

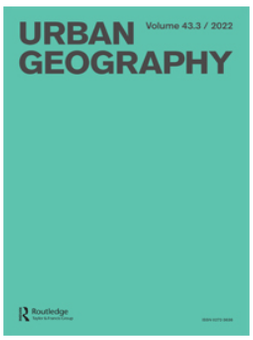
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# Co-producing urban expertise for SDG localization: the history and practices of urban knowledge production in South Africa

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**ABSTRACT**

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are used as an entry point to consider issues and questions surrounding the forms of urban expertise that are required to achieve transformative and sustainable urban development. The article builds on the authors' experiences as researchers working co-productively with South African municipalities through the African Centre for Cities, an interdisciplinary research hub at the University of Cape Town. Insights from the literature on urban policy mobilities are deployed alongside those from an emerging literature on transdisciplinary research and knowledge co-production for global policy implementation. The aims are, first, to identify emerging kinds of urban expertise that are produced and mobilized by constellations of actors involved in the advancement of global development policies at the city scale and, second, to examine the role of city-university partnerships in producing particular forms of urban expertise to support SDG localization. Locating this work within a longer genealogy of urban governance reform in South Africa, it is shown that the conditions under which effective co-productive relationships can be built and institutionalized are highly context specific and geographically uneven. Understanding and assembling such conditions will enable cities to benefit from the forms of expertise these can engender.

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SDG localization; urban expertise; policy mobilities; transdisciplinary research; co-production; Cape Town

## Introduction

There is a growing literature on the urban dimensions and implications of global development agreements such as Agenda 2030, represented by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and in particular the significance of the inclusion of a stand-alone objective to make cities and human settlements everywhere more "inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable" as SDG 11 (Parnell, 2016). Cities represent key sites of global demographic and economic growth; consequently, city actions are and will be increasingly central to driving progress towards SDG 11 in addition to many other interrelated global

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development objectives, ranging from the eradication of poverty to climate change responses. However, the uneven technical and financial resources, political mandates and data available at the city level to monitor and implement development policies and interventions means that such progress is only possible if global goals are implemented in ways that are attuned to specific local contexts and capacities (Klopp & Petretta, 2017; Simon et al., 2016; Valencia et al., 2019). This recognition has prompted calls for placing "localization" – the process of "taking into account subnational 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" (Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments [GTLRG], 2016, p. 6) – at the heart of SDG implementation.

The past decade has seen a wide range of stakeholders emerge with an interest in promoting and supporting processes of SDG localization, which encompass practices of awareness-raising, advocacy, implementation and monitoring, reporting and evaluation (GTLRG, 2016). These stakeholders (which include United Nations (UN) agencies, city networks, global consultancy firms and private sector service providers) have developed a range of mapping exercises, diagnostics, toolkits, training guides and monitoring platforms and instruments to support SDG localization in ways that "leave no one behind" (UN, 2015). However, researchers have critiqued the role of such actors in contributing to the depoliticization and commodification of the implementation of global development policies and agendas. For instance, Leitner et al. (2018, pp. 1276–1277) argue that they are part of a "dense network of public, private, non-profit sector actors" that are involved in the top-down roll-out of policies, "producing norms that circulate globally" so that "private sector involvement becomes an integral part of urban development planning and governance". Others, by contrast, have pointed to the benefits of the involvement and contribution of a variety of actors, including those from local civil society organizations and academia, in furthering processes of SDG localization, building effective localization strategies, and sharing examples of good localization practice within and across cities (Fox & Macleod, 2021; Morales et al., 2021; Perry et al., 2021; Valencia et al., 2019).

In this paper, we argue that supporting the effective uptake and implementation of SDG localization processes requires a recognition of the ways in which local configurations of urban expertise are not simply imposed or transferred in a unidirectional manner by self-interested external actors, but may be co-produced and mobilized by a constellation of actors involved in the advancement of global development policies. Specifically, we point to the role of city-university partnerships in producing particular kinds of urban expertise that may contribute to SDG localization. Theoretically, we build on insights from an extensive literature on urban policy mobilities, on the one hand, and an emerging literature on transdisciplinary research and knowledge co-production for global policy implementation, on the other. In doing so, we show how processes of co-production often unfold over extended periods of time, reflecting the multiple, incremental and at times non-linear ways in which global policies may (or may not) travel to the local level (Robin & Nkula-Wenz, 2021; Wood, 2015). Moreover, they are shaped by the particular social and politico-institutional histories and legacies of different contexts, as well as local networks of policy actors and knowledge exchange (McCann, 2011, 2013; McCann and Ward, 2013; Robinson, 2011). Effective SDG

localization, therefore, requires engaging with these temporal dimensions of co-production and reform, including the historical legacies that impact on contemporary governance imperatives.

Empirically, we build on our own experience as researchers at the African Centre for Cities (ACC), an interdisciplinary research hub located at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, and our co-productive work with South African metropolitan local governments, with a particular focus on the case of Cape Town. In doing so, we foreground the particular role that academic researchers can play in co-producing urban policy expertise, while maintaining that the space, extent and modalities of such co-production are context-dependent and subject to change over time, in response to changing pressures and agendas. On one hand, we draw on experiences of action research undertaken by the first author as part of an international comparative research project focusing on the implementation of the SDGs in seven cities across the world under the aegis of the Mistra Urban Futures network. Between 2017 and 2019, the first author worked as an embedded researcher in the City of Cape Town, working with city officials in the City's Policy and Strategy unit on the development of an approach to SDG localization (Croese et al., 2019). This involved the joint exploration of possible avenues for SDG localization, such as the alignment of existing as well as new municipal plans, policies and programmes with the SDGs, sectoral and budget planning and alignment, SDG data and monitoring, as well as the facilitation of internal and external knowledge exchanges on the SDGs. On the other hand, the second author was involved in a project of knowledge co-production with the Cities Support Programme (CSP), a vehicle for urban reform and city support established in 2011 within the South African National Treasury. The CSP has introduced reforms to the South African fiscal, regulatory and policy environment to enable the country's large urban municipalities to promote more productive, sustainable and inclusive modes of urban development. Cape Town was one of eight metropolitan municipalities targeted by the work of the CSP. The project, designed as a co-produced initiative between the CSP and ACC, sought to document the CSP's experiences and lessons in order to inform future policy options and debates on urban reform and expertise in South Africa and elsewhere (Duminy & Parnell, 2020). This work entailed extensive analysis of the secondary literatures on historical and contemporary urban reform in South Africa, working with CSP representatives to define the scope and focus of the research, as well as undertaking around 50 interviews with academics, policymakers and practitioners involved in processes and debates surrounding post-apartheid urban reform.

Our involvement in these processes offers insights born of participant observation, while also raising a problem of positionality. Our arguments and conclusions surrounding urban expertise are necessarily biased towards the approach and work of the ACC, which is only one recent (relatively well-funded) example, among many, of an applied urban research hub in South Africa. Broadly speaking, our perceptions of success for the projects in which we were involved are shaped by the fact of our active participation. However, we do not face an ethnographic dilemma of trying to discern *participation* from *observation*. Indeed, our participation as academic researchers in processes of urban governance reform constitutes part of our object of analysis. Our concern is not to judge the success or failure of these projects, but rather to reflect on what they tell us about emerging forms of urban expertise in an era of a global urban agenda for

sustainable development, and how such forms of expertise are always mediated by the particular demands of specific political and institutional contexts.

Without arguing for South African exceptionalism, then, we draw on our insights as co-productive researchers to call attention to the importance of understanding the various trajectories through which urban expertise emerges and interfaces with global development policy and practice. In order to identify the different kinds of urban expertise that may be produced, mobilized and assembled in the advancement of global development policies, we start by putting the policy mobilities literature in conversation with insights from a growing literature on transdisciplinary research. We then move on to a discussion of the evolution of urban expertise in post-apartheid South Africa to show how an emerging community of urban practitioners has been key to shaping the preconditions for critical academic engagement with processes of urban policy, reform and knowledge production. This is illustrated by reflecting on the partnership that was forged between the City and the University of Cape Town, which in more recent years provided essential grounds for the development of a collaborative project around SDG localization. In a national urban context marked by profound historical rupture and transformation, these experiences surface some of the emerging roles played by researchers and academics in the ways that urban knowledge is co-produced and applied in the search for new pathways and spaces for transformative policy and practice.

## Co-producing urban expertise for SDG localization

The SDGs were designed to overcome the narrow understanding of development and the limited scope of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Fukuda-Parr, 2016). This ambition resulted in the production of an extensive monitoring and review framework, with 17 goals, 169 targets and 231 respective unique indicators (covering social, economic and environmental domains of development) that apply to "developed" and "developing" countries alike. For many contexts, it is the implementation of this monitoring framework that to date has invited and activated most external involvement and expertise, as the framework requires national and local governments to conduct baseline studies and indicator assessments, and to align their local statistical and planning frameworks with UN-approved methodologies, to ensure an appropriate interface with the SDGs. For these purposes, numerous international organizations and agencies have provided assistance to national and city governments as a starting point for SDG implementation (Kanuri et al., 2016). At the national level, such assistance includes the work of UN agencies on assessments of SDG indicator data "readiness" (Woolfrey, 2020). At the city level, it includes initiatives such as the development of an SDG monitoring platform through the City Prosperity Initiative of UN-Habitat, the creation of global hubs for real-time SDG data, as well as the establishment of "local data hubs" by semi-private organizations such as the Sustainable Development Solutions Network and World Council on City Data. Such initiatives have triggered a rush by cities to "climb the ladder" of newly created SDG monitoring and implementation indices, aided by the rise of an entire industry surrounding "urban indicators", "smart cities" and data analytics (Herzi and Hasan, 2004; Hollands, 2008 cited in Klopp & Petretta, 2017). In this regard, some scholars have expressed concern that:

> When thinking about SDGs and the array of targets and possible indicators, which will be deployed to measure improvements on wellbeing around the world, it follows that there will be a reproduction of the exceptionality of the expert in their role as defining, framing and measuring whatever matters in people's lives. This is when the role of the expert in defining people's lives becomes more explicit and, hence, controversial (Caprotti et al., 2017, p. 369).

Caprotti and colleagues go on to caution that "as discourses of entrepreneurialism and neoliberalism impact on cities and become embedded in urban policy", municipal agencies and officials may "lose hold of mechanisms of control in different areas of spatial and environmental policy" (2017, p. 369). In a similar vein, scholars of policy mobilities have long cautioned against the flattening and homogenizing force of global policies through international benchmarking and the contributions of policy experts to the emergence of systems of policy governmentality (Larner, 2002; Larner & Le Heron, 2002, 2004). Many such critiques focus on the role of private-sector agents and experts in the transfer and circulation of policy ideas and models across the globe. These are "urban policy entrepreneurs" (Hoyt, 2006); members of a "new specialist elite" (Larner, 2002, p. 663 following Porter 1995), "global consultocracy" (McCann, 2011 following Saint-Martin 2000), development industry or "complex" (Leitner et al. 2018 following Peck, 2011), who roam the globe in search of willing entrepreneurial candidates to rapidly export or import best practices (Peck & Theodore, 2010) with little regard for local contexts or long-term outcomes.

This work, in turn, has faced some constructive pushback, with several scholars illustrating the multiple, incremental and at times non-linear ways in which global policies may (or may not) travel to and "land" at the local level (Robin & Nkula-Wenz, 2021; Wood, 2015). Others have drawn attention to the wide array of actors and agents involved in the business of (urban) policy transfer and mobilization. These may include supranational institutions, philanthropic organizations, global consultancy firms, finance and IT companies, international development NGOs, as well as local policy actors and civil society groups (McCann, 2011; Perry, 2011; Wood, 2019). Some researchers note that these actors each bring their own interests, histories and "embodied knowledges", with differing outcomes (Harris & Moore, 2013; Larner & Laurie, 2010). Studies such as these have enhanced our understanding of the various forms of agency and possibility that shape the outcomes of urban policy circulations (Robinson, 2011). However, to date their insights have not been put in conversation with the growing literature on transdisciplinary research, which focuses on the benefits of the transfer and exchange of knowledge and expertise between different types of actors as a necessary condition for overcoming complex developmental challenges and problems, especially in the area of urban development and sustainability (Lang et al., 2012; Polk, 2015). This literature highlights the importance of "iterative and collaborative processes involving diverse types of expertise, knowledge and actors to produce context-specific knowledge and pathways towards a sustainable future" as key aspects of a transdisciplinary research agenda that bridges the gaps between research, policy and practice (Norström et al., 2020). More specifically, researchers have emphasized the benefits of transdisciplinary research for advancing SDG implementation through various types of co-production that involve the private sector, civil society and academia (eg. Fritz et al., 2019).

Our focus here is on processes of co-production between government and academic institutions, and the emerging role of universities in the (inter)mediation of flows and

relationships of urban knowledge and expertise (May & Perry, 2018; Perry, 2011). A growing literature on city-university partnerships has highlighted the contribution of such partnerships, noting that universities represent important place-based vehicles for the co-design and co-production of urban sustainability (Trencher et al., 2014). More specifically, universities can provide valuable research capacity to urban local governments, helping to strengthen knowledge platforms to inform municipal decision-making and policy development for SDG implementation (Rankmore, 2020, p. 3). This body of literature is significant because effective SDG localization in cities goes beyond traditional modes and exercises of data collection, indicator mapping and monitoring. It requires in-depth engagement and assessment of existing targets and indicators in relation to local data and monitoring frameworks (Hansson et al., 2019). Moreover, it calls for raising awareness of, and planning for, the cross-sectoral implementation of local plans and policies in ways that align with the SDGs while fitting local priorities, resources and capacities. This requires a collaborative approach to SDG localization that does not simply "add on" but integrates the SDGs into existing municipal structures and operations. Such an approach in turn demands "coherence" that is "dependent on aspects such as structure, leadership and coordination" while also encompassing "flexibility, organizational learning and not least time and timing" (Krantz & Gustafsson, 2021, p. 2655).

Recently documented experiences of co-production at the city level show how city-university partnerships can contribute to SDG localization. In Los Angeles, cross-departmental teams of officials from the City of Los Angeles followed a "task force" model in working with academics and students from five universities. Their task force assessed the application of SDG targets and indicators to the city context and worked to translate the SDGs into local actions, thereby contributing to the development of the first Voluntary Local Review for Los Angeles (Morales et al., 2021). In Bristol, an informal stakeholder network (that ultimately crystallized as the Bristol SDG Alliance) – consisting of over 170 stakeholders from non-profit organizations, private firms, local city government, the city's two universities and the Bristol City Council – forged opportunities to expand and deepen interest in the SDGs within the city government. Here the use of a mechanism of "embedded advocacy" was key; a process through which an academic researcher worked full-time with City Council staff on embedding the SDGs into Bristol's One City Plan (Fox & Macleod, 2021). In Greater Manchester and Sheffield, by contrast, university researchers fulfilled the role of "lynchpins in cross-sectoral partnerships", working with city officials to identify challenges to SDG localization and "tactics" for their alleviation through collaborative research projects and workshops (Perry et al., 2021, p. 12).

The success of these city-university partnerships illustrates the value of such an approach, even if these examples focus on cities of the global North. Several key questions emerge from their insights – how do city-university partnerships emerge? Who champions such partnerships? What kind of expertise do they build on and produce, and how can such expertise be mobilized in support of SDG localization? In the discussion that follows, we build on the example of SDG localization in South Africa, specifically Cape Town, to address these questions and to argue that the context-specific historical, social and political actors and factors that enable (or hinder) the co-production of urban expertise need to be carefully traced and understood. Core to our argument is the fact

that, in confronting the specific challenges presented by the SDG process, South African cities like Cape Town have been in the relatively fortunate position of being able to draw upon an established epistemic community and a precedent of academic critical engagement in urban policy and practice.[1] More specifically, we highlight the key role played by an emergent network or cohort of actors, often former anti-apartheid activists, who in post-apartheid years were able to forge an urban policy space marked by progressive urban policies, frameworks and ongoing partnerships.

## Urban expertise and critical engagement in post-apartheid South Africa

Recalling the range and shifts of urban policy debates in twentieth-century South Africa reveals how the influence and constraints of various kinds of "urban expertise" can shift over time, and how this influence is always mediated by wider pressures and agendas. From the initial dominance of public health as a way of framing and controlling key urban problems in the early twentieth century (Parnell, 1993; Swanson, 1977), through the central role played by modernist planners and engineers in mid-century projects of "reconstruction" and apartheid (Kane, 2011; Mabin, 1995; Mabin & Smit, 1997), and on to the post-apartheid expectations of the "participatory planner" – for each iteration of the South African "urban question" new kinds of actors and expertise have been placed at centre stage (Duminy & Parnell, 2020). Successive generations of urban experts faced differing constraints (born of wider political-economic imperatives and governance structures) over what they could or could not do. As we will argue, the historical legacies of expectations and constraints facing "urban experts" in a particular context shapes the way in which later policy and development initiatives – including those aiming to localize global policy accords – can be implemented.

The end of official apartheid policy and the transition towards democratic rule in South Africa brought new expectations and expertise into the urban domain. By contrast with the country's international isolation experienced in previous decades, in the early 1990s new sources of international expertise were brought to bear on South African urban reform processes through World Bank technical assistance missions, the arrangement of international study tours and other mechanisms (Harrison, 2001; Tomlinson, 2002). In the resulting policy context, planners were positioned centrally in the project of reconstructing the country's unequal and rapidly growing towns and cities (Mabin & Smit, 1997). But they were also ascribed new roles within the delivery of integrated urban development and the wider political objectives of material redress and decentralization. As participation became a keystone of post-apartheid urban and developmental policy, planning professionals were increasingly expected to act as mediators of local community engagements and objectives. This was, in part, a reaction to the reputation of the profession as a technocratic enabler of apartheid and, in part, the local expression of a broader international critique of top-down master planning in favour of more flexible and strategic approaches to practice (Pieterse, 2004).

The new mediatory knowledge and skills expected of post-apartheid planners represented a continuity in practice with the longer history of activist planning and technical assistance provided by urban-sector non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the 1980s and early 1990s (Van Ryneveld, 2006). Young activists working with NGOs like Planact had brought together community-based leaders, urban professionals, and

scholars to articulate new visions and strategies of participatory urbanism in a direct challenge to apartheid authoritarianism. Many of those activists later came to occupy key positions within the new democratic state, where they faced new kinds of bureaucratic pressures and constraints (Tomlinson, 2002). One result was the emergence in South Africa of a generational community of urban scholars, practitioners, activists, and officials who were steeped in the demands of local practice and critical engagement, and who were tuned into larger international debates around how cities function and how they should be governed (Duminy & Parnell, 2020).

This generation of urban practitioners varied in their professional pathways and domains. Billy Cobbett, for instance, moved from organizing local development projects for Planact to a role as director general for the National Department of Housing in Nelson Mandela's Government of National Unity, before taking up senior positions at UN-Habitat and Cities Alliance. Andrew Boraine and Philip van Ryneveld moved from their activist initiatives with the United Democratic Front (UDF) into positions in local and national government, before branching out into work for a range of multilateral and international agencies. Edgar Pieterse founded the Cape Town-based development NGO Isandla Institute before taking a position as a senior advisor in provincial government, and before then becoming the founding director of the African Centre for Cities (ACC). Vanessa Watson, who was instrumental in establishing the ACC, had played a part in the UDF-affiliated United Women's Organisation (UWO), consulted for Planact and with others in the mid-1980s established the Development Action Group, an NGO based in Cape Town seeking alternatives to apartheid's urban development legacy. Later she entered planning academia full time at UCT. Many of these individuals knew one another at a personal level, moved between intellectual and practical spaces, connected South African conversations and experiences with those of other contexts, and continued to work on similar projects or themes.

For our current purposes, the key point is that the post-1994 era of policy development and state building carved out a new space for the involvement of academics in processes of urban reform in South Africa. Many urban scholars, like David Dewar, Susan Parnell, Vanessa Watson, Philip Harrison and Alison Todes, who had been activist-critics of state intervention in the lives of ordinary urban residents prior to the democratic transition, found themselves in demand as consultants and advisors to the private sector, civil society, donors and government agencies (Parnell, 2007). New roles were cast for the academic-as-critical-insider and "activist intellectual" – roles predicated on co-productive, rather than strictly critical or oppositional, modes of engagement with actors in these other sectors. Moreover, the relationships, networks and modes of working forged in this post-apartheid period have structured much of what these urban academics, and those who have engaged with their work, seek to do in their research and teaching.

Based on their experiences of "critical engagement" in practice and policy development, a number of these urban scholars sought to explicitly challenge and contribute to mainstream urban scholarly debates, including those dominant in the global North (Oldfield et al., 2004; Parnell, 1997, 2007; Watson, 2002, 2003, 2009). For some, those experiences have highlighted the advantages of "decentring" the university within knowledge production, physically shifting the location of that production within and beyond the space of the university, and thus reconfiguring academic practice in ways that

straddle the domains of university, community and society (Oldfield et al., 2004). For Sophie Oldfield (2015), recognizing that urban knowledge is produced in multiple sites and registers enables us to identify wider sets of formative urban practices and processes than would be afforded by more conventional modes of researching the city. That recognition also has the potential to enable new research agendas, methodologies and knowledges that avoid the universalist pretensions of much "expert" knowledge – knowledge that often overlooks the specific contextual demands of doing research on African cities – while also responding to the imperatives of addressing profound local urban problems of poverty, violence and inequality (Oldfield, 2015; Parnell & Pieterse, 2016).

What emerged, at least in some academic sites, was an emerging praxis of "translational" knowledge production both as a way to address pressing issues of urban transformation and as a mechanism to reorient the urban theoretical and methodological project at large (Parnell & Pieterse, 2016). Thus South African cities have arguably provided a useful, if not unique, example of "the blurring of boundaries between theory, practice and civic engagement" (Smit et al., 2015, p. 52), with members of the urban intellectual community actively reflecting on the theoretical import of their engagements well before similar debates on the role of universities in urban knowledge production gained traction in the global North (Addie, 2017). Here we explore this "blurring" of sectoral boundaries through the particular example of the African Centre for Cities or ACC.

## City-university co-production in Cape Town

The ACC was established in 2007 as an interdisciplinary research hub at UCT with the aim of producing new knowledge to address the poly-crises facing African cities (Parnell et al., 2009; Pieterse, 2013). The ACC emerged from the ideas and interactions of a network of Cape Town-based urban academics, NGO actors, and officials who collectively recognized the need to enhance the quality of, and to scale-up, urban research on the continent. While the Centre's scope of work was regional, addressing contexts and problems across sub-Saharan Africa, co-producing knowledge that was deeply embedded within the challenges facing Cape Town was a priority from its inception (Parnell et al., 2009).

What in later years came to be known as a methodology of knowledge "co-production" or "translation" has been a core and foundational element to the work of the ACC (Parnell & Pieterse 2016). This work started in 2008 with the CityLab programme, consisting of a total of six thematic or place-based engagements. The CityLabs were undertaken in formats ranging from think tanks, to seminar series, to discrete projects aimed at stimulating "interdisciplinary engagement between researchers and practitioners on the production and sharing of policy-relevant research on key issues facing Cape Town" (Anderson et al., 2013, p. 3). In addition, the ACC assisted in convening a series of "policy roundtables" through which academics advised the City, as well as provincial government, on specific policy issues (Smit et al., 2015, p. 58). In 2012 this work was augmented with the launch of the Knowledge Transfer Programme (KTP), a unique collaboration between the ACC and the City of Cape Town, as part of the Mistra Urban Futures research network programme. Key to the programme was its bi-directional nature, as it straddled the researcher-practitioner divide by, on the one hand, enabling doctoral researchers to spend prolonged periods of time in the city

government while, on the other hand, allowing City employees to spend time at the University as part of a City Officials Exchange Programme (Smit et al., 2015, pp. 58–59).

Patel et al. (2015) demonstrate how this partnership with the City allowed for the sharing, deepening and generation of new substantive knowledge about Cape Town and its regulatory decision-making processes. Such knowledge transcended institutional boundaries and therefore offered a basis for developing alternatives to "best practice" solutions that were grounded in the needs and realities of the local context. Key among the specific conditions that enabled the success of the KTP was the history of personal engagements between the programme researchers and practitioners, which contributed to an already existing degree of trust (Miszczak & Patel, 2018). This was facilitated by the presence of numerous UCT graduates in positions within City departments and institutions (Smit et al., 2015, p. 54). Such interpersonal and institutional relationships were an essential precondition for a later project centred on the localization of the SDGs.

## Localizing the SDGs in Cape Town

As part of the second phase of the KTP a comparative research project was started focusing on the implementation of the SDGs and New Urban Agenda in the cities of Cape Town, Kisumu (Kenya), Gothenburg and Malmö (both Sweden), Sheffield (United Kingdom), Shimla (India) and Buenos Aires (Argentina) (Valencia et al., 2019, 2020). This project built on a pilot programme focusing on SDG 11 indicators, conducted in 2015, which also involved officials from the City of Cape Town and ACC researchers (Patel et al., 2017). For the later project, a critical element of the co-production process was the hosting of an embedded academic researcher in the Policy and Strategy unit of the City of Cape Town. Between 2017 and 2019, the embedded researcher worked with officials to develop an approach to SDG localization.

Although the City of Cape Town and the ACC already held a Memorandum of Understanding as part of their broader collaboration under the KTP, the inclusion of the embedded researcher required the elaboration of a detailed Terms of Reference (ToR). This document outlined the aims, scope and expected outputs of the work, as well as the terms of the working arrangement between the hosting department and the researcher. The ToR partly followed previous examples developed for doctoral researchers who had been embedded in the City as part of the first phase of the KTP, but also included specific tasks that were tailored to the scope of the SDG project, building on the experiences of the previous pilot project. These included assessing capacity-building needs and preparing training sessions in collaboration with city partners on the SDGs. The document further identified the City's Resilience Strategy as an entry point for SDG alignment (CCT & ACC, 2017).

Consequently, the ToR was actively shaped by the officials leading the department in which the researcher would be embedded. This department had been central to the City's numerous programmes related to data and indicator development that linked with wider international initiatives. In addition to the Mistra Urban Futures SDG 11 indicator pilot project, such initiatives included the ISO 37120 certification process, the City Resilience Index (linked to Cape Town's membership of the Rockefeller 100 Resilient Cities Network), as well as projects implemented through other partnerships such as the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group and the Future Global Cities Programme.

The City of Cape Town's involvement in these programmes had enabled the accumulation of extensive experience in matters relating to data collection and monitoring, and had contributed to the adoption of internal policies that supported evidence-based decision-making and external research partnerships. Such policies included the City's Data Strategy of 2018 and its Research Framework, adopted in 2019. This ensured that the City was well positioned to monitor SDG implementation, even if many SDG indicators demanded data that were not (yet) being collected (Croese et al., 2019). However, one of the early internal engagement meetings suggested that there was a degree of wariness among city officials regarding the emphasis these projects had placed on indicators and monitoring, to the detriment of implementation. According to one official: "we spend a lot of time on indicators and monitoring them, but little time on evaluation and looking at effectiveness." According to another: "If you reduce things to indicators you don't capture complexity and unintended consequences." A third observed "a general imbalance between effort into monitoring and reporting and little resources into evaluating" (notes SDG engagement meeting 27/9/18).

Hence, there was a general belief among the co-production partners that SDG localization called for more than data and monitoring initiatives, which were seen internally as technical "box-ticking" exercises. Officials within the Policy and Strategy unit, in particular, pushed for a more transversal, strategic and long-term approach to SDG engagement that focused on policy. As such, much of the early work of the embedded researcher was geared towards raising awareness of the SDGs within and across City structures through one-on-one meetings and internal workshops with officials. Here, a particular focus was placed on cross-cutting departments, such as the department responsible for the City's Integrated Development Plan, the Resilience department, as well as the departments of Arts and Culture, Health, and Environmental Management. These engagements resulted in the emergence of a group of SDG champions within the City; individuals who actively contributed to the development of a multi-pronged approach to the SDG implementation in Cape Town. That approach came to focus on a phased alignment of the City's policy ecosystem with the SDGs in accordance with existing local needs and priorities. The project also successfully contributed to the alignment of Cape Town's Resilience Strategy to the SDGs (Croese et al., 2020), as well as subsequent steps towards the development of a Voluntary Local Review (VLR) to report on local progress on the SDGs (CCT, 2021).

The City of Cape Town's historically well-developed technical resources and expertise, at least relative to other local governments in the country, and its strong outward-facing orientation, has contributed to the City's track record in forging strong global partnerships and alliances. However, the City seemed less capacitated in connecting its work with other urban actors outside of the local municipal context, or other cities and city networks within South Africa, as well as other government agencies and departments in the provincial and national spheres of government. In part, this lack of external connections reflected Cape Town's position as a city run by the Democratic Alliance, the key political opposition of the ruling African National Congress (ANC). That reality had resulted, among other things, in an uneasy relationship between the City of Cape Town and national networks of municipalities including the South African Cities Network (of which Cape Town is not a member) or the South African Local Government Association, which has been perceived as ANC-leaning by Cape Town officials (Mileham, 2018).

Yet, the disconnect between Cape Town's actions and those of other cities and spheres of government in South Africa is also the product of a significant degree of fragmentation in the country's intergovernmental framework surrounding urban planning and governance. Indeed, the relative institutional and fiscal autonomy afforded to large metropolitan municipalities like Cape Town in the post-apartheid local government system has arguably undermined efforts to ensure consistent urban policy application between national, provincial and local spheres of government (Duminy & Parnell, 2020). The slow and uneven progress on SDG implementation in South Africa aptly illustrates this fragmented landscape. While South Africa played a leading role in the formulation of the SDGs in the run up to their multilateral adoption, since then national leadership and guidance on localizing the Goals has been limited. Moreover, just as support and expertise within the City of Cape Town had been geared towards SDG-related data collection and monitoring initiatives, national efforts were mainly focused on the data-related aspects of localization (Croese et al., 2021). In effect this granted a leading role to the national Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) within an inter-ministerial committee established to spearhead SDG efforts with the assistance of the national statistical office (Statistics South Africa or Stats SA), the agency responsible for producing the country's SDG baseline studies and statistical reports. However, these national-level processes have not involved or utilized existing mechanisms through which municipalities collect and report data to central government; mechanisms that are potentially useful for the purposes of SDG monitoring. In addition, this work has largely been disconnected from other national initiatives related to frameworks and agendas for city governance and development, including the Integrated Urban Development Framework (IUDF), South Africa's policy mechanism for localizing the global New Urban Agenda, the implementation of which is overseen by other national departments.[2]

South Africa's failure to create appropriate linkages between national-level efforts surrounding the SDGs and the policy processes of other spheres of government reflects a growing recognition of the need for enhanced intra- and inter-governmental coordination against a persistent backdrop of limited transversal and transformative modes of policymaking and development in South Africa (Duminy & Parnell, 2020). This recognition has translated into the creation of national-level initiatives like the Cities Support Programme and the National Planning Commission, as well as the recently adopted District Development Model, which is aimed at promoting joint and collaborative planning between all three spheres of government. In this respect, and in the context of the Cape Town SDG localization partnership, the ability of the embedded researcher to work outside conventional political networks and "loops", and to forge connections with other cities and actors that are active in the SDG space, both within and beyond South Africa, represented a significant contribution to implementing the City's objective of taking a more transversal approach to localizing the Goals. Over the course of the researcher's time with the City, she organized numerous knowledge-exchange events focusing on SDG localization. These included workshops bringing together officials from different South African cities, and a seminar series that assembled government officials, researchers and representatives of NGO as well as the private sector. Moreover, through the wider KTP comparative research project the researcher was able to facilitate exchanges with researchers and officials from the other participating cities, as well as with organizations and networks that the City of Cape Town had not previously engaged, such

as the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG). In November 2019, for instance, two City officials participated in the week-long UCLG World Congress held in Durban (South Africa), which subsequently led to Cape Town's inclusion in an emerging UCLG supported community of practice focusing on the development of Voluntary Local Reviews.

The researcher's location within university and wider SDG networks helped to shift the manner in which the SDG processes were perceived within the City of Cape Town, making it easier to connect City initiatives and actors to activities in other parts of the world. This indicates that embedded researchers can play a valuable role as "boundary spanners"; actors who facilitate "collaboration and knowledge exchange across organizations to combine expertise for addressing complex issues of shared concern" (Taylor et al., 2021, p. 205). Yet, the challenges encountered in these processes of SDG localization also highlight emerging demands for other kinds of urban expertise. Such demands are less for specialist skills and knowledge that are delimited by discipline or sector (such as public health or transportation) or for urban planning as a mechanism of spatial integration – expertise that have dominated in previous iterations of the South African urban question (Duminy & Parnell, 2020). Rather, the introduction of the SDGs has underscored the significance of convening capacities, relating to the ability to connect different forces and entities through the establishment of "communities of practice" (Annan-Aggrey et al., 2021), and to identify synergies and link strategies and frameworks that are active at various scales in order to support the translation of policies and strategic objectives into reality.

Upon reflection, the embedded researcher was only able to play this role because of her affiliation to the ACC. The names and contacts of the ACC's leadership facilitated access to key actors (both within and beyond the City), contributing to the building of trust and a familiarity with academic researchers, thereby fostering a perception of the researcher and the research process as differing from more conventional short-term consultancies and "client-consultant relationships" (Vogelpohl, 2019). As Taylor et al. (2021, pp. 205–206) argue, embedded researchers represent an internal (rather than external) resource, which sets them apart from other types of boundary spanners and knowledge brokers such as project coordinators, consultants, trainers and planners – even if many of their attributes and functions are similar. This points to the importance of temporality, and issues of interpersonal and institutional trust, as key elements of the logic and practice of successful research-policy knowledge co-production. That trust, built over an extended period, enabled officials not only to perceive and present the researcher as a neutral actor capable of creating and fostering connections, but also to create a receptive space for the uptake of policy inputs and recommendations. In that sense, the researcher was not just locally embedded in the City administration; she was also embedded in the sense that this partnership built on existing interpersonal relationships and past institutional collaborations.

At the same time, the City of Cape Town stands out among many other local governments in the country and continental region for having both the technical and intellectual capacity to be able to determine how the SDGs should interface with its own policy cycles and strategic ecosystem. This is largely because the City hosts a critical mass of key officials and bureaucrats who, through multiple local and transnational research and data partnerships and engagements, are able to think beyond the immediate domain

and imperatives of key performance indicators and delivery targets. Those City officials who were involved and engaged through the project collaboration were able to engage critically with development frameworks at a high level, and they could question what such global frameworks might add to the local pursuit of urban development and socio-spatial transformation. Taken together, the outcomes of the project indicate the value that processes of co-production can provide under these enabling conditions. Indeed, engagements between the researcher and City officials have continued beyond the project's formal end, as part of efforts to establish an SDG community of practice comprising a group of South African cities that includes Cape Town.

## Conclusion

By drawing on the example of SDG localization in Cape Town, the first aim of this article was to explore the kinds of urban expertise that are increasingly produced and mobilized by a diverse range of actors involved in the advancement of global development policies at the city scale. Set against the dominant positions occupied in South Africa's past by technical experts in sectors such as health and transportation, and more recently a growing technocratic focus on urban data analytics and monitoring, commitments to localize the SDGs have created new demands for urban experts who are capable of engaging critically with international frameworks and networks, of reading and working strategically across sectors and scales, and of translating universal targets and indicators into locally relevant and useful tools.

Second, we sought to examine the role of city-university partnerships in the mobilization of particular forms of urban expertise in aid of SDG localization. In reflecting on the partnership between the City of Cape Town and ACC, both scalar and temporal factors are instructive. In terms of *scale*, the Cape Town experience shows that the manner in which policies travel, circulate and "land" is always mediated by, and filtered unevenly through, the various spheres and sectors of government. These circulations may unfold in different directions, in specific locations and sometimes fail to intersect. In South Africa, the failure to ensure a consistent and aligned intergovernmental approach to the SDGs reflects a degree of political and institutional fragmentation that itself is a legacy of democratic institution-building and decentralization in the post-apartheid era – processes that, while well-intentioned, have at times set in place obstacles to effective coordination and alignment across sectors and scales of governance. The outcome is that SDG action has been defined at particular scales, with initiatives in Cape Town often linking more directly with international processes rather than those led by the national government, for example. Yet the realities of intergovernmental fragmentation also highlight the importance of urban expertise, existing exterior to formal state structures, that are able not only to inform policymaking but also to manage and overcome the particularity or "patchiness" of policy processes unfolding within the wider government system. For the Cape Town case, such expertise were made possible via the academic researcher's embeddedness in the local institutional context so that they could play a "connecting" and "mediating" role from a "neutral" and "trustworthy" position.

The empowerment and expression of particular kinds of urban expertise also has an explicitly *temporal* dimension. The history of anti-apartheid activism and the post-

apartheid transition in South Africa has created the precedent and space for the involvement of academic urban experts in contemporary policymaking processes in various guises, including as the "expert outside consultant" and the "activist intellectual". Had the university-based research institution discussed in this case not held and actively fostered a longstanding relationship with the local municipality in Cape Town – in some cases built on longstanding interpersonal connections of collegiality and friendship – it is doubtful that an academic would have been able to play the sort of "connector" and "mediator" role described above. Moreover, had the academic's role simply been that of a conventional short-term consultant, they would not have had sufficient time to make the necessary introduction and follow-up to maintain those relationships. Processes like those involved in localizing the SDGs – and exercises in knowledge co-production more generally – require longer, more iterative and patient engagements of "embedded advocacy" (Fox & Macleod, 2021), especially when the aim is to build collaborative and progressive projects of knowledge production and policy formulation. In some ways, this places academics (as externally-supported actors with connections spanning university, civil society and state sectors) in a particularly favourable position to contribute as "embedded advocates".

These points about scale and temporality add a new perspective to the literature on SDG localization and the critical urban geographical literature on the transfer and circulation of global development policies and agendas. Instead, our arguments accord with the growing attention given to history and temporality within urban policy mobilities research (Wood, 2019). However, rather than focusing on transactions between actors and geographic contexts in (post)colonial times, or how successive circulations of specific urban policy ideas iteratively create the precedent for their eventual adoption (Wood, 2015), we have emphasized how particular historical legacies can mediate the circulation, uptake and effects of contemporary urban policies and practices for global sustainable development. This realization enjoins a more genealogical approach to work on SDG localization and policy mobilities more generally – an approach that would involve a diagnosis of the conditions of possibility that facilitate and constrain policy circulations and their local appropriations (Robinson, 2011). Those conditions include, in this case, the wider political-institutional context of national urban reform, as well as the existence of an intellectual cohort and resource base capable of effectively carrying out co-produced processes of policy localization. In this case, recognizing the history of co-production and "embedded advocacy" in South Africa and Cape Town is essential for understanding the origins, process and outcomes of the SDG localization project.

Our analysis also contributes to the emerging study of urban co-production initiatives and transdisciplinarity in the global South (Marrengane & Croese, 2021). The South African case shows that the conditions under which effective co-productive relationships can be built and institutionalized are highly context specific – as well as often highly uneven. Large South African cities are in the relatively fortunate position, at least in the regional sub-Saharan context, of having well-developed capacities for data collection and management. Indeed, one reason why cities like Cape Town have been actively involved in data-related initiatives is because it is relatively easy for the Municipality to do, given its historically well-developed technical resources and expertise. That capacity can be contrasted with other African contexts, where local agency and capacity is generally more circumscribed and official concern around the SDGs is often oriented

towards donor stipulations, demands and incentives for monitoring and reporting rather than real political interest in localization. Yet it is in less-capacitated contexts that transdisciplinary and co-productive approaches are potentially more relevant and valuable (Thiam et al., 2021). Our experiences and analysis provide one set of lessons that can be considered when designing and implementing co-production initiatives elsewhere in pursuit of more sustainable and just urban futures.

## Notes

1. We do acknowledge that this mostly applies to a limited pool of South African metropolitan municipalities and does not reflect the reality of smaller, historically underprivileged and less well-resourced towns and districts.
2. Namely the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA), the national government department responsible for local governments, together with the Department of Human Settlements.

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