

Talking COP's Buildings Breakthrough with Lindsay Baker

The initiative offers a set of actions for the international building sector to collaborate on decarbonization and resilience.

by Elizabeth Waters

Ever wonder how the building sector is contributing to the goals of the Paris Agreement?

Look no further than the Buildings Breakthrough, an initiative to drive international collaboration to make near-zero-emission and resilient buildings the new normal by 2030. Launched at the 2023 U.N. Conference of the Parties (COP28), the Buildings Breakthrough provides a clear set of focus action areas for the building industry to ensure it meets the Paris Agreement, explained Lindsay Baker, CEO of Living Future, and lays out “what it needs to focus on, what role it plays.”

The Buildings Breakthrough is the newest section within the Breakthrough Agenda, an initiative centered on annual COP meetings to drive international cooperation to decarbonize the world's major greenhouse gas emitting sectors. Forty-five leaders launched the agenda in 2021 at COP26, and it's now supported by 61 governments. Initially, the Breakthrough Agenda included the power, road transport, steel, hydrogen, and agriculture sectors. But those who work in the building industry called for the addition of the building sector, said Baker. “Power obviously includes things that happen in buildings,” she continued, but buildings often “get lumped in with electricity or get understood very vaguely as an end-use rather than being seen as a sector where coordination is necessary.” As such, “it's really powerful and important that buildings are listed as a breakthrough sector.” Baker explained, “When you call out buildings as both a

climate problem and climate solution, it gives us more opportunities to act as an industry to be central to climate solutions.”

What does the Buildings Breakthrough entail?

The Buildings Breakthrough is facilitated by the Global Alliance for Buildings and Construction (GlobalABC), an umbrella organization of building sector stakeholders established at COP21 in 2015. France and Morocco co-lead the initiative, which is supported by 29 countries. The Buildings Breakthrough is comprised of six priority international actions—which respond to a set of recommendations from the International Energy Association and U.N. Climate Change High-Level Champions in the annual Breakthrough Agenda Report—focused on:

- standards and certification
- demand creation
- finance and investment
- research and deployment
- capacity and skills
- landscape coordination

The six priority actions were announced in March 2024 at the first ever Buildings and Climate Global Forum in Paris, out of which came the Chaillot Declaration and the Intergovernmental Council for Buildings and Climate (ICBC). Together, these deliverables expand upon the Buildings Breakthrough and offer a political framework to encourage coun-

Buildings Breakthrough: Priority International Actions for 2025

B1: Standards and Certification

Build consensus among countries on qualitative definitions and principles for Near-Zero Emissions and Resilient Buildings (NZERB) across the entire life cycle, and outline related indicators, as well as guidelines to help ensure transparency, comparability and accountability, and consult on these over 2025.

B2: Demand Creation

Create procurement and policy commitments for NZERBs, for both new buildings and deep renovation projects, and join relevant initiatives to aggregate these commitments, as well as favor alignment of procurement policies on NZERB-related standards for clean and efficient heating and cooling technologies.

B3: Finance and Investment

Aim to clarify and amplify the finance sector's impact on mitigation, adaptation and resilience within the building sector by continuing to scale-up the availability, coordination and effectiveness of finance for near-zero emission and resilient building projects, along with related technical assistance, with a focus on emerging and developing countries.

B4: Research and Deployment

Coordinate with governments and companies to jointly

tries to stay informed of and engaged with it. The forum was “the first time the global building decarbonization community came together to talk,” said Baker, reflecting that sometimes initiatives like the Buildings Breakthrough precipitate global coordination.

Eight months later, at COP29, the Buildings Breakthrough priority actions for 2025 (updated to address recommendations in the 2024 Breakthrough Agenda Report), were presented by the groups responsible for coordinating them along with progress made so far—mostly the convening of working groups—and next steps. The demand creation and deployment teams launched their first deliverables, the Global Framework for Action on Sustainable Public Procurement (SPP) in Construction and the Blueprint for a Solutions Deployment Platform, respectively.

But it’s early days still for the Buildings Breakthrough.

“One of the biggest questions in my mind and in a lot of people’s minds is how it gets written and governed because it is essentially an action agenda,” said Baker, “So it’d be great to have more structure on how to follow through on it. That’s still getting worked out.”

What does the Buildings Breakthrough mean for the U.S. building sector?

Baker explained that often the structures created by the United Nations assume that governments will act in certain ways—assumptions that tend to be true for European countries, but not true for the U.S. For this reason, she considered, “the Buildings Breakthrough Agenda may not be a driving force for decarbonization in the U.S.”

For example, she elaborated, there’s an assumption in the Buildings Breakthrough that there’s someone at the federal level responsible for building decarbonization—but the U.S. federal

government doesn’t set standards for buildings. Additionally, she continued, “the emphasis for the Buildings Breakthrough has been on coordination between governments,” but here in the U.S.—at least for the foreseeable future—the private sector, along with local, regional, and state governments will be showing up for climate action in the building sector.

Still, this kind of initiative is important for international coordination, and “the more that U.S. actors can participate and show up, the better,” she said.

So, how do we show up?

So how will the U.S. participate in the Buildings Breakthrough and align with the rest of the world?

Baker pointed out that voluntary standards functioning at the national level have a role to play. She explained that it’s crucial for standards to establish rules that align with how others are establishing rules. Not to do so, she continued, creates market confusion, issues around greenwashing, and undermines progress toward industry-wide decarbonization goals. “One can say that international alignment and coordination of how to decarbonize the sector means that we are able to learn from each other, reduce conflicts between each other’s rules for engagement, and help wherever these issues cross borders for climate action to be as seamless as possible,” she explained.

Many U.S.-based organizations will help push this agenda forward, as well, predicted Baker, explaining that “in its ideal form, something like a Buildings Breakthrough Agenda should get philanthropic and private capital to flow toward the specific problems outlined in the agenda.” Organizations can leverage the Buildings Breakthrough document to drive funding by pointing to how specific decarbonization projects will support key issues identified in the agenda, said Baker.

identify research priorities & knowledge gaps, share RD&D priorities and leverage existing networks to gather expertise and additional country members; as well as drive solution deployment by identifying shared challenges, highlighting replicable models, and leveraging existing networks through a participative and collaborative effort with governments.

B5: Capacity and Skills

Coordinate with countries and companies to jointly identify training and capacity-building priorities (including institutional capacities), and leverage existing networks to share capacity-building resources and tools across all regions, with a focus on the establishment and compliance of building codes (in line with NZERB’s principles and requirements). Countries and initiatives should work to include NZERB principles and practices in education institution curricula and training programs and accreditation frameworks.

B6: Landscape Coordination

Enhance the coordination and transparency of international collaboration on near-zero emission and resilient buildings, in coordination with the work for the Intergovernmental Council for Buildings and Climate (ICBC) meetings.

Although AEC practitioners likely won't be engaging with the Buildings Breakthrough initiative directly, having an awareness that this international collaborative effort exists could help frame their decarbonization work at the project, portfolio, and industry levels. It could also underline for industry stakeholders the need for shared definitions, goals, and carbon accounting ledgers across international borders, said Baker. She emphasized that practitioners pursuing zero-carbon or zero-energy buildings or products should seek verification from a standard body participating in this broader landscape of carbon accounting. Decarbonization work is getting highly technical, she explained, "I don't want it to sound too intimidating. It's more about not doing it alone."

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