GUIDELINES FOR VOLUNTARY SUBNATIONAL REVIEWS

SDG REPORTING BY LOCAL AND REGIONAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATIONS

UCLG
United Cities
and Local Governments

GUIDELINES FOR

VOLUNTARY SUBNATIONAL REVIEWS

© 2021

UCLG All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission, in writing, from the publishers.

United Cities and Local Governments
Cités et Gouvernements Locaux Unis
Ciudades y Gobiernos Locales Unidos
Avinyó, 15
08002 Barcelona
Tel: 0034 93 342 87 50
www.uclg.org

DISCLAIMERS

The terms used to refer to the legal status of any country, territory, city or area, or to its authorities, or to the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries, or its economic system or degree of development do not necessarily reflect the opinion of United Cities and Local Governments. The analysis, conclusions and recommendations contained in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of all the members of United Cities and Local Governments.

Editorial board:
Coordinators: UCLG CIB Working Group and UCLG Global Observatory on Local Democracy and Decentralization
Author: Eline Vermeer
Contributors: Edgardo Bilsky, Arthur Wiggers, Anna Calvete Moreno, Ainara Fernández, Cécile Roth
Design and Layout: Kantō Creative
November 2021

Special acknowledgments to:
Benin: Sègla Lihoussou and Maurice Gbemenou (ANCB); Cape Verde: Jacinto Santos, Luis Barbosa and Fernando Borges (ANMCV); Costa Rica: Eugenia Aguirre, Karen Porras and Karla Rojas (UNGL); Ecuador: Alicia Trejo, Marcela Andino and Juan Haro (CONGOPE); Germany: Sabine Drees (Deutscher Städtetag) and Marc Wolinda (Bertelsmann Stiftung); Indonesia: Teti Armiati Argo, Sri Maryati and Ninik Suhartini (ITB SDG Center); Kenya: Ken Oluoch (CoG) and Regina Mutheu (CAF); Mexico: Ady Carrera; Mozambique: Pedro Laice, Carlos Mucapera (ANAMM) and Ekatherine Murillo (GiZ); Nepal: Dileep Adhikary, Kala Devkota (MuAN), Bimal Pokharel (NARMIN) and Dinesh Shrestha (ADDCN); Norway: Bjørn Rongevær, Knut Hjorth-Johansen and Anne Romsaas (KS); Sweden: Dominique Faymonville, Anna Eklof and Niklas Hellblom (SKR); Tunisia: Emna Sohlobji and Mouna Mathari (FNCT); Zimbabwe: Kudzai Chatiza, Lee Mutekede and Isaac Matsilele (UCAZ); Sri Lanka: Hemanthi Goonasekera and Uchita de Zoysa (FSLGA); on behalf of UCLG's regional sections: Aniessa Delima Sari and Hendra Adi (UCLG ASPAC); Rahmatouca Sow, Charles Patsika and Thierry Sanzhie Bokally (UCLG Africa); Sergio Arredondo, Sandra Arredondo and Mónica Solórzano (FLACMA); on behalf of our partners: Christian Luy and Benjamin Oloyede (GiZ/DeLoG). Special acknowledgment also goes to the UCLG World Secretariat (learning, policy, research).

This project is co-funded by the European Union

Supported by:
This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of UCLG and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

Sweden
Sverige

This document has been financed by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, Sida. Sida does not necessarily share the views expressed in the material. Responsibility for its content rests entirely with the author.

UCLG
United Cities and Local Governments

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction....4
1.1. Background....4
1.2. Local reporting on the SDGs....7
1.3. Methodology and contribution of the Guidelines to the bottom-up reporting ecosystem....9

2. The purpose of VSRs....12

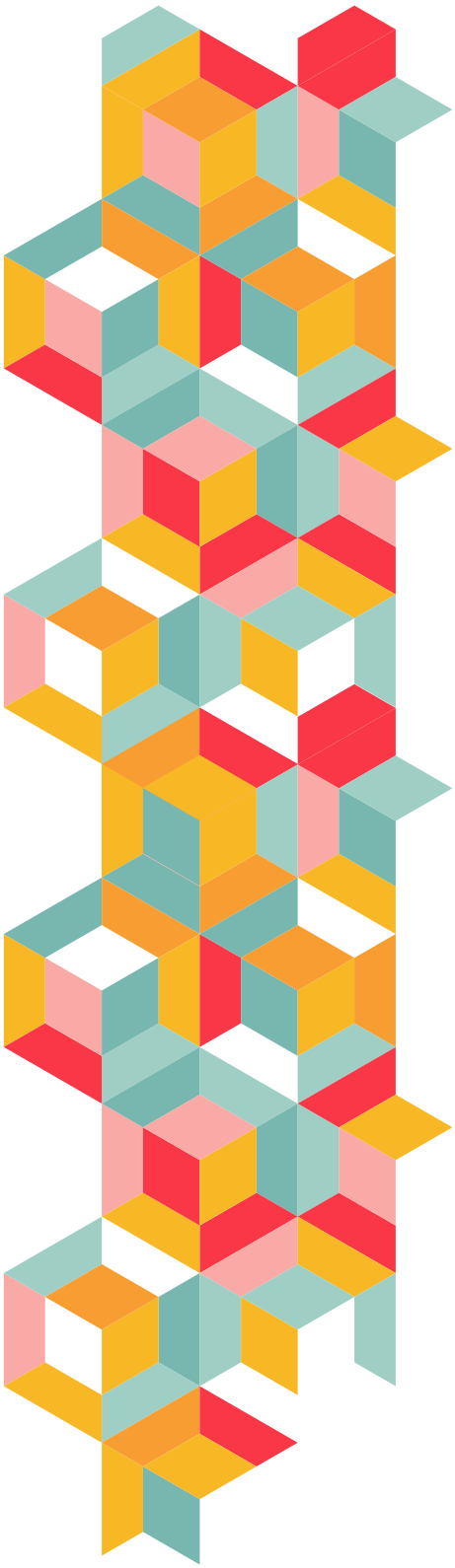
3. Guiding principles to the VSR....19

4. Guidelines on the process for developing VSRs....23
4.1. Development of a roadmap for the VSR process....24
4.2. Connecting the VSR with the VNR....28
4.3. Creating local ownership: involving local and regional governments in the VSR process....35
4.4. How to gather information, case studies and data....38
4.5. How to work with civil society, academia, the private sector and development partners....50
4.6. Writing the report....52
4.7. How to organise dissemination and advocacy through the use of findings....60

5. Ways forward....66

Annexes....68

1. INTRO-DUCTION



We are nearing the end of our second year of living, working and governing in the new reality of the COVID-19 pandemic. The most critical health and socio-economic crisis of our time has highlighted the critical role of local and regional governments in improving living conditions and in planning for recovery and working towards a sustainable future. The 2030 Agenda has proved an unavoidable framework for achieving a green, just and sustainable recovery. SDG localization and reporting through Voluntary Local and Subnational Reviews, led by local and regional governments and their respective associations, have proved essential. They help to bring about catalytic changes and to promote better multi-stakeholder and multi-level governance cooperation, transformative policies, transparency and accountability.

1.1. BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has put pressure on our governance systems. Local and regional government associations (LRGAs) all over the world have seen, and helped, their local and regional governments (LRGs) play a critical role at the frontline of the response to the pandemic by providing increased protection and guaranteeing the continuity of services delivered to local communities. The impact of COVID-19 has also led to shifts in power and new distributions of responsibilities between the central and subnational levels of government; it remains to be seen whether these will be temporary or permanent. The crisis has, however, reaffirmed how crucial it is to have sound relations between central, regional and local governments and to ensure effective government measures. LRGAs must play an integral part in achieving this.

Photo Jeffrey Czum
www.pexels.com

The pandemic has also reaffirmed the importance and relevance of the values and objectives that we have committed to promote and pursue via the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): the need for everyone to have access to essential services (health, education, water and sanitation, waste management, etcetera); the integral nature of policy and planning (with health permeating all policies); the interdependency of territories and the international dimension of many of the challenges facing society; and also the need to rethink the future of our local communities in a more sustainable and resilient way. The New Urban Agenda, the Climate Agenda and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction give us directions in which to work to achieve the SDGs at the local level through transformations which will not leave anyone behind.

Several elements will be important in the recovery from the pandemic. First of all, we must ensure that the recovery will be inclusive, green and resilient, and linked to the concrete goals of the previously mentioned international agendas. Secondly, LRGAs will have to adopt a strategic approach that will enable LRGs to maintain service delivery, improve through innovation and cooperation, and ensure that they have access to sufficient funding. With regard to the SDGs, local governments have many competences but often only limited resources. In many countries, national COVID-19 recovery packages provide an important chance for LRGs to get involved in the recovery process and to thereby contribute to achieving the SDGs. It is of utmost importance that LRGAs have a say in the content of recovery packages and in the distribution of resources. In countries without recovery packages, it is also important to explore how LRGs can be better supported and helped to face the challenges triggered, or aggravated, by the pandemic.

Connecting the SDGs with recovery strategies fits in with the accelerated localization of the SDGs that we have seen in the past years.[1] For LRGs worldwide, integrating the SDGs into their thinking and policy, and aiming for a just, green and sustainable recovery, will be instrumental to making progress in local sustainable development. In parallel, the SDGs will continue to be important pillars in the work of LRGAs, including supporting their members, promoting peer learning, finding solutions to common problems, and mobilising LRGs and helping them to carry out their responsibilities and deliver the SDGs. Through their services, LRGAs will continue to contribute to upscaling

1 UCLG's "GOLD V - The Localization of the Global Agendas" report (2019) and earlier GOLD editions can be found at *https://www.gold.uclg.org/reports*. UCLG and the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments' 5th report to the 2021 HLPF "Towards the Localization of the SDGs. Sustainable and Resilient Recovery Driven by Cities and Territories" (2021) can be found at *https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/5th_report_gtf_hlpf_2021.pdf*

local SDG action by helping LRGs nationwide to become more actively involved at all stages of the SDG localization process: in the definition, implementation, follow-up and monitoring of localization strategies and priorities. They will also continue to help improve relations between LRGs, local stakeholders and national authorities. **The development of Voluntary Subnational Reviews (VSRs) by LRGAs, building on the efforts made by their LRG members, will enormously reinforce such pivotal tasks and help ensure a more sustainable future.**

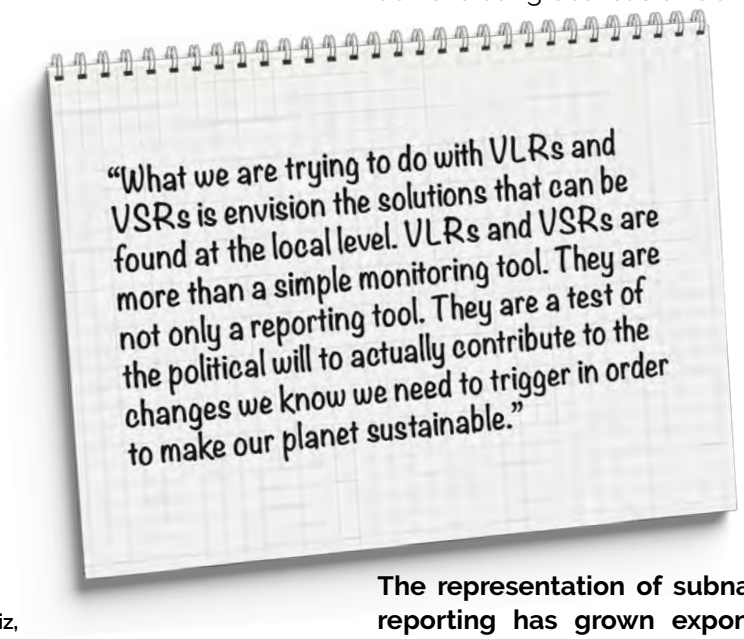
In these Guidelines, **subnational governments** are defined as independent legal entities, elected by universal suffrage, that have a degree of autonomy.[2] They include a wide variety of institutions with different levels of powers, capacities and resources (regions, provinces, counties, departments, municipalities, districts, parishes, etc.) and are usually represented by one or more LRGA. **Voluntary Subnational Reviews** (VSRs) are tools with which LRGAs can report on their overall progress, setbacks, opportunities and challenges associated with achieving the subnational government level SDGs in a given country. Although they could potentially complement each other, they are different from **Voluntary Local Reviews** (VLRs), which are produced by local or regional governments, on an individual basis, and circumscribed to a specific city or region.

2 OECD/UCLG, "Report of the World Observatory on Subnational Government Finance and Investment – Country Profiles," 2019 *https://www.sng-wofi.org/country-profiles/*

Photo Nextvoyage
www.pexels.com
Hong Kong

1.2. LOCAL REPORTING ON THE SDGS

Reporting on local progress towards achieving the SDGs is an essential instrument for raising awareness of the 2030 Agenda both amongst and within LRGs. It helps to accelerate the localization movement, improve policy making, and promote a greater acknowledgement of, and more enabling institutional environment for, LRGs, thereby helping them to achieve our global sustainability commitments.



Emilia Saiz,
Secretary General of UCLG,
2021 HLPF VLR-VSR Days

The representation of subnational levels in global SDG reporting has grown exponentially over the last few years (although in some world regions more than in others). Through Voluntary Local Reviews, over 100 LRGs have, up to now, reported progress in achieving the SDGs.

VLRs are becoming more and more widely recognised as an important tool for stimulating bottom-up transformations. They provide first-hand information about the way in which LRGs are leading the way in the implementation and innovation of the SDGs, aligning their policymaking to the SDGs, engaging citizens and local stakeholders, and increasing accountability and transparency. Just like VSRs, VLRs present differences in terms of their objectives, scope, and methodologies, adapting them to their own goals, needs and resources. They have also increased in number, and evolved over time, as explained in the very practical volumes 1 and 2 of the "Guidelines for VLRs" produced by UCLG and UN-Habitat.[3]

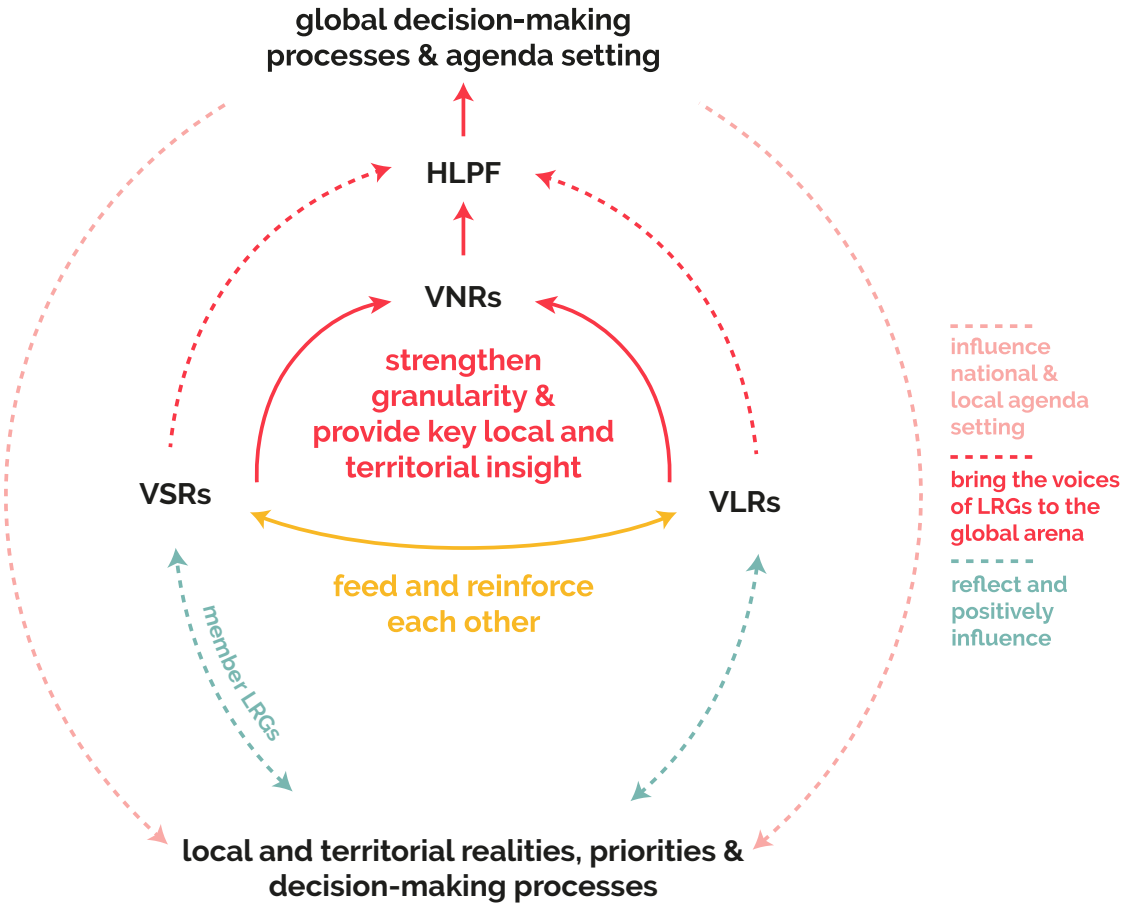
These efforts have expanded the involvement of LRGs and LRGAs in national reporting processes and in national mechanisms for SDG implementation. Through the newly emerging VSRs, LRGAs from 14 countries have now reported on the current state of affairs of SDG implementation by LRGs nationwide. VSRs are produced by LRGAs based on inputs from their members and offer a broader country-wide analysis of subnational efforts and

3 UCLG and UN-Habitat, "Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews. Vol. 1: A Comparative Analysis of Existing VLRs," 2020 *https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/uclg_vlrlab_guidelines_2020_volume_i.pdf* and UN-Habitat and UCLG, "Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews. Vol. 2: Exploring the Local-National Link," 2021, *https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/guidelines_for_vlrs_v.2.pdf*

of the challenges to be overcome for the localization of the SDGs. Most of the national reports from countries in which LRGAs have produced a VSR have taken this subnational reporting exercise into account, dedicating specific space to it, or including a contribution written by their LRGAs in the country's Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs).

This has injected new energy into the dialogue between LRGs and their associations, national governments and international institutions, such as UNDESA, UN agencies, regional UN commissions, etc. During the UN 2021 HLPF, dedicated VLR-VSR Days were organised that were widely welcomed by both public and private institutions, at all levels. **Whereas VLRs are now acknowledged as consolidated catalysts for the localization process, VSRs are slowly becoming recognised as levers for creating a more comprehensive, nationwide, multi-level approach to governance related to the monitoring and reporting of the SDGs.** Upscaling the VSR process, hand-in-hand with that of the VLRs, offers many opportunities to improve bottom-up dialogue and to make a significant contribution to the UN Decade of Action and to accelerate implementation, as shown in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE SDG PROGRESS REPORTS AND PROCESSES AT DIFFERENT LEVELS



Source: own design

1.3. GOALS, METHODOLOGY AND CONTRIBUTION OF THE GUIDELINES TO THE BOTTOM-UP REPORTING ECOSYSTEM

This publication provides guidelines for those LRGAs that are willing to embark on the project of developing their own VSRs in a way that serves as input for their national VNRs, with the aim of helping to strengthen the localization of the SDGs. It provides the tools necessary to further enhance the potential of VSRs as instruments with which to increase LRG ownership of the 2030 Agenda and other global commitments and to strengthen multi-level and multi-stakeholder dialogue. The Guidelines are meant to be flexible so that each LRGA can adapt them to its own needs, objectives, resources and capabilities.

These are not the first guidelines for SDG reporting, but rather build on a growing toolbox for SDG reporting. Although originally written to support national governments in drafting their VNRs, the UN Secretary General's office's Guidelines for VNRs[4] are the main point of reference. This linkage allows LRGAs to speak in the same language as the other stakeholders working on the SDG agenda. Indeed, and as mentioned above, in 2020 and in 2021, UCLG and UN-Habitat developed two sets of Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews. Volume 1 presented a comparative analysis of existing VLRs presented prior to June 2020 (around 40),[5] while Volume 2 explored the linkage between national and local levels in SDG reporting, analysing 80 VLRs.[6] Also UCLG's Training Module 3 on monitoring and reporting on SDG progress builds on the UN Secretary General's office's tool.[7]

The UN Secretary General's office's guidelines have also served as the basis for UNDESA's "Global Guiding Elements for Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) of SDG implementation".[8] What these Guidelines, which are laid out in paragraph 74 of the 2030 Agenda, mean for LRGAs can be found in greater detail in section 3 (see below). UNDESA's VLR Guidelines also underline the connections between national and local reporting; this is something that will be discussed further in Section 4.2.

4 An updated version of the UNSG's Guidelines is available online here: *https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/17346Updated_Voluntary_Guidelines.pdf*

5 UCLG and UN-Habitat, *https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/uclg_vlrlab_guidelines_2020_volume_i.pdf*

6 UN-Habitat and UCLG, *https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/guidelines_for_vlrs_v.2.pdf*

7 UCLG's Module 3 provides guidance for the reporting and monitoring aspects of the SDGs localization process. It gives examples, exercises and tools for the inclusion of the local and regional governments' actions and perspective in Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), and introduces the potential of Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) to further foster SDGs integration in the local policy process. It is available here: *https://learning.uclg.org/module-3/*

8 UNDESA, "Global Guiding Elements for Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) of SDG Implementation," 2020, *https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/GlobalGuidingElementsforVLRs_FINAL.pdf*

Similarly, in 2020, UNESCAP: the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, published its "Asia-Pacific Regional Guidelines on Voluntary Local Reviews"',[9] which were specifically for Asia-Pacific LRGs'. These provide practical tools and guidance specific to the region to help LRGs to decide where to start, how to start, and what to keep in mind when developing a VLR.

As in the document that you are currently reading, **the central principle in all the guidelines mentioned above involves leaving no one and no place behind**. This objective is to be achieved by: taking explicit action to end extreme poverty, confronting discrimination, improving participation, promoting accountability, and defending human rights. These objectives are discussed in more detail in Section 3, on guiding principles.

The drafting of these Guidelines is the culmination of a rich, participative and co-productive process. The Guidelines are based on experiences shared in a series of VSR workshops organised by UCLG and UCLG-CIB throughout 2021. The four workshops, held in March, April, May and October 2021, brought together the LRGAs preparing VSRs in 2020 and 2021 and set in motion a number of in-depth exchanges on matters such as structure, methodology, the selection of case studies and indicators, key findings, the dissemination and use of findings, and negotiations with national governments. The aim of the sessions was to exchange ideas in order to enrich the VSRs and to instil good practices into these VSR guidelines, highlighting the elements to replicate, in order to inspire other LRGAs to produce VSRs in the coming years.

Photo NICE GUYS
www.pexels.com
Manila, Philippines

9 UNESCAP, "Asia-Pacific Regional Guidelines on Voluntary Local Reviews", 2020, *https://www.unescap.org/resources/asia-pacific-regional-guidelines-voluntary-local-reviews*

These guidelines are based on the experiences of the following LRGAs which have reported in 2020 and 2021 (click on the name of the country to download the VSR):

2020

Benin: **ANCB** – *Association Nationale des Communes du Bénin*

Costa Rica: **UNGL** – *Unión Nacional de Gobiernos Locales*

Ecuador: **CONGOPE** – *Consorcio de Gobiernos Autónomos Provinciales de Ecuador*

Kenya: **COG** and **CAF** – Council of Governors and Counties Assembly Forum

Mozambique: **ANAMM** – *Associação Nacional dos Municípios do Moçambique*

Nepal: **MuAn**, **NARMIN** and **ADCCN** – Municipality Association of Nepal, National Association of Rural Municipality in Nepal and Association of District Coordination Committees of Nepal

2021

Cape Verde: **ANMCV** – *Associação Nacional dos Municípios Caboverdianos*

Germany: **DS** – *Deutscher Städtetag*

Indonesia: **APEKSI**, **ADEKSI**, **APPSI** – Association of Municipalities in Indonesia, Association of Indonesian City Councils, Association of Provincial Governments in Indonesia

Mexico: **CONAMM** – *Conferencia Nacional de Municipios de México*

Norway: **KS** – Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities

Sweden: **SALAR** – Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions

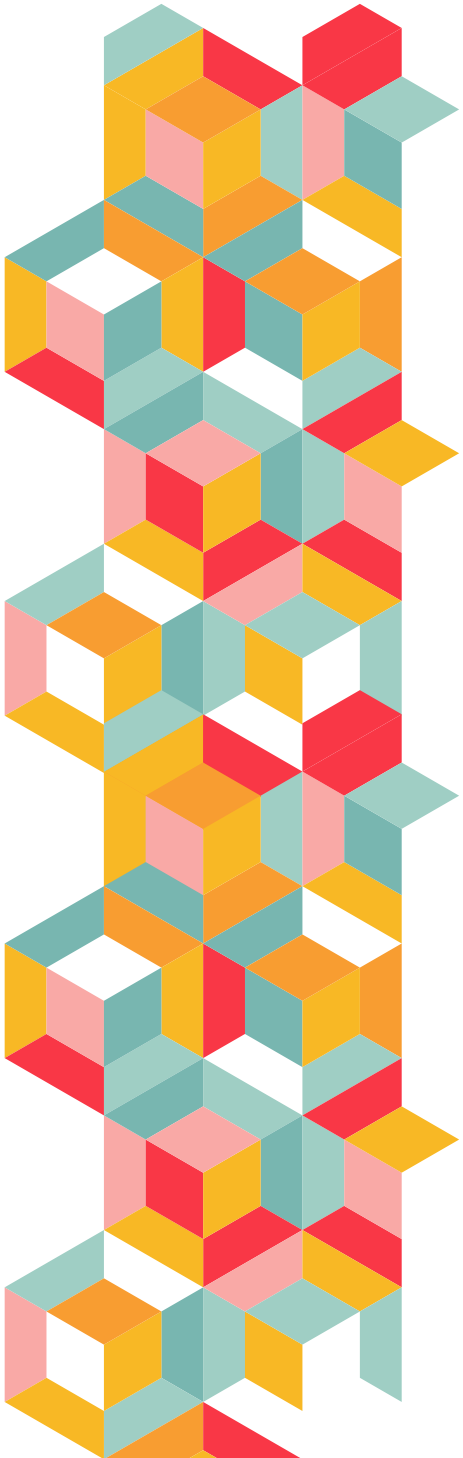
Tunisia: **FNCT** – *Fédération Nationale des Communes Tunisiennes*

Zimbabwe: **ARDCZ, UCAZ, ZILGA** – Association of Rural District Councils of Zimbabwe, Urban Councils Association of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe Local Government Association

CONGOPE, in Ecuador, also reported in 2021

Section 1 has given an introduction to VSRs within the global reporting ecosystem and to these Guidelines for VSRs. Sections 2 and 3 delve into the various purposes of VSRs and the key principles of SDG reporting that are relevant to VSRs. Section 4 provides practical guidelines on the VSR process. It examines how to: draw up a roadmap for the whole process, involve members, work with partners, gather data and conduct case studies. It also provides practical guidelines and recommendations on VSR content and how to disseminate findings. Finally, Section 5 proposes ways forward to support the development of the VSR movement worldwide.

2. THE PURPOSE OF VSRS



Voluntary Subnational Reviews are a new level of SDG reporting that has the potential of significantly strengthening the performance and visibility of local and regional governments in achieving their commitment to global sustainability. This Section sheds light on the reasons for LRGAs to produce VSRs.

VSRs are produced by LRGAs on a voluntary basis; they are drawn up in countries whose national governments are already reporting to the UN HLPF through a VNR. In this way, input from VSRs can contribute to VNRs with first-hand information from the subnational government level. This has been the case in almost all of the 14 countries in which VSRs have been produced to date. However, VSRs also have a valuable purpose beyond contributing to VNRs and the HLPF. They have proven to be tools that offer great potential for strengthening multilevel governance, informing local and regional SDG policy and thereby contributing to improvements in LRG performance towards achieving the SDGs.

When undertaking VSRs, it is important that LRGAs carefully examine their reporting ambitions and keep them in line with their possibilities. VSRs must be organised in accordance with their national enabling environments, LRGA competences, resources and capabilities, and any other relevant considerations. It is therefore of critical importance to carry out a framing analysis of the country's practical reality and to examine the possibilities of undertaking a VSR within that context. Some of the points to consider are listed below.

The relationship between VSRs and VNRs (and also with VLRs): an opportunity to strengthen vertical cooperation

The full SDG reporting constellation currently consists of three types of input: input from 176 national governments through their VNRs, complemented in 36 countries by instrumental -yet specifically pinpointed- input from individual local governments (VLR), and also, in the case of some countries, input also from civil society (e.g. "Voluntary People's Review" in Sri Lanka, "*Informes Luz*" in Colombia, etc). Given that a country-wide overview of the status of LRG involvement in SDG achievement is often missing, VSRs appeared to provide LRGAs with a unique chance to bring together the aggregated contributions of LRGs towards achieving the SDGs. Furthermore, they put this on the map via a country-wide analysis of local government efforts, capacities and commitments and the challenges they need to overcome for the localization of the SDGs. **This information and data feed, support and contextualise the VNRs, acknowledge the role played by LRGs, and recognise the need for national governments to cooperate with LRGs in the common task of achieving the SDGs.** This reinforced vertical cooperation is fertile ground for developing better constructed public policy which takes LRG perspective into account. As a product of their VSR, and based on their recommendations, different stakeholders should outline a strategy with which to overcome the main limitations that they encounter and to enhance their existing strengths.

Teti Armiati Argo
Team leader of the VSR, Institut Teknologi Bandug (ITB) SDG Network, Indonesia. See the Indonesian VSR (2021) here: *https://gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/indonesia_2021_0.pdf*

"The dynamics of the interactions of national-regional-local governments when interpreting and implementing the SDGs are the core of reporting VSRs. It is more collaborative and yet locally defined, leading towards partnerships and yet independently distinctive. At the subnational level, the process of interpreting SDGs implementation means bringing the 'language' into the local dimensions of planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. The VSR reveals how subnational governments generate the aggregate, congruous qualities of working together towards national goals while highlighting their capacity to achieve their development goals in line with the international commitment to the SDG agenda of 2030."

Assessing efforts and needs at the local level, improving SDG ownership, and strengthening relations with LRG members and local stakeholders

How are subnational governments currently performing with regard to achieving the SDGs? What are their strengths and their weaknesses? Amongst other things, VSRs allow LRGAs to critically assess the efforts made by their member local governments to: align local development plans, projects and budgets with the SDGs; raise awareness and build capacities amongst their staff, the local population and local stakeholders; and to monitor and report on their efforts. **This is a vital step along the way for associations and one that can help them to catalyse SDG localization by their members and encourage the use of the SDGs as a reference framework for promoting sustainable development.** In addition, VSRs allow LRGAs to listen to the needs of their members, conduct consultative processes, provide technical assistance, undertake peer learning, exchange local experiences, and also promote local reporting on the SDGs. VSR processes are also vital for strengthening the relationship between LRGAs and their members.

Finally, the VSR process has enormous potential for strengthening relationships with local stakeholders, including civil society organisations, academia, private companies and trade unions, etc. Some of these may have also produced civil society reports which could be combined with and used to complement VSRs. A participative process involving a representative sample of these stakeholders does not only serve the purpose of contributing to the production and publication of the VSRs but, looking beyond this, it also facilitates the establishment of enhanced exchanges and collaborations in future projects.

Photo Artem Beliaikin
www.pexels.com
Marga, Indonesia

A thorough analysis of the institutional enabling environment

VSRs provide an assessment of whether, and how, the institutional environment enables local governments to carry out their responsibilities associated with the global sustainable development agenda (e.g. decentralization policies, local finance and access to financing, cooperation between levels of government, etc.). **The VSR gives LRGAs a channel through which to communicate regarding the means of SDG implementation, voice their needs, explain capacities and aspirations, and advocate improvements** such as promoting national-local collaboration in tasks such as mainstreaming the SDGs into national and local budgeting, and requesting support from national authorities to fund SDG localization strategies within local development plans, programmes and budgets. As stated above, being a product of the VSR, this should be turned into a strategy that could be used to address some of the main limitations encountered and to build upon existing strengths.

BREAKDOWN OF RESPONSIBILITIES ACROSS SUBNATIONAL GOVERNMENT LEVELS AND THE RELATED SDGS

Without even realising it, many local governments have already been taking action to implement the SDGs for several years. This is because most of the 17 SDGs and 169 targets cover activities that refer to the daily work of local and regional governments (education, health, water, sanitation, waste management, public transport, housing, sustainable environmental protection and climate change, amongst others). There is, however, a large degree of heterogeneity in the distribution of responsibilities across different levels of government. Firstly, the breakdown of competences between central/federal government and subnational governments (and also across subnational government levels) is very complex in many countries, with many cases of an asymmetric decentralization of responsibilities. Furthermore, most responsibilities are shared across different levels of government. Even so, some general patterns can be identified, such as those highlighted in the following Table 1.

TABLE 1: BREAKDOWN OF RESPONSIBILITIES ACROSS SUBNATIONAL GOVERNMENT LEVELS AND THE RELATED SDGS

MUNICIPAL LEVEL (e.g. municipalities, districts, parishes, etc.)	INTERMEDIARY LEVEL (e.g. departments, counties, provinces in non-federal countries)	REGIONAL LEVEL (e.g. federated states, regions, provinces, counties, etc.)
A wide range of responsibilities: • General clause of competence • Eventually, additional allocations by the law **Community services:** • Education (nursery schools, pre-elementary and primary education) - SDG 4 • Urban planning & management - SDG 11 • Local utility networks (water, sewerage, waste, hygiene, etc.) - SDGs 6, 11 • Local roads and urban public transport - SDGs 9, 11 • Social services (support for families and children, the elderly, the disabled, poverty, social benefits, etc.) - SDGs 1, 3, 10 • Primary and preventive healthcare - SDG 3 • Public order and safety (municipal police, fire brigades) - SDGs 11, 16 • Local economic development, tourism, trade fairs - SDGs 8, 9, 11 • Environment (green areas) - SDGs 11, 13, 14, 15 • Social housing - SDG 11 • Administrative services - SDGs 8, 16	**Specialised and more limited responsibilities of supramunicipal interest** **An important role of assistance towards small municipalities** **May carry out responsibilities delegated by regional and/or central government** **Responsibilities determined by functional level and geographic area:** • Secondary or specialised education - SDG 4 • Supra-municipal social and youth welfare - SDGs 3, 10 • Secondary hospitals - SDG 3 • Waste collection and treatment - SDGs 11, 13 • Secondary roads and public transport - SDGs 9, 11 • Environment - SDGs 13, 14, 15	**Heterogeneous and more or less extensive responsibilities, depending on the country (in particular, federal vs unitary)** **Services of regional interest:** • Secondary/higher education and professional training - SDG 4 • Spatial planning - SDG 11 • Regional economic development and innovation - SDGs 8, 11 • Health (secondary health care and hospitals) - SDG 3 • Social affairs, e.g. employment services, training, inclusion, support for special groups, etc. - SDGs 8, 10 • Regional roads and public transport - SDGs 9, 11 • Culture, heritage and tourism - SDG 4 • Environmental protection - SDGs 13, 14, 15 • Social housing - SDG 11 • Public order and safety (e.g. regional police, civil protection) - SDGs 11, 16 • Local government supervision (in federal countries)

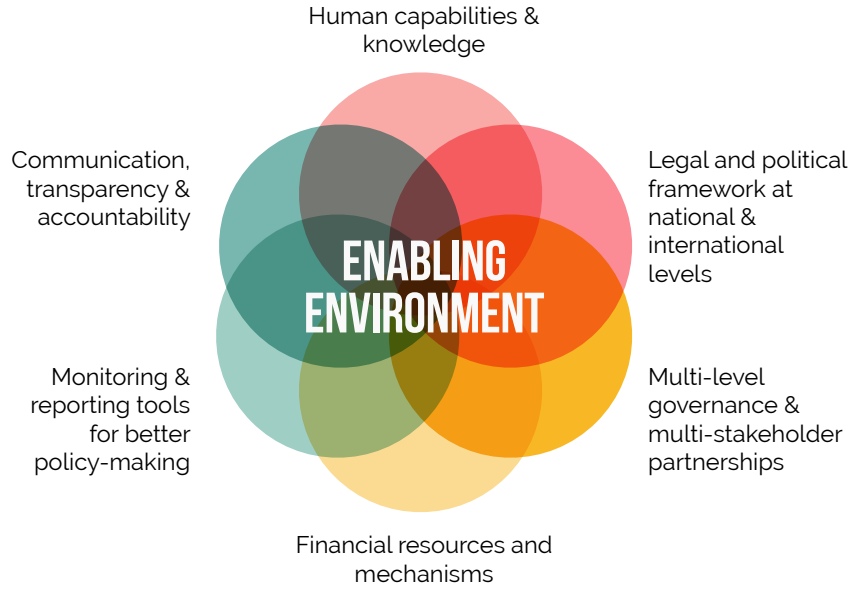
Source: own design, based on OECD/UCLG, "Report of the World Observatory on Subnational Government Finance and Investment," 2019

A very convenient tool for conveying policy recommendations and advocating in favour of transformation

Thorough, first-hand assessments of local efforts within the institutional environment of the country allow LRGAs to use VSRs to convey policy recommendations and advocate a more enabling environment. Recommendations to improve the local implementation of the SDGs in LRGs can be shared with members whilst those aimed at improving the institutional enabling environment for SDG localization should be addressed to the corresponding national government, international institutions and other stakeholders. Such recommendations could concern measures to refine national collaboration mechanisms, increase the competences allocated to LRGs, and match competences with the resources required to make them effective. For instance, multilevel governance can be improved by including local government repre-sentatives in national VNR drafting teams or commissions, and by creating national SDG coordination mechanisms in which local and regional governments are involved. **The VSR is therefore an important tool for supporting SDG lobbying and advocacy, particularly during the COVID-19 recovery period.** In situations in which there is not yet a coordinated strategy or a coordination mechanism between LRGAs and national governments, or between LRGAs within the same country, the VSR can be a very useful tool for helping to set up such mechanisms.

The VSR therefore has a value as a tool for promoting greater cooperation and also for transforming the institutional framework and the enabling environment (see Figure 2). VSRs strengthen the voice of local and regional governments within national contexts and present more localized snapshots of where a particular country stands in the implementation of the global agendas.

FIGURE 2: ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR SDG LOCALIZATION



Source: adapted from: *https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/roadmap_for_localizing_the_sdgs_0.pdf*

VSR ADVOCACY FOR DECENTRALIZATION AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE

All VSRs lead to policy recommendations. They do so by supporting policy reforms or opening the way to new institutional arrangements.

Within the framework of the localization efforts, by the end 2019, the LRGA of **Benin** (ANCB) had developed a proposal for the local financing of the SDGs. In its report, the ANCB demanded that national policies should contribute to empowering local authorities in accordance with the laws governing decentralization. The ANCB recommended increasing the resources dedicated to supporting the localization process and destined to the National Fund for Municipal Development. It also called for central government to respect the established calendar for transfers from the national budget to the municipalities.

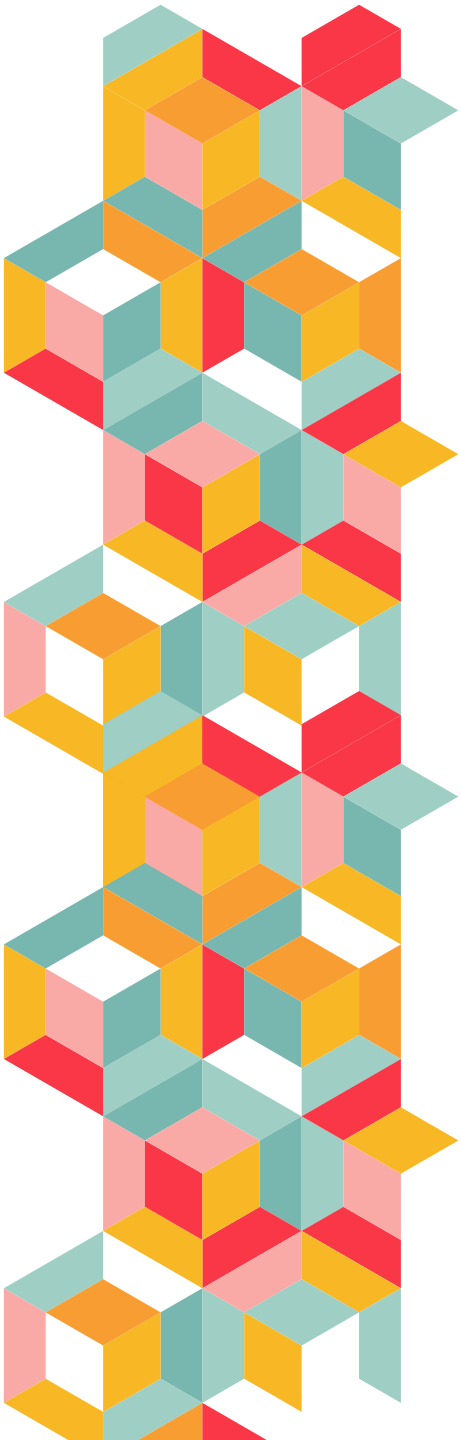
In **Indonesia,** the VSR asked for: stronger and more regular coordination between sectoral ministries responsible for local development strategies; more flexible and more place-based policies to support local plans aligned with SDGs; and greater coherence and cooperation, supported by adequate incentives and technical assistance.

In **Norway,** as a result of the VSR recommendations advanced by the LRGA (KS), the national and local governments signed an agreement to create a commission that will ensure the follow-up of these proposals. Amongst other measures, this will include: upholding multi-level governance, policy coherence and multi-stakeholder partnerships; engaging in full consultations with LRGs at each step of the national decision-making process; maintaining and fostering increased political commitment; continuing to localize and implement the SDGs; and investing in developing competences and increasing knowledge and competences across all organisational levels.

In **Mexico**, the VSR considers fiscal coordination and decentralization as two of the greatest challenges facing the localization of the SDGs. It therefore proposes reforming the National Fiscal Coordination System, national mechanisms for implementing resource transfers, and the expenditure modalities of subnational governments.

3. GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR VSRS

Like other reviews, VSRs should be consistent with and promote the principles of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. This means that the UN Secretary General's Guiding Principles[10] for all follow-up and review processes under the 2030 Agenda also apply to VSRs. This Section aims to demonstrate how these principles should also permeate the design, process and outcomes of VSRs.



The following are the guiding principles set out by the UN Secretary-General that LRGAs should take most into account when designing and developing their VSRs. However, this selection does not imply that LRGAs should ignore the other principles contained in the 2030 Agenda, but that they should also enhance them throughout the VSRs, as well as in their daily work with their LRG members, so as to promote better delivery of public services to citizens that contributes to the localization of the SDGs.

Tracking progress (UN Guiding Principle 74b)

VSRs should track local government progress in implementing the SDGs and achieving targets **relating to their universal, integrated and interrelated nature:** achieving one goal should not negatively influence another goal, and any potential unintended negative consequences should be anticipated and mitigated. VSRs should also take into consideration the different (social, economic and environmental) dimensions of sustainable development, to which LRGs add a cultural dimension. This relates to the 17 SDGs, which are often regrouped into five pillars (people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership) (see Figure 3). Attention should also be given to the means of implementation available to LRGs and to the possibilities and potential stumbling blocks that they may entail; these are often interrelated considerations.

10 UN Secretary General, "Voluntary common reporting guidelines for voluntary national reviews at the high-level political forum for sustainable development (HLPF)," *https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/17346Updated_Voluntary_Guidelines.pdf*

FIGURE 3: THE FIVE PILLARS OF THE 2030 AGENDA

Source: United Nations Secretary General

Identifying achievements and challenges within the medium and longer-term visions of SDG implementation (UN Guiding Principle 74c)

VSRs should identify the achievements, challenges, gaps and critical success factors required for LRGs to achieve the SDGs. To do this, **VSRs should support LRGs, helping them to make informed policy choices, and also help national governments to make policy choices that will enable LRGs to carry out their responsibilities.** VSRs can help different government agencies to explore solutions and best practices and promote the coordination of actions that will help to achieve the global agenda.

Opening up the review process to stakeholders (UN Guiding Principle 74d)

Inclusion is one of the key principles of the SDGs. In the case of reporting, this means that **the VSR process should be open, inclusive, participatory and transparent for all people and actors** and that it should support reporting by all relevant stakeholders. It goes without saying that, by their nature, the content of VSRs tends to be heavily dependent on input from LRGs. Their active involvement in the process of developing VSRs (through consultations, surveys and other arrangements) is therefore a key element of the reporting process, and one that helps to incorporate VLR

content into those of VSRs (and VNRs). Proposals regarding how to involve LRGs in the process can be found in Section 4.3.

It is also strongly recommended for LRGAs to involve other stakeholders in the reporting process. Local stakeholders are producers of data and information that can be very valuable for VSRs. LRGAs can engage with civil society and other stakeholders through the coordination and combination of their processes and SDG voluntary people's reports: these contain information on SDG implementation from the community perspective that can make invaluable contributions to VSRs. Taking advantage of local, regional and/or national SDG platforms, international development partners (such as UN agencies) and/or international cooperation agencies is also advisable and a good way to broaden the contextualisation of the work and to fine-tune recommendations and demands. When circumstances allow, it would also be a good idea to link the VSR process to related tools that are already available. For example, for the Africa region, it would be advisable to choose a path consistent and compatible with that already laid down by the Institutional Enabling Environment of local governments (or CEE) initiative.[11] More information about this can be found in Section 4.5.

Leaving no one behind (UN Guiding Principle 74e)

With millions of people living in poverty, the objective of leaving no one behind is essential to the SDG agenda. VSRs should be people-centred and gender-sensitive, respect human rights and have a particular focus on the poorest, the most vulnerable, and those furthest behind. VSRs should provide a truly representation of the diversity of different localities (e.g. poor neighbourhoods, rural areas, informal contexts, etc.). Differences in local cultural and societal characteristics, different traditions and forms of governance, and the spatial aspects of marginalisation, cannot be reflected in detail in VNRs as well as they can through VSRs (and VLRs). To do this requires LRGs and their associations to engage with vulnerable groups, to collect evidence, and to underline the priorities and needs of different communities and territories. By showing this, **VSRs can serve as an important channel for communicating the needs of minorities and vulnerable groups.** Several ideas as to how to avoid leaving anyone behind are described in more detail in Section 4.[12]

11 More information on this joint undertaking between Cities Alliance and the United Cities and Local Governments of Africa (UCLG Africa) is available here: *https://www.citiesalliance.org/resources/publications/cities-alliance-knowledge/assessing-institutional-environment-local-0*, and here: *https://knowledge.uclga.org/-L-environnement-institutionnel-des-collectivites-territoriales-.html?lang=en*

12 UNDP, "What does it mean to leave no one behind? A UNDP discussion paper and framework for implementation," 2018, *https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/Discussion_Paper_LNOB_EN_lres.pdf*

Basing VSRs on sound and disaggregated data (UN Guiding Principle 74g)

One of the key challenges in developing subnational SDG reports is the limited availability of local SDG data. The objective when reporting should be to employ the maximum rigour possible and to base content on evidence and on data which is: of high-quality, accessible, timely, reliable and, as far as possible, disaggregated by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability and geographic location, as well as any other characteristics that may be relevant within a particular context. However, acknowledging the difficulties for LRGAs and their LRG members to develop sound SDG monitoring systems and adequate indicators, quantitative data will be a key ally to bridge this gap in the VSR. Guidelines on gathering data can be found in Section 4.4 and in the Annex.

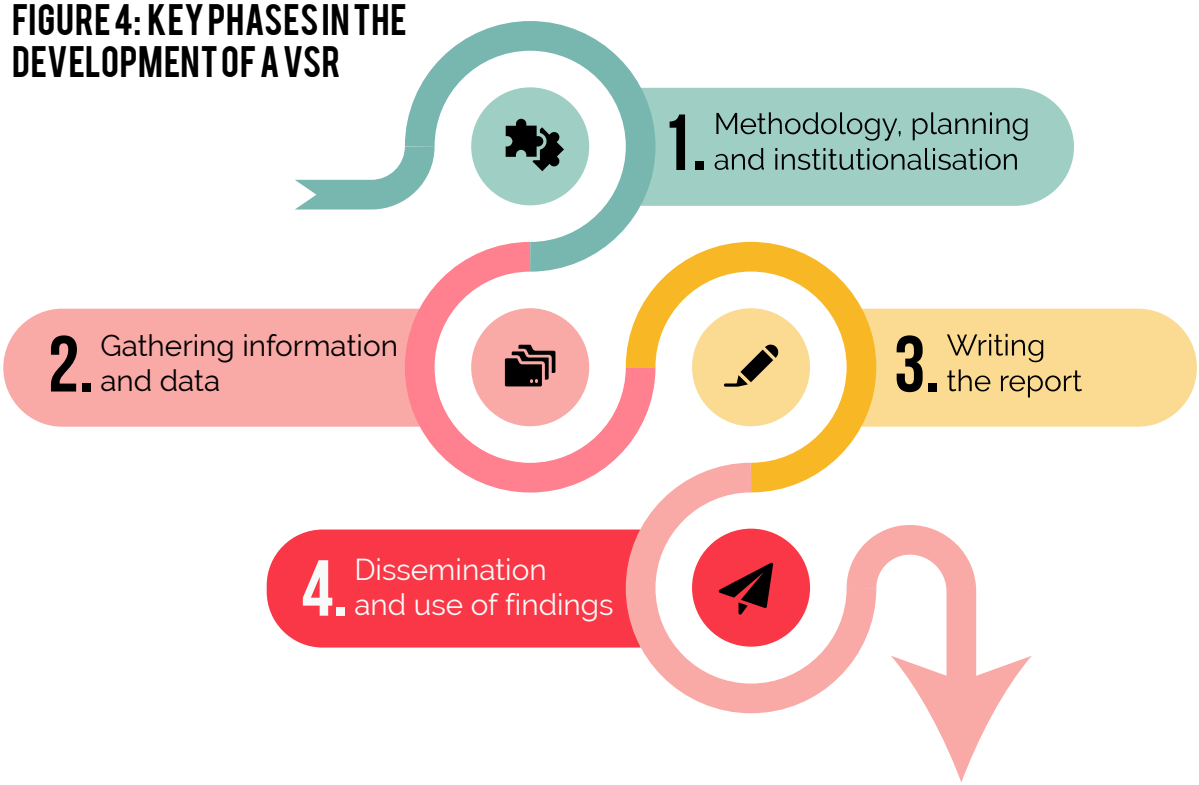
Photo Alexandre Saraiva Carniato
www.pexels.com
João Pessoa, Brazil

4. GUIDELINES ON THE PROCESS FOR DEVELOPING VSRS

In order for a VSR to have the maximum impact, it is necessary to plan the reporting process in advance, taking into account matters such as: the roadmap, the timeline, how to work with partners, how to gather case studies and data, how to organise the content of the report, and how to take advantage of dissemination and make use of your findings. This Section provides practical recommendations.

There is no single template or "roadmap" for the VSR process. In every country, the process and report developed by the LRGA will have to respond to its own specific context. Nevertheless, a general sketch of the process may prove helpful in developing VSRs, and can be adapted as necessary. Broadly speaking, the VSR process contains four key phases, which are shown in Figure 4:

FIGURE 4: KEY PHASES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A VSR



Source: adapted from UNESCAP, "Asia-Pacific Regional Guidelines on Voluntary Local Reviews", 2020, p. 19

The following Sections propose a set of activities that give shape to the four phases mentioned above. Throughout all four key phases of the VSR process, ensuring stakeholder engagement (the participation of LRGs and other partners throughout the process) and operationalising the VSR within the VNR are key objectives.

4.1. DEVELOPMENT OF A ROADMAP FOR THE VSR PROCESS

One important precondition for the LRGA to engage in the VSR process is to ensure the necessary political will to embark on such a project and to take ownership of it. The more institutionalised the process is, and the higher the level of the organisation that is supporting and overseeing the process, the greater are the chances that the VSR process will be a success.

Once political will and ownership are guaranteed, the first activity will be to develop a preliminary roadmap, including a plan, a calendar and a budget for various activities. The following points will need to be carefully considered:

Photo Julia Volk
www.pexels.com
Peru

Photo Mathias P.R.
www.pexels.com
Rabat, Morocco

1) **Assembling a reporting team.** The LRGA may have the capacity to lead the whole process by itself. If not, it would be reasonable to hire a specialised reporter and to organise a coordination team within the LRGA. Sometimes, a training and capacity-building process prior to launching the VSR process could be required, to ensure that all members of the team have the necessary skills and knowledge (UCLG can help with this). Monitoring that the necessary steps are being followed will be essential for ensuring the smooth development of the process.

2) **Developing a VSR roadmap**. The agreed roadmap should include the selected management model and outline: the organisations and individuals involved and the specific responsibilities assigned to each of them; deadlines; budgets, aims and objectives; and the expected outputs. One crucial action, which will serve to monitor progress, involves defining specific outputs to be developed and delivered by the end of each stage and that will contribute to achieving a precise objective within the VSR process.

3) **Ensuring that the roadmap is approved by the LRGA governing body and is owned by the constituency.** This will entail carrying out a series of communication and dissemination actions throughout the process that will serve two main purposes: complying with the principles of transparency and accountability, and ensuring that the messages are adequately conveyed and that ownership and support are maintained.

Figure 5a offers a one-year roadmap and timeline for the preparation of VSRs that could serve as a model, or inspiration, for LRGAs willing to develop their own VSR. It is important to note that the suggested timeline and set of actions should be adapted to the specific context of your process, Also, it should be considered that the production process is not linear, but iterative; this means that the different stages may not happen one after the other but could coincide, and the stages will not tend to be homogeneous in terms of the resources needed, effort required, and/or time allocated.

FIGURE 5A: SUGGESTED PLAN AND TIMELINE FOR VSR PREPARATION

OCTOBER

- Candidate reporting countries with VNRs to the HLPF are announced by the UN
- Start of exchanges with national government on LRG/LRGA participation in the VNR process, within existing SDG coordination mechanisms, or initial contact with your national SDG coordination focal point
- Development of a plan roadmap for the preparation of the VSR
- Validation of the plan by the governing body of the LRGA

NOVEMBER

- Identification of stakeholders and partners in the VSR writing process
- Assembling of the steering group (which will include dedicated experts)
- Identification of LRGs that are committed to the localization of the SDGs and to undertaking VLRs, and getting them involved in the process

DECEMBER

- Start of involvement of local and regional governments in the VSR process through a kick-off meeting/consultation
- Organisation of dedicated meetings with local and regional governments preparing VLRs to make the VLR-VSR-VNR connection
- Collection of information on national strategies for SDG localization and on the institutional enabling environment for LRGs (decentralization, local finances, local planning, etc.)

JANUARY

- Further collection of information on the institutional enabling environment for LRGs
- Start of gathering information from LRG initiatives for the localization of the SDGs (alignment of local plans with SDGs, projects and programmes) through surveys, consultations and other information gathering mechanisms

JANUARY-APRIL

- Analysis of the information collected through surveys and other sources
- Identification of local experiences and visits to LRGs to collect information on experiences to be included in the VSR
- Organisation of interviews and/or focus groups to complete information gathering
- Writing up the report
- Reporting regularly on the progress of the VSR to the national government office in charge of drafting the VNR

APRIL

- Request to all partners contributing to the VSR, such as LRGs preparing VLRs, civil society organisations and other stakeholders, to submit (a summary of) their input before mid-April for inclusion in the VSR
- First draft of the VSR

END OF APRIL - MAY

- Submission of a summary or draft of your VSR, including its main messages, to the national government for inclusion in the VNR. By submitting an early version at the end of April/ beginning of May, it will be possible to include it in the VNR and for presentation at the UN's HLPF in July
- Validation of the final version of the VSR through a workshop involving LRGs

END OF MAY-JUNE

- Editing and publishing of the VSR
- Submission of final version of the VSR to national government for inclusion in the VNR
- National launch of the VSR (through a press conference)

JULY

- Presentation of the VSR during the HLPF VLR-VSR Days

AUGUST - SEPT

- Dissemination of the VSR findings within the LRGA and LRG members and sharing with other stakeholders

Starting early makes it easier to carry out the process, but -for many different reasons- this may not always be possible in many contexts. In such cases, the following suggestion (see Figure 5b) for a fast-track timeline may be of help.

FIGURE 5B: SUGGESTED FAST-TRACK PLAN AND TIMELINE FOR VSR PREPARATION

JANUARY

- Start of exchanges with national government on LRGA participation in VNR process
- Development of a plan for the preparation of the VSR
- Validation of the plan with the governing body of the LRGA
- Identification of the experts that will work on the report, as well as any stakeholders, partners and/or LRGs that could be closely involved in the process

FEBRUARY

- Collection of information, case studies and best practices from LRGs on initiatives for the localization of the SDGs (alignment of local plans with SDGs, projects and programmes) via surveys, consultations and other information gathering mechanisms
- Collection of information on the national strategies for SDG localization and on the institutional enabling environment

MARCH

- Analysis of the information collected
- Visits to LRGs to make sure that their experiences are included in the VSR and organisation of interviews or focus groups to complete the information required
- Writing up of the report
- Reporting regularly on progress to the national government office in charge of drafting the VNR

APRIL

- Asking all partners contributing to the VSR, such as LRGs preparing VLRs, civil society organisations, and other stakeholders, to submit (a summary of) their input, before mid-April, for inclusion in the VSR
- First draft of the VSR

END OF APRIL AND MAY

- Submission of a summary, or draft version, of your VSR, including its main messages, to your national government for inclusion in the VNR
- Finalisation of the VSR and, if possible, validation through a workshop involving LRGs and partners

END OF MAY-JUNE

- Editing and publishing of the VSR
- Submission of the final version to the national government for inclusion in the VNR
- National launch of the VSR (via a press conference)

JULY

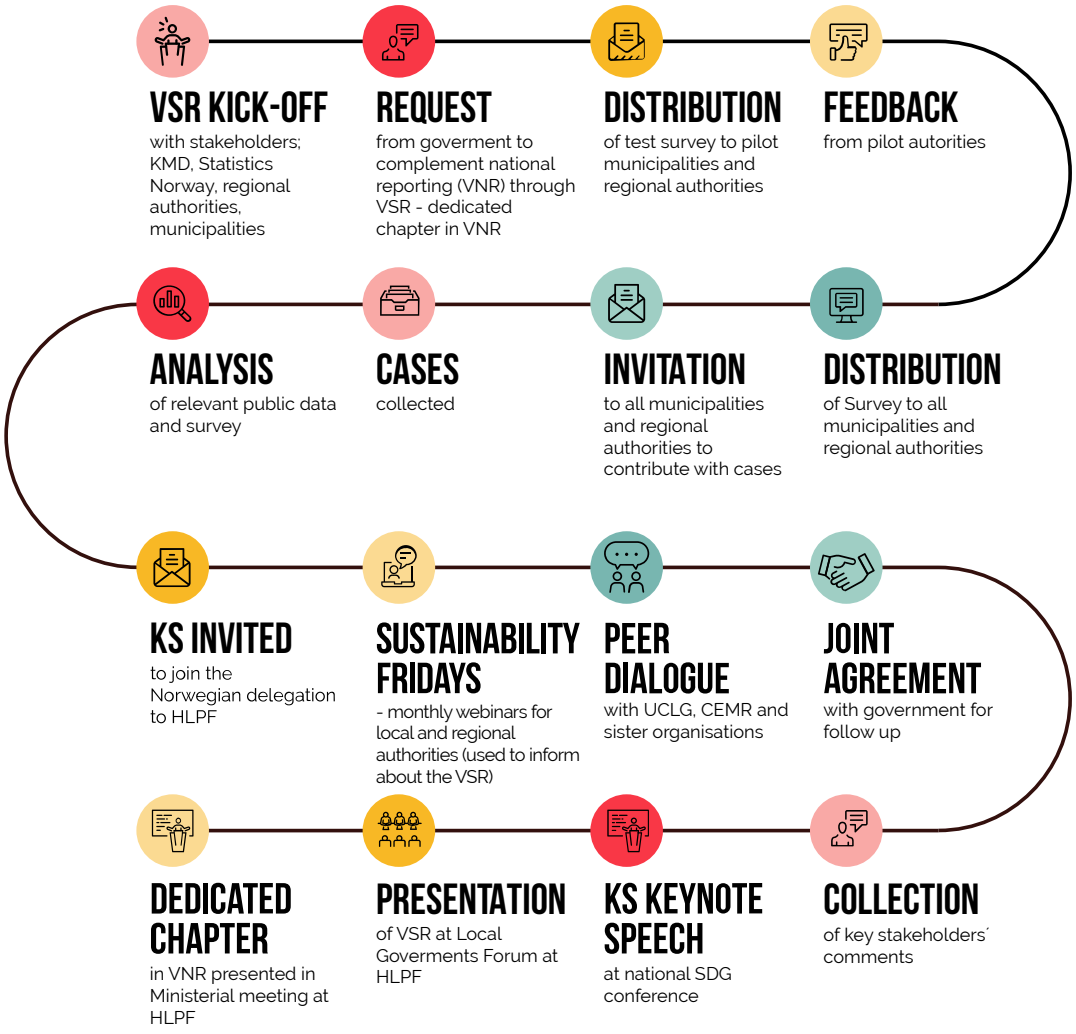
- Presentation of the VSR during the HLPF VLR-VSR Days.

AUGUST - SEPT

- Dissemination of the VSR findings within the LRGA and LRG members and distribution to other stakeholders

Norway has provided a helpful example of how the phases and process of VSR production can be organised. Here, stakeholder engagement and the operationalisation of the link between the VSR and VNR are central issues throughout the process (see Figure 6):

FIGURE 6: HOW KS PREPARED THE VSR



Source: Voluntary Subnational Review – Norway (2021)

4.2. CONNECTING THE VSR WITH THE VNR

There is no standard way to align or integrate the VSR into the national authorities' SDG reporting processes culminating in the production of a VNR. On the contrary, different scenarios may be envisaged, as a result of the many and varied institutional environments that can be found around the world. It is, however, certain that national SDG coordination mechanisms and systematic consultation can considerably facilitate integrating a VSR into its corresponding VNR.

The degree to which different national SDG coordination mechanisms consult LRGs and their associations with regard to SDG implementation and monitoring differs from

country to country. The national-subnational dialogue in a specific context may be limited, ad hoc, systemic, co-produced, or view LRGs as key actors for delivering the SDGs. In any of these cases, existing structures, such as SDG steering committees and national SDG focal points, can always be used to introduce the VSR process and can work together to take things from there. And vice versa, the VSR could be used as a vehicle to strengthen dialogue and coordination. The greater the institutionalisation of these processes and mechanisms for dialogue and joint work, the greater the integration of development policies at all levels and the mainstreaming of the local perspective and action in national decision-making for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. Figure 7 shows the different levels of dialogue that can take place between national authorities and LRGs.

FIGURE 7: SCHEMATIC REPRESENTATION OF THE DEPTH OF NATIONAL-SUB-NATIONAL DIALOGUE FOR SDG IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING

Source: GTF, UCLG and UN-Habitat, "Sustainable Cities Dialogue – Urban Governance at the Core of the Implementation of SDG 11," 2018

In many countries, the absence of consultation, or its ad-hoc nature, makes it difficult for LRGAs to tap into the SDG reporting process. Nevertheless, through dialogue with the national government and a provision for input in the reporting process, LRG data, information, conclusions and recommendations can be included in VNRs. This is the case of some LRGAs that have reported in the past, such as those of Zimbabwe and Indonesia, as highlighted below. In addition, VSRs have proved a good channel through which to advocate a larger role for the local level in national coordination mechanisms.

The ways in which national authorities could be approached by LRGAs and LRGs are, as previously mentioned, highly dependent on each country's enabling conditions and existing mechanisms. Whether approaching them via a phone call from the president of the LRGA, through an official letter, within the framework of a meeting of the national coordination mechanism, or by some other means, here are some arguments that could be used to emphasise the need for national authorities to consider VSRs as a critical tool to support their own work. They can be used to:

- **Enrich VNRs by providing information on the progress of SDG implementation at the local level.** VSRs provide a country-wide comprehensive analysis of the progress made by LRGs in implementing the 2030 Agenda. Their findings, the localized data that they use, and the examples and best practices that they put forward, can help enrich national reporting processes and, in particular, VNRs. This input will complement the central government perspective and the presentation of national policies and initiatives for achieving the SDGs.

- **Reinforce local engagement for the 2030 Agenda and multilevel coordination.** VSRs can help strengthen the involvement of LRGs in the SDG localization movement, and also exchanges between different tiers of government. They are not just part of a reporting exercise but also an essential, and transformative, tool for consolidating policy visions related to global sustainable agendas, help raise awareness and commitment among LRGs, and can be used to trigger an evolution in the way that policy making is carried out. In particular, as part of a process, VSRs pave the way towards a more effective whole-of-government approach for the achievement of the SDGs. To date, VSRs have had a positive impact. They have enhanced the participation of national LRGAs in national reporting processes and VNRs, and even in SDG coordination mechanisms. VSRs are also powerful tools for international advocacy. This has been shown by the many international events in which LRGAs and experts that had already produced a VSR have participated, such as the VLR-VSR Days organised during the 2021 HLPF.

- **Promote evidence-based and appropriate territorial policy-making.** It is important to encourage national governments to duly take notice of what is being done by their subnational governments to achieve the global sustainable agendas. This way they will be able to draw up and implement social, economic, and ecological territorial policies that can capitalise on, and develop, the full potential of these efforts, thereby providing improved responses to the obstacles and challenges that LRGs encounter. Based on the level of subnational engagement analysed in the VSRs, national governments can apply leverage to exploit multilevel synergies that will ensure better coordinated and more effective SDG implementation and reporting trajectories.

Photo Peter Kvetny
www.unsplash.com
Zimbabwe

In **Zimbabwe**, the institutional framework for SDG implementation is comprised by a steering committee at ministerial level and various technical committees with stakeholder participation, but these mechanisms do not yet include LRGs. Although the national reporting unit recognised that ZILGA (Zimbabwe Local Government Association) could contribute to its 2021 VNR, the request for input early in the process made it difficult for the association to provide detailed information. In March, ZILGA was able to synthesise preliminary inputs from its VSR and submit a paper on the work done by LRGs in SDG implementation. This was used to add brief notes to the VNR. In its 2021 VSR, ZILGA called for the national government to develop and implement a systematic institutional framework for SDG localization connecting national mechanisms to subnational governments. In July, the Ministry of Local Governments and Public Works participated in the presentation of the ZILGA VSR during the VLR-VSR Days, within the framework of the UN HLPF.

In **Indonesia**, an SDG National Coordination Team, headed by the Ministry of Planning (*Bappenas*), a Steering Committee and various Working Groups with representatives from civil society, coordinate SDG implementation and monitoring at the national level. LRGs do not participate in coordination mechanisms at the national level (although they do at the provincial and local levels) and are consulted on an ad hoc basis. In March 2021, in the first of three reporting years, a contribution to the VNR from LRGs was requested via the LRGAs (APEKSI, APPSI and ADEKSI, supported by the ITB SDGs Network under the auspices of UCLG-ASPAC). The LRGAs submitted their input at the end of April and their contribution was quoted in the VNR. In their 2021 VSR, amongst other measures, the LRGAs called for the integration of local government representatives into national coordination mechanisms for SDG implementation and for them to participate in the definition, implementation, monitoring and assessment of national SDG strategies at all levels. The Head of the National SDG Secretariat of *Bappenas*, who chairs the SDG National Coordination Committee, also participated in the presentation of the Indonesian VSR during the VLR-VSR Days, within the framework of the UN HLPF.

The systematic consultation of LRGAs, through regular meetings, can provide a solid basis for the inclusion of the local level in the national reporting process. This is relevant to national bodies for SDG implementation, as has been shown in Norway, where coordination with LRGs has recently been further institutionalised.

In **Norway**, the consultation of LRGs in SDG implementation and monitoring received a significant boost when, in 2020, the Ministry of Local Government appointed a national SDG implementation coordinator whose function is to maintain frequent dialogue with the local government association KS. Increased dialogue has enhanced coordination, improved communication between KS and the ministries of Local Government and of Finance, and ultimately persuaded the Prime Minister's office to assign a specific role and work to LRGs in order to achieve the SDGs. This has actually been the main focus of Norway's 2021 VNR. In January, KS was asked to prepare a 17-page report on progress made towards delivering the SDGs by Norway's municipalities and regions, which was finally included in the country's VNR by the end of March.

In most countries where VSRs have been produced, a summary is included as an annex to the VNR, or it is (at least partially) quoted in the VNR. In cases in which both VSRs and VLRs have been produced, the VLRs have often been included as annexes to the VSR and their data have been used to illustrate some of the VSR findings in greater detail.

The following Table shows the level of complementarity between VNRs, VSRs and VLRs (where applicable) in the countries in which VSRs were produced in 2020 and 2021.

Photo Redcharliefrom www.unsplash.com Florø, Norway

TABLE 2: LEVEL OF COMPLEMENTARITY BETWEEN VNRS, VSRS AND VLRS IN SELECTED COUNTRIES

COUNTRY	YEAR	VNR-VSR	VSR-VLR
Benin	2020	The VNR references the ANCB as part of its technical steering committee and includes four short sections on local government, but with no direct reference to the VSR	No VLRs.
Cape Verde	2021	The VNR describes its linkage with the VSR[13], refers to the national government's reinforced relationship with LRGs and includes many references to, and several excerpts from, the VSR.	No VLRs.
Costa Rica	2020	Chapter 9 of the VNR includes a section on LRGs, including the main results of the VSR and highlighting the added value of local contributions to the implementation, monitoring and reviewing of the SDGs.	No VLRs.
Ecuador	2020	Part 1 of the VNR includes a section on local and provincial governments, referencing the VSR and highlighting the added value of local and provincial contributions to SDG implementation, monitoring and reviews.	No VLRs.
Indonesia	2021	The VNR references the VSR and Surabaya's VLR and incorporates data from surveys conducted for the VSR as well as data from the VLR.	The first VLR from Surabaya was still underway during the preparation of the VSR. The VLR is mentioned, but was not used as input for the VSR.
Kenya	2020	Chapter 3 of the VNR includes a short section on subnational government and makes reference to the 2019 VLRs. It was initially announced that the VSR would be included as an annex to the VNR, but it was not finished on time for its inclusion.	The VSR includes a section on 'SDG localization by county governments', with highlights from, and summaries of, the five VLRs undertaken in the previous year (2019).
Mexico	2021	The VNR highlights the contribution of subnational governments to the successful localization of the SDGs. It refers to VLRs and its Chapter 2 includes a detailed summary of the VSR.	The VSR mentions the 5 VLRs.
Mozambique	2020	The VNR refers to ANAMM as a partner in the development of a VSR to feed the national VNR exercise.	No VLRs.
Germany	2021	The VNR includes an annex with a brief report by the Association of German Cities. This highlights the key findings of the VSR and summarises the three VLRs.	The VSR includes a chapter on the three German VLRs. It briefly presents them as examples of good practices, which are briefly compared.

13 This association's VSR is referred to as a VLR.

COUNTRY	YEAR	VNR-VSR	VSR-VLR
Nepal	2020	The VNR includes some references to LRGs. There is no direct reference to the VSR but, as a result of the process, the Chief Ministers of seven provinces and the chairpersons of the LRGAs have been included in the national High-Level Steering Committee on SDGs.	No VLRs.
Norway	2021	Chapter 7 of the VNR is specifically dedicated to the key role of LRGs in achieving the SDGs and provides an overview of key findings from the VSR.	The VSR refers to the five VLRs as separate appendixes.
Sweden	2021	Chapter 5 of the VNR includes a section entitled "Regional and local level", which includes input from the VSR as well as the main messages of the four VLRs.	The VSR contains an annex with summaries of the four VLRs.
Tunisia	2021	Chapter 6 of the VNR, entitled "alignment of SDGs with planning framework and national strategies" includes input on two city development strategies. Consultations relating to the VNR have been organised with presidents of 18 municipalities in order to exchange views on problems and experiences relating to specific SDGs.	No VLRs.
Zimbabwe	2021	The VNR makes reference to the VSR and underlines the importance of local authorities for the implementation of the SDGs. Synthesised information from the VSRs was used as input for the VNR.	The VSR contains text boxes with detailed experiences from the two VLRs contained in Chapter 4, relating to local actions to localise the SDGs. Data from the two VLRs was used as input for the VSR.

Source: own design

As already mentioned, past experiences show that the extent to which VSR and VLR input is integrated in the VNR largely depends on the timing of the reporting processes. This is specifically highlighted in the Swedish example, below. For this reason, it is essential to plan and establish direct contact with national-level authorities and with other stakeholders well ahead of the finalisation of the VNR. This will also allow the LRGA to extensively debate issues and to better align its focus with the expectations, and/or suggestions, of national authorities, and to request from them any data and information that the LRGA deems necessary for its VSR.

In **Sweden**, the VSR proved an excellent vehicle for stimulating further dialogue between the local government association, SALAR, and the national government about the SDGs. The main challenge in the process was timing. As the VNR and the two VLR processes started in late 2020, and were near finalisation when the VSR process began, coordination between the processes proved complex. The existence of only sporadic dialogue with the national government and the limited sharing of substantial parts of the VNR made writing the VSR challenging. Due to the lack of time available, its scope had to be reduced. Nevertheless, the increased dialogue between the LRGA and the national government about the reporting process led to the inclusion of a specific section dedicated to local government in the 2021 VNR and convinced the national level team to include the association in future reviews. SALAR's recommendation is to start your VSR early and to align it with the VNR process!

The processes of developing a VSR, and the report itself, have a usefulness and strength that go beyond the potential contribution they represent for national SDG monitoring processes, and VNRs in particular. This means that LRGAs that would like to engage in a dialogue with their national government on the implementation of the SDGs, to request support to LRGs in their efforts, or to foster better multi-level coordination mechanisms, among others, also have an interest in developing a VSR, even if their country has not committed to submitting a VNR to the HLPF that same year.

4.3. CREATING LOCAL OWNERSHIP: INVOLVING LOCAL AND REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS IN THE VSR PROCESS

The 2030 Agenda requires all levels of government and other stakeholders to contribute to achieving the sustainable development goals. For this to succeed, awareness and ownership of the SDGs needs to be increased across all subnational government levels, which is where LRGAs can play a pivotal role. The VSR process offers an opportunity to engage with members and stimulates dialogue regarding the challenges and opportunities implicit in SDG implementation.

The objective for LRGAs should be to involve a broad spectrum of LRGs in the reporting process. This will provide

a representative view of the state of local and regional SDG implementation and further stimulate the commitment of a large group of LRGs to the SDGs.

The involvement of members can be achieved by several means. Listed below are four such steps; those involving data gathering and the dissemination of findings will be discussed in more detail in Sections 4.4 and 4.7.

#1

Organising a VSR kick-off event before the start of the process (whether offline or online). It is important to invite local and regional governments and other stakeholders to participate, to introduce them to the VSR process, to discuss reporting priorities with them, and to explain them the data gathering process.

#2

Involving LRGs closely in the case studies and in the process of producing and gathering data and information. Input from local and regional governments lies at the core of the VSR. Whether conducting a survey, organising focus groups or field visits, carrying out video consultations, or gathering case studies, it is recommended to establish a small test group of a few LRGs to give feedback on your data gathering method. This will help to improve your methodology, and it could also increase the number, and quality, of your responses. You should seek to identify the LRGs that are most advanced in the localization process and pay particular attention to those that are working on (or have already published) VLRs. For more information, see Section 4.4 on gathering data, information and case studies.

#3

Using the LRGA's existing mechanisms, meetings and channels for communication for the VSR process. This can be done by the VSR coordination team within the LRGA. The LRGA should integrate information on the VSR process in its regular webinars, meetings and mailings. Communications about the VSR process need not be restricted to specific SDG information channels; instead, they can be weaved into sessions and communications on all SDG subthemes (such as social, economic and ecological sustainability).

#4

Collecting comments on the VSR. At different stages of the process of preparing the VSR, it is important to open up spaces to allow contributing LRGs to comment on the VSR. This could be done by them providing written comments, or by organising online, or in-person, feedback sessions, interviews and/or focus groups.

The involvement of LRGs in the reporting process presumes their familiarity with the SDGs. In many contexts, the absence of national strategies or directives on the localization of the SDGs, and the absence of an LRG community of practice related to SDG delivery, complicates the accumulation of local SDG know-how. In such cases, the VSR can provide an opportunity for the LRGA to develop capacity-building initiatives and to share knowledge about the SDGs with its

members. It is therefore vital for the LRGA to organise a sound kick-off event and to explain the importance and significance of the SDGs for the LRGs. Another idea is to establish a small group of front-running LRGs to steer the process, provide feedback on the data gathering approach, and support the full process from a closer position.

Norway's process of involving members included a VSR kick-off with the involvement of stakeholders such as the national statistical office and LRGs. A test survey for LRGs was distributed to a selected group of LRGs for piloting and validation. Two different surveys were distributed: one went to all the municipalities and the other was sent to all regional governments; this process was completed in February-March.[14] The surveys were then followed by an invitation to make further contributions through information about specific cases. Via the "Sustainability Fridays" (monthly webinars organised by the association for its members), LRGs were informed about progress on the VSR. The association then collected key stakeholder comments, delivered a keynote speech at the national conference on the SDGs to draw attention to the VSR, and presented the VSR at the Local Government Forum held at the UN HLPF.

In **Tunisia,** the association FNCT succeeded in involving 59 municipalities in a VSR process through a survey.[15] However, not all of its municipalities were familiar with the SDGs; 34,8% were not. The absence of national-level orientation on SDG localization adds to limited conceptual, methodological and institutional clarity regarding the localization of the SDGs; this in turn makes it difficult for municipalities to relate to the 2030 Agenda and the reporting process. Despite this complicated involvement of municipalities in the VSR process, the process proved highly valuable for assessing local needs in terms of the SDGs and inspired ideas as to how the FNCT could provide further support to municipalities and help them in the localization of the SDGs. This was done by providing relevant documentation and organising sessions to reinforce the capacity of municipalities to implement and monitor progress with the SDGs.

Photo Med Mhamdi
www.unsplash.com
Nefza, Beja, Tunisia

14 In total, 33% of the municipalities (118 out of 356) and 73% of the regional authorities (8 out of 11) responded to the survey.
15 In total, 80% of the municipalities (59 out of 76) responded to the survey.

4.4. HOW TO GATHER INFORMATION, CASE STUDIES AND DATA

The global SDG monitoring strategy is centred around collecting data and indicators with which to measure progress. Data and indicators are crucial for establishing a baseline (a way of measuring where we are now), identifying what we want to achieve (measuring targets), visualising the challenges to be confronted, and deciding how the SDGs can help us to find strategic solutions. **Data and indicators permit us to measure the impact of local and regional SDG policies, to assess which changes are necessary, and to plan for a more sustainable future.** They can also help us to analyse social and economic differences between different localities and regions, and amongst the members of their communities. This is particularly true when the data used are disaggregated by territories. This also applies when the data can be broken down by socio-economic background (e.g. by income, by educational level), structure of the population (e.g. by sex, by age) and components (e.g. by race, ethnicity, migratory status, sexual identity and disability) so as to better target policies and to make sure to leave no one behind. This is of crucial importance in order to define national (and local) strategies for monitoring, creating indicators and data collection.

Importantly, collecting quantitative data and the use of indicators are complementary, not substitutive, of qualitative analyses. The mutual reinforcement between quantitative assessments and case studies is essential for our understanding of local experiences, the reality and complexity of local development, the potential opportunities and setbacks, and the different roles that local stakeholders play on the ground. Collecting this information complements gathering statistical data and helps us to understand the local reality when quantitative data that might help us to do this either does not exist, or is insufficient.

Main ideas on information and data collection

Firstly, it is important to understand that data and information collection should be a systematic and ongoing process and one carried out throughout the year; it should not just start when embarking on the VSR process. Given the limited time available to prepare the VSR, **it is important to look for pre-existing data and information that can be used as input for your VSR**, instead of trying to establish an ad-hoc monitoring system.

National institutes of statistics usually have a relevant amount of localized data that would certainly be of use

when preparing a VSR. Approaching this institution should therefore be considered a critical part of the process. It would also be highly advisable to establish a strong relationship with it that could be nurtured at both levels of government (particularly as the LRGA can also provide strategic and fundamental data and information to the national institution) and sustained over time. However, not all the data and information collected by the national authorities will necessarily be disaggregated by territory or be geospatial. Consequently, and as mentioned in Section 4.3, it will be critically important to involve your members in gathering information to develop your VSR. In the last few years, LRGAs have gathered data from their members in various ways, several of which are highlighted here. As mentioned above, systematising the generation and collection of SDG-related information and data on a constant basis throughout the year facilitates the task of preparing the VSR.

Ady Carrera
VSR coordinator, Professor of CIECAS at the *Instituto Politécnico Nacional* and the College of Fiscal Studies of the Fiscal Institute of the State of Mexico (IHAEM). See the Mexican VSR (2021) here: *https://gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/mexico_2021_0.pdf*

"In Mexico, the collaborative and inclusive work, which involved FLACMA, CGLU, GiZ, the Federal Government, the governments of different entities, and numerous associations of municipalities, was the most important factor that made it possible to produce the VSR in such a short time. For some time now, the work carried out by the state governments has been closely monitored and this provided up-to-date information for the VSR. Another significant factor was the policy, which has been applied by the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía* (National Institute of Statistics and Geography) for many years now, of collecting and keeping a large quantity of up-to-date data which are disaggregated at the municipal level."

The following is a summary of five methods of data and information collection that can be used to develop the VSR. The annex provides an additional table that analyses these methods further.

Surveys. To date, most VSRs have been partly based on information gathered through surveys. The advantage of using surveys is that they provide an easy-to-use overview of large amounts of comparable data. When using digital surveys, it is critical to ensure that they are easily accessible

to LRG staff. They must be accessible via different means (which means that there must be the possibility to work with them both online and offline, taking into account the existence of territories with poor access to the internet), be provided in the different languages of a given territory, and have a methodology that is both easy to follow and clear (e.g. using closed answers to multiple-choice questions and with only a reduced number of open questions).

- A **small test group**, of the type recommended above, could help to ascertain whether the draft survey initially prepared would provide the desired results and could be used as initially prepared, or whether some changes would be needed before its dissemination (e.g. Would members of the test group understand all the questions on their first reading?, Is everything well programmed?, Are there any questions or options that could be formulated in a better way?, Are any important questions or options missing?).

- Another question to consider relates to the arrangement of **interactive sessions** in which the organisers would explain the goals and questions of the survey to the target audience. This would allow the audience to ask questions. Such an approach would increase the effectiveness of the questions and utility of the answers, as people would probably respond more adequately to the specific questions posed.

Photo Taha Loukil
www.unsplash.com
Sfax, Tunisia

In **Tunisia**, as said above, a questionnaire inspired by a UCLG template was adapted and shared with 76 municipalities. The UCLG template, revised on a yearly basis, allows the network to gather very valuable data and to produce the annual report to the HLPF, entitled 'Towards the localization of the SDGs', on behalf of the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments. It can be found at the following address: *http://survey.uclg.org/en/*

In **Norway,** the two separate questionnaires sent out had similar structures. Thematically, they related to the 'Policy and Enabling Environment' chapter in the UNDESA Global Guiding Elements for VLRs, but adjusted its content to fit the Norwegian municipal and regional context. The survey included the following main themes: 1. Understanding, owning and engaging with the SDGs, 2. SDG strategy and management, 3. The principle of "leaving no one" behind, 4. Priority areas, 5. Innovation and partnerships, 6. Structural barriers and critical considerations for success, and 7. the COVID-19 pandemic. Questionnaires were sent to Chief Executive Officers from municipal and regional institutions, and also to central e-mail addresses. The recipients were invited to either respond themselves, or to forward the questionnaires for completion by managers with designated responsibility for sustainability.

In 2020, similar surveys were circulated by LRGAs in: **Costa Rica** (which received 50 replies from 81 municipalities), **Ecuador** (14 from 23 provincial governments), **Benin** (the survey was sent to LRGs and to key partners; 80% responded) and **Nepal** (a questionnaire was sent to selected LRGs).

Photo Alessandro Sacchi
www.unsplash.com
Toffo, Benin

Field visits. They can be of great added value in creating local enthusiasm for the SDGs, and also for reaching regions which are less easily contacted digitally. Visits can also reinforce relationships between LRGAs and their member LRGs. It is important to bear in mind that organising field visits needs to be included in the planning and budgeting phases of the project. This must be done appropriately, considering how much time will be required for each visit and forecasting any related expenditures. Moreover, since the COVID-19 outbreak, it is also critically important to factor into calculations the potential cancellation of field visits due to travel restrictions. As a result, it is not currently very recommendable to build data collection strategies that are solely based around field visits.

Photo Danique Tersmettei
www.unsplash.com
Praia, Cape Verde

In **Mozambique**, field visits were initially organised to a sample of municipalities (17 with different typologies and in different regions). However, as a result of the lockdown caused by COVID-19, surveys had to be disseminated as an alternative (one of these was general and the others were specifically for the executive, assemblies and civil society); these were conducted in addition to interviews with structured questions. In **Cape Verde**, field visits were also planned to the majority of the islands, but the number of municipalities visited was finally limited to two due to the restrictions imposed to combat the pandemic.

Video consultations. One of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic has been that people have become more used to making video calls. Organising video consultations with individuals or groups of LRGs can be an excellent way to spread knowledge about the SDGs, create enthusiasm, and reach people in faraway regions, in an inexpensive way. They can be a very appropriate alternative to field visits when time, costs and/or emergency measures do not allow travel. However, and as previously mentioned with regard to digital surveys, it should be borne in mind that it is important to avoid increasing any potential barriers to participation in the VSR process for those who have less access to the internet.

The LRGAs which reported in 2020 (**Benin, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Kenya, Mozambique** and **Nepal**) and those reporting in 2021, all carried out virtual interviews during lockdowns.

Focus groups. The organisation of focus groups can be helpful not only to gather information about the SDGs, but also to exchange it. Focus groups allow the exchange, discussion and validation of information; they thereby increase horizontal dialogue (between local and regional governments), vertical dialogue (between local and regional government, associations and national government), and also interactions with other stakeholders (such as civil society). Focus groups may have different purposes, such as facilitating discussion about specific areas (SDGs, sustainability pillars, etc.) or about different phases of the process.

In **Indonesia**, a targeted approach to promote the involvement of LRGs and gather data was chosen by the LRGAs APEKSI, APPSI and ADEKSI. Based on an established set of criteria, 15 provinces, 15 municipalities and 5 regencies were chosen to form focus groups for the review. These LRGs were involved in the process which was conducted through surveys, interviews and the organisation of focus groups discussions in conjunction with provincial and district governments and associations. The latter focused their attention on the main ideas initially set out in the surveys.

Photo Tom Fisk
www.pexels.com
Jakarta, Indonesia

The selection of case studies

Detailed case studies, or "innovative practices", are what really brings a VSR to life. The sources can be VLRs or case studies which are requested from LRGs by their respective associations (e.g. as follow-ups to surveys or interviews, or after their identification in relevant complementary literature or successful projects). **When choosing case studies, it is important to gather a genuinely representative sample of the diversity of the LRGs in your country and also of the population covered** (including different social groups and communities, such as women, children and young people, migrants, people with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ populations etc.). The following list of criteria for the selection of case studies may be of help.

Photo Los Muertos Crew
www.pexels.com
Chenalhó, Mexico

When choosing case studies, the majority of which were conducted at the municipal level, **Mexico** adopted eight criteria which respected the heterogeneity of the country and its population:

1. Transversality (the experience should cover several different SDGs)

2. Multi-stakeholder participation

3. Innovation

4. Measurable outcomes

5. Management

6. Institutionalisation

7. Replicability

8. Focus on vulnerable or structurally discriminated social groups (leave no one behind)

The expert in charge of the VSR in Mexico, Ady Carrera, stresses that: "In a very heterogeneous country, both small and indigenous governments and metropolitan (and richer) governments implement very interesting actions for SDG implementation. Our selection of practices seeks to show that SDG implementation can be done at all levels and doesn't require big budgets, but rather depends on stakeholder engagement."

In **Indonesia**, three criteria were used for the choice of inspiring practices:

1. The principle of leave no one behind

2. Human rights-oriented activities

3. A good response to COVID-19

In **Kenya,** the Council of Governors and County Assemblies Forum reviewed the integrated development plans of selected counties and used a database of inspiring practices.

Other key criteria for the use of case studies, policy documents and other public sources of LRGs in the VSR could include:[16]

#1

The implementation agency and responsibility have to lie with the local or regional administration. The VSR should highlight the initiatives of LRGs and any related organisations as key drivers for SDG implementation and localization. Initiatives driven by ministries belonging to national governments can also be integrated into the VSR if they actively involve LRGs in their planning, implementation, monitoring and/or evaluation processes. The agency and responsibility for initiatives either should lie with, or be shared with, LRGs within their recognised tasks and responsibilities. In the same vein, initiatives that are co-produced by LRGs and local stakeholders (civil society, private companies, academia…) are more than welcome and should emphasise the critical role played by local public institutions in the success of the practices highlighted.

#2

Documents should provide data and information on the actual implementation of SDG initiatives. Use documents that include examples of locally or regionally-based reviewing and monitoring of the implementation processes: general planning instruments or strategies need to be completed with information that shows actual implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Even if it is sometimes too difficult or too early to assess the direct impact of a given practice, an effort should be made to demonstrate its tangible results.

16 Adapted from UCLG and UN-Habitat, Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews, vol.1: A Comparative Analysis of Existing VLRs (2020), p. 12.

LRGAs should also consider including references, practices and data that, even if not explicitly related to, or mentioning the SDGs, show the role of LRGs in the localization of the SDGs. Even when LRGs are not aware of it, they have often already been taking action to implement the SDGs for several years. The reason is that the majority of the 17 SDGs and 169 targets cover activities that refer to their day-to-day work (education, health, water and sanitation, waste management, public transport, housing, sustainable environmental protection and climate change, among many others). Indeed, without LRG action, the SDGs would be impossible to achieve.

The documents and practices used to provide information for the VSR should preferably make reference to the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda as the framework in which the LRGs and their communities are developing the localisation and implementation initiatives. Progress towards achieving the SDGs should respect their universal, integrated and interrelated nature. LRGAs are recommended to carefully weigh up these considerations and to make their choices explicit in the VSR.

It is important that the LRGA systematises the generation and collection of SDG-related information, data and case studies over the course of the year. This will allow for much easier collection and analysis, given the inevitable time constraints. For example, best practice awards given to LRGs by the LRGA could be ranked according to the SDGs and the specific goal(s) to which they contribute. If the LRGA has its database organised by SDGs, the selection of information, data and case studies will be much faster.

Guidelines on indicators

As stated above, the collection of indicators is a key aspect of monitoring progress towards achieving the SDGs. There are, however, several challenges for LRGs and their associations which wish to embark upon this endeavour. Firstly, whereas the official UN system developed by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDGs (IAEG-SDGs) adopted 231 official statistical indicators,[17] it should be noted that these were conceived for the national level. This means that they are often not easily transposable at the local level and usually need to be redefined and localized. While the principles of the 2030 Agenda require the use of data that have been

17 United Nations Statistics Division, "SDG Indicators: Global indicator framework for the Sustainable Development Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development," 2021, *https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/indicators-list/*

disaggregated by gender, age, ethnicity, rural/urban, etc., this information may only be partially collected, or even be non-existent, for the majority of SDGs and territories. In addition to this, the limited capacities of national and local statistics offices mean that they cannot necessarily ensure the regular collection of localized data. This situation is especially worrying in developing countries.

Various sets of SDG indicators are available and some of these are either designed at the local level or adjusted versions of the official UN set. Within the framework of the VLRs, some LRGs have made extraordinary efforts to develop localized indicators adapted to their own local priorities (including the cities of Barcelona, Bristol, Buenos Aires, Los Angeles, Sao Paulo, and Suwon, among others). One third of the LRGAs reporting in 2021 were working closely with their national (or regional) statistics offices to adapt local indicators to national monitoring systems, as well as collaborating with other types of institution (academia, think tanks, civil society organisations, international agencies, etc). Some of the LRGAs that prepared their VSRs in 2021 have been developing different strategies (see the boxes below). Other countries, such as Indonesia, Kenya and Mexico, are also making great efforts to develop national monitoring systems that are capable of integrating the different levels of government into the reporting process, even when they have been faced with multiple challenges. **The most effective monitoring systems are those based on joint and coordinated efforts between different levels of government, LRGs, and/or stakeholders.**

Although a detailed overview of all the sets available is beyond the scope of this Section, several international initiatives need to be mentioned here.[18] UN-Habitat is currently developing the Global Urban Monitoring Framework whose purpose is to harmonise existing urban indicators to track the performance of both the urban SDGs and the New Urban Agenda[19] and to support the production of VLRs. The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) has developed a set of Global Monitoring Indicators that has 100 parameters linked to the SDGs; this is already being used in several countries, including India, the USA, Bolivia, Italy and Spain.[20] The European Commission's Joint Research Centre recently presented a handbook for VLRs including 71 indicators[21] and has recently tested them in six European pilot cities.[22] Working in collaboration with the French government, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR-CCRE) has developed a Reference Framework for Sustainable Cities (RFSC) to assist cities in the implementation of urban SDGs, which is based around 30 indicators.[23]

18 Agustí Fernández de Losada, Alexander Heichlinger and Julia Bosse, "Comparative Study on SDG Monitoring Systems at Local and Regional Levels," 2021, *https://gold.uclg.org/report/localizing-sdgs-boost-monitoring-reporting#field-sub-report-tab-5*

19The resources are available online here: *https://www.urbanagendaplatform.org/news/un-system-wide-urban-monitoring-framework-being-developed-support-local-and-regional*; *https://unhabitat.org/programme/global-urban-observatories* and *https://unhabitat.org/tools-and-guides*

20 SDSN, "Indicators and a Monitoring Framework for the Sustainable Development Goals: Launching a data revolution for the SDGs," 2015, *https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/be6d1d56/files/uploaded/150612-FINAL-SDSN-Indicator-Report1.pdf*

21 Alice Siragusa et al., "European Handbook for SDG Voluntary Local Reviews," 2020, *https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/bitstream/JRC118682/european_handbook_for_sdg_voluntary_local_reviews_online.pdf*

22 Alice Siragusa et al., "Building urban datasets for the SDGs: Six European cities monitoring the 2030 Agenda", 2021, *https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC126179*

23 The 30 indicators are described in detail at this link: *http://rfsc.eu/european-framework/*

Photo Sonya Taraba
www.pexels.com
Cologne, Germany

In **Germany,** an SDG Portal was specifically developed to measure the progress of LRGs in achieving the SDGs. The "SDG-Portal" is based on 60 indicators for LRGs. These context indicators measure various parameters, including poverty and economic development, and compare the current situation with previous ones, and/or with situations in other municipalities. The portal also contains over 200 inspiring practices. Information from the portal was also used as the basis for the municipal contribution to Germany's Voluntary National Review. A similar initiative is being developed in Italy by the association AICCRE.

In **Sweden**, a set of SDG indicators for local governments has been developed by the national statistics bureau. This was inspired by the work of the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, by Sweden's environmental objectives, and by Germany's choice of SDG indicators for the local and regional levels. The 50 indicators are grouped under the different SDGs and are based on current official statistics. The Swedish Council for Municipal Analysis has also developed an open database called Kolada, on behalf of SALAR.

In **Norway,** the association KS, working in partnership with the country's national statistics office (Statistics Norway), has developed a taxonomy to classify SDG-related indicators. Existing data sources were used to objectively assess the status of, and progress towards achieving, goals and targets at the local and regional levels. The analysis of progress was not structured goal per goal, but rather organised around the municipal sector's six priority policy areas (which are largely based on the SDGs). At the same time, 30 cities are currently assessing the implementation of the SDGs through the U4SSC Key Performance Indicators for smart and sustainable cities, which were developed by UNECE.[24]

24 The full methodological guide to the KPIs is available online: Cristina Bueti and Domenica Carriero, "Collection Methodology for Key Performance Indicators for Smart Sustainable Cities," United 4 Smart Sustainable Cities, 2017, *https://bit.ly/35lg7L0*

In **Mexico**, the indicators used for measuring six SDGs at the state and local government levels were based on the official national indicators (localization is currently in progress). A platform on municipal data (DatMun) was launched in 2019 by the National Statistics Office in order to access key information for local planning and the SDGs. A complementary methodology from UNDP has also been used to measure 16 SDGs at the state and local government levels. The methodology used by the Municipal Progress Index on the SDGs generates disaggregated information and provides a comprehensive assessment of the progress of subnational governments, allowing comparisons, and complementing their own monitoring efforts.[25]

25 UNDP, "Metodología de Índice de Avance Municipal de los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible," 2019, *https://gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/metodologia_pnud_medicion_ods.pdf* For more details, also see the Mexican VSR published in 2021: *https://gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/mexico_2021_0.pdf*

To summarise, when developing a set of indicators, the following recommendations should be considered:

- generate sound indicators that it will be possible to track, maintain and fund over time and on a regular basis; it is also important to consider the financial, technical and human resources available and to avoid being over-ambitious
- establish indicators that cover all the pillars of sustainable development, i.e. the social, environmental and economic pillars, but also the governance pillar
- disaggregate data by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability and geographic location and any other characteristics that may be relevant within the context
- consider the use of data generated by public institutions as well as non-governmental data (data generated by academia or CSOs, citizen-driven data, big data, and geospatially disaggregated data, amongst others) so as to overcome data gaps and be able to contrast official data sources; generate vertical as well as horizontal coordination for the production of data as well as for the monitoring activities themselves
- complement data with qualitative information and case studies

4.5. HOW TO WORK WITH CIVIL SOCIETY, ACADEMIA, THE PRIVATE SECTOR AND DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS

Involving civil society and leaving no one behind

For a VSR to be comprehensive, it is important that the LRGAs and LRGs providing input engage with civil society and local stakeholders in a meaningful way and that particular attention is given to structurally discriminated populations. In some countries, CSOs are currently developing their own shadow reports at the global and national levels (e.g. the "Progressing National SDGs Implementation" independent assessment, which is published annually by a coalition of NGOs working at the global level; Colombia's "*Informe Luz*"; Sri Lanka's "Voluntary People's Review", etc.), with which VSRs could coordinate, so as to offer a broader, more integrated, vision of different territories.[26] If, as in Sri Lanka, there is an initiative of this type, it could be a good idea to incorporate it into the SDG stakeholder platform so as to foster exchanges amongst different stakeholders and promote the combined gathering of data, information and key messages, which could then be passed on to the relevant national authorities.

The general population, and structurally discriminated groups in particular, are usually excluded from traditional engagement mechanisms. Ways towards more direct means of engagement should therefore be explored, such as encouraging LRGs to approach civil society organisations that work with these groups. Particularly in the COVID-19 recovery, VSRs could be used as a tool to provide critical information on the exacerbation of inequalities as a result of the pandemic. The inclusion of a diverse group of stakeholders who have traditionally not had a voice in decision-making could help to ensure that the COVID-19 recovery keeps people (and sustainability) at the centre of attention, rather than business as usual. **VSRs can help to bring marginalised groups to the table and enable them to share their experiences and priorities**. Tailor-made methodologies, dynamics, mechanisms and instruments should be put in place that acknowledge and highlight the specific needs and capabilities of the different target groups.

26 At the global level, see IISD's reports "Progressing National SDG Implementation: An Independent assessment of the voluntary national review reports submitted to the UN HLPF", which have been published yearly since 2016: *https://www.iisd.org/publications/progressing-national-sdgs-implementation*

Collaborating with academia and the private sector

Producing a high-quality report, preferably based on a data system that, once set up, can be maintained over time, is a task that LRGAs cannot usually assume on their own. LRGAs may therefore wish to collaborate with universities, the research sector, and the private sector to collect existing and new information, and to develop and systemise the production of VSRs and/or VLRs. Academia and the private sector can also play a valuable role in the dissemination of VSR findings and in their transformation into proposals to improve public policy.

Collaborating with development partners

In a number of countries, LRGAs have received support from development partners for the development of their VSRs. In the majority of countries, UN national coordinators and UNDP play an important role in the VNR process. LRGAs are encouraged to contact them and inform them about their VSR process and to ask for their support (information, consultation, etc.). The Decentralization and Local Governance Network (DeLoG), which includes various cooperation agencies, has collaborated with UCLG in a number of different countries to support VSR initiatives. UN-Habitat and regional UN Commissions (such as UNECA, in Africa, and UNESCAP, in Asia Pacific), as well as GiZ (the German development cooperation agency) have supported VLR processes in different countries. They do this by providing technical advice, financial support, or extra input for the report.

In 2020, **Mozambique**'s VSR was supported via an agreement between ANAMM, UCLG and the development partner GiZ. In Benin, the development of the VSR by the association ANCB was also supported with technical advice from GiZ. In 2021, a similar agreement was implemented in **Mexico**, involving the national office in charge of the VNR, GiZ, LRGAs (FLACMA and UCLG) and a university (Tech Monterrey), to support the development of the VSR and six VLRs. In **Indonesia**, the preparation of the VSR was supported by the UCLG ASPAC project "Localize" and the EU. In **Tunisia**, international donors and development partners supporting the country's decentralisation process, such as USAID, BIT, Cities Alliance and CILG-VNG International, were interviewed to provide input for the VSR. In **Zimbabwe**, consultative meetings with international organisations were also organised to obtain further input for the VSR.

It might not be possible to get all the potentially interesting organisations involved in the VSR process at the same time. It is important to plan who the partners in the endeavour will be at the beginning of the process (i.e. when drawing up the roadmap) and to decide at which stage, or stages, the LRGA will request their participation, and under what terms will they contribute (i.e. what their specific tasks will be). There should be regular and smooth communication with such partners, with the aim of ensuring: the continuity of their ownership of the process; their compliance with the tasks allocated to them; and that they will meet the deadlines previously agreed with them and therefore avoid any delays or unforeseen problems.

Photo Ana Campos
www.pexels.com
Oslo, Norway

4.6. WRITING THE REPORT

VSRs are a new instrument with which to explore together and learn by doing. This also means that there is no official template for VSRs. This Section presents some guidelines for how to structure them, based on VSR experiences from 2020 and 2021.

As an illustration of the above, it should be noted how the VSRs presented to date have differed in structure. In 2020, the VSRs roughly followed the VNR guidelines, with a few minor adaptations. In those of Benin and Mozambique, for example, the second part of the review was based on a selection of SDGs (7 for Benin, and 10 for Mozambique). In the VSR for Nepal, the association found examples for all 17 SDGs. Several VSRs presented a selection of case studies (from 2 to 10) which underlined the interlinkages between the SDGs. All the VSRs presented proposed policy recommendations. Finally, the reviews differed in length (ranging from 37 to 70 pages long).

In 2021, the structures of the VSRs presented varied, but steps were clearly made towards a more unified format. A structure suggested by UCLG (see below) was followed by Indonesia and Zimbabwe and was also more or less visible in the other six VSRs submitted. Almost all the VSRs started with an introduction, followed by a chapter, or section, on methodology, and then continued to discuss national policies and the institutional enabling environment for SDG implementation. The second part of their analyses then focused on how LRGs work to achieve the SDGs. Several of these VSRs included case studies, either as additional chapters or in their annex. Three out of eight VSRs presented featured a specific chapter, or section, on the means of implementation (financing). All of the documents concluded with recommendations and further steps to follow. They ranged from 28 to 82 pages in length (excluding annexes).

Suggested structure

To support the reporting associations, in 2021, UCLG suggested a VSR structure that combines the VNR and VLR guidelines but which is tailored to the specific requirements of the LRGA reporting exercise:

OPENING STATEMENT

HIGHLIGHTS

1. INTRODUCTION

2. METHODOLOGY FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE REPORT

3. POLICIES AND ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR THE LOCALIZATION OF THE SDGS

- **a)** National Strategies for the implementation and localization of the SDGs
- **b)** National coordination mechanisms
- **c)** Enabling institutional environment for LRGs

4. LOCAL AND REGIONAL ACTIONS TO LOCALIZE THE SDGS

- **a)** Actions to create local ownership and leave no one behind
- **b)** Mapping local and regional government efforts to implement the different SDGs
- **c)** Progress made in the implementation of the goals and targets

5. MEANS OF IMPLEMENTATION

6. CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

ANNEX: INDICATORS

Guiding questions for content with the suggested structure

The following content suggestions are based on the structure suggested by UCLG and have been roughly adapted from UNDESA's Global Guiding Elements for VLRs, but also tailored to meet the needs of LRGAs.

Photo Ryoji Iwata
www.unsplash.com
Tokyo, Japan

OPENING STATEMENT

Objective of this section: to showcase how the reporting entity sees the SDGs as part of their vision for a sustainable future; to show how the SDGs are integrated into the LRGA's vision, plans and strategies; and to highlight the main messages that the VSR seeks to convey.

- A short message from the President of the LRGA to underline the role of LRGs in the localization of the SDGs and the main messages to the national government and partners (1 page)

HIGHLIGHTS

Objective of this section: to get the attention of the reader by conveying the main messages of the VSR and to include some success stories, review the challenges faced and highlight the lessons learnt.

- A brief summary of the key findings and progress made by the LRGA and LRGs in the country concerned towards the localization of the SDGs (progress and obstacles), including the main takeaways and some recommendations for the future (2-3 pages)

1 . INTRODUCTION

Objective of this section: to briefly contextualise the development of the VSR in the country and the goals that it pursues.

- A short description of the characteristics of the LRGs in your country (e.g. number, tiers, responsibilities, etc).
- What were your reasons for carrying out a VSR? Why is the localization of the SDGs important for LRGs? Have you previously produced any other VSRs or VLRs? If so, what was the impact?
- How are LRGs in your country working towards sustainability?
- How are LRGs involved in your national SDG policies?
- Presentation of the structure of the report

Photo Georgeta Dendrino
www.pexels.com
London, England

2. METHODOLOGY

Objective of this section: to report on the methodology used to produce the VSR

- What methodology was used to develop the VSR?
- How was the process coordinated (i.e. by the LRGA, by multiple LRGAs, by a drafting team consisting of associations and members, or by a drafting team including experts, etc.)?
- Were certain SDGs prioritised? If so, how did the decision-making process go? And how will areas that were not initially prioritised be dealt with in the future?
- How was the country-wide inclusion of LRGs ensured? Were other local stakeholders included? If so, how were they chosen?
- What methodology was adopted to ensure that the process was inclusive? How can inclusivity be improved in the future?
- How were the data, information and case studies collected? And what were the main challenges, gaps and opportunities in this process?
- How have SDG data and indicators been localized by LRGs in your country? And what are the main challenges that they face in this task?
- What lessons can be learnt from the process that will help to streamline future work?

3. POLICY AND AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR THE LOCALIZATION OF THE SDGS

Objective of this section: to describe the main characteristics of the system of governance and to illustrate the relationship between the subnational levels of government and the national level; to highlight different national strategies for SDG implementation and, in particular, their localization, the dialogue between these levels carried out through coordination mechanisms, and the extent to which the institutional environment enables and promotes local action towards achieving the 2030 Agenda.

a) National strategies for the implementation and localization of the SDGs

- What are the main national strategies for the implementation and localization of the SDGs? How do they affect and involve LRGs?

b) National coordination mechanisms

- How would you describe the relationship between LRGs, their association, and the national government (particularly with regard to the national institutions in charge of the coordination and reporting) and their combined work on SDG implementation?
- How do LRGs cooperate to implement the SDGs? For example, do they achieve this through their association?

c) Enabling institutional environment for LRGs

- What tasks and responsibilities do LRGs carry out in order to implement the SDGs? How does this fit in with the general process of decentralization in your country?
- How are fiscal decentralization and local finance being mobilised to support the localization of the SDGs (e.g. analyse the share of subnational government revenue and expenditure in the national budget, local investment, etc.)? Or is this not taking place?
- Does the national institutional framework facilitate dialogue and collaboration between the different levels of government in order to support implementation of the SDGs, create synergies, and reduce overlaps? (multi-level governance)
- How does the national planning system facilitate the implementation of the SDGs and coordination with LRGs (for example, to integrate national SDG priorities into regional and local plans, and vice versa)? How do sectoral ministerial strategies (e.g. urban policies, health, and education) take into account subnational plans and priorities in order to promote localization?

Anne Romsaas
Chief Adviser on SDGs, Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS). See the Norwegian VSR (2021) here: *https://gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/norway_2021.pdf*

"In Norway, we have benefited from good relations and an existing system of consultation and dialogue with the national government. This made it possible to achieve an inclusive reporting process covering the whole of government. National reports tend to fall short when it comes to understanding and explaining local and regional progress towards the SDGs. Through combining a VNR with a VSR and several VLRs, as Norway has now done, we can learn from their individual shortcomings and take appropriate action. During the reporting process, KS entered into a political agreement with the country's national Government to take joint action on SDG implementation. This agreement ensures that we can transfer knowledge from the voluntary reports into joint action, across different levels of government."

4. LOCAL AND REGIONAL ACTIONS TO LOCALIZE THE SDGS

Objective of this section: to demonstrate the critical role that LRGs are playing in the pursuit of the 2030 Agenda by establishing baselines and highlighting trends, successes, challenges, emerging issues and lessons learned, along with the actions they have taken to address existing gaps and challenges.

a) Actions to create local ownership and leave no one behind

- What do your LRGAs do to promote the SDGs among LRGs? (e.g. campaigns, training, communication, etc.)

- What are the main commitments undertaken and/or actions implemented by LRGs in your country to support the SDGs (or other sustainable development agendas: Paris Climate Agreements, Sendai Framework to prevent natural disasters, New Urban Agenda, etc.)? For example: statements, conferences, action plans, etc. Point out the most important initiatives that they have been involved in.

- What are main actions that the LRGs in your territory have taken to foster the dissemination and promotion of the SDGs among their citizens and local stakeholders? Do your LRGs participate in campaigns, or national initiatives, in favour of the SDGs initiated by civil society and/or other actors? (if yes, give examples)

- Does multi-stakeholder involvement influence the localization of the SDGs? i.e. in your country, do local alliances and platforms support and promote innovation, partnerships, and cooperation? How diverse is multi-stakeholder involvement to help localize the SDGs?

- How is the principle of leaving no one behind translated into practice at the LRG level? Are those further behind identified in policy making and implementation, and how are they supported by concrete actions? (e.g. during the pandemic, many LRGs have offered alternatives for homeless people and ensured access to food and essential services for the most vulnerable)

- How are human rights, non-discrimination and gender equality integrated into local strategies, plans, programmes and policies?

b) Mapping LRG efforts to implement the different SDGs

- Are LRGs making progress in the inclusion of the SDGs in their development plans and budgets? (This is called "alignment".) If so, what are the challenges that they are facing in this regard?

- Can you calculate the number, or the percentage, of LRGs that have integrated the SDGs in their local development plans at the country level (and if possible, could you break this down by type of local government organisation: municipality, county, region, etc.)?

- What are the main geographical differences in LRG efforts to implement the SDGs? Are certain areas further ahead than others? Are certain areas falling behind? Why do these differences exist and how could they be remedied?

  How do these spatial differences relate to the principle of leaving no one,

- or nowhere behind?

c) Progress made in the implementation of the goals and targets

- Include an analysis of the progress made towards achieving all 17 SDGs, based on examples, case studies and the data available. (A sound analysis of progress towards all the SDGs is strongly encouraged. However, in the case of a prioritisation of goals, please address your main priority goals in detail, providing a more superficial analysis of secondary objectives.)

- Qualitative analysis is as important as data and indicator-based analysis: provide a sample of case studies for different SDGs to illustrate the efforts made by different types of local government organisations (big cities, small towns, provinces, regions, etc.), paying particular attention to innovative practices and following the criteria laid out in Section 4.4 on case studies.

- What are the main trends that you can highlight? What are the main successes, challenges, emerging issues, lessons learned, and actions taken to address gaps and shortcomings?

- Where can solutions and best practices be found? Do these require advice and support from external organisations?

- Data analysis: are localized data available? Can baselines be established? Is progress monitored at the LRG levels, at the national level, and/or also at the association level? How do the LRGs and the LRGA aim to monitor progress in the future?

- Are there areas in which data are lacking? What could be done to enhance evidence-based monitoring and evaluation? In the absence of traditional data, could other solutions be found to enhance monitoring and evaluation? Could this be done by involving other stakeholders, academia, civil society, or the private sector?

5. MEANS OF IMPLEMENTATION

Objective of this section: to assess the existing national and local (human, technical and financial) resources and the ability of regional and/or local authorities to mobilise local resources and to exploit the opportunities and deal with the challenges encountered.

- What are the existing national and local financial resources for SDG implementation?

- What is the ability of LRGs to mobilise resources and allocate them effectively?

- What is the current situation (regarding such questions as financing, technology, capacity building and data) and what are the additional requirements of LRGs to in order for them to implement the SDGs effectively?

- How are financial systems and resource allocations being aligned to support the pursuit of the SDGs and to deliver the objective of leaving no one behind?

- What are the main challenges facing LRGs in terms of tapping into new or additional resources?
- What are the needs of LRG public employees? What needs to be done to improve their capacities in line with achieving the SDGs (training, capacity building, work conditions, etc.)?
- What kind(s) of partnerships and collaborations would help LRGs to address these needs in implementation? Do decentralised cooperation initiatives already help in this regard?

6. CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Objective of this section: based on the main findings and outcomes of the VSR, the aim is to make recommendations for the different stakeholders involved in SDG localization and to outline the steps required to enhance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

- What measures are recommended to further enhance SDG implementation at both LRG and national government levels and make the institutional environment more enabling?
- What has been the most important progress made by the LRGs? What opportunities and setbacks have been observed in the process of localizing the SDGs?
- What lessons have LRGs and their associations learned from the VSR process?
- Based on the outcomes of the review, what steps are planned to improve the local and regional implementation of the SDGs?
- What specific actions does the LRGA aim to take in order to improve its efforts and tackle the challenges that have been identified?
- How does the LRGA plan to conduct further, continuous monitoring of SDG implementation by LRGs, and when will it conduct its next VSR?

ANNEXES: INDICATORS AND OTHERS

Objective of this section: to include complementary information about the indicators used to measure progress in the VSR, the level of disaggregation of the data used, and any other elements that the LRGA may deem necessary.

- Which indicators have been used to measure progress?
- How have the data used been disaggregated (by gender, age, class and other criteria)?
- Is there any other complementary information that should be included in an annex?

4.7. HOW TO ORGANISE DISSEMINATION AND ADVOCACY THROUGH THE USE OF FINDINGS

VSRs should, above all, be reports that help to support LRG policy and advocacy work. **The VSR should be understood not as an end in itself but rather as a means for political transformation.** This means that dissemination should be developed with specific purposes in mind. The moment the VSR is finalised is actually when the real work starts. It should be published (an edited document should be disseminated by email and also presented as a printed document), its contents should be disseminated, and most importantly its findings should be used to support advocacy.

How to organise dissemination and advocacy is context-bound. It is connected to the purpose of the VSR in question (see Section 2, above) and to the possibilities available.

Two important questions need to be considered by LRGAs when they start giving shape to their dissemination and advocacy strategies:

What do you want the report to bring to your association and its members?

- Does your association want to promote a better understanding of LRGs' efforts to achieve the SDGs among the general public?
- Should the VSR boost the image of the LRGs and highlight its work to support SDG localization?
- Should it stimulate political recognition of the role of LRGs?
- Does it seek to draw attention to the precarious financial conditions currently facing many LRGs and promote their transformation?
- Does it look to create unity around a single, common agenda?
- Does it address current challenges in certain specific policy areas?

Conclusions and policy recommendations: who should they be aimed at?

- What particular messages should be conveyed to each stakeholder that is approached?
- What is the best way to approach them? By which means? When is the best time to do this?

Photo Danilo Ugaddan
www.pexels.com
Fatih, Turkey

For dissemination purposes, calculate the number of reports to be printed based on the objectives of your outreach strategy (and budget): a limited number must be formally presented to national government and key partners; should a large number also be distributed to your members? Do you think that other outreach products could facilitate its dissemination (video, a dedicated webpage, brochures, training sessions, etc.)?

For dissemination in your own country, it is important to define your key message, key audience and preferred communications channels. These are some actions that you can undertake vis à vis the different stakeholders with whom you wish to engage:

National government / parliament

- Share the first copy of the VSR with the Prime Minister or another relevant Minister;
- Share the VSR with relevant ministries and national government authorities and/or members of parliament to discuss ways to address gaps and challenges;
- Present the VSR at a joint VNR-VSR launch;
- ...

Members of your LRGA and member LRGs

- Organise a VSR launch conference, regional VSR workshops, VSR webinars;
- Publish an article in a members' newsletter, share the full VSR, share a summary of policy recommendations;
- Produce a guidebook to give instructions to LRGs on implementing VSR policy recommendations;
- ...

General public

- Provide information about the VSR via your own website and social media;
- Develop a public press release and newspaper articles summarising the VSR for the public;
- Organise a public VSR presentation conference;
- Organise a radio interview with your Chair or a podcast about the VSR outcomes;
- Record an appealing video communicating the VSR's main messages to the public;
- ...

Photo Manuel Joseph
www.pexels.com
Munich, Germany

Partners and stakeholders

- Promote a meeting for the presentation of the results and joint dissemination through any stakeholder engagement mechanisms that have worked well during the drafting of the VSR;
- Involve partners and stakeholders, such as civil society, academia and development partners, in the dissemination strategy and exchange best practices, resources and timing information, encouraging each of them to contribute to disseminating the VSR.
- ...

Of course, this list is not exclusive; other key audiences, channels and messages are also possible, as are combinations of the above. The important question is to define what the LRGA wants the VSR to promote, and to start planning the dissemination and the use of findings as soon as possible.

The **Mozambican** association ANAMM recorded a video for the public with the main messages of the VSR.

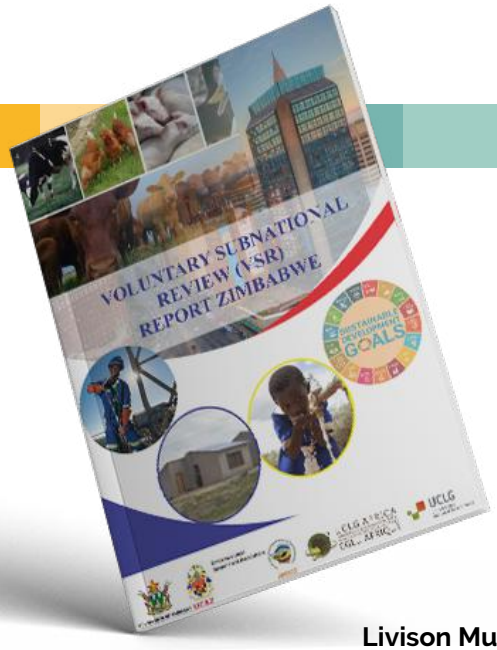
In **Norway,** the VSR was printed and published online and spread through articles and social media. A dialogue was organised at a joint launching event with the national government. In addition, a podcast was developed with the Minister of Local Government and Modernisation and the President of local and regional government association KS. A political agreement between the Ministry and KS on innovation and the SDGs was concluded, including a commitment to develop a roadmap for further SDG action. On the international level, KS was included in the Norwegian delegation to the UN HLPF in 2021 where it presented its VSR in the Local and Regional Governments Forum.

In **Indonesia**, the VSR's target groups were local governments and local governments associations, as well as non-state actors at the local level. As such, in May-June 2021 the VSR was submitted to the National SDG Secretariat, participating local governments and local government associations, and a small-scale virtual workshop with participating associations was organised to plan the use and follow-up of the VSR's recommendations. In July-August 2021, it was made available in digital format at websites of local government associations, the website of UCLG Asia Pacific (ASPAC), and the national SDG network ITB, and the VSR was included in the Virtual National VNR Launch. The VSR was distributed in physical copies at a conference and at exhibitions. In September 2021, the VSR was disseminated in a side panel under the UCLG ASPAC Congress 2021 Event in Zhengzhou.

With regard to using the findings of the VSR for advocacy purposes, the strategies will vary depending on the different stakeholders involved.

Focusing on the national authorities first, it will be essential to open communications with relevant national government counterparts in order to highlight the VSR conclusions and recommendations, and also to fill in any gaps and plan to tackle challenges that require their support. This can be done either within existing SDG coordination mechanisms, in which the LRGA has formal institutional representation (such as SDG focal points, SDG steering committees, etc.), or through new communications channels that can be opened taking advantage of the launch of the VSR and the dissemination of its findings. **An agreement with national government counterparts will be needed on how to provide follow-up to the actions required.** This could, for example, be done through a dedicated follow-up roadmap or through the joint development of national SDG implementation strategies that better respond to the LRGs' needs, aspirations and goals. Achieving the inclusion of the LRGA and/or representative LRGs in the national delegation at the HLPF would demonstrate the national government's commitment to supporting the local perspective in SDG localization.

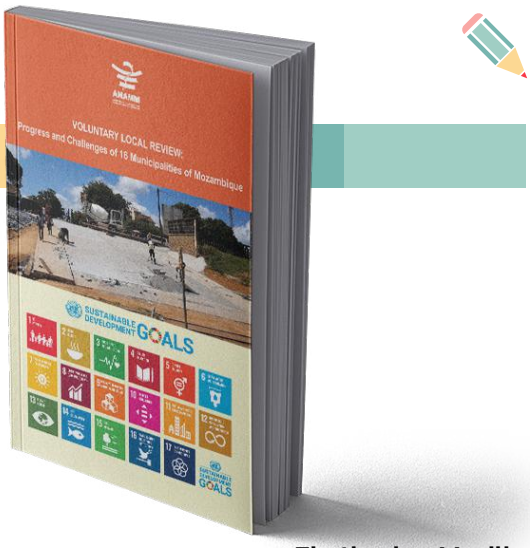
Another key action would be to **use the VSR findings to ensure collaboration on SDG policy and implementation**. This could be done with national government partners whose briefs specifically focus on local government issues (such as the Ministry of Local Government, and the Ministry of the Interior), as well as local government councillors and executives. This would help to secure political support for the LRGA's SDG-related advocacy work and for obtaining the human, technical and financial resources necessary for local SDG implementation.



Livison Mutekede
Secretary General of the Zimbabwe Local Governments Association (ZILGA) and of the Urban Council Association of Zimbabwe (UCAZ). See the Zimbabwean VSR (2021) here: *https://gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/zimbabwe_2021.pdf*

"We came to realise at some point that implementation of SDGs in Zimbabwe has been ongoing but the major issue is that there has not been reporting on it. The VSR process has helped us to take a look at it critically so that, going forward, we are able to have structures that really help us to monitor the implementation of SDGs, and the members of our association should also be able to report. We are happy to say that even the national government acknowledges the importance of this and they are prepared to work with the association seriously to make sure that every year, every municipality must make a presentation of their performance in terms of the implementation of the SDGs."

Within the LRGA, and with respect to the work carried out to support its members, action should be taken to lay a path for the further use of relevant findings. The first step towards this should be to **establish a work programme detailing the goals, actions to be taken, and actors to be involved, etc. This would then be used, in the subsequent months, to build upon the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the VSR.** Examples of action to be taken that depend on these findings could be: capacity building; raising awareness amongst LRGA and LRG staff and political members; integrating the SDGs into LRGA and local plans; improving the communication of results amongst LRGs and/or local stakeholders to generate ownership; developing the indicators and monitoring that could be carried out; engaging in new partnerships or strengthening of the existing ones; reaching out to local and international partners for technical and financial support; and searching for further international arenas to which to disseminate findings, etc.



Ekatherine Murillo
Expert on local finances and good governance, Adviser of the Association of Municipalities of Mozambique, GiZ. See the Mozambican VSR (2020) here: *https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/mozambique_2020_english.pdf*

"The first VLR in Mozambique identified the efforts made by municipalities to improve the lives of their populations, within the framework of their competences and the 2030 Agenda, and despite their (financial and other types of) constraints. The dissemination of the results from Mozambique is still pending, due to the COVID-19 crisis, but remains a priority. The good practices should be made known and replicated by other municipalities. These relate to: policies, programmes and projects that have been carried out with success and which will help vulnerable groups to recover from the crisis caused by pandemic and ensure that no one is left behind."

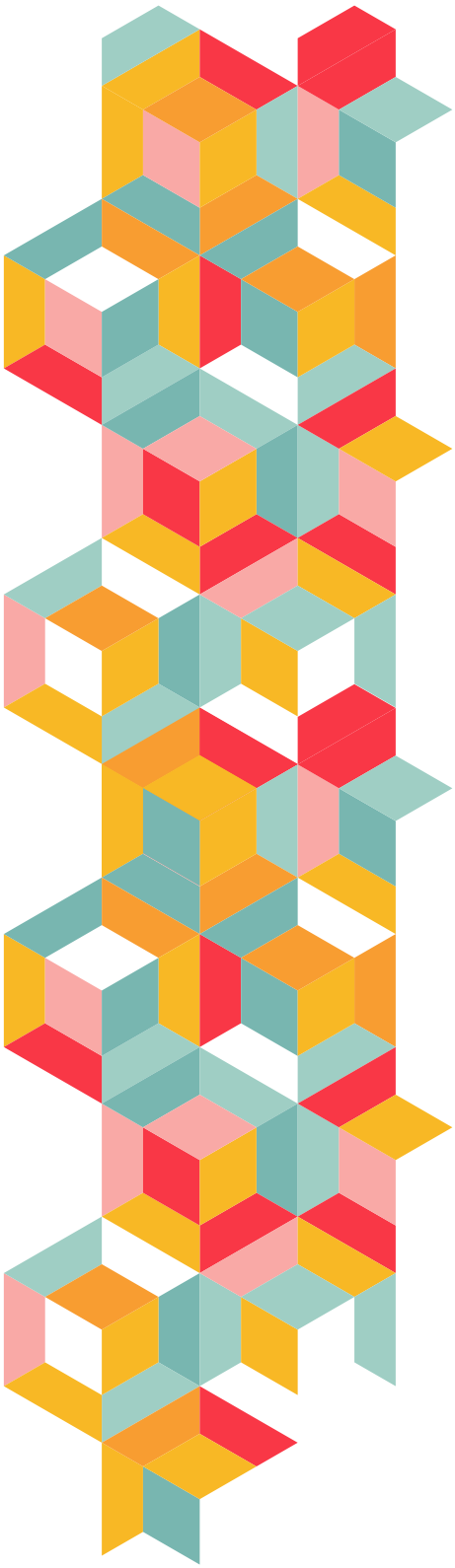
At the institutional level, it may be necessary to allocate this responsibility for advancing with SDG localization action to a specific department, or to a senior member of staff who has the ability to coordinate across departments and draw on diverse expertise. If this happens, the role of the staff member or department responsible for SDG localization should be strengthened in order to subsequently follow up on this portfolio. Furthermore, designating a mayor or elected official, or a group of them, as 'SDG policy lead' or 'SDG Ambassadors' may be advantageous, especially if they can represent the LRGA at the HLPF to mobilise political support, and can (jointly) catalyse and stimulate further action and follow-up on findings at the local level.

As these Guidelines clearly demonstrate, **the VSR is already part of a growing global movement for SDG localization and reporting.** Sharing the VSR with international organisations, such as UCLG or peers from other countries and world regions, will have a catalytic effect and help this movement to expand. It has been broadly demonstrated that global commitment and joint actions bolster transformation at the local, national and international levels, and that LRGAs involved in VSR processes are responsible for a critical part of this success. LRGAs are thus encouraged to disseminate their VSRs, findings, conclusions and recommendations to international institutions and to peers with whom they may have regular or sporadic contact. They should also participate in local and global fora promoting sustainable development, such as the HLPF and the VLR-VSR Days organised within its framework, the Africities Summit, and the Forum of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean.

In Africa, **10th August is Decentralization Day** and this provides an excellent moment for local authorities, national governments and other stakeholders to take stock of the implementation of the SDG Agenda. It also offers a very good opportunity to further discuss the findings of the VSR and to follow up on them.

Photo Rohan Reddy
www.unsplash.com
Maputo, Mozambique

5. WAYS FORWARD



These Guidelines provide concrete technical suggestions as well as guidance on the key approaches to consider when producing a VSR and as to how to maximise its advocacy potential. The objective is clear: to provide direct support to LRGAs to help them to prepare VSRs and to strengthen the global movement for the localization of the SDGs.

This publication has allowed us to summarise and analyse the VSRs produced to date by LRGAs from 14 countries. Thanks to the analysis of these VSRs, and the knowledge compiled through exchanges between the LRGAs that accompanied these VSR elaboration processes, it has been possible to produce these Guidelines which provide insights into the potential that these reports offer and the challenges that still lie ahead. Moreover, these Guidelines also engage with the ongoing conversation between the various actors involved in what has become an increasingly prominent global ecosystem for reporting on the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs from the bottom up.

VSRs are no longer a pilot experiment, but now a consolidated tool that has proved successful in contributing to the global debate and SDG monitoring. Indeed, **their positive impact on both subnational and national SDG implementation processes has been remarkable**. As these Guidelines explain, VSRs provide a country-wide overview of the role of LRGs and can help them to deliver the SDGs; they go beyond merely providing a report on this subject. VSRs promote a collaborative production process, facilitating exchanges of knowledge and experience between LRGAs and their members, and also between LRGAs and national governments. At the same time, VSRs are also a call to action: they contribute to the identification of current and future challenges and promote the local ownership of the SDGs. The evolution of the VSRs illustrates the role that LRGAs can play in supporting their members and working towards sustainable development.

Photo Polina Kuzovkova
www.unsplash.com
Cepaka, Indonesia

VSRs have demonstrated their potential for extending and accelerating bottom-up reporting; in just two years, they have given a voice to inspiring initiatives, within national reporting processes, and have highlighted the challenges faced by over 16,000 LRGs from 14 countries. They have also facilitated the integration of LRG voices in VNR processes: VSRs have been quoted in, and even integrated into, VNRs, thus strengthening the dialogue between the national and subnational levels of government during the reporting process. Furthermore, VSRs have had a direct and positive impact on using multilevel governance to achieve the SDGs. They have contributed to the promotion and consolidation of dialogue between different levels of government, as well as with non-governmental actors. On several occasions, this has resulted in the inclusion of LRGAs in national coordination mechanisms for SDG implementation.

In addition, **by fostering wider ownership of the SDGs at the local level, these processes have a multiplier effect and have contributed to the strengthening of the advocacy work carried out by LRGAs. They have also fostered the acknowledgment of the role of LRGs in national SDG strategies and international debates.** In this sense, VSR processes can help to boost actions to help achieve the 2030 Agenda, as part of the UN Decade of Action to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals.

In the current global context, in which the COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated the climate and social crises, it is imperative to reaffirm our commitment to global sustainability through a series of recovery actions. Within the framework of the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis, VSRs can also help to support LRGA advocacy of greater involvement in the recovery packages that national governments are currently launching in many different countries and regions. VSRs can also provide the disaggregated and localized data needed to improve public policies. This information can also facilitate the mobilisation of sufficient funding for subnational governments to improve the delivery of basic local services and build more caring and resilient communities. This is of the utmost importance for upholding the principle of leaving no one and nowhere behind.

United Cities and Local Governments, its regional sections, and the UCLG Capacity and Institution Building Working Group (UCLG-CIB) warmly invite local and regional government associations, worldwide, to participate in this growing global movement for SDG reporting by developing their own Voluntary Subnational Reviews. Furthermore, through these Guidelines, UCLG restates its commitment to supporting joint efforts to achieve the SDGs. It commits to doing this by organising workshops, knowledge exchanges, capacity building, and other actions to help LRGAs further strengthen the roles and capacities of LRGs to advance towards more just, inclusive and sustainable development models.

ANNEX: DATA COLLECTION AND INDICATORS

The collection of data and local experiences is essential for supporting the narrative and key messages of the VSR and doing so with valuable evidence. However, the global indicator framework for Sustainable Development Goals, which was developed by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs)[27], in 2017, is not fit to serve such a purpose for LRGs. Amongst other reasons for this is the fact that not all of the 231 indicators contain mature methodologies or facilitate data collection.[28] In addition, aligning national data and indicators with the UN's set of indicators has so far proven problematic, with data availability often being a challenge.

Following the ideas and recommendations contained in section 4.4, here are some further suggestions that might help you tackle the challenge of indicator and data collection and, as a consequence, strengthen your VSR.

1. **Approach your national statistics office: to ask for, as well as offer, data**

National statistics offices gather a lot of information that usually covers all aspects of sustainable development and with which national authorities are able to measure the implementation of the SDGs in their country. The first step towards developing a local SDG monitoring system requires **approaching them in order to determine how LRGs can: contribute to generating their own data; collect data themselves; and provide help with monitoring tasks or using the data generated and collected by national governments,** especially when this is disaggregated by territories and by groups of population.

It is also important to analyse the set of indicators selected by your government to monitor the SDGs and the extent to which they relate to the IAEG-SDGs indicators. In cases in which LRGs have responsibilities for achieving specific targets and selecting indicators (whether through full or shared responsibility), your involvement in data generation, collection and analysis is key for the sound monitoring of progress and any setbacks. Two examples will help you to better understand this idea:

- The first target of SDG 6, on water and sanitation, is expressed as follows: "By 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water". The IAEG proposes only one indicator to monitor this target: "6.1.1. Proportion of population using safety managed drinking water services". Although LRGs have responsibilities for delivering drinking water in the majority of countries, in many others, this is shared with the national government, which regulates this service and, sometimes, decides to externalise water delivery to a national public utility or to a private company. Consequently, LRGs may have only limited powers in this area.

27 See *https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/indicators-list/*
28 The IAEG distinguishes between Tier I indicators (116 out of 228 unique indicators: 50.9%), which are methodologically mature and reliable and use data which are 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 are not produced on a regular basis by most countries; and Tier III indicators (20/228: 8.8%), whose methodologies are currently being developed and tested and are not yet acknowledged as international standards.

Even so, they are still responsible and often need to implement solutions for the poorest neighbourhoods or slum areas which are not otherwise served by the public utility or private company providing the service on behalf of the national government.

» In another example, concerning SDG 13 on climate change, most of the targets and indicators are only defined for national monitoring (except for target 13.3. on the percentage of local governments that adopt and implement disaster risk reduction strategies [...]). However, many of the actions proposed (policies and strategies needed to address the impact of climate change, foster climate resilience, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions) require major involvement by LRGs if they are to be achieved. Collecting information about the number of LRGs that have adopted climate change action plans and/or implemented policies to reduce CO2 emissions (such as reducing car emissions, fostering renewable energies, etc.) therefore definitely contributes to monitoring the implementation of the SDGs at the subnational level.

2. Mobilise your members

Fully exploit your relationship with your network, as well as with your partners and contacts, in order to collect and manage data that are relevant to the task of tracking achievements and obstacles relating to SDG localization in your territory. **Involving your members is not only instrumental, but also strengthens their involvement and ownership.** Make sure, however, that they do not see your request for information and data as a burden and as something that they must provide because their LRGA asks them to. Instead, foster an environment in which they feel part of a relevant process: one in which they, together with their fellow LRGs, are key players, working together to promote sustainable development.

Be aware of the fact that data collection is very labour-intensive and that it may put the capacity of your members and your own staff under strain. A preliminary analysis of the costs that the SDG monitoring exercise will entail is essential to avoid running out of resources or potentially overworking your own staff or that of your member LRGs. Measures to consider may include preferring the use of existing channels to collect data and information rather than creating new ones.

When reaching out to your members for collaboration, you should therefore analyse the quantitative and qualitative data that are already available (recent surveys, compendia of best practices, voluntary local reviews, civil society reports on SDGs...) and calculate exactly what you would like to ask them for so, as to bridge any gaps and get a reliable and representative picture. For example, when carrying out a survey, assess how many responses (and of what kind) will be needed to give you a clear picture of a given situation. Taking into account the characteristics of your country (number of LRGs, availability of data, accessibility to different regions of the country, resources, etc.), choose the most appropriate ways via which to collect data and establish a representative sample of LRGs (or approach them all). Ensure that there is a good balance between LRGs representing different regions, different types of LRGs (regions, counties, districts, urban and rural municipalities, those with stronger and those with more modest roles) and population centres of different sizes (large cities, medium-sized cities and towns, etc.).

3. Reach out to international organizations and explore their initiatives

UN agencies collect data related to specific indicators on a country-by-country basis. **Even though this work is not carried out at the subnational level, these indicators may help you to illustrate certain macro-trends in your country**, in domains related to subnational government responsibilities.

Several indicators relating to local responsibilities have been collected for certain countries in the UN Global Database on SDG Indicators,[29] from which it is possible to extract information by SDG,

29 See *https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/database/*

target or specific indicator. This can, for example, be done for SDG indicators:

- 1.4.1. on the % of population living in households with access to basic services
- 5.5.1. on the % of seats held by women in national parliament and in local governments
- 11.1.1. on the % of population living in slums
- 11.6.1. on the % of municipal solid waste collected and managed
- 11.6.2. on air pollution – annual means of particulate matter in cities
- 11.a.1. on the number of countries that have national urban policies or regional development plans that (a) respond to population dynamics; (b) ensure balanced territorial development; and (c) increase local fiscal space
- 11.b.2. on the % of local governments that have adopted local disaster risk reduction strategies (including the number of local governments per country)

In addition, some UN agencies (UN-Habitat, UNICEF, WHO, UNEP, FAO etc.) publish specific reports, statistics and conclusions using the same logic; these are based on aggregated national indicators. UN-Habitat has developed a series of tools for SDG 11 monitoring and collected indicators for a sample of cities in a limited group of countries (which includes Colombia, Egypt and Mexico).[30]

As mentioned in section 4.4, other international institutions can also be consulted. In Europe, the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission has published tools for data collection at local levels. SDSN has developed a set of Global Monitoring Indicators, with 100 parameters linked to the SDGs, which is already used in countries such as India, the USA, Bolivia, Italy and Spain, as well as in 45 capital cities in Europe.

4. Be pragmatic

For the identification and selection of indicators, one very important first step is to define their purpose. **The use of data and indicators is only relevant if it informs your decision-making. It must contribute to assessing the effects of the policies and actions implemented (the evaluation goal) and help to establish priorities for future policies and actions (the decision-making goal).** Both goals are linked and necessary for any long-term approach.

Indicators are also relevant if the figures presented are influenced by the actions of LRGs. For instance, among the indicators defined by the IAEG-SDGs, particular attention should be given to those referring to SDG 11, related to sustainable cities and communities. LRGs should also be involved in the monitoring of SDG indicators that relate to LRG competences, whether these are exclusive, or relate to responsibilities shared with national governments (as in the case of SDG 13, on climate change).

However, and as mentioned above, in many countries, LRGs and their associations have only a limited capacity and resources to define local indicators and collect local data. As a result, the objective of creating a database containing information on localized indicators could be beyond the scope of their VSRs. If you finally opt for generating your own indicators, and need to use new data collection mechanisms, you should carefully consider the practicality of your initiative and your effective capacities. You should look to generate sound indicators that it will be possible to track, maintain and fund over time with adequate financial, technical and human resources.

One solution to some of the difficulties that an LRG or LRGA can experience in the endeavour of generating its own set of indicators would be to consider using data generated by other public

30 See *https://unhabitat.org/programme/city-prosperity-initiative*

institutions, as well as non-governmental data (e.g. data generated by academia or CSOs, citizen-driven data, big data, and geospatially disaggregated data, amongst others). This would help you to overcome data gaps and contrast official data sources. It would also generate vertical, as well as horizontal, coordination for both the production of data and the monitoring of activities themselves.

5. Fostering alliances with universities, NGOs, and the private sector

Building on the previous point, it is clear that LRGs and their associations are not the only local actors generating valuable data that could be used for monitoring both progress and setbacks in a given territory. **The SDGs have become a global framework for both public and private stakeholders and also help to involve citizens in the advocacy and achievement of the 2030 Agenda. This requires multi-stakeholder approaches and the participation of the general population and local actors in a way that leaves no one behind.** Fostering alliances with local universities, NGOs, CSOs, companies and citizens to generate and collect data, particularly within the framework of broader collaboration towards attaining the SDGs, can be extremely beneficial. NGOs and local stakeholders often have community-based monitoring systems,[31] scorecards, and/or other initiatives, such as the "Know your City" initiative promoted by Slum Dwellers International.[32]

A thorough planning of the activities that will be undertaken within the framework of this collaboration will be essential to prevent any potential misunderstandings or mistakes. You will need to consider the following questions:

- What will be the key questions that will guide your data and information collection and analysis?
- Who will collect the data and information?
- What methods will be used?
- How will the data and information be analysed?
- What deadlines will you work to?
- How will the team that will collect the data and information and carry out their analysis liaise with the institutions that will provide the data and information (e.g. university teams and LRGs)?
- What coordination methods will need to be established?

6. Exploring qualitative information and alternative ways to gather input

Qualitative information is just as important as quantitative data and, to some extent, can complement the limited data available. But, where can we find such information? The table below presents some of the most common forms of data collection (surveys, focus groups, field visits, video calls and case studies), highlighting their advantages and disadvantages. The choice very much depends on the kind of data that you need and what resources you have to collect them.

31 See, for example, the Community-Based Monitoring System of the Philippine Statistics Authority, *https://psa.gov.ph/cbms*
32 For more information, visit *https://sdinet.org/*

METHODS FOR DATA AND INFORMATION COLLECTION

SURVEYS

What are they?	They make use of a standardised questionnaire with a set of questions related to the research topic.
	The responses, whether on paper or electronic, are collected and analysed.
Advantages	They are often used for quantitative questions, but can be used with qualitative questions too.
	It is possible to have a large group of respondents.
	They are easy to create and distribute; no travelling is required, saving costs and time.
	They can be conducted anonymously. This could be beneficial with sensitive issues and allows respondents to answer without fear of repercussions, thereby producing more honest answers.
Disadvantages	The answers may not be in depth.
	The respondents may not be representative of the research group. The size and composition of the group of respondents must be carefully defined.
	The answers to the survey may not be genuine; the researcher has no control over the legitimacy and quality of the answers provided.
	Generalising based on the data collected may be problematic due to above mentioned issues.

FOCUS GROUPS

What are they?	They are organised interactive group sessions during which the researcher talks to groups of people who are relevant sources of required data.
	This involves freely sharing ideas as a group, rather than answering set questions as in a survey.
Advantages	It is possible to have relatively large groups, especially when they are organised online.
	They can be organised online if required, or if this is easier.
	They make it possible to get a better understanding of issues by talking to people who have personal experience.
Disadvantages	Going into depth is not always possible.
	One person may act as a leader, while others may not have a chance to speak.
	The participants may not be representative of the whole research group. The size and composition of the group of respondents must be carefully defined and controlled.
	It is often difficult to ensure that the researcher is unbiased.

FIELD VISITS

What are they?	They involve travelling to areas for which little or no data are available to do research and/or to meet local officials/researchers/knowledgeable individuals.
	The aim is to obtain primary data (collected by the researchers themselves) instead of secondary (already available) data.
Advantages	Large groups of respondents are only possible if they are met in groups, otherwise this will be very time-consuming.
	Obtaining data by collecting it yourself means that you can control the validity of the process and therefore, to a reasonable extent, also the reliability of the data collected.
	It is possible to gain a better understanding of an issue by talking to those who have direct knowledge and experience of it.
	These may involve face-to-face meetings or just visiting an area; both can be very helpful.
Disadvantages	They require a lot of resources, time and money.
	It is necessary to plan ahead in order to be effective.
	This is currently more difficult due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
	It can be challenging to identify the most important areas and/or people to visit.

VIDEO CALLS

What are they?	It is possible to organise videocalls with those who know most about the topic/region/municipality that the researcher wants data about.
	This can be done over the internet via a laptop, or on the phone. They may involve large groups at the same time.
Advantages	Large group of respondents are possible.
	They enable quick, easy and cheap communication with those in areas of interest.
	It is possible to get a better understanding of an issue by talking to those who already have direct experience.
Disadvantages	It is not always possible to go into much depth.
	They require prior planning to ensure that people are available.
	Not everyone can do videocalls; they require the internet, electricity, and appropriate devices.
	Their effectiveness may be limited as people can pretend that all is well while the reality is very different.

CASE STUDIES

What are they?	They are a form of qualitative research in which the focus is on a small number of cases.
Advantages	They allow the researcher to gain in-depth knowledge of (a) case(s).
	They can highlight case-specific issues that need to be addressed.
Disadvantages	There is a risk that the cases are presented in a more positive light than they should be.
	Testing or checking to avoid the aforementioned risk is often difficult or not possible.
	A small, unrepresentative sample may lead to unwarranted generalisations.

What makes a document generated by, or associated with, an LRG useful within the scope and objectives of a VSR? Here are some hints:

- **The document should clearly approach the links between local policies and practices and the SDGs.** In it, it is important to identify those policies that are the (full or shared) responsibility of LRGs and those experiences that have been driven by LRGs themselves or developed in partnership with national government or other stakeholders (e.g. civil society, community-based organizations, the private sector, international partners, etc.). It is important to ensure that the involvement of LRGs in the practice is active, rather than passive, particularly in the latter case.

- **LRG implementation agency and responsibility should be understood in the broadest sense possible.** This includes policies and experiences in which responsibilities are shared between national and local governments and LRGs have a say in policy making, project development, implementation, monitoring and financing.

- **Look for elements related to locally-based reviewing & monitoring** of the implementation process so as to provide data and information on actual implementation instead of only offering purely strategic and planning-orientated approaches.

UCLG
United Cities
and Local Governments