



Guidelines for

Voluntary Local Reviews

VOLUME 1

A Comparative Analysis of Existing VLRs



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Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews

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UCLG Community of Practice on VLRs
UN-Habitat

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Foreword

We are in the midst of the most critical global health and socio-economic crisis of the century, which has the potential to set us back several years in our quest to realise the Agenda 2030 and other global commitments. Yet, the COVID-19 pandemic also presents an opportunity, to rethink the relationships and promote joint ownership of different spheres of government, public administration and civil society, in order to “build back better”. The battle for sustainability, inclusion and resilience will be won or lost in cities and across territories. The universal development agendas remain a transformative framework within which to carry out the actions that our communities need and to transmit the ambitious global message to strengthen cooperation and solidarity. Local action will be critical if we are to change the world.

The strong and growing drive towards the localization of the SDGs, and the associated international agendas, is proof that local and regional governments, the level of government which is closest to the people, are the frontline responders that address the priorities and issues that most affect their communities. They must be seen as an integral part of a joined-up and determined national effort to deliver the Global



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Agendas. The efforts of LRGs is also demonstration of their commitment to the construction of a multilateral system capable of engaging everyone in shaping global solutions.

The universal agendas are interlinked and cannot be achieved in isolation. The 2030 Agenda is critical for ensuring that no-one and nowhere is left behind. The New Urban Agenda is central to achieving the SDGs in our cities. Alongside the Paris Agreement, these commitments are of paramount importance for addressing the current climate emergency. Only with effective coordination mechanisms and synergies between institutions and communities can we catalyse the action required to revitalize our planet and our societies after the pandemic and build their resilience to future crises.

If the SDGs are to be achieved, it will be critical to strengthen the mobilization of local and regional governments and their communities. It is therefore critical to ensure that local and regional governments are actively involved in all steps of the process: in the definition, implementation, follow-up, and monitoring of the localization strategies and priorities. To achieve this, they must be empowered with localized and disaggregated data, in particular in regards to gender, and also be given adequate resources to contribute to the process. Voluntary Local Reviews and Voluntary National Reviews should be seen as opportunities to revise policy decisions and to create more traction and a wider ownership of the goals.

The value of a VLR lies in the fact that it transcends local borders and can potentially influence all spheres of government. VLRs are more than just mechanisms for



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monitoring and evaluation: they are levers for bringing about transformation; learning and training instruments for public officials from all spheres of government; mechanisms of transparency and accountability with which to promote increased civic involvement; and tools for boosting joint ownership of the universal agendas.

VLRs represent a sense of responsibility. They are the embodiment of the aspirations of local and regional governments and their sense of ownership, as institutions. They offer a practical way of taking part in the global movement towards sustainable development. In short, VLRs can bolster local commitments and accelerate actions.

For this reason, UCLG and UN-Habitat, decided to join forces to devise a *VLR Series* to provide guidance, definitions and technical

support to any local and regional government aiming to engage in the VLR process.

This first Volume of the Guidelines for VLRs, jointly developed by UCLG and UN-Habitat, aim to bring out the intrinsic value of VLRs as a political process that can enhance coordination between different spheres of government.

We hope that this work will serve as inspiration and support to many local and regional governments throughout the world. UCLG and UN-Habitat stand ready to respond to the needs and priorities of LRGs in the path to realise the global agendas, leaving no one and no place behind.



Maimunah Mohd Shariff
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UN Habitat



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Secretary General
United Cities and Local Governments

Preamble

These Guidelines build on UCLG and UN-Habitat's longstanding and unique partnership in support of the localization of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The two organizations have been working together for a long time, since UCLG's establishment in 2004 and its contribution to UN-Habitat's Global Campaign on Urban Governance (1999-2009), and its successor, the World Urban Campaign. In 2014, both institutions co-led the 'Dialogues on Implementation' of the post-2015 development agenda,¹ a milestone in the local implementation of the global agendas, conducting local, national and global consultations on the process.

Since then, UCLG and UN-Habitat have collaborated to raise awareness among local and regional governments (LRGs) on the relevance of SDG localization, while also amplifying their voices in international fora for their role in the achievement of the Goals to be duly acknowledged and supported across international institutions. Being especially supportive of lifelong learning among local administrations and communities, UCLG and UN-Habitat, together with UNDP and other global and local partners, have also contributed to the development of a series of learning and training modules on the localization of the SDGs: one of the UCLG Learning's Modules, dedicated to reporting on the SDGs, also discusses the Voluntary Local Review (VLR) as a tool of inclusive participation and knowledge exchange among LRGs.²

The two 'Local and Regional Governments Forums', organized in the framework of the 2018 and 2019 United Nations' High-Level Political Forums, were a breakthrough in the global conversation on Voluntary Local Reviews as a medium for locally-sourced

information and mutual knowledge exchange at the local level. In 2018, New York City and three Japanese Cities (Kitakyushu, Shimokawa and Toyama) were the forerunners which officially launched VLRs, soon followed by Helsinki and several others. More cities came together in 2019 to sign a VLR Declaration,³ also endorsed by UN-Habitat, and to create the VLR Community of Practices supported by UCLG.

In January 2020, with the 2030 deadline only 10 years away, the United Nations' Secretary-General launched the 'Decade of Action' to accelerate action towards achieving the SDGs. A few weeks later, the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded as a worldwide health crisis, sparing no region of the world. In the light of these events, UCLG and UN-Habitat have also been working together to provide support and experience-sharing among local governments at the forefront of the response to the pandemic. This joint effort has resulted in a 'Live Learning Experience' (LLE), co-hosted by both institutions with Metropolis, since March 2020, titled "Beyond the Outbreak".⁴ The LLE has been built on three main blocks: a) creating a virtual and living community for experience-sharing; b) providing local governments with online resources and promote the active sharing of materials, strategies and protocols; and c) developing briefings and guidelines to respond to the actual needs of local governments in these times.

Building on these premises and on their unrelenting efforts for SDG localization, UCLG and UN-Habitat have decided to further join forces and launch a global process of mobilization for Voluntary Local Reviews through the development of the VLR Series – a set of normative resources and guidance materials. Both institutions acknowledge that no single VLR definition or format exists,

1 UNDG et al., "Localizing the Post-2015 Development Agenda" (New York, 2015).

2 The module, 'SDGs Learning Module 3: Reporting to national and local reviews', is available online at the following address: <https://www.learning.uclg.org/file/module-3-eng-0>.

3 See also: <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/international/programs/voluntary-local-review-declaration.page>.

4 All resources on the Live Learning Experience can be accessed at this link: <https://www.uclg.org/en/issues/live-learning-experience-beyondtheoutbreak>.

and that VLRs today reflect the diversity of LRGs and their territorial and national contexts. Primarily developed as an SDG monitoring tool, VLRs are also seen as instruments of political relevance, with the potential to stimulate civic mobilization and participatory planning, while also fostering partnerships and investment towards the achievement of the global goals. Ultimately, engaging in the VLR exercise provides opportunities for stronger multilevel governance mechanisms, especially whenever VLRs are successfully integrated with a country's Voluntary National Review (VNR) processes.

The broader goal of the *VLR Series* is to provide cities and LRGs with cutting-edge knowledge and practical guidance on the VLR process, while kindling the sharing of experience and practices — and, ultimately, a global conversation — on monitoring and reporting on the SDGs at the local level.

The work of the Series follows the inputs of UCLG's Community of Practice on VLRs, thus directly responding to the needs and demands of cities and LRGs approaching this context. A range of guidance products and input will be produced jointly by UCLG and UN-Habitat as part of the *VLR Series*. This report is the first Volume of the Series, and focuses on a comparative analysis of

actors are actually being involved in a VLR?; b) where is the VLR process located institutionally in the broader scheme of multi-level governance?; c) what contents are VLRs including, and why?; and d) how are VLRs being made, with what resources and what goals?

Building on the findings of this report and on existing VLR examples, the second volume of the UCLG-UN-Habitat *VLR Series* will provide a deeper analysis of the core principles that should underpin the VLR process, while also outlining different approaches and practical steps to undertake it. The project will also develop spin-off normative documents and tools, exploring in detail some of the most relevant features and outcomes of VLRs and, more generally, SDG reporting exercises.

The expectation is that these guiding volumes, and their accompanying suite of tools, will provide food for thought and practical advice to LRGs and their communities, promoting peer-learning and experience-sharing across all regions.



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