GOLD V 2019

The Localization of the Global Agendas

How local action is transforming territories and communities

Middle East and West Asia region

UCLG MEWA

UCLG CGLU

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The Localization of the Global Agendas

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The GOLD V Regional Report on Middle East and West Asia

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

A

ASPAC – Asia-Pacific

B

BRT – Bus Rapid Transit
BTVL – *Bureau Technique des Villes Libanaises* (Lebanese Cities Technical Office)

C

CLGF – Commonwealth Local Government Forum
CO_2 – Carbon dioxide
CSO – Civil society organization

D

DRR – Disaster Risk Reduction

E

EU – European Union

G

GCC – Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP – Gross domestic product
GHG – Greenhouse gas
GOLD – Global Observatory on Local Democracy and Decentralization
GTF – Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments

H

HLPF – United Nations High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

I

IPCC – Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
IT – Information Technology

K

Km – Kilometre
KRG – Kurdistan Regional Government

L

LGA – Local government association
LGCP – Local Government Capacity Programme (Palestine)
LRG – Local and regional government

M

MDG – Millennium Development Goal
MDLF – Municipal Development and Lending Fund
MEWA – Middle East and West Asia
MLG – Multilevel governance

N

NDP – National development plan
NDS – National development strategy
NGO – Non-governmental organization
NUA – New Urban Agenda
NUP – National urban policy

P

PNDES – *Plan national de développement économique et social* (National Plan of Economic and Social Development, Burkina Faso)
PPP – Public-Private Partnership
PPPP – Public-Private-People Partnership
PSB – Presidency of Strategy and Budget (Turkey)

S

SDG – Sustainable Development Goal
SIDA – Swedish International Development Agency
SNG – Sub-national government

T

TALD – Territorial approach to local development

U

UAE – United Arab Emirates
UCLG – United Cities and Local Governments
UMT – Union of Municipalities of Turkey
UN – United Nations
UNCDF – United Nations Capital Development Fund
UNDESA – United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs
UNDP – United Nations Development Programme
UNDRR – United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction
UNEP – United Nations Environment Programme
UN-Habitat – United Nations Human Settlements Programme
UNHCR – United Nations Refugee Agency
UNRWA – United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (Palestine)
UNSG – United Nations Secretary-General
UNV – United Nations Volunteers
U.S. – United States
USAID – United States Agency for International Development
USD – U.S. dollar

V

VLR – Voluntary Local Review
VNG – *Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten* (Association of Netherlands Municipalities)
VNGi – VNG International
VNR – Voluntary National Review

W

WALD – World Academy for Local Government and Democracy

#

100RC – 100 Resilient Cities Project

Foreword

It is my pleasure to greet you with the Regional Report on Middle East and West Asia, derived from the Fifth Edition of the Global Report on Decentralization and Local Democracy, UCLG's flagship publication.

At present, municipalities, which carry out and undertake many important tasks and responsibilities particularly in the context of the localization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), have developed many strategies to achieve long-term wellbeing, peace, sustainability and many other commitments of the global agendas. However, for these international agendas to live up to their historic potential and foster the transformation they seek to achieve, strong ownership at the local level is essential.

Building upon this perspective, the GOLD V Report, titled 'The Localization of the Global Agendas', seeks to present an up-to-date global mapping of the processes of localization of the SDGs, and in particular how decentralization and multilevel governance contribute to these processes.

This Report also highlights how, within the current institutional frameworks, the involvement of local and regional governments in coordination mechanisms and monitoring and reporting processes is essential to create a sense of collective responsibility for the achievement of more equitable, fairer and sustainable societies, as embodied in the commitments of the Agenda 2030.

We, as the representatives of the MEWA region, are proud to have contributed to this Report, advocating the need to include an urban and territorial perspective, with a specific reference to our region, in the global agendas. We were pleased to see that these efforts in turn showed us the growing role that local and regional governments are playing in the localization and in ensuring sustainable development.

We hope you will be inspired by this tool and foster the transformation you seek to achieve.

Please accept my best wishes for a prosperous, peaceful future and my kindest regards.

Mehmet Duman
Secretary-General
United Cities and Local Governments
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Background:
Why SDG localization?

In 2015 and 2016, world leaders came together to set a historic milestone in multilateral cooperation with the adoption of global agreements towards sustainable development. **The 2030 Agenda and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, the New Urban Agenda, the Paris Agreement on climate change, the Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development all showcased a global will to respond to today's global challenges through the adoption of a firm rights-based approach**.

Local and regional governments (LRGs) have risen to the scale of the challenge, demonstrating their commitment to the realization of the global agendas by putting in place elaboration, adoption and implementation processes. From their perspective, the global agendas are interlinked and cannot be achieved in isolation: all sustainability actions to address the highly interrelated challenges affecting our territories and cities must be fully integrated and comprehensive. The 2030 Agenda has been widely embraced across territories and represents a significant step forward in terms of ambition, universality and complexity with respect to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The interconnectedness of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provides, on the one hand, our best shot at tackling the multi-dimensional challenges facing our societies. On the other, it requires a significant step up in policy-making efforts and the adoption of a truly integrated approach that ensures that 'no one and no place are left behind' — in other words, the UN **'whole-of-government' and 'whole-of-society' approach** to development (see Box 1), encompassing a truly **multilevel** and multi-stakeholder **governance** system that puts people at the centre of development (see Box 2).

We currently stand at the end of the first quadrennial cycle of implementation of the SDGs, which means that the worldwide state of implementation of each SDG has been evaluated at least once. Consequently, the international community is taking this time to take stock of the progress made, the trends that have emerged and the challenges encountered over these past four years, and these will be discussed at the

Box 1

'Whole-of-government' and 'whole-of-society' approaches

Multilevel and collaborative governance frameworks that emphasize the need to approach policy-making processes in an integrated way, factoring in all government bodies and members of society. Adopting these approaches is critical for advancing sustainable development, since they constitute the basis for policy coherence (see Box 7) by requiring policy-making to happen in an integrated manner beyond institutional siloes, promoting synergies and improving public accountability. Putting governance frameworks in place requires the establishment of adequate coordination and participation mechanisms that ensure that sub-national governments (SNGs) and members of society take part effectively in policy design, implementation and monitoring processes at all levels of government.

Source: UNPAN; GTF, UCLG (2019), 'Towards the Localization of the SDGs'.

SDG Summit in September 2019. According to the UN's quadrennial Global Sustainable Report and the UN Secretary-General 2019 Special Report, positive trends have emerged at the aggregate global level, in particular regarding the implementation of SDGs 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 11 and 14.[1] Extreme poverty, child mortality rates and the share of the urban population living in slums continue to decrease, while progress has been made with respect to health, certain gender equality targets and access to electricity in poor territories. However, the shift towards a new sustainability paradigm is not taking place at the pace and scale required to trigger the necessary transformation to meet the Goals by 2030. The incidence of hunger has continued to spread in 2019, a trend observed since 2016. Greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, 70% of which cities are responsible for, also continue to increase, while the loss of biodiversity continues to accelerate dramatically as the intensity of climate change worsens.[2] Despite the progress made in poverty reduction, rising inequality continues to fuel the exclusion of discriminated and disadvantaged populations (such as the poor, women, youth, the elderly, people with disabilities, ethnic and sexual minorities, amongst others). Moreover, although the means of implementation are progressing, finance for sustainable development remains an ongoing issue. Institutions often depleted by territorial conflict are not robust enough to respond to the magnitude of the interrelated challenges they face.

As stressed by the UN Secretary-General (UNSG), the current social, economic and environmental trends that are shaping the world have a major impact on the realization of the SDGs and present a daunting challenge in terms of meeting the Goals in the mandated time. The UNSG identifies five such trends — urbanization, demographic change, climate change, protracted crises and frontier technologies.[3] The interactions, synergies and trade-offs between these trends give rise to highly complex and interconnected policy-making environments at local, national and international levels. One of the main objectives of the GOLD V Report has been to examine how LRGs are contributing to the achievement of the global agendas in the face of such trends. These agendas — and the commitment of LRGs to achieving them — are changing our societies and promoting the evolution of good governance and citizen participation in highly diverse contexts all around the world. It is therefore critical to take this time to better understand where LRGs stand with respect to SDG implementation, and to revisit policy-making processes in order to take full advantage of the mutually reinforcing potential of global agendas and local processes as catalysers for change. The aim of the GOLD V Report is to contribute to such an endeavour, looking at how to promote integrated policies and actions that meet today's challenges from the local and regional perspective.

The report highlights how, as part of their day-to-day responsibilities, LRGs are implementing policies and carrying out actions which although not always officially 'SDG-labelled', have a direct impact on populations' access to infrastructure, services and life opportunities. As acknowledged by the UN General Assembly, the UNSG and the Habitat III consensus, the decarbonization of our economies and ensuring access to energy, water, food, transport and infrastructure will ultimately be achieved through project-level investments that take place mostly at the sub-national level and are led by LRGs.[4] It is thus crucial to build up a critical mass of knowledge about how territories and cities are progressing towards sustainability, what initiatives are being put forward and what obstacles are being encountered if we are to achieve the SDGs and other global agendas.

One of the main transformations humanity is experiencing is the rapid urbanization of society, and in this respect LRGs find themselves increasingly at the centre of many crucial challenges. The percentage of the world's population living in urban areas is expected to rise from 55% to nearly 70% by 2050 — an increase of 2.3 billion urban dwellers likely to be concentrated in low and lower middle-income territories where urbanization is happening at the fastest rate. Changes in population growth, age composition and migration patterns heavily impact urbanization pathways and those of the surrounding territories, cutting across a wide range of SDGs — for example poverty eradication, access to food and water, health, gender equality, economic growth and decent work, the reduction of inequalities and promoting sustainable cities

Box 2

Multilevel governance

A decision-making system based on coordination mechanisms that allow the allocation of competences and responsibilities of government both vertically and horizontally in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity (see Box 6) and that respect local autonomy. This system recognizes that there is no optimal level of decentralization (see Box 5) and that implementation and competences are strongly context-specific: complete separation of responsibilities and outcomes in policy-making cannot be achieved and different levels of government are interdependent. Multilevel governance necessitates all levels sharing information and collaborating fully, so that every level can publicly and accountably lead horizontal relations with respective stakeholders to optimize policy outcomes.

Source: UCLG (2016), 'Fourth Global Report on Local Democracy and Decentralization. Co-creating the Urban Future'.

that are better articulated with their hinterlands — which significantly influences the prospects for SDG implementation. At the aggregate level, world population growth has slowed compared with ten years ago and stands at an annual growth rate of 1.1%.[5] However, such figures mask highly heterogeneous demographic patterns between regions and urban and rural territories.

While more than half the growth forecast between 2019 and 2050 (estimated at two billion people) is expected to take place in Africa, Asia is expected to grow by 650 million people, Latin America by 180 million whilst Europe's population is expected to decrease.[6] Population growth will be concentrated in the least economically developed regions, which will make it even harder for those territories and cities to eradicate poverty and hunger and improve the provision of education, health and basic services. Moreover, the number of persons aged over 60 is expected to rise to 1.4 billion by 2030, although the pace at which the population is aging varies greatly between world regions. By 2050, all regions of the world are expected to have more than 25% of their populations aged over 60 — with the exception of Africa, which is expected to concentrate the world's largest share of population aged between 15 and 19. Aging territories and cities will face increasing fiscal and political pressure to provide the elderly with pensions and social protection. At the same time, it will be critical for territories and cities with swelling youth populations to provide adequate healthcare, education and job opportunities to ensure the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Climate and environmental challenges are profoundly reshaping our territories and have a direct impact on cities. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 2018 Special Report, the world has already warmed by 1°C above pre-industrial levels and, at the current rate of warming of 0.2°C per decade, global warming will reach 1.5°C by 2030. This report stresses the pivotal role played by cities in climate change mitigation and in reaching the agreed goal of limiting climate change to 2°C, and if possible 1.5°C. Allowing global warming to reach 2°C will critically endanger natural and human systems and will particularly affect the most vulnerable populations and territories. Since 1990, climate-related extreme disasters have more than doubled. This, together with drastically changing weather conditions, is causing unquantifiable suffering and loss of human life and the destruction of infrastructure, aggravating resource scarcity and forcing the displacement of populations. Existing tensions act as risk multipliers for violence, putting additional pressure on often fragile political systems and resources. Since 2010, state-based and non-state-based conflicts have risen by 60% and 125% respectively, while the number of globally displaced people has doubled over the past 20 years to reach 65 million.[7] The deterioration of global peace constitutes a fundamental threat to the rule of law and good governance and, consequently, to the cornerstones of sustainable development.

In the face of such challenges, it is imperative that we scale up and accelerate action before it is too late. In order to do so, we need to think differently about development strategies and adopt an evidence-based approach to sustainable development that reflects the reality of today's world. Urbanization, the development of frontier technologies and connectivity are some of the defining features of our contemporary societies, and although they pose challenges to governance, they are also the key to achieving the SDGs and preserving life for future generations.

The Local and Regional Governments' Forum, organized by the Global Taskforce, during the United Nations' SDG Summit in New York on September 24, 2019 (photo: UCLG-CGLU/Ege Okal, bit.ly/2naVvsb).

Purposes and goals of the report

The purpose of the GOLD V Report is to propose how these ambitious Global Goals and objectives can be met through policies, actions and initiatives designed and put in place by the territories and communities that make up cities, towns and regions. The report suggests that this cannot be done unless urban and territorial planning, strategic design, institutional environments and political roadmaps are fully embedded in the territories, i.e. 'territorialized', taking full advantage of local potentialities, involving all local stakeholders and building on local needs and demands. In other words, these goals can only be achieved through a fully-fledged, co-owned and accountable process of localization of the global agendas (see Box 3).

Territories and cities can lead transformational processes that promote development models that are both respectful of the environment and put people first. Territorialized development strategies based on integrated planning have the power to transform cities and territories, foster inclusion, reduce resource usage and GHG emissions, and improve rural-urban linkages. When coupled with cutting-edge technologies, the economies of scale facilitated by cities and their ability to attract innovation become major catalysts for the achievement of the SDGs, allowing for the development of alternative patterns of production and consumption, decentralized renewable energy systems, individualized healthcare, natural disaster detection solutions, and stronger bonds between cities, towns and their hinterlands. The possibilities are endless. As shown throughout the GOLD V Report, such localized development strategies, developed from and suited to local realities, also have an impact on the global process of transforming development, which in turn reinforces sustainable local processes. The transformational potential of a **territorial approach to local development (TALD)** is enormous (see Box 4). Yet, in order to fully unleash it and ensure the implementation of the global development agendas, important challenges must be tackled. Significant efforts have been made since 2015 to implement the 2030 Agenda's provisions and advance towards the achievement of the Goals. However, given the multi-dimensional challenges our societies are facing, the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs call for a move beyond narrow targeted policy-making towards a review of governance culture and

Box 3

Localization

The 2030 Agenda emphasizes the need for an inclusive and localized approach to the SDGs. Localization is described as 'the process of defining, implementing and monitoring strategies at the local level for achieving global, national, and sub-national sustainable development goals and targets.' More specifically, it takes into account sub-national contexts for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, from the setting of goals and targets to determining the means of implementation and using indicators to measure and monitor progress.

Source: GTF, UCLG (2019), 'Towards the Localization of the SDGs'; GTF, UNDP, UN-Habitat (2016), 'Roadmap for Localizing the SDGs: Implementation and Monitoring at Sub-national Level'; UN Development Group (2014), 'Localizing the Post2015 Agenda' (outcome of the global UN dialogue process realized from June 2014 to October 2014).

institutions. As discussed in the GOLD V Report, existing national strategies and institutional frameworks for SDG implementation, as well as the state of **decentralization** and the means available for local implementation of the global agendas, determine the transformational strength that local action can achieve (see Box 5). Questions thus arise: can the SDGs both inspire local action and influence such institutional environments?; and can local action arising from the cities and territories translate into global change?

Box 4

Territorial approach to local development (TALD)

National development policy that recognizes local development as being endogenous, incremental, spatially integrated and multi-scalar, and which acknowledges the primary responsibility of local authorities for planning, managing and financing such local development — in other words, development that enables autonomous and accountable local authorities to leverage the contribution of actors operating at multiple scales to produce public goods and services tailored to the local reality, which in turn brings incremental value to national development efforts.

Source: European Commission DEVCO (2016), 'Supporting decentralization, local governance and local development through a territorial approach'.

Box 5

Decentralization

The existence of local authorities, as distinct from the state's administrative authorities, to whom the legal framework allocates powers, resources and capacities to exercise a degree of self-government in order to meet the allocated responsibilities. Their decision-making legitimacy is underpinned by representative, elected local democratic structures that determine how power is exercised and make local authorities accountable to citizens in their jurisdiction.

The World Observatory on Subnational Government Finance and Investment proposes the following definition: 'decentralization consists of the transfer of powers, responsibilities and resources from central government to sub-national governments, defined as separated legal entities elected by universal suffrage and having some degree of autonomy'.

Source: UN Habitat (2009), 'International Guidelines on Decentralisation and Access to Basic Services'; UCLG (2008), 'Decentralization and Local Democracy in the World,First Global Report on Local Democracy and Decentralization'; OECD-UCLG (2019), 'World Observatory on Subnational Government Finance and Investments'.

This is important for shedding light on a number of related issues affecting (and changing) development policy globally. As stated previously, this study primarily aims to show the state of progress of SDG achievement in the territories and emphasize its critical importance for the realization of the global agendas. On the one hand, it is widely acknowledged that fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda requires the full engagement and commitment of all levels of governance including LRGs, civil society and local stakeholders such as the private sector, social partners, academia and grassroots organizations. On the other, territories and local communities are where implementation is taking place. The key question addressed by the GOLD V Report is the extent to which towns, cities, provinces and regions have been able — through their actions and initiatives — to become part of the solution to the fundamental and historic challenges they face. Analyzing the progress that local governments are making in the implementation of the Goals and their 'localization' — bringing them down to the local level, rethinking and re-designing them so that they fit with the characteristics and demands of citizens and territories — is an indication of how well the SDG framework itself is developing, and how much there is still left to do.

The GOLD V Report also aims to provide an updated picture on the current state of decentralization around the world. Achieving the SDGs and the other global agendas at the local level will not be possible unless territories, communities, and local authorities at different sub-national levels are adequately empowered, supported and funded. This implies strengthening and improving decentralization of the political system, promoting the devolution of competences and powers, ensuring respect for the principle of **subsidiarity** and making local governments responsible and accountable (see Box 6).

This regional report includes an analysis of national strategies for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and how LRGs are being engaged in this process, whether the institutional framework enables LRGs to be proactive in the implementation of these agendas, and the status of decentralization in the region. The report aims to answer questions on decentralization trends and the development of a truly multilevel understanding of policy-making: are LRGs more empowered and active than they used to be?; have the SDGs and the other global agendas driven any change in institutional relationships and vertical/horizontal cooperation?; are national planning and decision-making mechanisms and systems more open, sensitive to and aware of LRGs and their unique potential within territories and communities to effect change?

Looking at decentralization and providing up-to-date mapping of how this trend has evolved are all the more essential in studying territorial and municipal authorities, given that rapid (and often uncontrolled) urbanization has become a worldwide phenomenon and a fundamental challenge facing local governance. Urbanization has had a crucial impact on several dimensions of local and regional governance: from urban and territorial planning, to the provision of basic public services; from socio-economic equality to marginalization and informality in housing and work; from the inevitable impact of climate change to the creation of new social and cross-cutting alliances to improve democracy, transparency and the quality of life in cities and territories. However, advances in these fields raise fundamental questions of sustainability and viability. The global agendas were agreed with the expectation that LRGs would act as accelerators and catalysts in the process, but how is this pressure altering the political balance? What room is there for LRGs to see their competences, powers, capacities, financial and human resources grow and improve, making them more aware, responsible and able to play an active role in the global quest for sustainability, prosperity and inclusiveness? What kind of financial autonomy is really granted to local and regional governments? There are plenty of financial and management instruments (climate and green bonds, Public-Private-People Partnerships — PPPPs — and remunicipalizations, amongst many others) that are changing the way actors are empowered at all levels to become drivers of change and leaders in policy-making. In what way are these new opportunities accessible to local governments? And how can those that are more visionary and long-sighted fund and sustain their policies and agendas in the long term?

The ability of LRGs to report on their policies and actions is also problematic since it is currently limited by a substantial lack of data, indicators and measurement which historically has not been devolved or disaggregated enough (with the partial exception of larger and wealthier regions and cities), hindering the capacity to grasp the huge potential at the local level for the localization and achievement of the Goals.

Ultimately, the responsibilities that LRGs are assuming in the localization of the SDGs and other agendas are raising fundamental questions of local democracy, accountability and transparency, representation and the place occupied by the local level in the current global system. Can LRGs be catalysts for change in politics and development policy? Do LRGs have the means and capacities to ensure that 'no person or place is left behind'? Can effective intergovernmental cooperation across all levels of governance improve performance, boost **policy coherence** (see Box 7) and help make the SDGs and the global agendas a reality, with positive effects on the quality of life of territories, cities, communities and society? Can the SDGs trigger a new model of development — urban, territorial, social, economic and human — which starts at the local level? This regional report provides inputs, answers and critiques of these points, as well as exploring other relevant issues. The conclusions and policy recommendations provide a common vision and understanding of the way forward for LRGs.

Box 6

Subsidiarity

The principle according to which public responsibilities should be exercised by those elected authorities closest to citizens. The central authority should have a subsidiary function, performing only those responsibilities or tasks which cannot be performed at a more local level. Subsidiarity requires that local governments have adequate financial, managerial and technical and professional resources to enable them to assume their responsibilities to meet local needs, carrying out a significant share of public expenditure. Local governments should be granted the authority and power to raise local resources in line with the principle that authority be commensurate with responsibility as well as the availability of resources. The principle of subsidiarity constitutes the rationale underlying the process of decentralization.

Source: UN Habitat, 'International Guidelines on Decentralisation and Access to Basic Services' (2009); UCLG (2013), 'Third Global Report on Local Democracy and Decentralization. Basic Services for All in an Urbanizing World'.

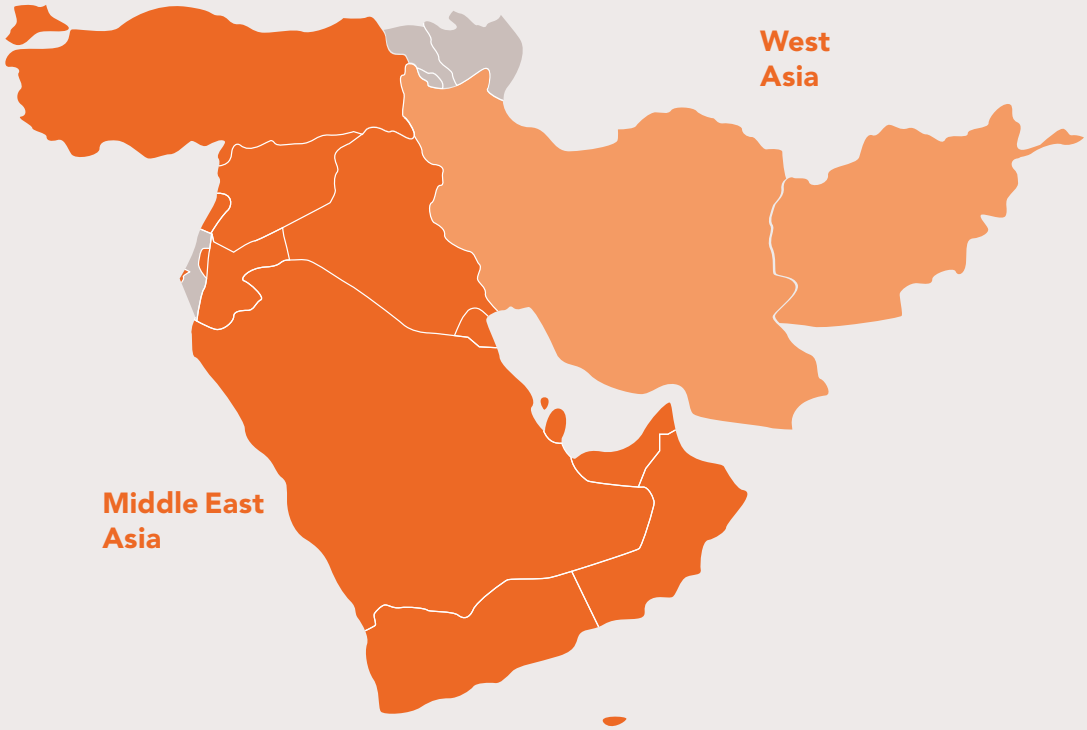
Box 7

Policy coherence

An approach to sustainable development that calls for the integration of economic, social, environmental and governance dimensions in the policy-making process, acknowledging the critical interlinkages that exist between the SDGs. It aims to foster synergies, promote partnerships and balance transboundary and intergenerational policy impacts in order to identify and manage the relationships between SDGs in a way that limits and overcomes any potential negative impact resulting from their implementation.

Source: OECD (2019), 'Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development 2019'.

The Middle East and West Asia region



Middle East Asia

Bahrain
Iraq
Jordan
Kuwait
Lebanon
Oman
Qatar
Saudi Arabia
State of Palestine
Syria
Turkey
United Arab Emirates
Yemen

West Asia

Afghanistan
Iran

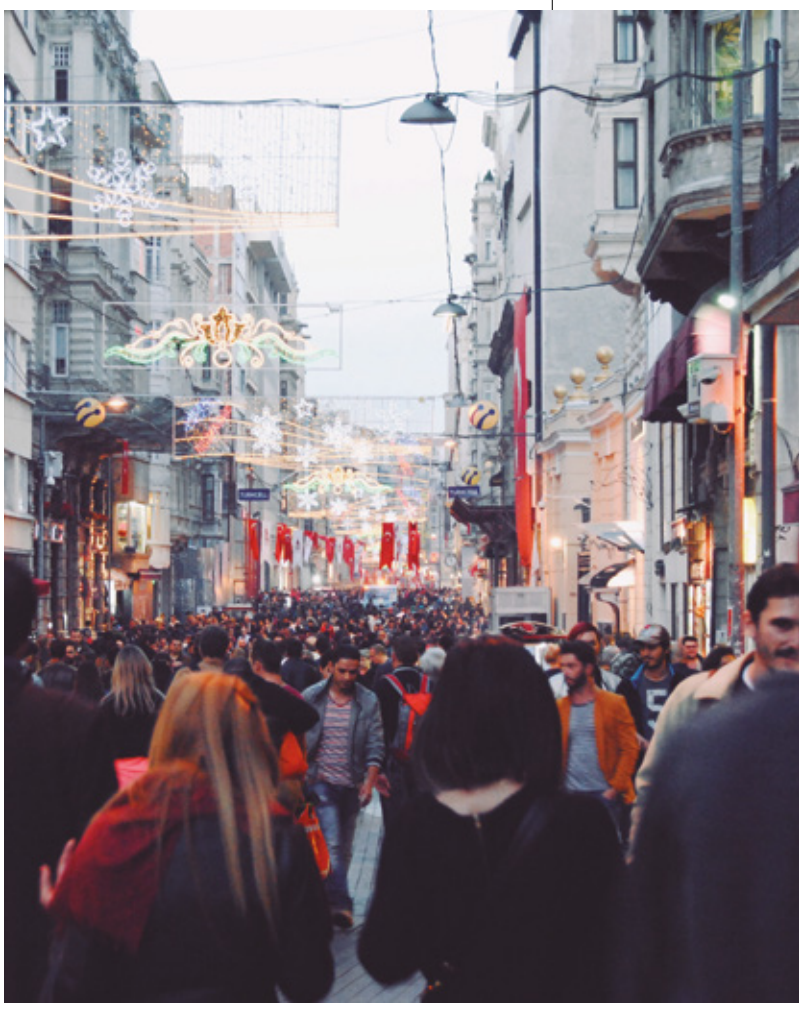
01. Introduction: the Middle East and West Asia region

The Middle East and West Asia (MEWA) region presents distinct and significant challenges with regard to the involvement of local and regional governments (LRGs) in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). With a historical record of strong centralization and authoritarian regimes, the region has in recent years felt the impact of extensive conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Yemen, and experienced high population growth and rapid urbanization.

With around 364 million inhabitants, the MEWA region is one of extreme heterogeneity.[1] Thanks to their oil wealth, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) monarchies — Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) — are among the wealthiest countries of the world with a gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, purchasing power parity, ranging from USD 50,526 to USD 154,008. The State of Palestine, Yemen and Afghanistan, meanwhile, are among the poorest (USD 4,885, USD 2,150 and USD 1,981 respectively). With the exception of Afghanistan and Yemen, the region is highly urbanized: 67% of its population live in cities. Jordan and the GCC countries are the most urbanized with nearly 84% of their populations living in urban settlements; Afghanistan and Yemen are the least urbanized with 27% and 35% respectively of their populations living in cities. Israel is not included in this analysis.

Large-scale migration from rural areas and the massive influx of refugees has accelerated urban growth, with a current annual growth rate of 2.6%.[2] This has led to overcrowding of existing built areas and the growth of informal settlements. Climate change, in the context of fragile natural systems, has exacerbated access to basic services problems, particularly with regard to access to water, and thus the ability to provide an essential service. Over 50% of the population are under 25 and young workers aged 15-25 account for 20% of the labour force.[3]

While the discovery of oil in the 20th century gave Iraq and Iran substantial wealth that allowed them to develop an industrial base, the economic base in Afghanistan, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria and Yemen has been unable to keep up with population growth, and urban unemployment has generally risen. In some countries, Jordan and Palestine in particular, the remittances of expatriate workers in Gulf states and Western



Crowd in Istiklal Caddesi, Istanbul, Turkey (photo: © Jaume Puigpinós Serra).

Despite recurring conflicts, political turmoil and civil unrest, most countries had made significant economic progress.

Europe have financed a rapid urbanization. Oil wealth has allowed the GCC countries to embark on ambitious development programmes and urban megaprojects that rival western models.

Since the beginning of the century, a succession of wars and sectarian conflict have afflicted large parts of the MEWA region. The **State of Palestine** (West Bank and Gaza) is still under Israeli occupation and/or blockade. The civil war in **Afghanistan** caused massive destruction and displacement of vulnerable populations. Even though most of the 4.3 million people that fled to Iran and Pakistan have since returned, their need for shelter, services and economic integration is placing huge pressures on the local economy.[4] In **Iraq**, the 2003 war caused widespread destruction in most cities, including Baghdad, Basrah and Mosul, and severe damage to the civilian infrastructure. The 2014 invasion of the Western part of the country by *Da'esh* fighters resulted in chaotic conditions, and cities as well as smaller towns and villages suffered extensive physical damage and devastation.

While **Syria**'s civil war shows signs of winding down, the destruction of national infrastructure and of urban areas has been massive. Refugees fleeing the conflict have moved to neighbouring countries with approximately 3.6 million refugees

in Turkey, 1.1 million in Lebanon, 630,000 in Jordan, 245,000 in Iraq, and 118,000 in Egypt.[5] In **Jordan** and **Lebanon**, most refugees are living in densely settled urban areas, driving up housing costs and placing stress on available public services. One of the two poorest countries in the region, **Yemen** has been in the throes of a civil war since 2014, and over 22 million people — three-quarters of the population — forcibly displaced in multiple waves are in desperate need of aid and protection. An estimated 13.5 million people (including six million children) have been in need of one form or another of humanitarian aid: food, potable water, sanitation and waste disposal.

Despite recurring conflicts, political turmoil and civil unrest, most countries had made significant economic progress before the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in early 2011. The conflict not only devastated Syria but also affected Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, as displaced populations sought refuge and traditional regional economic ties were severed.

Kids playing and resting in UNRWA Training Centre in Siblin, Lebanon (photo: Silvio Arcangeli, bit.ly/2Mn9Iuo).

Jordan has borne much of the brunt of the crises at its borders. Wars and conflicts in neighbouring countries have resulted in waves of refugees and displaced persons, imposing serious economic challenges and fuelling an increase in poverty, unemployment rates and stresses on infrastructure and services. Jordan's population in 2015 was 9.5 million, nearly 40% of whom were refugees, displaced by the four Arab-Israeli wars and granted Jordanian citizenship. In spite of the negative effect of regional conflicts, Jordan made remarkable progress towards meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The absolute poverty rate dropped from approximately 21% in 1990 to 14.4% in 2010.

It is a similar story in Lebanon. Following the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, **Lebanon** was second only to Jordan as a country of destination for Palestinian refugees, 504,000 of whom are currently registered by the United National Relief and Works Agency for **Palestine** (UNRWA).[6] As a result of the Syrian civil war, more than a million people displaced by the conflict have found refuge in Lebanon. The government estimates that the country now hosts 1.1 million refugees; this includes nearly one million Syrians registered with the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), 31,000 Palestinians displaced from Syria, and 35,000 Lebanese returnees from Syria.

Based on this framework, this publication provides a broad description and analysis of the challenges and opportunities for the implementation of the SDGs by LRGs in the MEWA region. The first part of the publication describes the engagement with the SDG agenda at the national level, the participation of LRGs and the institutional context for SDG implementation, including recent trends regarding (de)centralization and the governance frameworks of LRGs, particularly as regards decision-making. The second part of the regional report focuses on the specific efforts of LRGs across the region to contribute to the SDGs, as well as those of local civil society and those supported by external actors. The analysis takes a comprehensive view of these initiatives, considering not only those explicitly identified with the SDGs, but also efforts whose outcomes are directly related to the SDGs, even if no explicit linkage to the framework is established in their formulation. The last section presents a set of conclusions and policy recommendations for both the MEWA region and the global sphere.

02. National and local institutional frameworks for the implementation of the SDGs

2.1 National frameworks

The MEWA region countries share a tradition of centralized systems of governance that inevitably influences the SDG implementation process. All countries in the region have similar multi-tiered governance structures: governorates, districts and municipalities in urbanized areas, and governorates and villages in rural areas.[7] This multi-tiered system of governance is reflected in the institutional structures that are being created in each country for the implementation of the SDGs. With the exception of Syria and Yemen, SDG principles have been incorporated in current national development strategies (NDSs) across the region, with some modifications that reflect the Islamic values that prevail in many countries.

Twelve MEWA countries submitted their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) to the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) in the 2016-2019 period.[8] Almost all countries share the same mechanisms of follow-up and implementation of the SDGs: a high-level council of ministries; a national coordination committee; or a national commission for sustainable development, formed by various ministry-level representatives and usually led by one ministry in particular, often the one in charge of territorial or urban planning (see Table 1). Consultation processes and partnership methods are not always well-defined, even when a consultation process has been explicitly mentioned in the VNR. The participation of local governments is often determined by their legal position in the country's political system, but it is mostly limited or even non-existent (see Table 1).

In **Afghanistan**, the primary SDG implementing agency is the Ministry of Economy, through its SDG Secretariat (SD). While the SD's mission is to ensure a broad national participation and promote a sense of ownership among national stakeholders, all sub-national administrative entities are institutionally and financially dependent on the central government.[9] Accurate data for setting baselines and annual targets for indicators are lacking and, since over half of government expenditure is dedicated to security, the country's capacity to implement SDG policies remains limited. The 2017 VNR mentions the importance of SDG localization, while also highlighting that this can only be achieved after adoption at the national level.

In **Iraq**, the government has divided the 17 SDGs into eight socio-economic sectors: security, education, health, governance, infrastructure, social protection, agriculture and rural development, and economy. It has identified 169 specific national targets and 217 indicators. A Social Fund for Development has been established to support the implementation of the SDGs at the local level.[10] Moreover, the central level has created an SDG National Coordination Commission, SDG Secretariat, Technical Coordination Committees, Technical Working Groups, and an SDG High-Level Board to ensure smoother implementation. The Global Initiative Towards a Sustainable Iraq (GITSI) is a further acknowledgement of the importance of including LRGs in the process.

The government of **Iran** has not yet declared when it will report to the HLPF. SDG stakeholders include the Sustainable Development Steering Council, the national legislature, local governments, academia, civil society, and the private sector.[11]

In the GCC countries, the implementation of the SDGs is primarily the responsibility of national ministries. **Qatar** has aligned the SDGs

In the MEWA region, the participation of local governments is often determined by their legal position in the country's political system, but is mostly limited or even non-existent.

Table 1 National strategies for integrating SDGs, coordination mechanisms and LRG participation

Afghanistan
National Peace and Development Framework (2016-2021) and integrated in 22 National Priority Programmes (NPPs). Coordination: High Council of Minister (policy guidance); Executive Committee on the SDGs (in the Office of the Chief Executive – the President's Office, and co-chaired by the Ministry of Economy); National Coordination Committee (inter-ministerial, includes multi-stakeholder engagement); Technical Coordination Committee.

Bahrain
Government Plan of Action 2015-2018. Coordination: National Information Committee (chaired by the Minister of Cabinet Affairs).

Iran
Iran has still not presented its VNR. It prepared the 6th National Five-Year Development Plan 2017-2022, and other sectoral plans (e.g. Climate Change Plan, Health Transformation Plan), and will prepare a national sustainable development strategy (NSDS). Coordination: National Committee for Sustainable Development (but a new mechanism will be created).

Iraq
Iraq Vision 2030, National Development Plan 2018-2022 and Poverty Reduction Strategy. Coordination: National Commission for Sustainable Development (chaired by the Ministry of Planning), SDG Secretariat; Technical Coordination Committees; Technical Working Groups, and an SDG High-Level Board Monitoring Committee, headed by the Ministry of Planning (multi-stakeholder, consultative body); Governorate Committees for Sustainable Development.

Jordan
Jordan 2025, Executive Development Programmes (EDPs), 2016-2019, Roadmap for SDG Implementation, thematic strategies (e.g. Economic Growth Plan 2018-2022). Coordination: Higher Steering Committee (headed by the Prime Minister's Office) National Higher National Committee for Sustainable Development (created in 2002, headed by the Minister of Planning and International Cooperation); Coordination Committee (oversees EDPs).

Kuwait
Kuwait Vision 2035 and Kuwait National Development Plan (2015-2020). Coordination: National Sustainable Development Committee, co-led by the General Secretariat of the Supreme Council for Planning and Development and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA); National Observatory on Sustainable Development and Anticipation of the Future (multi-stakeholder).

Lebanon
National Physical Master Plan of the Lebanese Territory (2009) but does not yet have a national integrated sustainable development framework. Coordination: National Committee for the SDGs, headed by the Prime Minister (multi-stakeholder).

Oman
'Oman 2040' and the 9th Development Plan 2016-2020. Coordination: National Committee for the SDGs, created under the High-Level Council on Planning.

Palestine (State of)
National Policy Agenda 2017-2022. Coordination: National SDG Team (headed by the Prime Minister), supported by 12 SDG working groups (multi-stakeholder).

Qatar
Qatar National Vision 2030 and National Development Strategy 2018-2022. Coordination: Council of Ministers (oversight); Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics (coordination entity).

Saudi Arabia
Saudi Vision 2030, National Transformation Programme 2020 and sector-specific strategies (e.g. National Environmental Strategy, etc. Coordination: Council of Ministers (high-level political direction); Minister of Economy and Planning (coordination entity); Council of Economic and Development Affairs (tasked with the implementation of Vision 2030); Strategy Committee (proposes strategies for achieving Vision 2030).

Turkey
10th and 11th National Development Plans (2014-2018 and 2019-2023) and Annual Programmes. Coordination: Presidency of Strategy and Budget (PSB), under the Turkish Presidency; Department of Environment and Sustainable Development (DESD), under PSB coordinates follow-up, monitoring and reporting. Turkstat produces the required data.

United Arab Emirates (UAE)
Vision 2021 (adopted in 2005); Vision 2071 (UAE Centennial Strategy), launched in 2017; Emirates' own national development plan (NDPs) (for five out of seven emirates); National Key Performance Indicators aligned with the SDGs. Coordination: National Committee on SDGs (chaired by the Minister of State for International Cooperation and by the Chairwoman of the Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Authority).

Middle East and West Asia

Sources: UNDESA, 'Compendium of National Institutional Arrangements for the SDGs 2016-2017 and 2018'; VNRs; UCLG surveys.

with its own Qatar National Vision 2030. The Ministry of Development, Planning and Statistics (MDPS) is in charge of implementing both the National Vision 2030 and the SDGs, and has incorporated the 2030 Agenda in different sectors and established various dedicated task teams. At least eight municipalities have drafted spatial development plans.[12]

In **Bahrain**, SDG implementation is based on a government Plan of Action, under the responsibility of the National Information Committee, chaired by the Minister of Cabinet Affairs and designed to bring together all units of the central government involved in SDG implementation, reporting through the National Statistical Office.[13] The consultation process has involved community groups, civil society organizations (CSOs), and private sector, although there is no reference to the engagement of the country's five governorates. While governorate councillors are in fact elected, governors are appointed by the monarchy: the Bahraini VNR consequently considered governorates as an extension of the national government.

Saudi Arabia reported in 2018 by adapting its Saudi Vision 2030 to the SDG framework. Implementation efforts are led by the Ministry of Economy and Planning, which is also the body in charge of reporting and data collection from other ministries and relevant stakeholders. The Saudi VNR puts emphasis on the private sector's engagement in the SDG process as part of a trend of economic diversification. The role of LRGs in this process, however, is not clear: the consultation process was given no visibility, except for the Future Saudi Cities Programme, linked to the Saudi Vision 2030.

Kuwait's approach to the SDGs has been guided by the Kuwait Vision 2035 and mainstreamed through the Kuwait National Development Plan (2015-2020). The National Sustainable Development Committee provides overall strategic leadership, with the collaboration of the General Secretariat of the Supreme Council for Planning and Development; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and the Central Statistical Bureau. A National Observatory on Sustainable Development and Anticipation of the Future also plays a coordination role in follow-up, and was involved in the preparation of the VNR. It is expected to ensure the involvement of government entities, civil society, the private sector and other stakeholders.[14] In **Oman**, a National Committee for the SDGs was created under the High-Level Council on Planning, and the SDGs were integrated in the long-term 'Oman 2040' plan and the 9th Development Plan 2016-2020.

Jordan's Higher National Steering Committee provides overall strategic guidance for the implementation of the SDGs (with the broad aim of reducing the poverty rate to 8% by 2015 and 7% by 2030), including consultations with stakeholders. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation is in charge of reporting progress. In **Lebanon**, a national committee to implement the SDGs was formed in 2017, with members including ministerial officials, and representatives from CSOs and the private sector. This is chaired by the Prime Minister. Sub-committees monitor the implementation of each thematic component. While workshops were held for central government agencies, the private sector and CSOs, none was held for LRGs.[15] Although **Palestine** has incorporated the SDGs in its national strategy and submitted a VNR in 2018, little progress has been achieved because of limited resources and the continued Israeli occupation of the West Bank and blockade of Gaza. No specific SDG-based consultative process with local governments has yet been established.[16]

Turkey was the first MEWA country to submit a VNR in 2016 and again in 2019. Turkey's national development plan (NDP) was prepared by the Ministry of Development (MoD). The government, however, has since been restructured within the framework of the amendment of the Turkish Constitution (2017). The Presidency of Strategy and Budget (PSB) under the President's Office is now the focal point for sustainable development. The Department of Environment and Sustainable Development (DESD) under PSB coordinates follow-up, monitoring and reporting, supported by the Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat). Different ministries ensure coordination for each SDG.[17] The 2016 VNR granted little space to local governments. For the preparatory process of the 2019 VNR, however, the national local government association (LGA), the Union of Municipalities of Turkey (UMT), was nominated to coordinate and collect information from LRGs.

With the exception of Syria and Yemen, SDG principles have been incorporated in current national development strategies (NDSs) with modifications that reflect the Islamic values that prevail in many MEWA countries.

2.2 Local and regional government institutional frameworks

As mentioned throughout this publication, the countries of the MEWA region are characterized by a high degree of centralization, with only very few exceptions. This also applies to the various tiers of local government: provincial governors tend to have substantial powers over municipal governments, either through the direct appointment of local authorities or the delivery of local services, or even both in many cases.

Afghanistan is still a primarily rural country: only 27% of its population were classified as urban in 2015. Its structure is organized into 34 provinces, 399 districts, 150 municipalities and about 40,000 villages (see Table 2). Tribal councils (*jirgas*), moreover, play a governance role across various levels. Provincial governors are still appointed by the central government almost in spite of existing laws that already establish their electability.[18] Local elections have generally not been held since the end of the Afghan wars: one in five municipal posts is currently vacant.[19] Municipalities implement national plans and policies. The Independent Directorate of Local Governance (established in 2007 as a governmental entity) works as a 'compulsory' LGA and theoretically provides opportunities for citizen participation through the establishment of Provincial Councils, Community Development Councils (CDCs) and District Development Assemblies. The latter two entities, both of which form part of the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) structure, assess community needs at the local level and design development projects accordingly.[20]

Iran is organized into 31 provinces (*ostan*) and 324 municipalities (*shahrdarihah*) — which include cities (10,000 inhabitants or more), towns, districts and villages. Provinces, cities, towns and villages have directly elected councils (*shora*). At the national level, a Higher Council of Provincial Councils was established in 2003. Provinces are headed by a governor appointed by the Ministry of Interior, and municipalities by a mayor elected by the local councils. The appointment of mayors is subject to the Minister of Interior's approval.[21] From a legal point of view, municipalities and town councils are defined as 'non-governmental, public organizations'. They are considered part of the political system but not of the governmental structure. In spite of the calls for more decentralization in the country's third NDP (2001-2005), decision-making for local infrastructure planning and public services has generally been top-down:[22] many basic services are managed directly by their respective ministries, and the authority of local governments is easily overridden by the Ministry of Interior. Villages are in general not granted sufficient resources or competences to fulfil service-related tasks, and are thus reduced to consultative bodies.[23]

Iraq's 2005 Constitution established a federal state system, followed by a dedicated law on local authorities (2008), which gave formal autonomy to the country's 18 governorates, three of which (Erbil, Dohuk and Sulaymaniyah) subsequently associated to form the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), based on article 199 of the Constitution. The KRG in fact is the only regional government that benefits from a high degree of autonomy. Elections to the governorate councils were held in 2009 and 2013, but responsibilities have yet to be fully transferred to them, with central ministries still managing water, electricity, and sanitation. Governorate budgets rely on redistributed oil revenue through budget allocations from the central government and, in some cases, on their own petroleum revenues or fees. The priorities determining the allocation of resources are still set at the ministerial level.[24] Governorate councils, 69 cities (*baladiyah*) with more than 10,000 inhabitants and 120 districts (*qadaa*) have elected local councils, which in turn choose their own executives.[25] The governorate councils have extensive power over the lower local councils within the same governorate in the execution of local projects. The capital Baghdad itself is a governorate divided into administrative districts and municipalities. At the same time, municipalities locally represent the Ministry of Municipalities and Public Works. Inevitably, the resettlement of internally displaced persons and the improvement of security are two key issues facing local authorities.

In a very different context, all six countries in the GCC are centralized monarchies and essentially, with the exception of Saudi Arabia, city-states. Their local councils, comprised of

both elected and appointed members, are primarily advisory bodies. Ministries set national, regional and local urban policies, while the power of municipal authorities is generally restricted. **Kuwait** has endowed sub-national authorities with some executive powers: the Kuwait Municipality now enjoys decision-making powers related to licensing, health and safety in workplaces, and the planning and approval of infrastructural projects. **Bahrain** is divided into five governorates, each headed by a governor, in charge of development-related economic and social regional policies.[26] In 2002, moreover, Bahrain held its first local elections since 1957. Governorate councils are elected but governors are still appointed by the central government. In October 2011, the Sultanate of **Oman** announced the establishment of municipal councils (*wilayah*) in all of its 11 governorates. Until then, only the capital city of Muscat had a council — whose members were however all appointed. Local elections were eventually held in December 2012, although only via the expression of nominal preferences, since national law forbids the establishment of political parties.[27] At the regional level, governorates are led by appointed *walis* (governors), who report directly to the Ministry of the Interior. As the Ministry of Regional Municipalities and Environment maintains control over municipal budget and administration, Omani municipalities enjoy very limited autonomy.[28] **Qatar**'s elected Central Municipal council, created in 1999, is purely advisory. In the **UAE**, a number of federal and local regulations have been implemented in recent years. The membership of the Federal National Council, on the other hand, is half-elected, half-appointed. The first council elections were held in 2006. Local administrations each have an executive council, which reports to the Ruler's Court of each specific Emirate. The capital Abu Dhabi has its own executive council, currently chaired by the Crown Prince.

The largest country in the group, **Saudi Arabia**, has a more conventional territorial organization: this includes 13 provinces, led by governors; municipalities report to governors for the delivery of local services.[29] Over the last ten years, there has been evidence of the role of local authorities expanding somewhat.[30] The country's shift towards more de-concentration of administrative powers includes the establishment of regional authorities (*amanat*) and the enhancement of the institutional capacity of local agencies. Elections — albeit limited to half the membership of local councils — were held in 2005, 2011 and 2015. The local councils have been given nominal planning and development responsibilities and are specifically responsible for public health, the management of public space, and the issuance of building permits. However, they do not enjoy the same financial autonomy: the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs has dominated the formulation and implementation of urban policy. Although local councils prepare local master plans and monitor their implementation, ministries still have the power to overrule local decisions. Similarly, central government transfers still account for 70% of local expenditures.

In **Yemen**, on the other hand most local councils — perceived as being a continuation of the previous regime — have been inactive since the outbreak of conflict in 2015. In the country's northern territories, however, local tribes are de facto local bodies, and tribal councils have stayed active. As of 2000, Yemen has had three levels of government: the national government, governorates at the regional level, and districts at the municipal level. Their organization is mandated by the Local Authority Law, which came into force in 2000. However, even though the text of the law imposes the direct election of district and governorate councillors, these posts have always been appointed by national governments. Studies show that current local government regulation is contradictory or redundant, with at least 80 more pieces of legislation covering a range of different issues.[31]

Similarly, since 2011, **Syria** has experienced one of the worst and most documented conflicts in the world. Traditionally, and formally at least since 1963, the country had adopted a strictly centralized form of state. Nonetheless, and with the particular support of the European Union (EU) the country was able to begin the major — albeit slow — of its municipal administrative system. The onset of the civil war and the ensuing collapse of an effective political system has however led to a multiplicity of administrative systems in those areas not controlled by governmental forces. Military or civilian leaders in different zones are retaining control over territorial organization, thus fostering — to a certain extent — the emergence of more localized initiatives, also with the support of tribal, religious and family-clan leadership in some areas.[32]

The territorial organization and (re-) centralizing trends is quite different in the other countries of the Levant. **Jordan** is divided into 12 governorates, each headed by a *muhafez* (governor) reporting directly to the Ministry

The countries of the MEWA region are characterized (with only very few exceptions) by a high degree of centralization, including the direct appointment of local authorities and the centralized delivery of local services.

of Interior.[33] Since the 2007 Municipal Act, 93 local of which are elected for a mandate of four years, with the exception of the Greater Amman Municipality, whose mayor and half the municipal council of which are appointed by the Cabinet. Municipalities are ruled by elected officials but still placed under the supervision of the Ministry of Municipal Affairs. Since August 2015, members of the governorate councils have also been elected, but governors remain appointed.[34] Jordan's 2015 Decentralization Law, on the other hand, sought to create more inclusive participation. Women, for example, are guaranteed 20% of the seats on municipal councils.[35] Citizen participation in local governance, however, is still limited even though the government has started to engage civil society and solicited its input on national policy through formal dialogues, in an attempt to strengthen its role as a policy-making partner.

In **Lebanon**, the Taif Agreement — which the Lebanese parliament approved in 1989 and which marked the end of the Lebanese civil war — resulted in an extensive decentralization process. The country today is divided into eight administrative governorates, 26 sub-regions (*Qadaa*) and 1,018 municipalities. These can associate in Municipal Unions (there are currently 51). New legislation enacted in 2014 has decentralized urban governance even further: accordingly, municipalities are now financially independent, although their activities must be coordinated with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs. Central transfers, on the other hand, still account for 40% of municipal revenues. An additional 14% is received as a loan from the Cities and Villages Development Bank. Citizen participation in local governance is still minimal, despite the recent efforts by government to engage more with civil society. Beirut, the capital city, has a unique system, in which the (elected) mayor retains certain policy-making powers while sharing the executive power with an (appointed) governor.[36]

Palestine's geographic and administrative structure derives from its particular history and status. Is the consequence of its particular history and status. It is divided into two main geographical units: the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. This spatial configuration has led to a relative autonomy in terms of municipal authority, also considering the impact of territorial fragmentation as caused by the Israeli occupation. Today urban governance is largely decentralized and elected local authorities are responsible for planning, managing growth within their boundaries, (e.g. water, power) and granting of building permits. In 2005 and 2006, there was a rise of agglomeration into joint councils for shared service provision and development planning. At the national level, the Municipal Development and Lending Fund (MDLF), established in 2005, provides municipalities with grants and loan guarantees and programmes to strengthen their financial management capabilities. It has channelled significant funding from international donors for municipal infrastructure, capacity development, and other municipal activities.

Turkey, a founding member of the Council of Europe and an active member of its Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, is the most decentralized country in the region. In 2004, the Turkish parliament adopted a comprehensive decentralization reform as part of its process of integration with the EU. Local authorities enjoy both financial and administrative autonomy. There are three types of local government: villages, municipalities and special provincial administrations (SPAs). Following the 2014 Metropolitan Reform, the number of local governments with greater powers fell from 2,930 to 1,398, especially in the case of metropolitan municipalities.[37] As of December 2014, Turkey also comprises 18,362 villages as the lowest tier of local administration. The new presidential form of government (following the referendum of April 2017) has not affected the local government system. Central oversight issues remain, which can affect the clarity of the relationship between the local and central levels of governance.

Evolution of key functions and responsibilities of LRGs

The actual capacity to implement the SDGs locally is inevitably linked to the distribution of responsibilities, power and resources between national and local governance levels. Many countries of the MEWA region are disadvantaged by a legal and administrative framework that does not seek to address the lack of transparency and clarity in the allocation and way in which tasks and labour are distributed among central, local and private actors and sectors.

This lack of clarity about responsibilities and relationships between the central government, municipalities and other related local departments, has generally resulted in institutional competition and duplication. In **Lebanon**, for example, the Municipal Law devolves planning competences to municipalities, meanwhile the Urban Planning Code gives municipalities only a consultative role in the implementation of plans, and the national Directorate-General for Urban Planning prepares or reviews all urban master plans.[38] Moreover, while the 1977 municipal reform (Law 118) gives municipalities a broad range of tasks, nearly 70% of the country's 1,108 municipalities are small towns with limited capacity structurally to ensure basic service provision.[39] Thus, most functions related to urban development and infrastructure project implementation are supervised by a district commissioner (*qa'im maqam*). Pooling resources and enhancing decisional and implementation

Table 2 Local and regional governments (LRGs) by tier

Country	System	Number of LRGs
Afghanistan	Presidential Islamic Republic	34 Provinces (*wilayet*) 399 Districts 153 Municipalities Roughly 40,020 Villages
Bahrain	Constitutional Hereditary Monarchy	5 Governorates (*muhafazat*)
Iran	Islamic Republic	31 Provinces (*ostan*) 324 Cities (*shehristan*)
Iraq	Parliamentary Republic	18 Governorates (*muhafazat*)
Jordan	Constitutional Monarchy with Representative Government	12 Governorates 100 Municipalities
Kuwait	Constitutional Emirate	6 Governorates
Lebanon	Parliamentary Democratic Republic	8 Governorates (*muhafazat*) 25 Districts (*qadaa, qaza*) 1,108 Municipalities (*baladiyya*)
Oman	Absolute Monarchy	11 Governorates
Qatar	Constitutional Hereditary Emirate	8 Municipalities (*baladiyya*)
Saudi Arabia	Unitary Absolute Monarchy	13 Provinces 60 Centres (*markaz*) for each province 43 Secondary Governorates (*muhafazat*) for each province
State of Palestine	National Authority	187 Municipalities
Syrian Arab Republic	Semi-Presidential Republic	14 Provinces
Turkey	Presidential System	1,398 Municipalities 51 Provincial Administrations 18,362 Village Administrations
UAE	Constitutional Federation of 7 Emirates	7 Emirates
Yemen	Multi-party Parliamentary System	22 Governorates 333 Districts 2,210 Municipalities 38,234 Villages

Source: UCLG MEWA Report on Country Sheets, 2018.

capacity are incentives for many small Lebanese municipalities to establish municipal unions, as already mentioned.

Recentralizing trends have hindered competence devolution in **Jordan** over the past few years. Even though the current regulations of the Municipal Act do assign a diverse range of competences to the local level, the central government has tended to either centralize or even privatize municipal competences such as water and electricity provision, school and health systems. Joint Service Councils have been established from the top down by the Ministry of Interior to coordinate service provision in clusters of municipalities and villages — with the aim of achieving economy of scale and making certain services (and waste management in particular) more efficient — such as in the Petra region or special economic zones (SEZs) like Aqaba. The gubernatorial level maintains coordination among local governments, and has the power to intervene in municipal affairs and decisions.

The territorial and administrative fragmentation of the **State of Palestine** described above is evident in the inconsistent distribution of competences and powers to local authorities across the state's territory. Following the Oslo Accords of 1993 and 1995, the Palestinian territory in the West Bank was ultimately divided into three Areas: A, B and C. Area C territory is de facto under Israeli control, not only in terms of its political administration and security, but even as far as urban and territorial zoning and planning are concerned. It accounts for about 60% of the whole of the West Bank. Nonetheless, the Local Authorities Law of the State of Palestine identifies a wide range of tasks that are the responsibility of the Association of Palestinian Local Authorities (APLA). Some municipalities have even taken on additional tasks, such as providing emergency services and the construction and maintenance of schools. Between 2005 and 2006, several joint councils were created to guarantee more effective service provision and development planning. However, due to the limited capacities of most local governments in the area, CSOs have played an important role in providing health, education and relief services, especially to the poorest groups of the population and/or those affected by the conflict.

The lack of clarity about relationships between the central government, municipalities and other related local departments has generally resulted in institutional competition and duplication.

The status of competence allocation and devolution in West Asia is more varied. The **Afghan** Government introduced a Sub-National Government Policy (LRGSP) in 2010, which aims to devolve certain central powers to local authorities. This document includes roles and responsibilities of Afghan local governments in various fields, such as justice, security, roads, water, sanitation, natural resources management, infrastructure, agriculture, education and energy, among others.[40] The Ministry of Urban Development, however, has planning oversight of local administrations' decision-making. In **Iran**, on the other hand, municipalities enjoy both direct responsibilities and shared responsibilities with higher levels of governance. Locally however, municipal offices and mayors have a limited or no role in the provision of many basic services. In the case of urban planning, for example, municipalities are generally tasked with the development and follow-up of projects that are usually defined and designed directly by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development. Finally, in **Iraq**, district (*qadaa*) and sub-district (*nahiya*) councils have taken on several responsibilities of public service delivery to respond to local needs and interests, but most services remain under central government control. Following the country's structural political reform, governorates now manage and deliver most of the competences related to the urban system. Accordingly, overlapping of authority and responsibility is still a fundamental problem in the relationship between federal and local governments, as well as a hindrance in terms of transparency and resource allocation.

The centralized nature of task and competence distribution in the Gulf countries has led to a relatively unusual picture in the sub-region. Emirati municipalities are in charge of daily urban service management but only as part of an ever-tighter distribution of competences within the federal system, which remains largely in the hands of each Emirate's government. In **Oman**, municipal councils have no specific competence other than providing recommendations for the delivery of urban services. Over the last few decades, several municipal responsibilities in **Kuwait** have in fact been re-centralized, although municipal councils are still responsible for certain services — including roads, urban planning, sanitation, garbage disposal, food safety, licensing, environmental protection, and housing.[41] **Yemeni** municipalities have traditionally had little leeway when it comes to local powers and responsibilities. A process of decentralization began in 2001 with the entry into force of a law on local authorities, which devolved most administrative tasks and competences to the local level. An amendment to the law was a

step forward also in terms of the democratization of the appointment and accountability of local representatives. However, in 2011, the President's Office overturned most of these arrangements, returning the lion's share of policy control from the local level to central government.[42] Finally, with the onset of the civil war in 2014 and the Saudi-led invasion of 2015, Yemeni municipalities found themselves in the unprecedented position of abandoning most local policy-making and focusing primarily on guaranteeing the supply of food and medicine to their communities.

In **Turkey**, on the other hand, municipal competences include an extensive range of tasks and responsibilities, with the exception of several basic national competences such as border security, justice and compulsory education. The Turkish system, however, still has certain overlaps in labour distribution between local governments and sectoral ministries. There have also been some instances of central government devolving competences to local authorities, who have in turn rejected this due to bureaucratic difficulties in managing these tasks. Municipalities larger than 50,000 inhabitants, for example, have a legal obligation to provide sheltered housing for women and children. However, even after building the infrastructure (and thus complying with the law), due to their limited capacity and the process's complexity, many municipalities are transferring the management and maintenance of shelters back to the Ministry of Family and Social Affairs. Similarly, in an attempt to rationalize their tasks, many municipalities have resorted to creating municipal unions, entities supported by specific national legislation: 789 such unions exist, sharing competences in a diverse range of fields, from geothermal energy production to health and tourism.[43]

Finally, urban legislation and regulations may have a very important role to play in preparing MEWA countries for the introduction of the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda in an otherwise slowly evolving system. However, most urban planning and management laws, rules and regulations remain obsolete and have not been able to respond adequately to the needs (and challenges) of local governments willing to take on this task.

Local and regional governments' finance

Inadequate access, delivery and provision of basic services and infrastructure have obstructed the achievement of the SDGs and their targets in the MEWA region. A thorough revision of financial resources and their allocation across levels of governance is essential to overcome this challenge. There are many obstacles in the way of LRGs' finance systems across the region. Generally in the MEWA region, **Turkey** and **Palestine** are probably the most decentralized in terms of the spending capacity of their local governments. Countries such as Iran, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon are lagging behind while Gulf countries are as a rule so centralized that sub-national finance still depends largely on national decision-making. In most MEWA countries however, the current institutional framework means local governments are not sufficiently invested with their own revenues (either through taxes, fees or charges) and thus are unable to autonomously fund their own spending. Increasing urbanization, on the one hand, has put even more financial pressure on local governments. Meanwhile obsolete institutional and regulatory frameworks, on the other, have made it even harder for them to recover their fair share of public services' operating costs or offset the impact of rising property value in urban contexts. This has ultimately most benefitted the private sector. Moreover, and generally across the entire MEWA region, an inadequate regulatory framework has limited local governments' access to alternative sources of funding and finance. Most MEWA local governments cannot legally issue municipal bonds, or implement land-value capture models, Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs), value-based zoning mechanisms, and many other financial options. Making these accessible at the local level would require another step forward in financial decentralization.

Similarly, local taxes and fees have so far played a minor part in the financing of local governance, systematically hindered by inefficient collection mechanisms. Very few countries in the MEWA region really enjoy any degree of autonomy in the management of their own local revenues. Although municipalities in Iran, Jordan, Turkey and Palestine are in fact able to generate income through property taxes, their share of local revenues (with the exception of Turkey) is still limited.[44] On the other hand, real-estate tax rates in Turkey, for example, are still set centrally by the Council of Ministers, with no engagement of municipalities. There are some positive examples, however: the city of Sanlıurfa, for example, doubled its tax revenue in one year by monitoring collection with improved IT systems.[45]

Although municipal revenues in **Iran** increased eight-fold during the period 2006-2013, these came mostly from land sales and building permits. Meanwhile, over the past 45 years, the share of own revenue in the income of Tehran Municipality fell from about 40% to 20%.[46] Iranian cities have accordingly faced significant financial constraints in their ability to support the implementation of the SDGs.[47] Similarly, in **Iraq**, even though Iraqi governorates were granted the right to levy taxes, a judicial action has suspended this prerogative, leaving them highly dependent on central transfers. The system of tax collection, moreover, is strongly centralized. Specifically, in the case of the Iraqi economy, the Ministry of Finance has

been trying to retain control of the local budget, which has been spent entirely on reconstruction.

The current situation is even starker in the Gulf countries, where municipalities have basically behaved as implementing agencies for national urban policies (NUPs). With few exceptions, local governments in the Gulf have no direct taxing or borrowing powers and are dependent on central transfers for funding infrastructure and public service provision. Inevitably, any initiative to implement the SDGs needs to be centralized, top-down, and an integral part of NDSs. In **Bahrain**, for example, the budget allocated to governorates is agreed at the central level and managed as part of the overall budget of the Ministry of Interior.[48] In many Gulf countries, moreover, the wealth engendered by oil and hydrocarbons has allowed national governments to single-handedly adopt a specific model of urban planning and development, based mostly on ambitious megaprojects that rival — though more in appearance than function — the stereotypical image of the Western metropolis. This model of top-down urban development leaves the city, to a certain extent, devoid of its own main primary functions. In **Saudi Arabia**, for example, business licence and advertising fees and building permits are the only real source of income for local governments, while just a handful of cities — Riyadh, Jeddah, and the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah — are granted the capacity to manage local finance and maintain a local budget. Some cities, however, are seeking revenue from municipal land property to raise additional financial resources, and have been experimenting with PPPs to attract private investment. In an apparent acknowledgement of the urgency of this issue, Saudi Arabia's national Saudi Vision 2030 now specifically addresses municipal finance.[49]

In **Lebanon**, local governments cannot create additional taxes nor can they make changes to the tax base since they only have limited control of fee levels. While they collect up to 36 different kinds of fees, the cost of the collection process has been higher than the income obtained (direct fees represent around 40% of local revenues).[50] In **Jordan**, revenues raised by municipalities represent 43% of total local revenues. Municipalities have some control of some fees (e.g. waste collection, building permits), and property tax.[51] Most Jordanian municipalities, however, face budget deficits, mostly due to the inability to compensate for expenditure on salaries and local infrastructure maintenance (e.g. transport, roads and waste management). In the **State of Palestine**, on the other hand, local governments have maintained a certain degree of control over both the tax rate and the tax base. Inevitably, however, the current military occupation, the territorial fragmentation and the lack of actual control over border security and functioning have vastly affected the ability of local governments to collect a stable amount of own revenue, and they have relied extensively on foreign aid.[52] At the national level, the MDLF, established in 2005, provides municipalities with grants and loan guarantees, as well as programmes to strengthen their financial management capabilities. In **Turkey**, finally, local taxes and fees represent around 30% of local revenues.[53]

With regard to the remaining components of local budgets, local governments in most MEWA countries ultimately depend to a high degree on transfers from central governments: 70% of local revenue in **Turkey** come via grants, about 40% in **Jordan**. **Palestine** and **Afghanistan** are the only exceptions: in the former, the mechanism of grant and transfer has been inefficient due to the systemic issue in the organization of the country; in the latter, centre-to-local transfers have not been established, and structurally, local governments do not have their own financial sources.[54] The centrality of transfers for the sustainability of local finance also highlights the importance of the criteria according to which national governments allocate resources via grants — as well as any flexibility that LRGs have to use these funds. Several countries have traditionally adopted pre-set allocation formulas: Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. The other governments in the region, however, define these criteria via centrally — led national negotiations in which LRGs are generally not included.[55] In **Iran**, on the other hand, where transfers are allocated on a yearly basis, 60% of development transfers are earmarked for specific projects, and only 40% are left discretionary for the recipient.[56] In **Iraq**, central transfers are still essential for the sustainability of local government. They are allocated, however, in a highly unbalanced way: the four governorates included in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) — due to the particular status of this union as the country's only autonomous region — receive about 17% of the national budget via grants; the remaining 15 governorates combined only receive about 5%.

Clearer allocation criteria and formulas are not necessarily conducive to more effective local finance. In most cases, metropolitan areas have been benefitting more than intermediary cities or smaller towns from intergovernmental transfers. More specifically, because of the extreme conditions imposed by the Syrian

There are many obstacles in the way of local and regional governments' finance systems across the region.

conflict on the whole region, transfer schemes and criteria have failed to take into consideration the sudden and dramatic change brought about by the refugee crisis. In **Turkey**, for example, a large city such as Gaziantep — on the Turkish-Syrian border, hosting over 400,000 refugees with a local population of about 1.5 million — receives transfer allocations about 14 times lower than Kocaeli, on the Marmara Sea, with a similar population but a much lower impact of refugee fluxes.[57] At a much lower scale, but with similar dynamics, transfer schemes also penalize affected territories and communities — one way or another — by growing commuter flows among cities. Lebanese municipalities have met with the same set of challenges, as they have come to host over 1.4 million Syrian refugees.[58] The country's Independent Municipal Fund, a governmental agency in charge of fund allocation, has often been criticized for unpredictable transfers and inadequate criteria, hindering territorial equality.

Consequently, municipalities across the MEWA region have tried to find alternative sources of financial support. The simplest option for most local governments is borrowing from domestic banks or special purpose funds. Jordanian cities, for example, have made up 14% of their budgets through loans from the Cities and Villages Development Bank (CVDB). Longer-term financing is more difficult to obtain in non-oil producing countries in the region. Loans from international institutions require sovereign guarantees and carry foreign-exchange risks. Moreover, borrowing from multilateral banks or international financial markets is often hindered by the lack of quality data and transparency in the financial system, which increases credit risks to an unsustainable level. In most MEWA countries, the existing legislation does not allow for the issuance of municipal bonds and attempts to instate this have been sporadic. In **Turkey**, the city of Antalya did plan a municipal bond initiative, but this was frustrated by the bureaucratic requirements of the process. On the other hand, Iran's experience has been relatively positive, in this regard: both Tehran and Tabriz have implemented municipal bond initiatives successfully.[59]

Lack of financial autonomy, transparency and alternative options have curbed the capacity of MEWA LRGs to fund themselves, their activities and — inevitably — also their mobilization for the SDGs. In fact, the extensive reliance on short-term funds has led to a general financial weakness, and many national governments in the region have used this to leverage more municipal amalgamation. In Jordan alone, over 300 municipalities were joined into 93 municipalities.[60] In 2014, Turkey amalgamated 2,950 municipalities into 1,398.

Women walking with kids, Syria (photo: Charles Roffey, bit.ly/2MsZR6v).

2.3. Multilevel governance mechanisms and trends for stakeholder involvement

The historical legacy of centralized administration has remained solidly embedded in the political system of the MEWA countries. It still influences city management and the mechanisms of urban and territorial governance. Across the region, the predominance of centralizing models and initiatives has paved the way to territorial coordination via hierarchical processes rather than co-ownership, negotiation or inclusive consultation.

Inevitably, this has also affected the role and effectiveness of national LGAs, making representation of local governments in national decision-making even weaker. An important exception is **Turkey**, where the UMT, established in 1945, has a consultative role in the drafting of legislation and holds one seat in the Presidential Local Government Commission. In **Lebanon**, a Committee of Mayors, gathering the representatives of the country's major cities, has been active since 1995.

Although many countries in the region have established a separate ministry addressing local government matters, concrete impact and change have been negligible. In **Iran**, the Office of Councils and Social Affairs within the Ministry of Interior oversees all municipal councils. Although mayors are elected by the councils, they are still vastly dependent on the Department of Municipal Affairs within the ministry. Line ministries are in charge of local services and policies in their respective fields, a mechanism that has frequently led to a lack of coordination among decision-makers formalized, to a certain extent, within often contradictory regulations. This trend has impeded the establishment of a consistent local government model or system across the region.

In **Iraq**, for example, governorate councils have extensive power over lower local councils in the implementation of local projects: at the administrative level, more generally, mayors need the approval of governors for any activities within

Phosphate train on its way to Aqaba, Jordan (photo: rikdom, bit.ly/2B1ASli).

the municipal jurisdiction. In **Jordan**, the Ministry of Interior is the main authority in charge of local governments' functioning and activity, even though municipalities are formally under the control of the Ministry of Municipal Affairs. After the adoption of the country's Decentralization Law (2015), the central government created in 2016 eight different ministerial committees and one central committee to assist local policy implementation. The role of the Ministry of Municipal Affairs — within the framework of the decentralization process — is expected to be reduced, focusing more on consultation and capacity-building, instead of on strict policy supervision.[61]

In **Lebanon**, the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities is in charge of local administration and exerts administrative supervision over municipal councils — including financial control — through Governors (*Muhafizes*). They can suspend municipal decisions for three months. The Ministry is also responsible for planning, budgeting and expenditure of municipal revenue. The **Palestinian** Ministry of Local Government is in charge of the oversight of local authorities. The central government has been attempting to pool municipal services via intercommunal entities — the Joint Services Councils (JSCs) — to overcome the practical difficulties many local administrations meet in the delivery of basic services. In **Turkey**, a new General Directorate of Local Government was established in 2017 under the Ministry of Urbanization and Environment.

Finally, in the MEWA region most legal frameworks for citizen mobilization have been historically weak, and participatory channels have been either inadequate or non-existent. While mayors can play a pivotal role in creating a culture of participation in their cities, their actions seldom go beyond formal policy practices. Participation, however, varies across the region. In **Afghanistan**, the sub-national governance framework adopted in 2010 acknowledges citizens' right to participate in decision-making, yet in practice most decisions are still based on informal political ties. In **Iran**, the level of public participation in municipal decisions is very low, and official mobilization channels are limited to the election of local councillors. In **Lebanon**, public participation in urban planning and development remains marginal, but has been improving: in 2016, a platform set up by NGOs under the slogan of 'Beirut My City' won 37% of the votes in the capital. The winner-take-all electoral system left the movement with no representation in the city council, but it won international acclaim.[62] In **Jordan**, the central government is currently working on a new framework to enable citizens to define and share their preferred projects. In **Turkey**, municipal elections are still the main institutional channel of participation: citizens vote for their mayor and for candidate lists linked to political parties, however in most cases without any information available about the councillors they are supporting.

Lack of coordination among decision-makers has impeded the establishment of a consistent local government model or system across the MEWA region.

A remarkable challenge for the MEWA region, but also an area in which (modest) progress has been achieved, is women's participation in sub-national politics. **Saudi Arabia** granted female citizens the right to participate in local politics in 2015: since then, 21 women candidates have won seats in Saudi municipal councils.[63] In 2018, **Bahrain**'s monarchy appointed two Bahraini women as director-generals of the Capital and Northern Municipalities. In **Iran**, a campaign to increase the number of woman-held seats in local legislatures led to the election of 415 women to city councils across the province of Sistan-Balochistan in the 2017 elections, up from 185 in the previous election. In **Iraq**'s second election for governorate councils in 2013, 117 women were elected to a total of 440 seats, seven more than in the 2009 elections.[64]

Ultimately, because of its history and traditional institutional setting, the MEWA region as a whole presents significant challenges for the implementation and achievement of the SDGs, and in particular for the active participation of LRGs in the process. The region is characterized by widening disparities in development levels and enduring armed conflict, making it even harder for poorer and war-torn countries, such as Yemen or Afghanistan, to conceptualize — let alone implement and achieve — the SDG targets locally. Despite its heterogeneity, the MEWA region still has a common trend that emerges across all countries, which is that it has historically rewarded strong political centralization: this is limiting authority, autonomy and capacity (including but not limited to financial resources) of LRGs in all MEWA countries. Accordingly, their ability to advance in policy-making and either adapt to or introduce the SDGs in their activities is severely limited. This notwithstanding, it is important to emphasize that many LRGs in the MEWA region have sought ways to introduce and localize the SDGs in their territories and communities — often in opposition to the constraints imposed by their national systems. The following section explores and analyses these efforts in more detail.

03. The contribution of local and regional governments to the localization of the SDGs

3.1 Promoting local ownership to localize the SDGs

There is plenty of evidence from around the world of the importance of local governments and their national associations in the successful localization of the SDGs. While the SDGs as a framework are inherently intergovernmental, and their realization is tied to national policies, budget and political will, the achievement of most Goals still depends extensively on the cooperation, commitment and participation of local and regional authorities. SDG 11 on 'inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable' cities and human settlements, for example, acknowledges the transformative power of sustainable urbanization and the impact that local governments can have on driving (global) change from the bottom up.

The implementation of a complex and comprehensive Goal such as SDG 11 requires not only improvements in the delivery of basic services (health, education, water and food security, energy, among others), but also access to inclusive economic opportunities and the protection of women, youth, minorities and other vulnerable groups. While the resources for this would in most countries be allocated by national governments, the design and successful implementation of specific programmes are a local responsibility and require true cross-level co-ownership, participation and mobilization of local communities, actors and stakeholders.

Not surprisingly, considering the region's traditionally centralized political and administrative structures, local governments have only rarely — and only in a few countries of the region — actively participated in the process of implementing the SDGs, as well as in the preparation of the VNRs. This can partly be explained by the still limited development and presence of LGAs and networks across the region: the job of intermediating across governance tiers and representing the shared interests of local authorities performed by associations and networks can be a valuable enabler for local governments to gain visibility and centrality in SDG-related decision-making. **Turkey**, **Lebanon** and **Palestine** are essentially the only MEWA countries with a developed, established network of local government associations and organizations. Turkish local governments have come together in the UMT, which has to date been included in the community of partners invited to all the national events related to either the SDGs or the Turkish government's VNR for the United Nations. Since 2017, the UMT has taken on the task of circulating information and knowledge about the SDG framework to all Turkey's mayors and municipalities.

The Mersin Metropolitan Municipality and the municipalities of Nilufer (Izmir province), Nevşehir and Bakırköy (a municipality in the larger conglomeration of Istanbul) have organized several SDG-related workshops. Seferihisar, in the Izmir province, created a webpage for reporting practices and examples of local implementation. The municipalities (and Istanbul districts) of Bakırköy, Esenler and Maltepe have already developed their own local reports on the SDGs. The Regional Municipal Union of Marmara has organized workshops and seminars on the SDGs for its member municipalities. Several NGOs have also been active in monitoring and promoting municipal activities in support of SDG implementation: the *Yereliz* ('We are local') Association created an online reporting system that maps local government efforts in support of SDG targets and their achievement. The Maya Sustainable Development Agency has organized local workshops and conferences to raise awareness among local stakeholders and communities.

The national government — via the Presidential Directorate in charge of the realization of Turkey's VNR for the 2019 HLPF — has shown an increasing willingness to engage the local level. The UMT was selected as the coordinating institution for local administrations contributing to the reporting process and bringing to the table the experiences of LRGs in the country. The UMT directly engaged with 50 municipalities in the process, while reaching out to over 1,400 municipalities for them to

The implementation of the SDGs requires improvements in the delivery of basic services and the protection of vulnerable groups.

contribute to the document's recommendations.[65] The UMT attended the 2019 HLPF in New York along with the national government delegation.

In Lebanon and Palestine, national municipal associations have evolved to a certain degree. In **Lebanon**, the *Bureau Technique des Villes Libanaises* (BTVL, Technical Office of Lebanese Cities), also known as *Cités Unies Liban* (United Cities Lebanon), has a membership of 66 municipalities and 22 federations of municipalities, comprising 80% of the country's population. The country's largest municipalities collaborate under the aegis of BTVL. However, when the national government prepared its VNR for the 2018 HLPF, the municipalities of the BTVL were informed but not invited to contribute to the process.[66] When the **State of Palestine** presented its 2018 VNR, the national LGA was neither informed nor involved in the process. The Association of Palestinian Local Authorities (APLA), however, has been particularly active in the territory. It has established the Palestinian City Managers Network (PCMN), which involves higher-level administrators responsible for running the day-to-day operations of Palestinian municipalities,[67] and has historically been proactive in global networks of local authorities and in the effort of granting their members increasing visibility on the international stage.

In **Iraq**, UN-Habitat has monitored and supported the process of establishing a national LGA to improve information and experience exchange among municipalities, channelling their concerns and priorities to reach regional and central governments. Although the Iraqi national LGA has been active in conferences and specific projects, it is still in its infancy institutionally and politically. Using a similar process, the World Bank has assisted in the creation of the Independent Directorate of Local Authorities in **Afghanistan**.

Besides these efforts, several municipalities in the region have also actively sought to participate in international initiatives, particularly on issues of climate change, sustainability and resilience. Many cities in the MEWA region are part of the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy.[68] UCLG has maintained an active presence in the region through the Istanbul-based regional headquarters of UCLG-MEWA: in the past year, it has developed several dissemination initiatives in the region about the SDGs, aimed at training local governments and their officials on the process of localization through workshops and conferences. In 2018 and 2019, UCLG-MEWA completed a pilot project to map SDG implementation which was initially launched in **Turkey** — with the financial sponsorship and partnership of the World Academy for Local Government and Democracy (WALD). UCLG-MEWA planned to use the project to integrate SDG-related municipal activities as widely as possible in the VNRs of the countries in the region. UCLG-MEWA plans to disseminate the results and outcomes of the project throughout the region to incentivize mutual learning and collaboration.

In **Jordan**, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has supported a dedicated 'roadmap for the implementation of the SDGs with a 2030 time-horizon' to reinforce SDG-related initiatives in planning at the national and sub-national levels: this includes awareness-raising, mapping, mainstreaming and financing development initiatives. Jordan's VNR — submitted in 2017 — stressed the participation of both elected municipal councils and appointed governorate councils to the reviewing process. Development-related priorities for the country's 12 governorates, however, are still centralized through the Governorate Development Programmes: while these are 'expected' to be fully aligned with the SDGs, there is no significant evidence of actual implementation or integration of the Goals in the initiatives undertaken at the local level.

UN-Habitat has also been very active in Afghanistan, sponsoring several programmes in partnership with the national government and sub-national authorities. Even if designed outside the SDG framework, many of the 30 projects, active on the ground since 2008, have a strong impact on the achievement of core SDG targets and development indicators in Afghan territories and communities. UNDP, as mentioned above, has also been a key player for SDG localization in the region. In **Bahrain**, UNDP — in partnership with other UN agencies such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and United Nations Volunteers (UNV) — has aimed to engage young Bahrainis in the Capital Governorate to issue 'Volunteering Passports' in the SDG framework to increase awareness at the local level.[69] In **Saudi Arabia**, a national-level UNDP-led project included a pillar dedicated to localization. Through UNDP support, moreover, the Riyadh Urban Observatory has engaged in discussion with local actors to promote the integration of the SDGs and their related indicators in the Observatory's toolkit for monitoring and reporting on implementation in the city of Riyadh.

In **Palestine**, UNDP has organized awareness-raising workshops with the participation of sectoral, national and local-level representatives. In **Syria**, the agency has also been assisting governorates in the preparation of their voluntary reviews. In Iraq, with the support of the national government, UNDP has set up a project to integrate the SDGs at the governorate level. Governorate Sustainable Development Committees (GSDCs) have been established to support implementation of NDPs (which are already aligned with the SDGs) and monitor progress in implementation at the provincial level.[70]

3.2 Local initiatives in line with the 2030 Agenda

Despite MEWA LRGs' historical reliance on the support of national governments, evidence of innovative or 'game-changing' progress in the region's countries is scarce. There is only limited information available about new programmes that are catalysed by the SDGs or any other global agendas, and new lines of funding or support to local initiatives. There are, however, significant examples in Turkey, where several projects — mostly related to SDGs 3, 6, 10 and 11 — have clearly been beneficial to SDG localization and increased policy consistency between central and local levels.[71]

In other countries, certain governmental priorities have been consistent with some of the main objectives of the SDGs, and some of the policies that national governments and other tiers of governance have been able to develop are to an extent aligned with these agendas. Informal settlements, access to essential services and urban management challenges — all core elements of the commitments behind the SDGs — have been more and more central for national and local policy arenas across the MEWA region.

Urban development

The SDG closest to the reality and actual commitments and expectations of cities and local governments is SDG 11 on Sustainable Cities and Communities. Most of the advances, initiatives and strategic alignment of local governments within the framework of the SDGs have an impact on the implementation of SDG 11, even when there is no explicit reference to the Goals.

Over the past few years, several countries in the region have put in place urban development strategies as a tool to help address their main urban and territorial challenges, although the content and objectives of these have been diverse. **Turkey**, for example, is implementing an Integrated Urban Development Strategy and Action Plan, with different sub-programmes designed to manage urban growth and sprawl; prevent disaster risk; promote urban regeneration and reduce regional disparities; develop integrated transit and transport in major cities; and curb sub-standard housing supply. **Saudi Arabia**, faced with increasing urbanization rates, launched its National Spatial Strategy 2030 and Future Saudi Cities Programme (in partnership with UN-Habitat) to tackle urban sprawl reduction; promote spatially balanced planning and development; improve public transportation in and between major cities; promote national investment towards less-developed regions; and empower middle and small-sized cities and

Over 400 Turkish, Syrian, Afghani and Iraqi women from the SADA Women's Empowerment and Solidarity Center in Gaziantep celebrate International Women's Day along Turkey's border with Syria, March 8th, 2019 (photo: UN Women Europe and Central Asia, bit.ly/2AVOrTz).

settlements as regional growth hubs.[72] A major challenge will be the devolution of greater responsibilities to local governments. Although they currently prepare local master plans and monitor their implementation, the autonomy of local governments is limited as higher-level officials have the power to overrule local decisions. Moreover, central government transfers still account for 70% of local expenditures due to LRGs' low efficiency in revenue collection at the local level and the traditional provision of many public services free of charge.[73]

In **Afghanistan**, one of the least urbanized countries of the region, the Ministry of Urban Development Affairs, the Independent Directorate of Local Governance, and the Municipality of Kabul, in partnership with UN-Habitat, launched in 2014 (before the SDGs were established) the nationwide Future of Afghan Cities Programme (FoAC). After a successful database and reporting phase, which led to the publication of the State of Afghan Cities report in 2015, the programme moved to a second stage. In 2016, the partnership produced an atlas and a dataset of Afghan cities and regions.[74] Similarly, the Afghan Citizens' Charter project — in partnership with the World Bank and several local authorities — promotes the improvement of service and infrastructure delivery through the engagement of local communities by means of Community Development Councils. **Qatar**'s Ministry of Municipality and Environment, meanwhile, has developed a Sustainable Strategy 2018-2022 and plans to provide the country's cities with support for food security, environmental protection, waste management and recycling.

Another dimension of specific provisions of SDG 11.4 — cultural legacy and preservation — has been a controversial issue in planning and spatial policies in many countries of the MEWA region. Either because areas were war-torn or because of the structural indifference of political authorities, many Middle Eastern municipalities have experienced the destruction and abandonment of historical heritage and millennia-old settlements. Mosul, in **Iraq**, has already accessed financial assistance from the central government to rebuild the old city. The Turkish municipality of Altindag (a district of Ankara's metro area) has renovated the once abandoned historical centre of Ankara, refurbishing it into a cultural hub for the city.

Many MEWA urban areas have experienced massive population influx, urban growth and major imbalances contributing to the fast growth of informal settlements.

Informal settlements and social inclusion

Following trends of growing inequality and the displacement of refugees escaping conflict in several areas of the MEWA region, many urban areas have experienced massive population influx, urban growth and major imbalances contributing to fast growth of informal settlements. **Lebanon**'s dynamics of urban growth, exacerbated by an extremely high number of refugees, have led to the sprawl of larger cities. In 2015, 1.8 million people — 53.1% of the urban population — were living in informal settlements and urban slums.[75] In response to the inflow of Syrian refugees that began in 2011, Lebanon's municipalities expanded their services, and schools opened their doors to refugee children, which resulted in a doubling in enrolments and the empowerment of local governments to operate and maintain the educational system.[76] Iran's informal settlements today host about one third of the country's urban population.[77] The municipalities of Tehran and Isfahan have established specialized agencies that have been working with the Urban Development and Revitalization Organization (UDRO) on informal settlements and neighbourhood upgrading and renovation.[78] Afghanistan's Community-Led Urban Infrastructure Programme seeks to secure and stabilize urban areas through community empowerment and the improvement of living conditions. In Iraq, the Funding Facility for Stabilization (FFS), in partnership with UNDP, the national government, and the governorates, has focused on rebuilding and renovating urban infrastructure.[79]

Basic services

Inevitably, due to the climatic and geographic conditions of the region, issues of **sustainable water consumption and provision** and management of wastewaters have been crucial for national and local governments across the MEWA region, and especially in the desert areas in the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf. Desalinated water currently provides for over two-thirds of potable water used in **Bahrain**, **Kuwait**, **Qatar** and the **UAE**, and 61% in **Saudi Arabia**. Water recycling, sanitation and waste management technologies have become essential alternative sources of water to meet a skyrocketing demand in the region's urban areas.[80] Almost all urban settlements in almost all countries of the region have some degree of water recycling and wastewater treatment system in place. In **Turkey**, for example, the number of municipalities with domestic wastewater treatment facilities increased from 126 in 2002 to 881 in 2018 and the rate of use of these services by the municipal population rose from 35% to 75%. Within the same period, the percentage of the population using safely managed drinking

water increased from 95% to 99%. Following new legislation, municipalities will reduce water loss rates averaged 25% in 2023.[81]

Waste management has also traditionally posed a challenge to local governance in the region. The **Greater Beirut** area's main landfill site was closed in 2015: since then the municipality has struggled to remedy this situation because of both inadequate financial resources and a centralized approach that has historically limited the ability of local government and stakeholders to address these issues.[82] The GCC countries, thanks to their substantially different national economies have been able to establish highly efficient landfill systems. Larger cities such as **Doha,** in **Qatar**, have even invested in food and organic waste treatment for the production of compost and chemical products. In **Oman**, uniquely for the region, solid waste landfills are managed jointly by the general government and certain municipalities, including **Muscat**, the capital city, and **Salalah**. In **Turkey**, within the framework of the National Waste Management Plan, the number of municipal landfills has increased to 88, which provide services to 62.3 million inhabitants in 1,160 with three incineration plants also in existence have been established. As of April 2019, packaging waste is collected separately at the source in 499 municipalities. A Zero Waste Project was initiated to foster and recover recycling (within the framework of a National Recycling Strategy). Municipalities with financing difficulties are supported by the Solid Waste Programme.[83] The metropolitan municipality of **Istanbul** has established a network of container recycling across the city, the credits of which can be spent on public transport fees. **Beirut** has partnered with a domestic private waste management company to launch the first phase of a local waste recycling project. Again, exposing perhaps a regional susceptibility to the appeal of mega-planning, the city of **Dubai** has inaugurated its 'Glow Garden', a structure made out of 500,000 recyclable glass vials, porcelain ware, plastic bottles, dishes, and thousands of compact discs recovered from municipal waste — a reminder of the massive accumulation of waste in densely urbanized settlements.

Many other essential elements of the SDGs, e.g. **transport and energy**, are being increasingly integrated in the region's municipal agendas. The debate on alternative and sustainable sources of energy and the improvement of public transportation — especially when considering the massive yet untapped potential for solar energy production in the whole area — is challenged by the easy access to fossil fuel energy in the region. However, several examples show growing progress in this regard. The city of **Istanbul** is developing efficient management of energy in municipal buildings, in facilities and parks. Several Turkish cities have developed public rail system projects (subway, light rail systems, trams) or created bicycle lanes (e.g. Istanbul, Izmir, Kocaeli, Kayseri and Konya). Istanbul has been able to expand its public transport network, growing the underground network and infrastructure, while imposing some restrictions on private motorized transport. In **Izmir,** a solar power station was established on 10,000 m^2 of roofs by the local transport authority ESHOT General Directorate. This station aims to meet the energy needs of 20 ESHOT buses, fully powered by electricity.[84] **Malatya**, also in Turkey, already uses electric bus vehicles with routes that allow for battery recharging. **Qazvin**, in Iran, signed a deal in 2018 with a Chinese company to build the country's first tram network. **Riyadh,** the capital of Saudi Arabia, has allocated an investment of USD 16 billion to fund an underground system extending 178 km. At the same time, **Qatar** and some of the **UAE** (including Abu Dhabi, the country's largest state have been developing green building ratings and certifications, in order to integrate the latest environmental construction standard in their national regulations.[85]

Box 1

Resilience plan actions in Byblos, Ramallah and Amman

Consistent with the participatory approach of the 100 Resilient Cities (100RC) network the experiences and actions of the cities of Amman (Jordan), Byblos (Lebanon) and Ramallah (Palestine) have helped identify major resilience challenges, as shaped by local conditions and structures. Those experience and actions have also assisted with the development of plans that truly reflect local priorities and concerns. Byblos' resilience plan was created through dialogue with key stakeholders — the Municipal Council, government ministries, the police, NGOs, academic institutions, and civic groups. It prioritizes municipal data collection and use as a prerequisite for improved planning and city management. In Ramallah, the preparation of the resilience plan involved working groups from the Municipal Council, universities and the private sector, as well as conversations with local political and community leaders. A similar process was followed in Amman for its resilience plan. Transport was a critical component for the Jordanian capital, and required the development of an integrated mobility plan: this includes a three-corridor Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) network, to open in 2019, and the enhancement of walkability, especially through the creation of a railway corridor park. All these measures augment initiatives against climate change, and the improvement of digital connectedness, urban infrastructure and participatory mechanisms.

Source: 100 Resilient Cities network (https://www.100resilientcities.org).

Resilient cities and territories

Local governments in the MEWA region have been developing innovative approaches to improve resilience and sustainability in their territories and communities. Amman in **Jordan**, Byblos in **Lebanon** and Ramallah in **Palestine**, for example, have all joined the 100 Resilient Cities (100RC) network: the membership has helped the municipalities assess the status of their resilience outlook and develop state-of-the-art strategic planning to adequately meet resilience criteria (see Box 1).

In **Turkey**, 141 Urban Regeneration and Development Projects Areas and ten Renovation Areas in cities are being developed with the support of the government (USD 2.83 billion spent since 2012). Many cities, such as the Kocaeli Metropolitan Municipality are implementing a Disaster Management and Decision Support System Project (AYDES) with the national Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD). The project implements an electronic tracking and management system for all stages of integrated disaster management.[86]

With the Aqaba Declaration,[87] approved at the first Arab Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction,[88] in 2013, under the aegis of the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) and UNDP, Arab countries and members of the League of Arab Countries acknowledged the risks and vulnerabilities of Arab cities in the face of climate change, earthquakes, desertification and flooding. The signatories committed to dedicate part of their budget to risk prevention and preparedness, awareness-raising and education on resilience and climate change, with particular attention given to vulnerable cultural heritage and protected sites, among several other measures.

Men chat in shrine near Kashan, Iran (photo: Charles Roffey, bit.ly/80zbB).

Environment and climate change

Climate change, which is central to the policy commitments and innovation framework of the SDGs, is also a key issue for local governments and a fundamental challenge tackled by local initiatives and activities. Besides SDG 13 on climate change, environmental, resilience and sustainability issues are at the core of SDG 7 on clean energy, SDG 11 on cities and human settlements, SDG 12 on sustainable production and consumption, SDG 14 on life below water, and SDG 15 on life on earth. Throughout the MEWA region, many municipalities developed initiatives and policies that refer to a number of these Goals' targets: 30 cities made commitments within the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy in 2019.[89]

In **Jordan**, the Greater Amman Municipality commited in 2015 to a plan to become a green city by 2020. In **Turkey**, several frontrunning cities and municipalities have been implementing climate action plans for years, and have also been joining various international networks active in this field.[90] Following a regulation passed in 2017, municipalities are expected to increase green areas in their spatial planning and improve their accessibility. Taking initiative on air pollution the number of air quality monitoring stations increased from 36 in 2007 to 253 in 2017. Several regional authorities, moreover, have developed air quality improvement plans.[91] The municipality of **Tehran** organizes an annual Organic Week Festival to promote sustainable land-use patterns. The Corniche Area park, in the **municipality of Abu Dhabi,** is an internationally awarded structure which embodies the country's quest to join the highest global standards in planning and management of public and green spaces. **Qatari** cities are promoting the development of desert campsites as a way to fund natural resource protection and alleviate touristic pressure on coastal localities. Similarly, the central government is funding sustainable greenhouse farming in cities. These kinds of interventions (and not just mega-planning or top-down solutions) are fairly endemic in the Gulf region, where local government can count on significant financial support from the national level. Are fairly endemic in the Gulf region, where local government can count on significant financial support from the national level.

In **Iran**, on the other hand, the Ministry for Health and the Tehran Municipality have joined forces with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). The partnership seeks to improve air pollution analysis equipment throughout the city, historically affected by extremely high levels of pollution.

Many cities in the region maintain policy competences over coastline protection and regulation, with a strong impact on marine environment and sea life preservation. The city of **Istanbul**, for example, has managed waste collection in the Bosporus and the Golden Horn: in the first three-quarters of 2018 alone, the city recovered 140 trucks of waste. The municipality of **Shahama**, embedded in the Abu Dhabi metro area in the **UAE**, has allocated parts of its budget to ecosystem protection for the marine environment specific to the Abu Dhabi region.

International cooperation

The role of international donors and cooperation agencies has been significant as well. The Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) and the cooperation branch of the Swedish Association of Local Governments (SKL International) partnered in **Iraq** with the Al Qaddissiyah and Dohuk governorates to establish the 'Governance in Social Care' project (2012-2017). This project supported improvements in social care at the sub-national level.[92] In **Lebanon**, assistance by European LGAs and international institutions has been crucial to sustain healthcare, education and relief provision to the refugee population and other vulnerable groups not directly covered by UN relief efforts.

In **Jordan**, the governorate of Al-Mafraq partnered with the City of Amsterdam and VNG International (VNGi, the cooperation branch of the Dutch national LGA) to develop a Municipal Assistance Programme for the Al Za'atari Refugee Camp. VNGi also worked in Jordan, with funding from USAID, with the Cities Implementing Transparent Innovative and Effective Solutions (CITIES) programme. The project provides technical assistance to governorates and municipal stakeholders to translate administrative reforms into innovative and sustainable solutions for service delivery, participatory mechanisms and community cohesion and stability — to improve citizens' awareness, responsiveness and resilience. Donor assistance has been essential particularly in the case of **Palestine**, where municipalities have extremely scarce resources and political leeway and are often unable to address local policy issues autonomously. Palestinian cities have depended on external aid for public service and infrastructure provision and local economic development (see Box 2 for an example, specifically cooperation with the Dutch government). Additionally, in 2005 Palestine established an MDLF,[93] an independent public institution which assists local governments in economic development promotion. While many of the stakeholders involved have been responsive and aware of the SDG framework, actual localization in the State of Palestine has hardly progressed, mostly due to periodic violence and conflict in the area (and the Gaza Strip especially), and the continued Israeli occupation in the West Bank.

In assessing the reach and impact of the SDG framework and the other global agendas in the MEWA region, this section has demonstrated the activities and initiatives that are contributing to the localization process. However, because of the structural circumstances of the region, most progress and actions have been the prerogative of national governments, occasionally with the involvement or consultation of LRGs and local stakeholders. As a rule the motivation, commitment and leadership of LRGs in the localization of the SDGs has a clear correlation with the degree of (planned) decentralization and/or the level of wealth and financial resources available at the national level.

Box 2

Local Government Capacity Programme (LGCP), Palestinian Territory

Building on the successful history of collaboration between Palestinian local authorities and VNGi, the Local Government Capacity Programme (LGCP), in place from 2012-2016, focused on local economic development in the Palestinian territory. The collaboration led to positive outcomes in sustainable development, lower unemployment and increased food security, thus helping improve the legitimacy of local governments in their communities. The Dutch government, through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, backed an approach that promoted local self-sufficiency: the LGCP initially supported the activities of 12 local governments in the West Bank, providing both funds and the capacity to stimulate local economic development. The project was carried out under the umbrella of the MDLF, through which the most important donors to the area work together with the Palestinian Authority. Selected local governments could submit applications for financial and technical support for projects, workshops, on-the-job coaching and training. The municipality of Bethlehem was the first to establish a Council for Local Economic Development, together with the private sector and civil society, an output of the project's participatory spirit, which put particular emphasis on the establishment of strategic business alliances.

Source: ttps://www.vng-international.nl/palestinian-territory-local-government-capacity-programme-lgcp-2012-2016.

04. Conclusions and policy recommendations: the state of SDG localization in Middle East and West Asia

Despite the immense socio-economic, cultural and historical diversity of the MEWA region, certain trends in the way in which countries approach the SDG framework and the global commitments of the new agendas help elicit some region-wide conclusions. With the exception of Afghanistan and Yemen, the MEWA region is now highly — and increasingly — urbanized, and it is estimated that its cities will have to accommodate more than 96 million new residents by 2030. An exceptionally large youth cohort will continue to fuel the intense demand for jobs, housing and services that — with the exception perhaps of Gulf countries, thanks to their reliance on the economy of hydrocarbons — all countries in the MEWA region will struggle to meet.

In recent years, recurring civil strife in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Yemen have exacerbated the challenge of the region's high urbanization rate. War has destroyed urban infrastructure and torn the socio-cultural fabric apart. This damage has rapidly spilled over to neighbouring countries because of successive, overwhelming waves of refugees displaced by region-wide conflict. Against this gloomy backdrop, several MEWA countries have made impressive progress in accomplishing human and economic development advances — thus contributing to the achievement of several SDGs — despite the consequences and impact of conflict. However, socio-economic and gender inequalities remain major challenges for all countries in the region.

Ultimately, in the MEWA region as in the rest of the world**, urban planning and territorial management are shared responsibilities in a complex and evolving mechanism in which central, regional and local authorities work together to varying degrees of engagement and effectiveness**. In the MEWA countries specifically, however, political and financial resources are still concentrated in national ministries and presidential offices: the devolution of responsibilities to the provincial, metropolitan or local level has been partial at best, and woeful progress in this regard has had significant consequences.

On the one hand, inconsistent devolution has provided most MEWA cities — with perhaps the exception of Turkish municipalities — with an uncertain, unreliable mandate and strategic outlook to plan and manage urbanization and urban expansion and development. This has affected the ability of local governments to include the mission and scope of the SDGs and the other global agendas in their own policy-making: thus, the dimensions of sustainability, inclusiveness and policy co-creation have inevitably been undermined. On the other hand, the financing issue is still essential for the quality and effectiveness of local government in the region.

Municipalities, provinces and other local authorities across MEWA countries still do not have adequate financial resources and mandates to fund a proactive role in a truly multilevel governance (MLG) in the region. This has translated into an endemic inability to fund service provision and infrastructural assets, with the public sector especially compromised. The sole exception in the MEWA region is the Gulf area. However the uniqueness of the GCC countries' highly centralized political systems and the unprecedented resources available to them through the extraction economy make their local governments exceptional with features that would be hard to replicate elsewhere funds have nurtured an approach to local policy-making that relies on mega-planning urbanism and has concealed — when it has not neglected them altogether — issues of inequality, marginalization

and unaccountable or non-democratic rule.

There are several factors constraining local governments' and the public administration's ability to fully contribute to governance and policy-making. Inadequate property records and the specific organization of tax revenue and collection systems (many MEWA local governments, for example, are still unable to collect user fees reliably), in particular, have been hindering the capacity of local governments to fund themselves and the provision of basic public services**. If MEWA local governments expect to play an active, guiding role in the implementation of the SDGs and the other global agendas — such as the New Urban Agenda, the Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction, and the Paris Climate Agreement — they will need enhanced, reliable, effective local financing sources.** Capturing their fair share of land-value appreciation following public investment and improvement will be essential to funding infrastructure and delivering better more inclusive services.

Finally, the region's geography and ecology and the organization of urban, territorial and spatial planning have made environmental challenges and the pressures of climate change particularly threatening for MEWA local governments and cities. With the exception of Turkey and Iran, all other countries in the region are already using water at unsustainable rates — as skyrocketing demand meets stagnating supply, dwindling reserves and an average 20%-40% loss of water due to obsolescence or lack of maintenance of underfunded distribution networks. Similarly, while access to improved sanitation systems has increased in almost all countries, these statistics tend also to include poorer-quality, on-site sanitation systems with a high social and environmental cost in most precarious or informal settlements. Full high-capital water-borne systems, in fact, have often not been expanded to cover newly urbanized areas or more informal neighbourhoods, with a strong negative impact on quality of life and socio-economic equality.

Similarly, waste management and disposal have been lacking in many urban systems across the region, with significant spatial inequalities in service provision and delivery. Recycling, moreover, is not yet socially or economically embedded in the urban culture of the area, and has not therefore provided the same kind of relief on environmental impact as it has in more aware regions or urban systems.

Traffic congestion is historically crippling in the region's larger cities, and generally mobility across MEWA countries is highly dependent on motorized private transport (even mass transportation is usually performed, more or less informally, with private and obsolete vehicles). Reliance on motorized, polluting vehicles has reached unsustainable levels in many countries, with high environmental impact and economic costs that considerably hinder the achievement of all related SDGs and targets. **Any improvement in this regard, however, will inevitably require the devolution of more and better spatial control and development authority to the local level, alongside the adoption of consistent and full-fledged national urban policies (NUPs), integrated with strategies and plans across all levels.** The impact on health, inequality and socio-economic opportunity makes this point particularly important with regard to the actual localization of the SDGs and their co-ownership at local and territorial levels.

Ultimately, balancing the growing pressure of rapid urbanization and the achievement of the SDGs and making them compatible in a complicated and diverse region such as MEWA will require a major investment of political will and commitment. Even in spite of the historical legacy of strongly centralized governance systems and the intense pressure of conflict, war and destruction in many areas of the region, cities and territories have an opportunity to become engines of growth and drivers of change for the whole region.

To be effective, the next steps for MEWA countries **must include increased autonomy and resources devolved to more engaged and efficient local governments; increased capacities to provide, maintain and effectively deliver basic public services and infrastructural development (all the more important in war-torn territories); and a consistent governance mechanism able to empower a growing youth and urbanized population**, allowing them to truly co-own their future and their land, and embrace the opportunities offered by the SDGs.

Even in spite of centralized governance and the intense pressure of conflict and war, MEWA cities and territories have an opportunity to become engines of growth.

05. Policy recommendations at the global level

Our roadmap to accelerate the achievement of the 2030 Agenda through the localization of the SDGs

The transformation that needs to be brought about to achieve the global agendas will only occur if our development model responds to the dreams and expectations of communities, and if there is collective responsibility to make the necessary adjustments and sacrifices to achieve more equitable, fair and sustainable societies.

The global agendas must either be local or they simply will not be. The constituency of local and regional governments (LRGs) has a critical role to play to catalyse change and provide the kind of service delivery that will deliver inclusion, efficient use of resources and sustainability. This LRG constituency shares the sense of urgency to scale-up and accelerate such a transformation.

The findings of the GOLD V Report have inspired policy recommendations that build upon the 'Bogota Commitment and Action Agenda', adopted by the World Organization of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) in 2016, as well as the annual reports of the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments (GTF) to the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) since 2017.

In a context of increasing inequalities, endangerment of ecosystems and tensions that are threatening human solidarity, the GOLD V Report presents the efforts of a key constituency that serves communities, responding to their needs and hopes. It is a positive message about the impact that well-resourced localization can have in a new vision for the sustainability of our planet. The recommendations are addressed to local and regional leaders and their organizations, to our partners, national governments, international organizations, civil society and social actors, as well as to the business sector.

Local and regional governments lead the way towards a more equal and sustainable world

In the globalized urbanization era, the actions of cities and LRGs are integral to the global agendas: it is at the local level that the interrelationship between the different agendas most clearly manifests itself. With regard to the global agendas, getting the 2030 Agenda commitments right necessitates the full implementation of the principles of the New Urban Agenda and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, that in turn are fundamental to changing the patterns of production and consumption as the basic premise of the Paris Agreement on climate change and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. The following recommendations situate the LRGs as drivers of an alternative territorial approach to local development (TALD).

Actions at local and regional levels

Galvanize forces for the localization of the 2030 Agenda in our cities and territories

LRGs and their global and regional organizations have pioneered the localization of the SDGs. To make the 'quantum leap' currently needed they must:

- Adopt the **SDGs as a reference framework** for LRGs' policies, programming, planning and budgets, ensuring a coherent and integrated approach — mindful of the Paris Agreement on climate change, the Sendai Framework and empowered by the principles of the New Urban Agenda.
- Embolden ambitions by fostering **greater ownership** of the communities and attain real **local buy-in** of policies. Co-creation with other local stakeholders will be critical in the definition, implementation and assessment of the localization process.
- Share and learn: participate in LRG networks and invest in **peer-to-peer knowledge-sharing**, practice exchange and training. Fostering and accessing technical assistance and decentralized cooperation to promote the localization of the SDGs will be key.
- Link with science: serve as catalyser to foster partnerships with research institutions and promote **'labs' to experiment** with innovative ways to implement, review and follow-up the localization process.

Protect the commons, human rights and culture as foundations of peace

The preservation of the global commons (biodiversity, land, atmosphere, oceans) that determine the survival of all living beings, as well as the protection of peace, cultural diversity and human rights, require strong local action and LRGs' commitment to:

- Foster an **ecological and systemic relationship between people and nature**. LRGs must support cohesion of the 'urban-rural continuum' and strengthen the interconnected policies that halt deforestation and desertification; effectively manage the current network of protected areas, including terrestrial, freshwater (both surface and ground) and marine areas; and improve human wellbeing, particularly of indigenous populations and communities whose livelihoods depend on forests, water and soil conservation and climate change mitigation.
- Achieve **climate neutrality in cities and territories**, taking into account the life-long cycle of GHG emissions to proactively tackle the climate emergency. Decoupling socio-economic development from environmental degradation calls for well-planned urban development and land management, responsible and fair management of natural resources and waste, and ensuring the reduction of inequalities. It implies divesting from fossil fuels to free up resources. These can in turn be invested to accelerate scaling-up the protection of most vulnerable populations and ecosystems, and offsetting any emissions that cannot be further reduced or avoided.
- Contribute to **holding global warming to 1.5°C** by the end of the 21st century, through the collective definition of Territorially-Determined Contributions (TDCs) feeding into the Nationally-Determined Contributions (NDCs) for the implementation of the provisions of the Paris Agreement. Support the post-2020 negotiation of the global biodiversity framework, as well as the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora.
- Promote peace and city diplomacy by tackling the roots of local violence, educating for its eradication and to create a mindset that makes it possible to build a culture of dialogue in cities and territories. Foster cities and territories as spaces for **co-existence and peace** through measures that fight interpersonal violence, extremism, racism, xenophobia, gender-based violence and other forms of intolerance, and introduce measures to integrate all citizens.
- Promote **culture as the fourth pillar of development** and as a core component of local identity, a strand of global solidarity, and a vector for peace and human rights. Foster locally relevant cultural policies and programmes on memory, heritage, creativity, diversity and knowledge, as intrinsic to local sustainable development.

Put human rights and the 'Right to the City' at the core of the local agendas – strengthen inclusive local policies to 'leave no one behind'

Given its multiple dimensions, the eradication of extreme poverty is inextricably linked to the protection of human rights. LRGs should put the 'Right to the City' at the centre of urban and territorial governance to ensure universal access to quality basic services, nutritious food, health and education, economic opportunities, access to adequate housing and disaster risk prevention for the most vulnerable. These are essential components of territorialized pro-poor policies. Partnerships with communities and community-based organisations are instrumental in creating alternative solutions, particularly where public services are scarce. LRGs should commit to:

- **Remove any discriminatory legal and social policy** at the local level to ensure equal opportunities for all, particularly for women, indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities, the LGBTQIA+ populations, the elderly, the youth, and people with mental and physical disabilities. Facilitate migrants' and refugees' access to rights and services, regardless of their status.
- Tackle **gender-based discrimination and violence** with tailored policies, budgets and legal reforms. LRGs can raise awareness and reinforce education on the changing conception of gender roles. Women must be equally represented and granted equal powers in decision-making forums. It is necessary to enact gender-sensitive policies in territories that promote equal access to health and education and acknowledge the role of women in the domestic and informal economy. Gender equality has a multiplier effect in advancing sustainable development, environmental protection and social justice.
- Support the fulfilment of the **right to adequate housing for all**, which includes affordability, legal security of tenure, habitability, accessibility and cultural adequacy standards, and must be understood within the framework of the 'Right to the City'. Promote inclusionary housing policies and slum upgrading initiatives that are undertaken in partnership with the communities and seek to avoid forced evictions.
- Promote the **Principles of Open Government** as a tool for the improvement of policy ownership and accountability. Create spaces and mechanisms that favour citizen participation in local decision-making, access to information and communities' ownership of the 2030 Agenda and other global agendas.

Harness the co-creation of cities and territories through sustainable participative urban and land planning

Planning needs to be the result of the political, economic and social systems within which it is embedded. Deep reforms on planning regulations and frameworks are a critical part of SDG localization and the New Urban Agenda. This includes the need to produce qualified professional planners and researchers. By renewing participatory urban and spatial planning, LRGs should:

- Adopt an **integrated planning approach**, as reflected in the New Urban Agenda, to strengthen the inclusive dimension of cities, climate adaptation and mitigation and disaster risk prevention strategies, and multiply the benefits of interlinkages between urban and territorial areas. Inclusive and participatory planning are key levers for the co-creation of sustainable and inclusive cities and territories.
- Build capacities and retain **local expertise** to address rapid urbanization with adapted approaches to reduce urban sprawl and avoid costlier retrofitting. Most urgent actions are needed in regions where rapid urban growth will be concentrated (Sub-Saharan Africa and South and South-East Asia).
- Scale-up efforts to build **urban resilience and disaster risk preparation**, involving local communities, particularly vulnerable groups, in particular in coastal cities and Small Developing Island States (SIDs).
- Contribute to promoting **'polycentric' urban development** to reduce core-periphery divides, promote more compact and social-mix neighbourhoods, reduce inequalities and avoid urban segregation.
- Create or preserve **open public spaces** to boost inclusion and protect urban heritage and culture, while also pursuing innovative solutions to foster creativity for sustainable urban development.
- **Curb urban sprawl**, reduce distance between home and work places to reduce commuting times and encourage access to alternative and safe modes of mobility (including walkable cities) to reduce GHG emissions. Urban and

spatial planning can lead to transformative use of renewable energy, and reduce the ecological footprint of cities and territories, greening public infrastructure and spaces, reducing air and waste pollution, and reducing risks such as floods, drought or urban heat island effects.

- Improve relationships with the surrounding peri-urban and rural areas, avoid land degradation, and improve **food security** and farmers' livelihoods.
- Enhance the management of **natural protected areas** and ecosystem services, such as upstream watershed areas that the city relies on for fresh water supply, and support reforestation.

Improve access to sustainable and inclusive public services in cities and territories

LRGs need to develop an integrated and systemic approach that will guarantee universal reach. This includes universal access to safe drinking water and sanitation, to quality education and health, to public affordable and sustainable mobility, to integrated waste management and to affordable and clean energy. LRGs need to:

- Develop **infrastructure plans** alongside urban land-use plans, including long-term investment strategies to guide economic and spatial expansion, especially where there are pressures for growth.
- Reduce the **environmental impact** of urban infrastructures and contribute to communities' resilience.
- Support **inter-municipal cooperation** or specific mechanisms that guarantee collaborations to ensure full coverage and adequate quality delivery in territories, be it in metropolitan areas, cities or peri-urban areas, or between neighbouring municipalities in rural areas.
- Guarantee access to affordable services exploring new universal models of service co-production, taking advantage of new decentralized technologies; support small-scale businesses as basic service providers and improve the **quality oversight of services**; and gradually insert the informal economy into the organization of public service delivery.
- Improve the management, delivery and transparency of public basic services, and facilitate innovative **partnerships for co-production and co-management**.

Focus on the future of jobs and local economic development (LED)

It is now urgent to steer a course away from the patterns of economic growth, consumption and production of goods and services that perpetuate deprivations, generate inequalities, deplete the global commons and threaten to cause irreversible damage to the environment. LRGs should therefore:

- Promote LED that helps generate **sustainable socio-economic development tailored** to the particular needs and contexts of cities and territories, and ensure decent work and respect for responsible sustainability standards.
- Prioritize **quality local employment** as a right and tailor fully-fledged policies responsive to the barriers faced by and vulnerabilities of specific groups, including women, youth, ethnic and religious minorities or people with disabilities among others; likewise find inclusive solutions to involve migrants regardless of their status; and facilitate intergenerational knowledge transfers to preserve, disseminate and evolve local know-how and crafts.
- Create spaces for **local innovation** in order to nurture and scale-up local capacities, including those enabled by technology and nature-based industries; develop synergies with local initiatives; support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that contribute to sustainable growth and to create employment in their local environments, give impulse to productive clusters and cooperative strategies both within and between sectors and territories.
- Ensure that **new technologies and e-platforms** do not widen the divide that is consolidating poor-quality employment, or priviledge extractive systems of production that do not support communities' social cohesion, connectedness and wellbeing. Develop policies to protect people's privacy, and foster traditional local small business.
- Promote **alternative economic models** such as the transition towards a circular and green economy; support the social and collaborative economy and sustainable tourism. Support the transition towards territorialized food systems that foster good health while minimizing environmental impact; and support efforts to reduce the environmental footprint.
- Recognize the critical role that the **informal economy** plays in the urban fabric. Because of this contribution and the growing number of

workers involved in informal economy activities (estimated at over two billion people worldwide, among which women are 'over-represented'), LRGs need to take necessary steps and support and create initiatives to help entrepreneurs in the informal economy. This must support them to evolve their activities towards the social and solidary economy, and promote the creation of mechanisms to facilitate access to social protection.

- Create enabling conditions, capacities and confidence to mobilize the transformative power of **public procurement**, while respecting the autonomy of LRGs to set their own policy priorities. This should be done by mainstreaming and implementing sustainable and decent work policies, and fair, labour-friendly and environmental clauses, and by encouraging a culture of transparent public contracts and disclosure.

At the global and national levels

Foster a global-local movement to localize the SDGs. Localization should be a pillar of national sustainable strategies to implement the SDGs

To achieve the 2030 agendas on time, the pace of change needs to accelerate and ambitions need to be bolder. National governments and international organizations should work in collaboration with LRGs and their networks to increase the outreach and strengthen partnerships of the 'whole-of-government' with the 'whole-of-society' to boost localization. National governments should:

- Integrate (or strengthen) robust **localization strategies** in their sustainable development strategies and action plans to expand the involvement of LRGs and local actors, accelerating and upscaling territorial sustainable development. Localization strategies should be mainstreamed in all plans, programmes and budgets from national to local levels.
- Coordinated strategies for the 2030 Agenda, the SDGs, the Paris Agreement on climate change and the New Urban Agenda are an imperative. **No single agenda can be addressed in isolation**. National sustainable development plans (NSDPs), Nationally-Determined Contributions (NDCs) to the Paris Agreement and national urban policies (NUPs), as well as other strategic plans, need to be articulated in order to overcome sectoral fragmented strategies, improve the allocation of resources and boost implementation at all levels, from global to local and vice-versa.

Create an 'enabling institutional environment' for localization – empowered local and regional governments and adequate financing flows to support localization are an imperative

Effective decentralization policies are intrinsic to empowering LRGs and supporting SDG localization. The principles of effective decentralization are defined in the International Guidelines on Decentralization and the Strengthening of Local Authorities, adopted by the UN-Habitat Governing Council in 2007.

- LRGs need **local autonomy and subsidiarity principles** to be respected in order to respond to the demands of their inhabitants, to innovate and to adapt national policies and the SDGs to the local context. Urgent actions are needed to unlock LRGs' potential to localize the SDGS and ensure access to basic services for all.
- Access to **basic social services** is a universal principle acknowledged by the UN and a building block for human development. LRGs need to be empowered and accountable to ensure the delivery of quality basic services for all, defined as direct or shared responsibilities in the legal frameworks of a majority of countries, to achieve the principle to 'leave no one behind' — one of the core objectives of the 2030 Agenda.
- LRGs' adequate **fiscal powers and capacities**, as acknowledged by the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (paragraph 34) need strengthened local tax systems, including the power to capture part of land and property added-value; a better allocation of national fiscal revenues through fair, regular and predictable intergovernmental transfers; and access to responsible borrowing

to invest in sustainable public services and infrastructures. Environmental taxes should be considered to advance energy transition and enshrine the 'polluter pays' principle into financing frameworks. Equalization funds are also necessary to ensure the adequate redistribution of resources across the whole territory to avoid 'leaving any territory behind', paying particular attention to intermediary cities and small towns and promoting more balanced and 'polycentric' urban systems.

- To mobilize national and international **sustainable investments** toward cities and territories, national policies and legal frameworks should be revised. An appropriate range of debt finance options needs to be adapted and made accessible to LRGs, one that considers multiple sources of financing and innovative financial instruments. It is also necessary to adopt vertically aligned NDC investment plans and open or facilitate LRGs' access to climate and green funds.
- Facilities supporting cities in making transformative projects reach **bankability and creditworthiness** standards are essential and require strong backing and leadership to close financing gaps and enhance match-making opportunities, either through specific funds, or connecting cities with potential financiers. The next phase, already in motion, is to support a more diverse set of financial mechanisms that are adapted to the different capacities of cities and territories, such as the upcoming International Municipal Investment Fund, set up by the UN Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) and UCLG with the support of the Global Fund for Cities Development.
- The promise of 'blended finance' can only be fulfilled with the creation of **adequate regulatory frameworks** and with support for LRGs in setting up partnerships with the private sector. These must be mutually beneficial and have clear contractual parameters ensuring that the needs of their citizens come first and that the poor and vulnerable groups are not 'left behind'.

Effective involvement of all spheres of government, civil society and key stakeholders is imperative to strengthen the governance of the SDGs and the localization process

Strong partnerships and the participation of LRGs, civil society, private sector, social partners and academia in SDG implementation, are critical to achieve the 'whole-of-government' and 'whole-of-society' approaches called for by the SDGs. It is also crucial to ensure policy and institutional coherence both internally and externally. Without the active and collaborative involvement of all stakeholders, the SDGs will remain aspirational goals only.

- At the national level, there is much to do in terms of effectively involving LRGs and stakeholders in the **national coordination mechanisms** for the implementation of the SDGs. Limited consultations and uncoordinated decision-making presently hinder the policy coherence necessary to achieve the SDG targets and reduce local ownership.
- Integrated national planning systems are at the core of **functional multilevel governance systems** and need to be revamped to enhance the coordination between national governments, LRGs and local stakeholders. A renewed approach to planning that articulates national strategies with strong local initiatives in active collaboration could recalibrate development policies, facilitate burgeoning local actions and promote institutional innovation. This collaboration needs to be founded on the respect of the principle of subsidiarity.
- As decision-makers, LRGs need to be involved in the definition, implementation and follow-up of NDCs and national strategies for the implementation of the New Urban Agenda. National urban policies (NUPs), adopted (or in the course of being adopted) by more than 92 countries, need to be integrated in national development strategies (NDSs) to take advantage of the cumulative benefits of urbanization and identify **cross-sector synergies to support SDG implementation**.
- **Horizontal cooperation** at the sub-national level (e.g. intra and inter-municipal cooperation) needs adequate governance mechanisms, tools and fiscal policies to foster urban-rural partnerships and reinforce the management of growing metropolitan areas. Coordination will also strengthen interconnections and cooperation between territories for service delivery and key environmental issues that require reinforced and trans-jurisdictional (and often trans-boundary) actions, such as the management of river catchments and environmental resources.

Support the production and dissemination of disaggregated data for monitoring, evaluation and impact measurement of the localization of the global agendas, including the SDGs

- LRG involvement in the global and **national monitoring and reporting processes** on SDG implementation is crucial and should not be limited to ad hoc consultations. The process of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) needs improvement, to ensure the fully-fledged participation of LRGs that brings the voice of the territories and local actors to the process.
- Fragmented reporting systems hinder ownership and the institutionalization of the SDGs across different spheres of government. Strengthening **local reporting capacities** and closing the data gap require particular attention and support. National and local capacities to define and collect disaggregated and localized data should be part of SDG localization strategies to ensure that planning processes at all levels are founded on realistic targets and that effective implementation can be monitored, as well as to ensure accountability and citizen follow-up.
- Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) contributing to national monitoring and to the global debate, and promoting knowledge-sharing and emulation between LRGs, are opportunities that need specific support and acknowledgment.

A global governance system that brings together local and regional governments and civil society will boost the implementation of the global agendas

- The UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) will need to be reshaped to enhance the participation of different stakeholders, as well as facilitate **true innovation and learning**. The HLPF should be an effective multilateral and multi-stakeholder space for dialogue, exchange and knowledge-sharing in order to reinforce multilateral collaboration and partnerships and ensure the real oversight of commitments, policy agreements and implementation.
- The consolidation of the **Local and Regional Governments Forum** is essential as a critical space for interactions between the LRGs, UN Member States, and the UN system. Furthermore, multilevel dialogues need to embolden the local-global leadership, as proposed in the 'Seville Commitment'.

At the continental level, **LRGs' enhanced involvement in the regional forums** (e.g. Regional Forums on Sustainable Development, co-organized by regional UN Commissions), in multi-stakeholder platforms (e.g. the European platform) and spaces (e.g. urban forums) will enhance policy exchange to foster SDG localization and the active involvement of LRGs in the monitoring of the SDGs and related agendas.

The audience at the Local and Regional Governments' Forum, HLPF, 16 July 2018, New York (photo: UCLG-CGLU/Joel Sheakosk, bit.ly/31UjlHR).

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The Localization of the Global Agendas

How local action is transforming territories and communities

The Middle East and West Asia (MEWA) presents distinct and significant challenges with regards to the involvement of local and regional governments in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). With a historical record of strong centralization and authoritarian regimes, the region has, in recent years, felt the impact of extensive conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen; and experienced high population growth and rapid urbanization, as well as massive displacement. With the exception of Afghanistan and Yemen, the MEWA region is now highly urbanized, and it is estimated that its cities will have to accommodate over 96 million new residents by 2030.

The countries of the MEWA region are characterized by a high degree of centralization, with only very few exceptions. This also applies to the various tiers of local government: provincial governors tend to have substantial powers over municipal governments, either through the direct appointment of local authorities or the delivery of local services, or even both in many cases. These centralized systems of governance inevitably influence the SDG implementation process. All countries in the region have similar multi-tiered governance structures: governorates, districts and municipalities in urbanized areas, and governorates and villages in rural areas. This multi-tiered system of governance is reflected in the institutional structures that are being created in each country for the implementation of the SDGs. With the exception of Syria and Yemen, SDG principles have been incorporated into current national development strategies.

There is plenty of evidence on the role of local governments and their national associations in the successful localization of the SDGs from around the world. While the SDGs as a framework are inherently intergovernmental and their realization tied to national policies, budget and political will, the achievement of most Goals still depends extensively on the cooperation, commitment, and participation of local and regional authorities.

Despite the immense socio-economic, cultural and historical diversity of the MEWA region, certain trends and common challenges can be observed in the way in which countries approach the SDG framework and the global commitments of the different agendas. To meet their existing and future developmental challenges, MEWA countries must ensure the autonomy of local governments and increase their engagement, devolving more resources and allocating more capacities to provide, maintain and effectively deliver basic public services and infrastructural development (all the more important in war-torn territories). They must also put in place consistent governance mechanisms able to empower a growing young and urbanized population, allowing them to truly co-own their future and their land, and embrace the opportunities embedded in the SDGs.

The GOLD V Regional Report on Middle East and West Asia

UCLG United Cities and Local Governments

UCLG MEWA

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