

# The Nordic View on Sustainability

## Learnings from the Local Level

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Nordic Voluntary  
Subnational Review 2024



**THE GLOBAL GOALS**  
For Sustainable Development

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## Abbreviations

HLPF	High-Level Political Forum
KPI	Key performance indicators
LRG	Local and regional governments
LRGA	Local and regional government association
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SDR	Sustainable Development Report
VLR	Voluntary Local Review
VNR	Voluntary National Review
VSR	Voluntary Subnational Review

# Opening statement

This Nordic Voluntary Subnational Review (VSR) is the first cross-national report of its kind in the world. It has been developed as a joint venture by the Nordic Associations of Local and Regional Governments and the Nordic research institution, Nordregio, with funding from the Nordic Council of Ministers. The aim of the report is to highlight how the Nordic municipalities and regional authorities have localised the SDGs, progress made, as well as obstacles they have met in their work towards the 2030 Agenda. Furthermore, we aim to inspire more local-level SDG action worldwide by sharing what Nordic local authorities have learned on their way to create more inclusive and sustainable communities, and possibly foster new collaborations across borders.

The implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals is a shared responsibility which requires mobilisation of local and regional authorities, civil society, businesses, and other local stakeholders – together with national authorities and through international cooperation. In this review, we include subchapters by youth and civil society organisations. These are valuable contributions, underlining the importance of including a broad range of actors and dedicated societal voices – and how to ensure meaningful cooperation.

We are soon entering the last five years of the 2030 Agenda implementation period. The need for further action is imminent. About two thirds of the 169 SDG targets can only be achieved through local and regional engagement. We cannot succeed in creating a sustainable future without localising the SDGs. This review shows that Nordic local and regional authorities actively contribute to the SDGs by integrating them in key strategies and budgeting, and by taking part in coordination mechanisms and collaborations to facilitate their delivery. Despite these efforts, there are still significant obstacles to overcome in implementing the SDGs and reaching the global ambitions of the 2030 Agenda.

The work on the 2030 Agenda requires resilience and long-term thinking. The Nordic Voluntary Subnational Review highlights signals of SDG fatigue in our region. This is a worrying trend, which resonates with similar messages from our European and global colleagues. It emphasises the need for accurate knowledge on where we are on the path to sustainability – followed by implementation of new measures based on that knowledge. This is vital to accelerate progress in time for the year 2030, and to start planning for the time beyond. **Our hope is that this report will be an inspiration and encouragement for more cooperation and action towards sustainability, not only in the Nordic countries but in the global community as a whole.**



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PHOTOS: UNSPLASH AND S.SIGBJØRNSEN / NORDEN.ORG

## Nordic VSR results at a glance

The Nordic VSR is based on a survey sent to Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish municipalities in 2023, together with a similar national survey sent to Danish municipalities. The survey data was complemented by interviews with representatives from the Nordic Local and Regional Government Associations (LRGAs) regarding the strengths and weaknesses of national support to the local level, as well as the role of LRGAs in building competence and promoting municipal cooperation. The Nordic VSR also includes 'subchapters' by other key stakeholders: The Nordic Youth Network for Sustainable Development and the Nordic Civil Society Network. Below are the highlights from all these sources – the surveys, the interviews, and the subchapters.

### Highlights from the surveys to Nordic municipalities:

- **A large majority of responding municipalities in the Nordic countries (from 98% in Norway to around 64% in Finland and Iceland) are working towards localising the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.** There are differences in implementation approaches: while approximately 10% of municipalities in the Nordic survey identify as pioneers, between 36% (Iceland and Finland) and 2% (Norway) are not working actively with the SDGs at all.
- **A majority of responding municipalities that have integrated the 2030 Agenda and SDGs have done so in a holistic manner,** focusing on all sustainability dimensions, from the economic to the social and environmental.
- **A number of responding municipalities have also integrated the 2030 Agenda into several aspects of governance and administration,** for instance embedding SDGs into core documents such as the local strategy and vision (from 93% in Finland to 35% in Iceland), local planning systems (from 86% in Norway to 34% in Finland), local budgets (from 79% in Sweden to 16% in Iceland) and procurement guidelines (from 45% in Finland to 23% in Iceland).
- **While all SDGs are acknowledged as important, some municipalities prioritise individual SDGs in their work,** with SDG 3 (Good health and well-being), SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities) and SDG 13 (Climate action) among the most important for local authorities.

- A number of key success factors were mentioned concerning local implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including incorporation of the 2030 Agenda into municipal management processes ('anchoring'), capacity to work with the global goals, political prioritisation of this work, and translating the global goals to the local context.
- Lack of resource capacity, including designated personnel for coordinating SDG implementation, can be an obstacle to a municipality's ability to integrate sustainability initiatives into local governance frameworks (from 77% of municipalities in Finland to 71% in Sweden mentioned this as a serious or very serious obstacle). Additional obstacles to local work with the 2030 Agenda include lack of state support and political prioritisation, as well as lack of access to methods and tools.
- Other exogenous factors, such as financial constraints caused by rising inflation and high energy prices, may lead to de-prioritisation of the 2030 Agenda, as immediate financial challenges demand attention and resources. From 68% of responding municipalities in Norway to 38% in Iceland view this as a considerable to high risk.
- When it comes to partnerships to reach the global goals, Nordic municipalities' primary collaboration partners are other municipalities or regional/county councils. Finland and Iceland also put universities/research institutes and private businesses on their top lists, while Norway and Sweden chose civil society actors. In Denmark, businesses and civil society organisations are the most common collaboration partners – and only 7% of municipalities say they don't work in partnerships to achieve the SDGs.
- There is significant variation in how Nordic municipalities measure their progress towards the SDGs. While approximately 68% of municipalities in both Finland and Sweden report that they measure progress, this figure is considerably lower in the other Nordic countries: 45% in Norway, 38% in Denmark and just 18% in Iceland.

## Highlights from the interviews about policies and enabling environment

### Nordic SDG governance success factors:

- Strong local self-governance model: autonomy and broad service delivery.
- High degree of trust and open dialogue between local and national authorities.
- LRGAs take a proactive role in facilitating SDG capacity-building and advocating for local needs.
- Municipalities were early adopters of sustainability goals and climate targets. An increasing focus on climate neutrality benefits SDG work provided that local climate action plans are based on SDGs and take a holistic approach.
- Collaborative culture and tradition of volunteer work: thriving Civil Society Organisation (CSO) sector and legal requirement to have youth councils in several countries; Prevalent Public-Private Partnerships; integration of SDGs and innovation in procurement guidelines.
- 'Copying with pride': Frontrunner municipalities like to compare measures and collaborate.

- Development and use of local SDG **indicators** and reliable data collection in some countries.
- Important role played by **VSRs** in facilitating reporting, action and dialogue with the national level.
- Participation in international organisations is viewed as important for enhancing local sustainability efforts. This global and '**glocal'** (global and local) **cooperation** offers substantial benefits to municipalities and regions, contributing to policy discussions and global best practice learnings.

#### **Nordic SDG governance challenges:**

- Decline in use of SDGs as a holistic framework. **Signs of SDG fatigue** at different levels of governance.
- Weaker government support to the 2030 Agenda in some countries. Shift in **political prioritisation** has led to budget reductions and discontinued measures/programs.
- Lack of **faith among youth** regarding politicians' ability to solve societal problems.
- Rising economic **inequalities** can threaten social cohesion.
- Lack of human resources, **capacity** and indicators hinders many municipalities.
- Effectively achieving the 2030 Agenda and advancing sustainability requires a **long-term approach**, which can be hindered by recurring political shifts. To mitigate these challenges, the 2030 Agenda should be viewed *less* as a political agenda, and more as a beneficial tool for local development.

The principle of leaving no one behind, as well as engaging local stakeholders – including youth and Civil Society Organisations – is fundamental to developing sustainable communities. This resonates strongly with Nordic municipalities, but there are important aspects for local policymakers to consider in order to avoid youth washing and foster fruitful collaboration. **Below is a call to action from the *Nordic Youth Network for Sustainable Development* to local policymakers:**

- Implement principles for meaningful participation in all youth inclusion measures.
- Establish local youth councils and youth groups in collaboration with local schools.
- Utilise social media and digital platforms to reach youth beyond youth council members.
- Focus on *all* SDGs in educational programmes and school curricula, not just on climate issues.

#### **Last but not least, Nordic Civ's key messages for involving civil society as partners in SDG efforts:**

- A framework and structure, including clear aims and objectives, need to be in place to enable meaningful collaboration.
- Municipalities should develop cooperation forms in close dialogue with civil society.
- To ensure that civil society's expertise and resources are utilised effectively, the collaboration needs to be anchored with and welcomed by local decision-makers.
- Civil society includes a variety of organisations with different perspectives, preconditions, and competencies. Municipalities that want to embrace this diversity of collaboration partners need to allocate enough funds towards this end.



PHOTOS: PHOTOPOP AND ISTOCK

## 1. Introduction

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**It is estimated that at least 65% of the 169 SDG targets will not be reached without proper engagement of local and regional governments.**

– OECD, 2020

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Development happens locally. It can be experienced as increased quality of life for people and planet, as measured by – among other things – access to better education, sanitation, green transportation and affordable cultural experiences, as well as cleaner air and water. Hence, it is widely recognised that at least 105 of the 169 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets cannot be achieved without engaging local and regional governments. As the examples in this report will show, the 17 SDGs are also a useful ‘tool’ for local actors to identify their main sustainability challenges and measure progress in a more holistic way, bringing on board their citizens, businesses and civil society in the process.

The decentralised Nordic welfare states, characterised by the substantial autonomy and decision-making capabilities vested in municipalities and regions, have long served as a global benchmark for systematically addressing sustainability challenges. This is reflected by the fact that all the Nordic countries are regularly among the highest rated countries in the Sustainable Development Report (SDR) rankings, with Finland, Denmark and Sweden consistently in the top three (Figure 1).

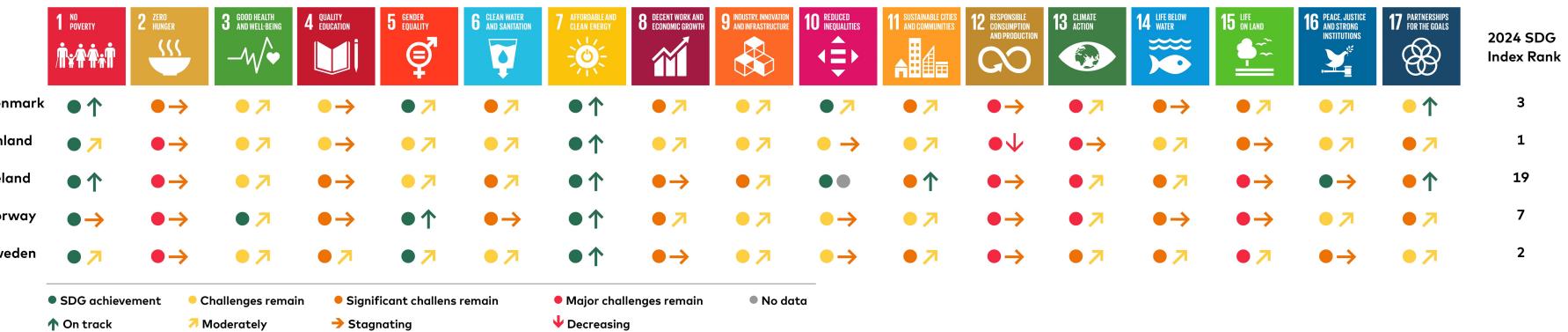
**Figure 1: Nordic Countries SDG Index Ranking, from 2018-2024**

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
<b>Denmark</b>	2	1	2	3	2	3	3
<b>Finland</b>	3	3	3	1	1	1	1
<b>Iceland</b>	10	14	26	29	22	29	19
<b>Norway</b>	6	8	6	7	4	7	7
<b>Sweden</b>	1	2	1	2	3	2	2

**Source:** Sustainable Development Reports (SDG Transformation Center, 2024). From 2018 to 2024.

While the Nordic countries show positive performances across various SDG indicators, there are also signs of stagnating progress in some areas. The Nordic economies excel in socioeconomic goals such as SDG 1 (no poverty) and SDG 7 (affordable and clean energy) and have performed relatively well in areas such as SDG 3 (good health and well-being), SDG 4 (quality education), SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions). However, according to the 2023 SDG Dashboard (Figure 2), the Nordic countries have 'red' marks against several SDGs, particularly those related to responsible consumption and production, climate action, and biodiversity. In addition, the Nordic countries face obstacles in achieving SDG 2 (zero hunger) due to unsustainable diets and obesity. In short, several major challenges remain on the Nordic countries' path to achieving the SDGs by 2030 (Sachs et al., 2024).

Figure 2: Nordic countries' 2024 SDG Index Ranking



Source: Data from 2024 SDG Index of the SDR2024.

In light of the dashboard results, several questions arise regarding the Nordic countries' progress in localising the SDGs: How extensively have municipalities engaged with the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs? Have they integrated the 2030 Agenda into their governance systems? Which SDGs have been prioritised? How do municipalities perceive different factors as barriers or facilitators to their local 2030 Agenda initiatives – and how have these been affected by global economic trends such as inflation and high energy prices? Finally, what lessons can others learn from the Nordic experience in localising the 2030 Agenda?

To address these questions, local and regional government associations (LRGAs) in the Nordic countries, together with Nordregio, decided to produce this first ever Nordic Voluntary Subnational Review (VSR). The aim is to inspire local-level SDG action worldwide by sharing what Nordic local authorities have learned from using the SDGs as a holistic framework for creating more inclusive, sustainable communities. What are the main benefits and challenges? And how best to ensure political engagement and involve local stakeholders in the process?

The Nordic VSR builds primarily on a survey sent out to all Nordic municipalities in 2023 (except for the Danish municipalities, which received a fairly similar National survey that will also be referred to – the [Danish survey](#)). Besides the survey, content is based on interviews with LPGA representatives, focusing on strengths and weaknesses in national support to the local level, including the role played by LRGAs in building competence and fostering collaboration between municipalities. An important complement to the Nordic VSR is the [Nordic Toolbox](#): an interactive, online map of Nordic municipalities showcasing transferable methods and initiatives for implementing the SDGs.

Another special feature of the Nordic VSR is a subchapter on youth engagement (section 5.3), drafted by the *Nordic Youth Network for Sustainable Development*. This provides concrete advice on how to involve youth in local decision-making in a systematic, inclusive way, thereby creating sustainable solutions for more youth-friendly communities. Additionally, the *Nordic Civil Society Network* (section 5.4) have provided local insights on how to collaborate with civil society and mobilise citizens to become part of the sustainability transition.

The main target groups for this report are municipalities, regions and national governments across the globe that are curious to compare their own approaches with the proactive Nordic municipalities. The Nordic VSR was funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers, while the Nordic local government associations generously dedicated time and insights to the editorial work and supported the report's launch at the UN High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development in July 2024.

## 1.1. Structure of the report

Following this introduction, [Chapter 2](#) explains the methodology, process and milestones in the production of the VSR. Next, [Chapter 3](#) on policies and enabling environment for localising the SDGs highlights the shared characteristics shaping each country's approach to the SDGs – national-level support to municipalities and LRGAs is explored, as well as the role of LRGAs in implementing SDGs at the local level. [Chapter 4](#) on local government efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda shifts the spotlight to the Nordic municipalities, exploring their different approaches the SDGs they prioritise and the success factors/obstacles encountered. [Chapter 5](#) on actions to create local ownership emphasises the benefits of inclusive practices and partnerships with local businesses, youth, and civil society. [Chapter 6](#) on progress made emphasises the strides made when it comes to measuring progress, particularly in terms of monitoring methods and the wide array of indicators utilised for measurement. Last but not least, [Chapter 7](#) provides a series of learnings for national, regional and local governments to consider.



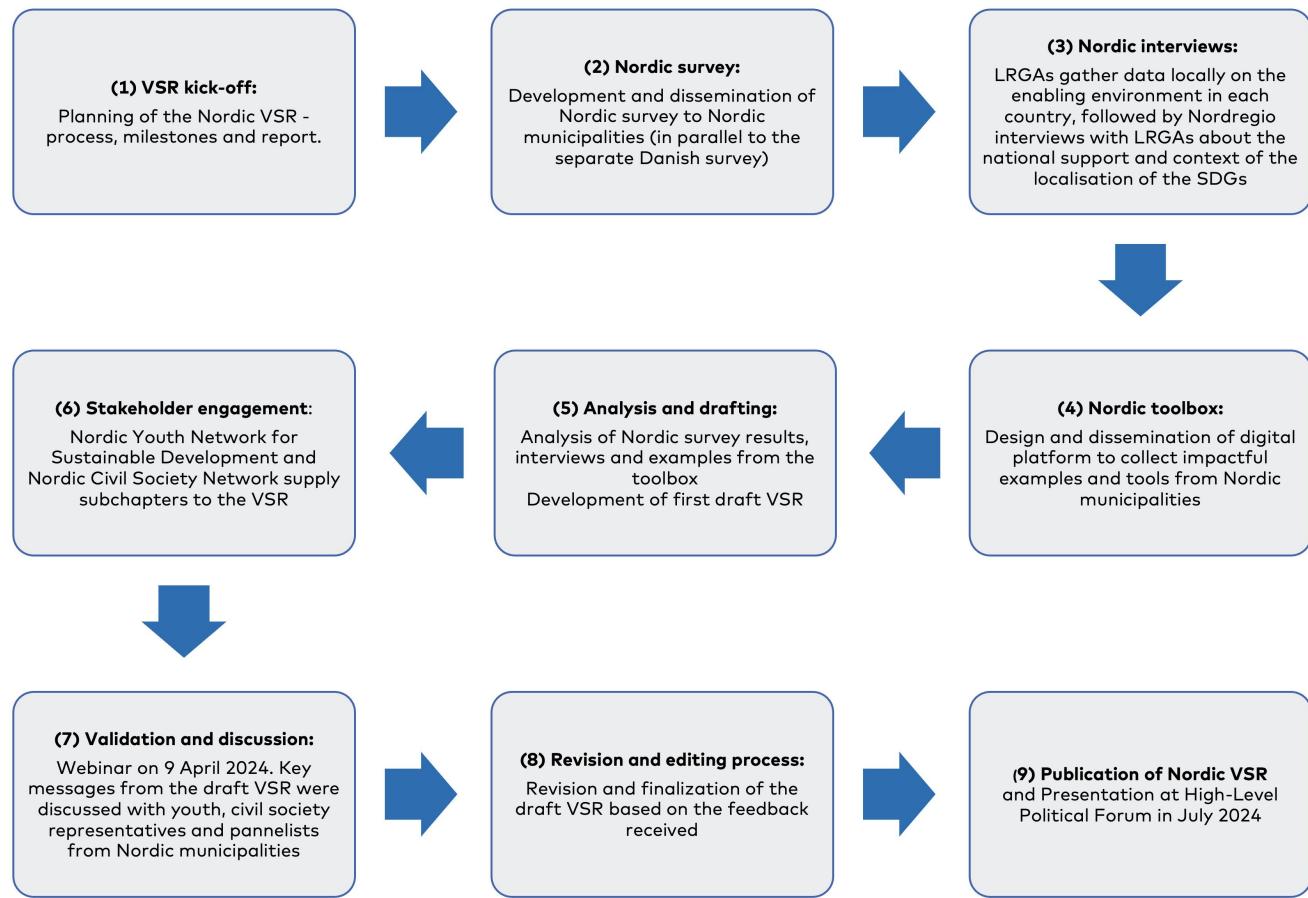
PHOTOS: VIGGO LUNDBERG AND UNSPLASH



## 2. Developing a Nordic VSR: process and milestones

Preparation of the Nordic VSR started with a number of digital meetings during spring 2023 followed by a formal kick-off meeting in August 2023 (see step 1 in Figure 3). An editorial group was formed, consisting of representatives from the LRGAs of Finland (*Kuntaliitto*), Iceland (*Samband*), Norway (*KS*) and Sweden (*SALAR*), as well as researchers from Nordregio. A representative of the Danish Association *KL* joined the editorial team at a slightly later stage in the process. The Åland islands, the Faroe Islands and Greenland were also invited but, due to limited resources, only Åland decided to follow the editorial process. Between the formal kick-off meeting in August 2023 and the publication of the Nordic VSR in mid-2024, the editorial group met every second week to discuss the ongoing work while at the same time individually gathering information. Figure 3 provides an overview of the key steps taken to develop the Nordic VSR.

**Figure 3: How the Nordic VSR was developed**



The Nordic VSR is based on three main sources of information:

1. Nordic surveys on the localisation of the SDGs (see step 2 in Figure 3 and Appendix 1 and 2)
2. Interviews with LRGA representatives in the five Nordic countries and Åland (step 3); and
3. The [Nordic Toolbox](#) (step 4).

#### Nordic surveys on the localisation of the SDGs:

The editorial team jointly developed a questionnaire addressed to local authorities in Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, asking about – among other things – the status of 2030 Agenda-related work, integration into steering documents, and key challenges and success factors. The LRGAs in the four participating countries then invited their member municipalities to answer the survey in their respective national languages. In some countries, regional authorities were also invited to participate. The response period differed across the countries in order to accommodate the local contexts (e.g. election periods). Moreover, the response period was extended in some countries to increase the number of responses. In other words, although based on a common questionnaire, the survey was conducted separately in each Nordic country. Figure 4 provides an overview of the survey dates, as well as the number and rate of responses. In Denmark, KL conducts an annual survey<sup>[1]</sup> on local implementation of the 2030 Agenda. As such, KL did not participate in the Nordic survey, instead supplying the results from its own survey.<sup>[2]</sup>

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1. Note that 2022 represents an exception, as no survey was conducted in Denmark in that year.  
 2. The survey and its results can be viewed [here](#).

**Figure 4: The Nordic survey and Danish survey: Response period and respondents per country**

		Response period	Number of respondents	Response rate (% of all municipalities)
<b>Danish survey</b>	<b>Denmark</b>	5 July–29 September 2023	81 municipalities	83%
<b>Nordic survey</b>	<b>Finland</b>	6 June–15 August 2023 (extended 31 August – 17 September 2023)	83 municipalities	27%
	<b>Iceland</b>	15 March–10 April 2023	61 municipalities	95%
	<b>Norway</b>	6–20 December 2023	98 municipalities	28%
	<b>Sweden</b>	21 August–29 September 2023	226 municipalities	78%

#### **Interviews with LRGA representatives in the five Nordic countries and Åland:**

In addition to the survey, Nordregio conducted structured interviews with representatives from the Nordic LRGAs. This required extensive internal preparation efforts by the LRGAs to gather and analyse information on their respective enabling environments. The aim was to understand the national policies and institutional context impacting localisation of the SDGs in each country, as well as key success factors and challenges. Topics included national-level support for SDG localisation (financing and coordination mechanisms), the role of LRGAs in providing peer learning and capacity-building, and how best to advocate for localisation. The interviews were held in January 2024.

#### **Nordic Toolbox**

The Nordic VSR includes numerous examples and tools that have been used by the Nordic municipalities in their 2030 Agenda-related work. These good practices were collected via a digital platform. Initially, Nordic LRGAs added local examples to the platform while encouraging local and regional governments (LRGs) to contribute directly to the platform with their own best practices. In addition, Nordregio invited LRGs who had previously participated in 2030 Agenda projects and webinars to share their best tools and methods. Finally, the platform was promoted during the Nordic VSR webinar in April 2024 (step 7), at *Baerekraft Fredag* (a series of peer learning webinars for Norwegian municipalities about their SDG work, organised by KS), and at a Swedish 2030 Agenda webinar for

municipalities in April 2024.

The toolbox examples were reviewed to ensure coherence, taking into account thematic relevance and the potential for replication or adaptation by other municipalities (both in the Nordic Region and across the world). In addition, emphasis was placed on initiatives promoting diversity and stakeholder involvement. Geographical coverage was also a priority in terms of ensuring a balanced representation of different Nordic municipalities and countries.

The data and information from these three sources were analysed in step 5 of the VSR process, with key findings described in the first draft VSR.

Various stakeholder groups were involved in the VSR process. In particular, the editorial team made efforts to involve youth and civil society associations. Representatives of the *Nordic Youth Network for Sustainable Development* and the *Nordic Civil Society Network* were invited to supply subchapters to the Nordic VSR (step 6). These subchapters<sup>[3]</sup> provide concrete examples on how municipalities can involve youth/students in local decision-making and in creating sustainable solutions. They also discuss how civil society groups work to mobilise residents to live more sustainably and contribute to building more inclusive communities.

A broader group of stakeholders was invited to discuss the first draft of the VSR during a Zoom webinar<sup>[4]</sup> hosted by Nordregio on 9 April 2024 (step 7). The Nordic LRGAs invited their member municipalities, and Nordregio researchers invited partners and stakeholders via their network. In total, 260 participants registered to attend the webinar or watch it afterwards. During the webinar, the editorial team presented key findings from the Nordic VSR and put the draft conclusions and learnings up for discussion. Representatives from the Nordic Youth Network for Sustainable Development and the Nordic Civil Society Network, as well as representatives from five Nordic municipalities shared their views on the Nordic VSR in relation to their own SDG-related work and the benefits they had observed. The webinar audience was invited to participate via Zoom polls and the chat function. A number of questions posed in the chat were brought into the discussion by the webinar moderators.

Based on feedback obtained from the webinar participants and the Nordic LRGAs, the Nordic VSR was revised and finalised (step 8), then launched together with the [Nordic Toolbox](#) during the July 2024 UN HLPF on Sustainable Development (step 9).

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3. See the subchapters contained in Chapter 5 of this report.  
4. The recording of the webinar is available [here](#).



PHOTOS: UNSPLASH AND MASKOT / IMAGEBANKSWEDEN.SE

### 3. Policies and enabling environment for localising the SDGs

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One of the main benefits of working with SDGs is having a shared language across sectors. Even when the municipality's attention may vary, the business sector and civil society keep the SDGs high on their agenda, putting pressure on us. This can be helpful in times of political shifts.

– Kristiansand Municipality, Norway

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This chapter provides an overview of the context and institutional framework supporting local-level implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the Nordic countries. While recognising the significant role played by regions in some Nordic countries, this chapter focuses primarily on the local (municipal) level.

The chapter begins by exploring the Nordic model of self-governance, along with other key features, offering insights into the operational environments within the five countries. It then describes national support for implementation and localisation of the SDGs, before going on to examine the role of LRGAs. It concludes by analysing the governance-related success factors and challenges encountered in localisation of the SDGs. The insights in this chapter are primarily drawn from interviews with and written contributions from the Nordic LRGAs.<sup>[5]</sup>

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5. For more detailed information on data sources and methodological considerations, please refer to the Methodology section.

## **3.1. Enabling institutional environments for local and regional governments**

The Nordic countries – Iceland excepted – operate under a three-tier governance system, with the size of their respective municipalities and regions varying significantly in terms of both area and population (see Figure 6). Figure 6 illustrates the classification of Nordic urban and rural areas based on population density, proximity measures and land cover parameters. Apart for Denmark, the Nordic countries are for the most part sparsely populated, especially in the northern regions (shown in green). Iceland has a particularly sparse population, with only 11 out of 64 municipalities having more than 5,000 inhabitants (Government of Iceland, 2023).

### **3.1.1. The Nordic model: Welfare state with broad decentralised responsibilities**

The Nordic model, which emerged in the 1970s and defines key features of the region's social and economic frameworks, distinguishes the Nordic countries in the global context. More recently, the model has played a pivotal role in laying the groundwork for advancing the SDGs (Nordicsinfo, 2019a).

Central to the Nordic model is a robust welfare state supported by a comprehensive, decentralised public sector funded through taxation. This sector provides a wide range of welfare services, as well as a social safety net for citizens. The universal support offered to those who are sick, unemployed or elderly closely aligns with the SDGs aimed at poverty reduction, leaving no one behind, health, and well-being. Other key features of the model are high levels of income and gender equality, strong labour unions, widespread democratic engagement and extensive public participation (Nordicsinfo, 2019b), all rooted in a tradition of popular movements such as labour movements, temperance movement and free churches. The model also emphasises strong municipal and regional self-governance. Consequently, the foundational principles of the Nordic model resonate strongly with SDG objectives. Despite facing significant challenges in recent years, notably due to an ageing population impacting financial stability (Nordicsinfo, 2019b), the Nordic model continues to be an important facilitator in local-level implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

### **3.1.2. Strong local and regional governments form the cornerstones for SDG localisation**

Strong local self-governance in the Nordic countries including municipal autonomy and broad service delivery provides an effective basis for supporting local-level implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Municipal autonomy encompasses the authority to impose taxes on residents and formulate local policies across various sectors. Municipalities can therefore tailor their services to the needs and priorities of their communities, providing a higher degree of accountability in service provision than would be possible under a more centralised system (Eckerberg & Dahlgren, 2007). The role played by regions within the

Nordic countries varies significantly, reflecting different administrative structures, historical contexts and policy priorities (Figure 5).

In terms of financing, Nordic municipalities and regions have various sources of revenue, including taxes, user fees for specific public services, and government grants. Income tax is the main source of tax revenue, constituting on average 24.9% of residents' taxable income. The Nordic states implement a financial 'equalisation system' to address disparities between local authorities concerning tax revenues and costs associated with providing services. This system aims to ensure a more balanced distribution of resources across different regions and municipalities (ORF, 2021).

Regional and local authorities play a crucial role in advancing sustainable development. This role is explicitly mentioned in the legislative texts of several Nordic countries. In Finland, the first article in the 1995 Municipal Act delegates responsibility for sustainable development to municipalities (Ministry of Finance, Finland, 1995). Similarly, in Sweden, Article 2 of the Instrument of Government mandates that all public institutions at a national, regional and local level promote sustainable development (Riksdagen, 1974). In Norway, one of the aims of the Local Government Act (2018) is to help regional and local authorities become efficient, confidence-inspiring and sustainable (Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, 2021). The Building and Planning Act also aims at promoting sustainable development in the best interests of individuals, society and future generations (Ministry of the Environment, Norway, 2008).

## BOX 1: ASSOCIATIONS OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND REGIONS (LRGAS)

KL in Denmark, AFLRA in Finland, Samband in Iceland, KS in Norway, SALAR in Sweden and the Association of Municipalities of Åland function as member and employer organisations for their respective municipalities and, in some cases, regions. These organisations support local and regional authorities by providing knowledge, expertise, advice and peer learning, thus strengthening their ability to develop welfare services for citizens and implement the 2030 Agenda. The LRGAs act as a cooperation partner vis-à-vis the state on behalf of their members, using various platforms to advocate for local interests at the national level.

Figure 5: Key features of local and regional governance frameworks in the Nordic countries

	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
Area (km <sup>2</sup> )	42,924	303,892	103,000	304,226	407,340
Population density (people per km <sup>2</sup> ) <sup>[6]</sup>	137.05	18	3.66	15	26
Average territory size of municipalities (km <sup>2</sup> )	433	983	1419	854	1404
Levels of government	central (national) government, regional governments (regions) and local governments (municipalities)	central (national) government, regional governments (regions) and local governments (municipalities)	central (national) government and local governments (municipalities)	central (national) government, regional governments (regions) and local governments (municipalities)	central (national) government, regional governments (regions) and local governments (municipalities)
Number of municipalities and regions (2024)	98 municipalities, 5 regions	309 municipalities, 19 regions	64 municipalities	357 municipalities, 15 regions	290 municipalities, 21 regions
Municipality responsibilities	<p><b>Commonalities across the Nordic countries:</b> primary and lower-secondary education, kindergartens, care for the elderly and disabled, social services, public housing, management of local roads, planning authority, water supply, sanitation and sewage, local economic development, and cultural affairs. The extent and nature of these services can vary across the Nordic countries.</p> <p><b>Differences across the Nordic countries:</b> provision of upper-secondary education, rescue services and public transportation.</p>				
Regional government responsibilities	<p><b>Commonalities across the Nordic countries:</b> Regional development.</p> <p><b>Differences across the Nordic countries:</b> Responsibility for healthcare is divided between regions and municipalities in Denmark, Norway and Sweden with some degree of variation in the content and responsibilities (NHWStat, 2024). In Finland, healthcare, social welfare and rescue services are managed by well-being services counties since 2023 (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Finland, 2023). In Iceland, healthcare is primarily a state responsibility. Regions in Sweden have the authority to levy taxes, which is not the case in Denmark, Finland and Norway.</p>				

6. Globally, the average population density was 61 people per km<sup>2</sup> in 2022 (UN DESA, 2023).

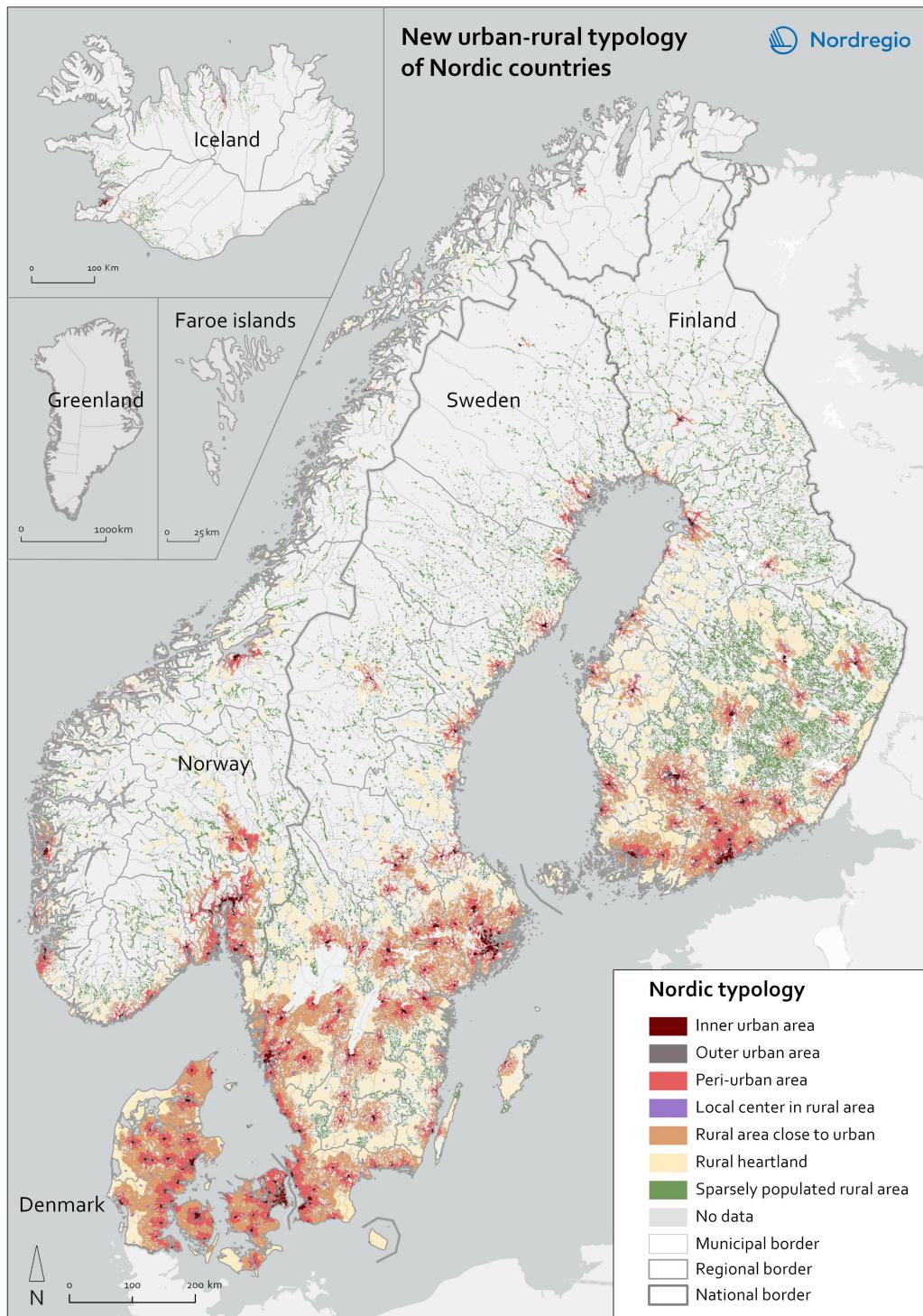
Local government expenditure as percent of GDP (2022)	30 <sup>[7]</sup>	22.1	14.1	20.4	23.4
Local Autonomy Index (2015-2020) [8]	75,59	85,73	76,21	69,18	76,19

**Source:** Eurostat, 2022; ORF, 2021; Sandberg, 2023; and input provided by LRGAs

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7. In Denmark, the local government expenditure is the highest in the EU

8. Self-rule index for local authorities in the EU, Council of Europe, and OECD countries. The values are aggregate indicators on a scale of 0–100. The higher the value, the greater the autonomy of the municipalities. Average for 57 countries is 57,16 (Sandberg, 2023).



**Figure 6: Nordic urban-rural typology based on the grid-level data**

**Source:** Nordregio, 2023. Read more about Nordic urban-rural typology [here](#).

### 3.2. National strategies for implementation and localisation of the SDGs

The Nordic countries have maintained an active involvement in sustainability, human rights and environmental issues for several decades. The explicit commitment to local action dates back to 1992 and the adoption of Local Agenda 21 at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (Eckerberg & Dahlgren, 2007). This adoption represented a milestone, setting the stage for sustainable development initiatives at the local level.

Finland, Denmark, Norway and Sweden have all either formulated or previously developed specific national action plans outlining concrete actions for achieving the global goals set out in the 2030 Agenda<sup>[9]</sup>. Iceland, meanwhile, has integrated SDG-related issues more broadly into its existing policy frameworks, and is currently in the process of developing a national strategy on sustainable development that aligns with the SDGs.

When it comes to localising the SDGs, Norway's 2021 Action Plan for the 2030 Agenda (Meld. St. 40 (2020–2021) emphasises the central role of regional and local authorities in implementing the global goals. Similarly, the Swedish government's proposition to parliament regarding implementation of 2030 Agenda (prop. 2019/20:188) underscores that nearly all the SDGs in the 2030 Agenda are linked to local and regional actions. Moreover, it emphasises that direct citizen engagement at these levels is the most effective way of achieving these goals. Accordingly, municipalities and regions are acknowledged as key to implementing the 2030 Agenda, bearing significant responsibility for executing sustainability initiatives(Agenda2030 samordnaren, n.d.). In Finland, the 2030 Agenda Roadmap (2022) places strong emphasis on the critical role of municipalities in contributing to biodiversity and carbon neutrality (Prime Minister's Office, Finland, 2022), while Denmark's National Action Plan for the 2030 Agenda (2021) underscores a strong commitment to broad engagement, including efforts at the local level (Regeringen, Denmark, 2021).

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9. The 2030 Agenda Roadmap in Finland (2022); National Action Plan for Agenda 2030 in Denmark (2021); '*Mål med mening*' ('Goals with Meaning') – an action plan to achieve SDGs in Norway (2021); Action Plan for Agenda 2030 for 2018–2020 in Sweden.

## BOX 2: THE 'FLOURISHING PEOPLE' VISION IN THE ÅLAND ISLANDS – PURSUED THROUGH THE BÄRKRAFT NETWORK

The Åland Islands exemplify the localisation of the SDGs through their tailored 'flourishing people' vision and Seven Strategic Development Goals for 2030, customised to their unique needs and context. These goals encompass well-being, trust and participation, water quality, biodiversity, attractiveness, reduced climate impact, and responsible consumption and production.

Åland's 16 municipalities are actively integrating the vision and goals. This integration is facilitated by the strong connection between municipalities and citizens and achieved through democratic representation and comprehensive municipal services. Municipal autonomy allows municipalities to tailor activities to local conditions: for instance, the city of Mariehamn has aligned its 'Vision 2040' with these goals. The goals are incorporated into municipalities' daily operations, enhancing residents' quality of life through education, social care and community involvement in decision-making, culture, sports and associations. This involvement builds trust and fosters participation. Environmental goals concerning water quality, biodiversity and sustainable practices are integrated into municipal planning, investments in infrastructure, and procurement processes.

The strategic development goals are pursued through the multi-stakeholder bärkraft.ax network, using specific mechanisms known as roadmaps. The bärkraft (sustainability) network coordinates sustainability efforts across Åland promoting a community-oriented approach to sustainable development through involving stakeholders from various sectors. The roadmaps serve as detailed guides outlining each goal's necessary steps, sub-targets, priority measures, timelines and strategies.

### IMPACTS:

Åland has published a status report on sustainable development every year since 2016, with the roadmap targets regularly measured to track progress. The bärkraft.ax network has also recently carried out an awareness and attitude survey linked to the sustainability agenda and the 'flourishing people' vision.

Åland's statistics bureau, ÅSUB, is currently collecting data about the 'flourishing people' vision based on a quantification method devised at Harvard University. This method encompasses six areas used to measure an individual's opportunities and the resources they need to flourish: 1) satisfaction with life; 2) mental and physical health; 3) meaningfulness; 4) character traits; 5) social relations; and 6) financial security.

### LINKS TO LEARN MORE:

[Development and sustainability agenda for Åland](#)

[The Seven Strategic Development Goals](#)

Åland's 'Everyone Can Flourish' vision is available as an audio version on the [bärkraft.ax website](#)

### **3.2.1. National-level support to municipalities and LRGAs**

Although there are obvious overlaps between the funding of the welfare system and the SDGs' implementation, none of the Nordic countries has specific state funding allocated to municipalities and LRGAs for implementing the 2030 Agenda. National support generally involves including LRGAs and municipalities in various national forums, along with coordination and consultation processes. These efforts are aimed at integrating local and regional perspectives, thereby aligning local and regional initiatives with national SDG efforts.

Through these various initiatives, the Nordic governments utilise a multi-level governance approach to fosters interaction among diverse stakeholders across different levels of governance. Its overarching aim is to enhance knowledge sharing, facilitate shared decision-making and facilitate more effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Other state-supported initiatives that facilitate SDG localisation include developing indicators to measure progress (see Chapter 6), establishing platforms for dialogue and best practice exchange, and enhancing knowledge through educational activities such as the development of learning materials (read more in Box 3).

Nordic LRGAs also receive state-level support for their international collaborations, particularly when it comes to facilitating their participation in the UN HLPF on Sustainable Development, highlighting the role played by global dialogue and exchange in achieving the SDGs.

## **BOX 3: EXAMPLES OF STATE-SUPPORTED INITIATIVES TO LOCALISE THE SDGS IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES**

### **CAPACITY BUILDING AND EDUCATION ABOUT THE 2030 AGENDA**

In Denmark, the government has launched a dedicated section on emu.dk, the country's educational portal, offering resources and inspiration for schools and educational institutions to integrate the SDGs into their curricula. This site offers a comprehensive introduction to the SDGs, addressing a variety of topics.

In Iceland, the national government facilitated development of a toolbox for municipalities designed to assist peer learning among local authorities regarding implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The 2021 initiative was conducted as a collaborative effort involving Samband, Statistics Iceland and municipality representatives.

In Sweden, the 'Glocal Sweden' initiative was instrumental in engaging some 200 municipalities and all the country's regions in networking and mutual learning, enhancing their understanding of the 2030 Agenda. The initiative, operational from 2018 to 2023, was implemented in collaboration with SALAR and the Swedish United Nations Association. The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) provided financial support, until a government decision to change the scope of Sida's funding led to a dismantling of Glocal Sweden. The state still has a supporting role in SDG localisation through the county boards, which have been tasked with supporting local action and collaboration on the 2030 Agenda, as well as reporting to the national government on local and regional progress. The impact of this support is not yet clear.

In Finland, ILMAVA – a tailored, partly state-funded training programme conducted in 2021 – targeted the top leadership of municipalities. The initiative was designed to play a supportive role in achieving municipal climate goals, with pilot training encompassed orientation sessions, municipality-specific work, peer-learning opportunities and expert mentoring.

## **COLLABORATIVE PLATFORMS FOR STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT**

In Sweden, three government agencies (Vinnova, the Swedish Energy Agency and Formas) are jointly funding Viable Cities, a national innovation programme that brings together approximately 140 member organisations from businesses, academia and research institutes, public sector and civil society. The initiative, which began in 2017 and is scheduled to continue until 2030, has a mission-based approach aiming to achieve 'climate neutral cities with a good life for all within planetary boundaries'. A key activity in Viable Cities is the Climate Neutral Cities 2030 initiative where 23 Swedish cities and their partners are spearheading efforts to become climate neutral by 2030 together with six government agencies. Governance innovation is at the core of the Viable Cities approach, and the programme has co-created a so-called Climate City Contract as a tool to accelerate the climate transition. In addition, Viable Cities is working closely with the EU Cities Mission and the implementation platform NetZeroCities, supporting the acceleration of climate transition in 112 cities across Europe, among which seven are Swedish.

In Finland, the Ministry of the Environment-coordinated Sustainable City Programme (2019–2023) which accelerated sustainable urban development by fostering collaboration among ministries, municipalities and stakeholders. Roughly 80 municipalities and 50 organisations participated in tackling common urban sustainability challenges; fostering new solutions through pilots and projects; sustainable budgeting; replicating best practices; and sharing insights globally. Several initiatives, including the KEKANUA municipal indicator development, will continue to receive support from the Ministry of the Environment, in collaboration with research institutes.

## **NETWORKS**

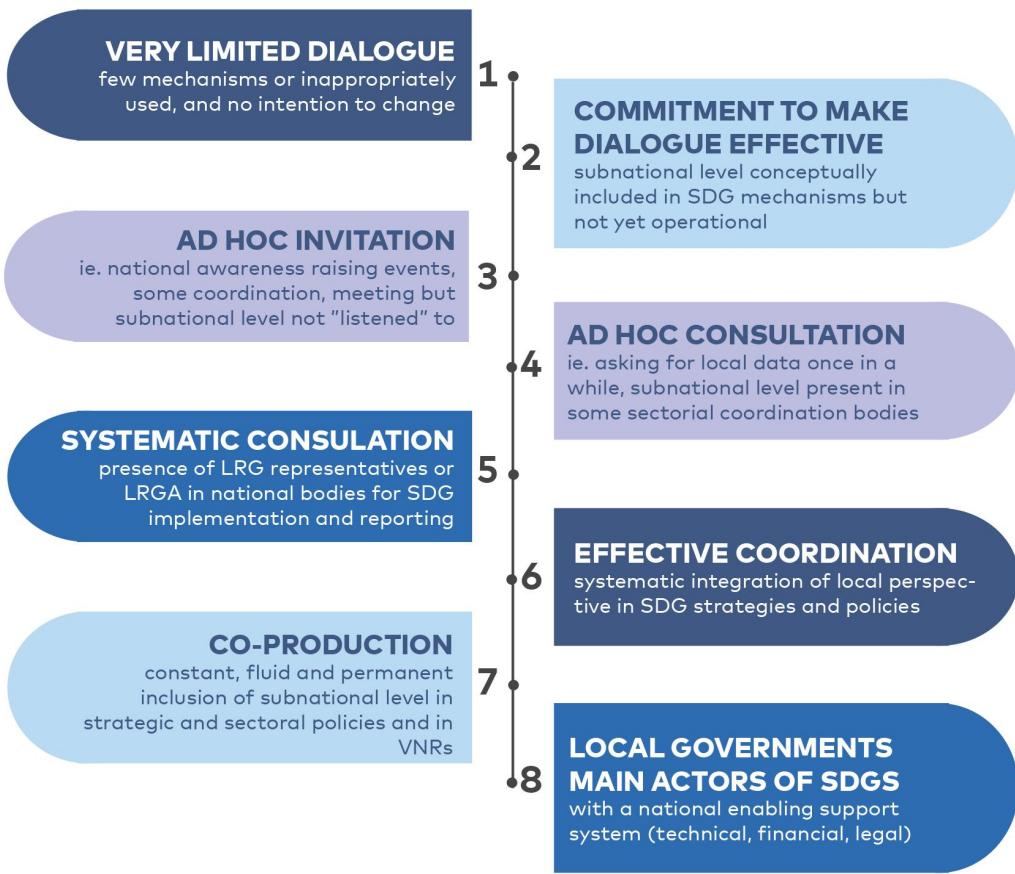
The Hinku network in Finland, established in 2008, unites nearly 100 municipalities that have committed to an 80% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030. Coordinated by the state-owned Finnish Environment Institute (SYKE), the network promotes peer learning and provides a range of services, including emission calculation support.

### **FUNDING FOR LOCAL SUSTAINABILITY INITIATIVES**

While there is no direct funding specifically allocated for local-level implementation of the 2030 Agenda, national governments do provide grants or financial incentives for sustainability-related initiatives in areas such as gender equality, energy, district heating and climate change. Municipalities in Åland, for instance, can apply for funding from the provincial government for activities aimed at promoting collaboration among municipalities and boosting sustainability efforts. Additionally, the government has appointed 'Bärkraftlotsar', or sustainability pilots, who offer guidance to a wide range of local actors, including businesses and municipal bodies.

### **3.2.2. National coordination mechanisms**

According to a self-assessment by the Nordic LRGAs in April 2024, the extent of *national-subnational dialogue* about implementation and monitoring of the 2030 Agenda varies widely across the region. This assessment is reflective of the current situation and acknowledges that conditions are subject to change. In Sweden, dialogue tends to occur through *ad hoc consultation*, indicating a more sporadic and less structured approach focused on some but not all the SDGs at any given time. Finland and Norway have adopted *systematic consultation*, demonstrating a more consistent, formalised process whereby LRGAs are present in national bodies for SDG monitoring. Iceland, meanwhile, has adopted a *co-production approach*, which entails the continuous, fluid and permanent inclusion of the subnational level in strategic and sectoral policies, as well as in Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). Placing Denmark in the ranking shown in Figure 7 poses a challenge due to the country's specific context. Municipalities have largely taken ownership of the SDGs, acting as key implementers, particularly in areas like climate action plans. However, the dialogue between national and sub-national levels is less structured, with no established coordination mechanism. Despite this, the government emphasises co-creation and inclusion, for instance, by involving municipalities in the VNR and providing them with funding for educational initiatives related to the 2030 Agenda. While the overall assessment is broadly positive, the variations between countries indicate opportunities for peer learning to enhance dialogue processes (see Figure 7).



**Figure 7: Schematic representation of the depth of national-sub-national dialogue for SDG implementation and monitoring.**

**Source:** GTF, UCLG and UN-Habitat (2018).

Regardless of the differences outlined, all the Nordic countries' coordination mechanisms aim to enhance collaboration and ensure efforts to achieve the SDGs are harmonised and inclusive. This '*whole-of-society*' approach seeks to bring together stakeholders who can then work towards common sustainability objectives.

Finland and Iceland have established national platforms for coordinating the SDGs and sustainability efforts. These serve as central frameworks for aligning actions across various government levels – AFLRA and Samband are represented, along with the municipalities.

In Finland, the [Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development](#), chaired by the prime minister, has been active since 1993. It has evolved to integrate the SDGs into its ongoing efforts, with a primary focus on enhancing policy coherence and embedding sustainable development throughout the state administration. AFLRA holds a permanent seat on the commission, while municipalities are allocated one seat per term. Most recently, the cities of Turku and Espoo have represented this municipal seat.

In Iceland, the government initially set up a National SDG Steering Group, which included a special state–municipal cooperation platform. From 2022, this evolved into the [National Steering Group of Sustainable Iceland](#) and the Sustainable Iceland Cooperation Platform. These initiatives aim to enhance public sector coordination using the SDGs as a foundational framework for developing the country's sustainable development strategy.

Notable achievements include a toolbox for municipalities and the development of common municipal SDG indicators through the state–municipal cooperation platform. There was, however, a notable decline in the effectiveness of SDG support and coordination measures in 2023 when the cooperation platform was discontinued and resources redirected towards preparation of the new national sustainable development strategy.

The other Nordic countries have adopted different approaches to SDG coordination. From February 2020 until March 2024, Sweden had a national coordinator tasked with enhancing cross-sectoral collaborations and initiating efforts aimed at fulfilling the 2030 Agenda's objectives. This role focused on five priority areas: 1) leadership for social transformation; 2) sustainable economic development; 3) transformation at local and regional levels' 4) data for sustainable development; and 5) sustainable consumption and production. Sweden also appointed SDG coordinators within various ministries to ensure a holistic approach and foster inter-ministerial synergies, although these roles were dissolved in 2023–2024 due to a shift in government priorities. Meanwhile, regional state county boards continue to play a role in supporting SDG localisation.

Since 2001, Norway has implemented a consultation mechanism involving formalised meetings between KS and various government departments. The mechanism promotes political collaboration on various issues and aims to ensure that local and regional voices are integrated into national policymaking. This dynamic cooperation is evident in the VNR 2021, for which KS was specifically invited to prepare a subnational review. This collaboration also led to a political agreement between KS and the government focused on SDG-related actions and innovations. In Iceland, a similar process unfolded, with Samband contributing a chapter to the country's VNR 2023. LRGAs in both countries have stressed the importance of VSRs in facilitating sustained dialogue with the state.

Another coordination mechanism used in Norway is [Regjeringens Topplederforum for SDGs](#) (the National Government's Executive Leadership Forum for the SDGs), which acts as a platform for advancing the SDGs through creating a shared knowledge base around sustainability challenges and solutions. The forum serves as a critical bridge between different stakeholders – including government ministries, KS, business leaders, labour unions and civil society representatives – to enhance mutual understanding and coordinated action towards the SDGs.

In Denmark, the government-established '[2030 Panel](#)' acts as an advisory body for integration of the SDGs on a political level. Established in 2017, it is composed of 20 diverse members representing key changemakers in Danish society. KL was represented on this panel until 2022.

### **3.3. LRGAs role and support to municipalities in localising the SDGs**

Local-level implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the Nordic countries is predominantly driven by a bottom-up approach, with active engagement from municipalities and support from LRGAs. Collaboration between Nordic LRGAs and municipalities encompasses a range of activities, from educational initiatives, networking and peer learning to developing practical tools and resources (e.g. studies, surveys, reports) and executing specific projects that directly contribute to SDG implementation at the local level.

The specific focus of LRGA support activities varies across countries. Finland's AFLRA focuses on assisting municipalities in developing leadership skills and integrating sustainability into strategic planning. Denmark's KL concentrates on supporting municipalities with their climate action plans, while Iceland's Samband promotes peer learning. In Sweden and Norway, SALAR and KS adopt a broader approach, managing several thematic networks that address various sustainability issues, in addition to their involvement in awareness-raising and educational activities. Below are some examples of LRGA activities that support SDG localisation, grouped according to four categories: 1) networks for municipalities and regions; 2) education and awareness-raising measures; 3) climate action plans; and 4) innovative procurement for sustainability.

### 3.3.1. Networks for municipalities and regions

Among AFLRA's flagship initiatives in Finland is the Six Cities Network ([SDG46](#)), established in 2021 for Finland's six largest cities: Helsinki, Espoo, Tampere, Vantaa, Oulu and Turku. Initially funded by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, and later supported internally by AFLRA and the participating cities, it serves as a prominent local-level initiative. The network aims to promote the six cities as sustainability frontrunners in the strategic steering of the SDGs, providing inspiration for other cities both nationally and globally. Peer learning through co-creation is a key concept utilised by the network.

AFLRA also runs a network called Climate Municipalities, which supports municipality climate initiatives by facilitating communication and interaction between projects and networks. Additionally, AFLRA conducts surveys on municipal climate efforts.

In Norway, the KS-supported National Sustainability Network, which includes 25 frontrunner municipalities and regional governments, aims to enhance the competencies and capabilities necessary for SDG achievement. Its activities involve actively developing methods to analyse and evaluate local and regional SDG efforts; enhancing local SDG data utilisation in governance mechanisms; bolstering citizen involvement and mobilisation; and promoting sustainable public procurement practices.

SALAR in Sweden manages numerous sustainability-related networks for municipalities and regions. These networks focus on a broad range of issues, such as SDG governance and steering; integrating gender equality and human rights; facilitating citizen dialogue; sustainability reporting within municipal companies; and climate and environmental issues. The SDGs are also seen as a helpful tool in the ongoing industrial green transition that many municipalities, mainly in the north, are experiencing.

### 3.3.2. Education and awareness-raising measures

In Finland, SDG46 has co-created [SDG analysis tools](#), which are freely available on AFLRA's website in Finnish, Swedish and English. These tools are specifically designed to facilitate integration of the SDGs into municipal strategic governance. As such, they are crucial for helping local governments effectively integrate sustainable practices into their operations and planning.

Similarly, in Sweden, SALAR has developed online training and research reports focused on governing with the 2030 Agenda. The material is designed to provide local leaders and government officials with the knowledge and tools to implement the SDGs within their respective governance frameworks. One notable peer-learning network with a 2030 Agenda focus was [Glocal Sweden](#), (2018–2023) established by SALAR and the UN

Association of Sweden with national funding, the network included about two-thirds of the country's municipalities and all 21 regions.

An important KS initiative in Norway is the monthly webinar series called [Sustainability Fridays](#). Since 2020, these webinars have covered a broad range of sustainability topics, attracting a diverse audience from government, municipalities, academia and other sectors. As a result, they have become a popular platform for peer learning, sharing news and discussing sustainability issues. Additionally, KS has developed [e-learning courses on the SDGs](#) addressing both basic knowledge and more advanced topics, such as SDG conflicts and synergies. These resources aim to integrate the SDGs into various facets of municipal and regional governance and planning.

In 2021, Samband launched a six-month SDG support programme for Iceland's municipalities with the objective of enhancing strategic SDG implementation and facilitating knowledge sharing/peer learning. Participating municipalities were divided into 10 SDG localisation frontrunners and 18 beginners. Frontrunners shared insights with each other and acted as mentors to the beginners, who in turn received tailored support from external experts. Furthermore, Samband offers short educational courses on localising the SDGs through its digital school for municipal leaders.

### **3.3.3. Climate action plans**

KL in Denmark offers targeted support to municipalities developing and implementing climate action plans. These plans encompass a broad spectrum of municipal operations, including energy, infrastructure, social activities and children's services. Developed through a facilitated peer-learning process, the plans comply with the international C40 Climate Action Planning Framework, which has been customised for the Danish context. The framework prioritises equity and equality, ensuring SDG alignment while focusing on achieving climate neutrality and adaptation. The work arising from the approach – which has been adopted by all 98 Danish municipalities – is conducted in partnership with the country's five regions, Realdania and the Danish green think tank CONCITO, while certification of the municipal climate action plans is managed by the C40 Cities network.

KL has also established a special committee for climate action planning, which includes mayors and local politicians. The committee plays an important role supporting municipalities in the financing and implementation of their climate action plans. Additionally, the committee actively explores partnerships with data providers, industry and others, which can provide valuable resources and expertise when it comes to executing the climate strategies and plans.

### **3.3.4. Innovative procurement for sustainability**

Swedish, Norwegian and Finnish LRGAs have sought to advance sustainability in innovative procurement processes within local governments and regions. These initiatives highlight the impacts that sustainable procurement can have at a local, national and international level.

In Sweden, SALAR and The Regional Office for Sustainable Procurement collaborate through the [Sustainable Public Procurement initiative](#). A key aspect of this initiative is the promotion of circular procurement, including online training for stakeholders and assisting regions and municipalities to sign framework agreements for furniture upcycling and related services.

In Norway, KS has been instrumental in helping municipalities and regions adopt innovative and sustainable procurement solutions. In partnership with the Confederation of Norwegian Industries, KS established the [National Programme for Supplier Development](#) in 2010. This programme represents a unique collaboration between the public and private sectors, providing advice, information and expertise to Norwegian public entities regarding smarter, more sustainable and efficient procurement strategies. Additionally, the programme helps coordinate various joint procurement initiatives, particularly in the fields of health, digitalisation and climate change.

## 3.4. Key enablers and challenges

This section provides an overview of the success factors identified for localising the SDGs, along with insights into the key challenges facing this process. The information is drawn primarily from interviews conducted with the Nordic LRGAs.

### 3.4.1. Governance-related enablers

Internationally, the Nordic countries are renowned for their substantial achievements in implementing the 2030 Agenda. This success can partly be attributed to the decentralised Nordic governance model, which gives municipalities and regions substantial authority and responsibilities. Additionally, high levels of institutional and social capital at the local level, coupled with local government autonomy and decision-making capabilities, enable municipalities to engage effectively and strategically with sustainability issues. It is important to recognise, however, that the situation may be very different for small rural municipalities that lack institutional and social capital.

Governance in the Nordic countries is strengthened by a high degree of trust and open dialogue between local and national authorities, facilitated by various established platforms. This cooperative dynamic is reinforced by a collaborative culture, characterised by the informality and less hierarchical organisational structures typical of Nordic societies. The active involvement of diverse stakeholders, including civil society organisations, youth representatives and the business sector, further enriches this governance model.

**Enthusiasm for sustainable development:** Municipalities' enthusiasm for sustainable development as means of creating attractive communities and enhancing quality of life has been a major driving force in local SDG implementation. In several Nordic countries, this commitment to sustainability has been reflected in municipalities' early, proactive engagement with environmental and climate issues, often preceding similar efforts at the regional and national level. For example, the early 1990s saw the establishment of several municipal-led networks in Sweden, such as the Swedish Eco-municipalities and the Swedish Climate Municipalities. These efforts demonstrate how effective bottom-up approaches can help drive substantial progress in sustainability.

**Collaborative environment:** Additionally, pioneering municipalities are strongly motivated to demonstrate to residents and neighbours their commitment to being at the forefront of sustainability efforts. This creates a positive environment where development and collaboration go hand in hand: stakeholder engagement is encouraged, while municipalities can actively learn from one another and share best practices. Such interaction builds 'collective momentum', fostering a culture that values cooperative advancement.

**Peer learning:** Alongside this, peer learning and 'copying with pride' from frontrunners – adapting proven strategies or methods used by leading municipalities – has proven invaluable for local-level SDG implementation. This approach is especially crucial for municipalities that may feel isolated in their sustainability efforts, although frontrunners have also made progress based on learnings from other frontrunners. A prime example of peer learning can be seen in the practices of Kópavogur in Iceland and SDG46 in Finland, where municipalities have replicated or adapted innovative strategies to promote sustainable development.

**Proactive role of LRGAs:** From the perspective of the Nordic LRGAs, a key success factor in localising the 2030 Agenda has been the production of VSRs. These have significantly enhanced dialogue between municipalities, LRGAs and state authorities. In doing so, they have highlighted the specific challenges and needs of local governments and their communities, drawing attention to the areas requiring targeted action.

**International collaboration:** When it comes to advancing the 2030 Agenda, the Nordic LRGAs place significant emphasis on international collaboration.<sup>[10]</sup> Participation in political forums and international organisations is considered crucial for enhancing sustainability efforts, contributing to policy discussions and learning from global best practices. Such global and glocal cooperation offers substantial benefits to municipalities and regions.

**Local and regional indicators:** Availability of and access to local and regional indicators monitoring SDG progress is recognised as a critical component of success, particularly in Sweden and Norway.

### 3.4.2. Governance-related challenges

**Working in silos at the national level:** While municipal and regional authorities strive to incorporate SDG-related goals into their broader operations, such efforts are often impeded by a sectorised state that operates in silos. Additionally, this lack of coherence makes it difficult to track and measure SDG progress.

**Political shifts and changing political priorities:** Despite the Nordic countries' long-standing commitment to sustainable development, recent years have seen a noticeable decline in the visibility of the 2030 Agenda in national-level policies, most recently in Sweden and Finland. This change in focus can partly be attributed to political shifts, which have led to diminished funding for some targeted 2030 Agenda initiatives. In Finland, the recently concluded Sustainable City Programme exemplified the country's dedication to the 2030 Agenda. Despite a national shift away from targeted sustainability initiatives, municipalities are increasingly encouraged to engage in sustainability efforts, particularly in preparation for the country's next VNR in 2025. In Sweden, the focus has shifted from specific 2030 Agenda initiatives to integrating SDGs across all policy areas. The discontinuation of the Glocal Sweden project, as well as the position of National Coordinator for the 2030 Agenda, has led to the emergence of new local and regional initiatives. The state's county boards have been tasked with supporting SDG localisation, although approaches vary significantly across regions.

**Waning enthusiasm:** Despite a national-level shift in policy, many municipalities in Sweden continue to demonstrate a strong desire to implement the SDGs universally. This stands in contrast to Denmark and Finland, where local dedication to the SDGs has somewhat

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10. See: <https://nordregioprojects.org/agenda2030local/#>.

waned (despite a few forerunner municipalities). In these countries, the focus on municipal climate agendas may be diverting attention and resources away from broader SDG efforts. In Iceland, however, interest in sustainability appears to be gaining momentum, with the country currently drafting a sustainability strategy that aligns with the SDGs. In Norway, a new white paper on the implementation of the SDGs is expected in 2025.

### 3.5. Key messages

- The Nordic countries' decentralised governance model effectively supports SDG localisation, empowering municipalities to actively engage in sustainability and demonstrate strong local leadership. Given that municipal tasks and responsibilities align closely with the SDGs, the 2030 Agenda has become an effective tool for enhancing communities' quality of life by improving the services provided to citizens.
- Localisation of the SDGs has been supported by a multi-level governance approach and political leadership across the national, regional and municipal level, integrating both bottom-up and top-down sustainability incentives. National-level shifts in policy focus have encouraged regional and local actors in some countries to adopt more proactive roles when it comes to pursuing the SDGs. Additionally, the ongoing national-local dialogue through designated SDG collaboration platforms remains valuable.
- Effectively achieving the 2030 Agenda and advancing sustainability requires a long-term approach, which can be hindered by recurring political shifts. To mitigate these challenges, the 2030 Agenda should be viewed less as a political agenda and more as a beneficial tool for the local development of both citizens and the environment. From this perspective, the political leadership's main responsibility is to allocate resources effectively and choose which sustainability goals and measures to prioritise.
- LRGAs play an important role in promoting long-term local engagement with the 2030 Agenda in the Nordic countries, especially in times of limited state support. They do so through various recurring activities, such as facilitating peer learning; fostering networking; providing courses for local politicians and administrators; implementing awareness-raising activities; and, in several cases, producing VSRs. Moreover, they advocate for local-level needs and views at a national level.
- Although municipalities in Nordic countries have generally embraced a broader SDG agenda, there has been a shift in Denmark and Finland, where local governments are now increasingly focused on specific sustainability initiatives, particularly around climate-related efforts and plans to reach climate neutrality.



PHOTOS: ISTOCK AND UNSPLASH

## 4. Local government efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda and the different SDGs

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Integrating the SDGs and sustainability agenda into the core functions of the municipality is very important because it [the 2030 Agenda] doesn't work as an additional strategy.

– Gladsaxe Municipality, Denmark

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This chapter shifts the focus to the Nordic municipalities and their engagement with the SDGs. More specifically, it highlights their efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda, looks at whether they have adopted holistic or targeted approaches, and examines key success factors and perceived barriers. The findings presented are based primarily on data collected through the Nordic surveys, complemented by examples from local cases collected in the [Nordic Toolbox](#).<sup>[11]</sup>

### 4.1. Exploring municipal engagement towards SDG Implementation

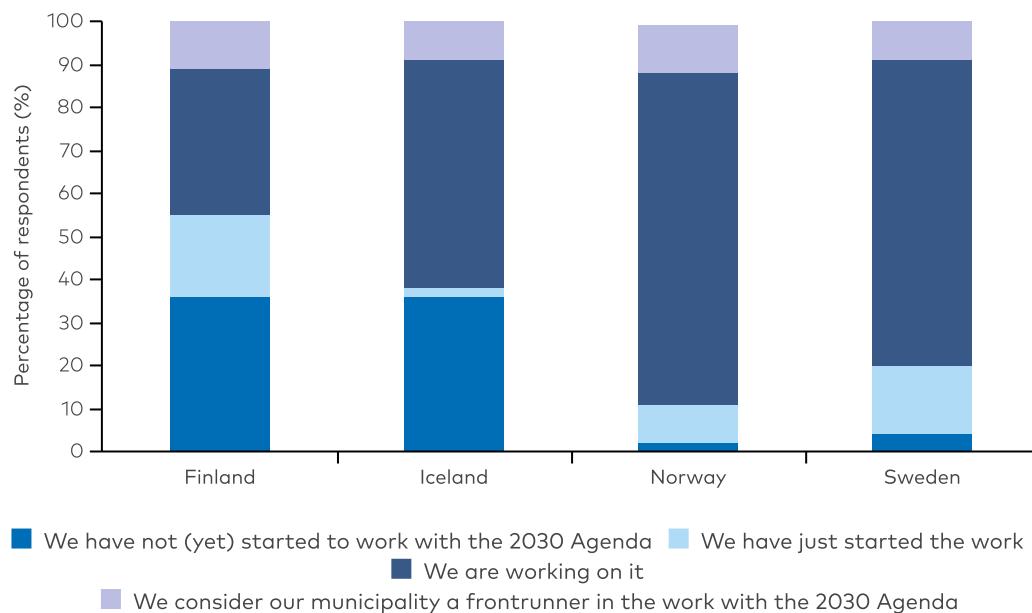
Across all the Nordic countries, the majority of municipalities who took part in the surveys reported that they are either working with the 2030 Agenda; have just started the work; or consider themselves frontrunners. More precisely, the percentages of responding municipalities working with the 2030 Agenda at these different levels of progress breaks to over 95% in Norway and Sweden, 80% of responding municipalities in Denmark<sup>[12]</sup>, and 64% in both Finland and Iceland (Figure 8).

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11. See Chapter 2 for more details on data sources.  
12. For Denmark, see Figure 1 in [Danish Survey](#)

Around 36% of municipalities in Finland and Iceland stated that they were not yet working with the 2030 Agenda – a substantially higher share than in Denmark (18%), Norway (2%) and Sweden (4%). One likely reason for this discrepancy is the different response rates to the survey.<sup>[13]</sup> Most notably, Iceland's LRGA made significant efforts to engage all municipalities in the survey, including those not yet working with the 2030 Agenda, resulting in an overall response rate of 95%. In the other Nordic countries, where response rates were lower, it is possible that the municipalities not yet working with the 2030 Agenda were less likely to respond to the survey, and so are under-represented in Figure 8. In Finland, the 2030 Agenda has been eagerly adopted by a few frontrunner municipalities, particularly those active in the Six Cities Network.<sup>[14]</sup> The level of interest among other municipalities has not been as pronounced, however, which may partly be explained by their involvement in other sustainability initiatives not explicitly linked to the 2030 Agenda.

**Figure 8: How far has your municipality come in working with the 2030 Agenda/the SDGs?**



**Note:** The figure is based on 73 responses in Finland, 58 responses in Iceland, 97 responses in Norway and 223 responses in Sweden. Some additional municipalities responded 'Don't know' and are excluded here. Results from Denmark are not shown in this figure, as the LRGA in Denmark (KL) conducted a separate survey among Danish municipalities. Question 1 in the [Danish Survey](#) provides insights into how many municipalities in Denmark are working with the SDGs.

13. Countries response rates: Denmark 83%; Finland 27%; Iceland 95%; Norway 28%; Sweden 78%.

14. For more information on the Six Cities Network, see section 3.3.1.

Around 10% of responding municipalities in the four Nordic countries in Figure 8 identify themselves frontrunners in engaging with the 2030 Agenda.

The [Nordic Toolbox](#) – where municipalities were invited to showcase successful implementations and tools linked to localising the 2030 Agenda – offers context for the survey data. Figure 9 reveals the municipalities that have invested time and effort in sharing their most compelling examples or tools, underscoring their proactive role in advancing SDG localisation. It is interesting to note the substantial diversity among these municipalities, which encompasses both larger urban centres and smaller rural communities. This trend aligns with previous insights, such as those presented in the Norway VSR 2021, which emphasise that successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda is not solely determined by size or resources. Instead, a combination of factors is important, with collaboration and peer-to-peer learning notable factors supporting progress (KS, 2021).

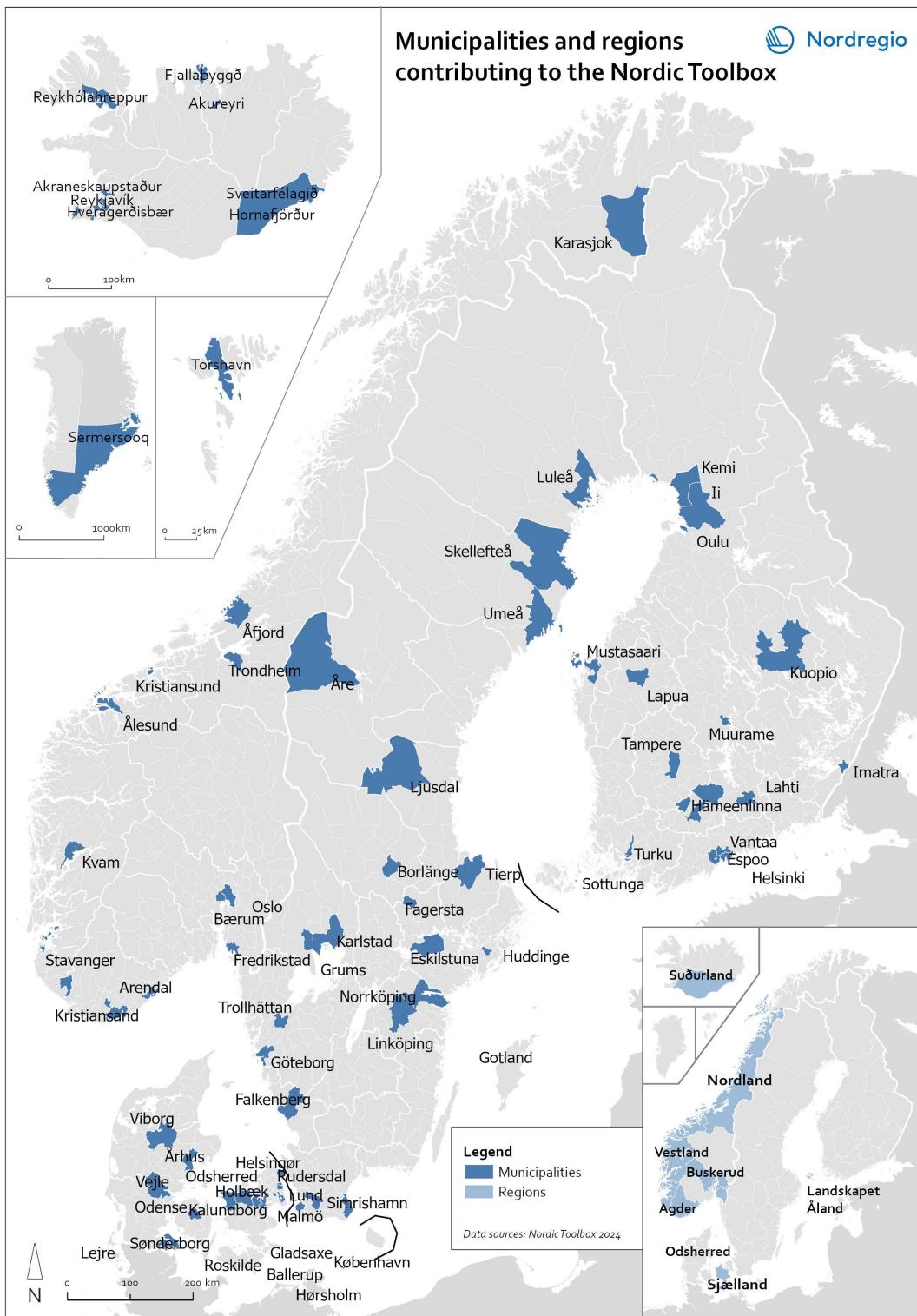


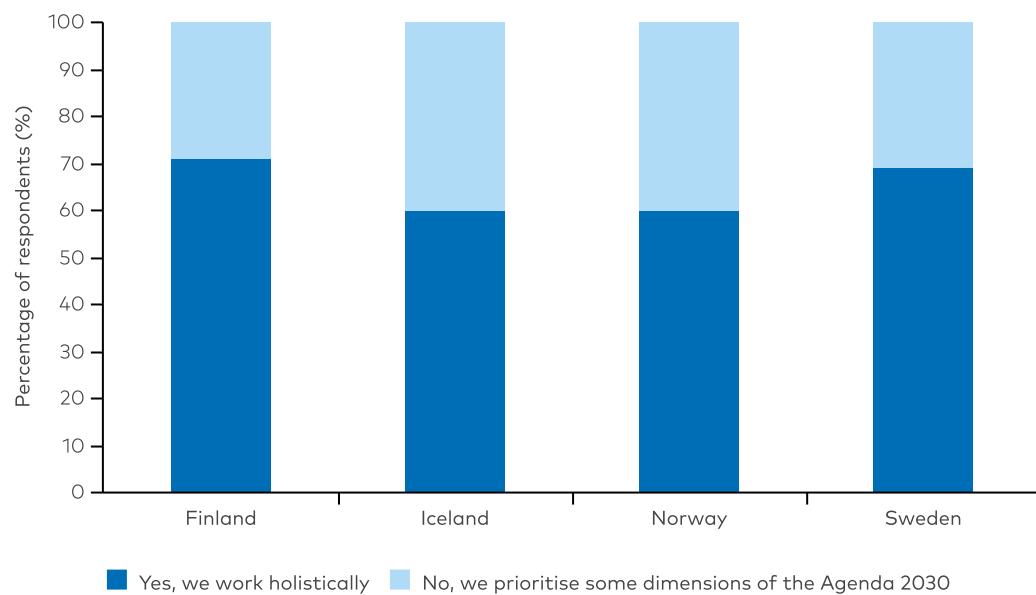
Figure 9: Municipalities and regions contributing to the Nordic Toolbox

Data source: [Nordic Toolbox](#) 2024

## 4.2. Holistic or targeted approach

While most Nordic municipalities appear to be actively involved in implementing the 2030 Agenda at the local level, a notable trend arises regarding their preferred approach to implementation. A majority of responding municipalities in Finland (71%), Sweden (69%), Norway and Iceland (60% respectively) reported that they work holistically with the 2030 Agenda (Figure 10). This approach involves prioritising all three dimensions of sustainability: social, economic and environmental (for examples, see Box 4). Meanwhile, between 30% and 40% of the surveyed municipalities fall into the second group, stating that they prioritise one or two sustainability dimensions. A follow-up survey question (not shown in *Figure 10*) reveals that a majority of these municipalities focus on the environmental dimension. Relevant SDG initiatives include, among other things, attempts at reducing transport- and mobility-related carbon emissions, enhancing waste management and preserving natural resources (for examples, see Box 5).

**Figure 10: Do you work holistically with the 2030 Agenda?**



**Note:** The figure is based on 56 responses in Finland, 25 responses in Iceland, 93 responses in Norway and 207 responses in Sweden. Municipalities that answered 'Don't know' or 'We do not work with the 2030 Agenda' are excluded. Results from Denmark are not shown in this figure, as the LRGA in Denmark (KL) conducted a separate survey among Danish municipalities, which does not include a similar question as the one posed here.

## **BOX 4: HOLISTIC WORK WITH THE 2030 AGENDA: EXAMPLES FROM THE NORDIC REGION**

### **INCORPORATING THE SDGS IN THE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM, KRISTIANSUND, NORWAY**

The SDGs serve as the overarching framework guiding Kristiansund municipality's strategic development. Tailoring these global objectives to local circumstances, Kristiansund has devised ten bespoke goals aligned with its unique challenges and opportunities, firmly rooted in its social plan. To ensure comprehensive planning and efficient execution in accordance with the SDGs, all municipal plans must adhere to a coherent goal structure. This ensures consistency, linking the municipal plan's overarching goals with the specific targets and initiatives pursued in departmental plans and activities. The municipality's commitment to these goals was formalised in the 2018 Action Programme, which set the budget and economic plan for 2018–2021. Ongoing monitoring utilising various models, data analysis and reporting mechanisms occurs through the management system.

#### **IMPACTS:**

These ten goals, along with their corresponding indicators, have been integrated into Kristiansund's management system, enabling continuity from goal-setting all the way up to action and resultant outcomes within the municipality's planning process.

#### **LINKS TO LEARN MORE:**

[Sustainable development, Kristiansund municipality](#)

## THE SDGS IN KÓPAVOGUR, ICELAND

In 2018, Kópavogur's municipal council adopted a holistic strategy that reflects its mission statement, vision and values, as well as its SDG-related strategic goals. The aim was to ensure Kópavogur's inhabitants could enjoy quality of life in a sustainable and efficient way. Staff, inhabitants and other stakeholders were engaged via online participatory portals and meetings. An important step in implementation was encouraging elementary schools to embrace the SDGs and so reach families through students. Today, implementation is also conducted through strategic budgeting, which includes yearly divisional action plans with SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound) targets, related indicators, and actions encouraging sustainability.

### IMPACTS:

An annual survey on citizen awareness of the SDGs in Kópavogur reveals an upward trend, with the level of awareness reaching around 83% by the end of 2022. In spring 2021, Kópavogur developed an SDGs index in order to track the status of SDG implementation within the context of its overall strategy. Most of the indicators are updated yearly.

### LINKS TO LEARN MORE:

[Global Goals Index Kópavogsbaer](#)

[Kópavogur City Strategy](#)

## THE SDGS IN ODENSE, DENMARK

Odense municipality is currently working to raise awareness among citizens and businesses about its efforts towards SDG achievement. The municipality works with all 17 of the SDGs, rather than selecting specific ones to pursue. As a result, Odense is committed to incorporating sustainability into all aspects of the municipality's work.

### IMPACTS:

The SDGs committee has identified six specific projects that will initially contribute to Odense municipality taking its share of responsibility for integrating work on the SDGs:

1. Sustainable everyday life: From global goals to everyday goals.
2. Sustainable construction in Odense – with a focus on Vollsmose.
3. Environmentally-certified procurement in Odense.
4. Education on the SDGs and ambassadors for change
5. Gender equality across segregated industries.
6. Odense leads on the climate agenda – utilities and neighbourhoods.

### LINKS TO LEARN MORE:

[UN's Global Goals in Odense](#)

## BOX 5: THE PURSUIT OF CARBON NEUTRALITY: NORDIC EXAMPLES FROM DIFFERENT SECTORS

### **GREEN TRANSPORT PLAN, AARHUS, DENMARK**

Transportation accounts for the largest share of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in Aarhus municipality, making this sector one of the most important in the green transition and to achieve carbon neutrality by 2030. In alignment with the Climate Plan 2016–2020, the city council mandated the development of a plan to ensure Aarhus municipality's transportation becomes fossil-free by 2030. The Green Transport Plan, integral to the municipality's broader climate goals, aims to pave the way for a CO<sub>2</sub>-neutral Aarhus by the target year.

#### **IMPACTS:**

The main delivery of the Green Transport Plan was a step-by-step plan to achieving fossil-free transport for both the municipality's own fleet and transportation used in connection with the delivery of goods and services. In the 2020 budget settlement, the city council upped its ambitions, choosing to bring forward its goal of having a fleet free of fossil fuels to the end of 2025. The plan is framed as a roadmap containing milestones for the gradual phasing-in of new requirements for the municipality's fleet, as well as for procurement and tendering, thereby ensuring both Aarhus municipality and its suppliers can convert transportation as cost-effectively as possible.

#### **LINKS TO LEARN MORE:**

[Groen Transportplan](#)

## **CLIMATE ACTION IN AKRANES, ICELAND**

The municipality of Akranes (Akraneskaupstaður) has pursued several climate-related initiatives and established partnerships with various companies. In 2020 the municipality decided to develop an eco-industrial park (EIP) on reclaimed land north of Akranes at the base of Akrafjall mountain. An EIP is a community of independent production and service-oriented businesses located in a shared, dedicated area. Together, the businesses strive to improve their environmental, economic and social performances: resource consumption is optimised, and waste reduced through sharing and reuse in a 'circular' economy.

### **IMPACTS:**

Akranes aims to achieve several goals with its EIP, including serving as an exemplary model in efforts against climate change. Alongside this, it is envisaged that the EIP will offer local businesses – as well as those elsewhere in the country – a favourable environment in which they can improve their environmental profiles, in turn making them more competitive. Moreover, the sustainability of the town's commercial sector is intended to be bolstered by the diversity of business located in the local area.

### **LINKS TO LEARN MORE:**

[300 Akranes](#)  
[Breið Innovation Center](#)

## **ESTIMATING CLIMATE GAS EMISSIONS FROM LAND USE, AGDER, NORWAY**

Agder in Norway decided in 2022 to launch an ecosystem accounting system that could estimate climate gas emissions from land use and be used in conjunction with spatial planning (municipal master plans and zonal plans). The system was based on available digital information, with all processing done within a geographic information system (GIS) framework. The model had to overcome several difficulties, including conflicting standards and geographic precisions in the included datasets.

### **IMPACTS:**

The solution is intended to facilitate better understanding of land use impacts through a visually understandable interface. The model provides data on ecosystem contributions, as well as actual and planned land use, and should be usable by all municipalities, with the results open to everyone.

### **LINKS TO LEARN MORE:**

[Arealregnskap for Agder 2022](#)

## 4.3. Integration of the 2030 Agenda into key steering documents

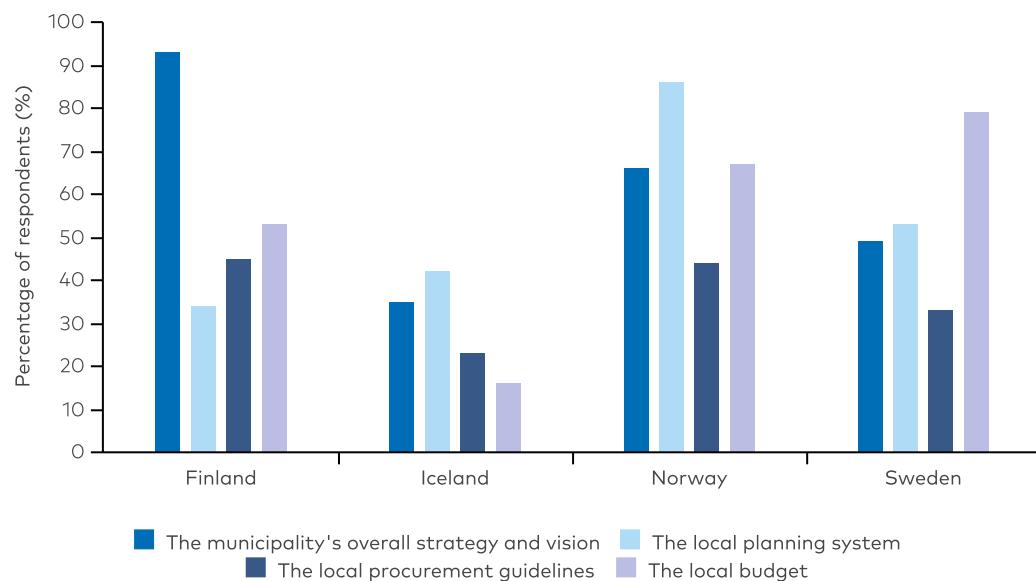
The respondents were asked whether they had integrated the 2030 Agenda into key steering documents, including local strategies or visions, the local planning system, procurement guidelines or the local budget. Replies from the Finnish municipalities reveal that they have come furthest in integrating the 2030 Agenda into their local strategy or vision. The Icelandic and Norwegian municipalities, by contrast, are the most likely to have integrated the global goals into their local planning systems, while the Swedish municipalities lead the way in terms of integration with local budgets (Figure 11). In the Danish Survey, approximately 75% of respondents indicated that they had integrated the SDGs into existing strategies or plans.<sup>[15]</sup>

Figure 11 suggests that Iceland's municipalities have not come as far as the other Nordic countries in integrating the 2030 Agenda into local steering documents. This is likely due to the fact that momentum for working with the 2030 Agenda occurred later than in the other Nordic countries.

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15. See Figure 3 in [Danish survey](#)

**Figure 11: Into which of the following steering documents have you integrated the 2030 Agenda?**



**Note:** The figure is based on 53 responses in Finland, 31 responses in Iceland, 95 responses in Norway and 202 responses in Sweden. Multiple answers were possible: i.e. municipalities could indicate more than one steering document into which the 2030 Agenda has been integrated. Municipalities that answered 'Don't know' or 'We do not work with the 2030 Agenda' are excluded. Results from Denmark are not shown in this figure, as the LRGA in Denmark (KL) conducted a separate survey among Danish municipalities that did not include a similar question to the one posed here.

### 4.3.1. Strategy, Vision and Planning System

A majority of responding municipalities in Finland (93%) and Norway (66%) reported that they had incorporated the 2030 Agenda into their existing strategy or vision (Figure 11), compared to municipalities in Iceland (35%) and Sweden (49%). Meanwhile, a significantly higher percentage of municipalities in Norway had also integrated the 2030 Agenda into their planning systems (86%) than was the case in Sweden (53%), Iceland (42%) and Finland (34%).

Overall, Figure 11 suggests that many of the Nordic countries' municipalities have already taken the step of integrating the 2030 Agenda into key steering documents. Successful cases of SDG integration into municipal visions or strategies can be found among municipalities of varying sizes and contexts, for example in urban municipalities such as Gladsaxe in Denmark (see Box 6), smaller rural communities such as Simrishamn in Sweden (see Box 7), and areas such as Åland (see Box 2 in section 3.2).

## BOX 6: SUSTAINABLE WELFARE AND DEVELOPMENT – THE GLADSAXE STRATEGY, DENMARK

Gladsaxe municipality in Denmark has incorporated the SDGs into its overall strategy: the Gladsaxe Strategy. More specifically, the city council has prioritised six SDG-related objectives in its strategy, which encompasses all the municipality's administrative sectors and activities:

1. A good place to live: SDGs 3, 11, 13, 15 and 17
2. Children and youth shaping the future: SDGs 4, 11, 13 and 17
3. Sustainable business city with strong partnerships and job growth: SDGs 3, 8, 11, 12, 13 and 17
4. Equal opportunities for a good life: SDGs 11, 12, 13, 15 and 17
5. Climate action: SDGs: 3, 4, 8, 11 and 17
6. Health and well-being for all: SDGs 3 and 17

Each objective is linked to the SDGs they contribute to, while SDG 17 (partnerships for the goals) is integrated into all of them. Implementation of the strategy is organised around three dimensions:

1. Political focus – progress and results: The Gladsaxe Strategy has been politically adopted and forms the basis of the municipal budget and its strategic investments. Three to five local development indicators have been defined for each of the six strategic objectives in order to measure progress and enable adjustments if progress does not meet expectations. Both quantitative and qualitative development is assessed in follow-up reports.
2. Systematic implementation within the organisation: All strategies, plans and decisions link to the Gladsaxe Strategy. The municipality's strategic goals are integrated into organisation-wide management processes and steering systems, thereby ensuring the objectives make sense within and across departments and units. Furthermore, attention has been given to knowledge sharing about cases across all sectors, with the aim of inspiring employees and leaders to experiment and take action.
3. Participation and partnerships for local action: In accordance with SDG 17, the municipality has emphasised the need for cooperation and co-creation with citizens, associations and relevant organisations and enterprises. This involves participation, dialogue and innovation, built around fostering a strong local commitment to a more sustainable future.

**IMPACTS:**

Quantitative and qualitative data from the municipality years show that the strategic goals have been integrated into the core areas and services of the municipality and are now embedded within the organisation and the local community. The municipality's Voluntary Local Reviews for 2021, 2022, and 2023 highlight these results and showcase local initiatives such as activities and projects in food waste reduction, circular building, and child-friendly city projects.

**LINKS TO LEARN MORE:**

[Gladsaxe VLR 2021](#)

[Gladsaxe VLR 2022](#)

[Gladsaxe VLR 2023](#)

[Gladsaxe Strategy on Sustainable Welfare and Development 2022-2026](#)

## BOX 7: SIMRISHAMN'S SUSTAINABILITY POLICY AND GOVERNANCE MODEL, SWEDEN

In 2019, the municipality of Simrishamn decided to develop a sustainability policy that would integrate all sustainability dimensions (environmental, economic and social) while maintaining a local action programme for national environmental objectives and public health work. The SDGs were analysed in order that they could have a bearing locally. Extensive consultation meetings led to a political consensus on goals and a further increase in the level of policy ambition.

In 2024, as part of a new governance model, Simrishamn adopted an updated version of the sustainability policy valid for the period 2025–2035. All work in the municipality is now based on the sustainability policy, within a framework set by financial management.

Each year, the city council prioritises particular focus areas to be analysed and adapted by various specialist committees. The resultant objectives then constitute the entirety of the municipal council's aims for the coming year, together with the overarching goal of good financial management.

The sustainability policy is intended to support work on sustainability across the entire municipality. Each committee take into account the council's focus areas when choosing their strategic objectives for the year, before going on to develop activities and measures to achieve them. This means every unit within the municipal organisation focuses on selected parts of the sustainability policy each year, steering its operations towards optimisation in the relevant areas.

### IMPACTS:

The sustainability policy, together with the governance model, has provided a good balance and Simrishamn municipality for instance won the Aktuell Hållbarhets Sustainability Award 2023 (in competition with the other 290 Swedish municipalities) in the category of rural municipalities.

Within the context of the Nordic VSR Report, the municipality conveyed several key messages drawn from their experience to inspire other municipalities:

- **Convert to custom goals:** When adapting the global goals to the local/municipal level, take account of the responsibilities and conditions that already exist, while always retaining relevance to the purpose behind the goal.
- **Perform a local analysis of problems, drivers and influencing factors:** Every local community is unique. As such, no one else's sustainability policy is directly transferable unless you have first carried out your own analysis based on local context and conditions.
- **Describe where you are going and target images for what a solution looks like:** Everyone wants to live a good life. Focus on securing consensus around that

- *goal before debating politically the means of getting there.*
- ***Reconcile by politics, social acceptance and economic opportunity:*** Having done so, reconcile solutions that society is willing to accept and political trends can accommodate and deliver.
- ***Take social acceptance seriously as a prerequisite for implementation:*** Developments in recent years have shown that social acceptance is something that must be taken into account.
- ***Give priority to cost-effective measures:*** Limited resources relative to the size of the problem require wise and diligent prioritisation. This means identifying minimum levels of achievement and then attempting to fulfil or exceed them.
- ***Give priority to synergistic measures:*** Priority should be given to measures that affect several different problems – or rather dealing with problems that have a bearing on a number of critical areas but are fixable by minor adjustments in measures.
- ***A holistic approach is optimal:*** Each issue can affect other issues, meaning care must be taken to ensure measures in one sustainability dimension or within certain SDGs do not counteract others, or even create completely new problems. Always strive to prioritise holistic solutions where the three sustainability dimensions interact and support each other.
- ***Ensure constant forward movement until the task is complete:*** Even those who currently have the privilege of living in countries that enjoy high levels of peace and prosperity, and so are closer to achieving a state of sustainability, must constantly strive towards full sustainability. You must constantly run forward even to remain in the same position.
- ***Engage in cooperation across administrative boundaries:*** Collaborate with actors outside the municipality, as well as citizens civil society and the business community. Act in concert with those actors who have parts of the solution to each issue regardless of administrative level (local, county, state, region, the EU, etc.).
- ***Accept imperfection but strive for perfection:*** Everyone must begin from where they are in the various sustainability issues and try to improve from there. Nothing is so good than it can't get even better.

**LINKS TO LEARN MORE:**

[Hållbarhet – Simrishamns kommun](#)

### 4.3.2. Local Budgeting processes

Local budgets serve as potent instruments for translating local government policies into action through prioritisation and development. Given that it takes significant commitment to carry out this complex task, it is noteworthy that a high proportion of responding municipalities in Sweden (79%), Norway (67%) and Finland (53%) have already taken the step of integrating the 2030 Agenda into their local budgets (Figure 11). In Iceland, by contrast, only 16% of responding municipalities have so far taken this step. Box 8 describes interesting cases of how municipalities have worked with the SDGs in their budgeting processes.

#### **BOX 8: INTEGRATION OF THE 2030 AGENDA INTO BUDGET PROCESSES**

##### **INTEGRATION OF THE 2030 AGENDA INTO THE CITY COUNCIL'S BUDGET AND BUDGET PROCESS: THE MÅLÖ MODEL, SWEDEN**

In 2018, the City of Malmö approved its strategy for long-term 2030 Agenda initiatives, opting to embed the SDGs into its existing processes rather than create a separate programme.

As part of the 2019 budget process, the city's politicians tasked the City Executive Office with reviewing the SDGs' goal structure, with a view to establishing a more enduring framework for integrating progress towards the 2030 Agenda into the city's own goal structures. Since then, the city budget has been the cornerstone of Malmö's local 2030 Agenda plan, indicating of areas for development where committees and companies need to join forces in order to achieve a clear shift. Building on this work and with the aim of reinforcing the strategy, the city drafted a VLR in 2021.

The administration also compiles an annual sustainability report that sets out the progress made locally in relation to the global goals. The report contains approximately 100 local and national indicators that fall under the 17 SDGs, providing an overview of what progress towards 2030 Agenda looks like in Malmö.

##### **IMPACTS:**

The 'Malmö model' aims to foster collaboration and alignment across various sectors of administration, ultimately driving progress towards the SDGs. Integration of the SDGs into budget and management systems facilitates resource allocation and decision-making, which in turn supports sustainable development initiatives. Furthermore, the model provides a framework for institutionalising SDG commitments, thereby embedding sustainability principles into the city's governance structure for long-term impact.

##### **LINKS TO LEARN MORE:**

[Malmö VLR 2021](#)

## **TRONDHEIM SDG BUDGETING, NORWAY**

Trondheim municipality has integrated the SDGs into local finance structures using existing accounting systems. Through a data science approach, Trondheim connects the 169 UN targets with local accounting standards, developed in collaboration with the European Cities for Sustainable Finance network. The proof of concept is based on KOSTRA (the accounting standard used by Norwegian municipalities), which makes it replicable in other Norwegian cities regardless of local context. Moreover, the logic has been duplicated and tested in cities such as Barcelona and London.

### **IMPACTS:**

SDG budgeting influences local planning and programming by providing a new perspective on financial resource utilisation. It establishes a direct link between resources and impact, facilitating the redirection of resources towards areas needing attention. Trondheim's initiative offers a framework for cities worldwide to align financial resources with sustainable development objectives, thereby fostering a more impactful, accountable approach to urban development.

### **LINKS TO LEARN MORE:**

[Trondheim 2050 Bold City Vision and Guidelines](#)

## **BUDGETING IN TURKU, FINLAND**

The project "Phenomenon-based budgeting derived from service needs" initiated the creation of a sustainable development budgeting model in Turku, focusing on necessary changes in current operations and decision-making, with an emphasis on social sustainability, particularly for young people.

"Phenomenon-based budgeting" (in Finnish "fenomenbaserad budgetering") seeks to provide comprehensive, systematic solutions that transcend traditional sectoral boundaries within budget structures. This approach addresses complex issues such as well-being, social inequalities, and climate change, which cannot be resolved by a single administrative branch.

Based on the "Children and Youth Well-being Plan," which defines annual priorities, the project uses a system of metrics derived from population data and field experience to inform situational analyses. It prioritises collaborative service planning with interventions designed by multiple stakeholders. The aim is not to increase service output but to adapt information and resource management to be more needs-based.

Emphasis is placed on shared use of facilities, prevention of exclusion, support for multicultural families, and regular monitoring and adjustment of goals and resources to ensure effective implementation.

This process is intended to create a sustainable development budgeting model and identify the necessary changes in current operations and decision-making.

### **IMPACTS:**

The goal would be that by the 2025, this model will be in use and could be expanded.

### **LINKS TO LEARN MORE:**

[Budgeting for Sustainable Development – Experiences and Lessons from Municipalities](#)

### **4.3.3. Public Procurement Guidelines**

The incorporation of sustainability criteria and the SDGs into public procurement guidelines provides local governments with a fundamental tool for enacting meaningful change (Nordregio, 2022). It allows municipalities to not only advance specific SDGs related to sustainable production and consumption, but to ensure coherence between their procurement activities and broader policy objectives. Through creating demand for sustainable products and services, local and regional governments can stimulate market transformation, foster innovation and accelerate progress towards the SDGs (Nordregio, 2022). In the Nordic countries, between 45% (Finland) and 23% (Iceland) of responding municipalities working with the SDGs have already integrated them into their procurement guidelines (Figure 11). Examples such as Vantaa, Oslo and Åland, highlighted in Box 9, illustrate the diverse approaches taken by municipalities.

## BOX 9 : THE SDGS IN PROCUREMENT

### GREEN PROCUREMENT IN OSLO MUNICIPALITY, NORWAY

The City of Oslo annual expenditures total approximately NOK 26 billion. Leveraging this influence, its procurement strategy aims to promote sustainability through supplier requirements designed to enhance recycling, minimise waste, develop environmentally friendly solutions, and reduce energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions. Specifically, the strategy includes mandates for transport in municipal procurement and for fossil- and emission-free buildings and construction sites.

Recognising the environmental impact of its procurement activities, particularly within the construction sector – which contributes over 50% of the city's consumption-based emissions – the council has set goals, including a 30% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from materials used in new and renovated buildings. Moreover, with the aim of influencing the market towards climate-friendly solutions, procurement decisions are required to take into consideration the carbon and environmental footprints of the entire product lifecycle.

Oslo plans to expand its sustainability efforts beyond construction materials to include other procurement categories, such as food, textiles, electronics and furniture.

#### **IMPACTS:**

From 1 January 2025, all municipal building and construction sites must be emission-free, and mass transport will utilise emission-free methods or biogas technology.

#### **LINKS TO LEARN MORE:**

[Oslo VLR 2023](#)

[Sustainable Public Procurement Oslo](#)

## **SUSTAINABILITY IN PROCUREMENT IN VANTAA, FINLAND**

Vantaa has developed an approach to public procurement focused on sustainability and innovation, recognising it as more than just a bidding process. With strategic priorities including carbon neutrality and circular economy, the city evaluates sustainability aspects in procurement through a dedicated team and a web-based checklist tool. Public engagement is also prioritised, with citizens encouraged to make procurement suggestions. Additionally, Vantaa emphasises collaboration with stakeholders to achieve its sustainability goals, drawing on experiences and practices from Finnish, European and local partners.

### **IMPACTS:**

The impact of budgetary decisions on sustainability in the City of Vantaa is significant, as it shapes the allocation of resources and funding towards initiatives promoting environmental, social and economic well-being.

### **LINKS TO LEARN MORE:**

[Procurements in Vantaa](#)

[Competence Centre for Sustainable and Innovative Public Procurement](#)

[The missing multiplier Nordregio](#)

[Vantaa's Sustainability Reporting 2023](#)

## **GUIDE TO SUSTAINABLE PUBLIC PROCUREMENT, ÅLAND**

Recognising the pivotal role procurement plays in advancing sustainable consumption and production a practical guide aimed at facilitating sustainable purchasing across various sectors was developed in Åland. This guide, available in the form of a checklist, empowers contracting authorities and entities in Åland to integrate environmental and social considerations into their procurement processes.

### **IMPACTS:**

The checklist, aligned with both Åland legislation and European directives, serves as a tool for helping foster sustainability practices that adhere to procurement law principles.

### **LINKS TO LEARN MORE:**

[Åland's guide to sustainable public procurement](#)

## 4.4. SDG Prioritisation

The survey responses reveal that many of the Nordic municipalities working with the 2030 Agenda do not prioritise individual SDGs: around 32% of surveyed municipalities in Norway, 34% of municipalities in Finland, and more than 50% of Swedish and Icelandic municipalities fall into this category. Turning to the municipalities that do state some SDGs are more important in their work, however, some interesting similarities across countries emerge (Figure 12). Notably, SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities) is prioritised by many municipalities across all five Nordic countries, while SDG 3 (good health and well-being) and SDG 13 (climate action) are among the top three prioritised goals in four out of the five Nordic countries.

On the other hand, some priority areas are specific to different countries. Many Swedish municipalities, for example, have focused their efforts on SDG 4 (quality education), while SDG 17 (partnership for the goals) is prioritised among many Danish municipalities.<sup>[16]</sup> From a broader Nordic perspective, the emphasis on SDGs 3, 4, 11, and 13 may be expected, since the provision of basic services such as education and health care, as well as local planning and climate adaptation, tend to be part of local government responsibilities.

The emphasis on climate action, particularly in Finnish and Danish municipalities, can potentially be linked to an increased national focus on climate goals. As Nordic countries encounter significant challenges in implementing SDG 13 (see Figure 2), this approach can be viewed as a strategic allocation of resources. For example, as of 2024, KL in Denmark has shifted its focus away from the broader 2030 Agenda to support municipalities' implementation of local climate action plans. This is reflected in the Danish Survey, where about 63% of responding municipalities indicated that the political focus on climate and climate action plans had influenced their overall SDG-related efforts.<sup>[17]</sup> As for Finland, the focus on SDG 13 is likely related to the 2023 amendment to the Finnish Climate Change Act, which requires municipalities to create their own climate action plans. More recently, however, there have been discussions about reversing this requirement, with an official consultation anticipated for spring 2024 – but with no further developments at the time of writing (Ministry of the Environment, Finland, 2024b, 2024a).

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16. See Figure 6 in [Danish survey](#).  
17. See Figure 10 in [Danish survey](#).



Figure 12: Which SDGs do you prioritise in your work with the 2030 Agenda?

**Note:** The figure is based on 50 responses in Finland, 40 responses in Iceland, 92 responses in Norway and 203 responses in Sweden. Multiple answers were possible: i.e. municipalities could choose more than one prioritised SDG. Municipalities could also choose the answer option: 'We have not prioritised any goal'. The figure shows the SDGs most frequently chosen as priority goals by municipalities. In some cases, individual SDGs received the same number of answers, in which case the SDGs are shown side by side. Municipalities that answered 'Don't know' or 'We do not work with the 2030 Agenda' were excluded from the analysis. Results for Denmark are taken from the [KL survey of Danish municipalities](#).

## 4.5. Critical factors in SDG localisation

Internationally, the Nordic countries have gained recognition for their progress in localising the SDGs, largely due to their capacity to integrate the goals into existing municipal operations. This success can be attributed in part to the decentralised Nordic governance model, supplemented by other governance-related success factors and challenges (see Chapter 3). This section explores how municipalities perceive both the main drivers of progress and the challenges that remain to be addressed when it comes to advancing local-level implementation of the SDGs.

### 4.5.1. Factors Driving Success

While there may be slight variations in the prioritisation of different factors, survey respondents across the board highlighted the importance of anchoring the 2030 Agenda in a municipality's administrative management (Figure 13). Doing so involves integrating sustainability across all levels and activities, including tying them to key documents such as local plans, budgets and procurement (see Box 6, Box 7, and Box 8, respectively). Such alignment ensures the Agenda's principles become integral to governance, aiding effective progress. This was considered a particularly important success factor in SDG-related work, especially among Swedish and Norwegian municipalities.

Capacity to work with the 2030 Agenda was also highlighted as an important success factor, particularly among responding municipalities from Finland and Iceland. Whether it entails financing sustainable initiatives (see Box 9), embracing new technologies, digitalisation and monitoring tools (see Box 19), or investing in capacity development among staff to augment expertise and competencies (see Box 3 and Box 10), resource mobilisation emerges as a cornerstone for advancing the SDGs.

Political prioritisation of the 2030 Agenda and translating the global goals into local contexts were also considered important to making SDG-related work a success.

Figure 13: Important success factors for the local work with the 2030 Agenda<sup>[18]</sup>

1	ANCHORING OF THE 2030 AGENDA IN THE ADMINISTRATIVE MANAGEMENT OF THE MUNICIPALITY
2	CAPACITY TO WORK WITH THE 2030 AGENDA
3	POLITICAL PRIORITISATION OF THE 2030 AGENDA
4	TRANSLATION OF THE 2030 AGENDA INTO THE LOCAL CONTEXT

**Note:** The figure is based on 56 responses in Finland, 33 responses in Iceland, 96 responses in Norway and 195 responses in Sweden. Municipalities were asked to rank nine potential success factors on a scale of 1 ('not important') to 5 ('very important'). The ranking of success factors is based on joint analysis of the answers provided in each Nordic country. Municipalities that answered 'Don't know' or 'We do not work with the 2030 Agenda' were excluded from the analysis. Results from Denmark are not shown in this figure, as the LRGA in Denmark (KL) conducted a separate survey among Danish municipalities that did not include a similar question to the one posed here.

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18. For country-by-country charts on 'How important are the following factors for the success of your municipality work with 2030 Agenda', see Appendix 2.

## BOX 10: SDG LEARNING MATERIAL FOR ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES IN MØRE OG ROMSDAL, NORWAY

The regional authority of Møre og Romsdal, the County Governor of Møre og Romsdal, and the District Centre have collaborated to produce learning material on the SDG's specially for elected representatives in the municipalities and regional authorities. The material is divided into two parts: a digital track available to all municipalities, and a track where smaller municipalities can get additional support. The material includes films, methods and tools.

### **IMPACTS:**

Through the collaborative development of this learning material, elected officials were able to access additional knowledge and become aware of different tools for localising the SDGs.

### **LINKS TO KNOW MORE:**

[Training in Planning for Politicians](#)

### 4.5.2. Challenges and Obstacles

Mirroring the success factors, the participating Nordic municipalities also emphasised 'capacity to work with the 2030 Agenda' and 'lack of political prioritisation' as the primary obstacles to their SDG-related work (Figure 14). This implies that despite the fact many Nordic municipalities work with the 2030 Agenda, there remains ample room to improve the conditions and context in which this work takes place.

**Figure 14: Important obstacles for local work with the 2030 Agenda<sup>[19]</sup>**

<b>1</b>	<b>LACK OF CAPACITY TO WORK WITH THE 2030 AGENDA</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>LACK OF SUPPORT FROM THE STATE</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>LACK OF POLITICAL PRIORITISATION</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>LACK OF METHODS AND TOOLS</b>

**Note:** The figure is based on 44 responses in Denmark, 56 responses in Finland, 33 responses in Iceland, 96 responses in Norway and 202 responses in Sweden. Municipalities were asked to rank six potential obstacles and barriers on a scale of 1 ('not an obstacle') to 5 ('a very serious obstacle'). The ranking of obstacles is based on a joint analysis of the answers provided in each Nordic country. Municipalities that answered 'Don't know' or 'We do not work with the 2030 Agenda' were excluded from the analysis. Results from Denmark are included in the analysis. The LRGA in Denmark (KL) conducted a separate [survey among Danish municipalities](#), that included the same question on barriers as was included in the Nordic Survey.

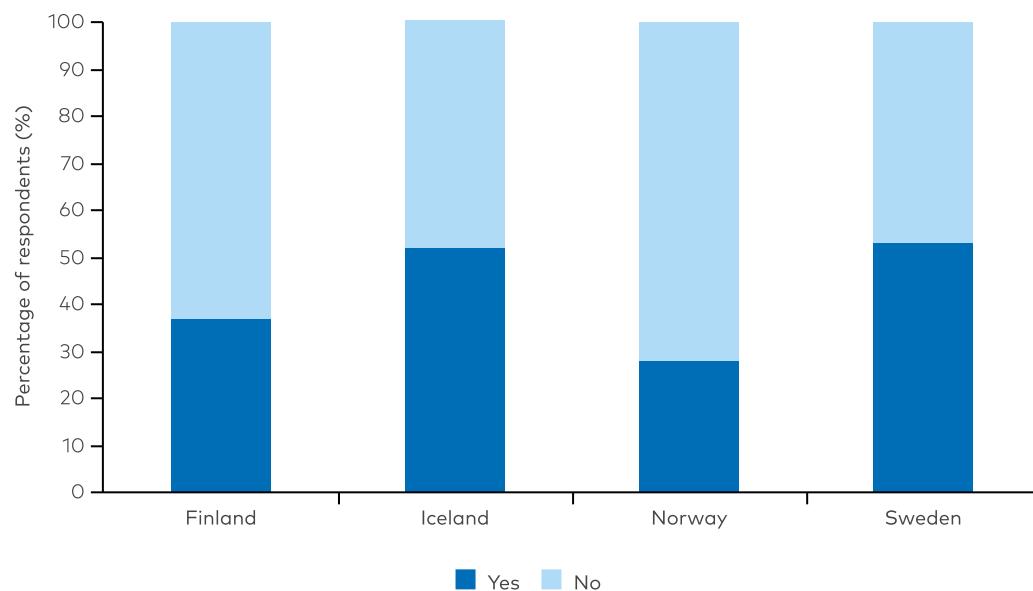
**Capacity to work with the 2030 Agenda:** Insufficient resource capacity was identified as a 'serious' or 'very serious' obstacle by the majority of responding municipalities in all five Nordic countries.<sup>[20]</sup> Here, it is interesting to note that it is not lack of methods or tools that is the biggest identified obstacle, but rather lack of human and financial capacity. Without sufficient resources, municipalities may struggle to launch and sustain sustainable development and green transition initiatives, hindering progress towards achievement of the SDGs. In the survey, more than 63% of municipalities in Finland and 72% of municipalities in Norway stated that they do not have dedicated staff to coordinate implementation of the 2030 Agenda versus 47% in Sweden (Figure 15). In Denmark, only 34% of responding municipalities affirmed that a dedicated secretariat, municipal director or senior adviser had responsibility for SDGs implementation<sup>[21]</sup>. In Sweden and Iceland, meanwhile, around half the responding municipalities had a staff member, team of staff members coordinating local SDG-related work. These constraints on human resources can potentially hinder progress towards local-level SDG achievement.

19. For country-by-country charts on 'How much of an obstacle do the following factors pose in your work with 2030 Agenda', see Appendix 2.

20. See Figure 12.1 in [Danish survey](#).

21. See Figure 5 in [Danish survey](#).

**Figure 15: Does your local authority have dedicated staff responsible for coordinating and implementation of the 2030 Agenda?**



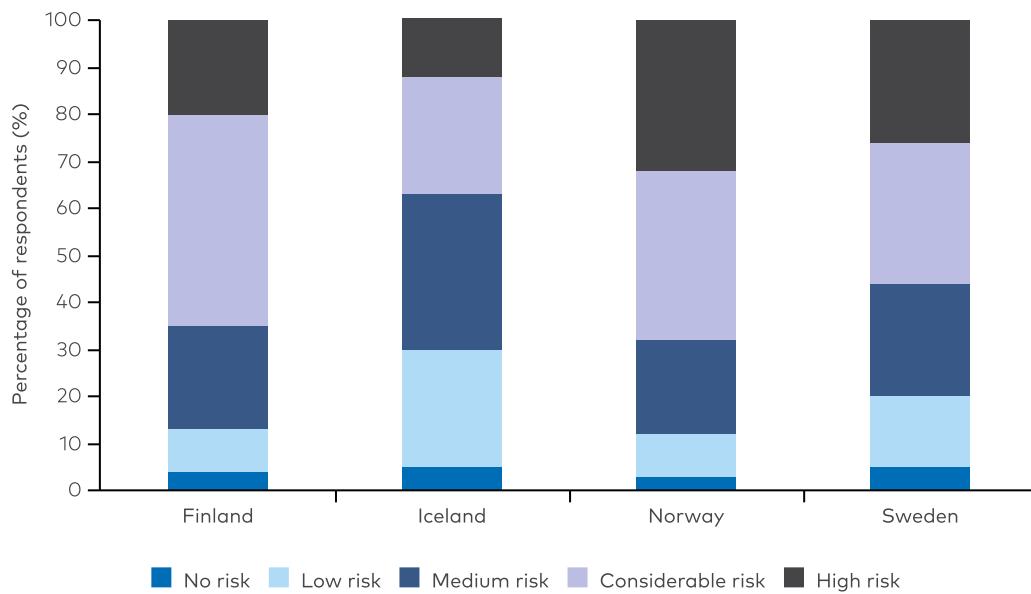
**Note:** The figure is based on 49 responses in Finland, 33 responses in Iceland, 95 responses in Norway and 206 responses in Sweden. Municipalities that answered 'Don't know' or 'We do not work with the 2030 Agenda' were excluded from the analysis. Results from Denmark are not shown in this figure, as the LRGA in Denmark (KL) conducted a separate [survey among Danish municipalities](#). This survey contained a similar question to the one posed here ('Where is the work with the SDGs anchored administratively?'), the results of which are described in the main text.

**Lack of political prioritisation and support from the state:** Alongside 'lack of capacity', Nordic municipalities consider 'lack of state support' and 'lack of political prioritisation' to be the main obstacles to SDG localisation. When political and administrative leaders at all levels of governance prioritise the SDGs, they signal a commitment to sustainability that can galvanise action across government agencies, civil society and the private sector. Conversely, the absence of political prioritisation by national, regional or local politicians and/or the administrative leadership can pose a significant barrier to progress. Without political commitment, efforts to localise the SDGs may lack support and direction, leading to fragmentation, inconsistency and competing priorities within municipal governance structures. This can undermine coordination, resource allocation and overall effectiveness in addressing sustainability challenges.

**Challenges ahead:** Looking ahead, the survey results shown in Figure 16 highlight the interconnected nature of global economic trends and local sustainability efforts. In the current context of rising inflation and high energy prices, well over half of the responding municipalities in Norway (68%), Finland (65%) and Sweden (56%) stated that there is a considerable or high risk that the global goals will be de-prioritised. By contrast, only 38% of responding municipalities in Iceland saw such a risk. In Denmark, meanwhile, around 30% of responding municipalities stated that the local administration and politicians currently had little or no interest in the

SDGs.<sup>[22]</sup>

**Figure 16: In your view, what is the risk that the current economic stress caused by rising inflation and high energy prices will lead to a de-prioritisation of the 2030 Agenda?**



**Note:** The figure is based on 55 responses in Finland, 40 responses in Iceland, 95 responses in Norway and 190 responses in Sweden. Municipalities that answered 'Don't know' or 'We do not work with the 2030 Agenda' were excluded from the analysis. Results from Denmark are not shown in this figure, as the LRGA in Denmark (KL) conducted a separate [survey among Danish municipalities](#). This survey contained a question similar to the one posed here ('Are you seeing an increasing or decreasing interest in the SDGs in your municipality?'), the results of which are described in the main text.

Overall, the challenges faced by the Nordic countries in implementing the 2030 Agenda underscore the critical need for strategic governance, political support and strengthened capacity. A changing political climate, declining support for working with the global goals, and external economic stressors pose significant obstacles to the effective long-term integration of the SDGs into local governance structures. Fostering resilience, prioritising sustainability and maintaining momentum amid changing circumstances is therefore critical to realising the transformative potential of the SDGs and advancing sustainable development for all.

22. See Figure 13 in [Danish survey](#).

## 4.6. Key messages

- A large majority (from 98% in Norway to around 64% in Finland and Iceland) of Nordic municipalities are working towards localising the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. Despite this, differences exist in their implementation approaches: while approximately 10% of municipalities in the Nordic Survey identify as pioneers, between 36% (in Iceland and Finland) and 2% (in Norway) are not working actively with the SDGs at all.
- Overall, most responding municipalities that have integrated the 2030 Agenda and SDGs have done so in a holistic manner, focusing on all sustainability dimensions, from the economic to the social and environmental.
- A number of municipalities have been able to integrate the 2030 Agenda into several aspects of governance and administration, for instance embedding SDGs into the local strategy and vision (from 35% in Iceland to up to 93% in Finland), local planning systems (from 34% in Finland up to 86% in Norway), local budgets (from 16% in Iceland to 79% in Sweden) and procurement guidelines (between 23% in Iceland and 45% in Finland).
- While all SDGs are acknowledged as important, some municipalities prioritise individual SDGs in their work, with SDG 3 (good health and well-being), SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities) and SDG 13 (climate action) among the most important for local authorities. These priorities reflect strategic resource allocation imperatives and tailored efforts to address local concerns, such as environmental challenges and public service provision.
- A number of key success factors were mentioned concerning local implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including incorporation of the 2030 Agenda into municipal management processes ('anchoring'), capacity to work with the global goals, political prioritisation of this work, and translating the global goals to the local context.
- Lack of resource capacity, including designated personnel for coordinating SDG implementation, can be an obstacle to a municipality's ability to integrate sustainability initiatives into local governance frameworks (from 77% of municipalities in Finland to 71% in Sweden mentioning this as a serious or very serious obstacle). Additional obstacles to local work with the 2030 Agenda include lack of state support and political prioritisation, as well as lack of access to methods and tools.
- Other exogenous factors, such as financial constraints caused by rising inflation and high energy prices, may lead to de-prioritisation of the 2030 Agenda, as immediate financial challenges demand attention and resources. Around 38% of responding municipalities in Iceland to 68% in Norway view this as a considerable to high risk that the global goals will be de-prioritised.



PHOTOS: UNSPLASH AND STEFAN BERG / IMAGEBANKSWEDEN.SE

## 5. Actions to create local ownership and leave no one behind

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One of the consequences of involving youth in local SDG work is that their trust in politicians and political institutions increases when they participate. Democratic legitimacy starts at the local level.

– Nordic Youth Network for Sustainability

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This chapter elaborates on the importance of partnerships and stakeholder engagement for supporting local ownership of the SDGs and using local resources to build more inclusive communities. In addition to analysis based on the survey responses and [Nordic Toolbox](#) examples, it contains two 'subchapters' drafted by the *Nordic Youth Network for Sustainability* (section 5.3) and the *Nordic Civil Society Network* (section 5.4). These subchapters provide additional insights into what municipalities could gain from more systematic collaboration with youth and civil society – and how to do it in a productive and meaningful way.

### 5.1 Current and potential collaboration partners

The principle of leaving no one behind and reducing inequalities is fundamental both to the 2030 Agenda and for the work of municipalities and regions in the Nordic welfare states. In the 2021 Norwegian VSR (KS, 2021), 99% of municipalities agreed that it is 'at the heart of their purpose' to provide good social services and basic welfare for all inhabitants. Still, 'only' 58% said they had identified marginalised groups in policymaking and worked preventively against, for example, child poverty, racism and drug abuse (*ibid.*). Income inequality has increased more in the Nordic countries than in most OECD countries since

the early 1990's, although it remains well below the OECD average. Capital income has become a more significant factor of inequality and redistribution has weakened, thus contributing to the trend, according to the Nordic Economy Policy Review 2018 (Egholt Søgaard et al., 2018). This could pose a threat to social cohesion and trust a development further elaborated on by the Swedish Fiscal Policy Council in a recent report (Swedish Fiscal Policy Council, 2024).

Despite this, Nordic societies generally boast a high degree of trust (Andreasson, 2017) and a collaborative governance culture involving diverse stakeholders through partnerships and volunteering. As mentioned in Chapter 3, this is a success factor supportive of the innovative, cross-sectoral approaches needed to implement the inter-related SDGs. The Nordic Survey asked how often municipalities host SDG-related activities for different *local actors* in order to enhance local ownership of SDGs.<sup>[23]</sup> In Iceland, Norway and Sweden, *internal staff* were the most commonly invited group, followed by *local politicians* and then *youth*. In Finland, schools (children and youth) were the most often invited, while local politicians and local businesses ranked second and third respectively.

Municipalities were also asked how closely they collaborate with different *external actors* on SDG-related activities (see Figure 17). The top closest collaboration partners were *other municipalities in the same country*, and in one case *regional/county council*. Notably, Finland and Iceland put private *businesses* in their top three lists, while Norway and Sweden instead referred to *civil society* actors. In general, Iceland comes out as being less engaged in collaborations, with Norway boasting the most collaborations.<sup>[24]</sup> This can be related to the previous finding that Icelandic municipalities have thus far worked less with the SDGs than the other Nordic countries.

**Figure 17: Nordic Municipalities' top three closest collaboration partners<sup>[25]</sup>**

Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
Other municipalities in the same country	Regional/County council <sup>[26]</sup>	Other municipalities in the same country	Other municipalities in the same country
Research & education institutes	Research & education institutes	Regional/County council	Civil society organisations & culture
Private companies	Private companies	Civil society organisations & culture	Regional/County council

- 
23. For country-by-country charts on 'How often has the local authority carried out activities to involve the following actors on 2030 Agenda', see Appendix 2.
24. For country-by-country charts on 'How often has the local authority engaged in collaboration with the different actors on 2030 Agenda', see Appendix 2.
25. Country by country charts on "how often has the local authority engaged in collaboration with the following actors on 2030 Agenda" in Appendix 2
26. Note that in Iceland, the Regional Associations of Municipalities ("Landshlutasamtök sveitarfélaga") have no official mandate but receive funding and have a secretariat. The associations organize the cooperation between municipalities located in a certain area/region on specific issues.

**The Danish Survey** contained two questions related to the topic of partnerships. Firstly, it inquired how municipalities utilise SDG 17 (on partnerships) as a means of achieving the SDGs. In response, 48% of municipalities said they implement SDGs within existing partnerships, while 30% said they have established new ones. *Only 7% responded that they don't work in partnerships.*<sup>[27]</sup> Secondly, the survey questioned the degree to which municipalities collaborate with different external actors in order to achieve the SDGs (here 'other municipalities' was not an option). *The top three collaboration partners selected were private sector actors, civil society, and 'other actors'.* Universities/research institutes and regions were ranked slightly lower<sup>[28]</sup>.

Overall, survey respondents from a majority of the Nordic countries confirmed that they see benefits of collaborating primarily with other municipalities and regional actors to achieve the SDGs, while Danish respondents put businesses and civil society at the top. The responses imply a potential for improvement when it comes to forming partnerships with businesses (especially in Sweden and Norway) and with civil society (in Finland and Iceland) and also with research institutes to enhance SDG-related competencies. Although it is difficult to verify how well the results mirror the full extent of existing partnerships, as they are often integral to a municipality's daily work. There are several examples in the [Nordic Toolbox](#) of impactful public-private partnerships, including a local business-driven approach to reducing youth unemployment (*Alla behövs på Gotland*, see also Box 12); increasing access to recycled goods and upcycling services (*ReTuna second-hand mall* in Eskilstuna, Box 13); and producing biogas energy from organic waste (*Förka biogas plant* in Torshavn, Box 11). In Iceland, *Suðurnes Forum* was established as a consultation forum aimed at enhancing cooperation between municipalities and companies in line with the SDGs (again, see Box 11). Finally, it should be noted that the survey response to prioritise activities for local staff and local politicians is promising, as it is an important success factor in SDG implementation (see section 4.5.1 and Figure 13).

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27. See Figure 4 in [Danish survey](#)  
28. See Figure 9 in [Danish survey](#)

## BOX 11: ENHANCING COOPERATION AND PARTNERSHIPS

### TORSHAVN AND PARTNERSHIPS FOR A CIRCULAR ECONOMY, FAROE ISLANDS

Torshavn municipality, the Förka Biogas plant (part of the Bakka frost Group, the largest salmon producer in the Faroe Islands), Hilton and other hotels, and the Torshavn hospital together launched a pilot project aimed at converting organic waste from various sources into energy and heating. The operation started in March 2023. Initial assessments indicate that the facility's equipment and capacity are sufficient for the level of waste processing required. A final evaluation involving Torshavn municipality, Förka, Hilton and the hospital is planned.

#### IMPACTS:

Processing organic food waste into energy and heating instead of resorting to landfill or incineration contributes to SDG 13 (climate action). Additionally, the production of fertiliser from biological waste decreases the need for synthetic fertilisers, aligning with SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation) by potentially reducing chemical runoff. Recovering fertiliser from organic waste also supports SDG 15 (life on land) by reducing the need for new raw materials and promoting resource efficiency. Meanwhile, waste reduction efforts in line with a zero waste policy contribute to SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production), and economic benefits such as cost savings in waste management and potential job creation align with SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth). On top of this, community engagement through collaboration with stakeholders fosters partnerships and addresses local waste management challenges, contributing to SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities).

#### LINKS TO LEARN MORE:

[Circular Economy: Pilot Project for Recycling of Organic Waste in Faroe Islands](#)

## **SUÐURNES CONSULTATION FORUM TO ENHANCE COOPERATION FOR SDG LOCALISATION IN SUÐURNESJAVETTVANGUR, ICELAND**

Suðurnes Forum is a consultation forum established to enhance cooperation in line with SDGs between the region's municipalities and companies. Projects were created and linked directly to the SDGs. The platform has a steering group responsible for the projects, as well as a group of sponsors who support these initiatives. The forum's vision of a 'Sustainable Journey to Prosperity in the South' has helped in getting people involved.

### **IMPACTS:**

Great emphasis was placed on ensuring objectives were clear and measurable, with numerous steps taken to define the projects. Work on one of these projects, which involved collectively measuring the area's carbon footprint area, is now in its final stages.

### **LINKS TO LEARN MORE:**

[Suðurnes Consultation Forum: Declaration of Intent for a Circular Park](#)

## **BOX 12: ALLA BEHÖVS ('EVERYONE IS NEEDED'), GOTLAND, SWEDEN**

'Everyone is Needed' is a business-driven initiative to improve matching and skills supply in Gotland (a predominantly rural island community) and reduce youth unemployment. The initiative aims to match young people - aged 16-35 who are neither working nor studying and who are in or at risk of long-term unemployment and other barriers to work – with local jobs, mainly in the private sector. Employment service or social services can assign participants to the programme, or youth can apply directly.

The initiative is a collaboration between the local business association and its members, and the regional authority and social services. While the former are seeking staff, the latter wish to reduce the risks of long-term unemployment, social exclusion and mental health issues among youth. The fact that the project works closely with companies and make matches based on skills and personal interests also stands out. While the ultimate goal is to place participants in full-time positions, many start with a 1–3 month internship/introduction.

### **IMPACTS:**

So far, the initiative has managed to match 70 unemployed people with jobs. According to evaluators, this represents a very good result based on the target group (youth living on social assistance).

Since September 2023, the initiative has worked with 19 new participants, with an increased focus on prevention efforts for youth who have not completed high school.

### **LINKS TO LEARN MORE:**

[The Perfect Match – Gotland's Official Inspiration Page](#)

[Tillväxt Gotland](#)

[Final conference – Alla behövs på Gotland \(youtube.com\)](#)

## BOX 13: RE-TUNA GALLERIA IN ESKilstuna, SWEDEN

ReTuna is a shopping mall selling only recycled goods. All the goods are refurbished items that would otherwise have been thrown away. The mall is located on the outskirts of Eskilstuna next door to a recycling centre where visitors can hand in items to be freshened up and resold. Staff then sort through and distribute goods to the 13 stores selling clothes, home furnishings, furniture, electronics, books, bicycles, eco-certified flowers and more. Municipalities, companies, media outlets and others visit ReTuna every week in order to study the concept or be inspired by its environment and accompanying conference area. The World Economic Forum in Davos and international media such as the BBC and CNN have drawn attention to the mall.

### **IMPACTS:**

In the beginning, ReTuna was seen as primarily an environmental project, with the goal of increasing recycling and reducing waste incineration. After a while, however, it became clear that the project was creating a significant number of jobs. Another positive effect is that the money stays within the municipality, which has a high unemployment rate. Overall, the mall has proven to be sustainable – environmentally, economically and socially.

### **LINKS TO LEARN MORE:**

[ReTuna](#)

Nordic municipalities' attitudes towards youth engagement are reflected in the responses to the Nordic survey question, 'How often has your local authority carried out activities to involve the following groups(...)?' Finland put schools/students as most frequent guests while the other countries put youth as number two or three. Empowering youth to impact political decisions and develop sustainable solutions not only benefits the community but can give young people a sense of meaning and belonging – and hope for the future (as further elaborated in the youth subchapter, 5.3). Local youth councils are mandated by law in Finland, Iceland, and Norway. Here, some municipalities have had youth councils for a long time, while others have not yet established a youth council. In 2022, the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufdir) and the Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS) invited the youth councils in Karasjok, Alta and Hammerfest to participate in a peer-learning workshop on how to run youth councils. The workshop was the first of its kind, aiming to strengthen the impact of youth councils through better organisation, training and systematisation of their work. Workshop recommendations and learnings were summarised in a report<sup>[29]</sup> for other youth councils to be inspired by – and to avoid reinventing the wheel in every new youth council.

Even so, it remains a challenge for local policymakers to reach out to youth beyond those who are most interested. Here, local schools can play an important role in building knowledge on sustainable development, as well as mobilising students to participate in youth councils and other sustainability work. In Karlstad, Sweden, all middle and high schools were invited to participate in a *Students' Council for the Climate (Elevborgarråd för klimatet)*, which was tasked with helping reduce the municipality's CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. The council generated 50 proposals aimed at accelerating the transition towards a more sustainable city. Several of the proposals quickly became reality, such as a competition between schools to reduce food waste. Meanwhile, in Fagersta, also in Sweden, young people aged 13–20 years old were invited to engage in *participatory budgeting*. This involved developing concrete ideas for youth activities that could improve mental health and security in the community, with a maximum price tag of SEK 50,000 (ca 4,400 EUR). The winning proposals were implemented in collaboration with the local authority.

Another acclaimed youth engagement approach is to become a UNICEF-certified child-friendly city. Certification requires that local authorities consult with the younger generation on a regular basis regarding matters that concern them. Ideas are collected through dialogues and workshops in schools and pre-schools, with the aim of improving decision-making towards the SDGs. At the same time, the city administration must fulfil the *UN Convention of the Rights of the Child*. There are several examples in the [Nordic Toolbox](#) on how to practice this, most notably Kópavogur in Iceland and Gladsaxe in Denmark (see Box 14). Finland is also pursuing a UNICEF child-friendly municipality model, with examples including Oulu and its youth challenger group, and [Hämeenlinna](#) – the country's first UNICEF-certified child-friendly city.

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29. <https://www.ks.no/contentassets/ef9db5970a5d4b5d949804b9c29a269b/KS-Hefte-Undomsmedvirkning-og-ungdomsraad-ENG.pdf>

## BOX 14: UNICEF-CERTIFIED CHILD-FRIENDLY CITIES

### CHILD-FRIENDLY KÓPAVOGUR, ICELAND

Kópavogur implements the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child through municipal-level strategic action plans. In May 2021, Kópavogur was recognised as a Child Friendly City by UNICEF – with its preschools in particular highlighted for praise – making it one of the first municipalities in the world to achieve this acknowledgment. In line with the city's commitment to children's rights, numerous projects and actions have been undertaken. For instance, the local authority has engaged in 'World Café' meetings with children aged 9–15, including those from immigrant backgrounds, to gather their perspectives. Individual interviews have also been conducted with children with special needs.

#### IMPACTS:

The *Child Friendly City Index* offers a significant tool for assessing the well-being of children in Kópavogur. The index, comprising 80–90 indicators sourced from reliable surveys and other data, monitors children's quality of life over time and serves as a foundation for various initiatives, including the Digital Citizenship benchmark curriculum. The curriculum, set to commence in 2024, provides a web-based solution designed to assist children in navigating the digital world responsibly. In doing so, the programme aims to tackle challenges highlighted in the Child-Friendly City Index, such as the prevalence of hurtful messages on social media reported by 30–40% of children.

#### LINKS TO LEARN MORE:

[Children's quality of life in Kópavogur -methodology](#)

[Child-Friendly Society Kópavogsbær](#)

[Nordregio – Agenda 2030. How to reach the goals and measure success at the local level](#)

## CHILD-FRIENDLY HÄMEENLINNA AND THE FINNISH MODEL

The Child Friendly Municipality model is based on the Child Friendly City initiative, implemented by UNICEF since 1996. More specifically, the Finnish model was developed in cooperation with the City of Hämeenlinna during 2012–2013. In December 2013, Hämeenlinna duly received recognition as the first UNICEF Child Friendly Municipality in Finland.

The city implements a detailed action plan based on surveys assessing the realisation of children's rights, steered by a cross-administrative coordination group. Hämeenlinna has also committed to providing high-quality children's cultural activities, including workshops, performances, and festivals like Hippaloi and the Light Phenomenon festival. The city's efforts focus on preventing discrimination, supporting mental health, and ensuring the inclusion of vulnerable children.

Overall, the solutions developed by municipalities vary, but they always contribute to addressing the most significant child rights challenges in the municipality. Child-friendliness can take the form of free afternoon activities, hobbies or bringing youth services to where young people are located. The Child-Friendly Municipality model reaches 55 percent of children living in Finland and 59 municipalities are developing their child-friendliness with the support of UNICEF, namely: Eurajoki, Forssa, Hämeenlinna, Hamina, Hattula, Helsinki, Humppila, Imatra, Isokyrö, Janakkala, Joensuu, Jyväskylä, Kangasala, Kärkölä, Kauhajoki, Kemiönsaari, Kempele, Keuruu, Kirkkonummi, Kokkola, Kotka, Kuopio, Kurikka, Lapinjärvi, Lappeenranta, Lempäälä, Leppävirta, Liminka, Liperi, Lohja, Loppi, Lovisa, Malax, Marttila, Nokia, Oulu, Outokumpu, Pedersöre, Pori, Puumala, Ranua, Rautalampi, Riihimäki, Rovaniemi, Ruokolahti, Salo, Seinäjoki, Sotkamo, Tammela, Tampere, Tornio, Turku, Tuusula, Vaasa, Vantaa, Vesilahti, Vihti, Vöyri, Ylöjärvi.

### IMPACTS:

By adhering to the UNICEF guidelines, Hämeenlinna and the other Finnish UNICEF "Child friendly Cities" fosters an inclusive environment for children, ensuring their voices are heard and valued. Children and young people are actively involved in decision-making processes through structured programs like the "Path of Influence" and the Youth Council, promoting a culture of engagement and responsibility. The city's policies emphasise the mental well-being and safety of children, integrating these priorities into everyday life and municipal decision-making.

### LINKS TO LEARN MORE:

[UNICEF\\_\(lapsiyystavallinenkunta.fi\)](http://UNICEF_(lapsiyystavallinenkunta.fi))

The youth subchapter (section 5.3) below offers further in-depth knowledge about effective local practices aimed at ensuring meaningful youth participation. Following this, in the civil society subchapter (section 5.4), Nordic Civ and three of its member organisations describe their work building partnerships in the municipalities and strengthening local communities in line with the SDGs.

## 5.2. Key messages

- Core to the work of Nordic municipalities and regions is the notion of leave no one behind.
- In general, Nordic societies boast a high degree of trust and a collaborative governance culture.
- In Iceland, Norway and Sweden, internal staff were the most often invited group to SDG-related activities, followed by local politicians and youth. In Finland, schools were most often invited, followed by local politicians and local businesses.
- Nordic municipalities' primary collaboration partners are other municipalities and regional/county councils. Finland and Iceland also put research institutes and private businesses on their top lists, while Norway and Sweden chose civil society actors.
- Only 7% of Danish municipalities say they *don't* work in partnerships to achieve the SDGs. Their closest collaboration partners are private sector and civil society actors.
- There is room for improvement when it comes to municipal authorities forming partnerships with businesses and civil society in some countries (see examples in the [Nordic Toolbox](#) and in the civil society subchapter – section 5.4 – below).
- Activities for staff and local politicians are important when it comes to anchoring the SDGs.
- Reaching and involving youth in a systematic and meaningful way remains a challenge for policymakers. Here, digital tools, youth councils and local schools can play an important role (see examples in the Youth subchapter – section 5.3 – below).

## **5.3. Subchapter by Nordic Youth Network on meaningful youth inclusion**

Youth participation is critical to ensuring inclusive civil societies and political processes in line with the 2030 Agenda. Despite young people between the ages of 15 and 25 constituting a fifth of the world's population, their power and influence in societal matters is often lacking, leading to many young people feeling that policymakers do not listen to them (UN, n.d.-b). In Sweden, a recent study found that young peoples' trust in democracy is fading, with 56% of youth between 15–24 reporting they do not believe politicians will be able to solve the major societal issues facing us (Ungdomsbarometern, 2024).

Youth participation is vital if future generations are to feel a sense of legitimacy regarding the processes and institutions underpinning society. As such, this subchapter will provide recommendations for local policymakers on how to engage youth in local efforts towards achieving the SDGs. The subchapter has been drafted by the *Nordic Youth Network for Sustainable Development*, which consists of youth delegates from all five Nordic countries. Despite these roots in the Nordic Region, the hope is that the ideas expressed below can inspire policymakers from across the world in their efforts to include youth and give them hope for the future.

### **5.3.1. 'Youth washing'**

A fruitful starting point before turning to a discussion of *good* youth participation is to unpick the practice of *youth washing* – to superficially engage young people in decision-making processes without meaningful participation or influence. While the Nordic Region is often lauded for its progressive policies and inclusive governance, there are notable discrepancies when it comes to meaningful youth involvement.

One of the primary challenges is the tokenisation of youth voices, with young people being invited to participate in policy discussions merely as a formality, rather than any desire for genuine engagement. Additionally, structural barriers – such as limited access to decision-making platforms, inadequate resources for youth-led initiatives, and a lack of political will when it comes to prioritising youth perspectives – further exacerbate the issue. While youth washing remains a problem also in the Nordic countries, concerted efforts to prioritise meaningful youth participation and dismantle systemic barriers are underway. By adopting and scaling up good practices from other municipalities, local policymakers can move towards more inclusive and equitable governance, ensuring young people are not only heard but also actively involved in creating solutions to local sustainability challenges.

### **5.3.2. Real and meaningful participation**

The [Swedish National Youth Council \(LSU\)](#) has identified several crucial aspects that need to be in place in order to engage youth more efficiently, thereby reducing the risk of youth washing (LSU, 2023). Above all, there must be a clear mandate for young people to be involved throughout the entire process from agenda setting to follow up with resources allocated to ensure this. Moreover, youth need a permanent seat at the table, as well as easy access to responsible politicians and policymakers. In practice, this means invitations should be sent out at an early

stage, rather than last minute. This will allow youth to come prepared, as their time and resources are limited compared to full-time municipality employees.

Similarly, the [Norwegian Children and Youth Council \(LNU\)](#) has mapped out five key principles that should be implemented to ensure real and meaningful youth participation aligned with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (LNU, n.d.):

1. **Independence.** Youths must be able to choose what they want to engage in. This involves the right to be heard in all decision-making processes they are impacted by, including any processes youth themselves deem they have a stake in.
2. **Representation.** Youths must be able to choose their own representatives, rather than political leaders cherry-picking a youth 'alibi' or someone they believe represents youth.
3. **Unique competences.** Youths should be recognised as a professional resource with unique expertise that is cannot be found elsewhere.
4. **Access to information.** Youths must be given full access to information relevant to the institutions and processes in which they participate. This access to information should be on a par with other stakeholders and participants.
5. **Continuity in processes.** Youths must be able to participate across the entire length of a political process, including its core work and debates. One-off events and processes that are not democratically founded do not count as full participation. As such, youths should not simply be invited to give initial input before the process begins, nor asked to give a stamp of approval once the process is finished.

### 5.3.3. Youth involvement in practice at the local level

Expanding on the above-mentioned good practices and principles for participation, below are some concrete steps local policymakers can take to include youth in their day-to-day and long-term work.

#### Youth councils at the local level

In many Nordic municipalities, youth councils play a significant role in achieving the SDGs. In Finland, Iceland and Norway, municipalities are required by law to have a youth council or equivalent structures in place (Government of Norway, 2020). Creating a politically non-partisan local youth council that works parallel with the elected council is a tangible, fruitful way of including youth and strengthening their bonds to the local community. The task of a youth council is to make young people's voices heard, take a stand on current issues, and bring youth initiatives and statements to the elected council. Youth councils can and should be given the opportunity to comment on all types of issues, not just those directly related to young peoples' lives.

While ensuring broad, inclusive participation in a youth council can sometimes be challenging, addressing the needs of youth from all sections of society and including them in existing as well as new political structures is vital. There are several ways to recruit youth. Reaching out to local schools and/or student councils offers a useful starting point and could involve teachers asking students if they might be interested. Just as important as inclusive participation is the political feedback loop. This involves local policymakers asking youth council representatives to gather and deliver back opinions from their classmates, student councils and other relevant youth

organisations. The policymakers must also notify youth which political decisions were made and the means by which they can be involved in implementation of any relevant (often SDG-related) measures. This creates a feedback loop that ensures youth representatives are not just speaking on behalf of themselves, but all of their peers and reporting back to them.

## **Showcasing impactful efforts to include youth – crowning proactive municipalities**

In Finland, [the Union of Local Youth Councils](#) (Nuva ry) has developed the *Youth Council Friendly Municipality Certificate* programme in cooperation with the country's municipalities. The aim is to showcase a municipality's and/or city's outstanding contribution to youth participation, as well as shine a light on the time and resources expended by its youth council.

Every second year in Norway, meanwhile, the Norwegian Agency for Children, Youth and Family (Bufdir) appoints a jury to choose which of the nominated municipalities will be awarded the title of '*Youth Municipality of the Year*' (Bufdir, 2023) (see Box 15). Like Finland's certificate programme, being crowned 'youth municipality of the year' spotlights local policymakers' efforts to enhance the lives of and include children and youth. Implementing arrangements along the lines of these two examples can form part of a broader toolbox for motivating local policymakers and municipalities to include youth in their work.

## **BOX 15: KVAM: YOUTH MUNICIPALITY OF THE YEAR 2023, NORWAY**

Kvam municipality have been developing SDGs targeted work in the leisure field. In January 2021, together with the local youth council, the municipality carried out an 'Alla Med' (All Join In) initiative. Local youth, municipal employees, politicians and volunteers helped identify obstacles to children's and young people's participation in leisure activities. This, in addition to information from a survey, set a course for the municipality leisure initiative.

Every year since 2021, the municipality has arranged a leisure fair, where local youth organisations get the opportunity to showcase the activities they offer. All seventh to tenth grade students attend the fair, which is also open to students in the first grade of high school. Among other things, the municipality has established an interdisciplinary coordination group for young people's leisure, which includes representatives for instance from the school sector, the child welfare service, the cultural office, and the local volunteer center.

Kvam municipality has also worked actively to create meeting places for children and young people, with the youth council playing a central role in this. In June 2023, for example, the municipal council granted funds to a Basecamp outdoor area at the initiative of the youth council. The youth council has also been important in the development of the holiday home Ungdomsbasen. Furthermore, the municipality has established services such as an open hall, strengthened the local cultural school and further developed the concept Young Leisure Holiday. Through the leisure initiative, the municipality has also allocated funds to a new motocross track and facilitated the establishment of a local e-sports club.

### **IMPACTS:**

Through a systematic focus on the leisure field and active participation work, the municipality seeks to ensure that children and young people experience a sense of belonging to their communities.

In 2023 the municipality was recognised in the Norwegian national youth conference in Mosjøen, as the Youth Municipality of the Year.

### **LINKS TO LEARN MORE:**

[Kvam – Youth Municipality of the Year 2023](#)

## Digital tools – a smart way to reach youth

Local policymakers should take into consideration the fact that young people often use digital tools as their primary way of engaging. As such, efficient youth participation should not be limited to traditional face-to-face interactions. Instead, policymakers should take advantage of digital platforms as an additional means of engaging youth in SDG-related work. Although there are few concrete examples of this being done as yet, some municipalities have tried using social media to connect with young people. For example, Åfjord in Norway is using Snapchat to gather young people's opinions on local matters (Government of Norway, 2019). The Snapchat account is run in collaboration with their local youth council and has proven to be a productive method of reaching youth (see Box 16). Elsewhere, the rural municipality of Tierp in Sweden recently developed an app for youth dialogue called *Young in Tierp*, which provides essential information and ways of sharing opinions with local policymakers (Tierp Municipality, 2024) (see also Box 16).

## **BOX 16: HARNESSING DIGITAL TOOLS FOR YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN MUNICIPAL GOVERNANCE**

### **EMPOWERING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT: LEVERAGING SNAPCHAT FOR MUNICIPAL COMMUNICATION IN ÅFJORD, NORWAY**

The municipality of Åfjord in Trøndelag has worked with its youth council to manage a Snapchat account. The youth council plays a key role in ensuring youth participation by facilitating communication between young people and the municipality. Towards this end, young residents can use Snapchat to voice their concerns or suggestions indirectly through the youth council, reducing the need for direct contact with the municipality.

#### **IMPACTS:**

This platform allows young people to share their perspectives on various aspects of their lives, including making requests for new services and providing feedback on existing initiatives. In addition, both the municipality and the youth council can use Snapchat to disseminate information about available services and ongoing issues, fostering a more dynamic, interactive relationship between local government and young citizens.

#### **LINKS TO LEARN MORE:**

[What is a Youth Council? – Åfjord municipality](#)

[Children and young people's involvement – the Government of Norway](#)

## **MENTAL HEALTH THROUGH A FIVE-STEP DIALOGUE PROCESS PLUS A NEW APP 'YOUNG IN TIERP', TIERP, SWEDEN**

In recent years, Tierp has focused on improving access to health services and social activities in the municipality. These efforts target several SDGs, including SDG 3 (good health and wellbeing). The initiative aims to increase mental health literacy, involve young people in identifying and implementing preventive measures, and evaluate the effectiveness of such interventions. The ultimate goal is to develop improved methods for addressing mental health issues while empowering young people. The dialogue process employed in Tierp was developed by the NGO Tillia and consists of five steps:

1. *Initial workshops in schools:* Workshops are organised in local schools consisting of 15–30 students per session. The workshops begin with a broad discussion about well-being and mental health, gradually narrowing down to specific actions for improvement.
2. *Formation of a youth expert group:* A group of young experts is then created to ensure the ideas, opinions and suggestions captured during the workshops are accurately understood and incorporated into a report.
3. *Report writing:* A report is written and findings shared with various stakeholders in the municipality.
4. *Policymaker engagement meeting:* A meeting is held with local policymakers to discuss the report's findings, with the aim of securing both short-term and long-term commitments to act.
5. *Follow-up:* Three months after the meeting, the participating policymakers are requested to provide a written follow-up to the young people, outlining what actions have been taken (or not) in the interim.

### **IMPACTS:**

One impact of the process was the launch of the 'Young in Tierp' app in spring 2023. The app features a calendar of events and directory of activities and youth-friendly meeting places, as well as information about school meal options. Additionally, it offers guidance on where to access psychological and social support services. Moreover, it includes an integrated digital youth panel, allowing young individuals to take part in brief surveys on various topics, such as climate initiatives, and influence local decision-making. These surveys help inform municipal authorities about youth perspectives on key issues. The app was developed in collaboration with a company that also distributes it to other municipalities.

### **LINKS TO LEARN MORE:**

[Nordregio – Youth as partners in the green transition](#)

### **5.3.4. The role of education and schools as platforms for sustainable development**

The fact that public education at the primary and lower-secondary level is mandatory in the Nordics means that municipal policymakers can directly impact all youth through the education system. As mentioned, schools and teachers can play an important role in recruiting young people to participate in local decision-making structures (e.g. youth councils) and SDG work. Enabling young people from all parts of society to participate in a meaningful and effective way, however, requires that they be provided with the requisite knowledge on democracy and sustainability.

In this respect, education plays an essential role when it comes to reaching the SDGs. SDG 4 (quality education) not only focuses on inclusive and equitable quality education for all, but – via Target 4.7 – highlights the importance of ensuring all learners acquiring ‘the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development’ (UN, 2024). As this implies, knowledge about sustainable development is considered an important goal in and of itself.

In a recent report, the Nordic Council of Ministers explored the implementation of Target 4.7 in compulsory education in Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2021). As has been acknowledged, the pillars of sustainable development are interconnected, which means understanding the relationships and possible synergies or trade-offs between goals is fundamental to achieving the 2030 Agenda. Although the study confirmed a strong emphasis on equality and democracy in education across the Nordic countries, education on sustainability was often limited to climate issues. Hence, there remains scope for enhancing educational opportunities and increasing education around *all* aspects of sustainable development.

### **5.3.5. Key messages from youth to local governments**

- Implement principles for real and meaningful participation in all youth inclusion measures.
- Establish local youth councils and youth groups in collaboration with local schools.
- Utilise social media and digital platforms to reach youth beyond youth council members.
- Focus on *all* SDGs in education programmes and school curricula, not just climate issues.

## 5.4. Subchapter by Nordic Civ: Civil society's role in creating sustainable communities

The Nordic Region has a long tradition of citizen participation and involvement in decision-making. A communal sense of belonging and trust, combined with strong social capital, has provided a firm foundation for the Nordic countries' welfare societies and the Nordic social model. Civil society has played – and continues to play – a crucial role in this process.

Numerous challenges, as well as opportunities, lie ahead in the ongoing transition towards a more climate-friendly, integrated Nordic Region in which resources are circulated and biodiversity protected. Towards this end, civil society is a vital partner when it comes to working with residents to anchor decisions and accelerate local-level action for change, while also reporting local experiences and results to policymakers. Engaging citizens in meaningful work within their communities offers a wide range of benefits beyond this bridging process between them and local politicians: it increases trust, builds knowledge and has a positive impact on participation in society at large. All this in line with the guiding principle of *leaving no one behind* and reducing inequalities and discrimination.

The Nordic Civil Society Network (Nordic Civ, see Box 17) was established in 2021 to ensure civil society has a strong voice in Nordic cooperation and that strategic work at the Nordic level reflects citizens' needs and interests. Recurrent consultations with the Nordic Council of Ministers provide the 40 member organisations with a forum for contributing their collective expertise. An added benefit is the opportunity for peer learning within the network, as the various member organisations each have a special niche in the ongoing transition. With all of the above in mind, this subchapter opens the floor to three of the network's member organisations, allowing them to set out in their own words how they are co-creating a more sustainable future in the Nordic Region's municipalities.

### BOX 17: THE NORDIC CIVIL SOCIETY NETWORK (NORDIC CIV)

**Nordic Civ** is an independent civil society network formed in 2021 that promotes collaboration between civil society, the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Nordic Council. The overarching aim of the network is to strengthen civil society's voice in Nordic cooperation and contribute to the transition towards an environmentally, economically and socially sustainable Nordic Region. The network consists of representatives from 40 civil society organisations in the Nordic countries and autonomous regions.

Member organisations highlight the value of sharing experiences and knowledge across geographical areas and sectors, and the strength to be found in communicating collectively regarding Nordic strategies and action plans. Additionally, members report that relationships formed within the group increase their sense of a united Nordic community working towards common goals. The Nordic Association (Föreningen Norden, SE) is the current coordinator of Nordic Civ, and will retain this role until 31 December 2024.

#### **Nordic Civ's key messages for involving civil society as partners in SDG efforts:**

- To enable meaningful collaboration, a framework and structure need to be in place, including clear aims and objectives.
- Cooperation forms should be developed by municipalities in close *dialogue* with civil society.
- To ensure that civil society's expertise and resources are utilised effectively, the collaboration needs to be *anchored* with and welcomed by local decision-makers.
- Civil society includes a variety of organisations with different perspectives, preconditions, and competencies. Municipalities that want to embrace this diversity of collaboration partners need to allocate enough *funds* towards this end.

#### **5.4.1. Bærekraftige liv (Sustainable living), Norway**

*Text by Ingrid Solstrand, Bærekraftige liv representative*

Bærekraftige liv (Sustainable living) started in 2008 as a local initiative in Bergen, Norway, challenging the conventional wisdom that significant societal change can only be achieved through top-down approaches. Instead, the initiative aimed to build a more sustainable community through increased cooperation and co-creation at a highly localised level. Recognising that such a transformation requires broad engagement, we focused on action-driven measures that showcased the benefits of shifting towards a more sustainable lifestyle.

Through this first positive, empowering example, the initiative evolved organically into a movement of around 30 community groups across Norway. Each group mobilises people and creates change within their own area by utilising the local resources and opportunities available to them. Benefits for members are stronger social inclusion – you get to know your neighbours – and lifestyle changes that support both health and the green transition. Integration of new citizens can be another added value: some groups have succeeded better than others in engaging, for example, immigrant women in volunteer work, which is more common in the Nordics than in their countries of origin.

The Sustainable Living Association has been a Nordic Civ member since the network was founded in 2021. Given that the association works at a grassroots level, participation in Nordic Civ has been particularly valuable, enabling it to lift the voices of everyday people to the Nordic level and demonstrate how small local initiatives can grow to large, impactful movements.

#### **5.4.2. International Women's Association (IKF), Sweden**

*Text by Annika Nyström, IKF representative*

IKF is a national association with numerous local member organisations across Sweden, all of which work for integration and against racism in the community. The association creates open, accessible meeting places for women who have come from all over the world. The local organisations have many members who came to Sweden as refugees in adulthood and often lack a network or support system. The local organisations are religiously and politically independent and offer a safe place for women, both Swedish and foreign-born.

Each member organisation works in their local community and focuses on issues relevant to their members. Common focus areas include women's health, gender equality, and inclusion in civil society and society at large – all issues that are central to sustainable development and local action. When asked about how they work with the SDGs, besides promoting social inclusion, one organisation highlighted the inherent sustainability of their members' lifestyles and how we have much to gain by learning from each other. The coordinator of the IKF Association in Borlänge municipality put it as follows:

*I always 'preach' that our women have the most sustainable and environmentally friendly lifestyles! They have allotments, they use a lot of vegetables in their food, they bake their own bread, they do not have cars, they coordinate their grocery shopping, they recycle clothes and sew alterations, most live in multi-family houses, and so on.*

### 5.4.3. Sustainability Now (SUSNOW), Denmark (also active in Greenland)

*Text by Pernille Thorup, SUSNOW representative*

Based in Denmark, Sustainability Now ([SUSNOW](#)) works to increase awareness of sustainability and create sustainable living conditions for children and young people. In Greenland, we work with Kommuneqarfik Sermersooq to increase civil society involvement in local development in Tasiilaq – the main town on the east coast, which faces major challenges related to mental health and abuse, especially among youth.

We have an eight-year contract with the municipality and are about halfway through a process involving a method called *narrative community work*. We consult and support local civil society actors regarding initiatives they know are important to create more sustainable living conditions for children and young people, and to protect their mental health. These include more and better housing, better educational opportunities, and local jobs that makes it possible to be self-supporting and live a 'good life' in Tasiilaq.

Using the 17 SDGs as a starting point, we focus on how different issues are interconnected. For example, it is not possible to work on health issues without working on housing, which in turn is dependent on the local business community (craftsmen), who need to be educated at the local school, and so on. Acceptance of complexity and contradiction is central to our approach. Thus, we spend considerable time dancing the necessary dance with paradoxically present opposites, asking with curiosity how people understand what is happening and how we might make other things happen.

Although we can see some results now, many of our partners ask if we can stay longer than the eight years. It takes time to nurture trust in us, then build trust between people locally. It also takes time to create the necessary network in the municipal administration. Gradually, however, SUSNOW has shown local civil society actors that – with a little help – better results can be achieved by being part of a more coordinated local context. Sometimes we feel like the secretaries of various groups in Tasiilaq, other times we feel like innovators or external diplomats working for the interests of the city. Some concrete examples of our work are available in the [Nordic Toolbox](#) (search for Sermersooq municipality).



PHOTOS: ODDLEIV APNESETH / NORDEN.ORG AND ISTOCK

## 6. Progress made in implementation of SDG goals and targets

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We need to remember that it [implementing the SDGs] is not a sprint; it is a marathon.

– Municipality of Hornafjörður, Iceland

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This chapter explores the progress made by Nordic municipalities in implementing the SDGs, particularly the status and use of local SDG indicators to monitor advances. Building on this, the chapter provides an example of how smart steering tools can be employed to track and measure progress. The insights discussed draw from data gathered in the Nordic surveys, supplemented by examples from the Nordic Toolbox and other written sources.

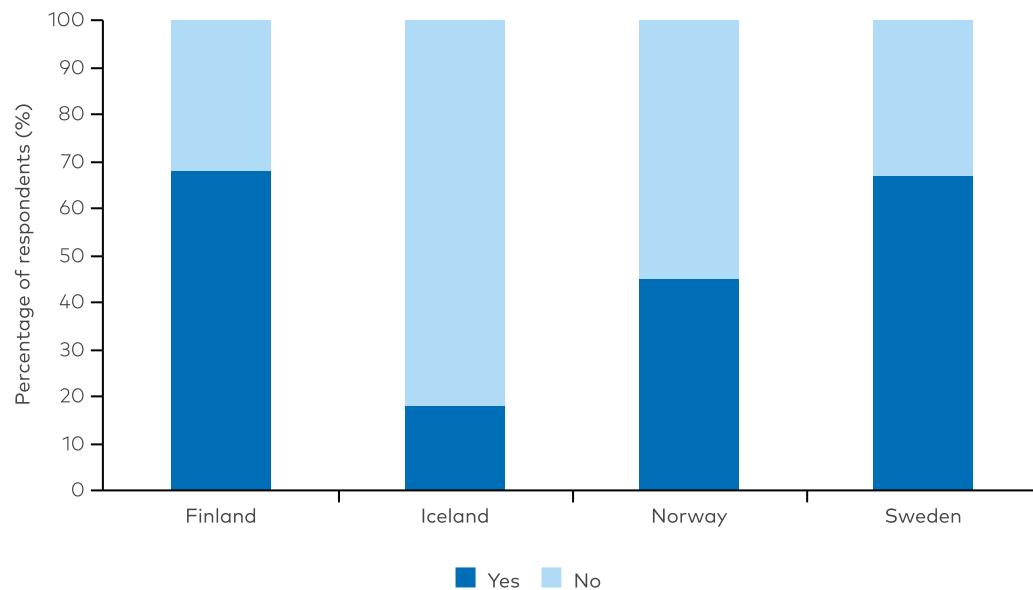
### 6.1. Measuring progress

Measuring and monitoring progress towards the SDGs and their associated targets is an essential aspect of the implementation process. The Nordic Survey results indicate significant variation in whether municipalities across the different Nordic countries measure their progress towards the SDGs (Figure 18). Approximately 68% of responding municipalities in Sweden and Finland reported that they measure their progress (unsurprising given the indicators available for municipal needs), compared to 45% of municipalities in Norway and just 18% in Iceland. The notably lower percentage in Iceland suggest its municipalities may still be in the early stages of implementing the 2030 Agenda compared to their counterparts in other Nordic countries.

Meanwhile, the Danish Survey results show a significant shift among Denmark's municipalities in terms of measuring progress. From 2018 to 2023, the share of responding municipalities stating that they do *not* measure progress in their SDG-related work

increased from 17% in 2018 to 62% in 2023.<sup>[30]</sup> Among those that did measure progress in 2023, 22% had created their own indicators, 7% were utilising indicators provided by Statistics Denmark ('Our Goals'), and 6% were adopting the UN's indicators.

**Figure 18: Does your authority measure progress in its work with the 2030 Agenda?**



**Note:** The figure is based on 53 responses in Finland, 33 responses in Iceland, 92 responses in Norway and 204 responses in Sweden. Municipalities that answered 'Don't know' or 'We do not work with the 2030 Agenda' were excluded from the analysis. Results from Denmark are not shown in this figure, as the LRGA in Denmark (KL) conducted a separate survey among Danish municipalities. That survey contained a similar question to the one posed here ('Which indicators does the municipality use to measure the progress of its SDG efforts?'), the results of which are described in the main text.

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30. See Figure 8 in [Danish Survey](#)

## 6.2. Local SDG indicators and monitoring tools

While national-level indicators for monitoring progress are relatively widely used in the Nordic countries, capturing the same progress at the local and regional levels has proven to be more challenging. This primarily stems from the lack of SDG indicators specifically adapted to local and regional contexts, as the existing national-level indicators are often too broad or insufficiently sensitive to local variations and priorities.

In collaboration with SALAR, Sweden has developed the so-called KOLADA database using a set of SDG indicators that more effectively measure local-level progress towards the global goals (see Box 19). Similarly, Norway has created a taxonomy of SDG-related indicators in order to enhance data classification and analysis (see also Box 19).

In Iceland, a preliminary set of local SDG indicators has been put forward by a working group composed of municipal statistical experts and representatives from state-owned Statistics Iceland. Advancement of the initiative has, however, stalled, primarily due to unresolved financing issues.

In Finland, the Ministry of the Environment coordinated the [KEKANUA II pilot project](#) under the broader Sustainable City Programme (2019–2023). This project focused on developing a set of indicators for sustainable urban development, collaboratively developed by researchers from the Finnish Environment Institute (SYKE) and various municipalities during 2021–2022. The pilot project will be continued within the Ministry of Environment, in collaboration with SYKE.

In 2018, Denmark's national statistics agency, Statistics Denmark, developed a set of national indicators to monitor the country's progress toward implementing the 2030 Agenda. These indicators were developed as a result of "[Our Goals](#)" project using inputs from a broad representation of Danish society, including civil society, the private sector, academia, government agencies, municipalities, and the general public. Many of the national indicators can be disaggregated at the regional and/or municipal level, with some already accessible in the [database](#).

In addition to indicators, Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) and VSRs offer essential supplementary insights into progress towards SDG achievement and specific local or subnational targets (see Figure 19). VLRs enable firsthand information on how LRGs are implementing the SDG, serving as powerful tools for enhancing transparency, fostering accountability, and promoting sharing of best practices among municipalities and regions and (see for instance Box 18). These reviews help municipalities to assess their progress and identify gaps and remaining challenges. As for VSRs, these reports are increasingly becoming recognised for creating a more comprehensive multi-level governance approach related to the monitoring and reporting of the SDGs. They accomplish this by evaluating local initiatives, identifying challenges, and promoting collaboration across municipalities and state authorities.

Figure 19: SDG Reporting at subnational level

SDG reporting at subnational levels	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden	Åland Islands
<b>Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs):</b> Produced by local or regional governments on an individual basis. Focused on a specific city or region, providing an overview of the progress, setbacks, opportunities and challenges associated with local-level SDG achievement. Typically more localised and detailed in their analysis compared to broader national or subnational reviews.	Gladsaxe ( <a href="#">2021</a> , <a href="#">2022</a> , <a href="#">2023</a> )	Espoo ( <a href="#">2020</a> ) Helsinki ( <a href="#">2023</a> , <a href="#">2021</a> , <a href="#">2019</a> ) Joensuu ( <a href="#">2023</a> ) Vantaa ( <a href="#">2023</a> , <a href="#">2021</a> ) Tampere ( <a href="#">2022</a> ) Turku ( <a href="#">2022</a> , <a href="#">2020</a> )		Bergen ( <a href="#">2023</a> ) Asker ( <a href="#">2021</a> ) Oslo ( <a href="#">2023</a> ) Viken ( <a href="#">2021</a> )	Helsingborg ( <a href="#">2021</a> ) Malmö ( <a href="#">2021</a> ) Stockholm ( <a href="#">2021</a> ) Uppsala ( <a href="#">2021</a> )	Åland ( <a href="#">2024</a> )
<b>Voluntary Subnational Reviews (VSRs):</b> Used by LRGAs to report on their overall progress in achieving the SDGs at the subnational level. Cover a broader geographical area than VLRs, encompassing multiple local or regional governments. Provide a comprehensive assessment of progress, setbacks, opportunities and challenges at the subnational governmental level concerning SDG achievement.			<a href="#">Voluntary Subnational Review – Iceland, 2023</a>	<a href="#">Voluntary Subnational Review – Norway, 2021</a>	<a href="#">Voluntary Subnational Review – Sweden 2021</a>	

Source: Adapted from (UCLG, 2021; UN, n.d.-a)

## **BOX 18: TAMPERE – MWANZA VOLUNTARY LOCAL REVIEW TWINNING, FINLAND**

In 2022–2023, the Finland–UN-Habitat Strategic Partnership facilitated an SDG localisation process involving the sister cities of Tampere, Finland and Mwanza, Tanzania. This collaboration enabled Mwanza to develop its first VLR using insights from Tampere's VLR experience. Mwanza's VLR process was notable for its strong emphasis on community and stakeholder engagement, aligning with the VNR process. The launch event in Mwanza celebrating this milestone featured participation from Tampere representatives.

UN-Habitat coordinated the technical work and supported the consolidation of a consortium of partner organisations. These included the Finnish Ministry of Environment, the City of Tampere, AFLRA and the SDG46 network, alongside Tanzanian stakeholders such as the City of Mwanza, President's Office Planning Commission, National Bureau of Statistics and others. International support came from various UN bodies and global organisations such as the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG).

### **IMPACTS:**

The twinning initiative has facilitated extensive engagement between Tampere and Mwanza, fostering knowledge and best practice exchanges and so enriching both cities' approaches to SDG localisation. The exchange has been instrumental in amplifying community voices and enhancing stakeholder participation, culminating in Mwanza's submission of its first VLR.

### **LINKS TO LEARN MORE:**

[Finland–UN-Habitat Strategic Partnership for the SDGs](#)

Moreover, a variety of digital tools are utilised in the Nordic countries to support the collection, storage and showcasing of sustainability data within and between municipalities, thereby facilitating efforts aimed at tracking progress towards SDG achievement. Additionally, other sustainability management tools are being employed to incorporate the SDGs into municipal budgeting and governance documents, making it easier to monitor progress. Such tools may assist organisations in identifying which are the most significant sustainability challenges they face, as well as in clarifying their strategies by connecting goals, key performance indicators (KPIs) and actions across all levels, from management to operational tasks.

## BOX 19: MEASURING AND MONITORING PROGRESS

### KOLADA DATABASE, SWEDEN

In Sweden, the government's 2018–2020 Action Plan for the 2030 Agenda specified that relevant indicators should be produced to support work in the municipalities and regions. The Council for the Promotion of Local Government Analyses (RKA), a collaboration between the national government and SALAR, was commissioned to lead this work in consultation with Statistics Sweden, the 2030 Agenda Delegation, and a number of municipalities and regions. The indicators were duly presented in March 2019. The KOLADA database includes a set of 50 indicators specifically related to each of the SDGs. The indicators – later revised in 2023 – were strategically chosen to reflect municipalities' and regions' diverse responsibilities and areas of influence. Some indicators are specifically designed to address the needs of groups at risk of being left behind or who are particularly vulnerable, such as specific age groups or minority communities. For example, Goal 1 has a KPI showing the share of retired residents experiencing low economic standards, while Goal 2 has a KPI that measures the share of residents with obesity. The indicators for Goal 5 (gender equality) – designed to assess disparities in various key areas, such as employment, income, caregiving responsibilities and leadership opportunities – include the share of paternity leave days taken by men; ratio of women's median net income to men's median net income; and percentage of women holding chairperson positions in regional organisations. The indicators are derived from existing official statistics and are updated regularly.

#### IMPACTS:

The data in the KOLADA database allows municipalities and regions to assess their performance against others, enabling baseline comparisons and evaluations. In addition to tracking progress, the hope is that the platform will stimulate learning and inspire municipalities/regions to pursue the SDGs with renewed ambition and effectiveness (SALAR, 2021).

#### LINKS TO LEARN MORE:

[KOLADA database](#)

## TAXONOMY FOR CLASSIFYING INDICATORS, NORWAY

Initiated by KS and developed by Statistics Norway in 2022, the taxonomy for SDG-related indicators is designed to help both local- and national-level policymakers and administrative bodies select indicators that are most effective for measuring progress towards SDG achievement. Not only does the taxonomy offer a practical tool, its architecture and method has also proven helpful in other sectors. The taxonomy was developed in close collaboration with local and regional authorities, which have been involved in testing out how best to connect SDG localisation and progress monitoring to the indicators already in use in municipal management.

The taxonomy's systematic framework organises indicators across three key dimensions: 1) Goal; 2) Perspective; and 3) Quality. The 'Goal' dimension specifies what each indicator measures – namely, which SDGs and targets it aligns with. The 'Perspective' dimension explains the context or rationale behind the indicator's use, enhancing its applicability and relevance to the user's needs. Finally, the 'Quality' dimension evaluates the indicator's usefulness – i.e. whether it is fit-for-purpose. Applying the same taxonomy to all the indicators helps in clarifying and comparing their uses and usability, making it easier to reuse indicators that have already been classified and evaluated by others. KS is continuing the work by utilising the taxonomy to present a shortlist of relevant indicators for use in local and regional administrations.

### **IMPACTS:**

The taxonomy of SDG-related indicators simplifies the monitoring and evaluation process for decision-makers by clarifying each indicator's practical application and usability (Government, 2021).

### **LINKS TO LEARN MORE:**

[A taxonomy for indicators related to the Sustainable Development Goals](#)

## **MAPPING MUNICIPALITIES THAT USE CLIMATE REQUIREMENTS FOR PUBLIC PROCUREMENT, SWEDEN**

Klimatkollen (Climate Check), a non-profit organisation launched in 2022, aims to make climate data easily accessible to municipalities. Its platform evaluates municipalities based on several criteria, including their CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, the existence of climate plans, and adherence to climate budgets. In 2024, through a partnership with Greenpeace, Klimatkollen created an interactive online map highlighting which Swedish municipalities enforce climate requirements in public procurement. This effort serves as a benchmarking tool that can help municipalities measure their progress and pinpoint areas for improvement.

Data for this initiative was gathered through a comprehensive survey conducted by Greenpeace across Swedish municipalities. The survey also investigated how municipalities are working to minimise their climate impact within public kitchens. Given Sweden's substantial consumption of publicly provided food, particularly evident in school lunch programmes, the findings underscore the pivotal role played by local canteens in driving positive change. By adopting sustainable food practices, municipalities can significantly reduce their carbon footprint, providing individuals and families throughout the country with a model for sustainable living.

### **IMPACTS:**

Information and interactive maps are readily accessible on Greenpeace Sweden's website, empowering municipalities to utilise them in their sustainability endeavours. Local governments have also been encouraged to enlist volunteers to assist in implementing sustainable procurement practices for food and meals, thereby fostering a culture of community engagement and environmental stewardship.

### **LINKS TO LEARN MORE:**

[Klimatkollen](#)

[Greenpeace Sweden](#)

### 6.3. Key messages

- The survey results indicate a significant variation in how Nordic municipalities measure their progress towards the SDGs. Approximately 68% of municipalities in Finland and Sweden report measuring their progress, whereas this figure is lower in other Nordic countries.
- The adoption of SDG indicators that are specifically tailored to local and regional contexts and mandates makes it easier to monitor and measure progress on the SDGs. Currently, this effort is gaining momentum across the Nordic Region, with Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden showing more advanced approaches.
- VLRs and VSRs are effective tools for measuring and analysing progress towards achieving the SDGs at local and subnational levels, enhancing transparency, fostering accountability, and promoting sharing of best practices between municipalities and regions.
- Monitoring and measurement of progress could be made easier through a broader application of smart sustainability management tools. These tools can facilitate the integration of the SDGs into municipal budgeting and steering documents, making the process more streamlined.



PHOTOS: ISTOCK

## 7. Nordic learnings

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**Everyone wants to live a good life. Focus on consensus around that goal and then debate politically the means for how we get there.**

– Simrishamn Municipality, Sweden

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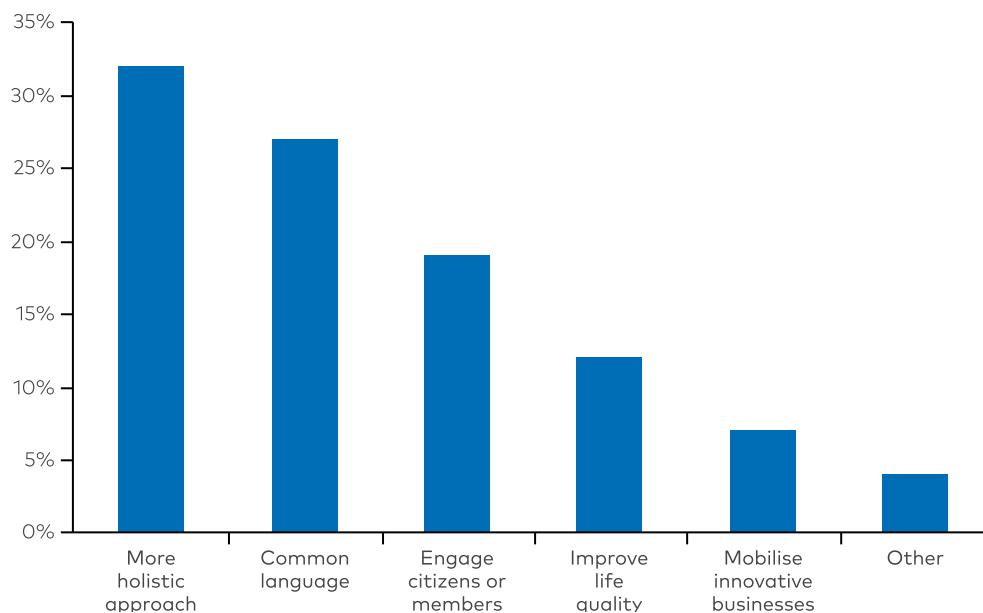
Having concluded our exploration of Nordic experiences and insights concerning SDG localisation, this final chapter highlights some key learnings in the form of practical guidance for both national and local/regional governments. This guidance is derived from the Nordic survey and Danish survey, interviews with LRGAs, contributions to the Nordic Toolbox, and input from additional stakeholders, including the Nordic Youth Network for Sustainable Development and the Nordic Civil Society Network.

As part of the iterative process involved in this VSR, Nordic municipalities and other stakeholders were invited to provide feedback on the preliminary findings. This engagement took place during a webinar held in April 2024, where participants discussed the initial results of the report.<sup>[31]</sup> Interactive Zoom polls conducted during the event shed further light on the perspectives of Nordic municipalities regarding the main benefits of working with the SDGs (Figure 20). These benefits include adopting a more comprehensive approach to sustainability, establishing a common language and leveraging the SDGs to engage citizens or members. Looking ahead to how SDG implementation might be accelerated, participants emphasised the importance of political prioritisation, peer-learning networks and increased investments in green programs (Figure 21).

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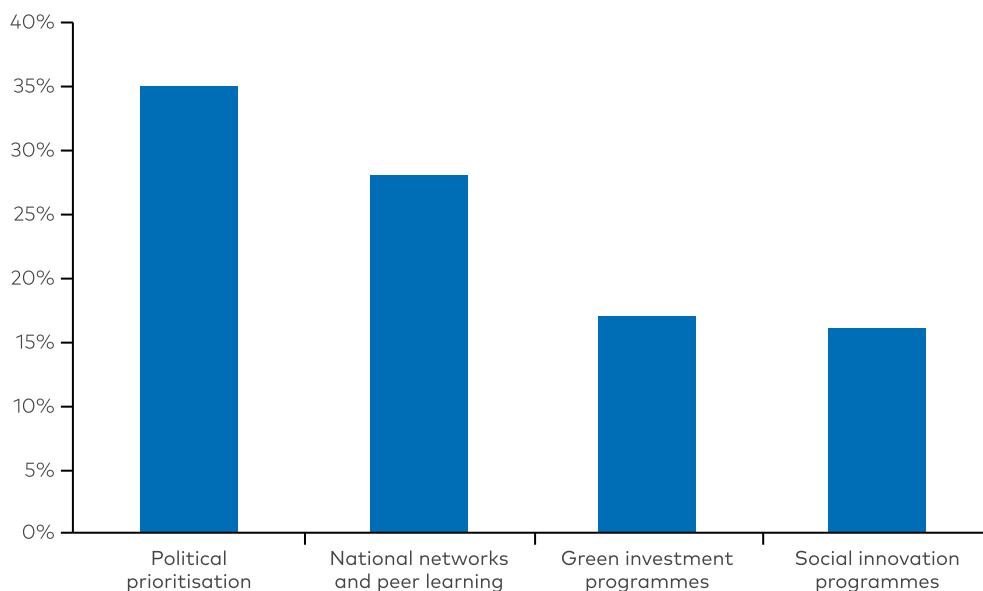
31. For more information on the webinar, see Chapter 2.

**Figure 20: Which are the main benefits of working with the SDGs in your municipality/organisation?**



**Source:** Zoom Poll during Nordic VSR Webinar in April 2024. N=67

**Figure 21: Looking forward: What kind of national support would you need to accelerate your SDG work?**



**Source:** Zoom Poll during Nordic VSR Webinar in April 2024. N=50.

Overall, the Nordic learnings highlighted by this report can be divided into those aimed at national actors and those aimed at local and regional governments.

## 7.1. Nordic learnings for national level actors

- **Acknowledge your country's commitment to the SDGs** and your role in the ongoing transition. Analyse your main sustainability challenges and the benefits of using the SDGs as a holistic framework to create more livable, attractive communities in your country. Monitor progress.
- **Maintain a holistic approach to sustainability** by addressing the social, economic and environmental aspects of all policy proposals. Ensure policy coherence, synergise, and reduce any negative spill-over effects that arise across sectors. Break down silos.
- **Support local level action** by recognising the pivotal role played by municipalities and regions in driving the sustainability transition. Provide them with the mandate and resources needed to act effectively, while taking into consideration different geographies and socio-economic conditions.
- **Continue funding national programmes** to support local SDG implementation, social innovation, and climate action through a multi-stakeholder approach. This should involve facilitating peer learning networks, coordination and funding mechanisms, and capacity-building processes.
- **Acknowledge and support the work of LRGAs** in offering capacity building and peer learning to local authorities. Also, consult regularly with LRGAs on SDG-relevant policy issues and local level needs and invite them to provide input on VNRs.
- **Take responsibility for the financial investments** needed to mitigate and adapt to climate change and enable a sustainability transition together with local governments.
- **Include innovation and SDG targets in public procurement guidelines** as a means of advancing sustainable production and consumption goals.
- **Support the development of local-level indicators** and reliable data collection that can help local authorities measure progress towards SDG achievement.

## 7.2. Nordic learnings for local and regional governments

- **Set your own local sustainability goals** by analysing SDG-related challenges, risks and opportunities. Explore the benefits of using the SDGs as a holistic framework for increasing residents' quality of life and engaging local stakeholders. **Formulate a common vision!**
- **Foster sustained commitment towards a common vision** of SDG implementation by striving for cross-party consensus. Regularly educate the administration and new political appointees about the local vision and goals.
- **Prioritise synergistic measures and a holistic approach** in which the three dimensions of sustainability support each other. Acknowledge the need to prioritise cost-effective measures that will be socially accepted.

- **An increasing focus on climate neutrality benefits SDG work** as long as local climate action plans are based on SDGs and have a holistic approach.
- **Anchor the SDGs in the municipality's administrative management** by ensuring that the principles and goals of the 2030 Agenda are embedded within municipal governance structures, budgets and reporting systems.
- **Appoint dedicated personnel** to lead the SDG work and coordinate across sectors.
- **Use smart steering tools and indicators.** Incorporate SDG-related KPIs into budgeting and planning tools, follow up continuously and report to management. Spread the word about successes and remaining challenges to the population and all relevant stakeholders.
- **Utilise existing resources and learning networks.** Make use of the LRGA's courses, tools and peer-learning networks to build on existing good practice and tools and enhance SDG-related capacity.
- **Take every peer-learning and copy with pride!** Get inspired by and collaborate with neighbouring municipalities and regions, sharing experiences and best practices.
- **Engage local stakeholders.** Collaborate with local businesses, civil society actors, schools, youth councils and researchers to co-create solutions that will have a wider impact on the community. Ensure sustainability efforts are inclusive.
- **Harness public procurement** as a tool to drive sustainability, encouraging suppliers to innovate and align with SDG principles.
- **Develop and use VSRs and VLRs** as tools for measuring and analysing progress towards SDG achievement at a local and sub-national level, enhancing transparency and fostering accountability.
- **Embrace international collaboration and dare to act 'glocal' (global and local)!** Such collaboration involves engaging with global and local sustainability communities, thereby facilitating exchanges of ideas and best practices.

In relation to **the principle of leaving no one behind**, it is worth reiterating the following call to action from the *Nordic Youth Network for Sustainable Development*:

- Implement principles for meaningful participation in all youth inclusion measures.
- Establish local youth councils and youth groups in collaboration with local schools.
- Utilise social media and digital platforms to reach youth beyond youth council members.
- Focus on *all* SDGs in education programmes and school curricula, not just climate issues.

Also consider these key messages on **including civil society** in SDG implementation:

- To enable meaningful collaboration, a framework and structure need to be in place, including clear aims and objectives.
- Cooperation forms should be developed by municipalities in close dialogue with civil society.
- To ensure that the expertise and resources of civil society organisations are utilised effectively, the collaboration needs to be anchored with and welcomed by local decision-makers.
- Civil society includes a variety of organisations with different perspectives, preconditions, and competencies. Municipalities that want to embrace this diversity of collaboration partners need to allocate enough funds towards this end.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1 – Nordic Survey: Questionnaire

### BLOCK 1. THE ROLE OF THE 2030 AGENDA IN THE MUNICIPALITY

#### 1. How far has your municipality come in working with the 2030 Agenda /the SDGs

We have not (yet) started to work with the 2030 Agenda/the SDGs.

FILTER: continue with Q2.

We have just started the work.

FILTER: continue with Q3.

We are underway with the work.

FILTER: continue with Q3.

We consider our municipality a frontrunner in the work with the 2030 Agenda.

FILTER: continue with Q3.

Don't know.

FILTER: continue with Q2.

Option to provide further comments:

#### 2. Does your local authority carry out other sustainability work – without reference to the 2030 Agenda?

Yes.

No.

Don't know.

Option to elaborate:

### BLOCK 2: IMPLEMENTATION APPROACH AND PRIORITY GOALS

#### 3. Do you work holistically with the 2030 Agenda/the SDGs?

Yes, we work holistically.

FILTER: IF ANSWER is YES, continue with Q5.

No, we prioritise some dimensions of the 2030 Agenda.

FILTER: IF ANSWER is NO, continue with Q4.

We do not work with the 2030 Agenda.

FILTER: continue with Q6.

Don't know.

FILTER: continue with Q5.

Option to provide further comments:

**4. Which sustainability dimension is prioritised in your municipality? (Up to two answers possible)**

- The economic dimension
- The social dimension
- The environmental dimension

Option to provide further comments:

**5. Which SDGs do you prioritise in your work with the 2030 Agenda? (Multiple choices possible)**

- SDG 1 – No poverty
- SDG 2 – Zero hunger
- SDG 3 – Good health and well-being
- SDG 4 – Quality education
- SDG 5 – Gender equality
- SDG 6 – Clean water and sanitation
- SDG 7 – Affordable and clean energy
- SDG 8 – Decent work and economic growth
- SDG 9 – Industry, innovation and infrastructure
- SDG 10 – Reduced inequalities
- SDG 11 – Sustainable cities and communities
- SDG 12 – Responsible consumption and production
- SDG 13 – Climate action
- SDG 14 – Life below water
- SDG 15 – Life on land
- SDG 16 – Peace, justice and strong institutions
- SDG 17 – Partnership for the goals

Option to provide further comments:

**BLOCK 3: INCORPORATION OF 2030 AGENDA/THE SDGS INTO LOCAL FRAMEWORKS**

**6. Into which of the following steering documents have you integrated the 2030 Agenda (multiple answers possible)?**

- the municipality's overall strategy and vision
- the local planning system
- the local budget
- the local procurement guidelines
- Don't know.
- We do not work with the 2030 Agenda.

Option to provide further comments:

**7. Does your local authority have dedicated staff responsible for coordinating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda/the SDGs?**

- Yes.
- No.
- We do not work with the 2030 Agenda.
- Don't know.

Feel free to describe the organisational placement of responsibility for the municipality's sustainability work and who the responsible persons report to.

**BLOCK 4: PROGRESS IN THE WORK WITH THE SDGS**

**8. Does the local authority measure progress in its work with the 2030 Agenda/the SDGs?**

- Yes.
- No.
- Don't know.
- We do not work with the 2030 Agenda.

Feel free to elaborate: Which measurement frameworks have been adopted (e.g. U4SSC, OECD, own local indicators etc.)

**9. Has your local authority adopted an action plan to implement the 2030 Agenda in your work?**

- Yes.  
FILTER: IF ANSWER is YES, continue with Q10.

- No.  
FILTER: IF ANSWER is NO, continue with Q11.

- We do not work with the 2030 Agenda.  
FILTER: continue with Q11.

- Don't know.  
FILTER: continue with Q11.

Option to provide further comments:

**10. Has your local authority carried out activities to implement the action plan?**

- Yes.
- No.
- Don't know.

Option to provide further comments:

## BLOCK 5: ACTIONS TO CREATE LOCAL OWNERSHIP AND COMMITMENT

**11. How often has your local authority carried out activities to involve the following groups in your work with the 2030 Agenda? Please use a scale from 1 to 5 with '1' meaning "no activities" and '5' meaning "very frequent activities".**

1-5 SCORE + Don't know, don't say for each of the answer options

- Local authority staff members
- Local politicians
- The local population
- Youth
- Local businesses
- Other groups (please elaborate below)
- We do not work with the 2030 Agenda.

Option to provide further comments:

## BLOCK 6: PARTNERSHIP AND COLLABORATION

**12. How often has the local authority engaged in collaboration with the following actors to achieve the goals of the 2030 Agenda? Please use a scale from 1 to 5, with '1' meaning "no collaboration" and '5' meaning "very frequent collaboration".**

1-5 SCORE + Don't know, don't say for each of the answer options

- Civil society organisations/Cultural sector
- Research institutes/Universities/Higher education institutions
- Private companies
- Other municipalities in your country
- Regional/County Council
- National government and public authorities
- Other actors (please elaborate below)
- We do not work with the 2030 Agenda.

Feel free to describe your collaborations in brief:

**13. Which of the following international networks on the 2030 Agenda/the SDGs does the municipality participate in? (Multiple answers possible).**

- Nordic networks
- European networks
- Global networks (UN or similar)
- Other international networks (Please elaborate below)
- Don't know
- We do not work with the 2030 Agenda.

Feel free to elaborate in which initiatives, networks or programmes your municipality has participated.

## BLOCK 7: STRUCTURAL BARRIERS AND CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

**14. How much of an obstacle do the following factors pose in your work with the 2030 Agenda? Please use a scale from 1 to 5, with '1' meaning "Not an obstacle" and '5' meaning "A very serious obstacle".**

1-5 SCORE + Don't know, don't say for each of the answer options

- Lack of sufficient competence on the 2030 Agenda
- Lack of resource capacity to work with the 2030 Agenda
- Lack of methods and tools
- Lack of political prioritisation
- Lack of support from the state
- Lack of networks and cooperation
- Another factor (please elaborate below)
- We do not work with the 2030 Agenda.

Option to provide further comments:

**15. How important are the following factors for the success of your municipality's work on the 2030 Agenda? Please use a scale from 1 to 5, with '1' meaning "Not important" and '5' meaning "Very important".**

1-5 SCORE + Don't know, don't say for each of the answer options

- Sufficient competence on the 2030 Agenda
- Capacity to work with the 2030 Agenda
- Citizen involvement
- Translation of the 2030 Agenda into the local context
- Political prioritisation of the 2030 Agenda
- Anchoring of the 2030 Agenda in the administrative management of the municipality
- Access to successful methods and tools
- Support from the state
- Access to networks and cooperation
- Another factor (please elaborate below)
- We do not work with the 2030 Agenda.

What do you think is the most important condition for success in becoming a sustainable municipality?

**16. In your view, what is the risk that the current economic stress caused by rising inflation and high energy prices will lead to a de-prioritisation of the 2030 Agenda? Please use a scale from 1 to 5, with '1' meaning "No risk" and '5' meaning "Very high risk".**

1-5 SCORE + Don't know, don't say

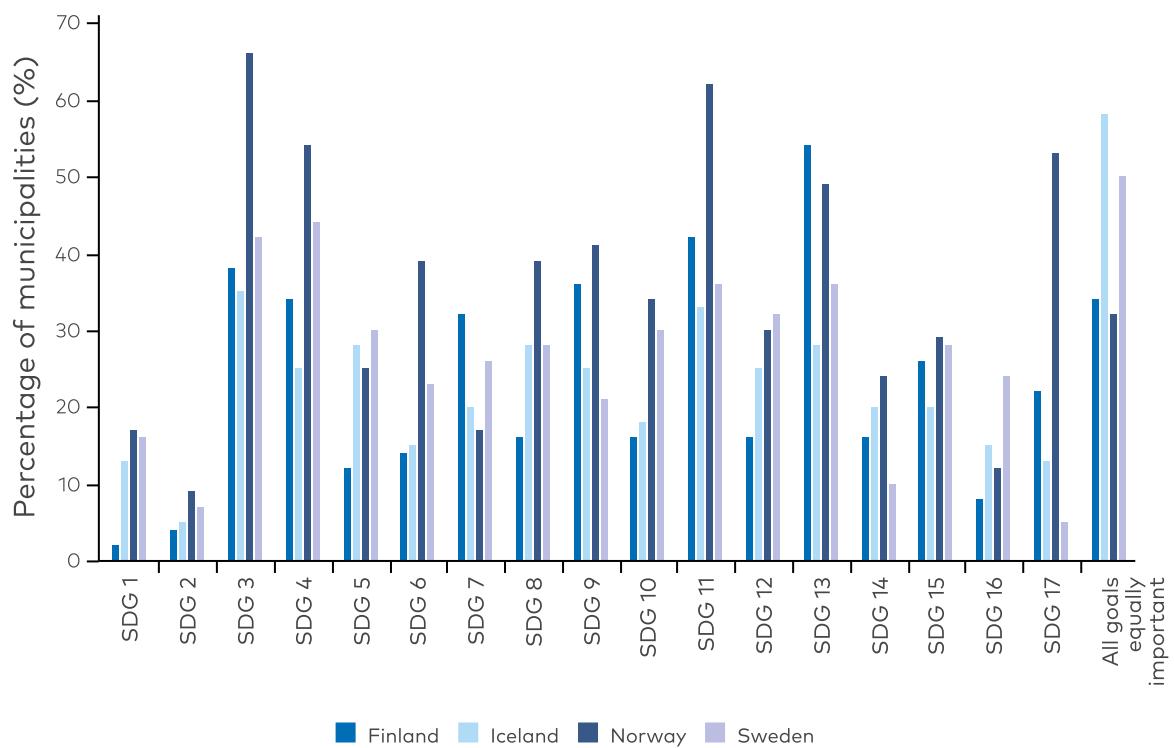
## Ending

Thank you so much for replying to this questionnaire. We really appreciate your support. If interested, you can find more information on the outcomes from this research at ....

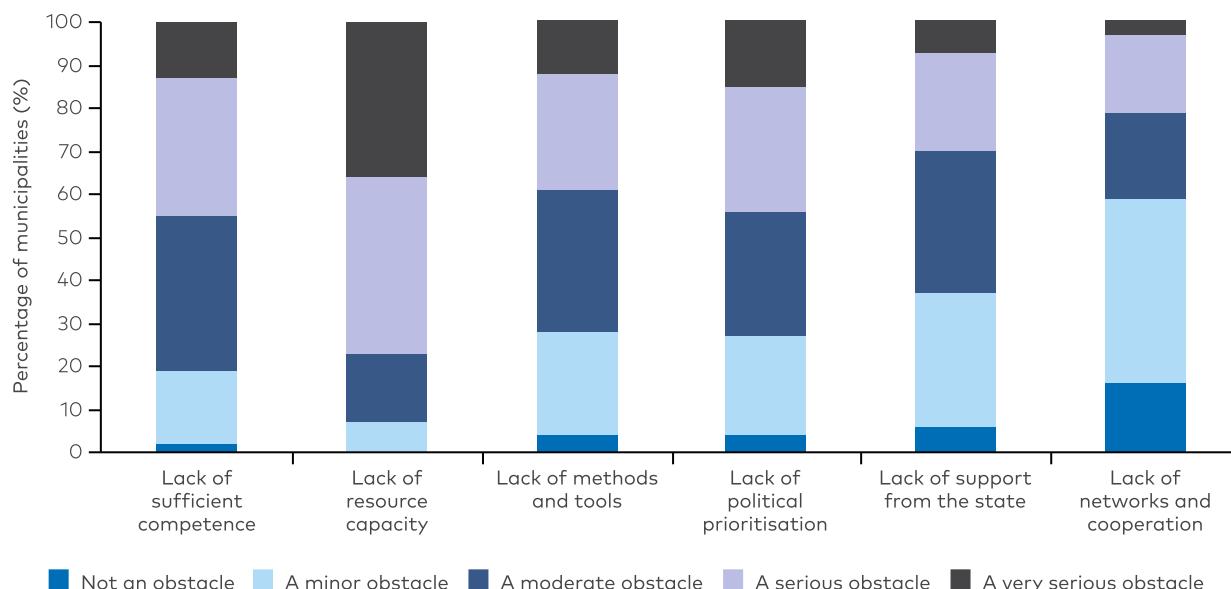
END OF SURVEY

## Appendix 2 – Nordic Survey. Additional charts. Country by country results

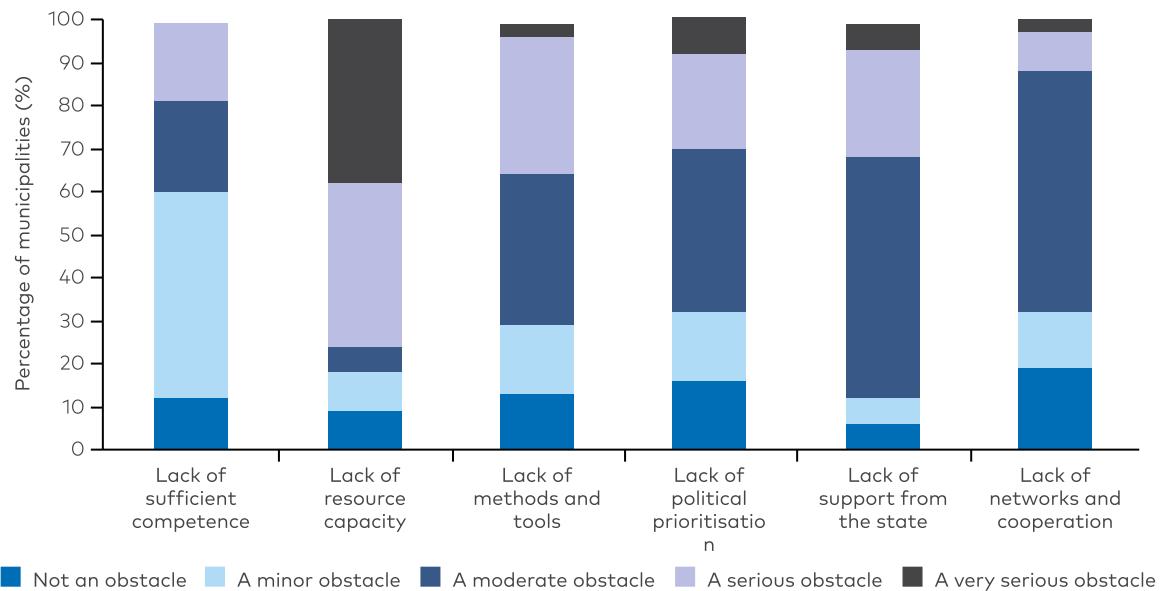
Which SDGs do you prioritise in your work with the 2030 Agenda?



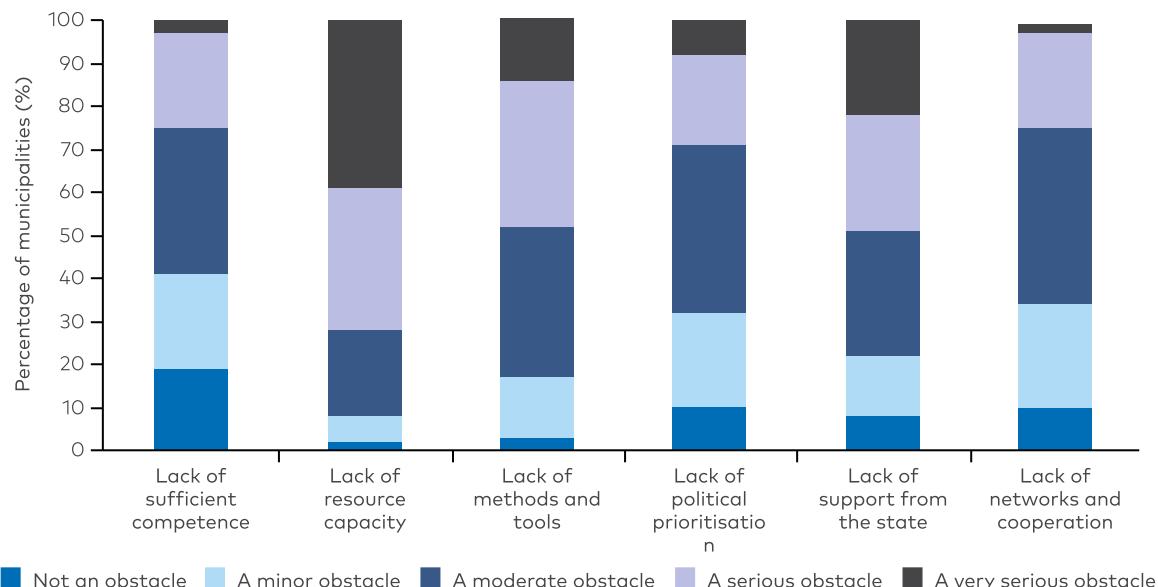
**Finland: How much of an obstacle do the following factors pose in your work with 2030 Agenda**



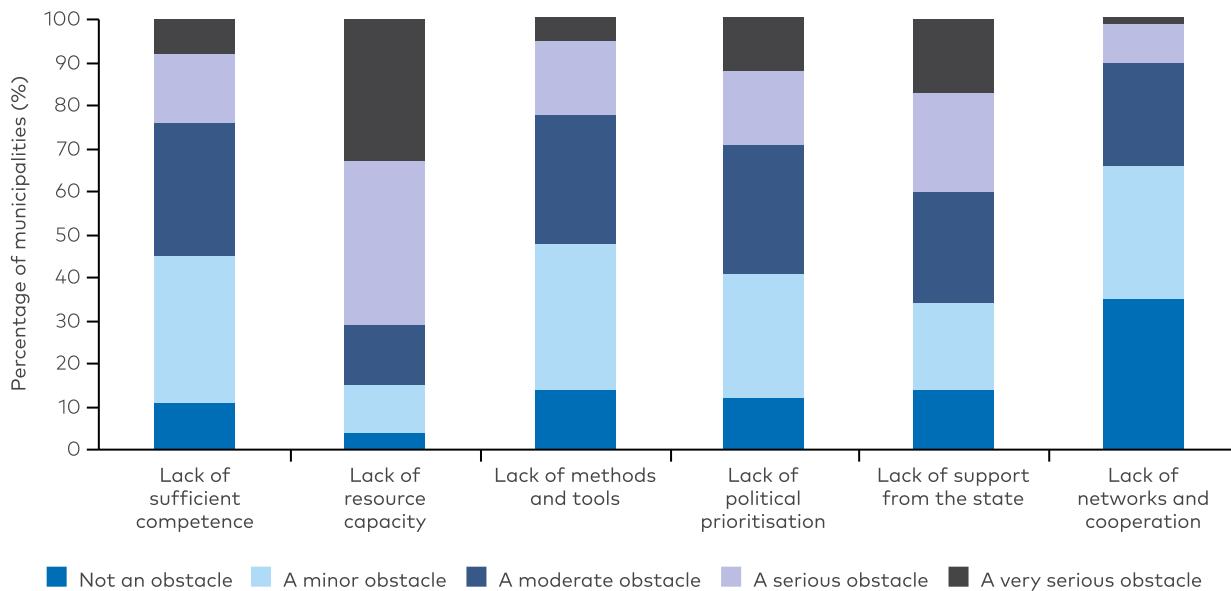
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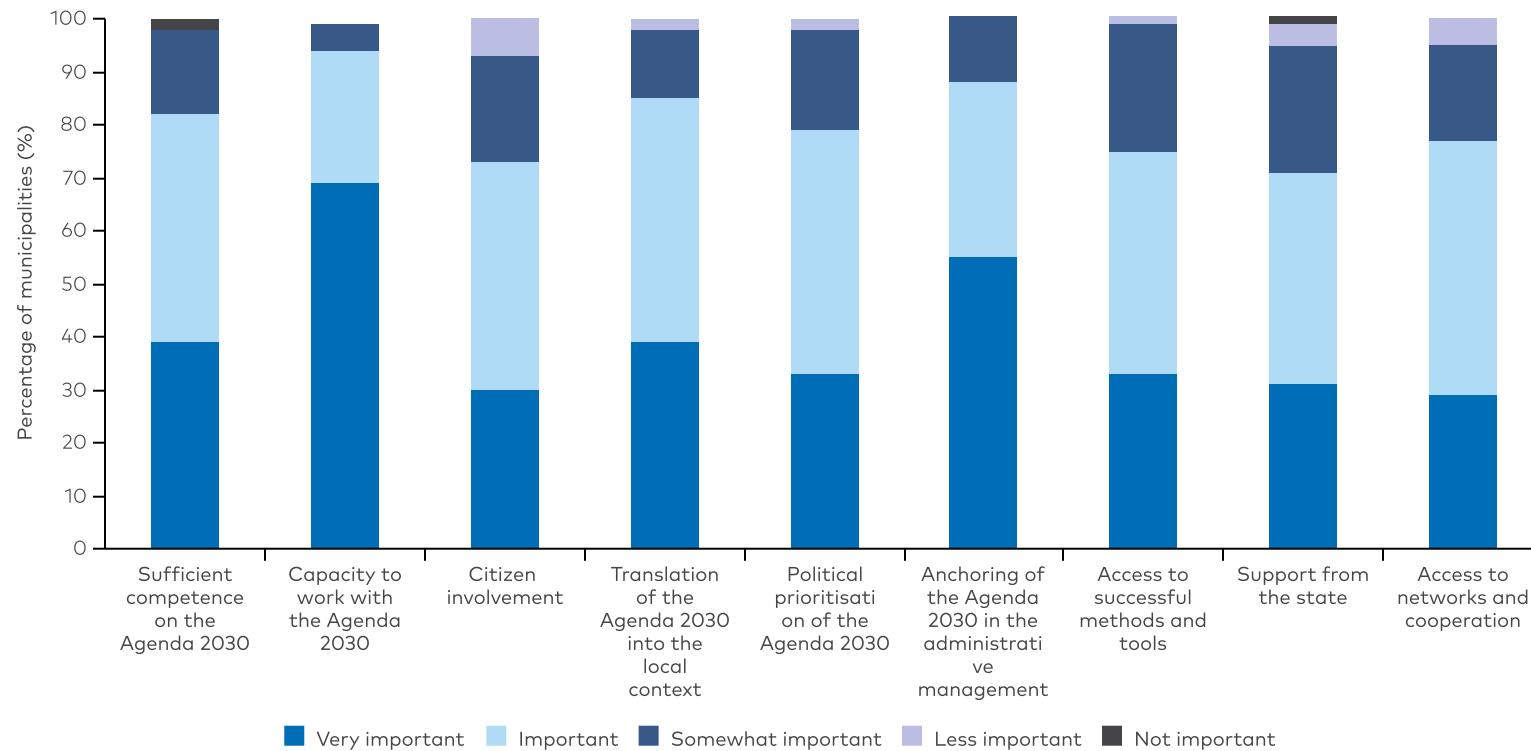
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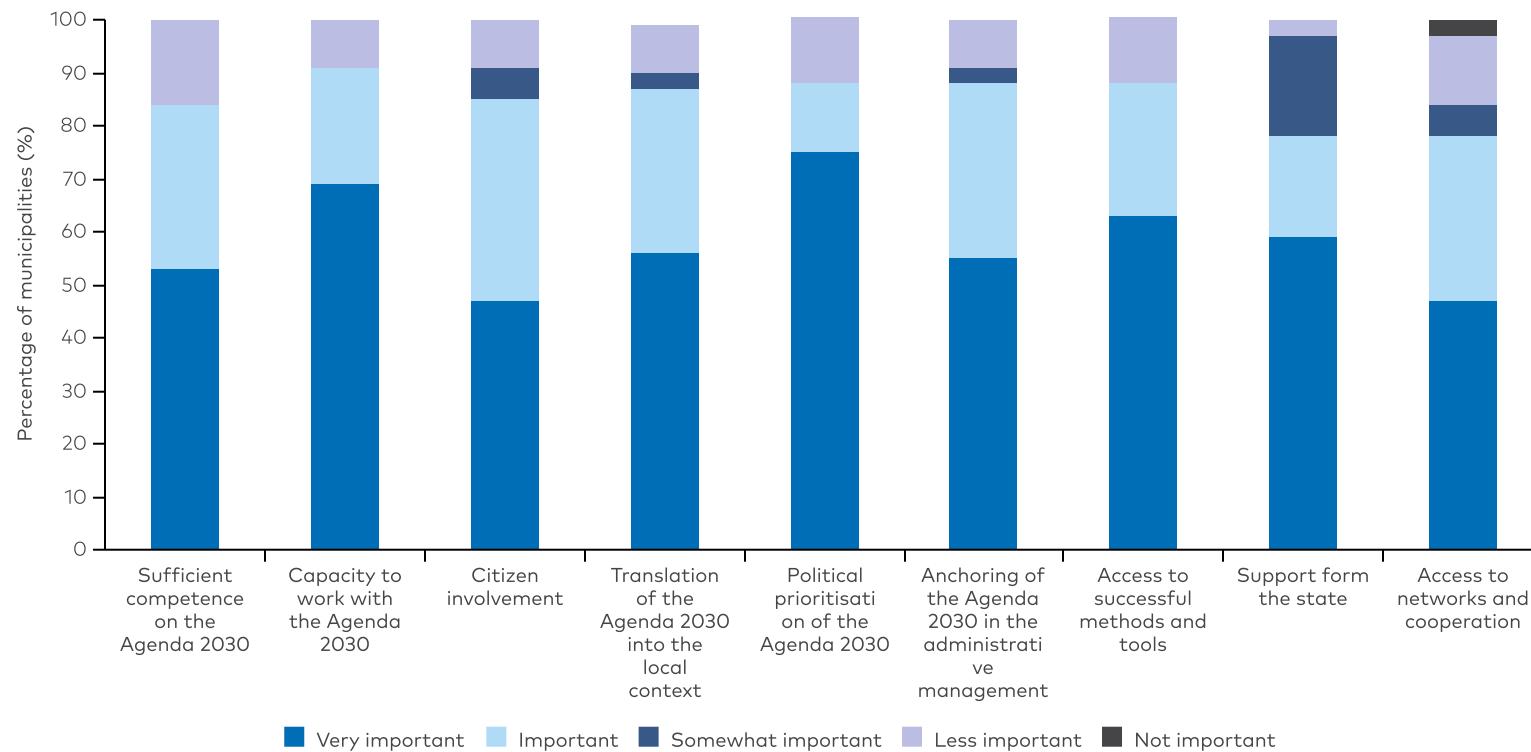
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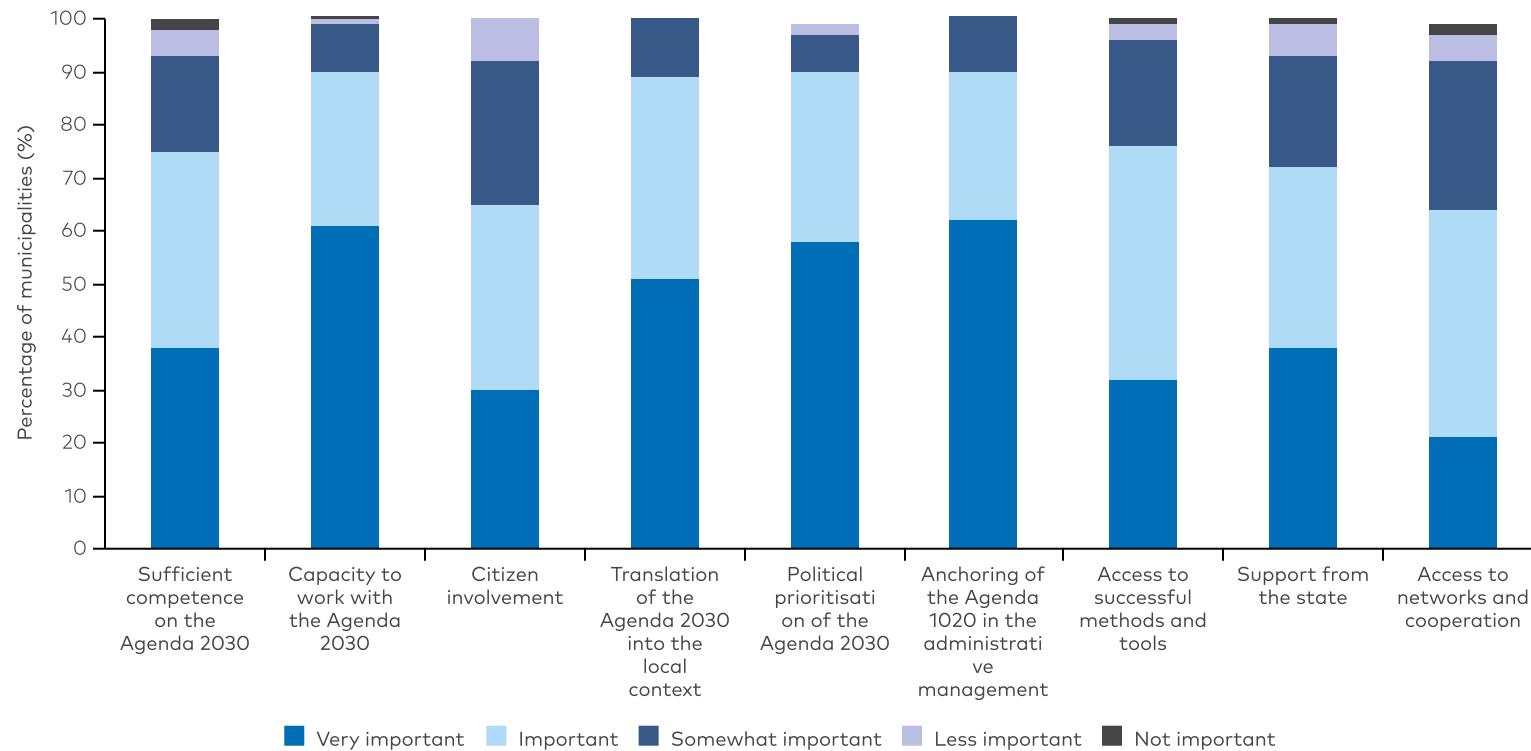
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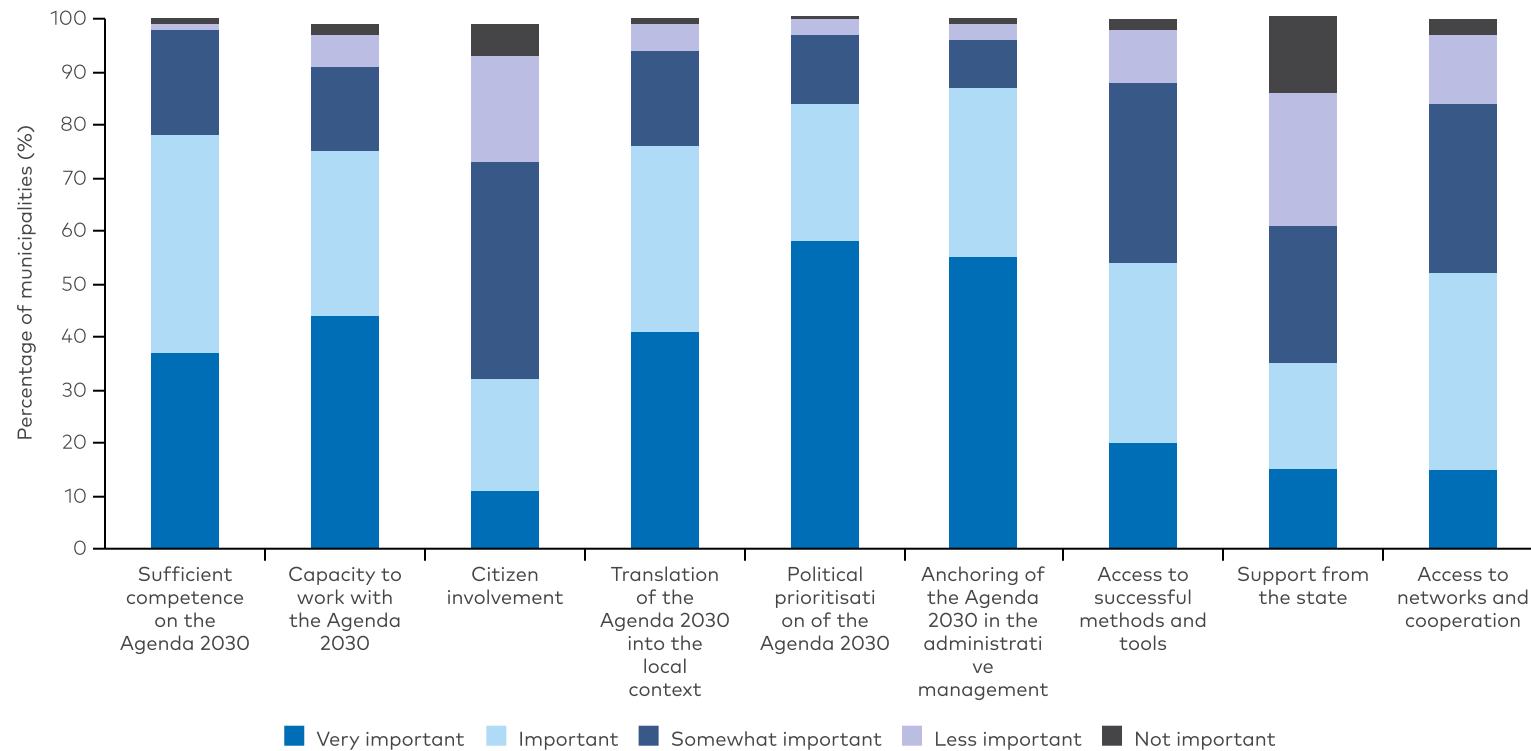
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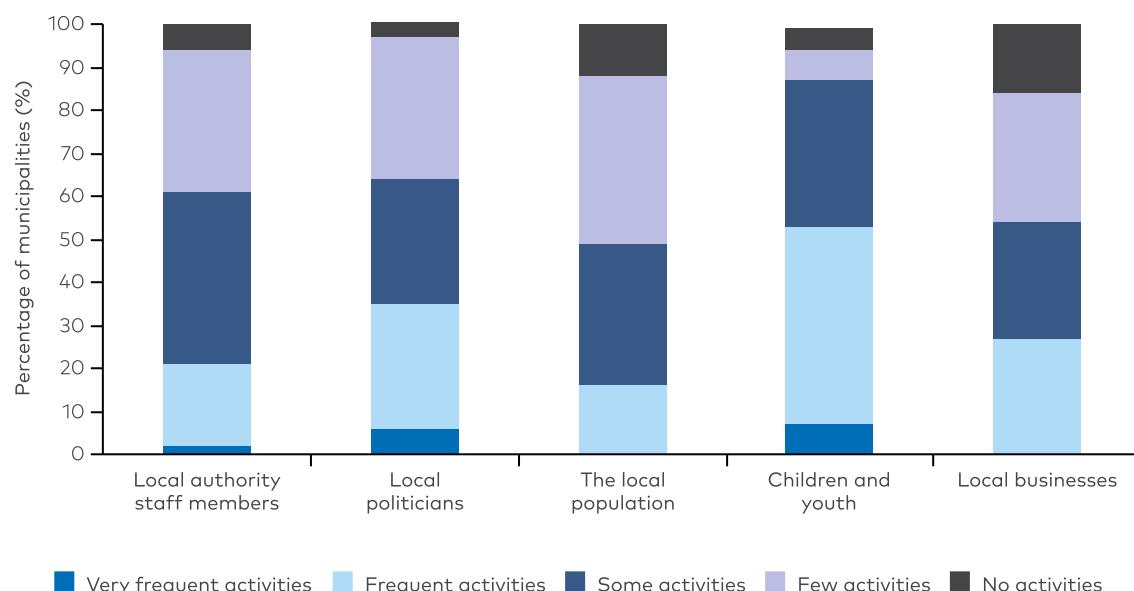
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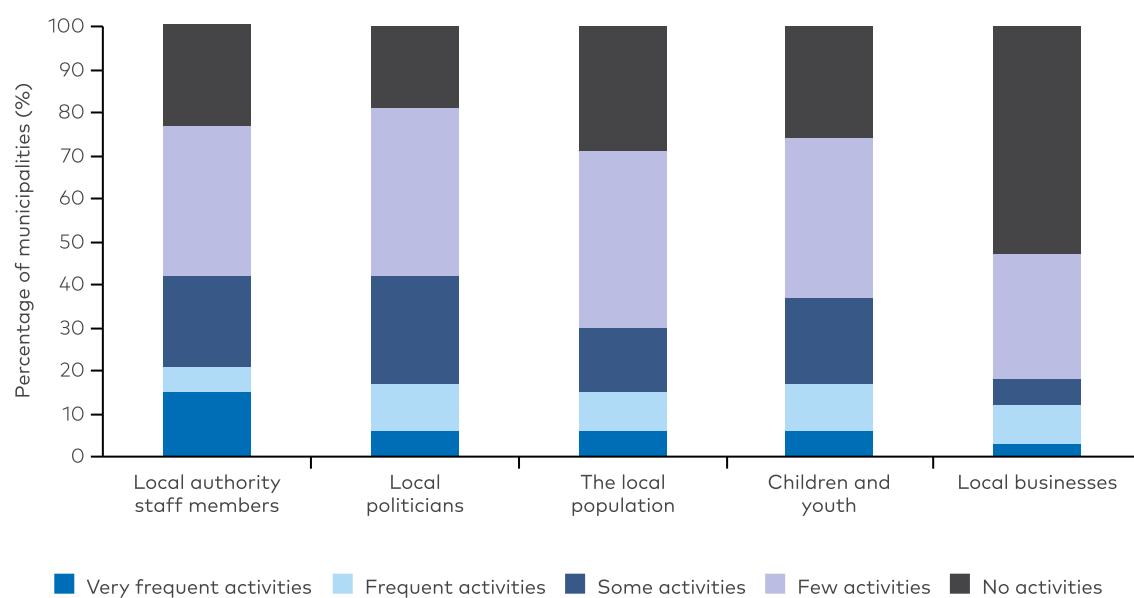
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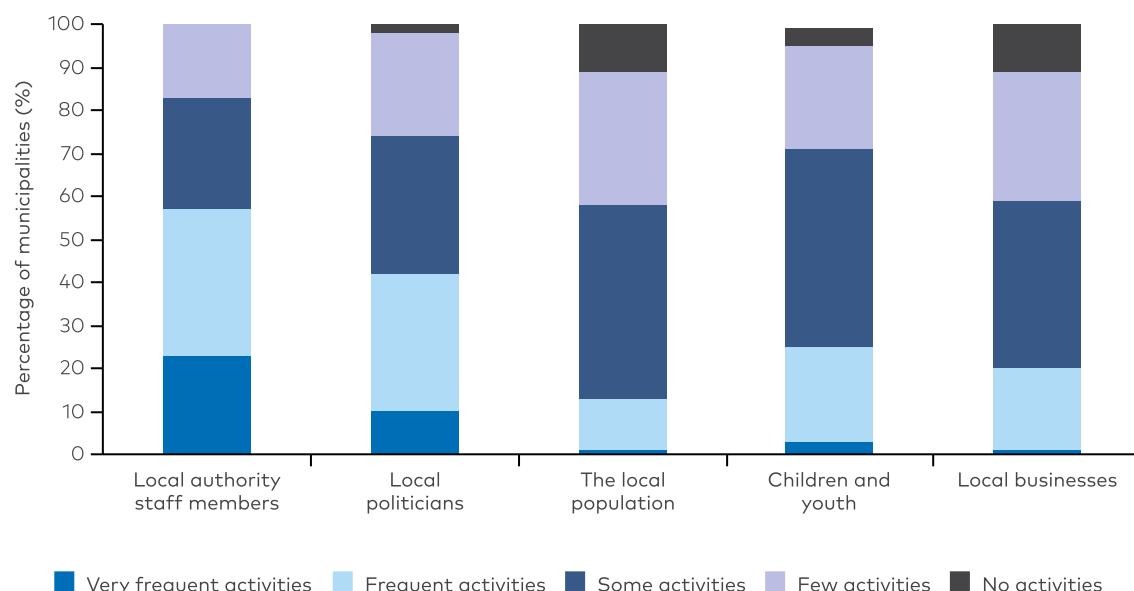
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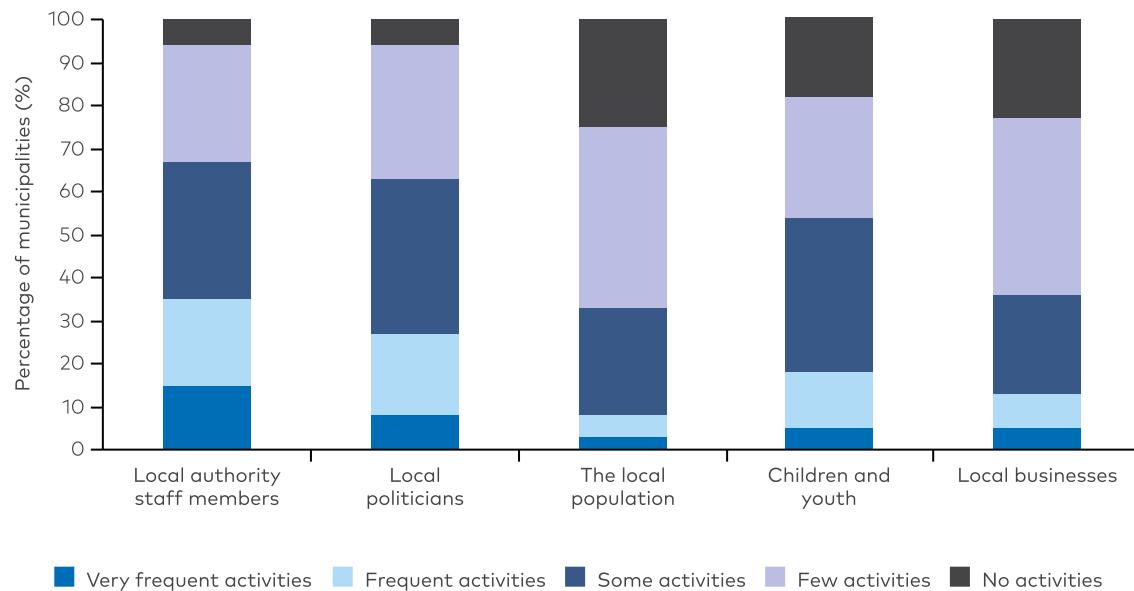
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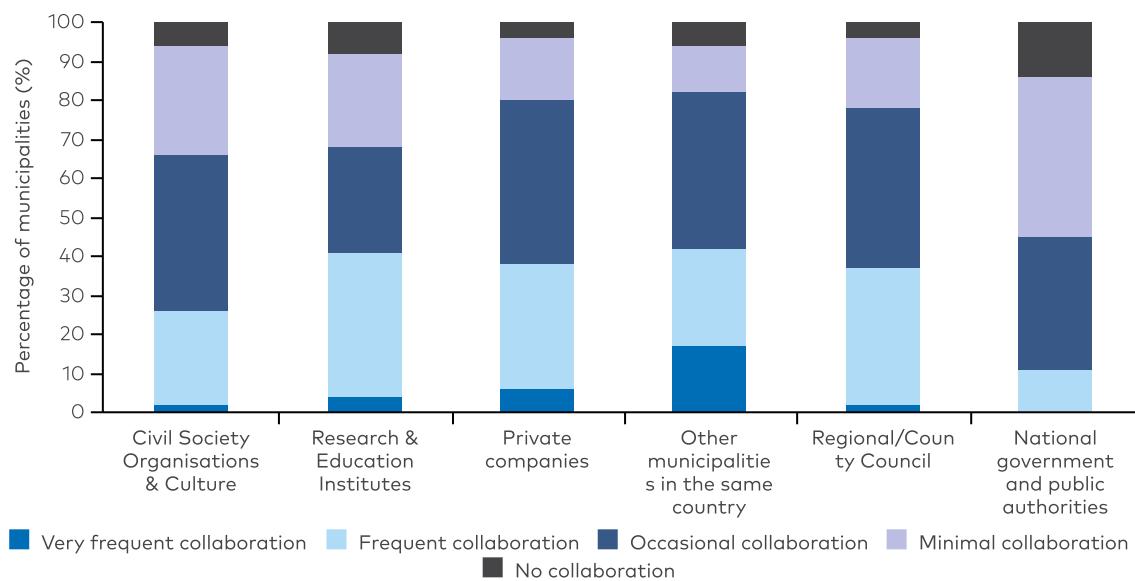
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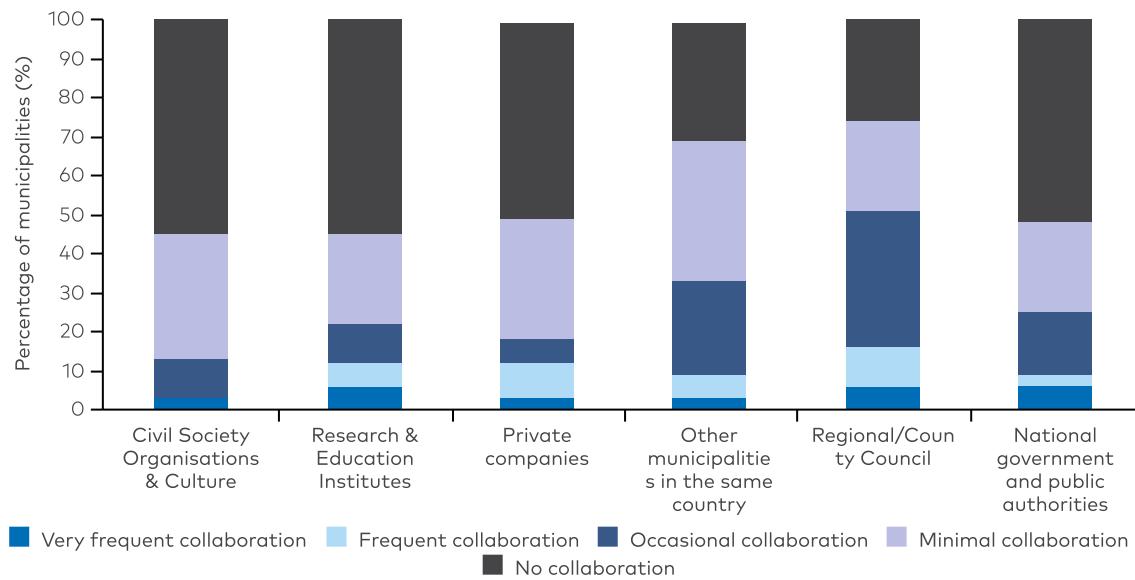
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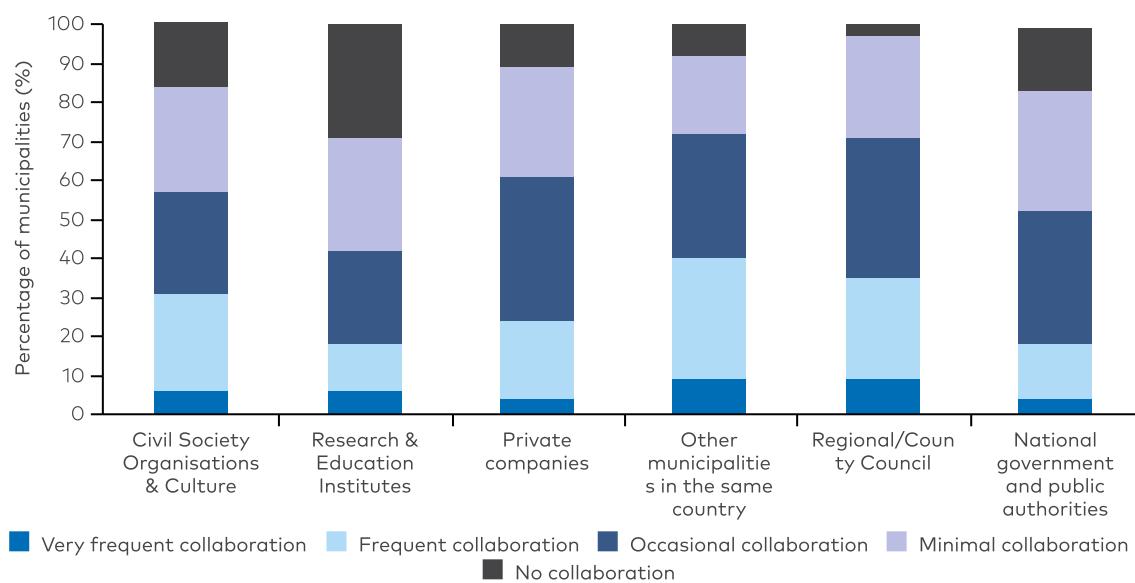
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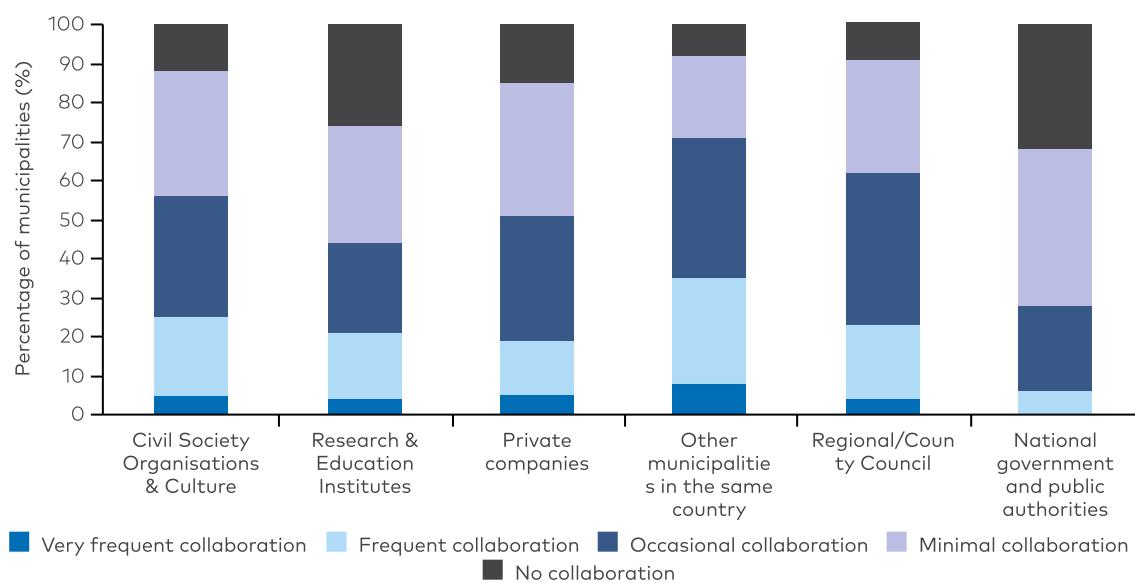
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