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SDG 11

Tackling the challenges of global urbanization: flagship local government initiatives to meet the SDGs

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Highlighting the crucial role of local and regional governments in the frontline implementation of the SDGs, this article showcases a selection of innovative initiatives by subnational governments, often in dialogue and cooperation with trade unions and community groups. Cases go beyond the scope of SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities) reaching out to other SDGs relating to essential public service access, housing, climate change and public procurement.

In 2018, 4.2 billion people in the world lived in cities and an additional 2.5 billion will urbanize by 2050.[1] Rapid and disorderly urbanization has led to deep inequalities and unsustainable urban environmental footprints. Over 100 million people are homeless, and about 900 million live in slums and informal settlements where access to vital services is precarious or non-existent. Public transport still only represents 16 percent of global daily urban transit,[2] while cities account for more than 70 percent of global energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions.[3]

In response to these daunting challenges, the international community has committed to several global policy frameworks, including the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the New Urban Agenda (NUA), the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, and the Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Prevention. While these international agreements have been signed by national governments, it is local and regional governments that are on the frontline of their implementation.

Global local government networks including United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), Metropolis, Cites Climate Leadership Group (C40), and Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI) – gathered under the umbrella of the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments – are asking for a stronger acknowledgement of subnational authorities' role in global policy and decision-making. Many subnational governments have already embedded sustainability targets into their local policies and responsibilities and are developing path-breaking initiatives to localize SDGs implementation well beyond SDG11 on sustainable cities. Nonetheless, this work goes largely unnoticed: out of the around 100 countries which submitted Voluntary National Reviews to the UN High Level Political Forum (HLPF) between 2016 and 2018, only 45 had involved local governments in the reporting process, and 39 had engaged them in national policy coordination mechanisms.[4]

1   UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2018).

2   Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments and UCLG (2018) p. 54.

3   C40 (2018), p. 11.

4   Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments and UCLG (2018).

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The following selected initiatives showcase how local governments are leading the implementation of the SDGs, often in dialogue and cooperation with trade unions and community groups.

Local solutions to enhance access to essential public services for all

Universal, free access to essential public services are the foundation blocks of the SDGs and at the core of local governments' commitment to the 2030 Agenda.[5] In most countries, local and regional authorities carry full or shared responsibility for water and sanitation, health and social care, waste management, education and culture. Government investment in public services is one of the most powerful policy tools to fight income inequality: it is estimated that free access to public services in OECD countries reduces it by 20 percent.[6]

Lack of service access and regressive user fees are associated, instead, with income inequality, largely borne by the most vulnerable dwellers.[7] Water privatization in Chile and Jakarta failed to expand access to water beyond affluent urban areas,[8] and waste management privatization in Dar es Salaam translated into unequal service, with private providers collecting waste only from areas where residents can afford to pay fees.[9] Where privatization brought no improvement or impacted negatively on service accessibility, quality and affordability, cities and communities are seeking alternatives by bringing (back) in-house essential public services through a process referred to as "(re)municipalization". Research from 2017 listed 832 such cases since 2000, involving 1,600 municipalities in 45 countries, in relation to water, energy, waste, transport, health and social care, education and other local government services.[10]

Some of these initiatives are promising. In 2010, Paris remunicipalized its water facility, creating *Eau de Paris*. Since then, the company has made substantial reinvestments in network maintenance and enhancement (€71.1 m in 2017)[11] and could lower water user fees by 8 percent, saving water users €76m between 2011 and 2015.[12] The management board includes local government, worker, consumer and civil society representatives, and a participative body has been established ("Paris water observatory") where stakeholders have a say. Barcelona has moved towards energy remunicipalization by creating publicly owned *Barcelona Energia* (BE).[13] In 2019, the public utility started servicing 20,000 households, distributing locally-generated renewable energy. Its tariffs are controlled by the local administration, which expects to make significant savings just by using it to power all its public buildings and services.

The role that public services play in addressing socioeconomic inequality is especially evident in the global South, where such services are typically delivered by informal workers who often lack basic human rights. In the case of waste services, the progressive transition of informal workers into local and national integrated waste management systems can be a powerful lever for enhancing service quality and coverage while fighting inequality by creating decent work opportunities.[14] In Belo Horizonte, Brazil, this approach led to improved working conditions of over 600 informal waste workers while it increased waste service coverage for *favela* residents up to 70 percent.[15]

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5 The Bogotá Commitment and Action Agenda, adopted at UCLG's 5th World Congress in October 2016 by over 400 mayors and local authority officials, states that "access to basic services is a human right that should be guaranteed for all", p. 7 (www.bogota2016.uclg. org/sites/default/files/bogota_commitment.pdf).

6 Oxfam (2014).

7 Wainwright (2014).

8 Karunananthan/Kishimoto (2018).

9 van Niekerk/Weghmann (2019).

10 Kishimoto/Petitjean (2017).

11 Eau de Paris en chiffres, Rapport annuel 2017 (www.eaudeparis.fr/ uploads/tx_edpevents/EDP_RA2017_V_BD.pdf).

12 See Le Strat (n.d.).

13 See www.barcelonaenergia.cat.

14 Cibrario (2018).

15 Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments and UCLG (2018), p. 74; Lethbridge (2017), pp. 30-31.

Tackling the global housing crisis: between informality and gentrification

The commitment to achieve decent, safe and affordable housing for all tops the SDG 11 target list, is at the heart of the NUA,[16] and is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, rapidly increasing urbanization and demographic rates, insufficient public infrastructure investment, urban gentrification, real estate financialization and the privatization of public housing, land and services are making it harder to fulfil. Skyrocketing prices for the sale and rent of housing are reshaping cities across income-segregated geographies, expelling low-wage workers and vulnerable dwellers to the outskirts of cities, while forced and violent evictions are a common occurrence.

The frameworks for housing, real estate regulation, rent and tenancy agreements are usually set by national governments. However, subnational governments are typically responsible for neighbourhood development and in some countries for housing policies. Confronted with systemic housing crises, they find themselves in a structural mismatch between their responsibilities and their actual powers and resources to deliver affordable housing to their communities. Nearly US\$ 1 trillion are needed to improve conditions in informal settlements, not counting homelessness and displaced people in conflict-torn zones.[17]

The housing crisis is a global one, with informality and gentrification being two sides of the same coin. Medellín,[18] Nairobi[19] and Harare[20] have all developed participatory, inclusive schemes of slum and neighbourhood renovation or upgrading. Paris, São Paulo, Barcelona, and Vancouver have instead taken measures to disincentivize vacancies and unused lots, regulate the private rent market and enhance access to affordable housing for vulnerable tenants. Amsterdam, Barcelona, Berlin, Mexico, Durban, London, Montreal, Montevideo, New York, Paris and Seoul launched the *Cities for Adequate Housing Declaration*[21] at the 2018 HLPF, joining the *Make the Shift* initiative promoted by the UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing.[22]

In this global scenario, the case of London and the UK is emblematic: one in three of lowest rental homes are unhealthy[23] and renters spend on average 41 percent of their wages on rent.[24] As of 2017, English local councils had 1,155,285 households on social housing waiting lists.[25] A national borrowing cap and the national Right-to-Buy scheme resulted in a drastic drop of councils' ability to provide social housing: out of 326 UK local authorities, 166 have sold off their social housing assets,[26] 40 percent of which are now privately owned and often rented back to councils at much higher rates.[27] Working together with civic associations, progressive local governments and members of parliament, UK trade unions Unison and Unite are documenting and disseminating evidence of the disastrous social effects of national policies that constrain local governments' housing prerogatives.[28] They are now reclaiming councils' financial and political powers to pursue social housing goals.[29]

16 UN General Assembly (2016).

17 Ibid., para. 34.

18 Mejoramiento Integral de Barrios Project (http://isvimed.gov.co/programa/mejoramiento-integral-de-barrios).

19 Mukuro slum project (www.iied.org/special-approach-slum-upgrading-special-planning-area-mukuru-nairobi).

20 Open Reblock project (https://openreblock.org/about.html).

21 See www.uclg.org/en/media/news/cities-adequate-housing-call-action-ensure-right-housing.

22 See www.unhousingrapp.org/the-shift.

23 The Guardian (2018): Study reveals rise in children raised in squalid rental homes, 10 September (www.theguardian.com/money/2018/sep/10/study-reveals-rise-in-children-raised-in-squalid-rental-homes).

24 The Guardian (2019): UK rents fall for first time in a decade, 23 January (www.theguardian.com/money/2019/jan/23/uk-rents-fall-for-first-time-in-a-decade).

25 "Will Tories face home truths?" In: Labour Research, July 2018, pp. 16–18.

26 UNISON (2019).

27 The Guardian (2019): New homes alone won't solve the housing crisis, 11 January (www.theguardian.com/society/2019/jan/11/new-homes-alone-wont-solve-the-housing-crisis).

28 See UNISON (2018) and (2017).

29 See www.unison.org.uk/at-work/community/key-issues/housing/.

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Fighting climate change and reducing disaster risk at the local level

The SDGs require a substantial shift towards renewable energy to fight climate change and related disasters and to enhance energy access and efficiency. Over 90 percent of urban dwellers are exposed to high concentrations of particles.[30] Cities and local communities are also often the most vulnerable and severely hit by extreme climate events and disasters, especially in low- and middle-income countries. It is no surprise that local and regional governments lead in climate change mitigation and adaptation, testing innovative approaches for transition into renewable energy and in the response to extreme weather events.[31] To date, 9,322 cities have committed to the fight against climate change under the framework of the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy.[32]

Dakar is implementing its Territorial Climate Energy Plan (PCET) to reduce pollution assisted by the Covenant of Mayors and EU funding.[33] Izmir, the third-largest city in Turkey, committed to a 20 percent CO_2 emission cut by 2020 through the Izmir Development Agency's sustainability plan to improve public transport efficiency through renewable energy electrification.[34] Recife, Brazil, developed a climate change mitigation and adaptation plan to strengthen its public transport system.[35]

The Australian state of Queensland launched in 2017 an ambitious integrated energy policy to achieve 50 percent renewable energy by 2030 with the creation of CleanCo, a renewable publicly owned energy generator.[36] The initiative aims to ensure a stable,

affordable energy supply and to create 4,600 quality jobs for local communities transitioning away from carbon-intensive generation. The plan was developed with the involvement of local energy workers, their trade unions and civil society groups. A "Just Transition" consultative forum was set up to inform the transition policy framework and support the local community along the process.[37]

In November 2013, typhoon Haiyan hit the Philippines causing over 6,000 deaths, displacing over 4 million people, and leaving 90 percent of Tacloban City destroyed.[38] Drawing from this tragic event and recognizing the fundamental role of public emergency workers in responding to extreme climate events and post-disaster rebuilding, Bislig City agreed in 2016 to develop a comprehensive disaster preparedness action plan in cooperation with its workers' union,[39] recognizing that "a functioning and effective social dialogue between local government employers and workers (...) is the essential condition for a successful disaster preparedness scheme".[40]

Making public procurement socially and environmentally responsible

Representing on average 10-15 percent of a country's GDP,[41] the public procurement of goods, services, works, utilities and infrastructure building is a key instrument for governments to fulfil their mandates. Subnational governments are major public procurement agents, accounting for almost 40 percent of the

30 UN (2018), p. 9.
31 See Climate Chance (2018) for thematic initiatives and city case studies led by subnational governments.
32 See www.globalcovenantofmayors.org/.
33 See www.reseau-cicle.org/wp-content/uploads/rapport_final_arene_pcti_dakar_vf2_04_04_2016.pdf.
34 See www.investinizmir.com/upload/Node/27742/xfiles/2014-2023_ingilizce.pdf.
35 See http://www2.recife.pe.gov.br/sites/default/files/plano_de_baixo_co2_recife.pdf.
36 See https://cleancoqueensland.com.au/.
37 See https://desbt.qld.gov.au/employment/transition-programs/just-transition.
38 See e.g. www.worldvision.org/disaster-relief-news-stories/typhoon-haiyan-facts.
39 The Bislig City Employee Association, affiliated to the Public Services Labour Independent Association (PSILINK); https://pslinkconfederation.wordpress.com/tag/bislig-city-employees-association.
40 With the help of a union solidarity fund, Bislig emergency workers can upskill, get disaster preparedness training and personal protective equipment to better respond to their city emergencies and save lives and infrastructures. See www.world-psi.org/en/memorandum-undertaking-disaster-risk-reduction-between-local-government-bislig-city-and-psilink.
41 See www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/gproc_e/gproc_e.htm.

world total public investment.[42] By promoting and implementing socially responsible public procurement beyond price-only considerations, local and regional governments exercise a powerful lever for implementing the SDGs. The inclusion of labour and environmental clauses in public procurement tenders and contracts enables local authorities to promote sustainable sourcing practices along short and long supply chains.[43]

In Bordeaux, since 2017 a team of the city's public procurement officials and CFDT Interco union representatives have been looking at the sustainability of procurement contracts. Their pilot project, covering the industrial laundry cleaning of municipal workers' uniforms, involved approaching and visiting contracted suppliers, disentangling their supply chains, and agreeing on manageable improvements to enhance the social and environmental performance of the city's public contracts.[44] This approach led to sharpened sustainability specifications in the city's contracts and earned the union the only stakeholder place in the city's *Steering Committee for Public Procurement Innovation*.[45]

Conclusions

Local governments and their communities are actively taking up the urban and territorial challenges of our times to meet the SDGs and comply with global sustainability policy frameworks. To do so, they need adequate resources, powers and institutional capacity to transform cities and local communities into hubs of opportunity, sustainability and inclusion for all. Effective decentralization,

subnational government empowerment, adequate financing, improved cooperation among all levels of government, and interagency policy coherence are necessary requirements if local authorities are to step up their efforts to localize implementation of SDGs.

Systematic involvement and dialogue with public service workers and their unions are a precondition to succeed in the many challenges cities and territories face every day, as subnational government staff need to have the appropriate skills, equipment and decent working conditions to deliver quality public services to their local communities. Finally, collaborative, participatory, democratic, multilevel governance involving all local stakeholders is critical to ensure that urban and territorial development is inclusive and sustainable and can fulfil the promise that no one and no place will be left behind.

42 OECD-UCLG (2016).

43 Examples include contract specifications to foster social inclusion and fight poverty in their communities by selecting local bidders that employ workers under decent conditions; pay a living wage; negotiate and implement collective agreements; and facilitate access to employment for disabled, vulnerable, young workers or to the long-term unemployed.

44 Bordeaux's procurement contracts incorporate by default social clauses with a focus on professional rehabilitation, see www.achatsresponsables-aquitaine.fr/images/documents/SPASER_BxMtropole_2016.pdf.

45 See www.world-psi.org/fr/les-agents-territoriaux-et-syndicalistes-cfdt-interco-sengagent-dans-une-demarche-innovante-sur-les.

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