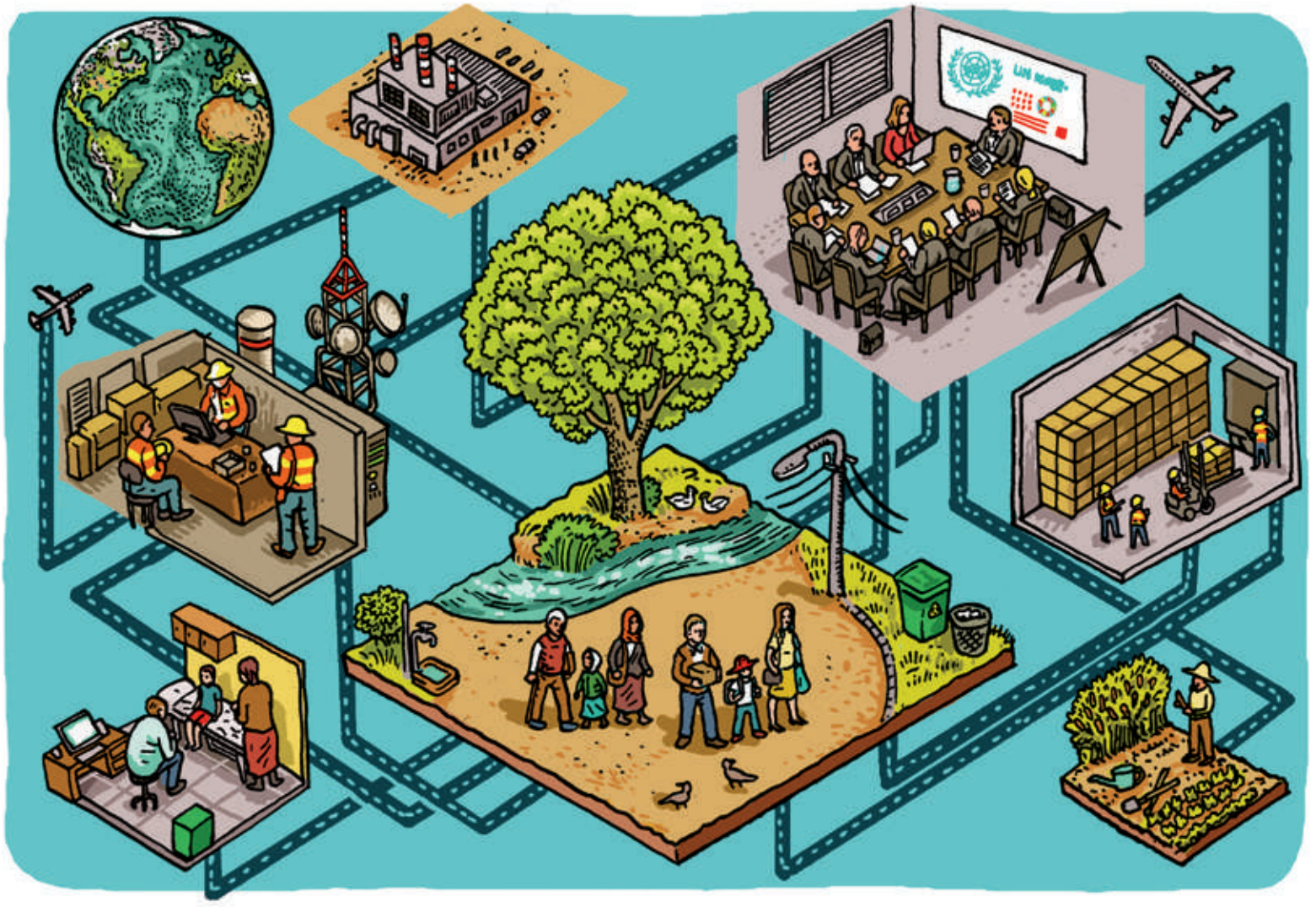


UNLOCKING THE POWER OF LOCALISATION & MULTI-STAKEHOLDER PARTNERSHIPS TO RESCUE THE SDGs

June 2025
Forus International

forus CONNECT SUPPORT INFLUENCE

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We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all Forus members who generously shared their time, experiences, and expertise by participating in interviews or by providing critical resources and insights that shaped this publication.

This report, *Unlocking the Power of Localisation and Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships to Rescue the SDGs*, was made possible through the collective efforts of a dedicated team of authors, peer reviewers, and contributors from across the Forus network.

We especially acknowledge the support of the **Forus Advocacy and Communications team**, whose contributions were instrumental in shaping and finalising this report.

We are also grateful to the members of the **Forus Agenda 2030 Working Group** and the **Local Power Working Group**, whose insights, feedback, and case study submissions were vital to ensuring this report reflects the rich diversity and lived realities of local actors working towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

A special thank-you goes to **Sarah Strack**, Director of Forus, for her continuous support and encouragement throughout the development of this publication.

Finally, we extend our heartfelt appreciation to the many communities and grassroots partners whose stories and experiences are highlighted throughout the report – they are the heart of this work, and their leadership and vision continue to inspire our shared efforts to localise and realise the 2030 Agenda.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the 2030 deadline for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) approaches, global progress remains critically off track. According to the UN's **2024 SDG Progress Report**,[1] only 17 per cent of targets are on track, with significant regressions in poverty eradication, hunger, education, and climate action. A convergence of crises – including persistent inequality, conflict, food insecurity, climate instability, and a global financing shortfall – threatens to derail the 2030 Agenda.

Amidst these challenges, localisation and multi-stakeholder partnerships emerge as essential strategies to accelerate SDG implementation. Localisation is essential for achieving the SDGs because it brings implementation closer to the people and places most affected. With an estimated 65 per cent of SDG targets dependent on local action,[2] local governments and civil society actors are uniquely positioned to tailor solutions, foster community ownership, and ensure accountability. Localisation enables better production and use of disaggregated data, facilitates inclusive participation, and drives innovation in service delivery – often pioneering scalable models that national or global actors can adopt. As global progress stalls, empowering local actors has become not only a practical necessity but a strategic imperative to rescue the 2030 Agenda.

This report entitled 'Unlocking the Power of Localisation and Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships to Accelerate SDG Implementation', drawing on 15+ real-world case studies from the Forus

1 UN General Assembly Economic and Social Council 'Progress Towards the Development Goals: Report of the Secretary-General' UN Doc A/79/79-E/2024/54 (2024) 2 https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/report/2024/secretary-general-sdg-report-2024--EN.pdf (accessed 4 June 2025) .

2 UNDP, UN-Habitat & UNDESA 'Inter-Agency Policy Brief: Accelerating SDG Localization to deliver on the promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' (2024) 3 https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/Policy%20Brief%20FINAL%20May%2029%205%2024.pdf .

network across Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Pacific, and Europe, underscores the transformative potential of localisation and equitable partnerships in delivering the SDGs. It presents key insights into what works, what hinders progress, and what opportunities lie ahead for accelerating the implementation of the SDGs through localisation and partnerships. Examples from over 15 countries – including Argentina, Guatemala, Indonesia, Zambia, and the Philippines – demonstrate that localisation, *when adequately resourced and powered by inclusive, multi-stakeholder partnerships*, is our best lever to rescue the 2030 Agenda.

Unlike traditional assessments, this report combines grassroots data, official statistics, and diverse regional case studies to build a comprehensive picture of SDG localisation efforts. It provides a timely, strategic roadmap for governments, civil society, public development banks (PDBs), and donors to reorient implementation efforts around local power, inclusive governance, and coherent policy frameworks. The report also highlights narratives from the Forus multilingual and participative campaign **'We are leaving no one behind, are you?'** on civil society impact and positive influence on the SDGs and on Leaving No One Behind (LNOB) with stories that have been submitted from across the globe.

Key findings

- **Localisation is gaining momentum:** As of July 2024, **over 300 cities, municipalities, and regions have published Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs),** reflecting a surge in local leadership and accountability.[3]
- **National-local integration is increasing**: Nearly **70 per cent of VNR countries in 2024** reported formal coordination mechanisms between national and subnational levels for SDG implementation – marking a steady institutional shift toward multilevel governance.
- **Success depends on systemic enablers**: Key enabling conditions include coherent policy and budgetary frameworks, predictable financing, robust local data systems (including community-generated data), inclusive civic participation, and digital innovation.
- **Persistent barriers remain**: Many local actors continue to face fragmented governance systems, underfunded mandates, weak statistical infrastructure, and shrinking civic space – especially in contexts of political volatility and centralisation.
- **Civil society is central**: Community-based organisations are playing a vital role in catalysing inclusive planning, local monitoring, and bottom-up accountability.

3 Author *Progressing National SDGs Implementation Report 2024* 9 ed (Publisher 2024).

Recommendations

To scale and sustain SDG localisation, the report calls on governments, donors, and development actors to:

- **Institutionalise localisation in national planning, budgeting, and monitoring systems**, with clearly defined roles for subnational actors.
- **Scale up and integrate VLRs and Voluntary Subnational Reviews (VSRs)** into formal national and global SDG reporting cycles to strengthen coherence and accountability.
- **Provide direct, predictable, and flexible financing to local governments and civil society**, ensuring that financing mechanisms are tailored to local needs and realities.
- **Strengthen local capacities** through long-term training, infrastructure, and peer learning.
- **Enhance local data ecosystems**, including the integration of disaggregated and community-generated data to track progress and identify gaps.
- **Promote equitable multi-stakeholder partnerships and protect the enabling environment of civil society** – especially of marginalised and underrepresented groups – into local governance structures.
- **Leverage inclusive digital tools and capacity strengthening** to improve access, engagement, and transparency in local SDG planning and service delivery.
- **Align donor funding with locally-led development strategies**, ensuring support for long-term, trust-based partnerships.

A CALL TO ACTION

With just five years remaining in the 2030 Agenda, the present situation pertaining to SDG delivery cannot continue. Localisation is not an add-on – it is a transformative shift to ensure that SDG delivery is rooted in local realities, responsive to local needs, and led by local actors.

This report urges stakeholders, working in collaboration, and particularly duty bearers, policymakers, funders and international institutions, to act decisively and collaboratively. Only by centring local leadership and multistakeholder partnerships can we accelerate meaningful progress toward the 2030 Agenda and truly ensure that no one is left behind.


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BRING INDIGENOUS, RURAL, AFRODESCENDANT AND WOMEN TO THE FINANCING TABLE. NOW!!

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ABA Accelerator and Bottleneck Assessment
Agenda 2030 United Nations Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development
A4SD Action for Sustainable Development
AMAP Asset Management Action Plan
AN Peru National Agreement Forum
AREDES Costa Rica's Regional Development Agencies
CADE Civil Society Alliances for Digital Empowerment
CCCF County Climate Change Fund
CD Capacity Development
CENN Caucasus Environmental NGO Network
CEPS Citizens Engagement Platform Seychelles
CIDPs County Integrated Development Plans
CODE-NGO Caucus of Development NGO Networks
CoG Council of Governors (Kenya)
CONGAD Conseil des ONG d'Appui au Développement
CONGCOOP Coordinación de Organizaciones y Cooperativas
COVID-19 Coronavirus disease
CSOs Civil Society Organisations
CSR Corporate Social Responsibility
DCSS District Councils of Social Service
DDPs District Development Plans
DDCCs District Development Coordination Committees
DESA UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs
DFID Department for International Development
DIF District Indicator Framework
EENGD Red Encuentro de Entidades No Gubernamentales para el Desarrollo
FALE Facility Aiding Locally-led Engagement
FCOSS Fiji Council of Social Services
FFD4 Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development
FiCS Finance in Common Summit
FIDH International Federation for Human Rights
GIZ Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
GNI Gross National Income
HLPF UN High-Level Political Forum
IFAM Institute for Municipal Development and Advice
IGES Institute for Global Environmental Strategies
IIED International Institute for Environment and Development
INFID International NGO Forum on Indonesian Development
INGO International Non-Governmental Organisations
JANIC Japan NGO Centre for International Cooperation
KCOC Korea NGO Council for Overseas Cooperation
KOICA Korea International Cooperation Agency
LAC Latin America and the Caribbean
LAO PDR Lao People's Democratic Republic
LCAPA Local Climate Adaptation Plans of Action
LGA Local Government Associations
LGDG Local Government Development Grant
LGU Local Government Units
LISA Local Government Institutional Capacity Self-Assessment
LNOB Leave No One Behind
LRGs Local and Regional Governments
MEAL Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning
MoFAGA Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration
NDC Nationally Determined Contributions
NFN NGO Federation of Nepal
NGOs Non-Governmental Organisations
NGYouthSDG Network of Youth for Sustainable Initiative
NIYEAP Nigeria Youth Employment Action Plan
NNNGO Nigeria Network of NGOs
ODA Official Development Assistance
OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PDA Pakistan Development Alliance
PDB Public Development Bank
PDCs Parish Development Committees
PDM Parish Development Model
PFM Public Finance Management
PIANGO Pacific Islands Association of Non-Governmental Organisations
RINGO Reimagining NGOs
SACCO Savings and Credit Cooperative Organisations
SDGs Sustainable Development Goals
SDSN Sustainable Development Solutions Network
SIF State Indicator Framework
SINAPLAN Sistema Nacional de Planeamiento Estratégico
UCLG United Cities and Local Governments
UN United Nations
UNDESA United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNDP United Nations Development Programme
UNGA United Nations General Assembly
UN-Habitat United Nations Human Settlements Programme
UNNGOF Uganda National NGO Forum
USAID United States Agency for International Development
VLR Voluntary Local Review
VNR Voluntary National Review
VSRs Voluntary Subnational Reviews
ZCSD Zambia Council for Social Development
ZeP2030 Zero Poverty PH 2030



INTRODUCTION

When world leaders adopted the 2030 Agenda in 2015, they set out a bold and universal vision: to end poverty, reduce inequality, protect the planet, and ensure that no one is left behind (NOLB). Civil society organisations (CSOs) played a crucial role in shaping the 2030 Agenda, contributing to the United Nation's (UN) negotiation process and advocating for inclusive development. But ten years later, global progress is significantly off-track in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). With fewer than 17 per cent of SDG targets being achieved,[1] we are also witnessing a convergence of crises – including persistent inequality, conflict, food insecurity, climate instability, and a global financing shortfall – which threaten to derail the 2030 Agenda.

The year 2025 marks both a symbolic and practical turning point in the global journey towards achieving the SDGs: it marks the ten-year anniversary of the adoption of the SDGs – a moment of

1 UN General Assembly Economic and Social Council 'Progress Towards the Development Goals: Report of the Secretary-General' UN Doc A/79/79-E/2024/54 (2024) 2.



global reflection and recalibration. It is also a pivotal turning point, with only five years remaining before the deadline for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Today is a moment to reflect on what has been achieved, confront what is not working, and course-correct before it is too late and for future action. With only five years remaining to meet the ambitious targets of the 2030 Agenda, the global community needs to adapt, accelerate, and innovate, or risk falling short of the transformative vision laid out in 2015.

Localisation is not simply a matter of delivery; it represents a deeper political and historical shift in the development cooperation landscape. Localisation is far more than a technical adjustment or a donor-driven project shift. It represents a fundamental rebalancing of power, recognising that sustainable development must be rooted in the leadership, priorities, and rights of local actors. This transformative agenda challenges entrenched models of cooperation shaped by historical inequities and asserts the need for a more just, inclusive, and reciprocal system of global solidarity.

Localisation is not simply a matter of delivery; it represents a deeper political and historical shift in the development cooperation landscape.

With an estimated 65 per cent of SDG targets dependent on local action,[2] localisation and multi-stakeholder partnerships emerge as essential partners to tailor solutions, support community ownership, and ensure accountability. Localisation enables better use of disaggregated data,

2 United Nations, *Inter-Agency Policy Brief: Localising the SDGs to Accelerate Implementation – The Power of Local Action*, 29 May 2024 https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/Policy%20Brief%20FINAL%20May%2029%205%2024.pdf

As global progress stalls, empowering these actors has become not only a practical necessity but also a strategic imperative to rescue the 2030 Agenda.

facilitates inclusive participation, and drives innovation in service delivery – often pioneering scalable models that national or global actors can adopt. **Local actors** refer to a broad range of stakeholders operating at the subnational level, including **local governments, municipalities, local CSOs, community-based groups, grass-roots movements, and local private sector actors**. As global progress stalls, empowering these actors has become not only a practical necessity but also a strategic imperative to rescue the 2030 Agenda.[3]

In this context, **Forus** – a global network representing 72 national NGO platforms and seven regional coalitions – has launched this study in collaboration with its members to assess the power of localisation to boost the implementation of the SDGs by 2030. Drawing on grounded experience, deep research and key insights, this report underscores the transformative potential of localisation and equitable partnerships in delivering the SDGs. Examples from over 15 countries – including Argentina, Guatemala, Indonesia, Nigeria, Zambia, and the Philippines – demonstrate that localisation, *when adequately resourced and powered by inclusive, multi-stakeholder partnerships*, is our best lever to rescue the 2030 Agenda.



3 *United Nations, Inter-Agency Policy Brief: Localising the SDGs to Accelerate Implementation – The Power of Local Action,* 29 May 2024. https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/Policy%20Brief%20FINAL%20May%2029%205%2024.pdf

PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Through this study, we aim to:

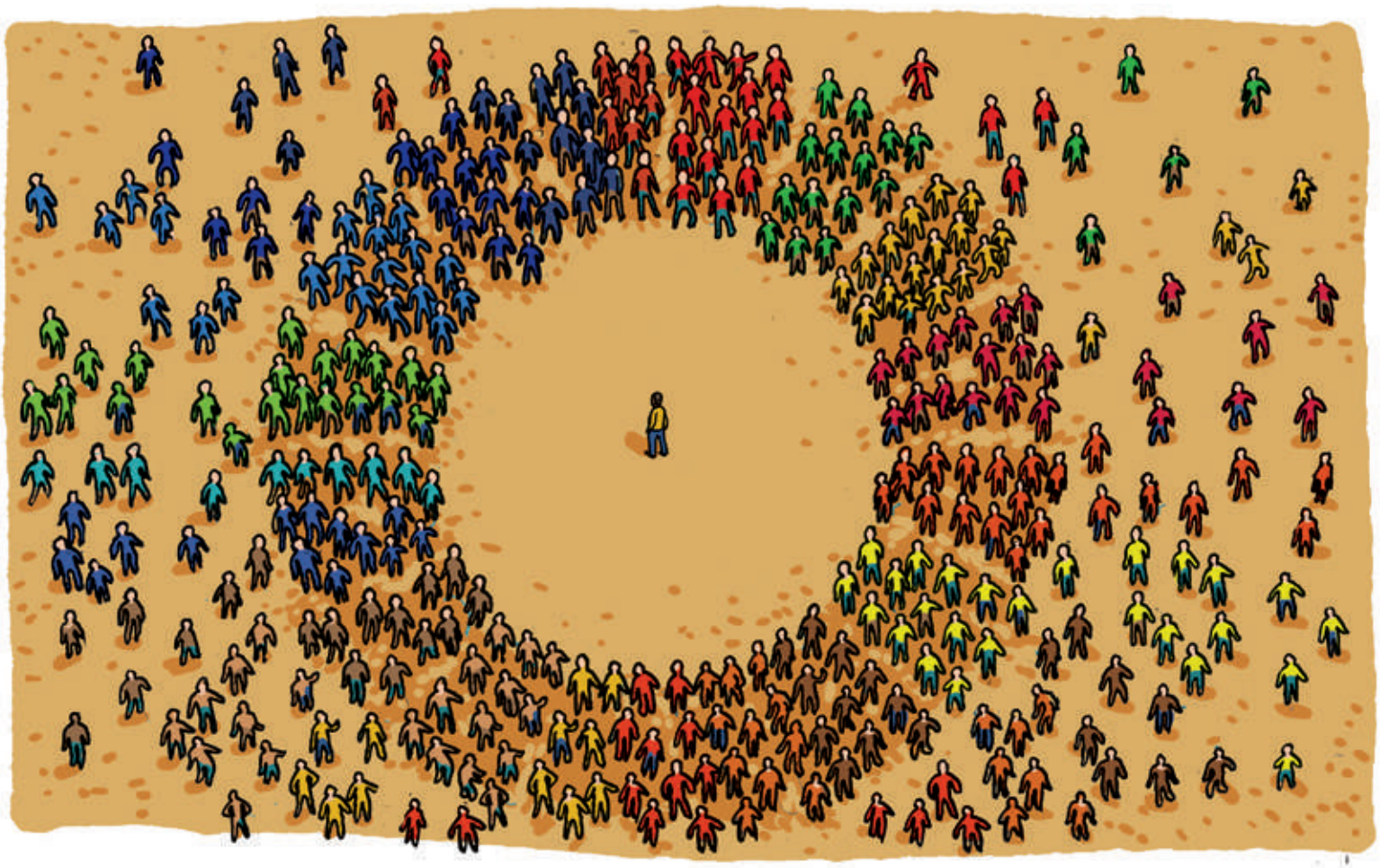
- Document how SDG localisation and multi-stakeholder partnerships are taking shape in diverse contexts.
- Identify enabling conditions, persistent challenges, and opportunities for scaling effective practices; and
- Propose participative and evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, funders, and multilateral institutions to support local action and partnerships more effectively.

By synthesising real-world experiences from Forus members and anchoring them in the global SDG framework, this report serves as both a practical tool and an advocacy resource for civil society practitioners and decision-makers alike.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-method approach incorporating both secondary and primary data sources to ensure a comprehensive analysis of localisation and partnerships, reflecting both global research and grounded realities:

- **Secondary data sources:** A comprehensive literature review was conducted by the Forus advocacy team with insights from members of the Agenda 2030 working group, analysing UN reports, SDG implementation studies, and documented case examples. These sources not only inform the conceptual underpinnings of the report but also offer operational insights and good practices that validate the lived experiences of Forus members. See Annexure 1 at the end of this report for the complete list of resources reviewed for the creation of this report.
- **Primary data sources.** A structured questionnaire and 15 in-depth interviews were conducted with Forus members to identify successful strategies, challenges, and gaps in localisation and partnerships. This approach helped consolidate 15 case studies that you will find throughout the report, highlighting innovative local practices and multi-stakeholder models.



SECTION 1
THE CASE FOR LOCALISATION

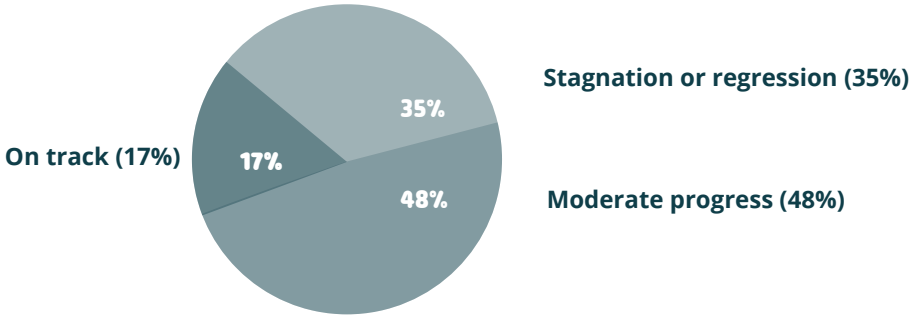
1 GLOBAL SDG PROGRESS: A critical juncture

According to the UN **Sustainable Development Report 2024, only 17 per cent of the 169 SDG targets are currently on track,**[4] with **48 per cent showing minimal or moderate progress**, and **over one-third having stalled or regressed.**[5] This marks the slowest rate of progress since the SDGs were adopted in 2015.

4 UN General Assembly Economic and Social Council (n 1 above).

5 UN *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024* (2024) 4 https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2024/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2024.pdf

GLOBAL SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL PROGRESS STATUS (2024)



***Source**: Forus, based on data from United Nations, SDG Report 2024*[6]

Several compounding global crises have severely undermined implementation. The lingering impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, escalating armed conflicts, geopolitical tensions, and intensifying biodiversity and climate-related disasters have reversed hard-won gains across many goals. For example, extreme poverty has increased for the first time in decades, with 712 million people living on less than $2.15 per day in 2022.[7] Hunger remains widespread, with 733 million people suffering from undernourishment in 2023, and nearly 2.3 billion facing moderate or severe food insecurity.[8] At the same time, about 40 per cent of the planet's soil is degraded, severely compromising the food security of billions of people. Education is in crisis, with only 58 per cent of students globally reaching minimum proficiency in reading by the end of primary school.[9] Climate impacts are worsening: 2023 was the hottest year on record, with global temperatures approaching the 1.5°C threshold and greenhouse gas emissions hitting a historic high.[10] Peace and security have deteriorated, with a 72 per cent increase in civilian deaths from armed conflict between 2022 and 2023, and nearly 120 million forcibly displaced persons worldwide by mid-2024.[11]

6 UN Press Release 'With less than one fifth of targets on track, world is failing to deliver on promise of the Sustainable Development Goals, warns new UN report' 28 June 2024 https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2024/06/press-release-sdg-report-2024/ United Nations: Climate Action 'Land – The planet's carbon sink' https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/science/climate-issues/land (accessed 4 June 2025).

7 UN *SDG Report 2024* (n 5 above) 8.

8 UN *SDG Report 2024* (n 5 above) 10.

9 UN *SDG Report 2024* (n 5 above) 16.

10 UN *SDG Report 2024* (n 5 above) 34.

11 UN *SDG Report 2024* (n 5 above) 40.

WORLD SDG DASHBOARD (2024)



***Source**: SDSN Sustainable Development Report 2024 (2024)*

The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Index 2024 shows that while some high-income countries (for example, Nordic nations) maintain relatively high SDG scores, no country is on track to meet all SDG targets by 2030. Low-income and conflict-affected countries are at greatest risk of being left behind.[12]

Financing remains a critical barrier. The **Sustainable Development Report 2024** by the SDSN[13] corroborates these findings and stresses the chronic lack of financing as a systemic barrier. It highlights an annual SDG financing gap of $4 trillion in developing countries, exacerbated by rising debt burdens and unequal access to capital markets.[14]

12 Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) *Sustainable Development Report 2024: The SDGs and the UN Summit of the Future* (2024) 17 https://files.unsdsn.org/sustainable-development-report-2024.pdf (accessed 4 June 2025).

13 Ibid).

14 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Financing for Sustainable Development Report 2024: Financing for Development at a Crossroads*, April 2024. https://desapublications.un.org/publications/financing-sustainable-development-report-2024



2 LOCALISATION FOR THE FORUS NETWORK: An ongoing journey

As detailed in Forus research and campaigns,[15] localisation is a critical pillar of sustainable development, based on a recognition of the importance of communities having ownership over the development processes taking place in their own neighbourhoods. Localisation means fully recognising the value of assets within the communities where development takes place and elevating the voices of community representatives. This is relevant in many contexts, including with respect to development cooperation.

Organisations from the Global North working in international development will need to change their operating systems and organisational cultures and will undoubtedly themselves require significant capacity strengthening for this purpose. The growing trend towards localisation in international development will mean ensuring that CSOs in the Global South have control and ownership over all aspects of their work, including any aspects linked to sharing capacity. It is important that local CSOs should decide on their own learning agenda. CSO capacity strengthening initiatives must be created by and with local stakeholders, build on existing capacities, recognise and value local knowledge and capitalise on it from the outset. Access for CSOs, and particularly for local CSOs, to regular opportunities for capacity strengthening plays a role in increasing their legitimacy and ability to develop their leadership role in their specific contexts. CSO capacity strengthening should be targeted at local and sub-national CSOs in particular, to support policies of localisation and locally-led development. At the same time, international and bilateral donors

15 Forus International *Sustainable development by shifting the power: Capacity strengthening of civil society as a key tool for the implementation of SDG 17* (2023).

should not be prescriptive in their funding of CSO capacity strengthening but should instead create the conditions for autonomy on the part of CSOs in planning, designing and evaluating their own capacity strengthening programmes and initiatives. Responsibility for ensuring the capacity strengthening of CSOs everywhere should be shared between national, regional and global levels, particularly in the context of implementing the 2030 Agenda. Innovative and flexible new CSO funding mechanisms, prioritising long-term and unrestricted financial support need to be urgently developed, both to resource CSO capacity strengthening and to ensure that less formalised forms of civic participation (for example, social movements) are also eligible to receive funding.

Forus as a network through its Local Power group and other participative initiative, specifically emphasises the critical role of civil society capacity strengthening in accelerating positive trends in the international development sector. These trends include the movement towards greater localisation, power shifts, and the decolonisation of development policies and practices.

Building on this understanding, it is equally important to recognise that localisation has become a broader global priority for sustainable development, as detailed below.



Trends include the movement towards greater localisation, power shifts, and the decolonisation of development policies and practices.



3 WHY LOCALISATION MATTERS

Amid today's global and national challenges, localisation is increasingly seen as essential to make sustainable development real and relevant. In the context of the SDGs, localisation involves adapting and implementing the SDGs at the subnational level – in cities, towns, and communities – where the majority of public services are delivered, and where people directly experience the impact of policy decisions. According to the **Roadmap for Localising the SDGs**,[16] localisation entails more than devolving responsibility. It requires aligning national strategies with local plans, enabling meaningful participation of civil society and community actors, and ensuring that adequate resources and data systems exist at the local level. Localisation is not simply about geographic reach – it is also about relevance, participation, and accountability. The 2024 Sustainable Development Report by SDSN emphasises that 'the SDGs cannot be achieved without strong local action', particularly in a context where global progress is hampered by political fragmentation, fiscal constraints, and climate shocks.[17] In other words, global commitments become tangible only when translated into local priorities and practices.

Inter-Agency Policy Briefs[18] underscores that 65 per cent of SDG targets cannot be achieved without active engagement from local and regional

16 Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, UN-Habitat & UNDP 'Roadmap for Localizing the SDGs: Implementation and Monitoring at Subnational Level' https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/commitments/818_11195_commitment_ROADMAP%20LOCALIZING%20SDGS.pdf .

17 Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), *Sustainable Development Report 2024*, SDSN and Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024, pp. 2–3. https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2024/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2024.pdf

18 Inter-Agency Policy Briefs (n 2 above) 3.

governments. These authorities are directly responsible for delivering essential services in areas like health, education, sanitation, transportation, and urban planning – many of which form the backbone of SDG implementation. Here, it is important to emphasise that localisation must not be understood solely through the lens of local authorities or decentralised government structures.



While the role of municipalities and subnational governments is undeniably crucial, equally vital is the leadership of civil society and grassroots communities in driving transformative, context-specific implementation of the SDGs. CSOs, community-based groups, and social movements often operate as the connective tissue between national policies and lived realities. Their proximity to the most vulnerable populations, combined with their trust-based relationships and localised expertise, enables them to expose needs, co-create solutions, and hold institutions accountable in ways that governments alone often cannot.

Moreover, in many settings – especially where state capacity is limited, or where local authorities are under-resourced or constrained – civil society actors have stepped in to fill governance gaps, deliver essential services, and catalyse community-driven development. Their contributions are not supplementary but foundational to effective localisation. In the Forus **'We are leaving no one behind, are you?'** campaign several stories are featured, showing exactly how civil society steps in and supports communities worldwide. The role of civil society empowerment is evident from **Nepal**, where youth and children led Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) to ensure that their voices shape national and global policy, to **Zambia**, where the Chikankata Ngangula Disabled Farmers Association empowers individuals with disabilities to combat poverty, promote sustainable development, and improve health and education in rural communities. In **Argentina,** Red Encuentro is helping young people actively engage in decision-making processes, whereas in **Nigeria**, Hope Behind Bars Africa is helping incarcerated individuals advocate for their rights and improve their social reintegration.

Are these highlights in this paragraph necessary? These examples highlight the power of **community-led and focused initiatives** and the **impact** of civil society in addressing gaps in governance and service delivery for transformative social change. Across the world, civil society is taking **concrete steps** to ensure that no one is left behind, and their work is not just a complement to government action; it is an **essential foundation** of effective localisation of the SDGs.

As the campaign moves forward, the goal remains clear: to amplify the voices and actions of grassroots actors who are leading the charge for inclusive, people-centred development. By showcasing civil society-led initiatives around the world, the campaign challenges dominant narratives, and calls attention to those who are too often overlooked in policy processes.

CASE STUDY

ORIGINAL, a movement for cultural diversity - Mexico

More than just a social programme, ORIGINAL is conceived as a movement to defend the collective rights of Mexico's creative communities. Rooted in principles of recognition and respect, it fosters an egalitarian dialogue with Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and Mestizo communities.



ORIGINAL
CIUDAD DE MÉXICO



With active support from the State, ORIGINAL seeks to raise awareness about the value of artisanal work; to combat the persistent plagiarism of traditional designs and symbols; and to resist the historical invisibility and dispossession suffered by these communities.

It is within this context that ORIGINAL emerged – as a programme dedicated to making the cultural rights of Indigenous and Afro-Mexican Peoples a lived reality.

This vision aligns with the cross-cutting principles of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and is reflected in several targets under SDG 17.[19]

With most countries presenting their third or fourth Voluntary National Review (VNR), the 2024 **VNR Synthesis Report** by the UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) welcomed that countries are increasingly moving beyond a focus on national-level SDG mainstreaming towards 'context-specific SDG implementation … with a clear emphasis on decentralization'.[20] Yet, the report cautioned that for these efforts to be truly transformative, 'further institutional innovation is needed to bridge gaps between national priorities and local realities'.[21] Too often, they are under-resourced, under-consulted, or structurally disconnected from national strategies.

Despite limitations in internet access, smartphone penetration, and bandwidth, **Ugandan CSOs** have developed new methods for community

19 Secretariat of Economy '4th Voluntary National Review, Mexico 2024: 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' (2024).

20 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) *2024 Voluntary National Reviews Synthesis Report* (New York: United Nations 2024) 32 https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/meetings/vnr-workshop-dec2024/2024_VNR_Synthesis_Report.pdf (accessed 4 June 2025).

21 Ibid.

engagement. One such initiative is the **'Topowa Forums'**, a series of community conversations led by civic mentors who travel directly to meet with residents.[22] This approach overcomes connectivity barriers and fosters open dialogue on important issues. Furthermore, Ugandan civil society plays a crucial role in supporting the government's Parish Development Model (PDM), a bottom-up development strategy that emphasises community mobilisation and mindset change. This collaboration between civil society and government exemplifies how such collaborations can effectively adapt to local contexts and contribute to national development goals.



4 MAINSTREAMING THE SDGS INTO NATIONAL AND LOCAL FRAMEWORKS

The Progressing National SDGs Implementation Reports (2016-2023) provide a comprehensive account of how countries are integrating the SDGs into policy-making, governance, and service delivery. These reports consistently emphasise that if the 2030 Agenda is to 'leave no one behind', the localisation of the SDGs must be at the heart of national development strategies.

A review of the Progressing National SDGs Implementation Reports over time highlights how countries consistently report embedding the SDGs in their national development plans and policy frameworks. In earlier editions, there was limited reference to how local governments were integrated. However, in 2024, 85 per cent of countries submitting VNRs reported efforts to institutionalise SDG localisation – a notable rise from 75 per cent in 2023.[23]

22 Forus 'Rebuilding Trust for Inclusive Governance: Unlocking SDG 16 for Peaceful Societies' (2024) https://www.forus-international.org/en/pdf-detail/115544-rebuilding-trust-for-inclusive-governance-unlocking-sdg-16-for-peaceful-societies/?force_active=305a7f03-0dea-4efc-91ac-89f322e8e999 (accessed 4 June 2025).

23 Author Progressing National SDGs Implementation Report 2024: 9 ed (Publisher, 2024). https://www.progressingsdgs.org/ninth-edition-2024-1

CASE STUDY

KCOC's advocacy for civil society in Korea's localisation agenda

In South Korea, the **Korea NGO Council for Overseas Cooperation (KCOC)** has championed civil society participation in the country's SDG localisation strategy.

Through targeted advocacy and peer review mechanisms, KCOC influenced several key policies:

- The **2021-2025 Policy Framework for Government-Civil Society Partnership in International Development Cooperation**, now referencing SDG 17;
- Korea International Cooperation Agency's (KOICA) internal review of direct support pathways for CSOs in the Global South; and
- Korea's **2024 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Peer Review**, where KCOC's civil society report elevated implementation concerns.[24]



KCOC's dialogue with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Office for Government Policy Coordination has pushed the government to broaden its localisation approach beyond state-led programmes. A new programme was recently launched to support CSO engagement in the Global South.

However, the pace of institutional reform remains slow, and most official development assistance (ODA) is still directed toward government channels.

KCOC's work underscores how **structured civil society advocacy** can catalyse shifts from symbolic inclusion to genuine policy reform – making localisation real in national and global development cooperation.

24 OECD 'OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: Korea 2024' OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews (Paris: OECD Publishing 2024) https://doi.org/10.1787/889c6564-en (accessed 6 June 2025).

In countries with decentralised governance structures, such as Austria, Brazil, and Nepal, the integration of SDG targets and indicators into local planning processes appears to be gaining momentum. Austria's VNR highlights subnational strategies like the Spatial Vision Vorarlberg 2030, the Climate and Energy Strategy SALZBURG 2050, and Vienna's Smart Climate City Strategy. These are complemented by dedicated tools for SDG management, such as the **Lower Austrian Environment, Climate and Energy Report** . Similarly, in Brazil, municipalities like São Paulo, Barcarena, and Niterói are using SDG handbooks and reporting mechanisms to integrate and monitor local contributions. Nepal's VNR notes that formalised SDG committees have been established at both the provincial and local levels, creating an interface between national coordination mechanisms and local planning. However, the Nepal SDG Forum reports that these structures face significant challenges in terms of financing, technical capacity, and staffing, which hinder full operationalisation.

In countries like India, Nepal, and Cuba, localisation is being driven through dedicated coordination platforms and integrated planning systems, linking local governments with national SDG units. India's NITI Aayog, for instance, has supported States and Union Territories in developing localised SDG frameworks with disaggregated indicators, enabling 'competitive federalism' where states are benchmarked on SDG performance.[25]



The UNDP's 2023 Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) report[26] on localising the SDGs shows that subnational coordination mechanisms, especially in federal or decentralised systems, have significantly increased vertical coherence, enabling policy alignment between municipalities and national objectives.

In sub-Saharan Africa, devolved governance systems are increasingly fostering SDG localisation, though progress remains uneven. Kenya's 47 county governments implement SDG-aligned initiatives through their County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs), supported by

25 National Institution for Transforming India (NITI Aayog) *Annual Report 2019-20* (2020).

26 UNDP 'Localization of the Sustainable Development Goals and Effective Local Governance: A strategy for acceleration in Latin America and the Caribbean' (2023).

coordination mechanisms such as the Council of Governors, which promotes inter-county learning and dialogue with national institutions.[27]

In Zimbabwe, the government's **Devolution and Decentralisation Policy**[28] supports the alignment of District Development Plans (DDPs) with SDG priorities, integrating community needs into national strategies. This Devolution Agenda empowers local authorities to lead in SDG implementation while ensuring that local objectives align with national and global development targets. However, the framework remains nascent, and local governments require additional investment to build institutional readiness.

In its 2024 VNR, Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR or Laos) emphasised plans to enhance disaggregated data collection and research.[29] The country aims to engage local organisations, government agencies, and international partners to adopt a holistic and inclusive approach to tracking SDG progress.

Here it is important to note the lead role civil society plays to catalyse shifts from symbolic inclusion to genuine policy reform – making localisation real in national and global development cooperation.

CASE STUDY

Futuro en Común in Spain - Building bridges between local realities and global policy through structured dialogue

Futuro en Común is a Spanish alliance made up of more than 60 CSOs and platforms from diverse sectors – social action, feminism, the environment, trade unions, development cooperation, peace, consumer rights, social and solidarity economy, childhood, youth, and migration. These organisations work together for a more just, sustainable, and democratic society, with a structural and intersectional perspective on eco-social crises.



FUTURO EN COMÚN

27 Council of Governors *SDGs Booklet for Governors' Induction* (2022) https://cog.go.ke/reports/sdgs-booklet-for-governors-induction/ (accessed 4 June 2025).

28 Government of Zimbabwe *Devolution and Decentralisation Policy* (2020) https://ucaz.org.zw/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/DEVOLUTION-AND-DECENTRALISATION-POLICY-pdf-min.pdf (accessed 4 June 2025).

29 Lao People's Democratic Republic *Voluntary National Review on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development* (July 2024) https://rtm.org.la/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Third-Voluntary-National-Review-Report_-Lao-PDR.pdf (accessed 4 June 2025).

To achieve this, in addition to working at the national level, the alliance has committed to supporting processes in ten regions across the country. These efforts focus on facilitating coordination among different civil society sectors to build a joint agenda for social and political mobilisation that promotes a truly transformative Agenda 2030 at both regional and municipal levels.

Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development is the backbone of these actions. From this perspective, studies have been carried out to assess the degree of localisation of the 2030 Agenda in various territories, generating context-specific diagnostics that help identify progress made, ongoing challenges, and opportunities for improvement. These analyses have led to concrete proposals aimed at strengthening the effective implementation of the SDGs at the local level, with the goal of bridging the gap between global commitments and the social, economic, and environmental realities of each territory.

Based on the findings from these territorial studies and the proposals developed by civil society in intersectoral coordination spaces, dialogue has been promoted with key stakeholders such as local governments, public administrations, academia, and the private sector. This has taken place both through structured dialogue processes and the organisation of specific gatherings that enabled the exchange of diagnostics, perspectives, and proposals; co-creation of localisation strategies; identification of policy gaps; and alignment of regional priorities. The objective of these initiatives has been to influence strategic documents for the localisation of the SDGs in each territory. The intensity and degree of success of this advocacy have varied depending on the political, institutional, and social context of each regioOne of the main obstacles that has limited the reach of these processes has been the impact of electoral cycles and the subsequent formation of territorial governments in alliance with political groups opposed to the principles and objectives of the 2030 Agenda. These changes in the political landscape have, in some cases, hindered the continuity of dialogue, institutional receptiveness, and the effective incorporation of proposals into local strategic frameworks.

Futuro en Común also developed a shared messaging framework, ensuring coherent communication across sectors and regions. This approach has helped integrate concerns about the backlash against the transformative ambitions of the 2030 Agenda and the shrinking of civic space into Spain's SDG narrative, highlighting the importance of an enabling environment for civil society as a foundation for sustainable development.

Futuro en Común exemplifies how structured, multi-level civil society coordination can strengthen policy coherence, institutional capacity, and community participation – anchoring the localisation of the SDGs both nationally and globally.



5 PROLIFERATION OF VLRS

One of the most prominent tools for localising the SDGs has been the VLR. By conducting a VLR, local governments can map their existing initiatives against the 17 SDGs, identify gaps in their sustainability efforts, and create targeted action plans. This process not only helps cities understand where they stand but also fosters collaboration between different stakeholders – from government departments to businesses and community groups. The VLR transforms abstract global goals into concrete local priorities, making sustainability efforts more tangible and measurable at the community level, enhancing accountability, and facilitating peer learning across cities.

Since 2018, more than 300 VLRs have been produced globally, up from just two in 2018.[30] Although only 40 per cent of countries referenced VLRs in their 2024 VNRs– up slightly from 33 per cent in 2023 – momentum is building, particularly in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa.[31] Costa Rica is a notable example, with cities such as Atenas, Escazú, and Goicoechea submitting VLRs. This is supported by the Institute for Municipal Development and Advice (IFAM) and the UN Country Team, which jointly developed an online training course on VLR preparation. Ecuador has also been a regional leader in this area, with the Consortium of Provincial Governments producing VLRs since 2020. Honduras recently completed its first two VLRs in San Nicolas and Intibucá, while Peru and Brazil reported sporadic but promising developments. In Africa, 17 counties in Kenya and 15 districts in Uganda have completed VLRs, supported by national SDG Secretariats and development partners. Zimbabwe's government,

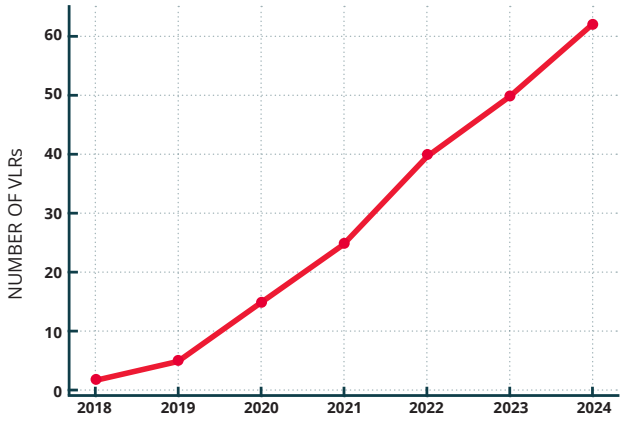
30 *2024 VNR Synthesis Report* (n 20); United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) & United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) 'Action-Oriented Voluntary Local Reviews: A methodology for the partners of UN-Habitat' (2024) 7 https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2024/02/action-oriented_vlr_methodology.pdf (accessed 4 June 2025).

31 Author (n 23 above) page.

supported by the UN-DESA/Italy project, facilitated the development of six VLRs in both urban and rural councils between 2022 and 2024. However, Zimbabwean civil society warns that the sustainability of these efforts is threatened by their dependence on donor financing.

The **Action-Oriented VLR Methodology** developed by UN-Habitat & UCLG[32] further reinforces this by offering a flexible yet standardised tool for cities to assess impact and adjust policies. The **Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES)** Global VLR 2024 Report[33] also highlights the increasing number of Global South cities producing VLRs, breaking the early Global North dominance of the VLR process and making localisation a more equitable global movement.

GROWTH OF VOLUNTARY LOCAL REVIEWS (VLRs)



***Source**: Diagram by Forus sourced from UN-Habitat & UCLG 'Action-Oriented Voluntary Local Reviews: A methodology for the partners of UN-Habitat' (2024)[34]*

> Far from being mere reporting tools, VLRs have become strategic instruments for bottom-up planning and vertical alignment.

Recent evidence from 'Action-Oriented Voluntary Local Reviews: A methodology for the partners of UN'- shows that VLRs are now playing an important role in fostering policy coherence. Far from being mere reporting tools, VLRs have become strategic instruments for bottom-up planning and vertical alignment. They allow municipalities to not only monitor progress but to also influence national strategies, enhance local ownership of the SDGs, and scale up inclusive partnerships. The experiences of cities such as Samarinda, Indonesia, and Vantaa, Finland, exemplify the transformative potential of VLRs within multilevel governance systems. In Samarinda, the VLR was fully integrated into the city's medium-term development plan and used by the National Ministry of Planning (Bappenas)

32 UN-Habitat & UCLG (n 32 above).

33 F Ortiz-Moya & Y Kataoka 'State of the Voluntary Local Reviews 2024: Strengthening the Local Implementation of the 2030 Agenda' (Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES) 2024).

34 UN-Habitat & UCLG (n 32 above)

to inform the VLR. In Vantaa, the VLR process led to the adoption of SDG-based budgeting and participatory planning mechanisms that are now informing inter-municipal cooperation across Finland.

Cities like **New York, Buenos Aires,**[35] **Kitakyushu, Amman, and Suva** have used VLRs to integrate SDGs into urban planning, budgeting, and community outreach. In **Suva, Fiji**, the VLR directly influenced the city's ten-year development plan, ensuring SDG alignment and community relevance. Suva's VLR was not just a reporting exercise but shaped fiscal decision-making. It helped identify funding gaps and reprioritise municipal investments toward health and housing resilience post-COVID.

Finland and the Netherlands have developed strong VLR-VNR linkages, where local input feeds directly into national reporting mechanisms. As such, the City of Espoo, Finland, was one of the earliest adopters of the VLR. In its 2020 review, Espoo showcased integrated digital governance, inclusion of immigrants and persons with disabilities, and youth participation in SDG planning.[36] Through partnerships with universities, NGOs, and residents, Espoo's approach illustrates how SDG localisation can promote both innovation and equity.

In Mexico, Yucatán's 2020 VLR highlighted its use of disaggregated data and culturally appropriate consultation with Indigenous communities. The report provided sector-by-sector alignment of local policies with SDGs and emphasised the role of traditional knowledge and localised indicators.[37] The **Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve** in Querétaro has also demonstrated how ecological restoration, social entrepreneurship, and local governance can coalesce to meet SDG targets. This model was cited for balancing biodiversity protection with income generation, especially for rural women.



35 Ortiz-Moya & Kataoka (n 35 above).

36 City of Espoo *Voluntary Local Review Implementation of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals 2030 in the City of Espoo* (2020).

37 Government of the State of Yucatan *Voluntary Subnational Report Yucatan 2020* (2020) https://www.local2030.org/pdf/vlr/yucatan-2020-min.pdf .



In Nepal, as detailed in the **'We are leaving no one behind, are you?'** campaign by Forus, the **Nepal SDGs Forum** – a multi-stakeholder platform that includes civil society, youth, private sector, and local authorities – organised a series of innovative, **inclusive reviews** of the SDGs. Among them was a special initiative: a **VLR** across various municipalities in Nepal. Organised with support from the **NGO Federation of Nepal (NFN)**, the event brought together children to assess SDGs. Children identified key achievements, such as the creation of children's networks, improvements in food access, and poverty alleviation programmes. They also raised challenges – youth migration, poor education quality, lack of disaster preparedness – and proposed powerful, actionable solutions. The OECD report[38] notes that since 2021, the Province of Córdoba has aligned its annual budget with the 2030 Agenda, using it as a management and administrative tool to allocate resources towards prioritised SDGs and targets. This alignment includes a focus on equality, sustainability, and a specific gender perspective, particularly emphasising SDG 5: Gender equality. For instance, in the 2022 provincial budget, 72 programmes were identified as contributing to SDG 5.

The findings of the 2024 **VNR Synthesis Report** published by DESA notes that countries are increasingly moving beyond national-level SDG mainstreaming towards 'context-specific SDG implementation … with a clear emphasis on decentralization'.[39] It also cautions that for these efforts to be truly transformative, 'further institutional innovation is needed to bridge gaps between national priorities and local realities'.[40]

38 OECD *OECD Toolkit for a Territorial Approach to the SDGs* (2022) https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-toolkit-for-a-territorial-approach-to-the-sdgs_2913bae2-en.html (accessed 4 June 2025).

39 DESA (n 20 above) 32.

40 Ibid.



SECTION 2

THE ENABLING FACTORS BEHIND LOCALISATION

Localising the SDGs is not a technical undertaking – it is a systemic transformation that depends on a well-functioning ecosystem. It requires an enabling environment composed of institutional, financial, political, and technical conditions. Based on global frameworks and insights from Forus members, this section identifies eight key enabling conditions. These are illustrated through case studies from across the Forus network and relevant official reports.



1 MULTILEVEL GOVERNANCE AND POLICY COHERENCE

Multilevel governance is widely recognised as a foundational enabler for the successful localisation of the SDGs. Defined as the set of institutional arrangements that link national, regional, and local governments in decision-making and implementation processes, multilevel governance creates the vertical policy coherence necessary to bridge the gap between global aspirations and local realities. The 2016 Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, UN-Habitat & UNDP **Roadmap for Localising the SDGs**[41] emphasises that effective multilevel governance ensures 'systematic dialogue and shared responsibilities between levels of government', enabling both upward and downward accountability in SDG delivery. Without such coordination, national strategies risk becoming disconnected from local contexts, while local governments often lack clarity or resources to contribute meaningfully to national goals. The 2024 UN **Inter-Agency Policy Briefs**[42] reiterates that multilevel governance is essential to 'align policy priorities, incentives, and objectives across all levels', particularly when integrated planning, implementation, and monitoring are required across sectors.

In India, the NITI Aayog established SDG Coordination Centres across states, helping align subnational and national strategies.[43] Through the NITI Aayog, the government has established the State Indicator Framework (SIF) and the District Indicator Framework (DIF), complemented by the creation of 24 SDG Coordination Centres operating across

41 United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), UNDP, and UN-Habitat, *Roadmap for Localizing the SDGs: Implementation and Monitoring at Subnational Level* (2016), https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/roadmap_for_localizing_the_sdgs_0.pdf

42 Inter-Agency Policy Briefs (n 2 above) .

43 NITI Aayog (n 27 above).

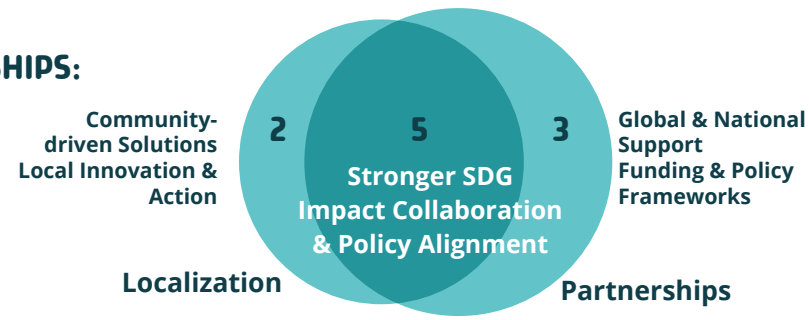
India's states and union territories. These structures have facilitated the localisation of more than 170 SDG indicators and enabled real-time progress tracking at the district level through interactive dashboards. Furthermore, the Aspirational Districts Programme[44] uses these indicators to allocate additional development resources to underperforming regions, creating a strong incentive for local-level planning and innovation. This model demonstrates how vertical integration – through data, finance, and institutional infrastructure – can translate national commitments into local results.

Nepal offers another noteworthy case of multilevel governance enhancing SDG coherence. The Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration (MoFAGA) has embedded SDG alignment into its intergovernmental fiscal transfer system, linking capital grants to local government performance on key development indicators such as primary education, sanitation coverage, and maternal health. As a result, over half of Nepal's municipalities now reference specific SDG targets in their five-year development plans, and local governments that meet performance benchmarks receive supplementary matching grants. This approach demonstrates how policy coherence can be embedded in public finance systems to foster accountability and performance-driven localisation.

Multilevel governance and policy coherence are not theoretical ideals; they are essential institutional conditions for achieving the 2030 Agenda. They ensure that the efforts of national and local actors are aligned and mutually reinforcing, allow communities to contribute meaningfully to national development debates, and provide the architecture for scaling local innovations. Countries and cities that invest in these mechanisms – such as India, Nepal, Finland, and Indonesia – show that structured coordination across governance levels leads to faster, smarter, and more inclusive SDG implementation.

Here it is important to note the key role that civil society can play to help strengthen multi-level inclusive and participatory governance. In **Argentina**, Red Encuentro (EENGD) uses participatory youth policy labs to integrate adolescent voices into municipal SDG planning. Some of these youth-generated proposals have been formally adopted in provincial plans (2023). In **Fiji**, Pacific Islands Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (**PIANGO**) worked with traditional leaders and district service councils to co-develop disaster preparedness protocols aligned with SDG 13, now used nationally.

LOCALIZATION & PARTNERSHIPS: A SYNERGISTIC APPROACH



Source: *Forus*

44 NITI Aayog 'Aspirational Districts Programme' https://www.niti.gov.in/aspirational-districts-programme (accessed 6 June 2025).



2 FINANCING MECHANISMS FOR LOCALISATION

Access to adequate, timely, and flexible financing is a fundamental enabler of SDG localisation. The growing attention to climate finance provides a telling example of how decentralisation can unlock more responsive and impactful development finance. Several countries in Africa – namely Kenya, Mali, Senegal, and Tanzania – have pioneered decentralised climate finance mechanisms that empower local authorities and communities to identify, prioritise, and manage investments in resilience and adaptation. These pilot models have been supported by multilateral development partners, including Department for International Development (DFID), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the **International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED)**, and have produced tangible results that can inform broader financing reforms.

Strengthening local leadership through financing: Forus' local power initiative

Forus' Local Power Working Group brings together national platforms and regional coalitions to challenge traditional financing models and shift power to local actors. Through collective action, the group:

- Promotes equitable partnerships between Global North and Global Majority platforms.
- Advocates for the leadership of local actors in decision-making and resource allocation.
- Develops practical tools and strategies to support decolonised, inclusive, and sustainable financing models.

By centring local voices and ownership in financing discussions, the Local Power Working Group drives systemic change towards more responsive and resilient localisation of the SDGs.



In Kenya,[45] the County Climate Change Fund (CCCF), for instance, has institutionalised a mechanism whereby county governments allocate one to two per cent of their development budgets to climate action identified through participatory Local Climate Adaptation Plans of Action (LCAPAs). Tanzania's Local Government Development Grant (LGDG) system[46] offers a compelling example of how structured fiscal transfers can be linked to performance incentives. Under this system, district councils receive capital development grants based on adherence to criteria related to public financial management, citizen participation, and transparency. The LGDG supports community-prioritised infrastructure projects – including those in education, water, and health – many of which contribute directly to local SDG outcomes. By 2024, all 166 local government authorities on mainland Tanzania were eligible to access funding under this national system. The model illustrates the potential of results-based financing frameworks to enhance local service delivery and strengthen participatory governance.

Beyond domestic systems, bilateral and multilateral ODA also plays a role in supporting localisation. According to the OECD's DAC data, bilateral aid flows to partner governments – including central and local authorities – increased from 13 per cent of total bilateral ODA in 2011 to 17 per cent in 2022, with absolute volumes growing

45 Climate Investment Funds 'Transformational Climate Finance: Kenya's County Climate Change Funds Lessons for Practice' (2024) https://www.cif.org/sites/cif_enc/files/knowledge-documents/tcf_kenya_case_study_apr11-compressed.pdf (accessed 4 June 2025).

46 Overseas Development Institute & Mokoro 'Sector Budget Support in Practice Desk Study Local Government Sector in Tanzania' (2009) https://odi.org/documents/790/5583.pdf and United Republic of Tanzania, Prime Minister's Office Regional Administration and Local Government 'Local Government Development Grant (LGDG) System Proposed Changes and Recommendations for Effective Operation of the New LGDG System: Final' (2014) https://www.jica.go.jp/english/overseas/tanzania/activities/__icsFiles/afieldfile/2024/08/09/lgdg_04.pdf (accessed 4 June 2025).



from USD 13.9 billion to USD 30 billion over the same period.[47] Direct funding to local NGOs nearly increased by 100 per cent in volume from USD 1.1 billion in 2011 to USD 2.1 billion in 2022, though it has to be noted that this only represents a 0,2 per cent increase in bilateral ODA share.[48]

Here, it is important to note the lead role that civil society can play in strengthening capacity to manage budgets locally. In Zambia, the **Zambia Council for Social Development (ZCSD)** trained municipal officials and civil society in financial oversight and procurement policy, directly enhancing participatory governance. ZCSD also facilitated citizen audits of district budgets, improving transparency and resource allocation aligned with SDG 16. These reforms focused on community-driven planning, financial accountability, and tracking of public expenditure in sectors like health, education, and agriculture, enabling local governments and communities to strengthen governance systems and local ownership of SDG implementation.

In **Pakistan**, the Pakistan Development Alliance (PDA) successfully used citizen scorecards and local SDG indices to influence provincial and national budget debates on inclusive development.

47 OECD, *Development Co-operation Report 2024* (OECD Publishing, July 17, 2024), p. 105, Table 4.2: 'Bilateral ODA to partner governments' (showing 13 %, USD 13.9 billion in 2011, rising to 17 %, USD 30 billion in 2022), https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/07/development-co-operation-report-2024_b9cb300f/357b63f7-en.pdf.

48 OECD *Pathways Towards Effective Locally Led Development Co-operation: Learning by Example* (2024, OECD Publishing, Paris) https://doi.org/10.1787/51079bba-en (accessed 3 June 2025).

CASE STUDY

ZCSD in Zambia - Civil society driving fiscal reform and local accountability

In Zambia's centralised governance context, the **ZCSD** stands out as a leading civil society actor championing transparency, fiscal justice, and inclusive governance in line with the SDGs.

Operating under restrictive NGO legislation and limited civic space, ZCSD has strategically positioned **capacity-buildi**



from partners including **Fo** grassroots CSOs in **public budget tracking** – equipp decisions, and engage in evidence-based advocacy.

ZCSD's interventions have directly influenced district-level governance. **Community feedback mechanisms** have been institutionalised in select municipalities, and civil society now holds seats in local development planning processes. These structural gains are embedded in Zambia's broader **Vision 2030** strategy and align with **SDGs 16 and 17**, promoting peace, justice, and accountable institutions.

Beyond fiscal governance, ZCSD is also active in **digital inclusion and anti-corruption advocacy**, pressing for more open, equitable access to information and services. Its work continues to confront shrinking civic space while demonstrating that **trusted, resourced CSOs can drive systemic reform** from the ground up.

ZCSD's experience shows how civil society – when supported with resources and political space – can embed accountability, transparency, and civic inclusion into local governance, shaping sustainable and people-centred SDG implementation.



3 CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

The ability of local actors to meaningfully engage in the localisation of the SDGs is directly dependent on their access to adequate technical, institutional, and civic capacities. Across official literature and independent evaluations, capacity development consistently emerges as a foundational enabler for translating the SDGs into actionable, context-relevant strategies at the subnational level. It is not simply a question of skills or training, but of building resilient systems of governance that can plan, finance, implement, and monitor complex, multidimensional development agendas.

The **2024 Progressing National SDG Implementation Report**[49] documents how capacity building and knowledge exchange initiatives are being scaled up to support localisation. In Costa Rica, municipalities collaborate through the Network of Cantons Promoting the SDGs, which provides toolkits, trainings, and an awards programme to incentivise local implementation. Ecuador and Honduras have both rolled out targeted training for local governments on how to align municipal development plans with the national SDG framework. Yet, in conflict-affected settings such as Chad, Libya, and Syria, localisation is significantly constrained by weak institutions and regional disparities in security and development.

It is not simply a question of skills or training, but of building resilient systems of governance that can plan, finance, implement, and monitor complex, multidimensional development agendas.

49 Author (n 23 above).

CASE STUDY

Strengthening SDG localisation through multi-level coordination and civil society leadership in Nepal

Nepal has taken steps to advance SDG localisation by establishing dedicated **SDG committees at both provincial and local levels.** These bodies aim to foster coherence between subnational development plans and the national SDG framework. Framed within a broader institutional approach, these committees are intended to help mainstream the SDGs across all levels of governance while encouraging participatory planning mechanisms.

NGO Federation of Nepal







Civil society actors, particularly the Nepal SDG Forum and **NGO Federation of Nepal (NFN**), point out that the progress on implementation remains uneven across local governments. As of early 2024, only 17 of the country's 753 local governments had completed VLRs, with a handful more in the process of drafting guidelines to adapt SDGs to local contexts. To enhance subnational planning, the government has introduced the **Local Government Institutional Capacity Self-Assessment (LISA)** tool, which evaluates performance in service delivery and alignment with both SDG and national development targets. The National Planning Commission has published the SDG Localisation Guideline of NPC Nepal (Nepali)[50] and some provinces have published the SDG Localisation Roadmap to guide the process.

50 *SDG Localization Guideline of NPC Nepal (Nepali)* (2021) https://nepalsdgforum.org/project/1642691692 (accessed 6 June 2025).

Despite these institutional advances, NFN emphasises persistent gaps in technical capacity, skilled personnel, and financial resources at the local level. While Nepal's laws mandate inclusive governance and diversity in representation, the actual practice of inclusive policymaking and participatory decision-making is still evolving.



In response, civil society initiatives have helped fill critical gaps. The Nepal SDG Forum – coordinated by NFN – functions as a national coordination space for civil society engagement on the 2030 Agenda. It convenes a broad spectrum of actors, including grassroots organisations, International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs), thematic networks, and government stakeholders, to promote locally grounded and inclusive approaches to SDG implementation.

Here, it is important to note the lead role that civil society can play in strengthening capacity. In Indonesia, the experience of INFID shows the transformative impact of CSO-led integration of SDGs into local policy frameworks.

CASE STUDY

INFID's long-term facilitation of local SDG planning in Indonesia

Indonesia's decentralised governance structure requires locally tailored strategies to implement national SDG commitments. The **International NGO Forum on Indonesian Development (INFID)** has played a pivotal role in advancing SDG localisation by serving as a bridge between communities, academic institutions, and national authorities.





Between 2018 and 2025, INFID provided technical assistance to 13 districts and three provinces – including Bojonegoro, Wonosobo, Banda Aceh, and West Papua – to support SDG Action Plans and align them with provincial development strategies. A particularly transformative initiative involved INFID's partnership with the **University of Papua New Guinea** to establish an SDG Centre. This hub integrates SDG content into undergraduate and postgraduate curricula, promotes research-driven policymaking, and fosters multi-actor collaboration across government and academia.

In addition, INFID supported harmonisation of local indicators with national SDG frameworks and contributed to Indonesia's national SDG implementation team, enabling a two-way flow of knowledge between the local and national levels.

Despite significant progress, persistent challenges include:

- Local capacity gaps and lack of clarity around stakeholder roles.
- Fragmented data systems impeding vertical coherence.
- Limited sustainable financing for CSO-led engagement.

INFID's work illustrates how long-term CSO facilitation, combined with academic-government partnerships, can institutionalise localisation, foster local ownership, and improve the use of data for planning.

CASE STUDY

PIANGO's culturally rooted humanitarian capacity building in the Pacific

The Pacific's dispersed geography and vulnerability to natural disasters have historically led to externally driven humanitarian responses. The PIANGO, representing civil society across 24 Pacific countries and territories, has worked to shift this model by embedding humanitarian leadership in local governance traditions and community capacities.

In 2020, PIANGO launched the Pacific Humanitarian **FALE** (Facility Aiding Locally-led Engagement) with support from the **Start Network**.[51] The FALE was established as a regional hub rooted in Pacific values and governance systems to promote locally led humanitarian action. In 2021, the initiative expanded its membership and adopted a community-informed governance structure. PIANGO also partnered with the **Humanitarian Advisory Group** to produce two research papers evidencing the impact and viability of local leadership in crisis response.

As part of its scaling efforts, PIANGO began supporting the development of 'national-FALEs' in Fiji, Tonga, the Solomon Islands, and Kiribati. Samoa and Vanuatu. These national hubs are designed to build coordination and governance capacity for independent, community-led response strategies. The FALE also piloted a localised Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning (MEAL) approach that integrates Pacific dialogue traditions such as Talanoa, helping deepen participatory learning and inclusion.

Despite its innovation, the FALE continues to face systemic challenges, including:

- Chronic underinvestment in local humanitarian leadership.
- Fragmented and project-based donor support.
- Limited recognition and inclusion of CSOs in official crisis planning processes.

PIANGO's experience demonstrates how capacity building rooted in cultural context – and backed by long-term partnerships – can transform humanitarian action from externally led intervention to sustainable, locally owned leadership.

51 PIANGO 'FALE' https://piango.org/fale (accessed 4 June 2025).



4 DATA SYSTEMS, LOCAL INDICATORS, AND COMMUNITY MOBILISATION

Reliable, disaggregated, and timely data is a cornerstone of evidence-based planning, implementation, and monitoring of the SDGs. At the local level, such data is critical to identifying development gaps, targeting interventions, ensuring equity, and enabling accountability.

India presents a particularly notable case in the advancement of localised data infrastructure. Through its federal planning institution NITI Aayog,[52] India has developed state- and district-level SDG dashboards that disaggregate national indicators into regionally relevant metrics. These dashboards are accessible in real-time and are used by state and district planning departments to benchmark progress, identify priority gaps, and inform annual fiscal planning cycles. Kerala, in particular, has been at the forefront of subnational data innovation. Its **Local Indicator Framework** links development plans at the village, block, and district levels to the state's SDG strategy. The Kerala State Planning Board manages a real-time dashboard system that ranks local government performance across key SDG sectors and guides resource allocation accordingly. This integration of digital infrastructure into local planning systems has not only enhanced transparency but also introduced performance-based budgeting practices that reinforce alignment with SDG priorities.

Here, it is also important to note the lead role that civil society can play in strengthening data gathering and sharing of best practices to strengthen SDG implementation at the grassroots level.

52 PIB 'NITI Aayog – Release of SDG India Index 2023-24: India Accelerates Progress towards the SDGs Despite Global Headwinds' 12 July 2024 https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2032857#:~:text=The%20SDG%20India%20Index%202023,62%20to%2079%20for%20UTs (accessed 4 June 2025).

CASE STUDY

Zero Poverty PH 2030 partnership model for localising SDG 1 in the Philippines

The experience of the **Zero Poverty PH 2030 (ZeP2030)** in the Philippines offers a compelling example of how civil society can move beyond top-down frameworks to lead the development of **integrated area-based partnerships** that strengthen SDG implementation at the grassroots level.





ZeP2030 is a national movement aiming to reduce poverty by improving the incomes and access to essential social services for families in ZeP2030 communities. It is led by national and local CSO and CSO networks, one of which is the Caucus of Development NGO Networks or **CODE-NGO**, a member of Forus. ZeP2030 utilises a **convergence model** that aims to unite CSO, local government units (LGUs), grassroots movements, corporate foundations and private donors across more than ten provinces.



A key innovation of ZeP2030 has been its development of **targeting indicators** that are co-created by local coalitions and national partners. These metrics – tailored to reflect regional specificities – fill long-standing gaps in disaggregated poverty data, enabling local actors to **track progress, guide funding allocation, and target advocacy priorities**.

Despite its success, the data gathering and convergence building were not without obstacles. The resources available for the movement were limited and affected the target number of families the movement set out to reach in its first few years of operation. The integrated and area-based approach to poverty reduction is intended to facilitate the leveraging of resources and coordinated delivery of programmes among CSOs and LGUs to benefit the identified families and communities. ZeP2030 and its convergence approach has proven replicable, scalable, and effective in demonstrating how **efforts in organising the community** can build trust, strengthen accountability, and empower locally-led development.



ZeP2030's work illustrates the power of **civil society-led data innovation** in creating coherent, inclusive partnerships for SDG delivery. By enabling locally owned metrics and fostering horizontal collaboration, ZeP2030 directly advances SDG 1 (No poverty).



5 INCLUSIVE AND PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE

At the heart of effective localisation of the SDGs lies the principle of inclusive governance. This means ensuring that a broad range of stakeholders – particularly civil society, marginalised communities, youth, women, Indigenous peoples, academia, and the private sector – are actively involved in the planning, design, implementation, and monitoring of development strategies. Multi-stakeholder collaboration lies at the heart of **SDG 17**, emphasising that sustainable development requires coordinated effort across governments, civil society, the private sector, and communities. True localisation involves bridging vertical divides (between national, subnational, and local authorities) and horizontal silos (across sectors and stakeholder groups). When done right, these partnerships deliver innovation, legitimacy, and sustainability.

In the Forus 2024 report 'Rebuilding Trust for Inclusive Governance: Unlocking SDG 16 for Peaceful Societies',[53] the network delved into the current state of inclusive governance globally. The report highlights the critical role of transparency, accountability, participation, equity, and the rule of law in rebuilding trust between governments and their citizens. The findings of this report underscore the urgent need for collective action to strengthen governance structures and create an

The findings of this report underscore the urgent need for collective action to strengthen governance structures and create an environment where all individuals can participate freely and equally by presenting 18 case studies from its member organisations.

53 Forus (n 22 above).

environment where all individuals can participate freely and equally by presenting 18 case studies from its member organisations. For instance, the Uganda National NGO Forum (**UNNGOF**) implemented the Topowa Forum Model, fostering civic mentorship and promoting accountable governance through inclusive dialogue platforms. **La Coordinadora de Organizaciones para el Desarrollo** in Spain emphasised the importance of participatory processes to enhance transparency and citizen trust in institutions. Similarly, **LAPAS** in Latvia focused on building local capacities to engage marginalised communities in decision-making processes, thereby reinforcing democratic institutions. These case studies collectively underscore the pivotal role of civil society in advancing SDG 16 by promoting peace, justice, and strong institutions through localised, participatory initiatives.

Localisation, by definition, brings development closer to peoples' lived realities. It therefore requires not only proximity in administrative terms but also **democratic ownership** – embedding decision-making processes in the values of participation, equity, and accountability. True localisation, therefore, requires enabling environments where civil society can exercise leadership, access resources, and engage in decision-making processes on an equal footing with institutional actors. It demands multi-stakeholder approaches that elevate community knowledge and grassroots innovation as central to advancing the 2030 Agenda.

Across the global literature and official UN guidance, inclusive and participatory governance is identified as a critical enabler of SDG localisation. The **2024 UN Inter-agency Policy Briefs** emphasise that the effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the local level demands 'structured participation mechanisms', including SDG councils,

Across the global literature and official UN guidance, inclusive and participatory governance is identified as a critical enabler of SDG localisation.



youth parliaments, and participatory budgeting processes.[54] Such mechanisms are necessary not just to fulfil the ethos of leaving no one behind, but to ensure that policy decisions are informed by the lived experiences and priorities of communities. Rights-based and community-led approaches to development planning enhance the relevance, equity, and legitimacy of SDG initiatives. They create feedback loops that enable governments to better understand where gaps exist, how services are delivered, and whether policies are translating into meaningful improvements in people's lives. Moreover, participatory governance strengthens accountability by making development outcomes visible and negotiable at the community level.

The role of local non-state actors – CSOs, academia, private sector actors, and traditional authorities – has gained recognition in SDG implementation. In 2024,[55] 77 per cent of countries reporting acknowledged the involvement of local actors, though the extent of engagement varies considerably. Kenya's provincial SDG committees include CSOs and grassroots representatives, while Sierra Leone coordinates efforts through District Development Coordination Committees. Nepal has created inclusive local SDG Committees and involved youth in planning processes. In the Pacific, Indigenous knowledge and traditional governance structures serve as key enablers for culturally appropriate and participatory SDG implementation. For instance, Vanuatu emphasises community resilience-building, while Palau entrusts traditional leaders with SDG coordination roles.

Here again, it is important to note the lead role that civil society plays in strengthening and enabling multi-stakeholder processes for the effective implementation of the SDGs at local level. According to the OECD,[56] local CSOs are often the first responders to development challenges and have demonstrated innovation and resilience – especially during the COVID-19 crisis. Moreover, the 2023 UN-Habitat and UCLG report on VLRs affirms that in over 220 cities and regions globally**, civil society leadership was instrumental in shaping localised SDG indicators, participatory governance mechanisms, and social accountability frameworks**.[57] CSOs are not merely implementers – they are enablers of democratic ownership, equity, and bottom-up policy coherence.

As such, in **Argentina**, Red Encuentro EENGD activated youth participation through civic education and creative platforms (for example, radio, street art, theatre) to shape municipal policy planning, while in Guatemala Coordinación de Organizaciones y Cooperativas (**CONGCOOP**) led budgeting capacity strengthening sessions to enable Indigenous leaders to directly engage in planning and budgeting processes.

54 Inter-Agency Policy Briefs (n 2 above) page.

55 Author (n 23 above).

56 OECD *COVID-19 and Well-being: Life in the Pandemic* (OECD Publishing 2021) https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2021/11/covid-19-and-well-being_298c2553/1e1ecb53-en.pdf (accessed 4 June 2025).

57 United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) and UN-Habitat, *Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews, Volume 1* (Barcelona and Nairobi: UCLG and UN-Habitat, 2023), https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/guidelines_for_voluntary_local_reviews_volume_1.pdf.

CASE STUDY

Red Encuentro's youth-led co-creation model in Argentina

The experience of **Red Encuentro (EENGD)** in Argentina illustrates how youth-led co-creation can revitalise civic engagement and build inclusive local policymaking in fragile democratic and economic settings.





Working across cities and provinces like Bariloche, Córdoba, and Misiones, Red Encuentro collaborates with municipal authorities, schools, and grassroots youth networks to develop innovative spaces – such as policy labs and creative platforms (for example, community radio, street art, and theatre) – where young people diagnose local challenges and co-develop solutions.

This participatory process has led to tangible results. In at least one municipality, youth-developed policy proposals were integrated into the official development plan, covering themes such as education access and anti-discrimination. Crucially, Red Encuentro emphasises co-creation over consultation, ensuring that youth engagement is not merely symbolic but policy-shaping.

These gains have been achieved despite major challenges, including low institutional trust, economic instability, and limited capacity for institutionalising participation at the municipal level.





Red Encuentro's model demonstrates how **youth-led, multi-stakeholder collaboration** can bridge trust gaps, democratise planning processes, and drive SDG implementation from the bottom up – even under fragile conditions.

CASE STUDY

CONGCOOP in Guatemala - Fiscal justice for local empowerment

In a context of entrenched inequality and exclusion, **CONGCOOP** – a national platform of NGOs and cooperatives in Guatemala – has positioned rights-based fiscal advocacy at the heart of SDG localisation.





CONGCOOP supports Indigenous and rural communities to strengthen their political participation through civic education, participatory budget monitoring, and social audits. These efforts aim to hold public authorities accountable and make development spending more transparent. Their work extends beyond monitoring: they also advocate for progressive tax reform in Congress and highlight the under-taxation of elites as a structural barrier to financing sustainable development.

At the community level, CONGCOOP's trainings enable Indigenous leaders to directly engage in planning and budgeting processes. This has led to greater inclusion of marginalised voices in local governance and increased attention to health, agriculture, and land rights. Nationally, the platform produces policy reports that inform public debate and challenge government inaction, while internationally, they elevate grassroots concerns through UN human rights mechanisms in Geneva.





This case shows how rights-based fiscal advocacy can anchor SDG localisation in equity and transparency – empowering communities to influence how development is financed and delivered.

CASE STUDY

Civil society as an evaluator of the progress of the 2030 Agenda in Mexico

DECA, Equipo Pueblo is a Mexican social organisation that monitors and evaluates the situation of the SDGs of the 2030 Agenda and held an exchange with 20 CSOs in May 2024, presenting the result of the Alternative Report integrated last year. Among the participants in the Forum Balance of the SDGs and co-responsible promotion of the please **2030 Agenda in Mexico: Perspectives and proposals from Civil Society**, they considered and agreed on the following actions:

Reactivate the CSO Space for follow-up to the 2030 Agenda, created since 2015.

To continue to participate in the monitoring and fulfilment of the Agenda, since the current federal government will have the last stretch towards 2030 and it will be a matter of attention and dialogue to recover the commitment and vitality of the country around the care of the rights and the planet of the Agenda.[58]



DECA Equipo Pueblo AC



58 DECA, Equipo Pueblo *Informe Alternativo sobre el cumplimiento de los ODS de la Agenda 2030 en México* Ciudad de México: DECA Equipo Pueblo / Grupo Agenda 2030 (October 2024).

In the meantime, in Japan, **the Japan NGO Centre for International Cooperation (JANIC)** has helped foster a shared national vision for a multicultural and inclusive society through long-term partnerships with private sector, labour unions, and local authorities; and **Fingo**, the umbrella organisation for Finnish development NGOs, has pioneered ways to localise the SDGs by making them visible and accessible to the broader public.

CASE STUDY

JANIC in Japan - Advancing inclusive development through partnership

The **JANIC** has helped foster a shared national vision for a multicultural and inclusive society through long-term partnerships with private sector, labour unions, and local authorities.

Through these efforts, JANIC has shown that diversity can be a foundation for social cohesion and governance innovation.

JANIC's model demonstrates how inclusive partnerships across sectors can mainstream SDG-aligned values into public policy and community development.





CASE STUDY

Fingo in Finland - Engaging the public through culture and citizenship education

Fingo, the umbrella organisation for Finnish development NGOs, has pioneered ways to localise the SDGs by making them visible and accessible to the broader public.





Through large-scale events such as the **World Village Festival**, which draws about 50 000 participants annually, Fingo brings sustainable development into the public sphere using culture, music, youth forums, and thematic workshops. These events connect CSOs with different stakeholders and people in a festive yet educational setting. The Festival is part of a broader range of communication initiatives that encourage action and share information on sustainable development.





Beyond awareness-raising, Fingo contributes to Finland's VNR, coordinates and facilitates learning around SDG-aligned global citizenship education, and trains different stakeholders on sustainability. This multilayered engagement model has helped integrate different actors committed to SDG 4.7 and public participation.

This case shows how public engagement, local festivals, and education partnerships can strengthen civic awareness and participation in SDG implementation – linking national commitments to local dialogue. It also builds local commitment to global solidarity which is needed to achieve Agenda 2030.

Senegal's experience reflects both the potential and persistent challenges of localising the SDGs within a decentralised governance system. Through **Conseil des Organisations Non Gouvernementales d'Appui au Développement (CONGAD's)** leadership, civil society has played a pivotal role in piloting inclusive approaches and advocating for stronger territorial implementation of the 2030 Agenda.[59]

CASE STUDY

Civil society-led localisation and SDG monitoring in Senegal

Senegal has adopted a decentralised governance model to advance national development and SDG implementation. However, significant gaps persist in aligning subnational development planning with the 2030 Agenda. The **Conseil des Organisations Non Gouvernementales d'Appui au Développement (CONGAD)** has played a central role in mobilising civil society networks and piloting strategies to localise the SDGs through participatory processes and inclusive data collection.

Between 2018 and 2024, CONGAD coordinated multi-year activities through its national SDG working group, comprising over 170 NGOs and platforms. It supported the integration of the 'Leave No One Behind' (LNOB) principle into municipal development strategies by conducting national and regional workshops, producing guidance tools, and fostering local dialogue among civil society, local authorities, and state institutions. In 2023, CONGAD organised a high-level workshop to align territorial development plans with the LNOB campaign strategy and the Agenda 2030.

CONGAD also implemented **action research in the municipalities of Gagnick and Guinguinéo**, in partnership with **Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)**. These pilots involved inclusive planning processes, consultations with women and persons with disabilities, and the development of **local planning documents** aligned with SDG targets. A prototype for **disaggregated data collection at the commune level** was tested to better inform municipal policy and SDG reporting.

In Senegal, most municipalities still lack formal SDG localisation plans due to limited awareness, weak technical capacity, insufficient data, and inadequate financing. While CONGAD's efforts have strengthened civil society engagement and piloted local monitoring tools, national SDG frameworks remain underutilised at the local level. Advancing territorial ownership of the 2030 Agenda will require deeper investment in local systems, inclusive planning, and equitable resource allocation.

59 CONGAD *Rapport d'activités du Groupe de Travail sur le Suivi des ODD – Exercice 2018-2022* (2022); CONGAD *Rapport alternatif de la société civile pour le VNR 2022 – Version revue* (2022); CONGAD *Rapport d'activités 2022-2024* (2024)



6 DIGITALISATION AND e-GOVERNANCE

Digital technologies are transforming the landscape of local governance, offering new avenues to enhance service delivery, promote transparency, and foster civic engagement. In the context of SDG localisation, digitalisation and e-governance tools can serve as powerful enablers of participatory development, real-time monitoring, and efficient resource allocation. They support the operationalisation of several cross-cutting goals, particularly SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions and SDG 17 on partnerships and data systems. When effectively deployed, digital tools allow local authorities to engage citizens more inclusively, make evidence-informed decisions, and improve public accountability.

The accelerating global process of digitalisation has fundamentally transformed the landscape of civic space and the operating space for civil society in countries across the world. As digital technologies increasingly permeate every aspect of life, they are reshaping how citizens organise, communicate, and exercise their rights to freedom of association, assembly, and expression. However, while digital tools have the potential to support civil society, they also present significant challenges, especially in the context of restrictive governance and shrinking civic spaces.

For Forus, ensuring that its members and the broader civil society have access to digital technologies remains a growing priority. In today's world, it is crucial that CSOs are equipped with the tools necessary to exercise their rights and advocate for the communities they serve. Digitalisation must not restrict or repress activists and civil society in the context of localisation and the SDGs; instead, it should serve as a tool to amplify their voices, increase their reach, and support greater participation in decision-making processes.

Forus launched the **#Let'sTalkDigital** campaign to stimulate important debates about the role of digital technologies in civil society.

This campaign aims to bring attention to the need for a more inclusive, democratic approach to digitalisation, one that upholds the values of transparency, accountability, and freedom of expression. At the same time, Forus recognises the growing threat posed by autocratic and illiberal political leaders who undermine the legitimacy, independence, and credibility of civil society.

Launched in January 2025, the **EU System for an Enabling Environment for Civil Society (EU SEE)** documents near real-time changes in civil society's enabling environment and sheds light on critical trends – including legal, financial, political, and digital threats and opportunities. In many countries, governments have used digital tools to monitor, restrict, or even shut down civic space, presenting a significant challenge for civil society platforms, as noted in recent EU SEE alerts where Forus is a consortium partner.

To ensure a digital future that aligns with human rights and democratic principles, Forus and its members strongly advocate for an inclusive, human-rights-based, and democratic form of digitalisation. To do so, Forus is actively contributing to international dialogues on digitalisation, especially related to internet governance through the **Civil Society Alliances for Digital Empowerment (CADE)** project.

The Global Digital Compact adopted at the 2024 Summit of the Future reinforces the urgent need to bridge the digital divide as a development priority. It commits countries to universal, affordable, and meaningful connectivity – including for schools, hospitals, rural areas, and people in vulnerable situations. The Compact specifically emphasises the deployment of resilient digital infrastructure, such as local networks and satellites, to reach remote and hard-to-reach areas, and calls for the mainstreaming of gender and equity perspectives in all digital strategies to overcome systemic barriers facing women and marginalised groups. These pledges validate and strengthen civil society's calls to make rights-based digital access a core enabler of SDG localisation



Emerging examples from diverse global contexts demonstrate how local governments are leveraging digital innovation to advance inclusive SDG implementation. One of the most notable cases is that of Reykjavík, Iceland, which has institutionalised citizen engagement through the '**Better Reykjavík**' platform. Launched in 2010 and integrated into formal policymaking processes since 2018, this digital tool allows residents to submit policy proposals, comment on others' suggestions, and vote on preferred priorities. The city council commits to reviewing the most popular proposals monthly. Since its full integration, over

70 per cent of proposals submitted through the platform have been addressed in official council debates, demonstrating a direct and measurable link between digital participation and institutional responsiveness. Reykjavík's experience is a model of how e-governance can strengthen democratic institutions and promote civic trust while contributing directly to SDG 16.7, which calls for responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels.[60]

Similarly, in Suva, Fiji, digitalisation has been deployed to enhance budget transparency and participatory planning. As part of its VLR process and wider smart city strategy, Suva introduced a set of digital budgeting tools that visualise spending priorities, compare community needs with fiscal allocations, and allow citizens to give feedback on proposed investments. These tools have contributed to more strategic resource use and have helped align capital investments with SDG-related objectives, including climate adaptation and resilient infrastructure under Goals 11 and 13. Moreover, Suva's digital engagement mechanisms have improved trust in municipal governance and encouraged broader participation from youth and marginalised populations, who were previously underrepresented in budget consultations.[61]

Beyond high-income cities, innovations in digital governance are emerging in lower-resource settings as well. In Uganda and Kenya, pilot initiatives supported by UNDP and the Local2030 Coalition are testing mobile-based feedback platforms that collect citizen input on local SDG priorities and service delivery performance.[62] These tools are designed to complement traditional town halls or planning meetings by enabling broader participation, particularly in remote areas with limited physical infrastructure. Early results from these pilots suggest that mobile tools can enhance outreach to women and youth, while also generating usable data for municipal planning teams.

Still, the success of these initiatives depends on enabling conditions. Reliable internet access, inter-operable digital platforms, and data privacy protocols are often uneven or absent in many local contexts. In some cases, the rapid adoption of digital tools has outpaced the regulatory environment, raising concerns about data misuse, exclusion of digitally marginalised populations, and erosion of trust. Furthermore, many municipal administrations lack dedicated personnel or funding to maintain, upgrade, and institutionalise digital systems over time.

Here, it is important to note the lead role that civil society can play in showing the way for innovative digital solutions. In Japan, in order to strengthening internal governance and monitoring, JANIC created standardised self-assessment tools for NGOs to align with SDG 16, especially accountable institutions and participatory decision-making.[63]

60 Inter-Agency Policy Briefs (n 2 above).

61 Ibid.

62 United Nations 'Rescuing SDG 11 for a Resilient Urban Planet: SDG 11 Synthesis Report High Level Political Forum 2023' (2023) https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2023/11/sdg_11_synthesis_report_2023.pdf (accessed 4 June 2025).

63 JANIC Accountability Self-Check (ASC) 2021 https://www.janic.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/asc2021_checksheet_ENG.pdf (accessed 4 June 2025).

CASE STUDY

Strengthening CSO accountability through JANIC's multi-stakeholder platform in Japan

In Japan, the **JANIC** has pioneered efforts to institutionalise CSO engagement in SDG governance by creating **standardised tools for self-assessment, reporting, and recognition**.

Through the **Japan SDGs Award**, the Government of Japan promotes excellence in SDG implementation across NGOs, municipalities, and private sector actors – linking visibility with performance benchmarking. JANIC encourages its members and partners to apply for the award, and six of its members have been given prizes for the last seven years along with 67 organisations. It also facilitates civil society's engagement in **VNR processes, along with the Japan Civil Society Network on SDGs,** and supports digital transformation through peer learning and public-private innovation platforms.[64]

JANIC's efforts have helped professionalise smaller CSOs and NPOs by strengthening internal governance, digital capacity, and alignment with national SDG frameworks. However, **resource constraints**, short-term project funding, and heavy compliance burdens remain limiting factors for smaller NGOs.

JANIC's multi-actor platform showcases the impact of **self-assessment systems, digital tools, and peer exchange** in building an enabling environment for CSOs and aligning local action with national SDG goals.

64 56 'Social Map' is Japan's first comprehensive content for searching, strengthening and promoting cooperation between NGOs and NPOs working to solve social issues, and is provided by JANIC in partnership with EMA Inc. It enables not only an analysis of the organisation, but also an objective understanding of the organisation's position in the industry for more than 500 NGOs/NPOs in Japan. See https://socialmap.jp/ (accessed 6 June 2025).



7 KNOWLEDGE SHARING AND PEER LEARNING

Decentralised cooperation, city-to-city exchanges, and regional networks serve as accelerators for localisation by promoting peer learning and policy innovation.

Peer learning and horizontal cooperation between local governments and regional platforms have proven essential in strengthening institutional capacity, scaling innovations, and bridging knowledge gaps across jurisdictions. As highlighted in the **UN Inter-agency Policy Briefs**,[65] these exchanges play a crucial role in enabling **context-specific adaptation** of global frameworks, reducing duplication of efforts, and supporting **policy coherence through regional and global learning platforms**.

At the UN level, annual events like the Regional Forums on Sustainable Development, organised by UN Regional Commissions ahead of the UN High-level Political Forum (HLPF), and the Local and Regional Governments Forum, held as a special event during the HLPF on Sustainable Development, promote the exchange of best practices and strengthen collaboration across all levels.

The **OECD (2023)** and **UNDP-UN Habitat Roadmap for Localising the SDGs (2016)** further emphasise that 'decentralised cooperation' and 'city-to-city partnerships' are among the most cost-effective and sustainable strategies for scaling local SDG action.[66] According to **UCLG (2018)**, more than **180 city-to-city cooperation agreements** now explicitly include SDG localisation components.[67]

65 Inter-Agency Policy Briefs (n 2 above).

66 OECD 'City-to-City Partnerships to Localise the Sustainable Development Goals' 20 April 2023 https://doi.org/10.1787/d2fe7530-en .

67 UCLG 'Towards the Localization of the SDGs' (2023) https://gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/uploaded/hlpf_2023.pdf.

Since 2020, more than 35 bilateral peer learning activities have taken place between Japanese municipalities and their counterparts in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines.



UNDESA's **Infrastructure Asset Management** initiative[68] and UNDP's **Local Action Platform**[69] demonstrate how peer exchanges support city-level capacity for SDG planning and infrastructure financing. UNDESA's global initiative trains city-level public asset managers in planning and maintaining infrastructure in alignment with SDG 9 and SDG 11. Pilot projects in **Malawi, Nepal, and the Philippines** supported over 60 local governments to develop Asset Management Action Plans (AMAPs), improving investment efficiency and sustainability metrics by up to 30 per cent in some districts.

Japan's **Future City Initiative** allows local authorities from across Asia to share policy toolkits, procurement templates, and civic engagement methodologies. Since 2020, more than 35 bilateral peer learning activities have taken place between Japanese municipalities and their counterparts in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines.

68 UNDESA *Managing Infrastructure Assets for Sustainable Development: A Handbook for Local and National Governments* (New York: UN 2021) https://financing.desa.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/IAMH_ENG_Jun2021.pdf .

69 UNDP Nature Hub 'Catalysing local action' https://www.undp.org/nature/our-work-areas/local-action#:~:text=For%20over%2030%20years%2C%20UNDP,disaster%20risk%20reduction%2C%20participatory%20landscape .



8 INTEGRATED PLANNING TOOLS AND VLRS

VLRs are one of the most impactful tools for localisation. They not only measure local progress but foster alignment with national goals and stimulate stakeholder dialogue. VLRs play a dual role: they are **planning tools** for embedding the SDGs into local policy cycles and **reporting mechanisms** that amplify local voices within national and global forums. VLRs help cities identify gaps, monitor equity and service access, and create accountability loops with communities.

Since 2018, the global VLR movement has skyrocketed with more than 260 VLRs developed as of February 2024 – representing the lived realities of over 460 million people. The number of VLRs has increased exponentially from two to 62 reviews per annum between 2018 and 2023.[70]

In the **2024 Zimbabwe VNR** included a **'children's chapter'**, informed directly by five district-level VLRs and participatory consultations co-organised with UNICEF and youth coalitions.[71] This marks a **first-of-its-kind integration** of child perspectives into national SDG reporting.

In Finland, **Espoo's 2020 VLR**[72] was not a reporting formality – it functioned as a **strategic planning document**. The process included online citizen consultations, school-based youth focus groups, and cross-departmental reviews. The results led to an updated municipal strategy incorporating SDG-linked KPIs.

In Mexico, **Yucatán's 2020 VLR**[73] aligned local

70 UN-Habitat & UCLG (n 32 above) 7.

71 UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development – Zimbabwe https://hlpf.un.org/countries/zimbabwe/voluntary-national-reviews-2024 (accessed 4 June 2025).

72 *Espoo Voluntary Local Review* (n 38 above).

73 *Voluntary Subnational Report Yucatan* (n 39 above).

development priorities with federal SDG indicators and focused on Indigenous inclusion. The VLR informed the state's 2021-2027 Development Plan.

Enabling the localisation of the SDGs is not a singular intervention but a **systemic ecosystem** composed of governance, finance, data, participation, and capacity development. Where these enablers are in place – backed by political will and institutional coherence – local governments and communities deliver transformative progress. The case studies from South Korea, Uganda, and Mexico, among others, demonstrate how enabling environments can yield SMART outcomes across multiple SDGs, reinforcing that **local action is global acceleration.**

Enabling the localisation of the SDGs is not a singular intervention but a **systemic ecosystem** composed of governance, finance, data, participation, and capacity development.





SECTION 3

WHAT'S MISSING? BOTTLENECKS TO REALISING THE PROMISE OF LOCALISATION

Despite growing political recognition of localisation as a cornerstone of sustainable development, its practical implementation remains uneven, fragmented, and often under-supported. While the expansion of VLRs, local indicator systems, and multistakeholder partnerships reflects significant progress, these advances coexist with persistent structural and systemic barriers. These bottlenecks undermine the potential of localisation to serve as a transformative lever for accelerating SDG implementation. Understanding and addressing these challenges is critical to closing the gap between global ambition and local delivery.



1 FRAGMENTED GOVERNANCE AND LIMITED VERTICAL INTEGRATION

Despite its importance, multilevel governance – the systematic coordination between national, regional, and local governments – remains insufficiently institutionalised in the global implementation of the SDGs. While national governments have increasingly adopted SDG strategies and action plans, meaningful integration of subnational actors into those frameworks has lagged behind. In most countries, the involvement of local and regional governments (LRGs) in national SDG planning is either symbolic or ad hoc, lacking legal mandates, institutional mechanisms, or operational clarity.

VLRs have emerged as a critical tool in the localisation of the SDGs, providing a structured framework through which cities and subnational governments can assess, report on, and communicate their contributions to the 2030 Agenda. Yet, in most countries, VLRs remain disconnected from national SDG coordination



frameworks. Their findings are often siloed within municipal departments and are **rarely integrated into national development plans, budgeting processes, or VNRs**. The consequences of this fragmentation are manifold. First, VLRs struggle to influence upstream policy or resource allocation decisions, limiting their strategic value for local governments. Second, they risk becoming one-off exercises – used for visibility or donor engagement – rather than integrated tools for planning, accountability, and learning. Third, without formal integration into national SDG architecture, VLRs remain vulnerable to political turnover and shifting local priorities, reducing the incentives for institutional investment in their development and follow-up.

A major barrier to deeper integration is the **lack of dedicated funding for VLR production, implementation, and follow-up**. Most local governments must finance their VLRs through ad hoc project budgets, donor support, or redirected staff time. This limits the scope, inclusiveness, and quality of reviews. Municipalities in low- and middle-income countries – many of which face more acute development challenges – often lack the resources to produce VLRs at all, contributing to significant global disparities in VLR representation. According to UCLG, over **70 per cent of published VLRs originate from high-income countries**, especially in Europe and East Asia, while regions such as sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East remain underrepresented.

Even when VLRs are produced, the absence of budget lines for consultation, data collection, and dissemination means that important functions



A major barrier to deeper integration is the **lack of dedicated funding for VLR production, implementation, and follow-up**.

– such as community engagement or gender-sensitive indicator tracking – are often limited or excluded. This reinforces inequalities in both the production and impact of VLRs, creating a two-tiered system in which some cities are able to influence national and global SDG processes, while others remain invisible.

The **2024 Progressing National SDG Implementation report**[74] underscores that fragmented governance and limited vertical integration remain significant barriers to effective SDG localisation. In countries such as Georgia, Uganda, Nepal, and Zimbabwe, the lack of

74 Author (n 23 above).

clear mandates, coordination mechanisms, and structured communication between national and subnational levels has led to disjointed planning and implementation. Georgia's municipalities, for example, operate within an SDG Localisation Action Plan but lack defined roles within national coordination structures, resulting in parallel efforts with little integration.

Nepal and Zimbabwe face comparable challenges, where decentralisation has created local SDG structures, but insufficient support and coordination from central government limit their effectiveness. In fragile contexts like Chad and Libya, institutional instability further hampers efforts to align local and national SDG planning. These cases highlight that without strong vertical coherence – anchored in legal mandates, adequate financing, and robust coordination platforms – the transformative potential of SDG localisation remains unrealised. Localisation cannot succeed in isolation; it must be embedded within an integrated, multi-level governance framework that enables shared ownership and accountability across all levels of government.

Several localisation frameworks also lack the **legal mandates or statutory clarity** needed to function effectively. Uganda's PDM is a notable case where parish-level committees – central to the model – have unclear legal status and insufficient authority over planning and budgeting. This leads to implementation bottlenecks and undermines accountability. Similarly, in some countries, decentralisation reforms have not been accompanied by the necessary legislative frameworks to formalise local responsibilities in SDG delivery.

By contrast, countries like Indonesia and Finland have made significant strides in strengthening vertical coherence. In Indonesia, the Ministry of National Development Planning (Bappenas) has facilitated joint planning frameworks with municipal governments, linking VLRs to national SDG indicators. In Finland, VLRs developed by cities such as Espoo and Vantaa are formally acknowledged in national development reports and contribute to the country's VNR, ensuring local perspectives shape national policy narratives.

The issue is compounded by persistent power asymmetries within multistakeholder partnerships. Some cited issues such as lack of shared decision-making, top-down funding modalities, or tokenistic consultation practices. These asymmetries erode trust, limit the sustainability of initiatives, and reduce local ownership of SDG strategies. Moreover, they contradict the SDG principle of 'leaving no one behind', as they marginalise the very actors closest to the communities most in need of development interventions.

Fragmented governance and limited vertical integration continue to undermine the potential of SDG localisation. These structural weaknesses result in disjointed planning, inefficient use of resources, and a failure to harness the knowledge, innovation, and proximity of local actors. Without deliberate efforts to institutionalise multilevel coordination, clarify subnational mandates, and address power asymmetries in partnerships, the SDGs risk remaining distant from the communities they are meant to serve. Reforms are needed to codify the role of local governments in national SDG strategies, embed VLRs in formal policy and financing cycles, and foster inclusive, transparent, and accountable decision-making processes across all levels of governance.



2 INADEQUATE AND UNPREDICTABLE FINANCING

Inadequate, unpredictable, and inflexible financing remains one of the most systemic barriers to effective SDG localisation. LRGs – often responsible for delivering essential services such as health, education, sanitation, housing, and infrastructure – operate under persistent resource constraints. This mismatch between mandates and means has become a defining feature of the localisation bottleneck. Despite managing up to 40 per cent of public investment in some OECD countries, LRGs control only a small share of overall fiscal resources. The **2024 UN Inter-agency Policy Briefs**[75] reports that globally, less than 15 per cent of public investment is directly managed by local authorities, and only 25 per cent of countries provide performance-based fiscal transfers to municipalities. Most local governments remain dependent on ad hoc, earmarked transfers from central governments, which are often unpredictable, tied to national priorities, and detached from local realities.

Fiscal autonomy is especially weak in low- and middle-income countries. Many municipalities lack legal authority to raise taxes, issue bonds, or access credit markets, forcing them to rely on restrictive national budgetary frameworks. According to the **2024 OECD Peer Learning Report on Locally Led Development**,[76] this constraint is particularly acute in sectors requiring innovation and long-term investment, such as climate adaptation, digital infrastructure, and gender-responsive services.

Donor funding patterns reinforce this structural imbalance. Most bilateral and multilateral aid is still channelled through central

75 Inter-Agency Policy Briefs (n 2 above).

76 OECD, *Pathways Towards Effective Locally Led Development Co-operation* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024), https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/pathways-towards-effective-locally-led-development-co-operation_51079bba-en.html.

governments or international agencies, bypassing local institutions. When funding does reach the local level, it is typically short-term, project-based, and fragmented – subject to overlapping reporting requirements that strain local capacity and limit strategic coherence. On average, 15–18%[77] of bilateral ODA is channelled through CSOs. However, most of this support is directed to international CSOs headquartered in donor countries, with only a small share reaching CSOs in partner countries directly.



Country experiences echo these systemic challenges. In Zimbabwe, recent VLRs were enabled by UN-DESA/Italy project funding, with no national strategy for sustainable financing in place. In Uganda, the PDM suffers from a uniform allocation formula that ignores local needs and lacks clear accountability frameworks, while revolving funds are widely misinterpreted as grants, undermining financial sustainability. Local cooperatives expected to manage these funds lack the capacity and trained personnel to do so effectively. Similar fiscal fragilities are reported in Chad and Libya, where institutional instability hinders consistent resource allocation for SDG coordination.

The SDG financing gap has surged to an estimated USD 4 trillion annually - up from USD 2.5 trillion pre-pandemic.

The global context further compounds the problem. The SDG financing gap has surged to an estimated USD 4 trillion annually – up from USD 2.5 trillion pre-pandemic.[78] This growing shortfall disproportionately affects low- and middle-income countries already grappling with debt distress, inflation, and declining aid flows. Meanwhile, the private sector remains largely absent from localisation efforts: most municipalities lack credit ratings or access to capital markets, leaving untapped the potential of impact investing, blended finance, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) engagement. As Forus member UNNGOF cautions, funding mechanisms must avoid tokenistic partnerships and instead be grounded in long-term investment and trust-building with genuinely community-rooted CSOs.

77 *OECD, Development Co-operation Report 2021: Shaping a Just Digital Transformation (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2021), p. 188, https://doi.org/10.1787/9a58c83f-en.*

78 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), *Financing for Sustainable Development Report 2024: Financing for Development at a Crossroads* (New York: UN, 2024), pp. II–1 to II–2, https://desapublications.un.org/publications/financing-sustainable-development-report-2024

CASE STUDY

Localising development through Uganda's PDM

Uganda's **PDM, introduced in 2022**, aims to catalyse local economic transformation by focusing on the parish as the primary unit of development planning and delivery. Built on seven strategic pillars – including agriculture, financial inclusion, infrastructure, and service delivery – the initiative seeks to transition approximately 39 per cent of households from subsistence livelihoods into the cash economy, in alignment with **Uganda's Third National Development Plan.**



Despite the model's transformative aspirations, the UNNGOF has raised significant concerns regarding its operational effectiveness. Many Parish Development Committees (PDCs), which are central to local implementation, operate without formal legal status, sufficient resources, or robust oversight mechanisms. This has resulted in fragmented coordination and limited community accountability.

Financial implementation has also faced criticism. The launch of **the UGX 490 billion Parish Revolving Fund intended to support local entrepreneurship applied a uniform distribution formula across parishes.** This approach overlooks disparities in demographics, economic conditions, and poverty levels. Additionally, unclear loan guidelines, minimal financial literacy, and weak accountability systems have led to poor loan recovery rates and financial mismanagement.

UNNGOF's 2024 review of the PDM highlights ongoing risks of corruption, political manipulation, and institutional fragility. Furthermore, the initiative has yet to adequately integrate climate resilience, multi-stakeholder engagement, and digital tracking tools into its framework – key components for sustainable, inclusive development.

To address these gaps, UNNGOF advocates for structural reforms: the formalisation and resourcing of PDCs, improved supervision of Savings and Credit Cooperative Organisations (SACCOs), enhanced civic education, and the deployment of climate-smart, tech-enabled solutions. Without such reforms, the PDM risks entrenching existing inequalities rather than alleviating them.

Since early 2025, the EU SEE mechanism of which Forus is part of, has recorded a troubling surge in alerts linked to funding disruptions for civil society. Recent cuts to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and other sources of funding, alongside shifting donor priorities and new legislative attempts to control or delegitimise CSO funding at national levels, have further strained CSOs' ability to operate effectively. Before the cuts, civil society actors were already calling for more flexible, needs-based funding. Now, this adds to an already challenging landscape. These challenges are manifesting in different countries, from Peru's tightening control over CSO funding to the criminalisation and stigmatisation faced by organisations in Nigeria, Indonesia, and beyond.



3 PERSISTENT CAPACITY GAPS AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

The **SDG Localisation Platform**[79] further stresses that 'local implementation is only possible if institutions have the capacity to manage delivery, finance it, and monitor progress' – making capacity building a central pillar of SDG acceleration. Still, one of the most consistently cited bottlenecks is the lack of institutional, technical, and human resource capacity within local governments. Even in countries where formal decentralisation structures are in place – such as Nepal's SDG Committees or Uganda's PDM – implementation remains constrained by insufficient staffing, limited planning expertise, and poor administrative infrastructure. These capacity gaps are particularly acute in low-income, fragile, or rapidly urbanising settings, where the demand for localised service

79 UNDP. Localizing the SDGs: A Guide for Local Governments, Associations and Communities. United Nations Development Programme, 2018. https://www.local2030.org/library/view/55

delivery has outpaced the institutional bandwidth of municipal authorities.

Across contexts, local governments are tasked with delivering on complex and multidimensional goals while lacking basic tools and support systems. The **2023 Global Sustainable Development Report** and the please **2024 UN Inter-agency Policy Briefs** emphasise critical shortfalls in local capacity for strategic foresight, participatory planning, and evidence-based policymaking – particularly the use of disaggregated data and localised monitoring frameworks. These gaps are often compounded by legacy administrative systems, outdated software, and top-down planning cycles that are misaligned with the integrated and participatory ethos of the 2030 Agenda.

Historical analysis from the **Progressing National SDG Implementation** series further underscores the scale of the issue. In 2018, 32 of 46 countries reviewed identified local capacity limitations as a major barrier; by 2021, 67 per cent of reporting countries cited severe deficits in subnational planning, monitoring, and data literacy. Despite this clear and growing need, capacity-building efforts remain fragmented, donor-driven, and typically short-term. Toolkits and trainings offered by international partners often lack contextual adaptation and follow-up support, leaving local officials with generic materials that are difficult to translate into action. Budget constraints also limit the ability of local governments to retain skilled staff, leading to high turnover and loss of institutional memory.

These deficits are reflected in the uneven quality of VLRs. While some municipalities have produced robust, data-driven reports, many others present only general summaries with minimal evidence. In **Nepal**, while SDG Committees have been established at the provincial and municipal levels to integrate the 2030 Agenda into local plans, the **NGO Federation of Nepal (NFN)** underscores that these bodies face severe deficits in skilled personnel, technical know-how, and financial resources, significantly constraining their operational effectiveness. Similarly, in **Georgia**, despite the existence of an SDG Localisation Action Plan and coordinated national guidance, municipalities report shortages of qualified personnel and weak local data systems that limit their ability to adapt and monitor SDG strategies. The **Caucasus Environmental NGO Network (CENN)** notes that insufficient human and technical capacity hampers progress even in municipalities that have formally committed to localisation. **Zimbabwe** faces similar issues, where local authorities engaged in SDG pilot programmes and VLR production lack sustained institutional support and technical expertise. These challenges are further exacerbated in fragile contexts such as **Chad** and **Libya**, where local governments are expected to implement SDG-related actions amid chronic institutional instability, inadequate staffing, and weak public administration systems.

These examples consistently demonstrate that the ambition of localisation often outpaces the current capacities of local authorities. Without significant investment in training, staffing, and institutional infrastructure, even well-intentioned and well-structured localisation frameworks risk stalling at the implementation stage.



4 WEAK MONITORING, DATA, AND REPORTING SYSTEMS

Robust, localised, and disaggregated data is fundamental to effective SDG localisation, yet it remains one of the most persistent weaknesses across countries. Many municipalities operate with **limited statistical capacity**, fragmented data systems, and inadequate access to timely, disaggregated, and policy-relevant information. These gaps prevent LRGs from aligning development strategies with SDG targets, assessing progress, or participating meaningfully in national and global reporting mechanisms.

As of 2024, only 59 per cent of LRGs globally have developed or are in the process of developing SDG-aligned indicator systems, and just 43 per cent of Local Government Associations (LGAs) report having any structured approach to SDG monitoring.[80] Data gaps are especially acute in areas related to gender, disability, migration, informal labour, and spatial inequalities – precisely the domains most critical for ensuring no one is left behind.

Most local authorities, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, operate with limited statistical capacity, fragmented data ecosystems, and insufficient access to real-time or gender-disaggregated information. These challenges significantly constrain the ability of LRGs to align their development strategies with the SDGs or to participate meaningfully in national and global reporting processes.

Case studies underscore the scale and persistence of challenges in building effective local SDG monitoring systems. In Georgia, while an SDG Localisation Action Plan and national guidance tools have been developed, the CENN highlights the absence of a comprehensive monitoring

80 United Nations. *Inter-Agency Policy Brief: Strengthening National and Subnational Capacities for Localizing the SDGs*. May 29, 2024. https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/Policy%20Brief%20FINAL%20May%2029%205%2024.pdf

methodology, and the lack of clarity around how municipal progress is tracked. Most municipalities still operate without localised indicators or functioning data systems, making it difficult to assess implementation gaps or outcomes. In Uganda, the PDM lacks built-in mechanisms for data collection and evaluation, contributing to poor financial oversight and confusion among beneficiaries about the nature of support provided through parish-level funds. In Nepal, although 17 municipalities have initiated VLRs, the NFN observes that these efforts are constrained by the lack of reliable local data, particularly in remote areas where coordination with national statistical systems remains weakIn Zambia, the ZCSD notes that local councils lack the capacity and financial resources to generate disaggregated data at the ward or community level, often relying instead on outdated or donor-driven national statistics. In Fiji, the **Fiji Council of Social Services (FCOSS)** highlights that small island communities lack the digital infrastructure required for timely and inclusive SDG monitoring, causing community-led efforts to remain undocumented or excluded from national reporting cycles. Similarly, in Guatemala, the **Redlad**-CSOs coalition emphasises that Indigenous municipalities are rarely consulted in national SDG reviews, and there are no institutional mechanisms in place to collect culturally sensitive, locally generated data.

Despite recent advances, systemic barriers also continue to limit the effectiveness of SDG localisation in Senegal. According to the 2022 Civil Society Alternative Report for the VNR, most municipalities have not yet developed formal SDG localisation plans. Key challenges include weak awareness of the 2030 Agenda at the local level, insufficient technical capacity to align municipal strategies with national and global frameworks, lack of disaggregated and locally relevant data, and inadequate financial resources to support territorial implementation. CONGAD's broader monitoring efforts – captured through community surveys, inter-regional workshops, and citizen scorecards – underscore that while national frameworks for SDG implementation exist, they are often underutilised at the subnational level. Civil society's engagement in national SDG coordination platforms is growing but remains limited in both influence and geographic reach outside the capital.





5 SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE AND LIMITED PARTICIPATION

While multi-stakeholder engagement is widely recognised as a core principle of the 2030 Agenda, the **2024 Progressing National SDG Implementation report**[81] reveals that meaningful participation in SDG localisation remains **uneven, underdeveloped, and frequently symbolic**. Many VNRs and VLRs refer to civil society consultations, yet these processes are often ad hoc, poorly resourced, or lack mechanisms for follow-up and accountability.

Across multiple contexts, **ambiguity surrounds the structure, influence, and sustainability** of participatory mechanisms. In Kenya, provincial-level SDG coordination bodies are said to include forums for civil society and local communities, but their roles are ill-defined, and there is no assessment of their effectiveness. In Sierra Leone, District Development Coordination Committees (DDCCs) are presented as inclusive platforms, yet they appear to function primarily on a project basis, without formalised mandates or long-term support. In Nepal, local SDG Committees nominally include community leaders and youth, but the Nepal SDG Forum notes these structures are underfunded and disconnected from national planning processes.

Even in countries with more formalised frameworks, such as Spain's social councils or Costa Rica's Regional Development Agencies (AREDES), questions remain about the representativeness, empowerment, and durability of these platforms. Meanwhile, in traditional governance contexts like Vanuatu and Palau, local ownership is expressed through customary leadership systems. However, these arrangements may limit the participation of women, youth, and marginalised groups unless explicitly reformed to promote inclusivity.

The **State of the VLRs 2024 report** confirms wide disparities in participation quality: while some

81 Author (n 23 above).



VLRs reflect strong stakeholder input, others are drafted by municipal authorities with little or no external engagement.[82] In many cases, there is a **lack of transparency around stakeholder selection, consultation processes, and integration of feedback** into final strategies or budgets.

These gaps are exacerbated by a broader **deterioration of the environment for civil society**. The **2024 UN Sustainable Development Goals Report**, the Civicus '**Monitor: Global findings 2024**' and the **EU SEE** highlight increasing constraints on civil society globally.[83] Local CSOs, particularly those advocating for human rights, environmental justice, or gender equality, face restrictive laws on foreign funding, burdensome registration processes, surveillance, and digital repression. Through verified alerts and detailed country-level reporting, EU SEE documents escalating threats to civic space, including crackdowns on freedom of expression and association, legal reforms restricting NGO operations, and delegitimising rhetoric by public authorities. Alerts in 2025 have tracked cases of judicial harassment, arbitrary detention of activists, funding suspensions, and media suppression across countries such as **Peru, Nigeria, Hong Kong, Sierra Leone, Indonesia, and El Salvador**, among others. The data shows that even in democracies, civil society actors are increasingly constrained in their ability to participate meaningfully in development processes.

Alerts in 2025 have tracked cases of judicial harassment, arbitrary detention of activists, funding suspensions, and media suppression

82 Ortiz-Moya & Kataoka (n 35 above).

83 SDG Report 2024 (n 5 above); Civicus 'Monitor: Global findings 2024' https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings_2024/ (accessed 7 June 2025).

CASE STUDY

The complex reality of participatory planning: The case of Peru

In Peru, the VNR highlighted in its latest report a participatory effort to define the country's long-term vision for sustainable development. This process, led by the National Planning System (**SINAPLAN**), culminated in the **Vision of Peru to 2050**, which was formally adopted by the **National Agreement Forum (AN)** in 2019. The government described this as a strategic step to align national planning with the principles of the SDGs.



However, civil society perspectives reveal a more complex picture. According to the **Agenda 2030/ANC Group**, the participatory process lacked true inclusion. While the AN brings together governments at all levels, political parties, religious institutions, trade unions, and the private sector, most grassroots CSOs and social movements were **excluded from the dialogue process**, despite the strategic importance of the **Vision 2050** document. To make matters worse, the Forum is convened only sporadically by the current government, reflecting a broader trend of political instability and declining public trust.

The citizen participation system within **SINAPLAN** remains highly fragmented. Although some participation mechanisms exist at the subnational level, such as the development of local and regional Coordinated Plans, they are applied inconsistently and often depend on the political will of local and regional authorities, still lacking a broader space to address the planning system with national government sectors. Legal mandates for participation are often undermined by technical, financial, and informational barriers, allowing local and regional governments – and their representatives (mayors and governors) – to bypass input from civil society.

This example illustrates both the **potential and the challenges** of aligning national and territorial (local/regional) levels in the implementation of the SDGs. While the Peruvian case reflects ambition in long-term strategic vision, it also underscores that **participation must be institutionalised – not symbolic** – in order to ensure ownership across different territories and coherence in SDG implementation, particularly in the allocation of public resources.

These dynamics have real consequences. In countries such as Cambodia and El Salvador, legal restrictions have prevented CSOs from participating in SDG policy dialogues or accessing resources, undermining both the quality and legitimacy of localisation efforts. Marginalised groups – including women, Indigenous peoples, youth, persons with disabilities, and informal workers – remain structurally underrepresented in local development planning, despite their critical perspectives and lived experiences. As a result, participatory processes risk becoming **performative exercises**, failing to influence decisions or shift power.



6 DIGITAL INEQUALITIES AND UNEVEN e-GOVERNANCE INTEGRATION

Despite the transformative potential of digital technologies to support inclusive SDG localisation, stark digital inequalities persist – exacerbating existing divides and limiting the effectiveness of e-governance initiatives at the local level.

While many countries have developed national digital strategies, these often fail to translate into meaningful implementation at the municipal or community level. Local governments, especially in rural or underserved areas, frequently lack the infrastructure, digital literacy, and institutional capacity to adopt technology for participatory governance, service delivery, and data collection. This contributes to a digital divide that is not only about access but also about **affordability**, **relevance**, and **rights-based use** of digital tools.

The **2024 Global Digital Compact**, adopted at the Summit of the Future, reinforces the urgency of addressing this challenge. Countries committed to seven SDG-aligned actions aimed at bridging the digital divide, including the development of affordable connectivity targets, rural infrastructure investment, and gender-responsive digital inclusion strategies. Yet, implementation remains fragmented.



Digital inequalities are no longer just about access, but about the **security, integrity, and freedom** of digital spaces.

From the perspective of civil society, the same observations are being reflected. The Forus network's experience, now reinforced by evidence from the **EU SEE Early Warning Mechanism**, shows that **digital inequalities** are no longer just about access, but about the **security, integrity, and freedom** of digital spaces.

In **Zambia**, **ZCSD** reports that despite increasing interest in e-governance, many local CSOs and district governments lack the digital infrastructure to implement real-time citizen feedback tools. Efforts to expand digital access are constrained by high costs and limited broadband coverage in rural areas.

In **the Philippines**, **CODE-NGO** has experimented with digital dashboards to track local SDG indicators, but uneven connectivity and varying levels of digital literacy across municipalities limit uptake and consistent use.

In **Argentina**, **Red Encuentros** has used digital media, including youth-run community radio and mobile surveys, to engage marginalised groups in SDG monitoring – but notes that many young people lack access to stable internet or affordable devices outside urban areas.

Forus' 2022 report entitled **Towards an Enabling Digital Environment for Civil Society** further emphasises the **risks of digital repression**, surveillance, and shrinking online civic space – especially in authoritarian or closing environments.[84] Civil society actors in Indonesia, Uganda, and El Salvador have raised concerns about digital harassment, data privacy violations, and government-led cyber threats.

Without deliberate investment in **inclusive infrastructure**, **rights-based safeguards**, and **local capacity**, digital governance tools risk becoming exclusive rather than empowering.

84 Forus International. *Towards an Enabling Digital Environment for Civil Society* (Full Report). June 2021. https://www.forus-international.org/en/pdf-detail/77151-towards-an-enabling-digital-environment-for-civil-society-full-report

Moreover, the lack of **interoperability** across systems (between local and national databases, for example) limits the ability to aggregate and act on local data.

As part of the **CADE Project**, Forus together with members and partners also conducted a comprehensive mapping and baseline study on CSO engagement in internet governance processes. Civil society continues to face several significant challenges in engaging with internet governance. Resource constraints, such as financial limitations and lack of staff, hinder CSOs from participating in key digital policy-making processes, as they struggle to cover the costs of travel, accommodation, and participation fees. Additionally, the digital divide, particularly limited internet access in rural areas, further marginalises already vulnerable groups, excluding them from important discussions. The technical nature of internet governance processes, such as those managed by the **Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF)** and the **Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN)**, often requires specialised knowledge, and the lack of capacity-building opportunities restricts many CSOs from fully engaging. Language barriers, particularly the dominance of English and insufficient translation services, exacerbate this issue, making it difficult for non-English speaking organisations to participate effectively. Furthermore, power dynamics within internet governance favour governments and corporations, often sidelining civil society, especially from the Global South, which undermines their influence on policy decisions. The lack of accessible information and networking opportunities makes it harder for CSOs to build the necessary capacity for meaningful involvement. Finally, the political environment in many countries, significantly limits civil society's ability to engage in multistakeholder forums and advocate for digital rights and freedoms. This challenge faced by civil society in internet governance is directly linked to e-governance and the localisation of digital policies. E-governance relies on the active participation of all stakeholders, including civil society, to ensure that digital platforms and policies reflect the needs and rights of the diverse populations they serve. However, when civil society is excluded from key digital policy discussions due to factors like resource constraints, digital divides, language barriers, and power imbalances, the process of e-governance becomes less inclusive, undermining the goal of localised governance that is responsive to local needs.





7 FRAGMENTATION OF SUPPORT AND DONOR INCOHERENCE

Despite growing recognition of localisation in development discourse, the fragmented and often incoherent nature of donor support continues to undermine its full realisation. While the international development community has increasingly embraced the rhetoric of locally-led development, in practice, localisation remains largely project-based, underfunded, and inconsistently supported. Many development partners still operate through short-term projects, siloed funding mechanisms, and misaligned priorities – often bypassing national and local coordination structures.

This lack of coherence often results in overlapping initiatives, administrative burden on local governments, and a disconnect between local development needs and programme design. Without an intentional, rights-based approach, the localisation agenda risks being hollowed out or instrumentalised.

Despite growing rhetorical commitments, systemic risks persist. Shrinking financial resources, rigid compliance demands, and the superficial adoption of decolonial language without structural reforms all threaten to undermine genuine localisation efforts. Localisation must not be reduced to a cost-efficiency exercise. It must remain firmly anchored in a political commitment to shifting power, redistributing resources, and advancing locally defined priorities and solutions.

Localisation efforts are often driven more by the availability of donor funds than by strategic, country-led planning, thereby reducing their relevance, ownership, and sustainability.

At the same time, access to international financing remains heavily centralised. Local governments and CSOs frequently report that while they are expected to deliver on increasingly ambitious mandates, they lack predictable, flexible, and sustained funding to do so. This disparity severely limits their capacity to institutionalise localised SDG implementation over the long term.

These challenges are compounded by insufficient investment in systemic capacity strengthening. According to the **State of the Voluntary Local Reviews 2024**, capacity-building support for local authorities and civil society actors is often fragmented and focused on narrow objectives. Rather than strengthening the institutional and data infrastructure required for participatory governance and evidence-based policymaking, much of the support remains output-driven and short-lived. Consequently, many local initiatives lack continuity, and gains in SDG implementation are rarely scaled or embedded within formal governance systems.

The experience of **INFID** in Indonesia illustrates these challenges in practice. Over a multi-year engagement, INFID supported 13 districts and three provinces to develop and align SDG action plans, build local monitoring systems, and promote partnerships between academic institutions and local governments. While these efforts demonstrated the transformative potential of locally embedded strategies, progress was frequently slowed by fragmented donor priorities, insufficient structural support, and inconsistently timed funding streams. These constraints limited the ability of local institutions to sustain momentum or expand their efforts beyond project timelines.

Such experiences reaffirm the need for a fundamental shift in how donor support for localisation is conceptualised and delivered. Rather than piloting isolated initiatives, development partners must align with national and subnational development strategies and invest in the institutional ecosystems required for long-term sustainability. This includes fostering pooled funding arrangements, co-designed programming with local stakeholders, and harmonising monitoring frameworks that reduce duplication and reinforce accountability. Without such systemic alignment, localisation risks remaining a rhetorical commitment rather than a structural transformation of development governance.

Fragmented governance, inadequate financing, persistent capacity deficits, weak data systems, exclusionary practices, digital divides, and limited policy uptake of local insights collectively undermine the transformative potential of localised SDG implementation.

The promise of localisation as a pathway to accelerate the 2030 Agenda remains aspirational unless these structural bottlenecks are addressed. Fragmented governance, inadequate financing, persistent capacity deficits, weak data systems, exclusionary practices, digital divides, and limited policy uptake of local insights collectively undermine the transformative potential of localised SDG implementation. These challenges are not merely technical; they are political and systemic. Overcoming them requires addressing structural inequalities, rethinking international cooperation models, and placing local actors at the heart of SDG implementation. Confronting these challenges requires a renewed political commitment, targeted investments, and the systematic reorientation of development frameworks to value and elevate the role of local actors as full co-creators – not just implementers – of sustainable development.



SECTION 4

SCALING AND SUSTAINING LOCALISATION – PATHWAYS FOR RE-IMAGINING SDG IMPLEMENTATION

With only five years remaining to realise the 2030 Agenda, the time has come not merely to accelerate implementation, but to fundamentally rethink how the SDGs are delivered. Reimagining SDG implementation from the ground up means shifting away from top-down models that often fail to reflect or respond to local needs. It requires recognising that communities are not passive recipients but active agents of sustainable development, and that transformative change is most effective when it is anchored in local realities, knowledge systems, and leadership.

Recognising that localisation unfolds through diverse and dynamic pathways, three complementary entry points can be identified for driving change:[85]

- **Project-driven pathways**, where local actors lead the execution of externally initiated initiatives.
- **Actor-driven pathways**, where the central goal is building the autonomy, leadership, and institutional resilience of local organisations.
- **Demand-driven pathways**, where development is shaped directly by the expressed needs, visions, and aspirations of communities themselves.

These overlapping approaches demonstrate that localisation is not a one-size-fits-all model but a flexible, evolving process that must centre the agency and self-determination of local actors.

Globally, evidence shows that local and regional governments are responsible for delivering on over 65 per cent of SDG targets – especially in areas such as health, education, water and sanitation, and climate adaptation.[86] Yet, local actors remain underfunded, undervalued, and structurally excluded from many formal implementation and financing mechanisms. As the **2023 Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR)** observes, 'transformations do not trickle down –they must be cultivated through distributed, inclusive, and locally responsive systems of governance'.[87] The **2024 UN Inter-agency Policy Briefs** reinforce that 'transformational localization requires a new ecosystem of implementation, rooted in multi-level governance, participatory planning, and community-led innovation'.[88]

Despite systemic bottlenecks, a growing body of evidence – backed by UN, UNDP, SDSN, and UCLG analyses – demonstrates that transformative change is possible when local actors are empowered within coherent, adequately resourced implementation frameworks. This section outlines seven strategic pathways to scale and sustain SDG localisation.

85 Coordination SUD *Note de constats communs – Groupe de travail Partenariats & Localisation* (2025).

86 United Nations, UNDESA, UN-Habitat & UNDP. *Inter-Agency Policy Brief: Accelerating SDG Localization to Deliver on the Promise of the 2030 Agenda*. 2024. https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/Policy%20Brief%20FINAL%20May%2029%205%2024.pdf

87 Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General *Global Sustainable Development Report 2023: Times of crisis, times of change: Science for accelerating transformations to sustainable development* (United Nations, New York, 2023).

88 United Nations, UNDESA, UN-Habitat & UNDP. *Inter-Agency Policy Brief: Accelerating SDG Localization to Deliver on the Promise of the 2030 Agenda*. 2024. https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/Policy%20Brief%20FINAL%20May%2029%205%2024.pdf



1 INSTITUTIONALISE LOCALISATION IN NATIONAL PLANNING AND REPORTING

There is growing consensus that institutionalising localisation within national planning and reporting systems is both feasible and necessary. To operationalise this shift, national governments and development partners must scale the enabling environment for locally led development: legal recognition of local plans and VLRs, direct financing mechanisms, harmonised national-local data systems, and formal mandates for civil society inclusion. Several countries have already demonstrated that multilevel governance is achievable through deliberate legal and institutional reforms.

Countries that have embedded localisation into national systems – such as Indonesia's SDG Coordination Centres and Finland's formal VLR-VNR linkages – are showing stronger policy coherence, vertical integration, and institutional resilience. In Finland, the Ministry of Finance recognises VLRs as key inputs to national SDG reporting, and cities like Espoo and Vantaa have developed formal processes to integrate VLR findings into their annual planning and budgeting cycles. In Indonesia, the Ministry of National Development Planning (Bappenas) has encouraged municipalities to align their VLRs with medium-term development plans and national SDG indicator frameworks. In Buenos Aires, Argentina, the city government used its VLR process to identify budget performance gaps and reallocate municipal resources to align with SDG priorities.

These examples illustrate that institutional integration is achievable when backed by clear mandates, dedicated resources, and sustained political commitment. Yet such practices remain the exception rather than the norm. Even in countries with relatively mature VLR ecosystems, horizontal learning among municipalities and vertical coordination with national ministries remain underdeveloped.



The persistence of fragmented governance structures underscores the need for codified mandates that elevate the role of local governments and CSOs within national SDG strategies. Governments must establish permanent coordination mechanisms, mandate the integration of VLRs into VNRs, and align subnational and national indicator systems. Institutional coherence is essential for scaling localisation beyond isolated pilots toward systemic transformation.

Tools such as UNDP's **SDG Accelerator and Bottleneck Assessment (ABA)** framework[89] enable local and national governments to identify catalytic interventions and address structural barriers. This framework has been adapted in Latin America and Southeast Asia to support municipal prioritisation linked to national SDG strategies.[90] Other promising models include India's SDG Coordination Centres, Nepal's integration of SDGs into intergovernmental transfers, and Cuba's local planning hubs (supported by UNDP) – all of which offer replicable examples of vertical integration and co-owned governance.

Civil society also plays a pivotal role in advancing bottom-up approaches. In Fiji, the regional CSO coordination platform PIANGO has pioneered a localised disaster response structure. Drawing on commitments from the World Humanitarian Summit and the Grand Bargain, PIANGO and its Fijian members revived the **District Councils of Social Service (DCSS)** as community-rooted coordination platforms. Supported by Forus through an institutional grant in 2020, the Fiji CSO Protocol formalised the role of subnational actors and traditional knowledge in disaster governance. This model replaced top-down approaches with a multi-stakeholder, locally-led coordination system that has become a reference for other Pacific countries.

89 L Garmer (ed) *SDG Accelerator and Bottleneck Assessment* (UNDP 2017).

90 UNDP & Local2030. *SDG Accelerator and Bottleneck Assessment*. 2017. https://www.local2030.org/library/view/401

CASE STUDY

PDA in Pakistan - Co-creating national accountability frameworks

The **PDA** is reshaping SDG localisation in Pakistan by embedding civic voices into national development frameworks. Through citizen scorecards, Voices Reports, and SDG localisation research, PDA has built tools to hold public institutions accountable.

Its most significant achievement, the **Charter of Democracy 2.0**, is a cross-party, civil society-endorsed document that reinforces civic space, fiscal decentralisation, and rights-based governance. The Charter has gained recognition both nationally and internationally as a model for democratic accountability.





PDA's work also challenges top-down development models, advocating for bottom-up policy design and inclusive agenda-setting. Through global platforms like Forus, PDA continues to push for Global South leadership in development policy dialogues.

PDA shows that co-developing national scorecards and rights-based frameworks with CSOs can institutionalise democratic accountability and amplify marginalised voices in SDG planning.

Recommendations:

- Mandate the integration of VLRs into VNRs.
- Legally codify the roles of local actors in SDG implementation and reporting.
- Create permanent national-subnational coordination platforms.
- Leverage VLRs as Strategic Planning Tools:
    - Support more cities to produce and institutionalise VLRs.
    - Integrate VLRs into budget cycles and SDG indicator frameworks.
    - Use VLRs to improve transparency, track community priorities, and inform national reviews.



2 REFORM PUBLIC AND INNOVATIVE FINANCING SYSTEMS TO EMPOWER LOCAL ACTORS

Restructuring financing systems is essential to ensure that local actors – particularly in low-resource or marginalised settings – have predictable, equitable, and flexible access to resources. The **2024 UN Sustainable Development Goals Report** and the **Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development draft outcome document (FFD4 draft outcome document)** reaffirm the urgency of closing the global SDG financing gap, now estimated at USD 4 trillion annually.

In most countries, fiscal decentralisation remains partial or non-existent, with local actors dependent on ad hoc transfers from central authorities that are often delayed, earmarked, or misaligned with local development plans. Even in OECD countries, local governments manage just a fraction of overall fiscal resources despite being responsible for up to 40 per cent of public investment. Many low- and middle-income countries lack legal mechanisms for local authorities to raise taxes, issue bonds, or access credit markets.

Promising models exist, such as Nepal's intergovernmental grant system, India's SDG Coordination Centres, and Uganda's parish-level funding model, that illustrate the catalytic potential of decentralised financing frameworks, and how they can be used to align funding with subnational SDG priorities. Local development funds and participatory budgeting mechanisms, such as those used in Tharparkar, Pakistan and Zambia, demonstrate how community-rooted fiscal tools can link public expenditure to local priorities. County and local governments in the drylands of Kenya, Mali, Senegal and Tanzania have also established local-level climate adaptation funds with technical support from IIED and government and non-government organisations. These funds improve their readiness to access and disburse national and global climate

finance, supporting community-prioritised investments to build climate resilience.[91]

At the same time, there are several innovative financing instruments that offer promising pathways. Subnational climate finance facilities, municipal green bonds, participatory budgeting, remittance-driven development funds and community development funds can diversify local funding streams and strengthen resilience. Financial transfers from migrants, or remittances, have become a major source of external financing for low- and middle-income countries, reaching $605 billion in 2021. According to the European Parliament's 2022 study **The role of remittances in promoting sustainable development**[92] these flows not only support national economies but also advance the localisation of the SDGs by reducing poverty and improving access to health, education, and resilience at the community level.

Municipalities and CSOs must be empowered with legal authority and technical capacity to access and manage such funding. Forus members across regions are already advancing these practices. INFID's work in Indonesia, PDA's district-level budget engagement in Pakistan, and ZCSD's transparency audits in Zambia underscore the transformative potential of local civil society actors in reshaping fiscal governance and aligning resources with SDG goals.

CASE STUDY

Finance in Common Summit 2025 - Rethinking climate and development finance

At the **Finance in Common Summit 2025** in Cape Town, civil society and grassroots leaders from Africa, Asia, and Latin America issued a resounding call for a transformation in how climate finance is governed.



91 IEED 'Local climate finance mechanism helping to fund community-prioritised adaptation' https://www.iied.org/local-climate-finance-mechanism-helping-fund-community-prioritised-adaptation (accessed 4 June 2025).

92 I Olivié & M Santillán O'Shea 'In-Depth Analysis: The role of remittances in promoting sustainable development' European Parliament (2022) https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2022/702563/EXPO_IDA(2022)702563_EN.pdf (accessed 4 June 2025).





In the session 'Shifting the balance', co-organised by Forus, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), and the Coalition for Human Rights in Development, community leaders emphasised that current top-down financing models often harm rather than help vulnerable populations – through land grabs, exclusion, or extractive infrastructure projects.

Speakers championed **locally-led development** as the foundation for climate justice. They demanded direct, long-term investments in grassroots initiatives, the democratisation of climate finance, and a shift toward care-centred, feminist, and Indigenous economic models. The call to action centred on redefining finance from transactional to transformational.

This case illustrates a growing consensus that climate and development finance must prioritise community leadership, participatory governance, and justice-oriented frameworks to advance equitable localisation.

Recommendations:

- Close the $4 trillion SDG financing gap with a focus on local-level access.
- Transition to direct, flexible, and community-driven financing mechanisms.
- Expand fiscal decentralisation and establish transparent, performance-based transfers.
- Empower municipalities and CSOs to access innovative funding tools.
- Integrate community-managed funds and participatory budgeting into national strategies.



3 TRANSFORM DONOR MODELS TO SUPPORT LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT

A systemic shift in donor behaviour and international cooperation is essential to consolidate and scale the pathways outlined in this report. Despite widespread rhetorical support for localisation, most aid continues to flow through centralised channels and remains projectised, short-term, and compliance heavy. The OECD report **Pathways Towards Effective Locally Led Development Co-operation: Learning by Example** reveals that only a fraction of ODA reaches local CSOs directly, while much of the support to local governments is earmarked and lacks flexibility. **INFID** in Indonesia showed how donor fragmentation stalls implementation unless harmonised.

However, scaling up localisation demands more than surface-level adjustments. It requires deep, systemic transformation within donor agencies and Global North CSOs.[93]

Supporting locally-led development means fundamentally reimagining roles – from implementers to facilitators, from managers to partners – and shifting funding models to prioritise unrestricted, long-term support that strengthens local leadership. It also requires confronting historical power dynamics and rebuilding institutional cultures around principles of equity, solidarity, and mutual accountability.

Promising models do exist. The **EU's programmatic guidance note** on promoting equitable partnerships with local responders in humanitarian settings commits to localisation, pooled funds, and local actor leadership. It outlines key recommendations for recognising the value, skills and resources of local actors; establishing fair and impartial partnerships; and facilitating access to localised financing models. DAC members including

93 Coordination SUD (n 98).

Ireland, Switzerland, and Australia have also piloted approaches that emphasise multi-year, flexible funding for grassroots and community-based organisations.[94] Spain also allocated 55 per cent of ODA to CSOs in 2021. Ireland's multi-year support to grassroots partners provide critical lessons in donor practice. Beyond these examples, initiatives like the OECD's DAC Working Group on Localisation, the UN's **Grand Bargain 2.0** process, and the **Global Alliance for Communities** are advancing common standards and accountability mechanisms for shifting power and resources closer to communities. Furthermore, the Finance in Common Summit and the UN Joint SDG Fund have started advocating for pooled funds and trust-based partnerships with local actors.

Yet, much of this conversation remains focused on macro-level reforms, with insufficient mechanisms for tracking impact at the local level. Meanwhile, drastic cuts to cooperation budgets have increased pressure on public authorities and civil society to diversify funding sources, mobilise domestic resources, and implement fiscal reforms.

Public development banks have begun to align their mandates with localization goals, though progress remains uneven. The **Asian Development Bank (ADB)**, through its technical assistance initiative 'Strengthening Institutions for Localizing Agenda 2030',[95] has worked with governments across Asia and the Pacific to build the planning and implementation capacity of subnational authorities. This included policy dialogue, training, and the development of SDG action plans in countries such as China, the Marshall Islands, and Micronesia. Increasingly, there are calls for public development banks (PDBs) to not only expand concessional lending to sub-national entities but also embed localisation criteria in investment decisions, thus supporting community-led infrastructure, climate adaptation, and service delivery.

Philanthropic actors play an increasingly influential role in development finance, with a growing trend toward funding locally rooted initiatives. Several foundations are now experimenting with participatory grant making models that involve community representatives in funding decisions, ensuring that resources are aligned with actual needs. Moreover, initiatives like the **RINGO Project (Reimagining INGOs)** aim to transform the relationships between donors, INGOs, and local actors by promoting equitable and transparent funding models.

CSR and Private Sector Contributions are also key, as they can supplement public financing when rooted in local priorities. However, CSR often remains detached from community-led priorities unless frameworks are in place to co-create projects with local authorities and CSOs. In Japan, the **JANIC** platform has developed standardised self-assessment tools for companies to align with environmental, social, and governance (ESG) standards and contribute to the SDGs in meaningful ways.[96] Public-private partnerships, when designed with inclusive governance structures, offer a

94 *Pathways Towards Effective Locally Led Development Co-operation* (n 51 above).

95 ADB 'Regional: Strengthening Institutions for Localizing Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development' https://www.adb.org/projects/50385-001/main (accessed 4 June 2025).

96 JANIC checklist (n 68).

pathway to leverage private capital for SDG-related investments – particularly in infrastructure, education, and digital inclusion.

Forus' engagement with the Finance in Common process and member case studies from Guatemala, Zambia, and the Philippines confirm that localisation cannot be achieved without localisation of finance. INFID's experience in Indonesia illustrates how donor fragmentation stalls implementation unless harmonised. Donors must align funding modalities with national and local SDG plans, embed localisation metrics into evaluation frameworks, and prioritise trust-based partnerships with community-rooted actors.

For more recommendations and insights from civil society on these issues, check out the **Forus Global Voices Rising** podcast series and the **Funding Freeze, Unfrozen Purpose** series as part of the **EU SEE** initiative. These platforms explore the urgent need for change in donor models and the role of civil society in driving localised development solutions.

CASE STUDY: *Taiwan AID's advocacy for inclusive, SDG-aligned development cooperation*

Since 2015, the **Taiwan Alliance in International Development (Taiwan AID)** has led a sustained advocacy campaign to reorient Taiwan's foreign aid strategy toward inclusive, SDG-aligned principles.





Through consistent dialogue with legislators, civil servants, and the public, Taiwan AID successfully influenced the **2023 Foreign Aid Policy White Paper**, which now includes:

- Chapter 6, Section 5 of the White Paper specifically explains the importance of CSOs in international cooperation affairs.
- A commitment to SDG 17.2 and the 0,7 per cent ODA target; the SDGs are included in the Policy White Paper, and the importance of SDG 17 is emphasised.
- Explicit references to gender equality, climate action, and inclusive partnerships.

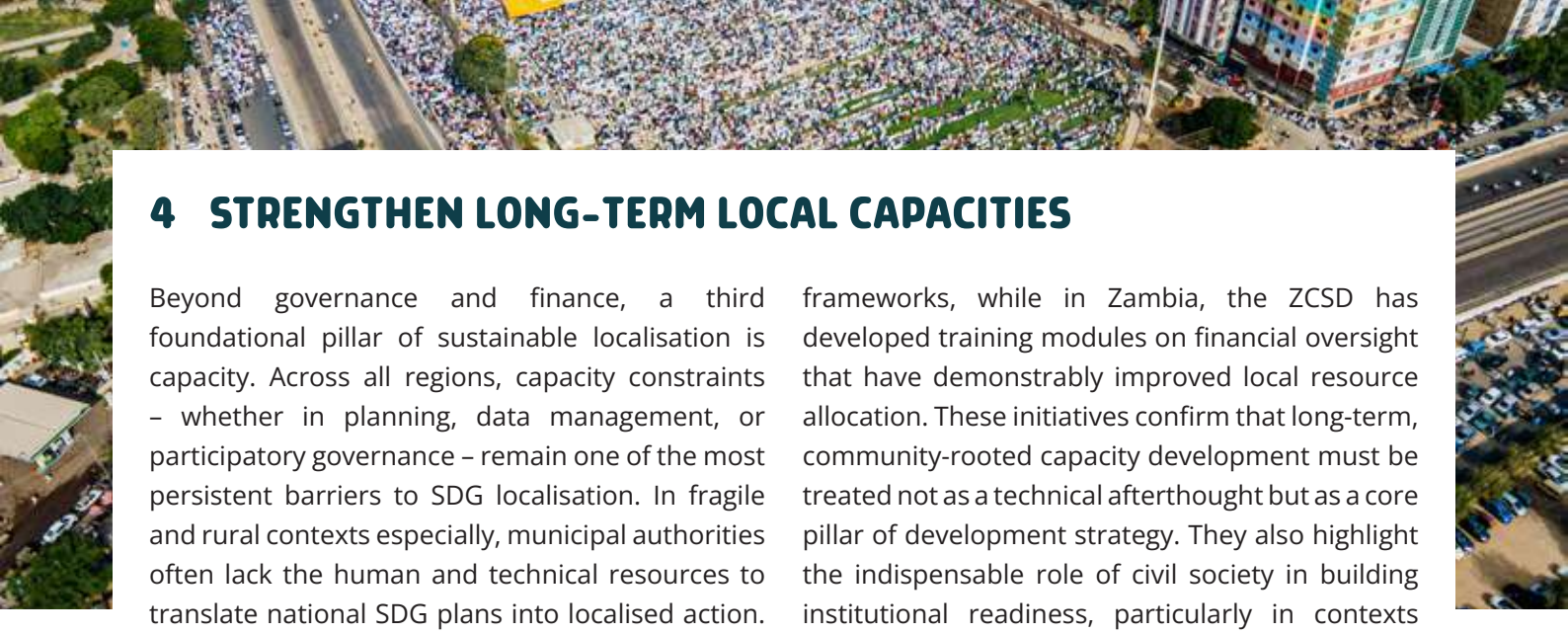
Despite political turnover and low ODA allocations (just 0,06 per cent of Gross National Income (GNI)), Taiwan AID has maintained pressure through strategic alliances and transparent communication, pushing for deeper legal and institutional reforms.



Taiwan AID's success shows how **coalition-building and transparent policy engagement** can shift national development frameworks to align with global goals and recognize civil society as equal partners.

Recommendations:

- Align donor support with national and local SDG strategies and implementation frameworks.
- Support long-term, flexible, and core funding for local CSOs and authorities.
- Promote pooled financing platforms and co-created programme design.
- Embed localisation metrics into donor evaluation and accountability frameworks.
- Reduce administrative burden and compliance barriers for local partners.



4 STRENGTHEN LONG-TERM LOCAL CAPACITIES

Beyond governance and finance, a third foundational pillar of sustainable localisation is capacity. Across all regions, capacity constraints – whether in planning, data management, or participatory governance – remain one of the most persistent barriers to SDG localisation. In fragile and rural contexts especially, municipal authorities often lack the human and technical resources to translate national SDG plans into localised action. This is particularly concerning given that 65 per cent of SDG targets require localised implementation.

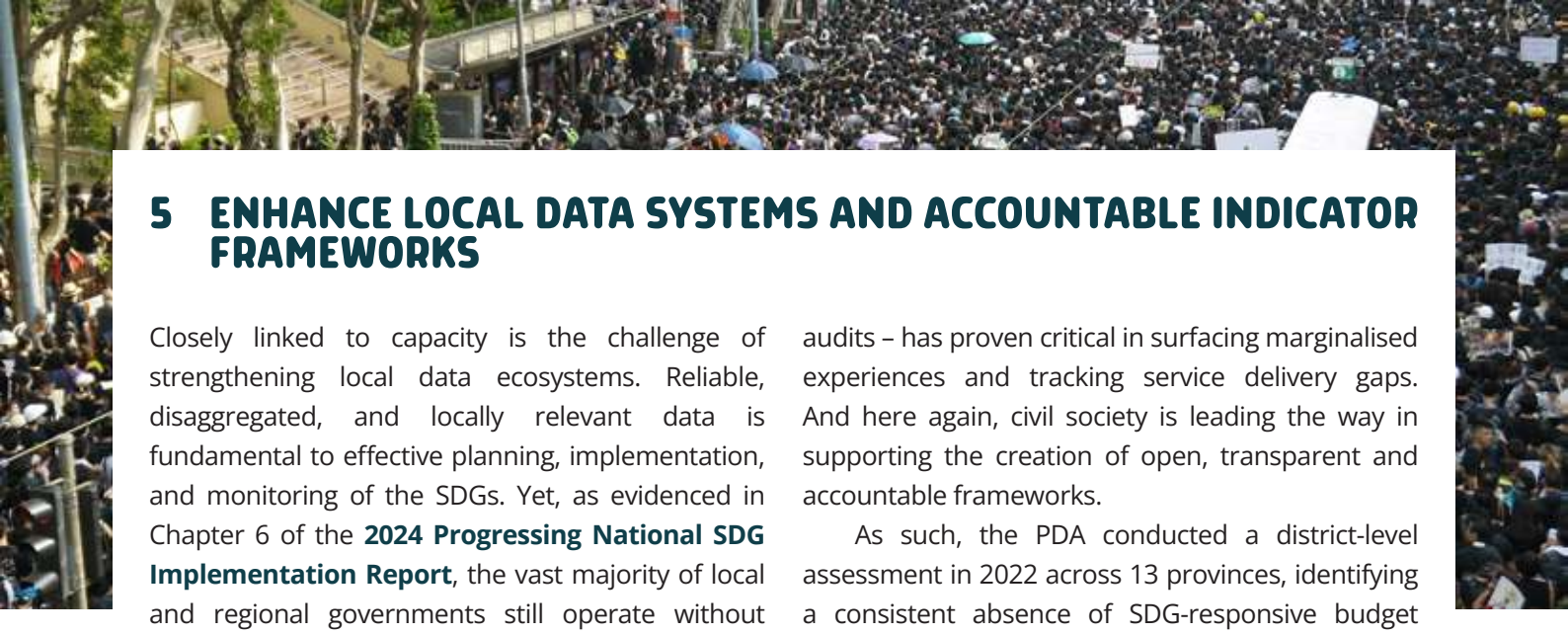
Yet promising models are emerging. In Costa Rica, municipalities collaborate through the Network of Cantons Promoting the SDGs, which provides toolkits, trainings, and an awards programme to incentivise local implementation. And civil society is leading efforts to help strengthen local capacities. In Indonesia, the INFID-supported SDG Centres have equipped subnational officials with tools to monitor progress and engage in strategic planning. In the Pacific, PIANGO's institutional support to District Councils of Social Service has reactivated local disaster response frameworks, while in Zambia, the ZCSD has developed training modules on financial oversight that have demonstrably improved local resource allocation. These initiatives confirm that long-term, community-rooted capacity development must be treated not as a technical afterthought but as a core pillar of development strategy. They also highlight the indispensable role of civil society in building institutional readiness, particularly in contexts where state presence is limited or contested.

Citizens Engagement Platform Seychelles (CEPS), Forus member from the Seychelles, runs the Youth Volunteers Programme, encouraging young people to engage in community service and development projects. This Programme not only fosters a culture of volunteerism but also contributes to SDG 4 (Quality education) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the goals) by building skills and promoting collaborative efforts towards sustainable development. Through these and other initiatives, CEPS plays a significant role in translating global SDG targets into tangible actions at the local level in Seychelles.[97]

Recommendations:

- Enhance capacities of local governments and CSOs through targeted, multi-year support and capacity-building initiatives.
- Create national training hubs for planning, monitoring, and participatory governance.
- Fund peer learning and horizontal cooperation models.

97 Citizen Engagement Platform Seychelles (CEPS) 'Civil Society Organisations' Festival' https://www.ceps.sc/projects/civil-society-organisations-manifestation/ (accessed 4 June 2025).



5 ENHANCE LOCAL DATA SYSTEMS AND ACCOUNTABLE INDICATOR FRAMEWORKS

Closely linked to capacity is the challenge of strengthening local data ecosystems. Reliable, disaggregated, and locally relevant data is fundamental to effective planning, implementation, and monitoring of the SDGs. Yet, as evidenced in Chapter 6 of the **2024 Progressing National SDG Implementation Report**, the vast majority of local and regional governments still operate without robust indicator frameworks or interoperable data systems.[98] Many VLRs lack baseline data, trend analysis, or target alignment. The challenges are especially acute for data on gender, disability, informal labour, and spatial inequality – precisely the areas most relevant to the SDG principle of 'leaving no one behind'.

However, emerging models illustrate how these barriers can be overcome. India's integration of state and district dashboards through the NITI Aayog, and Kerala's real-time data system linking village-level indicators to state budgets, show the power of strategic investments in localised data platforms. Furthermore, community-generated data – including citizen scorecards, participatory mapping, and social audits – has proven critical in surfacing marginalised experiences and tracking service delivery gaps. And here again, civil society is leading the way in supporting the creation of open, transparent and accountable frameworks.

As such, the PDA conducted a district-level assessment in 2022 across 13 provinces, identifying a consistent absence of SDG-responsive budget allocations.[99] In Gilgit-Baltistan, 68 per cent of respondents noted that SDGs were not integrated into PC-1 planning documents. Despite limited transfers from the provincial government, Tharparkar district proactively developed a localised SDG framework. PDA's work catalysed citizen engagement, calling for formula-based fiscal transfers, decentralised planning, and civil society inclusion in budget negotiations.

To be fully effective, such data must be formally recognised and integrated into national reporting cycles. This calls for inclusive data governance frameworks that balance utility with ethical considerations around privacy, consent, and security.

Recommendations:

- Invest in interoperable, real-time local data platforms.
- Integrate community-generated data into official reporting.
- Develop equity-focused indicators that reflect local realities.

98 Action for Sustainable Development et al (n 23 above).

99 Z ur Rehman & S Mujeeba Batool 'Voluntary Local Review-VLR 2022: A situational analysis of localization of SDGs at district level' AwazCDS -Pakistan/Pakistan Development Alliance (2022) https://www.pda.net.pk/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/VLR-Report-2022.pdf (accessed 4 June 2025).



6 PROMOTE EQUITABLE MULTI-STAKEHOLDER PARTNERSHIPS

From **national ownership** to **shared, multilevel leadership**, achieving the SDGs requires more than aligned intentions – it demands shared strategies, mutual respect, and co-ownership of implementation pathways. When civil society and government institutions build a common vision, they create the foundation for **policy coherence**, **institutional trust**, and **sustainable, inclusive action**. As the **OECD Pathways Towards Effective Locally Led Development Co-operation** report emphasises, **co-created development strategies lead to more resilient institutions and inclusive outcomes**. Yet, across many contexts, CSOs are still treated as project implementers rather than **strategic co-authors** of national plans. The **UN-Habitat VLR methodology** and the **SDG Localisation Platform** both stress that development frameworks grounded in co-owned objectives are more likely to survive political transitions, attract cross-sector investment, and reflect real community needs. For this to happen, we need to address the global-local power imbalances. We also need to foster genuine co-creation processes that involve local stakeholders as equal partners in decision-making and policy implementation.

Reimagining localisation requires shifting power. Donors and development partners must embed localisation within their financial instruments, reduce administrative burden, and commit to long-term, trust-based partnerships with local actors. CSOs – especially those closest to underserved communities – receive just 2,1 per cent of total bilateral ODA, with little access to direct, multi-year, or core funding. Funding continues to be largely project-based, short-term, and driven by donor reporting cycles that inhibit long-term planning, limit flexibility, and constrain community ownership. Yet, civil society engagement is key to ensure local priorities and needs are reflected in budget decisions, and to ensure transparent accountable and effective processes. Across Latin America and parts of Asia,

participatory budgeting has empowered citizens to allocate portions of municipal budgets based on local priorities. When coupled with social audits, this mechanism enhances transparency, aligns spending with community needs, and strengthens civic trust.[100] For example, in Tharparkar District, Pakistan, civil society engagement in district budget consultations led to the inclusion of locally defined SDG targets in annual planning.

Additionally, we need to promote an enabling environment for civil society's participation. However, the 2024 reports by CIVICUS, the UN, and the EU SEE link these initiative all converge on a troubling finding: civil society's environment is shrinking across virtually every region, undermining the very participatory foundations of the 2030 Agenda. As highlighted by the EU SEE's early warning alerts, CSOs face an increasingly hostile operating environment marked by surveillance, legal harassment, and funding restrictions. In contexts such as Peru, Nigeria, and El Salvador, these constraints have not only silenced dissent but also excluded critical actors from development planning. The implications are profound. Without meaningful civic participation, localisation efforts risk becoming administrative exercises devoid of democratic legitimacy or community ownership. There is therefore a pressing need to institutionalise inclusive participation mechanisms – youth councils, SDG forums, and participatory budgeting processes – that ensure marginalised voices are not only heard but empowered to shape policy outcomes. Additionally, laws safeguarding civic freedoms must be enacted and enforced, and donors must prioritise flexible funding for CSOs, particularly those operating in high-risk environments.

Recommendations:

- Repeal laws that restrict NGO operations or funding.
- Institutionalise platforms for youth, Indigenous peoples, women, and marginalised groups in local decision-making.
- Embed participation mechanisms in law and budgeting cycles.

100 A Shah (ed) *Participatory Budgeting* World Bank Public Sector Governance And Accountability Series 39498 (2007) https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/bfb2f14e-41c5-5503-ba54-9cfcb804f51c/content (accessed 4 June 2025).



7 BRIDGE THE DIGITAL DIVIDE AND SCALE e-GOVERNANCE INNOVATIONS

Digital transformation also represents a key area of opportunity for enhancing SDG localisation. Digital tools – from mobile planning applications in Kenya to participatory dashboards in Suva, Fiji,[101] or Davao's geospatial mapping of clean water access[102] – are revolutionising how citizens engage with governance and how local authorities collect data, plan interventions, and track progress.

However, as Forus' own research and the EU SEE alerts underscore, digital transformation is a double-edged sword. Without targeted efforts to close the digital divide and protect online civic space, digitalisation risks reinforcing existing inequalities and exposing activists to new forms of surveillance and repression. To maximise its potential, digital infrastructure must be paired with rights-based frameworks, capacity-building for local actors, and investments in digital literacy and cybersecurity.

Without targeted efforts to close the digital divide and protect online civic space, digitalisation risks reinforcing existing inequalities and exposing activists to new forms of surveillance and repression.

101 UN-GGIM 'Pacific Geospatial and Surveying Council (PGSC) Meeting, Suva, Fiji – 2024' https://ggim.un.org/meetings/2024/Suva_Fiji/ (accessed 4 June 2025).

102 F D Masancay et al 'GIS-Based Site Selection for Rainwater Harvesting in Davao City' (2025) 15 *Davao Research Journal* 176 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/387757569_GIS-Based_site_selection_for_Rainwater_Harvesting_RWH_site_suitability_mapping_in_Davao_City (accessed 4 June 2025).

CASE STUDY

NGYouthSDGs' youth-led localisation of the SDGs in Nigeria

In Nigeria, the Nigeria Youth SDGs Network registered as the **Network of Youth for Sustainable Initiative (NGYouthSDGs)**, has played a key role in advancing SDG localisation through youth empowerment, digital training, and community-led advocacy.





Between 2020 and 2021, NGYouthSDGs partnered with the Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the International Labour Organisation to co-develop the **Nigeria Youth Employment Action Plan (NIYEAP)**, targeting 3.5 million youth annually. They organised a survey reaching 213 000 young people to understand their decent work aspirations and how the youth want policymakers in Nigeria to support them. It happened alongside youth labs organised across the 36 states of Nigeria and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, involving 850 youth organisations in the process. They also launched digital skills programmes in Adamawa, Benue, and Lagos states to equip young people with tools for emerging job markets.



To advocate for youth leadership in SDGs localisation, NGYouthSDGs has commemorated

International Youth Day since 2017 by creating a space for inter-generational collaboration between young people and the elders. They developed the Youth Day Spotlight Awards, an annual celebration of 50 young Nigerians who are taking SDGs actions in their local communities. The awards which began in 2022, has recognised 150 young people across Nigeria for their efforts in SDGs localisation and 'leaving no one behind'.



To promote environmental sustainability, NGYouthSDGs trained over 360 youth in six states on climate justice. They followed this with a campaign to advocate for youth leadership in Nigeria's third **Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC 3.0)** by educating 178 youth CSOs in five states to understand the NDCs and lead the creation of Local Adaptation Plan of Action in four Nigerian states. The campaign provided climate change education to 2 700 individuals directly and more than 150 000 people virtually. They also developed an '**SDGs Playbook**' with 200 localised actions and led COVID-19 outreach in 25 communities, supported by the Mastercard Foundation. These efforts have been recognised by the UN as SDG Good Practices.

Persistent challenges include:

- Limited long-term financing for youth-led initiatives.
- Uneven digital access across regions.
- Weak institutional linkages with local governance.









NGYouthSDGs' experience highlights how youth-driven civil society can lead localised SDG implementation by linking national policy, community needs, and innovative action.

As demonstrated in Japan, where **JANIC** developed standardised SDG alignment tools for NGOs and municipalities, digital innovation can be a powerful enabler of transparency, participation, and localisation – when deployed inclusively and ethically.

Recommendations:

- Expand inclusive digital infrastructure and services.
- Equip local governments and CSOs to adopt planning and transparency tools.
- Guarantee digital rights and data protection.

In sum, reimagining SDG implementation from the ground up is no longer a theoretical aspiration – it is a practical and political necessity. Localisation offers not only the most contextually relevant path to deliver the 2030 Agenda, but also the most democratic and resilient. Yet, to scale this potential, global and national actors must make deliberate choices: to invest in institutional coherence, to democratise access to resources, to centre community leadership, and to transform how development is conceived, financed, and measured. Localisation is not a detour from the global agenda – it is its most viable route forward.

KEY ASKS FOR EACH STAKEHOLDER

STAKEHOLDER	KEY ASK
National governments	Institutionalise and fund SDG localisation by embedding it in national planning, budgeting, and reporting processes. Mandate and fund VLRs. Establish multi-level governance platforms that include civil society and marginalised communities.
Local and regional governments	Co-create SDG plans and budgets with communities. Strengthen local data ecosystems, promote participatory governance, and institutionalise VLR processes.
CSOs	Act as conveners and accountability agents. Lead inclusive planning and accountability. Amplify marginalised voices, generate community data, and scale grassroots innovations. Advocate for an enabling environment for civil society and localisation financing.
Donors and international development agencies	Provide direct, multi-year, and flexible funding to local actors. Align aid with local SDG plans and embed localisation metrics in evaluation. Support pooled funds and co-creation.
Public Development Banks & IFIs	Prioritise community-rooted, subnational investments. Embed localisation criteria into financing frameworks. Channel funds toward municipal and community-level efforts. Support participatory budgeting and local infrastructure.
Private sector	Align business operations with local SDG goals. Build inclusive partnerships and invest in community development. Co-create initiatives with CSOs and municipalities.
UN System	Champion localisation and partnerships in global SDG processes. Expand technical and financial support for VLRs and grassroots engagement in VNRs. Support an enabling environment for civil society engagement in VNRs. Facilitate learning and coordination across countries, as well as capacity-strengthening for local actors.
Youth, women, Indigenous & marginalised groups	Engage in co-leadership roles. Share innovations, shape local policies, and demand inclusive service delivery through direct participation. Call for accountability in public service delivery.



CONCLUSION

UNLOCKING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SDGS THROUGH LOCALISATION AND PARTNERSHIPS

The findings of this report leave no doubt: achieving the SDGs by 2030 requires a decisive shift in how development is designed, financed, and delivered. Localisation is not a policy trend – it is a structural transformation. It moves the SDGs from paper to practice by anchoring global commitments in local realities, centring community knowledge, and enabling multi-level collaboration grounded in shared accountability. Localisation is not simply about technical delivery; it represents a political and historical rebalancing of power, grounded in the leadership, rights, and lived expertise of local actors.

Across 20+ case studies, this report has shown how local governments, civil society, and communities – from Argentina to Zambia, from Finland to Fiji – are not waiting for permission to lead. They are shaping their own development pathways, institutionalising participation, aligning budgets with local needs, and generating community-owned data to track progress and push for policy change. From youth-led co-creation labs in Argentina and parish-level financing in Uganda to data innovation in the Philippines and grass-roots governance in Guatemala, these examples underscore a common truth: the SDGs can only succeed when local actors are trusted, resourced, and supported to lead.

Yet, despite this momentum, structural barriers continue to obstruct progress. Financing remains overwhelmingly centralised, unpredictable, and disconnected from local priorities. Civic space is shrinking in many contexts, limiting the voice and visibility of civil society. And top-down planning persists, often crowding out the lived knowledge and leadership of those closest to the challenges – and solutions – on the ground. Without intentional shifts in financing models and power structures, there is a real risk that localisation efforts will be instrumentalised – reduced to rhetoric or cost-saving exercises – without addressing underlying inequalities.

This report calls for an urgent course correction. To unlock the full potential of localisation, stakeholders at all levels must act on eight strategic imperatives: These actions must recognise that localisation evolves through diverse pathways – whether project-driven, actor-driven, or shaped by community demands – and that true transformation requires donors and international partners to reimagine their roles, shift toward long-term, flexible support, and prioritise local leadership.

- **Institutionalise localisation** in national planning, budgeting, and accountability systems.
- **Direct predictable and flexible funding** to local governments and civil society actors.
- **Reform donor practices to support long-term, trust-based partnerships** rooted in local leadership.
- **Strengthen local capacities through peer learning**, infrastructure investment, and participatory governance mechanisms.
- **Expand inclusive data ecosystems**, recognising community-generated data as critical evidence.
- **Systematise Voluntary Local and Subnational Reviews** as tools for policy coherence and accountability.
- **Bridge the digital divide and scale digital tools** that enhance local participation and transparency.
- **Protect civic space and embed equitable, multi-stakeholder partnerships** across all levels of governance.

We are now in the final stretch of the 2030 Agenda. The window to deliver transformative results is closing rapidly – but not entirely. The evidence presented here offers a path forward. Localisation and partnerships are not merely complementary to global progress – they are its engine. When governments, funders, and institutions invest in local ecosystems of change, they unlock innovation, legitimacy, and impact at scale.

Forus and its members stand ready to partner in this work. But bold commitments must now translate into structural reform. The final five years must be defined by proximity, power-sharing, and purpose. This call echoes priorities outlined in the 2023 SDG Summit Political Declaration, the Local2030 Coalition, and Finance in Common commitments to shift power and resources closer to communities. Only by placing communities at the centre and resourcing the frontlines of development can we rescue the 2030 Agenda—and truly leave no one behind.





LOCALISATION + PARTNERSHIPS = ACCELERATION OF THE SDGS

CORE MESSAGE

Localisation and multi-stakeholder partnerships are no longer optional – they are essential. With only 17 per cent of SDG targets on track and systemic challenges deepening, the most powerful accelerators for the 2030 Agenda lie at the local level. CSOs, local governments, and grassroots leaders are not just implementers – they are co-creators of sustainable development.

Localisation brings global ambitions into real-world action, rooted in the lived experiences of communities. When empowered through inclusive governance, coherent financing, robust data, and equitable partnerships, local actors drive innovation, accountability, and transformative change.



KEY FINDINGS

- **The world is dangerously off-track.**
  Only 17 per cent of SDG targets are on course to be achieved by 2030. Hunger, poverty, education, climate action, and civic space have regressed globally.
- **Local action is delivering results.**
  Over 300 cities and regions have published VLRs as of July 2024 – reflecting growing local ownership and policy alignment.
- **CSOs are leading transformative innovations.**
  From Zambia's transparency audits to participatory planning in Indonesia and Nepal, community-led initiatives are reshaping how the SDGs are implemented.
- **Financing remains the Achilles' heel.**
  Less than 2,1 per cent of bilateral ODA reaches local CSOs directly. Most fiscal systems still bypass local priorities, with ad hoc and delayed transfers.
- **Capacity and data systems remain under-resourced.**
  Local governments often lack the technical, financial, and human resources to deliver on SDG mandates – especially in fragile or decentralised contexts.
- **Civil society environment is shrinking.**
  Forus' EU SEE Early Warning System and alerts from members in Paraguay, Pakistan, Peru, and El Salvador reveal escalating restrictions on the environment of civil society, and civil liberties.
- **Digital innovation offers opportunity – but risks deepening inequality.**
  Without targeted investment, digital transformation risks excluding the very actors it seeks to empower.

EIGHT STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Institutionalise localisation in national systems**
  - Legally mandate local participation in SDG planning, reporting, and financing.
  - Integrate VLRs and subnational indicators into national reviews and budgets.
- **Reform financing systems to empower local actors**
  - Expand fiscal decentralisation and performance-based transfers.
  - Invest in participatory budgeting and community-managed funds.
- **Transform donor models for locally led development**
  - Shift from project-based aid to long-term, flexible funding.
  - Align funding with local SDG plans and embed localisation metrics.
- **Strengthen long-term local capacities**
  - Build national hubs for training and peer learning.
  - Invest in sustained support for local institutions and CSOs.
- **Enhance local data systems and indicators**
  - Fund real-time, disaggregated, and community-generated data platforms.
  - Include citizen scorecards and social audits in national SDG tracking.
- **Foster equitable multi-stakeholder partnerships**
  - Institutionalise spaces for civil society, youth, Indigenous and marginalised groups.
  - Co-create development strategies – not just consult.
- **Bridge the digital divide and scale e-governance**
  - Support local digital infrastructure, literacy, and data protection.
  - Leverage tech for participatory planning and transparent budgeting.
- **Protect and promote an enabling environment for civil society**
  - Repeal restrictive laws and enable independent civil society oversight.
  - Recognise CSOs as essential development actors in law and practice.



WHY IT MATTERS

The final stretch toward 2030 must be powered by proximity, partnership, and policy transformation. Localisation is our most democratic and effective pathway to rescue the SDGs. This report is not just a diagnosis – it's a roadmap for governments, donors, civil society, and multilateral actors to act together and act now.

FROM COMMITMENT TO ACTION
IT'S TIME TO RESOURCE THE FRONTLINES OF CHANGE.



ANNEXURES

ANNEX 1: DOCUMENTS REVIEWED FOR THIS REPORT

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ANNEX 2: LIST OF PEOPLE INTERVIEWED AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

COUNTRY	NAME	ORGANISATION
Argentina	Rolano Kandel	Red Encuentro (EENGD)
Fiji	Vani Catanasiga	Fiji Council of Social Services (FCOSS)
Finland	Silla Ristimäki	FINGO – Finnish NGO Platform
Guatemala	Alejandro Aguirre Batres	CONGCOOP - Coordinación de ONG y Cooperativas
Indonesia	Bona Tua	INFID – International NGO Forum on Indonesian Development
Japan	Aoi Horiuchi	Japan NGO Centre for International Cooperation (JANIC)
Mexico	Laura Becerra Pozos	DECA, Equipo Pueblo / unidOSC
Nepal	Hum Bhandari	NGO Federation of Nepal (NFN)
Nigeria	Oyebisi Oluseyi	Nigeria Network of NGOs (NNNGO)
Pakistan	Zia Ur Rahman	Pakistan Development Alliance (PDA)
Peru	Carlos Arana	ANC - Asociación Nacional de Centros
Philippines	Sandino Soloman	Caucus of Development NGO Networks (Code-NGO)
Senegal	Malick Diop / Ibrahima Niang	Conseil des ONG d'Appui au Développement (CONGAD)
Seychelles	Alvin Laurence / CEPS Team	Citizens Engagement Platform Seychelles (CEPS)
South Korea	Jaeun SHIN	Korea Center for International Cooperation (KCOC)
Spain	Team (Collective Input)	Futuro en Común
Taiwan	Jay Hung	Taiwan AID
Uganda	UNNGOF Team (Collective Input)	Uganda National NGO Forum (UNNGOF)
Zambia	Leah Mitaba	Zambia Council for Social Development (ZCSD)

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS TEMPLATE

This short-form template is designed to be filled out in **10-15 minutes** by interviewees or local partners. It can be used in both Google Form and offline formats.

1 Initiative overview

Briefly describe one initiative where you localised SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals): *(2–3 sentences)*

2 Key local partners

List up to 3 main partners in this initiative: *(for example, local CSOs, subnational government, academia, private sector)*

3 Partnership impact

How did this partnership contribute to localising the SDGs? *(1-2 sentences)*

4 Main challenge

What was the most significant challenge in building or maintaining this local partnership?

5 Solution

How did you overcome this challenge? *(1-2 sentences)*

6 Concrete outcome

What's one tangible result of this localized partnership? *(1-2 sentences)*

7 Key recommendations

Based on this experience, what are your **top 3 recommendations** for effective SDG localisation through partnerships? *(1-2 sentences)*

8 Alternative input (Optional)

If you don't have a direct partnership example, could you describe how localisation of the SDGs is happening in your country or region? Are there any **success stories or innovations** you'd like to share?

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