

Multi-level Government and localising SDGS in Africa

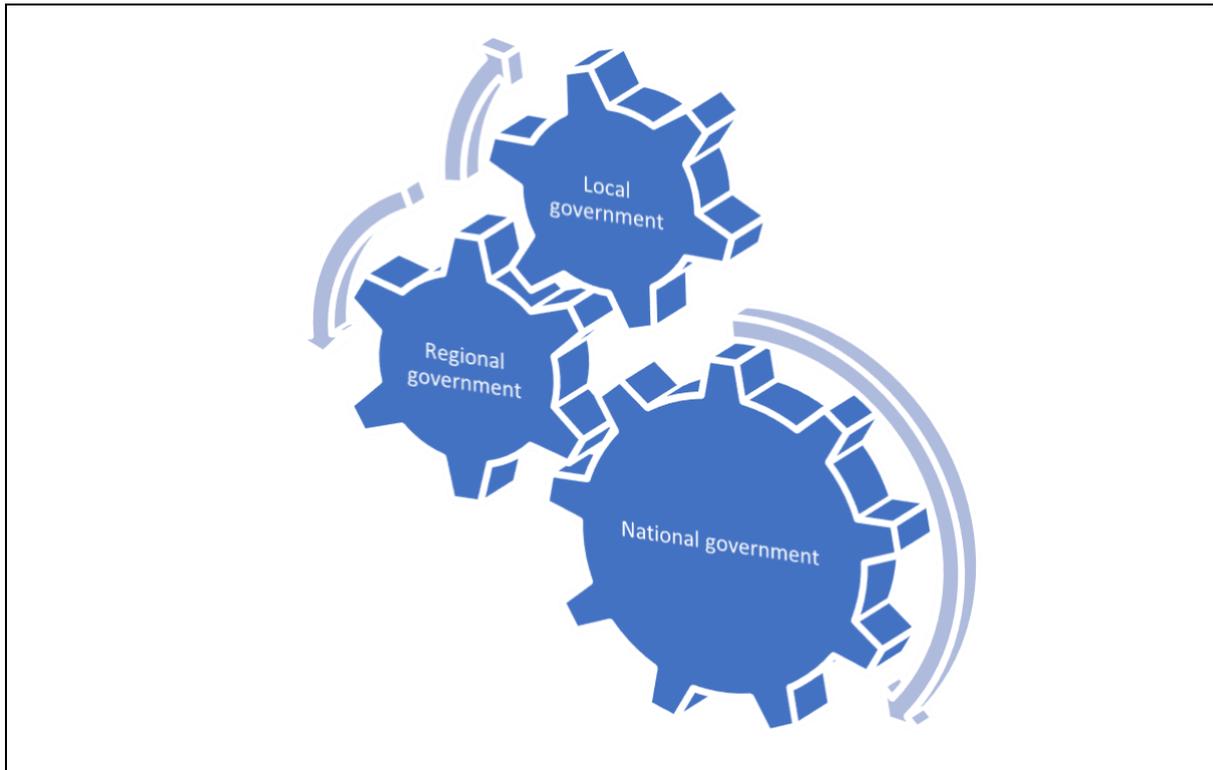
1. Introduction

This brief outlines the critical role of multi-level government (MLG) as a catalyst for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with a specific focus on the African context. The integrated nature of both the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the African Union's Agenda 2063 necessitates a cohesive approach across all government levels. The brief begins by establishing a foundational understanding of MLG, then explore its potential as a territorial solution to democracy, development and national integration challenges. Drawing on authoritative evidence from the UN and other key agencies, the brief makes a compelling case for MLG as an accelerator of SDG localization. Finally, the brief provides a set of practical, evidence-based guidelines from the OECD to help practitioners strengthen their MLG frameworks and drive tangible results in their countries.

2. What is Multi-level Government (MLG)?

MLG is a system of governance with multiple centers of decision-making at national/federal, state/provincial/regional and/or local levels. Conceptually, MLG is used to describe various forms of power distribution such as federalism, devolution, decentralization, or autonomous regions. At the core of MLG is non-centralism, which emphasise the dispersal of political, administrative, and fiscal powers and authority to the subnational and local levels. For a MLG system to work well, a balance must be struck between the autonomy of each level of government, cooperation of all governments and intergovernmental supervision.

An MLG arrangement



The **principle of subsidiarity** often shapes the distribution of power in MLG systems. In simple terms, the principle requires that governmental responsibilities be exercised at the lowest level of government unless they cannot be effectively exercised at that level. The UN, EU and African Union, among other stakeholders, all seek to advance the principle in member states. The African Union has identified the principle at central in its effort to advance and promote the implementation of decentralised governance in its member states.

Article 6 of the African Charter on Decentralisation (2014)

- 1. Central government shall create enabling conditions for decision-making, policy and programme initiation, adoption and implementation to take place at lower levels of government where local governments or local authorities offer a better guarantee of pertinence and efficacy.*
- 2. Central governments shall create enabling conditions for cooperation and coordination between national and all sub-national levels of government and shall empower local governments or local authorities to discharge their duties and responsibilities.*
- 3. Local governments or local authorities shall cooperate with central governments and other local actors to achieve increased efficiency and effectiveness in public action for the delivery of public services.*

3. MLG as a territorial solution?

MLG is adopted as a territorial solution (but not always) to challenges such as:

- Underdevelopment or skewed development,

- Abuse of centralized decision-making,
- Democracy being too far removed from the people, and
- Conflict in deeply divided societies where conflict often has a territorial base.

MLG has potential to:

- deepen democracy,
- realize development,
- accommodate diversity, and
- promote national integration.

MLG has become an attractive option throughout the world. Here are examples of countries that have adopted various MLG systems.

Africa	Europe	Asia
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Ethiopia 1995 - federation •Nigeria 1999 - federation •Comoros 2001 - federation •Sudan 2005 – federation (since 2019 again on agenda) •Democratic Republic of Congo 2006 – decentralisation •Kenya 2010 - devolution •South Sudan 2011 / 2020 – decentralised (federation on agenda since 2018) •Somalia 2012 – federation •Zimbabwe 2013 – devolution •Zambia 2016 - devolution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Spain - 1978 •Belgium – 1970-1993 •UK (Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland) •Bosnia- Herzegovina 1995 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •India 1947 •Pakistan 1947 •Nepal 2015 •Philippines – Bonsamoro 2019 •Indonesia – Aceh 2001

4. MLG and SDG localization

In its 2014 *Inter-Agency Policy Brief: Accelerating SDG Localization to deliver on the promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, the UN defines SDG localization as “the process of adapting and customizing the SDGs and translating them into local development plans and strategies that fit the needs, context, and priorities of a particular region or locality, in coherence with national frameworks”. The Brief identify the important role of subnational and local governments in the implementation of the SDGs.

4.1. Role of subnational and local governments

As the tier of government closest to local communities, local and regional governments (LRGs) are best positioned to recognize and deliver on local needs and priorities and to craft people-centered policies in keeping with the principles of leaving no one behind. LRGs deliver essential public services such as housing,

education, energy, and water, and they are often the first responders to conflict, displacement, and disasters linked to climate change and natural hazards. Given their mandate to deliver these critical services, LRGs can act as catalysts for innovative solutions and transformative change.

4.2. MLG as an accelerator of SDG localization

The universal, integrated, and transformative nature of the 2030 Agenda requires governments to work across policy domains and governance levels, and to cooperate with diverse stakeholders. Multilevel governance is an accelerator of SDG localization, strengthening cohesive leadership, vertical policy coherence, and horizontal coordination for improved service delivery by and among all spheres of governance.

UN-Habitat, in a Report titled *Multilevel governance for SDG localization*, published in 2022, emphasises the importance of territorial and bottom-up approaches to the implementation of SDGs.

Adapting global and aspirational strategies to local conditions and priorities requires an integrated territorial approach to the implementation of the SDGs, which is critical to see them succeed holistically.

4.3. Integration of SDGs in plans

While an MLG system provides an enabling environment for the localisation of SDGs, the realisation of regional and global aspirations is not automatic. Strong intergovernmental cooperation, coordination, and stakeholder participation is required to achieve policy integration and coherence. The integration of SDGs in national, regional and local plans is one of many desirables to achieve this outcome. The integration must take place both at vertical and horizontal levels. Furthermore, there must be a close link between the plans and relevant budgets.

Vertical integration



Horizontal integration



4.4. Challenges for MLG and SDG localization

Local autonomy	Cooperation	Coordination and Integration	Resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Decentralization frameworks that do not adequately empower local governments •Wide gap between the <i>de facto</i> and <i>de jure</i> •Unwillingness of local governments to fully exploit their autonomy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •No culture of cooperation, consultation and engagement among levels of government • Weak or non-existent stakeholder participation in the development of local plans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vertical integration of national, provincial and local plans is often weak •Integration of SDGs in plans not always there •Limited connection between local plans and budgets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Limited financial resources •Limited technical capacity to deliver •Misuse of resources

5. How to make MLG work?

The OECD, in its *Making Decentralisation Work: A Handbook for policy-makers* (2019), developed ten guidelines for policy makers and practitioners on how to make decentralisation work. These guidelines are also useful for the localization of SDGs.

Guideline 1: Clarify the responsibilities assigned to different government levels

Guideline 2: Ensure that all responsibilities are sufficiently funded

Guideline 3: Strengthen subnational fiscal autonomy to enhance accountability

Guideline 4: Support subnational capacity building

Guideline 5: Build adequate co-ordination mechanisms among levels of government

Guideline 6: Support cross-jurisdictional co-operation

Guideline 7: Strengthen innovative and experimental governance, and promote citizen engagement

Guideline 8: Allow for and make the most of asymmetric decentralization arrangements

Guideline 9: Consistently improve transparency, enhance data collection and strengthen performance monitoring

Guideline 10: Strengthen national regional development policies and equalization systems

6. Conclusion: From Rhetoric to Reality

- MLG presents significant opportunities for localizing the SDGs, but its full potential has not been fully exploited.
- We need to move from the rhetoric of non-centralism to reality.
- Empower local governments not just to implement national policies but to fully participate in setting and monitoring national, regional, and global agendas.
- The importance of integrating SDGs in national, regional and local plans should be underscored.
- Intergovernmental and intra-governmental cooperation and coordination, as well as stakeholder participation, are needed to enhance policy integration and coherence.

7. Resources and materials

- African Charter on the Values and Principles of Decentralisation, Local Governance and Local development, 2014.
- OECD. 2019. Making Decentralisation Work: A Handbook for Policy-Makers, OECD Multi-level Governance Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris.
- UN. 2024. Inter-Agency Policy Brief: Accelerating SDG localization to deliver on the promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
- UN-Habitat. 2022. Multilevel governance for SDG localization, UN-Habitat, Nairobi.