



Guidelines for

Voluntary Local Reviews

VOLUME 1

A Comparative Analysis of Existing VLRs



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Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews

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UCLG Community of Practice on VLRs
UN-Habitat

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V O L U M E 1

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Foreword

We are in the midst of the most critical global health and socio-economic crisis of the century, which has the potential to set us back several years in our quest to realise the Agenda 2030 and other global commitments. Yet, the COVID-19 pandemic also presents an opportunity, to rethink the relationships and promote joint ownership of different spheres of government, public administration and civil society, in order to “build back better”. The battle for sustainability, inclusion and resilience will be won or lost in cities and across territories. The universal development agendas remain a transformative framework within which to carry out the actions that our communities need and to transmit the ambitious global message to strengthen cooperation and solidarity. Local action will be critical if we are to change the world.

The strong and growing drive towards the localization of the SDGs, and the associated international agendas, is proof that local and regional governments, the level of government which is closest to the people, are the frontline responders that address the priorities and issues that most affect their communities. They must be seen as an integral part of a joined-up and determined national effort to deliver the Global



Agendas. The efforts of LRGs is also demonstration of their commitment to the construction of a multilateral system capable of engaging everyone in shaping global solutions.

The universal agendas are interlinked and cannot be achieved in isolation. The 2030 Agenda is critical for ensuring that no-one and nowhere is left behind. The New Urban Agenda is central to achieving the SDGs in our cities. Alongside the Paris Agreement, these commitments are of paramount importance for addressing the current climate emergency. Only with effective coordination mechanisms and synergies between institutions and communities can we catalyse the action required to revitalize our planet and our societies after the pandemic and build their resilience to future crises.

If the SDGs are to be achieved, it will be critical to strengthen the mobilization of local and regional governments and their communities. It is therefore critical to ensure that local and regional governments are actively involved in all steps of the process: in the definition, implementation, follow-up, and monitoring of the localization strategies and priorities. To achieve this, they must be empowered with localized and disaggregated data, in particular in regards to gender, and also be given adequate resources to contribute to the process. Voluntary Local Reviews and Voluntary National Reviews should be seen as opportunities to revise policy decisions and to create more traction and a wider ownership of the goals.

The value of a VLR lies in the fact that it transcends local borders and can potentially influence all spheres of government. VLRs are more than just mechanisms for



monitoring and evaluation: they are levers for bringing about transformation; learning and training instruments for public officials from all spheres of government; mechanisms of transparency and accountability with which to promote increased civic involvement; and tools for boosting joint ownership of the universal agendas.

VLRs represent a sense of responsibility. They are the embodiment of the aspirations of local and regional governments and their sense of ownership, as institutions. They offer a practical way of taking part in the global movement towards sustainable development. In short, VLRs can bolster local commitments and accelerate actions.

For this reason, UCLG and UN-Habitat, decided to join forces to devise a *VLR Series* to provide guidance, definitions and technical

support to any local and regional government aiming to engage in the VLR process.

This first Volume of the Guidelines for VLRs, jointly developed by UCLG and UN-Habitat, aim to bring out the intrinsic value of VLRs as a political process that can enhance coordination between different spheres of government.

We hope that this work will serve as inspiration and support to many local and regional governments throughout the world. UCLG and UN-Habitat stand ready to respond to the needs and priorities of LRGs in the path to realise the global agendas, leaving no one and no place behind.



Maimunah Mohd Shariff
Executive Director
UN Habitat



Emilia Saiz
Secretary General
United Cities and Local Governments

Preamble

These Guidelines build on UCLG and UN-Habitat's longstanding and unique partnership in support of the localization of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The two organizations have been working together for a long time, since UCLG's establishment in 2004 and its contribution to UN-Habitat's Global Campaign on Urban Governance (1999-2009), and its successor, the World Urban Campaign. In 2014, both institutions co-led the 'Dialogues on Implementation' of the post-2015 development agenda,¹ a milestone in the local implementation of the global agendas, conducting local, national and global consultations on the process.

Since then, UCLG and UN-Habitat have collaborated to raise awareness among local and regional governments (LRGs) on the relevance of SDG localization, while also amplifying their voices in international fora for their role in the achievement of the Goals to be duly acknowledged and supported across international institutions. Being especially supportive of lifelong learning among local administrations and communities, UCLG and UN-Habitat, together with UNDP and other global and local partners, have also contributed to the development of a series of learning and training modules on the localization of the SDGs: one of the UCLG Learning's Modules, dedicated to reporting on the SDGs, also discusses the Voluntary Local Review (VLR) as a tool of inclusive participation and knowledge exchange among LRGs.²

The two 'Local and Regional Governments Forums', organized in the framework of the 2018 and 2019 United Nations' High-Level Political Forums, were a breakthrough in the global conversation on Voluntary Local Reviews as a medium for locally-sourced

information and mutual knowledge exchange at the local level. In 2018, New York City and three Japanese Cities (Kitakyushu, Shimokawa and Toyama) were the forerunners which officially launched VLRs, soon followed by Helsinki and several others. More cities came together in 2019 to sign a VLR Declaration,³ also endorsed by UN-Habitat, and to create the VLR Community of Practices supported by UCLG.

In January 2020, with the 2030 deadline only 10 years away, the United Nations' Secretary-General launched the 'Decade of Action' to accelerate action towards achieving the SDGs. A few weeks later, the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded as a worldwide health crisis, sparing no region of the world. In the light of these events, UCLG and UN-Habitat have also been working together to provide support and experience-sharing among local governments at the forefront of the response to the pandemic. This joint effort has resulted in a 'Live Learning Experience' (LLE), co-hosted by both institutions with Metropolis, since March 2020, titled "Beyond the Outbreak".⁴ The LLE has been built on three main blocks: a) creating a virtual and living community for experience-sharing; b) providing local governments with online resources and promote the active sharing of materials, strategies and protocols; and c) developing briefings and guidelines to respond to the actual needs of local governments in these times.

Building on these premises and on their unrelenting efforts for SDG localization, UCLG and UN-Habitat have decided to further join forces and launch a global process of mobilization for Voluntary Local Reviews through the development of the *VLR Series* – a set of normative resources and guidance materials. Both institutions acknowledge that no single VLR definition or format exists,

1 UNDG et al., "Localizing the Post-2015 Development Agenda" (New York, 2015).

2 The module, 'SDGs Learning Module 3: Reporting to national and local reviews', is available online at the following address: <https://www.learning.uclg.org/file/module-3-eng-0>.

3 See also: <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/international/programs/voluntary-local-review-declaration.page>.

4 All resources on the Live Learning Experience can be accessed at this link: <https://www.uclg.org/en/issues/live-learning-experience-beyondtheoutbreak>.

and that VLRs today reflect the diversity of LRGs and their territorial and national contexts. Primarily developed as an SDG monitoring tool, VLRs are also seen as instruments of political relevance, with the potential to stimulate civic mobilization and participatory planning, while also fostering partnerships and investment towards the achievement of the global goals. Ultimately, engaging in the VLR exercise provides opportunities for stronger multilevel governance mechanisms, especially whenever VLRs are successfully integrated with a country's Voluntary National Review (VNR) processes.

The broader goal of the *VLR Series* is to provide cities and LRGs with cutting-edge knowledge and practical guidance on the VLR process, while kindling the sharing of experience and practices – and, ultimately, a global conversation – on monitoring and reporting on the SDGs at the local level.

The work of the Series follows the inputs of UCLG's Community of Practice on VLRs, thus directly responding to the needs and demands of cities and LRGs approaching this context. A range of guidance products and input will be produced jointly by UCLG and UN-Habitat as part of the *VLR Series*. This report is the first Volume of the Series, and focuses on a comparative analysis of currently existing VLRs with the ambition to distil the common traits and threads that make this reviewing effort truly 'shared'. The VLRs come in a variety of shapes and sizes – from implementation reports to sustainable development strategies, from broad all-SDGs studies to simpler SDG 11 reports – reflecting the diversity of the LRGs that embark on them, their unique context and long-term objectives. The aim of this first Volume is to provide LRGs with an overview of the current approaches to the VLR exercise. It does so by studying the key elements underpinning the VLR process: a) what institutions and

actors are actually being involved in a VLR?; b) where is the VLR process located institutionally in the broader scheme of multi-level governance?; c) what contents are VLRs including, and why?; and d) how are VLRs being made, with what resources and what goals?

Building on the findings of this report and on existing VLR examples, the second volume of the UCLG-UN-Habitat *VLR Series* will provide a deeper analysis of the core principles that should underpin the VLR process, while also outlining different approaches and practical steps to undertake it. The project will also develop spin-off normative documents and tools, exploring in detail some of the most relevant features and outcomes of VLRs and, more generally, SDG reporting exercises.

The expectation is that these guiding volumes, and their accompanying suite of tools, will provide food for thought and practical advice to LRGs and their communities, promoting peer-learning and experience-sharing across all regions.



01. Introduction and context

These guidelines are designed to provide those local and regional governments (LRGs) interested in developing their Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) with key information and a few directions and recommendations to approach this tool. This would assist them in joining the growing group of local authorities that have taken initiative to monitor and report on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

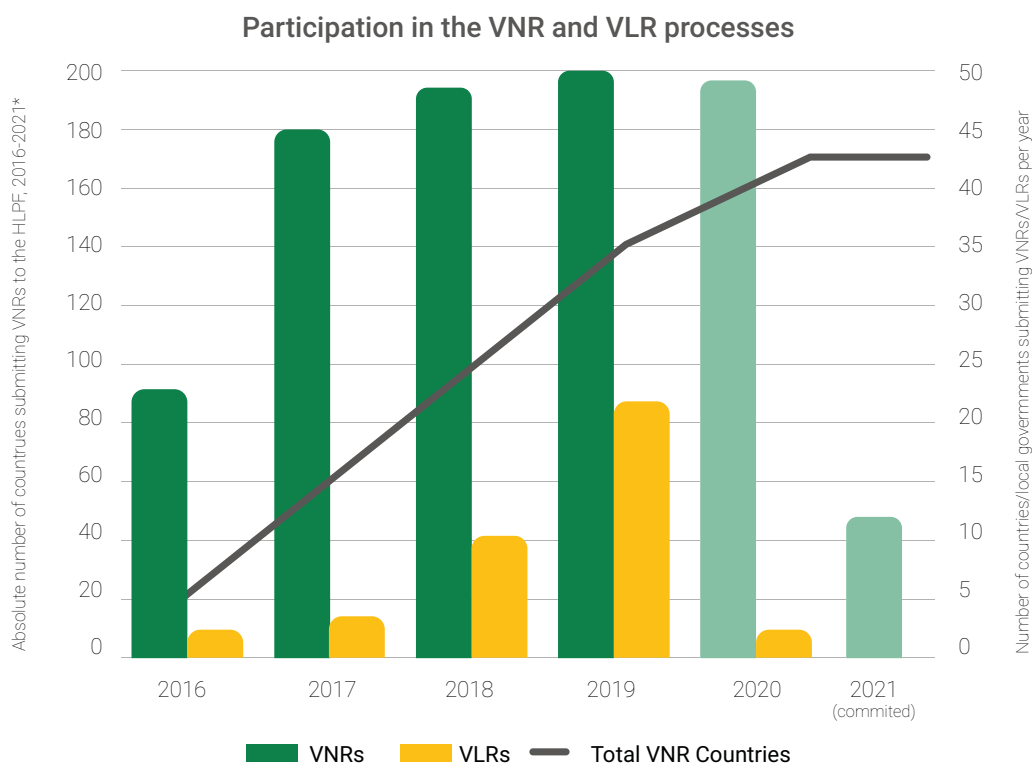
The United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda and the 17 SDGs in 2015. The UN established, at the same time, the institutional framework

in which the achievement of the Agenda and the SDGs was to be monitored and evaluated. This framework is based essentially on the United Nations' High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), to which 142 UN member states submitted, between 2016 and 2019, their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), a national report on the status of the implementation of and alignment with the SDGs and the Agenda. 47 more countries are expected to present their VNRs at the (mostly virtual) 2020 HLPF.⁵ Each UN member state is required to submit at least two VNRs before 2030.⁶

⁵To date (June 3, 2020), the United Nations' Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) is working on adjustments to the 2020 HLPF programme and format in order to meet the requirements of public health policies related to the COVID-19 pandemic. All side events, including all contributions by major stakeholders, will most likely be held virtually.

⁶A complete list of countries that have reported or are reporting is available on the HLPF webpage: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf>.

Graph 1. Relative and absolute numbers of VNR submissions and published VLRs.



Source: own elaboration and HLPF data (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/>)

Even though the 2030 Agenda is an intergovernmental agreement and the HLPF is an institutional framework clearly designed for UN member states to showcase their *national* progress, the impact of the SDGs affects the subnational government level immensely. **It is commonly mentioned that at least 65% of the 169 targets of the Goals could not possibly be achieved “should local urban stakeholders not be assigned a clear mandate and role in the implementation process”**.⁷ More importantly, because of how transversal, complex and all-encompassing the Goals are, the subnational level as a whole – local and regional governments (LRGs), communities, territories and all other local stakeholders – has to be engaged with the governance mechanisms that are set up for national policy to really comply with the 2030 Agenda. In many countries, this political framework, geared to build on the input of national governments, had no clear system or mechanism in place to collect information, monitor and build on what local and regional governments were doing for the implementation of the SDGs and the achievement of the Agenda.

VLRs first appeared to fill this void and as a tool to show local and regional governments’ commitment. Accordingly, since the inception of the SDG framework, the reports presented annually to the HLPF by UCLG and the Global Taskforce show clearly that local and regional governments have been at the forefront of implementation, awareness-raising, training and coalition-building.⁸ They have been able to produce data without which even national reporting, as sanctioned by the UN-led process, would be either impossible or unreliable. VLRs allow LRGs to (vertically) complement the information that is being provided at the national level. They also allow them to (horizontally) share and learn mutually from other LRGs, strengthening the sense of community and joint destiny and ownership that underpins the SDG framework and its discourse.



⁷ Cities Alliance, “Sustainable Development Goals and Habitat III: Opportunities for a Successful New Urban Agenda,” *Cities Alliance Discussion Paper 3*, no. 36 (2015): 13.

⁸ UCLG and GTF, “National and Sub-National Governments on the Way towards the Localization of the SDGs,” LRGs’ Report to the HLPF (Barcelona, 2017); UCLG and GTF, “Towards the Localization of the SDGs,” LRGs’ Report to the HLPF (Barcelona, 2018); UCLG and GTF, “Towards the Localization of the SDGs,” LRGs’ Report to the HLPF (Barcelona, 2019). The reports can be accessed online at this link: <https://gold.uclg.org/reports/other/local-governments-and-localization-sdgs>.

01.1. Methodology

When designing the guidelines' methodology, the main goal was to answer three basic questions: what is the Voluntary Local Review that these guidelines are about? What makes a document by or associated with a local or regional government compatible with the scope and objectives of a VLR? How should the guidelines approach existing VLRs in order to compile a thorough atlas that is also attractive for other sub-national governments to join?

For the past few years, after all, the commitment to co-owned and locally-sourced monitoring and assessing of the localization of the global agendas has grown significantly and from the bottom up. UCLG and UN-Habitat have contributed to this movement of local and regional governments willing to support this global effort, with the ambition to make it even more inclusive and comprehensive.

Consequently, as regards a common definition of VLR upon which to build this document up, the methodology for the drafting of these Guidelines attempts to include data, information and contributions from as many local and regional governments as possible, while also offering the opportunity to participate in the process to any LRG willing to contribute. In order to do so, and considering also that there exists no formal definition of what a Voluntary Local Review *has to be* or include, the Guidelines adopt a shared understanding of the process that UCLG and UN-Habitat have consistently used throughout their initiatives and awareness-raising work (see Insight Box 1).

#1 INSIGHT BOX

TOWARDS A SHARED DEFINITION OF VOLUNTARY LOCAL REVIEW

To date, there exists no fixed working definition for Voluntary Local Reviews. So far, this has been less of a problem and more a testament to the heterogeneity of LRGs and local stakeholders and to the diversity of the territorial and institutional contexts in which they operate – in terms of size, population, national environment, the degree of decentralization, the resources they have available, and so on. Even within such a diverse group, however, it is clear that all VLRs have common elements, particularly as regards their primary purpose: assessing and presenting advances on the fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda from a local standpoint and through a locally-developed narrative.

At the same time, the potential of VLRs goes beyond their monitoring and evaluation (M&E) function. VLRs represent an aspirational statement and the commitment of a community to a global endeavour: the Sustainable Development Goals. They are multifaceted tools that can positively influence various dimensions of local action and development:

POLITICAL Enabling dialogue between different stakeholders, local agencies and levels of government and aligning local public policies and, often, national development strategies through the common framework of the SDGs.

SOCIAL Facilitating civic engagement and transparency through shared vision and a participatory approach.

PLANNING Steering budgeting and catalytic infrastructure projects through local prioritization of SDG goals and targets.

As this publication demonstrates, different cities define and use VLRs in different ways. While this volume attempts to collate and compare these different approaches and experiences, a forthcoming one will aim to provide some guidance on essential elements of any VLR, as well as guiding principles and considerations for its development.

In order to answer to the second core question, and taking advantage of how loose and encompassing the VLR definition can be, the Guidelines identify three key criteria according to which localization documents from sub-national governments can be included in the broader concept of Voluntary Local Review:

#1 documents included in this analysis should **make a clear reference to the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda as the framework in which the local administration and/or community are developing their localization and implementation initiatives.** There are examples of public local administrations developing a complex and long-standing sustainable development strategy or framework which, however, makes no reference or does not acknowledge the SDGs or other global commitments. This fundamentally excludes such endeavours from being VLRs proper, considering that they are hardly able to contribute to knowledge and assessment of how the implementation of the global agendas is progressing at the local level;

#2 **implementation agency and responsibility have to be local in the broadest sense possible.** Local administrators, stakeholders, associations and/or grassroots organizations have to be the drivers of the localization initiatives in the territory and/or the institutions accountable for the reviewing process;

#3 documents should also be designed as to **include elements of locally-based reviewing and monitoring of the implementation processes** – i.e., avoid a purely strategic or planning approach and provide data and information on actual implementation measures of which local administrators and communities are co-responsible.

Finally, in terms of what elements are required to read through the VLRs in order to identify common traits and a basic shared structure

for others to join in the effort, these Guidelines have selected four core variables around which the analysis is structured:

#1 Agency, to define the main drivers of the reviewing effort and the conventional distribution of monitoring tasks and political responsibility of the VLR;

#2 Institutional locus, to locate the VLR within the larger system of multi-governance and inter-institutional relations in a territory, public administration and local communities, as players engaged at various levels and steps of the VLR-making process;

#3 Technical content, to shortlist a few essential components that are recurrent in most VLR examples and can guide interested LRGs in sorting out the kind of competence, resources and know-how required to approach the instrument;

#4 Data and indicators, to locate the VLR vis-à-vis the global instruments that the UN system and national governments are using to standardize the reviewing effort and allow for more comparable knowledge and information on the localization and implementation of the global agendas at all levels of governance.

The essential building block of the analysis is the existing group of reviewing, monitoring and strategic planning documents that local administrations have issued to study and disseminate their implementation initiatives at the local level. While only some of these documents are explicitly 'branded' as Voluntary Local Review, all the documents analysed in this work do comply with the above-mentioned criteria and have been grouped as part of the VLR process. For both UCLG and UN-Habitat it was important for any analysis to be as comprehensive and inclusive as possible, in order to provide the broadest possible overview on a process that is being extremely diverse and very closely related to the specific contexts in which is being developed.

02. Locating the Community of Practice in the VLR map

UCLG and the members of the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments (GTF) have long been at the forefront of the advocacy movement which is demanding more and more visibility and centrality for local and regional governments' initiatives. UN-Habitat, the leading UN agency to work with LRGs and on local development-related matters, has been supporting these efforts extensively. UCLG, the GTF and UN-Habitat have been working together to stress the importance of the localization of the SDGs and amplify the voice of LRGs in international fora since well before the approval of the 2030 Agenda. In this regard, the first Local and Regional Authorities Forum, organized in July 2018 by the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, UNDESA and UN-Habitat, was an integral part of that year's HLPF programme – and a key milestone in a

process that helped increase LRGs' awareness of their co-ownership of the 2030 Agenda and provide them with an institutional harbour to share knowledge, experiences and learn mutually.

Events such as the Forum and the support provided by new arrangements – such as the New York VLR Declaration (signed in September 2019), the establishment of UCLG's VLR Community of Practice, and the session dedicated to VLRs on the occasion of the 10th World Urban Forum in February 2020 in Abu Dhabi – are meant to improve information exchange and stimulate imitation and participation. The more 'networked' the local government constituency and community, the more easily and quickly this 'contagion' effect will help them reach the critical mass needed to impact the global implementation process.

02.1. The Voluntary Local Review process

Even though there is no official count available, **these guidelines acknowledge at least 39 Voluntary Local Reviews published and recorded, to date:** those of the municipalities of Barcarena, Barcelona, Besançon, Bristol, Buenos Aires, Canterbury, Cape Town, Cauayan City, Chimbote, Gothenburg, Hamamatsu, Helsinki, Kitakyushu, La Paz, Los Angeles, Málaga, Mannheim, Mexico City, New Taipei, New York,⁹ Niterói, Santana de Parnaíba, Shimokawa, Suwon, Taipei, Toyama, and those of the second-tier subnational governments (i.e., counties, provinces, regions or federated states) of the Basque

Country, the Valencian Country, the province of Santa Fe, Busia, Kwale, Marsabit, and Taita Taveta counties, Deqing, Nord Rhein-Westfalen, Oaxaca, São Paulo, and Wallonia. However, there are various items that affect the reliability of this count, and many of these issues are addressed explicitly in Section 3, which goes into deeper detail in the attempt to define what a VLR is and what it implies for local and regional governments. Figure 1 locates current VLRs across the globe. Table 1 provides a few data on the cities and regions that have already joined this process. Additional variables are analysed throughout the document.

⁹ The City of New York is the only one to have presented two VLRs (2018 and 2019) to date, although the Basque Country's government issued a VLR in 2018 and a shorter follow-up assessment in 2019.

Table 1. List of currently available VLRs, with basic data on government, population and VLR structure

Links	Local Government	Type	Year	Length (# pages)	Region	Population	Document Type
PDF	Barcelona	Municipality	2018	42	LAC	121,190	Localization report
PDF	Barcelona	Municipality	2019	181	Europe	1,620,343	SDG implementation municipal strategy
PDF	Basque Country	Regional Government	2018	67	Europe	2,189,534	SDG implementation strategy agenda
PDF	Besançon	Municipality	2018	95	Europe	115,934	Localization report
PDF	Bristol	Unitary Authority	2019	70	Europe	463,400	VLR
PDF	Buenos Aires	C.Autonomous Government	2019	106	LAC	2,891,082	VLR
PDF	Busia	County	2019	16	Africa	893,681	VLR
PDF	Canterbury	Municipality	2019	33	Europe	55,240	Implementation report
PDF	Cape Town	Metropolitan Municipality	2019	27	Africa	3,776,000	Localization report (see also Gothenburg)
PDF	Cauayan City	Municipality	2017	7	ASPAC	129,523	State-of-the-city address on the SDGs
PDF	Chimbote*	Municipality	2020	70	LAC	365,534	VLR
PDF	Deqing	County	2017	85	ASPAC	428,000	Implementation report
PDF	Gothenburg	Municipality	2019	37	Europe	579,281	Localization report (see also Cape Town)
PDF	Hamamatsu	Municipality	2019	48	ASPAC	791,707	VLR
PDF	Helsinki	Municipality	2019	84	Europe	650,058	Implementation report
PDF	Kitakyushu	Municipality	2018	58	ASPAC	940,978	VLR
PDF	Kwale	County	2019	15	Africa	866,820	VLR
PDF	La Paz	Municipality	2018	98	LAC	757,184	Implementation report
PDF	Los Angeles	Municipality	2019	140	NORAM	3,990,456	VLR

Notes: Chimbote's report includes data and processes from two municipalities – Chimbote and New Chimbote – located in the same contiguous metropolitan area but administratively part of two separate districts within the same province. Data includes figures from both municipalities.

Links	Local Government	Type	Year	Length (# pages)	Region	Population	Document Type
PDF	Málaga	Municipality	2018	61	Europe	571,026	Implementation report
PDF	Mannheim	Municipality	2019	88	Europe	309,370	Implementation report
PDF	Marsabit	County	2019	16	Africa	459,785	VLR
PDF	Mexico City	C.Autonomous Government	2017	98	LAC	8,918,653	Implementation report
PDF	New Taipei	Municipality	2019	131	ASPAC	4,014,560	VLR
PDF PDF	New York	Metropolitan Municipality	2018 2019	104 118	NORAM	8,398,748	VLR
	Niterói	Municipality	2020	-	LAC	496,696	Publication forthcoming
PDF	NR-Westfalen	Regional Government	2016	49	Europe	17,912,134	Sustainable development strategy
PDF	Oaxaca	Regional Government	2019	85	LAC	3,967,889	VLR
PDF	Santa Fe	Regional Government	2019	64	LAC	3,194,537	Implementation report
PDF	Santana de Parnaíba	Municipality	2019	48	LAC	126,574	VLR
PDF	São Paulo	Regional Government	2019	130	LAC	45,538,936	Implementation and alignment report
PDF	Shimokawa	Municipality	2018	60	ASPAC	3,836	VLR
PDF	Suwon	Municipality	2018	35	ASPAC	1,241,311	Implementation report on SDG11
PDF	Taipei	Municipality	2019	80	ASPAC	2,635,286	VLR
PDF	Taita Taveta	County	2019	21	Africa	381,210	VLR
PDF	Toyama	Municipality	2018	56	ASPAC	415,884	VLR
PDF	Valencian Country	Regional Government	2016	22	Europe	5,003,769	Localization report
PDF	Wallonia	Regional Government	2017	65	Europe	3,633,795	Strategic report

02.2. Institutional support

Several UN agencies and offices have attempted to provide references for local governments interested in participating in the SDG monitoring process. The Division for Sustainable Development Goals of UNDESA, which is already in charge of the national reporting process and organizes the High-Level Political Forum, is mandated by Paragraph 89 of the 2030 Agenda to assist major groups and other stakeholders in their contributions to the implementation of the SDGs: gathering and updating information on the VLR process falls within its tasks.¹¹ Also within the UN system, the Local2030 platform has been pooling together resources, information and data coming directly from the local level to improve and streamline the localization process in diverse areas and administrative cultures, as well as local awareness of the process.¹² UN-Habitat, which co-leads the Local2030 Secretariat, has already been active in standardizing the local reviewing process, assisting local authorities in several countries while also defining VLR Guidelines to report specifically on SDG 11,¹³ and supporting the UN Regional Commissions (e.g. UNESCAP) in defining regional Guidelines.

Outside the UN system, Japan's Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES) has established, since the earliest stages of the global VLR movement, a VLR Lab, through which it collects relevant examples of local monitoring and reviewing. The Institute also assisted four Japanese cities in the production of their own reviews (see Section 3), some of them being the very first to accomplish this feat.¹⁴ The Brookings Institution, a United States-based global public policy think-tank, organized a seminar on VLRs in April 2019 and developed a pioneering VLR Handbook.¹⁵ The European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC)

also presented an ambitious and rigorous *European Handbook* on local reporting on the SDGs in February 2020.¹⁶ The *European Handbook* is a very valuable resource for European cities interested in approaching VLRs with a catalogue of 71 local indicators. Some cities, such as Bristol, have also developed their own tools to support VLR initiatives and have turned into vocal advocates of local monitoring as a token of enhanced transparency, accountability and actual co-ownership of the SDGs.¹⁷

Finally, even before the establishment of the Community of Practice on the VLRs, UCLG's Learning department – in collaboration with UN-Habitat, the UNDP-ART Initiative and the GOLD Observatory and with the support of the Barcelona Provincial Council – had already made the VLRs and the process of sourcing the reviews locally one of the mainstays of the third 'Module' of its SDGs Training of Trainers series.¹⁹ This institutional background is particularly relevant, considering that the work of the Community of Practice and the purpose of these guidelines are embedded into this vision and strategy.

¹¹UNDESA's repository is available online at this link: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg11/local>.

¹²The Local2030 portal is accessible via this link: <https://www.local2030.org/>.

¹³UN-Habitat, "Annotated Table of Contents. Voluntary Local Report on the Implementation of SDG11 and Its Interface with Other SDGs" (Nairobi, 2019).

¹⁴The VLR Lab is accessible online at this link: <https://iges.or.jp/en/projects/vlr>.

¹⁵Anthony F Pipa, "Shaping the Global Agenda to Maximize City Leadership on the SDGs: The Experiences of Vanguard Cities" (Washington, D.C., 2019).

¹⁶Alice Siragusa et al., "European Handbook for SDG Voluntary Local Reviews" (Luxembourg, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.2760/670387>. The report is also available online at this link: <https://t.ly/J3mPB>.

¹⁷Sean Fox and Allan Macleod, "Voluntary Local Reviews: A Handbook for UK Cities" (Bristol, 2019).

¹⁸The Global Observatory on Local Democracy and Decentralization Works as the intelligence and research department of UCLG. More information on the Observatory is available on its website: <https://gold.uclg.org/>. The Observatory is in charge of UCLG's flagship publication, the GOLD report, published every three years. The latest GOLD report (GOLD V) addressed in detail the process of localization of the SDGs and can be accessed at this link: <https://gold.uclg.org/reports/other/gold-v-report>. GOLD has also curated since 2017 a review of the HLPF process, including an analysis of all the Voluntary National Reviews submitted to date and accounts of local policies, initiatives and practices of localization of the SDGs. The HLPF reports are available online: <https://gold.uclg.org/reports/other/local-governments-and-localization-sdgs>.

¹⁹The online resources of the Learning team can be accessed at this link: <https://www.learning.uclg.org/>. The modules can be accessed at this link: <https://www.learning.uclg.org/sdg-learning-modules>, whereas a flyer specifically on VLRs is available here: <https://www.learning.uclg.org/file/flyervlrpdf.0>.

03. A typology of Voluntary Local Reviews: criteria and trends

This section aims to catalogue the existing examples of (and experiments with) Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) according to a few key variables. These have been identified in order to be easily relatable to the practices and experiences of other municipalities, with the aim of making them as replicable in other contexts as possible.

There are four key variables that this analysis re-interprets as core research questions:

#1 Who is involved in the VLR? This question elicits an analysis of the process that leads to the VLR and aims to identify the main actors involved in its realization, studying whether the initiative was taken by the local authority itself, and if so, by what offices or departments; what kind of human or technical resources were required; and to what extent other stakeholders and actors – local or not – were engaged in the process.

#2 Where is the VLR process located within the larger institutional and policy scheme? The strategic value of a VLR – as explored specifically in the VLR flyer issued by UCLG Learning²⁰ – changes significantly according to how tasks are distributed within the governance system of local governments. Is the VLR a cross-departmental effort, or has it been ‘siloeed’ for one department only? Is the VLR part of a larger coordinated effort which involves other local, national or even supranational institutions and actors? Is the VLR an autonomous initiative of the local

government? Is it disconnected from other efforts or was it developed in response to the lack of alternative frameworks?

#3 What is the content of the VLR?

This question explores the structure and contents of the VLR in search for both common or replicable and more unique contributions. This section should be able to provide the Community of Practice with an idea of the inherent diversity of the examples and experiences with VLRs. At the same time, this understanding should encourage local governments willing to produce a VLR to contribute to this richness of approaches with their own and guide them by showing similarities with other local authorities and the importance to share and pool together common solutions to common problems.

#4 How is the VLR made? This

section should provide answers to basic doubts about what data is needed for a VLR; what kind of indicators has been used, why and in what context; what kind of data a local government should be able to produce, collect and disaggregate; and how alignment with other reporting/monitoring channels and actors (e.g., national institutions, international organizations) can work.

Each subsection will also showcase relevant examples through ‘insight boxes’ that will give more detail on specific cases and contexts.

²⁰See: <https://www.learning.uclg.org/file/flyervlrpdf-0>.

03.1. Who is involved in the VLRs? Institutional ownership and governance

Tracing the process that leads to the production of a VLR can provide a lot of information on the political legitimacy of the monitoring and reporting commitment of a local or regional administration. It can also shed light on the balance between different stakeholders at the local level and their ability to create effective coalitions and ‘alliances’. Ultimately, it tells about the existence and quality of the ‘enabling environments’ that make localization possible, the sense of shared direction between the global agenda and local policy.

Most currently available VLRs are backed by the technical and political support of their city-hall or regional government administration. It is common for VLRs to be the product of the joint effort of various offices and departments from anywhere within the local government. Since accepting to draft a VLR implies a certain degree of knowledge and awareness of international politics and global development policy, it is common for VLRs to build on the expertise and support of international relations departments or officers. It is similarly common for various offices and specialized teams to contribute more accurately to the specific SDGs that fall within their competences and domain. However, even within this group, there is a certain degree of diversity.

Kitakyushu,²¹ Shimokawa²² and Toyama,²³ for instance, the first three pioneering Japanese cities that published their VLRs in 2018, have been assisted by a nation-wide institution –

the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES), supported by the Japanese government and specialized in research and policy innovation – which worked in close contact with the mayors’ cabinets and city halls’ departments. Similarly, the Chinese province of Deqing published in 2017 a report on the implementation of the SDGs, compiled by a team of over 30 scientists and technicians from various universities and research institutions from the region *and* the rest of the country.²⁴ The report counted on the support of several branches of the *national* government, including the central statistical office of China, but relied less on the involvement of local institutions and their representatives. The city of New York, another pioneering example, developed its first VLR in 2018 through the NYC Mayor’s Office for International Affairs, in close partnership with the Offices of Operations and Climate Policy and Programmes, and in consultation with other relevant city hall agencies.²⁵

More recently, the city of Barcelona developed its first report in early 2019.²⁶ The effort was led by the Technical Board for Strategic Planning and mentioned explicitly the need to establish a dedicated Commissioner post for the 2030 Agenda, with the aim of “weaving and strengthening alliances with citizens, stakeholders, the private sector and other public administrations in order to achieve the SDGs” all the while reinforcing Barcelona’s global leadership in localization.²⁷

²¹IGES and City of Kitakyushu, “Kitakyushu City: The Sustainable Development Goals Report. Fostering a Trusted Green Growth City with True Wealth and Prosperity, Contributing to the World” (Kitakyushu, 2018).

²²IGES and Town of Shimokawa, “Shimokawa Town: The Sustainable Development Goals Report. The Shimokawa Challenge: Connecting People and Nature with the Future” (Shimokawa, 2018).

²³IGES and City of Toyama, “Toyama City: The Sustainable Development Goals Report. Compact City Planning Based on Polycentric Transport Networks” (Toyama, 2018).

²⁴Chen Jun et al., “Deqing’s Progress Report on Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. A Comprehensive Assessment with Statistical and Geospatial Information” (Deqing, 2017).

²⁵NYC Mayor’s Office for International Affairs, “Voluntary Local Review. New York City’s Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (New York, NY, 2018).

²⁶Barcelona City Hall, “Informe Sobre Localització Dels ODS 2030 a Barcelona” (Barcelona, 2019).

²⁷Barcelona City Hall, “Miquel Rodríguez Planas Nou Comissionat d’Agenda 2030,” October 13, 2019.

Table 2. Institutional actors, process and 'enabling' environment of currently available VLRs

Local Government	Blueprint	Institution in charge	Refers to VNR/national SD strategy
Barcelona	Spontaneous report	City Hall	Reference to Brazil's sustainable development strategy at large, and strong link to nationally-defined SD targets and commitments, but no actual reference to the VNR process or the national strategy as referring to the HLPF and/or the global monitoring processes
Barcelona	Alignment of existing strategic plans with the SDGs, de-siloed department tasking and monitoring	Dedicated department within City Hall; de-siloed inter-departmental committee	No mention of the national strategy, but the strategy acknowledges the work of the national association of municipalities and provinces (FEMP) and Barcelona's role in both the international community and the municipalist movement worldwide
Basque Country	Spontaneous report	The regional government (specifically the Directorate General for the Presidency and the DG for External relations) is in charge of the process but there is no explicit methodological or technical presentation	No link to the central government's strategy. The whole monitoring process revolves around the SDGs but there is no specific mention of the HLPF and the 'official' monitoring framework
Besançon	Spontaneous report	City Hall (no detail on task distribution within the institution)	Besançon is one of the 'pilot' cities of a French government initiative to promote local awareness on the SDGs. The report adopts 5 strategic directives of the French government as categories guiding its own monitoring effort
Bristol	UNDESA Guidelines	Prepared by university institutions, backed by City Hall plus support of a ad hoc alliance of stakeholders (Bristol SDG Alliance)	No real mention of the overarching strategy. VLR comes later than VNR. Delegation to the UN. Spearheading a municipal movement approaching reporting. Strong self-awareness and direct link to opportunities and shortcomings of the UN system
Buenos Aires	No actual reference to any framework or pattern	Fully institutional within City Hall: IR departments, strategic management	Issue with the magnitude and role of the Buenos Aires city government, which is massive for LRG standards and largely comparable with the federal one
Busia	Spontaneous report	Officials and resources from County offices	The VLR is prepared within an institutional 'agreement' or consensus that includes the national institutions that collect most of the relevant data
Canterbury	Spontaneous report	Canterbury SDG Forum: community-based coalition (private and public). City council engaged only as interlocutor	Direct reference to the 2019 UK VNR and willingness to contribute periodically
Cape Town	Mistra Urban Future project template	University-led study and report with validation by city authorities	Direct mention of the South African national strategy and implementation mechanisms. Analysis of potential synergies and conflicts with existing plans, including the integrated development plan of CT
Cauayan City	Spontaneous report	City Hall	No mention of the Philippines' strategy or the VNR/monitoring process as such
Chimbote	UNDESA Guidelines but only for SDG 11 assessment	City-level governments, even though the distribution of tasks across at least two municipalities (Chimbote and New Chimbote) of the metropolitan area are not singled out clearly	Acknowledges Peru's VNR and locates the city's effort in monitoring as part of a larger strategy of common engagement and dialogue across national and local levels
Deqing	Spontaneous report	Team of 30+ academic technicians from various universities in the area and the country. Acknowledged support of several branches of the national (including the statistical office) and regional governments, plus UNDESA	Project seen as experimental towards realization of China's overarching national plan on sustainable development. Indicators or measurements based on National Plan criteria are classified specifically

Local Government	Blueprint	Institution in charge	Refers to VNR/national SD strategy
Göteborg	Mistra Urban Future project template	University-led study and report with validation by city authorities	While structured from an academic standpoint, the report is embedded in the larger framework of City Hall's 2030 Agenda strategy (although without a clear political direction). The report acknowledges the many branches in which the national strategy has developed, but makes no actual connection to any of their products
Hamamatsu	IGES template based on UNDESA Handbook	IGES in collaboration with the municipality	The city was already involved in the national "SDG Future City" project, which selects municipalities as case-studies and laboratories for sustainable policy implementation. The city is aware of the global monitoring process and has a history of collaboration with international institutions and LRG organizations
Helsinki	New York's VLR	Several City Hall offices	There is no concrete mention of how the city's strategy fits the bigger picture, but the Finnish attitude towards the SDGs is regarded as an enabling environment. The review explicitly outlines the alignment of the city's strategic priorities with the SDGs
Kitakyushu	IGES template based on UNDESA Handbook	IGES in collaboration with the municipality	The city was already involved in the national "SDG Future City" project, which selects municipalities as case-studies and laboratories for sustainable policy implementation. Direct link with the VNR production process and an instance of mobilizing municipalities in the same groove of reporting and monitoring responsibilities. IGES and the municipalities also led the movement that engaged municipalities in the national process (SDGs are a relatively strong framework for public policy in Japan) and collected data according to the templates adopted by the national strategy
Kwale	Spontaneous report	Officials and resources from County offices	No actual mention of the national process. Awareness of the global process and reference to specific elements such as means of implementation and key challenges
La Paz	Municipal implementation report and plan	Fully institutional within City Hall: Municipal Analysis and Research Programme + Territorial Planning Unit + Cartography teams	No formal engagement with the national plans or strategies, acknowledges itself as pioneering for municipalities in the country (and elsewhere)
Los Angeles	Loosely based on the UNSG model	Mayor's office, with the VLR seen as a political instrument for the mayor's agenda	No current national process to report to the HLPF
Málaga	UNDESA Guidelines	The VLR was developed by a third-party foundation with the collaboration of city hall	Strong alignment analysis with municipal strategic plans and documents, no reference to the HLPF or implementation reporting processes at other levels
Mannheim	Spontaneous report	City hall as political driver and stakeholder, no actual mention of the parties or contributors to the VLR as such	The report acknowledges the VLR/HLPF process but is disconnected from the national mechanism. It does not really follow any guidelines although the main components (assessment, highlights, process and method) are present. The city commits to the reporting process as a tool for aligning municipal priorities

Local Government	Blueprint	Institution in charge	Refers to VNR/national SD strategy
Marsabit	Spontaneous report	Officials and resources from County offices	The report refers to national legislation, but the process appears to be detached by any corresponding national initiatives
Mexico City	Loosely based on the UNSG model	Administration of the municipal government (with references to achievements during the specific mandate of the incumbent administration). Four main Technical Committees with tasks and competences distributed according to specialization of different city hall offices	Thorough reference to Mexico's federal government's approach to the 2030 Agenda, localization and the international mechanisms of monitoring and reporting
New Taipei	Spontaneous report with loose reference to the UNDESA structure	City Hall and a Sustainable Development Committee (43 members max.), plus specialized teams on different sectorial priorities of SD	Acknowledges the importance of the national strategy in the adaptation of the global goals and refers to a "VNR"
New York(2018 and 2019)	UNDESA Guidelines	Mayor's Office's desk for International Relations, in collaboration with the offices for Operations and Climate Policy and Programs, plus the involvement of several other municipal agencies	No current national process to report to the HLPF
Niterói		Publication forthcoming	
NR-Westfalen	IGES template based on UNDESA Handbook	Regional government with clear task distribution across municipalities in the region	While the strategic framework is designed with a clear acknowledgement of the SDGs, it also began in 2014, so references to the SDGs are almost added ex post to the strategic platform created by the region
Oaxaca	Loosely based on the UNDESA model	Political leadership of a dedicated Working Committee on the Achievement of the 2030 Agenda in Oaxaca; acknowledgement of relevant input from civil society, academia and international organizations including UN system agencies and international donors	The report is mostly framed in the state-level context
Santa Fe	Spontaneous report	Mostly the directorate for International Relations within the provincial government, with the inclusion of several other offices	There is evidence of a strong international involvement (via UCLG and other stakeholders) and a knowledge of the HLPF mechanism as well as all the other global agendas and cooperation frameworks. No actual mention of the national strategy at the global level
Santana de Parnaíba	Spontaneous report very loosely based on UNSG's guidelines	City Hall with the involvement of at least 8 departments	Clear acknowledgement of the SDGs and the HLPF process, but no mention to Brazil's reviewing strategy or participation
São Paulo	Spontaneous report aligned with the state's pluriannual strategic plan (PPA)	Collaboration between the government of the State of São Paulo, the SEADE foundation, and the FAPESP foundation	The main goal of the report, besides reporting on the outcomes of the activities of the ad hoc committees created by the state government to implement the 2030 Agenda, is aligning the measurements and policy initiatives with the state's PPA
Shimokawa	IGES template based on UNDESA Handbook	IGES in collaboration with the municipality (Policy Promotion Department in particular), with strong involvement of locally-based advocacy groups ("Town Subcommittee on the SDGs FutureCity") also via interviews and workshops	The town was already a selected member of the national "SDG Future City" initiative
Suwon	Spontaneous report	Suwon City Government with strong presence of ICLEI and city-level agencies on SD	Explicit mention of the 2018 HLPF process but no direct link to national initiative or frameworks

Local Government	Blueprint	Institution in charge	Refers to VNR/national SD strategy
Taipei	UNSG's recommendations	SD-dedicated council in City Hall	No formal participation in global monitoring processes
Taita Taveta	Spontaneous report	Officials and resources from County offices	Although the process begins because of the national endeavour and framework, there is no mention of the regulatory impulse from the national level
Toyama	IGES template based on UNDESA Handbook	IGES (ultimately authoring the paper) in collaboration with the municipality (Environmental Policy Section in particular)	City already selected as a case-study for the national "SDG Future City" project on urban sustainability and the "Municipal SDG Models Project" on stakeholder engagement. Direct link with the VNR production process and an instance of mobilizing municipalities in the same groove of reporting and monitoring responsibilities
Valencian Country	Process analysis on localization (almost prior to HLPF monitoring)	Regional government with strong engagement of civil society, stakeholders at all levels and the private sector	Document is prior to the organization of national reporting cycles in the HLPF framework
Wallonia	Spontaneous report	Sustainable Development department within the General Secretariat of the regional government	The report is the regional contribution to the larger national review submitted to the 2017 HLPF

Providing either authorship or support to the realization of many VLRs, academia and research institutions have in many cases been essential. The city of Bristol capitalized on the long-standing collaboration with the University of Bristol's Cabot Institute for the Environment, the research institution that coordinated the realization of the VLR,²⁸ and involved city officials in the process. Inspired by the selection of Bristol as the Environmental European Capital in 2014, the city aligned its plans with the vision embodied by the 2030 Agenda and established a fruitful cooperation mechanism – the SDG Alliance – between city hall, associations in the community and at the grassroots, and Bristol's renowned university centres. This process of institutional creation allowed for an otherwise unavailable enabling environment, in which local stakeholders converged with the SDGs as a common framework, in close collaboration and co-ownership with the city council.

In a different context, Mistra Urban Futures,²⁹ 9a research organization based at the Chalmers University of Gothenburg (Sweden)

and a 'federation' of research teams, is another interesting example: it has assisted and promoted comparative urban research in four continents and nine cities in order for them to draft their own localization review and assessment.³⁰ The reviews built on the methods jointly developed and were finally validated by joint taskforces with city-hall representatives and officials. The process resulted in the cities of Gothenburg³¹ and Cape Town³² being able to publish, with the assistance of the partnering research staff, their own implementation reports.

A different kind of bottom-up ownership was behind the VLR of the British city of Canterbury³³ In this case, the coalition driving the monitoring process was a group of both local associations and organizations and individual citizens, joined in the Canterbury SDG Forum. This spontaneous coalition, in a relatively small municipality (55,000 inhabitants in 2011), succeeded to involve the municipal and county (Kent) governments in the reporting process via the contribution of data and position papers on implemented policies – as well as with their

²⁸City of Bristol, "Bristol and the SDGs. A Voluntary Local Review of Progress 2019," ed. Sean Fox and Allan Macleod (Bristol, 2019).

²⁹Visit <https://www.mistraurbanfutures.org/en> for more information.

³⁰All documents and more information on localization in partner cities are available on the project's webpage: <https://t.ly/JvyJB>.

³¹Sandra C. Valencia, "Localisation of the 2030 Agenda and Its Sustainable Development Goals in Gothenburg, Sweden" (Gothenburg, 2019).

³²Sylvia Croese, "Localisation of the 2030 Agenda and Its Sustainable Development Goals in Cape Town" (Cape Town, 2019).

³³Canterbury SDG Forum, "Canterbury Sustainable Development Goal Forum: Initial Reports on Local Implementation of the Goals" (Canterbury, 2019).

political legitimacy. The strong 'localness' of this peculiar arrangement makes for a quite unique VLR example, in which the resources available were mostly focused on a qualitative assessment of policy results vis-à-vis the strategic commitment of local and provincial institutions, while also featuring a large component of bottom-up recommendations, demands and guidance for next steps and improved localization.

On the other hand, the VLR of the city of Los Angeles, in the United States, shows quite the opposite of Canterbury's example. The VLR of Los Angeles was designed and directed at all stages not just by municipal institutions, but more specifically by the Mayor's Office, in extensive collaboration with university researchers and institutions through all four phases of its methodology.³⁴ Los Angeles' review follows loosely the guidelines of the UN Secretary General's Office, and it adapts the SDGs and their targets to the Angeleno context with rigour, joining a generally qualitative assessment with a policy-based approach and a massive vault of locally-sourced data,³⁵ all collected in a freely accessible database and portal which assesses compliance with both official and localized indicators of SDG performance.

The chain of responsibility and accountability that lies behind the making of a VLR is particularly important in the case of regions, provinces, departments and comparable second-tier sub-national governments – considering the often particular relationship these have with both the national government and the local authorities in terms of competences, administrative boundaries and tasks, and political legitimacy altogether. In many diverse contexts, the SDGs and the global monitoring process on their localization have empowered some of the regional governments involved, to the extent that they have been able to systematize a sustainable development strategy, overtly align it with the SDGs and their Targets, and mobilize an inclusive process of co-ownership with their territory and communities.

#2 INSIGHT BOX

A VOICE FOR THE 'PERIPHERY': THE VLR OF THE STATE OF OAXACA (MEXICO)³⁶

The Mexican state of Oaxaca is one of the least prosperous communities in the Central American country. According to data collected by the state, 26.9% of Oaxaca's population in 2016 was below the threshold of *extreme* poverty. At least 65 municipalities in the state's jurisdiction lagged severely behind in social and educational metrics. In 2019, 56% of the working population was employed in the informal sector, basic agriculture or housekeeping/caregiving. Against this backdrop, the SDGs turned into an opportunity for the systemic emancipation of the state's population and workforce, and Oaxaca made a significant institutional statement in this regard.

The state administration established in 2018 a 'Council for the Achievement of the 2030 Agenda in Oaxaca'. The body is meant to work with a direct connection to the presidency of the state and, at the same time, transversally with several other stakeholders at all stages of the reporting process. The Governor's office maintains the Council's presidency, but key roles involve departments such as the directorates for Planning for Development and Wellbeing (formerly, Social and Human Development). The Council includes most of the state government's directorates and offices (21 members in total) and has at least two ground-breaking features, in that it hosts the state's delegation of the Mexican central statistical office as a permanent invitee to the works of the Council, and that both federal and municipal representatives, alongside members of academia, civil society, private and public sectors and international organizations, are routinely invited to take part in the Council's meetings. The members are able to take initiative on sustainable development projects with a transversal approach: the Children's Agenda 2030 ('Agenda 2030 Infantil') project, for instance, will be launched in Summer 2020.

Since its establishment, the Council has formed three selected workgroups, each devoted to one of the sustainable development's core dimensions: social inclusion, economic growth, and environmental sustainability. These formally include local stakeholders from civil society and academia. Ultimately, the Council – which has been keen to engage new partners, and the private sector in particular – has included 23 non-governmental institutions. The first systemic alignment of the state's strategic plans with the SDGs led to definition of a 'Guide' for the state's municipalities to follow suit and align locally too, as well as the reform of the State Planning Law and the engagement of Municipal Social Development Councils as the locally-based hubs for institutional dialogue and cross-level interaction on the localization of the Goals.

³⁴City of Los Angeles, "Los Angeles Sustainable Development Goals. A Voluntary Local Review of Progress in 2019" (Los Angeles, 2019).

³⁵The resource – which is testimony to the commitment to transparency and accountability by the municipal institutions involved in the monitoring process – can be accessed at this link: <https://sdgdata.lamayor.org/>.
Gobierno de Oaxaca, "Revisión Estatal Voluntaria" (Oaxaca de Juárez, 2019).

Alongside few other examples, all of these are important case studies in the context of local monitoring efforts, as they raise the legitimate question of what localization means (or should mean) from the point of view of local and regional governments. How truly 'local' is this kind of local review? Should fully local and shared ownership of the policies and the localization process be a criterion? Is engaging as many local stakeholders as possible necessary? Is sourcing the data locally enough? Ultimately

— as it is the case with Los Angeles, a city embedded in a metro area, a county, and a federated state, with several competing legitimacies, competencies and political mandates — context is essential to answer such questions. Authorship and political responsibility are at the heart of VLRs. True localization has to stem from the fully-fledged involvement of diverse local components: people, territory, politics and representation.

LESSONS LEARNED

- So far, the input of **city hall departments and specialized offices** has been the main engine in the creation of VLRs
- At the same time, there are several **examples of bottom-up entrepreneurship for reporting locally**: citizens' associations, civil society initiatives, fora of local stakeholders
- Academia can play an essential role: they can organize and source information; **catalyse and improve mobilization and participation**: and bridge horizontally to larger communities of like-minded institutions

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- What department or institutional body in your organization would be best prepared to **access data, compile information and engage local stakeholders**?
- What **institutional spaces and 'enabling environments'** are there available to foster dialogue, information exchange and engage with local actors?
- What kind of **locally-sourced data** can each actor bring to the table? What tools (surveys, workshops, workgroups, seminars, etc.) can be used to involve them formally in the reporting process?

03.2. Where is the VLR located in the local, national and global design?

This issue relates to larger questions of intergovernmental coordination (as well as multi-level governance and institutional organization) and affects the distribution of resources, tasks and competences across sub-national governments of all tiers. Certain VLRs were in fact born into a process of interinstitutional dialogue and cooperation: the Kenyan counties of Busia,³⁷ Kwale,³⁸ Marsabit³⁹ and Taita Taveta⁴⁰ produced their local reports under the aegis of the Council of Governors (COG) – the authority gathering all county governors – and in the framework of a larger process which seeks the contributions of all county governments to the general reporting effort put in place by Kenya’s national government, through the SDGs Liaison Office in the Secretariat of the COG.

However, besides these few examples, most VLRs do not establish a direct connection with local or national strategies and approaches to the SDGs – and the existence of such links is certainly not a precondition for initiating a VLR process. The city of Helsinki, for example, developed its VLR as a purely local and municipal effort. They build on the trailblazing example of New York’s review and engage several city-hall offices in the process of producing the document. The VLR also locates itself in the global framework of implementation and monitoring, since it addresses the five SDGs that were specifically examined in that year’s HLPF (the review was published in 2019). Even so, there is no link with the initiatives of the Finnish national government – which submitted their review to the very first HLPF in 2016 and are now slated to present in

2020 too – although the overall national attitude towards sustainable development, the global agendas and multilateralism in general is credited as an essential “enabling environment” for a city like Helsinki to be able to become the first European capital to elaborate a VLR.

Ultimately, however, **perhaps the largest impact that VLRs can have is at the local level**, often within the functioning of a local administration itself. Since their inception, the SDGs have been heralded as an effective framework to promote “synergies among sectoral policies to overcome silos and fragmentation, because of their interconnected and indivisible nature”.⁴¹ The SDGs were designed as a self-nurturing policy method, since the 2030 Agenda and its holistic structure may only be really fulfilled if they are realized as a whole. Many of the VLRs published so far are a testament to this ‘de-siloing’ nature of the SDG framework. Not only did the implementation of the SDGs at the local level engage departments or offices that would have otherwise remained at the fringes of the localization process, unaffected by the all-encompassing design of the Goals; but it also ‘forced’ local administrations to overcome internal barriers and compartmentalized operations and opt for more transversal cross-sector initiatives, institutional creation and decision-making.

Barcelona’s strategic planning to take on “the challenge of sustaining in the long-term decent living for all the citizens”⁴² acknowledges explicitly the need for an “organic arrangement” of city hall institutions



³⁷ Busia County Government, “Busia County Voluntary Reporting on SDGs” (Busia, 2019).

³⁸ Kwale County Government, “Kwale County Voluntary Reporting on SDGs. Continuing Kwale’s Transformation Together” (Kwale, 2019).

³⁹ County Government of Marsabit, “Marsabit County SDGs Voluntary County Reporting” (Marsabit, 2019).

⁴⁰ County Government of Taita Taveta, “County Sustainable Development Goals Implementation Voluntary Report 2019” (Mwatate, 2019).

⁴¹ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, “A Territorial Approach to the Sustainable Development Goals” (Paris, 2019), 9.

⁴² Barcelona City Hall, “Informe Sobre Localització Dels ODS 2030 a Barcelona,” 6.

when approaching the SDGs. The aim of the administration is, on the one hand, to set up an effective office for the 2030 Agenda as well as, on the other hand, to establish “a transversal committee able to represent the diverse sectors in which City Hall operates” in order to not only implement but also “measure” the achievement of the SDGs throughout territory and community.⁴³ In Bristol, an informal coalition of citizens, stakeholders and institutions, organized in the Bristol SDG Alliance, managed to obtain funding and support from local academic institutions and successfully lobby the localization of the SDGs into the mainstay of municipal sustainable development in the form of its ‘One City Plan’. The platform explicitly called for city hall to include the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda in all facets of public administration and policy planning.

Although it has not formally authored a VLR, the city of Córdoba (a provincial capital and a metro area of 1.5 million inhabitants in Argentina), took part alongside eight more local governments in a project led by the OECD, *A territorial approach to SDGs*, designed to assist local and regional governments to “prioritize, sequence, plan and budget” consistently with the objectives and requirements of the SDGs. In the framework of the OECD project, Córdoba began a process of institutional creation which led to the establishment of an Inter-Ministerial Roundtable, with members from all the ranks of local governments – ministries, secretariats and agencies –

actively engaged in “priorisation and alignment” of each work line’s priorities with the SDGs.⁴⁴

In Los Angeles, de-siloing had to do primarily with the organization of the multi-level governance system in the city region: city hall was faced with the issue of overlapping or even contrasting jurisdictions and competences with the government of the county, and had to answer methodological questions about monitoring the compliance of other institutions, or demanding another level of government with consistency with its own planning and data-collection methods. The solution lay with sharing the table with as many stakeholders as possible, including civil society, other local governments, academia and the private sector, thus “validating” the massive work of indicator adaptation that the VLR performed with “equity-minded organizations exploring their alignment to this agenda”. Accordingly, city hall acknowledged that “[r]eporting on our progress is... a platform for outreach to others working on a particular Goal or target”.⁴⁵ Similarly, the Mexican state of Oaxaca created cross-field, multi-stakeholder Work Committees on three main SDG categories (social inclusion, economic growth and environmental sustainability) in which NGOs and civil society organizations were charged with coordinating the committees and work with specific offices of the state administration (see Insight Box 2 above).

⁴³Barcelona City Hall, 5.

⁴⁴Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, “A Territorial Approach to the Sustainable Development Goals,” 135.

⁴⁵City of Los Angeles, “Los Angeles Sustainable Development Goals,” 6.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Vertically, most VLRs **do not link directly** with national strategies, but some do and are a substantial **part of the national monitoring process**
- Horizontally, many VLRs have a great impact on **'de-siloing' local administration** and policy-making: the reporting process makes de-cluttering, re-organization and **strategizing around the SDGs easier**
- VLRs can work as a lever to improve **local governments' global relations**: joining the Community of Practice, being proactive within global organizations, reaching **a critical mass of engaged local authorities** and taking part in the global conversation on localization, as parts of a true strategy of internationalization

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Has the local government been involved in the **national reporting strategy**? Has an existing national effort **helped or hindered** local reporting?
- Has your administration **re-planned or re-organized internally due to the reporting process** or the SDGs in general? What kind of coordination mechanisms have been put in place?
- Are you part of a **global network of local and regional governments**? Have you been provided with technical assistance or **political opportunities** to take part in the monitoring process?

Finally, it is worth noting that several VLRs celebrate the ability of a local government to engage fruitfully the global framework of the SDGs and sustainable development. Mexico City, for instance, mentions its participation in UCLG, ICLEI and the Global Taskforce as a driver of change and a catalyst of increased awareness, participation and co-leadership.⁴⁶ While this may be an obvious strategic path for large metropolises endowed with significant resources, this is an opportunity

that should not be lost for the other members of the local and regional governments' community. One of the main goals of UCLG's Community of Practice, supported by UN-Habitat, is to facilitate this kind of participation and commitment, while also providing as many instruments as possible for member cities and local governments to make the most of the opportunity with which the VLR provides them.

⁴⁶Municipality of Mexico City, "Informe de La Agenda 2030 Para El Desarrollo Sostenible En La Ciudad de México" (Mexico City, 2017).

03.3. What is the content of the VLR? Structure, key points and output

This is one of the most sensitive questions when approaching a VLR, and it has been so also for the members of the Community of Practice, who are looking to take part in the process (and movement) of monitoring SDG implementation at the local level and report on its performance and achievements. This document, however, contributes to a series of guiding efforts that the international community has made so that the willingness, drive and shared spirit of co-ownership of the local governments' constituency is not lost or mishandled. For this reason, and as mentioned above, several more blueprints, recommendations, content guides, reviews and handbooks have been produced and circulated over the past few months, with the aim of providing local governments with the necessary voice, tools and visibility. This report, as part of UCLG and UN-Habitat's *VLR Series*, will be followed by more practical guidelines focused on the principles underpinning the VLRs and setting out steps and approaches that LRGs can take to fully engage with the reviewing process.

One of the results of this premise is that the current spectrum of templates and structures of VLRs is quite diverse. Not only is a definitive template yet to be designed, let alone adopted, but **several methods are in fact coexisting**, each one offering potential new contributors a specific approach which may well respond to their needs or fit the information and data they have available.

Various VLRs refer to two of the foundational documents of the monitoring and reporting strategy at the UN level: the original recommendations for the production of Voluntary National Reviews issued by the UN

Secretary General's Office in 2016 and updated in 2018; and the yearly VNR Handbook, edited and published by UNDESA. When produced within this framework, the VLR is generally closer to the template that has also been adopted (even then, with a certain degree of variability) by national governments to submit their own reviews. This is an approach to the VLR that several institutions, including UCLG, have often recommended as a more comfortable starting point for local and regional governments willing to engage in reporting processes: the understanding is that a voluntary *local* review which is technically similar in structure and contents to the *national* review allows for an easier comparison of contexts, enabling environments and institutional change and, ultimately, makes it easier to assess the unique contribution and potential of localization.

The VLR of Buenos Aires is almost by-the-book:⁴⁷ it follows **the main criteria of the UNSG's template** while at the same time localizing the information they can extract from both the policies that have been implemented and the indicators they have used. The analysis of the SDGs focuses on the 2019 HLPF cycle but adds SDG 5 on gender equality as a transversal assessment for local adaptation to the Goals. It is supported by local data whenever available, adapted to the key indicators of the official Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDGs' (IAEG-SDGs) indicator system. The VLR of



⁴⁷City of Buenos Aires, "Voluntary Local Review. Building a Sustainable and Inclusive Buenos Aires," ed. David Groisman et al. (Buenos Aires, 2019).

Bristol, for instance, explicitly adopted **the UNDESA guidelines**. This translated into two main features: a thorough analysis of the 'enabling environment' that elicited the VLR and provided adequate tools, awareness and opportunities to produce the review; and a detailed study of available indicators, exploring consistency and differences between the data required by the IAEG-SDGs system and its 232 'official' indicators and the information collected locally and available to city government. On the other hand, the pioneers of the VLR movement, the three Japanese cities of Toyama, Shimokawa and Kitakyushu, supported by the research team of the Institute of Global Environmental Strategies (IGES), adopted since the beginning the format **recommended by the UN Secretary General's Office**. In 2019, IGES assisted the municipality of Hamamatsu too, but its effort to standardize local reporting has not been limited to Japan: the institution is currently managing a VLR Lab which collects, supports and analyses the VLRs of various cities around the world (see Insight Box 3 below for more details).

At the other end of the continuum, various VLRs **do not follow a specific blueprint** or model. So far, spontaneous reporting has been typical of less institutionalized processes: the four Kenyan counties (mid-tier subnational governments) produced a simple list of key localization highlights, a description of methodology and outcomes – including means of implementation and lessons learned – accompanied by a set of locally-sourced data for tailored indicators providing insight on the reality of territory and communities in which monitoring was carried out. Canterbury's (United Kingdom) VLR, the outcome of a bottom-up push by mobilized citizens and grassroots organizations, follows a looser reporting scheme too, with a strong qualitative effort which cherry-picks the most relevant SDGs for the community. Not following a specific

template or stemming from a less formalized process (or a less-enabling environment) does not devalue the effort that the stakeholders have put in initiating and supporting the monitoring and reporting processes in their territories, and should not deter any local governments which find themselves in a comparable situation.

Finally, there are several cases of reporting documents that, while considered 'local reviews' as much as those overtly branded as such, **follow different kinds of template** or blueprint, e.g., national reporting mechanisms or national action plans and strategic documents to which the review is either linked or a substantial contribution. The review of the state of São Paulo, in Brazil, is a valuable example: the document analyses in depth the implementation of the SDGs in the federated state, and acknowledges the value of bottom-up monitoring, all the while assessing the alignment of SDGs and the policies implementing them with the state's 'pluriannual plan' for sustainable development.⁴⁹ The line dividing these strategically-mixed reviews from other documents in the larger realm of sustainable development policy is very fine: it should be drawn according to the information and insight that they provide on the localization of the SDGs, the institutional mechanisms that allow it, and the outcomes for the community involved. It is according to these criteria that strategic documents such as Sydney's – however rich in information they may be – hardly qualify as voluntary local reviews, considering that the socio-political drivers of the process, the involvement of community and the grassroots, or the methods and data used only marginally help understand the impact that the local level has on the implementation of the global agendas.⁵⁰

⁴⁹Governo do Estado de São Paulo, SEADE, and FAPESP, "ODS SP No PPA 2016-2019. 1° Relatório de Acompanhamento Dos Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável Do Estado de São Paulo" (São Paulo, 2019).

⁵⁰The city government of Sydney, for example, publishes a biannual report on green and environmental achievements in city policy and has adopted a city-wide 2030 strategy. No document in these series even mentions the Sustainable Development Goals.

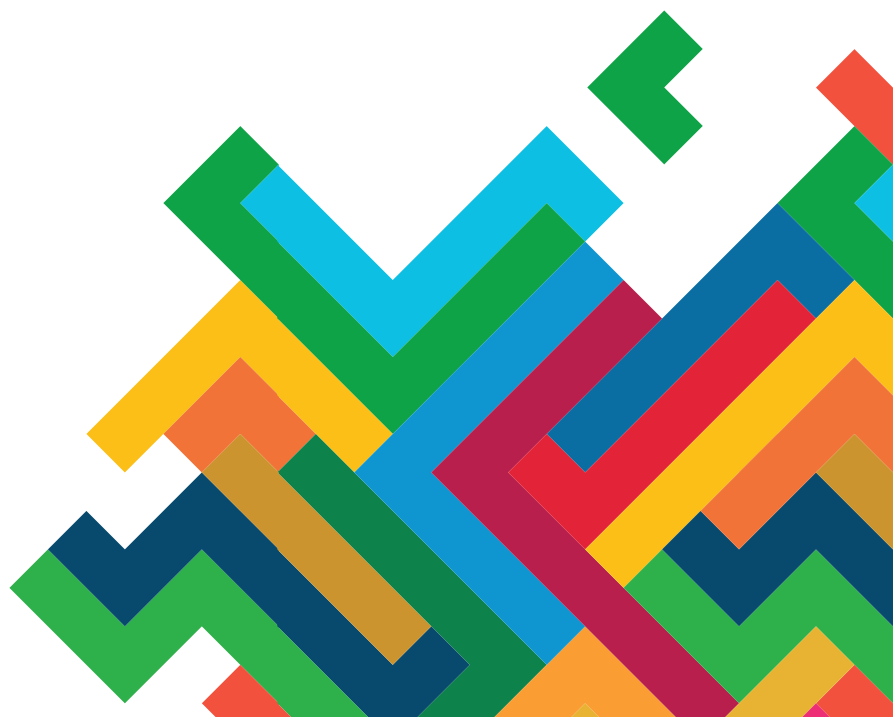
THE PATHBREAKING STUDY THAT STARTED IT ALL: THE IGES REVIEWS

In 2018, the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES) engaged three Japanese cities in an experimental attempt to report (from the bottom-up) on the local implementation of the SDGs. This initiative was the combination of a specific political strategy to increase awareness and participation, combined with a strongly embedded positive attitude towards sustainable development and environmental restoration and preservation by the local governments involved in the project.

In terms of replicability of the VLR experiment, the project tried to cover as diverse an urban environment as possible in the Japanese context, in order to show that all municipalities were in fact constantly contributing to the achievement of the SDGs and the global agendas regardless of criteria of size, territorial linkage or resources available. For this reason, IGES assisted the cities of Kitakyushu, in the South-Western district of Fukuoka, a harbour city of over 940,000 inhabitants with a complex history of maritime success and restructuring after decades of virulent impact of pollution and industry-oriented planning; Toyama, a 400,000-inhabitant intermediary city on the Sea of Japan, a port hub for a number of industries and manufacturers, and a recognized environmental model city by the Japanese government; and Shimokawa, a small village of about 4,000 residents in the interior of the Hokkaido island, Japan's northernmost. Building on this pioneering experience, in 2019 IGES also assisted the city of Hamamatsu (800,000 inhabitants), a Japanese member of UCLG, to produce its VLR.

The IGES reviews have a specific approach to indicators, and the way the reviews adapt them to the local context: while the review tries to provide measurements for as many UN indicators as possible, they contextualize them in the specific scenario of each town, thus justifying why reporting on their achievement is meaningful for the policies that are implemented locally.

In terms of the structure of available VLRs, it should always be considered that there is a significant diversity as for the **resources – human, technical, and financial – that local governments had available** for the production of their VLRs. This translates into a very diverse pattern of materials, information and data that is poured into the reviews. In terms of **length and density**, the current available VLRs are as diverse as including 15-page-long documents alongside VLRs of almost 200 pages. As mentioned also above, the less institutionalized or formal the context in which the VLR is developed, generally the shorter the review.

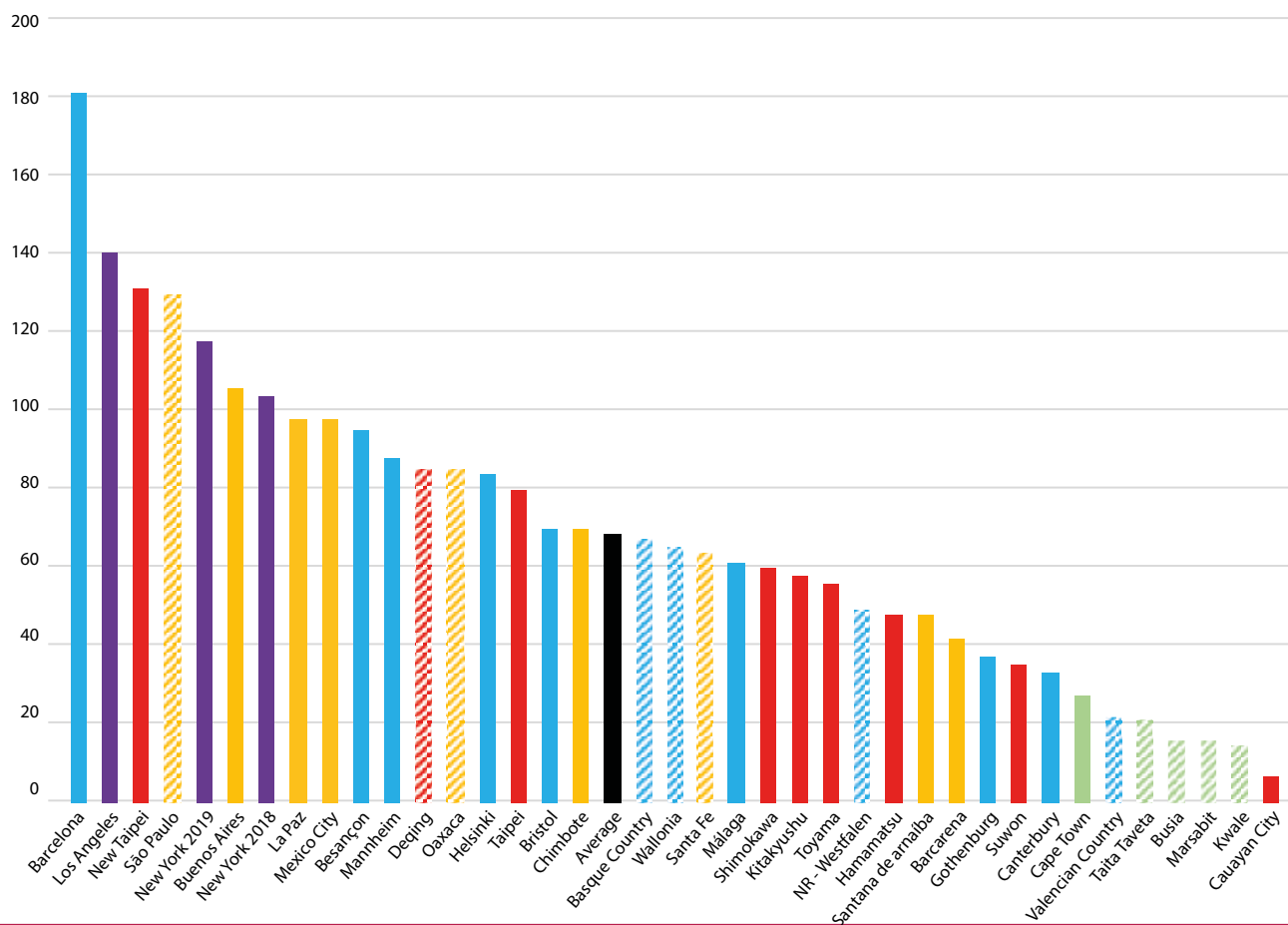


THE TORTOISE AND THE HARE: NO VLR IS TOO SHORT

Even devoid of any judgement, it is inevitable for cities interested in the process of locally monitoring the implementation of the Goals to wonder about any requirements or minimum standards for the review they may be able to prepare. As mentioned often in the previous sections, there are really no minimum requirements and the VLRs available so far span a very large spectrum in terms of structure, contents and the technical features of the documents that local governments have prepared.

In Figure 3, colours identify different world regions, whereas striped bars identify second-tier sub-national governments such as regions, provinces or departments. Even when reading the data according to these criteria, there really are no trends singling out any common methods or approaches to VLRs. Some regions (e.g., São Paulo) have produced lengthy texts, others have issued VLRs with simple strategic planning and a typology of implemented policies (e.g., the Kenyan counties). Some European local governments have compiled complex texts that merge strategic visions, indicators and data analysis, and policy recommendations; others have managed to address monitoring on all SDGs in much fewer pages by resorting to local policy actions first. North American cities that follow more closely the UNSG template sit all at almost the same number of pages. Predictably, the same happens with the four Japanese city that adopt the IGES design in their documents. Diversity so far has been the actual common feature throughout all the VLRs, and should be regarded as an element of inclusion rather than a screening criterion.

Figure 3. Length of available VLRs in number of pages.



The monitoring model and approach followed by the document also affect this feature. Several cities and regions have addressed all 17 SDGs, sometimes with time-series analysis using data from various years prior. Bristol has a two-pager on each SDG, providing locally-sourced data for relevant indicators and an overview of core policies and initiatives. Barcarena explores all SDGs even though the analysis is limited to selected Targets and often accompanied by recommendations and strategic plans for future action.⁵¹ New Taipei's approach has been more complex. The review provides data-backed information through selected indicators on all the SDGs, but it does so through a discourse that aligns certain SDGs with specific strategic priorities of the city. The review also provides case-studies and good-practice analysis on each of the SDGs, even though SDG 11 is granted a certain degree of centrality as a transversal, uniquely urban Goal.⁵² With a similar commitment but perhaps without the technical resources necessary to provide a fully data-based approach, the municipality of Santana de Parnaíba, a municipality embedded in the metropolitan area of São Paulo (Brazil), tried to address all the SDGs with at least a collection of case studies, local policies and initiatives, and activities put in place by local stakeholders for all 17 Goals. The VLR, which is the outcome of research and alignment work by officials from a number of city-hall departments and teams, manages to collect 68 different initiatives implemented at the local level and with the help of grassroots organization and civil society – a testament to the commitment of a relatively small municipality of 125,000 inhabitants.⁵³

Other cities have limited the analysis of the SDGs and their implementation to those that were under examination at that year's HLPF. Los Angeles' VLR focused only on the SDGs (4, 8, 10, 13, and 16) under examination in the 2019 Forum, even though the review also

pays specific attention to what city hall defines as the “two priority goals for Los Angeles”, i.e. Goals 5 and 11.⁵⁴ Helsinki too studies the 2019 Goals in detail, turning each of them into dedicated files on their theme at large: quality education, decent work, inequality, climate change and just institutions become an excellent pretext to showcase a number of city policies that have strengthened the city's resilience and response to these challenges – backed by a remarkable amount of data and statistical information on the localization of the five Goals.⁵⁵

Finally, other cities have simply chosen to address those SDGs for which they had the most recent or adequate data available (e.g., the Argentinian province of Santa Fe, whose VLR focuses overtly on SDGs 3 and 4 on health, well-being and quality education),⁵⁶ or to approach several SDGs via the concepts or policy categories of their own local planning and strategy tools. Mannheim, for instance, regroups the SDGs alongside its own seven Strategic Goals – and it is not surprising that SDG 11 is considered crucial for the realization of all their policy lines: access to quality education and work; quality of urban life; supportive and equitable community building; transparent administration; digitalized and innovative growth; climate-friendly policies; and cooperative external relations.⁵⁷

The take-aways from this information should not be that a ‘proper’ VLR has to have a minimum extension – since criteria such as these would likely discriminate against those stakeholders with limited resources or mandate at hand. Conversely, the idea that documents of all sorts, of all type of length and density are contributing to this global conversation should be a galvanizer for other local and regional governments willing to contribute.

⁵¹Prefeitura de Barcarena, “Localização Da Agenda 2030,” ed. Patricia M. Menezes (Barcarena, Pará, 2017).

⁵²New Taipei City Government, “New Taipei. A Livable and Thriving City” (New Taipei, 2019).

⁵³Grupo de Trabalho de ODS da Prefeitura de Santana de Parnaíba, “Santana de Parnaíba Conectada Ao Futuro. Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável,” ed. Cintia Marcucci and Juliana Marques (Santana de Parnaíba, 2018).

⁵⁴City of Los Angeles, “Los Angeles Sustainable Development Goals,” 13.

⁵⁵City of Helsinki, “From Agenda to Action. The Implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals in Helsinki 2019” (Helsinki, 2019).

⁵⁶Miguel Lifschitz, “Contribución de Santa Fe a La Agenda 2030 Para El Desarrollo Sostenible” (Santa Fe, Argentina, 2019).

⁵⁷City of Mannheim, “The Implementation of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals in Mannheim 2030,” ed. Christian W. Hübel et al. (Mannheim, 2019), 20–21.

LESSONS LEARNED

- It cannot be stressed enough: **there is no official template and no VLR design, idea or concept should be discarded.** Participation with any means is essential
- **Diversity is key:** the community of local and regional governments is approaching VLRs with the resources they have available, and this translates into **long and short reviews, more or fewer SDGs analysed, a focus on policy** or a focus on **strategy**
- There are **many kinds of leadership:** **academic institutions** can help systematize or standardize information; **proactive city hall departments** can coordinate with other offices and local stakeholders; **global LRG networks** can offer guidance and coordinate among various partners

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Do you think one of the **most common templates** (e.g., UNDESA, UNSG) fits well with the information you have available?
- Would you **emphasize one or more SDGs** as key and focus the analysis on them? Do you think **SDG 11** provides enough insight on how localization is impacting your community?
- Would you use the platform offered by the **Community of Practice to co-create a template** for more cities to join and engage?

#5 INSIGHT BOX

MOSCOW LOCAL VOLUNTARY REVIEW

During the 2019 edition of the Moscow Urban Forum, Mr Sergey Sobyanin, Mayor of Moscow, appointed UN-Habitat to collaborate in the preparation of the first SDG Voluntary Local Review for Moscow. This collaborative research is within the partnership framework of a Memorandum of Understanding between UN-Habitat and Moscow Urban Forum (MUF), signed in July 2018.

The preparation of this VLR entails a relevant challenge due to the importance, complexity and scale of the city: Moscow is one of the largest cities in the world as well as the significant political, economic, cultural, and scientific centre of Russia. Moscow is a macrocosm itself: the administrative boundaries of the city include not only consolidated urban areas but also rural territories and natural conservancy areas. The city has been under significant transformation during the last decade. There

are relevant improvements, but also new challenges to meet the 2030 Agenda.

The process to elaborate this VLR takes lessons learned from previous projects of UN-Habitat in the Russian Federation, particularly in the realm of urban monitoring and data. It will enable the government of the city to demonstrate how locally-based policies and approaches towards a sustainable, resilient, safe and resilient city can be realized, in combination with national government policies to support the achievement of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

The elaboration of the Moscow Voluntary Local Review will take place in the second part of 2020 and will be presented at the Moscow Urban Forum in July 2021.

03.4. How is the VLR made? Local data, indicators and knowledge management

Since its adoption in 2015, the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs came with a formal mechanism of quantitative monitoring that built on a complex system of indicators, developed by the IAEG-SDGs. The system includes 232 statistical indicators. The Expert Group took on the challenge of providing each one of them with adequate methodological rigour and detail to be universally available – a must-do for an agenda which is naturally transversal and all-encompassing. Surely, many of the indicators include standard socio-economic measurements that are generally available to *national* statistical offices. By December 2019, however, almost half of all indicators were still methodologically incomplete or unavailable.⁵⁸

Since the earliest moment, however, the system has posed several challenges in terms of data accessibility for other tiers of governance and subnational authorities in particular. Disaggregation of most indicators (i.e., the possibility to reliably collect data already classified according to specific typologies, such as gender, age or ethnic group, rural or urban, etc.) at the local level is either incomplete or unavailable in many local contexts across most regions of the world. Many local and regional governments have signalled since the beginning of the monitoring process that they have neither enough resources nor powers to access the information and/or detail required by many of the indicators. As for local governments specifically, contributing to monitoring is made even more complicated by the fact that, nearly five years after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, two indicators out of 15 for SDG 11 on sustainable cities and communities still have no established methodology or standards, and only two are already available as Tier I indicators.

This mismatch – the fact that some 65% of the actual Goals and targets cannot possibly be achieved without the contribution of local and regional governments, and that the very system created to monitor this achievement cannot be fully accessed and adopted by local governments because it lacks actual data, disaggregation and technical know-how – has been at the core of the debate on indicators and the implementation of the Agenda since its inception, and it substantially affects localization too.

On the one hand, many international institutions and stakeholders have approached the issue of SDG indicators, either by designing their own indicator sets or by adjusting the UN toolkit in order to make them (and the monitoring task as such) accessible to as many subnational governments as possible. Within the very UN system, several options have been available since the early stages of the process. As mentioned above, SDG 11 is key to the realization of several policy directives. It is with this idea in mind that UN-Habitat developed a series of guidance tools on SDG 11 Targets and Indicators.⁵⁹ UN-Habitat's instrument for urban monitoring – the City Prosperity Index (CPI) – also includes several SDG indicators, assisting cities to align their policy-making processes with the fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda. The CPI has so far been tested on about 400 cities worldwide and builds on a 72-indicator dashboard, calibrated so as to allow for cross-city comparability.

⁵⁸IAEG-SDGs distinguishes between Tier I indicators (116 out of 228 unique indicators, 50.9%), which are methodologically mature and reliable, and use data which is generally available in all national contexts with adequate periodicity and frequency; Tier II indicators (92/228, 40.3%), which have universally accepted standards and methods, but whose data is not regularly produced by most countries; and Tier III indicators (20/228, 8.8%), whose methodology is being developed and tested but have no acknowledged international standard.

⁵⁹The resources are available online at this link: <https://unhabitat.org/tools-and-guides>.

THE SDGS AND THE NEW URBAN AGENDA

The New Urban Agenda (NUA), adopted a year after the 2030 Agenda, is an action-oriented document that mobilizes Member States and other key stakeholders to drive sustainable urban development at the local level. The Secretary General of United Nations considered that the New Urban Agenda is the entry point of the SDGs (2018), and the implementation of the NUA contributes to the localization of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development for urban contexts in an integrated manner. It also contributes to the achievement of the SDGs and targets, including SDG 11 of making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

Understanding the range of interdependencies among the global agendas is key to unlocking their full potential, optimizing resources and leveraging capacities at every level of government. A close understanding of these interlinkages promotes balanced decision-making and adopts long-lasting solutions. Working in an interdependent manner reinforces synergies and multiple efforts steered in the same direction.

The NUA is an important component of a VLR analysis, providing a framework of intervention and a roadmap for building cities that can serve as engines of prosperity and centres of cultural and social well-being while protecting the environment. The interlinkages between the NUA and the SDGs, especially SDG 11, are extensive. More than half of the SDG targets have an urban component, linked to about 62 per cent of all the SDGs indicators. The NUA provides implementation mechanisms to accelerate action in these goals, ensuring that the fundamental principles of sustainability are realized (environment, social and economic). This includes, for example, the provision of basic services; making sure that all citizens have access to equal opportunities and face no discrimination; tackling air pollution in cities; promoting safe, accessible and green public spaces and sustainable urban design to ensure the liveability and prosperity of a city; supported by specific measures of urban planning, regulatory frameworks, financial conditions, quality infrastructure and adequate local responses.

There is for example strong evidence that NUA action areas on integrated urban planning, access to basic services, and decent and affordable housing, reducing non-communicable diseases and limiting environmental impacts, can directly accelerate achievements on SDG 3 on health and well-being, SDG 7 on energy and SDG 13 on climate. The NUA also has a strong gender equality component, connecting it with SDG 5.

Policies and strategies that respond to these possible interactions together can transform potential synergies into holistic action with greater impacts.

Table 3. Currently available VLRs and their use of indicators, data and civil society involvement in information management

Local Government	Use of indicators	Local data	Civil Society
Barcarena	There is no reference to the official indicator system, but occasionally local data is used to support evidence of policy localization	While more limited in scope than the targets it uses to report, most data refer to municipality's policies, studies, information and results	The reporting process as such is highly centralized in the offices of City Hall, but process localization was a process thoroughly supported by various and diverse stakeholders across the municipality's civil society
Barcelona	The strategy acknowledges the IEAG-SDGs indicators but also the difficulties for LRGs to collect certain kind of required data in a local context. The city is developing several metrics, at different local scale and from diverse sources, to assess as thoroughly as possible the impact of the 2030 Agenda. Moreover, the city had already developed since 2012 a set of 28 indicators of urban sustainability which it has been monitoring since. These indicators are adapted as a preliminary measurement for SDG compliance, as the city proceeds to localize even more indicators	At this stage, indicators are defined in an open and modifiable list which includes input and recommendations from a set of partners and other local institutions from the metropolitan area and beyond. All current indicators are based on the availability of data within the reach and the analytical capacity of city offices. Localized indicators are considering local availability, gender requirements, and an inter-municipal, multi-level and metro-based approach to monitoring	Both strategic planning for the localization and implementation of the SDGs and the policy examples of municipal legacy in terms of sustainable urban development are hugely indebted to the work of civil society, grassroots organizations, civic associations and neighbourhood-level advocacy and community building. The engagement of as many local stakeholders as possible is a staple of Barcelona's approach to sustainable development and the 2030 Agenda in particular. There is no clear methodological indication that civil society was involved in the actual production of the strategic report
Basque Country	The strategy is forward-looking more than it is evaluating implemented policies. The document adapts the 17 SDGs for them to be linked to 15 prior regional objectives, and further dissects them into 100 targets. Each of the adapted 17 objectives is measured via several indicators (50 total), designed after the examples of the IAEG-SDGs, Eurostat and other sources	Indicators are adapted to the sources currently available to the government	There is no mention of civil society inclusion, either in the process leading to the monitoring effort (several institutions within the regional governments are mentioned in this regard, as well as the regional association of municipalities) or in the policies that are included as part of the implementation plan
Besançon	The report identifies 42 local goals that are connected to targets of the UN system. Each of these local goals is accompanied by a few locally-sourced indicators as evidence of progress	All analysis is based on local data and is accompanied by policy examples of localization	No mention of civil society actors (or any other stakeholders) in the introduction as part of the monitoring process. Various examples of collaboration with diverse local stakeholders in the actual implementation phase
Bristol	Attempts direct link to SDG Targets. Systematic work to fetch local data providers (across institutions and civil society) to fulfil the official indicator	Dedicated annex to local indicators, adapted to the SDG framework and listed by SDG compatibility, with data available for extended time-series (2010-2018) and sourced in detail for reference	Six-week-long public consultation: 88 responses from organizations: 48% from civil society; 42% of all respondents NOT using SDGs as a working framework
Buenos Aires	Cherry-picking of official indicators to use with local data	Institutional: specialized offices within City Hall	Strong reference to local projects, including civil society and grassroots organizations, although always branded as City Hall sponsored or green-lit ventures
Busia	At least 6 sources methodologically identified, including official national statistical office, county assessments, CSOs, community-based data, development partners and local research institutions	Forum track with CSOs and private sector. Interviews and questionnaires with community members	Engaged in data collection and awareness-raising events. Significant mention of the role of international partners and donors

Local Government	Use of indicators	Local data	Civil Society
Canterbury	Cherrypicked SDGs to monitor because of grassroots initiatives and actions explored. More qualitative assessment of policy and initiatives than hard data linked to SDG indicators	Occasional and cherrypicked to accompany the policy	Fully in charge of the reporting process, strong ownership and agency vis-a-vis the local government
Cape Town	Merges 'domesticated' indicators as close as possible to official UN ones with additional indicators, adopted from existing local data already available in the city's work. Main focus is SDG 11	Engagement of relevant departments within City Hall. No mention of locally-sourced or community-based data	Mechanism of cross-city learning events and activities with the inclusion of stakeholders and academic partners, although with no real input in terms of information and monitoring data
Cauayan City	Data on policy implementation provided occasionally, no mention of actual indicators, metrics or evaluation, and no mention of adaptation	Occasional figures provided to accompany facts on implementation policies in certain SDGs	While there are examples of collaboration with different groups of policy recipients, there is no mention of inclusion of civil society in the reporting process as such
Chimbote	Although the analysis is limited to SDG 11, the work on indicators is thorough. All official indicators of SDG 11 are adapted in accordance to available information and are often accompanied by all the statistical work and methodology required for the adaptation	All indicators are assessed through the use of the local data closest to the information required by the official IAEG-SDGs indicators	Vast involvement of local stakeholders throughout the process, from the definition of the methodology through various open sessions and meetings to streamline the contents
Deqing	Extremely effective work on data collection in accordance with the UN baseline indicators for each SDG. Mix of geospatially-derived and statistical	On the one hand, several local institutions have participated in the data collection process. On the other hand, several indicators were addressed via geospatial technology which, in a sense, being a reading of the territory's reality, is the 'most' local data	Academia is a substantial contributor to this study, although it is hardly the driver or catalyst
Gothenburg	(Non exclusive) focus on SDG 11. Indicators are selected locally (50 regional and 50 municipal) also according to local availability rather than consistency with the global framework. Time series and traffic-light assessment	There is no explicit mention of local sources of data. Several indicators adopt locally collected statistical data or measurements	Inclusiveness is explicitly referred to as 'limited', benefitting from different existing channels of participation and engagement is recommended
Hamamatsu	The review analyses all 17 SDGs via selected and adapted local indicators (whenever applicable)	Data for the adapted indicators are locally sourced, and generally accompanied by qualitative analysis of local policy examples and case-studies	Civil society is mentioned as part of the VLR process, being involved via interviews by the IGES authors. In terms of policy implementation, the city is active in engaging several stakeholders (including the private sector, innovation agents and community organizations) in the strategic formulation and awareness-raising phases
Helsinki	In line with NY's example, the review is mostly qualitative and refers only to the Goals analysed in the 2019 reporting cycle	The qualitative assessment is accompanied by locally-sourced data on core dimensions of the topics at large, with no specific reference to either official targets or indicators and based whenever possible on Eurostat's or Finland's national statistical office's own indicators	No clear mention of societal engagement at any stages of the reporting and monitoring process
Kitakyushu	Cherrypicked indicators to match data available at the local level. Whenever possible, measurements are highly consistent with the official UN indicators and SDG Targets. Analysis of Goal performance is accompanied by discourse-based qualitative assessment and showcasing of good practices	No concrete mention of locally-sourced or unique data processed from the bottom-up	Cross-platform collaboration among all societal stakeholders is cited as a key enabling environment and a precondition for co-ownership of the SDG implementation process and outcomes. Public engagement in education and awareness-raising activities

Local Government	Use of indicators	Local data	Civil Society
Kwale	Qualitative assessment accompanied by policy description and highlights. No concrete reference to either systems of measurement as derived from the official IAEG-SDG indicators or similar national/ state-level criteria	The focus of analysis is limited to policy at the county level, with descriptive data available to county offices engaged in the implementation tasks	No real mention of locally-based or driven processes to contribute to the implementation of the SDGs. There is an exploration of the impact on community and territory of the policies that the county has implemented, but there is no mention of bottom-up or participative processes
La Paz	Explicit process stage on the establishment of adequate indicators and criteria. Indicators are localized with available (quantitative) data on the city's reality and in line with the targets. Worth noticing that not all SDGs or Targets are explored	Most data are municipal (including formal statistical sources and surveys) or otherwise integrated with national sector-specific data disaggregated for the city	The city engaged with many local communities with the aim of compiling the necessary information for the review, the assessment of civil society inclusion thus goes beyond reporting on good practices or policy implementation
Los Angeles	Database with evaluation and adaptation of 245 official indicators. 151 (61.6%) deemed available online, 70 (28.6%) still being explored, 24 (9.8%) deemed not applicable. Best adapted: SDG 11 (88.2% available). Worst adapted: SDG 12 (69.2% exploring + 15.4% NA)	All indicators which are deemed adaptable to local sources are quantified via locally-sourced data, all publicly available with metadata and periodic updates on the SDG platform of the mayor's office	Civil society has been vastly involved throughout the process. The analytical phase was shared with university departments specialized in SDG-specific issues. The third phase, identified as localization, mobilized several stakeholders to share the work on adaptation of both goals/targets and indicators to measure and assess progress
Málaga	There is no actual measurement work as the report merely refers to the data and finding adopted in another report (SDSN and REDS on Spain's 100 cities' implementation assessment)	Since the actual analysis corresponds to the work of REDS with the 100 largest Spanish cities and province capitals, there are issue with that report's methodology that should be dealt with, including the fact that REDS only adopted the lowest data available for each indicator considered, so that often data was not available at any level lower than province or even region	Thorough analysis of the involvement of civil society, associations and organizations in the implementation of the SDGs. Disaggregated output between private and public actors, comparison with city hall's results, and an assessment of measures adopted and initiatives taken for each SDG
Mannheim	The report cherrypicks a few targets within each SDG to establish its own seven "Strategic Goals", each of which incorporates various indicators from all the SDGs and an assessment of performance according to short time-series comparisons over the past few years. There is an acknowledgement of the reporting methods and tools of the German national system (the indicator set designed by the Bertelsmann Foundation)	There is no thorough sourcing of the data used, but both the availability of time-series databases and the kind of indicators adopted for each strategic goal seem to show that the data is materially available to the offices of city hall	The whole process is based on the constant engagement and contribution of citizenship and civil society. Residents were given the opportunity to discuss the localization of the global framework in their own community with international partners and representatives; the process constantly updated the community and the stakeholders on the outcomes and next steps. A total 22 civil society organizations were supported in organizing third-party events discussing localization
Marsabit	Occasional cherrypicked indicators to introduce analysis of local policies	Data is generally obtained at the county level, no mention of any local or bottom-up involvement in the preparation of either indicators or data	Multi-stakeholder involvement is mentioned but no outcome or evidence is available
Mexico City	Institutional members of the Technical Committees were in constant contact with all branches of municipal government to localize as many official indicators as possible (69% aligned at the end of the process)	Issues with adapting the 'official' indicators to the local level, and clear reference to the unavailability of relevant data even in national sources	The building block of the VLR is the commencement of a series of grassroots activities across the city, with the My World survey. Civil society and academia are represented in the "Council for the Monitoring of the 2030 Agenda in Mexico City"

Local Government	Use of indicators	Local data	Civil Society
New Taipei	The IAEG-SDGs indicators are acknowledged and considered in the reviewing process, alongside 343 other indicators	The review cherry-picks targets for each SDG (and SDG 11 in particular) for which local data is available to review indicators and performance	There is a call for further collaboration across all stakeholders of civil society in the future, but there is no mention of involvement in the monitoring process as such
New York	There is an acknowledgement of the official IAEG-SDGs system but only occasional alignment is considered, whenever local and global indicators are comparable.	New York has developed since the 1970s its own monitoring system at the municipal level and most data, even to assess UN indicators, is available locally on basically all dimensions covered by the SDGs	New York has developed since the 1970s its own monitoring system at the municipal level and most data, even to assess UN indicators, is available locally on basically all dimensions covered by the SDGs
Nord Rhein Westfalen	Strategic goals are identified in 7 focal areas and 19 fields of action. Indicators to review compliance are drawn from national (2014) and regional frameworks on sustainable development and adapted to include the SDG indicator system as well, although "to a minor extent" (each indicators marks compatibility with specific SDGs whenever available)	Indicators based on available local data is differentiated from those extracted directly from national reviewing frameworks	Comprehensive regional events on sustainable development, engaging over 400 civil society stakeholders in the region. Collaboration with municipality associations to increase awareness-raising activities in the territory and horizontal exchange of knowledge
Oaxaca	The report works more as a declaration of intent and a strategic plan than an actual reporting tool. There is no real indicator defined, and the analysis of the goals is accompanied by a series of desired policy measures	Since there is no actual measurement there is no real need to fetch data, locally or elsewhere	The composition of the Working Committees organized by sector and expected to develop policy for the implementation of the SDGs included 29 civil society organizations, 9 research and education entities, and 5 representatives of the private sector. Bonn, which is a global hub of sustainability-related NGOs, IOs and other relevant stakeholders, is NRW's ninth-largest municipality
Santa Fe	While only a few SDGs are selected as priority ones for the provincial strategy, each of the selected SDGs is analysed through the 'official' indicators, at least those metrics in which data are locally available and sufficiently disaggregated. A few localized indicators are added to the analysis whenever available	The report uses local data whenever available and even provides time-series analysis back to 2015	There is a very strong involvement of civil society organizations and other local stakeholders in the strategic formulation phase and in awareness-raising activities. It is not fully clear whether these actors are engaged in the actual process of creating the report
Santana de Parnaíba	SDGs are divided into priority goals (SDGs 3, 4 and 16) and growth-related goals (1, 11, 15 and 17). The selection is cherry-picked and accompanied by a traffic-light evaluation system with no strong methodological explanation (and a high achievement rate)	Assessment, even if related to localized indicators and processes, is made through locally-sourced data identified as compliant with the metrics of the indicators by the working group in charge of the review	The working group in charge of the review is composed by several members of a number of departments and offices within city hall. Policy examples show the involvement of civil society and local stakeholders in implementation, but there is no mention of such engagement in the report's methodology
São Paulo	The indicators are overtly adapted to the reality of the state and the outcome of a specific selection process which took into consideration availability, periodical measurability, consistency with the context and replicability in other LRGs of the federal country	Indicators are aptly tailored to the local reality and accompany consistently the account of policy implementation and outcomes at the local level, among communities and citizens. However, national ministries and the national statistical office are the main sources of data	There is extensive work with surveys and the engagement of the population in the description of the outcomes of the policies but there is little evidence of their engagement in the process that led to them

Local Government	Use of indicators	Local data	Civil Society
Shimokawa	The strategy approaches local policy decisions and plans through the three main dimensions of the SDGs, and adapts the local agenda to the SDGs by locating its impact within any of the 17 Goals. 6 SDGs are examined through localized indicators	Data is provided for each of the local indicators selected for the review, alongside time-series analysis whenever available	Limited size and traditionally consensual social organization led to a strong involvement of all stakeholders and basically the whole community in the definition of the sustainable development strategy of the town. Feedback was used on the alignment of local policy goals with the SDGs and the mobilization of specific groups (women, youth, etc.)
Suwon	While limited to SDG 11, each target revision is based on the official indicators	Data is adapted to locally-sourced information and figures, and accompanied by policy outcomes and achievements	ICLEI is a co-author and a city-wide research council has been involved. There is no methodological note and it is not possible to retrace the components, authors and contributors of the report. Civil society is not mentioned throughout the report as part of the implementation process except for 11.3.2
Taipei	The report includes an analysis of both the few 'official' indicators that are deemed compatible with local data, and other local indicators developed in other monitoring activities that can help measure the implementation of official targets	All data used is from local sources	Involvement of civil society in the monitoring effort is considered "for the future". Representatives of 'civil organizations' are consulted at different levels of the sustainable development policy hierarchy
Taita Taveta	Systemic use of local indicators with baseline comparison (2017), measurement and performance evaluation accompanied by practical examples and policy applications	Indicators are shaped according to available local data, the SDG is the main framework but there is no link to the official indicator because of the lack of data	Dialogue with all stakeholders is regarded highly as a key recommendation and a lesson learned, although the report provides no further details on methods of engagement
Toyama	Certain indicators are adapted to existing local ones, for which metrics and indicators are already developed. 7 SDGs are assessed in detail.	Local data is provided (for most indicators), although the assessment is eminently qualitative via the presentation of SDG-specific case-studies and policy examples	Traditional reliance on stakeholder involvement in municipal policy making. Working groups with private sector, academia, NGOs on city resilience. Engagement of households, businesses and grassroots organizations on climate change. All activities prior to the SDG framework and not related to the process leading to the VLR
Valencian Country	The report is strategic and process-based, is not a monitoring effort proper. There is an acknowledgement of the official indicator system, but no actual method is implemented or planned as for monitoring localization impact)	There is a mention of Eurostat and other international efforts to gauge implementation but there is no study of local data availability, quality or usage	Strong mention of the engagement of civil society among many other stakeholders (including NGOs, a specific mention of NGOs, and academia), both on the side of preparing the localization strategy and including them as necessary validators of the strategy and actors in the actual implementation
Wallonia	Analysis of each SDG is localized to define the current status of implementation of SDG-related metrics in Walloon. Indicators refer to the analysed SDG but the document does not include or assess the official indicator system	As indicators are largely adapted to local context, most data is available from local sources. Policy analysis and examples are also accompanied by facts and figures related to local implementation	Most policy examples presented in the assessment include a vast number of local stakeholders engaged in many phases of implementation. There is no methodological guidance and no mention of civil society being engaged in the actual reviewing or strategic process.

Among the early movers in this field, the Sustainable Development Solution Network (SDSN) developed, back in 2015, a set of Global Monitoring Indicators, with 100 parameters that adapt the SDGs' by linking several measurements together across various domains.⁶⁰ Since 2016, in collaboration with the Bertelsmann Foundation, it has published a general assessment and tracking of local SDG implementation based on a mixed methodology that links official UN indicators with other subsets – available at the national or local levels – and tailored 'new' indicators⁶¹. Moreover, by applying this methodology, which was audited by the EU's Joint Research Centre,⁶² to different national contexts in close collaboration with local authorities, academic institutions and other local stakeholders, SDSN has also published national reports on local performance of localization in Spain, Italy the United States and Brazil, as well as for Europe, Africa and the Arab countries.⁶³

The European Union has addressed this issue systemically. Eurostat, the European office of statistics, developed a set of 100 indicators that cover all the 17 SDGs. 41 of them are cross-SDGs, in an attempt to stimulate de-siloed thinking and cross-sourced data at the local level. As mentioned above, the European Commission's Joint Research Centre has presented as recently as February 10, 2020, at the WUF10 of Abu Dhabi, its European Handbook for SDG VLRs,⁶⁴ which performs extensive research work on the status of indicators, data and sources for European local governments willing to take part in the monitoring process. *The Handbook's* catalogue defines 71 indicators, 26 of which are labelled as 'experimental' in that they cover fields or domains that are not currently explored by the official indicators. In terms of alignment, the indicators recommended by *the Handbook* coincide with some of those used in different systems: four of them match UN

official indicators; ten are also present in the Eurostat's system; and six more are present in both. The catalogue does a rigorous job of presenting in detail each of the defined indicators, including the original context in which they were designed, the main source of available data, as well as frequency and universality.

International institutions and organizations working with local and regional governments have of course participated in this process and have contributed significantly to reducing the indicator gap and making the monitoring and reporting process more accessible to local authorities. With regard to issues of standardization, the World Council on City Data (WCCD) has developed a certification protocol for an international standard on city data collection and management (ISO 37120). The WCCD provides a certification of a city's ability to collect and organize relevant urban development data on 100 socio-economic indicators (46 are defined as 'core') according to the standard. To date, 119 cities are either certified or processing their application.

UCLG's European section, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR-CCRE), in collaboration with the French Ministry of Housing and Sustainable Homes, has developed since 2016 a monitoring tool to assist cities in the implementation of urban SDGs, the global goals and their initiatives on sustainable urban development, the Reference Framework for Sustainable Cities (RFSC). The RFSC is a tool developed within the framework of the 2007 European Union's Leipzig Charter on European Sustainable Cities, and it is acknowledged as a tool for European cities in the Pact of Amsterdam, which adopted the Urban Agenda for the EU in 2016. The tool identifies 5 key dimensions and 30 objectives/indicators to assess city performance in spatial organization, governance, society, environment and the economy.⁶⁵ The RFSC is

⁶⁰SDSN, "Indicators and a Monitoring Framework for the Sustainable Development Goals" (New York and Paris, 2015).

⁶¹The general report's data is also available in an online dashboard: <https://dashboards.sdgindex.org/>.

⁶²The EU Research Hub is accessible online at this link: <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en>.

⁶³All SDSN reports on the implementation of the SDGs are available online at this link: <https://www.unsdns.org/sdg-index-and-monitoring>.

⁶⁴Siragusa et al., "European Handbook for SDG Voluntary Local Reviews." See footnote 6 above for more information.

⁶⁵The 30 indicators are described in detail at this link: <http://rfsc.eu/european-challenges/>

conceived as a guiding instrument for local authorities willing to learn from peers' experiences and practices, and offers a library of indicators to help cities integrate the SDGs as they develop their own sustainable development strategies. Cities are ranked via a *circle* (or radar/web) *chart* that visually conveys all relevant dimensions in one graph. Brazil's National Confederation of Municipalities (*Confederação Nacional de Municípios*, CNM) has developed its own measurement and reporting tool – a *Mandala* of SDGs at the municipal level – which shows municipal performance on the economic, social, institutional and environmental dimensions, via 28 indicators, through a simplified radar chart. The *Mandala* also links the different dimensions and indicators with relevant SDGs.⁶⁶

Finally, and perhaps most importantly for the members of the Community of Practice, in several of their VLRs, city and regional governments themselves have attempted to bridge this data-availability gap. Most strategies can be grouped in three different approaches: a) VLRs that have **adapted official indicators to the specifics of their local context**, reworking terminology, method and sources to make them accessible; b) reviews that look as systematically as possible for **a correlation between the 'official' indicators and relevant datasets or local indicators**; and c) VLRs that use the SDGs or their themes to present a **qualitative assessment sporadically accompanied by hard data**.

Los Angeles is a fitting example of the first group. The city administration built on the preliminary work of a group of academic researchers and experts to identify which facets and fields of the city's policy portfolio were specifically consistent with the SDG framework. Against this background roundtables with staff of city hall and local stakeholders, including county officials and civil society representatives, were set up to cooperatively adapt the official SDG

indicators to the data and resources available for the VLR project. The methodology of Los Angeles' exercise is particularly attractive in that it *literally* addresses the terminology, vocabulary and concepts of the original set of indicators *translating* them into the daily policy reality of the city's territory and community. The result was also graphically presented in an enthralling way, as the original text of the indicators was redacted or corrected according to the new wording validated by the working groups. By exposing the physical act of changing and adapting the formal words to the city's own, the VLR shows that local governments are empowered to do so, if it is what is letting them contribute knowledge and information to the global effort to monitor implementation. The city of Mannheim reinterpreted as many of the official indicators as possible in seven Strategic Goals.⁶⁷ Mexico City set up dedicated Technical Committees to work indicator alignment, and even the government of a 20-plus-million-inhabitant metropolis was not able to localize more than 69% of the UN toolkit.⁶⁸

VLRs in the B group, on the other hand, are generally reviews that aim to stress the compatibility of existing workplans and strategic frameworks with the requirements and data demanded by the SDGs and localization. The Basque Country does a systematic job of developing what they define as a 'dashboard' of 50 localized indicators, based on the technical adaptation of UN indicators, Eurostat indicators and other available toolkits with the data and information available locally.⁶⁹ It is not necessarily common for a state-level government to define such a comprehensive local development agenda: at least 100 'official' Targets of the 2030 Agenda were translated into a set of 80 planning instruments, thanks to which the Basque regional system has already developed 19 regulatory acts and 93 measurable commitments. The state of São Paulo performs the same process in the attempt to

⁶⁶Building on the Brazilian experience, UCLG Learning has been building a *Mandala* standard to be easily applicable to other municipalities and local governments, in order to establish a repository of city practices and reports on a global scale by means of a 9-step guideline process (more information online at: https://www.learning.uclg.org/sites/default/files/documents/the_mandala_tool.pdf).

⁶⁷City of Mannheim, "The Implementation of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals in Mannheim 2030," 18.

⁶⁸Municipality of Mexico City, "Informe de la Agenda 2030 para el Desarrollo Sostenible en la Ciudad de México" (Mexico City, 2017), 84.

⁶⁹Eusko Jaurlaritza, "Euskal Ekarpene Garapen Jasangarriko 2030 Agendari" (Vitoria-Gasteiz, 2018).

align as many indicators as possible with those developed in the framework of the state's five-year plans. The VLR of the city of La Paz shows an extremely methodical approach to align the requirements of the official SDG indicators to the measurements and categories that the city had developed for its strategic 'La Paz 2040' plan.⁷⁰

Finally, the third group includes VLRs that make the incoherence between the formal system of UN indicators and the resources

available to the local level visible. The cases of the Kenyan counties or the state of Oaxaca show that for many local and regional governments in diverse contexts a VLR is still an ambitious political step. The review has served as a political manifesto of commitment to the global process, or an enabling environment itself to legitimize the local government in the pursuit of policy creation and change to make local planning and decision-making compatible with sustainable development and the SDGs.

⁷⁰ Carla Cordero Sade et al., "Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible y su Localización en el Municipio de La Paz" (La Paz, 2018).

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Disaggregation problems, data unavailability and the technical and financial cost** of data management are fundamental bottlenecks for local reporting
- There are several, diverse ways to approach data and indicators locally: **adaptation, language reformulation, integration with local indicators**, crowd-sourced indicators and criteria
- The **international community has been active for years** to bridge this information gap: **UCLG, UN-Habitat**, the European Union and many other actors have been providing support to interested cities to overcome data-management issues

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Are you knowledgeable on the **official indicator systems**? Have you gone through any **process of indicator adaptation** to your local context?
- Have you (or are you available to) started a **process of localization of data** and indicators that includes local stakeholders and communities? Workshops, seminars, open consultations, etc.?
- Would you like the Community of Practice to provide **technical insight on indicators**, data management and comparable best practices?

04. Guidelines, templates and recommendations

This section builds on the model of UNDESA to suggest a short checklist of elements that can make a VLR a particularly strong statement about the contribution and potential of local and regional governments to the localization and the achievement of the SDGs.

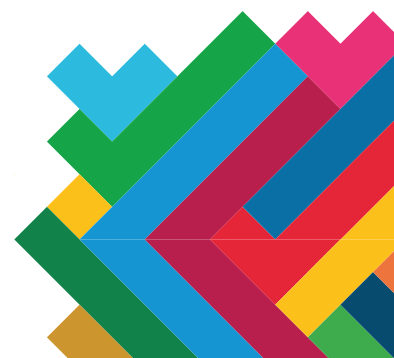
This part is perhaps addressed more fittingly to those members of the CoP which have not issued their VLR yet, or are interested in experimenting with different approaches, changing the balance among contents and/or strengthening certain variables instead of others. These Guidelines are expected to be the starting point of discussion and exchange within the Community – which for this purpose gathers both local authorities that have VLR experience and local/regional authorities that have not – and a reference for those local governments willing to approach reporting on the localization of the SDGs in their communities and territories, under the aegis of the advocacy work that global networks of local and regional governments and their partners have brought forward for the past few years.

#1 Political legitimacy. Although there are no strict criteria about one region, municipality or community's investment in the monitoring and reporting process, building on the political mandate and commitment of the local and regional government is an important added value for a VLR to contribute to the constituency's sense of mission and long-term strategy. So far, most VLRs are produced by regional ministries or city-hall departments and officers, often specialized in the domain of specific SDGs, and most have the overt support of elected representatives and officials. In certain cases, the VLR has

been instrumental to the specific political agenda of the incumbent administration, but most cases show that monitoring, SDG training and growing awareness are perceived as valuable assets for the local, national and global stance of the local government and its community. **USEFUL EXAMPLES:** introductions or prefaces by local elected officials (see La Paz or Helsinki); 'mission statements' as representative of the whole community's commitment (Mannheim); academic statement as proof of rigour/impartiality (Bristol; Mistra's work with Gothenburg and Cape Town).

#2 Methodology and timeline.

Consistent with the resources available, the VLR should be as rigorous, effective and replicable as possible. Method and time are essential in this regard. As described above, indicators and measurements of performance of SDG localization in diverse contexts is perhaps the most challenging task for any local and regional government. The VLR should make it clear from the onset whether it adopts a specific set of indicators (e.g., the UN's, Eurostat's, CPI, national systems adopted in other strategic efforts, locally-sourced sets, etc.) or defines its own. In fact, in this latter case, it should also provide as much information as possible on the methodology that has been used to define the indicators. Similarly, all available detail on how data is collected, from what sources, and how it is made to fit the requirements of the indicators should be provided as well. A consistent and clear timeline is crucial to determine whether the data is reliable, recent and, ultimately, comparable. Absolutely all efforts to monitor and report are welcome and are a testament to a local/regional government's ambition to



contribute to localization. However, the more information and data the VLR is able to deliver, the more valuable it can be as a contribution of shared knowledge for the local/regional governments' constituency.

USEFUL EXAMPLES: method sections with thorough description of the process of adaptation of indicators to the local context (see Los Angeles) or data-driven treatment of UN indicators at the local level (Deqing).

#3 The 'enabling environment': strategy and process.

The VLR plays a very important role of awareness-raising first and foremost in the very community of a city, province or state. The VLR is commonly serving as a manifesto of a community's commitment and dedication to the aims of the 2030 Agenda, the SDGs and the other goals. Surely, the review should locate itself in the grander scheme of SDG localization and implementation. It should make it clear how much of the local strategy is owed to the national process or if the administration has been active globally. However, a VLR can (and should) be a process supportive of accountability and transparency efforts throughout local administration and local stakeholders. Links to other VLRs or the initiative of other LRGs can also be an asset: horizontal cooperation across a community of like-minded local administrations can be crucial for subnational governments to reach the critical mass needed to make an impact in the global process of implementation. **USEFUL EXAMPLES:** the IGES reviews and New York's VLRs (the most loyal to the primal UNSG guidelines) provide an example of identifying those context and institutional pre-conditions that allow certain local stakeholders to be aware of the SDGs, foresee their impact for the community and align their local strategies to the global framework.

#4 SDG implementation analysis.

Consistent with the resources

available to the authors in charge of the document, the VLR should be unambiguous about how it approaches the SDGs: whether it measures performance and localization of all the 17 Goals; the SDGs specifically assessed at that year's HLPF; or only the SDGs that the local government can effectively monitor, be it because only certain indicators affect the community or because local data can only be adequately fetched for a limited number of targets and Goals. Inevitably, the contribution of local government to measurement and assessment should be valued as a constructive process: this framework is expected to last until 2030, the impact on the community's ability to track and monitor should be assessed over time. It is also important that the VLR address the **means of implementation** of its localization strategy – i.e., the resources (financial, human, technical) to be devoted to the process, the institutional mechanisms that will be required; and the policy initiatives that will be needed for localization to take place. **USEFUL EXAMPLES:** reviews that address all SDGs, normally mixing UN indicators with adapted measurements consistent with locally-available data (Deqing); reviews that address a selection of 'official' indicators and/or integrates them with other parameters from local, national or global initiatives (Mexico City, Los Angeles, Mannheim, Bristol); reviews that reproduce the national process and only address SDGs from the HLPF assessment (New York, Helsinki).

In addition to the above and as mentioned before, this document is the first block of a series of normative products that UCLG and UN-Habitat are developing to support LRGs in their monitoring efforts. More detailed Guidelines, exploring the principles of, approaches to and practical steps for the elaboration of a VLR, is currently being jointly designed by the two institutions and will follow up on this report.

05. Way Forward

This publication presents an up-to-date overview of the LRGs that are issuing Voluntary Local Reviews and, at the same time, highlights the importance of supporting LRGs across the globe to build on, and take advantage of, these reviews. The report also shows that the scope of VLRs can go beyond reporting and monitoring the achievement of the 2030 Agenda: they can be key enablers of political dialogue, civic engagement and inclusive urban and territorial planning. In several cases, VLRs are emerging as a key tool to streamline multi-level governance processes: on the one hand, they strengthen the connection with national frameworks and sustainable development monitoring tools (i.e., the VNRs); on the other, they promote an inclusive and participatory approach that builds on the involvement of

local communities. It is worth mentioning that the diversity of existing VLRs is a valuable opportunity to promote the exchange of knowledge and best practices from a varied range of contexts and typologies. This document is expected to contribute to this wealth of information.

This report also capitalizes on the lively and engaging discussion on the most adequate methods to develop a VLR: a rich and diverse debate that is taking place in various sectors and policy areas. UCLG and UN-Habitat acknowledge the opportunities that this conversation is bringing up and reinforce their commitment to the localization of the SDGs – based on their long-standing partnership in this field, their unique expertise and proactive network of partners.

05.1. What is next?

Increasing demand for VLRs. Many more LRGs are expected to develop their VLRs as awareness of this tool and its usefulness grows. In light of the expected rise in demand, it is necessary to consolidate the existing Community of Practice on VLRs, including new LRGs able to share their own experience of drafting a VLR. It would be likewise important to stress the relevance of those areas – however niche they may be – that raise specific challenges for local and regional governments, and for which additional guidance and tailored technical support may be needed.

New actors, new approaches. To date, the discussion on the development of VLRs has been mostly steered by LRGs and only a few international and global institutions. New actors, however, may now be keen on joining this conversation. For instance, a few UN Regional Economic and Social Commissions

(UN-ESCAP and UN-ECA in particular) have expressed their interest in developing regional approaches to VLRs. The inclusion of new voices should be capitalized on and contribute to improving the methods and approaches that LRGs have adopted so far.

Specific technical challenges: identifying synergies for an articulated response. Many LRGs are facing common challenges in the preparation of VLRs: lack of locally-sourced data or the necessary resources to disaggregate or collect it compatibly with global requirements; diverse public participation approaches; and insufficient technical capacities to work with the information that the local level could provide. These common challenges should be the lynchpin around which the Community of Practice could plan and strengthen its own knowledge-sharing and mutual training activities, providing customized support as

requested by LRGs due to their specific context and needs.

All these elements mentioned above will constitute the basis of further joint work and collaboration between UCLG and UN-Habitat, with the aim to upgrade the global discourse

and local action on VLRs. The publication of the next volume of the Guidelines on VLRs, as well as setting up Expert Group Meetings and developing knowledge-sharing mechanisms, will all be parts of this common strategy.

July 2020

Launch of

**Vol. 1 of the UCLG-UN-Habitat
Guidelines on Voluntary Local Reviews
at the 2020 High-Level Political Forum**



June - July 2020

UNDESA VLR
Workshop, online
pre-meeting



September - October 2020

Virtual meeting of the Community of
Practice on VLRs, in preparation of UCLG's
World Council



November 2020

Expert Group Meeting on
Voluntary Local Reviews, hosted
by the city of Madrid



Late 2020

Launch of Vol. 2 of the UCLG-UN-Habitat
Guidelines on Voluntary Local Reviews



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