

Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities
(VVSG)

Research Report
Perspectives of the Sustainable City from the Global
South

Final Report

South Research

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INTRODUCTION

This document presents the research report authored by South Research's Søren Stecher-Rasmussen and Luk Raeymaekers and titled "Alternative Perspectives of the Sustainable City" in the context of the Common Strategic Framework (CSF) for Sustainable Cities (CS) and its partners in the global South, commissioned by the VVSG.

The document consists of the following chapters:

- Executive Summary
- Context and Objective of the Assignment
- Methodology
- Findings
- Recommendations of partners and south research
- Appendices

Met opmerkingen [AH1]: @Karlien, spreken wij niet of Joint Strategic Framework? Of hebben we onze keuze veranderd naar Common Strategic Framework? Weet niet wat aan de vertaler meegegeven is van woordenlijst... Als toch Joint Strategic Framework, dan moet dit overal veranderd worden in de tekst en afkorting ook van CSF naar JSF.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Brief Description of the Assignment

The Joint Strategic Framework for “sustainable cities” (CSF SC) is a platform on which members collaborate to strengthen the concept of the “sustainable city” (sustainability at the ecological, economic, social and political levels) through international cooperation. The CSF SC was initiated in early 2022 under a grant programme funded by the DGD, (Directorate General for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid). The CSF SC currently has 5 active members:

- VVSG (Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities) – the leader of the platform
- UVCW (Union des Villes et Communes de Wallonie)
- Brulocalis (Association of the City and Municipalities of Brussels)
- Echos Communication (NGO)
- Rikolto (NGO)

The main objective of this assignment was to gain a clear understanding of the perspectives held by the partners of the 5 members of the CSF SC in terms of the concept of the “sustainable city” (referred to as perspectives from the global South), and to identify the needs and expectations of these partners as a way to realise their visions of a sustainable city in their specific contexts. The research findings were intended to enable the CSF SC to better align its operations with the perspectives, needs and expectations of the partners in the global South, with the specific aim of revising or refining the CSF SC by the autumn of 2025.

Methodology

The steps taken in the chosen methodology were as follows:

- Literature review
- Online survey of CSF-member partners (103 participants)
- Interviews with external experts (3)
- 12 focus group discussions with CSF-member partners (41 participants)
- “Sense-making” workshop with partners (17 participants)
- Final restitution with partners and other interested actors (institutions, NGOs, municipal governments, DGD, etc.)
- Final Report

The partners originated from Africa, Asia and Latin America.

The study cannot be considered representative of the CSF SC partners or the regions due to the composition of participants in the survey, focus-group discussions and workshop, given the high participation (majority) of African partners, male participants, participants from the public sector and individuals aged between 30 and 50.

Findings

Partners' Perspective of the Current Situation

As to the current situation in cities, the partners were in agreement about inadequate access to quality basic social services (education, food security, income, health, etc.).

The privatisation of social services was seen as a significant factor in this regard, where private provisions were of good quality but relatively expensive, while public provisions were cheaper but underfunded and generally of mediocre quality.

The political context was also identified as a crucial factor in the current urban situation, particularly the influence of political interests, corruption, clientelism and pre- and post-election dynamics on political decisions at all levels of governance and policy implementation.

Local policies emerged as a common thread from the exchanges, especially where participation of local groups and policy transparency and implementation were concerned. Local development plans were often developed in a participatory manner, but the policy outcomes frequently failed to reflect the priorities of local communities due to their limited involvement in prioritisation and policy implementation. Other actors and factors (as mentioned above, particularly political interests and actors from the private sector) often exerted a decisive influence. In addition, local actors were generally engaged to a minimal extent in project implementation and monitoring, which resulted in limited accountability towards local actors.

Tensions between political levels also surfaced as a problematic factor in the urban reality, notably between the central level and local levels.

Finally, the absence of shared perspectives between actors in the global South was specifically highlighted and described as a weakness in the context of sustainable cities.

International cooperation was also examined by the participants, who discussed several weaknesses including the lack of a holistic perspective on the dynamics and relationships between local actors. Understanding local cultures and practices was still seen as a challenge for international actors by most participants. According to the participants, international actors tended to impose their own thematic priorities (e.g. gender, LGBTQ+ issues, democracy) and specific approaches to these themes (e.g. overly quantitative approach to gender).

Lastly, the importance of creating synergies between projects and actors was stressed as a significant area for improvement in international cooperation on sustainable cities, given the lack of coordination between projects and actors both at the local and higher levels, and the tendency for projects to remain isolated or in 'silos'.

Partners' Perspectives of the Ideal Sustainable City

Here, the search was directed towards specific differences between Western and non-Western perspectives on the sustainable city. The following conclusions can be drawn:

- Western (CSF) and non-Western (partner) perspectives of sustainable cities are based on 'basic needs' and show no discernible differences. The sustainable city themes were also linked by the partners to each other ('interdependent') and to the SDG themes, which were recognised as strongly linked or 'mutually reinforcing'. However, the participants' prioritisation of these themes differed from the standard prioritisation found in international cooperation.

- Themes such as climate and environment are seen as less urgent in the global South due to the challenging living conditions, and precedence is given to income, health and housing. Nevertheless, the participants emphasised the importance of these themes in the near future.
- Gender was also recognised as a crucial theme, yet participants did not always agree with the way international donors address gender-related issues.
- Local policy was reiterated as being crucial to the sustainable city.
- Significant differences were observed in terms of culture, local practices and approaches.
- International cooperation often lacks a proper understanding of the cultural dimensions.
- International cooperation tends to have a specific agenda, which it occasionally imposes (gender, LGBTQ+, etc.).

Key Recommendations for the CSF

- Better integration of local governance into thematic projects, with a particular focus on strengthening multi-actor participation mechanisms in policy preparation and implementation
 - improvement of partner capacity in the following domains:
 - Methodology for developing shared perspectives in partner countries in the global South as regards sustainable urban development
 - Methodology (knowledge and tools) for participatory planning processes
 - Specific support for innovative multi-stakeholder participation approaches
 - Methodology for long-term urban planning and spatial organisation
 - Lobbying and advocacy (for policy change at higher political levels)
- Strengthen synergies between projects and actors to facilitate process articulation and foster learning dynamics among actors
- Sharper focus on the sustainability (long-term prospects) of projects, encompassing social, technical and political sustainability, both for the partner organisation (especially institutional capacities, considering factors such as staff turnover) and possibly other local actors
- Develop a better understanding of the local reality (local dynamics between actors, cultural differences, etc.) from the project design phase
- Revise the approach to themes such as gender, democracy, LGBTQ+ in projects: integrate them more strongly within a context-specific approach, improve alignment between international actors' expectations and the local reality on the ground

2. CONTEXT AND OBJECTIVE OF THE ASSIGNMENT

2.1 The VVSG and the CSF SC

The Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (VVSG) is the representative member organisation of all 300 Flemish municipalities and Public Centres for Social Welfare (OCMWs), more than a hundred police zones, over 60 autonomous municipal companies and other decentralised agencies, around fifty intermunicipal associations and other inter-local collaborative entities. It has 3 core missions with relation to Flemish local governments and their partners: advocacy of their interests, sharing of knowledge and facilitation of networking.

From this foundation, the international team in the Department of Governance and Strategy supports local administrations in their implementation of Local Global Policy (LGP) and translation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into local contexts.

The “Sustainable Cities” Joint Strategic Framework (CSF SC) is a platform in which actors consult, exchange ideas and collaborate to strengthen the concept of the “sustainable city” (sustainability at the ecological, economic, social and political levels) through international cooperation. The CSF SC was initiated in early 2022 under a grant programme funded by the DGD, (Directorate General for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid, federal level). It currently has 5 active members:

- VVSG (Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities) – the leader of the platform
- UVCW (Union des Villes et Communes de Wallonie)
- Brulocalis (Association of the City and Municipalities of Brussels)
- Echos Communication (NGO)
- Rikolto (NGO)

The CSF-partner members are from Benin, Burkina Faso, Morocco, RDC, Senegal, Uganda, Indonesia, Rwanda, Tanzania, Vietnam, South Africa, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Peru. They include municipal governments and their associations, as well as civil society organisations, research institutions and community representatives.

2.2 Objective of the Assignment

The main objective of this assignment was to gain a clear understanding of the perspectives held by the partners of the 5 members of the CSF SC in terms of the concept of the "sustainable city" and to identify the needs and expectations of these partners in order to realise their visions of a sustainable city in their specific contexts. The research findings should enable the CSF SC to identify specific paths and themes on which to concentrate in the future, aligning its operations more effectively with the perspectives, needs and expectations of partners in the global South.

The need for this research on partner perspectives arose from the impression held by CSF members that the partners were not adequately involved in shaping the perspective of the current CSF SC; whilst partners had been asked to respond to the CSF strategic document in a digital workshop, they were not involved in its creation (unlike the individual programmes of CSF members, which were developed in close dialogue with their partners). For the DGD too, it was important to increase the involvement of partners from the global South. Therefore, this research aims to amplify the partners' voices in the

debate on sustainable cities in international cooperation and the review/refinement of the existing CSF action plan.

Sustainable urban development in 2023 is a highly complex phenomenon, given the escalating urban issues, varying contexts, diverse interpretations of sustainability and the need to make choices. The perspectives of actors in the global South on sustainable cities are diverse, evolving (similarly to the North) and dependent on local factors such as:

- Housing, income and transportation needs
- Health, access to clean water, green spaces, local food production needs
- Impact of climate change (heatwaves, floods, etc.) and pollution
- Influence of actors in political decisions (the construction sector, neighbourhood committees, etc.) with or without consultation processes
- Migration
- Urban dualism (growing disparity between poor and affluent areas)

The approach was that the research results would bring to light the diversity of perspectives on sustainable cities among the stakeholders involved, and that this would contribute to a healthy debate within the CSF and between its members and partners as regards sustainability in an urban context. These critical reflections would, in turn, provide valuable input for the redrafting/refinement of the CSF, planned for the autumn of 2025.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 General Considerations

The task was to outline the opinions and perspectives of CSF SC partners from the global South on sustainable urban development. Participation was central to this process, as evidenced by the stages followed by Søren Stecher-Rasmussen and Luk Raeymaekers, the consultants for South Research:

- Literature review
- Online survey
- Interviews with experts
- Focus group discussions with the 5 CSF members
- “Sense-making” workshop with partners:
 - Collective exchange on the findings of the assignment
 - Deliberation in working groups on 3 strategic issues/proposals
- Report: deadline 29 June 2023
- Final restitution on 29 June 2023 with partners and other interested actors (institutions, NGOs, municipal governments, DGD, etc.)

Multiple data collection methods were employed to enable triangulation: conversations with external experts, digital survey, numerous focus group discussions (FGDs) with partners, 1 sense-making workshop and 1 final restitution.

To encourage the partners to speak as freely as possible, the decision was made to exclude CSF members from both the FGDs and the sense-making workshop.

An important element of the mission was the exchanges between the following **external experts**:

- Rafael Tuts
Director
UN-Habitat (United Nations Human Settlements Programme)
Global Solutions Division
Kenya
- Jean Bossuyt
Senior executive and head ECDPMs inclusive governance and accountability team
Netherlands
- Amal Jabouk
Intervention Officer and project formulation
ENABEL
Morocco

These exchanges, combined with the literature review, were crucial in obtaining a broader perspective of the theme.

The **online survey** aimed to launch a general enquiry into partners' views on sustainable cities. The survey provided essential information for the research theme as well as input by which to organise the focus group discussions to stimulate discussion and compare the various opinions.

103 people took part in the survey. However, the profiles of participants could have been more balanced:

- Continents:
 - Africa: 80 participants (78%)
 - Asia: 13 participants (12%)
 - Latin America: 10 participants (10%)
- Actors:
 - Public sector: 60 participants (58%)
 - Civil society: 30 participants (22%)
 - Private sector: 5 participants (5%)
 - Research institutions: 5 participants (5%)
 - Other: 3 (3%)
- Gender:
 - 72 male participants (70%)
 - 31 female participants (30%)
- Age:
 - Over 50: 28 participants (27%)
 - between 30 and 50: 71 participants (69%)
 - under 30: 4 participants (4%)

These profiles may have influenced the survey outcomes.

The participants in the FGD came from the 3 continents and represented municipal governments, civil society organisations, local communities and research institutions. There were 4 focus groups: 2 French-speaking, 1 English-speaking and 1 Spanish-speaking. Each group did 3 online sessions of approximately 1.5 hours each, or a total of 12 sessions.

The FGDs spanned a period of 3 weeks and followed the 3-step approach ("Three Horizons Framework") set out by Bill Sharpe:

- week 1: analysis of the current situation as regards urban sustainability
- week 2: partners' perspective of the sustainable city (ideal situation)
- week 3: changes required to transition from the current situation to the ideal situation

Therefore, each language group held a weekly focus group discussion following the structure above.

It should be said that the level of participation was relatively low despite the weekly reminders.

In addition, the profiles in the focus groups were quite specific: some groups were mainly composed of participants working in local governments, while civil society was overrepresented in others.

The participants were predominantly male (76% men, 24% women) and primarily from the African continent (78%).

Table 1: gender of the FGD participants

| | English | French 1 | French 2 | Spanish | Total | % |
|-------|---------|----------|----------|---------|-------|------|
| Men | 5 | 9 | 14 | 3 | 31 | 76% |
| Women | 4 | 5 | 0 | 1 | 10 | 24% |
| Total | 9 | 14 | 14 | 4 | 41 | 100% |

After the 12 FGDs, South Research held an online sense-making workshop with the partners, during which the consultants presented the findings and recommendations. In this workshop, the consultants also set up 3 working groups in which partners deliberated over a number of findings and potential recommendations presented to them by the consultants. The outcomes of the working groups were subsequently presented in a plenary session. To facilitate communication across the 3 continents, online simultaneous translation was provided in English, French and Spanish.

Table 2: participants in the various FGDs and sense-making workshop

| | English | French 1 | French 2 | Spanish | Total |
|-----------------------|---------|----------|----------|---------|-------|
| FGD 1 | 6 | 11 | 9 | 1 | 27 |
| FGD 2 | 4 | 6 | 5 | 3 | 18 |
| FGD 3 | 6 | 4 | 6 | 4 | 20 |
| Sense-making workshop | 3 | 5 | 5 | 4 | 17 |

It is most likely that the specific composition of the FGDs and sense-making workshop (gender, continents, types of organisation, etc.) influenced the dynamics of the exchanges and their outcomes. For that reason, the results of the exchanges cannot be considered representative of opinions in the global South or among the CSF SC partners.

Lastly, on 29 June, an online presentation was organised in which South Research once again presented the findings and recommendations. Participants included the DGD, the CSF members, the Brussels municipalities and partners. This session also featured online simultaneous translation in English, French and Spanish.

3.2 Limitations of the Methodology

- There were no discussions between the consultants and the CSF members (except for the VVSG). They were unable to validate specific observations from the global South in relation to international/Belgian cooperation with the CSF members through interviews or workshops.
- Evidently, as confirmed by the experts, there is no uniform interpretation of sustainability in the North, the South or even between the North and South.
- The final findings are, given the specific profiles of the participants and limited participation in the FGDs, clearly not representative of the partners, sectors or any country.
- Participants did not always know/report exactly which remarks pertained to Belgian or other international cooperation (and if so, which). Often, the group participants were partners of multiple Belgian and international organisations, which made it difficult to expand on project- or partner-specific information. As a consequence, it is not always clear whether a remark is related to Belgian (CSF SC) or other (Belgian or international) cooperation. Given the nature of the assignment, the questions focused more on filtering perspectives and opinions about sustainable cities than on identifying project- or partner-specific information.
- The information in the report mainly stems from exchanges with partners, which implies limitations in the analysis. Many participants responded primarily from their involvement in the completion of their specific projects, which sometimes restricted the scope of the answers.
- For the participants, the time invested in a weekly focus group over 3 weeks and a sense-making workshop in the 4th week was quite substantial, given that the focus groups were not an immediate part of their daily responsibilities and deadlines. It is most likely that this played a part in the relatively low and variable attendance.

4. FINDINGS

Below we give the findings from the focus groups and sense-making workshop.

It is important to reiterate that "perspectives from the global South" is confined to the perspectives of the limited group of actors involved in the data collection (digital survey, focus groups, sense-making workshop). While these viewpoints are meaningful for this report, they cannot be considered representative of the overall sentiment as regards sustainable cities in the global South as a whole.

4.1 Partners' Observations on the Current Situation of Sustainable Cities

4.1.1 Current Situation in Cities and Municipalities

The observation that ran as a common thread through the exchanges with participants was insufficient access to quality social basic services (education, food security, income, health, etc.). This observation was highlighted by the digital survey and confirmed in the focus groups. This does not come as a surprise, obviously, as many statistics from international institutions broadly support this perception. Participants described the everyday situation in cities in the global South as a "daily urgency".

Table 3: partner level of satisfaction with social basic services in cities

| | Global | Africa | Asia | Latin America |
|-------------------|--------|--------|------|---------------|
| Dissatisfied | 56% | 62% | 20% | 50% |
| Satisfied | 38% | 32% | 80% | 38% |
| Very satisfied | 6% | 6% | 0% | 12% |
| Excellent quality | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% |

Source: the digital survey

Political Culture

In all conversations with partners and external experts, there was reference to the political factor, specifically the influence of political interests, corruption and clientelism on political decisions at all levels of governance and on policy implementation.

During election periods, local governments frequently make promises that are not fulfilled, and they often invest opportunistically, whereas newly elected municipal governments typically discard the decisions and priorities of their predecessors in favour of new development activities chosen to strengthen or build privileged relationships with locally strategic actors ("*The links between certain groups and certain powers, they are typical*", according to one of the experts). They also replace administrative staff structurally, which leads to the loss of essential expertise and undermines the technical capabilities of the local administration.

These classical dynamics and mechanisms consistently weaken the continuity of local policy and project implementation. As one expert pointed out: *“There is no policy continuity due to changing power (...) and political figures often remain in power due to the system of ‘patronage’, not on the basis of merit; local politicians often engage in short-term thinking, looking for quick visible wins.”*

Local actors perceive and analyse these recurring patterns, resulting in a lack of trust in governments and diminished credibility of local authorities as reliable partners in local sustainable development for all.

This low level of trust in local municipal governments is also reflected in the survey, in which 72% of respondents indicate that national and local politics have a negative impact on the implementation and sustainability of local development projects.

Individualisation of Society

It repeatedly emerged that the process of individualisation was underway in society, leading to the increasing fragmentation or atomisation of the actors. According to a significant number of participants, this individualisation also occurs at the level of values, causing common goals (“le bien commun” or the common good) to be increasingly replaced by individual goals. A lack of social cohesion in an urban context also plays a role: due to massive migration from rural to urban areas, Southern cities become melting pots of different ethnic-cultural populations, which weakens the local social fabric.

Private-sector Influence

The influence of the private sector in urban development came strongly to the fore in the discussion with partners, as well as in the literature and conversations with experts, who stated that local governments are powerless in the face of the corporate sector, capital and private investments: *“Companies determine 80% of the pattern of urban development, and governments and NGOs are powerless in the face of the corporate world”,* said one of the experts.

Participants highlighted the privatisation of social services as an issue in urban development: private services are of better quality than underfunded public services, but they are also much more expensive and often unaffordable for average and lower incomes.

Land also plays a crucial role in urban development processes, according to the experts, as illustrated by the African example: *“Africa, the continent with the fastest urban growth, is characterised by a transition from agricultural land to urban development, with agricultural land now increasing in value by a factor of ten. 90% of the added value goes to new landowners who are closely intertwined with the political power and therefore face no resistance from local governments; the government does not intervene because the economic and political elite collaborate. 10% is left over for local governments, and this is not enough to build sustainable structures. This is an “unsustainable urban pattern”. There is, therefore, a clear need for legislation and regulation. (...) Financial and commercial interests have a very negative impact on the sustainability agenda of cities, such as through land speculation by foreign actors (...) Cities do not know where to start and have no say in the development of their mandate area.”* All of this was also confirmed by the participants in the FGDs.

Absence of a Clear Perspective in the South

Finally, in line with the previous point, the absence of a clear perspective in the South on sustainable urban development was clearly identified as an inhibitive factor in creating sustainable cities. Urban development is still largely ad hoc ('*plic ploc*' according to the French-speaking participants, 'scattered' according to the English-speaking participants) and, as the participants say, is slightly influenced by chance, the interests of various actors and political agendas.

A strong and locally endorsed perspective based on a rights-based approach could serve as a barrier against disruptive speculation and promote coherent and socially supported urban policies. As one participant put it, as long as the answer to "where do we wish to take our cities and how do we aim to get there?" remains unclear, urban development can take any direction or be influenced by external interests, and sustainability is far from guaranteed.

4.1.2 Local Policy

The local governance level emerged as a crucial factor in the partners' analysis of the current situation in cities, particularly local policy in all its stages. In this section, therefore, we examine local policy from the formulation of local development plans to their implementation by local governments, whether funded by international cooperation or otherwise. In interviews with external experts, local policy also strongly emerged as a key factor in achieving sustainable cities.

Tension between Political Levels

Tension is identified between different political levels, notably between central and lower levels, including the municipal level, which was identified as an inhibitor to the development of sustainable local policy. Most countries in the global South had a tradition of strong central governance, but in the 1990s, global decentralisation processes began, partly driven by international cooperation, through which powers and therefore authority were partially transferred to local governments.

As a result, competition emerged between the central governance level and the decentralised levels for resources and political influence; in these relationships, municipal governments are often less assertive than the central level, making it difficult to implement robust and coherent local policies. "*Competition between local government and central government, where the central level does not want to give autonomy to the local level, but wants to retain control*", say the experts. For that reason, vertical relationships between governance levels continue to exist. The partners concluded that decentralisation did not bring the necessary resources (in the broad sense of the term) or powers ("there is a juxtaposition between central power and local powers," according to one female participant; a sentiment echoed by other participants).

Partners from Benin provided 2 clear examples of how the central government still exercises a controlling function over local governments. Firstly, the central government recently introduced the system of the 'caisse unique', where all financial resources must first be collected through the central government and then distributed to local governments. In reality this often means that local governments receive the funds (too) late and the amounts received are lower than officially agreed, clearly impacting their ability to successfully execute local development plans. Secondly, in 2022, the central government of Benin created new roles at the local governance level, namely "secrétaires executifs". Some partners view this new change as a central-government strategy to limit the decision-making power of local mayors.

Participation Process in Local Development Plans

At the local level, political dynamics can also come into play, as mentioned above. Local policy-making in all partner countries begins with local development or policy plans ("development master plan", "strategic urban planning", "local development plan"), which almost always involve citizen participation (associations (women, youth, producers, etc.), communities and their authorities, religious authorities, etc.), albeit to varying degrees and with different procedural accents in each case. This could suggest that local policy is automatically based on the needs and priorities of diverse local actors.

However, reality is more complex: there appears to be a participation gap between the formulation of local development plans and their ultimate execution. With insufficient budgets, municipal governments must prioritise, often under the influence of contextual factors and influential actors or alliances, so that final policy choices at the municipal level do not necessarily reflect citizens' priorities. In other words, citizens are involved in drafting local policy plans, but when it comes to implementing and prioritising themes, participation is significantly lower.

This can result in projects (related to basic services) that do not meet the expectations of local actors and the population, which weakens their ownership of the projects carried out (and hence the sustainability of the projects). Local governments must also report faithfully to the local actors (accountability). Experts stressed that *"(...) local governments (cities) collaborate too little with neighbourhood groups, citizens,... in terms of budgetary participation (not marginal aspects, but fundamental aspects) and needs analysis."* Also: *"Governance in the South is different. Accountability, gender participation (participation of women),... is not welcomed by local governments. It is to do with political cultures and power dynamics. Citizens want that change, but local governments often do not."*

That said, it is worth mentioning that community groups are, of course, also involved in these power dynamics. Therefore, it is a two-way street, and the dynamics are complex and deeply rooted.

It is also worth mentioning that during the FGDs a number of existing good practices were mentioned, primarily by participants from Senegal, in the Niayes geographical zone (a coastal area in the north, covering 180 km by 30 km), where all relevant stakeholders are involved in a systematic and participatory manner in local development plans and particularly in the allocation of available land. The "Municipalité de Grand Dakar" has also actively engaged all local stakeholders not only in developing the local development plan and triennial operational plan, but also in the annual monitoring and adjustment of these plans.

A third interesting "good practice" comes from the city of Sale (Morocco) where the local government, through social media, has developed a system that allows citizens to monitor, evaluate and potentially adjust the quality of the municipal services. However, the practice of such a participatory monitoring system is not widespread in Morocco, and mostly depends on the motivation and commitment of the elected politician at that time.

4.1.3 International and Belgian Cooperation on Sustainable Cities

The various exchanges have shown that Belgian support for sustainable urban development is valued by all actors. However, significant areas of concern have also been identified for potential improvement. It is important to mention here that the distinction between types of international cooperation (CSF members or otherwise, and if so, which CSF members) was not always explicitly stated or known to the partners.

Holistic View of Local Reality

According to the participants, actors involved in international cooperation for sustainable cities (including Belgian actors) often lack a sufficiently holistic view of the dynamics and relationships among local actors. These dynamics are inherently complex, and many underlying relationships and agendas are difficult to see, such as power dynamics within and between local actors (municipalities, communities, religious leaders, private sector, etc.), which can impact crucial factors such as control over land and water.

Privileged relationships between municipal governments and certain local actors may not be readily apparent, but they can influence access to certain basic services. The fact that international donors do not always develop this level of analysis can contribute to strengthening certain local actors at the expense of others, which can weaken local governance in the long term.

Some respondents also indicated that international donors do not adequately consider the political power of traditional leaders. These leaders serve as crucial intermediaries between local and central government. In the African context especially, local traditional leaders often enjoy more trust and legitimacy from the local population than municipal officials and politicians (who are often not present in the area for an extended period, due to elections, for example).

The experts confirm this analysis: *“International organisations often lack an integrated, holistic approach to complex power dynamics (...) they address symptoms rather than structural, underlying fundamental changes and underlying relationships and power dynamics that largely determine a city's sustainable development”*. Also: *This means that public good is difficult to achieve there, due to an institutional weakness. So it is about rights, interests, exercising power ... But we often ignore that because it is anthropological. It is a cultural difference.* Also: *“And then the international organisations bring that Western narrative. But that is more to do with ignorance of the processes and the diversity of actors they know little about.”*

Knowledge of Local Cultural Values and Practices

Understanding local cultures and practices is still a challenge for international actors. Examples are cited here that may not necessarily be directly applicable to the projects of the Belgian CSF members, but the underlying principles can still be borne in mind, such as the placement of water sources near local authority residences, which makes women feel less comfortable fetching water. Placing a daycare centre near a cemetery was also problematic for women. While we cannot definitively ascertain whether these and other examples are relevant to Belgian sustainable cities cooperation, they illustrate the importance of having a good understanding of local cultures and practices.

Extrapolation of Own Agendas by International Actors

According to the participants, international actors often had their own thematic priorities, such as, where gender is concerned, LGBTQ+ or democracy issues. Participants do not reject the strengthening of gender equality but did criticise the manner in which it was executed, such as imposing quotas for women's participation (often at 50%) in workshops.¹

Donor expectations of women's participation in vegetable garden projects were also problematic, as women in some African countries are officially barred from owning land. This approach to gender in

¹ We would like to reiterate here that 76% of the participants in the FGDs were men, which may have affected the outcomes of the exchanges.

the project was perceived as mechanical and not context-specific. The inclusion of LGBTQ+ themes was frequently mentioned as problematic and "imposed" without regard for specific local contexts.

According to the experts, the core issue is as follows: "They extrapolate their own themes without considering local power dynamics and funding possibilities." The fact that societies and governments in the South often lack a clear perspective to guide their activities and projects, coupled with the structural lack of resources, contributes to the experts' view that local governments often "accept what comes their way". "There is little resistance from local governments due to financial dependence on international partners through a lack of domestic revenue".

Lack of Collaboration in a Multi-actor Approach

Finally, the need to create synergies between projects and actors was emphasised as a critical area for improvement in (international) collaboration on sustainable cities. Participants in the FGDs and sense-making workshop felt that projects often lack articulation with each other and with various actors (at local and higher levels). The majority of participants indicated that project implementation still tends to occur in isolated "silos".

From the talks between the partners two factors clearly emerged that hamper synergies. Firstly, deeply culturally ingrained vertical power structures that hamper cooperation and, secondly, a lack of trust among local actors in their (local) governments.

As a result, opportunities for mutual learning and reinforcement of the multi-actor approach are not created or lacking, and this impacts on the quality of initiatives and learning processes, thereby affecting the strengthening of the organisations involved. The external experts explicitly confirmed this analysis.

Sustainability of Projects and Organisations

Participants in the FGDs clearly indicated that the aforementioned factors negatively influence the sustainability of the projects and of local actors involved at an organisational level.

4.2 Perspectives from the South on the "Ideal" Sustainable City

In this section we discuss the specific perspectives of our partners from the global South on sustainable urban development. Through the digital survey, FGDs and sense-making workshop, we tried to extract elements that would elucidate a potential divergence between perspectives in the global South and the global North.

The survey question was phrased in multiple ways and occasionally yielded contradictory information.

The following table (derived from the survey) illustrates that according to the partners there were significant distinctions between Western and non-Western perspectives of urban sustainability:

Table 4 Do the partners perceive fundamental differences between Western and non-Western perspectives of sustainable urban development?

| | Global | Africa | Asia | Latin America |
|------------|--------|--------|------|---------------|
| Yes | 72% | 80% | 50% | 38% |
| No | 17% | 11% | 40% | 38% |
| Don't know | 11% | 9% | 10% | 24% |

Source: digital survey

However, the survey did not provide clarity on how these differences took shape.

In response to the question as to whether organisations operated according to Western perspectives, non-Western perspectives, or both, the survey yielded the following answers:

Table 5: Does your organisation operate according to Western or non-Western perspectives on urban development?

| | Global | Africa | Asia | Latin America |
|------------------------------|--------|--------|------|---------------|
| Western | 10% | 13% | 0% | 0% |
| Non-Western | 12% | 13% | 0% | 13% |
| Both | 69% | 67% | 78% | 75% |
| There is no clear difference | 11% | 7% | 22% | 12% |

Source: digital survey

It is evident from this table that the vast majority of partners work according to both perspectives on urban sustainability. Once again, no specific dividing lines can be discerned between Western and non-Western perspectives.

4.2.1 Sustainable City Themes

Findings from the Digital Survey

The online survey revealed that partners considered the following SDG-based themes to be of the highest priority for an "ideal" sustainable city: water and hygiene, education, health, food security, safety (especially for women, girls and youths), and good local governance. What stood out was that gender, LGBTQ+ issues, environment, climate change, renewable energy and transportation were ranked very low, despite these themes often holding a prominent position on the agenda of the Belgian cooperative sustainable cities.

Table 6: Priorities of sustainability themes

| | 80% and higher | | 60% - 80% | | 50%-60% | | Below 50% |
|---|---------------------|----|----------------------------------------------|----|------------------------------|----|-----------------------------|
| 1 | Water & hygiene 89% | 6 | Good Local governance 78% | 11 | Gender 57% | 15 | Religion & Spirituality 34% |
| 2 | Education 87% | 7 | Social Cohesion 72% | 12 | Renewable energy sources 56% | | |
| 3 | Health 86% | 8 | Employment 66% | 13 | Urban biodiversity 53% | | |
| 4 | Food Security 85% | 9 | Municipal waste 61% | 14 | Mobility 52% | | |
| 5 | Safety 83% | 10 | Housing 60% Climate change resilience 60% | | | | |

Source: digital survey

Findings from the FGDs

In the focus groups, these findings were closely re-examined and confirmed by the participants, albeit with certain refinements. The reason why the aforementioned themes received the highest priority in the online survey was explained by the challenging living conditions that make basic needs a primary concern: as long as income, education, food, health, access to clean water, etc., are not guaranteed, other themes remain of secondary importance.

Participants acknowledged that the themes are “interdependent and mutually reinforcing”. Gender was also recognised as an important theme in discussions, but questions were raised about the way in which international cooperation introduced the theme. In contrast, LGBTQ+ issues were still mentioned in the focus groups as a theme that probably lacked sufficient support in the South and was even perceived as delicate in certain cases. This was also explicitly emphasised in the sense-making workshop.

Nevertheless, in the focus groups, environment and climate were often described as fundamental for the (near) future, given the impact of climate change and the visibly influential role of environment and climate on themes such as agriculture, income and housing.

“Good governance” as the Main Priority

The theme that emerged as the strongest pillar of the “ideal” sustainable city across the 3 continents was “good governance”. On the French-speaking side, participants refer to it as “le nerf de la guerre” and “le centre de tout développement”. The experts also emphasised the crucial significance of “good governance” as a key element for sustainable urban policy.² Within “good governance” the participants specifically highlighted 1) the importance of transparent participation of local actors in all phases of project cycles, ranging from identifying priority themes and local development plans, design

² The specific profile of the participants (local government staff and civil society organisations that collaborate with municipal governments) may also have played a role here.

Met opmerkingen [AH2]: Moet deze voetnoot niet bij zijn ervoor, wanneer het gaat over deelnemers ipv de experten?

and implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and 2) transparent policy decisions and policy implementation.

Local multi-actor consultation structures exist in all continents, but participants confirmed that local projects, whether internationally funded or not, do not always align with the priorities of local actors or are not implemented in a way that strengthens ownership and sustainability.

Furthermore, participants in the FGDs reiterated that, in addition to political will, the necessary methodological knowledge and tools are crucial prerequisites for successful project execution. A significant number mentioned that establishing and guiding constructive and transparent participation processes poses a major methodological challenge. These processes are often difficult due to insufficient financial resources and/or capacities among partners, as well as the tendency for projects to be output-oriented and time-bound, leaving little or no room for sustained participation processes.

Other Themes

Urban planning and spatial development were also identified as specific areas in which local municipal authorities needed strengthening, given the lack of technical capacities in this domain. And, as previously mentioned, there is a need for participatory development of a shared perspective of sustainable urban development.

4.2.2 Western versus non-Western Perspectives on Sustainable Cities

A central question in the study was how the partners' perspectives of the sustainable city differ from those of the CSF members.

Findings from the Survey

In the digital survey and focus groups, the responses on this subject were sometimes contradictory. On the one hand, the survey confirmed that there was a distinction between perspectives, but it was not clear what that distinction exactly entailed. Cultural differences between the North and South were mentioned, but not necessarily differences in perspectives of urban sustainability. As mentioned above, according to the partners, there are differences in prioritisation of the same themes, which can be explained by the existence of a subsistence economy and the operation of local actors in survival mode in the global South.

The experts confirmed this: *"There isn't really a difference in perspective: everyone knows that green (etc.) is important, but the context and hence the priorities are different. Because economically, socially, the situation in the South is precarious. The inequality is immense, and that's what it's about. The South does not have the luxury to prioritise climate and ecology when you have no income and no health. (...) The central governments in the South don't want that because they want economic growth."*

The survey participants also largely expressed that Western perceptions of sustainable urban development did not pose an obstacle to addressing the challenges, as evidenced by the following table:

Table 7: Are Western perceptions of sustainable urban development an obstacle to addressing the challenges in your city/municipality?

| | Global | Africa | Asia | Latin America |
|----------------------------------------|--------|--------|------|---------------|
| Yes | 12% | 13% | 0% | 14% |
| No | 54% | 57% | 43% | 43% |
| More or less | 22% | 20% | 14% | 43% |
| Not relevant, there are no differences | 12% | 9% | 43% | 0% |

Source: digital survey

A small number of participants spoke of Western development models (urban industrialisation, high-rise buildings, etc.) that needn't necessarily be adopted by the global South. However, this perspective was not spontaneously shared by other participants (nor was it contradicted).

According to the participants, there were indeed different perspectives in the North and the South, not just one particular Northern view and one particular Southern view. In both cases (North and South), "basic needs" were central, but these "basic needs" were not identical in the North and South due to differing contexts.

Cultural Differences between the North and the South

From the survey, it did become clear that Western and non-Western cultural differences do exist and are important in the pursuit of urban sustainability, as seen in the table below:

Table 8: Is the pursuit of non-Western (cultural) values a key factor in sustainable urban development?

| | Global | Africa | Asia | Latin America |
|--------------------------------------------|--------|--------|------|---------------|
| Yes | 74% | 76% | 71% | 57% |
| No | 12% | 13% | 14% | 0% |
| Don't know | 9% | 7% | 0% | 29% |
| Not relevant, there is no clear difference | 6% | 4% | 4% | 14% |

Source: digital survey

Local dynamics in democracy and gender, approaches to issues such as gender and values, customs and practices revealed differences between the North and the South, and, as mentioned earlier, these were not always understood in international cooperation.

In the narrative comments from respondents in the survey, the focus is mainly on respecting local customs and traditions, with mention made of the following concepts: *“Ubuntu, togetherness, LINKS (Local Indigenous Knowledge Systems), collectivism, entraide, pratiques culturelles, valeurs socio-culturelles, gotong royong (collaboration and helping each other), sense of togetherness, conocimientos ancestrales, respect des anciens, respect des us et coutumes, respect des forêts sacrées, ...”*

Met opmerkingen [AH3]: ?

Conclusions on the "Perspectives"

- Western and non-Western perspectives of sustainable urban development largely coincide in terms of basic needs
- There are differences in the ranking of priorities for themes and in terms of culture, local practices and approaches
- International cooperation has not always developed a deep understanding of cultural dimensions and complex political power dynamics
- International cooperation partly maintains "an agenda" of specific themes and tends to defend them strongly before the partners

5. RECOMMENDATIONS OF PARTNERS AND SOUTH RESEARCH

5.1 Recommendations from the Partner side

The following partner needs and desires in the context of the work on sustainable cities have emerged from the survey, FGDs and sense-making workshop.

- Need for further capacity building, especially in the following domains:
 - Methodology for developing shared perspectives in partner countries in the global South as regards sustainable urban development
 - Methodology (knowledge and tools) for participatory planning processes
 - Specific support for innovative multi-stakeholder participation approaches
 - Methodology for long-term urban planning and spatial organisation
 - Lobbying and advocacy (for policy change at higher political levels)
- Sharper focus on the sustainability (i.e. long-term prospects) of the projects (social, technical and political sustainability) and of the partner organisations (especially institutional capacities, considering factors such as staff turnover)
- More robust integration of multi-stakeholder participatory processes into thematic projects
- Synergies: clear articulation between the projects themselves and relevant actors, where relevant
- Revision of the approach to themes such as gender, democracy, LGBTQ+ in projects: integrate them more strongly within a context-specific approach, improve alignment between international actors' expectations and the local reality on the ground
- Establishment of multi-actor teams that engage in dialogue with Belgian donors to ensure local participation (design, plans, execution, monitoring and evaluation) and enhance understanding of local cultures, values and dynamics (cultural, interrelationships among actors, etc.)
- Expansion of international cooperation beyond city-to-city collaborations, attention paid to other local actors not officially designated as partners under the collaboration agreement ("*boundary partners*") but still involved in project implementation (e.g. capacity building)

5.2 Recommendations from the South Research side

The most central element for CSF SC in this regard is the enhancement of local governance in a cross-cutting manner within thematic projects, through:

- Stronger involvement of local actors and consultation structures in the projects, i.e. the transversal integration of local governance (with a focus on participation of local actors and transparency of decisions made by policymakers and policy execution) in thematic projects
- A better understanding of local actors and dynamics
- Enhanced synergies between CSF members

Transversal Integration of Local Governance in Thematic Projects

A specific approach to more effectively integrate "local governments" (and thereby strengthen local actors and "local governance" practices) in thematic projects is to establish projects among CSF members, utilising specific knowledge at the municipal level, involving local actors and consultation processes. Thematic projects can thus support municipal governments and local actors (civil society) in consultation processes with municipal governments. This way, consultation structures are strengthened through thematic projects. Projects need to be more comprehensively integrated into a holistic approach, with actor synergy at its core.

We acknowledge that this is already happening to some extent; the recommendation is to substantially strengthen this approach.

In-depth Knowledge of Local Reality from Project Design Phase

Partners have emphasised the importance of a stronger understanding of local realities (political, cultural, etc.) among CSF members on multiple occasions. To achieve this, mechanisms and structures need to be created. One option is to organise consultations among Belgian actors with multi-actor groups, in which diverse local actors play a significant role.

Capacity Building of Local Actors

In this context, there should be a greater emphasis on capacity building of local actors, such as enhancing their ability to set agendas and engage in lobbying and advocacy. Societal and political work must find a place within this. Innovative and context-specific forms of capacity building are crucial here (through "look and learn", learning from local experiences, etc.).

Capacity building of municipal governments in terms of establishing effective consultation structures is important.

Enhanced Synergies between CSF Members

Synergies between project and actors should be reinforced, contributing to capitalisation and strength and learning processes.

6. APPENDICES

6.1 List of External Experts Interviewed

Rafael Tuts

Director
UN-Habitat (United Nations Human Settlements Programme)
Global Solutions Division
Kenya

Jean Bossuyt

Senior executive and head ECDPMs inclusive governance and accountability team
ECDPM
Netherlands

Amal Jabouk

Intervention Officer and project formulation
ENABEL
Morocco

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- 4) Vers des villes africaines durables – Brigitte Bariol Mathais
- 5) World Cities Report 2022 – Envisaging the Future of Cities – UN Habitat
- 6) Three Horizons – The Patterning of Hope – Bill Sharpe



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