Urban Governance for Sustainable Global Development: From the SDGs to the New Urban Agenda

Summary

"Our struggle for global sustainability will be lost or won in cities." With these words Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations, opened the High-Level Delegation of Mayors and Regional Authorities in New York City on 23 April 2012.

A little more than three years later, at the United Nations (UN) Summit in 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted. In the Agenda, 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) define the key areas and mechanisms for a future global development partnership. One of these goals (SDG 11: "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable") distinctly alludes to urban development. The urban community has widely celebrated the adoption of this "stand-alone urban goal". The step is perceived as reflecting an increased awareness of the important role of cities for global development pathways.

Although sharing in this positive assessment, this briefing paper argues that for an effective follow-up to Agenda 2030, issues of urban and local governance ought to be addressed in further detail and as cross-cutting issues. This applies to the "urban" SDG 11, which does not have a distinct target on (good) governance. It is also true for the "governance" goal, SDG 16, which, while referring to institutions "at all levels", does not spell out local or urban responsibilities. And it is pertinent for many sectoral goals, such as SDGs 13 (action towards climate change) and 9 (build resilient infrastructure), both of which strongly hinge on local- or city-level implementation.

Against this background, the briefing paper identifies urban governance issues that are presently neglected in the SDGs and require further elaboration. This may occur in the process of the supplementary methodological work envisaged by

the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators for the coming months (UN Economic and Social Council, 2016, p. 9).

Even more importantly, the task of concretising the urban governance dimension – and thereby easing SDG implementation – must also be related to other global policy processes and events. Notably the New Urban Agenda (NUA), which is to be formulated at the 2016 World Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) in Quito, Ecuador, from 17–20 October 2016, can be considered a key vehicle in this regard.

Following are three decisive urban governance dimensions to be focussed on in the NUA:

1. Urban governance frameworks: Since urban governance is exercised at different governmental levels, defining the roles and responsibilities of – and coordination between – these levels is essential. Decisive elements are national urban policies among other institutional frameworks; multi-level and -sectoral cooperation and coordination mechanisms; and formal and informal linkages beyond city borders.

2. Intra-urban partnerships: Effective partnerships and co-operative practices between local authorities, the private sector and civil society constitute the backbone of good urban governance. In particular, mechanisms and space for the participation of disadvantaged groups in collaboration and decision-making processes must be defined and the related capacities built.

3. Transformative urban governance: In order to effectively confront global challenges in the sense of truly transformative development, key elements of climate-friendly governance at the city level must be defined, relating to both mitigation and adaptation measures.

SDGs and urban governance

SDG 11, one of 17 goals adopted in Agenda 2030, aims at making "cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable". The goal is detailed in 10 targets covering different dimensions of city life and urban development (see Box 1).

Box 1:   The urban SDG 11 and its targets

Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

11.1   By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums.

11.2   By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons.

11.3   By 2030, enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management in all countries.

11.4   Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage.

11.5   By 2030, significantly reduce the number of deaths and the number of people affected and substantially decrease the direct economic losses relative to gross domestic product caused by disasters, including water-related disasters, with a focus on protecting the poor and people in vulnerable situations.

11.6   By 2030, reduce the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, including by paying special attention to air quality and municipal and other waste management.

11.7   By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities.

11.a   Support positive economic, social and environmental links between urban, peri-urban and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning.

11.b   By 2020, substantially increase the number of cities and human settlements adopting and implementing integrated policies and plans towards inclusion, resource efficiency, mitigation and adaptation to climate change, resilience to disasters, and develop and implement, in line with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030, holistic disaster risk management and all levels.

11.c   Support least developed countries, including through financial and technical assistance, in building sustainable and resilient buildings utilizing local materials.

The urban community has widely welcomed the adoption of this "stand-alone urban goal". It indicates a much stronger emphasis on cities, as compared to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), in which they were only addressed on the target level. MDG 7.D, which aimed at a "significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers", also reflected a rather narrow focus on urbanity – sectorally as well as geographically.

Although sharing the positive appraisal of the SDGs regarding cities, this paper argues that their urban dimension goes far beyond Goal 11. Moreover, in order to effectively follow up on the majority of the SDGs, the urban (governance) dimension and/or interlinkages with the "urban goal" must be specified. This argument is informed by the following three assumptions:

1.   Firstly, much more than just places, cities are increasingly becoming *drivers* of global sustainable development. This is due to their socially and economically transformative roles as well as their connectivity beyond their own administrative borders.

2.   Secondly, implementation of most SDGs requires local-level action. A city's degree of autonomy, role and actions with respect to other government levels will vary for different intervention areas and city types, but it needs to be established at some point.

3.   Thirdly, current conditions and frameworks of urban governance do not allow cities to adequately fulfil the functions spelt out by the SDGs (Cobbett, 2015, p. 1). Thus, concretisation on the key actors, strategies and required resources for improvement is necessary to remove obstacles such as inadequate decentralisation frameworks and insufficient financial and technical capacities at the local level.

But to what extent is urban governance precisely accounted for in the SDGs? In what follows, the focus is on the "urban" goal (SDG 11), the "governance" goal (SDG 16), and two sectoral goals, SDGs 13 (climate) and 9 (infrastructure).

The urban goal (SDG 11)

Although SDG 11 includes references to urban governance, no distinct (good) governance target was defined. Important governance aspects are, however, mentioned in target 11.3, as well as the means of implementation targets, 11.a and 11.b, including some mutual overlaps.

Target 11.3 reads: "By 2030, enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management." The first indicator for this target is the "[r]atio of land consumption rate to population growth rate", and the second the "percentage of cities with a direct participation structure of civil society in urban planning and management which operate [*sic*] regularly and democratically". Although important aspects of the target are covered, framework conditions (e.g. municipal finance, inter-sectoral planning frameworks, capacity-building) and tools for achieving integrated planning and management are not addressed.

The means of implementation target 11.a is to "support positive economic, social and environmental links between urban, peri-urban and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning". The indicator for this target is the "[proportion] of population living in cities that implement urban and regional development plans, integrating population projections and resource needs, by size of city". Multi-level and territorial governance issues are taken

up here; however, the important role of national urban policy frameworks is not elaborated on any further.

The means of implementation target 11.b is to "(…) increase the number of cities and human settlements adopting and implementing integrated policies and plans towards inclusion, resource efficiency, mitigation and adaptation to climate change …". Both presently retained indicators make reference to local and urban disaster risk-reduction strategies and implementation in line with the Sendai Framework Indicators. It is recommended that the role of vulnerable and marginalised groups, for example informal settlers, is specifically taken into consideration in risk-reduction and resilience strategies and mechanisms.

The governance goal (SDG 16)

SDG 16 is to "promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels". Both in the goal and in its ascribed targets, there is an implicit – but no explicit – reference to local and urban governance.

Target 16.6 stresses to "develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels". The retained indicators for this target are "primary governmental expenditures as a percentage of original approved budget" and "proportion of population satisfied with their last experience of public services". These are certainly relevant for all governmental and administrative levels. However, the distinct leverage of the urban context with regard to good governance (e.g. spatial proximity of diverse and active constituencies) and key frameworks (decentralisation, subsidiarity, administrative capacities) and mechanisms (e.g. residence-based rights, participatory budgeting, public-private partnerships) to bring this potential to bear should also be mentioned. Moreover, frameworks determining interrelations between different scales of government should be referred to. These are a pre-condition for local or urban governments to effectively exercise their rights and duties vis-à-vis their constituencies.

Target 16.7 is to "ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels". Its two indicators refer to the distribution of governmental positions for certain groups (e.g. women, migrants, youth, disabled) with respect to the average representation of these groups on the national scale and the proportion of the population that believes decision-making is inclusive and responsive, disaggregated by group membership. Imbalances in access to political power and opportunities to participate in public life are particularly pronounced in cities, alongside social and economic inequalities. Thus, tools and instruments to enhance participatory processes, particularly considering urban fragmentation and informality, must be elaborated. Furthermore, there are obvious interlinkages with targets 11.3 and 11.b, which should also be further elaborated.

Other (sectoral) SDGs

Many other SDGs and targets also have a clear relationship with local- or urban-level action but lack the corresponding references. According to Misselwitz and Salcedo Villanueva, "*21% of the 169 targets can only be* implemented with local stakeholders, *24% should be* implemented with local actors and a further *20% should have* a much clearer orientation towards local urban actors" (Misselwitz & Salcedo Villanueva, 2015, p. 18, emphasis in original).

SDG 13 on climate change ("Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts") is a case in point. Target 13.3 reads: "Improve education, awareness-raising and human and institutional capacity on climate-change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning." The indicator of this target refers to the number of countries that have integrated mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning into primary, secondary and tertiary curricula, without an explicit urban or local reference. And target 13.b suggests promoting "mechanisms for raising capacity for effective climate change-related planning and management in least-developed countries, including focusing on women, youth and local and marginalized communities" – its indicator referring to the number of least-developed countries receiving specialised financial and technical support in this regard. Although the former target lacks any spatial specifications, the latter does point to local-level measures; however, it does not explicitly refer to the urban context and to governance challenges for effective and socially just climate adaptation. Again, guidance for multi-level and inter-sectoral / integrated planning and coordination mechanisms are particularly relevant here, strongly interlinking with other goals and targets (e.g. 11.3, 11.b, 16.7). Moreover, given that an increasing number of people live in localities that form part of large, contiguous urban areas, reference to metropolitan-scale mitigation and adaptation is necessary.

Another example is Goal 9 on resilient infrastructure, in which no reference can be found on the role of urban actors in identifying, providing and financing adequate infrastructure. This goal and the ones on health, education, water and sanitation as well as energy provision strongly interlink with Goals 11 and 16. For improved guidance and emphasis on urban coping potentials, these links must be strengthened. In view of the urgency of (new) urban infrastructure investments and the resulting leverage of the sector for breaking up unsustainable path dependencies (e.g. by reducing fossil fuel-related emissions in the transport sector) in global development, the urban reference must be made clearer.

Complementing the indicators will not close the implementation gap per se but provide guidance on future developmental priorities and required data collection for monitoring progress. However, before this potential is brought to bear, considerable technical constraints with regard to the effective measurement and monitoring of the indicators must be resolved. Among these are the lack of spatially disaggregated data, problems of "SMART" (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound) operationalisation and capacity gaps.

Habitat III – a vehicle for SDG implementation?

Implementation of the SDGs at the local and urban levels must also be seen in the context of other global processes and events. The final list of proposed SDG indicators includes several cross-references to parallel policy and indicator elaboration processes, for example the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction or the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. However, what has as of yet been unstated – and of overarching relevance – is the NUA, which is to be formulated in the context of Habitat III in Ecuador this October.

This said, the degree to which the NUA or the Habitat III process shall stream into Agenda 2030, thereby also addressing its gaps, is still subject to debate. Advocates of "cities as focus of all development" (Parnell, 2015, p. 538) consider such a tributary function as being a key leverage towards sustainable global development or as a way to push forward their inclusive-, smart- or resilient cities perspective. Meanwhile, opponents of such a view may consider it as distracting from truly urban (sectoral) concerns. And defendants of a more spatially neutral or rural agenda may dread future shifts in the national and international development focus and finance towards cities.

However, against the background of the aforementioned urban governance gaps and the relevance of cities beyond Goal 11 for successfully implementing the SDGs, it seems clearly pertinent to connect Agenda 2030 and the NUA. Such a linkage is also likely to enhance the influence of urban stakeholders, particularly local governments, in persistently nation-state-centric UN processes.

The NUA should specify urban governance-related policy recommendations and related indicators in the following decisive areas:

- **Context-specific urban frameworks**: Urban governance is exercised at different levels of government and on different scales. Although the Habitat II Istanbul Conference declaration in 1996 supported the principles of decentralisation and subsidiarity, action on them is broadly considered to have been unsatisfactory. Although country-specific particularities need to be considered, national (urban) policy frameworks and corresponding fiscal and financial regulations must define local and urban functions and responsibilities. Additionally, the multilevel management of new and highly dynamic urban forms such as metropolitan areas and urban corridors must be regulated.

- **(Intra-)urban participation and partnerships**: Effective stakeholder participation and entitlement to urban spaces is another field in which implementation is lagging behind. It is also at the heart of the "right to the city" struggle of a strong and increasingly transnational urban citizenship movement. Against the background of global dynamics such as diversified population movements and climate change, new collaboration spaces and partnerships between governments, academia, the private sector and (increasingly fluid) local communities must be sought out to produce equitable outcomes and adaptive capacities.

- **Transformative governance**: During times in which more people than ever are living in cities and there being a rising international awareness about the importance of subnational and local-level climate action, mitigation and adaptation investments should also concentrate on cities. Mechanisms to enable city- or metropolitan-scale climate action must be sought out. Additionally, strategies must be designed in such a way to include and protect the most disadvantaged urban groups.

"Transforming our World" – this is the vision that Agenda 2030 set off with. To be truly transformative, the role of urban governance with regards to the SDGs needs to be further elaborated. Besides complementary indicator formulations, the Habitat III process and the NUA can make crucial contributions towards this aim.

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