The role of sub-national governments in ‘localising’ the UN SDGs in Nigeria

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The Localisation Agenda

The push for a stand-alone ‘urban’ goal – SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities) by sub-national multilateral groups underscores the crucial role to be played by sub-national governments (SNGs) in the successful implementation of a majority of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs).[1] More importantly, SNGs are advocating for a localisation of the UN SDGs. Localisation in this context is a mandate to see SNGs be involved *‘…in all phases of the policymaking process…’* The appeal of the localisation agenda is in the idea of a local approach to global development. Focusing on Nigeria as a case study, this contribution aims to examine the localisation of the UN SDGs in Nigeria critically.

Localising the UN SDGs in Nigeria

According to the OECD, an *'estimated 65% of the 169 targets behind the 17 SDGs will not be reached without the engagement of local and regional governments.'* Nigeria's 2017 National Voluntary Review (NVR) acknowledges that it is *'…at the sub-national (State and Local Government) level where the most critical development challenges reside…'* (Nigeria NVR, 2017: p. 6). This admittance underlines the need to involve Nigerian SNGs as critical stakeholders in all phases of the SDG policymaking process. More so, given the federal nature of Nigeria, SNGs have concurrent powers with the central government under the 1999 Constitution to legislate on a majority of the issues relevant to the UN SDGs.

However, it was argued in a UCLG 2017 Report that: *Although many national governments acknowledge the role of sub-national governments, their national plans and VNRs do not always reflect a clear strategy for their inclusion* (p. 13). In Nigeria, this appears to be the case. For example, reading through Nigeria's 2017 NVR, Nigeria's strategy reflects SNGs as rule-takers rather than as co-designers of polices. In comparison, in India's 2017 NVR, it is stated that in keeping with the country's long-standing federal tradition, the SDG policies and strategies are being *'…prepared with the active participation of the sub-national governments'* (India NVR, 2017: p. 5 ff P. 31). The different designation of SNGs in the NVRs of both India and Nigeria are in the very least, an indication of the level of priority accorded to the 'localisation agenda' in both countries.

Beyond the semantics, another issue militating against the localisation agenda in Nigeria is the SDG financing gap. Finding sustainable financing strategies at SNG level to achieve SDG targets is a burden shared across the international system. Countries have approached this common issue differently. For example, in terms of financing the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and now the SDGs, Nigeria's flagship Conditional Grant Scheme (CGS) was introduced in 2007. This innovative scheme is now available from 2019 for capacity building and post-intervention support services for micro-enterprises. However, is this a sustainable strategy? For example, with successive changes at the helm of government in Abuja, question marks have been raised about corruption and nepotism in the administration of this federal government scheme (see Yusuf and Hulme, 2019). As such, it is questionable if upscaling the CGS, in itself will be sufficient to meet the financial commitments needed at the sub-national level for implementing the SDGs. This argument is premised on the fact that financing the SDGs at the subnational level requires a radical rethink to financial strategies relied upon across the international system. In India, in addition to special-purpose grants (similar to Nigeria's CGS), the fiscal devolution to states in India has been increased substantially (from 32 to 42 % of the central pool of tax proceeds). In addition to an increase in fiscal devolution, the Centre supplements Local Body finances by providing them with appropriate fiscal space (see India's NVR, 2017: p. 27). In Nigeria, a similar approach is needed.

As laudable as the Nigerian CGS is, there is a need to broaden the tax base of SNGs to meet the expanded tasks posed by the SDGs compared to the MDGs. For example, in the Netherlands, it has been argued by The Dutch Association of Municipalities, that *'central funding system in the Dutch governance model does not do justice to the vastly expanded tasks and powers at the provincial and municipal levels'* (UCLG Report, p. 60). This underscores how critical it is for there to be parity between allocated responsibilities and the corresponding fiscal powers to fund these responsibilities (Dang, 2013: p. 6).

Under the current strategic plan by president Buhari's government to restore Nigeria's economic fortune - 'The Nigerian Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (NERGP) 2017-2020', the emphasis is placed on sub-national fiscal coordination, rather than on creating appropriate fiscal space (see NERGP, p. 103-104). SNGs are encouraged to be fiscally responsible, i.e. rationalise public expenditure; improve public financial management and manage debt sustainably. This is all well and good because the contribution of SNGs to Nigeria's debt profile in the 4th republic is a worrying trend. However, SNGs are facing dwindling revenues compared to their growing responsibilities to implement the SDGs successfully. As such, SNGs need more control of their resources and/or a broadened tax base to boost revenue receipts. This raises the perennial political question of resource control which has been a recurrent agitation from some sections of the country (see Ekuri and Etim, 2017).

Conclusion

Evidence from Nigeria's 2017 NVR indicates that the strategic framework for operationalising the SDG goals are far from localised. This top-down approach for designing SDG policies in Nigeria does not encourage SNGs to '*foster actual ownership of the goals and embody their vision of the future in concrete actions and initiatives'* (UCLG Report, p. 15). Localising the SDGs is not a magic bullet solution to development problems in Nigeria; however, the involvement of SNGs as collaborators and co-designers of rules is crucial to the successful attainment of the SDGs. Especially, as funding is a significant impediment to the actualisation of the SDG goals, the federal government and SNGs must work in tandem to create innovative solutions.

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[1] The sub-national multilateral groups that were part of the campaign include the such as United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), Metropolis, C40 and the other members of the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments (GTF)