

THE PROXIMITY PARADOX: URBAN YOUTH AWARENESS OF MULTILEVEL GOVERNMENT RESPONSIBILITY IN SDG LOCALISATION IN CHENNAI, INDIA

Induja Sugunuri*¹, Dr. P. Uma Maheswari²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Media Sciences, Anna University, Chennai, India.

²Associate Professor, Department of Media Sciences, Anna University, Chennai, India.

Correspondence Author Email: induja.sugunuri@gmail.com

Abstract

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) localisation depends on citizens recognising which tier of government is responsible for delivery, yet little is known about how urban youth perceive this multilevel division of responsibility. Drawing on a survey of 400 respondents within the age group of 18-25, in Chennai, India, this study examines awareness of municipal, state, national and global government roles in SDG implementation. A repeated-measures comparison revealed a “proximity paradox”: awareness of the Greater Chennai Corporation’s initiatives was significantly lower than awareness of state, national and global efforts. Attitude, sustainable practice and media exposure, rather than demographic background, predicted government awareness. Implications for municipal communication and SDG localisation are discussed.

Keywords: SDG localisation; multilevel governance; municipal visibility; local self-government; citizen participation; institutional awareness; urban youth; Chennai; India.

1. Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development rests on a premise that is easy to state and difficult to operationalise: globally agreed goals can only be achieved through action anchored in specific places, delivered by specific institutions, and understood by specific citizens (United Nations, 2015). Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) “localisation” is the process through which global targets are translated into sub-national strategies, budgets and services (Bilsky et al., 2021; Fox et al., 2021; Sever et al., 2025). Localisation scholarship has, to date, been dominated by an institutional and managerial vantage point: how city governments adapt SDG indicators (Yamasaki et al., 2022), incorporate the Goals into strategic plans (Guarini et al., 2021), and renegotiate multilevel arrangements between national, regional and municipal authorities (Croese et al., 2021; Masuda et al., 2021). Far less is known about a precondition for localisation that lies outside the institution altogether: whether citizens actually recognise the municipal, as opposed to the state, national or global, tier of government as an actor in SDG delivery. Local governments, as the tier closest to the population, are widely held best placed to identify and respond to citizen priorities (Bilsky et al., 2021); yet this proximity advantage can only translate into legitimacy, participation and accountability if citizens are first aware that the local tier has a distinct role to play.

Young citizens are an especially important population in which to examine this question. As the cohort who will interact with, vote for, and eventually staff sub-national institutions, their present-day recognition of which level of government is answerable for sustainability outcomes has direct implications for the long-term legitimacy of multilevel governance arrangements (Nikitina et al., 2021; Lola & Nesmiiian, 2024). Youth trust in government is closely bound up with awareness of institutional activity: Nikitina et al. (2021) report that lower awareness of municipal authorities’ work among Russian youth predicts lower trust in those authorities, while comparative evidence from Morocco finds that institutional distance itself shapes trust, with local and regional bodies trusted far more than distant central government (Chraimi et al., 2025). Whether a comparable “distance” pattern holds for awareness itself, rather than trust, in a large Indian metropolitan setting, remains empirically untested.

Against this background, this study examines awareness of government and institutional responsibility for the SDGs across four governance tiers, municipal (Greater Chennai Corporation; GCC), state (Tamil Nadu), national (Government of India) and global (United Nations), among 400 youth in Chennai. It investigates whether awareness

is uniform across tiers or instead follows a graded “visibility ladder”; whether such awareness varies across the city’s administrative divisions, gender and income; and how government awareness relates to respondents’ sustainability attitudes, practices and media exposure. In doing so, the study shifts the locus of SDG localisation research from institutional indicators to citizen perception, and argues that municipal visibility, not merely municipal performance, is a distinct and measurable precondition for the legitimacy of local self-government within multilevel SDG governance.

2. Literature Review

2.1. SDG Localisation and Multilevel Governance

The concept of SDG localisation has matured rapidly since 2015, evolving from a normative call for sub-national engagement into an active field of empirical inquiry into how cities operationalise global targets. Early scholarship emphasised the “subnational turn” in global policy, documenting how city governments in Bristol (Fox et al., 2021), Quebec City (Tremblay et al., 2021) and across Japan’s “SDGs Future Cities” initiative (Masuda et al., 2021) translated the Goals into local strategic instruments. Yamasaki et al. (2022) extended this institutional focus with indicator-based frameworks evaluating local progress on SDG 11, while Clement et al. (2023) found that smart-city strategies across 29 countries disproportionately localise a narrow subset of Goals (7, 8, 9 and 11), leaving others neglected. Leavesley et al. (2022) caution that localisation is neither automatic nor uniform, its transformative potential depending on data availability, resourcing and inter-city peer learning. Sever et al. (2025) reframe localisation as a fundamentally agentic process in which local governments are active co-producers rather than passive implementation sites, a reframing implying that citizens too should be understood as participants in localisation rather than its passive beneficiaries.

Multilevel governance (MLG) theory supplies the conceptual scaffolding most localisation scholars use to describe this vertical redistribution of authority. First systematised by Hooghe and Marks (2002) to explain the jurisdictional arrangements of European integration, later work distinguishes stable, nested “Type I” MLG from overlapping, task-specific “Type II” MLG (Hooghe et al., 2004; Hooghe et al., 2020). Bilsky et al. (2021) apply this vocabulary directly to SDG localisation, arguing the movement reshapes multilevel governance from the bottom up through Voluntary Local and Subnational Reviews and multistakeholder co-creation. Guarini et al. (2021) similarly frame municipal SDG integration as embedded within multilevel governance settings, while Croese et al. (2021), examining Kisumu and Cape Town, show effective SDG implementation in Africa requires simultaneous top-down guidance and bottom-up initiative. Zürn (2020) and Börzel (2020) note that classical MLG theory carries a “government bias”: its focus on formal authorities rather than citizens has limited the approach’s capacity to explain how ordinary residents experience multilevel arrangements, a gap this study addresses by measuring citizen-level awareness of each tier rather than institutional coordination between them.

Citizen participation is widely positioned as the mechanism through which multilevel SDG governance acquires democratic legitimacy. Meschede (2020) finds that German municipalities mostly restrict citizen participation to the implementation phase rather than earlier agenda-setting stages. Comparable findings recur outside Europe: Rahman (2025) documents a persistent gap between de jure participatory policy and de facto citizen engagement in Bangladeshi local government, while Hue et al. (2021), using panel data from 63 Vietnamese provinces, find citizen participation positively associated with institutional and political, but not economic, performance. Kiss et al. (2022), reviewing 58 nature-based-solution cases, find that “tokenistic” participation dominates in practice, with only deeper engagement generating social learning and stewardship outcomes. This literature converges on a precondition that has received little direct empirical attention: legitimacy cannot be built on an institutional foundation that citizens cannot see. It is this precondition, awareness rather than participation or performance, that the present study investigates.

2.2. Citizen Awareness, Proximity and Institutional Visibility

A second, more directly relevant strand of literature examines the relationship between citizens’ “distance” from government and their awareness of, and trust in, it. Political theory has long held that proximity should make local government more legible to citizens than remote national or supranational authorities, and empirical evidence

broadly supports a proximity-trust link. Sabbi et al. (2024), combining interviews and propensity-score matching in a Ghanaian case study, find proximity to elected officials and municipal institutions a significant trust-building mechanism, with positive local experiences projecting onto evaluations of national government. Mabillard (2021) similarly finds citizens who value information accessibility more likely to trust local authorities, while Halvorsen et al. (2024) show the Buenos Aires mayoralty deliberately constructed “proximity” as a strategy of urban democratic legitimacy, drawing on Rosanvallon’s account of legitimacy grounded in physical and relational closeness rather than electoral mandate alone. Yet proximity does not straightforwardly translate into trust or awareness in every context. Chraimi et al. (2025), surveying Moroccan youth, found trust in local (40%) and regional (41%) councils markedly higher than in central government (16%), but also found that awareness of institutional activity, not proximity alone, most consistently explained trust; Nikitina et al. (2021) reach a parallel conclusion, showing that lower awareness of municipal activity among Russian youth predicts lower trust in it, independent of proximity itself. This distinction between physical proximity and cognitive awareness is the analytic space the present study occupies: local government is, by definition, the proximate tier, but this does not guarantee it is the most visible tier in citizens’ minds.

Emerging youth-focused evidence suggests awareness of local government may be structurally harder to sustain than awareness of higher tiers. Lola and Nesmiian (2024), surveying Ukrainian students and schoolchildren in the Kharkiv community, found insufficient awareness of the tools available to influence local authorities even amid heightened wartime civic mobilisation, deteriorating further with geographic distance from the seat of local government. Savchuk et al. (2024) offer a communication-side explanation: analysing municipal social-media accounts in Russia’s Sverdlovsk region, they find young people do not perceive social media as a genuine channel for dialogue with local government, citing low awareness that municipal accounts exist and limited understanding of how to engage them, even though engagement with individual municipal leaders’ personal accounts was comparatively higher. Broka (2026), drawing on European Social Survey data across 28 states, finds satisfaction with locally delivered welfare-state institutions the strongest predictor of youth political trust, ahead of formal participation itself. Against this literature, the “local slot” municipal government should occupy in citizens’ cognitive map of governance (Sabbi et al., 2024) cannot be assumed; it must be empirically verified, tier by tier, the approach this study takes through its repeated-measures comparison of awareness across the municipal, state, national and global levels.

2.3. Local Self-Government and Municipal Governance in India

India’s constitutional architecture for urban governance is defined by the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA) of 1992, which granted Urban Local Bodies (ULBs), municipal corporations, municipalities and nagar panchayats, constitutional recognition as institutions of self-government (Sharma, 2020), envisaged as the primary vehicle for translating national urban policy, including India’s SDG commitments, into ward-level service delivery (Gahlot et al., 2025; Mahajan, 2026). In practice, implementation has been partial and skewed: Sharma (2020) finds reform has disproportionately empowered large municipal corporations while neglecting the autonomy and financing of small and medium ULBs, and Gupta et al. (2024) identify financial scarcity, unplanned urbanisation, excessive state oversight and weak citizen-participation mechanisms as persistent constraints on ULB capacity. Kaur and Ganaie (2025) apply this diagnosis directly to SDG localisation, identifying inadequate financing, limited technical expertise, fragmented governance and constrained participation as the principal barriers facing Indian municipalities, notwithstanding pockets of innovation in waste management, renewable energy and inclusive planning.

Decentralised governance performance varies considerably across Indian states, offering an instructive counterpoint to Tamil Nadu’s trajectory. Nair et al. (2024) argue Kerala’s long-standing tradition of decentralised planning allowed the state to assimilate SDG localisation with comparative ease, its community participation, convergence and monitoring mechanisms already institutionalised well before 2015, a foundation reflected in Kerala’s consecutive strong SDG India Index showings. Patnaik (2020) extends this logic to rural India, arguing Panchayati Raj Institutions occupy a strategic SDG-delivery position precisely because of their proximity to citizens, while Mohd (2026) frames rural-urban synergy, rather than either tier alone, as the binding constraint on inclusive local development. Tamil Nadu’s own position is comparatively strong on conventional indicators, ranking second

nationally on the NITI Aayog SDG India Index (2024) and recording a Gross Enrolment Ratio nearly twenty points above the national average (AISHE, 2022), yet Chennai continues to lag Coimbatore and Madurai on several components of the SDG Urban Index (NITI Aayog, 2024; PIB, 2021). This pattern, strong state-level performance alongside weaker capital-city outcomes, echoes Kushwah's (2024) observation that Indian municipal reform has produced uneven empowerment even within a single state, motivating this study's attention to whether citizen-level awareness of the GCC specifically shows a comparable shortfall.

Notably, none of the reviewed India-focused literature examines citizen-level awareness of ULBs as an SDG actor directly; available evidence is institutional and administrative, describing what ULBs are empowered or constrained to do rather than what citizens know about them. This is the gap the present study addresses: rather than auditing GCC's institutional performance, it measures whether the constitutional proximity the 74th CAA assigns to municipal government is matched by a corresponding proximity in young citizens' awareness.

2.4. Youth, Government Communication and Digital/Media Channels

If awareness of government initiatives must be actively communicated and received, the channels through which young citizens learn about government activity warrant direct attention as the mechanism connecting institutional action to citizen cognition. Savchuk et al. (2024) find social media, despite its ubiquity among young people, functions poorly as a channel of dialogue with local government, constrained by low awareness of municipal accounts, unfamiliarity with how to engage them, and scepticism about their effectiveness, though personal accounts of individual municipal leaders attracted comparatively more youth engagement. Ahmad et al. (2025) reach a more optimistic assessment in the Nigerian smart-city context, reporting most surveyed citizens perceived digital participation platforms as effective in shaping municipal planning, against persistent digital-literacy and connectivity disparities; Alvarado Porras et al. (2025), reviewing Ecuadorian municipalities, likewise find digital citizen participation contributes positively to SDGs 11 and 16 only where infrastructure, political will and digital competencies are jointly present. Tejedo-Romero et al. (2022) find Portuguese e-government participation infrastructure scales with municipality size, structurally disadvantaging smaller, often less visible, local authorities in digital communication capacity. Wen et al. (2025), examining Chinese youth netizens, similarly find the effect of government trust on political participation systematically weaker online than offline, complicating any assumption that digital channels substitute for other communication forms.

Where government communication does reach citizens, exposure appears consequential for downstream civic orientations rather than incidental to them. Mabillard (2021) distinguishes mere exposure to government information from citizens' perception of transparency, finding exposure alone does not drive trust, whereas Kim et al. (2019), studying Seoul residents, found offline participation channels more consistently associated with perceived government transparency than online channels.

This literature motivates treating media exposure not as a standalone object of inquiry but as the empirical proxy for how effectively government communication reaches young citizens, the pathway through which awareness of SDG-related initiatives is most plausibly transmitted, and, accordingly, an explanatory correlate of government awareness rather than this study's central theme.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three complementary theoretical resources to explain why government awareness might vary systematically across governance tiers, and relate to, without being reducible to, citizens' sustainability attitudes and practices.

The primary structural lens is multilevel governance (MLG) theory, systematised by Hooghe and Marks (2002) and extended to SDG localisation by Bilsky et al. (2021). MLG theory conceives of authority for collective goods as dispersed across nested (Type I) or overlapping (Type II) jurisdictions rather than concentrated in a single tier. Applied to this study's four governance tiers, the Greater Chennai Corporation, the Government of Tamil Nadu, the Government of India and the United Nations, MLG theory predicts that citizens' cognitive representation of "who is responsible" for SDG delivery should itself be multilevel and layered. What MLG theory does not predict is the relative visibility of each layer; as Zürn (2020) and Börzel (2020) note, classical MLG scholarship retains a "government bias" that models coordination between authorities but says little about how citizens perceive or

differentiate between them. This study addresses that gap by treating government awareness as an empirically measurable, tier-differentiated citizen-level construct, rather than assuming formal jurisdictional proximity translates automatically into perceptual proximity.

To explain why formal proximity might not translate into perceptual proximity, this study draws second on proximity and institutional-visibility theory, developed in the local-trust literature (Sabbi et al., 2024; Mabillard, 2021; Halvorsen et al., 2024). This literature distinguishes physical or jurisdictional proximity, the fact that municipal government is constitutionally closest to citizens' daily lives (Sharma, 2020), from cognitive or communicative proximity, which must be actively constructed through visible institutional action and citizen exposure (Nikitina et al., 2021; Savchuk et al., 2024). Where jurisdictional and cognitive proximity align, proximity theory predicts the trust and legitimacy-building "local advantage" documented by Sabbi et al. (2024); where they diverge, for instance where a municipal corporation delivers services without corresponding public communication relative to nationally branded schemes, proximity theory instead predicts a visibility deficit at precisely the tier formal governance arrangements assume to be most legible. This study labels this divergence the proximity paradox: the possibility that the governance tier structurally closest to citizens is, empirically, the least visible, precisely because higher tiers typically command greater media presence, more centralised and higher-budget communication campaigns, and more nationally or globally branded initiatives (Savchuk et al., 2024; Tejedo-Romero et al., 2022).

Third, because government awareness is measured alongside, and hypothesised to correlate with, respondents' sustainability attitudes and practices, the analysis draws selectively on the broader knowledge-attitude-practice literature (Afroz et al., 2020; Leal et al., 2024) as an organising rather than fully explanatory framework, treating attitude and practice as explanatory correlates that plausibly co-vary with government awareness through a shared underlying civic-sustainability orientation (Yang et al., 2025; Chang et al., 2023), while declining to model government awareness as a cause of practice, or vice versa, given the design's cross-sectional structure.

Integrating these resources, this study's working model holds that (a) government awareness is structured as a multilevel, tier-differentiated construct (MLG theory); (b) the ordering of that structure is shaped by cognitive and communicative visibility rather than jurisdictional proximity alone, such that municipal awareness may lag behind higher tiers despite the GCC's constitutional proximity to citizens (proximity/visibility theory); and (c) government awareness co-varies with attitude, practice and media exposure as markers of a shared civic-sustainability orientation, without either construct treated as causally prior. This integrated framework directly generates the study's analytic strategy: a repeated-measures test of the visibility ladder across governance tiers, tests of variation in municipal awareness across administrative divisions and demographic groups, and a correlational and regression-based account of how attitude, practice and media exposure relate to government awareness net of demographic background.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design and Sample

This study adopts a cross-sectional survey design. Data were collected from 400 youth aged 18-25 (final N = 400), drawn from Chennai's North, South and Central administrative divisions, corresponding to the operational zones of the Greater Chennai Corporation, allowing government-awareness comparisons to be disaggregated geographically as well as demographically. The sample was 56.8% male, 41.8% female and 1.5% third gender; household income spanned five bands from under ₹25,000 to above ₹1 lakh per month (see Table 1).

4.2. Materials and Measures

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire covering demographic background, SDG knowledge, attitude, practice and, central to this study, a five-item Government and United Nations Awareness and Collaboration scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.799$). Four items measured awareness of sustainability-related initiatives at each of four governance tiers, the Greater Chennai Corporation (municipal), the Government of Tamil Nadu (state), the Government of India (national) and the United Nations (global); a fifth measured normative agreement that inter-governmental collaboration is necessary for SDG achievement. This

structure allowed government awareness to be analysed both as a single composite (gov_aw_mean) and, central to the study's first research question, as four distinct within-subject measurements suitable for a repeated-measures comparison across governance levels.

The questionnaire additionally captured recognition of specific national schemes (National Action Plan on Climate Change, Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Digital India) and Tamil Nadu state schemes (Tamil Nadu Vision 2023, Kudimaramathu, Amma Unavagam), a perceived-effectiveness item, and the channels through which respondents reported learning about government initiatives (media, college/university programmes, social media campaigns, family/peers). The analysis draws on summary attitude (17 items, $\alpha = 0.965$) and practice (20 items, $\alpha = 0.912$) means as composite explanatory variables, together with one targeted attitude item on government responsibility ("Government should consider sustainability in policy decisions"), rather than reporting the full item-level structure of either scale, addressed separately in a companion knowledge-attitude-practice study using the same dataset. A three-item media-influence scale ($\alpha = 0.678$, $n = 400$) captured respondents' general perception of media's influence on SDG-related attitudes, knowledge and behaviour, used here solely as an explanatory correlate of government awareness.

4.3. Data Analysis

All analyses were conducted in SPSS Version 26.0 following assumption checks appropriate to each test. Shapiro-Wilk tests indicated significant departures from normality for the government-awareness composite and related variables ($p < 0.001$), consistent with the ceiling effects typical of Likert-scale sustainability measures. Non-parametric procedures were accordingly used throughout: Kruskal-Wallis H tests for comparisons across three or more independent groups, Mann-Whitney U tests for two independent groups, and the Friedman test for related samples.

The study's first research question, whether awareness differs across the municipal, state, national and global tiers, was tested using a Friedman test across the four related awareness items, followed by Wilcoxon signed-rank pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni correction for the six resulting pairs. Differences in the government-awareness composite across administrative division, gender and income were tested using Kruskal-Wallis H tests, with Bonferroni-corrected Mann-Whitney U follow-ups where the omnibus test was significant. Associations between government awareness and attitude, practice, media influence, perceived SDG importance and knowledge were examined using Spearman's rank-order correlation.

A multiple linear regression tested the joint and independent contribution of attitude, practice, media influence, administrative division, gender, income and age to government awareness, reporting the overall model F-test, R^2 , adjusted R^2 , and unstandardised coefficients with 95% confidence intervals. Associations between categorical variables (perceived government effectiveness and administrative division) were tested using chi-square tests of association, with Cramér's V reported as a measure of association strength. Consistent with the cross-sectional design, all reported relationships are interpreted as associations rather than causal effects throughout.

4.4. Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary and anonymous; no personally identifying information was retained in the analysis dataset. Respondents were informed of the study's purpose prior to participation, and the sample was restricted to those aged 18–25 to ensure eligibility as Chennai youth. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines prescribed by the Departmental Ethics Committee of the Department of Media Sciences, Anna University, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India.

5. Findings and Results

5.1. Sample Profile

The final sample ($N = 400$) comprised youth aged 18-25 drawn from Chennai's South (53.8%), Central (34.2%) and North (12.0%) administrative divisions. Full sample characteristics are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics ($N = 400$)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	227	56.8
	Female	167	41.8
	Third gender	6	1.5
Administrative division (GCC zone)	Chennai North	48	12.0
	Chennai South	215	53.8
	Chennai Central	137	34.2
Monthly household income	Less than ₹25,000	139	34.8
	₹25,000 – ₹50,000	64	16.0
	₹50,001 – ₹75,000	73	18.2
	₹75,001 – ₹1,00,000	64	16.0
	More than ₹1,00,000	60	15.0

5.2. The Multilevel Visibility Ladder: Government Awareness across Governance Tiers

Descriptive comparison of the four governance-tier awareness items revealed an ascending gradient: awareness of Greater Chennai Corporation (GCC) sustainability initiatives was lowest ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 0.97$; 35.5% agreement, 17.5% disagreement), followed by awareness of Tamil Nadu government initiatives ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 0.94$; 43.0% agreement), Government of India initiatives ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.98$; 51.0% agreement) and United Nations SDG efforts ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 1.03$; 52.8% agreement), with the highest mean recorded for the normative item that inter-governmental collaboration is necessary ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 0.99$; 66.8% agreement). Bonferroni-corrected Wilcoxon signed-rank comparisons showed GCC awareness significantly lower than Tamil Nadu ($p = 0.026$), Government of India ($p < 0.001$) and United Nations awareness ($p < 0.001$); Tamil Nadu awareness was, in turn, significantly lower than both Government of India and United Nations awareness (both $p < 0.001$); Government of India and United Nations awareness did not differ significantly ($p = 1.000$). This pattern, municipal awareness lower than state awareness, which is lower than national and global awareness, with national and global awareness statistically indistinguishable, constitutes this study's central finding and is termed here the proximity paradox: young citizens' awareness of government responsibility for the SDGs increases, rather than decreases, with governance distance from their own city.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Government/UN Awareness across Governance Tiers

Governance tier / item	M	SD	% Agree	% Disagree
Municipal – Greater Chennai Corporation	3.16	0.97	35.5	17.5
State – Government of Tamil Nadu	3.29	0.94	43.0	16.2
National – Government of India	3.48	0.98	51.0	11.8
Global – United Nations	3.53	1.03	52.8	11.2

A complementary, paired comparison of scheme-level recognition reinforced this pattern at a more granular level. Mean recognition of four central government schemes (proportion known = 42.1%) did not differ significantly from recognition of three Tamil Nadu state schemes (proportion known = 41.8%), Wilcoxon $W = 30503.5$, $p = 0.354$, indicating the visibility deficit documented above is specific to the municipal tier rather than a general national-versus-subnational gradient. Individual scheme recognition varied considerably by branding and welfare visibility rather than tier alone: recognition was highest for Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (58.2%) and Amma Unavagam (61.8%), both prominently branded, high-visibility campaigns, and lowest for the National Action Plan on Climate Change (29.8%) and the Kudimaramathu waterbody-restoration scheme (29.0%), the latter administered through decentralised local bodies with limited public communication. This suggests visibility is shaped as much by the communicative prominence of individual schemes as by governance tier per se, consistent with the government-communication literature reviewed above (Savchuk et al., 2024; Tejedo-Romero et al., 2022).

5.3. Government Awareness across Administrative Divisions, Gender and Income

Government awareness did not differ significantly across Chennai's three administrative divisions, whether

measured as the full five-item composite (Chennai South $M = 3.52$, Chennai Central $M = 3.40$, Chennai North $M = 3.34$; $H(2) = 4.42$, $p = 0.110$) or as GCC awareness specifically ($H(2) = 3.62$, $p = 0.164$). This null finding indicates that the municipal visibility deficit documented in Section 5.2 is a generalised feature of the youth population citywide, rather than a localised shortfall in any single administrative zone.

Table 3. Kruskal-Wallis Comparisons of Government Awareness by Administrative Division, Gender, and

Grouping variable	Group	n	M	SD	Test statistic	p
Administrative division	Chennai South	215	3.52	0.73	$H(2) = 4.42$	0.110
	Chennai Central	137	3.40	0.69		
	Chennai North	48	3.34	0.83		
Gender	Third gender	6	3.90	0.43	$H(2) = 5.28$	0.071
	Male	227	3.49	0.73		
	Female	167	3.40	0.74		
Household income	Less than ₹25,000	60	3.57	0.75	$H(4) = 9.75$	0.045
	₹25,000 – ₹50,000	73	3.55	0.69		
	₹50,001 – ₹75,000	139	3.49	0.73		
	₹75,001 – ₹1,00,000	64	3.35	0.77		
	More than ₹1,00,000	64	3.30	0.71		

Income

Gender differences approached, but did not reach, conventional significance ($H(2) = 5.28$, $p = 0.071$); the small third-gender subgroup ($n = 6$) recorded the numerically highest mean ($M = 3.90$), though this estimate warrants caution given its limited sample size. Household income was associated with government awareness at a marginal level ($H(4) = 9.75$, $p = 0.045$), though no individual pairwise comparison survived Bonferroni correction, indicating a modest but imprecisely located income gradient.

5.4. Correlates of Government Awareness: Attitude, Practice and Media

Government awareness was significantly and positively correlated with respondents' general sustainability attitude ($\rho = 0.393$, $p < 0.001$) and practice ($\rho = 0.353$, $p < 0.001$), with the single attitude item most directly concerned with government responsibility showing a comparable, if weaker, association ($\rho = 0.291$, $p < 0.001$). At the municipal tier specifically, GCC awareness correlated more modestly with attitude ($\rho = 0.203$, $p < 0.001$) and practice ($\rho = 0.257$, $p < 0.001$) than the four-tier composite did, consistent with the broader visibility gradient reported above. Government awareness also correlated positively with self-reported media influence on SDG-related cognition ($\rho = 0.407$, $p < 0.001$), the strongest bivariate correlate identified, as well as with knowledge scores ($\rho = 0.307$, $p < 0.001$) and perceived SDG importance for Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India and the world ($\rho = 0.214$, $p < 0.001$). These associations are consistent with, but do not establish causal direction with, respondents' broader sustainability orientation, and should be interpreted as such given the cross-sectional design.

Table 4. Spearman Rank-Order Correlations Between Government Awareness and Attitude, Practice, Media Influence, Knowledge and Perceived Importance

Variable	n	ρ	p
Sustainability attitude (17-item mean)	400	0.393	< 0.001
Sustainable practice (20-item mean)	400	0.353	< 0.001
Attitude item: "Government should consider sustainability in policy"	400	0.291	< 0.001
Media influence on SDG cognition (3-item mean)	375	0.407	< 0.001
SDG knowledge (% correct)	400	0.307	< 0.001
Perceived SDG importance (Chennai/Tamil Nadu/India/World)	400	0.214	< 0.001

5.5. Predictors of Government Awareness: Regression Results

A multiple linear regression examined the independent contribution of attitude, practice, media influence, administrative division, gender, income and age to government awareness. The overall model was statistically significant, $F(13, 360) = 9.02$, $p < 0.001$, explaining approximately one quarter of the variance ($R^2 = 0.246$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.219$). Three variables emerged as significant independent predictors: media influence ($B = 0.288$, 95% CI [0.182, 0.394], $p < 0.001$), sustainable practice ($B = 0.177$, 95% CI [0.070, 0.284], $p = 0.001$) and sustainability attitude ($B = 0.132$, 95% CI [0.044, 0.219], $p = 0.003$), with media influence the strongest unique predictor. Administrative division (South: $p = 0.558$; Central: $p = 0.716$), gender, income and age were not significant independent predictors once attitude, practice and media influence were entered, indicating the bivariate associations reported are substantially accounted for by respondents' broader attitude-practice-media orientation rather than independent demographic effects. Government awareness in this sample is thus better characterised as an extension of general sustainability orientation and media exposure than as a function of geographical or demographic background.

Table 5. Multiple Regression Predicting Government Awareness (N = 400)

Predictor	B	SE	t	p	95% CI
Intercept	1.359	0.765	1.78	0.076	[-0.145, 2.863]
Sustainability attitude	0.132	0.045	2.96	0.003	[0.044, 0.219]
Sustainable practice	0.177	0.054	3.25	0.001	[0.070, 0.284]
Media influence	0.288	0.054	5.33	< 0.001	[0.182, 0.394]
Age	0.005	0.037	0.14	0.893	[-0.067, 0.077]
Household income (ordinal)	-0.027	0.024	-1.13	0.259	[-0.073, 0.020]
Gender: Female (ref. Male)	-0.110	0.075	-1.47	0.143	[-0.258, 0.037]
Gender: Third gender (ref. Male)	0.271	0.274	0.99	0.323	[-0.268, 0.811]
Division: South (ref. North)	0.064	0.109	0.59	0.558	[-0.151, 0.279]
Division: Central (ref. North)	0.042	0.115	0.36	0.716	[-0.184, 0.268]

Note. Dependent variable: five-item government-awareness composite (gov_aw_mean). $R = 0.496$, $R^2 = 0.246$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.219$, $F(13, 360) = 9.02$, $p < 0.001$. B = unstandardised coefficient; CI = confidence interval.

5.6. Perceived Government Effectiveness and Government Communication Channels

Perceptions of government initiative effectiveness were mixed: 46.5% of respondents believed government initiatives effective in promoting SDG awareness, 41.0% were unsure, and 12.5% believed they were not. As these figures reflect subjective perception rather than independent assessment, they are reported descriptively and not used to evaluate the GCC's, or any other body's, actual delivery. Perceived effectiveness did not differ significantly by administrative division ($\chi^2(4) = 3.80$, $p = 0.433$, Cramér's $V = 0.069$), but was significantly associated with government-awareness level: respondents in the highest awareness tertile were more likely to regard initiatives as effective (47.3% "yes") than those in the lowest tertile (34.0% "yes"), $\chi^2(4) = 19.12$, $p < 0.001$. This association is consistent with a plausible bidirectional relationship, greater visibility may support more favourable evaluation, or favourable prior evaluation may sustain attention, and is not interpreted causally given the cross-sectional design. Regarding communication channels, media (65.8%) was the most commonly cited source of learning about government initiatives, followed by social media campaigns (40.8%), college or university programmes (39.2%) and family or peer networks (20.8%). This positions media exposure as the dominant conduit through which government communication currently reaches young citizens in this sample, a finding directly relevant to the municipal visibility deficit reported in Section 5.2, suggesting that closing this deficit is a communications-design problem rather than solely a matter of institutional activity.

6. Discussion

This study set out to examine how young citizens in Chennai perceive government responsibility for SDG delivery

across the municipal, state, national and global tiers, and how this perception relates to their broader sustainability orientation. Three findings merit discussion in light of the multilevel governance, proximity and localisation literature reviewed above.

First, and most centrally, the visibility ladder documented in Section 5.2 substantiates the proximity paradox this study's framework anticipated: the tier structurally closest to respondents, the Greater Chennai Corporation, was consistently the least visible, while the most distant tier examined, the United Nations, was statistically indistinguishable from national government and significantly more visible than the municipal tier. This qualifies, rather than contradicts, the proximity-trust literature (Sabbi et al., 2024; Mabillard, 2021): where that literature finds experienced proximity builds trust, the present findings suggest this presupposes a prior condition, that citizens are aware of local institutional activity in the first instance, which cannot be assumed simply because a tier of government is jurisdictionally close. This distinction between jurisdictional and cognitive proximity, foreshadowed in the critical MLG literature's concern with the framework's "government bias" (Zürn, 2020; Börzel, 2020), appears empirically consequential here: the 74th CAA formally positions the GCC as the tier closest to citizens' everyday lives (Sharma, 2020), yet this constitutional proximity was not accompanied by corresponding perceptual proximity among the young citizens surveyed.

Second, the finding that this municipal visibility deficit was statistically uniform across Chennai's North, South and Central divisions (Section 5.3) suggests the deficit reflects how the GCC is communicated and perceived citywide, rather than a localised failure of outreach in any particular zone, a generalised pattern arguably more, not less, concerning: a zone-specific deficit could be addressed through targeted outreach, whereas a citywide deficit implies the underlying communication strategy requires attention. This interpretation is reinforced by the finding, in Section 5.2, that the two schemes lowest in public recognition, the National Action Plan on Climate Change and the Kudimaramathu waterbody-restoration scheme, were both technical initiatives with limited public branding, in contrast to the two most-recognised schemes, both high-visibility welfare campaigns with substantial national media presence. This echoes Savchuk et al.'s (2024) finding that municipal communication channels are frequently under-recognised relative to their actual availability, and Tejedo-Romero et al.'s (2022) observation that smaller or less resourced local authorities are structurally disadvantaged in communicative reach, a disadvantage that, this study's findings suggest, extends beyond formal e-government infrastructure to basic public awareness of routine municipal initiatives.

Third, the regression results in Section 5.5 indicate government awareness functions less as a demographic or geographic outcome than as an extension of respondents' broader sustainability attitude, practice and, most strongly, media exposure. This is consistent with the youth political-trust literature's emphasis on institutional visibility, rather than background characteristics, as the more proximate driver of civic cognition (Nikitina et al., 2021; Broka, 2026), carrying a specific implication for practitioners: because income, gender, division and age were not independently associated with awareness once attitude, practice and media exposure were accounted for, interventions aimed at closing the municipal visibility gap are unlikely to succeed if targeted narrowly at demographic segments or geographic zones. The results instead point toward media-channel design, the dominant communication conduit identified in Section 5.6, as the more promising lever for municipal authorities such as the GCC seeking to raise visibility among young citizens, complementing rather than substituting for continued investment in the substantive work such campaigns would publicize.

Finally, the association between government awareness and perceived effectiveness (Section 5.6) merits a cautious reading. Because this study measures subjective perception rather than independently verified performance, the finding that respondents with higher awareness also viewed initiatives more favourably should not be read as evidence that the GCC, or any government body, is more or less effective; it indicates only that visibility and favourable perception move together, in a direction this cross-sectional design cannot adjudicate. At no point do the findings reported here permit a judgement about the GCC's actual institutional performance, only about how visible its sustainability-related role currently is to the city's young citizens, a visibility gap that constitutes a meaningful and independently addressable target for local self-government policy regardless of how underlying institutional performance is ultimately assessed.

7. Conclusion

This study examined how young citizens in Chennai perceive government responsibility for SDG delivery across municipal, state, national and global governance tiers, and how this perception relates to their sustainability attitudes, practices and media exposure. Its central contribution is empirical evidence of a proximity paradox: awareness of the Greater Chennai Corporation's sustainability-related role was significantly and consistently lower than awareness of state, national and global efforts, despite the GCC's constitutional position as the tier of government closest to citizens under India's 74th Constitutional Amendment Act. This deficit was generalised across the city's administrative divisions, more strongly associated with media exposure, attitude and practice than demographic background, and accompanied by lower recognition for technically administered local and state schemes relative to nationally branded welfare campaigns.

For local self-government scholarship and practice, these findings suggest SDG localisation efforts should treat citizen-level visibility as a distinct policy target, separate from the institutional integration, financing and capacity-building that dominates existing localisation literature (Kaur & Ganaie, 2025; Sharma, 2020). Because the visibility deficit documented here was uniform citywide rather than concentrated in specific zones, and better explained by media exposure than geographic or demographic background, municipal authorities such as the GCC may find more traction in redesigning the communicative framing and reach of their sustainability initiatives, for instance through the kind of higher-visibility, welfare-branded communication associated with the most-recognised schemes in this sample, than in geographically or demographically targeted outreach alone. More broadly, the finding that national and global awareness were statistically indistinguishable, while municipal awareness lagged both, suggests India's local self-government institutions compete for public attention within an informational environment structurally weighted toward higher, more centrally resourced tiers of government (Tejedo-Romero et al., 2022), a competitive disadvantage that closing the "local slot" (Sabbi et al., 2024) in public awareness may help offset.

This study is subject to several limitations. First, its cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; associations between government awareness and attitude, practice, media exposure or perceived effectiveness may run in either direction or reflect a shared unobserved orientation. Second, the sample was drawn exclusively from Chennai's youth population, and findings cannot be generalised without caution to other Indian cities with different municipal communication environments or 74th CAA implementation trajectories. Third, all constructs were measured through self-report, subject to the same social-desirability and recall limitations common to survey-based governance research; they measure citizens' perceptions and should not be read as an audit of any government body's actual institutional performance. Fourth, while non-parametric methods were appropriate given the non-normal distribution of the underlying measures, the regression model explained approximately one quarter of the variance in government awareness, indicating substantial additional variation remains unexplained, plausibly including factors such as direct personal contact with municipal services, family political socialisation, or exposure to specific local news outlets not captured here.

Future research would benefit from replicating this visibility-ladder approach in other Indian cities with differing 74th CAA implementation histories, incorporating longitudinal or experimental designs capable of testing whether targeted municipal communication interventions causally improve local government visibility, and extending the citizen-awareness lens developed here to adult populations more broadly. As India continues to urbanise and its Urban Local Bodies assume an increasingly central role in SDG delivery, ensuring this institutional proximity is matched by a corresponding visibility in citizens' own understanding of multilevel governance may prove as consequential to the legitimacy of local self-government as the institutional reforms that have, to date, dominated the localisation research agenda.

Funding: No funding was received for conducting this study.

Conflict Of Interest Statement: The authors report that there are no competing interests to declare.

Data Availability Statement: The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Human Ethics and Consent to Participate Declaration: Ethical approval was granted by the Departmental Ethics Committee of the Department of Media Sciences, Anna University, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines and regulations prescribed by the committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the study.

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