



HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Going Local

How can we support local authorities in implementing the SDGs and how can we best build on voluntary local reviews?

Thursday, 8 July 2021, 12:15 PM- 1:15 PM

Secretariat Background Note

Background

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide an unprecedented opportunity to align global, national and subnational priorities and engage stakeholders at the local level in efforts to achieve sustainable and inclusive development. Urban policy decisions can have far-reaching impacts across all the SDGs, including eradication of poverty and hunger, reduction of inequalities, climate mitigation and adaptation, promotion of safety and good governance and in ensuring access to quality education and health care, clean water and sanitation, affordable energy, transportation, sustainable waste management, technology infrastructure including broadband and online public services, not just for urban populations but also for the surrounding peri-urban and rural areas.

Prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Member States had reaffirmed¹ the critical role of cities, local authorities and communities in implementing and realizing the SDGs and committed to empowering and supporting them in pursuing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has only added to the challenges facing cities and local authorities, including pressure on delivering health care services, education and safety systems. The pandemic has also disproportionately affected the poor and people living in vulnerable situations, further leaving them behind. Early estimates for 2021 from the World Bank and UN entities suggested that local governments may on average lose 15 per cent to 25 per cent in revenues this year² and cities with less diversified economic bases have been hit especially hard.

¹ Political Declaration adopted at the 2019 SDG Summit: Gearing up for a decade of action and delivery for sustainable development. Resolution A/RES/74/4.

² Semeh Wahba and others, "Cities are on the front lines of COVID-19", 12 May 2020, available at <https://blogs.worldbank.org/sustainablecities/cities-are-front-lines-covid-19>.



Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that promotes the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development: building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development



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An increasing number of national governments have been already supporting the localization of the SDGs in cities and regions through direct provision of public goods and services, technical co-operation and financial support. However, more support is needed from all partners if countries are to achieve the SDGs in the remaining nine years.

Investing in inclusive, sustainable cities and human settlements means investing in inclusive, sustainable nations. By adopting stimulus packages that maximize support for tailored subnational responses and that boost local governments' budgetary and implementation capacity, national governments can help ensure that COVID-19 response and recovery measures fit the local context.³ Local level resilience plans and the Voluntary Local Reviews can help in understanding the local gaps and challenges and in designing effective and targeted location-specific policies for attaining the SDGs.

Voluntary Local Reviews

Local and regional governments are increasingly engaging in subnational reviews of SDG implementation, including by preparing Voluntary Local Reviews (VLR). These reviews, modelled after the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), have proven useful for local governments to foster SDG localization and to demonstrate their capacity and commitment to the 2030 Agenda. A growing number of local governments in all regions of the world have already prepared such reviews with many more currently going through the process, resulting in tangible benefits to SDG implementation at large.

The discussion on the VLRs during the 2020 HLPF is reflected in the President of ECOSOC's Summary of the Forum, which states that the VLRs are a useful tool for increasing local commitment to the SDGs and for integrating the Goals into strategies, budgeting, procurement procedures and other key areas at the local level. However, the 2021 HLPF is the first time the Forum has dedicated a session to consider how the VLRs can be utilized for effective SDG implementation.

The VLRs have also been referred to in the intergovernmental negotiations regarding the review of the HLPF itself. During these discussions, the Regional Forums for Sustainable Development have also been mentioned as potentially useful fora for deliberations on the VLRs.

³ Secretary-General's Policy Brief: COVID-19 in an Urban World, July 2020, https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg_policy_brief_covid_urban_world_july_2020.pdf





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Several United Nations Regional Commissions have already incorporated reflections from the subnational level and the VLRs in previous Forums and local government leaders have contributed to the discussions at the Forums.

Considering that the VLRs are not directly mandated by the 2030 Agenda, there is no official format for the reports. However, the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs has made available a set of suggested Global Guiding Elements for VLRs⁴, in order 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 this way try to facilitate a dialogue between these two levels of reviews. United Nations Regional Commissions have also aimed at providing region-specific guidance, with United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific having published the first regional guidelines⁵ and others following suite in the near future. Knowledge products and guidance materials have also been produced by UN Habitat⁶ and other entities⁷.

In 2020, a few Voluntary National Review (VNR) countries referred in their reports to VLRs conducted by their subnational governments, and in 2021 a number of countries have integrated findings from VLRs in their national level reviews. For the Voluntary National Review processes, the VLRs can, if countries decide to use them, provide a fuller picture of SDG implementation at the local level, enhance inclusive stakeholder engagement, identify data gaps and challenges and opportunities for mobilizing means of implementation at the local level, and help national governments in ensuring that no one is being left behind in the process, just to name a few potential benefits. The VLRs can also enhance dialogue and promote coherence between different levels of governance, enhance policy coherence and serve as a diagnostic tool for geographical inequalities within a country.

⁴ UN DESA website for the VLRs, including the Global Guiding Elements: <https://sdgs.un.org/topics/voluntary-local-reviews>

⁵ Asia-Pacific Regional Guidelines on Voluntary Local Reviews: <https://www.unescap.org/resources/asia-pacific-regional-guidelines-voluntary-local-reviews#>

⁶ 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>

⁷ 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/IRC118682#:~:text=European%20Handbook%20for%20SDG%20Voluntary%20Local%20Reviews,-The%20European%20Handbook&text=VLRs%20are%20a%20fundamental%20instrument.and%20competitive%20sustainability%20in%20particular>



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Proposed guiding questions:

- What are some of the main challenges and bottlenecks for effective SDG localization? 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?
- How can the Voluntary Local Reviews benefit SDG implementation at large? How can they be used as an effective tool for multilevel governance and dialogue between different levels of government?
- In what ways can the Voluntary Local Reviews be used to ensure a better recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic locally, nationally and globally?
- How could the Voluntary Local Reviews feed into the Voluntary National Reviews? What modalities have worked for fostering effective dialogue between these two levels of reviews?
- What arrangements are needed to ensure that findings and good practices from the local level are disseminated and utilized? What role can the United Nations, including the Regional Commissions, play in this?

Institute for Global Environmental Strategies: Shimokawa Method for Voluntary Local Reviews.
<https://www.iges.or.jp/en/pub/shimokawa-method-vlr/en>



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