ICLEI input to Global Sustainability Panel

ICLEI answers to selected UN NGLS Consultation Questions for the UN Secretary-General’s High-level Panel on Global Sustainability (GSP)

1. Context: assessing progress towards global sustainability

a) What is your objective assessment of progress (or regress) in the achievement of global sustainability over the past few decades?

In our view progress towards global sustainability over the past decades has been insufficient. This is most clearly illustrated with the slow progress on the Millennium Development Goals. There are a number of other indicators and measures which make this very clear. Yet, within this disappointing and unacceptable lack of progress towards global sustainability some cause for hope remains given that some successful initiatives have been undertaken. As the world’s largest association of local governments working for sustainability, ICLEI is proud to say that many local governments are among those that have made some progress. To give but one example: managed and guided by ICLEI, since 1990 over 1000 cities and local governments went through a five-milestone process of establishing their greenhouse gas emissions inventories, establishing their voluntary CO2 reduction targets, developing local climate action plans, starting to implement these measures, and monitoring progress.

The recognition for action on global sustainability has increased. At the local level there is a greater awareness on how local improvements also address global sustainability. There is stronger political commitment, local target setting (e.g. Cities Climate Catalog), and action in many areas that exceed those of national governments (e.g. climate change). At the international level there is a growing, albeit slowly, awareness of the significant and essential contributions cities and local governments can and do make.

Attention on the need to capture information at the sub-national level socio-economic and environmental conditions has increased. Comprehensive global information gathering, gradual integration of databases and trend analysis, however still suffer from a lack of information on the environmental status, data that is in-accessible, scattered, often non-comparable, and a lack of resources and capacity to obtain data. ICLEI has responded to these challenges in multiple ways, such as by capturing and disseminating innovate local case
studies (e.g. Local Action on Biodiversity, local renewables), showcasing cities and local
governments at national and international events, building a mitigation and adaptation
inventory (carbon).

Nonetheless the roles of local governments, in respect to their responsibilities, remain at
international level understated. Around the world central governments over the last decades
have devolved political, administrative and fiscal responsibilities towards lower tiers. This has
involved moving decision-making authority, the managing of public infrastructures and
services, and moving public sector resources closer to the local level. The driving factors for
this trend have varied including political legitimacy and availability of resources, along the
lines of the subsidiary principle. These trends have played out very differently in each
country, and each local government has differing fiscal capacities according to their size,
socio-economic base, as well as the political, legal and financial institutional make up of their
country. This devolution of responsibilities endowed to local governments however rarely
matches their fiscal capacity. To realize the full potential of local governments’ opportunities
to address the pressing environmental and social challenges, local governments will need to
be equipped and better positioned within an international governance framework. The
challenges and barriers of local governments can be illustrated with the current international
climate financing architecture.

2. Foundations for a new vision of sustainability

a) How would you define the new vision (or “paradigm shift”) required to transform
economic development dynamics in a manner that simultaneously pursues the goals of
poverty eradication, full and decent employment and reducing inequalities, while
promoting social and environmental regeneration and sustainability?

In a global economy, local governments compete at a global scale for attractive business. The
lack of global principles and minimum standards undermines the ability of already
disadvantaged places to negotiate sustainable economic activities. It complicates and
undermines efforts to regulate, monitor and effectively reduce local pollution and
environmental degradation, as well as the provision of decent jobs and livelihoods. The great
effort of local governments and cities to measure their greenhouse gas emissions makes this
perfectly clear. Cities in developed world countries export their pollution, emissions and
resource exploitation to places where products are produced, resources are mined, and cheap
labor exploited. New international government bodies are needed that can support locally
driven solutions eradicate poverty and reduce environmental risks.

b) Should components of this new vision be turned into new international time-bound
Sustainable Development Goals? If so, how would you define these new Goals and what
should be the relationship between these goals and the current Millennium Development
Goals framework?

ICLEI input to GSP, March 2011
Time-bound Sustainable Development Goals can include the creation of new international institutions with regulatory powers to address such issues. In such international institutions participation of sub-national governments can be measured, regulatory improvements and minimum standards set etc, which could form part of a new indicator set on multi-level governance performance. The MDGs can be extended to look at sub-national territorial boundaries, and complimented with the multi-level governance performance indicators.

3. Better and more coherent policies and institutional mechanisms

a) What better policies and measures are required at national and international levels to put into practice the goals of the new development paradigm? These can be discussed generically, or in relation to particular sectors such as agriculture, forestry, extractives, services (including social/environmental services), manufacturing, water, energy, housing, etc.

combined with

b) What obstacles (at the national or international level) need to be overcome in implementing these new policies and measures? What are fair and politically acceptable ways of overcoming these challenges?

At the global level it is not a question of agreeing on yet more polices, conventions and goals, but rather about more effective implementation. One of the key tools to enable more effective implementation is to incorporate all actors into policy formulation and implementation. We have seen severe lack of progress towards the achievement of sustainable development over the past decades. To us, this indicates that we live in a world in which national governments and their intergovernmental cooperation mechanisms like the UN are not sufficient to safeguard the planet and its common goods. Other actors have to come on board in a way that is much more meaningful than in the past. Among those actors are subnational governments, local governments, business and civil society. In order to achieve any meaningful progress towards global sustainability each of these groups as well as national governments and the UN has to do the utmost, and work in complementarity. That is the only way present and future generations may be able to live within the earth’s limits. Existing and new policies and measures therefore have to provide mechanisms which enable synergies and capacitiate all actors, including local governments.

4. Measures of progress beyond GDP

a) A number of alternative progress indicators (beyond GDP) have been developed to assess progress on sustainable development (e.g. UNDP’s Human Development Index (HDI), the work of the Stiglitz/Sen/Fitoussi Commission, the Kingdom of Bhutan’s Gross Happiness Index). What are your preferred indicators and why?
These models all highlight an increasing gap between economic information and people’s experience of well-being or quality of life. Well-being must be defined more broadly and people-centered to include subjective and objective data.

ICLEI supports a move away from GDP towards alternative indicators which include a wider range of factors. At a minimum this may be the HDI, but once this discussion about progress indicators is being held it may be better to “leap-frog” and start using even more inclusive and broad indicators such as the Kingdom of Bhutan’s Gross Happiness Index.

A multi-dimensional approach should include material living standards, health, education, personal activities, political voice and governance, social connections and relationships, environment (present and future), and insecurity (economic and physical). But the composition and weightings involve strong value judgments. Local governments are the closest level of government to citizens and communities, and have already been experimenting with tools and models.

b) How can they be combined or built upon to provide clear indication of progress on global sustainability?

New thinking suggests that local governments can work towards happiness and well-being of their people by promoting health, education, culture, good governance, ecology, community vitality and a good living environment. Local governments are already exploring with a combination of new tools based upon these models. What matters to the public is the service delivery to the people and the speed. The faster the delivery, the happier the people would be. Qualitative assessments of people’s sense of well-being and their satisfaction of local service delivery can help prioritize actions and inform decision makers. Local governments can also enable healthy and engaged citizens through the provision of recreational ecosystems like parks. Participation in decision-making, capital investments, budget reviews, and reducing social exclusion caused by poverty, gender, disability, linguistic isolation, racism, or ageism are further important dimensions towards better multi-level governance performance.

c) How could these indicators become associated with time-bound targets that could be a part of new sustainability goals?

Improved well-being will respond to basic services. Time-bound targets should be part of any activity and results measurement e.g. delivery of water, electricity, waste collection, education and green and recreational areas. It depends upon effective and efficient planning, governance and regulatory functions. The lack thereof will affect well-being. Measuring this can help identify causes and action priorities. It can be part of multi-level governance performance monitoring, as well as good governance.
5. Any other feedback and input

b) Please share any other feedback and input related to the information provided thus far in reports from the GSP Panel’s and Sherpas’ meetings.

ICLEI is pleased to have been cited in the background paper prepared for the GSP meeting in September 2010 in New York and equally pleased about the recognition of the important role of Local Governments in the report of working group 1 on poverty.

Since the GSP aims to “connect the dots”, we suggest that one way of connecting several dots is to consider urbanization. While today over half of the global population lives in urban areas, by 2050 it will be two-thirds. Challenges around water, food security, climate change et cetera are interrelated with urbanization.

Resilience is brought up as an important topic. Cities are often worst affected by catastrophic events and increasing their resilience is a major challenge the world faces. ICLEI helps to address this by convening the annual Resilient Cities world congress (www.iclei.org/resilient-cities).

The reports state that case studies may form part of the GSP’s final report. ICLEI has a long record of producing case studies on cities and sustainable development and would be pleased to contribute.

Outreach will be important for the GPS. We urge the GPS to include local governments, the closest level of government to the citizens, in its outreach activities.

It is mentioned that the GPS considers it important to examine what has worked and what has not in order to draw lessons for the future. That is exactly what ICLEI aims to do with our “Local Sustainability 2012” global study, which will document the variety of Local Agenda 21 and other local sustainability processes and analyze the impacts of these processes in order to propose ways forward for local governments.

Compiled by the office of the ICLEI Secretary General in March 2011. For further questions please contact secretary.general@iclei.org.