



**United  
Nations**

Department of  
Economic and  
Social Affairs

## **Voluntary Local Review Series: Leaving No One Behind**

**Division for Sustainable Development Goals**

**15 April 2021**

### **SUMMARY**

The fourth thematic workshop of the DESA Voluntary Local Review Series was held on 15 April 2021 from 8:00 to 9:30 a.m. EDT virtually. The workshop, organized by the Division for Sustainable Development Goals (DSDG) of United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), focused on the principle of Leaving No One Behind in the context of SDG implementation and the Voluntary Local Reviews. The previous workshops have been focusing on stakeholder engagement, integrating the SDGs into strategies, plans and budgets, and addressing issues on data, monitoring and indicators.

Over 130 participants representing cities, regions and national governments from around the world as well as United Nations entities and other international organizations took part in the workshop. The workshop consisted of a presentation by Mr. Graham Long (Newcastle University) on a recent paper reflecting the principle of Leaving No One Behind in Voluntary Local Reviews, a panel discussion with speakers from Mexico City (Mexico), Bristol (UK), Malmö (Sweden) and the national government of Uganda, and breakout group discussions chaired by the cities of Barcelona (Spain), La Paz (Bolivia), Guangzhou (China), Mannheim (Germany), Santa Fe (Argentina) and Espoo (Finland), as well as Busia County (Kenya) and the State of São Paulo (Brazil).

**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. Mr. Sibanda noted the growing interest towards the Voluntary Local Reviews and welcomed new members to the informal community of practice. Mr. Sibanda called Leaving No One behind one of the transformative and perhaps the most ambitious promises made in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. He referred to UN DESA's [Global Guiding Elements for VLR's of SDG Implementation](#) which recommend that cities and regions give adequate focus to the crucial principle of Leaving No One Behind in their reviews and dedicate a stand-alone section in their reports to this matter. He noted that this section can, for example, showcase how the principle is translated into practice in the city or region. It can also reflect on how those considered furthest behind are identified in policy making and implementation and how they are supported by concrete actions.

**Mr. Graham Long from the Newcastle University** presented early findings based on a research paper on how published VLRs and guidelines vary on how they address Leaving No One Behind. Mr. Long highlighted three key challenges based on the research. According to Mr. Long, the first challenge is applying the principle in the local context and asking who is left behind and why. Mr. Long emphasized that since left behind groups do not get left behind by chance, it is vital to understand and engage in questions around who is being left behind and why. The second challenge refers to data and statistics. We need to examine what disaggregated statistics are available and which ones are missing. The last challenge applies to participation. In order to ensure that 'left behind' groups are included in the participation process, we need to analyze their inclusion and representation in both the implementation and review. Mr. Long then shared some insights to keep in mind going forward, including the need to identify 'left behind' and disadvantaged groups through direct outreach, assessing how data gaps can be addressed, comprehending

the barriers to participation, and partnering up with other partners such as civil society organizations, national statistics offices and universities to fill in some of the data gaps.

#### **Panel discussion: VLRs as a tool for ensuring that no one is left behind**

**Mr. Allan Macleod, Bristol, United Kingdom**, noted that Bristol has been working on the SDGs through its One City Office which has used the goals to frame a common view and a set of objectives for the city. Bristol aimed at ensuring that its VLR process included as many voices as possible and that it reflected the efforts of not only the local government but also other organizations within the city. Bristol has also partnered with University of Oxford on the Inclusive Cities Project, which has become a key network for engaging a wide range of stakeholders, especially within marginalized communities. These engagements helped to make the VLR more inclusive, but they also helped in bringing the stakeholders more closely involved in the city's work in general. Bristol also has a stakeholder network called the SDG Alliance, through which the city has been able to better engage with from marginalized and disadvantaged communities, working with actors such as Bristol African Voices Forum, Somali Resource Center and Hearing-Impaired Support Service. This engagement has also helped with data collection, including the use of partner collected data through community air pollution reporters. Mr. Macleod noted that the city of Bristol is now working with the Office for National Statistics to ensure strong representation of community voices also in the national level review processes.

**Ms. Mariana Flores, Mexico City, Mexico**, noted that Mexico City's government plan is inspired by the 2030 Agenda and other global commitments, and there is a constitutional mandate to enact a 20-year plan for the city which integrates equal rights at the core of the agenda. Mexico City conducted its first VLR in 2019 and is preparing its second VLR this year, with an emphasis on leaving no person or place behind. The city's current aim is to take geographical inequalities into consideration in all its policy planning. A particular focus has been put on digitalization and guaranteeing digital rights of the population, for example, through major investment into wifi infrastructure. According to Ms. Flores, the VLRs have helped Mexico City to acknowledge the crucial role of data for addressing inequalities. This has been further highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic during which data has been crucial to ensure that no one is being left behind. In this regard, Ms. Flores stressed the importance of availability of reliable, inclusive, and transparent data in decision-making processes, and noted the work together with the national statistical office to ensure data availability. For its second VLR, Mexico City is utilizing some indicators from the global SDG indicators as well as additional indicators that are particularly relevant to the local context.

**Mr. Pascal Byarugaba, SDG Secretariat-Office of the Prime Minister, Uganda** noted that the national Government has been very happy to see the progress made by the pilot districts that have been involved in VLR processes and more entities are now joining. He stressed that a VLR establishes a platform to engage a number of partners from the private sector and other stakeholders in SDG implementation and in supporting those that are being left behind. For example, a youth coalition for the SDGs has been established involving all local governments and national universities in Uganda. Youth participating in the coalition are being linked to the private sector for mentorship and support. Mr. Byarugaba noted that the national government has seen how the VLR processes have increased engagement with the local government leaders but also with the community level, which cannot be taken for granted. There is a lot of potential for synergies and ensuring coherence between the Voluntary National Reviews and VLRs both for reviews but also for policy implementation. VLRs can also showcase some of the realities on the ground that may be masked by national statistics.

**Ms. Katarina Fehir, Malmö, Sweden** highlighted that for Malmö equality is not only a fundamental human right but the necessary foundation for peaceful and sustainable growth. Malmö has a fairly young,

diverse population with people from 182 different countries. The city is currently working on its first VLR. Ms. Fehir noted that for Malmö the VLR can showcase the links between equality, human rights and sustainability in practice. The VLR process can also help in assessing in what ways the implementation of the principle of leaving no one behind is dependent on the municipality's systematic efforts to enhance equality and gender equality. Ms. Fehir stressed the importance of data collection for working towards equality and noted that Sweden has for example worked on ensuring availability of gender disaggregated data for years. However, she also stressed that while differences can be made visible with data collection, the work should not end here. Data findings should be thoroughly analyzed and put into context, and political courage is needed to act upon these findings. Ms. Fehir also noted that currently municipalities are restricted in what data they can collect to gender, age and country of birth and there are on-going discussions on the topic. For Malmö, the VLR process is one tool for highlighting challenges related to statistics and policy coherence to the national level and for having a dialogue with the national government on these.

### **From Principle to Practice: Leaving no one behind in the VLR Process**

During the breakout group discussions, each of the eight groups was chaired by an entity that had already conducted a review of their SDG implementation or had initiated useful activities on the principle of Leaving No One Behind. During the report back session, Chairs shared the main findings of their discussions with the plenary:

- VLR processes around the world need to serve a need that is specific to the entity's own context. The principle of leaving no one behind must hence also be interpreted in the local context.
- A VLR can be a key tool in implementing the principle of leaving no one behind. First of all, a VLR can give a holistic view of the inequalities within a city or region, including showcasing linkages between multiple deprivations. A VLR process provides data for monitoring progress but also for policy making. A VLR also provides an opportunity to review current policies and programmes developed to support those in need.
- VLR should be seen as one step in the larger process of SDG implementation and as a part of wider policy cycle.
- Ensuring an enabling environment for marginalized groups to make progress and engage in municipal processes is crucial. Without access to basic services, infrastructure and care services, it is unreasonable to think that individuals will be able to engage in discussions with the local government.
- Marginalized groups often lack the resources and time to participate in online platforms established for stakeholder engagement. Community-level consultations in-person can provide invaluable information that should be then used in decision-making processes. In some cities, universities have been able to support such outreach efforts. The COVID-19 pandemic has, however, added challenges to in-person data collection.
- Language barriers must also be brought down to ensure true engagement of all groups in VLR processes and SDG implementation. This will often require resources but is crucial for ensuring effective engagement. There is also a need to demystify the SDGs and use language that resonates with the realities of citizens so that communities see the value of this work.
- Maintaining stakeholder engagement is a challenge. Participating individuals need to see that their efforts are respected and that their engagement ignites changes to ways of working.
- Disaggregated data is crucial for ensuring that no one is being left behind. Citizen generated data shows a lot of promise but questions about the legal frameworks governing their use still exist in many places. Issues related to data privacy and consent must be addressed. However, innovations such

as neighborhood networks have been able to provide much needed granular data for some local governments.

- There exist a lot of innovative methods for engagement and data gathering and these should be shared in a more structured way, including through peer learning opportunities.
- However, data is not enough. Once inequalities have been unmasked, there is a need to analyze the root causes of inequality, discrimination and marginalization so that they can be tackled with right policies, whether these causes stem from geographical inequalities, poverty, governance issues, discrimination of certain groups or other issues.
- Ensuring that no one is being left behind cannot be a task only left for local governments. All levels of government are needed to ensure inclusion and equality.

**Materials and resources shared by the participants during the workshop:**

UNDESA's [Global Guiding Elements for VLR's of SDG Implementation](#)

UNDESA's Global Guiding Elements in Spanish: [https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/2016125S\\_0.pdf](https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/2016125S_0.pdf)

UN DESA VLR website: <https://sdgs.un.org/topics/voluntary-local-reviews>

The Impacts of COVID-19 on Stakeholder Engagement for the SDGs:

<https://sdgs.un.org/publications/impacts-covid-19-stakeholder-engagement-sdgs-32589>

City of Los Angeles (Goal 1, Target 1.2, Indicator 1.2.): <https://sdgdata.lamayor.org/1-2-1/>

São Paulo State 1st Progress Report on the Sustainable Development Goals (VLR):

<https://sdgs.un.org/topics/voluntary-local-reviews>

São Paulo State Government, Brazil: COVID-19 and its effects on the Sustainable Development Goals:

[https://issuu.com/worldvidi/docs/vidi\\_005\\_2](https://issuu.com/worldvidi/docs/vidi_005_2)

SDG Agenda for the municipality of La Paz, Bolivia: <http://sitservicios.lapaz.bo/agendaods/> and

<http://sim.lapaz.bo/sem/Biblioteca/Publicaciones/Index#>