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How to align city strategies with the SDGs
Embracing common language to measure and amplify progress

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Cities are playing a growing role in global sustainable development. Already, there is a dizzying array of international frameworks that they are encouraged to employ (Paris Agreement, C40 Green and Just agenda, LEED certification, etc.). Adapting to yet another framework may seem an unnecessary extra step for cities that have long been tackling the range of challenges addressed in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

However, for city governments, the SDGs are not a rigid blueprint. They don't come with a prescribed set of metrics that requires a significant undertaking to collect. Instead, the SDGs act as a common language for cities to share success, identify areas for improvement and learn from others. It also enables communication at all levels—from hyper-local to global.

Step 1: Crosswalk the data

Crosswalking is the process of compiling and unifying data under one rubric. In this case, it involves dipping into a city's existing strategies and mapping them to the SDGs.

In New York City (NYC), public servants kicked off the crosswalk by mapping each of the 17 goals and 169 targets to the city's activities in 2015. This served as a foundation to develop our SDG programming, which led to increased internal cooperation as well as policy exchanges with partners around the world.

Step 2: Conduct a Voluntary Local Review

In NYC, crosswalking was validated through a concept I created in 2018 while overseeing NYC's Global Goals program, which I coined a "Voluntary Local Review" (VLR), modeled on Voluntary National Reviews.

For NYC's first VLR, I took the 2018 OneNYC city progress report and reorganized the information into the SDG framework, incorporating the work of city agencies addressing issues not reflected in the city's sustainability strategy. Confirming this mapping with the relevant agencies was critical to gaining their buy-in, and helped establish new working relationships.

Step 3: Map the voluntary local review directly into new strategy documents

The outcomes of the VLR were then incorporated into the follow-on strategy OneNYC 2050 in 2019, which also includes a mapping to the SDGs directly in the document.

A city does not need to adopt new metrics or collect additional data to conduct a VLR. However, through the process of identifying the programs it is undertaking to address the SDGs and laying out the metrics used to measure success, a city may identify gaps and decide to address them by either collecting new data or establishing new policies. My hope for the VLR is to foster conversations

about what we measure, and why, not to compare and contrast data points in wildly different contexts.

Step 4: Build a shared language with city agencies

Before you swamp city agencies with a list of goals and targets for alignment, take the time to conduct an initial assessment of how their work aligns with the SDGs.

For example, before reaching out to the NYC Parks department about the GreenThumb community garden program, I researched materials and had informal discussions with staff about their work, which I mapped to the SDGs. Their feedback was an excellent opportunity for us all to reflect on the broader impact of their program.

Step 5: Go global

With city agencies, city government and the international community using a shared framework, you can now communicate initiatives at a global level.

In the GreenThumb example, we invited relevant international community members to visit community gardens and discuss how community gardening programs in their respective countries helped achieve a range of Global Goals. This process was similarly applied to other city programs and agencies. **Getting the conversations out of meeting rooms and into local communities to see firsthand how the goals were being implemented opened up new ways to discuss solutions to long-standing shared challenges.**

The SDGs can also help facilitate policy exchanges with non-governmental entities. Following a panel discussion on SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), NYC invited the International Labor Organization to testify at a hearing about improving pay equity in NYC.

Through a relationship established using the framework of the SDGs, concrete examples from other countries informed NYC's pay equity policies.

Any city can find value in the SDGs

One barrier that many local authorities ask about is the costs to localize the SDGs. Although some cities have hired additional staff, we instead adopted the SDGs as a tool used by current city employees responsible for enhancing the city's sustainability plans and strategies. While knowledge of the SDGs is helpful, it's more important that staff understand how the city works.

Universities are also an excellent resource. My current employer, Carnegie Mellon University, is directly engaging in the SDGs through its Sustainability Initiative and publication of a Voluntary University Review.

Furthermore, there are countless free resources published by cities, civil society organizations, think tanks, and U.N. agencies. The only major costs incurred from SDGs should be from implementing solutions to challenges identified through the process.

There is no single way to localize the SDGs, and tailoring the framework to meet your needs is encouraged. The goals are flexible and you should use them in a way that benefits your work and your city.