

Decentralized Cooperation to localize the SDGs in the Asia Pacific Region



Introduction

Contextualizing the development challenges in the ASPAC Region

In a 2017 World Bank Report *Expanding Opportunities for the Urban Poor*, it is noted that the East Asia and Pacific Region's average annual urbanization rate of 3 percent has helped lift 655 million people out of poverty in the last two decades. At the same time, however, the sobering report notes that the region has the world's largest slum population: 250 million people with poor-quality housing, limited access to basic services, and at risk to hazards such as flooding. The Report concludes that cities in this most rapidly urbanizing region in the world are not yet delivering infrastructure, jobs, and services at a pace as rapid as urban development, warning of widening inequalities that may hamper economic growth and ultimately lead to social division.

It is not surprising, therefore that such a fast-urbanizing region like ASPAC (and Africa) have been recognized by the latest *CIB Policy Paper on Decentralized Cooperation (2021)* as an area of high priority for networks of cities and local governments to focus on, as it is in areas where urban change is greatest that local development is most impacted. Interestingly, the Policy Paper goes on to note that local and regional governments (LRG) boast an impressive range of collaborative and multi-scalar partnerships through their networks and associations, all of which are built on mutual trust and respect for individual mandates. It is here that the potential for making real change at a local level through effective, sustainable and well-structured decentralized cooperation (DC) can be realized. More importantly, it critically points out that it is in responding to the constantly changing nature of contemporary challenges, that LRGs are well positioned to consider how new strategic partnerships, for example with university and research stakeholders, can help strengthen evidence-based action, and further assist understanding and aligning with changing donor priorities.

In attempting to explore the extent to which the ASPAC Region has delivered on global targets, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) *Asia and Pacific SDG Progress Report 2021*, acknowledges the excellent strides made by the region towards achieving 2030 developmental targets. More specifically, exceptional progress has been made with the socio-economic indicators of the first ten SDGs. Notwithstanding the progress, however, numerous difficulties and delays in achieving the targets for DC have been recognized, given the obvious additional strain as a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic.

At the same time, the UN ESCAP Report notes the overall struggle to improve on the achievement of environmental targets. Flagging that the decline generally applies to the region as a whole and not to a specific country, a regression was noted with SDG 13 and 14 and that they overall

Introduction

receive the least local attention. What stands out from the report, that makes a strong case for a watertight response to climate change in cities, is that DC should be at the heart of the climate response.

And from the experiences articulated from practitioners on the ground, it does appear that this is indeed where much of the focus of UCLG ASPAC lies. This short article prepared on behalf of the UCLG Learning and UCLG ASPAC teams provides a short snapshot view of the nature of DC in the ASPAC Region. Based on interviews with key players and drawing from online workshops with DC personnel and desktop material, it presents a short overview of the ASPAC perspective of the process of mobilizing DC to localize the SDGs in the region. Central to this article is the presentation of two interesting case studies that helps give a sense of the type of DC projects that have been underway. Importantly, the article also begins to articulate key elements of the strategy underpinning how DC is to be rolled out moving ahead in the region.



Source: World Bank EAP Report, 2017





Decentralized Cooperation to localize the SDGs in the Asia Pacific Region

This section of the article is structured around four key questions that are answered with research that draws on selected interviews, desk top analysis, a survey conducted by the UCLG ASPAC team in preparation for the training, a focus-group workshop after the training with the ASPAC leadership team and finally, the researcher’s observations during a period of six months of engagement.

It begins by asking (i) what are the critical enablers required for effective SDG-linked DC in the ASPAC region in order to set the macro context. Thereafter, it explores the question of what Asian local government practitioners think are key success factors for DC, drawing on earlier published research by Secretary General Tjandradewi and Marcotullio (2009) and augmented with a more recent interview with her to understand what role the regional section and local government associations (LGA) could be playing to enable SDG-linked DC. We close this section with 2021 empirical research done with ASPAC DC practitioners sharing insights from them on their unique understanding of DC in the region and its state of readiness for implementation.

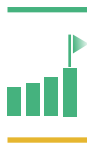
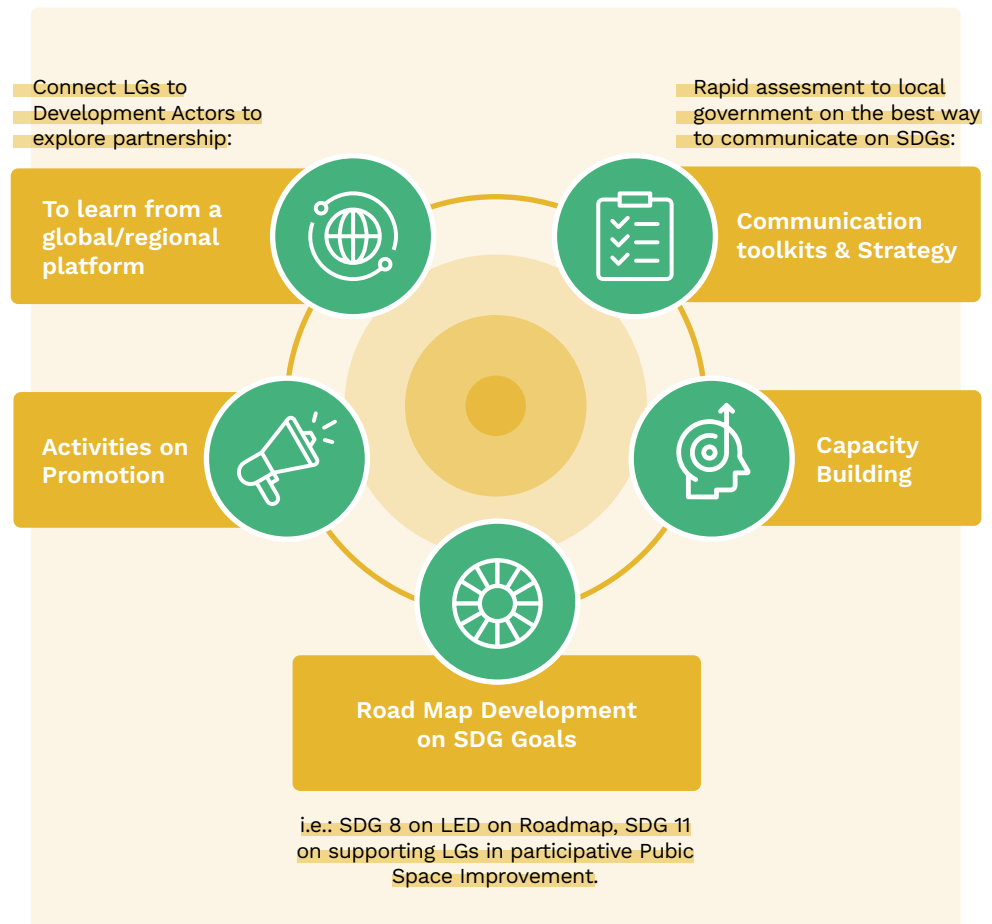


Figure 1
Key elements in localizing SDGs in the ASPAC Region

Source: Tjandradewi, 2016





01 What are the critical enablers or building blocks required for effective SDG-linked DC in the ASPAC region?

For ASPAC, an important starting point has always been ensuring a sound understanding of **needs** done through **rapid assessments** led by LRGs and their associations. Through this analysis, potential identification of cities that share similar challenges can be made. In order to effectively manage this process, however, LGAs must be able to have soft skills related to communication, lobbying, advocacy, monitoring and networking. In addition, close collaboration with all local stakeholders, and the buy-in and support of elected leaders, is seen as key in this process.

It is clear therefore that a second critical building block is the ongoing process of **building capacities** not just of the LRG professionals managing DC processes, but of key roleplayers involved in the engagements. From resource management to ensuring that decisions are data-driven to thinking about issues of transparency in governance will require careful skills transfer.

It is the third component of **actively connecting actors** to explore **partnerships** that is perhaps the most critical action. DC does not magically happen, but like any successful courtship requires much effort. The active brokerage role of the LGAs between suitable cities/regions can make or break the cooperation. The ability to lever in the right resources from global and regional platforms is also key here.

Of course, without **effective communication and promotion** there will be little visibility on DC projects and activities. The UCLG ASPAC team has acknowledged knowledge management as a strategic element of its DC rollout (outlined later in this article) and will be developing capacity to ensure its portal is updated and case studies can be continually uploaded to share with its members and the global community.

Finally, the importance of a **clear road map** commencing with securing local commitment, to stakeholder mapping, building a Task Force, developing clear action plans that are synchronized with national plans right through to the active promotion of its best practices must all be clearly charted out.

02 What do Asian local governments think are important for effective DC in their region?

From analysis based on a survey of local governments in Asian countries conducted by Tjandradewi and Marcotullio (2009) several important elements emerge. The expressed commitment to be linked was an obvious precursor for success, whilst community engagement with linkages between civil society from both cities, and not just official counterparts from LRGs, featured high in the survey. Having a clear understanding of mutual expectations, schedules and outcomes were also seen as key, together with reciprocity, mutual trust and respect for the engaging parties. Results also showed that more successful DC initiatives showed demonstrable results through tangible projects (UNDP, 2000).



Beyond these five success factors, interesting results emerged from a study of a collaboration between Yokohama and Penang City expounded by Tjandradewi and Marcotullio (2009). These are the securing of political support from higher levels of government, consistent and sustained leadership, project cost-sharing and importantly cost-effectiveness and finally ensuring the continual free flow of information.

Moving beyond success factors, it is useful to also understand the diverse focus areas or themes around which DC has been organized. Within the ASPAC, an important set of issues for cities included poverty reduction, women's empowerment, the local environment, social and cultural concerns, urban infrastructure and services, health and education, employment and economic development, housing and shelter, security and disaster management and municipal finance (UN-HABITAT & WACLAC, 2003). Obviously, these differ according to location and context, and change over time.

03 What role do associations play in enabling DC in the ASPAC Region?

In an interview with UCLG ASPAC Secretary General Tjandradewi (pers. comm., 23 June, 2020) the role of LGAs in successful DC emerged strongly and is included in this article as it is often underestimated. Some key factors from an Asian perspective included:

1. The importance of constant direct **communication** between the LGA and its members to actively facilitate communication around DC.
2. The strategic role required of LGA to be **dynamic brokers/matchmakers/facilitators** between members by understanding the needs and matching the cities.
3. The constant advocacy for the importance of DC (especially with donor agencies) to secure **funding** for DC projects – which should not be done through bidding process. DC funding should be allocated for it to work sustainably – e.g. ideal for 10% of Official Development Assistance to be allocated was suggested
4. The need to move beyond lip-service to commit to effective **capacity building and training** of members to conduct DC in its various forms. Ideally this should be embedded into government training institutions.
5. The intensification of **ongoing academic research**. Regional sections, supported by LGAs, should explore how to engage with universities around curriculum development on international relations.
6. Regional sections and LGAs are still grappling with the **role of private companies** through technology transfer and consulting capabilities. This is an important area to be followed through, depending on the local investment culture.



04 What is the state of readiness from city practitioners to roll out SDG-linked DC in the region?

In preparation for the ASPAC November 2021 Training programme, a survey was conducted with 18 practitioners from across the Asia Pacific Region. Whilst the sample size is fairly small, the results are shared here as they do provide useful insights to the state of readiness for DC rollout. For this article, a full analysis of the survey is not presented but highlights on four key areas. The first interesting result was around how LRG officials **rated their understanding of the complexities of DC**.

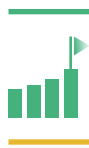
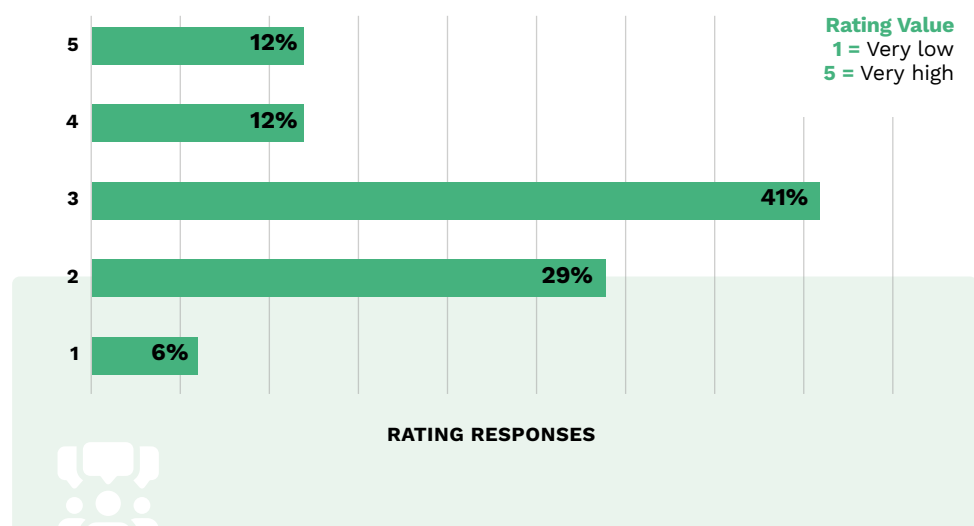


Figure 2
Understanding of decentralized cooperation

Source: UCLG ASPAC, 2021



As indicated in Figure 2, nearly two-thirds (65%) of all participants felt that they had a sound understanding of DC, with only 36% rating their understanding as low or very low. This does indicate that, in general terms, the practitioners feel confident of their understanding of what DC entails.

During the interactions in the training program, high levels of experience in the field were also observed.

In an attempt to unpack how Asian practitioners perceived the nature of the relationship between two DC partners, participants were also then asked to share whether they felt whether the DC projects were more beneficial to themselves, whether they had seen themselves as predominantly teachers/sharers of knowledge, or whether in fact the process was more reciprocal with both teaching and learning built into the process.

As indicated in Figure 3, the majority of survey participants (41%) felt the learning process as a reciprocal one, with them teaching as much as they themselves were learning during the DC process. This is interesting and shows



that, perhaps, even where one partner might have been relied on to share knowledge, opportunities to learn from the other were also created. The rest of the participants were more or less equally split as predominantly learners or teachers.

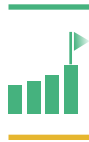
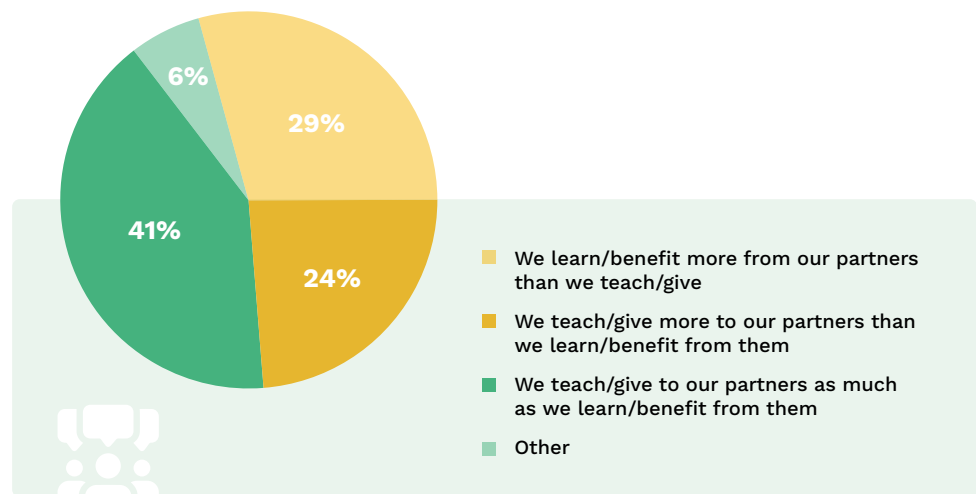


Figure 3

Perception of relationships between decentralized cooperation partners

Source: UCLG ASPAC, 2021



The third useful result from the ASPAC survey focused on determining participant **perception of the amount of effort and energy** that was currently being expended on SDG-linked DC.

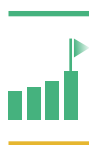
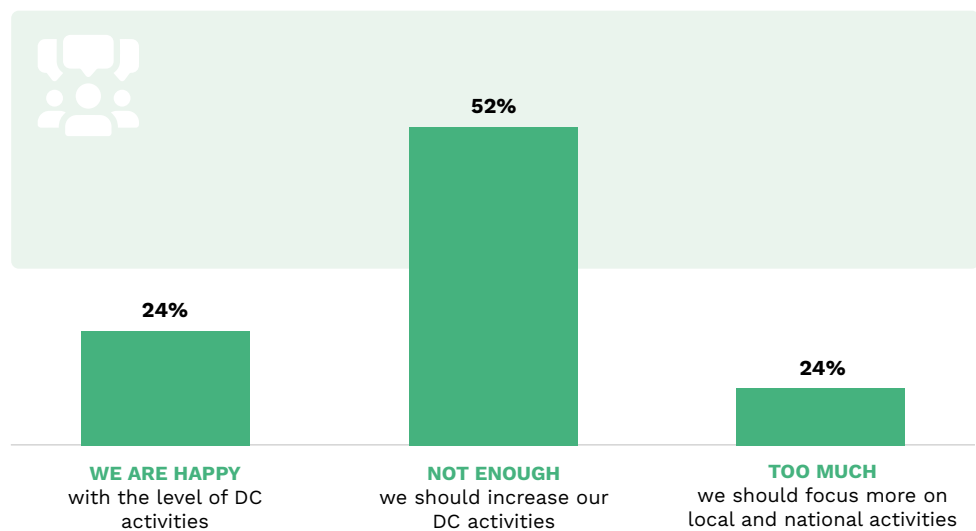


Figure 4

Perception of efforts expended on decentralized cooperation

Source: ASPAC, 2021





Whilst the ASPAC region has many (although not often documented) examples of active DC projects, nearly two-thirds (65%) of all survey participants felt that not enough energy was currently being spent on DC cooperation activities. This is perhaps understandable, given the current global pandemic that makes face-to-face learning currently untenable. What the result does show, however, is a real commitment by practitioners to do more, and a commitment to spend time and energy to promote DC, which in itself is encouraging.

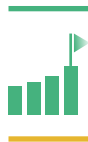
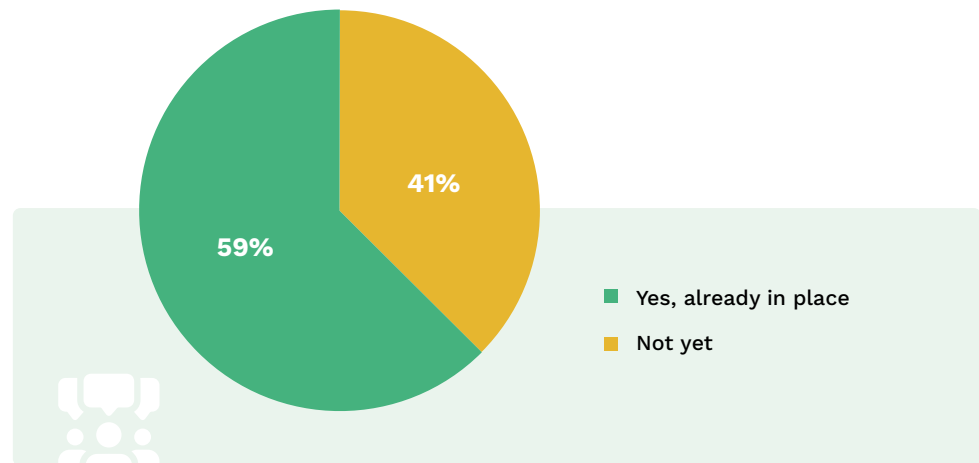


Figure 5

Perception of state of readiness and planning for decentralized cooperation

Source: ASPAC, 2021



The fourth and final area of exploration was around the current state of readiness and planning for city-to-city cooperation. Whilst the result above indicated a strong keenness, enthusiasm and willingness to embark on DC, it is most interesting that this was not necessarily matched with an accompanying readiness to intervene.

Nearly 60% of all participants felt that their cities were not in a state of readiness to roll out SDG-linked DC at the time of the survey in November 2021. This is an important finding and will be revisited in the final section of this article.

The presentation of these interesting survey findings that represent the voices of the practitioners at the coal-face of LRGs in the ASPAC region wraps up this section that has helped deepen our understanding on perspectives of DC. In the next section, we delve directly into the world of practice and immerse ourselves in two selected DC best practices' case studies.



A focus on practice: Showcasing selected ASPAC decentralized cooperation practices

The following two vignettes present interesting examples of DC in the continent. They draw on different DC modalities and methodologies that are effective in the ASPAC context.



Example 1

Green Sister City Cooperation of Surabaya, Indonesia and Kitakyushu, Japan



Climate change remains one of the biggest challenges faced by cities and it continues to ravage ecosystems and communities globally. The prevalence of rising sea levels, erratic weather patterns, and the overall degeneration of the planet are just some of the deep rooted impacts of this complex issue at hand. As global warming is advancing, responses to sufficiently address this crisis should be cemented on the eradication of harmful emissions. Recognizing the need for an urgent intervention at city level, the Municipality of Surabaya, Indonesia as well as Kitakyushu, Japan joined forces in being at the frontline of climate action. Their partnership aimed at establishing a low carbon society and smart compact city respectively.

The direct DC project thrives on a number of focus areas not only pertinent to achieving the end goal, but is notably entrenched on Global Goals. For instance, clean water and sanitation (SDG 6) is evident in the project's capacity building through environment management and wastewater treatment. Another collaboration point of the partnership is entrenched on SDGs 11 and 12, where solid waste management is addressed through composting in Compost Center Wonorejo, and a waste sorting facility, the Super Depo Suterejo. The two cities moreover cooperated on energy management



to support smart community, and also on Dengue Fever management. In ensuring that objectives are met, the project is also aligned to climate change (SDG 13) and Life on Land (SDG 15). Importantly, the SDGs were actively incorporated through aligning the output and outcome of projects with SDG Indicators. While recognizing the notable integration of the Global Goals to the project as a key factor, it is worth noting that the reporting of the output and outcome in the alignment of the SDGs attainment proved to be a challenge. This must be flagged as a learning point.

Although the partnership on these grounds initially commenced from 2012 to 2016 through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), its success has resulted in two renewals, one being as of 2016 to 2020, and the other being from 2020 to 2023. It comes as no surprise as the two cities have a history of good standing as their collaboration was prompted by another city to city partnership between Surabaya and Kochi, Japan that dates back to 1997. It was also thereafter prompted by the launch of the Kitakyushu Initiative Network (KIN) in 2005.

With Surabaya and Kitakyushu at the forefront as strategic leaders of the project, a collaborative approach was taken with private sectors for technical support and capabilities, and also with research institutions to gain insights, ideas, innovations and feedback regarding implemented projects. Furthermore, the involvement of communities at the grassroots was a secondary benefit (i.e. employment of local residents and people in facilities responsible for waste sorting were prompted by the project's technical implementation).

Behind the successful implementation of any project lies the component of funding, which can be viewed as a catalyst to actualize project targets. This project mainly relied on two sources of funding, firstly from the local budgets of the respective cities of Surabaya and Kitakyushu, and secondly on knowledge exchange visits funded by private sectors. Additional funding was also mobilised through grants on several project components, also from private sectors. Fortunately, funding to propel the project was sufficient as it was allocated in a mechanism that accommodates multiple years.

It is through the Surabaya City's Department of Environment, as well as the Legal and Cooperation Division, where the project was carried out in collaboration with several actors in the private sector and local owned enterprises. The cooperation also operates within the premise of effective communication through formal regulations, workshops, FGDs, community meetings and press conferences. To ensure transparency and accountability, project progress is monitored through monthly reporting, and reporting on implementation is reported annually.

The Indonesian government has been instrumental in providing enabling environments through frameworks to support this DC project. More specifically, Government Regulation No. 28/2018 on Regional Cooperation extends its support to cooperation projects as one key point prescribes that every cooperation establishment with foreign cities need to obtain approval from the central government and city's House of Representatives.



Given the nature of any DC project, it is crucial to draw key lessons in order to facilitate an improvement for future projects. In this context, a key lesson learnt was involving communities at the grassroots level in the implementation of the cooperation. This carries infinite potential to create multiple opportunities and benefits to communities, local governments and other sectors through the outputs and outcomes. Also, moving forward, establishing low carbon environments, the development of sustainable environments, and human resources capacity development were key points required to be adapted in the 2020 MoU renewal.



Example 2

Sister City Partnership between Jakarta (Indonesia) and Berlin (Germany)

SMART CHANGE

CONFERENCE 2021 - Urban Collaboration

The Online Conference For Smart City Governance in Jakarta



The Indonesian capital city of Jakarta is a sprawling metropolis that embodies a rich diversity of people emanating from various parts of the country. As the largest city, with a population of a little north of a million, it is evident that economic activities in the city are dynamic. Despite its strategic advantage, city leadership grappled with an unsustainable economy, infrastructure



and a meaningful governance ecosystem. There was therefore a dire need for technical response to address these challenges.

As a result, the city of Jakarta, and Germany's capital, the city of Berlin, collaborated to address these issues. More specifically, the direct DC project was initiated in 1994 with the aim of strengthening cooperation between the two cities, while improving the entrepreneurial ecosystem by enabling start-up growth and urban innovation, and also promoting good urban governance and sustainable urban development in Jakarta. The parameters in which the notably long-standing partnership relies are city planning, public transportation, clean water and waste management, smart city/e-governance and start-ups, as well as sports and culture.

As the project was rooted in various focus areas, the SDGs aligned to the interventions were also diverse and intertwined in nature. It was pertinent for the population of Jakarta to enjoy poverty eradication (SDG 1), maintain good health and well-being (SDG 3) with the provision of clean water and sanitation (SDG 6). As the largest city and economic hub of Indonesia, decent work and economic growth (SDG 8) are key to the creation of a sustainable economy, with the support of cutting-edge industry, innovation and infrastructure (SDG 9) and to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable (SDG 11). However, it is worth noting that the successful implementation of these goals heavily relies on peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG16), with partnerships (SDG 17) being the cornerstone of sustainable development.

The SDGs were mandated through presidential regulation for all local governments' programme and development projects. The Jakarta government issued Regional Action Plan on SDGs encouraging all projects shall have to consider the sustainable development principles. Fortunately, there were no challenges encountered in linking SDGs to the Jakarta-Berlin project, and they were incorporated into the development plan. The strong commitment demonstrated by the local leaders from both sides to implement the SDGs is one of the project drivers.

Inspired by SDG 17, the initiative adopted a multi-stakeholder approach involving relevant departments within the Jakarta administration –such as the International Cooperation Bureau, and Communication, Information and Technology– as key role players. Their role extended to the establishment of the sister-city partnership and the implementation of key project goals. Project activities were carried out in dual partnership with a team comprised of staff from both cities respectively.

Funding arrangements of the project were jointly spearheaded by the state government of Berlin, Jakarta's city government, as well as other funding instruments such as the European Union and the GIZ. Allocated project funds were indeed sufficient for activities of technical assistance, workshops, expert placement and consultancy, delegation visits as well as related events. The other forms of funding were mobilized through development funding.

Of course, the successful implementation of all planned activities of the project wouldn't have been possible without enabling frameworks at the



national level. Accordingly, Government Regulation No. 28/2018 on Regional Cooperation, as well as the MOHA Decree No. 25/2020 on International Cooperation Guidelines for Local Governments, are key pieces of legislation that are enablers of the direct DC cooperation.

In order to ensure that the project did not fall out of the intended scope, a monitoring mechanism was carried out by preparing a regular report involving all stakeholders. On the other hand, upon an impact assessment of the intervention, it was deduced that positive impacts of the project include improved territorial/spatial planning, public transportation, enhanced e-governance, and a well-developing start up ecosystem.

It is worth noting that communication plays a vital role in any project setting. Likewise, in this context, platforms and means of communication utilized were public and social media, and other available platforms. Reporting to all key players was undertaken through regular government-prepared reports, and submissions were made to funding agencies/principals and through public hearing with local parliaments.

In weighing up all the successes, it is worth mentioning that the DC project did encounter budgetary challenges as it was insufficient and must be sought to scale up the programme and for the purposes of strengthening the roles of Jakarta Development Collaboration Network (JDCN) in support of realizing Jakarta Smart City and Collaborative City. The key takeaway point from the project was that, when cities are considering to partner, they must ensure the cooperation is underpinned by needs and mutual interest, and that it stands to benefit both parties.





Building technical capacity to roll out **SDG-linked decentralized cooperation:** **Training of Trainers**

The leadership of the UCLG ASPAC region recognized the value of intensive capacity building of LRG practitioners. Following on from the positive experience of their European and African colleagues who attested to the power of building a regional cadre of DC ambassadors, the UCLG ASPAC regional section partnered with the UCLG Learning team to run an online

training program tailor-made for the region. Aimed at equipping potential trainers with the knowledge to run their own training sessions, a staggered three-day intensive program developed by UCLG, Platforma, UNDP and UN-Habitat was run on the 8th of November and followed through in the 25th and 26th November 2021.

This hands-on interactive training used a blended-learning methodology to cover the content of a training module that was released to all trainers prior to the training.

Equipped with an understanding of the history of DC and its relations with the principles of the SDGs, this module studies the value of new possibilities of partnerships, resources and funding and how to design SDG-linked projects and policies.

The experiential learning component focusing on real life case studies drew on lessons from two case studies featured above. Please note that a portal with updated case studies using an agreed upon template will that emerged through this process will go online once finalized by the UCLG ASPAC team.

The workshop culminated with participants in consensus of the steep learning curve and feeling empowered in the content of the UCLG Module 4 on SDG-linked DC. The following four resolutions emerged:

1. The first trainings for 2022 will be organized by Jakarta and Surabaya, with the support of UCLG ASPAC. Certificates will be thereafter issued to participants.
2. DC will be integrated into the program for the Asia-Pacific Mayors Academy, facilitated by UN-ESCAP.
3. 10 best practices on DC will be included in 2022 targets.
4. UCLG ASPAC has committed to continue to facilitate DC between two cities on tele-medicine.

Similarly, the UCLG World Secretariat recommitted itself to continue its partnership with the region and to further its support for future initiatives and activities. As a way forward in the short term, the continued support will be in the form of the current article outlining the ASPAC perspective on DC, and to provide proposals for the purposes of more global alignment in future cases of good practices that will be published.



Strategic next steps for action

As with UCLG Africa, one of the important outcomes of the training session was the opportunity created for the leadership team from UCLG and ASPAC to reflect on the approach to DC in their region, and to begin the process of crafting a strategic action plan to help embed SDGs in the DC process. To this end, a successful half-day workshop was facilitated by a Urban Vision Consulting in December 2021 to map out a way forward. In summary, the four central components of the high-level strategy agreed upon at the workshop is presented in Figure 7 below:

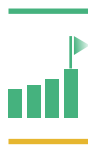


Figure 6
Strengthen LRG capacities in Asia Pacific

Source: UCLG, 2022



The first central action is the **gearing up of dedicated capacity** to lead SDG-linked DC in the region. It was accepted that capacity is currently small, but given the visionary leadership of the UCLG ASPAC Secretary General, this capacity is being grown.

The second related action adopted is around **building up DC intelligence** at the country level. It was accepted that a DC database is still in the pipeline, but has been given further impetus post the workshop. Critically here, there was agreement of the value of **knowledge management** and its strategic role in driving the DC Agenda.



The third action was around the ongoing **support and enabling of country champions**. It was agreed that a practical and well-resourced strategy needs to be developed to see how to mainstream this and to identify champions by linking it to the work on SDG implementation through the local development planning processes. Participants felt that this presents key opportunities that must be maximized urgently. The intention was expressed to work closely with national governments; starting with Home Affairs and it was noted that training has already started to date. As a concrete action, the UCLG ASPAC team will identify potential champions drawing on the list of participants from the training. Other partners such as relevant Ministries, think tanks on DC, SDGs Centers of universities, etc. were to be actively considered in moving ASPAC DC forward and flagged as important.

Finally, it was agreed that a **sustainable Regional DC Program** will be crafted, with support from Urban Vision Consulting. One of the important take-aways from the strategy session was for UCLG ASPAC to do careful introspection into identifying their unique and key capacities, and what it will be able to bring strategically to the process. This will help consolidate its position not only within the region but in relation to its regional sections and partners.