

Administrative Capability and Commitment as Pathways to SDGs Localization in a Heritage City

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ABSTRACT

Recognizing the role of local governments in translating sustainable development goals into concrete local actions, this study examined how Vigan City has operationalized the UN SDGs within its local governance framework, leveraging the avenue afforded to local governments to translate global development goals into actionable local imperatives. The study determined the administrative capability and commitment of Vigan City in the localization of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It also addressed the city's administrative capacity, commitment, and practices for coping with global sustainability frameworks and for localizing governance actions. The work was specifically focused on the city's performance with respect to four selected goals: SDG #3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG #4 (Quality Education), SDG #11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and SDG #16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). In addition, the best practices of the City of Vigan in localizing the Sustainable Development Goals as a model of effective and sustainable local governance were also considered. This study utilized the quantitative descriptive-correlational research design, adopting the survey questionnaire of Anicas (2020), and involved two groups of respondents: 384 residents of Barangays 1-9 and Tamag, and six key informants. The data obtained were subjected to statistical analysis, including mean and bivariate correlation, as well as a thematic analysis. Results showed that Vigan City has a high level of administrative capability and a high commitment to the localization of Sustainable Development Goals. Its best practices are Leadership and Governance, Inclusion and Capacity Development, Financial Management and Resource Mobilization, and Empowering Community and Well-being. These areas point out the city's commitment to participatory governance, openness, and, along with that, inclusive local development. Administrative capability significantly influences Vigan City's commitment to the localization of the SDGs. This study recommends that city officials maintain exemplary leadership toward sustainable development. The LGU may integrate SDGs into local policies to further enhance the city's commitment. Moreover, achieving the SDG agenda requires LGU capacity and collaboration with other sectors. Future research may also explore additional variables and mechanisms to improve SDG evaluation strategies. This study provides empirical, city-level evidence on how administrative capacity and governance commitment interact to localize the SDGs in the context of a heritage city.

Keywords: Localization, Sustainable Development Goals, Local Government Unit, Administrative Capability, Commitment

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has brought an unparalleled convergence of challenges, including persistent poverty and inequality, environmental degradation, and governance crises, all of which threaten the very foundation of human societies worldwide. These tightly linked challenges demand a unified global response, leading to the adoption of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. The SDGs comprise 17 goals to be achieved by 2030, aimed at promoting peace, welfare, and environmental sustainability. Unlike the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which primarily targeted developing countries, the SDGs apply universally, emphasizing the shared responsibility of all nations and societies in pursuing sustainability.

Various studies have examined global and country-level SDG adoption, highlighting the importance of localization, the process of translating global objectives into context-specific local actions. Grainger-Brown and Malekpour (2019) argue that achieving the SDGs requires a combination of strategic planning, governance reforms, and institutional transformation. Similarly, Guarini et al. (2021) and Chakas (2022) stress that local authorities play a critical role in the SDG agenda, as most targets, such as health, education, and urban sustainability, fall within their jurisdiction. In the Philippine context, Cadorna et al. (2023) found that people perceive the SDGs as a continuation of long-standing development agendas, shaped by complex global and national dynamics, and requiring strong institutional mechanisms to be effectively mainstreamed into local programs.

National policy frameworks such as the Philippine Development Plan, AmBisyon Natin 2040, and Executive Orders 05 (2016) and 27 (2017) mandate the integration of SDGs into local governance systems. Anicas (2020) further notes that national frameworks, including the Philippine Development Plan and Ambisyon Natin 2040, embed the SDGs into broader policy goals. However, successful implementation heavily relies on Local Government Units (LGUs) executing programs at the community level.

At the same time, civil society engagement has emerged as a critical factor in strengthening SDG localization. Ursulom et al. (2021) show that Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) reinforce LGU service delivery through collaborative commitments in health, education, governance, environmental management, and social services—areas that directly overlap with SDG priorities. Their findings highlight how community participation acts as a governance multiplier, enhancing accountability, responsiveness, and policy legitimacy. Thus, SDG localization must be viewed not solely as a bureaucratic task, but as a multi-actor governance process.

Despite these efforts, substantial gaps remain. Many local governments struggle to align administrative capacities, financial resources, and policy priorities with SDG targets. The challenge extends beyond planning to sustaining commitment, fostering community participation, and monitoring progress. Furthermore, there is limited empirical research on how cities operationalize the SDGs through governance structures and localized practices, particularly in the Philippine context. Therefore, while the literature has identified the crucial role of local governments in SDG implementation, empirical research remains scarce on how administrative capability and organizational commitment jointly influence SDG localization at the city level, especially for Philippine heritage cities such as Vigan. This underscores the need for studies exploring how LGUs transform global aspirations into actionable, measurable, and culturally grounded programs.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines Vigan City's roadmap for SDG localization, focusing on administrative capability, leadership, financial capacity, and commitment to selected SDGs: SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). Within this national and governance landscape, Vigan City stands as an exceptional case for examining SDG localization. As a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Vigan's cultural landscape adds a unique spatial and historical dimension to sustainable development (Tabunan).

This research addresses the extent to which Vigan City has institutionalized the SDGs within its governance framework. Understanding this is crucial, as successful SDG localization depends on administrative capacity and political will to drive sustainable change. Insights from this study may illuminate mechanisms that make local governance effective for achieving sustainable and inclusive growth. This paper will not discuss outcomes, impacts, or effectiveness in SDG policies or their aims.

Theoretical foundations of the study include institutional theory, administrative capacity theory, and decentralization and SDG localization theory. Additionally, the former is also supported by Heritage Governance Theory. Institutional theory explains how local governments across the globe have adopted local development standards to attain legitimacy and align their operations with local and global development policies (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014). According to institutional theory, localizing SDGs is an institutional approach that enables local governments to align their processes with the tenets of sustainability to justify the mainstreaming of SDGs (Cadorna et al., 2023).

Administrative Capacity Theory also states that achieving governance results hinges on leadership capacity, people skills, and financial capacity (Grindle, 1996; Fukuyama, 2014). In a decentralized form of governance, these factors shape an LGU's capacity to develop global sustainability goals into localized programs

(Rondinelli, 1981; Smoke, 2015). In SDG Localization Theory, this idea persists because harmonious localization can only be achieved if there is policy consistency, administrative readiness, and stakeholders' participation in the local setting (UNDP, 2016; Grainger-Brown & Malekpour, 2019). On Heritage Governance Theory in relation to UNESCO World Heritage Cities, Heritage Governance Theory illuminates that strong governance structures ensure that conservation, tourism, and welfare programs remain separate, thereby gaining importance for SDGs 11 and 16 (Tabunan, 2019). In summary, these theories explain that administrative capacity is a crucial factor in the City of Vigan's observance of SDG localization.

The study aims to determine Vigan City's administrative capability and commitment to SDG localization and to identify best practices that can serve as models for other LGUs. Effective SDG implementation directly affects citizens' quality of life, including access to health services, education, community resilience, and institutional integrity. The study seeks to answer how leadership, personnel competence, and resource management influence the city's ability to advance the SDGs.

The purpose of this study is to provide empirical evidence on how local governance structures localize the SDGs at the city level, emphasizing the interplay between capability, commitment, and community well-being. It aims to guide policymakers, local administrators, and development practitioners in enhancing SDG integration into local plans and programs.

The relevance of this research is both practical and theoretical. Theoretically, it contributes to SDG localization literature through a city-level analysis in the Philippine context. Practically, it offers actionable insights to LGUs, planners, and policymakers on strengthening local governance to achieve global development goals. For Vigan City, the findings could help improve leadership, administration, and citizen engagement, fostering a future that balances sustainability, inclusivity, and heritage preservation.

Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to determine the administrative capability and commitment of the City Government of Vigan in localizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Specifically, it sought to: 1) Determine the level of administrative capability of Vigan City in terms of leadership, personnel, and financial capacity; 2) Determine the level of commitment of Vigan City to the localization of selected SDGs (SDGs 3, 4, 11, and 16); 3) Examine the relationship between administrative capability and commitment to SDG localization; and 4) Identify best practices of Vigan City in localizing the SDGs that may serve as models for other LGUs.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design. As a descriptive-correlational study, this research examines relationships among variables and does not establish causal effects. Similarly, this study used a quantitative, descriptive-correlational research design. It is descriptive, as it assessed the City of Vigan's administrative capability, evaluated the local government's commitment to the localization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and identified the best practices implemented in this context. It is also correlational, as it sought to examine the relationships between key variables, specifically the relationship between the city's administrative capability and its level of commitment to the localization of the SDGs.

Participants of the Study. This study included 390 respondents, divided into two groups. In selecting the first group of respondents, the study identified 384 respondents using Slovin's formula. They were selected using stratified random sampling via the fishbowl technique. The respondents are 18 years old and above, residing in the selected barangays in Vigan City, Ilocos Sur, for at least 6 months. The second group of respondents comprises six (6) key informants: the City Vice Mayor of Vigan, the City Administrator, the City Health Officer, the City Local Government Operation Officer, the School Principal, and the Chief of Police of Vigan City. Key informants were included to contextualize survey findings and to identify best practices through qualitative insights.

Research Instrument. The data needed for this study are generated primarily through a questionnaire adapted from Anicas (2020). The first part concerned the City of Vigan's administrative capacity to localize the Sustainable Development Goals. The second part is the City of Vigan's commitment to localizing the Sustainable Development Goals. Four (4) SDGs were included: SDG #3: Good Health and Well-being, SDG #4: Quality Education, SDG #11: Sustainable Cities and Communities, and SDG #16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions, which is based on its relevance to the specific needs and priorities of Vigan City. The third part consists of a question about the City of Vigan's best practices in the localization of the Sustainable Development Goals in Vigan City, Ilocos Sur.

Data Gathering Procedure. The researchers obtained formal approval from the College Dean. Once institutional clearance was granted, a written request, duly signed by the researchers and their thesis adviser, was submitted to the City Mayor of Vigan City, Ilocos Sur, to seek permission for conducting the data collection. After receiving approval, the researchers briefed the respondents on the nature and purpose of the study, highlighting its significance to both local governance and community development. Respondents were asked to complete the questionnaires, which were then collected promptly.

Data Analysis. The data gathered in this study were statistically treated using the mean to measure Vigan City's administrative capability and commitment to localizing the Sustainable Development Goals. Bivariate Correlation Analysis was employed to examine relationships among variables. Specifically, it investigated whether there were significant relationships between the city's administrative capability and its commitment to localizing the SDGs. In addition, thematic analysis was used to examine the open-ended responses on Vigan City's best practices in SDG localization, collected from interviews with key informants. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach, the analysis involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, identifying and reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. This process allowed the study to identify the best practices, which were used to validate the quantitative survey results and provide richer insights into how Vigan City localizes the SDGs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Level of Administrative Capability of the City of Vigan in the localization of Sustainable Development Goals.

This study examined three general areas for appraising the administrative capability of the city of Vigan in the localization of sustainable development goals: *leadership capability, personnel capability, and financial capability.*

Table 1 presents a summary of the assessment of the City Government of Vigan's level of commitment to the localization of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Table 1

Summary of the Level of Administrative Capability of the City of Vigan in the Localization of Sustainable Development Goals

Administrative Capability			Mean	Description
A. Leadership Capability			3.96	MuC
B. Personnel Capability			3.95	MuC
C. Financial Capability			3.90	MuC
Overall			3.94	H
Norm:				
Range of Mean Values			Item Description	
Description			Overall	
4.21	-	5.00	Very Much Capable (VMC)	Very High
(VH)				
3.41	-	4.20	Much Capable (MuC)	High (H)
2.61	-	3.40	Moderately Capable (MoC)	Average (A)
1.81	-	2.60	Slightly Capable (SC)	Low (L)
1.00	-	1.80	Not Capable (NC)	Very Low
(VL)				

The overall assessment of the City Government of Vigan's administrative capability in the localization of sustainable development goals was rated "High," with a mean rating of 3.94. This indicates that the city government is highly devoted to the localization of sustainable development goals.

When examining the administrative capabilities individually, the leadership capability received the highest mean rating (3.96), indicating a "High" rating. It implies that the city's leaders, such as the mayor and key department heads, are visionary, strategic, and effective in guiding the city towards the successful localization of the SDGs. Their leadership likely involves strong decision-making, clear communication, and a commitment to sustainability and development goals.

However, financial capability acquired the lowest mean rating (3.90). Though it is rated "High," financial resources or management may not be a critical weakness; it is not a standout strength either. While it is sufficient to support operations, it may lack the strategic depth to drive substantial growth or innovation. This could signal a need for improvement in financial management, planning, or resource allocation to ensure they align better with the organization's overall strategic goals, and Heritage Governance Theory also supports this.

As Guerrero (2013) emphasizes, the key to the performance and growth of today's enterprise lies in the organization's capabilities, which, in turn, depend on the people's capabilities. The individuals in an organization must address concerns, and their capabilities are composed of attributes, competencies, and mindsets.

2. Level of Commitment of the City of Vigan in the localization of Sustainable Development Goals.

The City Government of Vigan was rated high (Mean = 4.00) in overall commitment to the localization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The high level of commitment suggests substantial alignment of local initiatives with SDG principles, though this does not necessarily indicate full attainment of SDG targets. The commitment indicated by this high rating is what Cadorna et al. (2023) describe as the ability of local institutions to apply SDG principles when the administrative structures and mandates are clear. The study emphasizes that when LGUs adopt strategic planning frameworks and align their programs with national and global

development agendas, SDG mainstreaming becomes more achievable—consistent with Vigan’s results.

Table 2

Summary on the Level of Commitment of the City Government of Vigan in the Localization of Sustainable Development Goals

	Sustainable Development Goals	Mean	Description
A.	Goal 3: Good Health and Well-being	4.00	MuC
B.	Goal 4: Quality Education	3.93	MuC
C.	Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	4.01	MuC
D.	Goal 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	4.06	MuC
	Overall	4.00	H
Norm:			
	Range of Mean Values	Item Description	Overall Description
	4.21 - 5.00	Very Much Committed (VMC)	Very High (VH)
	3.41 - 4.20	Much Committed (MuC)	High (H)
	2.61 - 3.40	Moderately Committed (MoC)	Average (A)
	1.81 - 2.60	Slightly Committed (SC)	Low (L)
	1.00 - 1.80	Not Committed (NC)	Very Low (VL)

SDG 16 obtained the highest rating (Mean = 4.06), suggesting robust governance systems. This supports the literature asserting that effective, transparent, and accountable institutions are central to achieving localized SDGs. Chung (2019) emphasizes that strong institutions are essential for inclusive and accountable public service delivery, enabling resilient governance systems that support SDG attainment. Cadorna et al. (2023) likewise highlight that local governments with clear governance structures and accountability mechanisms are better positioned to meet SDG targets.

The city of Vigan’s commitment to achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 was reflected in the respondents’ ratings (Mean = 4.01). Among the factors, Tabunan’s study on Calle Crisologo emphasized that the heritage landscape of Vigan requires urban governance practices to be shaped so that the same policy sometimes pilots together cultural preservation, tourism management, and community welfare. This is very much in line with the SDG 11 framework, which encourages urban development that is inclusive, safe, and sensitive to local culture.

SDGs 3 (Mean = 4.00) and 4 (Mean = 3.93) have also received the rating “High Commitment,” as indicated by the mean scores. The health and education initiatives spearheaded by the local government unit (LGU) are in line with the findings of Cuenca (2011, 2018), who maintains that the LGUs are the ones that make the most substantial contribution to the accessibility of social services, public health systems improvement, and educational projects supporting the disadvantaged sectors. The

excellent works, and the corresponding SDG 11 (Mean = 4.01), signify the city's positive attitude towards, as well as the appropriate management of, heritage.

Although SDG 4 obtained the lowest mean score, it still reflects a high level of commitment, indicating potential areas for improvement rather than systemic deficiency. The low rating it obtained could imply a lack of equal access to education, unavailability of resources, or inadequate infrastructures, which are among the issues pointed out by Ursulom et al. (2021) in their study of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Ilocos Sur, where the researchers stated the need for easy access to better learning facilities and support for underprivileged students.

In general, the continued commitment labeled “High” across all four SDGs indicates that Vigan's administrative capacity—strong leadership, institutional systems, and participatory governance—can effectively localize sustainability goals.

3. Significant Relationship between the Level of Administrative Capability and the Level of Commitment of the City of Vigan in the Localization of Sustainable Development Goals

Table 3 presents the correlation coefficient between the level of administrative capability and the level of commitment of the city government of Vigan in the localization of sustainable development goals.

Table 3

Relationship Between the Level of Administrative Capability and the Level of Commitment of the City of Vigan In the Localization of Sustainable Development Goals

Goals	Leadership Capability	Personnel Capability	Financial Capability	Overall
SDG 3	.703*	.682*	.626*	.742*
SDG 4	.670*	.635*	.659*	.727*
SDG 11	.624*	.619*	.656*	.704*
SDG 16	.614*	.634*	.664*	.708*
Overall	.728*	.743*	.846*	.861*

**Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)*

There is a significant relationship between the level of administrative capability and the city of Vigan's commitment to the localization of the Sustainable Development Goals ($r = .861$). The strong positive correlation indicates that higher levels of administrative capability are associated with greater commitment to SDG localization. This result complements Anica's (2020) finding that if the provincial government has high competence, it may also tend to influence its dedication to

realizing a sustainable development agenda in the province. This finding reinforces the view that administrative systems and organizational readiness are critical correlates of sustained governance commitment. These findings further imply that administrative capability, through effective leadership, competent personnel, and financial management, is a critical driver of commitment to the SDGs.

4. The best practices of the city of Vigan in the localization of Sustainable Development Goals

The best practices of the City of Vigan in the localization of sustainable development goals were organized into key thematic areas named after the word LIFE that captures the essence of sustainable development. In this context, LIFE stands for Leadership and Governance, Inclusion and Capacity Development, Financial Management and Resource Mobilization, and Empowering Community and Well-being. The LIFE framework illustrates how administrative capability and commitment are operationalized through leadership structures, inclusive governance, financial transparency, and community-centered programs.

The first theme is Leadership and Governance, which highlights the important role of the city mayor and department heads in defining the city's sustainable agenda. As evidence, the City Administrator elaborated that *"The city mayor always had a vision of making Vigan City a habitable heritage city of choice. Thus, the city mayor's key efforts include preserving its cultural heritage through responsible urban planning."*

A respondent supported this by reiterating that *"Local leaders are committed to promoting sustainability in the city by focusing on delivering effective services for improving the quality of life in Vigan."*

This demonstrates the mayor's active role in pursuing inclusive and sustainable development. As Sarkar et al. (2022) asserted, local governments have been regarded as key agents in promoting the development agenda, as policymakers, change catalysts, and as the government most well-positioned to connect the global goals to local populations.

The second theme is Inclusion and Capacity Development, which suggests that SDG localization ensures that the city employees are empowered. The City Administrator asserted that *"The local government builds up the capacity of its employees so as to ensure they can be efficient and also effective when it comes to service delivery."*

In support of this, the respondent expressed that *“Continuous training programs ensure that local employees are well-equipped to handle SDG-related issues.”*

This indicates the importance of continuous education to ensure government employees are efficient, effective, and capable of implementing SDG-related initiatives. This is corroborated by Giarola et al (2023), who view that the realization of each SDG is founded on the development and enhancement of the skills needed by organizations to live and advance in a fast-changing world.

The fourth theme is Financial Management and Resource Mobilization, which underscores the importance of transparency in building public trust and ensuring that funds are used effectively to implement SDG initiatives. The City Administrator remarked, *“We always value transparency in the city, especially regarding finances and public funds. Hence, the city has implemented open data platforms that allow residents to access information on public spending and policies while holding regular public consultations and town hall meetings to involve the community in decision-making.”*

The respondent backed this up by noting that *“The city’s budgeting office ensures that funds are used efficiently, that’s why I always say with confidence that there is a level of transparency in how funds are managed here in our city.”*

This establishes that by maintaining clear and accessible financial records and involving the community in decision-making, the local government not only supports the successful implementation of SDG initiatives but also enhances the effectiveness of the city’s development projects. This is also argued by Breuer and Leininger (2021), who contend that the success of SDG implementation depends largely on the government’s regulations and institutions for monitoring and the effective use of funds.

Lastly, Empowering Community and Well-being reflects Vigan City’s holistic and people-centered approach to localizing the SDGs. The City Administrator mentioned, *“Vigan City tactically designed efforts to improve healthcare accessibility, to promote sustainable development, and to address key social determinants of health, and that the implementation of the Universal Health Care Act (RA 11223), which ensures equal accessibility to health services for all residents regardless of their financial standing, is central for the city’s health improvement strategies.”*

A respondent supported this by stating that *“The city provides free maternal and child health services, including prenatal checkups and immunizations.”*

Improved healthcare access greatly improved the quality of life for residents. Hence, Mikula et al. (2024) validated this idea by showing that

investments in health are necessary to improve quality of life and form the foundation for sustainable development. These best practices may serve as a governance reference for other heritage and non-heritage cities seeking to localize the SDGs

CONCLUSIONS

Findings show that Vigan City demonstrates a high degree of administrative capability and commitment to the localization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in health, education, sustainable communities, and peace and justice. The study demonstrates that SDG localization at the city level is not merely a policy mandate but a function of administrative capability coupled with institutional commitment. Vigan City's experience illustrates the value of governance quality in translating global development goals into localized action. The best practices of Vigan City, grounded in leadership and governance, inclusion and capacity development, financial management and resource mobilization, and community empowerment, served as strong prototypes to guide local policies and actions toward global development goals. In conclusion, effective leadership, administrative capacity, and participatory governance are necessary to sustain Vigan City's commitment to achieving the SDGs and to potentially guide other local government units toward sustainable development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the City Government of Vigan sustain and strengthen its administrative capability through continuous leadership development, personnel training, and transparent financial management. The integration of SDGs into all local development plans and monitoring systems may further institutionalize commitment. Multi-stakeholder collaboration among civil society, the private sector, youth, and academia should be enhanced to support inclusive SDG localization. Future studies may examine additional governance variables and employ longitudinal designs to assess changes in SDG commitment over time.

ETHICAL STATEMENT

This research strictly observed accepted ethical standards for research involving human participants. Data-gathering procedures were preceded by approval from the Research Ethics Review Committee of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Northern Philippines. The purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits of the study were clearly explained to all participants,

and their informed consent was obtained before the study began. It was made clear that participation was purely voluntary, that they could terminate their involvement at any time without consequences, and that all information provided would remain confidential and anonymous. No identifying personal data was disclosed, and all responses were used solely for academic purposes. The researchers had no conflicts of interest, and no participant was harmed, coerced, or unduly influenced during the study. In sum, the research was conducted with integrity, transparency, and respect for the dignity and rights of all participants.

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