



Developing a Policy and Systems Change Compass for Local Government

Reflections and Lessons from a Three-City Pilot

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Local government leaders have the power to bring about transformative progress toward health equity in their communities. Every day, cities across the country confront complex, interconnected issues—from housing to workforce development to health to climate change—often without sufficient resources and staff. When considering potential policy proposals, they rarely have the opportunity to explore the root causes of these issues and the multiple systems they touch or to gather evidence that could support the systems changes needed to advance equity in their communities. Instead, in the face of urgent needs, local governments often focus on single-issue solutions rather than the collaborative, cross-sector, cross-agency approaches that change inequitable systems in partnership with their communities (Scally et al. 2020).

Through its ongoing Cities of Opportunities (CoO) peer-learning cohorts, launched in 2018, the National League of Cities (NLC) aims to support local governments in advancing comprehensive and equitable policy and systems change around multiple issue areas to advance health and equity for all residents. While local governments are uniquely positioned to address the complex issues that affect health and well-being, CoO observed that cities have had success with changes to practices and other systems-level changes but been less successful in making changes to actual policies. CoO identified a number of reasons for this, including and especially a lack of city capacity to adopt and implement effective and sustained policy changes that address community problems. In other words, city

governments have neither a cohesive process to follow nor access to evidence-based model policies they could adapt. Cities need a solid understanding of the policy levers for systems change and the drivers of inequity.

To respond to these challenges, NLC partnered with the Urban Institute to develop a new Policy and Systems Change Compass process (“Compass”) to help cities pursue strategic policy solutions to complex problems. This brief describes the Compass development and technical assistance process, introduces the resulting Compass phases and steps, highlights key principles for implementing the Compass process in the future, and suggests how cities might use the Policy and Systems Change Compass to tackle complex issues to meet their equity goals.

Rationale and Process

A perennial issue facing local governments is how to change systems that yield inequitable outcomes for communities and residents (box 1). This hard work requires shifting systems by enacting policies; changing programs, administrative practices, and resource flows; building power and relational trust across diverse stakeholders; and changing personal and public perceptions through clear case-making (Kania, Kramer, and Seng 2018).

BOX 1

Systems and the Barriers to Changing Them

Systems are the “set of actors, activities, and settings that are directly or indirectly perceived to have influence in or be affected by a given problem situation” (Foster-Fishman, Nowell, and Yang 2007). These include the people, policies, processes, programs, market conditions, and political environments that shape access to wealth and health (Sally et al. 2020). For systems to yield equitable outcomes for affected residents and stakeholders, they often need to shift in ways that remove barriers standing in the way of individual and collective thriving. Barriers might stem from current and past discrimination against groups of people based on income, race and ethnicity, language, gender, disability, and other differences and include government policies that perpetuate harm, even if unintentional. Overcoming these barriers requires a comprehensive understanding of the barriers and tools to identify, assess, and act on solutions.

In spring of 2019, NLC reached out to the Urban Institute to initiate a partnership that would bring together data and evidence, technical assistance (TA), and clear policy options to help cities make progress on deeper, sustainable changes to advance health and equity. Work began in spring 2022 to co-develop the Policy and Systems Change Compass process and accompanying set of tools. The goal of the Compass is to provide local leaders with a proactive, replicable, and intentional approach they can apply in the design and development of policy and systems changes, informed by data, root cause exploration, community engagement, and the realities of the current moment.

CoO and Urban then partnered with three cities to pilot the Compass, with a focus on addressing wealth inequity. The pilot provided the opportunity to develop, test, and refine the Compass while simultaneously supporting the pilot cities in advancing their policy change goals.

To implement the pilot, NLC assembled a team of experts with different roles and responsibilities.

- The **National League of Cities** identified and invited three cities to pilot the Compass process. Staff shared knowledge on the CoO framework, processes, and outcomes and provided feedback on all Compass materials prior to their use. They also attended all TA engagements.
- The **Urban Institute** developed and delivered evidence-based TA and content on policy and systems change. The team scheduled and developed agendas and materials for each TA engagement. They solicited reflections from city teams at multiple points and revised materials based on NLC and city team feedback.
- **MySidewalk** was the data partner responsible for providing city teams with data sheets to help them understand the scope of their community challenges.
- Faculty and students of the **George Washington University School of Public Health** conducted scans of existing policies for each city team to provide a range of options for action within their identified priority area.
- **Three city teams** that had been members of previous CoO cohorts—Dubuque, Iowa; Roanoke, Virginia; and Tacoma, Washington—agreed to participate in the Compass process to work toward the goal of improving wealth equity in their cities.

The Compass was piloted over a nine-month period, consisting of group workshops and one-on-one engagements. Group workshops provided peer learning across teams as well as time for individual teamwork. Team-specific engagements provided opportunities to focus on unique team needs and questions through a combination of training lessons and exercises. In addition, Urban provided four reflection points, two via surveys and two via group discussions, and debriefed with NLC to reflect on lessons learned and next steps for evolving and scaling the Compass process.

Introducing the Policy and Systems Change Compass

The Compass is designed to help local governments and their partners achieve better outcomes to advance the health, wealth, well-being, and equity of their residents. The ‘true north’ of the Compass process is achieving the targeted policy and systems change (figure 1). Policymakers and staff can pursue this goal by following a series of interdependent steps supported by a set of analytical and engagement tools.

- Set clear goals during policy change efforts that describe how systems need to change to support people—not what people need to do to access systems.
- Conduct root cause analyses to understand the underlying causes of community challenges rather than just their symptoms.

- Envision and describe the cross-sector impact you would expect to see if you adequately addressed root causes.
- Articulate a clear rationale for action that describes the root cause to be addressed, why previous efforts have been unsuccessful, and why now is the right time for action.
- Assess the forces that influence and affect the policy ecosystem, including key stakeholders, internal and external dynamics, equity considerations, windows of opportunity, and community perspectives.
- Understand the related systems changes that are needed to accompany a policy change.
- Comprehensively assess the feasibility and potential impact of various policies using data, landscape scans, evidence, and insights from key stakeholders.
- Identify barriers to policy adoption and overcome them.
- Create policy change road maps that clearly lay out the steps needed for implementation and the milestones that will be used to measure steps toward policy adoption.
- Track progress toward policy enactment, systems goals, and population impact.

The process represents a journey across four distinct phases, each containing a series of individual steps. While we tested the sequencing of most of these steps¹ and believe they are each a necessary part of achieving the desired policy and systems change, governments may want or need to adapt this process to their local conditions and dynamics. This may include incorporating prior work already done to identify barriers and root causes or finding potential policy solutions implemented by other jurisdictions. We also encourage iteration. For example, when a team starts developing their proposal for policy change in Phase Three, they may realize that they have a clearer articulation of their problem than they did in Phase One and want to make some changes.

The catalyst for launching the Compass process may come from different places, which can affect and influence the local government's policy focus and team composition. A city councilor, mayor, city manager, or department head might initiate the Compass process to focus on a particular policy problem or to improve internal legislative and policymaking processes. An outside organization, such as a regional or local foundation or nonprofit, might provide resources to support the Compass process; take part in information-gathering exercises, such as root cause analysis or policy ecosystem mapping; or engage at critical decisionmaking junctures.

FIGURE 1

Policy and Systems Change Compass



Phase One: Get Specific about the Community Problem and Set Systems Goals

The primary deliverable for Phase One is a rationale for action that persuasively describes the community problem to be addressed, the root causes of that problem, the data and evidence that demonstrate the scope of the problem, an explanation for why previous efforts have not worked, a call to action that describes why now is the time to act, an explanation for why the government needs to act, and what local leaders hope to see if the problem is adequately addressed.

Policy ideas to address community problems can arise from a range of sources. A common challenge for local government leaders and staff is whether these policy ideas will resolve or mitigate the underlying causes of community problems they intend to address. Many complex community problems involve multiple dimensions that preliminary policy proposals may not holistically address. There are three interdependent steps that can help policymakers, local government staff, and community partners build a solid policy foundation by dissecting the root causes of a pressing community problem and then setting goals for what an effective, efficient, and equitable system would look like for their community.

STEP 1: ARTICULATE THE PROBLEM

The first step is for local government teams to articulate a specific community challenge as they best understand it by gathering existing data and evidence. Later steps will challenge them to delve deeper into root causes to explore why the community challenge exists. For instance, after reviewing existence evidence on local business expansion and employment, a community challenge might be stated like the below problem statement.

Despite recent efforts to bring more employers to our region, large segments of our population are not currently accessing new jobs and therefore are not achieving economic stability or generating wealth, resulting in negative outcomes.

—Pilot city team

Although local governments are likely to have myriad community challenges to work through, there is value in anchoring the Compass process in one specific challenge, as this will allow places to delve more deeply into that challenge and focus on engaging key stakeholders with deep rather than general knowledge of the challenge. As the team goes through the early Compass steps, it may identify other community challenges to circle back to later using the Compass process to explore other areas in need of policy and systems change.

STEP 2: IDENTIFY ROOT CAUSES

During this step, local government teams conduct a root cause analysis around the problem they identified in step one by elucidating reasons why the problem may exist. This starts with identifying a series of causes and then asking why those causes exist several times to delve deeper and deeper to get to the roots of each of those causes (figure 2).

For example, if a local government is trying to understand the root causes of why certain populations may not be benefiting from new job growth, they will ask themselves “why?” and generate a list of first order reasons. In this example, teams might name “a lack of the needed skillset,” “companies not advertising in the right venues,” and “barriers to employment” as three possible reasons why certain populations are not benefiting from job growth. From there, they ask “why?” several more times for each cause to identify the root causes of the challenge. In this example, a team would ask why people lack the needed skillsets for jobs and identify a second order of causes, such as “trainings are not offered during times that are convenient to people who need them,” “people do not have time for training or ways to access them,” “education is not properly preparing people for these skillsets,” or “companies are being recruited to the region that are not well aligned with the skills residents do have.” For each of these causes, teams would again ask “why?” to dig deeper to the roots. There is no clear answer for

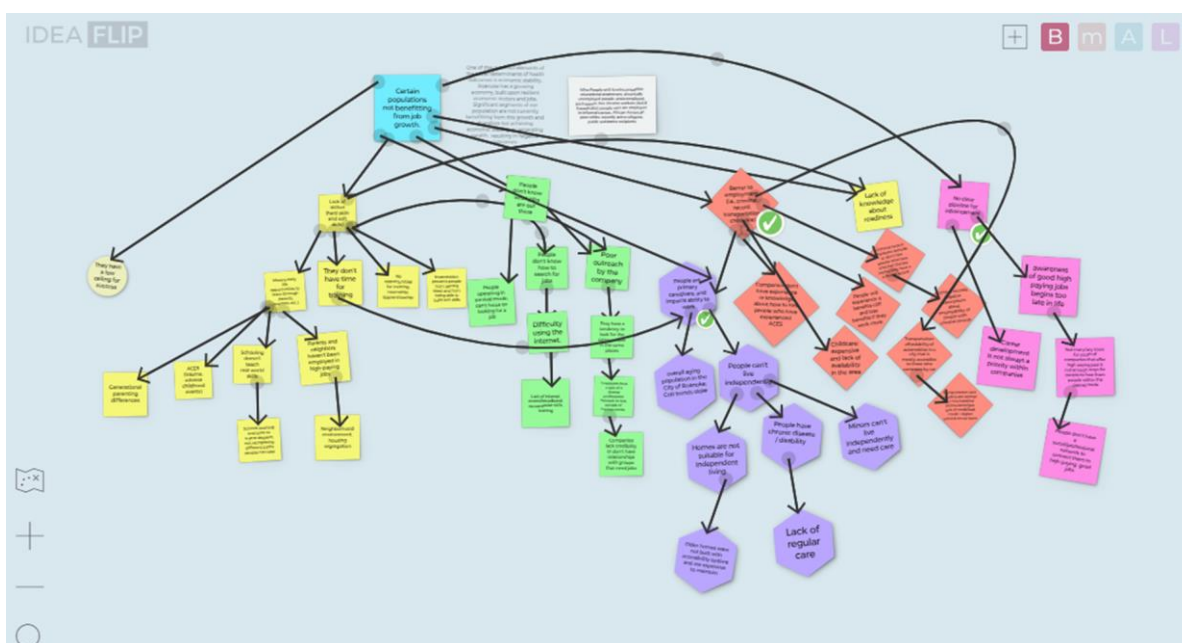
when to stop this process, but teams should continue until they feel they have a firm understanding of the systems barriers holding the community challenge in place.

Teams then assess the feasibility and impacts of and possible solutions for the identified root causes, with the goal of selecting one with which to move forward for the duration of the Compass process. While the Compass encourages cities to focus on one root cause, it recognizes that to fully address complex community challenge, cities must act on multiple root causes. This root cause exploration can be revisited for multiple policy changes.

FIGURE 2

Sample Root Cause Analysis Outputs

Root cause map of the problem that “certain populations are not benefiting from local job growth”



Source: Compass pilot city.

STEP 3: SET GOALS

The local government team writes impact statements focused on the desired result, or new reality, that the proposed policy and systems change should create for residents. For example, a local government wrestling with inequitable job opportunities might adopt the following impact statement: “All residents have equal access to new job opportunities and thus the chance to build their wealth, health, and well-being.”

Teams also develop goals for system improvements that will help achieve these desired impacts. Said differently, systems goals should describe what needs to happen in order to reach the desire impact statement. Systems goals are always written as ideals, answering the question, “What would this system

be doing if it were working the way it should?” For example, systems change goals for an inadequate workforce development system might include the following:

- Workforce development programs take into consideration the whole person’s needs.
- Workforce development programs are linked to other supportive services that people need to fully leverage the programs.
- Workforce development programs target challenges in corporate culture and business practices and are not just focused on getting people into jobs.
- No disparities or gaps exist among certain populations in terms of their participation or success in workforce development programs.
- Workforce development programs move beyond just getting people into jobs and focus on how people can move along their career ladder.

It is important to point out that impact statements are about the intended population impact, whereas the systems goals are about what the *system* needs to do to function better, not what people need to do to improve their own circumstances. Both the impact statement and systems goals should be measurable.

Phase Two: Identify Solutions to Address Root Causes

The final outcome for this Compass phase is a policy ecosystem map depicting: (1) a set of policy options; (2) the actors that control, influence, support and oppose action in a policy group; (3) the internal forces within your local government that push forward or hold back change; (4) the external forces outside of local government that push forward or hold back change; (5) the equity implications of proposed options; and (6) the community’s role and perspectives.

In response to their defined problem, local governments could apply a range of policies. The goal for Phase Two is to narrow down the options to the most feasible policy proposals that maximize the desired impacts.² The following steps can be supported by examining relevant data (local and national), promising models from other cities, existing policy evaluations proving the efficacy and impacts of different policy options, and input from internal conversations with other local officials and external meetings with key organizations. While this work might begin with internal sessions with relevant local government leaders and staff, the process can benefit from a series of workshops with different stakeholders who can shed light on the various policy options that exist within a given ecosystem. These strategic discussions can provide valuable insights about the policy ecosystem’s details, help the team understand where there is momentum for change, and identify potential barriers to policy adoption and implementation. Teams may also benefit from engaging a policy expert—such as someone from a university or research organization—who can help them conduct a scan of promising policies from other places.

STEP 4: MAP THE POLICY ECOSYSTEM

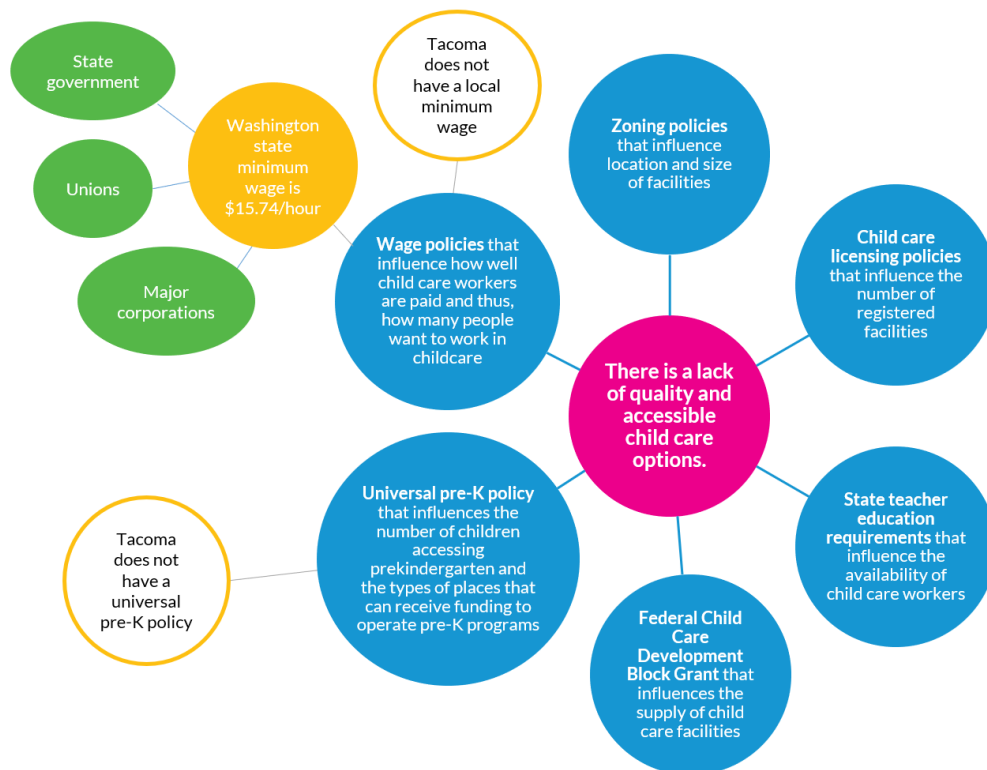
Teams identify a list of promising policy options (figure 3) for addressing their selected root cause and then build out more detailed ecosystems maps that includes the following elements:

- **Stakeholders:** relevant public, private, and nonprofit sector actors who either control, influence, support, or oppose possible policy options
- **Internal dynamics:** positive/negative forces within your local government
- **External dynamics:** positive/negative forces outside of your local government
- **Equity implications:** Where does equity come into play with this policy option? How can this policy option ensure equity/equitable benefits?
- **Community role and perspectives:** How does the general public affect and influence your policy ecosystem? How do they feel about this policy option?

FIGURE 3

Sample Policy Cluster Map with Stakeholders

Policy clusters around root causes form the core of the ecosystem map



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Source: Compass pilot training materials developed by the Urban Institute.

The first piece of ecosystem mapping is creating a policy cluster by brainstorming the various types of policies that are influencing the root cause and potentially contributing to the identified local problem. This step is important because local governments can miss viable policy options that could address their root cause by failing to acknowledge the full breadth of policies that uphold the status quo. The policy cluster diagram in figure 3 identifies six distinct types of policies (the blue circles) that may be affecting the lack of quality and accessible child care options in a city (pink circle).

The second step is to identify the relevant internal and external stakeholders involved with each policy type (green ovals). These stakeholders can include government officials and department directors and staff, along with private-sector businesses, civic associations, and community-based groups. The goal is to identify those that play pivotal roles, whether they control policy levers, allocate resources, or are the subjects of the proposed policy change. Each type involves different actors and diverse interest groups and community perspectives. For example, the federal and state stakeholders involved with proposed policies, such as Federal Child Care Development Block Grants or state minimum wage laws that come into play when trying to increase wages for child care workers, are different from stakeholders engaged with zoning and land-use consideration or child care licensing.

The third step is to outline the forces, past and present, that influence and affect the general policy domain and specific policies within your cluster. This includes market or political forces that might make adoption and eventual implementation difficult or emerging opportunities, such as recent investments by federal and state governments or new regulations that might support one policy proposal over another.

The fourth step examines each policy cluster through the lens of equity and the community. Equity can take many forms (procedural, social, racial, health, distributional, and more) that local governments must consider when developing a robust and accurate understanding of the policy ecosystem. Community perspectives—whether those of individual residents or more organized nonprofits, interest groups, and community-based organizations—have a significant impact on whether certain policies are adopted and effectively implemented.

While in theory each policy type deserves its own map, local government teams may decide to winnow the cluster down to policies over which the local government has the most control, power, and influence. For the example above, zoning and child care licensing seem to qualify for robust ecosystem mapping since these areas are typically under local purview.

As part of the mapping process, teams should consider opportunities to engage others within the local government or even external organizations and partners. This would invite deeper insights and reality checks on each map, help teams select the most promising policies, and better position the local government to identify the strategies and tactics needed to adopt and implement the policies (described in steps 5 to 8 below).

STEP 5: IDENTIFY POLICY SOLUTIONS

Once teams have filled in the different policy types upholding the root cause in their ecosystem mapping, the next step is to gather more intelligence about the specific policies that already exist or could be created within each of the policy types. In the example above, the local government identified minimum wage law as a type of wage policy that affects the availability of child care and noted that their state has set a local minimum wage higher than the federal minimum. However, the local jurisdiction does *not* have a minimum wage law (the yellow circles), which could be one way to raise the wages of child care workers.

To identify the specific policy options that exist within each of the policy types, teams can start by talking with public officials, staff, and others within their local government or from other cities and counties that have adopted and implemented similar policies. An internet scan can identify relatively recent reports or articles by national, regional, or local organizations or professional associations that identify examples and/or promising policies. The team might engage a consultant or partner with a local university to undertake a more in-depth and formal scan of the academic and policy research that documents, tracks, and assesses the results, outcomes, and impacts associated with the policy.

STEP 6: ASSESS FEASIBILITY AND IMPACT

In this step, teams assess promising policy options based on (1) the feasibility that they can be enacted given the current policy ecosystem, and (2) the potential they have for achieving the systems goals and the desired impacts on the communities and populations teams identified during Phase One. The result is a score for each policy that reflects feasibility, the window of opportunity, and impact.

Feasibility is scored across individual elements of three key dimensions that were originally outlined in their ecosystem maps:

1. Internal dynamics, such as budget, departmental/staff capacity to implement policy, policy rationale, and political dynamics (e.g., upcoming election cycles)
2. External dynamics, such as regional and local fiscal or market impacts, partner organization capacity, state and federal spending, or policy alignment
3. Community roles, context, and perspectives, such as general public perceptions, awareness and support for the policy proposal, and level of grassroots advocacy and support

Teams also consider the overall window of opportunity (Kingdon 1984) for each proposed policy change or the circumstances they can leverage within the next few months to help enact the policy, including whether there is sufficient local momentum (e.g., political, policy, community, fiscal, etc.).

The final scoring activity helps teams focus on potential policy impacts: (1) targeting examines whether the policy will reach the intended groups or population(s) and help reduce disparities; (2) scale refers to whether the policy's scope is big enough to reach all of those who need it; (3) outcomes refers to whether the policy will lead to equitable outcomes over time; and (4) systems change asks whether the policy advances systems change goals (e.g., change practices, change values, and/or remove structural barriers).

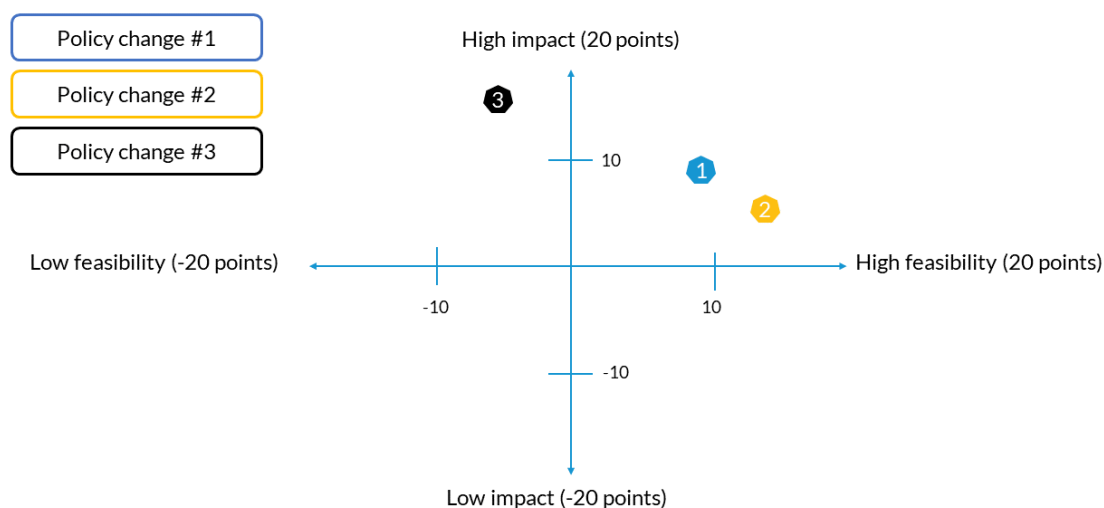
Combining the scores helps local government teams understand any potential trade-offs between feasibility and impact and pick the best policy change option given the current window of opportunity (figure 4). This might include determining that a substantial hindrance to feasibility can be addressed during upcoming policy change efforts (e.g., election outcomes or new revenue sources) or that a feasible policy change option falls short of the desired population impacts and systems goals and is not worth pursuing.

The framework and scoring, while simple, provide a common framework that others can use as part of ongoing policy discussions and negotiations. In fact, teams may want to repeat this exercise with other government agencies or relevant partners since they may have different perspectives that could be useful in deciding which policy options to move forward to the next phase—developing the specific policy proposal and road map for adoption and implementation.

FIGURE 4

Feasibility versus Impact Assessment

Based on separate scores assessing dimensions of feasibility, window of opportunity, and impact



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Source: Compass pilot training materials developed by the Urban Institute

Phase Three: Write the Policy Change Proposal and Road Map

The final deliverables for Phase Three are a policy change proposal laying out the specific policy change the team wants to enact and a Policy Change Road Map describing the steps the team will take to enact the policy change. The policy proposal is a holistic action plan that effectively positions the policy for formal enactment by the local government's legislative body. Successful policy change requires crafting a compelling story that both conveys the urgency of the issue and explains the practicality and promise

of the proposed policy solution. Proponents can then leverage a well-honed policy proposal to build further community support and political momentum.

The Policy Change Road Map outlines the strategies and the tactics for maneuvering the specific policy proposal through the local government policy process. A strong road map identifies a range of actions that can be taken to “make the case” in support of the policy proposal, including internal meetings, external outreach, and engagement with core partners and community stakeholders. The Policy Change Road Map should also include important implementation steps should the policy proposal be adopted.

STEP 7: DEVELOP THE POLICY PROPOSAL

To solidify the proposed policy change, local government teams should develop a clear policy proposal, including: (1) an explicit statement of the proposed policy change; (2) who is responsible for making the policy change; (3) the window of opportunity for policy change; and (4) the rationale for why the team needs to take action and make this policy change. A sample policy change proposal might read, “The team proposes a new child care incentive program to incentivize businesses to provide on-site child care through performance agreements. City Council will be responsible for approving this new program. The next fiscal year is our window of opportunity to advance our policy change agenda.”³

STEP 8: CREATE A POLICY CHANGE ROAD MAP

This step lays out a concrete process for how the local government team will get their selected policy change passed. The Policy Change Road Map acknowledges the barriers and roadblocks identified in past steps and addresses how the team will attempt to overcome these barriers. It describes campaign activities the team will undertake, such as conducting opposition research, building coalitions, activating grassroots support, and engaging in education and advocacy with key decisionmakers, media, and government staff. The road map also includes the key steps needed to move the policy change campaign forward and identifies who is responsible for leading each step. Finally, it sets milestones for policy adoption—such as securing champion support, identifying funding, and boosting media coverage—and outlines a system to track these benchmarks.

Phase Four: Enact the Policy and Measure Progress toward Goals

The goal of Phase Four is to implement the road map and ensure that the local legislative body actually enacts the proposed policy change.⁴ Certainly, there may be amendments and revisions to the policy proposal as part of the inherent give and take of the legislative process. Teams may need to adjust their Policy Change Road Map along the way.

Once the policy is formally enacted, the city team’s focus will shift to implementation, budgeting, and establishing a regular policy and program evaluation process that can track progress toward the original systems goals. At the end of this Compass phase, teams will have a policy change measurement plan that describes how they will track milestones and success and what measures and methods they will use. The plan should also include timelines and data sources for indicators of desired outputs and outcomes.

STEP 9: ENACT POLICY

For this step, success looks like the local government adopting the policy change, either as originally envisioned or as amended or revised during the adoption process based on additional evidence and community engagement. This usually takes the form of new local legislation or revisions to existing local laws.

STEP 10: IMPLEMENT AND MEASURE SUCCESS

To prepare for this final step in the Compass process, local government teams focus on identifying and selecting measures to track their progress and outcomes and develop a policy change measurement plan to keep on task. Tracking the outputs and outcomes of the process provides insight into how the process itself contributes to policy and systems changes. *Process outputs* might include materials developed to support the local government's policy change campaign, signing on partners to the proposed policy change, hosting internal informational sessions with government staff, and getting the policy adopted. *Process outcomes* may include documenting a new public narrative around the policy change, stronger trust among implementation partners, deeper buy-in from government staff, or new champions publicly advocating for the policy.

Local government teams will also want to know whether the Compass process has helped and if the policy change is working after it is implemented. This includes tracking *policy outputs*, or the impacts on systems and resources, such as the number of people who engage directly with the policy change. For example, after implementing a living wage policy, local governments may want to track the number of companies paying the living wage and number of people receiving the living wage. It also means tracking medium- and long-term *policy outcomes*, or the desired impacts on specific populations and communities (as stated in step three above). In the medium term, systems might begin to work more efficiently and equitably. For example, with a new living wage ordinance, household incomes for low-wage workers might increase, opening access to credit and reducing outstanding debt in collections. Over the longer term, families and communities may see other benefits, such as declining poverty rates, increased housing stability, and improved health.

What It Takes to Engage in Policy and Systems Change

Piloting the Compass highlighted several key and interconnected practices that can help local governments maximize their success in applying and adapting this process. We also identified some key insights about the broader process of local government systems change.

Take an Integrated Approach to Policy and Systems Change

Policy change is an essential piece of systems change as one of the few levers available to local government that can shape the actions of the private and nonprofit sectors—key partners in promoting equitable outcomes and achieving systems goals. On its own, however, policy change is not always sufficient to change systems, and it may not even be necessary to overcome a particular barrier. This means that assessing all the areas where systems intersect with root causes is important for

understanding the pain points and identifying levers for change, whether they are policies, programs, resources, trust- and power building, or efforts to shift public narratives and deeply held personal opinions.

Engage an Empowered Group

The ability of teams to move through the Compass phases and steps quickly will depend on their capacity to find necessary information, know who to contact for information, find crucial information quickly, and have the time and capacity to advance action. Teams that are too small or lack the relationships needed to execute the Compass steps will likely struggle to move easily through the process. Similarly, teams that have too many high-level decisionmakers but not enough low- and mid-level staff who have the time to advance the work will struggle to move through the Compass. The ability to move quickly through the Compass will also depend on being able to bring key champions and decisionmakers together in a timely fashion.

Ideally, teams will have a mix of on-the-ground staff with capacity to move daily tasks forward, high-level staff with authority and subject matter expertise in the issue area, and external partners from private and nonprofit sectors with subject matter expertise and influence. This group might change over the course of the Compass process as root causes and policy change options come into focus. Flexibility is key. A reliable group of champions to provide insights at critical points is also critical to implementing solutions. This might include additional local government department heads, knowledgeable stakeholders such as business and nonprofit leaders, and local funders.

Bring Evidence in Early and Often

Data can help local governments define the problem and set goals at the outset, understand and select policy options, assess potential impacts, and measure progress toward their goals. There are several points throughout this process where teams would benefit from support with identifying data sources and gathering, analyzing, and presenting data. It may be beneficial to identify data and policy research partners who can be called in at critical junctures to support the teams with these activities. Embedding a data expert—either as part of the team or as an external consultant—can help the team select indicators for measuring the success of their policy and systems changes and lead evaluation efforts.

Focus on Action and Impact, not Just Goals

Many local governments are familiar with the process of setting goals for a proposed new policy, program, or practice, but aligning for population-level impacts is more difficult, requiring both setting goals and taking action. Systems goals state how the system should behave when working well and help assess whether a proposed change will help achieve those system change goals. Stating the desired impacts or population-level goals centers the work on addressing root causes and inequities that keep specific groups of people from opportunities to thrive. Importantly, they provide local governments with a powerful rallying cry around which to build allyship and momentum.

Tracking both impacts on people and changes within the targeted systems tells policymakers and local government staff if changes to the system are actually translating to the desired population outcomes. If local governments succeed in changing target systems to behave the way they should but do not see the desired changes in their population-level goals, then it is possible that they misidentified the root cause or policy change proposal. Outlining a clear theory of change between root causes, policy change, systems outcomes, and population outcomes can keep this work focused.

Thread Equity Throughout

Equity can be defined in terms of goals, processes, and outcomes (Sally et al. 2020). Establishing equity as a goal means looking at who is currently harmed or kept from the opportunities they deserve by the targeted system and seeking to understand the root causes of the barriers they face. This includes setting population goals through an impact statement about how system changes should remove harms and open up opportunities. Pursuing equity also means ensuring accountability to the groups of people most harmed by the current system by enlisting them to help drive the Compass process—from setting goals, to articulating what they see as the root causes of inequities, to selecting the best change action, to measuring progress toward systems goals and impact. As an outcome, equity means having real evidence that policies are achieving the government’s goals for groups that are normally left behind by existing systems. Local government teams need strong supports to focus equity at all stages of the Compass.

Partner with Those Usually Left Out

Partnering with affected communities and the organizations and institutions that represent them and boosting their capacity to participate in policy change is also key to a successful Compass process. Such partnerships lead to greater accountability for the groups most affected, who have different vantage points on the problems and their root causes and less power to influence systems compared with local government officials and staff. Partnership is also key when assessing policy change options, including understanding the feasibility of a proposed policy change based on the level of community support. Finally, vocal support from the populations most harmed by existing systems may be necessary to change the public narrative around the problem and generate positive pressure to enact the proposed policy change.

Why Use the Compass?

The Compass was designed to assist local governments in achieving policy and systems change. Based on the pilot and feedback from pilot city teams, the Compass process is potentially beneficial to local governments and their partners in ways beyond achieving a specific policy change outcome.

Enhance the policymaking process. Many elected officials and government staff do not have training or background in policy and systems change before taking office or being hired. The Compass process invites local government participants to understand the building blocks of policy change and

consider changes to policymaking procedures that do not seem effective in yielding intended outcomes. The Compass also makes space for shaping strategy by offering the time and tools for cities to get in front of core problems facing their constituents rather than always being behind them.

Embed evidence in policymaking. To create a more deliberate, evidence-based foundation for developing new policy proposals, local governments could adopt Compass steps into their policymaking process. An evidence-based approach assesses root causes instead of merely addressing symptoms. It encourages starting with problems in search of solutions instead of starting with a proposed policy solution that may or may not actually address root causes or change systems. The Compass process also draws on data and community knowledge, measures progress, and evaluates outcomes.

Build trust and capacity for partnership. Working in teams within and across agencies builds trust and connection, strengthening governments' capacity to identify problems and enact solutions. Similarly, engaging with external partners with a stake in the proposed policy change helps improve the feasibility of the change as well as increase public support for it. Inviting people into policy design and development can lead to shared goals and better implementation and outcomes.

Shift language and narratives. Taking time to work through a process together helps local government staff and partners develop a shared language around the problem, its root causes, and possible solutions and impacts to better communicate with each other and the broader public. Cities can use this new language in messaging around proposed policy changes to help shift the public narrative away from a focus on individual responsibility toward the need to collectively address systemic problems that affect people's ability to thrive.

BOX 2

Interested in the Compass?

Is your local government interested in applying the Policy and Systems Change Compass process? Please reach out to the National League of Cities' Cities of Opportunity program at CoO@nlc.org or Joseph Schilling of the Urban Institute at jschilling@urban.org to discuss opportunities for technical assistance and peer learning.

Notes

- ¹ We slightly rearranged some of the steps in Phase One based on the experience of piloting them.
- ² For the pilot, we asked city teams to narrow the selection down to a single policy change to pursue due to the limited time of our engagement. There is no reason that multiple viable policy options cannot be pursued simultaneously.
- ³ This language was adapted from a pilot city team's proposal.

⁴ Pilot activities ended with road map development. We were unable to observe whether policy change was enacted in the three pilot cities.

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