



Connective Cities Dialogue Event

Local Government Associations: Capacity building through exchange of good practices and peer-to-peer learning

Cologne, Germany, 09-11 July 2018

Background paper

Already today, most of the world's population lives in cities. The urban centres' responsibilities in achieving sustainable development grow and so does their need to count with an effective representation of their interests on the national level.

In this context, **Local Government Associations (LGA) worldwide assume a crucial role in supporting their members, the local governments.** The New Urban Agenda, for example, recognizes their role as "as promoters and providers of capacity development".

LGAs are institutionalised alliances between a large number or all of the local governments of a country. They may take different names, such as "federation", "union", "standing conference", "league", etc.

They articulate the local governments' interests, exert pressure on the national level to create suitable frame conditions, provide information and support the capacity building of their members. LGA's activities differ according to the priorities set and the capacities available and may cover activities like:

- Participating in the legislative process, e.g. through position papers or hearing rights
- Supporting their members with information, e.g. through thematic committees, newsletters, trainings, peer-to-peer working groups, research, etc.
- Facilitating the exchange of experience between its members, e.g. in thematic committees and ad-hoc working groups.

Despite significant differences in the structures, legal roles and experience, Local Government Associations often face similar challenges. Many of them have developed innovative and effective solutions, but these remain too often unknown to other LGAs which could profit from them. There is a substantial potential for exchange of know-how and mutual learning between LGAs. Bilateral and multilateral donor organisations, such as the World Bank or the GIZ, institutions such as the Council of Europe, and experienced LGAs such as VNG, the Association of Netherlands Municipalities or KS, the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities are active in LGA capacity building.¹

The Connective Cities Dialogue event will allow for an exchange on eye-level between practitioners from LGAs worldwide in four working groups: 1) Representation of local government interests and influence on law-making, 2) Structure, processes and financing, 3) Thematic members' committees and working groups and 4) Membership services for learning and peer exchange.

¹ VNG International 2005, Establishing a Local Government Association, p. 13.

1) Representation of local government interests and influence on law-making

In order to bring the interests and concerted decisions to implementation, LGAs rely on several resources. They need legitimacy and recognition as “the voice of the cities”, independence, leadership and procedures and mechanisms for effective lobbying, including communication.

First of all, they have an informative role. LGAs advise regional and national governments about the needs and challenges of the local level and contribute in this way to informed and demand-driven decisions.

Secondly, usually they seek an active role in influencing legislation in favour of the local governments. The procedures and mechanisms for lobbying and advocacy may include formalized, legally-binding mechanisms, such as hearings or participation in cabinet sessions, and informal procedures, such as direct contacts to decision-makers in the government sphere.

Not necessarily, there is a single LGA per country. Actually, quite often there are several LGAs assuming the representation of different categories of municipalities or regions (e.g. Germany, Bolivia), ethnic/linguistic groups (Guatemala, Belgium), or political affiliation (e.g. Mexico).² If two or more different LGAs are active in one country, they may decide to work together, e.g. through an umbrella organization (e.g. the Federal Association of municipal associations in Germany or the federation in Romania) or through cooperation (ad-hoc or permanent) on specific issues.³

Decision making

The capacity of lobbying for local interests depends on the LGA’s capacity to create common positions and to unite their members despite their diversity. The German Association of Cities, for example, follows the principle of not representing party interests, but only those which reflect a broad, cross-party consensus among their members. Therefore, decisions are made by ¾-majorities.

Independence

The capacity of effective representation depends on the LGA’s relationship to the central government. On the one hand-side, it needs to be independent from central government and party-political interests, assume a leadership role and make sure that all members, independently from their political affiliation, are being heard. On the other hand-side, direct and healthy contacts to the central government may help influencing decisions, especially where there are no formal, legally-binding mechanisms for participation. On the formal level, most LGAs consider themselves independent from central government. However, there are many cases of direct or indirect dependence: For example, in most African LGAs, the association’s chairman is part of the ruling political party. In other cases, the LGA depend financially on the central government’s resources, as it often happens in Latin America.⁴

2) Structure, processes and financing of LGA

Most of the LGAs have a political structure, which takes the decisions, and an administrative-technical structure, which prepares them. While in countries with a strong and autonomous local

² Platforma (2015), Local and regional government associations in EU partner countries: State of play, p. 12

³ VNG International 2005, Establishing a Local Government Association, p. 11.

⁴ Platforma (2015), p. 12

level, the LGAs are mostly ruled by private law, in other cases it is public law that rules their status. In Latin America and Africa, roughly half of the LGA seem to be governmental, the other half private institutions (NGOs / foundations).⁵

Facing limited financial resources and accountability towards their members, LGAs may find it hard to contract staff in adequate number and training. In most of the LGAs that Platforma, a European coalition of local and regional governments and their associations, surveyed for a comparative study, the recruitment of human resources in adequate number and training is a key challenge: On a global scale, less than half of the surveyed LGAs indicate they are able to pay competitive salaries.⁶

Financial independence and sustainability is probably an LGA's biggest challenge. Ideally, an LGA counts on members who are able and willing to fully finance its' activities. However, they often face difficulties collecting those fees: In sub-Saharan Africa, LGAs only collect around 30% of the membership fees. In the MEWA-Region, conflicts and thus political instability compromises the local governments' ability to contribute to the LGA's finances.

Other, complementary sources of revenue include donors, cooperation partners and sister LGAs, or revenues from renting buildings, paid trainings or services. Sometimes, the central government contributes to the LGA's financial resources. A solid base and a good balance between the different sources of revenue help achieving sustainability and independence.

3) Thematic members' committees and working groups

Local governance covers a large number of different. LGAs assume the role to articulate the members' diverse interests, to provide policy expertise and organize the decision making process. Most of the times, the associations therefore structure their work in sections, departments, committees, and/or working groups. Often, these structures are paralleled by policy officers or advisors who are experts in their area and help facilitating the policy dialogue within the thematic working structures.

Thematic committees allow for a two-way communication: First, to monitor the local governments' interests and needs and to build on their practical, hands-on expertise (bottom-up). Second, to communicate relevant, sometimes information from the central government or state-of-the-art research from universities and think tanks to the members (top-down).

The focus of these thematic committees might be informational, i.e. to exchange information and expertise. Very often, these thematic committees additionally formulate policy recommendations to be considered by the LGA's board or Assembly. And sometimes they can formulate binding policy positions for the LGA.

4) Membership services for learning and peer exchange

Providing high quality and demand-oriented services to the members is an aspiration that most LGAs worldwide share. However, as it requires additional resources and staff, very often the provision of membership services relies on external donor support, as the revenues are sometimes barely sufficient to cover lobbying activities and the administrative costs. In the Platforma survey, most LGA indicate they cannot deliver high quality innovative services to their members.

⁵ Platforma (2015), p. 19

⁶ Platforma (2015), p. 30 / p. 27

The services provided can be divided into core services and additional services, the latter often being paid and sometimes outsourced. The German Association of Cities for example provides the central services such as representation on all relevant policy levels, whereas the provision of on-demand trainings on municipal administration is being provided by an independent entity, the KGSt.

International recognition LGAs' role for local development and global agendas

Although the focus of LGA is principally on the national scale, there is an increasing international recognition of their role. LGAs help to formulate and implement global agendas, specifically the Agenda 2030, the New Urban Agenda (NUA) and the international climate conventions. When it comes to the localization of the SDGs, for example, LGAs raise awareness, provide information and facilitate measures and projects which support the implementation of the SDGs on the local level.

Numerous LGAs assume an increasingly active role as development actor and partner for the formulation and implementation of national programmes and global agendas. Working groups such as the UCLG-CIB (Capacity and institution building) focus on the international activities of LGAs and provide a forum for exchange on LGAs' activities in development cooperation.

Further reading

- Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities (AFLRA) / Kimmo Östman: "Local Government Association Capacity Building – Rationale, co-operation practices, and strategies for the future", Helsinki 2010
- Association of German Cities (2018): [Association of German Cities – the Voice of Germany's Cities](#)
- Council of Europe: Toolkit: Towards a modern Local Government Association
- Council of Europe: European Charter of Local Self Government
- Platforma (2015), [Local and regional government associations in EU partner countries: State of play](#)
- UCLG Policy Statement / UCLG Policy paper on development cooperation and local government
- UCLG, "The sustainable development goals. What local governments need to know"
- VNG International (2004-2008): Manuals for LGAs within the framework of the VNG Association Capacity Building programme
 - Establishing a Local Government Association
 - Strategic Planning in a Local Government Association
 - Developing a Communication Strategy for a Local Government Association
 - Advocacy and Lobbying by a Local Government Association