Local stakeholders, such as governments and public authorities, are at the forefront when citizens demand solutions to their problems and the fulfilment of their needs. This applied also, and especially, to the attainment of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). According to some observers, however, over-centralisation of decision-making has all too often slowed or even obstructed solutions. With the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this is to change: local stakeholders are being consulted on the framing of the post-2015 agenda, an approach which was praised at the Bonn Symposium 2014: "Fortunately, there was a willingness to listen to criticisms that the genesis of the MDGs had taken place behind closed doors, and we are currently witnessing a valuable consultation and discussion process on the post-2015 agenda at all levels," said Cologne’s Mayor Jürgen Roters. The Symposium, which was organised by the sef: and its partner Service Agency Communities in One World/ENGAGEMENT GLOBAL gGmbH, took place at Deutsche Welle in Bonn on 26-27 November 2014.

The importance of the local level is also reflected in the report by the UN’s Open Working Group, which includes a stand-alone goal for cities (Goal 11: “Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable”) in its list of 17 SDGs, unveiled in summer 2014. The goal thus addresses highly diverse dimensions, such as infrastructure, mobility and energy. Whether it is retained in the final document remains to be seen. There is also intensive debate among experts on how the concept of localisation can potentially be incorporated into the other goals. For Johannes Krassnitzer from UNDP’s ART Initiative, Goal 11 is a good start, "but more important is how all of the goals can be localised”. Some participants at the Bonn Symposium therefore called for stand-alone local indicators for each goal, or, like Johannes Krassnitzer, felt it was particularly important to enshrine the concept in the Preamble.

Organised and networked for the future

The inclusion of the goal for cities in the Open Working Group’s list was partly the outcome of intensive lobbying. In 1992, municipalities had to struggle for the right to participate in the Earth Summit in Rio, but since the adoption of the Istanbul Declaration at Habitat II in 1996, at the latest, they have come to be recognised as important partners in the international context. “Without local commitment we will not succeed,” Dr Ingolf Dietrich is convinced. In his keynote speech the Head of the Special Unit ‘Post-2015 Agenda for Sustainable Development’ at the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) presented the German negotiating positions and repeatedly advocated for a greater consideration of local sustainability initiatives.

Municipalities are organised in numerous associations and networks, which speak on their behalf in the international arena. Christiane Overmans, for example, represents German municipal interests in the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), of which she is Vice-President. It’s a role which, as she explained at the Bonn Symposium, enables her to have a say on policy-making on the
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South, said Yunus Arikan from ICLEI: frontrunners exist everywhere, and it is important to enable others to benefit from their experience. For Jürgen Roters, this engagement plays a key role: “In view of the urgent problems, I think it is important to develop concepts at the local level that enable progress to be achieved independently of the sometimes rather protracted international negotiations,” he said.

At the grassroots

Internationally, then, the climate for engagement by the municipalities has steadily improved. But what about the grassroots? Is stronger engagement for sustainable development rewarded by local citizens – in other words, by the voters? There were various answers to this question. “Sustainability is already an every-day issue in the municipalities,” said Dr Bernd Vöhringer, Mayor of the city of Sindelfingen. Indeed, in some sectors, such as energy and mobility, citizens are already demanding this from their politicians. However, it is more difficult to mobilise support for projects undertaken in cooperation with the Global South, perhaps because their benefits are not always immediately apparent to potential voters or because there are tensions surrounding the issues under discussion. “Yes, of course citizens want more sustainability, but they also want their new motorway,” said Christiane Overmans. It’s easier if a topic is seen as directly affecting local citizens. The issue of refugees clearly shows that global problems are now reaching the German municipalities, said Dr Vöhringer. Most participants at the Bonn Symposium were optimistic that the adoption of a post-2015 agenda would do much to increase citizens’ awareness. “SDGs that are also binding on the Global North will help us to put issues on the agenda and thus make progress with our own development,” said Christiane Overmans. Dr Simone Höckele-Häfner, Head of Development Cooperation in Baden-Württemberg, shared this conviction: “The SDGs will force us to address initially painful sustainability issues as well,” she said.

When the question of establishing responsibilities was raised, however, there was criticism from some participants: it was pointed out that in Germany, for example, sustainability is far from being a cross-cutting issue and its mainstreaming is often impeded by interdepartmental frictions. “Silo thinking” has yet to be overcome. According to Mayor Jürgen Roters, what is needed is “an administrative structure in which all the dimensions of sustainability are firmly embedded in a manner which ensures policy coherence, with no room for failure due to interdepartmental conflicts.”

But the Global South faces even greater problems, as was pointed out by Charles Patsika, for example. Despite the MDGS, very few citizens are sufficiently informed about sustainable development issues. Al-
though he praised the consultation processes which took place within the Localising 2015 framework, he pointed out that they were held in just five out of 53 African countries, which, he said, was “far too few”. With reference to Tanzania, Tausi Kida described how this type of process can have positive effects: during the period October 2012 to May 2013, under the leadership of the President’s Office Planning Commission (POPC) and with support from national research institutes and think tanks, Tanzania conducted comprehensive consultation processes at the local level. Dr Kida’s organisations, the Economic and Social Research Foundation (ESRF), played a lead role in this context. The process was not only intended to inform citizens about the post-2015 agenda but also to identify which specific priorities were of particular importance to them. As well as civil society organisations, local authorities and vulnerable groups (the elderly, women, children, young women and youths), the consultations involved the private sector, central government officials and representatives from higher education, research institutions and voluntary organisations. The outcome was a report whose key demands largely reflect the 17 Goals defined in the Open Working Group report, said Tausi Kida. She was convinced that this approach results in a higher sense of ownership among community members and higher chance of sustainability.

Similar impetus could potentially come from the European Union, which nowadays not only appreciates the municipalities as negotiating partners but also provides them with targeted support as drivers of development. “The EU finally has discovered the importance of empowering local authorities”, said Jean Bossuyt from the think tank ecdpm, giving several examples. Local authorities from the Global South have, for some years, been recognised as eligible for EuropeAID and can submit project applications. Budget support has also been redesigned for their benefit; for example, the European Commission, as a donor, can now require that a proportion of the funding it provides be disbursed directly to local authorities.

A partnership-based agenda

Whereas the MDGs were regarded primarily as an agenda for the Global North, the SDGs will focus less on traditional forms of development cooperation and more on partnerships and dialogue. The participants at the Bonn Symposium agreed that: “Post 2015 is all about transformation and mutual learning in the Global North and the Global South.” Partnerships should play a key role in this context. In some cases, however, this will require a new approach. For example, Charles Patsika and Emmanuel Kwaldo Agyekum, Ghana’s Deputy Minister of Local Government and Rural Development, lamented the fact that partnerships tend to be forged primarily with capital cities in the Global South. This oversupply of partnerships for these centres results in a certain lack of interest, while cities and citizens outside the capital are largely excluded from dialogue. “The elites don’t
need know-how from the Global North, but ordinary people in rural areas can benefit from it,” said Emmanuel Kwadwo Agyekum. In his view, “knowledge sharing, not money” should be the guiding principle behind partnerships under a new universal development agenda. German partners would also benefit from this approach. For example, Cologne is currently engaged in a climate partnership with Rio de Janeiro with the aim of developing appropriate indicators. Sabine Drees from the German Association of Cities also made it clear that in relation to urban planning and major infrastructural projects, German municipalities can learn a lot from their partners in the Global South. However, further capacity building is essential, for transnational municipal engagement often fails due to the lack of intercultural and language skills among administrative staff and local office-holders, as various participants pointed out.

Finance: a hot topic

Inevitably, over the course of the two days, the discussion also focused on financial resources, which will be a key factor for the successful implementation of the post-2015 agenda. Dr Jochen Harnisch, Head of Division, Environment and Climate Policy, at KfW Bankengruppe gave an overview of the work of the Intergovernmental Committee of Experts on Sustainable Development Financing (ICESDF) and its report. Over recent months, this 30-member body has produced strategies for sustainable development financing on behalf of the UN Secretary-General. Germany was represented by Dr Norbert Kloppenburg, a member of KfW’s Executive Board. In their report, the experts note that sufficient public and private funds are available worldwide to meet current development financing needs. Four basic sources for financing sustainable development are identified, namely domestic public, domestic private, inter-

national public and international private sectors. As well as analysing the current status of development financing, the report proposes a strategic approach which could provide guidance in formulating a sustainable development financing strategy. It comprises, inter alia, strong country ownership in implementing sustainable development strategies, consultations with all stakeholders, including civil society and the private sector, and matching of financial flows with domestic needs, also with a view to maximising local impact. Transparency and accountability should be ensured at all levels.

The report does not deal with specifics, for which it drew considerable criticism from participants at the Bonn Symposium. For Dr Ulrich Graute, Scientific Adviser for the City of Berlin’s METROPOLIS Initiative, it is no more than a toolbox, with no ranking or recommendations on how the tools might usefully be deployed. As it stands, he said, the report is an invitation to “cherry-pick”. In addition, various participants complained about the failure to assign responsibilities or provide a cost breakdown in the report. Dr Graute would have welcomed a bolder approach by those responsible: a proposal to introduce a “solidarity levy for the SDGs”, for example, “would undoubtedly have caused a furore. But that kind of creative friction can be useful in sparking a lively debate.”

It is also unclear how funding should be allocated within countries. As Dr Harnisch pointed out, it is therefore important for local stakeholders and/or their networks to participate in the international financing for development (FfD) debate and conferences over the coming months, not least because it will continue to be difficult for the local level to attract international private finance in future. This applies especially to municipalities in the Global South whose security situation is ranked as critical. “An individual region never has a better ranking than the state as a whole,” Dr Harnisch observed. But German municipalities, too, need additional finance to implement a post-2015 agenda, said Dr Vöhringer, Mayor of the city of Sindelfingen. However, an opposite trend can be discerned in this context: the economic and financial crisis in recent years has led to greater centralisation of powers, responsibilities and finances in various European countries. What is needed, according to Mayor Jürgen Roters, is “a reliable financial framework which would allow municipalities to implement sustainable development not only in individual projects but on a holistic, city-wide basis”.

Financial flows under the microscope

Habraham Shamamuyo was also in favour of more financial autonomy for the local level and drew attention, at the same time, to the need for more transparency: “The SDGs will not be achieved if the flow
of money to local governments remains unclear.” Courts of audit can and must contribute to increasing transparency and monitoring. Elysée Ndaye, President of the Burundian Court of Audit, was convinced that the role of these review and supervisory bodies “in prevention and sanctioning” will continue to increase. He reported that the International Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions (INTOSAI) is now addressing this issue. Since 2014, the United Nations Public Service Forum has also been supporting INTOSAI’s demand for independence and capacity building for supreme audit institutions and for better public financial accountability for the post-2015 agenda.

The meeting in November 2014 was the last Bonn Symposium before the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals, which is expected to take place in September 2015. It remains to be seen what form they will take and what implications they will have for the local level in North and South.