Editorial: Regions and Cities – Key actors for delivery on SDGs

The ratification of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the UN General Assembly in September 2015, composed of 17 goals and 169 targets, set a global agenda for achieving environmental sustainability, social inclusion and economic development by 2030. They provide a set of ambitions to whose realization all countries must contribute. One of the challenges is adjusting our focus, looking beyond national approaches to the powerful role that regions and cities play. The global agenda will require local data, the engagement of many stakeholders and all levels of government, and improved government capacity to steer and manage the delivery of public policies for inclusive growth.

Regions at a Glance 2016 makes a critical contribution to advancing this global agenda, providing disaggregated data and unveiling the differences within countries that otherwise remain hidden behind national averages.
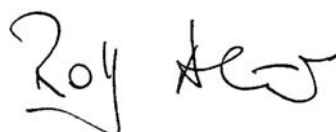
For the first time, the assessment of well-being outcomes across OECD regions includes a range of dimensions, from income and jobs to health, the environment or civic engagement. It can help countries pursue policy goals that take into account the specific conditions of regions and incorporate local solutions. These new data are revealing. For example, average life expectancy at birth in Mississippi, USA, is 75 years, 6 years less than in Hawaii. Differences within some cities are even more staggering: for example, there is a 20-year gap in life expectancy between neighbourhoods in London; this is more than twice the 8-year gap among OECD countries. Similarly, while gaps across OECD regions have narrowed over the last decade in well-being dimensions such as education and access to services, gaps have increased in income, air pollution and safety. In 2014, the difference in unemployment rates among all OECD regions was above 30 percentage points – almost 10 percentage points higher than the difference in unemployment among OECD countries.

The SDGs will not be achieved without the full engagement of a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including the people living in the world's cities. Metropolitan areas, home to about half of the OECD population, are critical to the economic prosperity of countries, contributing to 62% of GDP growth of the OECD area in the period 2000-13. Household incomes were 17% higher in metropolitan areas than elsewhere in 2013. However, metropolitan areas are also host to greater inequality than their respective countries, and these inequalities grow as cities become more populated. This is not just about income: inequality encompasses many dimensions of life. In 2014, 53% of the OECD urban population was exposed to levels of air pollution higher than those recommended by the World Health Organisation. If unchecked, these disparities will grow as urbanisation continues in OECD countries. A holistic approach is required to ensure that cities are inclusive, sustainable and safe.
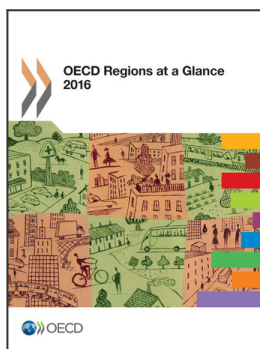
The challenge going forward is to ensure that all levels of government are implicated in the implementation of the SDGs. OECD data show that regional and local governments play crucial roles in the well-being of today's and future generations. For example, 70% of subnational government (SNG) spending goes to education, health, economic affairs and social expenditures. At the same time, *Regions at a Glance* documents how spending responsibilities are shared across central and subnational governments. But aligning priorities between national and subnational governments and ensuring the capacities and resources needed for implementation remain critical challenges. New data from an OECD-EU Committee of Regions survey of European regional and local authorities show that the lack of co-ordination across sectors and levels of government, red tape, and excessive administrative procedures are the top challenges for infrastructure investment at the subnational level.

The SDGs, UN Conferences on Climate Change, and the New Urban Agenda of Habitat III offer opportunities to refocus our attention on multi-level policy actions and on local data. Within this context, *Regions at a Glance 2016* is an important contribution to creating pathways from the local level to meeting global goals.

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