Abstract
The ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has been especially felt in cities, with the urban poor in the global South having suffered most from the disproportionate impact from the crisis. With over half of the world’s global population already living in urban areas, the ways in which future urban growth and development is managed will greatly determine the extent to which global development goals are met, making cities and local governments key parts of the solution to achieving sustainable development.

This position piece builds on our engagements as a researcher and practitioner in various international projects, networks and initiatives related to sustainable urban development to argue in favour of a lateral approach to post-pandemic development. Such an approach recognizes the significance of peer-to-peer exchange and learning between cities and urban communities at large as an accelerator of progress on the localisation of global policy agendas. This is especially important in the African context where levels of decentralization and access to urban expertise or resources are uneven. We identify city networks, national governments and academia and civil society as key actors and vectors that can support such cross-city exchange and sharing, in order to stimulate horizontal and transversal local approaches to sustainable development in a post-pandemic world.
Introduction
At the start of the UN Decade of Action we find ourselves at a crossroads. The adoption of Agenda 2030 and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 represented a universal commitment to achieve sustainable development by the year 2030 in ways that would leave no one behind. However, progress on the realisation of the SDGs has been slow and uneven, with structural issues such as climate change and funding gaps representing major barriers to successful implementation. The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has further revealed and reinforced existing deep-seated inequalities within and across societies (Sachs et al., 2021). The impact of the pandemic has been especially felt in cities, which have been bearing the brunt of most Covid-19 cases as well as the effects of the measures put in place to control them (UN, 2020). In addition, it has been the urban poor in the global South who have suffered disproportionately more from the crisis, due to rising unemployment levels as a result of the global economic slowdown and local lockdowns (Alcázar et al., 2021). This has slowed, and in some cases reversed, progress made on goals such as SDG 1 (no poverty), SDG 3 (good health and well-being), SDG 4 (quality education), SDG 5 (gender equality), SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation) and SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth).

The pandemic has showed our weaknesses and fragility, but it has also demonstrated our strength and ability to adapt and innovate in unexpected and unprecedented ways. This has been displayed by strong local leadership, with city authorities in some cases having to make up for national government indecisiveness at best or denial of the severity of the pandemic at worst. Community and grassroot initiatives and partnerships have also played an instrumental role in managing and mitigating the impact of the pandemic, from contact tracing to the organisation of a host of actions to reach those most in need of support (Mejía-Dugand et al., 2020).

In the context of growing reflection on the ways to “build back better” and get back on track to achieving the SDGs in a post-pandemic world, numerous calls have been made in support of interventions to build local institutional and fiscal state capacity (Parnell, 2020) or to upscale existing community initiatives in order to achieve “transformative urban recovery” (Sverdlik and Walnycki, 2021). Both types of interventions are important, but in this piece we build on our engagements as a researcher and practitioner in various international projects, networks and initiatives, such as ICLEI Africa’s webinar series “Building sustainable African cities during and after a pandemic: Lessons from past and present crises”, to argue in favour of a lateral approach to post-pandemic development. Such an approach recognises the significance of peer-to-peer exchange and learning between cities and urban communities at large as an important accelerator of progress on the localisation of global policy agendas (Oloko et al. 2021). Opportunities for horizontal learning are especially important for African cities, for which access to urban expertise or resources is either dependent on global organisations, city networks and alliances or on national government. This has created and reinforced an uneven landscape consisting of pioneers or “vanguard cities” (Pipa, 2019) on the one hand, and many, often smaller cities, left behind.

SDG localisation in Africa
City diplomacy, exercised by city representatives and networks, represented an important contribution to putting cities on the global map of the SDGs and related global development agendas
with the aim of “leaving no city behind” (Acuto and Parnell, 2016). Such efforts were largely driven by a recognition that in an increasingly urban world, cities represent key pathways to development. With over half of the world’s global population already living in urban areas, cities are the world’s largest contributors to energy consumption, waste and CO2 emissions, as well as the main sites of socio-economic and spatial inequality and of vulnerability to the effects of climate change. However, they also represent increasingly interconnected economic and political powerhouses and hubs of innovation. As such, the ways in which future urban growth and development is managed will greatly determine the extent to which global development goals are met, making cities and local governments key parts of the solution to achieving sustainable development. But the extent to which cities can play an active role as an actor, not just site of development, varies widely across the world. While cities in many developed countries enjoy high levels of political, administrative and fiscal autonomy, levels of decentralisation in Africa remain uneven, even if African cities face some of the highest rates of urbanization in the world, and therefore require adequate power to address associated challenges such as poverty and informality. These uneven levels of decentralisation are the product of many different but often inter-related factors, such as colonial legacies of centralised rule, protracted conflict, ethnic tensions and economic crises, resulting in partial and complex reforms. Many of these reforms have only been implemented since the 1990s and in many countries are still ongoing. As a result, with only limited and changing exceptions, African local authorities face many challenges. These range from an uneven administrative reach over urban territories, central governments reluctant to devolve mandates and power (especially when opposition parties govern cities) and weak fiscal capability, which limits their ability to respond to, engage with, and plan for development in a sustainable and integrated way (UCLG, 2019a).

This uneven landscape of decentralisation has roughly translated into two approaches to SDG localisation. On the one hand, central governments in Africa, such as Kenya, have adopted top-down approaches whereby regional and local governments are actively guided towards localisation. On the other hand, local governments in countries such as South Africa have adopted their own approaches to SDG localisation from the bottom up, in the absence of concrete national government guidelines (Croese et al., 2021).

These divergent approaches do not just illustrate the challenges of multi-level governance for global policy implementation, but also the resources and conditions required to enable SDG localisation at the city level. Those cities that have been successful in taking a bottom-up approach are often either larger cities that have more political and fiscal autonomy and/or cities that are plugged into global networks and alliances that provide important access to financial and technical support, resources and networking. These networking opportunities often have an accumulated effect, with a particular group of cities and actors within them building up important skills, knowledge and expertise that allow them to become SDG champions. An example of this is the South African metropolitan municipality of eThekwini, which has a longstanding track record of engagement, participation and partnerships with global sustainability networks and agendas through an active leadership that has fostered the emergence of local sustainability champions within the city. This combination of global commitment and connectedness has enabled the city to carve out its own path to SDG localisation in a way that is grounded in local planning processes (Akkiah, forthcoming). There is a need for this kind of experience and expertise to be shared with other cities who have not
had similar opportunities and support.

**Tackling SDG localisation sideways**

We identify three important actors and vectors that can support such cross-city exchange and sharing, in order to stimulate horizontal and transversal local approaches to sustainable development in a post-pandemic world.

**City networks**

There are a growing number of global, regional and national city networks across the world, active in areas ranging from climate change to health. While the existence of such networks is not new, their number has exponentially increased in recent years, with at least 170 active city networks having been counted in 2015, up from 1985 in 1985 (Acuto 2016; Acuto and Rayner, 2016). These networks make important contributions to the transfer and circulation of urban knowledge and policies, with concrete outcomes such as investments in city infrastructure and development (Davidson et al., 2019). However, the existence of such networks is still geographically skewed to the global North, with peripheral membership in Asia, the Middle East and Africa (Figure 1). Moreover, even within Africa membership is often limited to the same set of cities (Figure 2).

![Global city network membership (as of 2017)](image)

Source: Acuto and Leffel (2021)

There is a need to promote and support exchanges beyond North-South alliances towards South-South alliances, by bringing together cities between different African countries and within the same country, so as to share learnings between cities that share similar backgrounds and challenges. In this regard, city networks such as ICLEI Africa provide important platforms to share and build on the experiences and learnings around SDG localisation of existing, often relatively well-resourced and connected, members of city networks. Expanding such opportunities among a much wider range of smaller or less-endowed cities would represent an enormous contribution to accelerating the benefits of mutual exchange and learning.
National governments

Between 2016 and 2021, 46 out of 54 African countries presented their Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) on SDG progress to the UN High Level Political Forum, some of them multiple times (UNDESA, 2021).

While the involvement of local and regional governments in VNR processes was limited in the first VNR cycles, this has gradually increased over time. According to the global local government association United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), one of the key voices and advocates for SDG localisation, local and regional governments’ involvement in VNR processes increased to 55% in 2020, up from 42% in the 2016-2019 period (UCLG, 2019b). Additionally, UCLG has noted an increase in the elaboration of Voluntary Local and Regional Reviews, from over 50 as of July 2020 to at least 110 VLRs either already published and publicly available, or to be published in 2021 and 2022. This also includes a growing number of what have come to be referred to as Voluntary Subnational Reviews (VSRs), which represent country-wide, bottom-up reports that assess the state of localisation processes at subnational levels (UCLG and UN Habitat, 2020; 2021 - Figure 3).

As the number of VLRs and VSRs developed on the African continent increases, it will be important for national governments to support these forms of subnational reporting as they will form instrumental inputs into national reporting processes, as well as conduits for the support of SDG localisation at the city level. Importantly, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) has started to support such work through discussions around the preparation of a template for peer-reviewed VLRs in Africa that is aligned with both Agenda 2030 and Agenda 2063 reporting (UNECA, 2021).
Academia and civil society

There is increased interest and recognition in academia of the importance of research methods and approaches that transcend disciplinary silos and that involve societal actors, in order to produce knowledge that can contribute to solving complex sustainability problems (Marrengane and Croese, 2021). Examples of such partnerships can be found in cities across the world, where researchers have worked closely with city officials in the development of approaches to SDG localisation. In Los Angeles, eight city teams (departments and Mayors’ shops, including the Mayor’s Office of International Affairs), 13 academic advisors, and 162 undergraduate and graduate students across five universities, worked with the City of Los Angeles to translate the SDGs into local action (Morales et al., 2021). In Bristol, an informal stakeholder network that became the Bristol SDG Alliance consists of over 170 stakeholders, including individuals working in non-profit organisations, private firms, local city government, the city’s two universities and the city council (Fox and Macleod, 2021). In both cities, these partnerships resulted in the development of VLRs, completed in 2019.

In the South African city of Cape Town, longstanding collaborations between the City and the University of Cape Town with support of an international research network, led to the inclusion of an embedded researcher in the City who worked with City officials for over two years on SDG localisation. This partnership involved the organisation of awareness-raising activities, one-on-one meetings, exploring different pathways to SDG localisation (strategic, sectoral, and programmatic), as well as internal and external knowledge exchanges, discussions and seminars (Figure 4). Over time, these efforts resulted in the adoption of an SDG implementation plan, the alignment of the City’s Resilience Strategy to the SDGs, and the development of a VRL, the first VRL to be completed by a South African city (Croese et al., 2020). These examples illustrate the importance of building on
the learnings of such partnerships and the role of researchers and members of civil society, as they represent important bridges between cities and society and can strengthen both sides through the documentation and dissemination of good practices and learning.

Conclusion

While the scale and impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is certainly unprecedented, adversity, scarcity, and crisis are not unknown to local governments in Africa. Uneven levels of decentralisation and divergent approaches of national governments towards SDG localisation, further hamper the ability of cities to respond to, engage with and plan for development in a sustainable and integrated way. However, even in the absence of national government or other sources of external support, cities have shown to be able to adapt and innovate in unexpected and unprecedented ways, providing important learning for and avenues to SDG localisation from the bottom up.

Recognising that the ways in which the future growth and development of African cities is managed will greatly determine the extent to which any of the global development goals can be met, means that local action will be central for the effective uptake and achievement of the SDGs. Key for fostering such local action is the expansion of opportunities for horizontal learning, beyond a still-limited set of cities to encompass a wide range of local actors within, between and across cities on the continent and global South as a whole. Examples from city networks, voluntary local and subnational reporting processes and partnerships with academia and civil society provide key avenues in this regard. Now is the time to draw on the accumulated knowledge and expertise of these actors and experiences, in order to facilitate mutual learning and strategically accelerate the institutionalisation and upscaling of knowledge and support for existing SDG champions and practices.

Figure 4. Participants in a knowledge exchange between the City of eThekwini and Cape Town on SDG localisation


Nachi Majoe, a development practitioner, provides African cities, development agencies, private sector and other stakeholders with technical assistance, support, advice and capacity building in the areas of sustainable development, climate change, energy and economic development. She is passionate about Africa’s development which amongst others believes can be fostered through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Over the past 11 years Nachi has worked in various roles at ICLEI Africa – Local Governments for Sustainability and the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) wherein she led the development of various frameworks, tools, guidelines as well as designed and facilitated capacity building programme; all geared towards supporting technocrats and political leaders across Africa. Nachi is a Chevening scholar; she holds a Masters in International Planning and Sustainable Development (Urban Resilience) from the University of Westminster in the United Kingdom and a Masters in Public Management and Governance from the University of Johannesburg in South Africa and she is a Certified Expert in the Financing of the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). Nachi is currently the Managing Director of her own company; Stones EcoPlanning Pty (Ltd) which provides consulting services on climate change, energy, economic development and planning.

About RISE Africa:

RISE Africa is ICLEI Africa’s platform for inspiring and fostering new connections that lead to swift and impactful actions for enhanced sustainability and resilience in Africa’s urban areas. Exposure to forward-thinking ideas from different disciplines through a range of curated interactions will provide an antidote to outdated “silo” thinking that is well recognised to inhibit innovation. Instead of being another ‘talk shop’ amongst like-minded individuals, RISE Africa will bring a diversity of city role players together in innovative sessions to identify new opportunities for collaborative action.

About the authors:

Sylvia Croese is an urban sociologist and senior researcher based at the South African Research Chair in Spatial Analysis and City Planning at the School of Architecture and Planning of the University of the Witwatersrand and research associate with the African Centre for Cities at the University of Cape Town. She works on urban politics, policy and governance in Africa through the lens of housing, land, urban infrastructure, mobility, knowledge co-production and global policies such as the Sustainable Development Goals, on which she has published widely, including three co-edited books: Refractions of the national, the popular and the global in African cities (2021), Reframing the Urban Challenge in Africa: Knowledge Co-production from the South (2021) and Localising the SDGs in African cities (forthcoming).

Nachi Majoe, a development practitioner, provides African cities, development agencies, private sector and other stakeholders with technical assistance, support, advice and capacity building in the areas of sustainable development, climate change, energy and economic development. She is passionate about Africa’s development which amongst others believes can be fostered through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Over the past 11 years Nachi has worked in various roles at ICLEI Africa – Local Governments for Sustainability and the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) wherein she led the development of various frameworks, tools, guidelines as well as designed and facilitated capacity building programme; all geared towards supporting technocrats and political leaders across Africa. Nachi is a Chevening scholar; she holds a Masters in International Planning and Sustainable Development (Urban Resilience) from the University of Westminster in the United Kingdom and a Masters in Public Management and Governance from the University of Johannesburg in South Africa and she is a Certified Expert in the Financing of the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). Nachi is currently the Managing Director of her own company; Stones EcoPlanning Pty (Ltd) which provides consulting services on climate change, energy, economic development and planning.