

LOCAL PUBLIC SERVICES AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: SHIFTS IN PRIORITIES DUE TO COVID-19

Emergency Governance for Cities and Regions

April 2022



INTRODUCING ANALYTICS NOTE #05

This Analytics Note seeks to capture the change in focus devoted to different local public services by city governments around the globe since the onset of the COVID-19 emergency. The data used in this analysis comes from Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs). VLRs are a process by which local and regional governments undertake an assessment of their progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). VLRs involve different stakeholders and enable local governments to strategise and prioritise actions to fill gaps in the implementation of the sustainability agenda. The findings of VLRs are disclosed in reports which complement Voluntary National Reviews and highlight the sub-national perspective in the SDG review process.

The content analysis underpinning this Analytics Note was undertaken by comparing VLRs from before (published in 2019) and after (published in 2021) the pandemic – see Table 1. Whilst there are useful guidelines for the implementation of this process, cities and regions do not have to follow rigid templates in their local reviews. Reports may, therefore, differ substantially from place to place. Furthermore, the VLRs included in this analysis cover subnational territories of very different sizes, ranging from 43,000 inhabitants (Canterbury) to 15.3 million inhabitants (Guangzhou).

Table 1: VLRs included in the sample

World region	VLRs from 2019 (no.)	VLRs from 2021 (no.)	Total no. of VLRs
Africa	5*	4	9
Asia	3	13	16
Europe	7	10	17
Latin America	4	9	13
North America	2	2	4
Global	21	38	59

* The pre-pandemic VLR reports for Africa were published in 2020, since no African cities or regions published these documents in 2019.

The analysis was conducted in three parts. First, using a list of search terms related to 11 different public service sectors (see the Appendix), NVivo was used to count the number of times each term was present in the VLRs published pre- and post-pandemic. The policy sectors in this analysis included ‘at-risk populations policy’, ‘culture’, ‘economic development’, ‘education’, ‘environment’, ‘health’, ‘housing’, ‘policing/security’, ‘social services’, ‘transport’, and ‘utilities’. Second, to empirically gauge the emergence of the ‘new essentials’ as a result of the global health emergency, the systematic analysis was repeated for new lists of terms relating to ‘mental health’, ‘digitisation’, ‘care’, and ‘public space’. Finally, a qualitative analysis was conducted of the VLRs of three cities that published these documents pre- and post-pandemic: Buenos Aires, Helsinki and Taipei.

This publication is the fifth in the series of Analytics Notes by the Emergency Governance Initiative. It follows Analytical Note #04 which focused on multilevel governance and emergency coordination.

Main findings

- While health services unsurprisingly moved up the list of priorities for local public service provision, **utility services remained the top concern for cities and regions around the globe.**
- The analysis of the VLRs published after the COVID-19 outbreak confirmed **an upsurge in the attention given to public services and amenities increasingly regarded as ‘new essentials’**, namely mental health services, public space, care, digitisation of government services and widespread access to broadband.
- Continuous focus on the effective delivery of local public services is **a pragmatic way of pursuing the SDGs** and ensuring cities and regions can respond to complex emergencies.

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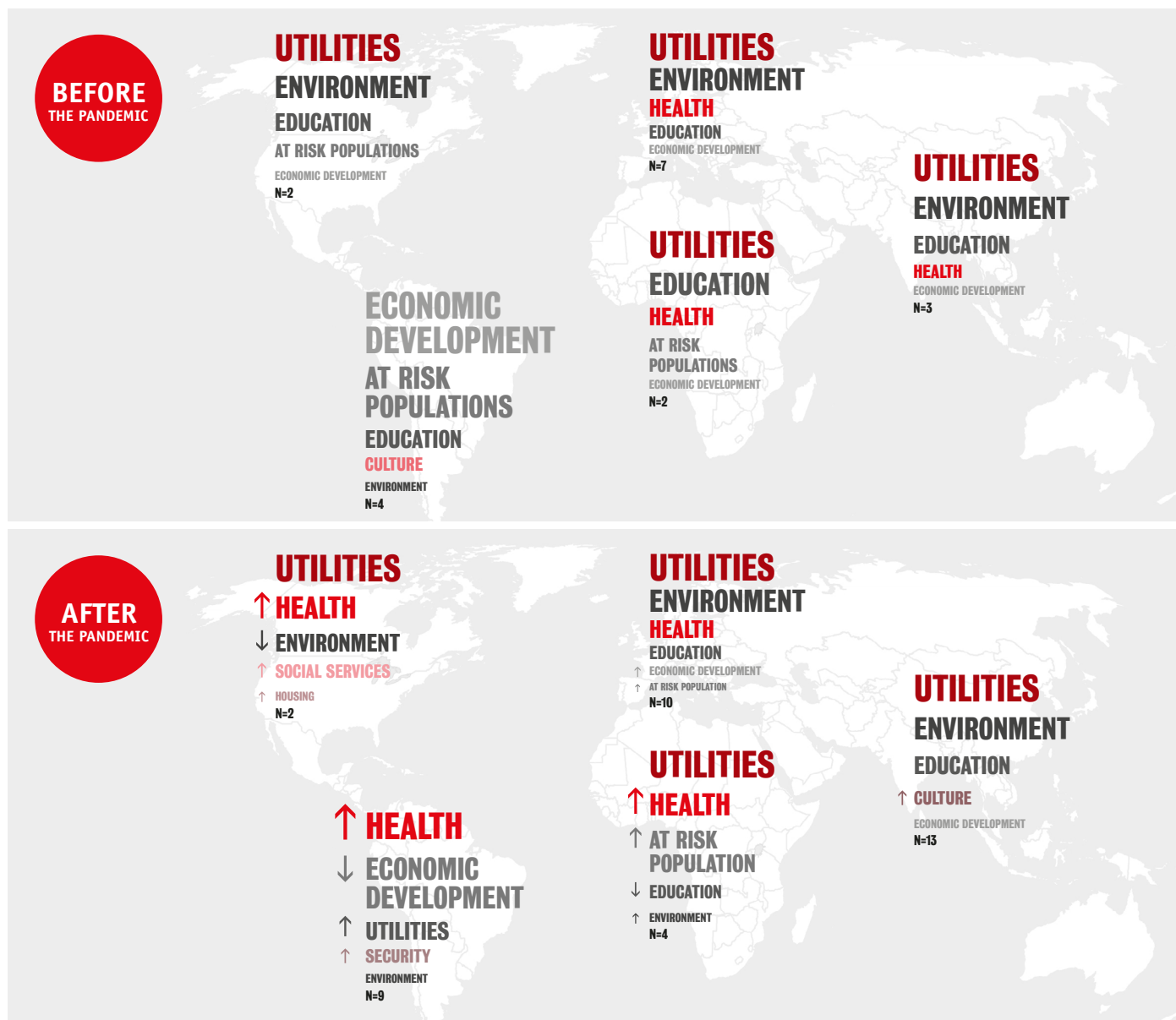
This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of UCLG, Metropolis and LSE Cities and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.



This document has been co-financed by the Swedish International Development Agency, SIDA. SIDA does not necessarily share the views expressed in this material. Responsibility for its content rests entirely with the author.



Figure 1: Local public service priorities before (top) and after (bottom) the pandemic



*'N' refers to the number of VLRs published in each global region in 2019 (top) and 2021 (bottom)

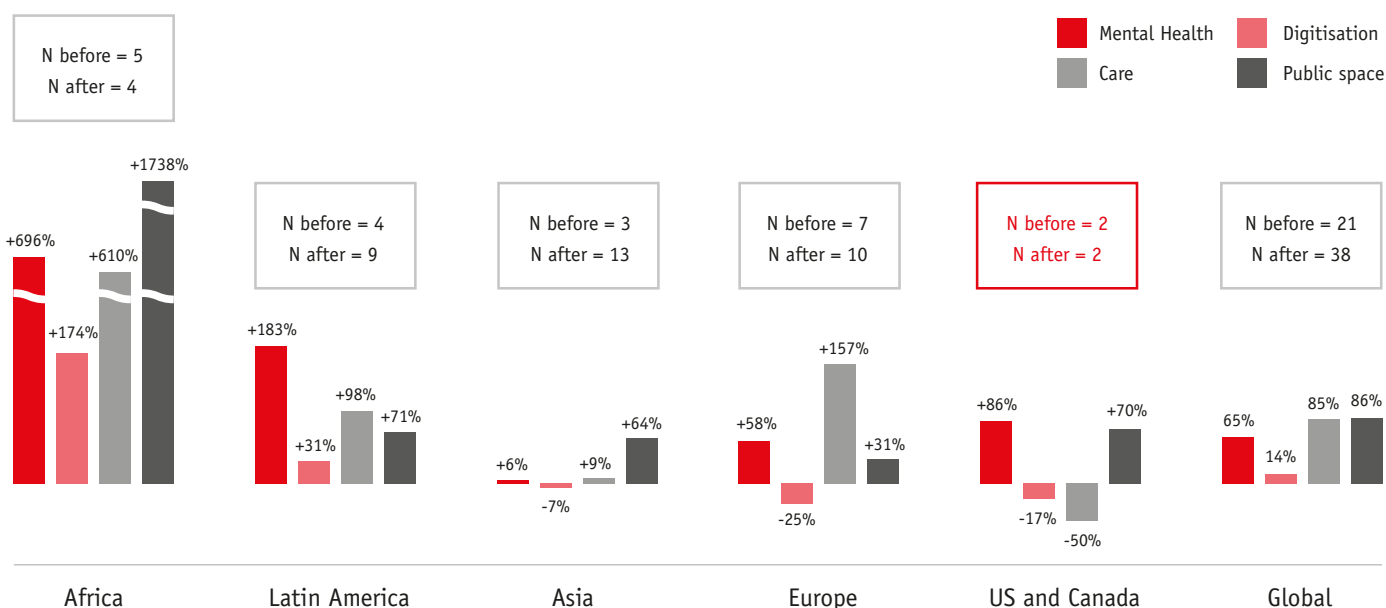
1. THE PROMINENCE OF DIFFERENT SECTORS ACROSS GEOGRAPHIES: BEFORE AND AFTER THE PANDEMIC

The systematic content analysis of the VLRs in the sample illustrates the prominence of different public service sectors in these documents before and after the global health emergency (see Figure 1). The impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on local public services were heterogeneous: some services faced a sudden increase in demand whereas, for others, it virtually disappeared overnight. Many local and regional governments (LRGs) had to adjust strategies and reprioritise certain public services to respond to the needs that arose because of the pandemic. However, as shown in Figure 1 above, **changes in the top priority sectors were perhaps not as extensive as expected**.

While health services unsurprisingly moved up the ranking of priorities in North America, Latin America and Africa, **utility services remained a top priority for most LRGs** around the

globe. Evidently, 'utility services' encompass many different sectors, as reflected in the list of terms shown in the Appendix (e.g., water, waste, energy); and they have been crucial in enabling policies to curb infection rates (e.g., stay-at-home, sanitising, etc.). This may help explain the prominence of these services in the VLRs. Furthermore, these public services are precisely the ones that tend to be the responsibility of subnational governments at the global level, whereas other sectors are highly contingent on local devolution arrangements. As with utilities, environmental services also seemed to show resilience in the face of the pandemic, featuring high up in the rankings of the most prominent public service sectors. This suggests that the climate movement may be successfully building momentum around this theme.

Some shifts, however, are concerning. **Education appears to be one of the sectors that lost prominence**, giving way to new priorities. Others, such as **transport, social services and housing, remain lower on the policy agendas**. Although priorities can change very quickly following successive or concurrent complex emergencies, these competing priorities and the resulting compromises manifest on the ground and have direct impacts on the lives of residents.

Figure 2: Prominence of ‘new essential’ services before and after the pandemic (percentage change)


*‘N before’ refers to the number of VLRs published in 2019 (before the pandemic); ‘N after’ refers to the number of VLRs published in 2021 (after the pandemic).

2. NEW ESSENTIALS

2.1. EMERGING GLOBAL PRIORITIES

The COVID-19 pandemic and the policy measures that had to be deployed to manage it reveal that some services and amenities should now be considered ‘new essentials’. These include **mental health and wellbeing services** (e.g., to deal with the ramifications of restrictive social distancing measures), **high-quality public space** (e.g., to deal with the implication of restrictions to movement and access to nature, etc.), **care services** (e.g., to cope with the surge of people with care needs and the disruption to established – and often informal – networks of care), and **digitisation and widespread access to internet broadband** (e.g., to enable remote working, education and shopping, but also other administrative and government-related services).

Improvements and additional investments in these sectors are not only important in the response to the current emergency, but are also key to recovering from the crisis and building resilience to future emergencies. As shown in Figure 2, the systematic content analysis of the VLRs confirmed **a general uptick in the attention devoted to these public services and amenities**. This was especially the case for African cities – where the VLRs published after the pandemic were vastly more focused on these new essentials – but the trend is global. Whereas digitisation may be less of an issue for wealthy cities in Europe, North America and Asia, much remains to be done in this sector in Africa and Latin America. With the exception of care in the US and Canada – which may be explained by the private nature of these services in those countries (though please note the sample of VLRs is particularly small for these jurisdictions and strong conclusions should be avoided) – the increased interest of subnational governments in all other new essential sectors was consistent across global regions.

2.2. A CLOSER LOOK AT BUENOS AIRES, TAIPEI, AND HELSINKI

Public service providers around the world incorporated the new essentials through diverse programmes and initiatives. Buenos Aires, Taipei, and Helsinki are among the few cities that published VLRs in both 2019 and in 2021 (before and after the COVID-19 pandemic). This section therefore focuses on these three cities to illustrate in more detail the types of policies being rolled out to realise the emerging global priorities.

The VLRs for these cities vary in format and thematic focus. Some have an overarching theme, such as the integration of vulnerable neighbourhoods ([Buenos Aires’ 2019 VLR](#)), population wellbeing ([Buenos Aires’ 2021 VLR](#))¹, or the climate crisis ([Taipei’s and Helsinki’s 2021 VLRs](#)). Other VLR reports focus on specific SDGs. While [Taipei’s 2019 VLR](#) focuses on SDGs 3 (Good Health & Wellbeing), 6 (Clean Water & Sanitation), 7 (Affordable & Clean Energy), 11 (Sustainable Cities & Communities), 12 (Responsible Consumption & Production), 13 (Climate Action) and 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), [Helsinki’s 2019 VLR](#) focuses on SDGs 4 (Quality Education), 8 (Decent Work & Economic Growth), 10 (Reduced Inequalities), 13 and 16 (Peace, Justice & Strong Institutions).

In 2021 all three cities implemented measures that responded directly to the global health emergency, for example developing testing and vaccination services. Furthermore, the pandemic placed additional pressures on other public services that local governments needed to address. For instance, given the [increase in domestic violence](#) experienced by many countries worldwide, Buenos Aires, Helsinki, and Taipei decided to implement action plans to assist victims of gender-based violence.

¹Despite these thematic foci Buenos Aires’ VLRs also reported on specific SDGs prioritised by the High-Level Political Forum, namely: SDGs 4, 5, 8, 10 and 16 for the 2019 VLR and SDGs 1, 2, 3, 8, 12, 13, 16 and 17 for the 2021 VLR.

Figure 3: BA Climate Action



Source: Buenos Aires Ciudad

In response to the increased demand for mental health services, Buenos Aires launched the programme ‘Salud Mental Responde’, a **telephone service line staffed by healthcare professionals** to guarantee rapid access and crisis intervention, assessment, and active containment. The telephone line was launched at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and, in its first five months of operation, dealt with around 7,000 calls.

In order to tackle the climate emergency, Buenos Aires also launched its Climate Action Plan (CAP) and the BA Climate Action, an online platform that shares information on the environmental management of clean energy, sustainable mobility, and comprehensive waste management in the city. The BA Climate Action promotes public monitoring and accountability by reporting on the CAP’s 24 targets, employing user-friendly graphics, disclosing project details and milestones, and facilitating citizens’ inclusive access to, and engagement with, climate action.

Following school closures due to lockdowns, the city of Taipei significantly improved its free, cloud-based learning system ‘CooC-Cloud’ which includes **over 11,000 educational videos and over 300,000 e-books, covering contents from primary to high school levels**. While the platform was first established

Figure 4: Taipei – CooC-Cloud



Source: Taipei City Government

in 2016, it was not until school closures in May 2019 that most students and teachers accessed it. By August 2021, the total number of visits to the platform exceeded 70 million. After the COVID-19 outbreak, live or pre-recorded videos were uploaded onto the website, providing remote education services, and ensuring access to education for all students. The platform partnered with several cities, counties and universities to increase the quality and number of resources available to students.

Recognising the importance of high-quality public space for the health and wellbeing of city residents, Helsinki’s 2021 VLR report highlights the central pedestrian zone project that will also include an underground distributor road to reduce traffic moving through the city centre. The project will expand the pedestrian zone and include cycling infrastructure, improving the central business district’s attractiveness and functionality. The aim is to **develop a safe environment and to promote walking** as the primary mode of transport in the city centre. While the project has been planned since 2019, it was finally approved by the Helsinki City Council in 2021.

Figure 5: Helsinki – central pedestrian zone project



Source: Ground Engineering

3. LOCAL PUBLIC SERVICES AND THE GLOBAL AGENDAS

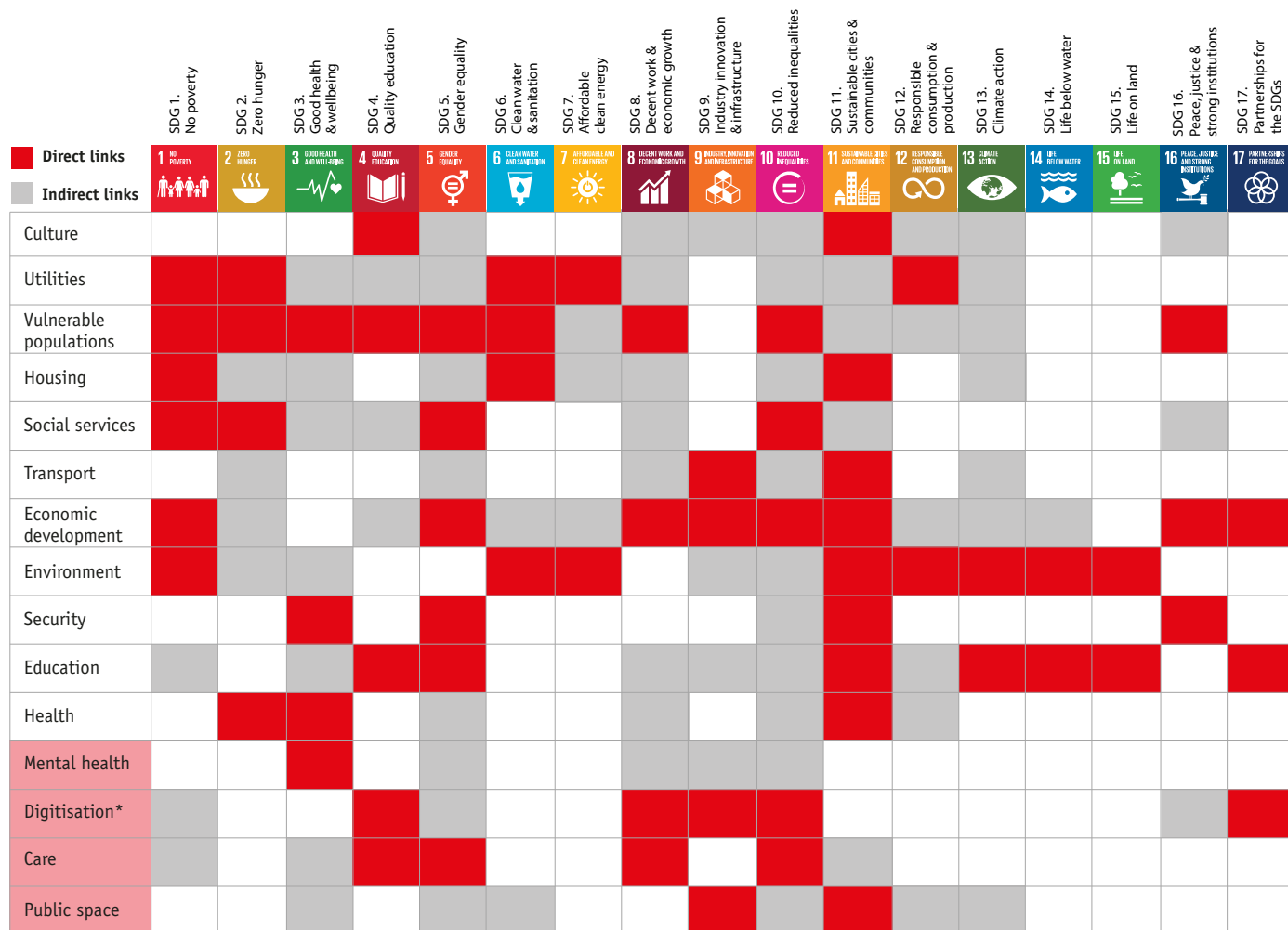
The delivery of local public services is how many of the SDGs are translated on the ground. As illustrated in Figure 6, the links between these services and the various targets set for each of the goals are extensive. Thus, to a large extent, **to localise the SDGs is to ensure that these essential services, both 'old' and 'new', are being delivered effectively to residents.** And this requires that all levels of government – from the city, through the metropolitan area, to the national level – maintain constant dialogue and coordinate interventions.

Complex emergencies threaten to disrupt the provision of local public services **just when they are most needed**, challenging the pursuit of the global agendas altogether. Competing recentralisation and decentralisation processes in emergency contexts disrupt established systems and challenge the capacity of LRGs to deliver public services and address the priority trade-offs inherent to emergency responses. Furthermore, LRGs have **incurred financial deficits to ensure the continuity of local public services** and these will need to be covered to safeguard future provision.

VLRs, such as the ones reviewed in this Analytic Note, and Voluntary Subnational Reviews (VSRs) are efforts led by LRGs and their associations to monitor their progress in the localisation of the SDGs (all accessible in the [UCLG repository of VLRs and VSRs](#)) – and local public services feature prominently in these documents. But VLRs and VSRs are also **political processes that improve dialogue between levels of government** in the implementation of the SDGs.

It is critical that **national governments and the international community acknowledge the links between local public service provision, complex emergencies, and the global agendas**; and that in response, they improve the coordination frameworks and mechanisms between levels of government and other stakeholders such as Voluntary National Reviews and national coordination units for SDG implementation, so that these incorporate synergies and concerns regarding local public service provision. We live in an age where emergencies are becoming ever more common and where local public services are key in both responding to and becoming more resilient to them – critical aspects to achieving global sustainability commitments.

Figure 6: Links between search terms (see Appendix) and the targets of the global SDGs



*Although before the COVID-19 pandemic, the links between digitisation and SDGs 4, 8 and 10 could have been considered indirect, the health emergency brought these connections to the fore.

APPENDIX

List of search terms

Culture	Utilities	Transport	Environment	At risk populations policy	Social services	Education	Health
architecture	carbon	bicycle	air	at risk	aid	academic	addict
art*	cemeteries	bike	aquifer	disab*	cash assistance	capacity building	death
book	cleaning	bus	biodiversit*	elderly	cash transfer	education	disease
cultur*	dispos*	car	biofuel	equal*	child care	Homework	doctor
dance	drainage	congest*	blue infra*	equit*	child mind	internship	health
drama	electric	corridor	CO2	ethn*	child welfare	kindergarten	hospital
festival	energy	cycl*	carbon	female	childcare	learn*	illness
film	gas	freight	climate	gender	childmind	literacy	life expectancy
folklor	heating	last mile	contamin*	girl	debt	nurser	life insurance
heritage	kWh	mobilit*	emission	homeless	family cent	school	medic*
librar	landfill	passenger	environment	migrant	family welfare	teach*	mental
literature	meters	pedestrian	fossil fuel	race	food	training	mortality
museum	plastic	rail	green	racial	meal	university	obesity
music	power	ride	greenhouse	reduced mob*	nursing homes	vocational	pharmac*
painting	rain	road	ground water	vulnerab*	social benefit	Mentions before pandemic (no.) = 1,572	physical care
parks	recyc*	subway	groundwater	women	social credit	Mentions before pandemic (no.) = 3,896	primary care
sculpture	refuse	taxi	heat	Mentions before pandemic (no.) = 1,154	social polic*		secondary care
sport	renewable	traffic	material consum*	Mentions after pandemic (no.) = 3,433	social service		vaccin*
theat	reuse	tram	micro plastics		social subsid*		wellbeing
Mentions before pandemic (no.) = 816	sanitation	transit	natural resource		social support		well-being
Mentions after pandemic (no.) = 2,095	sewage	transport	nature reserve		welfare benefit		Mentions before pandemic (no.) = 1,424
	sewer	underground	net zero		welfare state		Mentions after pandemic (no.) = 4,549
	utilit*	vehicle	pollut*		welfare support		
	waste	walk	production scrap		youth service		
	water	Mentions before pandemic (no.) = 575	protected areas		Mentions before pandemic (no.) = 425		
	wind	Mentions after pandemic (no.) = 1,723	river		Mentions after pandemic (no.) = 1,536		
	Mentions before pandemic (no.) = 2,645		sea				
	Mentions after pandemic (no.) = 7,703		zero-energy				
			Mentions before pandemic (no.) = 2,067				
			Mentions after pandemic (no.) = 5,532				

Housing	Economic development	Policing/security	Mental health	Digitisation	Care	Public space
crowding*	business	burglar	addict	app	after school	active mobility
dwelling	companies	crim*	antidepressant	artificial intellig*	at risk	air quality
home	econ* develop*	drug	anxi*	automation	care	green area
hous*	employ*	fatalities	belonging	broadband	caring	green space
informal settlement	employment	femicide	communit	connectivity	child	land use
land	enterprise	fire	depression	contactless	elderly	nature
property	entrepreneur	gang	emotion	data	femini*	park
rent	GDP	harassment	happ*	digit	in need	pavement
shelter	growth	hate	hobb*	e-government	left behind	pedestrian
slum	local development	homicide	leisure	egovernment	nurser	plann*
Mentions before pandemic (no.) = 361	patents	murder	loneliness	electronic	nursing	playground
Mentions after pandemic (no.) = 1,480	private sector	pickpocket	mental	hackaton	old people	public realm
	seed funding	police	nervous	ICT	older people	public space
	Mentions before pandemic (no.) = 1,515	policing	psycholog*	internet	older resident	recreational
	Mentions after pandemic (no.) = 3,768	racis*	sadness	online	senior	sidewalk
		rape	solitude	open data	vulnerable people	street
		safety	substance abuse	open government	vulnerable resident	tactical urbanism
		security	suicide	remote	Mentions before pandemic (no.) = 1,033	urbanisation
		terror	therap*	smart	Mentions after pandemic (no.) = 3,453	urbanization
		theft	wellbeing	software		walking
		violence	well-being	surveillance		Mentions before pandemic (no.) = 468
		Mentions before pandemic (no.) = 776	Mentions before pandemic (no.) = 679	tech		Mentions after pandemic (no.) = 1,571
		Mentions after pandemic (no.) = 2,024	Mentions after pandemic (no.) = 2,022	virtual		
				wi-fi		
				wifi		
				wireless		
				Mentions before pandemic (no.) = 1,204		
				Mentions after pandemic (no.) = 2,487		