Guidelines for
Voluntary Local Reviews

VOLUME 2

**Towards a New Generation of VLRs:
Exploring the local-national link**

Voluntary Local Reviews

UN-HABITAT
FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE

UCLG
United Cities
and Local Governments

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Cover picture:
Bhar Sudip (sudipbhar5b@gmail.com)
Gaya Railway Station at Bihar in India
A train compartment which was already overcrowded but still passengers were trying to get in the train from the other side of the platform. It's a daily and very common practice in Bihar State in India. Lack of protection and security in every step in the journey can be seen.

UN-HABITAT
UNITED CITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

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Foreword

One year after the publication of the first volume of the Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), the VLR and Voluntary Subnational Review (VSR) global movement has grown exponentially, with at least 110 VLRs and 15 VSRs either already published and publicly available, or currently being drafted to be published in 2021 and 2022.

But the progress made through VLRs/VSRs is not only about increasing numbers, it is a story of transformation from the bottom up, of local innovation and of increased global dialogue. VLRs/VSRs have become established as one of the main tools for local and regional governments to monitor and report on SDG progress. Beyond their reporting role, VLRs/VSRs have proven to be powerful accelerators of the SDG localization process worldwide.

To capture this potential and build on our long-standing alliance to localize the SDGs, UN-Habitat and UCLG created the *VLR Series* to support the VLR/VSR global movement. The *VLR Series* aims to provide national, local and regional governments as well as communities with cutting-edge knowledge and best practices on SDG monitoring and reporting along with opportunities for exchange, peer learning and international engagement.

We are pleased to present this second volume of the Guidelines for VLRs, a critical piece of the *VLR Series* and an important step ahead for the research and dissemination of practices on multilevel coordination for SDG monitoring and reporting. This volume builds on the first volume published in 2020, and explores the link between VLRs and Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), a connection that remains largely preliminary and informal, but is essential for achieving the SDGs by 2030.

The guidelines demonstrate how VLRs and the global movement around them have revamped multi-level dialogue, increasing the demand for an effective multi-level cooperation and reinforcing the centrality and effectiveness of SDG localization. While much of the VLR-VNR link is still not fully institutionalized, a limited number of cases demonstrate effective approaches to connect the different dimensions of analysis of the guidelines.

This volume also showcases growing evidence of the impact of VLRs/VSRs on VNRs and the national monitoring process: local representatives have joined national delegations at the High Level Political Forum, while the 'local government sections' in VNRs are being co-produced between national and local governments. Taken together, the two volumes of the Guidelines (1) provide an overview of the VLR process; (2) demonstrate of how VLRs and VNRs can add value to one another; and (3) propose key recommendations on how to strengthen multilevel cooperation for data generation and management as well as for enhanced participatory process and means of implementation.

We hope that this volume will inspire and support both national and local governments throughout the world to strengthen their cooperation in jointly advancing the implementation of the SDGs. UCLG and UN-Habitat stand ready to respond to the needs and priorities of governments and partners worldwide to realise the global agendas, leaving no one and no place behind.

Maimunah Mohd Shariff
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1 Introduction: Contributing to a VNR-VLR ecosystem

When UN-Habitat and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) published the first volume of the *Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews* (VLRs) in July 2020, both institutions had a clear goal in sight: the guidelines were designed to provide technical assistance to the local and regional governments (LRGs) that were approaching a local review of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) localization in their territories and communities. The first volume presented the key concepts, potential components of a review's structure and outcomes, and a repository of examples and practices that could inspire even more local and regional governments to join this fledgling movement.

A few months later, in March 2021, while volume two of the guidelines was being developed, **the number of available VLRs had nearly doubled**[1] from 37 local reviews to 65, with about 20 more municipalities and regional governments already working on their VLRs for 2021 and 2022. Moreover, new ways of reporting on SDG localization, such as Voluntary Subnational Reviews (VSRs), are beginning to emerge and consolidate themselves as valuable options for local and regional governments willing to take part in this process. More importantly, the political context that surrounded local and national reviews on SDG implementation had changed. **Local and regional governments in the vanguard of SDG implementation have been building a worldwide community** that has been looking for opportunities to work together and exchange knowledge and information. **National governments have started to see in local reviews a natural ally for their own implementation, monitoring and reporting efforts** — including policy alignment with the SDGs as well as their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) — complementing the information they have with the unique data and evidence that

comes from local initiatives and mobilization. The policy innovation and trailblazing ideas that the SDGs have stimulated at the local level and that VLRs have collected can kindle an actual paradigm shift in national policy making too. Local governments reporting on localization, building on their communities' experiences and practices, involving their population in the achievement of the SDGs can become laboratories for policy change at all levels.

This is the rationale behind the second volume of the guidelines for VLRs: **exploring the relationship between national and local reviews, VNRs and VLRs, institutional creation and multi-level mechanisms for dialogue, collaboration and mutual learning.** Because of the progress in VLR participation and the emergence of a critical mass of local governments committed to SDG localization, national governments have access to an **unprecedented wealth of information** and an institutional channel that can ensure their policies get down to the level closest to the people and their communities. In the framework of an improved dialogue with national governments, local and regional governments have new opportunities to make an impact at higher levels of policy making, **catalysing the participation of even more local and regional authorities and stakeholders**. These guidelines are designed to guide both national and local governments that want to take this route of collaboration and mutual support. They explore how the national and local levels have worked together so far in SDG implementation and monitoring; what work is there still to be done; and what the VNR-VLR processes can teach us about the achievement of a fully multi-level, holistic and inclusive approach to the 2030 Agenda, the SDGs, and the sustainable future of our countries, communities and territories.

[1] All recounts of VLRs available at any given time of the editorial process are always considered to the best of the editorial team's knowledge.

1.1 The *Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews* and the goal of Volume 2

The idea of volume one of the *Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews* developed throughout 2019 as a response to the growing interest of the sub-national governments[2] that joined UCLG's Community of Practice on VLRs — originally established at UCLG's 2019 World Congress in Durban, South Africa. These cities and regions were willing to contribute to the global monitoring process on the localization and implementation of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda, and turned to the Community of Practice for common solutions to shared problems: How can a city or region report on implementation with the resources they have available? What data is needed to write a VLR? Ultimately, what is a VLR and how can one be made?

In order to provide this kind of guidance, Volume 1 analysed in detail the structure, content and methods of the 37 VLRs that had been published by June 2020[3]. It also attempted to categorize VLRs according to a few key variables that may help to identify general trends in local reporting: which local institutions or stakeholders drove the reporting effort; the relationship with national and global trends and strategies; common

team's knowledge — were available by 31 March, 2021.

VLRs do not happen in a political vacuum. In most cases, local governments act in an institutional context in which their initiatives and policies coexist with national frameworks, regulations and strategic planning. National governments, moreover, have become increasingly aware of the untapped potential of implementation and monitoring capacity that sub-national governments can provide. National governments that fully embrace a 'whole-of-society' approach to the realization of the 2030 Agenda can play a fundamental role as drivers of policy innovation at the local level, and legitimize sub-national governments' initiatives, activities and mobilization as key parts of sustainability-driven progress that can sweep through all of society, communities and territories. The SDGs, since their establishment, have been a call for this kind of 'complementary' linkage across all levels of government. Their implementation is an important incentive to mobilize resources and participation, and VNRs and VLRs are, in turn, key incentives to perform, advocate for dialogue and to start building policy in a new