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GLOBAL CITIES IN THE AGE OF COVID-19: AGENDA 2030 AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

edited by **Tobia Zevi**





In 2015 the UN General Assembly included a **specific target for cities and local communities** (n. 11) in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), thus recognizing urbanisation as a major global challenge. Today, the role of global cities is put to the test by **the Covid-19 pandemic**. The need for a urgent and coherent management of the emergency also in urban realities – not to mention slums – places further emphasis on the quest for sustainable urbanisation processes and strategies worldwide. How to achieve these goals? What is the expected impact of Covid-19 on SDGs targets on sustainable urbanisation? Will it be a further constraint or will it help meet the targets? And where to look for best practices?

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Sustainable Development: The Need for Healthy Global Cities

Tobia Zevi
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While working on this Dossier, the whole world has been hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. I found myself doubtful, together with some of the authors: **can we still discuss SDGs without sounding disrespectful?** Will SDGs still be relevant in the upcoming post-Covid-19 world? In addition, will cities – now fighting day and night to open new emergency units in the hospitals and to heal as many patients as possible – be able to focus again on such an ambitious, comprehensive and difficult-to-achieve Agenda?

At this stage of the pandemic, and at the dawn of a huge economic crisis, a clear-cut answer is simply not available. However, one key point emerges from the commentaries of this dossier: **there is no alternative to SDGs, if the world hopes to prosper after Covid-19.** No one can deny that, if we ignore global issues related to social inclusion, inequalities, the environment, education etc., the spread of this virus will be even higher. The international community needs to work cohesively at all levels and **cities can**



provide key answers to the pandemic. At the same time, it seems impossible to implement the Agenda without localizing it and involving communities and their leaders in the age of Covid-19.

To this aim, three fundamental questions need to be raised today: what is the expected impact of coronavirus on global urbanization trends? How will the virus affect polarized populations, with many rich and too many poor people? What is the role of technology when fighting the virus and for the future of cities?

Around 55% of the world's population lives in urban areas, and some estimates predict that in 2030 this percentage will increase to 70%. In recent years, between two and three hundred thousand people every day have been leaving rural areas to live in cities. Despite frequently **extreme social conditions**, living in a city allows many people to pursue an opportunity, thanks to a vast and dynamic economic system. Let us take, for example, international migrants: statistics show that they tend to move to big cities, where they can find jobs and 'safety nets' provided by ethnic clusters. Nevertheless, the same holds true when it comes to "creative classes" and top managers.

Will this phenomenon go on in the age of Covid-19? For the time being, nobody is really able to answer this question. We can just put forward a hypothesis: if the pandemic continues, many people might decide to exploit the potential of smart working and **move to less densified and healthier suburbs**,

like in the Sixties and the Seventies. In this perspective, urbanization could slow down, as it is happening with migration flows from Africa to Europe. Moreover, we should expect different behaviors from elderlies and young people, with the former preferring healthier contexts and the latter "working, living and playing" among skyscrapers. In this scenario, **the implementation of Agenda 2030 could even accelerate**: in fact, huge urban concentrations (megacities) may be reduced, thus improving cities' livability and making SDGs more approachable.

On the contrary, **the economic effects of the Covid-19 crisis may threaten SDGs targets**. Over the last years, dozens of cities around the world have been testing the so-called "Voluntary Local Review", a document on local Sustainable Development similar to the one released by countries to report their progresses at the UN. Cities like Buenos Aires, Durban, Helsinki, Kitakyushu, Los Angeles, Medellin, New York City, Rio de Janeiro have been working on this very important experiment, in order to let the Agenda 2030 land on cities' priorities and problems. This exercise turned out to be very promising not only in terms of implementation of down-to-earth policies, but also because it included a clear message of 'citizen ownership': each one of us is responsible for building a sustainable and just world. **The sudden spread of the coronavirus may jeopardize these efforts as cities are much more focused on tackling the emergency.**

Does it mean "Game over"?

It depends on the way the world will shape the recovery phase. If we look at the past, post-disaster plans turned out to be a failure quite often. After hurricane Katrina, New Orleans was given a huge amount of public money (see Anthony Pipa's commentary in this Dossier) but today poor communities are even poorer than they used to be before the hurricane, and the same neighborhoods would probably be destroyed should another devastating hurricane hit the city.

However, viruses tend to be more "democratic" than hurricanes as nobody is completely safe: if cities do not take care of the homeless, of prisoners, of the elderly in retirement homes, of those living in super-densified areas with inadequate healthcare systems, even high-income citizens will be in danger. If we do not include these potential hotbeds in a sustainable development paradigm, the future will look threatening. This is a powerfully good reason not to forget the Agenda 2030 and, on the contrary, to implement it even faster.

Last but not least, the role of technology. In his [article](#) for the Financial Times, the Israeli historian Yuval Harari shows that two radical alternatives are available during an emergency: national isolationism vs. international cooperation and technological surveillance vs. citizens' empowerment. Cities are at the core of both choices.

Looking back at the process that led to the Sustainable Development Agenda in 2015, cities proved to be able to face common challenges by working in network. Best-practices exchanges among cities were key to proceed with "Voluntary Local Reviews" and similar exercises aiming to comprehensive (and transformative) sustainable strategies. There is no alternative for mayors – as Benjamin Barber wrote some years ago in his famous book "If Mayors Ruled the World" – but to be **cooperative, open and pragmatic** (as they are doing today with hospitals, supply chains and health devices). This attitude can help the international community on the path towards sustainability.

Moreover, by looking at different models in the management of the COVID-19 pandemic, Harari claims that there is an underpinning question: should the state be entitled to surveille its citizens both externally (as happens with digital behaviors) and internally (body temperature, chemical reactions etc.)? On the other hand, what alternatives are there to defeat the virus?

We need to find a compromise within this dichotomy in order to shape healthy cities for the future. The answer cannot be a technological Leviathan that spies on everyone to heal people and orient their choices, behaviors and lifestyles. Instead, a flexible organism, able to shut and reopen pieces of urban texture following the virus' movements, relying on people's collaboration (the "test, trace and treat" mechanism) as well as on



technology. A city that can prevent and fight Covid-19, while guaranteeing rights and privacy. A community that empowers "smart citizens", aware of their own responsibility in fighting the virus, improving their community and shaping a sustainable future.



City Leadership on Sustainable Development in the Era of Covid-19

Anthony Pipa
Brookings Institution

City leaders are confronting one of the most **urgent crises in their careers**. As they scramble to protect their citizens and communities while Covid-19 ripples throughout the world, the idea of sustainable development and meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 may seem irrelevant to their current demands. Yet the very principles that drew mayors and local governments to the SDGs, and elevated the **importance of local leadership** to global progress, may be just the thing for enabling a rapid path forward in the aftermath of Covid.

Prior to the current crisis, a groundswell of local leadership was demonstrating the importance of local contributions to sustainable development. In the summer of 2018, several cities published reports of their local progress on the SDGs, with New York City presenting its as a Voluntary Local Review (VLR), **echoing the official format¹** used by countries to report their nation's progress at the UN.



The idea stuck. Within less than a year, more than **20 other cities** had committed to or completed a VLR. At the World Urban Forum in February 2020, multiple sessions focused on scaling VLRs to every continent and hundreds of cities.

VLRs struck a chord with mayors and local governments: Here was a problem-solving tool that **facilitates the use of evidence and a common language** to “multi-solve” and articulate a coherent vision, enabling exchanges with other cities, partnerships with other sectors, and opportunities for investors.

THEN COVID-19 STRUCK

It's much too early to know the full extent of the economic, social, and psychological dislocation this crisis will cause. But it's clear that mayors and city officials **are on the frontlines**, with implications both broad and deep for local governments.

At the same time, while the top priority is to stop the virus and stabilize economies and communities, even UN Secretary General Guterres has pointed to the 2030 Agenda **as a natural organizing principle** once the world can shift its focus to recovery.

At this early juncture, it's risky to hazard what that will mean. National leaders, mayors, and city governments will be faced with a new and **unpredictable set of challenges**. Leaders will encounter immense pressure to develop new policy solutions and surge financial resources at warp speed in a chaotic environment.

The ambitious quantitative benchmarks of the SDGs may now look unreachable or even unreasonable. Targets asking for a 50% reduction in those living under the national poverty line or achieving **full employment by 2030** take on a new light, given the hit that economies are experiencing. It's fair to ask: what might the 2030 Agenda offer to cities in such a situation?

The answer likely lies in the essential principles at the core of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda:

- **Leave No One Behind:** The SDGs ask policymakers and decisionmakers to focus on reaching the most vulnerable and furthest behind first. In the aftermath of Covid-19, this will be fundamental for achieving an equitable recovery. Mayors and city officials will be determined to **re-knit the social fabric** that has been frayed and torn, intent on rebuilding their communities. Using disaggregated data to focus policy interventions on the demographic groups and neighborhoods that are most affected will offer one of the best chances for rapidly leapfrogging to recovery. It will also be crucially important for voices from these groups to be part of the public policy decisions that take place. After hurricane Katrina, the city of New Orleans had to go through **three different planning processes** before finally producing a plan for its future that was not a political failure. The third attempt stuck in part because the process for producing it prioritized widespread participation and equitable decision-making.



- **Point towards a “North Star”** – The mobilizing power of the SDGs comes in part from their timebound nature and their focus on community-level outcomes. That clarity of purpose – how far by when – provides a platform for organizing participation, resources, and support by stakeholders and citizens themselves. While cities may feel the need to adjust their targets, having quantitative, time-limited benchmarks as part of their forward-looking plans will drive an emphasis on data and measurement, encouraging and strengthening **evidence-based policymaking** to identify and scale the most effective interventions.
- **Embrace interdependence:** The SDGs ask policymakers to advance progress on social, economic, and environmental dimensions at once. City leaders used VLRs to break down internal barriers among different offices and officials, enabling improved policy coherence and the chance to solve **multiple problems through integrated approaches**. Challenges related to climate change and biodiversity will not disappear even as policymakers are seized with protecting the health of their constituents and addressing their economic disruptions– the SDGs encourage city leaders to think of these challenges as linked and requiring systemic approaches.
- **Develop unusual partnerships:** City leaders love the connective properties of the 2030 Agenda. The **SDGs are a lingua franca** that offer the basis for new partnerships with

businesses, universities, civil society, and local philanthropy. The city of Los Angeles, for example, has benefited from support from the Conrad Hilton Foundation, and developed partnerships with four local universities. City leaders will need these types of new and creative partnerships to enable a rapid recovery, with the aim of building back better.

A post-Covid recovery, whenever it begins, will take place in a chaotic environment marked by uncertainty, disruption, and some measure of devastation. Perhaps the situation may render the idea of a VLR obsolete, retired as a tool for a different time and purpose. Or perhaps it will adapt or morph into something altogether different – after all, **innovation is part of its DNA**.

Yet the crisis clearly shows that business as usual will not be adequate to the task. The planet is experiencing too many shifts, disruptions, and catastrophes. Two truths seem unambiguous: local leaders will remain fundamental **to achieving global progress on sustainable development**, and the key tenets of the SDGs will remain relevant, useful, and essential to catalyzing a recovery that can lead to transformation.

¹ Member states at the UN report on their SDG progress by submitting Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) at the UN’s High Level Political Forum, held annually.



The 2030 Agenda: A Policy Framework for a New Urban Future

Agustí Fernández de Losada
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Unlike the major global agreements that preceded it, the formulation of the United Nation's 2030 Agenda was a collective process open to all actors working in the area of sustainable development. In particular, major cities sought to highlight their contribution as laboratories in which globalisation's **greatest challenges are taking shape**. For the first time, cities were able to participate in the definition of a global policy framework that has become fundamental to tackling the planet's major challenges. It will also be key to **addressing the coronavirus pandemic** we currently face and its mid- to long-term consequences.

Following the launch of the so-called Post-2015 Process in Rio de Janeiro in 2012, cities used their international networks to demonstrate **their willingness to contribute** to designing a universal agenda that meets the challenges of twenty-first century urbanisation.



They collaborated in the global consultation process on [localising](#) the future agenda and launched a campaign for **a standalone goal on sustainable cities**. The latter campaign was devised and promoted within the framework of a multi-stakeholder alliance in which cities, civil society, academia, UN agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UN-Habitat, and some national governments participated.

Gradually, awareness and consensus were generated about the importance of the localisation of the new global agenda. This consensus led the then UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, to state that "our struggle for global sustainability will be won or lost in cities." It also paved the way for the **inclusion of a dedicated goal** on sustainable cities and communities among the 2030 Agenda's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): **SDG 11 addresses core issues** such as affordable housing, sustainable mobility, participatory urban planning and air quality. However, what is more significant is how many of the other goals and their targets fall into the remit of the **competences and responsibilities of cities** in areas such as education, healthcare, economic development, peacebuilding and the fight against climate change.

But recognising the importance of localisation and the role cities should play is not enough. Cities should be **at the heart of the SDG implementation processes**. To achieve this, the necessary resources and an enabling

environment in terms of competences should be created. Since the 2030 Agenda was launched in 2015, cities around the world, from New York to Jakarta, Buenos Aires, Barcelona, Durban and Sydney, have shown strong commitment to it and are making notable efforts to align their public policies and to report results. They are generally doing so with limited resources and under **potentially unfavourable conditions**. Yet, they are clearly willing to play an essential part in this global effort.

What remains to be seen, is what impact this commitment has and whether aligning with the 2030 Agenda is helping cities tackle sustainable development processes more efficiently. It certainly provides them with **a policy framework** that is based on shared challenges and a set of transformative principles. These principles should be used to improve local policymaking processes. Whether it is climate change, migration or global health that cities are tackling, they need to break out of their administrative silos and move towards holistic, integrated approaches to development; to commit to collaborative governance by shaping partnerships between public and private actors; and to accept the importance of measuring results and being accountable. Time will tell whether cities have the vision to achieve progress, create change and take advantage of **all this transformative potential**, moving beyond "business as usual".

What seems clear is that the policy framework the 2030 Agenda provides must be decisive



in tackling the **global pandemic we currently face**. Cities must realise – and the signs suggest they do – that this is a universal crisis that ignores borders and requires collective responses. Such **responses must be comprehensive** and transcend specific sectors, such as healthcare, the economy and caring for the most vulnerable. They must involve all the actors, resources, knowledge and innovation that can be mobilised; and all of this must be deployed in a way that is transparent and for which city governments can be held accountable.

But what is absolutely crucial is that the 2030 Agenda is used to address the mid to long-term consequences that will be the pandemic's legacy. The world that awaits us after this pandemic is hard to visualise, as is the urban future ahead. What is clear is that cities must learn to adapt, to be resilient and to develop scenarios that ensure social cohesion. They must do this by **relying on their citizens to unite in collective efforts**, and by building on the mutual understanding and alliances among cities, collective ties that states often lack. Possessing a **shared policy framework** may yet prove crucial.



European Cities on the Path Towards a Sustainable Future

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EUROCITIES

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The **UN agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** could not be more important than during these challenging times. The Covid-19 crisis is teaching us that it will be important, once the mitigation phase of the impacts will be over, to re-think and re-orient our economic and social systems towards a more sustainable future. Urbanisation is one of the key transformative trends of our time and any successful path to achieving such a future will run through [sustainable cities](#).

SDG11 – “making cities inclusive, safe and sustainable”, is surely a key entry point to sustainable urban development, but systemic interactions with **at least 11 other SDGs need to be made, with implications for the whole Agenda 2030**. While many countries have started to incorporate the SDGs into their national strategies and plans, the importance of local action has gained significant traction

over recent years. In many ways, European cities have been driving this effort by playing a key role in implementation of the agenda.

Since 2018, a number of cities all over the world have started to report their progress on the SDGs to the United Nations, by submitting **Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs)**, a subnational equivalent to Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) to report on actions and policy-systemic solutions to achieve the goals. In Europe, the cities of Barcelona, Helsinki and Bristol have so far taken part in this process.

In this respect **EUROCITIES will soon publish a report aimed at capturing the contribution of European cities to the SDGs**, through good practices and concrete recommendations for accelerated action. It will be based on a mapping exercise and a survey among EUROCITIES members with the aim of understanding their level of involvement with the SDGs. 57% of members surveyed (55 cities) are active on the agenda. Highly engaged cities (32%) have taken concrete actions and developed plans for mainstreaming the SDGs at the city level. Cities with medium to partial engagement (25%) have so far focused on communication actions, benchmarking and support to external activities. The final cluster of cities (43%) are familiar with the concept of sustainable development and are taking concrete actions but are using other conceptual frameworks such as Agenda21 or the well-being-driven frameworks.

To ensure that the commitment on SDGs is met, there are concrete steps cities (with the help of other levels of government) can take in four directions: governance, spaces for collaboration, finance and innovation.

As an integrated agenda, the achievement of the SDGs requires an important **coordination effort across all levels of government**.

Strengthening SDG leadership, multi-level governance and capacity building across national, regional, and local levels is essential to this endeavour. The integration of the SDGs in the overall city strategy is a key enabler to help policy-makers to develop accountability mechanisms. Starting from a strong vision of sustainable development, several cities have aligned their strategic plans with the SDGs and put in place **dedicated strategic coordination mechanisms**.

As the closest level of government to people, city authorities can help **policy co-creation processes, set-up citizens' assemblies, foster civic dialogues and organise participatory budgeting** and promote collective action, while ensuring citizen inclusion in economic, social and cultural life. This participatory approach is a key driving force to implement SDGs at the local level and ensure that policies meet the needs of the population while increasing the sustainability of their impact.

While cities typically do not exercise influence over fiscal, monetary and trade policy, local authorities can leverage a range of **policy instruments to re-orientate investment**



flows towards sustainable development needs. Examples include raising awareness and incentivising businesses to contribute to mainstreaming SDGs, providing space for coordination platforms and helping to de-risk investment in new innovations. Integrating SDGs into city budgeting can be an important tool for cities to address resource allocation, mobilise investments, and encourage participatory budgeting processes to better address interconnected challenges. An ambitious approach to sustainability budgeting would entail taking SDGs as a starting point to identify gaps and improve budget performance and policy coherence, rather than only mapping existing budgets [against the SDG](#). SDG-friendly budgeting also requires strong political will and ambition on the national level. Countries which integrate the SDGs into their main budget and budget tools, making decisions towards sustainable development criteria, are also more likely to reflect this ambition on municipal level.

Innovation and research are key enablers for transformative change towards sustainability. While cities are centres of innovation and creativity, attracting talents and connecting research hubs, universities and businesses, they are also focal points of interconnected challenges. For example, cities produce 72% of all global greenhouse gas emissions and are places where decarbonisation strategies need to address **energy, transport and buildings**, foster green jobs while working to ensure that the most vulnerable citizens are not disproportionately

affected by the transition. With urban systems getting increasingly complex and multi-dimensional, new knowledge and partnerships are required to tackle new and emerging challenges in innovative ways. In the framework of the Agenda 2030, **science, innovation and technology** can be central to harnessing co-benefits and minimising trade-offs while addressing the 17 SDGs.

There isn't a unifying framework used by cities to report on SDG implementation, and local authorities face several challenges in availability, harmonisation, statistical capacity and local disaggregation of data. However, while methods to integrate the local dimension into international reporting are currently under discussion at the international level, cities have already started to report on SDGs. [The European Handbook for SDG Voluntary Local Reviews](#) includes a useful overview of the reviews produced so far on the local level and a collection of useful indicators especially relevant for the European level.

The implementation of the SDGs is an opportunity for Europe to accelerate the transition and to pioneer cutting-edge innovation that can inspire the world. Notwithstanding the ambition of cities, more needs to be done to fully develop and scale-up solutions across most cities. Champions cities will continue to inspire the world through decentralised cooperation in Europe and beyond. However, later adopters also need to be enabled to contribute to the global agenda.



In this respect the EUROCITIES report recommends that cities willing to scale up efforts on the SDGs:

- Use the SDGs as a common framework to engage with citizens and to incentivise partners and suppliers towards more sustainable practices;
- Consider doing a VLR as a useful exercise for the city not only to highlight good practices, but also to define trade-offs and gaps in the implementation of SDGs at the local level. This can help to break silos and prioritise focus areas for reinforced collaboration and investments.
- Strengthen multi-stakeholder partnerships and further combine the “innovation community” and the “sustainability community” to accelerate implementation and scale up solutions;
- Support both bottom-up and top-down strategies: civil society actions and awareness support can reinforce political leadership and administrative ownership, and vice versa;
- Use the SDGs to drive the change towards sustainable finance and to push green and social investments;
- Focus on cities’ production and consumption external spillover, and how to improve policy coherence for sustainable development.



Poverty and Inequality. The Role of Cities in a Post-Covid-19 Scenario

Marco Simoni
 LUISS

Sustainable development goals number 1 and number 10 are about **poverty and inequality** respectively. Economists and policy-makers know well that these two are very different subjects. A country or a city can reduce poverty while increasing inequality. In fact, this is exactly what has happened in many countries (at different levels of development) in the last 30 years. This is what has happened globally as well. Overall **poverty has been drastically reduced**: some estimates suggest 1 billion people have come out of poverty. Inequality, on the other hand, has increased under all metrics.

Therefore, it is challenging to address these two themes simultaneously in one commentary. However, there is I think one lesson from our recent past that is often overlooked, which can also come to be very useful in the months to come, when the real impact of **the Covid-19 global crisis** on economies will manifest itself.



The key lesson is that many economic dimensions of human life, poverty and inequality included, can be dealt with very effectively at the local level. In fact, national governments do not have enough financial resources to address poverty effectively through "traditional" redistributive policies. Additionally, as explained very clearly by Branko Milanovic's latest book, it is very hard to **counteract inequality trends with redistributive policies** because such trends are reinforced by personal choices; additionally, the increased diffusion of capital income which now overlaps with labor income can make traditionally redistributive policies from capital to labor even counterproductive for inequality. At the same time, in a quickly changing scenario, national governments are likely not have enough information about the different and new dimensions of poverty and inequality. While **deprivation is similar in its manifestations**, it can be driven by lack of housing, lack of infrastructure, lack of job opportunities. Similarly, inequality – both absolute and relative – can be driven by spatial and urban features: relatively poorer neighborhoods with an **abundance of social and public spaces** are known to yield better quality of living and better opportunities for young people than relatively richer neighborhoods that suffer from social distance (and therefore isolation) because of their urban planning.

In other words, we all know that globalization in the last thirty years is a history of cooperation,

competition and exchange between global cities. The leading role of mayors, for example, is a clear by-product of **such increased importance**. Research carried out in the last ten years by Enrico Moretti and other economists explains to us the economic drivers of such increased importance of the city for economic variables, and the widespread social consequences.

Despite this centrality of the city dimension, the public discourse on poverty and inequality rarely encompasses a specific focus on cities and **this is a mistake**. Even when urban poverty is discussed, the approach tends to be remedial. Urban inequality instead is always overshadowed by efforts towards economic growth which, as I said at the outset, can instead lead (when achieved) to increased inequality. Instead: a lot can be achieved by targeting **different dimensions of inequality and poverty drivers**, by focusing on proximity measures. For example: local estate taxes (a tax paid on inheritance) can be set, or increased, and directly aimed at funding special school programs in disadvantaged neighborhoods. [Recent evidence](#) by research from Moretti et al. (2019) suggests that such taxation is beneficial to local finances (the share of older, richer people who move residences because of it is small) and additionally, taxes with a pre-committed use of their revenues are known to be better accepted and in fact better complied with.

Let me give a different example. The expansion of large malls instead of city markets and



city shops had the effect of depriving neighborhoods of much-needed social environments and interactions. Malls are a **by-product of globalization**, the rise of large retail and manufacturing global chains, and of course of financialization, whereby large funds can be applied to serve the needs of large construction sites. However, through smart local regulations and smart local tax incentives, the same large financial instruments can be deployed towards **urban renewal and reinvigoration**. The widespread use of concessions for services and maintenance could also divert private funds towards schools and other community-based services that can contrast poverty and inequality both effectively and structurally.

In short: what we have seen in the past twenty years is a lack of creativity to match the increased importance of **global finance and global trade**, with the increased importance and ability of cities to address problems that once were considered to be of the national domain, but over which the state now has much less control. One reason for this mismatch could be that such creativity does not well serve local political dynamics, and/or that the knowledge required to mobilize global instruments to serve social cohesion at a local level is not readily available at the urban level. Whatever the reason, there seems to be something akin to a gap waiting to be filled.

How does this reasoning square with the changes that COVID-19 is imposing on global cities during **the current lockdown phase** and,

more importantly, in the coming future, when facing the economic consequences of the pandemic crisis? The economic crisis is likely to impact cities and territories very differently, depending on the sectors they mostly rely on. So, while poverty is likely to rise in many countries, **inequality will increase as well** because not all sectors will be similarly hit by the crisis. Aviation, tourism, and other industries heavily dependent on close human interaction will be the most hit. Possibly, many companies and jobs will never resurface because the notion of risk in these sectors will affect relative prices even after COVID-19 will be defeated.

Furthermore: we know from previous research (for example Balland et. al 2020, Nature Human Behaviour) that innovation in different sectors is very **concentrated in space**, and more generally cities often rely on a limited number of important industries that drive their economy. Hence, some cities will be hit particularly hard.

Therefore, while it will be crucial that nation-wide or even continent-wide macroeconomic policies are put in place to alleviate the worst effect of the economic crisis and to preserve as much production capacity as possible, many initiatives will need to rely on the local level to be effective. Cities will need **to find new specializations**. Tourism-heavy cities will need to re-orient their cultural capabilities towards other creative occupations. We do not know yet if global value chains will be able to restart in the same configuration as yesterday. While



some value chains will restore their operations, new products are likely to develop with a shorter chain to reduce the increased costs of insurance and re-insurance against **the new risks we now are more aware of**. Such shorter chains will probably mean, for example, that manufacturing will increase its numbers again even in the developed world, and offer new opportunities for displaced workers and capital.

In short: the economic importance of cities in the coming future will not decrease, on the contrary it will increase, and we can expect to see differences in poverty and inequality, also depending on **the local-level capacity to design intelligent targeted policies**, carefully planned and effectively implemented.



New York City: A Case Study in Localizing the Agenda 2030

Penny Abeywardena
 NYC Mayor's Office for International Affairs

Surbanization intensifies, the role of cities is changing to adjust to this new reality. This evolution is aided and abetted in part by national governments that are increasingly **abdicating their responsibilities** on the global stage on issues like climate change, migration and – as we are seeing with the COVID-19 pandemic – public health. As a result, cities are banding together to tackle these crises and exerting their collective power to effect change for their constituents.

At the NYC Mayor's Office for International Affairs, we work to connect New York's local initiatives to global efforts. Our city hosts the largest diplomatic corps in the world and so we are privileged to draw on international expertise from **193 permanent missions, 116 consulates and more than 70 trade missions.**

After the United Nations ratified the 17 Sustainable Development Goals in September

2015, my office mapped the commonalities with our city's OneNYC sustainable development plan and created Global Vision | Urban Action, a platform that highlights **ways to localize the Global Goals**.

We brought UN diplomats into our community to exchange ideas about addressing global challenges like **poverty, hunger and sustainability, on a local level**. For example, in summer 2018, the Mayor's Office for International Affairs invited a delegation of UN sustainability experts to tour our community gardens to exchange ideas on urban resilience and addressing hunger.

Still, we knew we had to go further

Each year, the UN's member states are invited to share their progress on achieving the Global Goals through an exercise called the Voluntary National Review. The United States has never committed to doing this report. My office recognized, however, that New York City was already collecting **all the data needed for these reports** as part of local efforts to update the OneNYC plan on a yearly basis. And so we proposed the idea of a Voluntary Local Review.

After receiving favorable feedback from senior UN leadership, New York City became the first to submit a Voluntary Local Review during the High-Level Political Forum in July 2018.

In the ensuing months, we worked with other cities around the globe to do the same. Then during the 2019 General Assembly, we launched the NYC Declaration on the Voluntary Local

Review. Two dozen cities representing nearly every continent on Earth signed on to formally commit to reporting on their progress in achieving the SDGs.

The Declaration consists of three key commitments:

Commitment 1: To identify how existing strategies, programs, data, and targets align with the Sustainable Development Goals

Commitment 2: To provide at least one forum where stakeholders can come together to share experiences, lessons learned, and information gathered using the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals

Commitment 3: To submit a Voluntary Local Review to the United Nations during the United Nations High-Level Political Forum

A key feature of the Declaration is the emphasis on using existing resources. Our offices were intentional about keeping the entry bar low so that subnational leaders could engage in the process in their own time, **using their own resources and navigating their own processes**. In this way, we can level the playing field for smaller localities and ensure that the exercise is meaningful for all, regardless of region or size.

Take Helsinki, Finland. This city was the first to join the Declaration. With guidance from New York City, Helsinki initiated its VLR process by creating a cross-disciplinary research group to draw comparisons with the city's sustainable development strategy and the



SDGs. From this exercise, Helsinki was able to identify their primary school and public library systems as **areas for SDG implementation**. In July 2019, Helsinki submitted its first VLR, *From Agenda to Action – The Implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals in Helsinki 2019*, to the High-Level Political Forum at the UN.

The City of Freetown is in the beginning stages of undertaking its VLR process. In January 2019, Mayor Yvonne Aki-Sawyers released *Transform Freetown*, an 11-point development report, with the goal of combatting socio-economic and environmental issues in Sierra Leone's largest city. Using the VLR process as a tool, the City of Freetown is mapping the synergies between their targets and the SDGs. As Freetown moves through the VLR Declaration commitments, city leaders will be able to **exchange best practices with New York** and other cities worldwide, moving ever closer to not only submitting their own report, but most importantly, effecting **change for their constituents**.

When it comes to the sharing of ideas, the possibilities created by the Voluntary Local

Review are endless. Take the current crisis of the novel coronavirus, for example. By undertaking the VLR process, subnational governments can learn from each other what proactive measures can be taken and what resources might be needed to stop community spread of this disease in its tracks.

Ultimately, the Voluntary Local Review is a vehicle that cities of all different sizes can use to exchange best practices and be transparent **about what is working and what does not**. In our increasingly interconnected world, subnational governments can use the SDGs as a common language to find solutions and accelerate impact in their communities. New York is moving aggressively to grow this movement (more than 60 cities have now signed the Declaration) because our people are on the frontlines of global challenges like climate change and pandemics (NYC is now the epicenter of the Covid-19 outbreak in the U.S.). It is **imperative that we act**. In fact, we have a moral obligation to be part of the solution.



Tackling Climate Change: Give Cities a Voice

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The mayor of London oversees decisions regarding energy provision, transport, housing stock and waste management for the city's nearly **9 million inhabitants**, more than the total population of Denmark or Austria. This is true for many global cities, which make decisions about infrastructure provision that determine energy use and carbon emissions for populations larger than entire countries.

In the global effort to slow down and eventually halt anthropogenic climate change, local governments have been **important drivers of ambition**. While – for instance – the national administrations of Australia and Brazil have inhibited progress at the international climate negotiations in recent years and implemented domestic policies that go against the commitments of the Paris Agreement, Melbourne and Rio de Janeiro have set ambitious targets of achieving carbon neutrality by 2050. In response to President Trump's



decision to withdraw the United States (US) from the Paris Agreement, **247 US cities have joined "We Are Still In"**, a coalition of US non-state actors committed to implementing the global climate pact.

Local governments around the world do not only set ambitious targets, but many have already translated them into **comprehensive, local, long-term climate strategies**, even though, in contrast to national administrations, there is no obligation for them to do so.

For the cities that enact them, climate strategies have **several important functions**. First of all, such documents directly steer the process of decarbonisation by outlining how the greenhouse gas emissions can be reduced across different sectors, over the course of several decades. The strategies set interim targets and milestones towards achieving those goals, assign roles and responsibilities between municipal departments and external stakeholders.

For most local governments, climate strategies up to the year 2050 are the first plans with such a long-term perspective. They provide opportunities to create a comprehensive vision that makes it possible to **identify synergies** between decarbonisation goals in different sectors (for instance reducing per capita domestic energy use and transport emissions by promoting a compact and connected city). Such visioning exercises can become especially powerful in cities. They make climate action a more tangible

concept for local citizens by showing **what life in a carbon-neutral city would look like in practical terms**. In this respect, it is important that many of the policies that lead to decarbonisation in urban areas are designed to improve overall livability, e.g. by improving public transport provision, creating safer cycling infrastructure, regenerating housing stock, reducing energy poverty or combatting urban air pollution. This provides opportunities to frame climate action as **a desirable development** and create support and buy-in.

The process of preparing a local, long-term strategy also provides opportunities to directly **engage citizens in climate governance**. A review of the process of preparing long-term climate strategies in Austin, Berlin and Melbourne¹ has shown that all three cities have actively involved citizens and community groups in creating the strategies, by means of in-person and online consultations, advisory panels and direct engagements. In the cases of Austin and Melbourne, the local strategies also elaborate on the roles that specific stakeholders, businesses, community groups but also individuals and families will play in the implementation of certain activities. Within the municipal structures, preparing a long-term climate strategy creates **opportunities to foster unprecedented long-term collaboration** between different departments, sectors and service providers.

At the same time, although urban populations account for 70% of the world's greenhouse

gas emissions, cities' contribution to overall global mitigation efforts **is inevitably limited**. Local climate strategies normally account for carbon emissions that are attributed to municipal operations and utilities, and others that are generated within the city's limits, such as emissions from urban transport or local housing stock. They do not, however, capture the **carbon footprint** of products consumed within the city but produced elsewhere, emissions associated with freight or its citizen's domestic and international travel. Even within their borders, cities with ambitious climate goals may be stuck with existing infrastructure, such as a coal power plant, **operated by national or private actors**. Usually, cities have limited powers to shut down or shorten the life of such a plant, where this is governed by national regulations.

Achieving carbon neutrality in particular can present an even bigger challenge, since reaching net-zero emissions assumes **removing some of the already-emitted carbon dioxide** from the atmosphere, e.g. by means of biological sequestration or carbon capture and storage. Opportunities for creating such negative emissions are highly limited in urban areas.

Despite the global cities' increasing presence in the international climate governance arenas, such as the UNFCCC COP² or increased recognition of the role cities play in achieving the energy transition by supranational bodies such as the EU (see e.g. Urban Agenda

for the EU³), local governments **have little influence on the decisions** on short- and long-term climate policies taken at national and supranational levels. Yet, these decisions determine the actual pace of national and global climate mitigation and the de facto emissions generated by urban populations.

Decreasing greenhouse gas emissions to slow down anthropogenic climate change is among the most complex and urgent problems faced by humanity today. Achieving the global goals set in the Paris Agreement requires **actions in every country and at every level of government**. Despite their limited ability to influence the national and international climate policy decisions, global cities play a **crucial role in mitigating climate change**. Actions taken by local governments are essential elements of the distributed effort to reduce emissions globally and many cities around the world have proven to be ambitious, fast-paced actors that engage with their citizens and peers around the world to take meaningful steps towards mitigating climate change.

Local governments are the level of governance closest to citizens and cities serve as **a key site to engage vast amounts of population** with climate change action, show its co-benefits, and test and implement innovative, participatory and cross-sectoral governance arrangements.

Given the cities' important role in this multilevel governance arrangement, it is essential that local governments **be more closely involved**, engaged and consulted in the emerging



national and supranational processes, such as the European Green Deal, that aim to stimulate far-reaching transformative processes to achieve **carbon neutrality** at a planetary scale – and not just in cities.

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1 Iwaszuk, Ewa; Mederake, Linda; Knoblauch, Doris (2019): [The Transformative Potential of Local Climate Change Strategies](#). In: Zevi, Andrea Tobia (Ed.) *The Century of Global Cities. How Urbanisation is Changing the World and Shaping our Future*. Milan: Italian Institute for International Political Studies.

2 Mederake, Linda; Iwaszuk, Ewa; Knoblauch, Doris (2019): [The evolving role of cities as non-state actors in the international climate regime](#). In: Abdullah, Hannah (Ed.) *Cities in World Politics. Local responses to global challenges*. Monografias CIDOB 75. Barcelona: CIDOB.

3 Urban Agenda for the EU (2019), [Energy Transition Partnership Action Plan](#).