

Improving infrastructure by talking a lot (and drawing a bit)

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Expert meeting on people and infrastructure within
the DEALS programme, May 20th 2019



Can you have an impact on investments in infrastructure by investing in people? And what role do urban governments play in this? Those were the central questions at the DEALS expert meeting held on 20 May. The session was attended by eleven urban experts at the VNG headquarters in The Hague. It was livestreamed to the six DEALS cities (see box), making it possible for the city focal persons there to witness the discussions. DEALS programme manager Irene Oostveen kicked off by saying that often tension is felt between people and infrastructure. A lack of sewerage, for example, affects people's lives negatively. On the other hand, the construction of new infrastructure can have negative effects too. People have to move to make way for coastal protection works, for example. 'This topic is causing a great deal of stress. Urban governments are caught between investors and inhabitants. The question is: can they solve this tension, and if so how?'

Channelling investments

One of the answers came from Jeroen Diepemaat, deputy mayor of Enschede. This Dutch city used to be at the heart of the Dutch textile industry, but it has suffered severely from the industry's decline. Among other things, this has led to relatively high unemployment. One of the main goals of the municipality is to keep the city, including its poorer parts, attractive. The challenge facing Enschede is to achieve maximum results with limited resources. Enschede has designed a programme, the Urban Assessment Agenda, which is supported by a Dynamic Investment Agenda. Both aim to tackle social, community, climate/energy and habitability issues at the same time. Diepemaat explained how infrastructural works can provide opportunities for overall improvements. 'If you have to repave a road in a specific year, and you know that the lighting has to be renewed the next year, and the houses also need to be renovated, then you can combine those works. Channelling your investments enables you to get more out of your euro.'



But this can only be done by involving all stakeholders. Basically, it means a lot of talking.'

The programme's first focus was a neighbourhood called Tweekelerveld, half of which consists of social housing. 'Its inhabitants have been calling and e-mailing us for twenty years now, begging us for improvements. This really is a step forward for them. If we succeed here, we will succeed anywhere,' according to Diepemaat. Asked how to get people to commit to a programme like this, Diepemaat said that the secret lies in being open and transparent about what can be co-decided. 'For example, we are planning an energy transformation in the neighbourhood, stopping the gas supply. The decision itself isn't something up for discussion, but people can co-decide on how to do it.'

Colour swatches

Videos made by the DEALS city focal persons emphasized their different investment needs. They vary from training waste pickers (Pereira) and improving access to satellite markets (Kumasi) to investing in changing people's mindset regarding waste and sewerage systems (Pathein). The city of Beira, which was severely hit by cyclone Idai in March, received special attention. Irene Oostveen explained that the proud mayor succeeded in making an investment needs report within three weeks. The Dutch government, in cooperation with UN-Habitat and Arcadis, assisted in this task. Beira's actual needs are not that much different than they were before the cyclone – basically they involve housing, drainage and waste management – but they are far more urgent now. The overall aim is summarized in the slogan Building Back Better.

After this, the experts were invited to do an exercise. Irene presented sets of colour swatches, brushes and sheets of paper with images of the DEALS cities. City teams were asked to paint their city in five different colours, showing both obstacles and progress in areas such as infrastructure and participation. Each team could make its own choices regarding the items and the colours. 'Activate the artist in you!' Irene said smiling, handing over the paint, brushes and sheets of paper to the teams.

The teams used very different strategies. The Sèmè-Podji team had a long discussion before even beginning to paint, while Pereira and Pathein immediately started painting. Kumasi drew attention by starting late, but by painting very fast. The painting methods also differed considerably. Pathein connected two sheets using a long blue stream, representing water, littered with red dots, representing garbage. Little green dots that were later amplified ('but they should be even bigger') represented participation. The painting contained a great deal of white, 'because lots of elements are intertwined and a lot still remains vague', team representative Myrte van der Spek of VNG International said.

The Pereira team made a waste picker partly blue (social) and partly yellow (money), providing him with a red hat (government). The painting contained lots of green, representing Pereira's green environment, and yellow, representing the lack of money. 'Everything starts with affirmative action by the government towards the waste pickers,' said VNG International associate expert Alfonso García in his analysis of his own drawing. 'They are partly recognized and empowered now and the local government has started to assert its role. This is mainly due to VNG International. The turning point was the visit of Pereira's mayor to the Netherlands last September, which established good personal relationships.'

Climate resilient

The Kumasi team, consisting of consultant Jean Eigeman, used all five colours to represent the great variety of problems the city faces, such as traffic congestion, the dirty and unhealthy iron separating industry, the overcrowded market and its young female porters. The basis of the drawing was green, as Kumasi still is a very green city. Black strings represented the connection between the different stakeholders. Solutions proposed by Eigeman included restructuring the markets, which can provide jobs and improve the infrastructure, and finding resources for an alternative transport system.

The Sèmè-Podji team came up with two different drawings, one representing the actual and the other the desirable situation. In the first drawing, a big green surface represented a waste collecting project funded by the World Bank. A yellow dot stood for a road and drainage systems project and a red one for the new port. 'But we mixed them with white, because all of this is only partly realized', Anke Tjoelker of VNG International commented. In the second drawing, blue lines (representing DEALS) connected green balls (representing local waste collecting initiatives) with an orange dot (the municipality), supporting the big green surface (a central waste collecting system).

The colourful painting of the Beira team would have enriched any wall. It was dominated by yellow, representing development. 'Our general idea was to make the city more climate resilient', Nicole Ward-Boot of VNG International explained. The team wanted to do this by raising part of the city to prevent it from being flooded again. This means that people will have to move and therefore should be compensated, which requires an efficient registration system. 'People who really depend on living there should be trained to live and work elsewhere', Nicole added. But again, a lack of money is hindering this solution. In her final remarks, Irene mentioned that DEALS is working on detailed investment plans. There will be a follow-up and a paper on the people and investment theme.

WHAT IS DEALS?

Inclusive sustainable urban development in developing countries is such a complex matter that it can only be dealt with by working in close cooperation with other partners. That's the basic idea behind DEALS. It's a multi-stakeholder programme: not only does it target local governments, but companies, CSOs, other governments and particularly citizens in the partner countries are also expected to join in. The target cities are Beira in Mozambique, Kumasi in Ghana, Pathein in Myanmar, Pereira in Colombia, Sèmè-Podji in Benin and Manilla in the Philippines.

Each city develops a tailored programme, based on local priorities. The interests of people who earn less than 1.25 dollar a day come first. VNG International and several Dutch municipalities support the cities. The ultimate deal will be an agreement signed by all stakeholders that aims to solve an urgent problem and achieve an 'attractive aspiration'. Moreover, the deal is innovative, sets an (inter)national example and will generate tangible results. Solutions must be sustainable, receive broad support and tackle the underlying causes of the deal's main challenge.

DEALS was launched on 1 September 2017 and will end in August 2022. In September 2018, delegations from Beira, Kumasi, Pathein, Pereira and Sèmè-Podji visited the Netherlands. In the following months, Dutch delegations made trips to the partner cities. In addition to VNG International and Dutch municipalities, the programme is supported by the Dutch Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations. It is financed by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The budget is around €5 million.



Building better futures

by strengthening local governments

VNG International is an expert in strengthening local government in developing and transitional countries. Local governments play a key role in the provision of basic services such as water, waste management, health care and housing. They have profound impact on areas like safety, food security, rule of law, and women's rights.

Therefore our projects contribute in a sustainable way to better futures for people, communities and countries. In over sixty projects worldwide, VNG International strengthens local governments, associations of municipalities, and local trainings institutes. VNG International was founded in 1993 by the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (Vereniging Nederlandse Gemeenten, VNG), the world's oldest association of municipalities. VNG International is housed within the association's offices in The Hague, allowing it to easily access the know-how of the Dutch local government sector. VNG International is embedded in the Dutch local government sector, while it also disposes of an international network of experts in the fields of decentralisation and local administration.

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