

10th REPORT

TOWARDS THE LOCALIZATION OF THE SDGs

Local and Regional Governments
Report to the 2026 HLPF



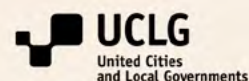
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days of local
multilateralism



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We dedicate this report to the memory of our esteemed colleague Sara Höflich. Her energy, generosity and unwavering commitment will continue to inspire us all. She held a profound belief in the power of learning and capacity strengthening to advance justice and equality through strong local governments. Her legacy will live on in UCLG's work.

T.C.

Table of contents

A. Abbreviations.....	04	3. Localizing human rights and public services through SDGs 6, 7, 9 and 11	48
S. Statement.....	06	3.1 The role of local public services for SDG localization: A focus on housing, transport and energy	50
1. Introduction: A decade of reporting on local SDG action	12	3.2 LRGs towards SDG 6: Localizing water and sanitation for sustainable development	82
1.1 LRGs' shifting political priorities and narratives.....	14	3.3 Localizing culture: How LRGs contribute to SDG 11.4 and the cultural dimension of global agendas.....	115
1.2 The evolution of LRGs' actions to localize the 2030 Agenda and the national contexts in which they operate.....	16	4. Conclusions and recommendations	126
1.3 The UN system's official recognition of LRGs and SDG localization.....	20	4.1 Localization: The only way forward.....	127
1.4 Report structure	24	4.2 Challenges.....	129
1.5 Methodology.....	25	4.3 Recommendations to accelerate action.....	131
2. Local action, policy and enabling environment for SDG localization.....	26	N. Notes.....	133
2.1 Local leadership and innovation driving SDG localization through VLRs and VSRs.....	27		
2.2 LRG involvement in VNR preparation.....	38		
2.3 LRG participation in national coordination mechanisms for SDG implementation.....	44		



Abbreviations

A

ABHT: Agence du Bassin Hydraulique du Tensift (Tensift Water Basin Authority)

ABM: Associação Brasileira de Municípios (Brazilian Association of Municipalities)

AECM: Association of Estonian Cities and Municipalities

ALAT: Association of Local Authorities of Tanzania

ANAMM: Associação Nacional dos Municípios de Moçambique (National Association of Municipalities of Mozambique)

B

BRT: bus rapid transit

C

C40: C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group

CALM: Congresul Autorităților Locale din Moldova (Congress of Local Authorities of Moldova)

CEMR: Council of European Municipalities and Regions

CESCR: UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

CHAMP: Coalition for High Ambition Multilevel Partnerships

CLTS: community-led total sanitation

CO2: carbon dioxide

CONGOPE: Consorcio de Gobiernos Autónomos Provinciales del Ecuador (Consortium of Provincial Autonomous Governments of Ecuador)

COVID-19: coronavirus disease, originated by SARS-CoV-2 virus

D

DR Congo: Democratic Republic of the Congo

DLT: Deutscher Landkreistag (German County Association)

DST: Deutscher Städtetag (Association of German Cities)

DStGb: Deutscher Städte- und Gemeindebund (German Association of Towns and Municipalities)

E

ECOSOC: UN Economic and Social Council

EU: European Union

EUR: euro (currency)

F

FEDOMU: Federación Dominicana de Municipios (Dominican Federation of Municipalities)

FNP: Frente Nacional de Prefeitas e Prefeitos (National Front of Mayors of Brazil)

G

GLAAS: Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water

GIZ: Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German Agency for International Cooperation)

GOLD: Global Observatory on Local Democracy and Decentralization

GTF: Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments

H

HLPF: High-Level Political Forum for Sustainable Development

I

IAM: Institute for Albanian Municipalities

ICESCR: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

ICLEI: ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability

ICT: information and communication technology

J

JPY: Japanese yen (currency)

K

KS: Kommunesektorens organisasjon (Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities)

L

LATAM: Latin America and the Caribbean

LDC: least developed country

LGA: local government association

LGAZ: Local Government Association of Zambia

LGBTQIA+: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual+

LRG: local and regional government

M

MEWA: Middle East and West Asia

O

OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

S

SDG: Sustainable Development Goal

SRM-MS: Société Régionale Multi-services Marrakech-Safi

U

UCLG: United Cities and Local Governments

UK: United Kingdom

UN: United Nations

UN-Habitat: United Nations Human Settlements Programme

UNDP: United Nations Development Programme

UNICEF: United Nations Children's Fund

US/USA: United States of America

USD: US dollar (currency)

UV: ultraviolet

V

VLR: Voluntary Local Review

VNR: Voluntary National Review

VSR: Voluntary Subnational Review

W

WASH: water, sanitation and hygiene

WHO: World Health Organization

**S.**

Statement of the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments at the 2026 High-Level Political Forum

1. The 2026 High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) comes at a decisive moment for the 2030 Agenda and for the renewal of multilateralism.
2. We, local and regional governments (LRGs) and our associations from across the world, gathered within the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments (GTF), reaffirm that the achievement of the SDGs depends on empowered LRGs, adequate financing, multilevel governance and structured participation in global decision-making.
3. With only four years left to deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and as efforts to strengthen the United Nations system call for global governance to become more effective, inclusive and fit for purpose, the role of LRGs must move from recognition to institutional transformation. The 2026 HLPF should help secure the conditions for territorial delivery: multilevel governance, adequate financing, structured participation and democratic ownership from the ground up.
4. The SDGs under review at the 2026 HLPF — Goals 6, 7, 9, 11 and 17 — give concrete meaning to this renewal agenda. Water, sanitation, energy, infrastructure, housing, mobility and sustainable cities are deeply local and interconnected: they are planned, financed, maintained and experienced in cities and territories. Their transformation depends on governance that is place and rights-based, and rooted in universal access to local public services. Their delivery must also advance in coherence with the Paris Agreement, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and the New Urban Agenda, so that multilevel governance is strengthened consistently across all global frameworks rather than negotiated anew in each of them.

5. LRGs are institutions of proximity, care and democratic participation. They deliver and protect the everyday infrastructure that makes dignity, equality and trust tangible: not only the public services under review this year, but also health, education, care, culture, digital connectivity and public space.
6. Ten years of reporting on localization through the *Towards the Localization of the SDGs* report show that LRGs have shaped, delivered and monitored the 2030 Agenda through public services, territorial planning, infrastructure investment, democratic governance and community engagement. Echoing the UN Global Sustainable Development Reports' calls for integrated transformations, this evidence confirms localization as a political process, evolving from awareness-raising into a broader agenda grounded in multilevel cooperation, co-responsibility, and social justice.
7. Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) and Voluntary Subnational Reviews (VSRs) are critical tools to connect territorial realities with national and global follow-up and review. Their findings should systematically inform VNRs, national SDG strategies and HLPF deliberations, supported by multilevel governance, adequate financing, strong data systems, and structured participation.
8. The Secretary-General's report A/79/968, mandated under Action 55(e) of the Pact for the Future, recognizes the central role of LRGs in advancing sustainable development and strengthening the multilateral system. The 2026 HLPF must help translate this recognition into institutional practice by strengthening the structured and structural participation of the LRG constituency in UN deliberations, implementation, follow-up and review, in the spirit of SDG 17 of governing in partnership.
9. Building on the Local SDG Rescue Plan, the Global Strategy of the Secretary-General's Advisory Group on Local and Regional Governments, the Pact for the Future and the evidence gathered through a decade of reporting, our constituency calls for a renewed multilateralism that delivers through territories, recognizes the diversity of local, metropolitan and regional realities and governance frameworks, and connects action across spheres of government.
10. The 2026 HLPF must therefore help close the gap between political recognition and institutional practice. Localization must be understood not only as implementation, but as an accelerator and a way of renewing sustainable development governance from territories.

1. Reclaiming SDG 11 as the accelerator of the 2030 Agenda

Territorial equality and the Right to the City

11. In the year of the ten-year review of the New Urban Agenda, SDG 11 must be reaffirmed as a strategic accelerator and the territorial backbone of the 2030 Agenda and a political foundation for the post-2030 framework.
12. Fast-growing cities, intermediary cities, metropolitan areas, rural-urban territories and informal settlements face growing pressures linked to housing exclusion, infrastructure deficits, climate vulnerability and unequal access to services. These challenges require integrated urban and territorial policies rooted in rights, care, culture and democratic participation, supported by effective metropolitan and multilevel governance arrangements where challenges and service provision transcend administrative boundaries.
13. Housing justice sits at the centre of SDG 11. Access to adequate, safe and affordable housing is a human right and a foundation for dignity, care, resilience and belonging. It is also the entry point to a wider system of essential local public services and rights, including water and sanitation, energy, transport and mobility, health, education, culture, public space, community engagement and livelihoods.
14. The Baku Call to Action adopted at the Thirteenth Session of the World Urban Forum reinforces this approach by recognizing housing as a human right and calling for stronger multilevel governance, territorial finance and institutional conditions for local action.
15. Integrated urban and territorial planning must connect housing with land, infrastructure, food security, water, sanitation, energy, waste management, ecological transition and disaster risk reduction. It must also respond to the unequal conditions experienced by women, caregivers, migrants and refugees, older persons, children, persons with disabilities and historically marginalized communities.
16. The localization of the SDGs, including SDG 11, cannot be achieved without culture. Cultural rights, heritage, diversity, creativity and community-led cultural initiatives contribute to social inclusion, public space revitalization, economic opportunities, climate adaptation and demo-

cratic participation. Recognizing culture as a driver and enabler of sustainable development, including through a stand-alone Culture Goal, is essential to building territories that are more equitable, resilient and connected to their communities.

- 17. We, local and regional governments, commit to making SDG 11 a driver of the transformations needed to achieve the 2030 Agenda. We will continue to advance housing justice, integrated territorial planning and universal local public services as foundations of territories that are more equal, resilient, democratic and rooted in human rights.**

SDG 11 must be reclaimed as the territorial accelerator of the 2030 Agenda and a framework for housing justice, local public services and the Right to the City.

Local and regional governments call for:

- 18.** Recognizing SDG 11 as a strategic accelerator of the 2030 Agenda and a key framework for territorial equality and the Right to the City.
- 19.** Advancing housing justice by recognizing adequate, safe and affordable housing as a human right, a public good and an entry point to essential local public services.
- 20.** Connecting housing, mobility, food security, water, energy, sanitation, waste management, public space and climate resilience through integrated and participatory urban and territorial planning.
- 21.** Empowering LRGs with the mandates, fiscal space and financing required to deliver universal, accessible and quality local public services and strengthening metropolitan and multilevel governance and interconnected planning at all levels.
- 22.** Strengthening the role of LRGs in building inclusive, climate-resilient and disaster-prepared territories through locally led adaptation, risk prevention and the protection of vulnerable communities and ecosystems.
- 23.** Investing in urban nature, nature-based solutions and ecosystem restoration as core urban infrastructure for adaptation, health and biodiversity, in line with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and its Plan of Action on Subnational Governments, Cities and Other Local Authorities for Biodiversity.

- 24.** Recognizing culture, heritage, diversity and local identities as core dimensions of sustainable development and as drivers of social cohesion, democratic life and territorial belonging.

2. Delivering water, sanitation and energy justice through local public services

SDG 6: Water and sanitation as human rights and commons & SDG 7: A just and locally led energy transition

- 25.** Water, sanitation and energy justice require public leadership, democratic accountability and financing that reaches the territories where services are delivered.
- 26.** Water, sanitation and energy are essential local public services through which rights, dignity and equality become tangible in people's daily lives. Their delivery depends on local institutions with the mandates, resources and capacities to plan, finance, operate and maintain systems that respond to territorial realities.
- 27.** Achieving SDG 6 requires accelerated local action to close service gaps, improve water quality, protect freshwater ecosystems and expand climate-resilient water, sanitation and hygiene systems. Persistent disparities in rural areas, rapidly growing cities, peri-urban territories and informal settlements show the urgency of addressing water and sanitation through integrated territorial approaches.
- 28.** LRGs act as the bridge between national water policies, basin-level coordination and the needs of communities. They are central to wastewater treatment, pollution control, ecosystem restoration, drought and flood preparedness, and community participation in water governance. Water must be recognized as a vulnerable public commons requiring stewardship across uses, sectors and administrative boundaries.
- 29.** The United Nations Water Conference later this year must recognize LRGs as indispensable actors in global water governance, with a central role in turning commitments on water and sanitation into rights-based, climate-resilient public services.

30. Achieving SDG 7 requires a just and locally led energy transition. Universal, affordable and clean energy underpins housing, health, education, mobility, digital connectivity and local economic opportunities. LRGs are already advancing renewable energy, energy efficiency, low-carbon mobility, building retrofits, clean public facilities and decentralized energy solutions.

31. Energy access and energy poverty are territorial challenges. National energy frameworks must recognize LRGs as energy transition actors and align mandates, regulation and financing to enable community-benefiting energy development. Building on the Coalition for High Ambition Multilevel Partnerships (CHAMP), the new generation of Nationally Determined Contributions must reflect and enable local climate and energy action.

32. We, local and regional governments, commit to strengthening rights-based public service delivery for water, sanitation and energy, closing service gaps, protecting ecosystems, reducing energy poverty and advancing just, locally led transitions. We will continue to connect access, affordability, quality, accountability and resilience in the territories we serve.

33. Recognizing water, sanitation and energy as essential local public services, human rights and foundations of dignity, health, equality and territorial resilience.

Local and regional governments call for:

34. Securing predictable finance, fiscal decentralization and enabling regulatory frameworks for local water, sanitation and energy systems, including operation, maintenance and long-term service quality.

35. Scaling up investment in climate-resilient water, sanitation and hygiene infrastructure, watershed protection, wastewater treatment and ecosystem restoration, especially in underserved and climate-vulnerable territories.

36. Advancing a just, locally led energy transition that reduces energy poverty and supports renewable energy, energy efficiency, low-carbon mobility, building retrofits, clean public facilities and decentralized energy solutions.

37. Implementing CHAMP commitments by embedding local and regional climate and energy action in Nationally Determined Contributions, national energy plans and climate finance frameworks, with structured multilevel cooperation on their design and delivery.

38. Ensuring structured LRG participation in national water and energy strategies, global water governance processes, climate finance mechanisms and transition planning.



Source: Aviv Rachmadian, Unsplash

3. Investing in resilient infrastructure, public value and territorial cohesion

SDG 9: Infrastructure and innovation for people and territories

39. Infrastructure and innovation must be treated as public value: the everyday systems and creative problem solving that connect people to rights, services, livelihoods, climate resilience and opportunity.

40. Sustainable development and territorial cohesion depend on quality, reliable, inclusive and climate-resilient infrastructure that serves public purpose. SDG 9 connects people to services, opportunities and decent livelihoods by aligning infrastructure investment, local public services, productive capacities and ecological transformation with community needs.

- 41.** LRGs play a central role in planning, financing, operating and maintaining the systems through which communities access mobility, energy, water, housing, digital connectivity and public facilities. Their mandates shape the spatial distribution of infrastructure investment and the conditions under which local economic development, innovation and productive capacities can emerge.
- 42.** Delivering SDG 9 requires infrastructure, industrial and innovation strategies that are shaped with territories and respond to how people live, move, work and access services. With their close knowledge of community needs, LRGs can test, adapt and scale solutions grounded in local realities. Productive transformation depends on local innovation ecosystems where infrastructure is planned, skills are built, services are delivered and economic opportunities emerge, including through structured city-business collaboration that aligns local private sector investment and innovation with public priorities. National strategies must therefore support territorial ecosystems that connect investment, decent work, circular and low-carbon economies, care and local public services, while reducing territorial divides.
- 43.** Accelerating the upgrading, rehabilitation and retrofitting of housing and settlements to improve adequacy, affordability, resilience, accessibility and environmental sustainability is a priority for resilient and inclusive territorial development. Public buildings, including social housing, schools, care facilities, markets and community spaces, require sustained investment to improve energy efficiency, accessibility, climate adaptation and resilience.
- 44.** Digital public infrastructure also requires democratic governance. Connectivity and access to the internet should be recognized as public services and commons, while responsible data governance, open and interoperable systems and digital rights must guide digital transformation in the public interest.
- 45.** **We, local and regional governments, commit to** advancing infrastructure that serves people, territories and public value. We will continue to connect infrastructure investment with local public services, decent work, climate resilience, digital inclusion, care systems and territorial cohesion.

Local and regional governments call for:

- 46.** Expanding technical and financial support to LRGs for quality, reliable, sustainable and climate-resilient infrastructure that strengthens local public services and reduces territorial divides.
- 47.** Ensuring that LRGs shape national infrastructure, industrial and innovation strategies from the outset, so that investment responds to territorial needs, strengthens local innovation ecosystems and reduces inequalities.
- 48.** Ensuring that infrastructure, industrial and innovation strategies are designed with territories and support local innovation ecosystems, decent work, productive capacities and circular and low-carbon economies.
- 49.** Mobilizing and aligning long-term finance for territorial infrastructure through project preparation, capacity-building and partnerships with public development banks, multilateral development banks and other partners.
- 50.** Prioritizing the upgrading, rehabilitation and retrofitting of public buildings, social housing, schools, care facilities, markets and community spaces to improve energy efficiency, accessibility, climate adaptation and resilience.
- 51.** Recognizing digital connectivity and access to the internet as public services and commons, and empowering LRGs to govern digital public infrastructure in the public interest.

4. Making local multilateralism a driver of SDG 17

Partnerships for democratic governance and territorial delivery

- 52.** Partnerships must become governance arrangements that share power, resources and accountability across spheres of government.
- 53.** SDG 17 is the political test of the 2030 Agenda: whether partnership can become shared governance, shared responsibility and shared accountability. Partnerships only accelerate implementation when they align political mandates, financing, data, capacities and accountability across spheres of government.

54. Local and regional governments give practical meaning to this agenda by convening communities, civil society, workers, academia, local economic actors and public institutions around shared territorial priorities. Through public services, housing, climate action, infrastructure, culture, equality policies and local economic development, they connect global commitments with the institutions and communities that deliver them, including through public-community partnerships rooted in proximity, trust and shared responsibility.

55. The 2026 HLPF must strengthen this way of governing in partnership. Multilevel governance should enable co-design, joint implementation and shared review, ensuring that national strategies are informed by territorial realities and that local action is supported by adequate mandates and resources.

56. VLRs and VSRs are central to this shift. They generate territorial evidence, strengthen transparency and create platforms for dialogue between local, regional and national actors. Their findings should systematically inform VNRs, national SDG strategies, policy planning and HLPF deliberations.

57. The Pact for the Future and the Secretary-General's report A/79/968 provide an opportunity to move from recognition to institutional practice. The Local and Regional Governments Forum should be reinforced as the constituency's political space within the HLPF and anchored more firmly within the ECOSOC-HLPF architecture.

58. Decentralized cooperation is also a key expression of SDG 17. It connects territories, supports peer learning, scales shared solutions and strengthens solidarity across borders, especially in the face of climate shocks, inequalities and pressures on local public services.

59. Local democracy is a cornerstone of sustainable development. Strengthening transparency, participation, accountability and civic trust is essential to address polarization, misinformation and declining confidence in public institutions at all levels.

60. We, local and regional governments, commit to governing in partnership with communities, civil society, workers, academia, local economic actors, national governments, the United Nations system and partners. We will continue to make global commitments visible and actionable in territories, while bringing territorial priorities, evidence and voices into national, regional and global decision-making.

Partnerships must become governance arrangements that share power, resources and accountability across spheres of government.

Local and regional governments call for:

61. Recognizing LRGs as political actors and partners in national, regional and global governance frameworks.

62. Institutionalizing structured and distinct LRG participation in United Nations decision-making, implementation, follow-up and review, including through the stronger anchoring of the Local and Regional Governments Forum within the ECOSOC-HLPF architecture.

63. Integrating VLRs and VSRs systematically into national SDG strategies, VNR processes, policy planning and HLPF deliberations.

64. Strengthening multilevel and metropolitan governance arrangements that align mandates, financing, data and accountability across spheres of government.

65. Aligning multilevel governance commitments across the Rio Conventions and the 2030 Agenda, including through CHAMP under the UNFCCC and the Plan of Action on Subnational Governments, Cities and Other Local Authorities for Biodiversity under the CBD, so that recognition gained in one framework reinforces the others.

66. Moving from ad hoc consultation to co-design, joint implementation and shared review with the organized constituency of local and regional governments, including through decentralized cooperation.

67. Expanding fiscal space, predictable intergovernmental transfers and access to adequate, affordable and long-term finance for territorial implementation.



Source: Diego Romeo, Unsplash

1. Introduction: A decade of reporting on local SDG action

As the 2030 deadline approaches, local and regional governments (LRGs) continue leading efforts to sustain momentum towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through public service provision, territorial planning, infrastructure investment, democratic governance and community engagement, LRGs have become central actors in translating global commitments into concrete action adapted to local realities. Over the last decade, they have also played a growing role in shaping sustainable development debates – advancing localization not merely as an implementation mechanism but as a transformative governance approach grounded in multilevel cooperation, participation and territorial justice.

LRGs' growing role unfolds amid mounting global challenges and insufficient progress towards the SDGs. According to the [Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025](#), only 35% of SDG targets with available data are on track or show moderate progress. Nearly half are making only marginal progress, while 18% have regressed below the 2015 baseline level.

These trends take place within a broader context of overlapping global crises. Climate change, biodiversity loss, geopolitical tensions, democratic backsliding and persistent poverty increasingly interact, forming a polycrisis. Both the COVID-19 pandemic and intensifying wars and conflicts worldwide have exposed structural vulnerabilities within global socio-economic systems. Such dynamics have complicated the 2030 Agenda's implementation while underscoring the need for urgent transformative action at all levels of governance.

Achieving the SDGs requires strong local efforts. Many of the challenges addressed by the SDGs materialize locally through uneven development patterns, shortcomings in infrastructure provision and unequal access to essential services. **Cities and regions often reveal inequalities, environmental vulnerabilities and governance fragmentation, but they also develop bottom-up and collaborative solutions.** In this sense, local action on SDGs 6, 7, 9, 11 and 17, which are under review at the 2026 High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), offers an unmissable opportunity to accelerate global progress.



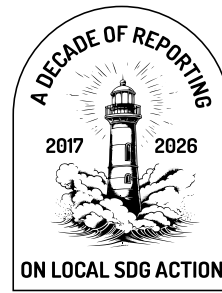
In particular, SDG 11, “Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable,” sits at the core of LRGs’ action. It functions as a systemic accelerator: its targets intersect with climate and environmental goals, social inclusion, investment in and management of public spaces, and participatory governance. These targets are deeply interconnected with several other goals – including those concerning clean water and sanitation (SDG 6); affordable and clean energy (SDG 7); industry, innovation and infrastructure (SDG 9); and partnerships for the goals (SDG 17) – reflecting the systemic nature of territorial development processes.

Looking back, LRGs, their associations (LGAs) and their networks played a pivotal role in shaping the post-2015 agenda and translating global objectives into context-specific policies and actions. Unlike the Millennium Development Goals, which largely kept local implementation concerns at the periphery, the SDGs explicitly incorporated LRGs’ role from the outset due to the active engagement of the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments (GTF) and its networks.

Since then, localization has emerged as a central governance strategy for advancing sustainable development. It has evolved from a perceived tension between top-down global commitments versus bottom-up local action into a broader multilevel governance paradigm through which LRGs define, implement, monitor and evaluate strategies to achieve the SDGs within their specific territorial contexts, where national institutional support often remains limited.

In the last decade of SDG localization, LRGs have translated global commitments into place-based policies, infrastructure investments and inclusive public services. They advocate for understanding localization as a [transformative governance process closely interconnected with other global frameworks](#) such as the New Urban Agenda, the Paris Agreement and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. Increasingly, LRGs pioneer innovative sustainable development pathways and participatory, multi-stakeholder governance models, which have gained prominence within global sustainable development debates.

Despite this recognition, significant challenges persist. Existing multilevel governance arrangements do not ensure LRGs’ structural inclusion in national and international decision-making processes, usually limiting their role to consultation rather than co-creation. At the same time, weak decentralization systems do not provide the necessary institutional, economic and technical conditions (e.g. mandate and decision power, resources and competences) for LRGs to fully lead SDG implementation in their own settings.

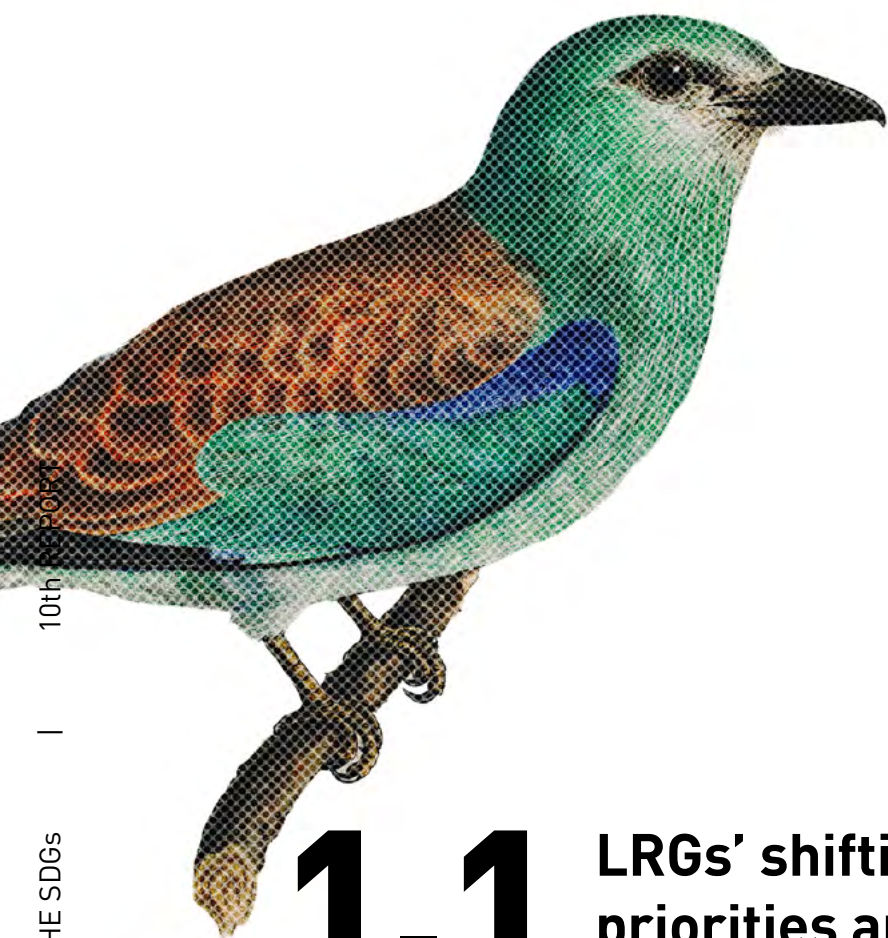


This year’s *Towards the Localization of the SDGs* report – the GTF’s 10th edition, facilitated by United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) – consolidates a decade of evidence, advocacy and practice on SDG localization and strengthens LRGs’ visibility and recognition in global development debates.

This introduction analyzes the trajectory of SDG localization from inception (2015) to today (2026).

In particular, it identifies the main trends characterizing these last 10 years (Section 1.1), the progress made from LRGs’ perspective (Section 1.2), and the GTF’s achievements regarding LRGs’ recognition and inclusion in the United Nations (UN) system (Section 1.3). These subsections together review LRGs’ actions and inform the GTF’s ongoing pro-localization advocacy with national and international actors. Subsequently, Section 1.4 outlines the report structure and Section 1.5 presents the methodology employed.





1.1

LRGs' shifting political priorities and narratives

Over the past decade, LRGs have adapted their vision and roles to emerging societal challenges, transforming their narratives and priorities to implement the 2030 Agenda. The nine past editions of the *Towards the Localization of the SDGs* report (2017–2025) clearly show specific progress on three central areas – public services, feminism and climate justice – alongside cross-cutting advances on social inclusion and local and regional governance.

First, **LRGs' narrative on local public services has significantly evolved over the past decade.** During the initial stages of the 2030 Agenda's localization, services such as housing, water, mobility, health and education were primarily approached as operational areas for local SDG implementation. The COVID-19 pandemic marked a turning point, highlighting LRGs' central role in crisis management and reinforcing the "right to the city" principle and the narrative around caring cities and territories. In this context, LRGs are increasingly [recognizing public services](#) holistically as essential tools for safeguarding rights, collective health and social cohesion.

Around 2023, the idea of a [next generation of public services](#) took shape, later translated into the notion of "[new essentials](#)." Alongside traditionally essential services, these include areas such as mental health, public spaces, access to culture and digital connectivity. Such new essentials show LRGs' commitment to respond to their communities' needs and localize the 2030 Agenda comprehensively, embracing change and breaking silos.

Nowadays, LRGs design and deliver public services as not only technical exercises but also rights-based systems oriented towards care and universal access. They treat them as infrastructure to sustain life, reduce inequalities and strengthen territorial resilience. In this perspective, LRGs increasingly advocate for recognizing public services and the new essentials as the [foundation of a renewed social contract based on human rights, care, proximity and solidarity](#), enabling more integrated and place-based responses to peoples' needs and positioning themselves at the forefront of SDG implementation.

Second, **the gender dimension of SDG localization has shifted from an initial focus on women's representation in LRGs, gender budgeting and mainstreaming to a broader, more structural vision** based on women's leadership and the [Global Feminist Municipal Movement](#) aiming to embed [gender equality and feminist principles](#) within all decision-making structures.

Even amid the COVID-19 pandemic, LRGs emphasized that [crisis recovery should be grounded in feminist leadership](#) attentive to people's needs and care. They increasingly advanced holistic actions for gender equality, including gender-responsive planning and budgeting, women's political representation, care systems, prevention of violence against women (including elected women) and the radical transformation of local institutions themselves. Research processes and programmes such as UCLG's [GOLD VII research process on the Economies of Equality and Care](#), Metropolis's [Care initiative](#) and Mercociudades's [Cities of Care](#) nourish and deepen LRG efforts in this area.

Third, **the climate action narrative has also evolved, shifting from a sectoral, technical management approach to a systemic political claim that places climate justice at the centre of local action**. While LRGs' attention in the early phases focused mostly on mitigation and adaptation – particularly on [energy efficiency and emissions reduction](#) in the transport and building sectors – the 2019–2020 period marked a qualitative leap, boosted by [rising concerns expressed by grassroots movements](#) pushing LRGs to take bolder action. With the pandemic's onset, the narrative further evolved by reinforcing the intrinsic link between environment, health and quality of life. LRGs began promoting urban models based on [proximity](#), such as the [15-minute city](#), aligning sectoral policies for a green and just transition.

In more recent years, LRG action has consolidated around the concept of climate and environmental justice. LRGs do not merely respond to physical shocks but emphasize the need to develop [people-centred climate action](#), inseparably linking climate and social justice. [Water management](#), [urban health](#) and [biodiversity protection](#) are now defined as [common goods and non-negotiable human rights](#), and [climate resilience](#) is a fundamental pillar of the renewed global social contract.

In line with these developments, a broader narrative on social inclusion and local governance has also evolved as a central, cross-cutting theme for LRGs. Overall, LRGs' policies shifted from general language on inclusion towards more explicit and impactful frameworks for action grounded in human rights and care. While early on the principles of inclusion and "leaving no one behind" were mainly related to participation, access to services and territorial balance, the reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic boosted a clearer understanding that local governance should be rooted in human rights, equality and care.

LRGs increasingly link rights to local public service provision: housing, food systems, conflict prevention, public health, climate justice, culture, finance and new essentials, particularly for people experiencing structural discrimination such as [those affected by hate and extremism](#), [Indigenous populations](#) and [migrants and refugees](#). The narrative on urban governance has evolved towards the adoption of feminist approaches, proximity has become a lever for environmental and social sustainability, and care moved from the margins into a central organizing principle of public action and governance.

Above all, 10 years of localization efforts by LRGs have surfaced the call for a renewed social contract based on human rights, care, proximity, solidarity and democracy. To achieve this vision, LRGs should be recognized as [key players impacting millions of lives](#) through rights-based public services, local partnerships and grounded community action rooted in proximity, local public services, care and democratic participation.

1.2

The evolution of LRGs' actions to localize the 2030 Agenda and the national contexts in which they operate

Beyond shifting priorities and narratives, LRGs have also transformed the ways in which they put these into practice. Over this report's 10 editions (2017–2026), UCLG and the GTF have shared 4,650 practices by 1,615 LRGs, demonstrating LRGs' vital role in [driving SDG implementation and fostering sustainable and inclusive communities worldwide](#). This growing body of evidence not only reflects a quantitative increase in action but also a clear evolution in both the practices and narratives put forth by LRGs and LGAs. **Their engagement with SDG localization has progressively shifted from initial awareness-raising and capacity-building activities towards more structured forms of monitoring, strategizing, project implementation and policy integration.**

BOX 1.1 WHAT IS SDG LOCALIZATION?

SDG localization refers to the process through which LRGs define, implement, monitor and evaluate strategies to achieve the 2030 Agenda. It involves translating the SDGs into local action by inclusively adapting them to the specific contexts and needs of each territory. This process includes setting localized goals, identifying appropriate targets and means of implementation, and using a range of indicators to measure progress towards the SDGs. This process is linked to the localization of other global agendas and compacts, such as the Paris Agreement, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and the global compacts on migrants and refugees.

Early on (2017–2018), efforts primarily focused on raising awareness of SDG localization among higher levels of government, alongside disseminating knowledge of the SDGs locally, fostering ownership, and strengthening institutional capacities through training, peer-learning initiatives and advocacy activities. At a moment when national governments seldomly accounted for the local and regional dimensions of the 2030 Agenda, LRGs and LGAs played a decisive role in mobilizing local actors, organizing conferences and workshops, and promoting dialogue with national and international organizations.

As one illustrative example, several LGAs launched the [“Be Counted” campaign](#) in 2017 to improve data on women’s representation in local governments per SDG indicator 5.5.1. In some cases, notably when New York officially presented its first Voluntary Local Review (VLR) at the HLPF in 2018, these efforts showed that very often LRGs were committed to achieving the SDGs even before their national government started to prioritize the 2030 Agenda.

Already in 2018, many LRGs were mainstreaming rights-based approaches to territorial development, such as [the “right to the city” principle](#) advanced in the New Urban Agenda. Between 2019 and 2021, the shift towards monitoring and mainstreaming became more pronounced. During this period, LRGs increasingly integrated the SDGs into local development plans and territorial strategies, moving beyond awareness raising towards formal commitments to operationalization. **The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated their responsiveness in supporting the most exposed members of the population as well as LRGs’ transformative capacity to ensure no one and no territory are left behind.** The *Towards the Localization of the SDGs* reports of 2020 and 2021 highlighted and pushed for institutionalizing the resilience shown by LRGs during the pandemic and for linking it with the broader localization efforts around SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) and the 2030 Agenda as a whole.

In this context, their role as policy-makers, coordinators and investors gained greater visibility, even when LRGs did not have the official mandate or sufficient resources. Their alignment of local policies with global objectives, as well as their caring approaches to value daily life and those essential, yet often rendered invisible, tasks that make it possible,

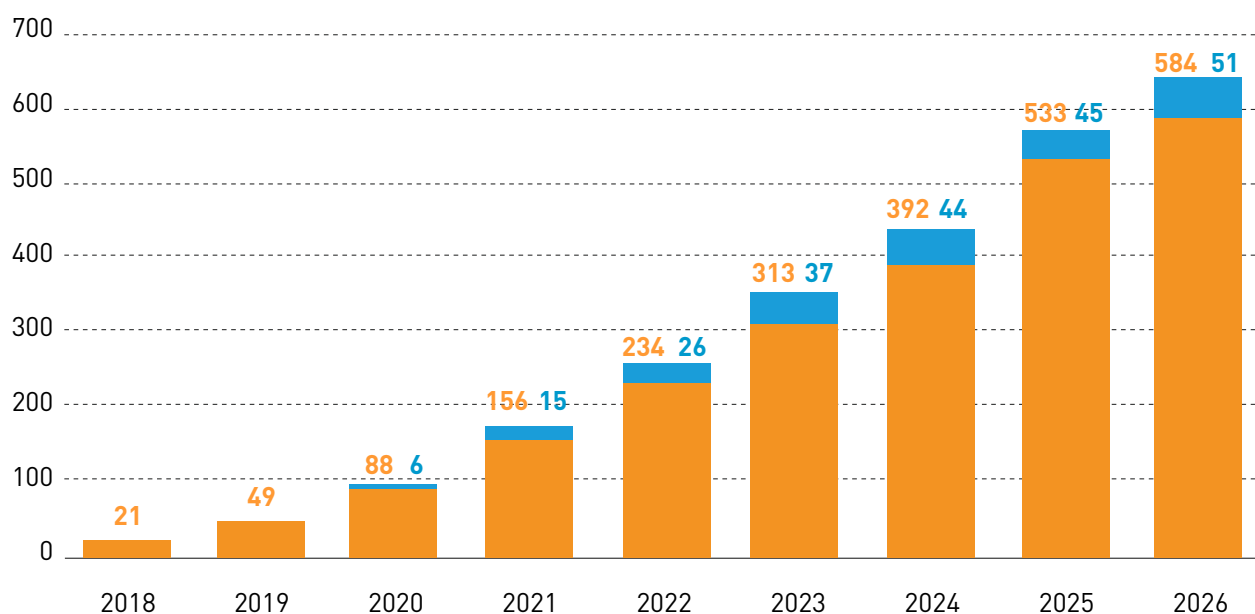
also became more visible. Crucial in this sense were UCLG’s [Live Learning Experience Knowledge Hub](#), Metropolis’s [Cities for Global Health](#) and C40 Cities’ [Green & Just Recovery Agenda](#).

The development of subnational monitoring and reporting mechanisms marked a crucial step in this evolution. While Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) remain the primary mechanism through which UN Member States report on SDG implementation to the HLPF, LRGs and LGAs have progressively developed their own complementary tools. From 2018 onwards, [VLRs](#) emerged as a key innovation. These fully bottom-up and truly voluntary reviews enable cities and regions to assess progress on the SDGs within their own jurisdictions and to align local development strategies with the 2030 Agenda. Introduced in 2018 with 21 cases, as of 2026 a total of 584 VLRs have been published. This trend reflects not only increased engagement but also a structural shift in SDG governance: subnational authorities are increasingly taking a proactive, autonomous role in reporting and policy alignment. Such bottom-up practices led by LRGs have led the UN to officially recognize VLRs and [Voluntary Subnational Reviews \(VSRs\)](#), prioritize them and support them through guidelines paired with technical and financial assistance.

Alongside VLRs, VSRs – through which LGAs (or, less frequently, groups of LRGs within a country) report local progress on the 2030 Agenda, analyzing efforts by all or most LRGs in a given country – have also gained relevance. The number of VSRs increased from 6 in 2020 to a cumulative 51 in 2026, highlighting LGAs’ growing involvement in SDG monitoring processes. Together, VLRs and VSRs signal a broader transformation in SDG governance, in which LRGs and LGAs take on a proactive role in data production and policy alignment.

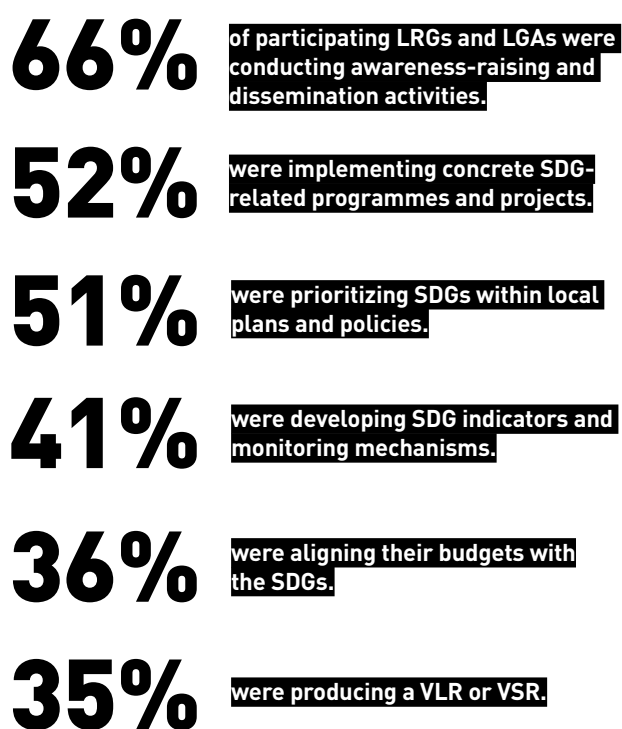
Figure 1.1 Global evolution of VLRs and VSRs, 2018–2026

■ VLRs ■ VSRs



Source: Authors

From 2021 onwards, this trajectory further consolidated into more advanced forms of strategizing and institutionalizing the SDGs at the local level. LRGs increasingly developed dedicated institutional structures, such as specialized units or coordination mechanisms for SDG implementation, and invested in creating indicator systems to track progress. Monitoring practices became more sophisticated and data-driven, often developed in collaboration with national statistical offices, UN agencies and research institutions. By this stage, a significant proportion of LRGs had moved beyond awareness and planning towards implementation and evaluation. Indeed, data from the GTF/UCLG 2025 Survey showed that:



These figures illustrate multidimensional engagement spanning communication, planning, implementation, monitoring and financial alignment.

At the same time, alongside this evolution in practices, **LRGs and their representative networks have consistently articulated a set of political and institutional demands aimed at enabling more effective SDG localization.** These demands primarily concern the need to strengthen decentralization processes and finance LRGs, enhance access to disaggregated and context-specific data and improve multilevel governance frameworks.

A central claim advanced by LRGs is that **effective SDG implementation requires integrated multilevel and multistakeholder governance**, thus fully embracing “whole-of-government” and “whole-of-society” approaches, based on stronger coordination between national, regional and local levels, as well as with civil society, the private sector and academia. In this regard, **LRGs have demonstrated their capacity**

to build partnerships with grassroots organizations and other local stakeholders, contributing to more inclusive and context-sensitive development pathways. They have repeatedly emphasized the territorial dimension of development and called for ensuring LRGs are not only implementers but also active decision-makers and contributors to policy design.

LRGs have also consistently advocated for the formal inclusion of their localization efforts – particularly VLRs and VSRs – within VNRs, as well as for greater participation in national SDG coordination mechanisms. However, such inclusion has historically remained limited and often consultative rather than institutionalized. These gaps are clearly reflected in this report’s monitoring data on LRG involvement in national SDG reporting processes. Between 2016 and 2026, only 44% of the VNRs analyzed demonstrate a medium or high degree of LRG involvement. Nevertheless, this year marks a notable improvement, with the share rising to 70% in 2026. While this increase signals growing recognition of the importance of involving LRGs in national reporting processes, the longer-term data show that the institutionalization of localized reporting at the national level remains uneven.

In some countries, however, substantive forms of local participation are beginning to emerge. Recently, Brazil, Costa Rica, Egypt, Italy, Mozambique, Nepal and Palau have directly involved LRG representatives in their most recent VNR drafting processes. Uruguay dedicated an 11-page chapter to SDG localization and and multilevel governance, including VLR summaries, Bulgaria incorporated nine pages drafted by the National Association of Municipalities, Eswatini established a joint VNR–VLR working group to produce a dedicated chapter on localization, and Zambia invited its LGA to draft an entire section of the report. Moreover, an increasing number of countries are integrating VLRs and VSRs into national reporting frameworks, such as Ghana, Malaysia, Senegal, South Africa and Tunisia.

In some cases, thanks to local advocacy, efforts made by national governments have grown from one VNR to the next. For example, in 2021, Germany’s participatory VNR referenced the VSR produced in the same year by three LGAs (Association of German Cities or DST, German Association of Towns and Municipalities or DSTGb, and German County Association or DLT) in the report annex. Then, in 2025, Germany directly requested that LRGs produce a “Voluntary Local Government Review” (i.e. a VSR), bringing together contributions from 15 German cities, districts and municipalities that had previously released their own VLRs. Italy went from integrating its 2022 VNR with a set of VLRs covering the full country to reflecting and valuing effective multilevel governance through a more comprehensive approach to the pro-

duction of the 2026 VNR. It directly involved regions, municipalities, provinces and mountain communities in the report's production.

Participation in national SDG coordination mechanisms has broadly followed a similar trend to LRG involvement in VNR processes, although levels of participation in coordination bodies have generally remained lower. Between 2016 and 2026, an average of 29% of the VNRs analyzed reported medium to high levels of LRG participation in national coordination mechanisms. In 2026, however, the two trends diverged sharply: while LRG involvement in VNR processes increased substantially, participation in national coordination mechanisms fell to just 15%. This contrast suggests that stronger engagement in reporting processes has not yet translated into more systematic or institutionalized participation in national SDG governance structures. However, some countries' positive evolution is worth mentioning. In Latin America, Brazil, Costa Rica and Honduras have strengthened national coordination mechanisms to ensure LRGs' robust participation. In 2023, Bra-

zil re-established its National Commission for SDG Implementation, bringing together municipal associations and state-level institutions. In Europe, Iceland and Romania have developed dedicated cooperation platforms, involved LRGs in revising national strategies, and included them in HLPF delegations. In Norway, the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities, KS, is a permanent member of the Higher Executive Forum for the SDGs. In Asia-Pacific, Nepal, India and Micronesia promote inclusive coordination mechanisms treating LRGs as equal partners.

Beyond formal participation in national reporting and coordination mechanisms, LRGs continue to advocate that **fully leveraging their contributions in SDG implementation, monitoring and cross-cutting strategizing requires granting LRGs a stable seat at global and regional decision-making tables.** Such representation would allow them to contribute more effectively to shaping sustainable development pathways.



Source: Frank Lloyd de la Cruz, Unsplash

1.3

The UN system's official recognition of LRGs and SDG localization

Amid the growing complexity and fragmentation in the multilateral landscape, the UN system has nevertheless seen a gradual but significant evolution in recognizing LRGs' political leadership and collective representation at the international level.

In this regard, the GTF's establishment in 2012–2013 marked a key milestone as this task force serves as the principal coordination and consultation mechanism of the organized constituency of LRGs globally. Through it, major international networks of LRGs and their members align their political advocacy, policy engagement and collective representation in international decision-making forums, particularly on the 2030 Agenda and other processes under the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), climate action, sustainable urbanization and multilateral system reform. LRGs are the only non-State UN stakeholder to have a mechanism such as the GTF to develop and coordinate inputs into all policy processes.

Over the past decade, LRGs and their networks – primarily represented through the GTF and facilitated by UCLG – have used this coordinated platform to strengthen dialogue with other spheres of government and across UN bodies, and increase their influence in intergovernmental processes. Their work has contributed to the growing recognition of LRGs as structured interlocutors in global sustainable development governance. While this recognition has not yet translated into a special, distinct and separated institutional status within the multilateral system, a range of policy frameworks, declarations and institutional initiatives have progressively strengthened their visibility and legitimacy as key actors in global policy-making and governance renewal.

Historically, LRGs have sought a more meaningful and self-organized role in international governance arenas, aiming not only to strengthen local administrative capacities but also to influence national and global development agendas. In this sense, **the localization of the SDGs did not emerge abruptly with the 2030 Agenda but evolved from earlier debates on decentralization, subsidiarity, territorial development, multilevel and multistakeholder governance and decentralized cooperation.**

LRGs gained a role in the SDG negotiation process as institutional stakeholders and policy co-creators from the early stages of the post-2015 agenda discussions. Their inclusion reflected a growing recognition within the UN system that achieving the 2030 Agenda would depend on coordinated action across multiple governance spheres and on the capacity to translate global objectives into territorial policies.

This representation was further institutionalized by including LRGs in the Major Groups and Other Stakeholders framework via the Local Authorities Major Group, facilitated by the GTF. This framework is the main participatory mechanism for organized constituencies to engage with ECOSOC and its sustainable development processes through structured channels for consultation, input and representation, in line with UN Resolution 67/290 adopted in 2013. It allows the organized LRG constituency to actively contribute to HLPF processes.

Moreover, during the negotiation phase of the 2030 Agenda, several institutional dialogues contributed to consolidating this perspective. In 2014, the [“Localizing the Post-2015 Development Agenda”](#) dialogue led by the GTF in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme and UN-Habitat explicitly addressed how the post-2015 agenda could be implemented at the local level and how subnational actors could be integrated into intergovernmental processes. A significant outcome of the 2030 Agenda negotiations was the inclusion of SDG 11 within the final SDG framework, despite the substantial reduction in the total number of goals during the process.

One of the earliest explicit endorsements of SDG localization occurred at the [Third World Forum on Local Economic Development](#) held in Turin (Italy) in October 2015. During this high-level dialogue on the territorial implementation of the post-2015 agenda, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon emphasized that the SDGs’ success would ultimately depend on their implementation within cities, regions and local communities. He highlighted that local environments constitute the arenas where global commitments are translated into concrete development outcomes. Such endorsement was possible only thanks to the capacity of LRGs and their networks to showcase their fundamental role as innovators and leaders of solutions.

Following the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the localization movement and the organized constituency of LRGs progressively achieved their goal to embed the territorial approach into UN strategies, programmes and review processes, as well as national implementation efforts. In the 10 years of localization since the adoption, a series of institutional milestones strengthened the recognition of localization and LRGs’ political leadership within the UN system.

The Habitat III process, which led to the New Urban Agenda’s adoption in Quito (Ecuador) in 2016, marked another decisive milestone in recognizing LRGs’ political role in global urban governance. Throughout the process, the organized constituency of LRGs, gathered through the GTF and the World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments, contributed to

shaping the agenda’s territorial vision and to affirming the role of LRGs not only as implementers but also as co-creators of sustainable urban development. The explicit recognition of the World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments, in paragraph 169, as the New Urban Agenda’s follow-up and review mechanism, provided an important institutional and political reference point for the constituency’s engagement in global commitments.

A key milestone occurred in 2018 with the first edition of the [Local and Regional Governments Forum under the HLPF](#). The forum’s consolidation over the years as the self-organized political space of the constituency has represented an important achievement for LRGs and the GTF. The forum represents a critical space for political advocacy and dialogue between LRGs, Member States and the UN system on the localization and monitoring of the 2030 Agenda and the role of local governments as a distinct sphere of government. It proved particularly meaningful for the revisions of SDG 11 at the HLPF in 2018 and 2023, as well as this year in 2026. These revisions have brought explicit and increased recognition of LRGs as key actors in achieving SDG 11, moving beyond the idea of cities as implementation sites to acknowledging their governance role. In other words, SDG 11 has served as a critical entry point for this recognition of LRGs’ role.

This trajectory is also reflected in the institutional architecture of the global sustainable urbanization agenda. In 2019, the [first session of the UN-Habitat Assembly](#) adopted rules of procedure that included LRGs as observers in their own right, distinct from other stakeholders, in the Assembly’s public meetings and related bodies.

Other key milestones include the revision of the commitments to the 2030 Agenda during the [Decade of Action in 2020](#), which emphasized the urgency of accelerating SDG implementation through territorial approaches in light of the progress by several LRGs in their own settings. The launch of the [Local2030 Coalition](#) in 2021, which brings together 14 UN agencies and bodies along with a wide range of international partners to promote the mainstreaming of SDG localization across the UN system, marked a decisive acceleration of multilevel coordination for SDG localization. The GTF, one of its co-founders and steering committee member, pushed significantly for the Local2030 Coalition’s creation. The coalition operates as a network and collaborative platform between the UN system and local development stakeholders, enabling connections for higher impact and systemic transformation.

Further institutional consolidation occurred through the launch of [Our Common Agenda](#) in 2021, which emphasized the need to strengthen cooperation be-

tween the UN and territorial governance actors. This direction was further reinforced by the [UN Secretary-General's High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism](#). This advisory board has called for a stronger and more formal role for LRGs in global governance, including through dedicated institutional spaces, signatory roles in relevant multilateral treaty processes and enhanced support for 2030 Agenda localization. Within this framework, the [UN Secretary-General's Advisory Group on Local and Regional Governments](#) created in 2023 represented a significant step towards institutionalizing dialogue between the UN system and LRGs. The group brings together 15 LRG representatives and 5 Member State-nominated experts, under the co-chairship of the government of Spain and the presidency of Nouakchott Region in Mauritania. UN-Habitat and UCLG/GTF serve as the technical secretariat.

In 2022, the [review of the New Urban Agenda](#) reinforced the strategic link between urban policy frameworks and SDG localization. The GTF obtained its members' formal involvement in the upcoming review and follow-up of the agenda's 10th anniversary in 2026.

The [2023 SDG Summit](#) marked another important turning point. The [Political Declaration](#) adopted by the General Assembly at the summit explicitly acknowledged LRGs' role and recognized SDG localization and multilevel coordination as necessary conditions for achieving the SDGs. The New Urban Agenda was identified as a key accelerator of the 2030 Agenda through localization, while the Local2030 Coalition was designated as one of the 12 high-impact initiatives led by the UN system to support Member States in advancing SDG implementation. Here again, these achievements were possible thanks to sustained advocacy from the organized constituency, aimed at ensuring the UN system recognizes that SDG implementation cannot be achieved without the local level and without LRGs as driving actors. In parallel, the preparation of the [Global Sustainable Development Report 2023](#) expanded consultations with organized networks of LRGs under the GTF umbrella, formally recognizing their leadership and the growing relevance of VLRs and VSRs.

[UN-Habitat Resolution 2/6](#) adopted in 2023 was specifically dedicated to SDG 11. It encouraged Member States to promote the territorial implementation, monitoring and reporting of the SDGs; strengthen national coordination frameworks; and enhance the participation of local communities, while mandating UN-Habitat to develop guidance and practical tools to support these processes. Among others, these include SDG Cities (a results-driven, partner-led initiative accelerating sustainable development in cities), the Partnership Platform on Localizing the SDGs (working with national governments to establish na-

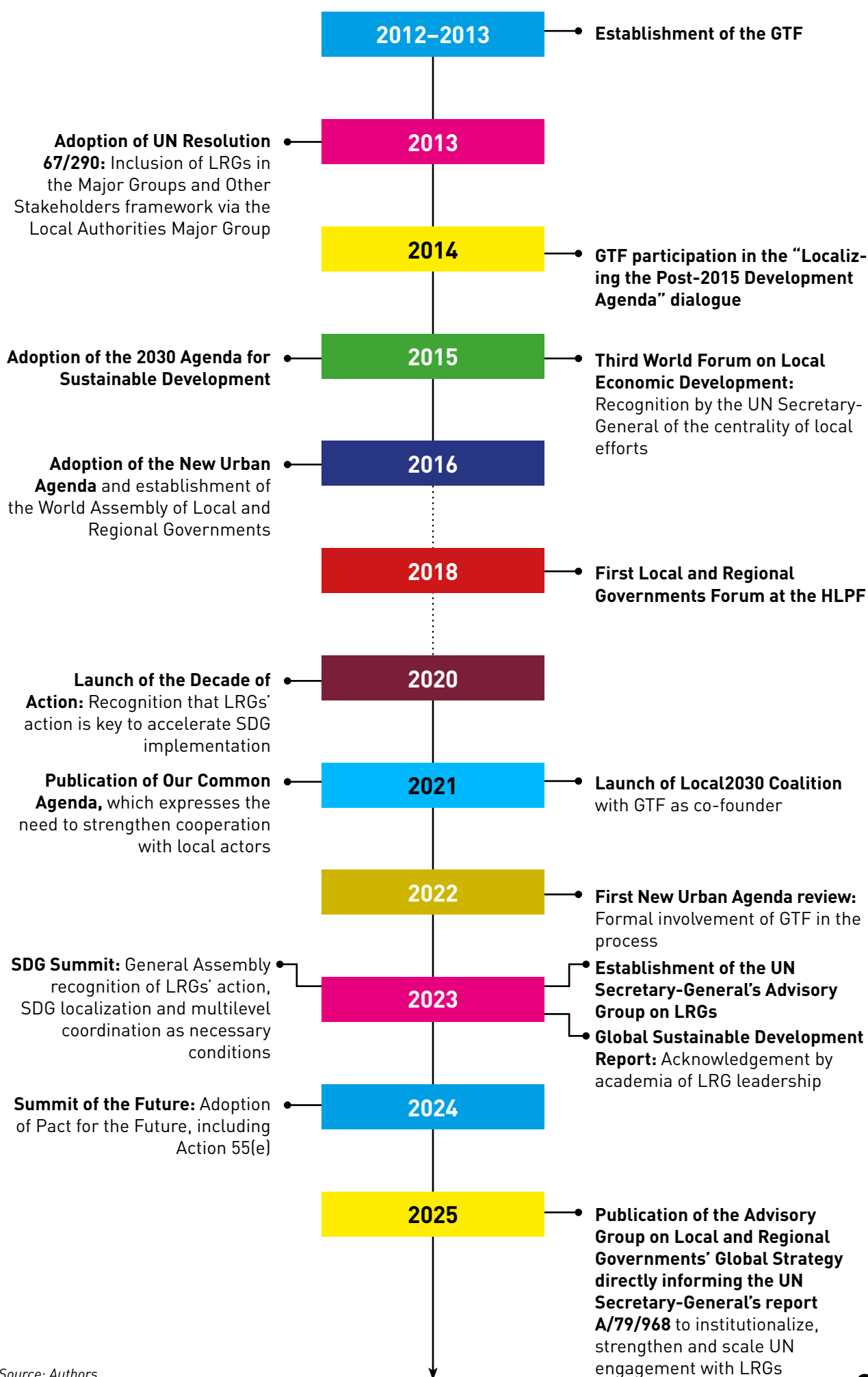
tional SDG localization frameworks) and guidelines on action-oriented VLRs, produced together with UCLG.

The most recent step in this trajectory emerged at the [Summit of the Future in 2024](#) through the adoption of the [Pact for the Future](#). **Action 55(e) of the pact requests the UN Secretary-General to report on mechanisms to strengthen collaboration between the UN system and LRGs for implementing the 2030 Agenda.** This provision represents an important institutional mandate to further advance the recognition of LRGs within multilevel governance frameworks. In this context, the work of the Secretary-General's Advisory Group on Local and Regional Governments proved instrumental, as its Global Strategy directly informed the subsequent [UN Secretary-General's report A/79/968 of 8 July 2025](#). These recommendations to the General Assembly represent a sizable leap forward insofar as the report sets out pragmatic, non-mutually exclusive and cost-effective pathways to institutionalize, strengthen and scale UN engagement with LRGs, guided by three criteria: permanence, structure and distinct recognition.

Some of these pathways provide concrete entry points for moving from recognition to structured engagement. They include institutionalizing the Local and Regional Governments Forum under the ECOSOC or the HLPF, establishing an annual hearing of LRGs under the General Assembly, and revitalizing and expanding the UN Advisory Committee of Local Authorities – established in 1999 as an advisory body to strengthen dialogue between LRGs and the UN system through UN-Habitat – as an advisory mechanism for the wider UN system.

Overall, within the broader framework of UN reforms, **LRGs and their organized constituency made important progress towards framing SDG localization** as a key approach to strengthening multilevel cooperation and advancing place-based and people-centred strategies for sustainable development.

However, while these developments signal a growing political recognition of the role of LRGs, the institutional architecture required to fully operationalize this mandate remains under construction. The mechanisms through which LRGs could obtain a stable and formalized role within global multilateral governance structures are still being defined, leaving the process at a critical juncture between increasing international recognition and incomplete institutionalization. **The GTF networks' advocacy, following the mandate of the global municipalist movement of LRGs, reflects continued efforts towards the full recognition of LRGs' pioneering and fundamental role in achieving the 2030 Agenda and realizing the promises of sustainable development.**



1.4

Report structure

Following this introduction, Section 2 of the 10th *Towards the Localization of the SDGs* report evaluates to what extent the enabling environment present in this year's reporting countries is favourable or unfavourable for SDG localization. While local leadership and innovation are driving SDG localization, as described in VLRs and VSRs (Section 2.1), this report studies LRGs' and LGAs' involvement in preparing each country's VNR (Section 2.2) and participation in their countries' national SDG co-ordination mechanisms (Section 2.3).

Section 3 comprises three papers that zoom in, from the perspective of LRGs and LGAs, on the specific SDGs under review at the 2026 HLPF. Together, these papers comprehensively assess challenges faced by LRGs and LGAs when localizing SDGs 6, 7, 9 and 11 alongside the solutions implemented locally:

- **Paper 1 analyzes localization efforts related to SDGs 7, 9 and 11. It uses SDG 11** (Sustainable Cities and Communities) as the guiding framework to examine how LRGs use public service provision to realize more just and sustainable cities. This includes analyzing enabling policy areas such as housing (SDG target 11.1), transport (SDG target 11.2), energy (SDG 7) and key infrastructure (SDG 9).
- **Paper 2 studies the localization of SDG 6 on clean water and sanitation.** With the upcoming 2026 UN Water Conference and the 11th World Water Forum, the paper focuses on global challenges related to SDG 6 achievement and localization and analyzes LRGs' key role in overcoming these challenges through concrete actions in their territories.
- **Paper 3 zooms in on the role of culture (SDG target 11.4) and its localization for sustainable development.** It showcases LRGs' fundamental role in localizing and promoting cultural goals, as well as the central position of natural and cultural heritage in sustainable development at all levels of government. Through the analysis, the paper makes the case for culture to be a self-standing goal that contributes to sustainable development, and presents the advancements made in this sense.

Section 4 discusses the findings of this report and presents a set of impact-driven policy recommendations to reinforce SDG localization globally. While challenges and barriers remain, especially with the 2030 deadline in mind, this last section of the report introduces practical pathways for systemic betterment of SDG implementation and, ultimately, achievement.



1.5

Methodology

The research methodology for this report included an extensive analysis of academic and grey literature. UCLG and the GTF focused heavily on VNRs, VSRs, VLRs and other documents reviewing SDG implementation and achievement at the international, national and local levels.

In addition, they collected primary data directly from and with LRGs and LGAs worldwide, particularly those from countries reporting to the 2026 HLPF. A survey, interviews and written exchanges with these key actors supported presenting a comprehensive picture of current progress and persistent gaps in SDG localization.





2.

Local action, policy and enabling environment for SDG localization

Local and regional governments (LRGs) and their associations (LGAs) are taking significant and increasingly innovative action to localize the 2030 Agenda. These efforts, however, often unfold within insufficiently enabling institutional environments, limiting their full potential and impact. Indeed, despite the numerous advancements made since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, LRGs still face sizable challenges such as limited recognition and support from national and international organizations, inadequate funding, and mismatches between competences and effective responsibilities. Under these circumstances, LRGs and LGAs deserve even greater acknowledgement for their role as forerunners in designing and implementing innovative solutions to localize the SDGs.

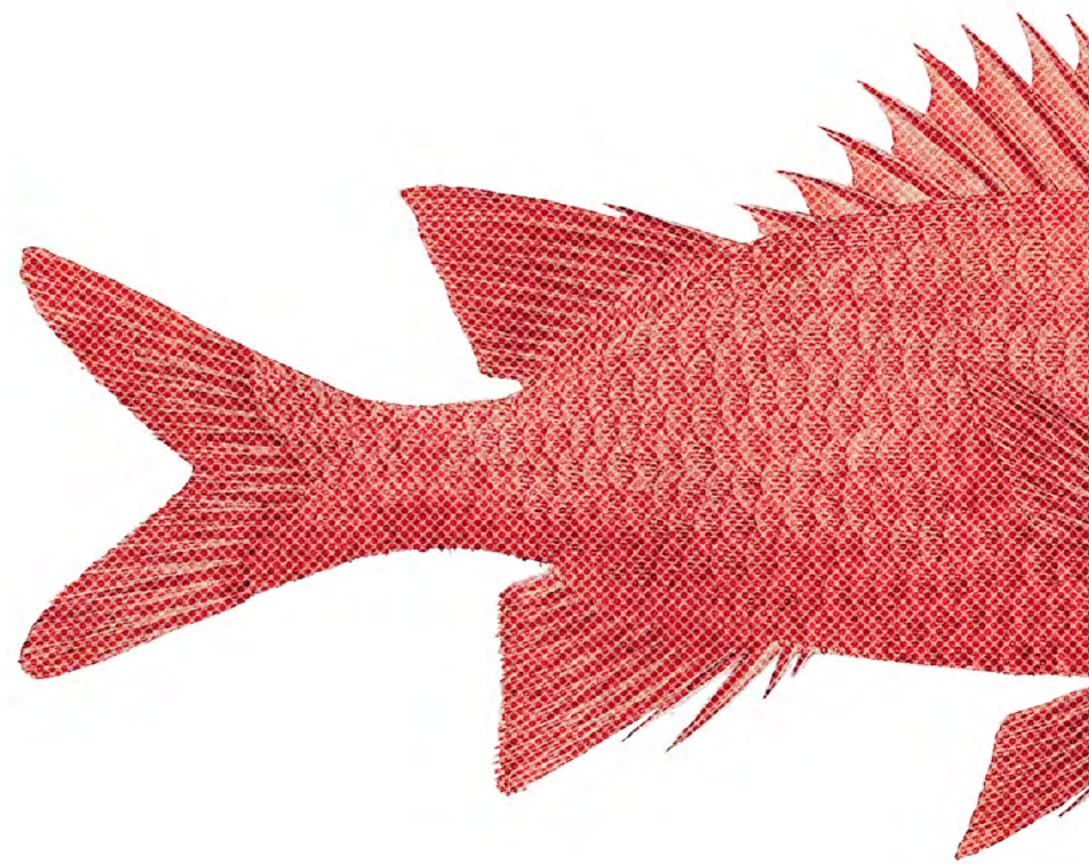
BOX 2.1 10 YEARS OF TOWARDS THE LOCALIZATION OF THE SDGs: SHOWCASING A GLOBAL MOVEMENT

This year's *Towards the Localization of the SDGs* report presents more than 300 new and inspiring practices led by LRGs and LGAs from all over the world.

To date, the report's 10 editions have showcased **4,650 initiatives by over 1,600 LRGs and LGAs**. This decade of reporting on LRGs' leading role globally leaves no doubt that the local level is the centrepiece of sustainable development, transforming the 2030 Agenda into a real tool for community wellbeing.

You can find all 10 editions of the report [here](#).

To ground the statement above on evidence, Section 2.1 presents the concrete actions that LRGs and LGAs are putting in place to localize the 2030 Agenda, with special consideration for Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) and Voluntary Subnational Reviews (VSRs). Section 2.2 analyzes LRGs' and LGAs' involvement in preparing and drafting their respective countries' Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). Finally, Section 2.3 discusses their participation in national coordination mechanisms and strategies for sustainable development.

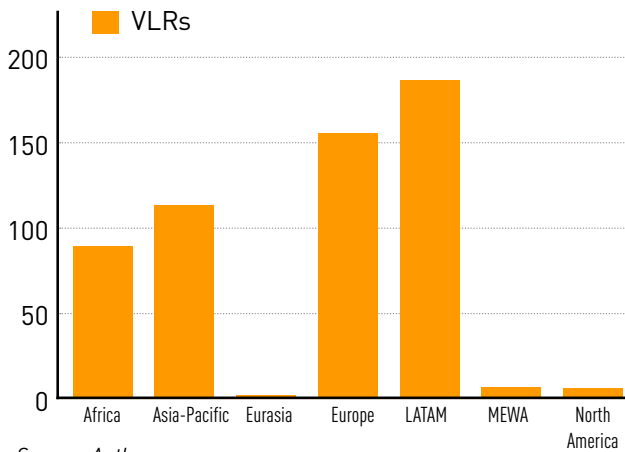
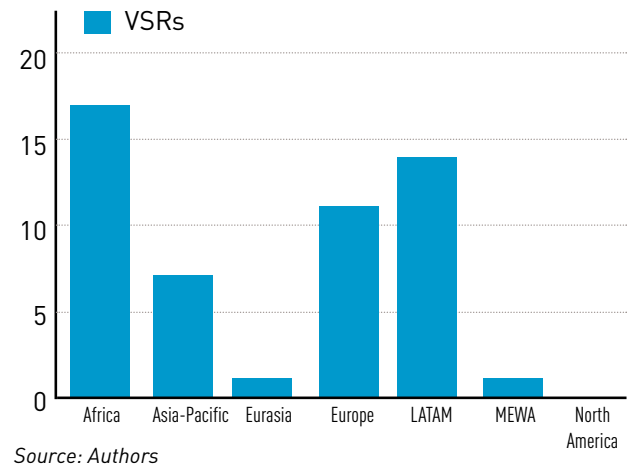


2.1 Local leadership and innovation driving SDG localization through VLRs and VSRs

Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, LRGs and LGAs have played a leading role in advancing SDG localization through a wide range of concrete actions. These efforts have included aligning local development plans, policies, projects and budgets with the SDGs; developing new sets of indicators to monitor progress at the local level; and raising awareness among technical staff, local stakeholders and citizens about the importance of sustainable development.

Beyond implementation, LRGs and LGAs have also actively worked to ensure that local voices are heard in national and international arenas, advocating for SDG localization to be recognized as a collective, multi-level effort requiring shared responsibility across levels of government. This leadership has been particularly visible in contexts where institutional recognition, financial resources and enabling frameworks remain limited.

From the early stages of the 2030 Agenda, LRGs and LGAs have also developed reporting tools inspired by VNRs to document their progress and challenges in implementing the SDGs: VLRs and VSRs. Initially conceived as reporting instruments, they have progressively evolved into powerful drivers of change. In many contexts, **VLRs and VSRs have become strategic public policy tools, helping to position the 2030 Agenda as a unifying framework for local action and decision-making.**

Figure 2.1 Number of VLRs per region**Figure 2.2 Number of VSRs per region**

The following paragraphs illustrate LRGs' and LGAs' cross-cutting efforts to channel their SDG-related actions through their most recent VLRs and VSRs, highlighting how these processes have strengthened policy coherence, institutional coordination and local leadership for sustainable development.

LRGs' and LGAs' efforts to localize the 2030 Agenda remain holistic in nature. Most cities are addressing multiple SDGs at once, recognizing the true interconnected nature of sustainable development. **Irbid** (Jordan) produced its first [VLR](#) focusing on six crucial SDGs. The city did not conceive of its VLR solely as a self-assessment tool but rather as a dynamic framework for long-term evaluation, transparency and collaborative action. The [2025 VLR](#) of **Banjul** (The Gambia) builds on cross-cutting and holistic approaches to nine key SDGs, examining the interconnections across different levels of governance in the area. **New Taipei** also published a [2025 VLR](#) focusing on cross-sectoral and cross-regional governance for sustainability.

The department of **Boyacá** (Colombia) recently embarked on a VLR process that has proven to be an excellent tool to address persistent challenges such as inequalities in access to public services, informal labour and digital connectivity by localizing the SDGs. It also consolidated a monitoring system for SDG indicators and strengthened internal coordination between departments, positioning Boyacá as a leader in the localization of the 2030 Agenda. In Jordan, the **Greater Amman Municipality's** second VLR, aligned with the country's 2026 VNR and Economic Modernization Vision, examines eight priority SDGs (3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11 and 13) through the integrated lenses of resilience and smartness. It highlights progress in climate action, sustainable mobility and planning, digital transformation and institutional strengthening, while also addressing challenges related to inclusion, spatial inequalities and equitable service delivery.

BOX 2.2 EUROPEAN TERRITORIES LOCALIZE THE SDGs: CITIES AT THE CORE OF IMPLEMENTATION

The Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) and PLATFORMA's 2026 report on SDG localization demonstrates European territories' strong added value in localizing the SDGs through practical action. A set of 100 local practices highlights how cities drive progress in water management, urban planning, innovation and sustainable finance.

Research findings confirm that LRGs are central actors in translating global goals into concrete results, especially in areas such as inclusive urban development and climate resilience. Their proximity to citizens allows faster experimentation and policy integration. This experience also has a considerable political impact, as territories contribute to preparing the post-2030 Agenda by proposing more place-based, flexible and citizen-driven approaches to sustainable development.

Other LRGs have used VLRs to identify key pillars that can guide localized sustainable development in their contexts. This is the case of the **Barcelona Metropolitan Area's** (Spain) [2025 VLR](#), aimed at achieving social equity, territorial balance and economic prosperity through the digital transition and the green transition. Similarly, **Tampere** (Finland) published its [second VLR](#) in 2025, focusing on four priority areas: equal individuals, active communities, carbon-neutral action and pioneering of the future. **Gwangmyeong** (Republic of Korea) focused its [2026 VLR](#) on six strategic priorities: care, lifelong education, social and solidarity economy, climate neutrality, circular economy and civic empowerment. These priorities are reflected in the city's Plan for Sustainable Development (2025–2029) and serve, together with 64 SDG-based indicators, to advance sustainable development for all citizens.

Through VLR processes, LRGs are mobilizing all key stakeholders to localize the 2030 Agenda. For instance, the **state of Guerrero** (Mexico) made an important effort in the production of its [2025 VLR](#) to foster the participation of members from the federal government, the state of Guerrero, municipalities, civil society and academia. In addition, the VLR reflects the state's strong focus on achieving economic, social, cultural and environmental rights, particularly marginalized and Indigenous populations' rights. In **Kogi State** (Nigeria), all three tiers of governance participated in preparing the [2026 VLR](#) alongside 15 civil society organizations. This engagement was not

a one-off consultation but a continuous dialogue, conscious that a VLR is stronger when it is owned and validated by all the people and the organizations closest to the ground, not only the state.

One of VLRs' most relevant advantages is that LRGs use them as future-oriented processes, rather than mere reporting exercises. For instance, the city of **Lusaka** (Zambia) published a [VLR](#) with the support of its association, the Local Government Association of Zambia (LGAZ). The VLR has a strong focus on SDG awareness and monitoring, data, community participation and the institutionalization of the SDGs into all planning, budgeting and reporting frameworks of the city. The city of **Tel Aviv-Yafo** (Israel) also published a [VLR](#) in 2025. One of the main achievements of the process was aligning long-term goals and day-to-day implementation, with the VLR informing the city's next strategic plan. In the same way, the 2025 **Malé** (Maldives) [VLR](#) was used as a base for the Malé City Council's Strategic Action Plan (2026–2030), setting forth strategic priorities.

Yokohama (Japan) produced a [VLR](#) in 2026 focused on integrating its Medium-Term Plan and the SDGs, particularly through the work on the city's SDGs Future City Plan. In addition, the VLR reports on Yokohama's city-to-city and global collaborations, highlighting the importance of decentralized cooperation to achieve the 2030 Agenda. **Portoviejo** (Ecuador) used its [2026 VLR](#) to not only align and integrate its local planning and development plans with the 2030 Agenda but also develop a framework for adaptive and future-proof governance. This framework is based on data analysis and opportunities for action identified in collaboration with over 70 stakeholders.



Source: Calin Stan, Unsplash

BOX 2.3 BILBAO'S 2025 VLR: THE SDGs AS A GUIDING FRAMEWORK TO COLLECTIVELY FUTURE-PROOF COMMUNITIES

The city of Bilbao (Spain) has used its third VLR as a tool to report progress, accelerate localization of the 2030 Agenda and improve local governance for sustainable development holistically. Bilbao adopted a structured methodology to foster multistakeholder alliances to accelerate the 2030 Agenda, which allowed for a systemic vision and cross-department collaboration. The VLR process enabled the city to integrate the SDGs with its 2025–2027 action plan for a sustainable Bilbao and other key local policies, increase public capacity for the localization of sustainable development and foster local stakeholder collaboration.

The VLR's main achievements include developing coherent and transparent frameworks for action around the SDGs, improving multilevel coordination and consolidating localization as a tool for both local governance and the city's international positioning. In addition, Bilbao used its VLR to accelerate internal and external capacity-building processes with the aim of producing better sustainable development policies and improving local governance. Notably, the city hosts the European Observatory for the Defence of Democracy at the Local Level and participates in the Euskadi Local 2030 Hub, which specializes in collaborative governance and SDG localization.

VLRs also showcase local projects that drive localization, such as in the case of **Oldenburg County** (Germany). The county's 2025 [VLR](#) includes multiple local and bottom-up projects that are contributing to the SDGs on the ground. The city of **Suwon** (Republic of Korea) used its 2025 [VLR](#) to showcase a number of citizen-driven initiatives as best practices for the city's sustainable development. Among them, mobility projects, citizen science initiatives and local food communities are strengthening partnerships between the local government and the population to localize the 2030 Agenda.

BOX 2.4 MANABÍ'S (ECUADOR) 2026 VLR: COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE IN SERVICE OF LOCALIZATION AND A FOCUS ON STRUCTURALLY DISCRIMINATED GROUPS

In its fourth VLR, Manabí celebrates the contributions by rural women, Montubio populations, youth and communities in the most-in-equitable municipalities to the province's sustainable development. The report identified Manabí's biggest overall contribution to the 2030 Agenda to date – 80.78% of the way to achieving the SDGs, with an increase of 5.21% compared with the previous VLR – consolidating a positive territorial trend for the second year in a row, with a 10.70% increase from 2024 levels. A public investment of \$574 million since 2019 underpins this progress, prioritizing regions with persistent gaps in development.

The report development process was truly participatory. It included citizens (through participatory budgeting and planning), the provincial government's 19 departments and five universities from Manabí. It also engaged a strong cluster of collaborating institutions: the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the country's National Statistical Institute, Consortium of Autonomous Provincial Governments of Ecuador (CONGOPE), United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), Regions4, GIZ, UN-Habitat and the International Institute of Gastronomy, Culture, Arts and Tourism. The VLR used their own previously developed methodology to examine the 22 municipalities' progress on the 17 SDGs. Manabí's progress on macro-economic indicators (gross value added, employment, remittances) results from the collective effort of its constituency, as well the direct influence of the provincial government.

LRGs also launched numerous interactive platforms to monitor advances on the ground and connect with communities. This is the case of the **Enzkreis District** (Germany) and its [SDG dashboard](#) that, together with the district's latest [VLR](#), aims to foster accountability on the progress made and promote the population's involvement. Similarly, **Regensburg** (Germany) produced a [VLR](#) that represented the culmination of integrating the 2030 Agenda into city development policies. The city also launched the online platform "[Future Barometer Regensburg](#)" to track key indicators in an accessible and interactive way. Academia, civil society organizations and citizens all collaborated to define and validate the indicators used for both the VLR and the Regensburg Plan 2040. The [2025 VLR](#) of **Montevideo** (Uruguay) drew upon the new municipal data platform [Montevidata](#), a public observatory that monitors and shares Montevideo's progress towards SDG localization.

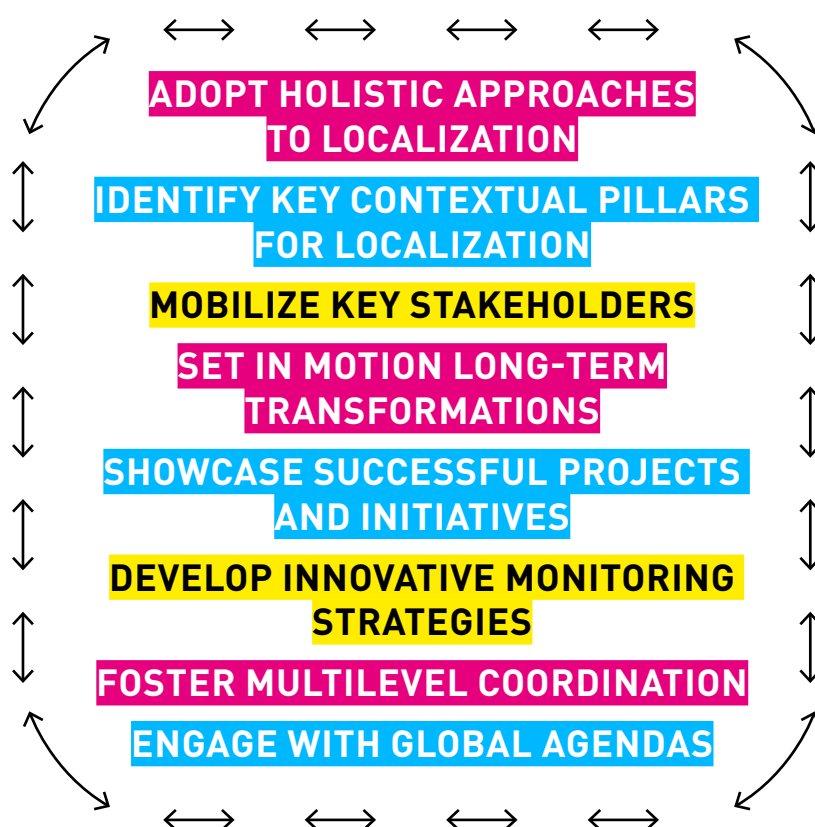
Additionally, LRGs, LGAs and national governments have improved coordination for SDG localization. LGAs remain crucial to strengthen and accelerate localization within countries at the local level. For instance, the **Consortium of Autonomous Provincial Governments of Ecuador (CONGOPE)** has provided steady technical support to several Ecuadorian provinces to facilitate the production of participatory and impactful VLRS. **Surigao** (the Philippines) produced a [VLR](#) focused on vertical integration across

barangays, the province, the Caraga Region and the national level. The process involved various stakeholders, zoomed in on 11 key SDGs and created evidence-based indicators that ultimately strengthen local planning.

Countries such as Brazil have prioritized vertical integration and 2030 Agenda localization by creating specific multilevel platforms such as *Meu Município Pelos ODS* (My Municipality and the SDGs). As a result, 51 LRGs have already published VLRS, proving that empowering the local level and instituting clear vertical collaboration mechanisms lead to direct positive impacts for sustainable development. [Abaetetuba](#), [Alto Alegre](#), [Fortaleza](#), [Ipanema](#) and [Sarzedo](#) provide strong examples of SDG localization through local reporting.

In Malaysia, close cooperation between LRGs and the State-led Centre of Excellence for Sustainable Cities and Community Well-being (URBANICE Malaysia) resulted in the publication of 22 VLRS in 2025, for a total of [83 since 2021](#). For instance, **Subang Jaya** recently published its second VLR, expanding the scope to cover poverty eradication, food security, climate action, responsible consumption and strong institutions. Although LRGs' ownership and leadership could be deepened in some cases, such multilevel processes are greatly fostering the localization movement in the country. These experiences are echoed in countries such as Italy (14 new VLRS) and South Africa (31 new VLRS).

Figure 2.3 Benefits of VLR processes



Source: Authors

Increasingly, local efforts for SDG localization are being translated into international advocacy and impact. Through VLRs, LRGs are raising their voices in international forums and advocating for more enabling environments for local and regional action. For instance, the municipality of **Odemira** (Portugal) used its [2025 VLR](#) to strengthen its relations with the national level. This effort culminated with local leaders participating in the 2025 HLPF as part of the official Portuguese delegation, representing the country's LRGs. These local leaders offered a holistic and bottom-up perspective on sustainable development and advocated for more adequate legal, political and financial frameworks for the local level.

The role of city networks – in particular, members of the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments (GTF), which share the same localization goals – remains vital for accelerating local action through capacity building, administrative and financial support, and knowledge sharing and dissemination. Moreover, several United Nations (UN) agencies such as UN-Habitat, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and UNDP, together with their country offices and the regional UN economic commissions, have stepped up their efforts to support LRGs in SDG localization and reporting processes. More and more, these collaborations recognize LRGs' decision-making role and empower them to steer VLR processes and localization projects. This local, bottom-up ownership moves the needle towards more just and equal multilevel collaboration.

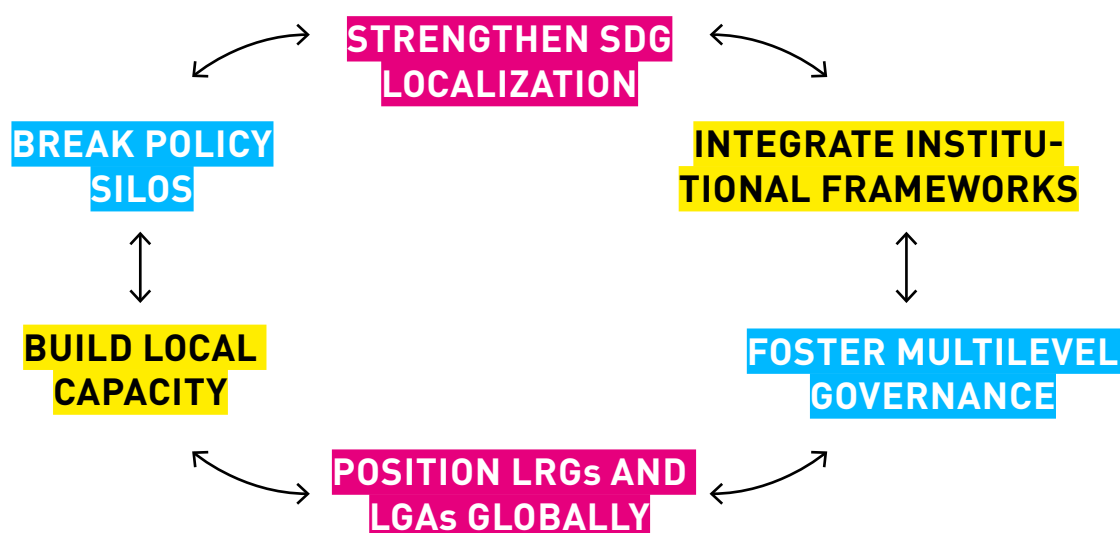
At the same time, more widespread exchange, coordination and integration between UN agencies and city networks and their members is needed to make sure local perspectives and aspirations remain at

the centre of sustainable development and reporting processes. Crucial events such as the fifth edition of the **VLR-VSR Days**, co-organized by UCLG together with UN-Habitat and UN DESA, contribute to these objectives.

Building on this progress, **VSRs continue to consolidate their role as key instruments to strengthen SDG localization and multilevel governance.** Since 2020, a total of 51 VSRs have been developed across five world regions (Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe, Latin America, Middle East and West Asia), representing nearly 186,000 LRGs and 1.9 billion inhabitants. The most recent additions – from the Dominican Republic, Kyrgyz Republic, Mozambique, Türkiye and Zambia – further demonstrate the growing relevance of these processes across diverse institutional and territorial contexts. Beyond their quantitative expansion, VSRs continue to generate significant qualitative impacts, **reinforcing LGAs' role as key interlocutors in national development processes and as drivers of coordination, knowledge production and advocacy.**

As evidenced in previous editions of this report, VSRs contribute both internally and externally to strengthening SDG localization. Internally, they foster more coherent institutional frameworks, break down silos and enhance capacities for data collection, monitoring and strategic planning. Externally, they support whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches, improving coordination across levels of governance and increasing LRGs' visibility and recognition in national and international processes, including VNRs. The new generation of VSRs continues to build on these contributions, while also adapting to emerging challenges such as fiscal constraints, climate pressures and social inequalities.

Figure 2.4 Benefits of VSR processes



Source: Authors

The following boxes highlight the main added value and specific contributions of these latest VSR experiences, as shared by the LGAs themselves.

BOX 2.5 THE DOMINICAN FEDERATION OF MUNICIPALITIES' (FEDOMU'S) 2026 VSR

What is the goal of your VSR?

It aims to establish the state of municipal-level SDG knowledge, ownership and implementation in the Dominican Republic, supporting the country's 2030 Agenda commitments.

Which methodological aspect has helped you most to achieve your goal, and why?

The focus groups – particularly the expert group held in February 2026 – proved most valuable. They validated survey findings, compensated for low survey response rates and generated rich recommendations from practitioners with direct territorial experience.

How enabling is the institutional environment in your country, and how has the VSR been useful in making the institutional environment more conducive to SDG localization?

The environment is moderately enabling: FE-DOMU participates in the national high-level commission for sustainable development, and legal frameworks align with the SDGs. However, the VSR revealed fragmented efforts and unequal territorial coverage, alongside the need for a coordinated multiactor, multilevel localization strategy.

How is the country advancing at the local level to achieve the different SDGs?

Progress is uneven. While some municipalities integrate the SDGs into development plans, most lack awareness and formal commitment. Local governments contribute to SDGs through routine functions – infrastructure, sanitation, social services – without conscious intention. Cooperation-funded projects in specific regions have generated good practices, but coverage remains limited and non-standardized nationally.

After the VSR, what are the main next steps for SDG localization?

Design and implement a coordinated national strategy for SDG sensitization, capacity building, planning integration and monitoring across all municipalities.

What is the main recommendation stemming from the VSR?

Translate SDGs into the everyday language of local governments, identifying their existing legal competences and how their actions are already contributing to global goals.



Source: Victor Rosario, Unsplash

BOX 2.6 THE UNION OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENTS OF THE KYRGYZ REPUBLIC'S 2026 VSR (FORTHCOMING)

What is the goal of your VSR?

It aims to assess municipal-level progress on SDG localization, identify institutional gaps and formulate recommendations for integrating the SDGs into local planning and budgeting.

Which methodological aspect has helped you most to achieve your goal, and why?

Combining administrative data analysis, consultations with local governments and a survey helped verify indicators, identify real institutional constraints and adapt global and national goals to the local context.

How enabling is the institutional environment in your country, and how has the VSR been useful in making the institutional environment more conducive to SDG localization?

The institutional environment is moderately enabling, with a defined strategic framework but limited coordination and resources at the local level. The VSR identified these limitations. If its recommendations are implemented, it will contribute to strengthening collaboration between the national and municipal levels of government, formalizing municipalities' roles and ensuring SDG integration in strategic planning and monitoring processes.

How is the country advancing at the local level to achieve the different SDGs?

The local level has made fragmented but incremental progress towards achieving the SDGs, primarily as related to social protection and basic services. Implementing the VSR could catalyze the institutionalization of SDG approaches to localization, including integrating the SDGs into municipal development programmes and strengthening monitoring practices. However, limitations related to data, funding and human resource capacity persist, requiring systemic support and scaling up of the achieved results.

After the VSR, what are the main next steps for SDG localization?

Institutionalize the VSR; integrate the SDG context into planning and budgeting processes; develop monitoring systems, including formalization and collection of data for SDG indicators; and strengthen municipalities' capacity.

What is the main recommendation stemming from the VSR?

Ensure systematic integration of the SDGs into strategic planning and budgeting processes at the local level, horizontal and vertical integration of strategic approaches to achieving the SDGs and corresponding coordination, and implementation of municipal-level SDG indicators.



Source: Mike Dudin, Unsplash

BOX 2.7 THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF MUNICIPALITIES OF MOZAMBIQUE'S (ANAMM'S) 2026 VSR (FORTHCOMING)

What is the goal of your VSR?

The VSR represents an important milestone in localizing the SDGs, particularly for municipalities, whose responsibilities are closely linked to the improvements that need to be achieved by 2030.

Which methodological aspect has helped you most to achieve your goal, and why?

Given municipalities' specific characteristics, various methods and techniques were combined to guide the VSR's development. Strong support and technical coordination by UCLG was fundamental for improving the data collection instruments and starting the process.

How enabling is the institutional environment in your country, and how has the VSR been useful in making the institutional environment more conducive to SDG localization?

The institutional environment in Mozambique is moderately enabling for SDG localization. Decentralization is progressing, but municipalities face limited resources, a need for stronger capacities and uneven transfer of competences. The 2026 VSR was highly useful for raising awareness, fostering SDG ownership at the local level, continuously integrating the 2030 Agenda into municipal planning processes, showcasing good practices and advocating for a more supportive framework through multilevel dialogue and visibility.

How is the country advancing at the local level to achieve the different SDGs?

ANAMM-led efforts are advancing SDG localization at the municipal level in Mozambique. Municipalities are integrating SDGs into planning and implementing initiatives in areas such as poverty reduction, water and sanitation, sustainable cities (e.g. infrastructure, waste management, resilience projects) and gender equality. The 2020 VLR, which involved 16 municipalities, kickstarted broader localization by raising awareness and boosting ownership. This momentum continues: now 11 more municipalities have the opportunity to highlight good practices and begin integrating the SDGs into local plans. As part of the National Reference Group, ANAMM has also strengthened multilevel coordination and discussions on decentralization challenges.

After the VSR, what are the main next steps for SDG localization?

Expand the VSR to even more territories, strengthen integration of the SDGs into local plans, enhance multilevel coordination via ANAMM and the Ministry of Planning and Development, build capacities through training and guidelines, improve data/monitoring and institutionalize VSR processes for sustained acceleration despite resource constraints.

What is the main recommendation stemming from the VSR?

Deepen SDG integration into municipal plans, strengthen multilevel coordination via ANAMM and the Ministry, build local capacities and include municipal indicators.



Source: Laxmish Nayak, Unsplash

BOX 2.8 TÜRKİYE'S 2026 VSR

What is the goal of your VSR?

Türkiye's VSR was launched to identify persistent barriers limiting effective local implementation of the SDGs, while highlighting key examples of local efforts.

Which methodological aspect has helped you most to achieve your goal, and why?

Interviews with 600 municipal personnel from all 12 statistical regions of Türkiye; guidance from an Advisory Board representing 22 institutions across academia, UN agencies, civil society organizations, municipal unions, central government, development agencies and private sector actors; and solution workshops involving 98 participants allowed the VSR to present local challenges and evidence-based solutions.

How enabling is the institutional environment in your country, and how has the VSR been useful in making the institutional environment more conducive to SDG localization?

Although municipalities and institutions in Türkiye were familiar with the SDGs, no VSR initiative had previously emerged. Initiated by the Urban Studies Institute, the process quickly attracted nationwide attention across the local government sector. Twenty-two institutions joined the Advisory Board, national media covered the initiative, and awareness of local SDG implementation significantly increased.

How is the country advancing at the local level to achieve the different SDGs?

Türkiye is advancing SDGs at the local level through municipal climate plans, social inclusion programmes, digital governance initiatives, participatory mechanisms and international co-operation projects implemented by local governments and LGAs. The VSR contributed by consolidating local experiences into a national reference framework, identifying recurring implementation barriers, strengthening dialogue between stakeholders and increasing awareness that SDG localization requires longer-term institutional coordination rather than isolated project-based interventions. The process also increased municipalities' visibility within national SDG discussions.

After the VSR, what are the main next steps for SDG localization?

Conduct advocacy to address the 51 priority problem areas identified by municipalities, bringing them to policy-makers' attention nationally.

What is the main recommendation stemming from the VSR?

Strengthen multilevel coordination, institutional dialogue and data-sharing mechanisms between municipalities, the central government and other stakeholders for the SDGs.



Source: Svetlana Gumerova, Unsplash

BOX 2.9 THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION OF ZAMBIA'S (LGAZ'S) 2025 VSR

What is the goal of your VSR?

It aims to document and showcase the role of Zambia's 116 local authorities in localizing the SDGs, while identifying challenges and opportunities to strengthen advocacy and evidence-based local planning.

Which methodological aspect has helped you most to achieve your goal, and why?

The mixed-methods design combining council surveys (15 councils), multistakeholder surveys (35 organizations), community surveys (217 respondents) and analysis of Constituency Development Fund dashboard data from the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development provided triangulated, ground-level evidence of SDG localization. This design revealed both achievements and systemic gaps that surveys alone would have missed.

How enabling is the institutional environment in your country, and how has the VSR been useful in making the institutional environment more conducive to SDG localization?

Zambia has a progressively enabling environment for SDG localization, anchored in the Constitution (2016), Local Government Act (2019), Decentralization Policy (2023) and Eighth National Development Plan. The VSR strengthened this environment by providing the first consolidated evidence base on council-led SDG actions, informing advocacy for fuller fiscal and administrative devolution.

How is the country advancing at the local level to achieve the different SDGs?

Zambia is advancing SDG localization primarily through the Constituency Development Fund, which financed 13,210 approved projects (7,886 completed) across health (SDG 3), education (SDG 4), water (SDG 6) and economic empowerment (SDG 8) between 2022 and 2025. The VSR strengthened this momentum by documenting council-led innovations, exposing disparities in completion rates across provinces, and providing concrete recommendations to embed SDG indicators into integrated development plans and ward-level monitoring systems.

After the VSR, what are the main next steps for SDG localization?

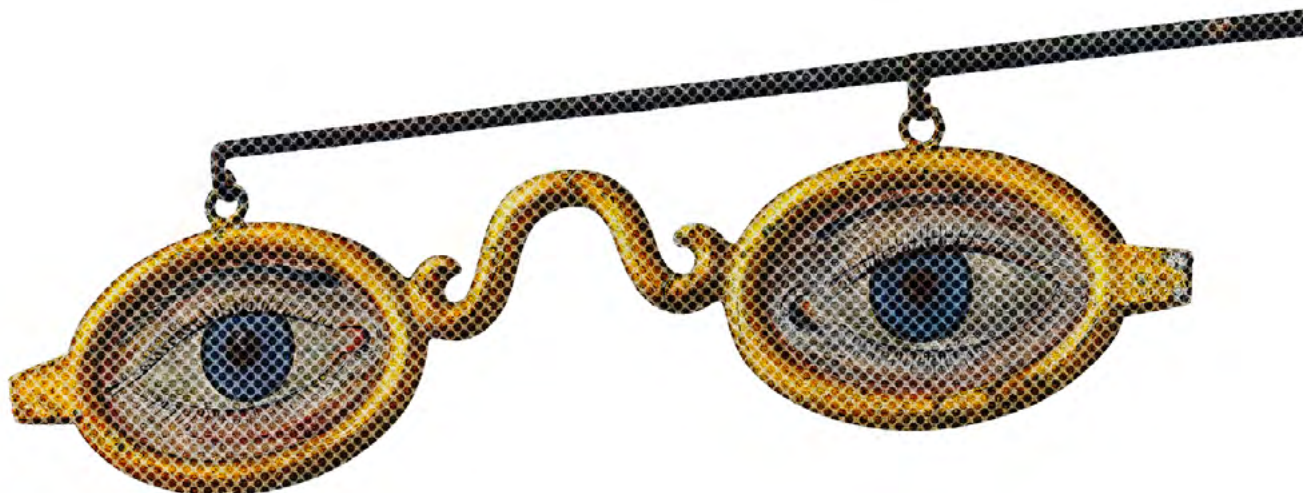
Integrate SDG indicators into councils' integrated development plans, strengthen ward-level data systems and link the Constituency Development Fund's allocations to performance and local impact.

What is the main recommendation stemming from the VSR?

Accelerate fiscal and administrative devolution, invest in local data systems and align the Constituency Development Fund's implementation with SDG targets to leave no district behind.



Source: Katsuma Tanaka, Unsplash



2.2 LRG involvement in VNR preparation

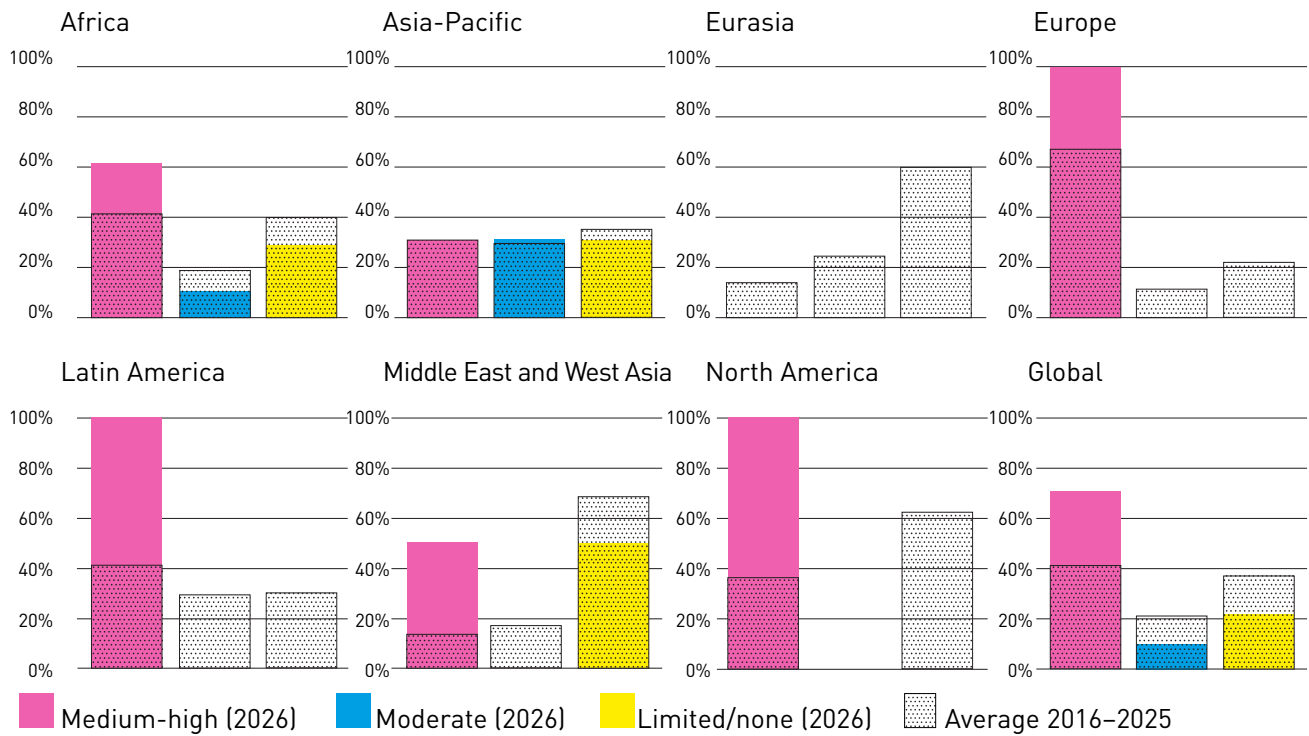
Since 2015, over 425 Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) have been published, and all have been analyzed in the *Towards the Localization of the SDGs* reports. This 10th report analyzes the 33 VNRs published by the time this section was finalized on 30 June 2026; in total, 36 countries committed to preparing a VNR for review at the 2026 High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) (the VNRs of Cabo Verde, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates had not been published).

Figure 2.2.1 points to a gradual improvement in the involvement of local and regional governments (LRGs) and local government associations (LGAs) in national reporting since 2016. **The 2026 results are particularly encouraging, suggesting a growing number of national governments are recognizing LRGs as relevant partners in VNR preparation.** In 2026, 70% of reporting countries showed medium to high levels of LRG participation, compared with an average of 41% over the 2016–2025 period. In these cases, LRGs engaged in VNR preparation through national or regional conferences, workshops or bilateral exchanges; submitted substantive inputs; or directly participated in the national reporting team.

Meanwhile, 9% of countries recorded moderate LRG participation, down from the average of 21% in previous reporting cycles. This level of participation generally meant that LRGs were invited to complete surveys or attend occasional information sessions, but they had limited opportunity to influence the substance of the report.

The proportion of countries with limited, zero or non-identifiable LRG engagement fell to 21%, compared to the 2016–2025 average of 38%. This category includes cases where LRGs were involved only after the report was finalized, where LRGs were not invited to participate or where no elected LRGs were in place.

Figure 2.2.1 LRG participation in VNR processes in 2026 and 2016–2025, by region and global



Source: Authors

As in past years, regional disparities are stark. In the 2026 sample, all reporting countries from Europe, Latin America and North America involved LRGs to a medium or high degree, increasing from 66%, 41% and 38%, respectively, in previous years. In 2026, 61% of reporting countries in Africa involved LRGs in the same way, compared to 41% in the 2016–2025 period. In the Middle East and West Asia, one out of two reporting countries (50%) involved LRGs to a medium or high degree (compared to 14% historically), while the figure in Asia-Pacific stood at 33% (in line with the historical average). No VNR from Eurasia was submitted this year.

The country-level analysis below examines the 2026 progress and outstanding challenges in greater detail.

Six countries (18% of the 33 in total) showed high LRG engagement in the VNR process. This category includes cases in which LRGs or their representative associations were directly involved in the task force or drafting process, contributed their own written inputs, or provided Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), Voluntary Subnational Reviews (VSRs) or other substantial territorial inputs that were integrated into the national report.

- In **Brazil**, LRGs were treated as a distinct constituency in the public consultation, and municipalities and states across all regions made contributions. The Brazilian Association of Municipalities (ABM) and the National Front of Mayors (FNP) participated directly in drafting the report, and the FNP also served in the curatorial group.
- In **Egypt**, the VNR preparation process drew on the contributions and experiences of governorates countrywide. The published report refers to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) localization reports by all governorates and includes localization boxes for each SDG under review.
- In **Italy**, the VNR – called a “Voluntary National Local Youth Review” – was developed through structured dialogue with regional and metropolitan administrations. It incorporates 14 VLRs prepared by 15 regions (Sardinia, Lazio, Liguria, Lombardy, Marche, Piedmont, Puglia and Umbria), autonomous provinces (Bolzano and Trento) and metropolitan cities (Genova, Milan, Reggio Calabria, Rome and Torino).
- In **Mozambique**, LRG participation was embedded in a highly participatory VNR process. The report summarizes the key messages contributed by the different stakeholder groups and was supported by the multistakeholder National Reference Group that included the National Association of Municipalities of Mozambique (AN-AMM) alongside the government (including parliament), international partners, civil society, academia and the private sector. Provincial, district and municipal governments, as well as sectoral and local focal points, were engaged through regional consultations and continuous coordination with local structures. Six VLRs – Boane, Manhiça, Gondola, Manica, Nampula and Monapo – participated in the VNR process, complemented by a specific consultation on VLRs. The report included a dedicated two-page section.
- In **Norway**, the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS) was engaged from an early stage under a formal cooperation agreement with the national government. KS contributed an independent, unedited assessment to the report (although placed under the “civil society” contributions). In addition, the two-page section dedicated to SDG localization refers to the Nordic VSR. The inclusion of KS

in Norway’s delegation to the HLPF further demonstrates the government’s commitment to meaningful multilevel participation, ensuring that local and regional perspectives are represented in international discussions and that Norway’s reporting reflects the full breadth of SDG implementation across all levels of governance.

- In **Uruguay**, departmental governments participated through dedicated dialogue, thematic workshops, territorial evidence and inputs from the VLRs of Montevideo, Canelones, Maldonado and San José. The published VNR dedicates an 11-page chapter to subnational considerations and multilevel governance, including summaries of each VLR and additional territorial analysis across thematic chapters.



Source: Edouard Tamba, Unsplash

Seventeen countries (52% of the 33 in total) had a medium level of LRG engagement, meaning it was substantial but less intensive. This category includes cases in which LRGs participated in bilateral exchanges with the drafting team, regional or thematic consultations, conferences or workshops. It also includes data provision, validation exercises and other structured opportunities to influence the report – but without LRGs being fully embedded in the central drafting process.

- In **Albania**, LRGs participated several times in the VNR process, with the Institute for Albanian Municipalities (IAM) reporting positive results.
- In **Burkina Faso**, representatives of governorates and urban communes participated in regional consultations on the provisional report and in the national validation workshop. Their comments and amendments were subsequently incorporated.
- In **Burundi**, provincial and communal administrations were included in the broad participatory process alongside ministries, public institutions and non-State actors.
- In **Estonia**, the Association of Estonian Cities and Municipalities (AECM) participated in the national SDG foresight and consultation seminar. AECM contributed LRG perspectives on the SDGs under review and on Estonia's country-specific SDG 18 on culture.
- In **Gabon**, local elected representatives responded to a dedicated nationwide questionnaire, and their contributions informed a notably critical analysis of the mismatch between transferred responsibilities and available financial resources.
- In **Jamaica**, LRGs participated in a dedicated consultation reviewing 10 years of SDG localization and post-2030 Agenda priorities, as well as in a broader stakeholder consultation whose results were incorporated into the final report.
- In **Kiribati**, Island councils, represented by mayors and clerks, participated directly in the VNR process.
- In **Malawi**, 12 district and city authorities were consulted.
- In **Moldova**, LRGs worked with ministries and central authorities to collect data and include territorial perspectives, although

the Congress of Local Authorities from Moldova (CALM) separately reported insufficient collaboration with the national government during drafting.

- In **Saint Kitts and Nevis**, the Nevis Island Administration contributed through the 2025 Nevis VLR, which provided disaggregated data, island-specific priorities and lessons that directly informed the VNR.
- In **Saudi Arabia**, six regional development authorities (Al-Ahsa, Al-Madinah, Makkah, Hail, Sharqia and Al-Jouf) participated through targeted questionnaires and bilateral exchanges. They contributed evidence on regional planning, territorial priorities, VLRs and place-based implementation, although they did not review the draft VNR. The report nevertheless dedicates a full 13-page chapter to localization and highlights the VLRs of Riyadh, Al-Madinah and Buraidah and regional development initiatives.
- In **Senegal**, territorial elected representatives, decentralized state services and regional development agencies participated in regional consultations, while the Pikine VLR was included as a pilot experience, with two pages devoted to it.
- In **Somalia**, Federal Member States contributed through stakeholder consultations, data provision, technical inputs and review processes.
- In **Switzerland**, 15 cantons and 24 cities and communes contributed through the SDGital2030 assessment, including a questionnaire and comments on the draft report. One VNR page is dedicated to localization and highlights several VLRs (Aargau, Basel, Bern and Geneva). Despite improvements since the previous VNR, the City of Zürich noted that a dedicated coordination channel with LRGs – distinct from broader stakeholder engagement – would help ensure SDG localization is more systematically assessed and accurately reflected in national reporting.
- In **Tanzania**, the Prime Minister's Office – Regional Administration and Local Government organized consultations with all 185 LRGs, which contributed information on local capacity, service delivery and subnational data.
- In **Togo**, territorial governments participat-

ed through thematic working groups, data collection and the national validation workshop.

- In **Tunisia**, 101 local actors took part in a dedicated consultation, which was critical to put forward the need for stronger political, administrative and financial decentralization. The final report includes a localization section covering the Ennour VLR and four municipal reviews under preparation.

Three countries (9% of the 33 analyzed) had moderate (limited) participation. In these cases, LRGs were mentioned within broad stakeholder engagement processes, contributed mainly through a general survey or an isolated national event, or were included in occasional informational consultations. However, the final VNR provides little evidence that LRGs had meaningful room to shape the report or that their inputs were clearly integrated. This category includes **Liberia, Rwanda** and the **Marshall Islands**.

Finally, seven countries (21% of the 33 analyzed) published VNRs with very limited or no evidence of LRG participation in the preparation process, despite some references to territories, communities, decentralized services or local implementation. This category includes **Algeria, Bahrain, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau** and **Tonga**.

Although visibility does not necessarily reflect a comparable increase in LRGs' institutional participation, **the 2026 VNRs show that localization is increasingly visible in national reporting.** Numerous reports, including those by **Albania, Burundi** and **Cameroon**, acknowledge LRGs' contribution to SDG implementation through local and regional development plans, decentralized service delivery, territorial investments, local data collection and locally led initiatives.

Saudi Arabia dedicates a full chapter to SDG localization. **Estonia's** VNR systematically distinguishes between measures taken at the central government level, non-governmental and LRG level and international level for each SDG. Each thematic chapter of **Jamaica's** VNR includes a dedicated section on localization. However, localization is understood broadly, encompassing community organizations, civil society and other territorial actors alongside LRGs, meaning that LRGs' specific institutional role is sometimes less clearly distinguished.

Norway dedicates two pages of its VNR to SDG localization and mentions the LGA KS's efforts, including its participation in the Nordic VSR, and a taxonomy for SDG-related indicators at the local level. **Brazil** also provides one of the most extensive accounts of

SDG localization in the 2026 cycle, with dedicated analysis of municipal implementation, LGAs, territorial data, public consortia, capacity building and multilevel coordination. These approaches are encouraging because they move beyond generic references to local implementation and begin to reflect the multilevel nature of SDG delivery.

Several VNRs give particular visibility to VLRs and VSRs. **Cameroon** refers to the VLR of Yaoundé and 10 regional reviews, the **Democratic Republic of the Congo** mentions review processes in two provinces, and **Mozambique** incorporates six VLRs into the national review and includes a specific section on their contribution. **Senegal** presents the VLR of Pikine as a pilot for integrating the SDGs into local development planning, and **Tunisia** mentions Ennour's VLR and four other municipal reviews in preparation.

Egypt combines the VLRs in Fayoum, Port Said and Beheira with other tools such as the second round of governorate-level SDG localization reports, a set of subnational indicators, an SDG performance index and an interactive data dashboard. It also dedicates six pages of the VNR to SDG localization. **Brazil** reports 66 VLRs produced between 2017 and 2026, including 55 since 2023, and presents them as tools for assessment, planning, partnership-building, monitoring and accountability, supported through the *Meu Município Pelos ODS* (My Municipality and the SDGs) initiative. These examples suggest that VLRs and VSRs are becoming more frequently recognized as inputs for national reporting, although their influence on national planning and policy follow-up remains uneven.

Multiple VNRs document persistent structural obstacles to localization. **Cameroon** points to limited local capacity in planning, financing and urban governance, as well as insufficient data for monitoring territorial progress. The **Democratic Republic of the Congo** highlights institutional fragmentation. In **Gabon**, the VNR incorporates an unusually strong assessment, emerging from consultations with local elected representatives, of the structural mismatch between transferred responsibilities and the financial resources available to municipalities and departments. The VNR warns that this gap is severely constraining proximity to social services, social protection and community resilience. It presents effective fiscal decentralization – with simultaneous transfers of competences and resources – as a prerequisite for improving urban sanitation, protecting local biodiversity and building locally grounded climate resilience.

Regional consultations in **Mozambique** identified limited availability of disaggregated local data, difficulties faced by subnational actors in accessing official data and inconsistencies between national sta-

tistics and local realities. **Tunisia's** consultation with local actors identified major barriers including weak fiscal decentralization, insufficient dedicated financing, limited administrative autonomy and the need for stronger technical capacities. **Malawi** showed that vertical links between national and district levels are clearer during planning than during implementation and monitoring; incomplete decentralization, programme silos and fragmented coordination weaken alignment.

Uruguay sets out eight targeted actions to strengthen localization, including building departmental and municipal capacities, improving access to finance, aligning national and territorial priorities, and expanding collaboration with local stakeholders. It also recognizes that VLRs substantially contribute to localization and recommends strengthening them and linking them more systematically with future VNRs and other national planning and reporting processes.

Some reports include localization among their priorities for the years ahead. Liberia refers to deeper decentralization, stronger local governance reform and the inclusion of VLRs among its acceleration pathways. **Tanzania** calls for greater investment in LRGs' planning, data and implementation capacities. Openly acknowledging these constraints and committing to make improvements is useful, but it also confirms that many of the barriers identified in previous reporting cycles remain unresolved.

A small number of countries, including Italy and Mozambique, annexed a joint message on making SDG localization a reality. This initiative has been led by UN-Habitat, Local2030 and the Italian Ministry of Environment and Energy Security, together with United Cities and Local Governments, the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. The message calls for engaging LRGs and territorial stakeholders early on and continuously throughout VNR processes, moving beyond one-off consultations towards sustained participation, stronger multilevel governance and greater policy coherence.

Some VNRs adopt only a partial multilevel perspective, engaging one subnational tier while providing little evidence on the participation of other levels of local government. **Somalia** documents the involvement of Federal Member States in consultations, data provision and technical review, but the VNR gives much less information on municipalities and district authorities. Similarly, in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, the VNR addresses territorial dimensions mainly through provinces and selected provincial review processes. The role of cities, com-

munes and other LRGs remains far less visible. In all these cases, the VNRs reflect national–regional or national–provincial coordination more clearly than a comprehensive whole-of-government approach extending across all levels of territorial governance.

At the other end of the spectrum, some reports provide virtually no information on localization or LRGs' role. Algeria and Guinea-Bissau are the clearest cases in the 2026 sample. Their VNRs do not meaningfully describe LRGs' contributions, territorial implementation arrangements or mechanisms for local participation.

Overall, the 2026 VNRs provide numerous examples of local action, localization tools, territorial data and subnational reviews. The greater engagement of LRGs evidenced in this year's VNRs appears to be associated with richer and more comprehensive analyses of SDG localization. This represents a significant and welcome advance: compared with previous reporting cycles, countries have made a clearer effort to involve LRGs in VNR preparation and to reflect territorial perspectives in national reporting. Nevertheless, LRGs' visibility in national reports remains uneven, and in many cases, is limited to acknowledging their role in implementation rather than reflecting their direct participation in VNR preparation, validation or follow-up.

The strongest examples show what is possible when LRGs are treated as institutional partners; the weaker and more fragmented cases underline how far national reporting still is from a genuinely multilevel approach. The key question is now whether this stronger involvement in reporting can be translated into sustained participation in the institutions responsible for implementing and monitoring the 2030 Agenda.



Source: Gonzalo Moreira, Unsplash



2.3

LRG participation in national coordination mechanisms for SDG implementation

This section examines whether local and regional governments (LRGs) and their associations (LGAs) participate in national coordination mechanisms for implementing the 2030 Agenda, beyond their participation in preparing Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), which was explored in the previous section. The assessment distinguishes between four levels of engagement: no identifiable participation, moderate participation (participation through ad hoc or occasional consultations), medium participation (regular participation at a consultative level), and high participation (regular participation as an equal partner in national coordination and decision-making).

The 2026 data show that sustained LRG participation in national coordination mechanisms for Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) implementation remains limited. This finding contrasts sharply with the progress observed in VNR preparation: while countries have increasingly involved LRGs in the reporting process, they have not yet translated this engagement into stable, permanent and decision-making roles within national coordination mechanisms.

Of the 33 countries analyzed, only five countries (15%) provide evidence of regular participation by LRGs or their associations either as equal partners or in a consultative capacity, down from the 31% average between 2016 and 2025. In 10 countries (30%), participation is limited to ad hoc consultations, occasional meetings or broader intergovernmental arrangements without permanent representation in the core SDG coordination architecture. This figure is up from a historical 21%. In the remaining 18 countries (55%), the VNRs provide no evidence of direct LRG participation in national SDG coordination mechanisms, compared with a combined historical average of 48% for countries with no identifiable participation, no elected LRGs or insufficient information.

At the regional level, Europe and Latin America lead the way: 50% of the reporting countries from these two regions this year reported medium to high levels of LRG participation in coordination mechanisms. Africa places third, although only 6% of reporting countries – one out of 18 – show high involvement of LRGs in national coordination mechanisms. In 2026, no reporting country in the Middle East and West Asia, North America or Asia-Pacific showed regular or institutionalized LRG participation in national coordination structures for sustainable development.

Figure 2.3.1 LRG participation in national coordination mechanisms in 2026 and 2016–2025, by region and global



Source: Authors

In 3 of the 33 countries analyzed in 2026 (9%), LRGs or their representative associations have a high degree of participation, meaning they are permanently embedded in national coordination structures.

They participate as institutional partners rather than simple consultees or implementers.

- In **Brazil**, the Brazilian Association of Municipalities (ABM) and the National Front of Mayors (FNP) provide formal channels between municipal governments and the National Commission for the SDGs. ABM also coordinates the thematic chamber on localization and territorialization, contributing to technical guidance, capacity building, municipal mobilization, SDG 18 on ethnic and racial equality, and instruments such as the *Meu Município Pelos ODS* (My Municipality and the SDGs) Pact and Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs). Together, ABM and FNP give LRGs a sustained role in national coordination and in shaping the country's localization agenda.
- In **Italy**, LRG participation is anchored in permanent territorial working groups, collaboration agreements, territorial steering committees and formal intergovernmental institu-

tions. The State–Regions Conference and the Unified Conference provide established channels through which regions, municipalities, provinces and mountain communities are represented, including through their national associations.

- In **Norway**, the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS) is a permanent member of the Higher Executive Forum for the SDGs. This participation is reinforced by a systematic consultation framework between national and subnational authorities that has operated for approximately two decades, giving LRGs an established role in national policy dialogue and coordination.



Source: Michael Savin, Unsplash

In 2 of the 33 countries (6%), LRGs have a medium level of participation, meaning they participate regularly through recognized institutional channels but do not exercise an equal decision-making role.

- In **Mozambique**, municipalities are formally represented in the National Reference Group (the country's coordination mechanism) through the National Association of Municipalities of Mozambique (ANAMM). The association participates with consultative status, while provincial reference groups replicate elements of this coordination structure territorially. Thematic groups and VLR processes connect national planning, monitoring and statistical institutions with provincial, district and municipal authorities, and the “One Territory, One Process, One Product” approach supports coordination between district administrations and municipalities. Nevertheless, the VNR identifies continuing weaknesses in the regularity of interactions, the clarity of roles and vertical coordination.
- In **Switzerland**, LRGs are not members of the federal 2030 Agenda Steering Committee, but they participate through permanent multilevel mechanisms. These include the Tripartite Conference, bringing together the Confederation, cantonal governments, cities and communes, and the Cantonal Sustainable Development Network. These arrangements provide regular consultative channels, although the City of Zürich has called for more formal, systematic national–subnational coordination on the 2030 Agenda.

In 10 of the 33 countries (30%), LRG involvement is moderate, meaning it is visible but remains occasional, indirect or insufficiently institutionalized. Participation may take place through individual meetings, consultations, national dialogues, sectoral mechanisms or broader intergovernmental bodies, but LRGs are not identified as permanent members of the principal national SDG coordination structure. Such cases include **Albania, Egypt, Estonia, Marshall Islands, Moldova, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Saint Kitts and Nevis** and **Uruguay**. Importantly, they show that broader intergovernmental relations or strong territorial implementation do not necessarily translate into permanent participation in national SDG coordination. In several countries, LRGs are connected to national strategies through planning, implementation, data provision or sectoral coordination while remaining outside the core institutions where national priorities, monitoring frameworks and follow-up decisions are defined.

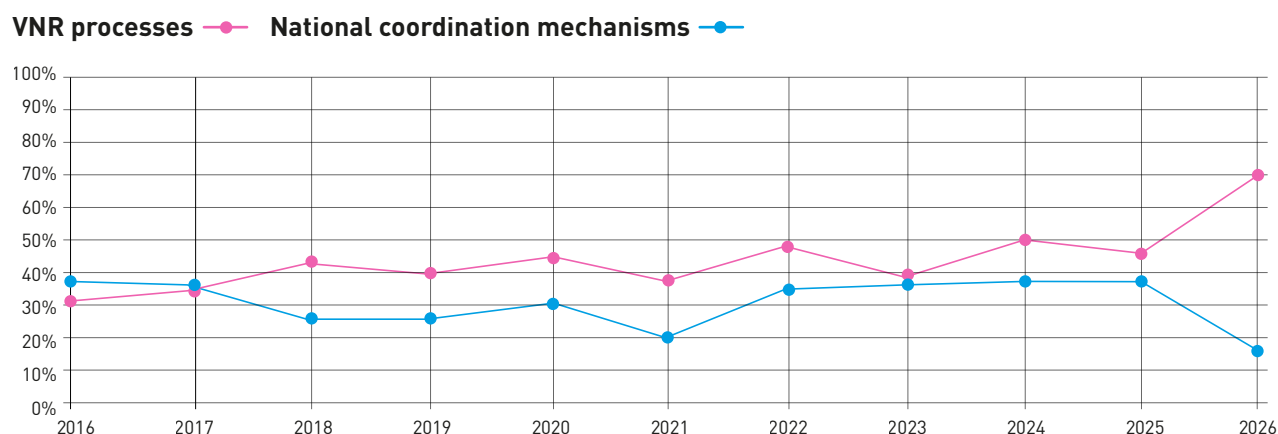
Finally, in more than half of the countries analyzed (18 of 33, or 55%), the VNRs provide no evidence that LRGs or their associations participate directly in national SDG coordination mechanisms. This category includes **Algeria, Bahrain, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gabon, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Jamaica, Kiribati, Liberia, Malawi, Somalia, Tanzania, Togo, Tonga and Tunisia**. This does not necessarily mean that no coordination takes place. Several of these VNRs describe localization, decentralization, territorial planning, regional consultations or LRGs' role in implementation. However, they do not identify concrete mechanisms through which LRGs participate in national SDG coordination as permanent political or institutional actors.

The 2026 findings reveal a persistent disconnect between participation in VNR preparation and involvement in national SDG governance.

The stronger engagement of LRGs in the 2026 VNR cycle, described in the previous section, should be welcomed but regarded as a starting point rather than an end in itself. Indeed, even where LRGs are consulted during the reporting process – as in **Burkina Faso, Burundi, Gabon, Malawi, Senegal, Tanzania, Tunisia, Kiribati, Albania and Estonia** – this engagement is rarely replicated through permanent, clearly mandated and adequately resourced coordination mechanisms once the VNR has been completed.

Countries should now build on the progress made in VNR preparation by institutionalizing LRG participation in national SDG coordination. They should involve LRG representatives not only in reporting but also in priority-setting, implementation, monitoring and follow-up. This gap between consultation for reporting and sustained participation in implementation and decision-making remains one of the central challenges emerging from the 2026 cycle.

Figure 2.3.2 Percent of countries with LRGs' medium and high participation in VNR processes and national SDG coordination mechanisms



Source: Authors

The analysis in sections 2.2 and 2.3 is mindful of the political and institutional context in each country, including situations in which elected LRGs have been suspended, replaced by appointed delegates or absent altogether. These circumstances necessarily affect both the scope and the interpretation of LRG participation in VNR processes and the coordination mechanisms described in the VNRs.

3. Localizing human rights and public services through SDGs 6, 7, 9 and 11

With only three years until 2030, achieving the 2030 Agenda requires a radical shift towards large-scale, impactful local implementation of SDG-aligned projects and policies. Despite the current political instability, climate crisis and growing inequalities affecting the world, the 2030 Agenda provides a solid and actionable pathway for collective action based on common values. National and international hesitations and mistrust are offset by LRGs' steadfast commitment to creating a more sustainable, prosperous and equal world for all people through good governance and quality local public services.

The world is not on track to achieve **SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation)** by 2030. While access to clean drinking water, basic hygiene services, and sanitation has improved compared to 2015 levels, an estimated [2.1 billion people](#) still lack access to safely managed drinking water and 3.4 billion to safely managed sanitation. The data on wastewater, water quality and water management show [little to no progress](#), and [regional disparities](#) reflect higher water stress in regions such as North Africa and West Asia. Picking up momentum requires better monitoring, accessible and localized financing, water-related cooperation, multi-stakeholder partnerships for water management and a more inclusive multilateral system.

SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy) is one of the most on-track SDGs, with [global electricity access reaching 92%](#) in 2023. Nevertheless, the global community should redouble its efforts to meet the targets for indicators such as access to clean cooking, renewable energy consumption and production, and international financial support for clean and renewable energy. Fully achieving this SDG requires targeted work to foster renewable energy and energy efficiency at scale to meet climate targets. [Consistent investments](#) adapted to local and regional realities can help continue the current positive trend and achieve universal access.

Notable advancements have been made around **SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure)** too. Global infrastructure is expanding in parallel with industrial growth and innovation. Internet coverage is steadily growing, although significant regional disparities persist. Manufacturing growth shows a similar pattern, with least developed countries [especially far](#) from achieving SDG 9 industry-related targets. Meanwhile, global CO2 emissions from fuel combustion and industrial processes reached an [all-time high](#) in 2024, marking an 8.3% increase from 2015. This situation jeopardizes the achievement of not only SDG 9 but the whole agenda. Urgent measures such as more inclusive financing for small enterprises, green innovation, and accessible, sustainable and resilient infrastructure are required to move closer to achieving the targets.

Amid ever-increasing urbanization, achieving **SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities)** is more important than ever. Nowadays, housing affordability and tenure security are among the most pressing issues to



tackle in most parts of the world, with up to [3 billion people](#) experiencing affordability difficulties and 1.1 billion living in informal settlements. Strengthening and equalizing access to land, transport and inclusive public spaces are key actions to foster positive transformations. Urban policy increasingly addresses climate adaptation and disaster risk mitigation, while the use of participatory mechanisms to include citizens in decision-making processes is growing.

Multilevel governance, participatory budgeting and better climate planning frameworks can help future proof our communities and build sustainable cities. Overall, stable and reliable financing lays the foundation for transforming urban and local policies into impactful and transformative actions. Greater fiscal devolution from national governments and improved local access to funding opportunities from international organizations, development banks and private stakeholders can accelerate progress in this regard. Wide spending gaps also hinder achieving SDG target 11.4 on cultural and natural heritage: the global median public expenditure was only [USD 21.22 per person](#) in 2023.

LRGs demonstrate consistent commitment to the 2030 Agenda, regardless of national and international vacillations. Through self-organized networks such as the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments (GTF), they are taking multilateral cooperation into their own hands and fostering tight collaborations to achieve the SDGs. In their ongoing efforts to lead the localization of the 2030 Agenda based on values of democracy, equality, inclusiveness, care and sustainability, LRGs are using local public service provision to deliver sustainable development in practice, to real communities and individuals. As a consequence of their actions, not a prerequisite, they call for better recognition as active decision-makers and crucial stakeholders for achieving the 2030 Agenda.

This section analyzes how LRGs are localizing the SDGs under review at the 2026 High-Level Political Forum. It highlights their actions and policies on water and sanitation, energy, infrastructure, industry

and innovation, culture, and sustainable and inclusive communities. Three in-depth papers showcase how LRGs' efforts around these SDGs contribute to advancing human rights-based governance that reduces inequalities and fosters care, democracy and inclusive development for all.

Specifically, the three papers focus on the following:

- **Paper 1** analyzes how LRGs localize **SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy)**, **SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure)** and **SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities)** through local public service provision. It emphasizes the interconnectedness of the SDGs and LRGs' cross-cutting action and leadership on key issues such as housing, mobility and energy.
- **Paper 2** describes LRGs' crucial role in advancing **SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation)**, noting that accelerating progress requires bottom-up innovations as well as national and international efforts to ensure appropriate institutional and financial conditions for localization.
- **Paper 3** focuses on the crucial target **11.4 ("Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage")**, showcasing how localization of culture and heritage permeates all policy sectors, people's lives and the planet.

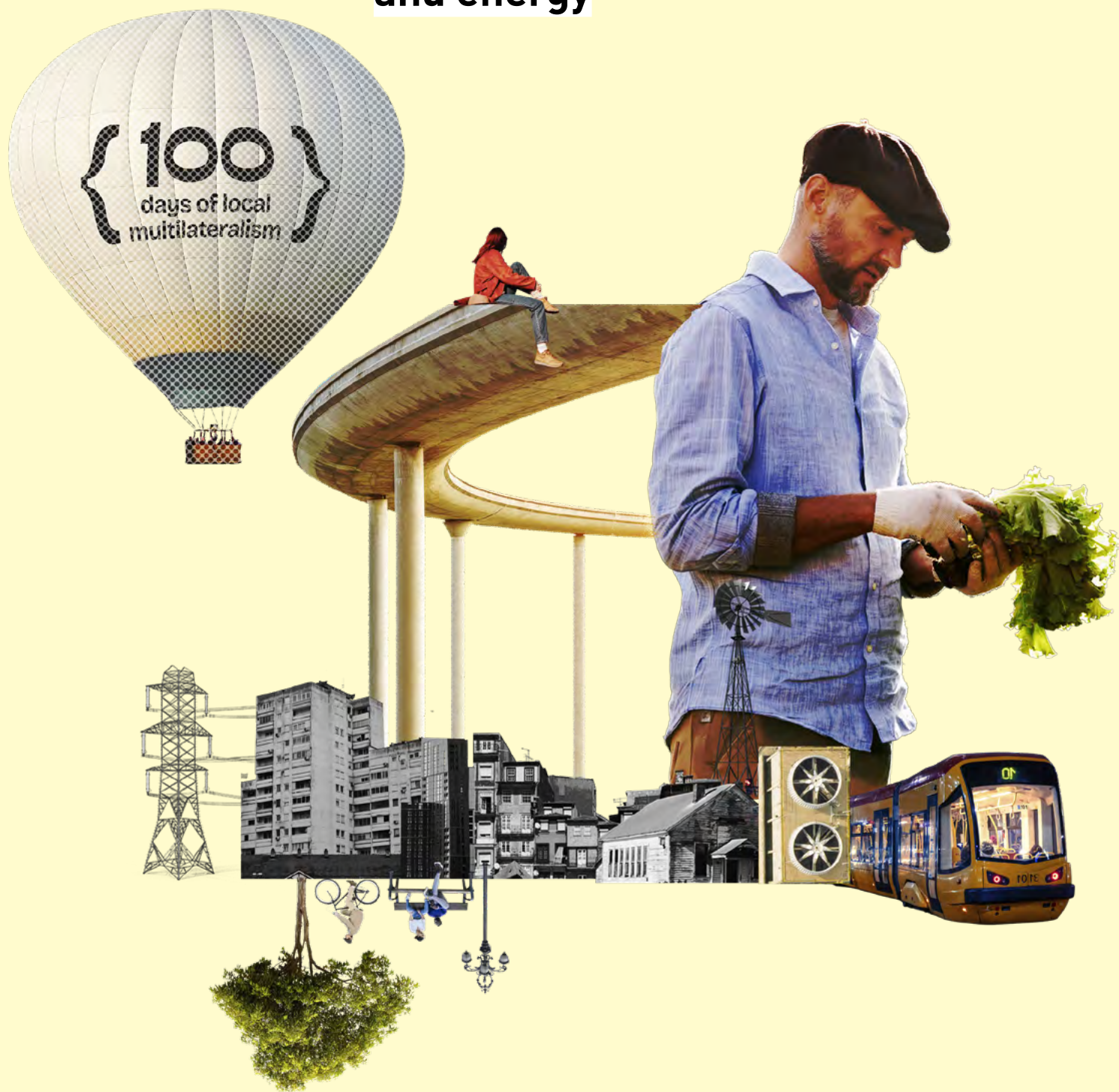
The findings presented in these papers stem from thorough secondary and primary research conducted by UCLG/GTF. Key collaborations within the GTF – including with ICLEI (paper on SDG 6); with think tanks, experts and academia (paper on SDGs 7, 9 and 11); and with the UCLG Culture Commission (paper on SDG 11.4) – made these papers' production possible. The papers also benefitted from firsthand, bottom-up insights collected directly from LRGs and LGAs. Their contents offer not only a comprehensive state-of-the-art review on localization of the selected SDGs but also precious tools for advocacy, policy-making and peer learning.



Source: Johnathan Tshibangu, Unsplash

3.1

The role of local public services for SDG localization: A focus on housing, transport and energy



3.1.1 Introduction, objectives and methodology

We are living in the era of [polycrisis](#), meaning that multiple, interlinked crises – political, social, economic and environmental – are simultaneously occurring and reinforcing one another, creating [complex and unpredictable conditions](#). On the one hand, escalating climate impacts, such as heatwaves, floods, droughts and biodiversity loss as well as the continuous, [worsening overshoot of planetary boundaries](#) pose a risk to human wellbeing for current and future generations. On the other hand, widening inequalities, energy poverty, rising living costs, a housing crisis and political polarization threaten social cohesion and increase territorial disparities within countries. In several contexts, democratic backsliding, weakening institutions, extractive governance models and climate denial interact with rising inequalities, instability, conflict and human insecurity. Taken together, these trends reduce the political legitimacy of ambitious reforms, both nationally and locally, to deal with such challenges.

For all these reasons, **fundamental changes to our economic and social systems in line with the 2030 Agenda have become increasingly urgent**. The international community needs to redefine the connection between the economic model, wellbeing and sustainability and take **co-ordinated action across governance levels (from the global to the very local one) for climate, economic and social policy-making**.

While the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are defined at the international level, their implementation largely depends on diverse and complementary local initiatives. **Local and regional governments (LRGs) are central actors in translating the SDGs into tangible, place-based actions; they contribute extensively, and in multiple forms, to advancing sustainable development**. Indeed, approximately 65% of SDG targets are linked to responsibilities falling within local mandates¹ – and thus cannot be reached without LRGs, which account for [nearly 40% of global public investment](#), playing a leading role. These figures suggest that SDG localization – the process of transforming the 2030 Agenda into reality at the local level, driven by LRGs in partnership with communities and other stakeholders, and aligned with territorial priorities – is not merely supportive but structurally necessary. As shown by several [reports](#) by the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments (GTF) and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) over the years, LRGs often began localizing the SDGs well before their national governments started to deal with them. Many LRGs have continued to fully engage and devote efforts even when national governments have withdrawn from the global agenda.

LRGs assume a key role in shaping, regulating, coordinating, and where mandates allow, delivering public services – including health, education, housing, water,² mobility, energy, social protection and cultural infrastructure – **that directly shape citizens' everyday wellbeing, thus fostering resilience, social inclusion and sustainable urban development**. On all these matters, LRGs are at the frontlines, navigating

and operating in territories affected by conflict, climate disasters, community displacement and political instability, even more in a landscape of systemic uncertainty and interconnected crises.

Within this context, efforts by LRGs to pursue SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and its targets occupy a strategic position. LRGs are building safe and affordable housing, developing sustainable transport systems, promoting inclusive and sustainable urbanization, protecting the world's cultural and natural heritage, reducing natural disasters' adverse effects and cities' environmental impacts, and improving access to safe and inclusive green and public spaces. Such efforts take place amid accelerated urbanization and alarming urban sprawl: between 2000 and 2020, cities grew outwards [up to 3.7 times faster](#) than they densified or grew upwards, often consuming ecologically valuable land. These trends, coupled with housing affordability, have become a critical global issue. More than [2.8 billion people](#) worldwide face some form of housing inadequacy, deprived of adequate living standards and constrained in their development opportunities. Achieving universal access to affordable, adequate housing and basic services by 2030 will require intensified policy action by both local and national governments, as well as financing and coordinated efforts to upgrade informal settlements and expand affordable housing supply, leaving no one behind.

At the same time, [global access to convenient public transport stands at 60%](#), but this figure drops to only 40% in the least developed countries (LDCs). This limited access to public transport constrains mobility, economic opportunities and inclusion – especially for women, older people and people with disabilities – highlighting the need for increased investment, better transport planning and infrastructure expansion, especially in low-income urban areas.

All in all, **the current polycrisis makes accelerating progress on SDG 11 both more challenging and more essential**. Urban sustainability is also deeply interconnected with global goals on energy (SDG 7) and infrastructure (SDG 9), among others, reinforcing the systemic nature of territorial development.

Global progress on SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), which aims to ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all, is advancing, despite some discontinuity and geographical unevenness. While global electricity access has increased notably – from 84% to 92% between 2010 and 2023 – [666 million people remain unserved](#), with 85% of them living in Sub-Saharan Africa. To achieve universal access by 2030, the world must advance progress on electrification by 1.2 percentage points per year, requiring efforts both in urban and rural

settings. Similarly, the proportion of the population with primary reliance on clean fuels and technology for cooking rose to 74%, yet 2.1 billion people still rely on polluting fuels for cooking. Meanwhile, although renewable energy comprised 30% of global electricity consumption in 2022, progress in heating and transport lags significantly. All these matters demand **decisive and coordinated actions by local and national governments together, making affordable access to clean energy for all and in all places a reality, especially in times of conflicts and wars**.

Similarly, progress towards SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), particularly target 9.1 (“Develop quality, reliable, sustainable and resilient infrastructure”) has advanced overall in some areas. One involves developing **infrastructure that not only supports moving goods but also connects people to jobs, education, markets, health care and one another**. Infrastructure is also a key driver of long-term economic growth and prosperity, often a key policy priority for LRGs. However, on this target, again, progress remains uneven and off track for 2030. The absence of reliable transport (for example, in rural areas and in LDCs) limits opportunities and affects economic growth and connectivity. [More than 1 billion people](#) still lack access to all-weather roads and transport services, while many high-income and rapidly motorizing urban areas face the adverse consequences of vehicle saturation, including congestion, deaths and injuries from road crashes, rising emissions, and air and noise pollution.

Trends, achievements and challenges on SDGs 11, 7 and 9 also interact with relevant cross-cutting dimensions that shape local public service provision:

- Urbanization (SDG target 11.3 on inclusive and sustainable urbanization and target 11.7 on universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces), as a matter of participatory and inclusive urban planning and territorial development (a core local government competence)
- Governance (SDG target 11.a on national and regional development planning), in terms of multi-level governance, participatory governance and public-private relations – key drivers of policy coherence and multistakeholder partnerships for the SDGs
- Natural environment (SDG target 11.5 on reducing the adverse effects of natural disasters, target 11.6 on reducing the environmental impact of cities and target 11.b on developing resilient and inclusive cities), concerning nature preservation, reduction of cities' environmental impact, and climate change mitigation and adaptation

In sum, LRGs' efforts on housing, energy and mobility do not occur in isolation. They are influenced by, and in turn influence, urban planning strategies, governance mechanisms and human-nature relations.

Based on these premises, this paper addresses the role of local public services, a central topic to the GTF members' mission, to promote sustainable cities and communities. It examines three SDGs under review at the United Nations' (UN's) 2026 High-Level Political Forum (HLPF): SDGs 11, 7 and 9. Specifically, it investigates their interconnections from the perspective of local public service provision, including the cross-cutting dimensions of urbanization, natural environment and governance. These connections are particularly seen in housing (SDG target 11.1 on safe and affordable housing), mobility and transport (target 11.2 on affordable and sustainable transport systems and target 9.1 on sustainable, resilient and inclusive infrastructure) and energy (target 7.1 on universal access to modern energy and target 7.2 on increasing the global percentage of renewable energy). The paper also examines implications for equality and the "leave no one behind" principle, highlighting LRGs' role as well as their collaboration with other governance levels and global networks.

This paper showcases LRGs' progress and achievements in localizing the 2030 Agenda through the lens of public service provision on housing, mobility and energy. These findings are then used to advocate for better policies, legal frameworks, financing mechanisms, accountability arrangements and recognition for local action on the abovementioned SDGs and public services in general.

The authors relied on a mixed-method research approach, combining review of academic literature and policy reports with an analysis of available data and expert interviews. These were designed both to identify sector priorities and to stimulate dialogue and knowledge exchange among practitioners and specialists.

After this introduction, the paper is structured as follows. The next section explores what LRGs are actively doing to address SDG targets on housing, mobility and energy. Then, the paper discusses these findings in relation to the cross-cutting dimensions of urbanization, natural environment and governance. The final section concludes by providing policy recommendations tied to the findings.



Source: Alessio Rinella, Unsplash

3.1.2 LRGs' efforts to drive SDG localization through housing, mobility and energy

HOUSING

Housing is a cross-sectoral social issue and a fundamental pillar of sustainable livelihoods. It represents a human right, not a commodity, and thus housing policy intersects with public health, infrastructure, social inclusion and environmental sustainability.

Quality housing – called “adequate housing” in international frameworks – encompasses more than the mere provision of shelter. It includes interrelated conditions such as affordability, accessibility for people with disabilities and older people, habitability, access to basic services, adequate space, tenure security and appropriate location. All of these are necessary to ensure a dignified standard of living.

» Housing informality

As stated in the UN's [World Urbanization Prospects 2025](#) report, most of the future growth of the world's population will occur in cities. Cities (densely populated areas) are expected to account for two-thirds of the projected growth of the world's population by 2050, with most of the remaining one-third of growth concentrated in towns (intermediate density areas). The population's concentration in cities could be an opportunity to plan for sustainable urban density while reducing urban sprawl. However, when adequate planning, affordable housing provision and inclusive economic opportunities do not match urban growth, informal settlements often expand. This is especially the case in rapidly urbanizing contexts where unequal land markets, tenure insecurity, exclusionary regulation, discrimination and insufficient rights-based housing alternatives interact with planning and infrastructure deficits.

Indeed, in rapidly urbanizing contexts, urban population growth frequently outpaces the capacity of cities to plan and deliver housing and infrastructure, while unequal access to land, finance, tenure security and formal housing systems further excludes low-income households, resulting in a misalignment between housing supply and demand. As a consequence, households – particularly low-income groups – resort to informal housing solutions to access shelter in areas often disconnected from jobs, services and economic opportunities, while others remain unhoused.

Housing informality refers to residential development and occupation that take place outside formal legal, regulatory and urban planning systems. It is often a survival strategy by households excluded from adequate and affordable formal housing options and [characterized by insecure tenure, difficulties in complying with building standards, and limited access to infrastructure and services.](#)



LRGs are addressing the issues of quality and informal housing through a range of complementary strategies. These include providing affordable alternatives to prevent the growth of informal settlements, upgrading existing informal housing, strengthening tenure security, improving land governance, preventing forced evictions and integrating settlements into urban planning.

Participatory upgrading programmes employed by LRGs illustrate how targeted local policies can help improve living conditions. For instance, **Medellín** (Colombia) implemented [community participatory exercises in informal settlements](#) to establish shared criteria for public intervention fostering cultural and socio-economic opportunities. Running since 1993, the Integral Improvement of Popular Neighbourhoods programme is currently embedded in the 2024–2027 “Medellín te quiere” district plan. In **Kisumu** (Kenya), the county government worked with Slum Dwellers International to conduct [participatory vulnerability mapping in 25 wards and 5 informal settlements](#). It then implemented active measures to support adaptation and improve the living situation for all, in addition to using the findings as a basis for future development planning including flood-resistant housing.

Community-driven housing programmes also provide important lessons. In Thailand, the Baan Mangkon programme and the Asian Coalition for Community Action support grassroots savings groups and slum-dweller associations in upgrading housing conditions while securing tenure for residents. In 2022, the **Bangkok Metropolitan Administration** put the programme into practice by advancing [housing projects for 44 communities](#) along the Lad Phrao and Prem Prachakorn canals. These efforts enabled neighbourhood-level improvements in infrastructure (integrating city flood control and drainage improvements), housing quality and public services while maintaining community cohesion (negotiating long-term leases or securing land arrangements for canal-side settlements). The outcomes included secure housing and improved public spaces for 4,394 low-income families. Similarly, the **Jakarta provincial government** (Indonesia) joined the community-driven initiative [Kampung Susun](#) to rehouse people who were forcibly evicted, and contributed to building new homes.

» Housing affordability

Housing affordability has reached crisis levels amid rapid urbanization. Data from 124 countries show that, in 2023, the average household spent [31% of its income on housing expenses](#) (e.g. rent, mortgage payments, utilities), with stark disparities across regions. Africa experienced the highest burden at

43.5%, followed by North Africa and West Asia at 36.9%. Europe and North America reported a lower burden, at 21.4%, which may reflect a combination of higher average incomes, stronger regulatory frameworks, financial support systems and housing market structures.

Housing inequality is a political choice, not an inevitability, and the financialization of housing – where homes are treated primarily as speculative assets rather than a human right – has become a central phenomenon shaping housing policy outcomes.

The pervasive nature of widespread market liberalization policies and reduced investment in social housing have further exacerbated the issue. These structural trends are compounded by broader social and demographic transformations, such as smaller household sizes and the growing number of people living alone, which increase housing demand. In many cities, affordability pressures are also intensified by the expansion of short-term rentals linked to touristification, rising construction costs, fragile material supply chains and fiscal restraint affecting LRGs. At the same time, political resistance to density in well-located areas – often reinforced by asymmetries of power between property owners, landlords and renters – continues to limit the supply of affordable housing where it is most needed.

LRGs across the world are on the front line in responding to these challenges, with a strong focus on the 2030 Agenda’s “leave no one behind” principle. **Vienna** (Austria), through its urban planning department and municipal housing bodies maintains [the right to develop land use through public land ownership and rent control](#), to shift urban planning towards more just development, controlling rent to match affordability needs.

There is also an urgent need to view affordability from an intersectional lens, considering gender, race, ethnicity, disability, age, health, migration status and displacement status, among other identity markers. In **Cabo Delgado** (Mozambique), national initiatives such as the [Integrated Resilience and Development Programme for Northern Mozambique](#) and the [Northern Crisis Recovery Project](#) have focused on constructing homes for female-headed households displaced by conflict and climate impacts, while also providing training on resilient construction techniques. These initiatives could not be implemented without [work by LRGs](#), such as the District Government of **Chiúre**, in terms of facilitating land allocation for resettlement sites, coordinating with national agencies and non-governmental organizations involved in the project, promoting community engagement and identifying participants (including female-headed households), and overseeing day-to-day local rollout of concrete housing and infrastructure projects.

Housing cooperatives represent another important model to help counter the financialization of housing. Despite dependence on national leadership for funding and strategy, as in many cities around the world, **Toronto** (Canada) developed a housing plan, [HousingTO 2020–2030](#), which prioritizes housing cooperatives. It also focuses on those with complex needs or experiences of historic discrimination. In terms of affordability, **Catalonia** (Spain) launched a regional scheme in 2024 ([Emancipation Loans Programme](#)) to loan young people deposits for their first residences, with the condition that these properties remain in the affordable housing market. Rent regulation measures are also adapted to the specificities of geographic areas (e.g. through extra regulations for areas under touristification-related pressure), efforts to expand the supply of affordable and public housing, and stronger mechanisms to curb speculation – such as taxation and restrictions on certain market practices. These experiences illustrate not only the importance of comprehensive local affordability policies but also that multilevel and multistakeholder collaboration is key to address complex housing dynamics. In a similar fashion, **Buenos Aires** (Argentina) works with [marginalized communities on urban regeneration projects](#) to make sure that decisions are co-produced and that eventual re-locations are agreed upon, remain affordable and reflect decent housing in the original neighbourhood.

» Planning housing for all

Across different regions, LRGs are implementing programmes that address structural housing deficits through infrastructure provision, tenure security and skills development. For example, **Tshwane** (South Africa) [constructed housing specifically for older people and people with disabilities](#) in its Region 3. **Ormoc** (Philippines), through City Housing Ordinance 078, has promoted [equal titling rights for women and single mothers](#) while prioritizing caregivers and people with disabilities in resettlement processes.

In the Indigenous settlement of **Quicet** (Guinea-Bissau), participatory territorial planning processes in 2022–2023 helped communities demarcate land boundaries and receive land titles; a [territorial development plan](#), which guides land use and reduces land-related conflicts, was also developed. The plan was developed through a multistakeholder arrangement including the Regional Administration (which coordinated the process and ensured alignment with national land and planning regulations); community representatives such as local leaders, landholders, and residents (who carried out participatory mapping and boundary demarcation, and took land allocation decisions); and technical facilitators such as international partners (which provided a methodolo-



Source: Zeng Jinwen, Pexels

gy, training and technical support for mapping, planning and land registration).

To ensure that strategies to meet SDG targets are tackled transversally, supralocal spatial planning helps to coordinate land use, territorial planning and housing affordability for all. For example, the metropolitan municipality of **Johannesburg** (South Africa) implemented this approach in its [Spatial Development Framework 2040](#), as did nine regions of Ethiopia, including **Amhara** and **Oromia**, through [regional spatial development plans](#) across multiple jurisdictions in 2021–2024.

In many European and other consolidated urban contexts, urban land availability for new housing developments is addressed through regeneration strategies, including the reuse of underused buildings and brownfield sites. For example, **Ghent** (Belgium) is leading the [Oude Dokken urban regeneration project](#), transforming a former industrial docklands area into a new residential district, while overseeing planning, land use and social housing integration.

However, when these strategies are not coupled with tenant protection mechanisms, they might contribute to gentrification disguised as renovation (or “renoviction”). Green gentrification is linked to environmental upgrades, where building and urban renovations lead either to direct evictions by landlords or to indirect displacement of long-term tenants, who can no longer afford the increased rent prices.

To counterbalance exclusionary housing dynamics and improve affordability, some LRGs integrate social housing requirements directly into planning and development schemes. **Rennes** (France) integrates affordable housing directly into its spatial planning framework through its [Programme Local de l’Habitat](#) (Local Housing Programme), which requires large-scale residential developments to dedicate a significant share of units to social housing – 25% overall and up to 40% in central zones. This requirement ensures that land-use decisions and housing affordability outcomes are determined together rather than treated as separate policy tracks.

Similarly, **LRGs’ housing policies address socio-spatial inequalities and foster inclusivity through integrated urban development programmes**, as demonstrated by examples in Latin America. **São Paulo** (Brazil) implemented the [Requalifica Centro Programme](#), a scheme offering tax cuts and construction incentives (up to 20%) for redeveloping underutilized buildings in the city centre, provided they include social housing. **Montevideo** (Uruguay) gave the [Hamabi housing cooperative](#) ownership of a government building to turn it into housing units built by and for former mental health hospital patients. This

example shows how LRGs create and support housing initiatives that improve the wellbeing of marginalized groups.

Another valuable example is led by the municipality of **Belo Horizonte** (Brazil), which issued a [sustainable urbanization plan for the Izidora area](#) to secure federal funding to protect local ecosystems while improving housing conditions for nearly 5,000 families. **Ramallah** (Palestine) has put in place a number of building regulations that aim to holistically [improve the living conditions of residents in terms of ventilation and lighting](#). In addition, it designed incentives to encourage green building, renewable energy and better plot subdivisions to reduce housing inequalities and achieve decent and sustainable living environments for all.

BOX 3.1.1 PARTICIPATORY HOUSING PLANNING IN JUIZ DE FORA

The [Territórios da Cidadania](#) (Territories of Citizenship) initiative in **Juiz de Fora** (Brazil), launched in 2022, aimed to integrate social housing policies with broader urban development strategies through participatory governance and evidence-based planning. The project focused on 139 urban micro-territories, many of them designated as “zones of special social interest,” where participatory methodologies engaged residents and local stakeholders directly in identifying socio-spatial needs and development priorities. Through tools such as quick participatory mapping and socio-economic profile surveys, the project collected detailed data on housing conditions, infrastructure, demographic characteristics and residents’ perceptions of public services.

This participatory data-generation process informed urban policy design and helped address longstanding socio-spatial inequalities in the city. A major outcome was the [Observatório da Cidadania JF](#) (JF Citizenship Observatory), officially launched in 2024, which consolidates municipal data to support transparent, evidence-based decision-making and monitor local progress towards the 2030 Agenda. The project also strengthened collaboration between the municipality, civil society organizations and the Federal University of Juiz de Fora, embedding participatory planning practices into the city’s long-term urban governance framework. UN-Habitat supported the initiative.

» Multilevel governance in housing policy

Housing represents a structural lever for improving quality of life and must be addressed through robust multilevel governance frameworks. While national and supranational institutions increasingly promote housing agendas, a persistent gap remains between political commitment and the legislative and fiscal competences available at the local level.

Effective multilevel governance is therefore essential to tackle interconnected challenges such as financialization, housing access and affordability, as well as to align housing policies with climate and environmental objectives. In this context, the mismatch between responsibilities and resources at the local level becomes a critical constraint, underscoring the need to ensure clearer mandates, adequate financial resources for LRGs and strong coordination. For instance, in the UK, some LRGs are still paying off debt from the Right to Buy scheme – a policy that allowed long-term public housing tenants to purchase their homes at discounted prices, significantly reducing the stock of social housing owned by LRGs –, limiting their ability to build new social housing. Cities like **Nottingham** [have faced significant limitations in replacing sold council homes](#), as properties sold under Right to Buy reduced the available social housing stock. At the same time, the council has had to service historic housing debt, limiting its capacity to invest in new construction.

In parallel, LRGs are already working towards the achievement of SDG target 11.a on national and regional development planning by integrating their plans and strategies to create strong social, economic and environmental links between urban and rural areas. The coordination of local and regional development planning is crucial, as shown above as well as in the case of the Canadian province of **British Columbia** and its largest city, **Vancouver**, which introduced complementary speculation and vacancy taxes to reduce empty homes and fund affordable housing.

LRGs are frequently expected to implement increasingly complex housing policies – including energy efficiency standards or climate adaptation measures – without receiving corresponding financial resources or regulatory authority. Nonetheless, **LRGs are innovating and setting up programmes and projects that integrate social, environmental and economic concerns to support their residents and provide decent and sustainable housing.** This is the case of **Milan** (Italy) and **Rotterdam** (Netherlands), which have one-stop shops to help marginalized residents navigate the energy transition in relation to their homes. **Dhaka** (Bangladesh) has included several adaptation measures tailored to housing in its latest [Climate Action Plan](#). The measures aim to accelerate

the shift to renewable energy, reduce exposure to climate risks and ensure new housing and social housing developments are built to high energy efficiency and resilience standards according to national law. This integration supports new housing and renovation projects to be designed for long-term climate resilience at the planning and building levels.

To accelerate multilevel collaboration, an [alliance of 17 European mayors](#) recently mobilized to demand the European Union take action to empower LRGs with financing, appropriate funding and political recognition for their efforts in addressing the housing affordability crisis.

Local innovation – through partnerships, municipal companies and alternative financing – can partially offset the loss of social housing stock and fiscal limitations. In **Bristol (UK)**, the [Bristol Housing Festival](#) programme, alongside the city's wider council housebuilding programme, strategically released and assembled council-owned sites to lower development costs and retain long-term control on council housing stock. Through innovative financing and partnerships (borrowing through the Housing Revenue Account, partnering with housing associations and private developers, using mixed-tenure developments to cross-subsidize affordable units), Bristol committed to delivering thousands of new homes, including a significant share of affordable and social housing, using its own land and development capacity.

Institutional complexity can also hinder coordinated housing policies. In **Lombardy Region (Italy)**, regional policy prioritizes the [regeneration of abandoned and underutilized buildings](#) as the primary vehicle for expanding housing supply, directing investment



Source: Büşra Bedel, Pexels

into the existing built environment to simultaneously address housing shortages and contain urban sprawl onto undeveloped land.

Cooperation, both horizontal and vertical, is crucial for advancing SDG 11 and the human right to housing. Decentralized cooperation programmes demonstrate how strengthening institutional capacity supports more effective housing governance. The **Fons Mallorquí de Solidaritat i Cooperació** (Spain) worked closely with the municipality of **Totogalpa** (Nicaragua) and the local community to [prepare the 2023 municipal investment plan](#), as well as to strengthen local capacity for housing planning and construction and the development of a better water and sanitation system in the area.

International cooperation-backed local capacity building also plays an important role in improving urban governance in the Arab region. In 2024, the [Arab Mayors Academy](#), supported by UCLG's Middle East and West Asia Section and various UN agencies, brought together municipal leaders from cities such as the **Greater Amman Municipality** (Jordan) and **Ramallah** (Palestine) in a structured executive training programme. The programme strengthened strategic planning, resilience strategies, housing governance and spatial planning as part of broader sustainable urban development priorities.

In conflict-affected contexts, governance reforms and technical assistance also help rebuild housing systems. In Yemen, LRGs in the settlements of **Aden**, **Al-Hudaydah** and **Al-Hawtah** lead a project called [Support Housing, Land and Property Rights for Vulnerable Communities and Improve Land Tenure Security of Women in Yemen](#), with support from UN-Habitat. They participated in awareness, legal support, claims processing and capacity building to improve land tenure security for marginalized groups.

Finally, LRGs are showing their capacity to convene and participate in multilevel and multistakeholder coalitions to develop better housing for all. In the [Japan Village project in Mosul](#), the housing rehabilitation programme led by **Ninewa Governorate** and **Mosul City** (Iraq) has been combined with vocational training initiatives, such as carpentry and construction programmes for unemployed youth. The LRGs ensured the project aligned with Mosul's master plan and integrated the new housing area (Rajm Hadeed) into the city's urban fabric. They facilitated and invested in basic infrastructure (electricity, water, sewage, roads and public services), supported the designation of land for returnee housing and coordinated neighbourhood development, and advanced a public-private cooperation model linking national authorities (e.g. the Iraq and Japan national governments), UN agencies and private companies.

MOBILITY

Mobility can be defined as individuals' ability to move between places to access essential services, employment and social and cultural opportunities as well as to participate fully in public life. It manifests in profoundly context-specific ways. In urban areas, mobility systems must respond to challenges related to congestion, road safety, pollution, competition for limited street space and unequal access, particularly for marginalized groups exposed to unsafe transport environments. In rural areas, mobility is shaped by low population density, long distances between key destinations and the limited economic viability of frequent public transport services.

Cities worldwide are coping with severe traffic congestion, and transport-related emissions are one of the main factors causing air pollution. User safety is a particular concern: road crashes still claim more than 1.2 million lives every year, and in some countries, [up to 80% of women report experiencing harassment on public transport](#). Due to structural inequalities, limited transport access disproportionately harms the poor, elders, people with disabilities, children and women. [Global access to convenient public transport stands at 60%](#) (40% in LDCs), leaving many people dependent on unsafe, informal, costly or inefficient mobility options. **Addressing these challenges requires a systemic change and LRGs' leadership: there is an urgent need for safer, more affordable, accessible, integrated and sustainable transport systems that leverage emerging technologies to reduce congestion, preventable crashes and noise and air pollution.**

All in all, transport is also an important sector as it generates significant employment, drives infrastructure investment and stimulates economic activity across both urban and rural areas. It includes both public transport systems and paratransit services.

Public transport systems – including buses, metros, trams and rail – represent major public and private sector enterprises that employ millions of workers worldwide. They are a strategic priority for LRGs, which plan, regulate, fund and often directly operate these services as part of their mandate to ensure accessible and equitable mobility options for all residents.

Paratransit services – such as minibuses, shared taxis and community shuttles, rickshaws, bicycle taxis, tricycles and minibuses – operate with varying degrees of formality and regulation. They often provide flexible connections where formal mass transit is insufficient. Paratransit plays a critical role in mobility, particularly for low-income populations, peripheral or underserved areas, and for first- and last-mile connections to major transit lines.

» Active and soft mobility

Active and soft mobility, respectively, refer to human-powered and environmentally friendly modes of transport such as walking, cycling and other non-motorized modes. They are a core component of inclusive urban transport systems in which LRGs are growingly investing. This shift is motivated by the need to improve road safety, reduce air pollution and enhance equitable access to mobility, particularly for marginalized groups such as women, children, older persons and low-income populations, directly contributing to the achievement of SDG target 11.2 on affordable and sustainable transport systems.

To address these challenges, **LRGs are developing infrastructure and integrated mobility measures, such as pedestrianization schemes, cycling infrastructure and solutions to foster traffic calming and improve road safety. These interventions aim to encourage a modal shift away from private motorized transport, reducing congestion and emissions without relying on road-capacity expansion that can induce further demand, while improving public health and urban liveability.**



Source: Eryk Piotr Munk, Unsplash

Globally, LRGs are increasingly implementing measures to support cyclists. They have significantly expanded dedicated cycling infrastructure through large-scale street redesign and reallocation of road space, including the construction of dedicated and protected bike lanes, improved road markings and the reallocation of street space to prioritize non-motorized users. In **Cleveland (USA)**, the city's 2025 [Cleveland Moves](#) multimodal transport plan includes the construction of 50 miles of protected "high-comfort" bike lanes. Efforts include clear road markings, physical separation, traffic calming measures and redesigned intersections to improve safety and usability for cyclists. **Vercelli (Italy)**, with funding from Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan and the European Union, [built a new cycling link](#) integrated into the existing network. Doing so involved road reconstruction and urban layout redesign to create a continuous and safer cycling route. The **Greater Chennai Corporation (India)**, under the Smart Cities Mission, built extensive street networks prioritizing walking and cycling, featuring protected cycle lanes, improved road markings, intersection redesign and traffic calming measures. Chennai [has now transformed over 120 kilometres of streets](#), with landmark interventions along corridors such as Pondy Bazaar and T. Nagar.

To complement infrastructure investments, many LRGs are expanding access to bicycles through public bike-sharing systems and e-mobility solutions. For example, under the 2025 [Comprehensive Mobility Plan for Nagpur](#), the **Nagpur Municipal Corporation (India)** in coordination with private operators has scaled up to 120 bike-sharing stations across the city, integrating these with metro and bus networks to improve last-mile connectivity.

Although LRGs sometimes struggle to maintain and make permanent some of the measures developed during the pandemic, **Paris (France)**, for instance, launched its [Plan Vélo 2021–2026](#). This plan committed EUR 250 million for developing over 1,000 kilometres of cycling lanes, including the permanent conversion of 52 kilometres of temporary "coronapistes" (coronavirus lanes) introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, the global [Cycling Cities campaign](#), led by the local governments of 34 cities (including **Addis Ababa, Glasgow, Jakarta, Cairo, Istanbul** and **Mexico City**) with support from the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy, has promoted the expansion of cycling infrastructure worldwide since 2021. Between 2021 and 2025, it resulted in the construction of over 1,900 kilometres of bike lanes. The [Hari Bebas Kendaraan Bermotor](#) (Car-Free Day) programme, implemented by the **Provincial Government of DKI Jakarta (Indonesia)**, closes key road corridors to motor vehicles every Sunday to create space for cycling, walking and exercise. Expanded from monthly to weekly frequency in 2012

and sustained through 2020–2025, the programme has helped build a cycling culture in the city. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the provincial government complemented it with pop-up protected cycle lanes – recording cyclist counts up to 1,000% above pre-pandemic levels – before [committing in 2021 to making these lanes permanent](#).

LRGs are increasingly prioritizing pedestrian-oriented planning as a key component of inclusive and sustainable urban mobility systems, particularly when it incorporates universal design, safety, shade, accessibility and proximity to essential services. This effort includes investments in new and shaded walkways, improved road markings such as sidewalks and crossings, safe waiting areas for public transport, and broader pedestrianization strategies aimed at reclaiming public space for people. In **Villa Carlos Paz** (Argentina), the [Urban Accessibility Programme](#) introduced sidewalk ramps, accessible public toilets, raised bus stop platforms, tactile signage, and braille plates, ensuring that public spaces and transport systems are inclusive for persons with disabilities and reduced mobility.

Efforts to improve pedestrian comfort through urban greening are also gaining traction. In **Tandil** (Argentina), the municipality implemented its [Urban Tree Planting Plan](#) (2021–2023), which planted over 212,000 trees to provide shade, improve air quality and mitigate the urban heat island effect. Similarly, **Ghent** (Belgium) has used its [green space strategy](#) to remove paved surfaces and replace them with green areas, enhancing walkability and pedestrian comfort while restoring urban ecosystems.

» Inclusive and safe mobility

Transport systems and mobility planning are deeply intertwined with social outcomes; the effective realization of the rights to education, health, work, care, safety and participation; and the need to reduce unequally distributed time burdens, particularly for caregivers and low-income workers. When mobility options are designed with and for women and girls, persons with disabilities, older people, children, low-income communities and others in marginalized situations, they also help fulfil the 2030 Agenda's principle of [leaving no one behind](#).

LRGs are increasingly recognizing that mobility systems, to be inclusive, must first and foremost respond to the needs of marginalized groups. A relevant example is the [Inclusify: Women's Empowerment for Inclusive Mobility](#) project (2022) implemented by the **Àrea Metropolitana de Barcelona** (Spain) in collaboration with its member municipalities. The initiative focuses on improving women's safety, accessibility and participation in mobility planning through a metropolitan mobility app, allowing wom-

en to report experiences and co-design solutions with public authorities. In Colombia, **Bogotá's Care Blocks** guarantee access to social care services and neighbourhood-level support systems through mobility improvements that take into account caregivers' (mostly women's) responsibilities, time and needs.

LRGs are also increasingly operationalizing the concept of "8-to-80" cities, where urban environments are designed to be safe and accessible for both children and older persons. The **Municipality of Brampton** (Canada) adopted an [age-friendly strategy](#) to guide planning and investment. In line with the 8-to-80 concept, the strategy has an explicit focus on mobility and accessibility for all ages. Based on input from residents and other stakeholders, it prioritizes safe, accessible pedestrian and transit infrastructure, barrier-free public spaces, and inclusive community programmes to ensure that citizens from childhood to older age can move around independently and safely. Recent successes include the launch of an e-scooter programme that will see the deployment of up to 750 scooters available for public use, aiming to encourage more sustainable, green, attractive, healthy and safe local travel options for all community members.

As seen above with pedestrian planning, mobility strategies also play a crucial role in advancing accessibility for persons with disabilities, ensuring that mobility systems are usable by all. **LRGs are increasingly integrating universal design principles into transport infrastructure, including features such as tactile paving and braille markings for visually impaired users, curb cuts and ramps for wheelchair accessibility, audio-visual signalling systems at crossings and step-free access to public transport.**

Such measures not only remove physical barriers but also enhance autonomy for persons with disabilities, while improving overall usability for a wide range of users, including parents with strollers and older persons. A relevant example is the [barrier-free transport programme](#) (initiated in 2020) implemented by the Land Transport Authority of **Singapore**, which focuses on making the public transport system fully accessible. The programme includes retrofitting mass rapid transport stations and bus interchanges with ramps and lifts; installing tactile guidance systems, audio announcements and priority seating; and ensuring step-free access across the network.

Affordability is a critical determinant of access to mobility and, by extension, to economic opportunities, education, health care and social participation. High transport costs can also contribute to spatial inequality, reinforcing patterns of exclusion where peripheral or underserved communities face both higher travel times and financial burdens.

In response, LRGs are increasingly implementing pro-poor mobility policies aimed at affordability and equitable access. These measures include subsidized fares; free or discounted public transport for specific groups such as students, older persons and persons with disabilities; and integrated ticketing systems that reduce the cumulative cost of multi-modal journeys. Some cities are also experimenting with targeted subsidies or fare-capping mechanisms to limit daily or monthly transport expenditures. By lowering financial barriers, these policies not only enhance mobility but also support broader social inclusion and economic participation.

For instance, in 2023, the state of **Karnataka** (India) [made all city bus rides free for women](#), significantly [improving freedom, equality and access to economic opportunities](#). The city of **Fuzhou** (China) has experimented with several fare-free public transport programmes since 2020. In February 2026, the whole metro system and selected bus services were made free of charge for everyone for 17 days. These initiatives not only improve residents' access to mobility services but also yield positive health outcomes and reduce negative environmental impacts. Similarly, **Besançon** (France) offers [free public transport on Saturdays for all](#), at all times for children aged 4–14, and at EUR 2 per month for low-income populations, to foster public transport and encourage civic local life.

Road safety is another essential pillar of sustainable and inclusive mobility systems, and a critical dimension of SDG target 11.2 on affordable and sustainable transport systems. Globally, road traffic injuries remain the [leading cause of death among people aged 5–29](#), with young children and older persons disproportionately at risk due to their greater physical

vulnerability and exposure in urban environments. In response, **LRGs are increasingly implementing measures such as speed reduction, traffic calming, safer and raised pedestrian crossings, improved signage and the redesign of intersections to prioritize human life over vehicle flow.** [Accra](#) (Ghana) introduced reduced speed limits, traffic calming measures such as speed humps, clearly marked pedestrian crossings and improved signage around schools in high-risk areas to protect children during their daily commutes while fostering safer street environments more broadly. [Xianning](#) (China) has worked with the community to improve traffic safety around a public school in an age-friendly, participatory way.

Improving safety in public transport access is another critical dimension. In **Lisbon** (Portugal), the Lisbon City Council has led the [Accessible and Safe Bus Stops Programme](#) since 2020, focusing on relocating bus stops to more visible and secure locations while expanding pedestrian space around them. This initiative particularly aims to reduce vulnerability to harassment and improve safety for women, girls and other marginalized users, thereby reinforcing the role of pedestrian infrastructure in creating inclusive urban environments. Beyond Europe, on-demand transit with virtual stops is also expanding: in **Dubai** (United Arab Emirates), the Roads and Transport Authority runs the [Dubai Bus on Demand](#) service, deploying app-based shared minibuses operating through virtual corner stops – rather than fixed infrastructure – to provide flexible first- and last-mile connections across 13 city zones, prioritizing accessibility and integration with the metro network.

Many urban trips inherently combine multiple modes (e.g. walking to a transit stop, cycling to a train sta-



Source: Mehmet Turgut Kirkgoz, Pexels

tion), including paratransit. Multimodal transport planning by LRGs is the process of designing and coordinating integrated transport networks that enable seamless transitions between different modes of travel – such as walking, cycling, public transit and private vehicles – to improve efficiency, reduce congestion and ensure equitable access to mobility for all urban residents. [Manila](#) (Philippines) has encouraged use of informal jeepneys (minibuses) to meet demand and to improve access to higher capacity formal transport services for residents.

Informal mobility systems are especially significant in many cities of the Global South, where formal public transport networks are often insufficient, underfunded or unable to keep pace with urban expansion. For example, in several African cities, [informal transport – such as minibuses and shared taxis – accounts for nearly 90% of commuter trips](#). While these systems provide employment and essential mobility services, they also face challenges related to regulation, safety standards and environmental impacts. Responses to these challenges need not always imply full formalization; in some contexts, upgrading, recognition and negotiated regulation may better preserve affordability, livelihoods and existing access systems.

A relevant example is Nairobi, where the *matatu* minibus system forms the backbone of urban mobility. Since 2014–2015, the [Nairobi City County Government](#) (Kenya) has introduced reforms aimed at improving sustainability, affordability and service quality, including the formalization of routes, the introduction of cashless fare systems, and efforts to integrate *matatus* into the wider urban transport framework. These initiatives seek to strike a balance between maintaining the accessibility and coverage of informal systems while enhancing safety, reliability and regulatory oversight, illustrating the complex role that affordability plays in shaping urban mobility systems while highlighting the need to protect workers' livelihoods and users' affordability during formalization processes.

A relevant example of integrated and multimodal transport planning can be found in **Quito** (Ecuador), where local authorities have made developing a coordinated urban transport system a central mobility objective. The city [has progressively integrated different modes of transport](#) – including the Quito Metro, the Trolebús and Ecovía bus rapid transit (BRT) systems, and feeder bus networks – into a more unified system aimed at improving connectivity and optimizing modal split. Quito supports this integration

through efforts to streamline fare systems, improve interchange stations and enhance first- and last-mile connectivity through pedestrian infrastructure and informal and formal feeder services. By linking high-capacity transit corridors with surrounding neighbourhoods, the city is working to reduce dependence on private vehicles, improve accessibility for peripheral and low-income communities, and strengthen the overall efficiency of the urban transport network.

In **Peshawar** (Pakistan), the provincial authority of **Khyber Pakhtunkhwa** introduced the [Zu Peshawar BRT system](#) in 2020. The system has transformed mobility by introducing high-capacity public transport, dedicated cycling infrastructure and climate-resilient infrastructure, significantly improving accessibility and reducing congestion and pollution. It also functions as a network of multifunctional urban nodes, as major BRT stations are planned to be integrated with markets, health care facilities, educational institutions and public services. This integration facilitates easier access to essential services for low-income communities while reducing travel distances and supporting more inclusive urban development.

At the same time, in several cities across the world, municipal authorities do not always have full regulatory or financial control over transport systems, particularly where responsibilities for bus operations, infrastructure planning or funding are shared with or retained by national governments or private operators. This constraint can affect cities' ability to redesign routes, implement dedicated bus lanes or enforce integration across modes. As a result, while cities may set ambitious goals for multimodal integration and sustainable mobility, their capacity to deliver comprehensive and coordinated systems often depends on multilevel governance arrangements, institutional coordination and supportive national frameworks.

By embedding active mobility within broader multimodal systems, cities contribute to creating more resilient, accessible and people-centred transport networks.

There is also a growing shift towards mixed-use neighbourhoods designed to reduce travel distances and strengthen access to public transport nodes. Concepts such as “walkability” and the “15-minute city” have gained prominence in cities like Dubai, Paris, Barcelona and Milan.

Dubai (United Arab Emirates) launched its [2040 Urban Master Plan](#), which aims to reorganize urban development so that residents can access 80% of daily services within 20 minutes by walking or cycling. The plan prioritizes compact mixed-use development and improved connectivity with public transport, placing 55% of residents within 800 metres of mass transit stations.

In **Paris** (France), the municipal administration has actively pursued the *ville du quart d'heure* (15-minute city) since 2020, promoting local access to work, education, health care and leisure by reallocating public space and expanding active mobility infrastructure. Similarly, in **Barcelona** (Spain), the *Superilles* (Superblocks) programme, initiated in 2016 and further expanded from 2020 onward, reorganizes urban space to prioritize pedestrians and local activities. Aligning closely with 15-minute city principles, it reduces traffic and enhances neighbourhood-level accessibility.

In **Milan** (Italy), the *Piazze Aperte* (Open Squares) plan, launched in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, has accelerated the transition towards a proximity-based urban model by expanding cycling lanes, widening sidewalks and promoting local services. Together, these approaches illustrate how integrated mobility planning, combined with compact urban development, can contribute to reducing travel demand, improve quality of life and advance more sustainable and inclusive urban mobility systems. Some other examples are the 15-minute garden project in **Bangkok** (Thailand), launched in 2022 by the Metropolitan Administration, or **Berlin's** (Germany) urban development plan for green and open spaces (2020), which establishes guidelines requiring neighbourhood green spaces within about 500 metres from residents, or 5–10 minutes walking distance.

BOX 3.1.2 FORMALIZING INFORMAL TRANSPORT WHILE PRESERVING ACCESS IN MEXICO CITY

In **Mexico City** (Mexico), the local government initiated major institutional reforms of the informal transport sector in 2020 as part of a broader strategy to modernize urban mobility while improving service in peripheral areas. Rather than eliminating the thousands of privately operated minibuses and informal routes that historically served low-income neighbourhoods, the government of Mexico City adopted a policy aimed at formalizing and integrating these services into the official transport system.

The reforms included replacing older polluting minibuses with modern vehicles, consolidating fragmented operators into regulated companies, and introducing digital monitoring, route restructuring and standardized fares. These measures were implemented under the city's *Sistema Integrado de Movilidad* (Integrated Mobility System).

The policy recognizes that informal transport has long been the only viable option for connecting peripheral and underserved districts with employment centres and public services. By improving safety standards, environmental performance and service reliability, the reforms aim to upgrade the quality of transport while maintaining accessibility for lower-income populations, turning previously informal systems into a coordinated component of the city's metropolitan mobility network.



Source: Ali Alcántara, Pexels

» Mobility and ecological transition

Working on road transport's ecological transition is a critical priority for improving air quality and public health. Many LRGs have developed mobility projects and policies aimed at reducing private vehicle traffic in city centres, promoting electrification and integrated climate-sensitive planning.

Global urban mobility systems remain dominated by private cars and increasingly affected by delivery fleets linked to e-commerce, although new trends are emerging. Electric vehicles and especially electric two- and three-wheelers are rapidly expanding across Asia and Africa, with the potential to transform urban mobility systems if integrated with clean energy, safety regulation and equitable access policies.

LRGs are increasingly investing in rapid electrification of vehicle fleets globally, including public buses and taxis, and supporting private electric mobility through infrastructure, incentives and regulation. For example, [Seoul](#) (Republic of Korea) is rapidly transitioning its public transport fleet through programmes supporting electric and hydrogen buses, with plans to introduce 1,000 hydrogen buses by 2026. [Jakarta](#) (Indonesia) has introduced an air pollution control strategy that includes expanding electric buses, introducing low-emission zones and transitioning towards electric vehicles. The city aims to have over 10,000 electric vehicles in operation by 2030.

Latin American and African cities are also promoting leading large-scale public transport electrification. [Dakar](#) (Senegal) inaugurated the [first fully electric BRT system in Sub-Saharan Africa](#) in January 2024, operating a fleet of 121 electric buses. In [Addis Ababa](#) (Ethiopia), the city administration has [deployed over 100 electric buses](#) as part of a national strategy to phase out fossil fuel vehicles. In Latin America, through the [Zero-Emission Bus Rapid Deployment Accelerator \(ZEBRA\)](#) programme, [Santiago de Chile](#) (Chile) now operates [more than 2,500 electric buses](#), the largest fleet outside China, while [Bogotá](#) (Colombia) has a fleet of nearly 1,500 electric bicycles through the Tembici bike-sharing service launched in 2022. These and other examples demonstrate how electrification can significantly reduce local air pollution and, where powered by increasingly renewable grids, reduce life-cycle emissions.

In other regions, cities are combining electrification strategies with broader urban mobility plans. For example, [Auckland](#) (New Zealand) has developed the [Low-Emission Bus Roadmap](#) aimed at achieving a fully zero-emission bus fleet by 2035, while the [Access for Everyone](#) plan seeks to create a zero-emis-

sion city centre by 2030 by reallocating road space for public transport, walking and cycling.

In Africa, [Cape Town](#) (South Africa) is starting to introduce electric buses into the BRT system. It ordered [30 electric buses for its MyCiTi BRT network](#), with the first delivery expected in August 2026 and full passenger service planned for 2027. The project includes deploying charging infrastructure at depots and along key routes, as well as testing operational performance under local conditions.

On the deployment of charging infrastructure that ensures operational reliability and system scalability, municipal governments are well positioned to support and coordinate this transition. They are doing so by setting strategic direction, establishing regulatory authority when possible, and coordinating across energy, transport and planning departments.

[Maribor](#) (Slovenia), under the [EfficienCE](#) project, installed fast-charging pantographs in early 2022 – with one 300-kilowatt and one 150-kilowatt charger – to support its electric bus fleet. The municipality has a long-term target of 50% zero-emission vehicles in the public transport fleet by 2030.

As part of integrated decarbonization strategies, municipalities across Europe, North America and Asia are establishing low- or zero-emission zones. [London](#) (UK) expanded its [Ultra-Low Emission Zone](#) in 2023 to cover all of Greater London, creating the largest zone of its kind in the world and improving air quality for approximately 9 million residents. Similarly, cities such as [Paris](#), [Amsterdam](#), [Milan](#) and [Copenhagen](#) are implementing [zero-emission areas and mobility planning frameworks](#) that prioritize active mobility and public transport.

In parallel, several global cities participating in the [C40 Green and Healthy Streets Accelerator](#) are implementing policies to reduce emissions from transport systems. Thirty-five cities worldwide – including [Rio de Janeiro](#), [Amsterdam](#), [Quito](#), [Mexico City](#), [Berlin](#), [Heidelberg](#), [Rome](#), [Madrid](#) and [Warsaw](#) – have committed to major targets, including procuring only zero-emission buses from 2025 onward and ensuring that large areas of cities become zero-emission zones by 2030, while redesigning streets to prioritize public transport, pedestrians and cyclists.

However, both electrification and low-emission zones carry equity risks that mainly affect structurally discriminated populations. Electric vehicle batteries depend on lithium, cobalt and other minerals [extracted predominantly in the Global South](#), with documented human rights concerns and environmental costs borne by communities that benefit least

from the transition. Meanwhile, low-emission zones can [disproportionately burden low-income residents](#) who depend on older private vehicles for work or cannot easily afford cleaner alternatives, unless they receive targeted support (such as income-based exemptions) and affordable transport options.

Climate risk assessments are also encouraging cities towards more integrated planning approaches. Infrastructure failures – such as flooding in metro systems – can disrupt entire urban economies, highlighting the need for climate-resilient mobility infrastructure and stronger collaboration between public and private actors in climate action planning. Thanks to the [Cloudburst Management Plan](#) adopted by **Copenhagen** (Denmark), the city has reported reductions in flood risk by 30% in high-priority areas. The plan outlines efforts to redesign streets, parks and transport corridors to function as stormwater management infrastructure, including permeable streets, green corridors and floodable public spaces to protect metro lines and urban mobility networks from extreme rainfall events.



Source: Polina Kuzovkova, Unsplash

» A cross-sectoral approach to mobility

Many cities are beginning to build stronger cross-departmental coordination mechanisms to support integrated urban planning. In 2020, **Melbourne** (Australia) created a cross-departmental mobility governance framework, [Transport Strategy 2030, integrated in 2023 with the Future Streets Framework](#) to guide transport planning, public health, climate policy and urban design. In addition to this cross-sectoral government approach, these two documents outline engagement with other levels of government, traditional leaders and Aboriginal communities to prioritize walking, cycling, public transport and coordinated actions across municipal departments to support integrated urban planning and emissions reduction.

While LRGs are often responsible for managing public spaces, mobility and public transport, climate and energy policies frequently depend on national authorities, sometimes creating a mismatch between LRGs' ambitions and their regulatory powers. Likewise, access to finance remains one of the most significant barriers to implementing sustainable mobility systems, particularly in the Global South: according to the World Bank, less than 20% of the largest 500 cities in developing countries are deemed [creditworthy in their local context](#), severely constraining their capacity to invest in public infrastructure including transport.

To address these challenges, international partnerships are increasingly promoting stronger cooperation between national and local governments. For example, the [Coalition for High Ambition Multilevel Partnerships \(CHAMP\)](#) seeks to strengthen collaboration between national governments and LRGs in designing and implementing climate (including mobility) policies, especially nationally determined contributions. Although it depends on national authorities' political will, the CHAMP proposal had a strong political adoption, backed by LRGs and major actors. It could become a powerful transformative mechanism for the years to come, if translated into structured participation, financing and implementation channels for LRGs.

ENERGY

The world has made significant progress towards achieving SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy) by expanding access to electricity and clean energy solutions worldwide, yet [advances remain uneven and insufficient to meet universal targets](#). Large disparities persist across regions, particularly in parts of the Global South, where millions of people still lack access to reliable and modern energy services, including continuity of service and protection from power cuts. While advances in electrification

and clean cooking technologies have improved living conditions for many, key sectors such as heating and transport continue to lag behind in the transition to sustainable energy.

Despite growing efforts to transition towards cleaner energy systems, many urban areas continue to rely heavily on fossil fuels and other high-emission or environmentally unsustainable energy sources. This dependence is particularly pronounced in cities across the Global South, where rapid urbanization, infrastructure deficits and limited financial resources constrain the adoption of renewable alternatives. Energy access and sustainability challenges are compounded by inequalities in service provision, exposure to energy price volatility, and reliance on informal or polluting energy sources. These dynamics point to the urgent need for integrated and well-financed energy transitions that address both sustainability and equity concerns.

Current geopolitical crises and climate-related disruptions are increasingly affecting energy supply chains and slowing down the pace of the energy transition. According to the International Energy Agency, [global energy markets have become more volatile](#) due to conflicts and supply disruptions, disproportionately affecting energy-importing countries and marginalized populations.

Climate change further compounds these risks, as extreme weather events [disrupt energy infrastructure](#) and [increase demand pressures](#), and disproportionately affect households already facing energy poverty. These dynamics can delay decarbonization efforts by diverting resources towards short-term energy security concerns rather than long-term sustainability investments.

Moreover, shifting political priorities and reduced international funding are constraining energy access initiatives. Recent reductions in development finance – linked to changing priorities in major donor countries such as the USA and Germany – have affected programmes aimed at expanding energy access in underserved regions. Reports by the United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank note that such funding gaps risk slowing progress towards universal access, particularly in rural areas of [Sub-Saharan Africa](#) and parts of Asia.

In this landscape of instability, cities with higher dependency on imported fuels and weaker energy infrastructure are struggling to respond, whereas cities with diversified energy mixes and stronger local generation capacity tend to be better positioned to withstand energy shocks.

Finally, questions of equity and global justice remain central to the energy transition. The extraction

of critical minerals, disposal of end-of-life energy technologies, and outsourcing of environmentally harmful processes to lower-income countries raise concerns about uneven burdens and benefits. Unless strong governance frameworks are put in place, waste from renewable technologies and energy systems could be [disproportionately exported to countries with weaker environmental regulations](#). At the same time, the energy transition itself requires significant energy inputs and financial resources, which are unevenly distributed globally; obtaining these may [exacerbate inequalities between countries](#) if not addressed through climate finance, technology transfer and fair supply chains.

LRGs have a direct role to play in ensuring the energy transition is locally grounded and socially just, but they need the right conditions to do so. Some cities are already leading by example. **New York State (USA)** has embedded equity explicitly into its clean energy legislation through the [Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act](#), which mandates that at least 35% of benefits from clean energy investments flow to disadvantaged communities. In practice, this law has enabled community solar programmes to deliver bill discounts to low- and moderate-income households who cannot access rooftop solar, while pairing installations with resident training and job creation. In **Getafe (Spain)**, the local government has used public buildings as anchor points for [energy communities](#) in lower-income neighbourhoods, delivering significant reductions in electricity bills for households in energy poverty through collective renewable energy arrangements, demonstrating that municipal assets can be leveraged to democratize energy access.

These examples point to broader needs. LRGs must be equipped with stronger and clearer legal mandates that explicitly recognize their role in delivering just energy transitions – including the authority to set equity conditions in energy procurement, to regulate or influence local energy markets, and to prioritize underserved populations in infrastructure planning. They need stable, multiyear funding – whether through national fiscal transfers, climate finance mechanisms or earmarked development finance – rather than the short-term, project-based grants that currently dominate. Also, they require meaningful inclusion in national energy governance: if key decisions on grids, tariffs and renewable energy frameworks remain exclusively at the national level or in the hands of centralized utilities without local accountability, LRGs are constrained to implementation roles rather than being genuine co-architects of the transition. Finally, technical capacity and peer-learning support – such as that provided through networks like ICLEI, C40 and UCLG – are essential for smaller and lower-resourced cities to design and deliver equitable local energy policies.

» Multilevel governance and energy policy

In the energy sector, where infrastructure, pricing and regulatory authority are often highly centralized, recognizing LRGs' limited room for manoeuvre is essential, as it fundamentally shapes what they can realistically contribute to SDG 7. Accelerating progress requires stronger, more coordinated action between local and national governments, especially to ensure that clean, affordable energy reaches underserved communities in both urban and rural areas, and to address growing challenges linked to economic instability and conflict.

Indeed, **LRGs are particularly well positioned to align energy planning with local development priorities, ensuring that energy systems are not only sustainable but also inclusive and responsive to community needs.** LRGs help to shape energy outcomes through urban planning, governance and environmental management, though their competences vary across contexts, playing a role in both the supply and demand sides of energy systems. Their influence operates through multiple channels: regulatory powers (e.g. permitting, zoning, building codes), fiscal instruments (e.g. incentives, tariffs, subsidies, public investment), public procurement and asset management (e.g. municipal buildings and fleets), and local infrastructure delivery and stakeholder engagement (e.g. awareness campaigns, partnerships and community energy initiatives). These channels enable LRGs to advance transitions in different ways depending on institutional frameworks, funding mechanisms and decentralization levels in their countries.

In **Utah (USA)**, a coalition of cities including **Salt Lake City, Park City, Moab** and **Summit County** spent years working with the state utility to develop a shared legal framework for community-wide renewable energy procurement. Their sustained advocacy directly resulted in the [Community Renewable Energy Act](#) – first-of-its-kind legislation in the country – which created a pathway for 19 local governments to achieve net-100% renewable electricity by 2030, later approved by the Utah Public Service Commission in 2026.

Cape Town (South Africa) faced significant constraints because national institutions controlled electricity generation, distribution and regulatory authority, limiting the city's ability to diversify its energy mix and improve reliability. To challenge this, it took [legal action](#) against the National Energy Regulator of South Africa and the minister of energy, after years of requests for ministerial consent to procure renewable energy from independent power producers went unanswered. Concurrent with the litigation, the national government published [amendments to electricity regulations](#) in 2020 that formally allowed

municipalities in good financial standing to develop their own energy projects outside the national utility's monopoly, opening the door for local generation of up to 100 megawatts via small-scale embedded generation and up to 200 megawatts from embedded independent producers.

Both cases illustrate how coordinated local advocacy, grounded in concrete targets and cross-municipal alliances, can reshape the regulatory environment rather than merely adapt to it.



Source: Nathan Wong Vig, Unsplash

» Energy supply

On the supply side, national governments and private companies mostly control decisions on energy regulation, generation and distribution. Yet, LRGs also play a key role to achieve SDG target 7.2 on increasing the global percentage of renewable energy.

LRGs facilitate renewable energy deployment through spatial planning, permitting, public procurement, use of municipal assets, and in some cases, direct investment in local energy generation through solar, wind or district heating systems.

In **Oslo** (Norway), the [district heating system](#) utilizes surplus heat from waste management facilities, sewage and data centres, while capturing carbon to reduce emissions from waste-to-energy processes.

In some contexts, LRGs also play a direct role in the energy supply chain by establishing or expanding municipal energy companies (public utilities), enabling them to generate, manage and supply renewable energy locally while retaining greater control over pricing, reinvestment and long-term planning. **Yerevan** (Armenia), through its [Covenant of Mayors](#) initiative in partnership with public utilities, developed solar photovoltaic systems on municipal buildings and strengthened local energy management capacities. Its longer-term objective is to strengthen municipal energy management and reduce dependence on external suppliers (through the



Source: Zibik IR, Unsplash

EU4Yerevan: Solar Community project). **Jakarta's Governor's Instruction No. 66/2019** mandated the installation of rooftop solar photovoltaic systems on public buildings and schools within the city, supported by national technical and permitting guidelines that allow such installations to connect to the grid under the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources' guidelines. This directive helped the city begin to build local solar capacity and signal market demand by aligning local targets with broader national renewable energy goals set under Indonesia's national energy transition mechanisms.

LRGs also shape energy markets through public procurement, a demand-side instrument with significant supply-side effects. They do so by committing to purchase renewable electricity for municipal operations or entering into power purchase agreements, thereby creating stable demand for clean energy and supporting market development. A notable example is the **Australian Capital Territory** (Australia): through a series of [reverse auctions and long-term contracts](#), the territory secured renewable electricity supply equivalent to 100% of its consumption, effectively powering public services with renewable energy while catalyzing large-scale wind and solar investments across the national grid. Moreover, the territory also provides [low-interest loans](#) for energy-efficient upgrades of multiunit buildings, electric vehicles and electric vehicle charging infrastructure.

In Latin America, the **City of São Paulo** (Brazil) in 2025 launched a [renewable energy procurement initiative](#) covering 186 public buildings – including hospitals, schools and subprefectures – which together account for roughly a third of the municipality's total energy consumption. By switching to clean sources including solar, wind, biomass and small-scale hydropower through a competitive procurement process, the city expects to reduce electricity costs by an average of 30% and generate cumulative savings of around USD 11 million by 2030.

Another cross-cutting dimension concerns the life cycle and material flows associated with energy systems. **LRGs play an important role in planning circular economy and waste management systems to handle technologies such as solar panels, wind turbine components and electric vehicle batteries sustainably and responsibly.** **Amsterdam** (Netherlands), through its [Circular Strategy 2020–2025](#) integrates material recovery and reuse into urban systems, including plans for managing electronic and energy-related waste streams such as solar panels and batteries. By embedding circularity into procurement and urban planning, the municipality is preparing for the long-term environmental impacts associated with renewable energy and electrification technologies.

BOX 3.1.3 MUNICIPAL ENERGY TRANSITION THROUGH SOLAR MANDATES AND LOCAL ENERGY GOVERNANCE IN KAWASAKI

Kawasaki (Japan) has taken a [leading role in driving local energy decarbonization](#), acting ahead of national policy timelines. The city set an ambitious target to reach virtually zero carbon dioxide emissions from electricity consumption in the civil sector by 2030, 20 years ahead of the national 2050 goal.

To implement this strategy, Kawasaki developed a neighbourhood-scale solar installation programme in the Mizonokuchi district, equipping over 1,000 public facilities and 50 private businesses with solar panels and battery storage. In October 2023, the city co-founded [Kawasaki Mirai Energy](#), a dedicated local energy company, together with seven private operators, to manage the local production and consumption of renewable electricity. In April 2025, Kawasaki enforced a [mandatory solar installation ordinance](#) for all new buildings under 2,000 square metres, allocating JPY 800 million in subsidies – nearly four times the previous year’s budget. These layered instruments – regulatory mandates, public-private ownership and targeted subsidies – position Kawasaki as a replicable model of municipal-led energy transition.

» Energy demand

On the demand side, LRGs deploy a wider range of instruments: influencing energy consumption patterns through building regulations and urban planning, defining the rules for public procurement and managing municipal assets, including transport fleets and public buildings. This subsection only focuses on the latter, as the former were described in the section on mobility, which showed how LRGs are increasingly addressing energy demand in transport through sustainable mobility policies and electrification of vehicle fleets.

Through the [Building Efficiency Accelerator](#) partnership with World Resources Institute Mexico and the Ministry of Environment of Mexico City, **Mexico City** (Mexico) has carried out energy audits of public buildings and retrofits since 2017, alongside the city’s [Sustainable Buildings Certification Programme](#). The programme involves retrofitting municipal buildings with energy-efficient lighting, upgrading cooling and heating systems, and introducing smart energy management systems to monitor and reduce con-

sumption. In parallel, the city has promoted behavioural change campaigns among public employees to encourage more efficient energy use.

Under the EU Horizon 2020 [SmartEnCity project](#) and a sustainable energy and climate action plan called [Tartu Energia 2030+](#), **Tartu** (Estonia) has retrofitted 18 buildings with improved insulation, solar panels and smart home monitoring systems, reducing total energy demand by 36% and space heating by 54%, while committing to 100% renewable energy in all city-owned buildings, street lighting and public transport. The initiative focuses on upgrading public buildings such as schools and administrative offices through improved insulation, efficient heating systems and smart energy management solutions. The programme also integrates monitoring tools to track energy savings and inform future investments, demonstrating how medium-sized cities can significantly reduce energy demand through targeted interventions in municipal assets.

LRGs influence energy demand through spatial planning decisions that shape urban form, density and infrastructure provision. The [Rwanda Urban Development Project II](#), which started in February 2021, supports local LRGs to integrate electrification and basic services into urban planning for four informal settlements in the city of **Kigali** (Mpazi, Gatenga, Nyagatovu and Nyabisindu). By extending infrastructure networks – including roads, electricity, water, drainage and street lighting – the project reduces reliance on informal and polluting energy sources while improving access to modern energy services.

LRGs also shape energy demand by improving the efficiency of both municipal and private building stock through regulations, incentives and targeted support programmes. A relevant example is the [Bangkok Solar City project](#) implemented by the **Bangkok Metropolitan Administration** (Thailand) in collaboration with the German International Cooperation Agency. The initiative focuses on installing solar photovoltaic panels across the city by raising awareness on their economic and environmental benefits. By providing a 360-degree guide for installing rooftop solar panels for Bangkok residents, the project attempts to shift the energy demand towards more sustainable energy sources. The city of [Dipolog](#) (Philippines) is also investing in solar street lights to reduce municipal electricity use and curb emissions.

València (Spain) operates its municipal [Energy Office](#) – a one-stop-shop service run through the city-owned foundation Clima i Energia – which provides technical assistance and guidance to residents seeking to improve building energy performance, install solar systems and access regional retrofit grants. The office also supports the creation of energy communities that prioritize the needs of marginal-

ized households, making it a central instrument in València's strategy to simultaneously reduce energy demand, address energy poverty and reach climate neutrality by 2030.

Similarly, **Onkaparinga** (Australia) has pursued building decarbonization through its [Towards Zero Corporate Emissions Roadmap](#), targeting an 80% reduction in corporate greenhouse gas emissions by 2030. Through its [Green Building Initiative](#), the council has installed over 1,000 solar panels across three city buildings and developed two Green Hub facilities showcasing solar-powered smart controls, natural ventilation and electric vehicle chargers – designed both to reduce municipal energy demand and to inspire residents and businesses to pursue similar upgrades by accessing financial support.

In addition, LRGs often reduce demand for conventional energy by promoting local renewable energy and circular economy solutions, like in the **Surat Municipal Corporation** (India). Through its [biogas-based power plant programme](#), Surat converts sewage sludge and organic municipal waste into biogas for electricity generation. The programme reduces waste, generates renewable energy and supports a circular urban metabolism, lowering overall dependence on fossil fuels.

Awareness campaigns are essential to influence consumption patterns, and LRGs are becoming growingly committed to promote energy saving and clean energy measures among the population. In 2020–2021, **Helsinki's** [Energy Challenge campaign](#) in Finland promoted energy-saving behaviours among households and businesses through public outreach, digital tools and partnerships encouraging reduced consumption and cleaner energy practices. In Croatia, **Križevci's** experience shows that [placing residents at the centre](#) of the energy transition – through co-creation, citizen investment and community-led initiatives – can rapidly accelerate the uptake of renewable energy and strengthen local ownership of decarbonization efforts.

» Universal access to energy

Ensuring universal access to affordable, reliable and modern energy (SDG target 7.1 on universal access to modern energy) remains a fundamental challenge, particularly in rapidly urbanizing regions where inequalities in service provision persist. In this context, **LRGs – as the level of government closest to residents – are particularly well positioned to identify underserved areas, including informal settlements and peri-urban neighbourhoods. They also coordinate targeted interventions that extend electricity and basic energy services to all, in line with the 2030 Agenda's "leave no one behind" principle.**

Through urban planning, infrastructure development and collaboration with national utilities and private providers, LRGs contribute to expanding energy networks and improving last-mile connectivity. Their role is especially important in ensuring that access is not only technically available but also equitable and responsive to local needs, supporting broader social inclusion and sustainable development objectives.

Collaborative governance models help improve social equity and accessibility to clean energy. Legislation in [Emilia-Romagna](#) and [Piedmont](#) (Italy) provides financial incentives, technical assistance and dedicated funding schemes to support the creation of local energy communities. In practice, this enables communities to self-organize and municipalities to take on coordinating roles – identifying suitable public buildings for solar installations, aggregating local demand and supporting citizen participation – without bearing the full administrative or financial burden alone.

Social equity considerations can be addressed through tariff structures, as illustrated by **Austin** (USA), where [progressive electricity pricing](#) ensures lower costs for low-income households. The municipally owned utility Austin Energy applies a pricing system where lower levels of consumption are billed at cheaper rates, helping low-income households manage essential energy needs at reduced cost. This system is complemented by programmes such as the [Customer Assistance Program](#), which provides bill discounts, weatherization support and energy efficiency upgrades for eligible households. In addition, protections against disconnections during extreme weather events or for medically vulnerable residents help prevent energy insecurity from escalating into broader social vulnerability.

In Australia, joint efforts like the [Cities Power Partnership](#) programme (since 2017) have allowed local governments to adopt renewable energy generation projects. Participating municipalities commit to a set of actions, including increasing renewable energy generation, improving energy efficiency and supporting community energy projects. For example, the [city of Darebin](#) has used the platform to support community energy initiatives and bulk purchasing schemes for rooftop solar, enabling residents – particularly low-income households and pensioners – to access renewable energy at a lower cost, while [Brisbane](#) retrofitted 25,000 street lights with energy-efficient lamps. [Lagos](#) (Nigeria) has invested in an anaerobic digester for the Ikosi-Ketu market, harnessing biogas and compost to power lighting for traders and a borehole that grants access to water for the community. The city also invested in solar energy access for small and medium-sized enterprises with support from C40.

Despite notable gains in electrification, [limited and inconsistent financing](#), both domestic and international, remains a major barrier to achieving universal access and expanding modern energy services. This is particularly the case in rural regions where decentralized renewable solutions are most needed. [Seongbuk-gu](#)'s (Republic of Korea) direct work with the energy provider has led to creating energy-saving stations for achieving carbon neutrality. These facilities involve citizens and civic groups to foster energy-friendly behaviours with financial and administrative support from the district. Other cities, such as [Chefchaouen](#) (Morocco), have started to reach out to national leaders, international organizations and multilateral development banks in different international forums or through bilateral conversations, with the objective of scaling up local investment for climate and energy solutions. **All in all, recognizing LRGs as active decision-makers and providing them with direct financial support is crucial for localizing SDG 7.**



Source: Markus Spiske, Unsplash

3.1.3 LRGs' cross-cutting action on urbanization, natural environment and governance mechanisms

The section above reviewed sectoral interventions embedded in broader territorial realities that both condition and amplify their impact. Three cross-cutting dimensions prove decisive: (a) urbanization, or how cities grow and are planned, which is a central area of LRG responsibility and one that must be both participatory and inclusive to deliver on SDG targets 11.3 and 11.7; (b) LRGs' engagement with the natural systems on which urban life depends, from disaster risk reduction to emissions mitigation and ecological restoration (SDG targets 11.5, 11.6 and 11.b); and (c) governance structure across levels and actors, with multilevel coordination, citizen participation and public-private collaboration acting as essential levers for coherent and sustained progress towards the SDGs (SDG target 11.a).

The following section shows how LRGs are actively shaping these dimensions – and in doing so, creating the enabling conditions for advances in housing, transport and energy policies.

HOW DO LRG-LED HOUSING, MOBILITY AND ENERGY POLICIES INTERCONNECT WITH URBANIZATION PROCESSES?

Addressing urbanization challenges requires strengthening LRGs' role in spatial planning and urban development. To prevent or address urban sprawl, local policies often promote compact and mixed-use urban development, prioritizing the densification of existing urban areas and the reuse of underutilized buildings or already urbanized land rather than expanding into new territories. Such strategies can limit land consumption, reduce infrastructure costs and improve the efficiency of transport and energy systems.

These approaches are particularly relevant in light of SDG targets 11.3 and 11.7, which highlight that **achieving sustainable urbanization requires balancing growth, efficiency and land conservation**. Data from 2024 show that cities are [expanding significantly faster](#) than they are densifying globally, with urban sprawl averaging 5.6% annually between 2000 and 2020 compared to only 1.5% densification. This situation underscores the urgency of coordinated action across governance levels.

LRGs are increasingly confronted with [spatial expansion patterns](#) that outpace population growth, leading to more dispersed urban forms and higher infrastructure demands. Although [these dynamics vary significantly across the world](#) – for example, cities in low-income countries are around four times denser than in high-income countries – municipalities struggle to manage land use strategically, often relying on real estate development as a key source of revenue. This reality shows once more how **reliable and stable financing for LRGs is key to manage urbanization dynamics sustainably**.

Housing policies implemented by LRGs shape urbanization patterns, while also operating within broader dynamics such as climate change, rural underinvestment, labour markets and access to infrastructure. In some territories, climate impacts are making certain areas increasingly difficult to inhabit, while other “push factors” – such as lack of employment, services and infrastructure in rural areas – continue to drive movement towards cities. Housing challenges are therefore closely linked to territorial inequalities, with a growing imbalance between housing shortages in urban areas and depopulation in rural regions. Addressing this imbalance requires not only expanding affordable housing in cities but also strengthening the right to stay in smaller towns and rural territories through access to adequate housing, services, connectivity and economic opportunities. For example, the **Galician (Spain) Fogar Vivo** programme, which mobilizes vacant housing to address rural depopulation and housing underuse and to attract new residents – including young families and returning migrants – saw a 50% increase in its budget between 2025 and 2026 amid rising uptake and claims of policy effectiveness.

LRGs are actively promoting housing as [social and reparative infrastructure](#) that supports the “right to the city” and advances more inclusive urban development. This premise directly relates to SDG target 11.7, which highlights global inequalities in access to public space. Indeed, [fewer than 3 in 10 people in LDCs](#) have convenient access to open public space compared to 6–7 in 10 in high-income regions and countries such as Europe or Australia and New Zealand. LRGs are using land-use regulations to prevent segregation and environmental degradation, as well as ensuring access to peri-urban land, reliable transport connectivity, secure land tenure and financing mechanisms such as mortgages and microfinance.

For instance, **Sekondi-Takoradi** (Ghana), through the [Open Government Partnership](#), has committed to [inclusive and participatory urban development](#). It has co-created local policies with citizens to improve access to municipal services and infrastructure, en-

suring that planning processes are responsive to the needs of all residents, including the most marginalized. This approach reflects a broader understanding of housing and urban development as a public responsibility and a vector for repairing existing inequalities.

[Mobility networks shape urban development](#), especially urbanization processes. In doing so, they influence land-use patterns, economic activity and spatial organization. This influence is directly linked to SDG target 9.1 on developing sustainable, resilient and inclusive infrastructure; this target emphasizes the role of infrastructure in enabling economic integration and connectivity.

Although global narratives around mobility – such as integrated transport networks and sustainable mobility systems – are broadly similar across regions, the underlying realities differ significantly depending on land ownership structures, financial resources and institutional capacity.

Urban form plays a major role in shaping mobility systems. European cities tend to be dense and spatially consolidated, often struggling to find land for new development. In contrast, in many rapidly growing cities of the Global South, the pressure to develop new infrastructure frequently leads to fragmented and dispersed territorial development rather than coordinated urban planning strategies.

The tension between urban density and sprawl [profoundly affects transport](#) efficiency, accessibility, costs and sustainability, linking directly to SDG target 11.3. When urban expansion outpaces densification, it causes infrastructure inefficiencies. In dense areas, shorter distances enable high-capacity public transport such as metros and buses, plus walking and cycling, cutting per-capita costs and car dependency. However, high density can also create challenges such as [congestion, overcrowding in transport networks and higher pressure on infrastructure](#) if investment does not keep pace with demand.

Sprawling cities, conversely, face higher costs from long distances and low ridership; for example, [Atlanta's](#) (USA) low-density growth has led to severe highway congestion on routes and elevated infrastructure maintenance expenses. Similarly, in [Ahmedabad](#), India, dispersed development and weak last-mile options have driven high private vehicle ownership – nearly one per household – boosting emissions and congestion.

This divide demands tailored strategies: density management for multimodal systems and sprawl mitigation via integrated land-use planning and first/last-mile solutions to curb reactive mobility approaches.

Urbanization dynamics strongly shape energy demand and infrastructure development, alongside energy prices, building standards, technology, income levels and national energy policies. Urban planning tools such as building efficiency standards, zoning regulations and transport planning influence how energy is consumed across cities, determining patterns of density, mobility and land use. These issues are directly connected to SDG target 7.3 on doubling energy efficiency improvements. This target highlights that global energy efficiency improvements remain insufficient ([2.1% in 2022 compared to the required 4% annually](#)), showing that local governance is critical for accelerating progress.

A clear urban–rural divide persists. While most urban areas have electricity access, rural regions lag behind because grid extension is less cost-effective at low densities. As a result, [666 million people still lack electricity access and 2.1 billion rely on polluting fuels](#) (SDG target 7.1).

Moreover, renewable energy expansion creates land-use tensions. As cities expand, coordinating energy infrastructure with land-use planning is essential to avoid fragmentation and ensure equitable access. The latter is especially important in contexts where infrastructure inequalities are most acute (for example, solar and wind farms require large land areas, often on the outskirts of growing cities) and where Indigenous Peoples, pastoralist communities and customary land users may face dispossession or exclusion from decision-making. In **Turkana** (Kenya), the Lake Turkana Wind Power Station, supplying nearly a fifth of Kenya's electricity illustrates these risks starkly: in May 2023, the Kenyan High Court [reaffirmed a ruling](#) that 150,000 acres of community land had been acquired irregularly, without the free, prior and informed consent of local pastoralist communities. Paradoxically, these communities [remain unconnected to the national grid](#) and still rely on diesel generators, bearing the costs of the project without sharing its benefits.



Source: Khaya Motsa, Pexels

HOW DO LRG-LED HOUSING, MOBILITY AND ENERGY POLICIES INTERCONNECT WITH CONCERNS FOR THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT?

Environmental sustainability should be inherently integrated into local housing, mobility and energy policies through a circular and resource-efficient approach. This integration is increasingly urgent in light of SDG targets 11.5, 11.6 and 11.b, which highlight the growing exposure of urban systems to disasters. Between 2015 and 2023, over [92,000 critical infrastructure units and facilities were damaged or destroyed](#) annually, and essential services such as health and education experienced more than [1.6 million disruptions](#) each year. These impacts underline the importance of strengthening local resilience through spatial planning and infrastructure governance.

Acting at the intersection of housing and energy, LRGs promote the refurbishment and adaptive reuse of existing buildings. These efforts often generate fewer greenhouse gas emissions and less waste than constructing new energy-efficient structures, while helping to preserve limited carbon budgets, and where relevant, cultural and architectural heritage. This links housing and regeneration policies to SDG target 11.4, particularly where adaptive reuse can prevent abandonment, reduce land consumption and preserve the social and cultural value of existing neighbourhoods.

Planning frameworks often also incorporate integrated diagnostic analyses of environmental, social and economic impacts to identify synergies and trade-offs among sustainability objectives. These approaches are particularly relevant for SDG target 11.6 on reducing the environmental impact of cities. This target emphasizes air quality and environmental health, and global exposure to fine particulate matter remains high ([35.7 microgrammes per square metre in 2015–2019](#)), suggesting that urban form and building efficiency policies remain central to improving environmental outcomes. **Accra** (Ghana) and **Bengaluru** (India) have proven themselves [leaders in tackling air pollution](#). They have adopted integrated measures spanning from air quality sensors and participatory citizen engagement programmes to nature-based solutions and urban planning measures.

LRGs' environmental planning also anticipates the life-cycle impacts of energy infrastructure, including the management of waste from renewable technologies such as solar panels and electric vehicle batteries. Developing circular economy strategies, including recycling and second-life applications, can help prevent environmental damage and reduce the risk of exporting hazardous waste to lower-income countries. Strengthening local data collection and

monitoring systems also supports evidence-based decision-making and aligns with SDG target 11.b. While 73% of local governments now report having [disaster risk reduction strategies](#), implementation capacity remains uneven across regions. Globally, LRGs in at least 110 countries are designing and implementing [local disaster risk reduction plans](#), ensuring the most marginalized social groups are not left behind.

Poorly planned mobility infrastructure and urban development contribute to the fragmentation of natural ecosystems and the loss of essential ecosystem services such as flood mitigation, clean water provision and biodiversity protection. **LRGs are increasingly reconsidering zoning and land-use planning in relation to major mobility investments** such as metro lines, low-emission zones and transit-oriented development, a planning approach that concentrates housing, services and employment around high-capacity public transport nodes to reduce car dependency and promote compact urban growth. While this approach can be an effective tool for reducing emissions and improving accessibility, it has faced growing criticism for being co-opted by real estate interests, leading to gentrification and displacement of lower-income residents – as documented in cities such as [Denver and San Francisco](#) (USA)— making strong social safeguards and affordability protections essential conditions for equitable implementation.

The relationship between mobility and environmental policy can also reveal tensions across different urban contexts. In many Global North cities, [de-paving initiatives](#) aim to reduce soil sealing, restore permeability and improve flood resilience and urban cooling. For example, since 2022, **Chicago's** Depave movement (USA) has been replacing asphalt in schoolyards and public spaces with permeable surfaces, rain gardens and green areas. In contrast, cities in parts of the Global South still need to prioritize basic infrastructure improvements such as paving roads or building sidewalks, highlighting the deeply uneven concerns that affect environmental sustainability across contexts.

Environmental considerations are increasingly central to local energy policies, particularly in relation to the land-use impacts of renewable energy infrastructure. While solar and wind projects contribute to decarbonization, they may also generate tensions with landscape preservation, biodiversity protection and cultural heritage conservation. LRGs therefore face the challenge of balancing clean energy investments with environmental protection and sustainable spatial planning. While cities require around [USD 5 trillion annually for climate-resilient infrastructure](#), they secured just over 1% of that in 2021–2022. Despite notable gains in multilevel co-

ordination between national governments and local governments, with 49% of countries increasing local fiscal space in 2023, the impact on LRGs' capacity remains limited since only one-third of national urban policies are adequately resourced.

To overcome these limitations, LRGs are already promoting innovative policies. **Vancouver** (Canada), through its [Renewable City Strategy](#), [Climate Emergency Action Plan](#) and [Climate Change Adaptation Strategy](#), has prioritized expanding renewable energy and low-carbon infrastructure while explicitly restricting new developments that increase land consumption and environmental degradation and supporting the retrofitting of older housing. The city promotes the installation of solar energy and district energy systems primarily within existing urban areas and integrates climate considerations into land-use and building regulations, helping to reduce pressure on surrounding ecosystems and limit urban sprawl.

Looking ahead, additional environmental pressures may arise from the rapidly growing energy demand of artificial intelligence infrastructure and data centres, raising concerns about increased electricity consumption, urban energy costs and the environmental footprint of digital technologies. In response, LRGs such as [Stockholm](#) (Sweden) have introduced initiatives to incentivize the establishment of data centres that employ heat recovery methods and draw upon renewable energy. Another example is the [Barcelona Digital City Plan](#) in **Barcelona** (Spain), which includes an [artificial intelligence strategy for the public sector](#) (2020–present). One key dimension is sustainability, explicitly linking artificial intelligence deployment to environmental and energy efficiency goals, ensuring that digital innovation is aligned with broader climate neutrality objectives.

Together, these trends illustrate the **need for integrated approaches that link energy planning with land management, circular economy strategies, climate resilience policies and the governance of emerging digital infrastructure** in order to respond effectively to the risks identified under SDG targets 11.5, 11.6 and 11.b.



Source: 阿了个哲, Pexels

HOW DO LRG-LED HOUSING, MOBILITY AND ENERGY POLICIES INTERCONNECT WITH MULTILEVEL AND MULTISTAKEHOLDER GOVERNANCE MECHANISMS?

Effective implementation of sustainable development policies requires strong multilevel and multi-stakeholder governance frameworks that empower LRGs and enhance coordination across government levels.

Key measures include capacity-building programmes and direct financial transfers to local governments, simplified reporting systems that consolidate multiple monitoring requirements into unified frameworks, and intensive capacity-building programmes to strengthen technical expertise in urban planning, energy systems and sustainable development. Many LRGs remain dependent on national funding: increasing their autonomy therefore requires institutional reforms and a cultural shift towards greater decentralization.

At the same time, **policy coherence mechanisms – such as interministerial coordination bodies and multilevel dialogue platforms – can help align national, regional and local strategies with the SDGs.** For example, [San Mateo County](#) (USA) has established the 21 Elements project to facilitate collaboration with all the county's cities.

Strong governance frameworks also promote collaborative and participatory approaches to city-making, supporting non-speculative development models such as housing cooperatives, community land trusts and collective savings groups. Recognizing diverse forms of knowledge and enabling the participation of communities, civil society and the private sector improve policy legitimacy and effectiveness. Despite [some data indicating limited civil society participation](#) in urban planning and management in cities as mandated by SDG indicator 11.3.2, there is a growing body of local participatory practices, consultations and direct-democracy instruments put in place by LRGs to foster citizen participation (which, at the same time, must be supported and monitored adequately). The state of **New South Wales** and the city of **Melbourne** (Australia) have led the way in this regard by creating, respectively, the [Connecting with Country Framework](#) and the First Nations Committee, two initiatives that bring different forms of knowledge to decision-making tables and improve city planning processes in favour of Indigenous communities.

Finally, **LRGs often leverage public procurement policies to promote social outcomes – such as gender equality, public health and environmental standards – in urban development projects.** Brus-

sels (Belgium) is [using public procurement for ICT equipment](#) to reduce transport-related emissions, improve energy efficiency, extend product lifespans through durability and repairability requirements, and increase the weight of sustainability criteria in tender scoring as part of its sustainable digital transformation of public administrations. **Cape Town** (South Africa) prioritizes [suppliers](#) contributing to local, township and rural development and businesses owned by Black people, women, youth and people with disabilities.

Housing, mobility and energy represent three structural determinants of urban quality of life and therefore require robust multilevel governance arrangements to be effectively addressed. While national and transnational institutions increasingly promote these policy agendas, a persistent gap remains between political commitments and LRGs' actual regulatory and implementation capacities.

Frequently, LRGs are expected to implement increasingly complex housing policies – including energy efficiency standards or climate adaptation measures – without receiving corresponding financial resources or regulatory authority. A positive example can be found in **Rotterdam** (Netherlands), where the municipality has integrated housing policy with climate adaptation through its [Rotterdam Climate Adaptation Strategy](#), developed in 2013 and continuously updated through the 2020s. The city, in coordination with national authorities from the [National Delta Project](#), promotes climate-resilient housing by encouraging the incorporation of flood-proof design standards in residential developments, supporting “water squares” and adaptive drainage systems in densely built neighbourhoods, and retrofitting vulnerable housing areas to better cope with extreme rainfall and rising water levels.

In the case of mobility policies, too often, **the lack of coordination between different institutions leads to heavily focusing on the “hardware” of mobility systems – vehicles, infrastructure and technology – while neglecting the “software” of mobility planning,** including governance structures, regulatory frameworks and long-term planning capacity. Indeed, transport governance remains highly complex, as different levels of government often control different components of mobility systems: LRGs may manage local roads and cycling infrastructure, while regional or national authorities control railways, highways or major transit systems. Horizontal coordination within local governments also remains a major challenge. Urban planning, transport, public health and environmental departments often operate in silos, limiting the effectiveness of integrated mobility strategies.

Some LRGs have nonetheless developed effective responses to these coordination challenges. In **Scotland** (UK), the [National Transport Strategy](#) (published in 2020, updated through 2023 and 2026) establishes a formal multilevel governance architecture. Regional transport partnerships produce strategies aligned with national priorities, and local authorities, regional bodies and the national transport agency are jointly accountable through a shared Delivery Board co-chaired by the national government and local government association – demonstrating how vertical coordination can be institutionalized across scales.

The governance of energy systems very often limits LRGs' capacity to shape energy transitions directly. In many countries, electricity generation and distribution remain controlled by powerful state-owned or national utilities, leaving LRGs in a reactive position where they must operate within regulatory frameworks they did not design. However, **municipalities are uniting to shape energy systems in a more sustainable way that also responds better to local needs.** For instance, with the support of ICLEI Africa, the municipalities of **Cape Agulhas, Ephraim Mogale, Greater Tzaneen, King Sabata Dalindyebo, Matzikama** and **Walter Sisulu** (South Africa) have joined forces in the Just Municipal Embedded Generation project to improve their capacity for just and sustainable energy procurement, inclusive partnerships and the financial and social governance of energy programmes. Such projects can help LRGs strengthen capacity and bargaining power against the dependence on national funding that often further constrains local autonomy, particularly in contexts where local leadership is appointed by higher levels of government.

Aligning local, national and supranational strategies around the SDGs can help ensure that urban planning decisions contribute to sustainable development objectives while avoiding fragmented policy efforts. Pursuing consistency with indicator frameworks developed at national, supranational and global levels – while ensuring the feasibility of applying the same frameworks at subnational levels, despite frequent limitations in territorially disaggregated data and statistics – can strengthen monitoring, accountability and alignment of urban policies with broader sustainable development goals.

In addition, **across housing, mobility, energy and governance systems, LRGs play a decisive role in shaping whether urban transitions reinforce or reduce inequality.** The analysis shows that SDG implementation is not only a technical or infrastructural challenge, but fundamentally a question of equity, territorial justice and social inclusion. Access to housing, affordable mobility and clean energy remains unevenly distributed, both within and between cities, reflecting persistent structural inequalities

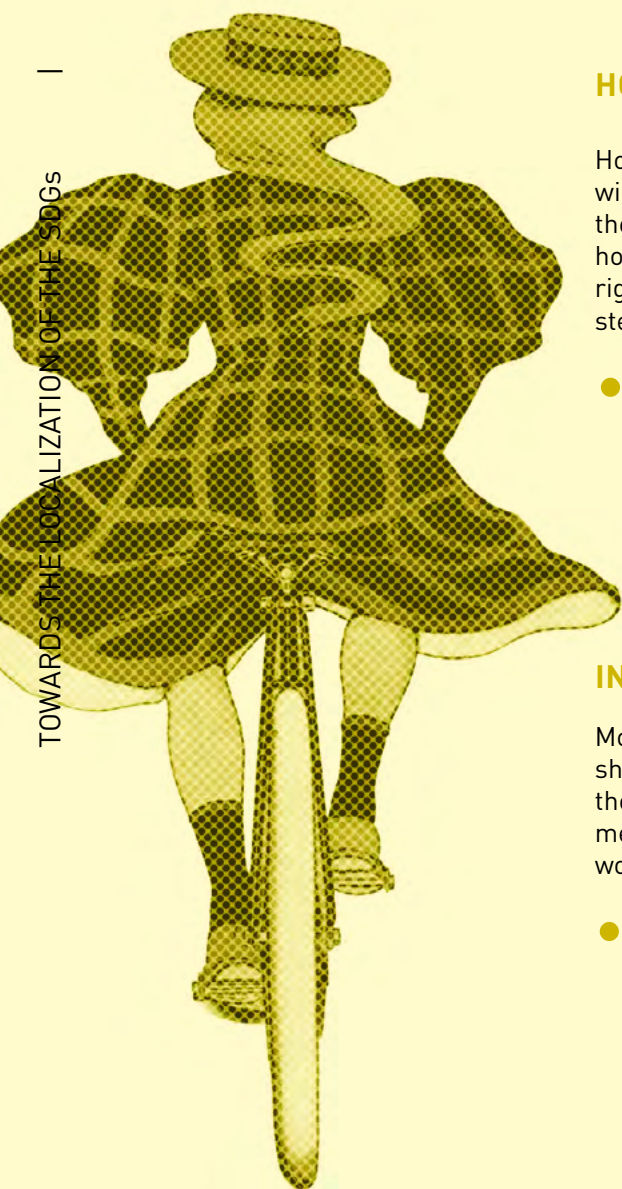
often reproduced through spatial planning and investment decisions.

In this context, **the “leave no one behind” principle operates as a cross-cutting framework for all urban policies.** Ensuring universal access to essential services – such as safe housing, reliable transport, clean energy, public space and basic infrastructure – requires LRGs to explicitly integrate social inclusion objectives into planning, budgeting and regulatory systems. This effort includes prioritizing marginalized groups such as low-income households, women, children, older persons, persons with disabilities and informal workers, who are disproportionately affected by fragmented governance systems and unequal service provision.

Ultimately, **achieving the SDGs at the local level depends on the ability of LRGs and national governments to translate sustainability goals into inclusive transitions, where environmental and economic objectives are pursued together with social justice outcomes.** Strengthening redistribution mechanisms, participatory governance, and territorial cohesion is therefore essential to ensure that urban transformation contributes not only to efficiency and resilience but also to fairness, dignity and equal opportunity for all.



Source: Mehmet Turgut Kirkgoz, Pexels



3.1.4 Policy recommendations

LRGs are often the primary providers of public services to their local communities, playing a critical role in ensuring access to housing, mobility and energy and in advancing the localization of the SDGs. However, their ability to deliver is often constrained by limited resources, fragmented governance frameworks and growing territorial inequalities. In this context, the following conclusions and recommendations are put forward:

HOUSING AS A PUBLIC GOOD

Housing is one of the most pressing issues the LRGs are facing worldwide, as well as a key accelerator for the achievement of SDG 11 and the 2030 Agenda as a whole. In practice, due to its intersectional nature, housing serves as a powerful enabler for the materialization of human rights, full socio-economic participation in society, and environmental stewardship and long-lasting wellbeing for all.

- Reject the notion of housing and land as targets of financialization and commodification processes, and instead **promote a “right to housing” approach in LRGs’ public policies**. This approach requires prioritizing investment in long-term, affordable, sustainable and accessible housing solutions, and identifying and supporting existing community-driven and cooperative approaches to housing that are holistic in nature.

INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE MOBILITY SYSTEMS

Mobility is a key aspect of daily life for billions of people worldwide, shaping economic opportunities, social inclusion and quality of life. Although mobility is a key aspect of sustainable and inclusive development, access to affordable and safe public transport remains limited worldwide, particularly for the most marginalized groups.

- **Enable and invest in LRGs’ mobility policies that repair socio-spatial inequalities and promote social and environmental wellbeing** by reframing efficiency-driven solutions into a vision which prioritizes user accessibility, comfort, experience and safety. This reframing involves centring sustainable clean infrastructure development that reaches urban, peri-urban and rural communities, and promoting community-centred solutions, including active and soft mobility and the co-design of solutions with structurally discriminated groups.

LOCAL ENERGY TRANSITION AND UNIVERSAL ACCESS

Despite progress, access to affordable, reliable and clean energy remains uneven, and LRGs face structural and regulatory constraints in shaping energy systems.

- **Empower LRGs to drive the energy transition from the local level** through not only demand-side measures – such as energy efficiency in buildings, clean municipal fleets and awareness campaigns – but also localized supply-side solutions, including municipal energy companies, district heating, decentralized renewable generation and community energy initiatives. LRGs should also be supported to ensure universal access, tackle energy poverty and promote affordability, while integrating energy planning into broader urban development, mobility and housing strategies, ensuring that the transition is equitable, resilient to shocks and responsive to local needs.

DECENTRALIZATION AND LOCAL CAPACITIES

LRGs are on the front line of delivering essential services, yet their ability to act is frequently constrained by insufficient, unpredictable or inflexible financial resources, in addition to limited technical and human capacities.

- **Strengthen decentralization frameworks** by ensuring that responsibilities are matched with robust and predictable financial transfers, access to diverse funding sources and the capacity to mobilize resources locally, alongside adequate technical and human resources. This effort will enable LRGs to fully exercise their mandate, deliver quality public services and effectively localize the SDGs.

MULTILEVEL GOVERNANCE

Fragmented governance and lack of coordination across levels of government continue to hinder effective service delivery and SDG implementation. While the main policies, regulations and legal frameworks for public services are often set at the national level, their provision takes place locally, where LRGs are closest to communities and best understand real needs.

- **Institutionalize multilevel governance mechanisms** to ensure policy coherence, coordination, support (data disaggregation, guidelines) and joint accountability, recognizing LRGs as key partners. National frameworks should enable and facilitate the adaptation of services to local contexts, fostering a transition towards inclusive, high-quality public services that effectively respond to and care for the needs of all populations.

PLACE-BASED AND PROXIMITY APPROACHES TO URBANIZATION

Rapid and uneven urbanization is reshaping territories, often deepening spatial inequalities and limiting access to essential services, particularly across housing, mobility and energy systems. Fragmented planning approaches risk reinforcing sprawl, informality, segregation and inefficient service provision.

- **Promote integrated, place-based and proximity-driven models that strengthen LRGs' public service delivery through coordinated local planning.** Doing so includes ensuring that housing policies provide affordable and well-located options connected to services and opportunities and that mobility systems go beyond public transport to integrate active mobility and multimodal solutions that respond to daily urban realities. National frameworks should enable LRGs to implement integrated territorial planning, aligning land use, infrastructure and service provision and supporting balanced development across urban, peri-urban and rural areas.

RESILIENCE, ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY AND CRISIS PREPAREDNESS

Climate change, environmental degradation and geopolitical shocks affecting energy and essential services increasingly threaten the continuity, quality and affordability of local public services, undermining people's quality of life and social cohesion and exacerbating inequalities.

- **Support LRGs in strengthening climate action, resilience and preparedness** through advance planning for reliable and adaptable infrastructure, sustainable resource management and rapid response to withstand external shocks, maintain access to services and protect marginalized populations.

EQUALITY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND INCLUSIVE LOCAL PUBLIC SERVICES

Persistent inequalities in access to housing, mobility and energy reflect and reinforce broader structural injustices, disproportionately affecting low-income households and marginalized groups. Ensuring equitable access to basic services and new essentials is not only a development priority but a matter of human rights, in line with the "leave no one behind" principle.

- **Embed human rights and an intersectional approach into service provision, supporting LRGs to eliminate exclusionary practices and guarantee universal access.** Doing so includes measures to prevent forced evictions and ensure secure tenure, prohibit energy disconnections for marginalized households, and ensure affordable and non-discriminatory access to transport systems (including fare policies, accessibility standards and safe mobility for women and other at-risk groups). National and international frameworks should reinforce LRGs' role in advancing the right to housing, the right to basic services and inclusive mobility, ensuring that no one is left behind. Across these areas, residents should be recognized as rights-holders and co-producers of solutions, rather than as passive beneficiaries or obstacles to planning.



Source: Quill J, Pexels

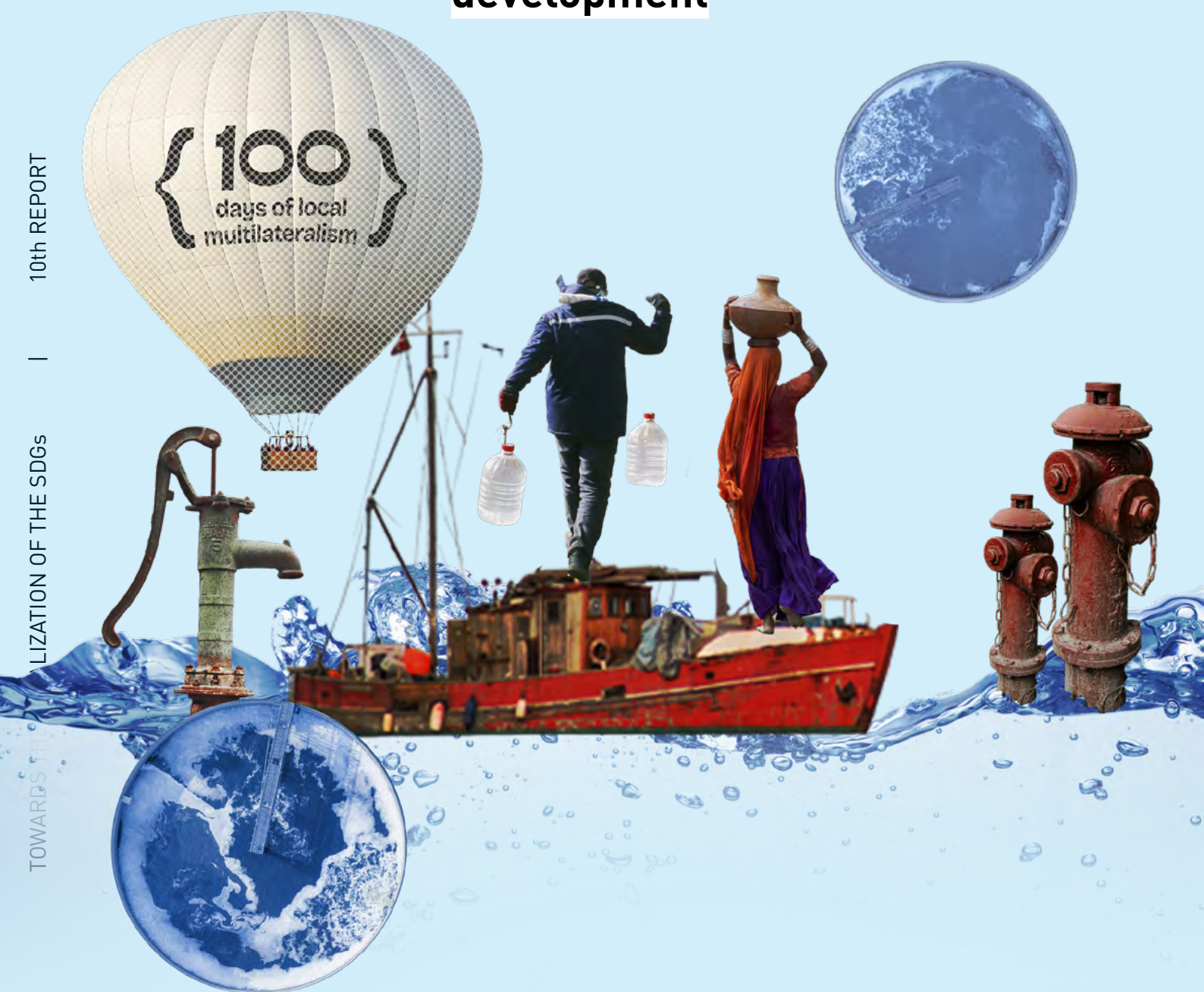
3.2

LRGs towards SDG 6: Localizing water and sanitation for sustainable development

10th REPORT

LIZATION OF THE SDGs

TOWARDS THE



3.2.1 Introduction: Key milestones shaping the global water agenda

Since the first United Nations (UN) Water Conference in Mar del Plata, Argentina, in 1977, the international community has developed a shared understanding of the central importance of access to safe drinking water and sanitation for public health, human dignity and socio-economic development.¹ Yet, long before this, cities in Europe and North America responded to cholera, typhoid and other waterborne epidemics in the 19th century by investing in modern waterworks and sewerage systems. The British physician John Snow famously demonstrated in London that contaminated water was the [source of cholera outbreaks](#). His work helped trigger a broad movement in which municipalities assumed responsibility for water supply, sanitation and hygiene as a core public health function. Urban waterworks, sewerage systems and sanitation departments were established to control infectious disease, manage urban crowding and industrial pollution, and establish basic living conditions.

Over time, these municipal successes influenced national policy. As improved water supply, sanitation and hygiene reduced mortality, national development strategies embedded these services. By the 1960s and 1970s, rapid urbanization in Africa, Asia and Latin America had further elevated water and sanitation as global priorities, setting the stage for the Mar del Plata conference, which placed local realities on the global political agenda.

The Mar del Plata conference recognized access to safe drinking water as a basic human need and underlined the importance of ensuring access to water supply and sanitation for public health. **The conference's resulting action plan also marked an early step towards recognizing water as a human right.**² The consensus led the UN General Assembly to proclaim the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade (1981–1990), mobilizing commitment, coordinating international support and scaling up investments to expand service coverage. Much of the latter was implemented through municipal utilities, local infrastructure programmes and decentralized providers.

Successive international initiatives – from the second dedicated decade, known as the International Decade for Action, “Water for Life” (2005–2015), to the inclusion of water and sanitation in [Millennium Development Goal target 7.C](#) (2000–2015) – further elevated domestic water supply and sanitation on the global development agenda. They culminated in the adoption of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 as a comprehensive stand-alone goal in the 2030 Agenda.

Table 3.2.1 Key milestones shaping the global water agenda

Milestone	Description
1977: UN Water Conference (Mar del Plata, Argentina)	Established water and sanitation as global development priorities and laid the normative foundation for international action
1981–1990: International Drinking Water and Sanitation Decade	Converted political commitment into large-scale national programmes and local action, significantly expanding global access to water and sanitation
2000–2015: Millennium Development Goals, including target 7.C	Introduced time-bound measurable targets, institutionalizing global monitoring and accountability
2002: CESCR General Comment No. 15	Operationalized the human right to water by clarifying State obligations and strengthening equity and accountability frameworks
2010: Formal recognition by the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council of the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation	Provided global political support for legal principles and embedded them within the procedures of the Human Rights Council
2015–present: SDGs, particularly SDG 6	Reframed water as a finite, interconnected and climate-sensitive resource requiring integrated and sustainable management

Source: Authors

Water and sanitation gained further prominence on the global agenda through developments in human rights law. In 2002, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), the body responsible for monitoring the implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), reviewed articles 11 and 12 of this covenant and issued General Comment No. 15 on the right to water. The CESCR recognized water as an essential element of both the right to an adequate standard of living and the right to the highest attainable standard of health. By defining normative criteria – *availability, quality, accessibility and affordability* – it translated broad treaty obligations into a practical framework to guide policy, regulation and accountability in the water and sanitation sector. General Comment No. 15 clarified that the right to an adequate standard of living under the ICESCR includes a distinct human right to sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible and affordable water.

Building on this interpretation, the UN General Assembly and the Human Rights Council adopted landmark resolutions in 2010 recognizing the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation and establishing the mandate of a UN Special Rapporteur on the human right to water and sanitation to promote implementation, clarify State obligations and monitor progress. **Together, these developments helped shift global discourse from access as a policy aspiration to access as a legal entitlement, reinforcing accountability, equity and non-discrimination as central principles in water and sanitation govern-**

ance. They also underscored the need for governance arrangements capable of translating legal commitments into effective service delivery at the local level.

The adoption of SDG 6 marked a fundamental shift from the Millennium Development Goals era: it recognized water as not only a social service but also a finite and interconnected natural resource requiring integrated and sustainable management. This goal's inclusion in the 2030 Agenda reflected growing recognition among Member States that population growth, urbanization, rising economic demands on water, and mounting environmental pressures – including water scarcity, pollution and climate-related stress – were intensifying the challenge of universal access. Whereas Millennium Development Goal 7.C located water and sanitation within a broader environmental goal, SDG 6 elevated water to a stand-alone goal central to human development, environmental integrity and economic activity. Nevertheless, localizing SDG 6 has emerged as a defining challenge of the 2030 Agenda. **Local and regional governments (LRGs) stand at the centre of efforts to translate global commitments into tangible improvements in people's daily lives.**

Altogether, the milestones shaping the global water agenda reflect substantial normative progress in the recognition of water and sanitation as global priorities. At the same time, they raise important questions regarding implementation. Localization requires alignment between global commitments and subnational financial and operational capacities.

PROGRESS AND BOTTLENECKS IN SDG 6 IMPLEMENTATION

Since 2015, the world has made significant progress on implementing SDG 6. An estimated [961 million people](#) have gained access to safely managed drinking water services and 1.2 billion people to safely managed sanitation services. **Despite these achievements, major challenges persist across several SDG 6 targets and indicators.**

In 2024, an estimated [2.1 billion people](#) still lacked safely managed drinking water (SDG 6.1), and 3.4 billion lacked safely managed sanitation services (SDG 6.2). Progress has been highly uneven across regions: while many countries in Europe, North America and East Asia have achieved near-universal access to basic water and sanitation services, large parts of Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia continue to experience substantial access gaps.

Only [56% of global domestic wastewater](#) is safely treated before discharge (SDG 6.3), a figure unchanged since the baseline estimate in 2015. Overall water-use efficiency (SDG 6.4) increased by 23% between 2015 and 2022, but overall water stress levels have remained broadly unchanged. Several regions in North Africa and West, Central and South Asia continue to experience critical stress levels exceeding 75%, while around 10% of the global population lives under conditions of high or critical water stress. These figures illustrate that, despite progress, structural bottlenecks persist across multiple dimensions of SDG 6 implementation.

On target 6.5 (integrated water resources management at all levels, including transboundary cooperation), implementation increased from about 49% in 2017 to 57% in 2023. While this reflects measurable progress, it remains insufficient to meet the 2030 target. On transboundary cooperation, on average countries report that [59%](#) of their transboundary basins are covered by an operational arrangement. At the current pace, progress may be too slow to support the joint strategies needed to address the intensifying impacts of droughts and floods in a changing climate.

On target 6.6 (protecting and restoring water-related ecosystems), global data suggest that freshwater ecosystems are declining: [50% of countries](#) report that one or more water-related ecosystem types are in a state of degradation. However, monitoring methodologies for this target remain under development, and many countries still lack comprehensive data on the extent, quantity and health of water-related ecosystems. Therefore, these statistics still need to be treated with some caution.

SDG 6 also has two targets related to the means of implementation: target 6.a, which aims to expand international cooperation and capacity building, and 6.b, which aims to support and strengthen participation of local communities. Indicator 6.a.1 measures the amount of water- and sanitation-related official development assistance in national spending plans. Recent reporting shows very low or near-zero values, meaning that no reliable global estimate is currently available due to limited reporting and data inconsistencies. Indicator 6.b.1 – proportion of local administrative units with operational community participation procedures – relies heavily on data from LRGs to support national reporting to UN-Water. Available data remain limited, and global estimates are not yet robust because many countries have not reported comprehensive data across LRGs. These limitations highlight **the importance of strengthening institutional coordination and data flows between national and subnational levels.**

Source: *Mega Caesaria, Unsplash*



Overall, progress is certainly insufficient to achieve SDG 6, and discussions on acceleration mechanisms that have been underway since 2020 are very much warranted. **Across countries and regions, LRGs are the frontline actors for most SDG 6 targets**, including drinking water and sanitation service delivery (6.1, 6.2); wastewater collection and treatment (6.3); water-use efficiency, including urban water demand management (6.4); local implementation of integrated water resources management (6.5); protection of local water-related ecosystems (6.6); and community participation and accountability (6.b). **Arguably, where progress is happening, it is often happening locally, and where progress is stalling, local constraints – often linked to capacity, finance or institutional frameworks – frequently explain part of the delays.**

WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT IN THIS PAPER?

As the international community strives to achieve SDG 6 and begins considering the post-2030 development agenda, it faces a growing need to rethink how global water goals are framed, measured and governed. The institutional realities of service delivery warrant more explicit recognition within global water and sanitation frameworks, highlighting LRGs' central role in providing, operating and maintaining water and sanitation services. **Accelerating progress towards global water and sanitation goals largely depends on the enabling environment for LRGs to fulfil their mandates.**

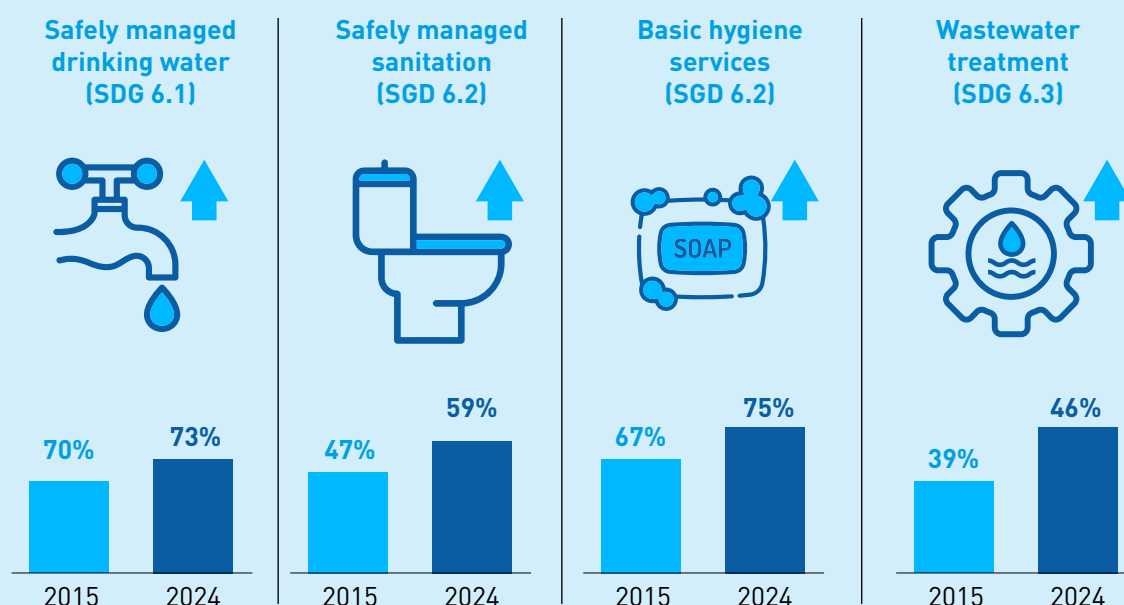
In this context, this paper, included in the 10th edition of the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments' *Towards the Localization of the SDGs* report, aims to contribute to the global discussion on concrete pathways to achieve SDG 6 – which inevitably require LRGs' active involvement. The paper begins by analyzing the global state of progress on SDG 6 (Section 3.2.2), before examining why LRGs are essential to achieving this goal (Section 3.2.3). It then explores how LRGs are responding to current trends through service provision, innovation and human rights-based approaches (Section 3.2.4), followed by an assessment of the main challenges they face (Section 3.2.5). The paper concludes with key findings and policy recommendations (Section 3.2.6).

The analysis builds on existing data, reports and other secondary sources, as well as on a collection of inspiring practices from LRGs, gathered through a survey disseminated by United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) among its members in 2025.

3.2.2 The global state of SDG 6 at a glance

The section above briefly summarized the key achievements and bottlenecks in SDG 6 implementation. In this section, we unpack several of these, highlighting issues of central importance to LRGs.

Figure 3.2.1 Global progress in WASH services (as a percentage of the population), 2015–2024



Source: Authors, based on UN-Water's [Sustainable Development Goal 6: Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation](#) (2018) and the World Health Organization (WHO) / United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene's [Progress on Household Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene 2000–2024: Special Focus on Inequalities](#) report (2025)

Figure 3.2.1 presents a concise overview of progress on targets 6.1, 6.2 and 6.3, which have advanced significantly since 2015. Nevertheless, the pace of progress between 2015 and 2024 is insufficient to achieve the target of universal access by 2030: for example, global access to safely managed drinking water and safely managed sanitation has increased, respectively, by just 3 and 12 percentage points.

TERRITORIAL DISPARITIES AND INEQUALITIES IN ACCESS TO SERVICES

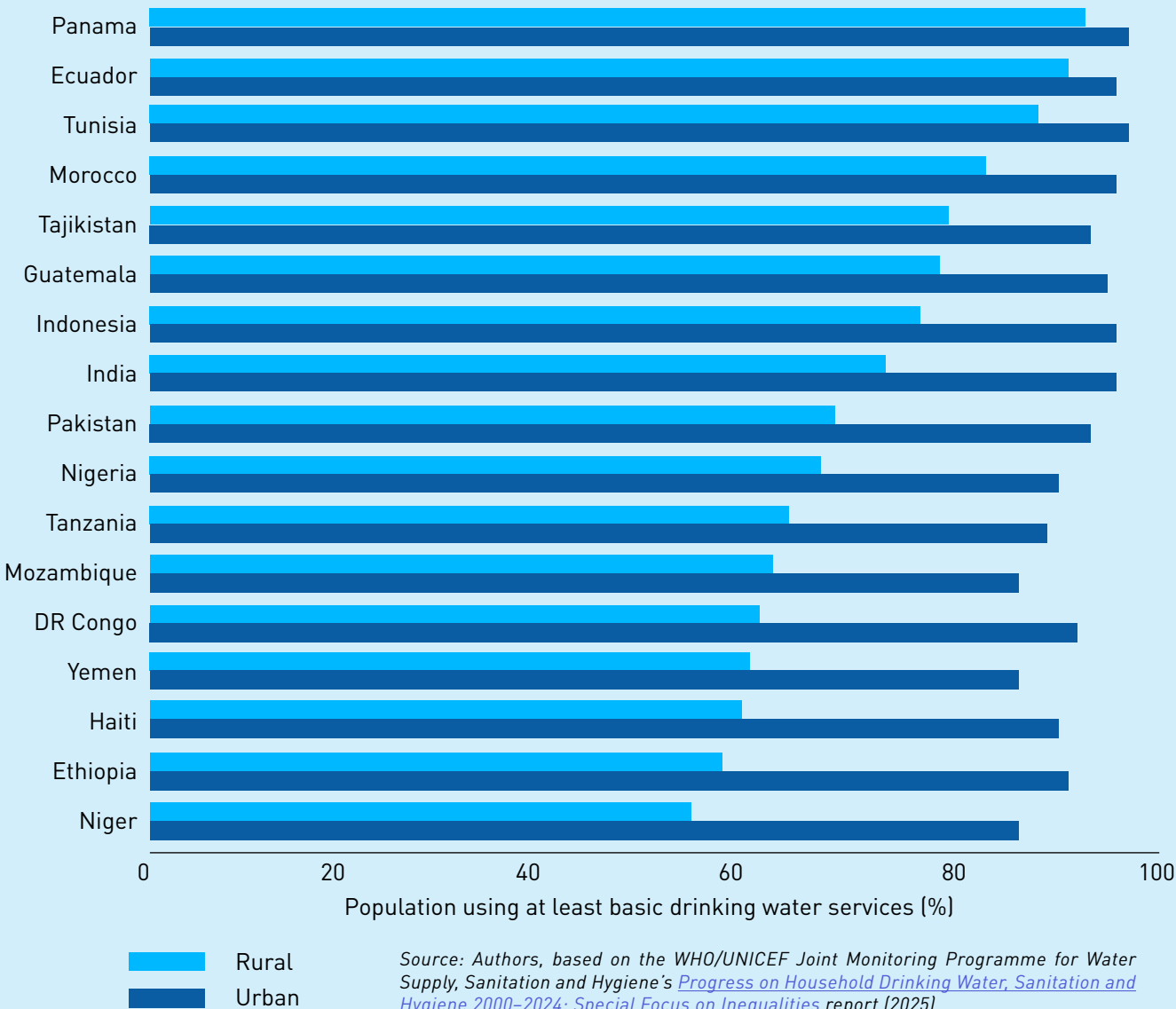
Global statistics on SDG 6 progress mask both marked differences between regions and deep and persistent inequalities. These inequalities only become visible – therefore opening the possibility to

act on them – through disaggregated national and subnational data.

The UN's 2018 [Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation](#) reminded readers that the 2030 Agenda's opening paragraphs pledge “no one will be left behind,” a central moral and political principle of the agenda. The report emphasized that inequality is multifaceted: access to water and sanitation is influenced by factors such as a country's gross national income, government stability, urban–rural disparities, inequalities *within* urban areas and differences in service provision across ethnic and cultural groups.

Figure 3.2.2 below shows urban–rural disparities in access to basic drinking water facilities for selected countries, using the latest available disaggregated national estimates.

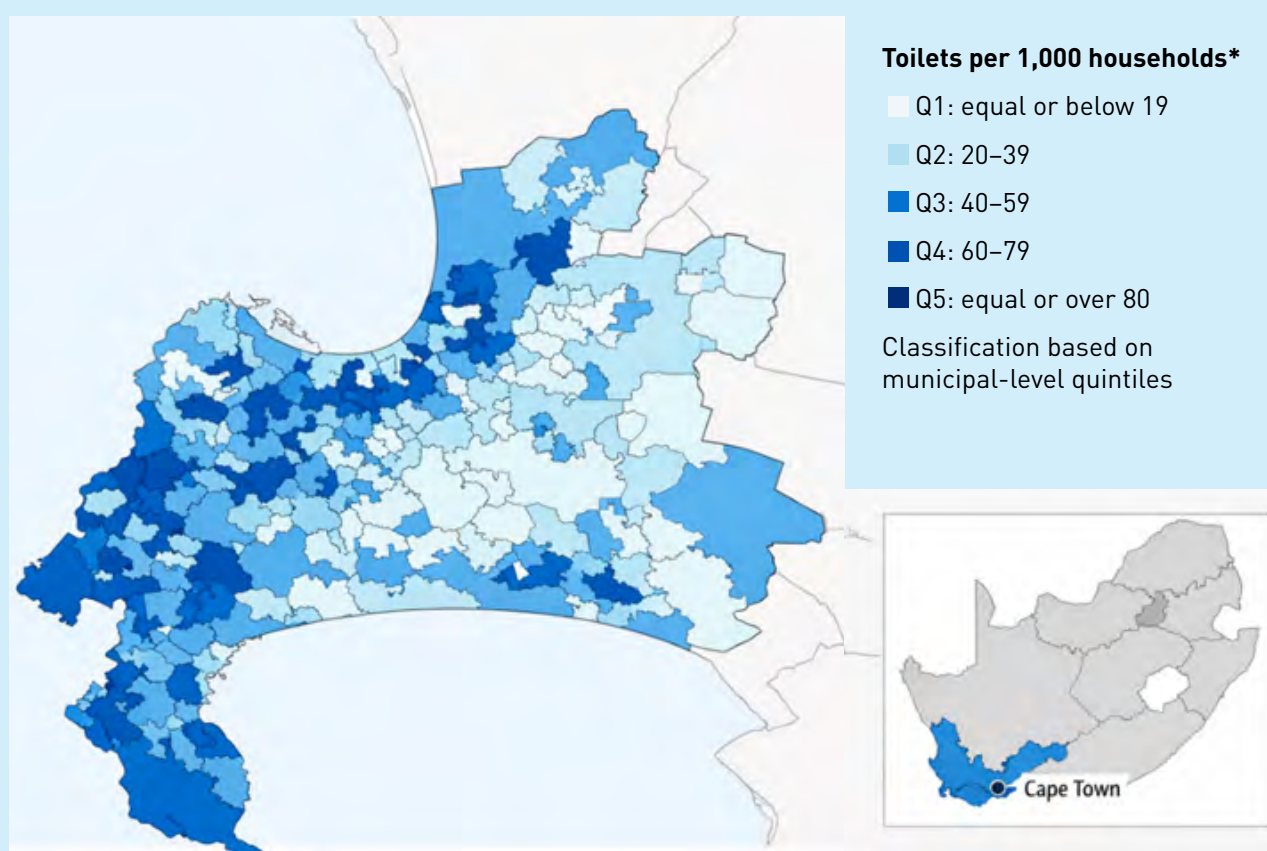
Figure 3.2.2 Urban–rural disparities in access to at least basic drinking water for selected countries



Based on national averages, access to basic drinking water services clearly varies widely between urban and rural areas. Such urban–rural disparities [remain significant](#) across income groups, highlighting the territorial nature of inequality and LRGs’ critical role in extending services to underserved rural and peri-urban areas. Addressing these disparities requires targeted territorial policies and adequate fiscal and administrative capacity at the local level.

Similar disparities also occur within administrative areas, with residents often experiencing different levels of access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services. **Targeting service provision to marginalized communities depends on the availability and quality of service data:** disaggregated data enables mapping patterns of vulnerability. For instance, Figure 3.2.3 below shows spatial differences in access to toilets in a municipality.

Figure 3.2.3 Inequalities in access to toilets in Cape Town, South Africa



*Toilets per 1,000 households = Number of toilets in pocket / Number of households in pocket x 1,000

Source: Authors, based on the City of Cape Town’s [Open Data Portal](#), dataset on basic services in informal settlements (2023)

THE IMPACT OF CLIMATE CHANGE ON THE WATER CYCLE FOR LRGs

The water cycle has become increasingly [erratic and extreme](#). As climate change accelerates hydrological extremes, LRGs are increasingly acting as front-line responders to water-related risks, confronting the combined challenges of water scarcity, flooding and deteriorating water quality.

During the 2015–2018 drought, the City of **Cape Town** (South Africa) demonstrated how local government leadership can mitigate acute water scarcity. Facing the prospect of “Day Zero” (when the city would have to switch off water services amid dwindling resources), the municipality implemented aggressive demand-management measures, public communication campaigns, pressure management, tariff reforms and diversification of water sources. These actions significantly reduced per capita water consumption and stabilized supplies, illustrating the critical role of city leadership in managing climate-related water crises.

In flood-prone cities such as **Semarang** (Indonesia), LRGs have led responses to increasingly frequent and severe flooding through integrated urban measures including improved drainage systems, retention basins, coastal protection, land use planning and community-based early warning systems. These interventions address both riverine and coastal flooding risks intensified by sea-level rise, land subsidence and extreme rainfall.

In Brazil, many municipalities have improved deteriorating water quality by expanding wastewater collection and treatment, supported by national frameworks but implemented locally. Investments in municipal wastewater infrastructure have reduced pollution loads in urban rivers and reservoirs, highlighting LRGs’ central role in addressing water quality challenges linked to urban growth and public health.

BOX 3.2.1 BUILDING FLOOD-RESILIENT URBAN WATER SYSTEMS IN BOR, SOUTH SUDAN

Since 2017, the town of Bor has been severely affected by recurrent flooding, leading to internal displacement and the loss of homes and crops. In response, the LRG treated water supply not as a humanitarian add-on but as an urban service responsibility, even under crisis conditions. Working together with national ministries and international development partners, the LRG incorporated climate resilience into the design of the Bor urban water supply system.

The project, launched in November 2025, includes several climate-resilient design features intended to ensure continued service during flooding events. These include the construction of a conventional water treatment plant with a capacity of 4,800 cubic metres per day built above the projected flood line, elevated storage and pumping infrastructure, and an expanded piped distribution network of approximately 53 kilometres. The system also includes 28 water kiosks to ensure equitable access for low-income neighbourhoods, a tanker filling station to support emergency distribution during disruptions, a water quality laboratory and a 750-cubic-metre steel storage tank to improve system reliability for the town’s rapidly growing population.

All these interventions respond directly to the needs of local residents, often in close proximity to local political leaders. Globally, LRGs are taking increasingly proactive steps to protect their communities from the impacts of too little, too much or too dirty water. However, they face a recurrent challenge: access to adequate technical skills and finance. This challenge particularly affects mid-sized or smaller cities and towns that struggle to attract specialized skills and have more limited revenue.

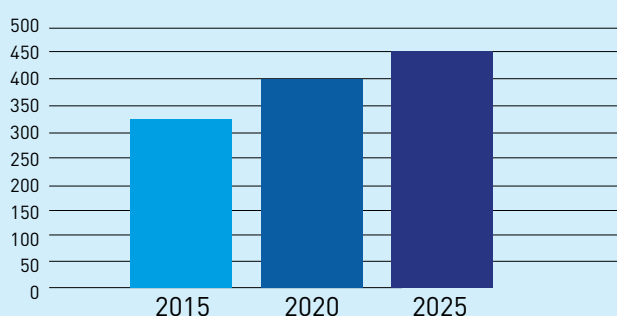
WATER AND SANITATION IN FRAGILE CONTEXTS

Fragility is a territorial condition resulting from the interaction of conflict, weak governance, climate stress and infrastructure vulnerability, rather than a fixed national characteristic. **In such contexts, water and sanitation infrastructure is both highly exposed to disruption and central to sustaining public health, livelihoods and social stability.**



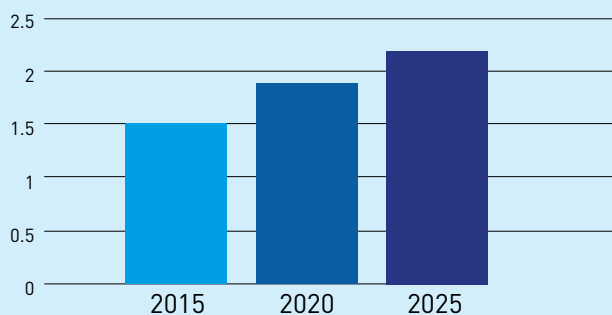
Source: This is Engineering, Unsplash

Figure 3.2.4 Number of water-related disasters per year (droughts, floods, storms), 2015–2025



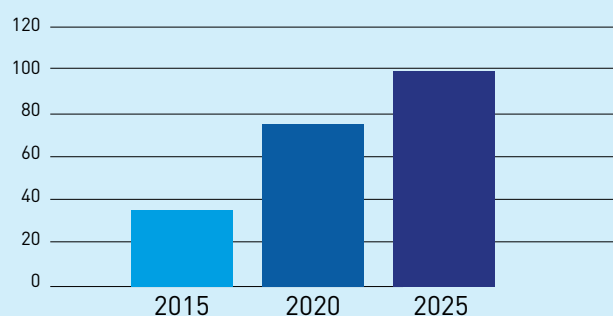
Source: Authors, based on the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction's [The Human Cost of Disasters: An Overview of the Last 20 Years \(2000–2019\)](#) report (2020) and the World Meteorological Organization's [“Weather-Related Disasters Increase Over Past 50 Years, Causing More Damage but Fewer Deaths”](#) article (2021)

Figure 3.2.6 Population in fragile and conflict-affected settings (in billions), 2015–2025



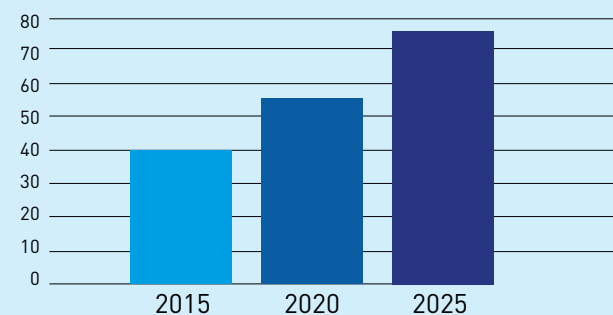
Source: Authors, based on the World Bank's [FY 2024 list of fragile and conflict-affected situations](#)

Figure 3.2.5 Water conflicts, 2015–2025



Source: Authors, based on the Pacific Institute's [Water Conflict Chronology](#)

Figure 3.2.7 Number of people internally displaced (in millions), 2015–2025



Source: Authors, based on the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre's [Global Report on Internal Displacement 2025](#)

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD's) *States of Fragility* 2025 report, in 2025, [2.1 billion people](#), equal to 25% of the world's population, were living in 61 contexts with high or extreme fragility. These contexts accounted for 72% of the world's extreme poor in 2024 and have affected humanitarian WASH needs. Over the last 15 years, and especially since 2019, the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance across the world has risen rapidly. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' [2025 humanitarian overview](#), by 2024, 307 million people needed humanitarian assistance – almost a fivefold increase. Forty-seven percent of these were living on the African continent. An estimated [173 million people](#) require WASH-related humanitarian assistance, representing 56% of the global total.

The OECD's report emphasizes that fragility manifests through failures in the social contract between citizens and the State; these failures are usually felt most directly through local service delivery, very often in the hands of LRGs. Furthermore, conflict and disasters frequently lead to rapid population movements into cities and secondary towns, creating intense pressures on local services.



3.2.3 Why LRGs are essential to achieving SDG 6

In most national legal frameworks for water and sanitation, primary responsibility for service delivery is delegated to LRGs, while policy development, overall regulatory frameworks and bulk water management remain national or regional competences. Municipalities or equivalent LRGs are typically mandated to ensure access to drinking water and sanitation services; manage local distribution networks; and in many cases, oversee wastewater collection, treatment and urban drainage. Higher tiers of government usually retain responsibilities for water resource management, standard-setting, financing frameworks, data collection and monitoring, and oversight, while LRGs manage day-to-day operations, infrastructure maintenance and service continuity. This multilevel allocation of mandates means that [achieving SDG 6 depends fundamentally on LRGs' capacity, resources and accountability](#) within nationally defined legal and institutional arrangements.

In France, municipalities are legally responsible for water supply and sanitation services, while river basin agencies manage water resources and quality. In South Africa, water resources are a national competence, but local municipalities are responsible for water and sanitation service delivery. In Brazil, municipalities hold constitutional responsibility for water and sanitation services, with states often playing a coordinating or regulatory role.

Table 3.2.2 Allocation of water and sanitation responsibilities among different tiers of government

Function	National	Regional	Local
Drinking water supply	National standards; financing frameworks; national regulation; consumer protection	Oversight of utilities in some countries; regional planning; intermunicipal coordination	Primary responsibility for service provision; operation and maintenance of distribution networks; local tariffs/bylaws (within national standards)
Sewage collection	National standards for sanitation; environmental regulation	Regional coordination where networks cross municipal boundaries	Core responsibility for collection systems; network expansion and maintenance
Wastewater treatment	National discharge standards; permitting frameworks	Larger regional treatment plants; technical oversight	Operation of local plants in many countries; connection policies; local enforcement
Drainage/stormwater	National design guidelines in some countries; disaster risk policy	Flood management planning in some contexts	Primary responsibility for urban drainage systems; maintenance; local flood mitigation
Water security (service continuity, drought resilience)	National water security strategy; emergency frameworks	Regional drought planning; interbasin coordination	Local contingency planning; demand management; leak reduction
Water resources management	Legal ownership of water; allocation regimes; national planning; transboundary waters	River basin or catchment management in many countries	Local catchment protection; groundwater protection zones; land use planning
Bulk supply infrastructure (dams, interbasin transfers, trunk mains)	Typically national leadership; major capital investment; regulation	Co-financing and regional planning in some countries	Limited role (except where municipal utilities operate bulk assets)

Source: Authors

Table 3.2.2 above shows how responsibilities for water and sanitation management are typically distributed across different tiers of government. The allocation of these responsibilities varies from country to country and depends on some fundamental aspects of State law such as whether it is a unitary state, a federal government or a strongly decentralized government. Roles are not mutually exclusive: national, regional and local competences frequently overlap and intersect, with shared responsibilities for planning, regulation, financing and implementation.

Water touches upon the three pillars of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental. According to the [United Nations World Water Development Report 2015](#), “Water resources, and the essential services they provide, are among the keys to achieving poverty reduction, inclusive growth, public health, food security, lives of dignity for all and long-lasting harmony with Earth’s essential ecosystems.” Researchers have pointed out [water’s central role in achieving the SDGs](#). For example, a group of

researchers reviewed 120 academic publications and found that [water security positively contributed to all SDGs](#), especially SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) and SDG 2 (Zero Hunger).

Not only are responsibilities for SDG 6 implementation largely held by LRGs, but international soft law also reinforces this principle. In line with the underlying principles of the 2030 Agenda, the 1992 Dublin Statement on Water and Sustainable Development sets out four principles that have strongly influenced national water law and policy worldwide. Principle 2 (participation) states that “water development and management should be based on a participatory approach, involving users, planners and policy-makers at all levels.” The accompanying text further emphasizes that [decisions should be taken at the lowest appropriate level](#) (the principle of subsidiarity), with full public consultation and user involvement.

The Dublin Statement served as an input to the UN Conference on Environment and Development in

1992, which led to three major conventions – the Convention on Biological Diversity, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification – and to Agenda 21. [Chapter 18 of Agenda 21](#) calls for delegating water resources management and services, where appropriate and legal, to lower levels of government. These principles and international instruments collectively reinforce the legitimacy of decentralized and territorially anchored water governance.

It follows from the principle of subsidiarity that LRGs are foundational to water governance. In many different respects, LRGs lie at the core of SDG 6 implementation. This section highlights four interrelated dimensions of LRG action in water governance: resource management, equity, service delivery and financing.

CATCHMENT MANAGEMENT, DISASTER RISK REDUCTION AND RESILIENCE

Over time, LRGs' water-related role has expanded from a primary focus on service provision (water supply and sanitation) to more integrated responsibilities spanning urban water systems, catchment stewardship and climate risk reduction. For integrated water resources management to balance competing needs for water at the basin level, these needs must be articulated through dialogue with local stakeholders. Catchments are lived spaces, and LRGs operate within subcatchments, regulating land use, settlements and infrastructure, while experiencing water risks such as water scarcity, floods and pollution directly. **They play a role in clarifying water needs across urban, peri-urban, rural and agricultural areas and in mediating between households, farmers, utilities, industries and ecosystems.**

SDG 6 implementation also depends on effective coordination across administrative and hydrological boundaries, including in transboundary and inter-jurisdictional river basins. While LRGs rarely hold formal mandates for basin-wide or transboundary water management, they play a critical role in ensuring coherence across jurisdictions through planning, service delivery, land use regulation and local risk management. LRGs contribute local knowledge, articulate territorially differentiated needs and implement agreed measures that give practical effect to basin-level strategies. In this way, subsidiarity does not conflict with basin-scale governance but underpins it: basin-wide objectives rely on coordinated local action to translate shared commitments into operational outcomes for water supply, sanitation, ecosystems and climate resilience.

A clear example of this is the Quito Water Fund in Ecuador. Established in 2000 by the municipal utility of Quito together with nongovernmental organizations and private users, it operates as a trust fund that finances conservation of the upper Andean watersheds supplying the city. Contributors include the [city water utility, hydropower companies, breweries and other water users](#), and the funds are invested in ecosystem protection, restoration, land stewardship agreements and watershed monitoring.

SOCIAL AND TERRITORIAL EQUITY AND THE GENDER AND ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINANTS OF WATER SECURITY

Addressing inequality is central to SDG 6 and the 2030 Agenda's commitment to "leave no one behind." LRGs play a decisive role in translating this ambition into practice. **As service authorities, LRGs are often responsible for extending water and sanitation services across entire supply areas, including low-income and informal neighbourhoods** where cost recovery is challenging but public health imperatives are strongest.

Many have therefore adopted a range of tools such as differentiated tariffs, cross-subsidies and other pro-poor financing mechanisms to balance financial sustainability with universal access. In sanitation, approaches such as citywide inclusive sanitation enable LRGs to combine diverse service models – networked and non-networked, public and private – within a single territorial framework, reflecting varied settlement patterns and income levels.

[Gender considerations](#) underscore the importance of local action as women and girls disproportionately bear the burden of inadequate water access and face heightened risks in unsafe sanitation environments. Finally, environmental determinants of water security – such as safe wastewater and faecal sludge management – depend on local oversight to ensure that services are not only accessible but safely managed and environmentally sustainable.

BOX 3.2.2 STRIVING FOR EQUITY AT THE CITY LEVEL: THE CASE OF DAKAR, SENEGAL

The municipality of Dakar exemplifies an effective approach to integrating social and territorial equity within a broader framework focused on environmental health. Since the mid-2010s, Dakar has progressively adopted a [citywide inclusive sanitation](#) approach to address persistent inequalities in access to safely managed sanitation across formal and informal neighbourhoods. Recognizing that a single service model could not meet the needs of the entire urban population, local and national authorities combined networked sewerage, on-site sanitation systems and faecal sludge management services within a unified territorial framework. Financing arrangements blended user tariffs, cross-subsidies and public investment – supported by development partners including the World Bank – to extend services to low-income areas where full cost recovery would otherwise be unattainable.

[Equity considerations](#) were central to this approach, with targeted measures to improve service coverage in underserved communities while reducing environmental and public health risks associated with untreated wastewater and faecal sludge. Dakar's experience illustrates how LRGs can operationalize the "leave no one behind" principle for SDG 6 through differentiated, financially sustainable and environmentally protective sanitation strategies.

LRGs, SDG 6.3, WASTEWATER TREATMENT AND DIGITAL MONITORING

SDG 6.3, which focuses on improving water quality through wastewater treatment and pollution reduction, often places LRGs at the centre of implementation. In many countries, LRGs are responsible for wastewater collection, treatment operations and compliance with discharge standards, even where national authorities retain regulatory oversight.

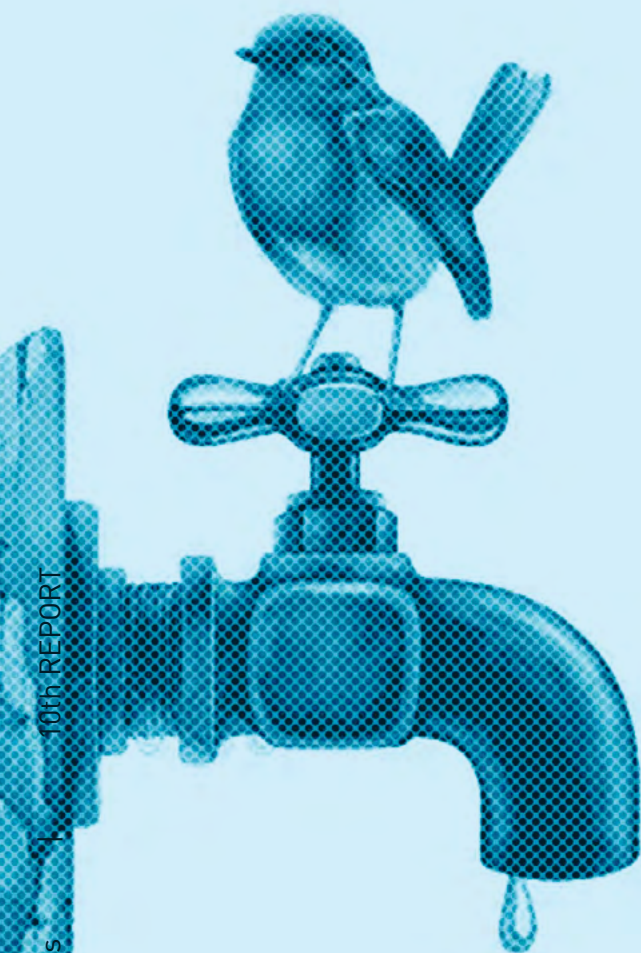
Beyond infrastructure provision, they increasingly monitor water quality through treatment plant data, effluent sampling, and in some cases, digital monitoring systems that support real-time reporting and performance management. These systems enable LRGs to track treatment efficiency, identify pollution hotspots, support regulatory compliance and contribute data to national monitoring frameworks. Wastewater treatment facilities are an important entry point for implementing circular economy approaches locally, enabling nutrient recovery and renewable energy generation.

For instance, as Section 3.2.4 will describe in more detail, Singapore's national water agency, the Public Utilities Board, uses a network of real-time sensors and digital monitoring systems to track water quality across reservoirs, treatment plants and distribution networks. **Singapore treats wastewater as a resource, not waste, reusing reclaimed water to fuel industries and blend into drinking water supplies.**

LRGs' ROLE IN FINANCING WATER AND SANITATION

As the authorities responsible for water and sanitation infrastructure, LRGs play a central role in planning investments and managing long-term operational and financial risks, but access to capital may involve national governments, utilities or development partners. Bringing in capital includes blending user revenues with public transfers, grants and concessional finance, as well as engaging with development banks and private operators where appropriate to fund infrastructure and long-term operations. Cities are responsible for service delivery across multiple sectors such as energy, transport and telecommunications, which opens up possibilities for cross-subsidization and co-development of infrastructure. LRGs also play a key role in designing tariff structures, cross-subsidies and affordability measures that reconcile financial sustainability with universal access.

In this way, **progress on SDG 6 depends not only on the availability of national or international finance but also on LRGs' institutional capacity to mobilize, combine and manage financial resources over the full life cycle of water and sanitation assets.**³ Where institutional mandates are not matched by adequate fiscal autonomy or access to appropriate financial instruments, SDG 6 implementation risks remaining fragile.



3.2.4 Global trends in SDG 6 localization: LRG responses and innovations

LRGs across the world are already playing a decisive role in translating SDG 6 from global commitment into local action. A growing body of comparative research – including analytical work by organizations such as the OECD and the World Bank, and practice-based knowledge generated through networks such as UCLG, ICLEI, C40 and Regions4 – shows how LRGs are adapting water and sanitation targets to territorial realities. **Localization extends beyond service delivery to integrated planning, climate resilience, watershed stewardship, social inclusion, institutional innovation and strengthened multilevel governance arrangements.**

In this process, LRGs act as key intermediaries between global goals and everyday governance, aligning SDG 6 objectives with local development strategies, infrastructure investment and community engagement. However, **innovations' scale and sustainability depend on the broader governance and financing environment including the alignment between institutional mandates and local fiscal capacity where LRGs operate.**

The following subsections build on this emerging evidence base to examine how each SDG 6 target is being localized in practice, illustrating the diverse ways in which LRGs contribute to water security, equity and sustainability across different regional and institutional contexts.⁴

SDG 6.1: ACCESS TO SAFE AND AFFORDABLE DRINKING WATER FOR ALL

At the local level, progress towards SDG 6.1 is driven largely by LRGs' capacity to expand and manage drinking water systems. This effort includes extending supply networks into underserved areas, improving water quality and reliability, and addressing territorial inequalities affecting health and wellbeing. In this context, **LRGs play a central role in the progressive realization of the human right to water, ensuring that services are accessible, safe and non-discriminatory.**

While national regulators typically define service standards and benchmarks, LRGs translate these into operational practice through infrastructure investment and day-to-day management. Beyond capital expenditure, sustainable progress requires adequate financing for operation and maintenance, supported by stable revenue streams that underpin the financial viability and bankability of water service providers.

LRGs translate national service standards into practice through infrastructure investment and day-to-day management.

Effective asset management enables LRGs to reduce non-revenue water – losses from leaks, theft or metering inaccuracies that represent water produced but not billed – and modernize ageing distribution systems. Advances in smart metering, artificial intelligence and leak detection can reduce water losses and improve water quality across service areas. Through these interconnected functions, LRGs ensure that water services move up the SDG service ladder towards safely managed, reliable and equitable supply.



Source: Wietse Jongsma, Unsplash

BOX 3.2.3 EXTENDING EQUITABLE WATER SERVICES IN BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA

In Buenos Aires, efforts to extend water and sanitation services to underserved informal settlements have driven progress towards SDG 6.1. While citywide coverage is high – 97.8% for piped water and 96.2% for sewerage – inequalities persist in low-income neighbourhoods. Over the past 15 years, the city has implemented upgrading programmes in areas such as Barrio Mugica, Barrio 20 and Rodrigo Bueno.

Interventions include the extension of water, sewerage and stormwater networks; housing improvements; and land regularization. In neighbourhoods such as Rodrigo Bueno, where many households had informal connections, regularization has improved service quality, enabled monitoring and reduced environmental and public health risks. By integrating infrastructure provision with social policy, the city illustrates how LRGs can address territorial inequalities and advance towards safely managed and equitable water access.

BOX 3.2.4 MIXED URBAN WASH STRATEGY IN SEMARANG, INDONESIA

The city of Semarang has pursued a mixed urban WASH strategy combining water supply expansion, sanitation upgrading, faecal sludge and wastewater management, water quality monitoring, and community campaigns for a clean river and end to open defecation. To extend safely managed water supplies, the West Semarang Water Supply Project initiated a public-private partnership to both expand clean water provision and reduce pressure on groundwater extraction.

BOX 3.2.5 ACCESS TO SAFELY MANAGED DRINKING WATER IN GHANA'S DISTRICTS AND MUNICIPALITIES

According to UN-Water's 2023 [SDG 6 country acceleration case study on Ghana](#), Ghana had the fastest improvement in safely managed drinking water coverage in Sub-Saharan Africa since 2000, reaching 41% in 2020 (up from 13% in 2000). Water supply is coordinated through Ghana Water Company Limited for urban areas and through the Community Water and Sanitation Agency for rural areas.

While these institutions coordinate action at the national level, implementation outcomes are strongly shaped at district and municipal levels. Metropolitan, municipal and district assemblies conduct local planning and coordination for WASH investments and service expansion, particularly outside major city networks. In rural and small town areas, district assemblies support service delivery through locally established water and sanitation management teams, which manage facilities, engage communities and support tariff-setting and oversight. These local arrangements help translate national targets into on-the-ground expansion and day-to-day functionality – key determinants of safely managed services. Recent assessments highlight the need to strengthen local capacity and accountability systems (including risk-based water quality management) to sustain gains.



Source: Jeff Ackley, Unsplash

In conflict-affected settings, delivering safely managed drinking water becomes more challenging, as infrastructure may be damaged, deliberately targeted, or disrupted by displacement and insecurity. In such contexts, LRGs often adopt adaptive, decentralized strategies to sustain minimum service levels, including temporary supply systems, emergency water trucking, localized treatment solutions and community-based management. **Protecting and restoring critical water infrastructure is both a humanitarian and public health priority, while maintaining basic operation and maintenance capacity helps to prevent system collapse.**

SDG 6.2: ACCESS TO ADEQUATE AND EQUITABLE SANITATION AND HYGIENE FOR ALL

Achieving SDG 6.2 largely depends on efforts by LRGs, which are closest to households and service realities. In many municipalities, conventional sewer networks cover only part of the urban area, leaving large populations dependent on on-site sanitation such as pit latrines and septic tanks. This makes it essential for cities to adopt locally tailored faecal sludge management systems – including safe pit emptying, transport, treatment and reuse or disposal – rather than relying solely on centralized infrastructure.

In this context, LRGs play a key role in the progressive realization of the human right to sanitation, ensuring services are safe, accessible, affordable and non-discriminatory, while guaranteeing dignity and safety of women and girls.

LRGs play a pivotal role in sanitation as the level of government closest to households and the everyday realities of service delivery.

LRGs must also address the sanitation and hygiene challenges of informal settlements, where land tenure, density and poverty limit conventional service delivery models. In dense neighbourhoods with limited space, tenure security and road access, municipalities may support shared or communal sanitation blocks, simplified sewers or container-based sanitation services with off-site treatment. As many households depend on on-site systems, cities are increasingly developing proactive faecal sludge management approaches – including licensing and regulating emptying services, establishing transfer stations, investing in treatment facilities and introducing scheduled desludging services to prevent

unsafe disposal. Effective sanitation governance therefore requires regulatory authority, enforcement capacity and sustained operational financing at the municipal level.

In climate-vulnerable areas, sanitation planning must respond to flooding, high water tables, drought and storm damage, often through integration with local land use planning and risk management. This effort may include promoting raised or flood-resilient toilets, sealed pits or tanks to prevent leakage, dry toilets in water-scarce contexts, and decentralized or nature-based systems such as constructed wetlands and gravity-fed membranes.

Approaches such as citywide inclusive sanitation support LRGs in planning a mix of technical solutions and service models across urban areas, ensuring that all residents – regardless of income level or settlement type – are progressively reached with safe, equitable and sustainable sanitation and hygiene services.

BOX 3.2.6 COMMUNITY-LED TOTAL SANITATION BY THE ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES OF TANZANIA

The Association of Local Authorities of Tanzania (ALAT) has promoted community-led total sanitation (CLTS) as a transformational approach for achieving SDG 6, particularly in sanitation, hygiene behaviour change and community empowerment. CLTS is a participatory approach that enables communities to analyze sanitation risks, trigger collective behaviour change and take local action to end open defecation. Emphasizing community ownership, social norms and self-investment rather than top-down infrastructure provision, it is widely applied by LRGs in rural and peri-urban settings. CLTS has a positive gender impact, particularly by involving women and girls in planning and implementation, including attention to menstrual hygiene.

Since adopting CLTS in 2012, Njombe District Council has emerged as a leading example. Under the national sanitation campaign, it implemented CLTS with strong political backing and structured monitoring from subvillage to council level. Reported outcomes show [household coverage of improved latrines](#) rising from 7.5% (2011) to 99.8% (September 2018) and functional handwashing facilities from 5.1% to 94%.

SDG 6.3: WASTEWATER TREATMENT

While national governments set standards and policies, LRGs are the frontline actors responsible for implementing SDG 6.3 on the ground. Their responsibilities span the entire wastewater chain – from collection and treatment to safe discharge or reuse. LRGs plan, finance and oversee sewerage networks and drainage systems that collect domestic, and in many cases, industrial wastewater.

LRGs' responsibilities extend throughout the entire wastewater chain, from collection and conveyance to treatment and the safe discharge or reuse of effluents.

In areas without full sewer coverage, they are also responsible for regulating and supporting on-site sanitation and faecal sludge services, ensuring that waste from septic tanks and pit latrines enters a managed system rather than being discharged into drains, rivers or open land. **By improving wastewater treatment and reducing pollution, LRGs help protect public health and contribute to the progressive realization of the human rights to water and sanitation.**

BOX 3.2.7 WASTEWATER AND ENVIRONMENTAL REHABILITATION IN ATYRAU, KAZAKHSTAN

Atyrau has implemented integrated measures to address environmental pressures linked to industrial activity and inadequate wastewater management. Rapid development of the oil and petrochemical sector has contributed to water pollution, groundwater impacts and the accumulation of untreated waste.

In response, the city has prioritized rehabilitation of wastewater infrastructure. Key interventions include reconstructing municipal treatment facilities, introducing biological treatment and disinfection, and consolidating sewage flows into a modernized system with a capacity of over 30,000 cubic metres per day. Treated wastewater is re-used for technical purposes, reducing environmental discharge.

At the same time, the “Tazalyq” project at the oil refinery is upgrading industrial treatment systems and replacing open evaporation fields with closed channels, reducing pollution of air, soil and groundwater. Complementary measures include reclamation of evaporation ponds and modernization of solid waste management.

Together, these efforts show how LRGs can address water quality challenges under SDG 6.3 by linking wastewater treatment, industrial regulation and environmental remediation.

BOX 3.2.8 IMPROVED WASTEWATER MANAGEMENT AND MANGROVE PROTECTION IN SANTA ROSA, ECUADOR

The canton of Santa Rosa, located in the southern coastal province of El Oro in Ecuador, has undertaken an integrated approach to advancing SDG 6 at the local level. The canton's jurisdiction includes part of the ecologically significant Archipiélago de Jambelí, which contains extensive mangrove ecosystems. The municipal government has prioritized the expansion, renovation and maintenance of sanitary sewerage and wastewater treatment systems, working in partnership with national financing institutions such as the Ecuador Development Bank, in order to reduce pollution loads entering rivers and coastal waters. These investments directly contribute to SDG 6.3 by improving wastewater management and safeguarding water quality.

Complementing infrastructure development, the canton has implemented reforestation and environmental restoration programmes in the upper Santa Rosa River Basin and in mangrove ecosystems within the Archipiélago de Jambelí, strengthening watershed protection and coastal resilience in line with SDG 6.6 on water-related ecosystems. Importantly, the municipality has coupled these measures with community outreach and dialogue processes – including awareness-raising sessions to build consensus around the special improvement levy (a local tax) following the execution of public works. These efforts have promoted transparency, local ownership and participatory decision-making consistent with SDG 6.b on community participation in water and sanitation management.

LRGs typically own or regulate wastewater treatment plants, either directly or through public utilities or contracted operators. They determine treatment levels based on environmental sensitivity, public health risks and financial capacity. Pollution control is often governed through partnerships linking LRGs with private operators, industrial zones and community groups for monitoring, compliance and source reduction.

Regional governments may also play a role where treatment facilities serve multiple municipalities, particularly in shared river basins. Effective governance requires adequate financing for operation and maintenance, staff capacity and performance monitoring – without which infrastructure quickly fails.

BOX 3.2.9 WASTEWATER TREATMENT AND REGIONAL SERVICE PROVISION IN PONTE DE LIMA, PORTUGAL

In Ponte de Lima, sustained investment in wastewater treatment and participation in the regional utility Águas do Alto Minho has driven progress on SDG 6.3. Through a multimunicipal system, the municipality has expanded treatment capacity and improved effluent quality in line with national and European standards.

Complementary measures include water quality monitoring in recreational waters and drinking water catchments, as well as the use of alternative water sources for irrigation and environmental awareness programmes. These actions contribute to pollution control and resource efficiency beyond the wastewater system itself.

This case illustrates how regionalized service provision, combined with local monitoring and environmental management, can support progress on SDG 6.3 while strengthening overall water governance.

Source: Ivan Bandura, Unsplash



SDG 6.4: PROGRESS ON WATER-USE EFFICIENCY

LRGs contribute directly to SDG 6.4 by improving water-use efficiency and supporting sustainable withdrawals at the territorial level. A key lever is reducing non-revenue water, addressing both physical losses from leakage and commercial losses from metering gaps and billing inefficiencies, thereby improving system efficiency and financial sustainability. An estimated 30% of water is lost as non-revenue water across the world. This situation presents a major opportunity for LRGs to improve operational efficiency and potentially increase revenue by [gaining more control over administrative systems and physical losses](#).

LRGs are central to water demand management through public awareness campaigns, pricing policies and incentives for wise water reuse.

Beyond supply-side measures, LRGs play a central role in demand management through public awareness campaigns, pricing policies and incentives that encourage responsible water use. **In water-scarce regions, they also support diversification and resilience of supply, often in coordination with basin or national water authorities**, through measures such as managed aquifer recharge, stormwater capture and reuse – helping stabilize groundwater levels and buffer variability. In this way, local water management contributes to the sustainable use of water resources, supporting the long-term realization of the human rights to water and sanitation. Together, these actions show how urban and regional water management can align operational efficiency with broader basin-level sustainability goals.



Source: Tyler Rutherford, Unsplash

BOX 3.2.10 WASTEWATER REUSE, SMART LEAK DETECTION AND SPONGE CITY APPLICATION IN SINGAPORE

Confronted with limited natural freshwater resources and rising industrial demand, Singapore has developed an integrated urban water strategy that combines technological innovation with sponge city principles, using nature-based urban planning to absorb, store and reuse water. Through its NEWater programme, led by the Public Utilities Board, wastewater undergoes advanced membrane treatment, reverse osmosis and UV disinfection, enabling large-scale reuse for industrial and indirect potable purposes. Advanced oxidation processes further address complex industrial effluents, contributing directly to SDG 6.3 on wastewater treatment and reuse.

At the same time, universal metering, real-time monitoring and smart leak detection have reduced non-revenue water to below 5%, advancing SDG 6.4 on water-use efficiency. Complementing these technological measures, Singapore's ABC (Active, Beautiful, Clean) Waters Programme integrates green roofs, restored waterways, rain gardens and multifunctional flood retention spaces into urban design. By enhancing stormwater capture, improving water quality and restoring aquatic ecosystems, these sponge city interventions contribute to SDG 6.6 while strengthening urban climate resilience. Together, these measures illustrate how dense Asian cities can combine circular water reuse with nature-based infrastructure to secure long-term water sustainability.

BOX 3.2.11 WATER TREATMENT AND REUSE COMBINED WITH WATER DEMAND REDUCTION IN MARRAKECH, MOROCCO

Marrakech offers a compelling example of water demand management and wastewater reuse in a context of increasing climate stress. Facing declining precipitation, rising temperatures and overexploited groundwater resources, the city has adopted a circular approach to water management. Since 2010, 1.5 million cubic metres of treated wastewater from its municipal treatment plant have been reused each year to irrigate golf courses, public parks (covering 414 hectares) and palm groves, re-

ducing pressure on potable water supplies.

The regional utility, Société Régionale Multiservices Marrakech-Safi (SRM-MS), has formalized agreements for reclaimed water use and operates a solar sludge drying facility covering 40,320 square metres, with dried sludge reused in cement and brick manufacturing. In parallel, the regional water authority, Tensift Water Basin Authority (ABHT), and SRM-MS have pursued water demand reduction measures. These included water audits in more than 100 public and private buildings in 2022 and infrastructure upgrades such as drip irrigation and leak detection. Combined with the preservation of traditional khettara groundwater channels, these measures illustrate how LRGs can integrate water reuse, demand management and circular resource recovery to advance climate-resilient implementation of SDG 6.

BOX 3.2.12 DEMAND MANAGEMENT AND WASTEWATER REUSE IN WINDHOEK, NAMIBIA

Windhoek has implemented an integrated water management strategy combining demand reduction, reuse and managed aquifer recharge to address chronic water scarcity. The city has long promoted water conservation through pricing policies, public awareness campaigns and strict demand management, maintaining relatively low per capita consumption. At the same time, treated wastewater and surface water are recharged into aquifers to store water for use during drought periods. Some 20% of the total water supply of the city comes from reclaimed wastewater. Efforts to reduce system losses and improve operational efficiency complement these measures: non-revenue water in Windhoek is less than 20%, exceptionally low by world standards. Together, these approaches illustrate how LRGs can enhance water-use efficiency and resilience under SDG 6.4.

BOX 3.2.13 SMART METERING AND WATER DEMAND REDUCTION IN TORONTO, CANADA

The City of Toronto implemented a citywide smart water meter programme, enabling real-time monitoring of water consumption and early detection of leaks. Following the rollout, per capita water use declined substantially – from approximately 440 litres per person per day in the late 1980s to about 270 litres per day, representing a reduction of nearly 40%. Smart metering allowed the utility to identify losses, improve billing accuracy and promote conservation among consumers. The resulting reduction in water demand improved overall water-use efficiency and enabled the city to defer costly infrastructure expansion. This case illustrates how local government adoption of digital water management technologies contributes directly to SDG 6.4 by improving the productivity and sustainability of water use.

SDG 6.5: INTEGRATED WATER RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

LRGs make an essential contribution to integrated water resources management under SDG 6.5.1 by linking basin-scale planning with territorial realities. They frequently participate in catchment or river basin committees, providing technical data on local water resources, land use, infrastructure and service demands. LRGs also support water allocation and licensing by integrating these into spatial planning and service provision. Through their oversight of urban growth, agriculture and industry, they help anticipate evolving water demand and pressures on resources.

LRGs connect basin-level water governance with territorial planning, translating integrated water resources management into practice.

BOX 3.2.14 COLLABORATIVE WATER GOVERNANCE AND INTEGRATED WATER RESOURCES MANAGEMENT IN LUSAKA, ZAMBIA

In Lusaka, efforts to localize SDG 6 have increasingly emphasized decentralized governance and multistakeholder coordination as key elements of integrated water resources management. Recognizing the importance of local engagement, authorities have promoted participatory decision-making and cooperation across communities, neighbouring jurisdictions and sectoral stakeholders.

These approaches align with broader initiatives such as the Lusaka Water Security Initiative, which brings together public institutions, utilities, private actors and civil society to address groundwater protection, pollution control and water security in a rapidly growing urban context. Given Lusaka's reliance on a vulnerable karst aquifer, coordination across administrative and hydrological boundaries is essential.

By strengthening local governance, fostering partnerships and promoting shared responsibility, Lusaka demonstrates how integrated water resources management can be operationalized through collaborative, decentralized approaches that link urban service delivery with basin-level water management.



Source: Lisa Marie Theck, Unsplash

LRGs are important drivers of transboundary water cooperation (SDG 6.5.2) and collaborative projects on shared water systems, infrastructure and risk management on the ground, particularly where they depend on bulk water supplies from distant sources.

BOX 3.2.15 THE LESOTHO HIGHLANDS WATER PROJECT

The Lesotho Highlands Water Project, the world's largest international water transfer scheme, supplies urban areas around Johannesburg, South Africa. Its development contributed to the establishment of basin-wide governance arrangements, including the Orange-Senqu River Commission.

SDG 6.6: PROTECTION AND RESTORATION OF WATER-RELATED ECOSYSTEMS

LRGs play a significant role in protecting and restoring water-related ecosystems, as they often hold responsibilities for land use planning, watershed management and environmental regulation. **Through spatial planning decisions, LRGs can prevent encroachment on wetlands, safeguard riparian zones and integrate nature-based solutions into urban and rural development.**

By embedding ecosystem considerations into territorial planning, LRGs contribute directly to maintaining natural systems that sustain water availability, quality and resilience.

They also oversee local conservation initiatives, river restoration projects and green infrastructure that enhance water retention, reduce pollution runoff and protect biodiversity. In many regions, **LRGs collaborate with basin organizations, farmers, community groups and environmental agencies to balance ecological protection with economic activities.** By embedding ecosystem considerations into territorial planning and service provision, LRGs contribute directly to maintaining the natural systems that sustain water availability, quality and resilience, including being involved in catchment management outside their territory.

BOX 3.2.16 IMPROVED WATER SERVICES AND ECOSYSTEM PROTECTION IN SAN VICENTE, ECUADOR

The canton of San Vicente (Manabí Province, Ecuador) has pursued both institutional and ecosystem-based approaches to advance SDG 6. To strengthen water supply governance, the canton participates in a regional initiative – supported by national and international partners – to assess and improve water treatment infrastructure and ensure a more reliable potable water supply for local communities.

In parallel, San Vicente legislatively established and expanded the Municipal Conservation and Sustainable Use Area. This area covers tens of thousands of hectares, including forests, mangroves, riparian corridors and watershed recharge zones to protect ecosystems that sustain water resources. These conservation measures enhance hydrological resilience and safeguard biodiversity, while municipal authorities continue to prioritize water access improvements through partnership with external development actors. Together, these efforts contribute to SDG targets 6.1, 6.3, 6.6 and 6.b by improving water governance, protecting water-related ecosystems and building participatory, locally tailored management frameworks.

BOX 3.2.17 URBAN ECOSYSTEM RESTORATION AND WETLAND MANAGEMENT IN ROSARIO, ARGENTINA

Rosario has advanced the protection and restoration of water-related ecosystems through an integrated programme known as the Environmental Triptych. This initiative brings together three major green areas – Los Tres Cerros Municipal Reserve, Bosque de los Constituyentes and Regional Sur Park – covering over 2,000 hectares of wetlands and peri-urban ecosystems linked to the Paraná River Delta.

These areas have been restored and managed to enhance ecological functionality, support biodiversity and improve urban resilience. As wetlands, they play a key role in regulating stormwater runoff, reducing flood risks and filtering pollutants, while also contributing to climate mitigation through carbon sequestration.

BOX 3.2.18 MANAGED AQUIFER RECHARGE AND DESALINATION FOR CLIMATE RESILIENCE IN PERTH, AUSTRALIA

The city of Perth has developed one of the world's most advanced groundwater replenishment schemes based on managed aquifer recharge. Highly treated wastewater is purified using ultrafiltration, reverse osmosis and ultraviolet disinfection before being injected into deep confined aquifers for long-term storage and later recovery. Commissioned in 2017 and expanded in 2022, the scheme now has the capacity to recharge up to 28 million cubic metres of purified recycled water per year, contributing approximately 5% of the city's drinking water supply and helping to restore depleted aquifers.

At the same time, Perth has rapidly diversified its water supply through seawater desalination: two large reverse-osmosis desalination plants now supply around 40–50% of the city's drinking water, providing a rainfall-independent source that significantly reduces vulnerability to drought.

SDG 6.A: WATER- AND SANITATION-RELATED COOPERATION AND CAPACITY

Although indicator 6.a.1 focuses on national-level coordination of international support, LRGs often translate this assistance into tangible improvements on the ground. Many externally financed water and sanitation projects are implemented subnationally, where LRGs are responsible for planning, service delivery and asset management. Their capacity to prepare investment plans, manage infrastructure and ensure inclusive service provision influences how effectively international funds are used. In addition, decentralized cooperation initiatives – including partnerships between municipalities and regional authorities across countries – contribute to technical exchange, institutional strengthening and city-to-city peer learning in the water sector.

UN-Water's [Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking Water 2025](#) (GLAAS) report found that despite the USD 9.1 billion in water- and sanitation-related official development assistance disbursed in 2022, financial and technical assistance must be more effectively aligned with national and subnational priorities. Ensuring such alignment requires meaningful involvement of LRGs in planning and investment decisions.

LRGs convert official development assistance into results on the ground. Their capacity to prepare investment plans, manage infrastructure and ensure inclusive service provision influence the effectiveness of international funds.

Source: Gowtham Agma, Unsplash



BOX 3.2.19 DECENTRALIZED COOPERATION: A WATER OPERATOR PARTNERSHIP IN BAHIR DAR, ETHIOPIA

A practical example of decentralized cooperation under SDG 6.a is provided by the water operators' partnership facilitated by the Global Water Operators' Partnerships Alliance in Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. In a context where low-income households without private connections paid significantly higher prices for water from public standpipes, the partnership focused on strengthening the [operational and social performance](#) of the local water utility, Bahir Dar Water and Sewerage Service.

Through peer-to-peer technical assistance and capacity building, the partnership supported developing a pro-poor financing mechanism enabling access to household connections via affordable, interest-free loans. Adopted and funded by the municipality in 2024, this mechanism enabled 100 low-income households – representing over 500 people – to secure improved and more equitable access to water services. The case illustrates how locally anchored, solidarity-based partnerships can translate international cooperation into tangible service delivery outcomes for marginalized populations.



Source: Leo Rivas, Unsplash

BOX 3.2.20 DECENTRALIZED COOPERATION: A WATER OPERATOR PARTNERSHIP IN BANJARMASIN, INDONESIA

In the city of Banjarmasin, low-income neighbourhoods located alongside rivers are referred to as floating communities. Collaboration between the city's sanitation and wastewater company, Perumda PALD Banjarmasin; Malaysia's national sewerage company, Indah Water Konsortium; and Waterlinks in Indonesia enabled access to sanitation services in hard-to-reach floating communities.

Tailored desludging solutions such as mobile units, three-wheelers and floating pontoons were introduced to access the narrow pathways to floating houses in Kampung Biru and Kampung Hijau, two low-income areas in Banjarmasin, as pilots. Standard operating procedures and operational tools were co-developed and adopted to ensure effective, scalable practices in other areas. Aside from technical improvements, inclusion of low-income communities in planning and decision-making was just as critical for sustaining services. A citywide public awareness campaign on sanitation and targeted information-sharing in the pilot zones transformed public perceptions on wastewater and faecal sludge. Stakeholder engagements also helped introduce new tariff frameworks and embed sanitation into broader governance.

SDG 6.B: COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Unlike technical service indicators (e.g. 6.1.1 or 6.3.1), which draw on household surveys and utility statistics, no routinely collected global dataset systematically quantifies indicator 6.b.1 for most countries. Both the UN-Water SDG 6 synthesis reports and the annual GLAAS analyses highlight that **governance indicators (including 6.b.1) suffer from patchy coverage, with many countries unable to provide comparable or complete data.** This gap helps explain weak monitoring of SDG 6's [governance and enabling environment dimensions](#).

Indicator 6.b.1 is the only SDG 6 indicator that explicitly refers to local participation, highlighting LRGs' central role.

As the only SDG 6 indicator that explicitly refers to local participation, 6.b.1 highlights LRGs' central governance role. **LRGs facilitate community engagement, support local water committees and integrate stakeholder input into planning and service management.** They also supply key information on how participatory mechanisms function in practice, yet weak data flows and coordination between local and national reporting systems often limit their visibility in official SDG reporting.



Source: Thomas Kinto, Unsplash

BOX 3.2.21 INSTITUTIONALIZING PARTICIPATION: THE COMMUNITY LAND TRUST IN SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO

A notable example of SDG 6.b in practice is the [Community Land Trust](#) established along the Caño Martín Peña in San Juan, Puerto Rico. There, residents of informal settlements mobilized to address severe water pollution, flooding and lack of sanitation infrastructure. Through a sustained participatory process, residents worked with public authorities to co-develop a comprehensive land use and environmental rehabilitation plan, formalized through national legislation in 2004. Central to the model is collective land ownership and governance, enabling residents to directly shape decisions on housing, infrastructure and canal restoration while safeguarding against displacement. Community representation structures, notably the Grupo de las Ocho Comunidades (G-8), ensure ongoing citizen oversight, accountability and inclusion in implementation. The case demonstrates how institutionalized participation can empower local communities to drive equitable water and sanitation improvements while strengthening tenure security and environmental management.

BOX 3.2.22 A COMMUNITY-LED PATH TO FRESHWATER CARE IN OTAGO, NEW ZEALAND

A further illustration of SDG 6.b is provided by the [Waiwhakaata \(Lake Hayes\) restoration initiative in Otago](#), where community participation has been central to freshwater governance. In response to longstanding water quality degradation, the local community – led by the Friends of Lake Hayes Society – played a decisive role in shaping the restoration agenda, commissioning scientific assessments and engaging directly with regional authorities.

Through a structured “listening journey,” the Otago Regional Council rebuilt trust and co-developed, with community actors and mana whenua (Māori customary authorities), an updated lake management strategy adopted in 2025. Governance arrangements explicitly embed shared decision-making, with responsibilities distributed across public authorities, community groups and Indigenous representatives. Ongoing public engagement, transparent data sharing and community-led monitoring ensure accountability and sustained involvement. The case highlights how participatory governance, grounded in local stewardship and knowledge co-production, can drive long-term, inclusive water quality restoration.

3.2.5 Challenges faced by LRGs

In progressing towards the realization of SDG 6, LRGs face considerable challenges also linked to the SDGs' overall achievement. Many of these reflect structural gaps between delegated responsibilities and the institutional, fiscal and regulatory conditions required for effective implementation.

UNDERFINANCING AND LIMITED REVENUE-RAISING CAPACITY

Different estimates exist regarding the total investment required to achieve SDG 6. In 2020, the World Resources Institute put the total figure at [USD 1.04 trillion](#), while a World Bank report estimated [USD 1.37 trillion](#). By 2023, the global community widely recognized that existing investments were insufficient and that [a sixfold increase in investment was needed](#) to achieve this objective. **Beyond the aggregate investment gap, a critical question concerns how financial flows are structured and accessed subnationally.**

LRGs play a central role in financing water and sanitation services, yet their capacity to mobilize stable revenue is often constrained. Tariffs remain the primary source of operational financing, but both physical losses (e.g. leakage) and commercial losses (e.g. metering inaccuracies and non-payment) reduce the revenue base. In many cases, revenues are also diverted to subsidize other services, underscoring the need to ringfence funds for reinvestment in operation, maintenance and network expansion. While infrastructure rehabilitation can improve cost recovery, utilities often lack the upfront capital required. At the same time, social tariffs and affordability policies – essential for ensuring equitable access – can limit cost recovery. Intergovernmental transfers and public subsidies therefore play a critical role, but these are frequently unpredictable or insufficient, constraining access to external financing.

Strengthening the [financial sustainability and fiscal autonomy of local water services](#) is therefore essential to achieving SDG 6.

INACCESSIBILITY OF CLIMATE FINANCE

LRGs face significant structural barriers in accessing climate finance for water and sanitation resilience, despite being at the front line of climate impacts. First, most global climate funds, including the Green Climate Fund, operate through nationally accredited entities, limiting direct subnational access. Second, preparing climate-resilient water projects requires complex technical studies, fiduciary safeguards, and environmental and social assessments that often exceed municipal capacity.

Third, climate finance mechanisms typically require co-financing or sovereign guarantees, which many LRGs cannot provide. Fourth, funding instruments often favour large-scale national programmes, with smaller municipal projects unable to reach minimum thresholds. While some metropolitan governments access climate finance through national partnerships, many LRGs remain effectively excluded.

Similar to the challenge above, strengthening [financial sustainability and fiscal autonomy of local water services](#) is crucial for advancing climate-resilient SDG 6 implementation.

FRAGMENTATION OF MANDATES AND INSUFFICIENT DECENTRALIZATION

LRGs often face fragmented institutional mandates and incomplete decentralization in the water and sanitation sector. Responsibilities for water resources management, drinking water supply, wastewater treatment, environmental regulation and climate adaptation are frequently distributed across multiple ministries and agencies, creating overlapping directives, inconsistent regulatory requirements and complex reporting requirements.

At the same time, decentralization reforms in many countries have transferred operational responsibilities for service provision to LRGs without fully devolving decision-making authority, fiscal autonomy or long-term planning powers. **This situation results in a misalignment between delegated responsibilities and available resources, creating unfunded or underfunded mandates, limiting LRGs' capacity to implement integrated and climate-resilient water strategies.**

Clarifying mandates, strengthening vertical coordination and aligning financial and regulatory frameworks with local responsibilities can accelerate progress towards SDG 6, consistent with the principles of subsidiarity and effective multilevel governance. Failure to address these misalignments risks slowing localization despite strong political commitments.

WEAK INTEGRATION OF LRGs IN SDG 6 MONITORING AND REPORTING

Central ministries typically lead national SDG 6 reporting, with data consolidated through national focal points and custodian agencies. **In many cases, LRGs are consulted informally or ad hoc but not systematically integrated into decision-making or reporting frameworks. Similarly, they often lack**

formal recognition as key implementation partners in SDG 6 territorial delivery. As a result, subnational data, practical implementation challenges and local innovation may be insufficiently reflected in national SDG 6 assessments and Voluntary National Reviews.

Strengthening LRGs' structured participation in national coordination platforms and formalizing their role in data collection and reporting – including through Voluntary Local Reviews, Voluntary Subnational Reviews and multilevel SDG coordination platforms – would enhance the accuracy, ownership and effectiveness of SDG 6 implementation.

DATA GAPS AND LOCAL SDG 6 MONITORING

Progress on SDG 6 is constrained not only by financing and governance gaps but also by data limitations and insufficient local monitoring capacity. While data on access to drinking water and sanitation (targets 6.1 and 6.2) are relatively well developed through household surveys and national monitoring systems, information on wastewater treatment (6.3), water-use efficiency (6.4), integrated water resources management (6.5), ecosystem protection (6.6), and the means of implementation targets (6.a and 6.b) remains uneven and often incomplete.

LRGs often lack the technical and financial capacity to monitor all 11 SDG 6 indicators, particularly those requiring complex environmental or financial reporting. At the same time, they often possess detailed operational data – on service coverage, non-revenue water, infrastructure performance and local participation – that are generated through service delivery and local management systems but are not consistently integrated into national statistical or SDG reporting frameworks.

Strengthening local monitoring systems and embedding subnational data more formally into national reporting processes – including by improving interoperability between local operational datasets and national SDG monitoring systems – would improve the accuracy, ownership and policy relevance of SDG 6 assessments.

RAPID POPULATION GROWTH IN SECONDARY CITIES AND INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS

Rapid population growth, particularly in secondary cities and expanding informal settlements, presents a structural challenge to achieving SDG 6 at the local level. Secondary cities in particular often face more

limited financial, technical and institutional capacity than large metropolitan areas, despite experiencing some of the fastest rates of urban population growth. **In many regions, urban populations are growing faster than LRGs' capacity to plan, finance and implement water and sanitation infrastructure.** As a result, service provision must continuously expand not only to close existing access gaps but also to accommodate new households entering the urban fabric.

Informal and peri-urban settlements often develop without prior infrastructure planning, increasing the cost and complexity of retrofitting water supply and sanitation systems. When demographic growth outpaces infrastructure rollout, gains in service coverage can be offset – making progress towards universal access appear slower despite substantial investment.

Addressing this challenge requires forward-looking urban planning, anticipatory infrastructure investment and stronger coordination between land use planning and water service delivery.

A MOVING RISK PROFILE: CLIMATE CHANGE CAN REVERSE SERVICE GAINS

Climate change poses a compounding challenge to LRGs in achieving SDG 6: they are both on the front line of climate impacts and responsible for implementing many adaptation measures on the ground. Increasingly frequent and intense floods, droughts and extreme weather events can rapidly reverse service delivery gains by damaging water and sanitation infrastructure, contaminating water sources and disrupting hygiene systems. Flooding can overwhelm wastewater treatment plants and latrines, leading to disease outbreaks, while prolonged droughts strain water supply systems and reduce source reliability.

These shocks place significant financial and administrative burdens on LRGs, diverting resources from planned expansion to emergency response and reconstruction. At the same time, integrating climate resilience into WASH infrastructure – through flood-proof design, diversified water sources or upgraded treatment systems – adds technical complexity and cost to already constrained investment programmes. Nature-based solutions, watershed protection and ecosystem restoration can also play an important role in strengthening the climate resilience of territorial water systems. Without systematic support for local climate adaptation, progress towards universal and safely managed services under SDG 6 remains vulnerable to reversal.

EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE OF PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS AND UNEVEN CONTRACTUAL POWER

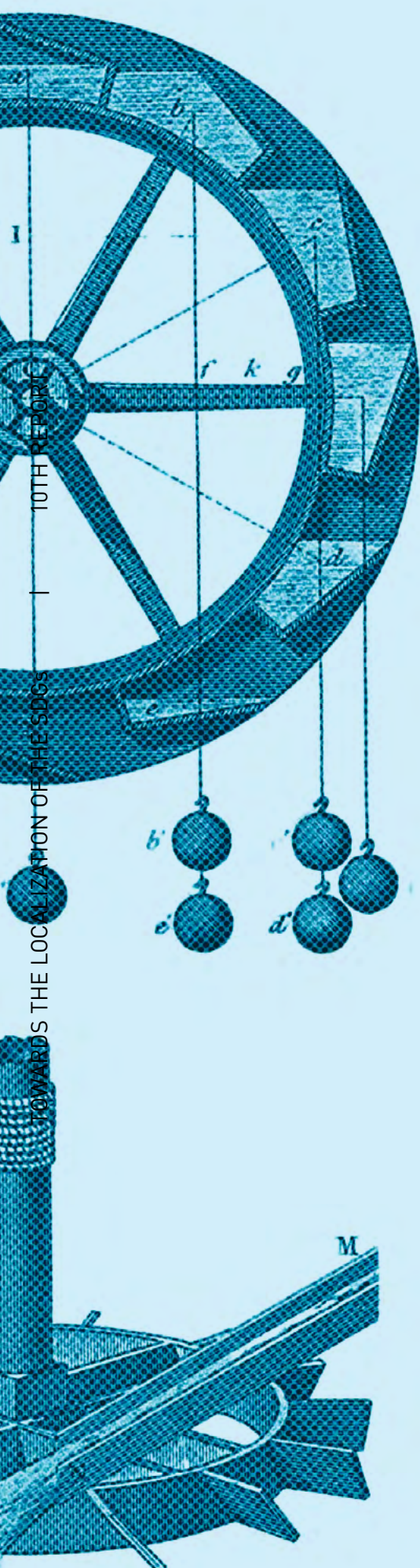
Public-private partnerships are often promoted as a mechanism to mobilize private finance and technical expertise for water and sanitation infrastructure, particularly amid public resource constraints. However, **they are not a universal solution. Their effectiveness depends strongly on the regulatory, institutional and financial context in which they operate.** LRGs frequently face governance challenges in structuring, negotiating and regulating such partnerships. Effective public-private partnerships require detailed contractual provisions on service standards, tariff structures, risk allocation, investment obligations and performance monitoring.

When large international operators are involved, LRGs may face asymmetries in technical expertise, legal capacity and negotiating power, potentially leading to contracts that do not adequately safeguard public interests. These asymmetries can be particularly pronounced in smaller municipalities or secondary cities with limited access to specialized legal and financial expertise. Limited regulatory and oversight capacity can constrain authorities' ability to monitor compliance, enforce performance standards or renegotiate terms when circumstances change.

Strengthening local regulatory frameworks and contract management capacity proves critical for ensuring such arrangements contribute effectively and equitably to achieving SDG 6, including through transparent procurement processes, balanced risk allocation and strong public oversight mechanisms.



Source: Sommai, Envato



3.2.6 Conclusions and policy recommendations

To meet all the SDG 6 targets, the global community must significantly intensify efforts. Accelerating progress will depend not only on making sectoral reforms but also on strengthening the institutional and financial conditions that enable localization, including more effective multilevel governance arrangements and stronger alignment between national commitments and local implementation capacities.

ACCELERATE SDG 6 IMPLEMENTATION THROUGH STRONGER SUBNATIONAL CAPACITY

The need for increased action led to the launch of the SDG 6 global acceleration framework in 2020 and laid the basis for the 2026 UN Water Conference, which aims to accelerate SDG 6. Often, where progress on SDG 6 is happening, it is happening locally; where progress is stalling, local constraints frequently explain part of the delays.

Local examples – whether smart metering in Toronto, managed aquifer recharge in Perth, inclusive sanitation in Dakar or water demand reduction in Marrakech – show that **SDG 6 implementation picks up speed when LRGs translate national commitments into operational systems, adapting global goals to territorial realities and service delivery contexts.**

By contrast, subnational constraints can stall progress on SDG 6; these include weak revenue bases, fragmented mandates, insufficient decentralization, limited access to climate finance, and inadequate monitoring capacity, as well as structural gaps between the responsibilities assigned to LRGs and the institutional, financial and regulatory frameworks that enable them to act effectively.

Five identified accelerators – financing, data and information, capacity development, innovation and governance – should largely be directed at regional and local implementation. Doing so in practice requires moving beyond sectoral approaches and clearly recognizing the territorial dimension of water governance and service delivery. **In other words, acceleration strategies must explicitly prioritize subnational implementation capacity.**

Financing windows, climate funds and technical cooperation programmes should be designed to reach municipalities more directly, by either simplifying access or strengthening national–local intermediation mechanisms, while ensuring national governments remain central partners in enabling coherent multilevel implementation frameworks. Without this recalibration, global commitments risk remaining structurally disconnected from the level at which implementation occurs. Each of these accelerators operates most decisively at local and regional levels, where policies, infrastructure investment and service delivery converge.

PLACE LRGs AT THE HEART OF THE POST-2030 FRAMEWORK ON WATER

Despite delays in implementing SDG 6, the very existence of this self-standing global goal on water in the 2030 Agenda reflects UN Member States' growing recognition that demands on water resources are intensifying and both pollution and climate change are increasing stress on freshwater systems. Having SDG 6 as a self-standing goal sends an important message that water and sanitation are central to human development, environmental integrity and economic activity.

Looking ahead, the upcoming UN Water Conference in December 2026 will devote an interactive dialogue to the topic of water in multilateral processes. As the international community begins to reflect on the post-2030 development agenda, it needs to rethink how global water goals are framed, measured and governed.

The institutional realities of service delivery warrant more explicit recognition within global water and sanitation frameworks. In many countries, LRGs hold full or partial responsibility for providing, operating and maintaining water and sanitation services. **Multilateral processes need to recognize the mandate for SDG 6 implementation is largely subnational.**

Discussions on the future global water framework should place LRGs at the heart of the advisory process, while giving them an explicit operational mandate to implement global goals within a strengthened multilevel governance structure.

Doing so entails:

- Strengthened formal roles for LRGs in multilateral water dialogues
- Enhanced representation within UN-Water processes and post-2030 negotiations
- Financing instruments that recognize LRGs' mandates and improve subnational access to investment and climate finance
- Monitoring systems that embed subnational data and recognize local reporting initiatives such as Voluntary Local Reviews and Voluntary Subnational Reviews
- Capacity-building strategies aligned with local competences and support for long-term institutional strengthening at the territorial level

SUPPORT LRGs TO LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND

LRGs play a decisive role in translating the 2030 Agenda's ambition to "leave no one behind" into practice at the territorial level, where inequalities in access to services are most visible and can be most directly addressed. **Reaching marginalized populations lies at the heart of realizing the human rights to water and sanitation.** Urban-rural disparities, intra-urban inequalities, conditions in informal settlements and marginalization of certain groups can be best addressed locally.

As service authorities, LRGs are often responsible for extending water and sanitation services across entire supply areas, including low-income and informal neighbourhoods. In these areas, cost recovery can be challenging, but public health imperatives are strongest. Many LRGs have therefore adopted a range of tools such as differentiated tariffs, cross-subsidies and other pro-poor financing mechanisms to balance financial sustainability with universal access. They use locally adapted service delivery models to operationalize social inclusion objectives.

In sanitation, approaches such as citywide inclusive sanitation enable LRGs to combine diverse service models – networked and non-networked, public and private – within a single territorial framework, reflecting varied settlement patterns and income levels. Inequality is a multifaceted problem, determined by differences in service provision between urban and rural areas, within urban areas and across different ethnic and cultural groups in society, among other factors. Such regional and local problems often have regional and local solutions.

Multilateral frameworks must therefore move beyond aggregate national coverage figures and recognize subnational inequalities. Doing so requires stronger territorial diagnostic and monitoring systems capable of identifying inequalities within and between territories. Targeting fragility hotspots – such as the Sahel, Horn of Africa and parts of the Middle East – requires coordination that links basin-level governance with municipal service resilience. In such contexts, strengthening local institutional capacity and protecting essential water services can contribute directly to social stability and conflict prevention. Protecting water infrastructure is not only a service function but a stabilizing public good.

PUT THE PRINCIPLES OF PARTICIPATION AND SUBSIDIARITY INTO PRACTICE FOR WATER GOVERNANCE

LRGs are the building blocks of water governance. They operate within subcatchments, regulating services, land use, settlements and infrastructure, while experiencing water risks such as water scarcity, floods and pollution directly. **Achieving SDG 6, including its targets related to WASH, catchment management, disaster risk reduction and resilience, depends fundamentally on LRGs' capacity, resources and accountability within nationally defined legal and institutional arrangements.** This is in line with the second Dublin principle on participation – which also clarifies that decisions need to be taken at the lowest appropriate level (the principle of subsidiarity), with full public consultation and users' involvement.

LRGs are essential for clarifying different water needs across urban, peri-urban, rural and agricultural zones and mediating between households, farmers, utilities, industries and ecosystems. In this sense, they play a central role in translating integrated water governance principles into operational decisions at the territorial level. LRGs are foundational to water governance within coherent multilevel governance systems linking basin management, national regulation and territorial service provision. Likewise, through intermunicipal collaboration, basin-level coordination and decentralized cooperation initiatives, LRGs contribute to building shared responses to water scarcity, climate risks and transboundary water challenges.

IMPROVE AVAILABILITY OF DISAGGREGATED DATA TO ACCURATELY ASSESS SDG 6 PROGRESS

When the 2030 Agenda was agreed, many SDG 6 targets and indicators were relatively new. Building monitoring and reporting systems requires considerable investment in human and technical resources. Measuring progress on some indicators has been delayed by the dual challenge of limited reporting and data inconsistencies.

For the one SDG 6 indicator that explicitly mentions the local level (6.b.1), available data suggest that measurable values for this indicator are limited. Global estimates are not yet robust because many countries have not reported comprehensive data across LRGs. However, **targeting inequalities depends strongly on the availability of disaggregated data at national and subnational levels.**

A persistent tension exists between where SDG 6 data is generated and where it is consolidated. LRGs collect granular operational data – on service coverage, wastewater treatment efficiency, non-revenue water, participation mechanisms and infrastructure performance – yet national reporting frameworks often do not systematically integrate these data streams.

Strengthening local monitoring systems, including through capacity development and technical support, and recognizing and embedding subnational data more formally into national reporting processes, will enhance the accuracy, ownership and policy relevance of SDG 6 assessments.

As discussions on the post-2030 water framework advance, **multilateral actors should consider embedding structured local reporting mechanisms within global monitoring architecture.** Strengthening the interface between water sector reviews, Voluntary National Reviews, Voluntary Subnational Reviews, Voluntary Local Reviews and SDG reporting that includes territorial realities could enhance accuracy, ownership and accountability.

FINANCE SDG 6 AND CLIMATE RESILIENCE AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Progress on SDG 6 depends not only on the availability of national or international finance but also on financial architectures that recognize the territorial nature of water service delivery and investment planning.

As the authorities responsible for water and sanitation infrastructure, LRGs are often the primary entities that plan investments, access capital and manage long-term operational and financial risks. This work includes blending user revenues with public transfers, grants and concessional finance, as well as engaging with development banks and private operators when appropriate, to fund infrastructure and long-term operations, while balancing financial sustainability with affordability and equity objectives.

LRGs' capacity to prepare investment plans, manage infrastructure and ensure inclusive service delivery influences how effectively international funds are used. In many contexts, these financial arrangements require strong coordination between national fiscal frameworks and local investment planning. Likewise, **strengthening LRGs' direct and predictable access to climate and development finance is essential to translating global commitments into territorially anchored outcomes.** Doing so may include simplified access modalities, strengthened

national–local financing channels and dedicated facilities supporting subnational investment pipelines.

Water is increasingly the public face of climate change, and LRGs are often the first responders to climate-related water risks. Drought, flood, salinization and contamination are not abstract risks; they are operational challenges for municipal utilities and local administrations. As illustrated by Cape Town’s drought response, Bor’s flood-resilient infrastructure and Perth’s diversification through desalination and groundwater replenishment, LRGs are managing an increasingly volatile hydrological cycle. Yet climate finance remains largely inaccessible to them due to accreditation barriers, fiduciary requirements, minimum scale thresholds and sovereign guarantee constraints.

For the multilateral system, **the lesson is not merely to increase climate finance for water but to restructure access pathways to support local adaptation projects – often smaller in scale but high in impact.** Strengthening intermediary mechanisms capable of aggregating local projects and facilitating access to international finance can help bridge this gap. SDG 6 cannot be achieved without embedding climate resilience into water and sanitation infrastructure. This integration must be supported institutionally and financially at the subnational level.



Source: Gary Mailich, Envato

3.3

Localizing culture: How LRGs contribute to SDG 11.4 and the cultural dimension of global agendas



3.3.1 Background: Culture and cultural rights in resilient, sustainable cities and territories

The international community has long acknowledged cultural diversity as an important heritage of humanity – the product of thousands of years of history and all peoples' collective contributions through their languages, ideas, techniques, practices and creations. Diversity includes multiple layers and can be found within each individual's unique identity. It forms an integral part of cities' and territories' essence; it enriches them, gives them a narrative and makes them attractive places to live and explore.

Alongside diversity, culture reveals common aspects of humanity, helps us find meaning in stories and ways of being that are different from our own, sparks inspiration, and allows us to express emotion and care and learn from others. Through culture, we can recognize one another as equals. **Culture is a common good**, which requires protecting and sharing. It can also serve as **the glue connecting communities, enabling care for one another in a world facing many critical challenges**.

For years, many local and regional governments (LRGs) worldwide have placed culture at the centre of their vision of sustainable, resilient cities and communities. We can only achieve sustainable development if citizens make meaning of the places they inhabit, and if we properly acknowledge the world's diverse ways of life, knowledge and aspirations, which involve different paths towards sustainability. Likewise, effective human development requires fully considering the value of cultural factors such as heritage, creativity, diversity and knowledge.

Recognizing cultural diversity goes hand in hand with affirming universal human rights and fundamental freedoms. Culture can only enable sustainable development if every person can fully exercise their human rights, free from discrimination.

Cultural rights are an integral part of human rights. No one can appeal to cultural diversity to infringe upon, nor limit in scope, human rights guaranteed by international law. The cultural freedoms of individuals and communities both stem from and precondition real democracy. Cultural rights serve as the backbone of the Global Taskforce's approach to culture in sustainable cities, ensuring that no one and no place are left behind in accessing and participating in cultural life, and that diverse cultural expressions and legacies are represented and acknowledged.

Accordingly, **this paper examines how LRGs contribute to achieving SDG target 11.4**, how cultural aspects have been partly **mainstreamed across several SDGs** and how future global sustainable development agendas could be **better localized and more effective by giving cultural aspects a more prominent position**.

3.3.2 Local governments' contributions to target 11.4 and to culture in the SDGs

Target 11.4, which calls to “strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage,” is the most explicit reference to cultural aspects in the SDGs. It reinforces the local dimension of cultural life and emphasizes **the important role of LRGs and localization strategies in protecting cultural heritage**, and more broadly, in caring for cultural life. Indeed, [several analyses](#) have emphasized the close connection between developing sustainable urban areas and protecting cultural heritage.

In addition to target 11.4, other SDG targets contain **explicit or implicit references to cultural aspects**. Notably, these include targets 2.5 (use of genetic resources and associated traditional knowledge), 4.7 (education to promote a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development), 8.3 (creativity and innovation in job creation and entrepreneurship), 8.9 and 12.b (local culture and products in sustainable tourism), 16.4 (recovery and return of stolen assets) and 16.10 (public access to information and protection of fundamental freedoms).¹

Globally, the assessment of target 11.4 relies on indicator 11.4.1, which measures total per capita expenditure on the preservation, protection and conservation of all cultural and natural heritage. The data are disaggregated by different categories, including level of government. Efforts to track [this indicator’s global achievement](#) have experienced challenges, such as the lack of available data in many countries. Nevertheless, the number of countries reporting data has rapidly increased over the past few years, reaching 92 countries in 2025, compared to only 30 in 2020.

The existing data indicate [marked disparities](#) in the amount spent by developed and developing countries (with a median of USD 83 and USD 4, respectively, between 2019 and 2023) as well as in the [average share of local government expenditure on cultural and natural heritage](#) within total public expenditure on heritage. One-third of reporting countries indicate that over 50% of expenditure on heritage came from local governments, while another one-third noted local government expenditure amounted to 25% or less. Country-level investment in heritage protection over time has [varied significantly](#): while 57% of countries reported increased investment in 2024 relative to 2021, other countries (including approximately half of those from Western Europe, North America, and Latin America and the Caribbean) decreased spending.

However, comprehensively understanding efforts to safeguard cultural heritage **goes beyond quantitatively measuring expenditures to qualitatively analyzing aspects related to policies, strategies, plans and measures**. Examining governance mechanisms, citizen participation, diversity, and the goals and values inspiring the preservation, interpretation and use of tangible and intangible cultural heritage also proves important. When we look at local policies and strategies addressing

heritage, their close connections with broader development challenges become obvious. For instance, climate change, commercial exploitation and accelerated urbanization affect efforts to protect and safeguard heritage. Interpreting and understanding the relevance of heritage today also requires sophisticated approaches – recognizing and engaging with multiple interpretations of heritage in diverse and polarized societies, and drawing inspiration from knowledge and practices of the past to address contemporary challenges. A qualitative, in-depth analysis can shed light on the meaning of heritage and its policy dimension.

In this respect, [previous analyses undertaken by the Global Taskforce](#) have underscored, for instance, how **cultural heritage policies should integrate diversity and inclusion concerns**. They should consider different voices and stories of citizens and residents, integrate a gender lens and a cultural rights approach and factor cultural heritage into approaches to the climate crisis. **Cultural policies, practices and actors are pivotal for achieving all the SDGs.** Failing to include cultural components that could boost SDG implementation, or to address identified culture-related constraints that could prevent their achievement, would be a missed opportunity.

Many cities and LRGs include cultural rights, heritage, creativity and diversity as substantial components of their sustainable development policies and strategies, promoting democratic, caring communities and SDG localization. Evidence from many cities and territories around the world illustrates how they integrate cultural heritage – and culture more broadly – into these policies and strategies. The following subsections highlight seven specific ways.

PROTECTING AND REVITALIZING CULTURAL HERITAGE TO ADVANCE THE SDGs

By identifying, safeguarding and promoting tangible and intangible heritage assets that contribute to quality of life, local identity and community building, several cities and local governments evidence the multiple ways in which heritage policies intersect with many SDGs.

In **San Antonio** (USA), for instance, the [Strategic Historic Preservation Plan](#), developed with strong community input and buy-in, outlines opportunities to educate and engage the community about cultural heritage and sustainable development practices. This effort contributes to preserving the city's unique sense of place, economic competitiveness and authenticity while considering social equity in



Source: Jack Ward, Unsplash

programme delivery (exemplifying contributions to SDGs 4, 8, 10, 11 and 17).

In **Brazzaville** (Republic of Congo), the [Poto-Poto Cultural Circle](#), based in a national heritage building renovated as a cultural centre, has become the hub for a broad urban network of artists and sociocultural actors. It illustrates how a long-term cultural vision can simultaneously foster the creativity of local young people, preserve heritage, diversify the local economy and encourage people to live together (SDGs 4, 8, 9 and 11).

Meanwhile, in **Novi Sad** (Serbia), the [renovation of four historic heritage areas](#), which involved engaged, constructive dialogue with citizens and cultural actors, contributed to transforming decades-long mistrust into trust and sparking inclusive development. A subsequent evaluation identified multiple impacts in areas related to SDGs 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 16 and 17.

INTEGRATING CULTURAL HERITAGE INTO APPROACHES FOR CARING, INCLUSIVE CITIES

Framing local strategies within cultural considerations and drawing on the rich wealth of intangible knowledge, cultural practices and tangible heritage assets can contribute to improving inclusion, participation and policy effectiveness.

For instance, **La Paz** (Bolivia) implemented traditional medicine centres known as [Qullañ Utas](#), which intertwine culture with care for life. The centres provide health services and information to users – integrating traditional Indigenous knowledge and medical practices, fostering the use of native languages and using an intercultural approach (SDGs 3, 10, 11 and 17).

Meanwhile, in **Malmö** (Sweden), the [City Archive](#) includes a focus on human rights. It recognizes diverse heritages and combats racism and discrimination through regular collaborations with civil rights and LGBTQIA+ movements, Black archives, the Finnish-Swedish minority and the Roma community (SDGs 4, 10, 11, 16 and 17).

CONNECTING CULTURAL HERITAGE PRESERVATION WITH INCLUSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Several LRGs have adopted strategies and programmes that recognize the potential of cultural heritage to influence innovation and creativity, attract tourism and act in synergy with economic strategies. At the same time, they have taken measures to ensure economic benefits are balanced with social inclusion and the multiple values of heritage.

In **Lisbon** (Portugal), for instance, the [Lojas com História](#) (Historic Shops) programme seeks to preserve shops with a historic value. It provides rent protection and contributes to their preservation while energizing and reinvigorating the commercial activities essential for their existence (SDGs 8, 11 and 12).

Meanwhile, the **Greater Amman Municipality** (Jordan) has implemented [policies and measures](#) to strengthen traditional handicrafts through workshops and training courses, fostering innovation in heritage practices and enhancing cultural tourism and youth employment in heritage-related activities (SDGs 8, 10 and 12).

RECOGNIZING CULTURAL HERITAGE AS AN ASSET IN CLIMATE ACTION

Some local and regional efforts to address the climate emergency have mapped, disseminated and integrated traditional knowledge and practices, as well as other cultural assets, illustrating the important role of culture in climate action.

In the [Historic Centre](#) of **Morelia** (Mexico), for instance, local strategies have promoted reusing existing buildings, urban landscapes and monuments for new purposes. These efforts reduce stress on the environment and enhance the circular economy and contemporary creativity without losing heritage values (SDGs 3, 4, 11, 12 and 17).

Meanwhile, the state of **California** (USA) conducted a [cultural heritage and climate action integration analysis](#) as part of a comprehensive effort to understand how culture intersects with the climate change-related work of its boards, departments and agencies. The initiative analyzed areas where culture or heritage was already playing a role and areas where it could add new value. A [subsequent analysis](#) identified synergies with 13 SDGs.

PLACING ACCESS TO CULTURE AS A CENTRAL ASPECT IN RIGHTS-BASED CITIES

By addressing obstacles hindering access to and participation in culture and placing equity at the centre of cultural strategies, LRGs demonstrate their commitment to human rights for all.

The [Culture for All](#) project in **Xi'an** (China), which aims to expand citizens' access to cultural opportunities, provides an example of this. It has involved major investments in building neighbourhood libraries and small museums at metro stations. The project has also enhanced collaboration among various theatres in planning and presenting free performances, among other initiatives involving effective leadership, financial contribution, extensive advocacy and partnerships. Such efforts have contributed to SDGs 3, 4, 8, 10 and 11.

In **Montevideo** (Uruguay), [cultural policies have integrated a gender perspective](#). This integration included identifying gender gaps, addressing visible and invisible forms of discrimination and abuse, recognizing women's contributions, raising awareness and establishing a dedicated equality team within the Department of Culture. Overall, this work has addressed SDGs 4, 5, 10, 11 and 17.

The city of **Yopougon** (Côte d'Ivoire) has designed and implemented several initiatives that see [culture as a key factor in fostering social cohesion](#) and broadening employment opportunities and civic participation among young people, addressing SDGs 1, 4, 8, 10, 11, 12 and 17.

FOSTERING PARTICIPATION IN CULTURAL LIFE FOR MORE DEMOCRATIC CITIES

Policies committed to encouraging everyone's participation in cultural life frequently serve to empower disadvantaged or marginalized groups and can support creating more plural and inclusive governance.

One example is the [Capital of Youth Culture](#) initiative in **Gwanak-gu** (Republic of Korea), which aims to actively engage youth in the local community and public policy processes and to enhance the cultural rights of young people who have been socially excluded. By doing so, it has responded to local challenges such as youth alienation and mental health needs. Young people have supported designing and implementing local policies and engaged in creative activities, shifting from beneficiaries to policy leaders and contributing to SDGs 3, 8, 10, 11, 16 and 17.

Meanwhile, the [Ortaklaşa initiative](#) led by the **Marmara Municipalities Union** (Türkiye) and the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts has promoted collaboration between civil society and local governments in the cultural sector, fostering innovative local partnerships and emphasizing the realization of cultural rights as central to local democracy. The initiative has supported new approaches to governance and management and fostered learning, research and the design of new practical tools, addressing SDGs 10, 16 and 17, among others.

CONNECTING CULTURAL VALUES WITH LOCAL SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGIES

Several cities and communities have developed sustainability strategies that integrate cultural visions, narratives and values to foster inclusive, locally relevant and effective approaches.

For example, the [Bilbao City of Values](#) project developed by **Bilbao** (Basque Country, Spain) has strengthened cultural values as the backbone of sustainable development. It brought together a wide cross-section of local stakeholders in a participatory process to develop a "Bilbao Charter of Values" and implement several joint activities, fostering equal access to culture and citizens' enhanced participa-

tion in cultural activities (SDGs 9, 10, 11, 16 and 17).

In **Ramallah** (Palestine), the [Moving Culture Forward](#) initiative emphasizes the role of culture as a tool for resilience and resistance under occupation and during the war in Gaza. It involves the promotion of cultural practices to maintain social cohesion, as well as international networking and solidarity, touching on SDGs 10, 16 and 17 in particular.

The areas of work and examples described in the subsections above illustrate the manifold connections between heritage, culture and sustainable development, evidencing how **localized initiatives contribute not only to target 11.4 but also to numerous other SDGs**. While the SDGs' lack of more explicit references to cultural aspects has not prevented LRGs from taking action, **the absence of an integrated framework, such as a dedicated Culture Goal, has arguably hindered more robust investment in culture** as part of sustainability efforts. The next sections further explore this issue.



Source: Toa Heftiba, Unsplash

3.3.3 Culture in VNRs, VSRs and VLRs: A short analysis

The [Culture 2030 Goal](#) campaign, an initiative that brings together several global and regional civil society initiatives, was first established during the consultation process that led to the adoption of the 2030 Agenda. Subsequently, it has continued to call for recognizing culture as part of achieving the SDGs and broader sustainability efforts. Over the past few years, the campaign has analyzed the presence of cultural aspects in Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), Voluntary Subnational Reviews (VSRs) and Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs). Cultural initiatives contribute to achieving many SDGs, yet the absence of an integrated framework – such as a standalone Culture Goal – prevents culture from taking a more substantial place in national and local approaches to the SDGs.

Recent analyses, including on [references to culture in VNRs submitted in 2025](#) and similar [developments between 2022 and 2025](#), find that over one-half of VNRs include references to cultural aspects across SDGs outside of explicit culture-related targets. Indeed, an analysis of references to culture broken down by clusters of SDGs demonstrates that **cultural actors or factors are relevant in every policy area**. The SDG clusters most frequently referenced within VNRs submitted in 2025 include agriculture, environment and climate (i.e. SDGs 2, 12, 13, 14 and 15); community and resilience (SDG 11); and growth, jobs and innovation (SDGs 8 and 9). VNRs also reference other SDGs, albeit to a lesser extent.

VNRs, VSRs and VLRs address different aspects of the relationship between culture and sustainable development. Whether culture is seen as an enabler of sustainable development (e.g. as a determinant of policy effectiveness) or as a barrier to it (e.g. where cultural factors and practices prevent the achievement of development goals, most notably around gender inclusion), the need to understand and address cultural behaviours and attitudes to achieve lasting change is clear. In many cases, these reviews also explicitly acknowledge that the arts, culture and heritage sectors have a unique power to make this happen.

An [analysis of 73 VLRs submitted until 2021](#) found that **74% included a cultural dimension in 2030 Agenda implementation**, with substantive narratives on the matter. LRGs integrate culture in diverse ways, ranging from high-level policy frameworks to practical project implementation, dedicated cultural plans and supporting aspects of other policy goals. While no comprehensive analysis of VLRs has been conducted in recent years, several recent VLRs illustrate how LRGs continue to place culture in their localization strategies:

- In its [2023](#) and [2025](#) VLRs, for instance, **Buenos Aires** (Argentina) emphasizes culture, sports and tourism as one of the five core areas of its local development strategies. At both the strategic and programmatic levels, the city views cultural participation and cultural heritage preservation as an end in themselves as well as a contribution to local objectives around health and wellbeing, inclusive economic development and social inclusion.
- The 2024 [VLR](#) presented by **Subang Jaya** (Malaysia) presents examples of how participation in cultural activities contributes to women's empowerment and employability. It describes the close connections between safeguarding traditional knowledge and preserving natural habitats due to the cultural significance of local forests.
- As part of its 2024 [VLR](#), **Basildon** (UK) involved artists and creative collectives and organizations in designing participatory activities to consult marginalized groups in the process of drafting the report and raising awareness about the SDGs. Among other strategic aims, the local 2024–2028 Corporate Plan includes ideas to harness the borough's creative and cultural potential.
- The 2023 [VLR](#) by the **Emboreet village** (Manyara, Tanzania) illustrates the cultural dimension of implementing the SDGs in a variety of ways. The village's efforts to raise awareness of and localize the SDGs are integrated into traditional governance mechanisms. Initiatives to empower women and support their engagement in economic activities include supporting traditional crafts through specific microfinance schemes. The VLR recognizes that progress on achieving some SDGs, such as SDG 5 (gender equality), is being slowed down by traditional gender roles; addressing this requires actively engaging with cultural factors.
- In line with the international Culture 2030 Goal campaign and the belief that “addressing the transformations required to meet the challenges of the 2030 Agenda cannot be achieved without a cultural approach,” **Strasbourg** (France) added an SDG 18 to address culture. As described in its [VLR and territorial assessment](#) of 2015–2023 developments, specific targets include promoting access to culture, promoting the message of peace and democracy, preserving cultural heritage, promoting cultural rights through amateur cultural practices, fostering artistic and cultural education, supporting new creativity and promoting bilingualism and regional culture. The VLR also identifies synergies between culture

and other SDGs, including those addressing education, climate action and international partnerships.

Overall, based on evidence from VLRs, VSRs and VNRs, LRGs appear to **address culture as a distinctive objective in their SDG strategies more frequently than national governments**. In particular, [VLRs](#) pay specific attention to issues such as cultural identity, diversity and rights; knowledge, education and cultural facilities; tangible heritage and spatial design; protection, management and economy of culture; and intangible heritage and performing arts.

Despite stakeholders' general understanding of the importance of culture for sustainable development, **culture acquires a more central position particularly in SDG localization**. In this respect, the two-pronged strategy of localizing the SDGs and providing an integrated framework for culture in sustainable development through a dedicated Culture Goal could enable more effective strategies – combining cultural sensitivity and contextualization, inclusive and diverse representation and participation, the protection of cultural heritage and the promotion of creativity.



Source: Roberto Carlos Roman Don, Unsplash

3.3.4 The way forward: Towards a Culture Goal

Building on the evidence presented in previous sections, this final section outlines proposals and examples on how a dedicated Culture Goal in the post-2030 Agenda could take shape. It relies on work undertaken in recent years by the Culture 2030 Goal campaign, including broad-ranging consultations and an indicator mapping and expert assessment. This work led to **the presentation of a [draft Culture Goal in September 2025](#)**, on the eve of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's Mondiacult 2025 conference. Such work also builds on culture and sustainability efforts by many cultural organizations, activists and governments over the years.

Ultimately, proposing a Culture Goal **aims to fill a gap in mainstream approaches to sustainable development**. Cultural aspects are necessary in sustainability and the SDGs' achievement because they respond to the individual and collective need to make meaning of the society we inhabit and our relation to the planet and to one another. Cultural factors are a critical component of SDG localization strategies, adapting the goals to local circumstances and ways of doing. Cultural participation not only supports developing one's identity and expressing human dignity but also contributes to other development goals related to social cohesion, civic participation and public space.

These aspects have frequently been neglected – partly due to being seen as secondary, partly due to doubts about the ability to capture them in concrete, measurable targets. The proposed Culture Goal helps alleviate those doubts.



A CULTURE GOAL

isn't a way of promoting a particular culture or a particular understanding of culture



A CULTURE GOAL

affirms the importance of connecting cultures and human experiences



A CULTURE GOAL

proposes mechanisms to support and promote all aspects of culture in their diversity

Source: Culture 2030 Goal campaign

With the motto “Ensure Cultural Sustainability for the Wellbeing of All,” the proposed Culture Goal outlines an integrated framework that could be implemented at national, regional and local levels. Indeed, some of its proposed targets address areas in which LRGs have already demonstrated their expertise and value-add. These areas often include key aspects of local cultural life, such as the exercise of cultural rights, the ability of Indigenous Peoples to strengthen their institutions and the implementation of a regenerative cultural approach to ecosystemic governance. **The proposed Culture Goal includes the following specific targets:**

1. Realize cultural rights for all, by fostering inclusive access to and participation in cultural life, creativity and diversity of cultural and artistic expressions, in particular for women, children, older persons, persons with disabilities and vulnerable populations.
2. Promote a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural and biological diversity.
3. Protect and safeguard cultural and natural heritage and leverage it as a resource and enabler for sustainable development.
4. Protect and promote the diversity of cultural expressions to strengthen the creativity, development capacity, resilience and regenerative capacity of individuals and communities.
5. Promote the economic and social rights of artists and cultural professionals, artistic freedom and safety, as well as local art, culture and products, notably in the context of artificial intelligence.
6. Enhance legal conditions and practical opportunities for the mobility of cultural professionals and cross-border creativity in the creation of cultural goods, services and practices.
7. Enhance the conditions for Indigenous Peoples to strengthen their own institutions, cultures and languages, and to pursue their development in keeping with their self-determined needs and aspirations.
8. Implement a regenerative cultural approach to ecosystemic governance, including environmental protection, sustainable urbanization, land planning, landscape management, biodiversity stewardship, agriculture and natural areas management.

a. Strengthen cultural institutions, including through international cooperation, to build capacity at all levels and in all policy areas to realize cultural rights and sustain cultural pluralism.

b. Ensure that cultural considerations are taken into account in all international development goals, at the outset of and throughout all policy-making processes, whether or not associated with pre-existing cultural targets.

As this chapter has shown, LRGs around the world have engaged in policies and projects that illustrate their action in several of these areas, including ensuring inclusive access to and participation in cultural life, safeguarding cultural heritage and leveraging it as an enabler of sustainable development, and promoting the diversity of cultural expressions.

Proposed targets (a) and (b) evidence the aim to **strengthen capacity for cultural policy-making and consideration of cultural aspects in policy and project design, implementation and evaluation** at all levels, including at the local level. Several of the accompanying indicators included in the Culture Goal proposal should also contribute to strengthening local capacities and making the local links between culture and sustainable development more visible.

The Culture 2030 Goal campaign continues to advance work around the proposed goal through **additional consultations planned in 2026 and 2027**, an invitation for national governments and LRGs to voluntarily adopt the goal, and other efforts to translate its guidelines into concrete action.

Relevant initiatives include the following:

- **An analysis and participatory consultation on [how several regional Capital of Culture programmes could better localize the SDGs](#) and integrate their approaches with the proposed Culture Goal:** This process involves collaboration with the European Union’s European Capital of Culture; the Iberoamerican Capital of Culture, organized by the Union of Iberoamerican Capital Cities; the Mediterranean Capital of Cultures and Dialogue, organized by the Anna Lindh Foundation and the Union for the Mediterranean; and the emerging African Capital of Culture, organized by United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) Africa. These programmes are being invited to test the proposed Culture Goal in their respective capital cities.

- **UCLG's [Seven Keys programme](#):** This programme involves participatory workshops that invite LRGs and communities to integrate cultural dimensions into SDG localization. So far, Seven Keys workshops have been implemented in **Brazzaville** (Republic of Congo), **Bulawayo** (Zimbabwe), **Burgos** (Spain), **Concepción** (Chile), **Izmir** (Türkiye), **Lilongwe** (Malawi), **Lisbon** (Portugal), **Puerto de la Cruz** (Spain), **Saint-Louis** (Senegal), **Xi'an** (China) and **Yoff** (Senegal).
- **[Culture 21 Plus](#), a new framework for cultural rights, citizenship and sustainable development adopted by UCLG in 2025:** This framework resulted from an extensive consultation process that renewed the commitment to making culture central in sustainable communities. To support local and regional implementation, it includes an adaptable set of modules enabling discussion, learning, self-assessment and policy guidance. Culture 21 Plus is closely connected to [LRGs' calls](#) for a systemic transformation that bridges local actions and global trends; cares for and guarantees equal rights for all; is driven by well-informed, critical and empowered communities; and is based on solidarity. It also evidences how culture is integral to achieving this systemic transformation and serves to embed culture's central place in SDG localization while paving the way for a future Culture Goal.
- **Boosted advocacy for the Culture Goal initiative:** Cities and regions, including inspiring examples (e.g. **Strasbourg**, France; **Hawaii**, USA; **Basque Country**, Spain), are already implementing SDG 18 on culture. In coordination,

national governments (e.g. **Brazil, Kenya, Mexico, Spain**) have explicitly supported the need to have a Culture Goal as soon as possible.

LRGs, when equipped with the relevant capacities and resources (e.g. legal competences, adequate funding, technical capacities) can effectively contribute to localizing the SDGs and integrating a strong, substantial cultural dimension in the process. Centring culture in future sustainable development agendas should contribute not only to more effective policies and programmes but also to better recognition of local communities' interests and needs, leveraging their knowledge and practices and addressing cultural factors that hinder progress towards more resilient, sustainable communities.

In this respect, United Nations agencies, regional organizations and national governments should support LRGs' role in implementing policies and programmes connecting cultural aspects, in all their dimensions and according to local needs, with sustainable development strategies. This support **involves recognizing the specific role played by LRGs** in identifying local needs, involving communities and delivering services – and should go hand in hand with transferring legal competences and additional financial and human resources. It should also involve establishing suitable multilevel governance mechanisms enabling coordination and synergy. Finally, all stakeholders should take steps towards **a stronger integration of culture in the post-2030 Agenda**, with a dedicated Culture Goal, drawing on the proposed version and other contributions that may strengthen this approach and its localization.



Source: Johnathan Tshibangu, Unsplash

4.

Conclusions and recommendations

After a decade of progress, bottom-up efforts by local and regional governments (LRGs) and their associations (LGAs) to achieve the 2030 Agenda are approaching a decisive phase. **The local level's proven innovative drive in SDG implementation shines a beacon of hope for realizing sustainable development for all.**

This 10th *Towards the Localization of the SDGs* report proves that, through Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), Voluntary Subnational Reviews (VSRs) and a myriad of action-oriented projects and programmes, the municipalist movement stands at the forefront of the fight against inequalities and climate change, while working to create more sustainable communities with access to affordable quality public services.

The report also presented the still limited but valuable advancements by 2026 High-Level Political Forum for Sustainable Development (HLPF) reporting countries towards actively including local perspectives in Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) and national coordination mechanisms for sustainable development. The three papers provided an in-depth analysis on the state of localization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) under review in 2026. More concretely, Paper 1 reported on achievements to localize SDGs 7, 9 and 11; Paper 2 examined the state of localization of SDG 6; and Paper 3 zoomed in on the key role of culture and SDG target 11.4 for sustainable development.

This final section reviews the report's main findings (Section 4.1) and then discusses the most pressing challenges to address for accelerating progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda (Section 4.2). Finally, Section 4.3 puts forth action-oriented recommendations for supporting LRGs and creating impactful transformations for a better future for all.



4.1

Localization: The only way forward

In the last 10 years, LRGs and LGAs have transitioned from being observers to increasingly recognized political actors within national and international arenas, demonstrating the municipal movement is here to stay. Notably, Action 55(e) of the UN Pact for the Future sets a clear pathway to strengthen collaboration between LRGs and the multilateral system in implementing the 2030 Agenda. The growing number of VLRs and VSRs, together with the expanding international presence of cities and regions, is a testament to the local level's increasing relevance in realizing the 2030 Agenda's commitments.

LRGs remain the fundamental actors that connect citizens and communities to national and global agendas. Now more than ever, LRGs are recognized as the true engine for SDG localization, while leading the way in shaping the sustainable development narrative and priorities. Through public service provision, tailored policies and caring governance, they transform sustainable development, wellbeing, equality and human rights from abstract concepts into tangible everyday essentials that empower marginalized groups and protect the natural environment.

The research conducted on the localization of the SDGs under review at the 2026 HLPF highlighted three crucial dimensions of LRGs' action.

First, LRGs are ensuring quality public services for all and the wellbeing of our communities (Paper 1 on SDGs 7, 9 and 11). SDG 11 sits at the centre of LRG action, with cities and regions all over the world striving to improve their population's wellbeing, create sustainable and cohesive communities and design future-proof public spaces. LRGs use public services as a tool for providing inclusive public spaces, accessible housing, quality transport, affordable and clean energy and resilient

infrastructure. LRGs are pioneering cross-cutting approaches that address urbanization dynamics and environmental concerns as part of localizing SDGs 7, 9 and 11, and they are doing so by working closely with all stakeholders and government levels.

Second, LRGs are delivering water and sanitation through human rights-based approaches and proximity (Paper 2 on SDG 6). Despite the current climate crisis, geopolitical instability and heightened water conflicts, LRGs keep providing clean water and sanitation while prioritizing equitable service access and quality. Progressively, holistic and integrated water management and monitoring systems are driven locally, revealing LRGs' commitment to act systematically, conscious that no SDG can be achieved in isolation. LRGs are constantly evolving and innovating, using human rights and social and environmental rights as guiding principles for the localization of SDG 6. In doing so, they ensure that water and sanitation become a vector for larger and more impactful positive transformations that improve living conditions, promote wellbeing and restore natural ecosystems.

Third, LRGs are putting culture and heritage at the core of SDG localization (Paper 3 on SDG target 11.4). They approach culture as a common good and as the glue that connects communities and enables caring for one another in times of crisis. Mainstreaming culture and cultural rights in SDG localization fosters sustainability and social inclusion. For this reason, local policies and projects are increasingly considering cultural aspects to preserve and value the diversity of cultural heritage. Given the current gap in the 2030 Agenda, several organizations, including UCLG, are proposing the adoption of a standalone Culture Goal, "Ensure cultural sustainability for the wellbeing of all."

In sum, in a period marked by widespread erosion of the shared values underpinning the 2030 Agenda, LRGs are proving themselves as bastions of democracy and sustainable development on the ground. The inspiring practices collected and presented in this report are proof that **we can still achieve the SDGs if we begin looking at where they become a reality: at the very local level, in regions, cities and towns and their communities.**

Over the next four years, the national and international levels should accelerate the way they recognize, empower and collaborate with LRGs to achieve the SDGs. In this regard, ongoing discussions on the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and HLPF review represent a key opportunity to **strengthen LRGs' institutional positioning within the multilateral system and finally institutionalize localization and the territorial approach.**



Source: Owen Cannon, Unsplash



4.2 Challenges

The significant local advancements collected in this report go hand in hand with a number of critical challenges that hamper further progress. Beyond regional specificities and context-dependent issues, the following overarching challenges need to be overcome to support LRGs in achieving the SDGs under review at the 2026 HLPF and the 2030 Agenda as a whole.

While SDG localization is gaining traction, LRGs' bottom-up and cross-cutting work is not always understood and valued. Frequently, LRGs' efforts are valued only sectorally. For example, international and national stakeholders may value LRGs' technical contributions on water and sanitation, including public utility management, but not how such efforts improve equity for low-income neighbourhoods or address historic gender inequalities. Especially in the case of SDG 11 and its culture target (11.4), the international community overlooks LRGs' holistic approaches.

LRGs' crucial role in sustainable development is not evenly recognized. National governments and international organizations often relegate LRGs to the role of 2030 Agenda policy implementers, while they actually fulfil the role of policy design, strategy creation, innovation, project implementation and monitoring.

VNRs and national coordination mechanisms for sustainable development do not yet consistently reflect LRGs' active decision-making role. Despite this year's remarkable progress, 10 (30%) of the 33 VNRs presented at the 2026 HLPF by the time this report was finalized reflected insufficient or non-existent LRG involvement, with LRGs either excluded from the process or consulted only occasionally. More concerning, 85% of reporting countries have yet to institutionalize LRG involvement in national coordination structures, relying instead on ad hoc consultations rather than permanent engagement mechanisms.

National strategies do not sufficiently reflect bottom-up tools such as VLRs and VSRs, and sustained institutional pathways for multilevel governance discussions remain limited. VLRs are valuable instru-

ments for SDG localization. Yet, in some cases national governments and international organizations draw selectively on them in reporting processes, using individual city or regional experiences as proxies for broader territorial realities, despite their limited representativeness at national scale.

LRGs still suffer from incomplete decentralization and devolution processes, depriving them of the political, administrative, financial and technical support needed to deliver for their citizens. LRGs' efforts are often not matched with their competences, resources and capacities, and some LRGs even face cutbacks on established devolved functions and programmes.

Globally, LRGs are chronically underfunded. The local level faces unpredictable financial transfers that jeopardize the long-term planning and the cross-sectoral nature of localization-related investments and projects. Furthermore, LRGs often experience obstacles to accessing supranational financial markets. This situation is particularly evident for SDGs 6, 7, 9 and 11, where local projects often lack adequate financial pathways for implementation.

Capacity building remains inadequate. LRGs lack the necessary support to build their personnel's capacities and raise awareness among their population on sustainable development. This is especially true for complex and cross-cutting issues such as the provision of local public services or the integration of culture in all sectoral policies.

Partnerships for localizing the SDGs are necessary but often lack scale. Moreover, especially for SDGs 6 and 11, LRGs do not always have the necessary negotiating power and the legal and financial expertise to ensure that such partnerships reflect human rights and the values of equality, care and sustainability that they promote.

The lack of quality disaggregated data and accessible monitoring systems that accurately describe the realities on the ground is a persistent challenge. In addition, for all the SDGs under review at the 2026 HLPF, both the interoperability of local data systems and the ability to include different local forms of knowledge – often coming from local communities and marginalized groups, including Indigenous populations – remain a pending matter.



Source: Victoria Prymak, Unsplash

4.3 Recommendations to accelerate action

Despite such challenges, SDG localization is increasingly recognized as a centrepiece of sustainable development. LRGs continue to holistically promote human rights, equality, care and wellbeing through their localization policies, ensuring that sustainable development remains an impactful life-transforming agenda for all people. For these reasons, with only four years to go until 2030, we call on all development actors to embrace LRGs' role, support their action and overcome the challenges constraining local action. To deliver the required structural changes, this report puts forward six recommendations:

- 1. Recognize LRGs' provision of accessible and quality public services as the basis for localization and a crucial dimension of achieving the 2030 Agenda.** LRGs ensure housing, water, transport, energy and infrastructure provision on the ground through holistic approaches that foster wellbeing for all people and the planet. Their efforts should be supported and facilitated through a mix of legal, political and financial mechanisms guaranteed by national governments and international organizations.
- 2. Build on the steadfast commitment and demonstrated capacity shown by LRGs to create a new multilateral system, inviting them to decision-making tables and putting the fight against inequalities, care for the planet and the realization of all human rights at the centre.** In a period of democratic backsliding, LRGs are demonstrating their commitment to care, equality and human rights. It is imperative to foster holistic multilevel coordination and collaborations for all policy sectors, so that LRGs, national governments and other stakeholders can break the silos and fully realize the 2030 Agenda.
- 3. Recognize, involve and work with LRGs in an active and equality-based manner.** Specific ways to do this include the following:
 - Involve LRGs and LGAs in VNR processes from the inception stage, including them in steering boards, decision-making bodies and drafting teams. LRGs' bottom-up perspectives should be reflected consistently in all VNR processes conducted from now until 2030.
 - To ensure effective multilateral coordination, set up formal channels for LRG engagement within national coordination mechanisms for sustainable development. Doing so requires integrating LRGs as permanent members with decision-making authority in relevant governing bodies.
 - Retain the bottom-up ownership of LRGs' and their local communities' and stakeholders' efforts in the production, dissemination and use of VLRs and VSRs. National governments and international organizations should acknowledge the role that LRGs, LGAs and city networks play in producing, disseminating and monitoring SDG localization by inviting them to participate in national and international strategic discussions on the 2030 Agenda.

4. Ensure strong political, administrative and financial decentralization frameworks that devolve powers and increase LRGs' capacity to localize the 2030 Agenda. This can include the following:

- Recognize and address the unfunded responsibilities that LRGs are carrying out beyond their formal mandates to ensure fair, effective and sustainable implementation of policies and services.
- Provide inclusive national and international legal and regulatory frameworks to recognize LRGs' agency in adapting and shaping contextual frameworks for SDG localization.
- Strengthen the sustainable development capacities of LRGs and their staff, which requires ensuring adequate financial and technical resources as well as trained personnel.

5. Deliver fit-for-purpose and accessible financial means that centre human rights, equality and care to localize the SDGs. Particular attention should be placed on developing financial tools that LRGs require to develop SDG-related initiatives for housing, water management and data collection and monitoring. Long-term planning requires creating the conditions for adequate, reliable, consistent and stable revenue streams for LRGs. To support this, national governments and international organizations can expedite LRGs' access to global climate and development finance by equipping them with the right political and legal capacity to directly tap into these markets and accelerate localization. Financial flows for development need to embrace small-scale and community-led projects, as well as to promote LRGs' ability to scale up these initiatives.

6. Promote the generation, collection, use and dissemination of disaggregated data on sustainable development, ensuring their integration into national and international data streams. Localized data capture better both inequalities and innovative solutions. To support this, national governments and international organizations can reinforce LRGs' technical capacities to monitor and report their advances. Furthermore, universal and free access to data can inform better policies that respond to local needs and foster wellbeing for all. It is thus essential to streamline access to and connections between different datasets, including different forms of knowledge such as citizen-led and Indigenous knowledge.

Together, we can create a new multilateral system – one more sensitive to inequalities, grounded in care, guided by human rights and willing to fully engage LRGs in multilevel governance for the SDGs. 2030 is around the corner, and these four remaining years will be critical to collectively show that the SDGs are a successful framework to deliver wellbeing to all people and the planet. LRGs illustrate how fully committing to the 2030 Agenda can advance localization and achieve the SDGs. Discussions on the post-2030 Agenda should include LRGs and recognize the crucial role that culture, care and local public service provision play in sustainable development.

N. NOTES

3.1 PAPER 1.

THE ROLE OF LOCAL PUBLIC SERVICES FOR SDG LOCALIZATION: A FOCUS ON HOUSING, TRANSPORT AND ENERGY

1 See: OECD (2022), [OECD toolkit for a territorial approach to the SDGs](#); GTF and UCLG (2023), [Towards the localization of the SDGs: From local action to global impact, how localizing SDG 11 empowers communities for sustainable transformation](#). 7th Report to the HLPF; and GTF and UCLG (2024), [Towards the localization of the SDGs: Local and regional governments driving equality, climate action and a new agenda for peace](#). 8th Report to the HLPF.

2 For a comprehensive review of the localization of SDG 6, review the GTF and UCLG's dedicated paper: [LRGs towards SDG 6: Localizing water and sanitation for sustainable development](#).

3 For a comprehensive review of the localization of SDG target 11.4, review the GTF/UCLG's dedicated paper: [Localizing culture: How LRGs contribute to SDG target 11.4 and the cultural dimension of global agendas](#).

3.2 PAPER 2.

LRGs TOWARDS SDG 6: LOCALIZING WATER AND SANITATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

1 However, since the 1930s, experts at the League of Nations Health Organization, a predecessor of the World Health Organization, collected data on drinking water and sanitation under the organization's rural health programme. See: [Bartram, J. et al. \(2014\): Global Monitoring of Water Supply and Sanitation: History, Methods and Future Challenges](#). In: *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* 2014, 11, 8137-8165.

2 It states, "All peoples, whatever their stage of development and their social and economic conditions, have the right to have access to drinking water in quantities and of a quality equal to their basic needs." In: [United Nations \(1977\). Mar del Plata Action Plan, in Report of the United Nations Water Conference, Mar del Plata, 14-25 March 1977](#). New York: United Nations.

3 See, among others, UCLG (2013), [UCLG Policy Paper on Development Cooperation and Local Government](#) and OECD (2016), [Water Governance in Cities \(chapter 5: finance\)](#).

4 See GTF and UCLG (2025), [Towards the localization of the SDGs. LRGs Report to the 2025 HLPF](#); OECD (2018), [Implementing the OECD Principles on Water Governance. Indicator Framework and Evolving Practices](#); and ICLEI (2015), [Implementing the SDGs in cities. ICLEI briefing sheet - Urban Issues, No. 05](#).

3.3 PAPER 3.

LOCALIZING CULTURE: HOW LRGs CONTRIBUTE TO SDG 11.4 AND THE CULTURAL DIMENSION OF GLOBAL AGENDAS

1 For more on this, see UCLG (2018), [Culture in the Sustainable Development Goals: A guide for local action](#); and GTF and UCLG (2023), [A cultural boost in the achievement of the SDGs: How local and regional governments are promoting cultural heritage and sustainable cities and territories](#).

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