

Building a data ecosystem to accelerate local SDG progress and action

How the City of Durban collaborated with external partners to drive data solutions

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THE PROBLEM: Without the evidence from a robust data ecosystem, cities cannot formulate policies and design programs that respond to local challenges.

WHY IT MATTERS: Developing city-level data systems in a way that integrates the SDGs helps to break the silos and deepen alignment among various stakeholders.

THE SOLUTION: We adopted a multisectoral and multistakeholder approach to building a functional data ecosystem that is inclusive and collaborative.

The lack of quality, relevant, accessible, integrated, and timely city-level data is a key obstacle to progress in monitoring and reporting on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In general, the lack of high-quality city-level data inhibits the formulation of evidence-based policies and the design of programs that respond to urban dynamics and related challenges in cities. For instance, the lack of integrated and reliable data affects the provision of basic services in informal settlement upgrading programs.

As the government of eThekweni in Durban, we believe taking a multi-stakeholder approach to building a reliable, timely, disaggregated, and accessible urban data ecosystem ensures that

the city's policymaking decisions are inclusive and based on evidence. We believe that local government should make decisions based on reliable and timely data. But that doesn't mean that the sole source of that data should be local government. In fact, we believe it's important to work with stakeholders such as universities, civil society, community-based organizations, and others to co-create a monitoring system.

How did we start the journey of becoming a data-driven city?

As a starting point, we assessed our internal data context on a city-wide basis. As we expected, this process revealed a highly complex data environment characterized by silos, as well as static, inaccurate, and incomplete datasets, lack of data management and sharing principles, and lack of analytics and visualizations for strategic decision-making.

In response to these challenges, we set up an internal data reference group and an SDG institutionalization committee consisting of a combination of internal and external partners such as the City's service delivery Units of eThekweni Water and Sanitation, Electricity, Development Planning, eThekweni Transport Authority, Human Settlements, Engineering, and support units such as Performance Monitoring and Evaluation and the Strategy Office. External stakeholders consisted of civil society organizations and

community members working in informal settlements, civil tech companies, and private sector companies working on data tools.

We then worked with this group to start the process of integrating city-level data which entailed developing multiple proofs of concept to demonstrate the art of what's possible. An example of this was a Shana tool where we used multiple data sets to create an integrated dashboard showing water as a value chain and how it impacts the provision of other basic services. We prioritized this process as it seemed important for securing people's buy-in and anticipating any concerns and resistance.

Once we started the process of integrating city-level data we realized that this process alone was not sufficient for meeting our developmental objectives of building an inclusive, livable, and caring city. We then adopted a multisectoral and multistakeholder approach to building a functional data ecosystem that is inclusive and collaborative. In the past two years, we also started building data partnerships with intergovernmental institutions (e.g., UN-Habitat), civil society, academia (e.g., University College London, Arizona State University, University of KwaZulu-Natal and Durban University of Technology), and private sector entities (e.g., Microsoft, Amazon Web Services, Open Cities Lab). Throughout 2020, we organized a series of engagements with these partners to solicit inputs on how to build a robust data ecosystem for eThekweni.

Localization of SDG indicators as a collaborative process

In 2019, through a council resolution, we received a political mandate to set up an SDG institutionalization committee and detailed terms of reference were established. This resolution also included the city's commitment to table a Voluntary Local Review (VLR) in the current financial year. The committee, still active today, consisted of multisectoral internal stakeholders representing their respective sectors.

The primary purpose was to conduct an extensive indicator localization process leveraging

the data ecosystem. We then realized that there was an opportunity to connect the city-level data integration process and the SDG institutionalization process: linking the two is critical in establishing a singular source of truth.

To support this process, we are working with University College London to map synergies between various SDG goals and all the 169 targets. This process is invaluable in breaking the silos of how we implement our city projects and will also deepen alignments between various SDGs at the city level. We see this work as critical in strengthening the localization process and demonstrating interlinkages between each SDG in relationship synergies, trade-offs, and risks.

How eThekweni has built a clear roadmap towards producing its first VLR

Building our data ecosystem has allowed us to develop a clear roadmap towards producing Durban's first VLR. Undergoing data integration and SDG institutionalization at the same time has allowed us to appreciate the process and the journey beyond the final product of the VLR. As a city government, we now have a better view of our data which is allowing us to make evidence-based and strategic decisions, and better align with our global objectives.

Our journey of centering SDGs through data-centric approaches has revealed a number of challenges and lessons:

- City governments need to secure buy-in from the wider internal and external stakeholder network. We found that this can be enabled by establishing data sharing partnerships where stakeholders, particularly civil society, and communities, can use city data to build solutions that respond to community issues related to service delivery.
- Securing funding and resources to support local SDG action is challenging. We are trying to partner with private sector companies to support local action through adopting an SDG goal and sponsoring local action.

- Building a regional collaborative action or regionalizing the SDG strategy can be facilitated by a clearly defined regional scope. Here we are looking at inviting neighboring municipalities to partner in building a regional SDG plan of action and reporting. Establishing a single local narrative on the SDGs is a big challenge. A useful approach is to build a reliable and collaborative SDG data portal.
- Although the SDGs find expression in the city's implementation processes, their monitoring and tracking is an unfunded mandate within the city's MTEF budget. To address this lack of support, we instead rely on securing external funding support by leveraging partnerships with universities for action research grants.

A data-centric approach to SDG prioritization and localization is crucial. As administrators of eThekweni, we now understand that mapping and managing progress on the SDGs is not possible without a robust data ecosystem. The success of SDG localization in our context is rooted in the navigation of complex multi-stakeholder collaborative processes that take an all-of-society approach.