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Daniel Tjarks

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International agencies and the implementation of the New Urban Agenda: Evidence from the United Nations in Angola

Daniel Tjarks 

University of Lisbon

ABSTRACT

The New Urban Agenda (NUA) was endorsed by the UN General Assembly in 2016 and embodies the contemporary ideal of sustainable development in an urban world. While the question who can and who should bring the agenda to life has been addressed by research for various actors and governance arrangements, international agencies have mostly been confined to their function as progenitors and advocates of norms. In this paper, I take a closer look at their operational work in implementing the NUA and analyze the main policies pursued by two UN agencies in Angola, UN-Habitat and the UN Development Programme (UNDP). I argue that rather than being led by national or local actors, NUA implementation in Angola was driven by international agencies. Highlighting the potential and pitfalls of their efforts, I further show how scarce funding, discontinuities, and a strong reliance on direct collaboration circumscribed their impact on the ground.

KEYWORDS

New Urban Agenda;
international agencies;
Angola; localization;
urbanization

Introduction

In the last decade, the developmental discourse has taken an “urban turn” (Parnell, 2016, p. 529). Sustainable Development Goal 11 for “safe, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable cities” and the New Urban Agenda are only the most tangible manifestations of the city’s newly elevated standing. The latter, adopted at the 2016 Habitat III. conference, adapts the existing variety of global agendas to the city and embodies the contemporary ideal of sustainable development in an urban world. While many elements of the NUA have been subject to engaged criticism and debate (Caprotti et al., 2017; Garschagen et al., 2018), much research has also revolved around the question of how it can be turned from an ambitious vision into an urban reality.

The quest for the effective implementation of a global urban agenda has spurred insightful work on a variety of actors and governance settings. At the same time that national governments were reconsidered in their “crucial roles” (Da Cruz et al., 2019, p. 10) in urban governance, the dominant perception shifted from regarding cities as mere “sites of developmental intervention to cities as vectors of change” (Parnell, 2016, p. 533). Consequently, subnational and local governments figure prominently in research agendas of different fields everywhere (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2020; Post, 2018; Wolman et al., 2022). Yet, one actor that has been curiously absent from such work are the very international agencies that have driven the discourse on the city and are frequently portrayed as trailblazers of global agendas. It is my contention that research all too often confines them to their role in norm-setting and diffusion. The agencies’ operational work, a vital element of their mandate and expenditure, tends to be neglected.

Exploring the under researched role of international agencies in urban development necessarily also connects this paper to the vast body of work that has considered and problematized the involvement of international actors in the developmental sector more generally. While many classic

accounts in the field of development studies and an extensive literature on so-called “aid effectiveness” have studied issues such as the depoliticization of development, technocratic solutions, and international actors’ detachment from local conditions (e.g., Easterly, 2006; Ferguson, 1994; Li, 2007), similar problems have been highlighted early on as potential impediments to the success of developmental agendas in the urban domain (e.g., Satterthwaite, 2001). More recent work raises such concerns, for instance, regarding the global campaign for urban resilience, pinpointing strong links to private sector interests and a top-down managerial approach to urban development (Leitner et al., 2018). Set against this background, I attempt to illuminate the potential and pitfalls of international agencies’ involvement in the current quest for sustainable urbanization by providing much-needed case evidence on their on-the-ground policy work.

There are two reasons why this research gap warrants attention. First, as I will argue with recourse to my Angolan case, the real and potential impact of international agencies in implementing the NUA through operational work is far from negligible. Even though funding is scarce and, especially compared to state actors, minimal, international agencies enjoy, by virtue of being representatives of the international community, preferential access to governments and distinct political sway. I do not intend to minimize the importance of national or local governments, but a more complete grasp of the actors that shape the city promises, by including international agencies, to enhance our understanding of how the implementation of international agendas ultimately fails or succeeds. Second, international agencies occupy their unique position in governance because they are legitimized by national governments. For this reason, they should, normatively speaking, be subject to particular scrutiny in order to retain the credibility of what they represent and guarantee the transparency necessary to keep them accountable to their agent, the international community (Bäckstrand & Kuyper, 2017; Tallberg & Zürn, 2019). This scrutiny should not be left to internal impact evaluations alone.

In the following sections, I will try to contribute to overcoming this gap in the literature by assessing the role of two UN agencies, UN-Habitat and UNDP, in the urban domain of Angola. I will do so by tracing key policies that sought to implement parts of the NUA, outlining the agencies’ strategic approach and the challenges they confronted. The paper thus makes three contributions. It is an argument for the inclusion of international agencies into our thinking on how international agendas are implemented, it presents empirical evidence on a case where international agencies were key drivers behind NUA implementation, and, specifically for the Angola case, it revisits the genesis and fate of some key projects in the country’s urban policy development.

In the remainder of the paper, I will first elaborate in more detail on the literature around NUA implementation and the research gap. After that, I will turn to my Angolan case and outline the country’s engagement with the urban dimension of global agendas. I will then briefly present my methodology and data, which is followed by the main analysis. The paper concludes with a final discussion of the results and their implications.

Implementing the NUA

When the NUA was finally agreed on in Quito in October of 2016, it marked the culmination of an extensive and innovative process of consultation. Diverging from the established procedures that preceded Habitat I. and Habitat II., the run-up to Quito was designed to gather contributions from as many stakeholders as possible. The most significant novelties included policy input from a total of 11 regional and thematic meetings, ten policy unit papers written by 200 national experts, and consultations that at multiple stages involved subnational governments as well as civil society organizations that were represented in the General Assembly of Partners toward Habitat III (Birch, 2016; Cociña et al., 2019).

The final product was not least thought a way to localize the Agenda 2030 SDGs. As the Urban Agenda Platform, an UN-Habitat knowledge portal to monitor implementation, puts it: “The battle to achieve the SDGs will be won or lost in cities” (Urban Agenda Platform). With this

paramount importance ascribed to the city, the NUA is expected to provide much-needed guidance to the implementation of urban SDG 11 and the urban components of various other SDGs. Their close connection is outlined in [Table A1](#), as adapted from the Urban Agenda Platform (see [Appendix](#)).

Notwithstanding the NUA's ambition to accelerate SDG implementation, the agenda, like other international agreements, inevitably faces a disconnect between ambitious goals and incapacity to enforce implementation. For this reason, the question of implementation is not easily resolved (Garschagen et al., 2018; Valencia et al., 2019). While the agreement was formally adopted by national governments, it clearly impinges on local and regional politics. Aware of the importance of attributing responsibility, a twofold approach was eventually chosen that emphasizes both, "the leading role of national governments" and the "equally important contributions of subnational and local governments" (United Nations, 2017a, p. 8). These also represent two strands of research and policy discussions about how to translate global goals into local action.

The "sub-national turn" (Post, 2018, p. 116) has, without any doubt, enhanced the weight of cities and their representatives in the international arena. City-to-city cooperation has proliferated, and cities, their mayors, and city groups have become noticeable voices in international debates (Bansard et al., 2017; Davidson et al., 2019). As far as local implementation is concerned, much research revolved around so-called localization, "the process of taking into account subnational contexts ... from the setting of goals and targets to determining the means of implementation and using indicators to measure and monitor progress" (Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, 2017, p. 6). This literature has provided valuable insights into how local governments navigate complex governance environments in their pursuit of urban sustainability, how they adopt and relate to global agendas, and how, in the process, they engage with actors such as civil society organizations or universities to further local objectives (Croese et al., 2021; Fox & Macleod, 2023; Jönsson & Bexell, 2021; Valencia et al., 2019).

Regarding the national level, it has been argued that the NUA maintained merely "subsidiary roles" for local governments (Garschagen et al., 2018, p. 122) or even paved the way for a "recentralization of urban governance" (Schindler et al., 2018, p. 48). Although the national level's precise weight envisaged in the NUA may be debatable, the agenda does posit National Urban Policies (NUPs) as one of its five pillars of implementation (United Nations, 2017a). These can be defined as "a coherent set of decisions derived through a government-led process that will promote urban development for the long term" (Turok, 2014, foreword). Having been championed in the last years, NUPs have become popular policy tools. In 2021, UN-Habitat counted 162 countries with a NUP, 52% of which took an explicit form (OECD, UN-Habitat & United Nations, 2021). While it must be noted that most advocates of NUPs promote the national as a complementary force to local-level action (Sietchiping & Omwamba, 2020), the contention that "cities are far too important to be left entirely to the devices of local government" (Parnell & Simon, 2014, p. 238) has undoubtedly surged in popularity and engendered a strand of academic and policy work that considers the global urban agenda from the vantage point of national governments.

Finally, the private sector and non-governmental organizations also figure prominently in the agenda and in pronouncements regarding the effective pursuit of its goals (Herrle et al., 2017; UN-Habitat, 2020c). Organizations such as the World Economic Forum echo this sentiment and praise the potential of private entities and public-private cooperations to deliver on the NUA (World Economic Forum, 2017). The recognized role of non-state actors in implementing international agendas is further reflected in urban governance research and has found expression in work on multi-stakeholder partnerships or meta-governance arrangements, tackling questions about the circumstances under which different actors engage in such partnerships and the factors that determine their success (Beisheim & Simon, 2018; Beisheim et al., 2018).

The vast literature, which I only cursorily touched upon above, is of unquestionable value to our understanding of how the lofty ideals of global agendas can be brought to life on the ground. However,

I would contend that research does not yet provide a comprehensive picture of all actors that warrant consideration when contemplating the implementation of global agendas.

As a closer look at the NUA reveals, a key role is reserved for UN-Habitat. In this regard, the agenda reaffirms the agency's role as "focal point for sustainable urbanization" (United Nations, 2017a, p. 40) and calls upon it to support the agenda's implementation through normative as well as operational work and capacity building. Curiously, then, if international agencies such as UN-Habitat feature in research assessments, they usually do so as mere promoters of abstract norms. A rare account that focuses specifically on international agencies and policy diffusion, for instance, credits the UN-Habitat with establishing "a worldwide awareness of innovative urban policies and reforms" (Stren, 2021, p. 169) but also highlights the agency's challenge to adapt complex policy goals to highly diverse contexts. While the role of international agencies in global norm dynamics is crucial and well-established, research tends to neglect their efforts to implement global agendas in heterogeneous local conditions. This is even more surprising given that decreasing core funding across the UN development system has engendered an inadvertent inclination toward operational donor-driven work to the detriment of many agencies' normative action (Baumann, 2021). Such tendency is particularly evident for UN-Habitat, the NUA's lead agency, where limited non-earmarked funding has made the agency often act more "like a consulting agency" (United Nations, 2017b, p. 12). As UN-Habitat's overall funding remained relatively stable (or decreased, if accounting for inflation), the share of non-earmarked funding during the last decade never exceeded 10% (see Figure 1). If we truly want to understand international agencies as actors in the implementation of global agendas, it is, thus, a pertinent question how their operational work plays out on the ground.

Finally, it should be noted that the UN has, to date, conducted two evaluations of the progress made toward NUA implementation (United Nations, 2018, 2022). These reports were presented as the first two in a series of five quadrennial reports during the 20-year implementation period. The elements considered pivotal in them are largely those already outlined by research in the wake of the NUA. First, there is the issue of local monitoring and data capacity, which, as the UN reiterated in 2022, still leaves much room for improvement. A second element is the limited understanding of how exactly the agenda ought to be implemented. Here, the UN calls on its own agencies to provide "evidence-based and practical guidance for the implementation of the NUA" (United Nations, 2022, p. 93 b). Moreover, the UN report stresses the importance of fiscally strengthening local governments, supporting institutional capacity building, and increasing their involvement in formal planning processes. And finally, and of special interest for the following elaborations on the Angolan case, the UN

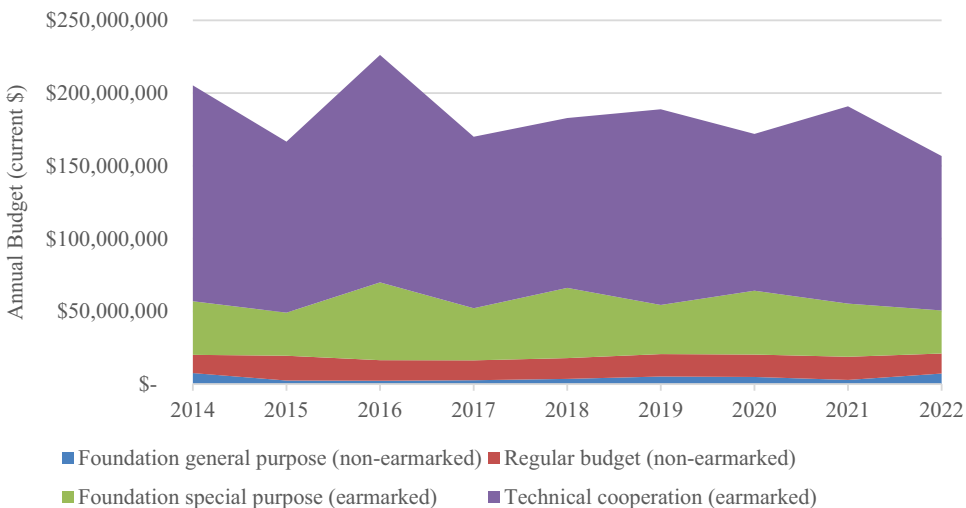


Figure 1. UN-Habitat annual budget 2014–2022. Data from annual reports (UN-Habitat, 2018a, 2020a, 2021, 2022).

emphasizes the role of NUPs in NUA implementation. The rest of the paper hopes to gauge the influence of international agencies on some of these factors.

In conclusion, it is widely acknowledged that responsibility for the implementation of global agendas cannot be borne by a single actor. Therefore, academic and policy circles have contemplated and assessed the role of various players with regards to how they can and, in practice do adapt and implement the ideal set out by the NUA and other international agendas. But while national and local governments as well as non-governmental entities have received considerable attention, international agencies have mostly been overlooked as actors beyond their role in norm diffusion. This is despite the fact that a different understanding of their mandate is articulated in the NUA itself and that their funding structure reveals, intentionally or unintentionally, a prevalence of operational work. To illuminate the underexplored role of international agencies in implementing the NUA, I will now turn to Angola.

Urban Angola and international agendas

In this section, I will briefly introduce the larger context of urban development in Angola and discuss the country’s engagement with the urban element of international agendas.

Angola’s urban history since independence in 1975 has been marked by war and reconstruction. The civil war that followed the departure of the Portuguese colonial power only saw brief interruptions until its conclusion in 2002 and pushed Angola’s population to the cities in a process of rapid and unplanned urbanization. The subsequent peace period, coupled with abundant oil revenues and Chinese loans, allowed large-scale investments to revive Angola’s debilitated infrastructure and support its capital’s ambition of becoming a “global city” (Cain, 2017; Udelsmann Rodrigues & Frias, 2016). Angola lived through exceptional GDP growth until 2008 and a building frenzy concentrated in Luanda that lasted until another drop of the oil price in 2014 (Udelsmann Rodrigues, 2022a). Notwithstanding large infrastructure improvements since independence, dwelling in Angola’s cities today remains a challenge for many, with estimates of informal housing between 40% and 60% and an often insufficient provision of basic services (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2019; Tvedten et al., 2018). Finally, the distinct genesis of Angola’s urban system has precipitated a remarkable dominance of its capital city, Luanda, unrivaled in demographic, economic, and political terms (Tjarks, 2024). Moreover, Angola remains a politically highly centralized country, a fact whose significance can hardly be overstated given the important role attributed to local actors and subnational governments for NUA implementation. Amid this difficult urban

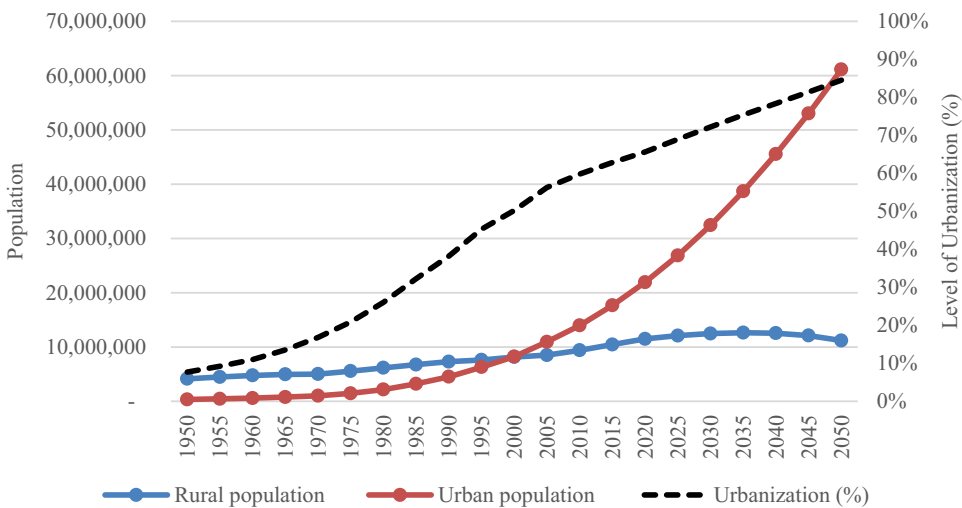


Figure 2. Demographic development of Angola 1950–2050. Data from United Nations (2019).

environment and projections that see the country at 50 million inhabitants and 80% urban in 2050 (see [Figure 2](#)), Angola's future is inevitably intertwined with the development of its cities.

Angola is committed to several international agendas, such as the Paris Declaration, the Agenda 2030, and the New Urban Agenda. Before delving deeper into the country-level implementation of the latter, it is a worthwhile undertaking to briefly consider the submissions and reports prepared by the Angolan government in the context of these agendas and see how they speak to the country's urban development.

A signatory to the Paris Agreement, the Angolan government has submitted Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and passed a national climate change strategy (Governo de Angola, 2017, 2021a). Both have vital links to the country's urban trajectory. First, while in terms of mitigation Angola is not a large emitter of greenhouse gases (<1mt CO₂e per capita), its economy is built entirely on oil, accounting for 95% of exports, 50% of fiscal revenue, and 35% of GDP (International Monetary Fund, 2024). Pressured by a potential phase-out of fossil fuels on international markets, Angola's hopes lie not least with the vibrancy of its cities and their promise to diversify the economy. To this end, the government has long adopted a growth-pole agenda in national development plans (Governo de Angola, 2018; World Bank, 2022). Additionally, the government's climate-related publications pledge to improve sustainability in urban fields such as transport, waste collection, and the building sector. Second, climate adaptation is crucial to Angola's cities since it is in the country's urban settlements where most of its population lives and where increased precipitation variability and droughts are guaranteed to strain the adaptability of cities that lack climate-sensitive urban planning (Carvalho et al., 2017; Udelsmann Rodrigues, 2019). Angola's climate change strategy and NDCs recognize these urban challenges.

As far as the Agenda 2030 is concerned, Angola has submitted a Voluntary National Review (VNR) to report on its progress toward the SDGs (Governo de Angola, 2021b). While, as argued above, most SDGs have urban implications, a brief consideration of SDG 11 shall suffice here. In this respect, the Angolan review highlights the problems of informality, rapid growth, and poor sanitation in many of its cities. On the other hand, the review stresses policy efforts that seek to alleviate these ills. For instance, governmental investments in infrastructure, the construction of planned towns outside of the main urban areas, so-called "centralidades" (see Udelsmann Rodrigues, 2022b), and a National Housing Policy planned to be developed with the UN-Habitat are mentioned. I will return to the latter below. In any case, the report reaffirms the New Urban Agenda as the "fundamental guide for the promotion of sustainable cities and communities in Angola" (Governo de Angola, 2021b, p. 81).

Finally, Angola has been part of UN-Habitat's governing council since 2016 and, in the run up to the Habitat III. conference, prepared, assisted by the NGO "Development Workshop," a national report on its urban development and progress since Habitat II. in 1996 (Governo de Angola, 2016). In line with the urban turn, this report is the first in-detail portrait produced by the Angolan government that focuses exclusively on the development of its cities. It gives an overview of some of the most pressing issues of urban Angola, details Angola's urban policy development, and contains a compilation of the available statistical information on the country's settlements. As expressed in the 2014 decree that established a committee tasked with the report's elaboration, the Angolan government's intention was to strengthen its relationship with UN-Habitat ahead of Habitat III. and "benefit from the advanced research, training and monitoring techniques for building sustainable cities offered for free by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme"¹ (Despacho Presidencial n° 18/14, 2014).

At this point, it is important to note that Angola should not be mistaken for a frontrunner when it comes to global agendas. As it has been pointed out, there is "little local awareness of the SDGs" (Croese, Dominique, et al., 2021, p. 8), Angola's 2021 Voluntary National Review was submitted comparatively late, and, so far, none of its cities have presented a Voluntary Local Review. Furthermore, Angola has refrained from engaging in the preparatory process by submitting written commentaries on the policy papers presented and discussed in the run-up to Quito (Habitat3). What

Angola's publications in this context show, however, is a recognition of the urban nature of some of the country's developmental challenges and a commitment to tackle them in the terms laid out by international agendas.

The question that shall occupy me in the remainder of this paper is the following: Given Angola's official commitment to the global urban agenda and its explicit desire to collaborate with international agencies, how have these agencies, the agendas' vanguards, pursued implementation on the ground?

Methods and data

To tackle this question, I will trace the policy work of two UN agencies in Angola. The natural candidate is the agency tasked with accompanying the NUA's implementation, UN-Habitat. This will be complemented by UNDP and its efforts to promote and implement participatory budgeting (PB), a key tool to achieve the type of participatory governance outlined in the NUA.

UN-Habitat, headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya, is a product of the first United Nations conference on human settlements in Vancouver in 1976 when concerns for the developmental impact of urbanization first reached the world stage. In the aftermath of the conference, the UN General Assembly founded the UN Commission on Human Settlements together with its governing body, the UN Centre for Human Settlement, in 1977. In 2002, 6 years after Habitat II in Istanbul, the commission was elevated to a stand-alone UN programme called the United Nations Programme for Human Settlements and became the NUA's lead agency following Habitat III. As will be discussed below, its most recent engagement in Angola goes back to a visit of UN-Habitat's then-executive director in 2008, a subsequent memorandum of understanding, and, finally, the inauguration of an UN-Habitat country office in 2015.

The second agency to be considered here, UNDP, was established in 1965 by merging the United Nations Expanded Programme of Technical Assistance and the United Nations Special Fund. It constitutes the main developmental vehicle of the United Nations. UNDP has been active in Angola since 1977 and, in 2024, had a country-level budget of \$83 million. Notably, the large share of this budget stems from the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria. Other UNDP priorities in Angola have long struggled with a challenging funding environment (UNDP Country Programme Evaluation, 2022).

In the following analysis, I will approach the two agencies under consideration from a policy analysis perspective (May & Wildavsky, 1979). This allows me to structure my elaborations according to the classic stages of the policy cycle: agenda setting, policy formulation, decision making, implementation, evaluation. Employing the policy cycle as a heuristic in that way does not mean to indicate a linear process, an assumption often targeted by its critics (see Weible & Jenkins-Smith, 2016). It is, however, an apt perspective to analytically differentiate an actor's influence in different moments, regardless of whether these are neatly separated or not. In my case, it enables me to clearly delineate and compare the agencies' varied interactions with Angolan public administration during the entire policy process.

In order to access the necessary information, I have conducted semi-structured interviews with staff from UN-Habitat and UNDP as well as with members of Angolan public administration and Angolan NGOs knowledgeable about the policies considered. Given the relatively small size of the UN-Habitat and UNDP teams that worked on the analyzed topics during the considered period, it was possible to interview almost all of the relevant personnel from the agencies' side. In a snowball sampling approach, the agencies' staff then pointed to their most important contacts in ministries and NGOs. These interviews were crucial to understanding the agencies' work and its effects, especially in the absence of detailed evaluation reports.² Moreover, to arrive at a sufficiently detailed reconstruction of their engagement in Angola and triangulate information wherever possible, I further draw on related publications by UN agencies, the Angolan government, and newspaper reports. Important to note, all interviewees have given their written consent to participate in this study and to be quoted under the condition of anonymity. Finally, it should be acknowledged that the author's own positionality as

a researcher as well as the research focus on international agencies could have produced undue bias toward the agencies' perspective to the detriment of the view held by the Angolan administration. In order to minimize this risk, interviews have been conducted with members of all ministries and ministerial bodies involved with the relevant policies as well as with Angolan NGOs. Additionally, subjective evaluations by interviewees are clearly indicated as such, while contradictory information given by different participants is presented with both diverging viewpoints. I will start my analysis with UN-Habitat.

UN-Habitat and UNDP in Angola

As mentioned above, UN-Habitat's involvement in Angola goes back to an official visit in 2008 and an agreement in the following year in which the Angolan government pledged \$680,000 for the establishment of an UN-Habitat country office (UN-Habitat, 2009). At the time, it was reported that the Angolan government requested UN-Habitat assistance in the areas of "housing (social housing and finance) and land reform" (UN-Habitat, 2009). In a 2011 memorandum of understanding, the Angola government committed to cover the costs of UN-Habitat's office for a period of 5 years and provide annual funding for its activities in the country (UN-Habitat, 2018b). Initial funding was made available in 2014 and is included in that year's Angolan general budget with 65,000,000 Kwanzas (Governo de Angola, Ministério das Finanças, 2014). After the first payment, Nairobi-based UN-Habitat staff began their work, while the Luanda office opened in October of the following year. It was inaugurated in the presence of Angola's then Minister of Urbanism and Housing, José Silva, and its purpose declared to be the development of a National Urban Policy, the "National Policy of Spatial Planning and Urbanism"³ (PNOTU; Portal de Angola, 2015). At this point, the agenda for the following policy formulation had apparently been broadened beyond the previously communicated support on housing and land reform. This is in line with former UN-Habitat staff who describe the NUP as the agency's "main product" (Interview UN-Habitat, October 11, 2022) in Angola. For UN-Habitat, the PNOTU and the National Housing Policy constituted, as their country document for Angola between 2018 and 2022 puts it, "the two fundamental documents to start the implementation of the NUA in the country during the next 20 years"⁴ (UN-Habitat, 2018b, p. 11).

The fact that UN-Habitat's engagement in Angola was explicitly solicited and financed by the Angolan government, the latter being repeatedly emphasized by UN-Habitat staff, hints at the agency's potential influence in matters of urban policy beyond mere norm conception on the international stage. Because the NUA itself is a rather all-encompassing list of aspirations and can only serve as a broad guide for policy makers, its translation to the national level constitutes an additional moment of agenda setting. In this case, one may suspect a considerable UN-Habitat influence behind the fact that policy efforts eventually assumed the objective of creating a NUP, given, as outlined above, the UN's strong global advocacy for this type of policy. However, the results in Angola came up short of what was envisaged.

Having moved into the Luanda office in October 2015, UN-Habitat developed a diagnostic of the country's legal, institutional, and programmatic (i.e., socioeconomic, spatial, and financial) urban environment. While UN-Habitat clearly led this stage of policy formulation, it also engaged in frequent consultations with the ministry responsible for urban development, at the time called "Ministry of Spatial Planning and Urbanism"⁵ (MINOTH). Eventually, the agency presented a detailed recommendation document to the Angolan side (UN-Habitat, 2018c). Invoking key elements of the NUA in each chapter, the numerous recommendations were structured along seven pillars: Territorial and urban planning, land management, municipal finance and prosperity of cities, social inclusion and eradication of poverty in cities, territorial and urban sustainability and resilience, territorial and urban governance and management, and territorial and urban legislation. Each chapter also stipulated channels for implementation, some in the form of legislative amendments, for instance, advocating for a new "General Law of Spatial Planning and Urbanism"⁶ (LBGOTU), others relying on the autonomous bodies of administration that UN-Habitat wished to strengthen in order to improve institutional memory in the

urban domain, most notably the “National Institute of Spatial Planning and Urbanism”⁷ (INOTU). The UN-Habitat country-level document, approved in 2017, dates the delivery of these recommendations to 2016 and states that, at the time, UN-Habitat was in the process of supporting MINOTH in the policy’s finalization (UN-Habitat, 2018b). However, it appears that it was at this point of policy formulation that the process stalled instead of advancing to the stage of decision-making.

Crucially, annual payments from the Angolan government, stipulated in the original agreement for 5 years, ceased after the first payment, and no funding was made available after 2014 (Interview UN-Habitat, January 31, 2023, January 11, 2024). Only in 2018 did the Angolan general budget again include funding for UN-Habitat, at the time 13 million kwanzas (roughly between \$40,000 and \$80,000, given currency fluctuations throughout that year) (Governo de Angola, Ministério das Finanças, 2018). This amount, according to UN-Habitat staff, was not only insufficient to finance the agency’s operations but also never fully released (Interview UN-Habitat, October 11, 2022, January 11, 2024). The dearth of funding led UN-Habitat to negotiate a second agreement with the Angolan government that included free-of-charge use of the office space and provision of staff housing. While UN-Habitat continued to use the Lunda office under this arrangement as a regional hub servicing different countries until 2019, the PNOTU never advanced beyond the UN’s recommendations. It is this what, in the words of former UN-Habitat staff, constitutes the “biggest frustration” of their work in Angola (Interview UN-Habitat, January 11, 2024).

Inquired about the reasons for the policy’s unsatisfactory fate, members of UN-Habitat involved with its development point primarily to the personalization of policy support within Angolan bureaucracy and the internal reshuffle that took place during the 2017 transition from long-time president José Eduardo dos Santos to João Lourenço (Interview UN-Habitat, January 11, 2024, January 24, 2023, December 20, 2022). When the new administration reorganized ministerial ranks, the PNOTU is believed to have been among the projects that fell out of favor. In this case, a final decision against advancing with the PNOTU might actually have been reached internally, albeit without clearly communicating such toward UN-Habitat. Regarding the role of UN-Habitat’s policy recommendations, staff interviews also reveal a clear erosion of communication between UN-Habitat and the Angolan administration during this time. A former UN-Habitat member laments, for instance, that the UN’s recommendation document was, at some point, internally renamed as if constituting the PNOTU itself (Interview UN-Habitat, October 11, 2022). A presentation by the then National Director of Spatial Planning and Urbanism as late as 2020, however, correctly presents the document’s content as a “foundation for the elaboration of the PNOTU”⁸ (Da António, 2020). Confronted with the nebulous fate of the PNOTU, a current member of Angola’s MINOPUH recalls it simply as something orchestrated from the top of the ministry, in which interest was eventually lost (Interview MINOPUH, March 9, 2023). In any case, the 2017 UN-Habitat recommendations appear to have neither served as a guideline for implementation nor as a foundation for further policy development. Current INOTU staff indicates that interest in the PNOTU has recently been revived, but that, tellingly, funds made available to this end were intended to entrust the policy’s elaboration to a private consultancy (personal communication INOTU, December 29, 2023).

The second key element that was thought to start the implementation of the NUA in Angola was the National Housing Policy. Faced with the funding default in Angola, this project was facilitated through the government of Bahrain that, in 2018, provided around five million dollars to UN-Habitat for the design of a housing policy in five countries, among them Angola⁹ (Interview UN-Habitat November 1, 2024, January 24, 2023). According to the UN-Habitat country document for 2018–2022, its objective was to support MINOTH in the PNH’s development, aiming to “optimize the impact of the National Policy for Housing and Urbanism”¹⁰ (UN-Habitat, 2018b, p. 31), a 2008 policy that once famously projected the construction of one million houses but struggled to provide accessible housing for less affluent Angolans (see Cain, 2020; Croese, 2012). The document further lists the support of zoning, infrastructure, social housing, and auto-construction as the policy’s goals.

According to UN-Habitat staff and Angolan news coverage, first conversations started in late 2018 followed by the policy’s official announcement at the National Urban Forum of the same year (Interview

UN-Habitat, January 1, 2023). In the following year, a diagnosis of the housing sector was conducted by the NGO “Development Workshop,” and its results were discussed in various rounds with stakeholders and citizens. The initial steps of the policy were subsequently presented at the World Urban Forum in Abu Dhabi in 2020 and circulated in the leading Angolan newspaper and in foreign press outlets (DW, 2020; *Jornal de Angola*, 2020). In Abu Dhabi, the high-level representative sent by MINOTH emphasized the policy’s links to the SDGs and described its ambition as to guarantee “equal access to housing for everyone through different forms that are inclusive, transparent, equal and that promote sustainable economic development”¹¹ (*Jornal de Angola*, 2020). At this point, the general tone of the policy agenda is in line with the NUA. But despite the apparent enthusiasm, policy development took a break during the COVID-19 pandemic and, as UN-Habitat staff recalls, due to another internal reshuffle in the ministry (Interview UN-Habitat, January 24, 2023). Finally, in 2021, the process was reinitiated, policy formulation being again led by UN-Habitat, and a policy document delivered to the government at the end of the year for internal revision. Not least as a result of the lacking on-the-ground representation in Angola, UN-Habitat has since not been informed of any advances regarding the approval or implementation of the policy (Interview UN-Habitat, January 24, 2023). “Epito Reporter,” an Angolan news portal, took up the topic in early 2022 and criticized that since its announcement in Abu Dhabi, no information had been made public regarding the policy’s fate. The report then went on to speculate that the housing policy may not be a feasible undertaking without the long overdue establishment of “autarquias” (elected local governments; Epito Repórter, 2022). Despite not being able to make definite judgments regarding its current status, one may conclude that the policy’s prospect of implementation remains as unclear to the general public as it is to UN-Habitat.

The story of this second pillar of UN-Habitat’s work in Angola strongly resembles the agency’s earlier experience with the PNOTU. Relying on direction cooperation with the Angolan administration and leading policy formulation, early advances and the NUA framed agenda were initially met with enthusiasm. Yet, after the delivery of the technical document, communication with the Angolan side quickly deteriorated and, coupled with the loss of its local office in Luanda, left UN-Habitat bereft of the capacity to accompany the next steps in the policy process.

For UN-Habitat, the PNOTU and the PNH were undoubtedly the cornerstones of its agenda in Angola. Yet, the strategy evident in these two projects, direct collaboration and agency-led policy formulation, was not the only means employed for NUA implementation. In conversations with UN-Habitat staff, it is, in particular, the communicative part of their work that is more positively remembered than the fate of the main policies. Even though public outreach and communication of the mandate was not an explicit element on UN-Habitat’s agenda, personal contacts enabled the agency early on to secure working relationships with Angolan news media (Interview UN-Habitat, January 24, 2023). This led to the publication of an extensive interview with UN-Habitat’s local representative in the foremost state-owned newspaper *Jornal de Angola* as well as numerous pieces on UN-Habitat’s work in other outlets (*Jornal de Angola*, 2016, 2017; *Novo Jornal*, 2017). Later, the country office assigned a staff member to disseminate the agency’s agenda and work through social media. This found expression, for instance, during the so-called Urban October when several events for the general public and expert audiences were organized, and the head of the mission had multiple speaking engagements (Interview UN-Habitat, January 31, 2023). As UN-Habitat staff recalls, some of these events were reported on the front pages of Angolan newspapers, which, in their view, amounted to a “game changer” (Interview UN-Habitat, December 20, 2022). Moreover, the promotion of the NUA was accelerated by the UN-Habitat’s active engagement with the National Urban Forums, an event first organized in 2007 as a cooperation between the ministry and the NGO-run Luanda Urban Poverty Project (LUPP) (UK Parliament, International Development Committee, 2009). Bringing together governmental entities, civil society, NGOs, and others, the last urban forum to date took place in 2018 (Interview NGO, June 24, 2023). This latest edition also generated country-wide attention for the NUA as it was held under the theme “The NUA and state reform”¹² (*Jornal de Angola*, 2018). The forum culminated in a final declaration that made explicit demands to the government. Among other things, the declaration called for the timely implementation of some of the key pillars of the NUA and

demanded the finalization of the PNOTU and the PNH (V Fórum Urbano Nacional, 2018). This example, not least, suggests a potential avenue for international agencies to rally support and increase NUA awareness as a way to influence the stage of decision-making that appeared to lie beyond the limits of UN-Habitat's political sway in Angola. While many of the mentioned initiatives are yet to be picked up again after the pandemic and UN-Habitat's departure, their impact, in the view of staff, reveals a critical shortcoming in their country-level agenda when it comes to public outreach. As a former country team member critically remarks: "People don't believe in communication. They think communication is a less important work . . . I don't know what happens in the mind of some of my colleagues, but they really have some prejudice on communication issues" (Interview UN-Habitat, December 20, 2022).

The analysis of UN-Habitat's work in Angola since 2015 can be beneficially complemented and contrasted with a brief assessment of UNDP's efforts to implement participatory budgeting in the country. UN-Habitat hails PB as one of the most successful governance innovations in the past 25 years and promotes it as a tool of participatory governance to accelerate implementation of the Agenda 2030 and the NUA (UN-Habitat, 2020b). While different logics may underpin PB conception, there can be no doubt that the Brazilian-born practice of putting parts of local budgets up to public debate has become a governance mechanism with global appeal (Cabannes & Lipietz, 2018; Dias et al., 2019). In Angola, establishing PB was, for the first time, declared a political goal in the National Development Plan for the period 2018–2022 (Governo de Angola, 2018). Around that time, UNDP proposed technical support for elaborating PB legislation to the Angolan government. As UNDP staff recalls, it was the transition from President Dos Santos to João Lourenço and a subsequent presidential pronouncement in favor of PB that shifted the tide and decidedly accelerated policy progress (Interview UNDP, September 29, 2023). For UNDP, PB was also a welcomed opportunity to support tentative decentralization and improve local service delivery after its efforts on decentralization had confronted considerable political resistance and scarce funding over the years (UNDP Country Programme Evaluation, 2022).

Having signed a cooperation agreement with the "Ministry of Territorial Administration"¹³ (MAT), UNDP worked with parliament and the Angolan government on the design of the policy. Although the agency's ideas did not prevail in all matters of policy design, PB was eventually enshrined in law in 2019 (Decreto Presidencial n° 234/19, n° 235/19, 2019). Following the passage of the presidential decrees, UNDP further accompanied the implementation process of bringing PB to life. The cooperation between UNDP and MAT projected a direct implementation model in which UNDP staff, together with MAT, organized the establishment and training of technical committees in Angola's municipalities (Interview UNDP, April 24, 2023). This proceeded in multiple steps: 60 technical committees were established in 2020, 180 in 2021, and in 2022, it was reported that technical committees were successfully set up in all of Angola's 164 municipalities (Interview UNDP August 25, 2023; Governo de Angola, Ministério da Administração do Território, 2020). At the same time, UNDP contracted two NGOs "Action for Rural Development and Environment"¹⁴ (ADRA) and the "Angolan Institute of Electoral Systems and Democracy"¹⁵ (IASSED) and entrusted them with the organization of PB's second pillar, consultative hearing forums on municipal budget priorities.¹⁶ These were conducted for the first time in 2021 and culminated in a detailed report on local citizen preferences (Governo de Angola, 2022). Afterward, the NGO-MAT cooperation on the hearing forums continued and entered its third edition in 2023 (Jornal de Angola, 2023a). Meanwhile, UNDP continues to work with MAT on further improving the transparency and accountability of Angola's PB process (Interview UNDP, August 7, 2023). This means that UNDP has been able to accompany the entire PB policy process, advocating for PB before its inception, working on policy design during the conceptual stages, pursuing direct implementation in cooperation with local NGOs and the Angolan administration, and, finally, contributing to the ongoing evaluation of the policy.

As far as the challenges that UNDP confronted are concerned, staff members lament that an anticipated take-over of the hearing forums' costs did not take place as planned. Still, UNDP was able to sign a second cooperation agreement and bear the costs of continuing the implementation process

in cooperation with local NGOs. Its uninterrupted local presence in Luanda also enabled the agency to maintain constant exchange with its partners at MAT (Interview UNDP, August 7, 2023). This has produced a situation where the development of PB in Angola is, despite an uncertain future considering, for instance, limited funding, accompanied by ample media attention and unabated enthusiasm in government communication (Diogo, 2023; Esteves, 2023; *Jornal de Angola*, 2023b). For one Angolan expert, it amounts to “for the first time the opportunity to have a situation where decision-making power about some public funds go to the citizens that live in a certain municipality”¹⁷ (Calundungo, 2021). As for the influence of UNDP, a current member of MAT working on PB appreciates their contribution, saying: “If it was not for the partnership with UNDP . . . , I do not know whether we would have PB today. It was really thanks to this partnership that we were able to implement PB in Angola”¹⁸ (Interview MAT, February 27, 2024).

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to illuminate the operational work of two UN agencies and their role in implementing the NUA in Angola.

Since the country office’s inauguration in 2015, UN-Habitat has, first and foremost, pursued two key policies, the PNOTU and the PNH. Both policies are examples of collaborative governance approaches, soft and direct, in the classification of Abbott et al. (2015), and they have come to share a similar fate. Initially, the cooperation agreement between the ministry and the agency was received enthusiastically on the Angolan side and disseminated widely in the media. The UN then led the policy formulation process and developed preliminary documents intended for internal revision and preparation of the required legislation. However, the revision process stalled, and the policies never matured. While internal disarrangement in the Angolan administration was certainly a factor in this development, UN-Habitat itself has been unable to accompany the process as a result of its lost on-the-ground representation and shortcomings in funding. In contrast, UN-Habitat’s outreach and communication efforts, while not formally part of their mandate, afforded greater visibility to the NUA. National Urban Forums, where UN-Habitat acted as orchestrator bringing together public and private actors, created an additional space for discussions of the country’s urban development that, as evident in the final declaration of the 2018 forum, evolved toward gathering and articulating concrete demands to the government. Complementary activities such as the Urban October or the Urban Circuit further permitted conveying the NUA beyond governmental circles.

UNDP’s endeavor to establish participatory budgeting in Angola has, so far, proven to have a more lasting impact than UN-Habitat’s main policy projects. UNDP seized a favorable political environment, relied on close collaboration with MAT, and, crucially, was able to accompany the entire PB policy process. The local uptake of these efforts was further enhanced by delegating parts of the implementation to local NGOs that successfully carried the second tier of PB to Angola’s provinces. Unlike UN-Habitat, UNDP was able to overcome a failed financial take-over by the Angolan government and proceeded to entrench PB in the country. It has since taken root in Angola, with engagement of local communities, consistent political support, and far-reaching media coverage.

Four main conclusions can be drawn from the Angolan experience:

First, despite being a neglected element of research on the implementation of international agendas, the country-level technical cooperation of international agencies can have a considerable influence on urban policy that goes beyond their role in norm conception on the global stage. In the Angolan context of weak institutional capacity and political centralization, the most tangible efforts for NUA implementation were not driven by national or local actors but by international agencies. Having formally subscribed to international agendas, the Angolan government turned to UN-Habitat to aid country-level implementation who, in turn, were able to put key NUA elements on the Angolan agenda. UN-Habitat as well as UNDP have led the policy formulation stage in projects that, at least initially, could count on high-level political backing and were thought to guide elements of the country’s urban policy for years to come. While UN-Habitat then encountered difficulties in

encouraging final decision-making on policy adoption, UNDP has played a significant part in the development of participatory governance in Angola. These experiences point to a vital role for international agencies in supporting NUA implementation in countries with limited institutional capacities as long as their efforts build on multi-stakeholder engagement, local capacity building, and increased local awareness. These factors, in turn, demand on-the-ground representation, continuous exchange with local partners, and a multifaceted approach to the mandate.

Second, the funding structure of international agencies shapes local activities and can obstruct a more diversified approach to NUA implementation. As was the case even more for UN-Habitat than for UNDP, its work was dependent on direct funding by the Angolan government while the agency struggled to mobilize resources for other projects envisioned in their proposed country portfolio. Outreach activities and communication, which are, as the UN holds in their reports on NUA implementation, important success factors to raise awareness, as well as orchestration governance, such as in the National Urban Forums, were a laudable effort. Yet, they were more a byproduct of staff members' personal inclination than an official strategy backed by separate resources. Non-earmarked funding at the country level could contribute to putting NUA implementation on a more stable and diversified footing and facilitate the "normative work, convening, advocacy, and innovation" that has been described as the UN's "comparative advantage" (Baumann, 2021, p. 356).

Third, on-the-ground representation and continuous exchange with local actors are essential for effective NUA implementation. Only local ownership of initiatives can ensure political uptake and guarantee that the success or failure of a policy is not entirely dependent on the actor that may have instigated the project. For UN-Habitat, this became painfully clear when the loss of its country office occurred at the stage of policy formulation, when it had not yet succeeded in creating sufficient buy-in from the Angolan administration and other local actors. Communicative channels quickly weakened, and the policy process stalled. In contrast, UNDP's local presence, despite limited funding, allowed the agency to foster close collaboration with MAT and join forces with local NGOs in the process of setting up PB infrastructure. While UNDP still accompanies the evaluation of the policy, its future does not appear to hinge on the agency.

Fourth, as far as the Angolan case is concerned, one may conclude that the country's fragile economic reliance on the price of oil jeopardized initiatives for NUA implementation despite apparent political will. Declining export earnings due to a lower-than-expected oil price and the associated currency depreciation were the main factors behind spending cuts to which the initially agreed UN-Habitat funding fell victim. Personalized policy support coupled with internal reshuffles further complicated policy conception and implementation for both the PNOTU and the PNH. This experience not least illustrates UN-Habitat's initial critique of limited policy continuity in Angola, which the agency had already highlighted in the PNOTU as it sought to strengthen autonomous bodies of administration less prone to suffer from the vicissitudes of ministerial politics (UN-Habitat, 2018c, p. 100).

Currently, only 16% of SDGs are on track to be met by 2030. In this regard, urban SDG11 and the sustainable urbanization of the NUA are certainly no exception (United Nations, 2024). The question who can and who should implement the NUA will, therefore, occupy policy circles beyond the 2030 horizon. As I have argued here, the role of international agencies in that endeavor is not sufficiently captured by norm-setting on the international stage alone. In the Angolan context, international agencies drove NUA implementation and decidedly shaped policy trajectories. Further research on their on-the-ground efforts will hopefully contribute to enhancing the effectiveness and transparency of these self-declared trailblazers of international agendas.

Notes

1. "Usufruir de técnicas avançadas de pesquisa, treinamento e controlo da edificação de cidades sustentáveis que oferece o Programa das Nações Unidas para os Assentamentos Humanos a título gratuito." All translations are by the author with the Portuguese original in footnotes. The text uses Portuguese acronyms.

2. In case of UNDP, it was possible to consult three independent evaluations of the country office (2005–2011, 2015–2017, and 2020–2022). UNDP has had an evaluation division since 1967 and regularly assess its country programmes in Independent Country Programme Evaluations (formerly Assessments of Developmental Results) since 2002. UN-Habitat only opened an independent evaluation unit in 2012, which produces evaluation reports for selected programs. So far, there are no publicly available assessments of the agency’s work in Angola.
3. “Política Nacional de Ordenamento do Território e Urbanismo” (PNOTU).
4. “Os dois documentos fundamentais para iniciar a implementação da Nova Agenda Urbana no país durante os próximos 20 anos.”
5. “Ministério do Ordenamento do Território e Urbanismo” (MINOTH). It should be noted that Angola’s urban ministry underwent a number of organizational changes throughout the last decade, underlining a certain ministerial volatility. In 2012, responsibility for urbanism and housing was transferred to a self-standing “Ministério do Urbanismo e Habitação” (MINUHA) [Ministry of Urbanism and Housing], which in 2017 was renamed as MINOTH and in 2020 rejoined with the ministry for public works as “Ministério das Obras Públicas e Ordenamento do Território” (MINOPOT) [Ministry of public works and spatial planning]. Since 2022, the ministry is known as the “Ministério das Obras Públicas, Urbanismo e Habitação” (MINOPUH) [Ministry of public works, urbanism and housing].
6. “Lei de Bases Gerais no Ordenamento do Território e Urbanismo” (LBGOTU).
7. “Instituto Nacional de Ordenamento do Território e Urbanismo” (INOTU).
8. “Bases para a elaboração da PNOTU.”
9. The other countries were Bahrain, Paraguay, Bulgaria, and Malaysia.
10. “Optimizar o impacto do programa nacional de habitação e urbanização.”
11. “Acesso à habitação adequada e condigna para todos, por meio de diferentes modalidades, de forma inclusiva, transparente, equitativa e que promovam o desenvolvimento económico e sustentável.”
12. “A nova agenda urbana e a reforma do estado.”
13. “Ministério da Administração do Território” (MAT).
14. “Ação para o Desenvolvimento Rural e Ambiente” (ADRA).
15. “Instituto Angolano de Sistemas Eleitorais e Democracia” (IASSED).
16. PB in Angola consists of two pillars. The “Orçamento Participativo do Múncipe” [Participatory Budget of the Citizen] allows the municipal community led by a technical committee to freely decide on the application of 25 million Kwanzas per year. The “Orçamento Participativo da Administração Municipal” [Participatory Budget of the Municipal Administration] gives the community the opportunity to voice their preferences for local budget allocation in organized hearing forums. See Kituxi (2023).
17. “Pela primeira vez, a oportunidade de ter uma situação em que o poder de decisão, sobre algumas verbas públicas a serem gastas passa . . . para os cidadãos, que vivem num dado município.”
18. “Se não fosse o apoio do PNUD . . . , não sei se até hoje teríamos a implementação ou a institucionalização do Orçamento Participativo. Foi graças a essa parceria que conseguimos, na verdade, implementar o Orçamento Participativo.”

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About the author

Daniel Tjarks is a PhD candidate in Development Studies at the University of Lisbon. His research interests include urban development, governance, and political economy.

ORCID

Daniel Tjarks  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0653-4161>

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Appendix

Table A1. Nexus between SDG 11, other SDGs and the NUA. Adapted from: urban agenda platform.

SDG 11 Target	Linkages to other SDGs	Linkages to NUA paragraphs
11.1 By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums		31, 32, 33, 34, 46, 61, 70, 99, 107, 108, 110, 112
11.2 By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations . . .		48, 50, 54, 113, 114, 115
11.3 By 2030, enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management in all countries		29, 39, 40, 41, 42, 92, 149, 155, 156, 157, 160
11.4 Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage		38, 63, 66, 121, 122
11.5 By 2030, significantly reduce the number of deaths and the number of people affected and substantially decrease the direct economic losses relative to global gross domestic product caused by disasters, including water-related disasters, with a focus on protecting the poor and people in vulnerable situations		65, 68, 69, 71, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 119, 123
11.6 By 2030, reduce the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, including by paying special attention to air quality and municipal and other waste management		65, 68, 69, 71, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 119, 123
11.7 By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities		37, 53, 55, 56, 67, 100, 109
11.a Support positive economic, social and environmental links between urban, peri-urban and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning		87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 158, 159
11.b By 2020, substantially increase the number of cities . . . adopting and implementing integrated policies and plans toward inclusion, resource efficiency, mitigation and adaptation to climate change, resilience to disasters, and . . . disaster risk management . . .		77, 78, 86, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98
11.c Support least developed countries, including through financial and technical assistance, in building sustainable and resilient buildings utilizing local materials.		131, 132, 133, 139, 140, 144, 149, 151