

Research paper

The preponderance of public policies in the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals in Portuguese Local Government: the case of the Municipality of Covilhã

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aims to expose the importance of sustainable local development in creating favourable conditions for the community in general.

Methodology: A qualitative study was carried out, involving two phases: conducting interviews, and document analysis.

Results: The implementation of the SDGs leads to an increase in spending, so municipalities must be aware of this fact and make savings in other areas to correct any imbalances that may arise. Therefore, the focus on achieving the SDGs must also be accompanied by improvements in the efficiency of public services.

Research limitations: The unavailability of data on the SDG targets and the need to cover a longer period of time was a relevant limitation to the development of the study.

Practical implications: In order to achieve the SDGs, municipalities highlight the need to create interdisciplinary teams that define goals, monitor their fulfilment and propose new actions.

Originality: This study contributes, both in terms of research and in terms of practical analysis, by assessing how sustainability can be achieved through the SDGs in the context of a local authority.

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1. Introduction

The SDGs are an ambitious project, conceived with a logic that integrates social and natural systems, with the aim of ensuring a future based on protecting the planet, economic sustainability and promoting quality of life and social justice, without jeopardizing the balance of ecosystems (Stafford-Smith et al. 2017; Benedek et al., 2021; Madeira et al., 2022). “The logic and the comprehensive and transversal purposes of the SDGs imply the involvement of all geographical scales of decision and action and their articulation, according to each objective” (Madeira et al., 2022, p.184).

According to Fenton & Gustafsson (2017, p. 129), “By adopting 17 global sustainable development goals (SDGs), countries of the world have signalled the need for urgent transformative action to enable sustainable development in the period up to 2030”.

According to Annan-Aggrey et al. (2022b) and Guarini et al. (2022), the most effective mechanism for sustainable development is the decentralization of government, i.e. the active participation of local governments.

In this sense, in Portugal, the role of municipalities is fundamental, as more than 65% of the SDGs relate directly to involving local communities (Guarini et al. 2022) and it is those institutions, as they are closest to the communities, that have the easiest time changing mentalities and paradigms, in order to bring about the necessary change for a safe, fair and sustainable future (Silva et al, 2022).

Although there has already been some progress in the implementation of sustainable actions by Portuguese municipalities, it is considered that the existing literature is still insufficient to understand the issue of sustainable development and the SDGs within the scope of local government. Therefore, the challenge of this work is to disseminate the topic and how the SDGs are being implemented at local government level, more precisely in the Municipality of Covilhã. This study follows an eminently qualitative approach, which consisted of documentary analysis and interviews.

This research is justified from an academic, social and municipal management point of view. From an academic point of view, the aim is to contribute to understanding the importance of sustainable local development and the impact it can have on the community, as well as providing theoretical support for other researchers. From a social point of view, the aim is to demonstrate the benefits that sustainable development brings to the people who interact in the region, whether professionally, in their workplaces, or because they live there. Finally, from the point of view of municipal management, we want to motivate public managers to implement more and more sustainable practices, because we can only mitigate existing environmental and social problems if everyone contributes.

With this in mind, and bearing in mind the objectives outlined, this work begins with a theoretical framework on sustainable local development. The methodology is then presented, followed by the analysis and discussion of results and conclusions.

2. Materials and methods

This research consists of a two-stage process involving planning and execution. The planning stage involves the development of research objectives and the execution stage involves the design, data collection and analysis, followed by reporting and follow-up (Bickman, Rog & Hedrick, 1998).

This study is characterised as an exploratory case study because of the inadequacy of the existing literature to examine the issue of sustainable development and the SDGs in the context of local government, with a view to the goals set out in the 2030 Agenda. According to Yin's (2010) typology, this is a type 2 case study, a single embedded case with multiple units of analysis - the SDGs, the policies and their implementation. The study followed an eminently qualitative approach, which consisted of document analysis and interviews with the municipal executive and municipal managers to characterise the unit in terms of SDG implementation.

The use of multiple sources of evidence leads to convergent lines of inquiry that tend to develop the construct validity of the variables under study (Yin, 2010). Table 1 illustrates the different data collection instruments used.

Table I: Instruments used for data collection

Instruments used for data collection		
Instruments	Goal	Aims and objectives
Interview guide I	Data Collection	Interview
Documentary evidences		Complement the data collected in interviews.
Contact summary	Data collection and analysis support	Description of the objective and summary of the topics covered

Source: Own elaboration

Semi-structured interviews were used, with an interview script based on the SDGs and the literature review (Benedek et al., 2021; Benito et al., 2023; Caiado et al., 2018; Choi et al., 2016; Gustafsson & Ivner, 2018; Madeira et al., 2022; Mutiarani & Siswantoro, 2020; Stafford-Smith et al...), 2017), which were integrated into dimensions according to their characteristics, since the aim is to access the content of the initiatives developed by Covilhã City Council to achieve the 17 SDGs included in the United Nations 2030 Agenda (United Nations, 2015).

In this way, the following dimensions have been established, taking into account the organisation of the local government, namely the political decision-makers, so we have taken into account the areas assigned, and the organic units involved in the operationalisation of the goals established. The dimensions are as follows: social dimension, health, education, justice, economic development and environment (United Nations, 2015).

Six semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of the municipal executive, depending on the areas of responsibility assigned to them, which are in line with compliance with the 17 SDGs, and with the municipal heads of the respective organic units, in order to assess their operationalisation. The interviews lasted an average of 40 minutes, with a total of two visits to Covilhã City Hall. It should be noted that SDG 14 - Protect marine life - was not included, as Covilhã is located on the south-eastern slope of the Serra da Estrela.

In addition to the interviews, documentary evidence was collected (e.g. the activity report for the last five years, press releases and media reports from the Municipality of Covilhã) (Município da Covilhã, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023) to complement the data obtained from the interviews, particularly with regard to the actions undertaken by the Municipality

of Covilhã to integrate the SDGs into the municipal agenda in terms of planning, investment and political decision-making. We based our analysis on the approach of Miles and Huberman (1994), in order to reduce both the content of the 17 SDGs and the factors responsible for their achievement to the dimensions already established: the social dimension, health, education, equity, economic development and the environment (Miles and Huberman, 1994; United Nations, 2015).

3. Theory

At the Rio+20 conference of the United Nations, held in 2012, the idea of creating the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda began to germinate, which came to fruition in September 2015, with the adoption by the member states of the United Nations of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, after an extensive participatory process and negotiations at the highest level (Caiado et al., 2018). This agenda is designed to eradicate poverty, protect the planet and combat inequality and injustice, i.e. a global plan of action focused on the planet, prosperity and people, with the aim of strengthening universal peace and access to justice (Benedek et al., 2021; Benito et al., 2023; Mutiarani & Siswantoro, 2020).

This agenda established 17 SDGs, with 169 integrated and indivisible targets, covering the economic, social and environmental spheres, aimed at assessing and monitoring sustainable development by 2030 (Benedek et al., 2021; Benito et al., 2023; Caiado et al., 2018; Choi et al., 2016; Gustafsson & Ivner, 2018; Madeira et al., 2022; Mutiarani & Siswantoro, 2020; Stafford-Smith et al., 2017).

It is in the context of the implementation and fulfilment of the SDGs that the importance of Local Government should be mentioned, not least because it is quite clear that many of the goals will have to be addressed at local level (Gustafsson & Ivner, 2018; Reddy, 2016; Slack, 2014), this being a key partner in the implementation of the SDGs (Annan-Aggrey et al., 2022b; Benito et al., 2023; Guarini et al., 2022; Reddy, 2016).

Annan-Aggrey et al. (2022a, p. 219) state that “the local government level is increasingly being recognized as the key locus of development effort, particularly because the SDGs are relevant to local jurisdictions and change can be tangibly measured at smaller scales”. Nerland et al. (2023) and Guarini et al. (2022) also share this opinion, as they consider that local governments play a vital role in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, by

providing the foundations for the social transformations necessary for this agenda, as well as providing the services on which around two thirds of the SDGs depend.

In the same vein, Silva et al. (2022, p. 432) argue that “Local Sustainable Development is an indispensable step towards achieving Global Sustainable Development”, as well as stressing that, in the current context, the main objective of a Municipality is not to be economically efficient, but to promote the well-being of society.

Slack (2014, p. 174) does not disagree with the previous arguments: local governments are essential partners in the implementation of the SDGs, as not only are many of the key services essential to achieving the SDGs provided at a local level, but these public institutions are also best placed to ensure that the needs of the local population are understood and met, given their proximity to citizens.

The importance of local governments in the 2030 Agenda and in the implementation of the SDGs seems clear. However, these organizations need to have different tools, mechanisms, strategies, platforms and innovations that can guarantee the translation of the sustainable development agenda into firm actions and concrete results at the local level that benefit communities (Reddy, 2016).

The financial aspect will also have to be taken into account: the implementation of public policies related to the 2030 Agenda requires solid and effective financial mechanisms (Medeiros et al., 2022). Reddy (2016, p. 12) mentions that there must be “adequate and equitable financial resources for the roles and responsibilities devolved to local government to facilitate the universal attainment of the SDGs within the prescribed period”. For this author, funding is clearly a critical aspect in the implementation and achievement of the SDGs at local level.

In Ferreira's view (2020, p. 4), with specific reference to the Portuguese reality, there is another obstacle to overcome in order to better implement the SDGs in Portugal: “the great lack of knowledge in local technical and political structures about how they can integrate

the SDGs into their planning, investment, political decisions and measures at local/regional level”. Therefore, additional work needs to be done on training, information, promotion and mobilization of the SDGs in municipalities.

Faced with the obstacles that may arise, Silva et al. (2022, p. 434) have a more positive view, as they believe that “municipalities have not been left adrift in this global sustainability project, there are several measures and support from the EU for the implementation of sustainability in municipalities”.

Given the importance of this issue, the potential problems, or even the problems already detected, it is only natural that there is a wide range of literature addressing the issue of sustainable development and the SDGs in the context of local government. A few examples will be presented in the following paragraphs.

Many of the studies carried out focus on the reality of a particular country. This is the case of the work carried out by Benito et al. (2023) on a sample of 96 Spanish municipalities. These authors concluded that local governments are carrying out various actions to implement the SDGs, considering the average degree of implementation to be 50%. As for the link between the state of local finances and the greater or lesser degree of implementation of the SDGs, the authors found that municipalities with greater implementation of the SDGs have shorter supplier payment deadlines and less surplus (or more deficit).

The Romanian reality was investigated by Benedek et al. (2021), specifically with regard to measuring the progress of SDG implementation at a local and regional level in that country, by calculating an index. The SDG Index uses an integrated approach, based on ninety indicators. The results show that the highest sustainable development performances are concentrated in a few specific geographical areas, with rural areas and peripheral regions in the eastern and southern parts of the country performing the worst.

For their part, the Swedish context was addressed by Krantz and Gustafsson (2021). The authors explored the case of a municipal organization in that country, at an early stage in terms of the SDGs and management practices, using interviews and document analysis. They found that an integrated approach to the SDGs depends on aspects such as structure, leadership and coordination, flexibility, organizational learning, timing, etc. In addition, the operationalization of the SDGs raises challenges in terms of management systems, budgets and employee motivation at different organizational levels. The authors also concluded that the SDGs present an opportunity for municipalities to understand and review their organizational functioning, adapting it to the implementation and monitoring of the SDGs.

An Italian perspective was provided by Guarini et al. (2022, p. 583). These authors investigated whether the SDGs can be integrated into the planning and strategic management processes of local governments. After analyzing the strategic plans of 110 Italian provincial capitals, they concluded that the focus on the SDGs in Italy is still at an early stage, with little integration of sustainable development concerns into local strategic plans (less than 10%). The scenario at the operational level is even more worrying: little or no translation into performance indicators at the operational level.

Orzeszyna and Tabaszewski (2021) looked at the role of local authorities in promoting the SDGs in Poland, specifically the legal aspects of activities carried out by local authorities obliged to promote the SDGs using global and regional regulations. The adoption of the 2030 Agenda has undermined the current, ineffective Sustainable Development Implementation model. The critical analysis of the legal aspects of the activities carried out by local authorities confirmed the thesis that the global solutions proposed in the 2030 Agenda are at least partially compatible with local legal norms.

4. Illustrative Results and Discussion

Local authorities play a crucial role in the fight for a more sustainable world and, consequently, in achieving the SDGs, since they are the public bodies closest to citizens and best aware of their needs (Ríos et al., 2022; Tremblay et al., 2021). Aware of this approach, the municipality of Covilhã, as mentioned by interviewee 1, has been planning measures to realise the SDGs according to the main interests of its stakeholders.

To this end, in order to promote the development and implementation of such a strategy at local level, the municipality of Covilhã can and does use citizen participation approaches, such as those advocated by Ajates et al. (2020); Guha & Chakrabarti (2019); Marzouki et al. (2021); Masuda et al. (2022) and Meschede & Mainka (2020).

There has been greater recognition of the role of local authorities as agents for the promotion, realisation and balanced integration of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, as advocated by Bandari et al. (2022), Kirst et al. (2019), Krantz & Gustafsson (2021), Reinart & Lundberg (2023) and Ríos et al. (2022), something that the municipality of Covilhã has taken on in achieving the various SDGs, as can be inferred from the following tables.

The data systematized in Tables 2 to 7 emerged from the analysis of the contents of the SDGs according to the perspectives defined in the United Nations 2030 Agenda, the actions and their implementation in the municipality of Covilhã and the results of the interviews conducted: the Mayor (interviewee 1); the Councillor (Spatial Planning, Environment, Rural Development, Forestry Technical Office and protected areas, Urban Planning) (interviewee 2), the Director of the Finance and Administrative Modernization Department (interviewee 3), the Head of the Social Action and Health Division (interviewee 4), the Head of the Education and Youth Division (interviewee 5) and the Director of the Works and Planning Department (interviewee 6).

Each table analyses the different dimensions of the SDGs as follows: social dimension (table 2), health (table 3); education (table 4), justice (table 5), economic development (table 6) and natural environment (table 7)

Considering the content of the SDGs, the results obtained by the Covilhã City Council, as shown in tables 1 to 6, are in line with the concerns of Kumi et al. (2014), Caiado et al. (2018), Benedek et al. (2021), Benito et al. (2023) and Mutiarani & Siswantoro (2020), who cite concerns about protecting the planet, ensuring sustainable environmental development and revealing good municipal practices in this area (Ferreira, 2020; Mutiarani & Siswantoro, 2020).

Table II: Content of the SDGs and Mobilization in the Municipality of Covilhã in relation to the social dimension

DIMENSIONS, ACTIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION	
<p>a) Eradicate poverty - SDG 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Combating poverty in old age ▪ Social Policies ▪ Support for ageing ▪ Support for the disabled ▪ Support for the needy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “The municipality's housing stock currently has 770 residential units: 645 on a rent-supported basis; 94 on a rent-free basis.” (interviewee 2) ▪ “The Cartão Municipal do Idoso, or Municipal Social Card, created in 2005 to exclusively support the elderly, has now been extended to support unemployed people and large families with monthly incomes equal to or less than the IAS (Social Support Index), or who have no income at all, and the disabled.” (interviewee 2) ▪ “Support for the IPSS in the Municipality of Covilhã” (interviewee 2) ▪ “Municipal Active Ageing Programs, namely the existence of Activity Centers and sports activities” (interviewee 2) ▪ “Allocation of various types of support under municipal regulations: “Regulations for the allocation of tax benefits and recognition of projects of municipal interest in the municipality of Covilhã” (interviewee 2)
<p>b) Eradicating hunger - SDG 2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Food support for people in vulnerable situations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “There is a municipal market and various local markets in different parishes where local producers can sell their products” (interviewee 2).

- Support Program for People in Need
 - Community Gardens
 - Social Gardens
- c) Gender equality - SDG 5
- Elimination of discriminatory practices against specific groups - rural women
- d) Reducing inequalities - SDG 10
- Reception of migrants
 - Provision of Public Services
- e) Sustainable cities and communities - SDG 11
- Municipal Social Housing
 - Free transportation for students at all levels of education
 - Improving access for people with reduced mobility
- “Promoting and boosting community and social garden projects.” (interviewee 2)
 - “Protocol to Support.Vincentian Conferences and POAPMC - Operational Program to Support the Most Deprived People. Food support is also provided by the Red Cross and ReFood, as well as by the Food Bank Against Hunger and Social Canteens” (interviewee 1).
 - “Candidacy ‘Weaving the Future in Equality’, which aims to implement the Municipal Plan for Equality in the Municipality” ... “with the objective of parity in the management positions of the Municipality’s Human Resources” (interviewee 5)
 - “Partnership in projects such as: Violence 0 Project, Tearing Silence, Veleda.Groups, in the empowerment of single and single-parent women” (interviewee 2)
 - “A reception structure has been set up for refugees from Ukraine” (interviewee 5)
 - “The municipality has two CLAIMs - Local Support Center for the Integration of Migrants 1 CLAIM - Support Center for the Integration of Migrants and 1 Migrant.Desk.” (interviewee 5)
 - “Creation of access ramps, elevators” (interviewee 6)
 - “Municipal Social Housing, its maintenance and dynamization in a participatory management of the neighborhoods, involving the community in the conservation and management of the sponsorship.” (interviewee 2)
 - “Municipal housing at controlled prices (affordable rent)” (interviewee 2)
 - “Covilhã + Social Municipal Social Card” (interviewee 1)
 - “Free pass for young students at all levels of education (including higher education)” (interviewee 2)
 - “Requalification projects for sidewalks, squares and public spaces that allow easy and accessible circulation for all types of publics, with concerns for babies, children, the elderly and people with reduced mobility.” (interviewee 6)

Source: Own Elaboration

Considering the information provided by interviewees 1, 2, 5 and 6, the various social initiatives of the Municipality of Covilhã demonstrate a coordinated effort to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. With regard to SDG 1 - Eradicate poverty - the Municipality of Covilhã demonstrates a significant commitment to the eradication of poverty through various initiatives, such as the provision of social and municipal housing at controlled prices and the extension of the Municipal Elderly Card to the unemployed and large families. In addition, support for the IPSS and active ageing programmes is essential to provide a safety net for the most vulnerable. With regard to SDG 2 - Eradicate Hunger, the municipality promotes food security through the existence of local markets that facilitate access to fresh produce, the promotion of community and social gardens, and partnerships with food support organisations such as the Red Cross and the Food Bank. These measures ensure that the food needs of the most vulnerable are met. With

regard to SDG 10 - Reducing inequalities, the Municipality of Covilhã has adopted several measures to reduce inequalities, namely the creation of a reception structure for refugees, the creation of support centres for the integration of migrants (CLAIM) and the implementation of accessible infrastructures for people with reduced mobility. These measures promote the social and economic integration of marginalised groups. The combination of these measures creates a fairer, more inclusive and sustainable environment that promotes the well-being and quality of life of all citizens.

Table III: Content of the SDGs and Mobilization in the Municipality of Covilhã in relation to health

DIMENSIONS, ACTIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION	
a) Quality Health - SDG 3 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Awareness, prevention and screening campaigns ▪ Support for the purchase of medicines ▪ Continued Care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ "...promotion of various campaigns, signposting and themed days and partnerships with ACES Cova da Beira and CBUHC-Cova da Beira University Hospital Center and University of Beira Interior..." (interviewee 1) ▪ "...Promotion of municipal sports programs, in various modalities, various activities, for various audiences and age groups." (interviewee 2) ▪ "... In the area of drug and alcohol prevention screening and campaigns, we have the following projects: Embrace the School, Projects Choices, Paths and I Want to Be +, Beira Mountain and collaborates respectively with the Project 'Weaving DiverCity Intercultural Municipal Mediators (interviewee 2).

Source: Own Elaboration

According to the information in Table 3, the initiatives of the municipality of Covilhã reflect a strong commitment to SDG 3 - Quality Health. Through strategic partnerships, the promotion of sports programmes and comprehensive prevention campaigns, the municipality is actively working to improve the health and well-being of its population. These combined actions help to create a more informed and healthier community, with access to the resources and support needed to maintain health at all levels.

Table IV: Content of the SDGs and Mobilization in the Municipality of Covilhã in relation to education

DIMENSIONS, ACTIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION	
a) Quality Education - SDG 4 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Upgrading the Public School Equipment Network ▪ Social Support and School Action 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ "Upgrading infrastructures and access and permanence in school buildings in the 1st cycle of basic education and in pre-school education in the 2nd, 3rd and secondary cycles..." (interviewee 2) ▪ "Improving accessibility, hygiene and health conditions in school buildings, as well as providing educational establishments with options aimed at improving energy performance and thermal comfort and lighting conditions in existing school buildings. We try to promote the sustainability of school architecture in the renovations, through ecological buildings..." (interviewee 2)

- “...we grant operating subsidies for office supplies, cleaning, teaching materials, for these cycles (pre-school and 1st cycle).” (interviewee 5)
- “The activity of the family support component, both at pre-school and 1st cycle level ... since the extension of school hours for pre-school and 1st cycle students allows support for Parents and Guardians to better reconcile family life and work” (interviewee 2)
- “Support within the scope of School Transportation”, in which 100% support is given to students up to university level.” (interviewee 5)

Source: Own Elaboration

With regard to the initiatives developed to achieve SDG 4 - Quality Education, the various initiatives of the Municipality of Covilhã demonstrate a clear commitment to its achievement. The modernisation of infrastructures, the promotion of sustainability, the granting of subsidies, family support and school transport are all integrated actions that guarantee a quality and inclusive educational environment.

Table V: Content of the SDGs and Mobilization in the Municipality of Covilhã in relation to justice

DIMENSIONS, ACTIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION	
<p>a) Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions - SDG 16</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Strengthening Transparency ▪ Municipal services tailored to local needs ▪ Victim Support Office 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ‘...We have adopted the Anti-Corruption Plan, the Code of Conduct for Elected Officials and Municipal Human Resources, the Whistleblower channel is currently being implemented, and we have a Data Protection Officer’ (interviewee 7). ▪ ‘One Stop Shop; Inclusion Shop, Immigrant Shop, Online Services, namely the Digital One Stop Shop, GeoPortal; Education Portal; Local service projects in the parishes on specific issues, such as registration with BUPI’ (interviewee 7) ▪ The Regulation for the allocation of support to Associations, which provides for the regular allocation of funds to the activities of the associative movement; and the Space for the support of specific individual or collective projects.’ (interviewee 1) ▪ ‘... We have the Violence 0 Project-Coolabora, which is part of the Victim Support Office and the Commission for the Protection of Children and Young People’ (interviewee 2)

Source: Own Elaboration

With regard to SDG 16, Covilhã has adopted some cross-cutting measures with the aim of promoting transparency, getting closer to citizens and monitoring possible problems of marital and child violence offences.

These issues are especially relevant in a society that wants to promote equality and security.

The local authority is also getting closer to its citizens, making it possible to obtain information and submit requests through different contact methods.

In a society that wants to be strong, it is essential to fight corruption and promote equal treatment. This is a goal that the local authority is constantly promoting.

Table VI: Content of the SDGs and Mobilization in the Municipality of Covilhã in relation to Economic Development

DIMENSIONS, ACTIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION	
<p>a) Decent work and economic growth - SDG 8</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Support for entrepreneurship and small and medium-sized enterprises ▪ Collaboration protocols with Beira Interior University 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ‘Collaboration protocols with the University of Beira Interior for training municipal human resources; Parkurbis’ (Interviewee 1). ▪ ‘Availability of plots of industrial land at symbolic prices, according to criteria established in municipal regulations’ (Interviewee 1) ▪ ‘Greenway for business - appointment of a multidisciplinary team of municipal technicians to monitor investors and investment projects’ (Interviewee 1)
<p>b) Industry, innovation and infrastructure - SDG 9</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “There are no measures or support for innovation, we are just taking our first steps in this area’ (Interviewee 1)
<p>c) Sustainable production and consumption - SDG 12</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Consumption of Local Products ▪ Sustainable tourism and Sustainable procurement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ‘The municipality supports and collaborates with various institutions in promoting and boosting community and social garden projects.’ (interviewee 3) ▪ Yes, Social Gardens in the Urbanização das Nogueiras Social Neighbourhood and in the Cabeço Neighbourhood. Partnership set up to implement ‘Healthy Neighbourhoods’ projects’ (interviewee 3)
<p>d) Partnerships to implement goals - SDG 17</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Decentralised cooperation with municipalities ▪ Decentralised cooperation with developing countries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ‘...protocol to support Vincentian Conferences and Operational Programme to Support the Most Deprived People. Food support is also provided by the Red Cross and ReFood, as well as by the Food Bank against hunger and Social Canteens...’ (interviewee 2), ▪ ‘Collaboration protocols with UBI for capacity building and training of municipal HR; Parkurbis, CIEC’ (interviewee 7). ▪ ‘Twinning Agreements with Madalena do Pico - May 1, 2005, Roubaix - October 20, 2000, Trelew - Argentina - May 23, 2000, Santarém-Portugal-December 31, 1992, Oeiras-Portugal-October 20 2000, City of Salamanca-Spain, Ethiopia, Ferment f Jumelage, Municipality of Praia and São Tomé and Príncipe.’ (interviewee 7).

Source: Own Elaboration

Covilhã, as a local authority, promotes the economic development of its territory. Economic development is supported in different ways: collaboration with educational establishments to promote the training and education required by the labour market; making industrial land available at reduced prices; setting up a science and technology park to promote new technologies and support entrepreneurship; monitoring potential investors; among other measures.

Economic development, given that Covilhã is part of a UNESCO World Geopark, is more concerned with sustainability. In this sense, it promotes rational use of the territory and promotes the consumption of local products as a way of boosting the local economy.

No less important is the set of partnerships established with other national and international territories, which enables the exchange of experiences.

Table VII: Content of the SDGs and Mobilization in the Municipality of Covilhã in relation to natural environment

DIMENSIONS, ACTIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION	
<p>a) Drinking water and sanitation - SDG 6</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Water Saving ▪ Drought Mitigation Plans ▪ Climate adaptation plans ▪ Social Tariff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ‘Most of the watering of green spaces is done with uncontrolled water from underground sources, thus saving treated water...’ (Interviewee 3), ‘Since 2014, several active campaigns have been carried out to detect and repair ruptures/leaks and replace branch lines’ (Interviewee 6), ‘Between 2020 and 2022, the Programme to Control and Reduce Losses in the Covilhã Water Distribution System was implemented’ (Interviewee 3). ▪ ‘The drought mitigation plan was also implemented in July 2017, based on the definition of preventive protection measures, as a public policy instrument for access to water’ (Interviewee 6). ▪ ‘In the context of climate adaptation, a pilot project was created: Pocket Forest, a pioneer in the district. The Pocket Forests were designed to mitigate the environmental effects of urban life, for example reducing air pollution through decarbonisation.’ (Interviewee 6) ▪ ‘...The company waters of Covilhã, practises social pricing by giving social discounts to users who are beneficiaries of the “Covilhã More Social” card’ (Interviewee 3)
<p>b) Renewable energy - SDG 7</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sustainable mobility systems ▪ Energy ▪ Efficiency measures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ‘... promotion of a Multimodal Urban Mobility System, which includes a network of soft mobility (bicycles and electric scooters) there is a network of urban cycle paths’ (Interviewee 3) ▪ ‘There is a network of fast and ultra-fast electric chargers being implemented under a municipal concession.’ (Interviewee 3) ▪ ▪ There is a plan to replace public lighting with LED technology.’ (Interviewee 3) ▪ ‘There is a pilot project by the municipal company ICOVI together with UBI to assess the potential for using the municipality's orographic conditions to harness the potential energy of water for electricity production.’ (Interviewee 6)
<p>c) Climate action - SDG 13</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Climate plans at local level ▪ Climate action training and capacity building 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ‘Collaboration policy with UBI, the Research Centre and other private business entities to promote the circular economy, environmental regeneration and the recovery of environmental liabilities (Panasqueira Mine).’ (Interviewee 6) ▪ ‘Municipal Plan for Youth, one of the areas included is the promotion of awareness-raising actions, training and local capacity-building to mitigate or deal with climate change’ (Interviewee 3)

- d) Protect life on Earth – SDG 15
- Combat desertification and soil degradation
 - Combating deforestation
 - Integrated management of natural parks
- ‘Forestry management programmes, planting and reforestation, clearing of fuel management strips, particularly primary and secondary networks’ (Interviewee 3)
 - ‘Promoting fire awareness and prevention programmes. Support for parish councils in providing equipment and materials for rapid fire intervention.’ (Interviewee 3)
 - ‘Soil consolidation projects with seed planting and retention techniques.’ (Interviewee 3)
 - ‘Collaboration and support with sustainable community projects in the territory (Ananda Valley)’ (Interviewee 3)

Source: Own Elaboration

Covilhã is a territory with an abundance of water. However, there has always been a concern about the rational use of this important natural resource. To this end, various investments have been made in collection, storage and distribution infrastructures with the aim of minimising losses. Various educational projects have also been supported with the aim of educating children and young people about the need to use water rationally.

Renewable energies are also an area of special relevance for Covilhã. An innovative project is the Multimodal Urban Mobility System, which includes a soft mobility network (bicycles and electric scooters), urban transport, lifts and the improvement of urban space with the introduction of a network of electric chargers.

As a way of saving energy, the local authority is developing the replacement of the public lighting network using LED technology.

As mentioned above, Covilhã is part of UNESCO World Geopark and therefore promotes the adoption of various nature conservation measures (e.g. soil erosion conservation) as well as supporting different community projects.

Taking into account the way in which the 2030 agenda was designed, in order to combat poverty, inequality and injustice, we can see that Covilhã City Council has set targets to combat poverty while ensuring sustainable economic development in the community, this sustainable development target being a fundamental feature of global development strategies, highlighting the municipal responsibility manifested as the best positioned partner in the implementation of the SDGs, seeking to meet the needs of the local population, promoting their well-being (Choi et al. 2016; Benito et al. 2016; Benito et al. 2023; Mutiarani & Siswantoro, 2020; Ferreira, 2020).

Analysing the results also highlighted some good municipal practices that contribute positively to each SDG. The operationalisation of the SDGs depends on local leadership and coordination, in which political decision-makers seek to integrate targets aligned with

the implementation of the 2030 Agenda into their planning and strategic management instruments, in which partnerships with local actors create synergies for this purpose. However, it is of significant importance to integrate the SDGs into day-to-day institutional life, taking advantage of existing mechanisms and involving departments and multidisciplinary teams in the municipality of Covilhã, boosting mechanisms for interdepartmental dialogue and coordination (Krantz and Gustafsson, 2021; Orzeszyna and Tabaszewski, 2021; Ferreira, 2020).

The results also show a set of initiatives developed by the Municipality of Covilhã that have a strong interconnection with the SDGs impacted by a good practice or municipal project, with reciprocal benefits between most SDGs and commitments made (Avelar et al. 2023).

Of the 17 SDGs, SDG 4 - Quality Education, SDG 6 - Drinking Water and Sanitation, SDG 1 - Combat Poverty stand out, given the targets set and results already achieved, which are in line with the United Nations 2030 Agenda. Although SDG 5 - Gender equality, SDG 10 - Reducing inequalities, SDG 3 - Quality health, SDG 16 - Peace, justice and effective institutions, SDG 17 - Partnerships to implement goals, SDG 7 - Renewable energy, SDG 13 - Climate action and SDG 15 - Protecting terrestrial life also deserve political attention and concrete results in terms of good practices, they still require additional promotion and mobilisation mechanisms. On the other hand, the targets set out in SDG 8 - Decent work and economic growth, SDG 9 - Industry, innovation and infrastructure and SDG 12 - Sustainable production and consumption are still far from being achieved and require planning, political decisions and measures at local level to implement and realise.

Understanding the SDG targets and their interconnections is crucial to achieving the local SDGs, as advocated by Ningrum et al. (2023) and Song & Jang (2023), which is why the Covilhã municipality's policies should be designed and implemented at the level of the targets and not at the level of the macro-targets. As a result of the interviews and documentary analysis carried out, there is a need to improve the presentation of results by the municipality of Covilhã. Promoting accountability is one of the main parameters for evaluating and promoting greater interconnection with stakeholders.

As advocated by Masuda et al. (2022), local authorities must improve their role as intermediaries to facilitate partnerships for the SDGs. The interviewees, stressing that the SDGs should be recognised as a driver of sustainable transitions, reinforced the need to

strike a balance in terms of the level of public sector involvement in partnerships, having identified a number of projects in which partnerships are established with external entities: University of Beira Interior; Cova da Beira University Hospital Center; PARKURBIS; Santa Casa da Misericórdia da Covilhã; Forest Sappers; Private Social Solidarity Institutions, Food Bank; among others.

On the other hand, local authorities must be the driving force behind integrating the different areas of sustainability into their municipalities, while realising that their resources are limited, which leads to the need to provide public services in the most efficient way (Guha & Chakrabarti, 2019; Keskitalo & Liljenfeldt, 2012; Ríos et al., 2022). In this context, the increase in public spending that may result from the fulfilment of the SDGs is not insignificant (Kavvada et al., 2020; Ríos et al., 2022). As such, the municipality of Covilhã must be aware of this fact and make savings in other areas to correct any imbalances that may arise. Therefore, the Covilhã municipality's commitment to achieving the SDGs must also be accompanied by improvements in the efficiency of related public services, something already identified in other local authorities by Ríos et al. (2022).

5. Conclusion

The SDGs provide a holistic framework for analysing commitment with a balanced representation of the different priorities, as they cover 17 goals and 169 targets spanning society, the economy and the environment. The prioritisation of these goals and targets can, however, change on a local scale due to their relevance to the local region and the local availability of resources (Nerland et al., 2023). Analysing the case of the municipality of Covilhã, a more general approach strategy can be observed, but it is worth highlighting a more concentrated effort on SDG 1 - Combating Poverty, SDG 4 - Quality Education and SDG 6 - Drinking Water and Sanitation, which are the targets that have already been achieved. With regard to SDG 3 - Quality health, SDG 5 - Gender equality, SDG 7 - Renewable energy, SDG 10 - Reducing inequalities, SDG 13 - Climate action, SDG 15 - Protecting terrestrial life SDG 16 - Peace, justice and effective institutions and SDG 17 - Partnerships for the implementation of goals, it can be seen that there are a wide range of measures to be implemented whose targets have not yet been met. On the other hand, SDG 8 - Decent work and economic growth, SDG 9 - Industry, innovation and infrastructure and SDG 12 - Sustainable production and consumption should be given

more urgent attention, as these goals are significantly behind schedule in achieving their targets.

However, it is essential to continue to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of these policies to ensure that they achieve their objectives and adapt to the ever-changing needs of the population.

Finally, the efforts made by the municipality of Covilhã to achieve the SDGs are clear, but there is a clear need to create an interdisciplinary team to set targets and monitor their fulfilment.

This study contributes, both in terms of research and practical analysis, by assessing how sustainability can be achieved through the SDGs in the context of a local authority.

The main limitation of this study is the unavailability of data on targets and the need to cover a longer period of time to fully uncover the implementation of the SDGs in the municipality of Covilhã.

Future studies could look more deeply into the synergies between the SDGs and spending policies, to assess the efficiency of local management in advancing the SDGs and participation in the municipal budget. Another future research perspective could be realised through the definition of a set of targets that will make it possible to assess more effectively whether the objectives proposed by the SDGs have been achieved and which measures have been implemented to achieve these targets more efficiently.

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