The Road to Rio+20 Reminds Us to Think Globally and Act Locally

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On Monday, the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC), the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) convened the fourth installment of the Road to Rio+20 series. The series was born out of the need for stakeholder awareness and input in the rapidly approaching Rio+20 conference in June. The main goal of the Summit—the growth of the green economy in the context of poverty alleviation and sustainable development—have implications for each of us. The Road to Rio series seeks to bridge the gap between global conversations on sustainable development and on-the-ground challenges and solutions in urban sectors and the built environment.

The New York installment of the series, "Exploring the Role of Cities and Buildings in the Green Economy," coincided with the UNCSD intercessional meeting (or preparatory meeting) underway at the UN Headquarters. Skanska's flagship offices at the Empire State Building set the stage for a larger than life cast of experts as part of the program. Keynote remarks by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Department of State Lawrence Gumbiner (seated on the left of the photo), addressed the state of negotiations as well as the goals for it outcome:

>"Rio+20 should be a powerful, aspirational event that inspires a new generation like its predecessor did 20 years ago. To do so, we cannot simply repeat the constructs, negotiating positions and symbols of the past. We must be forward-leaning and inclusive, and utilize all of the technologies and tools available to us in 2012 to assure that not just those present in Rio, but all stakeholders have a voice and can participate."

The expert panel, moderated by UNEP's Chief of Sustainable Production and Consumption Arab Hoballah, featured presentations from finance, government, non-profit and philanthropic organizations, all of whom contribute to the development of sustainable cities and green buildings including representatives from New York City's Mayor's Office of Long-Term Planning and Sustainability, PNC Bank, the Ford Foundation and C40 Cities. Each of their PowerPoint presentations is available here.

A fundamental component of our "tour" throughout North America includes listening to what you think about Rio+20, what is needed to make the conference more accessible to all, and how its outcomes can be most effective. These recommendations will be compiled into a report which will be made available to delegates, stakeholders, and businesses in the lead-up to Rio +20. So, what have we heard so far?

You have told us that decision-makers should consider green building and building sector resource efficient to be included in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. We also need common metrics for transferrable data between cities and other practitioners. Finally, we need to debunk the myth that only major changes (think UN-level) will make a dent in our global emissions. Remember the adage, "Think globally, act locally?" We need to remind our neighbors, friends and families that global goals can only be realized through changes undertaken by each and every one of us, no matter how small. We can't give up on switching light-bulbs, eating local and driving less. They have benefits at the individual level and, in aggregate, will change the world.

Maggie Comstock
Policy Analyst
U.S. Green Building Council

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Address
2101 L Street NW
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