



Management Response

African Cities Lab for Urban Development

By KEK - CDC

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1) Background

The “African Cities Lab for Urban Development” program is implemented by the École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL) from 1 November 2020 until 31 December 2024. It is setting up a digital education platform on urban development in Africa (African Cities Lab platform, ACL). The aim is to provide training for the current and next generation of urban planners, decision makers and academics across the continent. The platform offers Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and online learning for professionals. Six African universities are partners of the EPFL and shall ultimately co-own the platform.

The program’s first phase has the following objectives and outputs:

Development objectives (Impact):

African cities benefit from more sustainable urban development thanks to effective planning, management and monitoring in Urban Development in Africa.

Project objectives (outcomes):

- a) Set-up of accessible, financially sustainable platform for continued education on African urban development
- b) Expanded knowledge and information sharing, exchange and cooperation on innovative approaches and initiatives in urban development
- c) Improved access to relevant, up-to-date, quality continuing education on African urban development

Project Outputs:

- a) African platform on urban development
- b) Digital education content on urban development
- c) Continuing education

The main purpose of the evaluation was learning for project steering and for developing a second project phase. Furthermore, for SECO it was important to receive information on the perspectives of the ACL partners (the African universities). For example: How important is

the platform for them, how do they see its future and how was the collaboration with the EPFL perceived?

2) Appreciation of the report: structure, methodology & process

The evaluation report is very rich on information and in general gives a good impression on what was reached during project implementation and in addition what needs to be taken into consideration for a potential next project phase. Although the terms of reference of the evaluation set a focus on relevance, effectiveness, impact and sustainability only, the evaluation team deemed it important to assess also the coherence as well as the efficiency of the program. Overall, the evaluation questions have been sufficiently answered.

The evaluation is based on a mixed-methods approach, primarily combining qualitative data as well as primary and secondary data from various sources to ensure triangulation of evidence. Data collection is based on a document review, semi-structured interviews and focal group discussions. In the opinion of SECO, the interviews were confirmed to be most fruitful as well as relevant for information gathering.

The evaluation process was smooth, apart from certain difficulties to reach out to some stakeholders, which were reported by the evaluation team. From the perspective of SECO, the evaluation team was responsive to all questions and comments and performed within the agreed timelines. The presentation of the findings of the evaluation to SECO and the EPFL, allowed for a detailed discussion.

3) Key findings and lessons learnt

According to the evaluation report, the ACL platform with MOOCs has the potential to impact sustainable urban development, provided that key elements are integrated in a second phase of the project and beyond. However, at this stage, sustainability is not assured, and the platform is likely to collapse gradually should no funding for a second phase be made available.

Main findings according to the OECD DAC criteria are the following:

Relevance: The project is relevant, and its intervention logic is suited to contribute to the accessibility of a platform with digital education content in the form of MOOCs but lacks consistency in targeting aspects of financial sustainability and networking among practitioners and institutions.

Coherence: The program is found to be coherent and complementary to the SECO strategy and engagement. It also complements other educational offers.

Effectiveness: The establishment of an Africa-wide platform is a major milestone and represents an innovative resource from Africa for Africa. The platform has the potential to be used beyond the posting of MOOCs to support networking and exchanges among practitioners and institutions in Africa; potential that has yet to be tapped.

Efficiency: The operational project efficiency is rated unsatisfactory. The implementation of activities took much longer than initially planned. One of the factors was the underestimated laborious collaboration with the different partners.

Sustainability: At this stage, sustainability is not assured, and the platform is likely to collapse gradually should no funding for a second phase be made available and be used to ensure continuous operation as well as the establishment of a sustainable ACL structure.

Impact: The ACL platform with MOOCs has the potential to impact sustainable urban development, providing key elements are integrated in a second phase of the project and beyond. A platform with MOOCs is a first step and it will require strong communication to ensure that professionals visit the platform and enroll in courses.

Lessons learnt include:

1. Additional investment and partnership required

SECO funding alone cannot meet the immense capacity-building needs of African urban planning professionals and additional investment in training will be required. Only an ACL platform supported by a broad coalition of (funding) partners with a coherent strategy can contribute to lasting change.

2. Clarification of roles and expectations necessary

Diversity of partners is a strength but also a challenge which requires adequate attention. In addition, roles and engagement of ACL partners and third parties beyond the launch of the courses were not sufficiently considered and they should be given more opportunities to engage.

In general, SECO agrees with the key findings of the evaluation and has no major concern or disagreement with the evaluation team's assessment as well as with recommendations provided. SECO also appreciates the mentioned lessons learnt. In that context, however, SECO would like to underline in relation with lesson learnt 1 (additional investment) that SECO never aspired to meet all capacity-building needs alone and through ACL but always understood its investment clearly as a contribution to satisfy the needs.



4) Recommendations

| RECOMMENDATIONS | MANAGEMENT RESPONSE | | |
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| Recommendation 1 If SECO remains committed to supporting sustainable urban development in Africa, it should co-finance a 2nd phase over a four-year period to build on the achievements and lessons learnt of the 1st phase, in particular on the establishment of the platform and production of the MOOCs. However, when considering future funding, SECO should carefully review the proposed recommendations to ensure that its support follows an approach that sustains long-term results beyond SECO's financial contribution. | Fully agree | Partially agree | Not agree |
| | <u>Response</u> SECO's commitment to urban development in Africa remains unchanged. Furthermore, SECO is convinced of the potential of eLearning and more specifically MOOCs to reach the objective. However, financing the ACL platform is only one of the options to bring the topic forward. SECO will stay open for different instruments and programs and choose as suitable and appropriate. Certainly, for SECO it would be of advantage to continue collaborating and financing the ACL. First of all, because SECO sees the potential of the platform and secondly because the platform may collapse gradually without further funding. This scenario may involve that prior investment is lost. However, different conditions need to be met for SECO to be able to finance a second program phase. The situation and therefore the possibilities for SECO for further funding will only become clear in the future, once the program proposal is received. | | |
| | <u>Measures</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The recommendations of the external evaluation are valuable and will be taken into consideration during the assessment of the proposal for a second phase once it is submitted to SECO by the EPFL. • The evaluation recommendations will also be brought forward and be useful during the discussion of the proposal during the internal decision-making process in order to provide a third-party view. | | |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In case SECO finances a second phase, it needs to be ensured that the theory of change as well as selected structures and activities remain valid throughout the implementation period. On this background a mid-term evaluation may support the steering of the program. | | |
| Recommendation 2 When considering future funding, SECO should assess whether the proposal for a 2nd phase of the ACL project proposes a logic of intervention (theory of change) co-developed and co-owned by the ACL partners. The role and responsibilities of partners shall be an integral part of the intervention logic (who brings what and who does what) and expected changes of target groups' behaviour and practices clearly presented. | Fully agree | Partially agree | Not agree |
| | <u>Response</u> The ACL platform can only truly fly as a partnership. Moreover, it needs to be owned and carried by the partners in order to have a chance to become sustainable. The main aim of the first project phase was to establish the platform (IT wise) and to start its animation. It was clear that sustainability would not be fully reached but probably a next phase with SECO funding will be needed. On that background, the focus has not been (enough) on fostering the partnership. During the implementation of this first phase, it showed that roles and responsibilities have not been clear for all partners at any time. Moreover, it is a fact that at times, it may be not sufficient to for example sign a clear contract (in this case between EPFL and the partners) but much effort is needed to explain, clarify and remind. During this first project phase, this effort may have been underestimated. The evaluation confirmed these facts. On that background the evaluation confirmed that the theory of change of the first phase was suitable to contribute to defined impact. However, it also mentioned that it did not consider enough the structural aspects including the financing situation. | | |
| | <u>Measures</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> SECO will make sure to receive sufficient information and evidence to understand, how the program proposal for a next program phase has been established. Sufficient evidence needs to be provided to clearly understand roles and commitments of ACL partners. A clear structure of the program including clear roles and responsibilities of the partners will be key in order to assess chances for the sustainability of the program. | | |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A clear and impactful governance structure will be important. | | |
| Recommendation 3 When considering future funding, SECO should assess whether the proposal for a 2nd phase of the ACL project proposes a budget differentiating budget lines. Distinction should be made between costs for the establishment of a sustainable structure (recommendation 5), costs for implementing the individual activities related to recommendations 6 to 10, costs for training (new MOOCs, update of MOOCs, in-persons training) and costs for 2nd phase project management (project manager salary and travel). After two years of the ACL project implementation, the budget should be integrated in a budget for the sustainable structure (to be established under recommendation 5). | Fully agree | Partially agree | Not agree |
| | <u>Response</u> For SECO it is standardized procedure to request together with a project proposal a budget, which matches on one hand with the proposed program components as well as activities and on the other side sufficiently reflects program management, overhead and other costs. On this background, SECO principally agrees on the recommendations of receiving a detailed budget, which reflect agreed components and activities. However, SECO is not in the position at this moment to agree on the wording of specific budget lines mentioned in the recommendation as the full picture of suggested activities is not available. | | |
| | <u>Measures</u> SECO will make sure that the suggested budget is detailed and distinct. | | |
| Recommendation 4 When considering future funding, SECO should assess whether the proposal for a 2nd phase of the ACL project proposes refined and agreed roles for EPFL, ACL partners and third parties MOOCs developers in the 2nd phase of the project and an inclusive approach to collaboration. | Fully agree | Partially agree | Not agree |
| | <u>Response</u> See response to recommendation 2 | | |
| | <u>Measures</u> | | |
| Recommendation 5 SECO should only consider future funding if the proposal for a 2nd phase clearly sets out a process and concrete steps to achieve a | Fully agree | Partially agree | Not agree |
| | <u>Response</u> SECO agrees that an important part of a sustainable structure of the platform is the co-action | | |

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| sustainable structure for the ACL in which partners co-act and co-own the work, exchange and learn from each other. This should be a core activity of the project's 2nd phase to ensure sustainability of efforts and investments and to provide a framework around the ACL platform/website. SECO should re-consider its funding if this is not given the required space and/or the approach is not sufficiently developed in the project proposal. | and co-ownership of different partners – apart of the sustainable financing. This should be taken into consideration already during the planning stage of a second project phase. | | |
| | <u>Measures</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> SECO will in general assess and challenge the sustainability plan suggested in the program proposal of the second program phase. More specifically, SECO will make sure that it becomes sufficiently clear in the proposal how co-ownership of the platform will be reached. Sustainability will be an integral part of the regular program reporting to SECO and will also be made a topic during steering meetings (in case a second program phase is financed). | | |
| Recommendation 6 SECO should assess whether the proposal for a 2nd phase of the ACL project proposes to establish a suitable communication and moderation function for the ACL platform, based on existing efforts. There should be clear roles and responsibilities, targets and commensurate budget. Ultimately this should be one of the roles of the permanent secretariat of the sustainable ACL structure to be established. | Fully agree | Partially agree | Not agree |
| | <u>Response</u> In principle SECO agrees that the ACL platform will need some kind of animation and moderation in order to continue working, ideally this role is taken over by one or several African partner universities. SECO will be assessing the program proposal for the second phase concerning that matter. It is most likely that in the beginning more such structure is needed. But with the course of time, it is imageable and appropriate that this function becomes less central and therefore also less prominent and costly. On this background, it may not merit to be called a full secretariat. | | |
| | <u>Measures</u> The aspect of the moderation and animation of the platform will be an important point for SECO to take into consideration when assessing the project proposal. Moreover, SECO is convinced that such activities are an important factor towards the sustainability of the platform. | | |
| Recommendation 7 SECO should assess whether the proposal for a 2nd phase of the ACL project provides for an | Fully agree | Partially agree | Not agree |
| | <u>Response</u> | | |

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| inclusive process for defining a strategy for the development of MOOCs, including clarified property rights. | Such a strategy or moreover a process for developing MOOCs was already foreseen for the first phase. However, for different reasons, not all aspects could materialize and thus impact as planned (e.g. the establishment of consultative bodies, which should have contributed to ownership, dissemination and creating a network did not happen in all partner countries). In addition, it was planned that all content of the platform would be open source. However, it seems that this approach did not work in all countries for all partners (or was not sufficiently taken into consideration by partners at the beginning). | | |
| | <u>Measures</u> Aspect will be taken into consideration | | |
| Recommendation 8 SECO should assess whether the proposal for the 2nd phase of the ACL project proposes to consolidate an approach towards hybrid and executive courses. | Fully agree | Partially agree | Not agree |
| | <u>Response</u> MOOCs are efficient to spread information, but experience of the platform shows that hybrid training is yet needed and on top of that very effective in providing tailor-made training. Reason why more hybrid training was financed through the additional resources provided with the cost-extension of the program. | | |
| | <u>Measures</u> Aspect will be taken into consideration | | |
| Recommendation 9 SECO should assess whether the proposal for the 2nd phase of the ACL project proposes to re-conceptualise the scientific committee. It should oversee not only the selection for new MOOCs but the validation and peer review of MOOCs and training resources. | Fully agree | Partially agree | Not agree |
| | <u>Response</u> Ensuring a high quality of learning content is certainly important. However, partners of the platform are selected because of their relevance in relation with urban development. Ensuring that partners involve in peer-learning seems to be important and fosters the platform's exchange character. The request of validating a partner's/established university's content by a third party may be delicate. This point needs to be discussed and agreed upon by program partners. | | |

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| | <u>Measures</u> The clarification of roles and responsibilities may also include the matter of quality management of learning content. It will be important that an approach is selected, which meets different needs and expectations, taking individual situations as well as possibilities into account. | | |
| Recommendation 10 SECO should assess whether the proposal for the 2nd phase of the ACL project proposes actions for improving the structure of the ACL website. | Fully agree | Partially agree | Not agree |
| | <u>Response</u> The structure of the website has been discussed already several times during the course of implementation of the current program phase. Adaptations have continuously been made. There is (and there will always be) further room for improvement, especially in developing a tool and/or an entry structure that allows users to access targeted information/courses. During the second program phase, adaptations will also be necessary, and needs should continuously be evaluated. | | |
| | <u>Measures</u> The program proposal shall explicitly include an activity, that periodically evaluates the potential for structural optimisation. | | |
| Recommendation 11 SECO should only consider continuing funding the last two years of the 2nd phase if the sustainable structure (recommendation 5) has been successfully established as its funding should support the effective piloting of the established structure integrating all new | Fully agree | Partially agree | Not agree |
| | <u>Response</u> SECO is much in favour of the idea to build in milestones during the second program phase, especially in relation with the sustainability of the platform as mentioned before. The first two years could indeed be used for further structuring and piloting but implementation of such a sustainable structure needs to start thereafter and be consolidated until the end of phase two. | | |

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| functions, working groups and documents established (recommendations 6-10). | <u>Measures</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SECO will discuss and challenge the sequencing of planned activities. There should be consequent phases of implementation, which allow to set conditions and milestones with the aim of being sustainable at the end of a potential second phase. • A mid-term evaluation may be planned to support the decision making whether set milestones have been reached. Furthermore, the journey towards sustainability should be regularly discussed with partners and within the defined governance structure of the platform. • The theory of change towards the platform's sustainability and thus SECO's exit as a funder of the platform should be clearly planned. |

Place, Date

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