

The Sustainable Development Goals as a Framework for COVID-19 Recovery in Cities and Regions



OECD Regional Development Papers

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Abbreviations and acronyms

CFE	OECD Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions and Cities
CoR	European Committee of the Regions
EU	European Union
IoT	Internet of Things
LRG	Local and regional government
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
RDPC	Regional Development Policy Committee
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UN	United Nations
VLR	Voluntary local review
VNR	Voluntary national review

Executive summary

The COVID-19 crisis led to unprecedented contractions of the global economy, with asymmetrical impacts across territories. What started as a health crisis turned into a massive economic and social shock and exposed inequalities across people and places, notably in large cities, where vulnerable groups were affected the most. At the same time, the pandemic also accelerated environmental awareness and made the transition towards clean mobility and circular economy approaches politically and socially more acceptable (OECD, 2020^[1]).

At the forefront of the response to the COVID-19 outbreak, many cities and regions have used the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda as a framework to shape inclusive and greener long-term recovery strategies, for example through stimulus measures such as investments in infrastructure and financial assistance. Others have scaled up sectoral efforts underlying specific UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as expanding the supply of adequate and affordable social housing for vulnerable populations. Many cities and regions also expanded low-carbon mobility solutions such as bike lanes and invested in improving energy efficiency and retrofitting of buildings (OECD, 2020^[1]).

While the pandemic has set back part of the progress made on the 2030 Agenda (UN, 2021^[2]), the SDGs offer a clear and stable framework to guide governments in shaping a transformative recovery from COVID-19 and accelerating the shift towards a new urban and regional paradigm for inclusive, green, smart and resilient cities. The SDGs can offer a valuable guide for the recovery process for three key reasons. First, they provide a framework to identify local, place-based priorities directed towards sustainable development. Second, they are a powerful tool to help align priorities, incentives and resources across national, regional and local levels of government. Third, they compel governments to engage with the whole of society – including the private sector and citizens (OECD, 2020^[1]).

This paper presents the results of an OECD-European Committee of the Regions (CoR) joint survey on how local and regional governments (LRGs) are leveraging the SDGs to shape their recovery strategies from the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings, reflecting the position of LRGs before the outbreak of war in Ukraine, underline a solid engagement of LRGs in the implementation of the SDGs through actions ranging from measurement systems to track progress, awareness-raising and dedicated strategies to multi-level co-operation and a promising uptake of the SDGs as a guiding framework for place-based recovery. Yet, the survey reveals that more efforts are needed to engage LRGs in Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), address funding gaps caused by the pandemic and strengthen human and technical capacities. The results of the survey also show that LRGs could further harness the SDGs to develop holistic recovery strategies that address pressing local sustainability priorities such as decarbonising electricity production, which is likely to have been heightened following Russia's large-scale aggression against Ukraine, mitigating and adapting to climate change, accelerating digitalisation and building trust. More detailed results of the survey are presented below.

The SDGs are timely and relevant for local COVID-19 recovery strategies

- Most local and regional governments (60%) consider the SDGs as a suitable framework for designing a holistic approach to the COVID-19 recovery.
- Forty percent of LRGs were already using the SDGs as a policy-making tool before the pandemic and started using them to shape their recovery strategies. Forty-four percent had not used the SDGs before but are planning to do so now.
- Sixty-eight percent of LRGs using the SDGs for recovery decided to do so to shape new plans, policies and strategies based on the 2030 Agenda or adapt existing ones.
- Capacity (staff and skills) and funding gaps are the main bottlenecks preventing LRGs from using the SDGs to guide their recovery strategies for 47% and 44% of respondents respectively.

Cities and regions are taking action to advance the SDGs

- Indicators and measurement systems to track progress on the SDGs and awareness-raising campaigns are the actions most widely adopted by LRGs to advance the SDGs (41%).
- LRGs consider political leadership at the local and regional levels as the most important factor of success for the implementation of the SDGs in cities and regions (38%).
- Only half of surveyed LRGs and territorial stakeholders contributed to their national government's VNR, suggesting potential for improving co-operation between different levels of government.

Key policy priorities for cities and regions in the COVID-19 recovery

- Almost 60% of cities and regions prioritise the efficient delivery of social and community services for disadvantaged groups and equitable access to education to reduce inequalities.
- A third of LRGs consider shifting from fossil fuels to zero-carbon sources and decarbonising the built environment (e.g. houses, buildings and district heating) as the two most promising strategies to transition to cleaner energy production.
- Almost half of cities and regions (49%) set the improvement of multi-modal transport, such as active and clean urban mobility, as a main priority for sustainable mobility and accessibility.
- Thirty-six percent of LRGs consider digitalisation that delivers more efficient, sustainable, affordable and inclusive local public services as a top priority to transition towards smarter cities and regions.
- Forty-one percent of cities and regions stress stakeholder engagement in local and regional policy making as the most effective SDG contribution to strengthen citizens' trust in their governments.

Ways forward to make the most of the SDGs in local COVID-19 recovery strategies

The results from the survey show how many cities and regions are already leveraging the SDGs to shape their recovery strategies from the COVID-19 pandemic; but gaps persist in relation to multi-level governance, funding and capacity. Possible ways forward for local, regional and national governments to upscale the use of the SDGs in the COVID-19 recovery phase include:

- Promoting further the uptake of the SDGs as a policy-making tool to design, implement and monitor recovery strategies that respond to the challenges magnified by the pandemic, including through:

- Enhancing efficient social and community services for disadvantaged groups such as healthcare and home care, targeted education programmes for the unemployed, equitable access to education and better labour market outcomes.
- Incentivising the decarbonisation of the built environment and promoting cleaner energy production by resorting to zero-carbon sources such as solar, wind and hydrogen energy.
- Expanding further the cycling infrastructure, walkability through sidewalks, e-vehicle charging stations; and improving multi-modal transport supply for greater sustainability and accessibility.
- Facilitating the uptake of digitalisation in public services, online consultations and digital one-stop-shops for citizens' requests for more efficient, sustainable, affordable and inclusive local public services.
- Enhancing citizen participation, participatory budgeting or town hall meetings to incentivise public participation and better engage stakeholders in local and regional policy-making.
- Mainstreaming SDGs in budgeting processes to ensure adequate resources are allocated for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the COVID-19 recovery phase, including through:
 - Using the SDGs as a framework to identify sustainable development priorities and allocate related budget across sectoral policies.
 - Implementing innovative instruments such as sustainability bonds or contingency funds and leveraging private sector funding.
 - Enhancing and expanding the use of sustainable public procurement to leverage private sector contributions to the SDGs.
- Using training and capacity development to upskill staff in local and regional administrations on the SDGs implementation, including through:
 - Promoting training and peer-to-peer learning activities with cities and regions of similar characteristics that successfully used the SDGs as a policy-making tool.
 - Engaging with domestic and international city networks to incentivise and facilitate the organisation of peer learning activities and exchange of knowledge and experience at low cost.
 - Facilitating capacity-building activities to learn from local territorial stakeholders (such as universities and research institutions) who are engaged in the 2030 Agenda.

1 The SDGs as a guiding framework for COVID-19 recovery in cities and regions

A Territorial Approach to the SDGs as a framework for COVID-19 recovery

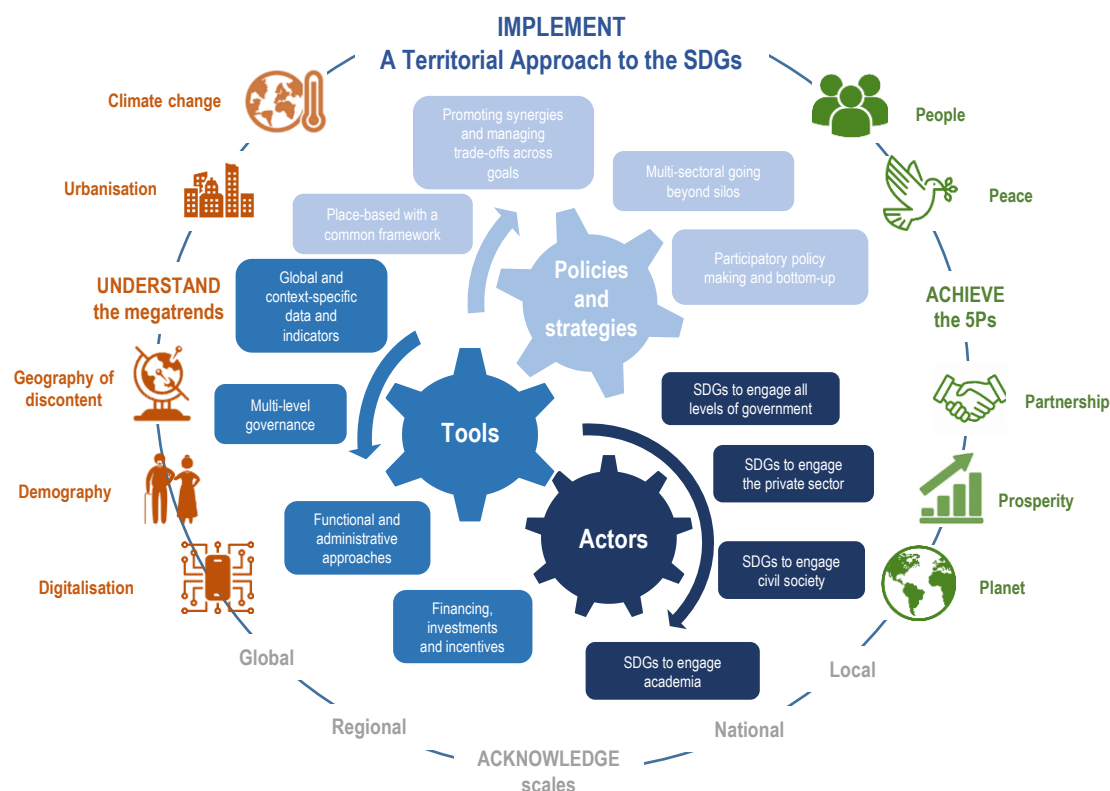
Cities and regions play a key role in the achievement of the SDGs. The 17 SDGs that were adopted by the UN in 2015 aim to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure prosperity for all by the year 2030. In 2019, the UN launched the Decade of Action for Sustainable Development to accelerate efforts, scale up projects and mobilise contributions across all levels of governments and society for the achievement of the SDGs. Local and regional governments are essential partners for an effective place-based implementation of the SDGs. The OECD estimates that at least 105 out of the 169 targets underlying the 17 SDGs will not be reached without the engagement of LRGs (OECD, 2020^[1]). They are responsible for more than 40% of public expenditure and 56% of total public investment in OECD countries and have core responsibilities in policies that are central to sustainable development and people's well-being (OECD, 2021^[2]). Such targets include but are not limited to housing, transport, infrastructure, land use, solid waste, drinking water and sanitation, energy efficiency and climate change, amongst others, which call for place-based solutions tailored to territorial specificities, needs and capacities. Place-based policies incorporate a set of co-ordinated actions specifically designed for a particular city or region and stress the need to shift from a sectoral to a multi-sectoral approach, from one-size-fits-all to context-specific measures and from a top-down to a bottom-up approach to policy-making.

The SDGs provide a framework for cities and regions to respond systemically to global megatrends such as demographics, climate change, technological changes and globalisation that have gained further attention due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 1.1). The recovery from COVID-19 provides an opportunity to build back better cities and regions through the effective and inclusive design and implementation of long-term strategies. While the pandemic has set back parts of the progress made on the 2030 Agenda, it has also illustrated how powerful political decisions can be taken in exceptional circumstances. In particular, cities and regions have been at the forefront of the response to the COVID-19 outbreak, both as implementation vehicles of nationwide measures and through spearheading more bottom-up, innovative responses, resorting to technology, mobilising additional resources and building on their unique proximity to citizens (OECD, 2020^[3]). The SDGs offer a clear framework to guide governments in shaping a transformative recovery from the pandemic to promote a new sustainable development paradigm.

The OECD and the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) therefore launched a joint survey to explore the potential and actual role of the SDGs as a framework for the COVID-19 recovery in cities and regions. It takes stock of cities' and regions' efforts to achieve the SDGs, assesses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak on the subnational SDG implementation and analyses how a territorial approach to the SDGs can help cities and regions to design and implement long-term COVID-19 recovery

strategies. The survey questionnaire was structured around three sections: i) the SDGs as a guiding framework for COVID-19 recovery in cities and regions, ii) key actions for achieving the SDGs in cities and regions, and iii) key policy priorities to achieve the SDGs in the COVID-19 recovery.

Figure 1.1. The OECD analytical framework for A Territorial Approach to the SDGs



Source: OECD (2020^[1]), *A Territorial Approach to the Sustainable Development Goals: Synthesis report*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/e86fa715-en>.

Box 1.1. OECD-CoR Survey on the SDGs as a Framework for COVID-19 Recovery in Cities and Regions (2021)

From 10 May to 18 June 2021, the survey gathered answers from 145 respondents, 92% of which came from European Union (EU) member states, 6% from other OECD member countries and 2% from non-OECD member countries. The most represented countries were Spain (8%), Germany (8%) and Italy (7%), followed by Romania (6%) and Slovenia (6%).

The aim of this survey was to offer a snapshot of the views expressed by diverse local and regional stakeholders rather than provide a statistically representative sample to draw conclusions. Many responses were received from municipalities (35%), 12% of which between 50 000 and 200 000 inhabitants, 11% under 50 000 inhabitants, 6% between 200 000 to 500 000 inhabitants and 6% from large cities (more than 500 000 inhabitants). Significant shares of respondents also represent regions (17%) and intermediary entities such as counties or provinces (8%) in countries with 3 levels of subnational government or other local and regional bodies (10%). The remaining 41% of respondents

represent diverse categories of other territorial stakeholders such as academia and research or associations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or public bodies.

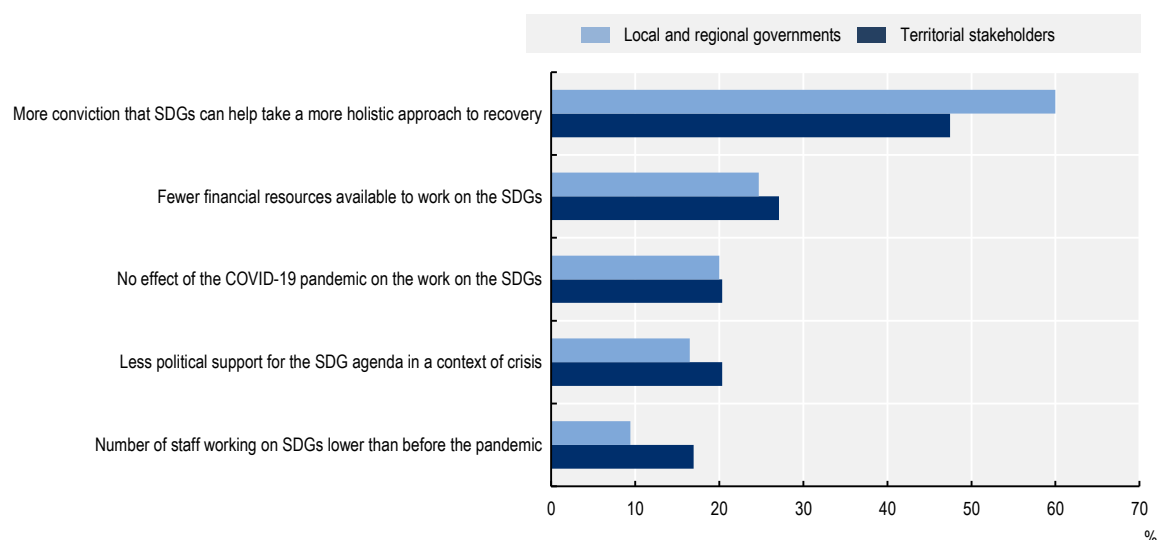
Survey structure (see detailed survey in Annex A)

1. The state of the SDGs implementation in cities and regions.
 - a. Implementation of the SDGs in cities and regions.
 - b. Success factors for SDG implementation in cities and regions.
 - c. Importance of EU support for the implementation of the SDGs on the ground.
 - d. Cities' and regions' involvement in VLRs and VNRs.
2. The relevance of the SDGs in the COVID-19 recovery phase for cities and regions.
 - a. Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on cities' and regions' work on the SDGs.
 - b. The role of the SDGs as a framework for the COVID-19 recovery phase.
 - c. Post-COVID-19 challenges in cities and regions.
3. Policies, strategies and priorities of cities and regions to achieve the SDGs in the COVID-19 recovery.
 - a. Policies and strategies to strengthen health outcomes and achieve SDG 3 Good health and well-being.
 - b. Policies and strategies to transition to cleaner energy production and achieve SDG 7 Affordable and clean energy
 - c. Policies and strategies to contribute to SDG 10 to reduce inequalities.
 - d. Policies and strategies to achieve climate objectives in an inclusive way.
 - e. Policies and strategies for sustainable mobility and accessibility.
 - f. Policies and strategies to transition towards greener cities and regions.
 - g. Policies and strategies to transition towards smarter cities and regions.
 - h. Policies and strategies to help strengthen citizens' trust in their governments.

Cities and regions see the SDGs as an opportunity to shape a more holistic recovery strategy

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided momentum for most subnational governments (60%) to see the value of the SDGs as a holistic framework for recovery. While 20% of respondents declared that the crisis has not affected their work on the SDGs, others mentioned fewer financial resources available to work on the SDGs (25%), less political support for the SDGs agenda in a context of crisis and emergency (16%) and fewer staff dedicated to the SDGs than before the pandemic (9%) (Figure 1.2). The latter conveys a mismatch between the recognition of the SDGs as a tool that can foster a holistic approach to recovery and the actual means of implementation dedicated to the SDGs during the pandemic times.

Figure 1.2. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your work on the SDGs?

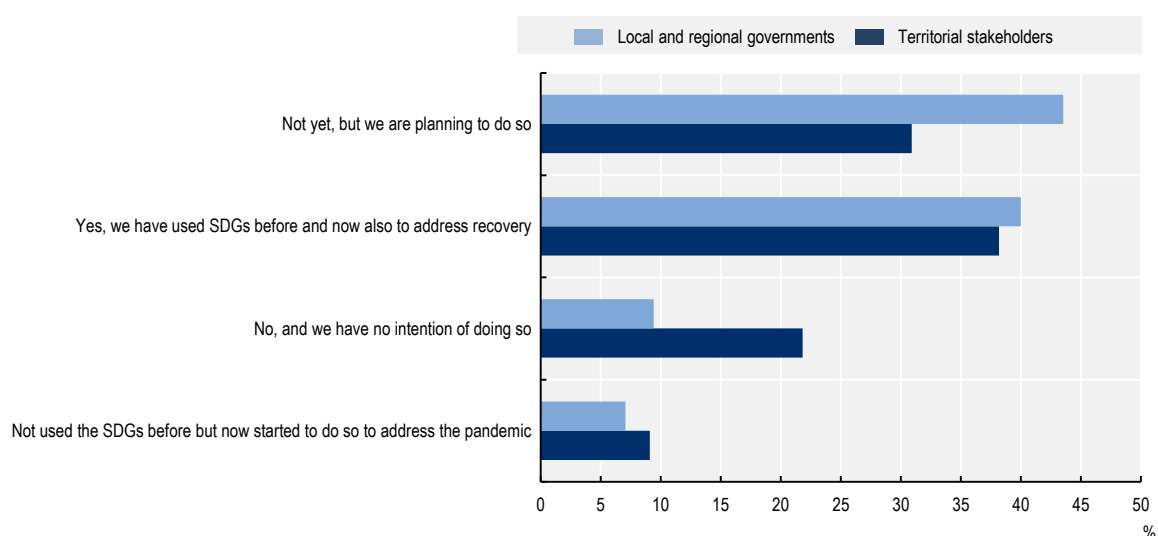


Note: Number of responses from LRGs: 85; number of responses from other territorial stakeholders: 59.
Source: OECD-CoR Survey on the SDGs as a Framework for COVID-19 Recovery in Cities and Regions.

Some cities and regions use the SDGs as a framework for recovery

A total of 40% of surveyed LRGs have been using the SDGs before the pandemic and already started to use them to shape the recovery phase. Another 44% have not yet started to use the SDGs in the recovery but are planning to do so in the future (Figure 1.3). Lastly, 6% of LRGs responding to the survey have been encouraged by the pandemic to use the SDGs as a framework for recovery despite not having used them before. Territorial stakeholders also consider the SDGs to be a relevant framework for the COVID-19 recovery phase with 38% having used them before the pandemic and starting to leverage them for their recovery and 31% planning to do so.

Figure 1.3. Are you using the SDGs as a framework for the COVID-19 recovery phase?

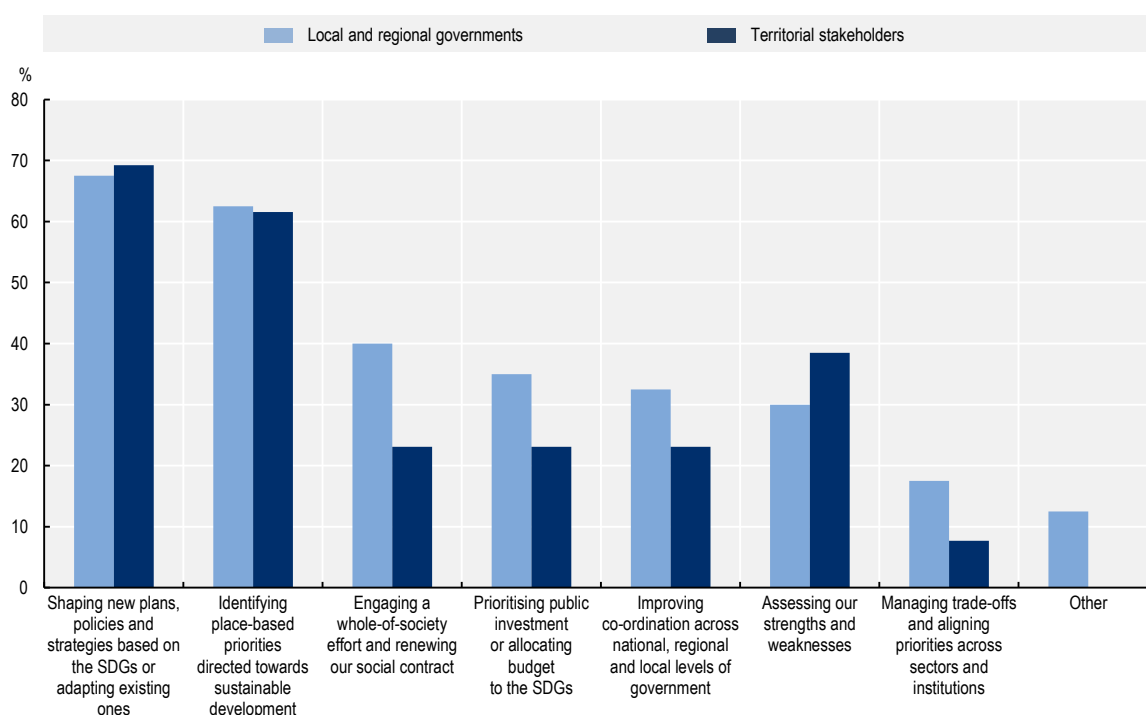


Note: Number of responses from LRGs: 86; number of responses from other territorial stakeholders: 55.
Source: OECD-CoR Survey on the SDGs as a Framework for COVID-19 Recovery in Cities and Regions.

The SDGs are mainly used to shape new plans and strategies and identify place-based priorities towards sustainable development

Sixty-eight percent of the respondents are shaping new plans, policies and strategies based on the SDGs or adapting existing ones. Sixty-three percent use the SDGs to identify place-based priorities directed towards sustainable development (Figure 1.4). The SDGs are also used to engage a whole of society effort for sustainable development and renew the social contract (40%), prioritise public investment or allocate budget (35%), to improve co-ordination across national, regional and local levels (33%) and to assess local and regional strengths and weaknesses (30%).

Figure 1.4. Which benefits convinced you to use the SDGs to guide your recovery?



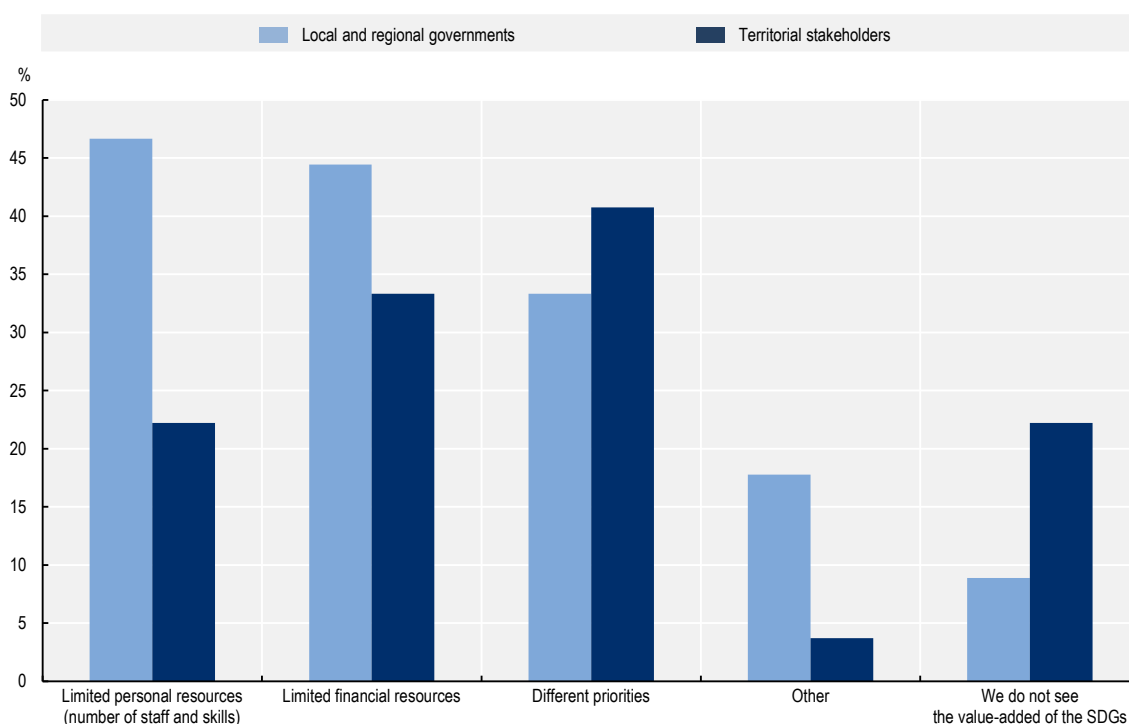
Note: Number of responses from LRGs: 40; number of responses from other territorial stakeholders: 26.

Source: OECD-CoR Survey on the SDGs as a Framework for COVID-19 Recovery in Cities and Regions.

Funding and capacity gaps are the main constraints for LRGs preventing them from using the SDGs as a framework in the recovery phase

Identified bottlenecks for LRGs to leverage the SDGs for shaping the recovery strategies are mostly related to limited human resources such as the number of staff and skills (47%) or limited financial resources (44%). Many LRGs are facing both (Figure 1.5). The funding and capacity gaps are more relevant for LRGs than for territorial stakeholders, among which 33% and 22% respectively are impacted by limited financial resources and limited personal resources. Around one-third of LRGs and more than 40% of territorial stakeholders do not use the SDGs in the recovery phase due to other political priorities. Furthermore, 18% of LRGs mentioned that their decision not to use the SDGs in their recovery was due to the existence of other local and regional development strategies or long-term planning based on the SDGs.

Figure 1.5. What prevents you from using SDGs to guide your recovery?



Note: Number of responses from LRGs: 45; number of responses from other territorial stakeholders: 27.

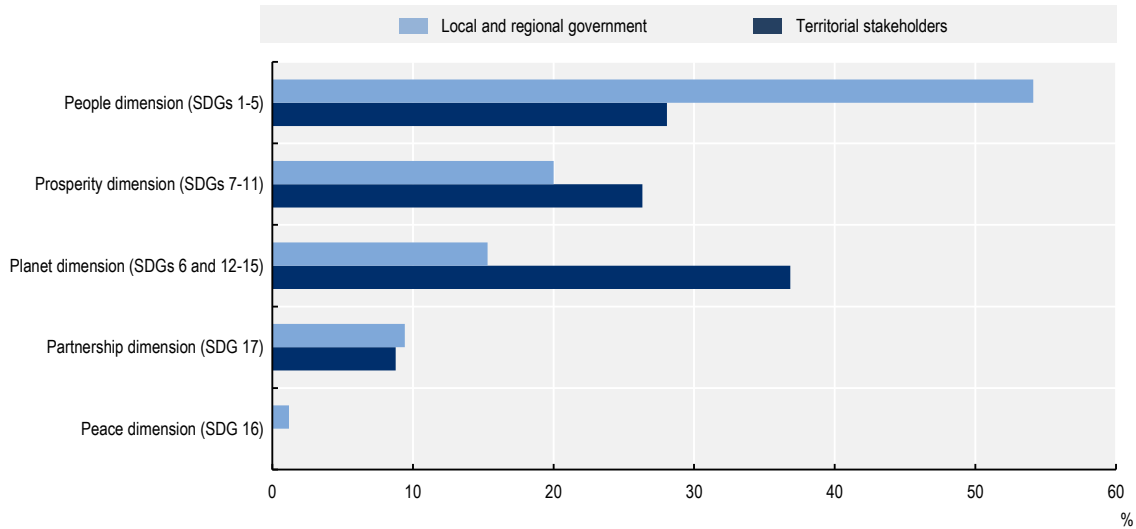
Source: OECD-CoR Survey on the SDGs as a Framework for COVID-19 Recovery in Cities and Regions.

LRGs and territorial stakeholders have different perspectives on the most pressing sustainable development challenges to address

LRGs consider the People dimension (SDG 1 No poverty, SDG 2 Zero hunger, SDG 3 Good health and well-being, SDG 4 Quality education and SDG 5 Gender equality) as the biggest post-COVID-19 challenge. With 54% of the responses, People is clearly the dimension that LRGs are concerned with the most in terms of post-COVID-19 challenges (Figure 1.6). Nine percent of the respondents stated to see the Partnership dimension (SDG 17) as their main post-COVID-19 challenge. One percent were most concerned about the Peace dimension (SDG 16).

For territorial stakeholders, the Planet dimension (SDG 6 Clean water and sanitation, SDG 12 Responsible consumption and production, SDG 13 Climate Action, SDG 14 Life below water and SDG 15 Life on land) is the biggest post-COVID-19 challenge. Thirty-seven percent of other territorial stakeholders considered the Planet dimension as their major challenge following COVID-19. As for LRGs, the Peace (SDG 16 Peace, justice and strong institutions) and Partnership (SDG 17 Partnership for the goals) dimensions were the least prioritised with 9% and 0% of responses respectively.

Figure 1.6. What are the biggest challenges for your city or region for the post-COVID-19 period?



Note: Number of responses from LRGs: 86; number of responses from other territorial stakeholders: 57.
Source: OECD-CoR Survey on the SDGs as a Framework for COVID-19 Recovery in Cities and Regions.

Ways forward

Some possible ways forward for LRGs to upscale the use of the SDGs in the COVID-19 recovery phase include:

- **Mainstreaming SDGs in budgeting processes to ensure adequate resources are allocated for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the COVID-19 recovery phase**, including through:
 - Using the SDGs as a framework to manage trade-offs in budget allocations across different sectoral policy areas.
 - Implementing innovative instruments such as sustainability bonds or contingency funds and leveraging private sector funding to finance public spaces, urban infrastructure, neighbourhood development and affordable housing.
 - Enhancing and expanding the use of sustainable public procurement to leverage private sector contributions to the SDGs, by incentivising social and environmental sustainability criteria in addition to the value-for-money ones.
- **Using training and capacity development to upskill staff in local and regional administrations on SDG implementation**, including through:
 - Promoting training and peer-to-peer learning activities with cities and regions of similar characteristics that successfully used the SDGs as a policy-making tool.
 - Engaging with domestic and international city networks to incentivise and facilitate the organisation of peer learning activities and exchange of knowledge and experience at low cost.
 - Facilitating capacity-building activities with local territorial stakeholders that are engaged in the 2030 Agenda such as universities and research institutions.

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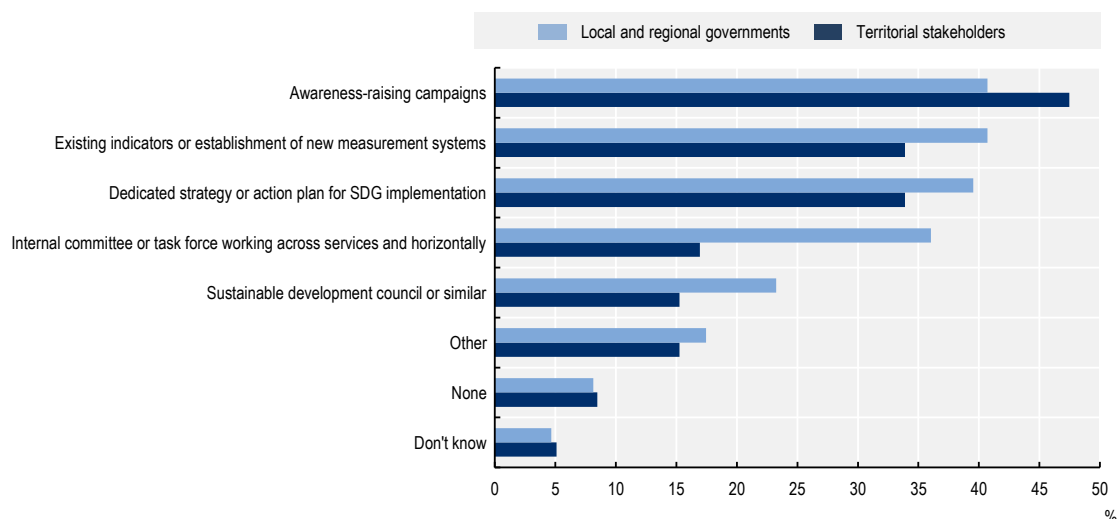
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2 Key actions for achieving the SDGs in cities and regions

Indicators and measurement systems to track progress on the SDGs and awareness-raising campaigns are the actions most widely adopted by cities and regions

Local and regional governments listed indicators and measurement systems to track progress of the SDGs (41%) and awareness-raising campaigns (41%) as the 2 most frequently used actions to implement the SDGs. In addition, 4 out of 10 LRGs have elaborated a dedicated strategy or action plan for the SDG implementation. More than a third (36%) have set up an internal committee, task force, working group or other inter-departmental structure on the SDGs. Setting up a sustainable development council or similar body that is attached to a high-level decision-maker is the least common type of action to implement the SDGs, used by less than one-fourth of LRGs (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1. Which tools has your organisation adopted for the implementation of the SDGs?



Note: Number of responses from LRGs: 86; number of responses from other territorial stakeholders: 59.

Source: OECD-CoR Survey on the SDGs as a Framework for COVID-19 Recovery in Cities and Regions.

Mid-size municipalities demonstrate a particularly strong commitment to the SDGs. A total of 67% of municipalities with between 200 000 and 500 000 inhabitants carried out awareness-raising campaigns (compared to 41% for the average sample), while 56% set up an internal committee, task force or similar structure working horizontally on the SDGs or used measurement systems to track progress (20 percentage points higher than the average sample). Larger municipalities with more than 500 000 inhabitants use dedicated strategies or action plans for the implementation of the SDGs even more frequently (63%). Among municipalities with fewer than 50 000 inhabitants, half of the respondents

have a dedicated strategy or action plan for SDG implementation in place or use indicators or measurement systems to track the progress of the SDGs. In contrast to cities, the commitment of regions towards the SDGs is overall lower for each of the measures suggested by the survey compared to the overall sample.

Among territorial stakeholders (academia, private persons, businesses and associations), close to half of the respondents use awareness-raising campaigns. They use them either internally (among employees and departments) or externally (targeted at citizens, civil society, businesses and/or schools) (Figure 2.1). About one-third of respondents have an action plan or dedicated strategy in place and/or use indicators or measurement systems to track progress on the SDGs. The three main actions implemented are thus similar to LRG actions. Seventeen percent of surveyed territorial stakeholders have established an internal committee, task force, working group or similar structure and 15% have set up a sustainable development council attached to a high-level decision-maker or resorted to other actions.

Box 2.1. Key findings from the first OECD-CoR survey (2018-19) on the key contribution of cities and regions to sustainable development

From 13 December 2018 to 1 March 2019, the OECD and the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) conducted a first survey on “The key contribution of cities and regions to sustainable development” across cities and regions. The survey addressed representatives of local and regional governments as well as other stakeholders at the local and regional levels (400 respondents) to collect examples and evidence about their work on sustainable development and in particular their contribution to the SDGs.

Overall, respondents to the survey showed a relatively high degree of awareness of the SDGs. Only 18% of respondents were either unaware of or unfamiliar with them. Furthermore, a significant majority (59%) was in the process of implementing the SDGs, whether in early or advanced stages. The most common actions put in place to implement the SDGs among the respondents were awareness-raising campaigns and establishing a dedicated body, selected by 62% and 57% of the respondents respectively.

Most cities and regions stated to work with the SDGs because they consider them a valuable tool to strengthen regional and local development. Among respondents that are implementing the SDGs, 71% pointed out that they “see the SDGs as a transformative agenda” and 66% explained that they “see the value of the SDGs as a local development planning and budgeting tool”. Key challenges to the SDG implementation conveyed by survey respondents included “Lack of awareness, support, capacities or trained staff” (50%) and “Difficulty to prioritise the SDGs over other agendas” (49%).

Tracking and measuring the progress of cities and regions against the SDGs is an emerging priority for subnational governments. Around 70% of respondents stated tracking progress toward achieving the SDGs. Around 58% of respondents implementing the SDGs at that time used indicators to monitor progress. Among all of the respondents that used indicators, most used local (26%) or national (19%) indicators. Fewer than 15% of respondents were using European Union (EU)- or UN-level indicators.

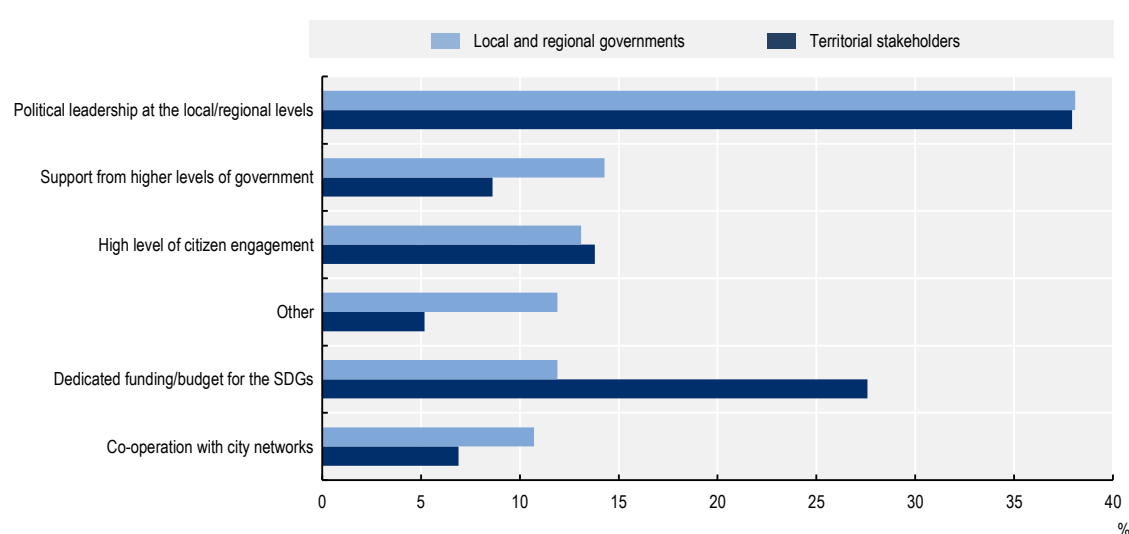
Respondents that stated to implement the SDGs reported having local-regional co-operation for the SDGs in place (60%). This highlights a high degree of co-operation between the different subnational levels, while answers related to co-operation with the national level were much less common among respondents (only 23% had joint SDG implementation projects with the national level). In terms of stakeholder engagement and co-operation, 39% of respondents highlighted mainly co-operating or having a dialogue with civil society or non-governmental organisations (NGOs), followed by universities and by citizens (both 31%). Moreover, 28% of respondents stated that they already collaborate with the private sector, while 26% signalled that they were planning to.

Source: OECD (2020^[1]), *A Territorial Approach to the Sustainable Development Goals: Synthesis Report*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/e86fa715-en>.

Political leadership is considered the most important success factor for SDG implementation at the local and regional levels

Thirty-eight percent of LRGs consider political leadership as the main contributory factor for effective SDG implementation. Support from higher levels of government (14%), citizen engagement (13%), dedicated funding or budget (12%) and co-operation with city networks (11%) were also cited by respondents, yet less frequently than political leadership (Figure 2.2). Additional factors stressed include strong commitment from the local administration or co-operation with the regional authorities. In addition, 88% of LRGs and 90% of territorial stakeholders considered EU support for the SDGs important for their implementation on the ground.

Figure 2.2. What contributes to the success of SDG implementation in your city or region?



Note: Number of responses from LRGs: 84; number of responses from other territorial stakeholders: 58.

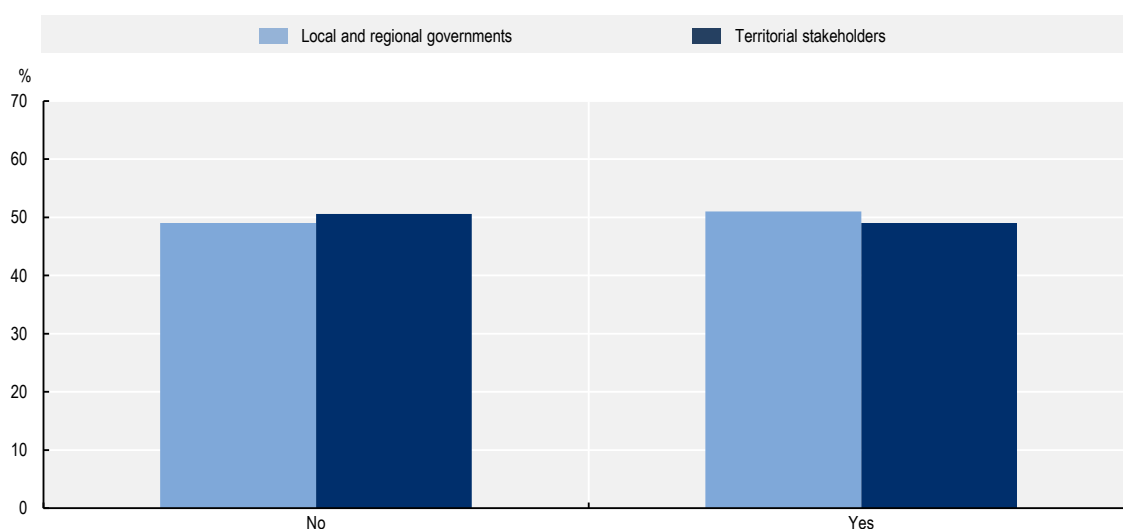
Source: OECD-CoR Survey on the SDGs as a Framework for COVID-19 Recovery in Cities and Regions.

LRG contribution to Voluntary National Reviews could be strengthened

Around half of surveyed LRGs contributed to their national government's VNR on the SDGs. Structured mechanisms of vertical co-ordination across local, regional and national levels are the most common form that facilitated such contributions (28%), followed by ad hoc consultations with the national government (19%) or dedicated Local or Regional Reviews (12%) (Figure 2.3). These results emphasise the need for improved and more structured co-ordination between different levels of government to ensure policy coherence regarding the implementation of the SDGs.

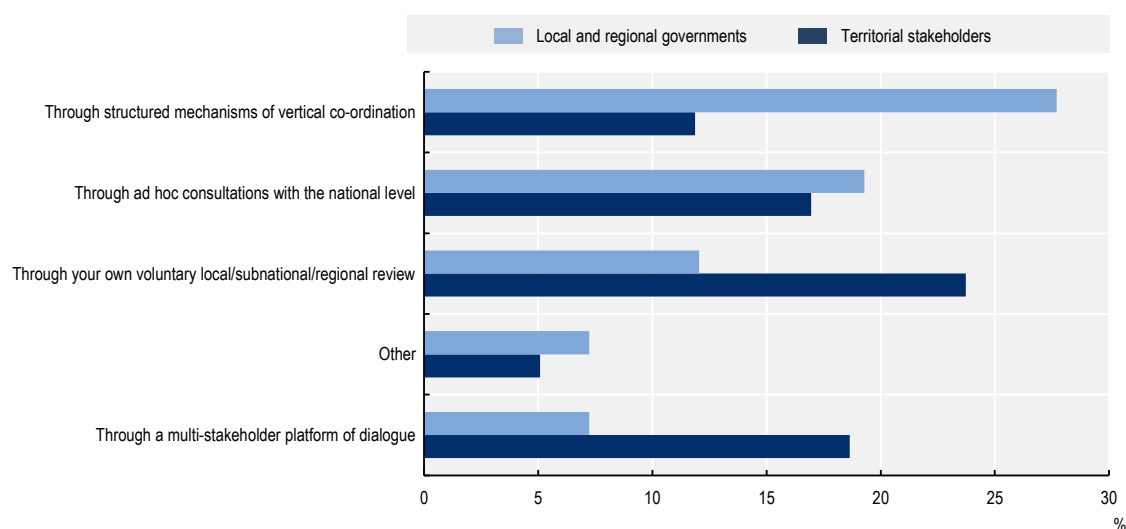
Overall, 51% of other territorial stakeholders have contributed to their national government's VNR on the SDGs (Figure 2.3). Most of them (24%) did so by providing input for local or regional Voluntary Reviews, through multi-stakeholder platforms (19%) or ad hoc consultations (17%) (Figure 2.4). Structured mechanisms of vertical co-ordination across local, regional and national levels are less commonly used by territorial stakeholders (12%) than by LRGs (28%).

Figure 2.3. Have you contributed to your national government's VNR?



Note: Number of responses from LRGs: 83; number of responses from other territorial stakeholders: 59.
Source: OECD-CoR Survey on the SDGs as a Framework for COVID-19 Recovery in Cities and Regions.

Figure 2.4. How have you contributed to your national government's VNR?



Note: Number of responses from LRGs: 61; number of responses from other territorial stakeholders: 45.
Source: OECD-CoR Survey on the SDGs as a Framework for COVID-19 Recovery in Cities and Regions.

Ways forward

Some possible ways forward for LRGs to use the SDGs as a means to improve multi-level governance, data and monitoring include:

- **Enhance co-ordination between different levels of government to foster policy coherence on SDG implementation.** Multi-level co-ordination that brings together national and subnational government representatives has emerged as a key factor to minimise the risk of a fragmented response to the pandemic through better communication and dissemination of information and solutions. Around half of responding LRGs are currently not contributing to their national government's VNR. In such cases, greater engagement of LRGs could help national policies take local priorities and conditions into account, and ultimately improve vertical co-ordination across local, regional and national levels.
- **Use SDG data and localised indicator frameworks to monitor progress and guide local policy making in the COVID-19 recovery phase.** Less than half of LRGs use indicators and measurement systems to track the progress of the SDGs. The 2030 Agenda offers an integrated framework to improve monitoring and evaluation at all levels of government and allow for a more comprehensive assessment of policy challenges. Analysing and measuring local policy challenges, including through tools such as artificial intelligence and big data, is crucial in the COVID-19 recovery phase in order to develop tailored and evidence-based policies that target local and regional realities. The OECD localised indicator framework for measuring the distance to achieving the SDGs in cities and regions can be a starting point for LRGs to use a harmonised and comparable local SDG indicator framework.
- **Leverage local and regional political leadership to expand the uptake of the SDGs as a policy-making tool.** Raising the awareness of political leaders about the 2030 Agenda and promoting peer-to-peer exchanges with frontrunner cities and regions can drive more sustainable local policies and contribute to the SDGs.

References

- OECD (2020), *A Territorial Approach to the Sustainable Development Goals: Synthesis Report*, OECD Urban Policy Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/e86fa715-en>. [1]

3 Key policy priorities to achieve the SDGs in the COVID-19 recovery

LRGs stress that considering the impacts of local policies on subjective well-being can improve health outcomes in the recovery phase

Well-being considerations in policy design are a priority for LRGs. In the third part of the survey, participants were asked to rank different actions and policies according to their priority from 1 to 4 (or 5 depending on the question) – with 1 being the top priority – to contribute to different SDGs. With regards to policies and strategies that can best help to strengthen health outcomes, considering the impacts of local policies on the subjective well-being of people was the option most often selected as the first priority (32% of respondents). This option was followed by promoting healthy lifestyles through better hygiene, lower consumption of tobacco, alcohol and other harmful substance (25%) and tackling air pollution levels and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (25%) (Figure 3.1). For 21% of respondents, expanding digital health solutions (e.g. telemedicine) at the local and regional levels to reduce the burden on hospitals and increase access to care was the top priority.¹ Other options suggested by the respondents include education, improvement of the health infrastructure, adequate funding for the health sector and citizen-centred and place-based healthcare that addresses regional and social differences between neighbourhoods.

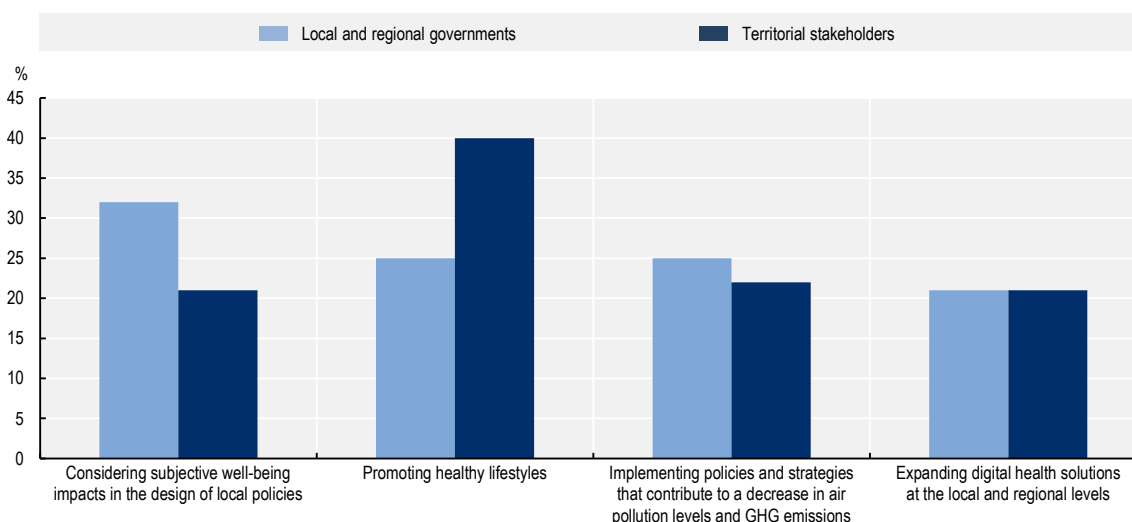
LRGs prioritise decarbonising electricity generation and improving energy efficiency in the built environment to transition to cleaner energy production

A third of LRGs consider shifting from fossil fuels to zero-carbon sources and decarbonising the built environment (e.g. houses, buildings and district heating) as the two most promising strategies to transition to cleaner energy production (Figure 3.2). Other priorities of LRGs include the regional use of local energy sources to reduce the dependence on supra-regional suppliers, the need to form strategic alliances to foster the further development of hydrogen energy and effective investments in energy distribution networks and infrastructure. Compared to LRGs, territorial stakeholders expressed a stronger preference for the decarbonisation of electricity production as the top priority to contribute to SDG 7 Affordable and Clean Energy post-COVID. For around 48% of respondents, this option was considered the strategy that can most help their city or region best transition to cleaner energy production.

¹ The total shares might exceed 100% as the number of overall responses per option and thus the denominator of the calculation varies.

Figure 3.1. Which policies and strategies can best help to strengthen health outcomes and achieve SDG 3 Good health and well-being in your city or region?

Share of respondents selecting the respective option as their top priority

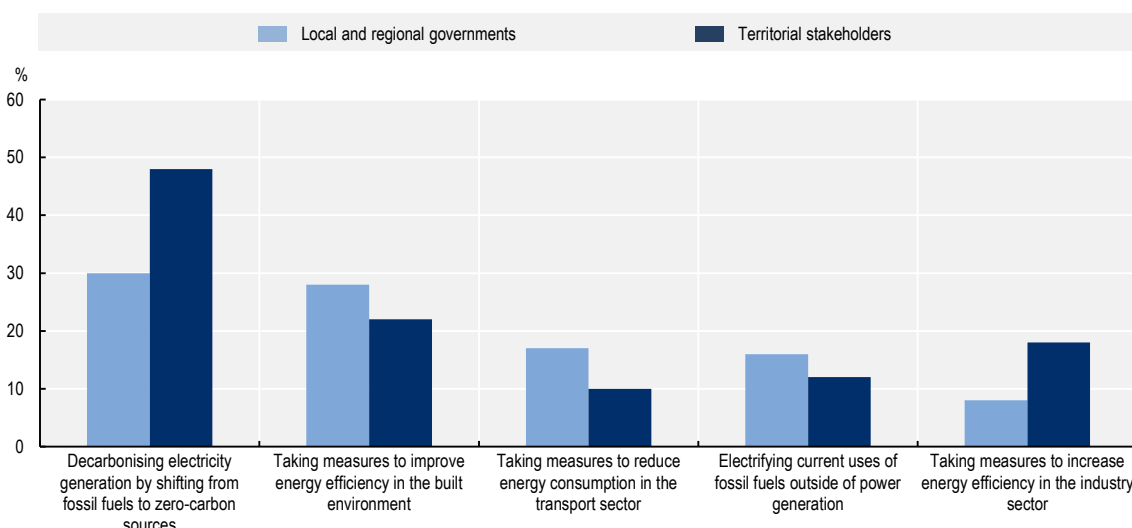


Note: Not every respondent has rated all of the options. Number of responses from LRGs: 75-79; number of responses from other territorial stakeholders: 48-55.

Source: OECD-CoR Survey on the SDGs as a Framework for COVID-19 Recovery in Cities and Regions.

Figure 3.2. Which strategies or policies can most help your city or region best transition to a cleaner energy production and thus achieve SDG 7 Affordable and clean energy?

Share of respondents selecting the respective option as their top priority



Note: Not every respondent has rated all of the options. Number of responses from LRGs: 76-81; number of responses from other territorial stakeholders: 46-51.

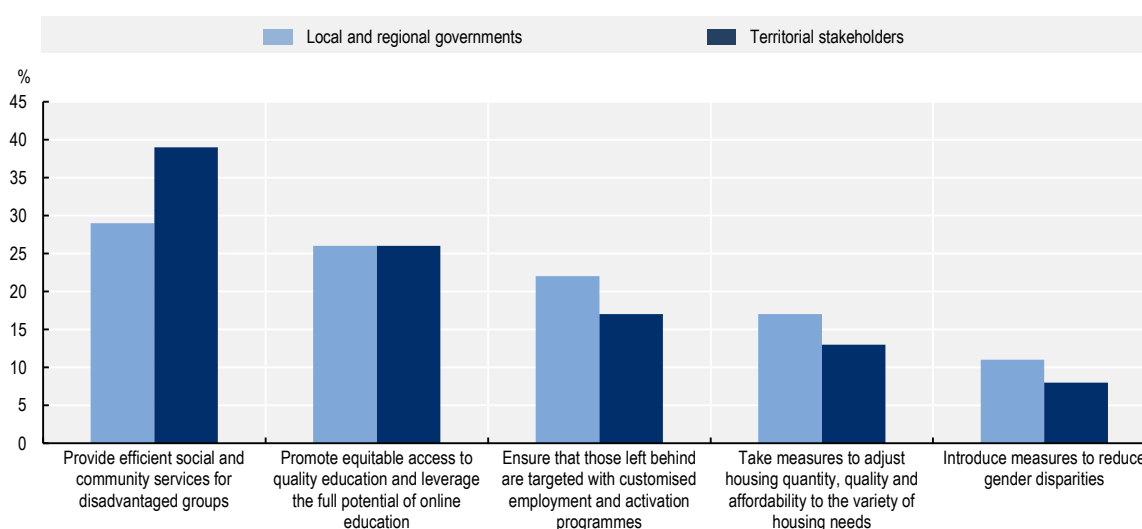
Source: OECD-CoR Survey on the SDGs as a Framework for COVID-19 Recovery in Cities and Regions.

Cities and regions prioritise efficient social and community services for disadvantaged groups to reduce inequalities

Efficient social and community services are considered the main factor to achieve lower inequalities. Responding to the question of which policies and strategies can most help to contribute to SDG 10 Reduced inequalities in their city or regions, 29% of LRGs named the “provision of efficient social and community services” such as healthcare and home care for disadvantaged groups through the design and implementation of ambitious social innovation strategies and repurposing of empty buildings (Figure 3.3). Other responses listed as top priorities include the promotion of equitable access to quality and online education (26%), customised employment and activation programmes that are adaptable, relevant, flexible and respond to the new needs of the local labour market (22%), providing sufficient quality and affordable housing (17%) and promoting social cohesion and measures to reduce gender disparities (11%).

Figure 3.3. Which policies and strategies can most help to contribute to SDG 10 to reduce inequalities in your city or region?

Share of respondents selecting the respective option as their top priority



Note: Number of respondents from LRGs: 73-79; number of responses from other territorial stakeholders: 49-53.

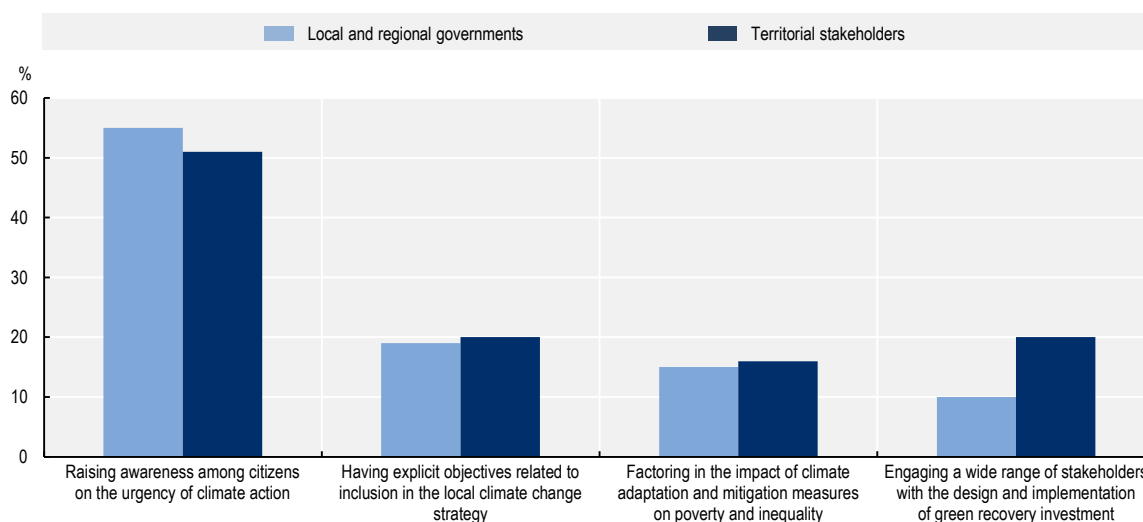
Source: OECD-CoR Survey on the SDGs as a Framework for COVID-19 Recovery in Cities and Regions.

Most cities and regions consider awareness-raising on the urgency of climate action to be crucial for a just and green transition

For 55% of surveyed LRGs, key priorities to reduce GHG emissions and increase climate resilience consist in raising citizen awareness. Beyond that, having explicit objectives related to inclusion in the local climate change strategy (19%), understanding the distributional impact of climate adaptation and mitigation measures on social groups (15%) and fostering an inclusive design and implementation of green recovery investment (10%) were the most frequent responses (Figure 3.4). Some of the respondents mentioned additional priorities of their city or region, for instance, the alignment of strategic documents with investment priorities and multi-level policy co-ordination and the integration of climate action in recovery plans using the SDGs as metrics.

Figure 3.4. Which actions is your city or region prioritising for the achievement of climate objectives in an inclusive way, thus contributing to SDGs 10 and 13?

Share of respondents selecting the respective option as their top priority



Note: Not every respondent has rated all of the options. Number of responses from LRGs: 74-77; number of responses from territorial stakeholders: 49-53.

Source: OECD-CoR Survey on the SDGs as a Framework for COVID-19 Recovery in Cities and Regions.

LRGs consider the improvement of multi-modal transport as the main contributor to sustainable mobility and accessibility

Cities and regions (49%) consider the improvement of multi-modal transport, such as active and clean urban mobility, as a main contributor to sustainable mobility and accessibility and the achievement of SDG 11 Sustainable cities and communities. This option was followed by developing regional public transport and better integrating rural areas into public transport networks (32%), adapting public transportation systems to the need for physical distancing and to changing patterns in working and commuting habits (15%) and addressing negative agglomeration externalities, such as traffic congestion and air pollution, by reducing the use of private cars through congestion charges and ad hoc regulation that account for specific exemptions (7%) (Figure 3.5). Additional actions include the extension of rail and public transport services, car-sharing offers and dedicated funding and investment.

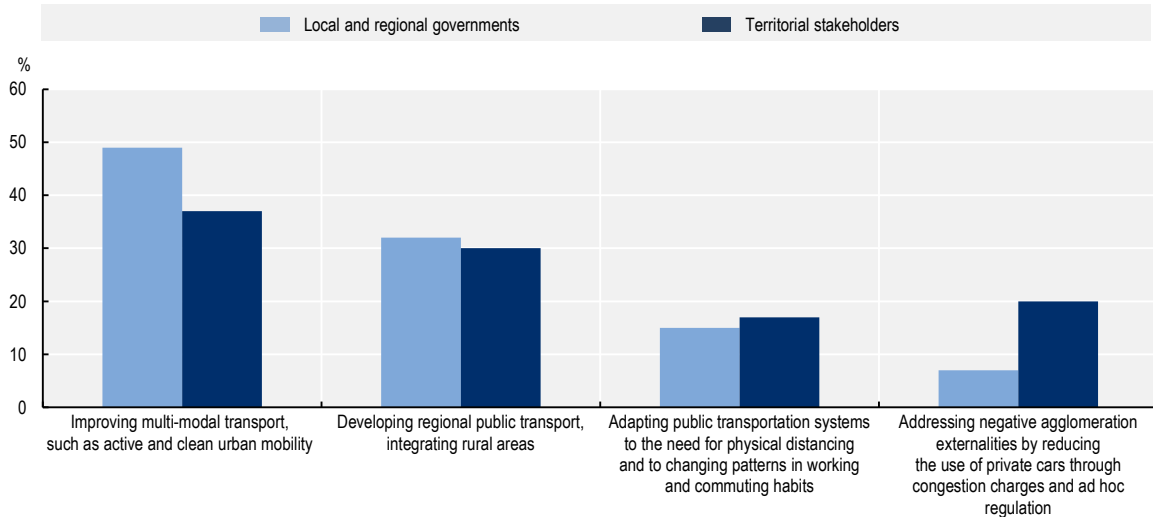
Cities and regions see compact urban development and the circular economy as important vehicles for the green transition

Exploiting the advantages of urban density and urban form through forward-looking spatial and land use planning to prioritise climate-resilient and low-carbon urban infrastructure is the top priority of respondents (35%) in order to transition towards greener cities and regions (Figure 3.6). A similar number of respondents prioritise in particular the transition to a circular economy for more efficient use of resources and more sustainable consumption and production patterns (30%). Stimulating the local economy (e.g. local food production) while rethinking short mile logistics (20%) and mainstreaming climate mitigation and adaptation priorities in stimulus packages and investments to recover from the crisis (18%) were mentioned less often as top priorities, yet account for almost 40% of responses. Territorial stakeholders did not show a strong preference for one option over the other, with an even balance across

the first three options. Mainstreaming climate mitigation and adaptation priorities in stimulus packages and investments to recover from the crisis appeared to be slightly less of a top priority considering that only 16% named it as their first choice.

Figure 3.5. Which policies and actions can most contribute to sustainable mobility and accessibility and thus achieve SDG 11 in your city or region?

Share of respondents selecting the respective option as their top priority

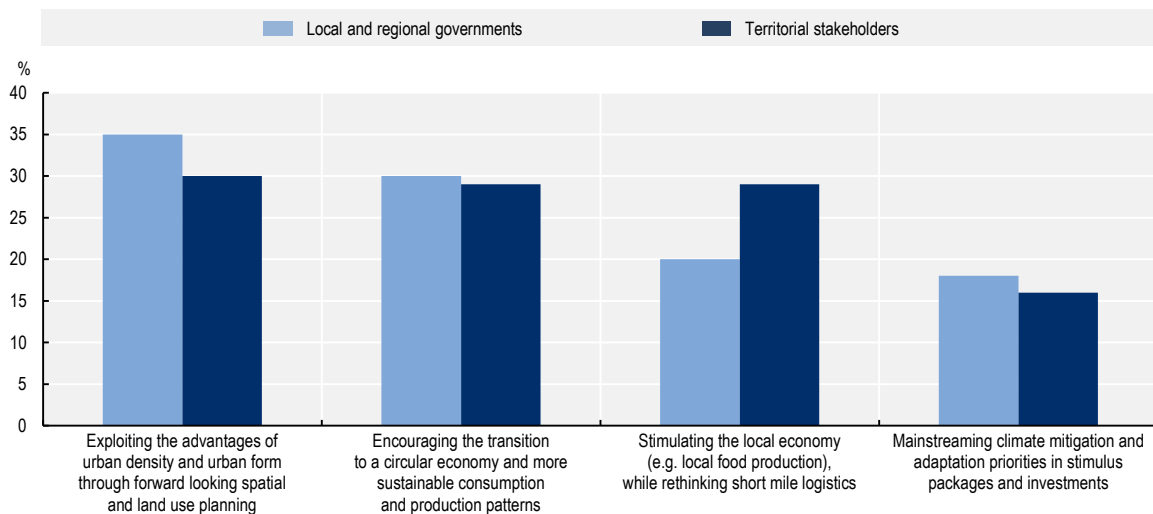


Note: Not every respondent has rated all of the options. Number of responses from LRGs: 73-79; number of responses from other territorial stakeholders: 50-56.

Source: OECD-CoR Survey on the SDGs as a Framework for COVID-19 Recovery in Cities and Regions.

Figure 3.6. Which actions can most help your city or region transition towards greener cities and regions?

Share of respondents selecting the respective option as their top priority



Note: Not every respondent has rated all of the options. Number of responses from LRGs: 73-80; number of responses from other territorial stakeholders: 50-56.

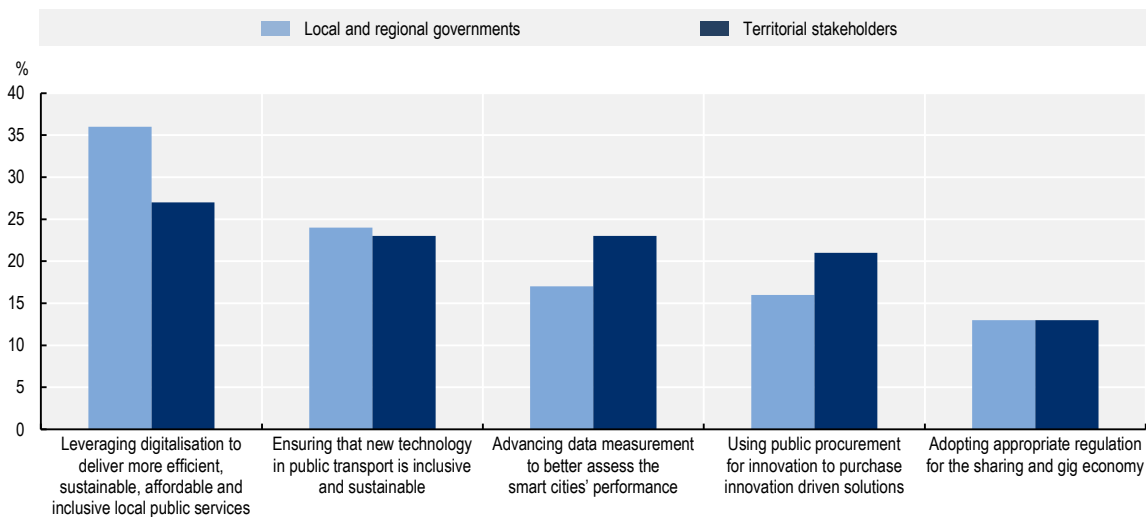
Source: OECD-CoR Survey on the SDGs as a Framework for COVID-19 Recovery in Cities and Regions.

The digitalisation of local public services is considered the first priority to contribute to smarter cities and regions

A total of 36% of surveyed LRGs consider that digitalisation can deliver more efficient, sustainable, affordable and inclusive local public services through real-time data, electronic congestion tolls, smart parking systems, Internet of Things (IoT) sensors and smart contracts amongst others. Ensuring that new technology in public transport (e.g. application-based ride services) is inclusive and sustainable including those with reduced mobility and those in underserved communities is also important (24%). These were followed by advancing the data measurement agenda to better assess the smart cities' performance and their contribution to urban residents' well-being and inclusive growth (17%) and using public procurement for innovation to purchase innovation-driven solutions (16%). Adopting appropriate regulation for the sharing and gig economy to protect the public interest and workers' social safety nets (13%) had the lowest priority (Figure 3.7). Additional priorities include the application of open-source solutions that people trust, urban data spaces and the application of big data in the urban context.

Figure 3.7. Which actions can best help transition towards smarter cities and regions?

Share of respondents selecting the respective option as their top priority



Note: Not every respondent has rated all of the options. Number of responses from LRGs: 76-79; number of responses from other territorial stakeholders: 43-52.

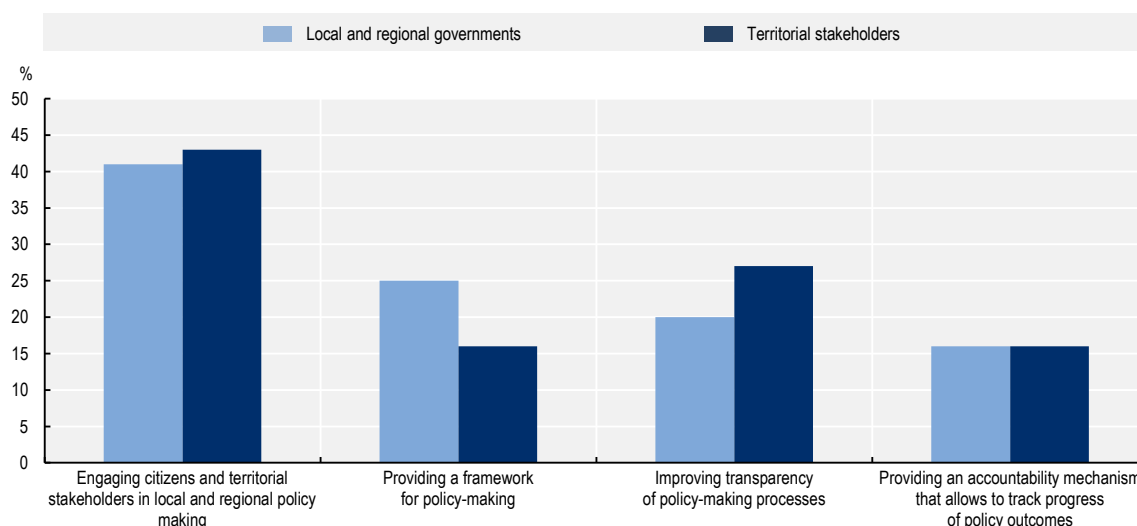
Source: OECD-CoR Survey on the SDGs as a Framework for COVID-19 Recovery in Cities and Regions.

LRGs consider stakeholder engagement in local and regional policy-making as the most effective tool to strengthen citizens' trust in their governments

Engaging citizens and territorial stakeholders in local and regional policy-making (41%) is the top priority for cities and regions to strengthen citizens' trust in government. In addition, the SDGs are deemed relevant as a framework for policy-making (25%), to improve the transparency of policy-making processes (20%) and to provide an accountability mechanism to track policy outcomes (16%) (Figure 3.8).

Figure 3.8. How can the SDGs help strengthen citizens' trust in governments and achieve SDG 16 Peace, justice and strong institutions?

Share of respondents selecting the respective option as their top priority



Note: Not every respondent has rated all of the options. Number of responses from LRGs: 75-79; number of responses from other territorial stakeholders: 47-56.

Source: OECD-CoR Survey on the SDGs as a Framework for COVID-19 Recovery in Cities and Regions.

Ways forward

Some possible ways forward for LRGs to use the SDGs to achieve their key policy priorities in the COVID-19 recovery phase are:

- **Promoting further the uptake of the SDGs as a policy-making tool to design, implement and monitor recovery strategies that respond to the challenges magnified by the pandemic, including through:**
 - Enhancing efficient social and community services such as healthcare and home care for disadvantaged groups, targeted education programmes for the unemployed, equitable access to education and better labour market outcomes.
 - Incentivising the decarbonisation of the built environment and promoting a cleaner energy production by resorting to zero-carbon sources such as solar, wind and hydrogen energy.
 - Expanding further the cycling infrastructure, walkability through sidewalks, e-vehicle charging stations, and improving multi-modal transport supply for greater sustainability and accessibility.
 - Facilitating the uptake of digitalisation in public services towards paperless formats, online consultations and digital one-stop-shops for citizens' requests for more efficient, sustainable, affordable and inclusive local public services.
 - Enhancing citizen participation, participatory budgeting or town hall meetings to incentivise public participation and better engage stakeholders in local and regional policy-making.

Annex A. The SDGs as a Framework for COVID-19 Recovery in Cities and Regions – A joint OECD-CoR survey

Table A A.1. Survey structure and questions

Section	Question	Options
Section 1: The state of the SDG implementation in cities and regions	1. Which of these policies and actions has your organisation adopted for the implementation of the SDGs? Several answers possible.	A dedicated strategy or action plan for the SDG implementation
		An internal committee, task force, working group or other structure, working across services and horizontally
		A sustainable development council or similar attached to a high-level decision-maker: mayor, governor, etc.
		Use of existing indicators or establishment of new measurement systems to track progress on the SDGs
		Awareness-raising campaigns, either internal (among employees and departments) or external (targeted at citizens, civil society, business and/or schools)
	2. What contributes to the success of the SDG implementation in your city or region?	Political leadership at the local/regional levels
		Support from higher levels of government
		Dedicated funding/budget for the SDGs
		Co-operation with city networks
		High level of citizen engagement
		Other: Please specify
	3. Is EU support for the SDGs important for your implementation of the SDGs on the ground?	Yes
		No
	4. Have you contributed to your national government's Voluntary National Review (VNR) to report at the UN level? Several answers possible.	Through a multi-stakeholder platform of dialogue
		Through structured mechanisms of vertical co-ordination across local, regional and national levels
		Through your own Voluntary Local/Subnational/Regional Review
		Other: Please specify
		No
Section 2: The relevance of the SDGs in the COVID-19 recovery phase for cities and regions	5. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your work on the SDGs?	There is more conviction that the SDGs can help us take a more holistic approach to recovery
		There is less political support for the SDGs agenda in a context of crisis and emergency
		The COVID-19 pandemic has not affected our work on the SDGs
		There are now fewer financial resources available to work on the SDGs
		The number of people working on the SDGs is now lower than before the pandemic

Section	Question	Options
	6. Are you using the SDGs as a framework for the COVID-19 recovery phase?	Yes, we have been using SDGs before and now started to use them to address the COVID-19 recovery
		Yes, we did not use the SDGs before but have now started using SDGs to address the COVID-19 pandemic
		Not yet, but we are planning to do so
		No, and we have no intention to do so
	7.1. If you are using the SDGs as a framework to guide the COVID-19 recovery, which potential benefits were your main motivation behind that decision	Identifying local, place-based priorities directed towards sustainable development
		Shaping new local plans, policies and strategies based on the SDGs or adapting an existing one
		Assessing your strengths and weaknesses
		Prioritising public investment or allocating budget against the SDGs at the local level
		Managing trade-offs and aligning priorities across sectors and institutions
		Improving co-ordination across national, regional and local levels of government
		Engaging a whole of society effort and renewing our social contract, through engaging the private sector, civil society and youth
	7.2. If you are NOT using the SDGs as a framework to guide the COVID-19 recovery, what is your rationale behind that?	Identifying local, place-based priorities directed towards sustainable development
		Different priorities
		Limited personal resources (number of staff and skills)
		Limited financial resources
		We do not see the value-added of the SDGs
	8. Where do you see the biggest post-COVID-19 challenges for your city or region with regards to the SDGs?	Other: Please specify
		People dimension (SDGs 1-5)
		Planet dimension (SDGs 6 and 12-15)
		Prosperity dimension (SDGs 7-11)
		Peace dimension (SDG 16)
		Partnership dimension (SDG 17)
Section 3: Policies, strategies and priorities of cities and regions to achieve the SDGs in the COVID-19 recovery	9. Which of the following policies and strategies can best help to strengthen health outcomes and achieve SDG 3 in your city or region? (Please rank from 1 to 5 – 1 being the top priority)	Promoting healthy lifestyles through better hygiene, lower consumption of tobacco, alcohol and other harmful substances
		Considering subjective well-being impacts on the design of local policies
		Expanding digital health solutions (e.g. telehealth) at the local and regional levels to reduce the burden on hospitals and increase access to care
		Implementing policies and strategies that contribute to a decrease in air pollution levels and greenhouse gas emissions
	10. Which of the following strategies or policies can most help your city or region best transition to cleaner energy production and thus achieve SDG 7? (Please rank from 1 to 5 – 1 being the top priority)	Decarbonising electricity generation by shifting from fossil fuels to zero-carbon sources, including wind, solar, hydro, geothermal and tidal energy
		Taking measures to improve energy efficiency in the built environment (e.g. houses, buildings, district heating)
		Taking measures to reduce energy consumption in the transport sector
		Taking measures to increase energy efficiency in the industry sector
		Electrifying current uses of fossil fuels outside of power generation, such as the internal combustion engine, through electric or hydrogen vehicles, boilers and heaters, and various industrial processes

Section	Question	Options
	11. Which of the following policies and strategies can most help to contribute to SDG 10 to reduce inequalities, in your city or region? (Please rank from 1 to 5 – 1 being the top priority)	<p>Provide efficient social and community services for disadvantaged groups such as healthcare and home care through the design and implementation of ambitious social innovation strategies and repurposing of empty buildings</p> <p>Ensure that those left behind (e.g. youth, migrants, homeless, low-wage workers) are targeted with customised employment and activation programmes that are adaptable, relevant, flexible and respond to the new needs of the local labour market</p> <p>Introduce measures to reduce gender disparities in terms of employment and disproportionate domestic and care responsibilities for women</p> <p>Take measures to adjust housing quantity, quality and affordability to the variety of housing needs, with a view to promoting social cohesion</p> <p>Promote equitable access to quality education and leverage the full potential of online education</p>
	12. Which of the following actions is your city or region prioritising for the achievement of climate objectives in an inclusive way, thus contributing to SDGs 10 and 13? (Please rank from 1 to 4 – 1 being the top priority)	<p>Raising awareness among citizens on the urgency of climate action and policy measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and increase climate resilience</p> <p>Factoring in the impact of climate adaptation and mitigation measures on poverty and inequality in different sectors</p> <p>Having explicit objectives related to inclusion in the local climate change strategy</p> <p>Engaging a wide range of stakeholders, in particular vulnerable population groups, with the design and implementation of green recovery investment and other climate policies</p>
	13. Which of the following policies and actions can most contribute to sustainable mobility and accessibility and thus achieve SDG 11 in your city or region? (Please rank from 1 to 4 – 1 being the top priority)	<p>Adapting public transportation systems to the need for physical distancing and hygiene, and to changing patterns in working and commuting habits</p> <p>Addressing negative agglomeration externalities, such as traffic congestion and air pollution, by reducing the use of private cars through congestion charges and ad hoc regulations that account for specific exemptions</p> <p>Improving multi-modal transport, such as active and clean urban mobility (e.g. public transport, proximity and walkability combining supply-side and demand-side transport management policies)</p> <p>Developing regional public transport, integrating rural areas</p>
	14. Which of the following actions can most help your city or region transition towards greener cities and regions? (Please rank from 1 to 4 – 1 being the top priority)	<p>Exploiting the advantages of urban density and urban form through forward-looking spatial and land use planning to prioritise climate-resilient and low-carbon urban infrastructure</p> <p>Encouraging the transition to a circular economy for more efficient use of resources, and more sustainable consumption and production patterns</p> <p>Mainstreaming climate mitigation and adaptation priorities in stimulus packages and investments to recover from the crisis</p> <p>Stimulating the local economy (e.g. local food production), while rethinking short mile logistics</p>
	15. Which of the following actions can best help your city or region transition towards smarter cities and regions? (Please rank from 1 to 5 – 1 being the top priority)	<p>Ensuring that new technology in public transport (e.g. application-based ride services) is inclusive and sustainable including for those with reduced mobility and those in underserved communities</p> <p>Advancing the data measurement agenda to better assess the smart cities' performance and their contribution to urban residents' well-being and inclusive growth</p> <p>Adopting appropriate regulation for the sharing and gig economy to further employment security, protecting the public interest and workers' social safety nets, considering social distancing rules to be applied in the long run</p>

Section	Question	Options
		Leveraging digitalisation to deliver more efficient, sustainable, affordable and inclusive local public services, such as real-time data, electronic congestion tolls, smart parking systems, IoT sensors and smart contracts
		Using public procurement for innovation to purchase innovation-driven solutions
	16. How can the SDGs help strengthen citizens' trust in their governments and achieve SDG 16? (Please rank from 1 to 4 – 1 being the top priority)	Providing a framework for policy making
		Improving transparency of policy-making processes
		Providing an accountability mechanism that allows tracking the progress of policy outcomes
		Engaging citizens and territorial stakeholders in local and regional policy making

Source: OECD-CoR Survey on the SDGs as a Framework for COVID-19 Recovery in Cities and Regions.

Annex B. Examples of policies, priorities, strategies and actions implemented by cities, regions and other stakeholders to contribute to the SDGs in the recovery phase

Table A B.1. Examples of policies, strategies and actions

Group of respondents	Example
Cities and regions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The city of Tampere, Finland, includes SDG targets in the preparation of new urban strategies and, where relevant, considers the SDGs in the update of the governance strategy. • In the city of Assens, Denmark, the SDGs are incorporated in the City Council's Vision 2030. • The city of Manresa, Spain, uses participatory processes with both local stakeholders and citizens, including young students of 12 to 18 years of age to create and develop local ambitions to achieve the SDGs. The city believes that citizen engagement, support from higher administrative levels, a dedicated budget and co-operation with other cities contribute to the success of the SDGs in Manresa. • The city of Bradford, United Kingdom, is developing an economic recovery and regeneration agenda for sustainable development featuring the SDGs. Additionally, the city uses the SDGs as a framework to measure social, economic, cultural and environmental impact and value. • The city of Loures, Portugal, has identified a strong commitment of local administration as a success factor for the implementation of the SDGs in the city. • The city of Pinneberg, Germany, participates in several co-operation projects on affordable housing and considers co-operation with regional authorities to be a key factor for successful SDG implementation. • The city of Hamburg, Germany, collaborates with the Hamburg Metropolitan Region on projects such as affordable housing and open space protection to contribute to the successful implementation of the SDGs. • The city of Sintra, Portugal, actively collaborates with universities to facilitate multi-level stakeholder platform dialogues contributing to local voluntary reviews.
Other stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Local Government Association in England is aligning its business plan with the SDGs in order to support local councils. In that way, the association aims to ensure that local governments in England are empowered to innovate, create services that are tailored to their localities and resilient to future development challenges. Another objective is to address the inequalities the pandemic has exposed and rebuild the economy. • The Institute of Environmental Engineering of the Polish Academy of Sciences is embedding the SDGs in its research agendas and projects, for example through rainwater management and capture projects. • The research institute Nordregio has indirectly contributed to Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) by reporting to the Nordic Council of Ministers' sustainability strategy.

