

Multi-level governance for SDG implementation: the role of VNRs and VLRs

Tuesday, 11 July, 1-2 pm Conference Room 11

Session Description:

National governments are increasingly utilizing Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) not only to highlight national level efforts, advances and challenges in SDG implementation, but to also capture the efforts of local and regional governments and other local stakeholders in support of SDG implementation. As part of their efforts to localize the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, local and regional governments (LRGs) are increasingly engaging in subnational reviews of their SDG implementation, also called Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs). While VLRs are not mandated by the 2030 Agenda, the process of preparing them provides multiple benefits to the entities engaging in them and to SDG implementation at large, including by contributing to the collection and analysis of timely, accurate and disaggregated data on SDG implementation and on the furthest behind at the local level; bringing stakeholders closer to decision-making processes; strengthening multilevel governance; and fostering integration of the SDGs into local planning.

With contributions from national and local governments, as well as other relevant actors, the VNR/VLR Lab, reflected on how VNRs and VLRs can be used to enhance multilevel governance to accelerate SDG implementation.

Speakers

- **Amson Sibanda**, Chief, Division for Sustainable Development Goals, DESA
- **Mr. Raf Tuts**, Director of Global Solutions Division, UN-Habitat
- **Ms. Carol Pollack** (Moderator), Inter-Regional Adviser for Implementation and Review of the SDGs, UNDESA
- **Ms. Irais Barreto Canales**, Head of Global Economic Intelligence Unit, Ministry of Economy; Executive Secretary, National Council of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Mexico
- **Ms. Anni Sinnemäki**, Deputy Mayor, Helsinki, Finland
- **Mr. Toshihiko Ota**, Mayor, Toyota City, Japan
- **Ms. Yumi Otsuka**, Chief Sustainability Officer, Toyota Motor Corporation
- **Mr. Raymond Saner**, Professor, International Relations & International Management, University of Basle, Switzerland; Director, Centre for Socio-Economic Development

Key Messages

- Local action is essential to achieving the 2030 Agenda; tailoring policies to address local communities' needs and priorities is key to effecting change and ensuring that no one is left behind.
- There is an urgent need to increase coordination between different levels of government and establish systems for continuous dialogue and feedback loops that can endure changes in administration. Improving coordination between national and subnational government, as well as associations can help harmonize SDG strategies for greater combined impact.

- SDG Localization can help strengthen public private partnerships; policy makers can leverage the private sector to tackle SDG challenges together, and companies can boost their competitiveness by helping their local communities.
- The Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) and related tools such as the Voluntary Metropolitan Reviews (VMRs) present valuable tools for translating the global SDGs into concrete local targets that can be measured and monitored to enhance policymaking. VLRs help local entities form long-term, action-oriented, measurable goals to encourage ambitious and cohesive planning.

Session Summary

- **SDG Localization Value and Opportunities:** Opening Speakers stated that strong local action, backed by healthy multilevel government systems is critical to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. They agreed that local and regional governments (LRGs) are essential for advancing sustainable development and responding to global crises. For example, during the global pandemic in 2019, LRGs rapidly transformed policies to address new and unprecedented challenges in their local communities. LRGs are also best placed to address important issues such as affordable housing. However, LRGs are still involved in less than 20% of frameworks. Speakers agreed that this needs to change. One presenter stated that the Resolution on SDG Localization endorsed in the second session of the UN Habitat Assembly in June 2023 demonstrated Member States' commitment to advancing SDG localization. Looking forward, participants suggested that while local level governance has played a role in shaping the SDGs, localization should play a bigger role in shaping the post-2030 Agenda.
- **SDG Localization Challenges:** Speakers and participants agreed that some of the biggest challenges facing SDG localization include weak or absent multilevel governance and coordination; inadequate resources – financial, human, and technical; challenges related to regularly monitoring and evaluating SDG localization; difficulty in fully and systematically involving local communities, often due to resource limitations; and a lack of necessary competences at the local level to localize the SDGs. Participants additionally discussed the challenge of addressing SDG synergies and tradeoffs at the local level. Switzerland, for example, has established an SDG strategy to identify trade-offs in the decision-making process. Similarly, in addressing key priorities including affordable housing and climate change, the city of Helsinki factors in trade-offs to prioritize expanding housing options while balancing considerations for greenhouse gas emissions. To that end, the city is moving towards a circular economy model to base decisions on full life cycle analysis, including the carbon footprint of materials.
- **Multi-level Governance:** Speakers suggested that multilevel governance is critical to effecting change because there are few targets that can be achieved without the buy-in and engagement of many policy makers and stakeholders from different levels of government. An opening speaker expressed hope to see collective dedication towards inclusive and effective multilateral systems. In terms of challenges, speakers stated that many government entities are structured with short terms in office, necessitating proper training and systems for continuation of work across different administrations. Establishing constant dialogue between multilevel stakeholders helps avoid disruptions in work. In this regard, speakers suggested that the VLRs and VNRs help improve reporting across levels. In Finland, for example, the national government takes great interest in the insights and support of LRGs, particularly for

thematic programmes, such as the country's commitment to become carbon neutral by 2025. Local entities are essential to helping reduce emissions and monitor change.

- **Role of reporting through VNRs, VLRs, VMRs, and related tools:** Speakers emphasized that the VNRs, VLRs, and related tools such as the Voluntary Metropolitan Reviews (VMRs) present invaluable tool to translate the global SDGs into concrete targets that can be measured and monitored to enhance policymaking. The VLRs can help enhance sustainable development in all areas of planning including strategy and design; budgeting and procurement; data, monitoring and evaluation; and stakeholder engagement. VLRs and VNRs encourage dialogue among different levels of government, resulting in better alignment of vision and strategies. Speakers suggested that the VLRs can help LRGs gain visibility and voice in national coordination mechanisms. One speaker suggested that the VNRs should be mandatory because they are so effective at improving transparency and accountability. They also help ensure continuity from one administration to another.
 - **Voluntary Metropolitan Reviews (VMRs):** The Voluntary Metropolitan Reviews present a new reporting tool to address the unique issues facing metropolitan areas, which are often agglomerations of separate cities and their surrounding territorial entities (towns, villages) that are interdependent but retain separate autonomy. One speaker suggested that the VMRs support coordination between entities on management of matters including natural resources, security, affordable housing, transport, waste management, education, etc.
- **Public Private Partnerships:** Partnerships, particularly public private partnerships are essential to achieving the SDGs. One speaker stated that the SDGs provides a valuable roadmap for better public private partnerships. For example, Toyota City, in partnership with the Toyota Motor Company, is undertaking various initiatives to increase the use of green vehicles to decarbonize transport and increase quality of life. In addition to benefitting society, companies can enhance their competitiveness by helping local communities. For example, Toyota Motor Company helped set up vaccination centres designed for rapid and efficient vaccination.
- **Social Inclusion:** Speakers stated that social inclusion of diverse populations, particularly underrepresented groups is essential to achieving the SDGs. Many countries are diverse, and different regions or populations may require different solutions. The VLRs help recognize and address these differences and acknowledge local cultures. Mexico, for example, was the first country in Latin America and the Caribbean to include VLR findings in its VNR and used this opportunity to discuss the needs and priorities of indigenous populations. Speakers agreed that increasing inclusion and participation of children and youth should also be a priority. Numerous national and subnational governments have created new opportunities for youth to engage and have their voices heard, but there is a need for more systematic engagement. One speakers proposed that there should be a separate goal dedicated explicitly to children and youth because they shape the future. Another emphasized that intergenerational considerations should factor into policy decisions, particularly with regard to issues such as unemployment.