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Should mayors be accountable for election promises? Effects of compulsory goal setting and reporting requirements on sustainability governance in four Latin American cities

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Since 1994, Colombian mayors have been legally held accountable for election promises and goal achievement in office; non-compliance or underperformance may trigger recalls. In several Latin American countries, civil-society coalitions striving for urban sustainability have successfully lobbied for adopting similar rules in more than 60 cities. We conducted a longitudinal, comparative case study, based on documents and 16 interviews, to study the characteristics and effects of the accountability mechanisms emerging in Bogotá, Córdoba, Guadalajara, and São Paulo. Results show that goal-setting and reporting requirements are beneficial to urban governance in terms of increasing programmatic policies, intra-municipal cooperation, civil society involvement, and citizen participation. However, unintended consequences, including a rigid, short-term focus on targets at the expense of long-term objectives, were also observed. This suggests trade-offs concerning accountability and flexibility and dilemmas in the choice of indicators; outcome-based targets foster long-term, holistic policymaking yet output targets align more easily to local government competencies and citizen demands. The engagement of strong local civil society organisations facilitates the effective implementation of mayoral accountability mechanisms. Our findings offer insights to practitioners and researchers of democratic innovations and international policy frameworks including localisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The design of accountability mechanisms at the city level in diverse contexts and alternatives to the dominant model of voluntary goal-setting require further attention and research.

KEYWORDS

performance accountability, urban governance, sustainable development goals, sustainability reporting, Latin America, election promises, local government, democratic innovation

1 Introduction

In international policy discussions, two ideas have become mainstream in recent decades: the world needs sustainable urban governance, and sustainable urban governance needs goals and indicators (Ferreira da Cruz et al., 2019). Since the 1990s, then promoted by the UN's "Agenda 21," many cities in Europe, North America, and other world regions have witnessed the

emergence of sustainability monitoring initiatives run by municipalities or civil society organisations (Sharifi, 2020; Wray et al., 2017). Initially, a bottom-up approach of selecting indicators based on local priorities was more prevalent; in recent years, the “top-down” variant of referring to standardised frameworks (such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or other indicator sets including ISO’s, 2014) has become more common. In these three decades of goals gaining a central role in urban sustainability governance, one constant in most countries has been the reliance on aspirational goals, non-committal monitoring of progress, and voluntary reviews by interested parties. Some of these voluntary efforts have had positive effects by influencing a city’s and country’s sustainability discourse, data availability, and institutional capacities (Lehtonen et al., 2016; Ortiz-Moya and Reggiani, 2023). This is similar to the SDG framework itself, which is also designed as a non-binding agreement (Aust and du Plessis, 2018; Biermann et al., 2017) that brought discursive benefits (Biermann et al., 2022) but shows bleak prospects in terms of actual goal achievement (Wu et al., 2023; Zeng et al., 2020).

The trend towards voluntary, non-binding goal-setting arrangements in (inter) national sustainability governance contrasts with an alternative development that also originated in the 1990s and gained prominence in Latin America. In 1994, Colombia introduced legal obligations for mayors to be held accountable for election promises and goal achievement in office; non-compliance or under-performance may trigger recalls. As depicted in Figure 1, this accountability mechanism addresses the electoral-administrative cycle by requiring candidates to write explicit manifestos, elected mayors to formalise plans with goals, and mayors to report on goal achievement.

According to its proponents (Bravo, 2019; Programa Cidades Sustentáveis, 2020), these new accountability rules should have two major clusters of benefits: One is increased government performance resulting from more programmatic policymaking, less corruption, and less clientelist politics; the other is better functioning (local) democracy resulting from more citizen participation and trust. The combined effects are expected to lead to a more effective “sustainability governance” at city level. To what extent does this innovation (belonging to “Latin America’s experimentalist vocation” (Pogrebinschi, 2018) yet hardly known in other parts of the world), deliver on these promises?

The extant literature contains few answers. Internationally, there are studies about SDG localisation and urban governance (e.g., Morita et al., 2020; Valencia et al., 2019) and some, mainly US-based findings

about the relationship between community indicators and government performance systems (Ammons and Madej, 2017; de Lancer Julnes et al., 2019; Greenwood, 2008). Numerous scholars call for more case studies about urban sustainability governance, particularly concerning reporting (Bexell and Jönsson, 2019), experiences in the Global South (Bell and Morse, 2018; Meuleman and Niestroy, 2015), and longitudinal research (Giles-Corti et al., 2016). In the absence of systematic documentation that would allow a comprehensive mapping or analysis of practices in various Latin American countries, we opted for a comparative, longitudinal case study on the four cities of Bogotá, Córdoba, Guadalajara, and São Paulo. To structure our research and guide the selection of methods, we developed the following two research questions:

1. What are the formal characteristics of novel performance accountability mechanisms that have evolved among pioneering local governments in Colombia, Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico?
2. What are the positive and negative effects of these mechanisms in relation to different design features and contextual factors according to a multi-year evaluation?

Our study’s purpose is threefold: (i) to produce an empirical understanding of some performance accountability arrangements for city mayors in Latin America, (ii) to help develop a replicable evaluation framework and research agenda, and (iii) to contribute lessons for policymakers in the field of urban sustainability governance (including the SDGs).

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: Based on insights from the academic literature, we first present an assessment framework designed to study the characteristics and effects of the emerging accountability mechanisms. The second section details the selection of cases and methods. In the results section, we introduce the case study cities and provide evidence on the above research questions. In the discussion, we reflect on study’s academic merit and make suggestion for further research. The conclusion contains succinct answers to the overall research question.

2 Assessment framework

In line with good practice recommendations to be transparent about the analytical choices made in developing one’s assessment tools (Bovens et al., 2008, p. 234) we developed an assessment framework that aligns with our research questions.

Our first research question—addressing the formal characteristics of the new accountability mechanisms—is mainly descriptive and methodologically straightforward. It can be explored via data found in documents and factual descriptions by local observers who are familiar with the long-term evolution of a city’s system. Since the research object concerns accountability rules, a useful conceptual tool also applied in this study is the “accountability cube” (Brandsma and Schillemans, 2012). This model proposes analysing a given accountability mechanism in terms of three dimensions: How much accountability-relevant information is provided (little vs. much, applicable in the present study to mayoral plans and reports), the level of discussion triggered (intensive vs. non-intensive, applicable in the present study to exchanges between mayors and other stakeholders



including the public), and the amount of consequences (few vs. many, applicable, e.g., to the threat of recall).

Our second, evaluative research question (on the intended and unintended effects of an accountability mechanism) is both conceptually and methodologically more challenging. In terms of effects, it is legitimate to assess whether the intended benefits such as “less clientelist policymaking” are observed. However, this is conceptually not sufficient as all governance innovations are likely to have intended as well as unintended consequences (Dahler-Larsen, 2013; Lehtonen et al., 2016). Therefore, assessing the relative value of a new mechanism requires probing for diverse effects in various domains. Moreover, research on public accountability and performance management has shown that well-intended innovations can have effects that most observers would classify as negative, e.g., when the publication of performance indicators leads to organisational risk aversion, rigidity, and strategic behaviour known as the “gaming” of targets (Bovens, 2005; De Bruijn, 2002; Pollitt, 2006). To capture this variety of potential effects—positive and negative, intended and unintended—we build on an assessment framework used elsewhere (e.g., Hezri and Dovers, 2006; Lehtonen et al., 2016; Niemann and Hoppe, 2018) that distinguishes three main clusters: instrumental, conceptual, and political-symbolic aspects. Instrumental effects would be evident if the accountability mechanism led to more efficient, evidence-informed governmental action (intended and positive) or the gaming of targets (unintended and negative). Typical stakeholders for this type of “use and influence” of goals and indicators are politicians and senior civil servants. The second cluster concerns conceptual effects as potentially evident from organisational learning and intra-governmental collaboration (positive) or the emergence of a blame culture (negative). Typically affected are staff of government or civil society organisations. The third cluster concerns political, symbolic, and discursive effects such as more attention to sustainability or citizen trust (positive) or the loss of trust and alienation between the government and citizens. The latter, unintended phenomenon has been described as the “tyranny of light” by Tsoukas (1997). Symbolic

“greenwashing” (cf., Velte, 2022) also belongs to this category. Table 1 summarises effects and main stakeholders of the accountability mechanisms as expected on the basis of prior research.

Methodologically, the challenge is that most potential effects are intangible. It is thus difficult to observe them empirically and also hard to attribute them causally to any given intervention. On the matter of citizen trust, for example, population surveys could contain relevant data, yet even if they existed at the city level (which is often not the case), one cannot interpret any changes in trust as evidence of the accountability mechanism being benign or harmful. Ultimately, numerous confounding factors at the national level may have caused the change. One way to deal with these methodological challenges is to combine the analysis of documents with interviews and to select multiple key informants per case to minimise biases and ensure triangulation.

3 Methodology including selection of cases

To investigate how the accountability mechanisms play out over time in different contexts, we opted for a longitudinal comparative case analysis using one case from each of four countries (cf., Table 2). Such a research design is appropriate for exploring differences and commonalities in practices and different settings and warrants selecting cases on the basis of “diverse” and “influential” sampling criteria (Gerring, 2007). Among the countries screened, Colombia is currently the only one with constitutional performance accountability rules for all subnational governments; in our analysis we included the capital (Bogotá) as case study city in the light of its highly influential citizen observatory “Bogotá Cómo Vamos” (Scrivens and Iasiello, 2010). In Brazil and later Argentina, performance accountability rules were introduced via by-laws at the municipal level. From each country, we selected the city with the longest track record and some academic documentation, namely São Paulo (Cáceres, 2014; Marin, 2016) and

TABLE 1 Potential effects of the accountability mechanisms.

Use and influence of goals and indicators	Associated concepts	Typical stakeholders	Intended, positive effects: Declared by proponents or plausible according to the literature	Unintended, negative effects: Plausible according to the literature
Instrumental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management • Decision-making • Policy performance • Policy alignment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elected politicians • Senior civil servants • Policy experts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence-informed policymaking • More effectiveness and efficiency • Less clientelism, less corruption 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rigidity • Gaming • Threshold effects • Costs of reporting
Conceptual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisational change • Knowledge, ideas • Networks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff in local government • Civil society activists / contributors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better informed staff, data literacy • Better informed citizenry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blame culture • Aversion to learning and experimentation
Political, symbolic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication, participation, norm-setting • Agenda-setting • Legitimacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizens • Media • Businesses • Civil society groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More citizen participation and trust • Public discourse geared towards sustainability • More transparent political culture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public discourse oriented towards short-term goal achievement • “Tyranny of light” • Symbolic “greenwashing”

TABLE 2 Prevalence of sub-national performance accountability mechanisms in Latin America.

Country	Government level targeted for performance accountability	Name of the policy (<i>local name</i>)	Level of codification, year of origin
Argentina	Mayors in 5 cities (Romanutti and Cáceres, 2020)	Target Plan (<i>Plan de metas</i>)	Municipal bylaws, emerging since 2011
Brazil	Mayors in approx. 60 cities (Gasparido and Ferreira, 2017)	Target Plan / Programme (<i>Plano / Programa de metas</i>)	Municipal bylaws, emerging since 2008
Chile	Regional governors (Bravo, 2019)	Programmatic vote (<i>Voto programático</i>)	National law (2018); policy not yet applicable to mayors
Colombia	All subnational governments including all governors and mayors (Rey Salamanca, 2015)	Programmatic vote (<i>Voto programático</i>), in Bogotá also citizen initiative “Council How Are We doing” (<i>Concejo ¿cómo vamos?</i>)	Constitutional article (1994)
Mexico	Mayors in approx. 8 municipalities in metropolitan areas of Monterrey and Guadalajara (Niemann and Hoppe, 2021)	“Mayor, how are we doing?” (<i>Alcalde, ¿cómo vamos?</i>) and “Mayor, what have you done?” (<i>Alcalde, ¿qué has hecho?</i>)	Voluntary commitments by mayoral candidates, emerging since 1999
Paraguay	Mayor in at least one city (San Lorenzo)	Target Plan (<i>Plan de metas</i>)	Municipal by-law introduced in San Lorenzo in 2014; basic reporting only
Peru	Mayor in at least one city (Trujillo)	Target Plan (<i>Plan de metas</i>)	Municipal by-law introduced in Trujillo in 2014; no recent reports
Uruguay	Rules for mayors lobbied for by civil society initiatives (Niemann and Hoppe, 2021)	Target Plan (<i>Plan de metas</i>)	No approved policy in any city

Córdoba (Romanutti, 2012b). In Mexico, mayoral performance accountability is not a legal requirement but has been introduced as a voluntary arrangement in two metropolitan areas (Monterrey and Guadalajara) by local civil society organisations (Niemann and Hoppe, 2021). Guadalajara has been subject to prior research (Soto-González, 2020), which justified its selection as a case study. In both Paraguay and Peru, at least one local government has bylaws on *plan de metas* yet these are hardly mentioned in municipal or local media reports, suggesting little active follow-up and limited research opportunities.

Our sample of four cases was researched through various data sources (Yin, 2018). In the absence of academic literature, this mainly concerned secondary material such as government websites, NGO reports and blogs, academic theses, media items, YouTube recordings and evaluation studies. In addition, we conducted 16 semi-structured interviews (face to face and via videoconference, lasting 45 to 90 min) between 2014 and 2022 with at least two key informants per case from different stakeholders, such as government representatives and civil society activists. In the case of Colombia, we also interviewed researchers familiar with the national law. The topic guides for interviews and the functions of interviewees are listed in [Supplementary materials](#). To avoid biases and the emergence of socially desirable answers, the semi-structured interviews with key informants did not probe for the presence of particular benefits. Instead, key informants were interviewed using open-ended questions (about positive and negative effects in the realm of elected politicians and decision-making, local government staff and organisational learning, and citizen trust and participation. To explore how positive and negative effects relate to design factors as well as the socio-political context of each city, we asked key informants about the suitability of mayoral performance mechanisms in different contexts and recommendations for change and improvement. In addition, we analysed the socio-political setup of each city (making use of

certain proxy indicators such as country corruption ratings). For national comparisons in other world regions, one may use governance indicators (Glass and Newig, 2019) yet reliable micro-data are not available at the subnational level for Latin American countries with frequent political upheavals.

For each case, we set up a file containing secondary material and interview transcripts that were translated from the original Spanish and Portuguese into English. The resulting research material was coded and analysed in line with the research framework outlined above. The main characteristics covered were the mechanism’s impact on the electoral cycle (pre-election, planning and reporting) and three dimensions of accountability (information, discussions, consequences). Data and emerging patterns were discussed between the researchers to arrive at an indicative rating on the scale high/medium/low on each of the accountability cube’s three dimensions (information, discussions, and consequences) and to arrive at summary statements about each mechanism’s strengths and weaknesses. The mechanism’s potential effects were researched by listing all declared objectives as found in preambles to municipal by-laws or explicitly mentioned in blogs and policy papers written by advocates. Declared objectives almost exclusively had positive connotations (such as “better informed citizenry,” “more efficient public management”). Negative or “perverse” side-effects (e.g., rigidity, gaming, blame culture) were not mentioned but constitute a possibility according to ample scholarship on performance management. In line with the assessment framework (cf., [Table 1](#)), we clustered potential effects in terms of the three main uses and influences of performance information (instrumental, conceptual, and political/symbolic/discursive). Results and emerging patterns per case were subsequently compared and condensed to show commonalities and differences between the cities and to help formulate hypotheses for further research.

4 Results

To provide essential context information, [Table 3](#) presents a summary data of the four case studies. Bogotá, Córdoba, Guadalajara and São Paulo are metropolises with more than 1 million inhabitants, and democratically elected mayors (holding office for 3–4 years) and city councils. In terms of country rankings, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico occupy average places on the UN's Human Development Index and Transparency International's corruption index. According to World Bank assessments, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and to a lesser extent Argentina are relatively advanced in terms of results-based public management and monitoring and evaluation capacities ([Feinstein and Moreno, 2015](#)).

4.1 Formal characteristics of performance accountability mechanisms per city

In this section, we present each case study city and summarise our findings in an overview ([Table 4](#)). For each case, we sketch the country context and how the accountability mechanism affects the electoral-administrative cycle (i.e., election, planning, reporting), followed by a concise description of how the mechanism has been implemented over time. We added an indicative rating of the mechanism in terms of the Accountability Cube's three dimensions.

- Case 1: Bogotá (Colombia): Evolution of *Programmatic Voting* since 1994

At a time when Colombia was internationally known for internal strife and crime, Colombia's 1991 constitution ushered in greater levels of decentralisation, a revamped planning system, and various direct democracy mechanisms, including referenda. In 1994, the Programmatic Voting Law came into force, introducing performance accountability to the (sub-national) elections, government plans, and reports. In the election phase, the law requires all candidates for mayor (and governor) to submit their manifestos to a national registry. The National Planning Authority issued guidelines for candidates on how to elaborate such plans (including goals and indicators) but as yet there are no formal content requirements ([Muñoz Ocampo and Álvarez Méndez, 2023](#)). After an election, the elected mayor must elaborate a "development plan" aligning to the manifesto as well as multi-year (provincial, national) master plans and submit this within four months to the municipal council, which has the right to revise, request corrections, and approve the plan. A local and national planning council monitors coherence with existing (master) plans and subsequently of goal achievement ([Romanutti, 2012a](#)), for which the

mayor must elaborate yearly progress reports. Amendments to the development plan are possible through the municipal council. Citizen oversight committees are legally mandated to exercise vigilance over all sorts of public management activities ([Pogrebinschi, 2023](#)). In recent decades, Bogotá's various mayors have all complied with the Programmatic Voting laws planning and reporting requirements. Importantly, the law foresees the possibility of a recall referendum if, after 12 months of tenure, a mayor is accused of failing to achieve stated goals ([Uribe Mendoza, 2016](#)). Recalls are rarely successful (as they require support by 40% of voters) but are frequently attempted. Colombia's capital is home to the highly influential, award-winning civil society initiative *Bogotá Cómo Vamos* ([Scrivens and Iasiello, 2010](#)). In addition to compiling and publishing data on sustainability indicators, it organises thematic discussions with mayoral candidates, issues multiple policy recommendations for the development plan, and runs the initiative "Council, How are we doing" that publicly monitors the voting behaviour (including task fulfilment) of municipal councillors. In terms of the three dimensions of accountability ([Brandtsma and Schillemans, 2012](#)), the substantial amount of planning and reporting and close scrutiny by civil society and governmental bodies leads to Bogotá's mechanism being rated as "much" for the information phase and "intensive" for the discussions phase. The constant threat of a recall or destitution, which came into play when Bogotá's former mayor and later president was temporarily removed from power in 2014, warrants qualifying the sanctions phase as "many."

- Case 2: São Paulo (Brazil): Evolution of *Target Plan* since 2008

After the end of the dictatorship and with the introduction of its 1988 constitution, Brazil became "the world's largest laboratory of democratic innovations" ([Pogrebinschi, 2021](#)). Against the backdrop of widespread practices of clientelism and patrimonialism ([Gaspardo and Ferreira, 2017](#)), the country obtained an institutional architecture of citizen participation and deliberation and newly empowered municipalities developed instruments such as "participatory budgeting" that spread internationally ([Porto de Oliveira, 2017](#)). In São Paulo, a set of business and civil society leaders founded in 2007 the *Nossa São Paulo* network that, inspired by *Bogotá Cómo Vamos*, started to conduct educational campaigns, publish sustainability indicators, establish work groups about public policies, and monitor the city council actions. The running costs exceeded \$1 million annually ([Fiabane et al., 2014](#)). Further, the network drafted and successfully lobbied for the "Target Plan" bylaw approved in 2008. This bylaw does not address the election phase, during which civil society organisations organise debates with candidates willing to participate, but obliges elected mayors to complete a governmental plan within

TABLE 3 Case study cities and countries.

Case study city	Inhabitants	Mayoral term	Country	Human Development Index (2022)	Corruption Perceptions Index (2022)
Bogotá	8.0 mio	4 years (no immediate re-election)	Colombia	0.76 (rank 91)	39/100 (rank 91)
São Paulo	12.4 mio	4 years	Brazil	0.76 (rank 89)	38/100 (rank 94)
Córdoba	1.6 mio	4 years	Argentina	0.85 (rank 48)	38/100 (rank 94)
Guadalajara	1.4 mio	3 years (with 1 re-election)	Mexico	0.78 (rank 77)	31/126 (rank 126)

TABLE 4 History and main features of performance accountability mechanisms in Bogotá, São Paulo, Córdoba and Guadalajara.

	Bogotá (CO): Programmatic Vote	São Paulo (BR): Target Plan	Córdoba (AR): Target Plan	Guadalajara (MX): What Have You Done, Mayor
Year of initiation	1994	2008	2011	2015
Legal framework	Constitution and national law	City-level bylaw	City-level bylaw	Voluntary commitments
Pre-election promises:				
Content requirements	Alignment with multi-year (provincial) master plans; no detailed content requirements	No formal requirement	No formal requirement	No formal requirement
Submission modality	Registration of all manifestos by national agency	No formal requirements; voluntary public debates	No formal requirements; public debates	NGO collects manifestos and organizes public debates
Post-election plans:				
Content requirements	Must align with <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • multi-year (provincial, national) master plans • manifesto / election promises 	Must <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • align with election promises, Strategic Plan, Budget • contain indicators about sustainable development and promotion of equity, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No reference to election promises • Must contain quantified indicators for areas of government action (e.g., public works, culture) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must align by law align with multi-year (provincial, national) master plans • Voluntary commitment to civil society: plans for 5 dimensions
Dissemination / deliberation	Submission to and approval by municipal council	Wide dissemination via media and public hearings at the district level	Submission to municipal council that organises a public hearing	To the public, media
Timing	Within 4 months	Within 90 days	Within 120 days	Not addressed explicitly
Potential adjustments	Via amendment in council	By public dissemination	By informing council and public dissemination	Not addressed explicitly
Post-governing reports:				
Content requirements	Progress	Indicators and goal achievement	Goal achievement	Goal achievement
Submission modality	To municipal council	Public dissemination	To municipal council	To the public, the media
Timing / periodicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual progress reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Semi-annual indicator reports • Annual progress reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual progress reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual progress reports
Accountability cube:				
Information phase	Much (embedded in nationwide government system)	Medium (quantity of data subject to willingness of politicians)	Medium (quantity of data subject to willingness of politicians)	Little (quantity of data subject to willingness of politicians)
Discussion phase	Intensive (close scrutiny by civil society and gov. bodies)	Intensive: (close scrutiny by large civil society platform)	Intensive (close scrutiny by civil society platform)	Medium (limited scrutiny by / cooperation with civil society)
Consequences/ sanctions	Many (risk of recall)	Medium (risk of municipal censure)	Medium (risk of municipal censure)	Few (no formal sanctions)

90 days of assuming power. Content-wise, the plan must contain the main goals presented in the mayor’s electoral campaign, be geared towards “the promotion of environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable development,” and have quantified “performance indicators”; process-wise, the bylaw stipulates: (i) wide dissemination in district-level public hearings; (ii) the possibility of amendments if changes are required; and (iii) semi-annual indicator reports plus yearly progress reports. Non-compliance with these formal rules is

punishable by impeachment, yet there are no sanctions for non-achievement of targets. Since the bylaw came into force, all mayors have complied with formal requirements. The first administration (2009–2012) produced a plan with 223 targets, and the next one (2013–2016) built a dedicated website for a plan with 123 targets and links to the budget that was discussed in 35 public hearings, reaching cumulatively more than 10,000 participants (Baliña, 2017). The third administration (2017–2020) received more

than 20,000 proposals during the public consultation phase of its plan (Cidade de São Paulo, 2022) yet it deactivated the previous website and faced several implementation difficulties due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Following São Paulo's leadership, similar bylaws with minor adjustments were established in over 60 other Brazilian municipalities (Gaspardo and Ferreira, 2017). Attempts by supporters to turn the Target Plan into a national law were thus far unsuccessful (Programa Cidades Sustentáveis, 2020), just as lawsuits by opponents who had argued that Target Plans interfere with the executive's constitutional independence (Villela and Souza, 2021). Compared to Bogotá, the "information phase" (Brandtsma and Schillemans, 2012) of São Paulo's accountability mechanisms is considered more limited (rating: medium) yet the "discussion phase" is considered equally intensive. The "consequences" are rated "few" as there are hardly any sanctions—neither legally nor politically—for non-compliance.

- Case 3: Córdoba (Argentina): Evolution of the *Target Plan* since 2011

In contrast to Brazil, Argentina transitioned to democracy in the 1980s without a substantial constitutional reform. The 1994 amendment increased some elements of citizen participation that have since evolved unevenly across the country, with two-thirds of participatory innovations observed in some large cities (Pogrebinschi, 2021). In Córdoba, Argentina's second largest city, a coalition of universities, business leaders, media firms, and civil society representatives established the network *Nuestra Córdoba* ("Our Córdoba") in 2009. Inspired by its namesake in São Paulo yet institutionally independent, *Nuestra Córdoba* begun collecting and publishing quality-of-life indicators, mobilising citizens, and lobbying for sustainable development policies. Furthermore, the network managed to gain approval in the municipal council of a Target Plan modelled after São Paulo's. Córdoba's 2011 bylaw, too, does not address the election phase, yet Argentina's national laws mandate the diffusion and public debate of election manifestos (Cruz Pérez, 2024). In Córdoba, the elected mayor must elaborate and submit a Target Plan to the municipal council within 120 days. The municipal council, and not the mayor himself or herself, is also tasked with the plan's diffusion. Contrary to São Paulo, the bylaw in Córdoba does not explicitly reference election promises or to the promotion of "sustainable development." Instead, the target plan is required to cover main lines of action (short and long-term) for at least "public works and services, public administration, health, social action, environment, culture, education, tourism, neighbourhood participation and economic development," in each domain with "quantified indicators." The plan can be adjusted by informing the council and the public, and the mayor must submit yearly progress reports. A lack of goal achievement is not sanctioned. However, the lack of reporting constitutes a "serious irregularity." Since the bylaw entered into force, all mayors formally complied with it. The first administration presented a plan with 513 targets (for 214 objectives in 16 thematic areas). According to civil-society observers, 42% of these targets could not be monitored due to the lack of suitable indicators and baseline values (Romanutti and Cáceres, 2020). The next administration produced a plan with 397 targets for 22 objectives and easier access to information thanks to the use of an open data platform. Public hearings were merely of an informational nature and had no

deliberative character yet they still achieved higher levels of public interest than other hearings (Romanutti and Cáceres, 2020). The network *Nuestra Córdoba* computed overall goal achievement levels that were significantly lower than the percentage communicated by the mayor (Baliña, 2017). Following the lead of Córdoba, similar target law bylaws with minor adjustments were established in several other Argentine municipalities (Gaspardo and Ferreira, 2017). In terms of the "accountability cube" dimensions, Córdoba's mechanism fares the same as São Paulo's, with "few consequences" yet "medium-level information" and "intensive discussions" due to the continuous engagement by the civil society network that had conceived it.

- Case 4: Guadalajara (Mexico): Evolution of *What Have You Done, Mayor* since 2016

Although Mexico's constitution had not undergone major changes since 1917, the country initiated decentralisation reforms in the 1980s and transitioned from a de facto one-party regime to multi-party democracy in 2000. In terms of national-subnational coordination, Mexico has a multi-layered system resembling that of Colombia, with local governments crafting "development programmes" that need to be aligned with higher-level, national plans. In recent decades, Mexico has also seen the emergence of numerous consultative bodies, giving it the most participatory institutions in the region (Pogrebinschi, 2021). Several citizen-run transparency initiatives concern the country's deteriorating levels of organised crime and impunity. In Guadalajara—the country's third-largest metropolitan area and capital of Jalisco state—a group of business leaders, nonprofit organizations, and universities took inspiration from the example of *Bogotá Cómo Vamos* and founded *Jalisco Cómo Vamos* in 2010. This organisation, primarily a citizen observatory, monitors and disseminates local indicators and public policy proposals through its website and media contacts. In 2015, *Jalisco Cómo Vamos* started the "What have you done, Mayor" programme as a voluntary arrangement: In the run-up to municipal elections, mayoral candidates were invited to debates, to make explicit manifestos, and to commit to participating in the programme if elected. Once elected, the mayor elaborated—in collaboration with a technical team from *Jalisco Cómo Vamos*—a plan with goals and indicators (currently in five domains "economy, education, environment, security, urban development, and public services"). During a mayor's tenure, *Jalisco Cómo Vamos* tracks goal achievement and disseminates this once or twice per year via a dedicated website and public events. When first run in 2015, the mayors of two municipalities, including Guadalajara City, participated. In subsequent electoral cycles, four other municipalities from the metropolitan area joined. Compared to the other case studies, the "information" phase of this entirely voluntary accountability mechanism is rated as relatively "little" and the consequences as "few". The discussion component is rated "medium" considering the active deliberations between the citizen observatory and mayors.

4.2 Positive and negative effects of mechanisms in relation to design features and the local context

In response to the second research question, we present evidence of instrumental, conceptual, and political-discursive use and influence,

TABLE 5 Summary of effects of mayoral performance accountability mechanisms in Bogotá, São Paulo, Córdoba and Guadalajara.

	Bogotá (CO): Programmatic Vote (since 1994)	São Paulo (BR): Target Plan (since 2008)	Córdoba (AR): Target Plan (since 2011)	Guadalajara (MX): What Have You Done, Mayor (since 2015)
Declared purpose	“Participation mechanism to impose compliance” with the manifesto	“Big pact of transparency between the administration and citizens”	“Instrument of planning and citizen communication”	Tool for “accountability and government-citizen communication”
Instrumental effects				
Intended / positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better informed policies More transparency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better informed policies More transparency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better informed policies More transparency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better informed policies More transparency
Unintended / negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High transaction costs associated with multiple layers of oversight 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rigidity, loss of flexibility to adjust policies to changing circumstances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High transaction costs associated with complex reports 	
Conceptual effects				
Intended / positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased awareness among politicians and other stakeholders of need to cooperate for long-term sustainability outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased data literacy among municipal staff Increased policy coherence among municipal departments Multi-stakeholder collaboration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased data literacy among municipal staff Increased policy coherence among municipal departments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased data literacy among municipal staff
Unintended / negative				
Political, symbolic, discursive effects				
Intended / positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased citizen engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased citizen engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased citizen engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Politicians acknowledging importance of accountability
Unintended / negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recall threat fosters timid, unspecific election promises 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on short-term and tangible outputs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on short-term and tangible outputs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Citizens daunted by complexity of indicator data
Design and context considerations:				
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> City-level mechanism part of nation-wide planning and data system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> City-level mechanism part of city network and support programme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> City-level mechanism part of multi-city network 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Economical and flexible set-up
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of guidelines on the content of manifestos Threat of recall unreasonable vis-à-vis veto power of municipal council 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of the bylaw’s depends on mayor’s disposition Lack of guidelines on (outcome-oriented) content of plans and reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of bylaw depends on mayor’s disposition Lack of guidelines on (outcome-oriented) content of plans and reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initiative is entirely dependent on candidates’ willingness and civil society resources

along with an analysis of strengths and weaknesses of each accountability mechanism. Table 5 presents a comparative summary of the main findings for each case. For each illustrative quote, there is a code pointing to the key informant (cf., List of Interviewees).

• Case 1: Bogotá (Colombia): Effects of Programmatic Voting

According to the law’s first article, programmatic voting is “the participation mechanism through which citizens [...] impose as a mandate on the elected person in compliance” with their election promises. Key informants agreed that the law generally has the desired effect of contributing to transparency and to programmatic election debates and evidence-informed policies. These benefits are contingent on the law’s integration into a nationwide planning system that is equipped with better quality data (on social, environmental and economic indicators) than that of other Latin-American countries.

Local stakeholders consider data availability as a key ingredient that allows the political discourse and monitoring of goal achievement to focus on sustainability outcomes (e.g., air quality) rather than about outputs (e.g., number of trees planted). In Bogotá, the active work of civil society organisations (such as *Bogotá Cómo Vamos*) in producing quality-of-life data, mobilising stakeholders and proposing public policies was credited as contributing to citizen participation and sustainability-oriented policymaking by successive city governments. Some informants were critical of the set-up: “*Bogotá Cómo Vamos* has lost some of its legitimacy. It is an oversight association of business origin, not a citizen initiative” (CO3). Furthermore, relative improvement over time can lead to a decrease in consensus. In the words of a senior municipal employee (CO3): “When in the 1990s Bogotá was in a serious crisis it was easy to agree about acute issues we had to resolve together. As we improve, there begins to be a divergence of opinion on the city’s priorities.”

The programmatic voting law's harsh sanctions are also viewed as problematic. As the interviewee (CO3) commented:

Programmatic voting is theoretically nice but doesn't work well in practice. That candidates have to guarantee something is good. If they are very committed to an issue, they make it explicit in the manifesto and later in the development plan. However, if they do not want to take risks, they set general goals that no one can charge them for.

To remedy this situation, there are calls for legal guidelines on the content of manifestos (Muñoz Ocampo and Álvarez Méndez, 2023). Other critical design factors concern the limited terms of office without re-election ("when the mayor arrives, the first six months are spent preparing the development plan"; CO4) and the fact that the burden of accountability is placed exclusively on mayors. As put by informant CO3:

People are politically uneducated and don't realise that the mayor cannot govern without councillors. The citizens' logic for electing councillors is one and for mayors another. In fact, the elections are on different days! In large cities, part of the council vote is a vote of opinion, but the bulk is a clientelist vote. [...]. One would need a political reform guaranteeing that mayors will govern with a majority.

In this context, key informants interviewed saw the civil society project of monitoring the councillors' work as a positive contribution yet also an expensive undertaking that relies on the continuous investment of resources by *Bogotá Cómo Vamos*.

- Case 2: São Paulo (Brazil): Effects of the *Target Plan*

São Paulo's bylaw does not stipulate objectives, but a recent evaluation compiled by the municipality describes the Target Plan as a "big pact of transparency between the municipal administration and population" designed to "facilitate and foster social control" (Cidade de São Paulo, 2022). According to various municipal and civil society informants, the law contributed overall to more transparency and programmatic political debates (during elections) and goal-oriented policymaking during a mayor's tenure. The bylaw also triggered significant citizen participation (as evident from public hearings and the initiative's name recognition). Key informants stressed that both types of benefits would not have been achieved without the continuous investment of time and energy on behalf of civil society actors (belonging to the *Nossa São Paulo* network) who were also responsible for the bylaw's initial formulation and spread to other cities. Cooperation in a network of cities lends some stability but did not prevent shocks when one administration (2017–2020) deactivated the municipality's Target Plan dashboard. In the words of a local interviewee (BR1): "It was a big step back when they took down these websites. It was seen as an assault on this idea of the Target Programme and government accountability." Later administrations rebuilt dashboards (and additional tools for geo-referenced monitoring), yet the incident showed the mechanism's dependence on politicians' willingness to engage.

In terms of conceptual effects, the network and its bylaw are also credited with fostering multi-stakeholder partnerships: In São Paulo, "one can observe religious community leaders discussing

accountability and transparency, leftist militants discussing indicators and targets, and businessmen demanding opportunities for participation" (Fiabane et al., 2014, p. 834). Similarly, the municipal staff interviewed explained that the drafting of a plan—after the election—led to more intra-departmental coordination, policy coherence, and data literacy among government staff. Negative conceptual effects such as organisational competition or blaming were not observed. However, a study of decision-making practices in the municipality found evidence of three types of negative effects typically associated with performance management: "external gaming, myopia and lock-in" (Marin, 2016). In one instance, São Paulo's mayor decided to stick to the target of constructing waste collection points (against better judgement available a year after planning) because he feared the political costs of amending the target. As commented by a municipal employee (BR1): "If you have to change your targets, then you are seen as someone who is not a good mayor." According to some informants, the fact that most targets in the plans of successive administrations concerned tangible municipal outputs can also be interpreted as a negative byproduct of the entire accountability mechanism that puts the focus on short-term goal achievement (expressed in percentages) rather than city-level sustainability outcomes in the long term.

- Case 3: Córdoba (Argentina): Effects of *Target Plan*

The preamble to Córdoba's bylaw refers to it as an "instrument of planning and citizen communication." According to key informants, the implicit objectives of better-planned municipal actions and better-informed citizens are generally achieved. There is evidence of high levels of citizen engagement (also due to the communication work done by civil society working in a network with like-minded groups in other Argentine cities). In terms of instrumental and conceptual effects, municipal employees reported that Córdoba's bylaw triggered better intra-departmental coordination and capacities:

We had to do trainings on methodological aspects because civil servants were not prepared to formulate indicators. At the beginning it was more of an obligation and now those responsible sit down and plan together. [...]. There are many secretaries who really take it as a basis for measurement and update themselves annually, and check whether their goals are being met (AR3).

In Córdoba's case, the choice of goals was initially the subject of many discussions. One debate concerned the scope of the municipality's influence and accountability. In the words of another municipal employee (AR4):

We are very focused on product indicators and not outcomes [...]. The dilemma comes as to how far you influence. For example, birth or death rates: You don't know which part was affected by you and which part affected by the province or nation.

In addition, there have been repeated debates about who is mandated to formulate policies when the Target Plan is elaborated after an election. Some municipal administrations have publicly rejected proposals made by civil society actors. As one senior municipal official explained (AR5):

We did have some interference with Nuestra Córdoba where they confused that their goals should be ours. [...] We strongly insisted

that the social contract is the election manifesto, and from there, the goals must emerge.

At the same time, the official (AR5) acknowledged that “in the manifesto, the choices should be much more explicit. Because manifestos often describe abstract wishes.” Civil society representatives concurred by stating that both manifestos and plans often lack specificity (“They make Target Plans for compliance. Modest ones. And then in the course of their mandate they make strategic decisions,” AR1) yet that the entire accountability mechanism led, nonetheless, to a more programmatic electoral cycle:

These are informal social processes of control and the Target Plans have improved the pre-electoral process in the sense that not just anything is promised any longer. (AR1).

- Case 4: Guadalajara (Mexico): Effects of *What Have You Done, Mayor*

According to the project’s website, “This accountability and governance tool seeks to evaluate the achievement of government actions and to establish a communication channel between citizens and the government.” Increased uptake of the mechanism by candidates and elected mayors (of multiple municipalities), along with substantial citizen interest in the reports produced, are evidence of the mechanism’s having political and discursive effects. In this case, in particular, the investment and prior standing of the civil society organisation was a prerequisite for this achievement. As representative of *Jalisco Cómo Vamos* (MX1) explained:

What we were doing in terms of monitoring was already completely mediatized, so to speak. Among academics and authorities, we had a voice that mattered to the media.

The continued willingness by politicians to participate, however, cannot be taken for granted. Reportedly, local mayors stopped cooperating with another, similarly designed initiative in northern Mexico that was overtly critical:

They pressed too much. The thing is that if you press too hard it doesn’t work. It has worked better for us to sit at the table, teach them, and tell them why investing is important (MX1).

In terms of conceptual effects, the mechanism also benefited municipal capacities and attitudes. In the words of one key informant (MX1): “They still have to work a lot and find it very difficult to differentiate between impact and process indicators” yet “at least we see progress in that they have fewer and better indicators”; municipal staff “now give meaning to being accountable and see it as a need to respond.” According to politicians, collaboration with civil-society observatories has also led to better policies as an instrumental effect of this mechanism. A mayor commented publicly (*Jalisco Cómo Vamos, 2022*):

What you have done, Mayor, is a programme that challenges and confronts governments. But above all, it helps us be better, set better goals, and achieve better results. [...] One great idea of

Jalisco Cómo Vamos was to conduct a survey to find out what [the children] think. [...] Through this study, what we are doing is making all our policies cross-cutting and centred around girls and boys.

In terms of potentially negative effects at the discursive level, another informant (MX2) mentioned the risk of technical (sustainability) information having adverse effects on civic empowerment:

If we get too much into the technicalities and talk about ‘indicators’ suddenly it is more complex to reach citizens.

5 Discussion

This paper set out to investigate the evolution of performance accountability mechanisms in Latin American cities, which have been under-researched yet offer valuable insights for academic debate about effective urban sustainability governance. In the four cities studied, the legal obligations for goal-setting and reporting were associated with an increase in programmatic policies, intra-municipal cooperation, civil society involvement, and citizen participation. An important contingency factor emerging from our research is that in all four case study cities, many benefits were dependent on the investment of civil-society networks (e.g., for data collection, reporting, websites, pro bono consultancies). Approving the legal framework alone may be merely symbolic: In one Brazilian city, the Target Plan bylaw reportedly fell into disuse when the civil society network that had promoted it ceased its operational activity. Overall, the institutional sustainability of the accountability mechanisms was found to be the lowest in Guadalajara and the highest in Bogotá. Our findings support the assertion that the thriving of citizen observatories requires the existence of favourable legislation as well as the presence of a civil society with a critical mass and stable resources (*Díaz Jiménez and Natal, 2014*). It is also in line with large-scale evaluations from the sub-continent. One recent study of 3,744 democratic innovations across Latin America found almost 500 targeting the evaluation of policies, which likely indicates dissatisfaction with democracy, feeding both civil society and government attempts to increase legitimacy (*Pogrebinschi, 2023*). However, many civil society monitoring initiatives are short-lived (*Niemann and Hoppe, 2021*).

Unintended, negative, or “perverse” effects of the accountability mechanisms were not observed on a large scale, but some were identified. One example concerned a municipality rigidly sticking to an outdated output target that was perceived as delivering on promises. This indicates a trade-off between accountability and flexibility, which is well-documented in the public management literature (e.g., *De Bruijn, 2002*). In light of this, the observation that Bogotá has relatively more outcome-based goals deserves further attention. After all, outcome indicators are essential for sustainability-oriented monitoring and policymaking (*Hák et al., 2016*) and less amenable to gaming; on the other hand, publicly reporting on shorter-term output data can improve government performance and citizen trust, which may be vital in underprivileged neighbourhoods and jurisdictions with lower levels of state capacities. This suggests further trade-offs concerning the relative benefits and constraints of

TABLE 6 Hypotheses for further research.

Factor	Hypotheses	Relevant case(s)
Design features of accountability mechanism	• Use of outcome indicators over output indicators in mayoral plans reduces the risks of short-term gaming	• Bogotá / Colombia
	• The high threat of sanctions for non-compliance discourages the elaboration of ambitious manifestos	• Bogotá / Colombia
	• Reporting on high content indicator data is unsuitable for engaging citizens	• Córdoba, Guadalajara
Local context and process	• The engagement of strong local civil society organisations facilitates the effective implementation of mayoral accountability mechanisms	• Multiple
	• Civil-society engagement in performance monitoring by a small set of organisations increases the risk of them being perceived as partisan	• Bogotá, Guadalajara
Country-level context	• The availability of reliable (national) datasets is a prerequisite to effectively use outcome-level goals at the city level	• Bogotá / Colombia
	• Broad legal competencies (covering health, education, environment, etc.) and as longer mayoral terms (>4 years) facilitate outcome-oriented performance accountability	• Multiple
	• Strong performance accountability has relatively more benefits in countries with low government effectiveness	• Multiple

outcome and output indicators in different policy sectors and local contexts.

This study enriches international debates (e.g., Valencia et al., 2019) about SDG localisation inasmuch as existing policy recommendations tend to be vague on the matter; one UN-affiliated guidance document (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2015, p. 19) states elusively that “as with SDG targets, it is generally preferable [...] to track outcomes (or the ends) rather than means. Yet the choice between input and outcome measures must be handled pragmatically.” Too many practitioners are still unaware of the potential downsides (in terms of perverse effects) of performance management. For practitioners, an important recommendation is probing for trade-offs concerning accountability and flexibility and dilemmas in the choice of indicators; outcome-based targets foster long-term, holistic policymaking yet output targets align more easily to local government competencies and citizen demands.

Studying “frontrunners” is a well-established approach (Gerring, 2007) yet has limitations. In this study, selecting the case of Guadalajara implies a survivorship bias because other voluntary arrangements started in other Mexican cities may no longer exist. Furthermore, a city’s targets in terms of policy sector and type was also not assessed systematically in this study. Overall, formal characteristics were relatively easier to code than the effects of each accountability mechanism, which emerge over time and are subject to competing perspectives from different stakeholders (Bovens et al., 2008). We contend that our assessment framework provides a useful starting point for further conceptual work (on additional assessment criteria and context indicators) and more empirical studies.

More research is needed, notably on the relative advantages and disadvantages of directing (city-level, urban) performance accountability and communication towards outcomes or outputs in divergent political contexts. After all, it is known that “good measurement systems and well-functioning performance accountability systems only operate in stable environments with a great deal of standardisation” (Van de Walle and Cornelissen, 2014, p. 453), yet these are not typical characteristics of cities in Latin America (and elsewhere). Further, in terms of citizen communication, it has been argued that to instill trust in institutions, storytelling may be more effective than “scientific evidence” (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). This too requires further research. We recommend studying a larger sample of cases/cities, with attention to government

competencies and resources (cf., Fuhr et al., 2018), cities’ governance settings (Morita et al., 2020), and the role of indicators in different sectors (environment, health, education) since these bring different dynamics in terms of politics and lay understanding (Batley and Mcloughlin, 2015). To facilitate further research, Table 6 lists a set of hypotheses derived from this explorative study and the city from our sample that gave rise to the formulation of each hypothesis.

6 Conclusion

This study explored the characteristics and effects of novel performance accountability mechanisms that have evolved among pioneering local governments in Colombia, Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico. In response to our first, descriptive research question on the mechanisms’ characteristics, we can conclude that the comparative analysis of Bogotá, São Paulo, Córdoba and Guadalajara showed three main types of legal approaches: a constitutional obligation in Colombia, city-level bylaws in Brazil and Argentina and, voluntary submission to external scrutiny by Mexican mayors. The mechanisms differ greatly in terms of scope. The Colombian system and Mexican project cover the entire electoral-administrative cycle, from election promises by candidates to a mayor’s reports on goal achievement. By contrast, the Brazilian and Argentine bylaws leave out the election phase. The latter approach pre-empts one difficulty inherent in the Colombian model: the mismatch between candidates making promises as individuals (or parties) and elected mayors needing to govern with competitive, multiparty councils. Another finding—which is not imposed by legal rules—is that many goals and the associated reporting system in Bogotá concern long-term sustainability outcomes (such as quality-of-life). In the other cities, relatively more goals and reports are about the delivery of tangible, short-term outputs such as public works.

Compared with the description of formal features, analysing the effects of an accountability mechanism is highly complex. As such, findings from this comparative case study do not provide comprehensive evidence that would allow us to answer our second, evaluative research question conclusively. However, several noteworthy patterns emerged. In all four cases, the mechanisms showed effectiveness in reaching the attention of citizens and politicians and informing specific (sustainability) policies.

Furthermore, there are indications of the mechanisms contributing to transparency and a more programmatic, policy-oriented election cycle with a more participatory process of political deliberation. Positive effects were also reported—at least in the first years after the mechanism's introduction—in the realm of data and indicator literacy, as well as in institutional cooperation among local governments and civil society actors.

What is the current verdict on the dichotomous question in this paper's title: Should mayors be made accountable for their electoral promises? In answering this question, there appear to be trade-offs between accountability mechanisms bringing benefits in government performance and citizen participation, yet costs in terms of inflexibility and “perverse effects.” Forced to choose an answer, this research suggests a tentative “yes” for cities with low-performing municipal administrations—some degree of accountability is associated with more programmatic, less clientelist policymaking. In high-performing institutional contexts, rigid performance accountability seems less appropriate. In both types of context, effective sustainability governance requires (i) working towards long-term objectives and outcomes rather than short-term election promises and (ii) exploring alternatives to the currently dominant model of voluntary goal-setting.

Data availability statement

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly. Anonymised data will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Author contributions

LN: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft. TH: Writing – review & editing.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/frsc.2025.1450933/full#supplementary-material>

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