



# IGES POLICY REPORT

## EARLY VIEWS OF ASEAN'S 'FRONTRUNNER CITIES' on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Local Data Management



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**April 2018**

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# Main Messages

- Approximately 1.5 years after the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), there is still only minimal awareness about the new global goals in ASEAN's environmental circles – at both national and sub-national levels of government – particularly where English is not used widely.
- There is recognition among policymakers that the SDGs are meant to form a holistic framework and in theory, all 17 goals should ideally be pursued concurrently in a carefully integrated manner. The SDGs are helpful in the sense of serving as an aspirational 'checklist' to ensure that respective national development plans are fully comprehensive. However, in practice, it is more likely that countries will employ a 'prioritising' approach rather than an 'integrated' one which would give more attention and implementing resources to goals that correspond to unique domestic interests.
- While some countries have introduced multi-ministerial bodies to lead the integration of the SDGs into national development plans and to monitor progress, these bodies are not widely viewed to be highly effective especially in terms of enabling meaningful implementation.
- Besides the typical challenges such as insufficient human capacity and funds, the process of localising the SDGs is expected to be hindered by institutional barriers (i.e. multi-level coordination within the government and multi-stakeholder coordination with other non-governmental stakeholders), as well as slowed by the significantly underdeveloped state of data management. Systems for monitoring, reporting and verifying data in sub-national levels of government are relatively dysfunctional, especially with the use of quantitative indicators to measure results and progress. Another fundamental challenge is that the prevailing cultural values in most societies still place more importance on economic and short-term growth over long-term social and environmental quality promotion. The dominant idea of personal success and 'a good life' is heavily promoted in mass media by businesses as a lifestyle of instant gratification, convenience and excessive consumption of goods and services.
- It will take time – probably years – for the SDGs to 'trickle down' to the local level, as most cities will be passively awaiting instructions from the national agencies. Nevertheless, some policymakers posit that a group of better-governed 'frontrunner' cities within ASEAN may already be localising the SDGs to varying degrees, even if they do not know all that much about the SDGs and/or are not able to articulate their achievements in great detail by referring to the SDGs frameworks and indicators. However, in contrast to advanced cities in Japan, Scandinavia and in other European countries, there are several factors, including the complexity of the SDGs, the relatively low level of English language skills among city officials and the lack of direct incentives, that discourage ASEAN's frontrunner cities to independently and explicitly integrate the SDGs into local plans, strategies and actions, and which make it less likely that these efforts will be communicated to a wider global audience.
- To speed up the localisation and meaningful implementation of the SDGs in ASEAN Member States, international supporting stakeholders can add the most value by: (i)

facilitating both vertical and horizontal multi-ministry, multi-stakeholder collaboration on SDGs at all levels; (ii) helping government officials understand the differences between pursuing the SDGs using an 'integrated' approach as opposed to a 'prioritising' approach; (iii) assisting governments connect and re-frame the theoretical nature of the SDGs to reflect the realities of national/local priorities and pragmatic local concerns; and (v) continuing to strengthen the capacity of city officials, especially in basic project management skills which include systematic approaches to collect, monitor and utilise data for decision-making.

# Introduction

## Purpose

It is widely acknowledged that one serious challenge to pursuing sustainable development is that there is a gap between policy and implementation, and also a gap between national level and sub-national/local level actions. High-level aspirations, policies and targets cannot be implemented successfully unless city leaders, officials and supporting stakeholders understand them well and commit to take concrete actions accordingly.

Since 2010, IGES has been implementing two regional initiatives to address the policy-implementation gap in ASEAN Member States through the ASEAN ESC<sup>1</sup> Model Cities Programme and the annual High-Level Seminar on Sustainable Cities. Together, they provide support for innovative bottom-up sustainability practices in ASEAN's frontrunner green cities and connect them to key stakeholders for peer-to-peer learning and new partnership development.

The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 as one of the core frameworks driving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provided the impetus to design a new phase of the Model Cities programme which is aligned to the SDGs. From around 2016, many parties and experts have launched publications to inform cities about the SDGs and explain how SDGs could or should be implemented in cities. On the other hand, there were fewer publications which presented the perspectives and practical viewpoints of stakeholders about localising the SDGs, despite the fact that these are equally essential for optimising the design of assistance programmes to cities.

To address this gap in research, the authors conducted surveys among national and local stakeholders who have participated in the Model Cities Programme. The survey covered stakeholders' viewpoints on the SDGs and aimed to uncover their early/first impressions perceptions, expectations and priorities regarding the global goals. By gathering viewpoints on *all 17* SDGs, and not only Goal 11 (the 'dedicated' goal for cities), the findings shed light on how the average government official perceives SDG-11 with the other goals, as well as misconceptions in interpretation by officials who are not highly familiar with the SDGs. There was an added emphasis on discussing issues relating to local-level data management, which has been highlighted as a key area of improvement by many experts.

The surveys have helped IGES and ASEAN Member States to upgrade the Model Cities programme into a new 'SDGs Frontrunner Cities Programme' to be funded by JAIF. This report shares the key findings, with the hope that it will also be useful to other donors, funders, international development policymakers and parties who are also designing and implementing SDGs-oriented projects targeting ASEAN cities.

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<sup>1</sup> Environmentally Sustainable Cities.

## Methodology

About 30 survey respondents<sup>2</sup> were selected from two groups of government stakeholders: i) national government officials who support the cities in international environmental projects and are responsible for promoting the agenda of 'sustainable cities' through ASEAN's regional cooperation framework; and ii) a group of 'frontrunner green cities' in ASEAN who are active members and participants of the ASEAN ESC Model Cities Programme (<http://www.asesanmodelcities.org>) and the High-Level Seminar (HLS) on Sustainable Cities (<http://hls-esc.org>) under the framework of the East Asia Summit Environment Ministers Meeting (EAS EMM).

The national officials interviewed were from environment ministries or related urban-related line ministries (such as the Ministry of Public Works in Lao PDR and Ministry of Urban Wellbeing, Housing & Local Governments in Malaysia). These officials serve as National Project Focal Points of the Model Cities Programme and/or the ASEAN Working Group on Environmentally Sustainable Cities (AWGESC), ASEAN's official grouping under the Environment Ministers which has the mandate to spearhead regional cooperation on 'sustainable cities', especially from an environmental perspective.

Respondents from the 'frontrunner cities' were mayors, deputy mayors and senior officials experienced in international projects. The senior officials were mainly based in the environment-related departments (e.g. public health, environment or pollution control). These cities have been officially recognised through national awards or programmes for their better-than-average standard of governance and achievements in environmental management.

Interviews were conducted in the form of open-ended face-to-face meetings and through telephone calls. Stakeholders were invited to comment freely, but thoroughly, on the SDGs. This means that they were requested to peruse the list of 17 goals, and then the numerous targets and proposed indicators corresponding to each goal one-by-one, and then express their opinions. During the research period (i.e. October 2014 – February 2015), only the goals and targets were final, while the global indicators were still under discussion. Respondents provided inputs based on the draft set of indicators disseminated by the UN as of September 2016.

Key questions posed were:

- What is your general impression of the SDGs? What is the level of awareness in your country/city?
- What do you think of the SDGs in terms of their importance, usefulness and practicality? Will they 'work' on the ground?
- How can local achievements in relation to the SDGs be measured? What are the existing systems and arrangements for collecting and monitoring local data? What are the main challenges and how can these be addressed?

To the respondents from cities, some additional questions were posed:

- What do you think of 'inclusive participation' and 'multi-stakeholder engagement'?
- What kind of support will help you implement the SDGs?

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<sup>2</sup> The number and nationality of correspondents are: Cambodia – 5, Indonesia – 2, Lao PDR – 4, Malaysia – 2, Myanmar – 3, Philippines – 4, Singapore – 2, Thailand – 6 and; Viet Nam – 2.

- How can city-to-city cooperation and international project help?

## Background

### Why do the SDGs matter to cities<sup>3</sup>?

In September 2015, the United Nations (UN) adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) along with 169 related targets to replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Figure 1). Unlike the MDGs, which focused on developing countries, the SDGs are universally applicable to all countries, while also ‘taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development.’

The timeframe for pursuing the SDGs is in line with the continued trend of steady urbanisation in ASEAN Member States. At present, World Bank statistics reveal that approximately half of ASEAN’s population is urbanised and some experts predict the urbanisation rate to exceed 70% - similar to levels in Europe, United States and Japan. The next 15 years represents a critical ‘window’ of opportunity for shaping urbanisation patterns in ASEAN cities to be more sustainable, particularly by referring to the SDGs.

The SDGs are expected to define development work over the next 15 years and significantly influence government budgeting as well as international aid funding priorities. A large amount of funds – as well as energy and time devoted to wisely use those funds – is at stake. It is assumed that many new SDGs-oriented projects will be launched, while existing projects may be re-designed or expanded with new components addressing the SDGs. Many of these activities will be designed with local governments as key implementation partners.



**Figure 1:**  
The UN’s agreed universal goals for global human well-being and flourishing.

<sup>3</sup> This report uses ‘cities’ as a catch-all phrase to include all forms of sub-national government entities.

## How do the SDGs compare to their predecessor framework, the MDGs?

The SDGs are intended to be less 'top-down' and 'prescriptive' (owing to a more inclusive drafting process<sup>4</sup>), and thus anticipated to be more meaningful and appealing to a variety of stakeholders, including cities.

Since the SDGs are equally relevant to both developing and developed countries, governments are expected to adopt the SDGs as a domestic agenda, as opposed to being a donor-driven agenda with substantial assistance from international agencies as was the case for the MDGs.

Also, in contrast with the MDGs, the SDGs consultation process allowed local perspectives to be incorporated, chiefly through the Local Authorities Major Group (LAMG), which included the United Cities & Local Governments (UCLG) and ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability, which are prominent organisations with long experience of championing the roles and interest of cities.

To mainstream the SDGs effectively, past experiences of the MDGs and from Local Agenda 21 offer valuable lessons. Experts<sup>5</sup> have highlighted the following issues: (i) achieving greater policy coherence through integrated/coordinated policies among different sectors and line ministries; (ii) effective multi-level, multi-stakeholder collaboration; (iii) paying attention to sufficient financing; and (iv) ensuring accountability through rigorous quantitative monitoring and evaluation using a global indicator framework. Over 200 core indicators have been developed by the Inter Agency Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators (IAEG-SDGs).

## Which SDGs are relevant to cities?

Recognising the unprecedented challenge of urbanisation and the critical role of local governments, there is one goal exclusively dedicated to cities (Goal 11; Sustainable Cities & Communities). Besides Goal 11, several other goals are closely related to cities, such as Goal 6 (Clean Water & Sanitation), Goal 7 (Affordable & Clean Energy) and Goal 12 (Responsible Consumption & Production).

Goal 11 affirms and radically elevates the importance of the role played by city-based actors (mayors, city officials and grassroots leaders), not only in achieving local well-being, but also as key players contributing solutions to global challenges. Compared to national governments, it is argued that city governments are the closest to everyday citizens and know the needs of their cities more intimately than national-level bureaucrats.

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<sup>4</sup> The UN conducted the largest consultation programme in its history to seek opinion on what the SDGs should be, through the creation of an open working group with representatives from some 70 countries. Alongside the open working group discussions, the UN conducted a series of "global conversations". These included 11 thematic and 83 national consultations, and door-to-door surveys. The UN also launched an online My World survey asking people to prioritise the areas they'd like to see addressed in the goals. The results of the consultations were fed into the working group's discussions. (<http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/jan/19/sustainable-development-goals-united-nations>)

<sup>5</sup> See: (i) Heijden & Bapna (2015). 'Now Comes the Hard Part: 4 Key Challenges to SDGs'. Online article. WRI online commentary. <http://www.wri.org/blog/2015/09/now-comes-hard-part-4-key-challenges-sdgs>; (ii) The Guardian (2016.) 'Live Q&A: Financing the SDGs - where will the money come from?'. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2016/jan/15/live-qa-financing-the-sdgs-where-will-the-money-come-from>

## How are the SDGs expected to be implemented?

It is widely expected that there will be sufficient national ownership of the SDGs, even though: (i) national development priorities do not always correspond with the global agenda; (ii) national policies may be incoherent (policies may conflict or contradict); and (iii) public resources alone may not be enough to address all of the goals.

SDGs will be implemented by UN Member States (national governments), following a country-wide 'top' to 'bottom' process. At the 'top', the SDGs would have the 'buy-in' of national government agencies which would incorporate them into national policies. National policies and frameworks then undergo a 'localisation' process to 'make sense' of and 'operationalise' the SDGs on the ground, where sub-national governments are the key drivers. In other words, the role of cities is required to complete the 'policy-implementation' loop. However, in many countries, policies are not backed by implementation, thus creating a 'policy-implementation' gap. To close the 'policy-implementation' gap for the SDGs, all levels of government need to work together.

In ASEAN, the agencies formerly responsible for the MDGs (typically the Planning Ministries) are expected to 'inherit' the leadership and coordination role for SDGs. In addition, new institutions/mechanisms are being (or have been) established in Indonesia (details unavailable during the time of interview), Cambodia (National Council for Sustainable Development) and Thailand (Sustainable Development Committee)<sup>6</sup>.

# Awareness, early impressions and perceptions

## National agencies

National government respondents generally considered the SDGs to be a comprehensive 'checklist'. A common comment was that the framework was highly complex and ambitious, and there seem to be '(too) many' goals and targets. Neither strong objections nor high enthusiasm were expressed towards the SDGs. Some interesting metaphors heard included 'the bible of development' and 'a recipe book', suggesting that officials may exercise discretion in interpreting the SDGs. The survey respondents expected over time that each government would establish multi-ministry mechanisms with representatives from all line ministries to integrate/mainstream SDGs into respective national development plans.

In other words, the process to 'nationalise' SDGs begins with a mapping exercise to first identify which national goals/policies also happen to align with the SDGs. If some points covered by the SDGs are found to be 'missing', they may be integrated as long as they do not conflict with the national agenda. This suggests that in some countries, there would be an inclination to 'cherry-pick' some SDGs over others, in line with respective country priorities.

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<sup>6</sup> Shared informally by officials from the Department of Environmental Quality Promotion, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment and officially announced in October 2015. (<http://www.thaigov.go.th/index.php/en/government-en1/item/96255-96255.html>)

Government officials interviewed think that the overall perception and awareness of the SDGs within their country is still 'very low' (some estimated as low as 'below 10%'), and very much lower among non-governmental stakeholders. Only those who are experienced and active in international projects (i.e. high-ranking officials, those proficient in the English language and with technical proficiency) are likely to be aware and knowledgeable about SDGs.

From this study, awareness appears to be higher in Cambodia, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines, and lower in Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam, where officials commented that most people were 'still talking about the MDGs'. The CLMV countries (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam) have greater expectations towards external actors (UN and supporting organisations) for assistance (especially funding and financing) to take the lead in promoting and implementing the SDGs.

### **'Frontrunner' cities**

The level of awareness among cities about the SDGs is even lower than national government agencies. This is understandable, since cities are still very unlikely to participate in global processes and meetings, compared to the national government.

Many city officials do not doubt or contest the importance of the SDGs, but are unsure if SDGs will be directly useful in their daily work. Similar to the national officials, they are taken aback by 'so many' goals and targets, and they think that the SDGs are 'abstract' and purely 'aspirational'. They are unsure of the real benefits of explicitly reframing all local actions in reference to the SDGs.

Under a centralised governance structure, cities describe themselves as being 'passive' by default (i.e. waiting for higher levels to request/instruct them to 'localise' the SDGs). Some officials firmly expressed their doubt of being able to pursue all issues covered under Goal 11, or all 17 SDGs, with equal effort and priority.

The minority group — the 'frontrunner' cities who are under the leadership of capable mayors and have previous experience in international projects — are willing to be 'pro-active'. This means that they agree to implement innovative actions to 'localise' the SDGs by re-framing/interpreting all, or most of the globally-adopted targets and draft indicators to make sense at the local level, without waiting for instructions from the higher level.

Nevertheless, officials pointed out that there are persistent technical capacity and institutional limits to their intention and ambitions. First, it is harder for a local government to attract and employ quality staff, compared to the private sector and national government. In terms of budget (with the exception of the very few primary/capital cities which enjoy a higher level of fiscal management autonomy) most cities are heavily dependent on the national government for their spending. For certain sectors which are technically complex and involve high infrastructure costs, such as energy, transport and buildings, small and medium-sized cities think they are insufficiently empowered to transform the *status quo*.

In spite of these challenges and constraints, the 'frontrunner cities' were willing to act as the 'policy leader' to demonstrate and test the viability of novel policies/practices, and have their

experiences and achievements feed into national-level policy for scaling up and out. However they may need to sometimes 'overreach' their scope of authority to make meaningful interventions, and may need greater support or special treatment in this aspect in order to reduce the risk of being 'punished'.<sup>7</sup>

### **Prevailing views and current status of local data management**

The globally-adopted indicators agreed by the UN Statistical Commission are expected to be adapted by countries based on unique national contexts. National reporting is considered the most significant level of reporting and will rely heavily on the work of National Statistical Offices (NSOs), particularly the national census. Given the breadth of the SDGs agenda, it seems important not to limit national reporting to NSOs but to foster broad, multi-stakeholder participation in national reporting.

The national officials interviewed remarked that they expect the main responsibility to be with the NSO, which has responsible focal points providing data in line ministries. For example, the statistics focal point in the Ministry of Health will provide health-related data. Therefore, the quality of measurement depends largely on the overall capacity and ability of line ministries, which is still weak compared to more advanced countries.

None of the cities interviewed could easily provide comprehensive baseline/historical data referring to the SDGs. Even if some quality data has been collected, officials lacked confidence in the quality of the data. Data collected from past projects or initiatives tend to be 'lost' or 'misplaced' due to the transition of staff.

It is uncommon for cities, even 'frontrunner' cities to independently (without impetus and assistance from external factors) implement regular data collection and use that for target-setting and policymaking. Most cities do not yet have effective multi-department coordination mechanisms to collect and monitor city-wide data. Most of the existing data, if collected, are: (i) scattered/fragmented in different departments, not organised in a centralised manner and not stored digitally; (ii) not regularly collected; and (iii) of poor or uncertain quality.

Many local government staff (both policy- and working-level) do not yet fully understand the importance of evidence-based policymaking and data collection. Also, there are no real incentives and supporting resources for regular data collection by local governments. Cities did not exhibit clear interest or confidence to keep track of the SDGs in a systematic and comprehensive manner (tracking each goal and target, referring to global indicators).

A substantial number of UN-proposed indicators (roughly a third) do not yet have widely available (quality) data nor do they have an internationally-agreed methodology. Also, experts have called for the data to be disaggregated, where relevant, by income, gender, age, ethnicity, migration status, disability, geographic location or other characteristics – a tedious demand for national-level data collection.

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<sup>7</sup> If a local official/politician tries to act on an issue outside the legal power of cities, they are technically 'breaking the law' (possibility of being prosecuted or disciplined against) and may be misunderstood as trying to 'play political games'.

Therefore, the constructive way forward will require a localisation process in cities and with innovative multi-stakeholder mechanisms as described above. Frontrunner cities in ASEAN will be able to play a meaningful and historical role in addressing this challenge.

On general implementation as well as on data collection for tracking progress, cities expressed the preference for selecting priorities among all the goals, rather than stretching themselves too thin to address every goal and target, which is contrary to the intended integrated set of priority goals and targets.

When asked about what kinds of institutional arrangements are possible for data collection, the 'frontrunner cities' proposed the following:

- In Phnom Penh (Cambodia), a 'Model University' (Faculty of Science and Engineering) could set up a student committee and implement data collection under the supervision of lecturers.
- In Luang Prabang (Lao PDR), the tourism and hospitality businesses are the key stakeholders, but these sectors are also imposing high environmental costs in terms of energy use and waste generation. A voluntary, semi-formal or formal association comprising the major hotels, tour operators, restaurants, schools and riverside communities (a key city tourist attraction) could be established and supported by the city government to conduct data collection.
- In Malang (Indonesia), many schools already have experience in collecting environmental management data under the national 'Green Schools' certification/award programme (Adiwiyata). These schools could be the pilot sites for implementing comprehensive data collection linked to the SDGs, which could later be gradually scaled up to be citywide.
- In Thailand (several cities), many small and medium-sized cities already have community volunteers who have experience in collecting health-related data under the guidance of the Ministry of Health. They can be trained to collect additional data related to SDGs.

## Priorities of cities

Without providing a comprehensive briefing or explanation of the SDGs beforehand, respondents were asked to pick out targets (out of over 160 targets) that appeared to be most meaningful or relevant at the city level, and then asked to suggest the potential local-level data that could be realistically collected and monitored by the city.

The targets shortlisted here reflect the issues that most closely correspond to the current scope of work/responsibility of the city official interviewed. It should also be noted that a majority of the respondents interviewed worked in the environment, public health and sanitation areas.

Table 1 below summarises: (i) the targets shortlisted by city officials as most meaningful and perceived as under their jurisdiction, especially relevant to cities and therefore could be prioritised; (ii) potential local-level indicators for monitoring progress; and (iii) some general remarks for certain SDGs. This reflects the perspectives of the individuals interviewed, and any misunderstanding or misinterpretation is purposely reflected here.

**Table 1: SDGs most meaningful and relevant to ASEAN ‘Frontrunner Cities’**

	SDG Goals	Targets Most Meaningful to, and Perceived as Under the Jurisdiction <sup>8</sup> of Cities	Potential Local-level Indicators/Data for Monitoring by Cities (Suggested by City Officials)	Remarks by the authors
1	No Poverty	1,3, 1.5 By 2030, build the resilience of the poor and those in vulnerable situations and reduce their exposure to climate-related extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters.	No. of affected citizens in a disaster No. of citizens residing in high-risk locations	This is a realistic concern for most ASEAN cities. The poorest people often live in the highest risk areas (i.e. riverside areas prone to flooding).
2	Zero Hunger	2.1 End hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and those in vulnerable situations including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year around.	Proportion of household income spent on food Types of food consumed	Malnutrition comprises: over-nutrition and under-nutrition (imbalanced diet) and hunger. ASEAN city officials are mostly concerned about hunger, under-nutrition in terms of food quality, especially hygiene and safety. They seem less aware of ‘overnutrition’.
3	Good Health & Well-being	3.9 By 2020, substantially reduce the number of deaths and illnesses from hazardous chemicals and air, water and soil pollution	Data on air, water and soil quality Amount of budget spent on improving air, water and soil quality	Cities have high jurisdiction and motivation on this issue. ‘Health’ is strongly linked to ‘hunger’ especially in poorer communities. Realistically, actions to promote health is politically attractive and important to local leaders.
4	Quality Education	4.7 By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development (SD), including among others, education for SD and sustainable	No. of schools within the city implementing extraordinary environmental education (EE) (beyond national curriculum) No. of students being educated on EE	This is a realistic concern for most ASEAN cities. Although cities cannot strongly influence national curriculum, most ‘frontrunner’ cities

<sup>8</sup> It is beyond the scope of this report to discuss the ‘real’ jurisdiction of cities for every issue mentioned here, because there are differences in every ASEAN member state. Therefore, this report intends to broadly convey the *perceived* sense of jurisdiction among city officials across all diverse ASEAN cities.

			lifestyles, (abbreviated) ...		have the ability to supplement the national curriculum through extra-curricular programmes.
5	Gender Equality	5.4	Recognise the value of unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household ... (truncated)	No. of citizens involved in environmental management (such as waste segregation, waste banks).  (Note: Ideally, the data collected on number of citizens should be disaggregated by gender, but in practice, there is not enough budget or manpower to collect data broken down by gender, even though most do not object to its 'usefulness'.	Some countries like Lao PDR and Myanmar appear to see this as a donor-driven agenda. They do not object to this, but they do not really see it as a 'problem'.
6	Clean Water & Sanitation	6.1, 6.2, 6.3 and 6.6	Targets related to provision of safe drinking water, adequate sanitation, water ecosystem quality, such as lakes, rivers etc.	Proportion of population with access to adequate water supply and sanitation services.  Drinking water quality  Water ecosystem quality  No. of citizens (volunteers) involved in management of water bodies	Water supply tends to be more a concern over sanitation, for complex reasons.  Most 'frontrunner' cities have active grassroots community volunteers who are unpaid. A concern is that most volunteers are senior citizens (often retired), and hence ageing societies may not be able to sustain these volunteer mechanisms.
7	Affordable & Clean Energy	7.2	By 2030, increase substantially the share of renewable energy in the global energy mix	Total energy consumption in public/private buildings  Total renewable energy generated in pilot projects	Decentralised off-grid solar and biogas pilot projects are especially practical and attractive to small and medium-sized cities.  Although building codes may be influenced by cities, most cities do not have technical capacity to improve, enforce and modify the building codes, especially when it comes to energy

					efficiency and conservation.
8	Decent Work & Economic Growth	8.4	Improve progressively ... endeavor to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation, in accordance with the 10-year framework of SCP ... (excerpt)	Same as SDG 4.0 (on environmental education for SD)	Even though it makes sense, city officials rarely have direct concerns about job creation, especially 'decent' job creation.
		8.9	By 2030, devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products	Budget allocated for promotion of tourism and local culture promotion and local products  Additional no. of jobs created (and income generated) from sustainable tourism	Most think that the private sector has more influence on job creation. ('People come to cities mainly for the jobs!')
9	Industry, Innovation & Infrastructure	9.c	Significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal access to the Internet ... (truncated)	No. of government and private facilities providing free Internet access to citizens  No. of citizens benefiting from free Internet service	In ASEAN, due to its sheer complexity and high costs, 'transport infrastructure' is still predominantly viewed (rightly or wrongly) by local governments as under the jurisdiction of the national government.  Some frontrunner cities view the provision of free internet access as a public facility/service which also makes business sense, particularly for boosting tourism.
10	Reduced Inequalities	--	Respondents were not interested in commenting on this.	Respondents were not interested in commenting on this.	This is a very sensitive issue due to the large wealth disparity in most countries.
11	Sustainable Cities & Communities	11.1	By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums	Level of citizen access to housing and basic urban services (water supply, waste collection, septage management, wastewater treatment etc.)  Quality of those services provided (citizen satisfaction level)	Slums, especially in riverside/coastal areas, are possibly one of most difficult challenges confronting cities. This tends to be a costly and political-charged issue.  This target is more focused on the comfort and quality of the housing (especially against

				harsh weather and crime), rather than its environmental sustainability. Energy efficiency is rather invisible to the average person/official, especially for those on lower incomes. It seems that electricity costs are still not 'prohibitive' in most ASEAN countries due to government subsidies.
		11.2	By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable and accessible and sustainable transport systems ... (truncated)	<p>No. of citizens using public transport, car-pooling and miles covered</p> <p>No. of citizens using vehicles using 'greener' fuels (biofuels etc.)</p> <p>Modes of transport used in the city and 'Model Sustainable Communities'.</p> <p>Quality of public transport services provided (citizen satisfaction)</p> <p>The sentiment among many local officials is that transport is the domain of central government and the private sector. If any transport projects are initiated, the local government may be heavily involved, but that is often compromised by the quality of inclusiveness and transparency of governmental processes.</p> <p>Such 'helplessness' may reflect the serious underestimation of the importance of transport agenda by governments for various reasons, including cultural and political.</p>
		11.3	By 2030, enhance and inclusive sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning ... (truncated)	<p>Existence of multi-stakeholder mechanisms and participatory events organised per year.</p> <p>Type and no. of stakeholders involved in participatory urban planning process/projects</p> <p>Unlikely to be initiated by city governments without an external stimulus.</p>
		11.4	Strengthen efforts to	Amount of cultural/natural Cultural heritage is

		protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage	heritage space officially designated  Amount of budget for enhancing and maintaining these designated sites	often undervalued by low-income societies. Cities which opt to preserve cultural and natural heritage make a choice to pursue tourism promotion as an economic growth strategy. However, it remains debatable whether tourism promotion improves the lives of most citizens as it is complicated to balance between the needs of citizens versus those of visitors.
	11.5	By 2030, reduce the no. of deaths and the no. of people affected and substantially decrease direct economic losses ... caused by disasters, including water-related disasters .... (truncated)	Same as SDG 1.5	Disaster prevention, with its unpredictable factors (when and where will disaster occur), is often not the priority especially when compared to other more predictable and immediate problems.
	11.6	By 2030, reduce the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, including by paying special attention to air quality and municipal and other waste management	Rate of waste diverted from landfill through waste segregation at source and appropriate treatment to stabilize waste.  Budget spent to increase the rate of waste diverted from landfill  Average air quality  Overlap with SDG 3.9	This is arguably the top environmental concern for cities. Lack of political will and lack of public cooperation (especially in larger cities) are the fundamental challenges for waste diversion and reduction activities.
	11.7	By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive, accessible green and public spaces ... (truncated)	Amount of, and ratio of public green spaces per citizen, and distance of green spaces from residential areas  Number of citizens using public green spaces  Quality of public green spaces (citizen survey and other measures)  Budget spent to promote citizen access to green spaces  Overlap with SDG 2.	This is a popular concern of cities. The common challenge is that most prime land belongs to the private sector, while public green spaces need to be located in prime areas for good accessibility.  Public green space is often associated with 'health promotion'.
	11.a	Support positive	Level of participation in trans-	Most well-managed

			economic, social and environmental links between urban, peri-urban and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning	boundary, regional planning processes and activities  Quality of cooperative relationships and frequency of contact with surrounding cities with close economic, social and environment links.	cities have decent but informal cooperative relationships with surrounding cities (neighbours).  Target 11.b on 'policy integration' is not shortlisted, It seems that there is a expectation among city officials that policies should firstly be integrated at the national level.
12	Responsible Consumption & Production	12.3	By 2030, halve the per capital global food waste at the retail and consumer levels, and reduce food losses along the production and supply chains ... (truncated)	Amount of food waste in retail, public facilities (markets) and households  Budget spent to reduce food waste	Food waste is not necessarily considered 'undesirable'. It is increasingly being considered a status symbol.
		12.4	By 2030, achieve the environmentally sound management of chemicals and wastes through their life cycle ... (truncated)	Same as SDG 3.9 and 11.6	Many 'frontrunner' cities are addressing this.
		12.5	By 2030, substantially reduce waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling and reuse	Same as or overlap with SDG 4.7, 3.9, 11.6 and 12.3	Many 'frontrunner' cities are addressing this, but are unable to quantify their progress.
		12.6	By 2030, ensure that people everywhere have relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature	Same as SDG 4.7  Budget spent on public environmental awareness raising/education activities and the no. of citizens involved	Unfortunately, popular culture encourages people to strive for an energy-intensive and high material consumption lifestyle. So we are 'stuck' in awareness raising without influencing real actions.
13	Climate Action	13.1	Strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters ...	Same as SDG 1.5 and 11.5	
		13.3	Improve education, awareness-raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation ... (truncated)	Same as SDG 4.7	Many frontrunner cities are promoting 'Model Green Schools' programmes and implementing 'Green School' competitions in the city.
14	Life Below	14.2	Prevent and	Overlap with SDG 11.6	Local governments

	Water		significantly reduce marine pollution of all kinds, in particular from land-based activities	Overlap with SDG 6	think the relevant data they can collect may serve both this goal which is ocean-oriented, as well as other goals not directly related to marine pollution.
15	Life on Land	15.1	Ensure the conservation, restoration and sustainable use of terrestrial and inland freshwater ecosystems ... (truncated)	Same as SDG 11.6 Overlap with SDG 6	This is related to water pollution and unfortunately, wastewater treatment is often of low priority even in the frontrunner cities.
16	Peace, Justice & Strong Institutions	16.6	Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels	Quality of local government communication channels (TV, radio, website, print, social media etc.)	Unlikely to be initiated independently by the average city without external stimulus.
		16.7	Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels.	Overlap with SDG 11.3 and 11.8	
17	Partnerships for the Goals	17.6	Enhance North-South, South-South and ... international cooperation ... (truncated)	Level of participation (dedicated staff, budget, projects) in international cooperation  Quality of communication materials for visitors  No. and quality of cooperative activities with other cities  No. of visitors from other cities/countries in learning/cooperation activities	An increasing number of cities are interested in being active on global issues and being involved in international cooperation.

## Discussion & Conclusions

One year after the official adoption of the SDGs (September 2016), only a small proportion of government officials and frontrunner cities in ASEAN Member States knew about the SDGs. Awareness appeared to be higher in Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand, while in other countries, officials may have confused the SDGs with the MDGs. Awareness and knowledge were also concentrated in officials active in international affairs and/or who had good English language skills. Therefore, supporting stakeholders such as UN agencies, NGOs etc. are recommended to continue to sustain or expand awareness-raising efforts targeted at governments.

Although cities and their supporting national stakeholders are eager to contribute to the SDGs and the global agenda, the results of the study revealed some key points that have practical implications for project design.

First, not all cities believe it is realistic, nor are they ready to address all of the issues covered by all 17 SDGs with equal priority and importance.

Second, there are deeper systemic issues which need longer term interventions, such as the perceived and real lack of legal jurisdiction, as well as prevailing popular culture and the legal scope of city authorities/responsibilities that restrict drastic interventions on certain issues. If perceptions of jurisdiction are inaccurate, more attention should be paid as to how to correct these misperceptions.

Third, without intensive guidance, it is unlikely that cities will be interested in articulating their achievements by referring to the SDGs, even if they are implementing initiatives that do in fact contribute to realising the SDGs.

On data collection, national statistical offices are expected to bear the primary responsibility for data collection and monitoring progress with indicators, coordinating with focal points providing inputs from line ministries. City-level data collection is almost non-functioning within the current organisational structure and culture of ASEAN cities. Multi-department coordination required for organised data is very weak. ASEAN cities are unlikely to initiate and sustain any data collection activities given the baseline situation of low capacity, interest and incentives in data-oriented policymaking and implementation.

The new voluntary data collection arrangements/mechanisms (which could be formal or informal) being proposed or tested by frontrunner cities interviewed are observed to employ two key strategies. First, they tap into affordable and pre-existing skilled/motivated/experienced manpower within the cities, such as educational institutions and community volunteers. These stakeholders have experience, basic skills and intrinsic motivation to perform data collection to fulfill their individual work or personal goals. For example, a university student may need to collect data for their research project and will be more motivated to collect data properly compared to a city official. This is preferable to working with NGOs where the prevailing relationship between NGOs and city officials is not close, and even sometimes unfriendly. Second, they create new incentives for these stakeholders by providing training on data collection (especially using 'fun' approaches) and awards/rewards to recognise the good performers and active contributors.

## Recommendations

The SDGs are unwieldy and not easily understood by the average government official. Supporting organisations and non-government stakeholders still need to assume leadership and/or provide additional support to both national and local governments in implementing the SDGs, and to be mindful about framing SDGs in terms of national and city priorities and perspectives.

In the lower-income countries (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam), expectations are higher for the more advanced countries to lead and assist. Unless there is strong support and clear guidance on how to implement SDGs with an 'integrated' approach, project managers should design their SDGs projects to be compatible with a 'prioritising' approach, which seems to be the overwhelming preference of ASEAN cities.

For SDGs-related projects, as well as any local sustainability projects, the large (over 250,000 citizens) and very large (over 500,000 citizens) cities already enjoy relatively high levels of support and international cooperation opportunities. Medium/secondary cities are generally less preferred by international organisations as project partners, compared to larger cities. They are less well-known and less exposed, and have fewer opportunities for multi-year, long-term projects compared to big cities. Their activities are usually not well-sustained after individual projects have ended. Very small cities (under 30,000 population) are not attractive to most international organisations/donors, even if they are very successful in innovating good practices. Therefore, it is recommended that more support be given to small- and medium-size cities. Medium/small cities are usually more suitable compared to the bigger cities for experimenting with novel practices/policies, due to smaller size and less complicated politics.

To improve the current status of extremely poor data management in cities, it would be critical to introduce and fund new mechanisms with attractive incentives/rewards, dedicated staff and adequate human resource to focus on data collection. For example, cities could be assisted to establish a mayor-supervised multi-department, multi-stakeholder Model City committee (including an international cooperation focal point) which convenes regularly to spearhead innovative activities and collect data. Regular data collection could be one of the main tasks of this committee. It may be also meaningful for future research to examine the potential overlaps between the practical indicators proposed by city officials in this report and the globally-adopted indicators, and how these overlaps may feed into the initiatives of National Statistical agencies.

National agencies (especially line ministries) and international supporting organisations can effectively 'boost' or scale up the attractiveness of awards/rewards for voluntary local-level data collection, for example, by inviting key persons who are actively contributing to data collection to present their achievements and results at international events and creating a national award programme to recognise outstanding efforts of local-level data management by cities.

To maximise the possibility of SDGs-related projects to be sustainable after any project ends, it is recommended that the projects are designed to address issues that are presently within priority as well as the legal mandates of cities. In addition, it is recommended that projects should also be designed to address the larger systematic/institutional challenges such as lack of local empowerment (especially legal frameworks) and weak coordination within governments and across multiple cities, especially for trans-boundary issues.

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