



# Local Action Groups and Sustainable Development Agenda: Case Study of Regional Perspectives From Czechia

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The United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is generally accepted as an overarching framework to cope with various global challenges. Many of them are manifested locally and need to be solved at the regional or local level. National strategies of regional development and top-down funding are important drivers of the activities of various regional actors. However, the integration of the regional development strategies and the sustainable development agenda is not straightforward and may fail to acknowledge the local context and potential for bottom-up activities. In the European Union's (EU) context, the local action groups (LAGs) are an important driving force of regional development, but little is known about their perception of the sustainable development agenda. The article presents a research case study of Czech LAGs realized in 2021. LAGs were approached with questionnaires focusing on their understanding of the sustainable development agenda and their own role in the process of its implementation. In this paper, we show that the LAGs' representatives are aware of the sustainable development concept and work with relevant governmental strategies, but they feel that they cannot contribute to the fulfillment of many particular sustainable development goals (SDGs), especially those related to the environment. This contrasts with their reflection of the goals with an economic and social focus in which they feel relatively more empowered, especially in education. Our findings reveal that there is a high risk of mismatch between the bottom-up potential of LAGs for regional sustainable development and top-down conditions of national strategies. The results of the research contribute to the contemporary discussions about the SDGs and regional development and thus could be used by both academics and practitioners. Notably, national policymakers and regional authorities could benefit from our insights into LAGs' perspective of SDGs' implementation.

**Keywords:** Czechia, local action groups, regional development, regional policy, environment, sustainable development goals

## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary societies are facing several environmental, social, economic, technological, and political challenges, often labeled as “megatrends”, which could be defined as “long-term transformation processes, which [...] influence peoples’ thinking, activities, social organization, and future reality” (Havránek and Pokorný, 2016 p. 5). The drivers of the transformations include changes in population and migration, urbanization, climate change, biodiversity loss, and other environmental issues, competition for resources, shifts in economic and political power, and growing diversity in lifestyles and governance (European Environmental Agency, 2019). To cope with the current challenges and to provide a framework for future development, the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was agreed upon as a “plan of action for people, planet, and prosperity” to help to end poverty, improve health and education, and deal with the pressing challenges of climate change and nature protection (United Nations, 2015). The particular aims are presented in the form of the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs), which are implemented by all United Nations member states and include various topics of social, economic, and environmental dimensions of human development. Contrary to the previous development agendas, like the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the SDGs are transformative, universally aspiring, oriented toward all countries, and integrative in terms of the three dimensions of sustainable development—social, economic, and environmental (Elder and Olsen, 2019; Fukuda-Parr and McNeill, 2019).

The sustainable development goals agenda is a general framework for national development policies, and, through them, the regional or local development strategies are addressed<sup>1</sup>. The main gap in both research and practice lies in the process of translating this very general, normative, and ambitious SDGs framework into a local context. The regional stakeholders should understand and respond to the SDGs so that transformative processes at different levels are initiated. While the linking of global and regional perspectives is crucial, there are different viewpoints and interests of global, national, and regional actors and their limited capacities for development (Messias et al., 2018). The importance of citizens and regions depends mainly on their ability to manage natural resources at the local level, while still being influenced by global processes and megatrends (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020). The resulting incomprehension of strategies at different levels (global, national, and regional) may undermine the sustainable development process. Even in the rich global north countries, most of the regions are still far from achieving the

SDGs as defined for the 2030 time frame (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020).

Therefore, we present a study of how the global and national agendas are reflected by the actors of local and regional development, and how they see their own roles within these processes. In our case study, we have chosen the members of the National Network of Local Action Groups in the Czech Republic<sup>2</sup> (NN LAGs). Local action groups (LAGs) are important actors of regional development in the European Union’s rural areas, as independent associations of local actors that are based on public-private partnerships and empowered to develop local strategies and allocate resources according to the LEADER method (European Commission, 2005; see also below). They consist of the representatives of local municipalities, businesses, NGOs, and other stakeholders, which are operating all over the EU, covering more than half of its rural population (European Network for Rural Development, 2017). The embeddedness of LAGs in local conditions theoretically provides an opportunity for the successful transfer of global policies into regions. Yet this can be problematic if top-down agendas do not meet local needs and perspectives, especially if the settings of financial and legal frameworks for the policy implementation are questionable (Konečný et al., 2021). Despite the fact that rural areas are often seen as important mainly in the local and regional context, their ability to provide ecosystem services and contribute to climate change mitigation and adaptation makes them important actors with large sustainability potential even at the global level (Bezák et al., 2020). Therefore, our main research objective is to identify how LAGs perceive various strategies related to sustainable development, how they reflect the importance of the SDGs for their region, and how they anticipate their own contribution to the SDGs’ fulfillment in the local circumstances.

Our paper contributes to the recent academic and practical discussions about the implementation of the global policies of sustainable development at the regional level. Given the fact that LAGs are key actors in the multilevel governance of rural areas, this case study fits well into the recent academic discussions about the relations of the internal and external driving forces of regional development [stressed in the neo-endogenous development paradigm (cf. Shucksmith et al., 2021)] and the imperative of SDGs in the re-focusing of regional development goals [i.e., New SDGs Development Paradigm (cf. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020)]. Specifically, this paper links together the global SDGs agenda and LAGs as a case study. According to the best of our knowledge, LAGs were already studied in the context of sustainable rural development (e.g., Sedlacek and Gaube, 2010; Palmisano et al., 2016; European Network for Rural Development, 2018a; Košťálová and Vávra, 2021) but not particularly connected to the SDGs themselves. We support this claim with our December 2021 search in the Scopus database, using the combination of topics “Local Action Group” (or “LAG”/“LAGs”) and “Sustainable Development Goals” (or “SDGs”/“SDGs”) in the titles, abstracts, or keywords of the

<sup>1</sup>Terms “local” and “regional” are important concepts used in this paper. “Regional” usually refers to the scale of countries’ regions often at the NUTS2 or NUTS3 level in EU territorial nomenclature (see, e.g., Eurostat, n.d.). “Local” is used for more detailed levels, including the microregional level of LAGs or municipalities. Generally speaking (see below for details), several LAGs can be found in one region and fulfill the niche between the individual municipalities and regions. In specific cases, the terms “local” and “regional” also refer to the particular policies, strategies, and concepts and are thus used in the sense of the original referenced document.

<sup>2</sup>National Network of Local Action Groups in the Czech Republic. (n.d.). *Kde působí MAS*. Available online at: <https://www.nsmas.cz/o-spolku/kde-pusobi-mas/>.

articles. This search did not provide any relevant publication with a focus on both LAGs and SDGs. This does not mean that any previous research has not covered these two topics together but suggests that there are no research articles in English in the global Scopus database with a primary focus on the LAGs' perception of the SDGs. Due to the fact that there is hardly any relevant research on LAGs' understanding of SDGs, we often refer to the perspectives of local and regional governments in the literature review as these have been researched more often.

This article is structured as follows. The Literature Review briefly presents the concept of SDGs, sketches shifts in regional development paradigms, presents LAGs in general, and then outlines the links between SDGs and regional development. The section concludes with the main research questions of this paper. The following Case Study Section describes the specifics of LAGs in Czechia and their position in Czech regional development strategies. The Materials and Methods Section outlines the conducted survey to gain evidence from practice: the sampling and data collection method, main items of the questionnaire, characteristics of respondents, and methods of data analysis, including limitations of the methods. The Results are then structured according to the research questions, similarly to the Discussion in which the details of the results are discussed in comparison to other research among LAGs and regional governments and with respect to discussions about SDGs and regional development. The paper ends with Conclusions, including suggestions for possible future research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Sustainable Development Goals

As presented in the Section Introduction, the SDGs are praised as an important step toward sustainable development by providing 17 universal, integrative, and indivisible goals, which aim to initiate various transformations (United Nations, 2015). These 17 SDGs' goals consist of 169 particular targets with assigned indicators. From the point of view of goals' interdependency, the terminological shift from the three "pillars" to the "dimensions" of sustainable development (social, economic, environmental) occurred after Rio+20 (Elder and Olsen, 2019) to reflect the intersectionality of the three aspects of sustainability better. Elder and Olsen argue that, despite their integrative nature, three groups of SDGs can be differentiated due to their predominant dimensions: social goals, 1–5 (the end of poverty; food security and sustainable agriculture; health and wellbeing; education; and gender equality); mixed goals, 6, 7, and 11 (water and sanitation; clean energy; sustainable cities); economic goals, 8–10 (economic growth and employment; sustainable industrialization; and inequality reduction); and environmental goals, 12–15 (sustainable consumption and production; climate change; oceans; terrestrial ecosystems). SDGs 16 (peace) and 17 (partnership) have a special position being mostly social (peace) and mixed (partnership) (Elder and Olsen, 2019). Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2015) confirms that the vast majority of SDGs combine the three dimensions.

Instead of a top-down design by experts or development institutions' bureaucrats, the SDGs were prepared by the Open Working Group established after the Rio+20 meeting in 2012. Along with the representatives of countries, this forum included various non-state actors (so-called major groups). This led to the better incorporation of the perspectives of the global south countries and acceptance of more ambitious and transformative goals than in the previous MDGs agenda (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill, 2019). Moreover, this also improved the SDGs' orientation toward countries and regions positioned at all levels of development and wealth, not only to the poorest countries, as previous MDGs did. Despite the generally positive reception of the SDGs, some critics pointed to the lowered ambitions of the goals with regard to sustainability due to the selection of particular indicators (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill, 2019) or due to the internal contradictions of some goals and the overall reliance on economic growth (Hickel, 2019). A lack of reflection of planetary boundaries (O'Neill et al., 2018) and the missing reference to any particular goal of climate change limitation (Elder and Olsen, 2019) were criticized as well.

The relation of SDGs to national and regional policies is not prescriptive – it rather sets particular targets and indicators but not the policies to achieve them (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill, 2019). SDG 17 aims to promote partnerships but leaves space for the activity of individual countries, which have the main responsibility for the SDGs implementation. The importance of regional and sub-regional (local) policies is expressed in the SDGs agenda and the need for reviews of the SDGs implementation at regional levels. When analyzing the wording of the SDGs, "region" is mentioned in six of them, and "urban"/"rural" in only one, namely, SDG 11, which focuses on cities and settlements (United Nations, 2015). The regional aspects are thus acknowledged but not defined in detail in the agenda. The SDGs provide a general framework for sustainability transformation, yet the way in which they are implemented regionally or locally relies heavily on the national, regional, and local actors and conditions.

When focusing on Czechia, the country's sustainable development agenda is set in the overarching strategy titled Strategic Framework Czech Republic 2030 (Kárníková, 2017), which is superior to other national and regional strategies and conceptions. According to the governmental analysis Implementace Agendy 2030 pro udržitelný rozvoj (Cílů udržitelného rozvoje) v České republice<sup>3</sup>, all 17 SDGs are relevant for Czechia and are addressed in the Strategic Framework Czech Republic 2030. Recent research (IPSOS, 2020) has shown that half of the Czech population is aware of the SDGs, which is a lower number than in most EU countries. Czech respondents rank health and quality of life, drinking water, decent work, and economic growth (SDGs 3, 6, and 8) as the most important, while they believe that Czechia is most successful in solving the topics of drinking water and education (SDGs 6 and 4).

<sup>3</sup><https://www.mpo.cz/assets/cz/prumysl/prumysl-a-zivotni-prostredi/udrzitelny-rozvoj/2019/6/Implementace-Agendy-2030.pdf>

## Rural Development Paradigms and LAGs

While the above section introduced the global SDGs agenda, this section briefly illustrates some important changes in rural development paradigms, with a special focus on Europe. The changes in the understanding of rural development or the roles of rural areas in society were reflected in various studies, which accompanied the traditional agricultural productivist role of rural regions with other important roles. Holmes (2006) defined the multifunctionality of rural areas through three topics: production, consumption (amenity), and protection. In line with the new paradigm of rural development (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006; Ward and Brown, 2009), which highlighted the role of tourism or services in rural areas, Holmes also acknowledges the importance of non-agricultural economic activities and additionally stresses nature protection.

Pělucha and Kasabov (2020) also describe a shift from traditional productivism to postproductivism, a new paradigm emerging in EU rural development policy documents—which is characterized by multifunctionality, environmental protection, involvement of various actors, diversification of the rural economy, and endogenous development. However, their analysis outlines another stage (appearing after ca 2014) labeled neo-productivism. Applied to the EU rural development policy and financial mechanisms, this means a kind of turn back to agriculture and support for farmers though with a specific focus and related regulations (conceptually linking agriculture and climate change mitigation, often within the framework of bioeconomy or green growth). Regardless of these paradigm shifts, EU rural policy has been emphasizing the agricultural sector for a long time, leaving a wide range of rural actors in most EU rural policy instruments neglected. The exception has been the support of LAGs implemented *via* the LEADER method since the 1990s. LEADER is a policy framework that aims to strengthen rural governance, improve local partnerships, and support endogenous development (Konečný et al., 2020). However, to implement this approach, only a marginal 5% share in the total allocation of the rural development policy funds is available. Therefore, criticism of the EU regional policies often concentrates on the lack of a comprehensive concept and understanding of rural areas.

As mentioned above, LAGs are associations at a sub-regional level comprised of the representatives of various local actors, including local authorities, entrepreneurs, local organizations (NGOs), groups of citizens, etc. (European Commission, n.d.). The first LAGs were established in the European Union in the early 1990s as a part of the LEADER framework, which aimed to support the economic, environmental, social, and cultural development of rural areas. Thus, all municipalities with a population of less than 25,000 inhabitants may participate in a LAG. LAGs always comprise the areas of several municipalities (i.e., different actors from the area of different municipalities can participate in a LAG). Regarding their legal form, LAGs follow the regulations of the particular countries in which they operate. Most often, they are established as a kind of NGOs. Their mission is to reflect the local situation by involving local actors and implementing strategic development goals in a

participatory way within this context. They use EU and national financial support to realize this mission. LAGs are thus important actors of rural governance, which not only develop communities through networking and supporting the realization of their own projects (often funded from EU and national grants) but also work as a funding agency distributing finances from EU and national governments as well. Their fields of interest are very wide, including support for local businesses, environmental issues, or social cohesion [see also Section Context of Czech LAGs for some Czech examples or Dlouhá et al. (2022) in this special issue].

## SDGs and Regional Development

While the bottom-up or endogenous approaches are, in general, seen positively by researchers as well as policymakers (contrary to directive top-down or exogenous approaches), what is, in fact, praised is neo-endogenous (networked) rural development, represented also by the LEADER. As Shucksmith et al. (2021) argue, purely bottom-up/endogenous development would catch poorly performing regions in a trap if they would have to rely only on the local endogenous resources. Contrary to this, neo-endogenous rural development “advocates local control and capacity building, but recognizes, in addition, the essential role of the state and other external actors at multiple scales” (p. 325). It potentially combines the benefits of both bottom-up (local knowledge and activity, decentralized governance, horizontal cooperation) and top-down approaches (expert knowledge, global context) while potentially avoiding their disadvantages: a democratic deficit and significant external investments in the case of a top-down approach along with the trap of limited local resources and divergence from general trends in the case of a bottom-up approach (Shannon and van Egeraat, 2013; Pělucha and Květon, 2016; Shucksmith et al., 2021). As such, it should allow LAGs to create their own development trajectories, which would be based upon local perspectives and knowledge of local specifics and to realize them in horizontal (within and outside LAGs) and vertical (region, state, EU) cooperation with multiple actors. This may open space for top-down support as well as empower local actors to contribute to sustainable development on a national and global scale.

According to the (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020), it is not possible to globally deal with the majority of the SDGs targets (100 out of the total 169) if there is no coordination with local and regional governments. However, the SDGs were not designed primarily for these decentralized actors, which means that there is a great risk of what could be “lost in translation” at regional and local levels. To minimize this risk, the OECD’s territorial approach to the SDGs suggests preparing local and regional development plans in accordance with the SDGs and to address concrete local issues in a holistic way. Thus, the “New SDGs Development Paradigm” is coined, which integrates equity, stresses the environmental dimension, involves civil society as a key actor in development, and applies a place-based approach within a global common development framework (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020). This approach is similar to the concept of neo-endogenous rural development explained

above (Shucksmith et al., 2021). Therefore, in theory, the SDGs provide an ambitious and useful concept of how to make use of the social, economic, and environmental potential of regions to deal with global issues while respecting regional and local specifics and their own way of implementing global policies.

Yet, the reality is often more complicated as the research findings suggest. On one hand, the studies show that local and regional governments are aware of the SDGs, have some plans for their implementation, and participate in a dialogue with central governments, civil society, businesses, universities, and other stakeholders (Messias et al., 2018; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020). On the other hand, the same studies show that regional governments find it difficult to prioritize the SDGs in their local context over their pragmatic needs and thus demand more capacities and financial resources. Additionally, Levarlet et al. (2019) argue that local governments feel that the SDGs' agenda is detached and brings further burdens. The authors list the obstacles for effective implementation of the SDGs, including, among others, problematic multilevel governance, administration, financial support, capacity building, or political and administrative commitment discontinuity. This suggests that to succeed with a territorial approach to the SDGs, attention should be paid to the actors at regional and local levels and their cross-sectoral relationships and perceptions of the sustainability framework as a whole.

## Our Research Questions

The literature reviewed above has introduced the SDGs concept, brought some examples of the paradigmatic change in rural development (including a basic explanation of the LAGs' functioning), and highlighted some possible interactions between the SDGs implementation and the more recent concepts of rural and regional development. Based on the literature, we argue that the SDGs provide a promising overarching framework that opens space for regional and local actors to use the potential of their regions for sustainable development. We also acknowledge that the theoretical shifts of the development paradigms are compatible with the practical implementation of the SDGs. But little is known about the perception of the SDGs by the bottom-up actors, here represented by LAGs, which are one of the key driving forces of rural and regional development processes in the EU (Dlouhá et al., 2021). Therefore, to analyze LAGs' perceptions of the SDGs and their role in this context in Czechia, our paper focuses on the following research questions:

1. Which national and regional strategies do Czech LAGs consider the most important for sustainable development at the local level?
2. Which sustainable development goals (adapted for Czech local conditions) do LAGs perceive as the most important at the local level?
3. How do LAGs perceive their own contribution to the fulfillment of the sustainable development goals (adapted for Czech local conditions)?

LAGs usually work within particular national or regional development policies, which contextualize the sustainable development agenda for the Czech conditions and not with the

global SDGs' concept itself (see also Section Context of Czech LAGs). Thus, our research did not literally reflect the original 17 SDGs but considered the 14 goals adapted to the Czech policies and conditions. We refer to them as Adapted SDGs or ASDGs. These Adapted SDGs cover the main important social, economic, and environmental aspects of regional sustainable development and reflect previous research among LAGs in the EU (European Network for Rural Development, 2018a; see Section Questionnaire for details).

## CASE STUDY

### Context of Czech LAGs

Czechia is a landlocked country in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), which came into existence in 1993 after the split of Czechoslovakia into Czechia and Slovakia. Similarly, as in other CEE countries, Czechoslovakia had a communist government with a tradition of strong top-down governance until 1989. After the end of the communist regime in 1989, the democratization process and neoliberal economic reforms changed the political landscape substantially. However, local actors lacked experience with bottom-up governance and horizontal cooperation (which was very limited before 1989), and, as Czechia became an EU member only after 2004, they had no chance to acquire these competencies in the early implementation of LEADER in the 1990s.

The first LAGs began to form only in connection with the possibility of local actors to participate in the SAPARD—Special Accession Program for Agricultural and Rural Development from 2002. This program focused on preparing candidate countries for drawing funds from the EU Common Agricultural Policy and rural development policy instruments. However, a major wave of new LAGs emerged after Czechia joined the EU in 2004. This was followed by a second minor wave of LAGs' establishment between 2012 and 2015 (Konečný et al., 2020). Currently, there are 180 LAGs in the whole country (see text footnote 2 respectively). The population size of one LAG community is between 10,000 and 100,000 inhabitants. Over 60% of the Czech population lives in the area of municipalities eligible to join LAGs, and 95% of those municipalities are already members of a LAG (Binek et al., 2020). Therefore, LAGs cover the vast majority of the country's territory and a significant share of the population.

As mentioned above, LAGs do various activities, including promoting cooperation and networking, the realization of their own development projects, animation of the area, or distribution of the finance from national/EU grant schemes. Since 2014, LAGs have been preparing plans for the development of their area labeled as the Strategy of Community-Led Local Development (European Commission, n.d.a). Regarding finance, Konečný et al. (2021) show that, in the 2014–2020 period, important subsidies were allocated to education, transport, entrepreneurship both in the agriculture and non-agricultural spheres, agricultural products, and social inclusion. In comparison, strongly environmentally oriented topics (like flood prevention or the protection of trees) were marginal. According to the research of Binek et al. (2020), LAGs'

representatives perceive the contribution of LAGs to their areas, mostly through the provision of finance for local development, cooperation and networking, and support for specific issues (e.g., education). A list of inspiring examples of best practices consists of very diverse projects realized directly by LAGs, including charity shops, community centers, education and childcare, activation of long-term unemployed people, tourism support, short food supply chains, or planting trees (Binek et al., 2020).

While the LEADER and Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) is usually seen as guiding principles for LAGs' work, which are inherently bottom-up, LAGs' representatives perceive strong limitations for the implementation of this approach. It is obvious that these tensions appear in other European countries as well (e.g., European Network for Rural Development, 2018a; Shucksmith et al., 2021) but can be even stronger in Czechia, a country with a long tradition of centralized top-down governance. In such conditions, the risk of formalistic implementation of the intended-to-be bottom-up approaches is higher. Based on their study of LAGs' representatives, Konečný et al. (2020) argue that over 30% of them would like to reduce regulations and restrictions and respect local needs in the LEADER application.

## LAGs in the Framework of Czech Regional Development Strategies

LAGs are important actors of regional and rural development situated in the context of the Czech national and regional strategies. The umbrella national strategy of sustainable development [Strategic Framework Czech Republic 2030 (Kárníková, 2017)] was introduced in Section Sustainable Development Goals. Spatial aspects of development are covered in the Regional Development Strategy of the Czech Republic 2021+, valid for the period 2021–2027 (Ministry of Regional Development, 2020), which identifies “which thematic areas need or require a territory-specific approach [...] to promote competitiveness, reduce regional disparities, and find solutions promoting sustainable development of the territory” (p. 3). The strategy defines various levels of objectives with a particular focus on different types of regions. At the most detailed level, so-called Type measures describe what the key problems of different areas are, how the are major challenges manifested, how should they be addressed, and who the key actors of development are. As such, the Regional Development Strategy is a mix of top-down and bottom-up approaches. In total, 58 particular Type measures are listed in the Regional Development Strategy, and 32 mention LAGs as a possible implementers of them. This proves that LAGs are seen as an important actor in regional development often mentioned especially among the type measures related to regional centers and vulnerable regions, which are typically situated in rural or peripheral areas. Among these two groups, LAGs can be implementers of 18 out of the total 24 Type measures, covering almost all social, economic, and environmental issues listed in the strategy.

Another relevant strategy, the Conception of Rural Development for years 2021–2027 (Ministry of Regional Development, 2019), deals with the implementation at the level

of 17 Specific goals defined for various types of rural areas and linked to the Regional Development Strategy. LAGs are defined as implementers for all 17 Specific goals. Such a reflection of the universal potential of LAGs to participate in rural development is supported by the fact that LAGs are the only stakeholder, among the various public, private, and NGO actors, mentioned as an implementer for all of them in the Conception of Rural Development (p. 117). The LAGs, due to the application of the LEADER method, which should guarantee a bottom-up process of (sustainable) development, have been, therefore, included as an important stakeholder in recent Czech strategies of regional and rural development. Our research investigates whether and how LAGs are committed and equipped to implement the SDGs in the specific context of the Czech regions.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Questionnaire

The research questions have been operationalized and included as questions in a comprehensive survey that mapped conditions for sustainable regional development from the perspective of LAGs. The questionnaire was developed by the research team in consultation with the members of the National Network of Local Action Groups (NN LAGs), an umbrella organization of Czech LAGs. It consisted of questions focused on the importance of various strategies and policies for sustainable development in Czech rural regions, the role of different actors in regional sustainable development, the prerequisites for the success of sustainable development, and the concrete experience of LAGs. The whole questionnaire included both closed and open questions<sup>4</sup>. The main results presented in this paper are based on the answers to the closed questions. The open questions were analyzed mainly in the dual papers, concerning the role of various local actors in the development, and the importance of local knowledge and education (Dlouhá et al., 2021, 2022). The data were collected from the representatives of the LAGs; the questionnaire was disseminated through the NN LAGs (see Section Data Collection, Sample, and Analysis for details).

The questionnaire addressed the research questions posed here in the following way. Firstly, the LAGs representatives' assessment of various national and regional strategies was investigated. Secondly, the respondents were asked to evaluate whether the concept of sustainable development is useful in the work of their LAG. These two questions shed light on how the local actors view the overarching idea of sustainable development and whether it is used at the local level. Thirdly, the respondents had to rank 14 goals of sustainable development according to their importance for Czechia as a whole. The set of the 14 items was based on the adaptation of the original 17 SDGs to the local condition with respect to Czech policies. As mentioned above, we refer to these 14 goals as Adapted SDGs (ASDGs). Fourthly, the respondents were requested to assess the possibility of their own LAG to contribute to fulfilling each of these Adapted SDGs. The exact wording of the questions, which were consequently analyzed, is available in the Section Results.

<sup>4</sup>For a complete questionnaire in Czech language, see Dlouhá et al. (2021).

The 14 Adapted SDGs are presented in the Section Results in short form (see below) but were included in the questionnaire in the more precise longer definition (in the brackets):

- 1) Regionally relevant education (education for the regional context, including lifelong learning).
- 2) Local culture (culture using local resources and supporting attractiveness of the region).
- 3) Decent work in the place of living.
- 4) Sustainable economy (sustainable economy, respecting circular principles, and reusing waste).
- 5) Local economy (local economy, using local resources and value chains).
- 6) Sustainable agriculture (agriculture providing natural balance and health).
- 7) Sustainable forestry (forestry providing natural balance and health).
- 8) Floods and drought prevention (prevention of floods and drought through landscape and soil management).
- 9) Affordable public services.
- 10) Regional disparities (quality of life and decreasing of regional disparities).
- 11) Climate change mitigation (climate change mitigation through lowering greenhouse gases emissions).
- 12) Climate change adaptation (adaptation to the consequences of climate change).
- 13) Community support (supporting the community and all its members).
- 14) Political participation (ensuring openness and participation in politics).

The selection and the adaptation of the original SDGs were based on the analysis of the Strategic Framework Czech Republic 2030 (Kárníková, 2017), with a special focus on regionally relevant aspects of the SDGs and national strategies. The 14 Adapted SDGs reflect themes of LAGs' local development strategies covered by recent EU-wide research (European Network for Rural Development, 2018a) as well. The process of their selection was consulted with the several members of LAGs, and the whole questionnaire was pre-tested with them before being sent to all LAGs (they also commented on the selection of assessed national and regional strategies included in the first research question). Instead of ascribing a score to each of the 14 Adapted SDGs separately, the respondents were asked to order all 14 items according to their perceived importance in the national context. This made them prioritize the goals and prevented a situation in which all ASDGs would be considered equally important.

The terms "perception", "assessment", or "evaluation" are generally used as synonyms in our paper and describe respondents' expression of their opinions and experiences in the form of answers to our questionnaire. These terms are equal to previous studies of local actors, which researched opinions, assessments, and experiences of respondents (e.g., Messias et al., 2018; Konečný et al., 2020, 2021).

## Data Collection, Sample, and Analysis

In March 2021, an invitation to fill in the online questionnaire was sent to all 180 Czech LAGs by the NN LAGs to support

the credibility of the research and to ensure a sufficient number and variety of respondents. As the whole research was of a combined qualitative and quantitative nature, the results benefit mostly from the diversity of responses, and not the response rate. We have received responses from 70 LAGs (39%); however, not all of them completed the whole questionnaire. In multiple questions (e.g., ranking of the Adapted SDGs), only the answers of those respondents who ranked all items were included in the analysis. Therefore, the number of responses for each topic may vary and is noted in the Results for each figure and table (answers in the range of 20–39% of all Czech LAGs). A varying response rate is common for such a type of research with relatively long questionnaires (e.g., European Network for Rural Development, 2018a). The rate was adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which required high online work demand in LAGs, but it was sufficient, given the fact that we aimed it at a special group of respondents representing their organizations. It is lower than in previous research among Czech LAGs by Binek et al. (2020), who reached a 72% response rate but comparable with recent LAGs' research in Czechia (European Network for Rural Development, 2018b), with a 30% response rate. The overall number of respondents is higher than in some recent surveys dealing with regional governments or municipalities in Europe (e.g., Spitz et al., 2016; Bardot et al., 2018).

The LAGs participating in the research cover an area of 28,923 km<sup>2</sup> (37% of the whole country), with 2,282 municipalities (36%) and 2.56 million inhabitants (24% of the population). LAGs in the sample are situated in all 13 NUTS3 regions of Czechia (except the capital city Prague), which provides good geographical representativeness. The group of LAGs' representatives in this study consists of managers (26%), CLLD managers (26%), project managers (21%), directors (17%), and administrative workers (10%). Of those who filled in the non-mandatory sociodemographic questions (half of the respondents), the majority are women (72%), with the prevailing age of 36–55 years (67%), and a university degree (83%) from various fields (mostly economics, social science/humanities, and engineering). The respondents are experienced with the everyday operations of the organizations, negotiations with partners as well as strategic decisions and, therefore, are relevant key informants for our research. The respondents' position in LAGs is comparable to a sample in a recent survey among LAGs in the EU (European Network for Rural Development, 2018a). The data for quantitative analysis were collected and cleaned; the analysis was then carried out using MS Excel and IBM SPSS software. Given the exploratory and illustrative nature of the research, the focus on the initial mapping of the problem, and a limited number of respondents, descriptive statistical methods were mostly used (frequency and percentage of answers and calculations of median). In one case, responses from open-ended questions were used to illustrate the quantitative results.

## Limitations of the Methods

The benefit of a common method of an online questionnaire survey is the possibility to easily contact all potential respondents, yet there is a risk of a low-response rate (see above). Similarly, the opportunity of covering various specific topics in the

questionnaire is balanced by the lack of dialogue necessary for clarification and in-depth explanation, which would be possible only in qualitative interviews. We tried to limit the potential shortcomings of our method by cooperating with NN LAGs in the pre-testing of the questionnaire and including some open-ended questions, which are used in the analysis presented in other outputs of the research (Dlouhá et al., 2021, 2022) and, in one specific case, also mentioned in the discussion.

Similarly, as in the original SDGs, the environmental, social, and economic dimensions are strongly interconnected in most of our Adapted SDGs, although it is possible to say that one domain is usually prevailing in each of them: environmental (agriculture, forestry, climate change mitigation and adaptation, floods, and drought), economic (decent work, sustainable economy, local economy, regional disparities), and social (education, culture, public services, community, and political participation). Being aware of the limitations, we used this “dimension approach” for better visualization in some figures and tables and in the Section Discussion.

As mentioned above, due to the response rate and geographic coverage, our findings do not include all Czech LAGs, yet they represent a significant amount of them and reflect their distribution across the whole country. Therefore, the results provide insight into the opinions of important groups of local stakeholders who, in fact, often represent other local stakeholders in dialogue with national and European institutions responsible for regional development (and who deliver to them information from the other local actors). These results should thus be not interpreted as universally applicable; rather, they provide “food for thought,” which may open new research fields and inspire initiatives in practice. From this viewpoint, the response rate is satisfactory for the purpose of this research, especially given its exploratory and novel focus on the, so far, under-researched aspects of understanding sustainable development at the local level. Further limitations of the study are mentioned at the end of the Section Discussion.

## RESULTS

### Assessment of National and Regional Strategies

The question on the importance of various strategies and policies for the sustainable development of the region—from the point of view of LAGs’ representatives—was phrased as “Are these strategies and policies useful as an inspiration for planning your LAG’s activities toward sustainable development?” **Figure 1** shows the percentages of the obtained responses. The more concrete strategies, like the national Regional Development Strategy (86% yes), the Development Strategy of the Region in which the LAG is situated (84%), or the Rural Development Strategy (78%), are found to be most useful. The overarching sustainable development’s Strategic Framework Czech Republic 2030 is ranked lower (59%) and, along with the Green New Deal, is also evaluated as not useful by 16% of respondents. The European Green Deal and Just Transition Fund are, in general, unknown.

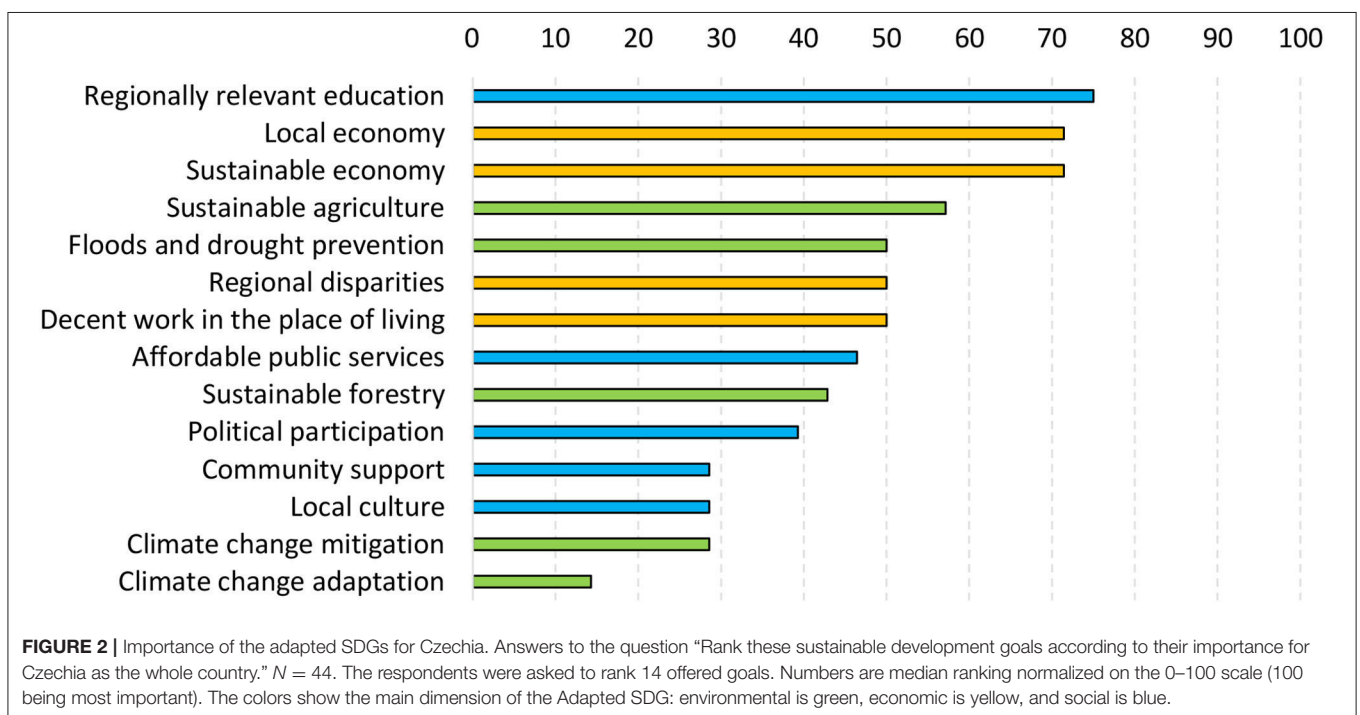
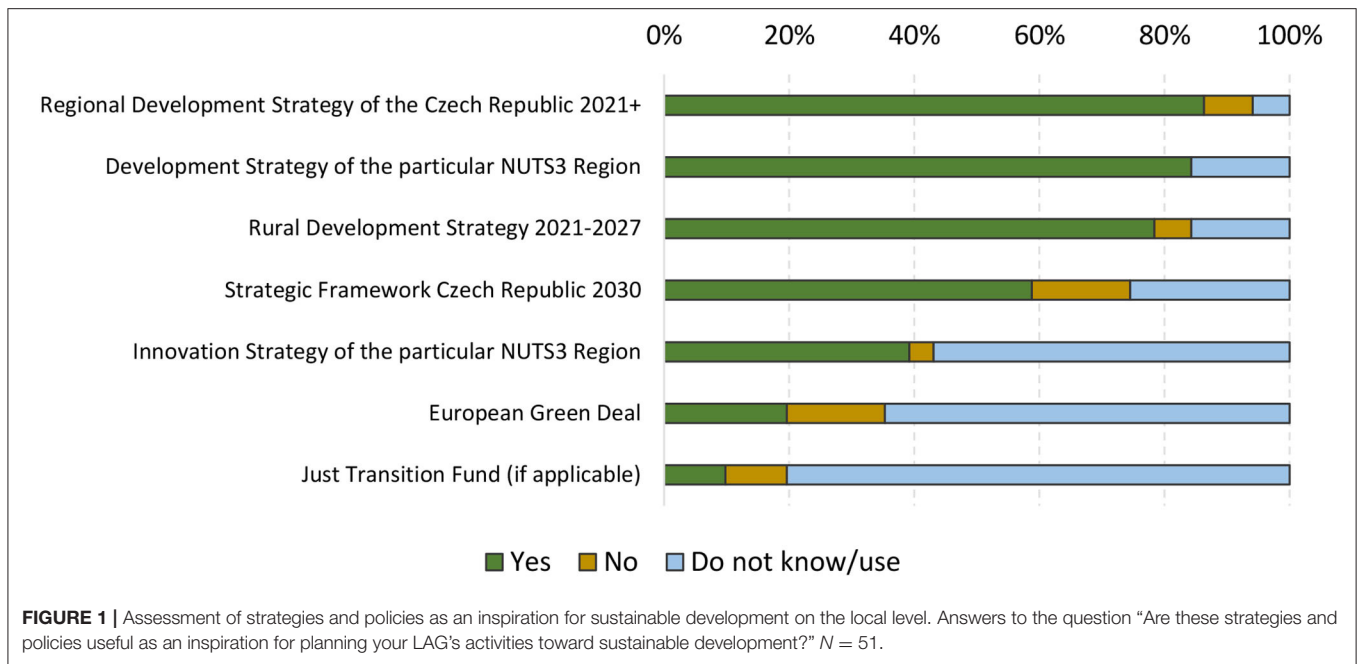
### Perception of Adapted SDGs and LAGs’ Potential to Fulfill Them

The results start with the general perception of sustainable development by local actors. In responses to the question “In your opinion, is the concept of sustainable development suitable for your LAG?” LAGs’ representatives ( $N = 70$ ) perceive this concept as generally useful for the activities of their LAGs (86%). Only 8% do not know/use it, and only 2% find it useless. With regard to the areas of sustainability most important at the regional level, the respondents were asked to order the 14 Adapted SDGs according to their importance for all Czechia: “Please, arrange [the Adapted SDGs] according to their importance for Czechia as a whole.” The results are presented in **Figure 2**. The original scale (an order from 1 to 14) was transformed into a scale of 1–100 (100 being the highest). The numbers in **Figure 2** are the median of the normalized scale. Regionally relevant education, local economy, and sustainable economy were ranked as the top three Adapted SDGs for Czechia as a whole. The middle of the rank consisted of various social and economic goals (e.g., regional disparities, decent work, public services) and environmental goals (e.g., sustainable agriculture and forestry, floods, and drought prevention). Some of the social and environmental goals are ranked as less important, including social topics of community support and local culture, and environmental issues, such as climate mitigation and adaptation. For a better, yet simplified visualization of the dominant aspects of each Adapted SDG, different colors are used in the following **Figures 2, 3** and **Table 1**: environmental is green, economic is yellow, and social is blue.

**Table 1** shows the answers to the question focused on LAGs’ own contribution to the fulfillment of the Adapted SDGs: “Based on your own experience, please assess whether your LAG can contribute to the fulfillment [of the Adapted SDGs].” Only in the case of regionally relevant education are LAGs convinced that they contribute significantly (56%). A relatively high share of respondents report significant contributions in the case of community support (31%). However, more than half of the goals received such a self-confident ranking by less than 10% of the respondents. For the majority of them, answers pointing toward the unutilized potential of LAGs are the most common. More than half of the respondents feel that LAGs contribute to the Adapted SDGs’ fulfillment but could do more in the case of regional disparities, local culture, decent work, local economy, and sustainable agriculture. Sustainable economy, floods and droughts prevention, climate change mitigation and adaptation, and sustainable forestry are often seen as fields in which LAGs could contribute to fulfilling Adapted SDGs, but only if top-down support would exist<sup>5</sup>. Political participation, as well as climate change mitigation and adaptation, was most often seen as goals without any potential contribution of LAGs. However, for any of these three goals, the negative answer was not the most common (see **Table 1**). This suggests that LAGs’ representatives see the

<sup>5</sup>The respondents were informed in the questionnaire that “top-down” support means “financial, legislative, methodical, etc., support by the central or regional authorities”.

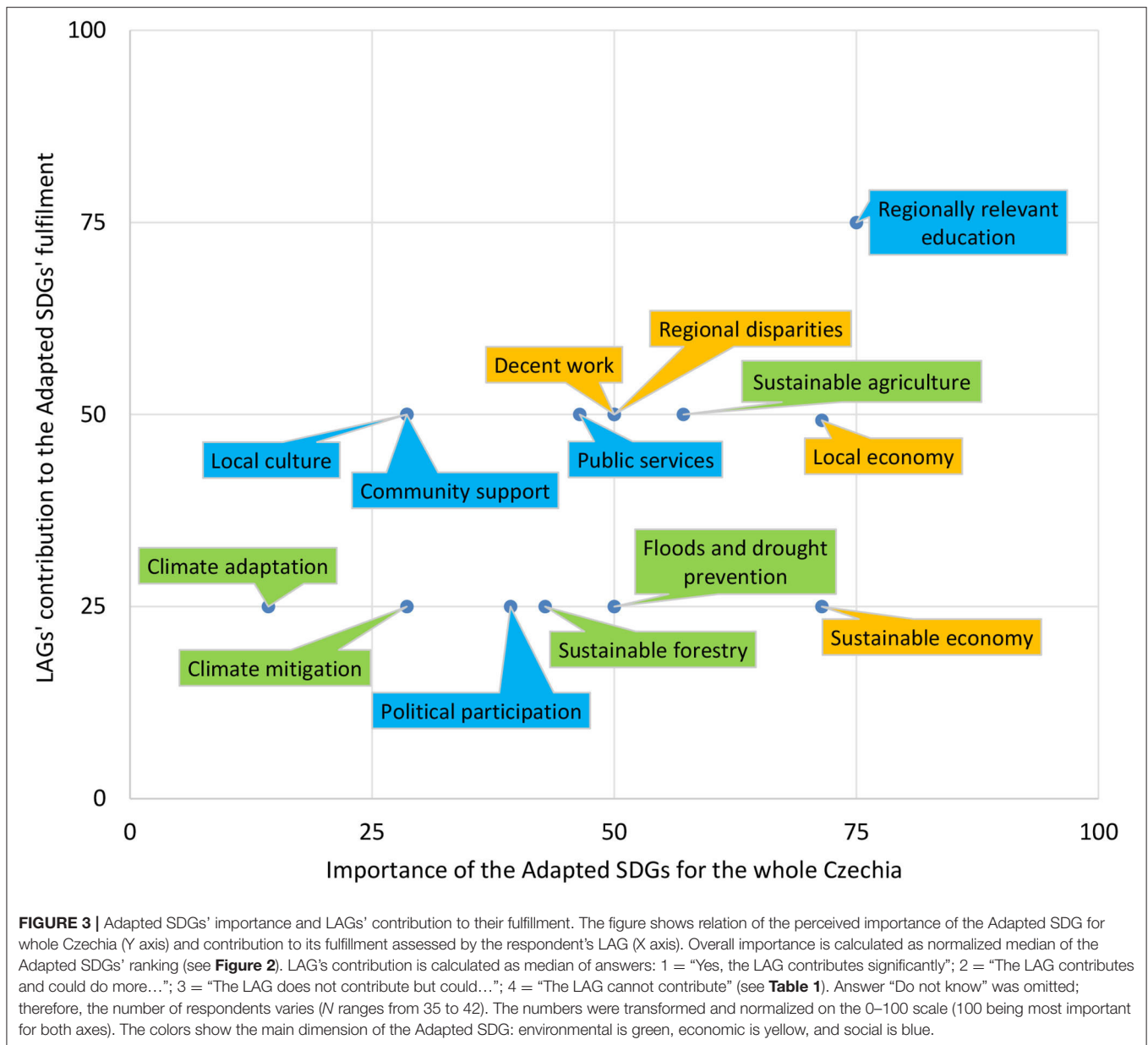




possibility of their contribution in all topics they were asked to assess, even in those in which they have ranked lowest.

The comparison of the perceived importance of the Adapted SDGs and a LAGs’ contribution to their fulfillment (**Figure 2** and **Table 1**) reveals interesting categorization. While some of the Adapted SDGs are seen as important and solvable by LAGs (e.g., regionally relevant education), some are seen as important

but not within the LAGs’ capacities (e.g., sustainable economy). In parallel, the Adapted SDGs perceived as less important in the context of Czechia are seen in some cases at least as partially solvable by LAGs (e.g., local culture or community support) but in other areas as out of their scope (e.g., climate mitigation and adaptation). For a better comparison, the answers from **Figure 2** and **Table 1** were combined in **Figure 3**. Both groups



of data are median answers normalized on a scale of 1–100. The order of importance (position on the horizontal axis) in **Figure 3** is the same as in **Figure 2**. The ranking of perceived LAGs' contribution in **Figure 3** is calculated as a median of the answers in **Table 1**, with the following values: 1 (Yes, the LAG contributes significantly); 2 (the LAG contributes and could do more, but top-down support is missing); 3 (the LAG does not contribute but could if top-down support existed); and 4 (the LAG cannot contribute). The results were then transformed and normalized on a scale of 1–100, with 100 as the highest value. See the captions of **Figure 3** for details. The perceived level of LAGs' potential contribution to the Adapted SDGs is distributed in three groups in **Figure 3**: (1) high contribution of LAGs in fulfilling the goal—this has been, however, reported only in the case of regionally

relevant education; (2) middle potential contribution of LAGs'—this group includes seven Adapted SDGs, with three of them each being related to the economic and social dimension; and (3) six Adapted SDGs fall into the group, with a low perceived LAGs' contribution to participate in their fulfillment; these goals combine all dimensions of sustainability but, most often, the environmental ones.

## DISCUSSION

Related to the first research question, the most influential strategies and policies from the perspective of LAGs are those regionally oriented: Regional Development Strategy, development strategies of the particular region to which LAGs

**TABLE 1** | LAGs' contribution to the fulfillment of Adapted SDGs (in percentages).

|                                    | Yes, LAG contributes significantly | LAG contributes and could do more but top-down support is missing | LAG does not contribute but could if top-down support would exist | LAG cannot contribute | I do not know |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---|---|-----------------------|---------------|
| Regionally relevant education      | 55.8                               | 40.4  | 3.8   | 0                     | 0             |
| Community support                  | 30.8                               | 50.0  | 13.5  | 1.9                   | 3.8           |
| Local culture                      | 23.1                               | 61.5  | 13.5  | 0                     | 1.9           |
| Local economy                      | 21.2                               | 55.8  | 17.3  | 1.9                   | 3.8           |
| Regional disparities               | 19.2                               | 65.4  | 7.7   | 5.8                   | 1.9           |
| Sustainable agriculture            | 11.5                               | 55.8  | 21.2  | 9.6                   | 1.9           |
| Decent work in the place of living | 7.7                                | 57.7  | 11.5  | 15.4                  | 7.7           |
| Affordable public services         | 7.7                                | 42.3  | 23.1  | 21.2                  | 5.8           |
| Sustainable forestry               | 7.7                                | 32.7  | 42.3  | 15.4                  | 1.9           |
| Sustainable economy                | 7.7                                | 21.2  | 59.6  | 9.6                   | 1.9           |
| Floods and drought prevention      | 5.8                                | 26.9  | 51.9  | 9.6                   | 5.8           |
| Political participation            | 5.8                                | 25.0  | 19.2  | 32.7                  | 17.3          |
| Climate change mitigation          | 3.8                                | 19.2  | 34.6  | 32.7                  | 9.6           |
| Climate change adaptation          | 1.9                                | 17.3  | 42.3  | 26.9                  | 11.5          |

Answers to the question "Based on the experience from the area of your LAG, answer whether your LAG can contribute to the fulfillment of the sustainable development goals."  $N = 52$ . Adapted SDGs are ordered according to the answer "Yes, LAG can contribute significantly". Numbers show the percent of responses; the sum of each row is equal to 100%. The colors show the main dimension of the Adapted SDG: environmental is green, economic is yellow, and social is blue.

belong, and Rural Development Strategy (Figure 1). This is expectable as the Strategic Framework Czech Republic 2030 is rather an umbrella document, suggesting how to link the SDGs with local and regional policies but not providing details for their implementation as usually required by LAGs. The low level of awareness of the European Green Deal and Just Transition Fund could be explained by their novelty and, in the case of the latter, also by its specific regional focus on only 3 Czech NUTS3 regions, which belong to the EU coal regions transitioning to a low-carbon economy (European Commission, n.d.b). The high awareness of the strategies is complemented by the general LAGs' opinion that sustainable development is a useful concept—which is in agreement with other research focused on regional authorities all over the world (Messias et al., 2018; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020).

With regards to the second research question, regionally relevant education is seen as the most important Adapted SDG for Czechia as a whole, according to the LAGs' representatives, followed by the goals from the economic domain. The list ends with explicit climate change issues. The ranking shows that the order of social, economic, and environmental Adapted SDGs is mixed. The top ranking of education from both perspectives (importance for Czechia and LAGs' contribution) can be, at least, partially explained by the fact that LAGs themselves administer some of the EU funding for this topic and are, therefore, experienced with it. This "explanation by experience" with the funding could also be partially applied to, e.g., economic topics or sustainable agriculture—but definitely not to the relatively highly ranked floods or drought prevention. As Konečný et al. (2021) show, these topics have received only marginal support in the last funding period.

In general, economic goals, including decent work and regional disparities, are ranked relatively higher both in importance and contribution, while some social (political participation, community support, local culture) are lower in importance but relatively high in contribution. Some of the environmental topics were ranked lower in contribution but higher in importance (e.g., floods and drought). This suggests that LAGs feel more empowered in the social and economic dimensions, but the important environmental topics are generally perceived as beyond their capacities. The international comparison with the prioritized topics of local development strategies of EU LAGs shows some similarity with the preference for Adapted SDGs in Czechia. European Network for Rural Development (2018a) reveals that local economy and jobs, social inclusion and cohesion, and agriculture and farming are the top three priorities for LAGs in EU countries.

The ranking of the explicitly mentioned climate change as the least important challenge seems to be surprising, but this finding is supported by previous surveys among Czech as well as other EU countries' LAGs (European Network for Rural Development, 2018a,b). It can be argued that climate change could be seen as something rather distant, which must be solved globally, not by one country. However, the everyday problems related to climate change, which may include floods, drought, agriculture, and forestry, are ranked higher by LAGs and are also often seen as important by the general public, at least in the case of floods, drought, and water scarcity (Vávra et al., 2014). Therefore, the terminology matters when talking to local stakeholders. Focusing purely on "expert" concepts (e.g., climate change) may undermine the understanding between local actors on one hand and experts on the other. If the answers reflect

a general mistrust in the global impact of local activities (i.e., the possibility to contribute to climate change mitigation), then we could hypothesize the disempowerment of local actors with regard to their contribution on a global scale.

The research on perceptions of the SDGs by other authors shows some similarities and differences with our findings. The survey among Czech municipalities highlighted the importance of the water-related SDGs, followed by health and life quality, sustainable industry, terrestrial ecosystems (including environmental protection), and quality of education (Ministry of the Environment, 2021). Education, along with poverty reduction, climate action, and decent work, was prioritized by Dutch local governments (Spitz et al., 2016). Similarly, the general population in Czechia reported the importance of health and quality of life, decent work, water, and education (IPSOS, 2020). All these examples show the mixed dimensions of the SDGs ranked as the most important, which is in agreement with the mixed ranking of our respondents.

From the top-down point of view, LAGs are perceived positively as actors by the regional and rural development strategies (LAGs are seen as important implementers of the Type measures and Specific goals), while these strategies cover all three dimensions of sustainable development more or less evenly. From the bottom-up perspective, Czech LAGs assess national strategies as highly relevant (see the first paragraph of this section) and use them in their own work. These findings suggest that LAGs could be key actors in regional sustainable development from both perspectives. However, in the particular wording of the national strategies' measures or goals, the "translation" of global goals to local actions might bring about some misconceptions. For example, education is addressed in the Strategy of Regional Development mostly as preparation for future jobs or with respect to the school infrastructure, while our concept of "regionally relevant education" reflects a broader scope of SDG 4 implementation in the context of sustainable development of the region and community (Dlouhá et al., 2021), in accordance with the SDG 4 definition (United Nations, 2015).

Above all, the activities of LAGs are mainly framed by funding opportunities, which are obviously not precisely defined in the strategic documents. When the funding priorities do not encompass the local needs, LAGs – when formulating their strategic goals – tend to either modify local priorities or find some "new" problems and needs (which might not be of the highest importance) to meet the criteria of support and receive some funding (Konečný et al., 2021). This can lead to the situation where the bottom-up potential of LAGs is not fully utilized, and important problems are not being addressed. On top of that, reflecting local needs was the most preferred principle of the LEADER method implementation among Czech LAGs, along with reducing regulations and restrictions (Konečný et al., 2020). The administrative burden was criticized even if the aim of the particular funding scheme was evaluated positively (Slach et al., 2021). The previous survey among Czech LAGs has also pointed to the high bureaucracy and administration as well as the top-down limitations of themes in local development strategies, which hinder bottom-up approaches (European Network for Rural Development, 2018b). When assessing conditions for

the SDGs implementation, the lack of top-down support and regional resources or capacities has been reported as an obstacle in other surveys among regional and local authorities from various countries. The prioritization of the SDGs agenda over other issues was also seen as a challenging task in various studies, including wide international surveys (Messias et al., 2018; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020), as well as in a Dutch case study (Spitz et al., 2016).

This must be kept in mind when interpreting the relationship between the perceived importance of the Adapted SDGs for Czechia as a whole, and LAGs' contribution to their fulfillments (third research question). The results in **Figure 3** show that there is high internal variability within the goals in the social and environmental dimensions of sustainability, but the goals with a dominant economic dimension are seen as more similar to each other. **Table 1** shows that, for the vast majority of the Adapted SDGs, the options that LAGs could contribute more (combination of "already contributing" and "not contributing yet") are dominant, with over 60% of positive answers. The only exception is positively evaluated Adapted SDG in education. However, even in this case, 40% of the respondents answered that their LAGs could do more.

To better understand this problem, we can refer to one of the open questions in the questionnaire. LAGs were asked for the reasons why they do not contribute more to the SDGs that they found important. The three most often mentioned reasons included the lack of financial resources, the conditions defined in top-down policies, and the lack of their own competencies<sup>6</sup>. This interpretation of LAGs' disempowerment to contribute to the SDGs achievement is backed-up by previous findings (European Network for Rural Development, 2018b; Konečný et al., 2020) among Czech LAGs. In the case of environmental issues (especially climate change), the low perceived contribution potential could also be explained by limited experiences with these topics and the lower importance ascribed to them. There are, however, more reasons for this situation. According to the answers to the other open-ended questions, LAGs do not feel to be responsible in this field as the environmental strategies are formed by the legislature and implemented by specialized institutions of nature protection. Moreover, usually, there are numerous actors missing in the region that could potentially contribute to the environmental field (such as active experts, environmentally friendly enterprises, relevant institutions, etc.), and there are also several actors that have an overall negative effect on the environment (typically, large businesses and agricultural companies with political power are mentioned here).

Based on these results, we argue that LAGs generally believe they have the potential to contribute more (than they currently do) to the regional implementation of the SDGs; and they think that the central governments should take their local perspectives and experiences more seriously into account. In

<sup>6</sup>The original question was phrased as follows: "Please explain why your LAG cannot contribute sufficiently to the fulfillment of sustainable development goals that you find important." The answers were coded and placed into three categories, which we mention here (the lack of financial resources, the conditions defined in top-down policies, and the lack of their own competences).

this regard, they were probably still mostly influenced by the Regional Development Strategy 2014–2020 (Ministry of Regional Development, 2013), which was more in line with a top-down approach and an economic perspective of development. The new Regional Development Strategy 21+, which was agreed in 2020 (Ministry of Regional Development, 2019), promised some changes – the LAGs were aware of it and used it in their preparation of new Strategies of Community-Led Local Development. However, as the research suggests, particular funding opportunities, which are associated with the top-down approach, still prevail.

It is worth mentioning that, according to the research among EU states, all LAGs complain about bureaucracy, administration, project application procedures, limited decision power, or project reporting requirements, in general (European Network for Rural Development, 2018a). However, the perspectives of the Czech LAGs are even more critical than other EU LAGs in comparison (European Network for Rural Development, 2018b). This applies, for example, to the opinion that LEADER implementation is constrained by the country's rural development program (75% of Czech LAGs report a negative effect compared to 53% of EU LAGs). When asked about the freedom to pursue their own “operational priorities” in their national framework, 52% of Czech LAGs report limited freedom, and another 27% seriously constrained freedom. This number is extremely high in comparison to EU LAGs with 27 and 11%, respectively. Similarly, 64% of Czech LAGs argue that greater independence would help them to improve their contribution to achieving their goals (only 42% in the EU). When comparing perceptions of the 2014–2020 EU programming period to the previous one, Czech LAGs' report decreased freedom to find innovative solutions (49% compared to 37% in EU) and decreased autonomy (CZE, 56%; EU, 33%), despite the increased budget (CZE, 73%; EU, 30%).

The above-mentioned results, and works by other authors cited in the discussion, suggest that the Czech legislative, governance, and funding frameworks limit the bottom-up potential of LAGs even more than the frameworks do in other EU countries. While the bottom-up approach, local development strategies, and networking are of the same high importance for Czech and EU LAGs (European Network for Rural Development, 2018a,b), the country's framework hinders their potential. We hypothesize that this is at least partially caused by the long tradition of top-down centralized government, which was not fully replaced by functioning bottom-up governance after the 1989 social and economic transformation, and by the highly bureaucratic governance culture. The relatively short period of a dialogue between LAGs and state authorities (since the early 2000s) may also play a role in the slow institutional and cultural changes in governance.

Summarizing the opinions of LAGs' representatives and referring to the EU comparison, we argue that the top-down measures have, so far, not fully reflected the regional potential for the SDGs' implementation—not to prescribe what local governments should do but to take advantage of what they are already doing and to provide a common supporting framework (Bardot et al., 2018). While the shift from the traditional to the new paradigm of rural development (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006) is obvious

and manifested, for example, by the importance of non-agricultural topics in practice, and also revealed in our research, the more recent conceptual changes are still to be discussed. Especially, the strongly expressed LAGs' potential to contribute to sustainable agriculture, sustainable forestry, and flood and drought prevention (perceived by ca 75% of the respondents in our research) suggests that LAGs are aware of the abilities of rural areas to deal with local manifestations of global challenges (even though they may use different terminology than experts). This can be seen as a way toward the New SDGs Development Paradigm and the territorial approach toward the SDGs (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020) or the neo-productivist concept of rural development (Pélucha and Květon, 2016) in practice.

However, according to our research, this potential seems not to be reflected nor utilized. This limits the agency of LAGs, which is crucial in the neo-endogenous concept of rural development (Shucksmith et al., 2021). Our research thus supports the recent findings of Konečný et al. (2020) who, in relation to Community-Led Local Development, claimed that the “...framework of supported activities set at the national level does not meet the needs and problems of rural communities” (p. 189). However, interpreting the problem in a wider perspective of the SDGs, this is not only a local problem of rural development but an important part of the global sustainability challenge: local communities are hindered from utilizing their potential to deal with challenges and megatrends, e.g., by implementing climate change adaptation and mitigation through management of agricultural and forest land.

Our research, exploratory in its nature, is novel, but our findings need to be carefully interpreted. We argue that the novelty is based on the connection of LAGs and SDGs' perception in an empirical study and by putting them into the context of discussions about regional development paradigms. Our findings are supported by the results of other authors on regional governance and on the roles of actors (e.g., Spitz et al., 2016; Messias et al., 2018) and by the experiences of LAGs in Czechia as well as in other countries, which point to the problems with top-down regulations (e.g., European Network for Rural Development, 2018a,b; Konečný et al., 2020; Shucksmith et al., 2021). Nevertheless, our study has some limitations that should be kept in mind when interpreting the results. The number of respondents was limited; therefore, no complex statistical analysis of the data was realized. Additionally, the case study presents the situation of a sample of LAGs in only one country with a specific history and socio-political conditions and was focused primarily on the opinions of LAGs' representatives. Different research approaches, such as a financial and document analysis or the assessment of LAGs' projects, would help to view the implementation of the SDGs from another perspective.

## CONCLUSION

Our findings corroborate previous results of research among Czech LAGs by suggesting that there is a mismatch between LAGs' perceptions of their own potential to be driving forces

of regional sustainable development and the top-down defined legislation and funding with a similar focus. According to their experience, the local actors find only a few sustainability themes (labeled here as Adapted SDGs) as beyond their scope, but they feel that they are constrained in contributing to the fulfillment of almost all of them. The findings of perceived LAGs' potential to contribute to the sustainable development agenda link the discussions about SDGs with the regional development debates, which is a novelty in the academic discourse and added value to this research. Interpreting the results within the context of Czechia, a country with a specific history of post-communist transformation since 1989 and with a legacy of bureaucracy and top-down governance, illustrates observed phenomena in its particular context, which may be typical for some of the other EU countries as well. Based on the results, we argue that, despite the formal policy and institutional support for the LAGs, Czech regional sustainable development strategies are still far away from the concept of successful multilevel governance and do not build upon the new development paradigms like the New SDGs Development Paradigm (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020) or the neo-endogenous paradigm (Shucksmith et al., 2021).

Within the context of other recent research on LAGs, and regional and local governments in Europe, our results uncover similarities in local and regional actors' perceptions of the global and national agendas of sustainable development. Our research, novel because of its particular focus on the perception of the SDGs by LAGs, may be a starting point for a future in-depth dialogue concerning specificity (of the regions) vs. universality (of the commonly agreed SDGs). We consider this to be an important step toward the analysis of the role of non-state actors in sustainable regional development framed by the New SDGs Development Paradigm (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020)—the initial endeavor in this respect is introduced by a complementary article in a special issue (Dlouhá et al., 2022). More research is necessary in this field to shed light on the topic investigated by this exploratory study. Future studies need to focus on the regional aspects of particular strategies, documents, financial schemes, and practical LAGs' activities, with attention paid to the conditions for the SDGs implementation. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches are needed. The former is necessary to deepen the understanding of how LAGs' representatives relate to the sustainable development agenda and of the drivers and barriers of local actions. The latter may then provide data-based evidence and enable a comparison of the progress in SDGs' implementation at the regional and local levels in various European countries with different social, environmental, economic, and political backgrounds.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation was not required for this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

JDlouhá and JV prepared the conceptualization of the research and interpreted the data. JDlouhá, JV, MPo, MH, and JDlouhý prepared the methodology and data collection. All authors except MPě jointly prepared the questionnaire. JDlouhý and MH managed questionnaire data collection. JDlouhý curated the data. JV and IŠ provided and curated complementary data on LAGs in Czechia. JV, JDlouhá, MPo, and MH did the data analysis. JV was the leading writing author of the article, led the process of writing revisions with the strong support of JDlouhá, and the participation of MPo and MPě. JDlouhá and MPě contributed to the writing process and provided important conceptualizations. All authors commented on the manuscript drafts. JDlouhá acquired funding and coordinated the research project. JDlouhý, ZDL, and IŠ participated in the project administration. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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