

# Developing the next generation of SDG leadership

## How city-university partnerships accelerate social change in Los Angeles

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**THE PROBLEM:** Lack of youth representation at all levels of governance is an untapped opportunity to drive social change.

**WHY IT MATTERS:** Involving young, diverse voices in local government can help implement and sustain long-term agendas. Cities can harness the perspectives and expertise of university students to advance sustainable development, while building youth leadership experience for future engagement.

**THE SOLUTION:** University partnerships and student projects on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) involve young changemakers in the creation of city strategy.

A critical demographic of young people aged 18–24 remains underrepresented in government. To fill this gap, cities can work with universities on localizing global agendas through student-led projects, [harnessing young residents' expertise and energy for social progress](#). In the city of Los Angeles, university partnerships have enabled youth to contribute solutions to complex problems under the framework of the SDGs.

The long-term nature of the SDGs means that persistent progress will increasingly rely on emerging leaders. City-level implementation, which is imperative to global progress, presents students with greater opportunities for leadership. We also understand that our generation could either reap the benefits of sustainable development policies or face the consequences of their abandonment internationally.

### How city-university partnerships work

As the “city client” for multiple student cohorts, [Erin Bromaghim and Angela Kim of the LA Mayor's Office](#) argue that university partnerships provide additional capacity and support for local SDG measurement and reporting. In LA, this multisectoral collaboration is accomplished through SDG-related projects assigned by the city client to a student “task force,” either as an experiential learning course under university faculty guidance or as a university-sponsored summer internship directly supervised by the Mayor's Office of International Affairs. Though projects vary in both theme and scope, at least one SDG underpins each task force's research to inform city policy.

The separate task forces that we worked on—one with 12 students at [Occidental College](#) and the other with nine students at [Pomona College](#)—were assigned the same project during the spring 2021 semester. We were tasked with proposing a

set of 30 data indicators to measure [SDG 5](#) and, more broadly, gender equity at the local level for the recently launched [City Hub and Network for Gender Equity \(CHANGE\)](#).

From the outset, the city client and university faculty provide task force members with project parameters, as well as strict deadlines for deliverables. Though faculty supervisors and the city client are available to offer expert advice and feedback, students are responsible for developing and organizing a methodology, conducting research, defining key terms, writing and designing a report, communicating with the city client, and presenting and submitting their reports. With students at the center of this process, we also facilitated in-class discussions, made decisions by consensus or majority voting, coordinated workshops, led meetings with the city client, and managed internal deadlines.

Our work was supported by regular contact with our city client: Bromaghim and Kim, as well as LA's gender equity lead, Tanya Pineda. During formal, biweekly meetings with the city client, we shared our progress, discussed new ideas and alternative avenues for consideration, and asked questions. Email correspondence allowed us to exchange resources or request additional guidance from Bromaghim, Kim, and Pineda.

Ultimately, each task force employs the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as a lens to identify disparities in local communities, as an enabler to collect data in an inclusive manner, and as a set of targets to propel city action in support of residents' needs. Toward the end of the term, representatives of both task forces presented our thematic areas and indicators to LA's deputy mayor of international affairs, our city client, and other CHANGE cities' officials at the network's monthly meeting. This culminating experience affirmed our position as SDG stakeholders whose recommendations can help city governments advance social change.

## What students bring to cities and local policymaking

### 1) Incorporating diverse perspectives into SDG strategies

Student projects enable city governments to hear the views of younger residents with diverse backgrounds, identities, and beliefs. While our task forces encompassed students who grew up in a variety of places and contexts, every member could reflect on their personal experience as a current resident of LA.

- As our task forces investigated gaps in support for underrepresented genders, students eagerly applied theories of linguistics, politics, international relations, and gender and sexuality studies, as well as their knowledge of human rights and social movements, to the “real world” contexts of CHANGE cities.
- Outside of the classroom, many students had previously either organized or participated in initiatives to uplift underrepresented genders on campus and in their local communities. For example, drawing upon several students' extensive experience working with survivors of domestic and sexual violence, our task forces encouraged cities to publicly evaluate their legislation and policy protections for underrepresented genders, as well as the institutions and infrastructure that recognize or aid survivors.
- Several students also built on their experience interning at the U.N. or volunteering for U.N.-affiliated organizations. Witnessing both language and policy recommendations on SDG action trickle down from U.N. agencies to the country teams and communities for whom the Global Goals are built, allowed these students to determine where cities belong and could lead in that process.

## 2) Young leaders are especially attuned to the need to “leave no one behind”

Our task forces called on CHANGE cities to move toward disaggregating data by sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics—rather than simply biological sex—to enhance inclusivity in measurements of local progress on achieving equity. We not only emphasized the need to account for gender identities such as transgender and non-binary, but also acknowledged the ways in which intersectional identities such as race and ethnicity could exacerbate inequalities facing underrepresented genders.

Other task forces’ reports have made similar recommendations on uplifting all city residents—regardless of their identities—in language, data collection, and policymaking. [One cohort](#) identified the abandonment of LGBTQIA+ individuals in the SDGs, highlighting how the city of LA could adjust target and indicator language to include this community. [Another task force](#) that analyzed linkages between student housing insecurity and educational outcomes developed a toolkit on how to center racial equity when localizing the SDGs in LA.

### Challenges and lessons learned

- **Coordination & collaboration.** Task forces introduce students to a much deeper form of cooperation than academic courses require. To accommodate varying opinions, students provided alternative perspectives and even engaged in informal debates before making important decisions. Setting weekly goals, drawing on individuals’ strengths, and creating space for open discussions fostered mutual understanding among students.
- **Identifying actionability in light of local contexts and city jurisdictions.** Students

may grapple with differences between their personal values and governments’ agendas; to combat this, our cohorts aligned some indicators with CHANGE cities’ strategies, while proposing ambitious indicators with more inclusive forms of data disaggregation to guide future measurement and action. As young voices are paramount to every task force, students have offered a combination of short- and long-term areas for growth.

- **Adapting to a policy audience.** Students tend to have limited experience in preparing deliverables for policymakers. In the process of addressing comments from university faculty and the city client, we actively adjusted, simplified, or reframed our language. Reviewing articles and reports produced by city officials or previous task forces helped ensure final outputs were accessible.

### Building future champions of the SDGs

City-university partnerships have supplied students with new opportunities to take the lead in driving local progress on inclusive and sustainable development. While deepening our understanding of the importance of the SDGs to everyday life, examining CHANGE cities’ pioneering efforts to achieve gender equity revealed to us how city-level implementation of the 2030 Agenda bridges global commitments to local communities in relevant ways. Serving on a task force not only empowered us to reimagine local measurement and action on the SDGs, but also laid a foundation for future leadership and engagement in city diplomacy. By strategically envisioning solutions to encourage meaningful change, students—as mayors, civil society advocates, and changemakers of tomorrow—can continue to work with our local governments on building a more equitable, innovative, peaceful, and sustainable world.