

2020 International Mayors Forum
**"Local Governments and the Sustainable Development Goals in times of
the COVID-19 pandemic"**
2 December 2020
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Voluntary Local Reviews

Ladies and gentlemen, first of all, many thanks of course to our colleagues for inviting us to the Mayors Forum. I am very happy to share our thoughts on the new, exciting movement of Voluntary Local Reviews.

As you may have heard, the Voluntary Local Reviews conducted by cities and regions, modelled after the Voluntary National Review reports, are truly picking up pace. Cities and regions as varied as New York City, Kitakyushu, Buenos Aires and Helsinki have already conducted their reviews and tens of cities are preparing their reports, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. As Mr. Sibanda just noted, cities and regions are often the engines of innovation and we are quite excited to see how they will utilize this tool for their SDG implementation.

Benefits of a VLR

Our Department of Economic and Social Affairs serves as the Secretariat of the High-level political forum on sustainable development, the main platform for follow-up and review of SDG implementation. While these VLRs are not directly mandated by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, we strongly believe that they can drive the transformational change that we desperately need.

For the cities and regions themselves, we believe that a Voluntary Local Review can for example:

- help raise awareness of the SDGs;
- support more integrated policymaking and coordination within the government;
- serve as a catalyst for increased engagement with civil society, academia and private sector;
- help enhance data collection;
- serve as a communication tool between different levels of government
- they can also help in forging new partnerships and searching for new means of implementation.

DESA capacity building

UN DESA has from the start supported the Voluntary National Reviews and organized peer learning workshops for the countries participating in this process annually. We have noticed that the best experts in the process are those who have gone through the full cycle themselves or are preparing their reports. This is why we wished to provide similar support for our colleagues working at the subnational level.

We held the first global capacity building workshop online in June when we brought together cities and regions that have already conducted a VLR to share their experiences with those only starting the journey. We also had colleagues working for the national governments share their experiences from the Voluntary National Review processes.

We are now continuing this work through our thematic Voluntary Local Review Series. We have held so far two thematic online workshops, one on stakeholder engagement and another one on integrating the SDGs into strategies, plans and budgets.

From our workshops, it has been very interesting to hear how many participants have depicted the SDGs as the new shared language, the lingua franca. They are using the goals to connect with other cities and regions around the world for peer learning - as well as with individuals and international organizations they would not otherwise reach out to.

During the workshops, participants have stressed the importance of showcasing in very practical terms what is the added value of integrating the SDGs into their work. For some, they provide a structure for setting priorities. For example, the Province of Cordoba in Argentina, has utilized the SDGs to agree on six priority goals for immediate action.

Others have utilized them to find the gaps and weaknesses in their existing sustainability efforts, as has been showcased in the VLR of Los Angeles and its findings on public health. This work has often also brought up questions related to jurisdictions. Should progress be monitored by cities, counties, states or national governments when issues are often interlinked? There are no right answers to these questions but hopefully VLRs can ignite discussions on them.

The SDGs have also been used to reflect in everyday work whether existing actions are taking into consideration environmental, social and economic dimensions and interlinkages with other targets.

In some cases, the VLR report has been part of the integration process. For example, in Helsinki, Finland, the first VLR served more as a stocktaking exercise while before the second VLR, now in the making, the city is working on further integration.

Our cities and regions of course all operate in very different contexts. For example, on SDG integration, some national governments such as Argentina and Ecuador,

have given direct guidance to subnational entities on how to include the goals into their strategies and plans.

In other countries, active subnational governments have initiated this process independently. In many cases, these processes at the local level can be very participatory, bringing together individuals from around the community to consider the shared priorities of the city. This was done for example in Mannheim, Germany, where the City's 2030 Mission statement was developed through a series of surveys, workshops, online consultations and debates. As part of the process, the Mayor of Mannheim held himself dialogues with citizens to discuss what actions should be prioritized by the city.

Related to this, we have heard how local action and the VLRs can provide avenues for participation that are impossible to achieve at the national level. They can extend a hand to actors who otherwise would not be participating in this work, reach out to the most vulnerable and marginalized groups and help amplify their voices.

For example, in Bristol, United Kingdom, the multi-stakeholder SDG Alliance has been used to bring in actors that wouldn't otherwise engage in sustainability projects, and initiatives such as the City Leadership breakfasts bring together city leaders from anchor entities with communities to discuss challenges faced by the city.

In city of Kitakyushu in Japan, the new SDGs Club is open for all stakeholders and it also provides funding for projects developed by the citizens. Through this mechanism, all citizens can propose how to solve local sustainability challenges.

These are the encounters that turn the SDGs into a reality. And these are the initiatives we can learn from and get inspired by through these discussions and through the VLRs.

We will be holding the next workshop on 20th of January, focusing on Monitoring, data and indicators. We expect to have very interesting discussion on how cities and regions have localized the global SDG indicators for their own work, what indicator sets and support from international entities they have found particularly useful and how they can contribute to the national efforts on monitoring progress.

Global Guiding Elements for VLRs

Colleagues, while there is no official format for the VLRs, we have learnt from the national processes that certain shared elements, drawing from the 2030 Agenda itself, can enrich the peer learning and contribute to the robustness of the reviews.

Hence, we have developed a set of global guiding elements for the VLRs which draw from the Secretary-General's common voluntary guidelines for the VNRs.

These elements merely aim at providing a proposed shared structure for the reports, and at minimum, give a checklist of issues that could be reflected in the process, even if they are not showcased in the report itself. The elements are not meant as restrictions to the process, but rather as a tool for those engaging in these reviews. They are also fully compatible with other, more detailed guidance materials, such as the Asia-Pacific Regional Guidelines prepared by UN ESCAP.

We have made them available online and we will have them translated into all official UN languages hopefully by the end of the year.

These Global Guiding Elements also aim at fostering a dialogue between the Voluntary National Reviews and the Voluntary Local Reviews, where applicable.

On this issue, we have been very happy to see more and more national level reviews refer to meaningful collaboration with subnational governments – and this year for the first time also to these VLRs as was done by countries such as Kenya, Uganda and Finland. We know that many of the 2021 VNR countries are already working with their subnational counterparts to utilize the findings from these VLRs in their reports.

Closing

As mentioned, we believe that cities and regions hold the potential for being the gamechangers in our SDG efforts. We expect these VLRs to become a driving force when taking a deep dive to assess our SDG impact at the local level and to see if the goals are making the difference in everyday lives of people around the world.

To close, it is important to note that for all of these reviews, the process is much more important than the report itself. Transformative change requires that all of us are willing to make an honest effort to assess the current state of our actions and to make the changes needed. The true value of a review will only be measured in ways in which it enhances SDG implementation and true sustainability of our societies on the ground.

Thank you.