



Chapter 24: Persuading Policy-Makers to Implement Sustainable City Plans

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Persuading policy-makers and influencing governance is a complex art. The city is, indeed, a complex system. In achieving a healthy and smooth operation of the urban system, coordination and balance among various subsystems (natural-social-economic) are necessary. In recent years, the need to build sustainable, livable, climate-resilient, and inclusive cities has achieved global consensus. Those who hold these values for cities want to highlight balanced relationships and positive interactions among the subsystems of a city. To make this great idea happen, a city needs to have a roadmap (featuring balanced and coordinated development), and then to follow that roadmap. During this decision-making and enforcement process, the understandings, decisions, and actions of government officials are critical to the success of a government policy. This is especially true in strong, top-down administrations, such as China. As a worker at a nonprofit NGO who advocates for sustainable development in China, I have experience dealing with decision-makers at different levels. But sometimes, my and others' advocacy efforts do not yield expected results. What are the main obstacles in persuading policy-makers?

When city administrators, mayors, and city officials think about issues and make decisions, they bear full responsibility for safeguarding the interests of the whole city and its citizens. This is quite different from the standpoint and responsibility of scholars, professionals, and environmentalists. This simple truth differentiates what these different actors value and their ways of thinking, which, in turn, bring about different attitudes towards urban development strategies. Mayors and city officials have an affinity for operational and practical blueprints that can promote economic development, boost employment, and strengthen social stability. Conversely, experts and representatives of NGOs and civil society tend to recommend roadmaps that feature environmental protection, climate change adaptation and mitigation, and social equity. In my opinion, these are the main obstacles in practice.

Based on the Chinese context and my personal knowledge of working with NGOs, I have a few suggestions for navigating these complex scenarios.

The NGO community needs to show policy-makers the socioeconomic co-benefits that sustainable roadmaps bring through real-world case studies and empirical research findings. These benefits include but are not limited to (1) improved health and longer life expectancy due to better ecological environment (such as air, water, and soil quality); (2) higher quality of life and well-being due to a mix of land use, public transit-oriented development, and the allocation of more public space (which means better access to public services, reduced commuting distances, fewer traffic jams, and more open space for recreational activities); (3) increased employment opportunities in new (low-carbon) industries, such as renewable energy, electric vehicles, green building materials, waste disposal, and ecotourism; (4) the improvement of international recognition and, subsequently, the growth of investment in the city (by implementing a sustainable roadmap, the investment environment will be upgraded and thus likely to attract more capital); and (5) technical and business exchanges with other “like-minded” cities, extended relationships and networks (as a city actively implements the sustainable roadmap, it effectively joins a growing number of cities in the world who set the similar goal to move in the direction of low-carbon, sustainable development. These cities have a common language, and they can benefit through networking, knowledge sharing, and other interactions).

The NGO community should use various strategies to advocate for sustainable urban development, including (1) communicating frequently with city officials to understand their worries, cares, and needs through discussion meetings, workshops and seminars, and relevant conferences organized and hosted by various ministries and local governments; (2) uniting and speaking in one voice to mayors and city officials, as consistency and uniformity are more persuasive than discord and may offer a clearer route to a bigger impact on government policy; and (3) provide training for policy-makers on sustainable urbanization and low-carbon development. NGOs can collaborate with government-authorized training institutions (such as the National Academy for Mayors of China) to jointly compile teaching materials, organize training sessions, and arrange study tours. Sometimes, a respected person, a renowned expert, an admired senior official, and a real-world practice case exert great influence on local policy-makers. In such circumstances, the NGOs can invite the right persons to lecture in the training courses and select the right cases to be investigated in the study tour.

It is a complicated task for NGOs to persuade policy-makers and influence the decision-making process. The NGO community should work to understand the government officials’ positions, use language within their lexicon, solve practical problems they care about, and strengthen the officials’ capacity on urban sustainability.