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Regional Roles in Implementing UN Sustainable Development Goals:
A Review of the Basque Country

REGIONAL ROLES IN IMPLEMENTING UN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS: A REVIEW OF THE BASQUE COUNTRY[1]
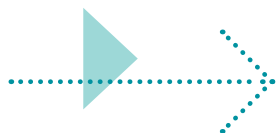
Bio

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In light of the economic and societal issues that arise from human-induced climate change (IPCC, 2021), the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that is designed to "shift the world onto a sustainable and resilient path" (UNGA, 2015) is more important than ever. The Agenda lays out 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) to reach this objective, with member states expected to review their efforts in meeting these goals by way of Voluntary National Reviews (VNR). This monitoring process is underway on a global scale and is supervised under the auspices of the UN through its High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (UNGA, 2013). Although this process is primarily country-led, regions – including subnational entities – can also play a vital role in sharing practices on SDG implementation through Voluntary Local Reviews (VLR). This practice is also particularly relevant for European Union (EU) regions given their central role in achieving a Just Transition in the framework of Horizon Europe, EU Cohesion Policy and the Green Deal. This CBE Briefing Note explores the innovative actions of the Basque Country – as a European leader in SDG implementation – in order to draw insights into possible actions that regional governments can take to localise and implement the SDGs. This comes at a critical juncture as the United Kingdom prepares to host the Climate Change Conference of the Parties ("COP26") in November 2021 in Glasgow, billed as the last chance to address the threat of climate change.

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Within the framework of the Agenda, UN member states are encouraged to present their SDG implementation efforts by submitting Voluntary National Reviews (VNR). Despite the state-centred nature of this process, some scholars place the urban community at the epicentre of SDG implementation. Additionally, a number of guides have as their aim to bring together networks of local governments to share practices in implementing the SDGs at the local level; a promising example of such a guide is the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments' Roadmap for Localizing the SDGs Implementation and Monitoring at Subnational (2016). Here, "localising" refers to the implementation of SDGs at the subnational level. To do this, entities at the regional and subnational levels are encouraged to submit Voluntary Local Reviews (VLR) to share practices and discuss shared targets. To date, although cities are the main protagonists in publishing VLRs, regions hold a considerable role in Europe both spatially and politically, and in this sense can play a crucial role in the effective implementation of SDGs in the EU.

Meso-level regions – between the state and local levels – are important socio-political spaces in planning, policy design and modernisation (Raagmaa, 2002). In the EU, regional and local authorities are delegated competencies from the EU through the incorporation of the principle of subsidiarity in Article 5(3) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU, 2009). This aims to guarantee "a degree of independence for a lower authority in relation to a higher body or for a local authority in relation to central government".

In this respect, the legislative bodies of the EU must consult the Committee of the Regions on policy areas concerning local and regional government, which are often central in the context of the SDGs. However, due to the disparate "territorial make-up" of member states, regions receive different amounts of support from the EU. Here, EU cohesion policy funds primarily underdeveloped subnational territories to reduce economic and social disparities, receiving almost a third of the EU's total budget in the period 2014-2020 (Eurostat, 2021). This funding is distributed in large part on account of the classification of territorial units for statistics – the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) – which in itself is based on GDP per capita. This classification is briefly presented in Table 1. The upcoming programme for cohesion policy (2021-2017) has been conceived with NUTS 2 regions in mind; smaller than major economic regions (NUTS 1) yet larger than NUTS 3 regions in terms of GDP. It will focus on the green and digital transition (Cohesion policy, 2021), with a budget of 373 billion EUR.

Specifically, as of 2021, EU NUTS level 2 regions can benefit from a number of EU instruments deriving from Cohesion Policy (2021), such as the Just Transition Fund, the European Regional Development Fund, the Cohesion Fund and the European Social Fund Plus, all of which contribute to regional sustainable development. This provides a financial and political basis for regions in Europe to actively participate in SDG implementation, and to submit VLRs.

NUTS level	Type	Number of regions
0	Country	0
1	Major socio-economic regions	104
2	Basic regions for the application of regional policies	283
3	Small regions for specific diagnoses	1345

Table 1: NUTS classifications (Eurostat, 2020b)

The Basque Country is situated on the border of northern Spain and southern France, facing the Atlantic, and as such is at the centre of Western Europe. As an autonomous community in Spain, it is categorised as NUTS level 2, within the north-eastern Spain territory (NL 1) and comprising of the provinces of Álava, Biscay and Gipuzkoa (NL 3). The Basque Country is the only NUTS level 2 region to have submitted its VLRs as of 2021, making its VLRs a promising empirical foundation to study the implementation of SDGs. To achieve this, the Basque Country has devised an elaborate multi-level and multi-stakeholder localisation strategy, which their government define as an "SDG ecosystem". This governance model is thoroughly detailed by Hidalgo (2021) in his report on SDG localisation, as illustrated in Figure 1.

The SDG governance model is guided by the General Secretariat for Social Transition and the 2030 Agenda, established as a branch of the Basque regional government, whose mission is to help build a collaborative social contract culture (Basque Government, 2021). As its name indicates, the Secretariat is aligned with the Euskadi Basque Country 2030 Agenda (Euskadi Basque Country, 2018), the regional government's cornerstone document for implementing the SDGs. The Secretariat's four priorities are all centred around greater cooperation and more proactive alignment with the 2030 Agenda. In terms of cooperation, the Basque Government collaborates on multiple administrative levels: the Provinces, the three Capital Cities, as well as the municipal level. Here, the Basque Multilevel Agenda, the Basque Urban Agenda (Bultzatu, 2050) and the local agenda (Udalsarea 2030) aid to foster cooperation within the Basque Country. Further, the Basque Country cooperates with actors outside the public institutions, namely those in industry and civil society. This is further developed in the Euskadi 2030 Gunea Guide (2020), developed by 17 organisations representing different sectors, which aims to guide public and private organisations in implementing the SDGs. These documents all serve to raise awareness
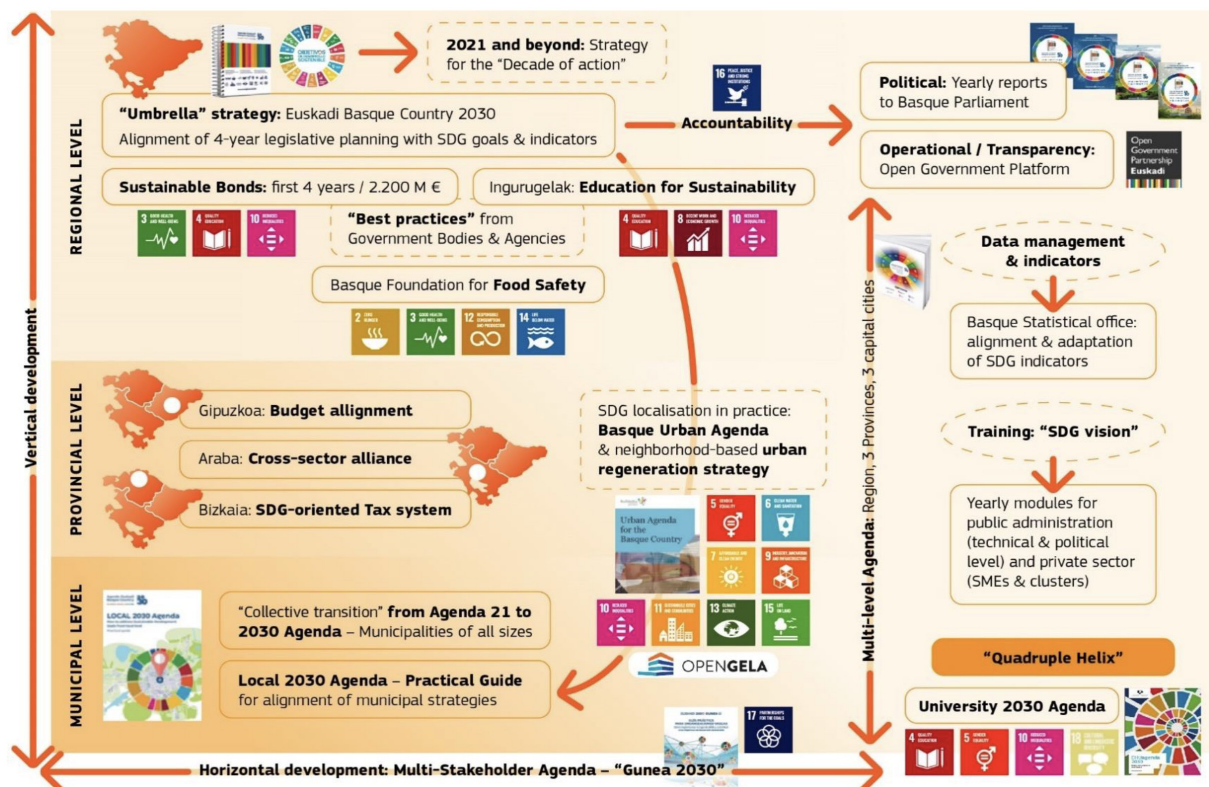

Figure 1: The Basque SDG ecosystem (Hidalgo, 2021)

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of the 2030 Agenda across multiple levels of society in the Basque Country.

Regional identity can also play a part in the localisation of SDGs. Whilst a region's territory is first and foremost established for the purposes of governance – as exemplified by the use of the NUTS classification – it can also be constructed from below in the form of territorial identification. This duality is not necessarily incompatible; it can prove to be a useful tool in governance and in the forming of partnerships.

Culturally, the Basque Country has a strong sense of identity. One of the most recent CIS barometer surveys (2012) operationalises Basque identity through the use of the Linz-Moreno Question to show that inhabitants of the Basque Country identify more with their territory (8.4/10) than with the State (5.5/10), presenting similar results to those in Catalonia. Additionally, more Basques are in favour of promoting their language in 2016 (65%) than in 1991 (55%) 6th Sociolinguistic Survey, 2016).

ANALYSIS: THE BASQUE COUNTRY'S INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO SDGS

Having established the favourable conditions that allow EU regions – including the Basque Country – to implement the SDGs and submit VLRs, this section explores the Basque Country's innovative SDG actions by way of a content analysis and expert collaboration. This briefing note considers cooperation with public institutions (international, national, regional, provincial, city, municipal level) as well as others (private actors and civil society). This cooperation is carried out primarily through grants between institutions, programmes, training, institutional arrangements and the exchange of data/practices, as well as operationalised through various tools, instruments and methods. The note also considers the role of regional identity in facilitating and/or obstructing the implementation of the SDGs. Indeed, regional identity is fundamental in the making of regions as socio-political spaces, and can therefore be an important tool in regional planning and development (Paasi, 2003).

Findings and Observations

This section lays out the four key findings from the combination of the content analysis and expert collaboration. Whilst the first two focus on the effective creation of synergies at various levels of governance, the third centres on guiding principles of implementation, and the fourth delves into the specific mechanisms of implementation.

Governance within the Basque Country

Horizontal and Vertical Cooperation of the Basque Country

■ International interactions   ■ State-interaction   ■ Regionalisation
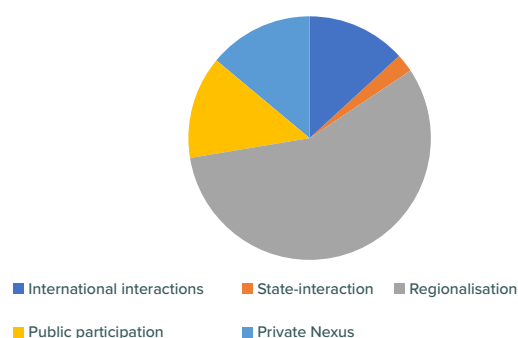■ Public participation   ■ Private Nexus

Figure 2: SDG Cooperation in the Basque Country

In the Basque Country's VLRs, the majority of actions (57%) involve cooperation at the regional level. These actions are often in the form of grants, programmes and institutional arrangements. The last of these in particular involves the mobilisation of the public authorities at the regional, provincial and municipal levels, as well as inter-departmental cooperation for specific tasks. An example of this last linkage is the partnership agreement between the Basque Energy Board and the Basque Department of Education to make schools more. sustainable (BC, 2019, p.14). Some institutional work also combines the two; as is the case for the Ministry of Housing's cooperation with the 3 Basque capitals to cut the number of homeless (BC, 2017, p.7).

These inter-institutional arrangements are much more prominent at the regional level than at other levels, and are spurred by what the Secretariat coins the Basque Country's social contract (Basque Government, 2021), which gives the territory a competitive advantage. This contract is made up from some of the following [non-exhaustive] networks and factors: a fruitful network of collaboration between public, private and academic actors; a dense network of third sector and collaborative (worker-owned) entities, and; a regional identity, which includes language-based policy, a cultural heritage and a sense of belonging. Here, regional identity plays a dual role; language in particular can be both promoted and operationalised through SDG actions, particularly in the context of Target 66 of the Euskadi 2030 Agenda (Promote the use of the Basque Language). All factors and networks are facilitated given the relatively small territorial size of the Basque Country.

Governance beyond the Basque Country

Beyond its territory, the Basque Country is active at the international level. Many of the actions in the VLRs at this level for example involve recognition from international organisations such as the UN on immigration, refugees, human rights and terrorism. The Basque Country is also part of regional-level networks. For instance, each VLR refers to their active participation in the EU's PLATAFORMA network, a pan-European coalition of local and regional governments committed to international cooperation for sustainable development. Additionally, the General Secretariat for External Action and the UN Global Compact are working to help Basque companies to approach the SDGs. Further, on specific technical initiatives, the Basque Country makes use of its geographical and linguistic connections. For example, the triangular cooperation with El Salvador and Costa Rica is often mentioned, with the aim of sharing good practices and implementing "technical cooperation and training actions" (BC, 2019, p.47). Likewise, the Basque Country cooperates with international partners to foster climate change adaption in the Pyrenees – north of the Spanish Basque Country yet at the centre of the greater Basque Country – in the context of ADAPYR. By localising climate change actions in such a way, regions can contribute to SDG implementation beyond their borders. With regards to the State, although synergies are few in the VLRs, and mostly focused on including the Basque Country in existing Spanish initiatives around climate change mitigation, the Basque Country remains committed to participating in all cooperation

mechanisms set-up by the State. In short, the Basque Country possesses various unique ways of contributing to the global development agenda, but remains mindful of a subnational territory's role in global governance.

Guiding principles and adaptability

The Basque Country does not favour specific SDGs over others, but instead operates through the principles and values that guide its SDG-related documents (e.g. Multilevel Agenda, Bultzatu 2050, Udalsarea 2030). In particular, the Secretariat has established seven "driving initiatives" in its Priority Programme to contribute to its four "P's" (Basque Government, 2021) – People (Equity), Planet (Ecology), Prosperity (Solidarity), Peace (Human Rights) – all of which feature throughout the VLRs. These principles are adapted to their context, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, many of the grants and institutional arrangements in the most recent VLR are aimed at building back better in a way that is equitable, an approach which is streamlined across the international regional, provincial, public and private levels, particularly in the context of SDGs 1, 3, 5 and 10. Specifically, many of the actions in SDG 1 aim to redistribute income equitably (BC, 2020, p.7), and some actions in SDG 5 seek to adapt the work-life balance in a way that fits the quarantine situation (BC, 2020, p.21). This narrative does not undo the foundation from the previous VLRs; there is still a strong emphasis on themes such as education and migration, for example, and the focus on climate change is also in line with the gravity expressed in the 2021 IPCC report. Adaptability is also exemplified with regards to the Basque Country's organisational learning capacity, showcased in the Secretariat's ongoing collaboration with Eustat (Basque Institute for Statistics) to optimise the process of monitoring and evaluating SDG progress.

Approaching the SDGs

Despite the recurrence of the Basque Country's guiding principles, we note from our content analysis of the VLRs that the Basque Country principally targets SDGs 10 (Reduce Inequalities), 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), and 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing) throughout its VLRs, as shown in Figure 3. This is not only the case in the VLRs as a whole but also longitudinally, as shown by the low discrepancies between each of the first three VLRs on Figure 3. We can conclude that reducing inequalities through SDG actions is a good and feasible practice for regional governments to carry out, as well

as ensuring peace and good health to a slightly lesser extent. This is also true in the most recent VLR (BC, 2020) given the health and social emergencies resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. This said, tackling these SDGs does not require a standardised approach. Although SDGs 3, 10, and 16 all require a range of institutional interactions at the national, supranational (especially EU interactions), and sub-regional levels, the Basque Country implements them through varying mechanisms. For example, whilst cross-border cooperation is often required in approaching climate change issues in SDG 15, public-private partnerships are common in the context of SDGs 8 (Decent work and Economic growth) and 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure). Examples of these partnerships include the private-public steering group overseeing the Basque Industry 4.0 Strategy and the Iberdrola (private utilities company) and EVE (public Basque Energy Board) joint investments in renewable energy.
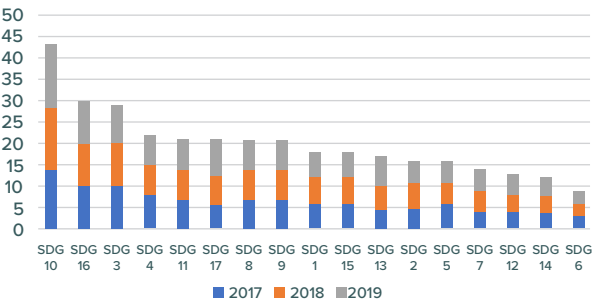

Figure 3: Most frequently targeted SDGs across the BC VLRs

We also note that the programmes implemented and grants distributed at the regional level have a "trickle-down" effect that serves to engage the public and the private sector.
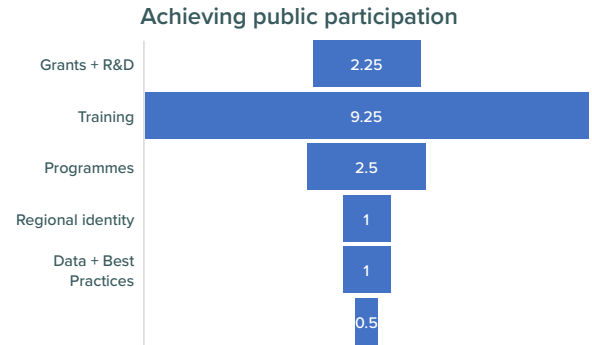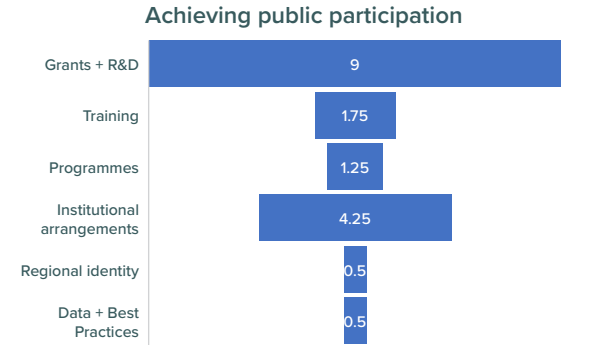

Figure 4: Engaging with the public

Figure 5: Engaging with the private sector

Most of the actions involving public participation are carried out through training (education, workshops, upskilling), often in the fields of health, education, responsible consumption and sustainability. Whilst the former two areas involve training staff, notably in the context of SDGs 3 and 4, the latter two refer to attempts at raising awareness on themes related to sustainability in the context of SDG 12. Often, these actions are catalysed by grants and/or programmes at the regional level, with the aim of upskilling and engaging the public. Additionally, citizens were engaged by way of public consultations regarding new programmes, or through the sharing of information from the governmental level.

Much like the involvement of the public, the private sector is mobilised through regional funding, through calls for proposals from the Basque government for instance. These provide good examples of sustainable public procurement; financial instruments to support strategic sustainability goals. Indeed, to target the more "technical" SDGs (such as SDGs 6, 7, 13, 14 and 15), actions are often contracted to Basque companies. These companies are made more competitive with help from the Basque Country and alliances such as BRTA and SPRI, which create optimal conditions for knowledge transfer and drive R&D for local companies. Further, inter-institutional arrangements in the shape of forums (e.g., the Basque Digital Innovation Hub) serve to implement specific tasks such as funding and/or training of the work force, or to share knowledge. Here, the Multi-actor Forum for the Social Transition and the Agenda 2030 creates a space for public and private entities with a desire to achieve the SDGs.

This section lays five policy recommendations for regions looking to localise SDG actions, based on the results of the analysis above.

Centralising SDG Actions: Regional governments can benefit greatly from establishing a regional department in charge of coordinating efforts towards attaining the SDGs. In the case of the Basque County, this was the General Secretariat for Social Transition and 2030 Agenda.

Adaptability: Regional governments should proactively adapt their SDG actions in a way that befits their situation. For example, the Basque Country's most recent VLR (2020) focused on tackling the social and health emergencies from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Engaging the public: Training staff in key sectors (e.g., health and education), as well as carrying out awareness-raising projects regarding sustainability can be valuable in engaging the public, particularly at the local level. These were prominent features of both the Basque VLRs, as well as in programmes such as Bultzatu 2050 and Udalsarea 2030.

Engaging private actors: Regional governments should consider developing their sustainable public procurement process and forging public-private innovation hubs to exchange knowledge in the private sector. For the example, the exchange of knowledge in the private sector of the Basque Country is facilitated by the Multi-actor Forum for the Social Transition and the Agenda 2030.

Being aware of global governance: Regional governments can foster links on technical issues with communities both near and far through networks. European regions can all benefit from participation in initiatives and networks such as PLATAFORMA and the UN Global Compact.

Policy Insights			
N	Aim	Description	Basque Example
1	Centralising SDG actions	Regional governments can benefit greatly from establishing a regional department in charge of coordinating efforts towards attaining the SDGs.	General Secretariat for Social Transition and 2030 Agenda
2	Adaptability	Regional governments should proactively adapt their SDG actions in a way that befits their situation.	VLR 2020: Tackling the social and health emergencies from the Covid-19 pandemic.
3	Engaging the public	Training staff in key sectors (e.g., health and education), as well as carrying out aware-ness-raising projects regarding sustainability can be valuable in engaging the public, particularly at the local level.	Bultzatu 2050 Udalsarea 2030
4	Engaging private actors	Regional governments should consider developing their sustainable public procurement process and forging public-private innovation hubs to exchange knowledge in the private sector.	Multi-actor Forum for the Social Transition and the Agenda 2030
5	Being aware of global governance	Regional governments can foster links on technical issues with communities both near and far through networks.	PLATAFORMA UN Global Compact

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