

Work in progress

Three years down the road

An overview of CIB member's strategies
towards implementation of the SDGs

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This research is commissioned by VNG International in the capacity of secretary of the Capacity and Institution Building (CIB) Working Group of the UCLG and is carried out by Edith van Ewijk and Maaike de Hon (Wereld in Woorden, Global Research and Reporting).

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1. Introduction

The Capacity and Institution Building (CIB) Working Group of the UCLG (United Cities and Local Governments) is dedicated to strengthening the role of local governments (LGs) regarding the implementation of the SDGs. This starts with a joint understanding at country level about the roles of various stakeholders in the implementation of the goals. It is therefore important to get involved in the dialogues on the achievement of the SDGs, concerning implementation, monitoring and reporting on the process and progress.

In the third year since the Adoption of the Agenda 2030 and the SDGs, it is crucial to share experiences and recommendations of how this inclusion at national level can best be achieved. Various organizations such as UCLG, PLATFORMA and CEMR are contributing to this exchange that also provides important information for the international programming of CIB members. The CIB Working Group also wishes to continue to contribute to exchanges among its members and to stimulate their partner organisations to work with the SDGs. The Working Group is also committed to contributing to the research and learning work of UCLG.

In the run up to the annual CIB meeting in Stockholm in June 2018, CIB therefore initiated an enquiry into current practices, policies, challenges and opportunities identified by a selection of the CIB Working Group members. This paper is the result of this research and aims to give an impression of CIB members' approach towards the implementation of the SDGs both domestically and internationally. We hope this document will inspire and motivate the CIB members in achieving more influence on the implementation and the achievement of the SDGs.

2. Methodology

For this paper 17 representatives of 14 CIB members from around the world – both cities and associations (for specification see Annex I, list of interviewees) – have been interviewed by telephone or Skype following a semi-structured interview guide (Annex II). CIB coordinator VNG International invited all CIB-members beforehand to contribute to the research. The final sample is a result of an attempt to include both associations and individual cities as well as to ensure some geographic coverage, as far as feasible within the scope of the research.

The interviewees elaborated on the importance of the SDGs in the work of their organisation or city, the main strategies applied for the implementation of the SDGs domestically and, if applicable, also in their international programming. They also reflected on the role of donors and international programmes in the inclusion of the SDGs through the formulation and implementation of the programmes.

3. National contexts

National contexts regarding the SDGs and their influence on local level.

3.1 National strategies

Although the attention for the SDGs highly varies among the national governments of the CIB-members participating in this research, in general there seems to be some kind of momentum for the SDGs. In Sri Lanka there is a lot of promotion for the SDGs, with talk shows on radio and television,

consultations throughout the country, the goals explained with drawings on the wall in provincial ministries, and a lot of attention on social media.

After recent elections in Nepal on local, provincial and federal level, the Nepalese government included commitment to the SDGs in the oath of office the newly elected officials took when they were sworn in. In Canada the government has recently installed an Interdepartmental Working Group and a 15-million-dollar fund to promote the SDGs. In South Africa, other national departments besides the official responsible National Department of Human Settlements are getting involved in the SDGs, particularly the Department for Cooperative Governance (responsible for local governance) and the Department of Land Affairs (responsible for spatial planning).

3.2 Awareness

Although the interest at national level is increasing, awareness is still a widespread concern and the main feeling remains that ‘we are not where we should be three years down the line’, as Elena Pierce from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) and Puvendra Akkiah, IDP manager of Durban City, both state.

In Turkey for instance, people who are, in one way or the other, engaged with the UN, are aware of the Agenda 2030 but in general the awareness is low. According to Cemal Bas, senior project manager of the Union of Municipalities Turkey (TBB), to the public the SDGs are still largely a UN agenda, something the United Nations are doing, that does not really concern the national or local level. Even for countries very active in implementing the SDGs, the awareness can be limited. ‘A lot of attention is not the same as a lot of awareness,’ Sabine Drees of the German Cities Association (GCA) emphasizes. Her country adopted, amongst others, a National Sustainable Strategy, installed an independent advisory council on sustainable development and every other year produces an independent indicator report on the SDGs. However, the German government itself identifies huge problems with awareness raising: they recently stated that only 10 per cent of civil society in Germany is familiar with the SDGs.

And even a widespread awareness is no guarantee for success, according to Hemanthi Goonasekera, National Coordinator of the Federation of Sri Lankan Local Government Authorities (FSLGA): ‘As a result of all the propaganda about the SDGs everybody is talking about it in my country, but no one is doing anything, except for UN bodies and NGOs.’

3.3 VNR participation

47 countries are expected to present a national report on the SDGs in July 2018¹, amongst them 4 related to the CIB members participating in this research: Canada, Mali, Mexico and Sri Lanka.

One of the bottlenecks in the implementation of the SDGs is that the national approaches often are still very top-down. Elena Pierce (FCM): ‘We would like to see more appreciation for the role local governments are playing in terms of development, sustainability and inclusivity because the local level

¹ The 47 countries expected to present VNRs in July 2018 are: Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Australia, Bahamas, Bahrain, Benin, Bhutan, Cabo Verde, Canada, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, Greece, Guinea, Hungary, Ireland, Jamaica, Kiribati, Lao People’s Democratic Republic (PDR), Latvia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Mali, Malta, Mexico, Namibia, Niger, Paraguay, Poland, Qatar, Republic of the Congo, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Singapore, Slovakia, Spain, Sri Lanka, State of Palestine, Sudan, Switzerland, Togo, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Uruguay, and Vietnam.

is where your citizens live and breathe; people live in communities that are governed by municipalities. Although Canada is a very decentralised country, that does not automatically mean that we are invited to the discussion.’

CIB members in other countries share that experience. In Mexico for instance, there is a lot of political attention for the SDGs since a huge media act accompanied the installation of a high level National Council for the 2030 Agenda by the president in April 2017. However, for the VNR that Mexico will present at the HLPF 2018 no input from the local governments was asked. ‘The national government has her own strategy to gather the information’, Braulio Díaz Castro, International Affairs Officer at Mexico City, explains. ‘We are not informed what the VNR is going to report about the cities’ strategies. It is not that the national government does not want to know, but the communication mechanisms are not working. There is no dialogue. I think it is essential to deepen the dialogue with the national government in the years to come.’

In Belgium such a dialogue seems to evolve. Belgium delivered a VNR in 2017 and has the intention of reporting again in 2019. Hanne Albers of the VVSG (Flemish Association of Cities and Municipalities) states that her organisation was asked to contribute to the process in 2017, but that in hindsight all parties concerned concluded that the process for 2019 has to be more transparent and efficient, and that the local governments and their contribution to the SDGs should get more attention. Albers considers the Dutch VNR 2017 with separate sections for different actors, including local governments, civil society organisations, private sector, knowledge institutes and youth as a good example because the input from local governments was extensively taken into account.

3.4 Multi stakeholder partnerships

The SDGs are remarkably widely spread in Flanders. According to Hanne Albers all sectors are involved: the governments, NGOs, private sector, civil society and the academic world. This is probably related to the fact that there are various multi-stakeholder platforms and organisations focussing on the SDGs in Flanders, such as *De Shift* (SDG Charter which unites all actors involved in the SDGs), the inter-ministerial Conference on Sustainable Development and the consultative SDG group of the VVSG itself, featuring amongst others external experts, representatives of the commercial chamber, universities and the associating of NGOs².

Comparable multi stakeholder commissions in other countries are for instance the Delegation Agenda 2030 in Sweden. According to Matilda Lindberg, Policy Advisor International Affairs at the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR), this commission is considered an important actor for the SDGs, ‘since the Delegation has been all over the country to discuss the Agenda 2030 with many actors for instance from civil society, universities, unions, business and so on’.

In Mali too, the government has installed a multi-stakeholder national steering committee that includes representatives of amongst others the ministerial departments, the parliament, the regional authorities, civil society organisations, trade unions, financial sector and the legal sector. In Brasil a National Commission on SDGs consists of 16 members, equally divided among government officials

² see also section 4.2.2 Stimulating multi-stakeholder partnerships

and representatives of civil society, including the National Confederation of Municipalities (CNM), representatives of NGOs, confederations of industry and the network of universities.

In the Netherlands, despite the thorough process to develop annual progress reports and the presentation of a VNR last year, no national ambition or strategy has been formulated. Apart from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which uses the SDGs as an umbrella for its policy, no other ministries are actively using the SDGs. Businesses, civil society and local governments are working more actively on integrating the SDGs in their strategies, priorities and actions. This is also reflected in the annual progress reports. This multi-stakeholder approach is considered a strong point of the Netherlands.

4. Strategies and activities of the CIB members towards implementation of the SDGs domestically

4.1 Importance of the SDGs in CIB-members work

When asked about the importance of SDGs in CIB-members work, a wide range of answers comes up: from 'not so much informing our work at this time' (FCM/Canada, SALAR/Sweden, AMM/Mali) to 'leading in our work' (MUaN Nepal, VVSG Flanders, ICLD/Sweden). And from 'important domestically, not so relevant in international perspective' (Association of German Cities) to 'key for the international department but not the main agenda for our association as a whole' (CNM, Brasil). A general finding is that incorporating the SDGs is still largely work in progress.

For instance, in Mexico City that has its own Constitution since last year, following a shift in the institutional framework of Mexico. The city's parliamentarians aligned this mandatory document to Agenda 2030, which shows Mexico City's sensitivity towards the SDGs. 'It is important for our work and it is going to be more important in the coming years,' Braulio Díaz Castro explains. 'Because, as is happening in many other countries, the financial support of the national government to the local level will be brought in line with the SDGs which makes them even more relevant.' According to Díaz Castro the next step for Mexico City has to be: bringing the discourse and the institutional mechanisms they have committed to in the Constitution into practise. 'We have to push hard to start operating and book results. Alignment with the local priorities is key to this.'

In most Local Government Associations, the coordination of the SDGs is considered to be the responsibility of the international unit. This was the case at the Swedish SALAR as well, however, this has recently changed after Matilda Lindberg and her colleagues strongly advocated the relevance of the Agenda for SALAR's members, not only on a global level but also on the local and regional level. An internal division is created in which the international unit coordinates the more global perspective while other departments such as the environmental and spatial planning units are responsible for the coordination of the Swedish dimension of the Agenda.

It is, however, also good to be aware that, no matter which department or unit is responsible for the coordination of the SDGs, the focus generally is on the local implementation and not on the international implementation. Compared to the Millennium Development Goals – which were mainly a development aid agenda – the SDGs' contribution to the international agenda is less self-evident.

‘The risk exists,’ Albers (VVSG) emphasizes, ‘that the SDGs are becoming too local and that we forget the international character of the Goals.’

4.2 Key strategies

4.2.1 Awareness creation / capacity building

Awareness raising and capacity building are key activities for CIB members regarding the implementation of the SDGs on a domestic level.

Within the Union of Municipalities Turkey (TBB) the department of foreign relations, where Cemal Bas works, is responsible for the implementation of the SDGs. ‘Our first activities all focused on awareness raising. We wrote a booklet of 18 pages describing the SDGs and their targets, and how the relation to the local governments in Turkey can be made. We distributed it to all municipalities and put it on internet. We also created desk calendars for our elected politicians that have a wooden backside revealing the full SDG goals. The majors put them on their desks and the visitor look at the SDGs on the background of the calendar. We also made sure that on every conference or meeting we spoke, we always stressed in one or two sentences the importance of the SDGs.’

MUaN (Municipal Organisations of Nepal) has also developed a guideline for its members on how to localise the SDGs. Besides that, they are disseminating good practices from municipalities, stimulating peer learning and arranging exchanges of elected and non-elected municipal officials to other countries. In the selection of candidates for the exchanges they include officials from municipalities with limited interest in the SDGs. ‘We encourage them to go and learn and enhance their capacity,’ Kalandhi Devkota, Executive Secretary at MUaN, explains. Another attempt to raise awareness and build knowledge are the peer learning hubs, called Province Learning Centres, which MUaN developed in 7 provinces. In these Centres, almost every subject that is brought to the forefront is linked to the SDGs.

The AMM (Mali) has recently initiated activities aiming at enhancing the dedication of their members towards the SDGs. In December 2017 mayors and local elected officials adopted a declaration stating their commitment to the implementation of the SDGs, during the National Day of the Communes of Mali. At the same occasion AMM held a presentation on the SDGs, with the assistance of UNDP.

SALAR (Sweden) has recently launched a communications project together with the Swedish UN association to spread awareness and knowledge about the SDGs within the municipalities, regions and county councils. The project addresses issues such as ‘how to relate the SDGs to your daily work’, and ‘how the local level is linked to the global level’. 6 participating pilot municipalities will help construct the communication and education materials.

VVSG’s (Belgium) most important activity at the moment is the SDG pilot in which 20 municipalities of various size, location and ‘SDG’-level participate. In this project VVSG and the municipalities work together on three SDG-areas: sensitisation (how to make their colleagues and the public enthusiastic for the SDGs), politics (how to raise awareness and promote the SDGs to politicians³) and policies (what is feasible in the integration of the SDGs in local policies?). One of the tools VVSG developed in close cooperation with the Flemish municipalities is a publication with 50 good practices regarding the

³ see also under section 4.3.2 Challenges, ‘Political Change’

enhancement of awareness on the SDGs (the publication is also available in English and on their website).

In the Netherlands VNG International implements a Global Goals campaign to which 60 municipalities have adhered up to now. The municipalities get access to material (brochures, policy documents, templates for action) that can help support their local implementation, a platform for exchange between municipalities is fostered, discussion on a common set of indicators is organised. Visibility materials are developed for each participating municipality, such as a customized SDG logo and SDG signs at the border of the municipality. Furthermore, following the municipal elections that took place in March 2018, VNG is currently doing an analysis of the coalition agreements to see how the SDGs have been used: at least 15 municipalities have used the SDGs as overarching frameworks in their political agendas for the coming 4 years.

In Durban the Municipal Institute of Learning, MILE, has linked the content of its Master Classes to the SDGs and the global agenda. Professionals within the municipal departments provide the content for these best practice seminars and invite external experts, for instance from the university or the national and provincial governments, to talk about specific issues. The 3-day Master Classes are free of charge: the participating municipalities only have to pay for their accommodation and transport, the rest – including food – is covered by the City's budget. Akkiah, 'It is our contribution to building capacity and give technical assistance. But it is also about creating knowledge for ourselves as we learn as well while we engage in these processes.'

4.2.2 Stimulating multi-stakeholder partnerships

Most CIB members emphasize that the SDGs are not just a government commitment and that other stakeholders also have to participate and commit to the goals.

As mentioned above, VVSG (Belgium) installed a consultative SDG group (involved are, amongst others, external experts, representatives of the commercial chamber, universities and the association of NGOs) to contribute to a wide-angled approach to the pilot project in which VVSG intensively supports 20 municipalities in finding ways to integrate the SDGs on a local level.

In the Netherlands, the private sector (businesses, SMEs and financial institutions) embrace the SDGs because they, amongst others, acknowledge their (future) market potential. 'Their contribution to the achievement of the SDGs can be substantial,' Renske Steenbergen, Senior Project Manager at VNG International, states. 'Governments at all levels should facilitate their contribution to the implementation of the SDGs.'

The inclusion of the civil society also is unbearable. In Mexico City for instance, the local stakeholders are more aware of some topics of the SDGs than the local governments, Díaz Castro states. 'They have more interesting experiences with advocacy or with territorial activities than the local government has. For example, regarding migration: how to shape the mobility of people internally and externally in the City? Mexico City has 23 million inhabitants but only 11 million of them are paying taxes. That is a huge challenge. The participation of civil society in this topic is very interesting. They provide the local government with international experiences, and new impulses on how to approach this challenge. Civil society has formed the Voice of Mexico City and this organisation will attend this year's World Migration Forum. It is very relevant to the SDGs that the local government has a multi-stakeholders'

platform to discuss how to contribute to the whole of planning and implementing of the SDGs on a local level.'

4.3 Challenges

4.3.1 Alignment

Alignment of the SDGs with the local governance level is a common challenge. CIB members have found various ways to deal with this challenge. Mexico City was the first city in the country to install an SDG Council after the national government instructed local authorities to do so. In an attempt to bring synergy into the local secretaries that have a role to play in achieving the different goals and targets, 4 thematic committees (on Economics, Society, Environment and Allies) within the Council were established. The committees have aligned all public policies with several SDGs, and with some of the indicators of the SDG goals. 'We created our own system of indicators to follow the SDGs and create coherence between them and the local policies.'

Last year, Durban mapped all capital projects: first to the SDGs and then to the targets. This year they identified the SDGs which were not addressed yet and currently the local government is connecting the city's budget to each of the SDGs and the targets. 'Local government has existed for ages', Puvendra Akkiah, IDP manager of Durban explains, 'and we are doing implementation for ages, but how do you actually make a shift in your local agenda towards the global agenda? Where do the two meet? That is what we are trying to find out with our mapping. I am not saying this is the best solution, but we are trying, and it is very much work in progress.'

Experimenting is also what Hemanthi Goonasekera (FSLGA) is pleading for. Inspired by the CIB meeting in Durban last year, she initiated an SDG-pilot in one of the provinces immediately after the meeting. Through a train-the-trainer workshop, FSLGA urged the local officers to look at their budget and refocus some of it in line with the SDGs. 'They don't have to go out of their way,' Goonasekera explains, 'but we just asked them to identify a part of the budget which they can relocate for instance on a particular area, like gender equality, goal number 5. Everybody is talking about resources, but I think we should just start. Looking at the budget from a different perspective, I am sure they can do something.'

In Germany an important step towards localizing the SDG has just been finalised with the launch of The Indicators Handbook, featuring 47 SDG indicators relevant to German Cities, and an online tool to link local sustainable strategies with the SDGs. 'There are so many goals not relevant for German Cities,' Drees explains, 'and at the same time it is not always clear how to interpret the goals. What does the UN for instance mean when they speak of "modern forms of energy"? China might think about nuclear power, whilst for us it is renewable power.' GCA joined forces with amongst others the Bertelsmann Stiftung, the national department of Urban Development & Environment and the Federal Institute for Research and Building. In a massive procedure they checked all 169 sub-goals on their relevance for German Cities and considered whether the cities would be able to contribute to achieving these sub-goals. The exercise led to the selection of 126 relevant sub-goals. The next step was the screening of 650 indicators from the UN, the EU, the Reference Framework on Sustainable Cities and the German government on relevant indicators for their cities. 'The handbook suggests around 3 indicators per goal, but we also invite cities to set their own priorities and find other indicators,' Drees explains, 'One of the challenges was to be flexible enough for our members to adjust the indicators to their specific circumstances.' Drees hopes they will find funds to translate the project into English and

spread it around the world as a best practice on how to translate the SDGs to a local level, but at the same time she gives a warning, ‘We are more than willing to share our method, but the actual work is something each country needs to do on its own.’

Local governments in developing countries often face many challenges, making it hard to prioritize the SDGs. Devkota (MUaN) states, ‘what local government leaders in Nepal think about, is delivering. They are focussed on things like sewage management, electricity, agriculture and forestry. This is a lot of work and therefore they are not very interested in several cross-cutting issues. The real challenge is aligning the program and activities related to the SDGs with the municipal plans and programs by integrating sustainability in to the municipal planning. That is the only way SDGs could be realised.’

Cemal Bas of TBB (Turkey) has a comparable experience: ‘Municipalities that are not active on an international level, don’t know the SDGs. When you tell them about it, they welcome them, but they forget everything within a second after you left, because it is their local agenda that is important to them. An international UN agenda is something they cannot spend their time thinking of. When the public doesn’t know, the municipalities also don’t care, because they are directly affected by the public desires. There is no advantage for them when the public awareness is low.’

Most municipalities are doing ‘the work’ any way, states Tatiane de Jesus, from the National Confederation of Municipalities (CNM) in Brasil, but they often don’t know it is SDG related: ‘all of our municipalities are contributing to the SDGs while doing their jobs, however only very few are explicitly working on the SDGs.’ Mali has the same experience and is regarding this as the main challenge towards the implementation of the SDGs: the anchoring of the SDGs in local governments’ management, administration, program development and activities. ‘The overwhelming majority of mayors or presidents of executive bodies fail to establish a link, a bridge between their actions, development activities, and the SDGs,’ Youssouf Diakité from the Association of Municipalities of Mali (AMM), states. He gives the example of a mayor who launches or inaugurates water supply works, a health centre or a school or who carries out actions for women’s empowerment. ‘This can all be related to the SDGs, but mayors aren’t aware of this agenda.’

4.3.2 Political change

Elections can have a huge influence on the SDG implementation. In Belgium for instance 66 municipalities today have signed an SDG-engagement declaration, but local elections are scheduled for October 2018 and it is unsure whether the next local Councils will also recognise the importance of the SDGs. Furthermore, the president of VVSG is a mayor who represents the party which holds the majority of the seats in all the Flemish municipalities together. This is currently the CDNV. If another party wins the elections, the president will be replaced. It remains to be seen whether a new president will be also dedicated to advocate the SDGs.

Therefore, VVSG focusses not only on SDG sensitisation on a policy level but also on a political level. They wrote letters to national parties and local councillors to emphasize the importance of the SDGs and compiled a document including tools for local politicians focusing on how to integrate the SDGs in their local party program as well as providing them with suggestions on how to bring the SDGs into discussions with both political parties and the public. They also provided visuals and texts that can be used for introductions or election speeches. ‘We are still thinking about ways to enlarge the attention for the SDGs in the local elections,’ Hanne Albers (VVSG) explains. ‘We want to reach as many

politicians as possible. That is a challenge because mostly it is the civil servants who are working with the SDGs in practice.’

In Brasil national elections are scheduled for October 2018. This brings a lot of political instability, but also some opportunities. In May 2018, on an election meeting called The March to Brasil, 80,000 participants from local governments all over the country and 3,000 mayors were present. President candidates presented themselves and could be questioned on the impact of their plans on the municipalities. CNM organised a parallel session on the opportunities for local governments to strengthen the SDGs. They also made use of the opportunity to launch their new online education course on the SDGs.

4.3.3 Monitoring

Monitoring and evaluation are essential features of the SDG since without reliable statistics it is hard to find out whether improvements are made, or further investment is needed. However, most developing countries do not have the capacity to measure progress in achieving the SDGs. Akkiah (Durban) for instance signals a lack of credible data and baselines in Durban, as well as a lack of ownership for monitoring and evaluation and the AMM (Mali) also refers to the collection of reliable statistical data as one of the main challenges regarding the implementation of the SDGs⁴.

4.3.4 Funding

Beyond the challenge of realising the monitoring and evaluation lies a more fundamental challenge: funding. As Youssouf Diakit , (AMM/Mali) states: ‘Mobilisation of resources, both financial, material and human, is our main challenge for the implementation of the SDGs, as is finding funding for the participation of local government associations in international activities, or the mobilization of internal resources for the implementation of national or bilateral programs regarding the SDGs.’

Akkiah (Durban) underpins: ‘Funding really is an issue. Funding for campaigns is very limited. How do we realise the information output needed to reach both the local governments and the civil society? We need to have civil society on board as well but to make that happen they need to get engaged, need to be in platforms and so on. All of this requires funding. How do we actually obtain that funding?’ These worries are not limited to developing countries. ‘The main challenge for FCM in implementing the SDGs is money,’ Elena Pierce of FCM (Canada) states: ‘We will never have enough funding to address all 17 goals.’

4.4 Opportunities

4.4.1 Long-term, holistic vision

Agenda 2030 is by some perceived as a positive agenda because the focus mainly is on what you want to achieve as a city or municipality instead of on the problems you might face. The SDGs also offer a good tool to talk about Sustainable Development in a general matter, to realise (inter)national partnerships and to link the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environment.

⁴ see also section 5.2.2 Monitoring, in the international section of this paper

Probably more than anything else the SDGs offer the opportunity to work towards an integrated approach to sustainability. The Dutch municipality Rheden used the SDGs to develop an integral framework for its municipal planning, breaking down the silo mentality so many local government (and other) organisations face. Rheden won the annual Most Promising Global Goal Municipality Award, that is annually being awarded by VNG International.

One of the other strong features of the SDGs is that it offers a long-term view. In most countries mayors and councils are elected for 4 or 5 years, resulting in a focus on short time policies. ‘One of the major challenges you have in local management is short-term thinking,’ Akkiah (Durban) states. ‘From a political perspective the majority of councilors are elected on a 5-year term of office and in many cases the programming and projects are based on this 5-year term. The SDGs create an opportunity for broadening that mindset and creating an organisation that thinks about a midterm and long-term perspective. I think that is one of the big opportunities of Agenda 2030.’

In line with that the SDGs also create a new mindset, Akkiah thinks, ‘You start thinking about your city as opposed to your department. What is best for the city? It is a more transversal sort of implementation, in which you move away from project management to program management.’ By requiring a more active role of local authorities in sustainable development the SDGs also offer them the opportunity to become more visible.

4.4.2 Partnerships

The SDGs also offer the opportunity for more cooperation and partnerships. It helps actors like local governments, universities, private sector and NGOs to get engaged and it offers municipalities a framework to work more closely together with their entrepreneurs as well as with civil society. Sometimes these partnerships can even contribute to stability in a country, as De Jesus (CNM) states: ‘The level of political conflict in Brasil is quiet high at the moment and there is a lot of tension between civil society and the government, however the National Comity of the SDGs transcends these conflicts by trying to work together and solve the problems. Because they have a common goal the space they are working in is much less conflictive.’

4.4.3 Inspiration

The SDGs can also contribute to realising a major shift in domestic matters, which is emphasized with great enthusiasm by Goonasekera (FSLGA). Before the last Local Government Elections Act was accepted in Sri Lanka this year, the women representation in the local councils was 1.7 per cent: the lowest In the South East Asia. In the new Act a minimum of a quarter was prescribed, which is in line with the surrounding countries. ‘Now 25 per cent of the councillors are women! I am very excited about that. It means that the councils will look to the budgeting in a totally different way, more focused on child related things, issues concerning education, health, sanitation. It is because of the SDGs and Goal 5 on gender equality that this has actually worked.’

5. Strategies and activities of the CIB members towards implementation of the SDGs internationally

5.1 The role of SDGs in international programming

5.1.1 Actions & activities

Irene Oostveen of VNG International is project manager of the 'DEALS - Governance of Inclusive Green Growth in Cities' program, the continuation of the Local Governments Capacity Program (LGCP), funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. During the preparation of the DEALS program, they were convinced the SDGs were going to be important, so they investigated how to include them in the program. As a result, SDG11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) is heading the DEALS' Theory of Change, as global impact. 'There were plenty other links to be made,' Oostveen says. 'For instance, to SDG1, poverty elevation, SDG5 gender equality, SDG6 on water and sanitation and SDG8 on economic growth. However, in our reports we will focus mainly on SDG11 and we used some of the corresponding SDG indicators for that goal.'

In most of the international programming of TBB (Turkey) the SDGs do not play a key role. They currently have 10 international projects in countries such as Kosovo, Bosnia, Somalia, Tunisia, Algeria, and Mongolia. The projects are directly funded by TBB and consist of direct aid: construction of houses, of an elderly care house, a school, delivering of fire trucks, garbage trucks and so on. 'We don't call it SDG,' Bas explains, 'we just do it. The local mayors don't really know what SDGs are and the Turkish local governments also are not sure what we are promoting. They say: we should just promote the Turkish union of local governments. They don't actually get the SDG relation yet, so we don't emphasize it right now.'

To contribute to the improvement of the awareness on the SDGs the foreign relations department of TBB is preparing an SDG Localization Summit in Turkey for local authorities in surrounding areas like the Balkan, Western Asia, Northern Africa and the Middle East this year. 'We try to localise the international agenda by lobbying and teaching other countries about the SDGs,' Bas explains. Their newly elected president, Fatma Sahin, mayor of Gaziantep, is also enthusiastic about the Summit. 'She told us that there should be no question about the funding,' Bas says. 'That is important, because when you do a conference like this in Europe everybody has the budget to come, but when you do it in Turkey and your target group exist of poor local governments in the region, you should be funding the travel costs and the accommodation.'

FCM (Canada) has developed a webinar series for partners in their city to city program to be better informed about the SDGs, their relevance, the role governments play and so forth. They also organise workshops for the local government associations in Bolivia, Mali and Vietnam towards the end of the fiscal year to discuss how to integrate the SDGs in their work, as well as how to advocate a stronger role of local governments in achieving the SDGs towards the central government.

At the Swedish International Centre for Local Development (ICLD) the Municipal Partnership Programme (MPP) offers the opportunity to integrate the SDGs, explains Ana Maria Vargas, Research Director at ICLD. In this program approximately 70 Swedish municipalities receive money to work together with municipalities in lower or middle-income countries. A review of the program showed that some municipalities already use the MPP to work on the implementation of the SDGs by identifying targets or general goals they want to contribute to through these partnerships. Vargas: 'For

instance, the Swedish municipality of Malmö and the municipality of Swakopmund (Namibia) have a partnership on “Local Sustainable Marine Food”, contributing to SDG14, Life Below Water. The objective of this 3-year partnership (2017-2019) is to conserve and sustainably use the oceans and marine resources for sustainable development.’

Following an increasing interest of the municipalities participating in MPP in the goals, ICLD has recently developed a workshop exclusively on the implementation of the SDGs. ‘Several municipalities contacted us and told us they were interested in how the work that they are already doing connects with the implementation of the SDGs, with their international engagement. An important next step is to discuss the agenda 2030 and to examine common goals and challenges for local governments.’

5.2 Challenges

5.2.1 Alignment

Since international programming often consists of long term projects and programs it is not always easy to bring them in line with the SDGs on a short notice. FCM (Canada), for example fosters city to city programs in 14 countries with the objective of sharing knowledge between municipalities, using a peer to peer approach focusing on needs of overseas partners. Since most programs were already in place when the SDGs were accepted, the SDGs play a modest role in the programs, making it hard to integrate the indicators and targets. ‘It is tough to add the SDGs to existing programs since they have tight timelines and work with already packed agendas,’ Pierce emphasizes. ‘I expect the new programs to focus more on the SDGs.’

Another challenge in the alignment of international programs to the SDGs CIB members encounter is that not all partner countries abroad have embraced the SDGs equally. FCM has for instance different programs in Southeast Asia. Vietnam will deliver a VNR this year and has integrated the SDGs in the National Development Plan, while neighbouring Cambodia does not acknowledge the need to be involved in the SDGs. Although a less welcoming national SDG-climate does not automatically imply that local authorities too are not committed to the SDGs, FCM discovered that due to the different levels of SDG awareness and knowledge a combined learning programme for associations in those two countries does not make sense. ‘We come across the same thing in other regions,’ Pierce (FCM) emphasizes.

ICLD (Sweden) recognises the large diversity in the dedication of participants in their programs: some are very focused on implementation of the SDGs, while others just mention them. ICLD is, however, very fine with both levels, because, as Vargas states: ‘You don’t want to impose an Agenda that was mainly decided at the top level on local governments that primarily need to respond to the needs of their people.’ ICLD therefore focusses on specific issues that their partners are concerned about and show them how those issues are related to the Agenda. For ICLD it is essential that the work on the Agenda 2030 follows the principles of local democracy, enhanced participation, transparency, equity and accountability.

5.2.2 Monitoring

Monitoring of the SDGs can be a challenge because targeted municipalities in international programming often do not have the capacity nor the statistic systems in place to collect and process the data. According to some CIB members there is an over-emphasis on the targets, numbers and

measurements, and too little attention for the stories of local communities and governments trying to improve things in their own way. As Vargas (ICLD) puts it: ‘The small projects we help carry out raise awareness and create a dialogue, even when they are not monitored according to the protocol. These small steps should also be acknowledged as part of the process.’ She refers to a project in Kisumu where the local government organised waste pickers and initiated a dialogue on how to improve the waste management. The impact of this project might not be immediately measurable; however, it is an important change that these communities now regard waste as a source of income and are working together to improve the waste collection and processing.

Furthermore, the translation of indicators and targets to a local level can be complicated since they are agreed on at the international level and the data are often not available at a local level (and sometimes not even at the national level). ‘One of the indicators on SDG11 is the number of people living in slums, Oostveen (VNG) explains. ‘Those numbers are only available on a national level. So, we don’t know the situation in Patheingyi, the city in Myanmar that participates in our program. Moreover, in a centralised state like Myanmar housing is a national responsibility. This is just an example of how the monitoring of the SDGs can mismatch with the local level. It is very complicated for us to make specific contributions to the international agreements and targets when the relevant decisions are made at the national level.’

Javier Sanchez Cano, head of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, DG Development Cooperation at Generalitat de Catalunya, recognises the problem: ‘We have a beautiful program in Morocco on quality education in which we invest 1 million euros. For the SDGs reporting this is very tricky because a) we have to coordinate with the national government and b) we cannot connect our spending to results. So, we have to make some kind of agreement with the Moroccan national government. That may be the biggest challenge for us.’

5.3 Opportunities

Besides challenges, the SDGs and Agenda 2030 offer important opportunities to international programming as well. What CIB members frequently mentioned was that the SDGs provide an opening to discuss difficult issues with actors less willing or aware of sustainable and integrated approaches because one can refer to the international agreement. ‘If you start cooperating with a municipality or organization,’ Oostveen (VNG) states, ‘you can use the SDGs as a checklist: look we agreed globally that we would contribute to these goals, to fight inequality, to eradicate poverty or to mainstream gender equality.’

Furthermore, the integral approach the SDGs promote, and the resulted urge to form innovative partnerships across different sectors and themes, offer the opportunity to really start doing things differently. Previously, development cooperation was mostly the unique responsibility of the international units of local authorities and a sectoral perspective was determinative in the decision making of international programming. Now different departments and units are encouraged to work together and take the policy dialogue to the next level. Javier Sanchez Cano, (Catalonia), for instance, uses the SDGs to tell regional ministries that are already involved in development cooperation through his international unit, that they now could come up with international programming proposals on their own. ‘If other departments are starting to feel responsible for international programming as well, this could really impede a huge change,’ Javier Sanchez Cano states.

Mainstreaming of sustainability is another key opportunity the SDGs offer to international programming. The Agenda 2030 makes it easier to hold countries in the North more accountable for themes like exclusion and poverty. The SDGs offer a good opportunity to show public sector actors that what they do is connected to what people in other regions, both in the North and South, are doing. Encouraging local and regional governments to participate in international networks and to exchange knowledge with other professionals will contribute to the internalisation of local and regional governments and to their engagement in development cooperation. This could help to deliver the SDGs both, at home and in other countries.

5.4 Donor programs

Although international programming generally contributes to the achievement of the SDGs in some way, the SDGs are not always directly addressed. In most cases only one goal is targeted. MUaN (Nepal) for instance carried out a project on urban sanitation, supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The contribution to SDG11 on sustainable cities was central to this program. With other donors, such as GIZ, the Asia Foundation and the UNDP, MUaN works on programs focusing on the empowerment of women or on capacity development of municipalities that do only touch upon the SDGs.

Although donors sometimes do encourage to relate to the goals in the programs they fund in some way, they overall do not seem to have incorporated the SDGs as a mandatory part of their funding yet. Nicole Ward-Boot of VNG International experienced that this potentially confines the possibilities to integrate the SDGs in a program. In the IDEAL program (Inclusive Decisions at Local Level; not to be confused with the DEALS program her colleague Oostveen referred to above) Ward-Boot manages, the SDGs do not play a leading role. 'The department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that gave us the assignment did not specifically demand to relate to the SDGs. They use their own targets and indicators and they informed us that it was important to align our indicators with theirs. In previous programs we experienced that we made ourselves less relevant if we do not firmly relate our program to their Theory of Change. We did however decide to install SDG16 (promote peaceful and inclusive societies) as the overarching, global impact goal of the IDEAL program.'

Ward-Boot also has the impression that the SDGs could have been integrated more prominently in two EU funded projects she currently is involved in. However, a recent tender call from the EU for a project in Ghana does require proposals to align with the SDGs, Irene Oostveen (VNG) adds.

Most CIB members feel it would be good if donors would focus more on the SDGs and expect that to happen in the near future. Albers (VVSG): 'In our city to city partnerships, sponsored by the national government, the SDGs were not compulsory, but the program was installed in 2016 – for the period 2017-2021. Maybe the requirements of the government will be more prominent in the next period.' By doing so, the donors would contribute to the essence of the SDGs: an integrated framework that goes beyond addressing one specific goal and looks at the consequences of activities on all goals.

6. Conclusion

The most important feature of the SDGs – their broadness and interrelation – is both their strength and their weakness. It is a challenge to realise ownership for the SDGs on a local or regional level (as it is on the national level) because there is not one department or unit responsible, while at the same time almost all activities carried out by municipalities are related to one of the goals and targets.

This paper shows that CIB members all over the world make impressive efforts to align their work with the SDGs, in their own organisations and cities, with their members and with their partners abroad. The ‘SDG-level’ differs hugely from CIB member to member. This is also related to whether or not the national government makes efforts to implement the SDGs as well as to the local context. However, in general the SDGs are still largely work in progress, which was to be expected three years after the adoption of the Agenda 2030 in 2015. Still, some participants to this research considered the accomplishments slightly disappointing.

The several challenges the CIB members identified are mainly in the field of alignment with the existing local and regional policies, the monitoring and evaluation and the funding. The local and regional circumstances are so diverse that alignment requires investigations into the goals, the indicators and the targets to figure out whether or not and how to integrate them in local policies and budgets.

Fortunately, a lot of promising new opportunities are accompanying the challenges, such as a more integrated policy approach, a long-term vision and an internationally agreed-upon ‘check list’ to bring the wide felt need for a sustainable future to the fore front in discussions with all kinds of actors.

One of the essential steps identified for the coming years to improve the implementation of the SDGs on a local level is to deepen the dialogue with national governments, with civil society, with partners abroad and within the own organisations. Through dialogue, partnerships, internalisation, awareness and mainstreaming of sustainability, the SDGs offer an opportunity to really do things differently.

Annex I: List of interviewees

1. Puvendra Akkiah, Integrated Development Plans Manager at the city of Durban, South Africa
2. Hanne Albers, Staff Member International Affairs at the Flemish Association of Cities and Municipalities (VVSG), Belgium
3. Cemal Bas, Senior Project Manager of the Union of Municipalities Turkey (TBB)
4. Braulio Díaz Castro, International Affairs Officer at Mexico City, and head of knowledge management and communication at the AL-LAS network
5. Kalanidhi Devkota, Executive Secretary at Municipal Organisations of Nepal (MUaN)
6. Youssouf Diakit , Executive Director of the Association of Municipalities of Mali (AMM)
7. Sabine Drees, Senior Advisor International Affairs, German Cities Association (GCA)
8. Hemanthi Goonasekera, National Coordinator/Chief Executive Officer, Federation of Sri Lankan Local Government Authorities (FSLGA)
9. Tatiane de Jesus, Coordinator International Department at the National Confederation of Municipalities (CNM), Brasil
10. Matilda Lindberg, Policy Advisor International Affairs, Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR)
11. Irene Oostveen, Senior Project Manager at VNG International, the Netherlands
12. Elena Pierce, Governance, Policy and Networks Advisor, Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM)
13. Javier Sanchez Cano, Head of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, DG Development Cooperation at Generalitat de Catalunya, Spain
14. Isabella Santos, Project Coordinator Localise SDGs at The National Confederation of Municipalities (CNM), Brasil
15. Renske Steenbergen, Senior Project Manager at VNG International, the Netherlands
16. Ana Maria Vargas, Research Director, Swedish International Centre for Local Development (ICLD)
17. Nicole Ward-Boot, Senior Project Manager at VNG International, the Netherlands

Annex II, Interview guide

Interview Guide short assessment for The Capacity and Institution Building (CIB) Working Group UCLG

Approach of CIB members on the strategies of implementation of the SDGs domestically and in their international programs

Introduction

- Shortly recap of the purpose of the study.
- The role of the respondent and the number of years he/she works for the organisation.
- Short intro of interviewer.

National level (context)

1. General attention being paid to the SDGs in your country.
2. Current policies of the *national* government in your country related to the Sustainable Development Goals and decentralised cooperation (and policy making context relevant to the implementation of the SDGs e.g. upcoming elections, decentralisation processes).
3. Key actors involved in your country related the Sustainable Development Goals. Existing multi-stakeholder partnerships (if any).

Role of your organization in relation to the SDGs

4. To what extent do the SDGs form part of your work? Since when did your association/city start to develop strategies towards localizing the SDGs?
5. What are your key strategies towards the implementation of the SDGs in your own country/city (domestically)?
 - a) Can you provide concrete examples of your work?
 - b) What are key challenges and opportunities related to implementation of the SDGs in your own country/city?
6. Is your association/ your city also involved in international programs/cooperation? (decentralised cooperation, city-to-city partnerships).
7. If so, do the SDGs also form part of the international programming of your association/city?
 - a. Can you provide concrete examples of your international programs/activities?
 - b. What are key challenges and opportunities related to implementation of the SDGs, in your international programmes/activities?

Role of donors

8. Does your association/city make use of donor programs in relation to the implementation of the SDGs (domestically and in international programming)?
 - a. If so, which donors are involved in these programs? (national government, European Union, Foundations etc)
 - b. What are the main characteristics/strategies of these programs towards the inclusion of the SDGs in the formulation and implementation of the programs?
 - c. To what extent and how do the various donors influence the formulation and implementation of these programmes?
 - d. Can you provide concrete examples of donor steered programs and their influence on the use of the SDG framework in decentralized cooperation? How do these programs evolve in practice?