

Article

Public Governance of Sustainable Development Implementation: A Case Study of Coastal Municipalities in Lithuania

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Abstract

This study aims to answer the research question what are the characteristics of existing institutional governance factors within Lithuanian coastal municipalities that lead to the establishment of a common aim of sustainable development across different coastal municipalities. The method employed includes a systematic academic literature review and document analysis. The data collected were coded according to predefined themes and sub-themes, facilitating the determination of extent to which institutional factors influencing the public governance of sustainable development are integrated into the structures and credentials of municipalities. The findings reveal that while some municipalities incorporate sustainability into their vision and strategic plans, there is a general lack of dedicated policies and accountability for sustainable development. The absence of a dedicated unit or responsible employee for sustainable development implementation further fragments the approach to addressing these issues. Communication methods and public engagement vary, impacting the effectiveness of sustainable development initiatives. This study concludes that meta-governance serves as a unifying factor in public governance coordination among municipalities. To foster sustainable development in Lithuanian coastal cities, recommendations for policymakers are provided to increase transparency and civic trust, lead initiatives, and enhance dialogue through regional stakeholder forums or digital platforms for the co-creation of solutions across coastal municipalities.

Keywords: public governance; sustainable development; coastal municipalities



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1. Introduction

As an independent state, Lithuania has embraced the concept of sustainable development and is actively implementing the Sustainable Development Goals outlined in the United Nations Declaration. These goals aim to eradicate poverty, ensure peace, promote the economic and social well-being of the global population by 2030, leave no one behind, and protect the planet while combating climate change [1]. Česonis [2] claims that Lithuania prioritises partnership and cooperation in its approach to sustainable development. Researchers argue that it is essential to promptly assess the sustainable development challenges that arise in coastal areas, as several strategic priorities and principles established by Lithuania are closely linked to the Baltic Sea and its coastal regions [3]. Baležentienė and Baležentis [4] state that sustainable development is a long-term process that is vital at the organisational, national, and global levels. Meanwhile, Klimaitė and Čiburaitė [5]

emphasise that achieving sustainable development requires balancing diverse economic, social, and environmental objectives.

According to Dumitrache [6], sustainable development can be regarded as a policy. This notion is further supported by Singh et al. [7], who emphasise that partnership and cooperation among all stakeholders involved in this process are crucial for enhancing the overall constructive collaboration of sustainable development implementation. This is particularly relevant for the sustainable development of coastal areas, as these regions are unique not only due to their geographical location but also because of their considerable influence on climate change globally.

According to Neumann et al. [8], the natural resources of oceans and coasts are vital components of human well-being. The world's coastal areas provide a considerable proportion of water-related services, and their impact on the economy and livelihoods in these regions is particularly crucial in less developed areas. Additionally, individuals are drawn to coastal zones for recreational, aesthetic, cultural, and spiritual reasons due to the unique sense of feeling 'at-home' and general well-being they associate with the coastal environment, as well as a distinct 'way of life' found along the coast. For many small island developing states, their unique landscapes and seascapes make tourism a key economic activity. However, the development of coastal states and island nations also presents complex challenges regarding the economic development and conservation of natural resources within the context of coastal tourism. Therefore, the issue of implementing sustainable development in coastal areas is especially topical.

P. de Alencar et al. [9] pointed out that the implementation of sustainable development in coastal areas requires a holistic approach that integrates social (cultural), economic, managerial, and environmental aspects, as these territories possess unique characteristics. They connect aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems and are highly attractive for tourism development, which leads to frequent conflicts related to ecosystem health and human well-being. A significant number of researchers [10–12], as well as DasGupta and Shaw [13], underscore the importance of integrated decision-making and the role of the public sector in facilitating such decisions for the successful implementation of sustainable development in coastal areas. According to researchers [14,15], public sector institutions have the legal authority to determine policies and implement the Sustainable Development Goals based on their political will while also representing the public interest. Meuleman [16] outlines both traditional and contemporary governance styles for achieving sustainable development, emphasising the principles of effective governance identified by the United Nations Committee of Experts on Public Administration [17], as well as the significance of meta-governance as a new public governance design.

In Lithuania, the governance of sustainable development implementation in the Baltic Sea coastal zone occurs at the level of local self-government. Therefore, it is crucial to analyse how the Sustainable Development Goals are implemented by Lithuanian coastal municipalities, as the significance of local self-government public sector institutions in achieving these goals is highlighted by various researchers [7,18–20] and other previously mentioned researchers.

Lithuania is divided into sixty municipalities, with each authorised to perform local self-governance functions. However, municipalities within the same county can differ significantly in their socio-economic profiles and potential, leading to varied approaches to sustainable development implementation. Meuleman [16] emphasises that for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to be effectively implemented (Resolution 70/1, 2015) [21], municipalities must use all available tools and resources to accelerate the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals outlined in this article.

Based on systems theory and the insights of researchers [22,23], it is crucial to analyse not only the implementation of sustainable development in specific municipalities but also the interactions between these municipalities in this process. This is particularly relevant for coastal municipalities located near the same body of water, as water not only provides livelihoods and income for local populations but also enhances well-being through non-monetary values. In many countries, it plays a vital role in socio-economic and cultural aspects [24]. According to Singh et al. [7], achieving the Sustainable Development Goals necessitates consideration of unique, and sometimes controversial, solutions.

Research problem: Among the Baltic Sea states, Lithuania has the shortest shoreline; however, along this 90-kilometre stretch, there are four municipalities in Klaipeda County: the municipality of Klaipeda city, the municipality of Palanga city, the municipality of Neringa city, and the municipality of Klaipeda district. One distinguishing feature of these municipalities, compared to others in Lithuania, is their geographical adjacency to the Baltic Sea, classifying them as coastal zones. Therefore, while implementing their approved strategic development plans, which are likely to define their identity and objectives while highlighting goals and priorities for sustainable development, these municipalities must also align with the objectives outlined in the European Union's strategy for the Baltic Sea region (European Commission Communication [25]), implement the action plan of Baltic 2030 (European Commission [26]), and promote a circular economy within the region.

Each municipality, with its unique characteristics, prioritises sustainable development, coastal management, and planning practices in a specific order that reflects its interests. Each municipality also has varying levels of knowledge and skills for implementing the Sustainable Development Goals in coastal areas. This diversity can result in differing priorities regarding sustainable development, along with distinct approaches and contributions to addressing the challenges faced by the Baltic Sea coastal region.

By uniting and collaborating with municipalities, it would be possible to effectively address the sustainable development challenges of the Baltic Sea coast, establish a shared vision of a sustainable seaside, and make united decisions regarding the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals [10,12,19]. Kaulins et al. [12] emphasise that partnership and collaboration among all stakeholders are particularly crucial for the effective implementation of sustainable development in coastal areas. Given the objectives outlined in the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea region (European Commission Communication [25]), it is especially pertinent to evaluate the extent to which the vision of a sustainable seaside serves as an important and unifying factor in the sustainable development efforts of Lithuanian coastal municipalities and the effectiveness of actions taken to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Therefore, the following research question is raised in this study: What are the characteristics of existing institutional governance factors within Lithuanian coastal municipalities that lead to the establishment of a common aim of sustainable development management across different coastal municipalities?

The aim of this research is to determine, through the lens of public governance, the extent to which institutional governance factors influencing the governance of sustainable development are integrated into the structures and credentials of Lithuanian coastal municipalities.

2. Methods

Data collection: Data was collected by a systematic academic literature review and documents analysis as a research method particularly applicable to qualitative case studies [27,28].

A *systematic academic literature review* was conducted, involving a detailed search of the literature across key databases, including EBSCO, Scopus, and Web of Science, as well

as peer-reviewed publications available through search engines like Google Scholar. The literature search was conducted without restrictions regarding timeframes or languages. The research study sought to analyse and systematise the distinctive characteristics of sustainable development via public governance in coastal areas.

All databases were searched using the following keywords and keyword combinations: sustainable development, sustainable development governance, public sector, municipality, coastal zone, coastal zone governance, networking, and public governance. To select the appropriate articles, several iterations were conducted. Firstly, duplicate articles within the databases were discarded. Secondly, the titles and abstracts of the articles were reviewed to assess their relevance to the research question and aim. Articles deemed irrelevant to the study were identified based on the following criteria: those focusing on discussions surrounding sustainable development and the Sustainable Development Goals, the role of sustainable development in business enterprises, and analyses of specific Sustainable Development Goals. Studies examining the impact of sustainable development on consumer behaviour and sustainable marketing were excluded.

Sample: The initial analysis of the selected appropriate articles resulted in the inclusion of 79 articles for a systematic academic literature review.

Data analysis: Systematic analysis was employed to process the collected data from the scientific literature, specifically examining the concepts or core statements and their interrelations. The criteria of broad inclusion and comprehensive searching were employed to link the concepts of sustainable development and its implementation through public governance in coastal areas. This approach led to the identification of the key features of sustainable development via public governance and the determination of its role in the broader context of sustainable development, highlighting the institutional governance factors influencing its implementation.

Document analysis was based on the authentic documents of four Lithuanian coastal municipalities. To identify existing institutional governance factors affecting the public governance of sustainable development, publicly available information from the municipalities' websites was analysed, including governance structures; reports; news items; published documents such as various procedures, regulations, policies, and similar documents; and publicly announced public consultations or citizen surveys. The strategic development plans of Lithuanian coastal municipalities were examined in detail. The strategic development plans for all municipalities were prepared concurrently and cover the period up to 2030. This allowed for an objective assessment of the sustainable development directions planned by each municipality and the measures for their implementation. The strategic development plans provide a detailed overview of each municipality's circumstances and vision, highlighting the primary areas of development. Researchers refer to these documents as 'social facts', which are produced, shared, and used in socially organised ways [29].

Sample: Document analysis comprises the strategic development plans and websites of all four Lithuanian coastal municipalities located along the Baltic Sea (Figure 1). These municipalities differ in size, including land area, length of coastline, number of inhabitants, and unemployment rate (see Table 1).



Figure 1. Map of Lithuanian coastal municipalities (Coastal municipalities in Lithuania are marked with a red box). Source: [30].

Table 1. Some characteristics of Lithuanian coastal municipalities.

Municipality	Area Occupied, ha	Length of Coastline, km	The Number of Inhabitants, Thousands	Unemployment Rate, %
Klaipeda city	9795.17	11.2	156,745	7.0
Klaipeda district	132,336.36	8.6	63,990	7.6
Neringa	13,876.76	45.03	4090	6.4
Palanga city	2464.46	24.4	17,849	10.8

Source: Characteristics were compiled by the authors of this article as per the data of the Official Statistics Portal [31].

Both Palanga and Neringa municipalities hold resort status, attracting a significant number of visitors during the holiday season. Klaipeda district municipality is the largest in terms of land area and is second in population size. Although it governs the shortest stretch of coastline among the four municipalities, it is the only one where agricultural activity is actively pursued. The last three municipalities referred to in Table 1 are classified as small municipalities in Lithuania, while Klaipeda city municipality falls into the category of large municipalities. In terms of population, Klaipeda city is 39 times larger than the smallest municipality, Neringa, and more than 2.5 times larger than Klaipeda district municipality, which ranks second.

The activities, functions, and governance structure of Lithuanian municipalities are the same because they are defined by the Law on Local Self-Government of the Republic of Lithuania [32] and bind all Lithuanian municipalities to follow the law. The purpose of this law is to promote and strengthen local self-government as a foundational element in the development of a democratic state.

Document analysis encompassed 4 written documents and 4 websites. In total, written data amounted to 631 pages of strategic development plans and 183 webpages.

Data analysis: Document analysis involves skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination), and interpretation. This iterative process combines content and thematic analysis elements [33]. Deductive qualitative content analysis, which is suited to check whether the theoretical concepts, models, or hypotheses of previous studies are suitable in another context [34,35], was used to analyse the collected data from publicly available documents of Lithuanian coastal municipalities. Based on the deductive research perspective, the key themes, dimensions, and/or categories of the research are known by the researcher and defined before data collection and analysis [36–39]. Therefore, the data collected during the document analysis were coded according to themes formulated in advance by the researchers in accordance with the distinctive features of sustainable development of public governance in coastal areas drawn from the scientific literature. During the highlighting of the existing institutional cooperation factors within Lithuanian seaside municipalities that impact the public governance of sustainable development implementation, 3 themes and 8 sub-themes were distinguished at the beginning of the document analysis.

Each researcher read the texts of the documents multiple times and extracted meaningful units of the text illustrating sub-themes of each theme, compared them with each other, and assessed whether they form a coherent construct. In cases where the text excerpts did not correspond to the theme and/or its sub-theme, the meaningful units of the texts were re-coded into other sub-themes of the theme. For more details, see Appendix A. As the qualitative content analysis is not limited to data extraction, the research data was also interpreted considering the theoretical assumptions of this study. Thus, the findings of both the systematic academic literature review and document analysis were combined into 3 themes and 8 sub-themes when presenting the research results.

Research limitations: Virto [11] highlights that the implementation of sustainable development in coastal zones would be bolstered by fostering partnerships and cooperation at all levels among stakeholders, including the government, local self-government institutions, civil society, the private sector, and the scientific community. The research study was limited to cooperation among public government institutions of Lithuanian coastal municipalities. Another limitation of this study is the lack of comparison of results obtained due to the absence of research on public governance of coastal municipalities in other regions using qualitative research methods.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Governance of Sustainable Development Implementation Within the Public Sector

Sustainable development is a model that incorporates appropriate methods and is an ongoing process. Sharpley [40] refers to this process as the ‘creation of a sustainable world’, which also highlights an aspect of creativity. Sustainable development contributes to the advancement of a global society, with its primary goal being the improvement of living conditions for individuals. The core principle of the sustainable development strategy is respect for the environment, including its attributes and ecosystems. However, it is essential to recognise that sustainable development cannot be confined to rigid frameworks, as it is a process of qualitative change that facilitates the creation of a sustainable world.

Researchers from different countries are increasingly focusing on the challenges associated with the implementation of sustainable development in municipalities and their governance. Frare et al. [41] present a framework for the structure of sustainable development indicators for small municipalities, while Gericke et al. [42] analyse the significance of stakeholder involvement in the processes of implementing sustainable development. Levesque et al. [43], as well as Nikulin et al. [44], discuss the influence of interest groups

and institutional characteristics on the planning and execution of sustainable development in municipalities.

Some researchers, drawing on case studies, provide detailed accounts and models for governing the implementation of sustainable development in specific municipalities. Notable examples include the analysis of the city of Slavutych (Ukraine) by Ilchenko and Lisogor [45] and the hierarchical model of sustainable development governance proposed by Kaulins et al. [19], who examined the case of Saulkrasti's municipality (Latvia). Additionally, Slusarczyk and Grondys [46] evaluate the concept of sustainable development within Polish municipalities that belong to special economic zones. Marra and Grimaldi [47] address the issue of depopulation in Italian regions, which poses a threat to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. The researchers propose a methodology aimed at supporting regional planning and enhancing cooperation between municipalities to foster territorial cohesion and sustainable regional growth.

Mapara et al. [48] studied the implementation of sustainable development in metropolitan municipalities, integrating health, safety, and environmental aspects. A systematic overview of the assessment of sustainable development within functioning urban systems is provided by Pera [49], while Smedby and Neij [50] present case studies on urban governance in achieving sustainable development in Swedish municipalities. Creutzig et al. [51] analyse the potential for evidence-based decision-making in smart cities, considering the processes of digitalisation to implement the Sustainable Development Goals.

Lithuanian researchers analyse the harmonious development of regional and local self-government institutions [2,52–57]. They highlight the differences between Lithuanian regions, identify challenges related to regional development, and propose frameworks for addressing these issues. Additionally, they conduct assessments of this development and present individual cases that illustrate the implementation of sustainable development in specific municipalities. Domarkas et al. [58] and Tamošiūnas and Butkaliuk [56] identify key factors influencing sustainable development within the public sector, while Giedraitytė and Raipa [59] discuss the importance of innovation and the barriers to its implementation in this context.

Bielecka and Rozynski [60], along with DasGupta and Shaw [13], address the contradictions between the principles of sustainable development and public sector governance, identifying failures that arise when political considerations and their practical implementation are intertwined. Meuleman [61] emphasises the central role of culture as a new paradigm for sustainable development and sustainability, agreeing that sustainable development necessitates a holistic approach and systematic thinking.

Montoya et al. [62] reported that the Zapatos Wetland Complex (ZMC) is a vital ecosystem in Colombia that is currently threatened by man-made elements such as population growth and resource extraction activities. The local population faces high levels of poverty and low educational attainment, leading to escalating conflicts between their socio-economic needs and efforts to conserve the marshes. Insights gathered from this research were utilised to develop actions aimed at balancing the sustainability of the ZMC with local economic development. The study revealed a lack of support from territorial administration entities concerning balanced sustainability and proposed a methodology that could be applied to address social, economic, and environmental conflicts in other critical ecosystems.

Raipa [63], Meuleman [14,16], and Miedzinski et al. [15] examine various types of public governance and their combinations, seeking the most effective strategies for governing sustainable development. They explore both classical governance approaches and new public governance techniques. Augaitytė [64], Carroll et al. [65], Drabavičius [66], and Gericke et al. [42] discuss the search for consensus among stakeholders in decision-making

along the path of sustainable development. Meuleman [16] emphasises that to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Resolution 70/1, 2015), the public sector must utilise all available tools and resources to ensure and expedite the execution of this agenda. According to Meuleman [61], one crucial measure is the selection of the appropriate governance type. This point is also underscored by Bileišis [67] and Miedzinski et al. [15]. The authors note that cohesive governance necessitates new, context-specific forms of governance that facilitate deliberation and help reach consensus among diverse and potentially conflicting interests.

In the context of public administration, meta-governance is increasingly recognised as a key competence for steering complex, multi-actor governance environments without relying solely on top-down authority. As Meuleman [16,68] argues, effective meta-governance requires the strategic alignment of three primary governance modes. Hierarchical governance is based on authority, rules, and control. It functions effectively where legal certainty, centralised command, and accountability are critical, such as in emergencies or regulatory enforcement. Market-based governance operates through competition, contracts, and performance incentives. This mode is suitable for increasing efficiency, promoting innovation, and allocating resources through quasi-market mechanisms. Network governance emphasises horizontal coordination, trust-building, shared values, and interdependence among actors. It is particularly valuable in addressing complex, intersectoral challenges that require collective problem-solving. As Sørensen and Torfing [69] emphasise, meta-governance includes activities such as the design of governance frameworks, facilitation of collaborative processes, and strategic intervention in network dynamics. It allows public authorities to retain steering capacity in polycentric environments by influencing the institutional rules, discourses, and interaction logics without undermining decentralised governance. According to Eweje et al. [70], the complexity and dynamism stemming from evolving environmental conditions require a trust-based, flexible, inclusive, effective, synergistic, and inherently complex institutional framework. Within this framework, responsibility and accountability are shared by consensus among all stakeholders, alongside mechanisms for self-monitoring.

3.2. Challenges and Governance of Sustainable Development Implementation of Coastal Areas

Many researchers analyse the implementation of sustainable development across various sectors and areas, with a particular emphasis on addressing the challenges associated with sustainable development in seas, large water bodies, and their adjacent areas. Vitkienė [71] presents a systematic review and a concept of the long-term premise for implementing sustainable development within these regions, which are distinctive due to their geographical characteristics and natural resources.

Visbeck et al. [72], Ntona and Morgera [73], and Singh et al. [7], along with Barmelgy and Rasheed [74] and Virto [11], discuss the particularity of the Sustainable Development Goals related to water bodies and coastlines, as well as the challenges involved in achieving these objectives. Many researchers highlight the significant impact that water bodies and their ecosystems have on climate change. Researchers indicate that current developments and future scenarios in five interrelated areas—namely water, ecosystems, food, health, and security—continuously reveal significant and escalating risks in the coming decades [13,75].

Reusch et al. [76] concur that the oceans of the world will undergo drastic changes in the coming decades due to climate change and increasing anthropogenic pressures. Consequently, there is a strong emphasis on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in the coastal regions. Alinska et al. [20] highlight the significance of the public sector in the context of sustainable development.

Martins et al. [77] argue that the conditions and methods for transforming the Sustainable Development Goals targeted at water bodies and coastlines necessitate that all relevant stakeholders comprehend the diverse perspectives and values involved. The researchers conducted an online survey, supplemented by virtual focus group discussions, to compile a ranking of the most significant conflicts among various stakeholders. A total of 132 conflicts were systematised into 12 categories, with the most pertinent being legal authority and oversight, large enterprises in coastal areas, pollution, fishing regulations, fisheries management, and planning. The study demonstrated that, to promote sustainability in specific territories, coherence between public interests and the socio-economic needs of communities is essential. Using a participatory assessment method, Martins et al. [77] also argue that collaborative identification of conflicts has the potential to foster social learning, thereby legitimising future sustainable marine spatial planning processes.

Similarly, along the U.S.–Mexico border, climate change and increasing urbanisation have exacerbated water resource issues in the Rio Grande basin, leading to conflicts among the agricultural, urban, and environmental sectors regarding water use rights [78]. Hargrove and Heyman [78] identified key water consumers and utilised participatory modelling techniques to develop effective scenarios and interventions for the sustainable governance of water resources.

Virto [11], Reusch et al. [76], and De Alencar et al. [9], along with DasGupta and Shaw [13], note that large bodies of water, such as oceans, seas, and lakes, significantly impact climate change, which frequently leads to new disasters, the incidence of which has been increasing in recent years. In coastal areas, particular emphasis must be placed on the prevention of potential disasters, risk assessments, and governance of these disasters, as well as on developing the capacity to recover in the aftermath of a disaster. Consequently, coastal areas face unique challenges that necessitate innovative political thinking shaped by both political and public institutions.

In the examination of sustainable development in coastal areas, DasGupta and Shaw [13] identified three main components that are crucial for implementing sustainable development in these regions: environmental preservation, disaster risk reduction, and development. It is in these areas that emphasis should be placed on the partnership and cooperation among public authorities situated in coastal areas adjacent to the same body of water, as enshrined in legal frameworks.

DasGupta and Shaw [13] also identified the key issues on which local self-governments should reach consensus, involving both the private sector and the public in the decision-making process. All local self-government institutions situated near the same body of water should collaborate to address concerns related to pollution control, ecosystem resources, public lifestyles, risk management planning, the search for engineering solutions, public education, and inclusive growth. Measures to tackle these issues should be incorporated into all strategic documents and development plans of public authorities in coastal areas.

Public sector bodies in coastal regions bear a particular responsibility, as the coastal zone is appealing for both residential living and economic activities. However, these zones are often designated as protected areas at the state (or international) level due to their unique characteristics, which may lead to restrictions or prohibitions on certain activities and sometimes even on habitation. In the EU, this governance is shaped by directives such as the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (2008/56/EC) [79], which promotes sustainable marine management, and the Habitats (92/43/EEC) [80] and Birds (2009/147/EC) [81] directives, forming the Natura 2000 network. The Marine Spatial Planning Directive (2014/89/EU) [82] ensures balanced use of maritime space, while the proposed EU Ocean Pact (2025) aims to protect 30% of EU seas, including stricter rules for marine protected areas [83].

In coastal areas, public interest is most often associated with the environmental dimension, which is prioritised when defining public welfare and safety in these zones. According to Monkevičius [84], public interest in the environmental context refers to the collective interest of the public, or a segment thereof that is safeguarded by the constitution and the law. This interest aims to protect the natural environment from harmful effects resulting from economic or anthropogenic activities to preserve and restore natural resources, thereby ensuring the harmonious development of society; enhance quality of life; and safeguard health.

Singh et al. [7], in their analysis of the challenges to sustainable development in coastal areas, note that a portion of the population in these regions is economically dependent on various sectors of the coastal industry, including coastal tourism and artisanal fishing. Consequently, their interests may conflict with those of other societal groups. Thus, the definition of public interest in coastal areas hinges on successful social and political discussions that facilitate consensus on fundamental values and actions. Local self-government authorities, equipped with legal authority, must enact legislation that reflects this agreed public interest. In coastal areas, public interest can be conceptualised as a shared vision for sustainable development that encompasses all regions adjacent to the same body of water, aligning with the principles of meta-governance.

The mentioned studies above claim that promoting sustainable development in coastal areas, which lie between land and water, necessitates an integrated approach and a robust sustainable governance system capable of effectively regulating and operating within complex social and ecological systems. However, one of the primary obstacles to achieving sustainable development, as identified by P. de Alencar et al. [9], is the fragmented public governance and administration of coastal areas. In response, researchers emphasise the need for holistic governance of coastal regions, which should be underpinned by a comprehensive structure for sustainable development governance, with clearly defined goals. This approach would enhance the accuracy of predictions regarding changes and their effects while also enabling an assessment of the suitability of those influences within the context of sustainable development.

3.3. Assumptions for Effective Cooperation Among Public Sector Institutions in Coastal Areas for Sustainable Development

An important characteristic of coastal areas, as previously mentioned, is that they typically encompass regions protected at the national or international level, the development of which is governed and regulated not solely by local self-government bodies. Singh et al. [7] emphasise the need for a shared vision of sustainable development that serves the public's interest and merges the competing interests of regulatory authorities. All institutions must contribute to the development and construction of this vision. The authors argue that establishing a common vision for a sustainable coastline and creating an institutional network to realise this vision through the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals must be a strategic priority. Virto [11], citing the example of France, supports the idea of creating such a network and notes that scientific understanding of the effectiveness of protective measures, including socio-economic aspects and activities related to the ocean and land, remains limited, with many knowledge gaps persisting in coastal zone management.

Virto [11], Kaulins et al. [12], and DasGupta and Shaw [13] assert that integrated decision-making in coastal areas should be actively promoted. The authors advocate for its application in the development of strategies by local self-government bodies, establishing the necessary requirements for regional planning. However, Kaulins et al. [12] highlight that a fundamental issue in coastal area governance, particularly at the municipal level, is the discrepancy between scientific evidence and policy objectives. Integration and balance

are essential across the board, from coastal science to the monitoring systems employed by municipalities.

According to Meuleman [61], the nature of governance can either hinder or facilitate the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Glass and Newig [85] also note that institutions can initiate an environment beneficial for sustainable development by establishing accountability and transparency in policymaking and political responses.

Temel et al. [86], through a detailed analysis of the scientific literature on sustainable development governance, identified the following key institutional governance factors that contribute to the successful implementation of sustainable development: the vision and mission (institutional framework), policies, reporting, communication, the board of directors (BoD), the sustainability department, and the person in charge. A vision and mission focused on sustainable development enables the development of an effective strategy that considers the needs and expectations of all stakeholders (the public sector, the private sector, and society) in the coastal area. The integration of sustainable development policies into strategies and action plans can play a crucial role in engaging all stakeholders and fostering consensus. Detailed reports on the implementation of sustainable development, which are prepared and made public, provide guidance on the institution's actions and decision-making. Effective communication enhances the efficiency of interactions and helps establish strong channels of communication between the institution and its stakeholders. The BoD is key in integrating sustainability into an organisation's strategy. A BoD engaged with sustainability can result in better performance and is more likely to ease the flow of dialogue about sustainability issues in the organisation and with its stakeholders. The presence of a dedicated unit within the institution is vital for developing policies, goals, and objectives, as well as for creating favourable strategies and implementing sustainable development by involving all stakeholders, including the scientific community. Appointing a responsible individual and establishing leadership fosters a commitment to creating a clear governance structure for the implementation of sustainable development. Additionally, Glass and Newig [85] argue that institutional governance factors are among the various aspects that can either support or obstruct integrated decision-making, which is particularly crucial for coastal areas. For example, a vision and mission prioritising economic development serves only a portion of the stakeholders' interests and either does not encourage or only partially supports the achievement of sustainable development in the coastal zone. This perspective is further endorsed by Drabavičius and Čiegis [87], who emphasise that the perception of the interaction among institutional governing factors is becoming increasingly significant at both the national and local self-government levels. A lack of cooperation among different public governing levels hinders the development of a common goal, impairs its perception, disrupts integrated decision-making, and complicates choosing the most appropriate options.

Temel et al. [86] indicate that there exists a direct relationship, either strong or weak, between various institutional governance factors. Consequently, enhancing one factor simultaneously strengthens others. A more nuanced understanding of the institutional cooperation factors and their interrelatedness can assist institutions in improving governance structures aimed at achieving sustainable development in coastal areas, as well as in implementing innovative governance strategies for this purpose. Each factor, along with its interactions with other factors, plays a crucial role in the effective governance of sustainable development, while improved governance fosters a more comprehensive implementation of sustainable development in coastal zones. Thus, local self-government bodies situated in coastal areas must address challenges associated with the implementation of sustainable development goals and objectives that pertain to both land and water. This necessitates specialised governance of a dynamic, multidisciplinary, and iterative process. Integrated

decision-making is essential in this context, as the sustainable development policies of one coastal zone can significantly influence the development of adjacent zones sharing the same body of water. Therefore, institutional decisions and collaboration among these institutions are critical for the successful implementation of sustainable development in coastal areas. While cooperation is recognised as an effective strategy for addressing complex challenges, Marek et al. [88] note that cultivating successful collaboration often proves to be a challenging endeavour.

Czajkowski [89], in an effort to create a model of successful cooperation for institutions to utilise in developing interinstitutional networks, conducted a study examining the activities of 52 public institutions. He identified six key factors that define successful cooperation between public sector bodies: trust in partners, a common and distinctive purpose, shared power and joint decision-making, a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities, open and frequent communication, and adequate financial and human resources. To achieve the successful implementation of sustainable development, similar factors, termed the principles of successful cooperation, are also recommended by the United Nations [90]. These include a coherent policy on cooperation, effective empowerment of cooperative institutions, cooperative risk-sharing and mutual support, transparency among partners and their activities, prioritisation of public interest, and a commitment to sustainable development. Thus, in recent years, inter-institutional relationships have been increasingly developed, and the political significance of these connections is being assessed, particularly concerning the interconnected issues of climate, earth, energy, and water.

The need for integrated decision-making for the implementation of sustainable development has long been acknowledged; however, many scholars, including Singh et al. [7], Virto [11], P de Alencar et al. [9], and Neumann et al. [8], have highlighted persistent challenges in this area. Kaulins et al. [12], along with DasGupta and Shaw [13], agree that the primary obstacle in integrated decision-making lies in the failure to incorporate the principles of sustainable development into the operations of existing institutions. This failure hinders the achievement of the necessary coherence and integration of cooperation required for sustainable development. Eweje et al. [70] pointed out that it is crucial to emphasise that successful cooperation and partnerships necessitate effective leadership and the willingness of stakeholders to invest time and relevant resources, including innovation and creativity. Furthermore, partners must strive to integrate, avoid duplication of efforts, and establish clearly defined objectives and deliverables to distinguish a shared vision for sustainable development in the coastal zone.

4. Research Findings

Distinctive features of sustainable development via public governance in coastal areas drawn from the scientific literature led to the determination of three themes and eight sub-themes, which, through the documents analysis, facilitated the identification of the characteristics of existing institutional governance factors and their level of maturity pertinent to each municipality, leading to the establishment of a common aim of sustainable development management across different coastal municipalities.

A six-level maturity matrix designed for public institutions [91] was used to determine the maturity level of each factor. Explanations of the scale values are provided in Table 2, while the assessment results are presented in Appendix A.

Table 2. Governance maturity matrix.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6
No progress	Basic Level	Early Progress	Firm Progress	Results	Maturity	Exemplar
No action taken or not relevant.	Principle accepted and commitment to action.	Initial actions and ongoing development.	Consistent progress that is evident internally.	Achievements evidenced by external recognition.	Systems and practices consistently and reliably produce locally recognised results.	Recognised leader with others learning from our achievements.

Source: [91].

4.1. Theme A: Determination of the Public Policy Towards Sustainable Development

4.1.1. Sub-Theme A1: Visions and Missions of Coastal Municipalities

The vision and mission of Klaipeda city are centred on conservation and sustainability. Conservation and sustainability are regarded as both a mindset and a tool for achieving a higher quality of life. While in Klaipeda district the term ‘sustainability’ is not mentioned in the mission and vision statements. The municipality’s vision, ‘Opening Horizons’, lacks clarity in promoting the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. In Neringa municipality, the term ‘sustainability’ is absent from both the mission and vision statements. The municipality’s vision is articulated as ‘Neringa—a legend that inspires’; however, it is subsequently explained that the aim is ‘to ensure and preserve the sustainable development of the municipality in all areas’. The mission of Palanga city focuses on conservation, sustainability, and well-being. However, the concept of sustainability is not elaborated upon clearly.

4.1.2. Sub-Theme A2: Sustainable Development Policies of Coastal Municipalities

The sustainable development policy of Klaipeda city is integrated into the urban strategy, and the utilisation of smart tools in everyday life contributes to the development of a circular economy, which serves to achieve sustainable development. Meanwhile, in Klaipeda district, there is no independently developed sustainable development policy, and the strategy does not specifically highlight this aspect. Although there is no independently developed sustainable development policy of Neringa city, it is adequately addressed through the objectives outlined in the strategic development plan. The sustainable development policy of Palanga city is incorporated into the strategic development plan.

The literature review shows that the determination of the public policy towards sustainable development is manifested through visions and missions, as well as the sustainable development policies of coastal municipalities. The findings indicate that only two coastal municipalities incorporate the terms ‘conservation’ or ‘sustainable’ in their mission statements (Figure 2). None of the municipalities have developed a sustainable development policy or made such a policy available on their websites (Figure 2). This may lead to the impression that sustainable development is not a priority for these municipalities; however, upon analysing the strategic development plans, it becomes evident that these terms are used extensively in the context of priority directions, objectives, and measures. Among the measures highlighted by the municipalities concerning the implementation of sustainable development in coastal areas, nearly all identify coordinated coastal tourism (not limited to Klaipeda district municipality) and sustainable mobility as significant priorities. Therefore, it can lead to the assumption that the coastal municipalities in Lithuania share a common vision for a sustainable seaside and are actively working towards its implementation.

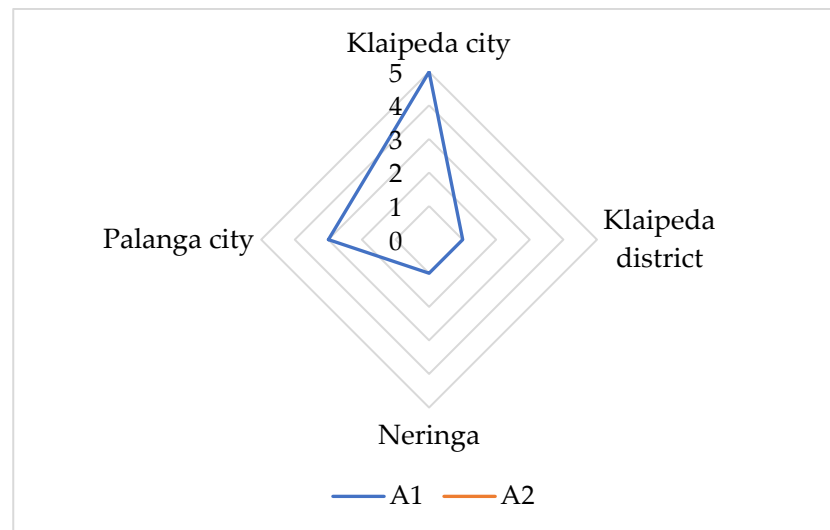


Figure 2. Determination of the public policy towards sustainable development. Source: It was compiled by the authors of this article.

4.2. Theme B: Representation of Public Interest

4.2.1. Sub-Theme B1: Reporting

All four municipalities' websites publish annual activity reports. However, since the legal statutes of the Republic of Lithuania do not mandate the submission of reports or public accountability on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, reports on the websites addressing this matter were not found. Furthermore, none of the municipalities have included such reports as accountability tools within their strategic development plans. This indicates a gap between strategic planning and transparent reporting on sustainability-related actions, which may hinder systematic monitoring and public engagement in sustainable development governance.

4.2.2. Sub-Theme B2: The Unit or Directly Responsible Employee for the Implementation of Sustainable Development

An analysis of the organisational structures presented on the municipalities' websites, along with the responsibilities assigned to individual departments and staff, reveals that none of the municipalities have established a dedicated unit or assigned clear responsibility for coordinating or overseeing the implementation of sustainable development initiatives.

4.2.3. Sub-Theme B3: Communication

Various modern communication channels are employed by Klaipeda city. The one-stop-shop principle is in operation, allowing users to submit requests via the municipality's website. Both the municipality and the mayor maintain their own Facebook profiles; however, there is no provision for a direct communication service, and public consultations have not taken place. The website of Klaipeda district provides details, including links to the municipal's Facebook profile and YouTube channel. There is an opportunity for residents to evaluate the quality of services, and a list of public consultations has been published. The information on the website of Neringa municipality suggests a lack of diversity in communication tools; however, the strategic development plan includes several measures aimed at enhancing communication. Traditional communication methods such as direct or telephone conversations, letters, press releases, public speeches, etc., are employed by Palanga city.

An analysis of scientific publications revealed that representation of the public's interest is manifested through reporting, a unit, or a directly responsible employee for

the implementation of sustainable development, as well as communication of coastal municipalities. However, the findings show that no municipality has accountability for the implementation of sustainable development, nor is there a designated unit or employee responsible for coordinating the implementation of sustainable development (Figure 3). It might be related to the previous findings that none of the municipalities have developed a sustainable development policy or made such a policy available on their websites (Figure 2). The absence of a unit or employee responsible for the implementation of sustainable development fragments the approach to addressing sustainable development issues and obstructs integrated decision-making. The communication methods of the municipalities show that interactivity and real-time engagement are lacking. Some municipalities provide links to their social media accounts and communication channels, while others rely solely on standard communication methods. Only Klaipeda district municipality consistently publishes and updates lists of public consultations in a timely manner. The remaining municipalities either do not publish this information or it is not readily accessible on their websites. Inadequate communication results in stakeholders being poorly informed about the efforts made to implement sustainable development and the outcomes of those efforts.

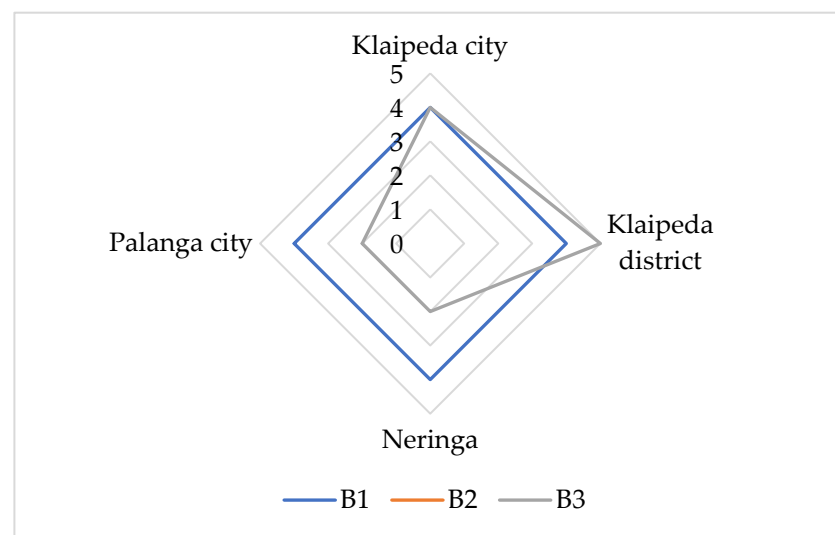


Figure 3. Representation of public interest. Source: It is compiled by the authors of this article.

4.3. Theme C: Meta-Governance Application

4.3.1. Sub-Theme C1: Hierarchical Governance

The information on the Klaipeda city website revealed that all coastal municipalities are members of the Regional Development Council [92,93]. This council comprises the mayors of the region's municipalities, delegated members of municipal councils, and a representative appointed by the government of the Republic of Lithuania or an authorised institution. The Minister of Interior of the Republic of Lithuania approves the composition of the Regional Development Council. As a formal political institution, its membership can change after each municipal election. The Regional Development Council formulates a common policy for the sustainable development of the region (municipalities), whose decisions are binding on the municipalities. Cooperation between the Regional Development Council and the municipalities is based on a hierarchical governance model.

4.3.2. Sub-Theme C2: Market Governance

The strategic plans of coastal municipalities include some governance activities through competition, contracts, and performance incentives. For example, Neringa's strategic development plan includes measures that focus on implementing joint activities and

projects between NGOs and the public sector and aims to increase public inclusion through communication and volunteering activities. Klaipeda city's strategic development plan includes measures that encourages and facilitates citizen integration into self-government processes. Palanga city's strategic development plan outlines measures to ensure the involvement of various population groups in decision-making and focuses on cooperation with NGOs in implementing social projects. Klaipeda district's strategic development plan includes measures promoting cooperation between the local government and the community. The emphasis is on projects funded through competition-based funding among local communities and NGOs. The analysis of the measures outlined in the municipalities' strategic development plans also reveals a lack of significant involvement from the private sector in the implementation of these measures and a failure to anticipate such opportunities. Each municipality announces independent projects or initiatives that are either implemented by the private sector or developed in collaboration with it; however, there are relatively few such examples. Most often, only project activities are mentioned, with plans to invite representatives of the private sector based on partnerships. For example, the strategic development plan for Klaipeda city includes measures aimed at encouraging private investment by expanding the scope of social service provision. Palanga city includes measures that focus on developing contacts and actively cooperating with public and private investors. The findings presented above have some features of the application of the market governance model.

4.3.3. Sub-Theme C3: Network Governance

It is stated on the Klaipeda city website that cooperation with other municipalities in the Klaipeda region occurs through the Association Klaipeda Region. On 14 December 2011, seven municipalities in the Klaipeda region established the Association Klaipeda Region [93], which aims to unite the municipalities to facilitate the more effective implementation of tasks requiring joint efforts. Through this association, the Lithuanian seaside municipalities collaborate. The Association Klaipeda Region acts as the central coordinating body for collaboration between municipalities, organising general meetings, addressing common regional issues, and initiating solutions. The association has refined and harmonised a common vision for sustainable development among all coastal municipalities, focusing on sustainable maritime and coastal tourism, which is vital for these areas. The establishment of the Association Klaipeda Region has made inter-municipal cooperation more purposeful and effective. While the association primarily employs a network governance model, it not only unites municipalities and assists them in achieving and implementing planned tasks but also fosters appropriate stakeholder networks (including the private sector, various societal groups, NGOs, etc.) to discuss and implement specific initiatives.

The works of researchers assert that three typical styles of governance can be distinguished: hierarchical governance, market governance, and network governance. These styles are seldom found in their 'pure' forms but usually appear in combinations. The design and management of such combinations is called meta-governance. The findings show that the appraisal of inter-municipal cooperation in coastal areas demonstrated that, in the municipalities studied, cooperation and integrated decision-making occur through the application of meta-governance principles, exploiting all three governance models (Figure 4).

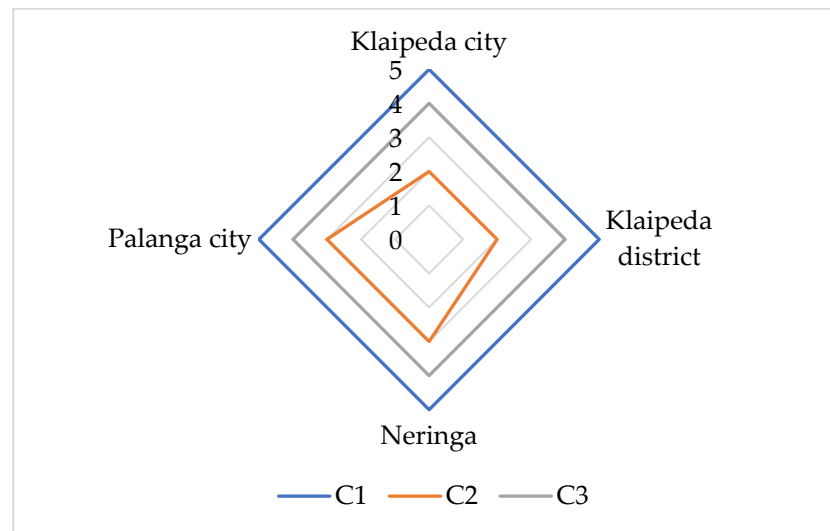


Figure 4. Meta-governance application. Source: It is compiled by the authors of this article.

5. Discussion

This study highlights the variability in public policy determination among Lithuanian coastal municipalities. Klaipeda city is noted for explicitly incorporating conservation and sustainability into its vision and mission statements, whereas other municipalities, such as Klaipeda district and Neringa city, lack clarity in their sustainability commitments. In terms of sustainable development policies, Klaipeda city has integrated sustainable development into its urban strategy. In contrast, other municipalities either lack independent policies or include sustainability within broader strategic plans. It echoes findings by Lithuanian researchers [2,52–57] on the existing differences between Lithuanian local self-government institutions in public governance, which lead to the lack of harmonious development of the coastal region. The data suggest that successful governance of sustainable development in Lithuanian coastal areas still needs to place an emphasis on the partnership and cooperation among different public authorities situated in coastal areas adjacent to the same body of water by incorporating sustainable development issues into all strategic documents and development plans of each public authority in coastal area, as is claimed by DasGupta and Shaw [13].

The representation of public interest is another critical aspect. While all municipalities publish annual activity reports, there is no accountability for sustainable development implementation, and no dedicated units or employees are responsible for this. As researchers [16,94] stated, if sustainable development is not integrated into the vision, mission, and strategy, then such reports are typically not prepared. This assertion is corroborated by the current situation in the Lithuanian coastal municipalities. Communication methods, as a crucial public governance factor, also vary among different coastal municipalities, with Klaipeda city utilising modern communication channels. Other municipalities, however, lack interactivity and public consultations on sustainable development in their engagement approaches. Results confirm the necessity, emphasised by Glass and Newig [85], of initiating an environment beneficial for sustainable development by establishing accountability and transparency in policymaking and political responses by local self-governing institutions.

While the determination of the common public policy towards sustainable development between different Lithuanian coastal municipalities is fragmented and the representation of the public's interest in sustainable development within coastal areas is weak due to the lack of flow of dialogue about sustainability issues in the municipalities and to its

stakeholders, the application of meta-governance for sustainable development is evident in the use of hierarchical, market, and network governance models by Lithuanian coastal municipalities. The Regional Development Council plays a significant role in formulating common policies for sustainable development across different coastal municipalities. The Association Klaipeda Region facilitates inter-municipal cooperation and a unified vision for sustainable development, particularly in maritime and coastal tourism. This finding supports Temel et al.'s [86] assertion that integrated decision-making is essential in this context, as the sustainable development policies of one coastal zone can significantly influence the development of adjacent zones sharing the same body of water; thus collaboration among public governance institutions is critical for the successful implementation of sustainable development in coastal areas. The results also fit with the theory by Miedzinski et al. [15] and Meuleman [16], who argue that it is necessary to combine all three public governance models to achieve sustainable development, emphasising the principles of effective governance as identified by the United Nations Committee of Experts on Public Administration [17], as well as the significance of meta-governance as a new public governance design to establish a common goal for sustainable development management across different coastal municipalities. The meta-governance approach serves as a unifying factor among Lithuanian coastal municipalities, leading to the shared vision of sustainable seaside development. Nevertheless, it is necessary to explore ways to enhance cooperation between coastal municipalities at the political level to set a common and integrated public policy towards sustainable development and engage all stakeholders, as well as foster consensus via representation of public interest. The legal authority of public sector bodies in coastal regions based on the political will enable them to identify the priority directions for Lithuanian coastal zone development, establish the key goals, and specify the objectives to achieve them via existing cooperation and decision-making among the four Lithuanian coastal municipalities in the context of the meta-governance model for the implementation of sustainable development.

6. Conclusions

The public sector operates in an environment characterised by complex and constantly changing challenges, roles, and tasks. In this sector, the concept of sustainable development encompasses areas that extend beyond widely recognised environmental issues, such as energy transformation and mobility, and includes broader social dimensions. Currently, significant attention is directed towards sustainable development strategies and concepts, as well as sustainable working practices. This focus yields a variety of outcomes, ranging from sustainable development strategies for public institutions to ecologically responsible development, green procurement, and the digitalisation of cities, towns, and educational institutions. Consequently, the public sector plays a crucial role in shaping sustainable development initiatives, as it is responsible for governing the implementation of sustainable development, making decisions, and overseeing their implementation.

The public governance of sustainable development of coastal cities is influenced by a complex interplay of institutional factors. A shared vision for sustainable development is essential, especially in areas governed by multiple authorities, which must align their policies and strategies for the common coastal area's sustainable development. A dedicated sustainability department or responsible individual, transparent reporting, and effective communication channels affect the sustainable development of coastal cities. Decisions in one coastal zone can affect adjacent zones, necessitating regional coordination by building interinstitutional networks and strategic partnerships that transcend administrative boundaries of different coastal municipalities. Meta-governance plays a critical role in shaping sustainable development outcomes. The growing political relevance of cooperation in ad-

addressing climate, energy, and water issues underscores the adaptive, iterative governance needed to respond to dynamic coastal challenges.

Sustainable development in coastal areas necessitates a specialised approach, along with specific knowledge and skills, as the coastal zone uniquely connects two ecosystems: aquatic and terrestrial. Therefore, an integrated approach to all aspects of the coastal zone is essential. It is important to highlight that an effective public governance structure is necessary for the successful implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in these areas. Official public sector bodies in coastal areas must adequately represent the public interest, as the implementation of sustainable development contributes to the evolution of global society, with the primary goal of improving human well-being. The role of the public sector in achieving sustainable development in coastal areas is particularly critical, as public governance must adopt a holistic approach that contributes to forecasting changes and their results while assessing the extent and adequacy of those results within the context of sustainable development. It becomes evident that these regions require a common vision of sustainable development that serves the public's interest and reconciles the competing interests of regulators and other stakeholders.

The major findings of this study indicate that while some Lithuanian coastal municipalities incorporate sustainability into their vision and strategic plans, there is, however, a general lack of dedicated policies and accountability for sustainable development. An important element—the sustainable development policy as a separate document—is not developed in the municipalities; instead, it is often integrated into other municipal documents. A significant missing factor across all municipalities is the absence of a dedicated unit responsible for the implementation of sustainable development, along with the lack of a directly responsible employee. Communication methods and public engagement also vary; no municipality is held accountable for the implementation of sustainable development, resulting in the non-preparation of such reports and impacting the effectiveness of sustainable development implementation initiatives. Significant coherence between different coastal municipalities' institutional governance factors is necessary for the determination of common public policies towards sustainable development and the representation of the public's interest across the Lithuanian coastal region.

Sustainable development can only be deemed viable if it is appropriately or collectively managed. Therefore, cooperation among all stakeholders and the establishment of a fully cooperative consensus are essential. The governance of sustainable development in coastal areas is unique, as it involves complex issues that arise within a multi-sectoral and multi-actor context, necessitating a specific approach. The findings suggest that existing institutional governance factors within Lithuanian coastal municipalities involve meta-governance of all institutions associated with the same body of water, leading to the establishment of a common aim of sustainable development management across different coastal municipalities. The existing cooperation and joint decision-making among Lithuanian seaside municipalities in implementing the vision of a sustainable seaside are based on various configurations and methods of collaboration. Primarily, cooperation occurs through the Regional Development Council and the Association Klaipeda Region, which facilitate the integration of different governance types to align with the specific issues being addressed, enabling negotiations and the achievement of amicable agreements and enhancing innovative perspectives and a range of alternative governance options that are crucial for providing practical solutions to the challenges of sustainable development. Thus, meta-governance serves as a unifying factor in public governance coordination, fostering cooperation among public sector bodies and potentially accelerating the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals, while contributing to the overall vision of sustainable development in the Lithuanian coastal zone.

To foster sustainable development in Lithuanian coastal cities, it is recommended for policymakers to create standalone sustainable development policies and make them publicly available to increase transparency and civic trust; establish a dedicated sustainability unit in municipalities and designate responsible individuals within institutions to lead initiatives; mandate regular, public sustainability reporting into annual reports and strategic plans that are aligned with SDG indicators to ensure open communication with stakeholders across municipalities; and enhance dialogue through regional stakeholder forums or digital platforms among public government bodies, NGOs, academia, businesses, and communities to increase participation, public consultations, and the co-creation of solutions across coastal municipalities of Lithuania.

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Appendix A

Final Coding Book of Institutional Factors

Theme A: Determination of the public policy towards sustainable development

Definition A1. *Strategic documents and development plans of coastal zone authorities that incorporate and outline measures aimed at the implementation and governance of sustainable development.*

Sub-theme A1: Vision and mission of coastal municipalities

Definition A2. *The striving for sustainable development is embedded within the municipality's mission and vision statements.*

Key words: future generations; well-being; circular economy; social justice; protection of natural resources; harmony; sustainability; balance; sustainable; balanced; holistic entity; whole; living organism; mutual compatibility; intercompatibility; conservation; social equity; living conditions; respect for the environment; ecosystems; health; safety; digitalisation; harmonious development; coherence; prevention; preservation; pollution control; public welfare; restoration of natural resources; sustainable coastline.

Sub-theme A2: Sustainable development policy for coastal municipalities

Definition A3. *A formal standalone strategic document approved by the authorities of municipalities and publicly available.*

Key words: sustainable development policy; sustainable development guidelines; sustainability strategy; local sustainability management plan; coastal resilience policy; integrated coastal zone management policy; policy programme; regional planning for

sustainability; goals for sustainable development; protective measures; coastal zone management; sustainable development policy objectives.

Theme B: Representation of public interest

Definition A4. *The institutional and procedural mechanisms through which local governments ensure that the needs, values, and priorities of the community are reflected in decision-making processes.*

Sub-theme B1: Reporting

Definition A5. *Reporting refers to the systematic process through which municipal authorities communicate, disclose, and justify their actions, decisions, and outcomes to the public.*

Key words: reporting; annual activity report; environmental impact assessment; monitoring and evaluation; transparency in governance; data-driven decision-making; climate adaptation metrics; self-monitoring; public interest; accountability.

Sub-theme B2: Unit or directly responsible employee for the implementation of sustainable development

Definition A6. *A municipal unit or employee whose functions and responsibilities are directly related to the implementation of sustainable development within the territory of the municipality.*

Key words: sustainability coordinator (specialist, etc.); person in charge; sustainability governance unit (office, department, etc.), sustainability coordination; support.

Sub-theme B3: Communication

Definition A7. *Communication refers to the structured and purposeful exchange of information between municipal authorities and the public, aimed at ensuring transparency, fostering civic engagement, and promoting accountability. It encompasses both internal and external communication strategies that facilitate dialogue, inform stakeholders, and support inclusive decision-making processes aligned with community needs and values.*

Key words: stakeholder engagement; stakeholder involvement; community involvement; public consultation; inclusive policymaking; local voice representation, social media, forums; participation; dialogue.

Theme C: Meta-governance application

Definition A8. *Meta-governance application refers to the design and orchestration of governance frameworks that enable context-specific, deliberative processes aimed at achieving consensus among diverse and potentially conflicting stakeholders. It emphasizes the coordination of multiple governance modes to foster cohesive decision-making and ensure the representation of pluralistic interests in complex policy environments.*

Sub-theme C1: Hierarchical governance

Definition A9. *Hierarchical governance refers to a top-down model of decision-making and authority distribution, where power and control are concentrated at higher levels of government or administration. It is characterized by formal rules, clear lines of accountability, and a command-and-control approach to policy execution, often used in contexts requiring uniformity, stability, and centralized coordination.*

Key words: public administration structure; policy enforcement levels; regulatory authority distribution; government; formal political institution; subordination; top-down authority; centralised command.

Sub-theme C2: Market governance

Definition A10. *Market governance refers to a mode of governance in which coordination and regulation of societal and economic activities are primarily achieved through market mechanisms such as competition, pricing, and consumer choice. In this model, the role of the state is often limited to setting the legal framework, ensuring fair competition, and correcting market failures.*

Key words: business support; private sector engagement; public–private partnerships; market incentives for businesses; business-driven sustainability; regulatory frameworks for business; business participation in policymaking; innovation; efficiency; competition; economic sustainability; investment; contracts; performance incentives.

Sub-theme C3: Network governance

Definition A11. *Network governance refers to a mode of governance characterized by horizontal coordination among a diverse set of actors, including public institutions, private organizations, and civil society. This model emphasizes flexibility, interdependence, and the co-production of policies and services, making it particularly suitable for addressing complex, cross-sectoral challenges.*

Key words: co-creation of policy; open governance networks; deliberative budgeting; participatory budgeting; horizontal cooperation, shared vision; integrated decision-making; cooperation between municipalities; consensus; horizontal coordination; trust-building; shared values; interdependence; collective problem-solving; collaborative processes; decentralised governance; institutional network; interaction; common and distinctive purpose; shared power; joint decision-making, cooperative risk-sharing; mutual support.

A codebook was hierarchically structured into themes and subthemes. Each code was accompanied by a precise operational definition delimiting its semantic field and the key words taken from the literature review and documents, illustrating its practical application. Each researcher thoroughly reviewed the documents multiple times, identifying meaningful text units that illustrated the sub-themes of each main theme. These units were then compared and evaluated to determine whether they formed a coherent conceptual structure. When experts did not align with the assigned theme or sub-theme, they were re-coded and reassigned to more appropriate sub-themes within the thematic framework. The relationship between themes and subthemes allowed moving towards axial coding, articulating the connections between the different levels of analysis. Thus, findings were grouped under major thematic axes.

Open discussions resolved the disputes among the members of the research team to understand the different perspectives and assumptions behind each coder's interpretation. When shared understanding was achieved, the code was corrected by refining the codebook and/or clarifying code definitions.

Definition of each code and the key words, as well as dispute resolution among four members of the research team, minimised potential subjectivity in qualitative coding. This format ensured analytical transparency, consistency in the application of the coding system, and traceability of the findings.

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