



The 2030 agenda in Spain's municipalities: participatory planning for sustainable development?

***La agenda 2030 en los municipios de España:
¿una planificación participativa para el desarrollo sostenible?***

***A agenda 2030 nos municípios da Espanha:
um planejamento participativo para o desenvolvimento sustentável?***

Néstor GARCÍA MONTES^{1*}, Luis ARNANZ Monreal¹

¹ Universidad Complutense de Madrid (UCM), Madrid, Spain.

* Contact e-mail: nestorga@ucm.es

Article received on February 11, 2025, final version accepted on March 30, 2025, published on December 5, 2025.

ABSTRACT: This work consists of analysing the development of the 2030 Agenda, in terms of the fight against climate change, in Spanish municipalities. In relation to this development, the focus is placed on the promotion and encouragement of citizen participation for sustainability. The results of the research show that the 2030 Agenda contains a significant deficit in this regard. It is a significant step backwards compared to its predecessor, Agenda 21. While Agenda 21 included citizen participation in the planning of sustainable public policies among its postulates and foundational axes, Agenda 2030, in its local aspect, lacks such intentions and, moreover, lacks strategies and tools for this purpose. The methodology used is an inductive, exploratory and explanatory case study. A sample of 11 cases selected from the set of Spanish municipalities adhering to the 'Network of entities for the 2030 Agenda' and recognised as 'good practices of the 2030 Agenda' by the FEMP is used. A comparative and longitudinal analysis is also made between the 2030 Agenda and its predecessor, the Local Agenda 21, in the case of three other municipalities: Madrid, Pinto and Legazpi.

Keywords: Agenda 2030; governance; participation; public policies.

RESUMEN: Este trabajo consiste en analizar el desarrollo de la Agenda 2030, en cuanto a la lucha contra el cambio climático se refiere, en los municipios españoles. Y en relación a dicho desarrollo, se pone el foco en el fomento y promoción de la participación ciudadana para la sostenibilidad. Los resultados de la investigación

evidencian que la Agenda 2030 acoge un importante déficit en este sentido. Supone un paso atrás muy notable respecto a su antecesora, la Agenda 21. Si la Agenda 21 contaba entre sus postulados y ejes fundacionales la participación ciudadana en la planificación de políticas públicas sostenibles, la Agenda 2030, en su vertiente local, prescinde de tales intenciones y, además, adolece de estrategias y herramientas para ello. La metodología que se utiliza es el estudio de casos de carácter inductivo, exploratorio y explicativo. Se recurre a una muestra de 11 casos seleccionados entre el conjunto de municipios españoles adheridos a la “Red de entidades para la Agenda 2030” y reconocidos como “buenas prácticas de Agenda 2030” por la FEMP. También se hace un análisis comparativo y longitudinal entre la Agenda 2030 y su antecesora, la Agenda 21 Local, en el caso de otros tres municipios: Madrid, Pinto y Legazpi.

Palabras clave: Agenda 2030; gobernanza; participación; políticas públicas.

RESUMO: Este trabalho tem como objetivo analisar o desenvolvimento da Agenda 2030 no que diz respeito ao combate às mudanças climáticas nos municípios espanhóis. Em relação a esse desenvolvimento, o foco é colocado na promoção e incentivo da participação cidadã para a sustentabilidade. Os resultados da pesquisa evidenciam que a Agenda 2030 apresenta uma deficiência significativa nesse aspecto. Representa um retrocesso considerável em relação à sua predecessora, a Agenda 21. Enquanto a Agenda 21 incluía, entre seus postulados e eixos fundacionais, a participação cidadã no planejamento de políticas públicas sustentáveis, a Agenda 2030, em sua vertente local, abre mão dessas intenções e, além disso, carece de estratégias e ferramentas para implementá-las. A metodologia utilizada é o estudo de casos de caráter indutivo, exploratório e explicativo. Foi realizada uma amostra de 11 casos selecionados entre os municípios espanhóis que fazem parte da “Rede de Entidades para a Agenda 2030” e são reconhecidos como “boas práticas da Agenda 2030” pela FEMP. Também é feito um estudo comparativo e longitudinal entre a Agenda 2030 e sua predecessora, a Agenda 21 Local, no caso de outros três municípios: Madrid, Pinto e Legazpi.

Palavras-chave: Agenda 2030; governança; participação; políticas públicas.

1. Introduction

The 2030 Agenda is a strategy for sustainable development adopted by the United Nations General Assembly through a resolution in 2015. Its purpose is the achievement, by the year 2030, of 17 goals – commonly known as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – which are further articulated into 169 specific targets.

This global strategy for sustainable development is not the first of its kind. The 2030 Agenda was preceded, first, by Agenda 21 – also referred to as “Program 21” – adopted at the United Nations “World Conference on the Environment”, or “Earth Summit”, held in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro.

Later, in 2000, the UN approved the “Millennium Development Goals” (MDGs) for the year 2015.

Across these transitions toward sustainability, certain challenges and approaches have remained consistently present. For instance, the concept of “sustainable development” began to gain traction when the “Brundtland Report” (UN, 1987) defined it as development “that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. The operationalization and practical implementation of the concept of sustainability has, from Agenda 21 to the SDGs, been structured around three fundamental dimensions: economic, social, and environmental. In this regard, it is also noteworthy that,

throughout this period, there has been a sustained emphasis on involving stakeholders at the local level – particularly municipal governments – in the responsibility of fostering a more sustainable planet. Consistent with the historic environmentalist motto “think globally, act locally”, coined in 1981 by René Dubos, numerous local authorities worldwide have developed, for their own municipalities, first Local Agenda 21 initiatives and, later, Agenda 2030 strategies, spanning from the 1990s to the present.

Empirical evidence supports this trend. In 2001, the number of identified Local Agenda 21 initiatives worldwide amounted to 6,416, the vast majority of which (5,292) were located in Europe, including 359 cases in Spain (Arnanz *et al.*, 2005). Subsequently, in 2009, the Spanish Observatory of Sustainability (OSE) recorded 3,763 Local Agenda 21 experiences in the country (OSE, 2010).

With regard to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the local level, it is worth highlighting the creation in 2020 of the *Network of Local Authorities for the 2030 Agenda*, promoted by the Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces (FEMP). As of October 2024, this network comprised 696 local authorities, representing 32,226,928 inhabitants – equivalent to 66% of Spain’s resident population (Network of Local Authorities for the 2030 Agenda, 2024a). Despite this significant figure, only 29.4% of the Spanish population “knows about or has heard of the 2030 Agenda”, according to data from a survey conducted by the Spanish Centre for Sociological Research (CIS) in September 2020 (CIS, 2020).

A major global challenge closely linked to the need for more sustainable development is climate

change. In this respect, many Spanish municipalities coordinate and design public policies through the *Spanish Network of Cities for Climate*, another initiative promoted by FEMP, which was launched in 2004. As of September 2024, this network included 372 local authorities encompassing 32,564,016 inhabitants (Spanish Network of Cities for Climate, 2024).

This article focuses on a comparative analysis of the processes of formulating major strategies for sustainable development carried out in Spanish municipalities from the 1990s to the present, namely Local Agenda 21 and the 2030 Agenda. The analysis places particular emphasis on the participatory mechanisms promoted, and especially on those that have been effectively implemented in different cases.

The authors have been involved in numerous public participation processes for environmental planning at the national level from 2000 to the present, including Local Agenda 21 initiatives. Their experience and expertise in such processes provide the basis for a well-founded and substantiated reflection on the proposed object of study.

2. Theoretical Framework

The ecological crisis currently facing the planet is a multifaceted and complex issue, characterized by the accelerated depletion of natural resources, environmental degradation, and climate change. These phenomena affect not only ecosystems but also human society and its social and economic structures (Bernal, 2004). The intensification of these problems can be attributed primarily to the economic model based on growth

and capital accumulation – characteristic of industrial capitalism – that has dominated human activity since the Industrial Revolution. The technological advances that enabled the intensive exploitation of resources marked the beginning of a radical shift in the relationship between humans and nature: from one of relatively harmonious and sustainable coexistence (Martínez, 2001) to one of domination and exploitation (Aledo & Domínguez, 2001).

The economic model of perpetual growth conflicts with the ecological limits of the planet. There is an intrinsic contradiction between material economic growth and the carrying capacity of ecosystems (Martínez-Alier, 1992). The global economic system, which promotes unlimited exploitation of resources, displaces anthropocentric values that once prioritized sustainability, replacing them with *market-centrism* (Hinkelammert, 2006), in which the environment is perceived exclusively in terms of profitability. Since the 1970s, political ecology and various academic disciplines have warned of the anthropogenic origins of the ecological crisis and have advocated for the need to restructure the economic and social model in order to prevent irreversible environmental degradation (Rosenau, 2003).

Sustainable development, defined as a model that seeks to balance economic growth, social well-being, and environmental conservation, has been widely accepted as a framework for action to mitigate environmental problems. This concept has gained significant recognition in various international forums and has been incorporated into the policies of organizations, institutions, and companies. However, despite its popularity,

sustainable development has generated controversy due to its theoretical and practical limitations (Richardson, 1997; Rosenau, 2003; Sneddon *et al.*, 2006, among others).

One of the main critiques of sustainable development concerns its economic-centered approach, which attempts to reconcile economic growth with environmental preservation without questioning the underlying economic and social structures. This approach has been characterized as a form of *greenwashing* (Westerveld, 1986), legitimizing the post-industrial development model without providing a profound solution to the ecological crisis. At times, sustainable development functions as a political strategy to perpetuate existing systems of production and consumption (Jabareen, 2008), rather than representing a genuine transformation in the relationship between society and nature.

The “weak sustainability” perspective (Norton, 1995) promoted by the sustainable development paradigm has also been criticized as insufficient to address the scale of the ecological crisis. To overcome these limitations, approaches grounded in “strong sustainability” have been proposed, emphasizing the need for structural transformation that reorients the economic system toward a model that respects planetary boundaries. From the perspective of social ecology, scholars have argued for a structural shift in the economic model that would foster a more equitable and sustainable relationship between human societies and ecosystems (Naess, 1973).

The ecological crisis, although driven by economic and technological factors, also has profound social implications. Environmental problems di-

rectly affect people's quality of life and reveal inequalities in the distribution of resources and in access to a healthy environment. Sustainability therefore requires a social approach that considers not only the technical dimensions of the environmental crisis (Garrido & Martín, 2006), but also human interactions, cultural values, and the economic systems underlying ecological challenges.

Moreover, urbanization driven by industrial capitalism has significantly contributed to the ecological crisis by concentrating large populations and consuming resources intensively. Lefebvre (1969) observed that modern cities are structured around the logic of capital accumulation, becoming epicenters of environmental problems (Bernal, 2004) by generating vast amounts of waste and demanding high volumes of resources – thus overwhelming the capacity of local ecosystems and producing an ecological deficit. This model of urbanization, consolidated after the Industrial Revolution, has promoted patterns of consumption and production that, being unsustainable and non-self-sufficient, depend on external resources to meet the needs of their inhabitants.

In this context, the local approach emerges as an important alternative for addressing the ecological crisis (Berry, 1987). From this perspective, the principle of subsidiarity becomes particularly relevant, as it proposes that environmental problems should be resolved at the lowest possible level in order to ensure responses adapted to local conditions (Verdaguer, 2000). Environmental policies implemented in cities can also generate spillover effects at other levels, thereby fostering sustainability that encompasses both the global and the local. Local governments, given their

closer knowledge of the specific problems within their territories, are in a position to mobilize resources more efficiently and effectively to improve environmental conditions (Alguacil, 2000).

Currently, various cities around the world are implementing sustainability initiatives in areas such as transportation, energy conservation, renewable energy use, and water management. Although these initiatives often provide only partial solutions, constrained by the current economic structure, they nonetheless represent progress toward mitigating the environmental impact of urbanization. Local sustainability, while frequently categorized as a form of “weak sustainability”, constitutes a necessary step toward the adoption of development models with lower ecological impacts.

At the local level, public participation emerges as an essential component for the success of any sustainability strategy. As early as 1991, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) emphasized that government action alone would not be sufficient to achieve sustainable development, highlighting the need to involve non-governmental stakeholders – including citizens and local communities – in environmental conservation efforts (IUCN/UNEP/WWF, 1991).

Citizen involvement in environmental management is a key element for fostering pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors (Di Giulio *et al.*, 2010). Solutions cannot originate solely from governments or technical experts; rather, citizens must be engaged as key stakeholders

in the construction of sustainable alternatives (Villasante, 2014).

3. Methodology

This study is based on research with a descriptive, hypothetical – inductive approach aimed at developing an exploratory and explanatory analysis. The guiding hypothesis is that the 2030 Agenda, in its translation and implementation at the local level, suffers from a deficit in promoting citizen participation.

The objective of the methodological strategy employed is to identify and analyze the participatory processes and mechanisms applied in the design of local-level 2030 Agenda plans, in comparison with Local Agenda 21. To this end, different types of secondary information sources are sought and analyzed according to a progressive methodological process moving from the general to the specific, structured in four stages:

In the initial stage of the research, the implementation of Local Agenda 21 initiatives in Spain is analyzed, covering the period from the mid-1990s to the mid-2010s. Specifically, Local Agenda 21 is examined as a tool for strategic and participatory planning of local public policies for sustainable development. The secondary sources consulted include scientific publications on this topic produced by various experts, including the authors of this study.

During the second stage of the research, a general overview of the implementation of the 2030 Agendas is carried out by observing and analyzing references in public opinion regarding the different types of social actors that promote 2030 Agenda

processes. To this end, the source of information used was a random sample of 100 news articles selected through the *Google News* application between June and October 2024. Subsequently, the analysis focuses more specifically on the participatory processes and mechanisms recommended for the design of local-level 2030 Agenda plans, using as the primary source the *Guide for the Localization of the 2030 Agenda*, published in December 2020 by the State Secretariat for the 2030 Agenda in collaboration with FEMP. The analysis of this document provides insights into both the axiological dimension (the “ought to be”) and the methodological foundations. In addition, a comparison is made with other reference manuals for the preparation of Local Agenda 21 initiatives. For this purpose, the sources used include the *European Guide to Local Agenda 21 Planning*, published in 1998 by the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI), and the *Code of Good Environmental Practices*, published by FEMP in 2004.

In the third stage of the research, a comparative and longitudinal analysis continues between the participatory processes and mechanisms of the 2030 Agenda and its predecessor, Local Agenda 21, this time with respect to methodological practice. For this purpose, three case studies are analyzed, corresponding to municipalities where both Local Agenda 21 and, subsequently, the 2030 Agenda were implemented: Madrid, Pinto, and Legazpi. These three cases were selected not only because they developed both types of plans, but also due to the diversity of population size they represent and the specific participatory characteristics they possess, which are described

in the results section. One of the most notable of these characteristics is the fact that Pinto and Legazpi hosted Local Agenda 21 Forums among the longest-running in Spain: 20 and 16 years, respectively. The secondary sources of information included reports, records, and minutes available on municipal websites, as well as data obtained directly by the authors of this article in their capacity as technical advisors for the Local Agenda 21 initiatives in Madrid and Pinto.

In the fourth and final stage, a joint analysis is conducted of a sample of 11 cases selected from among Spanish municipalities that are members of the *Network of Local Authorities for the 2030 Agenda* and recognized by FEMP as *2030 Agenda Good Practices*. The aim is to further examine the methodological practice of the 2030 Agendas in terms of the participatory processes and mechanisms employed, while limiting the comparison to a set of exclusively 2030 Agenda cases that

share the common feature of being recognized as *good practices*. At the same time, they differ in their territorial, demographic, socioeconomic, and cultural characteristics (Table 1).

The secondary source of information used for these 11 case studies consisted of the Strategies for the Localization of the SDGs approved by municipal governing boards.

Although throughout the methodological process the focus of analysis has been on the processes, mechanisms, and participatory bodies employed for the strategic and participatory planning of sustainable development at the local level, the specific aspects examined across the full set of case studies were the following:

- Whether participatory spaces and mechanisms for collective debate and reflection (meetings, assemblies, workshops, etc.) were created.
- Whether participatory institutions (coun-

TABLE 1 – Municipalities with a 2030 Agenda plan or equivalent selected as case studies.

Municipalities	Comunidad Autónoma	Province	Population ¹
Terrassa	Cataluña	Barcelona	225.277
Alcalá de Henares	Madrid	Madrid	199.184
Salamanca	Castilla-León	Salamanca	143.954
Alcobendas	Madrid	Madrid	119.416
Esplugues de Llobregat	Cataluña	Barcelona	46.921
Soria	Castilla-León	Soria	40.096
Rota	Andalucía	Cádiz	29.675
Onda	Valencia	Castellón	25.547
Riba-roja de Túria	Valencia	Valencia	23.555
Rafelbunyol	Valencia	Valencia	9.467
Sant Lluís	Baleares	Baleares	7.019

SOURCE: Own elaboration.

¹ Population data according to the Municipal Registry Review (INE, 2023).

cils, forums, etc.) were established.

- Whether participation was disseminated and publicized.

- The stakeholders invited or convened to participate (grassroots citizens, associations, formal entities, institutional bodies, etc.).

- The continuity of the participatory process (i.e., bodies, mechanisms, and spaces that are not one-off or sporadic).

4. Results

The research findings are organized into four sections, corresponding to the stages described in the previous section.

4.1. Agenda 21: The Great Potential for Citizen Participation

Agenda 21, conceived at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, was a local action plan aimed at achieving sustainable development from a municipal perspective. This initiative stood out for its comprehensive orientation across social, economic, and environmental domains (Bedoy, 2000), promoting – at least in principle – active citizen participation in the design of sustainable policies. It represents a milestone in local environmental policy within the broader context of global socio-ecological challenges. One of the essential aspects of Agenda 21 was therefore its philosophy of “thinking globally and acting locally”. This perspective implies that environmental problems are simultaneously global and local in nature (Selman, 1998; Aguilar, 1999), and that their solutions require the active participation of local

communities (Eckersley, 2004), without the need to be part of formal government structures or to hold public office or functions (Aldret, 2017).

Citizen participation was one of the pillars on which Agenda 21 was founded. As noted, the philosophy of Agenda 21 posits that environmental problems require not only global responses but must also be addressed locally. Local stakeholders (citizens, organizations, businesses, etc.) play a key role in this model.

Despite its potential, participation within Agenda 21 faced certain limitations in practice (García-Montes & Arnanz, 2019). In many cases, it may be regarded as a missed opportunity to foster scenarios of direct and participatory democracy (García Montes, 2020). In such cases, public participation was predominantly tokenistic, serving primarily to legitimize decisions that had already been made by local authorities. Frequently, municipal governments used Agenda 21 as a symbolic mechanism to comply with the “trend” of participation rather than to promote genuine public engagement in local socio-environmental planning (Garrido, 2005). In this sense, participation should not be limited to consulting public opinion but should also involve the creation of decision-making mechanisms in which citizens can exert direct influence. According to Hart (1993), participation must be understood as the capacity to make decisions that affect community life, thereby reinforcing a more active role for citizens in public affairs.

Chapter 28 of Agenda 21 (UN, 1992) urged local communities to develop their own adapted versions of the program, known as Local Agendas 21. This process entailed close collaboration between municipal governments and civil society

in order to adapt the global objectives of Agenda 21 to local needs and priorities. Following its inception, Agenda 21 was implemented in numerous municipalities worldwide – particularly in Europe, where it gained significant popularity. Its peak occurred during the 2000s, and within Europe, Spain stood out (Font & Subirats, 2000), reaching a maximum in 2009 with 3,763 municipalities engaged in its implementation, according to data from the Spanish Observatory of Sustainability (OSE). This growth reflected a rising social and political demand for the development of sustainability practices at the local level.

Nevertheless, although a very considerable number of municipalities initiated this process, its effectiveness can be questioned due to several limitations. Quantitatively, municipal commitment to sustainable development may appear significant; however, qualitatively, the effective implementation of these plans varied substantially. While some municipalities advanced into execution, others remained at preliminary diagnostic stages or, at best, progressed slightly further into planning without moving into actual implementation (Garrido, 2005). Moreover, a lack of financial and human resources hindered the advancement of many projects, compounded by a deficit of political will (Echebarría *et al.*, 2007).

Despite these limitations, the impact of Agenda 21 on local environmental planning was highly significant (Joas & Grönholm, 2004). It contributed to fostering social awareness and a culture of sustainability across various sectors of local populations and communities; it facilitated the creation of spaces for interaction between local actors (citizens, economic and social agents, associations, etc.) and public administrations; and it

promoted practices of public participation through institutional invitations, generating communication channels in which citizens could express their views and contribute to the sustainable development of their localities (García Montes, 2020). Ultimately, it encouraged a participatory approach that was unprecedented in public planning (Garrido, 2005). The experiences of Agenda 21 have demonstrated that citizen inclusion can enrich decision-making processes by providing perspectives that are more closely aligned with local needs and realities. While it did not always succeed in fully achieving its objectives, it opened a window of opportunity to integrate community voices into local governance processes toward sustainability, becoming for several years the main reference point for political and social initiatives promoting municipal public participation (Low *et al.*, 2000).

By way of synthesis, Table 2 presents some of the main strengths and weaknesses left by Agenda 21. These include not only aspects related to participation, but also its impact on territories, the implementation of sustainable measures, and the extent to which public policies were connected to the global ecosystem crisis.

4.2. Agenda 2030: A Step Backwards for Participation

The authors of this research argue that, within public opinion, there currently coexist different narratives regarding the 2030 Agenda and the social stakeholders linked to it. Specifically, four types of references to the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs can be identified depending on the type of social actor that promotes such initiatives (Arnanz, 2018):

TABLE 2 – Strengths and weaknesses of Agenda 21.

Strengths	Weaknesses
International outreach of the initiative	In many cases, more a declaration of intent than real implementation
Opportunity for sustainable development at the local level and for generating changes in the development model and in urban configuration and functioning	Partial actions and, in many cases, limited to habitability (weak sustainability) rather than structural changes and transformations (strong sustainability)
Comprehensiveness (environmental, social, economic)	Tendency toward environmentalism and addressing primarily “green” aspects
Local management and planning with environmental criteria	Lack of local-global connection
Shared and co-constructed diagnosis of local realities, incorporating multiple perspectives	Sectoral and palliative-oriented proposals and initiatives rather than structural ones
Shared and co-constructed proposals to improve local realities	Lack of binding character and limited implementation of plans and proposals
Opportunity for citizen participation and direct democracy	Limited participation of broad and diverse social sectors and stakeholders; those involved often engaged at a primarily consultative level
Strengthening of co-responsibility among different local stakeholders	Assignment (and assumption) of most of the responsibility to local administrations

SOURCE: Own elaboration.

1. Institutional: promoted by international organizations and public administrations at different levels (national, regional, local). The aim is to drive public policies guided by the SDGs through the development of strategies such as the 2030 Agendas.

2. Corporate: mainly led by large companies seeking to showcase their commitment to the SDGs before public opinion. This often involves drafting their own 2030 Agendas or collaborating in those promoted by public administrations. These actions are framed within the corporate logic of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR),

aiming to gain greater prestige and public trust.

3. Social: various third-sector organizations, particularly those linked to international co-operation, along with other social entities and educational communities, have responded to the UN’s call by engaging in the dissemination and promotion of the SDGs and their values. In some cases, they have also established their own 2030 Agenda strategies within their communities or spheres of action.

4. Anti-2030 Agenda: certain social actors of diverse kinds (politicians, media outlets, social organizations, and individuals) systematically

criticize and blame the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda. Rooted in a conspiratorial perspective, these narratives associate the initiatives with the interests of political, corporate, and media “globalist” lobbies. Through social media, discourses have emerged that distort the SDGs (Spanish Network for Sustainable Development, 2024), portraying the 2030 Agenda as responsible – often with little evidence – for several issues currently at the forefront of media attention: the COVID-19 pandemic and its management, natural disasters, institutional crises, among others.

It is worth highlighting that the first three perspectives are grounded in the recognition of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs as elements aligned with human rights, whose legitimacy, validity, and necessity appear to be unquestionable; precisely the opposite of the last perspective, which has been gaining increasing relevance over the years (Surasky, 2024).

The growing expansion of this critical perspective can be considered the direct result of the actions of social actors invested in disseminating it; however, such diffusion has been facilitated by a broader context in which citizens have not sufficiently identified with or appropriated either concept (Surasky, 2024) – namely, the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda. An important reason for this detachment, as evidenced by the findings of this research, is that the implementation of the 2030 Agendas at the municipal level – both in their design and in practice – has involved very limited citizen participation and has therefore been led almost exclusively by politicians and technical experts.

This study takes as its starting point an analysis of the *Guide for the Localization of the 2030 Agenda*. This document is key, as it serves as the reference manual for municipalities in the drafting of their 2030 Agendas. The guide indicates that a fundamental step prior to undertaking a diagnosis and subsequently designing an action plan is to establish a “focal point”, that is,

the person(s) or unit within the local government – at both the political and technical levels – responsible for promoting and coordinating the process of localization and implementation of the SDGs, as well as for monitoring progress in achieving the identified priority challenges and established targets, and for making adjustments whenever deemed necessary (Secretaría de Estado para la Agenda 2030, 2020, p. 19).

The document does not envisage the possibility of establishing, from the outset, a participatory body that includes citizen participation, allowing the public to take part in decision-making from the very beginning of the process (the drafting of the diagnosis) through to the final stage (the implementation and monitoring of the actions included in the plan).

Such a participatory body was indeed envisaged in other reference manuals used in the preparation of Local Agenda 21 initiatives. One example is the *Code of Good Environmental Practices*, also developed by the Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces (FEMP) in 2004. This document provides detailed guidance on how to establish an Environmental Forum, as well as information and examples regarding Citizen Participation Regulations and Environmental Councils as

alternative instruments to promote citizen participation bodies for Local Agenda 21 (FEMP, 2004).

Another manual, the *European Guide for the Planning of Local Agenda 21*, developed in 1998 by ICLEI, pays even greater attention to this issue. It proposes that the first step in developing an Agenda 21 should be the establishment of an “Environmental Forum” as a body in which the community as a whole is as broadly represented as possible (Martínez & Rosende, 2011). According to this guide, the Forum’s first task as a collective should be to debate and agree upon its own constitution and, subsequently, to reach consensus on an environmental philosophy and vision for the future of the community. Once this is achieved, it is then the responsibility of the municipal government to approve the final manifesto of the project’s philosophical foundations, including the guiding principles and a vision of the community’s future that reflects the diverse perspectives of the participants (ICLEI, 1998).

It should be noted that this type of forum has characteristics that make it a governance mechanism that goes beyond being a sporadic or permanent space of an exclusively informative and consultative nature, enabling all actors to have a say in the process of defining priorities and allocating resources in relation to public policies (Arnanz, 2018).

This research has analyzed the case of various municipalities that have developed local 2030 Agendas and Urban Agendas, which are similar strategies for localizing the SDGs created to address the challenges of sustainability in specifically urban environments (Secretariat of State for the 2030 Agenda, 2020). Specifically, the object of

analysis has been the participatory processes and mechanisms that have been implemented.

4.3. Case Analysis of Agenda 2030 Establishing Parallels with its Predecessor, Local Agenda 21

The case studies analyzed allow for a clear parallel to be drawn between Agenda 2030 and Local Agenda 21. One such case is the city of Madrid. On November 25, 2021, the Municipal Plenary of the capital approved the “*Strategy for the Localization of the Sustainable Development Goals of Agenda 2030 in the City of Madrid*” (Madrid City Council, 2021). The initiative for this project was undertaken by the General Directorate of “*Cooperation and Global Citizenship*”, under the delegated area of “*Internationalization and Cooperation*”.

This fact already indicates that the implementation of the SDGs in Madrid is oriented from the perspective of local public policy on Development Cooperation, unlike the case of Agenda 21, whose project was led by the General Directorate of “*Agenda 21 and Sustainable Development*”, under the delegated area of the Environment.

This issue implies not only differences in the project’s approach and content, but also regarding the principal actors invited to participate. For the drafting of Agenda 2030, participation was drawn from “*Foro Madrid Solidaria*”, which mainly comprises institutions and social entities in the municipality working in the field of International Cooperation. Their participation, at the final stage of the process, consisted of submitting written contributions during a designated period to the draft Strategy presented by the City Council.

In contrast, in the case of Madrid's Agenda 21, the participating social actors were the *Agenda 21 Commissions*, which were created within the existing participatory bodies at that time in each of the city's 21 districts, the *Territorial Councils*. This decision was made considering another distinction: one Agenda 21 plan was prepared for the entire city, but also a specific plan for each district, addressing needs in economic, social, and environmental domains. Work was carried out with the Agenda 21 Commissions of each district from the beginning of the action plan's preparation until its final approval. This entailed for each commission approximately 10–14 meetings over two years. The Agenda 21 Commissions consisted of 6 to 10 members of the Territorial Councils and were, therefore, linked to the associative fabric of the district or to political parties. Another additional social actor that participated in Agenda 21 was the citizenry at an individual level, who contributed proposals and expressed opinions on existing ones through questionnaires in paper or online format. Participation reached 14,400 people across the entire city of Madrid (Madrid City Council, 2013).

A second case study analyzed, which also allows a clear parallel to be drawn between the Strategy for the localization of the SDGs and Local Agenda 21 in the same municipality, is Pinto, a city of 55,208 inhabitants (INE, 2023) located in the Community of Madrid. The "*Pinto Urban Agenda 2030*" plan was approved by the Municipal Plenary in August 2022 and consists of 41 projects, 17 of which are considered priority, i.e., "strategic". At the beginning of 2021, three working groups composed of politicians and municipal technicians prepared a diagnostic assessment and a draft action plan that initially included 33 projects,

of which 10 were considered strategic.

Between May 2021 and June 2022, a participatory process was opened to the citizenry, which allowed, on the one hand, the inclusion of new projects and new actions in existing projects, and on the other hand, the opportunity to express opinions on the prioritization and selection of projects considered "strategic". Specifically, the following activities were carried out (Pinto City Council, 2022):

- Three public consultations (two online and one in-person) so that the inhabitants of Pinto could choose which projects they considered the most strategic. The online questionnaire was answered by 212 people and the paper version by 70 people. As a result, more strategic projects were added to the initial list.
- Sessions on sustainable development of the Urban Agenda in 8 schools, with a total of 1,253 participants, gathering needs and proposals expressed by children and adolescents.
- Various focus groups, each lasting about two hours, involving young people, women, older adults, neighborhood associations, people with functional diversity, migrants, the business sector, and political groups represented in the Municipal Corporation. In these sessions, the proposed projects of the draft action plan were presented, and participants were asked to prioritize and comment on them. Group dynamics were also used to create new projects.

In the participatory process of drafting Pinto's Urban Agenda 2030 action plan, we find, as in the case of Madrid, a "top-down" approach to participation rather than a "bottom-up" one.

That is, politicians and technicians establish the approach, objectives, and fundamental contents of the plan, and only later consult the public regarding possible changes and new contributions. Nevertheless, in Pinto's case, the process and participatory mechanisms employed have greater value than in Madrid's case, if three key factors are considered:

- a) the amount of time, resources, and participatory mechanisms devoted to the process;
- b) the diversity of social actors involved, including the participation of citizens not linked to social organizations, through in-person and deliberative mechanisms;
- c) the impact of citizen contributions on the final contents of the action plan.

It is also evident that permanent participatory bodies were absent during Pinto's action plan design phase, as well as during implementation and monitoring. The research results reveal that, in most cases, participatory bodies allowing citizens to take part in decisions on the definition of priorities and allocation of resources for public policies on a permanent, rather than occasional, basis are lacking.

As in Madrid, Pinto's Agenda 2030 entailed a conception and practice of citizen participation that was less significant than that of its predecessor, Local Agenda 21. The latter remained active for almost 20 years, from June 2002 to December 2021, when it was replaced by Agenda 2030. It may be considered an exceptional and exemplary

case of Local Agenda 21, both for its long duration and its participatory nature. However, it must be acknowledged that the level of participation and influence on local public policies varied throughout this extended period (Arnanz, 2018). This project had external technical assistance from the CIMAS Network from 2002 to 2015².

The diagnostic and action plan preparation phases lasted 11 months, from June 2002 to April 2003. More than 300 proposals for the Agenda 21 action plan were collected, thanks to an intensive citizen participation process with a "bottom-up" approach, involving highly diverse social groups and combining different quantitative, qualitative, and participatory techniques. The principal role of municipal technicians and politicians emerged only at the final stage of the process, when thematic roundtables were created to deliberate and refine the content and feasibility of the proposals. These roundtables were also attended by experts, businesspeople, trade unions, educational centers, representatives of associations, and individual citizens.

During these two initial phases, Pinto's Agenda 21 relied on two participatory bodies characteristic of the Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology:

- A Working Group composed of 12 residents with highly diverse profiles, together with the Coordinator of the Municipal Environment Department. This core group collaborated with the external technical assistance team in designing and implementing participatory mechanisms and

² The CIMAS Network is an expert in participatory methodologies that also provided external technical assistance for the development of Agenda 21 for the city of Madrid and its 21 districts from 2004 to 2008.

in analyzing the data collected.

- A Monitoring Commission, functioning as an assembly composed of politicians, municipal technicians, businesspeople, social organizations, and individual residents. Initially consisting of 24 members, it expanded to 44. In the three meetings held, not only was progress reported, but workshops were also conducted to collectively determine and prioritize proposals.

During the 18 years of the action plan's implementation and monitoring phase, Pinto's Agenda 21 maintained a permanent participatory body: the *Sustainability Forum of Agenda 21*. This formal and permanent space for participation replaced the Monitoring Commission and the Working Group and was structured into three distinct organs: an Assembly, two or three Working Commissions, and a Coordination Committee. This diverse and open body, similar to the Monitoring Commission, became a reference point for many other Local Agendas 21. It functioned primarily as a propositional and deliberative space for local environmental policy but, above all, as a forum for accountability and oversight of such policy (Arnanz, 2018).

A third case study analyzed, which enables parallels to be drawn between the Strategy for the localization of the SDGs and Local Agenda 21 in the same municipality, is Legazpi, a town of 8,341 inhabitants (INE, 2023) located in the province of Gipuzkoa.

The particularity of this case lies in having a Forum that emerged with Local Agenda 21 in 2001 and remains active today. Since 2017, the Forum has been renamed the “*Agenda 2030*

Forum” instead of the “*Agenda 21 Forum*”, as the municipality adopted a new climate change and sustainable development strategy entitled “*Legazpi Klima 2030*”, embodied in a local action plan for 2017–2024 (Legazpi City Council, 2017). On the Legazpi City Council website, records of more than 100 meetings held by the Forum from 2001 to the present are available. Reviewing these records reveals that this participatory body shares several characteristics with Pinto's Forum, which can be considered decisive in ensuring its effective functioning and continuity:

- The Forum was created at the very beginning of the Local Agenda 21 action plan preparation.
- It is an open space that allows participation by any individual, even in a personal capacity.
- Its composition is highly diverse, aiming for maximum inclusivity.
- The topics addressed are varied and not limited solely to environmental issues.
- Ad hoc working groups (“core groups”) are established to delve into and advance specific issues.
- Meetings are intended to be dynamic, and the implementation of agreements and decisions is emphasized.

4.4. Case Analysis of Agenda 2030 Evaluating the Characteristics of its Processes and Participatory Mechanisms

Cases considered as benchmarks and examples of good practices in strategies for localizing the SDGs through Agenda 2030 plans or other similar plans, such as Urban Agendas, have been analyzed.

Specifically, one of the cases analyzed was the municipality of Onda (Castellón), a noteworthy example of Agenda 2030, as it was selected as the only municipal council representing Spain at the Meeting of UN Agency Directors held in February 2024 in Bilbao, home to the Secretariat of the Local 2030 Coalition, organized by the Ministry of Social Rights, Consumer Affairs, and Agenda 2030. Furthermore, Onda's Agenda 2030 is included in the selection of best practices recognized by the Network of Local Entities for Agenda 2030 of the Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces (FEMP).

Onda, a city of 25,547 inhabitants (INE, 2023), drafted the action plan "*Onda 2030*" in May 2021 (Onda City Council, 2021). Upon analyzing the document, the most relevant information regarding the participatory approach and the mechanisms considered in the design of the plan can be summarized as follows: an open survey made available to the entire citizenry (disseminated via social networks) and virtual meetings – due to the COVID-19 context – with representatives of the citizenry (from the main economic, social, educational, political, cultural, and sports sectors) as well as municipal technicians from different departments.

The plan itself established the following governance model:

- Onda 2030 Strategic Steering Committee: a political management body, whose functions are assumed by the Local Governing Board.
- Onda 2030 Office: a technical monitoring and oversight body.
- Onda 2030 Information Council: a citizen

participation body to inform 26 business and social organizations of a specific profile about compliance with the implementation of the plan and to propose new actions to be included. Meetings are held once a year, and its composition does not allow for the attendance of individual residents.

The rest of the analyzed cases also correspond to experiences included in the selection of best practices recognized by the FEMP's Network of Local Entities for Agenda 2030 (Network of Local Entities for Agenda 2030, 2024b). In total, 11 cases were included, as reflected in Table 1 of the "Methodology" section.

The results of this part of the research are described through figures related to three analytical categories that allowed for a joint approach to the cases, based on the existence or absence of the following participatory mechanisms during the drafting of the action plan:

1. Informative actions aimed at the general public.
2. Consultative actions to identify problems or gather and prioritize citizen proposals: online consultations and group meetings.
3. Participatory bodies for monitoring the action plan.

Only 55% of the cases included in-person informative actions directed at the general public (Figure 1). These communicative actions have participatory value in that they may foster reciprocal interaction with recipients. In some cases, these actions took the form of a public presentation. However, due to widespread lack of knowledge

regarding the SDGs and Agenda 2030, attendance at such presentations was low. Consequently, in some cases, alternative actions were conducted in public spaces such as streets, parks, markets, and schools, using various engaging tools aimed at both informing and raising awareness: information panels, leaflets, games and group dynamics, merchandising, etc.

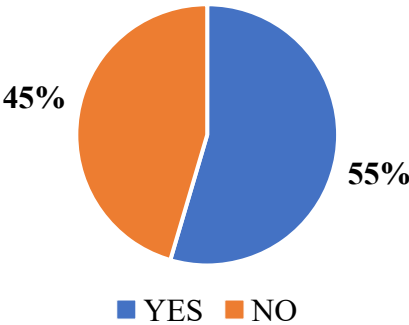
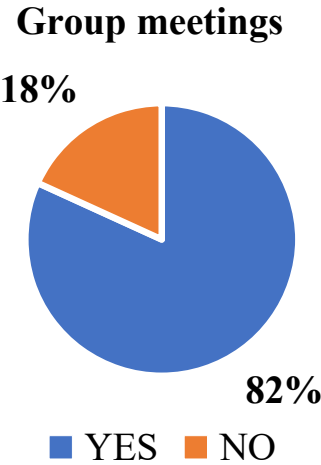
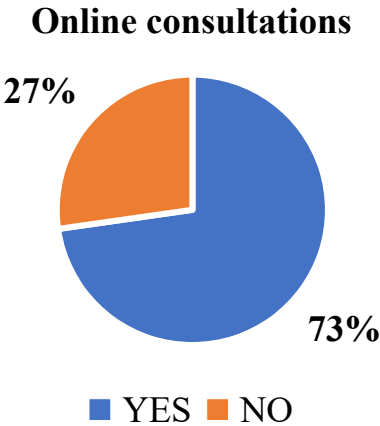


FIGURE 1 – Implementation of in-person informative actions directed at the general public.
SOURCE: Localization strategies of the SDGs approved and published by the City Councils of the municipalities listed in Table 1.

In the analyzed cases, two main participatory mechanisms were identified for carrying out consultative actions aimed at identifying problems or gathering and prioritizing citizen proposals: online consultations and group meetings. As shown in Figures 2 and 3, the most common practice was a combination of both.

It is important to determine in such processes whether unaffiliated citizens have the opportunity to participate in deliberative mechanisms, such as meetings and workshops, or whether such opportunities are restricted only to political parties, social entities, businesspeople, or individuals



FIGURES 2 and 3 – Implementation of online consultations and group meetings.
SOURCE: Localization strategies of the SDGs approved and published by the City Councils of the municipalities listed in Table 1.

regarded as experts. Figure 4 shows that the latter scenario occurred in 56% of cases where meetings with other social actors in the community were held, thus evidencing that this was the most common modality.

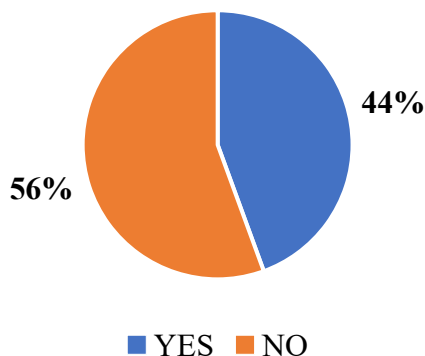


FIGURE 4 – Meeting modality: Does it allow attendance by individual citizens?

SOURCE: Localization strategies of the SDGs approved and published by the City Councils of the municipalities listed in Table 1.

Finally, regarding the aim of establishing participatory bodies for monitoring the action plan, Figure 5 shows that in most cases (64%) this was indeed the intention.

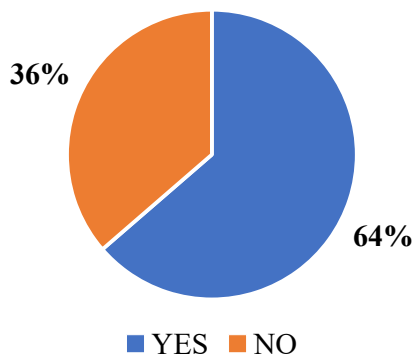


FIGURE 5 – Aim of establishing participatory bodies for monitoring the action plan.

SOURCE: Localization strategies of the SDGs approved and published by the City Councils of the municipalities listed in Table 1.

In cases where such an intention exists, it is essential to define the type of participatory body to be implemented, based on the classification established by the authors of this research:

A. Participatory bodies already in existence, composed solely of organized social actors.

B. Newly created participatory bodies, composed solely of organized social actors.

C. Newly created participatory bodies, composed of both organized social actors and individual citizens.

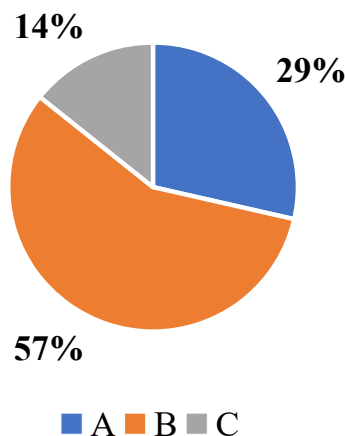


FIGURE 6 – Types of participatory bodies.

SOURCE: Localization strategies of the SDGs approved and published by the City Councils of the municipalities listed in Table 1.

Figure 6 reveals that open participatory bodies allowing the participation of any resident without needing to belong to an association are exceptional, contemplated in only 14% of the cases where participatory bodies for monitoring the action plan were foreseen. Consequently, in the remaining 86% of cases, the intended participatory bodies had limited composition, in terms of both number and profile of members, which corresponded to organized social actors such as public administrations, political parties, associations, companies, universities, etc.

5. Conclusions

It is noteworthy that, in the establishment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the UN General Assembly on September 25, 2015, there is no mention whatsoever of Agenda 21, despite the fact that it was the UN itself that promoted such a project 23 years earlier. No reference to Agenda 21 appears in the entire document, neither in the Declaration, nor in the Goals, nor in the Means of Implementation and Global Partnership, nor in the Follow-up and Review.

Although point 12 of the Declaration states, *“We reaffirm all the principles of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development”* (UN, 2015), Agenda 21, as conceived in Rio 1992, no longer seems to be regarded as a valid tool for the future of global sustainable development strategies, not even by the very organization that created it.

Agenda 2030 constitutes, in numerous cases, an instrument aimed at introducing improvements and palliatives within a model of production and consumption whose unsustainability is widely recognized, yet without questioning this model or proposing structural alternatives of global scope. Thus, for the authors, and based on the analyzed experiences, this project amounts to a form of greenwashing within the framework of the capitalist system, grounded in post-materialist values but without addressing the socio-economic structures of society.

Accordingly, Agenda 2030 presents itself as a tool or strategy intended to perpetuate the existing model through minor policy adjustments,

legitimizing its continuity. Many city councils and local governments that have promoted Agenda 2030 processes – largely guided by trends and electoral programs – have done so from a logic of continuity rather than rupture with the economicist development model. This has occurred, in part, because the very concept of sustainable development does not propose alternatives or challenges to the productivist-capitalist reasoning and its associated socio-cultural values, which guide humanity’s relationship with nature. From this logic, the actions derived from the Agendas 2030 have remained superficial, more closely related to weak sustainability, urban habitability, and a palliative, impact-minimizing environmentalism than to profound transformations concerned with rethinking an anti-ecological model and local-global ecosystemic sustainability.

Reversing this contradictory and counter-productive reality is not insignificant but rather essential, for two reasons:

1. Citizen participation, whose most suitable scale of implementation is the local level, not only enhances the efficiency and effectiveness of public policies and strengthens trust in the democratic system, but it is also a right enshrined in national and international legal frameworks, and even in the SDGs themselves.

2. The deficit in participatory dimensions undermines awareness of the climate crisis and the development of pro-environmental behaviors. Sustainable public policies especially require citizen involvement, and citizen participation is an appropriate means of fostering it.

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