

# Module 6: Strengthening Voluntary Local Reviews for Greater Impact

Enhanced Voluntary VLR Guidance Portal  
For Sustainable, Green, and Resilient Recovery & Transitions

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UNITED NATIONS  
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC  
AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS



UN-HABITAT



UNITED NATIONS  
ECONOMIC COMMISSION  
FOR EUROPE



**UCLG**

United Cities  
and Local Governments

# Who is this guide for?

- Officials of **local governments & organizations** who are in the process of preparing a Voluntary Local Review (or considering it)
- **UN or other experts** who are assisting local governments & organizations in the preparation of a VLR



# What will and won't you find in this module?

- You will learn **how to strengthen your Voluntary Local Review for greater impact**, informed by existing guidance from across the UN system and its partners



- This is **not a detailed guide on how to prepare a VLR**



# Implementing partners and authors

The implementing partners and authors of the Guidance Portal for Enhanced VLRs are:

- the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs ([UNDESA](#)),
- in cooperation with the United Nations Human Settlements Programme ([UN-Habitat](#)),
- the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe ([UN-ECE](#)), and
- the World Organization of United Cities and Local Governments ([UCLG](#)).



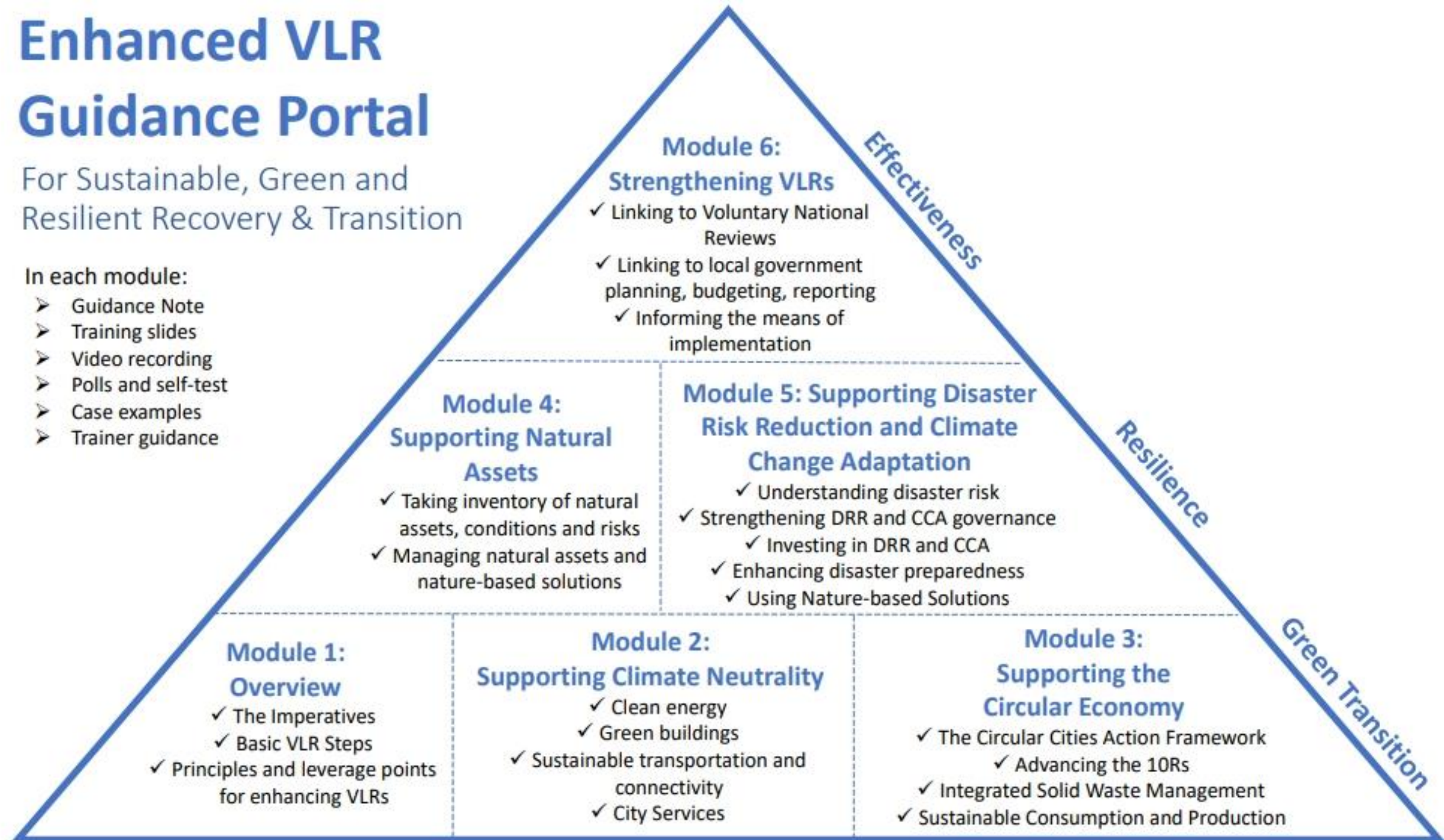


# Enhanced VLR Guidance Portal

For Sustainable, Green and  
Resilient Recovery & Transition

In each module:

- Guidance Note
- Training slides
- Video recording
- Polls and self-test
- Case examples
- Trainer guidance



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- Good practice examples
- Trainer/Facilitator guidance

## Module 6: Strengthening VLRs

- ✓ Linking to Voluntary National Reviews
- ✓ Linking to local government planning, budgeting, reporting
  - ✓ Informing means of implementation





# VLRs around the world?

- During 2022, 57 VLRs were published, including 26 by LRGs in Latin America and the Caribbean, 21 in Europe, eight in Asia, one in North America, and one in Oceania ([IGES, 2023](#)).

Source: [IGES \(2022\)](#)

- Of the VLRs prepared by local governments, the majority were from small-sized cities with populations under 250,000 persons.

## Voluntary Local Reviews 2018-2021



2018
(01) Kitakyushu
(02) New York
(03) Shimokawa
(04) Toyama

2019	(10) Canterbury	(17) Los Angeles	(23) Santana de Parnaiba
(05) Basque Country	(11) Gothenburg	(18) Mannheim	(24) State of São Paulo
(06) Besançon	(12) Hamamatsu	(19) Marsabit	(25) Taipei
(07) Bristol	(13) Helsinki	(20) New Taipei	(26) Taita Taveta
(08) Buenos Aires	(14) Jaén	(02) New York	(27) Wallonia
(09) Busia	(15) Kwale	(21) Oaxaca	
	(16) La Paz	(22) Santa Fe	

2020	(32) Chimbote and New Chimbote	(39) Harare	(46) Pará	(53) Turku
(28) Accra	(33) Ciudad Valles	(40) Hawai'i	(47) Pittsburgh	(54) Victoria Falls
(29) Barcelona	(34) Córdoba	(14) Jaén	(48) Rio de Janeiro	(55) Viken
(05) Basque Country	(35) Dangjin	(41) Liverpool	(49) City of São Paulo	(27) Wallonia
(30) Belo Horizonte	(36) Espoo	(42) Montevideo	(50) Stuttgart	(56) Yaounde
(31) Bonn	(37) Ghent	(43) Ngora	(25) Taipei	(57) Yucatán
(08) Buenos Aires	(38) Guangzhou	(44) Niort	(51) Taoyuan	
		(45) Niterói	(52) Trujillo	

2021	(63) Gladsaxe	(72) Malmö	(80) Shkodra	(90) Uppsala
(58) Asker	(64) Guadalajara	(73) Mérida	(81) Skiathos	(91) Vantaa
(29) Barcelona	(65) Helsingborg	(74) México City	(82) Stockholm	(55) Viken
(05) Basque Country	(13) Helsinki	(75) México State	(83) Subang Jaya	(92) Winnipeg
(59) Bergen	(66) Izmir	(20) New Taipei	(84) Sultanbeyli	(93) Yiwu
(08) Buenos Aires	(59) Kaohsiung	(76) Orlando	(76) Orlando	(85) Surabaya
(60) Cape Town	(68) Karatay	(46) Pará	(86) Suwon	(86) Suwon
(61) Durango	(69) Kelowna	(77) Penang Island	(87) Tabasco	(87) Tabasco
(62) Florence	(70) Lima	(78) Romsdal	(88) Taichung	(88) Taichung
(37) Ghent	(62) Florence	(17) Los Angeles	(49) City of São Paulo	(25) Taipei
	(71) Madrid	(79) Shah Alam	(89) Tokyo	(89) Tokyo

# How do VLRs Benefit Local Government?

In its review of VLRs published from 2018-2022, the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies observed the following:

- In most situations, the VLR process has helped to identify blind spots in local policymaking in need of urgent action.
- In some cases, cities that published consecutive VLRs, the process catalyzed progressive steps to localise the SDGs or to delve deeper into various aspects of the SDGs
- **Several benefits have been realized by local governments, outweighing the challenges and costs of preparing a VLR...**



**To kickstart sustainable development:** For cities without a long tradition of sustainability policies, a VLR can support the creation of policies aligned with the SDGs that embeds the three pillars of sustainable development. It provides structure to design, implement, and monitor sustainable policies.



**To think about the SDGs:** A VLR brings a new way of thinking about sustainability streamlining the localisation of the SDGs. It helps to find synergies and trade-offs between different goals and targets, and therefore, streamlining efforts.



**To advance horizontal integration:** The silo approach of much local governance blinds opportunities to accelerate sustainable development. More often than not, there lacks coherence and integration between local actions. A VLR makes visible missed possibilities to leverage co-benefits and to minimise trade-offs.



**To advance vertical cooperation:** To advance vertical cooperation: The common language of the SDGs facilitates the dialogue between national and subnational levels of government. It enables better coordination of policies, reporting and monitoring, ultimately accelerating the delivery of the 2030 Agenda.



**To communicate:** VLRs are a powerful communication tool with both internal and external actors, mainstreaming the SDGs across municipal departments as well as with the general public.

Source: [IGES \(2022\)](#)



# Why is it important to strengthen your VLR?

Preparing one is a difficult and long exercise, demanding a great amount of work, additional funding and human resources ([IGES, 2022](#)).

Therefore, reflecting on how to improve on the content and process of a VLR is very important, to help ensure that the impact of a VLR is commensurate with the level of effort needed to prepare one.



# Principles for enhancing a VLR

In 2021, the UN Economic Commission for Europe issued its *Guidelines for the Development of Voluntary Local Reviews in the ECE Region* and recommended a suite of enhancements to address challenges and lessons learned shared by local governments ([UNECE, 2023](#)).

Among the general principles suggested were for local and regional governments to ensure that VLRs:

- a. Develop practical **action-oriented** planning documents well-integrated with local or regional government planning and financing systems.
- b. Include both **long-term strategies and short-term plans** for cities and regions to address key challenges in achieving SDGs and promoting urban resilience.
- c. Are **well-coordinated** with national plans, including VNRs and concrete, actionable projects.
- d. Promote sustainable development at the local level through the creation of **shared value**.
- e. Promote a **participatory** approach.
- f. Ensure **no one is left behind**.
- g. Remain **evidence-based**.
- h. Remain **flexible and adaptable** in response to COVID-19 emergency recovery plans at regional and local levels.
- i. Maintain a strong focus **on mobilizing financial resources** for the implementation of VLR recommendations, including the use of innovative financing instruments.

# Ways to strengthen a VLR for greater impact

- The Enhanced VLR Guidance Portal was created to help local governments achieve sustainable, green, and resilient recovery & transitions in their communities.
- While the other modules in this Portal have focused on the sustainable, green, and resilient aspects of enhanced VLRs, this final module outlines **three practical ways for a local government to strengthen its VLR to help achieve greater overall impact commensurate with the level of effort required to undertake a VLR,**  
...

- 1. Strengthen linkages with Voluntary National Review (VNR) and Voluntary Sub-national Review (VSR).** By strengthening how both the content and process of your VLR connects and informs your country's VNR and your regional government's VSR, you help amplify key messages and build relationships between local and national, and sub-national governments;
- 2. Strengthen linkages with local government planning, budgeting, and monitoring.** By ensuring that your VLR provides practical information that is relevant to your local government's planning, budgeting, and monitoring processes, you strengthen the ability of your VLR to have short and long-term impact on sustainable, green, and resilient recovery and transitions; and
- 3. Support the means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.** The means of implementation is a term used within the United Nations system to convey key enabling factors for action. For VLRs, this means ensuring that the content and process of a VLR help inform and support: (i) the use of the full array of available financing sources and instruments; )ii) technology development and transfer for sustainable development and resilience; improvements in local trade and market access; and the development and use of local SDG progress indicators and data to inform continuous improvement.

# How can local governments strengthen their VLR for greater impact?

- The Enhanced VLR Guidance Portal was created to help local governments achieve sustainable, green, and resilient recovery & transitions in their communities.
- While the other modules in this Portal have focused on the sustainable, green, and resilient aspects of enhanced VLRs, this final module outlines **three practical ways for a local government to strengthen its VLR to help achieve greater overall impact commensurate with the level of effort required to undertake a VLR, ...**

## 1. Strengthen linkages with your country's VNR

- ✓ Link to the process of the VNR
- ✓ Link to the content of the VNR

## 2. Strengthen linkages with local government

- ✓ Inform local planning
- ✓ Inform local budgeting
- ✓ Inform local monitoring

## 3. Support the means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda

- ✓ Explore new financing sources and instruments;
- ✓ Benefit from and support technology development and transfer
- ✓ Develop and use local SDG progress indicators and data



# 1. Strengthen linkages with your country's VNR

- a. Link to the process of the VNR
- b. Link to the content of the VNR



# Strengthening Linkages with the VNR

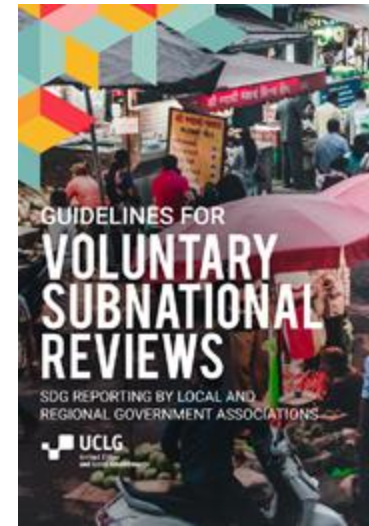
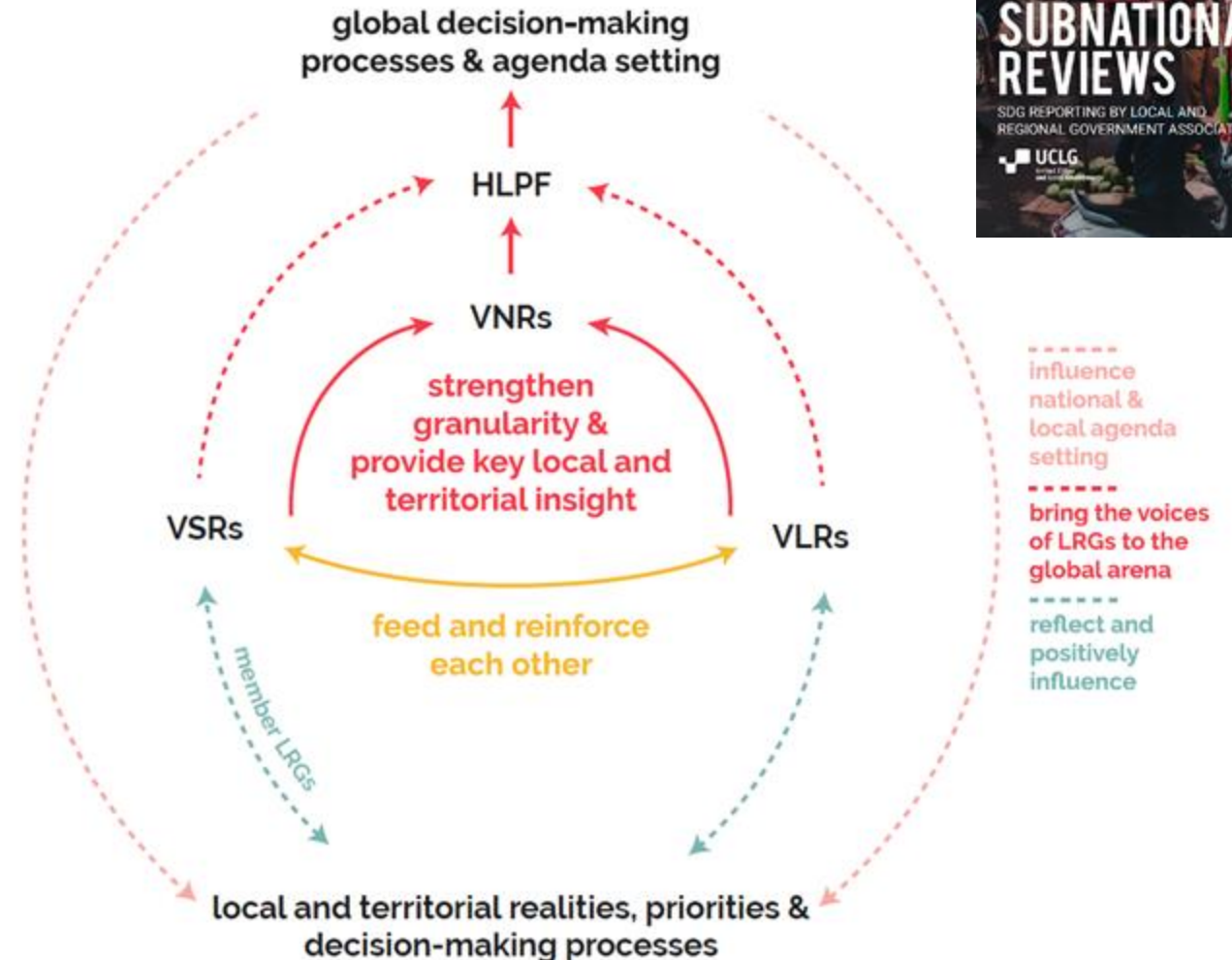
- A Voluntary National Review (VNRs) is a voluntary mechanism for countries to report on their progress toward achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 global goals ([UN, n.d.](#)).
- The VNR process for a country culminates in a report that is submitted to and presented at the HLPF in July of each year at the United Nations in New York.
- VNRs are most meaningful when they are:
  - ✓ conducted through an inclusive, participatory, transparent and thorough review process at the national and **sub-national levels**,
  - ✓ when they are evidence-based, and produce tangible lessons, solutions and commitments, and
  - ✓ when they are followed by concrete action and collaboration that drives implementation of the SDGs” ([UNDESA, 2023](#)).



Source: <https://hlpf.un.org/vnrs>

# Strengthening Linkages with the VSR

- VSRs are produced by local and regional government associations on a voluntary basis; they are drawn up in countries whose national governments are already reporting to the UN HLPF through a VNR.
- Like VLRs, a VSR can contribute to VNRs with firsthand information from the subnational government level.
- They have proven to be tools that offer great potential for strengthening multilevel governance, informing local and regional SDG policy and thereby contributing to improvements in LRG performance towards achieving the SDGs.

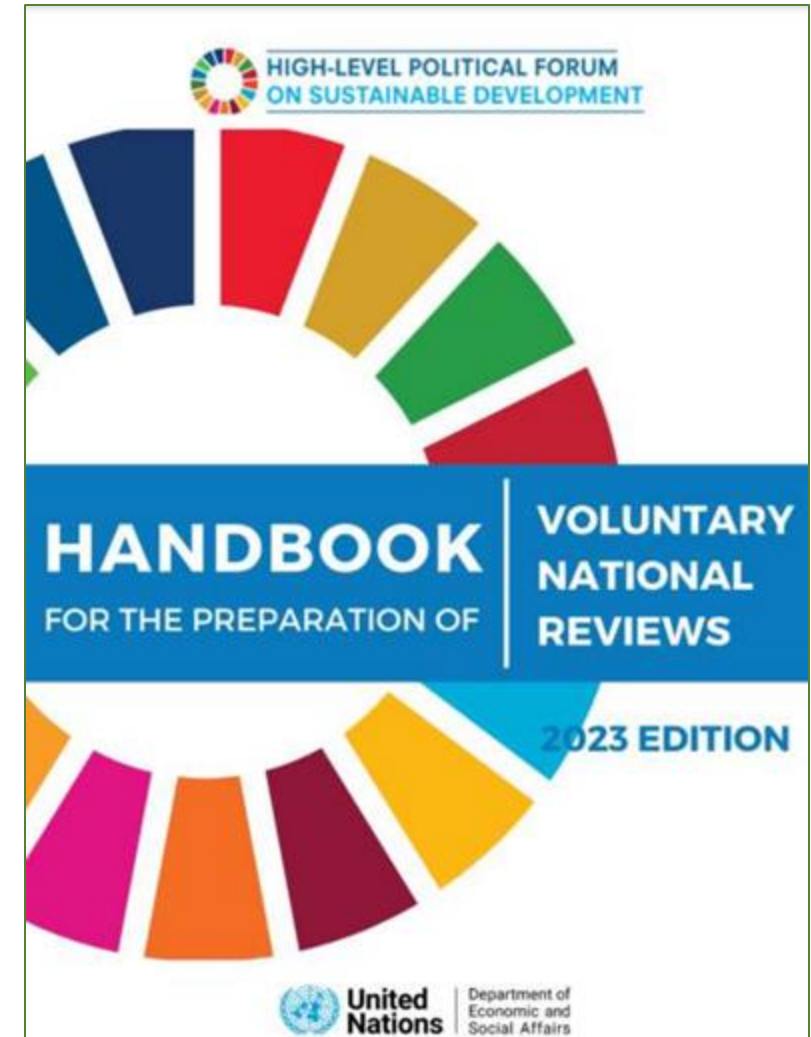


Source: [https://gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/guidelines\\_en.pdf](https://gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/guidelines_en.pdf)

# 1a. Link to the Process of VNRs

Engaging effectively with those officials in the national government who are responsible for preparing the VNR is a key first step helping to ensuring that the key messages of your VLR are heard locally, nationally, and globally.

- ✓ Time your VLR with preparation of the VNR.
- ✓ Informing your intent to prepare a VLR to the national government.
- ✓ Engage VNR staff for advice and review of your VLR.
- ✓ Offer to serve on VNR presenter's panel at the HLPF.
- ✓ Participate in multi-stakeholder bodies/mechanisms for VNRs and National SD Strategies.
- ✓ Strengthen participation of local and regional governments in national coordination mechanisms.
- ✓ Participate in, or advocate for, a national mechanism to support and consolidate VLR contributions.



Source: [UNDESA \(2023\)](#)

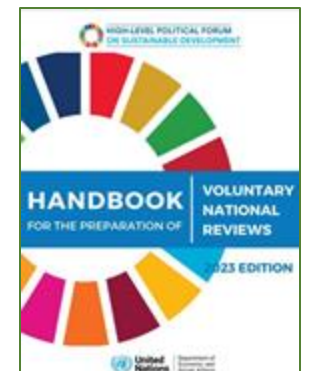


# 1b. Link to the content of the VNR

Aligning the organization of the content of your VLR with how the VNR is structured, can help to ensure that key and nuanced messages and stories from your VLR can be more easily integrated and reflected in the national report.

- ✓ Ensure that the VNR includes significant sections on localization of the SDGs.
- ✓ Provide local stories and case studies relevant to the VNR areas of focus.
- ✓ Contribute to the VNR content and ensure that indicators capture the contributions and impact of local efforts.
- ✓ Align structure of VLR report with VNR to the degree possible.
- ✓ Highlight the crucial role of local and regional governments in the implementation of the SDGs.
- ✓ Include recommendations and case examples for how national governments can support local green and resilient recovery & transition at the local level.

1. Opening statement
2. Highlights
3. Introduction
4. Methodology and process for preparation of the review
5. Policy and enabling environment
  - a. Ensuring ownership of the SDGs and VNRs
  - b. Integration of SDGs in national frameworks
  - c. Integration of economic, social, and environmental dimensions
  - d. Leaving no one behind
  - e. Institutional mechanisms
  - f. Systemic issues and transformative actions
6. Progress on goals and targets and evaluation of policy measures
7. New and emerging challenges
8. Means of implementation
9. Conclusions and next steps
10. Annexes

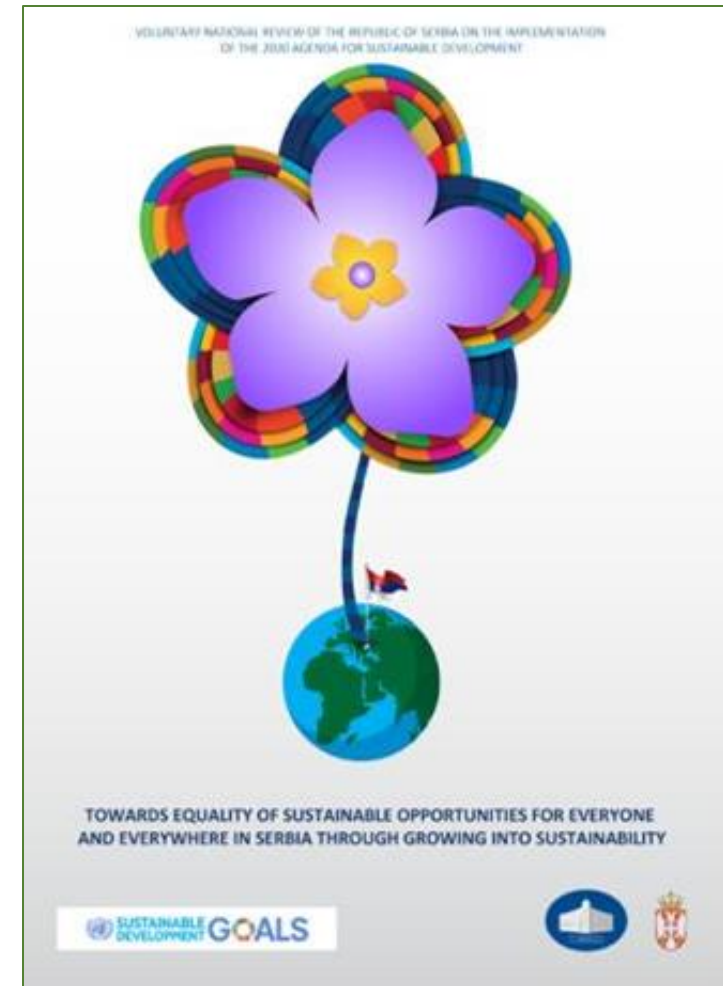


Source: [UNDESA \(2023\)](#)

# Case Example

## The 2020 Voluntary National Review of Serbia

- The 2020 National Voluntary Review of Serbia contains a unique section on “Local Self-government Perspective” for each SDG reviewed in the report.
- This level of reporting was made possible, in part, by the participation of the Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities (SCTM).
- The very process of participating in the development of the VNR helped SCTM and the National Association of Authorities in Serbia to catalyze the establishment of a local community-led hub of the institutional network-integrated mechanism for national implementation of the 2030 Agenda.



## 2. Strengthen linkages with local government

- a. Inform local planning
- b. Inform local budgeting
- c. Inform local monitoring



# Strengthen linkages with local government

- Ensuring that your VLR provides practical, relevant, and timely information for local government planning, reporting, budgeting, and monitoring may seem like a glimpse into the obvious, but it can't be overstated and should be elaborated. Such is the intent of this section.
- It is possible that the local government department responsible for preparing the VLR may not be well connected to the people and processes as the core of planning.
- It is also the case that some VLRs are prepared by stakeholder groups in a community with local government serving as a partner in the process.
- In any case, there are certain tactics that can help to ensure that a VLR is practical, relevant, and timely in the context of local government planning.





# 2a. Inform local government planning

**Informing Local Planning.** There are many facets of local government planning. Outlined below are just a few key areas in which a VLR can provide practical, relevant, and timely information for local strategies and plans:

- ✓ Create local shared value by recommending ways to enhance horizontal and vertical policy coherence for green and resilient recovery & transitions.
- ✓ Highlight local success and opportunities for achieving climate neutrality, participating in the circular economy, and managing natural assets
- ✓ Highlight local success stories, gaps, and opportunities in multi-hazard disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation.

*For more information on local government planning, refer to UCLG's SDG Localization Learning Module 2 on Territorial Planning to Achieve the SDGs ([UCLF, 2019](#)).*

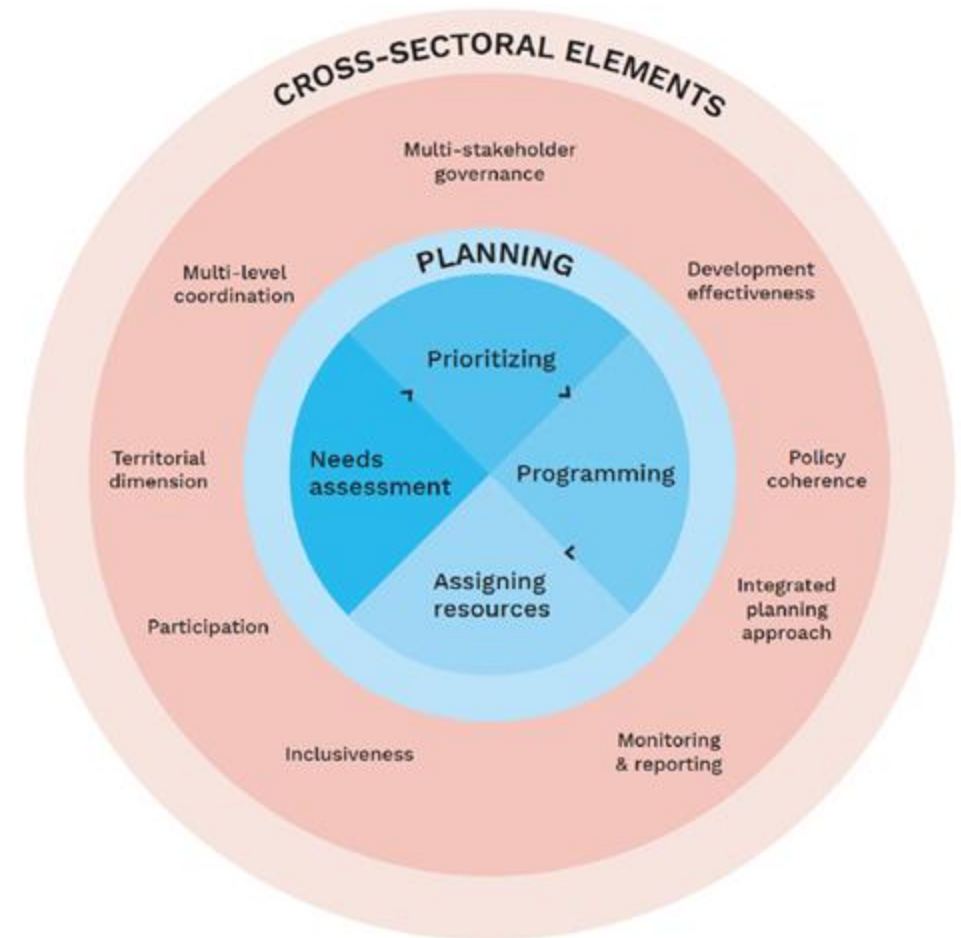


Image source: ([UCLF, 2019](#)).

## 2b. Inform local government budgeting

Budgeting and finance are at the heart of action at the local level.

Understanding what local issues are receiving budgetary support and what sources of finance are being tapped, is essential for assessing progress and making sound recommendations.

- ✓ ***When possible, conduct public expenditure reviews (PERs) relating to reducing ghg emissions and enhancing resilience to climate change.*** Budgets are a good reflection of priorities. There are established methodologies for conducting Public Expenditure Reviews (PERs) of climate action, including carbon reductions and climate adaptation/resilience. When the human and financial resources can be obtained in a VLR process, such PERs can provide key insights and evidence for advancing sustainability and resilience at the local level.
- ✓ ***Assess existing and potential financing sources and instruments for green and resilient recovery & transition.*** With an expanding array of potential innovative financing mechanisms accessible from public, private, and Islamic sources, examining where funds are coming from, and not, to support green and resilient recovery and transition at the local level, can be an insightful aspect for a VLR and for local government planning and budgeting.



## 2c. Inform local government monitoring

Local governments track and report on an array of key performance indicators for their continuous improvement and accountability to the publics.

Preparers of VLRs should consider the following tactics for strengthening links with local government operations:

- ✓ ***Provide data and stories relevant for local government key performance indicators (KPIs).*** With tracking and reporting on KPIs now mainstreamed in most local government planning and budgeting systems, VLRs can provide an additional source of data and evidence on KPIs relating to green and resilient recovery & transition. This will help establish VLRs as a useful and value-added process from a local government perspective.
- ✓ ***Provide data and stories relevant for level of service indicators for both built and natural assets.*** With more and more local governments starting to track KPIs relating specifically to built infrastructure assets as well as natural assets and city services, VLRs can be a source of additional information and evidence for local governments.



## Case Example

# Mandala SDG Indicator Tool of the National Confederation of Brazilian Municipalities

- The National Confederation of Brazilian Municipalities launched an online SDG indicator localization tool aimed at helping local governments evaluation progress towards achieving the SDGs at the local level.
- The “Mandala” online tool visualizes primary data in different areas of local government.



The Mandala presents local indicators that cover the four local dimensions: the economic, social, environmental and institutional dimensions.

They have been selected based on the 17 SDGs and ensuring that they are useful according to the local competences and to the local capacities to collect statistical data.

Given that not all local governments can attain the same development results, they have been classified in different groups according to the following data: average of the population; current net revenues per capita; population in extreme poverty, and the local human development index.



### **3. Support the means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda**

- a. Explore new financing sources and instruments
- b. Benefit from and support technology development and transfer
- c. Develop and use local SDG progress indicators and data



# Strengthen the means of implementation

- The term “means of implementation (MOI)” was defined in the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development to call attention to important cross-cutting aspects that are necessary to realize action.
- MOI describes the “interdependent mix of financial resources, technology development and transfer, capacity-building, inclusive and equitable globalization and trade, regional integration, and the enabling environment required to implement the 2030 Agenda” ([UNDESA, n.d.](#)).



# 3a. Explore new financing sources and instruments

There exist a variety of public, private, and Islamic sources of finance for local development initiatives, including from domestic and international source. For local governments, this means:

## ✓ ***Assess existing and potential financing sources for green and resilient recovery & transitions.***

Local governments have the potential to access financing including from public, private, and Islamic sources, and these can be either domestic or international.

VLRs can call attention to this array of financing sources by reviewing which sources have been access and identifying gaps and opportunities for future efforts toward green and resilient recovery & transition.

## ✓ ***Assessing existing and potential financing instruments.***

Public and private sources of finance, be they domestic or international, can be accessed through a range of financing instruments including grants and transfers, foreign direct investment, credit guarantee schemes, green and social bonds, public-private partnerships, sustainable funds, equities, pension funds, insurance, and philanthropy.

There are also several types of Islamic finance instruments including Islamic banking, Sukuk, Islamic funds, and Takaful and Waqf. VLRs can call attention to the degree to which broad suite of potential instruments have been leveraged by local government to fund actions toward green and resilient recovery & transition.



## 3b. Benefit from and support technology development and transfer

A number of technology networks and centre have been established and supported by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) that serve as facilitation mechanisms for promoting the development, transfer, and dissemination of clean and environmentally sound technologies ([UNIDO, n.d.](#)).

For local governments, this means:

- ✓ ***Assessing local access to domestic and international facilitation mechanisms that promote the development, transfer, and dissemination of clean and environmentally sound technologies.***

A VLR can help strengthen the means of implementation for green and resilient recovery & transition at the local level by assessing if the local government is taking advantage of the available technology facilitation mechanisms.

- ✓ ***Supporting domestic and international facilitation mechanisms*** that promote the development, transfer, and dissemination of clean and environmentally sound technologies.

A VLR can help strengthen the means of implementation for green and resilient recovery & transition at the local level by featuring stories where local innovations have been shared with other communities, regionally and globally.





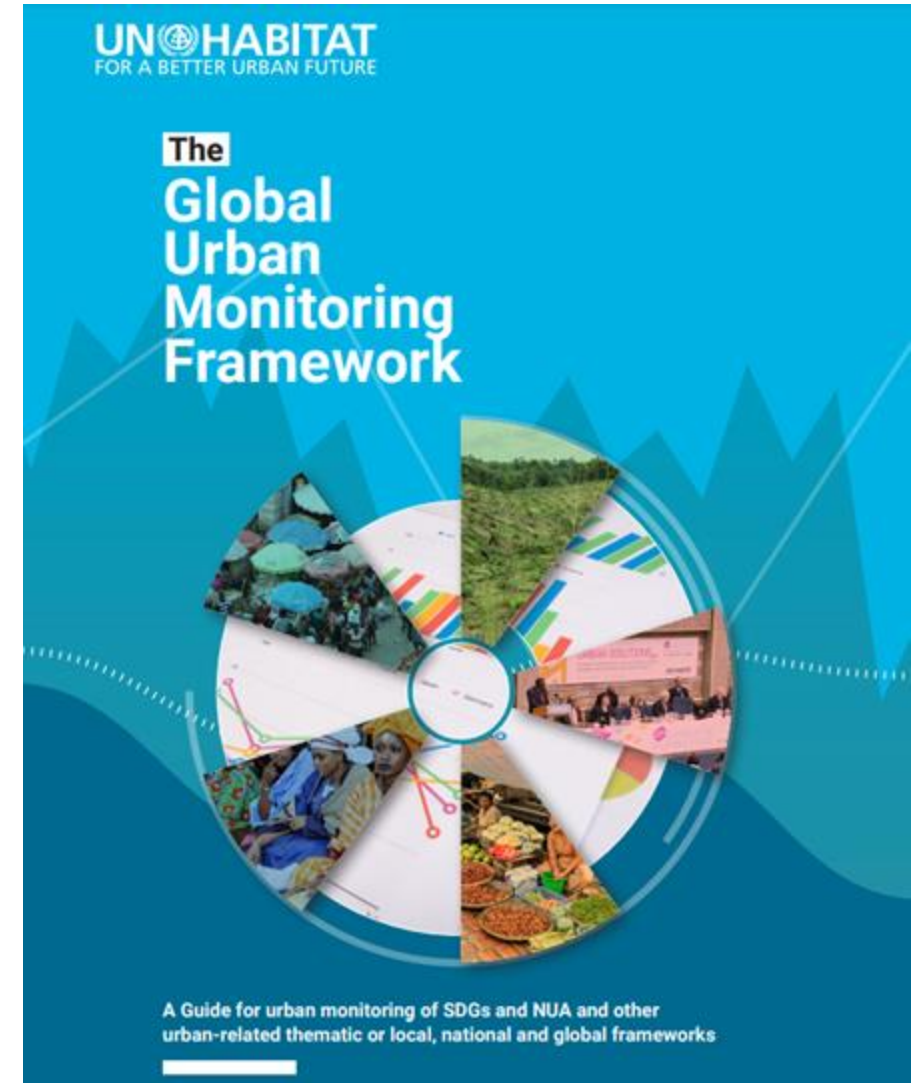
# 3c. Develop and use local SDG progress indicators and data

## ✓ *Clarify and assess locally relevant SDG indicators.*

While the global SDG Targets and Indicators were developed for national level application, some are easily transferable to a local context and these are highlighted in this Enhanced VLR Guidance Portal.

Other useful sustainable development indicator lists have been developed for application by local governments, including the UN-Habitat's [Global Urban Monitoring Framework](#) and the UN Economic Commission for Europe's [Protocol on the Evaluation of City Performance Against the Key Performance Indicators for Smart Sustainable Cities](#).

As preparers of your VLR, you can assess the extent to which relevant indicators for sustainable, green and resilient recovery & transitions have been used by local government in their monitoring and evaluation of local development strategies and plans.



## Case Example

# The UN Climate Technology Centre & Network

The United Nations Climate Technology Centre & Network (CTCN) promotes the accelerated transfer of environmentally sound technologies for low carbon and climate resilient development at the request of developing countries.



The CTCN facilitates the transfer of technologies through three core services:

1. Providing technical assistance at the request of developing countries to accelerate the transfer of climate technologies;
2. Creating access to information and knowledge on climate technologies; and
3. Fostering collaboration among climate technology stakeholders via the Centre's network of regional and sectoral experts from academia, the private sector, and public and research institutions.