Global Guiding Elements for
Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) of SDG implementation

Introduction

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 subnational levels, which are country-led and country-driven" (paragraph 79)[1]. As part of this review, starting in 2016, countries have presented their Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) to the UN High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development.

Local and regional governments are increasingly engaging in their own subnational reviews, so called Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), which have proven useful for cities and regions to foster SDG localization and demonstrate local governments' capacity and commitments. Unlike the VNRs, local reviews do not directly have an official basis in the 2030 Agenda or other intergovernmental agreements, even though the 2030 Agenda underlines in several places the importance of governments working closely with regional and local authorities on its implementation. However, the process of undertaking these subnational reviews provides multiple benefits to the entities engaging in them and has the potential to advance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. While subnational reviews of 2030 Agenda implementation contribute to the attainment of the Goals in their own right and have intrinsic value as part of the implementation process, they can also contribute to the national-level Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) and reinforce vertical coherence.

The critical role of local and regional actors was also highlighted by member States in the Political Declaration of the 2019 SDG Summit[2] in which member States committed to empowering and supporting cities, local authorities and communities in pursuing the 2030 Agenda, and recognized their critical role in implementing and realizing the Sustainable Development Goals.

The guiding elements outlined below provide a starting point for local and regional governments considering producing their own Voluntary Local Review and aim to give an overview of useful focus areas for the review process and the eventual report. As such, they are voluntary, as are the VLRs themselves, and they are not meant to be prescriptive nor restrictive. Given the variety of local and regional governments conducting reviews of their SDG implementation, these global guiding elements do not aim at addressing best practices for institutional arrangements, data collection or stakeholder engagement, but merely highlight areas that could be addressed in the process. Hence, the guiding elements aim at providing a low-threshold entry point to VLRs by showcasing a check list of issues that could be addressed. They aim at providing a framework that, building on the SDGs as the common language among all levels of government, enhances the dialogue between VNRs and VLRs and relevant actors at all levels.

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[1] https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E
[2] (A/RES/74/4). paragraph 27 (e), https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/74/4

The global guiding elements draw upon the Secretary-General's Voluntary common reporting guidelines for voluntary national reviews[3], developed by DESA, which have proven useful for member States' efforts in reporting on their progress.

The global guiding elements also aim at enhancing peer learning, including through promotion of consistency and comparability between reports of subnational governments, whether regions or cities. Given the positive, increasing interest towards the VLRs, the number of published reports is expected to grow. A shared approach to the development of these reports will make it easier for interested parties to analyze and learn from multiple cities' and regions' experiences on specific topics, such as institutional structures or 'leaving no one behind'. While the VLR reports produced by local and regional governments may ultimately differ in format and structure from their national counterparts, utilizing the guiding elements as a checklist for a thorough, frank and honest analysis of policies and actions can contribute to implementation efforts at all levels.

Orientation and consistency with the 2030 Agenda Guiding principles

VLRs should be consistent with and give effect to the principles of the 2030 Agenda. Accordingly, the principles guiding all follow-up and review processes under the 2030 Agenda should also inform and guide VLRs. In this regard, paragraph 74 provides particularly for the following:

c) They will maintain a longer-term orientation, identify achievements, challenges, gaps and critical success factors and support countries in making informed policy choices. They will help mobilize the necessary means of implementation and partnerships, support the identification of solutions and best practices and promote coordination and effectiveness of the international development system.

d) They will be open, inclusive, participatory and transparent for all people and will support the reporting by all relevant stakeholders.

e) They will be people-centred, gender-sensitive, respect human rights and have a particular focus on the poorest, most vulnerable and those furthest behind.

f) They will build on existing platforms and processes, where these exist, avoid duplication and respond to national circumstances, capacities, needs and priorities. They will evolve over time, taking into account emerging issues and the development of new methodologies, and will minimize the reporting burden on national administrations.

g) They will be rigorous and based on evidence, informed by country-led evaluations and data which is high-quality, accessible, timely, reliable and disaggregated by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability and geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts.

The VLRs may also benefit from the information contained in the respective National Reports on the progress of the implementation of the New Urban Agenda[4].

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[3] https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/17346Updated_Voluntary_Guidelines.pdf
[4] https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2019/05/nua-english.pdf

Structure and content of a report

The below sections provide a potential structure for a report. While there is no mandated structure for the VLRs, reflections on the below topics may benefit the robustness of the review process, even in cases where all sections are not included in the final report.

Opening Statement

The opening statement provides an opportunity for the Governor, Mayor, or another high-ranking public official to showcase how the reporting entity sees the SDGs as part of their vision for a sustainable future. The opening statement may reflect on how the SDGs are integrated into the region's, city's or town's longer-term vision as well as in the short-, medium-term and long-term plans and strategies, and reflect on any key successes or challenges in SDG implementation so far.

The opening statement may also include a political commitment towards concrete actions the city, town or region intends to take as part of the Decade of Action and Delivery, launched at the SDG Summit in September 2019[5]. The United Nations Secretary-General encouraged all sectors to mobilize for the Decade of Action and Delivery and particularly called for local action embedding the needed transitions in the policies, budgets, institutions and regulatory frameworks of governments, cities and local authorities[6].

Highlights

This section could bring forward in 1-2 pages the main messages of the report, including concrete success stories, challenges and lessons learnt. It can include a few particularly transformative good practices that the city, town or region would like to share with others. It should set the tone of the report and explain the main characteristics of the local context.

This section can showcase the efforts made to mobilize all stakeholders in the VLR process and SDG implementation at large. It could also show how the principle of leaving no one behind, as well as human rights, non-discrimination and gender equality have been reflected in the city's, town's or region's actions.

The main plans and challenges in securing adequate means of implementation (financing, technology, capacity building, data etc.) can also be reflected here, as well as the concrete areas in which the city or region would wish to receive advice from other cities or regions, or support from various actors such as the national government, peers, city-to-city networks, CSOs, research institutes, funds, and the United Nations system.

Introduction

The introduction can include a very short description of the local characteristics of the city, town or region and reflect on why the VLR process has been undertaken. It can also include reflections of the main benefits derived from the process. The introduction can give an overview of the entity's journey towards sustainability and showcase the main strengths and weaknesses the city, town or region

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[5] 4 Political declaration of the high-level political forum on sustainable development convened under the auspices of the General Assembly adopted on 15 October 2019 (https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/74/4)
[6] https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/decade-of-action/

possesses in this context. It can also include highlights of the progress made already towards the SDGs, as well as showcase how subnational actions have contributed to the attainment of national level goals and targets.

The section can showcase the main strategies and frameworks, as well as institutional mechanisms, utilized in SDG implementation locally as well as reflect on the city', town's or region's bearings in the national SDG context.

This section can also include references to previous VLRs conducted by the city or region and showcase any adjustments or changes made based on this analysis.

Methodology and process for preparation of the review

This section should report on the full methodology used for the production of the VLR. It can reflect on which entity was in charge of coordinating the process (Governor or Mayor's office, a working group, a multi-stakeholder drafting team, etc.), how was this responsibility assigned, and what steps were taken to include the whole of subnational government concerned in the process. If some Goals and targets were prioritized in the report, this section could explain the decision-making process and reflect how the de-prioritized areas will be addressed in the future.

This section should describe steps taken to engage local stakeholders, including in the scope and design of the VLR process, and showcase what innovative measures were used to ensure the inclusiveness of the process. Participating entities could be identified in this section or as a separate annex to the report. The section could also reflect on how the participating entities were chosen, as well as noting any challenges encountered and ways of improving such inclusive processes in the future.

This section can also show how the used data was collected from different actors, such as local statistical and administrative offices, national statistical offices, research centres, international institutions, and civil society organizations, and what were the challenges, gaps and opportunities encountered in this process. It can also highlight how SDG indicators have been localized in the city or region and analyze challenges related to these processes. Issues related to access to information and data and transparency could also be addressed in this section.

This section could also include any lessons learned on the process and any recommendation for improving the guiding elements in the future.

Policy and enabling environment

    a) Engagement with the national government on SDG implementation

The report can describe the main characteristics of the system of governance and illustrate the relationship between the subnational government and the national level, and showcase the dialogue between these levels in relation to SDG implementation. The section can review the on-going joint activities and assess potential areas for increased cooperation. This section could also address how the entity is participating in regional- or national-level institutional mechanisms for SDG implementation as well as in Voluntary National Review (VNR) processes.

b) Creating ownership of the Sustainable Development Goals and the VLRs

This section may reflect on activities that have been undertaken to raise awareness of the general public of the SDGs and to include different groups in SDG implementation actions. Regarding awareness-raising, the section could report on innovative actions taken such as publicity campaigns, events, and contests. Regarding inclusiveness of SDG implementation, the review could showcase how the city or region has ensured transparency and stakeholder engagement in its own efforts to implement the SDGs.

The review could also present interesting examples of SDG implementation actions by different stakeholders, such as CSOs, private sector, local parliamentarians, community associations, academia, youth groups and schools. To avoid the pitfalls of "nothing about us without us", the review could also address how different groups that have historically been marginalized from political, social and economic opportunities, particularly women and youth, as well as children, persons with disabilities, people living with HIV/AIDS, older persons, indigenous peoples, refugees and internally displaced persons, migrants and other vulnerable groups have been engaged and contributed to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including the full and direct participation of members of the social group(s) affected by specific policies.

c) Incorporation of the Sustainable Development Goals in local and regional frameworks

In this section, cities and regions may wish to address how the SDGs and targets are reflected in the local or regional short-, medium- and long-term plans, strategies and thematic programs. A mapping of current plans and strategies against the Goals may form the basis of the section, but cities and regions are encouraged to conduct a gap analysis showcasing areas receiving less attention and to reflect on ways to address these gaps. The report can showcase any adjustments or new policies and strategies established to reach the SDGs and assess how the city or region is using the SDGs as a framework for transformative change. The section can also address how the Goals and targets and their implementation actions are reflected in budgets, whether an integrated financing framework has been established, and how the Goals are included in monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

The report could also reflect on the relationship between local, regional and national sustainable development plans and sectoral strategies. It can assess the policy coherence and effectiveness of these plans and identify potential additional synergies, as well as reflect on how the entity has utilized potential national guidelines, financial resources or programmes for SDG localization.

This section could also highlight how the city or region has addressed the three dimensions of sustainable development, economic, social and environmental, in an integrated manner. The section could include examples of actions and policies aimed at unveiling interlinkages, enhancing synergies and avoiding trade-offs in the implementation of the SDGs.

d) Leaving no one behind

The promise to leave no one behind is one of the most powerful tenets of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. This section could showcase how the principle is translated into practice at the city or region level. It can reflect on how those considered furthest behind are identified in policy making and implementation and how they are supported by concrete actions. The section can reflect on efforts to combat inequality and how equality and inclusion is being enhanced at the city and region levels, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status. It

could also assess how human rights, the principle of non-discrimination and gender equality are integrated into strategies, plans, programmes and policies.

e) Institutional mechanisms

Effective SDG implementation requires integrated and coordinated approaches and many cities and regions have identified institutional mechanisms that support such actions. This section could reflect on how existing mechanisms are serving the city or region in SDG implementation or what types of new arrangements have been established for this use.

This section can also showcase how different stakeholder are included in such institutional mechanisms to ensure full, inclusive and meaningful participation and describe any institutional mechanisms that have been established to engage with specific stakeholder groups such as neighborhood associations, the private sector, cooperatives, academia or youth.

The section can also include references to useful engagement with associations and networks of local and regional governments and other city-to-city networks and initiatives in the context of SDG implementation.

f) Structural issues

Cities and regions are encouraged to report on relevant structural issues or barriers they have faced in implementing the 2030 Agenda. In the local context, this may include reflections on issues such as possible differences between the municipal administrative boundaries and the functional urban area, cross-boundary environmental impacts, decentralization/devolution, or challenges related to data availability or coordination stemming from this. The section may also include reflections on competence to implement policies responding to particular targets.

This section may also address any cross-boundary issues, both challenges and opportunities, within the surrounding region, and any collaboration and cooperation with other adjacent subnational governments in the fields of transport, environmental protection, or sustainable food chains, just to name a few areas.

Progress on Goals and targets

Cities and regions are strongly encouraged to provide an analysis of progress on all 17 Sustainable Development Goals, even if data is lacking in some areas. In some cases, entities may wish to give additional focus to their priority goals and targets, while addressing other goals through lighter analysis. The review could assess whether baseline data is available and how the entity aims at monitoring progress in the future, as well as highlight any locally adapted objective targets in relation to the topic. For analysis, this section may utilize both quantitative and qualitative data, also from non-traditional sources.

The consideration of Goals could focus on establishing baselines, highlighting trends, successes, challenges, emerging issues, and lessons learned, and describe what actions have been taken to address existing gaps and challenges. It could support the identification of gaps, solutions, best practices, synergies, trade-offs and spillovers and areas requiring advice and support from outside entities.

Cities and regions may also reflect here areas where data is lacking, what could be done to enhance the evidence-based monitoring and evaluation and what useful solutions can be utilized to enhance monitoring and evaluation in the absence of traditional data, potentially also involving other stakeholders.

Means of implementation

Local and regional governments often face unique challenges related to means of implementation when compared to their national counterparts. This section could assess the existing national and local financial resources, the ability of regional or local authorities to raise local resources, their effective allocation and the additional needs for successful implementation in areas such as financing, technology, capacity building, and data. The review could indicate how financial systems, statistical data and resource allocations are being aligned to support the realization of the 2030 Agenda and its pledge to leave no one behind. The cities and regions are encouraged to analyze the main roadblocks for tapping into new and additional sources.

Cities and regions can utilize this section to identify specific needs they may have in relation to means of implementation and to clarify what types of partnerships and collaboration they are interested in forging to address these needs. Cities and regions may also reflect in this section on their experiences from and actions towards decentralized cooperation, showcasing useful good practices.

Conclusion and next steps

Based on the outcomes of the review, the section could outline what steps are planned to enhance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, notably as part of the Decade of Action and Delivery for sustainable development. It could highlight what lessons the city, town or region has learned from the review process and what concrete actions it aims at taking in enhancing its efforts and addressing the identified challenges. As such, the section can serve as a call for continued engagement with local stakeholders. The review can also state how the city, town or region plans on conducting continuous monitoring of its SDG implementation and when it will conduct its next VLR process.

ANNEXES

As with the VNRs, local and regional governments are encouraged to include a statistical annex in their reviews, although lack of available data should not constrain entities from engaging in VLR processes. Such an annex may utilize the global SDG indicators, where applicable, or priority indicators identified at the subnational level as appropriate. Cities and regions should utilize a selection of indicators that are most beneficial for continuous monitoring of progress in the local context. Cities and regions may also wish to highlight gaps and areas where applicable indicators have not been identified or data is not available. Ideally, the statistical annex could also showcase the methodology of data collection (including geographical and time coverage; disaggregation by gender, age classes and others; level of aggregation).

Cities and regions may wish to also include specific inputs from stakeholders as annexes of their report.

Presentation and follow-up actions

Since Voluntary Local Reviews are not mandated by the United Nations, they do not currently have a dedicated space for presentations at the High-level political forum (HLPF) on sustainable development. However, local and regional governments are encouraged, to the extent possible, to actively participate in the events and discussions around the HLPF[7] and to share their experiences and lessons learned from the VLR process with all relevant stakeholders.

Rather than an end in itself, the VLR should be seen as a process by which cities and regions take stock of and assess their progress and shortcomings in implementation of the goals and targets through an inclusive process engaging all relevant actors. Hence, it is crucial to embed the process and its findings into existing implementation efforts and to plan for effective follow-up.

Local and regional governments may therefore wish to consider a number of options for sharing their experiences and lessons learned from the VLR process with a variety of actors:

- Dedicated de-briefing meeting with the stakeholders involved in the VLR process;
- Conducting an assessment of lessons learnt from the VLR process and developing a follow-up plan;
- Sharing the VLR report and communicating its main findings with the relevant national-level counterparts in order discuss joint actions to tackle gaps and challenges, as well as with other local and regional governments;
- Institutionalizing stakeholder engagement mechanisms that worked in the VLR process;
- Development of a communication strategy for the main messages of the report and engagement of local media;
- Participation in peer review exercises with other cities and regions, within city-networks or bilaterally through twinning arrangements;
- Participation in regional sustainable development forums and related events in the five regions of the United Nations;
- Organization of dedicated side events together with national Governments or individually at the HLPF or other useful events, such as the World Urban Forum.

For example, UN DESA organizes annually during the HLPF the Local and Regional Governments Forum, together with Local 2030, UN-Habitat, UNDP and the Global Taskforce for Local and Regional Governments. UN Secretariat also organizes a series of VNR Labs that provide an informal platform to share experiences from the VNRs and related processes: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/2020#labs