

Institutions, Culture, and Climate Policy: Comparative Lessons from Australia and Norway

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Abstract

This paper compares Australia and Norway's approaches to implementing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 13 ("Climate Action") and 11 ("Sustainable Cities and Communities"), focusing on the interplay between institutional frameworks and cultural factors. Australia's 2022 Climate Change Act establishes national emissions targets but lacks binding enforcement mechanisms and robust intergovernmental coordination. A fragmented governance structure, limited public engagement, and deep political polarisation impede the coherent development of climate and urban sustainability policies. In contrast, Norway has established a legally binding and fiscally integrated system combining a carbon tax regime, the 2018 Climate Act, and robust multi-level governance mechanisms. Broad public consensus and institutionalised participation mechanisms ensure policy continuity and accountability. Drawing on Norway's experience, this paper recommends that Australia strengthen climate and urban sustainability legislation, establish a national SDG coordination mechanism, adopt carbon budgeting and performance assessment systems, and enhance local capacity and citizen engagement. The study concludes that effective SDG implementation depends less on fiscal or technical capacity than on robust legal commitments, co-ordinated governance structures, and alignment with societal values.

Keywords

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Climate Governance, Urban Sustainability, Comparative Policy Analysis, Legal and Institutional Frameworks, Public Participation and Governance

1. Introduction

1.1 Alarming Global Progress on the SDGs

The United Nations' *Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024* reveals a sobering reality: despite nearly a decade of implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, global progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) remains far below expectations. As of 2024, only about 15% of targets are on track, over 48% are stagnating or progressing slowly, and 37% are regressing. Among these, Climate Action (SDG 13) and Sustainable Cities and Communities (SDG 11) have been identified by the UN as among the most challenging areas [1].

At the 2025 High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), UN Secretary-General Guterres warned that the world is caught in a "network of cascading crises": accelerating climate change, growing urban vulnerabilities, stalled international cooperation, and declining trust in institutions all threaten sustainable development outcomes. "We are at a crossroads," he stated, "on a path that will define humanity's future. Without urgent acceleration, 2030 may mark the failure of global promises" [2].

Regarding SDGs 13 and 11, global carbon emissions continue to rise, while climate stress on urban infrastructure outpaces adaptive capacity. Furthermore, the lack of policy coordination, absence of binding legal frameworks, and weak public participation mechanisms render progress on these goals particularly difficult [1].

1.2 Research Question and Motivation

In light of the above, this paper seeks to answer two key questions:

First, why has implementation of SDGs 13 and 11 been slow-or even regressive-in certain countries?

Second, what institutional and cultural factors influence the effective implementation of these goals?

Research shows that SDG outcomes largely depend on the capacity of national governance systems to institutionalise the goals and translate them into enforceable legal obligations. In the context of climate and urban governance, institutional fragmentation, non-binding legal provisions, poor intergovernmental coordination, and low public support frequently result in implementation delays [3].

By contrast, some countries have demonstrated stronger SDG performance, attributed to the robustness of their legal

frameworks, integrated policy systems, and higher socio-cultural alignment. The differing trajectories of SDGs 13 and 11 in Australia and Norway—two advanced economies with contrasting governance and cultural systems—offer a valuable comparative perspective. This study aims to identify each country's institutional strengths and structural bottlenecks, through detailed case analysis and policy-based reform proposals.

1.3 Structure and Analytical Framework

To examine the above questions, the paper focuses on legal and policy practices in Australia and Norway concerning SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). Benchmarking is structured around four dimensions:

- (1) Legal Systems: Whether each country has enacted binding climate and urban development legislation, integrated these into national strategies, and established accountability and enforcement mechanisms.
- (2) Governance Structures: Whether responsibilities between national and subnational governments are clearly defined, coordination mechanisms are effective, and whether hierarchical disjunction or unequal resource allocation exists.
- (3) Policy Mechanisms: Whether institutional arrangements support goal-setting, financial backing, monitoring, and public participation—and whether policies show synergy and long-term continuity.
- (4) Cultural Attitudes: The influence of public perceptions, civic engagement, and trust in government on policy effectiveness in climate and urban sustainability.

This framework supports a structured comparative analysis based on official reports, policy documents, and academic literature. The final section considers international reform proposals relevant to Australia's context, aiming to contribute to a political and legal roadmap for advancing SDG implementation.

2. Theoretical and Analytical Framework

2.1 The Three-Dimensional Structure of Sustainable Development

The concept of sustainable development has become a central term in global policy discourse since the release of *Our Common Future* in 1987. The report defines sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” and identifies its core structure as comprising three dimensions: economic growth, environmental protection, and social justice [4].

The inherent tension between these dimensions forms the backdrop for both synergies and conflicts among the SDGs. The economic dimension prioritises growth, innovation, and industrial development—often a dominant concern for developing nations. The environmental dimension emphasises ecosystem resilience, climate change mitigation, and resource efficiency. The social dimension addresses inclusion, equity, and access to fundamental rights such as housing, healthcare, and education.

SDGs 13 and 11 operate within this zone of structural tension. Climate action frequently requires recalibrating economic models and restricting high-emission industries. At the same time, sustainable urban development must contend with pressures from modernising infrastructure, managing population growth, and ensuring spatial justice. These structural contradictions are a major source of political difficulty in implementing the goals.

Thus, SDGs should not be approached as isolated, technical issues of environmental policy. Rather, they represent intersections between legal cultures and political economies. Understanding how a nation reconciles the tensions among these three dimensions within its governance framework is key to evaluating SDG implementation. This lens helps explain why some countries, despite having sufficient resources and advanced technologies, struggle to achieve SDGs—while others progress due to institutional advantages.

2.2 Sustainable Development Governance and the Principles of “Good Governance”

With the evolution of SDG governance frameworks, the concept of “good governance” has become a core principle in global governance theory. The United Nations Development Programme defines good governance as “ensuring participation, transparency, accountability and equity in decision-making under the rule of law” and highlights it as essential for achieving the SDGs [5].

Ellis and Edmonds argue that SDG governance is not merely goal-oriented strategy, but a reshaping of institutional processes—how standards are set, responsibilities distributed, progress monitored, and policy paths revised [3]. They emphasise that failures in SDG implementation stem less from the complexity of the goals and more from the absence of institutional support and consistent governance logic.

Without good governance as an “intermediate layer,” SDGs risk becoming symbolic commitments. Where transparency and accountability are lacking, public support and policy coordination weaken. This results in limited progress—even where policy documents exist—due to the absence of implementation mechanisms and social mobilisation.

For cross-sectoral challenges like SDGs 13 and 11, the degree to which good governance is embedded determines the possibility of synergy, the effectiveness of policy feedback, and the equitable allocation of resources. Transparency

promotes public acceptance; participation fosters legitimacy and ongoing oversight; and the rule of law anchors continuity, even amid political or fiscal volatility.

2.3 Comparative Dimensions Adopted in This Study

Drawing on the above theoretical context, this paper adopts four interrelated comparative dimensions to analyse how Australia and Norway implement SDGs 13 and 11. These dimensions are designed to capture the institutional, legal, operational, and cultural factors that jointly shape the effectiveness of sustainable development governance in different national contexts.

(1) Legal Systems: Do the two countries possess binding legal frameworks for climate and urban sustainability? Are there enforceable targets, accountability structures, and justiciable mechanisms that transform policy commitments into tangible obligations? For example, Norway's climate law includes strict targets and periodic reviews, embedding legal authority into the heart of climate policy and providing a structured legal pathway for long-term emissions reduction. By contrast, Australia lacks a unified national climate law, and its approach remains largely reliant on administrative directives, strategic plans, or political declarations rather than enforceable legal mandates, resulting in a comparatively weaker legal foundation for sustainability governance [6].

(2) Governance Structures: Are power allocations between central and local governments clearly defined and functionally efficient? Do coordination mechanisms ensure policy consistency across multiple levels of government? Australia's federal system delegates significant powers over urban planning, infrastructure, and land-use management to its states and territories, which often leads to fragmented and inconsistent policy outcomes. In the absence of strong national-level coordination, subnational disparities become more pronounced. Norway, conversely, operates within a unitary framework, where more centralised coordination is complemented by empowered local governments with strong planning capacity, particularly in climate and urban sustainability domains. This arrangement enhances vertical and horizontal policy coherence [7].

(3) Policy Mechanisms: Do the countries support SDG implementation through integrated strategies such as interdepartmental coordination, budgetary planning tools, performance evaluation systems, and participatory governance platforms? In Norway, SDG delivery is supported by a comprehensive suite of institutional tools that link policy objectives to fiscal planning, long-term investment, and ongoing monitoring. Participatory mechanisms further enhance transparency and civic legitimacy. In contrast, Australia exhibits weaker intersectoral coordination and limited institutionalisation of performance feedback mechanisms. Public engagement in policy design and oversight remains relatively underdeveloped, which may contribute to reduced accountability and citizen trust in sustainability policy [8].

(4) Cultural Attitudes: How do societal norms, political culture, and civic traditions operate as "soft constraints" in shaping SDG performance? Eckersley notes that Norwegian citizens generally exhibit strong environmental values, a high level of trust in government, and a sense of collective responsibility for sustainable outcomes. These cultural traits create a favourable environment for SDG implementation, reinforcing formal institutions with informal norms. By contrast, Australia faces greater political polarisation on environmental issues, and public discourse often reflects ideological divisions rather than shared goals. These tensions contribute to policy discontinuity, undermining long-term planning and the legitimacy of climate action [9].

These four dimensions guide the comparative analysis in the following sections, serving as a structural framework for understanding institutional differences, assessing national capacities, and informing context-sensitive reform proposals. Through this lens, the paper identifies how legal design, governance architecture, operational mechanisms, and cultural foundations interact to influence the success or failure of SDG implementation.

3. Australia's Case Study

3.1 Legal and Policy Framework for Climate Action (SDG 13)

Australia's institutional record on climate policy has long been characterised by political division, legal delay, and inconsistency. Despite early commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions under the Paris Agreement, progress on national legislation has been slow. It was only in 2022 that the Australian Federal Parliament passed the *Climate Change Act 2022*, which formally integrated emissions reduction targets into the national legal framework. The Act also established the Climate Change Authority, an independent body tasked with monitoring progress and reporting to Parliament on relevant policies [10].

The Act sets a target of a 43% reduction in emissions by 2030 (relative to 2005 levels), and net zero emissions by 2050. Although this was a milestone in Australia's climate governance, many scholars have noted that the legislation remains weak in its binding and operational aspects. First, the targets are considered 'moderate', lacking ambition for international leadership or any legal link to concrete national emissions plans. Second, the legislation does not provide clear implementation mechanisms or legal consequences for non-compliance, leaving broad discretion in the application of policies [8].

As a federal state, Australia faces structural ambiguity in climate responsibilities between central and state governments. States such as New South Wales and Victoria have adopted more ambitious targets and renewable energy strategies than the federal level. However, these have not been effectively harmonised at the national level, resulting in legislative

duplication, inconsistent regulations, and resource inefficiencies. This fragmented governance not only weakens policy coherence but also undermines public and corporate trust in climate strategies [11].

In global comparisons, Australia has diverged from the group of leading countries in climate action, due to discontinuity in carbon pricing (e.g., repeated repeal of the carbon tax), lack of industrial transition strategies, and limited financial support. These systemic gaps-between federal and state policy, between political vision and practical enforcement, and between law and finance-have become significant barriers to the advancement of SDG 13.

3.2 Policy Mechanisms for Sustainable Cities (SDG 11)

Australia's efforts in sustainable urban development are marked by long-term political fragmentation. While national strategy documents frequently reference sustainable, inclusive, and green urban development, the federal government holds no direct authority over urban planning or infrastructure. These responsibilities lie primarily with local governments, resulting in a lack of national standards and a "policy islands" effect [12].

Some cities, such as Melbourne and Sydney, have initiated pilot reforms in areas like public transport, EV charging infrastructure, and green housing standards. However, these projects rely heavily on localised funding and lack national strategic alignment. Peripheral cities and suburbs consistently face disadvantage in infrastructure, clean energy access, and resources for health and education-widening inter-city disparities and hindering SDG implementation [11].

Housing affordability is another challenge under SDG 11. Rising housing prices have escalated rent pressures, disproportionately affecting low-income families, young people, and Indigenous communities. The dominance of speculative housing markets, insufficient public housing, and the absence of national regulation for affordable housing contrast starkly with the UN's call for "adequate, safe and affordable housing for all" [13].

More critically, urban planning across Australia generally fails to integrate climate risk into building codes. Despite increasing threats such as heatwaves, bushfires, and flooding, many cities continue to apply outdated engineering standards and risk assessments. This "post-knowledge" policy logic limits adaptive capacity and reflects an institutional underestimation of the climate-urban nexus.

3.3 Legal and Governance Challenges

Despite the symbolic significance of the *Climate Change Act*, clear legal shortcomings remain in the governance of the SDGs. At present, the SDGs are not legally embedded in national law. Strategy papers frequently use SDG language, but they lack binding provisions assigning responsibility to ministries or establishing fiscal/legal mechanisms to ensure policy funding [3].

Public participation also faces institutional limits. Although the government hosts an SDG feedback page and some consultations, there is no institutionalised mechanism for public hearings, parliamentary scrutiny, or sustained NGO engagement. This results in opaque decision-making and weak public ownership. In the absence of consensus and civic oversight, policies become vulnerable to partisan shifts. Indeed, climate and urban strategies have frequently been revised or reversed following electoral changes, revealing the fragility of highly politicised policies [9].

Indigenous communities continue to be marginalised in both climate and urban policy. There is insufficient institutional recognition of traditional knowledge systems-such as land stewardship and cultural landscapes-in mainstream housing, infrastructure, and environmental planning. Likewise, policy programmes do not sufficiently address their distinct socio-economic and ecological vulnerabilities. This structural exclusion undermines policy inclusivity and directly conflicts with SDG 11's commitment to "inclusive cities" [10].

Scholars broadly agree that Australia's challenges in climate and urban sustainability are not due to technical or financial deficiencies, but rather stem from institutional fragmentation, low public trust, and political polarisation. This "triangle of institutional dilemmas" continues to inhibit Australia's ability to implement the SDGs effectively and consistently [8].

3.4 Summary: Institutional and Cultural Constraints

Institutional and cultural barriers have significantly hindered Australia's progress on SDGs 13 and 11. Legally, the absence of binding SDG mandates, weak intergovernmental coordination, limited public engagement, and lack of reporting transparency obstruct the development of a coherent national implementation strategy.

Culturally, environmental issues remain polarised and highly politicised, with little bipartisan consensus or stable policy foundations. Public confidence in environmental governance is fragile, and weak feedback channels reduce civic support, thereby limiting the scope of social mobilisation. These political and socio-cultural limitations also impair long-term national planning.

On the crucial issue of SDG access and implementation timelines, Australia must urgently establish a coordinated governance platform across levels and restore public trust and policy continuity. Without this, its pathway to achieving the SDGs risks prolonged stagnation and the forfeiture of a critical opportunity to lead in sustainable transformation.

4. Norway's Case Study

4.1 Legal Framework and Climate Governance (SDG 13)

Since the introduction of a carbon tax in 1991, Norway has remained one of the world leaders in climate governance. Its dual-track approach-combining carbon taxation with emissions trading-demonstrates a flexible yet robust regulatory model. This hybrid system is significant not only in terms of emissions reduction in the industrial sector but also as a long-term mechanism for financing green technological innovation and guiding technological pathways towards low-carbon transition [14].

In contrast to countries that rely solely on carbon trading mechanisms, Norway's carbon tax ensures stable public revenues while regulating energy market prices with greater continuity and political resilience.

The *Climate Change Act*, which came into force in 2018, formalised Norway's emission reduction commitments and clearly established the national target of achieving a "low-emission society" by 2050. The law mandates the government to submit an annual report to Parliament regarding the implementation of climate policies, thereby ensuring transparency and political accountability. Notably, it also establishes a legal and institutional bridge between international obligations and their domestic enforcement, addressing both technical and governance aspects [15].

Furthermore, Norway introduced the integration of SDG targets into its national budget framework as early as 2017. The draft budget is required to include an assessment of each major spending programme's alignment with the SDGs, while simultaneously publishing sustainable development performance indicators for public review. This initiative not only enhances fiscal transparency but also ensures alignment between policy objectives and budgetary allocation-strengthening the logic of a "policy-based budget" [16].

In summary, Norway has developed a mature legal-political governance model for SDG 13, supported by three key institutional pillars: (1) long-standing integration between taxation and climate policy; (2) legal codification of climate goals and international commitments; and (3) a mix of top-down and bottom-up governance tools. This multidimensional synergy forms a robust foundation for the effective implementation of SDG 13.

4.2 Policy Framework for Sustainable Cities (SDG 11)

Norway is at the forefront of implementing SDG 11, with an urban development model that not only promotes infrastructure equity and housing security but also systematically incorporates principles of green development across all levels of governance. Major cities such as Oslo, Bergen, and Trondheim have launched comprehensive "carbon-neutral" urban strategies that integrate low-carbon mobility systems, smart energy grids, and environmentally conscious building standards. These urban centres have introduced emission-restricted transport zones aimed at reducing air pollution and traffic congestion, expanded the infrastructure network for electric vehicles to encourage clean transportation, and actively promoted the use of renewable energy in public transport systems-gradually shaping a low-carbon, energy-efficient, and environmentally friendly urban model that serves as a national benchmark [17].

Importantly, the Norwegian government empowers local initiatives in implementing the SDGs, recognising that place-based knowledge and local agency are crucial for the realisation of sustainable outcomes. Its decentralised governance structure enables local authorities to tailor SDG targets in accordance with local geographic, economic, and social conditions, allowing them to formulate customised and context-sensitive local action plans. Rather than imposing a top-down approach, national institutions provide strategic guidance while granting municipalities a degree of autonomy in implementation. OECD data show that over 90% of Norwegian municipalities have incorporated the SDGs into their planning documents, with clearly defined measurable targets and performance indicators in critical areas such as housing security, green infrastructure development, and climate adaptation measures [18].

This governance model strengthens the link between policymaking and residents' actual needs while enhancing public ownership and civic identity in the sustainability process. By embedding sustainable development into the daily operations of local governments, Norway ensures that policy formulation is not detached from social realities. The bottom-up nature of local planning encourages the participation of a broader and more diverse range of social groups-including youth, seniors, and marginalised communities-in sustainability governance. This inclusive approach improves both the responsiveness of local authorities and the practical delivery of public services related to urban resilience and environmental sustainability [19].

Housing policy is another cornerstone of Norway's SDG 11 strategy, particularly in terms of ensuring equitable access and sustainability. The national housing bank (Husbanken) not only provides housing loans and rent subsidies to low- and middle-income groups but also plays an active role in financing experimental and pilot projects focused on sustainable community development. These include green building schemes, energy-efficient housing prototypes, and integrated residential planning that considers both environmental and social indicators. Through such initiatives, the housing sector becomes not only a recipient of policy support but also a driver of innovation and inclusiveness [17]. These mechanisms reflect and institutionalise the core SDG principle of providing "adequate, safe, and affordable housing for all" by embedding equity goals into policy infrastructure.

By successfully balancing central policy leadership with localised flexibility and innovation, Norway has constructed an integrated governance model that is adaptable to changing conditions, inclusive of diverse community needs, and

consistent with both the spirit and substance of the Lisbon Goals under SDG 11. The Norwegian experience thus illustrates how multilevel governance, when properly aligned with cultural values and institutional support, can serve as a powerful vehicle for sustainable urban transformation.

4.3 Culture and Participatory Mechanisms

Norway's success in sustainable development is deeply rooted in its cultural framework and broad social consensus. The country has long emphasised environmental education and public awareness, fostering a national identity strongly aligned with sustainability values. A 2023 survey conducted by Statec indicated that over 85% of Norwegian citizens believe that climate change should be addressed primarily at the national level—well above the OECD average—highlighting both the homogeneity and depth of public support [15].

This shared cultural outlook has enabled cross-party continuity in climate policy. Regardless of whether centre-right or centre-left coalitions are in power, successive governments have maintained unified climate agendas, resulting in stable institutional trajectories. This “depoliticised” environmental governance model underpins the credibility and longevity of Norway's climate strategies.

In terms of participatory governance, Norway has developed multi-level and institutionalised public engagement mechanisms. Regular national public hearings are held to gather input from citizens, NGOs, and industry stakeholders. In addition, online consultation platforms are widely used, including dedicated digital channels targeting youth and marginalised populations. These structures foster intergenerational inclusion and ensure pluralistic representation in the policymaking process [16].

Moreover, Norway's information disclosure system is among the most transparent globally: government budgets, policy drafts, and implementation reports are all publicly available. This institutional transparency not only builds civic trust but also helps prevent “greenwashing” or symbolic implementation, reinforcing the substantive legitimacy of sustainable development efforts.

4.4 Summary: Institutional Strengths of Norway

In essence, Norway's performance on SDGs 13 and 11 reflects a systemic advantage rooted in institutional synergy and cultural cohesion. These strengths include: a legally binding framework aligned with international obligations; a fiscal system deeply integrated with sustainability goals; autonomous and responsive local governments; multi-level public participation; high levels of societal support; and a robust pro-environmental culture.

Together, these features form a governance ecosystem in which sustainable development is not merely a rhetorical ambition but an institutional logic and operational reality. Norway's experience illustrates that meaningful progress on sustainability requires both institutional resilience and cultural alignment.

Unlike Australia—which also relies heavily on natural resource sectors—Norway did not succumb to the “resource curse”. Instead, it embraced structural transformation through institutional innovation. This model of “institutional-cultural synergy” offers valuable lessons for other nations seeking sustainable development pathways.

5. Comparative Analysis and Reform Recommendations

5.1 Summary of Key Differences: Australia vs. Norway

The preceding case studies have revealed several structural and institutional differences between Australia and Norway in advancing SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). These disparities can be observed across four main dimensions: governance structure, legal framework, implementation mechanisms, and public engagement capacity.

(1) Governance Structure:

Australia's federal constitutional system distributes responsibility for urban and climate policies across multiple levels of government. However, the absence of a coherent national strategy and lack of effective coordination mechanisms have resulted in persistent policy fragmentation [14]. This structural ambiguity manifests in frequent shifts in political priorities, unclear jurisdictional boundaries, and duplicated or wasted resources.

In contrast, although Norway operates under a unitary system, its central government effectively coordinates national strategies while simultaneously granting clearly defined autonomy to local authorities. This delineation of roles between different levels of government enhances policy continuity, strategic coherence, and operational efficiency [17].

(2) Legal Framework:

While Australia enacted the *Climate Change Act 2022*, the legislation remains largely aspirational. It does not impose binding obligations related to the SDG targets, and its implementation mechanisms are vague, lacking enforceable accountability clauses. Consequently, political declarations tend to outweigh legal commitments [9]. In Norway, however, the *Climate Act* provides legally binding emission reduction targets and is institutionally integrated into the national budget via a carbon tax regime. This structure translates policy goals into quantifiable fiscal performance metrics, significantly strengthening the law's operability and enforceability [15].

(3) Public Participation:

Australia's environmental policies are often entangled in political polarisation, with significant disparities in climate attitudes across urban-rural and ethnic divides, including tensions between Indigenous communities and dominant political groups. Public involvement in sustainable urban governance remains limited, with technocratic planning approaches sidelining the participatory rights of marginalised populations [8].

By comparison, Norway emphasises institutionalised public participation. It features high governmental transparency and structured feedback mechanisms that enhance both the legitimacy and the social acceptance of policies. Environmental initiatives are regularly subjected to public hearings, with implementation strategies assessed against criteria such as public consensus and community inclusion—especially relevant in urban sustainability planning [16].

In sum, systemic variables such as the type of government (federal vs. unitary), the legal rigidity of climate instruments (non-binding vs. enforceable), the degree of civic involvement (passive vs. active), and the effectiveness of policy coordination play pivotal roles in shaping the divergent SDG performances of the two countries.

5.2 Reform Proposals: What Australia Can Learn from Norway

Based on the above comparative analysis, this section proposes five practical and context-sensitive recommendations for Australia to improve its future implementation of SDGs 13 and 11 by drawing upon Norway's experiences:

(1) Develop a Binding Legal Framework

Australia should enhance the regulatory capacity of its Climate Change Act by embedding operational mechanisms that directly reference SDG indicators. This may include statutory clauses requiring climate impact assessments for urban infrastructure and transport projects, as well as explicit provisions for safeguarding Indigenous rights within environmental planning processes—thus addressing long-standing structural exclusions and enhancing legal clarity [9].

(2) Establish a National SDG Coordination Mechanism

Australia currently lacks a high-level, cross-sectoral governance body dedicated to SDG implementation. This institutional gap impedes interdepartmental collaboration and generates bureaucratic bottlenecks. Inspired by Norway's “budget-policy-performance feedback” model, Australia should develop a centralised mechanism that ensures vertical alignment between federal funding priorities and local implementation strategies, thereby improving both coherence and accountability across governance levels [16].

(3) Strengthen Local Governance and Financial Support

Local governments are essential agents for sustainable development but are frequently hindered by limited budgets and ambiguous mandates. Australia should activate local capacities through central government transfers, technical training programs, and inclusive governance reforms. Additionally, mechanisms for regular consultation with local communities and Indigenous stakeholders should be institutionalised to ensure policy relevance and equity. This approach would better equip municipalities to implement green policies tailored to regional needs [20].

(4) Introduce a Carbon Budget and Urban Performance Assessment System

Building on Norway's experience, Australia should adopt a national carbon budgeting system, setting clear annual emissions targets across all states and cities. At the same time, SDG 11 indicators—such as air quality levels, green mobility rates, and urban energy efficiency—should be measured regularly to support evidence-based policy revisions and adaptive management [21].

(5) Promote Cross-Sectoral Policy Synergies through Fiscal Incentives

Australia should integrate SDG-aligned criteria into its annual budget processes and establish a cost-effectiveness evaluation mechanism across ministries. By developing incentive structures that encourage inter-agency cooperation and long-term resource planning, Australia can build a feedback-driven governance model that fosters sustained environmental outcomes [16].

In conclusion, if Australia draws upon Norway's model of institutionalised, participatory, and culturally supported sustainability governance, it may overcome the current fragmentation and implementation gaps that have hindered its SDG performance. Through the development of binding legal norms, enhanced coordination structures, and inclusive governance mechanisms, Australia has the potential to achieve a transformative shift in its climate and urban policy trajectory—ensuring that its international commitments translate into real and measurable domestic outcomes.

6. Conclusion

This paper has undertaken a comparative analysis of Australia and Norway to examine how Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 13 ("Climate Action") and 11 ("Sustainable Cities and Communities") are implemented in practice. The discussion has emphasised the pivotal influence of institutional architecture and cultural foundations on the success or failure of sustainable development strategies. Although both countries formally commit to the 2030 Agenda, stark divergences in legal frameworks, governance systems, public participation models, and societal attitudes have resulted

in markedly different levels of progress and policy coherence.

Norway provides a clear example of how institutional and cultural synergies can yield effective SDG implementation. The country has established legally binding emission reduction targets through the *Climate Change Act*, integrated these objectives into national fiscal planning, and designed a governance system rooted in transparency, scientific evidence, and participatory processes. This holistic framework enables the mobilisation of public support and creates positive feedback loops between policy formulation and implementation, thereby reinforcing accountability and long-term policy stability.

In contrast, Australia encounters a set of complex structural impediments that hinder its SDG performance. As a federal state, it faces inherent challenges in coordinating policies across multiple jurisdictions, leading to fragmented implementation and inconsistent standards. The legal system does not sufficiently embed the SDGs as enforceable obligations, which undermines the certainty and continuity of climate and urban sustainability efforts. Furthermore, deep political polarisation and divergent public attitudes—particularly between urban and rural communities, and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations—have diluted social consensus and weakened the momentum for collective action.

Ultimately, this comparative inquiry illustrates that the effectiveness of SDG delivery depends not merely on financial capacity or technical readiness, but more fundamentally on the strength of legal commitments, the coherence of governance arrangements, and the depth of cultural alignment with sustainability values. Countries like Australia, which currently exhibit fragmented governance and low institutionalisation of sustainability, will require reforms on three interconnected fronts—legal, administrative, and socio-cultural—if they are to transition from aspirational goals to operational realities.

In order to fully realise the vision of the 2030 Agenda, Australia must move beyond symbolic commitments and establish a robust, inclusive, and transparent governance infrastructure that supports sustained public engagement and cross-sectoral collaboration. Only through such systemic reform can the country bridge the gap between intention and impact, and position itself as a credible actor in the global sustainability transition.

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