

## **Opening Remarks**

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### **“Advancing implementation of the SDGs: Workshop on Voluntary Local Reviews”**

3 October 2022, Helsinki  
Tapahtumatori (1st floor)  
Helsinki City Hall  
Pohjoisesplandadi 11-13, 00170 Helsinki

Ms. Nasima Razmyar, Deputy Mayor, City of Helsinki

Ms. Eeva Furman, Secretary General of the Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development, Prime Minister’s Office, Government of Finland,

Mr. Marco Ricci, Minister Plenipotentiary, Directorate General for Development Cooperation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy,

Colleagues from the UN system present here,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to join you for the opening of this workshop on advancing implementation of the SDGs, with a particular focus on voluntary local reviews.

I would like to thank the Government of Finland and the City of Helsinki for their tremendous work to organize this workshop in partnership with the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the UN Economic Commission for Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This workshop has been a long time coming. It was first proposed three years ago and was then delayed several times because of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. It feels so wonderful to finally be here with all of you in this beautiful city by Baltic Sea.

I would like to sincerely thank the Government of Italy for having joined us today and for its continued support to the capacity development activities of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs' Division for Sustainable Development Goals (DSDG). The Government of Italy just approved UNDESA's project proposal on "Improved local and national government capacities for localizing SDG progress through Voluntary Local Reviews". This project, which was just launched and which will end in December 2024, will support the acceleration and scaling up of SDGs implementation and localization through the preparations of Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) of SDG implementation in Mozambique, Zimbabwe, South Africa and local governments in the cross-border Chaco region of Argentina, Bolivia and Paraguay, in collaboration with the participating local governments and the United Nations Resident Coordinator's Offices and United Nations country teams. Through this process, the project will build the capacities of government officials at the national and subregional levels for effective SDGs implementation at all levels, including the subnational level and reviewing and monitoring of progress.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We meet at a time when the world is confronting multiple, inter-related crises. As the UN Secretary General put it during his opening remarks to the 77<sup>th</sup> session of the General Assembly high-level general debate, in New York about two weeks ago, "A winter of global discontent is on the horizon. A cost-of-living crisis is raging. Trust is crumbling. Inequalities are exploding. Our planet is burning. People are hurting – with the most vulnerable suffering the most."

Given these daunting global challenges and with less than eight years to go, translating global development goals to local and regional contexts has become imperative.

We are all gathered here because we strongly believe that localizing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is essential for ensuring that the SDGs and their pledge to leave no one behind reflect local needs, priorities, norms and values.

While the SDGs are global, their achievement will depend on our ability to make them a reality at subnational levels.

In that regard, in its 2022 Ministerial Declaration, the high-level political forum (HLPF), and I quote, “... encourage the involvement and empowerment of local authorities, to ensure ownership and localization of the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular by citizens, communities, civil society, local organizations, the private sector and academia” and “... welcome[s] voluntary subnational and local reviews as an essential tool to show progress and foster exchange on local implementation of the 2030 Agenda ...in coordination and synergy with national actors.”

Despite this growing recognition, voluntary local reviews are still to become a prominent feature of the development of Voluntary National Reviews. A review conducted by OECD showed that between 2016-19, only 34 percent of countries that reported to the HLPF engaged local and regional governments in national co-ordination mechanisms. Engagement was defined as weak in 15 percent of countries or inexistent in 43 percent of countries, and only 23 percent of subnational authorities had collaborated with national governments on SDG projects.

Furthermore, reviews have also shown that while countries have been skillful in aligning their efforts with existing laws, institutions, and development programmes, they have been less skillful when it comes to developing new integrated strategies for achieving the SDGs. Many countries have also not done enough to incorporate local and regional governments in SDGs implementation.

As a result, the slow pace of SDGs localization that is often attributed to limited resources and capacity of local actors and perceptions of conflicts between local, national and global agendas is now often described as the Achille’s Heel of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

To address some of these shortcomings, some countries have embarked on decentralization while others are actively reaching out and engaging local and regional governments, communities and stakeholders.

National governments seeking to mainstream and accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs have realized that they can be more inclusive and expand their perspectives by engaging more directly with local and regional governments, local communities, civil society organizations and the private sector. To be successful, these efforts must ensure that national level processes linked to SDGs implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and the preparation of

VNRs should pay more attention to how well indicators capture the contributions and impact of local efforts.

Furthermore, it is the local and regional level where the implementation of the SDGs is more rewarding. It is at this level that local communities and citizens, civil society organizations, local businesses and other stakeholders interface with their local governments on very concrete challenges like how to generate decent jobs, provide safe drinking water and affordable energy, or how to manage waste disposal.

In that regard, the cities and local governments that you serve have a huge responsibility to translate the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs in ways that make them appear recognizable, urgent and meaningful.

At the UN, there is strong and ever-growing recognition of the critical role of local and regional governments in accelerating SDG implementation in this Decade of Action to deliver the SDGs. There has also been growing recognition at all levels of the value of carrying out Voluntary Local Reviews as has been expressed, for example, in the 2021 and 2022 Ministerial declarations of the high-level political forum as well as by the UN General Assembly and by the Secretary-General in his recent Report entitled Our Common Agenda.

At the HLPF, we continue to see more and more local and regional governments take advantage of the HLPF platform to share lessons, challenges and good practices in their efforts to achieve the SDGs. The official programme of the HLPF now includes a session focused specifically on local action and additional special events, such as the Local and Regional Governments Forum, and Voluntary National Review Labs focused on city and local governments, also foster dialogue between national governments, local and subregional governments.

As the appetite to conduct VLRs continues to grow in both developed and developing countries, we have seen how cocreation is fostering the will and capacity for local and regional governments and the citizens they serve to advance the cause of sustainability, helping countries to better integrate the SDGs in development plans and strategies, identify untapped financial resources,

build support networks, create social and political accountability and promote wider stakeholder consultations that are critical to accelerating SDGs implementation.

More importantly, cocreation is helping local and regional governments to align the necessary resources and capacity and cultivating the political support and buy-in that is necessary for the successful adoption and localization of the SDGs.

Ladies and gentlemen,

With less than eight years to go, our work is cut out for us. How do we develop an inclusive and participatory local process? How do we establish a realistic local and regional agenda based on evidence and meaningful public engagement, including securing support from local institutions and influential political actors? How do we establish realistic goals for implementing the agenda? How do we monitor and evaluate progress toward achieving the SDGs at the local level? And how do we mobilize local resources, and identify and engage strong local champions who can accelerate localization efforts?

I do not have answers to all these questions, but I believe our deliberations over the next two days will provide some important answers to these burning questions.

I thank you for your attention!