ASToN

DIGITAL TRANSITION FOR SUSTAINABLE AND INCLUSIVE CITIES

BLUEPRINT
HOW TO DESIGN,
SET-UP AND LEAD
A CITY-TO-CITY
NETWORK?

Lessons from ASToN
(the African Smart Towns Network)

2019-2022

THE CONTEXT

LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS

BUILDING A NETWORK THROUGH LEARNING, RELATIONSHIPS, REAL-WORLD ACTION AND FUNDING

SUPPORTING FUNCTIONS

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Foreword
Why we've written this blueprint

This blueprint was written to help current and future operators of networks of cities learn from the work of the African Smart Towns Network (ASToN). It reflects the methods we used to set up ASToN. In it, we aim to share some lessons we learned from launching a network of cities that want to use digital tools to address local and global challenges. We've broken down our experience and what we learned from it across the different phases of the network, which we hope people in similar situations can pick up, learn from and use. Each section corresponds to a phase in the inception, delivery and closing of this first ASToN program (2019-2022). And although they are presented as a linear process, our experience has not been and things have at times overlapped, which we expect would be the case of anyone running a similar process.

A network
for the digital
transformation
of cities

**Laying
the foundations**

- Set-up
- Onboarding/design

Core ingredients

- Learning
- Funding and real-world action (experimentation)
- Strong network (human to human relationships)

**Support
functions**

- Trouble shooting
- Driving results
- The team

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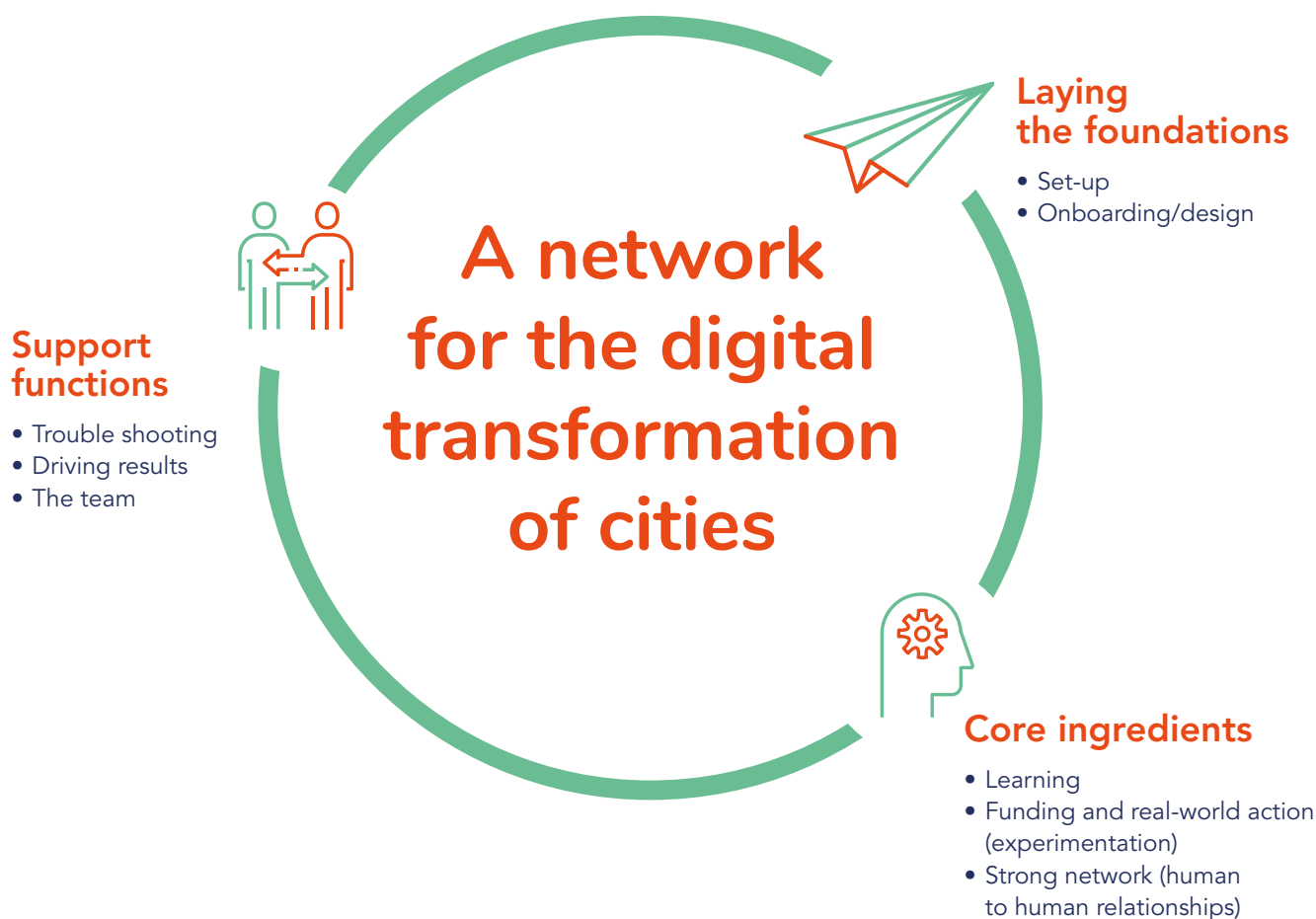
Throughout this blueprint, we use the term "city" to design any form of local government in charge with the provision of urban services. Throughout ASToN (2019 - 2022), we worked with municipalities, development agencies, public authorities or even regional entities that were in charge with the urban issues over their territory. This depended on the local context and legislation for each of the 11 countries. When we mention "city leaders", we mean the representatives of the 11 local authorities, in charge with the local ASToN project. From one case to another, they can be Mayors, City Councillors, Senior Executives, Chief Officers in charge of Planning, Urban Affairs, ICT and more.

Acknowledgements

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The Context

Section 1: A clear vision for digital transformation

Why a city network for digital transformation?

ASToN, as a city network for digital transformation, responds to a context of rapid urbanisation, a rise in complex and systemic urban problems, and opportunities to use digital transformation to address these issues. The idea of a network of cities collaborating around digital transformation came about as an extension of the work done with URBACT, ANRU and the AFD on smart cities and city collaborative networks. The objective of ASToN is to improve the capacity of African local authorities to lead digital transformation and innovation processes for their territory.
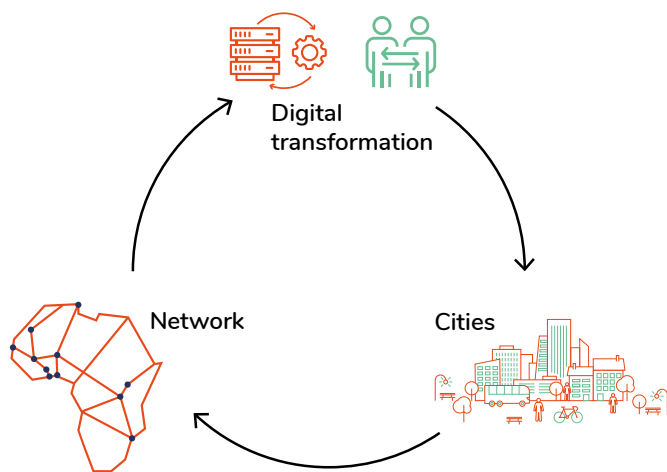
gies have the potential to increase economic output, improve public services, encourage citizen participation, and are being used to help tackle some of society's biggest challenges.

What does this mean for city authorities? The ability of a local authority to mobilise digital tools and data for the benefit of their territory will influence how they are able to design policies and deliver public services. Building digital infrastructure, skills and new ways of working are important in being able to structure, monitor and evaluate government projects in radically different ways. Digital transformation of a local authority or urban service, if it is pointed at the development of new, relevant and fruitful digital uses in the local area, can contribute towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

— Urban growth and digital transformation

With over half the world's population now living in urban areas, and with Africa being home to the 10 fastest growing cities in the world, African cities have a vital role to play in creating sustainable and inclusive futures.

The fact that by 2030, Africa will host 6 of the world's 41 megacities offers great opportunity and huge challenge at the same time.

The rapid pace of global technological change is opening up new economic and social relationships within Africa. Digital technology is increasing in importance, especially in the face of demographic change and investment in digital infrastructure that are connecting more individuals to the internet. In recent years, digital technology has been a powerful force in how we work, travel, trade, communicate and consume, in what is an increasingly globalised world. Digital technolo-

— The "Smart City" agenda, URBACT and ASToN

We started ASToN asking ourselves if cities working on digital transformations can advance faster together as a network, to respond to their most pressing challenges in a more sustainable way. At the heart of this network is the belief that there is an opportunity for cities across Africa to collaborate on becoming 'smart cities' - to harness digital, data and technology, and use participatory approaches in order to improve their policies, services and make life better for their citizens.

In order to get there, this flagship initiative has built on the URBACT method, knowledge and tools. URBACT is a European cooperation programme for cities. For 20 years, URBACT has worked with more than 1000 cities in Europe, to build cooperation networks between them. Through URBACT, cities have developed tailor-made solutions to solve their local

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problems. In 2018, AFD and URBACT launched a call to African cities to create a network of partners in the transition to digital - ASToN. ASToN stands for the African Smart Towns Network.

- We knew the URBACT method has proved effective in Europe for supporting transformations in over 650 cities. We wanted to see whether a similar method could be impactful in other geographical and cultural contexts.

- Boosting the (digital) capacities of local public stakeholders by offering them methods and experience feedback is at the heart of the AFD's smart city strategy.

— A network of African cities for digital transformation

By improving the capability of city authorities, the aim of a network of cities around digital transformation is to have an impact on the quality of public services, and the relations between the city and local stakeholders, and with citizens. This is done through a combination of local level and network level activities:

- **At the local level,**

  - Create engagement and collaboration with cross-sector groups via a Local Action Group
  - Frame the problem well
  - Develop a Local Action Plan, and
  - Test solutions and learn from the process.

- **At the network level,**

  - Create a strong network of African cities supporting and learning from each other
  - Build capacity amongst local teams to confidently use digital tools, technology and innovation methods like experimentation, and
  - Share results and lessons.

The African Smart Towns Network (ASToN), 2019-2022 - episode one

In its first phase (2019-2022), ASToN has worked alongside eleven African local authorities to use digital transformation as a catalyst for becoming more inclusive and sustainable cities.

These cities are:

- Bamako (Mali)
- Benguerir (Morocco)
- Bizerte (Tunisia)
- Kampala (Uganda)
- Kigali (Rwanda)
- Kumasi (Ghana)
- Lagos (Nigeria)
- Matola (Mozambique)
- Niamey (Niger)
- Nouakchott (Mauritania)
- Sèmè-Podji (Benin)

Across 2019-2022, ASToN member cities have advanced digital transformation projects through exchange and peer-to-peer learning, engaging their local stakeholders in a process of change and transformation, blending urban intelligences and adopting new ways of working, all with a results-oriented approach.

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As a network, our hope has been that by creating a cohort of partners, and collaborating in this way, ASToN cities were empowered to effect change. More specifically, they were able to become more effective, competent, autonomous and recognised enablers of economic and social wellbeing for their citizens, enabled by appropriate digital tools and in a sustainable manner for their local context.

Main outcomes from running the network include:

- 480 participants in trainings and transnational encounters

- 30% of the ASToN cities are already using the methods & tools from the programme to design other urban policies and innovative services

- 450 000 € invested in experimenting and testing innovative solutions

- 8 out of the 10 Local Action Plans produced by cities were validated by the respective City Councils and are included in their local strategies

- 424 people reached through the solutions experimented

5 things we wish we'd known, starting out with the network:

- **Interrogate the rationale for the network.** Framing our starting points as questions helped us steer the programme and adjust it along the way, to ensure it added most value for all involved.

- **Work with cities as critical friends.** Having a rotating 'critical friend' from one of the cities at any point meant we had a trusted partner to test ideas with, iterate on them, and together ensure they were aligned to needs.

- **Things won't go to plan, so plan things iteratively.** There will always be disruptions to the plan and parts of the plan that are not relevant in reality. It's only by designing a programme that's iterative and allows for adjustments along the way that you can stay relevant and useful through external shocks.

- **Connect people.** Don't underestimate the power and value of connecting people. It has proven valuable countless times throughout ASToN (2019-2022). We have seen deep relationships form, and 100% turnout to in-person events, including from city Mayors, such is the value they get from meeting with each other.

- **The experiment is not the end goal.** Learning to start small with an experiment can be a very new concept and way of working for a city authority. It's easy for the experiment to feel like the goal. But really the experiment is just one part of the process that gives us enough data to start / stop / continue and enough evidence to galvanise more funds.

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LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS

Section 2: Setting up the network

— What are the first steps in setting up the network?

Two important first steps are enrolling the cities around the set vision with an open call for cities to participate in the network, then defining what good looks like and setting indicators to know if objectives are reached.

— Enrolling 11 cities, becoming a network

Having articulated a clear vision, the first step to creating the network is to enrol cities compelled by this vision. A formal process like launching an open call is one way to get there. It also means that throughout the project, the network comprises cities that "signed up" to the exercise and were committed to it.

Our approach and methods

- **A call for cities:** Design a call describing clearly the offer of the network (including timeline, different work packages), as well as what is requested of participating cities (expected local and transnational activities). It should clearly lay out the vision for the network, and approaches to urban development and city-to-city cooperation.

- **Timeline of the call:** Set clear steps to the process:
  - Call launch
  - Initial notice of interest from cities
  - An opportunity for cities to request clarifications and ask questions
  - Bid submission
  - Announcement of the results

- **Selection panel and criteria:** Identify a selection panel and define clear selection criteria for city selection e.g.
  - Presentation of project leadership, interest and expectations from the network
  - Presentation of the selected challenge, relevance and expected impact
  - Identification of relevant stakeholders and collaborators for local action

- Mobilisable resources and team description, and credibility of the city offer
- Motivation and drive

- **Final decision and letting the cities know the outcome:** Decide e.g.

  - How many cities in total, and cities per country?
  - What city profile (e.g. size, digital readiness, capital cities and/or secondary cities)? And what mix of these profiles?
  - What challenges are the cities bringing into the network? What are the similarities and differences among them?

Lessons learnt from ASToN (2019-2022):

- **Adapt the process based on context and available resources.** While in URBACT cities would apply to a call as a group for the creation of a new network, our open call asked cities to apply individually. Group applications in URBACT are possible because of the wide-spread recognition of the programme among European cities, and the resources these cities have to get involved in what could be a heavy workload for an African city. The new nature of the ASToN initiative and limited resources to get involved in a similar prior workload made individual applications a more attainable goal.

- **Consider the mix of participating cities, the cohort they form and the opportunities it creates for collective learning.** It might be important to consider how the participating cities together bring or do not bring a mix of languages, geographical areas, types of cities, digital readiness to e.g. encourage peer learning or avoid regional clustering. Similarly, consider what challenges the cities are bringing and the opportunities for collective learning.

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CASE STUDY from ASToN (2019-2022):
Evolving the role of Lead Partner

At the start of ASToN (2019-2022) and following the URBACT methodology, it was originally envisaged that one city would be taking on the role of Lead Partner. They would be in charge of the overall progress, project management, and financial management of the network. However this did not happen and eventually we cancelled this component in Phase 1. Lead tasks were delivered instead by the ASToN Secretariat and Lead Expert.

Kampala was chosen as Lead Partner for ASToN in 2019, and roles were distributed between the Kampala team and Secretariat based on competences and availability to work on the inception of the programme and prepare the kick-off of the whole network, however our collective team had not foreseen a couple of complications which made us abandon this model:

- French and English both being working languages of ASToN participating cities, the delivering administration of the city holding the Lead Partner role would have needed to have a bilingual team to deliver on this role effectively, and this was not the case of any of the participating cities in the network.

- In the URBACT model where cities apply as a group, the Lead Partner has stronger responsibilities, but also stronger resources. It is the Lead Partner who submits the application for the creation of the network and manages the overall budget for the network. Overall, this stronger level of buy-in and commitment benefits the success of the Lead Partner role. Conditions that were not present in ASToN the way it was set up.

In spite of these challenges, the role was adapted into a much lighter model of rotating 'critical friend', which still helped us build deep and valuable connections. Each quarter a different city was the designated critical friend working with the Secretariat and Lead Expert to test ideas, collaborate on session designs, and more. While not what was originally envisaged, it was more adapted to the resources and context of ASToN (2019-2022). A reflection on roles we'll keep on having as the network changes.

— Defining what good looks like and setting indicators

Launching a flagship programme like ASToN is in itself a source of uncertainty. Will the programme work? Will we be able to create a meaningful community of peers or create true change on the ground? Which are the minimum results we can expect? Adding events like COVID-19 to that, uncertainty and disruption increase even more. Delivering the network means juggling between updating our logframe, listening more closely to the cities requests and adjusting our plans to fit their needs.

Setting good indicators helps continuously assess if the network is heading in the right direction. It will likely not be a one-time, linear process, but instead, indicators should be responsive to the reality of the network as it evolves. Indicators can be set at different levels - network, city, project.

Our approach and methods

- **Choosing and adapting indicators:** Define what good looks like and set corresponding indicators. Adapt them as the network evolves and build a rhythm of reviewing them.

- **A place for all indicators:** Think about a place where progress across network activities can be easily tracked, against a meaningful set of indicators. One of the key documents of ASToN (2019-2022) is a logframe that sets indicators for all the work delivered - locally by cities, learning as a network, capturing and sharing our knowledge and communicating about our results more broadly.

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Lessons learnt from ASToN (2019-2022):

- **Set up some indicators with the end in mind.** What will you want the future to look like? Set up internal indicators for what you would consider the best possible outcomes from the programme, and check progress against these as well. Right at the beginning of ASToN we set ourselves 2 series of result indicators: a) we'd consider the programme a failure if the following things happened... b) we'd raise a glass if the following things happened...

- **Keep track of emerging risks.** Following the onset of COVID-19, we drafted a risk analysis framework which helped us navigate the uncertain situation we found ourselves in and monitor closely the situation on the ground.

- **Accept that you might not meet some results.** For example, we unfortunately did not meet our target on gender inclusion. The tech environment in most of the participating countries we work with did not allow for our vision on gender equality to be attained. We did focus on pushing to leave no one behind where we could have an impact (ASToN training sessions, meetings, conferences etc).

- **Embed an adaptive rhythm for setting good success indicators.** At times, cities will not be able to respond to indicators that might have been originally set, and indicators shaped at the beginning of the project might not be relevant later in the programme. Adopt a rhythm to setting indicators that is responsive to the changes the network goes through and to the direction it takes.

- **Update your understanding of what good looks like in response to how the network evolves.** Getting into implementation, the definition of certain objectives and results changed from what they were at the start of the network.

— Thinking about and evaluating network sustainability

Sustainability is a key principle of both URBACT and of AFD Smart City strategy. In a context of scarce resources, how does one plan for sustainability when launching a flagship programme that can potentially be a one-off? How can sustainability be embedded in the work that is delivered so that the results achieved during the programme can outlive it?

Our approach and methods

- **Defining sustainability:** Involve relevant stakeholders in a discussion around what is understood by sustainability in the context of the project at hand, and in which key areas it should be considered.

  - It can be about the community - people continuing to exchange and work together even if the work has finished; For instance, ASToN (2019-2022) has progressively built a sense of belonging across the group thanks to our joint activities and network moments. The relationships that now exist between people who've participated in ASToN will endure far beyond the life of the project.

  - It can be about the local projects and strategies- For instance, ASToN (2019-2022) has defined sustainability as a key principle and objective for the Local Action Plans. And possibly, this might be the single most important point where achieving sustainability is key. Within ASToN (2019-2022), cities ensured the sustainability of their Local Action Plans by making sure all the steps they took in drafting their plans strictly adhered to the city needs and objectives they'd identifie. Furthermore, this approach encouraged cities to take ownership of their projects, by thinking about sustainability from the start and testing it through experimentation.

- **Building strong interpersonal relations from the start:** Use mechanisms e.g. accountability buddies, pairing cities together to do various assignments, or clustering small groups of cities by themes, to build strong interpersonal relations and ensure higher levels of accountability; Even if we don't have direct visibility on these exchanges we echo of their existence; they tend to be activated when one of the city leaders looks for support and guidance.

- **Network-level Project exit options and how to evaluate them:** for a network like ASToN it's not a given that it will last forever or that it needs to. Sometimes the shorter, sharper focus of a project can be enough to put activities in motion that will shift behaviour and approach, and lead to long-term impact. For ASToN we knew we had funding for an initial 3 years together as a network. We considered multiple 'exit' options of what to do beyond that initial funding. They were a mix of keeping the organisation of ASToN, the 'engine' that drives it, central, or moving that engine to sit with one or many of the cities. The options we considered include:

  - **Close** - shut down the network
  - **Self organise** - nominate a rotating lead from one of the cities who will be responsible for facilitating it and keeping it going
  - **Follow-on funding** - seek further funding from the same funders and new ones to finance the network level
  - **Thematic funding** - seek funding for a subset of the cities working on a particular theme e.g. mobility or in a particular region e.g. E Africa
  - **Membership** - shift to a membership model and charge cities a fee to join. Current members have preferential rates. New members pay higher rates.
  - **Sponsorship** - seek sponsorship funding from digital or tech partners that would benefit from access to 11 local authorities
  - **Hybrid** - some mix of the above

Lessons learnt from ASToN (2019-2022):

- **Think about sustainability.** Of resources, of action, of shifts in mindset and skillset, and of relationships.

- **Start with the end in mind.** With relatively short term funding.

- **Set clear priorities.** Even if the network as a whole will not continue, our priority is to look for funding firstly to finance the local action plans that emmmerged from the program. Their implementation and overall sustainability is the key success indicator for ASToN.

Section 3: Onboarding the cities and designing the method

How do you onboard the cities and get started on strong foundations?

Setting up the network well requires thinking carefully about how to effectively onboard each city and gather information about and with them so that method can be designed to suit their needs.

— Onboarding the cities

To make sure the network starts on solid foundations, it needs a dedicated period of well-considered onboarding. This includes the more formal aspects like dealing with the formalities of contracting and officialising the collaboration on paper, and the softer, intangible aspects of setting up an innovation network like preparing the teams to collaborate, learn and experiment. When designing the onboarding phase, it's important it fulfils several objectives:

- Confirming participation and completing all paperwork necessary
- Publicising the city's participation in the network
- Setting expectations
- Answering any arising questions from cities on how the network will run
- Getting participants to know each other, and
- Starting establishing the right culture and (innovation) mindset for the partnership.

Our approach and methods

- **1st contact and follow up call:** Let cities know they have been selected for the network and ask them to confirm that they are still interested and available to participate in the programme. Give cities an opportunity to ask any follow up questions they may have.

- **Admin:** Complete all necessary onboarding paperwork.

- **Kick-off event:** Host an in-person event in one of the cities to kick off the network, use this time to get to know each other, set expectations and start to establish the culture of the network.

- **City visits:** Organise a team visit in each partner city to know the wider local team and provide the city the opportunity to communicate on the new project (to the citizens, media and other key players). The city visits are a good opportunity to collect additional information in answering the baseline questions, and a catalytic event for each team to engage their Mayor and leaders, local stakeholders and other stakeholders sparking interest from their local action group.

Lessons learnt from ASToN (2019-2022):

- **Make sure city selection is followed closely by project launch.** Between the selection of cities, their confirmation and the official start of activities 8 months passed (January to September 2019, period during which we tried to keep the cities engaged with a newsletter and a series of messages). This made it difficult for us initially to take the network off the ground and re-engage with the cities (turn-over in city teams, change of political priorities, elections). In the first months of the project we spent more time securing cities' involvement to the detriment of other activities (designing the working method, starting the research for the baseline etc).

- **Do not under-estimate the time needed for the initial paperwork** (contract signature, first bank transfer). As these processes are happening for the first time they generally require more time than subsequent ones (people within the institutions concerned need to get familiarised with the project, need to create new budget lines etc).

- **Respect local processes and timeframes.** We were able to have 11 out of the 12 initially selected cities engage on the project because we were able to give them time and adjust the enrollment process according to what was possible for them.

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CASE STUDY from ASToN (2019-2022):
The network kick-off event
in Kampala (Uganda), 23-25 October 2019

To mark the launch of ASToN, the 11 network cities met in Kampala in October 2019. Cities were represented by technical officers from the city teams, and by an elected member or Mayor.

We designed a 3-day event with the objectives of creating a sense of occasion to mark the network launch; allowing the space and time for the cities to start to get to know each other; modelling the kind of engagement and honesty we hoped all would bring to ASToN interactions, we wanted to start building a safe space that would encourage sharing the wins and challenges further down the line.

The programme was:

• Day One: Launch

All Mayors signed a charter, official photo to capture the moment, all cities introduced themselves with the help of a massive map to stand on, we each shared what we're most excited about, then closed with a cocktail together, joined by others from Kampala City team.

• Day Two: Learn

We introduced ASToN method, we heard from each city about a 'gem' they wanted to the network to know about their city, we explored who is a tech optimist vs a tech pessimist in the group to help get to know each other better, and then we went out and about in Kampala to visit some of their flagship digital projects.

• Day Three: Vision and what's next

We did a visioning exercise with everyone to connect personally to what they wanted from ASToN and how it might shape their career and life in their city, we drew posters of the future each city wanted to create through their time on ASToN and 'visited' each others' city poster, we closed with a closing ceremony and a word from our host, Kampala Mayor.

Running a network kick-off is a significant investment in time and resources but it's worth it for the sparks of relationships that are created, and the common understanding you can build in the room. It's as much about the unstructured time as the organised sessions. Coffee breaks, dinners, walking between venues... these were all some of the most valuable times for getting to know each other.

Time together as a network is a high priority for everyone. We were quite blown away by how much people prioritised coming to the launch, and have prioritised ASToN network meetings ever since. It validates how useful and meaningful people find the connections to be.

ASToN requires a safe space, and that takes time. At the kick off meeting, cities presented the best of themselves and there was even a touch of competitiveness. That's only natural for a first-time meeting. Since then we've been able to coax out more sharing of problems and challenges, and a more nuanced view of each city. It's only be creating a safe, open and honest space in-person and online that this kind of sharing becomes possible, and it takes time to cultivate.

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— Setting the baseline and understanding city needs

A second step is ensuring the network you're building is a response to real needs. This means understanding the goals and ambitions of the cities involved, what their current levels of digital maturity are in both the local authority and related territory more broadly, and what the gaps or needs are which the network can support them with. Each city must identify a challenge to overcome, a problem to be solved which will define what activities the city does during their time as a member of the network.

Our approach and methods

• Drafting a baseline study:

- **Scope:** Define clear questions for the baseline study. What is the overview of the theme, what unites and distinguishes the cohort, and what are the things to measure progress against?

- **Data collection:** Use the answers to the application process and additional interviews with city representatives and other key stakeholders from each city to gather the information required to answer key questions. In the case of ASToN these were questions like: what is the digital maturity of the city authority (skills, purchasing power, culture of experimentation, ability to build / maintain technology) and what's the digital maturity of the city (e.g number of startups, % mobile phone penetration, etc)

- **Analysis and synthesis:** Analyse the findings from the data collection and synthesise the needs of the cities in the network - ask, where do the cities have similar needs? Where do they differ?

- **Identify a clear city challenge:** Work with the cities to identify a clear challenge each is willing to work on for the duration of the programme.

Lessons learnt from ASToN (2019-2022):

• Focus on the people in the network, and the unique insights from each city.

• Agreeing on the baseline can be a lengthy process. Using URBACT as a reference, we initially set-up the baseline work and the Engagement phase to 6 months. We very quickly realised this was not enough for several reasons. The geographical distances between cities meant we needed more time to undertake the city visits. Also, the process of drafting the baseline, agreeing on what the core values and principles of the network were within the team and also with the cities, required several exchanges and discussions.

• Visiting the cities is a valuable opportunity. Rather than see the visits to each city as purely a research moment, they were an opportunity for the ASToN team in each city to gel, for the local authority to gather existing and new stakeholders together, to hear from and align different voices around the challenge, and to do some key exercises that would set the team up for success like a pre-mortem.

━ Designing the method

Finally, the method should be articulated around this clear understanding of needs, leaving space for learning as new needs arise. The needs analysis should be used to design an initial proposition for how the network might best support this group of cities to achieve their goals. While a learning rhythm should intentionally build in space to learn and adapt as e.g. new needs arise.

Our approach and methods

• **Initial proposition:** Articulate the method using the insight from the baseline study to support this group of cities to achieve their goals. Share the method with the cities so they can see how the network will support them. Build in some stages of feedback from the cities before finalising the offering.

• **Structuring the network in 3 phases:** Think about what shift in knowledge, expertise and action the cities need to make to reach the network objectives. For ASToN, we structured the network in the 3 phases of Explore, Engage and Experiment.
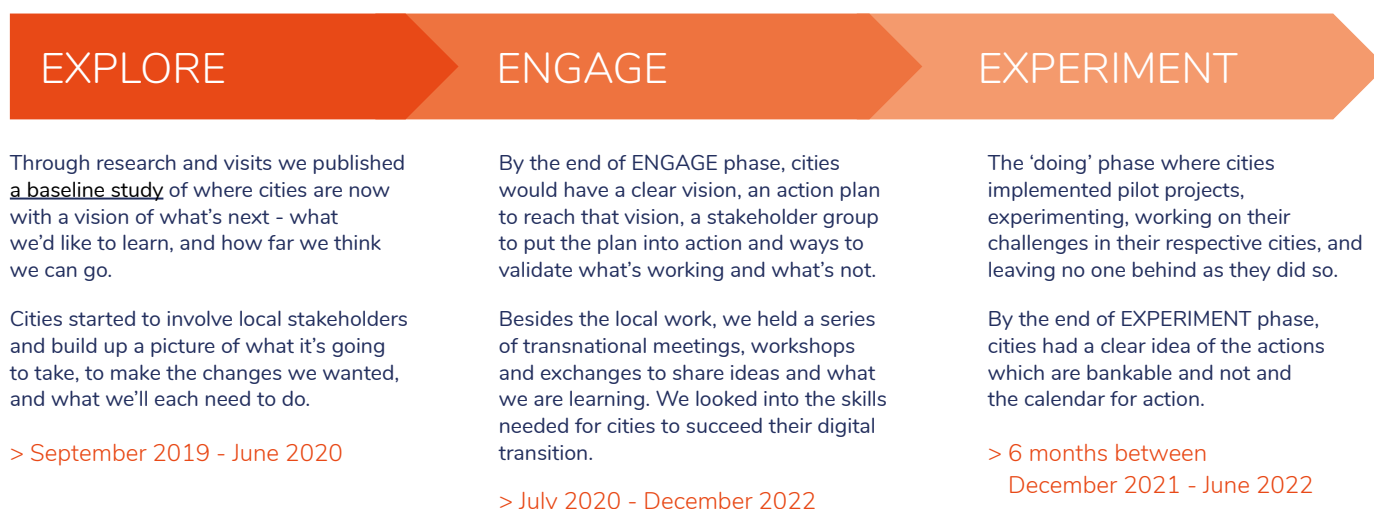
  - **Explore:** this first phase is for setting the baseline and mapping the landscape. Understand the context for each city and the challenge the city would like to focus on. Define the problem properly and map out the stakeholders from across all sectors and parts of the city who might have influence or resources for addressing the core problem.

  - **Engage:** the second phase is to move from theory to practice and begin building relationships with people from outside the local authority, in each sector that's affected by or involved in the problem and the potential solution for tackling it. This could be across business, startups, academia, the press, national government or other layers of administration, and most importantly always included citizens

  - **Experiment:** the third phase was the time for city teams to put together all they'd learned up to this point. The true root cause of the problem they'd like to address, an early stage idea for tackling that problem, the people from across the city who could help or would be affected to input into the design and the process, and funding from ASToN and beyond to finance the experiment. All supported by coaching from Innovation Coches and the Technical Experts.

• **A rhythm to learn and adapt:** consider using a Quarterly rhythm as a drum beat for the network e.g. every 3 months, get feedback, spot any changing needs, and decide on the details of what the next phase should look like (rather than setting out a really clear calendar at the start which will change as things go)

What are the stages of realisation?

EXPLORE	ENGAGE	EXPERIMENT
Through research and visits we published a baseline study of where cities are now with a vision of what's next - what we'd like to learn, and how far we think we can go.	By the end of ENGAGE phase, cities would have a clear vision, an action plan to reach that vision, a stakeholder group to put the plan into action and ways to validate what's working and what's not.	The 'doing' phase where cities implemented pilot projects, experimenting, working on their challenges in their respective cities, and leaving no one behind as they did so.
Cities started to involve local stakeholders and build up a picture of what it's going to take, to make the changes we wanted, and what we'll each need to do.	Besides the local work, we held a series of transnational meetings, workshops and exchanges to share ideas and what we are learning. We looked into the skills needed for cities to succeed their digital transition.	By the end of EXPERIMENT phase, cities had a clear idea of the actions which are bankable and not and the calendar for action.
> September 2019 - June 2020	> July 2020 - December 2022	> 6 months between December 2021 - June 2022

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Lessons learnt from ASToN (2019-2022):

- **Be flexible with your method and how you design your project.** We had initially organised the project in three phases (explore - engage - experiment) intended to be delivered consecutively. Reflecting on Phase 1 of ASToN, we realised that the Experimentation phase should be embedded in the Engagement phase in order to facilitate learning & adapting. Building the best model and running ASToN as effectively as possible was a constant matter of adapting to needs and context, especially given some external unforeseen shocks like COVID19.

- **Factor in time to reflect, learn, and course correct.** We always gained new insights from putting things into practice and made sure we took time to pause, reflect and learn regularly. We built a method that was modular, with three-month-long cycles of learning together, then pausing, reflecting, course-correcting where necessary before going again.

- **Tailor the offering.** A method designed on paper can be very far from what the cities actually need once you've got to know the city contexts, the teams' skillsets and mindsets and how they all sit together as a cohort. By tailoring the offering it's much easier to bring as many of the cities along on the learning and experimenting journey as possible and knowing how far you can stretch and challenge the city teams to test and learn new things.

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BUILDING A NETWORK THROUGH LEARNING, RELATIONSHIPS, REAL-WORLD ACTION AND FUNDING

Section 4: Creating a learning journey

**How do you structure what
the cities in the network are going to learn?**

Think of learning as a journey, it's an experience over time and involves a variety of different topics, methods, and modes. The topics covered in the learning journey should be based on the needs identified through the baseline study and inception period. It's important to balance the different modes of learning - learning from experts, learning from peers and putting things into practice.

— Learning journey

Think of learning as a journey, it's an experience over time and involves a variety of different topics, methods, and modes. A one off learning experience is less likely to have impact and really change the way that participants conceive certain problems or deliver certain outcomes. Getting participants to engage with content in a variety of ways allows them to really engage with the topic, absorb it, understand it, and then apply it.

Our approach and methods	
Different modes of learning	Create a mixture of learning - from experts, peers, practice, etc. - providing support where participants require assistance in attaining their learning goals but ensuring a transfer of know-how from peers, experts or else in the application of expertise, methods, mindsets and/or mechanisms.
Practising and reflecting	Make sure the cities in the network have the opportunity to put into practice what they're learning so it's not abstract.
Learning moments and learning rhythm	Organise intentional learning moments. Set up a regular rhythm of meetings and sessions to learn. - **Learning events** - Introduce a topic, bring inspiring speakers, etc. - **Peer learning sessions** - Invite the cities to spotlight their own work, encourage them to share issues and challenges with each other. - **1:1 calls** - Set up calls between cities with similar issues. - **Reflection sessions** - Create space to reflect on what's been learnt etc, with the aim of establishing the cities' ability to self assess and create openness and willingness to reflect and learn from experiences.

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CASE STUDY from ASToN (2019-2022):
ASToN's learning journey

Staying cohesive as a network

ASToN network was designed to support the cities in their digital transformation journey. However, we learned that every city in the ASToN network was starting at a slightly different point and the challenge was designing one common learning journey that would stretch the most advanced, whilst making sure not to leave anyone behind.

By the end of phase 1 we'd identified the areas with the most opportunities for the network to learn, together and from each other. The next phases became about building on existing strengths in the network, while also exploring new things together that would benefit the whole network.

A core curriculum

In order to support the key local activities required for the cities to develop their Local Action Plan, we have developed a core curriculum. It is informed by learning areas we identified in the Baseline Study.

The core curriculum introduced some of the most commonly used methodologies in digital development and innovation that answer these questions like Design Thinking, Lean Impact and Agile methods, as well as core topics, tools and techniques that supports all forms of digital transformation like digital government, data management, and data for decision making.

A long-list of topics that meant we could meet evolving needs

The learning areas were at a network level and were designed to be relevant to all cities, covering issues related to digital, technology building testing and experimentation, citizen participation, innovation methods and mindsets, data, funding and more.

We had a 'long list' or backlog of learning topics and areas we knew we wanted to cover, and we designed a quarterly rhythm of learning that meant we could deep-dive on a topic before moving on to the next one. Each quarter we reviewed our backlog and selected the next topic based on needs we heard from the cities.

Through our time with the cities we learned they would have also benefited from more learning about Project Management, budget follow-up, leading a Local Action Group that should be taken into account in the future.

A mixed-method approach to suit any learning style

We combined different methods and ways of supporting the cities to learn, including:

- facilitated network events with guest speakers or hosted by the Lead Expert
- curated tools for the cities to apply in their local activities
- peer-to-peer learning moments
- matchmaking with relevant technical experts

Held together by a rhythm and structure

The quarterly rhythm allowed us time to reflect, learn and course-correct where needed, and gave the cities a sense of familiarity and structure that meant they knew exactly where they were in the learning journey and understood how to engage with it.

At the start of each quarter, a kick off, a learning guide and some new topics and tools were introduced. By the end of each quarter, opportunities to put learning into practice, to reflect on what worked and what didn't, and a chance to exchange with others across the network to embed the learning.

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	2020		2021				2022				2023
	JULY - SEPT	OCT - DEC	JAN - MAR	APR - JUN	JULY - SEPT	OCT - DEC	JAN - MAR	APR - JUN	JULY - SEPT	OCT - DEC	JAN - MAR
Phase	PHASE 2: ENGAGE						PHASE 3: EXPERIMENT				Administrative closure
Events	Network event	Online learning & reflection event	Online learning & reflection event	Online learning & reflection event	Online learning & reflection event	Network event	Online learning & reflection event	Network event	Online learning & reflection event	**Final event**	
LEARNING AREAS	How to define the scope of the problem	How to involve citizens and stakeholders in solution design	How to move from vision to experimentation	How to use data for decision making	How to apply new method of collaboration	How to ensure the sustainability of a projec	How to measure in experimentation	How to pivot based on learnings	How to elaborate a good action plan	How to pitch an action plan to secure fundings	
LOCAL ACTIVITIES	Define the problem to focus on	Engage with stakeholders	Co-design solutions and draft Action PLan		Define areas to test and prepare experiment	Experimentation Committees	Conduct experiment & Capture Learning		Refine Action Plan & Secure Funding		

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— Learning areas

So much could be covered, and therefore it is important to both:

- **Prioritise learning areas together with participating cities** based on their most powerful needs in addressing their challenge, while also

- **Encourage cities to engage in a variety of topics more broadly.**

The learning areas should be relevant to all cities, irrespective of their digital maturity. The learning areas can therefore be decided based on an assessment of needs in the cohort. However they should be regularly reviewed over time, as things can quickly change for the cities, and new needs will emerge, and remaining adaptable is important. The curriculum set at the start of the network might not remain relevant throughout the lifetime of the network.

Our approach and methods	
Prioritised long list	Start with a prioritised long list of learning areas which you can go back to each quarter and pick the next topic from - as much as possible the learning area should support the specific challenge cities are working on at that time (eg. problem definition, identifying solutions or experimentation).
Learning guide	Accompany each quarter with a learning guide including the quarter's calendar and milestones, and an intro on the learning areas & tools cities can use to advance in their learning process.
Inspirational speakers	Bring inspirational speakers and external/ad-hoc experts who can provide a new perspective on the topic.

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— Thematic clusters

Bringing people together and fostering connections based on a shared purpose or topic of interest is one way to spark deep and holistic connections with unforeseen gains for peer-peer collaboration into the future. Set up smaller clusters of cities within the network that will meet and connect more closely as peers.

Our approach and methods	
Clusters	Group cities (e.g. by three or four) based on the common challenge they are tackling (mobility, e-tax, citizen engagement, land management).
Experts	Assign an expert to each group - someone with in-depth knowledge on the topic and expertise on the African continent.
Create learning space	Give time for cities to know each other, understand the similarity between the challenges they are facing. Create a space of trust where they can talk about what works and what doesn't work as well.

Lessons learnt from ASToN (2019-2022):

- **Remain very adaptable throughout.** COVID-19 changed the priorities and capacity of cities in our network significantly, but also certain thematic clusters became less relevant later in the network, and we didn't force these clusters to continue when they were no longer needed.

- **Onboard experts onto the ASToN process.** Thematic and technical expertise is needed within a specialist network, and in this case, experts with good knowledge of the African continent are highly preferred. However, it is also important that these experts share and are convinced by the implemented methodology to the network. Onboarding them onto this methodology is important to the success of their contributions.

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Section 5: Creating a strong, active network

How do you create a strong, active network?

As much as possible the network should create a community with intent. Communication and knowledge capture and sharing are important to engaging with the outside world effectively, while appropriate tools should be used to allow and encourage effective information sharing internally.

— Building a community

As much as possible the network should create a community and sense of collective identity and belonging between participating cities. These relationships will outlive the network and spark more opportunities that we cannot imagine. The community can supercharge any other types of support that might be offered by programme activities as it allows people to take the lead and ask for what they need from one another directly. Making change and doing things in new ways in a city authority can be hard. Each city team includes people with deep technical expertise who can offer their counterparts support and guidance based on their previous experiences. There is also a strong sense of peer support for when progress is hard - a feeling of being 'in it together' through the turbulence of changing politics and external shocks like a pandemic.

Our approach and methods

• **The culture of the network:** Think about the culture of the network. The participants that signed up to the programme are likely changemakers within their respective governments, with a stronger innovation mindset. The network should be a place to encourage and feel this common sense of identity.

• **Shared principles:** Develop together with all participants shared principles at the start of the network. ASToN's philosophy and shared principles were:

  - Transnational exchange based on mutuality
  - Learning by doing, being prepared to try new things we have never done before
  - Highly collaborative and participatory, including local stakeholders from across all sectors and truly listening to them
  - Openness and experimental mindset: the curiosity and willingness to 'get out, and go-see' and the honesty to say when things aren't working

  - Building relationships, investing the time to get to know each other

• **Connect people around areas of expertise:** Think about areas of deep technical expertise, how can you link up people with similar roles and remits across the network.

• **(In-person) network events:** Invest in in-person events/network events, these are moments when everyone in the network comes together, meeting in person and connecting on an individual level, learning together and eating together.

• **A digital space for collaboration:** Create a digital place where participants from cities across the different participating countries can connect with each other with the support of digital tools. We used Basecamp to share information and WhatsApp for general discussion (more details below).

• **Multilingual communication:** Where possible, think about communicating in 2+ languages. Use technology to reduce the barriers to community building that language barriers can create eg. use the in-zoom translation function, in person translators, etc.

— Brand, profile and communication

Communicating externally plays a crucial role in the setting up a strong network:

• To make the network known and share with a wider audience the work and results from the cities in the network, and

• To benefit from the visibility and recognition of others externally who might capitalise on the work delivered.

Our approach and methods

- **A communication strategy:** Capture clearly what will be communicated, how, when, and why. Think about the pillars around which the strategy should focus on, and the messages communication efforts should emphasise for each phase of the network.

- **Online communication:** Think about e.g.

  - Using a website as a main hub for content and contacts

  - Planning a strong presence on social media (esp. linkedin and twitter) with dedicated and targeted approaches

  - Systematic publications on medium sharing the life of the network and the main challenges cities were being confronted with.

- **External events:** Where relevant, participate in external events in relation with the activities and priorities of the network.

CASE STUDY from ASToN (2019-2022):
ASToN's communication strategy

ASToN's communication strategy organised itself around four pillars:

- **Presence and reach -** To publicise ASToN programme and its member cities; To validate the programme's constitution and member's actions.

- **Image -** Present the ASToN programme, enhance the methodology deployed and position ASToN as a key player in digital in Africa; Express the voice of ASToN (its positioning - its promise for the territories in which it is involved).

- **Facilitation and co-creation -** Bring the network to life, creating links between the participating cities through a series of actions and tools to make their cooperation effective; Encouraging co-creation (ASToN is an original project that is being developed and enriched as the experiments are carried out).

- **Influence -** To disseminate good practices amongst the member cities of the network and beyond, so other interested cities can apply lessons from the network; Beyond the results, communicate ASToN's stories, show the impact on the cities and their citizens.

External messaging was different for each phase of ASToN. Early content focused on presenting the network while later content focused on communicating the

value of the work delivered and methodology of the network:

Early phases - Presenting the ASToN network - messages:

- The network exists.

- ASToN brings together 11 African cities.

- ASToN responds to the challenges of development and governance that all cities face.

- ASToN develops local, integrated and participatory urban projects.

- ASToN believes that digital technology is an essential development lever to build citizen, solidarity, sustainable and inclusive cities.

- ASToN is supported by ANRU and AFD

Later phases - Communicating the value of the ASToN network - messages:

- ASToN supports the digital transition of African cities by setting up a network of cities.

- ASToN develops integrated and participatory local urban projects, through exchanges between cities, transfer of best practices, and peer review.

- ASToN develops tailor-made projects by and for Africans, adapting to the context of each territory.

- ASToN aims to strengthen the capacities of local actors.

— Capturing and sharing knowledge

Capturing and sharing knowledge developed by the network is important for three reasons:

- To tell the story of the network as it delivers work, sharing its flagship nature with the world, building impact beyond the 11 cities;

- To build the legacy of the network, making sure that other cities can embark on a similar journey and that potentially other international organisations can launch city cooperation networks;

- To reinforce the sense of belonging of the cities to the network by presenting to an external audience who the cities are and what they have achieved as a cohort.

Our approach and methods

- **A knowledge sharing strategy:** Capture clearly what knowledge will be shared, how, when, and why. Ensure this strategy is flexible enough and adaptive to the continuous evolution and adjustments of the programme.

- **Starting small, and capitalising on what is already going on.** Start small, see what can be done with the activities that are already taking place, build on them e.g. cluster meetings, transnational encounters, participation in external events or documents that cities produce. For instance, ASToN (2019-2022) drafted articles in relation to some of the main thematic areas researched by city partners (e.g. participation, sustainability), published videos capturing and synthesising the key messages from the different events organised by the network, and created explanatory animation videos of the ongoing work and/or methodology used. In drafting your strategy, reflect on what can be shared, when, based on what the main outputs of the different parts of the programme will be.

— Sharing internally

Internally, information sharing needs to be encouraged and purposefully facilitated:

- Making sure all cities have access to the same information, guidance and tools, calendar, deadlines and a repository of all ongoing city projects;

- Allowing cities to go back to these materials if need be;

- Encouraging transparency and working in the open;

- Maintaining exchanges and connections between the city leaders in between meetings (online or offline), reinforcing the sense of belonging to a group of peers, and,

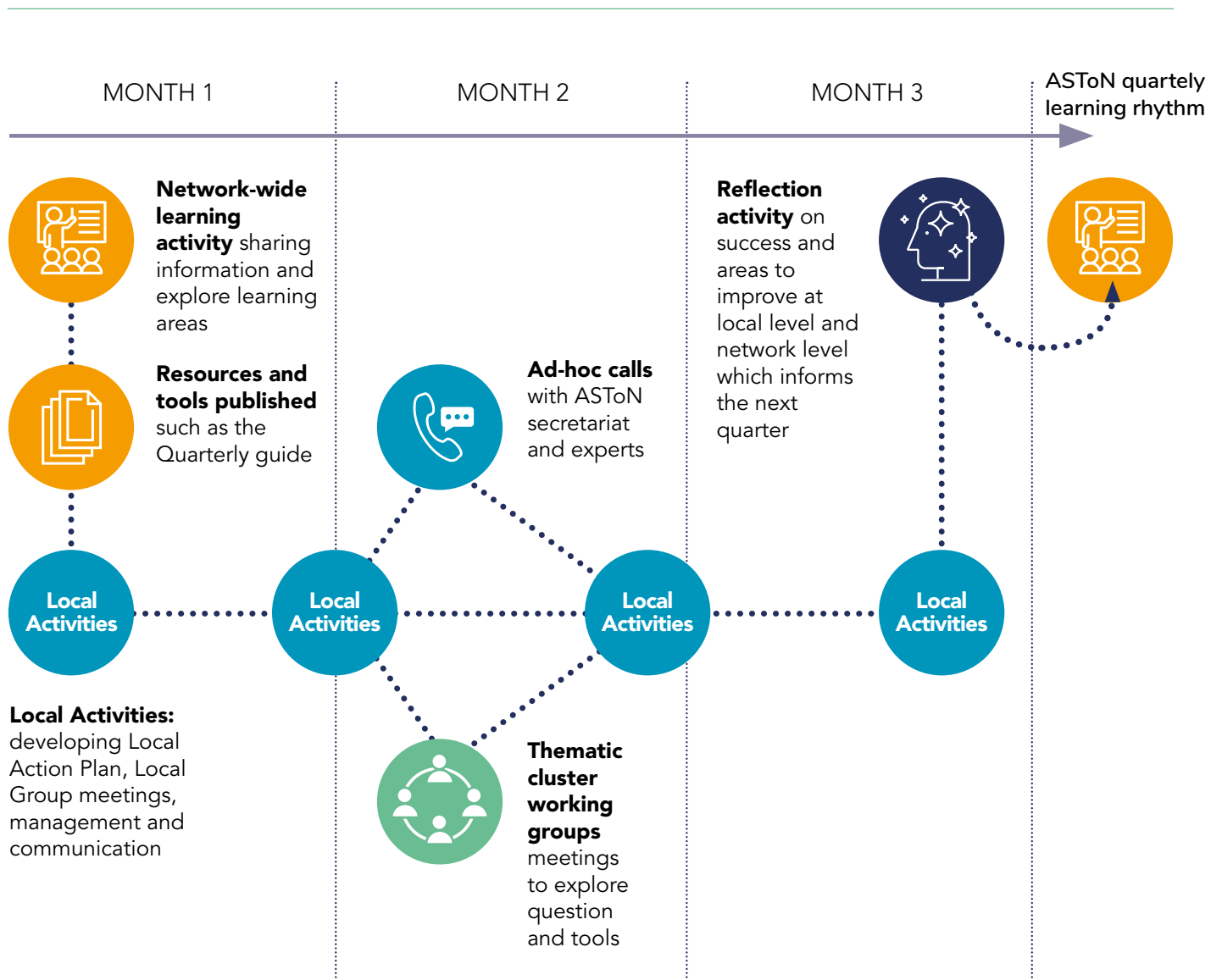- Creating a safe space for cities to exchange ideas and express themselves.

Our approach and methods

- **Tools and spaces for online collaboration.** Think about which tools are provided to cities for them to collaborate well. For instance, ASToN (2019-2022) used

  - Basecamp as the main intranet space to publish messages for the whole community, share documentation, the main calendar and deadlines for network inputs and outputs.
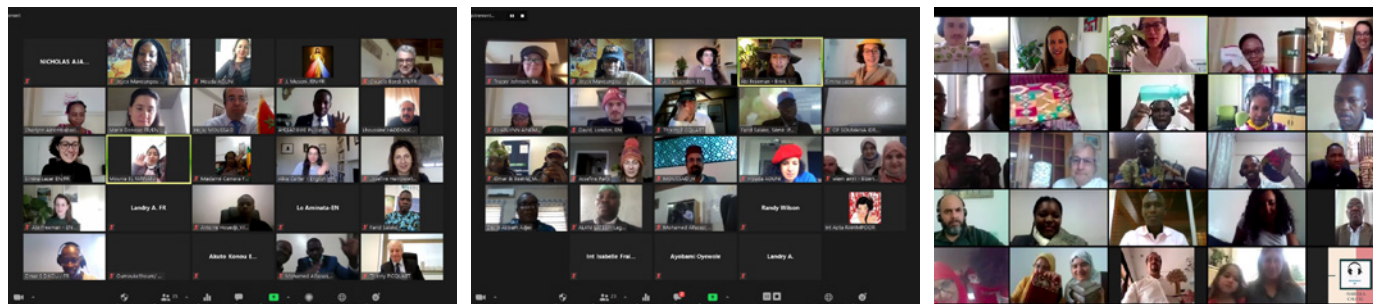
  - WhatsApp for informal check ins and follow-ups.

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Lessons learnt from ASToN (2019-2022):

- **Go where the people are**. The most efficient way to create a community for us was by going where the people were, i.e.

  - WhatsApp - We realised people respond much faster using WhatsApp than using email (it is often perceived as a more formal way of communication and requires internal validation); By 2022, the #astonnetwork whatsapp group had more than 80 members, including people from the wider community, people that are no longer directly involved in the project. People share general updates about their ASToN local activities and other ongoing work, celebrating encounters, interesting events and publications.

  - In line with the rhythms and availability of participants, we organised shorter but more frequent online gatherings.

  - To give people energy, we made a point of celebrating when we were all together as a network, online or in-person.

- **Make sure to identify clear points of contacts for participating teams.**

MONTH 1 | MONTH 2 | MONTH 3 | ASToN quartely learning rhythm

Network-wide learning activity sharing information and explore learning areas

Resources and tools published such as the Quarterly guide

Ad-hoc calls with ASToN secretariat and experts

Reflection activity on success and areas to improve at local level and network level which informs the next quarter

Local Activities

Local Activities

Local Activities

Local Activities

Local Activities

Local Activities: developing Local Action Plan, Local Group meetings, management and communication

Thematic cluster working groups meetings to explore question and tools

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CASE STUDY from ASToN (2019- 2022):
Pivoting to more virtual delivery, the impact of COVID-19

As a consequence of the lockdowns imposed across the globe at the start of 2020, ASToN was forced to put a pause to all physical events. And while we managed to hold nine out of the eleven planned city visits and to hold the network kick-off meeting in Kampala, by the end of March 2020, all ASToN meetings and activities were moved online.

With regards to programme delivery, one of the negative effects of the COVID-19 crisis was the immediate unavailability of in-person events. Throughout the programme, it should have been possible to visit the cities that were experiencing a downturn, to help them revitalise their local project, to re-legitimise them in the eyes of their elected officials, etc. This was not possible.

Despite the distress and pain it caused, pivoting to more online delivery due to the COVID-19 pandemic on the long run benefited network activities:

- It allowed us to maintain momentum by organising short calls and exchanges with city leaders on specific topics;

- It forced a learning curve among our partners - online meetings were the only way to exchange internationally;

- It made us space out the in-person meetings, making them true celebrations of the cities coming together as a network; While initially and following the URBACT methodology, we had considered a rhythm of closer in-person meetings, which, upon reflection, would have worked in Europe but not in Africa given distances and the time and resources needed to plan such events.

In response to the situation and among other things,

- We tested the best ways to come together as a group online considering the needs and specificities of each one of us (time zone differences and time slot during the day when people did not have meetings or were not in traffic, connectivity issues and choice of platforms that were lightest to load);

- The only online platform that allowed interpretation was zoom so we started using it - for the first group meetings we did a lot of explaining on how to use the tool, collectively adhered to a number of principles for conducting effective online meetings. Within zoom we tried out various tools (pre-registration, webinars). We also tested various tools to facilitate meetings (jamboard, mentimeter, miro). We learned to be flexible, accepted that people sometimes had to cancel last minute, called to attend senior meetings;

- Having a learning routine of learning and reflection sessions at the end of each quarter allowed all to build on the network collective learning and become more experienced in using online tools.

COVID-19 has also set in motion a huge shift in the way we interact, communicate, learn, and share. There is an opportunity to accelerate the pace at which we build communities virtually, in a way that is catalytic and human. We will continue to assess the situation and work together to understand the best ways to continue the work.

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Section 6: Managing grant funding & providing support

How to best use grants to support learning and experimentation?

Grant funding should be deployed in alignment with the activities planned and delivered by the cities, and should come in support of them. Create a process to formally validate and celebrate progress. And make sure to use grants to support experimentation and direct cities towards more iterative and experimental ways of doing things.

— Aligning grants and activities

Grants are a powerful tool to encourage positive risk taking, learning and drive progress. Align grants and activities, and align payments to outputs:

- It allows flexibility for participating cities to adjust their timeline and activities, based on results and time needed and spent on each phase.

- It simplifies paperwork, making payments output-based, rather than time-based.

Our approach and methods

- **Grant funding dedicated to experimentation gave clarity**

- **Flexible payment timetables:** Be flexible with participating cities and work with their calendars, following their needs rather than being strict. Avoid implementing a common framework for all. Work around an indicative grant allocation calendar that can shift as project timelines change.

- **Light paperwork:** Keep paperwork light and combining with activities.

— Validating and celebrating progress

A formal process to validate outputs is necessary to align payments to outputs. One way to do this is by convening a committee at a regular rhythm to validate access to each phase of the programme. This checkpoint also provides an opportunity to touch base and adjust the next phase work to ensure most value at all points. Finally, it is an opportunity to recognise and celebrate the work done so far and reinforce commitment on the city side towards next steps.

Our approach and methods

- **Clear outputs / checkpoints:** Define clear outputs for each phase of the programme. Within ASToN (2019-2022) for instance, to access the subsequent phases, cities had to prepare specific documents relevant to their phase of work (e.g. for phase 3 it was an experimentation plan and related budget).

- **Validating progress via a committee:** Assign decision rights to validate progress, and take advantage of this checkpoint to encourage a productive conversation and feedback. After reviewing the aforementioned documents, a committee made up of e.g. the Secretariat, external members and thematic experts was held with the aim of clarifying any remaining points with the city and validate their progress.

- **Celebrations:** Take this opportunity to celebrate progress.

— Supporting cities to conduct experiments

Experimentation re-frames the work that cities are doing so that it is focused on learning and adapting (based on what is learnt). This might be new to participating cities. Supporting cities to experiment will help them gain skills and confidence that they can then take forward.

Around the world, public services are becoming more user-centred, apps-based, and citizen-led. If local authorities are to occupy an important role in meeting citizens' needs in the future, taking an experimental approach is fundamentally important because of the nature of the digital solutions they now are looked upon to build, and the complexity of the challenges citizens face. Through experimentation at pace, cities are able to test their ideas so that they can incrementally

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build the right "thing", pivot, or stop a project when it simply is not feasible.

However, there's an in-built tension between the iterative way of working of experimentation and the requirements for long-term planning, cash flow and certainty of cities, which is why it's important to support cities as they plan and implement experiments.

This is a challenging shift in ways of working, so support to cities should move beyond sharing methods and tools to help teams, including time and resources to work through difficult moments, celebrate what might be considered as "wins", hold them to account and keep pace/momentum.

Our approach and methods

- **Coaching:** Partner each city who receives grant funding with a dedicated experimentation coach.

- **Grant planning - fund design and disbursement; coaching:**
  - **Prep time:** In project planning, bake in enough time for cities to familiarise themselves with the method, plan and complete necessary permissions and procurement. It is often surprising how long this can take in total.

  - **Size of grant for experiments:** Not massive but sizeable, give teams enough to build something small if needs be.

  - **Length and amount:** Leverage the relationship you have with cities to design the length and amount of funding based on what is realistic for the city authorities you are working with (i.e. recognising the timings to procure, or how ready they are to bring in citizens). Tools: Provide teams with tools and resources to frame their planning.

  - **Tools**: Provide teams with tools and resources to frame their planning.

  - **Reporting:** Design the artefacts for accessing and reporting on funding so that they are anchored on the specific aims of the grant, whether this is a specific impact or specific learnings. Provide support to ensure the budget is spent effectively.

- **Integrating the grants well:**
  - **During the programme:** Make this "phase" feel like a natural progression for the work that doesn't overextend the team.

  - **After programme:** Encourage changes to teams

approach that can continue beyond the grant funding.

- **Building in incentives:**
  - **Instil friendly competition**

  - **Investment committee:** As a gateway to make sure cities are ready, have them build up to an investment committee - albeit with friendly faces. This encourages the city to advocate for why they want to conduct certain activities and gives space for constructive feedback. Have the experimentation coach decide when to do this as they work most closely with the city and it acts as an informal gateway.

Lessons learnt from ASToN (2019-2022):

- **Have a separate pot of money for experimentation,** to give clarity and permission for cities to plan work specifically in service of learning. As much as possible, try to also treat the grant funding differently, to balance the usual level of oversight with the level of freedom needed in cities to allow them to get to work quickly.

- **Give cities more than just financial support** to experiment, since experimentation can often be new and in tension with existing ways of working. By offering methods, tools, and tailored coaching, cities will be able to successfully plan and test their ideas. This support will help cities to overcome administrative, budgetary or other challenges in order to enable cities to plan, test and learn about their ideas at pace.

- **Help teams understand the processes and requirements for their local authorities to access and spend money.** The starting point for experimentation is a lack of certainty about the idea, whether it will work and how it will scale. This can be in contrast with the processes for cities to spend funds (i.e. through procurement), which often require very detailed, concrete and unchanging plans. Many cities also experience cash flow problems that can hinder their ability to purchase assets or contract partners quickly. It's important to use this understanding to design the grants and support cities in the most relevant way for them.

CASE STUDY from ASToN (2019-2022):
Innovative Procurement, Bizerte (Tunisia)

The municipality of Bizerte aims for continuous improvement in the quality of life of its citizens, including in how it conducts cleanliness activities and waste disposal. Recently, however, the extension of municipal boundaries – including into peri-urban and rural areas – has challenged the existing approach to waste management. Specifically, the overall size of the municipal boundary has quadrupled, which adds difficulty in the monitoring of garbage collection vehicles, the amount of "black spots" in service provision, and the satisfaction levels of citizens. An improvement in service quality would be measurable by cleaner neighbourhoods and a greater understanding of providers' and citizen needs and satisfaction levels towards municipal waste disposal.

Back in January 2022 and as one of the steps taken to address this issue, the city of Bizerte wanted to source a partner to develop a Minimum Viable Product (MVP) of a waste management solution that could address the above issues. This was so they could learn about the stated solution's functionality, feasibility and impact. In order to find a partner the city of Bizerte ran three Requests for Proposals to design and develop the MVP, but no successful partner emerged from the calls. Technology providers from the city and throughout Tunisia shared that the length of the contract was too short to be feasible and financially viable, and the bar for expertise and experience was too high for an innovative, untested solution.

The ASToN innovation coach worked side by side with the city over a period of two months February to April 2022 to understand how they were designing the tender and coach them through sourcing and sensemaking feedback from technology providers about the tender process.

- The coach and city worked closely to map out diverse ways through which providers have been sourced in the city in the past, and could be in the future.

- Throughout the process, the city was coached to strive for a partner who could support them to deploy a version of the solution they could use to test and learn from (i.e. about what worked and what didn't), so that they could have the clarity they would need to source a longer-term partnership.

- These ongoing conversations with the city enabled them to spot an existing PPP between the city and a tech provider, who agreed to adapt an existing solution and test it within Bizerte's waste management systems.

As of May 2022, the city has established a clear partnership with the technology provider who is supporting them to test and scale their solution across the municipality. The partnership has delivered an adapted version of the original solution, and deployed it for experimentation, piloting the solution with a single waste collection drivers and managers. Based on the learning of the pilot phase, the solution is being scaled at pace.

This iterative and experimental way of working has saved the city of Bizerte both time and money. The unique way that the partnership was sourced has enabled them to co-design the solution, test it in small batches of work, and adapt the scope of the work to be delivered as it was being delivered and as needed. This has also meant that the city was able to avoid having to pre-establish a long-term, rigid plan, committing them to what would have been an otherwise highly uncertain solution.

⎯ Action plans

Action plans are a useful planning tool. Delivered by participating cities at local level, they encapsulate the work done with the network, from capturing a clear problem definition to defining a vision for the future, planning for and delivering experiments with the local team and the Local Action Group. Their ambition should be proportional to the vision and capacity of the city, and aligned with their needs, irrespective of whether it is a long-term strategy for the city, or a very specific project relevant to a more niche area of work.

Our approach and methods

- **Approach the design of the Action Plans in a step-by-step way, right from the start of the programme.** Embed the key milestones of the process into the phasing of the programme. Make sure that the various learning areas respond to where the cities are in their action planning process (problem definition - stakeholder engagement - solution design - experimenting).

- **Fundament your work on a through analysis of the local context.** Drafting a preliminary research can set the basis for a sound problem definition as it allows to go deeper in the local context, analisyng the institutional partners and the previous attempts that were done locally to adress the challenge

- **Coordination with the funding body:**
  - Set up a reporting procedure that gives you enough time to observe the trends but doesn't impose an unnecessary reporting burden on the cities.
  - Organise frequent coordination sessions. Within ASToN (2019-2022), quarterly sessions worked best.

Lessons learnt from ASToN (2019-2022):

- **Align reporting to the tasks to be delivered by the participating cities** (e.g. with experimentation cycles).

- **Listen, listen, listen -** Where are the cities at, what's happening on the ground? Make sure that whatever is done is relevant for them.

- **Provide an Action Plan template that is modular and flexible,** that cities can use how they find fits best.

- **Use the key take-aways from the Experimentation to finalise the Action Plan** - while cities drafted a V1 of the Action Plan before experimenting, it is through the results from the Experimentation that they were able to check their assumptions and hence build the V2 on solid results

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CASE STUDY from ASToN (2019-2022):
The Action Plan of Kampala (Uganda)

Traffic congestion is one problem the Kampala Capital City Authority is set to tackle. It has a major impact across the city both in terms of pollution and wasted time for drivers. And while the causes of congestion are numerous, a lack of reliable information for citizens on traffic activity is seen as a major contributing factor that can be mitigated.

Kampala's Local Action Plan is focused on Kampala Konnect - a unifying vision for improved traffic mobility led by the local authority. One element of this roadmap is the development of a citizen-facing, incident reporting tool, for traffic accidents and other causes of congestion such as flooding or potholes.

To deliver this plan, the Local Action group has worked on garnering a number of crucial, interconnected elements:

- First, strategic clarity, detailing how this plan feeds into other city-wide documents and strategies;
- Second, insights from the experimentation phase, crucial evidence informing future implementation;
- Third, an implementation plan, detailing how the plan will be rolled out, including responsibilities and financing;
- And finally, key metrics of success, defining how the team will track the effectiveness and efficiency of the plan as it is being rolled out.

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04

SUPPORTING FUNCTIONS

Section 7: Keeping things moving, closing things down

How do you keep momentum?

Building coalitions of relevant partners who can support and inspire participating cities, being mindful of different cities moving at different paces, and being clear on expectations and where we're at in the overall learning journey, all three are important to keep things moving and close things down.

— Partnerships

Partnerships bring an external perspective to the programme and give the network access to new audiences e.g. via joint sessions, participation in external events. They offer further potential sustainability for the programme (once initial funding ends), and can amplify network messages through joint communications. Find like-minded organisations to work with the network or smaller clusters of participating cities, to amplify the cities' impact, fund their work, or exchange and learn with them.

Our approach and methods

- **A partnership strategy**: Capture clearly what partnerships will be created, how, when, and why.
- **Typologies**: Build a picture of different types of partners, from one-off speakers at events, to deeper partnerships that last through the lifetime of the network (and beyond).

- **Roles**: Define the roles you want partners to play. What will be most valuable to participant cities?

Lessons learnt from ASToN (2019-2022):

- **Build external partnerships based on shared values and priorities** and the desire to work together; test small joint actions before going big to build the working relationship. As a flagship programme we needed to make sure our ideas travelled furthest and we could only do that by joining forces with other organisations. While we found joint interests and common grounds with many of them, we ended up building joint actions with only a handful. By starting small and testing before committing to larger actions, it was for us the best way to ensure that our working methods matched.

CASE STUDY from ASToN (2019- 2022):
ASToN's partnership strategy

Within ASToN (2019-2022), when we talk about partnerships, we envisage partners falling into any or all of three types of role, each with a clear set of activities we will expect of them:

Amplify

- Share news of our events or new opportunities with their network.
- Spread the word to their audience about ASToN insights, findings, questions we're still exploring or publications we're putting out into the world.
- Communicate the ASToN ambition, method and future plans to other potential members or partners.

Fund

- Explore opportunities to fund individual cities' experiments.
- Come together with other funders in a funding circle around a theme e.g. mobility
- Fund thematic clusters to scale up their work.
- Fund ASToN network as a whole to continue beyond the AFD funding, reaching more cities and more citizens .

Exchange and learn

Exchange with each other on what works and what doesn't, swapping tools, blueprints and insights.

Hold space for open conversations and explorations to learn from each other as peers.

We will enrol these partners and grow partnerships in a 3-step strategy:

1 - Identify and engage partners who can help ASToN reach sustainability through amplification, funding or strengthening our IP;

2 - Convene those partners into a coalition of financial and non-financial support and exchange for Africa's Smart Cities;

3 - Use that coalition to lever in more funding, expertise, momentum and talent and to bring ASToN to a second phase of project or ideally, ongoing sustainability.

— Supporting cities not being able to deliver in the given framework

The rhythm, methods used, and time commitment the programme requires of city practitioners might not fit all partners and their institutional context - potentially too hierarchical, bureaucratic, slow, or responding to different priorities. At times, participant cities may find themselves falling behind and unable to deliver what they signed up to deliver. It could be that events outside of the network and cities' control negatively influence what can be delivered. Be ready to adjust the expected outputs from participating cities. For cities that go off the radar or that are not capable of pushing through certain phases of the network, will there be space for contract terms to be renegotiated? Will contracts allow requesting the end of a financial agreement?

Our approach and methods

• **Network-level shocks** (e.g. the COVID-19 pandemic): It is possible that the network as a whole will experience important shocks that will question whether and how plans can continue to be delivered.

- How to respond? Sharing a framework and supporting city response: Understand and capture where best the network can support cities with the disruption they face. Deliver this support where appropriate. Think about how things are delivered if the lockdown and disruption continues and if it does not.

• **City-level disruptions** (e.g. elections, flood, discontinuity in staffing): It's highly likely that at least one of the cities will experience an external or internal shock or important change whilst the programme is running. For instance in ASToN (2019-2022), cities experienced changes in political leadership after elections, changes in personnel, key leaders leaving the programme due to illness or parental leave, external shocks like flooding or social unrest. These will all affect cities' project teams and may jeopardise their ability to carry on with their involvement in the programme either temporarily, or permanently.

- How to respond? While some thing will be out of the network's control and participant will drop out, if it's a temporary shock
  - Evaluate what this means for the programme and cities projects timelines;
  - Agree what's realistic;
  - Re-draft timelines and agreements;
  - Escalate where necessary.

> ### Lessons learnt from ASToN (2019-2022):
> • **Accept that city participants might go silent** in different moments of the program. Each city has its own cycles with downturns and upswings, and practitioners have not just their ASToN commitments to deal with. This is the interest of being in a network.

CASE STUDY from ASToN (2019- 2022):
Supporting responses to COVID-19

Back in 2020, the global pandemic has brought a time of uncertainty and disruption for everyone in the ASToN network. With regards to how we could respond to the disruption and continue to deliver the programme, we had to recognise that:

1 - A methodology like ASToN is sensitive to shifting priorities and needs, and

2 - The cities in the ASToN network have been hit by COVID-19 at different paces and in different ways, and cities will have deployed different levels of response to the pandemic.

That's why we decided to host a series of open, online calls around the following three horizons of response to COVID-19:

- **React -** Immediate response and action required to stop the spread of the virus and enforce confinement;
- **Stabilise** - Considering how to deliver vital services to citizens as confinement continues;
- **Recover** - Easing of restrictions and action focused on adjusting to the new environment and effects.

These sessions featured an expert presentation relating to responses to COVID-19 in each of the 3 horizons. We were joined by Lorenzo Kihlgren Grandi, lecturer in City Diplomacy at Sciences Po, Paris who provided examples from cities across Europe and South America to prompt and stimulate conversation.

Over the course of the conversations we noticed a shift in tone and mindset lining up with the 3 horizons we were discussing. In the first call (React), a lot of conversation centred around the African realities making this crisis particularly worrying; that many are not able to build as much locally, lockdown is not possible in the same way and there is the ever present issue of corruption. In the second call (Stabilise), we heard more about how ASToN cities were starting to reflect and look at their strengths and weaknesses. By the final call (Recover), many participants spoke about the need to see the opportunities and possibilities presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, including the way it's shifted people's attitude and behaviour towards digital & technology.

⎯ Project close-down

Sometimes a city is not able to continue with their work and commitment to the network, and a negotiation becomes necessary to agree whether and how they will stay involved and connected to the network. This may be due to an external shock like a pandemic which redirects city resources into other priority areas, or due to an organisational shift in priorities like a political change in leadership, or a lack of internal traction for the project when key personnel changes. It may also be due to underperformance by the city, which might show up as low attendance, or missing deadlines.

Our approach and methods

Questions to consider closing-down work with a city:

- How is the potential need for a project close-down manifesting? Is it missed deadlines, low attendance, or the city raising a hand that they'll struggle to deliver?

- What are the causes of the city needing to potentially close down? Are those causes temporary or irreversible? Could they be overcome?

- Would it help to raise the issue to the Mayor or at least higher up the hierarchy to unlock more resources and political support? Is there anything else the network might be able to support the city with, to explore how they might be able to pick up activity again and catch up with other cities?

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- What are the implications on the other cities, of closing down a particular city's participation in the network? Will it affect the thematic group, personal relationships, the dynamic of the network as a whole.

> **Lessons learnt from ASToN (2019-2022):**
>
> - **Accept that the ASToN method and working principles are not necessarily compatible with all the cities** and that only by testing it will they see if that is the case.

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Section 8: Choosing the right team

Which team is needed to deliver a network like ASToN? Given the thematic complexity of a network like ASToN, a delivery team articulated around a small core team and a roster of experts is best.

— A core team and a roster of experts

The ASToN programme method is multi-layered (full network, themed clusters, individual cities) and from 2019 to 2022 guided 11 cities through a 3+ year-long learning journey of exploring the problem they wanted to tackle then experimenting with ideas to solve that problem. It takes a blend of expertise to set up and run a programme like ASToN, with a small core team, some deep expertise and a roster of suppliers offering dedicated services.

- To support and stretch the cities, a constellation of different skills and expertise was necessary.

- To stay lean and able to respond to cities' needs as we learned more about them it was most effective to retain a small, core team and lead expert,

- And to provide deep technical, context-relevant expertise, it was crucial to bring in thematic, local, experimentation, subject matter and supplier expertise as and when needed.

CASE STUDY from ASToN (2019- 2022): The team delivering ASToN
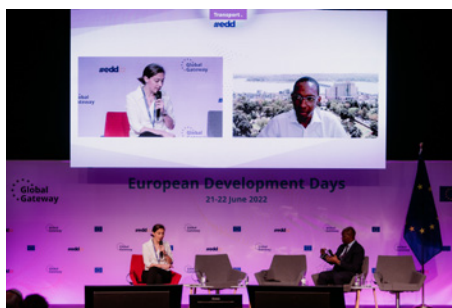
The ASToN Secretariat: The engine that coordinates and administers the project.

The Secretariat team is best kept small and lean to avoid unnecessary bureaucracy and help steer as much resource to the network itself as possible. Comprising a project coordinator, a network/community manager and an administrator, with the support and steer of a Financial Director, the most effective team blends a diverse set of experiences from across any or all of: urban affairs, international affairs, regeneration, communication, community management, economic development, administration. And then depending on the theme of the network, it's beneficial to have some expertise on that theme in the core team.

Experts team: The deep expertise to draw on for specific moments throughout the project.

- For ASToN we had a few different tiers of expertise, from innovation method experts who oversaw the duration of the project, to technical experts on a niche topic like data management who joined the cities for just one talk to share their wisdom and experience.

- For us, we divided expertise across:

  - **Lead expert.** The innovation strategy lead for the project. This could also be called Lead Coach.
  - **Thematic experts.** Technical experts with deep expertise in themes relevant to clusters of the cities,

(like mobility, addressing and citizen participation in our case) selected from a rooster of experts launched a the beginning of the programme

- **Ad-hoc experts.** Practitioners or academics with deep expertise on a more niche topic we could bring in as a guest speaker, or critical friend at key points in the programme
- **Local experts.** Consultants with expertise and networks rooted in the local ecosystem who could bridge communications and action across the city team, their citizens, academia, press, and any technical teams working with the city on the programme
- **Experimentation coaches.** Innovation coaches, experts in experimentation to guide the teams through designing, testing and iterating their ideas out in the real world, and drawing learning from those experiments.

Suppliers: Other dedicated support from a roster of selected suppliers

- External evaluation
- Brand and communications
- Knowledge capture

Distribution of competences:

Delivery team ←——————→ Technical expertise

- Lead expertise
- Secretariat
- Ad-hoc experts
- Suppliers
- Experimentation coaches
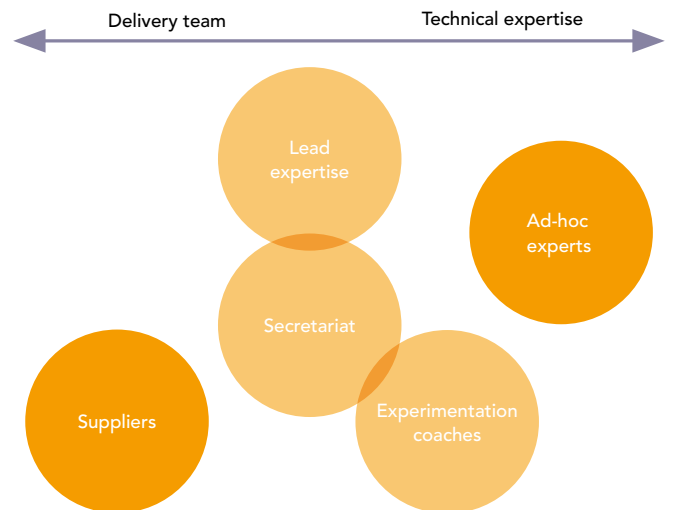
Lessons learnt from ASToN (2019-2022):

- **Be flexible as much as you can with your hiring scheme.** After one year into the programme we realised an extra permanent staff was needed.
- **Create time for all the team to be aligned** on the programme independently of their involvement (part-time, full-time etc). In our case this meant bi-weekly meetings to share the status & next steps on the on-going activities. This is a positive result of COVID-19: the confinement and remoteness led us, in the beginning, to hold a daily conference call at a fixed time. This was transformed into 2 weekly meetings at fixed days and times which remained after the crisis.
- **Regularly reflect on what's working, roles, and the relationship.** We used a regular rhythm of retrospective and reflection to check in on what was working and what wasn't, and keep defining our roles in line with the needs.
- **Create a pool of expertise from the start** you can hire people from. The wider the skill-set covered by the pool, the better.
- **Context matters.** Having people who understood the local, national, African or thematic context was vital.
- **Evolve meetings and working rhythms in line with need.** Over the course of the project, all-expert meetings felt overly heavy and we moved to much more lean structures only pulling in the relevant experts when needed.

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Discover more about ASToN in
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