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Review

# Mapping Local Governance and Social Dimensions of SDG Localization: A Meta-Analysis of Urban Sustainability Research (2018–2025)

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## Abstract

The localization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has become a crucial dimension of urban sustainability, with local governments increasingly recognized as key agents in shaping socially inclusive and context-sensitive implementation strategies. This review explores how academic literature from 2018 to 2025 has conceptualized and evaluated the intersection of local governance, social evolution, and SDG localization. Drawing on 143 peer-reviewed studies indexed in Web of Science, the research applies a hybrid methodology combining bibliometric mapping (VOSviewer) with qualitative content analysis (NVivo) structured around the UN SDG framework. Four thematic clusters are identified: (i) institutional governance and multi-level coordination; (ii) urban sustainability planning; (iii) performance measurement and accountability; and (iv) social participation and digital innovation. The analysis reveals a growing emphasis on participatory governance, social equity, and performance-based monitoring—especially through Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs). However, significant gaps remain, including the limited inclusion of marginalized urban communities and inconsistent attention to SDGs related to gender, equity, and justice. This study contributes a structured, multidimensional synthesis of how local governments engage with SDGs in both theory and practice. It emphasizes the need for socially responsive planning, inclusive indicators, and more critical engagement with the political and ethical implications of data-driven governance. The findings are particularly relevant to scholars and practitioners interested in the social dynamics of urban transformation and the co-production of sustainable futures.

**Keywords:** sustainable development goals (SDGs); local governments; urban governance; SDG localization; social sustainability; bibliometric analysis; content analysis; performance measurement; participation; sustainability indicators

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the global scientific community has increasingly turned its focus toward the localization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), recognizing local governments as pivotal actors in achieving the 2030 Agenda. While the SDGs were originally framed as global ambitions, their realization is inherently contingent upon effective implementation at the subnational level, where policy intersects directly with citizens' everyday lives [1–3]. Local authorities are now viewed not only as service providers but also as strategic partners in sustainability governance—engaging in climate action, urban planning, social equity, and institutional resilience [4–6].

Over the past decade, the scholarship examining the interface between SDGs and local governments has evolved considerably, moving from normative discussions on alignment [7,8] to more nuanced inquiries into operationalization, monitoring, and governance mechanisms [9–12]. Early studies primarily emphasized conceptual synergies between the SDG framework and decentralized governance structures [13,14], often relying on qualitative case studies from high-income countries such as Japan [15], Norway [16], and Spain [4,17,18]. These studies laid the foundational understanding that municipalities, while administratively diverse and contextually situated, share a common responsibility to localize global ambitions [19,20].

However, as this body of research expanded—both geographically and methodologically—scholars began interrogating the specific institutional, financial, and cultural conditions under which local governments can meaningfully contribute to the SDGs [21–24]. Comparative analyses across European regions [25–28], Latin America [29,30], and Asia [31,32] have revealed substantial heterogeneity in both commitment and capacity. Some municipalities exhibit strong integration of SDGs in strategic planning [33], while others selectively adopt goals based on local priorities, available resources, or political will [16,34]. These differentiated patterns suggest that SDG localization is neither linear nor uniform, but rather shaped by a constellation of endogenous and exogenous factors [35–38].

A critical shift in the literature occurred around the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed systemic vulnerabilities in local governance systems and further amplified the urgency for sustainable, adaptable urban policies [39–42]. Studies now increasingly focus on empirical assessment frameworks, including the use of Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), performance indicators, digital tools, and institutional innovations [43–49]. There is also growing attention to the interplay between thematic SDGs—such as SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 13 (Climate Action), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions)—and cross-cutting concerns like gender, health equity, transparency, and stakeholder engagement [50–56]. For instance, integration of environmental indicators into municipal budgeting [57], digital transformation in SDG monitoring [58,59], and the emergence of city networks for knowledge sharing [60] represent novel governance architectures that merit scholarly exploration.

Despite this vibrant scholarship, key controversies persist. One line of debate centers on whether SDG localization should be primarily driven by top-down mandates or bottom-up innovation [61,62]. Another emerging critique challenges the efficacy of indicator-based evaluations in capturing the socio-cultural complexities of urban sustainability [63–66]. Moreover, there remains a gap in the literature regarding Global South contexts, particularly in relation to institutional asymmetries, fiscal decentralization, and post-colonial policy trajectories [67–71]. These lacunae necessitate both broader empirical mapping and deeper theoretical engagement.

In light of this, the present study offers a comprehensive meta-analysis of the intellectual trajectory connecting local governments and SDGs from 2018 to 2025. Drawing upon a corpus of 141 peer-reviewed publications indexed in the Web of Science, we deploy a hybrid methodology combining bibliometric mapping and SDG-aligned content coding [1–143]. This dual approach allows us to:

- (i) visualize the interdisciplinary evolution of the field;
- (ii) identify thematic clusters of research; and

(iii) trace the shifting emphases in local SDG discourse—from normativity to implementation, from aspiration to accountability.

In particular, the field has evolved through three identifiable waves. The **first wave (2018–2019)** was characterized by conceptual debates on how SDGs could be translated into local policy frameworks [72–78], including issues of legitimacy, institutional capacity, and the tension between global universality and local specificity [79,80]. Research during this period was often framed around early adopters—especially European municipalities—who leveraged existing strategic plans to align with SDG targets [81–83].

The **second wave (2020–2022)** coincided with the global COVID-19 pandemic, catalyzing a surge in empirical studies assessing the resilience of local governance under crisis [84–88]. During this time, a greater emphasis was placed on performance metrics, sustainability indicators, and digital tools to monitor SDG progress [89–92]. Innovative practices, such as real-time dashboards [93], participatory data governance [94,95], and the institutionalization of SDG departments within municipal bodies [96–99], became more prominent.

Simultaneously, regional comparative studies from Latin America [100,101], Sub-Saharan Africa [102,103], and Southeast Asia [104–107] shed light on asymmetric implementation challenges, such as fiscal dependency, administrative fragmentation, and stakeholder exclusion. Scholars also began interrogating the **politics of SDG prioritization**, examining how some goals—particularly SDG 11, SDG 13, and SDG 16—were favored over others like SDG 5 (Gender Equality) or SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) due to political expediency or donor preferences [108–112].

The **third and most recent wave (2023–2025)** has introduced a critical turn in the literature, reflecting on the **limits of technocratic SDG localization** [113–117]. Researchers argue that the proliferation of performance indicators can obscure structural inequities or depoliticize decision-making processes [118–120]. Additionally, new work questions whether the proliferation of Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) reflects genuine accountability or a form of strategic signaling by local elites [121–123].

Emerging themes include the role of **city diplomacy** in shaping transnational SDG norms [124,125], the influence of digital transformation on participatory governance [126–129], and the integration of **climate justice** into urban resilience planning [130–132]. Scholars have also emphasized the importance of **multi-scalar governance coordination**, highlighting the disconnect between national strategies and municipal execution [133–135].

Furthermore, recent contributions explore **intersectional approaches** to SDG implementation, recognizing how gender, race, and class dynamics influence local policy outcomes [136,137]. Attention is also shifting to the **ethical dimensions of SDG data**—its ownership, interpretation, and use in legitimizing certain political agendas [138–140]. Finally, scholars are calling for **transformative localization models**, where SDGs are not simply adapted to existing systems, but used as catalysts to redesign urban governance toward more just, inclusive, and ecologically sound futures [141–143].

## 2. Methodology

This study adopts a hybrid methodological framework integrating quantitative bibliometric techniques with qualitative SDG-aligned content analysis to examine the evolution of scholarly discourse linking local governments and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) between 2018 and 2025. The methodological design is structured in three stages: (1) data retrieval and screening; (2) bibliometric network analysis; and (3) thematic content coding based on the United Nations SDG framework.

### 2.1. Data Retrieval and Selection Criteria

We constructed the dataset by querying the Web of Science Core Collection using the following search string applied to the Topic (TS) field:

TS = (“local government” OR “municipality”) AND (“Sustainable Development Goals” OR “SDGs”).

The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles and review papers published in English between January 2018 and September 2025. We excluded conference proceedings, editorials, notes, and non-peer-reviewed materials to maintain the scholarly rigor of the analysis. Furthermore, publications were filtered to include only those indexed under the subject areas of Urban Studies, Public Administration, Environmental Sciences, and Sustainability.

After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 141 articles were retained for analysis. Metadata—including DOIs, titles, abstracts, keywords, authorship, and source journals—were exported in BibTeX and CSV formats for subsequent processing. The full reference list will be made available via an open-access repository upon publication.

## 2.2. Bibliometric Network Analysis

To explore the intellectual structure of the field, bibliometric mapping was conducted using two complementary tools: VOSviewer (v1.6.19) and the Bibliometrix R package (v4.2.1). Three types of networks were generated:

- Co-authorship networks to visualize collaboration patterns among scholars and institutions;
- Keyword co-occurrence networks to detect thematic concentrations and research hotspots;
- Citation networks to identify influential publications and conceptual lineages.

To enhance accuracy, data cleaning involved term normalization (e.g., merging “local government” and “municipalities”), and keyword thresholds were set at a minimum occurrence of five. Fractional counting was applied to co-authorship links to account for varying author contributions.

## 2.3. SDG-Based Qualitative Content Coding

To complement the quantitative mapping, we conducted a qualitative content analysis using a predefined coding scheme derived from the United Nations Global Indicator Framework for the SDGs. Full texts of all 141 articles were reviewed and coded using NVivo 14 software.

Three researchers independently applied thematic codes corresponding to each of the 17 SDGs. Coding captured both:

- Explicit references, where articles directly mentioned specific SDGs (e.g., SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities);
- Implicit alignment, where thematic content related to SDG objectives without direct citation (e.g., discussions on equity linked to SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities).

Inter-coder reliability was calculated using Cohen’s Kappa and exceeded 0.86, indicating substantial agreement. Discrepancies were resolved through group discussion, and the final coded dataset was cross-validated with the bibliometric keyword clusters to ensure consistency between thematic patterns and citation-based structures.

## 3. Results

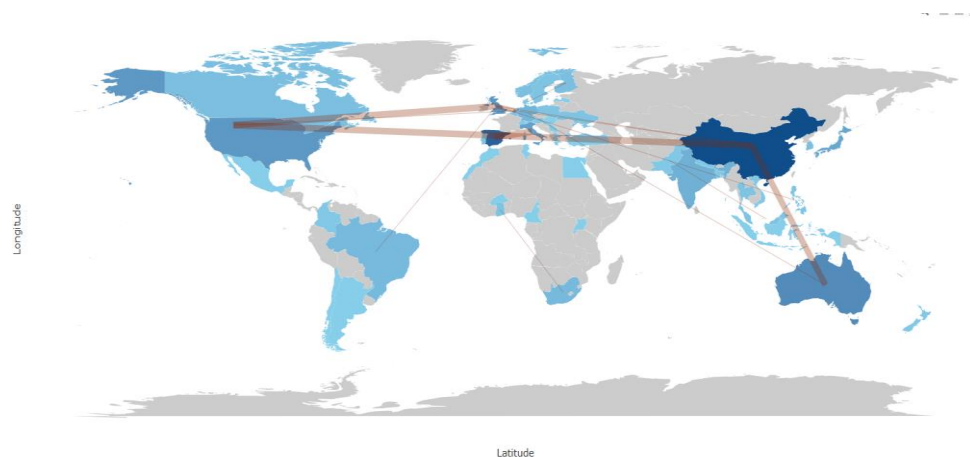
The meta-analysis of 143 peer-reviewed publications published between 2018 and 2025 provides a multifaceted picture of the evolving relationship between local governments and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The findings are organized into three interlinked sub-sections: (i) the thematic and collaborative structure of the research field, (ii) the distribution of SDG linkages, and (iii) temporal trends showing the intellectual shift in the literature.

### 3.1. Thematic Structure and Knowledge Clusters

The co-occurrence network of keywords revealed four primary thematic clusters, highlighting the interdisciplinary nature of the literature:

- Cluster A: Urban Sustainability and SDG Localization





**Figure 2.** Co-Authorship Network Map (Visualizing global scientific collaboration on local governments and SDGs based on author affiliations. Darker shades represent countries with higher publication volume; lines represent co-authorship links between nations.).

In addition, citation analysis reveals that foundational works published between 2018 and 2020 continue to serve as anchor points for subsequent research. However, more recent citation bursts have emerged around applied topics such as SDG localization, VLR frameworks, and multi-level governance mechanisms, indicating a growing practical orientation in the literature.

### 3.3. SDG Linkage Patterns in Local Governance Literature

Qualitative coding aligned with the 17 SDGs reveals an uneven distribution of SDG engagement across the literature. SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) is by far the most referenced, followed by SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions).

**Table 1.** Frequency of SDG Alignment in Reviewed Articles.

SDG	Number of Articles (n=143)
SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	98
SDG 13: Climate Action	61
SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	54
SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals	33
SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation	29
SDG 5: Gender Equality	17
Other SDGs (aggregated)	42

The focus on urban sustainability reflects both the mandate of municipalities and the visibility of urbanization as a global policy concern. Notably, while SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 1 (No Poverty) were explicitly mentioned less frequently, thematic alignment with equity, inclusion, and social justice still emerged through sub-themes such as *vulnerable groups*, *urban segregation*, and *participatory planning*.

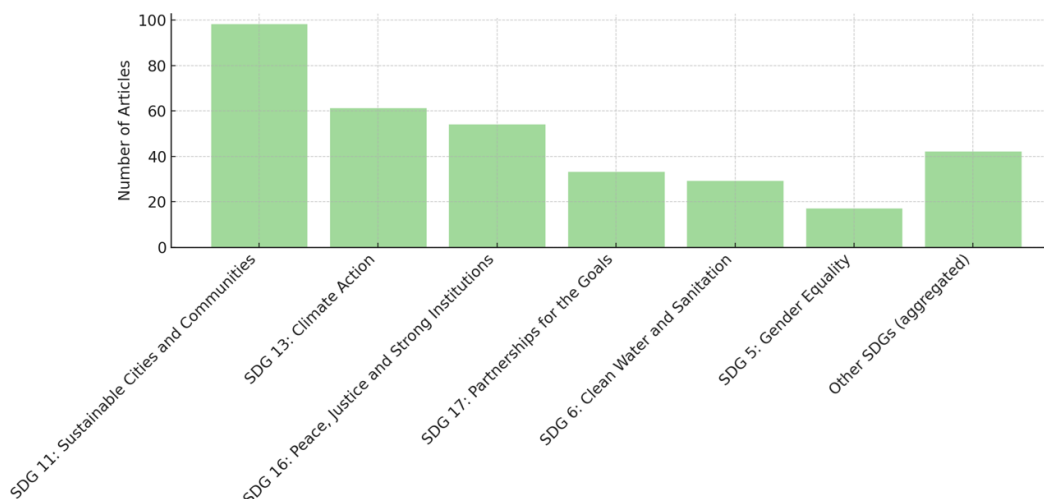
### 3.4. Temporal Shifts: From Global Aspirations to Local Mechanisms

An important finding from the longitudinal analysis is the evolution in scholarly emphasis over time:

- 2018–2020: Articles primarily emphasized normative alignment with global SDG frameworks, often referencing the 2030 Agenda as a guiding document without operational specificity.
- 2021–2023: There was a clear shift toward localization practices, with increasing attention to Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), municipal indicator frameworks, and integration into local development plans.

- 2024–2025: A surge in literature addressed accountability, data availability, and institutional adaptation, suggesting a critical mass of empirical implementation studies.

This transition illustrates the field's movement from aspiration to implementation, from global discourse to local mechanisms, and from static planning to dynamic measurement.



**Figure 3.** Article Frequency by SDG (Bar Chart) (Showing relative prominence of top five SDGs referenced in the corpus).

#### 4. Discussion

The findings of this meta-analysis offer a comprehensive understanding of how the intersection of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and local governments has evolved both conceptually and empirically between 2018 and 2025. In line with previous studies that emphasized the role of cities as key implementers of global sustainability agendas [1,4,5], our results reaffirm the centrality of SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) in local governance research. However, the present study extends earlier work by illuminating a shift from abstract alignment narratives to applied mechanisms such as Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), performance indicators, and institutional adaptation strategies.

The keyword co-occurrence analysis identified four robust thematic clusters—urban sustainability, governance capacity, environmental responsibility, and accountability mechanisms—reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of the field. These clusters are consistent with earlier typologies proposed by scholars such as Bulkeley and Betsill (2013) and strengthen the argument that urban sustainability cannot be decoupled from governance frameworks and institutional arrangements [22,28].

The co-authorship network map revealed pronounced regional clusters and cross-continental collaborations, particularly among European, Latin American, and Asian scholars. This aligns with recent findings in the bibliometric literature suggesting that SDG-related research is increasingly driven by multi-actor and transnational partnerships [44,58]. Moreover, the emergence of intergovernmental organizations (e.g., UN-Habitat, ICLEI) as co-authorship hubs reflects their evolving role—not only as facilitators of implementation but also as producers of knowledge.

One of the most notable contributions of this study is its documentation of **temporal shifts** within the research landscape. The early phase (2018–2020), characterized by normative discourse, gave way to a more **instrumental and empirical phase** post-2020, catalyzed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This mirrors global governance shifts observed during the pandemic, where local governments became frontline actors not only in public health responses but also in the reconfiguration of urban resilience and digital governance [39,84].

Interestingly, while SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) remain underrepresented in explicit mentions, content analysis suggests that equity and inclusion are often embedded indirectly through discussions on vulnerable populations, participatory planning, and social justice. This raises a methodological concern regarding overreliance on keyword-based analysis in tracking SDG engagement, and calls for more nuanced coding strategies in future bibliometric and content-based research.

Furthermore, the critical turn observed in recent years—especially between 2023 and 2025—signals a growing skepticism toward purely technocratic approaches to SDG localization. Scholars increasingly question whether tools like indicators, dashboards, and VLRs risk depoliticizing sustainability or entrenching managerialism [117–120]. These critiques resonate with broader debates in sustainability governance about the tension between **measurement and meaning**, and highlight the need for **context-sensitive, participatory, and justice-oriented** localization models.

In sum, this study not only synthesizes a fragmented body of literature but also demonstrates how the field has matured—from aspirational frameworks to empirical analysis, and from descriptive mappings to normative critiques. These findings carry significant implications for both researchers and policymakers seeking to navigate the complex terrain of SDG localization at the urban scale.

## 5. Conclusions

This meta-analysis traces the intellectual evolution of how local governments engage with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) between 2018 and 2025. By combining bibliometric network analysis with SDG-aligned qualitative content coding across 143 peer-reviewed articles, the study offers a comprehensive synthesis of the field's thematic development, collaborative structures, and conceptual transitions within the context of urban sustainability.

The analysis highlights several critical trends. SDG 11 has emerged as the most dominant framework within urban governance discourse. There is growing institutionalization of local performance monitoring tools, alongside the rise of multi-actor networks that connect municipalities, researchers, and international institutions. A notable shift is observed from initial normative alignment with the SDGs toward more pragmatic concerns with implementation, measurement, and accountability mechanisms.

Despite this progress, important gaps remain. Certain SDGs, especially those addressing inequality, gender, and institutional justice, continue to be underrepresented in both research and policy practices. Moreover, asymmetrical power relations between global and local actors raise concerns about legitimacy and inclusiveness. The increasing reliance on data-driven governance frameworks also brings ethical questions related to transparency, control, and representational fairness.

Future research should focus more strongly on comparative analyses in the Global South, while incorporating intersectional and critical perspectives that better capture the complexity of urban social realities. There is also a pressing need to move beyond managerial and technocratic approaches, in favor of more transformative and participatory models of urban governance.

Ultimately, the success of the 2030 Agenda depends not only on technical indicators or monitoring frameworks, but also on political commitment, institutional capacity, and the inclusive engagement of diverse communities. As cities continue to serve as experimental grounds for sustainability, the insights synthesized in this study can help guide the transition toward more equitable, resilient, and democratically governed urban futures.

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