rely upon the leadership of mayors who form the frontlines of the response and the recovery. We need to make sure mayors are central to designing the solutions – that they are not only in the room but leading the conversation and getting the support they need: “We need to more than an afterthought (...) Those who have been voted in the cities need to be represented.”
 - b. **Agency (“No one is safe until everyone is safe”):** In many countries, local leaders and especially mayors are under intense pressure, challenged by their national governments and political leaders, and in some cases are personally threatened for their actions. Our interventions must invest in and support City Hall: build their capacity, protect their independence, and leverage their credibility.
 - c. **Funding and budgeting:** Local governments worldwide face severe fiscal and budget constraints. Interactions with national governments and the global financial infrastructure will be instrumental in seeking relief.

- 2) Mayors are central to **restoring and protecting public health and economic security** in the face of the pandemic. They are **dual tracking**, responding in the immediate to the crises of health, inequities, and injustice, while envisioning a recovery that will be transformative and result in more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable cities.
 - a. **COVID-19 is the immediate priority:** Over the next 12-18 months, they will play an outsized role in protecting public health and stopping COVID by managing behavior change; disseminating a vaccine; and adapting public services to make citizens feel safe and whole.
 - b. **Partnerships:** Meanwhile, they will have to govern in the face of severe fiscal constraints and the unavailability of typical resources (county, state, country, private sector). To execute their vision for a transformative recovery, mayors will need to influence national and global decisions and develop new collaborations and partners, both locally and globally.
 - c. **Local policy decision-making should use the lens of addressing structural inequities and the climate emergency.** The pandemic has exposed where social supports are falling short and where long-term structural adjustments will need to be made to address these failures, especially to leave no one behind. Rebuilding and new investment provides an opening for cities to prioritize solutions that work both for recovery and for the long-term transformation of urban life.

- 3) Mayors' success depends upon **legitimacy and trust** from their public
 - a. **Evidence-based communications:** Over the next 12-18 months, mayors will have to combat disinformation and resistance to policies and practices that are necessary to advance public health, counter the pandemic, and restart the economy (vaccines, masks, lockdowns, etc.).
 - b. **Legitimacy:** Mayors need solutions that can reinforce their legitimacy by protecting community assets (from small businesses to civil society organizations), promoting transparency, facilitating citizen engagement, and leveraging non-state stakeholders that are trusted across the city ecosystem (communities, NGOs, local associations, mutual aid networks, etc.).

Actions and Proposals

- 1) **Advance tools and platforms that strengthen the legitimacy and trust** of local leaders
 - a. **Support mayors in combating misinformation and communicating key health measures** to counteract the pandemic through communications tools and approaches that include collaboration with media partners, citizen engagement, and leveraging trusted civic assets to build legitimacy for sensible health practices.
 - b. **Raise global awareness regarding the centrality of mayors and local leaders** to driving a transformative recovery and advancing the SDGs, increasing public support and strengthening their positions vis-à-vis other levels of government through a global communications campaign.
- 2) **Advance local and global models of mutual aid** that support mayors to protect health and economic security in the short-term, and advance equity and sustainability over the long-term:
 - a. Support and advance funds/facilities (such as the Swedish Municipal Credit Agency and the proposed U20 Global Urban Resilience Fund) **to strengthen the financial independence of cities and mayors** and reshape the international financial structure to be more city-led.
 - b. **Develop, collect, disseminate tools that enable mayors to support and leverage community assets** from across the city ecosystem (local civil society, local businesses, intermediaries, neighborhoods, mutual aid networks, social entrepreneurs, etc.).
 - c. **Strengthen the international infrastructure** to scale these tools and provide expertise, economic analysis, or applications that support mayors as they come under duress.

APPENDIX: MODERATORS AND PARTICIPANTS

Co-Moderators:

Jim Anderson, Bloomberg Philanthropies
Tony Pipa, the Brookings Institution

Participants:

Beth Blauer, Executive Director and Founder, Centers for Civic Impact, Johns Hopkins University
Jenny Durkan, Mayor, Seattle
Mauricio Rodas, Visiting Scholar, University of Pennsylvania; Former Mayor of Quito
Nina Hachigian, Deputy Mayor for International Affairs, Los Angeles
Penny Abeywardena, Commissioner, International Affairs, New York City
Randall Woodfin, Mayor, Birmingham, Alabama
Sascha Haselmayer, Public Interest Technology Fellow, New America
Yvonne Aki-Sawyers, Mayor, Freetown