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Local Leadership Driving Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals

Lessons from three years of the Brookings SDG Leadership Cities Network

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Photo credit: Shutterstock. Accra, Bogotá, Bristol, Buenos Aires, Durban, Helsinki, Los Angeles, Madrid, Malmö, Mannheim, Mexico City, Milan, New York, Orlando, Yokohama pictured.

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Introduction

In 2015, the 193 member states of the General Assembly of the United Nations collectively agreed on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a common set of priorities underpinned by time-bound, evidence-based targets to be achieved by 2030. The goals encompass economic, social, and environmental outcomes, guided by the imperative to “leave no one behind” and reduce inequality within and among countries.

Throughout the three-year process to develop the SDGs, cities and local leaders collectively advocated for recognition of the importance of urbanization to sustainable development. A goal focused specifically on sustainable cities (SDG 11) was included in the final framework, as national governments acknowledged the need for place-based policies and investments.

However, as the halfway point to 2030 nears, the relevance of cities and local leadership to achieving the SDGs in all aspects of the agenda has become clear. A global city-led movement is going beyond the confines of SDG 11, characterized by innovation, action, and progress on display, as they adapt the overall SDG framework to their own scale and context. The local policy and political implications of the SDGs take on a concrete aspect as city leaders translate lofty aspirations into the practical aspects of governing, using the goals to assess gaps in services and outcomes, create new policy interventions, and integrate a sustainable development mindset into their operations and regular processes of decision-making.

In 2019, the Brookings Institution convened a set of cities that were first movers in pursuing the SDGs for local purposes. This gathering gave birth to the SDG Leadership Cities community of practice, providing these vanguard cities an opportunity to shape and share their innovations and experiences collectively. The scale, diversity, and breadth of cities and local governments pursuing the SDGs has grown enormously since, and the evolution and experiences of the SDG Leadership Cities Network provide a perspective on the importance and progress that local action is making.

Innovations by cities concretely demonstrate the interdependencies among the SDGs. Intersections among the environmental, economic, and social dimensions of development become visible at the local level. The COVID-19 crisis and the urgency to build a recovery that advances multiple priorities reinforced the need for advancing progress on multiple issues simultaneously: For example, to link mental health to education and economic development, rethink transport infrastructure that works for climate change mitigation, and anchor the care economy and gender equity at the center of urban planning. Analysis based on the SDGs has offered cities a vision for the form that a deliberate departure from “business as usual” and a transformation of public life might take.

At the center of this movement, city leadership is undergoing a mindset shift, going beyond reporting on targets and goals to building a shared local commitment that enables collaboration across sectors and jurisdictions. As a common language and set of shared ambitions, the SDGs can act as connective tissue to prompt collaboration and strengthen trust. They provide a basis for new forms of partnership and bring together various sources of leadership for joint action, from the public and private sectors and a wide range of stakeholders important to the vibrancy of cities, such as universities, civil society, and faith communities.

This report builds on the experiences of the SDG Leadership Cities Network to take stock of the key role of city and local governments in driving local and global progress on the SDGs, and the effect of their commitments on their own operations, effectiveness, and impact. The international discourse on achieving the SDGs has evolved significantly since 2019. The SDG Leadership Cities have undertaken new political commitments, created new governance arrangements, built partnerships, and enhanced their capacity to execute sustainable development. They have recognized the challenges of ensuring the durability of their action over time and across political transitions and are experimenting with ways to maintain their efforts. They recognize that SDG integration into long-term plans and programs can be a key to such consistency. They are mainstreaming the SDGs into decision-making, planning, and operational processes, with binding commitments on targets and budget allocation.

Progress reports show varying degrees of success.

The ambitions of the policy commitments being advanced by the SDG Leadership Cities Network often face constraints. These include limited financing options and economic authority that inhibit adequate resourcing. Political cycles and changes in government can threaten sustained efforts. Multi-level governance that enables connections and alignment among local, regional, and national policies remains challenging.

In describing the pursuit of the SDGs in Pittsburgh, Professor Sarah Mendelson, Heinz College of Information Systems and Public Policy of Carnegie Mellon University, suggested that stakeholders and residents [will be eager to experience an “SDG effect”](#)—tangible impacts and outcomes based on their shared commitment to the agenda. This report seeks to capture lessons about the “SDG effect” experienced by vanguard cities and offers suggestions and recommendations to local governments seeking to accelerate progress on sustainable development. Its findings are informed by a wide-ranging discourse on the sustainable development challenges faced by cities today, brought to life by the experiences of the cities participating in the SDG Leadership Cities community of practice.¹

¹ The report also links to tools and “how-to” briefs from the [Brookings City Playbook for Advancing the SDGs](#) describing innovations and processes supporting SDG localization.

The SDG Leadership Cities Network, a community of practice of local leaders driving global progress of the SDGs.

Figure 1. Participants to the SDG Leadership Cities community of practice



As implementation of the SDGs began in earnest in countries in 2016, certain mayors and local government leaders recognized their potential applicability and value in enabling progress on key local priorities. They began making public commitments and adopting the SDGs to their local context, and as the process of adaptation resulted in innovations and challenges, they were eager to share knowledge, experiences, and challenges with their peers on similar journeys.

During a three-day gathering in 2019 at the Bellagio Rockefeller Center, the Brookings Institution convened a group of vanguard cities and early adopters that were using the SDGs as a policy planning and monitoring tool. Senior government officials from 15 cities and local organizations worldwide—one third from the Global South, one third from the United States, and one third from the rest of the Global North—came together to share their perspectives on a city-specific agenda for scaling local SDG implementation and exchange their experiences and practices. The participants were generally senior staff involved in operations, strategy, and policy planning, often in a direct advisory role to the mayor.

To continue to exchange knowledge, best practices, innovations, and challenges, and to capture lessons and share them publicly, the group formed a community of practice: The SDG Leadership Cities Network. The participants relied upon each other as the primary experts, asking members to draw insights from their cities' experiences and experiments to advance state-of-the-art approaches among the group. The relationships and trust that developed enabled frank conversation about the opportunities and challenges in advancing an SDG-sensitive city strategy. This also provided a strong basis for the Center for Sustainable Development at Brookings to collect, organize, and analyze lessons, innovations, and insights, sharing and disseminating them widely to enable knowledge sharing and scaling among other cities.

The participating cities have been an important force in shaping a global agenda and influencing the global movement of cities using the SDGs as a blueprint for social, economic, and environmental progress, and in promoting the SDGs in their recovery from the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Engaging political leaders in a conversation on the links between each city's SDG strategy and political platform, the group explored the influence of the goals on the planning process and governance in cities.

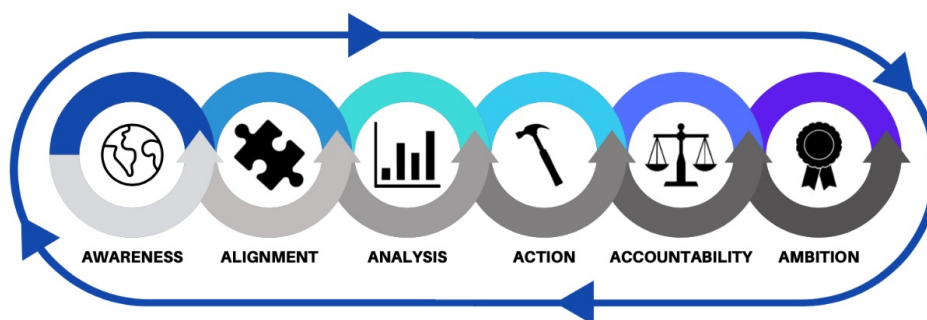
The gatherings were conducted in roundtable format with topics explored in highly interactive sessions mixing plenary and breakout sessions. Sessions were held under the Chatham House Rule to encourage candid discussion and problem-solving on limits, challenges, and obstacles.

Frame of reference: A process of adaptation and localization

Developed and agreed by member states of the U.N., the benchmarks and indicators of the SDGs are set at the national and global levels. The process of applying the SDGs locally thus requires cities to adapt the framework to their own context. At the initial meeting of the SDGs Leadership Cities community of practice in 2019, the participants described this as an iterative process that Brookings captured in a framework described as the 5 A's of Local SDG Adaptation (Figure 2).

In this framework, as a general rule, local governments and leaders approach this national and global agenda from the bottom up, rather than as a response to mandated imperatives from upper levels of governance. As the group's experience has evolved since 2018, from adaptation to innovation and leadership, the framework has been updated to include an additional "A": Ambition.

Figure 2. The Cycle of Local SDG Adaptation



| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| AWARENESS | Awareness of the SDGs can help expand the definition of what sustainable development means and facilitate multidimensional thinking. City leaders benefit from building awareness internally, within their city administration, as well as externally, among residents and other stakeholders. The framework helps create a common sense of understanding across sectors and layers of governance. |
| ALIGNMENT | Strategic alignment at the front end outlines the compatibility between the overall city strategy and the SDGs, so that the multi-dimensional priorities of the SDGs are adequately reflected, and cities benefit from the value of a cross-disciplinary perspective. The SDGs amplify existing priorities or uncover gaps in existing approaches. |
| ANALYSIS | Evidence-based analysis informs decisions and actions. Measuring ambitions against the targets and metrics of the SDGs provides an empirical, transparent, and accountable way to define success and measure progress at the outcome level. Creating and measuring progress toward their locally relevant benchmarks help cities identify where gaps exist, and policy efforts may need adjustments. |
| ACTION | Commitment to the SDGs can provide the basis for changing the allocation of staff, city resources, investment, procurement contracts, and programmatic interventions towards policies that advance inclusion and sustainability. It can also encourage new partnerships across sectors and issues, with a common language as a foundation for cooperation. |
| ACCOUNTABILITY | The emphasis on data and metrics generates a strong basis for transparency and accountability. Some localities are creating accessible, online dashboards to report on their progress. A growing movement of cities are reporting their progress through Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), signaling to national governments and international forums their responsibility and efforts. |
| AMBITION | The SDGs enable cities to connect their local efforts to global progress, reflecting an ambition to play a prominent role in solving the world's problems while solving their own and providing the basis for sustained effort. It also demonstrates the collective power of cities to address transnational challenges and provides motivation for national governments and global institutions to raise their own ambitions. |

Source: Authors

The “SDG Effect:” Innovations and impact on city priorities and processes

By 2019, forward-thinking local governments and city leaders were starting to adopt the SDGs as a framework to focus local policy on ambitious targets around inclusion, equity, and sustainability. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, their commitment and use of the SDGs significantly influenced their response to the crisis and the course to set for recovery. As these decision-makers managed the health crisis and the closing of the economy, they were also considering the long-term approach to revitalize their cities. The SDG principles gained new relevance as the basis for a recovery that combines growth, inclusion, and sustainability.

Three years of efforts to apply and advance the SDGs locally have produced multiple lessons on the impact of using an SDGs frame on city processes and policies.

1. Setting policy priorities and enabling political leadership

Effect: Setting policy priorities and shifting policy approaches to focus on long-term goals and transformative change.

In an era of COVID-19, the urgency of the day-to-day response and the economic pressure to recover quickly from the crisis created strong incentives to focus on short-term goals. As the COVID-19 crisis evolved, the SDGs proved valuable in enabling local leaders to keep track of larger and longer-term goals. The framework helped expose tradeoffs and focus attention on sensitive issues, such as inclusion and truth telling, in the crisis recovery. The SDGs also put concrete goals behind the larger visions to “build back better” and accelerate a “just transition.” The framework’s holistic and intersectional approach to policymaking encourages cities to simultaneously address the sustainable, economic, and social dimensions of development. This requires a policy mindset that considers the interlinkages between various development challenges while integrating evidence-based policymaking. It also entails understanding the root causes of these challenges, which often requires deeper policy changes that take more time to achieve.

The use of the framework has had a multiplier effect by clarifying existing policy goals and raising awareness of certain priorities that may have previously been ignored. Cities report that the SDGs help prioritize key challenges, especially with the emphasis on leaving no issue and no person behind. This has brought greater awareness of the need to ensure issues such as gender and racial equality are considered throughout their plans. In Bristol, the SDG framework highlighted the need to ensure issues of inequality were emphasized during strategic planning for the recovery.

“Aligning the SDGs has helped our city leadership broaden their understanding of sustainability and truly embrace the triple-bottom line of social justice, environmental sustainability, and economic vitality.” **Orlando**

The SDGs put a sharper focus on the role that a particular priority area plays in advancing sustainable development, and positively influencing other goals. When the city of Bogotá anchored its four-year development plan and its 2022-2035 Master Plan to the SDGs, it also positioned gender equity and care services as cornerstones of a strategy that are integrated in all aspects of its urban planning, including public facilities, public spaces, mobility, and service delivery. This commitment informed the creation of the Care Blocks, a network of community centers that offer services, such as laundry, childcare, education, professional training, and personal development to women and caregivers.

Table 1. Public Commitments from SDG Leadership Cities

| Government | Public Commitment |
|----------------------|--|
| Accra | In 2019, the mayor signed the NYC VLR Declaration . ² |
| Durban | The mayor refers to SDGs in the mayoral address, in budget consultation hearings, and during the Mayoral Operation Sukuma Sakhe (a community service campaign). |
| Bogotá | The mayor speaks about the SDGs mainly when interacting with other international stakeholders. |
| Bristol | The mayor signed the NYC VLR Declaration, and refers to the SDGs at citywide events, in political speeches, and in blog posts and news articles. |
| Buenos Aires | The mayor signed the NYC VLR Declaration and the city published VLRs in 2019, 2020, and 2021. |
| Hawai'i | Governor has made a public commitment to the SDGs. |
| Helsinki | The mayor has made a public commitment to the SDGs as a guide and reporting framework for the development of the city. |
| Los Angeles | The mayor frequently refers to the SDGs in speeches or remarks where the focus is related to the SDGs, U.N., or international cooperation. |
| Madrid | The mayor has made a public commitment to the SDGs. |
| Malmö | In 2018, the mayor signed the VLR declaration. The mayor typically refers to the SDGs in press releases, in related speeches, as opening remarks at conferences, and sometimes in opinion pieces in the press. |
| Mannheim | The mayor refers to the SDGs in public speeches, budget consultations, and political discussions. The mayor also signed the NYC VLR declaration. |
| Mexico City | The mayor has made a public commitment to the SDGs. |
| Milan | The mayor refers particularly to the environmental aspect of the SDGs and the changes needed to achieve it. |
| New York City | The mayor has made a public commitment to the SDGs. |
| Orlando | The mayor has made a public commitment to the SDGs. |
| Pittsburgh | The mayor has made a public commitment to the SDGs. |
| Yokohama | The mayor signed the VLR declaration in 2019 and frequently refers to the SDGs in city events and international conferences. |

Source: Brookings surveys of network participants.

² Launched by New York City during the United Nations General Assembly in September 2019, the New York City Voluntary Local Review (VLR) Declaration invites local and regional governments worldwide to formally commit to report their local progress toward the SDGs. Available at: <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/international/programs/voluntary-local-review-declaration.page> (Accessed: June 2022)

Effect: Realizing the commonality of priorities shared across sectors

Mayors and local decisionmakers have used the SDGs to articulate the full measure of all that they seek to address and accomplish, coalescing a wide range of local priorities into a cohesive whole. The SDGs provide a coherent and positive narrative in a constructive way that invites others to join this effort:

- **Common language:** The goals and targets of the SDGs provide a common language that cities can use to foster alignment and collaboration with regional partners and upper levels of government, as well as set benchmarks with each other.
- **Effective communication:** Some cities have used the recognizable icons and branding of the SDGs in campaigns to communicate their city priorities to residents, civil society, and potential collaborators, including Mannheim and Bogotá.
- **City diplomacy:** As SDG “champions,” cities have found value in using the SDGs to engage in city cooperation, share their progress and innovation with other cities, and—in partnership—raise their collective influence in national and multilateral fora.

“The Los Angeles Mayor’s leadership on the goals has raised Los Angeles’ profile globally, with respect to both the SDGs, our international affairs and sustainability work, and our interest in multilateral engagement and governance.” **Los Angeles**

However, cities often face a tension with the SDG branding itself. Adding another branded campaign over existing frameworks may complicate their communications or have limited value. The connection of the SDGs to the United Nations in a policy sense can also raise questions with constituents or create some resistance to its adoption and use, since it can be perceived as a framework with provenance outside of the city.

Many cities resolve these tensions by internally distinguishing between the branding of the SDGs and the discipline required by the framework’s adherence to community-level targets and evidence-based metrics. In their use and advocacy, cities most often highlight the measurement, prioritization, and interconnectedness of policies rather than promoting the SDG brand.

At the same time, the SDGs can have strong political relevance and salience, especially in connecting local problems and solutions to global progress. Some mayors and other political officials have used the SDGs in public remarks with key audiences, especially those with an international purview, to highlight the global standing of their cities and commitment to accountability (Table 1). Some city leaders have integrated the SDGs into consistent political messaging with their constituents.

A political embrace by a strong elected leader raises a key question: Does consistent use of the branding tie the SDGs too closely to a particular personality, potentially making the SDGs less attractive as a policy framework for an incoming mayor seeking to distinguish her or his own personal priorities? This will be a key dynamic to watch as more transitions occur with mayors who have been in the vanguard of integrating the SDGs so publicly into their policy priorities.

2. Strengthening evidence-based policymaking

Cities have been focusing their policy priorities, resources, and innovation toward sustainability and inclusion long before the creation of the SDG framework. Yet the SDGs are reinforcing their ability to identify gaps in their strategy and take actions designed to accelerate their progress.

Effect: Strengthening the city's policy interventions to advance equity and sustainability

By mapping their existing strategies to the SDGs, cities can identify gaps in their current policies and make notable shifts in local policymaking. New York pioneered this approach in 2019 by [aligning their newly launched OneNYC city strategy](#) to the SDGs. In Buenos Aires, analysis of local government plans against the SDG by the city planning team in 2017 [revealed a lack of indicators related to gender](#) and the autonomy of women. This discovery informed the launch of the Gender Indicator System and the Comprehensive Gender Equality Agenda of the city. Similarly, when Malmö conducted its first mapping of the city's steering framework to the SDGs, the city identified key gaps: The city's management of ocean resources linked to SDG 14 (Life Below Water), for example, led to a new Action Plan to improve Malmö's role as a coastal city.

Embedding the SDGs in upstream planning processes ensures operational decisions reflect SDG commitments. Increasingly cities such as Mannheim and Malmö are undertaking a sustainability analysis prior to planning. This approach elevates the visibility of SDG priorities and informs the work plan across many different departments. Mexico City used the integrated nature of the SDGs to [analyze the multifaceted nature](#) of urban violence. To prevent violence, the city considered gender equality (SDG 5), educational (SDG 4) and economic opportunities (SDG 8), and safe public spaces (SDG 11). Analyzing the data and adopting this holistic mindset translated into the PILARES initiative, a network of community centers that targets places with high social vulnerability indices and the highest incidence of violence to provide an integrated array of services to strengthen opportunities and safety for residents.

"The SDG framework helped make prioritization clearer and more communicative, and is a way to show accountability—to be open and transparent about the challenges, about what is being done to meet them, and about the outcome." Malmö

Effect: Shifting government budgeting and procurement to align spending with policy commitments

To direct their resources to maximize progress on their SDG priorities, cities are incorporating SDG thinking and metrics into operational budgeting, spending, and procurement decisions. Integrating the SDGs into operations enables cities to match their financial resources with their commitments, providing the basis for transparent accountability.

Budgeting processes are powerful tools to steer and maximize resources for SDG progress. Mapping budgets to the SDGs also forces cities to explicitly manage the tradeoffs and political arbitrations of different priorities, bringing into stark relief the interconnectedness of different aspirations. In Mannheim, this approach helped focus the budget conversation on the underlying goals behind the services delivered by the city. Comparing investment allocation to SDG targets can also elevate competing pressures during budget decisions and ensure proper justification. Strasbourg [assesses the link of each investment](#) to one or several SDG targets to elevate the budget's role as a lever for transformation. Milan reported that SDG-based budgeting expanded the space dedicated to substantial negotiation of budget allocations. Helsinki reviews its annual budget and analyzes all division goals and indicators through the lens of the SDGs.

Leveraging the power of the city's budget to steer services, Malmö decided to [make its primary budget document](#) the central action plan for implementing the SDGs. The City Council initiated a revision of Malmö's budget structure to embed the 13 goals reflecting the city's biggest, most complex challenges identified by its annual Sustainability Report. Malmö set these goals for a whole four-year term of office instead of an annual basis.

Selected cities are changing their procurement policies to reflect their priorities within the SDGs.

Integrating sustainability and equity criteria into municipal bids and purchasing processes seeks to ensure a preference for companies and vendors whose manner of operations contribute to key policy priorities. For example, Bristol requires that all contractors demonstrate the social value of their services, with targets and measures mapped to the SDGs. This value represents 20 percent of the final weighting in the procurement decision-making process.³ The City of Yokohama also [established the Yokohama City SDGs Certification System](#) (Y-SDGs) that supports small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and others for their sustainable operations and SDG engagement. Certifications can also be used as non-financial information in the evaluation by financial institutions. Certified companies are eligible for additional points in the scoring for one type of a public procurement competitive bid of Yokohama City.⁴

3. Assessing progress in transparent and accountable ways

Cities use the SDGs to measure their progress against targets and metrics in an empirical, transparent, and accountable way to demonstrate progress. Cities use the framework's metrics to assess progress, understand which issues are backsliding, and identify who is getting left behind. Reporting on their progress also ensures that they stay accountable to themselves and their constituents.

Effect: Using regular reporting to measure progress, hold themselves accountable, and reveal gaps

Cities are adapting standard SDG indicators as performance measures in yearly sustainability reports, such as those presented by Malmö and Yokohama. They are also expanding their data analysis by disaggregating data across demographic and geographic characteristics, an approach that reflects the powerful imperative of the SDG to "leave no one behind." The public can monitor progress on Buenos Aires' SDG-aligned "City Commitments" for the 2021-2023 period that are linked to time-bound goals and targets.⁵

Building a robust data ecosystem is important so that cities can formulate policies and design programs that respond to local challenges. Durban adopted a [multisectoral and multistakeholder approach](#) to building a functional data ecosystem that is inclusive and collaborative. Durban also established an Open SDG portal for communities to track progress the city is making towards achieving its SDG objectives.

The value for cities of the SDGs' focus on accountability and measurement toward specific outcomes is exhibited in the widening adoption of an innovation called the Voluntary Local Review (VLR). A VLR is a process in which local governments confirm their commitment to the SDGs and voluntarily assess their progress toward specific targets in the 2030 Agenda (see side-box).

As a global phenomenon, VLRs collectively exhibit the importance of local leadership on the SDGs to global progress and provide a basis for aligning policies and strategies with other levels of governance. As an innovation, they are providing cities and local leaders with the opportunity to craft an evidence-based, coherent narrative of progress and challenges that fits their respective capacities and data availability and quality.

3 Bristol City Council. Social Value Policy. February 2021. Available at: <https://www.bristol.gov.uk/documents/20182/239382/Social+Value+Policy+-+approved+March+2016-1.pdf/391b817b-55fc-40c3-8ea2-d3dfb07cc2a0> (Accessed: June 2022)

4 City of Yokohama. 2021 Voluntary Local Review. November 2021. Available at: https://businessyokohama.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/VLR_2021_Yokohama_for-Web.pdf (Accessed: June 2022)

5 City of Buenos Aires. Compromisos de la Ciudad (2022-2023). Available at: www.buenosaires.gob.ar/compromisos (Accessed: June 2022)

Data platforms and dashboards are emerging as key tools for accountability. Accessible websites with updated data offer the most up-to-date assessments of a city's progress, expanding accountability beyond the static, point-in-time snapshots presented in written reports. This innovation is being advanced by several cities that have worked creatively to develop dashboards that reflect their local context and priorities.

Los Angeles' Open SDG platform is the first in the world that reports city data at the SDG indicator level. The city's SDG team adapted a platform that is multilingual and open source, enabling other cities to replicate and customize it. Hawai'i Green Growth, in partnership with the State of Hawai'i, built the Aloha+ Challenge Dashboard to measure the six priority goals and metrics delivering the SDGs locally.

Developing a data dashboard is a technical and lengthy process, requiring an investment of financial and staff resources and expertise. While some cities have successfully partnered with other community stakeholders to do so, others are still in the process of creating a platform, or they find their capacity too limited to pursue this. Bristol received support from the University of Bristol and the UK Office for National Statistics. The City of Orlando is partnering with the Central Florida Foundation and the University of Central Florida to develop a dashboard to measure SDGs progress across different regional partners and sectors. Los Angeles partnered with the Center for Open Data Enterprise and various local universities to build and populate its dashboard. To offer an accessible data standard for cities, UN-Habitat and the City of Madrid convened experts to develop a [Global Urban Monitoring Framework](#), to harmonize existing urban indices and tools and offer a universal framework to track performance of the urban SDGs.

A city innovation to advance local and global progress on the SDGs: the Voluntary Local Review

History of the VLR. The first Voluntary Local Reviews were published in the summer of 2018 by New York City, Kitakyushu, Shimokawa, and Toyama at the High-Level Political Forum. In New York, the idea of a VLR took hold when the Office of International Affairs recognized the convergence between the SDGs and the city's own OneNYC sustainable development plan, on which the city was required to report annually. City officials worked with U.N. leaders to adapt and localize the Voluntary National Review reporting process, which nation-states use to assess their progress on SDG implementation, in a way that also fulfilled the OneNYC reporting mandate.

New York's pioneering innovation excited the interest of cities worldwide. The city subsequently launched a VLR Declaration, receiving commitments from more than 230 cities and local governments to undertake a VLR. The Brookings SDG Leadership Cities network has been in the forefront of this movement—Helsinki submitted a VLR soon after New York, with most of the group following soon thereafter. While there is no official count, UCLG and UN-Habitat reports that at least 100 voluntary local reviews had been published by June 2021, a testament to the momentum generated by the SDG localization movement.⁶ The importance of VLRs was recognized in the Quadrennial Report of the Secretary General, demonstrating its reach and recognition by the U.N. and its member-states.⁷

6 UCLG and UN-Habitat. VLRs and VSRs, Levers for Achieving the SDGs. July 2021. Accessible at: <http://uclg-unhlocalreporting.org> (Accessed: June 2022)

7 United Nations General Assembly Economic and Social Council. "Quadrennial report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of the New Urban Agenda." March 7, 2022. Available at: <https://www.un.org/pga/76/high-level-meeting-on-the-implementation-of-the-new-urban-agenda/> (Accessed: June 2022)

A city innovation to advance local and global progress on the SDGs: the Voluntary Local Review (*continued*)

Evolution of the VLR. VLRs are [regular reports](#) published by cities not only to assess progress on the SDGs, but to lay out their policy interventions and intentions for accelerating their action. The self-assessment process required to produce the report provides a tool for self-reflection that encourages evidence-based policymaking. It encourages local governments to break down silos across different agencies, allowing for improved collaboration and transparency internally.

Several cities have also used the process to invite the participation of residents and other local stakeholders. With VLRs positioned within the shared language of the SDGs, they enable cities to learn from peers around the world, sharing ideas and best practices for implementation.

As VLRs are increasingly recognized by member states within the official architecture of SDG follow-up and review processes, and as national governments acknowledge that VLRs are important inputs into their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), this attention has led to efforts to standardize VLRs, with published guides and monitoring frameworks. While important to elevate and recognize the commitments and analysis that VLRs represent, the diversity of size, governance structures, and capacity complicates the impulses to create a checklist manifesto.

At heart, VLRs [are an innovation initiated by cities to advance their local goals](#), right-sized to their respective capacity and aspirations. The VLRs presented by national governments at the U.N. have come under criticism for being pro-forma and painting an overly positive picture of progress. Cities should be encouraged to continue to experiment and push the boundaries of visualizing and rigorously presenting evidence that links progress to their policy interventions, based on their own local context and data. The process of creating coherence among their different departments, developing their own methodology and presentation, and analyzing the data that they have available has proven to have significant impact in addition to the final product itself.

“It is important for leaders and cities to show their commitment to the SDGs to citizens and the international community. A VLR is a great opportunity for that, and we proposed to the mayor to make our first VLR, which ensured the new mayor’s commitment to the SDGs.” **Yokohama**

Effect: Initiating efforts to measure the “SDG effect” on community outcomes

Attributing cause and effect requires resolving a missing link in SDG reporting. Most of the measurements and assessments undertaken by cities to date focus primarily on process and operations: They assess how policy commitments to the SDGs affect the city’s approach to problem-solving, rather than the impact of these commitments on community outcomes.

As cities are now articulating clear objectives and targets for progress, their next step will be to evaluate direct impact at the community level. Although several data reporting tools have been developed, cities often struggle to link the effects of local action and service delivery to city-level progress on strategic priorities. Compound indicators and data availability limit their capacity to establish a causal effect at the community-level. Using current data, cities can outline general trends over multiple years, but are not able to connect that progress to specific actions or policies. Being able to connect issues, policies, and solutions through data is the next step for cities with robust dashboards.

These efforts are in their early stages, and cities will need to overcome capacity and data constraints to be rigorous in their attempts. But the importance of this imperative cannot be over emphasized. This is truly the next generation of SDG action to be undertaken.

Bristol is working to complement data dashboards on local progress by data at the project level, including from community partners, to account for their collective impact. Los Angeles has revised target and indicator language, reported on proxy data sets for indicators where the city does not have or collect the specific data as proposed by U.N. Stats, and added new indicators to their local framework to reflect local priorities (such as indicators around LGBTI inclusivity). Helsinki is working with six other cities in Finland to produce a “SDG Sensemaking Tool” to help city officials and governments understand local actions and initiatives relate and contribute to progress on the SDGs.

“Measuring progress is also challenging because often the SDG indicator does not tell a complete story. The challenge is building a straightforward link between strategic SDG work, indicators, concrete action, and evaluation of efficacy and results.” **Los Angeles**

4. Identifying governance models that can accelerate SDG progress

Coordination and collaboration move at the speed of trust. The SDGs have the potential to drive new partnerships and governance models in cities. This entails using the common language of the SDGs to foster internal and cross-sector cooperation and put all parties on the same page, united in a collective commitment that is easily grasped and accessible to civil society, the private sector, investors, and other stakeholders.

Cities recognize the interconnectedness of issues and the need for cross-sectoral collaboration early on, if they are to be successful in achieving effective outcomes by 2030. This recognition encouraged them to systematically work across sectors and support internal arrangements across offices within city governments.

This emphasis on collaboration has pushed cities to create and expand partnerships, both internally and externally. Local leaders report value in communicating the SDGs to pique interest from local, regional, and international stakeholders; ripple adoption of the SDGs throughout city departments, organizations, and universities; and raise awareness among their communities and external stakeholders.

“Partnerships are arguably the greatest value-add of using the SDGs.”
Los Angeles

Effect: Using the SDGs to review whether internal governance structures create barriers or facilitate cooperation

By encouraging different offices and programs within city government to use similar and interconnected goals and metrics, the SDG framework helps build common cause among decision-makers and service providers, fostering greater engagement and collaboration. Milan partly attributed its winning of the 2021 Earthshot Prize to the shared language of the SDGs that drove the partnership behind the city's zero food-waste strategy. Helsinki [used its VLR process](#) to foster internal collaboration: While its first VLR process mostly involved a team around the SDG office, its revision in 2019 was led by a working group representing the most essential parts of the city government. This process resulted in a better partnership among different offices within the city government.

Effect: Enhancing partnerships and coordination across sectors and jurisdictions

One of the largest operational impacts of the SDGs is the basis that it has provided to the SDG Leadership Cities to harness the leadership, resources, and creativity of stakeholders and partners in their region. It has enabled these cities to advance a mindset shift not only within their governments, but among external partnerships and relationships.

Increasing buy-in and collaboration with external partners to broaden local governance. Universities, businesses, civil society, and neighborhoods are decisively contributing to increased sustainability and inclusion. The SDG framework has elevated greater awareness among these stakeholders about their comparative advantages and the role they might play in contributing to the city's successful achievement of key priorities. This has led to opportunities to open up governance arrangements that foster dialogue and cooperation among sector leaders, enabling city governments to build informal and formal relationships and partnerships to advance strategic priorities.

[Bristol's One City model](#) offers one example of leveraging leadership across sectors to broaden governance. The One City model takes a new approach to working and making decisions for the city, by coordinating decisions with communities, charities, and locally based organizations and businesses from across the city. This "opening up" of City Hall by working with partners to develop and advance city strategies increases local buy-in of the policy agenda.

"The SDGs have demonstrated to [city] communities the need for joined up thinking on these interconnected issues and as such they have been better advocates for the various issues they focus on. This has improved their power to advocate locally, regionally, and nationally with a better understanding of the connected issues." Bristol

Coordination across jurisdictions. In Orlando, the leadership of the city government helped create momentum, with other local institutions incorporating or referencing the SDGs in their strategies and activities: Local universities ([UCF GEEQ center](#)) and a local philanthropic foundation ([Thrive Central Florida: interested in tying funding to the SDGs](#)). The neighboring city and county governments started to work together to organize around the SDGs and established a [Regional Resilience Collaborative](#), which now comprises more than 35 government and academic members. The partnership emerged from informal relationships across these institutions and others, including the City of Orlando, creating a regional push for implementation of the goals. These nongovernmental actors have worked in synergy with city government, offering additional rationale to catalyze and inspire municipal action, creating new norms and expectations.

Effect: Driving local progress through community awareness and engagement

Beyond labels and brands, initiating behavioral change at scale involves empowering communities to take part in their city's transition. The use of digital media and partnerships with leaders who have influence in different segments of communities are helping SDG Leadership Cities create opportunities for bolstering trust and wider buy-in. They are emphasizing the impact and progress created by SDG-oriented action and localizing issues by tying goals to specific projects that affect residents' lives. With a multitude of causes competing for residents' attention, global campaigns on the SDGs must elevate local stories and reframe the SDGs as a list of solutions and actions rather than problems. In Hawai'i, the SDG priorities and metrics of Aloha+, the state's SDG roadmap, were identified by public, private, and community stakeholders in a multi-year process, ensuring that they are island-led interpretations of the SDG priorities.

“Embedding early on the voice of residents and meaningfully reflecting it in the city’s strategy are a way to increase transparency and buy-in and to uphold the democratic principles of our city.” Mannheim

[Mannheim developed a participatory process](#) combining dynamic community engagement with technological outreach to make residents a central part of its SDG strategy development. More than 2,500 residents actively participated. Another 10,000 were integrated via opinion polls and local festivals, resulting in 1,500 proposals to shape the mission statement.⁸ In Yokohama, likely as a result of increased visibility of the SDGs through media engagements nationwide, a recent survey showed 76 percent level of SDG awareness among residents. In Bristol, community level engagement

grew through activities to engage circles of actors: To help individuals understand the SDGs, Bristol adapted the SDGs into cultural forms via street art and videos explaining what action on the goals looks like. The Bristol 17 Campaign highlighted the work that members of Bristol's various communities were doing to deliver the SDGs locally. Durban initiated programs to bring local communities, particularly the youth, into SDG action, such as public arts and mural and SDG champion schools. [Los Angeles has built an academic partnerships model](#) and engaged over 130 university students in their SDG work.

5. Raising the importance of a long-term view and strategy

Effect: Using the long-term horizon of the SDGs to recognize the need for continuity and persistence of policy over time

The 2030 time horizon of the SDGs contrasts with the shorter electoral cycles for mayors and elected officials. This highlights a need for policy focus to persist for an adequate length of time; achieving long-term targets requires consistency of effort, despite political cycles and other shifts in the operating environment. To maintain momentum to 2030, cities are considering different factors, political arrangements, policies, and processes.

Participants in the SDG Leadership Cities community of practice expressed mixed confidence regarding the extent to which focused attention on the SDGs will remain after the current mayor departs office. Durability of effort can be reinforced by informal as well as formal means, both internal to city government as well as external (Table 2). It will be important to watch closely the impact and effectiveness of different elements during changes in political leadership. At this point, certain informal methods may turn out to be as important and effective—if not more—than formal policy mandates passed by city council resolution.

8 City of Mannheim. Voluntary Local Review 2020. Available at: <https://www.local2030.org/pdf/vlr/mannheim-vlr-2020.pdf> (Accessed: June 2022).

Table 2. Drivers of SDG Consistency Beyond Election Cycles

| | Formal | Informal |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|
| Internal to local government | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City council resolution • Master Planning • Budgeting • Procurement • Organizational structure | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reporting, data, & VLRs • Political resolution (non-binding) • Governance arrangements • City staff awareness & leadership • Organized transition process |
| External to local government | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central government mandate and alignment • Regional partnerships • Adoption by local organizations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public & youth support & awareness • Buy-in from regional organizations and businesses • Peer pressure and global branding • Outside investments (philanthropy and international organizations) |

Source: Authors

For any one city, the most effective package is likely contextual, based on leadership, culture, governance, and level of relationships among stakeholders. Enabling longevity may depend upon the extent to which the SDGs, and the cross-disciplinary, evidenced-based approach they require, have become part of the DNA of local civic culture and city government processes.

City leaders in Orlando, for example, describe how a combination of factors enabled the slow and progressive infusion of the SDGs into regional planning that includes other municipalities as well as other sectors, such as philanthropy and higher education. They created a formal SDG division within the city government while cultivating relationships across the region. They developed both SDG-linked data metrics while exploring informal alignment with other stakeholders without using the SDG branding.

a. Formal (internal): Cities institutionalize the SDG agenda through binding legislative action or other municipal powers

Binding resolutions. Some city and state legislative bodies are passing resolutions and mandates to set a long-term footprint. For instance, Bogotá passed a binding resolution to align its 2023-2027 Master Planning (POT) to the SDGs, to ensure a commitment through 2027 that will trickle down to all city departments. The State Senate of Hawai'i adopted the SDGs in 2018, with the Governor issuing an executive order directing all departments of the State to implement the SDGs. That executive order was then adopted by the City and County of Honolulu, Hawai'i County, Kauai County, and Maui County.

Incorporating the SDGs into law is another method of ensuring long-term viability of the framework. Bogotá is drafting additional public policy to commit the city to SDG measurement of progress. Buenos Aires is working to pass a law that would require future mayors to take on public commitments that are linked to the SDGs.

City leaders are weighing the trade-offs in taking a “legislative” approach. Among the SDG Leadership Cities, about half have adopted a resolution making SDGs an official framework. Spending the time and political capital to pass a resolution, especially a resolution with a minimum level of enforcement, may not be deemed worthwhile, given space that leaders can set political priorities without voting on a resolution.

Staffing and bureaucracy. The creation of an office dedicated to sustainable development establishes a foothold within the bureaucracy. Having a permanent home in city government or a centralized oversight of the SDG framework and its implementation is a step toward long-term viability that requires conscious action to undo. Malmö and Orlando have both created a sustainability office which is well-integrated into city government, raising expectations that its work will continue beyond the mayor’s term. Where such leadership sits matters: To reinforce continuity of the SDG framework through election cycles, Helsinki transferred management of its SDG aspirations and VLR from the mayor’s office to the city strategy department.

“We need to structure the governance models more systematically: without an overview at the central level, we lack the opportunity to see synergies and connect partners or projects for a bigger effect.” Malmö

Budgeting, procurement, and other operational processes. Integrating the SDGs into budget cycles and procurement processes also elevates the difficulty of extricating or ignoring the SDGs under new leadership. Durban, Los Angeles, Malmö, Mannheim, and Milan are all incorporating SDGs in the budget process. While these processes can always be changed, doing so requires an investment of time and organizational change to enact new processes.

a. Informal (internal): City governments also act informally to promote the SDGs

Non-binding resolutions or promotional campaigns signal key aspirations and priorities to constituents and potential partners, offering the opportunity for collaboration or support. They can also provide political cover for civil servants to use the SDGs in their work.

City reporting and data can create a discipline of policy development based on evidence that is hard for decisionmakers to ignore. Regular reporting on SDG progress can also build support among the general public for the SDGs, especially if the focus on targets produces results. Yet reporting is often subject to the preferences of elected leadership or senior management. Its effectiveness in ensuring durability is likely to depend upon the extent to which key stakeholders or even external investors hold an expectation that such reporting continues. Reporting that is linked to external or private investment may have greater power in ensuring longevity of effort.

Governance arrangements, like the Bristol One City governance structure, while often subject to the preferences of mayoral leadership, may also create input and decision-making processes, collaborative mechanisms, a set of expectations, and a track record of success that make it difficult for new elected officials to set them aside.

b. External (formal): Formal commitments by external stakeholders can force cities to maintain their SDG strategy over time

Mandate from upper levels of government. In Colombia, the National Planning Department issued an Agenda 2030 plan establishing goals at the national and sub-national levels with strategies to achieve them, including regular meetings with the Secretary of Planning for Bogotá. Such a mandate from the national government drives an SDG focus at the local level.

External commitments can also promote long-term consistency. Signing a public global declaration or collective agreement such as the New York City Declaration on Voluntary Local Reviews, especially if accompanied by strong accountability mechanisms, can make it difficult for an incoming city administration to retreat on such commitments.

Partnerships with regional counterparts and stakeholders can result in multi-year commitments that create a “mortgage” that can naturally bridge to a new administration. Collective action and cooperation among cities also encourage durability. Bristol, for example, is working with the 10 largest cities in the UK to drive a collective agenda establishing cities as the delivery hub for the SDGs. Bristol Mayor Marvin Rees also called for a motion to embed the SDGs in the work of the Local Government Association that represents all local governments in England, lobbying the national government for more resources for local governments. In Hawai‘i and Central Florida, regional partnerships between local governments, academic institutions, and philanthropic institutions have created momentum that is embedding the SDG framework across sectors while elevating the responsibility of the local government to continue its leadership.

c. External (informal): Buy-in from residents and partners outside of city government can incentivize long-term adoption of the SDGs

Community awareness and attention to the SDGs creates an additional accountability factor as residents expect to see continued focus and progress. In Mannheim, the city government involved its residents through a participatory planning process to define the city’s strategy, and its democratized process has raised community awareness and expectations to continue driving towards the targets that were developed in the city strategy. New York City is working to build an external network with universities, students, and nonprofits, so that the work is not narrowly confined to city government. The New York City Junior Ambassador program builds youth support and public awareness, creating an expectation and an enthusiasm to continue the work.

Participation in global city networks and collective efforts to drive progress on the SDGs can strengthen a city’s long-term commitment. Participation in such efforts builds buy-in vertically and horizontally in city administration, and the exchange of technical knowledge, innovations, and political support can prove valuable and enable fruitful relationships.

The look ahead: Opportunities to accelerate impact and progress

As the world approaches the midpoint of the 15-year span to 2030, cities and local governments are firmly establishing their importance on the frontlines of the SDGs. Yet more must be done to enable cities to maximize their impact and fulfill their promise in accelerating achievement of the goals.

1. Unlocking sustainable financing at scale

The ambitions of the policy commitments being advanced by the SDG Leadership Cities are constrained by their financing options. Their policy ambitions often require outside financial support. Some cities are benefiting from funding by their national government, international development agencies, or philanthropy. Others are starting to access financing from the capital markets and private investors.

Yet all are struggling to find resources at the scale that matches their ambitions, and they are aggressively seeking new financing outlets. Debt limits and narrow fiscal space increasingly result in growing funding gaps. While interest in the SDGs and ESG investing has grown significantly, municipal financing mechanisms available to support social outcomes as well as city needs have not yet substantially evolved.

Municipal governments also remain dependent on approval from their national governments to access resources from international finance institutions such as the World Bank and the regional development banks, unable to access their financing directly. Cities in the Global South face additional challenges in accessing debt and investment, given challenges in establishing creditworthiness and being dependent on revenue from central governments. In the post-COVID recovery, cities have staked out a leadership role in driving a green and just recovery, but financing options have not kept pace.

Effect: Exploring new investment partnerships with the private sector

Private sector investment and partnerships hold promise. The growing commitment of businesses to advance social outcomes while pursuing their commercial interests offers the basis for potential partnerships. These are not yet easy or smooth to enact. Finding alignment that works for both parties will require better mutual understanding of each sector's processes and priorities. As Mexico City was planning to electrify annually a portion of its pool of 10,000 taxis, it explored partnerships with automotive manufacturers with a professed SDG commitment; yet even when offering this "captured market," the perception of high risks and low returns combined with the cost hindered the project.

Informal engagement and buy-in from the private sector may offer less complicated ways to enable business contributions to the city's agenda. For instance, Hawai'i created a Sustainability Business Forum with over 27 of Hawai'i's CEOs of publicly traded and privately held companies. They are working with the City and County of Honolulu and other counties to facilitate business initiatives and projects based on the priorities laid out by Hawai'i's Aloha+ Challenge.

Creating ease of entry for potential investors is critical. Bristol has launched a Bristol City Fund, a mixed funding mechanism that provides loans, grants and mixed financing aligned to key SDG priorities in the One City Plan. During the pandemic, the City of Yokohama established a subsidy program for companies and groups planning new products and services contributing to the SDGs as a part of the remedies and economic stimulus package.

Groups of cities, through regional and other networks, are exploring the possibility of aggregating their projects to attract external investors. Bristol is also part of the UK Cities Climate Commission, which is collectively working to create a combined pipeline of investment-ready projects, set the total investment needed, and meet investors at the scale at which they generally deploy their capital.

Effect: Increasing advocacy to influence the international financial system

New financing options are not emerging at the scale and speed necessary. As cities increase their commitments to deliver more services and investments to drive a sustainable and equitable recovery, the tools and support mechanisms within the multilateral financial institutions have mostly remained the same. Cities are increasing their collective advocacy efforts, especially for creating financial tools and mechanisms that will enable local authorities to access resources directly from the international financial institutions. They are clamoring to bridge the gap between projects and funding opportunities and attract new donors.

2. Multi-level action and connecting up

By aligning their local priorities to a global agenda pursued by the international community, cities are positioning themselves as global leaders. The SDGs offer an opportunity to influence national and international policymakers on priorities, policy support, and resources.

Effect: Providing a platform to align multiple levels of government

While they frequently receive support from associations of local governments or municipalities, cities often receive inconsistent or limited attention from their national governments. The common language of the SDGs can facilitate multilevel governance, enabling recognition and support for the contributions of cities to national progress.

Country VNRs offer an opportunity to integrate VLRS and showcase local solutions and responses. National governments must consider the important contributions of local governments if they are to successfully convey the policy environment for SDG progress in their country.

In Finland, the prime minister's office for VNR published a report integrating VLRS and local case studies. The office actively supports and participates in VLR events. It participates in inter-city collaboration and a VLR network for six biggest cities in Finland that connects with the association of municipalities. In Sweden, the National Association of Municipalities acts as a collective bridge from cities to the national government: Cities played a significant part in the country's Voluntary National Review process, which in turn lifted the role of cities and their VLRS. Sweden also showcased examples from its cities, such as Malmö, during its session at the HLPF in 2021. In Bogotá, the national government issued an SDG mandate for national as well as local development plans, with a coordination scheme to provide local data to the national level.

National reviews and strategies should reflect and learn from local action and the considerations that matter for cities. Local innovation and priorities can often inform national efforts, and aligning local and national reporting can uncover ways to support community-driven development from the national level. Learning from local action, national governments could also better include indigenous communities, which have deep ancestral wisdom to contribute to developing sustainable processes.

Effect: Accelerating city-to-city cooperation to foster national policy change

City-to-city cooperation and regional collaboration benefits from the common language of the SDGs and facilitates a collective voice. The SDGs have been important in facilitating networks, cooperation, and convening spaces where local actors are empowered. As it conducted its VLR, Malmö exchanged with other Swedish cities undertaking the same process (Stockholm, Uppsala, and Helsingborg). The Y-PORT initiative of Yokohama helps [export the city's expertise](#) in sustainable development through city-to-city development cooperation, as Yokohama leverages Japanese foreign assistance resources and its own technical assistance to help cities in developing countries.

Such city-specific SDG platforms enable collective influence. Malmö has worked through the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions to influence the SDG dialogue at the national government level. Bristol is working in partnership with other UK cities through the Core Cities network and the Local Government Association to share experiences and encourage national government to support local action

Effect: Interjecting cities more forcefully into global agendas

In a similar way, the SDGs have provided cities a collective platform to influence the global policy discourse, showcasing practical innovations and successes and mobilizing global political momentum on sustainable development. Through their VLRs, their participation in key U.N. and other multilateral forums, proceedings, and conferences, and through the strengthening of their own formal networks such as United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) and the Global Taskforce cities are elevating their leadership on the global stage.

The SDG Leadership Cities noted a need for openings and opportunities in global and regional platforms where cities and local leaders are recognized for the political legitimacy derived from electoral processes and public administration and can contribute and voice their perspectives and experiences in a multilateral setting. Increasing participation in intergovernmental dialogues and negotiations is crucial to developing the next generation of benchmarks and establishing a collective SDG agenda that reflects perspectives from all levels of governance. Cities, for example, were important contributors to the review process of the Global Compact on Migration and Refugees at the 2022 International Migration Review Forum, providing concrete examples of policies and experiences from the frontlines and elevating their collective voice through the Mayors Migration Council.⁹

Such leadership is increasingly being recognized within formal proceedings at the U.N. These include:

- A landmark mention of local action in the final declaration of the high-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF) of the United Nations: “We commit to involving and empowering local authorities to ensure local ownership of the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular by citizens, community and local organizations, and to shape and translate national development priorities into local realities and, in this regard, note voluntary local reviews as a useful tool to show progress and foster exchange in local implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals.”¹⁰
- The importance of cities and local governments in the achievement of the SDGs emphasized by Secretary General António Guterres in his quadrennial progress report published in the lead up to the High-Level Meeting on the New Urban Agenda in April 2022. The Secretary-General highlighted work by New York City, Los Angeles, Orlando, and the State of Hawai’i.¹¹

3. To 2030 and beyond

As the midpoint of the SDGs approaches, these vanguard cities remain committed to accelerating their current progress while already beginning to envision what comes next. They recognize that the aspirations reflected in the SDGs, the Paris Climate Accords, and the race for equity will require continued transformation after 2030. They are concerned about the geopolitical and economic factors at play—the pressures on democratic governance, the war waged by Russia against Ukraine—that make it difficult to remain consistently focused on a long-term development agenda.

9 Mayors Migration Council (MMC). Global Mayors Unite to Deliver Critical Momentum at UN Migration Conference. May 16, 2022. Available at: <https://www.mayorsmigrationcouncil.org/news/mmc-at-imrf> (Accessed: June 2022)

10 Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform. United Nations High-level Political Forum 2021. Available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/2021> (Accessed: June 2022)

11 United Nations General Assembly Economic and Social Council. “Quadrennial report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of the New Urban Agenda.” March 7, 2022. Available at: <https://www.un.org/pga/76/high-level-meeting-on-the-implementation-of-the-new-urban-agenda/> (Accessed: June 2022)

Yet they are also looking to the future with optimism. They are finding inadequacies and gaps in the current agenda that they seek to rectify, and they are determined to continue innovating and shaping a better, more sustainable future. With their experience and political legitimacy from the frontlines, they are building their collective voice to inform, influence, and co-design future global agreements and commitments; already they are identifying gaps and future opportunities for a post-2030 agenda that will integrate and benefit from a city-specific perspective.

These include:

- A greater emphasis on **culture**, to leverage the rich diversity of traditions and historical legacies that can enable stronger buy-in and creativity from their residents. They fear the rise of polarization in the public debate and the threats from exclusive versions of identity can weaken progress, making it very difficult to get things done;
- A greater recognition of the natural limits of our environment and a nuanced shift from the idea of sustainability to **regenerative and thriving communities**. Frameworks like Doughnut Economics can add to and build upon the key pillars of the SDGs to achieve circularity and a distribution of resources that respects the boundaries of an ecological ceiling;
- Improved capacity for **multistakeholder action and multilevel governance**, especially better coordination with national governments: Any new common goals must include cities in their own drafting and definition of monitoring criteria from the very beginning;
- Continued creativity, evolution, and increased scale of **direct financing to cities**, with new mechanisms, new tools, and new recognition of the efficiency and effectiveness of investing at the local level to catalyze social, environmental, and economic progress; and
- A **greater role and influence for cities in the multilateral processes** that will define what comes next. The experiences of local governments in turning the SDGs from aspiration to concrete action, acting as labs for policy innovation and shifts in mindset, and demonstrating the power of global cooperation make them valuable “consultants” in any process of developing a post-2030 agenda. Their political legitimacy, however, should make them full partners, especially given the growing global deficit of trust in governing institutions.

A clearly defined “seat at the table” can ensure that the development of a post-2030 agenda benefits from the pragmatism, innovations, and experiences of local leaders who must respond daily to the demands of their constituents. The global policy discourse will be the better for it.

Annex I: Impact framework and survey of SDG Leadership Cities

The city-specific examples and perspectives outlined in this report were informed by data collected from the SDG Leadership Cities community of practice through the below survey. The questions in the survey also serve as a first step toward the development of indicators that might constitute a preliminary **impact framework** that cities can use to assess and measure their effectiveness in carrying out the SDG agenda. The attributes reflected in these questions were informed by the many exchanges and meetings among the Brookings SDG Leadership Cities, as well as findings from a [2018 Urban Institute report](#).

SDG Effect: How did the use of the SDG framework impact participating cities?

Adoption, Adaptation & Communication

- Did your city adopt a political resolution that made the SDGs an official framework? (Y/N)
- If so, what was its format? Was it binding? How was this received within your city government? If not, what prevented it?
- Has your mayor made a public commitment to the SDGs in a speech or through another mechanism? (Y/N)
- To what extent would you say your citizens are aware of the mayor's or city's commitment? When does the mayor typically refer to the SDGs or use them as the basis for remarks or interactions?
- How does your city adapt the SDGs to its local context, identity, and culture to make them politically relevant?
- Does your city use the SDG branding overtly or covertly in its internal decision-making process?
 - We use the SDG branding overtly in our daily work.
 - We use the principles of the SDGs, but not necessarily the branding.
- How does your city communicate internally (to staff) and externally (to residents) about the SDGs?

Attention & awareness in policy priority

- Did the use of the SDG framework lead to notable shifts in policy and stated priorities among city government decision-makers? (Y/N) If so, what notable shifts in policy and stated priorities?
- Has the use of the SDG framework led to notable shifts in policy & priorities among other city stakeholders and decision-makers, especially in a way that increases attention to city government priorities from your city's other leaders and residents? (Y/N) If so, please explain.

Resource allocation & investments

- Did the adoption of the SDGs reinforce or lead to changes in internal city operations, organization, and processes? (Y/N) If so, please explain.
- Did the adoption of the SDGs lead to any observable changes in the allocation of city resources, investment, and/or procurement contracts? (Y/N) If so, please explain.

Measuring the SDG effects on Community Outcomes & Partnerships

- How well-prepared is your city to measure an "SDG effect" on the community? (1= not well prepared, 5= well prepared).
- Please describe how your city organizes to measure its progress and gaps on its SDGs priorities?
- How strongly would you rank the effect of using the SDGs to drive community-level outcomes? (1=low, 5=high).
- If any, please provide examples of observable changes for local progress and outcomes resulting from the use of the SDGs.
- Did the use of the SDGs reinforce or lead to an uptick in community-level or external partnerships, or enable more collaborative governance?

- Please describe these new partnerships or governance models, and to what extent you were able to connect them to your SDGs priorities?
 - We measure intermediate outcomes
 - We measure final outcomes
 - We don't make that distinction
- Have you measured intermediate and/or final outcomes?
- What was your experience in measuring intermediate progress and/or final progress? What methods did you use?

Durability & a look in the future

- To what extent do you believe that the SDG agenda will remain after your mayor departs from office? (1 = low confidence, 5 = high confidence).
- What have you put in place to ensure long-term viability? Please describe both qualitative and quantifiable measures.

Annex II: Review of SDG Leadership Cities policy commitments

| City | Policy commitments | Binding commitments |
|---------|---|--|
| Accra | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Signed NYC's VLR Declaration in 2019 Published a VLR in 2020 City budget is mapped to the SDGs as required by the Budget Preparation Guidelines City development plan is aligned with the SDGs Have a set of indicators reported in their VLR used to report progress on the SDGs | Ghana's Ministry of Finance's Budget Preparation Guidelines require municipalities to align budgets with the SDGs. |
| Bogotá | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Currently drafting an SDG public policy Urban Master Plan aligned to the SDGs Publishes semiannual reports on SDG progress Currently preparing its first VLR Have technical documents linking each government program with the SDG they impact and expenditure by SDG Development Plan and chief city policies use the SDG framework Building a set of indicators to measure SDG progress | The SDG public policy will commit the city to certain actions and the constant measurement of SDG progress. |
| Bristol | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> SDGs are embedded in the City Council's urban planning approach Bristol City Council corporate strategy 2022–2027 aligned to SDGs Social value focused procurement process that incorporates SDGs delivery One City Plan maps citywide partnership delivery on SDGs Post COVID-19 Economic Recovery and Renewal Strategy and Ecological Emergency Strategy built around SDG delivery Reports to a GitHub open-source platform which has recently been populated with up-to-date data Signed NYC's VLR Declaration in 2019 | No binding commitment. |

| City | Policy commitments | Binding commitments |
|--------------------------------|--|---|
| Buenos Aires | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signed a non-binding cooperation agreement with the National Council for the Coordination of Social Policies in 2016 committing to SDG localization • “The City’s Commitments” program sets measurable and time-bound goals for the city government w/SDG mapping • Government Plan is adapted to the SDGs • Signed NYC’s VLR Declaration in 2019 • Published a VLR in 2019, 2020, and 2021 • Has a set of indicators for monitoring SDG progress | The city is working to pass a law requiring each mayor to establish City’s Commitments and link them to the SDGs. |
| Durban | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Established an SDG Institutionalization Committee to embed the SDGs in city processes • SDGs included in the Integrated Development Plan, with plan to submit a VLR • Use of SDG framework led to the Safer Cities Policy, the Social Development Strategy, and the Climate Change Action Plan • Immediate outcomes are measured via implementation protocols and Memorandums of Agreement • Created an integrated city-level data ecosystem for reporting on the SDGs | No binding commitment. |
| Hawai’i & Hawai’i Green Growth | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Published a VLR in 2020 • Have the Aloha+ Challenge Dashboard, an online, open-data platform that tracks thirty-seven targets and over two-hundred indicators • The Hawai’i State Planning Act, the Hawai’i 2050 Sustainability Plan, and the State of Hawai’i’s Aloha+ Challenge are aligned with the SDGs • Have a Sustainability Council with a budget and staff to carry forward the Hawai’i 2050 Plan | No binding commitment. |

| City | Policy commitments | Binding commitments |
|-------------|---|---|
| Helsinki | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helsinki's City Strategy 2021–2025 • Transferred SDG/VLR management from the mayor's office to the strategy department • Signed NYC's VLR Declaration in 2019 • Published VLRs in 2019 and 2021 • Creating local 2030 targets for as many SDG targets as possible • Starting climate budgeting by 2023 • City's new procurement strategy includes sustainability goals • Has 60 SDG indicators updated annually • SDGs incorporated into financial and operational planning • Started conducting SDG analysis for all city-level sector programs | Finnish municipal law requires the municipality to promote the well-being of its residents and the vitality of its area, and organizes services for its residents in an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable way. |
| Los Angeles | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signed NYC's VLR Declaration in 2019 • Published VLRs in 2019 and 2021 • Five out of 38 City Departments use the SDG framework in their strategic plan • Have used the SDGs as a lens for the city's Consolidated Plan • Have an SDG website and data platform reporting 247 indicators • SDG work incorporated into budget via personnel/ salary costs | No binding commitment. |
| Madrid | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan aligned with SDGs • Have a Localisation Strategy for the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda in the City of Madrid • Set up a commission that will report its progress on the localization strategy to the Mesa Transversal de Acción Internacional • Will produce an annual monitoring report on the localization strategy • Plan to produce a VLR • A total of 104 local targets have been defined that contribute to 53 goals and 16 SDGs and a system of 160 indicators will be used for monitoring and evaluation | No binding commitment. |

| City | Policy commitments | Binding commitments |
|-------------|--|--|
| Malmö | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integration of the SDGs into the city's overall budget and into the follow-up system, using the annual sustainability report to follow up on the SDGs • Integration of the SDGs into long-term and city-wide steering documents such as the Environmental Program and the Comprehensive Plan • Signed NYC's VLR Declaration in 2019 • Published VLR in 2021 • Signed a declaration for cities' commitment to the SDGs in 2015 • Created a central Sustainability Office (2017–2019) and SDG coordinator in the Sustainability department at the Mayor's office (2022) with a special mission to implement the 2030 Agenda • Measures and analyzes trends for about 100 indicators distributed across the 17 SDGs | No binding commitment. |
| Mannheim | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signed the NYC VLR Declaration in 2019 • Published a VLR in 2019 • SDG localized in a Mannheim 2030 Vision which is the basis for all decision-making, including budgeting and procurement. • Measure progress through 126 impact goals targeting the SDGs with 412 indicators • Annual Urban Thinkers Campus (UN Habitat World Urban Campaign) on localizing the SDGs and connecting up with the global Level (UN Habitat, World Urban Forum, High Level Political Forum) | The city council adopted the Mission Statement Mannheim 2030, a binding plan to achieve the SDGs. |
| Mexico City | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Published a VLR in 2019 and 2021 • The Political Constitution of Mexico City provides the institutional framework for the accomplishment of all the SDGs • The 2019–2024 Government Program outlines actions in pursuit of global sustainable development agendas, including the SDGs | The Political Constitution of Mexico City commits the city to fulfillment of global agendas for sustainable development, including the SDGs. |

| City | Policy commitments | Binding commitments |
|---------------|---|---|
| Milan | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SDG-based budgeting • Milan Urban Food Policy Pact is directly tied to SDGs • Have a Digital Alliance that unites private and public actors and that decided to codify its activity along the lines of the SDGs • SDGs have been mainstreamed in planning and decision-making processes • Made compulsory qualifying the Management by Objectives of each department through the SDGs | No binding commitment. |
| New York City | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OneNYC strategy is mapped to the SDGs and commits the city to tracking indicators and publishing data annually | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local Law 17 of 2008 created a permanent sustainability office and requires that NYC publish updated long-term sustainability plans and identify a set of sustainability indicators. • Local Law 84 of 2013 requires building owners to submit annual benchmarking data on energy and water usage, and served as basis for the NYC 2018 VLR. |

| City | Policy commitments | Binding commitments |
|------------|---|---|
| Orlando | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Passed a resolution in 2018 incorporating the SDGs into the Green Works Community Sustainability Action Plan • The 17 goals and their targets/indicators are mapped to the 7 Green Works priorities and incorporated into city planning documents • Signed NYC's VLR Declaration in 2019 • Published a VLR in 2021 • Are developing an SDG dashboard of standard indicators and targets for all 17 goals across our region • Have annual updates on the Green Works CSAP where we track progress towards our goals. • Have built an Office of Sustainability & Resilience as a formal division of the city government structure • The Sustainable Procurement Policy institutionalizes environmentally preferable decision-making into the city procurement process • Mandatory Recycling for Commercial & Multifamily buildings • Enabled Commercial Food Waste Collection Program and Residential Backyard Composting initiative • Hot annual Solar Co-op program to accelerate rooftop solar adoption for residential homes and small businesses • Passed EV Readiness Code that requires EV charging stations and make-ready requirements for all new commercial and multifamily buildings • Established the 'Regional Resilience Collaborative (R2C)' to mobilize local governments across Central Florida to begin working to advance the SDGs. • Established an Office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion to advance racial and social justice in the community | Orlando City Municipal Code, Chapter 15—local law for Building & Energy Water Efficiency Strategy (BEWES) requires buildings to submit annual energy and water benchmarking scores for public transparency. |
| Pittsburgh | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Published a VLR in 2020 • Created the OnePGH, the city's resilience strategy meant to help the city achieve the SDGs • Have aligned the SDGs with local investment areas of the OnePGH Investment Prospectus • Established the Office of Equity | No binding commitment. |

| City | Policy commitments | Binding commitments |
|----------|---|------------------------|
| Yokohama | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City's "Medium-Term 4-Year Plan," which the city council resolved, is aligned with the SDGs • Selected by the Government of Japan as an "SDGs Future City" • Have an SDGs Design Center run jointly by the city and private sector • Established an SDGs Promotion Headquarters headed by the mayor, and with a joint secretariat composed of three major organizations in the city • Established the Y-SDGs Certification System that supports SMEs and others for their operations and SDG engagement • Established a subsidy program for companies and groups planning new products/services contributing to the SDGs as a part of the COVID-19 response • Set local KPIs relating to local priorities and the SDGs in the Medium-term 4-year Plan and the SDGs Future City Plan and review the indicators annually • Signed NYC's VLR Declaration in 2019 • Published a VLR in 2021 | No binding commitment. |

Source: Authors

Annex III: Tools and resources on SDG localization and Voluntary Local Reviews

- [U.N. DESA's Sustainable Development Division's webpage](#) compiles reports, documents, and resources related to SDG 11 and city localization of SDGs, including their [Global Guiding Elements for Voluntary Local Reviews \(VLRs\) of SDG implementation](#) report.
- U.N. DESA created a submission-based [VLR database](#).
- A Joint Urban Monitoring Group led by UN-Habitat is currently developing a [UN System-Wide Urban Monitoring Framework](#) to support local and regional governments and stakeholders in monitoring and evaluating urban challenges, trends and public policies in cities.
- UN-Habitat has a [webpage that compiles resources and reports](#) on SDG localization and VLR production, including its [Voluntary Local Reviews, VLRs toolbox](#).
- United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) created [learning modules](#) on SDG localization.
- UCLG's Global Observatory on Local Democracy and Decentralization (GOLD) has a [platform of resources](#) on SDG localization, including guidelines for producing VLRs.
- Local2030 is a [network and platform](#) that shares tools and resources on SDG localization, including the [Localizing the SDGs Toolbox](#).
- ICLEI—Local Governments for Sustainability offers [various tools and cohort training platforms](#) to aid in SDG localization efforts.
- The [Reference Framework for Sustainable Cities](#) has a web application to guide cities in SDG implementation and monitoring.
- A team of students from Carnegie Mellon University's Heinz College of Information Systems and Public Policy Carnegie Mellon published a [handbook](#) to help cities report local progress on the SDGs.
- The city of Bristol published a [handbook](#) for U.K. cities based on its experience in developing a VLR.
- The Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES) launched an [online platform](#) that showcases local government actions on the SDGs.
- The City of Los Angeles developed multiple tools to help other cities localize the SDGs, including a [GitHub SDGs Wiki](#), a [starter's kit](#), and a [four-phase approach](#) to SDG implementation.
- SDSN's USA-Sustainable Cities Initiative (USA- SCI) and TRenDS launched [SDSN Local Data Action Solutions Initiative](#) to share knowledge on localizing SDG targets.
- The European Union manages a [resource library](#) on Localization the SDGs that includes a "European Handbook for SDG Voluntary Local Review."

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