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LEAVE NO PLACE BEHIND

The discursive construction of Sustainable Development Goals in local implementation plans

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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract

This thesis examines how urban sustainability is constructed in the local implementation plans of Sustainable Development Goals, and whether a common discourse can be outlined of them. Cities and other local authorities are increasingly assuming the global responsibility for sustainable development actions alongside the nation-states. In this case, the commitment is demonstrated by voluntarily committing to monitoring progress towards meeting the Sustainable Development Goals as part of a global city network. The potential reasons for cities to engage in such global city networks for sustainability are a disappointment to global cooperation efforts by nation-states, a possibility for peer learning, sharing new practices, and seeking branding possibilities.

A sample of local commitments, Voluntary Local Reviews, are analysed in terms of their discursive construction. The analysis is based on the theoretical constructions of environmental policy discourses by Maarten Hajer and John Dryzek. By focusing on policy discourses, it becomes possible to understand how certain issues are organized into politics while others are organized out. The research focuses on nine Voluntary Local Reviews released in 2019 by Bristol, Buenos Aires, Hamamatsu City, Helsinki, Los Angeles, Oaxaca, Mannheim, New York City and Taipei City.

The research shows that although cities have internalized the common principles of sustainable development, mainly deriving from the Agenda 2030, many of them are interpreted in various ways. The common framework by Voluntary Local Review offers only a vague guideline for the reviews which leads to cities rather resorting to copying the models from each other or developing their own. The inherent ambiguity that is connected to the term sustainable development is not addressed in any of the reviews, nor is an explicit definition of the used sustainability concept offered in any of them. This supports the notion that cities engage in the discursive construction of (urban) sustainable development with the reviews. Based on the reviews, the following Sustainable Development Goals are considered as most relevant for cities: goal 11 (Sustainable cities and communities), goal 8 (Decent work and economic growth), goal 10 (Reduced inequalities) and goal 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions).

Cities also actively position themselves as global sustainability actors in their reviews. They position themselves as eager to bear a global responsibility and as most relevant actors for citizens, close to their everyday lives. Furthermore, they express an urge to inspire other cities nationally and globally to also join in reporting and commit to sharing their progress on global arenas, such as in the United Nation's High-Level Political Forum. In their connection to national sustainable development reporting, broadly two approaches can be identified. In some situations, national reporting is not mentioned in a review at all and, consequently, its role is highlighted. This applies mostly in situations where national actors are not considered as active as city actors. In other situations, cities see their reporting as complementary to the national one and even consider cooperation as their duty thanks to shared values with national actors.

Voluntary Local Review reporting offers an interesting case of voluntary bottom-up commitment by cities to engage in global sustainability spheres and its significance is likely to only increase in the future. Based on results, reporting on the local level requires a careful balancing between adapting goals and indicators to locally relevant form, on one hand, and ensuring that they are general enough to allow for comparison, on the other hand. As sustainable development and Sustainable Development Goals are characterized by ambiguity concerning their precise definitions, the current local reporting offers considerable judgement for cities in terms of what to include in the reporting. More precise frameworks and indicators would allow that also cities with lesser resources could engage in this sustainability reporting.

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Sustainable development, sustainability discourses, urban sustainability, Voluntary Local Review, discourse analysis, Sustainable Development Goals, Agenda 2030

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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract

Tutkielmassa tarkastellaan, kuinka urbaani kestävyys rakentuu kestävän kehityksen Agenda 2030 -tavoitteiden paikallisen toimeenpanon suunnitelmissa, ja missä määrin niistä voidaan tunnistaa yhteinen kestävyysdiskurssi. Kaupungit ja muut paikallistoimijat yhä suuremmassa määrin omaksuvat vastuuta kestävän kehityksen toimista valtioiden rinnalla kansainvälisellä tasolla. Tässä tapauksessa sitoutuminen kansainvälisiin sopimuksiin näyttäytyy vapaaehtoisena kestävän kehityksen tavoitteiden saavuttamisen mittaamisena osana laajempaa kansainvälisten kaupunkien verkostoa. Kaupungit osallistuvat kansainvälisiin kestävän kehityksen kaupunkiverkostoihin esimerkiksi kompensoidakseen pettymystään valtioiden kansainvälisen yhteistyön puutteellisuuteen, oppiakseen vertaisiltaan, jakaakseen parhaita käytäntöjään ja hakeakseen brändihyötyjä.

Analysoitava aineisto koostuu yhdeksästä vapaaehtoisesta paikallisesta raportista (Voluntary Local Review). Tutkielman teoreettinen viitekehys rakentuu Maarten Hajerin ja John Dryzekin teorioille ympäristöpoliittisista diskursseista. Politiikkadiskurssien tutkimus auttaa ymmärtämään, kuinka tietyt kysymykset nähdään poliittisina ongelmina ja vastaavasti toisia taas ei. Otokseen kuuluvat raportit on kaikki julkaistu vuonna 2019, ja ne ovat julkaisseet Bristol, Buenos Aires, Hamamatsu City, Helsinki, Los Angeles, Oaxaca, Mannheim, New York City ja Taipei City.

Tutkimuksen perusteella kaupungit ovat omaksuneet kestävän kehityksen perusperiaatteet, jotka määritellään suurilta osin Agenda 2030- toimintaohjelmassa, vaikka monia niistä on tulkittu eriävin tavoin. Voluntary Local Review -malli tarjoaa korkeintaan suurpiirteisiä ohjeita raportoinnin toteuttamiseksi, minkä vuoksi kaupungit turvautuvat kopioimaan raportointimalleja toisiltaan tai kehittämään omiaan. Kestävän kehityksen käsitteeseen liittyvää epämääräisyyttä ei huomioida yhdessäkään raportissa, eikä sitä määritellä niissä tarkasti. Tämän perusteella voidaan todeta, että kaupungit osallistuvat (urbaanin) kestävän kehityksen diskursiiviseen rakentumiseen raporteillaan. Seuraavat kestävän kehityksen tavoitteet nähdään raporteissa tärkeimmiksi kaupungeille: tavoite 11 (Kestävät kaupungit ja yhteisöt), tavoite 8 (Ihmisarvoista työtä ja talouskasvua), tavoite 10 (Eriarvoisuuden vähentäminen) ja tavoite 16 (Rauha, oikeudenmukaisuus ja hyvä hallinto).

Kaupungit korostavat raporteissa aktiivisesti omaa toimijuuttaan kestävyyskysymyksissä kansainvälisesti. Ne näyttäytyvät innokkaina kantamaan kansainvälistä vastuuta, kaupunkilaista ja hänen arkeaan lähimpänä olevalla tasolla. Lisäksi ne ovat innokkaita jakamaan raportointimallia kansallisesti sekä kansainvälisesti muille kaupungeille ja raportoimaan omasta edistyksestään kansainvälisissä yhteyksissä, kuten YK:n Korkean tason kestävän kehityksen poliittisella forumilla. Kaupunkien raportoinnin suhde kansalliseen raportointiin ilmenee kahdella eri tavalla. Joissain tapauksissa kansallista raportointia ei mainita ollenkaan, jolloin kaupungin itsenäinen rooli korostuu. Tällainen suhde liittyy usein tilanteisiin, joissa valtiolliset toimijat eivät ole olleet aktiivisia. Toisissa tapauksissa kaupunkien raportointi nähdään kansallista täydentävänä, ja kaupungit kokevat yhteistyön jopa velvollisuudekseen.

Vapaaehtoinen paikallinen raportointi on kiinnostava esimerkkitapaus vapaaehtoisesta ruohonjuuritason kaupunkien sitoumuksesta kansainväliseen kestävään kehitykseen, ja sen merkitys tulee luultavasti vain kasvamaan tulevaisuudessa. Tulosten pohjalta voidaan todeta, että paikallistason raportointi vaatii tarkkaa tasapainoilua tavoitteiden ja mittarien paikallisen sovittamisen ja toisaalta niiden riittävän yhdenmukaisuuden välillä, jotta ne olisivat olennaisia, mutta vertailtavissa. Kestävän kehityksen ja Agenda 2030 -tavoiteohjelman ollessa tulkinnanvaraisia määritelmiltään nykyinen raportointimalli mahdollistaa kaupungeille merkittävästi omaa harkintaa siitä, mitä sisällyttää raportointiinsa. Tarkempi viitekehys ja määritellyt indikaattorit mahdollistaisivat raportoinnin myös sellaisille kaupungeille, joilla on vähemmän resursseja käytettävissään.

Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords Kestävä kehitys, kestävyysdiskurssit, kestävät kaupungit, Vapaaehtoinen paikallinen raportointi, diskurssianalyysi, kestävän kehityksen tavoitteet, kestävän kehityksen Agenda 2030 -toimintaohjelma
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CONTENTS

List of abbreviations

Agenda 2030	Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
GIZ	German Cooperation for Sustainable Development in Mexico
HLPF	High-Level Political Forum
IGES	Institute for Global Environmental Strategies
MGDs	Millennium Development Goals
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SDSN	Sustainable Development Solutions Network
UN	The United Nations
UN-Habitat	United Nations Human Settlements Programme
UNESCO	The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
VLR	Voluntary Local Review
VNR	Voluntary National Review
WCED	World Commission on Environment and Development

1 INTRODUCTION

> *"The battle for sustainable development will be won or lost in cities."*
> *(*Eugenia Birch, Co-Chair of the SDSN Cities network and Professor at the
> University of Pennsylvania)

Cities and other local authorities are increasingly assuming the global responsibility for sustainable development actions alongside the nation-states. On the other hand, some cities are even committing voluntarily when their nation-states are opting out of the commitments. New York City, for example, has been at the forefront of local sustainability actions whereas the United States has increasingly withdrawn from global treatises such as the Paris Agreement on climate change (Friedman, 2019).

The United Nations General Assembly adopted *Transforming our world: the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development* on 25 September 2015. It lays out 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030 as well as the general guidelines on their implementation (see Annex 1 for full targets & Picture 1 for the visual icons). The resolution recognizes the importance of urbanization in sustainable development in the SDG 11: *Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable* (United Nations General Assembly, 2015.) Furthermore, local authorities are considered as a core stakeholder group in the implementation of all the goals in an increasingly urban world where a little over half of the population now lives in cities (Kanuri, Revi, Espey, Kuhle, & Sustainable Development Solutions Network for Sustainable Cities, 2016, p. 11).

Besides the tremendous potential that these cities hold for meeting the SDGs, they also host several development issues: According to the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (UN-Habitat, 2016), cities occupy only 2% of the Earth's land but account for 60% of energy consumption and at least 70% of global carbon emissions. Furthermore, 828 million people are currently estimated to live in slums and the number is rising. The number of megacities with 10 million citizens or more is rising and in the coming years, most of these megacities will be in the developing world. (UN-Habitat, 2016.)

Picture 1 Sustainable Development Goals depicted with visual icons

Unlike its predecessor the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Sustainable Development Goals were initiated in close cooperation with several stakeholder groups, researchers, and civil society to ensure a wide representation of various views and actors. Local authorities have been active to advocate for the importance of urban sustainability perspectives from early on in the drafting process of the SDGs. The Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, a coordination mechanism bringing together the major international networks of local governments, campaigned for the inclusion of the Goal 11 into the Agenda 2030 and has supported cities in their efforts of localizing the SDGs (the Global Taskforce, 2019.)

Even though many local authorities are committed to advancing sustainable development, the implementation of the SDGs at a local level is still considered challenging. Adapting the SDGs to the local implementation requires awareness of the local context, the complexity of the urban systems and the local governance system as well as access to reliable data, just to name a few issues (Zinkernagel, Evans, & Neij, 2018). Additionally, although these actors agree on the importance of cities in sustainable governance, they might have distinct epistemological understandings of the concepts of a city and urban processes (Barnett & Parnell, 2016).

The research on this topic has previously focused on the comparison of the Agenda 2030 and its drafting process with the previous sustainability policy tools from the perspective of urban actors (see Barnett & Parnell, 2016; Graute, 2016; Zinkernagel et al., 2018), and on drafting recommendations concerning their implementation at the local level, while also examining the challenges that might arise in doing so (see Kanuri et al., 2016; Meuleman & Niestroy, 2015; Zinkernagel et al., 2018). Some researchers have already reviewed the preliminary implementation of the SDGs, but they have mostly focused on one case study or compared few case studies (see Gustafsson & Ivner, 2018; Krellenberg, Bergsträsser, Bykova, Kress, & Tyndall, 2019).

This thesis aims to shift the focus more towards the implementation of SDGs and analyse how global cities are discursively constructing sustainable development and their role in global sustainability policies through SDGs reporting. Because localization efforts have only recently gained prominence, little research is yet done on the commitments made by cities to achieve the SDGs. The theoretical focus will be on the sustainable development discourses, as outlined by Maarten Hajer (1995) and John Dryzek (2013), and to what extent the local actors share the common narrative when discussing sustainable development in the framework of the SDGs. The chosen case studies utilise the Voluntary Local Review (VLR) method of reporting.

This thesis progresses with an overview of cities as glocal sustainability actors, urban sustainability agendas, and the local level implementation of the SDGs (chapter 2). In chapter 3, I present a theoretical overview of sustainability discourses to guide my analysis. The methodology and the Voluntary Local Review as well as the chosen case studies are presented in chapter 4. Finally, empirical analysis and discussion on the results conclude this thesis in chapters 5 and 6.

2 CITIES AS GLOBAL SUSTAINABILITY ACTORS

To understand how cities have assumed their role as global sustainability actors, it is important to link the current actorhood into broader developments. In this sector, I first review how cities have gained new prominence on their global action and how the organization into global networks occurs in the case of sustainability. Next, I outline the current trajectory of global sustainability actions eventually leading to the Agenda 2030 initiation. The final part of the section examines the theoretical recommendations and challenges regarding the implementation of the SDGs at the local level.

2.1 Cities as glocal actors

In his influential book *If Mayors Ruled The World: Dysfunctional Nations, Rising Cities*, Benjamin Barber (2013) claims that nation-states are no longer able to establish cross-border collaboration on a global level due to their natural inclination towards rivalry and mutual exclusion. Therefore, alternative institutions should be found, capable of establishing cooperation to tackle wicked global problems while maintaining democratic governance. He suggests that cities, already governed by voluntary cooperation and pragmatism, should take the global role they already play unofficially. (Barber, 2013, pp. 3–4.) The book has sparked a vivid scholarly debate on the role of cities in the global sphere [1]. Barber's thinking represents a larger trend of *glocalization* − joining local and global levels of governance without the intervening national level.

Barber (2013) lists several reasons why cities would be a better suit for global cooperation than nation-states. First, cities as smaller units allow for more meaningful democratic participation for citizens and can engage in more democratic global cooperation. Second, cities are responsible for the execution of legislation which places them on direct responsibility to cope with the outcomes of any political decision-making. Third, he asserts that cities have already established new forms of cooperation that are not necessarily

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[1] Barber has also been criticized of making an overly bold claim with little theoretical support (for example, see Scerri, 2014).

formal, such best practice sharing and voluntary commitments, of which the Voluntary Local Reviews are a good example. (Barber, 2013, Chapter 1.)

City networks have emerged as a popular form of cooperation also on sustainability issues. By establishing cooperative networks, cities can overcome the territoriality trap of nation-states in addressing global issues (Keiner & Kim, 2007, p. 3). It is argued that participation in the international city networks facilitates the sharing of commonly accepted knowledge and learning as well as provide legitimacy to its members (Mejia-Dugand, Kanda, & Hjelm, 2016, p. 4). In the case of urban sustainability, this has taken the form of showcase cities sharing their best practices and establishing measurement standards (Mejia-Dugand et al., 2016, p. 6). The Voluntary Local Review -model represents this standard creation as it aims to provide a common framework for SDG measuring pioneered by active exemplar cities such as New York City.

By taking part in these international city networks for sustainability, the cities can strengthen their profile as international, modern, and progressive cities, therefore, turning the participation into a strategic decision to increase the attractiveness of the city (Mocca, 2017, p. 706). In their research of Swedish municipalities and their belonging to international city networks, Mejia-Dugand et al. (2016, p. 13) found that cities had diverse expectations of the benefits of belonging to the networks. Some hoped for funding opportunities while others expected to exchange experiences and learn from their peers. It was also found that for major (capital) cities, such as Stockholm in this case, some branding value was also considered for their exceptional performance in sustainability projects. Nevertheless, the actualization of these benefits remains difficult to verify thus remaining rather as expected outcomes than realized ones. (Mejia-Dugand et al., 2016.) Moreover, all best practices are not necessarily transferable across various urban contexts and cultures making benchmarking and adopting new practices more complicated (Keiner & Kim, 2007). Interestingly, some findings indicate that cities' participation in the sustainability networks is less motivated by the political will to improve their environmental performance and more by a wider strategy of city regeneration in which sustainability plays a role

(Mocca, 2017, p. 706).

The global networks are not always successful in capturing the diversity of urban sustainable activities globally. In terms of geographical scope, cities are unevenly represented in these networks. For example, Chinese and Indian cities have not been that active in international networks, whereas developing cities in Africa and South America have demonstrated high activity in several networks. Similarly, North American, Asian, and Australian cities are also underrepresented. (Keiner & Kim, 2007, p. 1389.) In the future, these networks are likely to accommodate more developing urban regions and cities to their networks.

The extent to which the networks can transcend the traditional geographical boundaries and foster new cooperation is also questioned. According to Keiner and Kim (2007), many of the networks continue to be restricted by the established structures that bind regions together. These often continue to hinder the networks from reaching their full potential and divide the member cities into frontrunners, capable of developing practices and taking responsibility, and free-riders, looking to take advantage of the network with little own contribution. (Keiner & Kim, 2007, p. 1393.)

Nevertheless, the current cooperation models are inherently conditioned by the sovereignty of the state, especially due to its juridical and fiscal authority (Barber, 2013). These limitations will continue to bound the extent to which cities can establish global activities. Their successful international capacities seem to require that cities engage in activities that supplement, rather than replace, national efforts and find ways to offset their limited capabilities for action.

2.2 History of global urban sustainability agendas

Parnell (2016, p. 538) describes that historically there has not always been agreement on the necessity of the global urban development agenda. The first real attempt to draft such an agreement on urban issues globally occurred in the Habitat conference of 1976 which then

initiated the whole UN-Habitat program mandated by the UN General Assembly. At first, the drafted urban development policies managed only partly to consider the complexities of urban life with a special focus on the global south and the urban poor. (Parnell, 2016.) Since then, the scope and ideas about cities have transformed dramatically and started to address the potential role of cities in, for example, tackling sustainable development issues.

Neither is Agenda 2030 the first global sustainability framework that has also been applied to the local level. For example, the Agenda 21 action plan was widely adapted by over 6000 local authorities in the aftermath of the influential Rio Earth Summit in 1992 (Kanuri et al., 2016, p. 26). Despite the marked interest that the Agenda 21 and Millennium Development Goals sparked on local actors, these both projects lacked in terms of adequate evaluation or impact assessment after their implementation (Graute, 2016, p. 5). Inadequate evaluation of these previous programs before the adoption of the Agenda 2030 entails a risk that local actors, unaware of previous sustainability actions, repeat the same mistakes as before.

Because the Agenda 2030 was initiated from the aftermath of Millennium Development Goals, the lessons learned from the MDGs impacted the way that the SDGs were initiated globally. Whereas the MDGs aimed to improve the quality of life of especially those living in developing countries, the Agenda 2030 strived towards a more encompassing agenda, taking into account all the aspects of sustainability, applicable to all countries at all levels (Zinkernagel et al., 2018, p. 11). The approach to drafting the Agenda was also novel: it was acknowledged that to foster urban sustainability transformations, local actors need to be included throughout the whole process (Patel et al., 2017, p. 786). One way that this approach was implemented was the enforcement of stakeholder groups or Major Groups to actively participate in the debates, negotiations, and consultations on the drafting phase. The SDGs became the first mandatory UN statistical reporting mechanism on sustainability that includes a clear sub-national component [2] and, therefore, also formally addressed, at least to some extent, the importance of urban transformations in reaching sustainability (Patel et al., 2017, p. 788).

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[2] This subnational component is connected to measuring progress on the SDG 11, Sustainable cities and communities.

The monitoring of urban sustainability has also developed over time according to the political importance of various issues. Zinkernagel et al. (2018) have compared previous sets of indicators with the SDGs to notice that, over time, some issues (such as water consumption, building regulations, and a modal split of transportation) have lost importance whereas others (such as the proportion of the population living in slums, teacher training, and internet connections) have gained more prevalence. Historically, cities have focused on monitoring especially environmental degradation and economic development and quantitative indicators have prevailed over qualitative ones. (Zinkernagel et al., 2018, p. 9.) Whereas currently the emphasis has shifted towards preventive measures, and indicators sets have been implemented to account better for complex urban issues.

This developing focus might be partly due to the lack of common definition for sustainability and sustainable cities which has led to shifting focus according to political interests prevalent at each moment. Moreover, the monitoring of issues has developed according to the New Public Management ideals towards more individualistic needs and overall improvement of the quality of life of citizens (Zinkernagel et al., 2018, p. 9). In comparison with the previous monitoring tools, the overall number of indicators measured has also increased over time, amounting to a total of 232 in the case of the SDGs. The SDGs differ from previous tools of sustainability management especially in its increased focus on urban sustainability and so-called soft policies, such as gender equality and inequalities, attempting to better capture complex societal questions and issues than the previous systems (Zinkernagel et al., 2018, p. 11). Nevertheless, this has resulted in a substantive set of more general goals and indicators that further increase the need for localization efforts, especially in an urban setting.

2.3 Localization of the SDGs

Localization refers to the process in which the SDGs are adapted, implemented, and monitored at the local level (Kanuri et al., 2016, p. 11). To understand how the local implementation of the SDGs differs from national implementation processes, it is necessary to review how the localization of the SDGs has advanced globally. In this section, I

examine how localization of the Agenda 2030 has been addressed in the previous research literature.

As the 17 SDGs of the Agenda 2030 form an interlinked approach to achieving sustainability, an integrated approach is also needed when the implementation plans are considered. It is not enough for a city to cherry-pick their favourite goals for implementation and ignore others considered as irrelevant. For example, realizing the urban SDG 11 is intrinsically connected with other SDGs, such as SDGs 2 (Food security), 6 (Clean water and sanitation), 9 (Investment in infrastructure) and 12 (Sustainable resource use) (Fenton & Gustafsson, 2017). To succeed in the process of translating the SDGs into a local context, concrete measures and monitoring indicators need to be developed to ensure that sustainability vision is implemented (Krellenberg et al., 2019, p. 2).

As a basis of this implementation, the Agenda 2030 recommends that the SDGs are integrated into existing tools for governing instead of developing new tools:

> "Each Government will also decide how these aspirational and global targets should be incorporated into national planning processes, policies and strategies. It is important to recognize the link between sustainable development and other relevant ongoing processes in the economic, social and environmental fields." (United Nations General Assembly, 2015.)

In the case of cities and local authorities, this integrative approach most commonly refers to a local-level strategy and its design as steering sustainable development. Implicit in the resolution is that instead of creating a new planning process, policy or strategy, the SDGs would rather be included in existing forms of governing. This integration aims to bridge the gap between policy level and implementation to ensure that goals become part of the everyday work as well as management in cities (Gustafsson & Ivner, 2018, p. 306).

Sustainable Development Solution Network (2016) has created a guide for cities wishing to integrate the SDGs in their actions. It is probably the most widely used tool for SDG localization when it comes to practical implementation guidelines. The guide establishes four steps approach into the SDG implementation in cities:

1. "Initiate an inclusive and participatory process
2. Set the local SDG agenda
3. Planning for SDG implementation
4. Monitoring and evaluation" (Kanuri et al., 2016, pp. 1–2).

Intended as a general framework for implementation, these steps are defined in broad terms and therefore Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) recommends that they should be applied considering local realities rather than treating the approach as something that could be applied similarly everywhere.

For cities to become global actors on sustainability, they need to be able to report effectively on their targets and indicators (Patel et al., 2017, p. 786). However, a number of factors complicate the adaptation of SDGs to the local level. In the following, I outline these factors.

Firstly, monitoring of the SDGs requires access to reliable data on distinct aspects of sustainability. The choice of indicators depends on the definition of sustainability applied: alternative definitions promote alternative indicators being chosen and will, therefore, account for diverse levels of progress (Zinkernagel et al., 2018, p. 4). Integrated goals, such as the SDGs, require integrated indicators that can measure the impacts on economic, social, and environmental levels as well as to take into account the interrelatedness of the goals (Graute, 2016, p. 6). Developing such measurement tools is difficult even on the national level, not to mention aggregating such data to a local level. Moreover, many of the suggested indicator sets for urban contexts favour quantitative indicators, whereas qualitative indicators would offer valuable information to complement the assessment especially when complex societal issues are addressed (Zinkernagel et al., 2018, p. 12).

Besides, cities can be characterized by a certain level of informality in terms of their economic and human settlements, often exceeding the administrative borders of the city. The second challenge for localizing the SDGs is to define how these externalities, created by their actions but extending the official borders, are accounted for in measuring (Zinkernagel et al., 2018, p. 2). This further increases the need for a more holistic and cross-sectoral approach instead of measurements based on the established borders (Patel et

al., 2017, p. 795). As a result of these complexities, the indicators of urban sustainability are chosen often rather based on political prioritization and the availability of data on issues considered important than following a holistic approach to address the complex issue in all its dimensions.

The third issue related is the translation of 17 interrelated goals into everyday governance of diverse local authorities. This can be challenging but it defines the success of the whole agenda. According to Graute (2016, p. 6), nation-states easily focus on setting the political agenda rather than the achievement of the goals, which often occurs on a local level. Depending on the governance structure, local actors have diverse opportunities to address issues politically (Zinkernagel et al., 2018, p. 7). Their ability to act on various issues is reliant to the extent that governance is decentralized nationally. In addition to local and regional authorities being tasked with distinct responsibilities in different countries, these responsibilities can also be allocated to separate authorities in distinct geographical areas (Gustafsson & Ivner, 2018, p. 303). Moreover, local authorities are likely required to cooperate with varying stakeholder groups beyond the city administration to receive all the data required for reporting and, therefore, cross the boundaries that usually exist between distinct levels and sectors of governance and policy-making (Patel et al., 2017, p. 793). In general, a more integrated way of working and sharing will be increasingly needed to efficiently address complex urban issues and avoid overlapping data gathering to ensure that effective coordination of reporting is established (Gustafsson & Ivner, 2018, p. 314).

Adopting the SDGs to a local level entails careful consideration of policy relevance and political prioritization in the local context to create a policy-relevant and measurable indicator set. However, this can compromise the level of universality of these goals because cities have various practices based on which they collect data and define some contested concepts of urban development, such as slum or informal housing (Simon et al., 2016, p. 61). Balancing between these two aspects is the fourth related complexity. At best, localization can reduce complexity around the Agenda 2030 but, at worst, it can focus too much on locally relevant aspects, therefore, compromising the implementation as a whole and failing to address the interconnectedness resulting from urban complexities

(Zinkernagel et al., 2018, pp. 2, 12). Patel (2017, p. 795) further emphasizes that the whole process of monitoring needs to be relevant for policymakers beyond the level of performance management: data, as gathered, should be such that it would benefit in urban planning and inform the concrete decision-making at the local level to avoid turning SDG reporting into laborious reporting exercise. However, too great adaptation to local priorities might result in measuring only aspects that already look positive in that local context.

Fifthly, the understandings of the dynamics of urbanization vary globally. The debates that have dominated the discussions on the importance of cities are predominately Western and developed in their context in cities that are changing due to deindustrialization, reconfiguration of local-central state relationships, and digital social life (Barnett & Parnell, 2016, p. 95). These dynamics are not necessarily directly transferable to other demographically or geographically distinct contexts in which the dynamics of urbanization are equally occurring but taking a variety of forms.

Urbanization must be carried out inclusively to fully realize its potential for meeting the Agenda 2030. Achieving a socially just urban sustainable transformation is the sixth related complexity, as the social dimension of urban sustainability is often argued to be neglected in relation to other dimensions. McGranahan et al. (2016) critically examine whether growth-dominated urbanization strategies can result in inclusive urbanization. According to them, exclusionary urbanization can at worst lead to a trajectory of inequality that is increasingly difficult to reverse in the future. These exclusionary urbanization strategies often result from political prioritization that sets the economic growth as the priority to then address social and environmental issues later because of their political contradictions with economic growth. These contradictions, however, do not need to reflect reality because balanced urbanization can lead to more sustainable growth overtime on all its aspects by creating more favourable conditions for growth over time. (McGranahan et al., 2016.)

Finally, the localization challenges are not adequately addressed as part of the global process. Despite the acknowledged growing importance of cities and urban settlements worldwide, cities and local authorities are granted a limited role in the international

framework of the UN, where they are only indirectly represented by their national governments in the intergovernmental bodies (Graute, 2016, pp. 6–7). The representation of the Major Groups was accepted in the Rio Conference in 1992 to ensure a wider consultation of the relevant stakeholder groups, one of which is the Local Authorities (Parnell, 2016, p. 535). Graute (2016, pp. 8–9) describes that High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) was designed in a manner that highlighted the importance of including Major Groups in the governing process of the Agenda 2030. The HLPF improves the participation possibilities of Major Groups by granting them with comprehensive participation opportunities to this event, formed as the main platform for monitoring progress achieved in the Agenda 2030 globally. Despite the more participative format of the HLPF, the formal participation on the UN system is still through nation-states and, consequentially, other levels of government are not officially acknowledged (Parnell, 2016, p. 533). Therefore, cooperation between diverse sectors of governance is still largely moderated by the nation-states themselves and could be hindered by their weak coordination capacities. This multi-level and multi-actor governance requires a clear division of responsibilities as well as the establishment of a cooperation system between separate levels of governance (Zinkernagel et al., 2018, p. 2)

In the process of adopting the SDGs into the local level, some evaluations of sustainability strategies have been carried out. Krellenberg et al. (2019) have examined the current sustainability strategies of four cities – Hamburg, Magdeburg, St. Petersburg, and Milwaukee. They conclude that each of the cities struggles currently to establish such a comprehensive and integrated sustainability strategy that would be required in the case of the SDGs. For example, their existing plans manage to capture diverse aspects of sustainability to a varying degree, their stakeholder participation is lacking, and coordination between separate actors is carried out only partly. According to them, lacking commitment in these respects leads to fragmented initiatives instead of an integrated approach. (Krellenberg et al., 2019, pp. 14–16.)

2.4 Summary

As outlined above, cities have gradually increased their roles as global actors. Several possible explanations for this development can be considered: Cities could have established global cooperation in response to the inability of nation-states to reach the required commitment. Alternatively, cities are increasingly looking into their global counterparts to share the best practices and learn from each other voluntarily when it comes to, for example, sustainability. The motivations for participating in these cooperation projects vary: they might seek legitimacy for their actions, want to learn from those more developed or seek to brand themselves according to their exceptional performance. Whatever their reason, the actual benefits and impact of glocal action are much harder to verify.

When it comes to sustainability, the SDGs are not the first framework of sustainability action that has been localized. However, prior processes, such as Agenda 21 and the MDGs, were not adequately evaluated in terms of their impact. When the SDGs were initiated, the most significant difference to previous agendas was the greater participation of the relevant stakeholder groups, such as local authorities. They took part from the beginning and several initiatives were started to facilitate the localization of the SDGs. Despite these increased efforts, some factors remain to complicate the adaptation of the SDGs into the local context. I have summarized these in Table 1.

Table 1: The key challenges related to the localization of the SDGs

-The need for reliable data and the establishment of relevant indicators
-Lack of common definitions for units and phenomena measured
-Implementing 17 interrelated goals into everyday action
-Making the agenda policy-relevant in the local context
-Complex urban issues
-Adopting socially just urbanization strategies
- Weak role of the local authorities in the global system

3 SUSTAINABILITY DISCOURSES

The theoretical framework of this thesis is developed from environmental policy discourse theories, especially from the theories by John S. Dryzek (2013) and Maarten Hajer (1995). By framing the concept of sustainability discourse on a broader framework of environmental discourses, we can define the specific trajectories that have led to the current dominance of sustainable development discourse. Theoretically, sustainable development is then treated as a subordinate, currently dominant, discourse to a group of sustainability discourses.

The following section is organized so that I first outline the historical trajectory of environmental discourses after which I examine the specific features of sustainability discourses. The theoretical overview is complemented by the critique presented of the sustainability discourse. Finally, the research questions of the thesis are defined.

3.1. Environmental discourses

Dryzek (2013, pp. 14–17) outlines four basic types of environmental discourses: *environmental problem solving, survivalism, sustainability,* and *green radicalism.* According to him, all four share a common point of departure, that is the industrial society or industrialism. It is characterized by an overarching commitment to growth and material wellbeing it provides while suppressing concerns for the environment. Therefore, to address environmental concerns, these discourses had to consciously depart from the terms used by the industrialism and develop their own. These four approaches then differ based on their departure from the industrialism: whether they consider the transformation to require a radical or more subtle shift from the existing system and discourse and how the new system relates to the previous one. (Dryzek, 2013.) The separate approaches are classified according to their differences in Table 2.

Table 2: A classification of environmental discourses according to Dryzek (2013)

	Reformist	**Radical**
Prosaic	Problem solving	Limits and survival
Imaginative	Sustainability	Green radicalism

Environmental problem solving takes the original political status quo as given but in the need for a readjustment to better address environmental concerns via legislation. The treatments offered by these traditional institutions follow the traditional problem-solving capacities of liberal democratic governments: offering incentives for environmental action, putting a price tag on environmental harms, or improving administrative capacities. (Dryzek, 2013, pp. 75–76.) This approach is also called 'end-of-pipe' policy in that it aimed for the elimination of the pollutions and other ex-post remedial measures instead of addressing the processes due to which pollutions were created (Hajer, 1995, p. 25). It is characterized by political struggles regarding the most appropriate measures.

The basis of survivalism is that continued economic and population growth will eventually lead to meeting limits of the Earth's stock of natural resources and therefore a surge in the capacity of the ecosystem to support human activities (Dryzek, 2013, pp. 27–29). This approach was originated in 1972 in the report *Limits to Growth* by the Club of Rome (Hajer, 1995, p. 24). According to it, to avoid meeting the limits of the earth would require a total redistribution of power as well as putting an end to continuous economic growth (Dryzek, 2013). This approach is a radical departure from the status quo in comparison to the problem-solving approach.

Green radicalism presents nowadays the most radical departure from industrialism: it rejects the whole basic structure of industrial society and its conceptions of environmentalism in favour of alternative visions on society. What that vision would be continues to be a source of lively political debate. Rather than being just one discourse, it combines several distinct perspectives. They usually focus either on green politics or profoundly changing consciousness. Many of the environmental movements fall into this

category. (Dryzek, 2013, p. 185.)

Finally, sustainable development departs from an attempt to dissolve the conflict between environmental and economic values by redefining their relationship in a way that is much more complex than the one offered by survivalism discourse. Remarkably, to this day no consensus of the definition of sustainability exists but the discourse takes place around those discussions. (Dryzek, 2013, p. 145.) Hajer (1995, p. 12) similarly outlines the current sustainability discourse as a struggle between various unconventional political coalitions instead of a product of a linear, progressive, and value-free process of knowledge production. These various groups with diverging interests form a discourse coalition that develops and sustains this discourse with no single group controlling the meaning of the sustainability story-line. (Hajer, 1995). Compared to the previous discourses, it has the potential to, at least theoretically, accommodate actors from the status quo to more ambitious climate movements. Despite this, it has also been criticized as not ambitious enough, and also Dryzek characterizes it as a reformist discourse rather than a radical one. The critique of sustainability discourses is discussed more at length in section 3.3.

A close concept that overlaps to some extent with sustainable development is *ecological modernization*. It refers to the notion that solving environmental issues requires that the economy and the market must be reconceptualized along more environmentally benign lines (Dryzek, 2013, p. 170). Taking a reformist approach, it assumes that solving these issues is possible within the existing political-economic institutional frameworks. (Langhelle, 2000). For example, Maarten Hajer (1995) prefers using the term ecological modernization when referring to the development of environmental policies and discourses since the 1970s even though these two approaches differ in their basic assumptions. Therefore, I next briefly examine the conceptual differences associated with the two terms. To develop my theoretical framework, I use these two terms to some extent interchangeably while keeping in mind their recurrent differences.

Scholars treat these two concepts in various ways: Maarten Hajer (1995) treats sustainable development as subordinate to ecological modernization whereas John Dryzek (2013) develops them as separate but overlapping concepts. Oluf Langhelle (2000, pp. 308–311) considers ecological modernization as a necessary but not sufficient condition for sustainable development. According to him, sustainable development is of the two a broader concept aiming to address also issues not mentioned by ecological modernization. Its scope reaches beyond the environmental issues, though the social issues are often neglected in analyses, attempting originally to reconciliation between developmental and environmental issues. In contrast, ecological modernization was developed in relation to the experiences of western industrialized societies with little to none interest in developmental issues of social justice. (Langhelle, 2000.)

3.2. Sustainability discourses

In the following sector, I outline the common features of sustainable development as a story-line that allowed for first truly global discourse-coalition to develop on the field of environmental politics (Hajer, 1995, p. 12). Sustainable development has been the dominant global environmental discourse since the publication of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) report in 1987 (Dryzek, 2013, p. 150). Tasked by the United Nations General Assembly to propose a long-term environmental strategy for achieving sustainable development, the Commission suggested the following definition of sustainable development: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." (United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 41.) It can be considered as the first document treating issues of environmental concern and development in an integrative manner whereas, previously, they had been treated as separate issues. Its position has sparked several interest groups to attempt to redefine it in a manner suitable to their ends (Dryzek, 2013, p. 148).

According to Hajer (1995, pp. 12,65), Sustainable development was the narrative that allowed for the first time a discourse-coalition to form in the field of environmental politics. The merit of the Brundtland Committee report was to bring around the same table

such players as the IMF and World Bank who were considered as the opposition of the previous zero-growth environmental discourses. In contrast to previous discourses, it offers an attractive story-line where regulating these issues is a positive-sum game, and pollutions are seen as a matter of inefficiency whereas previous discourses had suggested tackling the environmental issues would mean a compromise in terms of economic gains and social equity. Though the discourse-coalition exists, it is not considered as strong due to the vagueness of the common storylines. (Hajer, 1995.)

Despite the considerable attention that the publication of the Brundtland report received, its definition has not gone unchallenged and, consequently, it has sparked several unsuccessful attempts to develop alternative approaches. These further attempts to develop a better definition for sustainable development have rather distanced themselves from the ambiguities of the real world, such as the attempt by UNESCO in 1996. (Dryzek, 2013, p. 148). The general acceptance over sustainable development should not be taken to mean that there would be agreement regarding its more precise definition. Rather, if examined closely, the discourse turns out to be fragmented and contradictory as actors might have contrasting ideas about the nature of the issues and what should be done to address them (Hajer, 1995, p. 16). In the following, I discuss some of the contradictory features of the discourse.

The core storyline of sustainable development departs from the developmental policies by acknowledging that the legitimate developmental aspirations of the world's peoples cannot be met if every country follows the path of already industrialized countries and eventually over-burden the world's ecosystem (Dryzek, 2013, p. 155). Yet, to carry out the transformation in a socially just manner, economic growth is necessary. The idea of sustainable development is built around the mutual importance of its three pillars: economic, environmental, and social. Their relationship is considered to be a mutually reinforcing one: improving one in the long term improves also others: alleviation of poverty will also benefit for environmental protection when abusing natural resources is no longer necessary for survival (Dryzek, 2013, p. 157).

One of the core issues in terms of the definition of the term relates to the relationship between sustainable development and economic growth: Does sustainable development require economic growth or the decoupling of these two terms? Adopting sustainable development has meant a departure from the previous zero growth discourse in that it has been acknowledged that economic growth is needed to satisfy the needs of the world's poor and ensure socially just development. This discourse takes a capitalist economy as a given prerequisite. (Dryzek, 2013, pp. 155–156.) At the same time, this perspective has been highly criticized by scholars such as Meadows, who have argued that no sustainable growth of people and capital exists but the aim should be to keep the growth in check. (Dryzek, 2013, p. 149). The Limits approach would seem to suggest that it is necessary but that the growth needs to be sustained in some ways to ensure that it is also environmentally benign and socially just.

Connected to sustaining economic growth, Dryzek (2013, pp. 156–157) argues that the ambiguity of limits is another characteristic feature of the discourse. The dominant definition of sustainable development by the Brundtland Committee is based on limits, but it leaves many open questions: What are the needs of the present that need to be met and those to be sustained? How are they met without compromising the future generations' possibilities to meet their own? The resolution does not specify where the limits lie in the case of perpetual economic growth except for the ultimate limits of the carrying capacity of the ecosystem, and that those can be pushed back by developments in modern technology. The idea being that once ecological constraints are considered, economic growth could continue indefinitely. (Dryzek, 2013.) Is this, however, sufficient for ensuring sustainability also from a social and environmental perspective?

Sustainable development as discourse applies to all levels of society: sustainability issues and solutions can be found on all levels from global to local. While its global justification can be placed on the carrying capacity of the world's ecosystem, the concrete actions need to also be taken at the local and regional levels, where the problems and solutions are located. It is recognized that to find solutions more effectively to this problem, coordination between separate actions as well as shifts of power between different levels are required.

Similarly, it is recognized that to reframe sustainable development issues appropriately, shifts of power might occur between these levels, mainly away from the national level towards global and local action. These nested systems of social and biological entities at various levels form the basis of sustainable development. (Dryzek, 2013, p. 156.) As resources are recognized to be limited, the solutions lie in their most beneficial utilization.

Dryzek (2013) continues that, in line with the idea of scalable actions, actors for sustainable development are not limited to public authorities but also businesses and civil society are considered as relevant actors. Beyond the global and national levels, the role of NGOs and the grassroots-level is also acknowledged, as demonstrated by the slogan "Think globally, act locally" (Dryzek, 2013, p. 158.) Especially, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have profoundly altered the sustainability discourses of various actors, demonstrating the sustainability actorhood and scalability of actions from the global to the perspective of a single human being.

The relationship with the environment is defined in anthropogenic terms: biodiversity is needed to ensure the sustainability of the human population and its well-being, first and foremost. At best, they all support each other in a mutually reinforcing manner. However, sustaining human development is the priority while environmental protection agenda is taken on the side as supporting human development. The metaphor of natural capital is used to portray the added value that nature provides humans with, although its connotations are economic (Dryzek, 2013, pp. 157–158.) Similarly, the WCED definition of sustainability is deconstructed by Langhelle (2000, p. 6) to mean that the satisfaction of human needs (or social justice) is the primary objective while sustainability constraint is its necessary condition: without environmental considerations, it is not possible to pursue social development after a limit.

As demonstrated by Maarten Hajer (1995) with his example of the acid rain, metaphors can work as a powerful device in the environmental discourses effectually mirroring more broader discussions. Key metaphors associated with the sustainability are organic, portraying growth and development of the environment but also the societies and personal

growth, such as education and growing awareness. (Dryzek, 2013, pp. 158–159.) These stand in stark contrast with the apocalyptic metaphors utilized by the Limits discourse.

The general overtone of the discourse is positive, emphasizing progress, and reassurance. The idea that history moves on towards social improvements and the developments of technology can help to push back the carrying capacity of resource use. Its popularity lies in the reassurance that we do not have to abandon our current lifestyles, and it is still possible to have it all: economic growth, environmental conservation, and social justice. The discourse rather emphasizes local successes in sustainable development than focuses on images of doom or the work that still needs to be done. (Dryzek, 2013, p. 159.)

Key features of the Sustainability discourse are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Key features of sustainability discourse as adapted from Dryzek (2013) and Hajer (1995)

Discourse-coalition	The common concept for parties previously opposing each other in environmental matters
Common storyline	Existing but vague
Economic growth	Economic growth necessary for development, the capitalist economy as given
Limits	Ambiguity concerning their existence, the carrying capacity of the ecosystem
Scope of action	Multilevel cooperation and decentralized between separate levels of action, nested systems of social and biological entities
Actors	At distinct levels, on both private and public organizations
Three pillars	Mutual recognition and reinforcement of the three pillars of sustainability: economic, social and environmental
Relationship to nature	Anthropogenic, a prerequisite for social development
Metaphors	Organic growth, progress and reassurance, development of technology

3.3 Critique of sustainability discourses

Sustainability as a concept has also been questioned, mainly due to its inherent ambiguity. Some authors have even claimed that it represents an example of the Laclaudian empty signifier (Brown, 2016; Davidson, 2010; Gunder, 2006). This tradition of discourse analysis, also called as post-foundational discourse analysis, differs notably from the one utilized by Dryzek (2013) and Hajer (1995) but deserves to be recognized in this context for two reasons. Firstly, it has featured considerably in this respect in urban planning literature, whose scholars have argued that it has become a new paradigm of these planning practices, leading also to some adverse uses. Secondly, leaving this prominent critical tradition out of the picture might skew the conception significantly towards a positive outlook with a little explicit notion on its potential misuses. It should still be noted that the Laclaudian tradition is utilized as a tangent in this thesis, while the theoretical framework mainly builds around the conceptions of Hajer (1995) and Dryzek (2013) as the focus is drawn especially on sustainability policy discourses.

The main difference between the two approaches of discourse analysis is how they consider the relation between discourse and power. Whereas Hajer (1995) and Dryzek (2013) follow a Foucauldian tradition of discourse and power relationship (explained in chapter 4.1), the Laclaudian tradition focuses on the relationship of discourse to ideology, grounded especially on the notion of hegemony by Antonio Gramsci. According to this definition, hegemony is "an unstable equilibrium that always remains partial and temporary" (Fischer 2011, p. 78). Due to this inherent instability, the focus is drawn on strategies that aim to preserve the hegemonic balance of powers.

Ernesto Laclau defines an empty signifier as "a signifier without a signified" referring neither to the emptiness nor the fullness of the signification itself but rather to the failure of the signification process in defining its limits (Laclau, 1996, p. 36). On the one hand, each element within the signifier only carries meaning if it is presented as separate from all the other elements. On the other hand, all these differences are considered as equivalent if they

belong within the limits of the signifying system, therefore canceling the internal system of differences. This split within the system ends up constituting the identity of the system. (Laclau, 1996, p. 38.)

Examining sustainability as an empty signifier in scholarly literature stems from the field of urban planning. Michael Gunder (2006) argues that sustainability has become the transcendental ideal of urban planning while obscuring the injustices that planning has originally attempted to address under the primacy of economic concerns. Mark Davidson (2010) develops Gunder's argument further by examining how sustainability as an empty signifier has not contributed to its transformative promise on the more concrete level in urban planning. They both relate sustainability and sustainable development in a similar manner where sustainable development is seen as one of the discourses accommodated by the common empty signifier of sustainability. It has prevailed as a particularly attractive one for institutions of state and governance for it gives the economic growth an equal value to those of social and environmental (Gunder, 2006, p. 214). It has been criticized especially of sidelining social issues in favor of economic and environmental concerns.

Trent Brown (2016) aims to develop a more general notion of sustainability and sustainable development as empty signifiers. Following a Laclaudian theory of empty signifiers, he goes on to argue that the logic of equivalence present in diverse notions of sustainability is the multiple experiences of our individual and collective futures being threatened (Brown, 2016, p. 122.) The collective identity is built around a generalized sense of failure and a promise of such a society where these failures are reconciled. As constituted in this manner, the discourse excludes such discourses that have been unable to incorporate their future effect and adapt accordingly, therefore dubbed as unsustainable.

Despite the radical promise the discourse holds, it is more often used in ways not threatening the status quo. Especially sustainable development has been treated as the discourse of the dominant capitalist institutions and consequently unable to challenge the status quo and solve the fundamental issues that give rise to sustainability as an empty signifier (Brown, 2016, p. 125). Its conception of sustainability issues being vague and

ambitious regarding concrete actions has allowed many to use it to justify even unsustainable actions. By utilizing it, the existing powers have attempted to reformulate sustainability issues in such a manner that does not threaten their dominant position but allows for them to mitigate the fears of their constituents regarding the future (Brown, 2016, p. 127). The created solutions can be seen, at best, as only marginal reforms to issues that would require fundamental transformations (Gunder, 2006, p. 215).

Gunder (2006, p. 216) also points to the increased global competition, arguing that sustainable development is used as an ideological foil to promote actions for improving the economic competitiveness of cities and regions under globalization, such as urban intensification. In this regard, initiatives that are, for example, promoting greener cities are truly, first and foremost, executed to improve the global competitiveness of the area. In doing so they hope to ultimately attract certain types of citizens while not promoting better living standards for all nor addressing the environmental value of the region. (Gunder, 2006.) This argument is especially interesting when we consider the possible motives of the cities to engage in sustainability reporting and global cooperation: Are they genuinely aiming to transform their actions to be more sustainable or only seek promotional advantage through it?

3.4 Research questions

Informed by the theoretical framework, the main research questions will be as follows:

1) To what extent do local actors share a common narrative when discussing Sustainable Development Goals?
2) How can this narrative be characterized?
3) How do local actors construct their role as global sustainability actors through the narrative?

To agree on the common framework such as the Sustainable Development Goals, actors can be assumed to share, at least to some extent, a common conception of sustainable development and how it could be advanced locally. Potentially, this concept would

resemble the general conception of sustainability. Nevertheless, as previous research on sustainable development discourses seems to suggest, sustainable development can be considered as a constantly contested concept in a struggle concerning its precise meaning (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005, p. 176). The same issue has also characterized the SDGs due to the vague phrasing to the goals: Because no clear monitoring indicators or targets are set as a top-down approach expect for the national actors, the meanings various actors attach to the SDGs and sustainable development overall become paramount for their implementation. By defining urban sustainable development in certain way impacts which issues are organized in and, consequently, which are organized out.

Furthermore, in analysing the emerging narrative, it becomes possible to evaluate more generally the perceived role of local actors in implementing the SDGs. These findings represent a more practical side of the study and allow for comparisons in regards to the alternative solutions made in the reporting process. Therefore, my secondary research interests are as follows:

4) Which Sustainable Development Goals are prioritized by the cities and which ones are considered less relevant?

5) How have local actors tackled the issues related to the localization of the SDGs?

4 METHODOLOGY AND DATA

Treating sustainable development as a discourse implies that the conceptions of sustainable development are discursively constructed. The discourse analysis is, then, based on the notion that language shapes our conceptions of the world instead of being a neutral medium mirroring it (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005, p. 176). Concerning policy discourses, social constructivism is related to what Hajer (1995, p. 42) calls as the *mobilization of bias*: the process whereby certain definitions of the issue are organized into politics while others are organized out. Therefore, it is the meaning-making attached to the social phenomenon that becomes important, not the phenomenon itself. The environmental policies represent an example of this process in which the political conflict is hidden to the question of how the issue is defined. Depending on the framing of the situation, certain elements can appear as appropriate while others appear as problematic.

This section progresses as follows: I first develop the method of the thesis by discussing why and how policy discourses are researched. The data of the thesis is then analysed as I explain the Voluntary Local Review -model and discuss my case reports. Lastly, the limitations of the results and their generalization are explained.

4.1. Policy Discourses

Dryzek (2013) explains why discourses should be examined when sustainability policies are being discussed. He defines discourse as a shared way to apprehend the world by interpreting bits of information and placing them as parts of common coherent stories or accounts. As sustainability issues are often considered as complex, discourses help to make sense of the complexity by opening various perspectives into the issue. (Dryzek, 2013, pp. 9–10.) Hajer (2006, p. 67) similarly defines discourse as "an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduces through an identifiable set of practices". The research on

policy discourses might focus on a particular issue and its framings or attempt to capture a broader picture of discourse, such as the sustainable development discourse [3].

Discourses pave the way for further discussions and actions. Discourses help to construct meanings and relationships between distinct aspects. They rest on common assumptions, judgements, and contentions and, therefore, offer a starting point for further discussions by offering a common ground or language (Dryzek, 2013, p. 9.) The social construction of an issue impacts how policies around it are developed. According to Hajer (1995, p. 2), to find solutions to a political issue, it first needs to be defined in a way that gives policy-making a proper target and allows for solutions to be found. This definition allows for an analysis of the aspects that are included but also what is left out and why.

When policy discourses are concerned, they are often characterized by considerable incoherence as opposed to more formalized discourses such as the highly formalized legal discourses. This is due to their position at the intersection of various discourses, combining a range of discursive components. (Fischer, 2003, p. 84.) Yet often such discourse can be recognized with a particular claim to power and perceived legitimacy (Hajer, 2006, p. 70).

Discourses link closely with political power in that powerful discourses are easily accepted by others and they can affect which issues are advanced and which are suppressed by those subjected to them (Dryzek, 2013, p. 10). Some discourses are also bounded by political realities, such as ensuring continued economic growth or making a profit. Hajer (1995, pp. 47–48) explains the Foucauldian notion of discursive power as breaking discourses down into component discourses that are produced through various discursive practices in diverse institutional contexts. These component discourses, in turn, contain internal rules that either enable or constrain the discoursing subject: according to Foucault, institutions and interests are legitimized through discourses. The interests are produced and reproduced again over time and therefore are likely to change. (Hajer, 1995.) This notion helps us to understand how dominant discourses come to be and alter through practices of micro-powers and how

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[3] Maarten Hajer's (1995) research on the acid rain discourses represents an example of such discourse analysis that focuses on one issue and its framings specifically.

power vested in them has the potential to structure the behaviour of the discoursing subject.

As to whether we should talk about a common discourse, it should not be taken to mean that only one discourse exists but rather a multitude of them. According to social constructivism, the reality we perceive is socially constructed based on our pre-existing cultural views. The discourse in place is therefore a time- and space-specific notion of reality, reflecting our past experiences and current preoccupations as well as our conceptions of things such as nature (Hajer, 1995, p. 44). This does not mean that the issues themselves would be unreal but rather that people can interpret them and interconnections differently, causing political issues to arise (Dryzek, 2013, pp. 12–13). The issues perceived are also context related in a sense that they might reflect the current social developments taking place or focus on specific emblematic issues on the rise during that specific period – also considered as metaphors (Hajer, 1995, p. 63). Adopting a constructivist perspective allows for the discourses to be critically examined to reveal the claims that form their basis.

4.2 Discourse analysis

Following the definition of a discourse, the goal of the discourse analysis is to demonstrate how actions and objects become socially constructed, and what they mean for social organization and interaction. These constructions are created and recreated through practices or speech situations rather than merely pre-existing in someone's head. (Fischer, 2003, pp. 73–74.) Discourses are intrinsically connected to these practices and, therefore, should not be treated in isolation of them (Hajer, 2006, p. 67).

To analyse dominant discourses, it is important to understand how a certain discourse gains a dominant position in a certain field. Discursive practices provide people with subject-positions. Fischer (2003, p. 76) explains that, in politics, several competing discourses exist alongside the dominant discourse, struggling to gain recognition and power. The dominant discourses condition actors' social and power relationships in that actors begin to make sense of the world and to attach meaning to the others in terms of that discourse (Hajer, 1995, p. 53). According to Fischer (2003), to appear as relevant, these actors reshape their

view of the world by borrowing terms and concepts of the discourses available to them. Their remarks are thus situated in relation to the dominant discourse. The ideas that do not fit into any existing discourse will not receive attention or will be treated as irrelevant – no matter if their relation to the dominant discourse is approving or disapproving. (Fischer, 2003, p. 83.) In this way, actors and discourses are mutually constructing each other and reinforcing their position of power.

However, the dominant position of a discourse is not stable or static but rather subject to a constant change. Political actors engage in an argumentative struggle in which they aim to shape the perceptions of an issue according to their view and position other actors in specific ways to enforce discourse suitable for them (Fischer, 2003, p. 84). Political change can also take place resulting from the emergence of new discourses or storylines that reorder thinking. Not all discursive positioning is done consciously for a considerable part of their power remains hidden. In speech situations, people don't always recognize positioning but consider it rather as a normal way of talking. (Hajer, 1995, p. 56.)

To know why certain positions gain hegemony, an analysis must reveal the claims that define it. Especially, the focus is directed at identifying the elements that explain its emergence and persistence. These framings can make some features of the discourse to appear as problematic while others as proper or fixed. (Fischer, 2003, p. 85.) Hajer (2006, p. 71) suggests a simple two-step procedure to evaluate the influence of a discourse:1) if it is utilized to conceptualise the world (discourse structuration) and 2) if it solidifies into institutional and organization practices (discourse institutionalization).

Discursive practices play an important role in shaping discourses. Fischer (2003, pp. 83–84) explains that, as discourses are enacted through various practices, the analysis focuses on discursive practices through which actors seek to persuade others to reshape their conceptions of a situation or event. Similarly, they also seek to position other actors in specific ways. Rather than seeing these discourses as a static construction, they should be considered as constantly changing practices. The context of the interaction also has the potential to shape the discursive construction by presenting it with some possibilities and

constraints. (Fischer, 2003.) For example, rules and conventions that are taken to characterize political interaction have to be constantly reproduced and reconfirmed in actual speech situation (Hajer, 1995, p. 55).

The discourses are then identified and examined by looking at the discursive constructions such as *narratives, metaphors, and storylines* (Hajer, 2006). To make sense of distinct discourses and their impact on each other, Hajer (2006, p. 70) utilizes the concept of *discourse-coalitions* to refer to practices in the context of which actors employ the same storylines and therefore produce and transform discourses. In the case of sustainability discourses, this helps to illuminate why such diverse actors are prone to adopt certain discourse, such as sustainable development and the SDGs, while other discourses are not applied as widely.

Hajer (1995, p. 56) defines storylines as "a generative sort of narrative that allows actors to draw upon various discursive categories to give meaning to specific physical or social phenomena". According to Fischer (2003, pp. 86–88), they can suggest unity in a variety of discursive components that would otherwise have no clear connection. Storylines condense large amounts of information together with the normative assumptions and value orientations that assign meaning to these facts. They position actors and institutional practices in ongoing narratives and while that happens, they also stress some aspects of the issue and downplay others. (Fischer, 2003.) They also play a crucial role in assigning the social and moral order within the given domain through the roles assigned for various actors (Hajer, 1995, p. 65).

The appeal of the storylines lies in a fact that most people do not draw on comprehensive discursive systems to understand phenomena that exist around them but rather on these storylines: facts are told in a form of a story (Fischer, 2003, p. 86). The storylines help to summarize complex narratives to be used in discussions. This does not mean, however, that the problems would have a fixed identity but rather they are constantly renegotiated in discussions (Hajer, 2006, p. 69). According to Hajer (1995), most people utilize these concepts assuming that their reference is familiar to the others, but often it seems that

variations of a particular story exist, and these routinized forms of discourse thus mirror the existing power relationships. Discourses and definitions of the issues can be analysed in terms of whether they appear to homogenize the problem by simplifying it or heterogenize it by problematizing current definitions and opening up possibilities for the new explanations. (Hajer, 1995, p. 54.) Sustainable development can be treated as an example of a storyline.

As several competing storylines exist for political actors, finding an appropriate one becomes of the essence to maintain the position within the discursive field and, consequently, highlighting the need to have effective communicative skills. Actors of competing discourses often must decide between expressive freedom of choosing their discursive strategy or the possibility to influence by formatting their argument according to the dominant discourse. The struggle of choosing the appropriate storyline is especially prevalent in environmental politics, where actors have for long struggled between choosing the prevalent governmental storyline for greater visibility or constructing their own and risk losing influence over decision-makers. (Fischer, 2003, p. 88.) The relative strength of the storyline is based on the idea that it "sounds right": this is influenced by not only the viability of the arguments presented but also the credibility of the author presenting the idea and the discursive practice in which the storyline is uttered (Hajer, 1995, p. 63).

A metaphor is another key concept in discourse analysis. According to Hajer (2006, pp. 68–69), they are concepts that refer to something else than their usual, literal meaning. Metaphors aim to increase understanding of a certain phenomenon through another. In doing so, they might construct the way that the original phenomenon is framed profoundly, potentially bringing forth a larger conceptual shift. When political discourses are concerned, the recognition of these emblematic issues characterizing the whole policy might help understanding shifts in the policy discourses. (Hajer, 2006.) Metaphors can work also to reinvoke a whole storyline of which they are a part (Hajer, 1995, p. 62).

The third key concept is discourse-coalition. It refers to a group of actors that share the usage of a set of storylines over a particular period for various reasons. This all takes place in a certain situational framework, named by Hajer (2006) as a set of practices whereby discourse is utilized. Rather than focusing on the actors, this perspective focuses on the acts whereby these actors employ common storylines. (Hajer, 2006, pp. 70–71.) Discourse coalitions allow actors to rely on arguments that lie beyond their scope of expertise (Hajer, 1995, p. 63). This leaves more room to even contradictory positions within the discourse-coalition since it is assumed that rather than being clear and consistent, the storylines can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Actors can, therefore, interpret the issue in a manner suitable for them often leading to simplistic translations of a complex problem and a loss of meaning. Storylines provide actors with a set of references that can be used as a symbol of common understanding. (Hajer, 1995, pp. 61–62.)

4.3 Voluntary Local Reviews

The research material consists of Voluntary Local Reviews (VLR) submitted by local authorities based in various countries. Voluntary Local Review is a process initiated by local and regional governments themselves to voluntarily assess their progress in the implementation of the SDGs (Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, 2019). The format is similar to the national reporting model, which is called the Voluntary National Review (VNR). By establishing a common framework, the cities hoped for better policy integration, peer-learning, and accountability towards citizens. The first reviews were published in the UN High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) 2018 and in 2019 more cities participated from all parts of the world. (Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, 2019.) New York City has been credited as the developer and the first city to publish its VLR. For this thesis, focusing on the VLR modelled reports allows for a better comparison of various case studies than would a mere comparison of cities' sustainability reporting due to the similar reporting process as well as the reports.

At the High-Level Political Forum of 2019 altogether 22 cities committed to reporting on their progress and advancing the implementation of the SDGs at the local level by using the Voluntary Local Review model pioneered by New York City (see Picture 2) (The New York City Mayor's Office for International Affairs, 2019). This would seem to suggest a

level of increasing commitment towards the model as well as a growing number of cities submitting their reviews in the future.

Picture 2: The tweet from 2019 HLPF by the City of New York, about the commitment to the VLR model (Twitter, 26.9.2019)

Submission of the Voluntary Local Review report is based on voluntary commitment and it is to be carried out according to the resources already available. Therefore, no extensive framework or methodology is established. The VLR Declaration defines, however, three commitments that all the signatories are to comply with when designing their VLR. These commitments are as follows:

> **"Commitment 1**: To identify how existing strategies, programs, data, and targets align with the Sustainable Development Goals
>
> **Commitment 2**: To provide at least one forum where stakeholders can come together to share experiences, lessons learned, and information gathered using the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals
>
> **Commitment 3**: To submit a Voluntary Local Review to the United Nations during the United Nations High-Level Political Forum*"* (Mayor's Office of International Affairs, n.d.)

The selection of case studies includes nine VLRs made in 2019 by Bristol, Buenos Aires, City of Helsinki, Hamamatsu City, City of Los Angeles, Oaxaca, Mannheim, New York City and Taipei City. These reviews originate from diverse local authorities and contexts to assess whether discourses differ from each other based on contextual differences, and how the localization of SDGs affects the implementation roles these local authorities assume. In the process of collecting material, I excluded one report, the report by Santana de Parnaiba in Brazil, because no English version of the report was available. This can be considered to mean that it is primarily directed to the domestic audience and therefore of limited interest for the study. All the selected case studies were released in the year 2019 to allow for better comparability. More precise characterization of the selected case studies can be found in Table 4.

Table 4: Chosen case reviews

City	Name of the document	Nation-state	Has the state published a VNR?	Estimated population of the city [4]
Bristol	Bristol and the SDGs: A Voluntary Local Review of Progress 2019	The United Kingdom	yes	686 000
Buenos Aires	Voluntary Local Review Building a sustainable and inclusive Buenos Aires	Argentina	yes	3 000 000
Hamamatsu City	Hamamatsu Voluntary Local Review Report	Japan	yes	800 000
Helsinki	From Agenda to Action - The Implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals in Helsinki 2019	Finland	yes	1 305 000
Los Angeles	A Voluntary Local Review of Progress in 2019	The United States	no	3 990 000
Oaxaca	Voluntary Subnational Review	Mexico	yes	4 121 000
Mannheim	The Implementation of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals in Mannheim 2030	Germany	yes	309 000
New York City	New York City's Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development	The United States	no	8 399 000
Taipei City	2019 Taipei City Voluntary Local Review	Taiwan	yes	2 660 000

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[4] Source: World Population Review (https://worldpopulationreview.com/)

The analysed case studies represent a diverse group of global cities. These case cities could be characterized as the front runners of the VLR model, innovative and capable of acting as role models for later adopters of the model. They differ greatly in terms of their size, ranging from the metropolitan sized Buenos Aires, Los Angeles, and New York City to smaller cities like Bristol and Mannheim with far less than a million citizens. They also vary according to their geographical location, covering Latin America, North America, Europe, and Asia. Included is also one actor representing regional governance beyond the city level, namely the state of Oaxaca. Moreover, they differ in the level of economic and human development, but because development aspects are mostly reported on the level of the nation-states, no indicators of such were included in table 4.

According to the research questions, the interest is primarily drawn to three factors concerning these case studies: 1. To what extent these reviews utilize common discourse to discuss sustainable development? 2. What are the main differences that arise when these conceptions are compared with each other? 3. How are cities constructing themselves as sustainability actors in the reviews? Theoretically, the analysis will be guided by the framework of sustainability discourses introduced in chapter 3 as well as by the localization struggles of the cities outlined according to the previous research in chapter 2.

In this case, my characterization of discourse will be a broader one, in line with the methodological concept of policy discourses discussed especially by Maarten Hajer (2006) and Frank Fischer (2003). In the first reading of the material, I aim to develop an overview of the sustainable development discourse utilized in the reviews. The more specific analysis of the differences and their classification into broader categories will take place on the second reading.

4.4 Limitations

The data is not representative enough to reach any general conclusions since the process localizing the SDGs is still in its beginning. As only a limited amount of the Voluntary Local Reviews has been published and are analysed in this study, the results cannot be generalized to a wider population of cities. The study, therefore, represents a comparative case study with cases that differ markedly from each other and do not represent any consistent sampling.

Another issue that limits the scope of conclusions is the potential selectivity of the cases. As already mentioned, the case cities represent a group of early adopters of the model with potentially distinct motives to advance such reporting. In the case of city networks for sustainability (for example, see Mejia-Dugand et al., 2016), there has been discussion about the potential of branding associated with such international cooperation. It could be then assumed that well-performing cities have an incentive to communicate their best practices internationally and therefore improve their profile as a sustainability actor. Such reporting could then lead to poorer quality or even lacking reporting on sectors where the performance has not yet been equally positive to maintain a perception of exceptional performance.

Sustainability, as it has been demonstrated above, has no common definition that could be accepted by all its users. This complicates the analysis for no clear-cut definition or categories of discourses used are to be established. Despite this, I think that studying sustainability discourses is important, for, as demonstrated in this chapter, diverse ways of discussing the topic could serve to conceal various political underpinnings that are not necessarily accounted for as a general understanding of the topic is been taken as granted.

5 ANALYSIS OF SUSTAINABILITY DISCOURSES

The following section is arranged according to the research questions: I first analyse the reviews based on the roles they assign for cities and local actors in the implementation of the Agenda 2030. This is where I argue that the discourse is in its most coherent form as a great demand for the acknowledgement of the cities' role in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) exists also globally.

In the second section, I outline the common narrative construction of urban sustainable development shared by these local authorities. This analysis is complemented with the third section that focuses on the differences that arise when the diverse contexts and priorities of the cities are addressed. Due to considerable ambiguity associated with the sustainable development discourses, as discussed above, my goal is not to establish a categorization of discourses but rather to focus on the discursive features that they share and the ones they do not.

To facilitate the following of the analysis, all references to the city reviews are done by using the name of a city or a regional actor regardless of who has written the actual review. A comprehensive list of the reviews referenced as well as their authors can be found in the bibliography.

5.1. Cities as glocal actors

Cities are depicted as the executors of sustainability policies on behalf of the nation-states. On the one hand, they are responsible for executing the policies directed to them by the state actors and, on the other hand, they must also deal with the adverse effects of complex urban sustainability issues. They also represent the level of governance closest to citizens and issues of their everyday life. As summarized by the mayor of Los Angeles, Eric Garcetti: "cities are where things get done" (Los Angeles, 2019, para. 1).

Their active role is often, explicitly or implicitly, contrasted with that of the passive state governments failing to take the actions required to address these complex issues. Let it be the issue of the global democratic system or separate values of the prevailing political parties in power, cities are increasingly considering it as their duty to assume sustainability leadership even in situations where nations-states are incapable of such action. This tension is especially pressing in the situations of New York City and Los Angeles that demonstrate an active disappointment towards the inactivity of the United States in the global sphere. New York City addresses this directly in their review:

> "[G]overnments are failing to take necessary actions – – requiring that global cities such as New York take the lead and form partnerships to address these issues" (New York City, 2019, p. 20).

In situations where the values of the existing national and local governments are less contradictory, the role of these local actors is to accelerate the transformation towards sustainable policies. They also aspire to motivate other local actors nationally to join in the global commitment by offering to share their expertise. Notably, the report by Oaxaca (2019) is named as a subnational review, suggesting a direct relationship to national reporting activities. Other good examples of such a relationship are the reviews of Bristol and Helsinki, which are described as complementary for the national reporting. Bristol wishes to accelerate national policies with the release of its review.

> "This report, and any future iterations, may also serve as a source of evidence for the national government and add momentum to national efforts to engage with the SDGs" (Bristol, 2019, p. 50).

These examples would seem to indicate that the cooperation between national and local authorities is well-functioning in these cases. Helsinki grants this to be the result of common values by the national and local authorities to advance sustainability.

> "A working relationship between the government and the city is a key part of being able to fulfil the sustainable development goals. A close relationship with regard both to reporting and to implementation should be sought in countries where cooperation is possible thanks to common values and objectives." (Helsinki, 2019, p. 75.)

Furthermore, these cities are also looking to extend their role beyond national borders and actively seek global recognition for their activities. One way of establishing a global connection takes place through global city networks, such as the one in question committed to VLR reporting. As discussed in section 2.1 of this paper, cities are engaging in these networks to share their best practices, learn from others, cooperate, and reinforce the voice of the cities on a global sphere. Buenos Aires describes the importance of partnerships for the localization process in the following way: "Lastly, the partnerships with other local and global cities become essential, to share experiences and exchange good practice" (Buenos Aires, 2019, p. 17). This global approach departs from the common practice of seeking geographically or demographically alike counterparts, usually within the borders of the nation-state.

Some of the cities are also taking an active role themselves in global arenas to demand the global recognition of the work done in cities. Especially, this role has been taken by the New York City, as the city housing the United Nation headquarters and participating actively on the High-Level Political Forums (HLPF): "Finally, we bring City voices to UN events to infuse local perspectives into policy discussions about achieving the SDGs" (New York City, 2019, p. 8). The first Voluntary Local Review (VLR) was presented by the NYC to the global public in the High-Level Political Forum of 2018, and since then, the model has also been recognized and thanked by several high officials of the UN (New York City, 2019, p. 8). However, the establishment of such a global model requires already established connections and resources and is therefore not possible for all local actors.

Despite this great activity that these VLR publishers have portrayed, the submission of these documents is also a resource question, and those participating in such an early phase are usually well equipped to do so. This means, however, that the sample is not diverse. Most of the participating cities are relatively large ones, some even the capitals, such as Buenos Aires, Helsinki, and Taipei City. Furthermore, many represent the economic drivers of the nation, such as Bristol, New York City, and Los Angeles. Most of them can be described as global cities or regional areas with developed economies except for Oaxaca, which is still largely agriculture dominated, and Hamamatsu City, which houses substantive

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manufacturing industry (Oaxaca, 2019, p. 13; Hamamatsu City, 2019, p. 2). Their reporting can partly be accounted for the external help they have received, Oaxaca from German Cooperation for Sustainable Development in Mexico (GIZ) and Hamamatsu City from Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES) (Oaxaca, 2019, p. 5; Hamamatsu City, 2019, para. 8). This finding is discussed more at length below in section 5.3 where I focus on the ways of undergoing the reporting.

5.2 The narrative construction of urban sustainable development

In the following, I outline the common urban sustainable development narrative as emerging based on the Voluntary Local Reviews. The analysis focuses first on the common features of the reporting and then on the commonalities connected to topical issues analysed in the reports.

5.2.1 Common features of VLR reporting

The reviews frame the SDGs, and the VLR reporting especially, as the common language to discuss urban sustainability. Thus, they discursively reinforce the idea of a common storyline, in line with the theoretical framework of the thesis. This metaphor of common language implies that by translating the diverse urban sustainability actions to this framework of the SDGs, it is possible to foster mutual understanding, increase exchange among various actors, and make existing efforts more visible, to name a few examples. It is also expected that the common language allows the public to scrutinize if the local authorities are taking concrete actions towards the stated goals, and what is working for them:

> "Through the common language of sustainable development, these documents [Voluntary Local Reviews] are an essential tool to share and nurture from other experiences, unify metrics and know what plans and policies are giving better results in different parts of the world" (Buenos Aires, 2019, p. 6).

At the level of the discourse, the reviews have adopted well the universal nature of the SDGs, as already stated in the Agenda 2030 resolution: "All countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership, will implement this plan" (United Nations General Assembly, 2015, para. 2). Implicit in this definition is the idea that public authorities should broadly consider the relevant stakeholder groups for the implementation of the SDGs and ensure that their voices are heard in the process. This common understanding has, nevertheless, been interpreted and translated into reality in alternative ways. Whereas some cities have established specific frameworks for cooperation with the various stakeholder groups for sustainable development, some describe a more indirect engagement, for example via their strategy processes. The noteworthy examples of the former are *The Bristol SDG Alliance* and *The Hamamatsu City SDGs Promotional Platform*. They are both arranged similarly to offer a common platform for all interested in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals, representing city officials, businesses, academia, and civil society. They aim to foster information exchange and accelerate actions towards the implementation of the goals (Bristol, 2019, p. 12; Hamamatsu City, 2019, p. 23.) They both represent such a model of engagement that is based on voluntary participation for all interested and continued engagement that is implemented also outside the review process. In the latter case, cities like New York (2019, p. 15) and Mannheim (2019, p. 16) describe the extensive citizen consultation processes connected to their strategic planning, but these are, at best, indirectly linked to the implementation and advancement of the SDGs themselves, rather asserting the legitimacy of their existing strategies. The question of what consists of a sufficient level of stakeholder engagement thus remains unanswered.

Furthermore, many still acknowledge that their reviews lack an adequate methodology for stakeholder engagement and attempt to improve their action consequently on the upcoming review periods. The examples of this are the reviews of Buenos Aires and Helsinki, which are both composed based on the measures taken by the city officials. Despite this, they both acknowledge the future need for more wide-based consultations (Buenos Aires, 2019, p. 96; Helsinki, 2019, p. 75). This is described well in the following excerpt by Helsinki which is phrased using the language of modern governance ideals:

"Ecosystem-based thinking will in future enable fruitful implementation. The next stage of the Helsinki project is really to engage the whole ecosystem to accomplish concrete results more efficiently through the implementation of goals and the building of critical mass." (Helsinki, 2019, p. 75.)

Another feature that reviews must account for in their reporting is the interrelated and overlapping nature of the SDGs. Along with the idea of three pillars of sustainability and their mutual recognition, the nature of SDGs is inherently integrative: "They [the SDGs] are integrated and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental" (United Nations General Assembly, 2015, para. 3). Again, despite the discursive acknowledgement of this feature of the goals, this integral nature is embraced in distinct ways when it comes to comparison of the ways cities have chosen to portray them.

Interrelatedness is acknowledged on varying degrees, depending partly on the selected reporting models. Most reviews are structured around the SDGs, and, additionally, many of them are formatted according to the model which focuses on a set of focus SDGs chosen yearly for the High-Level Political Forum. This model has certain benefits from the perspective of allowing better comparability, but in doing so reduces its integrative nature, as demonstrated in this sentence of the review by New York City:

> "Because there is not a one-to-one correlation between OneNYC 2050 and the SDGs, there are some OneNYC 2050 initiatives that are relevant to numerous SDGs and may not be included here" (New York City, 2019, p. 12).

However, the review by the city of Mannheim provides an interesting exception. It is structured alternatively around the strategic goals of the city and how they are linked to various SDGs, respectively (see Picture 3). This model, although only utilized by Mannheim currently, visualizes the interconnections between separate SDGs better than the format that is structured around SDGs independently.

Picture 3: Mannheim strategic goal 1 and its connections to the SDGs (Mannheim, 2019, p. 20).

Some reviews have also chosen their cross-cutting SDGs that are analyzed in connection with all the other goals. Most commonly this Goal is SDG 17, Partnerships, which fits well with the ideals of cooperation and multi-actor engagement. The SDG 17 is reviewed in this manner by New York City (2019, p. 22), Buenos Aires (2019, pp. 25-27), and Taipei City (2019, p. 56). However, other goals can also be analyzed in terms of their interconnectedness. For example, Buenos Aires reports gender equality actions in connection with all the other SDGs that are analyzed. This is done because SDG 5 is one of the priority goals of the city:

> "However, we decided to add a section for SDG 5 (Gender Equality), a priority agenda for the Chief of Government, Horacio Rodríguez Larreta. Through it, the City promotes cross-cutting initiatives so that men and women have the same opportunities to grow and contribute with their talent to the development of the city." (Buenos Aires, 2019, p. 3.)

Another such integrative and integral goal is the SDG 11, Sustainable cities and communities. At least two of the analysed cities have chosen it as a priority goal for reporting: Taipei City (2019) and Los Angeles (2019). Furthermore, Taipei City stressed the role of SDG 11 in guiding the overall urban sustainability vision: "The goal is to lay the foundation for urban sustainable development and formulate relevant strategies for implementation by embracing the spirit of 'urban SDG'." (Taipei City, 2019, p. 17). The priority goals of the cities are discussed more at length below in section 5.3.

5.2.2 Shared urban sustainability thematic based on VLR reporting

Because the topics that are covered with the SDGs are so broad, prioritization is inevitable in some way. For this reason, some cities have chosen to focus on the goals that are under the spotlight that year instead of carrying out a narrower reporting on all the goals. Topic-

wise this inherently limits the possibility for an encompassing analysis. The priority goals for the HLPF 2019 are as follows: SDG 4 (Quality education), SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth), SDG 10 (Reduced inequalities), SDG 13 (Climate action), and SDG 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions)[5]. On top of these, as discussed above, the reviewers might have chosen their own priority goals to supplement the selection or selected to report on some other set of SDGs. In the following, I focus on the more specific issues that these priority goals address when urban sustainability is considered. By looking into the thematic issues, it is possible to analyse the targets and activities set to advance sustainability by the cities on a broader scale and acknowledge the interconnected nature of the goals.

One of the key priorities of the SDGs is that development should *Leave no one behind*. This overlapping ethos of the whole Agenda 2030 is predominantly linked to the core of sustainability on a broader level: As discussed in section 2.3, the proponents of sustainability consider it impossible to reach the other two dimension of sustainability, the economic and environmental one, without acknowledging the third, the social dimension of sustainability (McGranahan et al., 2016). At the same time, it aims to reconcile the ethical issue connected to the social dimension: Do people across geographical borders and generations share an equal right for development? According to the SDGs, the answer is simple – no one should be left behind: "We are determined to end poverty and hunger, in all their forms and dimensions, and to ensure that all human beings can fulfil their potential in dignity and equality and in a healthy environment" (United Nations General Assembly, 2015, para. 5).

In terms of urban sustainability, the ethos of Leaving no one behind connects discursively to many broader developments. Cities are depicted as diverse communities of various people and cultures (Buenos Aires, 2019, p. 66). On the other hand, hardened attitudes in national and international politics and nationalism have gained more popularity and impacted urban life (New York City, 2019, p. 20). Urban inequalities and intolerance are preventing cities from reaching inclusive sustainability and, consequently, an increasing group of people feels left out of the progress. Furthermore, these vulnerable groups are also

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[5] For a reference to the full definitions of these targets, see Annex 1.

disproportionately impacted when facing environmental, social, and economic issues. (Los Angeles, 2019, p. 13.) Social issues such as segregation, homelessness, and poverty are especially prevalent in major cities:

> "Yet, like all great cities, New York in 2019 is a place of striking contradictions. We have extreme wealth alongside dire poverty and homelessness. There is unmatched cultural and population diversity amid some of the most racially segregated urban neighborhoods in the United States. Our landmark skyscrapers are recognizable worldwide, and towering high-rises are reshaping our skyline. Yet in many neighborhoods most buildings are just a few stories tall." (New York City, 2019, p. 20.)

The commitment to this ethos is deemed to be fulfilled in varying ways. Some stress the importance of integration of separate groups from early on (Mannheim, 2019, p. 26; Hamamatsu City, 2019, p. 20). Both Mannheim and Hamamatsu City stress the importance of integrating all, especially vulnerable groups such as migrant children, to the schooling system and offer them personalized support to effectively prevent social exclusion in the future. Consequently, they both have built support systems for foreign resident's children. (Mannheim, 2019; Hamamatsu City, 2019.)

For some cities, this ethos is framed more in terms of general anti-discriminatory and inclusive policies along the lines of SDG 10, Reduced inequalities. This is discursively connected to embracing the diversity of these cities: "Through its various programs, it [Buenos Aires] seeks to highlight one of its greatest attributes: the multi-culturalism of its inhabitants" (Buenos Aires, 2019, p. 66). Besides a variety of programs designed for the support of vulnerable groups, the actions towards achieving the SDG 10 in multicultural cities include various commitments such as support services, events, commemorative days, initiatives, funds, as well as gender equality acts (Buenos Aires, 2019; Helsinki, 2019; Los Angles 2019; New York City, 2019). Despite the increased scope for action, the inequalities are still listed as a key challenge for many of the cities.

Furthermore, the Leave no one behind -principle aims also to reveal inequalities connected to spatial issues such as residential segregation. Bristol (2019, p. 48) highlights the importance of data gathering and disaggregated data to reveal geographical and spatial

inequalities of subnational context. Thus, reporting at the city-wide scale might, therefore, mask substantial, context-specific variation in the everyday life of the citizens on its distinct parts. This provides an additional argument for the subnational reporting: to receive more in-depth information about the situational differences in local areas that could otherwise be masked under aggregate national reporting schemes. An additional definition for the principle is offered by Oaxaca, which links it to the integrality of the stakeholder engagement in the SDG reporting program (Oaxaca, 2019, p. 46).

Alongside the increasing inequalities, climate change is also affecting the future of cities. Its importance is further highlighted in the reviews as SDG 13 (Climate action) was one of the priority goals of HLPF 2019. In line with the theoretical framework, many of the reviews defined the concern about climate change in an anthropogenic manner, that is, through its effect on human life. An example of this phenomenon features in the review by Bristol:

> "Even in the most deprived communities, 4 out of 5 people express concern about climate change. Bristolians are increasingly concerned about how climate change will affect their jobs, work, neighbourhoods, the weather and the economy." (Bristol, 2019, p. 38.)

Not solely through their concerns, citizens are also seen as part of the solution: For example, many cities are attempting to cut down greenhouse gas emissions (GHG emissions) by facilitating climate-friendly lifestyles, such as smart mobility and waste management (for example, see Mannheim, 2019, p. 64).

To measure their progress in climate actions, many of the cities have declared their target year for reaching climate neutrality, and significant variation exists in those. The climate neutrality refers to a situation where the city's GHG emissions are reduced as low as possible, and the remaining emissions are offset by the respective share of carbon sinks. Although the goal of this thesis is not to review the level of ambition of the goals set in these reviews, this target year figure illustrates particularly clearly whether cities are attempting to brand themselves in terms of ambitious climate action. Out of all 9 reviews, 8

reviews stated their target[6]. The common target for reaching carbon neutrality seems to be by the year 2050, and 4 reviews stated it as their target year: the ones by Buenos Aires (2019, p.76), Los Angeles (2019, p. 44), New York City (2019, p. 70), and Mannheim (2019, p. 64). Two of the review declared to aim for an earlier target: Bristol (2019, p. 38), that aims to be carbon neutral by 2030, and Helsinki (2019, p. 53), that aims for carbon neutrality by 2035. Similarly, two reviews declared not to aim for carbon neutrality by 2050: Taipei City (2019, p. 54), aims to cut down its emissions by 50% by the year 2050, and Hamamatsu City (2019, p. 38), by 80% by the year 2050. This comparison does not consider that the baseline year, from which this reduction of GHG emissions is counted, might vary between the cities. The results are summarised in Table 5.

Table 5: Emission reduction targets of the cities

City	Target year	Reduction percentage
Buenos Aires	2050	100%
Los Angeles	2050	100%
New York City	2050	100%
Mannheim	2050	100%
Bristol	2030	100%
Helsinki	2035	100%
Taipei City	2050	50%
Hamamatsu City	2050	80%

These climate policies can also be divided according to their priorities either on cutting down the GHG emissions or on adaptation and mitigation of the effects of climate change. This should not be taken to mean that any city would pursue climate actions based solely on either of the categories but rather that differences occur when prioritization of various actions is considered, similarly as in national policies. Based on the reviews, cities most affected with the adverse effects of climate change also highlighted on mitigation and adaptation efforts. These included Taipei City (2019, p. 49), New York City (2019, p. 67), and Hamamatsu City (2019, pp. 38–39). This is demonstrated in the Taipei City review, which focuses on especially on effective management of aquatic ecosystems:

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[6] Excluding Oaxaca (2019) which has not reviewed or set any targets yet in the review.

"As a result of a high-level of urban development and the serious impacts of climate change, metropolitan areas all over the world face different risks and challenges of varying degrees associated with their aquatic environments and characterized by water scarcity or overabundance – –" (Taipei City, 2019, p. 49).

Consequently, the other cities – namely Helsinki (2019, p. 53), Mannheim (2019, p. 63), Buenos Aires (2019, p. 75), Los Angeles (2019, p. 44), and Bristol (2019, p. 38) – focused more on efforts by which they could cut down the GHG emissions and increase energy efficiency. These focus on sectors such as smart and green mobility, increasing the share of renewable energy in the energy sector, and improving energy efficiency in the construction sector, to name a few most common ones.

A related popular discourse deployed by Los Angeles (2019, p. 45), Helsinki (2019, pp. 57–58), and New York City (2019, p. 75) is the one of Green New Deal or smart and clean growth. Much in line with the idea of ecological modernization, this approach aims to consolidate the ideals of sustainable and economic growth together to create growth and new jobs on climate-friendly sectors and thereby also aim to tackle social inequalities, as described by Los Angeles: "Consistent with our commitment to the SDGs, the Green New Deal is focused not just on climate action, but also on reducing inequalities" (Los Angeles, 2019, p. 45). This approach can be considered as particularly fitting with the ideals of sustainability due to its integrative nature, combining all three dimensions of sustainability.

Connected to the two previous themes, the SDG 8, Decent work and economic growth, enlists cities' efforts on achieving economic sustainability. *Sustainable prosperity*, one of its key concepts, is defined as follows in the Agenda 2030:

"We are determined to ensure that all human beings can enjoy prosperous and fulfilling lives and that economic, social and technological progress occurs in harmony with nature" *(United Nations General Assembly, 2015, para. 6).*

It aims to ensure that, alongside the overall attractiveness of the economic sector of the cities, it should be ensured that every resident could enjoy the prosperity, not just the ones most affluent. As with the other dimensions of sustainability, the key challenge for many cities seems to lie in the inequalities of the employment sector. The two examples below highlight this issue:

"While these are the most favorable economic conditions since the Great Recession, not every New Yorker is benefiting. Record job growth has been largely driven by high-paying professional occupations that require high educational attainment and low-wage service sector jobs that are not sufficient to support a family, build savings, or secure a retirement." (New York City, 2019, p. 44–45.)

"As in many other areas, Bristol's key weakness relates to inequality. Youth (8.6) and ethnic (8.5) unemployment are much higher than the Bristol average, and the gender pay gap has remained largely unchanged (see Goal 5), – –." (Bristol, 2019, p. 28.)

Therefore, it seems that although the case cities are considered as the drivers of the national economies, their key challenge is precisely achieving sustainable growth that would include all citizens. The continuation of economic growth is seen as important to ensure that ecological and social dimensions can be addressed. To tackle this issue of economic inequality, many of the cities have enlisted support programs to facilitate access to employment for vulnerable groups specifically. Examples of this include *The International House Helsinki service* (Helsinki, 2019, p. 30) and *Hire L.A.'s Youth* (Los Angeles, 2019, p. 37) targeted to the immigrants and the youth, respectively.

Many of the reviews consider digitalization and the promotion of technological industries as the core area of boosting the economy. These industries have been advanced by creating centers or hubs concentrated on it- and technology sectors, such as *PledgeLA* in Los Angeles (2019, p. 35) and *MAFINEX* in Mannheim (2019, p. 58) and hoping that such concentration would benefit these companies. It is in line with the general conception of sustainability to believe that technological development will solve issues related to making economic growth more sustainable for society and the environment at large. Building capacities for the digital future is also considered as a priority in connection to SDG 4, Quality education.

Finally, cities embrace the idea of open, transparent, and engaging governance in their reviews connected to the SDG 16, Peace, justice and strong institutions. The openness is simultaneously a prerequisite for such reporting: Suitable indicators and data that allow for

monitoring the progress made on these goals are essential for anyone within or outside the region to evaluate whether actual progress has been made on sustainability issues. I discuss more in-depth the challenges related to the localization of the SDGs and data gathering in the next section. A notable example of this open data principle is carried out by Los Angeles. It has opened its data online available to all public, including SDG indicators and activities, and, therefore, represents an example of openness in this context:

> "With this report, our SDG work is also compliant, as all indicators for which data is available and all activities mapped to the Goals are available via public websites, at sdg.lamayor.org and sdgdata.lamayor.org" (Los Angeles, 2019, p. 51).

Alongside the open data principles, many of the cities have adopted citizen participation projects, such as participative budgeting programs, to improve their governance in terms of openness and engagement. Out of the analyzed reviews, the following ones mentioned a participative budgeting program: Taipei City (2019, p. 59), Helsinki (2019, p. 67), Mannheim (2020, p. 48), Buenos Aires (2019, p. 26), and New York City (2019, p. 92). Furthermore, Buenos Aires (ibid.) has, for example, aligned its participatory budgeting programs with the SDGs, demonstrating therefore how these initiatives contribute to meeting the goals. Many of the programs also aim to lower the threshold for participation for citizens by acknowledging their needs within the process. Helsinki (ibid.) for instance, offered support for using the digital platform and designed a participatory budgeting card game to aid participation. The aims of the Taipei City participatory budgeting are explained in the following excerpt and these goals are, at least to some extent, generalizable also to other participatory budgeting programs:

> "By promoting participatory budgeting, Taipei City wants to awake civil consciousness, encourage citizens to generate opinions toward public policies and affairs and thus voluntarily propose better ideas regarding their own environment and public systems, which can help quality of life in Taipei City to move closer to citizens' expectations" (Taipei City, 2019, p. 59).

5.3 Localized narratives of the SDGs

In the previous section, I have outlined the common features that are to be associated with the VLR reporting. However, the localization of the SDGs also creates differences that are to some extent context-specific. Moreover, as discussed in section 4.3 concerning the data of the thesis, the official framework for VLR reporting offers only vague guidelines for reporting on the progress. Consequently, cities have also chosen alternative methods for reporting, and these are scrutinized in the following.

5.3.1 Sustainable development conceptions in the reviews

Cities do not share a common conception of (urban) sustainability and rarely explicitly mention which definition they are utilizing as the basis of the reporting. Thus, the basic assumptions connected to the definition remain unknown for the reader. As discussed in the theoretical framework of the thesis, this conceptual ambiguity arguably derives from the broader discursive inability to establish a common definition for sustainability or sustainable development. Despite this, it remains possible to compare the distinct conception of sustainability appearing implicitly in the reviews.

As sustainable development has gained increasing popularity, it has been enforced and redefined by separate groups to suit their ends. Consequently, one would then consider that cities would enforce such a vision of sustainability that would be compatible with their conceptions of the urban future. In the reviews, their vision is often expressed by the mayor of the city in the preface of the review, such as in those by Helsinki (2019, p. 2), Taipei City (2019, p. 1), and Hamamatsu City (2019, p. 0). In other reviews, the vision is placed as part of the executive summary at the beginning of the report.

These visions often differ based on their focus. In their definition of sustainable development, some relied on the balance between the three-pillar distinction of economic, social, and ecological sustainability. An example of this can be found from the review of Mannheim: "The foundation was laid to shape global economic progress in harmony with social justice and within the framework of the earth's ecological limits" (Mannheim, 2019,

p. 9). Others relied on the distinction of the Agenda 2030 between people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnerships as the dimensions of sustainability (United Nations General Assembly, 2015, paras. 4–8). This definition already tackles conceptually more specific issues such as eliminating poverty, tackling inequalities, and preventing the harmful effects of climate change. This approach features in the definition by New York City:

> "The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),– –,are a set of 17 commitments made by the world leaders in 2015 to end extreme poverty, fight inequality and injustice, and prevent the harmful effects of climate change by 2030" (New York City, 2019, p. 8).

While most of the definitions fall on either of the two categories, some definitions have integrated local priorities concerning their approach to sustainability. Bristol's highlights the importance of tackling inequalities and acquiring disaggregated data by mentioning the principle of *Leave no one behind*: "The SDGs vision for sustainable and inclusive prosperity that 'leaves no-one behind' is strongly aligned with the city's collective priorities and ambitions" (Bristol, 2019, p. 8). Similarly, the definition of Taipei City stresses the importance of environmental protection: "While emphasizing the promotion of social needs and pursuing economic growth, it is necessary to incorporate the consideration of environmental protection to allow human society and the nature to continually coexist" (Taipei City, 2019, p. 1). While the differences between definitions are subtle, they speak for local priorities of sustainable development.

5.3.2 Various VLR reporting processes

The process of reporting on the SDGs and compiling the Voluntary Local Reviews varies significantly across the cities and might also impact on the conclusions drawn by the cities. The benchmark set by New York City (2019) was executed by the Mayor's Office for International Affairs. The process has been similarly carried out by either the international or the executive office of the mayor in Buenos Aires (2019), Helsinki (2019), Los Angeles (2019), and Mannheim (2019). For many, this assignment seems natural since the Sustainable Development Goals reporting is connected to either international or strategic actions or even to both. However, this might lead to the question of whether reviews could

truly take up unpleasant topics that remain as challenges for the city if they are carried out by those leading the executive work.

In the case of Los Angeles, this has led to interesting discursive choices that grant many of the actions listed in the review as achieved by the standing mayor and his team, despite the acclaimed integrative perspective across various city departments. The approach is demonstrated in this example: "Mayor Garcetti is taking unprecedented action to end street homelessness in Los Angeles" (Los Angeles, 2019, p. 22). Such a direct emphasis on current political leadership effaces the impression of objective evaluation usually connected with the reporting.

Besides this model, others have included non-governmental bodies to the reporting work. Taipei City Government has compiled its review in cooperation with the Council for Sustainable Development, a standing multi-actor body established in 2004 to advance sustainable development activities in the city (Taipei City, 2019, p. 10). In addition, the Bristol review was conducted by the researchers of the University of Bristol and commissioned by the Bristol City Office in cooperation with the Bristol SDG Alliance, a similar body to the Council for Sustainable Development in Taipei City. As their outspoken goal, the authors of Bristol review aimed for an objective assessment of the state of sustainable development in Bristol:

> "The goal was to produce an independent assessment of progress towards achieving the SDGs. Unlike many previous VLRs, this document was produced independently of the city government and aims to present an inclusive portrait of how the city is faring, and what actors across sectors are doing to support SDG progress." (Bristol, 2019, p. 9.)

As mentioned in the excerpt, it is expected that such a process would grant a more independent and objective evaluation than one by the city government. This is, however, not easily verified by only looking into the discursive format of the reviews. It seems true that the review of Bristol is most explicit in its evaluation of challenges when it comes to the SDGs, but such an evaluation features in other reviews as well. I continue this analysis in the section beyond in connection with the selected ways to measure and report on the

SDGs.

Some of the reviews were also compiled in cooperation with or receiving assistance from external bodies. This is the case with the state of Oaxaca that cooperates with GIZ (Oaxaca, 2019, p. 5). The technical cooperation agreement aims to support the integration, monitoring, and execution of the SDGs into all municipalities of Oaxaca. The cooperation proceeds through a pilot phase which includes 10 municipalities. (Oaxaca 2019, p. 53–54.) By the time the 2019 review was released, the cooperation was still in the process and the review itself represents rather a guideline of how the goals will be put to action in the state, rather than reviewing any actual progress yet. Similarly, the review of Hamamatsu City has been compiled in cooperation with IGES: "– – the Hamamatsu Voluntary Local Review 2019, a collaborative effort between Hamamatsu City and the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES), is being released on the occasion of the SDG Summit 2019" (Hamamatsu City, 2019, p. 0). The scope or content of this cooperation was not specified in the review.

Although no explicit motive for cooperation is offered in the reviews, it could be expected that these cooperative organizations are hoping for a possibility to brand their sustainable development expertise through cooperation with public bodies. In the situation of Oaxaca, GIZ represents a cooperative body on behalf of the German government, which has created a bilateral development agreement with the government of Mexico to promote the national Agenda 2030 implementation, the state of Oaxaca being part of this agreement (GIZ GmbH, 2018). Cities, in turn, benefit from the cooperation by receiving additional expertise and resources to utilize in their sustainability actions. It is, however, not possible for all cities to utilize consultants in their sustainability work. This possibility for learning is in part compensated by the mutual support gained in sustainability city networks, as discussed above.

5.3.3 Measuring progress on the SDGs

The approaches to measuring progress on sustainable development can broadly be divided into two categories within the analyzed reviews. Some of the cities have chosen to review the efforts that are carried in line with the existing strategic plans whereas some have adopted a whole new framework to review all city actions from the perspective of sustainable development. The former model is utilized by Buenos Aires (2019, p. 18–19), Helsinki (2019, p. 5), New York City (2019, p. 11), Oaxaca (2019, p. 6), and Taipei City (2019, p. 14). Because most of their strategies originate from before the release of the VLR in 2019, the SDGs have not (yet) been included in all strategy processes and, therefore, the analysis is begun by cross-mapping these two together. The exception to this is the OneNYC 2050 strategy revised by New York City also in 2019 (2019, p. 8). In these cases, the SDGs and VLR reporting offer a common language to discuss the efforts already carried out:

> "– –[T]he NYC Mayor's Office for International Affairs (IA) has identified the synergies between the 2030 Agenda and NYC's strategy, and employs the SDGs as a framework to discuss NYC's innovations and challenges in sustainability with cities and countries around the world" (New York City, 2019, p. 10).

Instead of drafting new commitments, this approach helps the cities to communicate about the existing work in a manner that is accessible within and beyond the city borders. A close relationship with the existing strategic plan also means that other stages of the reporting procedure, such as consultations and reporting link to the existing strategy procedures. However, it is likely that once (and if) the SDGs reporting becomes grounded enough as an existing practice by the city, the goals are more integrated into the future strategy process from the beginning, as was the case with the new OneNYC 2050 strategy: "In OneNYC 2050, SDG icons are incorporated to demonstrate how NYC's initiatives align with and advance our progress towards achieving the SDGs" (ibid, p. 9).

In the latter case, cities have taken one step further to create a more extensive framework for measuring progress on the SDGs and sustainable development at large. This approach has been chosen by Bristol (2019, p. 16–17), Hamamatsu City (2019, p. 10–12), Los

Angeles (2019, p. 5–7), and Mannheim (2019, p. 14–15). This perspective involved a more holistic overview of goals, also attempting to identify the gaps that exist within the current activities by the city. Out of these four cities, three (Bristol, Hamamatsu City, and Mannheim) have reported on all the goals in their 2019 review. Although Los Angeles reported on only some of the goals, its methodology aims to develop also new initiatives to address such goals were gaps exist: "The Mapping informed the second phase of implementation — an analysis of where shortfalls or gaps exist when considering the City's activities mapped to the SDGs " (Los Angeles, 2019, p. 5).

Although adopting such a holistic perspective on reporting is admittedly more laborious than just considering existing activities, it is more in line with the multi-actor ethos of sustainable development: the achievement of these goals requires cooperation also between the distinct sectors of society. The downside of such an inclusive approach is, however, that the depth of reporting cannot be as broad as with the more concentrated efforts, and prioritization and selection must be practiced more than in the cases where observation is more limited. Developing a new framework similarly requires more localized metering on the progress of meeting the SDGs.

5.3.4 Prioritized SDGs

One of the research questions of this thesis is to find out whether cities perceive some of the SDGs as more important than the others for their work. For cities are using diverse models for reporting on the SDGs, it is not enough to consider the reported goals as the prioritized ones. This would not hold for those cities that have chosen to report based on the priority goals of that year's HLPF, such as Buenos Aires (2019), Helsinki (2019), Los Angeles (2019), and New York City (2019) have done in the analyzed reviews. Therefore, I base my analysis on the cross-mapping phase of the reporting in which cities seek connections between its existing strategic goals and the SDGs. This approach reveals which goals fall under the jurisdiction of cities and connect with the existing priorities based on strategic management tools. Such SDGs that have received the highest ranks in the cross-mapping exercises are selected from each of the reviews. If the perceived situation has been relatively even between the separate SDGs, more prioritized goals have been included than

in those situations where only a few SDGs appeared as the most relevant. The results of the analysis are summarized in Table 6. Figure 1 shows how many times each SDG has received a priority position in the analyzed cross mappings of the reviews. Picture 4 repeats all the targets in their abbreviated forms for a reference to these mappings.
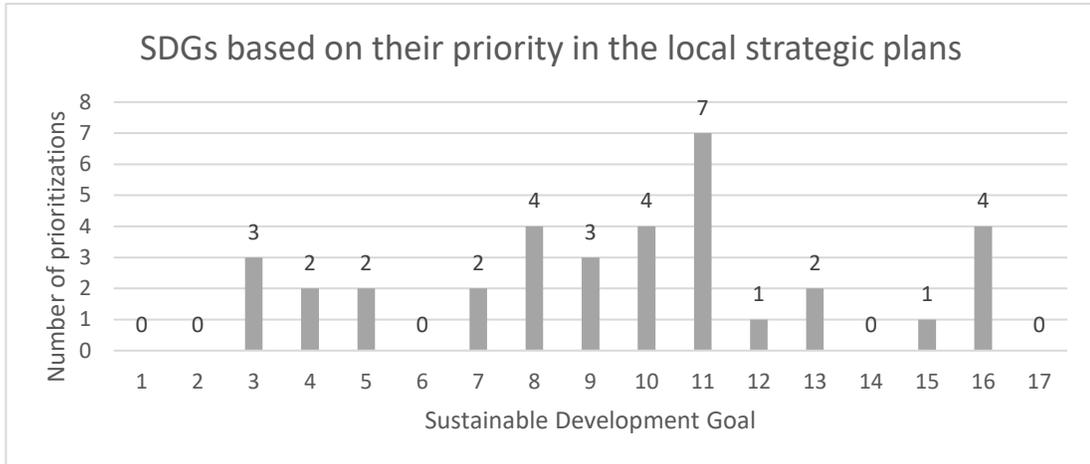

Figure 1: SDGs based on their priority in the local strategic plans

Picture 4: Sustainable Development Goals with abbreviated descriptions of the targets

Table 6: Most relevant Sustainable Development Goals for local strategic plans

	Bristol	Buenos Aires	Hamamatsu	Helsinki	Los Angeles	Mannheim	New York City	Oaxaca	Taipei City	Overall
SDG 1										0
SDG 2										0
SDG 3	x							x	x	3
SDG 4						x		x		2
SDG 5		x			x					2
SDG 6										0
SDG 7			x						x	2
SDG 8			x	x			x		x	4
SDG 9		x	x						x	3
SDG 10	x			x		x	x			4
SDG 11		x	x		x	x	x	x	x	7
SDG 12						x				1
SDG 13	x								x	2
SDG 14										0
SDG 15			x							1
SDG 16		x				x	x	x		4
SDG 17										0

Based on the analysis, expectedly SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities) was considered as the most relevant goal for the cities, receiving a prioritized notion in 7/9 reviews. After it, the differences between SDGs are marginal. Three of the SDGs were prioritized in 4/9 of the reviews, which accounts for nearly half of them. These goals were SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth), SDG 10 (Reduced inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions). Based on the thematic analysis of the reviews above, these are all in line with the anthropogenic interpretation of sustainability, and such themes that most cities are still struggling with. Surprisingly, no SDGs connected to the environmental dimension of sustainability stood out. On the other hand, the following 5 SDGs were not prioritized in any of the reviews: SDG 1 (No poverty), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 6 (Clean water and sanitation), SDG 14 (Life below water), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the goals). Indicating that either they were not considered as particularly important or the goals fell out of the jurisdiction of these cities.

5.3.5 Localization challenges

Adapting the SDGs to fit the local context creates special challenges for the cities. Despite the great relevance of many of the SDGs for the executive work carried out in the cities, the Agenda 2030 is still, first and foremost, a national agenda and the global role assigned for the local authorities is merely one of the observer's (Graute, 2016). For no common framework of localization has been established, these issues have fallen for the cities themselves to decide, and, consequently, distinct decisions have been made on how to resolve these localization issues. This part of the analysis links conceptually to section two of the thesis, where I have discussed the localization challenges based on previous literature. I next present a short outlook of the main localization challenges and solutions offered to them.

The limited jurisdiction of cities is arguably one of the main challenges that arises when the localization process is considered. Due to different scopes of the SDGs, some of the goals are not as relevant, at least in their original form, for the cities. This is the case for many cities when goals associated with international development cooperation are considered, for example, the SDG 17 (Partnerships for the goals) in its international dimensions (Helsinki,

2019, p. 79). To make matters more complicated, regional and local authorities also have diverse tasks and responsibilities across and even within national borders (Gustafsson & Ivner, 2018). The issue then arises as to whether these irrelevant goals should be addressed, summarized in the Los Angeles review:

> "This raised the question: should the City include Goals for which it does not have primary jurisdiction? Should the City actively monitor and track its own progress on SDG 3 or defer to the County? And what about the targets that clearly speak to nation-level authorities rather than local ones?" (Los Angeles, 2019, p. 5.)

In terms of how to address these issues, cities have selected broadly between two types of strategies. They either aim to ignore such goals and targets that are deemed as irrelevant in terms of limited jurisdiction or strive towards innovative solutions on how to tackle the issues by forming new cooperative relations or coming up with new solutions themselves. For example, Taipei City (2019, p. 15) has chosen the former strategy of focusing only on its core SDGs to solve the jurisdiction issue. Similarly, New York City, which aims to report on each of the sub-targets, has simply marked targets that fall out of its jurisdiction as "irrelevant" (for example, see p. 64). The latter strategy is adopted by, for example, Bristol (2019, p. 16–17) and Los Angeles (2019, p. 6) which have sought to complement the governmental reporting and its shortcomings in connection with the relevant stakeholder groups' actions, concerning also such goals that fall from the local jurisdiction.

Bristol (2019) also notes that the issue of limited jurisdiction links to the increasing interdependence of the regional authorities. Regional borders no longer accurately represent how people, goods, money, and pollution move beyond them. For example, large cities increasingly draw the workforce also from other nearby cities. Failing to account for this would lead to possibly wrong interpretations of the situation of these cities. This interconnectedness forces cities to acknowledge for the externalities of their actions beyond their immediate borders and to cooperate more with other regional authorities on matters that transcend these borders. (Bristol, 2019, p. 48.)

Many of the issues are also connected with measuring. Like the SDGs, also the developed framework of 231 indicators is first and foremost for national use (United Nations Statistics Division, n.d.). When it comes to local measuring, no common framework is developed

but cities are to adapt the global indicator framework to their use, where relevant. Additionally, many of the cities have chosen to complement or even replace the framework with their own selected set of indicators, as is the case with Helsinki review: "As for the follow-up indicators, the challenge is to produce indicators that are comparable. Therefore, the indicators that we have chosen for this report are mainly the ones that are used for evaluating the city strategy." (Helsinki, 2019, p. 79.)

Developing suitable indicators for local-level reporting is not an easy task. Indicators are modified to be relevant enough for the workings of the city but not modified too much to ensure that their initial meaning is preserved: "A revision that drifts too far from the intent of the Goals will limit its efficacy as a shared, common language, and otherwise compromise our ability to measure collective impact" (Los Angeles, 2019, p. 8). Moreover, to ensure that the indicators are methodologically robust and measured regularly, they should come from governmental sources (Buenos Aires, 2019, p. 25). To overcome this challenge, Los Angeles (2019, p. 9) created its own approach to the localization of the SDGs that aims to recognize if the goal applies to the city level and if not, to revise it so that it stays true to the original intent of the goal. Other cities have chosen resort to existing measurement frameworks in their SDGs measuring, such as their strategy indicators. Although no universal set of the city- or municipal-level SDG indicators exists, some organizations have attempted to develop common indicators for cities, such as Bertelsmann Stiftung's SDG indicators for German municipalities (Mannheim, 2019, p. 78).

Similarly as the development of reliable indicators, also the availability of robust city-level data awoke concerns already in the early phases of localization (Zinkernagel et al., 2018). Bristol (2019, p. 48-49) explicitly mentions its concern for the gaps in data. It claims that it would need better data to monitor the progress on many of the goals, such as SDG 1 (No poverty), 2 (Zero hunger), 5 (Gender equality), 8 (Decent work and economic growth), 12 (Responsible consumption and production), 14 (Life below water), and 15 (Life on land). In some situations, the data is gathered on a higher scale making it difficult to disaggregate differences in data based on spatial or demographic differences. Acquiring such data would be essential to ensure the ethos of Leave no one behind of the SDGs. (Bristol 2019.) Partly

this concern for relevant data can be accounted for to fact that the Bristol report is compiled by academics and therefore aiming towards a more encompassing and robust framework for measuring than would be considered necessary by the city officials.

Overall, many reviews do not discuss at length the process of selecting appropriate indicators and replacing the inappropriate ones, making it difficult to compare the monitoring frameworks. The methodology has been developed most extensively by Los Angeles (2019, p. 9) and Bristol (2019, p. 16-17). Many of the reviews have only included a selection of all monitoring indicators to the review, either as an annex or as part of the overall reporting. The rest of these indicators are not published.

Additionally to monitoring the actions of the city, also the flows of capital should be monitored in terms of their sustainability. At best, decisions to divest funding can be powerful tools towards sustainable development, as was the case when New York City decided to divest its pension funds of all fossil fuel reserve owners:

> "The City's pension funds hold roughly $5 billion in securities in more than 100 fossil fuel reserve owners — those companies that own the oil and gas in the ground.– – And we will pursue opportunities to leverage New York City's position as a financial capital to further drive divestment from the fossil fuel industry." (New York City, 2019, p. 79.)

Inspired by the example, also the Bristol City Council and the University of Bristol decided to make similar commitments (Bristol, 2019, p. 49). Furthermore, the state of Oaxaca has committed to aligning its budget program indicators with those of the Agenda 2030 thereby demonstrating a commitment to aligning the actions and the budget (Oaxaca, 2019, p. 28). Another way of making an impact through procurements is presented by Helsinki which aims to advance circular economy solutions with its procurements as well as to demand a commitment to sustainability from its partners as well (Helsinki, 2019, p. 56). Connecting these demands to the purchase process is an effective way to boost sustainability also within the stakeholder groups.

6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

6.1 Main findings

The thesis aimed to examine whether cities share a common storyline or discourse when discussing sustainability and how might this discourse be characterized. The analysis was based on the theoretical conceptions of environmental policy discourses by Hajer (1995) and Dryzek (2013), focusing especially on sustainability and sustainable development as common discourses. The research setting focused on 9 Voluntary Local Reviews (VLR) released in 2019 by Buenos Aires, Bristol, Hamamatsu City, Helsinki, Los Angeles, Mannheim, New York City, Oaxaca, and Taipei City. These examined cities can be considered as the frontrunners of this type of global reporting given that the first VLR reports were released only in 2018 and the whole Agenda 2030 was adopted in 2015. Beyond the common conception of sustainability, interest was also drawn to how cities perceived their role as global sustainability actors and which Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) they prioritised when urban sustainability is considered. In the following, I discuss the findings based on the research questions. The section is then followed by a comparison of the results with previous literature. Finally, limitations and grounds for further research are discussed.

The main finding of the analysis is that although cities have internalized a common sustainability discourse, that derives largely from the Agenda 2030, many of its core features have been interpreted in ways that differ from each other. The VLR model for reporting offers little help in consolidating these models and, in making the decisions over reporting, cities rather resort either to copying other relevant reference models or developing their own. Cities are also in varying stages of reporting even though this model is rather new: whereas New York City (2019) had established a whole monitoring framework with an extensive set of indicators to be monitored, the state of Oaxaca (2019) had more of a guideline for the review than an actual reporting itself by the time of the reporting. One might speculate that the reason for local actors to release such unfinished documenting lies in their will to articulate themselves as part of this frontrunner group in terms of monitoring.

The common features of reporting include speaking of VLRs as a common language for mutual exchange, stressing the importance of stakeholder engagement and the integrative nature of the SDGs, and embracing the ethos of leaving no one behind. However, the localized reporting seems to require a careful balance between addressing the special context of the local regions, on one hand, and the commitment to common methods of reporting to ensure that the results are comparable, on the other hand. Despite the apparent agreements, marked differences still exist in terms of how these features of sustainable development are executed into action in cities. For example, while some cities such as Taipei City (2019) and Bristol (2019) have engaged stakeholder groups from distinct sectors of society by setting up specific multi-actors working groups, the others have considered indirect public engagement in the strategy processes as sufficient. Let alone those that still have not organized any extensive stakeholder consultations but plan to do so for future reviews. This raises the question of what can be counted as a meaningful way to engage the various groups of society to truly call the strategy as one of meaningful cooperation.

Another interesting question in terms of the implementation process is whether cities have been able to treat the SDGs in a manner that embraces their interconnected and interrelated nature. It is firmly linked to the theoretical ideal that once the three dimensions of sustainability are addressed in a balanced manner, they work to mutually reinforce each other. According to the analysis, the process of compiling the review impacts how this interconnected nature can be addressed. The cities that have chosen to report the progress on all the goals better cater to their integrative nature. A notable example of this is the city of Mannheim (2019), which has compiled its report based on its strategic targets and their connections to several of the SDGs. Whereas the reporting mechanism that focuses on the prioritized goals of the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) each year, utilized by Helsinki (2019), Los Angeles (2019), Buenos Aires (2019), and New York City (2019), is not as successful in showing how these interrelated goals are put to action. This method might even lead to the exclusion of such actions from reporting that cater to several of the goals. However, a narrower scope of reporting allows for cities to review the actions in a more profound manner than would be the case if they reviewed progress on all the goals.

By looking at the thematic reporting, it becomes possible to evaluate the activities and targets set to advance these goals on a broader scheme. The common thematic issues that were addressed in the reviews included climate change action, urban inequalities, sustainable prosperity, and participatory governance. In their part, these are connected to the prioritized goals of the HLPF 2019, namely SDGs 4 (Quality education); 8 (Decent work and economic growth); 10 (Reduced inequalities); 13 (Climate action) and 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions), but the phenomenon behind these issues reflect the common sustainability challenges and possibilities for cities, in line with the three pillar or dimensions of sustainability - economic, social, and environmental. The main finding connected to these themes is that even though these cities can be considered as front runners in sustainability reporting, the targets connected to, for example, climate change actions were broadly in line with other developed cities: 4/8 of them reported that they aim to be climate neutral by the year 2050, 2/8 reported to aim for an earlier date and comparably 2/8 reported that they will not reach climate neutrality by then[7]. Furthermore, cities also seem to actively share knowledge and adopt the so-called best practices from each other. An example of this is participatory budgeting, a program that was reported to be in use in 5/8 reviewed cities as a method to encourage public participation and, therefore, can be considered as a trending topic in local governance. Urban inequalities prevailed as an interconnected issue for the reviewed cities, linking conceptually to several of these priority goals and standing out as an issue with which many of the cities still struggled.

Cities are actively positioning themselves as global actors in their reviews. Their actorhood is summarized by an old saying "Think globally, act locally". These cities are looking to bear their global responsibility and think they are well equipped to do because of their positioning close to the everyday life of their citizens (in comparison to national policies). Not only focused on their actions, but many of them also position as examples and aim to inspire other cities within and outside national borders to join into the global VLR reporting. Especially New York City (2019), the creator and publisher of the first Voluntary

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[7] For example, the same baseline year of 2050 has been adopted by the Carbon Neutral Cities Alliance (The Carbon Neutral Cities Alliance, n.d.).

Local Review in 2018, has been actively advocating for the greater acknowledgement of the role of cities in the global sphere. It has assumed this role as a rather wealthy and large city to address the issue of the limited role of local authorities in the formal framework of the UN and the Agenda 2030 (for example, see Graute, 2016).

Even more interestingly, the reviews differed in terms of their position in relation to national reporting. The scope ranged from considering the report as a continuation of the national one to not even addressing the possible Voluntary National Review (VNR) in their report. The contrast is especially visible in the case of US cities for it is the only respective nation-state of the case studies having not released a VNR to this date, consistent with their unwillingness to commit in global treaties more broadly. Consequently, New York City (2019) and Los Angeles (2019) discursively highlighted their role as global actors, compensating the federal government's inactivity on these issues. The extent to which national and local sustainability agendas fit together also influenced their relationship. Cities like Helsinki (2019) considered their role as complementary to the national reporting and even saw it as their duty to cooperate where possible thanks to the shared values of national and local actors. These national governments encourage such voluntary local actions and even invite city representatives as part of the national delegations to the international meetings. Cities must, therefore, navigate in this complex framework of current global diplomatic relations should they wish to participate in the global sphere. Their positioning in terms of national policies determines their possibilities for participation.

The results support the previous findings that participation in voluntary international city networks, such as is also the VLR modelled reporting, is biased towards those having the capacity and resources to participate (Mejia-Dugand et al., 2016). Most of the analysed cities can be characterised as developed and densely populated ones, often even the national capitals or otherwise economically critical cities nationally. They already belong to diverse international networks and have established networks with similar local actors globally. Interestingly, two examples do not quite fall into this characterization, namely Hamamatsu City (2019) and the state of Oaxaca (2019). Their participation can at least partly be

accounted for the external help they have received from organizations specialised in sustainability actions (IGES and GIZ respectively).

The reviews also illuminate the sustainable development priorities of these cities. As part of the VLR reporting, cities commit to first analysing how their existing strategic documents map with the Sustainable Development Goals. By looking into these cross-mappings, it is possible to evaluate in broad terms how the SDGs are connected to the urban sustainability priorities of these cities. The results indicate that the most prioritized goal, mentioned among the most relevant goals for the existing actions of the 7/9 cities, was SDG 11, Sustainable cities and communities. This is hardly a surprise since its targets are directly relevant to the context of cities. Beyond the SDG 11, three SDGs were prioritized in nearly half of the reviews, namely by 4/9 cities. These goals were SDGs 8 (Decent work and economic growth), 10 (Reduced inequalities) and 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions). Conversely, five of the SDGs were not prioritized even once: SDGs 1 (No poverty), 2 (Zero hunger), 6 (Clean water and sanitation), 14 (Life below water) and 17 (Partnerships for the goals).

As already hypothesized in the analysis section, two main mechanisms impact whether a goal is considered as relevant for cities: whether it falls on the jurisdiction of cities and whether they are considered as particularly relevant for them. As these two factors are related to the prioritized goals, it can be assumed that cities consider tackling inequalities, employment, and democratic governance as particularly relevant themes for sustainable urban development. What is also interesting is that while these themes broadly acknowledge economic and social sustainability, no goal focusing on environmental sustainability rose to similar popularity among the reviewed cities.

6.2 Study in relation to previous research

The theoretical framework of sustainability discourses as outlined based on Dryzek (2013) and Hajer (1995) is supported by the results of this thesis. By establishing their framework for sustainable development and reporting on their progress in meeting the SDGs, cities

have managed to create a common front or discourse-coalition that allows for mutual goal setting and reporting on the sustainability activities of these actors. Despite this, the common agreement remains vague. Based on the results, neither a common definition of what sustainable development means in this context nor a critical discussion on the diverse forms it might take features on these reviews. For the sake of comparability of the actions to promote sustainable development, it is problematic that cities do not engage in such conceptual specification in this context [8]. Based on discourse analysis it could then be argued that in the absence of such definition, these reviews engage in the discursive construction of urban sustainable development and conceptual differences can, therefore, be considered as struggles over distinct aspects of sustainability.

One of the concerns raised over sustainable development is that the ambiguity connected to its definition has led to it becoming an empty signifier that enables naming even unsustainable practices as sustainable (Brown, 2016; Davidson, 2010; Gunder, 2006). The scholars voicing their concerns base their arguments on the school of post-foundational discourse analysis and the concept of an empty signifier as defined by Ernesto Laclau (1996). It is too early to evaluate yet whether cities have managed to deliver on their promises of the Agenda 2030 as the reviews are still on the level of setting local goals and targets to follow up on in the future. What remains however clear is that further monitoring on the actual progress on these goals will be needed to ensure that cities aim truly to advance sustainability and not just attempt to use the discourse as a way to gain global competitive advance and appear as progressive, as suggested by these critics. To allow for external evaluation, cities will need to maintain or establish a transparent and open monitoring system and utilize reliable, disaggregated data.

In terms of the emerging conceptions of sustainability, the reviews followed well the features of the common sustainability discourses, as outlined in chapter 3. Many of the definitions of sustainability, which were implicitly mentioned, highlighted the need for a balanced consideration of all three dimensions of sustainability. While most of the

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[8] The Agenda 2030 could be considered as such common definition, but it is arguably vague one, especially in the context of local actions.

reviewed cities had an economically stable situation, they saw the continuation of economic growth as a prerequisite for also other actions, as became apparent from the reporting on the SDG 8, Decent work and economic growth. Furthermore, many of them seemed to rely on that the future potential for growth lies in the development of technology and digitalization and offering advantageous conditions for these firms. The value of environmental sustainability was acknowledged in the reviews but often in anthropogenic terms, such as through the recreational value of urban green areas or risks created by climate change to everyday life.

Before the creation of the VLR method, a great amount of scholarly literature was written highlighting the challenges that local authorities possibly have in localizing the Agenda 2030, as discussed in chapter 2 of the thesis (for example, see Zinkernagel et al., 2018). While many of the issues stated in the section arguably have complicated the process of localization, the reviews also show that cities have invented alternative ways to actively overcome the issues. One of the greatest challenges is connected to the availability of reliable data and the ability to establish relevant indicators. Many of the cities have chosen to utilize existing indicators, for example connected to their strategy, but several indicator sets were also developed by various organizations to address the local settings. Similarly, while some cities have chosen to ignore such goals and targets that they deem as irrelevant for the local context, some have turned to their partners for innovative actions that link to those goals. While innovative actions will likely be necessary to overcome the challenges linked to the localization process, developing top-down solutions, such as a common indicator framework for cities to measure their progress on these goals, would ensure that reporting methods are also available to such local authorities that pursue fewer resources to carry out their sustainability evaluation.

6.3 Limitations of the research

The study represents a case study of nine reviews to illuminate the discourses that are constructed around this new method of reviewing. The sample is, thus, too limited to draw any further conclusions of how urban sustainability is perceived by the cities generally. This choice of strategy is justified by the novelty of the method, due to which a broader

sample was not possible. The chosen sample represents a group of forerunner cities with sufficient resources and capabilities to carry out such global reporting.

Limiting the sample to only one year of reporting has allowed for greater consistency and comparability but has also made it more challenging to establish a comprehensive view of the sustainability policies of a city. This is especially the case in situations in which reporting has focused on the priority goals of the High-Level Political Forum 2019. Due to this, the conception of sustainability by these cities is fragmental and results from their prioritizations. A greater triangulation of methods, such as carrying out interviews with the relevant city officials of the chosen case reviews, would potentially have granted interesting findings and allowed to fill in the gaps of the data. Unfortunately, this was not possible due to the limited scope of this study.

The key methodological constraints derive from the ambiguity of sustainable development as a concept. Because no established definitions exist over its meanings, it is not possible to differentiate between clear-cut discursive categories. The analysis rather focuses on some of the features of the discourse and attempts to understand how these are constructed. Discursive policy analysis is needed to understand the political struggles to mobilize certain definitions of the issues over others when such controversial terms are considered.

Although theoretical research has been carried out on the sustainability discourses, much of it predates the Agenda 2030 and therefore does not address how the adoption of such a comprehensive Agenda has shaped the discourses globally and locally. Despite this, the academic relevance of both the works by Hajer (1995) and Dryzek (2013) is still considered high as they both are seminal works in the field of environmental policy discourses. However, the field would benefit from an analysis of the impact of Agenda 2030 on these discourses.

Due to the novelty of the Voluntary Local Review method, it is not yet possible to analyse the extent to which these cities have managed to achieve results in line with the set targets. Moreover, many of the reports were published as unfinished in terms of their methodology,

for example considering stakeholder engagement. Therefore, the risk exists that words are not adequately put to action in the future and necessitates that scrutiny is practised also in the upcoming years.

6.4 Significance of results and grounds for further research

This thesis has attempted to shift from the adaptation of the Agenda 2030 towards its implementation and review. Although the localization is still in its beginning, we only have 10 years left to reach the goals set in the Agenda, and everyone's contribution is needed.

For its part, the results of the thesis increase the understanding of the discourses connected to sustainable development, on the one hand, and how these conceptions are mobilized in glocal politics, on the other hand. The VLR method represents an interesting example of the voluntary bottom-up commitments taken by cities to cement their role as global actors, and the evidence seems to suggest that its significance will only increase in the future, as more than 200 local governments have already committed to reporting on their progress and it has gained a widespread acknowledgement from the high officials of the United Nations (New York City Mayor's Office for International Affairs, 2020). The question then remains, will the United Nations be able to open its systems to formally include sustainability actors beyond the national level.

However, more research is needed on both topics. Not only do we need an increased understanding of the macro-level discourses on sustainable development after the Agenda 2030, but a developed understanding is also needed on the actions and commitments of the distinct sectors of society, such as those of the local authorities. In the future, a time series research design could be utilized to trace whether cities progressed in meeting the goals. Similarly, the research could be extended to the comparison of diverse methods of the local sustainability reporting in an era after the localization of the Agenda 2030. This could potentially yield also to normative results on how cities are to best report on their work on sustainable development, no matter the resources and capabilities available for the work.

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APPENDIX

Annex 1. Sustainable Development Goals

SDG 1   End poverty in all its forms everywhere

SDG 2   End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

SDG 3   Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

SDG 4   Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

SDG 5   Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

SDG 6   Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all

SDG 7   Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all

SDG 8   Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

SDG 9   Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation

SDG 10   Reduce inequality within and among countries

SDG 11   Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

SDG 12   Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

SDG 13   Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts

SDG 14   Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development

SDG 15   Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss

SDG 16   Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

SDG 17   Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

(United Nations General Assembly, 2015)