Voluntary Local Reviews:
a blueprint for local and regional governments

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1 Introduction

Since 2016, the High-Level Political Forum of the United Nations has asked member states to submit their reports — the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) — to assess the state of implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Governments have committed to present at least two VNRs each by 2030. To assist them, the office of the UN Secretary General (UNSG) issued a set of guidelines for the production of the VNRs (see Annex 1: Resources).

Considering the role that local and regional governments play in the achievement of all the SDGs, and how important the localization of the agendas is for the achievement of the goals, there is a sub-representation of local voices and the perspective of local and regional governments (LRGs) in the assessment and monitoring process. The potential and the added value of the local sphere of governance in making the global agendas a reality is at risk of being lost, unless adequate space for representation, information and exchange is provided globally to local actors.

Voluntary Local Reviews (VLR) allow LRGs to (vertically) complement the information that is being provided at the national level. They locate themselves in the governance framework with which implementation and policy decisions are made. They allow them to (horizontally) share and learn mutually from other LRGs, strengthening the sense of community and joint destiny and ownership that underpins the SDG framework and its discourse.

No official template exists for VLRs. However, many of the LRGs that produced their VLRs have followed the model of the UNSG’s guidelines blueprint that this document adopts. The idea of picking up the same structure of the national reports is in itself a testament to the ambition of LRGs to take part as peers in the reporting process. It also allows for comparisons across the reporting activities of a very diverse — albeit small — sample of aware, active cities and regions (see Annex 2’s list of currently available VLRs).

This document provides a few guidelines and directions for local and regional governments (LRGs) — including cities, municipalities, regions and federated states — interested in developing and publishing their own Voluntary Local Review. Over the past few years, VLRs have become a common tool for cities and territories to present outcomes and results of the localization of the SDGs in their communities. While the UN-led monitoring system is designed to engage national governments, VLRs have been a tool for local governments to contribute, share and learn. **UCLG wants to assist its members and partners in the definition of a viable blueprint for even more VLRs to be available soon.** The more Local Reviews are available, the more the constituency of local and regional governments will be able to speak for their needs and demands at the same level of the other stakeholders involved in the implementation of the SDGs.

This document has two main sections. The first section recommends a simple outline and template for LRGs to follow when drafting their own VLR, based on the analysis of various experiences of cities and their institutional partners. The second section provides more information on the global monitoring process and how VLRs fit in this system.
2 A common VLR template

There is no ‘official’ template for LRGs interested in drafting their own review. UCLG has developed a short blueprint using three main sources: 1) the Guidelines published by the UNSG’s Office to support national governments in the preparation of the Voluntary National Guidelines they volunteer to submit each year to the UN High-level Political Forum (HLPF, referenced to in Annex 1); 2) a short guide published by UN-Habitat to assist LRGs in their VLRs; and 3) the approach of several of the cities that have already gone through the process of VLR preparation — specifically the Japanese cities of Kitakyushu, Shimokawa and Toyama; Bristol; Buenos Aires; and Helsinki.

The first step that cities and local governments need to take on their way to a VLR is to develop a work plan or a roadmap, and define the coordination structure that will be in charge of the process and endowed with adequate resources. The roadmap should define the scope of the VLR: structure and length of the report; the policies and programmes it will assess; a methodology for data collection and a clear set of indicators to be used; agencies and local bodies or actors to be engaged; the degree of involvement of stakeholders; among many other things. Interested local governments should take full advantage of the experiences, practices and insight of the other cities and local governments who have already undertaken a VLR.

Combining the input collected via all these sources, we recommend the VLR be structured as follows. The final document should not exceed a certain length (ideally 50-55 pages, however some VLRs are 100 pages or longer) and always be accompanied by a short (max. 5 pages) executive summary:

1. OPENING STATEMENT (max. 1 page). Cities interested in a VLR should consider the Opening Statement as a presentation of the political, administrative and social leverage put behind the review: local institutions at their highest-level (e.g., a Mayor or another high-level representative) could use this opportunity as a way to show the commitments and the efforts made by the local government to promote SDG implementation locally; the local government’s key SDG implementation strategies and its current status and achievements; the involvement of local stakeholders and citizenship, and the link with the national reporting strategy (considering, especially, that the Russian Federation is reporting to the HLPF in 2020).

In this regard, the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments has organized, for the last two years, the ‘Forum of Local and Regional Governments’, embedded in the framework of the HLPF. This event has been an opportunity for LRGs to gather in a top-level political context and present the outcomes of their local monitoring processes.

2. HIGHLIGHTS (1-2 pages). This section should provide an overview of the whole report, summing up the concrete plans, progress and achievements made in the implementation of the SDGs. It should briefly present the SDG strategy of the local government or the vision of the city to be achieved in 2030; identify the process through which the implementation process is being assessed.

The summary should highlight two or three SDGs in which the local administration has been proficient (any references to SDG 11 on cities would be welcome, coming from a local government); two or three best practices and/or concrete experiences and initiatives put in place in the community, particularly those related to the flagship principle of ‘leaving no one behind’; and an overall assessment — ideally with few selected figures and data — of where the local governments stands in terms of achieving its goals. Finally, this section should underline two or three areas where the local government requires some kind of support (financing, technology, technical assistance, etc.).
3. **INTRODUCTION (max. 2 pages).** The Introduction should provide the readers with the political and strategic context of the VLR. It should answer in the clearest way possible a few basic questions:

- **What is the strategic goal of the VLR** (e.g., show that the SDGs are being a framework helpful to assess local policies; promote a stronger involvement of local stakeholders in the monitoring process, etc.)? And how is this being pursued (e.g., how frequent will the assessment be, whether the local government chose an integrated or priority SDG approach)?

- **How do the SDGs link to local plans and development strategies?** Have there been relevant changes in the way the city works because of the SDGs (e.g., city planning; changes in strategic city priorities; the way local departments and offices are organized or participate in the monitoring process, etc.)?

- **How are local stakeholders (business, civil society, academia, etc.) involved in the process and, in particular, in the preparation of the VLR?** Do any other strategic documents on local sustainable development exist, and if so, what is the link with the VLR?

- **Does the VLR connect with the national monitoring efforts**, and what is the national context in which the localization process is being developed?

4. **PREPARATION OF THE REPORT: METHODOLOGY AND PROCESS (max. 2 pages).** This item is essential to understand the process behind the publication of the VLR. Following a template, moreover, will allow for enhanced comparability across different local governments:

   The methodology should clarify which institutions are in charge of the monitoring process: e.g., a special unit within the cabinet of the mayor, the planning department, an external institution such as a think-tank or academia. It should define how SDG-related priorities have been defined and how local policies and programmes have been assessed (for example, studying whether there was any alignment with SDGs in goals and budget). This sections should make clear what data, managed by whom, were used to perform evaluation or assessment; what kind of indicators were used, and how these were defined or if they had any link to other available indicator sets (e.g., the ‘official’ indicators adopted in the UN system and defined by the Inter-Agency Expert Group on the SDGs; national indicators; locally-defined indicators, etc.). Process and preparation of the report should highlight any joint consultative mechanisms (e.g., round tables, seminars/webinars, awareness-raising campaigns or events, public consultations, etc.) set up for the review, and the extent to which other levels of government (e.g., central or regional governments), civil society, academia and/or other actors were engaged. It is important that the VLR highlight any direct link with the Voluntary National Review process at the national level.

5. **ENABLING POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT (max. 20 pages, consider all subsections).** This part is the most emblematic of the UN-based recommendations and is based on the understanding that national and local institutions and policies are critical to the establishment of a truly ‘enabling environment’ for the successful localization of the Goals — a cornerstone of the UN approach to the SDGs. The updated UNSG guidelines propose six main steps: a) creating co-ownership of the SDGs, b) integration of the SDGs in the national institutional framework, c) integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development, d) institutionalizing the core principle of ‘leaving no one behind’, e) establishing adequate coordination institutional mechanisms, and f) addressing structural issues. In its activity of dissemination, UCLG has somewhat adapted these steps to the specificity of the local level,
thus merging some of their directives together. We highlight the following sub-sections to be covered:

a. **Creating co-ownership**: it is important to show how the local government is contributing to dissemination and awareness-raising among local public services employees, the general public, the private sector, civil society and communities’ organizations, academia, trade unions, women, youth, elderly persons, minorities, etc. The review should provide evidence of increased awareness among local actors and assess what has been done to engage these stakeholders and mobilize them as ‘co-owners’ of the SDGs. There should be proof showing how local governments have been able to create new local alliances and partnerships and, for comparability purposes in particular, what mechanisms have been developed to consult and involve stakeholders in local reporting: e.g., working groups and/or committees, open assemblies, newsletters, ‘urban labs’, web consultations, dedicated apps, etc. Similarly, it is important that this section tracks how different stakeholders contribute to the monitoring process (e.g., via assessment of outcomes and impact, assisting data collection, etc.) and improve the transparency and accountability of local institutions.

b. **Integration of the SDGs in local strategies, plans and institutional and regulatory reforms**: the local government should use this sub-section to assess to what extent the different SDGs and Targets are being integrated into urban or local development plans, policies, programmes and budgets (an alignment assessment). Similarly important is a gap analysis to show inconsistencies between the SDGs and current local priorities, so as to identify bottlenecks and correct policy-making accordingly (see, for example, the matrix in Figure 1). An alignment study should also show, if possible, how many indicators are being defined for the various targets, especially if these are locally sourced and linked to national SDG indicators.

**Figure 1.** Mapping of existing policies and alignment with the SDGs: the purple box shows how one local policy can impact several Targets; the green box shows how implementing one Target can require multiple local policy actions.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy Area/Sector</th>
<th>SDG 1</th>
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<th>SDG 2</th>
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<td>Health Strategy</td>
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<td>National Smallholder policy</td>
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<td>Justice System Reform Programme</td>
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<td>Early Childhood Development Programme</td>
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<td>Total aligned policies per SDG Target</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This sub-section should also explore the **institutional arrangements and mechanisms** established to coordinate the implementation of the SDGs at the local level horizontally (i.e., across various departments and agencies of the same local government and other public actors and stakeholders) and vertically (i.e., with other tiers of government such as the national government, federated states or regions, and other municipalities. It should highlight any institutional innovation and/or new regulatory frameworks (new legislation, new regulations, new rules in tendering, hiring, etc.) that have been elicited or changed in order to contribute to the localization of the SDGs. It is important to show whether these changes have widened the spectrum of institutions involved in policy-making, with specific attention to civil society, the private sector, academia and NGOs.

**c. Integration of the various dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social, environmental, spatial and cultural):** this sub-section should describe to what extent local strategies and actions are building on an integrated approach, improving policy cohesion across sectoral policies and interlinkages across the different Goals and Targets, so as to reduce negative trade-offs and counterproductive impact: neighbourhood development consistent with some of the urban requirements of the SDGs may actually feed gentrification and push low-income groups out of long-established communities (see Figure 2 and 3). Any examples in this regard would be relevant. This sub-section should also analyze the actions being taken to ensure that all tiers of government (national, federated states or regions, other municipalities) work together to integrate the different policies that have an impact on the city. It should underline the obstacles or difficulties faced. Consistent with an integrated policy approach, it is also critical that all sections of the report show how a gender perspective has been successfully adopted across as many policies as possible.

**Figure 2.** Example of interlinkages between SDG 11 and other SDGs.

d. **Leaving no one behind:** this is the principle underpinning the whole SDG endeavour and should be the compass of all local action to implement and monitor. This subsection should provide evidence of the local government’s attempts to address inequalities, avoid discrimination and engage as many vulnerable/marginalized groups as possible in the decision-making process. This sub-section should show to what extent local planning and policies identify and protect the more vulnerable groups and their needs. The sub-section will show how local governments make local policies consistent with the identified needs of such groups: women and girls, youth and children, elderly persons, ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples, people with disabilities, LGTBIQA+ people, migrants and refugees, informal settlers. It could also refer to available disaggregated sources of data that contribute to monitor these policies and underline data gaps.

6. **PROGRESS ON GOALS AND TARGETS (max. 20 pages).** This section should be freely available to the local government to provide **all the information on the local trends and initiatives of SDG implementation.** It should be able to choose whether to report on all 17 SDGs (the approach recommended by the UN) or rather **pick out those in which it is more confidently able to provide actual experiences, supported by examples and data.** This is the place for a recount — even a discursive one — of any initiatives, innovative experiences, good or bad practices, ‘stories’ about the SDGs being implemented locally that may contribute to assess the local government’s performance. It would be important that this part also describe key difficulties encountered in achieving specific Goals and Targets, and how these shortcomings should be addressed. The information provided in this section should be consistent with the methodology presented in Section 4: in particular, **indicators should be treated clearly,** with
reliable sources of data and comparable figures. Especially if mixed indicators are used (e.g., indicators taken from existing systems such as the UN’s and locally-developed indicators tailored to available local data), it is interesting for this section to highlight the process through which the analysis is conducted. UNDESA’s 2020 edition of the Handbook for Voluntary National Reviews recommends a few interesting questions that could lead in the preparation of this sub-section:

- Has the local government prioritized certain SDGs? What criteria/processes were used to identify priorities, and what actors took part in these processes?
- Has the local government established a baseline for the SDGs?
- What progress has the local government made and on what Goals and Targets? What are the trends? Are there any emerging issues of concern? Consider how the VLR can analyse progress/challenges, rather than describing existing/planned policies.
- Where gaps and challenges have been identified, what measures have been put in place, or are planned, to address them?
- Are there good-practice examples in the achievement of certain Goals and Targets which other local governments would find useful?

7. MEANS OF IMPLEMENTATION (max. 5 pages). This section is important to the extent in which it addresses what means (technical, social and financial) are available or are being identified in order to implement local plans and policies. It should be able to define strengths and weaknesses of the context in which the local government is acting as related to: financial means and resources (public, private, local/regional/national/international); human and technical capacities in both institutional venues and civil society and communities; capacity building needs, access to technology; issues with data availability to monitor implementation of the SDGs at local level and potential locally-sourced solutions. Again, UNDESA’s 2020 edition of the Handbook for Voluntary National Reviews recommends a few interesting questions that could lead in the preparation of this sub-section:

- How are the current resource flows working? This part should show steps taken to mobilize local, national or international resources, and additional sources of funding.
- How can financial systems and resource allocations be aligned to support the achievement of the 2030 Agenda?
- Has the country adopted a financing strategy/integrated national financing framework to support the localization of the SDGs? What policies and reforms are in place to finance localization strategies?

8. CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS (max. 2-3 pages). This final section should sum up the main insights of the whole review, including the main issues that the local government is facing in implementation, new emerging issues and what solutions and initiatives have been already taken. There should be a clear, bullet-pointed analysis of lessons learned, open issues, and recommended main proposals for the next steps to continue progress. It should be able to highlight the impact of local progress on the overall national strategy or vision for sustainable development and what support is needed to ensure follow-up and prepare more reviews in the future.

9. STATISTICAL ANNEX. Local governments are invited to include an annex with data, detailing what priority indicators identified at the local level, as well as any national and regional indicators with disaggregated data available at the local level. They may highlight whether statistics were collected from the national statistical system and pinpoint major gaps in the availability or reliability official statistics on indicators.
ANNEX 1. Resources

The following is a list of useful online resources for the production of a VLR:

- United Nations’ Secretary General’s Office, *Guidelines for Voluntary National Reviews*:


- UN-Habitat, *Annotated Table of Contents, Voluntary Local Report on the Implementation of the SDG 11 and Its Interface with other SDGs*, November 2019

- UCLG Learning department’s *Module 3 on local reviewing*:
  https://www.learning.uclg.org/module-3

- UCLG Learning department’s flyer on VLRs: https://www.learning.uclg.org/file/flyervlrpdf-0

- Joint Research Centre (JRC), European Commission, Handbook on VLRs: https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/bitstream/JRC118682/european_handbook_for_sdg_voluntary_local_reviews_online.pdf

ANNEX 2. List of Voluntary Local Reviews (partial list)


2. Basque Country Government, Spain, 1er Informe de Seguimiento – I. Agenda Euskadi Basque Country 2030, Año 2017; 2º Informe de Seguimiento, 2018:


4. Bristol One City et al., Bristol and the SDGs – A Voluntary Local Review of Progress 2019, UK: https://www.bristolonecity.com/sdgs/


13. La Paz, Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible y su localización en el Municipio de La Paz, 2018, Bolivia: http://sitservicios.lapaz.bo/sit/ods/


17. Mannheim, The implementation of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals in Mannheim 2030, 2019, Germany: 


Repository and Webpages where VLRs can also be downloaded:
- Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (Japan) and its VLR Lab: https://www.iges.or.jp/en/projects/vlr
- UN-based repository of VLRs and other local reporting tools: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg11/local
- the Local2030 Hub portal, which collects a catalogue of stories, publications and events on SDG localization: https://www.local2030.org/