Leaders, Followers and the Role of Policy Transfer.
Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals at the Dutch local level

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Abstract

Local implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or Global Goals is a good example of how internationalisation influences the local level. Dutch municipalities contribute to achieving the SDGs by carrying out all kinds of activities and actions. Most of these activities are focused on the own municipality. Local implementation of the Global Goals happens on a voluntary basis. Since it is up to local governments to give substance to the SDGs, they look at each other to get information and learn from each other how they can integrate the worldwide sustainability agenda. In practice, the SDGs are connected with existing municipal policies in line with local priorities and strategies. Municipalities are aware of the specific contexts in which they operate and compare their situations with each other. That is why municipalities do not only look at leading municipalities based on the perceptions they have of the latter's SDG policy performance, but also look at municipalities that are more or less the same, i.e. counterparts that have a similar profile and SDG approach, and face similar challenges in implementing the Global Goals. Because municipalities take into account the specific local conditions, learning rather than imitation is the underlying mechanism of policy transfer processes with respect to the SDGs. Also, the SDGs are often not seen as a way to profile the municipality. Adopting to the SDGs through mutual learning does not really happen, however, due to the limited contact between municipalities and factors that influence the local governance context in which implementation of the SDGs should take place. In fact, the degree of more or less learning depends on many other factors that impact the final step of policy change, i.e. the implementation of the SDGs. Politics particularly plays a role in all of this. Some factors may negatively influence learning processes, such as institutional capacity, ideology and changes in government, while others are the cause why policy change takes place. Policy change through policy transfer is therefore unlikely to happen.

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Preface

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Nowadays, our world is more connected than ever due to globalisation. We live in one big village, some people say. Whether this is indeed true is disputable, but we do know that the influence of internationalisation can also be felt at the local level, where municipalities adopt their policies to this course. In fact, they have been doing this since World War II. In the Netherlands, municipalities decided to get in touch with foreign counterparts that time. City twinnings were the result of these efforts, and some of them still exist today (Hoetjes, 2009). The driving forces beyond internationalisation such as international law and economic competition have strengthened over time. Nowadays, there are more international agreements such as climate treaties in which the role of local authorities in tackling global challenges is increasingly recognised by both the supranational and the local level (Potjer & Hajer, 2017; Kern, 2019; Reckien et al., 2018; Wurzel et al., 2019); there seems to be a growing rivalry between municipalities for attracting capital and tourists in order to strengthen local economies, and to profile themselves at the international stage (Kübler & Piliutyte, 2007; Hoetjes, 2009). Europeanisation as the result of further European integration also influences the internationalisation of the local level. It provides incentives for cities and towns to expand their international activities mainly as the result of various EU regional policy programs that have been set up since the 1980s (Kübler & Piliutyte, 2007). This mutual adaption process (influencing the EU and subnational authorities alike) entails both constraints and opportunities for the local level (RoB, 2013; Fleurke & Willemse, 2007). On the one hand, municipalities must comply with increasing EU legislation and requirements for structural and cohesion funds ('top-down Europeanisation'). On the other hand, local authorities can also influence decision-making and policy-making processes through transnational municipal networks (TMNs) and interest groups of local governments ('bottom-up Europeanisation'), such as Eurocities and CEMR (Council of European Municipalities and Regions) (RoB, 2013; Verhelst, 2019). Some bigger cities even established own offices in Brussels. In the Netherlands, the G4 cities (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht and The Hague) have done so (Verhelst, 2019). The influence of internationalisation/Europeanisation has resulted in a wide variety of international activities and practices undertaken by the local level, also noticed in previous research conducted by the International Agency of the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG International) (VNG I, 2009; VNG II, 2014). These activities are not always international in the sense that they are directly connected to the international stage, such as city twinnings or trade delegations, which can be seen as part of international municipal policies. Some activities are rather indirect in nature and cross many policy areas, such as the implementation of the

United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (also called 'Global Goals'). International aspects of municipal policies are therefore a better way to denote these activities.

Not only municipalities' activities are diverse, also to what extent municipalities are internationally active is not the same. In the academic literature, several factors are put forward for explaining the degree of internationalisation/Europeanisation, such as the institutional setting (legal competences of local authorities and a country's politico-administrative culture) (Kübler & Piliutyte, 2007; Tatham, 2010; Hoetjes, 2009); the presence of entrepreneurial politicians/civil servants (attitude and willingness to be active at the international/European level, and particularly the role of mayors as policy entrepreneurs in all of this) (Verhelst, 2019; Hoetjes, 2009); the relationship between a big city and adjacent municipalities smaller in size (conflict and cooperation, and the desire to profile oneself) (Kübler & Piliutyte, 2007); and the relationship between local and regional governments (again in terms of conflict and cooperation) (Kübler & Piliutyte, 2007), albeit this last factor is less relevant in the Dutch context. The size of a municipality (knowledge and expertise, and the number of civil servants engaging in international/European affairs) seems to be the most robust factor for explaining the scope of international policies, however (Hoetjes, 2009; RoB, 2013; Verhelst, 2019). Therefore, it is not a surprise mainly bigger cities are the most active ones in undertaking activities such as trade delegations. Moreover, these cities are often headed by prominent mayors who consider carrying out international activities to be important, as they can boost a city's self-image at the international stage (Hoetjes, 2009; Kübler & Piliutyte, 2007).

One factor not taken into account by scholars so far is whether learning also matters with respect to the degree of internationalisation of the local level. In other words, do municipalities also learn from each other to be internationally active? Both academics and policymakers consider learning between municipalities to be crucial, particularly for the following three reasons (Potjer & Hajer, 2017; Stead & Pojani, 2018; Kern, 2019). First of all, despite different local governance contexts, municipalities are often confronted with similar challenges, which increasingly entail international aspects. Migration and climate change are but a few examples. Secondly, local authorities often lack the adequate capacities in terms of human and financial resources to deal with these problems. Thirdly, the problems local authorities face do not stop at the border. Experimenting with innovative solutions and sharing these solutions with each other are seen by scholars and politicians as a way to tackle collective-action problems (Potjer & Hajer, 2017; Stead & Pojani, 2018; Barber, 2013). This also corresponds to a third dimension of Europeanisation as distinguished in the academic literature, the cross-loading dimension

('horizontal Europeanisation'). In city networks, innovative policy ideas are exchanged between local authorities (Huggins, 2017; Verhelst, 2019). Similar to the scope of international activities undertaken at the municipal level, mostly large cities play a key role here, albeit this also depends on the given policy. These places and city networks operate as laboratories of innovative initiatives to deal with challenges such as climate change, thereby supporting processes of learning-by-doing and exchange of 'best practices' (Bulkeley & Betsill, 2005; Reckien et al., 2018; Wurzel et al., 2019). These cities often act as leaders/pioneers, i.e. deliberately seeking to attract followers, or not in case of the latter (Torney, 2019), thereby setting an example for other municipalities to follow and implement their ideas, policy instruments or initiatives. However, are they indeed followed by other, non-leading municipalities? And is *learning* the mechanism explaining this followership, or is this rather the result of *imitating* successful models as a response to uncertainty (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983)? Also, it is often assumed that smaller and medium-sized cities are followers or non-followers/laggards. As showed in Wurzel et al. 's (2019) case study on climate change, this is not necessarily the case.

To assess whether learning or imitation is the mechanism underlying policy transfer, i.e. the adoption of ideas or policies from other municipalities that leads to acting internationally, the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or Global Goals at the Dutch local level is used as a case study. First of all, the SDGs are a good example of how internationalisation influences the local level. Although they were set up at the supranational level and endorsed by states - and therefore national authorities are responsible for achieving the goals -, the recognised role of the local level in tackling global challenges has led to embedding the integrated sustainability agenda in local policies and practices. Secondly, since the implementation of SDGs happens on a voluntary basis, a distinction might be made between municipalities that are quite far with connecting local policies to the Global Goals, local authorities that want to do 'something' with the sustainability agenda but do not know how, and municipalities that do not have an interest in contributing to the SDGs at all. In other words, we may distinguish leaders/pioneers, followers, and non-followers/laggards among Dutch municipalities. Thirdly, the SDGs entail a clear international dimension. Global Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) particularly expresses this. Thus, some Dutch municipalities may integrate the SDGs in international activities such as bilateral partnerships with counterparts abroad. They can inspire other municipalities to do the same. This may lead to a higher number of Dutch municipalities being active at the international stage. Fourthly, my position as a research intern at VNG International makes it possible to get access to relevant persons and data, since VNG International facilitates learning between Dutch cities and towns through the Municipalities4GlobalGoals campaign.

Using the SDGs as a case study to examine the influence of internationalisation on the Dutch local level leads to the formulation of the following research question: *Do Dutch local governments adopt to the Sustainable Development Goals through mutual learning or imitation?*

I formulated the following sub questions that can answer the main question. First of all, what does the implementation of the SDGs look like at the local level and what role does VNG International play in this? Secondly, how do leading municipalities give substance to the Global Goals? Thirdly, what does policy transfer between leading and non-leading municipalities look like and does this lead to policy change on the side of the following municipality?

1.2 Scientific and societal relevance
This thesis is important in several ways. First of all, learning as a factor influencing the degree of internationalisation of the local level has not been considered in the academic literature so far. By making a connection between learning and to what extent local authorities engage in international activities, we can assess whether this factor matters, i.e. whether municipalities learn to act internationally. Secondly, although the academic literature provides insight into how large cities can act as leaders/pioneers, particularly in the field of environment, less is known about followership. In addition, medium-sized cities can play the role of leader/pioneer as well (Wurzel et al., 2019; Kern, 2019). Thirdly, in the academic literature, no connection has been made so far between followership and learning or imitation as explaining mechanisms for policy change. Thus, this research can contribute to filling up the scientific gap about followers - and by extension - non-followers in policy areas where binding rules are lacking, such as in the case of the SDGs.

As regards the societal relevance, by focusing on the Global Goals and the different ways they are implemented at the local level, municipalities that want to do 'something' with the sustainability agenda can get an idea how they can do this by giving them some useful insights and clues to shape their policies and practices based on their specific strategic priorities and needs. Secondly, by mapping out the challenges local governments face that already started integrating the Global Goals in their policies, this thesis helps other municipalities to take account of these complexities when taking the initiative to embed the SDGs. Thirdly, by using the SDGs as a case study, this thesis also helps to show the important role of the local level in achieving the objectives of the worldwide sustainability agenda. Fourthly, this research is also relevant for VNG International as facilitator of the Municipalities4GlobalGoals campaign. If municipalities indeed learn from each other, to what extent does the agency play a role? Moreover, based on the overview this thesis provides of leading and non-

leading municipalities and how they exchange information, VNG International can tailor the campaign to the needs of municipalities.

1.3 Reading guide

Chapter II gives an overview of the academic literature regarding the two main mechanisms that might explain how policy change takes place at the local level. Based on policy learning literature, concepts such as policy transfer are covered. Leadership/pioneership and (non-)followership concepts based on urban sustainability and climate change literature are also discussed. The methods to conduct this research can be found in the third chapter. Methodological considerations and the operationalisation of concepts and factors are also discussed in this chapter. Chapter IV is about the implementation of the Global Goals at the Dutch local level and VNG International's Municipalities4GlobalGoals campaign. Chapter V is focused on leading municipalities. What policy transfer and policy change look like in practice is discussed in Chapter VI. The conclusion, discussion and recommendations can be found in Chapter VII. The questions and outcomes of the survey and the interview questions which were used as techniques for data gathering and analysis can be found in the Appendices.

Theoretical Framework

2.1 Introduction

This chapter gives an overview of the academic literature regarding *policy transfer* between municipalities and policy change as an outcome of this transfer. Dolowitz and Marsh (1996, p. 344) define policy transfer as ''a process in which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions, etc. in one time and/or place is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements and institutions in another time and/or place''. Applied to the context of the SDGs, *policy change* concerns the implementation of the Global Goals at the local level as an outcome of this process, i.e. the transfer of knowledge - in the broadest sense of the word - about the integrated sustainability agenda (see Figure 1). In other words, policy change is the dependent variable. Based on the literature that identifies leadership as an important factor that influences policy transfer, I assume that municipalities' roles also matter in the context of the SDGs and - by extension - that municipalities seeking ways to implement the Global Goals look at these leading municipalities. That is why this chapter starts with discussing concepts such as leadership and followership (Part I). Then, two mechanisms underlying policy transfer are discussed: *mimetic isomorphism* as component of DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) concept of *institutional isomorphism* and learning. The latter can be seen as a three-stages process which takes place between local governments (Part II).

Figure 1	Basic argumentation

'Filter'

Municipality (leader/pioneer)	→	Municipality (follower)
	Underlying mechanisms	Policy change (dependent variable)
	Learning/imitation	
	Policy transfer	
	Knowledge	
	Channels	
	Peer-to-peer/VNG	
	International/TMNs/other	
	Conditions	
	Local governance context	
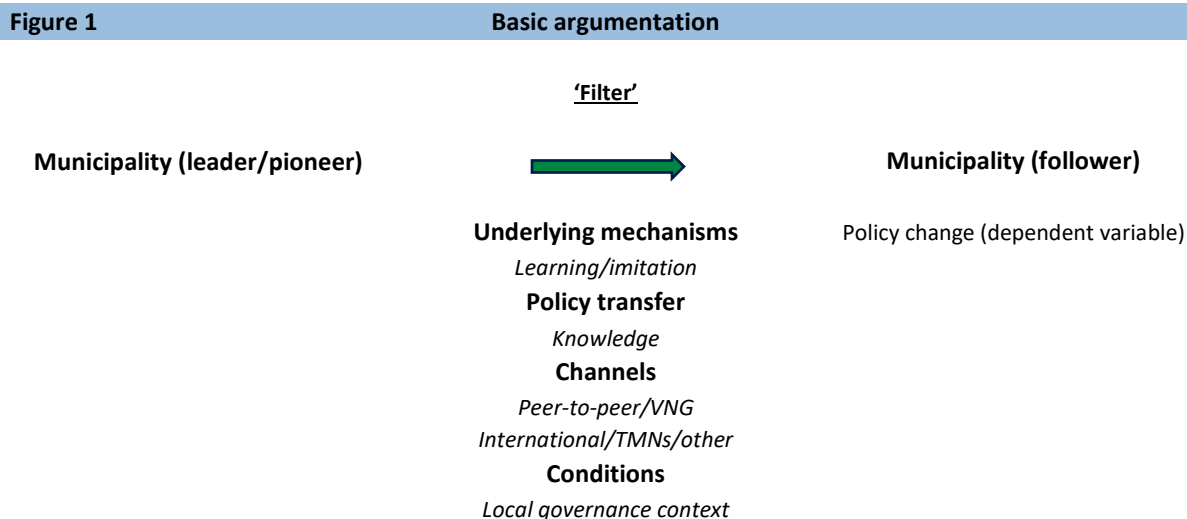
Four things stand between a leader/pioneer and a follower: the underlying mechanisms of policy transfer, the contents of this transfer, the channels through which policy transfer takes place, and the local conditions.

The channels through which imitation/learning about Global Goals takes place are the next topic of discussion (Part III). The concept of 'best practices' is key here. Based on the literature on policy innovation we know policy change is not always the result of learning, however. The governance context in which policies and institutions taken from another municipality are developed also matters, and local-level and other factors influence the embeddedness of these policies and institutions. In other words, there are certain *conditions* before the Global Goals can be implemented by the municipality that follows a leading city or town (Part IV). In sum, there are four things that stand between a leader/pioneer and a follower, like a 'filter': the policy transfer, the underlying mechanisms, the channels and the conditions (see Figure 1). The chapter concludes with a short summary.

I. Leadership, Pioneership and Followership

2.2.1 Leadership: through intermediary actors or through performance?
In the academic literature, political leadership is identified as an important factor that influences policy transfer, particularly learning processes between local authorities (see also paragraph 2.3.3). This leadership is mainly embodied in 'intermediary' actors, influential individuals such as mayors and senior policy officers who connect the local policy network with channels that facilitate learning (Huggins, 2017; Kern & Bulkeley, 2009). These municipal representatives act as 'policy entrepreneurs' by bringing people together, thereby creating an environment where learning processes can flourish (Kern & Bulkeley, 2009; Lee & Van de Meene, 2012). In other words, these intermediary actors are powerful *leaders*. Leadership can also be embodied by municipalities: a high level of policy performance as perceived by other municipalities is one of the factors that facilitates learning between municipalities (Lee & Van de Meene, 2012). One can argue that these municipalities that are perceived as good sources of information act as *leaders*, setting an example that may be followed by other municipalities. The academic literature does not make clear how political leadership by influential local actors such as a mayor and a municipality's high level of policy performance as perceived by other municipalities relate to each other. One can argue that leadership manifests itself through an intermediary actor or policy performance, or through a combination of both.

2.2.2 Leaders and pioneers
Finding patterns of leaders and followers among municipalities, we have to delve deeper into the concept of leadership. I mainly use theories on environmental leadership derived from urban sustainability and climate governance literature to do so. However, one should keep in mind that the

SDGs, although they are mostly about sustainability, do not only cover climate-related issues in that respect.

Scholarship on climate governance is mainly focused on large municipalities and their city networks, acting either as climate leaders or pioneers, i.e. not deliberately setting an example for others to follow. However, the role of *followers* and the relationship between leaders/pioneers and followers is often overlooked. An exception is Torney (2019), who conceptualises this leader-followership which is built on Liefferink and Wurzel's (2017) framework on environmental leadership (see also paragraph 2.2.3). These two authors make analytical distinctions between leaders and pioneers, and differentiate between internal and external climate ambitions.

Although Liefferink and Wurzel's leadership framework was originally applied in an international context, with a focus on states as actors, it might be an useful tool to establish patterns of leadership/pioneership and followership in the context of the SDGs. Wurzel et al. (2019) also use this framework for their analysis of climate leadership by structural disadvantaged maritime port cities in the UK and Germany, thus applying it to the local level. Moreover, albeit the focus of the framework is on environment leadership, the same observations as elaborated below may still apply to the context of the much broader Global Goals. Thus, internal and external ambitions and associated positions for identifying leaders/pioneers may still be valid with respect to the SDGs.

2.2.3 Different ambitions, different roles
Leaders deliberately seek to attract followers, while pioneers normally do not care about attracting followers (Liefferink & Wurzel, 2017). Another dichotomy that can be found in Liefferink and Wurzel's framework is the difference between *internal* and *external* climate ambitions. Combining these ambitions leads to four positions. While high external ambitions would amount to *leadership*, a combination of low external but high internal climate ambitions would lead to climate *pioneership* (see Table 1).

Table 1 Internal and external ambitions and corresponding positions

	Low internal ambitions	High internal ambitions
Low external ambitions	Non-follower/laggard	Pioneer
High external ambitions	Symbolic leader ('window-dressing')	Constructive or conditional pusher ('substantive leader')

Source: Liefferink and Wurzel (2017).

A combination of both high internal and high external climate ambitions turns a state into either a *constructive* or a *conditional pusher*. A state that acts as a conditional pusher only implements policy initiatives driven by its own high ambitions if others adopt similar measures. Moreover, economic considerations often override these climate ambitions. In contrast, a constructive pusher aims to set a good example and gives priority to environmental concerns (Liefferink & Wurzel, 2017).

Three things are important to mention to this regard. First of all, in differentiating high and low climate ambitions, one should keep in mind that this entails a normative dimension, and that different views exist on what beneficial is for the environment (Liefferink & Wurzel, 2017). The same applies to municipalities. For example, members of the Council may think differently about the importance of the environment. Secondly, ambitions are not static, which also means that a municipality can act as a leader for some time but can change its position into that of a symbolic leader and vice versa. Thirdly, as argued by Liefferink and Wurzel (2017), a state can play the role of leader/pioneer by introducing a first-mover climate action or a certain environmental policy innovation ('the first in class'), or setting the highest ecological standard ('the best in class'), which might be combined (Liefferink & Wurzel, 2017). This also pertains to the local level. A municipality can be the first one to incorporate the SDGs in all its programs, for example.

2.2.4 Followership

Torney (2019) adds climate followership to Liefferink and Wurzel's (2017) framework, which the author describes as ''the adoption of a policy, idea, institution, approach, or technique for responding to climate change by one actor by subsequent reference to its previous adoption by another actor'' (p. 169). Like adopting climate action strategies which has mostly been done on a voluntary basis (Kern, 2019), 'best practices' on the SDGs are not automatically taken up. Applying Torney's (2019) definition of followership to the SDGs, a municipality follows intentionally another municipality that acts as a leader/pioneer. This followership can emerge through a pathway that is based on a *logic of appropriateness* (see Table 2) (March & Olsen, 1998; Torney, 2019). Followers can be attracted through *exemplary* performance by municipalities acting as leaders/pioneers or through the knowledge they share, which followers consider as appropriate or relevant (Torney, 2019). The followership that stems from this logic emerges through persuasion and responds to *cognitive* leadership, i.e. the capability to interpret, define and reframe problems and ideas in such a way real innovative initiatives and strategies can be developed [pioneership is unlikely, for this would require intentionality by the municipality that acts as a pioneer] (Wurzel et al., 2019; Torney, 2019).

Conditions that facilitate followership are shaped by the logic of appropriateness and depend on both the characteristics of a leader/pioneer and follower, and the relationship between them (see Table 2) (Torney, 2019). To what extent a municipality follows a leader/pioneer depends on both the *ability* of a leader/pioneer to *(re)frame* knowledge, to what extent a follower perceives the exemplary performance or knowledge as *legitimate* and *credible*, and the size of the *gap* between leader/pioneer and follower in terms of interests and norms, i.e. what is acceptable to the follower (Torney, 2019). For a followership that responds to *exemplary* leadership, a follower needs to consider the leader to be legitimate and credible. In that respect, a *symbolic* leader is less likely to attract followers compared to a *substantive* leader (Torney, 2019). The ability to produce new knowledge and understanding, and to disseminate that knowledge is important for *cognitive* leadership. A leader who successfully builds and disseminates knowledge through persuasion is more likely to attract followers (Torney, 2019).

Notwithstanding the characteristics of the leader/pioneer and the relationship between the leader/pioneer and follower, *domestic* conditions also shape the degree of followership (see Table 2) (Torney, 2019). We will turn to this local governance context when we discuss policy change at the local level (see also paragraph 2.5.2).

Table 2 Followership: pathway, characteristics and conditions

	Type of leadership/pioneership	Conditions
Logic of appropriateness: *Learning and/or persuasion*	Cognitive leadership Exemplary leadership/pioneership	Leader's/pioneer's characteristics *- ability to (re)frame issues* *- ability to disseminate knowledge* Follower's characteristics *- Domestic conditions* *- Pre-existing norms and beliefs* Relationship characteristics *- size of normative gap*

Source: Torney (2019) (adapted).

2.2.5 Different ambitions, different roles

As discussed earlier, Liefferink and Wurzel (2017) distinct different types of leaders/pioneers based on their internal and external ambitions. According to Torney (2019), a same distinction can be made for followers. However, the author does not elaborate on this. Therefore, I made my own analytical distinction (see Table 3). *Symbolic followers* are municipalities that follow leaders'/pioneers' external

ambitions by committing themselves to do something with the SDGs, for example, setting targets, without implementing specific measures. Those municipalities that do not explicitly declare their commitment, but follow by implementing a leader's/pioneer's measures are *back-stage followers*. When a municipality follows both a leader's/pioneer's internal and external ambitions, i.e. it declares its commitment to implementing the SDGs and carry out concrete measures, the municipality acts as a *front-stage follower*. Those municipalities that neither follow internal nor external ambitions, i.e. they do not act at all, are *non-followers/laggards*.

Table 3 Internal and external ambitions and positions

	Low internal ambitions	High internal ambitions
Low external ambitions	Non-follower/laggard	Back-stage follower
High external ambitions	Symbolic follower	Front-stage follower

Source: Author's own matrix.

2.2.6 Summary
Leading municipalities take different positions based on their internal ambitions (measures) and external ambitions (commitment). They may act as a symbolic leader, pioneer or constructive/conditional leader. Followership emerges on the basis of a logic of appropriateness, i.e. through learning and/or persuasion. The conditions under which followership emerges depend on the characteristics of the follower and leader/pioneer and local domestic conditions. Non-leading municipalities may act as symbolic, back-stage or front-stage followers. Those municipalities that neither follow internal nor external ambitions can be described as non-followers/laggards.

II Policy transfer: Imitation or Learning

2.3.1 Introduction
So far we have discussed the concepts of leadership, pioneership and (non-)followership. These patterns of leaders/pioneers and followers form the foundation for assessing whether policy change takes place as the outcome of learning or imitating 'successful' practices from leading municipalities, although domestic circumstances and conditions influence this policy change as well (see also paragraph 2.5.2).

2.3.2 Institutional isomorphism
In explaining why organisations are so similar in terms of organisational forms and whose interests these forms serve, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) distinguish three mechanisms of ''isomorphic institutional

change'': *normative* mechanisms arising from professionalisation, *coercive* mechanisms arising from regulation and societal expectations, and *mimetic* mechanisms. The latter can be said to be the most important here, as the two others seem less relevant in the context of the SDGs (although societal expectations regarding the Global Goals may influence change). *Mimetic isomorphism* refers to the copying of 'successful' role models by organisations as a standard response to uncertain environments in which organisations are positioned. These modelled organisations are perceived as legitimate and their models are believed to be rational (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In that respect, this mechanism also fits the *logic of appropriateness* through which followership emerges, as discussed in paragraph 2.2.4. Moreover, as argued by DiMaggio and Powell (1983), organisational modelling as a response to uncertainty and the diffusion of practices can take place either intentionally or unintentionally. In other words, the modelled organisation acts as a leader/pioneer. When we apply the third form of institutional isomorphism to the context of the Global Goals, we can argue that policy change, i.e. the implementation of the SDGs at the local level, may take place as a result of copying practices due to the uncertainty that surrounds the broad sustainability agenda. In sum, mimetic isomorphism might be the mechanism explaining policy change (see Figure 1).

2.3.3 Learning as a three-stages process
Next to imitation, learning might be the mechanism explaining policy change, i.e. the implementation of the Global Goals at the local level. Local authorities seek ways to enhance sustainability by taking up initiatives but also adopting ideas or even whole policies from other municipalities. This learning or *policy learning* - when focused on a specific policy problem - is a central mechanism that can enhance the adaptive capacity of cities and can stimulate policy adaption (Lee & Van de Meene, 2012). One can find many conceptualisations of learning in the academic literature on policy learning, policy transfer as well as policy diffusion, each used in diverse contexts with terminologies derived from different disciplines. Notwithstanding the different types of learning and their components, essentially, learning is a process aimed at seeking information in order to make decisions and take action (Andersson & Cook, 2019; Lee & Van de Meene, 2012).

To get grip of the complicated process of policy learning, Lee and Van de Meene (2012) separate learning into three stages (see Figure 2). *Information seeking* as a learning activity is the first step. Moreover, it forms the very foundation of policy learning, as acquiring information from good sources is critical for making learning possible (Lee & Van de Meene, 2012). The knowledge an actor seeks from its peer can be very diverse and aligns with questions such as what ('facts'), how ('ability'), why ('principles'), and who (which actor knows what).

Two types of knowledge can be discerned here: *explicit* or codified (formal) knowledge, which is independent of the actor who holds the information, and *implicit* (tacit) knowledge, which depends on the relationship between the one who holds the information and another actor who seeks that information (Lee & Van de Meene, 2012). Know-how of the first type is transmittable without face-to-face contact and can be written down, while the second type is more subtle and mostly transmittable through direct contact. However, it is said that the latter form is less likely to be mobilised than the former (Andersson & Cook, 2019). Table 4 gives an overview of the two types of knowledge, applied to the context of leading and non-leading/following municipalities.

Figure 2 Learning as a three-stages process
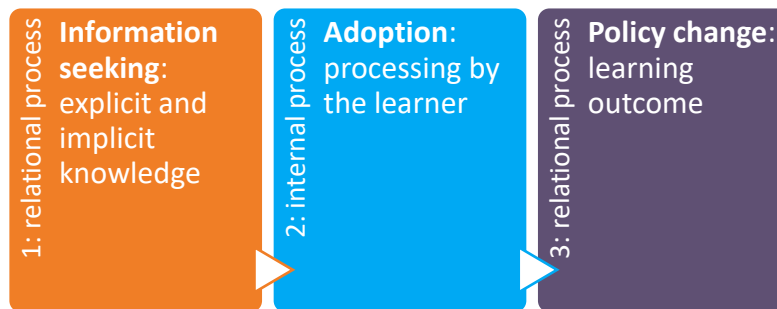
Source: Lee and Van de Meene (2012) (adapted).

Table 4 Two types of knowledge

	Explicit/formal knowledge	Implicit/tacit knowledge
Relationship leader/pioneer-follower	Independent of relationship leader/pioneer and follower	Depending on relationship leader/pioneer and follower
Codification	Codified	Uncodified (face-to-face)

The second stage of learning, *adoption*, is mainly about internally processing the acquired knowledge by the information-seeking actor and depends on the learner's characteristics (experiences from the past, prior knowledge, and belief system) and the aims the learning actor pursues. Thus, unlike the first stage, this is not a relational process. Connecting new information to what one already knows may lead to modification of the acquired information, but may also result in a shift in the learner's belief system and a reconsideration of prior assumptions (Lee & Van de Meene, 2012). This internal process of evaluating and judging information is emphasised by the lesson drawing literature (Lee & Van de Meene, 2012).

Policy change is the last stage and the most complicated one. Like the first stage, it is a relational process as there are often many stakeholders involved. There are also many factors influencing the outcome of learning (see also paragraph 2.5.2). This explains perhaps why there is not necessarily a direct and causal link between the previous stages and the third one. Rather, information seeking and adoption act as sources of inspiration that influence indirectly learning outcomes (Kern & Bulkeley, 2009; Stead & Pojani, 2018); direct implementation of what is learned (or modelled) is therefore *not* often the case (see also paragraph 2.5.3). What is more, only when both the local conditions on the side of the follower and the relationship between a leading and a non-leading municipality (as well as the channels through which policy transfer takes places, see also paragraph 2.4.3) are examined at the same time, one can fully understand if, how and why policy goals, instruments or content are adjusted as the outcome of the learning process (Lee & Van de Meene, 2012).

2.3.4 Summary
Mimetic isomorphism refers to copying behaviour of information-seeking organisations as a response to uncertain environments in which they are positioned, and can be seen as one of the two mechanisms underlying policy transfer. Policy learning is a process which can be seen as three stages: information seeking, adoption and policy change. However, the latter is not necessarily the result of the two previous learning activities. There are two types of knowledge, i.e. the contents of policy transfer: explicit knowledge and implicit knowledge. While the former can be written down, the latter depends on direct contact between the municipality that holds the information and the municipality that seeks that information.

III Policy transfer: Knowledge and Channels

2.4.1 Learning through 'best practices'
As described above, one can distinguish between explicit and implicit knowledge. The knowledge information-seeking municipalities ('policy borrowers') seek from leading peers ('policy lenders') are mostly shared through so-called 'best practices' (Stead & Pojani, 2018). Best practices can be promoted through the website of a network municipalities participate in, peer-to-peer contacts, publications, study tours, conferences and award ceremonies (Lee & Van de Meene, 2012). The latter three can be described as *informational infrastructures* that ''frame and package knowledge about best policy practices, successful cities and cutting-edge ideas and then present that information to specific audiences'' (McCann, 2008, p. 12), thereby shaping the understandings of participants what is successful and what can be transferred to other contexts (Andersson & Cook, 2019). Notwithstanding

this framing issue, these events entail two benefits: they enable the dissemination of *implicit* knowledge (see Table 4) and they make ideas and innovations that are presented attractive and conceivable by infusing them with imagination, which can improve learning capacities (Andersson & Cook, 2019; Potjer & Hajer, 2017; Stead & Pojani, 2018).

Best practices are not necessarily successful and their reputation are sometimes rather the result of programmatic or municipal spin doctoring in order to promote one's city. Moreover, difficulties or specific details might be obscured (Stead & Pojani, 2018).

2.4.2 Limits to the transferability of best practices
The transferability of best practices is quite limited. Four reasons can be put forward for this. Firstly, for an example that can be followed by others, the context needs to be clear. Therefore, best practices are often written down in form of policy transfer documents. However, the formal language used in those document cannot sufficiently translate *implicit* knowledge that is required to fully understand why a policy program was successful (Stead & Pojani, 2018). Secondly, best practices are often de-politicised and de-contextualized; the political dimension nor social and cultural differences are taken into account (Stead & Pojani, 2018). Thirdly, looking at the different components of best practices, such as ideas, methods, and programs, there is disagreement which parts make the most sense to exchange. Some scholars argue that medium visible components such as methods and operating rules are the most transferable, while others argue that principles are better suited to apply, since they underpin each policy (Stead & Pojani, 2018). Fourthly, although policy officials often argue that learning is important, many of them do not believe this effects internal decision-making processes. This is even more the case for best practices from international counterparts (Stead & Pojani, 2018).

2.4.3 Different channels
Modelling practices of other municipalities out of uncertainty ('imitation') and/or seeking specific information ('learning') about the Global Goals may take place through different channels. Municipalities can get information about the SDGs from other Dutch municipalities, but they can also get this knowledge from foreign counterparts.

National level
An important channel to learn more about the Global Goals is VNG International as facilitator of Municipalities4GlobalGoals campaign. Currently, 90 (out of 355) municipalities joined this campaign. VNG International offers all kinds of services to help municipalities, such as providing communication materials, tools and guidelines/guides to start as a 'Global Goals municipality'. Furthermore, VNG

International organises events to facilitate exchange of best practices (VNG III, 2020) (see also paragraph 4.3.2). Policy transfer can also take place between two municipalities outside a network or organisation, i.e. through peer-to-peer contact.

International level

Municipalities can learn from counterparts through different channels. A first channel to learn more about the sustainability agenda are city twinnings. Indeed, as argued by Hoetjes (2009) who distinguishes different waves of municipal twinnings since World War II, the most recent wave of initiatives has mainly been driven by the SDGs because of concerns about the environment and good governance. Yet, most of these cities' twinnings seem quite passive and forsaken nowadays. Others have been eliminated over time (Hoetjes, 2009).

A second channel which may serve a way to learn more about the Global Goals are transnational municipal networks (TMNs), which have mainly emerged as a response to further European integration and shifting competences between different government levels in the 1980s (Kern & Bulkeley, 2009; Huggins, 2017). There are all kinds of transnational municipal networks and they are not only limited to the level of the EU (Huggins, 2017). Yet, despite some different functional structures and the niche policy areas they focus on, they provide a platform for exchanging best practices between municipalities and the quick dissemination of innovative ideas. This way, they facilitate learning between members, despite the somewhat weak ties between municipalities (Kern & Bulkeley, 2009; Lee & Van de Meene, 2012; Bellinson & Chu, 2019). This exchange of best practices may also apply to the SDGs, and the information municipalities get from counterparts in networks may in turn pass on to other Dutch municipalities outside these networks. However, municipalities participating in these TMNs may have a head start compared to local authorities not engaging in these networks. For those municipalities that do not participate it may be harder to get information and to find ways to implement the SDGs at the local level.

Municipalities can also learn through other channels at the international level. The CEMR (Council of European Municipalities and Regions) and its associated network Platforma is an important channel that facilitates exchange of knowledge in the field of the SDGs. However, CEMR is an interest group that represents national associations of municipalities, unlike TMNs (Kern & Bulkeley, 2009). Therefore, this channel facilitates rather indirectly learning about the SDGs. This applies even more to the umbrella organisation for local governments - United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) - that represents members' interests at the level of the UN.

2.4.4 Summary

Knowledge in the broadest sense of the word is often disseminated as 'best practices' through websites and publications, but also at conferences and award ceremonies. However, these stories might not be so successful as they are promoted, as their reputation may rather be the result of municipal spin doctoring. In addition, the transferability of best practices is quite limited. One of the reasons is that these success stories are de-politicised and de-contextualised. The contents of policy transfer can be facilitated through different channels at the national and international level, including VNG International and TMNs.

IV Policy change: Conditions

2.5.1 Introduction

As we have seen, four things stand as a 'filter' between a leader/pioneer and a follower: the underlying mechanisms of policy transfer (imitation or learning); the contents of this policy transfer (knowledge in the broadest sense of the word, often promoted as 'best practices'); the channels through which policy transfer takes place (at the national and/or international level); and the conditions under which policy change takes place (see Figure 1). The latter is perhaps the most important one, as the local governance context determines whether and how what has been taken from another municipality can also be implemented. Politics plays an important role here. After all, the local level is another political arena where both political and sectoral interests clash (Bondarouk, 2019). In fact, there are many factors influencing this final step of learning.

2.5.2 Factors

The specific local governance context creates the conditions for making policy change possible. It is therefore important to look at factors. An overview of these factors can be found in Table 5. The influence of these factors on the local level makes the context in which municipalities operate different from each other. In addition, contexts entail a temporal and a situational dimension. For example, existing policy cannot be easily changed due to *path dependency*, choices that have been made in the past and still persist, limiting current decisions (Bovens, 't Hart & Van Twist, 2012). An example that shows the situational dimension of contexts is the influence of economic adversity (Bovens, 't Hart & Van Twist, 2012). Municipalities cannot easily do something against this, but they have to deal with the consequences of worsened economic conditions. In practice, this means cuts. In sum, municipalities operate in *dissimilar contexts*, which makes policy change through policy transfer complicated.

Internal factors

In the academic literature, one can find a whole range of local-level factors that influence policy transfer, particularly learning processes and their outcomes. Lee and Van de Meene (2012) point at the importance of *institutional capacity*, *ideology*, the *roles stakeholders* play and the *power relationships* between them. A *shift in the composition of the local government* can also impact the decision whether something that has been taken from another municipality will be implemented (Lee & Van de Meene, 2012).

External factors

In addition to local-level factors, external factors can also play a role. One can think of *issue saliency*. Since politicians have limited time, they have to make choices on which issues they want to focus. So-called *focusing events* such as a disaster can push a topic on the political agenda and make it more prominent. Reverse it also means that if the political saliency of an issue is low, the pressure to do something about it is also low (Versluis, 2004). Another factor is the *role of the media* that as an external actor can either enhance or challenge existing ideas and perspectives on a specific policy problem (Lee & Van de Meene, 2012).

Table 5 Overview of factors

Local-level factors	External factors	Network factors
Institutional capacity	*Focusing events*	*Sociocultural distance between local authorities*
Ideology	*Role of the media*	*Multi-stakeholder advisory committee*
Role of stakeholders		*Perceptions of high-level policy performance*
Power relationships between stakeholders		
Changes in government		

Network factors

Although the governance context shapes the way municipalities exchange information as well as how what is taken from other local authorities is institutionalised at the local level, the channels through which policy transfer takes place such as a TMN and its characteristics also matter. For example, in their research on policy learning in the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, Lee and Van de Meene (2012) discern three factors that facilitate learning processes in a TMN. *Cultural similarities* (language and regional proximity), the *presence of a multi-stakeholder governing body* and *high levels of policy performance* are cities' attributes that have a positive influence on learning relationships within the

network the authors argue. Thus, speaking a different language require more effort to translate information, therefore hindering communication. The same applies to geographical location. When municipalities are close to each other, they are more likely to seek information and learn from each other. In contrast, it takes more effort to communicate with peers further away. Moreover, the costs of interacting could be perceived as too high, thereby hindering learning from each other (Lee & Van de Meene, 2012). This is in line with Stead and Pojani's (2018) research on learning between cities and regions in a much broader context than a TMN. As observed by these authors, there is a strong bias towards municipalities located in the same region, because local actors often personally know each other and consider their peers to be trustful people. One can therefore argue that the *sociocultural distance between local authorities* is an important network factor that influences learning about the SDGs.

The existence of a *city-stakeholder advisory committee* consisting of external advisors or NGOs would also stimulate learning, as these committees show government officials different perspectives and opinions on policies and provide them the skills and willingness to cooperate and learn from others (Lee & Van de Meene, 2012). This network factor may also apply to learning about the SDGs, if these committees exist at the Dutch local level.

The knowledge or awareness of *high-level policy performance* was identified by the authors as a third factor that impacts learning relationships between network members. High-performing cities act as sources of information for other municipalities based on the latter's perception and understanding of these cities' policy performance. Thus, these high-performing cities act as leaders/pioneers. This performance not only depends on the experience high-ranking actors have in a specific policy field, but also on to what extent information about their performance is spread across a TMN (Lee & Van de Meene, 2012). This information can be disseminated through conferences, award ceremonies and publications. Whether the practical examples as distributed by these cities through a TMN or another channel are indeed 'successful' is another question, though (see also paragraph 2.4.1).

The varied combination of local-level or internal factors, external factors and network factors as discussed above and the dissimilar governance contexts in which municipalities operate, explains why similar *innovations in governance*, i.e. certain ideas aimed at inducing a qualitative change that are disseminated as best practices through channels, leads to various learning outcomes (see Figure 3) (Bellinson & Chu, 2019). However, more than often policy change does not happen. Dissimilar contexts is surely the reason, but there is more going on. For this, we have to look deeper at how policy comes about and is implemented.
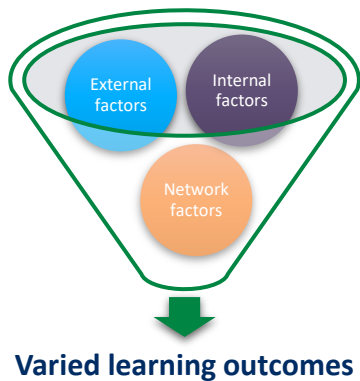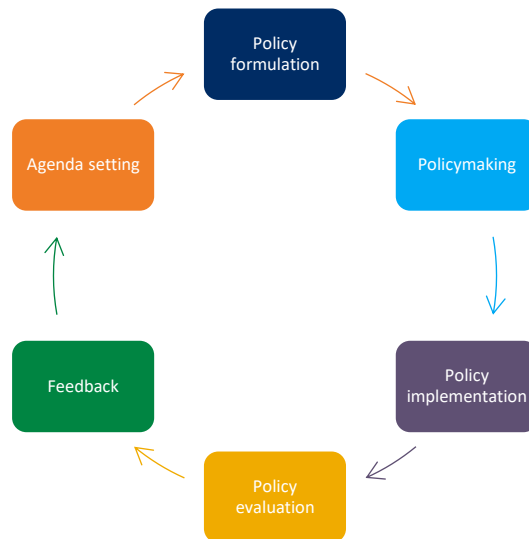
Figure 3 Factors   **Figure 4 Policy stages**

Varied learning outcomes

2.5.3 Policy change and the policy process

Policy processes can be approached from two different angles. Developing policy can be seen as a cycle of subsequent policy phases from an analytical point of view (see Figure 4). It is therefore a useful heuristic to analyse the policy process. In practice, however, the policy process is more like 'organised anarchy'. This corresponds to the political vision, in which policy processes are seen as permanent struggles and clashes, where sometimes problems are sought for solutions, instead of the reverse way (Bovens, 't Hart & Van Twist, 2012). Moreover, the former takes little account of the influence of *power* and *agency* (Howlett, McConnell & Perl, 2014). Yet, they influence whether and how policy comes about and is implemented.

Obstacles and chances

Two models help to get a better view of how policy comes about and how power influences the formation of policy, including the agenda-setting phase (although these stages are often not subsequent ones in practice). The first model looks at the policy process as an obstacle course (see Figure 5). To make or change policy, four obstacles need to be overcome. However, each of these barriers can also be used by those who do not wish changes in policies. In other words, power can be used to change policies or it can be used to obstruct them and keep the status-quo.

Looking from the side of those who seek policy change, a first obstacle to overcome is *converting wishes to demands*. A situation needs to be problematised and presented as a policy challenge. Awareness is a precondition for this. Overcoming the first obstacle is difficult, since people

have a natural inclination to stick to the status-quo. Framing the message is a way to overcome this first obstacle (Bovens, 't Hart & Van Twist, 2012). The second obstacle is to put the issue or condition on the political agenda. *Demands* need to be *converted to issues*. This is not an easy task, as there are many issues people want to put on the political agenda. In addition, politicians have only limited time. The third obstacle is the *decision*-making. For those who want to change the status-quo, it is crucial to influence this process in such a way their demands are met. The outcome of a decision can lead to disappointment for those who seek policy change, and a victory for those parties that want to stick to the status-quo, when the decision is made to do nothing or to carry out only symbolic acts (Bovens, 't Hart & Van Twist, 2012). The fourth obstacle is the *implementation* of the decision that is made. A plan or measure needs to be carried out, which is done by civil servants and/or other stakeholders ('policy implementers'). Coordination and tuning are important to meet the wishes and demands of those who want to change a certain policy. Sometimes this entails a change of procedures or methods. Also, those involved in the implementation have their own interests and try to influence the policy process, for example, by delaying the implementation of a plan or measure (Bovens, 't Hart & Van Twist, 2012).

Policy implementers have several power resources at their disposal. One of them is technical knowledge policymakers often lack (Bovens, 't Hart & Van Twist, 2012). As a result, policy implementers have a certain degree of *discretion*, which they can use to influence policy processes. This surely applies to civil servants. On the one hand, they need to be loyal and transparent vis-à-vis the 'principals', the policymakers, on the other hand, there is the practical requirement of predictability and autonomy (Bovens, 't Hart & Van Twist, 2012).

Figure 5 Obstacles model

Wishes ->   **Demands ->**   **Issues ->**   **Decisions ->**   **Results**

I
Converting wishes to demands

II
Converting demands to issues

III
Decision-making

IV
Implementing decision
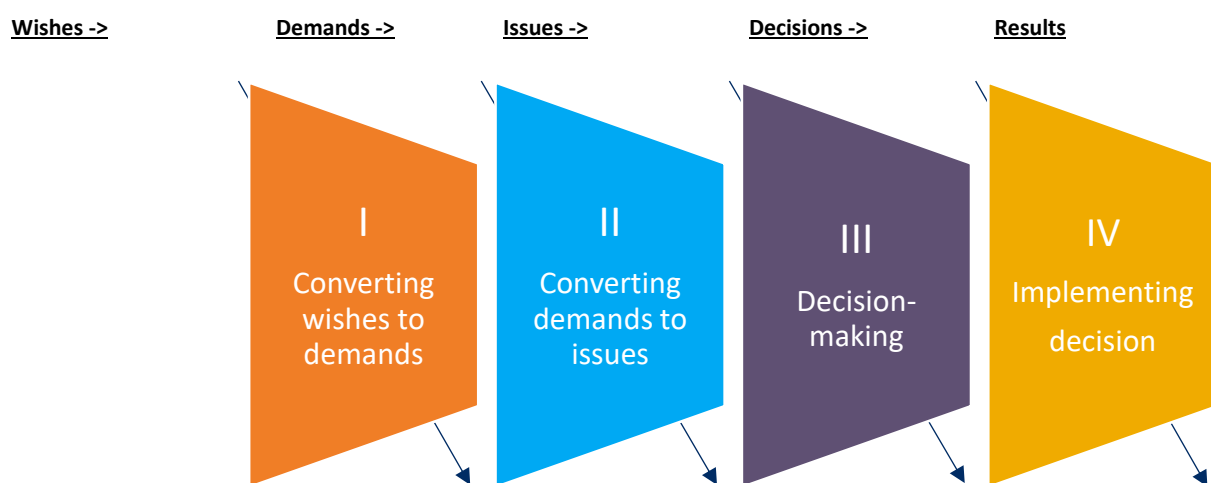
Source: Van de Graaf and Hoppe (1989), p. 187 (adapted).

Although the first model shows that the policy process is mostly incrementally in nature, this is not always the case. Moreover, the model still assumes subsequent phases, albeit reality is more turbulent and complex (Bovens, 't Hart & Van Twist, 2012). The multiple streams model as developed by Kingdon (1984) shows that policy is sometimes more about chances and opportunities. When these streams come across each other, policy change may take place (see Figure 6).

The first stream is the *problem stream*. Developments or certain situations are presented as issues by advocates, which may include civil servants, and require attention (Bovens, 't Hart & Van Twist, 2012; Howlett, McConnell & Perl, 2014). The second stream is the *politics stream*. Those looking for policy change have to convince the political and official elites who belong to the parties within this stream. However, that is not an easy task. A senior official or an Alderman has only limited time to spend on topics. Moreover, these players are constantly under societal and political pressure (Bovens, 't Hart & Van Twist, 2012). Local-level factors such as *changes in government* are included in this stream (Howlett, McConnell & Perl, 2014). The third stream is the *policy stream* which is about potential solutions or alternatives. As mentioned before, sometimes problems are sought for solutions. Like the other streams, these solutions have their advocates, including civil servants (Bovens, 't Hart & Van Twist, 2012).

Figure 6 The multiple streams model
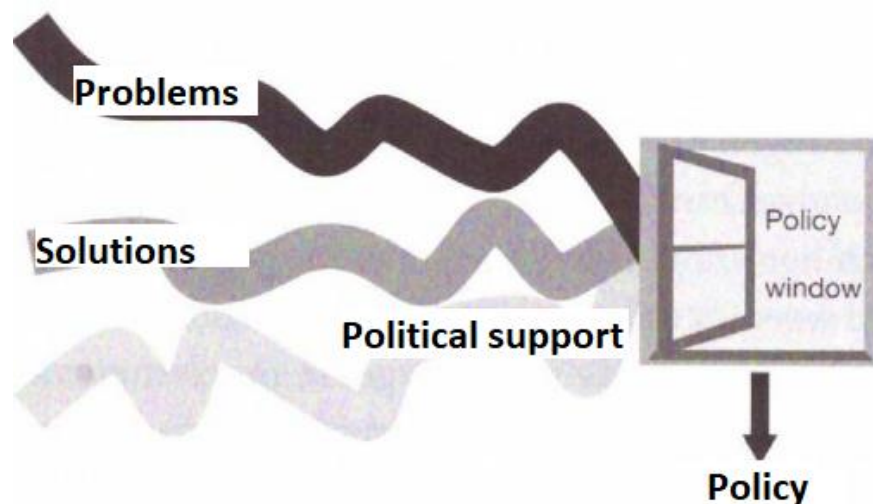
When three streams are coupled by policy entrepreneurship, a 'window of opportunity' opens which in turn makes policy change possible. Source: Hoogerwerf and Herweijer (2008), p. 73 (adapted).

Most of the time, the three streams flow independent of each other. However, due to certain circumstances such as a focusing event (see also paragraph 2.5.2), the streams come across each other.

In that case, an issue becomes prominent on the agenda, and there is a solution or alternative as well as the political will to address the issue (Howlett, McConnell & Perl, 2014). A 'window of opportunity' opens, which is used by 'policy entrepreneurs' to make policy change possible. These policy entrepreneurs are parties that are able to bring in line the interests and wishes of all advocates and decision makers in order to change policy. Often, policy entrepreneurs have their own interests and preferences (Bovens, 't Hart & Van Twist, 2012).

2.5.4 Summary

Municipalities operate in dissimilar contexts. The varied combination of local-level, external and network factors influence the local governance context which makes policy change through policy transfer complicated. Moreover, the local level is another political arena. Those actors seeking policy change need to overcome several obstacles in the policy process, which are used by others to stick to the status-quo and obstruct changes. When advocates of policy change are civil servants, they can make use of their policy discretion to influence the policy process, particularly the implementation of a plan or measure, although there may be others who obstruct this change. The multiple streams model shows that policy change does not happen a lot, because only under certain circumstances such as a crisis, opportunities for change occur which may be seized by policy entrepreneurs to change a policy. In sum, there are many factors influencing policy transfer, which is why policy change through policy transfer is expected *not* to happen a lot.

Resume

Applying the theories as discussed in this chapter to the SDGs, Dutch municipalities that seek ways to implement the Global Goals at the local level look at peers to get information how they can do this. They act as followers, while their counterparts act as leaders/pioneers. In addition, there is a group of non-followers/laggards. The emerging patterns are based on actors' characteristics such as internal and external ambitions but also on domestic conditions. Implementing certain ideas or examples of the SDGs from another municipality - presented as 'best practices' and disseminated through different channels - may be the outcome of two mechanisms underlying policy transfer: imitation or learning. The former refers to copying 'successful' practices from other municipalities as a response to uncertainty around the Global Goals. In that case, a specific arrangement or practice is adopted by followers, because it is believed it will also work out for them. Learning, on the other hand, refers to seeking substantive information (both explicit and implicit knowledge) from leading municipalities and subsequently processing this information to develop own practices, thereby selecting what is relevant. Notwithstanding the mechanisms underlying policy transfer, there are certain conditions that impact

the implementation of what has been taken from another municipality. These conditions stem from the local governance context and the channel(s) through which policy transfer takes place. Internal, external and network factors influence the embeddedness of ideas and practices derived from others. It is assumed that policy change through policy transfer does not happen a lot. Politics plays an important role in this. Those actors looking for ways to implement the Global Goals have to overcome several obstacles during the policy process, including making the SDGs a prominent issue that the given municipality has to deal with. Moreover, only in certain circumstances where policy entrepreneurs are present, policy change may take place.

Data and Methodology

3.1 Introduction
This chapter is about the way this research is conducted. The chapter is divided into two parts. First, ontological and epistemological considerations are discussed, as these assumptions have practical consequences for the way research is conducted (Duberley, Johnson & Cassell, 2012) (Part I). Then, the research methods of data collection are dealt with. This is followed by the operationalisation of this research, i.e. the concepts and factors as discussed in the theoretical framework and their indicators (Part II). The chapter concludes with a short summary.

I Approach and Methods

3.2 Research approach
This research aims to asses a) whether learning as a factor matters regarding international activities and practices undertaken at the Dutch local level by using the SDGs as a case study and b) whether learning or imitation is the mechanism that explains policy change, i.e. the implementation of what has been taken from a leading municipality. We do not know how municipalities strike the spark that makes policy change possible in that respect. This makes this research explorative in nature. But we do know a few things on policy transfer between local authorities, as discussed in Chapter II. Learning as a process takes place between local authorities through different channels and actors' characteristics, the relationships between them and the roles they play shape this process. Yet, learners can also refine and alter the information they get from others based on their belief system and past experiences, which makes learning also a non-relational process. Essentially, learning is an expression of human behaviour, which can be seen as responses to antecedent conditions (Duberley, Johnson & Cassell, 2012), including certain challenges local actors encounter at home. This also applies to the other mechanism, mimetic isomorphism, which might explain why policy change takes place within municipalities that follow leading peers. Imitating 'successful' policies is a response to uncertainty, which expresses human behaviour. Although learning activities can be seen as intersubjective in nature, it is possible to objectively observe and measure these subjective realities. The meanings actors allocate to these activities form facts 'out there' ('ontological assumption') independent of the observer that can be neutrally apprehend ('epistemological assumption') (Duberley, Johnson & Cassell, 2012). By providing a maximum, transparent process, it is possible to diminish the influence of the observer's own

assumptions and values. In other words, this research approach can be said to be 'neo-positivist' in nature (Duberley, Johnson & Cassell, 2012).

3.3.1 Research design

Based on the academic literature as discussed in the previous chapter, we have some presumptions how policy change takes place within following municipalities that may lead to a higher degree of internationalisation. Learning from leading municipalities might be the reason for this. A case study makes it possible to explore and study intensively a case, and find unique characteristics, which makes it transformable to another context (Bryman, 2015). In light of the explorative nature of this research, a case study is therefore a suitable research design to map out whether Dutch municipalities follow leading peers and learn to act internationally. For this research, the implementation of the SDGs at the Dutch local level serves as a case study, specifically as a *revelatory case* (Bryman, 2015). As discussed in the introduction, there are four reasons to use the implementation of the Global Goals at the local level as a case study to assess whether learning matters regarding international activities.

First of all, the fact that municipalities integrate the sustainability agenda in their policies shows the influence of internationalisation on the local level. After all, the SDGs were endorsed by countries at the supranational level.

Secondly, as the implementation by municipalities happens on a voluntarily basis, and municipalities look at each other to find out how they can integrate the SDGs in local policies and practices, patterns of leaders/pioneers and (non-)followers may be distinguished. It is assumed that following municipalities look at leading counterparts.

Thirdly, the sustainability agenda entails a clear international dimension. This is particularly emphasised by Global Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). Some municipalities may infuse the goals with their international activities, thereby inspiring others to do the same.

Fourthly, my position as an intern at VNG International makes it possible to get access to relevant documents and persons. These persons are often the ones who give impetus to the implementation of the SDGs within their municipalities. Moreover, they are often the contacts for VNG International's Municipalities4GlobalGoals campaign (see also Chapter IV).

3.3.2 Research methods

Three techniques to gather data were used for this research: semi-structured interviews, document analysis and a self-administrated survey. Using 'triangulation', i.e. a combination of research methods and sources, the *credibility* of research results is strengthened, while the chance of misinterpreting data

is reduced (Bryman, 2015). Credibility is one of the four aspects of trustworthiness as distinguished by Lincoln and Guba (Bryman, 2015), which guarantees the quality of social research.

Semi-structured interviews
In order to find out what policy transfer and policy change look like in the field of the SDGs, I conducted twenty-one semi-structured interviews. The interview questions can be found in Appendix I and are partly based on the factors that influence policy transfer and policy change (see also paragraph 3.5 and Table 8). Nineteen respondents are local actors who engage in implementing the SDGs within their municipalities. Two respondents are from local organisations that engage in international activities which are connected to the SDGs. Table 6 gives an overview of the respondents and the municipalities they represent.

Table 6 Overview municipalities

Respondent nr.	Municipality	Size (number of inhabitants) *	Respondent nr.	Municipality	Size (number of inhabitants)
R1			R12		
R2			R13		
R3			R14		
R4			R15		
R5			R16		
R6			R17		
R7			R18		
R8			R19		
R9			R20		
R10			R21		
R11					

* 1 January 2019. Source: Uitvoeringvanbeleidszw.nl.

The respondent numbers were randomly allocated to guarantee anonymity. The respondents were selected based on the following grounds (see also paragraph 3.4.2):

- ❖ They come from leading municipalities as presented by VNG International
- ❖ They attended the workshop about starting as a 'Global Goals municipality' and/or the workshop about international activities and the SDGs during the Global Goals Meet-Up, an event organised by VNG International on 12 March 2020 (see also paragraph 4.3.2)

❖ They come from municipalities in regions where a range of local governments joined the Municipalities4GlobalGoals campaign

❖ They come from non-Global Goals municipalities in regions where many municipalities joined the Municipalities4GlobalGoals campaign

❖ They are mentioned by other respondents ('snowball sampling')

Survey

Next to interviews, I made use of a self-administered questionnaire which was set up in order to map out the international activities and practices of municipalities, including their engagement in the SDGs. To this survey, I added two separated questions about policy transfer in order to assess whether counterparts are important for municipalities to get information about the implementation of the SDGs and if so, what and how they get that from their peers. Only a few survey questions were relevant with respect to the subject of this research, so the others were left out. An overview of the questions can be found in Appendix II.

On behalf of VNG International an email with a link to this online questionnaire was sent to 355 municipal secretaries[1] at the end of March 2020, asking them to share the survey with the relevant person(s)/department(s) within their organisations. The link was valid until 30 April. Three reasons underlie the decision to send the questionnaire to the secretaries instead of the persons in charge of international affairs and/or the SDGs.

First of all, the internal organisation of each municipality, the civil service, is different. While mainly big cities have a portfolio holder for international affairs, this is often not the case for smaller municipalities.

Secondly, due to the width of the integrated sustainability agenda in combination with the siloed structure of many municipal organisations, there is often not just one person or even one department in charge of implementing the SDGs at the municipal level. Rather, several people from different departments might be engaged in the SDGs, trying to find affiliation with a goal that suits their work and tasks. For example, Global Goal 8 (Decent Work And Economic Growth) and the department Work and Income, or Global Goal 13 (Climate Action) and a civil servant Sustainability and Spatial Planning.

Thirdly, building on the previous reason, civil servants dealing with international affairs are not necessarily the same as those engaged in the SDGs.

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[1] In reality, there are less municipalities, because several (smaller) local governments share the same civil service through partnerships.

I tried to tackle these problems in two ways. Firstly, I approached the contacts of VNG International's Municipalities4GlobalGoals campaign by email and phone, asking them to fill in the questions about the SDGs and forward the questions about international activities to another colleague. Secondly, for those municipalities that did not participate in the campaign, I decided to call the administerial secretariats, asking them to bring the survey to the attention of the municipal secretary so he could share it with the civil service.

Document analysis
As a third technique to gather data on policy transfer and policy change in the field of the SDGs, I made use of document analysis. I examined several documents to find out how Dutch municipalities give substance to the Global Goals and whether they refer to counterparts. Some of these documents I received from respondents. Other documents I obtained from VNG International. I made also use of public files I found on the internet.

II Operationalisation

3.4.1 Leaders, pioneers and (non-)followers
To analyse what policy transfer and policy change look like in the field of the SDGs, a first step to be made was identifying leaders/pioneers and (non-)followers. After all, it is assumed that non-leading municipalities look at leading peers to learn more about integrating the SDGs into local policies. Examining whether Dutch local governments adopt to the SDGs through mutual learning or imitation by applying the leadership-followership concepts as discussed in Chapter II gave rise to four problems, however.

First of all, it is very hard to figure out what municipalities exactly do to implement the Global Goals. The sustainability agenda is very broad and open, and it is up to local governments to give substance to the goals (see also Chapter IV). This is also the approach of VNG International's Municipalities4GlobalGoals campaign (see also paragraph 4.3.1). The discretion that is given to municipalities makes it likely that local governments interpret the SDGs according to their own perception of what the SDGs are, how they fit the specific municipal context, and what role the given municipality should play in implementing them. In practice, local governments connect the Global Goals to existing municipal policies. Consequently, municipalities approach the SDGs in a different way and may make a selection of SDGs they want to contribute to. In other words, municipalities follow different routes to implement the sustainability agenda. This makes comparing them very difficult. It is therefore hard to assess which municipalities are 'further' in implementing the sustainability agenda, i.e. which

municipalities act as leaders/pioneers, and which municipalities act as (non-)followers, as both starting points and contexts are dissimilar.

Secondly, one may argue that municipalities always do 'something' with the SDGs. This follows logically from statements that the SDGs and municipal goals are intertwined and a lot of the current activities local governments carry out already contribute to achieving the sustainability agenda (see also paragraph 4.3.2). A municipality can even implement the SDGs without knowing it. In other words, non-followers/laggards do not exist.

Thirdly, two different types of local governments can be distinguished: Global Goals municipalities (90 out of 355) and non-Global Goals municipalities (264 out of 355). However, since there are no preconditions to join the Municipalities4GlobalGoals campaign (see also paragraph 4.3.1), wielding the predicate says very little about how those municipalities have given shape to the SDGs. For example, some municipalities decide to sign up for the campaign and become a Global Goals municipality, while others first want to map out how their existing municipal policies already contribute to the SDGs before being listed as a 'Global Goals municipality'. As a result, it may look like the former are 'further' in implementing the sustainability agenda, simply because they are registered as a Global Goals municipality, while the latter are not Global Goals municipalities yet. Also, there is a chance some municipalities develop a non-committal attitude after being listed as a Global Goals municipality. In other words, one cannot say that Global Goals municipalities are 'further' in implementing the sustainability agenda than non-Global Goals municipalities. Indeed, it is possible some non-Global Goals municipalities are more active in giving shape to the SDGs than some Global Goals municipalities. In sum, Global Goals municipalities do not act by definition as leaders/pioneers nor non-Global Goals municipalities as non-followers/laggards.

Fourthly, local-level indicators to measure progress on the SDGs are limited and still in development (see also paragraph 4.3.2). This makes it difficult to identify leaders/pioneers and (non-) followers based on such data.

In sum, the concepts of leadership/pioneership and followership based on internal and external ambitions as discussed in the theoretical framework are not easily applicable to the context of the SDGs, since it is up to municipalities to give substance to them, which in turn leads to different routes of implementing the sustainability agenda. Also, it is important to look at both Global Goals municipalities and non-Global Goals municipalities, because the former are not necessarily 'further' in implementing the SDGs than the latter.

3.4.2 Activities and actions

Trying to overcome these problems as outlined above, I had to find another method for identifying leading and non-leading/following municipalities in the field of the SDGs, which led to the development of a tool to categorise both Global Goals and non-Global Goals municipalities, a so-called 'SDG scoring system' (see also paragraph 3.4.3).

The first step I had to take was mapping out the activities and actions local governments carry out to implement the SDGs, bearing in mind which municipalities *may* act as leading or following municipalities. I therefore made a selection of such municipalities to conduct interviews with (see also paragraph 3.3.2).

First of all, based on what I heard on this year's Global Goals Meet-Up, an annual event organised by VNG International to facilitate learning about the SDGs (see also paragraph 4.3.2), I contacted several municipalities that may act as *leaders* as described in the academic literature, i.e. they deliberately want to set an example for other municipalities to follow. These municipalities are also presented as leading municipalities by VNG International. For example, they won the Global Goals Municipality Awards (see also 4.3.2), because they implemented the SDGs in a unique or innovative way.

Secondly, I contacted representatives of municipalities who attended two specific workshops that were given on the Global Goals Meet-Up on 12 March 2020. The first workshop was about starting with the SDGs and the second workshop was about the international dimension of the Global Goals, and how international activities can be connected with the sustainability agenda. These municipalities might act as following municipalities.

Thirdly, I approached municipalities in two regions where a range of local governments joined the campaign (the provinces of [name] and [name]) to find out how they have shaped the Global Goals and which municipalities they look at to get information about the SDGs. These municipalities might act as leading or following municipalities.

Fourthly, to balance the number of respondents who came from municipalities that joined the Municipalities4GlobalGoals campaign, I tried to contact several non-Global Goals municipalities in regions where many municipalities joined the campaign. However, that was not an easy task. Trying to find out more about the implementation of the SDGs by these non-Global Goals municipalities, I contacted two local organisations that focus on the international dimension of the Global Goals.

Based on the interviews I conducted with representatives from these municipalities (see also 3.3.2), I made an assessment of the activities and actions that municipalities carry out to implement the SDGs. I particularly looked at three municipalities which were often mentioned as examples by respondents: [name] (R), [name] (R) and [name] (R). Subsequently, I compared their activities with the actions of other municipalities I approached. Out of these three municipalities, the most activities were carried out by the municipality of [name] (R) and [name] (R). Their actions were therefore used as a 'zero measurement' to make an overview of the activities and actions municipalities can carry out to implement the SDGs (see Table 6). I also submitted this overview to colleagues, which strengthens its *confirmability*, one of the quality criteria employed in qualitative research as distinguished by Lincoln and Guba (Bryman, 2015).

Table 6 Overview activities and actions

Activities and actions (non-hierarchical order)
The Global Goals are used as an assessment framework to set up vision documents such as the municipal environmental vision as part of the spatial planning law
Initiatives are set up to inform civil servants and/or politicians about the Global Goals
The Global Goals are mentioned on the municipal web site
(Regional) meetings are organised for other local authorities to inform them about the approach the municipality has taken towards the Global Goals
The internal organisation is completely based on the Global Goals, which are used as guiding principles
New initiatives are set up with other stakeholders (citizens, companies, knowledge institutions) to contribute to achieving the Global Goals
Initiatives are set up to inform the community about the Global Goals
In the municipal budget, explicitly attention is paid to the Global Goals
Policy documents (vision documents, policy notes) explicitly refer to the SDGs
Minimum 0.1 FTE is set aside to work on the Global Goals
Existing policies are systematically mapped out how they contribute to the Global Goals (and may include monitoring)
The coalition agreement explicitly refers to the SDGs
The Global Goals are connected with international activities

A diverse set of actions and activities municipalities can perform to embed the sustainability agenda at the local level.

3.4.3 Towards a SDG scoring system

Mapping out the activities and actions of local governments carry out to implement the sustainability agenda was the first step in identifying leading and non-leading/following municipalities. The second step was to look at municipalities' efforts to work on the Global Goals. For example, some municipalities are very enthusiastic in giving shape to the sustainability agenda, while others are more passive. They have a non-committal attitude, i.e. there is a low degree of effort. Therefore, a distinction can be made between high effort and low effort (see Figure 7).

Based on the overview in Table 6 and the degree of effort municipalities show to work on the SDGs, I made a ranking of municipalities (see Table 7). Since the municipalities of [name] (R) and [name] (R) are the ones that carry out the activities as identified in Table 6, they 'score' the highest (12/13). This also assumes a high degree of effort (see Figure 7). One can therefore argue that these municipalities are the 'furthest' with implementing the SDGs at the local level and are truly leading, i.e. they are *leaders*. Those municipalities that carry out slightly less activities but still show a high degree of effort take the position of *semi-leaders*. In sum, based on the degree of effort and the embeddedness of the sustainability agenda at the local level, i.e. the number of activities local authorities carry out, a municipality can take the position of a *leader*; *semi-leader*; *mover*; *follower* and *non-follower* (see Figure 7).
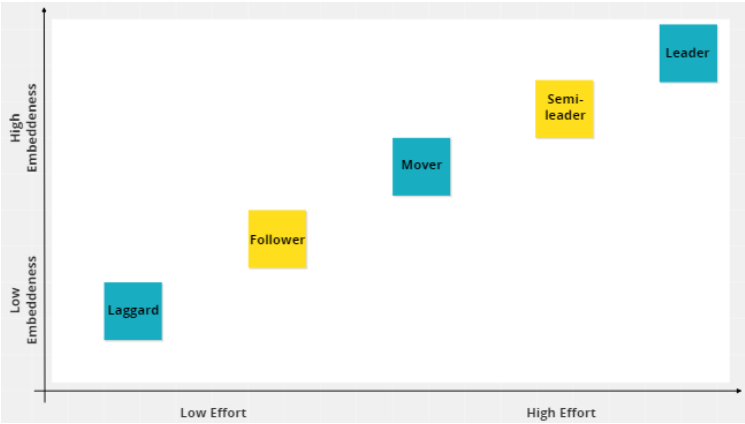
Figure 7 Positions

Table 7 Scoring system

Score	Degree of effort	Position
12/13	Very high	Leader
10/13	High	Semi-leader
7/13	Medium	Mover
4/13	Low	Follower
1/13	Very low	Non-follower

The five positions municipalities can take based on their efforts and the embeddedness of the sustainability agenda at the local level.

This scoring system entails three upsides. First of all, a municipality can gather more points and take a higher position via different ways, i.e. by combining different actions and activities, in line with their local priorities and needs. Secondly, due to the non-hierarchical order of activities, it avoids the impression a municipality must make certain steps to score higher. For example, a municipality may take the position of a *mover* without explicitly referring to the SDGs in its coalition agreement. Thirdly, the problem that non-followers/laggards do not exist because municipalities already contribute to achieving the SDGs through their daily work is also solved, for the activities as identified in Table 6 must deliberately be carried out to implement the Global Goals. Thus, non-followers are those that carry out three or less activities, and show a very low degree of effort (see Table 7).

Side notes

Based on the SDG scoring system, I initially selected three municipalities that I thought would act as *leaders*: [name] (R), [name] (R) and [name] (R) (see also Chapter V). However, in hindsight, one may argue that [name] (R) would rather act as a *semi-leader* (11/13), since the Global Goals are neither included in its coalition agreement nor in the municipal budget to take the position of leader. The municipality is therefore treated as a non-leading one. Yet, many respondents mentioned [name] (R) and seem to consider it a leading municipality. On the other hand, this may rather have something to do with perceptions (see also paragraph 6.3.1). Furthermore, it is possible there are municipalities that would score higher on the SDG scoring system, but which I did not approach. They may even act as *leaders*. In sum, there may be more leading municipalities than the two I selected.

3.5 Policy transfer and policy change

Now the problem of identifying municipalities that are leading in the field of the SDGs, i.e. they act as *leaders*, and non-leading municipalities, i.e. they act as *semi-leaders*, *movers*, *followers* or *non-followers*, has been solved, the next step is to look at how policy transfer can be analysed. Table 8 gives an overview of the operationalisation of the concepts of policy transfer, mimetic isomorphism and policy learning. The semi-structured interviews, the survey and several documents were used to gather the data (see also paragraph 3.3.2). The operationalisation of policy change as the outcome of policy transfer is also included in Table 8. The semi-structured interviews were mostly used to map out this final step. As described in the theoretical framework, there are many factors influencing policy change. Therefore, to ensure policy change is the outcome of policy transfer, factors that are in the way or hinder what has been taken from another municipality need to be *absent*. For example, if a respondent refers to the composition of the local government (*ideology*) which makes it difficult to put the Global Goals on the political agenda, policy change through policy transfer is unlikely. Or if a respondent refers to insufficient resources, the factor *institutional capacity* has a negative impact on learning outcomes.

Table 8 Operationalisation: concepts, factors and indicators

Concept/factor	Indicators

Concept: policy transfer	*Definition: ''A process in which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions, etc. in one time and/or place is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements and institutions in another time and/or place''* Dolowitz & Marsh (1996, p. 344)
	- Sources of inspiration
	  - other municipalities as sources of inspiration are mentioned
	- 'Best practices' and their components
	  - ideas, policy instruments, policy programs (or something else) related to the Global Goals are mentioned
	- Channels
	  - channels such as VNG International are mentioned
	  - specific events (such as workshops, award ceremonies and meetings) aimed at exchanging knowledge between municipalities are mentioned
	  - websites and publications with practical examples are mentioned

Concept: policy learning	*Definition: A three-stages process which takes place through different channels, in which local governance actors seek knowledge to tackle a specific policy problem at the local level*
	- Specific information (unlike imitation)
	  -based on a specific problem/challenge to implement the SDGs at the local level, substantive information from a municipality which dealt with a similar issue is sought by another municipality
	  -specific aspects of 'best practices' as disseminated by a channel are mentioned
	- Much attention is paid to a counterpart's local level (unlike imitation)
	  - detailed information (such as conditions) about the local level context is sought by the seeking municipality
	  - the seeking municipality mentions the necessity to 'translate' the information gathered from another municipality to make it operable for the own municipality
	- Critical attitude (unlike imitation)
	  - the seeking municipality asks the counterpart for mistakes and policy failures that occurred and/or murky details or uses other channels to figure this out

Concept: mimetic isomorphism	*Definition: The adoption of a model from another municipality as a response to uncertainty based on the assumption that it will also be 'successful' in the own municipality*
	- General information (unlike policy learning)
	  - based on uncertainty surrounding the SDGs/Global Goals what to do with the sustainability agenda, all steps taken by another municipality are mentioned as being inspirational
	  - 'best practices' as disseminated by a channel are mentioned without referring to specific aspects as being inspirational
	- Little attention is paid to local level context (unlike policy learning)
	  - the seeking municipality does not look for detailed information (conditions, obstacles) about the other's local level context
	  - the seeking municipality does not make any reference to the necessity to translate the information gathered from another municipality to make it operable for the own municipality
	- Non-critical attitude (unlike policy learning)
	  - the seeking municipality does not ask its counterpart for mistakes/policy failures/murky details nor uses other channels to figure this out

Concept/factor	Indicators

Concept: policy change	***Definition: The outcome of policy transfer (through learning or imitation) at the local level, i.e. what has been taken from another municipality to implement the SDGs, influenced by diverse internal, external and network factors***
	 - Channels (see also policy transfer)
	   - channels such as VNG International are mentioned
	   - specific events (such as workshops, award ceremonies and meetings) aimed at exchanging knowledge between municipalities are mentioned
	   - websites and publications with practical examples are mentioned
	 - Local-level factors
	   - budget for Global Goals implementation/available capacity (civil service) in hours (FTE) (institutional capacity)
	   - composition of the local government (ideology)
	   - changes in government
	   - attitude of politicians towards the SDGs (roles stakeholders)
	   - attitude of civil servants towards the SDGs (roles stakeholders)
	   - internal dynamics: municipal departments/employees, the Board of Mayor and Aldermen ('college van B&W') and the Council (power relationships stakeholders)
	 - External factors
	   - the (local) media are mentioned as a source of information to do 'something' with the SDGs/as a reference point to implement the SDGs at the local level
	   - references are made to focusing events
	 - Network factors
	   - sociocultural characteristics are mentioned
	   - at the local level, there is an advisory committee consisting of external advisors or NGOs
	   - the municipality considers a counterpart a good example based on what it knows about that municipality's performance

Resume

Using the leadership/pioneership and followership concepts as discussed in the theoretical framework to examine whether Dutch local governments adopt to the SDGs through mutual learning or imitation, and look at leading municipalities to do so, turned out to be too complicated. Therefore, a pragmatic tool was developed to categorise both Global Goals municipalities and non-Global Goals municipalities. This SDG scoring system is based on the embeddedness of the sustainability agenda at the local level, i.e. number of activities and actions municipalities carry out to implement the SDGs, and the degree of effort local authorities show to work on the SDGs. Based on this SDG scoring system, two leading municipalities were identified (see also Chapter V). Policy change through policy transfer (learning or imitation) can be determined when factors that hinder this process are absent.

The Sustainable Development Goals at the local level

4.1 Introduction

This chapter starts with briefly introducing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and how they differ from the previous campaign which focused on the realisation of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Part I). The current state of affairs regarding the position of the Netherlands in implementing the goals and the associated 2030 Agenda is also briefly discussed. Furthermore, some preliminary observations are discussed. Subsequently, we look at what role municipalities play in achieving the worldwide sustainability agenda. The role of VNG International through its Municipalities4GlobalGoals campaign in the next point of discussion (Part II). The last part of this chapter focuses on what local implementation of the SDGs looks like in practice (Part III). A short summary concludes the chapter.

Figure 8 The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The 17 Sustainable Developments Goals. Source : UN.org (2020).

I The Sustainable Development Goals

4.2.1 From MDGs to SDGs

In September 2015, the 193 Member States of the United Nations (UN) adopted the Post-2015 Development Agenda along with a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets based on

the principle of leaving no-one behind (see Figure 8). The Agenda 2030 came into force on 1 January 2016. The sustainability agenda guides global action on achieving the aims by 2030 - an end to poverty, a halt to climate change and a reduction of the growing inequality in the world - and requires efforts to be made by a range of different stakeholders at different levels, including local authorities (UN.org I, 2020; UN.org II, 2020).

The Agenda 2030 builds on the previous Millennium campaign that followed the 2000 United Nations Millennium Declaration (ICLEI, 2015). Although there is some overlap with the new agenda regarding the main aims - poverty reduction and equal rights -, it also differs from the 2030 Agenda in five ways:

❖ The eight MDGs only applied to developing countries, while the SDGs apply to all UN Member States (ICLEI, 2015)

❖ Unlike the previous campaign, the process leading to the Agenda 2030 was characterised by participation of a range of stakeholders, including local authorities (ICLEI, 2015)

❖ While the MDGs were mostly focused on more traditional development cooperation issues and their social aspects such as wiping out extreme poverty (see Figure 9), the SDGs are much broader in terms of scale and content (VNG II, 2014). For example, the SDGs also deal with global public goods such as sustainable energy and infrastructure. This reflects a paradigm shift on international development and sustainability, captured by the phrase 'people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership' (Spitz, Van Ewijk & Kamphof, 2016; ICLEI, 2015). Thus, while the MDGs were rather separate pillars, in the new agenda the environment, economy and society are seen as interdependent systems (ICLEI, 2015)

❖ Although there were some social and economic rights included in the MDGs, all human rights are more emphasised in the SDGs compared to the MDGs (OHCHR.org, 2020)

❖ A specific goal (Global Goal 11) on sustainable urbanisation was included in the new agenda due to the jointly efforts of municipalities, their national associations and the umbrella organisation United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) (UCLG, 2015).

Figure 9 The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

The eight Millennium Development Goals. Source: World Economic Forum (2015).

All in all, one can argue that both the issues of sustainability and security are now more prominent compared to the previous campaign (Spitz, Van Ewijk & Kamphof, 2016). The 2030 Agenda aims to provide a truly transformative framework (UN.org I, 2020), which makes it more ambitious, more integrated but also more complex than its predecessor. Particularly the issues of financing and measuring the progress made on implementing the SDGs are challenges that may impede the success of the 2030 Agenda (ICLEI, 2015).

4.2.2 SDG progress in the Netherlands
To track down the efforts made by countries, annual reports need to be publicised by national statistical offices. In the Netherlands, this is done by the *Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek* (CBS) through its *Monitor Brede Welvaart*. In addition, voluntary SDG reports on the current state of affairs are publicised each year. Different stakeholders provide input for these reports, including VNG International on behalf of decentral governments, i.e. municipalities, regional water authorities and provinces. The latest Dutch SDG report *Nederland Ontwikkelt Duurzaam*, which was publicised on 20 May 2020, sketches a positive image of last year. Awareness of the SDGs is steadily increasing. With respect to the progress made in 2019, the country is compared with other countries in the world. The data are provided by three organisations: CBS, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN)/*Bertelsmann Stiftung*. Additionally, unlike previous editions, a European monitoring system developed by SDSN and the Institute for European Environmental Policy (IEEP) has been added to the fourth SDG report. The indicators used in the different data sets differ from each other due to availability and reliability issues. Yet, it is argued that

the reports supplement each other (SDG Report, 2020). Also, the report *Monitor Brede Welvaart* by CBS uses additional indicators tailored to the Dutch context (SDG Report, 2020). The different data sets show that the Netherlands scores well on several SDGs compared to other EU Member States, but scores low on other goals as well as specific indicators such as female positions in company boards. A selection of these goals can be found in Table 9.

Table 9 Scores

Scoring high	Scoring low
SDG 1 No Poverty	SDG 5 Gender Equality
SDG 4 Quality of Education: Lifelong learning	SDG 7 Affordable and Sustainable Energy
SDG 9 Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure: Knowledge and Innovation	SDG 12 Responsible Consumption and Production
SDG 10 Reducing inequality	SDG 13 Climate Action
SDG 16 Peace, Justice and Strong Public Services: Institutions	SDG 14 Life Below Water
SDG 17 Partnerships for the Goals	SDG 15 Life on Land

The Netherlands scores well on some SDGs, but needs to make more progress on others, specifically the 'planet' goals. Source: SDG Report (2020).

All in all, the Netherlands makes progress on several SDGs, but must put more effort into achieving other goals. Moreover, numbers do not say everything. For example, although the country scores well on reducing poverty (SDG 1), there are still children who live in miserable circumstances (SDG Report, 2020).

4.2.3 Some preliminary observations

The Agenda 2030 is a very broad, ambitious and complex entity. Two things stand out in that respect. Firstly, due to the open character of the worldwide sustainability agenda, it up to local governments to give substance to the SDGs. According to the latest SDG report, the SDGs provide a ''concrete action plan'' and ''an overarching framework'' for actions that contribute to an inclusive and sustainable future (SDG Report, 2020, p. 3). They are mainly seen as a ''guidance for the own organisation strategy'' which ''inspire [stakeholders] to start new initiatives or partnerships, [or] *connect existing activities*'' [italics made by the author] (SDG Report, 2019, p. 3). Finding a connection with existing activities is indeed what mostly happens at the municipal level, a point I discuss in more detail in paragraph 4.4.1. The SDG report also mentions that although a lot of these initiatives do *not explicitly* mention the SDGs [italics made by the author], these activities can be carried out in line with the SDGs, because they have a focus

on the SDGs, a coherent vision, and are set up with different stakeholders such as the private sector (SDG Report, 2020).

Keeping track of the progress made is a second thing that stands out. In general, monitoring is already a complicated issue, as briefly outlined in paragraph 4.2.2. But indicators that fit the Dutch context makes this issue even more complicated. The SDG+ indicators as developed by CBS try to tackle this problem (SDG Report, 2020). However, these indicators pertain to the national level. Local indicators that measure progress made at the municipal level are still lacking, albeit a first set is being developed by VNG International and a group of municipalities. Also, some municipalities have started developing monitoring tools to measure their progress (see also paragraph 4.3.2 and Chapter V).

In sum, the fact that it is up to local governments to give substance to the worldwide sustainability agenda makes it likely that municipalities interpret the agenda according to their own norms and values, on the one hand, and their priorities and strategies, on the other hand. Moreover, local monitoring tools are still lacking, which gives municipalities even more discretion to shape the Global Goals within their municipalities.

4.2.4 The role of the local level
The importance of local authorities in achieving the Agenda 2030 is recognised by the supranational level, national associations of municipalities and the worldwide umbrella organisation UCLG, as well as municipalities themselves. The UN Secretary-General urges ''for a decade of action on three levels: (…) local action embedding the needed transitions in the policies, budgets, institutions and regulatory frameworks of (…) cities and local authorities'' (UN.org III, 2019). UCLG emphasises that ''all the SDGs have targets that are directly or indirectly related to the daily work of local (…) governments'' (UCLG, 2015). VNG International that leads the campaign at the Dutch local level uses a similar phrase (VNG III, 2020). In fact, a lot of what municipalities do *already* contribute to achieving the SDGs, according to VNG International (see also paragraph 4.3.2) (VNG III, 2020). Several respondents also mentioned this in the interviews (R; R; R; R; R; R; R). This is also in line with the statement that initiatives which are undertaken by stakeholders do *not* always *explicitly* refer to the SDGs, but still contribute to achieving them (see also paragraph 4.2.3). The societal problems municipalities face are often in line with the challenges the Agenda 2030 covers. In that sense, the SDGs and municipal goals are intertwined (SDG Report, 2019; VNG III, 2020). According to UCLG, municipalities are also best-placed to link the SDGs, as the local level is the closest to citizens (UCLG, 2015).

Table 10 Percentages

	Very important/Very much	Important/Much
To what extent is contributing to achieving the SDGs important? (n=83)	14.5%	44.6%
How often are the SDGs explicitly referred to in municipal policies? (n=94)	12.8%	22.3%

Local authorities themselves also consider the SDGs to be important. In the survey on international policies which was sent to 355 municipalities, more than half of the respondents indicated that the SDGs are important or even very important (see Table 10 and Figure A in Appendix II). Another question in the survey also points at that direction. A third of the respondents said that the SDGs are explicitly referred to in their municipal policies. According to a similar share of the group, the SDGs are mentioned, but not so much. Although a third of the respondents said that their municipalities do not refer to the SDGs or very little, it indicates that municipalities see a role for themselves in achieving the Agenda 2030.

4.2.5 Summary

The Agenda 2030 is a very broad, ambitious and complex framework. According to the latest SDG report, the Netherlands scores well on some SDGs, but falls behind in achieving objectives such as mitigating climate change. Due to the open character of the sustainability agenda, local governments have much discretion in giving substance to the SDGs. The limited number of SDG monitoring tools makes this even more likely. The role of local authorities in achieving the SDGs by 2030 is not only emphasised by the supranational level, Dutch municipalities also see a role for themselves in contributing to the goals of the worldwide sustainability agenda.

II VNG International's Municipalities4Global Goals campaign

4.3.1 The campaign

VNG International facilitates the campaign to implement the SDGs at the Dutch local level. Its Municipalities4GlobalGoals campaign started in 2015 as a successor of the former Millennium Municipalities Campaign. Some but not all Millennium Municipalities joined the new campaign from 2015 onwards. VNG International actively approaches Dutch municipalities to join the campaign. Currently, 90 municipalities (out of 355) call themselves 'Global Goals municipality' (see Figure 10).

Figure 10

The 90 green-colored municipalities that participate in the Global Goals campaign. Source: VNG (2020).

There are no requirements to become a Global Goals municipality. Usually, the decision to join the campaign is made by the Board of Mayor and Aldermen, although this decision can also be made by the Council (VNG IV, 2020). Instead of prescribing what municipalities should do, the campaign ''gives space for own initiative and choices'', in line with the priorities and preferences of the given municipality (VNG V, 2020). In other words, it is up to municipalities how they give substance to the international agenda and implement the Global Goals (see also paragraph 4.2.3). The assumption is that this makes it easier for a municipality to find a way to connect the Global Goals to its own policies in one way or another. However, it *is* expected that participants want to ''act in the spirit of the SDGs'' (see also paragraph 4.3.2) (VNG V, 2020). The open character of the SDGs as described in paragraph 4.2.3 is also expressed in the list of reasons why municipalities should join the Global Goals campaign (VNG IV, 2020; VNG VI, 2020). Next to more altruistic reasons such as solidarity, the following pragmatic reasons are put forward by VNG International (VNG V, 2020):

❖ The SDGs provide a useful and integrated framework that can be used as an guidance to develop and test municipal policies, and to work on integrated sustainability. For example, the Global Goals can be used as an assessment framework to set up the municipal environmental vision in the context of the coming spatial planning law [postponed to 2021]

❖ The Global Goals can function as a binding mechanism to facilitate cooperation between citizens, the private sector and civil society

❖ The Global Goals can be used as a basis for dialogue with inhabitants and local actors to decide on the direction that the community wants to take

❖ The Global Goals can be used strategically to profile the municipality at the international stage

4.3.2 Services and activities

VNG International carries out several tasks and activities to raise awareness about the Global Goals, inform municipalities how they can implement the sustainability agenda, and facilitate knowledge exchange between local authorities to this regard (VNG III, 2020; VNG IV, 2020):

❖ VNG International develops and provides different kinds of tools to help municipalities in giving substance to the Global Goals and to further determine their efforts. Examples of these tools are guidelines/guides, a 'menu' with several action formats for each SDG and practical examples shared on the VNG website. Two things are important to mention to this regard:

First of all, VNG International relies on the Global Goals municipalities for input (VNG VI, 2020). Indeed, a great deal of the disseminated 'best practices' are uploaded by a core of proactive municipalities that works closely with VNG International and joined the campaign from the beginning. These municipalities also give input for communication materials like the promotion video which is displayed on the website (VNG V, 2020).

Secondly, emphasis is laid on connecting the Global Goals with existing municipal activities. As stated on the website, ''a lot of your current activities already correspond to [the goals]'' (VNG III, 2020). This echoes the third SDG report, in which a similar statement was made (SDG Report, 2019).

The possibilities that municipalities have to implement the Global Goals are clustered in three groups based on the degree of the commitment and the role a municipality wants to play. This is apparent from the 'menu' and its action formats, for example (VNG VII, 2020): making the Global Goals public and visible (low effort), connecting with stakeholders such as local companies and supporting their initiatives

(medium effort), and integrating the development goals into municipal policies with an emphasis on the sustainable agenda's integrated approach, thereby playing an exemplary role (high effort). Furthermore, to explain what it means to ''act in the spirit of the SDGs'' (VNG IV, 2020), concrete steps municipalities can take to give substance to the predicate 'Global Goals municipality' are mentioned on the website. These are based on 10 principles derived from reports of both international and national actors (VNG IV, 2020). For example, a municipality can diminish its ecological and social footprint via responsible procurement (VNG IV, 2020).

❖ VNG International supports municipalities by making the Global Goals more visible both vis-à-vis the local community and vis-à-vis the internal municipal organisation. Action formats such as the 'Time capsule' help Global Goals municipalities to give momentum to the SDGs by gathering the wishes of local politicians who imagine what their municipalities will look like by 2030 (VNG VIII, 2020). This way, a Global Goals municipality can show its commitment to implementing the goals in an appealing and visible way. Communication materials such as a logo and formats for banners provided by VNG International also helps to make the SDGs more visible within the municipality (VNG VI, 2020).

❖ VNG International organises several events and actions throughout the year, such as the Global Goals Meet-Up, the SDG Flags Day, and a competition, the Global Goals Municipality Awards. Furthermore, VNG International participates in the SDG Action Day (initiated by SDG Nederland, a network comprising different stakeholders such as the private sector and civil society).

In the most recent Global Goals Municipality Awards (2019-2020), municipalities could win the title 'visionary', 'connector' or 'game changer' by submitting examples of how they have shaped the sustainability agenda within that particular category, while in previous years they could win the title 'most inspiring municipality' or 'most promising municipality'. Those municipalities that won in one of the categories have implemented the SDGs in a unique or innovative way by ''using the goals as the basis for municipal policies'' (SDG Report, 2020, p. 6). The award ceremony is important for both participating municipalities and VNG International. For local authorities, it is a way to put the Global Goals higher on the agenda. Moreover, by winning one of the titles, a municipality can profile itself (R). For VNG International, the competition is a way to arouse energy and make sure that municipalities continue with implementing the sustainability agenda. Also, the information participating municipalities submit is very useful for VNG International (R), as it provides a clearer overview of what the 90

Global Goals municipalities exactly do with the Global Goals. In addition, the event provides an opportunity to make VNG International more visible.

❖ VNG International organises regional meetings for local politicians and/or civil servants. Last year, such meetings were organised in the provinces of Limburg and Friesland (VNG III, 2020; PPT I, 2019). Local governments that are not Global Goals municipalities were also invited for these events. 'Hart van Brabant' is the first Global Goals region in the Netherlands, where all municipalities joined the Municipalities4GlobalGoals campaign (VNG X, 2020). A regional approach can create more impact and is a solution to the lack of capacity to provide a custom-made approach.

❖ VNG International is developing a set of local SDG indicators in collaboration with a working group comprised of several municipalities. The organisation also works with other stakeholders to provide insight into and data concerning the implementation of the SDGs at the local level. There are several monitoring tools available, such as the *Nationale Monitor Duurzame Gemeenten 2019* (National Monitor Sustainable Municipalities 2019) and the website *waarstaatjegemeente.nl* which can be seen as a benchmarking tool.

4.3.3 Summary
90 local authorities have joined VNG International's Municipalities4GlobalGoals campaign up to July 2020. There are no preconditions to become a Global Goals municipality and it is up to local governments to give substance to the Global Goals. VNG International informs and supports municipalities in doing so. Furthermore, it organises several events, including the Global Goals Meet-Up to facilitate the exchange of best practices between municipalities. In addition, VNG International is developing a set of local SDG indicators in collaboration with a group of municipalities.

III Implementing the SDGs at the local level

4.4.1 Local and international activities
We have seen it is up to local governments to give substance to the SDGs. There is no difference between those that joined the Municipalities4GlobalGoals campaign, and non-Global Goals municipalities in that respect. As discussed in paragraph 3.4.2, an assessment had been made to map out the actions and activities municipalities carry out to implement the Global Goals (see Table 11). For example, some municipalities use the Global Goals as an assessment framework to develop the

environmental vision (R; R; R). Other local governments have included the SDGs in their sustainability agendas and programs, or biodiversity plans (R; R; R; R; R). A few municipalities have connected the Global Goals with international activities (R; R; R).

Thus, in practice, local governments mainly connect the Global Goals with *existing* policies in line with their local priorities and needs, and make a selection of the SDGs they want to contribute to. The fact that the Global Goals are connected to existing policies does not come as a surprise, for local governments have much discretion in shaping the sustainability agenda within their municipalities. Furthermore, they already contribute to achieving the Global Goals through their daily work in their view (R; R; R; R; R; R; R).

Table 11 Overview activities and actions

Activities and actions (non-hierarchical order)
The Global Goals are used as an assessment framework to set up vision documents such as the municipal environmental vision as part of the spatial planning law
Initiatives are set up to inform civil servants and/or politicians about the Global Goals
The Global Goals are mentioned on the municipal web site
(Regional) meetings are organised for other local authorities to inform them about the approach the municipality has taken towards the Global Goals
The internal organisation is completely based on the Global Goals, which are used as guiding principles
New initiatives are set up with other stakeholders (citizens, companies, knowledge institutions) to contribute to achieving the Global Goals
Initiatives are set up to inform the community about the Global Goals
In the municipal budget, explicitly attention is paid to the Global Goals
Policy documents (vision documents, policy notes) explicitly refer to the SDGs
Minimum 0.1 FTE is set aside to work on the Global Goals
Existing policies are systematically mapped out how they contribute to the Global Goals (and may include monitoring)
The coalition agreement explicitly refers to the SDGs
The Global Goals are connected with international activities

A diverse set of actions and activities municipalities can perform to embed the sustainability agenda at the local level.

Most of the activities in Table 11 can be described as *local-oriented* activities (see Figure 11). The observation that municipalities mainly carry out local activities is in line with what Spitz, Van Ewijk and Kamphof (2016) also indicate in their research on SDG approaches of Dutch local governments. Some activities can be described as *international-oriented* ones.

Figure 11 Activities
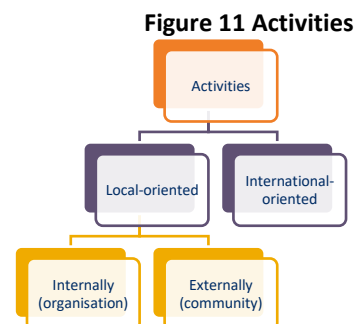
Actions and activities undertaken at the municipal level to implement the SDGs.

These are mainly undertaken by those municipalities that are already international-oriented and want to profile themselves at the international stage. Within the group of *local-oriented* actions, some activities relate to the municipal organisation (*internal* actions), such as initiatives to inform local politicians and/or civil servants about the Global Goals. Others are related to the community (*external* actions), such as setting up initiatives with other stakeholders.

4.4.2 Summary
In practice, municipalities mainly connect the Global Goals to existing policies. For example, they include the SDGs in their sustainability agendas. The activities that local authorities carry out to implement the SDGs are mostly focused on the own municipality, i.e. local-oriented activities. Some of these relate to the municipal organisation, others relate to the community.

Resume
The Agenda 2030 builds on the previous Millennium Development Goals campaign. Compared to the eight MDGs, the SDGs are much broader in terms of scale and content. Measuring progress made on the SDGs is complicated. Although there are some data sets, they pertain to the national level. The Netherlands scores well on reducing poverty, but falls behind in achieving the 'planet goals'. Providing insight into how local governments contribute to achieving the SDGs is complicated due to the lack of local SDG monitoring tools. The role of local authorities is considered to be important by both the supranational and local level. Indeed, Dutch local governments see a role for themselves in contributing to the SGDs. VNG International leads the Global Goals campaign at the Dutch local level. 90 out of 355 municipalities have joined the campaign up to July 2020. Local governments decide how they give substance to the Global Goals. This applies to both Global Goals municipalities and non-Global Goals municipalities. In practice, municipalities connect the SDGs to existing policies. Most of the activities local governments carry out to implement the SDGs are focused on the own municipality. These local-oriented activities and actions relate to the municipal organisation or the community.

Leading municipalities

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we look how leading municipalities give substance to the sustainability agenda from a comparative perspective. Two municipalities can be described as leading in the field of the Global Goals based on the SDG scoring system: [name] (R) and [name] (R) (but see the side notes in 3.4.3). The chapter starts with a brief overview of the run-up to the implementation of the SDGs and the challenges these municipalities face today (Part I). Subsequently, we look at the activities and actions these leading municipalities carry out (Part II). As outlined in Chapter IV, these can be divided into a group of internally and externally local-oriented activities, and international-oriented activities. This makes it easier to describe what the leading municipalities do regards the implementation of the SDGs. Both municipalities work closely with the community, for example (see Figure 12). As discussed in the theoretical framework, policy change is not self-evident. Often, there are all kinds of obstacles to overcome in order to implement a policy, such as convincing politicians and civil servants of the need to address the issue at stake, but also making sure the latter implement the plan to work on the SDGs, if such a decision is made. In other words, the attitude of civil servants and politicians towards the SDGs is important to consider. Therefore, we look at the degree of support among politicians and civil servants in the third part of this chapter (see Figure 12) (Part III). Leading municipalities also 'teach' their counterparts how they can approach the Global Goals, one of the activities identified in Table 6 (see also paragraph 3.4.2). How the two leading municipalities do this is the next point of discussion (Part IV). A short summary concludes the chapter.

Figure 12	Basic argumentation

- Overview
The initiative to work on the SDGs came from different directions
Challenges: SDG monitoring and getting people to work on the SDGs
- Activities and actions
Local-oriented activities: different approaches; initiatives with different stakeholders
International activities: SDGs as guiding principles
- Support base
Degree of political support: high
Support at the official level: small but growing
- 'Teaching' practices
Sharing stories at meetings and events of VNG International
Sharing stories on own initiative, including presentations

I Overview

5.2.1 The beginning and current challenges
The two leading municipalities carry out both internally and externally local-oriented activities to give substance to the Global Goals. They do so by connecting the SDGs with their profiles and local strategies. For example, the municipality of [name] profiles itself as a medical, agri-food city and Fair Trade municipality (VNG IX, 2019; R). Connecting is also laid with international activities.

The two leading municipalities became Global Goals municipalities quite early, but the initiative to work on the Global Goals came from different directions. In the municipality of [name], it was a senior official who came across the SDGs at an international conference in 2016, which were subsequently embraced by the Council as the basis of the organisation structure in 2018 (see also paragraph 6.5.4) (R; Document I, 2018). In the other leading municipality, it was the combination of an active Millennium Goals platform and an enthusiastic mayor which led to the first step. Here, the Global Goals were used as a way to overcome the aftermath of the 2009 economic crisis (R; VNG IX, 2019). The biggest challenge the municipalities now face is how they can monitor results on the Global Goals. Another challenge is how they can ensure everybody works on the agenda within the municipal organisation, ''to really implement [the SDGs] in the organisation'' as one of the respondents said (R).

5.2.2 Summary
Both leading municipalities are Global Goals municipalities and joined the campaign quite early. The initiative to work on the SDGs came from different directions, however. Monitoring local SDG progress and ensuring the municipal organisation works on the Global Goals are today's biggest challenges.

II Activities and actions

5.3.1 Local-oriented activities
Looking at the internal actions and activities of the leading municipalities, i.e. those that relate to the municipal organisation, six things stand out.

- ❖ First of all, the municipality of [name] uses the Global Goals as the basis of its organisation structure, unlike the other leading municipality. Thus, [name] connected the SDGs with existing municipal policies and mapped how these policies already contributed to the goals (Document II; R), while [name] took the goals as its starting point. This municipality has incorporated the SDGs in the organisation structure by using them as guiding principles since 2018 (Document

III). The network organisation is based on five clusters of SDGs (area development, economic development, sustainability, welfare, and governance and security) with one integrated policy team, one strategic team and one project group (R; Document I, 2018). The municipality now wants to integrate the Global Goals even further by moving to an organisation structure without teams, thereby using the clusters as programs, which has already been applied to the municipal budget. Because a program organisation would better fit societal challenges, a higher degree of effectiveness and efficiency would be the result, according to the respondent (R).

❖ Secondly, initiatives are set up to inform politicians and civil servants about the Global Goals and to explain how people can give substance to them in their daily work. For example, [name] added a 18th Global Goal ('share and pass on') to the existing ones (Document III). The other municipality organised an event with VNG International's 'Time capsule' format a few years ago (R).

❖ Thirdly, the SDGs are referred to in policy documents such as vision documents, programs, plans and policy notes, although the extent differs. The Global Goals are included in the coalition agreements. As one of the respondents said: ''If you look at the coalition agreement, then you see all the Global Goals, they cross all portfolios [of the Board of Mayor and Aldermen]'' (R). On the other hand, the SDGs are not included in all policy notes yet, according to the same respondent, while in the municipality of [name], ''all policy documents, from coalition agreement to team deals, and proposals of the Council and the Board of Mayor and Aldermen are in line with the Global Goals'' (Document III).

❖ Fourthly, the Global Goals are included in several components of municipal policies or used as an assessment framework to develop the environmental vision (VNG IX, 2019).

❖ Fifthly, the Global Goals are included in the municipal budgets. For example, in the municipality of [name], a section on sustainability for each policy programme has been added to the budget, describing which Global Goals are in line with that specific programme (Document II), while in [name] the budget is based on the SDGs (R7).

❖ Sixthly, both municipalities try to monitor progress made on the Global Goals and take further steps. One respondent said that under the supervision of a programme manager three students

are investigating how the municipality can do this (R). In [name], a local SDG monitor ('zero measurement') was developed in cooperation with a research institute to make visible how the municipality scores compared to peers (Document II; Document IV, 2019; R).

Looking at the external actions and activities of the municipalities, i.e. those that relate to the community, two things stand out.

❖ First of all, the leading municipalities have chosen for a bottom-up approach and play an active role towards the society (R; R). They support initiatives and set up projects with residents, companies and other stakeholders (Document I; Document II, 2018; Document V, 2019). For example, both respondents said that their municipalities work together with stakeholders in the area of education. In one municipality the Global Goals were translated into a children's version which can be used in primary school (R; Document I). In [name], students from universities of applied sciences in the region work on projects with local entrepreneurs as part of their minor (R). Sometimes, it is the society that takes initiative. For example, one respondent said that several entrepreneurs came up with the idea to develop a Global Goals cycle route. In this project, the municipality is only a participant, according to the respondent (R).

❖ Secondly, in the municipality of [name], several local sustainable initiatives are brought together in a Global Goals platform, which is subsidised by the local government (VNG IX, 2019; R). The volunteers of the platform work together with the triple helix and other stakeholders on the Global Goals (R). For example, together with the municipality, the Fair Trade team of the platform organises several activities for local entrepreneurs during the Fair Trade Weeks (R).

5.3.2 International activities
The Global Goals are also coupled with international activities. The sustainability agenda makes it easy to address societal challenges local governments face, according to one of the respondents (R).

The municipality of [name] made a connection with the Global Goals last year (R). It considers societal challenges, i.e. the Global Goals, as the starting point for its international policies which ''is suitable for a medium-sized municipality'' (Document V, 2019; Document VI, 2019). The municipality explicitly involves other stakeholders in its activities. The ''combination of triple helix partners (government, education, private sector), one or more ambitions in the field of the Global Goals and international contacts results in energy, which can lead to innovation and collaborative projects''

(Document V, 2019) and opportunities to learn from each other. It is also a way to profile the municipality (Document VI, 2019).

An example is the municipality's partnership with a [foreign] city, which used to be an economic one (R). Nowadays, the relationship is much broader than that in which the SDGs are used as ''reciprocal guidelines'' (Document V, 2019). Last year, in the context of learning from each other, a delegation comprising the municipality's mayor and representatives of five other cities, the province [name] and VNG went to a [foreign] province (the Dutch province has a partnership with its [foreign] counterpart for more than 25 years) (Document V, 2019; Document VI, 2019). The mayor of [name] took along people from the field of education, the private sector and volunteers from the local Global Goals platform, and visited several projects in the context of the SDGs 4 (Quality of Education), 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). Furthermore, the SDGs were included in a covenant ('Letter of Intent') to endorse the cooperation between the municipality and its [foreign] counterpart in the context of the SDGs (Document V, 2019; R). Back at home, several schools looked how they could include the Global Goals in the curriculum. Also, student exchange programs which are organised between these schools and counterparts in [country] and the [country] are all about the SDGs (Document VII, 2019).

In other international contacts such as those with a Vietnamese province and networks such as Slum Dwellers International, which aims to strengthen the living environment of slums in big cities in the world, the Global Goals are also used as guiding principles and an inspirational source (R; Document V, 2019). The same applies to networks at the level of the EU. An interesting example to mention here is Food NL in Brussels, a platform established with Dutch counterparts which aims to ask attention to SDGs 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), 4 (Quality of Education) and 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). The program was presented to the European Parliament last year (Document VII, 2019). National activities which entail an international dimension and international initiatives are also intertwined with the Global Goals, such as Liberation Day (SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Public Services), last year's Serious Request 'The lifeline' against human trafficking (SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Public Services) and Orange the World (SDG 5: Gender Equality) (Document VII, 2019; R).

5.3.3 Summary
The two leading municipalities have approached the SDGs in a different way. The municipality of [name] used the Global Goals as a starting point to set up its organisation structure, while [name] connected the Global Goals with existing policies by mapping out how the municipality already contributed to the sustainability agenda. Both municipalities have included the SDGs in their coalition agreements, budgets

and policy documents, although not completely in the same way. Attempts are made to monitor progress on the Global Goals. Both municipalities have also chosen for a bottom-up approach. The society takes initiative or projects are set up in collaboration with the local governments. The Global Goals are also coupled with international activities. The municipality of [name] uses them as guiding principles in its partnership with a foreign counterpart, in networks and in initiatives that entail an international dimension.
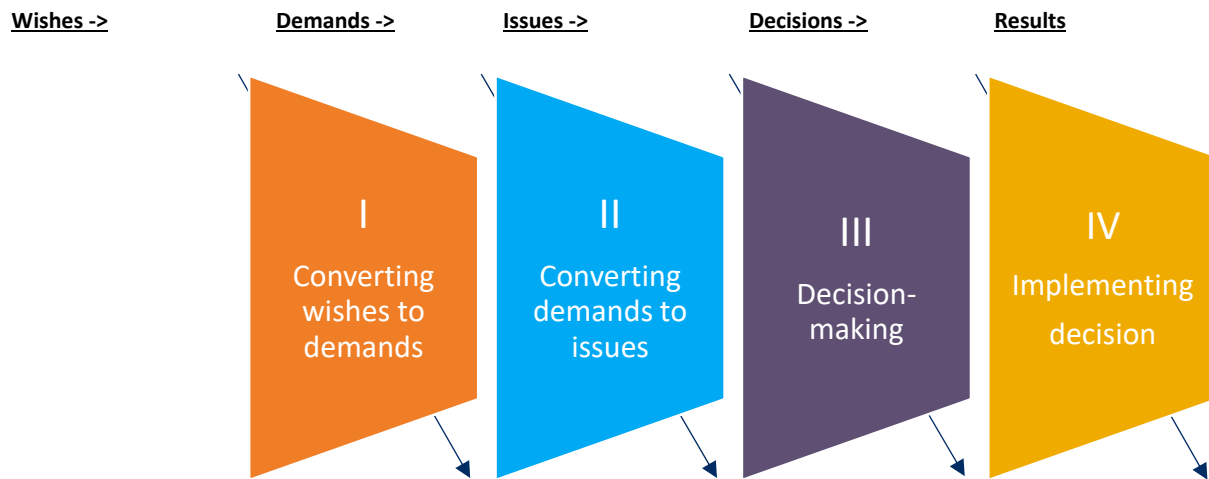
III Support base

5.4.1 Political support

In order to implement a policy, all kind of obstacles need to be overcome by advocates of a certain policy, according to the obstacles model (see Figure 13). An important obstacle is the decision-making process, for there is a risk an issue leads to a non-decision (see also paragraph 2.5.3). The attitude of policymakers is key here: they have to be convinced of an issue that needs to be dealt with, i.e. the SDGs. Although the model mainly applies to policymaking, in reality there are permanent struggles, which makes the policy process more like a 'garbage can'. Other issues may supersede plans to implement the SDGs. In sum, even after the decision is made to work on the Global Goals, political support is necessary.

Looking at the two leading municipalities, there is indeed continuous political support for the SDGs. Both respondents said that their councillors are enthusiastic about working on the Global Goals (R7; R12). In the municipality of [name], all political fractions are represented by the local Global Goals platform, which makes the Global Goals an apolitical issue, according to the respondent (R). In that respect, *ideology* is not a factor that negatively influences the implementation of the Global Goals (see also paragraph 2.5.2). In both municipalities, the executive board is also supportive of the SDGs (R; R). Particularly the mayor seems to play an important role in conveying the SDGs, making people aware of them and connecting different stakeholders, both at the local and international level (VNG IX, 2019). ''Our mayor (…) is Global Goals ambassador for VNG International, but also for [name] and [name] (…) He is really a figurehead, of course'' (R). For example, the mayor went to other cities in the province to encourage mayors to take part in the trip to [country]. At local level, the same mayor tries to make a connection with companies, education, civil society and residents (R). In other words, the mayor plays the role of a 'policy entrepreneur' (see also 2.5.3).

Figure 13 Obstacles model

Wishes ->	Demands ->	Issues ->	Decisions ->	Results

I
Converting wishes to demands

II
Converting demands to issues

III
Decision-making

IV
Implementing decision

Source: Van de Graaf and Hoppe (1989), p. 187 (adapted).

5.4.2 Support base at the official level

Advocates of a certain policy should ensure people look differently at a situation or condition, i.e. people need to become aware of a problem. Thus, if a couple of civil servants want the municipality to work on the SDGs, not only politicians must be convinced, but also colleagues within the internal organisation. After all, they may 'hinder' the implementation of the decision to work on the SDGs (see also paragraph 2.5.3). Therefore, the attitude of civil servants may negatively influence policy implementation.

In both municipalities there seems to be a small group of people from different domains/clusters that takes the lead in informing colleagues about the Global Goals and making them enthusiastic. They are the advocates of the SDGs. For example, in the municipality of [name], 17 people act as ambassadors, one for each Global Goal (SDG Nederland, 2019). Furthermore, in both municipalities, there is someone at the top of the official organisation who coordinates the Global Goals and connects initiatives and people from different domains/clusters (R; R). As one of respondents said: ''It comes in handy if you have a person within the municipality who can connect and find people for certain projects, for no one has sufficient knowledge of all goals'' (R).

From the interviews it became clear that support for the Global Goals is small but growing within the internal organisation. All too often, civil servants see the Global Goals as something extra they have to do (R; R). Also, some people are intrinsically motivated to work on the Global Goals, while others are not (R). Getting people to work on the Global Goals is therefore one of the biggest challenges both municipalities face.

5.4.3 Summary

The two municipalities show that the attitude of politicians and civil servants in implementing the SDGs is crucial. Both the Council and the Board of Mayor and Aldermen are enthusiastic about the Global Goals. The mayor plays an important role in that respect. At the official level, the support base is small but growing.

IV 'Teaching' practices

5.5.1 'Teaching' non-leading municipalities

The leading municipalities share their SDG approaches with non-leading municipalities in two different ways.

❖ First of all, they share their stories at events facilitated by VNG International, such as the Global Goals Meet-Up (R; Document I, 2018). ''We would have given a workshop with respect to internationalisation [at the Global Goals Meet-Up] (…) We have linked the Global Goals to our trip to [country] (…), and that is a nice example to show other municipalities'', one of the respondents said (R). The municipalities also share their SDG approaches at other occasions. ''I am often asked to tell the story (…) Over the past few months, I have been on a tour around the country [with VNG International]'' (R).

❖ Secondly, the leading municipalities share their approaches on own initiative. One of them gathered the lessons learned and shares that document with other local governments when they approach the municipality with questions about its SDG implementation (R; Document I, 2018). The municipality of [name] organises biannual meetings for counterparts. During these meetings, together with the volunteers of the local Global Goals platform, the mayor gives an presentation on how the municipality gives substance to the sustainability agenda, why it started to do so and how the SDGs fit the ''DNA of [name]'' (R12). The mayor often refers to the four A's (ambition, alliance, agenda and action) to make a connection with other stakeholders, according to the respondent (R). After the presentation, other municipalities have the opportunity to ask questions (VNG IX, 2019; R). According to the same respondent, it is the collaboration between the municipality and the local platform which makes the municipality's SDG approach such a good example for others (R). The municipality also makes videos to share its approach. In addition, the local Global Goals platform organises online webinars in which one or more Global Goals are coupled with current issues, such as the impact of COVID-19 on the financial situation of citizens. The municipality also takes part in those webinars (R).

5.5.2 Summary

The leading municipalities 'teach' their counterparts through stories and presentations. They do not only share their SDG approaches at events and occasions which are organised by VNG International, but they also take own initiative in that respect.

Resume

The two leading municipalities have implemented the SDGs in a different way. In [name], the Global Goals are used as the basis of the organisation structure. In [name], the Global Goals are connected and integrated into existing policies. Regarding actions and activities that relate to the internal municipal organisation, the SDGs are included in the coalition agreements, budgets and policy documents. Both municipalities have also chosen for a bottom-up approach and play an active role towards the community. Connection is also laid with international activities. For example, the SDGs are used as guiding principles in partnerships with foreign counterparts or networks. There is a high degree of political support in both municipalities. Both the Council and the Board of Mayor and Aldermen are enthusiastic about the Global Goals. Particularly the mayor plays an important role in conveying the SDGs and making a connection with different stakeholders. Civil servants are more reserved, however. All too often, they see the Global Goals as something extra they have to do. Next to monitoring the SDGs, getting people to work on the SDGs is one of the biggest challenges. The two municipalities share their approaches at different events and occasions. Sometimes they do this on own initiative.

Chapter VI
Learning practices

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, we have seen how leading municipalities give substance to the sustainability agenda. Here, we focus on the question whether non-leading municipalities adopt to the SDGs through learning or imitation. The basic argumentation can be found in Figure 14 (compare this with Figure 1). Local governments mainly look at Dutch counterparts, which affirms that *sociocultural distance between municipalities* influences learning processes (see also paragraph 2.5.2). The assumption that non-leading municipalities look at leaders does not hold. Municipalities also look at other non-leading counterparts (see Figure 14). The reason is that a municipality that looks for inspiration compares its situation with another municipality. The fact that municipalities pay attention to the specific local conditions clearly shows that *learning* rather than imitation is the main mechanism underlying policy transfer (see Figure 14). Copying successful practices is also less likely, because the SDGs are often not seen as a way to profile the municipality. The main channel through which policy transfer takes place is VNG International. What municipalities learn from counterparts is mostly general in nature, for specific information requires certain conditions are the same.

Figure 14	Basic argumentation	
	'Filter'	
Municipality (leader)		**Municipality (follower)**
	Non-leading municipalities also look at other non-leading municipalities	
	Underlying mechanisms	Policy change (dependent variable)
	Learning is limited *(+) /imitation*	
	Policy transfer	
	Knowledge exchange: general information (+) and to a lesser degree, specific information (+); tacit knowledge	
	Channels	
	Peer-to-peer contact is limited *(+)/VNG International (+)/Learning through TMNs is* limited *(+)*	
	Conditions	
	Local governance context	
	- Institutional capacity (internal factor) (+)	
	- Ideology (internal factor) (+)	
	- Changes in government (internal factor) (+)	
	- Roles of stakeholders (internal factor) (+)	
	- Focusing event (external factor) (+)	
	- Sociocultural distance (network factor) (+)	
	- Perceptions of high-level policy performance (network factor) (+)	

(+) means the specific element is affirmed.

Learning does not happen a lot due to *limited contact between municipalities* as well as *dissimilar governance contexts* and *factors* that hinder implementation of what has been taken from another municipality. Thus, in line with the theory, policy change through policy transfer does not happen a lot due to domestic factors that influence policy implementation (see Figure 14). Even if implementation takes place, this may be rather the result of a *focusing event* which provides an opportunity for 'policy entrepreneurs' to bring about change, as in the case of the municipality of [name].

This chapter starts with some preliminary observations (Part I), which will be further elaborated in the following sections. The second part is about the underlying mechanisms of policy transfer (Part II). It focuses on the *who*-question (which municipalities are considered to be inspirational sources?) and the *how*-question (what does the policy transfer process look like?). Subsequently, the *what*-question is discussed (what do local governments take from their peers?) (Part III). As it turns out, learning does not happen a lot. The reasons for this are the next point of discussion (Part IV). Indeed, there are several factors that influence policy change and even hinder the implementation of what has been taken from another municipality. The chapter concludes with a summary.

I Preliminary observations

6.2.1 Foreign municipalities versus Dutch municipalities
This section gives a short overview of how both leading and non-leading municipalities think about taking note from each other with respect to the SDGs, which will be further elaborated in the rest of the chapter. Leading municipalities look at each other, albeit the extent differs (R; R), while non-leading municipalities look at both leading and non-leading municipalities to give substance to the SDGs (R; R; R; R; R). ''We look at other municipalities, of course, and if we can benefit from them, we do'' as one of the respondents stated (R). Several respondents thought it is important to look at other municipalities to learn about the Global Goals. Moreover, they were relieved they were not the only ones who are struggling with giving substance to the sustainability agenda (R; R; R; R; R).

Municipalities mostly look at their Dutch counterparts for inspiration, the survey on international municipal policies shows (see Figure 15 and Figure B in Appendix II). From the interviews a similar image emerged. Several respondents said that they look for inspiration abroad to give substance to the SDGs or planned to do so, albeit most of them thought Dutch counterparts are more important.

There are four reasons for this:

❖ The Global Goals seem not to be an important issue in international municipal networks (R; R). As one respondent said: ''It is not really put on the agenda (…) It is more ad hoc, but we now try to structure that more with [partner] municipalities'' (R). On the other hand, there are transnational municipal networks (TMNs) such as [name], [name] and [name] in which learning about the SDGs is a salient topic and best practices are exchanged (R; R; R). For example, one municipality planned to rent a tour bus as part of the programme 'On tour for a better planet' to arise awareness in the municipality during the European Mobility Week. The municipality shared the idea with other members of the TMN via email (Document VIII, 2020), ''[so] we can all emphasise the Global Goals in the Week of the European Mobility'' (R). Another respondent said: ''We are member of the [name] taskforce (…) [In Brussels], Helsinki and Bristol presented their country reports and told us how they approached [the SDGs] (…) It is mainly about reporting and connecting [the SDGs to] your policies, and how you can do that'' (R). In other forums within [name], the SDGs are discussed how they can be connected to policies in content (R).

❖ International networks may be seen as less effective and efficient for getting information about the SDGs. For example, one respondent said that he noticed everything goes a bit slower within the UN Global Compact Cities Program the municipality participates in (R).

❖ The Global Goals are not seen as an important issue abroad. For example, one of the respondents said that in the view of a partner municipality abroad, the SDGs are not really an issue at the local level (R). Something similar was suggested by another respondent (R).

❖ There are legal and cultural differences between Dutch and foreign municipalities. This can make it difficult to implement what has been learned from a partner municipality (R).

The observations as outlined above affirm that the *sociocultural distance between municipalities* that was identified as a network factor indeed plays a role in learning processes about the SDGs (see also paragraph 2.5.2). In other words, there is a strong bias towards municipalities closer at home.

The foreign counterparts which were mentioned by a few interviewees as inspirational sources are members of the same municipal networks such as [name], [name] and [name], take part in the same EU programme such as Interreg, or are municipalities which the Dutch local governments have a partnership with (R; R; R; R; R). In the latter case, the municipalities have connected the Global Goals to their international activities in a more explicit way (R; R). As discussed in the theoretical framework, the information municipalities get from counterparts in such networks may in turn pass on to other Dutch municipalities outside these networks (see also paragraph 2.4.3). However, from the interviews it became clear that this is not the case. In other words, what these Dutch local governments get from their foreign counterparts are not shared with other Dutch municipalities.

6.2.2 Summary
Local governments mainly look at other Dutch municipalities to be inspired, which affirms that sociocultural distance between municipalities as a network factor influences policy transfer processes. Some municipalities also look at foreign counterparts to get information about the SDGs. They are often members of the same network.

II Policy transfer: Learning or Imitation?

In this part of the chapter, we look at policy transfer processes to assess whether learning or imitation is the underlying mechanism. Which municipalities are seen as sources of inspiration is the first point of discussion. Subsequently, we delve deeper in the process by looking at *how* municipalities look at each other.

6.3.1 Sources of inspiration
From the interviews and the survey on international municipal policies it became clear that non-leading municipalities look at leading municipalities based on their *perceptions* of the latter's SDG performance. In almost every conversation, interviewees mentioned the names of municipalities they considered to be forerunners. As one of the respondents said: ''[name] is very far with its SDG policies, and [name], so you keep that in mind and look for them'' (R). The fact that these municipalities are the furthest in implementing the SDGs was seen as common knowledge. Thus, as one of the respondents said:

''[name], you also probably know that, they are far'' (R). And another respondent said: ''For everybody knows that [name] is one of the forerunners'' (R). Several respondents also referred to [name] (R), [name] (R) and [name] (R) in the survey. Some of the interviewees even visited these three municipalities or planned to do so (R; R; R).

These statements and observations show that the *perception of high-level policy performance*, which was identified as a network factor, indeed impacts learning relationships (see also paragraph 2.5.2). In other words, non-leading municipalities do not only look at the municipalities that were identified as *leaders* according to the SDG scoring system, they also look at municipalities they *perceive* as good sources of information. Moreover, as discussed in the theoretical framework (see also paragraph 2.5.2), perceptions of high-level policy performance not only depends on the experience these municipalities would have in a policy field, but also on to what extent information about their performance is disseminated through different channels, such as conferences and award ceremonies. This is also the case here. Interviewees often referred to this year's Global Goals Meet-Up, when they talked about leading municipalities. During this event, the municipalities of [name], [name] and [name] were presented as leading municipalities and their SDG approaches were shared with the audience. In that sense, it is not odd non-leading municipalities consider these municipalities to be leaders.

Non-leading municipalities do not only look at leading municipalities, however, which has something to do with *how* municipalities look at each other. We turn to this point now.

6.3.2 Making comparisons

From the interviews it became clear that respondents look at other municipalities through the 'filter' of their own municipality and *compare* their situations and conditions. *Similarity* seems to be key here.

Specifically, respondents make this comparison based on the municipality's *profile*, its *approach towards the Global Goals* and the *challenges* it encounters in implementing the sustainability agenda (see Figure 16).

Figure 16

Similarity in:
➢ **Profile**
- *Size: municipalities often look at counterparts of similar proportions*
- *Type of community: sociocultural closeness*
- *Method of internal organisation: fit*
- *Attitude of politicians/civil servants: enthusiasm, for example*

➢ **SDG approach**

➢ **Challenges**

That is why non-municipalities not only look at leading municipalities, but also seek inspiration from those local governments that take a similar position or are further in their view compared to them (R; R). For example, one of the respondents said: ''In the collaboration with [the municipalities of] [name] and [name], we were a forerunner, a little bit earlier than the other municipalities, and then you get the question, how did you do that (…) So then you are the one who can pass on things to other municipalities'' (R).

The municipality's *profile* comprises its *size*, the *type of community*, the *method of the internal organisation* and the *attitude of politicians and/or civil servants* (see Figure 16).

❖ From the interviews it became clear *size* was indeed something local authorities take into account. This applies to both leading and non-leading municipalities. Big municipalities mostly look at other big municipalities (R; R), while smaller municipalities look at peers of similar size. Medium-sized municipalities look at bigger counterparts sometimes.

   Several respondents were quite explicit on this point (R; R; R; R; R; R). According to one of them, the municipality mainly looks at other islands because they are similar in size and face similar problems (R). Another respondent said: ''I tried to contact [name], because it is also a big municipality (…). Particularly big municipalities (…) [name] is also different from [name], but they probably encounter similar troubles (…) For I noticed when I spoke with smaller municipalities, it works differently (…), we have 7,000 employees (…) [name] is a big municipality and then you have got different challenges to get people along'' (R). A similar statement was made by another respondent (R). In that respect, size also relates to the *challenges* municipalities face in implementing the sustainability agenda, which I discuss below.

   One respondent was more nuanced, however, and said contents were more important than size, although ''you listen better, of course, if you notice that [name] and [name] are very comparable (…) If you know [name] would have something like this, I would rather look at [name] than [name], because it has the same capacities'' (R).

❖ A municipality also looks at the *type of community*, i.e. what kind of culture prevails and how active the society is, and compare this situation with counterparts' (R; R; R; R; R). Again, the sociocultural distance between municipalities plays a role here. There seems to be a strong bias towards local governments that are close to the own municipality (see also paragraph 2.5.2). For example, an interviewee mentioned that he looked at a neighbouring municipality that

joined the campaign, because this municipality would have ''a similar kind of population and a similar culture'' (R). One respondent said that his municipality was relatively conservative. According to him, the Global Goals came bottom-up but in a different way than in a leading municipality (R). A similar statement was made by another interviewee: ''[The municipality] is a quite conservative one (…) If I look at whom is worried about the environment and commits himself to that, it is not comparable with cities such as [name] and [name], but also not with [name], where [the residents] are willing [to contribute to the SDGs]'' (R). Another respondent said that he found it inspirational to see the approach of a leading municipality because the Global Goals were even more bottom-up compared to the own municipality (R).

❖ Municipalities compare their internal organisations with each other. As one of the respondents said: ''We have to look what fits our method (…) You always have to look what fits the organisation'' (R).

❖ Municipalities also look at the *attitude of politicians and/or civil servants* and compare them with their own administrators. Respondents mentioned the importance of having enthusiastic people at the political and/or official level, particularly the mayor (R; R). One respondent said: ''[That mayor] stands personally for them [the Global Goals] (…) that is surely in our [municipality the case] (…) one councillor and our mayor also stand for them'' (R).

Besides profile, local governments also compare their *approaches towards the SDGs*, which are mainly comprised of internally and/or externally local-oriented activities and actions (see also paragraph 4.4.1). Linked to this is also the direction from which the initiative came: the community, politicians and/or civil servants. Thus, from the interviews it became clear that in some municipalities, enthusiastic people within the official organisation took the lead in implementing the SDGs (R; R; R), while it was mainly the political level that took the lead in other municipalities (R; R). In a few municipalities, it was a combination of different initiatives (R; R; R).

Municipalities are aware of their different starting points and take this into account when they look for inspiration (R). Specifically, local governments look for inspiration from those municipalities that have a similar approach towards the Global Goals and are step further in their view.
These examples are not always the leading municipalities, however. For example, one of the respondents said: ''[We] are going to figure out how we can broaden this both internally and externally (…) Our neighbouring municipality has embraced the Global Goals a little bit more, also internally. We

also look at those plans and look if we can learn from them'' (R). Another respondent also mentioned that he looked at two other municipalities in the region, because the municipality was also using the Global Goals as an assessment framework, albeit the others turned out not be that far (R). Referring to the Global Goals Meet-Up, one of the respondent said: ''[name] (…) is very interesting to see, but because [name] is also a little bit more in the first phase, it was extra interesting'' (R).

Municipalities also look at others based on the *challenges* they encounter in implementing the Global Goals. From the interviews it became clear that one of these challenges is related to the *low degree of support* at the political and official level. Another challenge for several municipalities is how the contribution of municipal policies to the SDGs can be visualised, and by extension how progress on the SDGs can be *monitored* (R; R). For example, one respondent said that another municipality was used as a source of inspiration for finding SDG indicators in order to measure local sustainability (R).

6.3.3 Learning versus imitation
Municipalities are aware of the contexts in which they operate. Based on the comparison they make, municipalities make a selection of the information they get from their peers. The fact they take into account specific local conditions indicates that the underlying mechanism of policy transfer between municipalities is *learning*. Imitation does not seem to happen a lot. During the interviews, only a few times imitation seemed to be suggested. One of the respondents said: ''Probably we cannot *copy* [italics made by the author] [that measure from another municipality], because we are too small in size'' (R). The fact that this respondent takes into account the size of the own municipality points to the direction of learning though.

Two respondents seemed to point to the direction of imitation in a more explicit way. One of them said: ''It is better to steal something good then to invent something bad'' (R) when referring to other municipalities. Another respondent said something similar when he talked about a monitoring tool the municipality wanted to develop (R). However, because in both cases there was no indication aspects of practices of other municipalities were indeed copied by these information-seeking municipalities, imitation seemed neither to play a role here. There is also another reason why imitation does not seem to happen a lot: municipalities do not really see the SDGs as a way to profile themselves (see also paragraph 6.5.3). These local governments simply do not attach importance to the Global Goals, unlike the leading municipalities. In sum, learning rather than imitation seems to be the underlying mechanism of policy transfer between municipalities.

6.3.4 Summary

Non-leading municipalities look at both leading municipalities and non-leading municipalities (see also Figure 17). Sources of inspiration are not only the leading municipalities that were identified according to the SDG scoring system, however, because local governments look at those counterparts they perceive as leading ones. Non-leading municipalities also look at other non-leading municipalities, because similarity in profile, SDG approach and challenges seem to be more important than whether these municipalities act as leaders. They do so by comparing their situations and conditions. Thus, municipalities look at peers of similar size, culture and way of working, and they try to get information of counterparts that carry out similar activities and face similar challenges in implementing the SDGs. The fact that local governments are aware of the contexts in which they operate and take account of the specific local conditions indicates that learning rather than imitation is the underlying mechanism of policy transfer between municipalities. Moreover, many municipalities do not see the SDGs as a way to profile themselves, which makes imitation also less likely.

Figure 17

➢ **Nonleading municipalities look at both leading and non-leading municipalities for inspiration**

➢ **Non-leading municipalities look at local authorities they perceive as leading ones instead of the leaders which were identified based on the SDG scoring system. This affirms that perceptions of high-level policy performance impact policy transfer in the field of the SDGs**

➢ **Non-leading municipalities look at counterparts that have a similar profile and approach towards the SDGs, and face similar challenges**

➢ **A similar profile includes sociocultural closeness. This affirms that sociocultural distance between municipalities impacts policy transfer in the field of the SDGs**

➢ **Learning is the main mechanism underlying policy transfer between municipalities with respect to the SDGs**

III Policy transfer: Channels and Knowledge

In this part, we discuss the channels through which learning processes take place. Then, we look at the contents of policy transfer, i.e. *what* do municipalities get from each other?
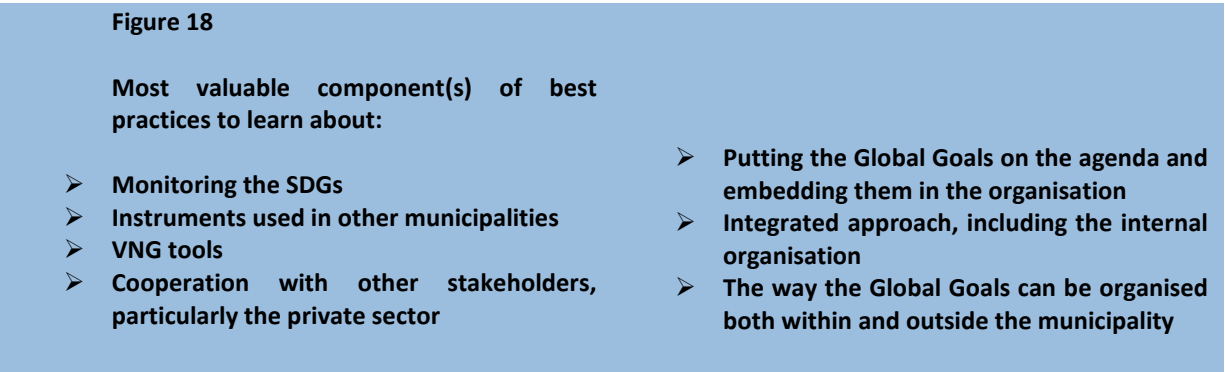
6.4.1 Channels

Considering the fact that local governments mainly look at counterparts within the Netherlands (see also paragraph 6.2.1), it does not come as a surprise exchange of knowledge mostly happens at the

national level. This may happen through peer-to-peer contact or VNG International. The former does not happen a lot, however, and in many cases, such contact is even absent (see also paragraph 6.5.1). Some respondents said that they went to other municipalities on their own initiative or emailed their counterparts for questions about SDG approaches - specifically those municipalities they consider to be leading ones - (R; R; R; R), but such contact seems sporadically.

Municipalities mainly get information about the SDGs via best practices which are uploaded on VNG International's website (R; R; R). The Global Goals Meet-Up is also important for municipalities to get information about the SDGs and how other municipalities implemented them, for many interviewees referred to this event when talking about inspirational municipalities (R; R; R; R). In other words, VNG International is the main channel through which learning about the SDGs takes place (see Figure 14).

6.4.2 General versus specific knowledge

As we have seen above, municipalities compare their situations with each other. Based on this comparison, they make a selection of the information they get from counterparts. As one of the respondents said: ''We try to balance which aspects we pick up and which we do not pick up (…) what we adopt, and what works and what does not work'' (R). A similar phrase was used by another respondent (R).

Figure 18

Most valuable component(s) of best practices to learn about:

➢ Monitoring the SDGs
➢ Instruments used in other municipalities
➢ VNG tools
➢ Cooperation with other stakeholders, particularly the private sector

➢ Putting the Global Goals on the agenda and embedding them in the organisation
➢ Integrated approach, including the internal organisation
➢ The way the Global Goals can be organised both within and outside the municipality

What municipalities take from each other is much harder to assess, however. From the survey it became clear that many respondents either did not know which components of best practices regarding the Global Goals they found the most valuable or chose N.A. (n=90; 81.1%) (see Appendix II). Those who filled in the corresponding open field gave very diverse answers (see also Figure 18). It seems that the respondents mostly refer to medium visible components of best practices, i.e. methods and instruments. This suggests these are the most transferable parts of best practices with respect to the SDGs (see also paragraph 2.4.2).

From the interviews a clearer picture emerges, although respondents found it hard to say what they had learned via different channels, i.e. the VNG website, the Global Goals Meet-Up or peer-to-peer contact. The information municipalities get from each other can either be seen as *general* in nature or *specific* in nature. In addition, one may distinguish between '*positive*' and '*negative*' knowledge.

General information seems less depending on whether municipalities are alike. Examples of this kind of knowledge are tips such as using the term Global Goals instead of SDGs, as this would suggest the goals have only something to do with the environment (R), and looking for students who can find out how municipal policies relate to the Global Goals. Several respondents said they planned to do so (R; R; R). Although most of the knowledge municipalities get from others is '*positive*', from the interviews it became clear that this is not always the case. For example, one respondent said that he noticed that when he talked to other municipalities, many of them had a hard time to make clear how their municipal policies exactly contributed to the SDGs. Also, he missed a clear picture of an integrated SDG approach in most municipalities (R).

Exchanging *specific* information depends on how similar the contexts of municipalities are, i.e. to what extent they have a similar profile and SDG approach, and face similar challenges. From the interviews a few examples of an exchange of specific information emerged. One of the respondents mentioned a concrete initiative from another non-leading municipality as a good example to apply, because it was bottom-up and entailed local and social aspects: ''[That municipality] works with the concept self-regulation 3.0 (…) [the municipality] started to make a budget available for [residents] to establish [their] own services (…) [other small municipalities] have problems with a decline in population and maintaining services, so they [inhabitants] do it themselves'' (R). Another respondent who was looking for information about monitoring the SDGs said that he learned from a non-leading municipality to use existing data for developing a local monitoring tool: ''So getting an overview of available data [from other organisations such as CBS] and what you probably already have at home, that was something I took from [name]'' (R). Another interviewee said that the same municipality was used for developing a local monitoring tool in order to apply it to the municipal budget (R), although it was not clear which aspects the respondent exactly learned.

One respondent said that he found it interesting to see that a leading municipality had connected the SDGs with its international activities: ''That [making the connection with international activities] has not been done yet [here], but perhaps in the future. So that was something I wanted to pass on to colleagues. I think it is a good idea'' (R). Referring to a presentation which was given by a

municipality at the Global Goals Meet-Up, the same respondent said: ''I use what has been said there, it will be included in the plan [to make visible how the Aldermen can work on the Global Goals], but I cannot say yet, this is what we have taken (…) How it will look like eventually, I am not sure yet'' (R). A similar observation of something specific which a municipality learned from a non-leading municipality was given by another respondent, who was neither sure whether it could be implemented: ''[The municipality of] [name] has chosen for a kind of main plug which fits the policy (…), a 'b' [political level] and 'a' [official level] [plug]. I am not sure we will go that far, because the board of Mayor and Aldermen has a say in that (…) Perhaps we can do something with it'' (R). Referring to a leading municipality, another respondent said that he learned to choose one Global Goal as a basis: ''For we have worked out a few scenarios on the basis of available resources. And if it turns out it is difficult to arrange a separate budget for the Global Goals, then we look whether we will focus on one Global Goal'' (R).

Even if what has been learned cannot be implemented one-on-one due to dissimilar contexts, this kind of knowledge is still useful in three ways:

- ❖ First of all, what has been learned can be altered in such a way it is applicable. For example, one of the respondents said that, although a platform used in another municipality could not be copied due to the difference in size of the two municipalities, cooperating with local organisations would make working on the Global Goals less non-committal, like in the other municipality (R). Another respondent said that it was a conscious choice to connect the SDGs with existing societal initiatives and projects to make it recognisable for inhabitants, thereby referring to a more active community of a leading municipality the respondent visited (R).

- ❖ Secondly, the information municipalities get from others can still give them ideas which they may implement at a later stadium, such as using a Global Goals signature, including the SDGS in the coalition agreement or using the SDGs as an assessment framework for the development of the environmental vision (R; R).

- ❖ Thirdly, this kind of information can arouse motivation to see what is possible. In that sense, it is an eye-opener. For example, one respondent said that seeing how a leading municipality had handled the different societal initiatives was ''why we said, okay, we want to continue with [implementing the SDGs]'' (R). As discussed in the theoretical framework (see also paragraph 2.4.1), conceivability can also improve learning capacities. *Informational infrastructures* such as

conferences and award ceremonies play an important role in doing so. The Global Goals Meet-Up and the Global Goals Municipality Awards are good examples of such infrastructures. Referring to the event and the award ceremony, interviewees said that they thought it was inspirational to see how leading municipalities had embraced the Global Goals, how the SDGs worked through their municipal policies and which actor took the initiative to work on the Global Goals (R; R; R).

Based on the observations above, one can argue that what municipalities learn from each other entail elements of both *explicit* (codified) knowledge, which is independent of the relationship between the municipality that holds the information and the municipality that seeks that information, and *implicit* knowledge, which depends on that relationship (see also paragraph 2.3.3). Thus, tips such as using students to map out how municipalities policies contribute to the SDGs is an example of an element of *explicit* knowledge. This kind of information is transmittable without face-to-face contact and can easily be written down. Another example of this type of knowledge is using existing data sets to develop a local SDG monitoring tool. However, for the most part, *implicit* knowledge is required to fully understand the specific local context and conditions, and implement what has been taken from another municipality. For example, one of the respondents said that he was not able to figure out the first steps leading municipalities had taken in implementing the Global Goals: ''I see they have those clusters of education and entrepreneurs (…) but how do you get there?'' (R).

6.4.3 Summary
Instruments and methods seem to be the most transferable parts of best practices (see also Figure 19). The knowledge an information-seeking municipality gets from another (non-)leading municipality can be described as either general or specific in nature. While the former seems to be independent of the contexts in which municipalities operate, the latter depends on similar contexts. Even if what has been taken from another municipality cannot directly be implemented due to dissimilar contexts, the knowledge is still valuable. It can be altered in such a way it is applicable; what has been picked up can be implemented at a later stadium; or the information functions as an eye-opener. Events such as the Global Goals Meet-Up are a good way to show what is possible. The contents of policy transfer between municipalities in the field of the SDGs entail elements of both explicit and implicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is more than often needed to understand the context in which a practice was implemented by another municipality.

Figure 19

➢ **Methods and instruments are seen as the most valuable components of best practices with respect to the SDGs**

➢ **General information seems less depending on whether contexts are similar, unlike specific information**

➢ **Even if what has been learned cannot be implemented, it is still beneficial for the information-seeking municipality**

➢ **What municipalities get from each other entail elements of both explicit and implicit knowledge**

IV Policy change through policy transfer?

In this part, we look at the link between policy transfer and policy change in more detail. First, we discuss why learning does not happen a lot. As we will see, the two main reasons for this are the limited contact between municipalities with respect to the SDGs and the dissimilar contexts in which local governments operate. Subsequently, we look in more detail at factors that shape the local governance context and influence policy implementation. A few of these factors are highlighted here. Since the attitude of politicians and civil servant influences whether implementation of the SDGs takes place, a separate section is dedicated to the roles these stakeholders play. Lastly, an example is given of policy change that took place, but which was *not* the result of learning, but of something else.

6.5.1 Limited contact and dissimilar contexts

There are two main reasons why learning between leading and (non-)leading municipalities does not happen a lot. The first reason is the *limited contact* between municipalities regarding the subject of the SDGs. Although some municipalities approach other municipalities for information about the SDGs (see also paragraph 6.4.1), such contact is mostly absent. Several respondents from Global Goals municipalities said that they had not much contact with counterparts within the same region (R; R; R), despite the fact that these municipalities also joined the Municipalities4GlobalGoals campaign. What is more, from the interviews it became clear that municipalities are not always aware of the fact that their neighbours are also Global Goals municipalities (R; R; R). One explanation for the limited contact between municipalities may have something to do with the difference in functions of those who take the lead in implementing the Global Goals within their municipalities. Thus, some contacts for the Global Goals work on environmental issues, while others engage in international affairs, and they do not know each other. Another explanation may have something to do with the way the SDGs are embedded in

the municipalities (R; R), for municipalities look at counterparts based on similarity in SDG approach, as we have seen. Municipal reorganisations can also be a reason why there is limited contact between neighbouring municipalities (R).

At regional level, the topic of the SDGs is neither a prominent issue. One explanation for this is the limited regional collaboration in some regions (R; R). As one of the respondents said: ''The rest of the province of [name] is quite fragmented, although we now try to improve that with a new consultative body (…) which includes the province and the regional water authorities (…) But the Global Goals are not on the agenda'' (R). Competition might be a reason why such collaboration does not take place, one of the respondents suggested (R). But even in those regions where municipal collaboration takes place, respondents had not the feeling much attention is paid to the sustainability agenda at the regional level (R; R; ; R; R). As one of them said: ''There are more persons in the province of [name] than organisations that engage [in the SDGs] (…) It is not like we said as municipalities, let us work on the SDGs'' (R). According to another respondent, there are all kinds of SDGs initiatives in the region where his municipality is located, and which are joined by local governments as well. However, municipal cooperation on the Global Goals does not take place (R). Regional cooperation on the SDGs is rather in its infancy, according to some respondents (R; R).

The second reason why learning does not happen is the *dissimilar contexts* in which municipalities operate, and factors that impact learning processes (see also paragraph 6.5.2). It is therefore directly related to the comparison an information-seeking municipality makes based on its *profile* and *approach towards the SDGs*, and the *challenges* it faces to implement the SDGs. In fact, it is the other side of the coin: if municipalities can learn from each other based on similar contexts in which they operate, dissimilar contexts makes learning difficult. This applies to both leading and non-leading municipalities that may act as sources of inspiration.

❖ Several respondents emphasised the difference between their own municipality and leading municipalities when making a comparison. For example, some of them pointed at a difference in *attitude of politicians* (R; R). As one of the respondents said: ''[The municipality of] [name] is very successful (…) they have a very enthusiastic mayor. We do not have that, unfortunately'' (R). According to the same respondent, the leading municipality had also someone at the top of the organisation who would work full-time on the Global Goals, which was not the case in his municipality. A similar statement was made by another respondent (R).

❖ Learning becomes also difficult when municipalities play a *different role towards the society*, which seems partly based on a difference in the *type of community* and *SDG approach*. These roles can be described as *active* or *reactive* (see Table 12). Thus, some municipalities see a role for themselves in communicating the Global Goals towards inhabitants and mobilising citizens (R; R; R; R; R), albeit their communities were seen as less active than those of the leading municipalities. One of the respondents said that the communication team had been instructed to set up a campaign to inform inhabitants and companies about the SDGs (R). In this case, the society was also seen as a very active one. Other municipalities do not see such an active role for themselves, however, as the following citate shows: ''I know they [the municipality of name] have a digital platform to hold debates with citizens and motivate them to set up initiatives (…) and on which inhabitants can meet each other to exchange ideas (…) So there [the SDGs] are directed outwards, while we use it as an instrument to work on [them] from our policies (…) We have used it as a starting point (…) and we do not think we have to promote them for inhabitants'' (R).

Table 12 Active role versus reactive role

Active role	- Informing inhabitants and other stakeholders about the SDGs - Cooperating with stakeholders such as companies located within the municipality - Facilitating and supporting societal initiatives
Reactive role	- Facilitating and supporting societal initiatives

Municipalities play different roles towards the society.

❖ Dissimilar contexts also play a role when municipalities look at other non-leading municipalities. Several respondents referred to a difference in *profile* when making a comparison. One of them said: ''Not completely comparable, for it is a big city with many capacities (…) the problems are not the same, of course'' (R). Another respondent said: ''[name] is quite a big municipality and I did not think it was comparable with [the municipality of] [name]'' (R).

One respondent argued that the neighbouring municipality was completely different with respect to the way of thinking and doing things (R), thereby referring to a difference in the *method of the internal organisation*.

❖ One of the respondents said that many examples from other municipalities were not applicable to his own municipality. According to him, the underlying reason was that the municipality was different from others, not only in size, but also in *type of community*: ''(…) while if you look at us, I see many residents' initiatives, they take initiatives themselves'' (R). Another respondent also pointed at that direction. He said: ''We differ from what other municipalities do (…) and follow our course (…) for the inhabitants, you have to ensure [the SDGs] fit the municipality'' (R).

❖ Another *SDG approach* makes learning also difficult. After all, municipalities mostly look at other municipalities that carry out similar activities and are a bit further in implementing the SDGs, in their view (see also paragraph 6.3.2). The same applies to the challenges municipalities face in implementing the integrated sustainability agenda. However, even if municipalities face similar challenges, dissimilar contexts make learning still complicated. As one of the respondents said: ''We figured out we really need a [name] version, for otherwise it will not fit [the local context]. And you want to deliver a tailor-made [monitoring tool]'' (R).

In fact, there all kinds of contextual factors that influence learning and - by extension - policy change. We turn to this point now.

6.5.2 The local governance context and policy change

In this section, we look in more detail at factors that influence the implementation of the SDGs. As discussed in the theoretical framework (see also paragraph 2.5.2), besides network factors (which were already dealt with in the paragraphs 6.2.1 and 6.3.1), there are local-level and external factors that impact learning processes. Some of these factors may hinder learning from another municipality. A few of these factors will be highlighted here. Figure 20 gives an overview of this section.

Particularly politics seems to play an important role. The next section is therefore specifically dedicated to one local-level factor that influences whether implementation takes place: the roles politicians and civil servants play, and specifically their attitude towards the SDGs (see paragraph 6.5.3).

Figure 20

➤ *Institutional capacity*: limited human and financial resources negatively impact learning from another municipality

➤ *Ideology*: a more rightist local government seems to prioritise other issues than the SDGs

➤ *Changes in government* may put the Global Goals on hold

➤ Due to external factors such as economic adversity, the SDGs are neither seen as a prominent issue

❖ A first local-level factor that plays a role is *institutional capacity*. Limited resources of local governments negatively impact learning from another municipality. This seems particularly the case for small and medium-sized municipalities. For example, one of the respondents said that a big subsidy fund for the SDGs like a neighbouring municipality had was not an viable option for his municipality, due to limited financial resources (R). Some respondents indicated they had limited time to work on the Global Goals (R; R), for example, to make visible how their municipal policies contribute to the SDGs (R).

❖ A second local-level factor that may hinder learning is *ideology*, which refers to the composition of the local government. The political level plays a crucial role in the implementation of the SDGs (see also paragraph 6.5.3). The priorities the municipality wants to focus on and how a municipality wants to profile itself are the result of political choices, in particular those of the coalition-forming parties. It is therefore quite plausible that the composition of the Council and the Board of Mayor and Aldermen influences whether the SDGs are seen as a focus area. As one of the respondents said: ''There [in the municipality of name], the Board of Mayor and Aldermen has fallen and replaced by a more conservative one, [and] sustainability is less in the picture now (…) It depends on the context, what is the main colour of the Council and the Board of Mayor and Aldermen?'' (R).

Other respondents also referred to the composition of their local governments (R; R; R; R; R; R). In those municipalities where the SDGs are seen as a priority, they are often put on the political agenda by parties at the left side of the political spectrum (R), while in other municipalities where the SDGs are not a focus area, left-wing parties try to draw attention to the SDGs (R; R). In some municipalities, these parties are less present, however. As one of the respondents said: ''There are many local parties which are in general a little bit more conservative (…) we miss a party like GroenLinks [an environmental party], for example'' (R).

Another respondent said: ''We are really a VVD [a liberal right-wing party] municipality (…) for many years (…), we have a what rightist coalition, with three councillors [of that party] in the coalition (…) And then it is not very easy to work on the Sustainable Development Goals'' (R). Another respondent also seemed to point at that direction when he referred to what he learned from another municipality: ''I am not sure this is the right choice for us [to do the same] at this moment. Maybe it is possible if a new Council and Board of Mayor and Aldermen [take office] (…) then we can go further perhaps'' (R).

❖ A third local-level factor that impacts the implementation of the SDGs are *changes in government*. Thus, one of the respondents said that the subject had fallen between the cracks due to changes in local government over the past few years; only recently, the Global Goals have been back on the political agenda (R).

❖ External factors such as worsened economic conditions or rules from upper hand may also be reasons why the Global Goals are put on hold. They are perhaps not *focusing events* such as a disaster that pushes an issue on the political agenda (see also the paragraphs 2.5.2 and 2.5.3), but since municipalities have to deal with the consequences of economic adversity or national legislation, priority lies with these issues. For example, one respondent said that it was not possible to put the SDGs on the political agenda a few years ago, due to cuts and a restructuring of tasks (R). Another respondent said that the harmonisation process as part of the municipal reorganisation demanded all attention the last two years, so there was no space left to focus on other things. In fact, the municipality has just been begun to define its direction (R).

6.5.3 The attitude of politicians and civil servants

An important local-level factor that influences the final step of learning, i.e. policy change, is the *roles politicians and civil servants* play, and specifically their *attitude towards the SDGs*. As discussed in the theoretical framework (see also paragraph 2.5.3), advocates of policy change need to overcome several obstacles throughout the policy process, which shows that policy implementation, in this case the SDGs, is quite a challenge. Also afterwards, implementation is not guaranteed. *Continuous* support, particularly at the political level, is therefore needed, for there are many other issues that may supersede the SDGs. Figure 21 gives an overview of this section.

Figure 21

➢ **The attitude of politicians and civil servants is key to policy change, i.e. the implementation of the SDGs**

➢ **In many municipalities, the support base is low at the political and even lower at the official level, which makes the implementation of the SDGs challenging**

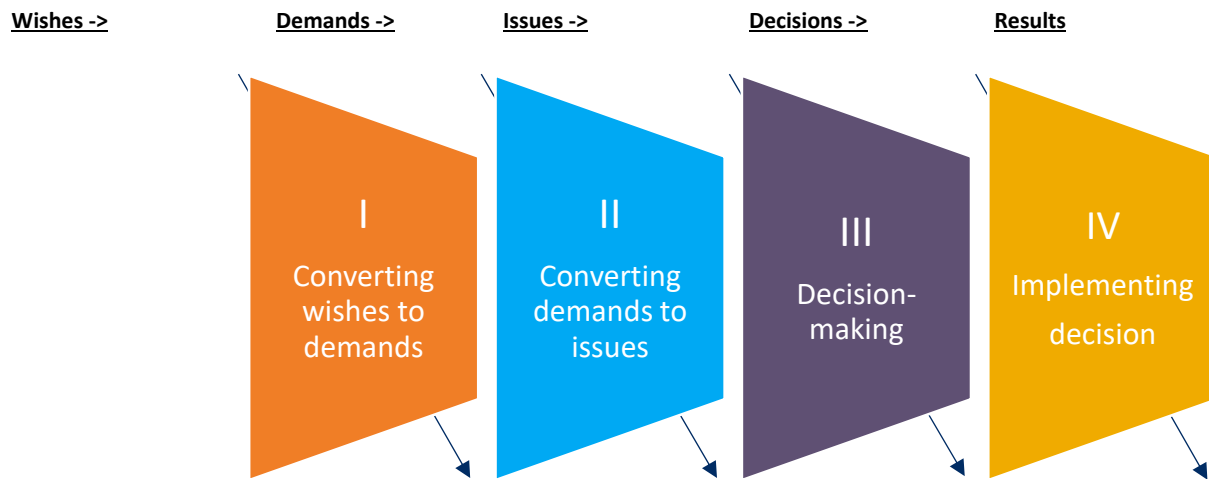➢ **Awareness is a precondition for getting support and therefore policy change**

Political support

Looking from the perspective of advocates of policy change, those people who wish to implement the SDGs within their municipalities (civil servants and/or politicians) need to present the SDGs as a policy challenge (the first obstacle) (see Figure 22). People need to look differently at their work and *awareness* is a precondition for this. Subsequently, the SDGs need to be put on the political agenda (the second obstacle). This requires that politicians - who have only limited time and are confronted with many other issues - are convinced of the Global Goals as an issue that should be dealt with. In other words, they need to see the SDGs as a priority.

From the interviews it became clear that this is indeed the case in some municipalities. Several respondents referred to enthusiastic members of the Council who are committed to addressing the issue of the SDGs (R; R; R; R). For example, in one municipality a motion was passed by the Council to make the Global Goals more visible (R). Several respondents also referred to enthusiastic members of the executive board, such as the Alderman for sustainability and the mayor (R; R; R; R; R; R). As one of the respondents said: ''What perhaps often lacks is a trustee, someone in the Board of Mayor and Aldermen, who wants to work on the Global Goals and sees the importance [of doing that]. I have an enthusiastic representative, if you hear him, then everybody gets excited and wants to work on [the SDGs]'' (R).

From the interviews it also became clear that several municipalities lack such enthusiastic people at the political level. In some municipalities, the SDGs are not a priority, because politicians do not see them as being part of municipal tasks. For example, as one of the respondents said: ''That [municipality] often felt back on legal duties, what was needed legally and everything which felt outside the law, they held off'' (R). Other respondents said that some local politicians consider the Global Goals as something internationally, while the municipality's tasks should lie at the local level (R; R).

Figure 22 Obstacles model

Wishes ->	Demands ->	Issues ->	Decisions ->	Results

I Converting wishes to demands   **II** Converting demands to issues   **III** Decision-making   **IV** Implementing decision

Source: Van de Graaf and Hoppe (1989), p. 187(adapted).

The third obstacle advocates of the SDGs need to overcome is the decision-making phase. Sufficient support for the SDGs among policymakers makes it likely that a decision is made to work on the Global Goals (see Figure 22). Including the SDGs in the coalition agreement is the translation of such a decision, for example. The attitude of the members of the executive board towards the SDGs is therefore particularly important, since the priorities the municipality wants to focus on are captured in a coalition agreement for a period of four years. On the other hand, coalition agreements are just collecting dust sometimes. It does not say everything, because there is a risk no further steps are taken afterwards (R; R).

If the political level decides to work on the Global Goals, it also determines how the SDGs can be aligned with local priorities and the municipality's profile, and how much money will be allocated to the SDGs (R; R; VNG IX, 2019). From the interviews it became clear that this is indeed the case in some municipalities. Thus, these local governments - both leading and non-leading municipalities - place high value on sustainability and want to profile themselves as sustainable municipalities (R; R). This is also apparent from the fact that they wield the predicate 'Fair Trade municipality' (R; R; R; Document V, 2019; Document IX). Some of the municipalities also took part in the previous Millennium Goals campaign (R; R; R; Document IX). This may have lowered the threshold to join the new campaign. In that sense, one may argue that there is a certain degree of *path dependency* here, i.e. a past decision that 'limits' current decisions. Furthermore, the municipalities that want to profile themselves as sustainable municipalities look for opportunities that can boost the local economy and help to create an attractive climate for both companies and tourists. Quality marks and predicates are ways to do so (R; R). As one

of the respondents said: ''We have the wish as a relatively clean municipality, where it is still dark outside, to profile ourselves in that field. And we are also looking to what extent we are eligible for the Blue Zone (…), to what extent that predicate is also applicable [to us]'' (R).

There is also the other side of the story, i.e. there are also local governments that do not want to profile themselves as sustainable municipalities. Here, politicians do simply not attach importance to the SDGs. Thus, this is another reason why the SDGs are not seen as a priority, besides politicians' view on what the municipal tasks entail, as mentioned above. If the Global Goals are not seen as a priority or focus area, it is hard to embed the SDGs within the own organisation. This is particularly the case when the SDGs are labelled as *not* being a priority for the period 2018 - 2022, as one of the respondents said. Even organising an event to raise awareness within the organisation becomes complicated in that case (R). In sum, political support for the SDGs is key to the implementation of the integrated sustainability agenda at the local level.

Support base at the official level

Political support is not sufficient, however. Besides politicians, advocates of the SDGs must also convince civil servants of the importance of the SDGs. This relates to the first obstacle, when a few civil servants who act as advocates of the SDGs look for allies among their colleagues, for example. But it surely relates to the fourth obstacle, the implementation of the decision to work on the SDGs. After all, policy implementers - in this case civil servants - influence the implementation of a plan to work on the SDGs. They can even 'hinder' it, because they see the SDGs as something extra they have to do or they see the Global Goals as something too vague and too abstract (R; R; R; R). Furthermore, people working on policy areas such sustainable development, climate and energy seem to be more enthusiastic about the SDGs than others. The reason is that they come across the SDGs because of their substantive work (R; R; R). In that sense, there is a difference in attitude between civil servants working in different departments. On the other hand, according to one of the respondents, the level of support is something which has more to do with age (R). Although in most municipalities there are small groups of civil servants that take the lead in implementing the SDGs, there is a low degree of support more generally within the internal organisation (R; R; R; R; R; R; R; R; R; R). Getting people to work on the SDGs is therefore one of the biggest challenges these municipalities face.

As mentioned earlier, awareness is a precondition for getting support (both at the political and official level), the first step that needs to be taken. People have a natural inclination to stick to the status-quo, so they have to look differently at their situation, specifically at their substantive work. Several respondents were quite explicit on this point and said that it is mainly about how people think

(R; R). As one of them said: ''I talk to employees and I say to them, do not see it [the SDGs] as a big bang (…) You do just your work and the only thing you have to do is to broaden the blinders, like, you use the same budget but in a different way, and then contribute to that goal'' (R).

In sum, advocates of the SDGs need to overcome many obstacles in the policy process and also afterwards. Continuous support at both the political and official level is needed to implement the SDGs, also for the long term. Awareness is a precondition to make this happen.

6.5.4 Policy change as outcome of learning?

Even when policy change takes place, i.e. the SDGs are implemented, this is not necessarily the outcome of policy transfer, specifically learning. Other factors can be the cause of the SDGs being implemented. In that case, policy change is *not* the result of learning. A good example of this is the leading municipality of [name] that uses the SDGs for its organisation structure. The implementation of the Global Goals in its internal organisation can be explained by the multiple streams model, as discussed in the theoretical framework (see also paragraph 2.5.3).

Figure 23 The multiple streams model
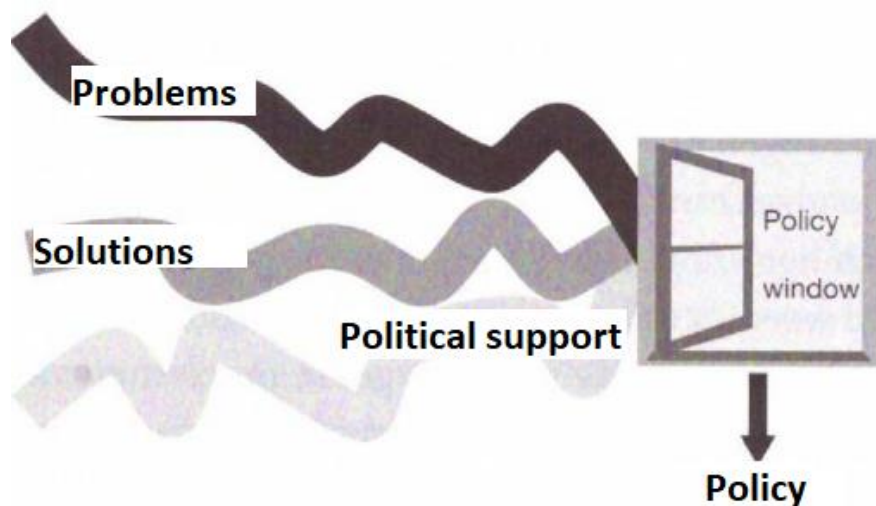
When three streams are coupled by a policy entrepreneur, a 'window of opportunity' opens which in turn makes policy change possible. Source: Hoogerwerf, A., & Herweijer, M. (2008), p.73 (adapted).

The model shows that when the *problem* stream (a perceived problem that is presented as an issue), the *policy* stream (potential solutions that can be implemented) and the *politics* stream (politicians and

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senior officials) come across each other, a 'window of opportunity' opens, which can be used by 'policy entrepreneurs' to make policy change possible (see Figure 23).

One can argue that this indeed happened in the leading municipality. The organisation used to be divided into three domains that did not communicate with each other (*problem stream*) (R; Document I, 2018). The respondent (who acted as a policy entrepreneur) was therefore looking for alternatives and came across the Global Goals at an international conference in 2016 (*policy stream*). Back in town, politicians were enthusiastic about using the SDGs as an integrated framework for the municipal reorganisation (which might be seen as a kind of *focusing event*), as the stated ambitions were in line with the Global Goals (*politics stream*). Subsequently, the SDGs were implemented as the basis for the organisation structure. As described by the respondent: ''The momentum was apparently there'' (R).

The multiple streams model explains why the municipality of [name] is rather an exception compared to its counterparts. After all, such a radical policy change is not something what is likely to happen - for it requires certain conditions to be met - but more importantly, it is not something which can be *learned*.

6.5.5 Summary

Learning does not happen a lot due to limited contact between municipalities and dissimilar governance contexts that impact learning, and - by extension - policy change. Neighbouring municipalities do not often exchange information about the Global Goals. Neither are the SDGs a prominent issue at the regional level, although this is starting to change in some regions. Possible reasons for the limited contact in the field of the SDGs are the limited regional collaboration more generally and the difference in positions Global Goals contacts have. Learning is also difficult when municipalities have dissimilar contexts, i.e. when they differ from each other in profile, SDG approach and challenges. Related to this is also the different roles municipalities play towards the society. This applies to both leading and non-leading municipalities.

At the local governance context, there are all kinds of factors that influence learning and the implementation of the SDGs. Some of these factors may hinder learning and the implementation of the Global Goals, such as institutional capacity, ideology, changes in government, as well as external factors. In other words, when there are limited resources or a more rightist local government, learning becomes difficult. This is also the case when the SDGs are not a prominent issue due to changes in government or other issues that need to be dealt with.

The roles politicians and civil servants play is a factor that particularly influences the implementation of the SDGs at the local level. Their attitude towards the SDGs is key to policy change. Advocates of the SDGs have to overcome many obstacles in the policy process to implement the SDGs. But even afterwards, implementation is not guaranteed. Both at the political and official level, continuous support for the SDGs is needed. However, with few exceptions, in many municipalities the support base is rather low at the political level and even lower at the official level. This makes the implementation of the SDGs quite challenging. Getting higher support by making people aware of the SDGs, but even more specifically, by helping them how they can look differently at their substantive work, can change this.

The example of the municipality of [name] shows that policy change, i.e. the implementation of the SDGs, can be caused by other factors than learning. In fact, there are so many factors influencing the final step of learning processes, policy change as the outcome of policy transfer is not likely.

Resume

Non-leading municipalities mostly look at Dutch counterparts for inspiration. The assumption that non-leading municipalities look at the two leading municipalities as identified in the previous chapter does not hold. Non-leading municipalities look at those municipalities they perceive to be leading ones. However, similarity in profile, SDG approach and challenges seem to be more important than whether municipalities act as leaders. In practice, non-leading municipalities look at those municipalities that have a similar context. They do so by comparing their situations and specific local conditions. This also means that learning rather than imitation is the underlying mechanism of policy transfer. Moreover, most municipalities do not see the SDGs as a way to profile themselves.

Looking at the channels through which learning takes place, peer-to-peer contact with respect to the SDGs turned out to be limited. VNG International is the main channel through which learning about the Global Goals takes place. Looking at the contents of this policy transfer, the information municipalities get from each other is mostly general in nature, although exchange of specific information, which requires that certain conditions are the same, also happens, but limitedly. The information municipalities get from each other entails both elements of explicit and tacit knowledge, although the latter is often needed to fully understand the specific context in which a practice was implemented.

Learning in itself is limited, however. The main reasons are the limited contact between municipalities with respect to the SDGs and the dissimilar contexts in which they operate, including factors that influence learning processes and the implementation of the SDGs. Some of these factors may negatively impact policy transfer. Thus, learning becomes difficult when the learning municipality

has limited resources at its disposal. A more conservative government seems to make it harder to implement the SDGs. The same is true when the Global Goals are put om hold due to changes in government or external factors.

The attitude of politicians and civil servants is key to implementing the SDGs. Advocates of the SDGs must overcome several obstacles in the policy process and even afterwards, implementation is not guaranteed. Continuous support at both the political and official level is therefore crucial. However, in many municipalities this is not the case. Particularly the degree of support at the official level seems to be low. Getting people to work on the SDGs - both politicians and civil servants - is therefore one of the biggest challenges municipalities face. Awareness is a precondition for getting support in order to make policy change possible. This means that people need to be convinced of the importance of the SDGs, but also that people need to look differently at their substantive work.

Policy change can take place as a result of something else than learning. The municipality of [name] is a good example of this. Here, it was the combination of policy entrepreneurship, time and a 'window of opportunity' that made the implementation of the SDGs as the basis of the organisation structure possible.

In sum, policy change through policy transfer, i.e. the implementation of the SDGs through learning, is not likely to happen, as there are many factors that influence this final step of learning.

Conclusion and Discussion

7.1 Introduction

This chapter is about the results and the implications of this research. First of all, based on what we have seen in the previous chapters, the research question can be answered. The implications of this research and what effects they have for the scientific and societal relevance as discussed in the introduction are the next point of discussion. Several recommendations are given in this section as well. Lastly, the limitations of this research and suggestions for further research are discussed.

7.2 Findings

In the previous chapters, several findings were highlighted based on the three sub questions from the introduction. In this section, we look at these sub questions and answers once again. Jointly, they can give an answer to the research question, which was formulated as follows: *Do Dutch local governments adopt to the Sustainable Development Goals through mutual learning or imitation?*

What does the implementation of the SDGs look like at the local level and what role does VNG International play? was the first sub question, which was formulated in the introduction. As we have seen, the Agenda 2030 is a very broad and ambitious entity. Due to its open character, it is up to local governments to give substance to the SDGs. Moreover, there are limited monitoring tools available to track progress at the local level, which gives municipalities even more discretion in implementing the SDGs. This makes it likely they interpret the SDGs in their own way. In practice, municipalities connect the SDGs with existing policies in line with their local priorities and strategies. In doing this, local governments make a selection of the SDGs they want to contribute to. As a result, there is a diversity in local implementation of the Global Goals.

VNG International leads the campaign at the Dutch local level. 90 out of the 355 municipalities have joined the Municipalities4GlobalGoals campaign up to July 2020. In line with the statement that it is up to municipalities to give substance to the SDGs, there are no preconditions to become a 'Global Goals municipality'. VNG International carries out different tasks and activities to raise awareness and support municipalities in implementing the Global Goals. VNG International provides different tools to help local governments in giving substance to the SDGs based on their efforts and role they want to play. Thus, a distinction can be made between 'low effort', 'medium effort' and 'high effort'. Emphasis is laid on the fact that municipalities already contribute to implementing the SDGs through their daily work. VNG International also organises different events throughout the year, including the Global Goals

Meet-Up and the Global Goals Municipality Awards to facilitate exchange of 'best practices'. The latter provides an opportunity for municipalities to profile themselves and put the SDGs higher on the municipal agenda, while for VNG International it is a way to arouse energy and further the implementation of the SDGs at the local level. Moreover, the practical examples municipalities submit to VNG International gives a better picture of what municipalities do in reality.

As mentioned above, the activities municipalities carry out to implement the SDGs are diverse in nature. This applies to both Global Goals municipalities and non-Global Goals municipalities. Some use the SDGs as an assessment framework to develop the environmental vision as part of the new spatial planning law that comes into force in 2021. Others have connected the SDGs to their sustainability agendas or programs. Most actions and activities local governments carry out are focused on the own municipality and relate to the municipal organisation and/or the community. Others can be described as international-oriented activities, in which a connection with the SDGs is made as well.

How do leading municipalities give substance to the Global Goals? was the second sub question. Based on the SDG scoring system, two municipalities were identified as leading municipalities. Both joined the Municipalities4GlobalGoals quite early. In the municipality of [name], it was a senior official who came across the SDGs at a conference, which were subsequently used for developing the organisation structure. In the municipality of [name], the initiative to work on the Global Goals came from the local Millennium Goals platform and the mayor.

The leading municipalities carry out both internally and externally local-oriented activities to implement the Global Goals, but they have a different approach. [name] uses the SDGs as the basis of its municipal organisation, while [name] connects the SDGs with existing policies. The SDGs are referred to in all kinds of policy documents, including the coalition agreement, although the extent differs. The SDGs are also included in the municipal budgets. Furthermore, initiatives are set up to inform the internal organisation about the Global Goals. In addition, first attempts are made to monitor progress on the Global Goals. In fact, monitoring is one of the challenges the leading municipalities face. Both municipalities play an active role towards the society. Initiatives are set up with stakeholders such as inhabitants, companies and schools, or initiatives are put forward by the community itself. In the municipality of [name], several initiatives come together in a local Global Goals platform. Connecting is also made with international activities. For example, the municipality of [name] uses the Global Goals as guiding principles in its partnership with a [foreign] counterpart.

The attitude of politicians is crucial for implementing the SDGs. They need to be convinced of the SDGs as an issue that should be dealt with. Looking at both leading municipalities, this is the case.

Both the members of the Council and the executive board are enthusiastic about SDGs. Particularly the mayor seems to play an important role in conveying the SDGs, making people enthusiastic and connecting stakeholders at different governance levels. The attitude of civil servants also matters. In both municipalities, there is a small group of people from different domains/clusters who act as advocates of the SDGs. Although the support base is small at the official level, more and more people are becoming aware of the Global Goals. Still, getting people to work on the SDGs is one of the biggest challenges the leading municipalities face, besides monitoring.

The two leading municipalities 'teach' peers through stories and presentations. At the request of VNG International, they share their SDG approaches at events and other occasions. However, the two municipalities also take own initiative. For example, in the municipality of [name], biannual meetings are organised by the mayor to show counterparts how the municipality gives substance to the SDGs.

What does policy transfer between leading and non-leading municipalities looks like and does this leads to policy change on the side of the following municipality? was the third sub question. Municipalities mainly look at Dutch counterparts to get inspiration. The assumption that non-leading municipalities look at leading municipalities does not hold, however. Non-leading municipalities do not only look at the two municipalities that were identified as leaders. The reason is that non-leading municipalities look at those municipalities they perceive as leaders based on their understanding of the latter's SDG policy performance. Moreover, non-leading municipalities also look at other non-leading municipalities based on the comparison they make between their own situation and conditions, and the circumstances of other municipalities. In other words, local governments look at counterparts of similar size; they look at those municipalities that are close to themselves in terms of culture and way of working; they look at peers that carry out similar activities to implement the SDGs; and they look at those municipalities that face similar challenges in doing so. That is why similarity in profile, SDG approach and/or challenges seems to be a more important 'precondition' for non-municipalities to get informed about the SDGs than whether a municipality acts as a leader.

Learning is the underlying mechanism of policy transfer with respect to the SDGs. Imitation is not likely, because municipalities are aware of the contexts in which they operate and take account of the specific circumstances and conditions. Moreover, the SDGs are often not seen as a way to profile the municipality, which makes imitation even less likely.

VNG International is the main channel through which learning takes place. The information a municipality take from a counterpart is either general or specific in nature. The former seems less depending on similar contexts, while the exchange of specific information presumes certain conditions

to be the same. Even though what has been taken from another municipality cannot be implemented due to dissimilar contexts, it might still be useful for the information-seeking municipality. Both general and specific information entail elements of explicit and implicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is often needed to fully understand how a practice was implemented in another municipality.

Learning in itself does not happen a lot, however, and - by extension - does not lead to policy change on the side of the following municipality. There are two reasons for that. First of all, there is limited contact between municipalities. Peer-to-peer contact with respect to the SDGs is quite sporadically. There is not only limited contact between neighbouring municipalities that joined the Municipalities4GlobalGoals campaign. At regional level, the SDGs are neither a prominent issue. This does not only applies to regions where collaboration is limited more generally, but also to those regions where collaboration between municipalities takes place. Secondly, learning is limited because of dissimilar local governance contexts and factors that impact learning and policy change. Thus, when municipalities differ from each other in profile, SDG approach, challenges, and - related to this - the roles they play towards society, learning becomes difficult.

Looking at the local governance context more specifically, there are all kinds of factors that impact learning processes and policy change. Particularly politics plays an important role. Limited resources and/or a more right-wing government seem to negatively impact the implementation of the SDGs. External factors and changes in government may also put the SDGs on hold.

The attitude of politicians and civil servants is key to policy change. Advocates of the SDGs need to overcome several obstacles throughout the policy process but also afterwards. Continuous support is therefore needed. Yet, it turned out that in several municipalities there is a low degree of political support. Having support at the political level is not enough, however. Having support at the official level is also important, for civil servants can 'hinder' the implementation of the SDGs, for example, because they see them as something extra they have to do. Indeed, it turned out that the degree of support at the official level is even lower in many municipalities.

Awareness is a precondition for getting higher support and making policy change happen, also for the long term. This means that - both at the political and official level - people need to look differently at their tasks and activities, so they can make other choices based on the SDGs.

Even if policy change takes place, this is rather the influence of other factors than learning. The municipality of [name] is a good example of this. Due to a combination of policy entrepreneurship, time and a 'window of opportunity', the SDGs became the basis of the organisation structure, something which cannot be learned.

Based on what has been discussed above, we can answer the main question *whether Dutch local governments adopt to the SDGs through mutual learning or imitation*. Dutch municipalities look at each other to get information how they can give substance to the SDGs. As we have seen, this does not really happen through mutual imitation, but rather through mutual learning, since municipalities are aware of the specific contexts in which they operate and compare their situations with each other. Also, there are not many municipalities that use the SDGs to profile themselves. Local governments look at leading municipalities, but they do this based on the perceptions they have of the latter's SDG policy performance. Local governments mainly look at other municipalities that are similar in profile, SDG approach and challenges. Adopting to the SDGs through learning does not really happen, however, due to the limited contact between municipalities and factors that influence the local governance context in which implementation should take place. In fact, the degree of more or less learning depends on many other factors that impact policy change. Some of them may negatively influence learning processes, while others are the cause why policy change takes place. In sum, we can assess that policy change through policy transfer does not really happen.

7.3 Implications and recommendations

The findings of this research on the adoption of the SDGs through policy transfer as a case study to assess whether local governments learn from each other to act internationally are relevant for both academia and society. There are several implications for the scientific world.

- ❖ First of all, since the degree of learning depends on many other factors that impact the local governance context, we can say that learning as a factor does not really influence the degree of internationalisation of the local level. It does not seem the case that local governments learn from each other to act internationally. The fact that learning is not really a factor that matters with respect to the degree of internationalisation of the local level also shows that other factors can better explain why some local governments are more internationally active than others, such as the size of a municipality (knowledge, expertise, and the number of civil servants engaging in international/European affairs) and the role entrepreneurial politicians - particularly the mayor - and/or civil servants play (their attitude and willingness to be internationally active. Interestingly, these two factors also influence the degree of implementation of the SDGs. After all, we have seen that insufficient resources negatively impact learning and policy change. Furthermore, in the leading municipalities but also in some other non-leading municipalities, there is a small group of civil servants and/or politicians

enthusiastic about working on the Global Goals. They act as advocates of the SDGs. The attitude and willingness of politicians and civil servants to work on the SDGs is key to its implementation. The mayor can particularly play the role of policy entrepreneur, when he considers the SDGs to be important to work on and sees them as a way to boost the municipality's image and profile. This is the case in one of the leading municipalities, but also in some other municipalities.

❖ Secondly, as discussed in the introduction, learning between municipalities is also seen by academia as an important way to overcome capacity problems and tackle collective-action problems. Although scholars take account of the dissimilar contexts in which municipalities operate, this research shows that learning between local governments is even more limited due to differences in situations and conditions than previously assumed. Academia should therefore pay attention to conditions that hinder learning processes when they conduct research on policy transfer and policy learning. In particular, researchers need to take into account the political dimension of the local context, for implementation of what has been picked up from another municipality is not self-evident.

❖ Thirdly, this research shows that municipalities that carry out a range of activities to implement the SDGS are not necessarily the bigger cities of the country. Neither are smaller municipalities the ones that always fall behind in implementing the Global Goals. This is in line with what Wurzel et al. (2019) argue in their case-study on climate change. In fact, one can argue that it requires much more effort to find allies and get people to work on the Global Goals in bigger municipalities than in smaller ones. This is particularly the case at the official level. After all, there is a big difference whether you need to convince 400 or 4,000 colleagues of the importance of the SDGs and how they can integrate them in their daily work. On the other hand, smaller municipalities are more often confronted with limited financial and human resources. This may negatively impact the implementation of the Global Goals and diminish their ambitions to work on the SDGs, while bigger municipalities have more opportunities to work out their ambitions, at least theoretically.

❖ Fourthly, it is often assumed that city networks play an important role in exchanging 'best practices' and innovative policy solutions. However, exchange of best practices with respect to the SDGs within transnational municipal networks (TMNs) turned out to be very limited, as the SDGs are often not seen as a prominent issue. Moreover, in those networks through which best

practices are disseminated, the information members get from each other seems not be shared with others outside these networks. In addition, peer-to-peer contact between municipalities turned out to be limited as well, which is interesting, because municipalities consider learning to be important.

❖ Fifthly, this research contributes to our knowledge of the relationship between leaders/pioneers, followers and non-followers/laggards, and the emergence of followership in several ways. It shows that these patterns and roles are difficult to distinguish when you deal with an issue as broad as the SDGs, for they cross many policy fields at the same time and they are implemented in very different ways, which makes comparing municipalities challenging. But it also shows that when something happens on a voluntary basis, followership is very difficult to get off the ground, and even more when incentives are missing to stimulate further implementation. This seems particularly the case for those municipalities that do not attach importance to the SDGs. Perhaps the only way these municipalities will become active is by setting minimum binding rules. But in case of the SDGs, that is out of the question, for they are not legally binding.

Furthermore, this research shows that there are municipalities that want to set an example for others to follow, i.e. those that would act as leaders according to the academic literature. However, this seems less to do with the ability to (re)frame knowledge and more to do with the way knowledge and performance are disseminated through different channels as the result of municipal spin doctoring. Municipalities do look at those municipalities that present themselves as leaders based on their perceptions of the latter's performance or knowledge, but they do this to see what is possible. Indeed, having more or less similar contexts is a more important precondition for followership to emerge. Although the literature refers to the importance of domestic conditions that shape this followership, this research shows that these conditions play a much bigger role in shaping the emergence of followership. More attention should therefore be paid to the local governance context.

❖ Sixthly, this research sheds more light on the role of imitation as an explaining mechanism of policy transfer as well. Imitation seems not to play a role when municipalities deal with something which is not compulsory, such as the implementation of the SDGs, at least not if the pressure is not big enough. However, if more and more citizens expect from municipalities that they work on the SDGs and if the national government makes more effort in implementing the

SDGs and encourages local governments to develop plans to implement the SDGs, this may lead to more imitation.

The findings entail several implications for municipalities and VNG International as well.

❖ First of all, for municipalities that want to work on the SDGs, or better to say, those who wish to implement the SDGs within their municipalities, it is crucial to get sufficient and continuous support both at the political and official level. In other words, advocates of the SDGs have to find allies and convince others of the importance of the Global Goals. However, that is not enough. Advocates also have to find ways to show politicians and civil servants how they can integrate the SDGs in their daily work. Furthermore, this research shows that it is really helpful to have enthusiastic people at the political level. Particularly the mayor can play this role, as he can propagate the sustainability agenda at different occasions and can connect different stakeholders at different levels.

❖ Secondly, for municipalities that want to contribute to the SDGs but do not know how they can do this, this research shows there is much discretion in giving substance to the Global Goals. The SDGs can be connected with existing policies in line with the municipality's priorities and needs. As we have seen, most actions and activities relate to the municipal organisation and/or the society. This also means there is still a lot of room left. For example, there are municipalities that do not make a connection between their international policies and the SDGs. In addition, there are local governments that participate in TMNs, but in which the SDGs are not a prominent issue. Thus, there are opportunities to work on the SDGs and learn from each other.

❖ Thirdly, as became clear from this research, monitoring progress made on the Global Goals and getting people to work on the SDGs are the biggest challenges municipalities face now, particularly those municipalities that already started working on the SDGs for some time. Related to this is also the low degree of support at the official level in several municipalities. These challenges can be tackled, but this takes time and effort. Particularly the development of local monitoring tools requires a long-term view and support.

❖ Fourthly, the findings also entail implications for VNG International's Municipalities4GlobalGoals campaign. It became clear from the research that VNG International

plays an important role in facilitating exchange of knowledge between municipalities. In fact, it turned out to be the main channel through which local governments get information about each other with respect to the SDGs. Furthermore, if we look at the implementation of the SDGs, one can argue that municipalities act internationally within their own municipalities. They connect the SDGs with existing policies and mainly carry out activities that relate to the internal organisation or the community. In doing so, municipalities play different roles, however. Some are very active towards inhabitants and companies, others are more reactive. Also, this research shows that there is still a long way to go, for there is often only a small group of advocates of the SDGs at the official and/or political level.

Based on the findings and implications as outlined above, the following recommendations can be made that can improve the Municipalities4GlobalGoals campaign.

> *Continue facilitating exchange of knowledge between municipalities via the website and events such as the Global Goals Meet-Up*
> Although learning is limited, it is still useful and valuable, for what has been taken from another municipality can be implemented at a later stadium, when conditions are more favourable; or the information a municipality gets from another municipality can be altered in such a way it can be applied. At least, municipalities can see what the possibilities are with respect to the Global Goals, which can arouse energy and motivation to work on the SDGs. In that respect, it is more an eye-opener. Events such as the Global Goals Meet-Up and other occasions are good opportunities for making conceivability and imagination possible. The Global Goals Municipality Awards provides the opportunity to do so.

> *Connect those who take the lead in implementing the SDGs within their municipalities*
> From the research it became clear that contacts from Global Goals municipalities are not always aware of the fact that neighbouring municipalities also joined the Municipalities4GlobalGoals campaign. Furthermore, it turned out that municipalities do not have much contact with counterparts located in the same region, even in those regions where a range of municipalities joined the campaign. One of the reasons why contact is so limited is that those people who take the lead in implementing the SDGs within their municipalities have different positions. Therefore, it would be a good thing to let contacts know who the persons are who take the lead

in implementing the SDGs in adjacent municipalities. This can be done at the request of municipalities or perhaps via a kind of matchmaking tool or network.

➢ *Further regional cooperation with respect to the SDGs*
From the research it became clear that municipalities do not always have the feeling that the SDGs are really addressed at the regional level. Although VNG International already supports and facilitates cooperation at the regional level, this can be strengthened and furthered. In those regions where administrative collaboration is very limited, this might be quite a challenge, though.

➢ *Encourage municipalities to link the Global Goals to their international activities*
Most activities municipalities carry out to implement the SDGs are focused on the own municipality. Opportunities lie with both Global Goals municipalities and non-Global Goals municipalities that engage in international activities, but do not link the Global Goals to those activities. In other words, there is much more room left to work on the SDGs, particularly the international dimension of the integrated sustainability agenda.

➢ *Further the development of local monitoring tools*
Measuring the progress made on the Global Goals is one of the biggest challenges municipalities face. If municipalities can keep track of the SDGs, they can also be held accountable. It becomes then easier to steer on the SDGs. Moreover, it becomes easier to compare municipalities' performance with counterparts. Therefore, it is crucial to further the development of local SDG indicators in cooperation with municipalities and the development of monitoring tools in cooperation with other stakeholders.

➢ *Encourage municipalities to address the SDGs within their international networks*
As became clear from the findings, the SDGs are often not seen as a prominent issue in international municipal networks. So here, there are opportunities to exchange good practices and learn from each other, even though learning in itself is often limited. But at least it can increase awareness of the Global Goals, which is a precondition for any change.

➢ *Help advocates of the SGDs to frame the story in order to convince politicians of the need to work on the SDGs but also how they can integrate the SDGs in their daily work*

Continuous political support is key to the implementation of the SDGs. Advocates of the SDGs have to convince the Council and particularly the executive board of the importance of the SDGs; they have to make their representatives enthusiastic, so the SDGs are seen as focus area to work on, also in the long term. This also means that politicians need to know how they can integrate the SDGs in their port folios. However, this is not an easy task, so it is important to frame the story in such a way politicians see the Global Goals as something that should be dealt with. VNG International can help these individuals or groups of civil servants/politicians who want to embed the sustainability agenda within their municipalities by giving them input for stories and working plans. This is particularly important for advocates of the SDGs in municipalities with a more conservative government. Although the Global Goals are not only about the environment, but also touch topics such as employment opportunities, it looks like more right-wing politicians are less inclined to work on the SDGs. VNG International can reach out to advocates of the SDGs within these municipalities and think along how these enthusiastic individuals should bring the story and how they can show their representatives the connection between the Global Goals and the priorities these politicians want to focus on.

➢ *Help advocates of the SDGs to make more people enthusiastic about the goals, also at the official level*

Besides political support, it is also important to have sufficient support at the official level. From this research it became clear that in many municipalities, the degree of support it quite low within the internal organisation, for the SDGs are often seen as something extra. VNG International can help advocates of the SDGs to set up initiatives to inform colleagues about the Global Goals in order to raise awareness. But this is only the first step, for it is also important to show people how they can integrate the goals in their daily work. Here, VNG International can also help, for example, by providing input for plans and initiatives aimed at integrating the SDGs into the daily tasks of civil servants.

➢ *Set up a network that connects municipalities that have more or less similar contexts*

As became clear from the research, municipalities mainly look at those municipalities that are similar in profile, SDG approach and challenges. Related to that is also the role municipalities play towards the community, i.e. an active or a reactive role. Although learning is often limited

due to the impact of other factors, learning processes can be strengthened by connecting municipalities that have more or less similar contexts. For example, a network can be set up of municipalities that carry out similar actions and activities to implement the SDGs, and play a similar role towards the community. This can facilitate the exchange of knowledge and raise the odds of implementing what has been learned from another municipality.

➤ *Invest more time in fine-tuning the Municipalities4GlobalGoals campaign*
Although 90 municipalities are Global Goals municipalities and more municipalities want to join the campaign, there is still a lot what can be done to further the implementation of the SDGs at the local level. Increasing the number of participating municipalities is one way, but focus should also be laid on the municipalities that already joined the campaign. In some municipalities, the SDGs used to be a priority when these local governments joined the campaign, but due to a change in government, this is no longer the case. In other municipalities, the Global Goals are put on hold, due to other circumstances. Sometimes, it also happens that a civil servant who takes the lead in implementing the SDGs and who is the Global Goals contact for that municipality gets another function or even another job. In that case, the Global Goals also disappear into the background. Getting a better overview of the problems municipalities encounter and what municipalities exactly do to give substance to the SDGs - also those that are less involved in the campaign - and keeping in touch with municipalities can help to further the local implementation of the SDGs.

7.4 Limitations and follow-up research
In this section, the limitations of this research on the adoption of the SDGs through policy transfer are discussed as well as suggestions for further research.

❖ A first limitation relates to the selection of respondents. As described in the Chapter III, this selection took place on several grounds. As a consequence of this procedure, there was a bias towards municipalities that joined the Municipalities4GlobalGoals campaign. There were only three respondents from non-Global Goals municipalities. Furthermore, most of the respondents came from regions where many municipalities participate in the campaign. In that sense, it is not odd that VNG International is the main channel through which learning about the Global Goals takes place.

❖ A second limitation relates to the SDG scoring system I developed as a way to categorise municipalities. In fact, there are several weaknesses here. One can argue that the scoring system is too strict. Based on the number of activities and the degree of effort municipalities show to work on the SDGs, only two municipalities were identified as leading ones - with difficulty, for it was not easy to figure out these activities based on the semi-structured interviews and document-analysis. Although I submitted to colleagues the overview of actions and activities municipalities can carry out in order to strengthen its reliability, one can wonder whether all these activities are also mutually exclusive. Some of them may relate to the same component or topic, which has consequences for the position a municipality can take. That is also the reason why the number of points for leaders (12/13) is a bit ambiguous. In other words, there is some nuance with respect to the positions municipalities take according to the SDG scoring system. Another weakness of the tool is the assumption that municipalities that carry out more activities also show more effort. And the reverse is also true: those that carry out less activities show also less effort. However, there are perhaps municipalities where a group of civil servants acting as advocates of the SDGs are very enthusiastic and show a lot of effort, yet only a limited number of activities can be carried out due to circumstances. For example, it could be the case that the SDGs are not seen as a priority by the coalition. As a result, these municipalities cannot move to a higher position.

Perhaps categorising municipalities based on the number of references they make to the SDGs would have been a better approach. For example, the municipality that refers to the SDGs the most could be used as a 'zero measurement' and would take the position of leader. For instance, this leading municipality would refer 16 times to the SDGs. Municipalities that refer less to them in their policy documents would therefore take a lower position. Or if there are four positions and a municipality would only mention the SDGs four times or less compared with the municipality that has the highest references, the former would take the lowest position. On the other hand, this would not say a thing about the practical implementation of the SDGs, i.e. what measures municipalities carry out in reality. Perhaps another way to group municipalities is to distinct various aspects of performance, such as duration and objectives, and categories of specific measures, like Bondarouk and Liefferink (2017) did in their research on the local implementation of a specific procedural air quality provision of an EU directive.

In sum, the SDG scoring system can help to categorise municipalities, yet the tool has several weaknesses which undermines its functionality. Perhaps a system that is based on the number of references or a version that is based on various aspects of implementation

performance and categories of specific measures would be a better way to categorise municipalities.

❖ A third limitation of this research relates to the limited attention paid to the role of norms and values, for we do know from the academic literature that they influence both learning processes and the emergence of followership. For example, we have seen that perceptions play a role with respect to leadership. However, in this research, most attention has been paid to the domestic circumstances and the local context in which implementation of the SDGs takes place. Also, it is very hard to examine how differences in norms and values at the individual level impact learning processes. The chosen approach and data therefore provide insufficient proof of how actors' characteristics such as experiences from the past and belief systems impact the acquisition of knowledge and the emergence of followership.

The findings of this research leads to new questions and suggestions for follow-up research. As discussed above, norms and values impact learning processes and the emergence of followership. More research on how different perceptions of individuals can lead to different learning outcomes would enhance our understanding of policy transfer and policy change. For example, it would be interesting to compare the perceptions of Global Goals contacts who work in different departments, and examine whether this is a factor that impacts learning. For it is plausible that someone who engages in international affairs looks differently at the SDGs than someone who engages in social affairs.

Further research should be conducted on the dynamics between leaders, followers and non-followers/laggards in those areas where binding rules are often lacking. We have seen that this relationship is complicated when you deal with something which is as broad and complex as the SDGs and for which incentives are lacking. It would therefore be interesting to examine another agenda and route map that crosses many policy fields at the same time, but also entails elements of hard law, in order to see whether followership gets off the ground, and under which circumstances this happens. The coming European Green Deal might be a topic to do so.

We have seen that several municipalities set up initiatives in collaboration with other stakeholders, including the private sector. Sometimes these stakeholders also take initiative themselves to work on the SDGs. Further research can be conducted on the roles these stakeholders play in implementing the

Agenda 2030 and their reasons for doing so. This can shed more light on how cooperation between the triple helix can further the SDGs at the local level.

There is a diversity in local implementation of the SDGs. It seems like some municipalities take the SDGs more seriously than others. The willingness and the wish to profile oneself can be seen as reasons for this, but perhaps there are also other factors that play a role next to the ones that were discussed in this research. These factors can be examined in a follow-up study.

Another research suggestion is to examine local implementation of the SDGs across different EU countries. How do foreign municipalities give substance to the goals? And if there are differences between countries, how can this variety be explained? Does it have something to do with legal competences or with intergovernmental relationships? A follow-up study can shed more light on these aspects.

Perhaps the most interesting suggestion for further research is to find out whether the SDGs also lead to other policy choices and - by extension - also to different policy outcomes. Do local governments make other choices because of the Global Goals? For only then it is possible to assess the real impact of the SDGs on municipal policies. If this is indeed the case, new steps can be taken to achieve the SDGs by 2030.

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Appendix I

Interview questions

<u>**Introduction**</u>
1. Can you tell me something about your position at the municipality of (….)?
2. What does the municipality do regarding international activities (*which can be very broad*)? Does the municipality make use of a specific profile to distinguish itself from others?
(3. How does COVID-19 impact the international work of the municipality (*in terms of saliency, for example*)?)

<u>**SDGs/Global Goals**</u>
4. What do the SDGs mean to you?
5. What does it mean to be a 'Global Goals municipality'?
6. What does your municipality do with the goals?
7. How are the goals shaped and embedded in your municipality? Are they embedded in the internal organisation? Are the Global Goals connected with existing policies (*for example, international policies*)?
8. Does the municipality work strategically on the goals (*more than just mentioned in the coalition agreement, if applicable*)?
9. How did this process come about? How did it start? Who took the initiative to do something with the goals (*civil servants, the executive board, the Council*)?
10. Were there any obstacles or difficulties beforehand (*for example, within the administrative spheres*)? How did it go?
11. Are the goals externally communicated? What role does the mayor play in this?

<u>**Exchanging information between municipalities**</u>
12. Which other Dutch municipalities are inspirational for the municipality with respect to the SDGs?
13. On what points are these municipalities inspirational? (Which aspects are exactly inspirational/relevant (*certain ambitions, concrete measures*) for the municipality (…))?
14. Can you give an example of this?
15. Do awards play a role in getting information about the SDGs? If so, how?
16. Are/were there difficulties to implement what has been picked up from other municipalities (*for example, after the Global Goals Meet-Up on 12 March*)?
17. Are municipalities outside the Netherlands a source of inspiration as well (*for example, through networks or partnerships*)?
18. Where does the exchange of information about the SDGs take place? Are there also other channels than VNG International such as the city network Eurocities, CEMR or the umbrella organisation of local governments, UCLG, that play a role here?
19. Is the municipality (…) also a source of inspiration for other Dutch municipalities, do you think? Is the municipality actively approached by other municipalities?
20. Are there things you want to say which have not been covered so far?

Appendix II

Self-administered questionnaire

Overview

- 159 respondents took part in the survey
- There were several invalid responses
- After filtering these responses, the total number was corrected to a 117 municipalities
- 45 (out of 117) join the Municipalities4GlobalGoals campaign
- Three provinces were underrepresented (Zeeland, Flevoland and Groningen)

Questions

9. How important are the following considerations for doing something with international policies?
If you have chosen the option 'not' for each category in question 8, please skip this question and go to question 10.

	Very important	Important	Not important, not unimportant	Unimportant	Very unimportant
Profiling of municipality at international stage					
Strengthening the local economy					
Contributing to the achievement of the sustainable development goals (SDGs/Global Goals)					
Staying informed about international/European rules and agreements					
Contributing to international solidarity and justice					
Acquiring knowledge and sharing of ''best practices''					
Acquiring European/international funding needed for setting up projects which would not be set up without these funds					
Differently,					

If you have chosen the last option, please elaborate:

* 17. In your municipal policies, to what extent are the following occasions explicitly referred to?

	Very much	Much	Not much, not little	Little	Not
Sustainable development goals (Global Goals/SDG's)					
Human rights (for example, the international disability treaty)					
International climate agreements					
International migration and integration					
International economy and world trade					
Differently,					

If you have chosen the last option, please elaborate:

21. To what extent do the following actors act as sources of inspiration to do something with the Global Goals (SDGs)?

	Very important	Important	Not important, not unimportant	Unimportant	Very unimportant	N.A.
Other Dutch municipalities						
Other individual municipalities outside the Netherlands						
Differently,						

If you have chosen the last option, please elaborate:

22. Which parts of best/good practices on the Global Goals do you consider most valuable for your municipality to learn about (for example, policy instruments)?

- o **I do not know/N.A.**

If you do know, please elaborate:

Findings

Figure A

	Very important/Very much	Important/Much	Not important, not unimportant/Not much, not little	Unimportant/Little	Very unimportant/Not
To what extent is contributing to achieving the SDGs important? (n=83)	14.5%	44.6%	30.1%	7.2%	3.6%
How often are the SDGs explicitly referred to in municipal policies? (n=94)	12.8%	22.3%	29.8%	23.4%	11.7%

Percentages based on questions 9 and 17.

Figure B

	Very important	Important	Not important, not unimportant	Unimportant	Very unimportant	N.A.
To what extent do other Dutch municipalities act as sources of inspiration to do something with the Global Goals (SDGs)? (n=87)	6.9%	49.4%	24.1%	0%	1.1%	18.4%
To what extent do foreign counterparts act as sources of inspiration to do something with the Global Goals (SDGs)? (n=92)	1.1%	28.3%	26.1%	18.5%	6.5%	19.6%
Differently (n=26)	15.4%	11.5%	19.2%	3.8%	7.7%	42.3%

Percentages based on question 21.

Figure C

	I do not know/N.A.	I do know…
Which parts of best/good practices on the Global Goals do you consider most valuable for your municipality to learn about? (n=90)	81.1%	18.9%

Percentages based on question 22.