Does Government Performance Influence Public Trust? The Case of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Policies at Local Level

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Abstract: In the recent past, governments have faced a number of crises (i.e. climate change, economic crisis, COVID-19, Russia-Ukraine conflict) that affect their overall performance. Crises have a direct impact on citizens as they yield increased unemployment and debt crisis, lead to global warming, spark high inflation, and raise the cost of living. These issues which normally mirror the way governments perform seem to have an impact on public trust. It remains unclear how and to what extent performance influences public trust. In addition, there has been difficulty identifying accurate ways to measure performance in the public sector especially at local level. Using data from IDEA Consult and Gemeente-en-stadsmonitor (GSM), we propose to use the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a holistic way of measuring performance and show how this performance determines public trust. Results reveal that the performance in specific SDGs (such as SDG6, SDG7, and SDG9) positively influences public trust, suggesting that government performance in some areas may be more influential in shaping public trust than others. SDG16 has the strongest statistically significant impact on public trust.

Keywords: Performance, Sustainable Development Goals, Public trust, Public sector

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Introduction

For the past decades, governments have faced unprecedented global challenges like the 2008 economic crisis, climate change, Brexit, Covid-19 and recently the Ukraine-Russia conflict. Most of these events, separately or concurrently, yielded increased unemployment and debt crisis, led to global warming, sparked high inflation, and raised the cost of living and inequality. Both challenges and opportunities mirror the way governments perform and seem to have an influence on public trust. For instance, competitive pressures and economic dislocations of globalization, growing economic inequality and increasing numbers of marginalized people have indeed fueled the loss of public trust in governments' capability and willingness to act in a timely and adequate manner (Alesina et al., 2000). A closer look at the trajectory of trust shows that trust levels have become lower over time (Edelman, 2022). Trust erosion is worrisome for institutions simply because trust is salient at different levels of government as it gives legitimacy to the actions and policies of governments (Bargain & Aminjonov, 2020; Zhang, Li, et al., 2022). Trust creates the environment that political leaders need to succeed (Hetherington, 1998; Keele, 2007). While there is enough evidence that trust matters for governance, there is little evidence to show how and the extent to which government performance affects public trust. Our study addresses this gap in literature by examining how government performance and trust are related.

A vast body of literature already investigated the link between government performance and trust (Dahlberg et al., 2015; Jiang, 2022; Zhai, 2022). While governments need trust to put up a good performance, low performance can undermine trust, making it difficult to increase performance. Consequently, there exists a vicious circle in the performance-trust link. Specifically, when trust is low, performance is poor, which in turn leads to even lower levels of trust (Yang & Holzer, 2006). If that is the case, in order to break and transform this vicious circle into an upward spiral of high trust which leads to good performance, which in turn could lead to higher levels of trust, governments have to perform well, which implies they have to achieve better socio-economic and environmental policy outcomes and policy process that are expected to bring benefits to people. While some prior research explore how trust depends on government performance, other studies show that performance depend on citizen trust. However, these studies fall short because they do not show how and to what extent performance affects trust.

Furthermore, the scarce and scattered extant research on trust and performance focus on macro level (i.e. national governments and transnational level) and on the private sector (European Commission, 2017; Sempiga, 2023). Accordingly, we lack knowledge of how performance and trust influence each other in the public sector at local level. This justifies the aim of this study which is to examine whether government performance at local level impacts public trust. Our study not only sheds some lights on the problem associated with understanding the performance-trust link but also contributes to the issue of measuring actual performance in public sector. While earlier studies were aware that the impact of performance on trust in government depends on how performance is measured (Yang & Holzer, 2006), we believe they failed to adopt a holistic and objective approach of measuring and conceptualizing government performance appropriate to the public sector. There exist different types of performance and it is not clear if and to what extent they enhance trust. Most research have given

more weight to economic performance at the expense of social and environmental performance and the interaction between them. Yet, contrary to rational thinking, citizens use both calculative and non-calculative approaches to evaluate government performance (Mishler & Rose, 2001; Ruscio, 1996) and to subsequently grant or withhold trust. This lends support to our argument that performance and indeed trust is more than outcome-based. The failure to grasp trust-performance vicious circle is often caused by a limited conceptualization of performance and the intricacies of trust formation.

Therefore, we aim to get a better understanding of the relationship between performance and trust by using Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) policies as a measurement instrument for performance. Operationalizing performance with SDGs offers a holistic and objective approach of measuring and conceptualizing public sector performance, something that is especially rare and difficult to achieve when it comes to both micro level and public sector. We use SDG index scores as a way of measuring SDG policies performance so as to comprehend the way local government performance enhances or decreases public trust levels and implications thereof. Accordingly, this allows us to find out whether local governments which may have more difficulties in realizing SDGs also suffer from lower trust. This lends support to our argument that while trust may be necessary for governments to perform well, low performance is likely to hamper trust, making it complicated to raise performance. In addition, performance is holistic, i.e. not just economic but also encompasses social and environmental policies. Using 2020 SDG Monitor cross-sectional datasets developed by IDEA consult and the Gemeente-en-stadsmonitor (GSM) on 300 municipalities and cities in the Flemish region in Belgium, we verify whether local government's performance has an impact on public trust. By studying SDG index scores and levels of citizen trust we find a better picture on how performance relates to public trust.

The remainder of this article exposes literature review on the link between trust and performance and the theoretical underpinnings surrounding their relationship. Building from the literature we develop our argument on whether and to what extent public sector performance at local level relates to public trust. The methods section explains how data were collected and analyzed. The results section describes and explains the findings. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion and a proposal of avenues for future research.

Linking Public Trust with Government's Performance

Understanding what drives trust in government at different levels is important for it allows to make use of this evidence to explore what policies may contribute to building trust or preserving it (OECD, 2022). Institutional theories focus on the performance of institutions, as the key determinant explaining levels of public trust (Bouckaert, 2012; Rothstein, 2013; Van de Walle & Migchelbrink, 2022). Performance of institutions is categorized in many types but we intend to focus on outcomes and processes, being the main components of performance. Performance seems closely related to trust in as much as the latter is mainly conceived as an expectation resulting from outcome and process performance. However, despite the close relationship between both variables, it is difficult to find an accurate measure of actual performance especially when it comes to public sector.

Public Trust as Expectations Based on Government's Performance

Trust is a more complex and a multifaceted concept. We define it as the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the party that trusts, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party (Mayer et al., 1995). Prior models have also conceptualized trust as a threefold relationship in which A trusts B to do X (Baier, 1997). The fact that B is supposed to perform action X creates an expectation from A. Specifically, citizens expect governments to implement quality policies that bring them a better wellbeing. Once governments respond effectively to expectations that citizens set for policy outcome, people are, conversely, more likely to acquire perceptions that the policy-making process or democracy works well, and by extension think that policymakers are honest and trustworthy (Jiang et al., 2022). The threefold relationship and the expectations that result thereof answers the question of why the other party is trusted or under what conditions an institution should be trusted: to perform an action to the benefit of the party that trusts the institution. This means that public trust is considered rational to the extent that the object is evaluated by its own merits, that is, its competency (Harteveld et al., 2013).

While positive performance from governments is likely to increase trust, a bad performance would decrease trust. Scholars argue that political and personal expectations (e.g., past experiences, perceived levels of risks such as unemployment, and financial and economic volatility) also shape people's trust in governments and institutions (Dalton, 2004; Murtin et al., 2018). The expectations that citizens have from the government lead them to constantly evaluate the government's performance. Citizens have a number of needs and services in mind that the government has to respectively fulfil and accomplish on their behalf. This means that citizens extend trust to governments and politicians that meet the expectations citizens set for policy performance. At the same time, ordinary citizens will withhold trust from those governments whose policy performance is below expectations or standards that the citizens set for policy delivery (Jiang, 2022). Prior research have also confirmed that governmental performance is a possible determinant of governments' trustworthiness (Bannister & Connolly, 2011; Gracia & Arino, 2015). It would seem that the government needs to keep performing well and this performance has to be in the interest of the subject of trust as well for trust to be maintained. While scholars seem to be in agreement that bad performance would decrease trust, they do not necessarily agree on the outcome of good performance. Some authors agree that improving service delivery is necessary but feel it is not sufficient for trust (Bouckaert, 2012). These maintain that good performance does not necessarily lead to more trust, but bad performance certainly will erode trust.

The Nature and Types of Performance and how these Affect Trust

Like trust, performance is a multidimensional construct. There are many types of performance, and not every type of performance contributes to trust in government in the same way (Zhang, Chen, et al., 2022). Government performance can be defined as 'change in the overall quality of public services, better meeting specified policy objectives or outcomes through improved service quality standards' (Manning et al., 2010, p. 203). Earlier studies distinguish different types of performance including inputs, processes, outputs, efficiency, productivity, and outcomes (Hatry, 1999). Recent performance

literature identify four main performance types: outcomes, democratic processes, outputs and citizen satisfaction (Zhang, Li, et al., 2022). Outcomes encompass the formal effectiveness of a service/program/policy and its impact. Indicators of democratic processes include transparency, social equity, participation, probity, and accountability. Outputs represent the immediate products or services produced by public organizations, including the availability and quantity of service provision. Finally, citizen satisfaction denotes the extent to which government meets the demands of citizens when providing services.

Several authors argue that citizen satisfaction and performance are not necessarily related, because of the subtle interplay of reality, perception and expectations (Van de Walle & Bouckaert, 2003). However, others are of the view that citizen satisfaction determines changes in the standards that people use to make political evaluations (Jiang, 2022). These changes in the standard are called priming and form another type of performance measure. Priming entails that people may give more weight to certain policies or parts of government performance than others. The concept of priming suggests that the criterion that a citizenry use to evaluate the performance of its government and leaders is not constant, and that the criteria can change depending on what is salient to those people at a given point in time. Due to the existence of multitude types of performance and conditions involved in the evaluation of performance it would seem difficult to accurately measure government performance.

Despite the difficulty associated with measuring performance, citizen trust in government has been studied against different measures and types of performance. However, earlier studies have not always determined which type of performance affects trust and to what extent. It is relevant to know what type of performance one is dealing with because conceptions of performance may affect trust differently and also some conceptualizations may yield more influence on trust than others. Earlier research concludes that the performance-trust relationship is strongest when outputs are used to measure performance (Zhang, Li, et al., 2022). In some cases, outputs such as service quantity and accessibility, are more directly noticeable to citizens. These authors believe that other types of performance like democratic processes are marginally more important than outcomes while citizen satisfaction is not statistically different from democratic processes in influencing trust. Other authors maintain that differences in process are able to explain cross-national differences in public trust (measured as satisfaction with democracy and confidence in national political institutions), whereas macro-economic outcomes fail to do so (Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017). The outcome/process debate yields more clarification on how performance relates to public trust.

Policy Outcome Performance and Ensuing Satisfaction as an Antecedent to Trust

A large performance literature has focused its attention on assessing the relationship between macro-economic outcomes on public trust. The debate has developed around whether the way economic policies succeed or fail matters to whether citizens grant or withhold trust in their government. Prior studies conclude that economic success correlates with public trust (Anderson, 2009; Taylor, 2000). Other research claims that economic performance is critical to overall public support of government (Miller & Listhaug, 1999). Trust as an evaluative orientation implies that good performance in terms of substantive economic policy outcomes ought to induce high levels of public trust. Recent studies confirm that the way governments fulfil their performance duties induce citizens to trust or distrust

them. Evaluating economic performance, these showed that development and economic growth are positively related to public trust, whereas inflation, unemployment, deficits and inequality are negatively related to public trust (Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017). Recent research also show that price rises, high inflation, rise in living cost resulting from geopolitical risks like the recent war in Ukraine negatively affect public trust (Sempiga, 2023). In addition, reduction of poverty leads to higher trust in government institutions (Cáceres, 2019).

Nonetheless, while many previous studies show that performance is positively associated with public trust (Anderson, 2009; Clarke et al., 1993; Cusack, 1999; Miller & Listhaug, 1999; Taylor, 2000), many other cross-national studies maintain that economic success does not significantly impact public trust (McAllister, 1999; Rahn & Rudolph, 2005; Van der Meer, 2010). Yet in longitudinal, within-country studies macroeconomic performance is an important driver of trust (Maggetti, 2020). While most public trust research has been restricted to macro-economic performance other policy outcomes also are said to influence trust. Besides economic performance, some find that public service quality is significantly associated with trust in government (Kim, 2010). Citizens' evaluation of basic service provision (e.g., education, health, and transportation, crime protection) is the single most important factor explaining trust in government (Cammett et al., 2015; Espinal et al., 2006). Similarly, performance on issues of security and corruption are associated with increasing trust ubiquitously (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2000; Ehrmann et al., 2013; Lipset & Schneider, 1987). However, some also argue that we cannot establish the causal relationship between satisfaction with public services (police, post, education, garbage collection and transportation) and trust unless we account for a predisposition toward the government that citizens already have (Kampen et al., 2006).

The public trust that results from the outcome type of performance of the government when it implements policies is outcome-based trust in as much as it is based on the way governments perform to satisfy citizens' expectations. Scholars from this school of thought believe that policy implementation performance has the most powerful positive role in promoting trust (Meng et al., 2020). Public trust is to a great extent the product of an outcome performance-based evaluation (Jiang, 2022). However, the idea that (only) objective economic and political performance (mainly) affects public trust can also be contested.

Process-based Trust Results from Process-Performance

Earlier studies demonstrate that performance solely based on results tends to demonstrate what is going on in terms of outputs or outcomes, but not why or how it occurred (Yang & Holzer, 2006). Yet the manner in which, or the means, an outcome was arrived at could be as decisive as the outcome itself or even more. Researchers argue that research that assume that a key to restoring public trust in the civil service lies in a focus on outcomes or results, thereby giving higher importance to outcome, fail to see the effect of processes on public trust (Zhai, 2019). Citizens tend to focus on outputs because they contact output institutions more frequently. But still we need not forget that dissatisfaction with government has more to do with unfair policy and political process. Process also matters in giving an accurate picture of government performance (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1995). The approval of the government depends not only on how well government delivers policy outcomes, but on the

perception of the political processes government follows to solve real problems and improve citizens' lives.

Whereas the above discussion shows that process is as important as outcome, authors set out to prove how democratic processes is the category of performance contents that is most important (Van Ryzin, 2011). They use voice and accountability, rule of law, and control of corruption as indicators of government process. Others seem to agree when they argue that both individual-level and country-level analysis suggest that indicators of process, such as fairness and rule of law, predict trust of public sector much more strongly than do indicators of outcomes (such as health, public safety, education, and economic well-being) (Yang & Holzer, 2006). It is also shown that administrative process, which captures fairness, respect, honesty, and similar procedural aspects, is the dominant driver of citizen trust because public perceptions of trust in government in part depend on getting the process right by treating people fairly and avoiding favoritism (Van Ryzin, 2015). A few other studies have also used corruption to measure process performance and have concluded that corruption has a strong, negative impact on public trust (Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012; Oskarsson, 2010), especially among the highest educated (Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017).

What process theorists are suggesting is that government performance is more than results-orientated performance. Citizens view government performance not only from the perspective of service delivery and outputs but, more importantly, according to the efficacy and fairness of government policy, the level of taxes, and government ethics (Yang & Holzer, 2006). A close match between a person's process preferences and the perceived workings of government increases the approval of government (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002). Several research papers conclude that not only process matters but it trumps outcome performance (Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017; Van Ryzin, 2011). Nevertheless, it is not always easy to dissociate outcomes from process. Due to the nature of government performance, output and process are often intertwined. Services are produced and consumed at the same time, making a distinction between output and process aspects in practice impossible. One process element or policy leads or is connected to an outcome and vice versa. That is why several authors use the term performance as encompassing both process and output/outcome (Van de Walle & Bouckaert, 2003). The retrospective evaluation of economic (outcome) and political performance (process) goes hand in hand and is positively associated with public trust (Jiang, 2022; Kim, 2010). Process-based trust turns into institutional-based trust when the focus of trust is based and driven by the performance resulting from strong institutions. Trust in institutions is measured on the basis of stakeholders' confidence in them, denoting that they perform according to the normative expectations of stakeholders. The confidence citizens have in the perceived realization of economic, social and environmental goals and targets create more trust. Process-based trust has a certain degree of impact on citizens' trust since citizens take into consideration their past experience with the very institutions and institutions' reputation to form trust. In this sense, trust towards organizations is about trust directed to an entity with a collective of people having a common goal and characterized by specific internal dynamics, culture and institutionalization processes (Latusek et al., 2020).

However, because the retrospective evaluation involves citizens' perceptions, it becomes difficult to distinguish actual performance from perceived performance and their impact on public trust (Van de Walle & Bouckaert, 2003), and to know the extent to which public trust is based on actual policy

performance and actual procedures (Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017). Trying to find a solution to such dilemma some scholars propose that objective measures (actual performance) concern exterior, observable phenomena (e.g. GDP growth, GINI index) whereas subjective measures (perceived performance) concern interior experiences and perceptions (e.g. perceived fairness, perceived corruption, or citizen satisfaction with services) (Andersen et al., 2016). The difficulty becomes evident when we realize that countries that objectively perform better economically do not necessarily have higher trust rates. Yet, subjective evaluations of economic performance continue to be strongest correlates of trust (Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017).This could be because many governments perform better than people think (Holzer & Callahan, 1998), but fail to demonstrate their success. It could also be due to the fact that the relationship between economic performance and public trust vary depending on whether they are based on (individual and aggregate) subjective evaluations of the economy, or on its objective performance. It is argued that it is the perception of government performance (rather than actual performance itself) that constitutes the basis for the formation of overall satisfaction judgments and related behavioral responses by citizens (Van Ryzin, 2007). Associated with the dichotomy between perceived and actual performance is a difficulty to find what truly represents actual performance especially when it comes to public sector at local level.

How SDGs Measure Performance and Influence Public Trust

As the discussion above demonstrated, the institutional approach and the resulting performance theory give an endogenous conception of trust which entails that public trust derives from the performance (actual or perceived) of political institutions. More specifically, public trust can be seen as a normative orientation of citizens toward the government that derives from the subjective evaluation of government's operations and performance (Miller, 1974; Newton & Norris, 2000; Stokes, 1962). Government's performance is evident when it provides services, such as health, education, security, law enforcement, electricity, transportation, water, and waste management. The rational base of trust proposed by performance theory is in contrast to other research that attribute citizen trust to cultural values, beliefs, and norms in a given society (Mishler & Rose, 2001).

Although citizens view government performance from the perspective of service delivery, and from the efficacy and fairness of government policy and government ethics (Beshi & Kaur, 2020), public administration scholarship has struggled to find accurate measure of performance especially in the public sector. SDG implementation at local level seems to offer a good way to test performance theory and to verify how trust relates to performance. Looking at how SDGs encompass various aspects of outcome-performance (e.g. economic growth, reduction of poverty and hunger, etc.) and process-outcome (i.e. justice, and strong institutions), SDGs could act as a specific measure of actual performance by government. The use of SDGs could provide an objective measure of economic, political, social and environmental performance in the public sector. In line with performance theory the more SDG attainment there is, the higher citizen trust there will be in institutions. The fact that citizens expect their government to perform well means that governments need to achieve a very good SDG index score. A very good SDG index score entails successful SDG implementation. This is because when SDG implementation is successful more societal value gets created through poverty and hunger reduction, economic growth, better gender equality and well-being, and climate regulation. It is also

expected that some government organizations will create more societal value than others and some in a more effective way than others. There is a great chance that an SDG index score could influence the way citizens view and evaluate their government in relation to the expectations they have. Citizens would then adjust their trust in government accordingly. This would reveal the importance of highly performing institutions in building public trust.

In addition, adopting SDGs as actual measure of performance responds to the excessive focus on the positive effects of economic performance on public trust in government which prevents us to realize that government performance is confined not only to the economic field but also in social and political fields that equally affect public trust in the government (Zhai, 2022). By empirically testing the postulation that government's performance in SDG implementation at local level affects trust we respond to the difficulty of measuring performance in public sector and enrich a public administration literature which has predominantly been concerned with government performance at national and global levels and not so much with a local focus. We respond to the call that 'more attention should be paid to the performance of local governments because they are at the forefront of public service delivery and represent the image of government' (Van Ryzin, 2015; Walker & Andrews, 2015).

Materials and Methods

Data and Procedures

Our analyses are based on datasets developed by the Flemish 'Gemeente-Stadsmonitor' (GSM) and by IDEA consult. A total of 377,530 people aged 17 to 85 years for all 300 municipalities/cities participate in the GSM 2020 survey. Of the 377,530 persons contacted, 139,470 people accurately completed the questionnaire. This is a gross response of 36.9%. 49.5% of respondents are male and 50.5 % of respondents are female. GSM conducts a triennial survey. We use the 2020 data because this year represents a few years after the SDGs have been implemented and entails that there are some tangible effects in relation to SDG implementation. There is a bias in the sample due to the over- or under-representation of certain groups. Women completed the questionnaire more often than men. There is an underrepresentation in the younger age groups up to 45 years. There are fewer persons of these age categories among the respondents than in the actual population. On the other hand, there is an overrepresentation in the age group of 55 to 75 years. The answers were weighted according to the population size and the age and gender distribution in each of the municipalities to correct for the under- or over-representation of certain groups (Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur, n.d.).

Dependent Variable

To measure trust in local government organization, respondents were asked the following question 'Do you trust the municipal authorities?' Their answers were recorded using a three-point scale. GSM distinguishes residents who have much to very much trust in the municipal council, from those who have little to very little trust and finally residents who have little to no trust. This corresponds to three tiers: a) a lot of confidence, b) little confidence and c) no confidence. Like other indicators, trust is chosen because it has a clear (either positive or negative) contribution to the SDGs and that it is applicable to all the municipalities so as to guarantee comparability. For our study we take the sum of

'a lot of confidence' (much to very much trust) and little confidence (little or not much trust) to create a trust index (*poltrust*). This becomes our unit of public trust in local government.

Independent Variable

To measure SDG achievement, IDEA consult uses multiple indicators in various policy domains: economic growth, environmental protection, income inequality, political corruption, employment, food safety, public health, and primary/middle school education. An overall SDG index score for each Flemish municipality/city serves as a final indicator of government performance. This score is the weighted average of the scores on the SDGs. The basis is more than 200 indicators that have been carefully collected and selected on the basis of their relationship with the SDG themes, the importance and relevance to the Flemish context. While 0 is the least score 100 will be the highest score. Higher scores indicate greater levels of government performance in SDGs according to citizens. We use each SDG score as a performance indicator and at the same time take the overall SDG score as the overall performance in SDGs in the public sector. Since SDGs represent local public sector performance in this study, we use performance in SDG1 up to SDG17 to describe performance. Among the 17 SDGs, only SDG14 is not included because it is less relevant for most Flemish cities/municipalities (Standaert et al., 2022). Since SDGs represent a way of indicating the performance of local government we termed the SDG variables as '*perfsdg*'. Location is our only control variable. For a municipality situated in the city, a yes was given while a no was attributed to a municipality located outside the city.

Results

We expect some relation between local government performance in SDGs and public trust. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for the variables included in our analysis. All the SDG variables are directly implemented from the IDEA Consult study. In line with extant research, we believe that SDGs ought to be treated as integrative framework (Sempiga & Van Liedekerke, 2023; Van Zanten & Van Tulder, 2020).

Table 1. Summary Statistics

Variable	Observations	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
poltrust	298	79.819	6.102	60	95
perfsdg1	298	82.728	7.060	52	92
perfsdg2	298	47.919	10.873	26	96
perfsdg3	298	66.349	5.124	42	77
perfsdg4	298	56.856	5.519	27	73
perfsdg5	298	73.097	3.749	60	82
perfsdg6	298	60.862	8.501	28	90
perfsdg7	298	40.708	5.373	20	55
perfsdg8	298	44.070	3.815	25	56
perfsdg9	298	57.430	6.441	37	82
perfsdg10	298	63.604	5.004	48	76
perfsdg11	298	54.493	5.785	35	70
perfsdg12	298	55.799	6.463	36	76
perfsdg13	298	72.285	6.539	55	90

perfsdg15	298	63.362	7.780	38	80
perfsdg16	298	59.319	10.077	34	86
perfsdg17	298	20.776	27.547	0	100
perfsdgall	298	57.517	3.505	49	69
location	298	0.181	0.386	0	1

We report the linear correlation analysis among regressors in Table 2. The correlation matrix is important in this instance because it shows the interaction between different SDGs. While a number of SDGs have synergies between them, few others have trade-offs among them and justifies further the notion of taking an integrative approach to deal with SDGs. Synergies refer to situations in which achievements on one goal contribute towards progress on other goals whereas trade-offs entail situations in which progress achieved on one goal will produce effects detrimental to other goals (or parts thereof) (Breuer et al., 2019). We notice there are strong synergies between SDG1 and SDG7, SDG11 and SDG16. For there to be a synergy or trade-off, correlations have to be significant. This notion of synergies can be used in relation to public trust where we find that there are synergies between public trust and SDG16.

Table 2. Correlation Matrix

	poltrust	perfsdgall	perfsdg1	perfsdg4	perfsdg5	perfsdg7	perfsdg8	perfsdg10	perfsdg11	perfsdg16
poltrust	1									
perfsdg all	0.432	1								
perfsdg 1	0.130	0.468	1							
perfsdg 4	0.159	0.508	0.466	1						
perfsdg 5	0.155	0.294	0.258	0.163	1					
perfsdg 7	0.299	0.540	0.505	0.495	0.086	1				
perfsdg 8	0.076	0.188	0.421	0.174	0.222	0.132	1			
perfsdg 10	0.214	0.309	0.413	0.284	0.303	0.254	0.160	1		
perfsdg 11	0.438	0.678	0.241	0.458	0.135	0.429	-0.100	0.239	1	
perfsdg 16	0.722	0.539	0.412	0.389	0.179	0.481	0.071	0.430	0.565	1

We realize that there is a positive but moderate correlation between overall SDG performance and public trust, performance in SDG7 and public trust, performance in SDG11 and public trust. There is a strong positive correlation between performance in SDG16 and public trust. For other performances there is either a weak positive correlation or negative correlation between them and public trust. In Table 3 the results of a multiple linear regression are presented.

Table 3. Regression of Trust and the SDGs

poltrust	Coefficient	Standard Error	t	P>|t|	[95% confidence Interval]	
perfsdg1	-0.075	0.064	-1.180	0.239	-0.201	0.050
perfsdg2	0.098	0.051	1.930	0.055	-0.002	0.197
perfsdg3	0.093	0.092	1.010	0.312	-0.088	0.275
perfsdg4	-0.027	0.072	-0.370	0.710	-0.169	0.115
perfsdg5	0.164	0.084	1.950	0.052	-0.001	0.318
perfsdg6	0.136	0.054	2.540	0.012	0.031	0.242
perfsdg7	0.164	0.075	2.200	0.028	0.017	0.311
perfsdg8	0.139	0.090	1.540	0.124	-0.039	0.318
perfsdg9	0.214	0.068	3.150	0.002	0.080	0.314
perfsdg10	0.031	0.072	0.430	0.669	-0.111	0.173
perfsdg11	0.067	0.081	0.820	0.412	-0.093	0.226
perfsdg12	0.020	0.062	0.330	0.745	-0.101	0.142
perfsdg13	0.022	0.064	0.350	0.726	-0.103	0.148
perfsdg15	0.046	0.059	0.770	0.441	-0.071	0.163
perfsdg16	0.593	0.057	10.370	0.000	0.481	0.706
perfsdg17	0.083	0.049	1.700	0.090	-0.029	0.018
perfsdgall	-1.210	0.759	-1.590	0.112	-2.704	0.175
location	0.849	0.612	1.390	0.166	-0.355	2.053
_cons	52.572	6.690	7.860	0.000	39.403	65.740

When analyzing the first column, we notice that the performance in SDG1 does not seem to have a significant impact on public trust. Looking at the p-values for perfsdg2 (0.055) and perfsdg5 (0.052), we notice that the performance in SDG2 and SDG5 may have a positive effect on public trust, but the evidence is not strong enough to establish a significant relationship. We notice that the coefficient for perfsdg6 is 0.136. It is statistically significant (p-value = 0.012), suggesting that the performance in SDG6 has a positive impact on public trust. Higher performance in SDG 6 is associated with increased public trust. Recent research has indeed demonstrated the strong connection between public trust and water security and sanitation (Wilson et al., 2023). Similarly, the coefficient for perfsdg7 is 0.164. It is statistically significant (p-value = 0.028), indicating that the performance in SDG7 has a positive impact on public trust. This was evident during the Ukraine-Russia conflict where citizens in Europe and elsewhere were affected by rising energy prices. Recent research also shows that there is a connection between citizen trust and affordable and clean energy (Sempiga, 2023). This becomes even more evident when sustainable marketing practices are put in place within the energy sector so as to have a positive influence on the environmental performance (Sempiga et al., 2023). There is also a statistically significant (p-value = 0.002) relationship between perfsdg9 and public trust. This means that the performance in SDG 9 has a positive impact on public trust. This aligns with recent research that show that consumer confidence in automotive industry and innovation will rebuild trust in regulatory system (Kalaitzidis, 2020).

On the other hand, the relationship between SDG17 and public trust is marginally insignificant (p-value = 0.090), suggesting that the performance in SDG17 may have a positive effect on public trust, but the

evidence is not strong enough to establish a significant relationship. Performance in SDG1, SDG3, SDG4, SDG8, SDG10, SDG11, SDG12, SDG13, SDG15 and SDG17 does not have a statistically significant impact on public trust. These results are in line with many earlier studies, mostly cross-sectional studies, that show that, among others, economic success does not correlate with public trust (Dalton, 2004; Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012; Oskarsson, 2010; Rahn & Rudolph, 2005; Van der Meer, 2010)2005). Our study contributes to these studies by showing that the effect of local government performance on public trust leads to the same outcome with macro-economic performance in relation to public trust/support.

The only highly significant relationship is found between performance in SDG16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) and public trust. This would confirm that the process of achieving good output matters the most in driving public trust more than outcome-based performance. This would align with earlier studies that suggest democratic processes is the category of performance contents that is most important (Van Ryzin, 2011). Similarly, both individual-level and country-level analysis suggest that indicators of process, such as fairness and rule of law, predict trust of public sector much more strongly than do indicators of outcomes (such as health, public safety, education, and economic well-being) (Yang & Holzer, 2006). It has been shown that administrative process, which captures fairness, respect, honesty, and similar procedural aspects, is the dominant driver of citizen trust because public perceptions of trust in government in part depend on getting the process right by treating people fairly and avoiding favoritism (Van Ryzin, 2015). It has also been suggested that giving higher importance to outcome-based performance amounts to a failure to see the effect of processes on public trust (Zhai, 2019).

When taking into consideration the overall SDG index score for municipalities/cities, we notice that the overall performance in SDGs does not have a significant impact on public trust. This seems to be consistent with the fact that most of the SDGs examined do not have a significant impact on the way citizen grant or withhold trust. Furthermore, there is a temptation to think that where a municipality is located could influence performance and hence trust. Our results show that the geographical location does not have a significant impact on public trust. Table 4 shows robust regression analysis of trust and SDGs.

Table 4. Robust Regression of Trust and the SDGs

			Number of observations =			298
			$F_{(18,279)}$ =			27.60
			Probability > F			0
poltrust	Coefficient	Standard Error	t	P>|t|	[95% confidence Interval]	
perfsdg1	-0.051	0.063	-0.810	0.416	-0.174	0.072
perfsdg2	0.119	0.050	2.400	0.017	0.022	0.217
perfsdg3	0.138	0.090	1.530	0.127	-0.040	0.316
perfsdg4	-0.005	0.071	-0.070	0.945	-0.144	0.135
perfsdg5	0.217	0.082	2.640	0.009	0.055	0.379
perfsdg6	0.152	0.053	2.890	0.004	0.048	0.256
perfsdg7	0.161	0.073	2.200	0.029	0.017	0.305

perfsdg8	0.176	0.089	1.980	0.049	0.001	0.350
perfsdg9	0.207	0.067	3.100	0.002	0.076	0.339
perfsdg10	0.046	0.071	0.640	0.520	-0.094	0.186
perfsdg11	0.107	0.080	1.340	0.181	-0.050	0.263
perfsdg12	0.042	0.061	0.690	0.489	-0.077	0.161
perfsdg13	0.069	0.063	1.110	0.269	-0.054	0.193
perfsdg15	0.054	0.058	0.920	0.358	-0.061	0.168
perfsdg16	0.617	0.056	10.980	0.000	0.506	0.727
perfsdg17	0.106	0.048	2.220	0.027	0.012	0.200
perfsdgall	-1.607	0.745	-2.160	0.032	-3.074	-0.141
location	0.761	0.600	1.270	0.204	-0.417	1.946
_cons	52.342	6.565	7.970	0.000	39.418	65.266

The robust regression analysis shows that the performance in specific SDGs (perfsdg2, perfsdg5, perfsdg6, perfsdg7, perfsdg8, perfsdg9, perfsdg16, and perfsdg17) has a significant effect on public trust. On other hand, performance in SDG1, SDG3, SDG4, SDG10, SDG11, SDG12, SDG13 do not have statistically significant coefficients, suggesting that their performance does not have a significant effect on public trust. However, the overall performance in the SDGs (perfsdgall) has a negative impact on public trust. The geographical location does not seem to have a significant effect in this analysis.

Discussion and Conclusion

The main aim of this study was to investigate the way local public sector performance affect public trust. Practitioners and scholars of trust and performance theorists have begun to acknowledge that while the economy is essential in generating public trust improved economy does not entail higher levels of trust simply because there are other elements involved in driving public trust (Vilhelmsdóttir & Kristinsson, 2018). Before the 2008 global financial crunch, economic performance was a key determinant of trust and the main characteristics of government performance (Lawrence, 1997). As a result, other elements of performance were overlooked. Once the economy improved and that public trust never followed suit, scholars started to suspect that there were other key components of performance. Some scholars began to show that subjective perceptions of economic performance are the strongest determinants of public trust, while the contextual effect of economic development (the actual performance) has no significant impact on the trust variable (Van der Meer & Dekker, 2011). Trust may not have followed suit of the post-crisis simply because citizens' negative evaluation of the national economy and their negative perceptions of their governments' ability to respond to the economic challenges engender even more distrust (Nye, 1997). This study builds on a growing body of work that has pointed out that process-based performance determines public trust even better than out-come based performance (Yang & Holzer, 2006). It is also in line with those that show that the retrospective evaluation of economic (outcome) and political performance (process) goes hand in hand and is associated with public trust (Jiang, 2022; Kim, 2010).

Our findings reveal that the performance in specific SDGs (such as SDG6, SDG7, and SDG9) positively influences public trust. SDG16 has the strongest statistically significant impact on public trust. These observations fit with former studies that found that the approval of the government depends not only

on how well government delivers policy outcomes, but on the perception of the political processes government follows to solve real problems and improve citizens' lives (Van Ryzin, 2009). It comes as no surprise that peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG16) is the main driver of trust for citizens simply because investigating trust in government organizations institutional-based trust is the most applicable (Almuqrin et al., 2022). For performance, this study is the first to offer a rigorous empirical evidence using SDGs to offer an integrative framework encompassing both outcome and process, thus contributing to existing findings that have shown that economic success lead to trust (Clarke et al., 1993; Kroknes et al., 2015), and also that peace, social justice and strong institutions contribute to building trust (Silander, 2020). This is true because process also matters in giving an accurate picture of government performance (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1995), and that government performance is more than results-orientated performance. Our findings are also in line with those that suggest that people's appreciation and experience in the process of government decision making influence the level of trust in government (Kumagai & Iorio, 2020).

There are a number of implications and contributions of this study. First of all, the varying strength of correlations between different SDGs and public trust indicates that not all goals have an equal impact. SDGs such as SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) show a strong positive correlation, implying that actions taken towards promoting peace, justice, and good governance can have a significant impact on public trust. This contributes to the theory that good governance and strong institutions play a key role in building trust (Bachmann, 2018; Yousaf et al., 2016). As a consequence, focus should be given to SDGs that exhibit stronger correlations with public trust, such as SDG 16. Governments can implement policies and initiatives that promote peace, justice, and strong institutions to foster trust in their political systems. This may include measures to ensure transparency, accountability, and participation in decision-making processes. Secondly, there is an urgent need for targeted actions in areas where the correlation is weak or insignificant, such as SDG 8. Policymakers should carefully assess the specific challenges and contextual factors that may influence the relationship between certain SDGs and public trust. Understanding the nuances of these relationships can help in formulating more effective strategies for sustainable development and enhancing public trust. There is a need for effectively integrating the SDGs into the mandates of institutions especially at local level (Oosterhof, 2018).

There are a number of limitations associated with this study. First of all, the analysis does not account for the influence of potential confounding variables or omitted variables that could impact both SDG performance and public trust. Factors such as socioeconomic status, political stability, cultural differences (Baniamin et al., 2020), or historical context could confound the observed relationships. The omission of these variables may have limited the study's ability to isolate the direct relationship between SDGs and public trust. Future studies could explore the role of governance structures, policy implementation mechanisms, public awareness and engagement, and media influence which could help identify the underlying mechanisms that shape the relationship. Future research could explore the role of transparency, accountability, participation, and responsiveness of governments in building or eroding public trust in the context of SDG implementation. Finally, while our quantitative method allows us to establish the impact of performance on trust it can neither investigate the mechanisms through which SDG performance influences public trust. Qualitative methods such as process tracing

would allow us to achieve that and may help uncover the underlying factors and contextual nuances that quantitative analyses may not capture.

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