



# Toward an Embedded, Integrated, and Collaborative Approach to SDG Localization in African Cities

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## Abstract

The African continent represents the key hub in the global transition to a predominantly urban world. Hence, the fate of African cities—and the global South more generally—will have major implications for the extent to which the world will be able to achieve globally agreed development goals, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Questions about what makes for effective take-up of the SDGs lie at the heart of this book’s aim and contribution. A key term in this regard is that of “localization.” This chapter makes a case for an approach to SDG localization that is embedded in the continent’s diverse local contexts. As an introduction to the book, this chapter departs from integrated perspectives and collaborative methodologies and outlines the ways in which the book’s chapters illustrate the need for advancing such an approach in African cities.

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Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) · Localization · African cities

## 1.1 Introduction

The African continent represents the key hub in the global transition to a predominantly urban world, with an urban population that is expected to grow threefold by 2050 (UN-Habitat 2014; UNDESA 2018). Cities such as Lagos, Kinshasa, and Dar es Salaam are predicted to be among the 13 African cities that will represent the world’s 20 largest cities with average populations of about 23 million in 2100 (Hoornweg and Pope 2017). This unprecedented scale and speed of urbanization comes with new and intensified challenges at the economic, social, and environmental level, which will greatly determine the ways in which cities will grow and develop (Satterthwaite 2017). Hence, if “cities are where the battle for sustainable development will be won or lost” (UN 2013), the fate of African cities—and the Global South more generally—will have major implications for the extent to which the world will be able to achieve globally agreed development goals, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and related global development agendas, by the year 2030 and beyond.

Implementing the SDGs does not take place in a vacuum, as the way in which global and local processes come together in any location are shaped by local history, geography, and politics, among others. Therefore, a recognition of both the global and local significance of the role of African cities requires a much better understanding of the nature, drivers, and management of urbanization, not just in the continent's megacities but also in its vast number of small- and intermediate-sized towns. It also means interrogating our universally defined understandings of what sustainable development means and the ways in which we think it can be achieved and measured in the African (urban) context. What are the barriers and constraints to achieving sustainable urbanization in urban Africa? What are enabling factors and opportunities? What is the role of local action and actors, and how can they be advanced? Who are the movers and shakers? And what do we know, and what do we still need to know, in order to answer these questions?

Questions about what makes for effective take-up of the SDGs lie at the heart of this book's aim and contribution. A key term in this regard is that of "localization." How can global development goals be adapted to and implemented at the local level in ways that contribute to sustainable urbanization? Our position here is not to promote the uncritical regurgitation of global goals in ways that have no relevance to the local level. In fact, our stance is that global goals can *only* be relevant to the extent that they address and are embedded in complex and diverse local contexts, needs, and realities. At the same time, we recognize and illustrate the significance of having a universally agreed set of global development goals that can be used to galvanize local action. As such, localization goes beyond the mere implementation of global goals and involves a process that covers practices of awareness building, advocacy, adaptation, monitoring, reporting, and evaluation. Importantly, such a process needs to recognize the different ways in which the global goals are interconnected at and across global and local scales, therefore necessitating an integrated perspective. Local or sub-national government actors are key actors in this

process, but effective localization requires the involvement of a wide range of actors that are active and have an interest in the local policy and development space in Africa, all the way down to the neighborhood level. For these actors to have maximum impact, a collaborative approach to localization is imperative.

With less than 10 years to go until 2030 at the time of writing, the contributions of this book are important for informing and accelerating local action going forward. At the same time, their relevance extends beyond global reporting timeframes, by locating sustainable development planning and change in the everyday practices of African cities and their residents.

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## 1.2 SDGs and the Global (Urban) Post-2015 Development Agenda

Global development goals are not new, nor is the recognition of the importance of the role of cities as both actors, places, and issues of development (Kosovac and Acuto 2020). But compared to the Millennium Development Goals, which only nominally recognized the urban as manifested in developing countries' slums, the inclusion of a stand-alone urban goal (SDG 11) to make cities "safe, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable" across the world should be seen as "pathbreaking both within the UN system for the acknowledgment it brings of the developmental role of sub-national governments and paradigmatically for global urban policy because it concedes that, in an urban world, cities can be pathways to sustainable development" (Parnell 2016, p. 529).

Globally, a broad coalition of local government representatives, civil society organizations, and scientists has been instrumental in advancing the inclusion of the (recognition of the) role of cities into a set of global development goals and agreements that together make up the post-2015 development agenda (Arajärvi 2019).<sup>1</sup> This

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<sup>1</sup>In this book, we see the SDGs as representing an all-encompassing universal development framework, which covers the various elements of economic, social, and

includes the adoption of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction in March 2015, which states that “disaster risk reduction and management depends on coordination mechanisms within and across sectors and with relevant stakeholders at all levels, and it requires the full engagement of *all State institutions of an executive and legislative nature at national and local levels*” (art. 19(2), emphasis added) (UN 2015a). This was followed by the adoption of the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on the financing of development post-2015 in July 2015, which “commit[s] to scaling up international cooperation to strengthen capacities of *municipalities and other local authorities* [...] in implementing resilient and environmentally sound infrastructure, including energy, transport, water and sanitation, and sustainable and resilient buildings using local materials. We will strive to *support local governments* in their efforts to mobilize revenues as appropriate” (par. 34, emphasis added) (UN 2015b). Signatories to the Paris Climate Agreement, adopted in December 2015, in turn “recognize that adaptation is a global challenge *faced by all with local, subnational, national, regional and international dimensions*, and that it is a key component of and makes a contribution to the long-term global response to climate change to protect people, livelihoods and ecosystem [...]” (art. 7(2), emphasis added) (UNFCCC 2015). The New Urban Agenda adopted in 2016 represents a culmination of the recognition of the importance of local action, dating back to the first Human Settlements Conference held in 1976 (UN 2016).

Important critiques have been made of the language of universality and inclusivity of the SDGs and related post-2015 development concepts and agreements as masking agendas that privilege global economic and commercial interests and structures while trivializing and depoliticizing local actors and development solutions (Kaika 2017; Weber 2017; Leitner et al. 2018; Macamo 2019). However, actors from the Global South actively played a key role in the preparations for

and negotiations around the SDG framework. African policymakers developed the Common African Position, which was adopted by the African Union (AU) as a platform to negotiate for African voices in the SDG framework (AU 2014). African leaders also pushed for goals that were of particular interest to the continent—such as inclusive and sustainable industrialization—in sessions of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals and other regional and global intergovernmental forums representing Africa and the Global South, such as the UN Group of 77 (Fukuda-Parr and Muchhala 2020). This active engagement shows that these agendas were not imposed on Africa but reflect local development aspirations that are supported and owned at the highest political level. African governments therefore carry responsibility for the design and operationalization as well as, at times, (mis)use of the SDG framework and in that regard should be held to account (Malonza and Ortega 2020; Jönsson and Bexell 2021). But the negotiations also reflect the nature of global development frameworks as the result of highly politicized and at times contested compromises and are therefore, in some way, inherently imperfect (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill 2019).

Nowhere is the paradox inherent in the 2030 vision clearer than in the tension between the universal recognition of cities in the post-2015 development agenda on the one hand and the position of cities in global and national governance frameworks on the other. The Janus-faced nature of the importance of the local scale in international development is particularly acute in the African context where many local governments lack the political, administrative, and fiscal power, mandate, and resources to govern vast areas of settlement, with far-reaching implications for the prospects of effective SDG localization.

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### 1.3 Localizing the SDGs

The need for devolution has been one of the unspoken reasons for the reticence of UN member states to commit to a stand-alone urban

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environmental goals included in other development agreements.

SDG. This will be an ongoing political, economic, and fiscal struggle, which will play itself out over the lifetime of the SDGs (UN Open Working Group on SDG 11, in Revi et al. 2014).

Despite the inclusion of a stand-alone urban goal, there has been much less consensus about what safety, inclusivity, resilience, or sustainability mean or look like in the urban context. Relatedly, there is little consensus on how sustainable urbanization can be achieved and measured across different places and scales (Klopp and Petretta 2017). This uneven local vision of the SDGs has resulted in an agenda which, while ground-breaking in the universality of its goals, is much less clear at the level of the targets and indicators developed to measure progress. Moreover, during the first 5 years after the adoption of the global indicator framework for the SDGs, over half of the framework's unique 231 indicators were classified as indicators for which data were not regularly produced by countries (Tier II) or for which there was no internationally established methodology or standard available (Tier III). A monitoring framework for the New Urban Agenda in turn was only launched in 2020. While the absence of comprehensive multi-scale information did not hinder the development of a vast number of different indices, dashboards, and rankings by international or UN-affiliated organizations to track levels of progress toward SDG achievement, most of these nationally produced reports did not include city-level data, as sub-national data and actors are not considered in and of themselves in the follow-up and review frameworks on the SDGs (Dellas et al. 2018).

Local governments and their representatives have actively challenged the deep-seated tension and deficit in global governance frameworks by creating their own spaces and terms for participation. Members of the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments (GTLRG), such as United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), have played an important role in this regard, by foregrounding the sub-national scale of action and information. The push for building a stronger role for sub-national actors in the multi-lateral system has gone beyond the lobby for the inclusion of a stand-alone urban goal, to advocating

for the importance of sub-national action for achieving *all* SDGs. Indeed, even with a stand-alone urban SDG, it will be very difficult to achieve any of the SDGs, ranging from poverty to climate change, without taking the role of cities into account. Moreover, many of the goals are interlinked and cannot be addressed in isolation, while certain goals and targets may function as accelerators and multipliers. From this perspective, "localization" has been understood as "the process of taking into account sub-national contexts in the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, from the setting of goals and targets, to determining the means of implementation and using indicators to measure and monitor progress" (GTLRG 2016, p. 6).

The work of members of the GTLRG has a distinct policy focus and is concerned with offering practical guidance for SDG localization at the local government level (UCLG 2015; Kanuri et al. 2016). A growing number of pioneering cities across the world in turn have started experimenting with their own approaches to SDG localization through the development of Voluntary Local Reviews on the SDGs, which are now recognized by the UN as important contributions to the implementation and monitoring of the SDGs at the national level (UNDESA 2021a). The success of local and regional governments in carving out a global space for collective accounting, reflection, and sharing of best practice is testament to the convening power of the SDGs and the usefulness of the framework as a tool to build and enable local dialogue and planning, as well as city networking and branding (Fox and Macleod 2021). It also provides insight into the kind of factors and actors that enable local action around the SDGs. Importantly, documented experiences of SDG localization show that effective local action goes beyond local governments themselves and includes the role and importance of an active local civil society, city-university partnerships, local political leadership and buy-in, as well as the support of global research and policy organizations, networks, platforms, and communities of practice to help share and disseminate good practices (Valencia et al. 2019; Fox and Macleod 2021; Morales et al. 2021).

Yet, overplaying the success of a few pioneering cities runs the risk of overlooking some of the basic institutional criteria that need to be in place to enable local action. This includes important provisions that need to be in place for local governments to have the financial, technical, and political mandate and capacity to engage with global and local development goals on their own and/or together with other relevant stakeholders. Many of such provisions are not (sufficiently) in place in African cities (UCLG Africa and Cities Alliance 2018). The underlying barriers of highly centralized countries with rapidly evolving urban centers means that many African local governments are not endowed with the political, administrative, and fiscal competencies they require to effectively advance with SDG localization processes in their respective territories.

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#### 1.4 SDG Localization in African Cities

The adoption of the SDGs and related development agendas has enjoyed high-level political support in Africa. This support is reflected not just in the widespread participation in the negotiations around the SDGs but also in their follow-up and review. Between 2016 and 2021, 46 out of 54 African countries presented their Voluntary National Reports (VNRs) to the UN High-Level Political Forum, some of them multiple times (UNDESA 2021b).<sup>2</sup>

Africa's commitment to a collective development agenda is also evidenced in the adoption of the continent's own development agenda, Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want. Agenda 2063 represents a homegrown vision of development that is inclusive, holistic, and sustainable. Notably, its adoption preceded that of Agenda 2030, but it covers many similar goals, illustrating the advantages to pursuing these agendas in tandem (UNECA 2017). Moreover, similar to Agenda 2030, Agenda 2063 also recognizes the role of

sub-national action in achieving developmental goals. More specifically, Africa's development agenda aspires for "institutions *at all levels of government* [to be] developmental, democratic, and accountable" and for "*cities and other settlements* [to be] hubs of cultural and economic activities, with modernized infrastructure, and [...] access to affordable and decent housing including housing finance together with all the basic necessities of life such as water, sanitation, energy, public transport and ICT" (AU 2015, pp. 2–3; 6, emphasis added).

The recognition of cities as important developmental and economic sites and actors is also evidenced in the development of a growing number of National Urban Plans, which represent a key tool for locating cities in national planning (Cartwright et al. 2018). However, levels of political, administrative, and fiscal decentralization in Africa remain uneven, limiting the capacity of cities to fulfill their roles. A few exceptions include countries such as South Africa, Uganda, Tanzania, and Morocco, and even here, degrees of decentralization are not permanent or linear. On the other hand, countries such as São Tomé and Príncipe, Togo, Comoros, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Egypt, Mozambique, Liberia, Guinea-Bissau, Central African Republic, Sudan, and Somalia are considered to represent contexts with incomplete decentralization processes (UCLG Africa and Cities Alliance 2018).

The limited extent of formal and functional devolution across Africa is the product of many different reasons, including histories of centralized colonial rule, economic crisis, (ethnic) conflict, and post-colonial political economies and settlements that have favored centralized rule, often—even if inadvertently—reinforced by the support of international donors and organizations. This inter-related set of factors has resulted in partial and complex decentralization reforms, many of which have only been implemented since the 1990s and in many countries are still ongoing. In many countries, large gaps remain between institutional reforms and practice, the effects of which are compounded by rapid urban growth. As a result, local governments face diverse and per-

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<sup>2</sup>African countries that had not presented yet as of 2021 were Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Gabon, Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe, and South Sudan.



sistent challenges, ranging from an uneven administrative reach over urban territories, central governments reluctant to devolve mandates and power to the local level (especially when opposition parties govern cities), and weak fiscal capability, which limits the capacity of local and regional governments to respond to, engage with, and plan for development in a sustainable and integrated way (UCLG 2019).

The capacity of the sub-national state in Africa to drive SDG localization has taken another hit with the COVID-19 pandemic. Just like in other parts of the world, African cities have been the hotspots of COVID-19 cases. The resultant strain on healthcare systems and economic impact of the global economic slowdown have stretched and diverted already limited fiscal resources, exacerbated by the effects of stringent local lockdowns (Teachout and Zipfel 2020; Morsy et al. 2020). With the most vulnerable in society most affected, the impact of COVID-19 has in many ways slowed down, and in some cases reversed, important progress made on the achievement of global development goals. As a result, the devastating effects of the pandemic have especially been felt in the area of poverty, hunger, and inequality, with detrimental consequences for health, well-being, and economic growth (Sachs et al. 2021). Reflections and debates on the need to “build back better” in post-pandemic times, including a rethinking or recalibration of the SDGs themselves, are therefore timely and appropriate (Nature 2020). But, to a certain extent, debates on the pandemic and its recovery do not recognize that the daily reality of many cities across the world already is, and has been for a long time, that of structural and recurrent crisis. This requires us to challenge some existing assumptions around the workings and scope—including limits—of democracy, economy, and public action.

One of the key examples to illustrate the limits of existing assumptions is the centrality of informality in the African context, as representing the predominant source of economic livelihoods, modes of land tenure and housing construction, actors involved in service delivery, and much more. The prevalence of informality means that

the actors and logics underpinning public action as included in global goals such as the SDGs work in very different ways, representing a much wider spectrum of actions and actors than just those of formal government. This spectrum includes non-state actors, ranging from traditional authorities to community-based organizations, religious organizations, neighborhood watch groups, associations, and small businesses, but also includes political parties, large corporations, as well as non-governmental or international organizations, who all play direct or indirect roles in the management and provision of services down to the community and neighborhood level.

The (re)thinking of ways to inform and accelerate local action going forward then urges a reflection on the ways in which these actors can be supported or at least taken into account as also part and parcel of the “city.” Such a reflection needs to be accompanied by a better understanding of the roles that they play, the ways and degree to which these roles are regulated, how different actors interact with each other and the state, as well as the role of structural and global forces and influences in shaping them.

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## 1.5 Toward an Approach to Advancing the SDGs Locally

An understanding of the complexity of the different actors and forces that make up African cities needs to be coupled with more sophisticated ways of generating knowledge. Many examples of new epistemological and methodological approaches for thinking and researching “wicked” problems of urban sustainability and development by approaching cities as interconnected systems have emerged in the post-2015 era (Bai et al. 2016; Elmqvist et al. 2018). This emergence involves a (re)appreciation of the role of (urban) science and calls for the need for transdisciplinary approaches to knowledge production that bridge the gap between science, policy, and practice (McPhearson et al. 2016; Acuto et al. 2018). Importantly, these calls have been

accompanied by a recognition of the geopolitics around science and knowledge production and efforts to address existing imbalances related to the role and stakes around African urbanization and Africa's role as a knowledge producer (Nagendra et al. 2018; Marrengane and Croese 2021).

This book aims to contribute to this important emerging body of work by straddling both disciplinary and professional boundaries. While there has been a growing academic interest in the challenges and opportunities for the uptake of the SDGs in Africa (e.g., Nagao et al. 2019; Ramutsindela and Mickler 2020; Nhamo 2017; Nhamo et al. 2020, 2021), few studies approach this topic with a transdisciplinary urban lens. This book presents contributions from the city level, by bringing together authors from a wide range of urban actors and practitioners, including researchers, city officials, representatives of consultancy firms, local government associations, and international organizations who have been working at the forefront of SDG localization in Africa. Taken together, the chapters present critical views of existing challenges, but also practical insights into innovative practices, partnerships, and lessons learned. As such, the book speaks both to academic debates on the SDGs and to wider policy debates on the current status and future prospects for SDG localization in Africa.

Geographically, the chapters cover urban research and practice in a variety of African cities, ranging from large metropolitan city regions such as Cairo and Lagos; large cities such as Kampala, Accra, and eThekweni; smaller cities such as Lusaka; as well as towns in Burkina Faso, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, and Ethiopia, including the island city of Príncipe Island in São Tomé and Príncipe. Methodologically, the chapters offer local perspectives and experiences of what it takes to effectively localize the SDGs. Taken together, they illustrate the range of different tools and methods that can be employed at different stages of the process of SDG localization while also highlighting the importance of fostering the skills and expertise that are required to apply such methods on the ground.

Examples in the chapters include the creation of Stakeholder Working Groups for Voluntary

Reporting on the SDGs (Chap. 2); SDG studios with community actors to generate local understandings of the SDGs (Chap. 3); participatory design and citizen science research as the basis for developing revised indicators to measure and improve urban housing and transport systems (Chap. 4); Learning Alliance Platforms to bring together different actors for participatory inquiry and knowledge production on urban water management (Chap. 5); multi-stakeholder platforms representing actors involved in urban waste recycling and repurposing (Chap. 6); new and cross-cutting disciplinary perspectives for advancing urban health (Chap. 7); local think tank groups to review the availability and management of SDG 11 data as the basis for community data collection (Chap. 8); comparative sub-national fiscal data analysis to assess prospects for financing sustainable development at the city level (Chap. 9); qualitative action experiments with urban planning professionals to address corruption at the local government level (Chap. 10); capacity and awareness-building as well as local data collection for and by city officials as the basis for the development of Voluntary Local Reviews on the SDGs (Chap. 11); the institutionalization of local integrated development planning for the SDGs at the city level (Chap. 12); and Participatory Incremental Urban Planning for the implementation of the SDGs and New Urban Agenda (Chap. 13).

While we have tried to cover a broad range of disciplines, actors, geographical areas, thematic issues, and methods, we recognize that this book is not an exhaustive account and that there are important themes and areas that are not, or not sufficiently, covered. This includes, among others, the area of education, culture, and social development, including the role and inclusion of the most vulnerable in society, such as women, children, and the elderly, but also members of the LGBTQI+ community, migrants, and the differently abled. Other areas that have not been fully addressed are that of the limits and trade-offs of economic development, including the role of private economic actors and technology, the environment and climate change, as well as the role of (party) politics in determining the prospects

and dynamics of effective SDG localization. All of these issues require further research and amplification going forward.

### **1.5.1 Part I: Embedding SDG Localization in Local History, Meanings, and Context**

The first part of the book consists of three chapters that all address the importance of the embeddedness of SDG localization in local history, meanings, and context. Chapter 2, in that regard, builds on the South African experience to highlight the importance of contextual knowledge that is necessary to translate the information that is reported at the global level on SDG progress into intelligence that builds on and supports locally available data, planning, and development efforts. Chapter 3 in turn builds on research conducted at the community level in the city of Kampala, Uganda, to call for the importance of the exploration of local meanings of the SDGs that are reflective of the vast diversity of urban contexts on the continent and can represent a critical counterpoint to the SDGs as a universal normative framework. Similarly, Chap. 4 offers a bottom-up approach to SDG localization by conducting grounded research in the housing and transport sectors at the neighborhood level in Cairo, Egypt, to shed light on the intricacies of the workings of informality as the basis for a revised set of SDG targets and indicators that can inform the measurement and improvement of local systems of service provision.

### **1.5.2 Part II: Integrated Perspectives on Water, Waste, and Health**

The second part of the book brings together integrated perspectives on some of the key development sectors in Africa that play a crucial role in addressing a range of interconnected development goals. Chapter 5 does so by unpacking the challenges of water management in Accra, Ghana, and how these can be overcome by sup-

porting more participatory and integrated approaches at the city level. Chapter 6 takes a similar approach by exploring the benefits of multi-stakeholder platforms for more sustainable urban waste management in the context of Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Chapter 7 offers unique insight into the importance of integrated approaches to SDG localization by introducing global surgery as a cross-cutting tool and perspective to advancing urban health in Africa in spatially and socially just ways.

### **1.5.3 Part III: Barriers or Opportunities—Data, Finance, Corruption**

The third part of the book sheds light on the cross-cutting challenges for SDG localization in the areas of city-level data, finance, and corruption while outlining important transformative steps to be taken going forward. Chapter 8 does so by presenting an innovative approach for overcoming existing data inequalities reflected in existing urban data collection and management practices through the co-design and production of knowledge at the community level in the cities of Lagos, Nigeria, and Accra, Ghana. Chapter 9 draws on a unique data set on sub-national finance to shed light on the complexity of sub-national fiscal data and systems in order to work toward building public finance systems that can address urban financing needs. Chapter 10 constructively sheds light on the role of corruption in hampering development at the city level and builds on collaborative work with planning professionals in Lusaka, Zambia, to offer insight into prospects for addressing corruption through the promotion of professional integrity and collective accountability mechanisms.

### **1.5.4 Part IV: Collaborative Experiences from the Frontier of Practice**

The final chapters of the book reflect experiences from the frontier of practice, illustrating the diversity of modalities of collaborative action for



and around SDG localization across the continent, in spite of complex institutional contexts marked by limited data, resources, and capacity. Chapter 11 does so by providing unique insight into the role of global and national local government associations in supporting SDG localization in contexts of complex and uneven decentralization by building on the experience of the development of a collective Voluntary Local Review in Mozambique. Chapter 12 looks at some of the factors that have shaped the globally renowned approach of the South African city of eThekweni to SDG localization from the perspective of a city official responsible for integrated development planning. Finally, Chap. 13 provides a view of the support provided by UN-Habitat for the implementation of the SDGs and New Urban Agenda through participatory planning in the cities of Bissau, Guinea-Bissau, Príncipe Island, São Tomé e Príncipe, and Hawassa and Bahir Dar in Ethiopia.

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