



Introduction: Localizing SDGs and Empowering Cities and Communities in North America for Sustainability

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1.1 The Sustainable Development Goals

In September 2015, the member countries of the United Nations adopted the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs), which defined new standards for a global commitment to the three interrelated pillars/objectives: economic development, social development, and environmental development. The SDGs form a cohesive and integrated package of global aspirations framed as Goals that individual countries commit to achieve by 2030. The 17 SDGs address the most pressing global challenges of our time, calling upon collaborative partnerships across and between countries to address universal, integrated challenges to sustainable development. The SDGs include goals for addressing job loss, deteriorating infrastructure, social exclusion, and climate change, among many other issues facing societies today. The SDG agenda comes at a time

when more than half of the world's population lives in urban areas. As this portion of the population grows at a rapid speed, so too do the complex development challenges in these locations.

The SDGs can provide a long-term and sustainable approach to city planning by providing a suite of clear, common, and objective Goals that can be continuously pursued irrespective of political cycles. Ensuring full ownership of the goals through an inclusive, participatory dialogue is of paramount importance to the success of the SDG agenda. The goals must ultimately act as the common language for government, business, and citizens and represent a shared ideal to be pursued at the city level but also within each community. The SDGs, therefore, must be localized through a fully representative and inclusive participatory planning process.

1.2 Overview of the Sustainable Development Goals

The SDGs provide a comprehensive and inclusive framework for sustainable development that can be utilized by local stakeholders as a guide for community planning. The history and main principles of the SDGs are outlined below.

“Getting Started with the SDGs in Cities: A Guide for Stakeholders”¹ summarizes the SDGs as follows:

¹Prepared by the Sustainable Development Solutions

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The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a universal set of goals, targets and indicators² that UN member states have committed to use, to frame both domestic and international development policies over the [...] period 2015–2030]. They build upon the progress of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were agreed by governments in 2001 and expired in 2015. While the MDGs focused on reducing extreme poverty in all its forms, the SDGs pursue a broader agenda that encompasses the social, environmental and economic aspects of sustainable development, which is relevant for all countries worldwide.

The SDGs are at the core of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,³ which was ratified by all UN member states at the 2015 United Nations General Assembly. Their 17 goals and 169 targets address critical issues facing the world today, including the eradication of extreme poverty, tackling global inequality and climate change, promoting sustainable urbanization and industrial development, protecting natural ecosystems, and fostering the growth of peaceful and inclusive communities and governing institutions (p. 8).

The SDG framework addresses five key themes, referred to as the Five Ps of Sustainable Development:

People – The commitment to ending extreme poverty, hunger, and economic and gender inequality

Planet – The commitment to protect the planet from degradation through sustainable development, production, consumption, and natural resources management practices and to address the causes and effects of climate change

Prosperity – The adoption of consumption and production patterns that are sustainable for future generations and result in equitable economic growth and participation for all members of society

Peace – The promotion of good governance, rule of law, anti-corruption, human rights, and equal protection under the law for all members of society

Partnerships – The coordination of a multitude of stakeholders, including national and local governments, multinational corporations, NGOs, and other members of global civil society to implement the SDG agenda with accountability and transparency⁴

The SDG framework is also designed to reflect advancements in the field of development since the advent of the MDGs, as it promotes key opportunity areas for improved outcomes by applying these five principles in development strategies:

Inclusivity – The SDG agenda stands on the principle that *no one is to be left behind* and therefore requires the engagement of stakeholders across all levels of society in order to effectively account for and respond to the needs and interests of all.

Universality – In order to achieve global targets for development, the involvement of developed and developing countries is required. Understanding that development contexts vary worldwide, the SDGs are designed to be adapted as they are applied to local situations.

Integration – The SDG agenda addresses the complexity of long-term solutions, by recognizing the interconnectivity of development policies and investments and building on existing relationships between stakeholders across the three dimensions of sustainable development: economy, environment, and society.

Technologically driven – Advances in ITC and data availability inform sustainable development policy and investment as they improve global communication and interconnectedness and bring to light a range of data that illustrate and measure development needs, challenges, and progress.

Network, 2016.

²A complete list of the SDGs and their targets is available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs>

³United Nations Resolution A/RES/70/1 of 25 September 2015 (2).

⁴For more information on the “5 Ps,” see: SDSN, “Getting Started with the Sustainable Development Goals – A Guide for Stakeholders”, (New York: SDSN, 2015), 8–9. Available at: <http://unsdsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/151211-getting-started-guide-FINAL-PDF-.pdf>

Locally focused – Local achievements in sustainable development and the SDGs require support, action, and coordination from communities and local governments. In this respect, cities are critical centers of sustainable change due to their population density and economic needs and output. For this reason, piloting the agenda in cities like Baltimore will not only provide benefits to the community, but the bottom-up approach can also inform national-level policy, and it will serve as an example for other cities around the world that seek ways to participate in the SDG initiative.⁵

1.3 Why the SDGs Are Useful for Cities

“Cities are where the battle for sustainable development will be won or lost”.⁶ This is a salient point, as the SDGs have come into effect in a world that is increasingly urban. A little over half the global population currently resides in cities, and by 2050 this statistic is expected to grow to two-thirds of the global population.⁷ Urbanization has created some of the world’s most complex development challenges. This trend of urbanization, however, also yields the opportunity to create high-impact solutions, as a result of the agglomeration of people and business activity. The imperative for innovation and change is spurring wide interest and investment in twenty-first-century urban development.

Mayors and local leaders who are tasked with the responsibility to manage and improve the

quality of life in urban environments recognize that the SDGs provide a road map for balanced and equitable urban development.⁸ Additionally, the quest to build sustainable cities that advance global progress is putting mayors and local government leaders at the forefront of change. This trajectory is triggering broad interest and investment in urban development. The SDGs provide a set of integrated objectives that comprise a more complete and sustainable vision of urban development, which provides equal living and working opportunities to all inhabitants, to promote healthy living environments and resilience against the array of everyday challenges and risks that we face today. As UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon described it, the SDGs are a “people’s agenda.” Utilizing the SDG framework therefore helps to show responsiveness to what local residents want, the world over.

1.4 How This Volume Is Organized

Chapters 1, 2 and 3 of the book describes the uptake and performance of the SDGs in three US cities. Baltimore had been among the first cities to attempt the exercise at a time when very little was known about the global Goals among local leadership and multi-sector civil society stakeholders involved in sustainable development. Dr. Seema Iyer describes how leveraging the expertise of the local community indicators project (Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance) helped fill in gaps in measures of equity and justice and how the SDGs remained relevant during the city’s update to the Sustainability Plan in 2019. In contrast, the next case from Los Angeles demonstrates that even with strong leadership from Mayor Garcetti, alignment with the global goals can only happen alongside internal alignment of agencies, policies, and data. Tony Pipa

⁵“Getting Started with the Sustainable Development Goals – A Guide for Stakeholders,” (New York: SDSN, 2016), 10–11. Available at: <http://unsdsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/151211-getting-started-guide-FINAL-PDF-.pdf>

⁶High Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, 2013. <http://www.post2015hlp.org/the-report/>

⁷UNDESA, “World Urbanization Prospects-The 2014 Revision,” United Nations, New York, 2014. Available at: <https://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/Publications/Files/WUP2014-Highlights.pdf>

⁸“Getting Started with the Sustainable Development Goals – A Guide for Stakeholders,” (New York: SDSN, 2016), 10–11. Available at: <http://unsdsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/151211-getting-started-guide-FINAL-PDF-.pdf>

shows that as LA prepares for the 2028 Olympics, the SDG framework can help set priorities for ongoing work towards a comprehensive vision for the city. In Houston, Dr. David Abraham reveals the city's history of engagement with sustainable development thought leaders and institutions, dating back from the 1970s to today. However, as Dr. Abraham points out, in his comparison of SDG performance in Houston and the top 100 most populous metros in the United States, Houston stakeholders need to tackle the fundamental issue of sprawl to significantly improve the sustainability performance of the region.

Although the introduction of the SDGs was new in North American cities in 2015, the idea of measuring and tracking sustainable development was certainly not. Chapters 5 and 6 of the book provide city-level examples of *mapping and adapting* existing sustainable development frameworks established in North America to the SDG framework. Maria Spiliotopoulou and Dr. Mark Roseland discuss the urgency for local action for achieving the global goals so that utilizing an adopted framework better mobilizes action toward implementing and monitoring the SDGs locally. They provide research findings for a complex matching and mapping exercise to show the relationship between the SDGs, the Community Capital Framework, and local goals for municipalities in British Columbia. The team of authors from California-based Applied Survey Research describes how and why it was possible to connect their long-standing work evaluating the Community Assessment Project in Santa Cruz County to the global goals. They explain that three conditions are necessary for any framework to successfully apply the SDGs locally: (1) a prior commitment to well-being for all which aligns with the priorities of the SDGs for leaving no one behind, (2) experience with creating a measurement system that tracks well-being, and (3) the ability to coordinate action across multi-sector stakeholders.

Chapters 7 and 8 of the book are about the dual challenge of both *national mobilization and local engagement* of SDGs. Indices and online Community Indicator System (CIS) portals are

recommended, respectively, as national- and local-level tools to manage and track local-level performance differences on SDGs. Jessica Espey of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) writes about the group's opportunities and challenges in preparing a national US Index for the SDGs. She presents the need to also complement such an effort with local-level action on SDGs, since city-level mayors are politically and thematically key stakeholders in developing sustainability policy. Jennifer Temmer and Stefan Jungcurt of the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) focus on the thematic benefits of community and city-level adaptation of the SDGs, before they present the benefits of a novel CIS portal their group developed for use by cities interested in reporting on the SDGs. Their research points to five predominant thematic indicator measurement movements that can be addressed by implementing the SDGs. These are Quality of Life, Healthy Communities, Sustainability, Government Performance and Benchmarking, and "Subjective Well-Being," which incorporates Public Happiness and Life Satisfaction. This shows that the SDGs are functional enough to report performance on many of the contemporary and important movements driving urban areas in North America.

Chapters 9 and 10 of the book are about *new indicator definitions and methods* that groups have developed to address unique development issues of importance in North America. The SDG indicators do not cover the full complexity of all development issues in North America. North American countries and cities are unique in the vast amount of research and resources that have gone into tackling wicked problems of importance. As such, more robust methods are needed to analyze and capture the nuances that may exist within themes. According to the 2017 report of the Secretary-General to the United Nations, "Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals," during the 10-year period from 2007 to 2016, 89 percent of countries around the world conducted one housing census, while 25 countries did not have such a data source. The papers in this section present examples from Youth Development and Housing. Both examples devel-

oped are composite indicators. This reflects the recognition of complexity that can be found within our ability to define and tackle problems in urban development. Specifically, Dr. Luis Estevez presents an academic method for identifying substandard housing within a community. Peg Thomas et al. from the Sundance Family Foundation present a methodology from the professional field. They present a *multi-indicator/multi-structured model* for providing policy guidance around developing more equitable economic opportunities for individual youth and their communities.

Chapter 11 of the book is a proposed heuristic outline of the SDGs localized for North American cities. Dr. Abraham, and his team from Rice University, will use this outline as the basis for a multi-city iterative process in 2020 to garner broad support for an agreed upon set of indicators for North American cities.

1.5 Recurring Themes in This Volume on SDGs for North American Cities

1. *Mapping local priorities, programs, and indicators to the national SDGs.* This is a task that has to be locally performed and communi-
2. Localization has both been able to *leverage existing local indicator systems and learn from the experiential knowledge* these local systems have attained.
3. When localization has occurred, the impetus has *predominantly come from the bottom-up in most of these cities.* Even in the cities that were invited to be a part of the USA-SCI, these pilot projects were only possible with local, on-the-ground groups making the case.
4. *Low awareness of what the SDGs are and lack of leadership in North American cities will hamper future attempts to localize them.* More work needs to be done to bring the growing international excitement to North American cities.
5. *The SDG framework can be used to highlight gaps in local indicator systems or priorities.* The SDGs represent a new language or way to communicate the comprehensive themes in urban- and country-level development.
6. *Local jurisdictions in the United States are strategic for implementing SDGs since they are notable for having broad autonomy in decision-making and adoption and implementation of policies, as long as these do not contradict state or federal laws or statutes.*