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Bringing the Global to the Local: the challenges of multi-level governance for global policy implementation in Africa

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ABSTRACT

The New Urban Agenda (NUA) and Agenda 2030's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) recognise the key role of 'sub-national entities', including cities, in achieving sustainable development. However, since these global policy agendas were agreed and signed by national governments, implementing them at the local level requires a process of localisation to fit local realities. This paper analyses the national guidance (or lack of) and the resultant collaborations emerging between various levels of government in the implementation of these agendas in African cities, namely Kisumu, Kenya and Cape Town, South Africa. It argues that effective implementation of the SDGs requires a strong framework for multi-stakeholder engagement and coordination at all levels of governance, which is possible if both top-down and bottom-up approaches are used concurrently and harmonised.

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Introduction

Agenda 2030, with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was adopted in 2015, followed by the New Urban Agenda (NUA) in 2016 (Rudd et al. 2018. These broad global agendas represent a universal, indivisible and ambitious vision for sustainable development and form part of a global policy shift – which also includes, amongst others, the adoption of the Paris Climate Agreement and Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction – that recognises the role of cities as both sites of and actors in development (Parnell 2016). However, almost six years down the line, relatively little is known about the ways in which cities and other local governments are going about the implementation of these global goals.

It is especially important to know more about this in contexts where the need for and challenges of sustainable development are particularly acute, such as in African countries which experience high rates of urban growth, accompanied by poverty, inequality and vulnerabilities to the effects of climate variability and change (UN-Habitat 2014). Multi-level governance frameworks are also often not strong, with varying levels of institutional capacity, mandates and resources across different tiers of government and little collaboration between them. This situation hampers the kind of coherent and integrated policy and decision making required for the local level planning, monitoring and implementation of global, but also related continental development goals and policies, such as the African Union's Agenda 2063 (African Union, 2015), as well as national development plans. As with climate change, long-term sustainability challenges and agendas also require effective governance within and between institutions to overcome the challenges of political contestations and short termism inherent in election and planning cycles (Leck and Simon 2013, Leck and Simon, 2013; Leck and Simon, 2018; Dryzek and Niemeyer 2019; Hölscher et al. 2019; Simon 2007).

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Based on the evidence collected during the transdisciplinary co-production project 'Implementing the New Urban Agenda and SDGs: comparative urban perspectives', which covered work in and with the cities of Gothenburg and Malmö, Sweden; Sheffield, UK; Buenos Aires, Argentina; Shimla, India; Cape Town, South Africa; and Kisumu, Kenya,[1] we analyse the engagement and implementation of the NUA and the SDGs across different levels of government through the cases of Kisumu in Kenya and Cape Town in South Africa. Research built on a pilot project undertaken during early 2015 to test draft targets and indicators of SDG 11 before the adoption of the SDGs (Simon et al. 2016; Arfvidsson et al. 2017).

Some researchers have critiqued the language of universality and inclusivity of the SDGs as masking an agenda that privileges global economic and commercial over local social and political interests (Weber 2017). While there are certainly important tensions and trade-offs between the various economic, social and environmental development goals, the universal nature of the SDGs, in that they, contrary to the previous Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), apply to both developed and developing countries recognises that all have a role to play towards achieving sustainable development. Moreover, actors from the global South played a key role in the negotiations around the SDG framework, to make sure that the SDGs represented an alternative vision of development that could be used to galvanise action around a complex set of inter-related development challenges (Fukuda-Parr and Muchhala 2020).

Both Kenya and South Africa were among these active advocates of Agenda 2030 in the run up to its adoption. In Kenya this was followed by active national government leadership, including guidance to local government authorities as per a national roadmap on SDG implementation and related planning and monitoring structures and mechanisms. In South Africa, on the other hand, national guidance to local and regional governments on SDG implementation has so far been largely absent. Consequently, most work on the SDGs at the city level has happened without the support of or collaboration with other spheres of government. Regarding the NUA, there has been modest preparatory work in both countries, but mostly at national government level and not directly articulated with efforts at the city level or around the SDGs.

Based on these cases, we explore comparatively the challenges and opportunities for the implementation of global development agendas at the local level in Africa and, in doing so, argue that while national guidance is imperative, local ownership and adaptation of these agendas is necessary. Ideally, top-down and bottom-up approaches should complement each other to improve multi-level co-ordination and governance for effective implementation of both the SDGs and NUA.

Localising the SDGs and NUA and multi-level governance

Across the world, local governments are emerging as important political actors (Herrschel and Newman 2017; Oosterlynck et al. 2019; Rapoport et al. 2019). Cities are not just hubs of economic growth but have also taken a leading role in global development and addressing sustainability challenges such as climate change, either individually or organised in a booming number of city networks of diverse character (Acuto and Rayner 2016; Johnson 2018). Increasingly these groupings have acted in cases where national governments have failed to do so, as illustrated by the creation of the American Cities Climate Challenge programme in response to the US federal government's announcement in 2017 of its intention to withdraw from the Paris Accord,[2] or the United States Conference of Mayors' response to the spread of the COVID-19 virus.[3] Cities also exercised a leading role in lobbying for the inclusion of a separate SDG specifically dedicated to cities and human settlements and the adoption of the NUA at the third UN Human Settlements Conference (Habitat III) (Parnell 2016).

While the increased agency of cities on the global stage reflects an acknowledgement of their importance for the implementation of these global challenges and development agendas (Revi 2016; Dellas et al. 2018), the role of national governments cannot be discounted. It is not just because global agendas were ultimately negotiated and signed by national governments, but also because of their continued central legal role in matters that are central to achieving the various global goals. Although seemingly contradictory, national governments play a key role in rapidly urbanising countries, where there is a need for targeted central interventions in urban systems, whether legal, institutional or fiscal, that are needed to create the necessary enabling

environment for local government action to allow cities to work better and more sustainably (Parnell and Simon 2014; see also Turok and Parnell 2009; UCLG and Cities Alliance, 2018). National governments are well placed to allow upscaling and integration of the experiences and actions at city level into existing multi-level governance systems (Fuhr et al. 2018). They can also play an important role in supporting and guiding the implementation of global sustainability agendas in small cities with limited institutional and financial capacity (Cirolia 2020). Hence, while it is necessary to recognise and define the role of cities and other local governments in the implementation and local adaptation of global goals, the interdependence between different levels of government and the importance of collaboration between the national and the sub-national must also be recognised.

However, in many countries, multi-level collaboration remains incipient and sometimes problematic; efforts tend to be either top-down or bottom-up. Many national governments still do not substantially include or consult their local and regional governments regarding implementation of the SDGs or the NUA, as evident from the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) presented at the annual UN High Level Political Forum (HLPF) since 2016 (UCLG 2020). As a response, a growing number of cities have taken the initiative to launch their own Voluntary Local Reviews (VLR), outlining their plans and progress towards SDG implementation (Pipa and Bouchet 2020; UCLG and UN Habitat 2020).[4]

In relation to the NUA, progress on implementation has been hampered, partly because the NUA represents a very broad set of ambitions, with as yet little information on how to implement or make it relevant nationally and locally. After its adoption in 2016, key reporting guidelines for making biennial National Reports to the UN by Member States were published in June 2019 (UN-Habitat 2019). These provide a coherent and logical structure but consist entirely of descriptive narrative texts, with some elements relating to provisions of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, and the SDGs, without any requirement for identification of gaps or self-reflection. National Urban Policies (NUPs) are meant to form a central pillar in the implementation of the NUA and have been championed by UN-Habitat as key tools for multi-level governance (UN-Habitat 2016; Kundu et al. 2020). However, to date there are still many countries that either lack NUPs or do not implement existing plans, especially in fast-urbanising regions in Africa and Asia (UN-Habitat and OECD 2018).

Global policy implementation in Africa

There is considerable variation in terms of the extent to, and the ways in, which African countries are going about SDG localisation and implementation. So far, 45 African countries are among the 142 worldwide that have participated in the five rounds of the VNR process between 2016 and 2020 (up from 35 in 2019). Eleven African countries are scheduled to present their VNRs in 2021, including two for the first time (Angola and Djibouti) (UNDESA 2021).

However, in many countries SDG implementation continues to be in its early stages and dominated by national governments. SDG alignment is generally limited to national development plans, while implementation mechanisms are often led at ministerial level. Some African countries, such as Benin and Cape Verde, provide leading examples of where local governments have been actively integrated into SDG localisation efforts by the national government. Elsewhere, such as in Uganda and Mozambique, local governments themselves have taken the lead in SDG implementation, with support from or in collaboration with UN agencies, donors or national and international local government associations (UCLG , 2020). In terms of the implementation of the NUA, only 18 African countries have adopted NUPs or similar policies and few have involved city governments in their development or are explicitly aligned to the NUA or SDGs (Cartwright et al. 2018).

These varied degrees of and approaches to the local level implementation of the global agendas are reflective of a global spectrum of responses. In the next sections, we focus on the cases of Kisumu and Cape Town to provide insight into the different and complex multi-level governance arrangements involved in and required for SDG localisation in Africa. This is followed by a comparative discussion of the challenges, but also opportunities illustrated by our research project for the localisation of global policies.

The case of Kenya

Kenya has been an active proponent of Agenda 2030. Its highest diplomats participated in various platforms on the formulation of the post-2015 development agenda, such as the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons who advise the United Nations Secretary General and the UN General Assembly Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals (OWG).[5]

Since the adoption of Agenda 2030, Kenya's high-level support has been translated into the creation of an institutional structure to coordinate implementation and monitoring of the SDGs (Ministry of Devolution and Planning 2016). In 2017, Kenya presented its first VNR, which outlines the functioning of this structure, to the UN HLPF. Key is a special SDGs Coordination Department within the Ministry of Devolution and Planning and which serves as the National Focal Point for the SDGs, offering technical backstopping within government and among stakeholders(UNDP, 2017). As outlined in the 2017 VNR report, the work is guided by a special SDG Road Map which covers areas such as the mapping of stakeholders, establishment of partnerships, advocacy and sensitisation, domestication/localisation of SDG targets and indicators and resource mobilisation (Ministry of Devolution and Planning 2017).

The VNR report further explains how, as part of this work, the Kenyan government has directed all ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs) to mainstream the SDGs into policy, planning, budgeting, monitoring and evaluation systems and processes. To improve coordination between national and subnational levels of government, the government established an SDGs liaison office within the secretariat of the Council of Governors, the representative body of all 47 county governors in the country (Ministry of Devolution and Planning 2017). Although the national government plays a critical role in guiding the localisation of the SDGs and encourages the multi-level co-ordination to operationalise it, several challenges can be identified in terms of the workings of the counties – which have implications for the monitoring and implementation of SDGs at the county level.

First, counties emerged as regional governments after the adoption of a new Constitution in 2010 and the enactment of the Urban Areas and Cities Act of 2012(The National Council for Law Reporting, 2010). This legislation provided that governments at the national and county levels are distinct and interdependent and shall conduct their mutual relations on the basis of consultation and co-operation (Kanyinga 2016). It also allocated significant responsibilities to county governments. However, not all functions have been devolved and not all devolved functions have been transferred to the county governments by the national government. These include important functions, such as water and sanitation, roads and health, which have only partially been decentralised or assigned to special government agencies with responsibilities that are shared among multiple counties at the regional scale, a situation giving rise to duplication of responsibilities and conflicts. Other functions, like statistics and data, police services, education, transport and communication, have not been devolved. Secondly, the responsibility for these many functions, is not always matched with the necessary financial or technical resources and capacity at the county level (Bassett 2016).

To address these issues, a comprehensive co-ordination framework/mechanism is needed to support devolution, and synchronise both devolved and non-devolved parallel functions to avoid conflicts during implementation. The role of the Council of Governors is to step in to support and facilitate such coordination through the institutionalisation, and to cascade the operations from the national to the local level (CoG and UNDP 2016). To this effect, SDG focal points have been established in all counties. With the support of the UN, the Council of Governors is involved in capacity building on SDGs at the county level in collaboration with the national government. However, currently there is no clear modality of engagement defining specific roles and responsibilities of the relevant departments from the two levels of governance as well as other agencies to facilitate effective sharing of information and dialogue on SDG matters (Ministry of Devolution and Planning 2017). In other words, the mandate for multi-level governance exists but is not effective in practice due to weak working relationships between the different levels of government.

In terms of the NUA, Kenya has developed an implementation plan within specific urban thematic areas such as housing and basic services, infrastructure, land, urban and regional planning, economy, environmental sustainability, resilience, governance, and means of implementation to be implemented from 2016 to

2036 (Ministry of Transport, Infrastructure, Housing and Urban Development 2017). However, it is unclear how this implementation plan is linked to the country's National Urban Development Policy, which was also adopted in 2016 and is more closely aligned to the country's National Vision 2030.

Localising the SDGs in Kisumu

The abovementioned challenges are most salient in the country's smaller cities. Nairobi and Mombasa, the capital and major port respectively, are city-counties (meaning the urban footprint and the county boundary more or less align). In Kisumu city this is not the case and as such there is no designated urban authority. Kisumu City Board is meant to manage and plan urban areas, as provided for in the Urban Areas and Cities Act of 2011. However, the Board was only established in 2018, which meant that until then it was treated like other urban areas within the county, even though it accounts for more than half of the county's population and around 60% of overall county revenue (Cirolia 2019, p. 92). The greater mandate in relation to what happens at the city therefore rests with the county government, undermining the board's expected accountability and financial autonomy. In addition, the county government comprises elected politicians with five-year terms, making it difficult to win support for long term institutional and coordination frameworks going beyond the electoral cycle, as required for SDG progress.

From 2017 to 2019, researchers from the Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology in Kisumu worked together with City and County officials on SDG localisation in Kisumu city(Onyango and Obera, 2015). In an attempt to unlock some of the challenges slowing the localisation processes, the researchers consulted with the national SDGs implementation team, capturing their attention and interest to participate in the research activities and demonstrate local-level implementation of the SDGs in a city set up, with Kisumu being a pilot city. This prompted a number of multi-level stakeholders' engagements (meetings, consultations and sharing of information) at both levels of governance, unearthing the weak areas and also considering possible interventions. It presented a point of convergence for both bottom-up initiatives backed by the comparative research work and top-down national guidance, providing an opportunity to address the unique local realities and challenges of Kisumu.

Kisumu County has mainstreamed the SDGs in its County Integrated Development Plan for 2018–2022 (Kisumu County Integrated Development Plan II, 2018–2022), which is currently being implemented through annual development plans (ADPs) by routine funding from the national government. This includes Kenya's National Big Four Agenda that covers food security, affordable housing, manufacturing and universal health care. These prioritise specific SDGs, including SDG 11.[6] Given that the county and national government are the only agents which have capital budgets to be expended on urban infrastructure, they have little incentive or interest to ensure that urban development contributes to sustainable development as their priorities are defined by a range of other parameters, including political representation, constituencies, catchment boundaries, river basins, etc. Having SDGs mainstreamed into the CIDP with the budget lines, does not therefore guarantee on-the-ground commitments because actual local expenditure is not always aligned with the planned allocations.

With limited autonomy and no capital budget, the City Board's functions are greatly restricted, affecting the timeliness and accuracy of both the City's SDGs implementation and progress reporting. Additional limitations include personnel/capacity constraints and high staff turnover at both County and City levels, as well as practices of data collection and local definitions that are not harmonised. Data collection and local definitions challenges are mainly related to the City's unclear urban boundaries. The City also grapples with inadequate data for some indicators, time-lags in updating indicators and lack of statistical capacity to compute some of the indicators. These difficulties have, in turn, been compounded by inadequate coordination lines among the relevant government departments to share information and work together.

In the context of our research project, joint meetings and workshops took place between the SDGs National Team (including the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics and the Ministry of Planning and Devolution), county and city officials as well as project researchers to discuss the abovementioned challenges in the SDGs localisation process and possible interventions to address them. These had a particular focus on data availability and data collection

methodologies for accurate reporting on the SDGs (Oloko 2019). Apart from highlighting and identifying critical issues and stakeholders, among the concrete outcomes of this work was that Kisumu city's boundaries and those of its constituent wards are now clarified in the Integrated Development Plan (Ombara et. al. 2015). Kisumu County and the City have also committed to increase their capacity to collect and analyse SDG-relevant information for planning and reporting purposes. In the process, the project played an important role in developing working relationships among these different levels of government and the various departments within them and connecting efforts around the SDGs at the national level to the local.

The case of South Africa

Like Kenya, the South African government was very active in the global platforms and processes that shaped the formulation of the post-2015 development agenda. This includes its participation in the UN High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons, but also its leading role in a High-Level Committee of the African Union through which it contributed to developing the Common African Position on the post-2015 development agenda, as well as leading international negotiations on the SDGs in its capacity as Chair of the G77 + China (Mthembu 2015; Stats 2019).

However, compared to Kenya, these efforts did not immediately translate into the creation of institutional mechanisms for the planning and implementation of the SDGs at the national level. Instead, the national government initially mostly focused on preliminary data and policy mapping and alignment exercises (Stats SA 2017a, 2017b; DPME 2018). It was not until 2019 that the South African government approved the creation of two National Committees, which were tasked with the responsibility of SDG implementation (RSA 2019a, p. 19–20). In the same year, South Africa also submitted its first VNR to the UN HLPF (RSA 2019a), followed by the launch of its first SDG country report (Stats 2019).

While these first steps generated praise from local UN representatives (Bekele-Thomas 2018), South Africa's efforts have been largely limited to SDG domestication at national government level (Mthembu and Nhamo 2021). They have also been disconnected from engagement around urban policy agendas such as the NUA. As such, efforts around the SDGs so far have been driven by the National Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) and linked to the country's National Development Plan, while the localisation of the NUA is led by the National Department for Human Settlements, together with the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA), through the country's National Urban Policy (CoGTA 2016; Department of Human Settlements, 2018). This lack of institutional coordination is both the result of and is reinforced by a structural lack of comprehensive long-term urban development planning (Everatt and Ebrahim 2020).

In this fragmented context, local governments are expected to 'formulate their own integrated development plans to achieve the SDGs' (RSA 2019a, p. 25). However, little guidance has been given to support these processes, nor have any institutional mechanisms been created to actively involve local governments in either SDG or NUA implementation (Croese 2019).

A lack of strong national guidance and leadership on multi-level governance processes may not be problematic in contexts where there are strong and well-established sub-national and intergovernmental systems in place. However, South Africa's current local government system was only put in place after the end of apartheid in 1994 and the adoption of a new constitution in 1996. An important departure from the past was the shift from a three-level hierarchical intergovernmental system to a three-sphere system, in which each sphere (national, provincial and municipal) is distinctive, interdependent and interrelated. Theoretically, this has uplifted local government from a subordinate level to a significant sphere in its own right, turning it into 'one of the most advanced local government systems in the world' (Cameron 2001, p. 98). However, in practice national government retains key exclusive powers, for instance over the judiciary, land and policing, while provincial governments hold key mandates over areas such as health, education and housing, even if some of these powers are held concurrently with national government (de Visser 2017).

Municipal governments, in turn, are subdivided into three different categories. So-called category 'A' municipalities represent the country's eight metropolitan municipalities that have exclusive executive and legislative authority in their areas. Category 'A' municipalities are considered strong, because they hold constitutionally protected powers including the

ability and the technical capacity to generate revenue, as opposed to smaller category 'B' and 'C' municipalities. Taken together, this means that South Africa's local government system is highly uneven, representing a landscape with a very broad range of different needs, powers, resources, and capacities, which has important implications for the ability of local governments to plan for sustainability.

Localising the SDGs in Cape Town

Efforts to localise the SDGs or NUA in South Africa so far have been limited to a few selected cities and have been bottom-up processes conducted through the support of cities' own networks and initiatives, not national guidance.

The City of Cape Town's approach to SDG localisation has been largely informed by its own strategic focus areas, partnerships and initiatives. Cape Town is a member of various global city networks and alliances such as the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group and Global Resilient Cities Network (formerly 100 Resilient Cities) and, like Kisumu, was involved in the Mistra Urban Futures SDG indicator pilot project in 2015 (Croese 2019). This project contributed to including reference to the SDGs in the City's current 2017–2022 Integrated Development Plan (IDP), specifically with reference to urban resilience, which is one of the six guiding principles of the City's IDP (CCT 2017).

Through the City's participation in the Mistra Urban Futures comparative research project on the SDGs, efforts were subsequently undertaken to develop a localisation approach. Between 2017 and 2019 a researcher was embedded in the Research Branch of the Policy and Strategy Department in the City, who facilitated and assisted with the preparations and development of this approach. On the one hand, this work consisted of internal meetings and workshops with officials from a range of key City departments in order to raise awareness around the SDGs and identify possible entry points, modalities and avenues for cross-sectoral SDG monitoring and implementation – at the planning, policy and programme level. On the other hand, this included engagements with departments and agencies from different levels of government, including national and provincial, as well as global and national city networks and other (South African) cities to enable opportunities for cross-city exchange, learning and collaboration.

Three major achievements resulted from these processes. The first included the approval of a report outlining an approach and implementation plan for the City of Cape Town on the SDGs by the City Manager and Executive Management Team of CCT. This plan foresees 'a phased alignment of CCT's policy-ecosystem to the SDGs in line with its existing needs and priorities, and the monitoring and implementation of the SDGs at policy, sectoral, and programme/project levels, while building internal awareness and capacity for transversal engagement, as well as sharing and showcasing the City's work at the national and international levels (Croese 2019). Secondly, in collaboration with the City's Resilience Department, the goals and actions of the City's Resilience Strategy were aligned to the SDGs down to the target level, preparing the way for the long-term monitoring and implementation of future policies and strategies (Croese et al. 2020). These efforts were boosted in September 2019, when the Mayor of the City of Cape Town signed a commitment to prepare a Voluntary Local Review (VLR) to the 2021 UN HLPF on its progress to achieve the SDGs as part of a group of 20 cities across the world.[7]

While Cape Town has high levels of autonomy, resources and capacity needed for SDG monitoring and implementation, the nature of South Africa's intergovernmental system means that some aspects of urban planning and service delivery lie beyond the city level mandate. Similarly, the data required to report on and track progress towards the achievement of these goals are distributed across different government levels and agencies. The bottom-up character of the work in Cape Town has been very important in terms of building local ownership of the SDGs in line with the City's own experience, priorities and partnerships. However, in a similar fashion to Kisumu (although with a different context and capacity), the City's constrained powers in a context of limited multi-level government coordination, implies that the City cannot fully plan or address all aspects including in the comprehensive Agenda 2030 by itself. Further, in the absence of active national and multi-level guidance and mechanisms, opportunities and synergies have been missed for the coordination and collaboration of efforts across different global and national development agendas, such as the NUA which has not effectively featured in the City's work. Moreover, opportunities have been missed to work across and collaborate with different scales of

government, from national to local as well as from large metropolitan to smaller cities and towns and within wider city regions (de Visser 2019).

Discussion

Our analysis of this comparative assessment between Kenya and South Africa and the wider seven-city sample that comprised this project can be encapsulated in a number of main points. First, the protracted and challenging process of formulating and gaining international acceptance of the new global sustainable development agenda was only the first stage. Although the essential roles of regional and local government entities are now formally recognised, there remains a mismatch between this high-level political support from the international level discussions (driven by national governments) and the multi-level governance frameworks that exist in each country – where the power and relations between national, regional and local levels vary significantly.

The cases of Kisumu and Cape Town show that, in practice, local government landscapes (including powers, capacities and finances) in Africa are particularly uneven and multi-level frameworks often fragmented, with little communication or collaboration across scales. Moreover, mismatches between mandates and resource requirements, skills gaps and rapid turnover of key personnel often militate against effective engagement – either reflective of or impacting the will to even engage at all.

Hence, leadership represents a key factor in addressing existing imbalances and allocating the necessary resources needed if the goals are ever to be met successfully. The case of Kisumu illustrates the importance of high-level political willingness to translate the SDG framework to other levels of government as a monitoring and evaluation tool and to help reorient the portfolio of capital investments and services towards sustainable development despite severe resource constraints at the city level. The case of Cape Town, on the other hand, shows how political commitment at the national level has not (yet) sufficiently translated to multi-level mechanisms and support for local SDG implementation, leaving it to cities themselves.

This spectrum represents a good microcosm of the diversity of conditions across the multitude of urban local authorities worldwide, extending beyond the African context. Our research showed that even in high-income countries such as the United Kingdom, a reluctance to engage with the SDGs at the national government level has impacted the space and support for SDG localisation at the local government level (Valencia et al. 2019; see also Jones and Comfort 2019). The lack of national leadership particularly affects small and intermediate cities that are less well resourced and connected and therefore less able to localise the SDGs from the bottom up (Simon et al. 2018). In some countries, regional authorities perform many governance functions for small towns, which may solve a capacity problem in relation to SDG implementation and reporting, as shown in the case of Basque region in Spain (Hidalgo Simón et al. 2021).

That said, the collaboration between researchers and local government officials in the project illustrates the importance of partnerships and co-production in enhancing local authority partners' understanding of the global sustainability agendas and their value as representing a universal language, framework and tool in support of local integrated development planning. As the cases of Kisumu and Cape Town have shown, the project also facilitated discussions and collaboration around SDG implementation between the case study cities and higher levels of government (regional and national) as well as with other municipalities inside the respective countries and abroad. Lessons from the project have also informed UN-Habitat's, United Cities and Local Governments' (UCLG) and the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network's ongoing efforts to provide tools and assistance to SDG and NUA localisation processes, especially for small, resource-constrained towns and cities (e.g., UCLG and UN Habitat 2020).

Nevertheless, multi-level governance challenges cannot easily be solved by UN support but require institutionalised and home-grown solutions adapted to local needs and contexts. A strong institutional and stakeholder coordination framework to guide working relationships and sharing of information at different levels of governance is necessary. Effective implementation of the SDGs is a responsibility of not only national and local governments but also of civil society and private sector actors, working together with clear guidance and coordination mechanisms in place. In the SDGs-Kenya Forum @HLPF 2019, it was noted that governments must invest in genuine and fruitful multi-stakeholder partnerships that begin at community local level, not only in global advocacy spaces such as the HLPF. This calls for more resources to be allocated to enhance local level engagement.

Furthermore, effective monitoring of SDG implementation is key to be able to assess progress, readjust strategies and identify gaps and needs. Data collection capacity at the local level is often weak but strong collaboration between the local and national levels can serve to complement and strengthen funding as well as collection and analysis capacities. Involvement of multiple tiers and actors, both in and outside of government, in data collection can also contribute with increased accountability on data quality (Fritz et al. 2019).

Lastly, while both Kenya and South Africa have developed plans for the implementation of the NUA, this has often taken a back seat to work around the planning, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of Agenda 2030 and its SDGs. This applies more widely across the world and is unlikely to change unless the SDGs can be utilised systematically as a monitoring and evaluation framework for the NUA, linking the two agendas more comprehensively together. The NUA monitoring framework which UN-Habitat and collaborators launched in 2020 is a step in that direction. The proposed framework utilises several SDG indicators and complements them with additional quantitative and qualitative indicators – several of which were developed for UN-Habitat's City Prosperity Index (UN-Habitat 2020).

Conclusions

While illustrating two sides of a spectrum of existing practices around global policy implementation, the contrasts revealed in this article between the experiences of Kenya and South Africa are not that profound. The process in Kenya is seemingly top-down, while the work of local governments in South Africa has been largely undertaken from the bottom up. However, in both countries, the outcomes so far have been mixed, because the multi-level governance frameworks that are in place are not (yet sufficiently) conducive to collaboration and coordination across levels and actors. While the top-down approach is important in giving policy directions and guidelines, as in Kenya, it needs to be supported with bottom-up initiatives and commitment as seen in the case of Cape Town in South Africa. Both top-down and bottom-up approaches need to be strengthened with institutional, technical, and financial capacity to allow for effective multi-level implementation and monitoring of the SDGs. This calls for relevant stakeholders with varied mandates at different levels of government to work together towards achieving the SDGs.

In both countries, our research has shown that partnerships between city officials and researchers can contribute to more integrated efforts by bringing together institutions from within and across different levels of government as well as enable cross-city learning. While such transdisciplinary knowledge production is inherently complex, time consuming and often unpredictable in terms of outcomes and therefore not without its challenges (Simon et al.2018; Valencia et al. 2020) in both Kisumu and Cape Town, as well as across the other five cities in the project, this experience has proven to be invaluable, producing tangible results. In Kisumu, those results include the clarification of Kisumu city's boundaries, commitment from city and county authorities to increase capacity and collection of SDG-related data as well as strengthened collaboration between national, county and city agencies in charge of SDG implementation at the respective levels. In Cape Town, outcomes facilitated by the project include an approved SDG implementation plan and the harmonisation between the city's Resilience Strategy and the SDGs.

Taken together, the cases of Kisumu and Cape Town represent a subset of experiences that can also be found in the other cities represented in our project and therefore extend beyond the global South, not just in terms of the tensions between the global, national or the local but also in terms of the overall focus on the SDGs. Both cities also serve to illustrate that while the SDGs and the NUA global agendas were agreed by national governments, these agendas, particularly the SDGs, have resonance in many cities around the world, which have found elements of these agendas useful tools to help define, frame, monitor and communicate their efforts towards urban sustainability.

Notes

1. This project ran from 2017–19 and complied with the good research practice and ethical policies of its host universities and funders, as formalised in the respective partnership agreements and contracts in each city. No vulnerable people were involved and all involved participated on the basis of informed consent. More information on the project page: https://www.mistraurbanfutures.org/en/project/implementing-new-

urban-agenda-and-sustainable-development-goals-comparative-urban

2. On becoming President in January 2021, Joe Biden immediately rejoined the Paris Agreement, which promises to reinvigorate the global momentum for tackling climate change.
3. See on the American Cities Climate Challenge: https://www.bloomberg.org/program/environment/climatechallenge/#overview and on the United States Conference of Mayors: https://www.usmayors.org/issues/covid-19/
4. Amongst the first to produce such Reviews were the cities of New York, New Mexico (USA), Helsinki (Finland), Shimokawa Town, Toyama City, and Kitakyushu City (Japan). In September 2019, over 20 cities announced their commitment to present VLRs to the UN. See http://sdg.iisd.org/news/local-governments-commit-to-sdg-reporting-in-vlr-declaration/. For an overview of all VLRs produced so far, see the UNDESA website: https://sdgs.un.org/topics/voluntary-local-reviews
5. This and more information on Kenya's involvement in the adoption of the SDGs comes from the background to the first VNR it submitted in 2017, as published on the UN HLPF website see: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/memberstates/kenya
6. For more information on the Big Four Agenda and the link the SDGs through Kenya Vision 2030, see: https://vision2030.go.ke/towards-2030/
7. See https://www1.nyc.gov/site/international/programs/voluntary-local-review-declaration.page

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