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How SDG localization interacts with existing governance contexts

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Review Article

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Abstract

Non-Technical Summary. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), endorsed by national governments, rely on local actors for effective implementation. While the nonbinding nature of the SDG agreement allows for adaptability, it also leads to varying localization across contexts, impacted by existing governance arrangements. This study provides a structured analysis of existing studies, discussions, and evidence that examines how SDG localization interacts with different governance dimensions across diverse contexts. Adopting a meta-perspective, it contributes to a deeper understanding of these variations in SDG localization and informs the development of strategies to accelerate SDG progress at the local level, both leading up to and beyond 2030.

Technical Summary. Cities and local actors have a critical role to play in implementing the SDGs, given their proximity to citizens and community-based challenges. Many regions and cities have undertaken SDG localization as a means to translate and implement global goals at the local level. However, the type and extent of SDG localization have varied a lot across contexts, and this variation is sometimes attributed to the varying governance contexts. Comprehensive studies of governance contexts and their impact on SDG localization are scarce, and the complexity of governance has led current literature to focus primarily on specific aspects – such as policies, strategic planning, or local initiatives – without providing a holistic perspective to fully explore their interconnections. This study addresses this gap by developing a conceptual framework to analyze their interactions at two levels: the intentional level, which examines images, instruments, and actions utilized by actors, and the structural level, which considers underlying conditions, enablers, or impediments. By integrating fragmented analyses and synthesizing insights in the literature, this study develops a more comprehensive understanding of how SDG localization interacts with existing governance contexts and what this means for accelerating progress on the SDGs and developing the next global agenda beyond 2030.

Social Media Summary. This research offers a structured analysis of existing studies, discussions, and evidence that examines how SDG localization interacted with existing governance contexts.

1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also referred to as the Global Goals, were adopted by the United Nations' member states in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that all people enjoy health, peace, and prosperity by 2030. With the 2030 deadline approaching, member states recognize that 'the achievement of the SDGs is in peril', as current progress falls far short of what is required to meet the goals (United Nations, 2024). Within the SDG framework, SDG 17 calls for the establishment of governance arrangements that facilitate coordinated, multistakeholder partnerships capable of mobilizing resources, aligning policies, and supporting coherent implementation of the 2030 Agenda (United Nations, 2015). For the SDGs to be realized, coordinated and sustained collaboration is required among all levels of governments, private sector, and civil society. The role of cities and local actors in the implementation of the SDGs has been widely recognized, given that 58% of the world's population lives in urban areas (World Bank, 2024) and their proximity to citizens and local needs. Since these goals were agreed and signed by national governments, implementing them at the local level requires a process of localization to fit local realities (Croese et al., 2021).

According to United Nations (2024), SDG localization is the process of adapting and customizing the SDGs and translating them into local development plans and strategies – ones that fit the needs, contexts, and priorities of a particular region or locality, in coherence with national

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frameworks. Similarly, some scholars define SDG localization as the adaptation of global goals to local circumstances, their integration into local institutions and governance structures, and the active implementation of actions at the local level (Malekpour et al., 2024). Many regions and cities have been actively pursuing SDG localization to demonstrate their commitment and efforts toward global sustainability. Local and regional governments are increasingly engaging in the subnational reviews of SDG implementation, also called Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs). The number of VLRs submitted to the United Nations has increased substantially, rising from around 10 cities in 2018 to more than 200 cities and regions globally by 2025 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.).

In practice, implementing SDGs locally could stand in conflict with local interests, local creativity, and local implementation (Krantz & Gustafsson, 2023). These tensions are compounded by knowledge gaps and inconsistencies in SDG practice. In many developing contexts, the absence of a shared vision, shortages of skilled personnel and funding, fragile administrative systems, entrenched sociopolitical dynamics, and insufficient governance infrastructure hinder effective multistakeholder engagement (Jain et al., 2021). Even in settings where actors express a commitment to integrated implementation, practical constraints, including limited resources and political pressures, necessitate selective action (Annan-Aggrey et al., 2022). Comparable tendencies are also evident in high-income countries: western municipalities prioritize SDGs that reinforce existing policy agendas, while more challenging goals become marginalized (Reinar & Lundberg, 2024). As a result, SDG localization varies widely across different governance contexts (Hickmann et al., 2024; Malekpour et al., 2024). Some cities, such as in China and parts of Africa, heavily rely on national governments for guidance and support (Croese et al., 2021; Kuhn, 2018). In contrast, municipal-level initiatives play a stronger role in Norway and Sweden, where cities leverage their autonomy to integrate SDGs into local planning (Bardal et al., 2021; Krantz & Gustafsson, 2021). There are also variations between cities within one country, such as in Australia (Ningrum et al., 2023), driven by context-specific conditions and local governance arrangements.

This variation reflects the dynamic relationship between SDG localization and existing governance contexts. Effective or smart governance structures facilitate robust stakeholder engagement, enabling local communities, civil society, and private sector actors to actively participate in decision-making (Giuliodori et al., 2023), thereby ensuring that local needs and priorities are appropriately reflected in SDG implementation. On the other side, by promoting awareness of sustainability and encouraging cross-sectoral collaboration, the SDGs can influence governance by shaping policies, enhancing accountability, and fostering inclusive decision-making processes that are responsive to the diverse needs of communities (Bilsky et al., 2021; Lauwo et al., 2022; Novovic, 2022). This opens an analytical space for studying SDG localization and its interactions with existing governance contexts.

As scholars have long emphasized (Bevir, 2010; Pierre, 2000; Rhodes, 1997), governance itself encompasses a wide range of aspects, reflecting its multifaceted nature. Across existing governance contexts, key aspects generally include the roles and actions of decision-makers at various levels of government, the formulation and implementation of policies and regulations, and the establishment of governance mechanisms and structures intended to facilitate administration and coordination. External structural conditions – economic, social, and cultural – also impact governance effectiveness, either enabling or constraining SDG localization efforts. Existing research discusses SDG localization with regard to specific aspects of governance. This includes research that highlights institutional design for integrated policymaking (Breuer et al., 2023), discusses embedding the SDGs in municipal strategic planning (Guarini et al., 2021; Halko et al., 2024; Reinar & Lundberg, 2024), introduces local actions and initiatives (Annan-Aggrey et al., 2022; Fox & Macleod, 2023; Krantz & Gustafsson, 2023), and challenges and barriers to SDG localization (Kadirbeyoglu & Kutlu, 2024; Lawrence, 2020; Perry et al., 2021). No study to date has offered a meta-synthesis of how SDG localization is impacting, and is impacted by, existing governance contexts, resulting in a lack of understanding of the variations in SDG localization we observe across different contexts.

In light of this, the aim of this research is to offer a structured and comprehensive analysis of existing studies, discussions, and evidence that examine the relationship between SDG localization and different aspects of governance. This meta-perspective is essential for constructing an explanatory framework that accounts for variations in SDG localization. It informs the governance-centered strategies designed to accelerate local progress and meet the 2030 deadline. It also offers insights for sustaining implementation beyond 2030 and for shaping a post-2030 agenda for global sustainable development.

This article is structured as follows: The next section elaborates on the proposed conceptual framework in greater detail. The third section outlines the research methodology, including the screening process employed in the systematic review. The fourth section presents the findings derived from the review. This is followed by the discussion section, which examines the underlying causes and identifies research gaps. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the key findings, acknowledges the study's limitations, and provides recommendations for future research.

2. Conceptual framework

Interaction refers to the reciprocal influence and dynamic exchanges between two or more elements, shaping outcomes through their interconnected roles. To analyze the interaction between SDG localization and existing governance contexts, a conceptual framework is needed to deconstruct governance into its key dimensions and examine their independent and interconnected roles. Drawing on Kooiman's (2003) widely cited work, governance can be conceptualized through the lens of social interactions, emphasizing its nature as a societal attribute shaped by the involvement of both public and private governors. This approach is referred to as social-political governance or interactive governance. Kooiman (2003) argues that governance today is a dynamic mix of efforts across multiple levels and methods, adapting to complex societal needs through evolving roles, interactive structures, and shared responsibilities. Kooiman's governance framework has been widely interpreted as inherently multilevel (Bavinck et al., 2018; Chuenpagdee & Jentoft, 2009; Pierre & Peters, 2005), making it a potentially suitable lens for analyzing complex social issues such as SDG localization, which depend on multilevel, multiactor, and multiorder governing interactions. This study's conceptual framework (see Figure 1) hence builds on Kooiman's interactive governance perspective, distinguishing between two interdependent levels of governing interactions: the intentional level and the structural level.

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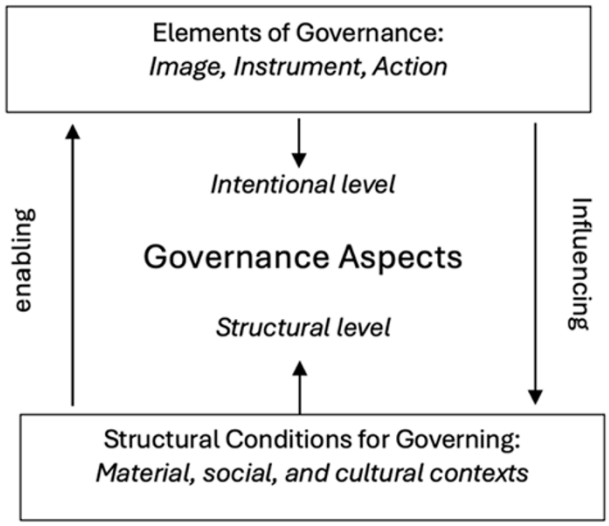


Figure 1. An analytical framework for examining governance.
Source: Adapted from Jan Kooiman (2003).
Notes: This figure presents the analytical framework adapted from Jan Kooiman (2003), illustrating the core aspects and interactions that shape governance processes. It provides the conceptual foundation for analyzing how governing images, instruments, and actions interact with societal issues under varying structural conditions.

The intentional level consists of three core elements used by governing actors: images, instruments, and actions. Actors develop images of governance objectives, apply instruments to achieve them, and take actions to implement these instruments. The structural level encompasses the broader conditions shaping the intentional level, including institutions, social constructs, communication patterns, material and technological capacities, and power distributions. The two levels are mutually influential: while the structural level constrains or enables intentional actions in the short term, long-term governance efforts can reshape structural conditions over time.

This proposed conceptual framework facilitates a meta-analysis of the governance aspects between intentional governing efforts by governing actors – addressing aspects of image, instruments, and actions – and the structural conditions unique to local contexts. In this study, 'governing actors' primarily refers to public actors across different levels of government, with additional consideration of private and civil-society actors involved in shaping local governance processes. Through this approach, the study enables a systematic exploration of how SDG localization interacts with various elements of governance, as well as the ways in which local structures either support or obstruct this process (see Figure 2).

At the intentional level, governing actors form images of SDGs and localization, ranging from extensive, data-driven analyses to more limited perspectives shaped by personal experience. These images – shaped by visions, knowledge, judgments, and theories – influence both decision-making and implementation of the SDGs, while the process of localization can, in turn, reshape these images. Based on these images, actors employ instruments to achieve SDG localization, from 'soft' tools like information and advice to 'hard' mechanisms such as policies and regulations. Some instruments, like national plans, have broad applications, while others target specific issues, such as environmental regulations. Finally, governance involves actors exercising willingness to implement chosen instruments based on their governing images. It leads to the action process, referring to practical steps, activities, or implementation undertaken by multiple governing actors for SDG localization. But as Kooiman (2003) further states, governing elements are 'contextual' and depend on the nature of interactions. His governance theory implies that such categories like instruments and actions are relational and depend on the order, level, and mode of governance from which an interaction is viewed. This would lead to some cases where activities such as capacity building may function as instruments for higher-level authorities while appearing as concrete actions or resources for local actors.

The structural levels are the stable and enduring patterns, contexts, or conditions to prevent systemic failure. This study focuses on three key structural contexts: material, social, and cultural. Material context can refer to the physical and economic conditions, such as local characteristics, infrastructure, resources, and environmental factors. These elements influence the feasibility of governance initiatives and affect the availability of services and opportunities in a community (Bardach & Patashnik, 2023). Social context encompasses the relationships and networks that shape political engagement and civic participation. Factors such as trust in institutions, social cohesion, and community dynamics significantly affect governance effectiveness by influencing public willingness to engage with and support governance efforts (Putnam, 2000). Lastly, cultural context includes the values, beliefs, and traditions that inform societal norms and attitudes toward governance and SDG localization. This dimension plays a crucial role in shaping how policies are perceived and accepted, impacting public discourse and the prioritization of issues (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). Together, these contexts create a complex governance landscape, influencing how SDG localization unfolds.

3. Method

Drawing on the proposed conceptual framework, this research employs a systematic literature review methodology to examine the diverse interactions between existing governance contexts and SDG localization. The review follows a structured process comprising several key stages. First, data collection is conducted using the Scopus database to ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant scholarly works. This is followed by a rigorous screening process, including duplicate removal, title and abstract screening, and full-text review, to ensure the inclusion of high-quality and relevant studies. Finally, data extraction and analysis are performed to identify key themes, patterns, and gaps in the literature, contributing to a deeper understanding of the governance dynamics and SDG localization.

3.1. Data collection

For this study, the Scopus database was selected as the primary source for data collection due to its extensive coverage of peer-reviewed academic journals and high-quality, diverse range of publications. A search protocol was designed to select studies that focus on SDG implementation at the local level and the issues of governance, ensuring the articles are relevant to the aims of the research. The key search terms included combinations of the following:

'Sustainable Development Goals' OR 'SDG' OR '2030 Agenda'
'Governance' OR 'Government'
'Local' OR 'City' OR 'Cities' OR 'Urban' OR 'Subnational' OR 'Sub-national'

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Figure 2. The interaction between SDG localization and existing governance context.
Note: This figure depicts the dynamic relationship between SDG localization and the pre-existing governance environment, highlighting the different levels at which these interactions occur.

The Boolean operator 'AND' was employed to combine terms, ensuring that only articles specifically addressing the intersection of SDGs and governance were included. The search string applied was: (Sustainable Development Goals* OR SDG* OR 2030 Agenda* AND Governance OR Government AND Subnational OR Sub-national) in the title, abstract, or keywords. This search yielded a total of 2,761 publications as of September 2024.

3.2. Data screening

In order to ensure the relevance and quality of the literature selected, a two-stage screening process was conducted, applying a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria. First, titles and abstracts of all publications were screened to exclude irrelevant studies. Inclusion criteria were devised reflexively between authors, through a few iterations of screening a sample of abstracts. Abstracts were included if they fulfilled all of the conditions below:

- Discussed the ways different levels of governments are working with the SDGs at the local/city level, or articles that discuss how different elements of governance and SDGs interacted with each other at the local level.
- Discussed SDGs implementation or engagement as a key feature, instead of the contributions or indirect implications on SDGs.
- Discussed the SDGs as a global agenda rather than focusing on specific goals such as water, food, or energy.

A total of 176 results passed the abstract screening and were prepared for full-text screening. Given the large volume of results at this stage, we limited the types of publications to journals, reviews, and book chapters, excluding any other types of publication such as books, conference reviews, notes, short surveys, and letters. Following full-text screening, a total of 62 publications were included for detailed review and data extraction.

3.3. Data extraction and analysis

For each one of the 62 included papers, data extraction involved analyzing the content of the paper according to a set of variables that operationalized our research aim. In addition to collecting basic information from each paper, such as the geographic location and the specific cities or regions analyzed, the primary focus was on extracting information related to three key elements of governance: image, instrument, and action. Furthermore, we also examined the structural conditions mentioned in the papers, including local characteristics, economic, social, or cultural aspects. The extraction process aimed to identify how these governance elements were presented and applied within different contexts. For 'image', we examined the vision or perception of SDG localization. 'Instrument' focused on the tools, mechanisms, and policies used, while 'action' covered practical implementation steps. Additionally, we analyzed structural conditions, categorizing them into local characteristics (e.g., city size, population, and administrative structure), economic and social aspects (development level, social cohesion, and public participation), and cultural factors (traditions, values, and norms).

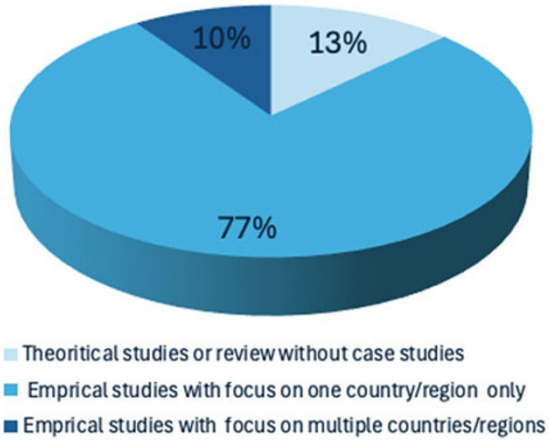


Figure 3. Study types.
Note: This figure categorizes the types of studies included in the systematic review, distinguishing between empirical, conceptual, comparative, and methodological contributions relevant to SDG localization research.

4. Results

This section presents the findings of the current literature on discussing the relationship between existing governance contexts and SDG localization. It covers fundamental characteristics such as study type and geographic distribution, alongside a more in-depth analysis of how different governance aspects are explored in relation to SDG localization. Overall, the majority of studies adopt case study methodologies (see Figure 3), with a predominant focus on a single region, particularly in Europe (see Figure 4), including countries such as Spain and Italy (see Figure 5). Additionally, existing research places greater emphasis on governance instruments compared to image and actions, while structural conditions remain the least explored aspect (see Figure 6).

Existing theoretical studies often focus on multilevel governance models for SDG localization, with an emphasis on the roles of local governments and stakeholders (e.g., Bilsky et al., 2021; Hickmann, 2021). Some of this research offers managerial frameworks designed to guide the implementation and monitoring of SDGs at the local level (Guarini et al., 2021). A smaller body of work critiques the SDG framework, arguing that it prioritizes economic growth over social inclusion and environmental protection (Lim et al., 2021), and overlooks human motives, values, and

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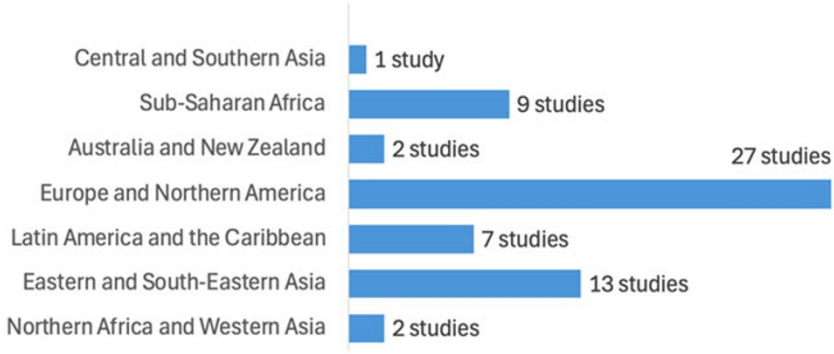


Figure 4. Regions covered in selected case studies.
Note: This figure maps the global regions represented in the selected case studies, illustrating the geographical distribution of existing research across continents and highlighting regional patterns in SDG localization research.

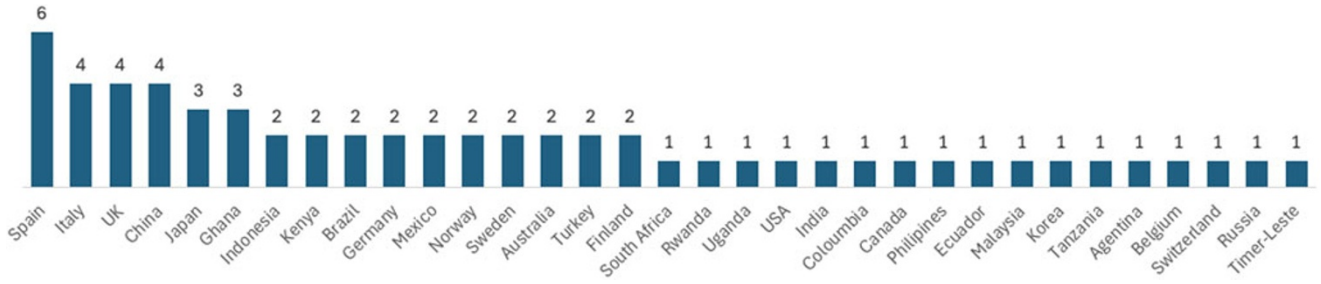


Figure 5. Countries covered in selected case studies.
Note: This figure identifies the specific countries examined in the reviewed case studies, providing an overview of national contexts that involve SDG localization practices or research.

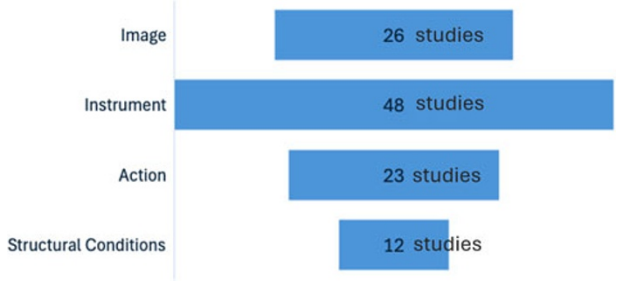


Figure 6. Governance aspects discussed in relation to SDG localization.
Note: This figure summarizes the governance aspects that are addressed in the selected literature, including image, instruments, action, and structural conditions.

decision-making in addressing global challenges (Lawrence, 2020). Scholars advocating for ecological democracy suggest rethinking the SDGs, proposing an emphasis on green politics, diversity, and participatory governance over capitalist hegemony (Lim et al., 2021). Additionally, some theoretical studies present specific tools to facilitate SDG implementation, such as the VLRs (Narang Suri et al., 2021) and the SDG Sensemaking Tool (Taajamaa et al., 2022). There are also review and scientific papers examining the political impact of the SDGs and exploring the governance dimensions at different levels, such as those by Biermann et al. (2022) and Hickmann et al. (2024).

Overall, theoretical studies (13% of the screened literature) have provided limited insights into how the SDGs interact with existing governance contexts. More substantial findings come from empirical research (87% of the screened literature) that examines these interactions across various dimensions, with Europe and East Asia leading this work.

4.1. Image

In the literature, various research foci examine how the SDGs are understood and envisioned at the local level, along with the challenges involved. One common perspective views the SDGs as a universal framework for sustainable development. Some scholars highlight the SDGs as a global vision for ensuring a good quality of life within planetary boundaries (Taajamaa et al., 2022). Empirical evidence suggests that in Norway, municipal planning processes incorporate the SDGs as a key policy framework (European Commission, 2019). Similarly, in Finnish cities, the SDGs serve as an interpretive scheme for 'glocalizing' sustainable development, functioning as both a global and local performance benchmark (Luhtala et al., 2024). A similar trend is observed in the Global South. In Ghana, the SDGs are integrated into local government programs as both a development tool and a standard for assessing progress (Annan-Aggrey & Arku, 2023). In China, SDG localization aligns with regional integration and SDGs under a shared national vision (Wu & Sun, 2023). Beyond their role as a framework, research also highlights how the SDGs offer opportunities for local development. They enable municipalities to evaluate and refine their sustainability initiatives through a structured lens (Krantz & Gustafsson, 2021) and, in some cases, introduce significant shifts in governance and sustainability thinking (Bornemann & Christen, 2021; Luhtala et al., 2024). The SDGs can also broaden community aspirations beyond local concerns, as seen in Australia (Ningrum et al., 2023), and serve as an international benchmark for urban transformation and sustainability progress, as demonstrated in England (Perry et al., 2021).

A second research focus examines how perceptions of the SDGs vary across local contexts. Some studies highlight the influence of political leaders, arguing that SDG integration in municipal planning reflects their interpretation of sustainability (Guarini

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et al., 2021). Empirical evidence suggests that policymakers' understanding of SDG implementation is shaped by political preferences, governance structures, and context-specific challenges (Horn & Grugel, 2018). For example, the UK's SDG implementation has been hindered by governance arrangements and perceptions that the goals primarily apply to developing countries (Geraghty, 2020), while in Russia, the political goals of municipal leaders and managers are a key factor influencing the choice of a sustainable development strategy (Irina & Evgeny, 2024). Research also explores whether sustainable development is framed as a collective vision or a response to specific needs in different contexts. In China's command-and-control context, advancing sustainable development from national to local levels aligns with its aspiration for global leadership in green technologies, forming a collective vision for sustainability transition (Kuhn, 2018). In cities like Milan, Modena, Naples, and Palermo, sustainability is embedded in political vision statements (Guarini et al., 2022), whereas in Japan, some municipalities view the SDGs as a means to address locally encountered challenges, such as depopulation, youth migration, and shifting local identities (Masuda et al., 2021). Similarly, some local government officers in Australia suggest that they engage with the SDGs because the SDGs improve ongoing routines and practices in local governance activities (Ningrum et al., 2023).

The third research area examines challenges in envisioning the SDGs, with two key issues dominating the literature: the knowledge gap and the selectivity of SDG localization. The knowledge gap includes a lack of awareness or personal connection to the SDGs (Fox & Macleod, 2023; Geraghty, 2020), misconceptions of the goals as purely international (Breuer et al., 2023), limited resources and expertise (Kanuri et al., 2016), and difficulties in articulating an SDG-aligned vision (Jain et al., 2021). Research highlights municipalities' adaptability in transforming bureaucratic mindsets by fostering awareness (Fox & Macleod, 2023), offering training (Bardal et al., 2021), building capacity (Annan-Aggrey & Arku, 2023; Krantz & Gustafsson, 2021; Kuhn, 2018), and promoting dialogue through the UN High-Level Political Forum (Annan-Aggrey & Arku, 2024; Donoghue & Khan, 2019). Studies on the selectivity of SDG localization, based on cases from Ghana, Ecuador, Norway, and the UK, reveal that local actors often interpret and implement the SDGs selectively to align with their own interests (Annan-Aggrey & Arku, 2024; Horn & Grugel, 2018; Perry et al., 2021; Reinar & Lundberg, 2024), challenging the idea that the SDGs provide a unified framework for global sustainability governance (Biermann et al., 2022). A small area of research examines the challenges posed by multilevel governance systems due to the involvement of multiple governing actors with divergent interests and varying rationales (Arda et al., 2024). It also raised the concerns whether clear national directives, such as China's centrally led agenda (Kuhn, 2018), foster SDG commitment at regional levels. However, this top-down approach conflicts with the SDG's emphasis on multilevel partnerships. It also depends heavily on high-level political will and commitment at the national level, which, if not effectively translated into multilevel mechanisms and support, risks leaving the responsibility for SDG implementation solely to individual localities (Croese et al., 2021).

4.2. Instruments

For clarity and ease of understanding, the term 'instruments' refers to the tools, mechanisms, or methods employed by local actors to achieve SDG localization or to implement specific policies, strategies, or decisions. These instruments span various strategic planning areas, from situational analysis to strategy development, implementation, and impact monitoring (Irina & Evgeny, 2024). Based on their degree of application, Fox and Macleod (2023) classify them into three types: (1) mapping SDGs onto existing strategies, (2) developing SDG-specific policies or tools, and (3) formally integrating SDGs into strategic planning. Extensive empirical research has examined these three types through case studies across diverse contexts, with a particular focus on Africa, Asia, and Europe. Findings from these regions suggest an increasing integration of SDG localization into governance frameworks, reflecting a growing commitment to sustainable development.

In Africa, SDG implementation remains in its early stages in many countries and is primarily driven by national governments, with alignment largely limited to national development plans and implementation mechanisms led by ministerial authorities (Croese et al., 2021). For instance, in Tanzania, institutional arrangements for localizing the SDGs remain structured within the existing hierarchical top-down governing regime, with no specific SDG-related strategy or policy being devised or enacted for engaging the key stakeholders (Lauwo et al., 2022). Some countries, such as Benin and Cape Verde, exemplify active inclusion of local governments in SDG localization efforts by national governments. Conversely, in countries like Uganda and Mozambique, local governments have taken the initiative in SDG implementation, often in collaboration with UN agencies, donors, or national and international local government associations (UCLG 2020). Research in Africa frequently focuses on Ghana. The Ghanaian government has integrated the SDGs into its national development planning framework, aligning national, regional, and local development plans. However, interviews with national and local practitioners reveal tensions between the ambition to implement the SDGs as an integrated framework and the practical challenges posed by inadequate financial resources, necessitating prioritization of the most pressing goals (Annan-Aggrey & Arku, 2024).

In Asia, a detailed comparative case study of Japan and Indonesia examines their national and local governance systems for SDG implementation (Morita et al., 2020). According to this study, Japan lacks a dedicated legal framework to directly support SDG implementation. However, national coordination efforts, such as related meetings and the establishment of a coordination office, have been put in place to facilitate progress. At the local level, several municipal governments have begun integrating the SDGs into their plans and strategies, coinciding with the launch of the SDGs Future Cities Projects in 2018. In Indonesia, an institutional framework for the SDGs was established in 2017, accompanied by the development of the SDGs Roadmap 2018–2030 and the National SDGs Action Plan 2017–2019 (Government of Indonesia 2017 a/b). At the local level, Governor and Mayor Regulations have been enacted to support SDG implementation, and local action plans are now mandated to localize the goals effectively. China represents another prominent research focus in Asia. Its approach can be categorized into two key measures: first, the development of national plans and strategies, such as the National Plan on Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2016), to influence local planning; and second, the establishment of pilot and demonstration zones at the city level to generate practical implementation experiences (Kuhn, 2018; Wang et al., 2020). Another study examines the roles of local governments in the era of SDGs in South Korea, focusing on their contributions through

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Official Development Assistance to developing countries (Lim & Jung, 2020).

European research on SDG localization is extensive, with a strong focus on Scandinavia. In Finland, local governments play a central role, supported by networks that have made the SDGs a policy priority. Six major cities – Helsinki, Espoo, Tampere, Vantaa, Turku, and Oulu – collectively issued a declaration reinforcing their commitment to sustainable development (Halko et al., 2024; Luhtala et al., 2024). Similarly, Norway's 356 municipalities have integrated the SDGs into strategic planning, following national guidelines (Bardal et al., 2021). Sweden's 2018 national action plan highlights the role of county councils and municipalities, promoting local indicators and capacity-building initiatives such as Glocal Sweden (Krantz & Gustafsson, 2023). Beyond Scandinavia, research also highlights Spain, Italy, and Germany. In Spain, research has introduced the establishment of the Spanish Sustainable Development Network, which oversees the monitoring of the 2030 Agenda at the city level (García-Peña et al., 2021). A review of Italy's strategic plans (2020–2022) found that only 19 of 110 provincial capitals referenced sustainable development, with just four – Bologna, Ferrara, Parma, and Rome – embedding it into strategic objectives and performance measurement (Guarini et al., 2022). In contrast, Germany is a leader in formal SDG institutionalization at both national and local levels. The country has established the Club of Agenda 2030 Municipalities and multiple networks to advance municipal sustainability efforts (Fox & Macleod, 2023; Raffer et al., 2022). Other European countries exhibit varied engagement. Ireland integrates SDG implementation into national plans, while Wales embeds SDGs into primary legislation (Geraghty, 2020). The UK's Bristol SDG Alliance fosters multistakeholder collaboration (Fox & Macleod, 2023). In contrast, Turkey's Union of Municipalities has taken limited steps beyond a few seminars, publications, and a database of local projects (İkizer, 2023). Russia's municipalities demonstrate uneven institutionalization of sustainable development (Irina & Evgeny, 2024). Another interesting area of research explores the role of the European Union (EU) in promoting SDG localization among its member states through its intra-EU channels (Dulak, 2023).

Additional related case studies include Australia and Canada. In Australia, state governments require local governments to develop a community strategic plan, which has emerged as one of the most effective avenues for engaging with the SDGs (Ningrum et al., 2023). In Canada, the consulted municipalities were generally in the early stages of developing methodologies to create a reporting framework for integrating SDGs into local policy plans (Rauf et al., 2024).

The empirical findings above indicate a shared recognition among local actors of the need to institutionalize SDGs within local governance contexts. However, effective localization requires assessing how existing institutional arrangements align with the evolving demands of sustainable governance. This may involve targeted, context-specific adjustments, as seen in Switzerland (Bornemann & Christen, 2021), or an expansion of local authorities' traditional roles, as noted by Hickmann (2021). In all cases, governance structures must adapt to emerging challenges to facilitate SDG implementation. Extensive research has explored strategies to enhance governance and SDG localization, introducing various instruments such as institutional innovation for cross-sectoral integration, publicly funded projects to address financial gaps (Raffer et al., 2022), Information and Communication Technology (ICT)-driven solutions (Lim et al., 2021), systemic monitoring mechanisms (Rauf et al., 2024), data-based approaches (Abidoye & Orlic, 2022; Jain & Espey, 2022), multistakeholder partnerships (Hickmann, 2021; Masuda et al., 2021), participatory mechanisms (Meschede & Mainka, 2020; Narang Suri et al., 2021; Righettini, 2021), subsidiarity-based local approaches (Alonso Frank & Mattioli, 2023; Rauf et al., 2024), and multilevel governance frameworks (Hickmann, 2021; Rauf et al., 2024).

4.3. Actions

This section distinguishes 'actions' from 'instruments', emphasizing that actions involve concrete steps taken by multiple governing actors to localize the SDGs, producing measurable outcomes. Drawing on the literature and Kooiman's (2003) governance framework, three levels of action are identified: (1) leadership at the individual level, (2) social movements at the (sub)societal level, and (3) coordination at the (inter)national level involving cross-departmental actors.

At the individual level, leadership is critical to SDG localization, yet research on individual political leaders' actions remains limited. At the local level, mayors often play a pivotal role. For example, in the city of Espoo in Finland, where there is a clear and logical approach to sustainable development, the role of long-serving leaders has been central. The mayor of Espoo has adopted a holistic view of sustainability, incorporating economic, social, ecological, and cultural aspects as key goals. This approach has created a strong foundation for SDG efforts to take root and flourish (Halko et al., 2024). At the national level, strong leadership can drive SDG agendas at the local level, as seen in China, where Xi Jinping's administration has spearheaded sustainability initiatives (Kuhn, 2018). However, centralized leadership can also pose challenges. In Kenya and South Africa, national political will significantly influences SDG localization and effective communication and implementation at the local level remain key barriers (Croese et al., 2021). Leadership conflicts at different levels can further complicate SDG localization efforts, as illustrated by tensions in Brazil between governors, mayors, and President Bolsonaro, whose administration was criticized for undermining sustainability efforts, particularly in the Amazon (Prado et al., 2021). Additionally, Breuer et al. (2023) highlight that in many countries, SDG leadership is assigned to ministries of foreign affairs or environment, often prioritizing political management over economic and social dimensions of sustainability.

At the other two levels, the boundaries between social movements that originate within specific groups and coordination at the (inter)national level are difficult to discern in the literature, particularly within the context of the SDGs, which inherently rely on multilevel partnerships. Research tends to highlight the fluidity between these levels, showing how grassroots activism can expand in scope and influence, often transforming into coordinated efforts and actions. The SDGs and pledge to leave no one behind are being powerful drivers of transformational change in and of themselves, inspiring people and leaders to engage in a collective project for a better world (United Nations Development Programme, 2018). The case of Bristol, UK, illustrates this transition, where a citizen-led initiative expanded to include a stakeholder network, a local university, and the city council (Fox & Macleod, 2023). Similarly, in Lucca, Italy, the Fridays For Future Movement demonstrated how an initial protest of around 2,000 people outside the town council generated growing expectations among residents, who increasingly looked to local authorities for visible and official action on climate change and local sustainable development (Annesi et al., 2021).

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More research focuses on common coordination among diverse actors, including governments, public and private organizations, civil society, and international institutions. Local governments, in particular, are widely recognized as key intermediaries in fostering partnerships due to their proximity to local communities and ability to mobilize collective action (Bilsky et al., 2021; Hickmann, 2021). Empirical studies highlight various strategies and actions: in Australia, local governments engage with the SDGs through eight distinct modes, including stakeholder coordination and progress monitoring (Ningrum et al., 2023). In Japan, municipalities have driven sustainable transitions by expanding networks, supporting private-sector initiatives, and facilitating partnerships (Masuda et al., 2022). However, challenges remain – while Germany has successfully institutionalized municipal SDG support networks (Raffer et al., 2022), local governments in Indonesia struggle with resource constraints (Morita et al., 2020), and in Canada, conflicts of interest hinder collaboration (Rauf et al., 2024). The case of Timor-Leste highlights how initial government efforts to promote SDG awareness were not sustained due to weak administrative follow-up, leading to limited tangible outcomes (Jain et al., 2021). Regional organizations, such as the EU, have been studied for their role in supporting subnational SDG collaboration and implementation (Dulak, 2023).

A growing trend of research emphasizes the participatory and inclusive nature of coordination and collaboration in SDG localization. Some study demonstrates that the SDGs can be used as a basis for collaboration and a (perceived) joint point of departure for actor collaboration (Krantz & Gustafsson, 2023), while other study states the public sector often dominates SDG decision-making, limiting governance diversity and democratic engagement (Catzín-Tamayo et al., 2022). However, successful cases offer insights for multicollaboration: Sweden's multiactor platform for SDG localization underscores a novel approach to governance having a bottom-up and actor-oriented approach, where public and nonpublic actors have an opportunity to collaborate in new and flexible ways. The county council, the county administrative board, the university, a regional business organization, and a municipality were all included (Krantz & Gustafsson, 2023). In Ghana, a district-level community of practice fosters mutual learning and harmonized development efforts among civil society organizations (Annan-Aggrey et al., 2022). In North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, municipalities have made citizen participation a core element of their sustainability strategies, highlighting that municipalities recognize the importance of involving civil society in decision-making processes (Meschede & Mainka, 2020). Increasingly, both scholars and practitioners recognize that mainstreaming SDGs into local actions fosters inclusive and sustainable societies by strengthening relationships and networks among diverse stakeholders (Fox & Macleod, 2023; Masuda et al., 2021).

4.4. Structural conditions influencing SDG localization

This section explores how structural conditions shape the localization of the SDGs, influencing the formation of images, the development of instruments, and the implementation of actions. Research highlights the role of local characteristics, governance structures, socioeconomic conditions, and cultural factors in either enabling or constraining SDG progress.

A case study in Indonesia shows that local characteristics such as region size, the number of regional units, and the availability of local own-source revenue influence the achievement of the SDGs. The results also highlight the importance of strong local leadership, robust infrastructure, and well-established governance systems (Mutiarani & Siswantoro, 2020). Similarly, an empirical study in Spain found significant variations in the level of SDG commitment across municipalities and regions, influenced by sociodemographic factors such as population size, dependency ratio, and population density. The results suggest that the size of a municipality (measured by the population), the percentage of the dependent population (young and elderly), and the degree of population density appear to positively influence the commitment of local governments to the SDGs (Rieiro-García et al., 2023). Additionally, higher population density and voter participation correlate with stronger SDG adoption, whereas higher unemployment and lower tax revenue often hinder progress (Benito et al., 2023). Favorable financial conditions facilitate SDG advancement, but large governing coalitions may complicate sustainable policy-making (Bisogno et al., 2023).

Research also highlights how socioeconomic development and cultural values shape the localization of SDGs. Governments with higher socioeconomic development tend to establish stronger cross-sectoral mechanisms for SDG implementation (Breuer et al., 2023). Countries with a long-standing sustainability tradition, such as Sweden, have integrated SDGs more seamlessly into governance and policy, with local actors actively engaging in global sustainability networks (Fox & Macleod, 2023; Krantz & Gustafsson, 2023). In contrast, weaker governance structures and socioeconomic constraints can hinder SDG localization. In Turkey, limited administrative capacity, financial resources, and weak public participation mechanisms create barriers to effective local governance and sustainability efforts (İkizer, 2023). Similarly, in Russia, municipal-level sustainability policies must navigate complex socioeconomic challenges, including economic disparities and social integration issues (Irina & Evgeny, 2024).

Cultural values and identity are often more profound and deeply rooted than other contextual factors. The Pact for the Future – the outcome of the intergovernmental Summit of the Future in 2024 – explicitly recognizes culture as a central enabler of sustainable development and calls for its systematic integration into policy, planning, and investment decisions (United Nations General Assembly, 2024). As the SDGs represent a set of universal values and beliefs, they are grounded explicitly in the promotion and protection of human rights, including the principles of equality and nondiscrimination that are the foundation of the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations Development Programme, 2018). Their localization involves a process through which local actors identify and adapt elements from the SDG framework that align with their own values and interests for effective implementation (Arda et al., 2024). Some scholars argue that the SDG framework is less Western-centric than previous global initiatives, as it recognizes shared global challenges rather than imposing a singular development model (Novovic, 2022). Some scholars emphasize the importance of identity values rooted in the local context, as illustrated by the case of Timor-Leste. The distinct national and cultural identity central to its nation-building serves as a foundation for advancing the SDGs. Organizations that link sustainable development to indigenous knowledge, thereby strengthening Timor-Leste's strong 'civic identity', play a crucial role in this process (Jain et al., 2021). Other scholars emphasize the importance of democratic values – such as transparency, accountability, and participation – in fostering effective SDG localization. Cities that embed these principles

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into their governance structures are better positioned to maximize their potential in achieving sustainability goals (İkizer, 2023). The Pact for the Future – the outcome of the intergovernmental Summit of the Future in 2024 – explicitly recognizes culture as a central enabler of sustainable development and calls for its systematic integration into policy, planning, and investment decisions (United Nations General Assembly, 2024).

5. Discussion

The preceding results section outlined the current state of existing research, with a particular focus on examining how the SDG localization interacts with the three intentional elements of governance and structural conditions. Across the images local actors construct, the measures and tools they adopt, the actions they implement, and the structural conditions that enable or constrain these processes, a consistent pattern emerges: SDG localization is both shaping and being shaped by existing governance context. This section will delve deeper into this direction and identifies the aspects that have been emphasized or overlooked in the literature.

To begin with, when SDG localization is introduced to different levels of actors, variations initially emerge related to 'image', driven by actors' preferences as well as differing levels of knowledge and capacity. While a substantial portion of the existing literature addresses this variation (accounting for 40% of the sources), it primarily concentrates on the diverse viewpoints or preferences that actors hold concerning sustainability or the SDGs. In contrast, the literature pays less attention to the processes through which these perceptions are formed or to the knowledge and vision-forming capacities needed for SDG localization. While a few studies mention strategies to raise awareness and improve capacity, they are typically relegated to brief suggestions in the conclusion or recommendation sections of papers.

The results also reveal that regions and actors with established traditions in sustainability, or greater exposure to sustainable development concepts, are better equipped to understand and implement the SDGs. In contrast, developing regions or those new to sustainability face significant challenges. This is also reflected in the geographic imbalance in literature, as approximately half of the case studies are coming from Europe, where municipal-level SDG implementation is examined in greater depth. In contrast, research on the Global South frequently emphasizes the influence of high-level political will and highlights the challenges and setbacks local actors encounter in envisioning and implementing the SDGs. This trend also revealed the conflicts of image between local- and national-level actors, due to their divergent interests and different logics.

The discussion of instruments emerges as a central theme in the SDG localization literature, with over 70% of the selected studies addressing this aspect. This emphasis is unsurprising, as instruments offer a more tangible basis for analysis compared to abstract concepts such as image formation or actions that require quantitative monitoring and evaluation. Much research focuses on specific policies, tools, or mechanisms, examining governance levels (national, municipal, or regional) and whether instruments are government-led or stakeholder-driven for SDG localization. Despite its fragmentation, existing research highlights varying degrees of SDG integration into policymaking, with a growing trend from Africa to Asia and Europe. Surprisingly, research on the U.S. is sparse, with few case studies, conceptual analyses, or contributions from American institutions, despite its global policy influence. While instruments have significantly shaped the policy agenda for SDG localization, questions can be raised about the authenticity of these efforts – that is, the extent to which policies and commitments that are stated align with genuine intentions and meaningful action. When SDGs are invoked without clear visions or concrete implementation, localization risks devolving into SDG-washing.

Approximately 30% of the reviewed studies address the actions. Existing studies approach actions in SDG localization through three main lenses: integrating them into research focused on instruments or images, examining the challenges and opportunities associated with actions in varying contexts, or conducting in-depth case studies of specific countries or cities. The findings indicate a research gap at the individual and societal levels, with a stronger emphasis on (inter)national-level actions. Scholars highlight the importance of collaboration among different levels of governments and stakeholders, as well as capacity building for effective actions. However, the existing literature places strong emphasis on government-led actions, while devoting less attention to their long-term evaluation and monitoring within local contexts. Moreover, comparative analyses across different contexts and timeframes are insufficient. The results also reveal a dynamic progression from social movements to national and international actions, suggesting an important avenue for future research. Specifically, further exploration is needed on how individual SDG champions and social groups can grow and expand their influence on SDG localization, including the role of universities in driving SDG transformations (Cuesta-Claros et al., 2022).

Although not extensively covered, nearly 20% of the selected papers discuss the structural conditions that impact governance and SDG localization, including local characteristics, governance structures, socioeconomic conditions, and cultural values. It is widely acknowledged by scholars that better performance in sustainable development is often facilitated by stronger governance (García-Peña et al., 2021), while weak public administration systems and inadequate governance infrastructure that fail to support multistakeholder relationships can significantly undermine commitments to the SDGs. Research on local characteristics and governance structures often focuses on factors such as population density, political ideologies, party structures, and institutional arrangements. These features form the basis for local actors' efforts and influence their expectations and motivations when implementing the SDGs. More research is essential for uncovering the diverse factors that enable or constrain SDG localization across various contexts.

More importantly, there is lack of empirical evidence to substantiate the relationships between local characteristics and SDG localization. For example, the impact of political ideology on SDG localization remains contested. An analysis of 102 municipalities in Spain suggests that left-wing parties are more likely to disclose SDG-related information on their websites (Rieiro-García et al., 2023). Conversely, a comparative study of cities in Italy and Spain found no significant correlation between the political orientation of the governing body and SDG policy implementation (Bisogno et al., 2023). This highlights the need for more robust, quantitative analysis to assess the actual impact of local characteristics on SDG localization. Additionally, studies on socioeconomic development and cultural distinctions remain largely conceptual, highlighting the need for empirical and comparative analyses as well. The Pact for the Future – the outcome of the

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intergovernmental Summit of the Future in 2024 – explicitly recognizes culture as a central enabler of sustainable development and calls for its systematic integration into policy, planning, and investment decisions (United Nations General Assembly, 2024). Deeper insights into how socioeconomic factors influence local priorities and how cultural values shape sustainability perceptions could inform more context-specific SDG strategies while identifying universal principles for broader application. Further research is needed on underexamined factors such as technological development, geography, natural resources, and social ideologies to better understand how local conditions shape SDG localization.

Lastly, the preceding discussion primarily emphasizes the influence of governance contexts on the localization of the SDGs at both structural and intentional levels. However, this influence goes both ways and it is evident that the SDG framework, as a comprehensive global agenda, exerts a significant impact on local governance processes as well (Raffer et al., 2022). Since the adoption of the SDGs in 2015, there has been a notable global shift toward sustainable development, with increasing focus on issues such as gender equality, education, and poverty alleviation. This shift has prompted not only public institutions but also private organizations and civil society to adopt the SDGs as a guiding framework for local development initiatives (Bilsky et al., 2021; Bisogno et al., 2023). While existing research has explored the interactions between governance and SDG localization as a mix, it has yet to clearly define the role of the SDG framework in shaping local governance. Moreover, scientific analysis suggested that limited evidence from local to global governance is observed on the political impact of the SDGs (Biermann et al., 2022). Future research, particularly comparative studies analyzing governance contexts before and after the adoption of the SDGs, could provide critical insights into the framework's tangible impact on local and even global governance structures.

To accelerate progress on the SDGs and inform the next global sustainable development agenda beyond 2030, future research and practice should consider both the intentional and structural dimensions of governance, recognizing how global agendas are translated into local governing practices. The current findings suggest that divergent images of the SDGs across actors and levels – and the resulting conflicts between local and national priorities – must be analyzed as drivers of localization outcomes. The literature's emphasis on instruments and actions without sufficient comparative assessment and evaluation signal an urgent requirement for systematic monitoring and impact assessment to move beyond descriptive case studies. The observed pathway from social movements to national and international action highlights the strategic importance of SDG champions, universities, and social groups as agents of scale-up, and they need to be effectively engaged in shaping any sustainable development agenda beyond 2030. Finally, the future agenda beyond 2030 should also explicitly recognize structural conditions that enable or constrain localization. Taken together, these gaps and trends indicate that a future global sustainability agenda should consider contextual variations and conflicts in existing governance context, their influence on localization efforts and capacities needed to navigate them from local, national, and international stakeholders. The applied governance framework could provide a durable conceptual foundation for designing and evaluating post-2030 SDG governance systems.

6. Concluding remarks

The SDGs, endorsed by national governments, rely on local actors for effective implementation. It is accepted by all countries and is applicable to all, taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). While the SDGs allow for adaptability, they also lead to varying localization across contexts, impacted by existing governance arrangements. Current literature covers specific governance aspects, leaving gaps in understanding their full interactions with SDG localization. This study uses Kooiman's governance framework to examine two levels of governance contexts: intentional and structural. The intentional level includes image, instruments, and actions, while the structural level involves the conditions that influence these elements, such as material, social, and cultural contexts. The findings show that literature disproportionately focuses on instruments, with less attention to image and actions. Disparities in SDG comprehension across contexts and government levels are evident, with the Global North outperforming the Global South not only in the quantity of case studies but also in the quality of understanding. A promising avenue for future research lies in comparative studies across diverse regions, with particular attention to the Global South. Given their varied contexts, it is also crucial to examine how different governance models – such as centralized versus decentralized or democratic versus authoritarian systems – shape SDG implementation, an area currently underexplored. Additionally, existing research primarily focuses on governmental actors; further studies should explore the expanding role of non-state actors – such as the private sector, NGOs, and community groups – in SDG localization. A number of widely cited case studies, including Unilever's Shakti, ITC's eChoupal, and Safaricom's M-PESA, illustrate how private actors can integrate commercial objectives with social value creation (Chakravorti et al., 2015). Understanding how these actors interact with local governments and influence policy, capacity-building, and resource allocation would offer valuable insights into the broader governance ecosystem. Furthermore, while this review provides a snapshot of current governance dynamics in relation to SDG localization, future research should examine their long-term impacts, as these structures are subject to change through intentional efforts such as capacity-building and knowledge exchange. Future research could also investigate whether SDG images, instruments, and actions are consistently maintained and adapted in subsequent cycles of government agenda-setting to provide a deeper understanding of their sustainability and impact over time.

This research, while offering valuable insights into the relationship between existing governance contexts and SDG localization, has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the scope of the study is constrained by the available literature, which may not encompass all relevant contexts, particularly those in less documented or emerging regions. The analysis and results only rely on what is reported in existing papers (i.e., secondary data) and are not rich in in-depth primary data. Second, while the Scopus database provides access to a wide range of high-quality literature, it is important to note that the review is limited to the articles indexed within this database. Additionally, the exclusion of non-English articles may have resulted in the omission of relevant research published in other languages. Furthermore, the governance framework used in this study only considers three intentional elements (image, instrument, and actions) and some

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structural conditions (material, social, and cultural). It may not capture every aspect of governance for SDG localization, and some elements may fall into different categories depending on the context, the actors involved, or the purposes they serve. Lastly, the literature selection process focuses on the urban areas, which, although systematic, may have excluded certain studies or perspectives that could offer additional insights, especially those from rural contexts. As a result, the findings and conclusions drawn from this review may not reflect the full range of existing governance contexts or SDG localization efforts in diverse settings. Future studies could address the research gaps identified in this review and overcome existing limitations through more objective and rigorous analysis.

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