

POLICY BRIEF

No. 19, 2020

Local Implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the Arab World: Addressing Constraints & Maximising Opportunities

Tarek Katramiz, Mahesti Okitasari, Hiromi Masuda,
Norichika Kanie, Kazuhiko Takemoto, and Masachika Suzuki

Highlights

The 2030 Agenda has come at a critical juncture for the Arab region. Countries have developed strategies for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) amidst ambitious economic and social reform. With a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape, much of the hope of the region rests on the involvement of cities and local actors to achieve the SDGs. In this context, Arab countries need to design and implement local strategies that respond to local needs.

Recommendations:

- An urban territorial approach tailored to the city context should be adopted, to help prioritise the goals, and manage budgets and planning for implementing the 2030 Agenda.
- SDGs governance mechanisms should expand the degree of involvement for local and non-state actors in development initiatives.
- Arab cities need to identify local priority actions and enable conditions that are essential to facilitate implementation.

Governance Trends: National to Local?

The majority of Arab countries have adopted the vision of the 2030 Agenda in their national development plans. This can be seen in the diverse governance structures set up for implementation. While there has been much progress in mapping policies related to SDGs and coordinating implementation at the national level, progress on local implementation has been very limited. This is particularly the case in urban areas beyond capital cities, where development goals are not yet mapped based on local needs and contexts, and interlinkages and trade-offs are not taken into consideration.

This policy brief considers the progress of 2030 Agenda localisation across cities in the Arab world, looking at implementation and the role of non-state actors, while considering regional and national networks of governance. It provides recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders to coherently address complex and interconnected challenges in cities and develop an enabling environment for engaging actors at all levels. The brief is based on analysis of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) submitted by 15 Arab countries between 2016 and 2019, as well as policy reports from international organisations, Member States, and major groups. It also examines common urban features and challenges across Arab countries.

Arab countries have each set up a national governance structure for implementing the 2030 Agenda. A variety of structures can be observed in their VNRs, with each country taking into account its own national context and governance. A few countries — Bahrain, Jordan, and Morocco — have added the implementation of the 2030 Agenda to the mandate of a pre-existing state planning commission, while other countries have each created a new platform within the government for the coordination of the SDGs. Supervision of SDGs coordination falls directly under the head of state in countries including Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon, while specific ministries have taken the responsibility for leading the process in Morocco, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, among others. Overall, Arab countries have clearly demonstrated how different ministries and other national bodies will interact to advance the 2030 Agenda.

A common issue for the examined countries is the lack of vertical coordination among national and local bodies. This is evident in literature focusing on urban governance in the Arab world that has addressed poor coordination issues, as well as the passive role played by urban actors in policymaking related to sectors that fall under the SDGs, such as energy, water, waste, and transport (Harb and Atallah 2015; Barthel 2016; Verdeil 2018). Considering the rapid pace of urbanisation in the Arab world, cities have great potential and should play a greater role in fostering a sustainability transition, especially in areas related to climate action and sustainable consumption and production. According to the UN Population Division (2019), average urbanisation levels vary from 44.6% in the Southern Tier countries to 90.5% in the Gulf countries. Rapid urbanisation in the Arab world means that diverse urban territories within each country hold specific needs and challenges, and the establishment of SDGs at the city level can significantly influence the implementation of the 2030 Agenda across the region.

It is only in capital cities such as Amman, Cairo, and Riyadh that urban actors have increasingly become involved in the SDGs-related coordination process. A similar pattern can also be observed in cities that serve as economic hubs, such as Abu Dhabi and Dubai. This is due to the concentration of national bodies in capital cities, which encourages more active involvement of urban actors while secondary and tertiary cities remain excluded from the process.

It is imperative for cities to be part of any platform for advancing implementation of the 2030 Agenda. This can include not only vertical coordination between national bodies and cities, but also horizontal coordination among cities within a country, as well as city-to-city networks

across national borders. Regional intergovernmental bodies concerned with national and urban development, such as the League of Arab States and the Arab Towns Organization, also have a potential role in lobbying and advocacy to promote sustainable development in cities through networks of ministers.

Multi-stakeholder Engagement & the Role of Local Governments in the Implementation Process

Arab countries have a long tradition of centralised state administration. The decentralisation progress has been marked by modest public participation and the slow gain of autonomy for local governments (United Nations 2017). Nevertheless, in their VNRs all countries in the region have reported the establishment of multi-stakeholder consultation processes to prepare for the implementation of the agenda. Multi-stakeholder implementation initiatives, however, are not yet present across countries — with the exception of Lebanon, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which have taken initial steps to set up cross-sector initiatives. The involvement of parliaments, youth, and local governments also varies, with only Morocco, Sudan, and Tunisia reporting in their VNRs the involvement of all three main stakeholders in the SDGs implementation process. Engagement with one or two stakeholders can also be observed — such as local governments and parliament in the cases of Iraq and Sudan, and local government and youth in the case of the UAE. Other countries including Jordan, Oman, and Saudi Arabia have only reported the involvement of the private sector in the implementation process. However, in all examined countries it is difficult to identify any mechanisms for coordination between the private sector and actors at the city level that would help develop and implement local policies contributing to achieving the SDGs.

Compared to other Arab countries, the Gulf countries (e.g., Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) focus on how the SDGs are shaping the portfolio of their international cooperation, i.e., sustainable development priorities and technical assistance mechanisms. In these countries, economic diversification measures in the energy sector play a critical role in shaping national priorities and national government initiatives, including partnerships with the private sector and the establishment of financial tools. There is a similar trend in Jordan, where national economic measures are translated into city-level schemes for specific SDGs such as SDG7 on energy. However, local governments continue to be passive recipients of such schemes, with decision-making under the national governments.

Mainstreaming Progress at the Local Level

Balancing the three dimensions of sustainability — social, economic, and environmental — crucially depends on the inclusion and mainstreaming of the SDGs into national and sub-national policies and strategies (Risse 2017). In the Arab world, mainstreaming mechanisms for the 2030 Agenda remain within the purview of central government, with high representation of ministries and government departments. Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Tunisia, and the UAE have appointed a ministry or government department to mainstream the SDGs into sub-national and local plans. However, it remains to be seen how central governments will meaningfully engage with sub-national and local actors in this mainstreaming process.

Arab countries need to make use of emerging best practices and research on how to achieve progress on the 2030 Agenda, although the diversity of challenges in each country requires mapping SDGs based on local needs while taking into consideration interlinkages and trade-offs. In the UAE, SDG targets have been mapped to the objectives of the development plans of the local Emirates (Abu Dhabi, Dubai). In their VNRs, most states have not identified cross-cutting issues and sectors at the city level (including capital, secondary, and tertiary cities). Policy coherence remains weak, with most countries mapping national policies along with each sector without considering the implications across multiple sectors in different localities.

Efforts towards achieving the SDGs locally are financed through the core mandates of portfolio ministries. None of the examined countries have mainstreamed the 2030 Agenda into city budgets. Central technical agencies and ministries have set local policies with the prevailing trend in devolving responsibilities to the city level without the necessary fiscal decentralisation. This indicates a lack of financial tools at the city level to effectively implement the SDGs.

Policy Recommendations

Based on this analysis, the following three recommendations are provided, which are of equal importance.

1. An urban territorial approach tailored to the city context should be adopted, to help prioritise the goals, and manage budgets and planning for implementing the 2030 Agenda. The available policy instruments need to be expanded, particularly in countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia, to strengthen the planning and monitoring system. The implementation of the 2030

Agenda at the city level should be accelerated by utilising national urban policies as a priority instrument. National urban planning should be strengthened, not to replace local policies but to enable the national planning agency to play a coordinating role by better aligning urban policies at different scales and distributing responsibilities. To increase city-level funding capacities, national and city-level governments need to work together to increase cities' fiscal autonomy and develop fiscal frameworks with more inclusive distribution of resources. Support is needed to strengthen cities' capacities to align investments across sectors and identify innovative funding mechanisms, from land-based financing and property taxes to public–private partnerships.

2. Governance mechanisms established for the SDGs should expand the degree of involvement for local and non-state actors in urban development initiatives.

Increasing the involvement of local governments would create more inclusive platforms that reflect local needs. Support from the national government should not be limited to capital cities, where its agencies are concentrated — it should reach out to other cities to develop local SDGs strategies. Cities need to engage in multi-level dialogue to build consensus on sharing responsibilities in implementation, and to enhance horizontal coordination through technical peer-to-peer networks or communities of practice within the country, or across national borders through city-to-city networks. Involving cities in implementation will be crucial to reach the full potential of the 2030 Agenda. The role of the private sector has been modest in all but a few Arab countries, mainly Jordan, Morocco, and the UAE, where the private sector is increasingly involved in promoting affordable and clean energy (SDG7). The private sector should play a more prominent role in the implementation of other goals, specifically for food security and health (SDG2), education (SDG4), water (SDG6), consumption and production (SDG12), and climate action (SDG13). Local governments can use the SDGs as tools to involve the private sector in public policies. Achieving the SDGs will require the active participation of civil society organisations (CSOs) and academic networks. Through multi-stakeholder partnerships, CSOs can help to review progress, while academic experts can play a unique role in providing contextual analysis of where each city stands on implementation of the SDGs, helping to update and revise the objectives.

3. Cities in the Arab world need to go beyond national priorities, by identifying local priority actions & enabling conditions that are essential to facilitate implementation. Realising this requires local stakeholders, including small and medium-sized enterprises and CSOs to

develop strong implementation capacities and capabilities to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of their engagements with the SDGs. The national government can contribute through integrated policy planning, capacity building, and raising public awareness at the city level. Arab governments should take advantage of advances in information and communication technologies that would expand capacity to provide information based on guiding urban interventions, delivering public services, and engaging citizens in decision-making processes to advance the localisation of SDGs. Moreover, Arab governments can follow the examples of other national governments that are promoting the localisation of the SDGs by creating financial schemes directed towards cities for developing local SDGs strategies (e.g., Canada, Germany, Japan, and the Republic of Korea).

Notes

1. The authors recognize the diverse features of the region and the different political and socio-economic contexts of Arab countries. Sustainable development priorities and goals vary accordingly from one country to another. However, this policy brief considers that Arab countries can build on "commonalities" and "regional cooperation" (Saab and Sadik 2016, 12).
2. The concept of territorial development has been defined as "spatially coordinated local development that leverages the interaction of actors operating at multiple scales of development planning and administration" (Rodríguez 2015). This definition helps us look at the local not only in terms of an administrative scale but also in terms of how and by whom sustainable development is promoted in a certain area. This includes the participation of all relevant actors within an area and effective coordination between different levels of governance.
3. This policy brief is based on research conducted as part of the UNU-IAS Governance for Sustainable project, which is supported by the Environment Research and Technology Development Fund (1-1801 and S-16) of the Environmental Restoration and Conservation Agency of Japan.

References

- Barthel, P. 2016 "Morocco in the era of eco-urbanism: Building a critical and operational research on an emerging practice in Africa". *Smart and Sustainable Built Environment*, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 272–288.
- Harb, M. and Atallah, S, eds. 2015. *Local Governments & Public Goods: Assessing Decentralization in the Arab World* [online]. Beirut: LCPS and OSI. http://www.lcps-lebanon.org/publications/1446627069-1443012809-decentralisation_latin_web.pdf
- Risse, N. 2017. "Getting up to Speed to Implement the SDGs: Facing the Challenges." IISD. <http://sdg.iisd.org/commentary/policy-briefs/getting-up-to-speed-to-implement-the-sdgs-facing-the-challenges/>
- Rodríguez, J. 2015. EU's new thinking on decentralisation and territorial development. *GREAT insights Magazine*, Volume 4, Issue 4.
- Saab, N. and Sadik, A, eds. 2016. *Sustainable Development in a Changing Arab Climate. How Can Arab Countries Achieve SDGs by 2030*, Beirut, Arab Forum for Environment and Development (AFED).
- United Nations. 2015. *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*.
- United Nations. 2016. *New Urban Agenda. Resolution of the General Assembly 71/256*.
- United Nations, the Habitat III Secretariat. 2017. *Habitat III Regional Report Arab Region: Towards inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable Arab cities. A/CONF/226/6*.
- United Nations. 2018. *Voluntary National Reviews Database*. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/>
- United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. 2019. *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision (ST/ESA/SER.A/420)*. New York: United Nations.
- Verdeil, É. 2018. "Energy Transition and Urban Governance in the Arab World." "Wise Cities" in the Mediterranean? Challenges of Urban Sustainability, edited by Eckart Woertz, CIDOB, pp. 93–102.

Local Implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the Arab World: Addressing Constraints & Maximising Opportunities
UNU-IAS Policy Brief — No. 19, 2019

© United Nations University
ISSN: 2409-3017

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations University.

Authors

Tarek Katramiz, Mahesti Okitasari, Hiromi Masuda, Norichika Kanie, Kazuhiko Takemoto, and Masachika Suzuki

Publisher

United Nations University Institute for the Advanced Study of Sustainability (UNU-IAS)
Tokyo, Japan



UNITED NATIONS
UNIVERSITY

UNU-IAS