



Voluntary Local Review Series: Integrating the SDGs into strategies, plans and budgets
Division for Sustainable Development Goals
19 November 2020

SUMMARY

The second thematic workshop of the DESA Voluntary Local Review Series was held virtually on 19 November 2020 from 9:00 to 10:30 a.m. (EST) by the Division for Sustainable Development Goals (DSDG) of United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA). The workshop focused on integrating the SDGs into strategies, plans and budgets at the subnational level. The peer learning workshop was attended by 70 participants representing cities, regions and national governments as well as United Nations entities and other international organizations. It consisted of a panel discussion, breakout group discussions and a report back session.

Mr. Amson Sibanda, Chief of the Capacity Building and National Strategies Branch at DSDG gave the opening remarks of the workshop, which was moderated by Ms. Riina Jussila, Sustainable Development Officer in the Division. In his opening remarks, Mr. Sibanda noted that the topic of the day is crucial for turning the SDGs into a reality. In most governments, be it at the national, state, district, city or village levels, this exercise has started with a mapping of existing strategies and plans against the SDG goals and targets. A mapping exercise can already provide a good understanding of how current actions are contributing to SDG implementation and it can also activate different entities and offices to take part in this work. Mapping exercises have proved useful in finding the relevant custodian agencies for different SDG actions and for communicating the framework to internal and external partners. In order for the SDGs to fulfil their transformative power though, it is imperative to use the framework for changing the status quo. In many cities, regions and national governments the mapping exercises have been complemented by a gap analysis, to see which SDGs and targets progress is lagging and where additional actions and resources are needed. To date, many cities and regions have also used the findings of this work to fully integrate the SDGs into their updated strategies, development plans, and long-term visions, as well as strategic plans and programmes of specific agencies. Mr. Sibanda noted that in the last few years, more and more national governments and now also subnational actors are also incorporating the SDGs into their budgets, either by monitoring the spending towards the goals or by specifically allocating funds for relevant and potentially additional activities.

To close, Mr. Sibanda also noted that the DESA Global Guiding Elements for Voluntary Local Reviews recommend dedicating a full section of the report for showcasing how SDGs have been incorporated into local frameworks. The elements aim at providing a proposed shared structure for the reports, and at minimum, give a checklist of issues that could be reflected in the process, even if they are not showcased in the report itself. These Global Guiding Elements can be found from the DESA website.

Mr. Friedrich Soltau, Senior Sustainable Development Officer at the Division for Sustainable Development Goals, made an introductory presentation reflecting on useful lessons learned from national level planning processes. Mr. Soltau noted that there is a new rise of national development planning after the active days of 1960s and the decline in interest which happened in the 1970s. He noted that there are signs of “new” planning, which is less technocratic and less prescriptive in orientation. This planning aims at being evidence-based and utilizes often more bottom-up processes and participatory gathering of stakeholders’ views in order to find shared priorities. Meaningful participation of stakeholders had been shown to improve the quality of outcomes; however, there may be trade-offs in relation to the efficiency of decision-making. Use of a robust evidence-base can help assess the interlinkages, synergies and trade-offs of policies and strategies. Mr. Soltau noted that when integrating the SDGs, all levels of governments should delve beyond the alignment of SDGs with plans and strategies. The SDGs could highlight the existing gaps in actions and how to fill them. They can also be used to assess how national level priority SDGs and targets, such as SDG 12 on sustainable consumption and production, link with local level action, such as waste management. In closing, Mr. Soltau asked how the SDGs could be used to foster cooperation between local and national levels as well as how the Goals could be combined with the traditional physical/territorial planning.

Integrating the SDGs into strategies, plans and budgets and the role of VLRs

During the opening panel discussion, four experts shared their experiences on their planning processes.

Ms. Gyrid Mangersnes, Program Manager, shared her experiences from Asker, Norway, a municipality that is a result of a merger of three municipalities. In 2016, it was decided that the policy framework of this new municipality of Asker would be built on the SDGs. Local politicians looked beyond the traditional sectors and party politics. According to Ms. Mangersnes, the SDGs have mobilized the citizens and municipal employees as well as non-governmental organizations. The SDGs are incorporated in the Municipal Master Plan as well as in budgeting. In 2019, the Norwegian Government defined the SDGs as the main direction for Norway’s policy for addressing the greatest challenges of our times. Ms. Mangersnes also highlighted the national network of excellence, linked to the UNECE work on Smart, Sustainable Cities. Asker aims for its VLR to boost coherence by collaborating with other Nordic cities working on VLRs, coordinating with the Norwegian association of local governments’ work on a subnational review. Asker also cooperates with the national government on the Voluntary National Review (VNR), including through collaboration with Statistics Norway. Asker believes that reviews at all levels can provide a framework for enhancing policy coherence for SDG implementation.

Mr. Pedro Miranda, Director of Monitoring and Territorial Management of the Technical Secretariat “Planifica Ecuador” showcased the experiences on integration from the national government perspective. In 2017, the government decided that the national Master Plan for 2017-2021 should be aligned with the SDGs. Once this work had been done, the government also aimed to ensure that the SDGs are integrated in the over 1000 subnational government

plans. In 2019, the national government released guidelines for this integration. In June 2020, new guidelines were provided for COVID-19 response at the local level. Mr. Miranda noted that local governments play a key role in implementing the SDGs and that VLRs can be an important instrument for monitoring and evaluation, as well as for coordinating national and local planning.

Mr. José Cristian Morales Márquez from the Government of the State of Oaxaca, Mexico, noted that their work on the SDGs had started three years ago with the establishment of a state council on SDGs and a technical multi-stakeholder committee. These institutional arrangements have proven useful for coordination of the SDG work of 570 local governments in the state. Oaxaca has, together with GIZ, developed a guide for integrating the SDGs into municipal plans. This guide has also been utilized in other states. Mr. Morales Márquez noted that the guide, and related trainings, have also helped to keep SDG work consistent through election cycles of different municipalities. Oaxaca currently has the SDGs incorporated in the State Master Plan and 15 municipalities have incorporated the SDGs in their plans and budgets. Regarding the VLR, Oaxaca has utilized their review not only for evaluation but also for highlighting the actions and efforts of different stakeholders.

Mr. Christian W. Hübel, Head of the Department of Strategic Governance, Mannheim, Germany, stressed the need to ensure that the municipality does not see the SDGs only as an additional burden. In Mannheim this meant showcasing the contribution of existing programmed and projects towards the SDGs, as well as assessing the performance of existing activities. The city developed its Mannheim 2030 Mission statement through a participatory process. This Mission statement is also the basis for Mannheim's budget plan which links the relevant SDGs with effectiveness targets and indicators. The aim was also encourage evidence-based discussions on policies and increase transparency of actions towards citizens. This work also showcases in concrete terms to the Federal government and the global community at large the contributions of Mannheim to SDG implementation. Mr. Hübel also mentioned the small separate budget allocation made for participatory budgeting which aims at involving different actors in implementing the Mannheim 2030 Mission statement.

Integration: overview of approaches, strategies and activities

During the breakout group discussions, each of the six groups was chaired by a participant from an entity that had already conducted a review of their SDG implementation. During the feedback session, held following the breakout group discussions, each Chair shared one main lesson learned, challenge, or finding with the plenary:

- There is a need to translate the holistic nature of the SDGs and the integrated nature of three dimensions of sustainable development into the local level work. In practice, this may include assessing how existing actions take into consideration all three dimensions, synergies and trade-offs.

- Governments at all levels should assess and highlight the added value that SDGs bring into our efforts, considering that most actors have been engaged in planning processes prior to the goals.
- Coordination among different levels of government on planning is crucial, and good examples were also shared on collaboration on indicators. However, this work can and should be also complemented by collaboration among other actors, such as subnational regional entities or between municipalities and specific national government entities.
- The challenge of including the SDGs into budgets was stressed by many, as were the questions related to utilizing indicator frameworks for monitoring. The case was made, that if the general strategy of the city is aligned with the SDGs, the budget for implementing the strategy automatically should become a budget for SDG implementation.
- The [Global Sustainable Development Report](#) “Future is Now: Science for Achieving Sustainable Development” was highlighted as a useful tool for assessing the different roles and responsibilities of national, subnational and local governments in SDG implementation.

Managing infrastructure assets for sustainable development - DESA tools and capacity development support for local governments

Ms. Caroline Lombardo, Chief, International Tax and Development Cooperation Branch, Financing for Sustainable Development Office of UN DESA, gave a short presentation on their existing work on managing infrastructure assets. She noted that the 2015 Addis Ababa Action Agenda 2015 highlights the need for capacity building for subnational infrastructure asset management. Infrastructure assets are all physical assets essential to the delivery of basic public services. Good asset management should include assessing the full lifecycle of the assets, utilizing a portfolio management approach and balancing risks and tradeoffs. It also entails changing mindsets and putting in place the right organizational culture to support good management. Ms. Lombardo reminded the participants that according to some assessments, 70 to 80 per cent of costs related to infrastructure assets occur after the initial purchase, highlighting the need for good management.

The Financing for Sustainable Development Office of UN DESA and the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) have supported municipalities and districts on asset management in four pilot countries: Bangladesh, Nepal, Tanzania and Uganda. In addition, the Office is working on a Handbook, as well as a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) that will support asset management in municipalities. A series of virtual Online Solutions Dialogues are also underway in three regions: Africa, Asia-Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean.

In conclusion, it was noted that the next event in the series will held on 20 January 2021 and will focus on Monitoring, data and indicators.