

Stepping up or stepping back?

Nordic local and regional views on the 2030 Agenda and beyond

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Summary

The United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development sets out 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030. With only four years remaining, it is crucial to accelerate progress. At the same time, discussions are emerging about what kind of global framework should guide sustainable development beyond 2030. This creates an important opportunity to bring forward insights to help shape the future agenda.

This policy brief presents perspectives from Nordic local and regional sustainability experts and youth representatives on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, examining what is working, where gaps remain and actions needed to accelerate progress. It also outlines their priorities and expectations for the global sustainability framework beyond 2030. The aim is to ensure that their knowledge and experiences are reflected in future global development work, enabling more effective support for those driving sustainability on the ground.

The insights are drawn from focus group discussions and interviews, conducted as part of the "Sustainable Nordic Municipalities and Regions" project, implemented by Nordregio in collaboration with the Nordic local and regional government associations (LRGAs).

Key takeaways:

1. The 2030 Agenda delivers real value when embedded in local governance.

Implementation has brought tangible benefits for Nordic local actors, but significant efforts are still needed to enhance and sustain its impact.

2. Local and regional action is critical but requires sustained support. Subnational governments are critical to achieving meaningful progress on the SDGs, but they depend on stable political commitment, effective coordination mechanisms and adequate resources.

3. Political leadership determines success or stagnation. Renewed and stable political support across all governance levels is essential for accelerating implementation and ensuring that the 2030 Agenda translates into real and lasting impact.

4. Extend and refine the 2030 Agenda – do not replace it. The framework of the 2030 Agenda should be retained, but with an extended timeline, greater simplification where appropriate, adaptation to current realities and strengthened implementation mechanisms to drive real change.

1. Introduction



Helsinki. Image: Yadid Levy / norden.org

According to the UN (2025), only around 18% of the SDGs are on track globally, while approximately 66% are either off track or progressing too slowly. In 2020, a report by the OECD underscored the essential role of local and regional governments, noting that some 65% of the SDG targets cannot be achieved without their involvement (OECD, 2020).

In this context, it is essential to gather local and regional actors' insights based on their work on the 2030 Agenda, pinpointing not only successes, but also challenges, gaps and areas for improvement. Equally important is understanding their expectations and priorities for global sustainability cooperation beyond 2030. Given their pivotal role in implementing the Global Goals, any future agenda should be grounded in their needs, realities and perspectives.

The Nordic context offers valuable lessons from SDG implementation, shaped by local actors' extensive experience with the 2030 Agenda. Several features of the Nordic model support effective local engagement in implementing the SDGs. These include strong local self-governance and autonomy, open and trusted dialogue across levels of government, proactive local and regional government associations (LRGAs), early municipal adoption of the SDGs and a collaborative civic culture. These elements were also explored further in the [Nordic Voluntary Subnational Review](#) (2024).

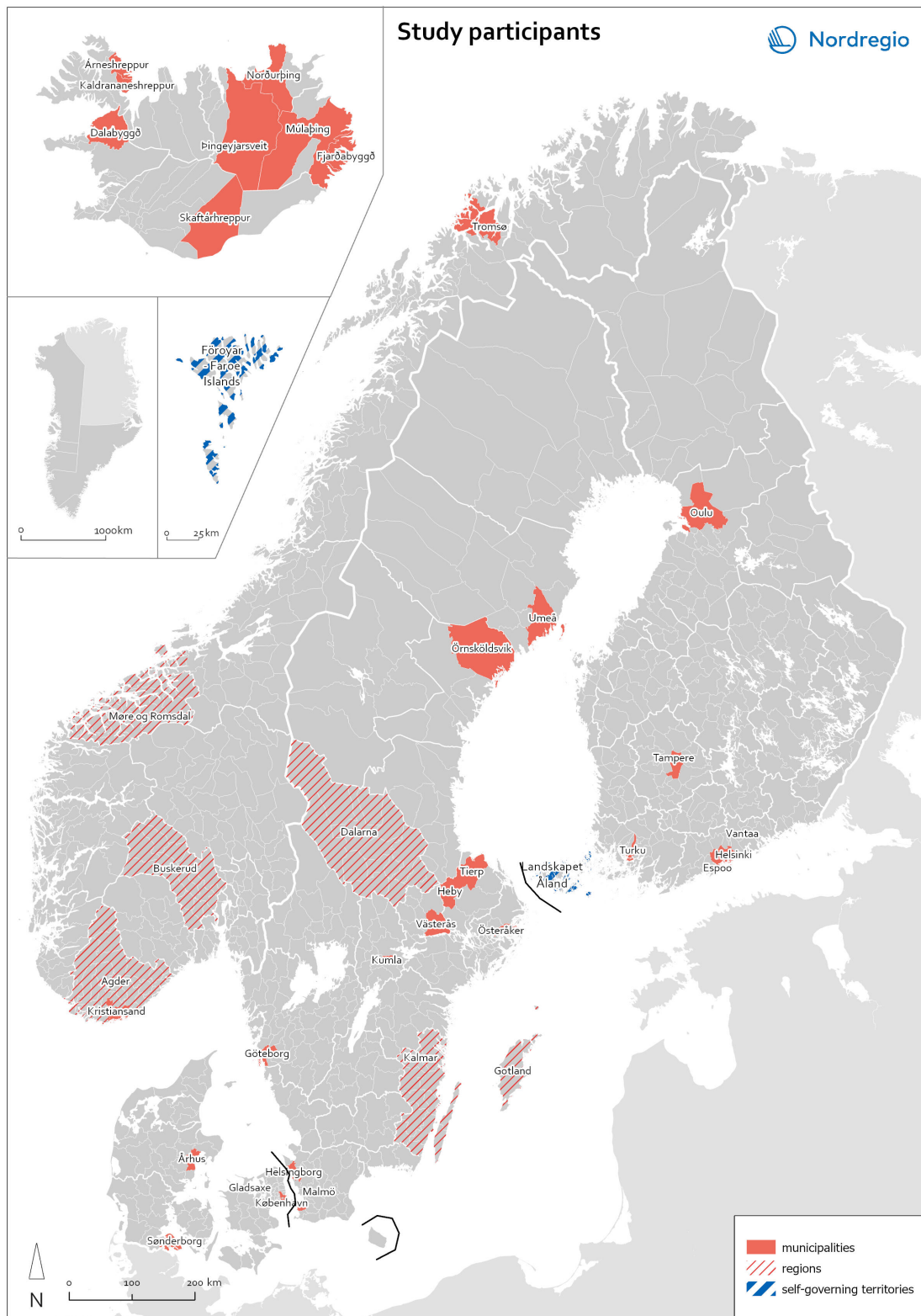
Formal discussions on the global sustainable development framework beyond 2030 will begin at the SDG Summit in September 2027, as mandated by the Pact for the Future adopted at the 2024 Summit of the Future. In anticipation of this meeting, preparatory research and consultations are already underway among policymakers and experts. This policy brief contributes to these efforts by presenting perspectives from Nordic sustainability actors working within local and regional authorities, Nordic LRGAs representing the interests of municipalities and regions, and youth representatives.

METHODS

This policy brief is based on findings from focus group discussions, complemented by interviews and written input from Nordic sustainability experts. Between spring and winter 2025, perspectives were gathered from 30 municipalities, 6 regions, 6 LRGAs^[1], the Government of Åland and 4 youth representatives. Map 1 shows study participants from municipalities and regions, including the autonomous regions of Åland and the Faroe Islands.

Municipalities and regions were selected in close dialogue with the LRGAs, who recommended relevant candidates in each country. Most contributors were civil servants working as sustainability advisors or specialists in areas such as climate action, environmental and social sustainability, or biodiversity. In Iceland, project administrators working on sustainable community development also participated. Youth representatives from Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Sweden were engaged through Nordic environmental and sustainability organisations.

1. The Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities, the Icelandic Association of Local Authorities (Samband íslenskra sveitarfélaga), the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS Kommunesektorens organisasjon), the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (Sveriges Kommuner och Regioner), the National Association of Municipalities (Føroya Kommunufelag), and Åland Municipal Association (Ålands kommunörbund).



Map 1. Study participants: municipalities, regions and self-governing territories.
 Note: LRGAs and youth representatives are not represented on the map.

2. Key findings



Reykjavik. Image: Yadid Levy / norden.org

The summary below highlights key perspectives and themes that emerged from focus group discussions and interviews with Nordic subnational actors, LRGAs and youth representatives. Due to the concise nature of a policy brief, some content has been condensed, and not all messages from the discussions could be included. Instead, the focus is on the points that were discussed most prominently and raised by multiple participants.

Our findings summarise:

- The benefits of working with the 2030 Agenda
- The challenges of working with the 2030 Agenda
- How to accelerate work on the 2030 Agenda
- Visions for the global development agenda beyond 2030

2.1 What are the benefits of working with the 2030 Agenda?

Nordic actors note that the 2030 Agenda has contributed positively to sustainability work over the past decade. This section outlines some of the key benefits identified by the participants, ranging from ways in which the Agenda facilitates collaboration to how it shapes local action.

The 2030 Agenda serves as a common language and a shared framework

"What's great about Agenda 2030 is that it gives us a shared language – everyone knows what it refers to, even if not in detail."

- a representative from Sweden

When asked about the benefits of working with the 2030 Agenda, focus group participants identified its role as a communication tool as one of its greatest strengths. Through the recognisable and colourful design of the SDGs, the framework provides a visual identity that helps Nordic municipalities and regions articulate and communicate their sustainability work both internally and externally. Additionally, participants noted that the SDGs have created a shared language, enabling broader participation across sectors and stakeholder groups.

The 2030 Agenda is relevant to local work and practice

"I think many of the contents are very relevant and part of our everyday work in the city. We are really working towards the same goals whether we talk about the SDGs or not."

- a representative from Finland

Nordic municipalities and regions, supported by a strong welfare model and local governance traditions, have diverse responsibilities. Beyond service provision such as education, healthcare and waste management, they also work in areas including supporting social cohesion, developing attractive neighbourhoods and enhancing quality of life (Ström Hildestrand et al., 2024). Given this breadth of mandates, participants emphasised how well the 2030 Agenda aligns with their everyday work and responsibilities.

The 2030 Agenda highlights the holistic nature of sustainability

"The strength of the Agenda is that it acknowledges the interdependence of the three dimensions – social, environmental and economic."

- a representative from Sweden

The 2030 Agenda has enhanced how Nordic actors understand and approach sustainability. The framework has helped broaden perspectives on what sustainability encompasses, moving beyond environmental issues to include other dimensions such as health, well-being, peace, social belonging and economic prosperity.

Some municipality representatives noted that the 2030 Agenda has helped municipal employees better recognise the sustainability dimensions within their own roles. It has fostered the understanding that sustainability is not confined to environmental departments or treated as a "side project", but is a shared responsibility engaging entire organisations and all parts of society. A number of study participants emphasised that this has contributed to a more integrated approach to sustainability work across local and regional administrations.

The 2030 Agenda is a source of inspiration

"It was very helpful that Agenda 2030 came along, because then we could refer to it and learn from it, but also be inspired by it. And show that our work for sustainable development locally also contributes to the global effort, even if it is only a small contribution."

- a representative from the Government of Åland

Some study participants noted that the 2030 Agenda has provided a framework to unite local actors around a shared vision, offering both direction and motivation. In this way, it has helped transform sustainability work from isolated local responsibilities into participation in a worldwide movement. The framework has provided municipalities and regions with clearer priorities and direction on where to focus their efforts. In doing so, the 2030 Agenda has created a sense of momentum and possibility. Several Nordic representatives emphasised that one of its greatest contributions may lie in sustaining the collective will to act, fostering confidence that, through joint effort, a more sustainable future remains within reach.

2.2 What are the challenges?

Local and regional implementation of the 2030 Agenda has also faced a number of challenges. Study participants report slow progress on several SDGs, especially ecological goals such as biodiversity, sustainable consumption and production, water and transport, as well as social dimensions including equality and well-being. The major challenges mentioned by the participants are presented here.

Geopolitical instability and global uncertainties undermine momentum on sustainability

***"One thing we are experiencing is that the world around us has changed. We are noticing uncertainty in the rest of the Nordic region regarding the political direction we are heading in, and not just in the Nordic region, but in Europe and globally."
- a representative from the Government of Åland***

Nordic actors noted that escalating global instability and crises have shifted attention away from accelerating sustainability towards other urgent agendas. The focus has turned to maintaining existing commitments and fulfilling legally mandated tasks at various governance levels. Consequently, actors highlighted competing priorities and a growing tension between short-term needs and long-term sustainability goals. Increasing security concerns, economic pressures and a heightened focus on crisis response overshadow SDG implementation, leaving local actors struggling to sustain momentum. Some participants even expressed concern that "extraordinary leadership in a negative sense" may be driving global agendas away from sustainability. The unstable global situation creates discouragement also at the local level, making it difficult to maintain focus on SDG work at the local and regional level.

Declining political support and lack of coordination across governance levels

***"There has been a setback [in political support] at the EU and global level. Support for the local level is lacking or non-existent [...]. It is difficult to keep the theme visible if it lacks public and political attention and momentum."
- written input, a representative from Finland***

A lack of political prioritisation and clear leadership remains a persistent challenge for Nordic municipalities, as noted in previous studies (Ström Hildestrand et al., 2024). Despite growing urgency, several municipal and regional representatives reported eroding national political support for the 2030 Agenda and sustainability more broadly during focus group interviews. In recent years, signals and resources from global, EU and national authorities have weakened, creating cascading effects that undermine local implementation efforts.

Focus group participants further emphasised that national-level disengagement has given rise to structural barriers and uncertainty due to the withdrawal of coordination mechanisms and inadequate funding, leaving municipalities and regions struggling to maintain momentum. Several focus group participants noted that increasing politicisation of the SDGs makes it more difficult to anchor local sustainability work. Some municipalities have even started to adopt "workaround strategies", avoiding explicit use of the term "sustainability" to circumvent potential resistance.

Study participants also stressed that unclear national frameworks and priorities fragment efforts, leaving local actors to adopt ad hoc approaches or to "reinvent the wheel". For example, some local and regional actors noted that environmental and public health goals have faded from the conversation and that tracking systems and indicators have weakened.

Lack of awareness and understanding of Agenda 2030

***"One major challenge we've identified at the local level is the general lack of understanding around the SDGs – not just the goals themselves, but also holistic sustainability overall. People often recognise the colourful icons of the 17 goals, but they don't always dig deeper into what they actually mean."
- a representative from Finland***

Although the 2030 Agenda has helped enhance understanding of sustainability (see previous section), knowledge gaps remain. Nordic actors report a persistent lack of awareness and understanding of the 2030 Agenda. Several municipalities noted that many stakeholders lack a holistic grasp of sustainability, limiting integration into daily operations and strategic planning. This knowledge gap persists across sectors and governance levels. Even where commitment is high, stakeholders often recognise SDG icons but struggle to translate global goals into local context and practice. Furthermore, many municipalities face challenges in reaching beyond "the usual audience" and engaging the wider population. This contributes to low awareness and limited broader support for the 2030 Agenda, especially among groups with low interest or trust in sustainability policies.

Difficulty in working holistically and overcoming silo-based thinking

“The siloed structures – these ‘vertical pipes’ – are a major obstacle. That’s where we need to move forward.”

- a representative from Sweden

The siloed structure of public administrations remains a major challenge, according to Nordic actors. The 2030 Agenda’s systemic ambition is undermined by fragmented priorities and weak mainstream governance integration.

Study participants stressed that sustainability is typically organised across separate departments (environmental, social and economic) with minimal cross-sectoral coordination. This fragmentation creates gaps, duplication and contradictory goals, while opportunities for synergies are missed and accountability for cross-cutting issues is weakened. In some authorities, sustainability is even treated as a separate activity and delegated to environmental departments rather than embedded in core processes. This may result in operational planning rarely considering holistic impacts, making genuine transformation difficult to achieve.

Excessive focus on economic growth overshadows other sustainability dimensions

“I can confirm that it’s very hard for many politicians to move beyond the growth agenda. Most other goals that are set, even locally, are measured against what they mean for our growth ambitions. And if they conflict with those ambitions, growth usually wins.”

- a representative from Denmark

Local and regional actors expressed concern that economic growth remains the dominant paradigm, with municipal performance evaluated primarily through GDP and financial indicators. In practice, sustainability often loses out when it conflicts with growth priorities.

Despite recognition of alternative progress metrics, focus group participants reported that systemic change faces strong political and cultural resistance across governance levels. This tension undermines the integration of social and ecological priorities into governance and planning. While tools for measuring progress “beyond GDP” exist, they lack traction and remain secondary to growth imperatives, weakening genuine sustainability transformation.

The 2030 Agenda is too complex and does not adequately address conflicting goals

"The SDGs are complex – and when a small municipality wants to take on all 17 goals and 169 sub-targets, it's easy to become overwhelmed by the bureaucracy of it all."

- a representative from LRGA

Nordic representatives, especially from smaller communities, find the 17 SDGs and 169 targets of the 2030 Agenda overwhelming and difficult to apply. Some study participants also noted that the Agenda is not framed as a practical tool, which hinders effective local implementation. Furthermore, participants argued that the framework lacks a clear "dilemma perspective", often presenting goals in uniformly positive terms while failing to address tensions between objectives, such as economic growth versus climate and nature conservation. Without tools to navigate trade-offs or understand interdependencies, local actors struggle to manage goal conflicts and harness synergies, limiting effective implementation and uptake.

Measuring progress on sustainability is complex

"Good work has been done on indicators, but more is still needed, and access to meaningful local data is still limited. If it's not measured, it's easy to deprioritise."

- a representative from Norway

Measuring and monitoring progress on sustainability remains challenging for Nordic municipalities due to fragmented approaches and insufficient local indicators. Municipalities often struggle with poor-quality indicators, limited data and analytical capacity. Some goals, such as CO₂ emissions, are relatively easy to quantify, while others, including well-being, biodiversity and discrimination, remain vague and difficult to measure. This results in uneven follow-up and risks deprioritisation of less measurable goals.

Some actors further noted that monitoring often focuses on local development, overlooking global impacts such as consumption-based emissions and spillovers. Voluntary Local Reviews may show strong local performance while masking significant global footprints. Inconsistent indicators, inaccessible data, weak accountability and failure to capture indirect effects undermine both local tracking and systemic progress towards the SDGs.

Small communities face capacity constraints and interconnected challenges

***"It's really challenging for people to build a future when they don't see themselves as having the privilege of good infrastructure."
- a representative from Iceland***

Many Nordic municipalities identified ongoing struggles with underfunding and capacity shortages for sustainability work. Smaller, remote and island communities are disproportionately affected, often with a single staff member handling multiple roles within local administrations, with little capacity for long-term strategic work.

In addition, these smaller municipalities often face interconnected demographic and socioeconomic challenges that may reinforce one another and undermine local sustainable development. Participants noted that youth outmigration, population decline and ageing can weaken local labour markets and economic prospects, while also making it harder to maintain public services and infrastructure. As such services become more limited, municipalities may struggle to attract and retain residents, creating a sense of places "spiralling down".

2.3 How to accelerate progress?

In light of the challenges outlined in the previous section, study participants discussed ways to refocus attention on the 2030 Agenda and accelerate progress towards the SDGs.

Enhance political leadership, accountability and coordination

***"Agenda 2030 can't solve everything. It's just a framework. There has to be a real will – both politically and among civil servants – to actually drive change."
- a representative from Sweden***

One of the most frequently mentioned factors required to accelerate implementation of the 2030 Agenda was political leadership. Study participants emphasised that successful sustainability work depends on political support at all levels of governance, as this provides the mandate, resources and direction needed for long-term efforts. They also stressed that such support must be stable and predictable to sustain momentum and achieve lasting impacts.

National-level leadership was repeatedly highlighted as particularly important for local and regional sustainability efforts. Participants noted that national governments play a key role in setting priorities and legal requirements, as well as in creating national fora for knowledge exchange. They can also support regional and local action by providing financial resources, developing common indicators to measure progress and coordinating efforts across levels of governance to avoid fragmentation. Stricter follow-up and reporting requirements were seen as key to ensuring contributions from all levels of governance.

Reframe and adapt the Agenda to current realities

***"I think sustainability work – and Agenda 2030 in particular – isn't as 'hot' a topic anymore. We need to adapt it to the current context and use terminology that resonates today. We need to package what we have in a way that more people can relate to."
- a representative from Sweden***

As described in the previous section, several study participants noted that the multiple challenges and crises affecting the Nordic region and other countries in recent years have shifted attention away from long-term sustainability efforts. To refocus attention on the 2030 Agenda, participants recommended adapting the language and framing of the SDGs. This could include, for example, linking sustainability goals more explicitly to emerging priority areas such as resilience and preparedness. Rather than treating the 2030 Agenda as a static plan, participants encouraged viewing it as a flexible framework for action that can help build resilient, socially cohesive communities that are prepared for disruptions.

Prioritise key areas and improve tools for measuring progress

“We need more clarity and focus, and each country could identify key focus areas for the next five years.”

- a representative from Norway

Several participants suggested concentrating efforts on key areas requiring particular attention, including the protection of ecosystems, infrastructure, housing and jobs. Youth representatives also emphasised the need for a renewed focus on supporting the sustainability efforts of countries in the Global South.

Measuring progress and developing suitable indicators was considered crucial to ensure that sustainability efforts lead to the intended outcomes and to enable comparisons across municipalities. Stronger national coordination could be valuable in this context, preventing municipalities from having to create separate indicators and measurement systems independently. At the same time, participants stressed that any joint indicators should build on existing data and allow sufficient flexibility to reflect local needs.

Share success stories, motivate and learn from one another

“Let’s highlight the good examples from municipalities and civil society. They can counterbalance the sense that everything is falling apart globally. Locally, there’s a lot of hope.”

- a representative from Sweden

Many local and regional government representatives stressed the importance of highlighting success stories and fostering optimism. They noted that inspiring work is taking place at the subnational level but often receives limited visibility. Showcasing good examples and progress can help motivate further action and counter perceptions that momentum around the 2030 Agenda is weakening.

Participants also emphasised the value of communities of action and networks for strengthening motivation. Such communities can help sustainability experts share good practices and insights, provide peer support and raise awareness of approaches that have been less successful.

Prioritise communication and engage stakeholders

"The Agenda still feels quite abstract to most people. [...] We need something that sparks the feeling: 'This is about me too. This is our shared future.'"

- a youth representative

Study participants stressed the importance of strengthening public communication on the 2030 Agenda and engaging a broad range of stakeholders. Communication efforts should use clear, accessible language and demonstrate how the SDGs matter for different regions and municipalities, including how sustainability efforts create tangible local benefits and improve quality of life.

Participants also emphasised that involving residents, businesses and other actors can significantly enhance local sustainability work. Many municipalities and regions reported positive experiences with participatory methods, which have helped tap into people's ideas, goals and concerns while also increasing trust in local decision-makers. Looking ahead, several participants argued for even stronger engagement of stakeholders, such as schools, civil society associations, Indigenous communities and the wider population.

Youth representatives stressed that participation should not rely solely on voluntary contributions, since this risks involving only those who are already active. To ensure that diverse voices are heard, participants suggested allocating funding and offering compensation, particularly when engaging young people and marginalised groups. They also highlighted the need to reach out proactively to communities that are typically less involved in policymaking, for example, by meeting people where they are and accommodating different forms of communication and participation.

Mainstream sustainability and build capacity

"I think what would be helpful for the SDGs and for sustainability work in general is that we [...] try to go towards the idea that it's not a separate work in the city. Rather, it's an integral part of our everyday work, no matter where you work in a municipality – whether you're a teacher, a daycare person or an infrastructure worker."

- a representative from Finland

Participants also discussed what regional and local administrations themselves could do to strengthen their sustainability work. Several suggested that public administrations can implement sustainability more effectively by mainstreaming the SDGs into the daily work of all roles and departments, rather than treating them as a separate project managed by a dedicated task force.

However, some participants cautioned that this strategy of mainstreaming could carry the risk of fragmentation if the interconnectedness of the SDGs is lost. Without a clear grasp of how the goals interact, siloed departments risk missing opportunities for synergies, where progress in one area can also generate benefits in others. Similarly, potential trade-offs may go unnoticed, leading to unintended negative impacts when goals are pursued in isolation.

To address these challenges, participants called for stronger support in building competence and developing tools that make SDG interlinkages more visible and help manage goal conflicts. They also emphasised the need for clearer guidance on how to work with the complex and integrated nature of the 2030 Agenda within public administrations often marked by sectoral division and fragmented structures.

Make a business case for sustainability

“We’re even experimenting with how to put a price on nature, to include it as a factor in economic planning. If nature becomes part of the value system, we may be more likely to protect it.”

- a representative from LRGA

Participants also reflected on how to accelerate progress on environmental goals. To curb the overexploitation of natural resources and influence behaviours, they noted the importance of ensuring that the environmental costs of resource use are reflected in prices. They also suggested implementing economic incentives to make sustainable choices more profitable.

In addition, participants from LRGAs highlighted the need for greater financial support to advance sustainability efforts. For smaller communities in particular, even the provision of basic services for sustainability, such as wastewater treatment, can place significant burdens on local budgets. To enable more ambitious sustainability goals and plans, additional funding may be required, for example in the form of state grants or through targeted funding streams.

2.4 Visions beyond 2030

The views below reflect Nordic perspectives on a post-2030 sustainable development agenda, including the desired direction, how it can better support local efforts, and emerging priorities.

Widespread support for extending and refining the 2030 Agenda

***"We've invested so much time and energy in understanding the current [Agenda]. We don't want to spend another ten years building that from scratch."
- a representative from Norway***

Study participants widely supported keeping and refining the existing 2030 Agenda framework, rather than replacing it entirely. They noted that significant investments have already been made in understanding and implementing the current Agenda and emphasised the importance of building on this foundation. Some argued that in a world of constant change, a stable and continuous framework provides a sense of direction and reassurance. Others expressed a concern that introducing an entirely new framework would require significant resources for institutional capacity building, potentially diverting attention away from implementation at the local level.

Several study participants emphasised the need to simplify the Agenda, for example, by reducing the number of sub-goals. This was seen as particularly important for smaller municipalities, which often operate with limited capacity and resources. At the same time participants stressed the importance of maintaining the Agenda's holistic and integrated nature.

Support for a more radical global development agenda beyond 2030

***"I lean more towards a radical approach – sharpening the goals rather than watering them down."
- a youth representative***

Youth representatives expressed support for a more radical transformation of the global sustainability framework post-2030. They advocated for sharper, more ambitious goals that explicitly tackle systemic challenges, including trade-offs between economic growth and climate action.

Promote global responsibility

"I think it's important that the sub-goals, indicators and follow-up mechanisms also reflect how the Western world impacts the development opportunities of other countries. That includes acknowledging negative impacts."

- a representative from Sweden

Some participants stressed that the future global framework must be applicable across diverse political and social contexts. Crucially, it should be grounded in a decolonial approach and recognise how actions in the Global North can impact development opportunities elsewhere, including through negative spillovers.

Ensure the future framework is flexible and sensitive to local contexts

"The agenda should be flexible and context-sensitive, allowing room for local priorities and cultural perspectives."

- written input, a representative from Norway

Several participants emphasised the need for a flexible, context-sensitive framework that allows municipalities to adapt it to their specific needs, priorities and cultural contexts. A recurring theme in the discussions was the call for a stronger spatial perspective that acknowledges regional diversity. Participants criticised the 2030 Agenda's "one-size-fits-all approach" and spatial blindness, highlighting its failure to recognise geographic and demographic differences. They emphasised that the agenda beyond 2030 should better account for the vastly different conditions, resources and capacities of small, rural municipalities compared to larger, urban ones, as these disparities significantly affect the ability of different regions to engage with the SDGs.

Strengthen the role of municipalities and regions

"If local and regional governments and civil society are involved in deciding what the future global framework should look like, rather than leaving it in the hands of UN member states alone – I think that would have a huge impact."

- a representative from the Government of Åland

In the Nordic countries, local and regional actors play a crucial role in advancing sustainable development by delivering essential public services, such as clean water, waste management and quality education, as well as by engaging communities and

addressing local needs on the ground. Study participants strongly supported strengthening the role of local and regional governments in shaping the global sustainability framework beyond 2030 – both through earlier involvement in negotiations and formal consultation processes and through recognition of their key role in implementation.

Focus on implementation and accountability

“It should be much more action-oriented, more focused on how to actually create change. And that change will only happen through innovation, new financing mechanisms, new technologies and new ways of doing things.”

- a representative from LRGA

Some participants emphasised the need for the future global framework to be more action-oriented, with a shift in focus from broad visions and goals to practical implementation. They stressed the need for clearer guidance and stronger support in localising the goals, along with better alignment with national priorities. Others called for the integration of innovation, financing mechanisms and new technologies to accelerate progress.

Stronger accountability and tighter implementation requirements were also emphasised to ensure that the post-2030 agenda delivers real impact rather than remaining symbolic. Suggestions included clearer reporting standards and defined division of roles and responsibilities between municipalities, companies and residents. While some participants advocated for binding obligations for the public sector, others warned against over-regulation, underlining the need to balance accountability with flexibility.

Rethink monitoring and measuring progress

“Many SDG targets address symptoms, but not the underlying causes. This should be adjusted in any new development agenda.”

- written input, a representative from Norway

Several Nordic stakeholders emphasised the need to rethink monitoring and progress measurement, suggesting it should better identify gaps, support learning and prioritisation, guide resource allocation and drive real change. Suggestions included focusing on measuring what truly matters, such as root causes like inequality or injustice, rather than symptoms like poverty. Several study participants advocated for moving beyond GDP-based metrics to include measures of well-being, quality of life and ecological sustainability.^[2]

2. See other concrete suggestions in the section on how to accelerate progress.

Review and potentially add new priority areas to the SDGs

While study participants acknowledged that the existing SDGs remain relevant, there was support for refining the goals and potentially adding new ones to better reflect today's global context. Several Nordic actors emphasised that the post-2030 framework should more effectively integrate emerging global challenges and megatrends, such as digitalisation and artificial intelligence, recognising their dual role as both enablers and threats to democracy, trust and equality. There was also support for giving greater visibility to areas such as ecological foundations, quality of life, democracy, justice and human rights.

Ecological foundations

***"Overconsumption as a kind of root cause for a lot of environmental issues in the global North in general – I think it's something that we should emphasise more."
- a representative from Finland***

Several participants called for clearer framing around planetary boundaries and a stronger emphasis on ecological foundations. Climate action, protecting biodiversity, addressing overconsumption, a shift towards a circular economy and securing ecosystem services were repeatedly emphasised.

Quality of life

***"The focus on life quality is actually the best answer to the mental and social crises we're facing among our citizens [...]. That's why the point about community is so important – because it offers another way of trying to solve problems."
- a representative from Denmark***

Several study participants urged a shift away from continuous economic growth as the primary measure of progress and development. Instead, they called for the future sustainability framework to prioritise quality of life, well-being and thriving communities, especially in light of rising mental health issues and social crises.

Democracy, justice and human rights

***"The core of sustainable development must remain grounded in human rights and the principle of 'leaving no one behind'. This core should be stable [...], something resilient through crises and political shifts."
- a representative from LRGA***

Beyond 2030, study participants emphasised the need to place greater emphasis on democratic values, civic participation and human rights, particularly as geopolitical uncertainty, crises and polarisation are on the rise.

3. Key take-aways



Image: Tina Stafrén / sweden.se

This study captures the voices of Nordic local and regional actors, including municipalities, regions, local and regional government associations and youth representatives, on the current state and future of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Their perspectives offer important insights on how to accelerate progress and shape a post-2030 framework that works in practice.

Many Nordic municipalities and regions have made significant progress in implementing the 2030 Agenda over the past decade. The framework has provided a common language for sustainability work, and its holistic approach has supported more integrated sustainability work across Nordic communities. However, implementation faces mounting difficulties. This study was conducted at a time when the world is facing rising geopolitical tensions and competing priorities. Political commitment to the 2030 Agenda and sustainability has diminished in several parts of the Nordic region, posing challenges for local efforts to advance the SDGs.

Despite these complex challenges, Nordic local and regional authorities that have embedded the SDGs into their governance structures continue to see clear benefits and added value in using the 2030 Agenda as a framework for their work. Sustainability experts stress the ongoing usefulness of the SDGs as a communication tool, source of inspiration and a well-established framework.

The findings presented in this policy brief are important for several reasons. First, they highlight the crucial role of local and regional governments in sustaining momentum for the 2030 Agenda, even as global and national attention may wane. Second, they show that the Agenda remains a valuable tool, particularly when the SDGs are institutionalised within local governance systems, to promote continuity and resilience amid political shifts and financial uncertainty. Third, they serve as a reminder to national governments and international actors that sustained political leadership, coordination across governance levels and financial support are essential. Without such support, local implementation risks halting and becoming symbolic or fragmented. Smaller and remote communities in particular face acute capacity constraints and interconnected challenges, requiring targeted support.

With 2030 just four years away, the question of what should happen beyond 2030 is gaining momentum. Nonetheless, local and regional authorities stress the importance of not losing focus and maintaining the ambition to achieve as much progress as possible towards the sustainability goals by 2030. Much of this progress can be made locally and regionally. Engaging local businesses, civil society and residents, sharing success stories and highlighting the importance of the 2030 Agenda to create strong, resilient communities are some of the tools that local and regional authorities recommend to accelerate progress.

Looking beyond 2030, study participants made it clear that they do not want a future without a unifying global agenda. Instead, they called for an extended and refined framework that builds on strengths of the current Agenda while addressing its limitations. Participants expressed varying views on how the Agenda should be refined, for example whether to simplify it, add new SDGs, introduce stricter milestones for subnational actors, or preserve local autonomy. However, they agreed that Nordic national and subnational actors must maintain ambition, show leadership and continue "holding up the torch" for sustainable development. As one participant put it: "We must not back down. We need to fight tooth and nail to demonstrate that these are central issues."

4. Reflections from the Finnish and Norwegian LRGAs

Eveliina Kiema-Majanen
and Anne Romsaas



Image: Julia Kivelä / Visit Finland

Nordregio has conducted research on the local and regional implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the Nordic Region since 2018, in collaboration with Nordic local and regional government associations (LRGAs). Representatives of four LRGAs (KS, Kuntaliitto, Samband and SKR) have supported the work on this policy brief by providing expertise, feedback, and advice. Two representatives share their reflections on the project outcomes in the following statement.

As we look ahead, the message from the Finnish and Norwegian LRGAs is clear: the spirit and principles of the 2030 Agenda remain relevant for Nordic municipalities. No matter what new challenges emerge, economic uncertainty, shifting demographics and technological paradigms, or the accelerating impacts of climate change, the framework continues to offer something essential. It gives us a shared language, a way to stay aligned and a practical guide for shaping municipalities and cities where people genuinely want to live.

At the heart of this work is a commitment to long-term, holistic and sustainable decision-making. These principles are the foundation for building resilient, fair and futureproof communities. When municipalities anchor their choices in these values, they strengthen both local well-being, ecological balance and broader societal resilience.

The 2030 Agenda also provides a powerful way to highlight the importance of multilevel governance, which sits at the core of LRGAs advocacy. Strong collaboration between local, regional, national and international actors is a governance ideal as well as a practical necessity. The Sustainable Development Goals cannot be achieved in isolation. They are built on shared responsibility and coordinated action.

For these reasons, the Finnish and Norwegian LRGAs emphasise the role of the 2030 Agenda as a guiding compass for the years ahead. It continues to bring coherence, ambition and purpose to local sustainability work and to anchor the kind of future Nordic residents deserve. The messages from local governments and youth representatives presented in this policy brief are important knowledge for us as LRGAs. They will inspire our work with the 2030 Agenda and, more importantly, influence our perspectives on the possibilities for the next agenda.

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About this publication

Stepping up or stepping back? Nordic local and regional views on the 2030 Agenda and beyond

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