



Online Pre-meeting on Sub-national reviews of SDG implementation

29 June 2020

SUMMARY

The Workshop on Sub-national reviews of SDG implementation, also known as Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), was convened virtually on 29 June 2020, from 9:00 to 11:30 a.m. EDT, by the Division for Sustainable Development Goals of United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs (DESA). It served as an online pre-meeting for a workshop originally scheduled to take place in Helsinki, Finland, which was postponed due to the travel restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The workshop covered the following topics (see full programme below): 1) local and regional implementation of SDGs and benefits of sub-national reviews; 2) the Voluntary Local Review preparatory process: overview of approaches, milestones and deliverables; 3) Utilizing guidance materials, peer learning and research; 4) Linkages with the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) and the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF).

In his opening remarks, Mr. Amson Sibanda, Chief of the National strategies and Capacity building Branch of the Division for Sustainable Development Goals at DESA noted that the Division is excited to see the growing interest towards the VLR movement and stands ready to support cities and regions in their efforts. Much of the actions needed for the achievement of the SDGs will need to be taken, and are being taken, at the subnational level. Mr. Sibanda noted that DESA has supported from the start the Member States conducting their Voluntary National Reviews and organized peer learning workshops which have proven very beneficial for the countries. Hence, cities and regions may also benefit from similar peer learning experiences in their review processes. Mr. Sibanda noted that due to the fact that the 2-day event had been compressed into a short online meeting, these first discussions will not go into the details of the VLR process.

In her presentation, Ms. Riina Jussila, Sustainable Development Officer at the Division for Sustainable Development Goals, shared some benefits of review processes and lessons learned from the VNR process which may be useful for cities and regions in their own work. Ms. Jussila noted that a VLR is not just a report but should be seen as a process to enhance overall SDG implementation. According to Ms. Jussila, reviews provide potentially numerous benefits depending on the city context. A VLR can be a great catalyst for raising awareness on the SDGs, obtaining buy-in from civil servants, enhancing coordination and ownership, reaching outside the usual circle of collaborators to forge new partnerships and for finding additional resources. A VLR allows a city or a region to take stock of their SDG implementation and to evaluate progress and to identify challenges and opportunities. A VLR can also be an opportunity for critical reflection and innovation and it can support prioritization at all levels of government.

From the VNRs, Ms. Jussila shared seven lessons learned: 1) start the process early on; 2) designate the roles of individual and entities as well as set deadlines from the start; 3) plan the coordination mechanism well; 4) engage stakeholders in a meaningful way; 5) manage expectations and plan for continuity; 6) focus on quality over quantity; 7) plan for follow-up.

The following key points were raised during the workshop sessions:

Local and regional implementation of SDGs and benefits of sub-national reviews

- The increased interest towards the VLRs reflects the changing role of cities in the past decades. Cities are drivers of growth, innovation and social development, and in many cases, national governments strongly rely on cities in attaining the SDGs.
- A VLR can create a shared language for local and regional governments to communicate with their citizens, to position themselves globally and to engage with other like-minded cities around the world, including through useful city networks.
- VLR can help build a deeper connection between the local and global levels, showcasing the value of local and regional governments for SDG implementation and widening their engagement with various stakeholders around the world.
- It is crucial for the VLRs to remain flexible tools for cities. Cities and regions should be encouraged to start the process from whichever starting point in which they are, using the resources they have, with low barrier for entry. VLRs should be about learning how to do better.
- While data is important, lack of data should not be a barrier for participation. A VLR creates an opportunity to enhance data availability and develop indicators as needed to measure progress.
- It was underscored that VLR is the beginning, not the end of a process. The most important question a VLR raises is what the city or region is planning to do with the lessons learned from the process.
- Especially in the post-pandemic world, adopting the SDGs as a shared language and being guided by a comprehensive framework can benefit cities and regions in the years to come in building a stronger future.

The Voluntary Local Review preparatory process: overview of approaches, milestones and deliverable

- The importance of involving citizens, making VLRs meaningful to them and embedding SDGs into daily business of local and regional governments was emphasized. Each person in the city should be able to see what benefits SDG implementation can bring to their lives in very concrete ways.
- Many representatives highlighted the importance of collaboration with key stakeholders during the VLR process. These stakeholders can vary depending on the context from civil society organizations to the national government, universities and think tanks, private sector and partnership networks, to name a few.
- It was emphasized that the aim of including uniform elements and making the VLRs more comparable should not be seen as traditional benchmarking. Instead, VLRs could be seen as “bench-learning”, as a process to learn from other cities in the country and around the world. For this, certain uniformity and shared elements can make distilling useful lessons learned easier.

- Data challenges were mentioned by several representatives. Many stressed that this should not be seen as a block for entry but as an opportunity to identify data gaps, to find new ways of gathering data and to utilize better existing resources. In many cases, cities and regions already accumulate a wealth of knowledge that can be contextualized in the SDG framework.

Utilizing guidance materials, peer learning and research

While no official format exists currently for the VLRs, several guidance materials have been developed or are being developed by different entities to support the development of the reviews and enhance relevant peer learning and research. The following entities made presentations on their knowledge products:

- **United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) and UN-Habitat** are preparing a VLR guidance series. Volume One will be launched during the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) on sustainable development 2020. The set of recommendations will cover: 1) Who is involved in the process? 2) Where is the VLR process located institutionally? 3) What is the content of the VLRs? 4) What are the lessons learned from the process?
- **Brookings Institution** has made available a meta-analysis of the first generation VLRs to facilitate peer-learning, which covers the 5As of SDG adaptation (Awareness – internal and external; Alignment – aligning local plans to the global framework; Analysis of trends within the cities; Action – policies, budgeting; and Accountability – transparency and reporting). The report also outlines a possible framework of key elements of VLRs, such as political commitment, alignment of local strategy, initiatives undertaken, institutional models, data and evidence.
- **The European Commission Joint Research Center (JRC-EC)** launched a European Handbook for SDG Voluntary Local Reviews in February 2020 and will convene an SDG Learning session on the handbook during the HLPF. The Handbook reviews existing methodologies and different frameworks of SDG implementation. It covers data issues and examples of indicators adapted to regional and local measurement, taking into account factors such as comparability, relevance, affordability and feasibility issues. It uses VLRs already produced as examples. The handbook is being piloted with a number of cities. It will remain as a living document to be refined further in the years to come.
- **United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP)** is developing regional guidelines for VLRs. These guidelines provide step-by-step guidance for local government leaders and stakeholders at a practical level that are specific to the Asia-Pacific region, which includes checklists, templates, and components to be included in a typical VLR. These guidelines will most likely be complemented by an online interactive portal for collaborative knowledge sharing and learning to support policy changes at the local level that are coherent with the global framework.
- **The Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES)** in Japan has developed the Shimokawa Method based on the experience of Shimokawa's VLR to guide other Japanese cities that are interested in the reviews. It is based on the Secretary-General's common

voluntary guidelines for the VNRs at the global level. This aims at facilitating the use of VLR findings in national governments' VNRs.

Linkages with the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) and the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF)

- VLRs hold intrinsic value for local and regional level SDG implementation. However, these reviews ideally should also feed into the national level Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). Many representatives emphasized that the core responsibilities of SDG implementation often lie at the sub-national level, especially in countries with a high degree of decentralization. It is essential to involve local governments from the very beginning of the VNR process. This engagement can effectively build on existing VLRS conducted in the country.
- It was reiterated that sub-national reviews should also abide to the principles set out for reviews at all levels in the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. Hence, they should maintain a longer-term orientation; be open, inclusive, participatory and transparent; be people-centered, gender-sensitive, respect human rights and have a particular focus on the poorest, most vulnerable and those furthest behind. They should build on existing platforms and processes and be evidence-based.
- Inclusion of stakeholders in reviews at all levels is essential for ensuring their ownership in SDG implementation at large. It was noted that the inclusion of all relevant stakeholders in the review processes of VNRs and VLRS can enhance continuity and sustainability of SDGs actions, including through political transitions.
- Regional forums on sustainable development, organized annually by the UN Regional Commissions ahead of the HLPF, can also highlight more prominently sub-national SDG actions, bridging the local and global processes.
- It was highlighted that the active SDG implementation of cities and region has been more and more recognized also at the HLPF. The 2020 session of the Forum includes an official session on local action. A dedicated Special Event, the Third Local and Regional Governments Forum will be held during the HLPF as will a VNR Lab on the VLRS. Several dedicated side events will also highlight the activities of local and regional governments and their important role for SDG implementation globally.

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Programme

9:00 – 09:10	<p>Opening and main purpose of the workshop</p> <p>Mr. Amson Sibanda, Chief, Division for Sustainable Development Goals, DESA</p>
9:10 – 9:40	<p>Local and regional implementation of SDGs and benefits of sub-national reviews</p> <p><i>Introduction and lessons learned from the Voluntary National Reviews – Ms. Riina Jussila, Division for Sustainable Development Goals (5 min.)</i></p> <p><i>Mini-panel: Brief interventions (5 min each)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Ms. Sanna-Mari Jäntti, Director of Strategic Initiatives, City of Helsinki- Ms. Aissata Camara, Deputy Commissioner for Operations and Strategic Partnerships, City of New York- Mr. Francisco Resnicoff, Undersecretary of International and Institutional Relations, Buenos Aires, Argentina <p><i>Guiding questions:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What is the role of local and regional governments in SDG implementation?2. What are the benefits of conducting a VLR?3. What gaps in SDG implementation did the VLRs highlight?4. Did the VLR process lead to changes in strategies, plans, coordination mechanisms or other areas of SDG implementation?5. How is the VLR being utilized after the report has been published?6. How can the SDGs be utilized in the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic?
9:40 – 10:15	<p>The VLR preparatory process: overview of approaches, milestones and deliverables</p> <p>Breakout groups (Each group will have a chair that has already prepared a VLR)</p> <p>Chairs of the breakout groups:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Christian Hübel, Mannheim, Germany- Patricia Menezes, State of Pará, Brazil- Allan Macleod, Bristol, United Kingdom- Edgar Pacheco, La Paz, Bolivia- Oneika Pryce, New York City, USA

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Laura Uttu-Deschryvere, Helsinki, Finland <p><i>Guiding questions:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How to begin a VLR process? 2. What are the key elements and milestones in the process? 3. Who leads the process and who is engaged? What works and why? 4. What are the lessons learned from the process and how has it contributed to the local implementation of the 2030 Agenda?
10:15– 10:30	Report back
10:30 – 10:50	<p>Utilizing guidance materials, peer learning and research</p> <p>Lightning presentations (4 min each)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mr. Edgardo Bilsky, United Cities and Local Governments - Mr. Tony Pipa, Brookings Institution - Ms. Alice Siragusa, European Commission Joint Research Center - Mr. Junichi Fujino, Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES) - Mr. Samiuddin Ahmed, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP)
10:50 – 11:20	<p>Linkages with the Voluntary National Reviews and the High-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF)</p> <p><i>Mini-panel:</i> Brief interventions (3 min each)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mr. Gabriel Ferrero y de Loma-Osorio, Director General, Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Spain - Ms. Leyre Madariaga, Director for Foreign Affairs of the Basque Government, Spain - Mr. Benard Eumu, District chairperson, Ngora District, Uganda (TBC) <p><i>Guiding questions:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How can VLRs best support coherent national SDG implementation? 2. What is the role of local and regional governments in VNR processes? 3. What types of arrangements support participation of local and regional governments in national SDG coordination bodies and mechanisms and how are synergies ensured between national and sub-national implementation?
11:20– 11:30	Next Steps and Closing