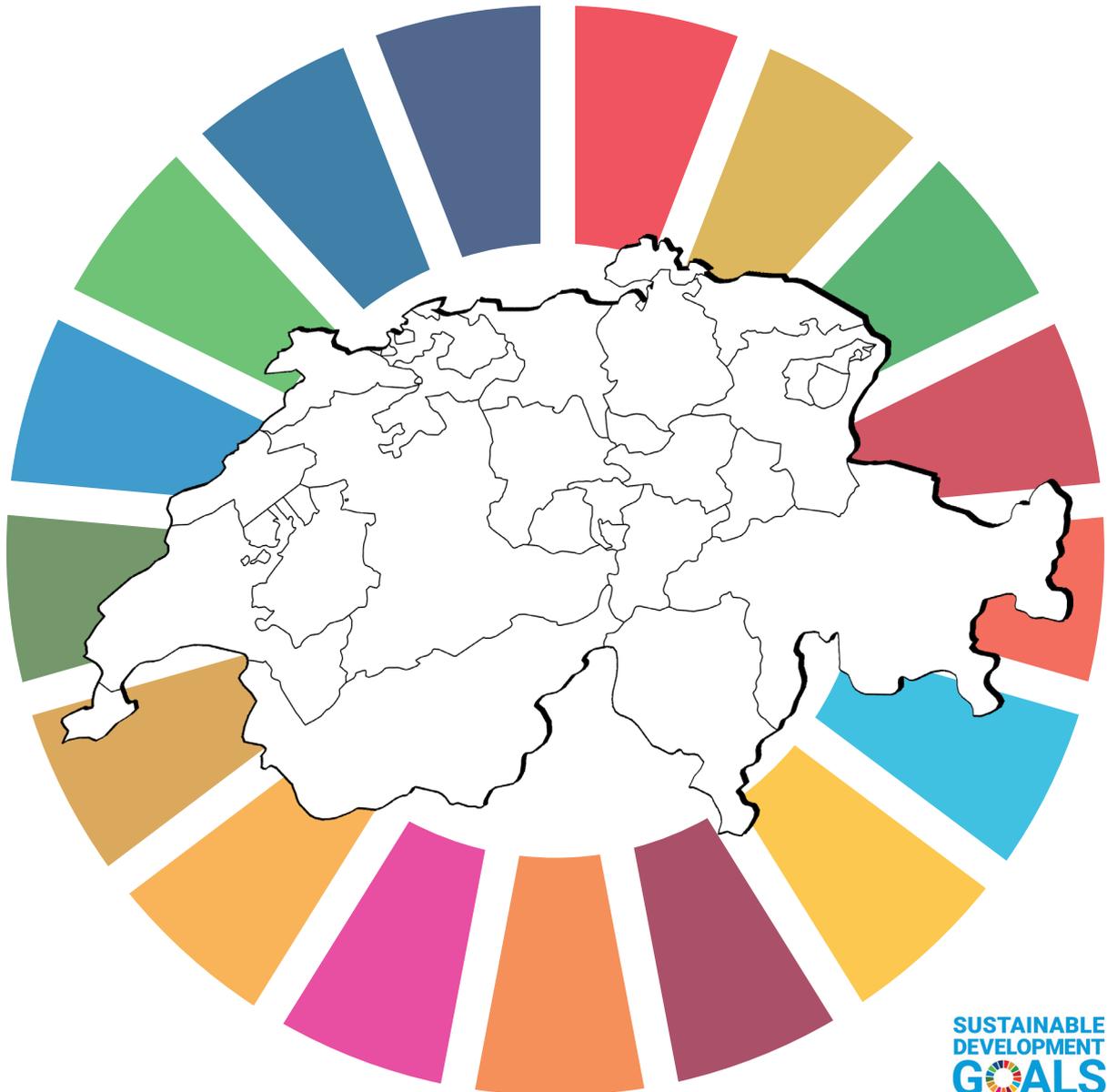




# Implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Swiss Cantons

## Results of an expert survey in cantonal offices

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University of Basel



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## Executive Summary

The UN 2030 Agenda with its 17 global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is a key framework that provides orientation for sustainability policy at the global as well as at the national level in Switzerland. Due to their competencies in many policy areas relevant to the SDGs, the cantons play a central role in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs in Switzerland.

*“The SDGs are an integral part of a long-term societal policy and are therefore implicit in the service mandate.”*

Respondent

So far, little is known about whether and how the cantons are implementing the 2030 Agenda as well as the SDGs and how they are coping with the associated challenges and opportunities. Therefore, the University of Basel has conducted a survey on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs in cantonal administrations as part of a research project funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

The survey aims to gain a comprehensive overview of how cantonal administrations perceive and value the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs (or corresponding sustainability topics). The survey also probed through what activities cantons have implemented the SDGs and how they might strengthen the implementation.

The online survey took place between summer and fall 2021, and all heads of office of the Swiss cantons received the invitation. Out of 1003 administrative offices contacted, 397 completed the survey (response rate: 40%).

The survey results document a high level of **awareness** and perceived relevance of sustainability and the SDGs. Half of the heads of office are aware of the SDGs, and almost all offices (94%) state that sustainability issues or SDGs are relevant. In particular, SDGs 5 (Gender equality), 11 (Sustainable cities and communities), 12 (Responsible consumption and production), 13 (Climate action), and 17 (Partnerships for the goals) appear to be relevant to the work of many offices. The anchoring of sustainability in overarching policy strategies and the personal motivation of office heads are both important reasons why the SDGs feature prominently in the work of the offices.

*“The 17 SDGs are not directly relevant to Canton’s administration, [but the] themes addressed in the 17 goals are.”*

Respondent

The **importance** given to the SDGs and corresponding sustainability topics – compared to other topics covered by the respective offices – is assessed as moderate. More than two-thirds (68%) of respondents consider the current level of attention appropriate. However, there is a unanimous view that the importance of the SDGs will not decline but rather increase in the future.

In particular, more **activities** are taking place in relation to SDGs 4 (Education), 5 (Gender equality), 11 (Sustainable cities and communities), 12 (Sustainable consumption and production), 13 (Climate action), 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions), and 17 (Partnerships to achieve the goals). They mainly influence existing policy measures but

*“The SDGs have been incorporated into the canton’s development planning and are taken into account in each year’s legislative planning. This is the right place.”*

Respondent

hardly trigger any new ones. In the view of many heads of office, the implementation of the SDGs is characterized by cooperation primarily within and between departments. External stakeholders, however, are hardly involved. A majority of the heads of departments who work with the SDGs report that working with the SDGs raises awareness of sustainability and promotes strategic planning. It also strengthens collaboration within a department.

According to the heads of office, **strengthening** the implementation of the SDGs at the cantonal level will require both additional financial and human resources. A lack of human resources, in particular, appears to be an essential obstacle to implementation. Furthermore, almost half of the heads of office would like the federal government to play a central role in implementing the 2030 Agenda.

# 1 Background and Objective of the Survey

The UN 2030 Agenda is a global call to action to end poverty, protect the planet's ecological integrity, and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity. The Federal Council acknowledges the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a key orientation framework for Swiss sustainability policy. Due to their competencies, the cantons, as well as the federal government, make potentially decisive contributions to a successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the achievement of the SDGs. So far, little is known about the importance of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs at the cantonal level. In particular, there is a lack of knowledge about whether and to what extent cantonal administrations are aware of the SDGs, consider them important, and translate them into concrete action.

The present survey with cantonal offices investigates the role played by the 2030 Agenda and the 17 SDGs at the cantonal level. The survey aims to overview the current status of implementing the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs in Swiss cantons. The survey is based on the following overarching questions:

- *Awareness:* How well are the SDGs known in the cantonal administrations?
- *Importance:* How important are the SDGs for the cantonal administrations?
- *Activities:* How do the cantonal administrations implement the SDGs?
- *Strengthening:* How can the implementation of the SDGs in cantonal administrations be strengthened?

The survey is part of the SNSF project "The Sustainabilization of the State" at the Sustainability Research Group at the University of Basel. It was designed together with master students of the course "Surveys Research Methodology" at the University of Basel (Faculty of Economics, spring semester 2021).

## The 17 global sustainability goals according to the UN 2030 Agenda



## 2 Process and Design of the Survey

### 2.1 Process

The survey was sent to all heads of offices and leading units of the 26 cantonal administrations in Switzerland, a total of 1003 organizations. Leading units are defined as the administrative offices that are not classified as offices but form a separate administrative, organizational unit with a management function, such as general secretariats or state chancelleries and their departments.<sup>1</sup>

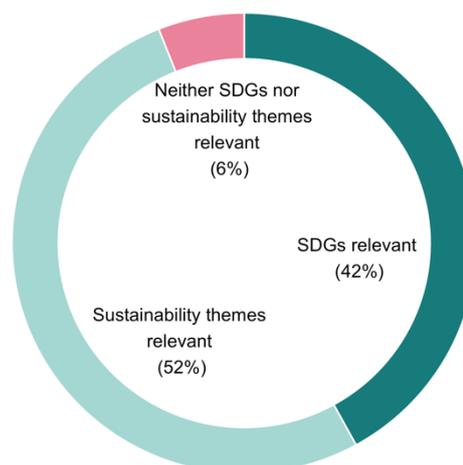
The invitations to participate in the survey were sent personally by e-mail to the heads of the offices. They were addressed as experts who know both the technical work in the respective offices and the political-institutional environment. After about ten working days, a reminder message was sent to all organizations that had neither participated in the survey yet nor explicitly declined to participate. The contact data were collected via online research and were used exclusively for the survey dispatch.

The survey was implemented between June and August 2021. In the canton of Ticino, the survey took place in November 2021. The participants could complete the questionnaire in German, French, or English. A total of 397 complete questionnaires were collected (participation rate 40%). These form the basis of this report. All data are anonymized.

### 2.2 Design of the Survey

In the survey, participants were first asked how familiar they are with the SDGs, what relevance they have for work in cantonal offices, what activities are being undertaken to implement the SDGs, and how their implementation can be further strengthened.

It is likely that the work of many offices is thematically but not explicitly related to the 2030 Agenda or the SDGs. The questionnaire designed in two variants accommodated both situations. First, it asked whether the SDGs are known and relevant for the work of the offices. The participants who stated that they were aware of the SDGs and that the SDGs were, in principle, relevant to their work (42%; N= 168) went on to answer further questions about the SDGs. Participants who indicated that they were not aware of the SDGs and/or that the SDGs were not relevant to their work proceeded to the second variant of the questionnaire on sustainability topics that thematically corresponded to the SDGs (52%; N= 206). To distinguish the responses of these two groups, we refer to “SDGs” and “related sustainability topics” below. Overall, SDGs or sustainability topics have relevance for almost all participants (94%; N = 374). For a small number of participants, neither the SDGs nor the corresponding sustainability topics are relevant (6%; N = 23); they answered a significantly reduced questionnaire.



<sup>1</sup> For the sake of simplicity, we will refer only to “offices” in what follows.

### 3 Participating Offices

- 397 offices participated in the survey.
- Most of these offices deal with environmental and social issues.

#### How many offices participated in the survey?

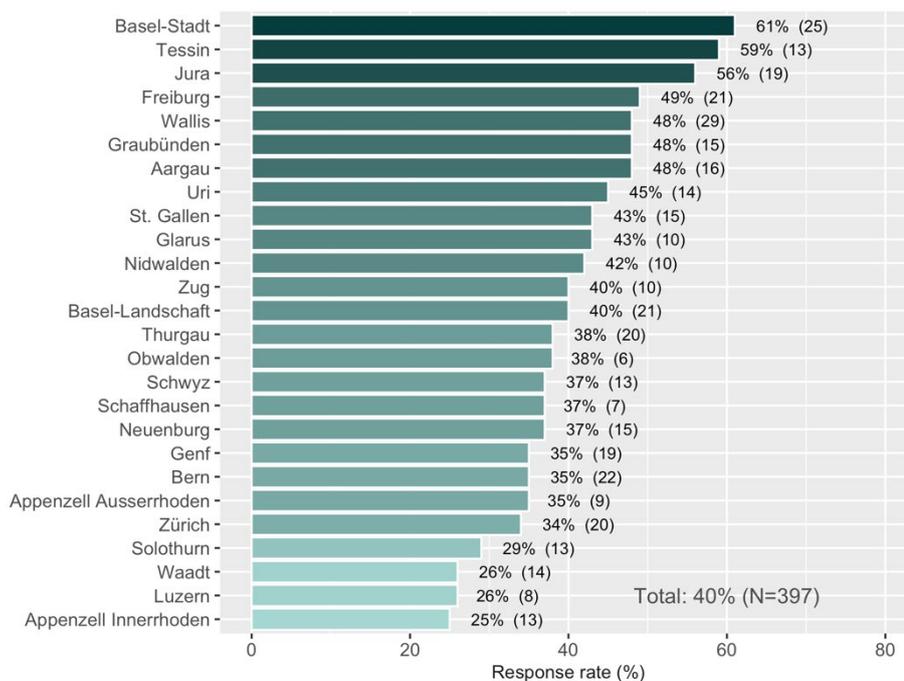


Figure 1: Response rate by canton

#### In which subject areas are the offices active?

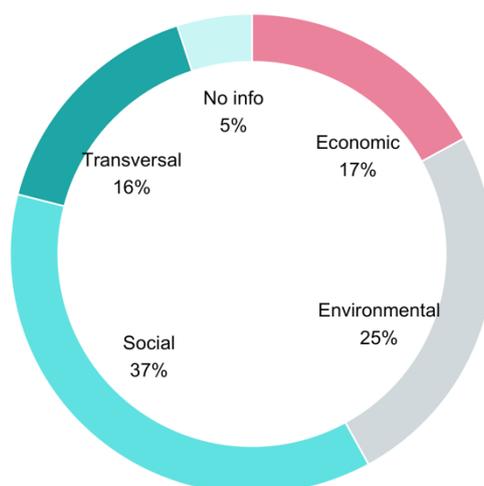


Figure 2: Assignment of offices to subject areas

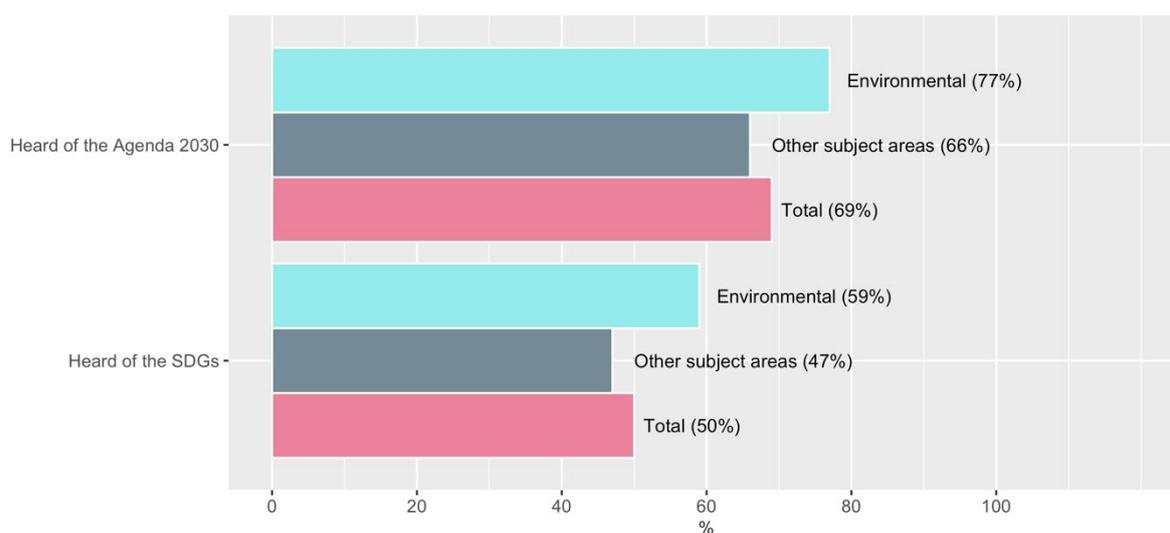
The assignment is based on “economic,” “environmental” and “social” sustainability dimensions. “Transversal” means that the office has a cross-cutting function and is potentially active on more than one sustainability dimension. Assignment was made during data analysis by the research team based on official office designation. N = 397.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Awareness of the SDGs in cantonal administrations

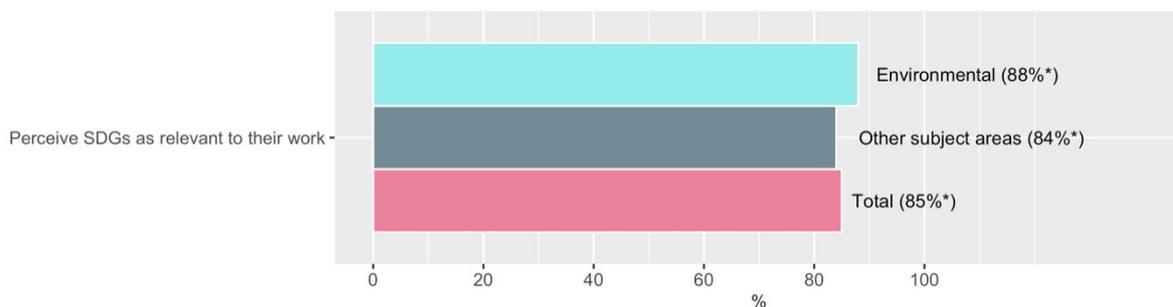
- Half of the offices are aware of the SDGs.
- If the SDGs are known, the vast majority (85%) also consider them to be of relevance to the activities of the offices.
- In particular, SDGs 5 (Gender equality), 11 (Sustainable cities and communities), 12 (Sustainable consumption and production), 13 (Climate action), and 17 (Partnerships to achieve the goals) are relevant to the work of the offices.
- Existing policy strategies with sustainability relevance (legislative planning, cantonal sustainability strategy, federal sustainability strategy) as well as personal motivation of the office heads are important prerequisites for the offices to deal with the SDGs. Government mandates and parliamentary initiatives are less important.
- Conversely, the lack of a mandate is a major reason why offices that are aware of the SDGs do not deal with them.

#### How well known are the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs?



**Figure 3: Awareness of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs**

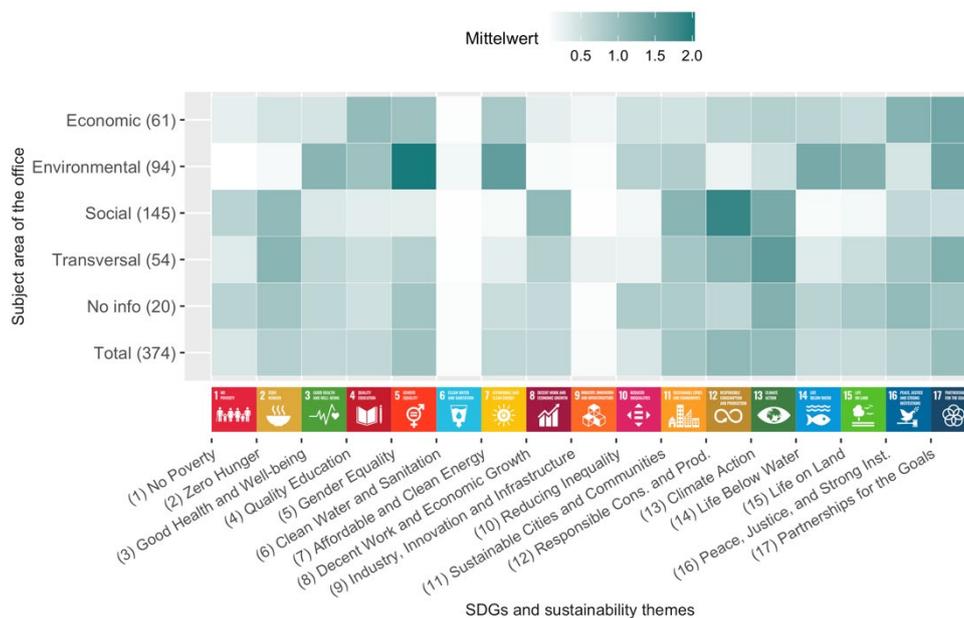
“Environmental” includes all offices assigned to the environmental subject area; “Other subject areas” includes all other offices; N = 374.



**Figure 4: Relevance of the SDGs for the work of the offices with awareness of the SDGs.**

\* Percentages are based on offices that have “already heard of the SDGs.” “Environmental” includes all offices assigned to the environmental subject area; “Other subject areas” includes all other offices; N = 168.

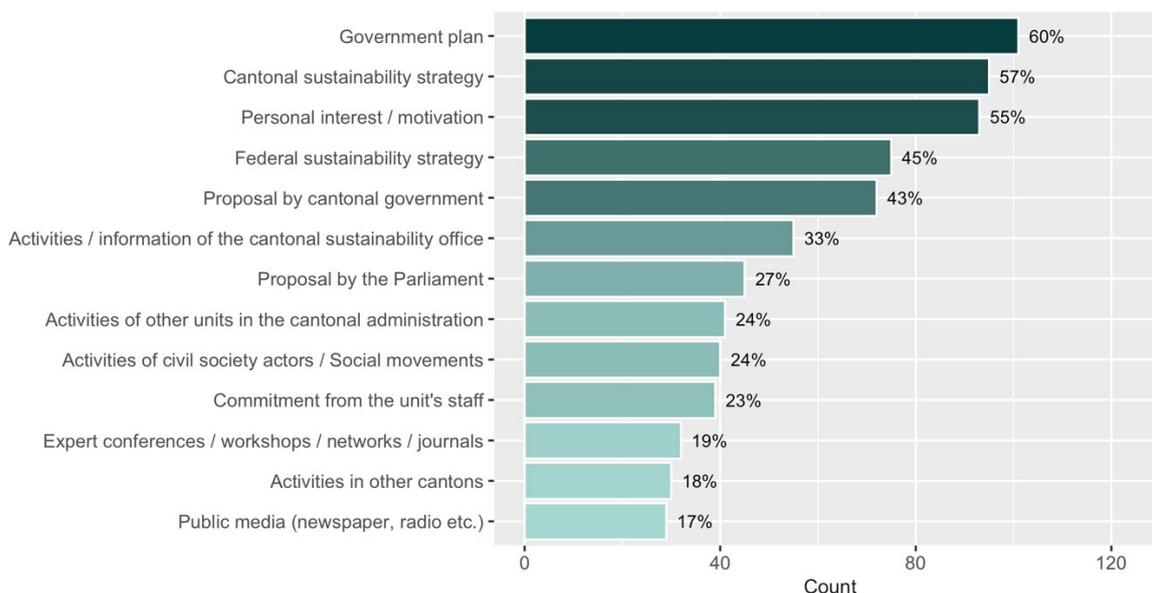
## Which SDGs and corresponding sustainability topics are relevant for the work of the offices?



**Figure 5: Relevance of the SDGs and sustainability topics for offices according to their subject areas**

Colors represent mean values, ranging from 0 (not at all relevant), 1 (not very relevant), 2 (relevant), to 3 (strongly relevant); N = 374.

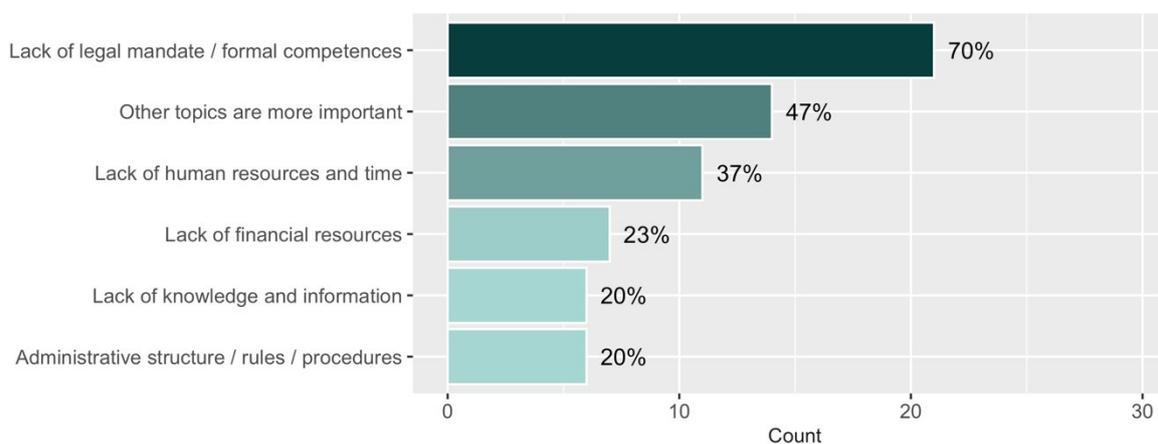
## What makes the offices engage with the SDGs?



**Figure 6: Reasons for engaging with SDGs**

The following response options are not shown because they were mentioned by less than 10%: "Activities of economic actors"; multiple answers possible; N = 168.

## Why do offices not engage with the SDGs?



**Figure 7: Reasons for not engaging with SDGs**

The following answer options are not shown because they were mentioned by less than 20%: "Conflict with other political goals/interests," "Administrative culture," "Lack of support from political actors," "Lack of support from civil society," "Lack of support from economic actors," "Lack of interest in sustainable development"; multiple answers possible; N = 30.

## 4.2 Importance of the SDGs in cantonal administrations

- The SDGs and the corresponding sustainability topics receive a moderate level of attention in the offices' work (20% vs. 80%).
- The SDGs or the corresponding sustainability topics "sometimes" but hardly "often" play a role in different working contexts.
- Two-thirds of the heads of office find that the SDGs receive the right amount of attention. Almost no one thinks that SDGs receive too much attention.
- At the same time, two-thirds of the heads of office assume that the SDGs will receive more attention in the future. There is consensus that the importance of the SDGs will not diminish in the future.

### How much attention do the SDGs and the corresponding sustainability topics receive in relation to other topics?

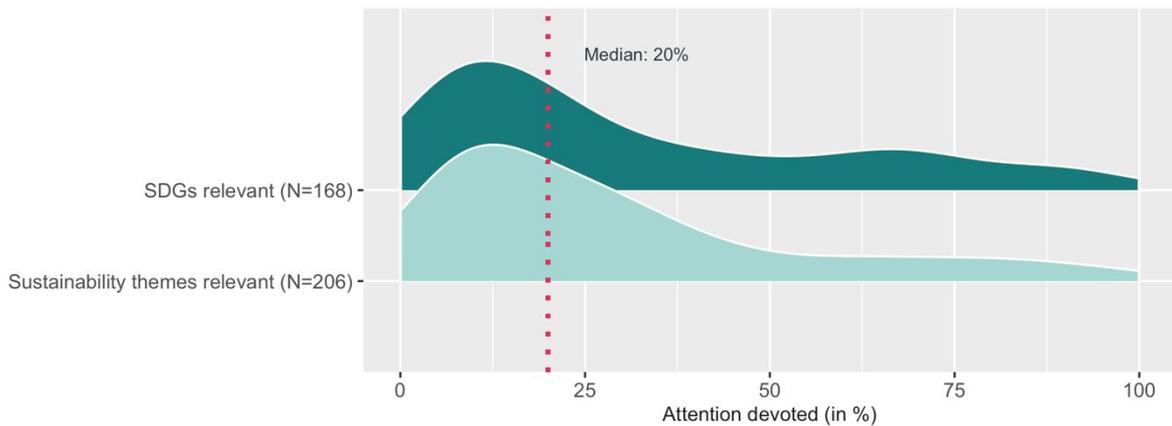


Figure 8: Attention to SDGs and sustainability topics in relation to other topics

### In which working contexts do the SDGs and the corresponding sustainability topics play a role?

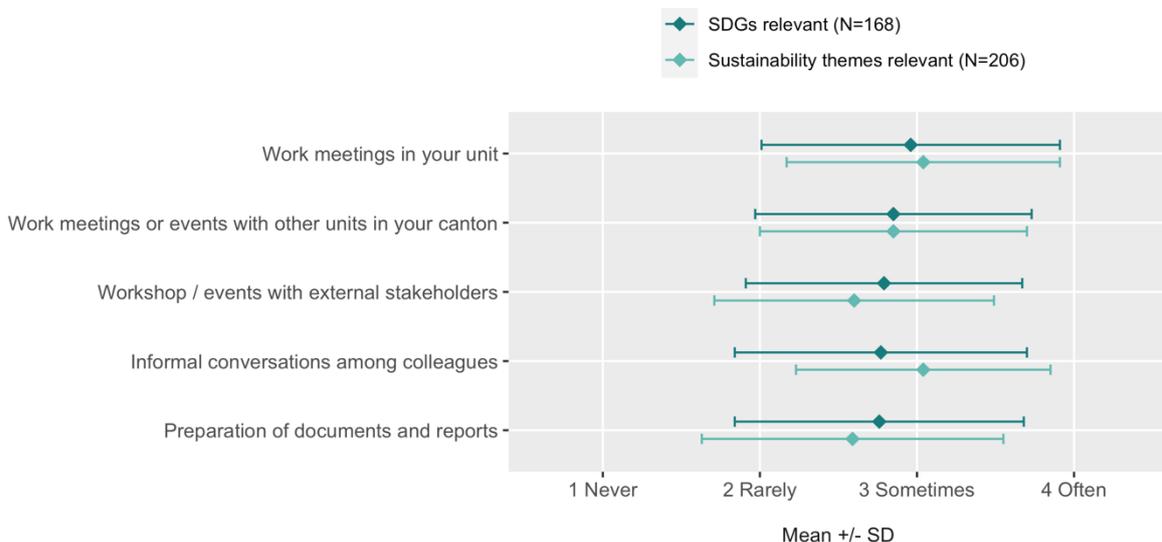


Figure 9: Presence of the SDGs and sustainability issues in different working contexts of the offices. Multiple answers possible

## Is the level of attention to the SDGs and corresponding sustainability topics adequate?

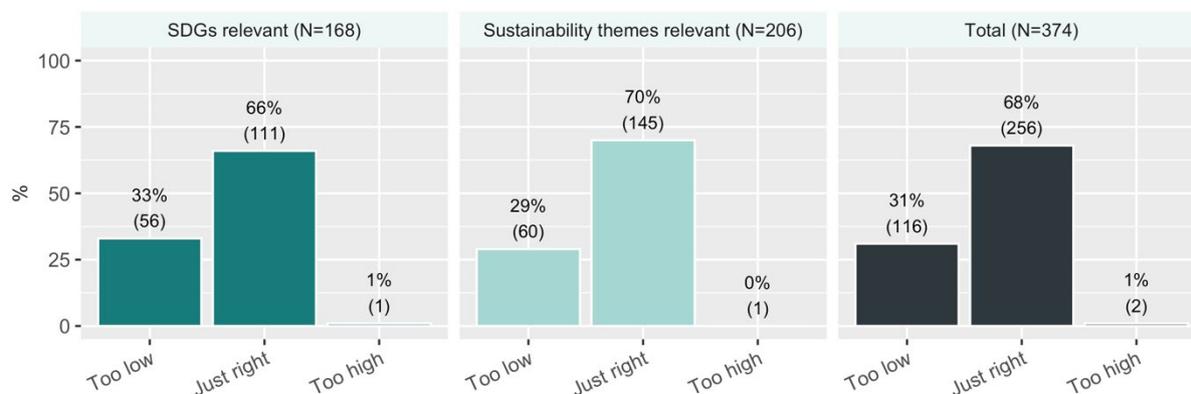


Figure 10: Assessment of attention to SDGs and sustainability topics

## How will office engagement with the SDGs and corresponding sustainability topics evolve over the next years?

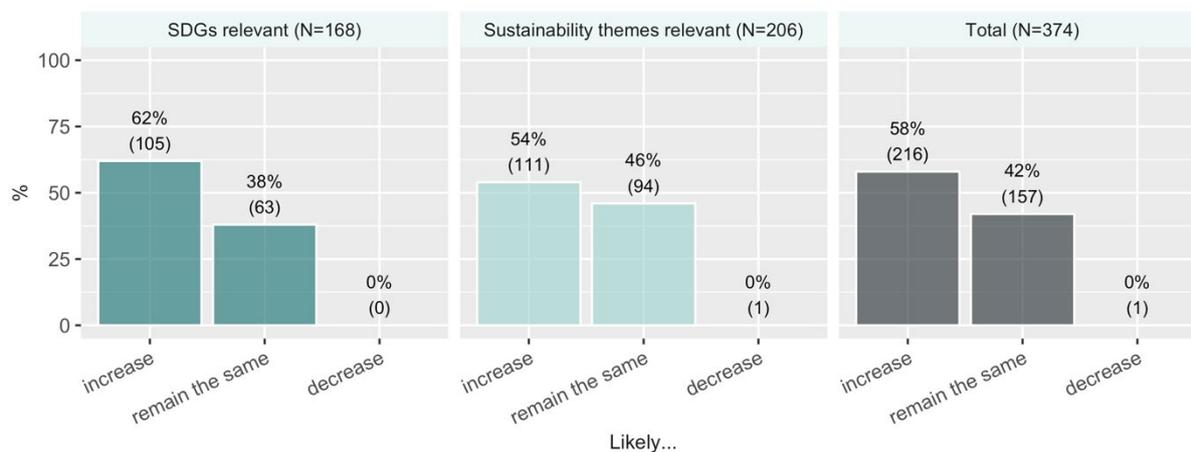
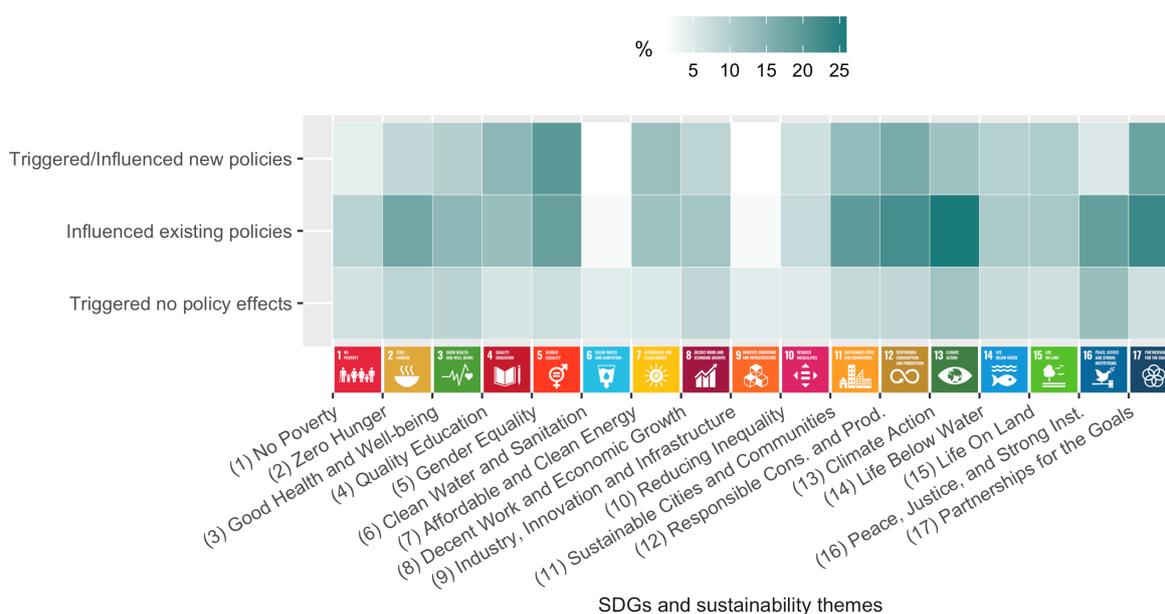


Figure 11: Expected development of attention to SDGs and sustainability topics

### 4.3 Activities for implementing the SDGs in cantonal administrations

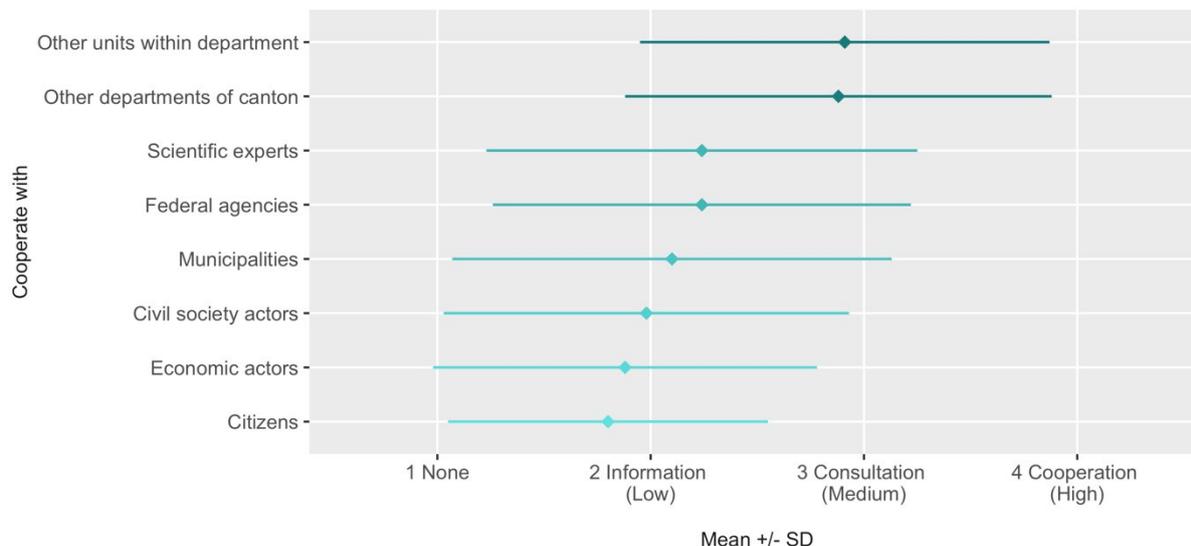
- The SDGs and the corresponding sustainability topics have an impact primarily on existing measures rather than leading to the formulation of new measures.
- SDGs 4 (Quality education), 5 (Gender equality), 11 (Sustainable cities and communities), 12 (Responsible consumption and production), 13 (Climate action), 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions), and 17 (Partnerships for the goals) are most influential.
- Overall, collaboration between offices and other actors in implementing the SDGs is rather weak. The most intensive collaboration is within the administration, both with offices in the respective department and between departments.
- Working with the SDGs has practically no negative effects on the work of the offices. It has a positive impact above all on raising awareness of sustainability and promoting strategic planning. It also promotes cooperation within a department and with the municipalities.

### How do the SDGs and the corresponding sustainability topics influence policy-making?



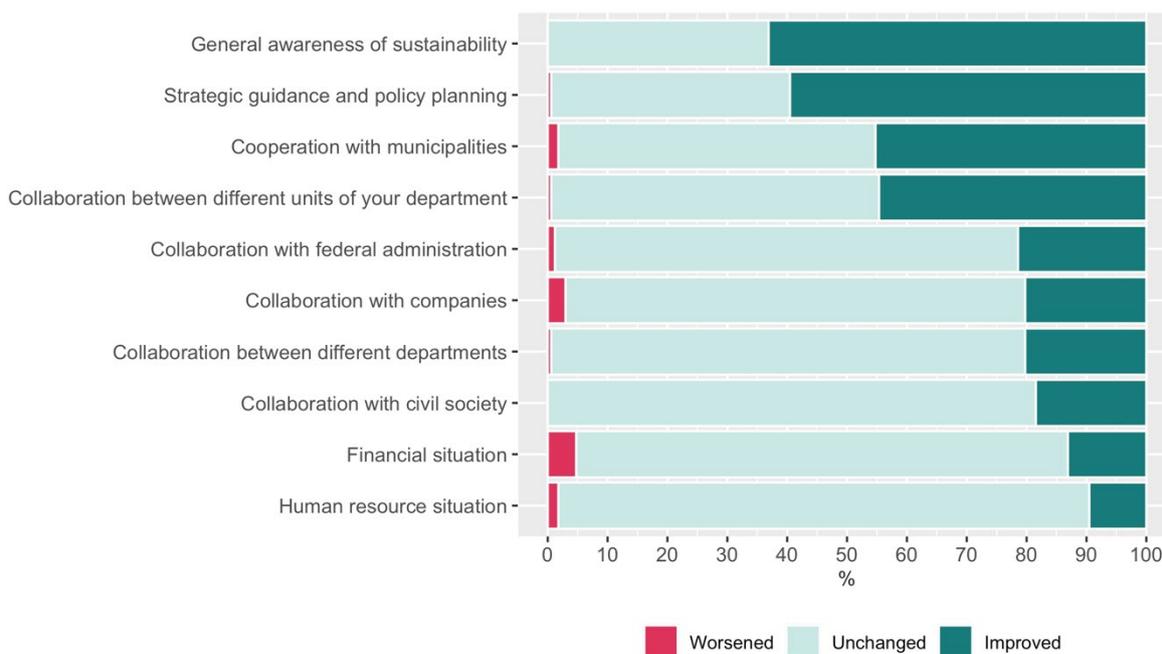
**Figure 12: Influence of the SDGs and sustainability topics on policy-making**  
The color intensity indicates the degree of influence of the SDGs and sustainability topics on the design of policies: the darker the color, the higher the influence; multiple answers possible; N = 374.

## How closely do offices collaborate in implementing the SDGs?



**Figure 13: Intensity of collaboration in implementing the SDGs**  
 The degree of collaboration increases from “information” to “consultation” to “cooperation”; N = 168.

## What are effects of working with the SDGs on the offices’ operation?

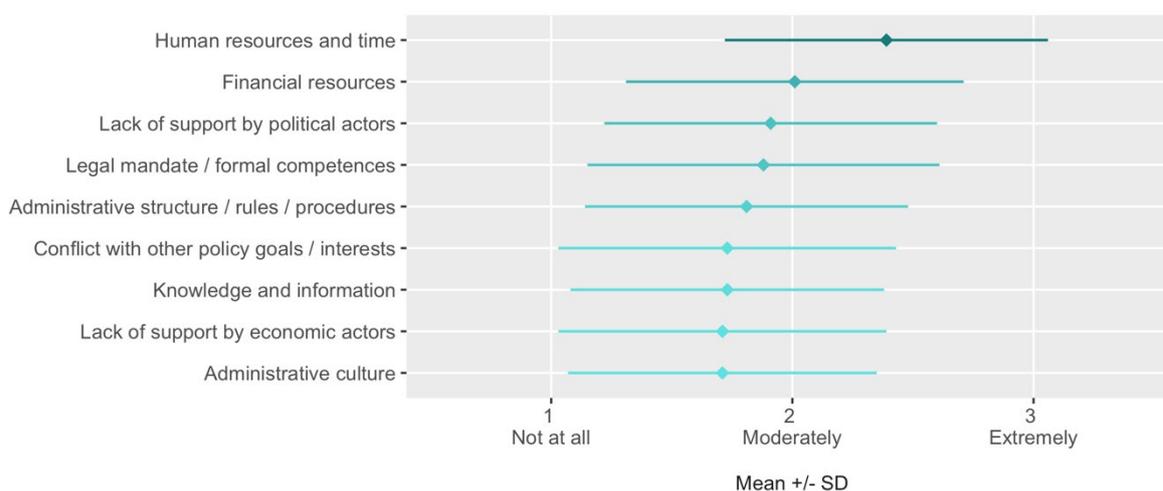


**Figure 14: Influence of the SDGs on office work conditions**  
 Multiple answers possible; N = 168.

## 4.4 Strengthening the SDGs in cantonal administrations

- Lack of human resources and time is the main obstacle for further implementation of the SDGs in the offices.
- In order to better implement the SDGs at the cantonal level, more financial and human resources are needed.
- In implementing the SDGs, the heads of office would like to see the federal government play a leading role.
- A majority of the heads of office think that the implementation of the SDGs and sustainability should not be in the hands of a specialized organizational unit but should be integrated into all offices.
- The heads of office regard the integrative character of the 2030 Agenda as particularly motivating for working with the SDGs.

### What hinders the implementation of the SDGs in offices?

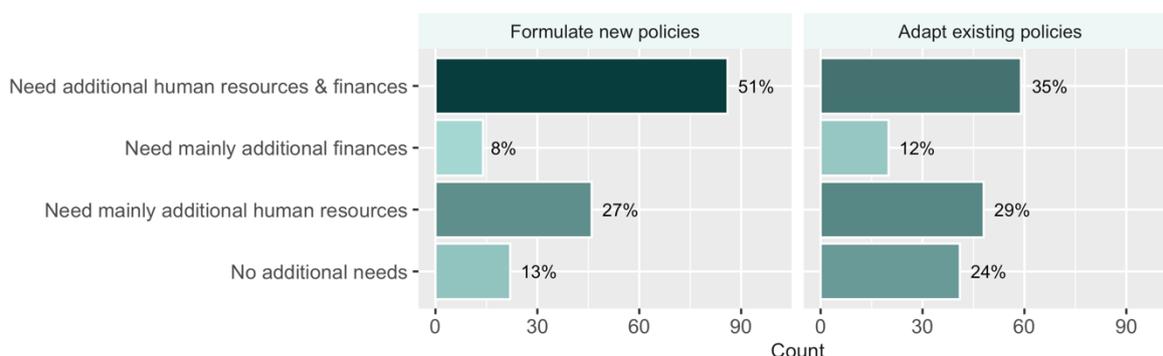


**Figure 15: Barriers to the implementation of the SDGs**  
N = 168.

#### Selection of other mentioned barriers

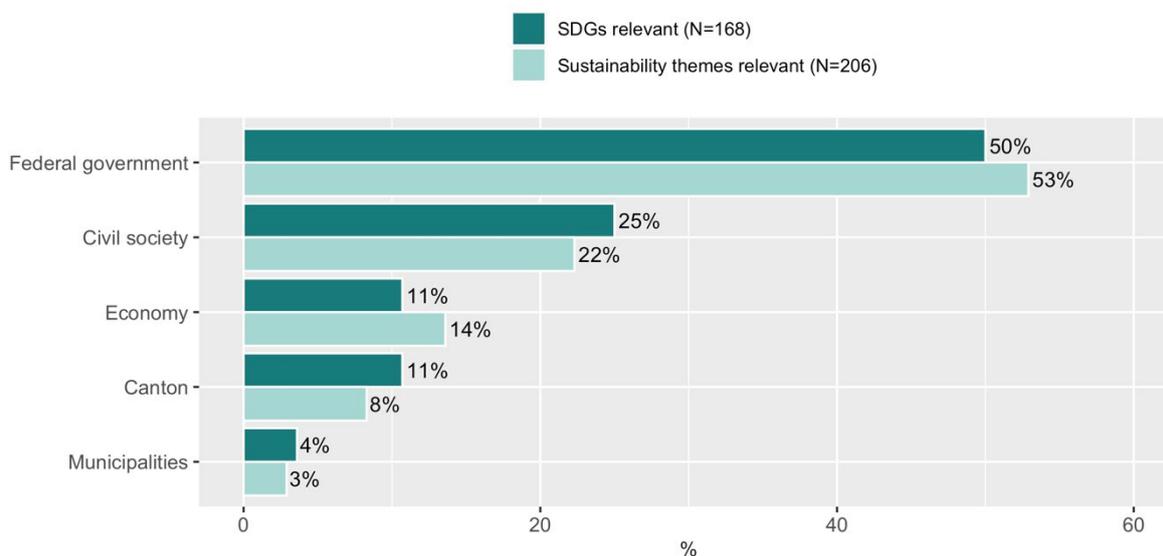
- “In particular, the political orientation of the Cantonal Council prevents a rapid implementation of the SDGs.”
- “Degree of abstraction of the SDGs & lack of awareness among employees of the relevance of their own activities to the SDGs.”
- “Actions generally relate to individual areas of the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (climate, energy, food, environment), each addressed individually. The global perspective of interactions and synergies between these areas is not sufficiently addressed.”
- “The 17 SDGs are not directly relevant to the cantonal administration, as there are cantonal strategies and plans for sustainability themes. The situation is different with the topics addressed in the 17 goals. They are definitely the subject of cantonal or governmental programs, etc.”
- “The SDGs have been incorporated into the canton’s development planning and are taken into account in the respective legislative planning. This is the right place. For implementation, the procedures prescribed by the rule of law with the responsible political bodies must be respected. And the cantons must be left the necessary room for maneuver.”
- “The priorities and time resources in the office allow only a small consideration of the SDGs. There are enough actors who take care of them as a priority. These should be given priority.”

## What do the offices need to address the SDGs more effectively?



**Figure 16: Conditions for improved consideration of SDGs**  
 Multiple answers possible; N = 168.

## Who is currently playing a leading role in implementing the SDGs and sustainability in Switzerland?



**Figure 17: Current leadership in the implementation of the SDGs**  
 The percentages refer to the first-ranked actors only.

## Who should play a leading role in implementing the SDGs and sustainability in Switzerland?

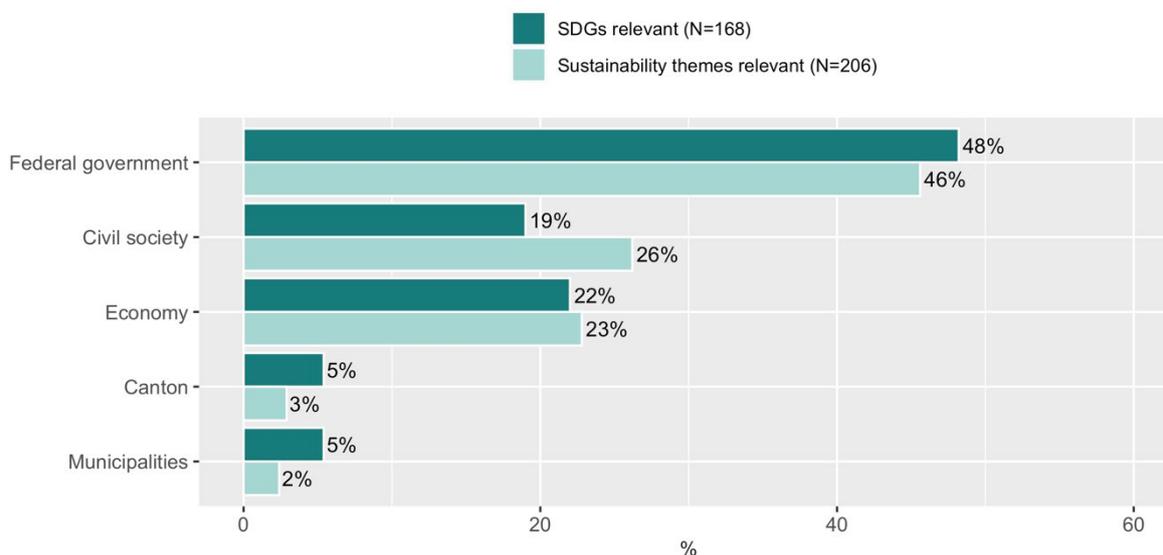


Figure 18: Preferred leadership role in the implementation of the SDGs and sustainability in Switzerland

## Who in the cantonal administrations should play a leading role in implementing the SDGs and sustainability?

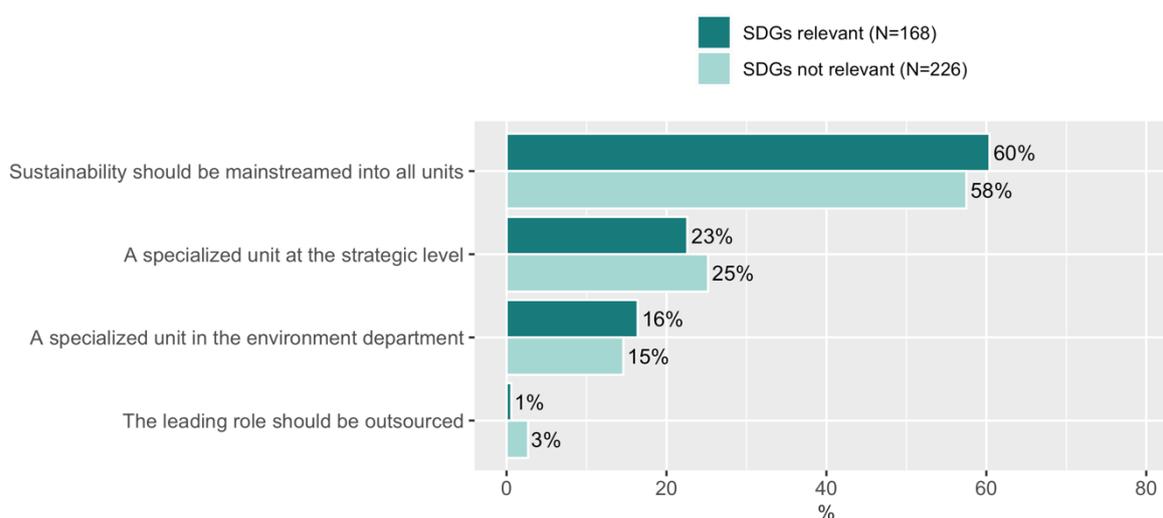
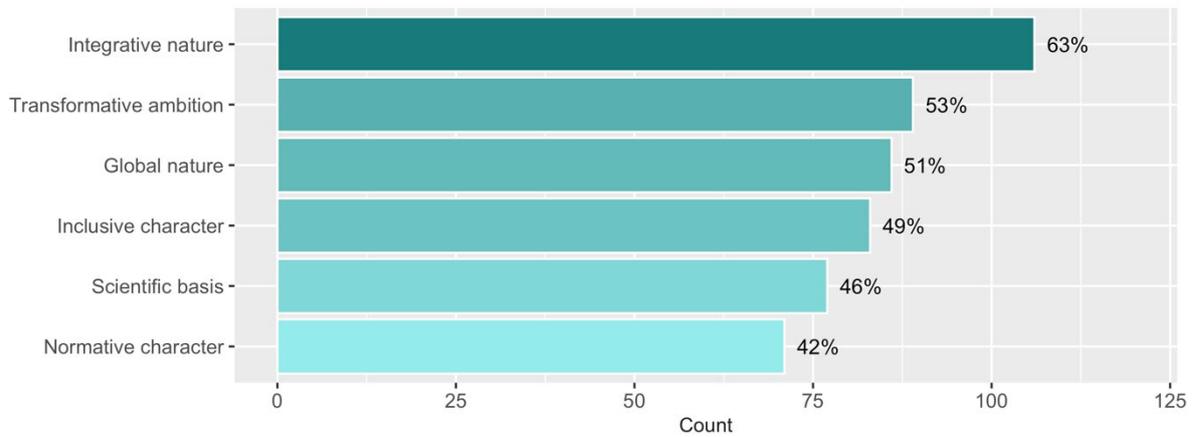


Figure 19: Preferred leadership role in the implementation of the SDGs and sustainability in the cantonal administrations

## What features of the 2030 Agenda motivate offices to work with the SDGs?



**Figure 20: Motivating features of the 2030 Agenda**

N = 168. Integrated nature: "Relating one's work to that of other actors and view it in a larger context"; Transformative ambition: "Contributing to a great socio-ecological transformation"; Global nature: "Working with global goals that apply to all of humanity"; Inclusive character: "Collaborating with social actors"; Scientific basis: "Working with goals that are founded in science"; Normative character: "Applying universal goals to guide action on the ground."

## 5 Summary

The survey shows that the SDGs enjoy a high level of awareness in the cantonal offices and that the SDGs or corresponding sustainability topics are important for the work in the offices. In particular, SDGs 5 (Gender Equality), 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), 12 (Sustainable Consumption and Production), 13 (Climate Action), and 17 (Partnerships to Achieve the Goals) are perceived as relevant to the work of the offices. The anchoring of sustainability in overarching policy strategies and the personal motivation of office heads are both important reasons why the offices engage with SDGs in their work. The lack of an official mandate is also an important reason why offices do not engage with the SDGs.

Despite relatively high awareness and relevance, the offices devote rather modest attention to the SDGs and corresponding sustainability topics, compared to other topics in their fields of activity. Even though the level of attention devoted to sustainability is largely considered appropriate, the general consensus is that the importance of the SDGs and corresponding sustainability topics will tend to increase in the future.

The SDGs – especially SDG 4 (Quality education), 5 (Gender equality), 11 (Sustainable cities and communities), 12 (Sustainable consumption and production), 13 (Climate action), 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions), and 17 (Partnerships for the goals) – shape office activities. They mainly influence existing policy measures but hardly trigger any new ones. Overall, the collaboration of offices with other actors in implementing the SDGs is not extensive. The closest collaboration is within departments and between departments. Working with the SDGs has a positive effect on raising awareness of sustainability and promotes strategic planning. It also strengthens cooperation within a department and with the municipalities.

The lack of human resources is the main obstacle to the implementation of the SDGs at the cantonal level. In order to strengthen the implementation, both additional financial and human resources are required in the view of the heads of office. In addition, the majority of the heads of office would like the federal government to take a leading role in implementing the SDGs and sustainability as a whole. At the cantonal level, they would like to see sustainability integrated into all offices instead of delegating the responsibility to specific units.