Introduction

Municipalities at the Crossroads of Change

The earth’s many sovereign nations garner much attention and allegiance for their powers to shape human destiny through their founding constitutions and their just laws. Yet within each of these are smaller self-governing units – from regional provinces, to states, to counties, to cities, to boroughs and towns, as well as the lands of self-governing tribes.

While historians record the rise and fall of nations, they often overlook these smaller jurisdictions, where so many important aspects of our lives take shape. This book offers guidance to local municipalities – called “cities” or “towns” for short throughout this book – that seek sustainability in their environment, their economy, and their engineering.

“Sustainability” in this book means capable of enduring and adapting over time. Without the qualities of endurance and adaptability, cities can see their assets and even their identities erode over time. The role of a good local government is to prevent such erosion, whether it be of natural habitat, human communities, or engineering infrastructure.

Global versus Local Village

No matter how large or small a city is, its government can make a vital difference in the lives of its citizens – protecting the environment that contributes to the public safety and enjoyment of life, while attending to the economic and engineering needs of residents. In fact, one of the sustainable development goals (SDG) of the United Nations specifically calls out the sustainability of cities. (See Goal 11 in Appendix 1: SDG at the end of this book.) The UN’s Agenda 21 initiative looked to local governments as a key to climate change response.

This book’s emphasis on local governments – even the smallest ones – may seem quaint in this highly globalized world, but in fact this is where our common vigilance belongs. The ever-zooming post-COVID-19 world may well be, in the words of sociologist Marshall McLuhan, a “global village,” but where we live still matters. In nations that grant powers to them, our local governments have a greater impact on our day-to-day lives than more distant units of government such as states, provinces, or countries.

Around the world, local governments affect the lives and fortunes of the citizens within their boundaries, because they have the power to pass ordinances and levy taxes. The Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR)
notes that up to 80 percent of public investments in Europe are made by local
and regional authorities.6

Local governments play a key role in advancing and protecting our quality
of life. Consider the many beneficial effects of nature – whether in the form of
dunes, wetlands, rivers, lakes, forests, parklands, or preserves. Local ordinances
can make the difference between conservation and destruction. Consider
also that we are living creatures, who need to consume food and water and dis-
pose of waste. Local governments often provide our only water, sewer, and san-
itation services. Furthermore, we need to be safe, and towns and cities often
provide local police and fire fighters. Clearly, for many citizens, the blessings
and benefits we want and/or need are typically provided by the local govern-
ments duly elected by the citizens of a municipality. In some countries, the role
of local commissions or councils is even greater, taking charge of public educa-
tion and social services, as well as the aforementioned services typically pro-
vided by local authorities.7

**Municipal Definitions**

This book defines a municipality (whether it calls itself a “city,” “town,” or other
name) as *any boundaried population empowered to elect local representatives to
serve on a governing body* such as a commission, council, or other such structure.
In US legal terms, these are called “incorporated” areas. In the US they total
approximately 79,000, not counting tribal councils.8 Many of these are large
enough to participate in public policy. The National League of Cities has a
membership of 19,000 US cities, towns, and villages.9

This book uses the terms “city” or “town” as shorthand for a local self-
governing community but acknowledges that such communities may go by a
variety of names, such as township or borough. In some cases, a local commu-
nity may legitimately define itself as a sovereign nation to be guided by a coun-
cil of tribal elders.

For the purposes of this book, if a municipality calls itself a “city,” it is one,
no matter what its size. This identity-based definition of the term “city” differs
from the population-based approach adopted by the United Nations in March
2020.10 Under that definition, the term “city” is reserved for areas with a popu-
lation of at least 50,000 living in contiguous grid cells with a density of greater
than 1,500 inhabitants per square kilometer,11 which equates to 2,414 inhabi-
tants per square mile – a size typical of many US cities.12 The United Nations
defines a town (or semi-dense area) as having a population of at least 5,000 in-
habitants with a density of at least 300 inhabitants per square kilometer. Other
places with a lower population and density are considered rural. These definitions are based on size and density of population, not on governmental identities.¹³

This book defines municipalities by their governments. Size and density matter, but they are not the defining characteristics of the places we live. An area may be designated by population counters as a “city” or “town,” but unless an area has a name, a government, and ultimately an identity, the power of its people to affect—or absorb—lasting social change will be low. Indeed, local sustainability depends on the influence of a local government and engaged citizens. As one recent empirical study of small municipalities noted, “the governmental structure, local interest groups, and growth pressures of a municipality jointly determine the likelihood that sustainability planning efforts will result in policy adoption.”¹⁴

For their citizens, these places are home—a place to forge a personal identity; a place to defend and protect; a place to make a difference through public service and activism. Therefore, the focus of this book will be on how to advance the sustainability of the place we call home, by whatever name, through either public service or through activism. Understanding how local governments work—and in particular the degree to which they can be self-governing—will be key to this approach.

From Magna Carta to COVID-19: Municipal Self-Determination

According to the principle of subsidiarity (see Appendix 2: Subsidiarity), government action is best taken at the level nearest to the citizen.¹⁵ As such, the smaller the entity, the greater the potential it may have for understanding and resolving local issues.

During the COVID-19 Crisis of 2020, as the entire world tried to cope with a global pandemic, we saw how important local governments can be—whether by enforcing, exceeding, or protesting the standards of higher national or regional authorities. Some towns and cities helped to enforce mandates from higher authorities, while some set even stricter local policies to save lives. Still others tried to assert their own, less restrictive rules to save their economies. The long-term medical and financial repercussions of these local decisions remain to be seen, but one lesson is clear: local governments play an important role in our lives, in both the best and worst of times.

The history of human civilization includes many struggles of local governments to determine their own standards. An early example of this impulse is captured in the Magna Carta, signed in 1215 in England, where a group of barons successfully demanded that a higher authority, King John, respect their rights, as enumerated in their grand charter.¹⁶ After perpetual revisions, the charter became official in 1297 (see Figure 1).
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Figure 1: The 1297 Magna Carta.
Another classic example is the European Charter of Municipal Liberties, passed in 1953. With inspiring eloquence, this document sets forth standards on several topics of perennial importance to municipalities everywhere.

- On citizen participation: “Municipalities should be conscious that they constitute the very foundation of the nation. Their citizens, members of the community, have the right to work together for their development. Municipalities must therefore strive to enable them to participate in the town’s life.”

- On municipal self-determination: “A true municipal freedom can flourish only if it is beyond all kinds of arbitrary authority. It exists only where the citizens possess the firm will to safeguard local self-government . . . . The law must be applied in such a way that safeguards the rights of the local community toward the higher authorities, just as it must also guarantee the rights of the citizens in the local community itself.”

- On municipal taxation: “Municipalities have the right to create their own resources, by voting local taxes that are sufficient to cover the costs of their administration, as well as all expenses necessary to meet the needs of their inhabitants.”

- On inter-municipal relations: “A system of compensation between municipalities shall be established, which will have effect in case of proven inadequacy of resources, without imposing any constraint on the management of the municipality.”

We will explore these and other governance concepts in subsequent chapters.

The Threefold Importance of Self-Determination Today

The issue of local self-determination is no mere civic abstraction, but rather an urgent priority today, considering the most critical environmental, economic, and engineering issues of our time. The United Nations has defined a sustainable city as one “where achievements in social, economic, and physical development are made to last,” with environment an integral part of all these goals (see Appendix 1).

Around the world, cities large and small are facing major environmental risks. While global, national, and other external sources may be helpful in identifying and facing those risks, nothing can help a city more than local awareness and engagement. If cities and towns can exercise their rights of self-determination to protect their environments from destruction, they can help slow the negative trends observers have charted for global warming, rising sea
levels, and loss of biodiversity. Engaged cities, and citizens need not be experts in such matters, but they would do well to understand some key trends. As of mid-2021, the steady rise in earth temperature is unbroken, with 2020 registering record-breaking heat, being the warmest year ever since 1896. The month of June 2020, for example, measured 2.3 degrees above preindustrial levels – close to the limit set by the Paris Climate Agreement. As for sea level, it is rising at an eighth of an inch per year, increasing the chance of flooding – a relevant concern for many cities, as eight of the world’s 10 largest cities are near a coast. Meanwhile, the loss of biodiversity has reached critical levels, with one million plant and animal species currently doomed to likely extinction, many within our lifetime.

At the same time, the global economic system is experiencing unprecedented changes. A January 2021 report from the World Bank predicted a modest 3.8 percent global growth rate in gross domestic product (GDP) for 2022, as the world continues to be “weighed down by the pandemic’s lasting damage to potential growth.” This was after the world experienced what the World Bank described as “the deepest global recession in eight decades.” In the US government sector (including local governments), total contributions to GDP declined in 2020, reports a March 2021 report from the Bureau of Economic Analysis.

GDP – calculated as the total market value of goods and services produced in a country (or in the collective case, all countries) during a given time – is a broad indicator of both human industry and human confidence. When GDP is low, it means that fewer people or properties are engaged in the economy, and/or the economy is not placing as high a value on these assets. A recessionary economy shrinks a city’s tax base at the very time when it may need to deliver more in social services due to poverty and its effects – including crime. New research shows that criminal activity in cities is highly localized by neighborhood, and that the most effective long-term solutions include not merely law and order, but economic opportunity.

Finally, engineering issues are also coming to the fore as a threat to city life. The world’s infrastructure is aging, and local officials know best what is broken where. More than 47,000 bridges in the US are in poor condition and require repairs, according to a 2019 report from the American Road and Transportation Builders Association. While many projects involve state or national purchases, local governments often have a role in infrastructure projects. Green thinking, such as preference for composite materials, including biological materials, can help with both environmental and financial sustainability.

It goes without saying that all of the issues covered in this book should be a topic for training of municipal staff, and areas for potential support from consultants. This book should be useful in the support of such efforts.
Over 10,000 Mayors

The number of towns and cities in the world can not easily be tallied but it is safe to say that they number in the hundreds of thousands. While the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy alone has more than 10,000 signatories, they represent only a small part of the municipal world.

Europe, for example, has more than 100,000 municipalities and regions. The CEMR has a membership of 54 national associations of municipalities and regions from 40 European countries, representing over 100,000 local and regional authorities.

The US claims 19,495 incorporated cities and towns, in addition to its counties and states. Most of these incorporated areas, which are also known as townships and districts, are small. Three-fourths of the nation’s cities and towns have a population of less than 5,000, and of these, more than half have fewer than 500 people; only 4 percent of all US cities have a population of more than 50,000.

The Municipal Hierarchy

One conundrum in municipal life is the relationship of towns or cities to the next level of government above them, such as a province or county.

In Europe, most countries have a complex government that involves not only cities but higher authorities. The terminology of governance varies from country to country. In a study of 39 European countries, the CEMR identified these unique combinations, ranging from villages to regions.

In the US, city government exists in tandem with county government. As of mid-2021, in the US, according to the latest data from the US Census, the US has 3,141 counties and equivalent jurisdictions. In most US states, cities are part of counties or their equivalents. In Maryland, Missouri, Nevada, and Virginia some cities are independent from counties and entirely self-governing. In Connecticut and Rhode Island, counties have no governmental power. In some rare cases, city and county governments combine. Hawaii has only counties.

Civic Activists

Every hometown has its issues, and no one knows them better than the citizens, both old and new. Those who have been in the locality for generations will know the past and how to avoid repeating its mistakes. Those moving to the
area in recent years may be able to perceive problems and solutions with a fresh perspective. While there may arise a culture clash between locals and newcomers, common values – and common enemies – can bring a truce and common action.

Civic activism may arise spontaneously from a purely local issue, or it may take its inspiration from a national movement. Through social media, local movements can quickly become national – even global – and vice versa. In the spring of 2020, many US towns held marches to protest police brutality, including towns where de-escalation policies had prevented this problem. In such towns, however, the marches were often followed with formation of local task forces to identify and resolve specific local problems. Another example is the America the Beautiful initiative of the Biden Administration in the US, named after a beloved national hymn. This movement, setting a 30 percent conservation goal by 2030, is animating similar local efforts, for example in Silver City, New Mexico.

Another cross-cutting theme in civic activism is protest versus politics. When local citizens want change, they can act as citizens by various civic actions – holding protests, speaking out at council meetings, collecting petitions, and so forth. As an alternative, they can run for office, or support someone who does. It is expensive to run for office and victory is not guaranteed but win or lose this is a good way of getting out a sustainability message. Another venue for change is service on a local advisory board. Many local candidates and activists concerned about sustainability have read the practical wisdom of Eben Fodor’s *Better Not Bigger: How to Take Control of Urban Growth and Improve Your Community*. The present book, hopes to be equally useful as a greenprint for change.

**A Greenprint for Municipal Change**

The four main sections of this book can help cities and citizens prioritize their environmental assets as part of a larger plan for sustainability. The Nature Conservancy sees a greenprint as “a strategic conservation plan and/or tool that reveals the economic and social benefits that parks, open space, and working lands provide communities.” Building on that concept, this book guides the reader through setting sustainability goals, financing those goals, implementing the goals, to resolving conflicts over the goals.

Part 1 addresses goal setting, as readers will identify key environmental, economic, and engineering issues; map their municipalities; and write a sustainability plan.

Part 2 covers the important subject of city financing, including land trusts, municipal bonds, and various kinds of grants.
Part 3 covers the environment, the economy, and engineering. (A compatible framework for this is the Global Development Research Center (GDRC) framework of the natural environment, the social environment, and the built environment.45)

Part 4 faces the issues of rights, conflict, and identity, covering the rights of nature, environmental litigation, and the issue of municipal boundaries and identity.

Concluding Reflections

This book is being published at what we can only hope is the waning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Around the world city leaders are forming groups to meet the challenges ahead. One such group is the C40 initiative engaging the globe’s megacities.

At a recent meeting of the group, the mayor of one of the world’s oldest cities struck a positive note: “Historical Athens begins its recovery phase from the epidemic with an array of green initiatives . . . treating this challenge as nothing more – and nothing less – than a unique opportunity. An opportunity to help our cities and our citizens grow, prosper and enter a new era of environmental awareness and involvement.”46

As these words show, it is important for governments and citizens alike to play an active role in advancing the sustainability of their communities. This book sets forth guidance in doing just that.

Notes

1 As of mid-2021, the world counts 195 nations, including the 193 members of the United Nations, plus observer states of Palestine and the Vatican. Some estimates have a higher count.
2 The term city is used here to mean any municipality with its own government. This is consistent with usage by the US Green Building Council, developer of the LEED standards. The USGBC defines a city as “political jurisdictions or places defined by their municipal public sector governance (e.g., mayors or town manager).” https://www.usgbc.org/leed/v41#cities-and-communities
3 As noted later in this chapter, the United Nations has defined a sustainable city as one “where achievements in social, economic, and physical development are made to last.” Source: United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS) Sustainable Cities Programme (UN-Habitat), 2002, p. 6. See the discussion in note 19.
4 Goal #11 of the United Nation’s 20 sustainable development goals is to “make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.” https://sdgs.un.org/goals/
goal11
5 https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/Agenda21.pdf

7 Sweden is an example of a country that grants municipalities broad-based powers of self-determination. [https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/main-executive-and-legislative-bodies-80_en]

8 https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R40638.pdf

9 National League of Cities – Cities Strong Together; https://www.ncl.org


11 1 km = (1/1.609344) mi, so about 2,414 people per square mile.


13 A recent UN booklet on the world’s cities specifically states that “The designations employed and the presentation of the material in this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers of boundaries.” Global State of Metropolis 2020 – Population Data Booklet, United Nations Human Settlement Program, 2020. [https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/07/gsm-population-data-booklet-2020.pdf]


16 https://www.archivesfoundation.org/documents/magna-carta

17 https://www.ccre.org/docs/charter_municipal_liberties.pdf

18 https://www.ccre.org/docs/charter_municipal_liberties.pdf, correcting “guaranteed” to read “guarantee.”


20 For the full text, see [https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2020.pdf]. Note especially this quote from p. 50 at Goal 13 on Climate: “Governments and businesses should use the lessons learned and opportunities arising from this crisis to accelerate the transitions needed to . . . redefine our relationship with the environment, and make systemic shifts and transformational changes to become low-greenhouse-gas emission and climate-resilient economies and societies.”

21 Climate at a Glance | National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI). [https://www.noaa.gov]

22 At the Paris climate agreement, policy makers agreed to limit global warming to less than 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit (or 2 degrees Centigrade) above preindustrial levels by 2100, with an aspirational goal of a rise no less than 2.7°F (1.5C). The accord does not define this baseline and commentaries vary. The oldest temperature covered by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration was in 1895: 50.34 F or 10.19 C. Source: NOAA National Centers for Environmental

23 [https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/sealevel.html](https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/sealevel.html)


31 [https://www.globalcovenantofmayors.org/about](https://www.globalcovenantofmayors.org/about)


35 See Box 12.1 in Chapter 12.

36 h Ch4GARM.pdf (census.gov). [https://www2.census.gov/geo/pdfs/reference/GARM/Ch4GARM.pdf](https://www2.census.gov/geo/pdfs/reference/GARM/Ch4GARM.pdf)

37 In Louisiana, the primary governmental divisions are called parishes; in Alaska, they are called boroughs, municipalities, or census areas. Source: [https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/popest/guidance-geographies/terms-and-definitions.html](https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/popest/guidance-geographies/terms-and-definitions.html)


40 See, for example, Citizen task force to advise Laguna Beach police on use of force – Laguna Beach Local News. [https://www.lagunabeachindy.com](https://www.lagunabeachindy.com) and City of Fernandina Beach Police Chief announces Police Department Advisory Board | Fernandina Observer

41 Biden-Harris Administration Outlines “America the Beautiful” Initiative | The White House, [https://www.whitehouse.gov/ceq/news-updates/2021/05/06/biden-harris-administration-outlines-america-the-beautiful-initiative/](https://www.whitehouse.gov/ceq/news-updates/2021/05/06/biden-harris-administration-outlines-america-the-beautiful-initiative/)

