

Local Voices, Global Goals: Participatory Planning for Localizing the UN SDGs in UNESCO Heritage Site Management

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Abstract

The research detailed here has explored the role of local actors in integrating SDGs into World Heritage Site Management Plans, within a polycentric governance framework. It highlights how SDGs can be localized in the context of World Heritage cities management and urban development. The Medieval Town of Toruń, Poland, serves as a case study here. Empirically, this research was based on three types of data collection, entailing: qualitative analysis of key documents facilitating the pursuit of the SDGs in urban planning; semi-structured expert interviews with representatives of the city administration, members of the Revitalization Committee, members of local NGOs, urban activists, as well as individuals officially designated as experts in city administration documents for projects related to World Heritage; participant observations of Revitalization Committee meetings. In the context of Toruń, the Revitalization Committee emerges as a key actor contributing substantially to the formulation of the World Heritage Site Management Plan and the integration of SDGs, despite not being initially designated for these functions. Toruń’s proactive approach, which expands periodic reporting and utilizes the Committee to enhance social participation in decision-making, seeks to ensure the integration of sustainable development principles into the urban planning framework, optimizing financial and human resources without the need to create new structures. The committee’s influence is evident in the integration of elements from the Revitalization Plan into the World Heritage Site Management Plan, underscoring a strong connection between participatory planning and the pursuit of SDGs in the context of World Heritage site management.

Keywords

heritage expertise; participatory planning; polycentric governance; Revitalization Committee; Sustainable Development Goals; UNESCO; World Cultural Heritage; World Heritage Cities; World Heritage Site Management Plan

1. Introduction

The 2030 UN SDGs, established in 2015, were designed to address key global challenges (Bowen et al., 2017; Cernev & Fenner, 2020) in an initiative that marked a significant shift, as cultural considerations had been largely omitted from development discussions in preceding decades (Rössler & Lin, 2018). However, integrating the SDGs with established heritage-conservation practices, as delineated by earlier conventions such as the Convention on the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, established by UNESCO in 1972, presents substantial challenges (Pereira Roders & Van Oers, 2014). Implementing the SDGs requires that complex issues be addressed, with coordinated efforts across various institutions.

The sustainability principles have been progressively incorporated through a landscape-related approach that underscores the context-specificity of heritage conservation and resource management (Aimar, 2024; Landorf, 2011; Van Oers & Pereira Roders, 2014). World Heritage cities of historical significance may experience a particularly pronounced challenge in balancing the preservation of their historical landscapes with SDGs. That balance is complicated further (with extra layers of complexity added) in urban settings where urban growth and sprawl pose a threat, alongside lucrative business opportunities (Monteiro et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2015). Problems may be yet further exacerbated in contexts of fragmented ownership of World Heritage sites. Where multiple actors are involved (as they are in cities designated as “world heritage sites”), it is typical for ownership of heritage assets to not reside with a single entity—as would be the case observed frequently among cathedrals and churches—being instead distributed among various actors (Eremenko, 2020; Vahtikari, 2016). This ensures the emergence of a unique mosaic in which each part can impact the entire site; in this context, conflicts arising among actors must be resolved in advance of any development work.

To better navigate this complexity and ensure effective implementation of the SDGs, a deeper analysis of decision-making contexts is essential. This includes examining the capacity of government institutions, the planning processes in place (Engström et al., 2021), and the role of local actors in localizing the SDGs and participatory planning (Bandari et al., 2024). A comprehensive understanding of these factors is crucial for identifying potential areas of conflict, aligning the priorities of different stakeholders, and promoting more inclusive governance models that accommodate both conservation and development needs.

Recognizing these challenges, it is evident that more research is needed to understand how local actors can influence the integration of SDGs into urban planning policies in World Heritage cities. Addressing this gap, the present study focuses on the city of Toruń, Poland, to examine through which institutions and documents within a polycentric governance framework such integration is possible. By analyzing the implementation of participatory planning and the roles of various actors, we aim to understand how SDGs can be localized in the context of World Heritage cities management and urban development.

As various actors can influence the implementation of SDGs in World Heritage cities, this article employs a framework relating to polycentric governance—a self-organizing system by which multiple actors coordinate activities across various decision-making venues and policy issues (Jordan et al., 2015; Kim, 2020). Processes under such governance foster self-organization and create cross-sector linkages among actors, thereby enhancing public participation and engagement (Gatto, 2022; Gould, 2017; Morrison et al., 2023). These actors are not necessarily related, are varied, and can be guided by national and state laws, international

recommendations, and other mechanisms acting in support of public participation processes. The approach is thus one of complex governance characterized by multiple centers of semi-autonomous decision-makers who are in relationships both cooperative and competitive, and resort to conflict-resolution mechanisms when necessary (E. Ostrom, 2009; V. Ostrom et al., 1961). This permits a transcending of traditional hierarchical decision-making systems to include diverse international, national, and local actors capable of exerting a direct or indirect influence on SDG integration decisions (Cordery & Manochin, 2021).

2. Materials and Methods

This research employs a case study method involving the Polish city of Toruń, whose historic center was designated a World Heritage site in 1997, under the name “The Medieval Town of Toruń.” The site covers 48 hectares and is surrounded by a 300-hectare buffer zone. Toruń traces its origins back to the Teutonic Order, which established a castle there in the mid-13th century, with a view to its serving as a base for the conquest and evangelization of Prussia (ICOMOS, 1997).

The selection of Toruń as the case study for this research is grounded in the city’s unique intersection of historical significance and contemporary governance challenges. As a UNESCO World Heritage site, the Medieval Town of Toruń exemplifies the complexities of integrating the SDGs into urban planning. The city’s proactive governance framework, particularly through its Revitalization Committee, offers a valuable lens through which to examine polycentric governance in action, a model essential for navigating the multilayered challenges of sustainable development in heritage contexts (Pereira Roders & Van Oers, 2014). Toruń’s approach to participatory planning, particularly in expanding the roles of local actors in SDG integration, further underscores the relevance of this case for broader applications in World Heritage cities facing similar governance and sustainability dilemmas (Gould, 2017). This research thus uses Toruń as a model to highlight how localized efforts can effectively contribute to global sustainability objectives.

Our research methodology incorporated different types of data collection engaged between April 2023 and April 2024, in Toruń. A descriptive analysis of key documents was conducted to facilitate the localization of the SDGs in urban planning. This method focuses directly on the content, enabling the highlighting of specific guidance for localizing the SDGs while ensuring a clear interpretation of the document’s original intent (Mutiarani & Siswanto, 2020; Triatmanto & Natsir, 2019). In the case of Toruń, this is grounded in three critical documents, i.e., the Revitalization Plan, the Local Spatial Development Plan, and the World Heritage Site Management Plan (City of Toruń, 2024a). This method highlights how urban planning in Toruń integrates global sustainability objectives into local policies.

Another source of information for this study was semi-structured expert interviews. In this study, a total of twenty-six interviews were conducted with participants selected based on their involvement in the planning and implementation of Toruń’s World Heritage Site Management Plan and Revitalization Committee activities. The interviews were conducted with representatives of the city administration, members of the Committee, members of local NGOs, urban activists, as well as individuals officially designated as experts in city administration documents for projects related to World Heritage. This allowed the research to capture diverse viewpoints, particularly those of actors working at different governance levels, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of how the SDGs can be localized in the context of Toruń.

The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for flexibility in accommodating the respondents' expertise and perspectives. Furthermore, this study utilized observations collected from participants at meetings of Toruń's Revitalization Committee, with these seen to facilitate an in-depth understanding of the decision-making processes crucial to effective revitalization as part of the management of a World Heritage site. Furthermore, this study utilized participant observations collected within the framework of the meetings of the Committee in Toruń. These observations facilitated an in-depth understanding of the decision-making processes that are crucial for effective revitalization efforts in the context of World Heritage site management. Participant observations offer a direct glimpse of the Committee's operational dynamics. This approach is particularly useful in participatory governance studies, where the roles of various actors can be complex and interdependent (Gerrard & Sosa, 2014).

The authors are aware of the limitations of this study and selected approach. This study's focus on the case of Toruń limits the generalizability of the findings to other World Heritage cities with different governance structures. Additionally, by emphasizing formally recognized actors, the study may potentially overlook non-institutionalized actors that can impact the integration of SDGs through local actions.

3. Participatory Planning in Toruń and the Leading Role of the Revitalization Committee

The conducted study has demonstrated that participatory planning plays a significant role in decision-making within the polycentric governance framework in Toruń. The method alluded to was developed to create more equitable, sustainable, and effective urban environments through the harnessing of local knowledge, building of community trust, and ensuring planning decisions are more responsive to the actual needs of the community—and thus perceived as more legitimate (Forester, 1999; Smith, 1973). Participatory planning involves the active involvement of users, local communities, and professionals in the development process, at stages from that involving the initial design ideas through to implementation. It is acknowledged as a bridge between decision-making processes and society, aiming to increase the capacity of planners towards more informed participatory planning-tool selection (Denney et al., 2018). This involves participatory processes that “are ultimately about co-creating new forms of blended knowledge where the traditional hierarchies of knowledge dilute” (Roura, 2021, p. 781). The goal is to empower communities and regulate social change, allowing individuals and communities to develop solutions per their conditions and aspirations (Gerrard & Sosa, 2014). Such an approach poses certain challenges; and, in the context of this article, the most notable of these concerns implementation of participatory planning where there are insufficient legal frameworks as regards urban design and participation (Thinyane et al., 2020).

Although the decision-making system regarding World Heritage sites in Toruń can be described as polycentric, interviews show that only institutionally organized actors can exert direct influence on decision-making. This is confirmed by the opinions of various actors, including the city administration and members of NGOs. The analysis shows that even within a polycentric governance framework, individuals without formal affiliations often struggle to engage with the system:

There are no people acting alone. It's more likely that they're involved with either a district council, an NGO, or a group, because if someone has influence over specific officials or is someone important, then they have more sway. Let's not fool ourselves; the city administration structures are sometimes hard to navigate, and it can be difficult to get things done. (Member of a local NGO)

Our work demonstrates that, in this case of polycentric governance, it is the Toruń Revitalization Committee that plays the most significant role among actors influencing the implementation of SDGs in urban planning. The Committee is a formal advisory body for social consultation at the local government level which is foreseen within the Polish legal system. Its creation was mandatory in the pursuit of revitalization processes under Poland's Revitalization Act of 9 October 2015. Notwithstanding the legal status, the literature on its functioning remains scarce, with most academic texts on the Polish system focusing on the role of the revitalization process in general (e.g., Kołsut, 2018; Przywojska, 2019; Strzelecka, 2011). The most relevant article—a case study of such a Committee's work in the Polish city of Łódź—offers a conceptual summary of the role played “indicating the necessity to combine social, economic, technical and spatial activities in revitalization projects” (Przywojska, 2018, p. 23).

The Revitalization Act of 9 October 2015 specifies the tasks assigned to the Revitalization Committee and envisions its structure by defining the stakeholders to be included in its composition. A committee of this profile and status does not necessarily deal with the protection or management of historical monuments. In the case of Toruń, the subject matter intersects, as Old Town was identified and designated as one of three areas in the wider city experiencing decline, and thus targeted for revitalization. Meanwhile, national law assigns six tasks to the Committee in such a way as to offer a baseline remit. Said tasks include: (a) the identification of the needs and expectations of stakeholders, with effort made to ensure that planned activities are consistent with these; (b) the pursuit of educational and informational activity on the revitalization process addressed to stakeholders; (c) the initiation, enabling, and support of activities that favor dialogue between stakeholders and are at the same time integrated around revitalization processes; (d) assurance of the participation of stakeholders in the preparation of documents regarding revitalization; (e) support for initiatives seeking to increase the influence of stakeholders as revitalization programs are prepared and pursued; and (f) the ensuring of possibilities for dialogue and the voicing of opinions among stakeholders as that preparation work is being done (Republic of Poland, 2015).

The main role of such a committee is to serve as a platform for articulating the voices of various stakeholders connected to the revitalization process and making them aware of each other's interests and goals. To this end, the law further defines the baseline categories of stakeholders to be included in the Revitalization Committee's structure. However, it does not specify the number of persons to be included in each category, leaving the choice to the municipality in charge of organizing the committee. There are seven mandatory categories of stakeholder, delineating the representation of interests of residents—both from the revitalized area and the rest of the city, owners of real estate within the revitalized area, entities engaging in economic activity within the area, entities engaging in social activity within the revitalization area, including NGOs and informal groups, and, as a last group, representatives of both local and national governments.

In the case of Toruń, the Revitalization Committee was established by the Mayor of Toruń. The vision for its role was further specified within the Revitalization Plan itself, going beyond the obligations mandated by national law. The difference is subtle, but here the Committee gains the power to monitor and evaluate the results of the revitalization program, which is not required by national law. Similarly, the Committee consults on planned actions and recommends solutions through the revitalization process (including its implementation). The structure of stakeholders is also expanded beyond the national-law requirements—as a prominent academic center, the city in our study chose to include representatives from the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń within the structure of its committee. All members representing the university

come from the Urban Planning Department rather than the Monument Conservation Department, which has contributed notably to the university's renown in Poland. The Revitalization Plan in Toruń does not deal solely with the Old Town area. Two additional urban districts fall equally under the scope of its work. However, in the context of this article, our analysis will focus exclusively on the area of the World Heritage site.

4. The Role of the Revitalization Committee and SDGs in Urban Planning in Toruń

Three local urban planning documents are relevant to the pursuit of the SDGs in Toruń: the Revitalization Plan (the only one within the formal scope of responsibility of the Revitalization Committee), the Local Spatial Development Plan, and the World Heritage Site Management Plan. These urban and spatial planning documents are the most prolific tools for implementing sustainable development at the local government level in Poland.

Firstly, the Local Spatial Development Plan is a zoning plan for an urban area in Poland defined by legal scholars as “an act of local spatial policy of a normative nature” (Szlachetko, 2017). In the most general sense, it regulates the “rules applicable in the future of development and principles of harmonization of new development with existing buildings” (Szlachetko, 2017). This is not a strategic document in the sense of defining goals and envisioning ways in which they will be implemented, but rather a normative and property-specific plan. This leaves this document as the one least applicable to our analysis, as its connection with the SDGs is that it should be integrated into the details of spatial planning, aligning with the strategic goals of sustainable development set out in other documents.

Among the three urban planning documents, only the World Heritage Site Management Plan is explicit in incorporating the SDGs. This plan prioritizes sustainable development as a core objective for the future management of the Medieval Old Town of Toruń. It designates the SDGs as foundational principles for planning and management. The integration of the SDGs within UNESCO's management framework is attributed to the international regulations governing the UNESCO World Heritage system. The plan elucidates this connection, stating that:

Due to the adopted principle that the World Heritage Convention is to set standards in the field of heritage protection, its implementation takes into account key international obligations and guiding documents, such as the United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development presented in the document entitled Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. (City of Toruń, 2024a, p. 41)

This linkage is further reinforced by the 2023 Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention, which assert that “states parties are encouraged to mainstream into their programmes...the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” and later directly connect this mainstreaming to a site management plan, stating that, in its creation, “sustainable development principles should be integrated into the management system” (UNESCO, 2023, p. 13).

The World Heritage Site Management Plan for Toruń provides a detailed analysis of specific SDGs, creating a legal and contextual framework for their localized implementation. Particular emphasis is placed on goal no. 11, which aims to “make cities and human settlements safe, stable, sustainable, and inclusive,” while

addressing the protection of World Heritage directly through subgoal no. 11.4—on “strengthen[ing] efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage” (United Nations, 2015). The indicator for the achievement of this goal reiterates the UN Agenda’s focus on financial commitment, specified as “the total per-capita expenditure on the preservation, protection, and conservation of all cultural and natural heritage” (United Nations, 2015).

The Plan also establishes a direct link between “creating safe and comfortable conditions for the use of the World Heritage site by residents and visitors of the city” and the focus on implementing the SDGs. It emphasizes that particular attention should be given to “climate, environmental protection, and social aspects” (City of Toruń, 2024a, p. 44).

Interestingly, the City of Toruń has proposed establishing accountability for its implementation and pursuit of the SDGs. Under its World Heritage Site Management Plan, the city suggests expanding the periodic reporting questionnaire to include, among other items, “the assessment and planning of management actions aimed at implementing the main obligations arising from the adopted World Heritage protection policy, including the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.” This proposed reporting obligation extends beyond the requirements of the standard UNESCO reporting questionnaires.

It is worth noting that Polish national law also mandates consideration of sustainable development. As the management plan itself observes, even the Constitution of the Republic of Poland obliges public authorities under Article 5 to “guard the national heritage and ensure environmental protection, guided by the principle of sustainable development.” However, the national legal framework for sustainable development is limited to declaratory commitments rather than introducing a system for assessing implementation methods.

The local government of Toruń offers a clear definition of its role in heritage management, envisioning itself as an actor that, on the one hand “fulfills tasks related to the protection and management of the historic urban organism—both as the owner of legally protected historic buildings and areas (responsible for their care),” and on the other, is “a local community association authorized and obliged to independently perform public administration tasks” (City of Toruń, 2024a, p. 42). The local government must carry out such tasks with its funds and budget. However, the document emphasizes that “the local government has the opportunity to obtain external funds (including subsidies) for the implementation of tasks in the field of cultural heritage protection, spatial order, conservation of monuments, promotion and education” (City of Toruń, 2024a, p. 42). The proper functioning of those urban structures responsible for heritage protection and sustainable development, as defined above, is underlined as being “crucial for the proper performance of management functions” (City of Toruń, 2024a, p. 42).

Both the internal structure of the city’s administration and division of tasks relating to World Heritage Site management and the implementation of the SDGs are deemed crucial for the successful execution of the above responsibilities. The plan stipulates that:

Achieving the mission adopted in the strategy is only possible with the involvement of all key entities. Therefore, the perspective adopted for the management plan has the following wording: We harmonize activities to maintain all the features of Toruń that build its status as World Heritage. (City of Toruń, 2024a, p. 78)

This pertains to all activities, including educational initiatives, aimed at preserving the city's heritage while ensuring its sustainable development. For example, educational activities are undertaken by Toruń's schools located within the World Heritage zone. These schools participated in events like the UNESCO Days, during which students familiarized themselves with documents like the UNESCO 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Lastly, the plan establishes a strong connection between the sustainable development of the World Heritage Site and efforts to ensure the sustainability of its tourism. The documents state that:

The effects of monitoring the tourist traffic in Toruń conducted in 2013–2020 indicated that Toruń has a developed tourist function and demonstrates the need for actions to balance tourist development (sustainable tourism) to implement this function at the correct level while maintaining cultural, natural, and social resources at a high level. (City of Toruń, 2024a, p. 51)

The current Tourism Development Program for the City of Toruń through 2030 focuses on Toruń's historical and cultural heritage being promoted to develop its sustainable tourism.

However, this strong focus on sustainability was implemented under the significant influence of the third planning document—the Revitalization Plan—and the work of the Revitalization Committee. Although the agenda for the Committee is often set by the city administration, the Committee has the autonomy to introduce its own issues and modify those assigned to it, fostering a degree of bottom-up decision-making. This frequently occurs in practice and highlights the participatory nature of the planning process. The Revitalization Plan bridges the gap between the strategic character of the World Heritage Site engagement plan and the zoning mechanisms of the Local Spatial Development Plan. According to Polish national law, it is considered a form of Local Spatial Development Plan (Szlachetko, 2017). However, it emphasizes the social aspects of improving and boosting living conditions within the revitalized area, and sets out a strategic vision for its development. It also requires the participation of the Revitalization Committee, a social consultative body, in its creation and implementation in Toruń's case. Due to the structure of the Committee and the strong engagement of various stakeholders in its creation, the city administration perceives it as a socially legitimate document.

Analysis indicates that in Toruń, the dual nature of the Revitalization Plan—both strategic and implementable—and its strong social legitimacy are reflected in the incorporation of elements from the Revitalization Plan into the World Heritage Site Management Plan. As participant observation revealed, city officials perceived the Revitalization Committee to be a social-participation actor enjoying a high level of social legitimacy. This perception was stated explicitly by the city's Deputy Mayor during the meeting, at which he explained their desire to utilize the expertise of the Committee in the World Heritage Site Management Plan consultations. This integration enhanced the emphasis on SDGs in both documents. The work of the Committee exerted a significant influence on the formulation of key aspects of sustainable development within the World Heritage Site Management Plan, indirectly through their involvement in developing overlapping parts of the Revitalization Plan, and directly through their participation in social consultations as an institution.

5. World Heritage Site Management Plan and Localization of SDGs

Although there is no statutory requirement for social consultations over a World Heritage Site Management Plan, both the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention 2023 and the Polish UNESCO Committee strongly recommend such consultations. The latter stipulates that, during the development of the World Heritage Site Management Plan, “a draft document should be formulated after consultations with the primary stakeholders, and the final version should be approved and adopted for implementation by all partners. Public consultations should be conducted at each preliminary stage of the plan’s preparation” (Polish UNESCO Committee, 2024).

As evidenced by interviews conducted for this study, the city authorities of Toruń presented their efforts in terms of this being the first Polish World Heritage Site to implement an extensive social consultation process in the creation of a document. However, the structure of those consultations was taken directly from an existing format of the Revitalization Plan, and the working methods of the Revitalization Committee. Firstly, consultations were not conducted at a single meeting but were instead divided into separate meetings, supplemented by the results of questionnaires. The categories of division echo those of stakeholders from the Revitalization Committee, with four separate meetings for members of academia, business actors, and residents of the different revitalized areas. Such a construct has not arisen by coincidence. For the present research, a meeting of the Committee was observed during which members who were representatives of the City administration stated that the Committee is used as a “ready, legitimate body to have influence over consultation” (City Administration Representative 1). They further elaborated that the Committee is asked for broad engagement in the World Heritage Site Management Plan consultation process, as “UNESCO is an imaginary, abstract concept for the people living in Toruń, so connecting it with revitalization will get more people involved, and it will make it more concrete as an idea” (City Administration Representative 2).

The use of the Revitalization Committee (as an advisory body that has already had experience with successful co-working) also helped with the avoidance of significant challenges often faced by other consultative bodies, e.g., as regards the ensuring of adequate representation and the maintenance of strong links between consultation and decision-making (Chu et al., 2018). Decisions approved by the Committee gained direct integration into the World Heritage Site Management Plan, rather than remaining as mere discussion points.

The Revitalization Committee was asked to complete questionnaires for the social consultation of the World Heritage Site Management Plan and to participate in all meetings constituting its social consultation, including research walks around the Old Town. Therefore, the connection and influence are not only direct but also initiated by the city authorities. As “effective governance in UNESCO World Heritage sites demands a reframing of the role of management plans as a tool to significantly improve community engagement at the local level” (Ripp & Rodwell, 2018, p. 251), the city of Toruń decided to attempt an approach of repurposed established institutions of social participation for engagement with a broader spectrum of stakeholders in planning for the World Heritage site. Such a connection seems to have the potential to be bi-directionally beneficial, as “at the level of local communities, heritage allows us to build a satisfying reality in a lasting way. The goal of sustainable urban development can, therefore, be most effectively achieved through local communities and heritage” (Kłosek-Kozłowska, 2011, p. 300). Therefore, participatory planning is connected and World Heritage is made a closer and less abstract idea relating directly to the quality of life within the World Heritage zone, the

improvement of which is the purpose of the Revitalization Plan. This is further supported by the Revitalization Plan for Toruń itself, which stipulates that “an important element of the heritage management process is social participation understood as an awareness of the value of the protected heritage/space and involvement in the process of caring for and managing it” (City of Toruń, 2024b, p. 73).

The localization of SDGs within urban planning documents in the context of the World Heritage site is limited to particular goals. The World Heritage Site Management Plan has achieved extensive incorporation of elements from the Revitalization Plan as regards sustainable development, sometimes repeating the text verbatim. SDGs only gain explicit mention in the World Heritage Site Management Plan—an inclusion attributed to legal and institutional intertwinement between the SDGs, World Heritage status, and the planning obligations arising out of the Convention on the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. The Revitalization Plan does not reference the SDGs, as it is not required to adhere to that framework. However, it addresses sustainable development for the Old Town of Toruń in detail, and establishes principles later expanded upon by the World Heritage Site Management Plan.

In its introduction, the Revitalization Plan states that this is “a multi-year program of activities in the social, economic, spatial-functional, technical, and environmental spheres, aimed at bringing revitalization areas out of crisis, and creating conditions for their sustainable development” (City of Toruń, 2024b, p. 4). The vision for the Old Town portrays the area as “a sustainable area—not just a tourist attraction, but a place to live for residents, where projects important for the development of the community in the revitalization area are implemented” (City of Toruń, 2024b, p. 159). These projects are primarily cultural and social, working to meet the needs of tourists and residents without endangering World Heritage, thereby creating a vision of a successful revitalization process as one achieving sustainability. This relates indirectly to the SDGs, such as subgoal no. 11.3 on “enhanc[ing] inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management in all countries” and, due to Toruń’s World Heritage status, subgoal no. 11.4, on “strengthen[ing] efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage” (United Nations, 2015).

In detail, examples of strategic goals relating implicitly to SDGs are plentiful: The goal of creating “recreation and relaxation zones available to everyone,” relating to subgoal no. 11.7, aims to “provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons, and persons with disabilities”; the goal of establishing a community of residents that are “socially and professionally active,” relating to subgoal no. 8.3, aims to “promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage the formalization and growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, including through access to financial services”; or the strategic striving for the World Heritage zone, in which “people who, for various reasons, experience problems of social exclusion are provided with professional support from public institutions and non-governmental organizations working for social inclusion,” relating to subgoal no. 11.B, aims to “substantially increase the number of cities and human settlements adopting and implementing integrated policies and plans towards inclusion” (United Nations, 2015).

On a more general level, all future revitalization projects will be assessed and implemented to “take into account the needs of sustainable development” (City of Toruń, 2024b, p. 163). The parts of the Revitalization Plan connected by their thematic areas to the implementation of SDGs are copied directly into

the World Heritage Site Management Plan. Our research shows that such instances are sustainability intersections of those urban planning documents. Matters regarding population decline and rising unemployment, as well as the measurement of satisfaction with life in the area, all underline the need for planned sustainable development actions in both documents. The strategic vision for the managed or revitalized area is another, just as are the conclusions of social studies and goals for the documents.

While the World Heritage Site Management Plan is more detailed in explicitly connecting its goals to specific SDGs, it lacks specific indicators of their successful implementation. The only indicator referenced is the Agenda 2030 indicator for subgoal no. 11.4—total expenditure per capita on heritage protection (United Nations, 2015), which provides little insight into the specific implementation of the World Heritage Site Management Plan. However, the Revitalization Plan foresees the construction of indicators relating directly to its development goals and connecting to its sustainability. Examples include the “number of facilities adapted to people with special needs,” the size of “modernized or developed public spaces, green areas, or play and recreation areas,” or the “number of facilities adapted for socially useful purposes” (City of Toruń, 2024b, p. 384). As the role of the Revitalization Committee in Toruń is expanded to overseeing and assessing the implementation of the Revitalization Plan (and not only consulting on its creation), the Committee’s crucial role in the implementation and pursuit of the SDGs within the urban planning system of Toruń is cemented further.

6. Conclusion

Our research highlights the role of a polycentric governance framework, wherein various stakeholders may, through participatory planning, exert a significant influence in integrating the SDGs into urban planning within World Heritage cities. This approach is especially crucial for effective participatory planning in these cities, as it ensures that local voices gain fuller incorporation into the decision-making processes essential to localizing SDGs. However, only a limited number of goals are addressed in local urban planning documents related to the World Heritage site.

In the context of Toruń, the Revitalization Committee has emerged as one of the most influential actors in facilitating the integration of SDGs into urban planning. The Committee was not explicitly designed for this particular function at the outset, and it is under no legal obligation to participate in the development of the World Heritage Site Management Plan. Nevertheless, the Committee has made a substantial *de facto* contribution to the formulation of the World Heritage Site Management Plan and the inclusion of the SDGs within its framework.

The Revitalization Committee’s significant influence on the World Heritage Site Management Plan has brought about a profound change in the governance of the World Heritage zone. The Revitalization Plan bridges the strategic vision of the World Heritage Site Management Plan with the zoning regulations of the Local Spatial Development Plan. It emphasizes social aspects of development and requires the participation of the Revitalization Committee, making it a socially legitimate document in the eyes of the city administration. This shift now mandates that future revitalization projects will need to take the incorporation of sustainable development principles into account in their planning. This integration will ensure that all urban planning and revitalization efforts align with global sustainability objectives, promoting a more inclusive and resilient approach to heritage management and urban development.

The city's initiative involves expanding the scope of the periodic reporting questionnaire. This expanded questionnaire would include the standard elements and incorporate additional items specifically aimed at assessing and planning management actions. These actions are designed to fulfill the main obligations arising from the adopted World Heritage protection policy, with a particular focus on implementing SDGs.

Toruń is seeking to create a more detailed and effective monitoring system through a broadening of reporting requirements. The said system would provide a clearer picture of how well the city integrates SDGs into its strategies for urban planning and heritage management. Such an approach, ensuring that all relevant activities are evaluated thoroughly, with any gaps in implementation identified and addressed promptly, can be viewed as demonstrating Toruń's commitment to the achievement of the SDGs.

In this sense, the case of the city of Toruń utilizing a novel strategy to leverage the previously established Revitalization Committee to increase social participation in sustainable development within various strategic urban planning documents can be viewed as an attempt to mitigate system complexity, while fostering its polycentricity and legitimacy. Such a strategy can allow for the intricate and concrete integration of the SDGs into the city's urban planning documents. By employing such innovative methods, Toruń enhances the participatory nature of its governance and ensures that sustainable development principles are embedded deeply within its urban planning framework, thus fostering a holistic and effective approach to achieving the SDGs.

For World Heritage cities aiming to integrate SDGs into their heritage management, considering the participation of existing advisory bodies can be highly beneficial. By engaging these established and legitimate entities, city administrations can harness local knowledge and stakeholder participation without creating new structures and optimizing financial and human resources.

In the absence of officially mandated and clearly defined indicators for World Heritage cities to follow in implementing the SDGs, the City of Toruń has taken a proactive approach to ensure accountability in the achievement of those goals. Recognizing the need for a robust framework to guide and evaluate the progress of SDG integration, Toruń has proposed the development of comprehensive measures within its World Heritage Site Management Plan. Through these efforts, it aspires to align its urban planning and heritage-management practices more closely with global sustainability objectives, thereby promoting a more inclusive and sustainable urban environment.

Future research should explore comparative studies across World Heritage cities to examine how diverse governance structures influence the integration of SDGs. Long-term studies are also needed to assess the sustained impact of SDG implementation and to evaluate the effectiveness of participatory planning processes in different contexts. To strengthen SDG integration in heritage management, cities should develop clear indicators for tracking progress and ensure inclusive participation by involving a broad range of stakeholders. Expanding the role of advisory bodies like the Revitalization Committee and enhancing public engagement can improve the effectiveness and legitimacy of urban planning processes.

The case of Toruń illustrates how leveraging existing advisory bodies within a polycentric governance framework can effectively integrate SDGs into urban planning and heritage management. The Committee's role in bridging top-down strategic directives with bottom-up community input demonstrates the city

administration's commitment to optimizing the impact of limited resources. The city achieves that and strengthens participatory planning and accountability by proactively involving the Revitalization Committee and enhancing monitoring mechanisms. Toruń's approach could serve as a potential model for other World Heritage cities, emphasizing the importance of promoting local actions that advance sustainability goals while ensuring that these efforts contribute to global progress.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Eremenko, I., & Kraski, T. (2024). *HERIEXPERT Dataset: Local experts in Polish and German World Heritage Cities: understanding their role in polycentric governance of heritage sites* [Data set]. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14185640>

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