European Construction Sector Observatory

Policy fact sheet

Sweden

SymbioCity

Thematic objectives 2, 3, 4 & 5

October 2021

In a nutshell

Implementing body	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA[1]), SKL International[2] and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR[3]).
Key features & objectives	SymbioCity is a holistic and inclusive approach to sustainable urban development that transforms urban challenges into opportunities.
Implementation date	2008: SymbioCity concept launched[4]; 2010-2015: SymbioCity 1.0 2015-2020: SymbioCity 2.0
Targeted beneficiaries	Local, regional and national governments and societies in developing and transition countries worldwide.
Targeted sub-sectors	All urban-related sub-sectors.
Budget (EUR)	5,445,872[5] (SymbioCity 2.0)
Good practice	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Transferability	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Urban areas are currently home to more than half of the global population and it is estimated that the number of people living in urban areas will double by 2050. The growth of urbanisation in largely rural countries and regions around the world is expected to be a contributory factor. To ensure that growing urbanisation is manageable and sustainable, it needs to be carefully planned and coordinated. To do otherwise would result in inadequate infrastructure and services, the inefficient use of resources, and a lower quality of well-being and life for inhabitants[6].

With good governance and effective planning and management, urban areas can deliver a high standard of living, from professional to personal and social opportunities. They can also provide the life and work spaces, infrastructure and services that people want in a manner that is more sustainable, with a lower carbon footprint, better use of space, and more efficient use of resources, among others[7].

One solution that is helping to resolve the global urban development challenge is SymbioCity, a sustainable urban development approach that draws on extensive local Swedish experience and best practice work in developing countries.

The SymbioCity Approach promotes a holistic and inclusive approach to sustainable urban development, which includes environmental, socio-cultural, economic and spatial dimensions. The end goal is to improve living conditions for citizens, with particular emphasis on gender equality and the urban poor.

SymbioCity provides both a theoretical approach and a practical methodology to address the urban challenges stated in the New Urban Agenda and the Global Development Goals[8].

SymbioCity is a highly innovative and successful measure and solution blueprint that has won the approval and praise of urban decision-makers and communities around the world.

Since 2010, SymbioCity has supported local, regional and national authorities in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America.

SymbioCity has been used by local and regional governments to plan, develop and manage cities with the aim of making them more inclusive and sustainable.

SymbioCity has been used in the implementation of projects in 20 cities in 8 countries. It has also been used to deliver capacity development programmes in 15 countries worldwide[9].

1.

General description

The **SymbioCity[10] Initiative promotes a holistic and inclusive approach to sustainable urban development in all its dimensions: environmental, sociocultural, economic and spatial.**

Based on Swedish municipal experiences, the SymbioCity Approach is designed to improve living standards, safety, comfort and quality of life for all by including stakeholders and citizens in the urban development process.

The initiative is run by SKL International and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR). They use SymbioCity to help local, regional and national governments in low- or middle-income countries worldwide to plan and build sustainable and inclusive cities.

The **main objectives**[11] of SymbioCity are to:

- Encourage and support multidisciplinary stakeholder cooperation and the use of a holistic and integrated approach;
- Contribute to capacity building through the mutual sharing of knowledge and experience between different stakeholders, primarily at local government level;
- Establish a basis for stakeholder dialogue and cooperation, particularly at local level, with the involvement of regional and national institutions;
- Guide urban sustainability reviews at varying urban levels or scales, using a combined multidisciplinary and sectoral approach;
- Contribute to the development of city-wide urban improvement strategies, covering all sustainability dimensions;
- Help cities and towns to identify practical and integrated systems solutions for sustainable urban development.

The SymbioCity Framework

SymbioCity provides an effective institutional framework for sustainable urban development.

The framework features six key components[12]:

- **Strong urban governance and capacity building** that encompasses the management of financial, economic, technical, organisational, human and other resources needed to improve the urban environment;
- **Legislation and policies** that support urban development and provide the basis for local policy-making, planning regulations and building codes. They should aim to benefit the urban poor by, for example, promoting small plots, mixed land use, as well as affordable land and housing;
- **Spatial planning and land management** that connect and coordinate land use in urban and rural areas, that align with urban planning objectives, legislation and policies, and that operate transparent decision-making processes;
- **Participatory processes** that establish mechanisms to ensure stakeholder and public participation and input in review, planning, implementation and follow-up processes;
- **Financial resources and incentives** that are commensurate with the challenge and scale of the development project. They should be based on sound financial expertise, a comprehensive and objective review of the financial requirements and risks, and a realistic and optimal financing plan;
- **Private sector participation** in collaboration with public authorities. Sufficient incentives should be provided to encourage businesses of all sizes to get involved in urban transformation.

The SymbioCity Conceptual Model

The SymbioCity conceptual model provides the foundation for all SymbioCity projects.

The **SymbioCity model**[13], as illustrated in Figure 1, integrates five essential parts of an urban development initiative:

1. **People** are at the heart of the model, with particular emphasis on gender equality and improving life for the urban poor;
2. **Environmental, economic and socio-cultural dimensions** of urban sustainability that a city needs to ensure the health, safety, comfort and quality of life for all inhabitants;
3. **Urban systems** that create synergies with everyday urban infrastructure, such as water, energy, waste, transport and traffic, buildings and architecture, information technology, landscaping and social spaces;
4. **Institutional factors** that include management, distribution of responsibilities, internal and external linkages, legislation, financing, urban governance and political leadership;
5. **Spatial dimensions** that combine various locational aspects of urban sustainability in order to understand the relationships between dif-ferent functions. It concerns the urban and regional built and natural environment, the distribution and location of urban functions and the provision of services in urban systems.

Figure 1: SymbioCity conceptual model

Source: SymbioCity[14]

The SymbioCity Approach

The SymbioCity application approach involves a six-step working process[15], associated entry points and tools.

The process can be adapted to local conditions and applied at various levels – a region, city, city district, neighbourhood or a single urban block. For example, the process can be used to review city plans, to provide strategic orientations for sustainability, to implement existing plans or to identify necessary institutional, organisational and managerial changes.

1. **Define and organise the process** because good planning and organisation are crucial to the success of any project. An organisational plan should define activities, their interrelationships and all relevant stakeholders. People must form an integral part of the organisational plan, with special attention being given to gender-sensitive and pro-poor perspectives;
2. **Assess local conditions** and map them to identify needs, problems, challenges and opportunities. The situation of the most disadvantaged groups should be in focus. Positive features are also important as assets to be further nourished. The cause of problems should be identified as a basis for developing effective and integrated solutions;
3. **Specify objectives, indicators and targets** to articulate ambitions for the city's future without pre-judging specific proposals and solutions. Targets and indicators are drawn up to formulate measurable objectives. Objectives should be based on the preliminary diagnosis and can be qualitative or quantitative;
4. **Develop alternative proposals** because urban challenges are complex and often have multiple solutions. For any solution or investment to be relevant in both the short and the long term, it is essential that alternatives are flexible and focused on synergies between different urban systems. Solutions should prevent environmental problems, or at least mitigate them;
5. **Analyse the impact** (economic, social, environmental and spatial) **of alternative proposals** to provide a basis for informed decision-making. Impact analysis is an important

step in developing integrated and innovative proposals, and also a core aspect of sustainability reviews. Best practice requires special attention to the conditions of the urban poor;

6. **Implement and follow up** on the preferred solution, ensuring synergies between different systems to optimise the effects of the planning process and on the quality of the built environment.

All SymbioCity projects are based on a set of "entry points" or principles which guide the process and working methods in an inclusive and sustainable direction. The main entry point of the process is defined in accordance with local priorities and circumstances as well as ongoing planning cycles.

The entry points[16] are:

From silos to multidisciplinary teams that connect stakeholders and disciplines, create synergies and integrated solutions, and make better use of local resources and assets;

From problem-based to vision-based providing a positive, shared vision of the future that motivates stakeholders to address the many difficult problems they face with courage and hope;

From single effects to more synergic solutions that solve multiple problems at once. They are often more cost-effective and sustainable, yielding more from less;

From top-down to bottom-up processes that empower and engage local stakeholders to enable the delivery of well-adapted and long-lasting urban solutions that work for everyone;

From reactive to proactive to solve challenges before they emerge, saving money and avoiding disasters.

SymbioCity projects are supported at every step by a range of tools[17], some of which can be used in more than one step.

The various tools used in SymbioCity projects are categorised in Table 1.

Table 1: SymbioCity project tools

Type	Tools
Gender	Transect walk[18], space analysis from a gender perspective, focus group discussion, disaggregated data, and design proposal from a gender perspective;
Participation	Communication plan, place making, participatory design and events, photo exhibitions and mapping, model making and full-scale modelling;
Environment	Climate change threats and impact analysis, focus group discussion, flood mapping, willingness to pay, problem-cause effects;
Public space	Transect walk, public space analysis, urban profile walk, focus group discussion, tactical urbanism, place making;
Mobility	Participatory events, focus group discussion, tactical urbanism, mobility survey;
Digitalisation	Google forms, GIS, 3D modelling, street sections;
Safety	Safety walk, neighbourhood security survey, focus group discussion;
Built form	Focus group discussion, 3D modelling, heritage analysis;
Process	Designing and developing solutions, SWOT, visioning and co-design workshops, sustainability assessment, stress test, city profiles, stakeholder analysis, backcasting model[19], willingness to pay.

Source: SymbioCity[20]

SymbioCity also offers international training programmes on inclusive and sustainable urban planning to strengthen the capacity development at local levels.

Training programmes are delivered in cooperation with the International Centre for Local Democracy and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research.

2.

Achieved or expected results

> **SymbioCity has been used to support local and regional governments in planning, developing and managing cities in a more inclusive and sustainable way through projects in 20 cities in 8 countries and capacity development programmes covering 15 countries[21].**

Examples of City Projects[22]

China – City project (2012-2013)

A **pilot cooperation project between Duyun (China) and Eskilstuna (Sweden)** to enhance the capacity of local governments service provision to citizens.

The project was delivered in two stages. First, the SymbioCity approach was piloted in both cities, under the joint coordination of the Swedish Association of Local Authorities (SALAR), SKL International and the China Association of Mayors (CAM). Second, the Citizen Service Centre (CSC) concept was piloted in both cities.

The partner municipalities Duyun and Eskilstuna jointly developed an Urban Sustainability Review (USR) of Duyun. The USR resulted in indicators, scenarios, impact analyses and an action plan.

The project produced a Citizen Service Centre Guidebook which was used to establish a pilot CSC in Duyun. The Swedish municipality of Eskilstuna used its own experience from working with CSCs to provide input on the establishment of CSC in Duyun.

Colombia – City projects (2017-2019)

Two projects in Colombia to develop a strategy to upgrade the city centre in **Apartadó** and provide for sustainable mobility in city of **Pitalito**.

The Apartadó strategy featured a number of integrated solutions and a tactical urbanism intervention consisting of a temporary pedestrian street closed from motorised traffic. The aim was to

test the idea and to show shop owners of the street as well as citizens of the potential positive effect such an initiative could have to the city if permanently changed.

The Pitalito strategy featured a number of different sustainable mobility solutions. Examples include a proposed bicycle network for the city, pedestrian streets, sustainable public transport solutions, and how to integrate more greenery into the city. The proposed bicycle network has been included in the city's new Comprehensive Plan and is part of the network has been constructed with funds from the National Agency of Road Security (ANSV).

Ethiopia – City projects (2018-2020)

Two projects in Ethiopia to help the cities of Shashemene (Oromia region) and Debre Berhan (Amhara regional state) to plan, manage and develop a sustainable solid waste management sector using the SymbioCity method.

Indonesia – City project (2012-2013)

A **cooperation project between two pairs of municipalities in Sweden and Indonesia** – Borås and Palu, and Helsingborg and Probolinggo – to implement SymbioCity in collaboration with the Ministry of Public Works and other local stakeholders. The overall goal was to improve capacity, knowledge and prerequisites for urban sustainability in the four municipalities by providing opportunities to learn and apply methodologies and tools for sustainable urban solutions. The end goal was to contributing to improved living conditions for the four municipalities' inhabitants.

Tunisia – City projects (2018-2020)

Two projects in Tunisia to conduct urban sustainability reviews in the cities of **Mahdia** and **El Mourouj** using the SymbioCity process including interactive public workshops and activities.

Examples of Capacity Building Projects[23]

Capacity building projects each provide an **International Training Programme (ITP) on sustainable urban development** that is jointly implemented by SKL International and the International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD).

The overall objective of each programme is **to strengthen the capacity of local governments** to plan, develop and manage urban areas in a sustainable and inclusive direction, using the SymbioCity methodology.

Participants have been exposed to new planning methods, inspiring examples and new global networks. Working with a combination of lectures and hands-on planning through 'change projects', the training experiences have been applied to planning projects at the local level. The working process and its tools have been institutionalised in the local governments through peer-learning.

ITP Asia – Capacity building project (2021-2025)

The aim is to enhance the capacity of individuals and organisations. Participants include decision-makers and local authority officials working in departments that deal with varying types of urban development. The training aims to provide inspiration, approaches and tools that are effective and useful at a local level and which will ultimately lead to improved health, safety, comfort and quality of life for people living in urban areas.

The project will run three rounds of training from 2021 to 2025. Phase I is running from January 2020 to March 2022. It involves participants from the **cities of Can Tho and Quy Nhon in Vietnam, and from Semarang and Yogyakarta in Indonesia**.

ITP East Africa – Capacity building (2011-2014)

The aim was to provide a training programme for civil servants and decision makers in local governments and local government unions in Zambia, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Kenya and Rwanda. This project has been delivered.

The training aimed to impart:

- The ability to use relevant tools, techniques and processes to analyse the constantly changing complexity of urban areas;
- A thorough understanding of the concept of sustainable urban development and the inter-relationships between the areas of climate change, local economic development, gender equality and youth, urban planning, and management and change within the urban context
- An understanding of the SymbioCity Approach, to support and foster sustainable urban development;
- Key knowledge and skills to support multi-stakeholder and multi-level change processes within public sector institutions that are involved in urban development work.

ITP Eastern Europe – Capacity building (2015-2019)

The aim was to run training programmes in **North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey, Georgia and Ukraine**. The programmes sought to enhance the capacity of individuals and organisations. Participants were decision-makers and local authority officials working in departments that deal with varying types of urban development. The training aimed to provide inspiration, approaches and tools that are effective and useful at a local level and which will ultimately lead to improved health, safety, comfort and quality of life for people living in urban areas.

The project ran three rounds of training from 2015 to 2019.

SymbioCity capacity building training programmes have been run in more than 15 countries worldwide and have engaged approximately 250 urban development professionals[24].

3.

Perspectives and lessons learned

Sustainable urban development action is a key enabler for countries to combat climate change.

The urgency of the global climate challenge means that time is of the essence if operational solutions are to have a chance of succeeding. According to SKL International: "*With less than 10 years left in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, we have entered into the Decade of Action which calls for accelerating sustainable solutions to the world's biggest challenges. At the same time, the world's urban population is expected to double within the next 30 years. The world is becoming urban*"[25].

SymbioCity empowers local people to achieve their own sustainable objectives.

SymbioCity provides a holistic sustainable urban development framework, from concept to method to tools and project support. SymbioCity is also highly focused on the context and needs of local urban areas and therefore does not impose one solution or another. It is for local people to decide what works for them. The SymbioCity is promoted as reference and a starting point for dialogue. On that basis, SymbioCity works with local people to help to formulate their own solution. The results are positive, with strong local buy-in.

"*We've wanted a mobility strategy for 20 years but due to lack of funds we have never developed one since the work is always assigned to consultants. Now we have one! It may not be to the same high standards, but it has the essential elements – and was developed by us in the municipal working group*" explains a member of the Pitalito Working Group[26].

The SymbioCity approach is highly flexible and can be adapted to any local context.

SymbioCity is designed to provide decision-makers at local level with a sound development framework and the flexibility they need to adopt SymbioCity principles and processes and embed them in a solution that works for them. This approach is key to the success of SymbioCity.

The Deputy Director of Urban Development Policies and Strategies at the Directorate General of Spatial Planning and Development in Indonesia[27] explains: "*I find the SymbioCity methodology very strong; the 'diagnosis' creates a great foundation for sustainability work. and because the approach is so flexible, parts of it can be made to fit into the local context under our Green City Development Programme*".

Strong local partnerships are at the heart of SymbioCity. They are an important key to success.

"*Urban development requires leaders who have collaboration, partnerships, civic education, vision, passion and drive at the fore of their leadership strategy*" explains a representative of Kitale Local Urban Forum, Kenya.

"*With SymbioCity, we not only bring people together, we also bring the various departments and arms of government in a working table whereby the issues addressed are seen from a wider scope of spectra. This is a very big plus.*" Explains the Pilot Coordinator for Kisumu County, Kenya.

Growing urbanisation can be very positive when handled the right way.

Well-designed, sustainable cities can achieve minimal environmental impact and resource use, the use of renewable energy and have a thriving 'green' economy. Sustainable cities also provide a built environment that is pleasant, safe and green, and they support a diverse and stimulating social, cultural and intellectual life for their inhabitants. A strong political vision at local government level is the key to success when applying the SymbioCity Approach[28].

4.

Conclusion and recommendations

> **SymbioCity is a highly innovative and successful measure that provides a sustainable urban development solution blueprint that has won the approval and praise of urban decision-makers and communities around the world.**
>
> **Since 2010, SymbioCity has been used by local and regional governments in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America to plan, develop and manage cities with the aim of making them more inclusive and sustainable.**
>
> **SymbioCity has been used in the implementation of projects in 20 cities in 8 countries. It has also been used to deliver capacity development programmes in 15 countries worldwide[29].**

It provides a blueprint for city-wide urban development that is not meant to impose a solution on cities, but rather to serve as a reference and provide a starting point for stakeholder dialogue and cooperation. It supports and guides urban sustainability reviews at varying urban levels or scales, using a combined multidisciplinary and sectoral approach.

Covering all sustainability dimensions, SymbioCity is able to provide valuable contributions to the development of city-wide urban improvement strategies, covering all sustainability dimensions. With a wealth of experience behind the initiative and approach, SymbioCity is able to help cities and towns to identify practical and integrated systems solutions for sustainable urban development.

SymbioCity supports two main types of sustainable urban development projects:

- City projects that work with local government agencies to help them define sustainable urban development solutions that work for them, fitting their local context and needs;

- Capacity building projects that provide tailored International Training Programmes that aim to strengthen the capacity of local government agencies to equip them with the know-how and support they need to undertake sustainable urban development projects.

Looking forward, two recommendations are suggested to help improve the reach and impact of SymbioCity:

- Given the obvious success of SymbioCity around the world, it would be ideal to focus on scaling up the initiative as much as possible, particularly over the course of this decade to maximise its reach and impact on global urban sustainability. This aim is already identified in SKL International's 2030 Agenda;
- It would be interesting to gain greater insight into the longer-term success, impact and evolution of previous SymbioCity projects.

Overall, SymbioCity is rated a '5-star good practice measure' on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high).

The SymbioCity approach is comprehensive and holistic, integrated and inclusive. It is also based on the extensive experience of Swedish municipalities in sustainable urban development, and draws on best practices from SKL International's work on the ground in developing and transition countries. SymbioCity provides an evidenced-based blueprint for sustainable urban development that is fully adaptable to suit the needs of local communities.

The SymbioCity is rated a '5-star transferable measure' on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high).

SymbioCity is fully designed to be transferred to regions around. It is a transferable measure at its core and the evidence of projects successfully delivered around the world support this maximum score.

Endnotes

1   The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) is a government agency of the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs:
    https://www.sida.se

2   Part of the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and regions (SALAR), SKL International works globally to promote and strengthen local and regional self- governance and resilience:
    https://sklinternational.se/

3   The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) is an employers' organisation and an organisation that represents and advocates local government in Sweden. All of Sweden's municipalities and regions are members of SALAR:
    https://skr.se
    https://skr.se/skr/tjanster/englishpages.411.html

4   SKL International, The SymbioCity Approach, A conceptual framework for sustainable urban development:
    https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54b57361e4b05fe5a237d8fd/t/56dd6fd007eaa05aaac063d1/1457352680242/SymbioCity+Approach.pdf
    https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/9597943/the-symbiocity-approach-is-a-conceptual-skl-international

5   Capacity and Institution Building (CIB) Working Group, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), SymbioCity Approach 2.0:
    https://www.cib-uclg.org/comp/details/symbiocity-approach-20
    The CIB Working Group is a voluntary community of practitioners that are members of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) and are engaged in international development cooperation.

6   SymbioCity, Brochure:
    https://symbiocity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Broschyr-SymbioCity-210X260-v9.pdf

7   Ibid

8   SymbioCity, About Us:
    https://symbiocity.org/about/

9   SymbioCity, Resources, Implementing Agenda 2030 Through SymbioCity:
    https://symbiocity.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Implementing-Agenda-2030-through-SymbioCity_web.pdf

10 SymbioCity:
    https://symbiocity.org

11 SKL International, The SymbioCity Approach, A conceptual framework for sustainable urban development:
    https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54b57361e4b05fe5a237d8fd/t/56dd6fd007eaa05aaac063d1/1457352680242/SymbioCity+Approach.pdf
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12 SymbioCity, The SymbioCity Approach, 2.0 Summary:
    https://symbiocity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/SC-publication-2.0-Summary.pdf

13 SymbioCity, Method:
    https://symbiocity.org/method/

14 SKL International, Online closing ceremony after three years SymbioCity Capacity Building Programme in Myanmar, Sept 2020:
    https://sklinternational.se/aboutus/news/allanyheter/onlineclosingceremonyafterthreeyearssymbiocitycapacitybuildingprogrammeinmyanmar.896.html

15 SymbioCity, Method:
    https://symbiocity.org/method/

16 SymbioCity, Method:
    https://symbiocity.org/method/

17 SymbioCity, Method:
    https://symbiocity.org/method/

18 Transect walks are promenades through a project area conducted by researchers and participants to gain an understanding of the water resources, wastewater flows and sanitation facilities of a location, their diversity and associated problems, and to assess opportunities.

19 Backcasting is a planning method used to envisage desired future scenarios and work backwards to assess what would be needed to achieve the desired outcomes.

20 SymbioCity, Method:
    https://symbiocity.org/method/

21 SymbioCity, Resources, Implementing Agenda 2030 Through SymbioCity:
    https://symbiocity.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Implementing-Agenda-2030-through-SymbioCity_web.pdf

22 SymbioCity, Projects:
    https://symbiocity.org/projects/

23 Ibid

24 SymbioCity, Resources, Implementing Agenda 2030 Through SymbioCity:
    https://symbiocity.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Implementing-Agenda-2030-through-SymbioCity_web.pdf

25 Ibid

26 Ibid

27 Ibid

28 Innovation for Sustainable Development Network, inno4sd.net, SymbioCity, Sweden's approach to sustainable urban development all over the
    World, 2019:
    https://www.inno4sd.net/symbiocity-swedenx27s-approach-to-sustainable-urban-development-all-over-the-world-508

29 SymbioCity, Resources, Implementing Agenda 2030 Through SymbioCity:
    https://symbiocity.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Implementing-Agenda-2030-through-SymbioCity_web.pdf