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Benjamín Tejerina,  
Cristina Miranda de Almeida  
and Clara Acuña  
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## The Case of ODSlocal in Portugal - Results of a Monitoring Survey

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**Abstract:** *The 2030 Agenda, proposed by the United Nations in 2015, was adopted and adapted by the ODSlocal (the local SDG) Platform. Thought to support municipalities and municipal communities in pursuing local sustainability, ODSlocal is based on a comprehensive and intense mobilisation of local authorities, stakeholders, and local actors while monitoring the progress of Portuguese municipalities concerning various SDG targets through national key performance indicators. At the same time, it also maps the innovative and sustainable practices that municipalities and other local actors are implementing in each territory.*

*Listening to the protagonists of this assisted but endogenous change is thus a sine qua non of the ODSlocal from an early stage. This paper presents some results of the first ODSlocal questionnaire survey conducted to acquire a baseline knowledge of local policy engagement strategy and action within member municipalities of the Platform. Given the spatial-cultural differences between regions (e.g., inland, coastal) and dimensions (number of inhabitants), the survey was conducted online, gathering information about how municipal actor groups perceived local sustainability. Moreover, to ensure a robust sample that portrayed the universe of respondents, we relied on the help of ODSlocal focal points in each municipality, who secured a reasonable number (1,310) of valid responses, including 70 from political decision-makers, 1,029 from municipal technicians, 58 from focal points and 153 from local stakeholders.*

*The results provide a preliminary diagnosis of SDG localisation regarding policy planning and implementation as well as community mobilisation and enforcement. In particular, this paper will focus upon the critical role of monitoring and transparency for sustainable development (Chowdhury & Kushwanth, 2017) as well as municipal and stakeholder evaluations of political priorities and outcomes. Our findings confirm the existence of gaps in knowledge and collaboration, both between local governments and their communities and within municipal structures. Nevertheless, all consulted groups, notably the municipal technicians who directly engage with localising sustainability, view these challenges as surmountable and prioritize addressing them as a pathway forward.*

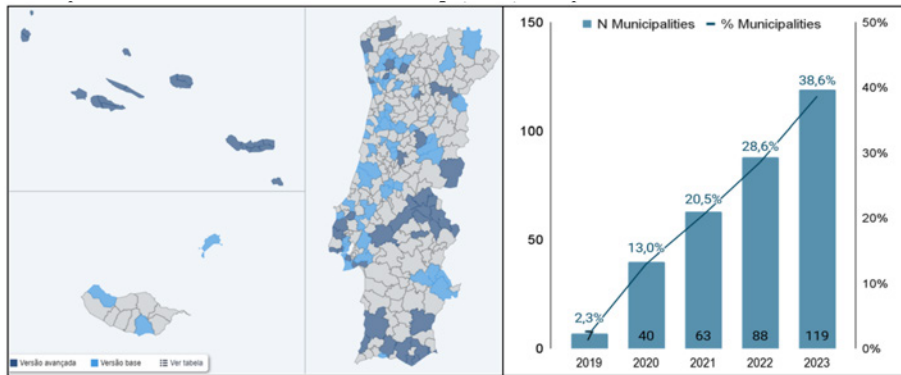
**Keywords:** 2030 Agenda; localisation of the SDGs, Portuguese municipalities, questionnaire survey

## 1 Introduction

Social, environmental, economic, cultural, and many other dimensions of sustainability are all part of the same process, and technical and political discourses have long advocated such intricate factors. However, the practice in public policies has shown the opposite: a segmentation that jeopardises the effectiveness of policies beyond good intentions (Schmidt & Guerra, 2018) despite the warnings that have emerged over the last four decades (e.g. Daly, 1990; Redclift, 1995). The 2030 Agenda (UN, 2015) seeks to reverse the situation with a more transversal and comprehensive action program. Indeed, partly due to “the embracement across nations, cities, companies and organisations of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), sustainable development has gained new interests, themes and objectives around socioeconomic issues that parallel and, perhaps more importantly, relate to climate and environmental issues (UN,2015, Bulkeley, 2021; Hofstad, 2023).

The ODSlocal – Municipal Platform on Sustainable Development Goals – contributes to this exact purpose but focuses attention on the local level. This Portuguese project aims to support monitoring the goals and targets proposed for the 2030 Agenda locally within the Portuguese municipalities. By so doing, it stimulates a participatory and transparent construction of “municipal agendas” with defined objectives and concrete and measurable targets, as well as the engagement and empowerment of municipalities, stakeholders and citizens in a ‘community practice’ that “encourages people to share responsibility for their environment, raising issues of concern and working in partnership to create solutions that work for local communities” (Gilchrist & Taylor, 2022, p. 31). The project is developed within a transversal and transdisciplinary consortium led by the National Council of Environment and Sustainable Development (CNADS). Over the last five years, as shown in Figure 1, the network of ODSlocal municipalities has expanded considerably; as of March of 2024, it encompasses 121 municipalities, representing over one-third of this level of government in Portugal (39,3%).

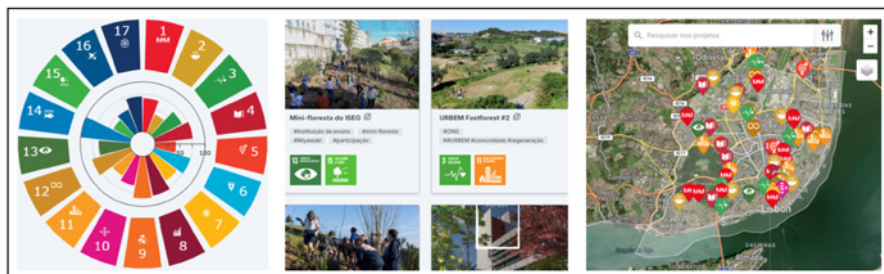
Figure 1. Current ODSlocal Network Map (2024) and growth between 2019 and 2023



Source: [www.odslocal.pt](http://www.odslocal.pt)

To monitor the performance of municipalities concerning SDG targets, considering national and local specificities, ODSlocal analyses of available indicators and datasets that are (or can be) disaggregated at a municipal level. Currently, 119 out of the 169 targets of the 2030 Agenda are covered and can be analysed at the municipal level while adapted and structured according to dimensions, objectives, themes, and indicators established by the UN. Through an application programming interface (API), the Platform can display and update a set of reference indicator data for all Portuguese municipalities. In contrast, network municipality members may link their proprietary databases to the API and thus display specific indicators for their territories. Moreover, the ODSlocal Platform enables the mapping and monitoring of SDG initiatives developed at the local, municipal, and regional levels to provide a more complete and comprehensive portrait of reality. By integrating all this information and georeferencing functionalities and self-evaluation metrics (Key Performance Indicators and Impacts on the SDGs), the ODSlocal Platform provides a means for municipalities and stakeholders to guide action and disseminate sustainability projects and good practices (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Georeferencing functionalities and self-evaluation metrics



Source: [www.odslocal.pt](http://www.odslocal.pt)

Seeking to further the objectives of empowerment, ODSlocal tailors support to the needs of local communities and governments, stimulating participative measures and partnerships for sustainable development at municipal and inter-municipal levels through 'Living Sustainability Laboratories', workshops and training materials. The consortium also seeks to disseminate knowledge via regular publishing in diverse mediums, from scientific means, project reports, interviews in news media, and social media presence to training materials and a newsletter. Additionally, the ODSlocal annual Congress, hosted by municipalities, is mobilised as an event that a) holds debates and lectures by politicians and experts in sustainability, b) attributes awards for Municipalities' SDG performance (current and evolution trajectories), and c) highlights the most innovative initiatives developed by municipalities and by civil society.

In sum, community sustainable development (i.e., a localised Agenda 2030) could be seen as a broad but endogenous movement for social change, which implies supporting people to work together from open-ended realities. ODSlocal fully embraced such a commitment, including opening perspectives based on local knowledge, unveiling roads based on local communities' specificities, and enabling local actors to organise around issues uncovered, valued, and promoted for themselves. (Gilchrist & Taylor, 2022)

## 2 The ODSlocal Survey

In line with the 2030 Agenda goals, a survey was developed to assess the impact of participation in the ODSlocal Network. The questionnaire was conducted online and disseminated to all municipalities in the network and stakeholders whose initiatives are mapped in the ODSlocal Platform. Hence, four different questionnaires were created, adapted to four distinct target groups: Decision-Makers, Focal Points, Municipal Technicians and Stakeholders (Table 1), which are set to take place in two rounds, with the second being set to commence in 2025, in order to gauge evolution and the project's impact within them. However, this paper will only analyse the first round of questioning, so the monitoring aspect will not be included.

Table 1. Respondent typologies, descriptions, and respective data collection periods

Typologies	Description	Data Collection
Municipal focal points	Municipal technicians nominated by the executive to implement and accompany the SDGs in the municipality and the ODSlocal Network.	December 2020 March 2022
Municipal technical staff	Municipal technicians that are not directly involved in ODSlocal and promoting sustainability at the local level	June 2021 March 2022
Municipal decision-makers	Elected politicians (mayor, deputy mayor and councillors) who assume decision-making roles at the municipal level	June 2021 March 2022
Local stakeholders	Representatives of non-governmental entities that act at a local or regional level that are key to sustainability	May 2022 March 2023

Source: Guerra et al., 2023

The first round occurred between 2020 and 2023, a context shaped by COVID-19 and, paradoxically, also by the considerable growth of the ODSlocal network. Therefore, the data collection period and scope of participation were expanded, soliciting the participation of recently-joined municipalities. This endeavour was largely successful, as the reach of 58 municipalities represented 145% of the network’s universe in 2020, although by the end of 2022, it represented around two-thirds (65,9%) of the network. The first ODSlocal Survey reached a total number of 1.310 respondents across the four target groups, of which 11,7% were Local Stakeholders and a majority represented the 58 municipalities that took part in this survey; 78,6 were Technicians, 5,3% were Decision-Makers and 4,4%, within all respondent municipalities, were Focal Points (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Percentage of Target-Groups respondents



Source: Guerra et al., 2023

A majority of decision-makers are male (54,3%), between 41 and 50 years old (46%), have attained higher education (73,7%) -primarily in the fields of Social Science (47,4%), STEM (21,0%) and Medical sciences (15,8%)- and hold positions as councillors (66,7%), mayors (12,9%) and vice-mayors (21,4%). However, there is considerable diversity regarding qualification levels and age; the most significant representation of secondary school qualifications (18,6%) and doctoral degrees (15,0%); and lacking ages under 30 whilst 11% are over 60. We also find that, on average, more than one decision-maker took part in the survey within the municipalities of the autonomous regions of Azores and

Madeira, as well as the region of the continental south (Algarve), which perhaps reflects a more significant political investment in the ODSlocal Platform.

The profile of the Focal Points, the municipal technicians that accompany the progress of the ODSlocal activities at the local level (spearheads for the Platform in the municipalities), is overwhelmingly feminised (70,7%), young (46% are under 40 years old) and highly educated (100% has at least a bachelor's degree). They predominantly work in environmental departments (41.4%) or other areas (36.2%), act as assistants to political decision-makers (17.2%) or are themselves policy-makers (5.2%). Much like the decision-makers, most municipalities are represented by one to two focal points, although a municipality in the Algarve Region (Loulé) distinguishes itself by having three focal point respondents.

The municipal technicians who are not directly engaged with the ODSlocal network are primarily women (64,9%) over the age of 40 (78%), with higher education qualifications (86,7%) within the fields of the social sciences (49,1%), STEM (21,8%) and Humanities (20,8%). On average, the municipalities in the North (15,4) and Centre (14,4) had the most respondents and fewer in the insular regions of Madeira (6,0) and Azores (5,0).

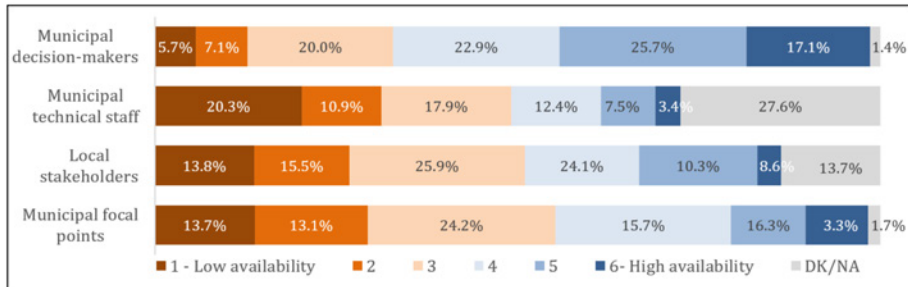
Among the stakeholders who promote sustainability, a majority are within civil society (56,8%), followed by the for-profit private sector (17,7%), educational and research institutions (13,1%) and non-municipal levels of governance (7,8%). On average, each municipality was represented by 2,6 stakeholders, the most within the regions of Algarve (4,3) and Centre (3,9), and unfortunately, there were no responses from the insular Regions. A majority of those respondents are women (54,9%) with tertiary education (92,8%) within the fields of Social Sciences (34,8%), STEM (18,8%), Humanities (14,5%) and Natural Sciences (15,2%). However, we find the most diversity in education levels – the attainment of doctoral degrees (15,0%) and primary school education (2,0%) – and ages – with 16% over 60 and 5% under 30 years old.

### 3 Evaluating policies and practices

Due to the critical role of information in promoting sustainable development, particularly the SDGs and evaluating municipal practices (Chowdhury & Kushwanth, 2017), the following pages will focus on this aspect. Focal Points (the link between municipalities and the ODSlocal Platform) were the most critical of the low availability of information. With an average of 2,8 in a maximum of 6, a majority (51%) chose the three lowest levels of availability of information on the SDGs in their municipality. Indeed, the groups most directly involved in promoting sustainability – within or without ODSlocal – had similarly critical evaluations.



Figure 4. Degree of information available in municipalities on the 2030 Agenda

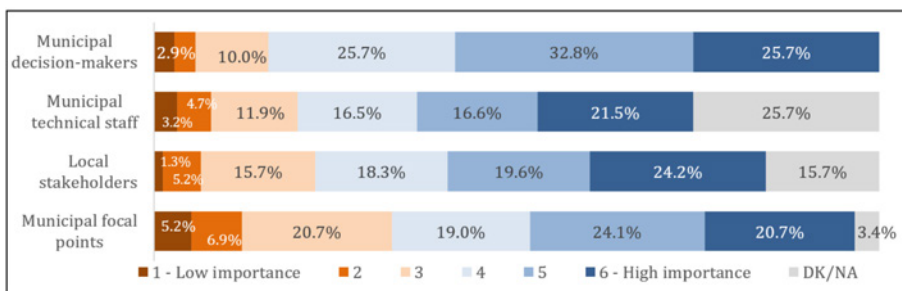


Source: Guerra et al, 2023

It is interesting to note (Figure 4) that decision-makers stand out, with an average evaluation of four out of six and a robust in-group agreement (33,4%), a position mirrored negatively by technicians. These findings indicate a considerable gap between the perspectives of decision-makers (who seem to defend the outcome of the decision) and the other groups, including stakeholders (who seem to assume their role as users). In any case, everyone seems to value the availability of information to guide action towards the 2030 Agenda. The difference comes down to the daily use of it, with those working in the field feeling the most significant gaps.

In this regard, we will analyse how respondents considered SDGs an important guideline in planning activities, projects and actions in municipalities (Figure 5).

Figure 5. SDGs importance for planning activities

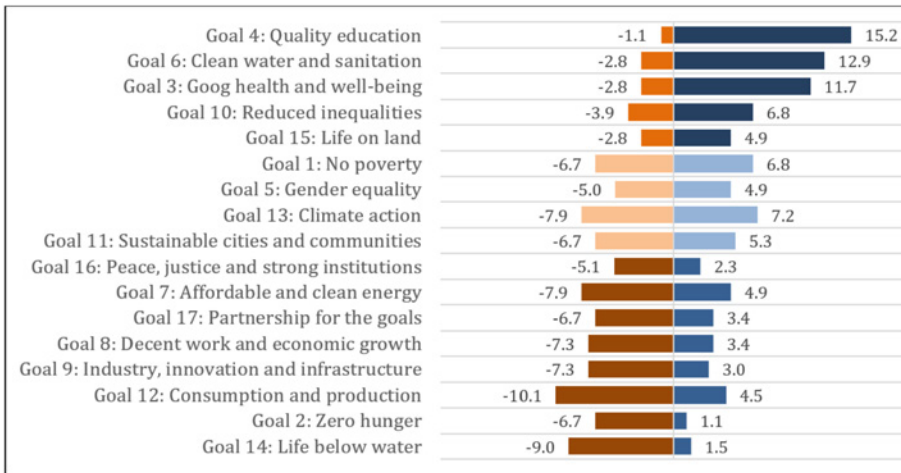


Source: Guerra et al, 2023

Although all groups attributed high average values (4, 5 and 6 on a scale of 6), they also shared a relatively low agreement in their evaluations. Focal Points are the most critical (with an average of 4,2 and 32,8% of responses on a negative ground). Once more, decision-makers have the most significant

optimism (average of 4,6 out of 6 with a large majority taking a positive stance. Additionally, when we take into consideration the high level of non-responses in both technicians (25,7%) and stakeholders (15,7%), we may consider that there is a pervasive lack of dissemination of the information, both internally and externally, even if those who are closer to the power of decision, or closer to the matters under discussion, feel more at ease.

Figure 6. Best and worst achieved SDGs, identified by "Municipal Focal Points"



Source: Guerra et al., 2023

In recognition of such a situation and of the Focal Points' role as experts on local sustainability, these respondents were asked to identify the five SDGs that were the best and worst achieved in their municipalities (Figure 6). The most positive evaluations lie within essential public services traditionally handled at the local level by municipalities: education (15,2%), sanitation (12,9%) and healthcare (11,7%). At a second level, which is divided between good and bad evaluations of achievements, we find more problematic areas that somehow either fall (partially or totally) outside the municipal remit (e.g. inequalities, poverty) or within emerging or too complex areas to let them assume a clear and unequivocally position (e.g., climate action, urban sustainability, gender equality, or poverty). As far as the other areas are concerned (from the more environmentally related issues (e.g. energy, life on land, life underwater) to the more pressing social and economic issues (e.g. decent work and economic growth, industry and innovation, consumption and production) they invariably deserve a primarily negative assessment, with the worst net values for 'life underwater' (7,5), and 'consumption and production' and poverty with a net percentage of 5,6%.

To ascertain whether this diagnosis matches the views of the other groups of respondents – Municipal decision-makers, Municipal technical staff, and Local stakeholders – we asked for the five SDGs they consider with the highest priority (Table 2).

Table 2. Given the reality of the municipality, which five SDGs should be prioritised

	Municipal decision-makers	Municipal technical staff	Local stakeholders	Average
Goal 4: Quality education	76,8%	49,7%	49,0%	58,5%
Goal 3: Good health and well-being	71,0%	50,7%	41,2%	54,3%
Goal 11: Sustainable cities and communities	42,0%	46,7%	51,6%	46,8%
Goal 13: Climate action	60,9%	40,3%	39,2%	46,8%
Goal 1: No poverty	34,8%	40,4%	28,8%	36,7%
Goal 6: Clean water and sanitation	43,5%	29,5%	24,2%	32,4%
Goal 8: Decent work and economic growth	10,1%	35,8%	28,8%	24,9%
Goal 10: Reduced inequalities	27,5%	25,6%	28,8%	23,3%
Goal 7: Affordable and clean energy	13,0%	30,1%	22,9%	22,0%
Goal 12: Consumption and production	13,0%	22,4%	30,7%	22,0%
Goal 2: Zero hunger	7,2%	26,5%	29,4%	21,0%
Goal 9: Industry, innovation, and infrastructure	14,5%	15,4%	22,9%	17,6%
Goal 5: Gender equality	33,3%	11,7%	7,2%	17,4%
Goal 17: Partnership for the goals	11,6%	8,9%	15,7%	12,1%
Goal 14: Life below water	7,2%	9,7%	17,6%	11,5%
Goal 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions	4,3%	14,8%	11,1%	10,1%
Goal 15: Life on land	8,7%	8,0%	13,1%	9,9%

Source: Guerra et al., 2023

This time, beyond healthcare and education, there is a clear prioritisation of climate action (SDG 13) and sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), particularly by decision-makers. No poverty (SDG 11) and clean water and sanitation (SDG 6) join them to form a sextet of priorities that respond both to more traditional problems and to emerging ones, such as climate change, which are already showing signs of concern, especially, but not only, in coastal municipalities. However, globally, the environmental area remains outside the priorities of the three groups. In effect, SDGs 14 and 15 (life on land and life below water) join the SDGs 16 and 17 ('peace, justice and strong institutions' and 'partnerships for the SDGs') that respondents tended to consider outside the scope of municipal action, despite the institutional weight expressed in SDG 16. These results align with previous studies on the Portuguese population (Schmidt et al., 2018), indicating that decision-makers, technicians, and stakeholders share the same cultural mix, although they maintain some differences. For example, municipal technicians tend to side with stakeholders, except for a lesser priority attributed to underwater life (SDG 14), Infrastructure (SDG 9) and partnerships (SDG 17), which they share with decision-makers.

## 4. Final remarks

Sustainability information and the promotion of instruments for the involvement and engagement of populations emerge in our days as the heads and tails of sustainability. Such a condition is even more true regarding local sustainability, where municipalities – the political power closest to the populations and problems – play a crucial role. Ensuring a successful endeavour in this area (i.e., general community mobilisation for SDGs localisation) implies the use of appropriate technologies, tools, standards, methods, policies, and practices so that sustainability can be achieved from all and for all.

Through ODSlocal's multi-pronged approach, we seek to help respond to such challenges and facilitate more sustainable, participatory and transparent local governance. The results of this survey confirm that lack of transparent monitoring measures and participatory governance are critical difficulties for implementing local sustainability, and all the consulted groups (particularly the municipal technicians who work near the population) call for conditions that will allow them to surpass such difficulties. Therefore, ODSlocal should further acknowledge these gaps to promote outreach and collaboration between local governments and their communities and interdepartmental and hierarchical transparency within municipal structures.

These results deserve a more in-depth analysis and a new survey round to understand the evolution inside and outside the Municipal Councils. Nevertheless, we already know that knowledge comes from experience and that municipalities more involved in sustainability issues become privileged actors in a societal change that emerges as inalienable and unpostponable in the second decade of the 21st century. The role of ODSlocal is to ensure that such a change occurs, and that decision-makers, municipal technical staff, and local stakeholders come together to guarantee it. Knowing their desires, fears, and expectations is just the first step.

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