Decentralized Cooperation to localize the SDGs in Africa

Introduction

There can be no doubt that the global agendas offer an important and exciting opportunity for local leadership to join the growing African municipal movement, and in particular for UCLG Africa to play a critical, cohesive and visible role in actively communicating and expressing challenges, and constantly looking for new regional and international partnerships that help move the 2030 Agenda forward.

This emerging role for UCLG is to be seen against the backdrop of Africa clearly becoming the focus of international development cooperation. As decentralized cooperation (DC) is intrinsically part of development cooperation, one of the strategic thrusts required is the active building of capacity in African local governments. As a point of departure, DC is no longer about the transfer of funding and knowledge, or of the mere implementation of development projects alone. At the same time, it is no longer limited to European-African relations.

It is time for a new, dynamic and more nuanced understanding of DC in the African context, which embraces mutual learning between practitioners rooted in trust and respect, and working collaboratively not just with local governments but with a range of territorial partners –from local business, NGOs and CBOs, to academia and research institutes–, each contributing based on their unique strengths. It is interesting that the call by the UCLG Africa team for this redefining and more progressive understanding of DC is mirrored in the latest CIB 2021 policy paper Decentralized Cooperation and Local Government: Addressing Contemporary Global Challenges, where DC is presented as multi-layered, multi-dimensional and responsive to 21st century challenges and opportunities.

This short article prepared on behalf of the UCLG Learning and UCLG Africa teams provides a short snapshot view of the nature of DC on the African continent. Based on interviews with key players, and drawing from online workshops with DC personnel and desktop material, this article presents an African perspective of the process of mobilizing DC to localize the SDGs on the continent. It contextualizes the municipal development challenges before presenting how DC can be seen as an important development lever. Three case studies are also included to 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 on the African continent.
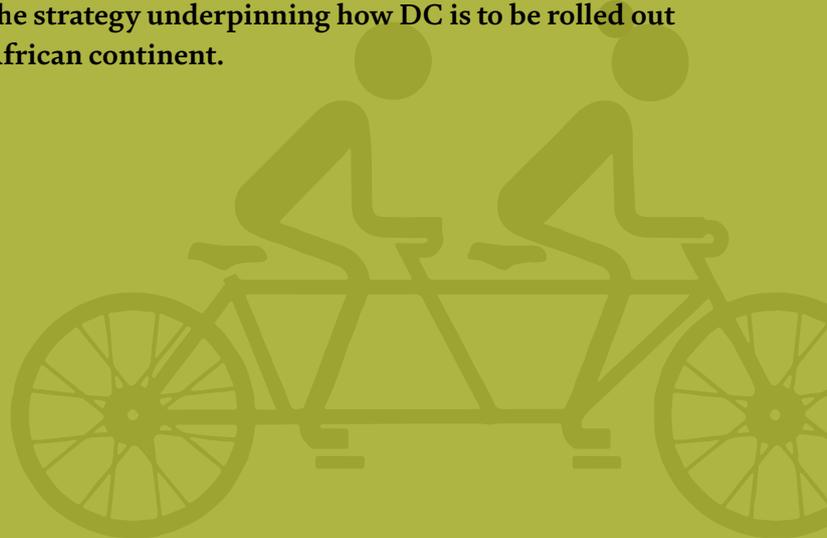
Contextualizing the development challenges in Africa

In its position paper on DC Africa (2021), UCLG Africa identified the first critical challenge facing the continent as population growth and its corollary, the rapid urbanization of the continent. This contributes to an acceleration of large movements of populations from communities located in rural areas to communities located in urban areas; from countries and regions perceived as poor to countries and regions perceived as offering more opportunities, both within and outside the continent. By force of circumstance, they note that African local authorities therefore find themselves on the front line in the management of migration since most migrants leave a local authority to settle temporarily or permanently in another authority in the same country, on the same continent or outside the home continent. It is this new dimension of relations between communities, they argue, that gives rise to numerous innovations in practices, involvement of actors, and institutional arrangements, often without the institutional and legal frameworks having prepared them for it.

The second major challenge articulated by the UCLG Africa that African communities must take up is that of their contribution to the achievement of the African Union's Agenda 2063 which calls for the structural transformation of the African continent in all areas to ensure its sustainable development and integration. The free trade area of the African continent created in 2019 to accelerate the dynamics of African integration, they note, will induce profound changes in the economic and business landscape. This will however require African LRGs to adjust their international action which will undoubtedly pay much more attention to the attractiveness of their territories, and to transforming the potential of their natural assets, their tangible and intangible heritage and their human capital in order to be able to better respond to the structural challenges of the employability of young people, the integration of women into economic and social life, or gender equality. This call to give focus on the nature on international action and creating powerful territories is a fundamentally important point to be noted in the context of DC.

In addition to these challenges, there are questions of improving democratic governance, access to basic services, citizen participation, respect for human rights and diversity, which bring within the scope of DC and development of coordinated international action by LRGs in new and much more diverse fields. Having set the broader African developmental context, it is also useful to obtain a snapshot view of the municipal challenges facing LRGs.

In a detailed assessment of the municipal environment in Africa, Accord (2019) offers a very useful framework for understanding the complex challenges facing cities and regions on the continent. It is contended that these challenges need to be in the foreground in any analysis of DC as they form the content around which collaborative partnerships need to be structured so that knowledge, expertise and technical learning processes can be mobilized to systematically address them.

Whilst acknowledging that generalizations across the regions cannot be made, given the specificities of local contexts, five broad areas have been identified

by Accord. As indicated in Figure 1 below, and briefly summarized again to help contextualize the municipal environment these challenges relate to, we will show how DC can respond to these challenges in real and tangible ways.

Figure 1

Key challenges facing local governments in Africa

Source: Accord Development Consultancy, 2019

PRIORITIZED ISSUES
Lack of strategic and long-term planning
Limited enabling policy and legislation

PRIORITIZED ISSUES
Low levels of service delivery
Ad hoc implementation
Environmental degradation

Policy, planning and legislation
Administrative sector

Service delivery
Economic
Social
Environmental

Governance
Decision-making
Communicating
Collaborating
Leadership
Development stakeholders

KEY CHALLENGE
Functional areas of Local Governments

Resources
Financial
Human
Technical

Systems and procedures
Financial
Procurement
Decision-making processes

PRIORITIZED ISSUES
Lack of leadership
Corruption

PRIORITIZED ISSUES
Severe lack of skills
Systems are antiquated
Limited own resources

PRIORITIZED ISSUES
Antiquated system
SOP Limited
Decision making not data driven

01 Policy, planning and legislation

Many African municipalities have not invested in strategic and long-term planning that envisions and positions themselves in terms of their strategic advantage. Where such plans may exist, they are not grounded with implementation plans, budgets and capacity to execute, nor with effective and ongoing monitoring mechanisms to ensure planning outcomes are achieved. The sharing of visioning experiences between African cities (e.g., Durban, Johannesburg, Mzuzu, Blantyre, Otjiwarango, Maputo, etc.) have proved invaluable in inspiring African cities to learn from each other.

02 Municipal systems and procedures

A key challenge is the lack of data driven decision-making that is supported by municipal systems, which in themselves are often antiquated. Municipal procedures are also often not documented and the loss of institutional memory through staff turnover is accompanied by a loss of technical know-how. Many good case practices of building effective municipal systems and procedures can serve as points of reference for other African cities involved in peer learning DC partnerships.

03 Resource deficiency

Given the history of underdevelopment and colonization, a related challenge for most African local governments is the lack of technical, human and financial resources. It is for this reason that many municipalities opt for DC projects that are defined by aid transfer from North to South. Whilst this is understandably justifiable, they come with their challenges and need to be carefully thought through.

04 Service delivery

At a fundamental level, it is this core business of the delivery of basic municipal services that many African municipalities still grapple with. Given the complex set of challenges outlined above, local governments are often unable to meet their economic, social and environmental mandates that enable their citizens to enjoy a better quality of life. It is here that technical expertise between cities and regions can be shared in direct DC projects that enable knowledge transfer.

05 Municipal governance

There is increasing appreciation for the role of "soft issues" related to governing complex municipal environments. The value of strong political and administrative leadership for example has been shown to make a real difference in cities and regions. Even in, or perhaps particularly in under-resourced contexts like those in Africa, the ability to communicate and collaborate, to foster and nurture multi-stakeholder partnerships and to enable local community voices to be heard and to participate meaningfully in their own development, is critical. Whilst some African cities have begun to build strong municipal governance traits, many still require support and will do well to partner with other cities that are further along in their governance journey.

As shown above, well-structured DC initiatives can be harnessed to mobilize resources, knowledge and expertise from partners to help deal with the myriad of challenges facing local governments in Africa. However, the way that DC is structured needs to be well thought out. In the next section, the thinking around using DC as a powerful tool to help localize the SDGs on the continent is outlined.

Decentralized cooperation as enabler of the 2030 and Africa 2063 Agendas

It is useful to note that the 17 Goals of the 2030 Agenda have local dimensions, with SDG 17 calling for a global cooperation and partnership to enhance North-South, South-South and triangular regional and international cooperation on access to science, technology and innovation and enhance knowledge sharing on mutually agreed terms. It is here that DC is not only the key enabler but also an effective lever for SDG localization given the skill gap in human capital, and the limitations in terms of expertise and finances. Critically, the changing context at the level of the African continent also calls for greater mobilization of LRGs to meet the new challenges.

As indicated earlier, this development gives rise to many innovations which place DC in a more strategic perspective. The international action and DC of African LRGs are encouraged to be oriented towards the promotion of more egalitarian and more long-term cooperation relations. In addition, by basing these relationships on issues of universal scope such as the SDGs, climate change and the protection of biodiversity, the management of migration, the fight against poverty and inequalities, the promotion of human rights, and in establishing and anchoring them over time, DC and the international action of LRGs appear to be an essential lever and enabler for the establishment of international relations and multilateralism over time and as close as possible to the concerns, needs and priorities of the populations. This reinforces their impact on the improvement of their life and on their conviviality.

DC and the international action of LRGs are all the more likely to be one of the best vehicles for bringing people together over time as these authorities have structured themselves by setting up the world organization of United Cities and Local Governments whose regional sections (including that for Africa, UCLG Africa) carry the representative voice of LRGs and authorities in the various continental and international arenas. The multiplicity of areas of intervention of DC, the diversity of practices and contexts of intervention and the more or less strong integration of the different components of local societies in the initiatives and actions of DC justify that we draw the lessons from these practices to provide the means for a greater contribution of DC and international action by local authorities to the decade of action for the achievement of the SDGs and African Union Agenda 2063.

A focus on practice: showcasing some African decentralized cooperation practices

The following three vignettes present interesting examples of DC on the continent. They draw on different DC modalities and methodologies that work best in this context.

Example 1

French and Madagascan municipalities partner to sustain municipal finances

The port city of Mahajangar, boasting the waterfront corniche with palms and vibrant street food-stalls, is an important international tourism destination in Madagascar. As a seaport, this city of nearly 300 000 people is the second most important one in the country. Notwithstanding with strategic advantage, the city leadership team has been grappling with the challenge of optimizing local taxation in order to ensure a more financially viable municipality and one with improved governance systems. In line with the spirit of SDG 17, a multi-stakeholder collaboration project was initiated with the city of Mulhouse in Eastern France, together with a range of partners –including the Syndicate of Electricity and Gas Rhine, the Interdepartmental Syndicate for the Sanitation of the Paris area, and the Syndicate of Water of Île-de-France.

Given the multiplicity of partners at various levels and the need to improve coordination between the stakeholders, a delegated cooperation process was adopted. Whilst the main interventions relied on technical cooperation through the sharing of knowledge skills and expertise, this North-South DC project also included a component of aid funding. Through sustained and intense mutual support, the project was able to yield important results. In the first instance, local finance and contract management were greatly improved in Mahajangar; which helped build the foundation for revenue enhancement. Secondly, overall governance improvement with increase in citizen accountability was reported as a significant achievement.

Example 2
Dakar-Marseille peer learning for more sustainable local tourism

When the Dakar city leadership was grappling with the challenge of integrated beach management, the bold decision to learn from successful experiences from Marseille really paid dividends. Recognizing the conflicts of beach use beyond bathing, and the need to boost local tourism by leveraging the latent, rich historical and cultural heritage of Dakar, a unique partnership was forged that brought together the International Association of Francophone Mayors (AIMF), the cities of Dakar and Marseille, the International and European Relations Department as well as project supporters Couveuse Interface and the Marseille Métropole Innovation Group. Working in the true spirit of SDG 17, a multi-stakeholder partnership was established to unlock and share the knowledge, expertise and financial resources to enable sustainable tourism in Dakar.

The establishment of a business incubator designed to enable small businesses to develop and hone their entrepreneurial skills was particularly significant. Whilst localizing SDG 8.3 through decent job creation and entrepreneurship, the project also aligned with SDG 8.9 by actively promoting sustainable tourism, creating jobs and promoting local culture and heritage. This aspect of the valorization of all indigenous knowledge systems is an important and positive contribution to culture and heritage preservation. The project resulted in the discovery of the rich history of a number of buildings in Dakar that date back to the colonial era, as well as the history of a mythical park ,while uncovering the traditions of the fishermen's district of Soumbédioune. The project also helped uncover more information of a typical Lebou neighbourhood and help craft an itinerary that would enhance both the sacred and historical sites. In addition, a process to identify and install informative panels telling the stories of ten buildings was initiated.

Given the challenges of economic precariousness, the business incubator project intended to reduce unemployment, while at the same time helping to create and consolidate micro and small businesses. Investing in local craft support by hosting workshops for weavers and shoe makers, as well as women dyers and soap transformers, were important aspects of the project. The hub enabled entrepreneurs to now enjoy extensive support for the establishment of their companies, with the enlistment of tutors, sponsors and advisors to ensure constant business supervision. Excited about the impacts of the program, the project team notes that the production of tourism promotional videos for the purposes of garnering online support, the creation of promotional leaflets on tourist circuits, while fast tracking the appointment of a guide in close proximity to Dakar, all count as important outputs. The project also facilitated the execution of several cultural events in various fields such as cinema, music, art, dance or traditional culture, and facilitated the installation of interpretation signage on historical buildings.

This direct cooperation project between the two cities from the North and South, supported by a range of divergent actors, is a good example of the unlocking and mobilization of human, material and financial resources from local and international partners for local development.

Example 3

Blantyre City reaches out to European and North American cities for educational and cultural partnerships

The Blantyre City Council boasts a long and rich history of interesting collaboration between itself and cities from the North. The partnership between itself and the City of Hannover in Germany, for example, dates back to 1968. This bilateral cooperation was inspired by a benchmarking tour to Hannover and other parts of Germany undertaken by a delegation of young Malawians.

This direct, vertical DC project comprised of two main goals. First, it was to cooperate in the area of cultural exchange and education, facilitating students from Blantyre to attend tertiary education in Hannover. Secondly, it was to undertake knowledge exchanges in areas of waste management, human development, city tourism and arts development.

In looking back at the impact of the cooperation, important results have been reported. In responding to SDG4's focus on education to promote a culture of peace and non-violence, an appreciation of cultural diversity, and of culture's contribution to sustainable development, a series of meaningful cultural exchange visits of artists from both cities have been facilitated successfully through performances and interactions. In addition, ten Malawian students granted the opportunity to pursue various courses in divergent fields at tertiary level in Hannover, with some enjoying learning visits to Blantyre through internship programmes. Importantly, and as a result of aid funding, a vocational school was established in Blantyre with the support of Hannover City.

The North-South DC partnership in Blantyre also extended beyond Europe to North America. Recognizing the inherent value of investment in education, Dr. Ntika, a Malawian national residing in the city of Norfolk in Nebraska, initiated a partnership aimed at supporting the establishment of a school based on the American syllabus in Blantyre in 2016. This interesting North-South direct DC project had a two-pronged focus of

improving education and of facilitating cultural exchange between the two cities.

The project enabled ten Malawian students to enjoy tertiary education in Norfolk City. More importantly, the dream of establishing a sister school in Blantyre was realized enabled by strong political leadership from both Mayors who even took the time to attend the graduation ceremonies. This case study and that of Hannover is interesting and important as it demonstrates the role and value of short-term financial aid from the North. It reveals how aid can be mobilized in ways that can help promote more sustainable outcomes such as investment in education in development economies, helping realie SDG 4 by ensuring "inclusive and equitable quality education, and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all". At the same time too, the case also highlights the limits to aid as the continued financial support from both Hannover and Norfolk City was not possible, and with limited funding from Blantyre, exchange visits could not be sustained.

Building technical capacity to rollout SDG-linked decentralized cooperation

One of the more sustainable ways to embed the value of SDG-linked DC is through intensive capacity building of LRG practitioners. Recognizing the power of building a regional cadre of DC ambassadors, the UCLG Africa supported by the African Local Government Academy (ALGA), partnered with the UCLG Learning team to run an online training program tailormade for the region. Aimed at equipping potential trainers with the knowledge to run their own training sessions, a four-day intensive program developed by UCLG, Platforma, United Nations Development Programme and UN-Habitat was run during June /July 2021 and repeated for French-speaking African practitioners in September 2021.

Figure 2
Excerpt from interactive online training
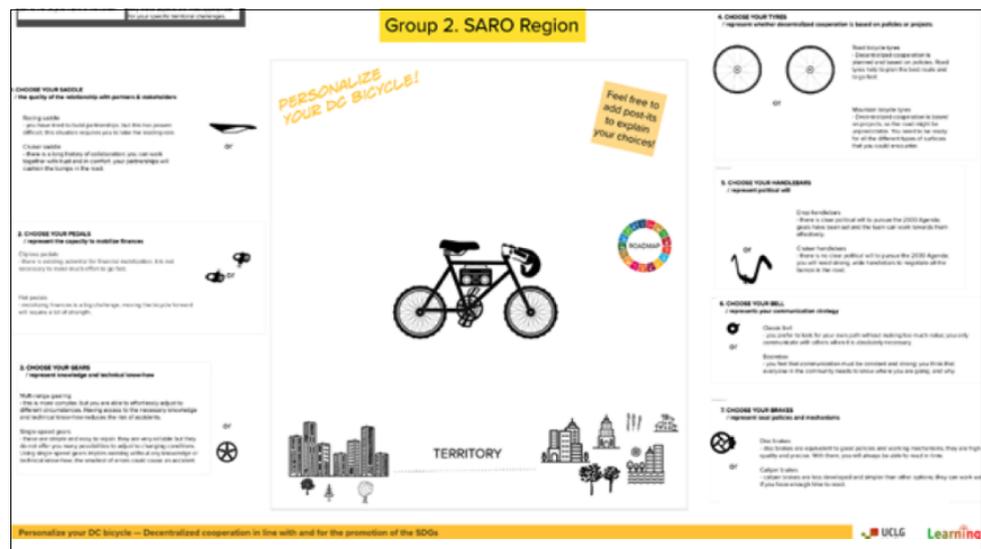
This hands-on interactive training used a blended-learning methodology to cover the content of a training module that was released to all trainers. Equipped with an understanding of the history of DC and its relations with the principles of the SDGs, trainers were empowered with appreciating the value 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 the cultural exchange and education in Blantyre (Malawi), from the sanitation and environment competitions in the Lake Victoria Region and from insights from the public space heritage South-South exchange between Rabat and Dakar. Participants also reflected on the National Association of Mozambican Municipality (ANAMM)'s experience of south-south cooperation in Mozambique revealing the inherent value of learning from southern partners grappling similar challenges in similar development con-

texts. In learning about the eThekwini Municipality's model of developing a DC policy, there was interesting discussion and consensus reached that DC policy development has been neglected within Africa. This was earmarked as a priority and the training offered simple steps for practitioners to begin drafting simple but effective policy guidelines for DC programs.

Strategic next steps for action

One of the important outcomes of the training session was the opportunity created for the leadership team from UCLG Learning/UCLG Africa and ALGA to reflect on the approach to DC in Africa, and to craft a strategic action plan to help embed SDGs in the DC process. In summary, these are the high-level actions that emerged from the workshop:
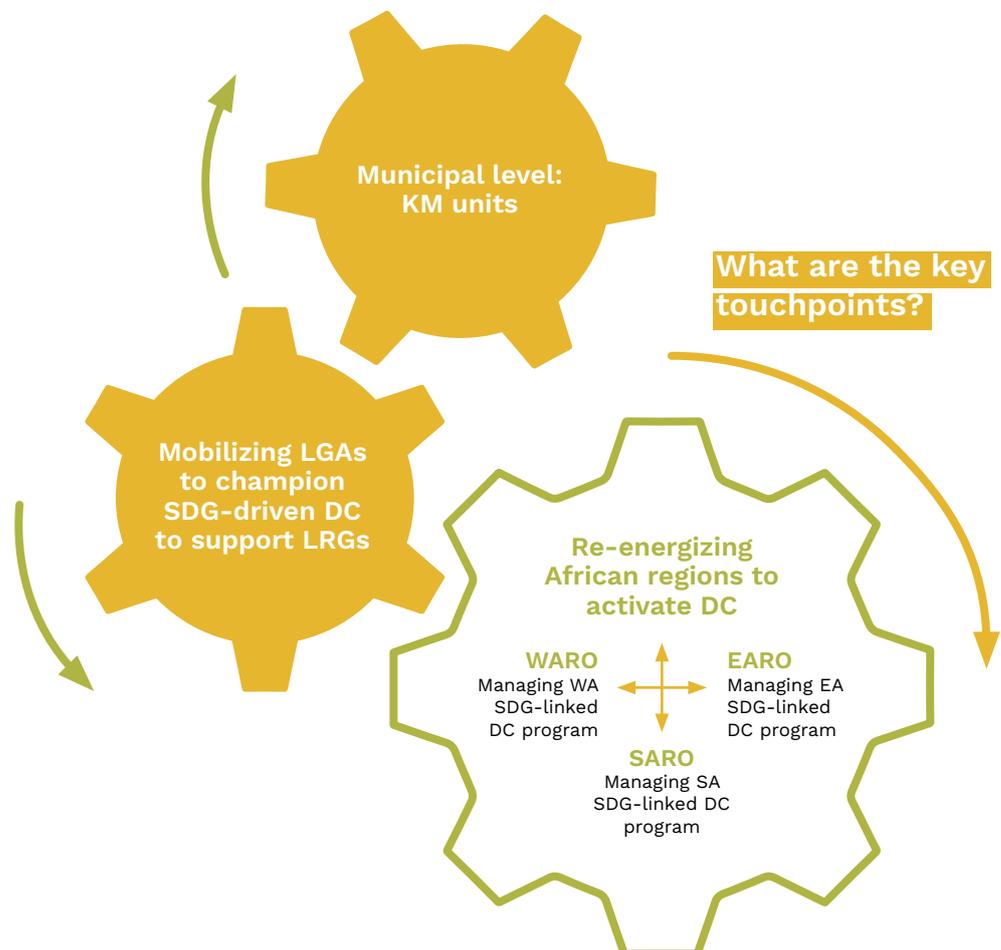
For UCLG Africa

- To promote a new understanding and mindset of DC that is more developmental and prioritizes south-south and triangular cooperation in a spirit of mutual learning
- To support a bottom-up capacitation program starting at the municipal level by building local Knowledge Management () capacity to be supported by LGAs at a regional level

Figure 3

Strategic action plan to embed SDGs in the DC process in Africa

Source: Agenda 2063. The Africa We Want.

Municipal level: KM units

Mobilizing LGAs to champion SDG-driven DC to support LRGs

What are the key touchpoints?

Re-energizing African regions to activate DC

WARO
Managing WA SDG-linked DC program

EARO
Managing EA SDG-linked DC program

SARO
Managing SA SDG-linked DC program

- To utilize the momentum created by the training to catalyze immediate action led by champions in the selected 8 countries of Zimbabwe, Namibia, Mozambique, Botswana, Uganda, Rwanda, Kenya and Zambia.
  - The trainers' community will have support in their endeavours to train more focal point and facilitators in associations and cities
  - Joint training that will be measured with peer learning and networking projects can be promoted and included on demand
- To urgently build the capacity of UCLG Africa through ALGA in order for it to strategically support the geographic regions on the continent
- To support these regions to develop regional learning frameworks, commencing with country assessments of capacity at LGAs and municipal level to roll-out SDG-linked DC
- To establish a simple but effective Monitoring and Evaluation system to ensure that the program in on track and continually monitored.
- To implement a communication system that ensures all regional role players are in the loop
- To devise creative mechanisms to ensure that political leadership are engaged as champions for SDG-linked DC in Africa.
- To enrich the UCLG Africa e-Academy platform by integrating all useful content on DC (videos, Moocs, etc.)
- Amplify the UCLG Africa knowledge hub with a section focused on DC cases

For UCLG

- To actively promote the good practices from Africa internationally as part of their knowledge management mandate in order to inspire and help improve the design of programs
- To work collaboratively with Platforma to support the methodologies and link and promote the practices once they are reported