

Voluntary Local Review Series: Integrating the SDGs into strategies, plans and budgets

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Concept Note

Introduction

In many countries the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs are being integrated into plans and strategies at national, regional, and local levels. There is an emerging body of experience and good practices of cities, regions and communities including the SDGs into their planning and implementing the goals. At the same time, there are opportunities to strengthen linkages between planning at different levels, so that integration initiatives at all levels of government reinforce each other. Utilizing the SDGs as a common language for planning and monitoring at all levels, regional and local authorities can potentially contribute better to solutions for challenges that cross boundaries, including waste management and circular economy, economic development and decent jobs, transport, and health.

Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)

As part of its follow-up and review mechanisms, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development encourages member States to "conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels, which are country-led and country-driven" (paragraph 79). As part of this review, starting in 2016, member States have presented their Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) to the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development. The contributions of local and regional governments to SDG implementation have been highlighted in numerous VNRs with countries reporting on local and regional level plans and programming efforts, subnational coordination structures, partnerships, contributions to data collection and other activities.

Localization of SDGs at sub-national levels is strategically important because in most countries many SDGs related services are delivered at province/state and local levels. A review of the voluntary national reviews presented at the 2020 HLPF shows that countries are translating development objectives of the SDGs and national development plans (NDPs) to the provincial and local levels. For instance, Ecuador has developed guidelines for reflecting the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs in sub-national, territorial plans. The "Guidelines for the articulation between the Plan Development and Territorial Ordering and the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals" contain general guidelines and procedures for linking the territorial plans (PDOT) to the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.¹ In course of localization of the SDGs at the provincial level, the 2020 VNR of the Democratic Republic of Congo explains that the government is identifying SDG targets that fit in with the priorities, specificities and context of each province, to be reflected in provincial development plans.

¹ <https://www.planificacion.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2019/09/Caja-de-herramientas-ODS-V6.pdf>

Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs)

Local and regional governments are increasingly engaging in Voluntary Local Reviews (VLR), which have proved useful for cities to foster SDG localization and demonstrate local governments' capacity and commitments. Cities and regions have reported on different ways in which they have ensured the alignment of their strategies and plans with the SDGs or fully incorporated the goals. VLRs provide examples of both bottom-up and top-down approaches to integrating the SDGs. In the former case, cities and regions themselves initiate the reviews and determine its scope and format. For example, the City of Los Angeles, United States, developed its own methodology for including the SDGs into its work. First, Los Angeles examined each target to determine if it applies to the city, and if not, revised it while maintaining its original intent. At the time of the publication of their VLR², the city was in the process of validating the new targets by ensuring alignment with existing City commitments and by coordinating with policy owners and community stakeholders.

In some cases, national or regional governments have initiated the process, including by providing guidance for subnational governments in how to integrate the SDGs into their work. According to its VLR³, the City of Buenos Aires committed to the SDGs in 2016 after signing the Cooperation Agreement with the National Council for the Coordination of Social Policies, which is charged with the adaptation at the national level in Argentina. Buenos Aires utilized the national guidelines to align its priorities and the SDGs. Bonn⁴, Germany, outlines in its VLR its participation in a project of the municipalities of the Land of North Rhine-Westphalia, which supported establishment of local sustainability strategies. As a result of a two-year process, Bonn adopted its first Municipal Sustainability Strategy in 2019. In the State of Oaxaca⁵, Mexico, the State government notes that municipalities have a strong responsibility for SDG implementation. Their SDG planning has been supported by the State provided Municipal Sustainable Development Plan Guide and planning workshops, among other activities.

Some cities and regions have also reflected in their VLRs how SDGs are linked with their budgeting. In Mannheim⁶, Germany, a participatory approach has been adopted to develop "Mannheim 2030", a Mission Statement that describes how the city is implementing the SDGs. Mannheim has identified 126 impact goals within the administration that are targeting the SDGs, together with 412 indicators. The Mannheim 2030 work has also been a part of creating the 2020/2021 budget plan in spring 2019. Target workshops were carried out with all administration units to identify how their daily business can support Mannheim 2030 implementation. Consequently, the budget was planned for 2020/2021 for each unit.

² https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/LA%27s_Voluntary_Local_Review_of_SDGs_2019.pdf

³ https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/VLR%20BA%202020_eng.pdf

<https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Voluntary-Local-Review-Bericht-englisch.pdf>⁴

⁵ <http://cepei.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Voluntary-Subnational-Report-Maria-Elias.pdf>

⁶ https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/25023VLR_City_of_Mannheim_final.pdf

Planning and integration of the 2030 Agenda

The implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs has led to renewed interest in plans and strategies at all levels of government. The VNRs of many countries report on the alignment between the SDGs and national development plans and strategies. The interlinked, inter-dependent character of the SDGs is widely acknowledged, but also poses challenge for their integration into plans and strategies, whether national or local levels. The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs can more readily be integrated into plans and strategies that are formulated in a manner that reflects the three dimensions of sustainable development. Similarly, engagement with a broad array of stakeholders is also a hallmark of planning processes that are aligned with the principles of the 2030 Agenda. While there is a wide spectrum of approaches to sustainable development planning at the national level, certain features appearing in a new generation of plans and strategies stand out.

- Setting goals and identifying the means of achieving them remain a central concern of planners; however, participants in the planning process have shifted their exclusive focus on a fixed plan towards a more open-ended process.
- Building common ground on priorities. There is less focus on level of detail in favour of agreement on strategic guidance and implementation mechanisms, including follow-up.
- There is a shift from the view that the state alone is responsible for development, to one where various stakeholders are involved in the planning processes, in line with the emphasis of the 2030 Agenda on participation and stakeholder engagement.
- Rests on a sound evidence base, drawing on different areas of knowledge, as well inter-disciplinary approaches.

As local and regional levels integrate the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs into their planning frameworks, they have the opportunity to innovate as they review and update their planning approaches.

Questions/issues for discussion

- ❖ What are good practices for integrating the 2030 Agenda into local and regional planning?
- ❖ What are some of the good ways of improving the alignment between national planning and regional/local plans?
- ❖ How can regional and local priorities be reflected in national planning?
- ❖ How could the VLRs contribute to alignment and coherence between planning at local and national levels?