



EUROPEAN SCIENTIFIC JOURNAL  
by European Scientific Institute



**Paper: “How Intermediate Cities Localise the Sustainable Development Goals through Sustainable Mobility Planning”**

**Submitted: 02 May 2026**

**Accepted: 07 July 2026**

**Published: 31 July 2026**

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Doi: 10.19044/esj.2026.v22n19p53

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Reviewer A:  
Recommendation: Revisions Required  
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**The TITLE is clear and it is adequate to the content of the article.**

The title — \*Intermediate Cities and Transport Systems in Embedding Global Agendas: A Multi-Level Approach to SDG Implementation\* — is fairly clear and generally consistent with the content of the paper. It clearly signals to the reader the three central concepts addressed in the study: intermediate cities, transport systems, and the multi-level implementation of the SDGs.

However, the title does not reflect one of the paper’s main empirical focuses — the Italian case study and, more specifically, the example of Nocera Inferiore, which appears throughout the text as a central illustrative case. It is recommended that the title also reflect the Italian context, for example: \*“...A Multi-Level Approach to SDG Implementation: Insights from Italian Intermediate Cities”\*

 or a similar formulation.

**The ABSTRACT clearly presents objectives, methods, results, and conclusions.**

The abstract is conceptually well-developed and clearly articulates the paper’s theoretical contribution. In particular, it effectively presents:

- \* the research problem (the gap between global targets and local implementation);
- \* the conceptual framework (the SDGs as an architecture for socio-economic planning);
- \* the focus of the study (intermediate cities and transport systems);
- \* the main conclusion.

However, several weaknesses remain:

- \* The methodology is insufficiently explained. The abstract merely states “By adopting a conceptual/policy review,” which is not sufficiently informative. What was the scope of the review? According to which criteria were the cases selected? What analytical tool or framework was applied?
- \* The findings are not clearly distinguished. The abstract does not explicitly formulate the specific results identified by the study beyond broad general conclusions.
- \* Spelling issue: at the end of the first paragraph, “consitute” should be corrected to “constitute.”
- \* There are formatting/spacing issues, particularly merged sentences (e.g., in the Abstract: “local accessibility.By adopting...” — a space is missing after the period).

**There are a few grammatical errors and spelling mistakes in this article.**

The article contains a clearly noticeable number of linguistic and grammatical errors, which unquestionably require correction through thorough language editing.

Specific examples include:

| Incorrect form                    | Correct form                                               |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| -----                             | -----                                                      |
| “consitute” (Abstract)            | “constitute”                                               |
| “eridicate poverty”               | “eradicate poverty”                                        |
| “This require breaking down”      | “This requires breaking down”                              |
| “effectiveness,, particularly”    | “effectiveness, particularly” (double comma)               |
| “and and support more inclusive”  | “and support more inclusive”                               |
| “use various of methods”          | “use various methods”                                      |
| “elevated levelsof air”           | “elevated levels of”                                       |
| “frames these area as key actors” | “frames these areas as key actors”                         |
| “constrained by their outdated”   | double spacing should be corrected                         |
| “In this capacity.”               | the sentence remains incomplete and the passage is unclear |
| “vectors of sustainability”       | incorrect quotation mark symbol                            |

Several broader language and formatting issues are also evident throughout the manuscript:

- \* The text frequently contains merged sentences and missing spaces. For example: “...sustainable development. (Slimani et al., 2024)” is stylistically incorrect, since the period should normally follow the citation rather than precede it.
- \* There are inconsistencies in paragraph formatting and line breaks, including misplaced newlines within sentences.
- \* Certain ideas are unnecessarily repeated across different sections. For instance, the statistic regarding “70% of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions” appears at least twice in both the Introduction and the Theoretical Framework.

Accordingly, the formulation used in point 3 (“There are a few grammatical errors and spelling mistakes”) significantly understates the issue. In reality, the manuscript contains numerous linguistic and stylistic deficiencies, and therefore requires comprehensive language and stylistic revision, preferably by a native English speaker or a professional academic copy-editor.

### **The study METHODS are explained clearly.**

This is one of the weakest aspects of the manuscript.

The authors state that the paper adopts a “conceptual/policy review” approach; however, the methodology is not properly formalized in any dedicated section of the article.

Main shortcomings:

- \* There is no separate “Methodology” section. The article moves directly from the Introduction to the Theoretical Framework and then to the Results and Discussion, omitting a distinct

explanation of the research design and methods.

- \* The criteria for source selection are not specified. On what basis were the cited studies selected? Which databases were consulted? What keywords were used? What was the temporal scope of the review? No recognized review methodology (e.g., PRISMA, SALSA, etc.) is applied or referenced.

- \* The logic behind case selection is unclear. Freiburg, La Rochelle, Vitoria-Gasteiz, Brindisi, Salerno, Potenza, Cosenza-Rende, and Nocera Inferiore are discussed, but the rationale for selecting these particular cities is not explained. The selection does not appear systematic; rather, these function as anecdotal examples whose broader generalization is methodologically unsupported.

- \* It is not clarified within which analytical framework the “exemplary cases” are examined (e.g., cross-case comparison, most-similar systems design, vignette-based illustration, etc.).

- \* The list of KPIs across the four dimensions is presented merely as a descriptive inventory rather than as the outcome of a structured empirical analysis.

- \* The discussion of the PUMS (Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan) of Nocera Inferiore is presented in broad and general terms, without reference to any formal document-analysis method (e.g., content analysis, document coding, thematic coding).

Recommendation:

It is essential to include a separate “Methods” or “Methodology” section that clearly explains:

- \* the philosophical and methodological orientation of the research (conceptual review, narrative review, case-based policy analysis, etc.);

- \* the strategy and criteria for source selection;

- \* the logic behind case selection;

- \* the analytical framework employed (coding scheme, comparative matrix, analytical indicators, etc.);

- \* the limitations of the study.

**The results are clear and do not contain errors.**

The Results section is presented through three tables (Tables 2–4) accompanied by an extensive discussion. The structure of the tables is generally clear and helps guide the reader through the argument. Nevertheless, several factual and analytical shortcomings should be addressed.

### Factual / Data Verification Remarks

\* \*\*OECD membership figure.\*\*

The manuscript states: \**“The SDGs Index score for Italy in 2023 is 69.9 (Finland 80.6 in first place and Turkey 57.1 in last place of OECD countries), placing 21st out of 34.”*\* However, the OECD currently has 38 member countries, not 34. The figure of 34 members is outdated in the context of the 2020s. The statement should therefore be updated and verified against the current OECD membership data.

\* \*\*Italy/Finland SDG scores.\*\*

The source of these numerical values is unclear. According to the \*Sustainable Development Report 2023\* by Sachs et al., Finland's global SDG Index score was approximately 86.7, while Italy's was approximately 74.4. The figures cited in the manuscript (80.6 and 69.9) may derive from a European SDG monitoring framework or another regional source; however, the manuscript does not clearly specify which report these values originate from. Precise source attribution is necessary, preferably including page references.

**\*\*Definition of intermediate cities.\*\***

The article relies on Bolay & Kern (2019) and adopts a population range of 20,000–500,000 inhabitants. However, UN-Habitat publications use varying thresholds, including 50,000–1,000,000 or 100,000–500,000 inhabitants depending on the report and policy context. The manuscript simultaneously references UN-Habitat (2015/2020), ESPON (2014/2020), and Bolay & Kern (2019), yet does not explain the differences between these conceptualizations. A short discussion clarifying why the authors selected this specific population range would strengthen the conceptual coherence of the study.

**\*\*Repetitive statistical claims.\*\***

The statement that **“Cities account for more than 70% of global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and generate over 80% of global GDP”** appears both in the Introduction and in the Theoretical Framework in almost identical wording. This creates unnecessary repetition rather than analytical development.

**### Analytical Remarks**

\* Tables 2, 3, and 4 are presented as **“elaboration by the authors”**; however, it is difficult for the reader to distinguish what constitutes original analytical synthesis and what merely paraphrases OECD, UN-Habitat, or related policy documents. In particular, much of the structure appears heavily derived from OECD's **\*A Territorial Approach to the SDGs\*** (2020). Consequently, the tables themselves appear more descriptive than genuinely innovative.

\* The manuscript does not provide concrete empirical evidence regarding Nocera Inferiore. For example, there is no presentation of specific provisions from its PUMS (Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan), no emissions data, no modal-share changes, and no measurable transport indicators. The discussion therefore remains largely at the level of broad policy assertions.

\* The KPI framework introduced in Section 2 remains purely theoretical. The paper does not include a table, dataset, or empirical assessment demonstrating how these KPIs are actually operationalized or measured in the case of Nocera Inferiore. As a result, the connection between the conceptual framework and the empirical case study remains underdeveloped.

**The CONCLUSION or summary is accurate and supported by the content.**

The Conclusion is substantively consistent with the main argument of the manuscript and effectively summarizes its central conceptual contribution. In particular, it successfully emphasizes the strategic role of intermediate cities, the importance of a place-based approach, and the necessity of multi-level governance frameworks.

However, several shortcomings remain:

\* The “Italian case study” is mentioned, yet the manuscript provides only limited empirical evidence to substantiate the claims made in the conclusion. For example, the statement that “The Italian case study demonstrates the importance of regional strategies and collaboration...” is not sufficiently supported by concrete data or systematic analysis (see the methodological remarks above).

\* The reference to an “endorsement scheme and interactive consultation tool” appears only briefly and without adequate contextualization. Since these concepts are not properly developed in the main body of the article, their sudden appearance in the conclusion may confuse the reader.

\* The broader transferability and applicability of the findings to other contexts are insufficiently discussed. While the examples of Nocera Inferiore and other Southern Italian cities are valuable, the manuscript does not adequately explain how the observations compare with cases such as Freiburg, La Rochelle, or Vitoria-Gasteiz, which operate within significantly different economic, institutional, and governance environments. A clearer comparative reflection would strengthen the paper’s analytical depth.

\* The conclusion partially restates theoretical positions rather than synthesizing concrete empirical findings. As a result, the section reads more as a conceptual reaffirmation than as a discussion of demonstrated evidence emerging from the analysis.

\* The directions proposed for future research remain rather vague. For example, the statement that “Future research could focus on the study of the harmonisation of indicators” would benefit from greater specificity. More concrete recommendations — such as comparative longitudinal studies, standardized KPI frameworks for intermediate cities, or empirical assessments of PUMS implementation outcomes — would considerably strengthen the scholarly value of the conclusion.

### **The list of REFERENCES is comprehensive and appropriate.**

The bibliography includes approximately 50 sources, among which there are several well-known and high-quality references, including OECD reports, UN-Habitat publications, the \*Sustainable Development Report 2023\*, IPCC materials, and the JRC report by Lella & Osés-Eraso.

### **### Positive Aspects**

\* Most of the core references are peer-reviewed academic sources (e.g., \*Land Use Policy\*, \*Sustainable Cities and Society\*, \*Socio-Economic Planning Sciences\*, etc.).

\* Many references include DOI identifiers.

\* A substantial proportion of the literature dates from 2021–2024, indicating that the bibliography is relatively up to date.

### **### Shortcomings**

Several citation inconsistencies and bibliographic problems are evident:

\* There are in-text citations that do not fully correspond to the reference list entries:

\* \*Saraji et al. (2023)\* is cited in the text, while the reference list includes \*Saraji, M. K., & Streimikiene, D. (2023)\*. Since the work appears to have only two authors, the use of “et al.” is inappropriate and should be corrected.

\* \*D’Amato et al. (2024)\* appears correctly reflected in the bibliography as \*D’Amato, V., Di Lorenzo, E., Piscopo, G., Sibillo, M., & Trotta, A. (2024)\*.

\* \*MATEC Web of Conferences (2024)\* is referenced only through the conference/journal title without the full citation details of the individual paper. This does not comply with APA standards. The full article citation (authors, title, pages, DOI if available) should be provided.

\* \*United Nations (2020). Impact of COVID-19 on SDG Progress: A Statistical Perspective\* lacks a URL or DOI.

\* \*United Nations Secretary-General’s SDG Stimulus to Deliver Agenda 2030\* appears in the bibliography but is apparently not cited within the main text.

\* \*Yuan et al. (2023)\* is listed with the journal \*Communications Earth & Environment\*, but the volume, issue, page/article number, and DOI are missing.

\* \*Valencia et al. (2019)\* lacks complete bibliographic details (volume, issue, pages, DOI).

\* \*Sharifi (2022)\* lacks full journal information for \*Ambio\* (volume, issue, page range).

\* \*UN-Habitat (2015)\* and \*UN-Habitat (2020)\* references do not include URLs, despite the documents being publicly accessible through the UN-Habitat website.

\* \*ESPON (2014)\* and \*ESPON (2020)\* similarly lack accessible URLs or publication links.

#### ### APA Formatting Inconsistencies

\* The formatting of page ranges is inconsistent across the bibliography.

\* Quotation marks are not standardized (“smart quotes” and straight quotation marks are mixed throughout).

\* Publisher information is inconsistent. For example, one entry lists \*‘‘OECD Publications Centre’’\*, while another uses \*‘‘OECD Publishing, Paris.’’\* These should be standardized according to APA guidelines.

#### ### In-text Citations and Reference List Consistency

The following references appear correctly matched between the text and bibliography:

\* \*Onorati et al. (2024)\*  
\* \*Pamučar et al. (2023)\*  
\* \*D’Amico et al. (2021)\*  
\* \*D’Adamo et al. (2022)\*  
\* \*Yigitcanlar & Dizdaroglu (2015)\*  
\* \*Slimani et al. (2024)\*  
\* \*Saxena et al. (2021)\*

#### ### Incorrect Source Attribution

\* The in-text citation \*‘‘Masson-Delmotte (2018)’’\* is problematic. The referenced work is actually the IPCC \*Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C\* edited by V. Masson-Delmotte et al., rather than a standalone work authored solely by Masson-Delmotte. The citation should therefore be standardized either as \*IPCC (2018)\* or \*Masson-Delmotte et al. (2018)\*, depending on the citation style and the specific referenced section.

#### ### Missing Primary Policy Documents

A significant weakness is the absence of primary policy documents from the reference list, despite their apparent centrality to the analysis. In particular, the following documents should be formally cited:

- \* the PUMS (Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan) of Nocera Inferiore;
- \* the Regional Mobility Master Plan 2021–2030;
- \* the PTCP and related regional planning documents.

Since the article’s empirical discussion relies heavily on these materials, their omission from the bibliography constitutes a substantial referencing deficiency.

***Please rate the TITLE of this paper.***

[Poor] 1-5 [Excellent]

4

***Please rate the ABSTRACT of this paper.***

[Poor] 1-5 [Excellent]

3

***Please rate the LANGUAGE of this paper.***



[Poor] 1-5 [Excellent]

2

***Please rate the METHODS of this paper.***

[Poor] 1-5 [Excellent]

2

***Please rate the RESULTS of this paper.***

[Poor] 1-5 [Excellent]

2

***Please rate the CONCLUSION of this paper.***

[Poor] 1-5 [Excellent]

3

***Please rate the REFERENCES of this paper.***

[Poor] 1-5 [Excellent]

2

**Overall Recommendation!!!**

Return for major revision and resubmission

**Comments and Suggestions to the Author(s):**

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Reviewer B:  
Recommendation: Revisions Required  
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**The TITLE is clear and it is adequate to the content of the article.**

Yes

**The ABSTRACT clearly presents objectives, methods, results, and conclusions.**

Necessary corrections have been advised in my comments below.

**There are a few grammatical errors and spelling mistakes in this article.**

Necessary corrections have been advised in my comments below.

**The study METHODS are explained clearly.**

Necessary corrections have been advised in my comments below.

**The results are clear and do not contain errors.**

Necessary corrections have been advised in my comments below.

**The CONCLUSION or summary is accurate and supported by the content.**

Necessary corrections have been advised in my comments below.

**The list of REFERENCES is comprehensive and appropriate.**

Necessary corrections have been advised in my comments below.

***Please rate the TITLE of this paper.***

[Poor] 1-5 [Excellent]

***Please rate the ABSTRACT of this paper.***

[Poor] 1-5 [Excellent]

2

***Please rate the LANGUAGE of this paper.***

[Poor] 1-5 [Excellent]

2

***Please rate the METHODS of this paper.***

[Poor] 1-5 [Excellent]

1

***Please rate the RESULTS of this paper.***

[Poor] 1-5 [Excellent]

1

***Please rate the CONCLUSION of this paper.***

[Poor] 1-5 [Excellent]

2

***Please rate the REFERENCES of this paper.***

[Poor] 1-5 [Excellent]

2

## **Overall Recommendation!!!**

Return for major revision and resubmission

### **Comments and Suggestions to the Author(s):**

This study presents an analysis of the role of intermediate cities and transport systems in the multi-level implementation of Sustainable Development Goals, with a specific focus on the Italian context and the case of Nocera Inferiore. While the article highlights the strategic importance of meso-level governance and mobility infrastructures, the current manuscript requires major revisions to enhance its technical depth, methodological clarity, and empirical rigour. I nonetheless have a few moderate comments and suggestions that may help fit the paper within the aims and scope of this particular journal:

[1] The theoretical framework effectively establishes the importance of intermediate cities as strategic nodes in the localization of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, the conceptual linkage between multi-level governance and specific transport interventions remains somewhat abstract. While the study correctly identifies transport systems as critical enabling dimensions for social inclusion and economic productivity, it fails to provide a rigorous analysis of the trade-offs inherent in these multi-level systems. For instance, the tension between regional efficiency and local accessibility is mentioned but not explored in depth. To improve the manuscript, the study should integrate a more robust theoretical discussion on how institutional fragmentation specifically hinders the operationalisation of global targets at the meso-level. Furthermore, the transition from the general global context to the specific case of Nocera Inferiore lacks a bridge that explains why this particular city serves as a representative laboratory for broader European trends. Strengthening this connection would provide a more compelling justification for the chosen geographical focus. Additionally, the study should consider incorporating a more detailed examination of the "implementation gap" by identifying the precise financial and regulatory barriers that intermediate cities face when attempting to align Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans with national development strategies and global sustainability priorities.

[2] The discussion regarding Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) provides a solid foundation for monitoring progress; however, the presentation of these indicators is currently too generic. The study identifies four main dimensions—environmental, accessibility, economic, and governance—but lacks a critical evaluation of the data availability and harmonisation challenges associated with these metrics in intermediate urban contexts. In many cases, intermediate cities suffer from a lack of granular, high-frequency data, which complicates the application of the indicators proposed in the manuscript. The study should provide a more detailed assessment of how these KPIs can be operationalised using existing data sources, such as the REGIONS2030 project mentioned later in the text. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to discuss the potential for digital innovation and Intelligent Transport Systems (ITS) to bridge these data gaps. By

providing specific examples of how Nocera Inferiore or other Italian cities have successfully—or unsuccessfully—implemented KPI-based monitoring, the study could offer more practical insights. A more technical comparison between the proposed indicators and established European frameworks would also elevate the scholarly contribution of the paper, ensuring that the suggested monitoring mechanisms are both feasible and theoretically grounded within the current international policy landscape.

[3] The empirical evidence provided from Southern Italy, including cases like Brindisi, Salerno, and Potenza, adds value to the manuscript, yet these examples are currently described in a manner that is overly descriptive and lacks comparative depth. The study mentions diverse strategies such as port-city logistics integration and vertical mobility but does not critically analyse the common success factors or systemic failures across these different urban environments. To strengthen this section, the study should adopt a more comparative approach, highlighting how different territorial constraints lead to varied implementation outcomes for the SDGs. This would allow for the identification of "best practices" that are specifically tailored to the unique scales and functions of intermediate cities. Additionally, the role of national and European programmes like URBACT and CIVITAS should be explored beyond simple mentions; the study should evaluate how these external funding and networking mechanisms influence the long-term sustainability of the projects. By shifting the focus from a list of examples to a critical analysis of territorial policy implementation, the manuscript would better support its claim that intermediate cities are strategic arenas for experimentation. This would also clarify the meso-level dynamics that the study aims to highlight.

[4] The analysis of the planning instruments—specifically the Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan (SUMP), the Regional Mobility Master Plan, and the Provincial Territorial Coordination Plans—is comprehensive but requires more critical scrutiny regarding their vertical alignment. The study notes that the effectiveness of these instruments is often constrained by fragmented implementation and weak monitoring systems. However, it does not sufficiently address how these "siloed" planning processes can be integrated into a truly holistic governance framework. The study should provide a more incisive critique of the legal and administrative barriers that prevent local SUMPs from being effectively synchronised with regional and national strategies. For example, the manuscript mentions that Provincial Territorial Coordination Plans are often outdated and lack binding capacity; the study should explore the implications of this for the implementation of SDG 11 and SDG 13. Furthermore, the role of stakeholder participation is mentioned in Table 1 but is not fully integrated into the narrative of the case study. The study should elaborate on how participatory governance has influenced the development of the SUMP in Nocera Inferiore, providing concrete evidence of how local engagement has shaped specific mobility policies or infrastructure priorities.

[5] The manuscript would benefit significantly from a more detailed exploration of the impact of climate change on carbon transport systems. While the study introduces the role of transport in climate mitigation, it overlooks the specific vulnerabilities of urban transport infrastructures to climate-induced disruptions. Incorporating recent research on the quantitative assessment of climate change risk at an urban scale would provide a more holistic view of the challenges facing intermediate cities. The study should discuss how extreme weather events and long-term environmental shifts might affect the resilience of the mobility networks described in the

theoretical framework. Furthermore, the integration of neural-network-based real-time monitoring for environmental pollutants could be presented as a technological solution to enhance the KPI frameworks discussed earlier. By addressing these technical aspects, the study would align itself more closely with contemporary research on sustainable urban systems and climate action (SDG 13). This would also strengthen the argument that mobility systems act as both catalysts and structuring elements of sustainable development. Adding a section or subsection that specifically addresses infrastructure resilience would provide a more comprehensive answer to the multi-faceted problems posed by global warming within the context of intermediate urban planning.

[6] Finally, the concluding section needs to be more ambitious in outlining future perspectives and policy recommendations. Currently, the conclusions reiterate the main points of the analysis but do not offer a clear roadmap for addressing the identified implementation gap. The study should propose specific policy interventions or governance reforms that could enhance the capacity of intermediate cities to lead the sustainability transition. For instance, the study could suggest the creation of inter-municipal governance platforms to manage mobility at the functional urban area scale, rather than the administrative scale. Additionally, the potential for public-private partnerships in the deployment of low-emission logistics solutions should be explored as a means of overcoming financial constraints. The study should also reflect on how the post-COVID stagnation in SDG advancement can be countered through mission-oriented urban policies that prioritises collective welfare. By framing the findings within the broader context of the UN-Habitat New Urban Agenda and the European Green Deal, the study would demonstrate its relevance to both academic and policy audiences. A more forward-looking conclusion would ensure that the manuscript contributes significantly to the ongoing debate on how to embed global sustainability agendas within territorially specific urban systems.

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Reviewer C:  
Recommendation: Revisions Required

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**The TITLE is clear and it is adequate to the content of the article.**

The title accurately reflects the manuscript's central thematic concerns, namely intermediate cities, transport systems, multilevel governance, and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. It is sufficiently specific to convey the scope of the article with clarity. However, the title suggests a stronger empirical orientation than the manuscript ultimately provides, since the paper is more appropriately characterised as a conceptual and policy-oriented review rather than a primary empirical research study. Notwithstanding this limitation, the title remains clear, appropriate, and broadly adequate to the substance of the manuscript.

**The ABSTRACT clearly presents objectives, methods, results, and conclusions.**

The abstract is well written and provides an effective summary of the manuscript's principal argument, namely the implementation gap surrounding the Sustainable Development Goals, the strategic role of intermediate cities, the enabling function of transport systems, and the European and Italian empirical focus. However, it somewhat overstates the paper's contribution. For example, the claim that the article "reframes the SDGs as an evolving architecture" suggests a level of conceptual innovation that is not fully realised in the body of the manuscript. In addition, the abstract does not clearly indicate that the study is fundamentally a conceptual and policy-oriented review rather than a systematically designed analytical investigation. It also presents illustrative cases in a manner that may be interpreted as empirical findings. Consequently, although the abstract is clear and professionally structured, it does not fully convey the precise nature, methodological basis, and limits of the paper's actual contribution.

**There are a few grammatical errors and spelling mistakes in this article.**

A small number of typographical and grammatical issues are evident throughout the manuscript. For example, the abstract contains the misspelling "consitutes" instead of "constitutes." In addition, certain sentences are grammatically acceptable but unnecessarily complex and syntactically dense, which reduces clarity. An example is the sentence stating that sustainability transitions depend on institutional coordination mechanisms capable of integrating policy objectives across administrative and territorial scales. Although technically correct, the construction is overly elaborate and could be expressed more directly. A careful proofread would address these minor issues. Overall, however, the language remains professional, coherent, and generally accessible.

**The study METHODS are explained clearly.**

No, the methods are not explained clearly. The paper is described as a "conceptual/policy review", yet it provides no methodology statement: no search strategy, no inclusion/exclusion criteria, no protocol for thematic synthesis, and no critical appraisal of sources. The empirical anchor (Nocera Inferiore and other Italian cities) is presented as illustrative, but there is no case selection rationale, no description of data sources, and no indication of how evidence was collected or analysed. A reader cannot determine how the authors arrived at their claims or how the analysis could be replicated. This is a major weakness.

**The results are clear and do not contain errors.**

The manuscript does not present results in the conventional empirical sense. The section entitled "Results and Discussion" primarily restates findings drawn from reports by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, documents produced by UN-Habitat, and various European Union initiatives, supplemented by tables identified by the authors as their own elaboration. While these tables constitute useful syntheses of existing material, they do not amount to original empirical findings. Similarly, the discussion of Italian planning instruments, including sustainable urban mobility plans, regional master plans, and provincial territorial coordination plans, remains largely descriptive rather than analytically developed. Consequently,

the assertion that the results are clear and free from error is not strictly applicable, since the manuscript does not generate primary results that can be independently assessed. As a synthesis of existing policy frameworks, the discussion is generally sound, but it does not offer substantial analytical originality.

**The CONCLUSION or summary is accurate and supported by the content.**

The conclusion accurately restates the manuscript's central argument, namely that intermediate cities provide important opportunities for experimentation in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals, that place-based approaches are essential, and that effective multilevel collaboration is necessary. These claims are broadly supported by the preceding discussion, particularly through reference to findings from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the illustrative Italian planning examples.

However, the conclusion is somewhat repetitive and offers limited added value beyond what has already been established in the introduction and discussion sections. It does not distil the analysis into a sharper or more distinctive final insight. In addition, the conclusion does not acknowledge the paper's methodological limitations, nor does it sufficiently qualify its recommendations in light of the structural constraints that intermediate cities commonly face, including limited data availability, weak institutional capacity, and financial constraints. Consequently, although the conclusion is consistent with the substance of the manuscript, it lacks the level of critical reflection expected of a strong scholarly closing section.

**The list of REFERENCES is comprehensive and appropriate.**

The reference list includes several important policy sources, notably publications from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, UN-Habitat, and ESPON, with a reasonable selection of peer-reviewed academic literature. However, it is not sufficiently comprehensive in relation to the range of claims advanced in the manuscript.

Several directly relevant and recent peer-reviewed studies appear to be absent, particularly systematic reviews concerning sustainable urban mobility planning in medium-sized cities and critical analyses of trade-offs associated with the localisation of the Sustainable Development Goals. More significantly, the manuscript makes specific empirical claims regarding Freiburg im Breisgau, La Rochelle, Vitoria-Gasteiz, Brindisi, Salerno, Potenza, and Cosenza without providing references to primary sources or case-specific scholarly literature. As a result, these examples cannot be independently verified from the reference list provided.

***Please rate the TITLE of this paper.***

[Poor] **1-5** [Excellent]

4

***Please rate the ABSTRACT of this paper.***



[Poor] 1-5 [Excellent]

4

***Please rate the LANGUAGE of this paper.***

[Poor] 1-5 [Excellent]

3

***Please rate the METHODS of this paper.***

[Poor] 1-5 [Excellent]

2

***Please rate the RESULTS of this paper.***

[Poor] 1-5 [Excellent]

2

***Please rate the CONCLUSION of this paper.***

[Poor] 1-5 [Excellent]

3

***Please rate the REFERENCES of this paper.***

[Poor] 1-5 [Excellent]

2

## **Overall Recommendation!!!**

Return for major revision and resubmission

### **Comments and Suggestions to the Author(s):**

Dear authors,

The manuscript addresses a timely and policy-relevant subject, and its central argument is broadly coherent and aligned with current debates on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. However, in its current form, it does not meet the standards expected of a peer-reviewed academic publication.

Several substantive limitations are evident. First, there is no clearly articulated methodology. The designation of the paper as a conceptual or policy review is not supported by a transparent account of how sources were identified, selected, or synthesised, which undermines the study's replicability and analytical rigour. Second, empirical claims are frequently presented without systematic evidence, explicit case selection criteria, or supporting primary sources. As a result, illustrative city examples lack verifiability and analytical grounding. Third, the manuscript does not meaningfully engage with contradictory findings in the literature, particularly those highlighting structural constraints such as limited institutional capacity, data scarcity, and financing challenges in intermediate cities.

# Specify the methodology clearly. If this is a conceptual review, describe the approach to literature identification and synthesis. If it is a policy analysis, state the analytical framework explicitly. If Nocera Inferiore is a case study, provide a case selection rationale and a clear description of sources/evidence.

# Distinguish between empirical claims and normative claims. Many statements are presented as factual when they are actually interpretive or judgment-based. Provide citations for empirical claims; for normative claims, frame them explicitly as arguments rather than facts.

# Engage critically with contradictory evidence. The literature on SUMP in intermediate cities is not uniformly positive. The paper would be strengthened by acknowledging the conditions under which SUMP fail or produce perverse outcomes.

# Address the constraints to KPI implementation. The paper proposes KPIs but does not engage with the well-documented barriers (data availability, technical capacity, financial resources) that are particularly acute in intermediate cities. A credible policy recommendation must address these constraints.

# Shorten the paper substantially. The manuscript is too long for the contribution it makes. Eliminate the sections that summarise well-known background knowledge (e.g., the basic facts about SDG 11, the description of SUMP) and focus on the specific argument about intermediate cities and transport governance.

# The proposed KPI framework is not accompanied by a discussion of its practical implementation constraints, despite these being well documented in relevant governance and planning literature. Finally, the referencing is uneven, with several claims insufficiently supported or lacking precise citation details.

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