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Cities Can't Solve Just One Problem

Amy Liu

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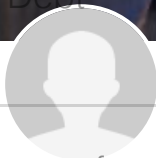
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Last month in Philadelphia, I addressed a regional convening of Habitat III, an effort by the United Nations to define a new global urban agenda. I was asked to speak about pathways to opportunity, a topic of a recent conversation I had with Julián Castro, secretary of housing and urban development, and Anthony Foxx, secretary of transportation. It's hard to talk about this goal in the abstract. Philadelphia is a region with lackluster economic growth, median wages declining faster than national averages, and stark racial disparities. So my talk touched on a range of issues: the role of innovation and minority entrepreneurship in creating good jobs; skills development, especially for underserved young adults, so they can be armed for jobs of the future; and the need for quality neighborhoods with

After my speech, a community development leader waited for the crowd to wane to tell me how much she appreciated what I had to say. She explained that our multidimensional view of cities reflected her aspirations to adopt a more integrated approach to making a difference in the poor neighborhoods in which she works.

Our conversation reminded me of two things I try never to forget.

One, there is an incredible demand for this holistic view of cities. Many leaders see cities through a particular lens—the people, the built environment, or the economy.

Yet, cities are all these things.

Cities are inherently dynamic, complex systems. They bring together a diverse mix of economic, social, and physical assets to produce the lion's share of our nation's growth.


Talk to any mayor and you'll know they're trying to move multiple dials at once. They are improving community policing, financing universal preschool education, and expanding affordable housing. They are thinking about job creation, start-ups, and foreign direct investment. They want to leverage their local hospital or university to help small businesses thrive. They've set targets to employ the underemployed, improve post-secondary educational attainment, or reduce carbon emissions. And they have to balance their budgets. All of this is in the service of better lives for their citizens.

Indeed, single "big bets" aren't possible in cities where everything is interconnected.

appreciate being reminded of: the positive, ambitious, energetic commitment of local leaders working to solve today's urban problems. I see this commitment everywhere I travel, most recently in Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Flint. Cities are brimming with smart leaders who want to step out of their silos and deliver results. Their spirit inspires me every day.

Brookings Metro is the place that so many of these leaders turn for knowledge and solutions. They turn to us because we are uniquely positioned to help them: We work to help local leaders achieve both stronger growth and expanded opportunity. We are data-driven, providing customized insights about their cities that enable them to do their jobs better. Our analysis gives leaders a comprehensive view of their metro area, a framework for connecting the dots between multiple strategies. Our network—which spans over three dozen cities in the U.S. and globally—reflects the multi-sector leadership needed to create change at scale. And we inform state and federal policymakers on how to scale the impact of city- and metro-led innovation.

I am proud of how our program's work helps our nation's cities, neighborhoods, industries, and individuals thrive, and look forward to continuing the many collaborations that make progress possible.

 Economic Development, Economic Research,
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Written by
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