

The Global Covenant of Mayors Supports Cities' Voluntary Efforts



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Over 10,000 cities around the world have joined the Global Covenant of Mayors, a coalition of local governments that supports actions to address climate change. The initiative, which is the product of the 2017 merger of the Compact of Mayors and the EU Covenant of Mayors, leverages other networks to provide technical assistance, training, and advisory support to participating cities.

Urban areas are prime candidates for voluntary reduction measures. The organization known as ICLEI Local Governments for Sustainability estimates that they are responsible for about 70 percent of global energy-related greenhouse gas emissions and are particularly vulnerable to climate change effects such as heat and flooding. GCoM, as the mayoral covenant is known, reports that all regions have “enormous potential for significantly lowering emissions.”

To participate, cities are required to conduct a greenhouse gas emissions inventory; assess their risks and vulnerabilities; set mitigation, resilience, and energy targets; and develop climate action plans. Cities must also track and report their progress. GCoM uses a system that awards “badges” in a city’s online profile when it achieves its fourfold set of requirements.

Cities must prepare a GHG inventory that follows specified accounting principles and uses a common reporting framework. Participants report emissions from three sectors, stationary energy, transportation, and waste, which, according to C40, are the key drivers of urban emissions. Participants also are required to report emissions from electricity generation.

Within two years of joining, cities must set targets that are “as ambitious as” their countries’ own climate pro-

tection commitments. GCoM recommends, however, that cities set even “more ambitious” targets.

The risk and vulnerability assessments, which also are required within two years of joining, identify a city’s most significant climate hazards, as well as provide information about their current risk level, future impact, likely intensity, and frequency. GCoM suggests cities also provide information on vulnerable populations.

Participants’ climate action plans must be completed within three years of joining and address both mitigation and adaptation — either in separate or integrated plans. The plans are required to include, among other components, a description of the synergies, tradeoffs, and co-benefits of mitigation and adaptation actions and an assessment of the energy savings, renewable energy production, and GHG emissions reductions associated with each action in the plan. GCoM recommends cities report a financial strategy for each action and list the stakeholders involved in planning and implementation.

Given these stringent participation requirements, why are cities motivated to join GCoM? According to Mary Beth Ikard, Nashville’s transportation and sustainability manager, cities have a “responsibility to account for emissions and chart a path toward reduction,” because citizens are demanding action on climate and cities have shown that “they can have an impact on reducing global emissions by setting policies at the local and regional level.” She also cites myriad benefits of addressing climate change, such as improving public health, stimulating economic development, and creating jobs.

The Urban Sustainability Direc-

tors Network’s Sarah McKinstry-Wu echoes Ikard’s points. She notes that cities are well positioned to take on the challenge and can reduce their emissions through land use and other policies that affect the carbon footprint of their buildings and transportation systems. She adds that cities also are stepping up to fill the void left by federal inaction.

At the same time, McKinstry-Wu emphasizes that a city’s mitigation abilities are limited if it doesn’t control its power sources. As National Public Radio reported on Atlanta’s efforts to decarbonize, “It turns out one thing Atlanta can’t do is choose where its energy comes from. . . . As in many places, the utility . . . makes that decision because it’s a monopoly [and] it’s also regulated by statewide elected officials . . . none of whom has emphasized climate change as a concern.” Since they are major electric customers and regulators of many facets of city-wide transportation, however, cities do have some leverage with utilities.

GCoM posts each city’s data but, to date, has not issued a needed report card on progress toward achieving the targets. Because some cities have failed to meet voluntary goals, critics have questioned the value of such pledges.

But some progress is better than none and, today, subnational initiatives, such as GCoM, are making a real contribution and are about the only game in town when it comes to U.S. governmental action on climate change.

Despite stringent requirements, 10,000 cities are banding to minimize impacts