

## Challenges in the Localization of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Developing Countries

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### Abstract

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), established by the United Nations in 2015, provide a global framework for addressing some of the most pressing issues facing humanity by 2030. However, the localization of these goals—adapting them to the specific socio-economic, cultural, and environmental contexts of countries and communities—poses significant challenges. The localization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in developing countries presents a critical intersection of global aspirations and local realities. As the United Nations calls for a collective effort to achieve these ambitious goals, it becomes increasingly evident that understanding and integrating local contexts is essential for effective implementation. This paper explores the multifaceted obstacles to the effective localization of SDGs, including governance and institutional frameworks, financial constraints, data availability, public participation, and the intersectionality of different goals. By addressing these challenges, stakeholders can work more effectively towards sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Local government, localization, SDGs, NITI Aayog

### Introduction

The SDGs represent a monumental effort to address global inequalities and environmental degradation. Comprising 17 goals with 169 targets, the SDGs cover areas such as poverty eradication, gender equality, climate action, and economic growth. However, achieving these ambitious goals requires not only national commitment but also localization efforts that ensure their relevance and effectiveness at local levels. Localization entails adapting these goals within local contexts, aligning them with local priorities, and engaging local stakeholders. Despite its importance, the process of localization faces a multitude of challenges that can hinder progress toward achieving the SDGs. This paper aims to identify and analyze these challenges while offering insights into potential solutions.

### Review of Literature

Kris Hartley in his article “Infrastructure and SDG localization: the 21<sup>st</sup> century mandate (2022)”, examines how the global political economy of the SDGs impacts the relationships between cities and levels of government in the planning of sustainable infrastructure. According to him, powerful cities may adopt exploitative strategies to source resources from the hinterlands, treating them as a “global depot”. There is a need for epistemic egalitarianism in global collaborations, and the perspectives of less powerful cities should be valued and incorporated into the global policy agenda. Systemic changes to production and infrastructure systems are needed to achieve sustainability, which will require government coordination and intervention. Kristina and Magdalena in their article “Localizing the Sustainable Development Goals: The Case of Tanzania (2020)” point out that the drivers of localization are the government, civil society organizations, the UN, members of parliament, and demands for review at the UN High-level Political Forum. Obstacles to localization are unclear allocation of responsibility, insufficient co-ordination, a high turnaround of people in key positions, a lack of data availability, low awareness of the SDGs among citizens, a shortage of resources, and shrinking democratic space.

The SWOT analysis conducted by Sarkar, Okitasari “Localization of SDGs an inclusive framework under local governments in Bangladesh (2022)” found that the majority of Local Government representatives have some knowledge, participation, and perceptions about the SDGs, they demonstrate a great desire to gain additional knowledge and participation. The study ascertains SDG 1 (No poverty), SDG 2 (Zero hunger), and SDG 6 (Clean water and sanitation) as the most locally important SDGs relevant to the Local Government (LG’s) actions, based on the opinions of the surveyed respondents. The paper “Localising the Sustainable Development Goals in Africa”

by Eunice, Elmond and Godwin (2021) has found that four main challenges viz. inadequate data, funding gaps, institutional context, and social exclusion to localizing the SDGs in Africa

### **Role of NITI Aayog in the Localization of SDGs in India**

NITI Aayog is the central organization responsible for achieving SDGs in the nation, guiding the 2030 Agenda with the principles of cooperative and competitive federalism. NITI Aayog assesses the progress at national and regional levels using tools such as the SDG India Index and Dashboard, Multidimensional Poverty Index: Progress Review 2023, North Eastern Region Index and Dashboard, and similar measures. NITI Aayog has recognized the significance of localizing the SDGs and views it as a driver for the expeditious attainment of the SDGs. NITI Aayog's efforts to localize the SDGs have enhanced the statistical systems and established a monitoring framework encompassing all 17 Goals and over 100 indicators nationwide (NITI Aayog).

The localization of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in India is a complex endeavour requiring robust institutional frameworks, strategic planning, and effective implementation. NITI Aayog, India's premier public policy think tank, plays a pivotal role in this localization process. Its three-phase plan encompasses annual monitoring, evaluation, and state rankings based on SDG progress, which aids in resource allocation and identifies regions lagging behind. This structured approach not only fosters accountability but also enhances the legitimacy of governmental efforts towards achieving the SDGs (Sakhamuri & Sanagani, 2024).

### **Challenges in Localizing SDGs**

#### **Governance and Institutional Frameworks**

A well-defined governance framework is essential for aligning local policies with the broader objectives of the SDGs. Effective localization requires an integrated approach that fosters collaboration among various stakeholders, including government entities, civil society organizations, and private sector actors. One of the most significant challenges in the localization of SDGs is the lack of effective governance structures at local levels. Many local governments may lack the capacity, resources, and political support necessary to implement SDG initiatives. In some cases, the existing institutional frameworks may not adequately incorporate SDG targets, leading to misalignment between national and local policies. Moreover, fragmentation in governance can result in overlapping responsibilities, diluting accountability and effectiveness in achieving SDG objectives. Effective governance and institutional frameworks are paramount for the successful localization of the Sustainable Development Goals at municipal levels. The interplay between cross-sectoral collaboration, robust monitoring systems, and educational initiatives forms a comprehensive approach toward achieving these global objectives locally. The SDGs were designed to address global challenges but often lack sensitivity to the unique cultural contexts of diverse communities. For instance, a goal focused on gender equality may need to be framed differently in societies where traditional gender roles are deeply entrenched. This necessitates a deep knowledge of local cultures and values to ensure that the SDGs resonate with community members and reflect their priorities (Tiwari G, 2024).

#### **Financial Constraints**

Financial constraints pose significant challenges to the localization of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in developing regions. Financial resources are crucial for the successful localization of the SDGs. Many local governments face significant budgetary constraints that limit their ability to implement programs and initiatives linked to the SDGs. Financial constraints in local contexts significantly impede the effective localization of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Many local administrations, particularly in developing countries, grapple with limited budgets and inadequate financial resources to implement SDG initiatives. This fiscal shortfall often results from competing priorities within municipal budgets, where essential services such as healthcare and education may take precedence over sustainability projects. Moreover, the tension between top-down directives from international bodies and the localized needs of communities can exacerbate these financial constraints. The challenge lies in balancing global objectives with local realities. Insufficient funding is often compounded by a lack of innovative financing mechanisms and reliance on external aid, which may not be sustainable in the long term. Furthermore, the global economic context, characterized by rising inflation and economic downturns, can worsen these financial constraints, severely impacting local governments' capabilities. Empowering local sustainability networks through digital infrastructure could provide a promising avenue for overcoming these obstacles by facilitating peer-to-peer exchanges and data aggregation at a lower cost. Such strategies may enable communities to articulate their specific needs and mobilize resources more effectively, thereby fostering a more inclusive approach to achieving the SDGs (Spesia, 2024).

#### **Data Availability and Quality**

Effective monitoring and evaluation, integral to tracking progress towards the SDGs, requires reliable data at the local level. However, many local authorities face challenges related to data availability, quality, and

granularity. In many developing regions, there is a lack of up-to-date socio-economic data, which hampers evidence-based decision-making. Additionally, differing methodologies in data collection can lead to inconsistencies, making it challenging to compare progress across regions and communities. The absence of disaggregated data can also obscure inequality issues within local populations. Data availability and quality issues represent significant impediments to the effective localization of Sustainable Development Goals. Reliable data is essential for assessing progress, identifying local needs, and tailoring interventions appropriately. However, many regions, particularly in developing countries, face substantial challenges related to data collection and management. Often, local administrations lack the necessary infrastructure and expertise to gather accurate data on various SDG indicators (Reuter, 2023).

This deficiency not only hinders effective monitoring but also limits the ability of stakeholders to make informed decisions based on empirical evidence. Moreover, even when data is available, questions regarding its quality frequently arise. Inconsistent methodologies or outdated information can lead to skewed assessments of local conditions and needs. For instance, if health-related data is unreliable or incomplete, it may result in misdirected resources that fail to address pressing public health concerns. This situation underscores the importance of establishing robust systems for data collection that prioritize accuracy and relevance (Tiwari G, 2024).

The localization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) relies heavily on data availability and quality, which are critical for tracking progress and informing local policies. The effective data-driven approaches can significantly enhance sustainable development outcomes in urban areas. However, the research also identifies persistent challenges related to data accessibility and reliability, which hinder local government's ability to leverage new technologies effectively. Thus, the importance of harnessing the data revolution at sub-national levels cannot be overstated; it is essential for empowering citizens and facilitating meaningful engagement with governments regarding SDG implementation (Jain & Espey, 2024).

### **Public Participation and Stakeholder Engagement**

Successful localization of SDGs depends on the meaningful participation of local stakeholders, including civil society, marginalized groups, and the private sector. The participation of local stakeholders in the localization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is crucial for achieving sustainable development tailored to specific community needs. However, achieving meaningful participation can be challenging due to institutional fragmentation and varying levels of commitment from local administrations. Local governments serve as vital intermediaries, bridging the gap between various actors, including civil society, businesses, and international organizations. By facilitating partnerships among these stakeholders, local governments can effectively leverage their unique insights and resources to address local challenges while aligning with global sustainability objectives. This intermediary role is particularly significant in fostering collaboration that respects both public and private sector contributions while recognizing the importance of informal networks that often exist within communities (Spesia, 2024).

However, achieving this level of engagement can be challenging. Barriers include limited awareness of the SDGs among local populations, lack of platforms for dialogue, and insufficient efforts to include marginalized communities in the decision-making process. Furthermore, power dynamics within communities can inhibit inclusive participation and lead to the prioritization of the goals that benefit the most influential stakeholders. The top-down approach inherent in the SDGs presents challenges for localization efforts. This approach often overlooks unique local conditions and contexts, creating tensions that hinder effective implementation. Empowering local actors through digital networking can help mitigate these issues by enabling knowledge sharing and best practices among diverse stakeholders. This approach establishes a "middle ground" between top-down directives and bottom-up initiatives, allowing for a deeper and more accurate understanding of local realities and enhancing the effectiveness of SDG localization.

### **Intersectionality of Goals**

The interconnectedness of the SDGs presents both opportunities and challenges for localization. While addressing one goal can positively impact others, the complexity of these interlinkages can also create conflicts and trade-offs. For instance, local governments may struggle to balance economic growth with environmental sustainability, leading to tensions in prioritizing certain targets over others. Understanding these interrelations requires a holistic approach that may not always be feasible within existing local governance frameworks, requiring enhanced collaboration and coordination among various stakeholders.

The SDGs, designed as a comprehensive framework for global sustainability, reveal intricate interlinkages that can enhance or hinder local implementation. For instance, while addressing climate action (Goal

13) can simultaneously advance goals related to health (Goal 3) and poverty alleviation (Goal 1), conflicting interests may arise when resources are allocated disproportionately across different objectives. The intricate nature of this situation requires a detailed comprehension of how these connections function within specific environments.

Furthermore, data created by citizens becomes an important resource for improving the monitoring of the SDGs at the local level. Local governments can obtain valuable insights that may not be captured by traditional national-level statistics by utilizing real-time data generated within communities. This grassroots approach improves data accuracy, fosters public participation, and amplifies marginalized voices in decision-making processes. Ultimately, while the interconnected nature of the SDGs poses significant challenges for localization efforts, it also offers transformative opportunities for sustainable development at the community level

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Localization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in developing nations is a challenging yet crucial task that necessitates a deep understanding of local contexts and active community involvement. Adapting strategies to fit unique socio-economic and cultural landscapes is incredibly important for fostering ownership and ensuring sustainability. Despite successful case studies, there are still challenges such as limited resources, institutional capacity gaps, and political instability. These obstacles can create a gap between global aspirations and local realities, leading to skepticism about externally imposed initiatives. Therefore, governments and institutions play a critical role in addressing these challenges by establishing collaborative frameworks that prioritize transparency, inclusivity, and data-driven decision-making. Tracking progress at the local level enhances accountability and allows communities to shape their own development stories.

Overcoming the issues associated with SDG localization in developing countries requires focused efforts on resource allocation, capacity building, and building trust through participatory practices. By addressing these challenges, development initiatives can be aligned with global objectives and resonate meaningfully with local populations, promoting sustainable development in an equitable manner where no one is left behind. Localization of the SDGs is a vital process that necessitates addressing various challenges, including inadequate governance structures, financial limitations, data deficits, public engagement issues, and the complex interplay among different goals. To enhance localization efforts, the following recommendations can be made:

1. **Strengthening Local Governance:** Building the capacities of local governments through training and support to align local policies with the SDGs effectively.
2. **Innovative Financing Mechanisms:** Developing sustainable funding strategies, including public-private partnerships and domestic resource mobilization, to ensure the necessary financial support for SDG initiatives.
3. **Improving Data Systems:** Establishing robust data collection and management systems that provide disaggregated and high-quality data at local levels.
4. **Fostering Inclusive Participation:** Creating platforms for meaningful engagement of all stakeholders, particularly marginalized groups, to ensure that localization efforts are representative and equitable.
5. **Promoting an Integrated Approach:** Encouraging collaborative efforts among various sectors and levels of government to streamline processes and address the interconnections between the SDGs.

By addressing these challenges and implementing these recommendations, countries and communities can make significant strides towards the successful localization of the SDGs especially in Developing countries, ultimately contributing to a more sustainable and equitable future for all.

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