SDG Localization in African Cities: The Crucible of the 2030 Agenda

14

Susan Parnell

Abstract

African cities are the crucible of SDG implementation, as they have the most to gain from advancing sustainability aspirations. Unsurprisingly therefore, some of the most interesting examples of SDG localization and implementation are now emerging from cities and towns from Cairo to Cape Town. This conclusion reflects on the contributions in this book and distills their learnings about sustainable practice and thought when viewed from the urban African frontier. The collection offers a range of local African experiences to nuance the way forward on the road to global sustainable development based on local ownership and adaptation of the 2030 Agenda to local priorities. As such, one of the most positive things the SDG process has made legible is the extent to which Africa matters in the overall urban conversation. If cities matter to sustainability, African cities matter more than most to our collective chances of realizing the SDGs globally.

S. Parnell (✉)
Human Geography, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK

African Centre for Cities, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa
e-mail: susan.parnell@bristol.ac.uk

Keywords

SDG localization · African cities · Agenda 2030 · Agenda 2063

14.1 Introduction

Our hope in curating this volume was to set out new ways of learning about Africa's transformation through the urban implementation of the SDGs. We also sought to offer fresh modes of exploring what has happened in African cities under the SDG rubric and to debate how collective knowledge might usefully be expanded or amended to drive SDG implementation in and through African cities. The intention is, through both the writers and readers of the volume, to build an interdisciplinary community of intellectual practice that is centrally involved in making sustainability change happen locally and nationally. At the global scale, our aspiration is to ensure that African voices, both from academia and practice, are at the forefront of forging an urban community of practice that has broad capacity to engage urban policy based on deep local knowledge and the bigger issues surrounding urban transformation. Ideally, Africans will be leaders in supra-local forums and debates about urban sustainability like Local 2030 (a collaborative platform to advance the local

implementation of the SDGs[1]) as well as the development of key tools and processes for urban SDG planning and reporting, such as National Urban Policies and Voluntary Reviews.

Contributing to the large-scale reconfiguration of the urban process requires action on multiple fronts and across varied scales. There is no use signing up to a long-term vision, as all African member states of the United Nations did when they endorsed *Transforming Our World: The Sustainable Development Goals* (UN 2015), if there is no commitment to honestly take stock of progress and adjust the course of action in a particular location to realize the intended outcomes. The nature of such large-scale reconfiguration and adaptation to the normal way of doing things requires continual adjustment, especially on the ground, as the implications of implementing the ambitions of the SDGs becomes apparent. These local experiences of SDG implementation are not simply an endpoint of the global agenda, but a hub in the feedback loops for revisions to the global agenda.

While it is difficult to make robust assessments of progress less than halfway through a large-scale multi-year program of change (monitoring implementation of the SDGs is a task that is set to run until 2030 and after), it has to be done. It also has to be done everywhere, or the integrity of the international process is put at risk. Regular formal evaluation is thus built into global programs like the SDGs, the New Urban Agenda, and the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Although it is far from clear how the local scale can and should engage with multi-lateral mechanisms that are designed primarily for national to global reporting, there can be no doubt that it is local implementation that is the litmus test of global change (Dellas et al. 2018). The critical importance of the local scale for putting global aspirations into practice makes it essential to generate knowledge about how the SDGs are working, or not, in particular places, most especially those cities that have the most to gain from advancing sustainability aspirations. It is no overstatement therefore to assert that rapidly changing African cities, who currently perform poorly against the SDG metrics, are the crucible of SDG implementation.

African cities and nations have engaged actively in both structured and informal review processes associated with the global urban agenda, including SDG 11 and SDG localization (c.f. Chaps. 11–13; Kundu et al. 2020). There is also a strong African engagement with the SDG Agenda more generally (Ramutsindela and Mickler 2020). However, there is still so much more to say about Africa—the region whose progress is central to the international success or failure of the SDGs. Turmoil, like the COVID-19 pandemic that has disproportionately disrupted the economies of low- and middle-income contexts, makes localized and urbanized African reflections of the direction of travel in the SDG process even more important than usual.

As early as 2018, just 3 years after the endorsement of the SDGs, the Committee for Development Policy (United Nations Economic and Social Council 2018) reflected that to achieve the UN's pledge to "leave no one behind" would mean a special focus on low-income nations and the sub-Saharan region. Curiously, that committee expected the tricky parts of ensuring progress on the global 2030 vision to lie only in rural areas, which they argued should be prioritized and, in so doing, ignored almost entirely the challenges and opportunities that African cities would pose for SDG implementation. By contrast, African leaders at the regional, national, and local level, alert to the urbanizing character of the region and the significance of cities to social, economic, and environmental integrity and large-scale change, have not been as short-sighted or anti-urban (AU 2015). The positive urban position of the Africans within the UN has been bolstered by the wider recognition that addressing challenges of resource use, climate change, and biodiversity would mean understanding the place of cities in the global system and getting to grips with African urbanization.

Increasingly, cities are seen as key to implementing transformative practices that will con-

---

[1]See the online Local 2030 platform: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/partnerships/local2030.

tribute to and benefit from ideas about sustainability. It was on this basis that member states endorsed a dedicated city SDG and from which the move to urbanize the SDG process has been forged. The recognition of the importance of spatial and locational dynamics to achieving sustainable development outcomes also pervades Africa 2063 (AU 2015). Although that landmark policy from the African Union preceded publication of the 2030 position of the UN (UN 2015) and did not focus overtly on urban areas, it is a city-sensitive approach to sustainable development for Africa that authors of several chapters point to as facilitating the new ethos of urban management that SDG implementation demands. Unsurprisingly therefore, some of the most interesting examples of SDG localization and implementation are now emerging from cities and towns, and we have seen that there is much to learn about sustainable practice and thought when viewed from the urban African frontier.

An overarching theme of the book is that ensuring local actors are integrally involved in efforts to reflect and revise the direction of travel on the urban implementation of the 2030 vision contributes to the legitimacy of SDG process. By extension, African adoption of and commitment to the SDGs will permeate the regional processes and inform the global SDG program. With these pointers in mind, the preparation of this volume brought together a range of African activists, specialists, and scholars. Unlike governments (city, regional, or national), our reflections illuminate rather than assess the SDG implementation efforts. They should be read alongside, not in place of or in critique of, SDG self-assessments from African member states. Our cases are in no way representative of the whole continent. We are methodologically eclectic and work on urban issues at varied scales. The different conceptual entry points we deploy all underscore the problems of making comparison and of aggregation, especially for Africa—a large and hugely diverse region. The paradox we navigate is that while it is politically important that the global community foreground the African urban question, it is imperative that there is no flattening of the urban condition in Africa.

There are further limits to the book. Most contributors seek to highlight gains and opportunities from the innovations we track, rather than dwell on the dark conundrums of implementing an overly ambitious global program in places that lack the necessary resources. While this Afro-optimism is essential to energizing the SDG implementation effort, it should not detract from the very serious structural barriers African cities face in raising the requisite finance to scale up innovations. African urban SDG implementation success must be celebrated at the same as these fragile and often burdened places and people are presented for heightened attention and additional support.

Taken as a whole, the 13 chapters in the book are relatively soft on the barriers to SDG realization, presenting a largely optimistic take on the uptake of the SDGs, based on local ownership of the pathways to change. There is a collective confirmation of the overarching value of the 2030 vision, for Africa and for its cities. Support for the SDGs is especially strong where urban change interventions for sustainable development are embedded in wholly owned local interventions. Areas of concern, especially capacity and the lack of finance, are regularly flagged. Rather than turning their backs on the SDGs, the contributors to this book record problems of implementation. Barriers to action range from the paucity of relevant ideas, the difficulty prioritizing in a context that needs multiple interventions for complex problems, the persistence of violence, the lack of full political support, and the drudgery of navigating bureaucracy. They furthermore endorse the value of multi-lateral action to spur change and nudge the direction and form of local action in Africa. Reading across the contributions, the collection offers a range of local African experiences to nuance the way forward on the road to global sustainable development. Most exciting of all is the emergence of a cadre of young engaged African urbanists who know and love their cities and who want to have a powerful voice in recrafting urban society and systems, aligning their aspirations with the normative base of sustainability.

14.2   What Can We Learn About SDG Localization From Africa?

It is very clear from each of the contributions to this volume that the SDG Agenda, with all of its shortcomings, has gained significant local traction in less than a decade. There may not be many academic texts on the SDGs in African cities, but there is already widespread acceptance of and buy-in to the vision. The extent of progress is, however, both slow and uneven, and the barriers to implementation experienced in African cities and towns are varied. For African cities, especially the smaller and less well-resourced centers, the value of the universal construction of the SDG indicator is sometimes a poor fit or it cannot be measured without available data. Crucially, the implied focus of the SDGs sometimes lacks potency either because of the imperatives of extreme poverty or because the varied configuration of political authority in African settlements does not readily translate into the multi-scalar notions of the state that most UN members understand. As one might expect from such a large continent, which at the time of producing this text was in the midst of a dramatic urban transition and a city altering pandemic, it is hard to generalize. Issues of African exceptionalism aside, there is no reason to abandon the 2030 project. For African cities to maximize their role, more can be done. Working from what is already being done well, there is much scope to scale up SDG implementation, to expand support to more African cities, and even to refine some of the detail and timeframes of the global and national policy processes to allow cities to consolidate their implementation plans.

Crucial support to Africa must come in establishing robust knowledge and data capacity, and any urban African support for implementing the SDGs must address the well-understood fiscal gap for cities. There is no need to start from scratch—there are already scalable lessons on SDG implementation to be drawn from African SDG experiences. First is the value of having African urbanists who are generalists and not just specialists and people who understand local articulations of community and government; who are literate in the way the local and the national interact; who have city-based experiences of the interactions of the water, energy, and food systems; and who can see beyond their narrow area of expertise. Second is the imperative of getting younger people into positions of authority and influence. The urban skills shortage in Africa can mean rapid promotion for younger professionals in the field, creating upward mobility that comes with the risk of compromising experience, but it also brings the dividend of energy and innovation into the urban management system. The third lesson from Africa is the merit in sharing accounts of SDG implementation among close neighbors in order to build a common narrative about the African urban challenge and how these cases fit into global stories about sustainability. The book thus speaks to the importance of getting the auxiliary urbanites—scholars, donors, development banks, and leaders of community-based organizations—into structured learning opportunities to generate authoritative urban vocabularies from which to shift international debates about the future of cities.

Although the SDGs set out a universal agenda, there is simply no blueprint for implementation of the goals in African cities. Thankfully, there are no obvious examples of leaders seeking to mold their cities to some idealized norm, as has been the case in the past with world city aspirations. Instead, perhaps reflecting the confidence of a new generation, African cities and towns seem to have taken different elements of the 2030 Agenda and fused them with their own priorities, often articulating local versions of the SDG values rather than invoking any international format. There is also no Africa-wide uniformity to the monitoring, governance, or financing of the SDGs, though the importance of generating both better and more comparable data systems was a common and frequent lament.

Cities that find value in associating with the ideas and monitoring systems of the 2030 Agenda sometimes, but not always, work in conjunction with SDG-related processes such as National

Urban Policies, the New Urban Agenda, or Voluntary National and Local Reviews. The problems of populating information for and from SDG implementation highlight the paucity of African data and the more general issue of the absence of public open access subnational or geospatial information. Our failure to present a composite picture of SDG implementation progress is but one example of the patchy, incomplete, misconfigured, and generally dysfunctional format of city data on Africa.

On the positive side, the multiplicity of policy formats and reporting lines seen in the large and small African cities we have covered just in this volume speaks to a healthy diversity of local practices and the absence of formulaic implementation. All chapters in the fourth part of the volume that cover collaborative experiences from the frontier of practice highlight the importance of the embeddedness of the global ideas in local planning processes and agendas. Exactly how these ideas are absorbed differs greatly from one place to another. Assembling local energy in places as different as Bissau, Cairo, Hawassa, or Lusaka, the book's authors reflect on barriers to and progress in the collective project of transforming urban areas to achieve the ambitions of sustainability. Time and again we read that cities and towns have taken from the global and national policy visions what they find works for them—but they have also (tentatively) managed to feed back into the bigger national and international narratives what has been working on the ground. In the chicken and egg narrative of sustainable urban development, it matters less where innovative ideas started than that they are relevant to local conditions and that they are gaining traction in Africa.

Ideas matter—at both the high-level conceptual stage and once there is physical or institutional operation of projects and programs. Ideas that eschewed single entry points of monolithic solutions have the most local African support. Across the continent, the urban leadership on the SDGs has rejected single projects and focused on multiscale operations, complexity, interdisciplinarity, and partnerships. There is an

acute awareness that change takes time and demands widespread support. Pragmatism is very evident with many of the chapters highlighting that, in order to advance the SDGs in an African urban environment, we need to understand the objectives and aspirations of the global agenda. But far more importantly, what is needed is a grounded understanding of how cities actually work. A deep knowledge of government, local history, and structures, and a deep sensitivity to political possibilities, helps make a difference to how well the SDGs "land" in a place. Grounded community engagement and a deep understanding of politics were seen to be imperative at all stages of urban change. Possibly a surprise to some, across the chapters there is a recognition and endorsement of the role of expert knowledge and of specialization for city governance. Alongside ongoing community mobilization, the importance of building a culture of cooperation in technical and professional processes within government emerges as an indicator of likely SDG success.

In truth, the time available to implement the SDGs in Africa's cities is too short. Yet the thread that emerged from all the cities is the importance of endurance and the will to complete programs that might advance the SDGs. Implementation must go on—even in the face of a pandemic, a climate catastrophe, and systemic injustices.

14.3 Conclusion

Looking to 2030, the date by which the SDGs are supposed to be realized from the vantage point of an African city is daunting. We will not make it. We were never going to. Even before the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the goals were unattainable. Aspirations for building in social, economic, and environmental integrity into the DNA of African cities remain a hope and a goal.

But just because the 2030 timeframe is so tight, and the targets and indicators were never designed with the realities of vast informality, extreme and deep poverty, and minimal public investment in mind, it does not mean that the

SDG path set out is the wrong one— even for this special continent. While there are undoubtedly particular African SDG obstacles, there are also African opportunities, not least of which is the energetic and aspirational commitment of residents and across local civil society. In local and national government too, there is a drive to improve African cities and forge more sustainable patterns of urban living.

One of the most positive things about the SDG process is that it has made legible the extent to which Africa matters in the overall global conversation. If cities matter to sustainability, African cities matter more than most to our collective chances of realizing the SDGs. Perhaps, the African Union timeline of 2063 is more realistic than the timeline of 2030, but at least the SDGs help guide, rather than distort, urban development for Africa.

References

African Union (AU) (2015) Agenda 2063: report of the commission on the African Union Agenda 2063. African Union, Addis Ababa

Dellas E, Carius A, Beisheim M, Parnell S, Messner D (2018) Realising synergies in follow-up and review: the role of local and regional governments and their partners in the follow-up and review of global sustainability agendas. Adelphi consult GmBH, Berlin; Cities Alliance, Brussels

Kundu D, Sietchiping R, Kinyanjui M (2020) Developing National Urban Policies. Springer Publishing, Singapore

Ramutsindela M, Mickler D (eds) (2020) Africa and the Sustainable Development Goals. Sustainable Development Goals series. Springer Publishing, Singapore

United Nations (UN) (2015) Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (70/1). United Nations General Assembly, New York

United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) (2018) Committee for Development Policy report on the twentieth session, 12-16 March 2018 (E/2018/33, supplement no. 13). United Nations Economic and Social Council, New York