

**Official Event  
Round Table**

## **Full Paper**

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we peruse the SDG Report for 2023 Special Edition from June, one cannot help but be deeply concerned about the progress—or lack thereof—towards nearly all of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The global landscape presents a disquieting picture, with disheartening trends evident across various fronts.

To begin, the world finds itself confronting levels of hunger not witnessed since 2005, with 670 million people grappling with extreme poverty—an alarming figure that is projected to drop to 575 million by 2030. Regrettably, only a mere third of nations are on track to meet the ambitious goal of halving national poverty rates, while food prices continue to remain elevated in more countries compared to the period from 2015 to 2019.

In the realm of education, the repercussions of years of neglect and learning setbacks loom large on the horizon. By 2030, a staggering 84 million children are expected to be out of school, and a further 300 million children or young adults attending school will leave without the ability to read and write.

These global statistics, though daunting, foreshadow the challenges that await cities of all sizes in the years to come. Currently, over half of the world's population resides in urban areas, a proportion projected to reach 70 percent by 2050. Examined through the lens of poverty, approximately 1.1 billion people presently dwell in slums or slum-like conditions within urban environments, with an additional 2 billion expected to join them over the next three decades.

These figures are nothing short of staggering and present an ominous outlook for city officials tasked with addressing these pressing issues. Yet, there is a glimmer of hope within this urban shift—a chance to intensify the battle against poverty. The fight against poverty is a multifaceted challenge intertwined with local and national economies and the capacities of communities.

Local communities possess a unique opportunity to collaborate with impoverished communities, collectively and individually enhancing their capabilities. This, in turn,

promises substantial economic benefits when local structures are adapted to facilitate poverty eradication and harness the potential of empowered citizens.

In order to engage these communities, municipalities must first comprehend the situation on the ground. Cities need data concerning issues such as poverty structures, discrimination, school dropout rates, and homelessness. The deeper a city's understanding of these human rights challenges among its residents, the better equipped it becomes to address them.

Two invaluable tools for gaining the necessary insights into these challenges are:

**Analysis of Existing Administrative Data:** Often, critical information from a human rights perspective is embedded in administrative data.

**Regular Surveys:** These contribute to identifying patterns, such as lack of access to essential services, including water, sanitation, as well as information on mobility, education, and health.

With this data in hand, cities can collaborate with academic institutions, NGOs, and most importantly, engage with the affected communities to explore pathways forward.

In many instances, local authorities possess the data and the will to address the challenges but lack the requisite financial and human resources to initiate this crucial groundwork effectively. The result is fragmented projects with limited outreach and duration.

Yet, there are shining examples from across continents of cities that have adopted a holistic approach to combating poverty, such as the well-known case of Medellin in Colombia. In just 13 years, Medellin managed to reduce poverty levels from 36 percent to 14 percent. An essential element in this project was recognizing that mobility is a linchpin in the fight against poverty: it facilitates access to education, work, healthcare, and more.

In Sweden, the Municipality of Lund and the Raoul Wallenberg Institute (RWI) are exploring how a human rights-based public transport system in Lund can enhance mobility for vulnerable populations. This involves mapping access to schools and

workplaces for children and adults in the rural outskirts of Lund and assessing the accessibility of buses and trams for individuals with disabilities.

In essence, in Lund and Medellin, bus and tram drivers have become crucial human rights actors, facilitating the realization of the right to education, health, work, and other essential rights.

These examples underscore the gravity of the situation illuminated in the 2023 SDG report: nearly half of the global urban population lacks adequate access to public transport. Cities, especially in the developing world, have a substantial journey ahead in creating safe, affordable, accessible, and sustainable transport systems. To address this, cities worldwide must integrate motorized transportation systems with walking and cycling through long-term sustainable urban mobility plans, targeted infrastructure investments, and policy implementation. These plans must be firmly rooted in human rights principles to ensure that no one is left behind.

The issue of mobility also ties into another pressing concern, namely child labor, which continues to be a problem in many countries, including Bangladesh. A significant number of children are engaged in hazardous work, a crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, Thakurgaon Municipality in Bangladesh, in collaboration with RWI's BLC participants, launched a project with the aim of reducing and ultimately eliminating hazardous child labor.

The project integrates a Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) into local policies, giving prominence to human rights and addressing the underlying causes of urban poverty. These efforts to integrate HRBA have yielded significant results, with 216 child laborers transitioning to regular school attendance. This initiative contributes to multiple SDGs, including ending child labor, protecting children from abuse and exploitation, and eliminating poverty-driven child labor.

As part of the initiative, a mandatory pledge has been introduced within the trade license application and procurement process, encouraging private businesses to adhere to human rights principles. Community Watch Groups were also established, enhancing community participation and enabling the monitoring of child labor. Government departments provided social protection to the parents of child laborers.

The Thakurgaon initiative serves as a testament to the transformative potential of integrating human rights into local government policies to address poverty and discrimination.

In conclusion, if we are to make significant strides toward achieving the 2030 targets and ending poverty worldwide, cities must play a central role. The task ahead is colossal, complex, and at times politically unpopular. However, it is not insurmountable. We possess the experience, knowledge, and, importantly, the understanding that every dollar invested will yield a substantial return for the entire community in terms of both economic prosperity and human well-being.

Thank you for your attention.