Decentralized Cooperation to localize the SDGs in the Middle East and West Asia Region

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Contextualizing the development challenges in the MEWA Region

Characterized by its unique and divergent features, the Middle East and West Asia (MEWA) region, as the name suggests, is geographically comprised of two subregions, namely, the Middle-East and Western Asia, with a total of 15 countries. A prominent contributor to the region's uniqueness is the co-existence of two worlds within one. With flourishing Gross Domestic Products (GDPs), as well as natural resources (including oil), the Gulf Cooperation Council monarchies of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) easily feature in the world's list of highly urbanized and excessively wealthy countries. And yet within the same region, these countries co-exist with ailing economies in Palestine, Yemen and Afghanistan that continue to grapple with serious political and socio-economic challenges.

Before exploring the range of other development challenges, it is important to also acknowledge a global disrupter that added immense strain to public health and economies worldwide. It has been two years since the world was brought to its knees by the Covid-19 outbreak. Despite extensive and progressive interventions such as mass rollouts of vaccine administration, infection rates continue to fluctuate. Governments in the region have been faced with the predicament of deprioritizing competing policy objectives in order to urgently respond to the pandemic over the last two years. It is therefore worth emphasizing that a new dimension in the form of the Covid-19 pandemic and its complex implications have intensified developmental challenges.

The UCLG *Middle East Position Paper* categorizes development challenges faced by the region based on the inherent factors of wars, conflicts, migratory movements and limited resources. At the forefront of inherent challenges however, lie social diversities and issues of governance. While interrogating the former, it important to take a step back and note the geographical composition of the region. People in the Middle-eastern countries identify with each other culturally, linguistically and historically, while the way of life of people in West Asia differs significantly. Even though fragmented social cohesion appears to be a soft issue, the magnitude of its impact is intense.

In setting the development context, it is useful to appreciate that administratively, government structures are highly centralized and in turn limit Local and Regional Governments (LRGs) from exercising any kind of full autonomy, especially in finances and urban governance. Furthermore, the impacts of centralization often result in the unequal distribution of essential services, taking away the attention from other priorities and fulfilment of other agendas such as gender-sensitive approaches (*Middle East Position Paper, 2019*).

Whilst the most important challenge that characterizes the region, as identified in the *UCLG Middle East Position Paper,* are those related to war, systemic conflicts and migratory movements, it is the ongoing and recurring nature of the hostilities and heightened tensions that are a significant area of concern and extremely complex to navigate. The origins of these wars could be traced

back to the early 2000s and have continuously left Afghanistan, Iraq and now Syria and Yemen in total devastation. This has resulted in mass political instability, and hinders LRGs from delivering basic services such as water and sanitation, solid waste management, electricity, housing, education, and social welfare. When citizens are faced with a humanitarian crisis of this magnitude it is clear that their survival hangs in a balance, with many citizens opting to flee to seek refuge in neighbouring countries.

In this regard, it is useful to note that _UNICEF_ (2022) declares the Syrian crisis as the largest displacement crisis globally. This is supported by the statistics of a 5.7 million registered refugees across Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Türkiye and Egypt. Accordingly, while Türkiye is home to 3.6 million Syrians, Jordan hosts the largest number of refugees relative to its population, with 89 (of the 1.3 million) refugees per 1000 citizens. Egypt and Iraq also continue its efforts in accommodating asylum-seekers to the best of its ability. It is reported that refugees hosted in these countries are dispersed in camps and informal settlements, while the remaining refugees have integrated with communities. Due to rapid rates of migration, governments of host countries grapple with inflated populations which therefore immensely stretches the capacity of public resources, infrastructure, and the provision of essential services. Exacerbating the pressure to already strained health care systems, not only has the advent of COVID-19 posed as a global threat, but it has also disrupted access to healthcare and other basic services, deepening the urbanization challenges.

At the same time, over the years climate change has advanced in the region and continue to increase its intensity. It continues to challenge the well-being of the environment, ravaging ecosystems and threatening 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. In this regard, the _UCLG Middle East Position Paper_ (2019) highlights environmental vulnerabilities while emphasizing the long-standing challenge of dwindling water supply (more especially in Jordan) due to arid terrain and limited rainfall. Rising temperature also threatens food security in the sense that the agricultural sector is impacted intensely. Due to erratic weather patterns, crop growth is hampered which poses an immediate threat of famine and therefore increases the chances of population emigration.

As alluded to earlier, some countries in the MEWA region are known for their rich underground natural resources such as petroleum and oil. Noting the decreasing water supply, this exerts additional pressure on natural sources of water such as rivers by populations. These natural resources are prone to mismanagement and misuse, which would lead to renewed tensions, thereby rendering climate change as a secondary issue as attention would be given to peacekeeping efforts in efforts to regain stability (_Middle East Position Paper, 2019_).

Finally, somewhat complicating these challenges, is the absence of a central intergovernmental union that fully represents the whole region. Whilst re-

Introduction

gional organizations such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) are actively involved in addressing matters, they do not necessarily respond to the integrated current needs due to divergent targets and priorities (*Middle East Position Paper, 2019*).

Decentralized cooperation as enabler of the SDGs in the MEWA Region

Having outlined the broader development context, in this section of the article, we reflect on the role of decentralized cooperation (DC) in the region and potential role in enabling the SDGs. It draws on selected interviews, desktop analysis, a survey conducted by the UCLG MEWA team in preparation for a training, a focus-group workshop after the training with the MEWA leadership team and on researcher observation during a period of four months of engagement. Given that MEWA as a region is unique, and its history and challenges are not as similar to countries in the African or Latin American regions, we commence with a short historical overview of the municipalization process

Early History

As a starting point, it is interesting to note that the Ottoman Empire that ruled over the countries in the MEWA region enjoyed a strong decentralization legacy, which was continued through the Byzantine and Roman Empire. As early as the 15th century for example, Türkiye possessed local administrative mechanisms, with municipal services being provided by religious foundations known as *waqf*. Large territories were administered by provincial governors and *kadis*, but were appointed centrally.

From the 1830s however, the tendency towards centralization grew stronger in order to counter the minorities' demands for greater autonomy. Simultaneously, municipalism was "imported" from the modern state system as the Ottoman government system underwent transformation. The very first municipality was established in Beyoğlu, İstanbul, and in 1861, the Jerusalem Municipality was formed. By the 1870's municipalities began to spread in the MEWA region, with the Tehran Municipality being established in 1907 in Iran, empowering citizens to elect their own mayors. World War I was the major turning point leading to the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the facilitation of decentralization based on mechanisms used in Europe.

The unique character of decentralized cooperation in the region

The first point to be emphasized is that unlike other regions, DC is still very much in its infancy. Whereas World War II served as an important catalyst in European cities prompting numerous city-to-city exchanges, the same effect was not felt in the MEWA region. Here, the focus is on mutual learning, and most of the cooperation happens between cities within the region. The deep political polarization at national level has been identified as a major factor hampering the entrenchment of DC. It is accepted that there are communities on both sides of some national borders that enjoy natural ties and shared interests, however working against these are major political conflicts (exacerbated by the cold war) between communities that prevent mutual cooperation. Another important point to be noted is that generalizations about the MEWA region cannot be easily made, as each country within the region is

itself unique, with its own history and particular challenges. This has been a recurring theme that emerged during engagements with the Learning Team and strongly influences the strategic approach in the region.

In addition to challenges of centralization that limit municipal autonomy, and the issue of political conflict raised earlier that does little to build relationships of trust needed for meaningful DC, many municipalities in the region also have very limited capacity. This means there are fewer human resources available to dedicate for DC initiatives. Further exacerbating this challenge is the lack of local government associations (LGA). Except for the Union of Municipalities of Türkiye (UMT) and the Association of Palestinian Local Authorities (APLA), there is no active LGA in the region to actively champion DC efforts, as is being done in other regions. This is a real challenge and again informs the need for practical and realistic learning strategies.

Catalyzing and enabilng role of UCLG-MEWA

As a result of low municipal capacities and the lack of local government associations, international institutions and agencies such as UCLG-MEWA, international financial institutions, national and international development agencies play a key role in supporing municipalities DC programs. It must be emphasized here that UCLG-MEWA in particular, has been the driving force to promote DC in the region as part of its mandate, actively facilitating and encouraging many DC projects. The Regional Section, in the absence of LGAs, is the first point of contact and plays a critical bridging role. Utilizing a database of municipal needs and priorities, it extends assistance to respective cities and plays a brokering role between cities in the region. This is carried out by six thematic committees that identify partners. Awareness-raising efforts of SDG localization has been identified as important amongst governments and communities, hence the utilization of the SDG framework as a common platform for DC between cities in the region has been key to MEWA's strategic approach. It is useful to acknowledge and emphasize the success of the SDG framework piloted by UCLG-MEWA in twenty municipalities across the region. With time, despite disrupting factors such as Covid-19 and limited funding, this will be upscaled.

As will be developed on later, UCLG-MEWA has a young, empowered team of professionals that are competent and enthused to enable action in the region, despite the numerous challenges. At the same time, the many crises have also created unique opportunities for cities themselves to take leadership roles in assisting collaboration between nation-states through city-led DC that is linked to the SDGs. This is an important trend that must be encouraged.

## The state of readiness of practitioners to roll out SDG-linked decentralized cooperation

While preparations for the 2022 rollout of the UCLG-MEWA Training of Trainers program were underway, a survey was conducted with 21 practitioners from across the Middle-East and West Asia region. Whilst the sample size is small, the results are shared here as they do provide useful insights to the state of readiness for DC rollout in the region. A full analysis of the survey is not presented but highlights on four key areas.

The first interesting result is around how LRG officials rated their understanding of the complexities of DC. This gives us a sense of the extent of general awareness of SDG-linked DC in the MEWA region.

Figure 1

Understanding of decentralized cooperation

(Source, UCLG-MEWA, 2022).
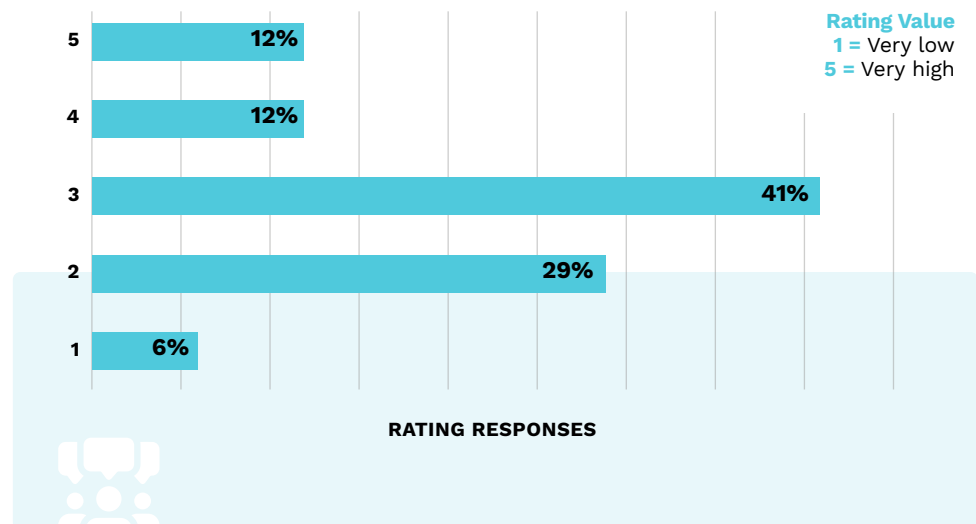
As reflected in Figure 1 above, more than 40% of the **participants understanding of DC** is reflected as only average. With only less than a quarter having identified their knowledge base as high/very high, and with more than a third suggesting their understanding as poor, the results show that there has not been sufficient awareness and knowledge around DC. It also indicates that there was an important need and impetus for the training program, and given the take-up and levels of participation, there is a good indication that the appetite for knowledge and learning in the region is great.

The survey also attempted to unpack how practitioners in MEWA perceived the **nature of the relationship between the two DC partners**. Participants were also asked to share whether they felt whether the DC projects were more beneficial to themselves, or whether they had seen themselves as predominantly teachers/ responsible for knowledge transfer or whether in fact the process was more reciprocal with both teaching and learning built into the process.
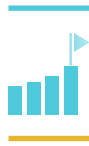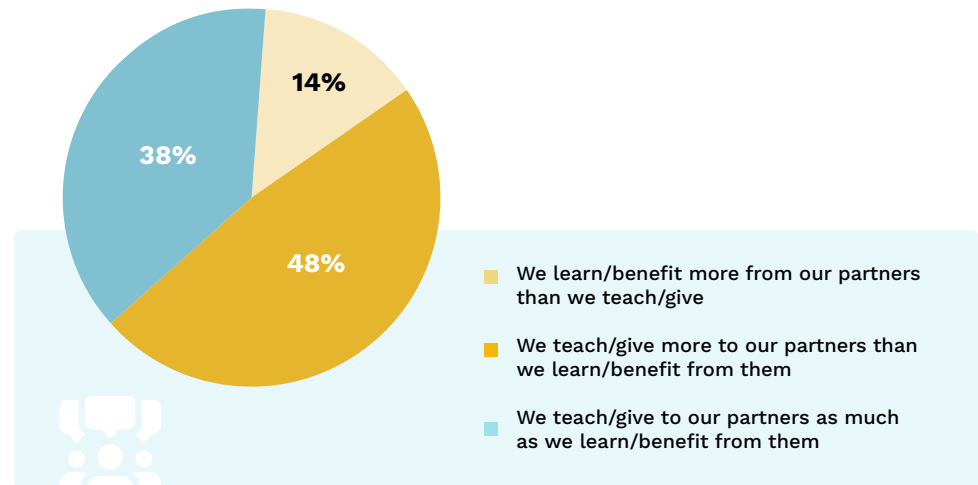
Figure 2

Perception of relationships between decentralized cooperation partners

(Source, MEWA 2022).

- We learn/benefit more from our partners than we teach/give
- We teach/give more to our partners than we learn/benefit from them
- We teach/give to our partners as much as we learn/benefit from them

It is interesting to observe that, as indicated in Figure 2, nearly half of all participants described their learning process as one in which they were primary sharers of knowledge, teaching and providing technical knowledge and know-how to their partners. This was followed by more than a third of participants who felt the learning process a reciprocal one with them teaching as much as they themselves were learning during the DC process. This willingness to teach and share knowledge bodes well for future city-to-city exchanges.
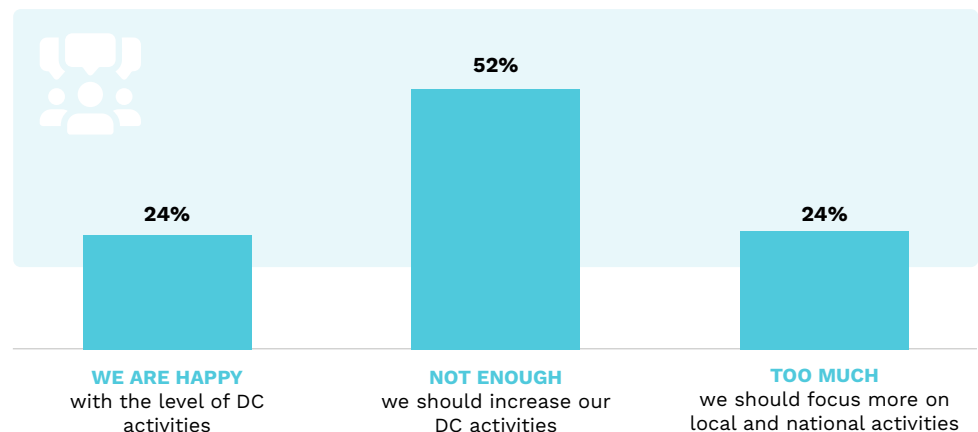
The third useful result from the MEWA survey focussed on determining participants' **perception of the amount of effort and energy** that was currently being expended on SDG-linked DC.

Figure 3

Perception of efforts expended on decentralized cooperation

(Source: UCLG-MEWA, 2022).

| WE ARE HAPPY	NOT ENOUGH	TOO MUCH
with the level of DC activities	we should increase our DC activities	we should focus more on local and national activities

The clear trend emerging from this result was that more than half of all survey participants felt that efforts towards DC are currently insufficient. Of course, this is not a surprising result, given the competing priorities in the region, and the issues around capacity and other challenges outlined earlier.

The fourth and final area of exploration was around the **current state of readiness and planning for city-to-city cooperation** in the MEWA region. Whilst the result of more than a third of participants indicating that plans are already in place to embark on DC, nearly 60% of participants have not yet geared up for DC rollout. Again, this is not a surprising result, as no concerted effort to initiate a structured and coordinated program had been implemented. The result of only 5% of participants indicating that this is not a priority, or of interest, is encouraging and will be discussed later.

Figure 4

Perception of state of readiness and planning for decentralized cooperation

(Source: UCLG-MEWA, 2022).

- Yes, already in place
- Not yet
- Not interested
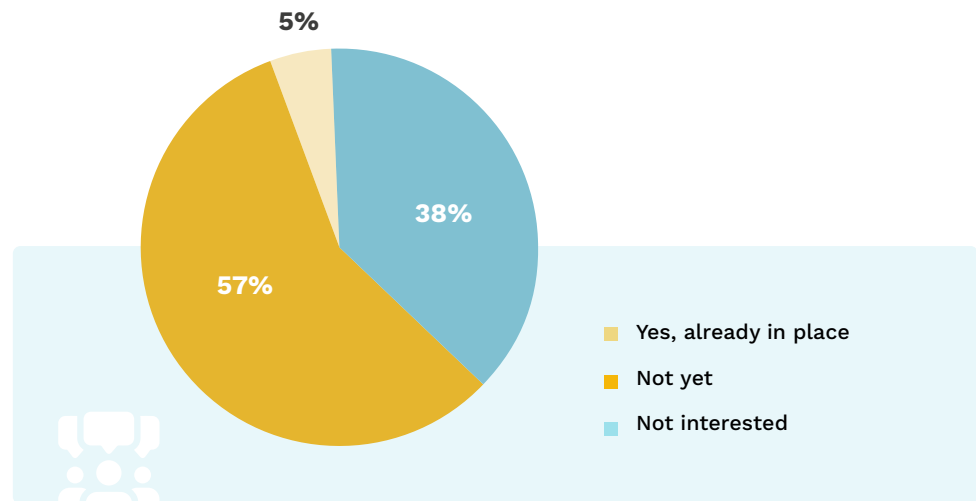
A focus on practice: Showcasing selected MEWA decentralized cooperation practices

One of main reflections from the recent engagement by the UCLG Learning and the UCLG-MEWA teams around the rollout of *Module 4 on Localizing the SDGs through Decentralized Cooperation, was the realization* that despite the many challenges experienced by the Region, there are indeed many good practice examples of DC initiatives. These interventions have mobilized the active support and facilitation of international organizations and national authorities. They include wide ranging projects from a Bus Rapid Transit system in Lahore supported by the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, to developing proactive cultural strategy development in the Kütahya Municipality, with support of Pecs Municipality and UNESCO; from UMT Sister Cities programs that mobilize EU funds to technical know-how exchanges on water and water management between the Istanbul Water and Sewerage Administration and Palestinian Cities mobilizing multiple partners from APLA, UMT and UCLG-MEWA. Such facilitation by different stakeholders has been instrumental in building trusted ties. A full database of such exchanges are being finalized by the UCLG-MEWA team and will be available soon. In order to give the reader a flavor of the DC projects, two examples are share below. They draw on different DC modalities and methodologies that work best in the MEWA context.

Example 1

Lahore and Istanbul Bus Rapid Transit Project

Home to some of Pakistan's major attractions, the bustling city of Lahore embodies rich historical and cultural features which informs its appeal to tourists all over the globe. Besides these characteristics, it is ranked as the second biggest city in the country and home to a dense population of approximately 12 million. In any given setting, urban sprawl often proves to be a challenge to underprepared cities and adds a strain on the provision of basic services such as convenient transport systems. Drawing on the substantial need for transport infrastructure, Lahore grappled with heavy traffic congestion and urgently required a robust solution to address the challenge of lacking a proper public transport infrastructure in the city. Besides, heavy traffic congestion was a competing priority with the longstanding issues of the high poverty rates and citizens' limited access to basic services, particularly convenient public transport.

In response to this urgent need, a transport delegation representing the city of Lahore cooperated with Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (IMM) in Istanbul, Türkiye, to initiate the Lahore Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) Project. More specifically, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed in 2012 for the BRT system construction in Lahore. With specific attention to areas of public transportation, the BRT system, and transportation planning, this South-South territorial partnership direct DC was aimed at providing safe, efficient, and solving problems in the city. As a direct result of the signed MOU, the Lahore Metrobus System was successfully built and the system is being further developed with the last additional routes opened in 2022.

Drawing from the background and aspects that triggered the project initiation, not only was the project designed with the intention of achieving certain outcomes, but it also embedded aspects that propel it towards achieving SDGs. For instance, it was of great importance to increase road safety and halve deaths and injuries resulting from road accidents (SDG 3). Moreover, it was considered crucial for the Lahore population to have access to a transportation system that uses sustainable energy, and that is modern and affordable (SDG 7) within a resilient infrastructure that is highly inclusive (SDG 9). The project is extensively entrenched in SDG 11 resilient infrastructure, as access to transport and expanded public transport for the people of Lahore was prioritized in the latter phases of the project, also taking into consideration the accessibility component. The challenge in linking SDGs to the project was that it was initiated prior to the onset of the SDGs, hence the delayed intentional incorporation of SDG 11.

Example 2

Köln and Bethlehem collaborate on renewable energy

Renewable energy and the incorporation of new technology is a prominent item in the current policy discourse as it is a sustainable solution to address the effects of climate change. Deriving clean and sustainable energy from natural sources such as the sun and wind is an innovation that will not prove to be obsolete, even in future generations. Therefore, there is a dire need for this approach to be as widespread as possible. Against this background, prior to 2020, Bethlehem's lighting network relied on traditional forms of energy. This proved to be a challenge because not only was it harmful to the environment, but it was also costly to residents as street lighting was charged on the bill of each household. In other words, Bethlehem urgently required to consider new technologies in deriving reduced energy consumption.

Consequently, in recognizing the need for an urgent intervention, Bethlehem and Köln joined forces in committing to the fight against harmful emissions and to the production of green energy. In specific, they signed a Memorandum of Understanding and kickstarted a cutting-edge project of upgrading and replacing the cost-intensive high-pressure sodium-vapor lamps in the main streets with LED lighting, and installing a photovoltaic system on the roof of the central bus station. Hence, this is considered to be the most suitable response as it reduces energy consumption of street lighting, thereby reducing costs, and thus reflecting on household bills of Bethlehem's residents.

At the offset of any given project, it is crucial to set specific objectives in order to constantly work towards achieving them. In this context, the initiative aimed to reduce energy costs for the street lighting network by replacing the old lighting system with new LED lights with increased energy efficiency. Moreover, it was also envisaged to have a sustainable energy source for the electricity supply provided by installing a solar panel system. Raising residents' awareness on the topics of climate change, clean and affordable energy, and sustainable cities also formed part of the project aims. Lastly, sustainable project success secured by strengthening local capacities for the installation, maintenance and operation of the LED lighting, in particular the exchange of expertise, was also an expectation from the project.

The project was initiated in 2020 and reached completion in 2022. A three-phased approach, based on the issuing of three tenders, was adopted in the implementation. The first phase of purchasing and supplying street lighting fixtures and units for Caritas Street and branches, as well as part of Manger Street, was completed in July 2021. The second phase entailed the supply and installation of 50 KWP Solar Panels on the Bus Station, which was underway from October 2021 and recently completed in April 2022. The third phase comprised of the purchasing and supplying of street lighting fixtures and units for Antonian Society Street was initiated in October 2021 and completed in January 2022.

In designing this direct-DC project, partners were inspired by the global goals and ensured the initiative was well-aligned to them. It was a priority for the residents of Bethlehem to enjoy affordable and sustainable energy (SDG 7), in sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), whereby effective climate protection measures are taken (SDG 13). As a matter of fact, one of the main objectives that Bethlehem highlights in its SDIP 2018-2021 is to work on energy efficiency and reduce the electricity consumption for street lighting.

Building technical capacity to rollout SDG-linked decentralized cooperation: Training of Trainers

Despite being confronted by complex developmental challenges that were further complicated with the advent of the pandemic, the MEWA region's leadership to mobilize the energy of countries in an attempt to connect, empower through training and help collectively build an agenda to move the SDG localization process forward is commendable. The UCLG-MEWA team in partnership with the UCLG Learning team collaborated over three months in order to plan and execute an in-contact training session tailor-made for the region. It is worth emphasizing that this contact mode of training was the first to be rolled out for Module 4, given the constraints of pandemic in the earlier regional rollouts.

With the aim of capacitating LRG practitioners in the MEWA region with knowledge and tools to deepen their understanding of DC to run their own trainings, a highly interactive training was rolled out on the 26th and 27th of May 2022 in Konya, Türkiye. Guided by UCLG and Platforma's _Trainers Guide to Module 4 on localizing the SDGs (2021)_, the session adopted the blended learning methodology to cover aspects specifically identified as priority areas for the region. 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 DC projects and policies. The experiential learning component focusing on real life case studies drew on lessons from the collaboration on Bus Rapid Transit project in Lahore (Pakistan), and from the collaboration on renewable energy and incorporation of new technology in Bethlehem (Palestine).
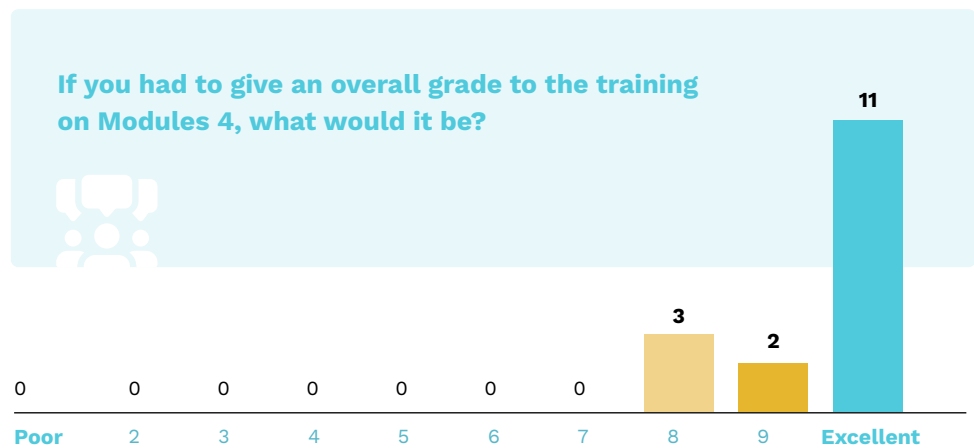
From anonymous feedback obtained from all participants at the end of the session, it became clear that the objective of the training was achieved (see Figure 5 below showing participants' ratings). The personal testimonies, however, were more important as participants described the session less as a training and more like a leadership seminar as important space was created for active engagement, debate and deliberation. Most interesting was that 100% of the participants surveyed were interested in replicating the training in their own territory and network.

Figure 5
Feedback on training
(Source: MEWA 2022)

If you had to give an overall grade to the training on Modules 4, what would it be?

Poor	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Excellent
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	2	11

In a close-out evaluation workshop held with the UCLG Learning team, one of the critical success factors that resulted in positive outcomes was that the MEWA team had invested in selecting the right participants who had a high-skills set and was willing and able to roll out the training in the future. To reiterate, another critical factor was that the UCLG-MEWA team were comprised of highly competent, professional and dedicated staff, led by a visionary General Coordinator and supported by an enabling Secretary General.

The workshop culminated with participants joining hands in a symbolic closing out ceremony and committing to move the SDG-linked DC program forward. The following three concrete actions emerged:

01 Development of Aman International Relations Policy and Alignment with Strategic Plan

This project in the city of Aman, Jordan, will be driven by a small inter-departmental team led by IGR office, local university and UN-Habitat and will involve the revision of the Aman (2022 – 2026) Strategic Plan.

02 Implementing training in key cities from the region

The second important intervention was the roll out of training that is to be adapted by the respective cities using local methodologies. The UCLG-MEWA team will be supporting these municipalities, and will be led by the Human Resources and Training departments. The focus here will be on awareness raising and training of more staff in order to roll out the program.

03 City-University cooperation project

Recognizing that universities are often left behind, this process intends to bring the university on board as a partner with municipalities. A first step is to update the curriculum, which will be done in the 2023/2024 financial year. An MOU will be drafted incorporating MEWA, UMT, Yalova University and the Ministry.

In addition to these three actions, the following commitments from cities were also received:

Table 1

Summary of participant's post-workshop commitments

Name of City	Commitment	Timeframes
1. Tehran, Iran	To roll-out the training program in Iran	July-December 2022

Strategic next steps for action

As with other regional sections of UCLG, one of the important outcomes of the training session organized with UCLG-MEWA was the opportunity created for the leadership teams from UCLG Learning and UCLG-MEWA to jointly 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 workshop was held in June 2022 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 6 below:
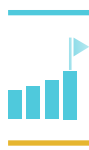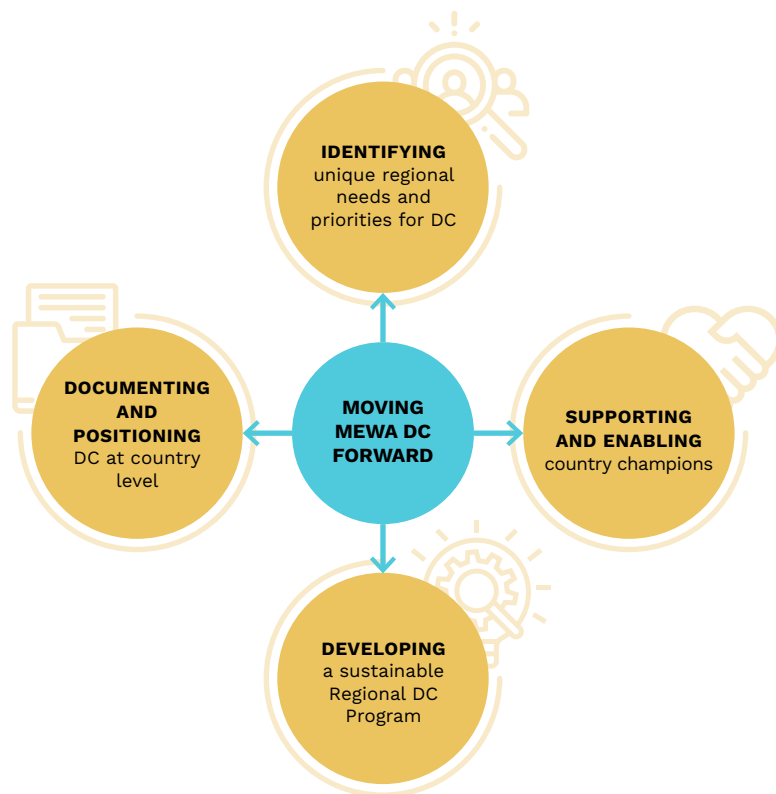
Figure 6

Towards a strategic framework for SDG-linked decentralized cooperation in the MEWA Region

(Source: Urban Vision, 2022).

The first central action is the **identification of unique needs and priorities** in the MEWA region. It is clear that the region is highly differentiated, with Gulf countries for example having a unique set of issues compared to others. So even adopting a tailor-made approach for the region is not possible, as each country context must be appreciated. The interventions will therefore be country-specific considering the local context and dynamics. It was also noted that the focus is predominantly

around technical cooperation as many of the mayors are engineers by profession. Social issues and those related to citizen engagement and participantion, for example, are still in the formative stages and these areas of content will emerge over time.

The second related action adopted is around the **documentation and positioning of DC at the country level**. It was accepted that the Module 4 training created the opportunity to begin the showcasing of excellent examples of DC practices. The issue therefore is not one of insufficient practices, but rather the need for more documentation, showcasing and celebration of good DC practices. It was agreed that the Committee of City Diplomacy will be used to create the space for sharing such projects. Similarly, the UCLG-MEWA quarterly note will also be maximized in order to increase visibility.

The third action was around the continued ongoing **support and enabling of country champions**. It was noted that not all champions have the same authority, and that this reality must be factored into the strategy. The new leadership within the City Diplomacy Committee was seen as an opportunity to be mobilized in order to help secure support of champions. Other partners such as relevant Ministries, SDGs Centers of universities, international funders and agencies were to be actively considered in moving forward and flagged as important.

Finally, it was agreed that a **sustainable Regional DC Program** will be crafted, focusing on a three-year mandate, with a detailed annual program of activities. Unlike other regions, it was noted that developing long-term programs is not feasible given the impact of elections, which often affect the viability of implementing programs. In this regard, the training was an important catalyst as each participating country has been tasked with preparing inputs on how their SDG-link DC will be rolled out. These inputs will help develop the overall regional program.