

Mobilizing Cities Behind the SDGs: A luncheon for Mayors and Permanent Representatives to the UN - Meeting Report

On September 22, 2014 the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) held ***Mobilizing Cities Behind the SDGs: A luncheon for Mayors and Permanent Representatives to the UN***. This event brought Mayors, Permanent Representatives to the United Nations, leaders from the private sector and technical experts together to discuss the potential offered by a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) dedicated to sustainable cities and human settlements.

Cities present a unique opportunity to bring together the economic, social and environmental sustainable development agendas in a concrete and operational manner that could accelerate the achievement of targets around both the urban and at least half a dozen other SDGs. Half the world's population and close to two-thirds of its economic output, comes from cities and towns. By 2050, 70% of the world's population will live in urban areas, and over three-fourths of its economic activity and carbon emissions will come from urban consumption.

An urban SDG enables the leaders of local and regional governments and other key stakeholders to mobilize around integrated, city-level approaches to reduce poverty, expand employment opportunities, improve infrastructure and basic services and housing, tackle safety, gender discrimination and social exclusion and address energy, climate change and other environmental concerns. In short, cities will play a vital role in implementing the entire SDG agenda.

Mayors will play a critical role in planning for, implementing and monitoring progress against the SDGs. This meeting provided a high-level forum for Mayors to discuss with representatives of UN member states how they can better use their roles, capacities and power around urban and human settlements and crosscutting themes such as effective governance, technological advances and global collaboration, to promote local and global sustainability.

A Campaign Press release provides an overview of these and other opportunities (see Appendix III).

Opening from Jeffrey Sachs, Director, SDSN, and Aromar Revi, Co-Chair SDSN Thematic Group on Sustainable Cities, introduced by Cynthia Rosenzweig, Co-Chair SDSN Thematic Group on Sustainable Cities.

For a long time urbanization and urban development has been seen as a local and internal process but there is now a greater push for global collaboration. Global initiatives, such as the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group and Cities Alliance, are bringing cities together to form solutions to some of the most pressing issues of our time. The international dialogue on urban sustainability reached a milestone in July 2014 with the creation of a proposed Urban Sustainable Development Goal.

The formation of this goal has been long overdue. More than half of the world's population currently lives in our cities. However, the topic of urban sustainability does not gain its importance solely from the amount of people that inhabit cities but also from the economic development that takes place in these regions. Since the 1980s half of the world's economic output has come from cities. Cities produce over two-thirds of the world's economic output and much of its incremental employment. Cities therefore provide a unique opportunity to address poverty, employment, social inclusion, basic service delivery and good governance.

The creation of a proposed urban SDG is a huge achievement of the global urban community that includes UN-Habitat, UCLG, ICLEI, C-40, Cities Alliance, Metropolis, WUC, SDI, WEIGO and Communitas; hundreds of Mayors, cities, universities, urban think tanks and institutions. This will place urban development at the front and centre of global development efforts. However, there are several more steps that must take place to make sustainable inclusive cities a reality.

First, cities must mobilize human, knowledge, institutional and financial resources to achieve the SDGs, on their own and by opening a dialogue with national governments on devolution – which the reason for this consultation. Together, cities and member states can be stronger, more effective and efficient in meeting the SDGs. Cities should be viewed in the context of surrounding regions and resources must be mobilized to strengthen economic and social links between cities and their surrounding rural and metropolitan areas. Furthermore, particular cities will need resources specific to the unique challenges they face, such as employment, housing, basic services, poverty and climate change.

Second, effective governance at local, regional and national levels must be established. This will involve examining our current political settlement and determining which frameworks are enabling or inhibiting change. Participation of national, regional and local governments will be a necessary condition for this important dialogue. Mayors will play a central role in this devolution and must be at the forefront of this process.

Last, urban sustainability can only be achieved if all stakeholders are involved in the process of visioning, planning, implementation and monitoring. This requires the participation of the private sector, research institutes and universities, non-government and civil society organizations and the people. It is the citizens of the world that will achieve urban sustainability and this can only be done through cross-sectoral partnerships and participatory planning processes.

Mayor Eduarado Paes of Rio de Janeiro

Major Paes has acted as Mayor of Rio de Janeiro since 2009. Mayor Paes played a crucial role in bringing the World Cup to Rio in 2014 and has already started preparations for the World Olympics set to take place in Rio in 2016. Mayor Paes is also chairman of the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, a group of the world's megacities working together to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

It is clear that the world is rapidly urbanizing and that this process is having a negative impact on our environment. Brazil's growing economic and social influence in the world has presented Rio de Janeiro a unique opportunity for social and urban progress. The world's current governance and multilateral systems have failed to address the specific challenges that cities face. Top-down approaches have often been misaligned with local needs and have not allowed cities to progress sustainably. We are now entering an era of city diplomacy where local actions can have a global impact. It is now more imperative than ever for mayors to act as leaders and reach out to national leadership about the importance of urban sustainability. The C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, a group made up of 69 cities from around the world, has already taken over 8,000 actions to prevent climate change. The group has also worked to display the intimate link between climate change and social inequality. C40 has shown that climate action is most effective when cities are involved.

We must also consider the opportunity technology presents in addressing the challenges our cities face. Unless innovation and data accessibility is encouraged, the world will continue to see casualties and economic losses from climate change. Climate change action and sustainability must be part of our long-term strategy. An urban SDG does not aim to confront national governments but rather highlight the role that cities can play. Using effective management, data analysis and information sharing can allow cities to play a greater role in the global movement towards sustainability.

Mayor Anne Hidalgo of Paris

Mayor Anne Hidalgo, the first woman to ever hold the office of Mayor of Paris, was elected in 2014. Mayor Hidalgo is in the midst of preparing for the next United Nations Climate Change Conference planned to take place in Paris in 2015. During her time in office, Mayor Hidalgo has been a champion for public and private sector action towards climate change mitigation and sustainability.

Paris's system of private and public transportation options has created a unique environment for sustainable innovation. Mayor Hidalgo, along with assistance from her predecessor, has implemented an innovative electric car-sharing program in Paris. The program was first created through conversations with the private sector and later implemented after a competitive bid process. The current program has been a success in the city and complements the public transportation system. The program has also helped to reduce air pollution, create jobs and encourage new opportunities for the private sector to promote urban sustainability.

Mayor Bill de Blasio of New York

Mayor de Blasio, elected in 2014, has put forth a series of policies to address sustainability in New York City. Recently, Mayor de Blasio pledged to decrease the city's carbon emissions by 80% by 2050. The Mayor's plan includes green building guidelines, such as, energy efficiency and lighting upgrade policies.

Social change does not come easily but, it cannot be achieved without acknowledging the link between environmental sustainability and economic equality. For many decades, world leaders have said that climate change action and sustainability advances will never be successful because the public is unwilling to change. On the contrary, recent events have shown that the public is ready. In fact, the public is now demanding that world leaders address the diverse range of challenges we face, as highlighted at the People's Climate March which took place in New York City on September 21.

Mayors will play a significant role in relaying the needs of their communities to a global audience. Local leaders are more equipped to address their communities' needs because they are closer to grassroots activity and can directly observe the urgent needs of their cities. Mayors from around the world have a responsibility to create urgency about the challenges they see in their cities. This can be achieved on an even greater level when mayors surpass borders and collaborate with leaders from around the world.

Cities have already begun to take sustainability into their own hands. Melbourne and Copenhagen have both set goals to achieve carbon neutrality by 2020 and 2025, respectively, and New York City has already reduced its carbon emissions by 19% since 2005. These goals are only a few examples of ways the public sector can set an example for the private sector in achieving sustainability for all. As 2015 approaches and a new set of global development goals are agreed upon, it is the responsibility of mayors across the globe to collaborate and continue to be champions of local action.

Break-out conversations

Between presentations, the mayors, researchers and other meeting attendees were invited to continue the dialogue about achieving urban sustainability. Many of the discussions echoed the issues addressed by the lunch's keynote speakers. The role of technological innovation, effective governance and the link between rural and urban areas in achieving urban sustainability were popular areas of discussion among the different groups of participants.

