

The Urban Dimension of Six Global Agreements: A Critical Reflection



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Six Global Agreements with Relevance for Urban Development and Governance, and What Can Be Done Now

During 2015-16, six global agreements were reached by UN Member States that have relevance to urban sustainable development issues: the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Paris Agreement on climate action, the World Humanitarian Summit, and the New Urban Agenda (Table 1).

Not all enjoy the same level of commitment from the signatories, and of these, the 2030 Agenda is the most comprehensive and ambitious global agenda; its 17 SDGs and 169 targets set a clear framework for tackling the economic, social and environmental aspects of sustainable development.

The agreements have, within their texts, the details of a shared vision for inclusive cities. If all commitments were implemented, they would solve almost all urban problems, avoid dangerous climate change and, as the SDGs promise, leave no one behind. At the same time, these agreements are very ambitious and include some internal sectoral and scalar tensions. In addition, the limited attention to operational connections among objectives weakens the ability to identify priority interventions and may undermine the overall effectiveness of these agendas.

Moreover, while all six agreements recognise the importance of local and regional government in implementation, there is little clarity on how much the achievement of goals and commitments is the responsibility of government bodies operating at the subnational level. As a result, it is unclear how the global agendas will operate in cities and other urban centres.

This brief explores how the global agreements relate to cities and reflects on the extent to which they provide a framework for action on sustainable urban development that can be bought into and implemented by governments at the national, local and regional level.¹ It proposes potential ways to use the global frameworks to better engage local actors to contribute to more inclusive, sustainable cities.

¹ In this paper, the term “local and regional governments” is used when referring to all subnational government systems, while “urban governments” is used where referring specifically to authorities with responsibility for medium or large urban centres (cities). The term “urban governance” is used to refer to institutional arrangements that involve both state and non-state actors in urban areas.

Table 1: The global sustainability agendas at-a-glance

Agenda	Scope and status of agreement	Key relevance for urban development and governance
Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (March 2015)	A non-binding global agreement for reducing disaster risk adopted by 186 UN member states after the Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifies poorly managed rapid urbanisation as a key underlying risk factor for disasters • Promotes shift from disaster response to disaster risk reduction among national and local governments • Is strong on importance of local governments for this, but weak on urban governance for DRR, including civil society
Addis Ababa Action Agenda (July 2015)	Non-binding global agreement to support implementation of the 2030 Agenda, endorsed by 193 UN member states at the Third International Conference on Financing for Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Includes general comments on the importance of local actors and recognises the need for strengthening capacities of municipal and local governments • Commits to “support” local governments to “mobilise revenues as appropriate” • Offers little on how to get financing to support local governments in addressing these commitments
Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (September 2015)	Non-binding global agreement that includes the 17 SDGs adopted by 193 UN member states	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Includes SDG11, which speaks explicitly to making cities “inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.” It makes extensive reference to universal provision of basic services in other SDGs that will require substantial efforts in cities; equality and governance are also stressed • Focuses on national goals and national monitoring with insufficient recognition of key roles of local and regional governments and urban civil society in addressing most of the SDGs, despite the sustained engagement of both local government networks and associations and civil society representatives throughout the inter-governmental negotiation process.
The Paris Agreement (December 2015)	Legally binding global agreement under UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, signed by 195 member states and ratified by 170	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • References “cities and subnational authorities” as one of many non-Party stakeholders with no reference to their specific roles, responsibilities, capacities or need for support • Encourages cities to develop specific agendas for action
The World Humanitarian Summit (May 2016)	Summit attended by representatives of 180 member states with more than 3,500 commitments to action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Includes five agreed “core responsibilities” with relevance for urban areas; commitments were made by professional associations, NGOs and networks of local authorities to address these in towns and cities • Local and regional governments were not well represented, and their key roles not extensively discussed
The New Urban Agenda (October 2016)	Non-binding global agreement as a framework for sustainable urban development, adopted by 167 UN member states at UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intended as the global guideline for sustainable urban development for 20 years, but little coherence with other agreements and little buy-in from the organisations seeking to implement them • Has limited recognition of local and regional governments or civil society as initiators and drivers of change • Includes extensive mention of subnational and local governments, but mainly as implementers of national policies

The urban dimension of the global sustainability agendas

For cities, the global agreements are a welcome recognition that change at the local scale is imperative to achieving global targets. Nevertheless, there are holes, flaws and distortions in the way that cities are treated. A critical urban engagement with the global agreements needs to probe the assumptions, misconceptions and omissions made in the understanding of cities in the texts.

The urban dimension of the different global agreements is not very clearly or uniformly defined. Except in the New Urban Agenda, there seems to be a reluctance to mention the words urban or urbanisation. And while the New Urban Agenda has many commitments to sustainable urban development, what sustainable urban development means is not defined. There is also ambiguity over the term local government and its use in the agreements, when what often needs to be considered is governance at the urban (municipal, city or metropolitan) scale. The loose use of terms creates a gap in the specific discussion on how cities, policies and governments influence the problems and the means to address them.

There is still a sense in the text of some agreements that urbanisation or cities are “problems,” for example where “uncontrollable” urban growth and migration are blamed as inherently urban problems. There is little acknowledgement that most urban problems are the result of failures of all spheres of government to meet their responsibilities, and of national governments and international agencies to adequately support local and regional governments. Local and regional governments are often not provided with the political mandate and financial and human resources to face the challenges of urbanisation.

While the New Urban Agenda explicitly recommends the development of national urban policies, it is not explicit that these need to include adequate frameworks to support and enable local actions. As low- and middle-income countries become significantly more urban in the coming years, this recognition of the contributions, roles and responsibilities of urban actors – both urban governments and civil society – will become ever more important. This in turn depends on the speed with which needed regulatory reforms are implemented and/or adjusted, which will affect the degree to which municipalities can react to global commitments.

Overall, the global agreements demonstrate at best lack of specificity and at worst great incoherence in their understanding of urban. Local actors are not sufficiently recognised for their pivotal contributions and valuable role in implementing the agendas.

Local and regional governments in the Global Agendas

Since the agreements are endorsed at the national level, all six global agreements focus heavily on national government commitments. However, parts of each document acknowledge the role of urbanisation in development, and the importance of local government in the implementation. The SDGs benefit from having a list of 17 short goals to which local and regional governments, including those with responsibility for towns and cities, can commit. Much is made of an “urban” goal in SDG11, but a great deal of the agenda that is relevant to urban areas falls within the scope of other SDGs. It is possible to draw out a short, coherent agenda for urban areas from the SDGs.

The Sendai Framework (and the Hyogo Framework that preceded it) are both very clear about the key role of local government in disaster risk management, and both sought to provide local governments with clear and relevant principles that they could adopt. The Sendai Framework has

“The Ten Essentials for Making Cities Resilient” that is short, concise and clearly relevant to local and regional governments, which means monitoring is possible through reports on progress for each of the essentials.

In relation to the Paris Agreement, local and regional governments and networks of local authorities are making their own commitments in parallel to those made by national governments. This includes cities in countries where national governments have indicated their intention to withdraw from the Paris Agreement, as is the case with the “We’re Still In” Campaign that has more than 200 municipal members in the United States. Even with voluntary commitments this can happen, such as the establishment of the Global Alliance for Urban Crises, which brings together major humanitarian actors who are seeking to develop methods for achieving the goals of the World Humanitarian Summit in urban settings.

While local government is mentioned frequently in the various documents, the explicit role of city governments is less evident, and always in a subsidiary role. Local and regional governments are often seen as one among many ‘stakeholders,’ separated from their formal governmental roles and responsibilities. In addition, the acknowledgement of their role in implementing the global agreements remains vague without discussions of how to implement and with what resources. For instance, the Sendai Framework and the World Humanitarian Summit are clear about what local and regional governments should do, but they have little on the means to support them and a reluctance to discuss specific issues of urban governance.

In general, there is little recognition of the wider politics of devolution, nor is there sufficient technical or administrative detail on how so many much-needed urban interventions are best planned and managed at the local level, with local finance and accountability. Many components of the global agreements are highly relevant to the distribution of powers and functions across government and to core mandates of local and regional governments: local regulatory, legal and policy frameworks; city planning, land use and building codes; and engaging with citizens, civil society and the private sector. Local and most regional governments are much closer than national governments to citizens and civil society and are central to getting more accountability and transparency to them. There is insufficient recognition of the importance of democratic pressures on national and local governments, including their electoral accountability to citizens and civil society. Moreover, the importance of city government and governance for integrating and implementing the goals and commitments of the agreements and achieving policy coherence across all of them is not recognised. Even if some acknowledgement exists, there is a lack of guidance for local and regional governments on how to localise the agendas and engage in their follow-up processes.

Non-state local actors in the global agreements

If there is a lack of sufficient recognition for local and regional governments, this is much more pronounced for local non-state actors. Civil society, private sector and academia make important contributions to implementing the goals and commitments of the agreements, especially at the local level.

None of the agreements fully recognise the importance of local **civil society** in meeting their commitments. For urban areas, this is particularly relevant in poor communities and in informal settlements. Around a billion urban dwellers in low- and middle-income nations live in overcrowded conditions with insecure tenure and poor-quality housing that have inadequate provision for safe

and sufficient water, sanitation and electricity, solid waste collection, drainage, health care, emergency services, schools and policing. These settlements are where much of the challenge to meet the global agreements' goals and commitments is concentrated, and where the commitment to leave no one behind will be tested.

The global agreements pay little attention to the competence and capacity of grassroots organisations and federations in enumerating and mapping informal settlements and in implementing, upgrading, and supporting new housing. All are critical parts of the SDGs, Sendai Framework and the Paris Climate Agreement, as they produce the depth and detail in data called for in the global agreements. Upgrading and improving low-income and informal neighbourhoods will be one of the central pillars of building resilience in towns and cities of Africa, Asia, and Latin America.² How this is done – around accessibility, building materials, and energy use – will shape patterns of carbon emissions for decades to come. Yet, the global agreements give no attention to the hundreds of partnerships organised communities have with local and regional governments (particularly in towns and cities), including jointly managed funds, such as Community Upgrading Funds.

It is well established that local development is a key arena where women tend to take a stronger and more direct leadership role. Achieving the global goals in cities thus hinges on the extent to which gender equity and empowerment are pillars of implementation. SDG 5 commits the international community to the overarching goal to “Achieve gender **equality and empower** all women and girls” by 2030. It also mentions the need for reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land (and land tenure). The World Humanitarian Summit discussed catalysing action for women and girls to achieve gender equality, and its report includes a section on women and girls as agents of change.

The Paris Agreement urged parties to consider their obligations on the right to development, as well as gender equality, empowerment of women and intergenerational equity, among other topics. The Addis Ababa Action Agenda resolves to undertake legislation and administrative reforms to give women equal rights with men for economic resources. Other commitments include establishing services that are responsive to women's rights and needs, recognising their capacities, encouraging their participation, paying attention to their road safety, making sure that they are not overcharged, enabling local governments to work with them, empowering them through capacity development, and ensuring they have access to information and communications technologies.

One of the most important goals for any urban agenda is meeting the needs of lower-income women and men – particularly those living in informal settlements – within the SDG commitment to leave no one behind. This includes groups deemed to be “vulnerable” or “in vulnerable situations” by the global agreements.³ Many mentions of gender or women come within discussions of “**vulnerable**” groups. However, what is needed is to move beyond the concept of vulnerability to

² Satterthwaite, David; Diane Archer; Sarah Colenbrander; David Dodman; Jorgelina Hardoy; and Sheela Patel (2018). “Responding to climate change in cities and in their informal settlements and economies.” Paper prepared for the IPCC for the International Scientific Conference on Cities and Climate Change, Edmonton.

³ For instance, there are 20 mentions of ‘vulnerable’ or ‘vulnerability’ within the NUA, which duly lists these groups as it recognises “the need to give particular attention to addressing multiple forms of discrimination faced by, inter alia, women and girls, children and youth, persons with disabilities, people living with HIV/AIDS, older persons, indigenous peoples and local communities, slum and informal settlement dwellers, homeless people, workers, smallholder farmers and fishers, refugees, returnees and internally displaced persons, and migrants.”

one of empowerment and leadership. The agreements fail to recognise the resources and capacities that women (and many others deemed “vulnerable”) can bring to meeting urban goals.

The importance of getting the **private sector** on board is mentioned in these six global agreements, but not much linked to urban issues and their pivotal role in realising goals and targets in urban areas. Yet in urban areas, a large proportion of low-income groups rely on private landlords for accommodation. Many informal settlement residents rely on a range of private sector services such as water vendors, pit latrine emptiers, finance where possible, and often schools and health care services. The price and availability of legal and informal plots for housing is usually powerfully influenced by private land owners.

Therefore, the involvement of the private sector in the urban economy is crucial to complement local capacities. The contribution of the private sector in running cities and providing basic services requires clear guidelines and incentives on how to ensure that the private sector can contribute and account to the global commitments and have a stronger role, for example in urban climate finance and in supporting improved and equitable access to affordable public services, infrastructure and goods.

Academia policy interface

This lack of recognition of urban scholars in the global policy process is part of a wider issue around the limited means for quality engagement for non-state actors. While there was significant attendance by non-state actors at the various conferences and meetings that generated these six global agreements, their involvement in the production of text was clearly at the level of consultation rather than deep participation. While civil society is encouraged to attend and to make presentations, the official sessions are still dominated by national government representatives, despite efforts to create roundtables and other platforms for broader engagement.

As is the case with local and regional governments, the potential of urban non-state actors to contribute to the implementation of the global agreements is not formally recognised. Much stronger efforts, including the creation of fit-for-purpose science policy platforms to deal with urban issues, are required to involve the urban science community in a meaningful way in the implementation of the global agreements.

Tracking progress: the role of data to address urban issues

Most of the agreements have formal processes to put them into practice and to track progress towards their implementation. The Paris Agreement has the strongest follow-up process, as it has an agreed text on commitments made and a Conference of Parties that meets every two years to review progress. There is also constant pressure on governments to commit (which almost all have done) and act even if their pledges are non-binding. The Sendai Framework has attracted buy-in from thousands of local and regional governments and report-backs, as demonstrated by the “Making Cities Resilient” Campaign.⁴ There is also a strong commitment within the UN to follow up

⁴ Launched in May 2010, the Making Cities Resilient Campaign addresses issues of local governance and urban risk. It supports the implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction at the local level, with its seven targets and four priorities for action. Currently, more than 3,900 cities are participating. <https://www.unisdr.org/campaign/resilientcities/>

on implementing the SDGs through the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) and the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). But here too, the recommendations focus strongly on addressing data gaps at national and global levels – ignoring local levels where the data is most needed to inform and help drive responses.

In ensuring the robust follow up and review of the agreements, there are very large gaps in the data needed to address urban issues. Progress on most goals and targets is measured with national figures or for aggregate “rural” and “urban” populations without decentralised and disaggregated data. It is easier to monitor progress on each of the agreement’s commitments if there is data available on outcomes (from reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, to mortality from disasters, to provision for safe, affordable water) in each locality. What data exists, however, is so aggregated that it cannot inform or support local processes. For example, a commitment to extend piped water to informal settlements does not require national-level data on the proportion of the population that lacks this service; it requires a cadastre data for each street and neighbourhood. Censuses should be providing local governments with detailed data about housing conditions and service provision for each street and district in their locality. However, many censuses are outdated and/or census authorities do not provide disaggregated data as they do not see local and regional governments’ data needs as their responsibility.

While some agreements mention the need for more disaggregation, they do not say how to generate needed data on informal settlements that can serve as a baseline against which progress towards, for instance, the SDGs can be monitored in each informal settlement. They also do not say how to store, manage, analyse and use such data at the local level. This risks obscuring progress at the subnational scale and hinders effective implementation of the global agreements at the local level.

The way forward

The six agendas inevitably focus on the national actors who have created them. The central contradiction that this presents is that **the goals highlighted in these agendas can only be achieved through action in cities that involves local and regional governments in partnership with civil society**. At the same time, this will require international cooperation agencies to change their policies and priorities around urban development in response to these agreements.

These agreements have hundreds of highly relevant and ambitious commitments – to end poverty, reduce inequality, address environmental degradation, and avoid dangerous climate change. However, most of the text of the six agreements is too wordy or unclear to guide action for local and regional governments. As a result, so many guidelines and tools have been developed by diverse entities that local authorities are overwhelmed by which one to apply and under which criteria. Related to this, the burden of acting on all of the agreements makes strategic prioritisation at the local level difficult.

To be effective, global agreements need to mobilise support and action at local level, including in urban environments, poor neighbourhoods and informal settlements. They need to recognise just how much local and regional governments, academia and urban civil society can contribute to most of the goals and commitments made, and how achieving the goals falls partly or fully within the responsibilities of local governments.

Acknowledging the centrality of local action needs to go beyond mere recognition; it must encompass clear guidance, stronger political mandates, and active consultation and engagement. The following six steps represent ways of strengthening the role of local actors in the global agendas.

1. Supporting localisation of agreements

There is a significant role for international organisations and UN agencies to continue conveying the key messages from these agendas to city and municipal officials. The UN Regional Commissions are taking up the role of developing guidelines in support of national governments on how to holistically implement the global agendas. This will need to include analysis of the applicability and prioritisation of particular agendas in achieving urban development, as well as an assessment of gaps and shortcomings. For instance, identifying areas where city governments can go beyond the roles assigned to them in the agendas or where local innovation needs recognition and support to be scaled up nationally and globally.

As international agencies and networks of cities work together to understand the relevance of these global agreements, they will need to develop synergies between the different agendas (and with existing priorities of national and local governments) to identify areas where buy-in can be generated most effectively. Local actors will have to take the elements of these different global agreements, interpret them for their contexts, then localise, prioritise and apply them. Additionally, there is a critical role for national governments to provide guiding frameworks for subnational governments, for example national development strategies that are based on the SDGs and/or the NDCs and which then become part of urban/local development plans.

This will inevitably only cover some parts of the global agreements, but it can help to ensure broader commitments – including to the wider set of commitments which might be newer or more challenging to address.

2. Engaging with international networks of local governments

All these processes require engaging with international networks of local governments (United Cities and Local Governments, ICLEI - Local Governments for Sustainability, C40, etc.) and national associations to develop the key elements and disseminate them, as well as supporting local and regional governments to commit to them. Keeping a strong local focus will help mobilise support from local “champions” including mayors or former mayors to promote and develop strategies on localising the agreements. These networks can also incentivise mayors and local government leaders to engage by providing international recognition and fostering support, for example from universities, to city networks.

3. Shifting institutional structures and capacity building

Achieving inclusive, resilient and risk-sensitive governance in cities will require shifting institutional structures and management in city governments. Most cities are not allowed to take debt; they depend on their own revenues and transfers or on lending from the national and regional governments. As clearly highlighted by the AAAA, one element of this will be improving the scale and reliability of municipal revenue sources. This could be done through more substantial and

predictable national government transfers, allowing cities to seek independent finance, or enhancing the ability of city governments (particularly in larger cities) to generate own-source revenue.

Giving cities greater fiscal power will include making international finance more accessible to subnational entities. In response to this, national governments and international agencies need to commit funding and other support that enables local and regional governments to act, and to address the very large deficits in urban infrastructure and services which are critical to achieving these global goals. This will help to ensure buy-in by local governments, civil society and other urban stakeholders. There is a need for funds that provide direct support to local governments and civil society to address key goals, while helping to build their capacity and accountability. These will need to be complemented by local funds in each city to support the residents of informal settlements and their organisations to take action and develop partnerships with local governments. Moreover, intergovernmental transfers need to take global commitments into account and promote integrated development approaches which are based on local priorities.

Another element will be expanding formal training and developing the appropriate skills of municipal officials to address the key elements of these global agendas, as well as providing incentives and rewards that encourage them to do so. Implicit in this is a fundamental review of the curricula and process of certification of civil servants and built environment professionals. Only in this way will cities be able to play their role in implementing the global agendas effectively.

4. Working with non-state actors

None of the agreements fully recognise the importance of local knowledge partners or civil society in meeting their commitments. This is particularly significant as individuals, organisations and federations represent the people whose unmet needs are the justification for so much of the six agreements and whose expertise will guide effective implementation. Consequently, the follow-up to all the agreements needs to deliberately create an environment in which the actions and results of civil society participation are valued and incorporated in their implementing, monitoring and review. This is particularly true for women and girls and others deemed vulnerable. There needs to be a stronger recognition of the resources and capacities that those groups bring to meeting urban goals as agents of transformative change.

The private sector also needs to be involved in creating new solutions which generate a range of mutual benefits. Improved local conditions and the reduction of climate-related risks can contribute to the well-being and productivity of the urban workforce, while a pleasant environment and demonstrated resilience to shocks and stresses can make cities more attractive for external investors.

There is a specific imperative to create local knowledge platforms – drawing on the expertise of diverse specialists to inform the technical design of local interventions – to advise on the interaction of complex systems, to help prioritise responses to achieve maximum gains against the agreement goals, to work with local users and to ensure robust oversight of all urban development.

5. Building on local data

In response to the challenges around data, local and regional governments need to strengthen their own efforts to generate and store useful disaggregated data and lobby collectively for other actors to do the same.

One practical response to these six global agreements by international agencies could be extended support to generating, curating and analysing the necessary evidence to support and track their implementation.

This may include disaggregated information, data collection and management systems (including with GIS); standardisation of methodologies so that data at different scales are comparable; and back casting to ensure longitudinal reflection and citizen-driven data collection.

These data collection efforts should feed into national and global assessments of progress on the global agreements. There are many opportunities for local actors to engage in the Follow-up and Review processes of the different agreements.

6. Learning from innovation

Implementing these six global agreements in towns and cities will require learning from innovation. While the agreements make many mentions of innovation,⁵ they never seem to draw on examples of urban innovations. For instance, there are many innovative finance schemes that have supported low-income groups to build or improve their homes (and to get tenure, infrastructure and services) which are not reflected in these global agreements. There are also many city-led innovations in participatory planning and budgeting, healthy cities, Local Agenda 21s, disaster risk reduction and responses to climate change that have achieved changes in urban policies and practices and contributed to meeting global agreement goals; but these are not reflected on either. An explicitly urban focus on implementing the global agreements will need to remind stakeholders of the many innovations that have taken place in cities that can be built on to achieve greater success.

Local and Regional Governments in the Follow-Up and Review of Global Sustainability Agendas



This Cities Alliance report, commissioned to Adelphi, reviews the role of local actors in the Follow-up and Review processes of three global sustainability agendas and provides clear recommendations on how to strengthen their involvement.

⁵ Innovation is mentioned 28 times in the SDGs and 43 times in the AAAA, for example.