

Local Agenda 2030 for sustainable development



The universal adoption of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is a strong sign of global interest in integrating economic, social, and environmental considerations in the development aspirations of UN member states. An ambitious outcome of such an integrated perspective is a substantial improvement in public health and social wellbeing while safeguarding the natural and economic systems on which these rely.¹ Although the SDGs have been adopted by heads of state, the UN has emphasised the need for a united effort from state and non-state actors at multiple levels of society²—a move beyond top-down strategies³ and a call for action from new agents of change, including businesses, cities, and local communities. This need highlights not only the continued investigation of global change and its effects across all dimensions of planetary health, but also the requirement for more nuanced investigation of the roles of bottom-up action from society.

Despite the think globally, act locally mantra in sustainability and the general agreement on the necessity of bottom-up action for achieving the SDGs, less agreement exists about how to instigate and realise local actions. We contend that mobilising new agents of change for the SDGs requires innovations in governance, and that those innovations need to draw on a critical scrutiny of experiences gathered from decades of work in the field of sustainable development. To achieve this goal, we propose a participatory and inclusive governance agenda, which we term Local Agenda 2030.

A Local Agenda 2030 conceptualisation acknowledges that engagement with the SDGs will differ according to local sociocultural, economic, and environmental contexts; policy agendas; institutional arrangements; social and human capital; and financial resources. We envisage Local Agenda 2030 to include a practical framework that can be adapted to any local community aimed at collectively achieving the global goals from the bottom up. Implementation will require a downscaling of the SDGs by identifying locally relevant indicators and setting sustainability targets, then identifying actions and shaping robust pathways for achieving them. Highly nuanced local conditions and capacities demand a plurality of bespoke qualitative and

quantitative methodological approaches to codevelop this information with communities and stakeholders. This situation also requires an understanding of alternative transformation narratives, pertaining to both systems of sustainable production (such as a transition to renewable energy to reduce industrial emissions intensity) and consumption (such as a transition to healthier, more sustainable diets).⁴ Local Agenda 2030 embraces diversity and complexity in local context, ways of knowing, and perspectives about the preferred pathways towards sustainability,⁵ while also recognising the linkages and potential trade-offs between sustainability aspirations at multiple scales.

Importantly, we are not claiming here that Local Agenda 2030 is a new approach. Initiatives are already underway that align with our Local Agenda 2030. The UN Global Compact has implemented the Local Network SDG Action Plan,⁶ a business-oriented approach to raising SDG awareness and building partnerships at the local level. Under the banner of SDG17 Partnerships for the goals, the UN Local2030 initiative⁷ aims to bring together multiple sectors of society to catalyse action at the local level. Localising the SDGs⁸ is assembling a knowledge base and toolbox of local experiences with implementing various aspects of the SDGs including planning, governance, and capacity building.

We must learn from experience, in particular that of Local Agenda 21 (LA21),⁹ to which our call for a renewed local emphasis pays homage in name. The extensive adoption of LA21 in more than 6400 local authorities in 113 countries demonstrated how the engagement of communities—as a local level of governance—is essential for the successful implementation of the sustainable development agenda. In pursuing Local Agenda 2030, we need to critically review the outcomes of LA21 and other locally focused initiatives to understand the opportunities and challenges faced in this endeavour. For example, the absence of strong financial support and long-term political commitment impeded the implementation of LA21 actions.¹⁰ Therefore, deep consideration of the economic and political capacity of local communities could be a determinant for the success of Local Agenda 2030. Understanding socioeconomic inequality—to ensure that the health and wellbeing of low-income,

middle-income, and high-income communities are equally accounted for—is also an essential prerequisite for achieving the SDGs.¹¹

While acknowledging the importance of previous lessons, we also need to renew our governance perspectives and incorporate emerging approaches in the science–policy interface¹² to open up spaces for experimentation¹³ with new ideas. Experimentation spaces can facilitate the development of alternative practices and can shape a genuine environment for local actors with different perspectives to actively engage with Local Agenda 2030. We argue that such an approach is crucial to support actions aimed at enhancing planetary health and sustainable prosperity.

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