



HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Session on Acting at Local Level

Wednesday, 6 July 2022, 12:00 to 1:00 PM



Secretariat Background Note



Background

Local and sub-national governments are critical to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Actions taken by local governments impact all SDGs and are critical, for example, for the eradication of poverty and hunger; the advancement of gender equality; the reduction of inequalities; access to health services, quality education and clean water and sanitation; as well as climate action. Indeed, it is estimated that at least 100 of the 169 SDG targets will not be reached without proper engagement and co-ordination with local and regional governments.



Even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Member States recognized that the world was not on track to achieve the 2030 Agenda, leading to the 2019 SDG Summit's call for a [global decade of action](#) to deliver the SDGs. An estimated 14.9 million excess deaths were associated with the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021.¹ The pandemic has disrupted and even reversed progress on many SDGs, with particularly severe impacts for those living in poverty or vulnerable situations, leaving them further behind.

Local governments have been at the forefront of addressing the impact of the pandemic, as well as leading efforts to build back better. They

¹ <https://www.who.int/data/stories/global-excess-deaths-associated-with-covid-19-january-2020-december-2021>



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serve as front-line responders in crises response, recovery, and rebuilding in the context of COVID-19. They have been compelled to carry out these roles with increasingly strained financial resources. The World Bank estimated that, due to economic decline, 2021 would see a 15%-25% reduction of revenues for local authorities.²

The SDGs provide a critical framework for COVID-19 recovery. The 2019 SDG Summit declaration focuses on local action as a way to accelerate the implementation of the SDGs. Member States have emphasized the critical role of local and regional governments in SDG implementation and committed to empowering and supporting cities, local authorities and communities in pursuing the 2030 Agenda.³ Local governments around the world are responding to these calls, increasingly working to localize the SDGs and to integrate them and contribute to their achievement through local development plans and approaches, as well as efforts to “build back better” from the impact of COVID-19.

Voluntary Local Reviews

As part of their efforts to localize the 2030 Agenda, local and regional governments are increasingly engaging in subnational reviews of their SDG implementation, also called Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs). VLRs are a powerful accelerator of SDG implementation. They have the potential to contribute to the collection and analysis of timely, accurate and disaggregated data on SDG implementation and on the furthest behind at the local level; to bring stakeholders, including those in vulnerable situations, closer to decision-making processes; to

² World Bank, Cities are on the front lines of COVID-19, May 2022, available at: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/sustainablecities/cities-are-front-lines-covid-19>

³ A/RES/74/4, para. 27 (e).



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strengthen multilevel governance and inform the elaboration of Voluntary National Reviews; and to foster integration of the SDGs into local planning. VLRs can also help to better respond to the specific needs of local communities and geographical areas. They further represent a unique tool to foster the link between the SDGs and COVID-19 recovery efforts, while providing evidence for the design of COVID-19 recovery plans and priority interventions both at local and national levels.

The practice of carrying out VLRs is being taken up not only by capital and large cities but also smaller cities, provinces, and districts, including in rural areas.⁴ Member States are increasingly benefitting from VLRs in their national level reviews. In 2021, VLRs contributed to the preparations of the VNRs of Cabo Verde, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Malaysia, Mexico, Indonesia, Japan, Thailand, Zimbabwe and others.

There is also growing recognition of the value of Voluntary Local Reviews at the international level. The Ministerial declaration of the 2021 high-level political forum on sustainable development noted that the VLRs are a useful tool to show progress and foster exchange in local implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. The General Assembly, recognizing efforts by local authorities to conduct local reviews, stated that the HLPF “...should continue to strengthen the attention given to efforts to bolster local action to accelerate implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals...”⁵ In his recent Report entitled *Our Common Agenda*, the Secretary-General further stated that: “The role of parliaments, cities and other

⁴ While there is no centralized database of all VLRs, those shared with DESA are collected here: <https://sdgs.un.org/topics/voluntary-local-reviews>

⁵ A/RES/75/290B



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subnational authorities is particularly being recognized in inclusive approaches, with, for example, voluntary local reviews of Sustainable Development Goal implementation providing a model on which to build. Cities, local authorities and specifically VLRs are key actors and processes to advance sustainable development and inclusive multilateralism”⁶.

As the VLRs are not directly mandated by the 2030 Agenda, there is no official format for the reports. However, guidelines for their preparation have been published in several instances by Member States⁷. The United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs has made available a set of suggested [Global Guiding Elements for VLRs](#)⁸, to contribute to the robustness of these reviews and to enrich peer learning. They draw from the Secretary-General’s common voluntary guidelines for the VNRs and thus try to facilitate a dialogue between these two levels of reviews. The regional commissions of the United Nations are also providing region-specific guidance, with guidelines having been prepared by the Economic Commission for Africa,⁹ the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific¹⁰

⁶ UN Secretary General Report on Our Common Agenda
<https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/>

⁷ See for example, Guía para el Desarrollo de Revisiones Subnacionales Voluntarias: La implementación de la Agenda 2030 para el Desarrollo Sostenible en el ámbito subnacional de México, Presidencia de la República de México, GIZ, Tecnológico de Monterrey and Comisión para el Cumplimiento de la Agenda 2030. available at: https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/590383/V2_-_Gu_a_para_elaborar_RSV.pdf

⁸ https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/GlobalGuidingElementsforVLRs_FINAL.pdf

⁹ <https://www.uneca.org/sites/default/files/TCND/ARFSD2022/VNR-VLR/AFRICA%20VOLUNTARY%20LOCAL%20REVIEW%20GUIDELINE.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.unescap.org/resources/asia-pacific-regional-guidelines-voluntary-local-reviews>



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and the Economic Commission for Europe¹¹. Knowledge products and guidance materials have also been produced by UN Habitat¹² and other entities¹³.

The present session will explore how cities and local governments are taking action to implement the SDGs and recover better from the COVID19 pandemic, as well as the important and growing role of VLRs in SDG localization and review. It will provide an opportunity for the sharing of key lessons and good practices from processes to date, including on better linking the national and local level.

¹¹ <https://unece.org/housing-and-land-management/publications/VRL%20guidelines-ece%20region>

¹² UN-Habitat and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG): Guidance for Voluntary Local Reviews Vol.1: A Comparative Analysis of Existing VLRs. <https://unhabitat.org/guidance-for-voluntary-local-reviews-vol1-a-comparative-analysis-of-existing-vlrs>

¹³ See, for example, See Brookings Institution: A Voluntary Local Review Handbook for Cities. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/VLR_Handbook_7.7.19.pdf; European Commission Joint Research Centre: The European Handbook for SDG Voluntary Local Review. <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC118682#:~:text=European%20Handbook%20for%20SDG%20Voluntary%20Local%20Reviews,The%20European%20Handbook&text=VLRs%20are%20a%20fundamental%20instrument,and%20competitive%20sustainability%20in%20particular;Institute%20for%20Global%20Environmental%20Strategies%20Shimokawa%20Method%20for%20Voluntary%20Local%20Reviews.https://www.iges.or.jp/en/pub/shimokawa-method-vlr/en>; Cabot Institute for the Environment at the University of Bristol, British Council, Bristol One City and Economic & Social Research Council: Voluntary Local Reviews: A Handbook for UK cities: Building on the Bristol experience. <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/cabot-institute-2018/documents/uk-cities-voluntary-local-review-handbook.pdf>



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Proposed guiding questions

- What are some of the main challenges and bottlenecks for effective implementation of the SDGs at local level? What type of capacity building and support is required to ensure that cities, local authorities and communities are empowered and equipped to implement the SDGs?
- What innovative approaches have been taken to raise awareness on and demystify the SDGs at local level?
- How can the VLRs bolster local action to achieve the SDGs and respond to COVID19?
- What can we learn from the increasing number of VLRs being carried out?
- What positive examples exist in terms of VLR processes fostering participatory approaches to SDG implementation and to leaving no one behind or gathering data relevant to the SDGs at local level?
- How do Voluntary Local Reviews and Voluntary national Review inform and strengthen each other?
- What positive examples exist of dialogue between the national and local levels in terms of SDG implementation?