Local Partnerships.
Working together to implement Agenda 2030 worldwide

Rebekka Hannes

A radical shift towards more sustainability can only succeed if society commits all its energies to the pursuit of this objective. Partnerships and networks involving a range of stakeholders within and among cities, municipalities and regions have a key role to play in this context. Many people are engaging at the local level for more sustainability – very much in the spirit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – often without being aware of the SDGs themselves. In most cases, their primary objectives are pragmatic: cutting traffic congestion, saving energy or reducing waste.

What are good examples of partnerships within and between municipalities in different regions of the world? What can be done to build on existing partnerships? Which factors determine the success of local partnerships for sustainable development? These questions were discussed at the Bonn Symposium on 5-6 December 2017. It was attended by 130 representatives of municipalities, city networks, international organisations, the academic and business communities and civil society from various world regions. The conference was organised by the Development and Peace Foundation (sef:) in cooperation with the Service Agency Communities in One World (SKEW)/Engagement Global gGmbH and the State of North Rhine-Westphalia, with support from other organisations.

The SDGs as a checklist

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set a high level of ambition for transforming our world. In his opening speech, Dr Stephan Holthoff-Pförtner, Minister for Federal, European and International Affairs of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia, described the SDGs as a checklist: "They ensure that we act in a less one-dimensional manner." The SDGs oblige us, he continued, to consider the cross-linkages between diverse policy fields and to weigh up the costs and benefits of our actions. Keynote speaker Mariam Yunusa, former Director of Partners and Inter-Agency Coordination at UN-Habitat and former

Gesine Schwan

Director of the World Urban Forum, reminded the audience that the SDGs came out of unprecedented dialogue and were bred and developed bottom-up. They relate to everyone's every-day lives. As she sees it, "That makes them sexy!"

For Professor Gesine Schwan, President of the Humboldt-Viadrina Governance Platform and Co-Chair of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Germany, the SDGs do not go far enough. While they reflect the world's extraordinary complexity, no practical guidance is offered on how to reach the targets. Not that this was a sticking point for Professor Schwan: "In light of the problems and interdependencies of today's world, we can despair – or just get on with it!"

Municipalities: places of innovation

There was general agreement among the keynote speakers that our municipalities, cities and regions are where change happens, as this is where most of the practical challenges arise: "Wherever you and I meet and engage, that's where we can move things forward," said Mariam Yunusa. For Gesine Schwan, municipalities are places of innovation. Working together means being able to do more. This is especially apparent in relation to energy, climate, mobility and integration policy. Integrating refugees is just one of many issues to be addressed in a plural-ist society. Integration – including but not confined to refugees – requires a new system: "Integration should be an incentive for development; it should not be a burden." Communities can only take full ownership of the SDGs if they cooperate with policy-makers, businesses and organised civil society.

Mariam Yunusa also saw local partnerships as important: "Partnerships bring in fresh ideas, zest and a competitive edge into politics." However, the success of local partnerships is not only determined by their own level of engagement; it also hinges on commitment from the centre. How willing are central governments to allow cities and subregions to govern and implement the SDGs? National governments must be responsive to and draw on local experience. At the same time, local governments need financial and structural support. The centre should trust in the abilities of local governments to move towards sustainability. National governments are increasingly accepting that the subregional level has a key role to play.

Ashok-Alexander Sridharan, Lord Mayor of the City of Bonn, also underlined the importance of localisa-tion in implementing global goals. During the UN Climate Change Conference in Bonn in November 2017, cities and municipalities staged a mayors' summit, which was attended by more than 1,000 delegates, including 330 mayors from all over the

world. This attracted a great deal of interest. "After the United States' decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement, the presence of so many mayors and governors from the US at the summit sent a very important message. They are saying: 'We don't

Mariam Yunusa

care what the White House does. Our commitment to the 2 degrees Celsius target is unbroken,'" Mayor Sridharan said.

Campaigning for progress!

But campaigning for social progress can be hard go-ing, and this progress is not always achieved through unity and harmony, as Martin Herrndorf, Co-Founder of Colabor | Raum für Nachhaltigkeit from Cologne, made clear: "We all agree that the SDGs are important goals. But in our communities, we see a daily confrontation between car drivers and cyclists. We hear people saying that sports halls should not be used to house refugees. Everyone prioritises their own personal interests." People's practical needs are particularly visible in cities, but so too are the resulting conflicts of interest. These conflicts have to be resolved through negotiation. "In any process of change, there are always losers. But we need to take them along on the journey with us. We need to talk about how we intend to redistribute resources: energy, jobs, public space. Who gets what?" Heinrich Bruns, Head of the City of Münster's Green Spaces, Environment and Sustainability Department, echoed Martin Herrndorf's call for dialogue. Negotiating a balance of interests between cyclists and motorists in Münster initiated a learning process in the City's administration, he said. He had some encouraging words for the audience: "Sitting around the table with people who want to put the brakes on innova-tion is not always easy. But it is helpful." Mirko Heid, Head of the Strategy Department at SWB – Stadt-werke Bonn GmbH, countered that from a business

perspective, transport planning cannot be constantly redesigned, not least because it has to reflect current user behaviour.

Ultimately, the big question, said Martin Herrndorf, is not what makes individual projects successful but how the city as a whole can change. The Colabor method is simple but effective: people should be able to experience, taste and smell what life would be like in a sustainable city. To give them a foretaste, a Tag des guten Lebens (Good Life Day) is held once a year in a district of Cologne. In 2017, 25 roads were closed for the event and 25,000 residents were asked to share their ideas. There was food, gardening and yoga, and even a bus stop repurposed as a living room. For Martin Herrndorf, one of the most important aspects is getting all the generations to talk about how they would like to shape their public space. He encouraged the audience to initiate change: "Be brave! Experiment!"

Successful local partnerships: examples

New Asker, a municipality in Norway, is one such experiment. Norway, which has more than 400 municipalities for just six million people, is currently merging some of its local authorities, the aim being to streamline its somewhat cumbersome structures. New Asker will be formed by merging three municipalities. Around 120,000 people will live in the new community by 2020. Stine Lise Hattestad Bratsberg from Pure Consulting, Oslo, is Principal Adviser to the Mayor of New Asker. She explained the approach: "Everything has to be planned from scratch anyway, so why not base New Asker around the SDGs? They

Patrick Leusch (Chair) and Addis Mulugeta (l.t.r)

help to disrupt typical silo thinking." The SDGs will provide the framework for all aspects of planning and will be the link between the municipal development plan and the regional and national development

strategies. The City of Utrecht, too, is trying to connect all its new and existing policies to the SDGs and is creating a dashboard to make the City Council see what influence its decisions have on the SDGs.

Sport for sustainability?

Rio de Janeiro is pursuing a different pathway towards sustainability. "The 2016 Olympics were a good excuse for us to attract sustainable inward investment," Gabrielle Guimarães, Senior Advisor for Multilateral Cooperation and Planning at Rio de Janeiro City Hall, explained. Working with the private sector, Rio mainly invested in management of water flows, city security and education. The City of Minsk is keen to adopt a similar approach, according to Igor Viktorovich Yurkewich, Deputy Chairman of Minsk City Executive Committee. Minsk is hosting several major sports events, notably the European Games and the European Figure Skating Championships in 2019, with potential to stimulate investment in sustainable infrastructure.

For Gabrielle Guimarães, equitable distribution of funding is the key to governing a more sustainable city. In terms of the statistics, Rio is considered a rich city but some areas have a really low index, so it is important to look at people's needs and focus on the interaction between policies. "Every person has needs in all the different policy areas!" She echoed Stine Lise Hattestad Bratsberg's call for partnerships to overcome single-issue and silo thinking. It is essential, she said, to find vulnerable people and let policies reach them, but for that to happen, there is a need for data. What services do they have? What do they need? Are any services unnecessary?

Energy: powering local partnerships

In some cases, however, it may be useful to focus a local partnership on a single issue, as Dr Peter Pluschke, the City of Nuremberg's Deputy Mayor for Environment and Health, explained. In MetropolitanRegion Nuremberg, 34 communities are trying to organise. The region has adopted a Climate Pact, which was developed by policy-makers and civil society together with industry partners. For Dr Pluschke, the need to work together in order to progress is most obvious in energy. He summed it up: "We can only do it with large-scale cooperation involving several municipalities; otherwise we will not be able to develop decentralised energy supply systems."
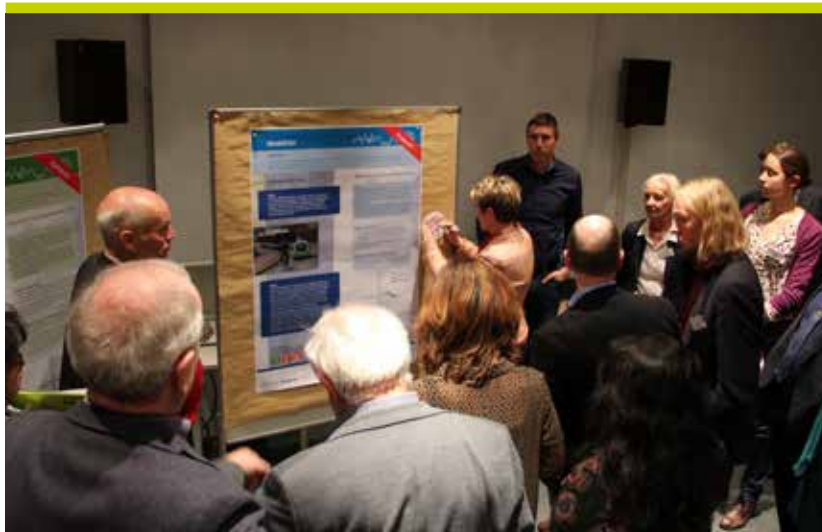
Tasneem Essop from South Africa agreed that energy is a particularly good foundation for local partnerships. In 2016, she set up the Energy Democracy Initiative in order to give communities the skills they need to set up decentralised renewable energy

systems in the longer term. In four pilot communities, training is being provided for Energy Democracy Champions, who will learn how to plan a decentralised mini-grid system for their community. The project consists of three phases. The communities themselves decide which partners can give them the necessary support, with citizen participation at the heart of the process.

"Co-creation" – a success factor

Ariane Bischoff and Evelyn Wurm reported on their experiences of networking in Solingen. Here, the City's sustainable development strategy is being produced by policy-makers, business, civil society and the academic community. They work in partnership within the framework of the Global Sustainable Communities in North Rhine-Westphalia project, supported by the Service Agency Communities in One World (SKEW). There is also broad citizen participation, mainly through sustainability conferences. For the process to be credible, everyone should have the opportunity to contribute their ideas, initiatives and suggestions. Involvement in decision-making is also important, but the threshold should not be set too high. The two speakers firmly believe that "participation must come to the people."

Workshop about "Producing municipal sustainable development strategies – the partnership approach"

In Somalia, Abdihakim Ainte is also keen to sensitise as many people to the SDGs and their implementation. He is the founder of iRise Hub, an innovation and technology centre in Mogadishu, whose aims include bringing young people together and unlocking their potential. The hub teaches young Somalis basic technical skills, such as programming, to enable them to develop their own online platforms – perhaps offering information on the SDGs – in future. At the same time, iRise is keen to make its own contribution to raising SDG awareness, so Abdihakim Ainte

and his colleagues are working on translating the SDGs into the local languages. They also plan to open a portal which will simplify the information about the SDGs, explaining what they are and which areas of life they relate to. "What we have realised is that the SDGs are largely driven forward by a small, elite group," he said. "We are trying to make the debate about the SDGs more accessible to ordinary people."

What might be an appropriate term to characterise the common feature of successful local partnerships? The discussants soon came up with the right word: "co-creation". In Utrecht, this is – to some extent – already the reality: the Utrecht 4 Global Goals campaign, for example, was developed by citizens. "The entire initiative is citizen-led. None of the organising is done by the City Council; it simply comes along to the events," said Desiree van de Ven, the City of Utrecht's International Affairs Coordinator. A language solution has also been identified. "We don't talk about the SDGs. We talk about the global goals," she explained. "That reaches far more people than an English abbreviation could ever do."

Data: the starting point

Many people also find technical terms such as "data" and "indicators" off-putting at first. For Melika Edquist from the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) in New York, however, data can be a way of opening doors and initiating discussions about sustainable development. It is the data-gathering about aspects of daily life that makes people understand how the SDGs directly relate to their own lives. Camilo Andrés Gamba Gamba from the Public Innovation Lab in the Mayor's Office in Bogotá took a similar view. Bogotá would like to use local citizens' complaints, recommendations and requests to generate data as a starting point for sustainability policies in future. It is important, he said, to have an "open data" policy as a basis for citizen participation in local governance. "Data are more than just numbers. There is always politics in the background," he said.

City partnerships or cooperation?

But it is not only the partnerships within cities and regions which can contribute to SDG implementation. Partnerships between cities also have a key role to play in the transition towards more sustainability, facilitating encounters between citizens and raising awareness of new issues. Cities are pursuing a variety of pathways here, from formal partnerships to project-based or thematic cooperation. The City of Leipzig, for example, is progressively integrating the SDGs into its 14 existing partnerships and building them into new ones from the start. After reunification, Leipzig itself underwent a radical transforma-

tion. Dr Gabriele Goldfuß, Head of the International Cooperation Division at the City of Leipzig, reported that during this process, it was necessary to rethink the fundamental rationale for city partnerships. Although each partnership has its own specific focus, the range of themes and cross-linkages within Agenda 2030 offer a wealth of opportunities. Previously, for example, cultural links were not taken seriously

Eckhardt Huber and Bernard Nenghabi Tosam (l.t.r)

by the City's economic development department, but there is now much more acceptance of how the international dimension can make a more vibrant city. For Dr Goldfuß, the benefits of formal partnerships are self-evident: the relevant City Council decisions open up access to the administration's budget, so there is no need to seek core funding for every project.

The City of Utrecht is pursuing a different pathway: it did not want to limit itself to formal partnerships. Instead, it cooperates with a large number of cities across a variety of themes. "These joint initiatives can last for decades," Desiree van de Ven explained. For example, Utrecht is engaged in an exchange with Stuttgart on how to organise renewal processes and participation. The city also worked with León in Nicaragua for 32 years, planting trees and creating business opportunities for local farmers. The project was adopted by Ecosia search engine, so Utrecht withdrew from the project. "It is important to recognise when the cooperation has served its purpose. And then the best way forward is to end it and focus on new projects." Utrecht is currently engaged in co-operation with local government in Uganda; the university is stepping in, local businesses are twinning, and a network of stakeholders is being created, with benefits for both sides. For the Dutch city, however, it is not enough to facilitate change in the partner city. "It must always be a learning process for our city as well, preferably coupled with a clear business case," as the speaker explained.

One participant voiced criticism that as a resident of a German municipality, she did not have the

sense that she played any kind of role in her town's partnerships. "You hear about delegations coming and going but there is a gap where the exchange with civil society should be," she complained. "But city twinning is exactly where citizens should be involved."

A number of cities in Germany and the Global South are now attempting to close this gap through climate partnerships, with support from SKEW. Eckhard Huber, Head of the Stadtwerke (Public Utility) in Horb am Neckar, and Bernard Nenghabi Tosam, Mayor of the City of Belo in Cameroon, are involved in one of these partnerships. The two cities aim to improve their climate footprint and to raise local citizens' awareness of climate change mitigation and shared challenges at the same time.

Modern city networks – more than just a talking shop!

Many cities are making use of international networks in order to make progress on sustainability across a range of policy fields. The networks pursue various priorities. ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability, for example, works with cities that are ahead in their field. "This is easier than working with cities that need encouragement," said Monika Zimmermann, Deputy Secretary General of ICLEI. ICLEI has identified 10 Urban Agendas as key areas of action. They include the EcoMobility Alliance, which focuses on mobility and transport. However, when it comes to developing and implementing innovations at sub-regional level, it is the local partnerships which have a particularly important role to play.

Platforma is a European platform of local and regional authorities with an interest in international development. It aims to put forth a common message within European institutions in order to support the development of local democratic institutions in partner countries. It offers members the opportunity for knowledge sharing, learning and exchange, produces publications and engages in research, organises conferences and provides support in order to initiate joint action. Platforma also works to ensure that national local government associations are involved in the formulation of countries' sustainable development strategies. "If we agree that localisation of SDGs is relevant, we should not only let them in in the implementation phase," said Laia Vinyes Marcé from Platforma.

Stacey-Leigh Joseph from the South African Cities Network offered a different perspective. The South African City Network has eight member cities of various sizes. It carries out research on urban issues and on how to centre cities around global goals. It produces the State of South African Cities Report every five years as a barometer of progress in certain areas,

translating global happenings to the local context. For example, the Network has compared Agenda 2030 with the African Union's Agenda 2063, the New Urban Agenda and South Africa's National Development Plan and identified key issues and targets of relevance to cities. "There are so many interventions, so someone needs to translate to city level what all

Laia Vinyes Marcé, Monika Zimmermann and Stacey-Leigh Joseph (l.t.r)

that means," she said. There's no point in trying to explain from the top down: "We need to have a conversation about how to change the reality that people live in in cities; we need to speak to people about how they want to live. We need to change space, and we need a bottom-up approach."

For these speakers, it is important that the networks have now evolved into much more than merely a platform for sharing experience. "Networks are carrying out research, translation and advocacy," was how Monika Zimmermann summed them up. And for many networks of cities, the SDGs are a source of fresh momentum. As it becomes increasingly important for cities to establish more strategic thinking, their networks give them an opportunity to make their voices heard at the international level; the negotiations on the SDGs are a case in point.

Notwithstanding the many innovative approaches being pursued in the various world regions, one major question remained unanswered: how can good projects and best practice partnerships within and between cities coalesce to drive radical policy change? In other words, how can urban transformation be achieved?