POLICYBRIEF

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Localising the Sustainable Development Goals: Needs and Challenges

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Highlights

1. Localisation of the SDGs is crucial for effective implementation but faces challenges like unclear national strategies, limited local capacity, and weak multi-stakeholder involvement.

2. SDG monitoring and evaluation at the local level is hindered by reliance on national metrics, data gaps, and lack of coordination across initiatives.

3. The Flanders SDG Monitor shows how existing local indicators can be reframed for SDGs through selection, normalisation, aggregation, and presentation via tools like quadrant plots.

4. Key recommendations for local SDG indices include tailoring to local needs, simplicity in construction and communication, and combining statistical rigor with intuitive visuals.

5. Gaps remain in SDG monitoring for developing regions and convergence of frameworks, necessitating expansion and standardisation of measurement initiatives.

The need for SDG localisation

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) emphasises the need for an inclusive and localised approach to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). With as much as 65 per cent of targets are estimated to depend on the involvement of local actors for their successful implementation (Valencia et al., 2019), development initiatives should consider the local context, including geophysical realities, socio-economic conditions, and the politico-administrative framework to achieve the SDGs effectively. Localising the SDGs is essential for ensuring that the goals reflect local needs, norms, and values, thus helping with inclusion, accountability, and transparency at the local level. An increasing number of cities worldwide engage with the SDGs through diverse localisation initiatives, with many of these initiatives going beyond SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities), such as carrying out creative awareness-raising and advocacy initiatives, mapping the SDGs onto existing plans and initiatives, developing specific initiatives and policies designed to tackle the SDGs, developing monitoring and reporting for the SDGs, and formally institutionalising the SDGs into planning and policy processes.

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Governance challenges of SDG localisation strategies

Unclear national localisation strategies

The strategies for remedying SDG localisation issues tend to oscillate between the prescriptive, top-down approach and bottom-up approach, culminating in mandatory local action versus showing increased sensitivity to the uniqueness of local constraints, opportunities, priorities, and creativity. As observed in the United Kingdom, a lack of a clear national policy framework for SDG localisation and uncertain and ambivalent national support in a bottom-up approach can limit progress in launching and developing local initiatives (Perry et al., 2021).

Weak involvement of multi-stakeholders in multi-level governance

Countries' ability to mainstream the SDGs varies based on their institutional strengths and political styles, directly

Local and regional stakeholders' limited resources and capacity to participate and perceptions of conflicts between global, national, and local agendas have made localisation the Achilles' heel of the SDGs

reflected in their multi-stakeholder constructs (Morita, Okitasari & Masuda, 2020). In practice, there remains a mismatch between this high-level political support from the international level discussions (driven by national governments) and the multi-level governance frameworks that exist in each country – where the power and relations between national, regional and local levels vary significantly – often fragmented with limited communication or collaboration across scales. Examples from municipal organisations in Sweden show a tendency of local governments wanting to operationalise the SDG internally before engaging with external actors, limiting their engagement and getting stuck in the details regarding operationalisation (Krantz and Gustafsson, 2023).

Decentralisation and limited local power, capacity, and resources.

Local and regional stakeholders' limited resources and

capacity to participate and perceptions of conflicts between global, national, and local agendas have made localisation the Achilles' heel of the SDGs. There is often a discrepancy between statutory responsibilities and powers and between resources and capacities, leading to diversity in local and regional governments' control over resources, including finance and their ability to balance accountability and flexibility to support SDG-related projects (Masuda et al., 2022). The reasons lay in the various decentralising reforms and different regulatory contexts in which local and regional governments operate vary widely, giving rise to policy environments that may not facilitate local action to various degrees (UCLG, 2020).

Political legitimacy and ownership

The political qualities of political institutions are influential in localising the SDGs; unclear allocation of responsibilities, insufficient coordination, and a high turnaround of people in critical positions are obstacles to SDG localisation (Croese et al., 2021). Low awareness of the relevance of the SDGs among citizens and local officers is one of the reasons for weak political institutions hampering SDG localisation (Akkiah, 2022). Another critical issue is transparent and accountable leadership, where the lack of both often leads to high levels of corruption and hinders SDG progress (Dube et al., 2021).

Accountability issues of monitoring, evaluation, and reporting

The SDGs are designed to be reported at the national level, and thus, most indicators are based on national statistics (Valencia et al., 2019). However, there is a limit on the usage of national-based SDG indicators at the local level, leading to cities relying on existing government schemes' monitoring and evaluation framework, which in turn holds effective SDG localisation based on the schemes' effectiveness (Kandpal & Okitasari, 2023). In SDG data initiatives, the main challenges are connecting different stakeholders, their perspectives, various data generation processes and systems, and the nascent development of data collection beyond the traditional data sources to measure SDGs (Valencia et al., 2019).

Since the launch of the SDGs, a substantial number of monitoring initiatives concerning the achievement of the

SDGs at the local level have started in many countries across different continents and at different geographical levels. More than 60 cities that actively and recurrently monitor and report about their SDG achievement were found (Borghys, Rayp & Sethi, 2023). Since adopting the Agenda 2030, including the SDGs in 2015, many attempts have been made to collect data and measure progress towards the goals at different geographical levels (international, national, regional and local). So far, the most well-known attempts have been made at a global and national state level, particularly the SDG monitoring using a set of quantitative indicators by the United Nations Statistical Division (UNSD). The main reference frameworks that inspired many more initiatives on the national and subnational level are the yearly updated SDSN Indexes and Dashboards and the OECD project 'measuring distance to the SDG Targets'. Both differ from the official UN monitoring process as they do not just give an overview of indicators but also construct their own indexes per SDG -allowing for benchmarking between countries. Several national and international initiatives have been set up to extend SDG monitoring to cities that currently lack a voluntary SDG reporting strategy. This indicates the drive that the SDGs have caused and the broad-based movement to achieve them. However, we notice the concentration within certain parts of the world (European Union, USA, some parts of Asia and some South American countries). Other regions generally lack any form of follow-up or monitoring. More developing regions (e.g., Africa) are lagging in SDG monitoring and reporting. In other words, there is a clear development bias in local SDG monitoring.

Despite the UNSD framework of SDG monitoring, the different initiatives are characterised by substantial heterogeneity in scope, methodology, and type of reporting or monitoring. Most monitoring initiatives in practice use indicators that deviate from the UN SDG targets and indicators, initially established in 2017 and refined last time in 2021. Although a large part of the UN SDG targets and indicators can be followed up and measured locally, we observe difficulties and limitations that local governments and other actors face regarding their implementation (Borghys, Rayp & Sethi, 2023). UN SDG Indicators respond to the national context and are defined to measure national development policies. Not all of them have a conceptually clear equivalent at the local level, have an internationally established methodology or available standards, and data may not be made available regularly.

This poses challenges to monitoring initiatives across levels and obliges them to adapt the indicators, using proxies, or searching for alternatives. Therefore, different initiatives are developing local-level monitoring systems and indicator sets that are only sometimes aligned with the ones from the UN. Monitoring initiatives that provide cross-region or country (and intertemporal) comparable data fall back on the SDSN framework, except for the OECD, which has developed a set of indicators to monitor SDG achievement.

While a minority of actors, including some front-running cities, have created systems to measure SDGs, most initiatives use existing (domestic) sets of indicators linked to data and information that are readily available. Most supra-national initiatives use international and national data sources.

> Through the infrastructure of measurement, the SDGs construct and reinforce an evaluation society with reporting practices at its core, designed to be reported at the national level, and thus, most indicators are based on national statistics

The production and access to reliable local data is still complex and only feasible in some places, usually because of the lack of resources and capacities. Frameworks include different indicators, with diverse scopes linked to varying data sources. Some local initiatives tend to use local and regional (provincial) data to fit their systems and report progress., while other local initiatives use more national and international data or produce their own data.

The way these data are used and visualised varies from being included in reporting documents (Voluntary Local Reviews) to being gathered through open data portals (i.e., Bristol and Los Angeles) and visualised for benchmarking purposes (e.g., OECD and SDSN European cities). The diversity and incomparability of the monitoring initiatives have important consequences, considering that the correlation between the ranking according to different indicator schemes for the same units is very weak. In the absence of clear and strong arguments to prefer one set of indicators to another, the difference between monitoring schemes leads to confusion about the degree of SDG achievement, e.g., in function of the definition of best practices, that seriously flaws the use of local SDG monitoring as a policy tool. This may also explain why SDG monitoring and indexes lack a prominent place in policymaking.

Two clear priorities in the SDG monitoring at the local level can be identified. First, a broadening of the geographical coverage of the monitoring tools to local entities in the Global South, which are barely present in the existing schemes and certainly not proportional to their weight in total population. Second, the convergence of existing monitoring schemes to a common, standardised framework to which all existing and new initiatives would align. The comparability of achievement between regions, countries, and over time is essential to

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determine best practices and identify essential determinants of SDG performance. A broader forum is needed to exchange views on data availability, methodology, and reporting as well as to benefit from externalities more in general. The starting point for the standardisation and convergence of monitoring schemes can be a common SDSN-OECD framework to which new local, regional, or national initiatives could align. It could be appended by a set of locally relevant indicators, in function of a locally specific strategy of sustainable development beyond the SDGs or a more refined monitoring of SDG achievement, closer to the official indicator framework.

Building a local indicator system: A closer look at the case of Flanders

Since 2021, UNU-CRIS and IDEA Consult have partnered to create the SDG Monitor. The SDG monitor is a database that tracks the SDG performance of all 300 Flemish municipalities over time since 2011. Since its first edition, the project has gained traction, and the collaboration has been extended to include stakeholders from various backgrounds in the write-up of the Voluntary Sub-national Review. The latest edition includes about 210 indicators, selected in close cooperation with local policymakers, that monitor progress towards the SDGs.

How to construct a local SDG index?

The first step consists of collecting data and selecting indicators for the local SDG index. While locally replicating international databases is often limited, this opens opportunities to adapt the index to the needs of local policymakers and stakeholders. This is crucial to enhance the usefulness of the monitoring system as a policy tool. Data unavailability may also lead to challenges. For the SDG monitor, that was the case for SDG14 (Life below Water), for which no relevant and sufficiently complete indicators could be found. Similarly, SDG17 (Partnership for the Goals) is hardly applicable locally. To address these data issues, stakeholders must display creativity and flexibility to adapt SDG indicators at the local level and be open to using partial or approximate
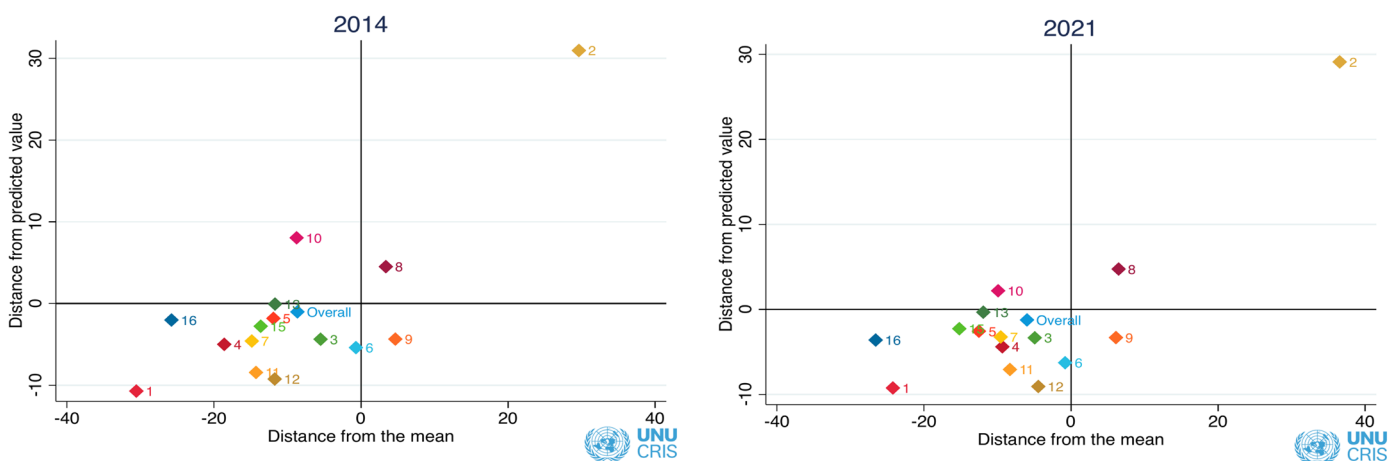

Figure 1. Antwerp's quadrant shows the distance from the median SDG score on the x-axis and the distance from its expected score (based on several contextual factors) on the y-axis.

substitute indicators.

Once the data is collected, it must be rescaled and harmonised to ensure comparability across indicators. For the SDG monitor, this was achieved by comparing each municipality to the best and worst performers in Flanders each year. This results in a relative score that serves as a comparative tool: a perfect score does not mean that a municipality has "completed" an SDG but has the best performance among all municipalities. In this manner, municipalities are encouraged to learn from each other and to continuously work on progress toward the SDGs.

While this methodology may appear trivial, it drastically improves the relevance of the index. Its simplicity is its greatest strength: policymakers, stakeholders, and citizens can easily navigate and understand the scores of the municipalities. We recommend this as a general goal of localising SDG indices. Despite these advantages, this approach means that we can only observe the current state of a municipality but not directly assess the effectiveness of its actions to improve its performance on SDG indexes. Nonetheless, in the case of Flanders, this selection process results in hundreds of indicators for all municipalities in the region, an exceptionally high number.

How to use the index?

It is easy to get lost in the data when so many indicators are available. Therefore, it is essential to develop tools that are relevant, easy to use, and presented in an accessible format. For the SDG monitor, local policymakers wanted to be able to assess whether their policies were improving the performance of their municipalities on the SDG index. Unfortunately, data on action, output, or even input indicators is scarce. Even for those specific subgoals where this information was available, modelling limitations made it impossible to conduct a statistical analysis of policy impact.

As a trade-off, the concept of "policy space" was introduced. The policy space captures the performance of a municipality accounting for the influence of contextual factors, such as municipality wealth and population characteristics. Those factors are a crucial determinant for the scores of municipalities on SDGs and are not adjustable by policy tools. They can, therefore, help municipalities determine the room they have to design policies for SDG implementation. The

influence of these factors can be accounted for by calculating the expected performance of a municipality on an SDG using regression techniques. The results are then presented using a quadrants graph, allowing an otherwise quite complex analysis to be presented intuitively. Figure 1 illustrates such a tool for Antwerp. For each municipality, we can plot the policy space by comparing its performance to its predicted performance

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and its score compared to the median score across all municipalities. The quadrant plot for Antwerp in both 2014 and 2021 shows that it is outperforming other municipalities on SDG2 (No Hunger). In 2014, we observed that Antwerp lags on SDG1 (No Poverty). By 2021, we note that while its score on SDG1 is closer to the median one, it still trails compared to what would be expected given Antwerp's contextual factors.

Local policymakers also wanted to use the SDG monitor to visualise the evolution of the performance of their municipalities compared to others across SDGs. Figure 2 shows the example of SDG5, Gender Equality. In this case, we see how Bruges is performing compared to the province it is situated in, the other regional hubs in Flanders, and Flanders as a whole.
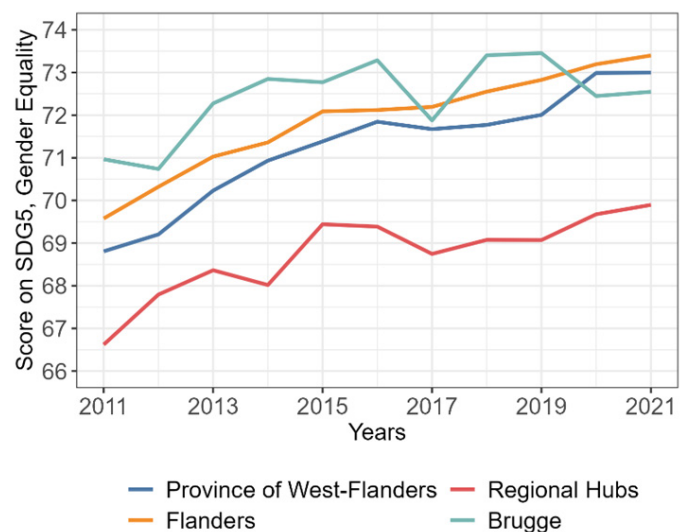

— Province of West-Flanders — Regional Hubs
— Flanders — Brugge

Figure 2. Evolution of SDG5, Gender Equality, over time.

Policy Recommendations

We can highlight three key recommendations to successfully develop localised SDG indices:

1. Data collection processes should not blindly reproduce international datasets at the local level but be tailored to the needs of all local stakeholders, including policymakers, citizens, and the institutions creating and maintaining SDG indices. In theory, small sets of indicators could be translated using fixed international benchmarks.
2. Simplicity should prevail. Potential users of SDG indices will not use them if they cannot understand how they were constructed or how scores can be interpreted, resulting in wasted efforts.
3. Design analyses and concepts that combine rigorous statistical analyses with ease of understanding, considering contextual factors. Simplicity should not come at the cost of fraudulent empirical analyses, so be open about what is and is not achievable with your SDG indices. Visual tools can act here as an excellent vehicle to share complex results.
4. Maintain the flexibility. The development process of SDG indices should be kept as an iterated and reflexive process to allow learnings to be incorporated as data changes or new data becomes available.
5. Ensure inclusive participation of all stakeholders throughout the development of SDG indices to assure local ownership and coherence with local policies and existing monitoring systems.

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