Lights...Cities...Action

Published on **6 Dec 2011** | Written by **Jason Hartke** | Posted in **Advocacy and policy**

Cross-posted from GreenSource's The Green Source: A Blog of Sustainable Building

With little yet to celebrate as the talks in Durban continue into the second week, international negotiators and other delegates are hearing from local leaders with stories that defy the intransigency of the status quo.

A Matter of Leadership
I'm reminded today that it was Albert Einstein who I think gave us the right perspective about the power of example. "Setting example is not the main means of influencing another, it's the only means."

Yesterday, in an uplifting session, the World Green Building Council, in partnership with ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability and UN-Habitat, held up a suite of shining examples as part of its Government Leadership Awards to recognize local policies that are accelerating green building around the world. Award winners included San Francisco (Best Green Building Policy), Mexico City (Climate Action Leadership Award), Birmingham, UK (Urban Retrofit Award), Singapore (Regional Leadership Award), New York City (Industry Transformation Award) and Tokyo (Most Groundbreaking Policy Award).

"These cities have demonstrated that focusing on energy efficiency in the built environment delivers a range of benefits, including operational savings, energy security, health and well-being to building occupants, and provides a much needed boost to the economy," said Jane Henley, CEO of the World Green Building Council.

The theme was simple: green building provides a triple-bottom line opportunity for cities hungry for clean energy solutions. Cities are proving over and over again that green building programs will save energy, help save businesses and residents money, improve health and strengthen the local economy.

For ICLEI, which represents about 1,300 cities around the world, it's about creating a sustainable future. And for buildings the future is now. "Where ever you are, you can build the buildings of the future, today" said David Cadman, President of ICLEI and Vice Mayor of Vancouver, Canada.

Yes We Can
Tokyo, a city with a strong, rich history in green building, won WorldGBC's Most Groundbreaking Policy Award because of its Cap-and-Trade program, which is the first in the world to include buildings.

"Before the earthquake, many Japanese believed that we could not further reduce the energy consumption since Japan was doing the maximum in terms of the energy efficiency," said Yoshio Wagai, senior director of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government's Urban and Global Environment Division.

Despite the doubters, Wagai knew his city would meet the challenge. "But in reality we could do more. Yes, we could!" said Wagai. "Even in such a difficult situation, many buildings in Tokyo succeeded in significantly reducing energy consumption by about 20 percent compared with the previous year without sacrificing their functionality."

In Birmingham, UK, the city's building retrofit program will spur £1.5 billion of green retrofits in more than 200,000 buildings and helping to create 16,000 jobs in the next 15 years.

"It is very difficult to change the pattern of development," said Martha Delgado, minister of environment, who accepted the Climate Action Leadership Award on behalf of Mexico City. "But changing these patterns are a matter of leadership." Through implementing its climate action plan, Mexico City is on course to reduce CO_2 emissions by 7 million tons by 2012.

Countries here at Durban can learn a lot from these city leaders, who simply refuse to listen to the naysayers and are taking action now to power a green, prosperous economy from the ground up.

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