

# Prioritising initiatives at the city level to achieve the SDGs

## Policy recommendations from the comparative co-production project Implementing the New Urban Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals: Comparative Urban Perspectives

Prioritisation among the 169 targets and indicators of the 17 SDGs is essential but challenging. This document presents highlights of a knowledge exchange between people from city governments and academic institutions in Buenos Aires, Cape Town, Gothenburg, Kisumu, Malmö, Sheffield and Shimla, with recommendations for helping cities to achieve the SDGs.

This Policy Brief was developed collectively by members of the Mistra Urban Futures project “Implementing the New Urban Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals: Comparative Urban Perspectives”<sup>1</sup> who in 2017-2019 have discussed the SDGs prioritisation processes.



## 7 CITIES AROUND THE WORLD

- In Kisumu, SDGs have been mainstreamed within the development plans and County Integrated Development Plans, then cascaded into the Annual Development plans with budget lines. Directly addressing SDG target 11.1, extra funding has been acquired to develop over 2000 affordable housing units through private public partnership arrangements and direct funding from the national government.
- Malmö has a five step strategy for localising Agenda 2030. In the new city budget for 2020, the global goals will be aligned with the goals for the city, thus providing a unified framework for prioritising.
- In both Buenos Aires and Cape Town, the 100 Resilient Cities strategies have provided opportunities for the cities to prioritise the topic of resilience. The city of Buenos Aires also presented a Voluntary Local Review (VLR) to the UN in 2019, outlining the city's priorities. Cape Town and Malmö committed in 2019 to present VLRs in the future.
- Also in Buenos Aires and Cape Town, international co-production helped to focus on SDG 11, particularly on housing issues in Buenos Aires. .
- In Malmö, a new local coastal strategy for implementing SDG 14, Life Below Water, is a direct result of Agenda 2030.
- Not all cities have used the 2030 Agenda framework to prioritise initiatives. Such is the case in Gothenburg and Sheffield where there is no clear mandate to use the SDGs and thus the localisation processes still are at an early stage (in 2019)

<sup>1</sup> For more information, please see <https://www.mistraurbanfutures.org/en/project/implementing-new-urban-agenda-and-sustainable-development-goals-comparative-urban>

# Challenges and Opportunities

The challenges and opportunities for municipalities in prioritising as they implement the 2030 Agenda are all connected with issues such as the mandates of various institutions (for example, over which issues the municipality has responsibility), power dynamics, legitimacy, political dynamics, old ways of working in relation to the need for new methods that are inclusive and, not the least, contribute to accelerating action.

Additional challenges for cities are to define the relative timing of priorities, as well as the scale and scope of policies. Part of the influence of timing also relates to the need to be aware of the available opportunities and to be prepared for readjusting priorities in cases of shocks and sudden crises (e.g. droughts, migration waves).

Other issues to consider regarding prioritisation processes include the capability and capacity of cities which develop and use strategies, policies, programmes, projects and initiatives as well the links between short, medium and long-term budget and goals which should be taken into account.

## **MISMATCHING MANDATES**

The mandates of cities and different departments within city administrations varies and often there are overlaps and duplications within city departments, and even cities and other government agencies, which can lead to conflicts in the implementation stage. Different mandates can also create mismatches between the needs of populations and set political priorities in comparison to pressing needs at different levels. In addition, many cities struggle with an organisation based on sectors and silos, which is deeply ingrained in the working culture and is pervasive for the cross-sectoral work needed to address sustainability challenges.

## **POLITICS OF PRIORITISATION**

It is important to consider who is being included in the prioritisation process. Municipal priorities are often defined by small groups of politicians and city officials. The potential problem with this is that short-political term imperatives take precedence over medium and longer-term needs. Another aspect that influences prioritisation is the time periods that are considered in the process. Politicians tend to focus on issues that can achieve results during their political terms, which normally range between 3 and 5 years. In addition, evidence-based work is often excluded from priority setting and policy development.

## **IMPLEMENTATION**

Prioritisation is just the first step. The next step and the most critical one is implementation. To be able to realise the SDGs, cities need to define where they aim to be by 2030, which includes defining concrete targets based on the city's baseline, capacities and priorities. 2030 is just ten years away and there is a need to accelerate action to achieve the SDGs. There are many initiatives taking place in relation to these global goals (even if they are not always framed as SDG work). Actions aimed at achieving the SDGs are taking place even at the individual level. Many of these initiatives are happening outside of the city administration, in an unco-ordinated manner.

## **LIMITED INNOVATION AND RISK AVERSION**

In the city context where there is pressure to meet local needs and increasing demands for resources, cities often use established and known methods and processes, this may mean that there is less emphasis on considering new ideas and techniques, innovate as well as consider more medium to longer term outcomes.



In Kisumu, Kenya, the SDGs have been mainstreamed into the development plans of City and County.



In 2019, Malmö (left) and Cape Town (right) both committed to present Voluntary Local Reviews in the future.

# Prioritisation as part of Agenda 2030

Cities will have to act fast to accelerate development and find ways of realigning the activities in accordance with the SDGs. Too much time has already been spent on preparations for the localisation processes. Cities have mandates and levers which can be used to provide a foundation for this, with enhanced possibilities and powers to achieve real impacts.

The prioritisation process means making choices about what to do, considering the ultimate goal is the implementation of policies to address the 2030 Agenda and accomplish its targets within the next 10 years. Globally, the agenda presents the vision of the 17 goals as holistic, but when cities have to localise them, they are compelled to consider their own priorities. A few common threads between the successful examples of prioritising are:

- Managing to time and align national and sub-national agendas with the SDGs for ease of implementation.
- Finding synergies and alignment with other initiatives
- Using international co-operation for funding and new partnerships
- External partnerships are important to ensure wider inclusion and greater impact, as well as mutual learning
- Seeking multifunctionality, through which benefits and effects are identified from one initiative on several goals in terms of efficient and effective use of resources for implementation and outcomes and impact
- Cross-departmental collaboration within municipalities towards specific goals as well as multi-level collaboration.

Within the 2030 Agenda framework, cities can define different approaches and methods to address their own goals:

- Prioritisation: selecting some goals or targets
- Re-prioritisation: considering some undervalued goals, targets or particular issues
- Multifunctional vision: defining cross-cutting issues related to several goals or targets and incentivising collaboration dynamics (working beyond the silos of cities administrations)
- Going beyond a pre-established agenda, which means including issues that are not being considered by the global agenda
- Matching needs to budget and guidelines from national level to local realities, which involves defining local needs within national guidelines.

In order to characterise prioritisation processes in cities, the following questions could be a starting point:

- How are cities actually prioritising their policies?
- Who is involved in the prioritisation process and who is not?
- How are cities using the SDGs to prioritise policies?
- What does prioritisation mean in terms of action?

# Policy recommendations

There are only 10 years remaining to achieve Agenda 2030. It means that we have to take big steps and move fast with courage and commitment. We have to proceed together with a wide range of stakeholders.

The following are some suggestions for prioritisation processes in cities, in order to accelerate the achievement of local goals in the framework of the 2030 Agenda.

## METHODOLOGIES

It would be useful for the United Nations to develop guidance on prioritisation and implementation at the national and city levels.

It is necessary to design innovative methods and tools to optimize prioritisation processes.

Integrate international best practices and learnings into local processes and plans.

Test activities and proposals early in the process and be prepared to make necessary adjustments during implementation.

Include independent evaluation and monitoring tools in the 2030 Agenda processes that focus on impact rather than activities.

Be aware of the broader intentions of the SDGs as a holistic agenda and the principle of indivisibility of the goals in the prioritisation process. Try to bring focus to pressing needs while finding synergies with other issues encompassed in the Agenda.

## RESOURCES

Ensure the necessary resources to support the implementation of prioritised goals and issues in the short, medium and long terms.

Find ways of mapping and co-ordinating information around initiatives, to maximise resources, expertise and impact.

Link projects to achieve multi-functionality for resource efficiency and reduce trade-offs and conflicts between implementation objectives.

Highlight initiatives carried out by the private sector and civil society and leverage the resources, expertise and energy they contribute.

## ACTORS

Working in multi-disciplinary teams at the city and higher levels is imperative.

Train local government officials on the prioritisation and implementation processes, using references to practical examples.

Include collaborations, consultations and partnerships with relevant experts and stakeholders to develop co-production methodologies and take advantage of different knowledges and experiences.

Deepen co-production with a broader range of actors from communities, academics and the private sector. This increases public-private participation, but requires allowing more voices contribute to the process.

Mistra Urban Futures strives towards Realising Just Cities which are Accessible, Green and Fair. This is achieved through transdisciplinary co-production and comparative urban research at Local Interaction Platforms in Cape Town, Gothenburg, Kisumu, Sheffield-Manchester and Skåne. It is funded by the Mistra Foundation for Strategic Development, the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida), and seven consortium members.



## MISTRA URBAN FUTURES

Postal address: Chalmers University of Technology, SE-412 96 Göteborg, Sweden  
Visiting address: Läraregatan 3, Göteborg, Sweden  
[www.mistraurbanfutures.org](http://www.mistraurbanfutures.org)