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For Cities to Walk the Walk, National Governments Need to Pave the Way

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While consensus in the COP18 negotiations has yet to be reached, most can agree that national governments cannot be solely responsible for addressing climate change. Local governments, the private sector and individuals must each play a part in supporting and growing the green economy. However, one way national governments can easily step up to the plate is to remove policy barriers for subnational actions on climate change.

Cities are uniquely positioned to address sustainability. Take an example from the built environment: it is under the jurisdiction of local governments to develop building codes and plan for urban development. Many cities have the motivation and drive to implement innovative sustainability policies that leapfrog efforts happening nationally. While national governments may not intentionally develop policies to curb their subnational governments, the reality is that sometimes lack of communication between levels of governments facilitates barriers to local actions on sustainability.

This evening, I participated in a Department of State panel at the U.S. Center on "Actions at the Local Level: Integrating Energy, Climate and Economic Development." In both discussing USGBC's activities to enable local government policies on green buildings and learning from the other panelists, I am once again encouraged and inspired by local leadership on climate change around the world.

Despite some negativity around the negotiations and perceived lack of progress by national governments, we cannot resign ourselves to be victims of climate change. Instead we need to put local players on a pedestal and encourage replication of these successes. It is sometimes forgotten that reaching agreement on global targets is only meaningful if they are implemented locally. Regardless of whether one's government is party to the Kyoto Protocol, cities are accepting the charge to pursue sustainability efforts, which is the only way we can address climate change. If we do not leave Doha with any breakthroughs at the multinational level, it is imperative that the decisions of national governments at COP18 do not hinder the efforts of subnational governments.

- 10
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