

Review

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Mapping Local Government Pathways to the SDGs: A Bibliometric and Content Analysis for Sustainable Urban Development (2018–2025)

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Review

Mapping Local Government Pathways to the SDGs: A Bibliometric and Content Analysis for Sustainable Urban Development (2018–2025)

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Abstract

The localization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has become a central dimension of sustainable urban development, as local governments play an increasingly important role in translating global sustainability agendas into place-based action. This study aims to provide a state-of-the-art assessment of how scholarly research has examined the relationship between local governance and SDG implementation over the period 2018–2025. A mixed-method review approach was employed, combining bibliometric mapping using VOSviewer with qualitative content analysis conducted through NVivo. Based on predefined inclusion criteria, 143 peer-reviewed articles indexed in the Web of Science database were systematically analyzed. The results reveal several dominant thematic clusters, including institutional coordination, sustainable urban planning, data-driven governance, accountability mechanisms, and the growing use of policy tools such as Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs). The findings indicate an increasing emphasis on performance-based monitoring, participatory governance approaches, and multilevel institutional frameworks supporting the integration of the SDGs into local policy and planning processes. At the same time, persistent challenges are identified, particularly with regard to equity considerations, data inconsistencies, and the limited inclusion of marginalized urban communities in SDG-related decision-making. Overall, this review offers a structured and comprehensive overview of current research on SDG localization in urban governance and identifies key gaps and priorities for future research and policy development aimed at more inclusive, measurable, and context-sensitive pathways to sustainable urban development.

Keywords: sustainable development goals (SDGs); SDG assessment; SDG localization; local governments; urban governance; voluntary local reviews (VLRs)

1. Introduction

In recent years, the localization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has emerged as a central concern within global sustainability research, reflecting a growing recognition of local governments as key actors in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Although the SDGs were formulated as universal global objectives, their realization ultimately depends on effective action at the subnational level, where public policies directly shape social, economic, and environmental outcomes in everyday life [1–3]. Consequently, local authorities are increasingly framed not merely as service providers, but as strategic partners in sustainability governance, engaged in areas such as climate action, urban planning, social inclusion, and institutional resilience [4–6].

Over the past decade, scholarly work at the intersection of SDGs and local governance has evolved substantially. Early contributions largely focused on normative alignment between global goals and decentralized governance structures [7,8], often relying on qualitative case studies from high-income contexts such as Japan [15], Norway [16], and Spain [4,17,18]. These studies established a foundational understanding that municipalities, despite contextual and administrative diversity, share a common responsibility in translating global sustainability ambitions into local strategies [19,20]. As the field expanded geographically and methodologically, research attention shifted toward operationalization, monitoring, and governance mechanisms that enable or constrain local SDG implementation [9–12].

Subsequent comparative studies across Europe [25–28], Latin America [29,30], and Asia [31,32] revealed significant heterogeneity in municipal capacity, commitment, and policy integration. While some cities demonstrate strong alignment of SDGs with strategic planning processes [33], others selectively adopt specific goals based on political priorities, institutional resources, or fiscal constraints [16,34]. These findings underscore that SDG localization is neither linear nor uniform, but shaped by a complex interaction of institutional, financial, cultural, and political factors operating across scales [35–38].

A critical turning point in the literature coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed structural vulnerabilities in local governance systems and intensified the urgency of resilient and adaptive urban policies [39–42]. Research during this period increasingly emphasized empirical assessment tools, including Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), sustainability indicators, digital monitoring platforms, and institutional innovations [43–49]. Particular attention has been paid to the interaction between core urban-related goals—such as SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 13 (Climate Action), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions)—and cross-cutting issues including gender equity, transparency, public health, and stakeholder participation [50–56].

Despite this growing body of research, several controversies persist. One major debate concerns whether SDG localization should be driven primarily through top-down regulatory frameworks or bottom-up innovation and community-led initiatives [61,62]. Another line of critique questions the capacity of indicator-based assessment systems to capture the socio-cultural complexity of urban sustainability and governance processes [63–66]. Moreover, the literature remains uneven in its geographical coverage, with Global South contexts still underrepresented, particularly regarding fiscal decentralization, institutional asymmetries, and post-colonial policy trajectories [67–71].

Against this backdrop, the present study provides a comprehensive state-of-the-art review of the intellectual landscape linking local governments and SDGs between 2018 and 2025. Drawing on 143 peer-reviewed articles indexed in the Web of Science database, the study applies a hybrid methodology combining bibliometric mapping with SDG-aligned qualitative content analysis [1–143]. This approach enables the visualization of the field's interdisciplinary evolution, the identification of dominant thematic clusters, and the tracing of shifting research emphases from normative alignment toward implementation, accountability, and performance assessment.

The analysis reveals three broad waves of scholarly development. The first wave (2018–2019) focused on conceptual debates surrounding the translation of SDGs into local policy frameworks, highlighting issues of legitimacy, institutional capacity, and the tension between global universality and local specificity [72–83]. The second wave (2020–2022), shaped by the COVID-19 crisis,

prioritized empirical assessments of governance resilience, digital monitoring tools, and performance metrics [84–99], while also exposing asymmetric implementation challenges across regions [100–107]. The most recent wave (2023–2025) reflects a critical turn in the literature, questioning technocratic approaches to SDG localization, the political implications of indicator-driven governance, and the symbolic use of VLRs as accountability instruments [113–123].

Overall, this study contributes to the literature by offering a structured and integrative synthesis of current research on SDG localization in urban governance. It highlights key theoretical debates, empirical gaps, and emerging priorities, and underscores the need for more inclusive, context-sensitive, and reflexive assessment frameworks capable of supporting sustainable urban development beyond the 2030 horizon.

2. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a hybrid methodological framework that integrates quantitative bibliometric techniques with qualitative content analysis aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It aims to examine the evolution of scholarly discourse connecting local governments and the 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

The dataset was constructed 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 journal articles and review papers published in English between January 2018 and September 2025. To ensure scholarly rigor, conference proceedings, editorials, notes, and other non-peer-reviewed materials were excluded. Additionally, only articles indexed under the subject categories of Urban Studies, Public Administration, Environmental Sciences, and Sustainability were included.

After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 141 articles were retained for analysis. For each article, metadata—including DOIs, titles, abstracts, keywords, authorship, and source journals—was exported in both BibTeX and CSV formats for further processing. The complete reference list will be made available in an open-access repository upon publication.

An overview of the data retrieval and screening process is illustrated in Figure 1.

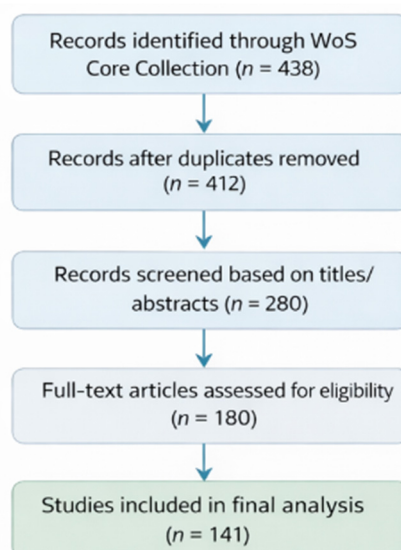


Figure 1. Literature Selection Process.

2.2. Bibliometric Network Analysis

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

- Co-authorship networks, to visualize collaboration patterns among individual scholars and institutions;
- Keyword co-occurrence networks, to identify thematic concentrations and emerging research hotspots;
- Citation networks, to trace influential publications and conceptual lineages within the field.

To improve the accuracy of the mapping process, a comprehensive data cleaning procedure was applied. This included term normalization (e.g., merging variants such as “local government” and “municipalities”), and keyword thresholds were set at a minimum of five occurrences to ensure statistical relevance. Additionally, fractional counting was applied to co-authorship links to account for variations in author contributions across multi-authored publications.

2.3. SDG-Based Qualitative Content Coding

To complement the quantitative bibliometric mapping, a qualitative content analysis was conducted using a predefined coding scheme based on the United Nations Global Indicator Framework for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The full texts of all 141 selected articles were reviewed and systematically coded using NVivo 14 software.

Three researchers independently applied thematic codes corresponding to each of the 17 SDGs. The coding process accounted for two distinct types of alignment:

Explicit references, where articles directly cited specific SDGs (e.g., SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities);

Implicit alignments, where thematic content was conceptually related to SDG objectives without direct mention (e.g., equity-focused discussions linked to SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities).

Inter-coder reliability was assessed using Cohen’s Kappa, which yielded a score exceeding 0.86, indicating a high level of agreement among coders. Any discrepancies were resolved through collaborative discussion and consensus-building. To enhance methodological rigor, the final coded dataset was cross-validated against the bibliometric keyword clusters identified in Section 2.2, ensuring alignment between thematic and citation-based structures.

An overview of the SDG coding process, including the distinction between explicit and implicit linkages, is illustrated in Figure 2.

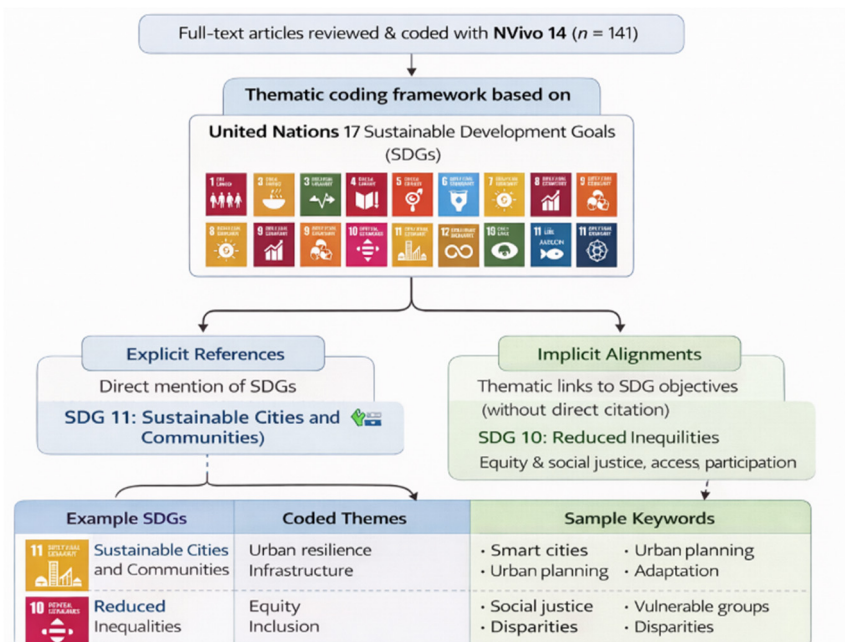


Figure 2. SDG-Based Qualitative Coding Framework.

3. Results

This meta-analysis of 143 peer-reviewed publications (2018–2025) offers a comprehensive overview of the evolving academic discourse linking local governments and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The findings are structured into four interconnected subsections:

- (i) thematic and knowledge clusters;
- (ii) collaboration patterns;
- (iii) SDG alignment distribution; and
- (iv) temporal evolution of the literature.

3.1. Thematic Structure and Knowledge Clusters

The keyword co-occurrence analysis revealed four major thematic clusters, reflecting the interdisciplinary contours of the field (Figure 3):

Cluster A: Urban Sustainability and SDG Localization

Dominated by terms such as “sustainable cities,” “urban planning,” “localization,” and “resilience”, this cluster emphasizes the integration of SDGs into urban policy frameworks and local adaptation strategies.

Cluster B: Governance and Institutional Capacity

Centered around terms like “governance,” “transparency,” “participation,” and “multi-level governance”, this theme highlights institutional arrangements and intergovernmental coordination in SDG implementation.

Cluster C: Environmental Responsibility and Climate Action

Closely aligned with SDG 13, this cluster features keywords such as “climate change,” “green infrastructure,” and “adaptation,” underscoring the environmental dimension of local governance.

Cluster D: Performance Indicators and Accountability

A more technical cluster, including “data governance,” “monitoring,” “performance measurement,” and “Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs)”, focusing on evidence-based policymaking.



Figure 3. This is a figure. Schemes follow the same formatting.

3.2. Collaborative Patterns in the Field

The co-authorship network analysis reveals pronounced regionalized and transnational collaboration patterns among scholars researching the intersection of local governments and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Based on institutional affiliations extracted from 143 peer-reviewed articles, several key trends are identified:

European and Latin American scholars frequently form tightly integrated subnetworks, often engaging in cross-institutional collaborations centered on SDG governance, urban resilience, and

climate action. These regional clusters are frequently supported by European Union-funded programs and South–South cooperation frameworks.

A North American cluster, primarily composed of researchers based in the United States and Canada, shows a strong focus on urban data governance, performance measurement, and the institutionalization of Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs).

Asian institutions, particularly those based in China, South Korea, and India, have significantly expanded their research output in recent years. While some work appears relatively isolated, several notable collaborations with institutions in Australia and the United Kingdom focus on sustainable infrastructure and climate adaptation.

International organizations such as UN-Habitat, UNDP, and ICLEI emerge as key bridging actors within the co-authorship network, linking otherwise regionalized research clusters. These entities frequently co-author applied policy research and facilitate transnational knowledge exchange between global and local governance arenas.

As shown in Figure 4, the global co-authorship network map visualizes these patterns of collaboration across regions. Countries with higher publication outputs are represented with darker shades, and connecting lines indicate co-authorship links between nations.

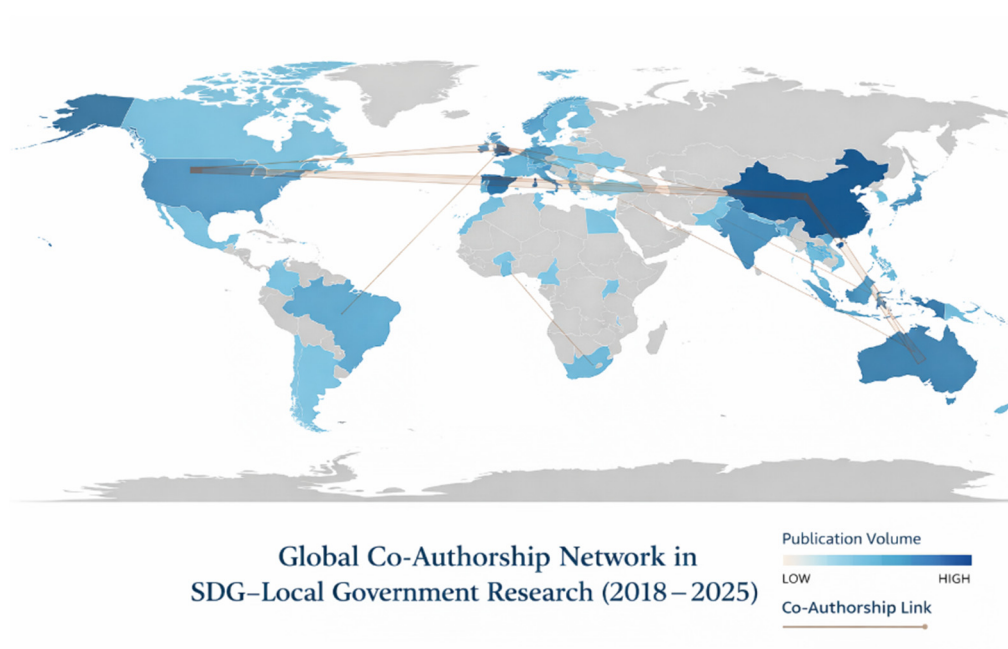


Figure 4. Global Co-Authorship Network in SD-Local Government Research (2018–2025): This map presents international research collaboration based on co-authorship data. It highlights the geographic distribution of publication volume and the extent of transnational linkages among contributing institutions.

In addition, citation analysis shows that seminal works published between 2018 and 2020 continue to serve as foundational references. More recent citation activity, however, is concentrated on applied topics such as SDG localization mechanisms, VLR reporting frameworks, and multi-level governance models. This indicates a growing shift in the literature from conceptual discussions toward practical implementation.

3.3. SDG Linkage Patterns in Local Governance Literature

The qualitative content analysis, guided by the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), reveals an uneven distribution of goal alignment across the reviewed literature. SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) emerged as the most frequently referenced, followed by SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). This pattern underscores the dominant role of urban governance and environmental concerns in the localization of the SDGs.

Table 1. Frequency of SDG Alignment in Reviewed Articles (n = 143).

SDG	Number of Articles
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 strong emphasis on urban sustainability reflects both the policy mandate of local governments and the rising global visibility of cities as critical nodes in sustainable development strategies. Although SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 1 (No Poverty) were cited less explicitly, conceptual alignment with these goals was still evident in sub-themes such as gender inclusion, social justice, and participatory urban planning.

To complement the tabulated frequencies, a visual summary of the relative prominence of the most cited SDGs is presented in Figure 5.

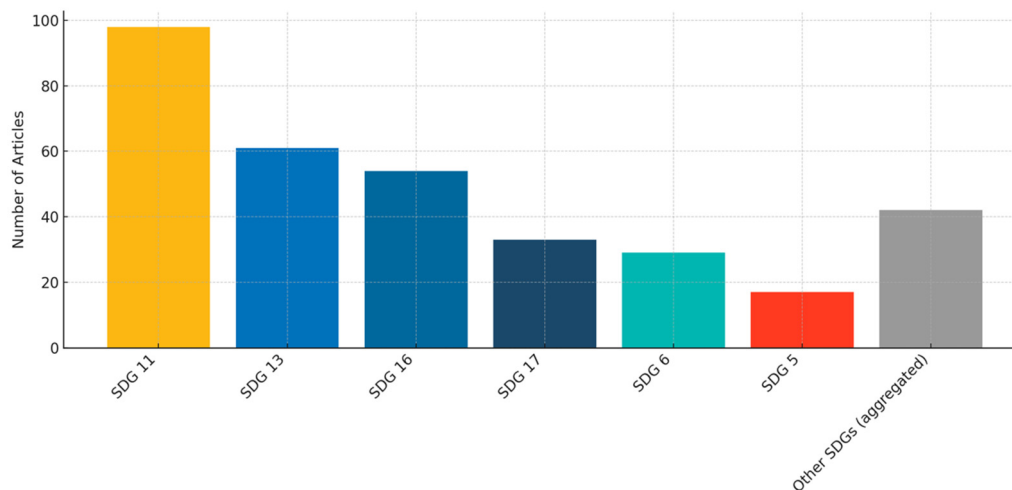


Figure 5. Article Frequency by SDG: Visual representation of the top SDGs cited in the reviewed literature, based on qualitative coding.

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. These clusters reflect the interdisciplinary nature of the field. They are consistent with earlier typologies proposed by scholars such as Bulkeley and Betsill (2013), and reinforce the argument that urban sustainability is inherently linked to 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 observation aligns with recent findings in the bibliometric literature, which suggest 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 highlights their growing 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 to 2020), characterized by normative discourse, gradually transitioned into a more instrumental and empirical phase after 2020, catalyzed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This shift mirrors broader trends in global governance during the pandemic, where local governments assumed central roles not only in public health responses but also in reconfiguring urban resilience and digital governance systems [39,84].

Interestingly, while SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) are mentioned less frequently, the content analysis suggests that themes of equity and inclusion are often embedded indirectly. These appear in discussions concerning vulnerable populations, participatory planning, and social justice. This finding raises methodological concerns about overreliance on keyword-based analyses when tracking SDG engagement, and suggests the need for more nuanced, context-aware coding approaches in future research.

In recent years, particularly between 2023 and 2025, a critical perspective has emerged. Scholars have become increasingly skeptical of purely technocratic approaches to SDG localization. There is growing concern that tools such as indicators, dashboards, and VLRs may risk depoliticizing sustainability or reinforcing managerialism [117–120]. These critiques resonate with broader debates in sustainability governance, especially those addressing the tension between measurement and meaning, and underscore the importance of developing context-sensitive, participatory, and justice-oriented models for localization.

In summary, this study not only synthesizes a previously fragmented body of literature but also demonstrates how the field has matured. It has evolved from aspirational frameworks to empirical analysis, and from descriptive mapping to normative critique. These findings carry important implications for both researchers and policymakers navigating the complex dynamics of SDG localization in urban contexts.

5. Conclusions

This meta-analysis maps the evolving intellectual architecture connecting local governments and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) between 2018 and 2025. By integrating bibliometric network analysis with SDG-aligned qualitative content coding across 143 peer-reviewed publications, the study offers novel insights into the thematic structures, collaboration patterns, and conceptual transformations within this rapidly expanding field.

Key findings highlight the centrality of SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) in urban governance discourse, the growing institutionalization of SDG monitoring instruments, and the emergence of multi-actor networks that link cities, researchers, and international organizations. The transition from normative alignment with global agendas to applied mechanisms of implementation and accountability represents a significant evolution in both scholarly inquiry and policy design.

Despite notable advancements, several gaps persist in the literature. These include the limited attention to underrepresented SDGs, the continued power asymmetries in global–local governance dynamics, and unresolved ethical concerns related to the use of data-driven decision-making tools. Future research should therefore prioritize comparative analyses in Global South contexts, adopt intersectional approaches that reflect social complexity, and critically assess the implications of technocratic governance models.

Achieving the 2030 Agenda will require more than technical instruments and localized indicators. It demands sustained political commitment, strengthened institutional capacities, and the meaningful inclusion of diverse stakeholders. As cities continue to function as laboratories for

sustainability innovation, the knowledge generated through this research can contribute to building more equitable, resilient, and accountable urban futures.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

MDPI	Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute
DOAJ	Directory of open access journals
TLA	Three letter acronym
LD	Linear dichroism

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