

'Squaring the circle' – Delegating Responsibility and Retaining Policy Coherence for the New Urban Agenda

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Executive Summary:

This brief will discuss the topics raised at the World Urban Forum 9 (WUF9) around the delegation of responsibility to local government for the monitoring of the New Urban Agenda (NUA). This briefing will highlight some of the potential issues faced by local and national government in successfully monitoring the implementation of the NUA and in the selection of indicators, whilst maintaining policy coherence to achieve urban sustainability. This briefing concludes that local governments must be entrusted with the resources and capabilities to effectively monitor and implement the NUA, and further guidance should be given to governments to help ensure there is data comparability and policy coherence. This is particularly pertinent with the support of various actors for the use of qualitative indicators.

Introduction:

The NUA commits nations to work towards 'an urban paradigm shift' with an ambitious set of goals that seek to improve urban sustainability by 2030.¹ The NUA uniquely places local government at the heart of implementation and the monitoring of progress so it remains adaptable to various cities and contexts. This leads to two key challenges in the implementation for the NUA:

- 1) Both local and national governments must have policy coherence in improving urban sustainability and implementing the NUA. A lack of harmony between local and national governments will undermine any attempt to improve urban sustainability, as policy decisions at both levels can significantly impact urban sustainability.
- 2) The selection of indicators to monitor the implementation and success of the

NUA will be vital in directing policy decisions, as these will be the measures for which governments at all levels will be held accountable to, and policy focus will be aimed at improving. Therefore, a holistic set of comparable indicators to measure urban sustainability will be vital in the successful implementation and monitoring of the NUA.

65% of the 169 targets behind 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will not be reached without proper coordination with local governments.² For example, within Goal 11 (on improving urban sustainability and which the NUA addresses) is the target of providing “access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all”.³ This may not be achieved if national governments incentivise the use of private vehicles by reducing fuel taxes or not assisting local government with funding for transport systems. A holistic and joined-up approach needs to be taken by local and national governments in monitoring and delivering urban sustainability.

Developments at the World Urban Forum

9:

Issues on monitoring the NUA at the local level:

WUF9 was able to bring together various actors at local and national level in order to discuss and deliberate how to best to implement and monitor the NUA. Those from a local level drew attention to importance of monitoring the NUA successfully, as well as some of the challenges local authorities face with the unique responsibility of monitoring the progress of global goals with little previous precedent.

Various contributors described how monitoring needs to be achieved in a harmonised way with national governments in order to focus policy delivery and support urban sustainability. There was critique with current approaches, being described as “business as usual” by Carol Archer, Associate Professor University of Technology Jamaica at the ‘Implementing the NUA in Latin America and Caribbean’ session.

Archer felt implementation is being driven by national governments as opposed to local governments. This could lead to the potential for divergence in priorities, particularly around economic development which could undermine local governments ability to improve urban sustainability. The Stockholm Environment Institute report, launched at WUF9, suggests the use of national urban strategies and frameworks which also delegate more responsibilities to local governments. This can ensure policy coherence in delivering sustainable urban development and set out coherent policies for all levels of government.⁴

Alongside policy coherence, the importance of local governments having the capacity to monitor NUA implementation was raised as an issue, including the need for finance and resources to effectively collect and analyse the data at local levels. This is crucial not only to measure the success of the NUA, but also ultimately give local governments autonomy in shaping urban policies by allowing them to monitor progress and use

this data to influence wider national policy. Furthermore, this autonomy will allow local governments to shape their own innovative urban policies and increase buy-in from the community. By ensuring that local governments have this autonomy along with open dialogue with national government, urban sustainability is more likely to remain a priority for all levels of government. However, there may be resistance at national levels due to the potential ceding of policy power to the local level, altering existing power dynamics in policy-making arenas.

The Kuala Lumpur Declaration on Cities 2030 – the outcome document of the conference – continues to provide impetus for monitoring, including developing national urban policy frameworks for monitoring mechanisms and community generated data, but fails to provide any specifics for how this should be achieved.⁵ Although leaving these decisions to national and local governments provides flexibility, this lack of direction means that national government may be unwilling to provide capacity or support for local government,

particularly due to it potentially altering policy power structures. This could also lead to policy incoherence, with national governments pursuing policies that could undermine urban sustainability.

Selection of indicators for monitoring the NUA:

Concurrent with the issues of monitoring at the local level is the importance of the selection of the indicators. Steps have already been taken with the establishment of the Global Indicator Framework (GIF), which includes 232 objective indicators to measure progress in regard to the SDGs.⁶ This will likely influence the development of indicators at the local and national levels when implementing the NUA. However, as the NUA places responsibility for monitoring with local government, the selection of indicators for each city will vary and be crucial in directing policy to improve sustainability, impact government accountability for NUA progress, and ultimately determine the success of the NUA.

Debate at the conference included various

stakeholders calling for a broad mix of indicators. Kim Kyung Hwan, Vice Minister of Land, Infrastructure and Transport of South Korea called for a mix of both “qualitative and quantitative targets” at the National Urban Policies Dialogue session. Similarly, the executive director of UN-Habitat, Maimunah Mohd Sharif stated “we must have a tool that is both quantitative and qualitative” in her press conference at WUF9.⁷

The recognition of qualitative measures as legitimate indicators is a significant policy choice which will allow for a number of previously unconsidered indicators to be implemented. These may include subjective wellbeing indicators similar to the UK’s Measuring National Well-being programme, or other social-environmental indicators. This open-minded approach could lead to significant policy developments for many local and national governments in terms of monitoring the NUA and social progress more broadly.

However, this also leaves uncertainty in terms of local governments capacity to monitor and collect the data on the

selection of indicators. This will be a key determining factor for local governments in terms of their preferences of indicators, with qualitative data collection and analysis likely to be more resource heavy. This follows calls at WUF9 by local actors for increasing their access to finance, supported by the Stockholm Environment Institute report.⁸ Similarly, the comparability of cities' data and indicators also remains unclear. Giving local and national governments too much scope in the choice of indicators could mean that comparing progress across cities will not be possible if the variety of qualitative and quantitative indicators chosen in each city varies significantly.

Despite acknowledgement at the conference, the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on Cities 2030 has no mention of specific guidance on indicators with the exception of being open to the use of various indicators.⁹ Evidently, the selection of indicators remains the prerogative of local and national governments, whilst questions remain over the comparability of these and the capacity of local government.

Conclusions:

WUF9 was a unique opportunity for various stakeholders at all levels of government to come together and consider the challenges of implementing and monitoring the NUA. However, there remains significant challenges in ensuring policy coherence, local governments' capabilities and resources for monitoring, and the need for clarity on the selection of indicators.

What was clear from WUF9 was that local governments are keen to play their part in the implementation and monitoring of the NUA, if the capabilities are provided. Although some national governments may be concerned about the devolvement of power to local government, it is vital this occurs to ensure the bold ambitions of the NUA can be met and implemented in each urban context. This could be facilitated through the formulation of effective national urban policy frameworks as suggested by the Stockholm Environment Institute, which will also help ensure policy coherence by placing urban sustainability

as a policy focus for all levels of governance.¹⁰ Furthermore, dialogue between local and national governments should continue to be encouraged. Only through open dialogue will the concerns of local government be heard and the challenges subsequently met in monitoring and implementing the NUA, including having the necessary finances for monitoring and ensuring greater policy coherence.

The openness to the use of various indicators, including qualitative indicators, is a positive step. However, UN Habitat needs to further elaborate on the guidance it gives to ensure that there is comparability of data, whilst ensuring that cities can be innovative with the choice of indicators they choose and to which they will be held accountable.

In conclusion, there remains some distance to travel for many nations in being able to successfully implement and monitor the NUA, especially for local government. However, with continued, open debate at all levels of government along with local governments being entrusted with the

capabilities and resources to fulfil their responsibilities, there remains reason to be optimistic on what the NUA can achieve.

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