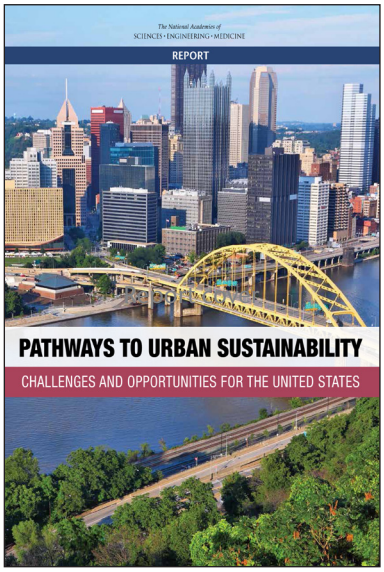
Report
HIGHLIGHTS

October 2016

Pathways to Urban Sustainability

Challenges and Opportunities for the United States



Eighty percent of the U.S. population now lives in urban areas, making cities pivotal in discussions about how to improve sustainability. A new report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine offers recommendations and a road map to help U.S. cities work toward sustainability, measurably improving their residents' economic, social, and environmental well-being.

Pathways to Urban Sustainability: Challenges and Opportunities for the United States draws upon lessons learned from nine cities' efforts to improve sustainability – Los Angeles; New York City; Vancouver, B.C.; Philadelphia; Pittsburgh; Chattanooga, Tennessee; Cedar Rapids, Iowa; and Grand Rapids and Flint, Michigan. The cities were chosen to span a range of sizes, regions, histories, and economies.

While no two cities are identical, many share some common problems, such as road congestion or high housing costs, the report notes. Every U.S. city should develop a sustainability plan that both accounts for its own unique characteristics and also adapts strategies that have led to measurable improvements in other cities with similar economic, environmental, and social contexts.

INFORMING EFFORTS TO IMPROVE URBAN SUSTAINABILITY

The committee that wrote the report developed ten recommendations to guide U.S. cities' efforts to increase their sustainability, drawing upon lessons learned from the nine cities' efforts and experiences, published literature, and expert testimony gathered at meetings.

Recommendation 1: Actions in support of sustainability in one geographic area should not be taken at the expense of the sustainability of another. Cities should implement local sustainability plans and decision making that have a larger scope than the confines of the city or region.

Recommendation 2: Urban leaders and planners should integrate sustainability policies and strategies across spatial and administrative scales, from block and neighborhood to city, region, state, and nation, to ensure the effectiveness of urban sustainability actions.

Recommendation 3: Urban leaders and planners should implement sustainability policies and programs that identify and establish processes for promoting synergies among environmental, economic, and social policies that produce co-benefits across more than one dimension of sustainability.

Recommendation 4: Urban leaders and planners should look to cities with similar economic, environmental, social, and political contexts to understand and adapt local and regional sustainability strategies that have proven to provide measurable impact.

Recommendation 5: Urban leaders and planners should gather scientific input to the maximum extent available in the form of metrics on social, health, environmental, and economic dimensions of sustainability; data related to policies, programs, and implementation processes; and measures of community involvement.

Recommendation 6: Cities should ensure broad stakeholder engagement in developing and implementing sustainability actions with all relevant constituencies, including nontraditional partners.

Recommendation 7: Every city should develop a cohesive sustainability plan that acknowledges the unique characteristics of the city and its connections to global processes while supporting mechanisms for periodic updates to take account of significant changes in prevailing environmental, social, and economic conditions. Sustainability plans should strive to have measureable characteristics that enable tracking and assessment of progress, minimally along environmental, social, and economic lines.

Recommendation 8: Sustainability plans and actions should include policies to reduce inequality. It is critical that community members from across the economic, social, and institutional spectrum be included in identifying, designing, and implementing urban sustainability actions.

Recommendation 9: Cities should adopt comprehensive sustainability metrics that are firmly underpinned by research. These metrics should be connected to implementation, impact, and cost analyses to ensure efficiency, impact, and stakeholder engagement.

Recommendation 10: Urban leaders and planners should be cognizant of the rapid pace of factors working against sustainability and should prioritize sustainability initiatives with an appropriate sense of urgency to yield significant progress toward urban sustainability.

The report also offers a road map that cities can use to guide their efforts, walking planners through the process from planning and adopting principles, to design and implementation, to assessing impacts and learning from outcomes.

COMMITTEE ON PATHWAYS TO URBAN SUSTAINABILITY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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For More Information . . . This Report Highlights was prepared by the STS Program based on the report *Pathways to Urban Sustainability: Challenges and Opportunities for the United States* (2016). The study was sponsored by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation; the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency; and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in the report are those of the authoring committee and do not necessarily reflect those of the sponsors. Copies of the report are available from the National Academies Press, (800) 624-6242; **http://www.nap.edu**.

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