

EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL OF CO-GOVERNANCE MODELS TO ACCELERATE SDGs AT LOCAL LEVEL

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ABSTRACT

With an eye to the upcoming 2030 deadline, this report aims to explore the potential of Co-Governance and Joint Management of Commons mechanisms in accelerating the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at local level. It argues that commons-based co-governance mechanisms have the potential to significantly enhance citizens' sense of ownership of the SDGs, including those who may be frail and vulnerable, thus enabling broad engagement and actions sustained over time.

Through desk research and literature review, the report examines the alignment between SDGs localization and commons-based co-governance experiences. The in-depth analysis of five case studies unfolds new forms of collaboration that have been developed and tested locally, encompassing diverse contexts across the European Union, and provides practical insights and evidence of Co-Governance in enhancing public policy effectiveness, social innovation, and citizen participation in vulnerable neighbourhoods, cities and territories.

The report concludes that commons-based Co-Governance models, going beyond the traditional top-down vs bottom-up dichotomy, could provide a powerful tool for localizing SDGs; however, further research and policy efforts are needed to overcome challenges linked to administrative silos, scaling up, financial sustainability and the inclusion of diverse groups of civil society.

KEYWORDS:

Co-Governance, Sustainable Development Goals, localization, citizen participation, public policy effectiveness, social innovation, governance models, governance of the commons, urban commons.

FOREWORD

This report is being submitted to publication at the end of 2024. We are about to enter the last 5 years period before the 2030 horizon, by which all Sustainable Development Goals should be achieved. However, today we find ourselves to be quite behind this objective, with only 17% of the Goals being on track according to the UN's The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024 [UN, 2024]. It is our duty to research and implement all possible strategies that could accelerate the process, and particularly those that build on the Leave No One Behind (LNOB) principle.

With this aim, the present report introduces what could be regarded as a field of opportunity: what if the principles of Co-Governance and Joint Management of Common Goods were implemented in policies and actions to achieve the SDGs? This report aims to explore if, and how, the Joint Management of Commons approach could have the potential to significantly enhance the engagement of all parts of society, including those who may be frail and vulnerable, in the design and implementation process of the SDGs at the local and territorial level.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Joint Research Centre's (JRC) Territorial Development unit (B3) is working to support the localization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in European urban and regional territories. This report explores the potential of Co-Governance as a model to foster shared responsibility between public administration and local stakeholders, promoting strong ownership and whole-of-society involvement in achieving the SDGs.

The 17 SDGs, adopted by the United Nations in 2015 together with the Agenda2030, include a framework of goals, targets and indicators that aim to end poverty, improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth.

By publishing the Reflection Paper on Sustainable Development Goals '*Towards a Sustainable Europe in 2030*' [EC, 2019], the European Commission has committed to fully integrate the SDGs into the EU policy framework, and to recognize the principle of multilevel governance in the elaboration and implementation of EU policies.

In the 2022 resolution on the implementation and delivery of the SDGs, the European Parliament has emphasized the need for a 'strong level of societal legitimacy and a genuine political reset' to achieve the SDGs, which can only be achieved by engaging citizens and ensuring their participation in the decision-making process. It has called for the urgent set-up of **a new mechanism for structured engagement**, with balanced, diversified and democratic representation covering civil society organisations, community-based organisations, the private sector, trade unions, cooperatives, academia and research institutions, regional and local governments and marginalised groups. [EP, 2022]

In addition, the central role of multi-level governance and partnerships approach to deliver accelerated progress towards achieving the SDGs has been reiterated in the UN's 'Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023: Special edition', as part of five key areas for urgent action. Governments should strengthen national and subnational capacity, accountability and public institutions for monitoring, follow-up and review of the SDGs, **'including by strengthening civic space and public engagement in policy- and decision-making'** [UN, 2023].

With only five years left to achieve the 2030 Agenda, it is crucial to accelerate action and focus on policies and tools that can drive progress. The subnational level (regions, cities) has a vital role to play, as over 65% of SDG targets require local government action and community engagement [OECD, 2020]. This report analyses the potential of Co-Governance to promote shared responsibility, social legitimacy, and ownership, ensuring sustained actions over time.

Through a literature review and in-depth analysis of case studies, this report explores the Co-Governance framework as interpreted and applied in coherence with Elinor Ostrom's theory on the governance of the commons, its alignment with the localization of SDGs, and its potential to drive meaningful and impactful changes. The findings reveal that commons-based Co-Governance can enable active involvement of local communities in achieving SDG targets, particularly those related to sustainable cities and communities, reduced inequalities, and quality education.

However, the successful localization of SDGs through commons-based Co-Governance requires overcoming challenges such as ensuring scalability and sustainability, addressing financial and structural barriers, and enhancing civic engagement.

The policy relevance of this research lies in its exploration of a governance model that can foster new forms of collaboration and cooperation between multiple stakeholders (public administrations and local governments, local industrial systems and SMEs, universities and research centres, NGOs and civil society organizations, citizens), and ensure long-term commitment.

This research delivers three main messages:

1. Firstly, the commons-based Co-Governance model can help overcoming the traditional dichotomy of top-down and bottom-up approaches, providing both methodologies and concrete examples to align public administrations' goals with community needs.
2. Secondly, the commons-based Co-Governance model can provide evidence-based guidance on how to strengthen localization of sustainability agendas in EU territories. With over 65% of SDG targets requiring local action, and with only five years remaining until the 2030 deadline, identifying effective localization mechanisms can be seen as a critical priority for EU policymaking.
3. Finally, the commons-based Co-Governance mechanism can help creating a most needed consensus-basis around the sustainability transition, by co-constructing sustainability policies as collective choices rather than external impositions.

Implementing commons-based Co-Governance mechanisms has implications for local policymaking, requiring ad-hoc legal and financial tools, comprehensive participation, inclusivity, and representation. Moreover, to enable scaling up, these practices should be fully integrated across all levels of governance, with the support of European institutions and relevant stakeholders.

In conclusion, this research aims to provide valuable insights into the potential impact of commons-based Co-Governance mechanisms in unlocking ownership and commitment to SDGs, and to sustainability agendas in general.

By sharing decision-making power and management responsibilities between public administrations and citizens, Co-Governance can promote inclusive and democratic management of common resources, enhancing long-time commitment, effectiveness, and sustainability of interventions that are essential to achieving SDGs localization.

1. INTRODUCTION

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development represents a landmark achievement in global governance, establishing a universal blueprint for sustainable development that integrates the interconnected dimensions of peace, people, prosperity, and the planet. Adopted unanimously by all United Nations member states in 2015 the Agenda, comprehensive of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets, constitutes an unprecedented commitment to addressing humanity's most pressing challenges through collective action and shared responsibility¹.

The European Union has raised to this challenge by embedding the 2030 Agenda within its policy architecture through a comprehensive whole-of-government approach. The European Commission's Reflection Paper 'Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030' [EC, 2019] commits to fully integrating the SDGs into the EU policy framework while recognizing multilevel governance as fundamental to policy elaboration and implementation, while the European Parliament Resolution 2022/2002 [EP, 2022] emphasizes that achieving the SDGs requires '**a strong level of societal legitimacy and a genuine political reset,**' calling for structured engagement mechanisms that ensure balanced representation of civil society organizations, community-based organizations, private sector, trade unions, cooperatives, academia, regional and local governments, and marginalized groups.

However, this institutional commitment increasingly confronts a paradox: while the urgency of sustainable development intensifies, citizen support for sustainability policies faces growing resistance across Europe. The farmer protests of 2023-2024, the gilets jaunes movement, and the electoral gains of parties opposing green transition measures are examples that seem to reflect a deepening disconnect between sustainability objectives and citizens' lived experiences. This discontent appears to stem less from opposition to environmental protection per-se, than from perceptions that sustainability policies are imposed top-down, inadequately consider local contexts and social impacts, and distribute costs unfairly while excluding affected communities from decision-making processes.

Recent Eurobarometer reports reveal that, while 85% of Europeans consider climate change a major problem, only 46% trust that the transition will be managed fairly, highlighting a critical legitimacy gap [Eurobarometer, 2025], [Eurobarometer, 2022].

This crisis of social legitimacy is compounded by the alarming lack of progress toward SDGs achievement globally: the UN's Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024 reveals that only 20% of SDG targets with available data² are on track, with the 2030 deadline rapidly approaching [UN, 2025].

As a result, the convergence of implementation's delay and social resistance poses fundamental questions about current governance approaches: can sustainability transformations succeed without

¹ With its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets, the Agenda demonstrates international commitment to achieving global sustainable development in its social, economic and environmental dimensions. What makes the SDGs unique is the widespread acceptance and dedication of the international community, the global definition of sustainable development across diverse dimensions measured through 232 indicators and the understanding that these sustainability goals are universal, integrated and indivisible. The emergence of these goals can be understood in the context and as a response to global issues arising from processes of globalization and increasing global interconnectivity. The Agenda 2030 entails a clear mandate for rapid socio-ecological transformations at the national level.

² 137 targets have trend data

social legitimacy? Can global commitments translate into tangible outcomes when citizens feel excluded from shaping these transitions?

A socially legitimate knowledge base

This report argues that SDGs' chances of success largely hinge on the social legitimacy of the knowledge base utilized to guide transformative governance towards achieving their objectives. To be effective, transformative governance must be supported by a foundation of knowledge that is perceived as credible, inclusive and reflective of diverse perspectives, particularly those of marginalized or vulnerable populations, as well as deeply rooted in the broader acceptance and trust of communities, stakeholders and governments. This knowledge base must be not only scientifically robust, but also socially relevant and culturally sensitive. It must integrate traditional knowledge systems, local expertise, and the lived experiences of communities with scientific and technical data to form a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities in sustainable development. Furthermore, the process of knowledge generation and dissemination must be transparent, participatory and inclusive, fostering a sense of ownership and commitment among all stakeholders.

The interplay between knowledge and social legitimacy is crucial because policies and actions that lack legitimacy are likely to encounter resistance, undermining their effectiveness.

Conversely, when knowledge is co-produced with stakeholders and validated through inclusive processes, it enhances the prospects for broad-based support and successful implementation. Therefore, the transformative potential of governance structures designed to achieve the SDGs is fundamentally dependent on the extent to which the underlying knowledge base is socially legitimate, and capable of guiding collective action in a just and equitable manner.

Knowledge base

A 'knowledge base' for SDGs governance is a structured, multidisciplinary repository that integrates diverse sources of knowledge - from scientific research and traditional knowledge systems to local expertise and community experiences. More than a static data collection, it serves as a dynamic platform that facilitates informed decision-making and collective action by providing credible, socially relevant, and adaptable information. Its effectiveness stems from combining insights across natural sciences, social sciences, and economics while ensuring cultural relevance to the communities it serves. Built on verifiable data and transparent methodologies, it functions as a trusted resource that promotes coherence across governance levels and enables diverse stakeholders to exchange information and identify shared solutions.

The legitimacy and impact of a knowledge base depend fundamentally on its co-production through inclusive, participatory processes. Rather than merely collecting external information, effective knowledge bases are collaboratively generated with the active involvement of affected communities, policymakers, civil society, and scientists. This approach enhances both the quality and acceptance of the knowledge produced, fostering ownership among stakeholders while ensuring accessibility through understandable language and open platforms. When developed through genuinely participatory methods, knowledge bases gain the social legitimacy necessary to guide policy and action effectively, reducing resistance to governance initiatives and enhancing the implementation of SDG-related objectives by aligning them with community needs and perspectives.

The role of local governments

In this context, the localization of the SDGs emerges as a crucial theme for enabling the achievement of the environmental, social and economic sustainability objectives outlined in the 2030 Agenda. Increasing evidence demonstrates that the localization of SDGs at subnational levels constitutes not only a technical necessity but a democratic imperative. The OECD report 'A Territorial Approach to the Sustainable Development Goals' [OECD, 2020] establishes that over 65% of SDG targets (110 over 169) cannot be achieved without proper engagement of local and regional governments. Yet, localization means more than administrative decentralization - it requires fundamentally reimagining how sustainability decisions are made, and who participates in making them [Rieutor et al., 2025]. When citizens experience sustainability policies as external impositions rather than collective choices, resistance becomes inevitable.

As noted by Bilsky, Calvete, and Fernández [2021] the localization of SDGs has evolved significantly since their adoption in 2015, particularly through the expansion of subnational processes like Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) and Voluntary Subnational Reviews (VSRs). These initiatives have been instrumental in promoting greater participation, enhancing local ownership and fostering multilevel governance mechanisms that align local, national and global strategies. Bilsky, Calvete, and Fernández argue that local governments, being the closest to citizens, are uniquely positioned to leverage collective capabilities and drive sustainable development through context-specific actions and policies [Bilsky et al., 2021].

On the other hand, Biggeri [2021] emphasizes the need for a multilevel governance approach that transcends traditional top-down and bottom-up dichotomies. He suggests that the sustainability transition requires both vertical and horizontal integration across governance levels, engaging public, private and social actors in a cohesive policy framework. This perspective aligns with the notion that local governance is critical for addressing the immediate challenges faced by communities, such as inequalities, power imbalances and environmental vulnerabilities [Biggeri, 2021]. Moreover, the capability approach, as explored by scholars like Deunelin [2008] and Frediani et al. [2020], provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how local institutions can be strengthened to support the localization of SDGs through participatory and inclusive processes.

COVID-19 pandemic has further underscored the role of local governments in the localization process. As Bilsky et al. [2021] observe, many local governments have not only maintained their commitment to the SDGs through the pandemic but have also adapted their public services and urban policies to meet the new challenges. This has often involved innovative collaborations with civil society and the private sector, highlighting the resilience and adaptability that local governance structures can deploy when facing crisis. Bilsky et al. [2021] recommend that local government institutionalize these emergency measures to ensure long-term progress toward the SDGs, particularly in areas such as housing, healthcare, and public services.

On the other hand, Elmassah and Mohieldin [2020] discuss the critical role of digital transformation in localizing the SDGs. They argue that digital tools, such as e-Government and Big Data, can significantly enhance the localization process by enabling local governments to tailor sustainable development strategies effectively. The study emphasizes the importance of building robust digital infrastructures and human capital to harness the potential of data-driven governance. This approach supports better service delivery, enhances transparency and fosters greater citizen participation, ultimately contributing to the successful achievement of SDGs at the local level. The authors also highlight that, while the potential of digital transformation is immense, it requires strategic investments and proper alignment with local needs to maximize its impact.

While local governments play a crucial role in implementing SDGs, they also face significant obstacles which, according to Guha and Chakrabarti [2019], include limited financial autonomy, challenges in coordinating multiple stakeholders, and the need for stronger leadership at the local level. The authors highlight the importance of enhancing local leadership capabilities and of clearly delineating responsibilities among local politicians and bureaucrats to effectively address these challenges.

According to the authors, successful SDG implementation at the local level requires not only robust partnerships between different levels of government and other stakeholders, but also improved local governance structures, that can adapt to the complexities of decentralization intended as localization. Addressing these challenges will be essential for local governments to fulfil their potential in driving sustainable development.

The capability approach

According to Deneulin (2008), it is a framework for evaluating human well-being that emphasizes not only individual freedom, agency, and the ability to achieve valued functioning but also the importance of social structures and collective dimensions that shape these opportunities. Deneulin argues that while the approach traditionally focuses on individual capabilities, it must also account for the societal and relational contexts in which individuals live. This includes recognizing the influence of communities, institutions, and collective actions on individual freedoms. Furthermore, Deneulin highlights the need to integrate ethical and political considerations into the Capability Approach, addressing issues of justice, social arrangements, and the distribution of resources. By emphasizing the interconnectedness of individuals within their social environments, Deneulin expands the Capability Approach to include a more comprehensive understanding of well-being that goes beyond individualism to consider the structures of living together.

The Capability Approach, as discussed in the article by Frediani, Cociña, et al. (2020), is applied to the context of urban development with a particular emphasis on institutional capabilities. The authors argue that achieving urban equality requires not only enhancing individual capabilities but also strengthening the capacities of institutions to support individuals and communities in attaining valued functioning. This approach highlights the importance of institutions in addressing systemic inequalities and creating environments where all urban residents have the opportunity to thrive.

The dual dimensions of localization

For the purpose of this report, it is worthy to note that localization of the SDGs presents at least a dual dimension.

1. Localization as an objective: each place has unique challenges and opportunities

On one hand, localization constitutes an explicit objective of the 2030 Agenda, as articulated in SDG 11's ambition to 'make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.' [United Nations, 2015]. Therefore, localization involves recognizing the specificities and unique contributions of each place, whether urban, rural, or in-between, with its unique challenges and opportunities that must be acknowledged and integrated into the implementation of the SDGs. This perspective of localization emphasizes that sustainable development cannot be achieved through a one-size-fits-all approach, and requires a nuanced understanding of local contexts, including cultural, economic, social and environmental factors, to tailor sustainable development strategies that are both effective and equitable.

By recognizing the diversity of places and the specific needs and strengths they possess, localization becomes a more inclusive and fitting process. It allows for the adaptation of global goals to local realities, ensuring that the strategies employed are relevant and impactful in each specific context.

2. Localization as a tool: the crucial role of local action

On the other hand, localization serves as an indispensable methodological tool for achieving all SDGs, acknowledging that global targets must be adapted to specific territorial contexts to be effective. This instrumental dimension recognizes that each locality - whether urban, rural, or regional - possesses unique characteristics, challenges, and capabilities that determine how global goals can meaningfully translate into action. Whether it is addressing urban poverty, improving infrastructure in rural areas, enhancing educational opportunities in small towns, or preserving natural resources in regional communities, localization ensures that the strategies employed are relevant and effective for the specific needs of the area.

In doing so, it enables local governments, organizations, and communities to take ownership of the SDGs, fostering a sense of responsibility and commitment to sustainable development. It also promotes innovation and creativity in finding solutions that are well-suited to local conditions. By empowering local actors to adapt and implement the SDGs in ways that make sense for their contexts, localization serves as a powerful mechanism for achieving sustainable development in a way that is inclusive and equitable, ensuring that no community is left behind. This approach is crucial for addressing the specific needs and contexts of each area, making the SDGs more relevant and actionable.

Examples include:



Local communities can play a significant role in poverty reduction through targeted social programs, affordable housing initiatives and inclusive economic development policies. Localizing SDG 1 involves addressing urban poverty by focusing on vulnerable populations and ensuring access to basic services [Nagati et al., 2022].



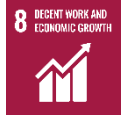
Local communities can play a significant role in poverty reduction through targeted social programs, affordable housing initiatives and inclusive economic development policies. Localizing SDG 1 involves addressing urban poverty by focusing on vulnerable populations and ensuring access to basic services [Nagati et al., 2022].



Local communities can enhance educational opportunities through improved infrastructure, inclusive policies, partnerships with educational institutions and through the concentration of people, including diverse social groups. Localizing SDG 4 involves ensuring equitable access to quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all city residents [Grindsted and Nielsen, 2022].



Local communities must manage water resources efficiently and ensure access to safe drinking water and sanitation. Localization of SDG 6 includes addressing water scarcity, improving wastewater treatment, and implementing sustainable water management practices [Nagati et al., 2023].



Local communities can foster economic growth and create job opportunities by supporting local businesses, promoting entrepreneurship, and ensuring decent working conditions. Localizing SDG 8 involves policies that drive economic inclusivity and sustainability [S. Fox, A. Macleod, 2023].



Urban areas are pivotal in climate action through policies aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions, enhancing climate resilience, and promoting sustainable urban development. Localizing SDG 13 involves integrating climate action into city planning and development strategies [D.T. Tal et al., 2019].

Investigating the potential of co-governance

These two dimensions of localization - as both objective and methodological tool - reveal a fundamental interdependence that shapes the very nature of sustainable development implementation. When localities adapt global SDGs to their unique contexts (localization as objective), they simultaneously activate the mechanisms through which these goals can be effectively achieved (localization as tool).

This convergence becomes particularly evident when we examine how successful SDG implementation occurs in practice: it requires not only technical adaptation of targets and indicators to local realities, but also the mobilization of local knowledge, resources, and commitment that can only emerge when communities feel genuine ownership over the process.

The dual nature of localization thus points toward a deeper requirement that transcends both technical adaptation and contextual specificity - the imperative to engage local actors as co-creators rather than passive recipients of sustainability policies. Without meaningful engagement of local communities, neither the contextual adaptation of SDGs nor their effective implementation can achieve their full potential [Glass & Newig, 2019]. The evidence from VLRs and emerging governance innovations across European cities suggests that the most successful localization efforts are those that move beyond technocratic approaches to embrace participatory mechanisms that transform citizens from external stakeholders to active co-governors of their territories [UNDP, 2023].

Therefore, this report examines whether and how co-governance models based on the joint management of urban commons can address the dual crisis of SDG implementation and democratic legitimacy of sustainability shifts.

Building on emerging empirical evidence from European cities and theoretical insights from commons scholarship, we investigate whether co-governance³ mechanisms can enhance citizen ownership of SDGs while responding to legitimate concerns about fairness, inclusion, and local autonomy. The analysis is particularly salient given that resistance to sustainability policies often emerges precisely in communities - rural areas, deindustrialized regions, lower-income

³ Co-governance, as conceptualized in this report, refers to institutional arrangements where public authorities share genuine decision-making power and implementation responsibilities with citizens, civil society organizations, private actors, and knowledge institutions in managing shared urban resources. This approach potentially addresses the legitimacy crisis by ensuring that those affected by sustainability transitions participate meaningfully in shaping them. Rather than viewing citizen resistance as an obstacle to overcome, co-governance recognizes it as a signal that current governance arrangements inadequately incorporate local knowledge, values, and needs.

neighbourhoods - that have been historically marginalized from decision-making yet bear disproportionate transition costs.

The research questions guiding this analysis are:

1. How can citizens' ownership of SDGs be fostered through governance innovation that also addresses concerns about democratic participation and distributive justice?
2. Could the joint management of common goods experience be applied to SDG implementation to embark citizens as co-creators and managers of sustainability transitions, effectively accelerating achievement of the SDGs at the local level?
3. Can co-governance mechanisms provide institutional channels for constructively engaging citizens around sustainability policies and into collaborative problem-solving?

To address these research questions, a methodology has been established as detailed in **Section 2**. **Section 3** will explore the joint management of common goods (co-governance), examining its theoretical foundations, key practical experiences, and experiments, while also introducing the co-city framework. **Sections 4** and **5** will explore the theoretical frameworks and methodologies that underpin effective SDG localization and highlight key concepts and practices adopted in the global and EU contexts, which proved to be essential for integrating SDGs into local governance structures. **Section 6** presents an in-depth examination of case studies. This section draws from some of the most virtuous cities featured on the *Commoning.city platform*⁴, the database linked with the *co-cities* framework. The selected case studies include Reggio Emilia, Amsterdam, Riga, Cluj-Napoca, and Barcelona. These case studies provide practical insights and evidence of successful co-governance models and their impact on urban sustainability. **Section 7** evaluates the outcomes of the various co-governance practices implemented in the case-study cities. It discusses the effectiveness, challenges, and barriers encountered, providing a critical assessment of the strategies employed. The report concludes by offering future research directions and practical recommendations for policymakers to enhance the localization of SDGs and the co governance of common goods in urban areas.

⁴ See the database and platform: <https://commoning.city/>

2. METHODOLOGY

This research work has encompassed three main activities:

Desk research

A desk research and literature review were conducted on:

1. The main strategies, policies and initiatives put in place at local level in the EU to foster the effective involvement of local communities (including citizens) in sustainability related (or, ideally, SDGs related) actions, looking in particular at the level of engagement (consultation, participation, co-design, etc.), and the ability to maintain such engagement over time; (Chapter 5).
2. The rationale of the joint management of common goods concept(s), including its conceptual foundations and evolutions and describing, in particular, why this approach can be meaningful for the empowerment of local communities for the achievement of the SDGs (Chapter 3).
3. Identifying five representative European case-studies, based on the information collected in the database *Commoning.city* and on the extensive work conducted on this field by the LABoratory for the GOVernance of the Commons (**LabGov**) at Luiss Guido Carli University. (Chapter 6)

From a methodological standpoint, the literature review was conducted through a problem-driven and purposive approach, aimed at identifying both theoretical frameworks and empirical studies that could illuminate the nexus between co-governance mechanisms and the localization of the SDGs. The review prioritized scholarly and grey literature that offered conceptual depth, empirical richness, and normative insights, with a particular focus on contributions relevant to European urban contexts. Selection criteria included: (i) relevance to the governance of urban commons and participatory processes; (ii) explicit engagement with SDG-related frameworks or sustainability transitions; and (iii) potential to inform institutional design and policy recommendations.

The five case studies - **Reggio Emilia, Amsterdam, Riga, Cluj-Napoca, and Barcelona** - were selected through a twofold filtering process. First, cities were identified based on their inclusion in the *Commoning.city* database and their documented implementation of co-governance practices aligned with the Co-City approach developed by Foster and Iaione in the Co-Cities research project and book [Foster & Iaione, 2022].

Second, among the eligible cities, a diversity of legal, socio-political, and geographical contexts was ensured, to capture a broad spectrum of institutional configurations, participatory ecosystems, and degrees of policy maturity. These case studies were not chosen to be statistically representative of European cities at large, but rather to be analytically illustrative, offering robust examples of how different enabling conditions and governance models can support the co-management of urban commons in alignment with the SDGs.

Figure 1: Map of the five selected case-studies



Source: Authors' own elaboration

Qualified interviews

Qualified interviews were conducted with stakeholders and participants from five case studies, identified in stage 1.c, to provide a breadth of examples of different projects and policies of collectively or collaboratively managed urban resources in various countries and contexts.

The interviews (one per city) took place between June and July 2024. For each case-study, the relevant respondents were identified through the Commoning.city database as well as building on previous direct contacts of the authors; they were contacted beforehand by email to explain the purpose of the activity, and to explore their availability and willingness to collaborate. Interviews were conducted in english and were recorded.

A questionnaire guided the interviews conducted with public administration representatives, focusing on Urban Commons management, citizen participation, sustainability, and co-governance. The questionnaire included 9 questions covering 2 dimensions: (a) connection with SDGs and sustainability frameworks, and (b) co-governance. The specific questions addressed the following key variables:

(a) Connection with SDGs and sustainability frameworks

- Relevant metrics for sustainability
- Legal tools for SDGs localization
- Co-governance applied to sustainability

(b) Co-governance

- Implementation of co-governance
- Degree, intensity, durability, long-term sustainability of co-governance
- Co-governance in multilevel governance
- Impact of co-governance
- Legal tools for co-governance
- Role of examples of projects and initiatives implementing co-governance as a possible strategy of SDGs localization.

The questionnaire with fully developed questions can be found in **Annex 1**.

Assessment

Finally, the information collected through the interviews was analyzed, based on the following 8 dimensions:

- 1.** Connection with SDGs and Sustainability: examines how co-governance initiatives align with and support the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and broader sustainability objectives (if any).
- 2.** Legal Tools for Localizing the SDGs: focuses on the legal instruments and frameworks used to implement and adapt the SDGs at local and regional levels (if any).
- 3.** Co-Governance Applied to Sustainability: explores the application of co-governance principles in fostering sustainable development and managing common resources.
- 4.** Implementation of Co-Governance and Intensity: discusses the methods and extent to which co-governance practices are implemented within various governance contexts.
- 5.** Long-Term Sustainability of Co-Governance: addresses the strategies and mechanisms to ensure the enduring effectiveness and stability of co-governance systems.
- 6.** Co-Governance in Multi-Level Governance: investigates the role of co-governance in the context of multi-level governance, involving collaboration across different governmental tiers.
- 7.** Impacts of Co-Governance: evaluates the outcomes and effects of co-governance initiatives on communities, policy-making, and resource management.
- 8.** Legal Tools for Co-Governance: examines the legal frameworks and instruments that facilitate and support co-governance arrangements and practices.

The results of this analysis are presented in **Section 7**.

Figure 2: Analytical Framework



Source: Authors' own elaboration

3. THE JOINT MANAGEMENT OF COMMON GOOD: CO-GOVERNANCE AND THE CO-CITY FRAMEWORK

Joint management of common goods - commonly referred to as commons co-governance - is a governance approach in which multiple stakeholders, including public authorities, private actors, civil society organizations, and local communities, collaborate in the stewardship, use, and preservation of shared resources [Von Heimburg et al., 2021]. These commons can range from natural ecosystems (such as forests and water bodies) to urban parks, cultural heritage, and digital infrastructures like open-source software. The premise underpinning commons co-governance is not that it is inherently superior, but that, under specific conditions, it may offer institutional responses better aligned with principles of sustainability, inclusiveness, and local accountability than conventional top-down or market-driven approaches.

This report adopts a normative position that supports co-governance as a potentially transformative framework, not by default, but based on empirical and theoretical claims that it can correct structural imbalances in how resources are accessed and managed - particularly in urban contexts where social, economic, and environmental vulnerabilities intersect. This approach draws upon the work of Elinor Ostrom [1990], who demonstrated that communities can, with the right institutional design, sustainably self-organize to manage commons⁵. It was further elaborated and blended with theories on collaborative governance in public services, knowledge co-production, cultural and digital co-creation, infrastructure co-governance models to establish cooperative economic and institutional ecosystems that foster benefit-sharing, transparency, shared responsibility, users' and civic inclusion [Benkler, 2011; Frischmann, 2012; Frischmann et al., 2014; Foster and Iaione, 2022]. Rather than proposing commons-based urban co-governance as a universal panacea, this report explores its contingent potential: when supported by enabling legal frameworks, equitable decision-making processes, and long-term policy commitments, co-governance may lead to more just and adaptive management of shared resources. This requires governance structures that facilitate multi-stakeholder participation, distribute authority and accountability, and integrate diverse forms of knowledge - including lived experience, local expertise, and scientific evidence.

⁵ Elinor Ostrom's theory, as articulated in her seminal work *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (1990), challenges the traditional views on how common-pool resources (CPRs) should be managed. Ostrom argues against the prevailing notions that CPRs are either best managed by centralized government control or privatization. Instead, she demonstrates that communities can successfully govern these resources through collective action and self-organization. Ostrom identifies key principles for effective collective management, including clearly defined boundaries, rules adapted to local conditions, collective decision-making processes, effective monitoring, graduated sanctions, conflict resolution mechanisms, and the recognition of the community's right to self-organize. Her work emphasizes the importance of trust, communication, and cooperation among resource users, showing that when communities adhere to these principles, they can avoid the 'tragedy of the commons' and sustainably manage shared resources. This groundbreaking theory has significantly influenced the fields of political science, economics, and environmental studies, highlighting the potential for decentralized, community-based resource management systems.

Figure 3: Timeline of Co-Governance experimentations (1980 - 2024)



Source: authors' own elaboration

The historical evolution of co-governance reflects this growing awareness. Since the 1980s, urban governance has undergone a shift from hierarchical management to more decentralized and networked models. David Harvey famously characterized this shift as a transition from managerialism to entrepreneurialism in city-making [Harvey, 1989], prompting both innovation and critique. The 1990s saw a proliferation of Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs), which, despite delivering infrastructure and services, were often criticized for marginalizing local voices and reinforcing neoliberal logics [Harman et al., 2015; Rossi & Vanolo, 2015].

In response, the early 2000s introduced more inclusive configurations, such as Public-Private-People Partnerships (4Ps) [Marana et al., 2018; Irazábal, 2016], emphasizing the active role of citizens. Projects like the Manila water initiative [David & Inocencio, 2001] exemplify how local participation can enhance service delivery and legitimacy. Later, the Quintuple Helix Model [Carayannis & Campbell, 2011] expanded this idea further by integrating civil society and environmental sustainability into innovation and governance systems - highlighting the need for multi-actor and multi-scalar cooperation in the face of complex societal challenges⁶.

⁶ Carayannis and Campbell propose a framework that expands on the Triple Helix model of innovation, which traditionally emphasizes the interaction between universities, industry, and government. The authors introduce the Quadruple and Quintuple Helix models to incorporate the roles of civil society and the environment, respectively. The Quadruple Helix adds the 'public' or 'civil society' as a critical fourth dimension, recognizing that public opinion, media, and cultural contexts play essential roles in the innovation process. This acknowledges that innovation is not just a product of institutional interactions but also of societal engagement and cultural values.

The Quintuple Helix further integrates the environment as a fifth helix, emphasizing that sustainable development and environmental stewardship are integral to the innovation process. This model underscores the need for

The first experiments to bring commons-based urban co-governance enabling the collective action of city inhabitants and their cooperation with local governmental agencies and private stakeholders, knowledge institutions and NGOs was carried out in Bologna. These experiments led to the codification of a Regulation on Collaboration and Regeneration for the urban commons [Iaione and De Nictolis, 2021]. This triggered an urban regulatory rush in Italy which led to adoption of similar regulatory tools but also alternative urban legal regimes and tools such as those designed in Naples [Bianchi, 2023] and Turin [Quarta and Vercellone, 2021]. Some epiphanies of these urban regulatory schemes enabling in other EU cities (e.g. Barcelona, Gdansk, Gent).

The main limit of these experiments is that they were limited to the management of single physical urban assets and services without the capacity and probably the aim to redesign the administrative, political and economic architecture of the city. In 2015, though, the city of Reggio Emilia in Italy implemented the Neighborhood-as-a-Commons initiative, adopting a **Regulation for Citizenship Agreements**. This policy established '*collaboratories*' at the neighborhood level, where local communities, alongside public officials and other stakeholders, could co-design urban solutions and services. A key figure in this initiative was the '*neighborhood architect*,' an innovative civil servant who acted as a broker between the city, its inhabitants, and local stakeholders, ensuring that community voices were integral to urban governance⁷.

As we move into the 2020s, the concept of co-governance has been further embedded in global and EU urban policy frameworks. The New Urban Agenda⁸ and the Urban Agenda for the EU⁹ both emphasized the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration, aligning with the principles of urban co-governance.

Also building on these developments, the **Civic eState URBACT** and the **Horizon 2020 EUARENAS projects**, initiated in 2018 and 2021, applied the insights – that will be later explained – emerging from the various experiments of urban legal and regulatory practices enabling Urban Commons co-governance in several European cities, including **Reggio Emilia** which kept investing on the evaluation and improvement of its legal framework ultimately carving out the Urban and Climate Democracy and Justice Regulation. These projects experimented with co-governance models adapted to specific local contexts, emphasizing the need for an 'n-tuple approach' that incorporates flexibility and the inclusion of new and diverse actors. The Civic eState and EUARENAS projects highlighted the importance of tailoring governance models to the unique needs of different urban environments, paving the way for more responsive and inclusive urban governance¹⁰.

innovation systems to be ecologically sensitive, aligning economic and social progress with environmental sustainability. Carayannis and Campbell's theory provides a transdisciplinary framework for analyzing how knowledge, innovation, and the environment interrelate, proposing that sustainable development can only be achieved when these multiple helices work together. Their approach promotes a holistic understanding of innovation, where all societal sectors - including the environment - are co-evolving and contributing to the advancement of knowledge and sustainability. This framework has significant implications for policy-making, research, and the practice of sustainable development, advocating for a more inclusive and integrated approach to innovation and societal progress.

⁷ See <https://www.comune.re.it/argomenti/citta-collaborativa/i-progetti/qua-il-quartiere-bene-comune/il-progetto-quartiere-bene-comune/the-city-as-a-common-good-english-version>

⁸ See <https://habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda/>

⁹ See <https://www.urbanagenda.urban-initiative.eu/>

¹⁰ See <https://www.euarenas.eu/>

These experiences are regarded as pivotal not simply in regards of the participatory instruments they introduced, but because they embody an advanced institutional rethinking of the city as an enabling infrastructure for economic and democratic innovation.

What makes Reggio Emilia's initiative and the Civic eState and EUARENAS projects exemplary is their shared capacity to reframe urban governance as a multi-scalar, co-productive process, anchored in the logic of commons-based institutional design. Both initiatives move beyond episodic consultation or stakeholder involvement, instead embedding sustained co-regulatory practices within the legal and organizational fabric of urban administration. The relevance of these cases lies in their methodological contributions: Reggio Emilia's codification of collaboration through legally binding public-private-community partnerships, the Civic eState call for the involvement of long-term investors, and EUARENAS' deployment of iterative, place-based experimentation of multi-stakeholder and multi-dimensional partnerships, demonstrate how governance can evolve as a reflexive ecosystem.

Crucially, these cases also advance the frontier of governance theory by integrating non-linear, transdisciplinary models - such as the n-tuple helix - not merely as theoretical abstractions, but as practical tools to map and orchestrate actor constellations in complex urban environments. As such, they serve as laboratories for institutional adaptation, offering actionable insights for cities aiming to structurally integrate civic capacity, legal pluralism, and distributed intelligence into their decision-making frameworks.

By situating co-governance within this broader historical and conceptual trajectory, this report does not aim to idealize the model, but rather to critically assess its institutional logic and practical implications - particularly in relation to its potential contribution to the localization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This approach calls for a careful examination of where, how, and under what conditions co-governance mechanisms generate public value, promote social inclusion, and foster collective ownership - while remaining alert to their limitations, such as risks of elite capture, institutional fatigue, or superficial, tokenistic forms of participation.

To guide this investigation, the report adopts as its theoretical point of departure the **Co-Cities** theoretical, empirical and experimental research and database developed by Foster and Iaione between 2004 and 2022, which builds upon the foundational insights of Elinor Ostrom on commons governance and the multi-actor innovation models proposed by Elias Carayannis [Ostrom, 1990; Carayannis and Campbell, 2010; Foster and Iaione, 2016; Foster and Iaione, 2022]. The Co-Cities theory and practice provide an operational and normative lens through which it is possible to explore if and how urban commons and joint management practices can activate citizen ownership and contribute to more just, inclusive, and context-sensitive pathways for SDG localization.

The co-cities framework builds on the concept of Urban Commons and the theory of the city as a commons. This approach envisions urban infrastructures and resources as collectively or cooperatively governed by city residents, often in collaboration with other actors.

It emphasizes collective action and polycentric governance, where various urban actors, including public authorities, private entities, civil society organizations and knowledge institutions, cooperate and pool resources to co-govern and steward urban infrastructure, assets, networks and services. This collective action results in the co-production and co-governance of affordable housing, green spaces, shared workspaces, and digital and energy resources, fostering social innovation, collaborative economies, and inclusive urban regeneration.

The 'co-cities research' investigated or designed case studies aimed at addressing social and distributive inequalities and enabling wider distribution of city resources particularly within the most vulnerable groups of urban populations by promoting active urban citizenship and participation in the stewardship of urban resources. Through an empirical and experimental investigation, the *co-cities* research identified **five key institutional design principles**:

- 1. Co-Governance:** This principle – as just described above – involves a multi-stakeholder governance scheme where a local community partners with public authorities, private entities, civil society organizations, and knowledge institutions. These actors collaborate to co-produce and co-govern urban resources, ensuring that these resources are maintained for and accessible to future generations.
- 2. Enabling State:** The state, typically represented by local public authorities, plays a crucial role in facilitating the creation of shared urban resources and supporting collective governance arrangements. This involves providing the necessary resources, technical guidance, and creating conditions conducive to co-governance.
- 3. Social and Economic Pooling:** This principle refers to the presence of autonomous, self-sustaining institutions that operate within non-mainstream economic systems such as cooperative, social, solidarity, circular, cultural, or collaborative economies. These institutions pool resources and stakeholders to create new opportunities and services in underserved areas and for vulnerable populations.
- 4. Experimentalism:** An adaptive, place-based and iterative approach to urban planning, legal reforms and policy innovations is essential. This principle encourages the co-creation of collectively shared urban resources through continuous experimentation and adaptation.
- 5. Tech Justice:** Access, participation, and co-management or co-ownership of technological and digital urban infrastructure and data are crucial. This principle highlights the importance of technology in enabling cooperation and the co-creation of shared urban resources.

Finally, the *co-cities* research also emphasized the importance of public participation and the role of the community in urban governance. By investigating or experimenting urban collective action, the research shed light on various forms of Urban Commons co-governance arrangements through which urban resources are distributed more equitably and are used to meet the diverse needs of city inhabitants. This approach has been implemented in various cities thanks to collaborative efforts that led to the enactment of pacts of collaboration, civic uses, citizenship agreements and public-private-community partnerships and other legal and governance tools designed through co-design processes, robust public participation, and supported by the city with fiscal, logistical, training, and organizational assistance¹¹.

¹¹ All the considered cases see are available at <http://commoning.city/co-cities-map2/>. The Co-Cities Map serves as a significant resource for understanding how cities around the world are experimenting with and implementing collaborative governance models to manage Urban Commons, engage citizens, and address complex urban challenges. It contains: 187 Mapped Cities that are part of the broader study, showcasing various instances of collaborative governance and Urban Commons management; 543 Case Studies Collected that are the case studies that have been gathered from the mapped cities. They represent different examples and projects where the co-city framework has been applied or where similar collaborative governance models have been implemented; 95 Case Studies Analyzed: out of the collected case studies, 95 have been thoroughly analyzed to extract insights, best practices, and lessons that can be applied to other urban contexts.

Overall, the *co-cities* research illustrated a possible path for achieving social justice, sustainability, and resilience in urban areas by leveraging collective action and shared governance of urban resources.

Public-Private-People Partnerships

Public-Private-People Partnerships, or 4Ps, emerged in the early 2000s as a response to the limitations of traditional Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs). While PPPs typically involve collaboration between public authorities (government) and private enterprises to deliver public services or infrastructure, the 4P model expands this concept by explicitly including people - local communities or residents - as active partners in the governance process. This inclusion is a critical innovation, ensuring that the needs and interests of the community are central to decision-making processes. At the heart of the 4P model is the recognition that local communities are essential stakeholders who bring valuable insights, labor, and local knowledge to the table. Unlike traditional PPPs, where decisions are often dominated by public and private entities, 4Ps emphasize shared decision-making. This approach seeks to balance power among all three partners - public authorities, private entities, and people - ensuring that the community has a significant voice in shaping projects that directly affect them. One of the key goals of 4Ps is to address social equity issues by ensuring that the benefits of public services or infrastructure projects are distributed more fairly. This includes making sure that marginalized or underrepresented groups within the community are included in the governance process.

A notable instance of 4Ps in action is the water management project in Manila, Philippines. In this project, local communities were actively involved in the delivery and management of water services, working alongside public water utilities and private concessionaires. This collaboration improved access to water, particularly for the urban poor, highlighting the potential of 4Ps to create more inclusive and effective governance structures. The 4P model offers several benefits. By including people in the partnership, 4Ps can enhance the legitimacy of projects, as decisions are perceived as more democratic and reflective of the community's needs. Furthermore, projects developed through 4Ps are often more sustainable in the long term because they are designed with local knowledge and are more likely to be accepted and maintained by the community. Additionally, engaging communities directly in governance fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility, which can strengthen social cohesion and community resilience.

However, implementing 4Ps is not without its challenges. Managing the diverse interests of public authorities, private entities, and communities can be complex and requires effective communication and negotiation skills. There is also a risk that, despite the intention of equal partnership, more powerful actors - such as private companies - might dominate the process, marginalizing the community's voice. Furthermore, communities may lack the resources or technical expertise needed to fully participate in complex projects, necessitating additional support from public or private partners.

The introduction of 4Ps represents a significant evolution in urban governance, moving beyond the simple outsourcing of public services to private companies. By bringing people into the equation, 4Ps recognize the importance of community-driven approaches to governance. This model aligns with broader trends toward more participatory and inclusive forms of urban governance, where the goal is not just to deliver services, but to do so in a way that empowers communities and ensures that the benefits are broadly shared. Overall, 4Ps aim to create more holistic and equitable urban governance frameworks, ensuring that the community's voice is not just heard but is central to the decision-making process. This approach reflects a growing recognition that sustainable and effective urban governance requires the active involvement of all stakeholders, particularly those who are most affected by the outcomes of public projects.

4. FROM GLOBAL TO LOCAL: FRAMEWORKS AND INITIATIVES FOR SDG LOCALIZATION FOSTERING ‘WHOLE-OF-GOVERNMENT’ AND ‘WHOLE-OF-SOCIETY’ APPROACHES

It is increasingly recognized that fostering effective sustainability transitions requires moving beyond the conventional ‘*top-down*’ versus ‘*bottom-up*’ dichotomy toward more sophisticated frameworks that can account for the continuous interaction of resources, skills, knowledge, and initiatives across levels and sectors. This shift reflects a fundamental understanding that sustainable development cannot be achieved through hierarchical mandates alone; instead, it requires collaborative ecosystems, in which local and territorial communities play crucial roles.

Indeed, local governance mechanisms are particularly significant, as they represent the most immediate level where interactions among authorities, institutions, and citizens occur. It is at this level that issues such as inequality, exclusion, power imbalances, and vulnerabilities are most directly experienced and can be most effectively addressed. The local level therefore directly influences individual and collective capabilities within distinctive ecosystems shaped by history, culture, geography, resources, knowledge, and institutions¹² [Biggeri, 2021].

In other terms, achieving effective and consistent sustainable development strategies and initiatives requires a common understanding and shared framework for local governance.

This involves operationalizing ‘*a whole-of-government approach*’ that integrates and aligns across sectors, departments, and administrative organizations to design and implement balanced and mutually reinforcing policy packages. Such approaches are essential to avoid fragmented policymaking that can lead to unmet promises and unintended consequences [OECD, 2018], while ensuring that sustainability initiatives benefit from the full spectrum of community knowledge and commitment.

Policymakers and academicians have initiated a productive dialogue that has led to significant policies and collective actions, thereby energizing international discourse on the localization of the SDGs [Biggeri, 2021].

At the same time, the United Nations and several other international organizations have made considerable efforts to create broad international consultation spaces concerning the objectives and

¹² According to [BIGGERI, 2021], four key arguments underscore the importance of local governance in tandem with national processes. First, local influence and action spaces enable governments and other development actors, including the private sector and civil society organizations, to more effectively pursue sustainable development. Second, local policies often have a direct impact on citizens’ wellbeing, where central governments might have a more limited influence. Third, the varied impacts of national policies across different territories can be attributed to their unique endowments and characteristics. Fourth, there is a critical need to tailor sustainable development strategies to local contexts and ensure institutional coherence across all governance level.

implementation of the Agenda, with particular attention to fostering a coherent multilevel approach to sustainable development. Noteworthy initiatives have been established, such as the UNDP **ART Initiative**¹³, which focusses on Territorial Partnerships for Implementing the SDGs at the Local Level. The methodologies and tools developed through the ART initiative have been consistently effective in guiding countries and territories toward achieving the SDGs through holistic and integrative approaches that emphasize multi-stakeholder participation [Biggeri and Ferrannini, 2014]. This initiative exemplifies the strong alignment between the 2030 Agenda's integrated, intersectoral, and universal nature, and methodologies that employ territorial approaches and multi-actor platforms across various sectors and levels, illustrating how sustained engagement can depend on the creation of institutional arrangements that facilitate continuous interaction among stakeholders, rather than episodic consultation.

Voluntary Local Reviews: from reporting tools to participatory instruments

Beyond specific initiatives, steady support and guidance has been provided by UN and other international organizations (UN Habitat, OECD, UCLG, the JRC, among many others) to promote guidelines and frameworks that operationalize the multilevel approach advocated by the 2030 Agenda at the local level through **Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs)**. Introduced at first as a local adaptation of the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) - the mechanism through which UN Member States report their SDG progress at the High-Level Political Forum - VLRs have emerged as critical tools for localizing the Agenda [Siragusa et al., 2022]. While VNRs provide a national perspective on SDG implementation, VLRs fill a critical gap by capturing the unique contexts, objectives and challenges that characterize the local level, reflecting the varied nature of local government and the contexts in which they operate [UN-Habitat, 2020]. In doing so, they create formal channels through which local knowledge and experiences can inform national, and global policy dialogues, which can strengthen coherence and effectiveness among governance levels [OECD, 2020; UCLG, 2022].

The concept of VLRs has undergone significant evolution since their inception, transforming from tools for reporting local progress on SDGs, to instruments understood as both products and processes. This shift underscores the iterative, inclusive, and dynamic nature of VLRs, which facilitate continuous improvement and stakeholder engagement in sustainable development efforts [Siragusa et al, 2025]. The VLR process involves several key components which could promote ownership and engagement: systematic and regular data collection, comprehensive stakeholder engagement, and widespread and transparent dissemination of findings.

A clear upward trend can be observed in VLRs publication, growing from 2 in 2016 to 80-81 in 2021-2022, with cities being the most prolific issuers (213 out of 325 reports published by September 2024). This surge reflects the significant mobilization of local governments, as well as the growing recognition of the critical role of Local and Regional Governments (LRGs) and communities in achieving the 2030 Agenda. At the same time, VLRs are valuable repositories of data to understand the monitoring practices at local level: identifying disparities (in number of indicators, or Targets/Goals covered) can help understanding, for example, challenges in defining indicators that are relevant for the local level, highlighting which policy areas seem easier to assess in cities vs regions, or identifying constraints linked to the interlinked nature of the SDGs in comparison to the siloed monitoring practices [Stamos et al., 2024].

¹³ More information on *UNDP ART Initiative* can be found at <https://open.undp.org/projects/00063660>.

Figure 4: SDG Voluntary Local Reviews and reports published around the world by local and regional governments – July 2025



Source: webpage: *The localisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*

The comparative dimension of VLRs can also serve as important instruments for benchmarking local sustainability strategies within a global arena, creating opportunities for peer learning among cities and regions and facilitating knowledge exchange, for example, about effective community engagement strategies in local sustainability initiatives.

VLRs serve multiple purposes:

- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** VLRs provide a structured approach to monitoring and evaluating progress toward SDG implementation at the local level. By systematically tracking achievements and identifying gaps, they offer cities and regions a comprehensive framework to assess their contributions to the global goals. This process not only aids in identifying areas that require additional focus but also helps in setting clear benchmarks for future progress. The data collected through VLRs can reveal trends and patterns, allowing local governments to make informed decisions that align with their sustainable development strategies [Bertozzi et al., 2021].
- **Stakeholder Engagement:** A core strength of VLRs lies in their ability to facilitate the inclusion of various stakeholders in the planning and execution of sustainable development initiatives. By engaging a wide range of actors - government agencies, civil society, private sector, and the local community - VLRs ensure that diverse perspectives are incorporated into the decision-making process. This inclusivity fosters a sense of ownership among stakeholders, enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of the policies and actions derived from the VLRs. Moreover, stakeholder engagement through VLRs can help bridge gaps between different sectors, creating synergies that drive collective action towards shared goals.

- **Policy Alignment:** VLRs play a pivotal role in aligning local policies with global SDG targets, thereby enabling local governments to prioritize their actions and resources more effectively. By mapping local strategies against the SDGs, VLRs help cities identify which global goals are most relevant to their specific contexts and challenges. This alignment not only ensures that local policies contribute to global sustainability efforts but also enhances the coherence of local development plans. Additionally, VLRs can highlight areas where local policies may need adjustment or reinforcement to better support the achievement of the SDGs, thus guiding local governments in refining their strategic priorities [Siragusa et al., 2022]. Finally, data extracted from VLRs can prove very valuable to inform the national and global levels, contributing to a better understanding of local practices across governance levels and to the identification of needs for ad-hoc policies and research [Stamos et al., 2024].

While VLRs offer significant benefits, several challenges remain:

- **Data Availability:** One of the primary challenges in conducting VLRs is the availability and quality of data at the local level. Many cities and municipalities lack the necessary infrastructure and resources to systematically collect, manage, and analyze data relevant to SDG indicators. This data gap not only hampers the accurate assessment of progress but also undermines the reliability of the VLRs. The scarcity of localized data often forces cities to rely on national or regional datasets that may not accurately reflect local realities. Additionally, the inconsistency in data collection methods across different localities further complicates the aggregation and comparison of data, leading to potential misrepresentations of progress.
- **Harmonization:** Another significant challenge is the lack of standardized guidelines for preparing VLRs. Unlike Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), which have a more established and harmonized framework, VLRs are still in an evolving stage. The absence of a uniform set of guidelines means that VLRs can vary widely in terms of structure, content, and quality. This variability poses challenges in comparing results across different cities or regions and can lead to discrepancies in how progress towards the SDGs is measured and reported. The lack of harmonization can also create difficulties for stakeholders attempting to assess or collaborate on SDG initiatives across different localities, as the inconsistency in reporting formats and methodologies can obscure critical insights.
- **Resource Allocation:** Adequate resource allocation is essential for the successful implementation of VLRs, yet it remains a considerable challenge for many local governments. Conducting a thorough VLR requires significant financial investment, human resources, and technical expertise. Many local governments, particularly in smaller or less affluent municipalities, struggle to allocate sufficient funds and staff to undertake the rigorous process of data collection, analysis, and reporting. This lack of resources can lead to incomplete or superficial reviews that do not fully capture the local progress towards the SDGs, thereby diminishing the utility of the VLR as a tool for sustainable development planning.
- **Political Support and Sustained Commitment:** Finally, the political dimension of VLRs presents its own set of challenges. The success of VLRs heavily depends on the political will and sustained commitment of local leadership. In many cases, the process of preparing and publishing a VLR may span multiple election cycles, which can jeopardize the continuity of the effort if incoming administrations do not share the same commitment to the SDGs. Ensuring that VLRs receive ongoing support and are integrated into the broader strategic planning of the city or municipality is crucial. Without consistent political backing, VLRs risk becoming mere formalities rather than actionable tools for driving sustainable development at the local level [Siragusa et al., 2022].

Despite these challenges, VLRs offer numerous opportunities for advancing sustainable development: they foster innovation in local governance, enhance accountability, and promote knowledge-sharing among cities and regions.

Conversely, VLRs could provide significant testing grounds for implementing, and comprehensive frameworks for evaluating, the outcomes of the Co-Governance approach in relation to the SDGs at the subnational level.

Designed to localize the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, VLRs not only allow local governments to monitor progress towards achieving the SDGs, but also to incorporate and take stock of different governance models, to better address the specificities and the needs of local communities. This makes VLRs an ideal tool for testing Co-Governance approaches, which actively involve a diverse range of stakeholders - from government representatives and civil society organizations to private and academic sectors.

The collaborative and iterative nature of VLRs enables knowledge co-production, making the monitoring and evaluation process more inclusive and participatory. This not only strengthens stakeholders' sense of ownership and commitment but also enhances the legitimacy of the policies derived from the VLR process, as they are based on a shared understanding and reflect the diverse perspectives and experiences of participants, including those of marginalized populations.

By integrating scientific data with traditional knowledge and local expertise, VLRs enable the creation of a complex and articulated framework of challenges and opportunities for sustainable development in local contexts and promote the alignment of local policies with global Goals, allowing for continuous evaluation and adaptation of local strategies to the SDGs.

The Co-Governance approach could be integrated in the VLRs process and assessed in regard to its ability to strengthen dialogue among various parties and to create synergies that encourage collective actions aimed at shared Goals.

Ultimately, VLRs could be regarded as an ideal ground for verifying if the principles of transformative and participatory governance can support SDGs implemented and sustained action over time, fostering tangible and lasting results at the subnational level.

5. POLICIES, STRATEGIES AND INITIATIVES CONTRIBUTING TO SDGS LOCALIZATION IN EUROPE

The European Commission has implemented a comprehensive ‘whole-of-government’ approach to the implementation of the Agenda2030, integrating the SDGs into all Commission proposals, policies and strategies across all sectors, and recognizing that effective implementation requires sustained cooperation with citizens, national, regional, and local authorities, civil society organizations, the private sector, and stakeholders at all levels [EC, 2019]. This institutional framework creates the foundation for transformative policies like the European Green Deal (EGD)¹⁴, which explicitly recognizes that **‘citizens are, and should remain, a driving force of the transition’** toward sustainability¹⁵.

5.1 The Green Deal

The European Green Deal represents a major opportunity for embedding SDGs within EU policies, with explicit recognition of the central role of the local level and consistent multilevel governance in achieving sustainability transitions. As the EU's roadmap for making Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050, the Green Deal is explicitly defined as an integral part of the Commission's strategy to implement the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. According to Trane et al., advancing on EGD targets in cities could contribute to operationalize at least 10 of the 17 SDGs [Trane et al., 2025].

The Green Deal's emphasis on decarbonization and sustainable growth necessitates the active participation of local governments, making it a powerful tool for SDG localization. By integrating climate neutrality into local policies, cities and regions can develop tailored strategies that address their unique environmental, social, and economic challenges. This localized approach ensures that global sustainability goals are translated into concrete actions that resonate with the specific contexts and needs of urban areas¹⁶. Moreover, the EGD policy framework recognizes that complex sustainability challenges - such as the rural-urban gap, attitudes toward the bioeconomy, water management, and energy source choices - can best be addressed through participatory processes involving citizens from different cross-sections of society. This approach creates sustained engagement by enabling communities to feel ownership over both the identification of problems and the co-creation of solutions.

The European Commission has developed specific instruments to operationalize participatory governance within the Green Deal framework. The **European Climate Pact**, launched in 2020, creates platforms for citizen engagement in climate action, enabling individuals, communities,

¹⁴ The EU Green Deal is available on the website: [EUR-Lex - 52019DC0640 - EN - EUR-Lex](#)

¹⁵ European Commission, 2019, COM(2019) 640 final

¹⁶ To this end, the EGD stresses the central role of the EU Covenant of Mayors in providing assistance on how to implement change locally, such as by sharing good practices. The Covenant, directly supported by the European Commission, involves over 10,000 local and regional authorities across Europe committed to achieving EU climate and energy goals. It operationalizes citizen-centric climate action through Local Climate and Energy Action Plans, and encourages public participation, stakeholder engagement, and accountability. <https://eu-mayors.ec.europa.eu/en/about>

organizations, and companies to participate actively in the transition to a climate-neutral Europe. In addition, under the Horizon 2020 program, specific calls for ‘European capacities for citizen deliberation and participation for the Green Deal’ (Call LC-GD-10-1-2020)¹⁷ were launched, explicitly aimed at establishing transnational networks of experts, researchers, practitioners, and civil society organizations specialized in deliberative democracy and civic participation. The **Just Transition Mechanism** ensures that communities affected by sustainability transitions participate actively in designing support measures, while territorial partnerships enable ongoing collaboration between government entities, civil society organizations, private sector actors, and local communities.

These initiatives help cities transition towards sustainable practices while ensuring that no community is left behind, thus adhering to the ‘leave no one behind’ (LNOB) principle inherent in the SDGs. Moreover, the Green Deal promotes the co-creation of Urban Commons and encourages participatory governance models¹⁸, which are essential for sustainable urban development. By involving citizens, local authorities, and various stakeholders in decision-making processes, the Green Deal facilitates the creation of resilient and inclusive communities that can effectively address climate and sustainability challenges.

Overall, the European Green Deal could act as a catalyst for integrating the SDGs into local governance framework, fostering a holistic and inclusive approach to sustainable development across the EU.

5.2 Cohesion Policy

This report aims to explore if and how the Joint Management of Commons approach has the potential to significantly enhance the engagement of the inhabitants, including those who may be frail and vulnerable, in the implementation process of the SDGs at the local level. This aligns with the European Union’s Cohesion Policy, which contributes to strengthening economic, social, and territorial cohesion within the European Union.

The European Union’s Cohesion Policy for 2021-2027 has undergone significant transformation to strengthen economic, social, and territorial cohesion while providing systematic support for what is described as a ‘*strengthened bottom-up, place-based approach by empowering sub-regional territories and local communities to identify their own priorities and projects in an integrated and participatory way*’, seen as ‘*one of the main added values of the policy*’¹⁹. This participatory approach reflects the recognition that sustainable development cannot be achieved through top-down mechanisms alone, but requires systematic engagement of multiple governance levels, as well as sustained community ownership and engagement.

The policy framework operationalizes participatory governance by supporting more than 2,150 strategies for integrated territorial development, as well as more than 400 community-led local development (CLLD) strategies, mainly in the rural context, to enhance ownership and the participation of local stakeholders and communities [European Commission, 2023a]. These strategies are supported under the “A Europe closer to citizens” policy objective by over

¹⁷ [European capacities for citizen deliberation and participation for the Green Deal | Atlantic Strategy](#)

¹⁸ EU Green Deal, p. 23 “*The Climate Pact will build on the Commission’s on-going series of citizens’ dialogues and citizens’ assemblies across the EU, and the role of social dialogue committees. It will continue to work to empower regional and local communities, including energy communities. The urban dimension of cohesion policy will be strengthened, and the proposed European Urban Initiative will provide assistance to cities to help them make best use of opportunities to develop sustainable urban development strategies*”.

¹⁹ [Inforegio - Report on the outcome of 2021-2027 cohesion policy programming](#)

€19 billion in funding, with nearly two-thirds planned for investments fostering integrated and inclusive social, economic, and environmental development in urban areas, and one-third pursuing similar objectives in non-urban territories.

Cohesion Policy fosters the creation of systematic mechanisms for sustained community engagement through what policymakers describe as ‘multi-level governance frameworks’ that involve EU, national, and regional authorities alongside local communities in shared management approaches. [European Committee of the Regions, 2023].

In the 2021-2027 programming period, EU Cohesion Policy directly supports 12 of the SDGs, an increase from the previous period, and indirectly influences others, notably SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality). Impressively, 94% of Cohesion Policy resources directly contribute to the SDGs²⁰, with significant allocations toward SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 13 (Climate Action), and SDG 15 (Life on Land).

Concrete examples demonstrate how Cohesion Policy supports sustained engagement: the **Bretagne Très Haut Débit** project in northern France exemplifies the policy's impact by providing high-speed broadband to 500,000 households and businesses, fostering economic growth while bridging digital divides. This infrastructure investment creates ongoing opportunities for citizen participation in digital governance and e-participation initiatives. Projects like **Tersan Puglia** in Italy and the **eco-village Boekel** in the Netherlands highlight how Cohesion Policy supports sustainable production and energy self-sufficiency while creating models for sustained community engagement in environmental stewardship. These initiatives demonstrate how Cohesion Policy enables communities to co-design sustainable solutions while creating frameworks for sustained community engagement through collaborative governance approaches.

Cohesion Policy significantly addresses social inequalities, supporting actions aligned with SDGs 1 (No Poverty), 3 (Good Health and Well-being), 4 (Quality Education), 5 (Gender Equality), 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), and 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Initiatives such as the **PISMO project** in Croatia and expanded shelter services in **Włocławek**, Poland, demonstrate the policy's commitment to fostering inclusive growth while enhancing employment opportunities and providing critical social services²¹.

5.3 EU Missions

The EU Missions represent strategic tools for implementing SDGs at local levels, complementing the European Green Deal while enhancing effectiveness through sustained multi-stakeholder engagement. Introduced as novel approaches within the Horizon Europe program, EU Missions are designed to tackle complex and ambitious global challenges with clear objectives and measurable results, making them particularly suitable for promoting sustained SDG localization. In addition, they focus on areas that have a direct impact on the lives of individuals and local communities.

²⁰ In this sense: EU Commission: DG Regio, *Cohesion Policy supports progress towards sustainable development goals*, PANORAMA, June 19th 2024, available on the website: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/whats-new/panorama/2024/06/19-06-2024-cohesion-policy-supports-progress-towards-sustainable-development-goals_en#:~:text=Moreover%2C%2094%20%25%20of%20cohesion%20policy,contribute%20to%20reaching%20the%20SDGs.&text=In%202021%2D2027%2C%20cohesion%20policy,corresponding%20amount%20for%202014%2D2020.

²¹ See: note 20

Each EU Mission, such as the **Mission on Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities**²², the **Mission on Adaptation to Climate Change**²³, and the **Mission on Soil Health and Food**²⁴, addresses areas that closely align with the SDGs, including climate action (SDG 13), promoting sustainable and inclusive cities (SDG 11), and improving health and well-being (SDG 3). These goals are pursued through targeted initiatives that support local governments in creating environmental, economic, and social policies tailored to their needs, with particular attention to resilience and sustainability.

EU Missions offer innovative governance models that promote sustained collaborative approaches by fostering active participation of wide ranges of local actors, including citizens, businesses, civil society organizations, research institutions, and local governments. This inclusive approach allows for co-creation of practical solutions that address specific needs of each territory while building sustained capacity for ongoing engagement in sustainability initiatives.

The Cities Mission provides concrete examples of how sustained engagement is fostered through systematic support structures. Local administrations can access funding and resources to implement urban decarbonization projects, promoting climate neutrality, energy efficiency, and sustainable mobility while building ongoing partnerships with community stakeholders. This creates cycles of engagement that extend beyond individual projects to build lasting capacity for sustained action.

In 2024, the European Commission introduced the Climate City Capital Hub²⁵, an international financial resource established to support cities participating in the EU Mission on Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities. This initiative enables cities to access financial advice, structure their financial needs, and introduce projects to various capital providers, including lenders and investors from both public and private sectors. The Hub opens pathways to innovative funding mechanisms like crowdfunding and sustainability-linked bonds, alongside more traditional forms of capital such as philanthropic and corporate funds.

These localized interventions enable concrete actions that strengthen social cohesion and promote more equitable and resilient urban development, in line with the SDG principle of leaving no one behind. The targeted financial support and intersectoral collaboration promoted by EU Missions provide crucial tools to address just transitions, significant challenges for many local communities as they adapt to new, sustainable economic and social models.

²² https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/eu-missions-horizon-europe/climate-neutral-and-smart-cities_en

²³ https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/eu-missions-horizon-europe/adaptation-climate-change_en

²⁴ https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/eu-missions-horizon-europe/soil-deal-europe_en

²⁵ In collaboration with the European Investment Bank (EIB), the Climate City Capital Hub offers advisory services, helping cities develop a comprehensive understanding of different financing options, including project pooling. By leveraging these resources, cities can effectively implement co-governance initiatives while contributing to broader sustainability goals. This approach is also being reinforced by the EIB, which has earmarked €2 billion for cities with the Cities Mission Label, supporting projects in areas such as renewable energy, efficient buildings, sustainable mobility, and social infrastructure.

5.4 Citizen-led initiatives

Many cities across Europe are making significant strides toward sustainability by planning, adopting, and implementing changes that create more stable and sustainable conditions, aligning with SDGs while contributing to the Urban Agenda for the European Union (UAEU). Citizen-led initiatives play crucial roles in enhancing the sustainability of places.

Residents often have a keen understanding of the improvements needed in their local environments, therefore, engaging citizens in the transition towards sustainability is vital. This approach is explicitly recognized both in Target 11.3, aiming to *'enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacities for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management in all countries,'* and in Target 16.7, seeking to *'ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels.'* These targets underscore the recognition that sustainable development requires ongoing citizen participation, not merely consultation exercises.

Cities increasingly adopt participatory methods to involve citizens and stakeholders in co-creating sustainable solutions, such as **nature-based solutions (NBS)**. NBS use natural processes and ecosystems to address environmental, social, and economic challenges, including climate change, urban heat islands, biodiversity loss, and water management. Initiatives like green roofs, urban forests, wetlands restoration, and sustainable urban drainage systems not only enhance ecological resilience but also improve quality of life for residents [Liu et al., 2021], [Ottaviani Aalmo et al., 2022].

5.5 Citizen Science

Citizen Science (CS) has emerged as a particularly fruitful approach for tackling urban challenges, co-creating technical innovations or improvements to public services, and raising awareness of sustainability issues²⁶ while maintaining long-term community engagement [Lämmerhirt et al., 2018], [Parkinson et al., 2022]. The alignment between Citizen Science and SDG localization has been highlighted by numerous scholars who recognize CS as a mechanism for sustained participation in sustainability initiatives [West and Pateman, 2017], [Fritz et al., 2019], [Fraisl et al., 2019], [Woods et al., 2022].

Scientific investigation from 2023 reveals that over 100 cities across Europe are actively engaged in EU-funded research initiatives that implement or plan to implement citizen science activities, which are directly or indirectly linked to various SDGs [Liu et al. 2023].

Cities such as **Barcelona, Amsterdam, Berlin, Ljubljana, and Oslo** are distinguished by their high levels of citizen engagement in research-related activities. Barcelona exemplifies successful CS integration into urban processes, with the city's commitment to innovation, supported by both municipal and regional authorities, reflected in dedicated investments and policies. The presence of well-established ecosystems comprising universities, research centres, and innovation hubs underscores Barcelona's leadership in creating sustained engagement through citizen science.

Research identifies SDGs 3 (Good Health and Well-being), 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and 13 (Climate Action) as most frequently addressed by CS activities, though other SDGs are also significantly targeted in numerous projects, indicating broad scope of CS contributions to

²⁶ This method also promotes education, community engagement and the formation of multi-stakeholder partnerships.

sustainability at local level. This diversity creates multiple entry points for citizen engagement, allowing communities to participate in areas that align with their interests and expertise.

If urban planning and policy play pivotal roles in achieving SDGs, often encompassing strategies such as land use control, the incorporation of green and blue infrastructure, and community engagement, the implementation of these plans necessitates public collaboration. To this end, Citizen Science contributes significantly to sustainability through definition of new targets and metrics, data generation, and monitoring of SDG indicators. It also raises awareness by emphasizing that no single solution can address the diverse challenges faced by cities. Instead, a spectrum of co-creative solutions must be developed through sustained collaboration between citizens, researchers, and local authorities.

Key interventions include awareness-raising initiatives for air pollution, behavioral change campaigns for energy conservation and renewable energy use, and transformative interventions involving various stakeholders.

Despite the progress, several challenges remain, such as the need for broader dissemination of the relevance of projects to achieve the SDGs, and the importance of adapting SDG targets and indicators to the local level [Liu et al. 2023].

6. THE INTERPLAY OF SDGS AND URBAN COMMONS: 5 CASE STUDIES

Figure 5: The five case-studies



Source: Authors' own elaboration

Understanding the interaction between the SDGs and Urban Commons is essential for fostering sustainable development and participatory governance in local communities. While the SDGs provide a global framework for addressing challenges like poverty, inequality, and environmental sustainability, Urban Commons offer the practical means to implement these Goals locally. By integrating shared resources such as public spaces and community facilities into the SDG framework, local communities can enhance social cohesion, promote inclusive governance, and become resilient.

Tiwari, Chauhan, and Varma [2021] emphasize that the **involvement of local communities in the management of Urban Commons is essential for the localization of SDGs, particularly in small cities where local administrations play a direct role in prioritizing and achieving these Goals. Their research underscores the importance of a bottom-up approach in implementing SDGs at the city level, which aligns the Goals with the everyday realities and needs of urban residents.** This participatory approach not only enhances the relevance of

SDGs but also ensures that the development processes are more democratic and inclusive [Tiwari et al., 2021].

The role of Urban Commons in fostering participatory governance is further explored by Almeida and Carla [2020], who argue that effective governance models incorporating broad social participation are crucial for achieving SDG 11. They note that the participation of various stakeholders, including civil society and business sectors, is vital for fostering collaboration and ensuring that urban development is sustainable and inclusive. This participatory governance model is particularly relevant in the context of Urban Commons, where shared resources require collective management and stewardship to ensure their sustainability [Almeida, Carla, 2020].

Ulbrich, Porto de Albuquerque, and Coaffee [2018] discuss the challenges associated with monitoring progress toward SDGs targets in urban areas, particularly in accounting for urban inequalities and ensuring that data collection methods are representative of diverse urban populations.

They highlight the need for more inclusive and representative data practices, which could include participatory geospatial methods and citizen-generated data, to effectively track the contributions of Urban Commons to SDG localization.

This approach is critical for ensuring that the benefits of Urban Commons are equitably distributed and that all urban residents have a stake in the sustainable development process [Ulbrich et al., 2018].

The potential of Urban Commons to contribute to SDG localization is further supported by Kharrazi, Qin, and Zhang [2016], who explore the integration of big data and innovative urban-level metrics. They argue that urban policymakers can leverage big data innovations to create more effective governance mechanisms for sustainable development, facilitating the development of new indicators that are more relevant to urban contexts. This integration of data-driven approaches with the management of Urban Commons can enhance the monitoring and achievement of SDGs, particularly in areas such as environmental sustainability and social equity [Kharrazi et al., 2016].

Rabadjieva and Terstriep [2020] provide a comprehensive analysis of how Urban Commons can be instrumental in promoting sustainable urban development through the co-governance of shared resources. They emphasize that the involvement of citizens in the co-design and co-management of urban spaces is crucial for creating inclusive and resilient communities. Their research highlights the importance of participatory governance models that encourage the involvement of diverse stakeholders, which is essential for the successful localization of SDGs in urban contexts [Rabadjieva et al., 2020].

In this context, co-governance emerges as a key element and entails – as explained in Section 3 – the sharing of decision-making power between public administrations and citizens, promoting inclusive and democratic management of common resources. This approach allows for the integration of the needs and expertise of local communities into the planning and management of urban policies, thereby enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of interventions.

To delve deeper into this synergy, qualified interviews were conducted with stakeholders and participants from various case studies that were considered exemplary case studies in the co-cities research platform and database (see the annex to the Foster and Iaione, 2022 book and the Commoning.city platform). These interviews provided a deeper understanding of the complexity of the subject and highlighted key points such as the importance of co-governance and the interaction between SDGs and Urban Commons. This synergy not only strengthens local communities but also contributes to the creation of more resilient and inclusive cities, where resources are managed

sustainably, and benefits are equitably distributed. Through co-governance and the enhancement of Urban Commons, cities can advance towards achieving the SDGs, improving the quality of life for citizens and ensuring a sustainable future for generations to come. The cities that we investigated and surveyed were selected to provide a breadth of examples of different projects and policies of collectively or collaboratively managed urban resources in various countries and contexts.

For this contribution, a research methodology based on interviews with qualified interlocutors from five European cities has been adopted. The main objective was to deeply understand co-governance practice, with the complementary objective to highlight challenges in implementing Sustainable Development Goals locally. A questionnaire guided the interviews conducted with public administration representatives, focusing on Urban Commons management, citizen participation, sustainability, and co-governance. The five cities selected for this exercise, chosen for their diverse contexts and approaches, provided varied data on strategies, best practices, and common challenges. These insights contributed to a comprehensive co-governance framework in European urban contexts.

The analysis of the case studies, selected from the research platform and database [Commoning.city](https://commoning.city)²⁷, was based on the following dimensions:

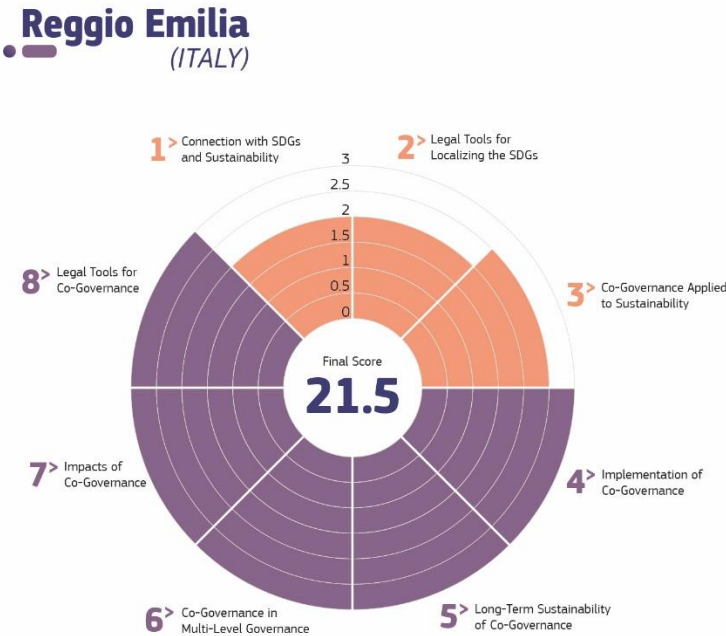
- 1. Connection with SDGs and Sustainability:** examines how co-governance initiatives align with and support the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and broader sustainability objectives (if any).
- 2. Legal Tools for Localizing the SDGs:** focuses on the legal instruments and frameworks used to implement and adapt the SDGs at local and regional levels (if any).
- 3. Co-Governance Applied to Sustainability:** explores the application of co-governance principles in fostering sustainable development and managing common resources.
- 4. Implementation of Co-Governance and Intensity:** discusses the methods and extent to which co-governance practices are implemented within various governance contexts.
- 5. Long-Term Sustainability of Co-Governance:** addresses the strategies and mechanisms to ensure the enduring effectiveness and stability of co-governance systems.
- 6. Co-Governance in Multi-Level Governance:** investigates the role of co-governance in the context of multi-level governance, involving collaboration across different governmental tiers.
- 7. Impacts of Co-Governance:** evaluates the outcomes and effects of co-governance initiatives on communities, policy-making, and resource management.
- 8. Legal Tools for Co-Governance:** examines the legal frameworks and instruments that facilitate and support co-governance arrangements and practices.

²⁷ See the database and platform <https://commoning.city/>. The content and scope of this platform are presented in Chapter 2.

6.1 The Evolution of Co-Governance in Reggio Emilia: From Decentralization to Inclusion, developing a municipal regulation for the Co-Governance

The case study of Reggio Emilia, a city of over 170.000 inhabitants located in north-west Italy, presents a transformative approach to local governance, shifting from traditional decentralization to an inclusive co-governance model. This model facilitates the dialogue between the center and the periphery of the city, actively involving citizens, the third sector, volunteers, the municipal administration, and the private sector. The implementation of this model has led to significant improvements in public policy effectiveness, social innovation, and citizen participation. However, the challenge lies in scaling up these practices, integrating them within existing organizational structures, and ensuring broader involvement across all sectors.

Figure 6: Reggio Emilia’s assessment



Source: Authors’ own elaboration

6.1.1 Key Elements of Co-Governance in Reggio Emilia

1. Governance Tools for Co-Governance

- Legal Tools:** The Regulation on Democracy and Urban and Climate Justice²⁸ is a cornerstone of Reggio Emilia’s co-governance model. This regulation defines the roles, rights, duties, and participation tools for all actors involved, providing a legal framework that supports co-governance and citizen participation.

²⁸ [Regolamento sulla democrazia e la giustizia urbana e climatica Reggio Emilia - Comune di Reggio Emilia](#)

- **Financial Tools:** The regulation also introduces financial mechanisms to support co-governance initiatives. These tools ensure that adequate resources are allocated to collaborative projects, fostering long-term sustainability and encouraging private sector involvement.

2. Top-Down and Bottom-Up Approaches

- Reggio Emilia's model exemplifies a hybrid approach, where top-down initiatives from the municipal administration are complemented by bottom-up participation from citizens and local organizations. This dual approach is essential for ensuring that policies are both inclusive and responsive to local needs.

3. Proposed Tools vs. Barriers

- **Area Co-Programming Councils:** These councils are pivotal in promoting citizen inclusion in decision-making processes. They address the barrier of disconnected governance by enhancing dialogue between citizens and the municipal administration, ensuring that local needs are integrated into urban projects.
- **Neighborhood Houses and Neighborhood Architects:** These innovations facilitate local-level dialogue and participatory design, overcoming barriers related to community engagement and spatial inequality.
- **Community Pacts and Urban Sustainable Development Partnerships (USDIPs):** These tools formalize collaborative initiatives and coordinate long-term sustainable development actions. They address the challenge of fragmented efforts by integrating contributions from various local actors.

4. Co-Governance Strategies and Solutions

- **City Science Office (CSO):** The establishment of the CSO as a support structure for research and implementation of participation and social innovation policies is a strategic move to institutionalize co-governance. The CSO acts as a knowledge hub, providing the necessary expertise and resources to support co-governance initiatives.
- **Community Pacts and USDIPs:** These instruments not only formalize collaborations but also ensure accountability and long-term commitment from all stakeholders, fostering trust and cooperation.

5. Experience in Social Innovation

- The collaborative protocol in Reggio Emilia has led to the development of numerous projects that have significantly improved the quality of life in various policy areas. These projects create networks and territorial relationships independent of the municipality's role, enhancing social cohesion and trust among citizens and between citizens and the administration.

6. Barriers to Scaling Up

- **Integration within Existing Structures:** One of the main challenges is integrating the co-governance model within existing organizational structures. This requires a shift in bureaucratic culture and a move towards more flexible and adaptive governance practices.

- **Broadening Private Sector Involvement:** Another barrier is the need for broader involvement of the private sector. While the regulation provides a framework for collaboration, there is a need for more proactive engagement with private actors to ensure the sustainability and scalability of co-governance initiatives.

7. Inclusivity and Representation:

- Reggio Emilia's ongoing commitment to actively engage ethnically and culturally diverse communities is a critical aspect of its co-governance model. Ensuring that these processes are inclusive and representative of the entire population is essential for the model's success and for fostering a sense of belonging among all citizens.

6.1.2 Main Takeaways

The case of Reggio Emilia illustrates how co-governance can enhance public policy effectiveness through the formal integration of citizen collaboration into the city's institutional architecture. The *Regulation on Democracy and Urban and Climate Justice*, operationalized through legally binding multistakeholder and multidimensional partnerships, represents a legal and administrative innovation that institutionalizes co-management practices, particularly in peripheral and underserved neighborhoods. This shift moves civic engagement beyond occasional consultation toward structured and durable forms of collaboration.

A central enabling mechanism is the role of the 'city science office', the open living lab and the 'neighborhood architects', an innovative institutional ecosystem civil servant specifically designed to facilitate the dialogue and co-creation between the administration and local communities. This figure facilitates participatory processes, supports the identification of shared needs, and guides the co-design of interventions in areas such as green space maintenance, cultural programming, and social infrastructure. By lowering bureaucratic thresholds, this mechanism has enabled participation by residents who typically face obstacles to institutional engagement, such as youth, migrants, and elderly people with limited access to digital tools or formal channels.

These instruments foster inclusion by embedding collaboration into everyday governance routines, creating stable entry points for citizen involvement in managing local public goods. However, structural challenges persist. Ensuring equitable outreach and representation requires continuous investment in capacity-building, training, and communication strategies, as well as political and administrative commitment. Moreover, the durability of such arrangements hinges on the availability of financial and human resources capable of supporting long-term processes of co-management.

While the Reggio Emilia model offers a promising benchmark for institutional innovation, its transferability to other contexts must be approached with caution. The effectiveness of co-governance mechanisms depends on favorable socio-political conditions, such as administrative flexibility, a culture of public participation, and trust between institutions and civil society. Recognizing these context-specific enablers is essential to avoid superficial replication and to encourage meaningful institutional learning.

6.2 Enhancing Citizen Ownership and Participation: Amsterdam’s Co-Governance and Public-Commons Partnerships

Amsterdam (The Netherlands) has distinguished itself as a leading European city in the implementation and development of effective governance practices, largely through the establishment of a Commons Agenda and the City Science Office (CSO). These initiatives reflect a holistic and innovative approach designed to enhance citizen participation and ownership in sustainable development. The case of Amsterdam illustrates the successes and challenges of embedding co-governance mechanisms within a complex urban environment, highlighting key takeaways for other cities pursuing similar goals.

Figure 7: Amsterdam’s assessment



Source: authors’ own elaboration

6.2.1 Key Elements of Co-Governance in Amsterdam

1. Administrative Silos and Bureaucratic Culture

- One of the significant challenges Amsterdam faces in implementing its co-governance model is the city’s siloed organizational structure. While initiatives like the Commons Agenda and the CSO aim to foster collaboration across different sectors, integrating these practices across all municipal departments has been difficult. Overcoming this challenge is essential for scaling up co-governance and ensuring that it becomes a common culture within and beyond the Municipality.

2. Governance Tools for Co-Governance

- **Legal Tools:** The city has explored various legal instruments, including subsidies and procurement procedures, to facilitate **public-commons partnerships**. These tools are critical in supporting the commons, particularly in areas where traditional public-private partnerships fall short.
- **Financial Tools: Neighborhood budgets** and funds supporting housing cooperatives are key financial tools that Amsterdam has implemented. These initiatives address financial constraints and enable local communities to take ownership of services, spaces, and infrastructure.

3. Top-Down and Bottom-Up Approaches

- Amsterdam's approach to co-governance effectively combines top-down support from the city administration with bottom-up initiatives driven by citizens and communities. The **City Science Office** plays a crucial role in bridging these approaches, providing the necessary research and support to align local initiatives with broader city objectives.

4. Proposed Tools vs. Barriers

- **Neighborhood Budgets:** These budgets empower communities by giving them direct control over local development funds. They address the barrier of limited community engagement by actively involving citizens in decision-making processes.
- **Housing Cooperatives:** The city's fund for housing cooperatives helps overcome financial barriers, enabling more residents to access resources and participate in the co-governance of housing.
- **Public-Commons Partnerships:** While Amsterdam has made strides in public-private partnerships, there was initially a gap in supporting the commons. The city has worked to bridge this gap by collaborating with academia, financial institutions, and legal experts, though challenges remain in fully integrating these partnerships within the existing municipal framework.

5. Co-Governance Strategies and Solutions

- **City Science Office (CSO):** The CSO is a key institution in Amsterdam's co-governance strategy. It supports research and the implementation of citizen-driven initiatives, providing a model that other cities can adapt. The CSO's role is to ensure that co-governance practices are evidence-based and aligned with the city's broader goals.
- **Commons Agenda:** The Commons Agenda is a strategic initiative aimed at increasing citizen ownership in various sectors, including energy and housing. This agenda is vital for promoting local ownership and ensuring that the benefits of sustainable development are equitably distributed.

6. Experience in Social Innovation

- Amsterdam's efforts to promote local ownership, particularly in the energy sector, represent a significant innovation in urban governance. The city aims for 100% local ownership of energy resources, although this concept is still under development. By focusing on enabling communities to produce and use their own energy, Amsterdam is moving towards a more sustainable and self-sufficient urban model.

7. Barriers to Scaling Up

- **Integration within Existing Structures:** The city's siloed organizational structure poses a significant barrier to the integration and scaling up of co-governance initiatives. To address this, Amsterdam must work towards creating a more flexible and interconnected governance framework.
- **Overcoming Financial and Legal Obstacles:** Ensuring the long-term sustainability of co-governance initiatives requires overcoming existing financial and legal barriers. Continued efforts in these areas are crucial for the success and expansion of Amsterdam's governance model.

8. Inclusivity and Representation

- Amsterdam's co-governance model emphasizes the importance of inclusivity, particularly in engaging ethnically and culturally diverse communities. Ensuring that these processes are inclusive and representative of the entire population is a priority for the city, and ongoing efforts are needed to maintain and enhance this inclusivity.

6.2.2 Main Takeaways

The case of Amsterdam demonstrates how collective action can intersect with sustainability transitions through citizen-driven experimentation and the development of new co-governance arrangements. Anchored in the city's Commons Agenda and supported by the City Science Office, Amsterdam's approach promotes distributed responsibility in the design and management of shared urban resources. These efforts have taken shape through the use of digital co-design platforms, cooperative ownership models, and flexible planning regulations that empower residents and civil society actors to influence building design, local energy systems, and public space configuration.

These instruments contribute to co-governance by decentralizing authority and embedding collaborative practices into the institutional landscape of urban policymaking. By enabling citizens to act not only as stakeholders but also as co-creators, the model fosters forms of long-term stewardship that support both ecological resilience and social cohesion. The integration of data-informed processes by the City Science Office further strengthens this framework, supporting participatory decision-making through iterative knowledge production and multi-actor engagement.

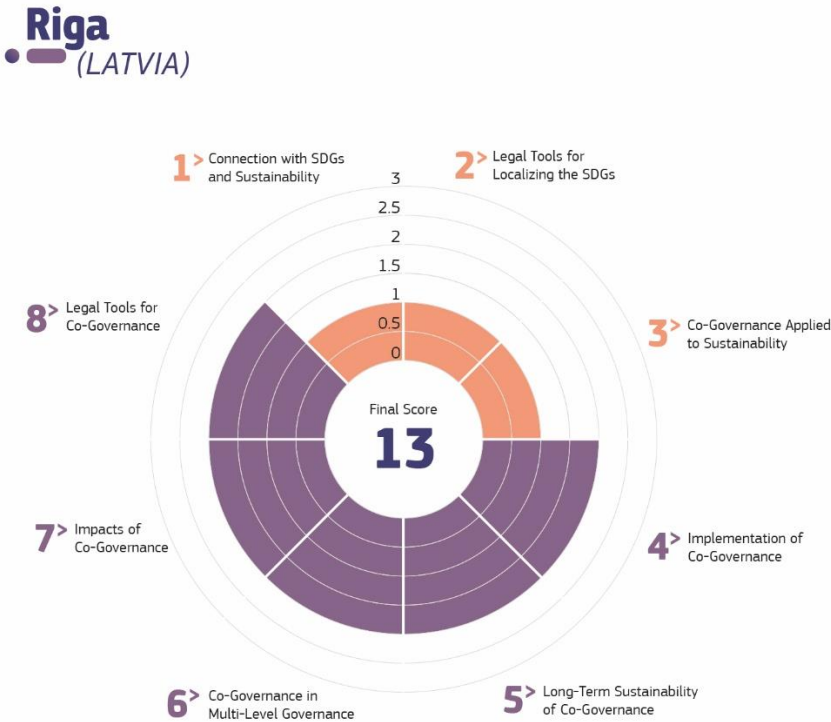
Participation in these initiatives has proven effective among active civil society networks, particularly those with prior experience in urban innovation or sustainability projects. However, access remains uneven. The ability to participate meaningfully often depends on factors such as technical literacy, property ownership, or access to institutional networks, which can systematically disadvantage migrant communities, renters, and low-income residents. These structural barriers are particularly relevant in a context marked by increasing gentrification and social fragmentation.

While Amsterdam benefits from a regulatory environment that encourages policy experimentation, the challenge lies in institutionalizing co-governance practices beyond isolated projects. Ensuring equitable access and addressing the risk of exclusion will be essential for the model to evolve from innovative practice to inclusive governance architecture. Furthermore, any potential replication in other urban contexts should take into account the specific socio-political conditions that have enabled its development in Amsterdam, avoiding uncritical transferability and promoting context-sensitive learning.

6.3 Riga: A model for and managing Urban Commons

Riga, the capital of Latvia, stands as a compelling case study for the implementation of the Sustainable SDGs and the utilization of Urban Commons to foster community engagement and sustainable development. With a population of approximately 700,000, Riga is not only a historical and cultural hub of the Baltic region but also a city facing significant urban challenges, including infrastructure development, environmental sustainability, and social inclusion. These areas are critical for the application of the SDGs, and Riga’s approach offers valuable insights into how global goals can be localized and operationalized within an urban context.

Figure 8: Riga’s assessment



Source: authors’ own elaboration

6.3.1 Key Elements of Co-Governance in Riga:

1. Administrative Silos and Bureaucratic Culture

- Riga has made notable progress in overcoming traditional bureaucratic and sectoral divisions within its municipal administration. This institutional transformation has allowed the city to transcend the confines of municipal management, fostering broader and more inclusive collaboration across various public institutions, civil society organizations, and the private sector. However, challenges remain in fully embedding this collaborative culture within all levels of municipal operations, highlighting the need for continued efforts to break down administrative silos and integrate co-governance practices more deeply.

2. Governance Tools for Co-Governance

- **Legal Tools:** The **new law on municipalities**, which came into force recently, plays a crucial role in establishing measures for citizen participation. This includes the creation of citizen councils, working groups, and the facilitation of public discussions. These legal frameworks are essential in formalizing the role of citizens in governance and ensuring their voices are heard in municipal decision-making processes.
- **Financial Tools: Participatory budgeting** is one of the key financial tools Riga has implemented to enhance citizen engagement. This mechanism allows citizens to propose and vote on public interest projects, which are then funded by the municipality, thereby directly involving residents in the allocation of municipal resources.

3. Top-Down and Bottom-Up Approaches

- Riga's co-governance model effectively blends top-down initiatives from the municipal administration with bottom-up participation from civil society. The city's support structures, such as annual competitions for social projects and memorandums of cooperation between NGOs and the municipal administration, are instrumental in sustaining this balance. These structures not only provide continuous financial support but also enable NGOs to influence local policies, ensuring that community needs are reflected in the city's governance.

4. Proposed Tools vs. Barriers

- **Participatory Budgeting:** This tool addresses the barrier of low citizen engagement by empowering residents to directly influence municipal spending. While participation in these processes is growing, the city must continue to work on increasing awareness and involvement to maximize the impact of this tool.
- **Urban Commons Management:** Projects like **NGO House**²⁹ and **Free Riga**³⁰ showcase the potential of co-managing Urban Commons. However, the utilization of abandoned buildings for social and cultural projects is still underdeveloped, indicating a need for more robust strategies to unlock the full potential of these resources.

5. Co-Governance Strategies and Solutions

- **Permanent Support Structures:** Riga has established permanent support structures to ensure the sustainability of its co-governance initiatives. These include **annual competitions for social projects**, which provide ongoing financial support, and **memorandums of cooperation** that formalize partnerships between the municipal administration and NGOs. These structures are critical for maintaining the momentum of co-governance efforts and ensuring that they continue to evolve and adapt to the city's needs.
- **Neighborhood Centers:** The establishment of neighborhood centers is a strategic move to enhance local inclusion and democracy. These centers serve as hubs for community engagement, providing spaces for residents to participate in decision-making and collaborate on local initiatives.

²⁹ [NGO house | urbact.eu](http://ngohouse.urbact.eu)

³⁰ [PASĀKUMI | My Site \(freeriga.lv\)](http://pasakumi.lv)

6. Experience in Social Innovation

- Riga's use of Urban Commons as a tool for social innovation is particularly noteworthy. The *NGO House* project, for instance, provides spaces for NGOs to conduct educational, social, and cultural activities, fostering a vibrant civil society. However, the potential of Urban Commons, especially in terms of repurposing abandoned buildings, remains largely untapped, suggesting that further innovation is needed to fully leverage these assets for community benefit.

7. Barriers to Scaling Up

- **Low Electoral Participation:** One of the significant challenges Riga faces is low electoral participation, which reflects a broader issue of limited civic engagement. Strengthening civil society's capacities and fostering a more participatory culture are essential steps toward overcoming this barrier and ensuring that co-governance can be scaled up effectively.
- **Need for Regional Cooperation:** Although Riga lacks a regional governance level, cooperation between the national and municipal levels is crucial for the successful implementation of the SDGs. The Ukrainian refugee crisis highlighted the importance of this cooperation, as the national government delegated functions to municipalities and provided the necessary financial support. Enhancing this cooperation is vital for addressing complex urban challenges that extend beyond the city's administrative boundaries.

8. Inclusivity and Representation

- Riga's co-governance model places a strong emphasis on inclusivity, particularly in engaging ethnically and culturally diverse communities. Ensuring that these processes are representative of the entire population is a key priority, and ongoing initiatives like neighborhood centers and participatory budgeting offer promising avenues for enhancing local inclusion and democracy.

6.3.2 Main Takeaways

The case of Riga illustrates how co-governance and SDG localization are being pursued through a meaningful institutional shift toward greater transparency, decentralization, and civic participation. A cornerstone of this transformation is the city's participatory budgeting program, which allocates a designated share of the municipal budget for projects proposed and selected by residents at the neighborhood level. These projects range from the creation of playgrounds and green spaces to investments in mobility infrastructure and community-building events. The process is supported by digital civic engagement platforms, which simplify procedures and expand participation, particularly among younger citizens and working individuals with limited availability for in-person consultations.

These instruments contribute to co-governance by democratizing decision-making and activating civic agency, especially in areas historically excluded from policy processes. They lower entry barriers and promote direct resident involvement in the management of public space and local development priorities. However, despite these advances, the social inclusiveness of outcomes remains uneven. Disparities in digital access, varying levels of proposal-writing skills, and the absence of tailored support for lower-income or marginalized groups can inhibit equitable participation. Analysis of recent budget cycles has shown that project quality and approval rates differ significantly across city districts, pointing to a risk that well-resourced communities may disproportionately benefit from participatory mechanisms.

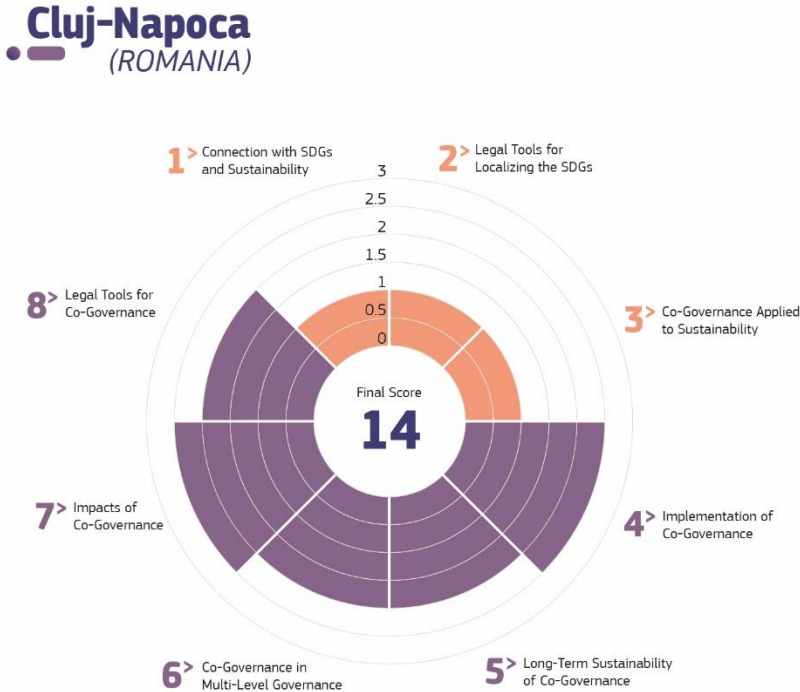
Beyond participatory budgeting, Riga is gradually integrating elements of the Urban Commons framework and testing collaborative partnerships for the co-management of public services and urban regeneration efforts. These emerging practices reflect a broader institutional intent to overcome bureaucratic silos and move toward distributed, adaptive governance. Nevertheless, structural constraints continue to affect the scope and effectiveness of these reforms. Challenges include low levels of civic engagement, variable administrative capacity across departments, and limited inter-municipal coordination, all of which can constrain the sustainability and scalability of co-governance initiatives.

Riga's experience reveals both the potential and the fragility of co-governance in a post-socialist urban context. It highlights the fact that the success of participatory instruments depends not only on their institutional design, but also on the broader socio-political ecosystem in which they operate. The case provides a cautionary insight for other municipalities: without sustained investment in capacity-building, inclusion strategies, and institutional learning, even well-intentioned participatory tools may fall short of promoting social equity or long-term civic engagement.

6.4 Cluj-Napoca: Pioneering Sustainability and Community Engagement through Urban Commons and Co-Governance

Cluj-Napoca, a prominent city in Romania, offers a compelling case study for the implementation of the SDGs and the utilization of Urban Commons to enhance community engagement and sustainable development. Central to Cluj-Napoca’s approach is the concept of co-governance, which emphasizes collaboration between public administration and civil society. This principle is reflected in various innovative initiatives aimed at fostering sustainability, economic development, and social inclusion, making Cluj-Napoca a model for other cities in Romania and beyond.

Figure 9: Cluj-Napoca’s assessment



Source: Authors’ own elaboration

6.4.1 Key Elements of Co-Governance in Cluj-Napoca

1. Administrative Silos and Bureaucratic Culture

- Cluj-Napoca’s co-governance model is an effort to overcome traditional bureaucratic barriers by fostering collaboration across different sectors and stakeholders. However, like many cities, Cluj-Napoca faces challenges in fully integrating these practices into all levels of municipal governance. The success of co-governance in Cluj-Napoca depends on its ability to break down administrative silos and embed collaborative practices across the entire municipal structure.

2. Governance Tools for Co-Governance

- **Legal Tools:** The development of **Local Green Deals** under the **Intelligent City Challenge** represents a significant legal and strategic tool for co-governance in Cluj-Napoca. These agreements, which involve diverse stakeholders committing to specific sustainability actions, provide a formal framework that supports the city's broader sustainability goals.
- **Financial Tools:** The transformation of the remote village of Plaiuri into a 'startup village' illustrates Cluj-Napoca's use of financial and infrastructural tools to promote local economic development. By investing in high-speed internet and digital infrastructure, the city enables the local community to become a network operator, fostering new job opportunities and supporting economic resilience.

3. Top-Down and Bottom-Up Approaches

- Cluj-Napoca's approach to co-governance effectively blends top-down initiatives with bottom-up participation. The city's strategic projects, such as the Local Green Deals and the Cluj Cluster Education (CEDU)³¹, demonstrate how collaborative frameworks can align municipal goals with the needs and aspirations of the community. This dual approach ensures that policies are not only inclusive but also responsive to the local context.

4. Proposed Tools vs. Barriers

- **Local Green Deals:** These deals are a key tool in addressing the barrier of fragmented efforts in sustainability. By bringing together various stakeholders to commit to specific actions, these agreements create a cohesive and holistic framework for sustainability across different sectors.
- **Cluj Cluster Education (CEDU):** CEDU is an exemplary model of co-management and co-design in education. It coordinates educational initiatives that align with the city's development objectives, thereby addressing the barrier of misaligned educational outcomes with local economic and social needs.

5. Co-Governance Strategies and Solutions

- **Startup Village in Plaiuri:** This project exemplifies how co-governance can drive local economic development. By equipping the village with digital infrastructure, Cluj-Napoca empowers the local community to participate in the digital economy, creating new job opportunities and fostering innovation in a rural setting.
- **Cluj Cluster Education (CEDU):** CEDU's role in coordinating strategic educational projects is crucial for building a knowledgeable and skilled community. By aligning educational programs with the city's sustainability goals, CEDU ensures that the next generation of leaders is equipped to drive the city's development forward.

6. Experience in Social Innovation

- Cluj-Napoca's initiatives, particularly the transformation of Plaiuri into a startup village, highlight the city's commitment to social innovation. These efforts not only address immediate economic needs but also contribute to the long-term goal of sustainable development by fostering local ownership and innovation in rural areas.

³¹ [C-EDU – Clusterul de Educație C-EDU](#)

7. Barriers to Scaling Up

- **Engaging Rural Populations:** One of the significant challenges Cluj-Napoca faces is engaging all segments of the population, particularly in rural areas where trust-building and increased participation are necessary. To overcome this barrier, the city has focused on creating opportunities for continuous dialogue and involving local communities in decision-making processes. However, further efforts are needed to ensure that these initiatives are truly inclusive and that rural populations are adequately represented in the city's governance.

8. Inclusivity and Representation

- Cluj-Napoca's co-governance model emphasizes the importance of inclusivity, particularly in engaging educational institutions and rural communities. Initiatives like CEDU and the startup village project are steps toward creating a more inclusive and participatory governance model, but the city must continue to work on ensuring that all voices are heard and that the benefits of development are equitably distributed.

6.4.2 Main Takeaways

The case of Cluj-Napoca illustrates how civic education and community-based economic development can serve as foundational entry points for co-governance and SDG localization. The CEDU program promotes civic awareness and participatory culture through partnerships with schools, libraries, and community centers, providing training on local governance, participatory mechanisms, and rights-based citizenship. This initiative is particularly targeted toward socio-economically marginalized neighborhoods, where access to democratic processes and civic knowledge tends to be more limited.

Complementing this, the Start-Up Village program supports social entrepreneurship by offering infrastructure, mentorship, and micro-funding to residents aiming to develop community-oriented business initiatives. Together, these programs link procedural empowerment - through civic education and participation - with material empowerment, by facilitating economic agency and skills development. They aim to reach structurally excluded groups, including unemployed youth, single-parent households, and residents in peripheral urban areas, by creating enabling environments for local initiative and co-production.

Preliminary evidence cited in local evaluations points to a high uptake among younger demographics and early-stage community actors. However, their long-term sustainability and transformative impact will depend on several factors: continued institutional investment, the ability to adapt program content to heterogeneous community needs, and stronger integration within the city's broader urban governance and development strategies. At present, mechanisms for monitoring impact and enabling knowledge transfer remain underdeveloped, limiting the programs' scalability and the capacity for structured policy learning.

Cluj-Napoca's broader co-governance ecosystem - reflected in cross-sectoral initiatives such as the Local Green Deals and the Cluj Education Cluster - signals a strategic orientation toward sustainable urban development grounded in collaborative governance. These initiatives align with an Urban Commons perspective, particularly in how they promote shared stewardship of educational, environmental, and energy resources across public, private, and civic actors.

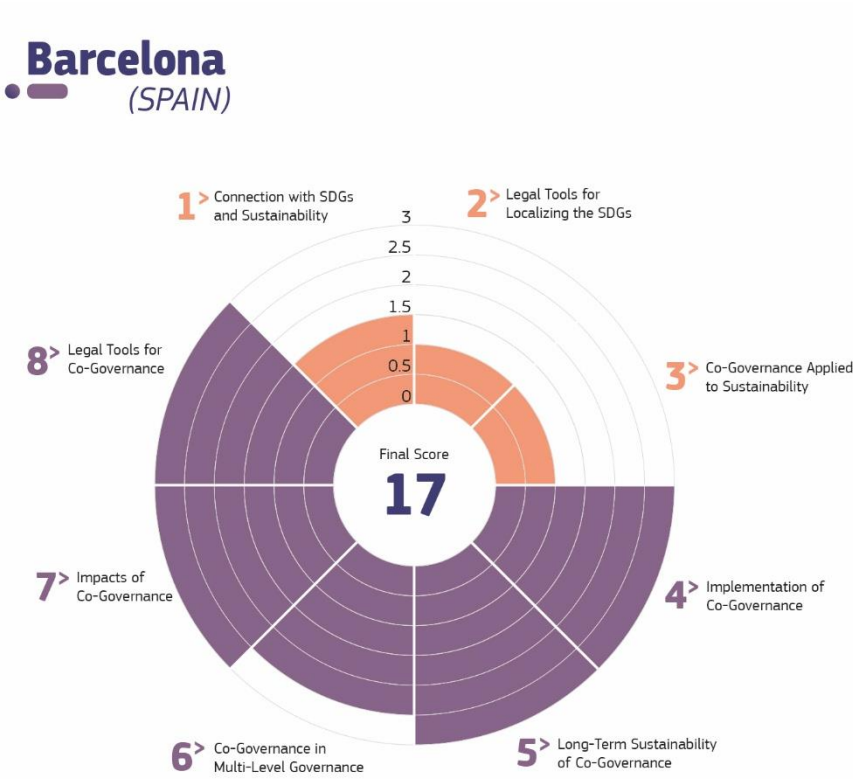
Nonetheless, significant challenges remain. Fragmented administrative coordination and limited engagement with rural and peri-urban areas constrain the consolidation and diffusion of co-

governance practices. To fully realize the city's potential as a laboratory for inclusive and locally rooted SDG implementation, Cluj-Napoca will need to pair its social innovation efforts with deeper institutional adaptation, focusing on long-term capacity-building and the structural integration of co-governance principles into municipal policy cycles.

6.5 Building Sustainable Communities: The Role of Co-Governance in Barcelona’s Urban Development

Barcelona stands as a leading example of co-governance in action, deeply integrating participatory mechanisms into its public policy formulation. The city’s strong tradition of citizen involvement, facilitated by a vibrant network of social organizations, neighborhood movements, unions, and cooperatives, has enabled the creation of robust co-governance structures. These structures, operating at multiple levels from neighborhood councils to sectoral committees, ensure that public policies are shaped by the community’s needs and aspirations. Barcelona’s systematic approach to co-governance has not only fostered collaboration but also positioned the city as a model for urban sustainability and innovation.

Figure 10: Barcelona’s assessment



Source: Authors’ own elaboration

6.5.1 Key Elements of Co-Governance in Barcelona

1. Administrative Silos and Bureaucratic Culture

- Barcelona has successfully embedded co-governance practices into its municipal framework, yet challenges remain in fully integrating these practices across all levels of government. The city’s extensive use of participatory mechanisms helps to break down traditional bureaucratic barriers but ensuring that these practices permeate the entire municipal structure is an ongoing effort. The presence of more than 200 councils across

the city demonstrates a commitment to inclusive governance, though the challenge lies in ensuring that these councils operate cohesively within the broader administrative framework.

2. Governance Tools for Co-Governance

- **Legal Tools:** Barcelona has developed a range of legal instruments that support co-governance. These include **concession agreements** like the one used for the Can Batlló project, which facilitate the transfer of management and redevelopment responsibilities to local communities. Such agreements are crucial for enabling community-driven urban transformation while providing a legal framework that ensures transparency and accountability.
- **Financial Tools:** The city's co-governance model is supported by financial mechanisms that empower local communities. For example, the **cooperative incubator Coopolis**³² provides resources and training to foster local entrepreneurship and social innovation. These financial tools are essential for sustaining the social economy and promoting economic equity across the city.

3. Top-Down and Bottom-Up Approaches

- Barcelona's co-governance strategy is characterized by a balanced integration of top-down and bottom-up approaches. The city actively engages citizens, civil society organizations, and various stakeholders in the creation and management of public policies, thereby aligning municipal goals with community needs. This dual approach is evident in projects like Can Batlló and Coopolis, where local communities play a central role in decision-making and project management.

4. Proposed Tools vs. Barriers

- **Participatory Mechanisms:** Barcelona's participatory governance structures, such as **neighborhood councils** and sectoral committees, address the barrier of limited citizen engagement by providing permanent spaces for deliberation and consensus-building. These mechanisms help prevent conflicts and promote collaboration, ensuring that public policies are responsive to the needs of the community.
- **Digital Platforms:** The **Decidim** platform³³ is a key tool for enhancing citizen participation in public decision-making. By using open-source technologies, Decidim ensures transparency and accessibility, allowing for broad participation across different social categories. However, challenges remain in engaging marginalized groups, particularly youth and residents of economically disadvantaged neighborhoods.

5. Co-Governance Strategies and Solutions

- **Can Batlló and Coopolis:** These projects exemplify how co-governance can empower local communities to manage and redevelop urban spaces. Can Batlló, a former industrial complex, has been transformed into a community-managed space through a concession agreement, while Coopolis supports the development of social economy projects. Both initiatives highlight an inclusive governance model that promotes sustainable urban innovation.

³² [Coòpolis - Coòpolis \(bcn.coop\)](https://bcn.coop/)

³³ <https://www.decidim.barcelona/>

- **Community Action Plans:** To address participation gaps, particularly among marginalized groups, Barcelona has implemented **community action plans** and **citizen assemblies**. These initiatives aim to engage underrepresented populations, ensuring that the benefits of co-governance are equitably distributed across the city.

6. Experience in Social Innovation

- Barcelona's systematic and inclusive approach to urban governance has made it a leader in Urban Commons policies. Projects like Can Batlló and Coopolis showcase the city's ability to leverage co-governance as a catalyst for social innovation. By fostering collaboration between public administrators and local communities, Barcelona has developed innovative solutions that contribute to both social equity and urban sustainability.

7. Barriers to Scaling Up

- Despite Barcelona's successes, achieving comprehensive participation remains a challenge, particularly among youth and in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods. To overcome this barrier, the city has implemented targeted strategies such as the **youth assembly**, which involved 100 randomly selected young people representing a demographic cross-section of the city. These initiatives are crucial for broadening the base of participation and ensuring that all voices are heard in the governance process.

8. Inclusivity and Representation

- Inclusivity is a cornerstone of Barcelona's co-governance model. The city's efforts to involve diverse social categories, including marginalized groups, are evident in its participatory mechanisms and digital platforms like Decidim. By focusing on inclusivity, Barcelona ensures that its governance model is representative of the entire population, thereby strengthening social cohesion and resilience.

6.5.2 Main Takeaways

The case of Barcelona illustrates how co-governance can be operationalized through the fusion of participatory democracy and spatial intervention, aimed at reshaping urban power relations and enhancing social inclusion. At the core of this model is Decidim, a robust, open-source digital platform that enables residents and civil society organizations to propose, deliberate, and vote on municipal policies and budgetary allocations. Its institutional architecture promotes transparency, accountability, and horizontal deliberation, fostering a culture of civic oversight that is rare at this scale.

The strength of this model lies in combining procedural openness with a deliberate effort to redistribute access to urban resources, both material and political. Participatory processes are designed to allow communities to co-decide on local priorities, while targeted spatial policies seek to transform the physical and social fabric of public space. However, despite these ambitions, systemic barriers continue to shape patterns of participation. Platforms like Decidim tend to be dominated by younger, more digitally literate, and politically active residents, while older adults, migrants, and low-income communities often face obstacles related to digital access, time availability, or lack of familiarity with deliberative procedures.

These limitations have material consequences. While some district-level pilot programs have generated tangible improvements - such as enhanced air quality, revitalized public spaces, and stronger neighborhood cohesion - participation and outcomes remain spatially uneven. Peripheral

areas of the city, often home to more vulnerable populations, report lower engagement rates and limited visibility in platform-generated initiatives. This raises concerns about the symbolic nature of participation and the risk of technocratic tools obscuring deeper inequalities in representation and influence. Moreover, without countermeasures to prevent displacement and socio-spatial fragmentation, spatial interventions may inadvertently reinforce exclusion.

Barcelona's approach remains a leading example of institutionalized participatory governance, combining digital infrastructure with urban commons policies. Yet its transformative potential depends not on the tools themselves, but on the political will to deploy them in ways that actively confront asymmetries of power. The case underscores a broader lesson for other cities: inclusion is not an automatic outcome of participatory innovation, but rather the result of deliberate, equity-focused institutional design and long-term investment in social justice.

7. RESULTS AND LIMITATIONS

The table hereafter evaluates the level of integration of co-governance practices and the localization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in five European cities: Reggio Emilia, Amsterdam, Riga, Cluj-Napoca, and Barcelona.

The assigned values (from 1 to 3) indicate the degree of implementation and success in each of the eight identified key variables. The data comes from a detailed analysis of case studies of the respective cities and from interviews conducted with local policymakers and other key stakeholders. These sources illustrate the specific strategies and initiatives adopted to promote urban sustainability through co-governance.

Table 1: Assessment of level of integration of co-governance practices

Variables	Reggio Emilia	Amsterdam	Riga	Cluj-Napoca	Barcelona
Connection with SDGs and Sustainability	2	2	1	1	1.5
Legal Tools for Localizing the SDGs	2	1.5	1	1	1
Co-Governance Applied to Sustainability	2.5	2.5	1	1	1
Implementation of Co-Governance	3	3	2	2.5	3
Long-Term Sustainability of Co-Governance	3	2	2	2	3
Co-Governance in Multi-Level Governance	3	3	2	2	2.5
Impacts of Co-Governance	3	2	2	2.5	3
Legal Tools for Co-Governance	3	2.5	2	2	3
Final Score	21.5	18.5	13	14	17

Source: Authors' own elaboration

The case studies from Reggio Emilia, Amsterdam, Riga, Cluj-Napoca, and Barcelona illustrate the transformative potential of co-governance in local and urban policy and its critical role in promoting social innovation. These examples demonstrate how co-governance, when effectively implemented, can serve as a powerful tool to address contemporary urban challenges and advance the localization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, while the successes are notable, these case studies also reveal significant challenges and barriers that must be addressed to fully realize the potential of co-governance in urban settings.

Across these cities, co-governance has been instrumental in enhancing the effectiveness of public policies, fostering social innovation, and improving the quality of urban life. Reggio Emilia's shift from traditional decentralization to an **inclusive co-governance model** has significantly enhanced

public policy effectiveness, particularly through the establishment of the City Science Office (CSO). This innovation has facilitated multi-stakeholder partnerships, driving improvements in social innovation and public decision-making.

Similarly, Amsterdam's development of a **robust legal and financial ecosystem**, including neighborhood budgets and housing cooperatives, underscores the importance of creating frameworks that support community collaboration. By embedding co-governance within these structures, Amsterdam has been able to promote sustainable solutions, particularly in sectors like energy and housing, aligning with SDG targets related to sustainable cities and communities.

Riga's approach, which emphasizes the integration of the SDGs into urban policies through **participatory budgeting and the management of Urban Commons**, provides a clear example of how co-governance can be leveraged to localize global goals. The city's initiatives, such as the 'NGO House' and 'Free Riga,' demonstrate the potential for co-management of public spaces to foster social inclusion and innovation.

Cluj-Napoca's focus on sustainability and innovation through initiatives like Local Green Deals and the Innovation and Experiments Fund highlights the **role of co-governance in bridging the urban-rural divide**. The city's efforts to engage various stakeholders in sustainable development projects underscore the importance of inclusive governance in achieving the SDGs.

Barcelona stands out for its **systematic integration of co-governance mechanisms into public policy**, supported by an extensive network of participatory structures. Projects like Can Batlló and Coopolis exemplify how co-governance can support social innovation and effectively integrate the SDGs into local policies. Barcelona's experience with the digital platform Decidim also illustrates the potential of technology in enhancing citizen participation and transparency in governance.

Despite the successes, these case studies also highlight significant challenges in the implementation of co-governance. A recurring issue is the **difficulty of aligning new collaborative models with existing administrative structures**. In cities like Reggio Emilia and Amsterdam, the persistence of administrative silos and bureaucratic cultures poses a major barrier to the integration and scaling up of co-governance practices. This challenge underscores the need for profound cultural and structural changes within municipal administrations to facilitate the adoption of co-governance across all levels of government.

The **financial sustainability of co-governance initiatives** is another critical concern. Many of the projects analyzed rely on one-time grants, donations, or government funds, which can be inconsistent and vulnerable to political and economic changes. This reliance on unstable funding sources jeopardizes the long-term viability of co-governance initiatives. Therefore, exploring innovative funding models, such as public-private-community partnerships (PPCPs), crowdfunding, and tax incentives, is essential to ensure the continuous flow of resources and the sustainability of these initiatives.

Civic engagement and participation also present significant challenges. In cities like Riga and Cluj-Napoca, low electoral participation and the need to strengthen civil society capacities are ongoing issues that hinder the effectiveness of co-governance. Moreover, the disparities between urban centers and rural areas, as seen in Cluj-Napoca, highlight the difficulties in ensuring that co-governance initiatives are inclusive and representative of all segments of the population. Barcelona's experience further illustrates the complexities of achieving comprehensive participation, particularly among youth and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods. Despite the city's efforts to engage these groups through targeted strategies, significant gaps in participation remain.

Addressing these challenges requires innovative approaches that go beyond traditional participatory mechanisms, ensuring that co-governance initiatives are truly inclusive and equitable.

The relationship between co-governance and the localization of SDGs is evident in the case studies analyzed. Co-governance provides a framework that could enable the active involvement of local communities in the achievement of SDG targets, particularly those related to sustainable cities and communities, reduced inequalities, and quality education. By promoting citizen participation, fostering collaboration between public and private entities, and ensuring the inclusive management of Urban Commons, co-governance can drive the localization of SDGs in meaningful and impactful ways.

However, the successful localization of SDGs through co-governance requires overcoming the challenges identified in these case studies.

Ensuring the scalability and sustainability of co-governance initiatives, addressing financial and structural barriers, and enhancing civic engagement are crucial steps towards fully realizing the potential of co-governance in advancing the SDGs at the local level.

Limitations

While the report offers valuable insights into how Co-Governance practices can contribute to the localization of the SDGs, several limitations must be acknowledged.

First, the case studies analyzed are not statistically representative of all European cities but were purposively selected for their relevance and richness. As such, the findings should not be generalized beyond the specific contexts investigated. The diversity of legal, cultural, and socio-political environments across cities implies that successful practices in one setting may not automatically be transferable to another. The replicability of Co-Governance models, therefore, remains highly context-dependent.

Second, although the interviews provide depth and qualitative richness, the analysis relies predominantly on self-reported information from local officials. This may introduce bias or emphasize aspirational narratives over critical assessments. Triangulation with citizen perspectives or independent evaluations was not conducted in this phase, and thus the social inclusiveness and actual impacts of the initiatives should be interpreted with caution.

Third, the evidence of causal links between Co-Governance mechanisms and SDG outcomes remains indicative rather than demonstrative. While many of the initiatives show promise in fostering participation, ownership, and policy innovation, the effectiveness and durability of such models over time require further longitudinal and comparative studies. In particular, little is known about how these practices evolve through political transitions, budgetary constraints, or in the face of systemic crises.

Finally, the analysis acknowledges that Co-Governance is not a panacea, nor a one-size-fits-all solution. In some contexts, it may reproduce existing inequalities, exclude marginalized voices, or suffer from participation fatigue. For these reasons, future research should focus not only on best practices but also on failures, frictions, and unintended consequences of Co-Governance processes. This would contribute to a more realistic, nuanced, and policy-relevant understanding of the conditions under which these models can truly support a just and inclusive transition.

8. CONCLUSIONS: FURTHER RESEARCH PATHWAYS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this report highlight the crucial role that innovative co-governance models could play in advancing urban sustainability and aligning local initiatives with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Co-governance refers to a collaborative approach where government entities, private sector actors, and local communities come together to jointly manage urban resources, make decisions, and address complex challenges. By fostering collaboration between the public sector, private sector, and civil society, co-governance frameworks have significantly improved urban management, optimizing resource utilization, enhancing responsiveness to community needs, and ultimately contributing to the overall well-being of urban populations.

To build on these achievements and address ongoing challenges, further research and policy development should focus on the following key areas:

CREATING AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

Policy recommendations should focus on creating an enabling environment that supports co-governance. This includes establishing legal frameworks that facilitate collaborative efforts, developing capacity-building programs for local authorities and communities, and promoting partnerships among multiple stakeholders. Legal frameworks are essential for defining the roles and responsibilities of different actors involved in co-governance, ensuring that collaboration is structured, transparent, and accountable. These frameworks should also provide mechanisms for conflict resolution, as differing interests among stakeholders can sometimes lead to disagreements. Capacity-building programs, meanwhile, are crucial for equipping local authorities, community leaders, and citizens with the skills and knowledge they need to engage effectively in co-governance. This could include training in areas such as consensus-building, project management, and the use of digital tools for participatory governance. Promoting multi-stakeholder partnerships is also key, as complex urban challenges often require the combined expertise and resources of government, private sector, academia, and civil society. By fostering a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility, these partnerships can drive innovation and ensure that urban development is both sustainable and inclusive.

DESIGNING SUSTAINABLE FINANCE AND INVESTMENTS

Another critical aspect of achieving sustainable places is the need for sustainable finance and investments to ensure the long-term success of co-governance projects. This goal demands innovative funding models that align with both environmental and social objectives. For instance, green bonds are specifically designed to raise capital for

projects with positive environmental benefits, such as renewable energy installations, energy efficiency upgrades, and green infrastructure developments. Social impact investments, on the other hand, aim to generate measurable social and environmental impact alongside financial returns, making them ideal for supporting initiatives that tackle urban challenges like affordable housing, public health, and social inclusion.

Instruments such as the Climate City Capital Hub, managed by NetZeroCities, focus especially on engaging private capital and addresses both climate mitigation and adaptation efforts, with a holistic approach for cities involved in both climate-neutral and climate adaptation missions. Such public-private-community partnerships (PPCPs) illustrate how diverse stakeholders - local governments, private companies, and community organizations - can pool their resources, expertise, and influence to achieve common goals, ensuring these initiatives are financially sustainable.

RECOGNIZING THE ROLE OF KNOWLEDGE INSTITUTIONS

Equally important is the role of knowledge institutions in stimulating and enabling civic engagement and active citizen participation. Co-governance can only succeed when citizens are involved in the decision-making process, particularly those from marginalized and vulnerable groups who are often most affected by urban policies but have the least say in their formulation. Active citizen involvement is crucial for fostering a sense of ownership, trust, and shared responsibility, all of which are essential for the long-term success of urban initiatives. Further research should focus on the capacity of knowledge institutions to develop effective strategies to boost meaningful and evidence-based participation, such as creating digital platforms for community input, launching educational campaigns to raise civic awareness and capacities on local co-governance, and ensuring transparency and accountability in decision-making and administrative implementation processes. Digital capacity - building platforms, for example, can provide an accessible and user-friendly means for residents to voice their opinions, report issues, and contribute to urban planning discussions and direct participation in the zoning game. These platforms can also facilitate direct communication between citizens and local authorities, enabling more responsive governance. Educational campaigns can help to demystify governance processes, empowering residents with the knowledge they need to participate meaningfully in decision-making and implementation. Additionally, institutional mechanisms to ensure transparency and technical empowerment, such as city science offices, open data portals, participatory budgeting and capacity - building processes, can build trust by demonstrating that citizens' voices are being heard, and their capacities being enabled to directly engage in the institutional, economic and democratic life of the city. Encouraging citizens to take part in governance helps create a sense of ownership and shared responsibility, which is vital for the success and effectiveness of urban sustainability initiatives.

SUPPORTING LEARNING FROM EXAMPLES

Moreover, examining successful co-governance models across different European cities can provide valuable insights into best practices and scalable solutions. A comparative analysis of the case studies provided can help identify the key factors that contribute to the success of co-governance initiatives, offering guidelines for their replication in diverse urban contexts. For example, cities such as Amsterdam, Barcelona, and Copenhagen have implemented innovative co-governance models that emphasize citizen participation, sustainable urban planning, and multi-stakeholder collaboration. By studying these examples, we can gain a deeper understanding of the specific policies, institutional arrangements, and community engagement strategies that have proven effective in different settings. This knowledge can be used to develop tailored approaches that are sensitive to the unique social, economic, and cultural characteristics of other cities, ensuring that co-governance initiatives are both effective and inclusive. Learning from these examples can provide a roadmap for other cities aiming to implement similar models, helping them avoid common pitfalls and build on proven successes.

FOSTERING THE INTEGRATION OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES

The integration of emerging technologies, particularly artificial intelligence (AI), seems to hold broad potential for transforming urban governance. AI has the capability to process large amounts of data, identify patterns, and support decision-making in ways that were previously unattainable. AI could enhance decision-making processes by providing predictive analytics for infrastructure maintenance, enabling smarter resource allocation, and offering real-time monitoring of environmental indicators. For example, predictive analytics can be used to forecast when infrastructure (such as roads, bridges, or water systems) may require maintenance, thereby enabling proactive interventions and reducing costs associated with emergency repairs.

Similarly, AI-driven smart resource allocation can optimize the distribution of public services (ex: energy, water, and waste management) based on real-time demand patterns, reducing waste and ensuring that resources are directed where they are needed most. Future research should explore these applications to better understand how AI can be leveraged to improve urban management, enhance service delivery, and ensure more efficient use of resources. Additionally, AI can play a role in disaster risk reduction by predicting and mitigating the impacts of natural disasters, which is crucial for the resilience of urban areas in the face of climate change. However, it is important to clarify that this study does not offer empirical evidence regarding the integration of Artificial Intelligence into co-governance practices. While the potential of AI to support urban governance is widely discussed in the literature, any reference to such technologies within this report should be interpreted strictly as a prospective avenue for future research, rather than as a validated outcome of the present analysis. Given that co-governance is inherently a political, deliberative, and participatory process, the use of AI and data-driven

systems raises critical questions about inclusiveness, transparency, and the reproduction of power asymmetries. Future investigations should not only explore the operational potential of AI within co-governance settings, but also critically examine its normative implications – namely, whether algorithmic decision-making might entrench existing inequalities, obscure deliberative processes, or challenge institutional transparency and civic oversight.

To ensure that co-governance can serve as a meaningful lever for sustainable urban transformation, future research and policies should focus not only on scaling up promising practices, but also on critically assessing the conditions under which these models are viable.

Co-governance holds the promise of creating cities that are not only more sustainable but also more equitable and resilient, where all residents have a voice in shaping the future of their urban environment. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that co-governance models are not universally replicable: their successful implementation depends on specific socio-political, legal, and institutional conditions. Understanding the enabling environment – such as administrative capacity, civic infrastructure, political culture, and trust in public institutions – is key to identifying where and how these models can function effectively. Therefore, co-governance practices could become one of the key instruments to localize the SDGs more effectively, promoting inclusive sustainable development. The path forward requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders to work together, innovate, and remain committed to the principles of inclusivity, sustainability, and shared governance.

By examining theoretical foundations, policy frameworks, and empirical cases, this report aims to provide evidence-based insights for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers seeking to strengthen both the effectiveness and legitimacy of SDG localization. In an era where sustainability and democracy appear increasingly in tension, identifying governance innovations that strengthen both becomes essential for achieving the 2030 Agenda while preserving European social cohesion.

The focus of this research aligns with several key EU policy frameworks that the JRC actively supports: the Territorial Agenda 2030's call for place-based governance, the European Green Deal's requirement for citizen ownership of transitions, and Cohesion Policy's partnership principle. By examining how co-governance mechanisms can enhance citizen ownership and sustained engagement with SDGs, this report provides evidence-based insights that can inform EU territorial policies. The findings can be particularly relevant to strengthening the social dimension of the sustainability transition. Understanding when and how co-governance models succeed, or fail, appears crucial for designing EU programs that effectively support local authorities and communities in achieving the SDGs.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND DEFINITIONS

AGENDA 2030	The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
AI	Artificial Intelligence
ART Initiative	UNDP Initiative on Territorial Partnerships for Implementing the SDGs at the Local Level
CEDU	Cluj Cluster Education
CLLD	Community-Led Local Development
CPRs	Common-Pool Resources
CS	Citizen Science
CSO	City Science Office
EGD	European Green Deal
EIB	European Investment Bank
EU	European Union
JRC	Joint Research Centre
LRGs	Local and Regional Governments
LNOB	Leave No One Behind
NBS	Nature-Based Solutions
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PPCPs	Public-Private-Community Partnerships
PPPs	Public-Private Partnerships
4Ps	Public-Private-People Partnerships
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UAEU	Urban Agenda for the European Union
UCLG	United Cities and Local Governments

UNDP United Nations Development Programme

USDIPs Urban Sustainable Development Partnerships

VLRs Voluntary Local Reviews

VNRs Voluntary National Reviews

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ANNEX 1. QUESTIONNAIRE FOR CITIES

1. CONNECTION WITH SDGs AND SUSTAINABILITY FRAMEWORKS

(a) RELEVANT METRICS FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Which specific sustainability metric (if any), such as the Agenda 2030 and the related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the objectives identified by the EU Green Deal and its implementing legislation, or others metrics nationally or internationally developed, are most relevant for your city's sustainability and climate objectives? Why have these specific metrics been chosen, and how do they guide the city's sustainability initiatives and policies?

(b) LEGAL TOOLS FOR SDGS LOCALIZATION

Are there strategies for localizing SDGs in your city (if any) based on soft law (voluntary guidelines) or hard law (binding regulations)? How effective have these legal tools been in advancing the city's sustainability goals and, more generally, the SDGs, and/or other sustainability-related goals, such as those deriving from the EU Green Deal and its implementing legislation? Additionally, to what extent do the SDGs feel binding or obligatory for the city in its sustainability efforts?

(c) CO-GOVERNANCE APPLIED TO SUSTAINABILITY

Has the experience of co-governance been applied by the city to pursue sustainability goals in general, and SDGs in particular? Through which means (legal, actions, participation), and with which results? Could you identify any impact (in involving communities, in implementing concrete actions, ...), that could not have been achieved without the co-governance experience/model?

2. ON CO-GOVERNANCE

(a) IMPLEMENTATION OF CO-GOVERNANCE

Where and how is co-governance implemented in your city? Can you provide specific examples of how co-governance has been implemented, and describe the actors involved and their role (innovators/inhabitants/vulnerable communities/groups/individuals, civil society, private sector, governmental institutions, knowledge institutions, other specific players)? Who is left out?

(b) DEGREE, INTENSITY, DURABILITY, LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY OF CO-GOVERNANCE

To what extent has co-governance been achieved in your city and how intense is innovators/inhabitants' role at different levels? What is the time horizon for the activities designed through co-governance, and how sustainable are they in the long term? In this regard, what are, or were, the most important roadblocks and how are you trying to solve them?

(c) CO-GOVERNANCE IN MULTILEVEL GOVERNANCE

How does the co-governance approach of your city connect with **other regional, national and global levels of governance, or processes**? Does it play a role in connections with other cities (ex: multi-cities partnerships)?

(d) IMPACT OF CO-GOVERNANCE

How does the application of co-governance impact the **effective engagement** of citizens and the **delivery of actions, activities and projects in the local context**? Specifically, how does it contribute to creating initiatives that are durable, fruitful, evolving, and self-sustaining over time and how can we **measure this impact**?

(e) LEGAL TOOLS FOR CO-GOVERNANCE

Are the strategies for citizens engagement in general, and co-governance in particular, based on **soft law (voluntary guidelines) or hard law (binding regulations)**? How effective have these legal tools been in advancing the citizens' engagement and overall achievement of the Municipality's objectives? Specifically, how is co-governance operationalized and integrated into municipal regulations?

(f) ROLE OF EXAMPLES OF PROJECTS AND INITIATIVES IMPLEMENTING CO-GOVERNANCE AS A POSSIBLE STRATEGY OF SDGs LOCALIZATION

How is co-governance utilized in Barcelona's approach to localizing the SDGs, and can you provide specific examples of its implementation through specific projects such as Can Battlo concession agreement, Coopolis, La Borda, ore more at the policy level the Patrimoni Ciudadani and the Community Balance, and the following developments?

Getting in touch with the EU

In person

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Online

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