City-to-City Peer Learning to Accelerate Localization of the Sustainable Development Goals and the New Urban Agenda

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Abstract

To accelerate localization of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development at city levels, governments all over the world should develop policies that encourage cross-sectoral and multi-level collaborations. This policy brief is informed by two comparative projects implemented by an international research centre on urban sustainability through knowledge co-production processes. While the findings revealed willingness by city authorities to engage with the Global Agenda, the difficulties they face include lack of capacity and skills to interpret the importance of the SDGs targets and indicators, data gaps and availability, overlapping mandates of various agencies, unclear city boundary delimitation, and weak collaborations among stakeholders at different tiers of governance. However, the way different cities uniquely responded to these challenges, provides opportunities for learning and sharing of experiences. This policy brief therefore recommends promotion of international comparative knowledge co-production, as a tool to inspire and strengthen cross-sectoral and multi-level collaborations, as well as city-to-city peer learning.

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Introduction

This policy brief presents challenges and experiences of different cities and the possible strategies to accelerate the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and the New Urban Agenda as stipulated in the United Nations decade of action, to be addressed globally, locally and by the people (United Nations, 2020). They are based on findings of two comparative projects undertaken by Mistra Urban Futures, an international research centre on urban sustainability through a network of city platforms providing neutral "safe" spaces for experimentation (Simon et al., 2018) to support the implementation of SDG at local levels. This raises the importance of "knowledge co-production" by bringing in flexibility to fit in different situations and ensures local ownership and legitimacy of outcomes making them more sustainable (Simon et al., 2018).

About ICLD

The Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is part of the Swedish development cooperation. The mandate of the organization is to contribute to poverty alleviation by strengthening local governments.

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The national workshop held in Kisumu in 2019 with local stakeholders and national participants as well as international researchers attending virtually from UK and Gothenburg (promoting both horizontal and multi-level collaborations).

Photo credit: John Chweya, media student at Maseno University

The first project tested the relevance and feasibility of measuring the targets and indicators for the SDG − 11 "sustainable cities and communities" across five cities: Cape Town (South Africa), Kisumu (Kenya), Greater Manchester (United Kingdom), Gothenburg (Sweden), and Bangalore (India) in 2015 (Helen Arfvidsson et al., 2017). The second project monitored the implementation of the SDGs, especially goal 11, and the New Urban Agenda, from 2017 to 2019 in seven cities; Sheffield (United Kingdom), Cape Town (South Africa), Kisumu (Kenya), Gothenburg (Sweden), Bueno Aires (Argentina), Malmö (Sweden) and Shimla (India).

The study provided opportunities for city-to-city peer learning and identified good practices and areas of improvement in each of the cities. For example, Kisumu learned from Cape Town how researchers can be embedded within the local government departments to perform specific tasks on the implementation of SDGs and the New Urban Agenda (stronger action from below) (Croese et al., 2020). In turn, Cape Town learned from Kisumu how to mainstream the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda within the national and sub national policies, programmes and development plans (stronger action from the top).

Methodology

The activities of the two comparative projects were guided by "knowledge co-production processes", which focus on jointly formulating and undertaking the successive stages of the research together, from initial problem identification to analysis and, where possible, implementation of the results (Lang, et al., 2012; Polk 2015).

We developed a common reference guide that included questions, overall activities, analyses of the political process and performance aspects, as well as deliverables and key milestones for reporting. The guide enhanced comparability in collection and analysis of relevant data and documentation across the cities and enabled the establishment of a good working relationship with the local authorities and other relevant stakeholders on the cities engagement with SDGs and the New Urban Agenda.

Actual activities included desk reviews, monthly research team meetings, interviews and meetings with the government officials and stakeholders, and workshops at local, national and international levels for sharing of experiences and good practices.

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"Knowledge coproduction" stimulating sustainable urban
development in Kisumu through KLIP's research network.
Visual communication by Hannah Williams during KLIP's
dissemination workshop on 29th March 2021.

Results

The results are based on Mistra Urban Futures' research work before
and after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and the New Urban Agenda
in 2016 by the United Nations. The focus is on how to improve the
engagement with the global agenda at city levels informed by experiences
and practices across the cities that participated in these the international
comparative research projects.

- The city authorities are willing to mainstream Sustainable Development Goals in their existing development frameworks, as long as they are relevant and of value to the respective cities.

- Data gaps, data quality, compliance with methodological standards, and non-availability of disaggregated data are some of the major challenges being faced. Availability of timely and disaggregated data by administrative boundaries has also been reported as a major setback to the reporting process (Kenya National Treasury and Planning, 2020).

- There is a need to build capacity for the personnel engaged with the Sustainable Development Goals at the city levels to cascade their implementation. Limited number of staff engage with the SDG and high staff turnover affects the consistency in operations.

- Because some data is not produced annually, annual reporting on the SDG indicators, are based on estimations and projections of varying and unverified degree of accuracy. The main sources of data are administrative, surveys and periodical censuses. Administrative data are available every year. They are compiled in the annual economic surveys. For the surveys and censuses, data is obtained from the households and establishments. Establishments based censuses are done every five years.

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The Lake Side City of Kisumu.

Photo credit: John Chweya,
media student at Maseno University.

- Accurate reporting on the SDG 11 requires a clear definition and demarcation of the urban or city boundaries. This was the issue in some cities, e.g., in Kisumu, where the city boundary is not aligned to the county boundary which is used as the reporting scale (Valencia S. , et al., 2020). Even at the immediate lower reporting levels, the city boundary still cuts across a number of sub county boundaries. This calls for efforts to consolidate the available data and information for analysis in line with the SDG 11 to report at the city scale.

- Different institutions, both government and private, within the cities have overlapping mandates that can result into conflicts but can also be an opportunity for synergies among them. In Kenya, the devolved governance system, creates two tiers with devolved functions implemented by the county government and national functions by the national government. Institutional mandates are also not consistent with the city boundaries. In South Africa, a three-tier government system exists.

Policy recommendations

The recommendations are informed by the demonstrated role the academic researchers can play in localizing the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and the New Urban Agenda in the various cities of the world if a well-defined framework of engagement, that also involves other stakeholders at different levels of governance is established. The recommendations call for the establishment of city platforms to provide neutral "safe" spaces devoid of institutional barriers due to policies or procedures that may inhibit discussions of certain views by some stakeholders.

Advancing engagement between the platforms and the city authorities is necessary for the identification of challenges towards the implementation of the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda. It will enable identification of challenges to monitoring and evaluation processes, and setting them out as research problems to guide the formulation of contracts between the platforms and the local city authorities on some specific tasks and targets to include.

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Meeting discussing challenges of localizing SDGs implementation processes. Present are City and County Directors of Planning, Representatives from the State Department for Planning, KNBS and Private Sector and the Local Researchers based in Kisumu.

Photo credit: John Chweya, media student at Maseno University.

Recommendations for research

- Establish **international comparative research networks** to connect the various cities to provide conducive space(s) for discussing the implementation processes and challenges in each city, opportunities for city-to-city peer learning, and guidance from international perspectives. Some of the good practices resulting from the city-to-city learning are: 1) Embedding researchers in the relevant city departments for capacity building and performance of specific research tasks for SDGs implementation in Cape Town, and 2) mainstreaming of the SDGs in city development plans in Kisumu.

- Organizations or institutions funding research activities to re-define or realign funding opportunities towards solving identified challenges hindering the localization and implementation of the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda at city levels.

- Establish city research platforms linked at an international level to provide neutral spaces and or platforms to discuss the issues related to SDGs and the New Urban Agenda without undue influence from any particular local partner institutions. In Kisumu City, this contributed to reinforcement of local implementation processes with the participation of international partners in meetings involving national and sub-national (county/city) stakeholders. This strengthened multi-level/stakeholder collaboration

Recommendations for local government

- **Multilevel governance.** Establish formal working relationships among stakeholders and institutions operating at the city level and higher levels of governance, specifying details of how the engagement with the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda will take place, which issues to be discussed and the expected outcomes. This will strengthen cross-sectoral and multi-level collaborations and mechanisms that allow for information sharing.

- Invest more resources in efforts to collect missing data, fill the data gaps, promote stakeholder collaboration and engagement with government institutions mandated to give statistical information (e.g., Kenya National Bureau of Statistics). This will improve data collection and analysis for planning purposes.

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- Emphasize the relevance of the SDGs targets and indicators to the city authorities for the local planning and policy making.

- Mainstream SDGs and the New Urban Agenda in government policies, planning and budgetary frameworks, which include the national and sub-national development plans and performance management frameworks. This helps securing budget lines.

Questions for local governments

1. What kind of city space can support effective stakeholders' interactions and public participation without undue influence from any of the stakeholders?

2. Local government departments sometimes suffer from lack of technical expertise, high staff turnover and influence by the frequently changing political leadership. How can these affect the implementation of the SDGs? What are the possible actions to reduce their effects?

3. The local and global interests sometimes conflict. How can this be avoided especially when implementing the SDGs?

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