

Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals – The Municipalities’ Roles and Responsibilities

Esther Ofei-Aboagye

Over the past fifteen years, the international world has implemented the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). During that time it became evident that “localization” even at the sub-national level was required. Some efforts were made to prepare local authorities for adapting MDGs targets and indicators into their priorities. However, it emerged that municipalities had to be empowered and better equipped to do this more effectively. Even more as in September 2015, the Member States of the United Nations signed on to the seventeen sustainable development goals (SDGs) as follow-up to the MDGs.

It is encouraging that the SDGs build on the MDGs because the gains that were made and the unfinished business must be sustained as well as completed, especially at the sub-national level. Particularly, vulnerable sections of the population must be protected so as not to slip back to previous levels of poverty or destitution. The thrusts of the SDGs also suggest the need to work more inclusively, collaboratively and in an integrated fashion. Financing is another important dimension. A lot of the MDG-related interventions were done with donor support. Therefore, the role of domestic financing through local revenue mobilization is a critical area of concern for the SDGs.

The roles municipalities can play

The SDGs are the core business of delivering development. While national governments have made the commitments and must translate these into national

SDGs with particular importance

- Goal 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere
- Goal 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
- Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
- Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
- Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
- Goal 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
- Goal 7: Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
- Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
- Goal 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
- Goal 15: Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
- Goal 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions

plans and budgets, municipalities can contribute considerably to achieving effective implementation of the arising plans. The SDGs relate largely to the expected functions of local authorities and municipalities. These bodies operate at the implementation levels, are the level of government nearest to the people and have the greatest opportunity to impact on the lives of the people. In the effort to localize the agenda, coherent effort is required with actors working together to address infrastructure, housing, sanitation and economic and cultural factors.

All of the SDGs are essential to the work of municipal governments. However, some can be regarded as being of particular importance (see box page 1). Some of the directions that can be envisaged for municipalities in the pursuit of these goals are the following:

- Local authorities' efforts to address poverty include creating an enabling environment for earning incomes; identifying and targeting vulnerable households for social protection support; enhancing equitable access to basic social services; as well as developing and implementing pro-poor budgets.
- Local authorities and local departments of food and agriculture in partnership with traditional authorities, land-owners and farmers organizations can develop strategies to promote sustainable agriculture, responsive to the cultivation and consumption patterns of their localities; while encouraging and rewarding the application of innovations in production. The local authority can also provide leadership in efforts to mainstream integrated and sustainable agriculture into a wide range of development priorities and promote innovative approaches to this end. Local authorities can partner the private sector to enhance storage and processing initiatives as shall be required. Sustainable urban agriculture and school feeding programmes provide critical opportunities for realizing this goal.
- The provision of primary social services is the purview of local authorities all over the world. Apart from ensuring requisite social infrastructure for health and education, local authorities must identify and address factors that constrain access to these facilities.
- Urgent progress is required for achieving gender equality and female empowerment. At the municipal level, there is more space and opportunity for strategizing on promoting women's participation, including affirmative action. This must be accompanied by appropriate plans and adequate budgets. Given the critical role that culture and social norms and practices play in reinforcing gender patterns

and inequalities, a sub-national focus is important for identifying and initiating processes of change.

- There is also the notion of demographic dividends to be derived by municipalities or sub-national authorities. As birth rates are lowered and there are greater proportions of national populations in the working age bracket, their contribution to national development can be strategically invested in. This issue directly involves the challenges to young people for better employment, educational opportunities and participation in decision-making.
- The availability and sustainability of water, sanitation and energy is a critical part of a municipality's services. However, new approaches, exploitation of the opportunities that advances in technology, communication and partnership with the private sector must characterise the new approaches municipalities would have to adopt.
- Inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable human settlements and cities are at the core of municipal services. Municipalities must harness all the resources available to identify workable technologies, update capacities, mobilize the requisite funding to improve spatial and land-use planning, security and physical access for all sections of the population.
- The implications of urbanization must be systematically taken on board. All indications are that the world is rapidly urbanizing. Often, the rapid growth of cities is greeted with caution. It conjures up visions of slums, pressure on infrastructure and the upsurge of crime. However, strategic approaches to the city growth phenomenon indicate that there are opportunities to be derived from safe, health, resilient and sustainable cities.
- The green economy must be understood and adapted by local authorities and local stakeholders to their circumstances.

The potential for conflict at the national and municipal levels must also be taken into account. Incidence of conflict can derail any progress in development that is made. It can interrupt good programming, hinder innovation, exacerbate bad situations and absorb scarce financial, human and other resources.

Opportunities to be optimized

Various opportunities are available for the effective pursuit of the SDGs by municipalities. Success at the local level also enhances the cumulative and collective achievements by nations.

Amongst others, the improvements in information and communication technology (ICT) resources for knowledge dissemination, data-gathering, advocacy and social accountability provide important means for success. Even as municipalities invest in these resources, attention must be paid to helping the citizenry optimize their use.

A focus on the sub-national/municipal levels of implementation should facilitate monitoring and tracking of real-time impacts and achievements. It would be easier to find out what is happening to whom as a result of the intervention.

Effective pursuit of the SDGs could have multiplier effects for the development of municipal institutional capacity including building human capital, stimulating investments and strengthening local economies.

The strong international endorsement of SDGs will encourage national governments in its will to achieve the goals. This should also spur national governments to empower municipalities to take pro-active and creative action towards their achievement in the respective localities.

Other opportunities include the idea that civil society is interested in and poised to partner municipalities after the MDG experience. There are also international best practices and national experiences to draw on by municipalities in their quest to work more efficiently and effectively.

Challenges and potential areas of support

In order for municipal governments in developing countries to effectively pursue the SDGs, they must be provided with some critical support including implementation capacity, ability to generate and analyse data and fiscal decentralization.

Municipalities' internal capacity to deliver specialised development of the kind suggested above must be built. In the short term, that capacity may have to be out-sourced, with a strategic plan to build relevant internal capacity over the fifteen year period.

The issue of adequate information and assessment of gaps has to be addressed. Access to reliable quantitative and qualitative data, timely, available and disaggregated is critical and the capacities of municipalities must be built to collect and analyse these. This will facilitate that benefit of being able to track what is happening to whom.

Financing has to be localised for achieving the SDGs. Amongst others, the capacities of municipalities must be strengthened for mobilizing local resources, budgeting better and reducing leakages and wastage in resource use. As they have greater responsibility for implementation, fiscal decentralization must ensure that resources actually go down. The availability of state resources could stimulate the economic potentials of municipalities. Better targeting of interventions that would have multiplier effects, stronger capacities of municipalities to raise long-term financing and manage public-private partnerships, and building bridges between international assistance and municipalities have been identified as essentials for achieving these objectives.

Conclusion

The SDGs provide a great opportunity and an agenda for municipalities to expedite local level development. On the other hand, nations would achieve better and more qualitative improvements and achievement of the SDGs if the approach is sufficiently decentralized and municipalities are empowered to localize and act on the goals. However, this would require considerable investments in capacity building, financing and promoting "working-together" for municipalities to take on the required leadership roles.

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Vice Chairperson of the National Development Planning Commission in Accra, Ghana.



* The paper expresses the personal opinion of the author and does not necessarily reflect the view of its employer or the publisher

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