

Governance for Resilient, Sustainable Cities

Best practices for bridging the planning-implementation gap

Key findings from Stratos' Resilient Cities Workshop
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Sustainability is becoming mainstream and municipalities are leading the way. From climate neutrality to zero waste, local governments are making bold commitments and demonstrating the critical role of local action in addressing global social, economic and ecological issues.

In the process, municipalities are changing the way they develop plans, engage with stakeholders and think about the future. They are integrating planning processes and developing inspirational, long-term visions for their community.

Where many municipalities are struggling, however, is in translating their high-level visions and commitments to sustainability into tangible progress on the ground. This “planning-implementation gap” is driven not only by a lack of time and resources, but also by conventional governance and decision-making structures, processes and attitudes.

The planning-implementation gap is indicative of a failure to integrate sustainability into decision-making at every level of the organization. Leading municipalities position their sustainability objectives to drive all policy development. They also implement comprehensive performance and change management strategies to monitor progress and deliver results.

How are local governments bridging the planning-implementation gap and institutionalizing sustainability within their organizations? What does governing for resilient, sustainable cities look like?

These questions formed the basis of an interactive workshop that Stratos facilitated at the Resilient Cities conference in Vancouver, BC on October 21, 2009. This report presents a process and set of strategies for bridging the gap based both on the workshop and on best practices from cities across Canada and around the world.



Six Strategies for Bridging the Gap

1. Develop a clear, measurable and inspiring vision.

Sustainability in the municipal context is about making every community a better place for current and future generations. People need to be engaged and inspired through messaging that makes the connection between sustainability and their values and quality of life.

To be effective, communities need to move beyond abstract visioning and set bold, inspiring goals for their long-term future. These goals should be measurable, outcome-oriented and based on principles rather than scenarios. The Smart Growth principles¹ are an excellent example of this approach: they provide a clear set of outcomes (e.g. walkable neighbourhoods) without being tied to a particular implementation scenario.

2. Build momentum and trust through accountability.

Strong internal and external accountability mechanisms are crucial for building community trust, monitoring progress and aligning municipal operations. Performance measures and targets should be established for each goal and integrated with existing management and reporting systems.

3. Redefine leadership and performance.

Sustainability leadership is collaborative, innovative and outcome-oriented. Sustainable organizations rely on vertically and horizontally integrated teams to identify synergies and break down departmental silos. They empower staff and stakeholders to make sustainability their responsibility through feedback, power/ decision-sharing and human resource mechanisms. They create an environment that supports innovation by allowing measured risk taking (e.g. pilot projects) as long as it moves the organization towards its long-term objectives.

¹ www.smartgrowth.org/about/principles

Collaboration should extend to external organizations as well. Community leadership is critical for setting the sustainability agenda, engaging non-traditional partners, motivating participation, pushing for innovation and developing consensus and shared ownership.

4. Understand and leverage community systems.

Many plans fail because they do not consider the complex interactions and feedback loops that moderate change. Systems thinking involves mapping out the key physical, ecological, social, economical, cultural and political systems in a community to identify the most effective policy levers for change. These system maps range from technical flow diagrams to more conceptual approaches, such as the key elements in community decision-making presented on the following page.

System thinking supports the development of integrated solutions that can provide environmental, social and economic benefits, address root causes and consider upstream and downstream effects.

5. Align, integrate and institutionalize sustainability.

The most important sustainability innovations have to do with process, not technology. Experiences with green building provide a perfect example of this.

Developers that approach 'greening' incrementally without changing how they approach a project end up adding significant costs in order to improve performance. In contrast, developers who adopt integrated design processes that optimize the building as a system have dramatically improved performance at no additional cost.

The catch is that there is a significant up-front 'soft' cost to change an organization's decision-making structures, processes, policies and attitudes. These changes include:

- Embedding the sustainability principles and vision in an overarching framework that controls and informs planning and decision-making;
- Integrating multiple issues, stakeholders, departments and implementation cycles into planning, design and decision-making processes;
- Aligning new and existing policies to create clear incentives for sustainability. Configuring incentives – through enforcement, tax-shifting, full-cost pricing, etc. – is critical to influence individual and organizational behaviour;
- Adopting effective management and performance measurement systems. These should be supported by decision-making tools like matrices and checklists to align day-to-day decisions (e.g. procurement, variances).

6. Communicate, celebrate and educate

As with any change program, stakeholders benefit from frequent reminders of the community's strong commitment to sustainability. Ongoing outreach and training programs are critical for building a shared understanding of what sustainability is; why it is important; and how it can be integrated at work and at home. Regular engagement, communication, and celebration builds trust, motivation and momentum.



Key Elements of Community Decision-Making Systems

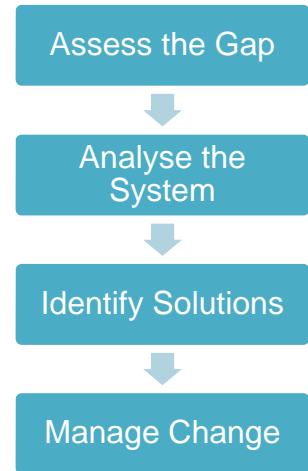
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Next Steps for Decision-Makers

Albert Einstein said “we can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.” Innovative sustainability goals and targets – such as going carbon neutral or achieving Zero Waste – cannot be achieved using the same approaches to planning and decision-making that created the problems in the first place.

Achieving sustainability therefore requires a systematic evaluation and transformation of community governance and decision-making structures, processes and attitudes. Stratos has identified four steps to guide this process:

1. **Assess the planning-implementation gap** in the community. This assessment should evaluate the degree to which the municipality’s performance against existing visions and plans is being tracked, evaluated and communicated.
2. **Analyse the community decision-making system** and evaluate its role in contributing to any gaps that have been identified. This assessment should look at the system of decision-making as a whole, including actors, visions, structures, policies and activities.
3. **Identify solutions and mitigation strategies.** Six cross-cutting solutions are presented above. Contact Stratos for a more comprehensive set of tools, strategies and approaches.
4. **Implement a change management plan to integrate this systems approach** to community decision-making into all aspects of planning and implementation.



Stratos is committed to continually improving and refining this approach and welcomes local governments as partners and collaborators in this work.

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