

“Local partnerships are key!” Interview with Mariam Yunusa on the importance of SDG localisation

Ms Yunusa, during most of your professional life, you have been focusing on human settlements and urbanisation. What is the role of local partnerships in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

Agenda 2030 consists of 17 goals and 169 targets which were negotiated at the global level, mostly by central governments. However, the inputs to the formulation of the goals were made from the bottom

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up. This makes the SDGs very distinct from the previous Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were handed down from the top to the bottom. But because they were negotiated by central governments, that’s where they remained. In order to bring them down to the grassroots level, we need local partnerships through a process we all know as localisation. Localisation of the agenda enables local partnerships to use awareness-raising. It includes implementation, monitoring, information, advocacy, measurement and reporting. All of this takes place in the localisation of the SDGs. Without local partnerships, the SDGs might not impact on the life of municipalities and that of citizens at the local level. Therefore, local partnerships are in fact key to the implementation of the SDGs.

During your time at UN-Habitat, you initiated the African Urban Agenda. What is its goal?

Cities tie all three dimensions of sustainability – the economic, the environmental and the social dimension – together. SDG 11 was already negotiated before the Habitat III conference in Quito in 2016. For UN-Habitat, Quito provided a very good opportunity to amplify SDG 11 further. I was privileged to initiate the African Urban Agenda as a reminder to African leaders, policy-makers and civil society and in preparation for Quito. What would be Africa’s argument at Habitat III? What would be Africa’s position this time?

I personally happened to have been at Habitat II in 1996. And I remember very well what a heavy weight it was to articulate the African interest, because at that time, not many African countries accepted that urbanisation was something to worry about. Every African country felt that it was more rural than urban. For Africa, urbanisation was an issue for developed countries. As a professional, I could see why urbanisation mattered even then.

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But it wasn’t easy to convince our policy-makers. It wasn’t easy to get them to prioritise it. The meeting room in which we were supposed to meet as Africans was literally empty. It was quite an uphill task.

But now, 20 years later, the story has changed. African countries are beginning to appreciate that urbanisation is in fact a major force for development. As early as 2003, we were able to get the Heads of State of Africa together to reflect on the need for towns and cities to drive development. That was a good starting point. Subsequently, the African Ministerial Conference on Housing and Urban Development (AMCHUD) was established. From then on, the African Ministers responsible for housing and urban development have been meeting to articulate their concerns

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and priorities. Gradually, over ten years, the awareness of urbanisation as a force for development began to take root. It was our privilege in UN-Habitat to help them in tying all their policies together for Habitat III.

The African continent has 54 countries. If we had not established the African Urban Agenda, there would have been 54 different voices at Habitat III and they would not have been impactful. The African Urban Agenda resulted in a common African position for Habitat III. By the time the African Heads of State went to Quito in 2016, Africa spoke with one voice. The African Urban Agenda says cities are important and that human settlements are important. They are the drivers of human development and the drivers of the transformation of African economies, most of which are still

rural, it's true. But the transformation is happening so fast. We need to deal with urban challenges in Africa now, so that we don't wake up in 20 years before Habitat IV and ask: “What did we do with all those years?”

If you imagine an ideal sustainable city, what would it look like?

The SDG that is most important to cities and communities is SDG 11. It is very complex and it has different dimensions. Essentially, SDG 11 is – if I can put it this way – a “territorialisation” of all the other SDGs. A sustainable city needs to embed all SDGs. In an ideal sustainable city, you would have adequate and affordable housing for the citizens.

“A sustainable city needs to embed all SDGs.”

You would have free and equally affordable transport systems for people of all ages, especially women and children because they are the most vulnerable members of society. You would find the cultural heritage of the people preserved and improved to resemble the international image-making of the municipality. You would also have a balanced flow between the urban and the periurban. A sustainable city would be disaster-ready. It would be a secure city. In a sustainable city, most members of society would get along and be protected. There would be constant improvement of smart signals and smart indices of measurement. The alleviation of poverty and hunger would be put into practice as well. And finally, a sustainable city is also one that is able to network globally with similar cities.

Mariam Yunusa

During her professional life, Mariam Yunusa coordinated the World Urban Forum and directed the Partners and Inter-Agency Coordination at UN-Habitat. She initiated the Africa Urban Agenda Programme and was part of the team in UN-Habitat which managed the SDG negotiations on achieving sustainable cities and human settlements as a stand-alone goal. Before joining the UN, Mrs Yunusa served in various capacities in the Nigerian public service. She is currently Chairperson of Ladisgold Projects Ltd.



Imprint

The Development and Peace Foundation (sef:) was founded in 1986 on the initiative of Willy Brandt. It is a cross-party and non-profitmaking organisation. sef: provides an international high-level forum for shared thinking on the complex challenges of globalisation..

sef: insight is an online publication to accompany key conferences hosted by sef:. It presents interviews with international experts as well as opinion pieces on pressing issues of local, regional and global governance.

Published by
Development and Peace Foundation (sef:)
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Editor
Rebekka Hannes

Design Basic Concept
Pitch Black Graphic Design
Berlin/Rotterdam

Layout
Gerhard Suess-Jung

Contents do not necessarily reflect the views of the publisher.

ISSN 2566-7262
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