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# The City of Cuenca, Ecuador: Enhancing Capacity Building for Southern Cities



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Cuenca seeks to contribute towards capacity building for Southern cities, in addition to the internationalisation of its experience and recognition of its leadership in the region

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## Introduction

“Without the leadership of cities it is impossible to reduce poverty levels, reduce inequalities or achieve effective, responsible and inclusive institutions” (Faieta, 2016). In 2015 the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted to face world challenges and improve the life of people around the globe. The goals seek to tackle issues of poverty, inequality, climate change, environment degradation and ensure prosperity, peace and justice at every level—global, regional and local.

Under this agenda, cities play an important role. It is expected that by the year 2030 due to urbanisation, the number of people living in cities would rise to five billion creating challenges in terms of urban planning, management of solid waste, generation of jobs, dotation of basic services, congestion, lack of infrastructure, and amongst others (United Nations, 2016). In Latin America and the Caribbean, 80 per cent of the population lives in cities making it one of the most urbanised region in the world (Faieta, 2016). The time for cities to take actions is now, and the best way for doing so is by empowering local governments to enable them to provide for citizen welfare, provide urban planning and along with dealing with a growing population. Additionally, Agenda 2030 through development and South-South cooperation provides the basis for mutual learning and capacity building. Allowing cities to strengthen and develop capacities among each other, to guarantee that no country or city will be left behind.

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The purpose of this paper is to provide a bird's eye view of the role of the city of Cuenca, Ecuador, in terms of South-South Cooperation. A case study is presented to reflect on the aims of Cuenca to fulfil SDG 11 for inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities, as well as highlight the scope of South-South and Triangular Cooperation.

### Managing International Cooperation

The Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador in its article 14 mentions: "Municipalities or local governments have the responsibility and the exclusive competence for managing international cooperation" (Asamblea Constituyente, 2008). Additionally, the National Council of Competences of Ecuador in its resolution CNC-009-2011 reinforces that the management of non-refundable funds and technical assistance for international cooperation will be held by municipalities and local governments in a decentralised way (Registro Nacional de Competencias CNC, 2011).

Since 2015, the local government of Cuenca has been trying to link its projects and objectives not only to the SDGs but also with local and regional policies. The local government of Cuenca through its Department of International Relations (DIR) manages international cooperation strategies and activities for the city. Nevertheless the focus of DIR has been North-South Cooperation and cooperation with non-states actors such as international agencies.

Since its creation in 2010, DIR has held projects with different international agencies such as Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), German Technician International Cooperation

Agency (GIZ), Korean International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), Latin American Development Bank (CAF), Korean Trade Investment Agency (KOTRA), and United Nations agencies such as PNUD, UN HABITAT, UN VOLUNTEERS, and UNHCR amongst others. These institutions have provided the local government with technical assistance, non-refundable funds, financial credits, capacity building, grants, and technology transfer. Nonetheless, these agencies have managed and traced the way in which they would prefer to cooperate with the city.

In terms of knowledge and actions about South-South Cooperation Cuenca is still learning. The city has made efforts to engage with a few international networks such as the Latin American EUnion of Municipalities (UIM), United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), Federation of Latin American cities, Municipalities and Local Governments Associations (FLACMA), Mercociudades, Inter-American Association of Sanitary and Environmental Engineering (AIDIS). These networks draw together many southern cities mainly from Latin and Central America. As a result of the commitments of these networks along with a union of cities, steps have been taken further to set up international congresses with the purpose of sharing experiences and good practices. For example, in 2017 the city of Cuenca with the support of AIDIS organised an international congress for knowledge sharing on good practices in solid-waste management for intermediate-cities. The event brought together more than 500 participants from Latin and Central America, Europe, and Asia, emerging

as a Southern platform for development cooperation and capacity building.

Additionally Cuenca has signed some agreements with southern cities such as Córdoba (Argentina), Puebla (Mexico), Bandung (Indonesia), Medellín (Colombia), Suzhou (China), Concepción (Chile), amongst others. These agreements have fostered relationships that allow for successful exchange of best practices, challenges and experiences amongst cities. For instance, Cuenca's agreement with the Colombian city of Medellín, has resulted in a mutually beneficial partnership.

In 2013, Cuenca started the civil engineering works for building its first electric tram system with no prior experiences either within the city or in the country. This lack of experience pushed the Municipality of Cuenca to seek guidance from the city of Medellín in Colombia. Medellín is one of the few cities in Latin America that has an electric

tram system along with the knowledge to build, operate, and administer the metro operations. Further, given the proximity between Ecuador and Colombia, officials of the local government of Cuenca visited Medellín for the creation of a legal framework for operations, function manual for the tram system, and capacity-building for security measures to avoid accidents. At the same time, this exchange of knowledge and capacity building efforts became a source of 'feedback' for Medellín to further improve its own operations, assess and analyse new challenges that may emerge in its own tram system and update its working simultaneously. This exchange has opened up a line of communication among the Southern cities, where Medellín and Cuenca are complementing each other through the sharing of experiences and capacity building to ensure effective mobility outcomes. (Municipality of Cuenca, 2018).

### Electric Tram in Municipality of Cuenca





## Experiential Learnings that Cuenca Can Share with Partner Cities

Cuenca has developed and implemented multiple technical-projects to ensure the development of the city facilitating its citizen's access to resources. Due to their linkage to the Agenda 2030, SGD 11 and its objectives, these projects have won eleven international prizes and recognitions worldwide since 2014. These projects focus on climate action, reducing inequality, generating gender equality, and generating sustainable cities and communities. Some of these projects are the Green belt of Cuenca, solid waste management through the Bio Gas Plant for the generation of electricity in rural areas, the Integral Improvement Plan for Peripheral Neighbourhoods, amongst others. The Integral Improvement Plan for Peripheral Neighbourhoods has become a successful project and it could develop and become a model for triangular cooperation. The project is supported by UN Habitat and the methodology and the learnings from its practice have been shared to other southern cities (EMAC EP-Municipality of Cuenca, 2017).

## The Integral Improvement Plan for Peripheral Neighbourhoods

The city of Cuenca for achieving its own targets in meeting SDG 11 sets a framework for furthering south-south cooperation with its project, namely, the Integral Improvement Plan for Peripheral Neighbourhoods.

Over the last decades, the city of Cuenca has experienced an accelerated demographic growth generating difficulties in identifying urban and rural areas due to their close proximity.

Progressively the sectors that once were recognised as rural areas now have been absorbed within the boundaries of urbanisation. This demographic growth in rural areas has happened without the conditions of consolidated core as witnessed in urban areas, and is reflected in the lack of access and to a large extent the non-existent nature of basic services in these areas. In these rural areas the infrastructure is deficient and houses predominantly are not well conserved, given the lack of planned architecture and the failure to use environmentally adequate materials.

With the aim of reducing a gap between the rural and urban areas, the Municipality of Cuenca, through its Barranco Municipal Foundation and the technical support of UN Habitat implemented the Integral Improvement Plan for Peripheral Neighbourhoods. The plan establishes mechanisms of analysis, detection, and specific actions with the purpose of improving the lives of the vulnerable population. These actions guide the Municipality of Cuenca at the moment in managing the investment in every area and sector related to development. All efforts are focused on drafting and formulating an immediate action plans to improve the situation in the 10 poorest neighbourhoods of the city (Fundación el Barranco-Municipality of Cuenca in Ecuador, 2017).

For this purpose, the project conceptualised the terms of periphery and vulnerability to the city and their statistical characterisation through twenty five indicators divided in socio-demographic, socio-economic, physical-environment, residence/infrastructure, and land-use

areas. These indicators included a gender component that helped to identify the ten most vulnerable neighbourhoods, establishing a set of priorities (Fundación el Barranco-Municipality of Cuenca in Ecuador, 2017). Improvement in the habitat of ten vulnerable neighbourhoods is to be done through a population-participatory-process based on the New Urban Agenda. The process is expected to be replicated in other environments after being adapted to each reality. The process is briefly described as follows:

- The establishment of mechanisms and tools of action, which will guide the Municipality of Cuenca and can be applied in other cities.
- The training of public officials, and capacity building to learn and guarantee effective mechanisms and tools for taking action in respective territories.
- The training and socialisation with the beneficiary population in the selected rural areas about the project, its planning and organisation mechanisms, their own current situation related to the project, and engage in decision making processes.
- The strengthening of communities in: risk and resilience; citizen security and coexistence; urban agriculture-permaculture; productive-ventures; human rights and gender; environmental-conservation; risk-and-resilience; youth participation, and leadership-development.
- The Establishment of regional-planning-instruments for building organised cities that are inclusive and less unequal.

Cuenca's pilot project experience adapted to the New Urban Agenda has generated a step by step manual that could be used as a guide or as a reference document for other Southern cities that face similar challenges due to the growth of their population without the proper infrastructure in their cities. This methodology and geographic information system (GIS) developed by Cuenca and supported by the census data of every city could help Southern cities to identify through the indicators the most vulnerable neighbourhoods that need intervention. Even in the same city not every neighbourhood require the same services, so the system and participatory process guide municipalities in the identification of those requirements.

This model developed by Cuenca facilitates the process of tackling inequality by providing resilient infrastructure and access to basic services to the marginalised population. The project is an example of a capacity building modality of South-South Cooperation and its methodology, given its flexibility, can be replicated in different southern cities to build capacities and joint action for policy changes in urban planning (Partners in Population and Development, 2012). This methodology acts as a guide of detection, analysis, and elaboration of different plans for local governments to tackle neighbourhood's issues. Therefore, Cuenca aims to enhance South-South technical cooperation by providing highly adaptive and relevant solutions to other Southern cities. Indeed, it could develop and become a model for triangular cooperation. Cuenca provides other Southern cities with the methodology by the transfer of this practical experiences and the guidance

in the process of replicability, while the Development Bank of Latin America, UN HABITAT, or Germany through the Regional Fund for Triangular Cooperation in Latin America and the Caribbean could be the financial contributor to replicate this project in other southern cities. This cooperation can have a positive impact on cities in knowledge sharing, the development of joint strategies, policies, and solutions to improve not only the cities and the life of their citizens, but also to strengthen the relationship among countries and the empowerment of the south.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, for many cities it is still a challenge to deal with becoming inclusive, resilient and sustainable. This is where South-South and Triangular Cooperation come in. Regionally, there is a knowledge deficit regarding the various modes of engagement under South-South Cooperation and given historical engagements there is a dependency on North-South Cooperation. While North-South and South-South Cooperation complement each other, North-South mode of engagement often results in northern countries guiding southern steps. On the other hand, South-South Cooperation relies on a demand-driven approach. This too results in the failure of cities in making the most of South-South Cooperation, given the lack of clarity in setting of priorities and recognising one's own needs.

As presented above, the city of Cuenca focused on its strengths towards development through projects like the Integral Improvement Plan for Peripheral Neighbourhoods. This allowed for a

complementarity between demand-driven and the technical support from the UN institutions through a mode of technical engagement. As a successful experience, it can be shared with neighbouring Southern cities that aim to implement this project. Indeed, Cuenca has received several international delegations from Southern cities which look for having a better understanding of the applicability of the project. Cuenca seeks to contribute towards capacity building for Southern cities, in addition to the internationalisation of its experience and recognition of its leadership in the region. Particularly, towards the adoption of the New Urban Agenda.

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## AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK REPORT ON “BUILDING A NEW ZIMBABWE”

The African Development Bank (AfDB) launched a flagship report titled, ‘Building a new Zimbabwe: Target policies for growth and job creation’. The report aims to revitalise Zimbabwe by presenting an economic analysis with policy recommendations to place the country on a positive development trajectory.

The report results from a one-year extensive research work of country, sector and thematic studies to offer economic analyses and policy recommendations that can help spark Zimbabwe’s transformation. It provides the current government, the development community, and the private sector with a detailed assessment of investment opportunities in Zimbabwe. As an analytical work, it also provides with alternative scenarios for infrastructure investment to the year 2030 and identifies sectors for potential investment to achieve sustainable and inclusive growth.

Zimbabwe is endowment with natural resources, public infrastructure, as well as a comparatively skilled labour force, all cumulatively becoming an asset for the Country and providing it a comparative advantage when joining in the Continental FTA.

The report brings to light the measures needed to increase the productivity of public investment, strengthen investor confidence, attract patient capital and, develop special economic zones towards further improving the business climate, while continuing to safeguard macroeconomic stability.

The Government of Zimbabwe acknowledged the role of the report towards the implementation of the Transitional Stabilisation Programme and the preparation of the Medium Term Plan for 2021 – 2025.

*Source:* African Development Bank Group. (2018, November 16). “Building a new Zimbabwe”, a flagship report launched by the African Development Bank to spark the country’s economic development. The African Development Bank.