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Empowering cities

The potential for sustainability at the local level is huge, fundamental and achievable.



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Europe, Africa and Latin America now each have roughly half a billion people living in cities. In Asia, there are two billion city-dwellers. Very soon, two-thirds of the global population will be urban.

These are impressive numbers, but what do they mean, in practical terms, for local leaders and civil servants? They mean that more people need access to essential services, and that cities must outpace urbanization with quick, innovative and adaptive plans. We have to think ahead, to ensure more sustainable cities for all.

The potential to achieve sustainability at the local level is huge, fundamental and achievable. But local governments and civil servants cannot do it all on their own.

After all, we have to ensure that city residents live in affordable, healthy, safe and low-carbon buildings; that they move through an intelligent mix of public, private and shared or non-motorized mobility; that they have access to clean water and affordable, clean energy; that inequality is curbed and women are empowered; and that we protect our environment and manage waste in a sustainable way.

Take waste – one of the many administrative areas affected by the momentous growth in urban population, and a challenge for all fast-growing urban areas of the world. Some 1.3 billion tons of municipal solid waste are produced every year globally, a figure that will rise to 2.2 billion tons by 2025. If we were to load it all onto garbage trucks and put them in single file, they would stretch all the way from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego.

Quito's approach in recent years has been to add a social inclusion element to waste management, by training almost 3,000 local collectors from the most vulnerable sectors of the population. We are now setting up an inclusive waste collection plan, by creating five recycling centres where citizens will be able to bring all their collected recyclable waste.

This is the kind of important issue mayors must deal with every day. Sometimes we succeed in planning for, and managing, them in a smart and sustainable way using existing human and financial resources. Yet there is still a financial gap that could be closed by creating new lines of financing, open directly to cities, as well as through integration and support from national governments.

All levels of government and all stakeholders must come together in a multi-level decision-making process to: develop national funding schemes that help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals in cities; come up with innovative financial instruments that also provide funds for projects that require much longer investment horizons; and

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leverage existing resources within each city, bridging the rich-poor divide and delivering a city that is not only more sustainable, but also more just.

Adequate financing is not the only ingredient for sustainable urbanization. The single variable that often defines a successful approach is the existence of strong national frameworks and support. National governments have a crucial role – through legislation, fiscal incentives, progressive taxation, funding schemes and capacity-building programmes – in ensuring that local actions for sustainable urbanization keep being nurtured and sustained.

Such support for cities, where present, enables them to develop and leverage their unique assets: leaders who articulate their vision to local residents and international observers; civil servants who have the knowledge to conceptualize and execute plans and projects; and communities and local stakeholders who are engaged in defining and implementing a progressive urban agenda.

This is particularly true of cities with high growth expectations, large challenges and few resources. In my capacity as Sustainable City Envoy for ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability, I have spoken with fellow leaders from cities of all sizes. We all agree that, while our vision is often quite clear, the path to achieve it requires further innovation and perseverance.

In 2015, we saw an unprecedented series of groundbreaking deals, from the decision on the Sustainable Development

Goals to the Paris Agreement, from the Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction to the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on financing for development.

Local and regional governments played their part in securing these results, by setting good examples and by pushing their national counterparts for more commitment.

Beyond this, local and regional governments have gladly taken up the challenge and opportunity of sustainable urban development, integrated and institutionalized in the management of our cities. But now we need to translate these global frameworks into action on the ground. We need a roadmap for sustainable urbanization.

The New Urban Agenda has the potential to be that roadmap. By bringing together nations to discuss urban policies, the process has sparked a beneficial debate – but there is still much to do. We need a strong New Urban Agenda that truly globalizes local actions for a sustainable city. With it, a sustainable model of urbanization will also become possible for cities with fewer resources and, arguably, more challenges.

Local governments have contributed to sustainable urbanization, and will continue to do so. Now it's the moment for nations to come together and bring this work forward. Habitat III should produce something as strong as the ambition we have on the local level. After all, it is cities that translate the words of policy into real action on the ground every day. ▲

