

Mobilising Decentralised Cooperation to localise the SDGs in the Asia Pacific Region



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Version 01

1. Introduction: Contextualising the development challenges in the ASPAC Region



(Photo source: World Bank EAP Report, 2017)

In a 2017 World Bank Report *Expanding Opportunities for the Urban Poor*, it is noted that the East Asia and Pacific Region's average annual urbanization rate of 3 percent has helped lift 655 million people out of poverty in the last two decades. At the same time however the sobering report notes that the region has the world's largest slum population: 250 million people with poor-quality housing, limited access to basic services, and at risk to hazards such as flooding. The Report concludes that cities in this most rapidly urbanizing region in the world are not yet delivering infrastructure, jobs, and services at a pace as rapid as urban development, warning of widening inequalities that may hamper economic growth and ultimately lead to social division.

It is not surprising therefore that such a fast-urbanising region like ASPAC (and Africa) have been recognised by the latest CIB Policy Paper on Decentralised Cooperation (2021) as an area of high priority for networks of cities and local governments to focus on, as it is in areas where urban change is greatest that local development is most impacted. Interestingly, the Policy Paper goes on to note that local and regional governments boast an impressive range of collaborative and multi-scalar

partnerships through their networks and associations, all of which are built on mutual trust and respect for individual mandates. It is here that the potential for making real change at a local level through effective, sustainable, well-structured decentralised cooperation can be realised. More importantly, it critically points out, that it is in responding to the constantly changing nature of contemporary challenges, that LRGs are well positioned to consider how new strategic partnerships, for example with university and research stakeholders, can help strengthen evidence-based action, and further assist understanding and aligning with changing donor priorities.

In attempting to explore the extent to which the ASPAC region has delivered on global targets, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) Asia and Pacific SDG Progress Report 2021, acknowledges the excellent strides made by the region towards achieving 2030 developmental targets. More specifically, exceptional progress has been made with the socio-economic indicators of the first 10 SDGs. Notwithstanding the progress however, numerous difficulties and delays in achieving the targets for decentralised cooperation DC have been recognised, given the obvious additional strain as a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic.

At the same time, the UN ESCAP Report notes the overall struggle to improve on the achievement of environmental targets. Flagging that the decline generally applies to the region as a whole and not to a specific country, a regression was noted with SDG 13 and 14 it was found that there is regression, and that they overall receive the least local attention. What stands out from the report, that makes a strong case for a watertight response to climate change in cities, is that decentralized cooperation should be at the heart of the climate response.

And from the experiences articulated from practitioners on the ground, it does appear that this is indeed where much of the focus of the UCLG ASPAC region lies. This short article prepared on behalf of the UCLG and UCLG ASPAC learning team provides a short snapshot view of the nature of DC in the ASPAC Region. Based on interviews with key players and drawing from online workshops with DC personnel and desktop material is presents a short overview of the ASPAC perspective of the process of mobilising DC to localise the SDGs in the region. Central to this article is the presentation of two interesting case studies that helps give a sense of the type of DC projects that have been underway. Importantly, the article also begins to articulate key elements of the strategy underpinning how DC is to be rolled out moving ahead in the region.

2. Decentralised cooperation as enabler of the SDGs in ASPAC Region

This section of the article is structured around four key questions that are answered with research that draws on selected interviews, desk top analysis, a survey conducted by the UCLG ASPAC team in preparation for training, a focus-group workshop after the training with the ASPAC leadership team and finally based on researcher observation during a period of six months of engagement.

It begins by asking (i) what are the critical enablers required for effective SDG linked DC in the ASPAC region in order to set the macro context. Thereafter, it explores the question of what Asian local government practitioners think are key success factors for DC, drawing on earlier published research by Secretary General Tjandradewi and Marcotullio (2009) and augmented with a more recent interview with her to understand what role the Regional Section and Local Government Associations could be playing to enable SDG-linked DC. We close this section with 2021 empirical research done with ASPAC DC practitioners sharing insights from them on their unique understanding of DC in the region and its state of readiness for implementation.

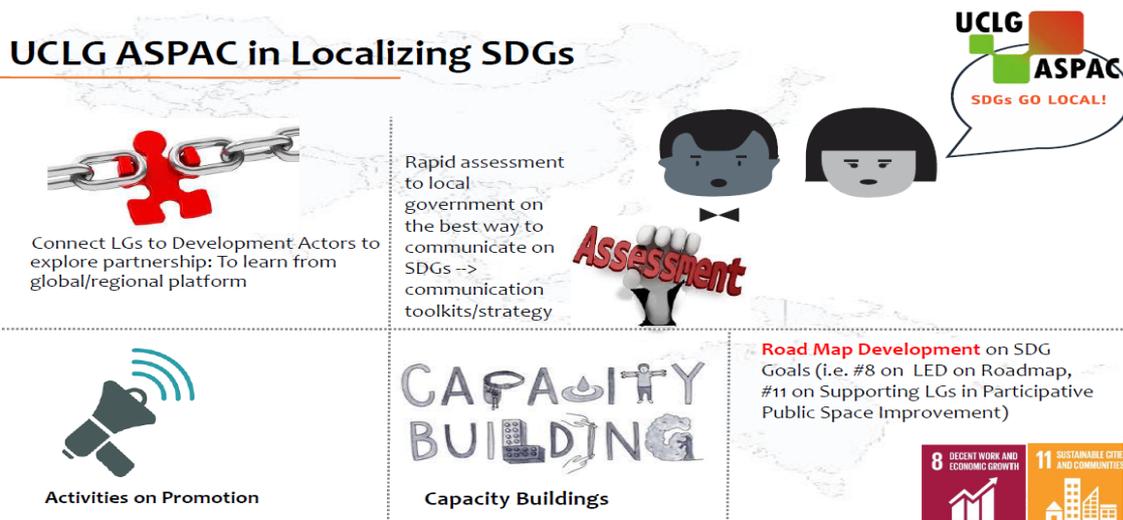


Figure 1: Key elements in localising SDGs in ASPAC Region (Source Tjandradewi, 2016).

What are the critical enablers or building blocks required for effective SDG-linked DC in the ASPAC region?

For ASPAC, an important starting point has always been ensuring a sound understanding of NEEDS done through **RAPID ASSESSMENTS** led by LRGs and their Associations. Through this analysis potential identification of cities that share similar challenges can be made. In order to effectively manage this process however, Associations must be able to have soft skills related to communication, lobbying, advocacy monitoring and networking. In addition, close collaboration with all local stakeholders, and the buy-in and support of elected leaders is seen as key in this process.

It is clear therefore that a second critical building block is the ongoing process of **BUILDING CAPACITY** not just of the LRG professionals managing DC processes, but of key roleplayers involved in the engagements. From resource management to ensuring that decisions are data-driven to thinking about issues of transparency in governance will require careful skills transfer.

It is the third component of **ACTIVELY CONNECTING ACTORS** to explore **PARTNERSHIPS** that is perhaps the most critical action. Decentralised cooperation does not magically happen, but like any successful courtship requires much effort. The active brokerage role of the LG Associations between suitable cities/regions can make or break the cooperation. The ability to lever in the right resources from global and regional platforms is also key here.

Of course, without **EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION & PROMOTION** there will be little visibility on DC projects and activities. The ASPAC leadership team has acknowledged knowledge management as an strategic element of its DC rollout (outlined later in this article) and will be developing capacity to ensure its portal is updated and case studies can be continually uploaded to share with its members and the global community.

Finally, the importance of a **CLEAR ROAD MAP** commencing with securing local commitment, to stakeholder mapping, building a Task Force, developing clear Action Plans that are synchronised with national plans right through to the active promotion of its best practices must all be clearly charted out.

What do Asian local governments think are important for effective DC in their region?

From analysis based on a survey of local governments in Asian countries conducted by Tjandradewi and Marcotullio (2009) several important elements emerge. The expressed commitment to be linked was an obvious precursor for success, whilst community engagement with linkages between civil society from both cities, and not just official counterparts from LRGs featured high in the survey. Having a clear understanding of mutual expectations, schedules and outcomes were also seen as key, together with reciprocity, mutual trust and respect for the engaging parties. Results also showed that more successful DC initiatives showed demonstrable results through tangible projects Nigel (UNDP, 2000)

Beyond these five success factors, interesting results emerged from a study of a collaboration between Yokohama and Penang City expounded by Tjandradewi and Marcotullio (2009). These are the securing of political support from higher levels of government, consistent and sustained leadership, project cost-sharing and importantly cost-effectiveness and finally ensuring the continual free flow of information.

Moving beyond success factors, it is useful to also understand the diverse focus areas or themes around which DC have been organised. Within the Asia Pacific, an important set of issues for cities themselves reported in the study included poverty reduction, women's empowerment, the local environment, social and cultural concerns, urban infrastructure and services, health and education, employment and economic development, housing and shelter, security and disaster management and municipal finance (UN-HABITAT & WACLAC, 2003). Obviously, these differ according to location and context and change over time.

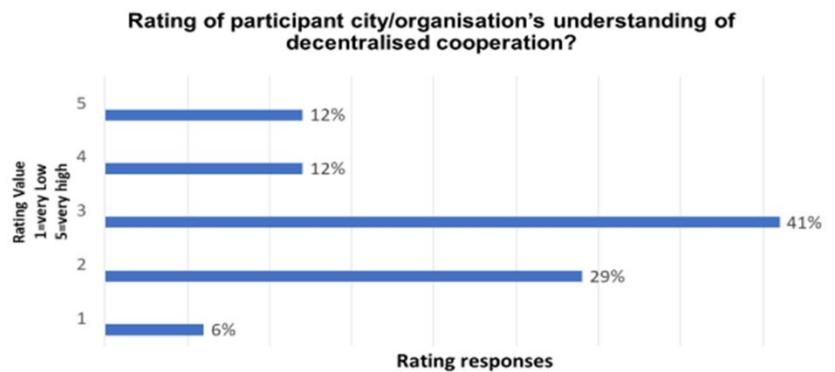
What role do associations play in enabling DC in the ASPAC Region?

In an interview with UCLG ASPCA Secretary General Tjandradewi (pers. comm., 23 June, 2020, the role of associations in successful DC emerged strongly and is included in this article as it is often underestimated. Some key factors from an Asian perspective included:

1. The importance of constant direct **communication** between Association and its members to actively facilitate communication around DC.
2. The strategic role required of Associations to be dynamic **broker/match-maker/facilitator** between cities / members by understanding NEEDS and matching cities.
3. The constant advocacy for the importance of DC especially with donor agencies to secure **funding** for DC projects – which should not be done through bidding process. DC funding should be allocated for it to work sustainably – e.g. ideal for 10% of ODA to be allocated was suggested
4. The need to move beyond lip-service to commit to effective **capacity building and training** of members to conduct DC in its various forms and ideally this should be embedded into government training institutions.
5. The intensification of **ongoing academic research** and Regional Sections supported by Associations should explore how to engage with universities around curriculum development on international relations.
6. Regional Sections / Associations are still grappling with the **role of private companies** (through technology transfer, consulting capabilities) – this is an important area to be followed through, depending on the local investment culture.

What is the state of readiness from city practitioners to roll-out SDG-linked DC in the region?

In preparation for the ASPAC November 2021 Training programme, a survey was conducted with 18 practitioners from across the Asia Pacific Region. Whilst the sample size is fairly small, the results are shared here as they do provide useful insights to the state of readiness for DC rollout. For this article, a full analysis of the survey is not presented but highlights on four key areas. The first interesting result was around how LRG officials **rated their understanding of the complexities of DC**.



As indicated in Figure 2, nearly two-thirds (65%) of all participants felt that they had a sound understanding of DC, with only 36% rating their understanding as low or very low. This does indicate that in general terms the practitioners feel confident of their understanding of what DC entails.

Figure 2: Survey participants understanding of DC (Source, ASPAC 2021)

During the interactions in the training program, high levels of experience in the field were also observed.

In an attempt to unpack how Asian practitioners perceived the **nature of relationship between the two DC partners**, participants were also then asked to share whether they felt whether the DC projects were more beneficial to themselves, or whether they had seen themselves as predominantly teachers/ sharers of knowledge or whether in fact the process was more reciprocal with both teaching and learning built into the process.

As indicated in Figure 3, the majority of survey participants (41%) felt the learning process as a reciprocal one with them teaching as much as they themselves were learning during the DC process. This is interesting and



Nature of DC relationship between partners

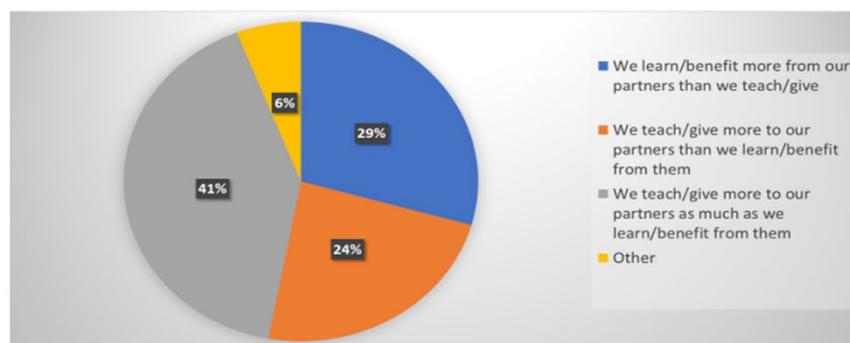


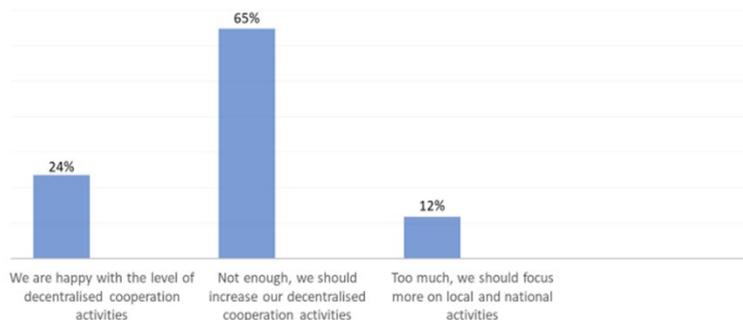
Figure 3: Survey participants perception of relationship (Source, ASPAC 2021)

shows that perhaps even were one partner might have been relied on to share knowledge, opportunities to learn from the other were also created. The rest of the participants were more or less equally split as predominantly learners or teachers.

The third useful result from the ASPAC survey focussed on determining participant **perception of the amount of effort and energy** that was currently being expended on SDG-linked DC.



Perception of effort expended on decentralised cooperation



Whilst the ASPAC Region has many (although not often documented) examples of active DC projects, nearly two-thirds (65%) of all survey participants felt that not enough energy was currently being spent on DC cooperation activities. This is perhaps understandable, given the current global pandemic

Figure 4: Survey participants perception of effort expended on DC (Source, ASPAC 2021).

that makes face-to-face learning currently untenable. What the result does show however is a real commitment by practitioners to do more and a commitment to spend time and energy to promote DC, which in itself is encouraging.

The fourth and final area of exploration was around the current state of readiness and planning for city-to-city cooperation. Whilst the result above indicated a strong keenness, enthusiasm and willingness to embark of DC, it is most interesting that this was not necessarily matched with an accompanying readiness to intervene.



State of readiness and planning for city-to-city cooperation

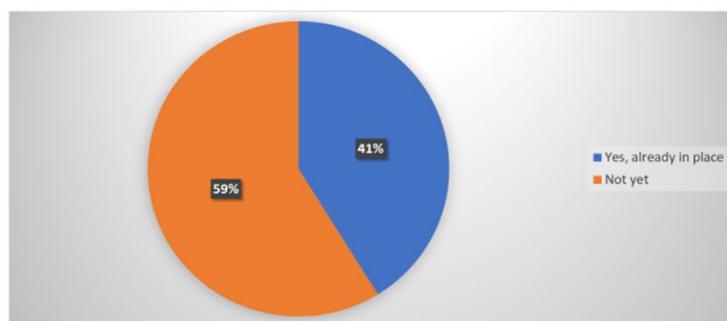


Figure 5: Survey participants perception of effort on DC (Source, ASPAC 2021).

Nearly 60% of all participants felt that their cities were not in a state of readiness to roll out SDG-linked DC at the time of the survey in November 2021. This is an important finding and will be revisited in the final section of this article.

The presentation of these interesting survey findings that represent the voices of the practitioners at the coal-face of LRGs in the Asia Pacific region wraps us this section that has helped deepen our understanding on perspectives of DC. In the next section, we delve directly into the world of practice and immerse ourselves in two selected DC good case practices.

4. A focus on practice: showcasing selected ASPAC DC practices

The following two vignettes present interesting examples of decentralised cooperation on the continent. They draw on different DC modalities and methodologies effective in the ASPAC context.

Green Sister City Cooperation of Surabaya (Indonesia) and Kitakyushu

Climate change remains one of the biggest challenges faced by cities and it continues to ravage ecosystems and communities globally. The prevalence of rising sea levels, erratic weather patterns, and the overall degeneration of the planet are just some of the deep-rooted impacts of this complex issue at hand. As global warming is advancing, responses to sufficiently address this crisis should be cemented on the eradication of harmful emissions. Recognizing the need for an urgent intervention at city level, the Municipality of Surabaya, Indonesia as well as Kitakyushu, Japan joined forces in being at the frontline of climate action. Their partnership aimed at establishing a low carbon society and smart compact city respectively.

This direct DC project thrives on a number of focus areas not only pertinent to achieving the end-goal, but is notably entrenched on Global Goals. For instance, clean water and sanitation (SDG 6) is evident in the project's capacity building through environment management and wastewater treatment. Another collaboration point of the partnership is entrenched on SDGs 11 and 12, where solid waste management is addressed through Composting in *Compost Center Wonorejo*, and a waste sorting facility, the *Super depo Suterejo*. The two cities moreover cooperated on energy management to support smart community, and also on Dengue Fever management. In ensuring that objectives are met, the project is also aligned to climate change (SDG13) and Life on Land (SDG15). Importantly, the SDGs were actively incorporated through aligning the output and outcome of projects with SDG Indicators. While recognizing the notable integration of the Global Goals to the project as a key factor, it is however worth noting that the reporting of the output and outcome in the alignment of the SDGs attainment proved to be a challenge. This must be flagged as a learning point.

Although the partnership on these grounds initially commenced from 2012 to 2016 through a Memorandum of Agreement (MoU), its success has resulted in two renewals, one being as of 2016 to 2020, and the other being from 2020 to 2023. It comes as no surprise as the two cities have a history of good-standing as their collaboration was prompted by another city-to-city partnership between Surabaya and Kochi, Japan that dates back to 1997. It was also thereafter prompted by the launch of the Kitakyushu initiative Network (KIN) since 2005.

With Surabaya and Kitakyushu at the forefront as strategic leaders of the project, a collaborative approach was taken with private sectors for technical support and capabilities, and also with research institutions to gain insights, ideas, innovations and feedback regarding implemented projects. Furthermore, the involvement of communities at the grassroots was as secondary benefits (i.e. employment of local residents and people in facilities responsible for waste sorting) were prompted by the project's technical implementation.

Behind the successful implementation of any project lies the component of funding, which can be viewed as a catalyst to actualize project targets. This project mainly relied on two sources of funding, firstly from the local budgets of the respective cities of Surabaya and Kityakushu, and secondly on knowledge exchange visits funded by private sectors. Additional funding was also mobilised through grants on several project components, also from private sectors. Fortunately, funding to propel the project was sufficient as it was allocated in a mechanism that accommodates multiple years.

It is through the Surabaya City Department of Public Spaces and Sanitary, as well as in the Cooperation Division where the project was carried out in collaboration with several actors in the private sector and local-owned enterprises. The cooperation also operates within the premise of effective communication through formal regulations, workshops, FGDs, community meetings and press conferences. To ensure transparency and accountability, project progress is monitored through monthly reporting, and reporting on implementation is reported annually.

The Indonesian government has been instrumental in providing enabling environments through frameworks to support this DC project. More specifically, Government Regulation No. 28/2018 on Regional Cooperation extends its support to cooperation projects as one key point prescribes that “Every Cooperation establishment with foreign cities need to obtain approval from central government and City House of Representatives.

Given the nature of any DC project, it is crucial to draw key lessons in order to facilitate an improvement for future projects. In this context, a key lesson learnt was involving communities at the grassroots level in the implementation of the cooperation. This carries infinite potential to create multiple opportunities and benefits to communities, local governments and other sectors through the outputs and outcomes. Also, moving forward, establishing low carbon environments, the development of sustainable environments, and human resources capacity development were key points required to be adapted in the 2020 MOU renewal.

Sister City Partnership Jakarta (Indonesia) – Berlin (Germany)

The Indonesian capital city of Jakarta is a sprawling metropolis that embodies a rich diversity of people emanating from various parts of the country. As the largest city, with a population of a little north of a million, it is evident that economic activities in the city are dynamic. Despite its strategic advantage, city leadership grappled with an unsustainable economy, infrastructure and a meaningful governance ecosystem. There was therefore a dire need for technical response to address these challenges.

As a result, the city of Jakarta, Indonesia, and Germany's capital, the city of Berlin collaborated to address these issues. More specifically, the direct DC project was initiated in 1994 with the aim of strengthening cooperation between the two cities, while improving the entrepreneurial ecosystem by enabling start up growth and urban innovation in Jakarta, and also promoting good urban governance and sustainable urban development in Jakarta. The parameters in which the notably long-standing partnership are city planning, public transportation, clean water and waste management, smart city/e-governance and start up, as well as sports and culture.

As the project was rooted in various focus areas, SDGs aligned to interventions were also diverse and intertwined in nature. It was pertinent for the population of Jakarta to enjoy poverty eradication (SDG1), maintain good health and well-being (SDG 3) with the provision of clean water and sanitation (SDG6). As the largest city and economic hub of Indonesia, decent work and economic growth (SDG8) are key to the creation of a sustainable economy, with the support of cutting-edge industry, innovation and infrastructure (SDG9). However, it is worth noting that the successful implementation of these goals heavily relies on peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG16), with partnerships (SDG17) being the cornerstone of sustainable development.

The SDGs was mandated through Presidential Regulation for all local governments' programme and development projects. The Jakarta government issued Regional Action Plan on SDGs encouraging all projects shall have to consider the sustainable development principles. Fortunately, there were no challenges encountered in linking SDGs to the project as they've been incorporated into the development plan. The strong commitment demonstrated by local leaders to implement SDGs is one of the project drivers.

Inspired by SDG17, the initiative adopted a multi-stakeholder approach involving relevant departments within the Jakarta administration such as International Cooperation Bureau, and Communication, Information and Technology as key role players. Their role extended to the establishment of the sister city partnership and the implementation of key project goals. Project activities were carried out in dual partnership with a team comprising with staff from both cities respectively.

Funding arrangements of the project were jointly spearheaded by the state government of Berlin, Jakarta city government, as well as GIZ. Allocated project funds were indeed sufficient activities of technical assistance, workshops, expert placement and consultancy, delegation visits as well as related events. The other forms of funding were mobilised through development funding.

Of course, the successful implementation of all planned activities of the project wouldn't have been a possibility without enabling frameworks at national level. Accordingly, Government Regulation No. 28/2018 on Regional Cooperation as well as the MOHA Decree No. 25/2020 on International Cooperation Guidelines for Local Governments are key pieces of legislation that are enablers of the direct DC cooperation.

In order to ensure that the project does not fall out of the intended scope, a monitoring mechanism was carried out by preparing the regular report involving all stakeholders. On the other hand, upon an impact assessment of the intervention, it was deduced that positive impacts of the project are improved territorial/spatial planning, as well as public transportation, enhanced e-governance, and a well-developing start up ecosystem.

It is worth noting that communication plays a vital role in any project setting. Likewise, in this context, platforms and means of communication utilized were public and social media, and other available platforms. Reporting to all key players was undertaken through regular government-prepared reports and submissions were made to funding agencies/principals and through public hearing with local parliament.

In weighing up all the successes, it is worth mentioning that the DC project did encounter budgetary challenges as it was insufficient and must be sought to scale up the programme and for the purposes of strengthening the roles of Jakarta Development Collaboration Network (JDCN) in support of realizing Jakarta Smart City and Collaborative City. The key takeaway point from the project was that when cities are considering to partner, they must ensure the cooperation is underpinned by needs and mutual interest that stand to benefit both parties.

5. Building technical capacity to rollout SDG-linked DC: Training of Trainers

The leadership of the UCLG ASPAC region recognised the value of intensive capacity building of LRG practitioners. Following on from the positive experience of their European and African colleagues who attested to the power of building a regional cadre of DC ambassadors, the UCLG ASPAC regional section partnered with the UCLG Learning Team to run an online training program tailored for the region. Aimed at equipping potential trainers with the knowledge to run their own training sessions, a staggered three-day intensive program developed by the UCLG, Platforma, United Nations Development Programme and UN Habitat was run on the 8th of November and followed through on 25th and 26th November 2021.



Figure 6: Excerpt from interactive online training

This hands-on interactive training used a blended-learning methodology to cover the content of a training module that was released to all trainers prior to the training.

Equipped with an understanding of the history of decentralized cooperation and its relations with the principles of the SDGs,

with appreciating the value of new possibilities of partnerships, resources and funding and how to design SDG-linked projects and policies.

The experiential learning component focussing on real life case studies drew on lessons from two case studies featured above. Please note that a portal with updated case studies using an agreed upon template will that emerged through this process will go online once finalised by the UCLG ASPAC Learning Team.

The workshop culminated with participants in consensus of the steep learning curve and feeling empowered in the content of the UCLG Module 4 on SDG-linked DC. The following four resolutions emerged:

1. The first trainings for 2022 will be organised by Jakarta and Surabaya, supported by UCLG ASPAC. Certificates will be thereafter issued to participants.
2. Decentralized Corporation will be integrated into the programme for the Asia-Pacific Mayors Academy, facilitated by UN-ESCAP.
3. 10 best practices on decentralized cooperation will be included in 2022 targets.
4. UCLG ASPAC has committee to continue to facilitate the decentralized cooperation between two cities on tele-medicine.

Similarly, the UCLG World Secretariat had recommitted itself to continue its partnership with the region and to further its support for further initiatives and activities. As a way forward in the short term, the continued support will be in the form of the current article outlining the ASPAC perspective

on decentralized cooperation, and to provide proposals for the purposes of more global alignment in future cases of good practices that will be published.

6. Strategic next steps for action

As with UCLG Africa, one of the important outcomes of the training session was the opportunity created for the leadership team from UCLG and ASPAC to reflect on the approach to DC in their region and to begin the process of crafting a strategic action plan to help embed SDGs in the DC process. To this end a successful half-day workshop was facilitated by a Urban Vision Consulting in December 2021 to map out a way forward. In summary, the four central components of the high-level strategy agreed upon at the workshop is presented in Figure 7 below:

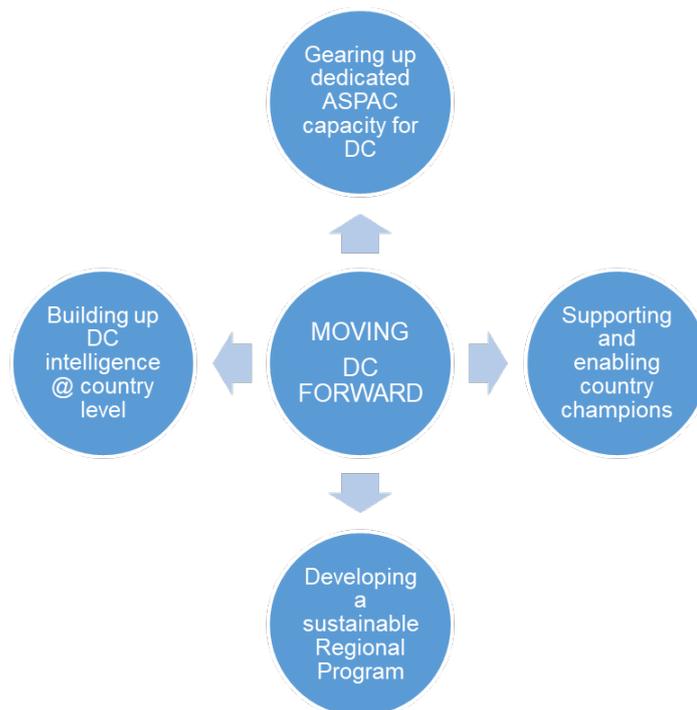


Figure 7: Towards a Strategic Framework for SDG-Linked DC in the ASPAC Region (Source: Urban Vision, 2021)

The first central action is the **gearing up of dedicated capacity** to lead SDG-linked DC in the region. It was accepted that capacity is currently small, but given the visionary leadership of the SG, this capacity is being grown.

The second related action adopted is around **building up DC intelligence** at the country level. It was accepted that a DC database is still in the pipeline, but has been given further impetus post the workshop. Critically here, there was agreement of the value of KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT and its strategic role in driving the DC Agenda.

The third action was around the ongoing **support and enabling of country champions**. It was agreed that a practical and well-resourced strategy needs to be developed to see how to mainstream this and to identify champions by linking it to the work on SDG implementation through the local development planning processes. Participants felt that this presents key opportunities that must be maximised urgently. The intention was expressed to work closely with national governments; starting with Home Affairs and it was noted that training has already started to date. As a concrete action the ASPAC Team

will identify potential champions drawing on the list of participants from the training. Other partners such as relevant Ministries, Think Tank on DC, SDC sectors of universities, etc. were to be actively considered in moving forward and flagged as important.

Finally, it was agreed that a **sustainable Regional DC Program** will be crafted, with support from Urban Vision Consulting. One of the important take-aways from the strategy session was for ASPAC to do careful introspection into identifying their unique and key capacities and what ASPAC will be able to bring strategically to the process. This will help consolidate its position not only within the region but in relation to its regional sections and partners.