

Making SDG 8 happen in South/ South West Asia with a little help from international friends: Negombo Beach Memoirs

When the UCLG team grappled with designing an action-focused agenda to guide international city to city learning at the end of September 2015, in an intense strategic session in UCLG's Barcelona headquarters, they had no idea that barely 10 weeks later the first international learning exchange that materialize. For UCLG Sec General Pep Roig who had just landed from New York after the adoption of the New Urban Agenda, the international learning team supported by the active leadership of Sara Hoefflich agreed that the strategic learning agenda had to focus on helping support municipalities and their associations localize the 17 SDGs with its 169 targets.

Damontoro from UCLG Asia Pacific (ASPAC) wasted no time in identifying SDG 8 as a critical priority for Asia, and with his SG, Bernadia Tjandradewi very quickly mobilized the ever-eager and highly committed team from Sri Lanka to host what was a truly historic and meaningful learning event in more ways than one. Perhaps it was the peace and tranquility of the western beach resort that provided a symbolic setting of post –conflict reconstruction and development that had inspired participants that with effort anything is possible. Maybe it was because of the genuineness and commitment of the officials and political leadership drawn from all over Southern Asia including Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, Japan and South Korea to get to grips with what localizing the SDGs would mean. It could also have been the unique cross fertilization of ideas and lessons not just limited to Asia, but drawn from the testimonies from South Africa and the Netherlands through the experiences of local government associations representatives, Charles Paterson and Nicolette Piekaar.

There can be no doubt that the blended learning approach (including a hands-on experience of the local fish market that was established by the municipality to promote sustainable livelihoods; the viewing of high impact videos of post-conflict development in northern Sri Lanka; the active role-playing of all participants in an innovative game developed by NGO Smileundo, to enable players to learn the power of collaboration, win-win negotiation, and conflict resolution and intense facilitated group work action planning sessions) clearly contributed to the richness of the learning experience. The powerful speakers and thought leaders, including Pierre Martinot- Lagarde from the ILO who kept participants focused on the theme of decent work, and who offered critical insights into local economic development, added to the overall learning experience.

But what stood out most however, was the move beyond learning and sharing towards ACTION-ORIENTED COLLABORATION. This was the clarion call made just a week earlier at the UCLGA Africities session in Johannesburg, where delegates in a dedicated session on city to city learning supported by the UCLG/SACN agreed that what was needed now was local action to

make the SDGs happen. SALGA's Kubeshnee Govender Jones understood this mandate well, and with the help of the UCLG facilitation team nudged all 40 participants to design clear and workable priorities for their cities and local government associations.

Beyond the focus on the content of LED and SDG8, Negombo allowed practitioners from learning institutes and training centers to think about future collaboration under the UCLG banner. From the experiences of eThekweni Municipality's innovative MILE program focusing on embedding local sustainability, the ILO's Turin Global training Center, Indonesia's IUTC, Japan's CLAIR, the All India Institute, Seoul's SHRDC and the coordinating role of ASPAC, it was abundantly clear that collaboration was not only possible, but made perfect sense in order to maximize synergies and help move the New Urban Agenda forward.

In reflecting on the week spent in Negombo, the quality of the new personal relationships developed between practitioners cannot be overestimated. The late night dinners, early morning beach walks, bus trips allowed trust to be developed and the process of challenging assumptions and mindsets had surely begun. For MILE, numerous opportunities to partner emerged as well, including the offer to include the Maldives strategic planning team and other associations / municipalities to the next MILE Master Class in March 2016. In addition a request from Sri Lanka to host all its Commissioners from the major cities in a dedicated session in May 2016 was welcomed by MILE.

In driving away from that beautiful Negombo setting, past the bustling city of Colombo and back home to Africa, an indelible impression of the power of triangular cooperation is left in my mind. It is left to us; servants of the local state to make the vision of a better world possible. It can be done.