

# **Implementing the 2030 Agenda: urban policy styles in Latin America and Europe**

## **Abstract**

The inclusion of Sustainable Development Goal 11 (SDG11) in the 2030 Agenda represents a significant policy shift in how urban challenges are addressed and sustainable development is promoted in cities. This orientation was reinforced by the 2016 Quito Declaration, which set the foundation for the New Urban Agenda (NUA), outlining a global framework for urban policy and intervention. Since then, numerous initiatives have emerged to incorporate SDGs into urban policies, including the development of National Urban Policies (NUPs) and the use of indicators to assess the implementation of SDGs in urban areas.

Poorly explored, however, is how the 2030 Agenda has influenced urban public policies, particularly in Latin America and Europe. In this paper, we examine the extent to which urban SDGs have been integrated into the urban policy frameworks of Mexico, Chile, Italy, and Brazil. The analysis of these case studies sheds light on how the 2030 Agenda has been transferred into urban policies and how it shapes public policy styles across different regions.

After exploring the role of urban issues in the 2030 Agenda framework, we describe the analytical approach adopted in the work. Key findings are then discussed, leading to conclusions regarding the distinct pathways through which urban SDGs have influenced policy in the regions under study.

## **Keywords**

SDG11, urban policies, 2030 Agenda, New Urban Agenda, Latin America, Europe, policy transfer.

## Introduction

In recent years, the pivotal role of cities in driving economic and social progress within nations has gained recognition (Cohen, 1991; Henderson, 1991; Spence et al., 2008; OECD, 2006). Rather than being viewed solely as problematic entities, cities are now being increasingly acknowledged as engines of sustainable development and global environmental change (Fitzgerald, 2010; Hoornweg, Sugar, & Trejos Gomez, 2011; Parnell, 2016).

Urban issues were not explicitly addressed in the 2000 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In 2015, however, an urban goal (SDG11) was included in the 2030 Agenda, marking a shift in policy focus and funding towards urban areas, in recognition of their key role in fostering sustainable development (Simon et al., 2016; Watson, 2016; Klopp and Petretta, 2017). The 2016 Declaration of Quito was a milestone: it catalysed the translation of SDGs into urban-targeted public policies, paving the way for the adoption of the New Urban Agenda (NUA). This was the first comprehensive global document to establish principles and measures of urban intervention.

Seven years after the Quito Declaration, initiatives directed towards integrating the SDGs in urban areas have surged. To this effect, National Urban Policies (NUPs) or "Urban Agendas" have been launched, alongside the development of intricate indicator systems to assess the outcomes of SDG implementation. Nevertheless, a notable gap remains in the literature regarding the impact of the 2030 Agenda on urban-focused public policies.

The study objective was to answer the following question: *To what extent have the so-called urban SDGs been translated into urban policies in Latin America and Europe?* We thus sought to understand *what* and *how* the 2030 Agenda has been transferred into urban policies, thereby leading to public policy styles in Europe and Latin America. The analysis was based on the case studies of Mexico, Chile, Italy, and Brazil.

This paper is structured as described next. In the first section, we describe how urban issues are addressed in the 2030 Agenda framework. We then present the analytical approach adopted before outlining the main findings in the subsequent section, and summarising the key conclusions in the final section.

## **The importance of cities in the world: urban policies in the 2030 Agenda**

Over the last three decades, we have witnessed how the important role of cities in the economic and social progress of countries has become firmly recognised (Cohen, 1991; Henderson, 1991; Spence et al., 2008; OCDE, 2006). More than two thirds of the world's population is likely to reside in urban areas by 2050, adding another 2.5 billion people to today's 4 billion urban residents (United Nations, 2014). Cities are now being conceived less as a problem and more as "drivers of sustainable development" and global environmental change (Fitzgerald, 2010, Hoornweg, Sugar, & Trejos Gomez, 2011; Parnell, 2016).

Urban issues were not explicitly mentioned in 2000 when the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were endorsed. However, Parnell (2016) points to five major ways in which the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) differ from the MDGs. One is related to the fact that the urban SDGs are new and "path breaking", because "in an urban world, cities can be pathways to sustainable development". In 2015, the inclusion of the urban goal (SDG11<sup>1</sup>) in the 2030 Agenda reflected the successful lobbying for increased policy attention and funding to urban areas, in recognition of the role of cities in enabling sustainable development (Simon et al., 2016; Watson, 2016; Klopp and Petretta, 2017).

Later, the Declaration of Quito (2016) would represent the first step in materialising the SDGs in terms of public policies with an impact on urban areas. This declaration was a milestone because it approved the New Urban Agenda (NUA), that is, the first document to establish principles and measures regarding urban intervention on a global scale. To contribute to the implementation of the NUA, UN-Habitat, OCDE and Cities Alliance have been actively promoting the launching of National Urban Policies<sup>2</sup> (NUP) since 2016<sup>3</sup>. The latest report assessed the progress of 162 NUPs in strengthening the links between the policies and urban-related global agendas (OECD/UN-HABITAT/UNOPS, 2021).

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1 The goal is to "make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable" and includes a series of 11 targets, each with politically negotiated indicators.

2 A national urban policy is defined as "a coherent set of decisions derived through a deliberate government-led process of coordinating and rallying various actors for a common vision and goal that will promote more transformative, productive, inclusive and resilient urban development for the long term" (Turok, 2014).

3 Launched during the Habitat III Conference in 2016 as a joint initiative of UN-Habitat, the OECD and Cities Alliance, the National Urban Policy Programme (NUPP) aims to contribute to the successful implementation of the New Urban Agenda (NUA) and to achieving sustainable and prosperous human settlements for all, leaving no one behind, through the development of NUPs. <https://urbanpolicyplatform.org/national-urban-policy-programme/>

Also of interest here is the fact that the 2030 Agenda and later, the NUA represent a historical precedent: for the first time, the United Nations (UN) explicitly acknowledged the essential role of subnational entities (i.e., regional and local government institutions) in achieving sustainable development (Parnell, 2016; Watson, 2016). Moreover, as mentioned above, following the approval of the Quito Declaration – on which the NUA definition is based –, similar documents proliferated across different regions and government levels all over the world. Also unprecedented, therefore, is the fact that urban intervention instruments have been articulated based on, or inspired by the same public policy model or framework on a global scale (Huete, Pradel and Merinero, 2024).

## **The impact of the 2030 Agenda on national urban policies: the construction of an *urban policy style***

Following the Quito approval, we have observed the spread of initiatives to territorialise the SDGs in urban areas or to develop varyingly complex indicator systems, aimed at collecting the results of SDG implementations (Koerber, 2024). Nevertheless, fewer efforts have been made in the academic domain to understand the impact of the 2030 Agenda on urban public policies. As stated by Valencia et al. (2019), it is urgent to explore how and to what extent diverse local authorities around the world have begun to approach urban policies, engage with them, and implement them through these agendas.

In this context, the study objective was to examine SDG implementation in four countries located in various specific institutional contexts in Europe and Latin America. An analytical approach was adopted which differs from that of the Voluntary National Reviews<sup>4</sup> (VNRs) elaborated for the United Nations High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. It seeks to draw on a precise comparative methodology in order to analyse how SDGs are concretely guiding policies, administrative arrangements, and institutions in those specified cases. In other words, we sought to test transfer policy theories through empirical studies.

To fulfil these objectives, we analysed how policies, administrative arrangements, institutions, and ideas in one (past or present) political setting were used to develop policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political setting (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000).

In concrete terms, the goal of this work was to answer the following question: *To what extent have the so-called urban SDGs been translated into urban policies in the countries under study?* We therefore attempted to know *what* and *how* the 2030 Agenda has been transferred into urban policies.

In short, what the work aims to address is the extent to which the 2030 Agenda framework has generated a specific public policy style in each country. The discipline of policy analysis is characterised by a strong interest in conceptual and theoretical debates. One of them concerns national policy styles, a concept originally formulated by Richardson et al. (1982) according to which long-term patterns can be detected in different countries based on the manner in which policies are formulated and implemented. The policy style concept characterises the early period of comparative policy studies which focused on the question:

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4 More information: <https://hlpf.un.org/countries>

How do we explain frequently observed major variations in how different nations handle policy issues which are essentially the same? The policy style concept arose from the widespread realisation that nation states had their own characteristic 'way of doing things' (Richardson, 2018).

In the present work, we sought to examine the degree to which the urban Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), commonly referred to as urban SDGs, have been translated into urban policies in Latin America and Europe. We thus examined both what these policies entail and how the principles of the 2030 Agenda have been integrated into urban policy-making processes. In essence, the objective was to investigate whether the framework provided by the 2030 Agenda has generated distinct national public policy styles, specifically in the case of urban issues.

Our theoretical departure point was Richardson's concept of national policy styles (1982) enriched by Howlett and Tosun (2019) and Zahariadis et al., (2021, 2022). These latter authors describe policy styles as unique decision-making systems and procedures for addressing societal challenges. This concept underscores the creation of a structured framework for public policy development and its implementation through specific policy instruments.

As highlighted by Richardson (1982), given the relentless flow of agenda items, policymakers often strive to establish standardised management procedures, which in turn require adopting systematic approaches to handle these issues effectively. This is why it is possible to identify the fundamental characteristics of how a given society formulates and executes its public policies, particularly in the context of urban development and the implementation of SDGs.

Nevertheless, as indicated by these authors, one difficulty in identifying a policy style is their sectoralisation. The fact of formulating policies independently within each policy sector (policy communities, policy sectors, or policy circuits) can hinder or invalidate the search for a policy style. If each policy area evolves within a quasi-waterproof compartment, governed by its own policy elite, then diverse policy styles may emerge within the same political system (Richardson, 1979). According to Lowi (1964), a variety of political behaviours exist in society, and these behaviours can be explained by the types of issues at stake.

However, as Richardson (1982) points out, policies cannot be original to the extent of not being able to fit them into a basic and simple typology of policy styles. This author suggests the existence of common trends that not only allow for a convergence of national styles but also for the gradual erosion of differences between sectors and types of policies. This suggests, among other

things, the existence of forces that drive all political sectors towards behaving similarly in any country, adopting common operational procedures. In this sense, the analysis of how far the 2030 Agenda can influence an urban policy style in the country rests on a dual consideration: the 2030 Agenda is grounded in the principle of integrality and transcends the effect of sectoralisation referred to by Richardson; and it results from a global consensus-building process, fostering a collective movement which has an impact not only on public policy sectors or areas, but also on the countries themselves.

Therefore, the 2030 Agenda represents an ideal context to investigate the transferability and adoption of urban policies across countries, as well as the policy styles promoted within each of them following its implementation.

Regarding policy style, we sought to produce an analytical model for this work which allowed developing a manageable typology of policy styles: one which would be flexible enough to facilitate cross-national comparisons. Hence, we turned to Richardson's proposal (1982), which suggests focusing on two main characteristics of policy formulation systems when devising a typology of policy styles. As pointed out by this author, many descriptions of individual policy systems seem to be related in one way or another to two factors. The first (1) is the governmental approach to problem-solving, often characterised in terms of an incrementalist/rationalist debate. In the context of our work, such an approach is understood as proactive when states explicitly link their urban policies to the 2030 Agenda. Alternatively, a reactive approach corresponds to when the 2030 Agenda is implicitly embraced but is not materialised in an explicit national urban policy. Related actions, however, are developed as a result of other pre-existing policies.

The second factor (2) was the government's relationship with other actors in the process of formulating and implementing the policy. In the context of this work, we analysed the involvement and role of different actors in realising the 2030 Agenda in urban policies. Thus, the policy style would be defined either by situations where the 2030 Agenda is implemented top-down, as part of a national strategy, or through the activism of local authorities and/or via community-led development.

These two primary factors are acknowledged as core aspects of any nation's policy system, although other factors may contextualise the cases of the countries analysed in the literature. For example, Premfors (1981) has argued that the degree of centralisation, openness, and deliberation should be added to the core characteristics of a policy process.

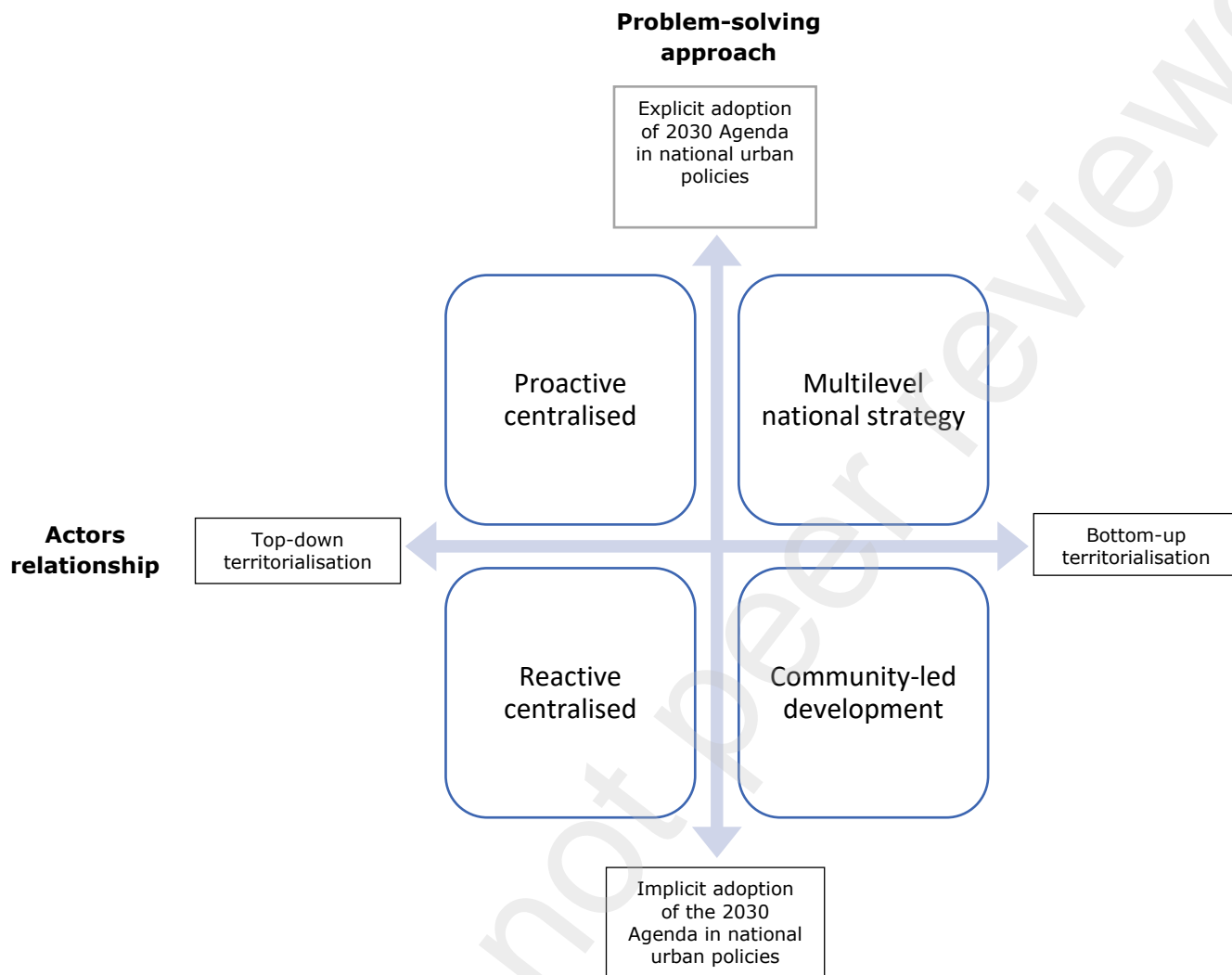
To increase the comparative value of the analysis in this work, we chose to privilege simplicity. That is, specific country typologies should be avoided when conducting comparative analyses. Therefore, policy style can be defined here as the interaction between: (a), the government's approach to problem-solving; and (b), the relationship between the government and other actors in the policy process.

The following typology was thus obtained:

1. Proactive centralised: characterised by explicit 2030 Agenda adoption at the national level and its direct integration into a national urban policy, under centralised government leadership.
2. Reactive centralised: refers to explicit 2030 Agenda acceptance at the national level, but no direct integration into a national urban policy. Instead, the agenda is materialised through actions derived from pre-existing policies.
3. Multilevel national strategy: 2030 Agenda explicitly adopted in urban policies or realised via a top-down process. The territorialisation of the 2030 Agenda is part of a coordinated national strategy between the central government and local authorities, in which the latter have the initiative.
4. Community-led development: 2030 Agenda implementation in urban policies as a result of local authorities' activism and community members' participation in policy formulation and implementation, promoting collaboration with other actors at both local and national levels.



**Figure 1. Implementation of the 2030 Agenda: urban public policy styles**



Source: own elaboration

These categories seek to capture the different approaches to the realisation of the 2030 Agenda regarding urban policies, in terms of its localisation in domestic systems and of the relationships between the government and other actors. A simplified analytical structure was maintained to facilitate a comparison between countries.

By focusing on two primary factors in the policy process, we developed a basic and straightforward typology of policy styles, as illustrated in Figure 1. The premises were as follow: (a) the typology would be instrumental for comparative purposes and could be extended or adapted to suit various countries; and (b),

analysing a series of case studies would allow researchers to map a policy system. Consequently, we would expect these case studies to cluster within one sector of our diagram, making it possible to identify each country's predominant policy style. Although different models would coexist in reality, countries would somewhat align with the ideal types defined by the typology. Therefore, this basic typology would prove to be useful to analyse the policy systems of individual countries and to identify transnational trends.

## Operationalisation proposal of urban policy styles

To define how a policy style could be measured in the context of this work, we considered the proposals of Tosun and Howlett (2022) and Zahariadis et al. (2023). In both cases, the authors operationalised the policy style concept using Sustainable Governance Indicators (SGI)<sup>5</sup>.

The presented proposal takes into account, first, the available information and, second, the model's validity and reliability criteria. Regarding construct validity, the aim was to measure policy style at the required level of abstraction. For its part, content validity covered the entire scope of the construct as all the policy style dimensions defined in the literature (problem-solving and actor relationships) were considered across all phases of the policy process (planning, adoption, and implementation) and involving various types of actors (public, at different government levels, and private).

Our goal was to adapt both operationalisation proposals to the content of our study, modifying not only the scale of abstraction but also the measurement of the indicators. As Tosun and Howlett (2022) point out, it is not immediately clear whether a national policy style—the "dependent variable"—is an "output," a characteristic choice of policy instruments, or the process through which choices are made. In this case, the proposed analysis of policy style refers to the process through which the 2030 Agenda materialises into national urban policy instruments. In this sense, the analytical tool was designed to measure the policy style of the cases under study.

The first dimension, *government approach to problem-solving*, is directed towards capturing the extent to which the 2030 Agenda is effectively adopted in urban policies – since as Zahariadis et al. (2023) point out in relation to Tosun and Howlett's (2022) measurement proposal, the concept of national policy style is more than strategic planning at the highest government level. A "way of doing things" also involves the execution of plans and the capacity to do so (Richardson, 1982). Based on Zahariadis' et al. (2023) proposal, we included four sub-dimensions which largely cover three important components of the policy process: planning, adoption, and implementation.

The first sub-dimension (planning) considers whether the government explicitly links its national urban policy to the 2030 Agenda objectives. The second sub-dimension measures the degree to which the government has developed specific policy tools to address the urban dimensions of the 2030 Agenda (adoption).

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<sup>5</sup> The supplementary information section presents the operationalisation process of these authors, along with the proposed operationalisation used in this work.

The third and fourth sub-dimensions (implementation) assess whether the government has adapted the necessary institutional structures to effectively implement policies related to the 2030 Agenda, and whether the government aligns its budget structures with the objectives of the 2030 Agenda. Both sub-dimensions take an 0 value when the condition is not met, and 100 when the condition is met. The sub-dimensions contribute to the aggregated Problem-Solving Approach Index (PSAI), which ranges from a reactive to a proactive approach, calculated as the average of the values adopted in each sub-dimension, and which take values between 0 and 100.

The second dimension, the relationship between the government and other actors, aims to measure inclusiveness in policy formulation. Howlett and Tosun (2019) propose a measurement that considers key policy actors as a variable, expressed in terms of high/low inclusiveness of social actors in policy formulation. Thus, the degree of inclusiveness, which captures the broad range of interaction between citizens and interest groups with the government in policy formulation and implementation, is the optimal way to operationalise state-society relations and is closest to Richardson's original conceptualisation.

In our paper, inclusiveness was used to capture the extent to which agenda adoption in urban policies results from a top-down approach imposed on local actors, or conversely, from a bottom-up initiative. In this sense, as Zahariadis et al. (2002) affirm, inclusiveness reflects the degree to which local actors have a seat at the policy-making table and the extent to which their participation is formalised.

The construct was operationalised using three sub-dimensions. The first sub-dimension examines whether the 2030 Agenda implementation at the local level is based on a supranational strategy. The second sub-dimension measures the extent to which local authorities are responsible for implementing the 2030 Agenda as part of a national strategy. The third sub-dimension evaluates the degree to which local societal activism drives the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. These sub-dimensions contribute to the Inclusiveness Index (II), which ranges from a top-down to a bottom-up approach. This indicator takes values on a scale ranging from 0 to 100, and the value is determined by the rating obtained in one of the previous sub-dimensions, as they are mutually exclusive.

**Table 1. Urban policy style: operationalisation proposal**

Concept	Dimensions		Sub-dimensions	Value	Composite indicators
Urban policy style	Government approach to problem-solving	Planning	The government explicitly links the national urban policy to the 2030 Agenda	0/100	Problem-solving approach index (PSAI)  Reactive <-> Proactive
		Adoption	The government develops policy tools related to the urban dimension of the 2030 Agenda (such as urban agendas)	0/100	
		Implementation	The government adapts the necessary institutional structures to facilitate implementation	0/100	
			The government structures budgets in accordance with the 2030 Agenda	0/100	
	Relationship between the government and local actors	Inclusiveness	The 2030 Agenda implementation at the local level is based on a locally implemented supranational strategy	0	Inclusiveness index (II)  Top down <-> Bottom up
			The 2030 Agenda implementation falls on local authorities as part of a national strategy	50	
			The 2030 Agenda implementation is based on local activism	100	

Source: own elaboration, based on Howlett and Tosun (2019) and Zahariadis et al. (2022).

## **Methodology**

### *Justification of the selection of cases*

The criteria considered at each level of analysis were as follow:

- The hypothesis that each case covers, a priori, one of the quadrants—or at least that these cases differ significantly in terms of actor inclusion and national adoption of the 2030 Agenda. This hypothesis is based on the findings of our Springer publication (cited as (authors, 2023) to maintain anonymity).
- The adoption of the 2030 Agenda at the national scale. All cases embrace the 2030 Agenda.
- The presence of a national 2030 Agenda implementation strategy in cities. This criterion presented some variability.

In any case, based on the analysis of multiple cases (Yin, 2002), the research design served a dual exploratory and explanatory purpose. It was directed towards describing the cases and understanding what could be learned from the process of materialising the 2030 Agenda in the countries under analysis. Additionally, it allowed identifying how the process unfolded in each case, in particular by examining the role played by factors such as the existence of intermediate documents between the 2030 Agenda and the territory, the presence of an urban policy institutional framework at the national level, and local institutional capacity to materialise the 2030 Agenda in urban policies in the cases studied.

### *Data collection and analysis techniques*

To achieve the above objectives, various public policy documents forming the foundation of each urban agenda under examination were analysed. Additionally, documents reflecting the urban agenda of each government level were studied. A summary of these documents is presented in Table 1 below.

**Table 2. Documents reviewed in each country**

Country	Documents
Mexico	National Voluntary Report (2021) Progress Report on the Implementation of the New Urban Agenda in Mexico (2021)
Italy	Voluntary National Reviews Italy (2017, 2022) Voluntary Subnational Review Localizing the SDGs in Italy (2022) Strategia Nazionale per lo Sviluppo Sostenibile (SNSvS) (2017, 2022) Agenda urbana per lo sviluppo sostenibile (2018) Agende metropolitane per lo sviluppo sostenibile (AMSvS) (started in 2019) Linee guida nazionali per l'Agenda Urbana per lo Sviluppo Sostenibile (2022)
Chile	Informe Nacional Voluntario sobre los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible en Chile 2023 Política Nacional de Desarrollo Urbano (2014)
Brazil	Brasil (2017). Relatório Nacional Voluntário sobre os Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável. Brasília: Presidência da República. Brasil (2021). Política Nacional de Desenvolvimento Urbano. Brasília: Ministério do Desenvolvimento Regional

Source: elaborated by the authors

The methodology followed to examine the indicated documents was content analysis. As Berelson (1952) points out, the content analysis technique allows describing the manifest content of communication based on objectivity (explicit rules) and systematisation (applicable to all units of analysis). A series of registration units were selected from the sampling units (the public policy documents shown in Table 1), i.e., the specific segments within the public policy documents that constituted the empirical material under study.

## Results

In this section, we present the key findings for each country based on the analytical framework dimensions. The table highlights policy style differences and similarities between the selected countries, focusing on how each government has approached the planning, adoption, and implementation of urban policies aligned with the 2030 Agenda. The results allow assessing the government's approach to problem-solving and the inclusion of local actors in implementing the 2030 Agenda, offering proactivity and inclusiveness indices which facilitate cross-country comparisons.

**Table 3. Urban policy style: main results per country**

Dimensions	Sub-dimensions		Value	Mexico	Chile	Italy	Brazil
Government approach to problem-solving	Planning	The government explicitly links national urban policy to the 2030 Agenda	0/100	100	0	100	100
	Adoption	The government has developed policy tools related to the urban dimension of the 2030 Agenda (such as urban agendas)	0/100	100	100	100	0
	Implementation	The government has adapted the necessary institutional structures to facilitate implementation	0/100	100	100	100	0
		The government has structured budgets in accordance with the 2030 Agenda	0/100	0	0	100	0
		Problem-solving approach index (PSAI)		0_100	75	50	100
Reactive <-> Proactive							
Relationship between the government and local actors	Inclusiveness	The 2030 Agenda implementation at a local level is based on a supranational strategy that is implemented at a local level	0	0	0	-	-
		The 2030 Agenda implementation falls on local authorities as part of a national strategy	50	-	-	50	-



		The 2030 Agenda implementation is based on local activism	100	-	-	-	100
<b>Inclusiveness index (II)</b>			<b>0_100</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Top down &lt;-&gt; Bottom up</b>							
<b>What can we learn from this country?</b>				Centralised approach effective but hinders local adaptation; highlights limits of centralised policy.	Centralisation lacks local participation; needs multilevel governance to make implementation more effective.	Multilevel governance with effective local participation; facilitates integration of the 2030 Agenda.	Lack of federal support drives local leadership; innovative but limited without a national strategy.

Source: own elaboration

Each case is described in detail below.

#### ***Proactive centralised: Mexico***

In Mexico, the 2030 Agenda implementation has been driven by the federal government, which has demonstrated a centralised and proactive approach to adapting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This process has been led by an institutional structure which includes the National Council for the 2030 Agenda, created in 2017, and chaired by the Office of the Presidency. This council is responsible for coordinating and monitoring SDG implementations nationwide. Additionally, specialised technical committees in various areas, including academia, contribute to the development of public policies aligned with the SDGs.

The Mexican government has also implemented a comprehensive information system to monitor and report progress on the SDGs, called the Sustainable Development Goals Information System (SIODS). This system provides disaggregated data per federal entity and allows tracking progress towards SDG achievement in detail, thus enhancing the country's ability to identify areas for improvement and adjust its policies accordingly.

However, despite these federal efforts, a significant disconnect can be observed between this robust structure and effective local implementation. Urban development policies and the Urban Agenda in Mexico are not fully integrated with the 2030 Agenda, leading to a lack of coherence between national actions and the needs and realities of local communities. The inconsistency is reflected in the fragmented implementation of the SDGs at the subnational level, where

the heterogeneous approaches and methodologies of different federal entities create a disparate landscape in terms of progress and reporting.

Despite these challenges, the federal government's centralised approach has led to top-down coordination which has played an essential role in establishing a common framework of reference and clear objectives for all levels of government. Mexico's 2030 Agenda implementation is characterised by this strong federal-level coordination, although articulation and coordination efforts with local actors are still in progress. Local governments have unevenly adapted their plans and reports to align with the SDGs, reflecting the variations in capacities and resources available in the country's different regions.

The National Strategy for the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda, adopted in 2019, has been key in aligning public policies with the SDGs. However, this effort faces significant challenges in terms of effective integration between government levels and in adapting the SDGs to local realities. The strategy still has room for improvement in terms of creating synergies between different government levels and in mobilising resources to ensure a more equitable and effective implementation across the country.

In conclusion, while the institutional framework for SDG implementation in Mexico is solid and centralised, it is unevenly applied locally. Coordination and adaptation efforts to local conditions are essential to bridge the gap between federal-level planning and the realities of local communities. The latter would allow for more uniform and meaningful progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda throughout the country.

### ***Reactive Centralised: Chile***

In the case of Chile, the analysis revealed that strategic urban planning policies do not explicitly address the challenges of the 2030 Agenda. This does not mean, however, that the Chilean government has not developed strategies to tackle these challenges. The National Urban Development Policy (PNDU), which guides the development of Chilean cities, predates the SDGs, and does not directly mention them, although it maintains strong connections which facilitate 2030 Agenda implementation. This is reflected in territorial planning instruments and strategic planning at regional and local levels, where solid links support their implementation in the urban domain despite the absence of any explicit reference to the SDGs.

Chile established a structure dedicated to implementing the SDGs in 2016: the "National Council for the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development". This body is characterised by strong centralisation and interacts

with various entities and state authorities at different levels to implement the 2030 Agenda. The council consists of 26 members, which are mostly representatives of national entities, such as the Minister of Foreign Affairs who chairs it, and representatives of several key ministries. Nevertheless, only two of these members represent municipalities, reflecting the limited territorial representation existing within the council.

Despite the centralised nature of this approach, reasonable progress has been made in SDG-oriented indicators, underscoring that the urban agenda and SDG implementation in Chile reflects the reality of policy implementation in Chilean cities: much of the urban planning and coordination depends on municipal subordination to other state bodies at regional and national levels. Therefore, sectoral state entities, which are relatively disconnected from the territory, are primarily responsible for achieving SDG-related targets in their respective jurisdictions.

The complexity of urban governance in Chile is a key factor in this analysis. While a significant portion of cities is governed by a single municipality, the role of governance becomes diluted in more complex urban areas, such as conurbations and metropolitan cities (Santiago, Valparaíso, and Concepción), where two or more municipalities share governance. In these cases, multilevel relationships are often marked by tensions but are necessary, and central government agencies generally play a predominant role.

In this already complex context, only three of the indicators associated with the SDG 11 goals are the direct responsibility of municipalities. For the remaining indicators, municipalities are subordinate to central government agencies which often operate in parallel to municipal authorities without any significant coordination. Despite the limitations imposed by the country's complex urban governance, municipalities show a voluntary interest in contributing to these goals. However, the scope of their responsibilities and the SDG national strategy often relegates them to a secondary role, limiting the participation of local governments and the communities they interact with. Although Chile's indicators show satisfactory compliance with some SDG objectives compared to the rest of Latin America, it is likely that a greater participation of territorial entities and local actors would contribute to achieving these goals more effectively, especially regarding the development of sustainable communities and cities.

### ***National Strategy: Italy***

The 2030 Agenda has been explicitly adopted or realised in urban policies via a top-down process. The 2030 Agenda territorialisation is part of a coordinated

national strategy between the central government and local authorities, in which the latter have the initiative.

Regarding the *government approach to the problem-solving dimension*, the Italian government has explicitly linked its national urban policy to the 2030 Agenda (planning) and has developed policy tools related to the urban dimension of the 2030 Agenda (adoption). It is worth noting, however, that the latter is the outcome of an incremental process over almost a decade. The elaboration of the national urban agenda began implicitly during the EU cohesion policy 2014-2020 programming period, with the National Strategy for the Internal Areas and the PON Metro which focused on metropolitan cities. The advancement towards an explicit agenda gained relative political attention during the Draghi Government (2021-2022). This led to the adoption of the *Agenda urbana per lo sviluppo sostenibile* (2018) and of a methodology to develop and integrate the agendas of the Ministries competent in urban matters (De Gregorio et al., 2023). Despite a loss of momentum due to the elections that led to the Meloni Government, the guidelines for the National Urban Agenda for Sustainable Development were finally published in February 2023, after almost two years of work. They were designed by a research team composed of members of universities and think tanks on urban and local sustainable development. They helped the former Italian Ministry for Environment, Land and Sea Protection to define a National Urban Agenda directed towards fostering sustainable development based on the 2030 Agenda SDGs. They equally developed guidelines and policy indications to support cities in their planning, implementation, and reporting of the local agenda goals.

The Italian government has adopted the necessary institutional structures to facilitate 2030 Agenda implementation through its National Strategy for Sustainable Development - *Strategia Nazionale per lo Sviluppo Sostenibile* (SNSvS)- approved in 2017. The SNSvS is reviewed every three years and is subject to the Voluntary National Review (VNR) process. The last update was in 2023. Regarding the structure of the budget in accordance with the 2030 Agenda, Italy has recently been criticised by the *Alleanza Italiana per lo Sviluppo Sostenibile* (ASVIS), a key stakeholder in both design and policy implementation of sustainable development in the country. It ensures that the 2024 national budget contributes to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda (ASVIS, 2023b).

Moreover, the *relationship between the government and local actors* in terms of inclusiveness is remarkable across all considered items. First, the 2030 Agenda is applied at a local level based on a locally implemented supranational strategy. The establishment of a national, multi-level framework for sustainable

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6 [https://asvis.it/public/asvis2/files/PolicyBrief/2023/ASviS\\_PolicyBrief4.pdf](https://asvis.it/public/asvis2/files/PolicyBrief/2023/ASviS_PolicyBrief4.pdf)

development introduces mechanisms to boost the fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda and attempts to incentivise regions and metropolitan cities to contribute to the national vision on the issue. In fact, the SNSvS22 has underlined the role that the urban level needs to play to achieve the national sustainability objectives (De Gregorio et al., 2023).

Second, the implementation falls on local authorities as part of a national strategy. At the regional level, this multi-level framework has been successful in involving the regions and metropolitan cities and developing regional strategies for sustainable development (SRSvS) as well as metropolitan agendas for sustainable development (AMSvS)<sup>7</sup>. It is worth mentioning that in the *Carta di Bologna* (2017), all the metropolitan mayors committed to developing their AMSvS fully aligned with the National Strategy (SNSvS) and their respective SRSvS. The metropolitan agendas developed so far can be regarded as 'urban agendas' in terms of their content and the policy discourse they develop. They integrate the sustainability and urban/territorial vision in a unique instrument (De Gregorio et al., 2023). Italy has been reporting how this process has been unfolding to the UN through the Voluntary Subnational Review. Localizing the SDGs in Italy (VSR8) in 2022.

Finally, the realisation is based on the activism of local society. Italy has structured a complex process of continuous involvement of institutional subjects and civil society at different territorial levels to contribute to SNSvS. This system has two areas of action. The first is dedicated to the mapping and formalisation of existing actors and processes, to support and strengthen lasting and dynamic exchange and learning networks. Specific forums are set up by regions and metropolitan cities, as well as nationwide with the National Forum for Sustainable Development. The second area of action focuses on collaboration and partnerships aimed at strengthening interactions and synergies between all sustainability, institutional, non-state and civil society actors by promoting co-planning, co-programming, as well as the development of integrated and collaborative tools (CReIAMO PA Project, 2023)<sup>9</sup>.

### **Community-led development: Brazil**

It is important to clarify that the period analysed was that running until the last Bolsonaro government (2019-2022). The reason is that alterations took place when the National SDG Commission was established with the return of Lula as President. In practice, little has been done anyway under the Lula government

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<sup>7</sup> For further information on the officially approved strategies, see: <https://www.mase.gov.it/pagina/strategie-territoriali-approvate>

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.mase.gov.it/sites/default/files/archivio/allegati/sviluppo\\_sostenibile/Il\\_ruolo\\_della\\_partecipazione\\_per\\_la\\_sostenibilit%C3%A0\\_2023.pdf](https://www.mase.gov.it/sites/default/files/archivio/allegati/sviluppo_sostenibile/Il_ruolo_della_partecipazione_per_la_sostenibilit%C3%A0_2023.pdf)

to organise a national strategy involving the municipalities. In this sense, Brazil can be defined as a case of community-led development given the role of local governments and the participation of civil society organisations in the framework of the SDG implementation, especially relating to the urban domain.

Federalism in Brazil is characterised by a high level of autonomy enjoyed by the states and municipalities, both constituting federative entities. In the Bolsonaro period, the 2030 Agenda lost traction and federal resources declined. Whether or not SDGs remained on the government agenda depended on each state and municipal government. It is important here to frame the case in the context of a lack of federal support at the municipal level, as the 2030 Agenda loss weight in the national agenda under the Bolsonaro government. The local implementation of the 2030 Agenda was thus left to the innovation capacity of municipalities and cities as well as state support where such action actually existed.

The change of government (when Lula replaced Bolsonaro) took place in 2023 and it is still too early to affirm that any national strategy in Brazil exercises some influence on local governments. Concretely, to date, local governments have assumed leadership in the absence of a national strategy and of any support or guidance regarding priorities and deadlines. On the one hand, the fact that the country has not adopted a national perspective on the SDGs and on the expected role of local governments may be a disadvantage. On the other, such an absence allows municipalities to strengthen or multiply their initiatives and local capacity to implement 2030 Agenda-related actions based on the constitutional autonomy at their disposal.

The Lula government began to prepare the Voluntary National Report, which should still be available in 2024, as a way of monitoring the implementation of the SDGs. The municipalities were called to contribute to the preparation of the report. This is one of the responsibilities of the National SDG Commission, which was appointed in 2023 by the federal government.

Regarding the status of the 2030 Agenda in Brazil, two issues should be highlighted: a) the existence of a national agenda oriented towards implementing the SDGs; and b), the existence of institutional arrangements which facilitate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the country. The Brazilian government, however, has hitherto released only one Voluntary Report – in 2017 – on SDG implementation progress. Meanwhile, civil society has produced annual “Light Reports”, an initiative of the Civil Society Working Group for the 2030 Agenda (GTSC A2030). This group is a coalition of non-governmental Brazilian organisations, social movements, forums, networks, foundations, and federations that promote sustainable development, fight

inequality and injustice, and strengthen universal, indivisible, and interdependent rights. Specifically, the coalition is composed of 64 non-governmental organisations, mental institutions, social movements, forums, networks, universities, entities, foundations and Brazilian federations. It was formalised in 2015, after having arisen from meetings of organisations which accompanied the negotiations leading up to the inclusion of the resolution "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development". Given the absence of the Bolsonaro government's involvement and the delayed political action under the Lula government to assume the SDGs in the country, the space was occupied by society.

With respect to the first topic, the national agenda – formulated in 2017 – prioritised SDGs 1, 2, 3, 5, 9, 14 and 17 under the theme "Eradicating Poverty and Promoting Prosperity in a Changing World". Three key issues were emphasised: poverty, prosperity, and transformation. The issue of poverty is essential in a country like Brazil because it affects 22% of the population (approximately 47 million people), as reflected not only in terms of financial scarcity, but also of other dimensions such as access to public services.

Regarding institutional arrangements aimed at implementing the 2030 Agenda, some dissemination objectives have been set in order to make them reach local policies, provided the latter are aligned with national goals to face social, economic and regional inequalities. Since Brazil is a decentralised federation and the municipalities enjoy the status of a federative entity with constitutional autonomy in the political, legal, financial, and administrative spheres, the local governments are considered key players in adapting national goals and indicators to the local reality. On the other hand, the incorporation of SDG targets at the subnational level exceeds the federal government's capacity to act, which is why civil society plays a fundamental role in the proposed multilevel governance strategy.

The objective would be to stimulate the creation of local governance structures which translate the SDGs into their planning and budgets, including the participation of civil society. This latter path has been chosen to incorporate the 2030 Agenda in territories via the following proposals: the engagement of the private sector, civil society and academia; the elaboration of Multiannual Municipal Plans based on the 2030 Agenda; the creation of Subnational Commissions; the preparation of monitoring reports; the formation of institutional partnerships; 2030 Agenda dissemination; training of public managers; and the ODS Brazil Award.

To make these proposals viable, several institutional, governmental, and civil society initiatives as well as institutional arrangements were implemented in the

2017 plan, with the aim of disseminating the SDGs. They were conducted despite the Bolsonaro government having deactivated some instruments or some having become obsolete. The initiatives are as follow:

- Creation of digital participation platforms allowing citizens and social movements to present suggestions to help build federal public policies through dialogues with the federal government. In addition, an internet portal that brings together organisations from society, the private sector, local governments, and academia has been set up to broaden the debate on the SDGs and to promote their implementation.
- Creation of information platforms on the construction of the 2030 Agenda, providing content and publications; monitoring of indicators and SDG databases in subnational governments; participation of institutions wishing to monitor i implementation progress.
- Map of civil society organisations: georeferenced platform with civil society information to enable the dissemination of information and monitoring of SDG targets.
- Atlas of Vulnerability of Municipalities, which presents the Vulnerability Index across three dimensions: urban infrastructure; human capital and income; and work in all Brazilian municipalities and metropolitan regions. The tool aims to support municipalities in the diagnosis and planning of local actions.

Within the scope of federal government actions, a strategic challenge is to expand the state capacities of municipalities, which are generally acutely lacking in administrative, managerial, financial, human, and technological resources. Therefore, federal public policies aimed at modernising local management are essential to encourage the realisation of the 2030 Agenda in the country.

The federal government's performance has significantly dwindled since 2019, and is still pending renewal by the Lula government. Moreover, ongoing initiatives are still timid. Despite these factors, however, it is worth highlighting a number of relevant institutional arrangements directed towards facilitating the implementation of the SDGs in the country. One example is the "SDG Strategy", which brings together organisations from civil society, the private sector, local governments, and academia. It is directed towards interdependent action and multisectoral articulation, with the purpose of mobilising, discussing and proposing means of implementation for this agenda. A central action consists of the ODS Strategy Network Strengthening Project, which engages in four main activities (<https://www.fadc.org.br/o-que-fazemos/fortalecimento-da-rede-estrategia-ods>):

- Consolidate the governance structure, capillarity, and representativeness of the SDG Strategy throughout the national territory, consolidating its performance as a multisectoral network.



- Qualify the national debate on the SDGs through communication actions and collaborative mechanisms to monitor national progress.
- Support the subnational implementation of the 2030 Agenda by building local and innovative solutions.
- Empower organisations representing vulnerable groups with a priority focus on reducing gender, generational and ethnic-racial inequalities.

In short, the results of Agenda 2030 are not significant in the case of Brazil. Despite this, the absence of federal government during the Bolsonaro government (2019-2022) and the Lula government's slowness in setting in motion the SDGs on the national agenda has opened the way to community-led development. However, considering the strong role performed by the central government in Brazil, this community-led development presents many limitations, and the "Light Reports" have been reflecting the poor degree of achievement of SDGs in the country.

## **Main conclusions**

This study objective was to investigate how the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has been implemented in urban policies. The Mexico, Chile, Italy, and Brazil case studies revealed different policy styles which were manifest in the national strategies they adopted to address the urban dimension of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). From centralised coordination in Mexico, to community-led implementation in Brazil, each country offers valuable lessons on the interaction between levels of government and the importance of local adaptation.

Mexico's experience underscores the importance of a strong institutional framework to ensure an effective 2030 Agenda implementation. The establishment of the National Council for the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals Information System (SIODS) illustrates the benefits of centralised coordination in monitoring and guiding national policies. However, the disconnect between federal planning and local implementation highlights the limitations of a top-down approach. The heterogeneity in subnational implementation demonstrates the challenges of integrating national strategies into local contexts. This case aligns with the concept of a "proactive centralised" policy style, where the federal government drives policy formulation and implementation (Howlett & Tosun, 2022). However, the difficulty in translating national goals into local action supports Richardson's (1982) observation that centralised systems can struggle with local adaptation, leading to policy outcomes which vary significantly across different regions. This gap suggests that a more adaptive approach including local actors in the decision-making

process could enhance coherence and effectiveness across different levels of governance.

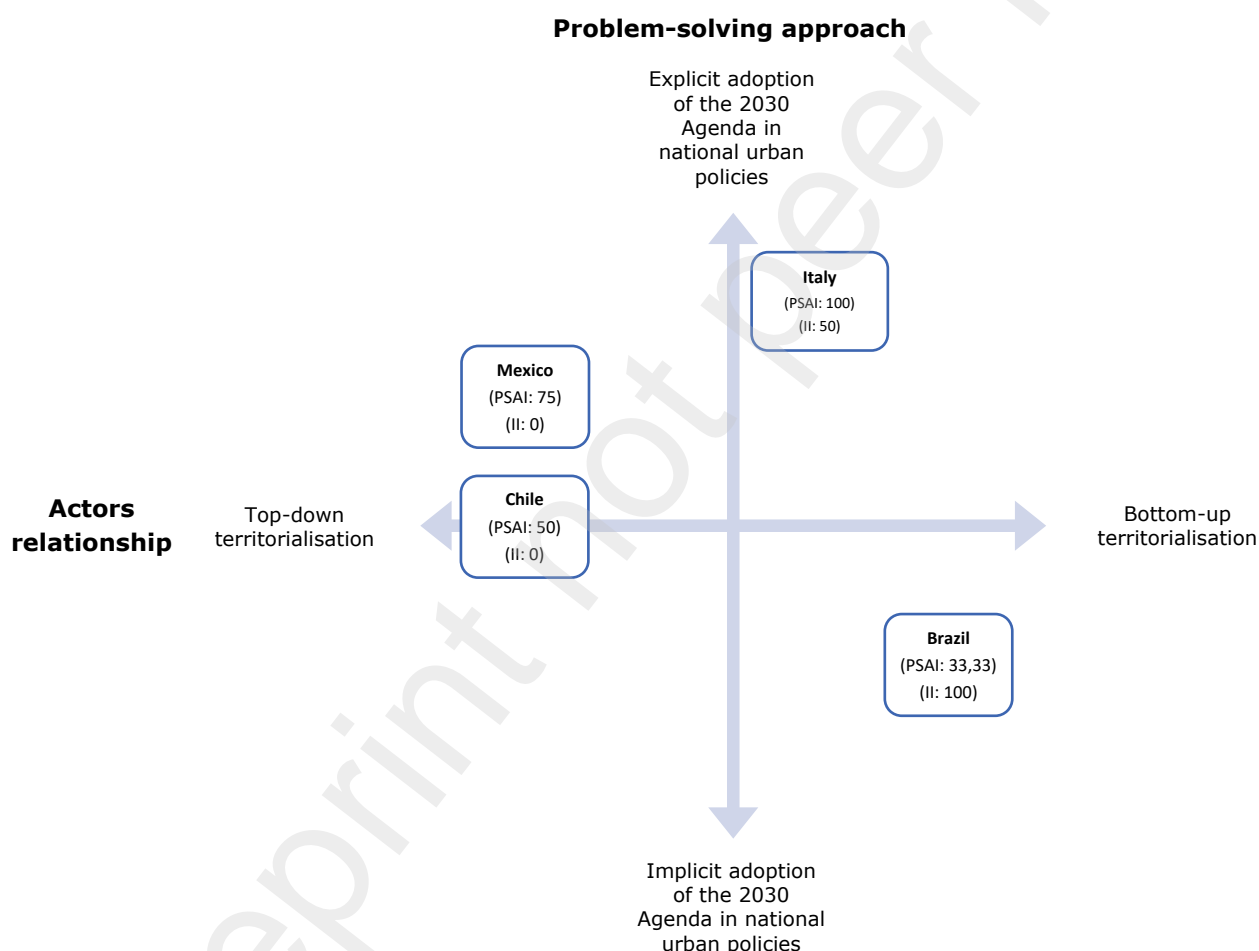
Chile's experience highlights the challenges of implementing the 2030 Agenda in a reactive centralised policy context. While national structures exist such as the National Council for the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the local governments' limited involvement hampers effective implementation. The complexity of urban governance, particularly in metropolitan areas, requires multilevel relationships which are often marked by tension and limited coordination. The dependence on sectoral state entities to realise SDG-related goals, with minimal local input, shows the limitations of centralised decision-making in a highly urbanised country. This scenario exemplifies a "reactive centralised" policy style, where the national government responds to emerging challenges but often lacks a proactive engagement with local entities (Richardson, 1982). Limited local involvement in Chile's SDG implementation echoes the findings of policy style studies which emphasize the need for inclusive and participatory governance structures (Howlett, 2009). The case suggests that improving vertical coordination and enhancing local government autonomy could foster a more integrated and effective policy implementation process.

Italy's case provides valuable insights into the benefits of a coordinated national strategy for implementing the 2030 Agenda. The multi-level framework, which includes the National Strategy for Sustainable Development (SNSvS) and the development of regional and metropolitan strategies, highlights the importance of aligning national and local objectives. The involvement of a wide range of stakeholders, including civil society, in the planning and monitoring processes underscores the value of inclusivity in policy implementation. However, the incremental nature of this approach together with recent political shifts illustrate the potential fragility of sustained policy momentum. Italy's stance reflects a "coordinated and strategic" policy style, characterised by deliberate planning and the integration of multiple levels of governance (Tosun & Howlett, 2022). The emphasis on inclusivity and stakeholder engagement is in line with findings on collaborative governance, suggesting that such approaches can enhance policy legitimacy and effectiveness (Ansell & Gash, 2007). The Italian experience also highlights the challenges of maintaining policy continuity in the face of political change, a common issue in strategic policy styles which rely on long-term planning and cross-party consensus.

The Brazilian case illustrates the consequences of weak federal support to the 2030 Agenda, leading to a scenario where local governments and civil society play a crucial role in sustaining SDG-related initiatives. The autonomy of municipalities within Brazil's federal system allows for significant local innovation and adaptation, but the absence of a coherent national strategy creates

disparities in implementation and outcomes. The role of civil society, as evidenced by the production of "Light Reports," shows the importance of non-state actors in filling governance gaps, particularly in a context of governmental inaction. This case aligns with the concept of "bottom-up" or "community-led" policy styles, where local actors drive policy implementation in the absence of strong central coordination (Peters & Pierre, 1998). The Brazilian experience supports the literature on decentralised governance, which suggests that local autonomy can lead to more tailored and contextually appropriate solutions (Ostrom, 1990). However, it also highlights the limitations of this approach, particularly when local capacities and resources are unevenly distributed, leading to significant regional differences in policy outcomes.

**Figure 2. Implementation of the 2030 Agenda: urban public policy styles**



Source: own elaboration

The implementation of the 2030 Agenda reveals that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to all contexts. Public policy styles, from centralised approaches to multilevel governance and community-led development, present different advantages and challenges. The experiences of Mexico, Chile, Italy, and Brazil highlight the need to balance central direction with local participation to address the complexity of the SDGs. Approaches which integrate effective coordination and adaptation to local realities tend to be more successful in implementing sustainable public policies. These lessons can guide other countries in formulating more effective strategies to meet global sustainable development goals.

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## Supplementary information

Comparison of policy style operationalisation proposals

Tuson and Howlett (2022)				Zahariadis et al. (2023)				Our proposal (2024)					
Sub-dimensions		Value	Composite indicators	Sub-dimensions			Value	Composite indicators	Sub-dimensions		Value	Composite indicators	
Strategic planning	Strategic planning units and bodies take a long-term view of policy challenges and viable solutions, and they strongly influence government decision-making.	9_10	Strategic planning 1_10	Government approach to problem-solving	Planning	Strategic capacity	Institutionalised forms of strategic planning take a long-term view of policy challenges.	1_10	Problem-solving approach 0_10	Planning	The government explicitly links the national urban policy to the 2030 Agenda	0/100	Problem-solving approach index (PSAI).  Reactive (0) <-> Proactive (100)
	There are no units and bodies taking a long-term view of policy challenges and viable solutions	1_2			Adoption	Inter-ministerial coordination	Level of expertise of the government offices.			Adoption	The government develops policy tools related to the urban dimension of the 2030 Agenda (such as urban agendas)		
							Involvement of line ministries.						
							Ability of cabinet committees to filter out and settle issues before cabinet meetings.						
				Extent of the ability of ministerial officials and civil servants to coordinate the drafting of policy proposals with other ministries before proposals reach ministerial coordination.									
					Existence of information coordination mechanisms, and the level of digitalisation for inter-ministerial coordination.								
					Implementation		Extent to which the government can achieve its policy objectives			Implementation	The government adapts the necessary institutional structures to facilitate implementation		
				Degree to which mechanisms exist to ensure ministerial compliance						The government structures budgets in accordance with the 2030 Agenda			
				Degree to which instruments exist to monitor ministries and public agencies									
				Degree to which the national government ensures that the tasks allocated to									

						subnational governments are adequately funded						
						Degree of decentralisation of subnational units of government						
						Degree to which the national government ensures that subnational governments realise national priorities of public services						
						Ability to deal with powerful lobby groups regarding lobby group influence in the policy-making process.						
<b>Public consultation</b>	The government always consults societal actors in a fair and pluralistic manner	9_10	Public consultation 1_10	<b>Inclusiveness</b>	Societal consultation	How successful the government is in inviting and considering the opinions of societal organisations such as trade unions, business associations, religious communities, and others.	1_10	Inclusiveness 0_10	<b>Inclusiveness</b>	The 2030 Agenda implementation at the local level is based on a locally implemented supranational strategy	0	Inclusiveness index (II)  Top down (0) <-> Bottom up (100)
	Governments rarely consult societal actors	1_2			Policy communication	Whether the government communicates its policy goals in a factually coherent way.				The 2030 Agenda implementation falls on local authorities as part of a national strategy	50	
					Citizens' participatory competence	Extent to which citizens are well informed of public policies and the extent to which the government publishes data and information in such a way that it strengthens the ability of citizens to hold the government accountable.				The 2030 Agenda implementation is based on local activism	100	

Source: own elaboration based on Tuson and Howlett (2022) and Zahariadis et al. (2023)

**Implementing the 2030 Agenda: urban policy styles in Latin America and Europe**

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