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The UN-Sustainable Development Goals going local: learning from localising human rights

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ABSTRACT

In 2015 the United Nations declared an ambitious programme, the *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs). With similar aspirations to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the SDGs claim is to make a difference in terms of justice and sustainability on a global scale. Both UN frameworks speak to the global imagination, but what do they do in (local) practice(s)? Recently the claim was made that human rights are 'not enough' (Samuel Moyn); but are the SDGs going to be enough? While current research focuses on the governance aspect of the SDGs and the efficiency of their *implementation* by national governments, little attention has been paid to the *localisation* process. Exploring the SDGs as a *social imaginary* of a moral order (Charles Taylor) and linking this to a framework of 'localizing human rights', we determine whether and in what way the SDGs might be a source of inspiration in some pioneering city-initiatives. Developing a typology of localisation approaches we argue for a move from the dominant *implementation* approach towards a *translation* one (foregrounding culture and human rights) to enable more reciprocity between the local and the global and therewith to take locality more seriously in realising the SDGs promise for change.

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Introduction

Leave No One Behind is the motto with which, in 2015, the United Nations Member States adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda),¹ including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a policy and governance roadmap for promoting a holistic view on social, economic and environmental sustainability worldwide. Articulating specific goals for 17 areas to be reached by 2030, the objectives are ambitious: to end extreme poverty and hunger, reduce inequality on a large scale, and establish zero-based targets to tackle climate change.²

Like the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs call on the global community to make it their responsibility and their goal to make a difference in terms of justice and social equity on a global scale. Both concepts

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embody a normative idea of a *moral order* as Charles Taylor has called it: ‘it tells us something about how we ought to live together in society’.³ While human rights have developed over decades into a firm ‘social imaginary of a moral order’, the SDGs herald a new, additional frame of reference. Both UN frameworks speak to our imagination, but in reality are they able to deliver? Both UN visions have a focus on implementation by member states at the national level, but the question remains as to how far do these imaginaries manifest at the local level?

Prominent leaders stress that the power of these UN frameworks is particularly at the local level: ‘We can say to all the people around the world, the 2030 Agenda is for you, is for everyone, everywhere. Claim it, demand that commitments be made, and promises kept. Be part of this global call to action’. These words are from the UN-General secretary Ban-Ki Moon in 2015⁴ as he launched Agenda 2030 and remind us of Eleanor Roosevelt’s notion of human rights in 1958:

Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home – so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any map of the world. [...] Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.⁵

Using Roosevelt’s powerful refrain as a point of departure, we argue in this article that there is an important and central lesson to be learnt from the debate and localisation of the human rights agenda if Agenda 2030 is to be successfully implemented; namely to take the local more seriously.

Current research focuses on the governance aspect of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs and the efficiency of their implementation by national governments.⁶ To date, there has been little attention paid to the *localising process*. While UN texts see localising the SDGs as a simple, one-way implementation strategy – as the ‘process of defining; implementing; and monitoring strategies at the local level for achievable global, national and subnational sustainable goals and targets’⁷ – city-representatives foreground the need for ‘local participation and their vision of our global future [...] because no global targets or goals can be reached without us’.⁸

Our two central questions are as follows: first, to what extent do the SDGs feature as a source of inspiration at the city level? Secondly, what roles do, or could, cities play in contributing to the global debate on localising and actualising Agenda 2030 and the SDGs?

As we know from experiences of the localisation of the human rights agenda, abstract principles need to be translated into local practices to become meaningful: ‘this is the paradox of making human rights in the vernacular: in order to be accepted, they have to be tailored to the local context and resonate with the local cultural framework’.⁹ Linking this experience of localising the human rights agenda¹⁰ to the debate on localising SDGs,¹¹ we aim to provide a better understanding of what constitutes ‘localising SDGs’. We take on board Charles Taylor’s concept of a ‘social imaginary’, which is useful when considering how the global aspiration of the SDGs might become a driver for change at the local level. Following Arjun Appadurai’s notion of the ‘relationship between globalization from above and below’,¹² we finally aim to illuminate also the reciprocal relationship between global (goals) and local (practices).¹³

In this article we will first (1) introduce Taylor’s concept of a *social imaginary* of a moral order,¹⁴ before (2) using it as an analytic lens to explore how the Sustainable

Development Goals function as an inspiration for change at the local level. With this lens we (3) earmark several cities as being exemplary of the SDG localising programmes¹⁵ and develop a typology of approaches. Based on this typology we reveal certain weaknesses that emerge when considering the dominant *implementation* approach. We then argue for (4) a move towards a *translation* approach – foregrounding culture and human rights – to take local needs and concerns more seriously.

Human rights and SDGs as moral orders

Human rights have become a fundamental aspect of what Charles Taylor has called the ‘social imaginary’ of a modern moral order¹⁶ where ‘the underlying idea of moral order stresses the rights and obligations that individuals have in regard to one another, even prior to or outside of the political bond. Political obligations are seen as an extension or application of these more fundamental moral ties’.¹⁷ According to Taylor, this moral order has developed since the seventeenth century in Western society, in a ‘long march’ from the theory about mutual benefit through social contracts (Locke and Grotius), via ideas about the natural rights of man (‘all men are created equal’), towards the human rights practice that became widespread after the Second World War with ‘the notion of rights that are prior to and untouchable by political structures [...] the clearest expression of our modern idea of a moral order underlying the political – the ideal of order as mutual benefit – which the political has to respect’.¹⁸ The ‘long march’ Taylor described as

a process whereby new practices, or modifications of old ones, either developed through improvisation among certain groups and strata of the population [...] or were launched by elites in such a way as to recruit a larger base [...] gradually acquired a new meaning for people and hence helped to constitute a new social imaginary.¹⁹

Social imaginaries start small, but to qualify as ‘social imaginaries’ they need to develop into imaginaries of larger groups and to gain a social momentum:

At first this moral order was just an idea in the minds of some influential thinkers, but it later came to shape the social imaginary of large strata, and then eventually whole societies. It has now become so self-evident to us, we have trouble seeing it as one possible conception among others.²⁰

Taylor’s idea of a moral order that transforms into our social imaginary, offers a broad understanding of the way people imagine their collective social life and the set of values, institutions, laws, and symbols with which people imagine their social whole.

While human rights today are largely considered as a legal framework, Taylor stresses the importance of the imaginative capacity propelling the human rights debate onto an international governance platform. Similarly, the historian Samuel Moyn wrote a history of human rights less focused on its legal than its inspirational character with human rights as an imaginary and ‘the heartfelt desire to make the world a better place’:

When people hear the phrase ‘human rights’, they think of the highest moral precepts and political ideals. And they are right to do so. They have in mind a familiar set of indispensable liberal freedoms, and sometimes more expansive principles of social protection. But they also mean something more. The phrase implies an agenda for improving the world and bringing about a new one in which the dignity of each individual will enjoy secure

international protection. It is a recognizably utopian program: for the political standards it champions and the emotional passion it inspires, this program draws on the image of a place that has not yet been called into being. It promises to penetrate the impregnability of state borders, slowly replacing them with the authority of international law.²¹

According to Moyn human rights had their breakthrough in the West through the social movements of the 1970s and their evolution into NGOs such as Amnesty International (1961), Helsinki Watch (1978), Human Rights Watch (1988), Helsinki Citizens Assembly (1989) or UN Watch (1993) – remaining *the last moral utopia* after political utopias (such as socialism for instance) had collapsed.²² Focussing on individual rights created an ethos of neutrality that was part of its appeal as human rights became ‘the core language of a new politics of humanity’ beyond the political spectrum of either the right or the left.²³

Challenges of globalisation

Some scholars argue that this kind of human rights historiography is too narrow and too Western, being focussed on liberalism and the protection of individuals from state violence, while excluding religious worldviews and collective struggles, such as the decolonisation movements that defended the right to national self-determination.²⁴ Others stress the problems globalisation presents within the human rights framework that is embodied in international law and in international governance arenas. It is, as such, a (binding) moral order for states, but not for multinationals or non-state actors (such as international financial institutions etc.) that given the reality of globalisation, play an important and increasingly significant role in delivering international governance agendas at the national and local level.²⁵

For a debate on social imaginaries – and its Western bias – Samuel Moyn’s more recent book on human rights, titled *Not enough*, made an important intervention.²⁶ He calls it the ‘tragedy of human rights’ that ‘they have occupied the global imagination but have so far contributed little [...] (to address) material inequality’.²⁷ Moyn claims that while human rights became our highest ideals, the demands of a broader social and economic justice were systematically neglected and that ‘human rights, even perfectly realized human rights, are compatible with inequality, even radical inequality’.²⁸ Moyn’s narrative shows how the social imaginary of human rights has shifted over time, ‘from the egalitarian politics of yesterday to the neoliberal globalization of today’ and from equity to sufficiency, with a major impact on global inequality. He shows how human rights were systematically kept away from the ideal of a globally fair distribution that was being advocated by the Global South during the 1970s. ‘Before the age of human rights came, realms of equality were taken quite seriously, both nationally and globally. In the age of human rights, the pertinence of fairness beyond sufficiency has been forgotten’.²⁹ Clearly, the *sufficiency discourse* has pushed to one side the *equality discourse* and this has had major ramifications on how we envisage justice.

The critiques of the human rights framework agenda detailed above, whilst addressing concerns of a misguided imagination and therewith questioning the central role of human rights in Agenda 2030, make it even more relevant to scrutinise the global aspirations of the SDG framework. In line with what Moyn claims then if human rights are not enough would the SDGs be enough?

Criticism of the SDGs is broad, and ranges from fundamental scepticism – calling them ‘inadequate’, and neglecting reality (as many of its goals are already known to be unachievable) – to more pragmatic reflections on ‘inconsistencies and contradictions’ between different goals.³⁰ Will the SDGs make a real change in terms of challenging established hierarchies, or rather continue to operate under the banner of ‘business as usual’ (to use a term of Burford et al.)?³¹ If human rights have failed to create a more substantial equality, will the SDGs – particular SDG 10 aiming to reduce inequalities within and among countries – be able to make a difference? Will the SDGs deal with some of the blind spots within the human rights framework or will they, on the contrary, reproduce them? Or, on the other hand, could it be that ideals of human rights and the SDGs are able to both complement and strengthen each other?

Raising these questions, this article relates to earlier debates on the relationship between human rights and the SDGs.³² Some scholars argue that human rights can provide important tools for realising the SDGs: ‘human rights norms, standards and tools can help to inform and guide actions towards these commitments, including how human rights monitoring mechanisms can play a role in tracking progress and providing a space for accountability’.³³ Others are more sceptical: considering both the SDGs and the international human rights agenda as being ‘inadequate to address many of the most pressing inequalities’.³⁴ According to Gillian MacNaughton ‘interpretations of international human rights to date also fall short in terms of addressing income, wealth and social inequalities’, and it follows therefore that they cannot ‘alleviate some of the shortcomings of SDG 10’.³⁵

Whilst MacNaughton sees the need for improving the legal groundings of the SDGs, we suggest paying more attention to the way in which the SDGs translate into local practices. We agree with Taylor who stated that ‘exploring social imaginaries means that local particularities most clearly emerge’,³⁶ and claim that it’s the manifestation of these SDGs at the local level that permits us to decipher whether or not the SDGs constitute a social imaginary that is able to propel change.

Social imaginary as a conceptual lens

The following section focuses on three dimensions of Taylor’s concept of the *social imaginary* to analyse how people make meaning of the SDGs. Social imaginary is a concept to which scholars from various disciplines give a complex set of meanings. Our use of the notion of a social imaginary draws on social theorists and philosophers such as Castoriadis (1987), Anderson (1991), Appadurai (2000, 2006, 2013), and Taylor (2002, 2004).³⁷ While each author has a different emphasis, what their definitions share is the deep embeddedness of imaginaries in one’s social practice, and the significance these have as metaphors or stories by which people make sense of their lives, of social boundaries and norms and of past and future events. While the concept has hitherto mainly been used and thought through in philosophical and conceptual publications,³⁸ there have been recent examples of its practical application within a case study context where the focus is on human rights, giving more detail to local-global dynamics, the role of particular actors, considering how to best integrate a bottom-up approach.³⁹ To make social imaginaries more tangible and following on from these practical case study endeavours, we use ‘social imaginary’ as an analytical lens to examine in what way the SDGs manifest

as an aspiration that has transformative power at a local level. Social imaginaries are more than simply ideas that guide action as they emerge where people take actions, in particular spaces, or become aware of the significance of their actions at a particular moment in time. We focus on three dimensions – ‘awareness’, ‘spaces’, and ‘aspiration’ – as being helpful analytic attributes allowing us to understand the meaning of the SDGs and how they might be understood and interpreted.

Awareness

Social imaginaries play an important role in giving meaning to the present and in binding a society together through common values, norms and beliefs. ‘It incorporates a sense of the normal expectations that we have of one another, the kind of common understanding which enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life’.⁴⁰ Social imaginaries are therefore a source of knowledge and a point of reference for what a society considers to be both rational and sensible.⁴¹ Social imaginaries are not limited to individuals or small groups, but rather they represent the knowledge, ideas, beliefs and practices of a larger social collective. Charles Taylor defines social imaginaries as follows:

the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations.⁴²

These imaginations enmesh memories of a collective past, and offer experiences and expectations of possible futures:

the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy [...] This understating is both factual and ‘normative’; that is, we have a sense of how things usually go, but this is interwoven with an idea of how they ought to go, of what missteps would invalidate the practice.⁴³

It is about the ‘images, stories and legends’, which are the narratives shaping people’s lives, desires, values and ideas. Stories play an important role in the design of ‘moral orders’, how it ‘ought to go’.⁴⁴ Stories (such as the human rights story) anchor us in larger contexts and also link our personal experiences to larger moral narratives, with their potential of influencing self-perception and determining action. In the data analysis presented below, we explore to what extent the *story of the SDGs* has secured a reputation and gained momentum at the local level.

Spaces

Another key category in social imaginaries is ‘space’. According to Arjun Appadurai the spatial dimension has radically changed in the last few decades with globalisation altering the way common people might imagine themselves in new ways. Benedict Anderson was revolutionary when discussing in the 1990s the nation state as an ‘imagined community’⁴⁵, revealing the power of imaginaries to constitute our social reality by establishing collective identities. Appadurai applies this idea of ‘imagined community’ to contemporary notions of globalisation stating that ‘Globalization is [...] marked by a new role for the imagination in social life’.⁴⁶ He believes that we live not any longer in locally

imagined communities, but rather in globally imagined worlds: more homogeneous cultures, in which people might have shared a self-assertive sense of the world with others, have been transformed into a range of narratives and images that touch people's lives through media exposure and everyday contact with other cultures. Appadurai predicts that imagination has an increasingly important role to play as individuals and groups constructively and creatively learn to deal with vast and various impressions. Culture then becomes less predictable and individuals can choose their personal identity from a much larger repertoire of ideas, styles, narratives or images. When considering ideas of space, Appadurai's notion of globalisation as a process from above and from below becomes even more crucial:

By providing a complex picture of the relationship between globalization from above (as defined by corporations, major multilateral agencies, policy experts, and national governments) and below, collaborative research on globalization could contribute to new forms of pedagogy [...] that could level the theoretical playing field for grassroots activists in international fora.⁴⁷

For Appadurai it is, 'the globalisation from below, the worldwide effort of activist non-governmental organizations and movements to seize and shape the global agenda on such matters as human rights, gender, poverty, environment, and disease'.⁴⁸ When considering ideas around space in this way, a focus on SDG's is potentially a game-changer both at the local level, whilst at the same time providing an opportunity for local voices to be heard at the global level.

Aspiration

'Aspiration' is the third key category we deploy when considering social imaginaries. In his work Appadurai describes how people exercise and extend their capacity to aspire via social actions. 'Aspirations have certainly something to do with wants, preferences, choices, and calculations [...] Aspirations are never simply individual (but) always formed in interaction and in the thick of social life'.⁴⁹ He considers aspirations as 'cultural capacities' helping people to 'navigate their social spaces'. Social imaginaries help to create belonging and change through embedding individual actions into larger collective stories as exemplified by the term 'shared citizen action'. According to Kirakosyan 'new ideas are introduced into social imaginaries taking root in people's minds, individuals apply them in the expanding sphere of common action, create new stories, and structure new ways of making sense of everyday acts in response to experienced needs'.⁵⁰ The question remains as to how aspirations might influence SDGs programmes at the local level.

We analyse particular programmes from selected SDG-cities using these three aspects of social imaginaries (awareness, spaces, aspirations) which, we argue, are key in demonstrating to what extent the SDGs – which have figured as a new social imaginary in the political realm since 2015 – might resonate with local aspirations.

Localising the Sustainable Development Goals: the role of cities

In the process of establishing the SDGs, the UN has – more than in previous UN processes – included city representative bodies such as the United Cities and Local

Governments (UCLG) or Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI).⁵¹ Since the adoption of the SDGs in 2015, a multitude of initiatives, websites, toolkits, data and monitoring initiatives, networks, awards and best practices have emerged around the question of how to implement the SDGs at the local level. A wide range of international initiatives are aimed at motivating municipalities and other local parties to 'localise' the SDGs. Despite this rhetoric, there is still limited awareness and support among local authorities or/and residents at the local level for the 2030 Agenda,⁵² or for the New Urban Agenda, in which the UN bi-decennial (the last of which was in Quito in 2016) puts together its sustainable urbanisation agenda. Despite the UN efforts to involve municipality representatives in realising the 2030 Agenda, urban scholar David Satterthwaite identified a large gap between the international arena and the relevant stakeholders in cities: 'Astonishingly, a document claiming to be the New Urban Agenda has no mention of mayors; no mention of democracy; no mention of urban innovations such as participatory budgeting; no reference to grassroots organisations'.⁵³ This gap has been reinforced by positioning the SDGs from a policy perspective, putting implementation and goals at the centre stage rather than the process in which involved parties might give meaning to the relevant agreements, develop strategies and take action. As Eugenie Birch says in her evaluation of urban development within the context of the Habitat III process: 'Complicating matters is the fact that the negotiators, diplomats usually trained in law, economics, or international relations, have scant background on urban issues'.⁵⁴ While UN speeches and documents demonstrate the ambition to integrate the local – cities in particular – practice shows local actors are hardly represented at major SDG events.⁵⁵ Even when municipalities do participate in these fora, the focus is on international governance and technocratic aspects of the SDGs (such as implementation and monitoring) which leaves hardly any space for discussing the meaning local communities and citizens might attribute to these global ambitions. This indicates that the *policy-making* takes place at (inter)national level whilst the local is restricted to *policy-implementation* alone; this means that instead of being an active agent, being a recipient only.

For a long time the crucial role of cities in achieving the Global Goals was not discernible. Eventually the UN included a 'standalone goal of sustainable cities', the SDG 11 ('make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable')⁵⁶; recognising the significant role of cities and citizens in the realisation of the sustainable development 2030 Agenda. This was the result of a lengthy negotiation process, qualified as a major achievement by urban scholar and UN-advisor Aromar Revi: 'Even though sustainable cities (SDG 11) is only one of 17 SDGs, the global discussion [...] has made it moderately clear that most of the other SDGs will never be achieved without sustainable urbanisation, and vice versa'.⁵⁷ At the city level as at the (inter)national level 'the global urban community is starting to find identity as well as voice in both national and global processes [...] with a rather different imagination than that of national governments'.⁵⁸

Five years after the official adoption of the SDGs in 2015, scholarly interest in its governance dimension is thriving and international initiatives to support localising the SDGs are also being widely established. While the number of cities engaging with the SDG framework increases day by day,⁵⁹ only a few cities refer to the SDGs explicitly in their strategies and their reports, and even fewer cities communicate convincingly the importance

of the SDGs to their citizens. It was only in 2019 that the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights reported to the Human Rights Council information about cities in 80 different countries and identified best SDG practices and effective methods to foster cooperation between cities and local stakeholders for the promotion and protection of human rights and for raising SDG awareness.⁶⁰ This was the first time at an UN Forum that cities received this kind of attention with the recognition that local engagement was needed if the SDGs agenda were to be promoted.

For an overview of this kind of SDG localisation, we analysed (from March 2019 to March 2020) websites, reports and toolkits of cities, city networks and international organisations from approximately 20 cities worldwide and finally focussed on 5 cities that had developed an explicit but also deviant SDG strategy by the beginning of 2020. These were Baltimore, Bristol, Helsinki, New York, and Utrecht.⁶¹ We then used the three dimensions of Taylor's concept of a social imaginary – namely awareness, spaces and aspiration – as an analytical lens to identify some examples of localisation strategies.

Awareness: do the SDGs function locally as a meaningful narrative?

To get to know how the SDGs figure as a social imaginary at the local level, it is crucial to establish how many people know of the SDGs, with the assumption that knowledge feeds – and is a prerequisite for creating – a binding social imaginary; and consequently action. However, despite a growing number of reports from scholars, international organisations, national and local governments, NGOs and the private sector, on the extent to which SDG-policies are implemented and targets met at the city level, there is little research on citizen knowledge of the SDGs.

The OECD Development Communication Network provides a summary of the available surveys until 2017⁶²: According to Globescan⁶³ and Eurobarometer, in 2016, one year into the SDG era, around 3 in 10 citizens say that they have heard of the SDGs:

Awareness of the SDGs varies widely across the EU [...] Luxembourg is the only Member State where at least one in five have both heard of the SDGs and know what they are (23%), followed by Finland (17%) and Spain (14%). This compares to 4% of respondents in Bulgaria.⁶⁴

Follow-up studies show an increasing awareness within the EU; where 10% to 12% of respondents between 2016 and 2017 claim to have substantial knowledge about the SDGs. However, as the OECD warns these numbers are only estimates as the 'social desirability bias, in particular, will lead many people to over report their awareness or knowledge of the SDGs'.⁶⁵

Thus, though only few cities do have such data; where it does exist it may also show some social desirability bias.⁶⁶ In Utrecht in 2017 one third of the inhabitants claim to know what the SDGs stand for. Here the strategy of the municipality⁶⁷ is to double the numbers by supporting the Utrecht4GlobalGoals Foundation, which is the key actor in coordinating numerous civil society organisations in familiarising inhabitants with the SDGs as well as initiatives in the circular economy, local food production, new mobility or fair fashion.⁶⁸ One such example is the Climate Planet in the city centre, which is a 30-metre diameter globe, displaying stories and facts of climate change. Within a few weeks of becoming active, the Climate Planet was attracting

more than 25,000 visitors. It was a key tool for awareness raising, proposing also concrete action that could make one's daily life more SDG-proof by, for instance, taking fewer, shorter or less-hot showers, buying local food, cutting out air travel, using energy saving electronics, turning off stand-by TVs and overall drawing attention to a whole host of other concrete actions citizens could take.⁶⁹

Although there are few examples of cities that are making a plea for local SDG awareness as in the case of Utrecht, many cities see the SDGs as a policy implementation task, which implies that involving or educating the population is not the priority. While international initiatives supporting the localising of SDG initiatives are becoming more common,⁷⁰ with several municipalities now monitoring their contribution to the SDGs,⁷¹ the development of local initiatives to raise SDG awareness is slow. Utrecht is exemplary in the way it approaches concerns around the SDGs as bottom-up initiatives driven by societal actors, who are facilitated by the municipality.

Spaces: how do the SDGs translate between the global and the local?

Clearly, for changes to be made, SDGs need much more than simply having local authorities raise SDG awareness. What is required is a far broader social movement involving smaller and larger local initiatives. We see how cities worldwide increasingly relate to the SDG framework: 'Holistic multi-scalar (local-to-global) urban governance and implementation frameworks are emerging across the world [...] Despite weak local capacities, [...] stakeholder groups are accelerating, catalysed via the Internet and a couple of hundred emerging urban networks'.⁷² However, it is still unclear how the relationship between SDGs and local actors unfolds. Are the SDGs supporting transformative action at the local level, or are they primarily a rhetorical device that seems to be reframing existing policies and initiatives but that is, in practice, continuing to do business as usual?

We take a look at another city where the SDG narrative has been used to drive social change.⁷³ In 2015, in Baltimore, a young black man (Freddie Gray) who was arrested for a minor offense died in police custody. This induced severe social unrest and created a state of emergency in Baltimore that reverberated across the country with citizens protesting against an unfair and racially biased system of law enforcement. The question arose as to how these concerns could be taken forward and, interestingly, it was the SDGs that became the vehicle for communication allowing for dialogue between diverse local groups. 'There were so many processes going on in Baltimore after the unrest that our job wasn't to convene but to look at what they were already doing and to use the SDGs framework to tie them together'.⁷⁴ The University of Baltimore and the Neighbourhood Indicators Alliance connected dozens of urban initiatives, putting pressure on the municipality to act upon their recommendations⁷⁵ and, in particular, to create a stronger system of accountability, based particularly on SDG 16 'Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions'. While the Neighbourhood Indicators Alliance has produced yearly reports and metrics by which citizens could measure the city's development at the neighbourhood level (around health, education, crime, culture etc.), the introduction of the SDGs brought home to citizens that they did not have indicators to measure progress around concerns of peace and justice. Taking on board some of the broader issues raised by the SDGs (in particular SDG 16), it became clear that what was needed was a

systematic collection of relevant data (such as on pre-trial detention, poverty, decent work etc.), that would inform new policies on equality.

As the Baltimore case shows, the municipality together with multiple stakeholders turns to the SDG framework which offers possibilities to address the violations structurally and allows for recommendations that speak to the serious frustration that fuelled the riots in the first place.⁷⁶ By adopting the SDG framework, and operationalising it within this context, the debate shifted from naming and shaming towards broader ideas of social justice, contributing to the development of policies around equality and well-being and in so doing being better able to address the entrenched frustrations that pressed for a more just society. The multi-stakeholder approach also had a positive effect as it was able to better synthesise various (sectoral) initiatives into a more powerful collective action; developing into a far broader notion of accountability. The Baltimore case provides a good example of how global concerns encourage a rethink of the local as well as how the global becomes articulated at the local level.

In contrast there are numerous cities that use the SDGs predominantly as a rhetorical device. These cities (re)label existing municipal policies as SDG policies ('ticking the boxes'), by fitting them into the SDG scheme. In these instances, there is little vision or political will to challenge the status quo. Helsinki is an excellent example, having a well designed and clearly formulated SDG policy, and claiming to be 'the most functional city in the world'.⁷⁷ To use metaphors such as of 'being the best' signals satisfaction and pride with the existing status quo. Helsinki followed the city of New York when sending its voluntary report ('From Agenda to Action') to the UN. Unlike the New York report however, the description of the work process is solely pragmatic, dealing with the SDGs as an internal municipal matter: 'Developing and coordinating the implementation report within the City was under the responsibility of a work group consisting of experts from the Helsinki City Executive Office and the Urban Environment Division'.⁷⁸ The report describes the development of a top down municipal programme by civil servants and as such it does not reflect the wider debate. Helsinki is thus an example for how many cities localise the SDGs, reframing existing aspirations without changing the aspirations themselves. As such the SDGs do not figure as a new social imaginary.

Aspiration: are the SDGs an inspiration for transformative collective action?

In contrast to this, the cities of New York and Bristol both formulate concrete aspirations and a long-term perspective based on the SDGs. New York City created a precedent when sending the very first voluntary local SDG report to the UN in 2018.⁷⁹ It shows how the SDG framework allows cities to do their 'own thing', operating at a local level and bypassing more restrictive policies from national governments. Their SDG approach was a follow-up on the municipal initiative 'One New York: The Plan for a strong and fair city' in 2015,⁸⁰ formalised in the project 'Global Vision, Local Action'⁸¹; a process profoundly shaped by the SDG framework. In 2019 the municipality launched a visionary plan as concrete goals leading up to the year 2050⁸² and translating the SDGs into eight priorities: vibrant democracy, inclusive economy, thriving neighbourhoods, healthy lives, equity and excellence in education, livable climate, efficient mobility and modern infrastructure.

In Bristol the SDGs are a follow-up to its local European Green Capital program (2015), but the programme started poorly: ‘despite an extensive celebrity campaign, the goals are still struggling to gain traction with the public’.⁸³ After a first Voluntary Local Report was published in 2019 the mayor launched⁸⁴ the ambitious ‘One City Bristol Plan 2050’, detailing – after an intensive participatory process involving citizens – far-reaching goals in terms of long-term green sustainability and tackling the inequality between inhabitants in all its forms. In addition to its participatory nature, its long-term perspective, pinpointing numerous concrete targets at a city level for 2050, goes far beyond the SDGs. It projects that in 2027 the ‘earnings inequality between lowest and highest earners in the city has been reduced by 10% compared to 2019 figures, as measured by the Gini Coefficient’; and for the year 2047 they envision that inequality between lowest and highest earners in the city has reduced by 50%.⁸⁵ In this instance inequality is being addressed in a revolutionary way, illustrating how the local imaginary of justice is way ahead of the global debate.

These examples show that there are several options for localising the SDGs. In New York, the mayor and the city take the primary responsibility to adopt the SDGs as a visionary starting point for municipal action, while in Utrecht the municipality mainly facilitates social initiatives, knowledge institutions and entrepreneurs. The way in which the SDGs are translated into urban planning also differs. Whilst Utrecht uses the SDGs mainly as an inspiration for daily current practice, New York goes one step further, aiming at unifying various municipal programmes. Bristol and New York extended their 2030 Agenda until the year 2050 with an ambitious long-term vision. While Bristol opts for a participatory process with numerous stakeholders in the city, New York utilises a more municipality-led approach.

The approaches of New York, Helsinki, Bristol and Utrecht despite numerous nuances and differences reflect a certain typology; namely four types of cities, those in which the SDGs are primarily a ‘municipal’ (municipality-focused) or a ‘societal’ project (municipality-facilitated), and those which focus primarily on developing ‘present-day action’ (reframing existing initiatives) or a ‘long-term vision’ (new aspirations) related to the SDG targets.

	SDGs as primarily a municipal project	SDGs as primarily a societal project
Approach primarily driven by: vision of the future	New York	Bristol
Approach primarily driven by: present-day action and programmes	Helsinki	Utrecht

Developing this schematic implementation typology of four types – New York (vision and municipal oriented), Helsinki (action and municipal oriented), Bristol (vision and societal oriented), and Utrecht (action and societal oriented) – reflects certain weaknesses that form part of the dominant *implementation* approach.

Most SDG-cities can be positioned somewhere in between these four different approaches in localising the SDGs. For example in Baltimore, where the university first took the lead, a bottom-up approach was developed (like Utrecht), hand in hand with a solid coordination and a planning role by the municipality (like New York), but also with a long-term vision with concrete indicators and targets such as Bristol.

The case of Baltimore was characterised as a ‘messy process’ with hundreds of local SDG ambassadors where ‘every story’ and every idea counts.

While the municipality-focused approach is foremost about the implementation of municipal policies, the societal and visionary approach is rather about translation; in the latter case the municipality is more a facilitator between multiple stakeholders aiming to translate global aspirations into local action and vice versa whilst challenging local creativity and knowledge to address the SDGs. The above observations about the *localising* of SDG practices in pioneering city initiatives reflect the need for more reciprocity between the global (ideal goals) and the local (practical needs) in order to realise the innovative potential of local SDG initiatives.

From an implementation towards a translation approach

The following section argues that to move from the dominant *implementation* towards a *translation* approach the role of ‘culture’ and of ‘(localized) human rights’ needs to be at the forefront within the SDGs localisation practices, so as to be more successful as a source of inspiration for local change.

How culture feeds the capacity to aspire

The SDGs are based on three pillars of sustainability – the social, economic and environmental.⁸⁶ Nevertheless city representatives from the United Cities and Local Governments, for instance, have stressed from the inception that more attention is needed to address the idea of culture. In their Montreal Declaration (2010) city representatives claim to consider ‘culture as the 4th pillar of sustainable urban development’ and they ask to establish equality between all four pillars: ‘The world is not only facing economic, social, or environmental challenges. Creativity, knowledge, diversity, and beauty are the unavoidable bases for dialogue for peace and progress as these values are intrinsically connected to human development and freedoms’.⁸⁷ The intrinsic value of culture, which is more than simply instrumental to the other areas, is emphasised.

Scholars support the claim to add a more explicit cultural approach to Agenda 2030, calling culture the ‘missing pillar’.⁸⁸ They argue that the SDG’s technocratic monitoring logics consider culture, ethics and values as intangible and immeasurable, which also means avoiding ‘issues of moral accountability’.⁸⁹ Without a cultural approach (which would incorporate a moral dimension) the current materialistic and technocratic implementation orientation of the SDGs reproduces the dominance of the social, economic and environmental policy discourse:

Any developments constrained to these three dimensions are insensitive, at minimum, to cultural/aesthetic dimensions, e.g. general discussions of cultural integrity and vitality and specific discussions about indigenous communities; the role of the arts in sustainability; political/institutional dimensions, e.g. ‘good governance’; and religious/spiritual dimensions. While in many ways these excluded dimensions are mutually distinct, they intersect in their shared interest in the category of values, in whatever manner these are understood.⁹⁰

This implies a singular identity and vision, erasing ‘the diversity of values and ideologies (at times incompatible) that characterise discussions bearing on sustainable development within institutions, whether global or local’.⁹¹

A cultural reading of Agenda 2030 would offer to integrate essential values ‘such as dignity, well-being, happiness, balance, harmony and identity’, which are represented in ‘human rights and culture’. It is argued that both would add to the SDG debate at a fundamental level.⁹² Were these values to be ‘systematically assessed’ scholars are convinced that ‘one result might be the creation of new political norms that tend to prioritize values such as equity, tolerance, justice and respect for nature at global, national and local levels’.⁹³ They advocate for developing such value based indicators, intersubjectively conceptualised, and within clearly defined practical and local contexts.⁹⁴ This implies that instead of giving value to what is easily measured and monitored, current indicators would need rethinking and expansion. Thus, instead of evaluating simply whether global standards are being met, there would need to be a rethinking how these standards address local needs. This would also include for example a redefinition of ‘experts’: Tuntiak Katan, the first indigenous representative at a UN climate action summit in 2019, urges the inclusion of native knowledge, since rainforest areas under tribal stewardship manage carbon much better: ‘governments were spending millions of dollars on environmental consultants while largely ignoring the land management skills of the planet’s indigenous people that could help combat the climate crisis and biodiversity loss’.⁹⁵

How a human rights narrative feeds the local imagination

Appadurai shows how culture and human rights are intrinsically linked. He puts emphasis on the formative role that culture plays – not just in processes of local meaning-making but also in enlarging people’s ‘capacity to aspire’, a ‘navigational capacity’ to craft the future.⁹⁶ Culture and art are key concerns to be imagining, and imagination is key to creating different futures. The ability to imagine, creating other worlds in our minds, needs to be rehearsed continuously. Culture is the instrument to exercise the imagination, nurturing the hope that change is possible. However, as Appadurai has shown, the poor often lack opportunities and pathways to achieve their aspirations, owing to ‘a lack of voice’ that is so central for civic action and advocacy for policy decisions that affect their lives. Owing to social structures that constrain the poor and force them to subscribe to norms that further diminish their dignity, their access to material goods and services worsens their inequality. Although not the case with the SDGs, the right to culture is explicitly embedded in several human rights treaties.⁹⁷

Inspiration for a cultural translation approach to UN frameworks can also be found in the work of scholars on human rights, particularly around the debate on ‘translation’ from which SDG theory and practice could benefit. While translation is often associated with the weakening of universal principles, (legal) anthropologists have shown that it can also be the opposite, increasing the meaningfulness of those global principles to people.⁹⁸ As Sally Engle-Merry stressed with her influential framework of ‘vernacularization’, human rights to be accepted, ‘have to be tailored to the local context and resonate with the local cultural framework’.⁹⁹ Vernacularization is seen as an anthropological category and a conceptual device, addressing questions of normative translation, more recently described as ‘human rights transformation in practice’.¹⁰⁰ According to Mark Goodale what this approach brings to the fore is that

human rights are conceptualized and mobilized in ways and in places that go far beyond the boundaries of the international human rights system. These are the worlds in which human rights are made in the vernacular and this is the essential, potentially transformative point. To take these worlds seriously, not as places where human rights as such are translated or made relevant in local contexts, but as places where human rights themselves are forged, is to reimagine radically both what human rights are, and even more, what they should be.¹⁰¹

This recognises that human rights are also ‘made’ at the local level. As Mark Goodale stresses: ‘the realities of human rights vernacularization demand a reconsideration of where human rights are produced and who is best placed to articulate their meanings’.¹⁰² This reasoning can be utilised around the debate on localising the SDGs and the (re)consideration of cities as being the places where the SDGs can take shape.

This is also what our analysis of the five SDG-cities has shown: localising SDGs is not about a top-down *implementation* but a reciprocal *translation* between the global and the local, calling for a multi-stakeholder process. Different from implementation, translation is more sensitive to locality and therefore more likely to succeed. While for implementation, culture is not a key variable, for translation it is. While ‘implementation’ and monitoring are the characteristics of technocratic procedures, hierarchies, power related and result oriented programmes, ‘translation’ is about relationality, connectivity, and de-centring. This shift in terminology would not just require the inclusion of culture into the SDGs, but would at the same time stimulate more awareness of the reciprocity the localisation of the SDGs calls for. Only by determining the meaning of SDGs in the everyday lives of people can the transformative potential of these global goals become evident. Stressing the reciprocity of translation might help to get beyond ‘the power asymmetries’ that frame not just the human rights but also the SDG discourse and as such the ‘discursive hierarchy’ between a ‘top-down’ and a ‘bottom-up’ approach.¹⁰³

Inspiration for such a cultural translation approach to localising the SDGs can also be found in the worldwide human rights city movement,¹⁰⁴ working on the ‘homecoming of human rights’.¹⁰⁵ ‘If a local government embraces a human rights based approach in designing sustainability policies, it is more likely to address the needs and priorities of its residents’.¹⁰⁶ What SDG-cities could learn from this approach is how they use the label to give additional meaning to local engagement, to involve and to connect numerous civil society organisations by synthesising (sectoral) initiatives into more powerful collective action.

The examples presented above have demonstrated how putting culture and human rights – not in the narrow sense of ‘sufficiency’ but in the broader sense of ‘material equality’¹⁰⁷ more centre stage – has enabled the localisation of the SDGs, thereby enhancing their transformative power. Foregrounding a cultural dimension to the SDGs would promote SDGs as part of people’s lives and beliefs instead of them being simply a political and procedural instrument. People need to experience and ‘feel’ the SDGs in order for them to become meaningful for them.

Discussion: opportunities and challenges of the SDG imaginary

In this article we have shown how the Sustainable Development Goals – a new social imaginary in the political realm since 2015 – have been translated to the local, by describing several pioneering city initiatives. In so doing, we have operationalised Charles Taylor’s

concept of a ‘social imaginary of a moral order’ to analyse to what extent the SDGs function as a source of inspiration for change at the local level. What have we learnt by using this social imaginary approach?

Although the 2030 Agenda is by definition an integrated, comprehensive and long-term ambition, we see that many municipalities – guided by day-to-day politics – are stuck in a pragmatic and in a narrow implementation perspective, reframing existing programmes as SDG programmes, without embedding these SDGs deeper into the fabric of society and thus applying additional aspirations for their meaningful achievement. Often monitoring systems are set up to measure how the city scores regarding the goals, but without SDG inspired targets they simply measure existing policies. However, some cities do engage in a multi-stakeholder dialogue, and seek – together with civic society – to develop alternative futures. The conclusion of the OECD in their global study on the implementation of the SDGs at local and regional level is that such multi-stakeholder platforms are crucial in addressing both the internal and external aspects of the 2030 Agenda.¹⁰⁸ Analysing the localisation of the SDGs from a *social imaginary* perspective – in terms of awareness, space, and aspiration – allows us to reveal several features of the SDGs discourse that would otherwise remain invisible if we had remained within the dominant SDG policy implementation perspective. This means addressing the following concerns:

Awareness: Do the SDGs function locally as a meaningful story? From an ‘implementation’ approach citizens’ knowledge about the SDGs is not an essential feature of municipal SDG programmes. The SDG discourse in these instances is mainly a technical toolkit for experts in a technocratic sense. However, if we adopt a ‘translation’ approach, the extent to which the SDGs are widely known, supported and given meaning within the local community becomes critical. Knowledge and meaning-making are key to unlocking the transformative societal potential of the SDGs, not just in municipalities, but also within civil society, NGO’s, educational institutions and the private sector.

Spaces: How do the SDGs translate between the global and the local scale? A critical conversation and reflection about the SDGs at the local level seems to be essential for what we call the ‘reciprocity between the local and the global’. Hitherto in the discursive hierarchies of SDG fora, the SDG policy-making approach takes place mainly at (inter)national level, while the local is restricted to policy-implementation alone; in lieu of taking on a more active role as an agent of change. The SDGs however offer the potential of a framework that can connect local mediators and translators globally. In our examples it appears that the role of these local translators is crucial: on the one hand bringing the SDGs closer to the people via translating the inspiration of the SDGs into transformative local initiatives; on the other hand, showcasing local experiences on the international stage to adjust and challenge international aspirations and agreements.

Aspiration: Do the SDGs figure as an inspiration for transformative collective action? It is too early to say so, particularly as we have analysed programmes (in the ideal) and not (yet) the practices themselves.¹⁰⁹ The schematic overview however showed that as long as cities approach the SDGs mainly from a policy and implementation perspective, as long as there is little citizen participation and as long as too few local partnerships help translating the goals into local long-term visions and targets (and vice versa: local

innovations into global debates), then their potential as a driver of transformation remains limited.

Going back to our theoretical framework, applying the insights of Taylor and Appadurai, we emphasise also the ambivalence of the SDGs as a social imaginary, being a source of inspiration and transformation, while also incorporating forms of societal control and reinforcing the status-quo. As Taylor claims: ‘like all forms of human imagination, the social imaginary can be full of self-serving fiction and suppression, but it is also an essential constituent of the real’.¹¹⁰ And as Appadurai highlights: ‘it is in and through the imagination that modern citizens are disciplined and controlled – by states, markets, and other powerful interests. But it is also the faculty through which collective patterns of dissent and new designs for collective life emerge’.¹¹¹

Conclusion

Social imaginaries are wor(l)ds we create and they create us. They form the epistemic structures we live in. They determine how we make sense of the world we live in; influencing our thoughts, experiences, actions and value judgements. Making use of the social imaginary lens however also allows us to see and address those epistemic structures we live, belief and act in. As this article has shown, analysing the SDGs as a social imaginary allows us to reflect on the tension between global and local, between rhetoric and practice, between pragmatism and aspirations, between targets and meaning, between top-down policy discourses and bottom-up initiatives. Shifting the debate from SDG policy to a social imaginary approach, and from an *implementation* towards a *translation* approach, permits us to redefine ‘localisation’ as a reciprocal relationship. Seeing the reciprocity of the local and the global we argue is essential not just to clarify how social imaginaries shape (and are shaped by) local realities, but also to take locality more seriously in realising the SDGs promise for change.

Notes

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 13. We are aware that the binary global/local framing does not reflect the multiple entanglements between both levels, nonetheless both categories – as Mark Goodale has stressed in regard to the transnational human rights discourse – are a useful lens as 'the binary global/local' remains an important part of those discourses themselves. See: Mark Goodale, 'Introduction Locating Rights, Envisioning Law Between the Global and the Local', in *The Practice of Human Rights, Tracking Law Between the Global and the Local*, ed. Mark Goodale and Sally Engle Merry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1–38.
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