



**European Committee
of the Regions**



Survey Results Note

The key contribution of regions and cities to sustainable development

From 13 December 2018 to 1 March 2019, the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) in cooperation with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) carried out an online survey on "*The key contribution of regions and cities to sustainable development*".¹

The survey was aimed towards representatives of local and regional authorities as well as other stakeholders at local and regional level, and concerned their work on sustainable development (SD) and in particular their contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The key results of the survey are summarised in this note,² while the full figures are available in the annex.

Key findings:

- 59% of respondents are familiar with the SDGs and currently working to implement them. Among respondents representing regions or large or medium cities (more than 50 000 inhabitants) this share rises to approximately 80% or more, while for small municipalities the share is 37%.
- 58% of the respondents currently working to implement the SDGs have also defined indicators to measure progress on the goals, with local indicators much more commonly used than those of the EU or UN.
- The most common challenges in implementing the SDGs - highlighted by half of respondents - are "Lack of awareness, support, capacities or trained staff" and "difficulty to prioritise the SDGs over other agendas".
- More than 90% of respondents are in favour of an EU overarching long-term strategy to mainstream the SDGs within all policies and ensure efficient coordination across policy areas.

¹ The results of the survey will also feed the final report of the OECD Programme on [A Territorial Approach to SDGs. A Role for cities and regions to leave no one behind](#).

² The note was drafted by CoR and OECD staff. It does not necessarily reflect the views of these organisations.

The CoR authors would like to thank nrg4SD, whose own 2018 survey on "[Localizing the SDGs: regional governments paving the way](#)" was a useful reference for this work.

I. Background on respondents

The survey gathered valid answers from 400 respondents, with approximately 90% coming from EU Member States³ and the rest from a number of non-EU OECD countries including Switzerland, Norway, Iceland or Turkey. A very small number of answers were from non-EU, non-OECD countries.

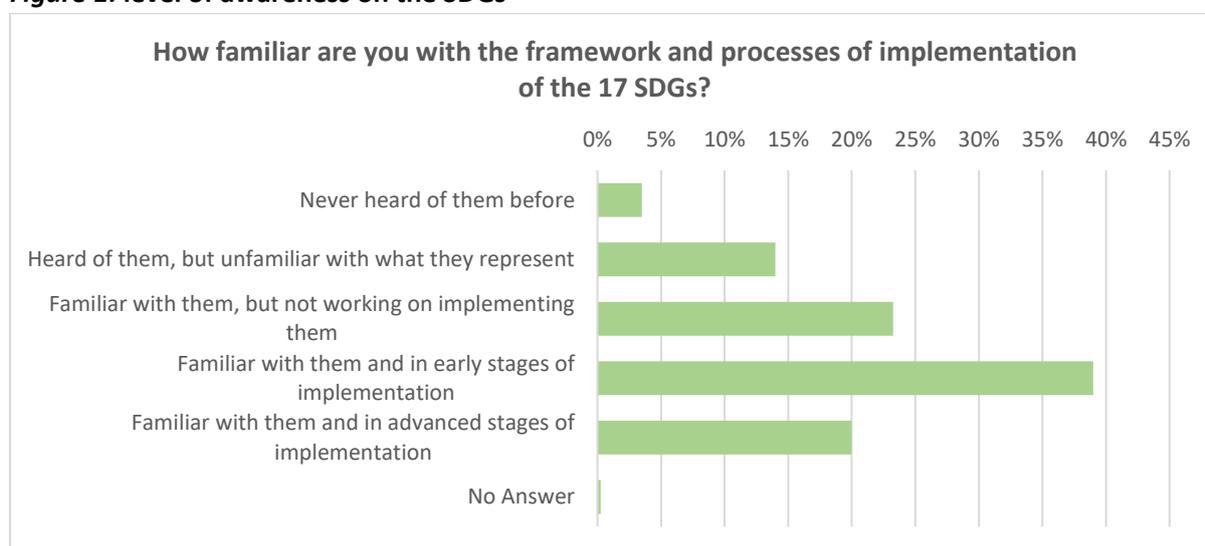
Many responses come from municipalities (39%), with 18% of answers specifically from small municipalities (under 50 000 inhabitants), 15% from medium-sized cities (50 000 to 500 000 inhabitants) and a further 6% representing large cities (more than 500 000 inhabitants). Significant shares of respondents also represent regions (17%), intermediary entities such as counties or provinces (9%) or other local and regional bodies (10%). The remaining 26%⁴ of respondents represent diverse categories of stakeholders such as academia and research (approximately one third of them) or associations, NGOs or public bodies, with a few answers from the private sector and individuals responding in their personal capacity.

The distribution of respondents among countries and levels of government is unbalanced and the respondents do not form a statistically representative sample. The aim of this survey is rather to offer a useful snapshot of the views expressed by diverse local and regional stakeholders regarding the SDGs and their implementation.

II. Respondents and the SDGs

Overall, respondents to the survey showed a relatively high degree of awareness of the SDGs: only 18% were either unaware or unfamiliar with them. Furthermore, a significant majority (59%) are actually in the process of implementing the SDGs, whether in early or advanced stages. The detailed figures are presented in Figure 1.⁵

Figure 1: level of awareness on the SDGs



Source: CoR-OECD Survey (2019) *The key contribution of regions and cities to sustainable development*.

The 59% share of respondents who are in the process of implementing the SDGs is an overall average that hides some marked differences, in particular according to the category of subnational authority

³ The survey gathered responses from all EU Member States aside from Luxembourg.

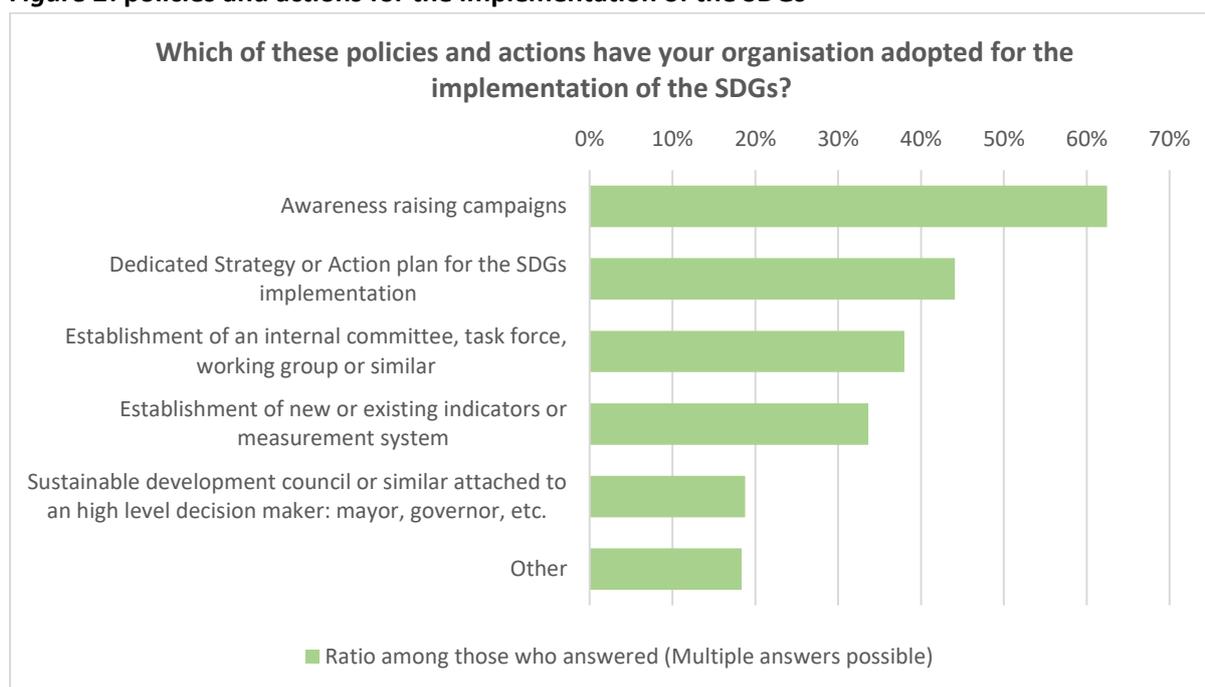
⁴ The percentages do not add up to 100 due to rounding. This is also applicable to subsequent questions.

⁵ If these seem high, it should be mentioned that some selection bias is probably at play, meaning that those already aware and active in this field are more likely to answer a survey dealing with the SDGs.

represented. Interestingly, the share of respondents "implementing" the SDGs is distinctly higher than the average for large cities (87%), medium cities (83%) and regions (78%), while it is much lower for smaller municipalities (37%), which would suggest that larger entities are better equipped to work on SDGs implementation.

The most common action put in place in order to implement the SDGs is awareness raising campaigns, selected by more than 60% of the respondents taking action⁶ (Figure 2). Having a dedicated strategy/action plan and establishing indicators are two of the key elements of a relatively advanced stage of implementation of the SDGs and these were selected by 44% and 34% of respondents taking action respectively. Among the "other" actions and policies, many respondents mentioned the integration of the SDGs in the organisations' plans and strategy, or intentions to do so in the future.

Figure 2: policies and actions for the implementation of the SDGs



Source: CoR-OECD Survey (2019) *The key contribution of regions and cities to sustainable development.*

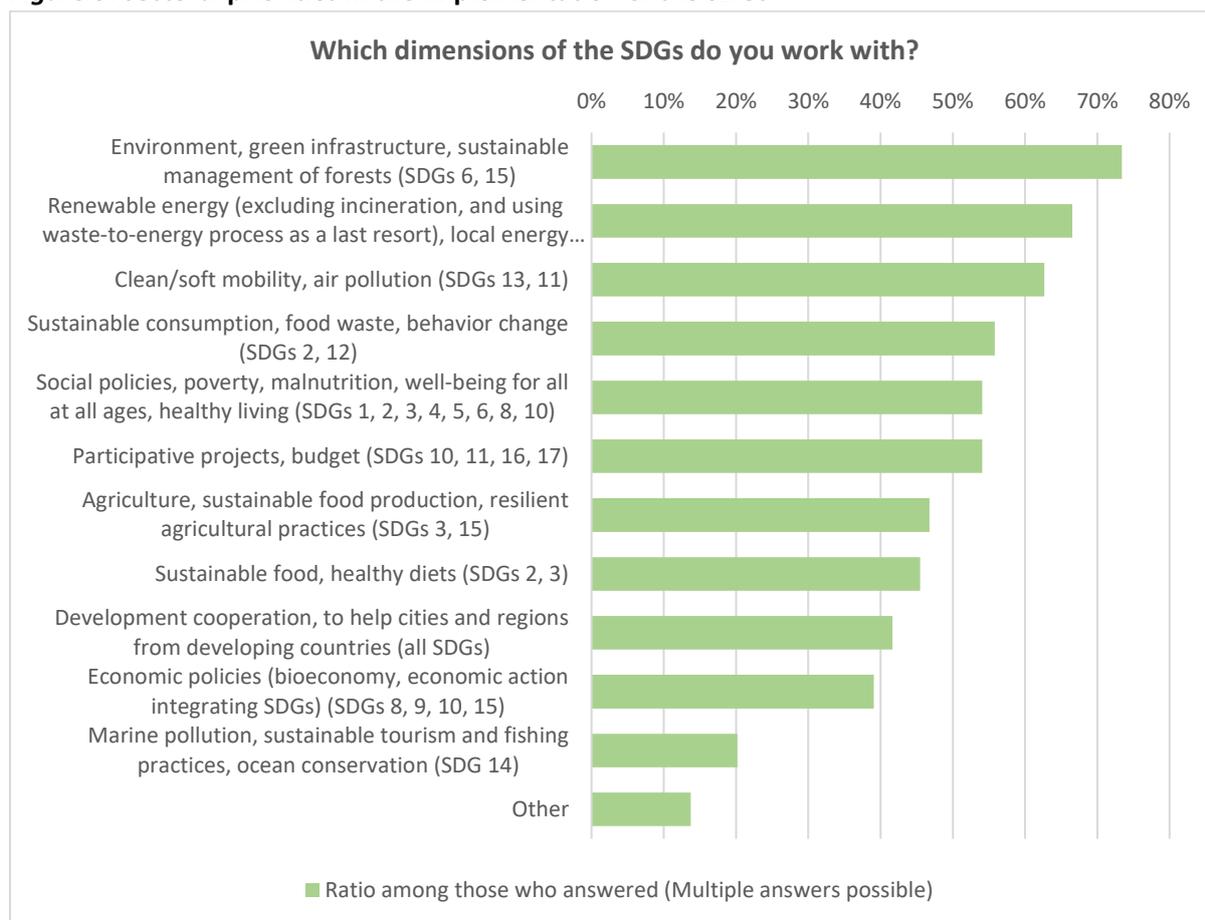
In terms of sectors, the most common topic or dimension of the SDGs tackled by respondents is the environment (73%), closely followed by energy (67%) and mobility (63%), with sustainable consumption, social policies and participative projects also scoring high (more than 50% of respondents). The diversity of sectors receiving high scores and the fact that respondents who answered this question selected on average 5 to 6 sectors each suggest that the cross-sectoral and multi-faceted nature of sustainability and of the SDGs in particular is well taken into account. Figure 3 shows the share of respondents (among those who answered this question) who selected each of the different topics as one in which they or their organisation are active.

Regarding the rationale for addressing the SDGs, among respondents who are implementing the SDGs, 71% stated the reason is that they "see the SDGs as a transformative agenda" and 66% that they "see the value of the SDGs as a local development planning and budgeting tool"⁷.

⁶ Excluding respondents who had not answered the question.

⁷ Multiple answers were possible.

Figure 3: sectoral priorities in the implementation of the SDGs



Source: CoR-OECD Survey (2019) *The key contribution of regions and cities to sustainable development.*

Turning to the challenges, respondents (whom again, could select multiple answers) predominantly highlighted "Lack of awareness, support, capacities or trained staff" (50% of all respondents) and "Difficulty to prioritise the SDGs over other agendas" (49%) as key challenges. Figure 4 shows the ranking of the challenges most commonly selected by respondents in decreasing order. Interestingly, the share of respondents citing "insufficient financial resources" as a challenge is not significantly different among respondents from small municipalities compared to the broader sample.

Figure 4: main challenges in implementing the SDGs at local and regional level

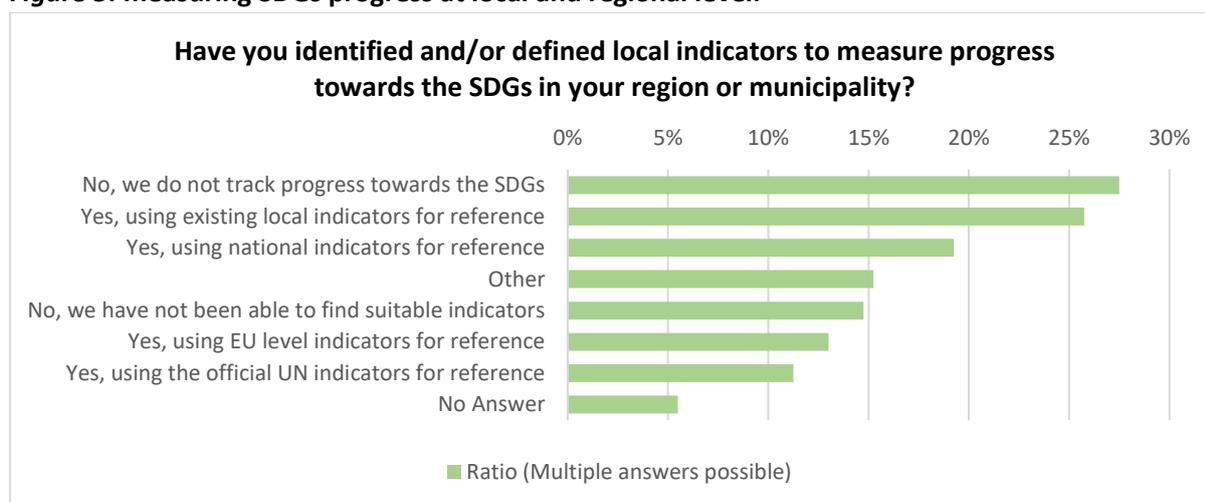


Source: CoR-OECD Survey (2019) *The key contribution of regions and cities to sustainable development.*

The challenges specified by respondents who selected "other" challenges include the following: lack of high-level commitment and follow up, difficulties in communicating on the SDGs, as well as lack of harmonised data at different levels or difficulty in selecting appropriate indicators. The two latter challenges are particularly relevant since they are necessary to start working on SDGs in order to understand the current situation and monitor progress.

Measuring progress is indeed emerging as a priority for sub-national government implementing the SDGs: 58% of respondents currently implementing the SDGs use indicators to monitor progress. Among all respondents who use indicators, the most common answer was for local indicators (26%) followed by national indicators (19%). Fewer than 15% of respondents use EU or UN-level indicators (Figure 5). Respectively 28% and 15% of respondents selected "No, we do not track progress towards the SDGs" and "No, we have not been able to find suitable indicators" with a further 6% not answering.

Figure 5: measuring SDGs progress at local and regional level.



Source: CoR-OECD Survey (2019) *The key contribution of regions and cities to sustainable development.*

The respondents who selected "other" in response to this question were asked to specify their answer: a large share of these respondents explained that indicators are being developed or that their development is planned.

Overall, 57% of all respondents do not use any indicators or did not answer. It is interesting to note that EU and UN indicators are roughly only half as commonly used as local indicators, which could suggest that they do not necessarily lend themselves to local and regional realities and constraints. In addition, the necessary data is not always available at NUTS2 level for the EU indicators for example.

III. Multi-level and multi-stakeholder cooperation in implementing the SDGs

Multi-level governance and cooperation is key to implement the SDGs and the survey analysed this dimension (with multiple answers possible). Among the respondents who stated that they are in early or advanced stages of implementing the SDGs, the most common answer was "I am a local authority and I cooperate with my regional level to implement the SDGs", selected by 60%. A further 55% selected "I cooperate with other regional/intermediary/local authorities in my own country". The answers highlight a good degree of cooperation between the different subnational levels, or between subnational authorities, while answers related to cooperation with the national level were much less common among respondents, with only 23% stating to have joint projects with the national level to implement the SDGs.

In terms of stakeholder engagement and cooperation, 39% of the respondents highlighted that they mainly cooperate or have a dialogue with civil society or NGOs, followed by universities and by citizens

(both 31%). 28% of respondents stated that they collaborate with the private sector, while 26% of respondents were not currently undertaking collaborations, but planning to.

As stressed by SDG17, partnerships are fundamental to achieve the SDGs, but this opportunity is not fully exploited yet by sub-national governments. 60% of all respondents answered "no" to the question "*Have you established any formal partnerships (e.g. MoU, PPP) with other public, civil society and/or private sector actors to support the achievement of the SDGs?*". 25% of the respondents selected "*yes, within my own region or city*" with a further 9% each stating yes with another region or city in their own country, or with a city or region in an EU or OECD country. 7% of the respondents had partnerships outside the EU and OECD, suggesting that very few subnational governments tackle the "external" dimension of the SDGs. (Multiple answers were possible to this question.)

IV. What respondents expect from the EU on SDGs

The survey also analysed what respondents expect from the EU on the SDGs.⁸ Overall, respondents appear to be clearly in favour of ambitious action at the EU level in relation to the SDGs, including an EU overarching strategy ensuring policy coherence, mainstreaming the SDGs and with financial support for sustainable projects. Specifically, between 85 and 95% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with all of the following statements:

- *The EU should have an overarching long-term strategy to mainstream the SDGs within all policies and ensure efficient coordination across policy areas*
- *A framework for policy coherence will be one of the essential objectives and aspects of an EU strategy on the SDGs*
- *All of the EU institutions should break silo-thinking and mainstream the SDGs internally across all structures, and ensure policy coherence*
- *The EU should have a financial mechanism dedicated to finance sustainable projects*
- *The EU -- through the European Commission -- should strongly promote sustainable public spending and finance more sustainability-proof projects*

66% of the respondents are in support of fiscal reform, possibly including an EU tax to support sustainability. Regarding the possibility that the European Semester be used to plan monitor and evaluate SDGs implementation in the EU, respondents were predominantly supportive (72% agree or strongly agree). However, almost one quarter of respondents had no opinion or did not answer the question, a much higher number than for the other questions in this section. Similar results were obtained regarding the possibility of using the "Better Regulation Agenda" to mainstream the SDGs within all EU policies.

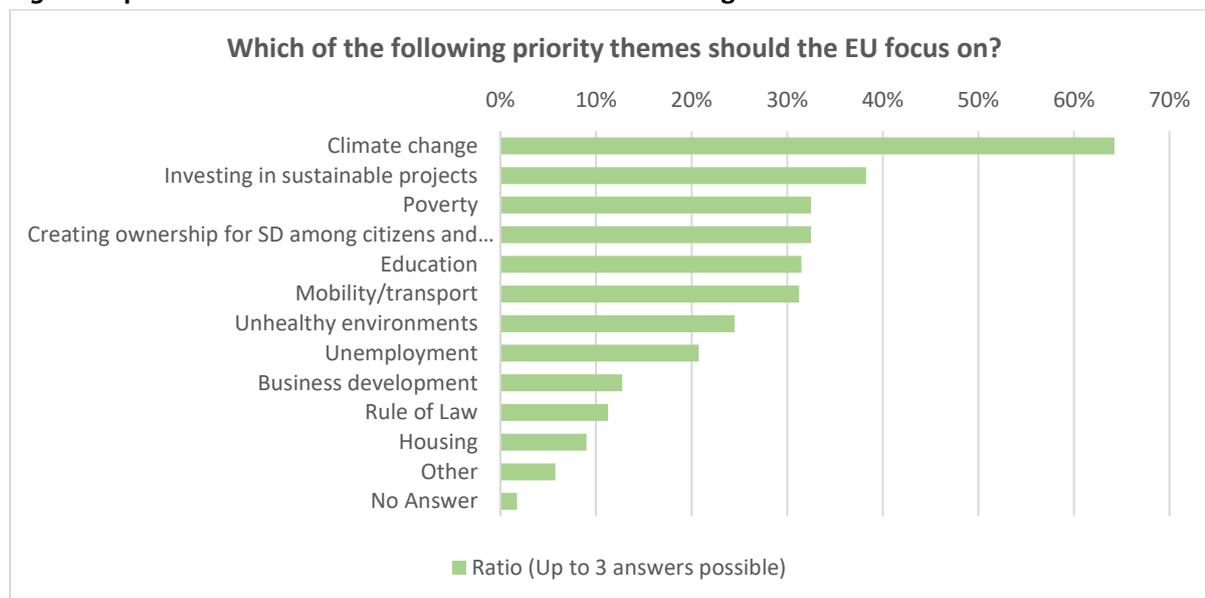
In terms of possible engagement of the European Committee of the Regions in a range of actions related to the SDGs, respondents are strongly supportive. 91% of respondents support the involvement of the CoR to a medium or large extent in "*supporting peer-learning, exchange of best practices and experience between regions and cities*". Similarly, 86% of respondents are in favour of the CoR "*helping cities/regions to connect with organisations that provide capacity-building support and financial information*".

Climate change emerged as the priority the EU should focus on, selected by almost two-thirds of respondents (who could select up to 3 answers). Investing in sustainable projects, poverty, creating

⁸ To this end, respondents were asked a series of questions taking the form "*Do you agree with the following statement?*". Respondents could choose among the following options: "*Strongly agree*", "*Agree*", "*Disagree*", "*Strongly disagree*", "*No opinion*" or not answer.

ownership for sustainable development, education and mobility also scored high in this question (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: priorities the EU should focus on when addressing the SDGs.



Source: CoR-OECD Survey (2019) *The key contribution of regions and cities to sustainable development.*

V. Regions and cities and the United Nations level

Every year, United Nations Member States review the progress achieved on the implementation of the SDGs, notably through the presentation of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). Respondents were asked whether their organisation has contributed to their national government's VNR and 21% of respondents stated that they have, either upon invitation by the national government, or upon their own initiative. The share of respondents answering yes to this question is much higher among respondents representing regions (38%) and intermediary bodies (29%) than for respondents as a whole, and much lower for small municipalities (11%).

It is worth noting that the overall figure for involvement in the VNRs is significantly lower than the share of respondents who are implementing the SDGs (59%). This suggests that many of the subnational governments actively "localising" the SDGs are not involved in SDGs reporting at national level, at least in the framework of the VNRs. (A handful of cities and regions, among which New York City, the City of Kitakyushu in Japan, the Basque Country, or Wales, have already prepared or are now preparing their own Voluntary Local or Regional Review.)

9% of respondents stated that they share their input with the national level through structured mechanisms of local/national coordination and 7% through a multi-stakeholders platform of dialogue.

Best practices examples

The survey also provided to the respondents an opportunity to share best practices on SDGs implementation at local and regional level. Respondents offered many interesting examples, and a few among the more detailed are highlighted below.⁹

One interesting example comes from the city of Mannheim (DE), which organised dialogues and consultations with citizens on how to implement the SDGs at local level, gathering over 1 500 answers. These formed the basis for the city's mission statement on sustainability, whose implementation will be supported by a multi-stakeholder alliance, and reviewed annually on the basis of indicators to measure success. In Strasbourg (FR), the city has conducted an ambitious process including a mapping of the city's budget through the SDG framework, which identified the main and secondary SDGs related to each budget line, and evaluated the contribution of expenditures to the achievement of SDG targets. In January 2019, the city of Bristol (UK) published its "One City Plan", a long-term plan for the city up to 2050, which uses the SDG framework to guide what the city wants to achieve by 2030. The city has also developed a local set of metrics to measure its achievement of the SDGs.

A respondent from the Government of Catalonia (ES) detailed their exhaustive work on the implementation of the SDGs, which started with a 2016 expert report identifying the key elements for localizing the SDGs in Catalonia. Following the report's conclusions, the Catalan Government adopted a Plan for the 2030 Agenda with the engagement of all its ministries, gathering specific commitments to achieve each target of the SDGs, both within Catalonia and abroad. In November 2018, the Parliament of Catalonia passed a motion committing itself to the achievement of the SDGs and pledging the region's Sustainable Development Advisory Council to appear regularly in Parliament to report on this.

Other advanced examples of SDG implementation came from the cities of Bonn (DE) and Terrassa (ES), and from the region of Wallonia (BE), among others.

⁹ The best practices will be further analysed and displayed in future OECD and CoR reports, e.g. the OECD Synthesis Report of the Territorial Approach to SDGs programme.