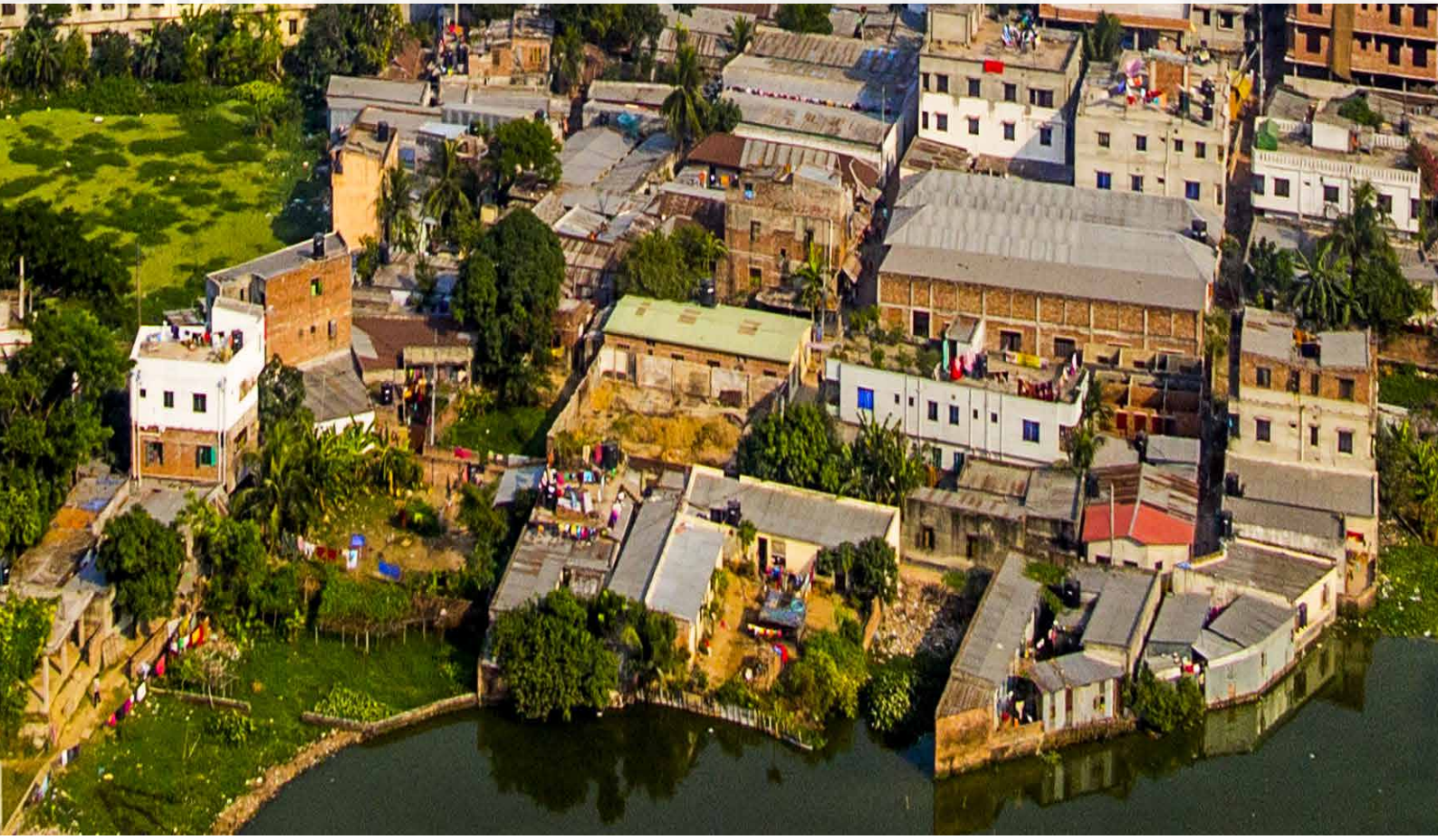
Asia-Pacific Regional Guidelines on Voluntary Local Reviews

Reviewing local progress to accelerate action for the Sustainable Development Goals



UNITED NATIONS ESCAP
Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

Penang Platform for Sustainable Urbanization

Asia-Pacific Regional Guidelines on Voluntary Local Reviews

Reviewing local progress to accelerate action for the Sustainable Development Goals

United Nations publication
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ST/ESCAP/2918

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Foreword

Sustainable urbanization can make cities change agents on solving the persistent problems of climate crisis, unsustainable resource use, widespread inequality, discrimination and injustice in the Asia-Pacific region.

Cities are also ground zero of the COVID-19 pandemic, with 90 per cent of reported cases globally. The pandemic has also highlighted the critical role local leaders and city governments play in action for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through their role in basic service delivery, affordable housing, economic and community development, environmental protection, and infrastructure investments. Most of the 232 statistical indicators to measure global progress toward the SDGs have an urban dimension and about one-third of SDG indicators are measured at the local rather than national level. In short, any country serious about meeting its obligations to achieve the SDGs will find the path to sustainable development runs through its cities.

The Asia-Pacific Regional Guidelines on Voluntary Local Reviews aspires to become a practical framework used by local policy makers to review local progress against the SDGs. The Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) have proven useful for cities and regions to foster SDG localization and demonstrate local governments' capacity and contributions to accelerating progress. The guidelines build on existing resources and provide practical tools, checklists, and templates that local governments and other stakeholders can use when conducting a VLR through a complimentary process with a country's Voluntary National Review reporting.

These guidelines are also a flagship knowledge product from the Penang Platform for Sustainable Urbanization (PPSU) since its inception at the Seventh Asia-Pacific Urban Forum (APUF-7) in 2019 in Penang, Malaysia. The PPSU represents a dynamic multi-stakeholder partnership to leverage the strengths of cities and leading urban development organizations to support local, regional, and national governments in achieving the SDGs and New Urban Agenda in Asia and the Pacific.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us that cities have a transformative potential that can be harnessed and enhanced to forge inclusive, prosperous, and resilient places. As home to most of the the world's urban population, Asia-Pacific cities can serve as the drivers of sustainable development for the achievement of the SDGs and the Paris Agreement.

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Acknowledgments

This publication was developed by the Environment and Development Division of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), in collaboration with the Penang Platform for Sustainable Urbanization (PPSU).

The principal authors of the publication were Samiuddin Ahmed, Hirotaka Koike and Omar Siddique of ESCAP, and Fernando Ortiz-Moya of the Institute of Global Environmental Strategies (IGES).

Members of the PPSU and beyond reviewed parts of the report and provided technical inputs: Agata Aleksandra Krause (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe), Hitomi Rankine and Riccardo Mesiano (ESCAP), Maizura Ismail (United Cities and Local Governments Asia-Pacific), Martino Miraglia (United Nations Human Settlement Programme), Mia Davison (Eastern Regional Organisation for Planning and Housing), Riina Jussila (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs) and Terry Parker (Commonwealth Local Government Forum in the Pacific). In addition, Asami Okahashi, Hannie Meesters and Jihoon Lee from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and Atsushi Koresawa, Lars Stordal, Lucia Kiwala and Shipra Narang Suri from the United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UN-Habitat) provided valuable insights during the development of the publication.

Robert Anthony Oliver edited the manuscript and project administration was provided by Sirikul Suvarnanetra and Orani Potchapornkul. Publication design and layout was by Jeff Williams.

Introduction

The urban population of the world has grown significantly since the 1950s, from 751 million to 4.2 billion in 2018 (United Nations, 2018). Generating more than 80% of global gross domestic product (GDP), cities are now the pre-dominant hubs of economic growth and wealth creation across Asia and the Pacific. The role of cities in both national and regional economic development has driven and benefitted from integration, large-scale investment, and employment generation. This has lifted millions of people out of poverty, forged growing middle classes and transformed the urban physical landscape (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and UN-Habitat, 2019).

However, as cities continue to grow, they are faced with new and increasingly complex challenges. Cities in the region are grappling with rapid unplanned urbanization and growing inequalities. One third of urban dwellers in Asia and the Pacific live in slums or slum-like conditions (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and UN-Habitat, 2019). The reliance of urban economies on environmentally exploitive models of development together with unsustainable consumption patterns and changes in lifestyle over the years have also led to environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity, increased pressure on natural resources, generation of waste, exposure to pollution and disasters, and vulnerability to climate change. The rapid growth and often informal nature of city populations, coupled with their high level of global and local interconnectivity, also make them particularly vulnerable to the spread of communicable diseases such as COVID-19.

Although certainly not the first time, COVID-19 has made many local leaders and Governments realize that the social, economic and environmental challenges it poses are not just abstract issues of national concern; they are very real and often played out locally in urban areas. In fact, the pandemic has highlighted the leading role that local leaders and city governments play in action for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through their role in service delivery, economic and community development, environmental protection and infrastructure investments to ensure the well-being of their residents and neighbourhoods. In order to meet such challenges and changing needs of the future, stakeholders from across the spectrum need to come together and ask new and better questions and build new approaches to tackling problems (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and UN-Habitat, 2019).

In the context of achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, local governments are increasingly finding value in situating their priorities within global policy frameworks such as the SDGs as an organizing principle and holistic framework for local planning and execution that targets multiple co-benefits for people and planet. Cities must be engaged and empowered to help deliver against many of the targets highlighted by the SDGs and can often act faster than national Governments in implementing many of the actions needed to realize the global agenda (Bulkeley and Betsill, 2913). City leadership on sustainable development is most evident in the progressive adoption of Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs). A VLR is a vehicle for subnational Governments (SNGs)[1] to assess their progress and identify opportunities for acceleration towards specific targets in the 2030 Agenda. By raising awareness of the SDGs, galvanizing partnerships and encouraging local action, VLRs enable cities to present a holistic and coherent picture of their social, economic and environmental progress, thereby connecting local strategy to a global agenda (Pipa and Bouchet, 2020).

In 2019, cities such as Bristol, Buenos Aires, Hamamatsu, Helsinki and Los Angeles joined earlier cities such as Kitakyushu, New York, Shimokawa, and Toyoma in delivering their VLRs at the United Nations High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). During a launch event at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in September 2019, the concept of the VLRs was further endorsed through the creation of the Voluntary Local Review Declaration (New York City Mayor's Office for International Affairs, 2019), an official document spearheaded by the City of New York that allows SNGs to commit to reporting and supporting the SDGs. At the tenth World Urban Forum (WUF) in February 2020, 17 additional cities, including eight from Asia and the Pacific,[2] committed to undertake VLRs.

[1] These guidelines use subnational government as an umbrella term to refer to city, local, and subnational authorities in different contexts. The guidelines fully acknowledge the uniqueness of each entity and use the term solely for the purpose of simplicity.
[2] Bauang, Betio Town, Dhankuta, Kuala Lumpur, Seberang Perai, Sipalay City, Tawau and Turkestan City.

Although gaining in momentum, the VLR process does not yet have any official status as part of the formal follow-up and review processes hosted by the United Nations. While the United Nations has supported initiatives such as Local2030[3] by giving them space at HLPF as well as cities in Japan and Malaysia to showcase their VLRs at regional sustainable development forums such as the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) convened by ESCAP, there exists no specific template or official format that cities can follow if they choose to undertake a VLR.

The objective of these guidelines is to provide support to Asian-Pacific cities willing to undertake a VLR and/or produce an initial report to stakeholders on how cities can work towards achieving the SDGs. The content is designed to provide cities with context regarding the 2030 Agenda as well as guidance specific to the region to help them decide where to start, how to start and what to keep in mind when conducting a VLR. The guidelines draw heavily from existing resources and is meant to be a living document – updated regularly to reflect new and emerging perspectives. It is not meant to be prescriptive, and it aims to assist Asia-Pacific cities[4] in using the SDGs as a common language and to localize it to their own contexts through a process of co-production with national and local authorities.

The guidelines are structured as follows: Chapter 1 provides an overview of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs as well as other key global agendas pertinent to the urban context. The chapter also discusses the need for localizing the global goals before introducing readers to the VLR. Chapter 2 dives deeper into the latter aspect and walks readers through the process of preparing and undertaking a VLR. Chapter 3 focuses on VLR-VNR integration – why it is important and what can local and national Governments do to deepen it. Chapter 4 provides the building blocks of producing a VLR report and how the report can be followed up.

[3] Local2030: Localizing the SDGs in a network and platform that supports the on-the-ground delivery of the SDGs, with a focus on those furthest behind. More information can be found at https://www.local2030.org/.

[4] Since its founding in 1947 the membership of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific has grown to 53 members and nine associate members. Member States include Afghanistan, Armenia, Australia, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, China, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Fiji, France, Georgia, India, Indonesia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kiribati, Kyrgyzstan, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Maldives, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia (Federated States of), Mongolia, Myanmar, Nauru, Nepal, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Pakistan, Palau, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, the Russian Federation, Samoa, Singapore, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Tuvalu, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the United States of America, Uzbekistan, Vanuatu and Viet Nam. Associate Members include: American Samoa; the Cook Islands; French Polynesia; Guam; Hong Kong, China; Macao, China; New Caledonia; Niue; and the Northern Mariana Islands.

1. A universal framework for sustainable development

1.1. An endeavor like no other

In 2015, after two years of negotiations within the international community, the UNGA resolution "Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" (United Nations, 2015b), including its 17 Goals and 169 targets, was adopted by Heads of State and Governments in New York (figure 1). The 2030 Agenda is a commitment to eradicating poverty and achieving sustainable development world-wide by 2030, and ensuring that no one is left behind. Its adoption was a landmark achievement, providing for a shared global vision towards sustainable development for all. The 2030 Agenda takes into account other approved agendas, such as the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, 2015) and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (United Nations, 2015a), acknowledging their contribution without duplicating objectives and targets.

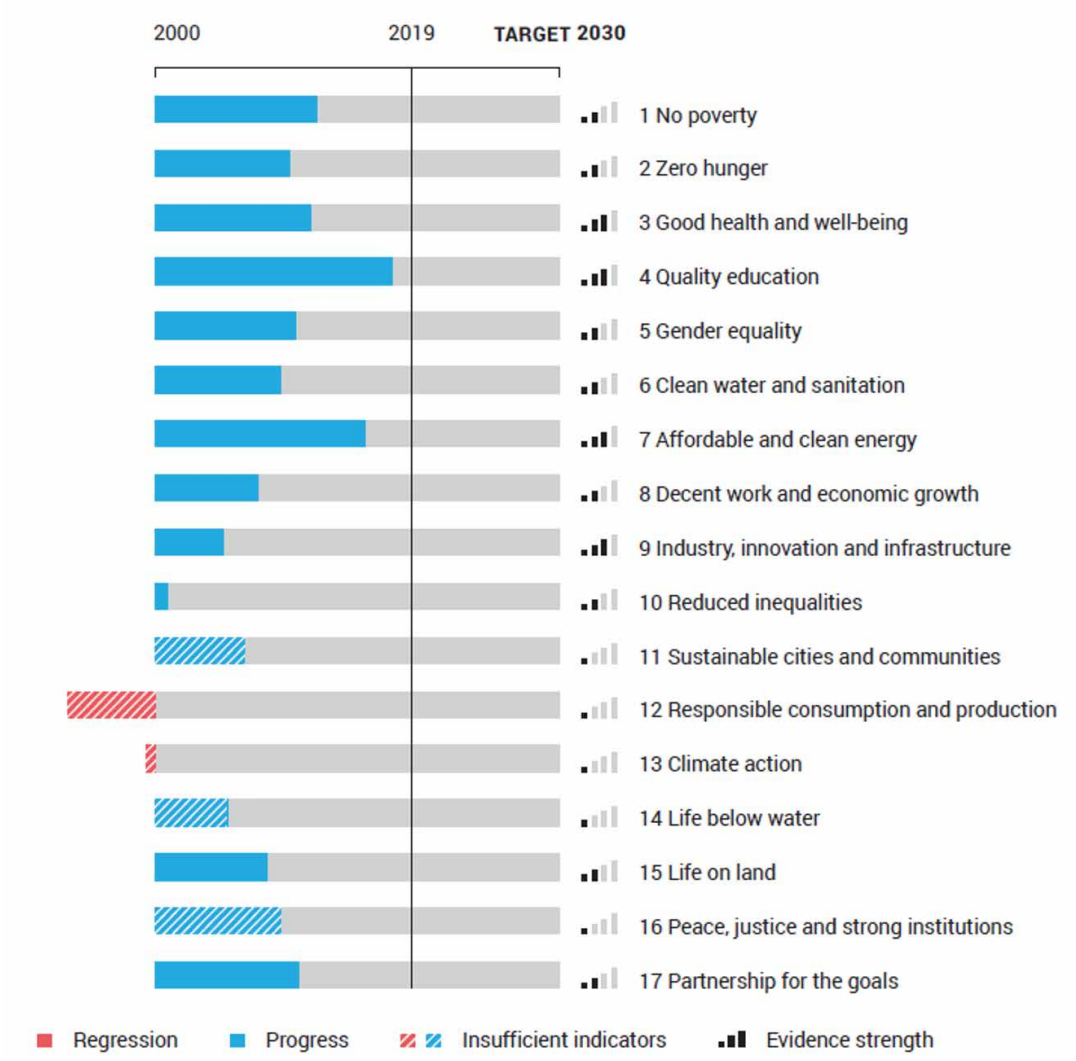
Figure 1: The 17 Sustainable Development Goals

Did you know...?

Reporting against the SDGs is structured around a three-tiered follow-up and review architecture at the national, regional and global levels. The 2030 Agenda encourages United Nations member States to "conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and subnational levels, which are country-led and country-driven" (United Nations, 2015b). The voluntary national reviews (VNRs) are the primary method for countries to document and share their efforts in implementing the SDGs. Through the VNR process, countries have a chance to revise national development goals and targets, assess and strengthen the adequacy of national policies and institutions, and mobilize multi-stakeholder support through the creation of partnerships for the achievement of the SDGs. At the regional level, the follow-up and review process takes the form of Regional SDG Forums, such as the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, which emphasize peer learning and exchange of good practices in the regional context. The HLPF has the central role in overseeing the network of follow-up and review processes at the global level. Upon completion of their VNR, countries have the opportunity to present their report at the HLPF, thereby sharing their experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learnt, with their peers.

Since 2015, countries have taken action to integrate the SDGs and targets of the 2030 Agenda into their national development plans, and to align policies and institutions behind them. While advances have been made, monumental challenges remain in the Asia-Pacific region, particularly in the environment-related SDGs (figure 2). In September 2019, the United Nations Secretary-General called on all sectors of society to mobilize for a Decade of Action on three levels – global action to secure greater leadership, more resources and smarter solutions for the Sustainable Development Goals; local action embedding the needed transitions in the policies, budgets, institutions and regulatory frameworks of governments, cities and local authorities; and people action, including by youth, civil society, the media, the private sector, unions, academia and other stakeholders – to generate an unstoppable movement pushing for the required transformations (United Nations, 2019).

Figure 2: Snapshot of the SDG progress in the Asia-Pacific region in 2019



Source: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2020.

The Decade of Action's recognition of cities and local authorities as critical actors in accelerating the implementation of the SDGs is not the first time the importance of the urban context has been highlighted in policy debates (figure 3). The 2030 Agenda has a cities' goal, SDG 11, which calls for "inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable" cities. It focuses not only on cities, but takes a place-based approach with emphasis on urban, rural-urban and regional linkages. In late 2016, the United Nations adopted a specific agenda for cities, the New Urban Agenda, which calls for compact cities, polycentric growth, transit-oriented development, adequate public space and reining in sprawl (United Nations, 2016). The New Urban Agenda was adopted as a collective vision and political commitment to promote and realize sustainable urban development, and as an opportunity to leverage the key role of cities and human settlements as drivers of development in an increasingly urbanized world (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and UN-Habitat, 2019).

Figure 3: United Nations global agendas and cities

March 2015

- **Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030**
- Acknowledges that responsibility to reduce disaster risk should be shared with other stakeholders, including local Governments and the private sector.
- Highlights the role of land use and urban planning, building codes, and environmental and resource management regulations, and acknowledges the role of United Cities and Local Governments and other relevant local government bodies as necessary to support implementation of the framework.

July 2015

- **Addis Ababa Action Agenda**
- Underscores the necessity for new financial architecture that can support the global sustainability agendas.
- Recognizes and supports the role of local Governments and calls for domestic public resources, domestic private finance, international private finance, international development cooperation and sustainable debt to help fill the infrastructure gap in developing countries.

September 2015

- **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**
- Applies to all countries, both developed and developing.
- Dedicated goal (SDG 11) for cities.
- Most of the 234 statistical indicators to measure global progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals have an urban dimension and about one-third of the Goals' indicators are measured at the local rather than national level.

December 2015

- **Paris Agreement on Climate Change**
- Countries to voluntarily reduce their greenhouse gas emissions in order to keep the mean global temperature rise below 2ºC and ideally below 1.5ºC from preindustrial levels.
- Cities are estimated to emit at least 70 per cent of the world's carbon emissions, and likely more when accounting for goods and services produced elsewhere but destined for urban consumers.

October 2016

- **New Urban Agenda**
- Sets out a 20-year vision to achieve sustainable urban and territorial development that is well planned, regulated and financed.
- Supports the previous agreements by offering a road map for implementing SDG 11 and enhancing the role of cities in creating sustainable development, fighting climate change and reducing disaster risk.
- Calls for compact cities, polycentric growth, transit-oriented development, adequate public space and reining in sprawl.
- Provides a spatial and territorial lens for achievement of the SDGs.

Source: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and UN-Habitat, 2019.

While the SDGs have a substantial but implicit urban dimension, the New Urban Agenda adds value by formulating a clear aspirational vision, which can mobilize relevant urban stakeholders and guide local implementation. In fact, up to 65 per cent of the SDG targets may not even be fully achieved without the involvement of urban and local actors (Cities Alliance, 2015).

To allow the co-creation of new frameworks of governance that is meaningful and practical in the day-to-day lives of citizens, it is necessary to root the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in local and regional priorities. The next section briefly discusses the topic of SDG localization and its status in the Asia-Pacific region.

Did you know...?

SDG 11 has been evaluated to be directly linked to the targets and indicators of at least 11 other SDGs. Furthermore, almost one-third of the 232 SDG indicators can be measured at the local level, making SDG 11 an important unit for action and tracking progress towards sustainable development (UN-Habitat, 2018).

1.2. Localizing the 2030 Agenda

The SDGs, and their targets and indicators were agreed by national governments. Officially determined and universally accepted SDG targets for local purposes do not exist even though achievement of the SDGs depend on the ability of SNGs to make them a reality. SNGs, therefore, often have to translate or "localize" the agenda to their own specific contexts (Pipa and Bouchet, 2020). Localization is the process of taking into account subnational contexts in the achievement of the 2030 Agenda – from the setting of goals and targets, to determining the means of implementation and using indicators to measure and monitor progress (United Nations Development Group, 2014; UN-Habitat, 2016).

Empowered SNGs coupled with localized development strategies based on integrated planning have the power to transform cities and territories, foster inclusion, reduce resource usage and improve rural-urban linkages. For localization to truly transform the implementation of the SDGs, it is necessary to also look at national development policies as it needs to acknowledge local development to be endogenous, spatially integrated and multi-scalar. National development policies should also accept the fact that local authorities themselves should be responsible for planning, managing and financing local development.

SDG localization efforts in Asia and the Pacific are a mixed bag. SNGs have made significant progress in raising awareness and aligning local plans with the SDGs. However, instances where cities are operationalizing the SDGs, localization appears to be more of an after-thought with SDGs unceremoniously added onto existing projects and activities (United Cities and Local Governments, 2020b). The Annex provides some examples of SNG contribution towards SDG localization in the region.

Did you know...?

The concept of localization is far from new. At the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the United Nations adopted Agenda 21. This was a voluntary process that aimed to create local policies and programmes that work toward achieving sustainable development. Localization was also promoted in the context of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). As the first unified effort to frame international development priorities, the MDGs were mainstreamed at the national and subnational levels in a number of countries (Oosterhof, 2018). Localization was introduced well into the MDG implementation period and was highlighted as a core necessity during the midterm evaluation in 2008, which indicated that the achievement of the MDGs required ownership, local accountability, and the efforts of local institutions (United Nations, 2008). Learning from these experiences, it is widely recognized that achieving the SDGs strongly depends on local contributions and the capacities of SNGs.

1.3. Why Voluntary Local Reviews? Connecting local action to a global agenda

A VLR is a process through which SNGs undertake a voluntary review of their progress towards delivering the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. They are guided by the same principles as those of the SDGs – leave no-one behind, the right to the city and multi-stakeholder engagement; universality across developed and developing countries; adoption of an all-encompassing strategy to envision the desired future by 2030; the need for a robust evidence base for action; and embracing and integration of environmental, economic, spatial and social systems.

Although VLRs have yet to become an official part of the review architecture of the 2030 Agenda, they hold the potential to bridge the gap between local action and the national and global conversation on sustainable development. A VLR translates to the common language of the SDGs the experiences in their localization, both of successes and difficulties, thus facilitating peer-learning for SNGs worldwide and the creation of new partnerships to remedy the shortcomings of means of implementation that cities may face.

Did you know...?

VLRs do not have a fixed working definition. This highlights the heterogeneity of SNGs and local stakeholders, and the diversity of the territorial and institutional contexts in which they operate. From a political perspective, VLRs enable dialogue between different stakeholders, local agencies and levels of government, and align local public policies and, often, national development strategies through the common framework of the SDGs. From a social perspective, VLRs facilitate civic engagement and transparency through shared vision and a participatory approach. Finally, from a planning perspective, VLRs steer budgeting and catalytic infrastructure projects through local prioritization of SDG goals and targets (United Cities and Local Governments and UN-Habitat, 2020).

A VLR reveals the standing of an SNG regarding the SDGs and their targets, allowing the identification of priority areas where actions are most needed. These actions will ramify to touch upon competences of different departments, given the growing interlinkages between goals and targets, and ultimately call for integrated approaches to policymaking. For SNGs, conducting a VLR will accelerate the uptake of the SDGs across all departments of the administration (even in communities), advocating for increased horizontal (and vertical) coordination between them. This, in turn, will help to overcome the often silo approach of local governance. Such coordination can also be extended to the management of local finances by aligning local policies with the SDGs and the local budget, which is also planned from a silo approach. This will streamline municipal budgets and result in increased budget efficiency.

However, to maximize their benefits, VLRs should go beyond being a tool to monitor progress towards SDG localization. Rather, they should explore innovative forms of local governance by providing four meaningful opportunities for action to accelerate progress on the SDGs (figure 4):

Figure 4. Opportunities provided by a VLR

Source: IGES, 2020a.

Altogether, the VLR process has the capacity to unlock the constrained power of SNGs in creating innovative pathways to attain the ambitious goals set by the 2030 Agenda.

Although not many VLRs have been published to date, early examples are hinting of a host of benefits that local and national Governments and others can derive from them. A VLR could enhance vertical and horizontal coherence in SDG implementation. A VLR opens avenues to strengthen the engagement of subnational levels of government in implementation and review of the SDGs at the national level by providing the status of SDG localization in different places in a country. If the VLR process is well-coordinated and integrated with the VNR,

it can nuance the state of SDG attainment in a country by acknowledging territorial imbalances in sustainable development between different regions, municipalities and at even smaller scales. This clarifies the particular requirements of SNGs and assists funding allocation for SDG-related programmes at the local level, thereby augmenting vertical coordination across different levels of government.

An additional benefit of the VLR process for national Governments is that it increases coordination between different levels of government in gathering, managing and sharing data. One of the greatest challenges facing any level of government in implementing and monitoring progress towards the SDGs is to find reliable data at an appropriate scale. SNGs have highlighted the lack of data at the municipal level for many targets, while also noting how blurry administrative boundaries are, particularly in peri-urban areas. National Governments are also finding it difficult to make an adequate assessment of many indicators that need to be aggregated from smaller levels and might not be readily available. In fact, several SDG indicators are specifically applicable at the local level – for example, those around public space and waste. If well-integrated and managed, the VLR process can harmonize relevant data needed, both at the national level and local level, facilitating progress towards the 2030 Agenda.

Did you know...?

The NUA is an important component of a VLR analysis, providing a framework of intervention and a roadmap for building cities that can serve as engines of prosperity as well as centres of cultural and social well-being while protecting the environment.

The interlinkages between the NUA and the SDGs, especially SDG 11, are extensive. There is also strong evidence that NUA action areas on integrated urban planning, access to basic services, decent and affordable housing, and reducing non-communicable diseases and limiting environmental impacts can directly accelerate the achievements of SDG 3 on health and well-being, SDG 7 on energy and SDG 13 on climate. The NUA also has a strong gender equality component, connecting it with SDG 5 (United Cities and Local Governments and UN-Habitat, 2020).

VLRs are particularly pertinent to helping SNGs in Asia and the Pacific to pursue sustainable development pathways. The region presents a unique mosaic of contrasting urbanization trends. It has some of the largest urban agglomerations in the world, booming intermediate cities[5] and a large number of Small Island Developing States (SIDS). Many countries are rapidly growing and urbanizing, with sharp disparities between well-developed and informal settlements reaching an unprecedented scale. Some others are, or will soon enough, be experiencing ageing-population contraction—such as Japan, China and the Republic of Korea. This myriad of development stages, socio-economic trends and urbanization patterns multiply the challenges confronting SNGs in the region. The principles underlying the VLR process encourage tailored solutions to SDG localization that respond better to each context as well as cooperation between countries, cities and regions.

As of April 2020, six local authorities had conducted a VLR process in the Asia-Pacific region. They are: Hamamatsu, Kitakyushu, Shimokawa Town and Toyama in Japan; and Taipei and New Taipei in Taiwan Province of China. With 3,383 inhabitants (in 2016), Shimokawa Town is the smallest place to conduct a VLR, while New Taipei City is the largest with more than 4 million residents. The four Japanese VLRs adopted the VNR format, with the reports themselves following a similar structure to that suggested by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) in its *Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews*. New Taipei's VLR follows the main building blocks of the VNR, while Taipei adapts them to a different structure.

The VLRs share a common approach to monitoring progress towards delivering the 2030 Agenda. In general, they present the city, its current context and challenges as well as highlight ongoing localization efforts, introduce their 2030 vision, review specific SDGs and recommend ways forward for the future. Despite these shared elements, each VLR has unique characteristics showing their own attitude towards the 2030 Agenda (figure 5).

[5] Megacities only accommodate a little over 10 per cent pf the region's urban dwellers and 7 per cent of its total population. The bulk of urban dwellers live in small- and medium-size "intermediate" cities where much of the region's urban transition is actually unfolding (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and UN-Habitat, 2015).

Figure 5. Characteristics of the first Asia-Pacific VLRs

Hamamatsu City

- This is the only city in the Asia-Pacific region to review all 17 SDGs in its VLR. Hamamatsu has incorporated the SDGs into its comprehensive plan covering 30 years, starting from 2015; it has also linked its key performance indicators (KPIs) with the SDGsm based on an integrated approach to sustainable development.

Kitakyushu City

- The VLR revisits the city's successful history of pollution abatement and looks at the core principles of the SDGs to solve the interweaving issues of today and to frame its strategy towards 2030.

New Taipei City

- The VLR reinforces the commitment of New Taipei City to act locally to achieve the Global Goals. The city re-examines the initiatives implemented to become a liveable and thriving urban centre by 2030 in the light of the SDGs.

Shimokawa Town

- The VLR emphasizes the town's extensive stakeholder engagement process. Shimokawa uses its VLR to ask its residents how the SDGs can help to create the Shimokawa they want to live in by 2030.

Taipei City

- For the city, the VLR is an opportunity to assess the alignment of the city's current objective of becoming a 'Liveable and Sustainable City' with the SDGs. The VLR employs an implementation and review process, divided into four stages, and focuses on monitoring specific SDGs.

Toyama City

- The city took the VLR process as an opportunity to review its current masterplan and its policies to intensify its integrative approach to development simultaneously addressing different SDGs.

These frontrunner cities provide different strategies for the VLR process in which the local reality is infused with the spirit of the SDGs. They also highlight how the VLR is a precious opportunity to imagine new pathways for sustainable development, exemplifying the transformative potential of the SDGs once they are integrated into local strategies. They have also highlighted the fact that to unleash its full potential VLRs need to be an inclusive process, leaving no-one behind and based on extensive stakeholder consultation processes (IGES, 2020a).

With the inauguration of the Decade of Action, the VLR process is more pertinent than ever. VLRs are a way to foster cooperation and peer-learning, and to accelerate local action to deliver the Global Agenda to all humankind.

Did you know...?

There is no single existing VLR format – its structure and content depend on the local context and drafting process. Existing documents produced by or associated with an SNG could be compatible with the scope and objectives of a VLR as long as they meet three key criteria (United Cities and Local Governments and UN-Habitat, 2020):

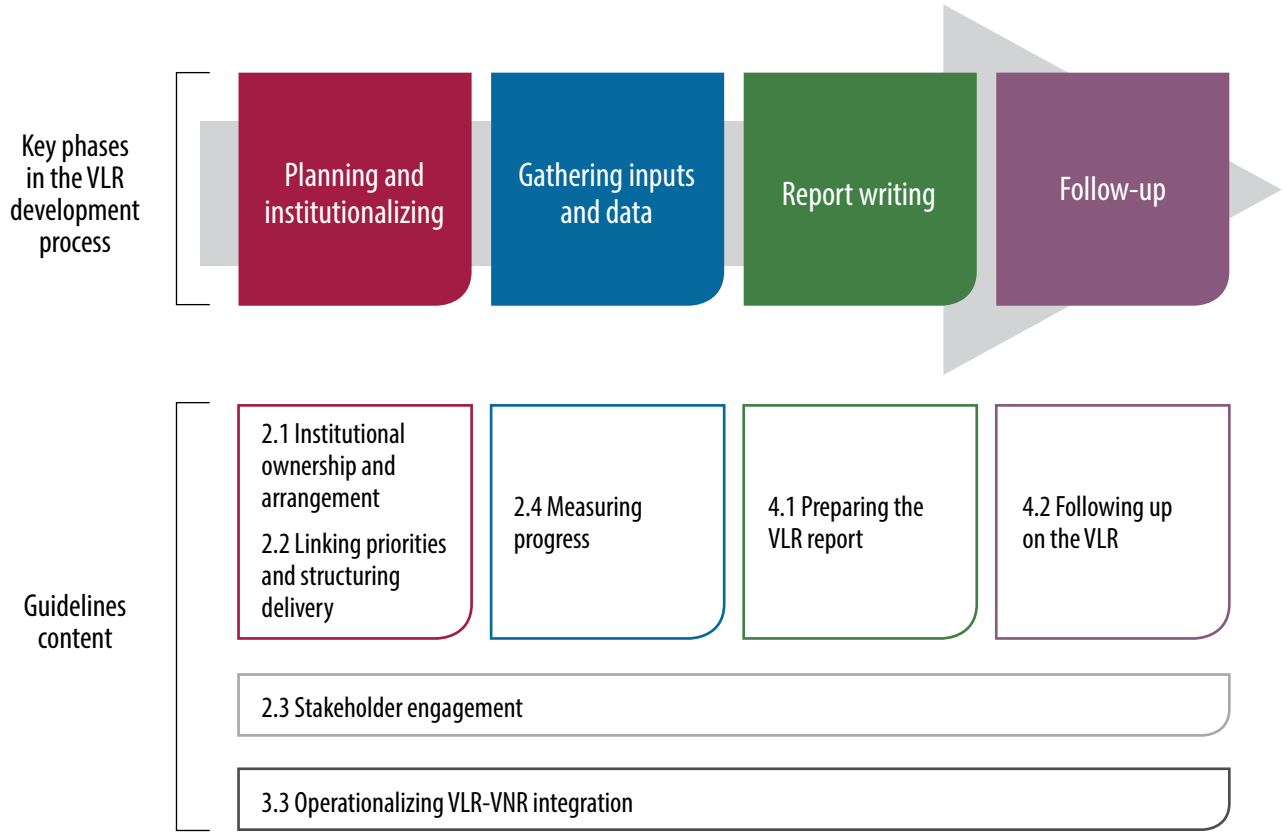
- The documents should make a clear reference to the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda as the framework in which the local administration and/or community are developing their localization and implementation initiatives;
- The implementation agency and its responsibility must be local in the broadest sense possible;
- The documents should be designed to include elements of locally-based reviewing and monitoring of the implementation processes.

Nevertheless, some key phases in the development of a VLR can be recognized and can serve as guiding principles for SNGs to undertake their reporting efforts.

2. Conducting a Voluntary Local Review

Based on the practical cases available, the VLR at its core appears quite similar to the VNR. This chapter discusses key components within each phase of the VLR process, as identified through the analysis of existing VLRs. As VLRs are very context-specific, SNGs are encouraged to check what works best for them and to make necessary changes to the process. Figure 6 outlines the different phases of the VLR development process and indicates where in the guidelines the key components of each phase are discussed.

Figure 6. Location of guidelines content and relevance with different phases of the VLR development process



Sections 2.1, 2.2. and 2.3 discuss in detail the first phase of the VLR, i.e., planning and institutionalizing. Effective stakeholder engagement is the cornerstone of a successful VLR; as such, it is discussed first in Section 2.3 but is referred to in all subsequent sections. Section 2.4 discusses the process of identifying/setting indicators and gathering data; which is the second phase of the VLR. Section 2.5 (not pictured above) discusses the issue of financing the VLR. Section 3.3 discusses how SNGs can operationalize VLR-VNR integration and is relevant throughout the VLR process. The last two phases of the VLR are discussed in sections 4.1 and 4.2, respectively.

2.1. Institutional ownership and arrangement

The prospect of conducting a VLR can initially appear to be quite daunting. The preparatory process starts by showcasing political support. Having high-level support, e.g., from the mayor or the governor is one of the most powerful tools a city or region can have for moving the VLR process forward. Engaging in the SDGs, however, may not always be a priority for the political leadership, and SNGs have generally used a combination of bottom-up action and top-down support to get their buy-in (Deininger and others, 2019).

Many VLRs clearly highlight their political support with an opening letter from the highest-ranking official of the SNG. Even though a political endorsement does not guarantee prioritization, it stands as a sign of political and institutional ownership and of the city's commitment to sustainable development. Political leaders have been crucial in raising the visibility of their SNGs SDG work with their peers and in providing an explicit directive for

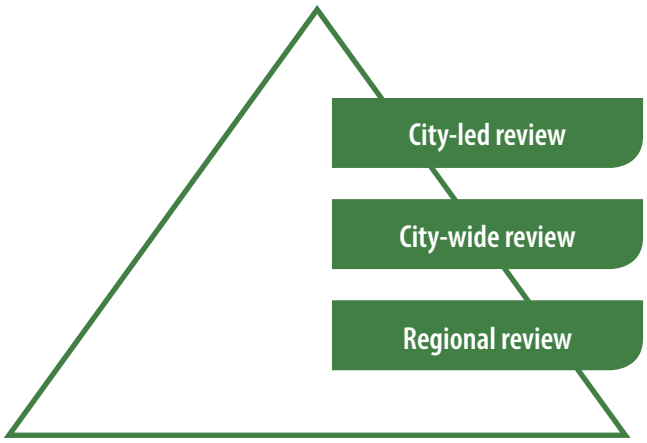
interagency collaboration. Political discontinuity through changes in power often leads to shifts in municipal or local strategies that can threaten the necessary long-term scope of sustainable policy. VLRs hold the potential to provide a platform for institutionalizing a commitment to sustainable development across political cycles (Pipa and Bouchet, 2020).

Did you know...?

As the name suggests, a VLR is voluntary and should be perceived as a tool for civic engagement rather than yet another internal reporting obligation or an index to rank cities. Taking on the SDGs as an analytical lens encourages city leaders to rediscover the impacts of their work across social, economic, environmental and political dimensions of their communities.

While high-level political support is critical, the actual work must be done at a level closer to the ground. Conducting a VLR includes a process of bringing city agencies and other stakeholders around the table, building leadership, and creating communication streams across the city and its partners. SNGs should, therefore, decide how they would like to structure the delivery of their VLRs (figure 7).

Figure 7: Structuring the delivery of the VLR



They can choose to do a city-led review, which can be effective in improving conversations within the city but may not accurately reflect the diversity of action in the city more broadly. They can also opt for a city-wide review that considers how organizations across the city and across sectors are working to deliver the SDGs. This would require a higher level of engagement with non-governmental stakeholders but can be an important mapping exercise to understand the variety of activities occurring within the city. Finally, SNGs can choose to do a regional review, which will require greater coordination across governmental activity but which offers an opportunity to reflect on coordination, both horizontally and vertically (Macleod and Fox, 2019).

Regardless of how the VLR is structured, SNGs must remember that the comprehensive nature of the VLR transcends the competences of individual offices. It requires close coordination and cooperation by staff members capable of leveraging informal networks, generating support and enthusiasm, and framing the VLR within the SNG's broader strategic plans. Figure 8 provides a guiding list of questions that staff leading a VLR could consider when starting the process of collaborating with different stakeholders. This should also help SNGs identify which model of institutional arrangement would work best for their context (table 1).

Figure 8. Guiding questions for effective collaboration

- How will you ensure buy-in from all partners?
- How will you bring partners together to plan?
- How will you share data on progress?
- What is your leadership structure?
- How will you train staff in collaboration skills?
- How will coordination meetings work?
- How will you fund the process?

Source: Apolitical, 2020.

Table 1. Models of institutional arrangement

	Model	Function
	One Key Office/ Team	Completes and communicates internally
	Hub and Spoke	One coordinator with outreach to relevant offices
	Interagency	A collaboration among different units led by a steering committee
	Partnership	A partnership between the city office and an external organization

Source: Pipa and Bouchet, 2020.

The advantage of having a designated team/individual offered by the One Key Office/Team and Hub and Spoke models can increase the quality of information sharing across departments. However, such models might also create barriers to generating momentum around the SDG across agencies and within the community, take longer to create a minimum viable product and may not survive political transition.

Following an Interagency or Partnership model allows for momentum to generate around the SDGs and spread quickly throughout the city. Engaging staff in different agencies and external stakeholders can catalyse sustained, independent action. It can also empower integration, as it creates an opportunity to break down siloes within city agencies and connect the work of thew staff to a larger sustainable development strategy.

There is, however, a strong need for clear leadership when such models are followed. Even when partners are engaged to provide additional expertise or capacity, local teams must realize that civil and leadership aspects of a VLR cannot be outsourced. Drafting a VLR includes a process of bringing city agencies around the table, building leadership, and creating communication streams across the city and its partners. Local teams benefit greatly by retaining ownership of this process. Additionally, such models might require dedicated funding as it would otherwise be difficult to get staff engaged with a sufficient degree of frequency. Finally, SNGs should be mindful of the possibility that the Interagency model may not always lead to an optimal environment for information sharing, as it may begin to silo around the passions of individual members (Deininger, Lu, Griess, & Santamaria, 2019).

Regional example

In Asia and the Pacific, partnership with academia and/or research institutions has been essential to the realization of many VLRs. Kitakyushu, Shimokawa and Toyoma – the first three pioneering Japanese cities that published their VLRs in 2018 – were supported by the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES) which worked closely with the mayors' Cabinets and city halls' departments.

Remember…

The chain of responsibility and accountability that lies behind the making of a VLR is particularly important in the case of regions, provinces, departments and comparable second-tier SNGs, considering the often particular relationship these have with both the national Government and the local authorities in terms of competences, administrative boundaries and tasks, and political legitimacy (United Cities and Local Governments and UN-Habitat, 2020).

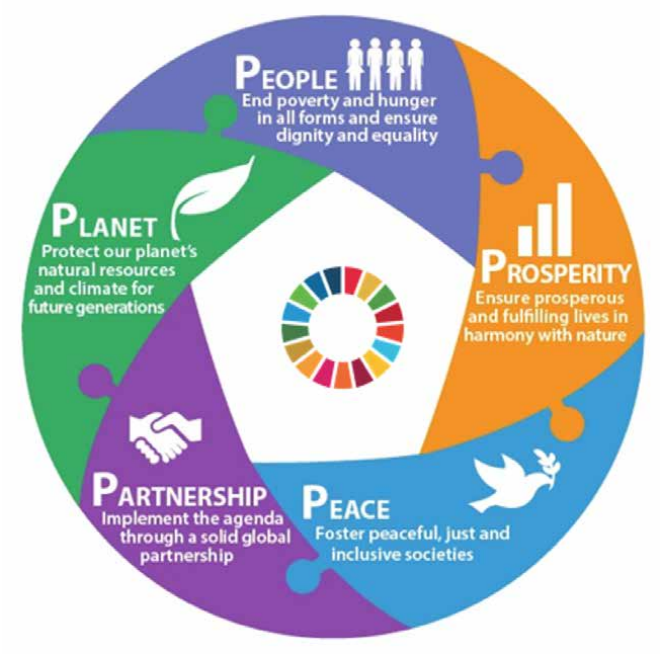
2.2. Linking priorities

The next step of the preparatory process involves SNG authorities defining the purpose of their VLR, understanding what existing policies and strategies are in place that meet the SDGs, and aligning them against the SDGs in a manner that fits their own contexts. In most instances, the political leadership and administration officials do not formulate urban strategies, priorities and plans by using the SDGs as a starting point. They are usually developed based on the needs and priorities of residents and communities, creating a vision that is relevant to local constituencies. The core step of localizing the SDGs links a city's policies and strategies (e.g., those around housing, public spaces, transport etc.), executive directives, or financing narratives (e.g., capital investments, local tax, projects etc.) to the 2030 Agenda.

In the preparation of a VLR, SNGs are strongly encouraged to map their policies and strategies against all 17 SDGs whenever possible, even if data are lacking in some areas, as this would allow for better comparability. Cities can also choose to map their policies and strategies against indicator frameworks developed by state and national Governments. These usually localize the SDGs and (re)define some SDG targets and indicators to the national/subnational context; for example, Bangladesh's second VNR report mentions that the Government has adopted 40 indicators to localize the SDGs, 39 of which are considered crucial at the local level (Government of Bangladesh, 2020). What is important, however, is that the VLR addresses the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development at once.

Alternatively, SNGs can also choose to cluster their policies thematically against the "5 P's", or five pillars of the 2030 Agenda, i.e., people, prosperity, planet as well as partnership and peace (figure 9). This view builds on the traditional approach of looking at sustainable development through the lens of social inclusion, economic growth and environmental protection by adding two critical components: partnership and peace.

Figure 9. The five pillars of the 2030 Agenda



Previous VLRs have shown that linking city strategies and the SDGs occurred at two levels. The first and more strategic level maps city goals to the SDGs. This can be done either by mapping SDGs onto each city goal or mapping city goals onto each SDG (table 2). The second level is more granular as it maps specific SDG targets to city targets. This is, unsurprisingly, a more labour-intensive process, as city targets rarely align perfectly with the official generic SDG targets.

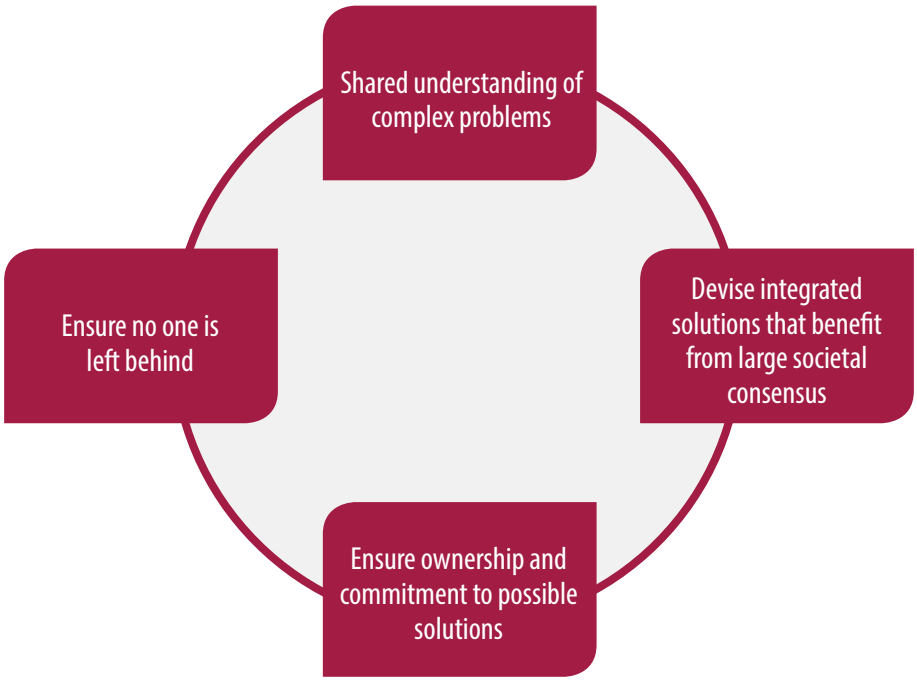
Table 2. Mapping city goals to the SDGs

CITY STRATEGY OBJECTIVES		Example 1 *Safe and creative*	Example 2 *Functional infrastructure*	Example 3 *Resilient*	Example 4 *Digital*
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS	1. No poverty				
	2. Zero hunger				
	3. Good health and well-being				
	4. Quality education				
	5. Gender equality				
	6. Clean water and sanitation				
	7. Affordable and clean energy				
	8. Decent work and economic growth				
	9. Industry, innovation, and infrastructure				
	10. Reduced inequalities				
	11. Sustainable cities and communities				
	12. Responsible consumption and production				
	13. Climate action				
	14. Life below water				
	15. Life on land				
	16. Peace, justice and strong institutions				
	17. Partnerships for the goals				

2.3. Stakeholder engagement

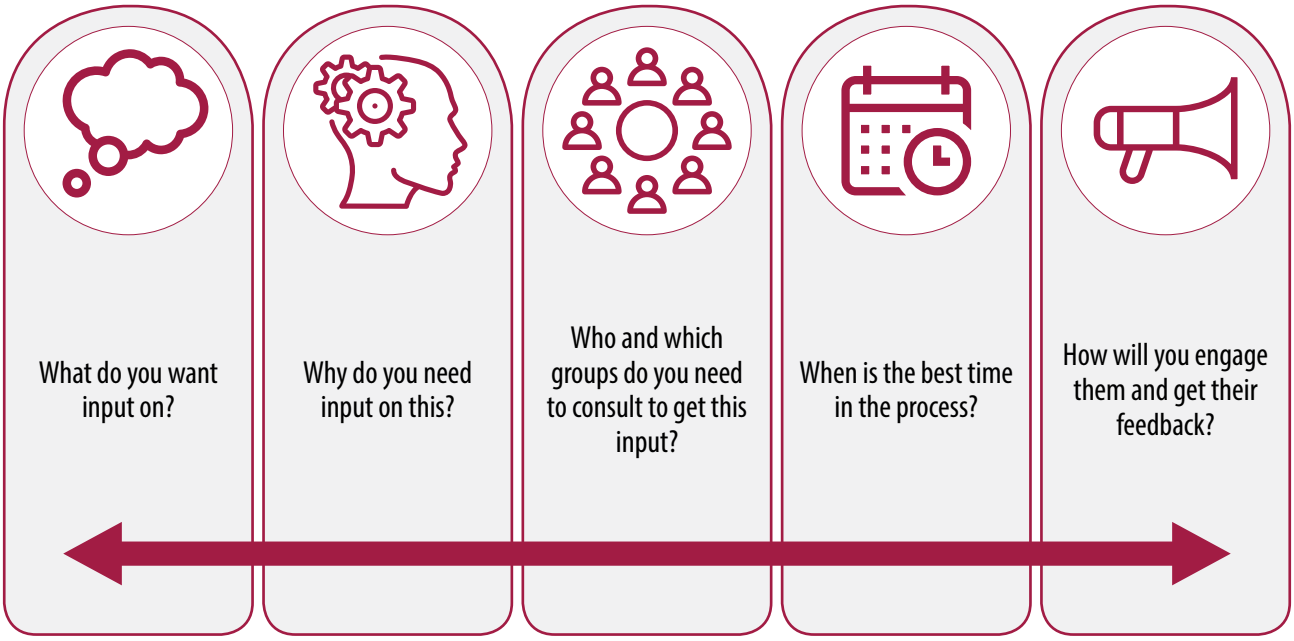
The comprehensive scope of the 2030 Agenda requires coordinated action between all levels and sectors of government and all stakeholders. For the 2030 Agenda to succeed, at the most basic level, awareness needs to be raised and ownership of the SDGs needs to be increased across the whole population. At the broadest level, engagement is needed to build integrated visions and strategies for the future, shared by all components of society and government, as a support to long-term transformation (figure 10) (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2018). The VLR process offers numerous opportunities to engage residents, other government agencies and organizations on the city/region's priorities and raise awareness of challenges and opportunities. The positive agenda and common language of the SDGs provides an opportunity to energize support and community buy-in (Pipa and Bouchet, 2020).

Figure 10. Why is engagement important



The first step of engaging stakeholders involves developing a comprehensive stakeholder engagement plan. This should establish the objective and parameters of the engagement process. The overarching question that should shape the process is: "What is the objective of stakeholder engagement and consultation?" This should be accompanied by five other key questions when developing the stakeholder engagement plan (figure 11).

Figure 11. What is the objective of stakeholder engagement and consultation



SNGs can choose to engage stakeholders for a variety of reasons. It could be to discuss the scope of the VLR process and report, or it could be to request for technical inputs on specific SDGs/indicators where there are little data or disaggregation. External experts can help access or interpret data. They can also help with complex problems arising from cross-sectoral interconnectedness around issues such as environment, transportation etc. Stakeholders can also comment on specific sections of the draft VLR report and even suggest ways to keep monitoring progress on SDGs beyond the VLR.

Stakeholder engagement is necessary to build ownership of the VLR process, invite expertise, understand key issues and demands of residents, gain a better understanding of what the data are suggesting and what it means for policy etc. In the context of the 2030 Agenda, it leads to acceleration in efforts to tackle the SDGs.

A crucial element of the engagement process involves identifying who the stakeholders are and where they are located. While conducting a VLR, SNGs will need to consider and actively engage with an array of internal and external stakeholders. Importantly, each city/region will have unique groups of stakeholders to engage, which may influence the structure of the VLR process. At the global level, "Major Groups and other stakeholders"[6] is the main framework utilized and could be a potential starting point for SNGs to map stakeholders for engagement. However, it is strongly encouraged that a specific mapping is undertaken at the local level (table 3) to address specificities, identify most vulnerable groups and ensure that no one is left behind (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs and United Nations Institute for Training and Research, 2020).

[6] "Major Groups" include women, children and youths, indigenous peoples, non-governmental organizations, local authorities, workers and trade unions, business and industry, the scientific and technological community, and farmers. "Other stakeholders" include local communities, educational and academic entities, faith groups, foundations and private philanthropic organizations, migrants and their families, older persons, parliamentary networks and associations, persons with disabilities and volunteer groups.

Table 3. Stakeholder mapping template

Constituency	Organization	Contact person Phone, email, website, address	Impact How much does Agenda 2030 implementation/ review impact them (low/medium/ high)	Capacity How much capacity do they currently have to participate in the stakeholder engagement programme (low/ medium/ high)
Major Groups				
Example 1				
Example 2				
Example 3				
Other stakeholders				
Example 1				
Example 2				
Example 3				

Did you know...?

Leave no one behind (LNOB) is the central, transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda. It requires prioritizing the most marginalized and reaching them first. In the context of cities, this requires drawing on evidence of the spatial aspects of marginalization, with many urban poor living in informal settlements, as well as a better understanding of their priorities and needs (Lucci, 2018).

For a VLR to be truly comprehensive, it is critical that SNGs identify and engage vulnerable groups in a meaningful manner. Vulnerable group members are often excluded from, or are unable to participate via traditional engagement mechanisms such as seminars, workshops or even webinars. SNGs should, therefore, explore more direct means of engagement such as door-to-door visits through the support of civil society organizations.

Furthermore, with the prevalence of COVID-19 and organizations shifting to more web-based exchanges, it is now more important than ever to ensure technology does not lead to more exclusion. SNGs can explore options that involve radios, which are still widely used in low-income settlements across the region, to solicitate feedback on the SDGs and the priorities of the vulnerable groups.

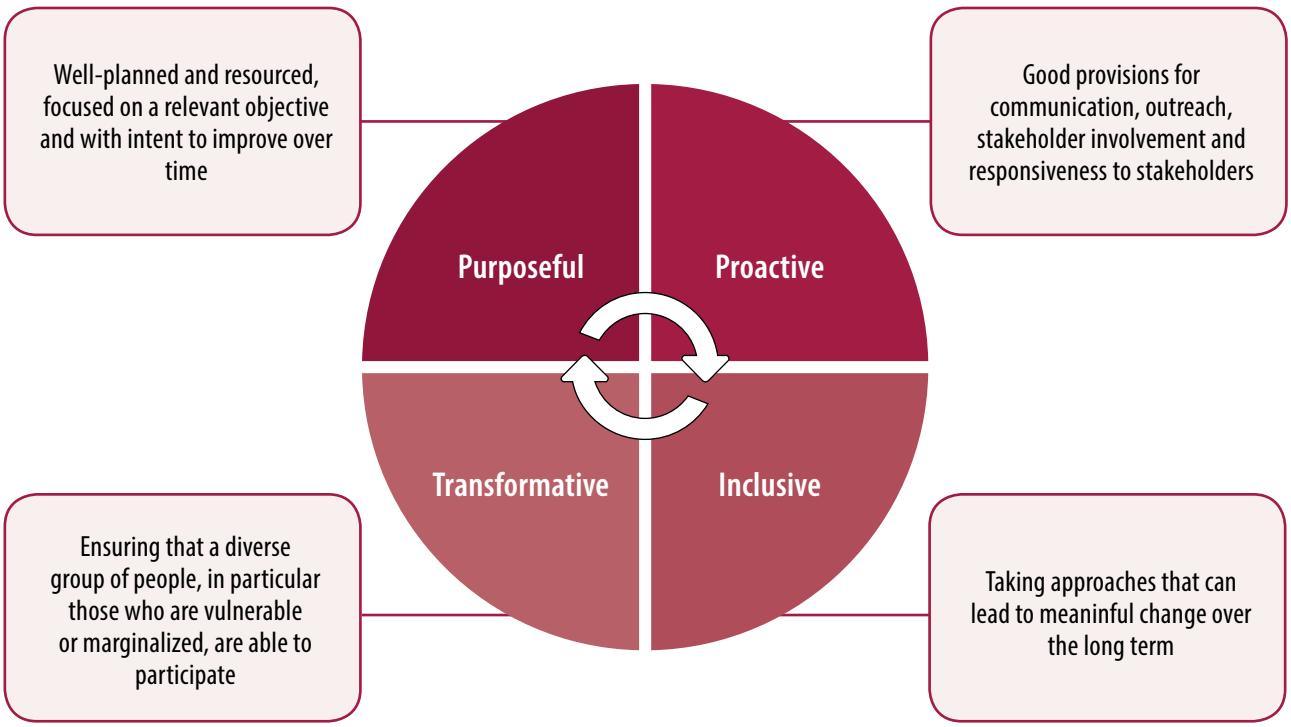
As more and more cities begin to undertake similar exercises in the future, SNGs need to be mindful of which stakeholders are taken into consideration while conducting a VLR and how, as in some cases, stakeholders are selected based on pre-existing contacts and working relations with local institutions, but not necessarily on the potential value they can bring in. SNG officials also need to be cognizant of bias arising from negative public reactions due to inclusion of certain actors or politicization of technical issues.

Remember…

If possible, SNGs should develop some basic communication material that can be shared with stakeholders on the substance and process of the VLR. It is important early on to share information on websites, social media and through networks about the upcoming consultation process and how different stakeholders can get involved.

Once the stakeholders have been identified, it is important to have a meaningful engagement process that leaves them feeling safe, valued and heard without ignoring the needs and constraints of decision makers. The way engagement is set up from the beginning can either build ownership and improve decision-making, or, if not effectively designed, promote distrust and division. Stakeholder engagement, therefore, needs to be purposeful, proactive, inclusive and transformative (figure 12).

Figure 12. Four dimensions of meaningful stakeholder engagement for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development



Source: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and International Association for Public Participation, 2019.

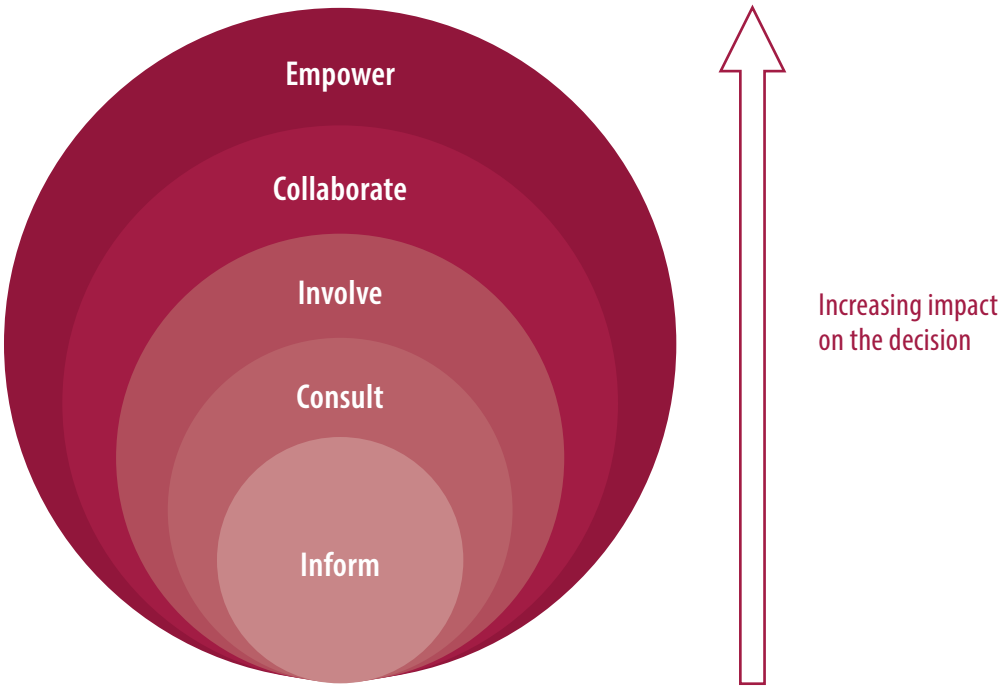
ESCAP and the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) have developed a set of practical indicators of quality engagement to support each dimension of meaningful engagement. SNGs can refer to the indicators while designing, planning, delivering and managing meaningful engagement processes.

While conducting a VLR, SNGs can follow a range of approaches on how to engage stakeholders. The five levels of stakeholder engagement proposed by IAP2 can be a useful framework to categorize the different stakeholder engagement approaches that SNGs can pursue (figure 13).

Remember…

While both internal and external engagement (i.e., with non-State actors) is important, SNGs also need to engage meaningfully with national government authorities. This is crucial to ensure the VLR process is anchored within national SDG processes such as the VNR, and to ensure vertical integration of policies.

Figure 13. Levels of stakeholder engagement



Source: Adapted from the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum (www.iap2.org).

Adapted from IAP2's Public Participation Spectrum, table 4 provides a detailed description of each level of engagement (with the exception of the fifth level, "empower", as it requires further adaptation), the appropriate use of different engagement approaches and the tools available to do so. UNDESA and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) have published a practical guide on stakeholder engagement that SNGs can refer to for further information. Although the publication is aimed more towards engagement at the national level, the conceptual frameworks, guidance and templates it provides can easily be adapted for use at the local level.

Table 4. Levels of stakeholder engagement – When and how to use

INFORM			
Levels of stakeholder engagement	Maybe appropriate when:	May not be appropriate when:	Example tools
This is a one-way communication, where Governments inform stakeholders of their plans for implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda. There are no expectations of a two-way dialogue.	- The process is beginning, and there is deeper participation to come. - Stakeholders have a low level of understanding of the 2030 Agenda.	- Stakeholders want more active involvement. - Decisions have meaningful impact on stakeholders. - Stakeholders are already well unformed about the 2030 Agenda.	- Fact sheets - Open houses - Newsletters, bulletins, circulars - Websites - Webinars - Radio - Newspapers and official media

CONSULT			
Levels of stakeholder engagement	Maybe appropriate when:	May not be appropriate when:	Example tools
This is where Governments present plans and options for implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda and receive feedback from stakeholders. The aim is to benefit from the experience and knowledge of stakeholders. Decision-making authority remains entirely with the Government.	- Clear plans exist, and there are a limited range of options for change. - Governments want to improve their existing plans and are able to use the feedback to do so. - Stakeholders can understand and relate to the plans and options. - Governments are committed to providing feedback to stakeholders on how their input influenced the outcome.	- Plans have been finalized, and feedback cannot be incorporated. - Clear plans do not already exist, and you are seeking a wide range of opinions. - Stakeholders need to be mobilized and empowered for long-term engagement.	- Focus groups - Surveys - Internal and/or public meetings - Webinars - Social media chats - Web-based platforms for discussion and inputs - Radio
INVOLVE			
Levels of stakeholder engagement	Maybe appropriate when:	May not be appropriate when:	Example tools
This is where stakeholders are meaningfully engaged with Governments in generating plans and options for implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda and carrying out actions based on decisions emerging from this input. Participation falls short of sharing formal decision-making authority.	- Governments need the expertise and contacts of stakeholders in order to effectively implement decisions. - Governments are committed to incorporating inputs received into their decisions, and to providing feedback to stakeholders. - Stakeholders have an active desire and demonstrate the capacity to be engaged in the 2030 Agenda implementation and review process.	- Governments need the expertise and contacts of stakeholders in order to effectively implement decisions. - Governments are committed to incorporating inputs received into their decisions, and to providing feedback to stakeholders. - Stakeholders have an active desire and demonstrate the capacity to be engaged in the 2030 Agenda implementation and review process.	- Deliberative polling - Solicitation of recommendations and proposals - Workshops - Forums - Provision of data - Webinars - Social media chats - Web-based platforms for discussion and inputs
COLLABORATE			
Levels of stakeholder engagement	Maybe appropriate when:	May not be appropriate when:	Example tools
This is where Governments and stakeholders decide together on the implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda. It is long-term, complex and demanding, requiring resources.	- It is important that stakeholders feel ownership of the process of implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda. - There is an identifiable extra benefit all parties from acting together. - There is enough time and resources to make the collaboration meaningful. - Governments and stakeholders demonstrate the political will, desire and commitment to develop a meaningful partnership around implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda. - Governments recognize the need for stakeholders' advice and innovation to create best solutions and are committed to shared decision-making processes.	- Time and resources are limited. - Commitment is low – for example if a Government holds all the power and plans to use the collaboration to impose solutions. - Stakeholders don't have a long-term interest in carrying out identified solutions, they only want to be part of the decision-making process.	- Guiding or advisory bodies - Working groups - Joint planning and shared projects - Standing or ad-hoc committees - Facilitated consensus building and decision-making forums - Training and capacity building to support joint action

Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs and United Nations Institute for Training and Research, 2020.

2.4. Measuring progress

The 2030 Agenda comes with a formal mechanism of quantitative monitoring that is built on a complex system of indicators. Many of the indicators are generally available to National Statistical Offices (NSOs), but disaggregation of most indicators at the local level is either incomplete or unavailable in many local contexts across most regions.

When conducting a VLR, SNGs should make it clear from the onset whether they are defining their own indicators or adopting a specific set. In the case of the former, SNGs should provide as much information as possible on the methodology that has been used. When defining their own local indicators, SNGs should first be mindful of the indicators' relevance, the level of influence that they have over the indicators and data availability. Local indicators need to be relevant to the local context and representative of the demands of the SNGs' constituents. The SNG should also have a certain degree of control over the indicators so that they can be influenced by local/subnational policies. There should also be data that are generally easily available for the indicators as it could reduce additional administrative burden and increase the chances of SNGs actually working on monitoring their progress. Second, SNGs should try to distinguish the indicators based on their nature (table 5). Third, SNGs should ideally try to use a combination of both quantitative and qualitative indicators. Qualitative indicators could be the level of innovation within the administration, the level of engagement with different stakeholder groups, the efforts put into raising awareness around a certain issue etc. Finally, SNGs need to decide how frequently these indicators will be monitored, as measuring the process at set intervals results in accrued insight and ensures that the monitoring framework encourages people to take initiatives (Herck, Vanoeteren and Janssen, 2019).

Regional example

Shimokawa Town's VLR had perhaps had the most comprehensive stakeholder engagement in the region. The town put in place special institutional mechanisms for the SDG implementation and review process. For example, the Shimokawa General Planning Council created the SDGs FutureCity Subcommittee to co-create the town's vision for 2030. Comprised of members coming from diverse backgrounds, the Subcommittee, after receiving extensive public feedback, eventually delivered the Shimokawa Vision 2030 (Shimokawa Town and IGES, 2018).

Remember…

Depending on stakeholders identified and the level of engagement that SNGs choose to pursue, the engagement mechanism can end up being open to all as well as rely on some form of sampling, use public invitations, draw on existing networks or deliberately target some actors or groups. Different mechanisms have different strengths and limitations in terms of their representativeness and legitimacy. For example, engagement mechanisms that are open to all are often unrepresentative of the larger public, because those with more resources and capacity may capture the process, reducing the range of inputs. On the other hand, selective recruitment may target actors that are less likely to engage yet whose views and inputs maybe valuable for finding multi-sectoral solutions.

The details of how engagement mechanisms are designed play a crucial role in achieving the objectives of engagement by creating the proper incentives for effective and inclusive involvement. For example, institutional design can help avoid the co-optation of engagement processes by groups that are better connected or have more capacities and foster the inclusion of all relevant stakeholders, especially in the cases of weaker or marginalized groups (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2018).

Table 5. Types of indicators

Indicator type		Description
	Context indicators	These indicators describe the context in which a SNG works. These are situations and development which the SNG can only exert a small amount of control, e.g., employment rates, number of people living in slums etc.
	Input indicators	These indicators provide information about the people and resources that are used to achieve a certain goal or action, e.g., financial resources used for a certain action, number of employees etc.
	Process indicators	These indicators provide information about the organization or the approach of an action or measure, e.g., the turnaround time of a housing permit, the involvement of citizens in an action etc.
	Impact indicators	These indicators measure the impact/result/output of goals/actions, e.g., improvement in citizen health, number of vaccines delivered etc.

Once the indicators have been defined, SNGs can start to collect the relevant data, once again providing details on which sources are used, how it is collected etc. Data can often be located centrally, locally or at source. Centrally located data refers to data that are available from NSOs. Locally located means data available within the local administration itself but perhaps spread across different agencies. Ease of access to the data could potentially depend on which model of institutional arrangement the SNG chooses to pursue, among other factors. Hearings within the city hall, the use of simple data mapping matrices and leveraging personal connections between staff members of different agencies could help ease the process. In fact, the VLR can actually serve as a good starting point for setting up a mechanism for better coordination between agencies going forward.

Remember…

A VLR will have different approaches to the data used depending on how its delivery is structured (city-led, city-wide or regional). A city-led review might focus too much on case studies about city government initiatives, whereas a city-wide review might focus more on sharing data about the city. Ideally, a mix of the two will help to provide a good blend of empirical data and practical action (Macleod and Fox, 2019).

It is also important to ensure case studies of previous or ongoing initiatives provide an honest assessment of the latter, or whether breadth and depth of the initiative's impact is adequately covering the distance needed to achieve the SDG target. This can provide the basis for unlocking new thinking and partnerships (Pipa and Bouchet, 2020).

Collection of data located at source would require SNGs to involve both internal and external stakeholders. External stakeholders, such as academia and non-governmental organizations, could have their own data sets or know additional sources that might be useful. They sometimes could even have their own sets of alternative indicators, which may provide a different perspective from the one the SNG originally had. Engaging external stakeholders is also important to ensure data inclusivity as the urban poor are often statistically invisible to NSOs and SNGs.

Did you know...?

The Know Your City (KYC) campaign, a joint initiative of Slum Dwellers International (SDI)-affiliated federations of the urban poor, and United Cities and Local Governments of Africa (UCLG-Africa), is a powerful mechanism for community organization, participatory local governance, partnership building and collective action. Many city governments do not have the data necessary for inclusive city and/or SDG planning, and slum communities are viewed as a burden to the city. KYC data on informal settlements fills this gap and enables informed dialogue on inclusive policy and practice (Slum Dwellers International, 2018).

SNGs can refer to the examples of different engagement tools provided in table 3 to collect data from external stakeholders while also being open to the use of non-traditional tools such as crowdsourcing.

The type of data collected to service the indicators is almost as important as the indicators and the data collection process themselves. Disaggregated data, for example, offer powerful possibilities for targeting evidence-based policies. Data could be disaggregated by socio-economic factors, demographics or even geography. Spatial disaggregation can be particularly useful for cities to observe differences across different neighbourhoods and form a basis for developing targeted interventions to reduce inequalities. SNGs can leverage new techniques, such as geospatial observations coupled with micro survey data and machine learning for designing and implementing people-based or place-based policies, e.g., targeting vulnerable groups or those living in slums. Temporal dimensions of data should also be considered whenever possible as that will allow SNGs to track their progress over time, giving a sense of direction that they are heading towards (Pipa and Bouchet, 2020).

Remember…

Data collection and analysis also reflect political decisions. Selective reporting, choices about which data are counted and decisions about what data are shared are often based on political agendas (Pipa and Bouchet, 2020).

Instead of defining their own indicators, SNGs can also choose to adopt those designed by others. Many international institutions and stakeholders have approached the issue of SDG indicators, either by designing their own indicator sets or by adjusting the United Nations toolkit in order to make them more accessible. Notable examples include UN-Habitat's City Prosperity Index (UN-Habitat, 2012), the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), Global Monitoring Indicators (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2015), the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) collection methodology for Key Performance Indicators for Smart Sustainable Cities (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and International Telecommunications Union, 2017), the SDG VLR handbook by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre, and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) tool to measure the distance to the SDGs in regions and cities (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020). Currently, UN-Habitat is coordinating the design of a Global Urban Monitoring Framework to serve as a universal basis for monitoring sustainable development progress at the urban and local levels, including VLRs.

Remember…

The wider functional urban area contains multiple towns and cities situated in different local authority areas, which are nevertheless socially, economically, and environmentally deeply integrated. Much of a city's workforce can often live or work under the jurisdiction of other councils. Flows of people, goods, money and pollution cross these council borders on a daily basis. While each local authority is responsible for serving citizens within their boundaries, these flows create de facto interdependence. This jurisdictional complexity in a functionally integrated urban region creates coordination challenges when it comes to delivering and monitoring the SDGs.

Additionally, most statistics are reported for administrative or statistical areas that do not necessarily map neatly onto de facto urban areas or even functionally integrated regions. Indicators measures within a local authority may not reflect the realities and experiences of communities that feel a part of the city but happen to live outside its administrative borders. The geography of measurement has a substantial influence on the picture that emerges about how the 'city' is performing (Macleod and Fox, 2019).

Did you know...?

The Key Performance Indicators for Smart Sustainable Cities (KPI4SSC) is a global standard on smart sustainable cities, which was developed by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) in 2015 and endorsed by 14 other United Nations agencies in the context of the United for Smart Sustainable Cities (U4SSC) initiative.

The KPI4SSC consists of 91 indicators at the intersection of three dimensions of sustainability (economy, environment, and society) and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and provides cities with a consistent and standardized approach to the collection of data and for measuring performance and progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda, and becoming a smarter and more sustainable city.

The KPI4SSC has been tested and implemented globally, in more than 150 cities across the world, including Singapore (Singapore), Shanghai (China), Moscow (Russian Federation) and many others. UNECE is currently leading KPI4SSC-based evaluations in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan), Tbilisi (Georgia), Almaty and Nursultan (Kazakhstan) and various other countries in the UNECE region (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and International Telecommunications Union, 2017).

International organizations working with SNGs have also participated in this process and contributed significantly. For example, there now exists a certification protocol for an international standard on city data collection and management – ISO 37120, developed by the World Council on City Data (WCCD) (International Organization for Standardization, 2018). The Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR-CCRE), together with the French Ministry of Housing and Sustainable Homes, have developed the Reference Framework for Sustainable Cities (RFSC) to support cities in the implementation of the urban SDGs (French Ministry of Housing and Sustainable Homes, General Directorate for Development, Housing and Nature, 2016). The Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy (GCoM) has developed a common reporting framework (CRF), in line with the Paris Agreement, to streamline cities' climate action planning, measurement and reporting procedures (Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy, 2018). Brazil's National Confederation of Municipalities has developed the Mandala tool that visualizes municipal performance via a simplified radar chart (Municipality of Mexico City, 2017). There is also the MayorsIndicators service, which helps local authorities track their sustainability performance, and allows for comparison and benchmarking across cities (MayorsIndicators, 2020).

Regional example

The six Asia-Pacific VLRs have used a mixed approach to their use of indicators. Most have adapted the 'official' indicators as much as possible to match local data availability, while also introducing their own, either developed previously as part of other monitoring activities or developed new for the purpose of the VLR specifically.

2.5. Financing the VLR

Reviewing local implementation of the SDGs comes with cost implications that SNGs need to be mindful of. Resources needed would vary depending on the breadth and depth of the data collection process, the frequency and format of stakeholder consultations, VLR report production and dissemination etc. Figure 14 highlights some of the generic costs associated with conducting a VLR, which will no doubt vary depending on each SNGs' context.

Figure 14. Resource commitments necessary to conduct a successful VLR

Institutional ownership and arrangement	• Meeting/workshop costs • Local travel (for staff)
Linking priorities and structuring delivery	• Consultant fees (if applicable)
Stakeholder engagement	• Meeting/workshop costs (e.g. ,meeting room rent, online/offline consultations, stakeholder travel etc.) • Local travel (for staff) • Translation costs (for inclusivity) • Consultant fees (if applicable)
Data collection and analysis	• New data collection (through surveys, focused group discussions - can also be merged with stakeholder engagement costs) • Data analysis and visualization • Software fees (if applicable) • Consultant fees (if applicable) • Local travel (staff)
Vertical integration	• Meeting/workshop costs • Local travel (staff)
Report writing	• Editing and printing • Consultant fees (if applicable)
Follow-up	• Meeting costs • Communication/media engagement • Local/international travel, e.g., participation in APFSD/HLPF (if applicable)

Did you know...?

UN Habitat's SDG Cities is a flagship programme designed to realize the potential of cities to drive the achievement of the SDGs. The programme has dedicated outcomes, among others, on identifying strategic actions to accelerate urban SDG achievement and reinforcing the value chain that interconnects knowledge, policies, planning, financing and implementation for effective impact. It is a global initiative that initially targets 900 cities around the world from 2020 to 2030, with the possibility to have an impact on more than 1 billion people. More information can be found at https://unhabitat.org/programme/sustainable-development-goals-cities.

SNGs can choose to finance their VLRs using a variety of approaches. If funds are available, SNGs can lead the process themselves. If funds are limited, SNGs can get creative and "piggyback" off already planned processes related to the local implementation of SDGs. For example, SNGs can use SDG language to provide thematic anchors for pre-planned community engagement meetings and gather inputs.

SNGs can also choose to partner with academia and/or research institutions for support. The three Japanese cities that have conducted VLRs were all directly supported by IGES working in partnership with the relevant city agencies. SNGs can also look towards partnerships in the private sector or with civil society. Many private sector firms now have considerable experience of the SDGs within their own organizations and may consider supporting a VLR initiative (Macleod and Fox, 2019).

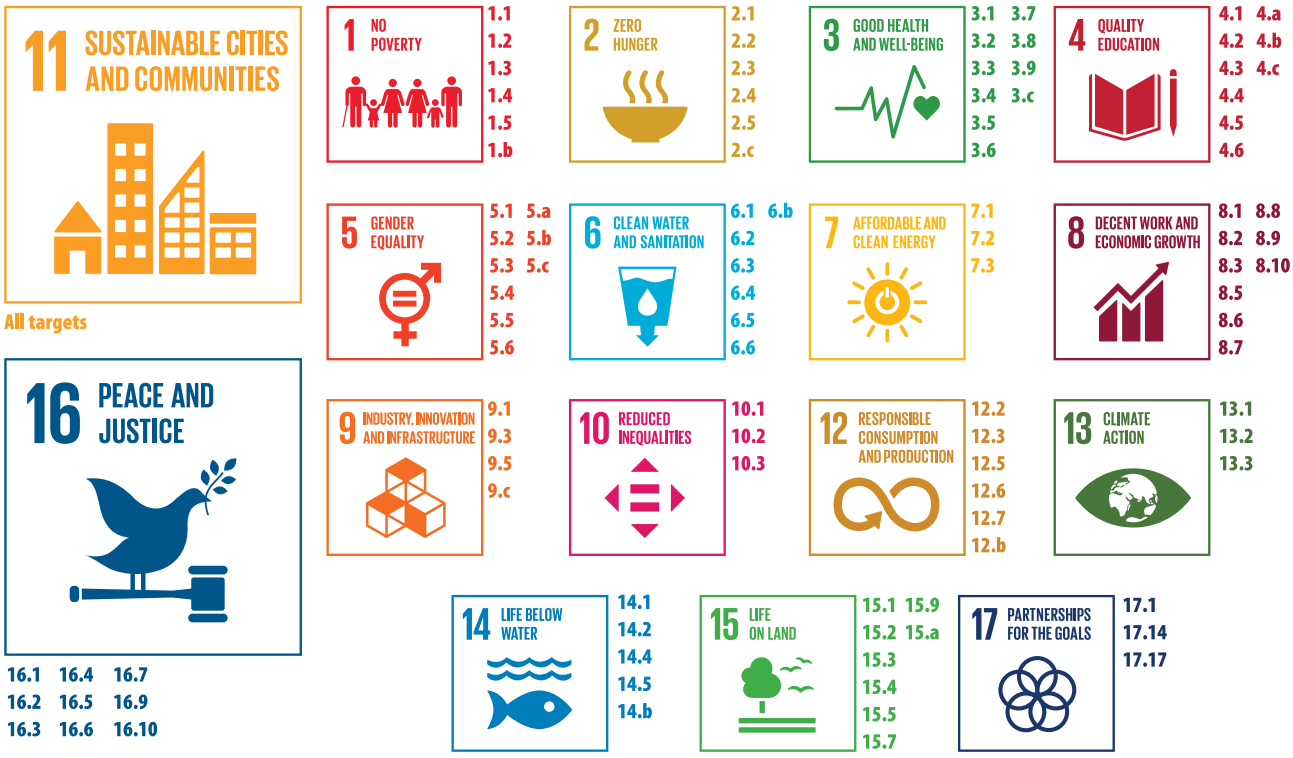
3. Integrating local and national reviews of the SDGs

A review of the initial wave of VLRs shows that not many have established a direct connection with local or national strategies and approaches to the SDGs. The existence of such links is certainly not a precondition for initiating a VLR process, but strengthening the linkage could play a crucial role in achieving scale at the local and national levels while driving and spreading the VLR movement across Asia and the Pacific. These guidelines propose the concept of VLR-VNR integration, i.e., the vertical integration of the two processes around the follow-up and review of the SDGs (where the policy cycle is divided into planning, implementation, and follow-up and review) as a response to clear gaps between the two processes as well as demands by national and subnational Governments to better understand, accommodate and utilize VLRs.

3.1. The need for integration

The realization of the SDGs requires the coordination of actions of different levels of government. In most cases, the achievement of specific targets in each national context depends on the aggregation of subnational, often local, outcomes, making coherent action a necessity (figure 15). Targets related to pollution reduction, waste generation, public transport use and greenhouse gas emissions are typical examples that require coordination across government levels (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2018).

Figure 15. SDG Goals and targets that involve subnational governments



Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2018.

The 2030 Agenda includes sub-national reviews as part of the VNR. This, however, has yet to translate to reality as subnational reviews are still rare and SNGs are not sufficiently integrated into the VNR process. To better understand SNGs' participation in the latter, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), in cooperation with the Global Taskforce of Local Governments (GTLG), has been reviewing VNRs presented at the HLPF and conducting surveys within its membership since 2016. In 2020, UCLG reported that globally, only 38 per cent of VNR submitting countries from the Asia-Pacific region reported mid/high participation of their SNGs (table 6).

Table 6. SNG participation in the preparation of VNRs in Asia and the Pacific

2020	Total Countries	Mid/high participation		Weak participation		No. participation		No elected SNG/no information	
Region	Countries per region	No. countries	%	No. countries	%	No. countries	%	No. countries	%
World	47	12	26	19	40	4	9	12	26
Asia-Pacific	8	3	38	0	0	1	13	4	50

2016-19	Total Countries	Mid/high participation		Weak participation		No. participation		No elected SNG/no information	
Region	Countries per region	No. countries	%	No. countries	%	No. countries	%	No. countries	%
World	47	12	26	19	40	4	9	12	26
Asia-Pacific	8	3	38	0	0	1	13	4	50

Source: United Cities and Local Governments, 2020c.

Did you know...?

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the hard-earned gains towards the SDGs are in jeopardy and years of development progress might be reversed. VNR reports presented at the 2020 HLPF describe the health measures undertaken to combat COVID-19, the socio-economic impact of the pandemic and related measures as well as the roles of various stakeholders in combatting COVID-19. Almost all countries have stressed that the current efforts to kick-start economic recovery and overcome the health crisis must be aligned with, and guided by, the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020).. Sustained and scaled policy choices that tackle inequalities and development deficits, strengthen the capacities of local actors, and pursue a green resilient and inclusive economic recovery are essential to avoiding a return to the pre-pandemic status quo (United Nations, 2020). The VLRs can be a meaningful tool to improve reporting on the recovery process, e.g., by evaluating the performance of evidence-based policies at the local level that support the transformation of cities for future resilience, inclusion, green and economic sustainability.

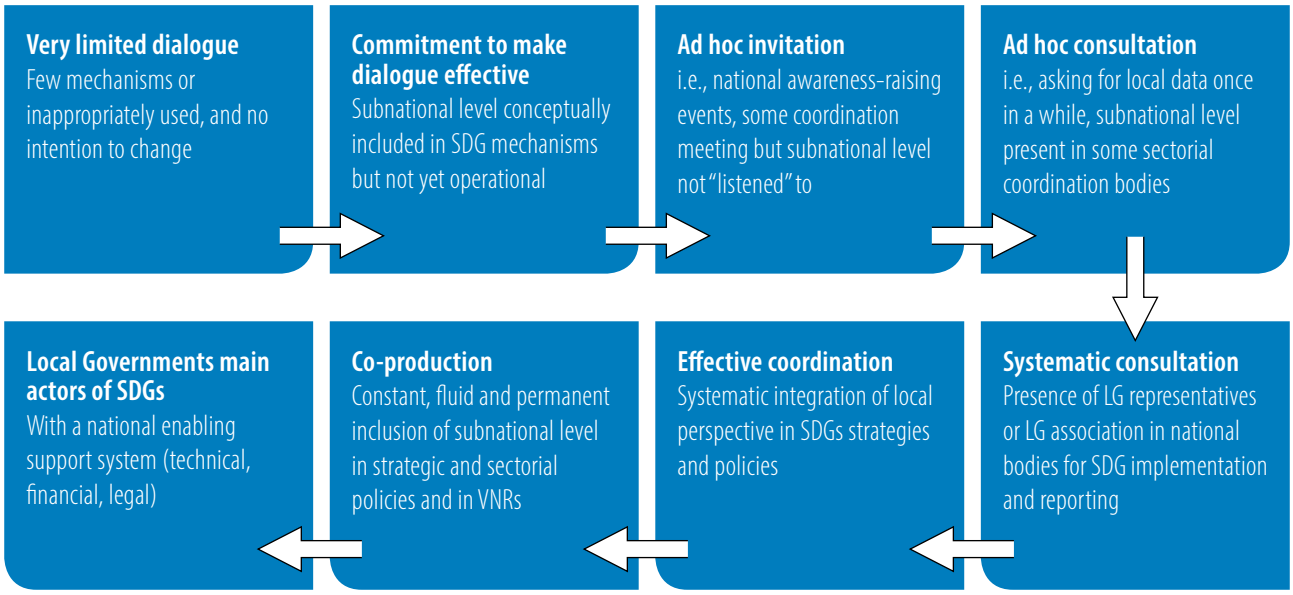
Strengthening VLR-VNR integration can serve numerous benefits. The policy cycle is incomplete if the follow-up and review mechanism does not allow for understanding the challenges, opportunities and lessons learnt during the implementation phase. Having VLRs integrated within the VNR process can fill in such information gap, provide opportunities to incorporate more nuanced disaggregated data and allow useful lessons and best practices that can potentially be scaled up nationally. VLR-VNR integration can also provide space to enhance both vertical and horizontal coordination, e.g., when consolidating inputs from SNGs for the VNR in the absence of any formal mechanism, thereby overcoming preexisting information silos and opening new lines of communication.

VLR-VNR integration can broaden stakeholder engagement within the VNR process. VLRs provide SNGs with the opportunity to bring together diverse local stakeholders and come up with a collective vision. VNRs, on the other hand, mostly engage stakeholders at the national level. Although some VNRs have in place strong stakeholder engagement mechanisms that reach a broader-than-usual proportion of the population, leveraging SNGs would ensure that no-one and no place is left behind. This would also allow countries to build ownership of the SDGs among the population in an effort to accelerate achievement (IGES, 2020a).

Additionally, VLR-VNR integration could, for SNGs in particular, strengthen the legitimacy of subnational/local follow-up and review of the SDGs. This, in turn, could validate SNGs' future requests for support from the national Government regarding SDG implementation

As the VLRs are not yet globally prevalent, no country has established robust proven mechanisms to incorporate them within their VNRs. This makes the notion of VLR-VNR integration a frontier issue. The core idea, however, is nothing new; it values the creation of an enabling environment for SNGs to plan, implement, monitor and follow up the SDGs and other associated national development plans within the local context. As the space-owner, it is the duty of the national Government to explore what it would look like to have a robust mechanism for dialogue between the different levels of government. Figure 16 sums up the various degrees of SNG involvement in dialogue and participation, in the framework of multilevel mechanisms for coordination and SDG follow-up.

Figure 16. Schematic representation of the depth of national-local dialogue for SDGs implementation and monitoring

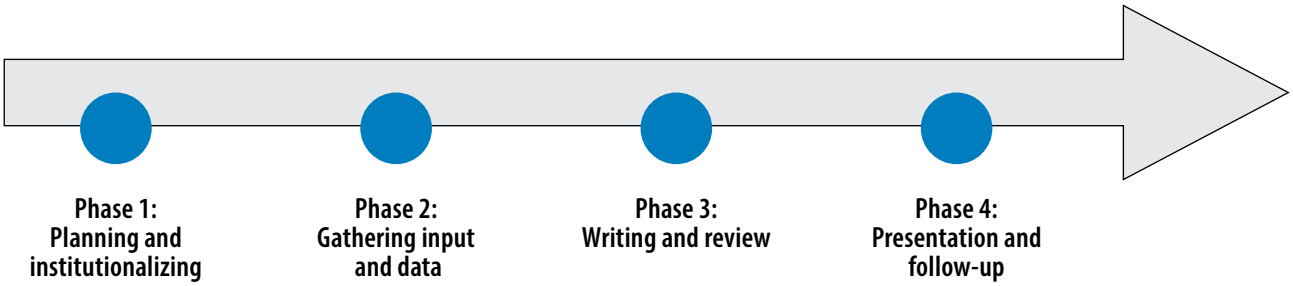


Sources: Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, United Cities and Local Governments,and UN-Habitat, 2018.

3.2. Regional examples

Although numerous examples exist of coordination and collaboration across different levels of government in the region, it is not easy to neatly map them onto the different phases of the VNR development process (figure 17). When looking for instances of national Governments attempting to create an enabling environment for SNGs to contribute to the implementation, and monitoring and reviewing of the SDGs, cases from Malaysia, Indonesia and Pakistan stand out. Malaysia's VNR in 2017 did not specifically include SNGs (probably due to the fact that the governmental organization is de facto unitary in its coordination), but the national Government aims to provide a framework of multi-stakeholder governance structure at state levels to enhance vertical and horizontal policy coherence and to increase stakeholder engagement (Government of Malaysia, 2017). Additionally, the Federal Department of Town and Country Planning (Plan Malaysia) has realigned its local sustainability indicator framework called "MURNI Net" with the SDGs (MURNI Net 2.0) in order to offer a nationally applicable set of local indicators that can help track and compare different territorial progress on the SDGs (PLANMalaysia, 2020). In Indonesia, a Presidential Regulation is in place which mandates provincial Governments to lead SDG implementation in administrative areas falling under their jurisdiction (UNDESA, 2018). In the context of SDG financing, Pakistan has set up a new framework to track relevant spending, while "district-level frameworks are being piloted to highlight priorities, especially those related to health and education" (Artaza, 2017). The Government also established provincial SDGs units to accelerate the implementation at all levels of governments (Government of Pakistan, 2019).

Figure 17. Key phases in the VNR development process



When discussing stakeholder engagement in the VNR process, the level of local engagement has always been a matter of concern. SNGs often have wider outreach to local partners and their own constituencies, but face resource limitations when trying to engage them. Moreover, the VNR process does not always provide funding to SNGs for organizing local level consultations. To this end, Vanuatu organized a series of participatory discussions while designing their national priorities for the 2030 Agenda. A high-level team was given the task of ensuring that their plan reflected the priorities of the entire population. The team consulted with all provincial government councils in November 2013, following the Mele Symposium that set the pathway to the development of a National Sustainable Development Plan (NSDP). Building on this, a Core Group was formed to develop the NSDP in 2014. A five-day public forum was held, which attracted an average of 75 to 100 people each day to the forum. The meeting was also aired live on radio and television. In 2016, a consultation report was drafted, translated into Bislama, and circulated for further deliberations across the country. During a six-month period, hundreds of people joined at one of 15 locations to provide inputs through one-day events. Consultations were held in the provincial centres, and the attendees were mostly from local Governments and civil society. This allowed rich technical discussions to be held. A National Validation Summit was held in November 2016, at which many stakeholders and development partners gathered, including provincial authorities and community representatives from all six provinces.

Some countries have engaged SNGs quite intensively in gathering inputs and data. The Government of the Philippines actively reached out to SNGs for its second VNR in 2019. The national Government organized three regional workshops to consolidate inputs. The Presidency of Strategy and Budget in Turkey coordinated a process to bring together more than 50 municipality representatives to contribute to its VNR preparation. Instead of selecting cities themselves, the Turkish national Government engaged local administrations through the Union of Municipalities of Turkey as the coordinating institution (Government of Turkey, 2019), which provided a larger space to SNGs. Likewise, in the case of the Russian Federation, SNGs were invited to join 17 thematic working groups established by the Analytical Centre for the Government of the Russian Federation (ACG) which subsequently opted for drafting each chapter per goal (Government of the Russian Federation, 2020). Similarly, Mongolia initiated a multi-stakeholder working group, including local government representatives, to address regional issues and inequalities and to hold dialogues with subnational entities (Government of Mongolia, 2019). New Zealand went a step beyond – Local Governments New Zealand, a group governed by local, regional and unitary councils and representing their national interests in New Zealand formed a part of the national delegation to the HLPF in 2019. They were also asked to provide inputs to the VNR earlier (United Cities and Local Governments, 2020b).

Countries have also highlighted SNG-led best practices in their VNR reports. Due to the absence of local government associations in Indonesia's SDGs National Coordinating Team (which is the government's main consulting mechanism to engage stakeholders), the National Secretariat of SDGs at Bappenas (Ministry of National Development Planning of Indonesia) selected cities for best practices in their VNR report. Pakistan's Ministry of Planning, Development and Research (MoPD&R) organised the country's first Local Government Summit to establish dialogue with local governments and solicit their views into the implementation of the SDGs. The declaration was included in the Pakistani VNR report in 2019 (Government of Pakistan, 2019). Likewise, Cambodia's VNR report highlighted the country's efforts in localizing the SDGs. The Ministry of Environment has transferred 6 functions to the sub-national level on the collection of solid waste, the management of drainage system, and natural resource protection. This is showcased through the example of Battambang City, one of five pilot cities under a joint ESCAP and UN-Habitat project on SDG localization, which has selected solid waste management, livelihoods and local economic development, waste water, and affordable housing as the city's Sustainable Urban Resource Management (SURM) priorities (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2019).

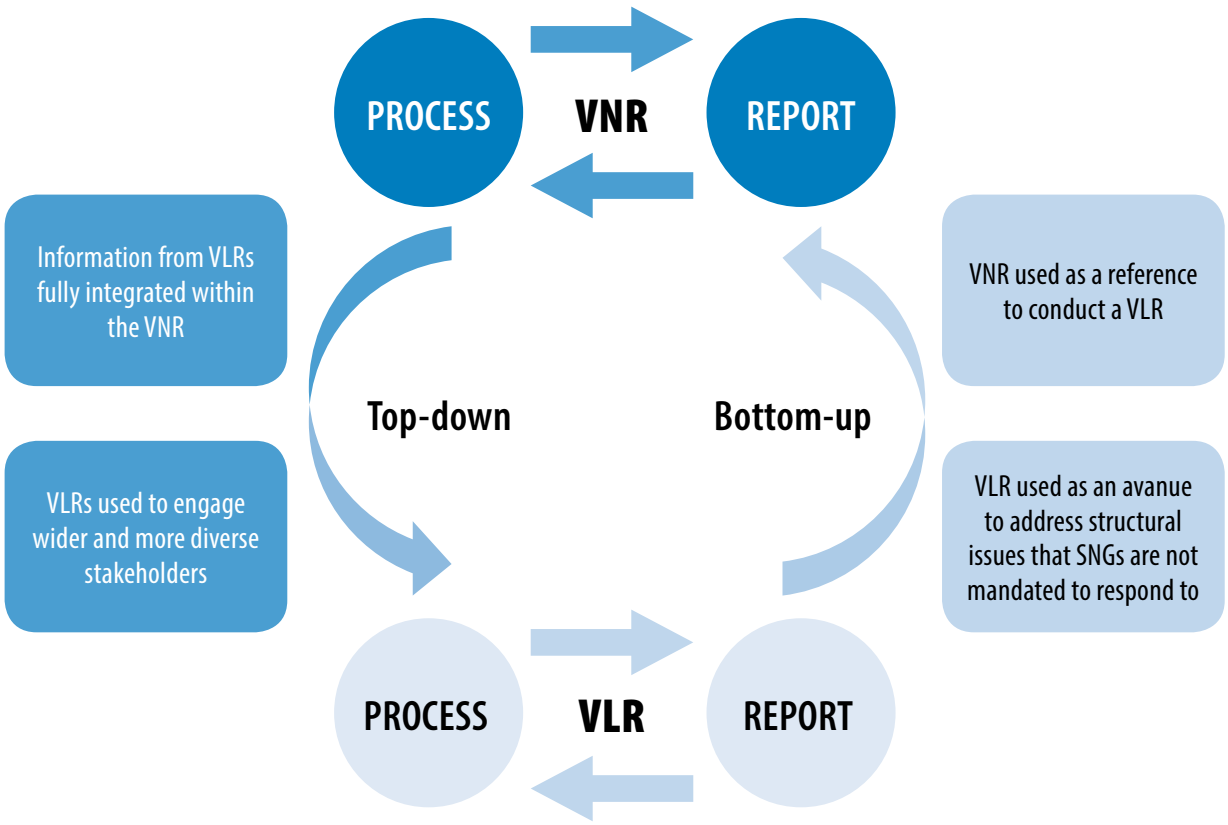
There also exist some unique examples of capacity development of SNGs to better contribute towards the VNR process. LOCALISE – an initiative by UCLG and funded by the European Union – has supported 16 provinces and 14 cities in Indonesia. Its activities in 2019 included supporting SNGs to achieve better engagement in VNRs by providing capacity development support around knowledge of the SDGs, data collection, analysis and others (United Cities and Local Governments, 2020b). With support from ESCAP and UN-Habitat, Naga City in the Philippines undertook a unique exercise – the first of its kind – by aligning the biannual household survey called Community-Based Monitoring System (CBMS) with the SDG indicators to generate statistical feedback on the local progress made on achieving the 2030 Agenda and set the foundation for a potential VLR. The CBMS, approved by the Philippines Statistical Authority, is a national programme for collecting city-wide statistical data. It is financed through an allocated municipal budget and executed biannually by each Local Government Unit of the Philippines (ESCAP, 2019). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has assisted Panabo City and Municipality of Carmona in the Philippines through the project "Localizing the Sustainable Development Goals Through a Community-Based Monitoring System". The project strengthened the ability of local Governments to monitor progress against the SDGs by offering capacity development support as well as training to prepare their own subnational SDGs report (City Government of Panabo, unpublished; Municipality Government of Carmona, unpublished.

In Japan, the national Government set up a mechanism to select local-level best practices for their VNR, and encouraged SNGs to apply by submitting written proposals. It is called the "SDGs Future City" programme and it aims to encourage cities to come up with promising plans to implement the SDGs in their own city or region. Between 2018 and 2019, 60 cases were selected as SDGs Future Cities and 20 more advanced cases were funded as the SDGs Model project. The programme provides an incentive to SNGs to integrate the SDGs into their own town or urban planning and to implement silo-busting approaches to local administration. The programme will continue to choose around 30 SDGs Future Cities and 10 Model cases. The Government has since eased the entry-bar by providing a format for proposals and guidance on how to set local indicators.

3.3. Operationalizing VLR-VNR integration

As the examples above show, VNRs not only can showcase SNG-led best practices around the SDGs, but can also engage them in the overall process more meaningfully. The examples also highlight four actions which can form the basis for effective VLR-VNR integration (figure 18).

Figure 18. Basis for effective VLR-VNR integration



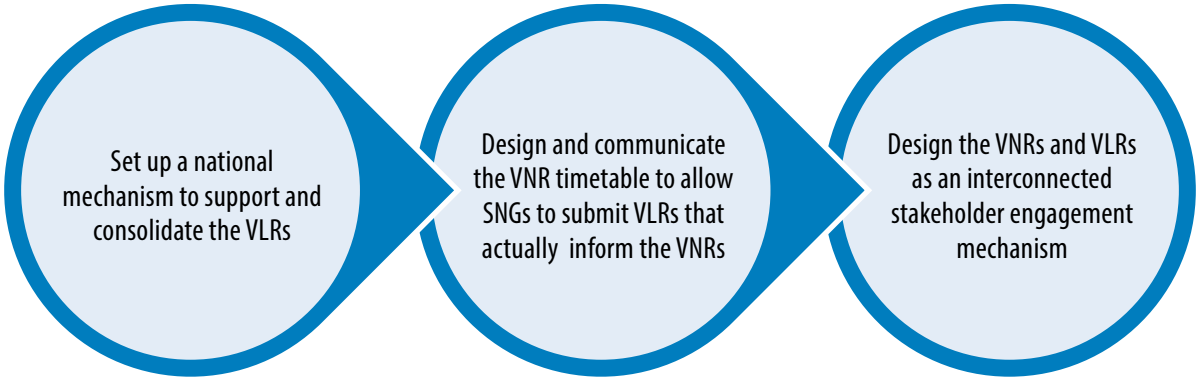
The first set of actions (top-down) take place at the national level when the national Government (a) fully integrates the findings, data and information collected from VLRs within the VNR, and (b) uses the VLR to engage wider and more diverse stakeholders as part of the local consultation process within the overall VNR process.

This requires national Governments to proactively reach out to SNGs conducting VLRs and can serve as an incentive to generate the political will to engage with the SDGs and potentially mobilize resources to conduct a VLR.

The second set of actions (bottom-up) take place at the local level when SNGs (a) use previous VNRs, if available, as a reference to develop their VLR, and (b) actively pursue the VLR process as an avenue of addressing structural issues that they face but do not have the mandate to respond to.

This requires SNGs to not limit VLRs as a mere local follow-up and review process, but to expand the scope to intentionally identify instances of coherence and inconsistency between local and national policy frameworks, and include structural issues that have to be addressed at the local level.

Figure 19. Actions to consider when integrating VLRs and VNRs



A clear mechanism for SNGs to develop and submit their VLRs is necessary to deepen integration. The national Government can first identify an appropriate focal point for communicating and working together with SNGs to set up such a mechanism. National associations of local Governments, if they exist, could also be mobilized to support this. When there is no such association, the national Government might have to choose some SNG representatives. Even so, it is highly recommended that both national and sub-national governments put in the effort to bring as many SNG constituency voices into the process as they can.

This national mechanism can be crucial in identifying the best ways to integrate the various inputs and reports submitted by SNGs, including VLRs. It is highly advisable that, instead of national Governments selecting cases that best fit the VNR narrative, they discuss the issue with SNGs in order to identify best practices, gaps and lessons learnt that can be featured in the VNR report. This should help to develop ownership and encourage active participation of SNGs in the VNR process.

While the national government often informs the UN of its intention to carry out a VNR at a very early stage of the process, national and local stakeholders are sometimes not aware of the timetable. Moreover, stakeholders might also not have sufficient knowledge of the VNRs, and have difficulty understanding the process and its added value. Therefore, awareness-raising on the VNR process is a key to enabling SNGs to take up VLR initiatives. Usually, by August of the previous year, the majority of countries indicate their intention of conducting a VNR (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019) An ideal scenario would be when SNGs are fully aware of the timetable and the national government consults them in a manner that allows for in-depth, meaningful feedback to be submitted into the VNR process. Once again, having a national mechanism to coordinate the process and consolidate the feedback would be greatly beneficial.

Designing the VNR and the VLR as an interconnected stakeholder engagement mechanism would allow both national and subnational Governments to reap the benefits of deeper integration. National Governments, instead of passively waiting for SNGs to conduct a VLR, can take steps to enable such processes to be an integral part of the VNR and bring onboard different stakeholder groups at their respective localities. For SNGs, such a multi-stakeholder, territory-based approach would enhance the validity, depth and legitimacy of the VLR.

National and subnational Governments can also refer to the checklist in table 7 while attempting to integrate the two processes further.

Table 7. Checklist to deepen VLR-VNR integration

For national Governments	
(SNG engagement in the VNR)	
○	Does your timetable allow enough time for SNGs to conduct local consultations and possibly a VLR?
○	Does your stakeholder engagement mechanism include a representative of SNG constituency, such as a National Sub-National Government Association (NSNGA)?
○	Do you have a mechanism to support SNGs with high commitments but low capacities?
○	Do you have a way to have a dialogue with SNGs to set up local indicators?
○	Does your national delegation to the regional forum for sustainable development and the HLPF include SNG representatives?
(When writing the VNR report)	
○	Did you include any examples from SNGs?
○	Have you consulted SNGs in selecting featured cases?

For subnational governments	
(When conducting a VLR)	
○	Do you have an inclusive stakeholder engagement mechanism in place?
○	Do you follow a specific structure in reporting and aligning with the VNR?
○	Have you communicated your intention of conducting a VLR to the National SDG Secretariat/Ministry in charge of the SDGs?
○	Do you work with a NSNGA?
○	Does your timetable fit the VNR timetable?
○	Does your VLR report include a section to articulate local demands to the national Government?
(When engaging in the VNR)	
○	Do you work with a national SNGA?
○	Does your national Government include any SNG representative in the stakeholder engagement mechanism?
○	Does the SNG representative in the stakeholder engagement mechanism at the national level speak to your SNG?
○	Will your national Government include any SNG in the national delegation to the regional forum on sustainable development and/or the HLPF?

4. Report writing and follow-up

4.1. Preparing the VLR report

Until recently, a conundrum facing SNGs when initiating their VLR process is the lack of official United Nations-made guidelines. However, to fill this gap, UNDESA is currently developing its own guidelines with the recommended elements that should be included in the VLR report. These guidelines, similar to the Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines for voluntary national reviews, are not prescriptive, but rather provide a framework on the main elements that should be included in the report itself to maximize the integration with VNRs and to better translate local actions into the global language of the SDGs.

As seen in the existing VLR reports of SNGs published since 2018 (as of April 2020), there is a great variety of formats and approaches to the VLR process as well as to the report itself. By drawing on reviews of existing VLR reports,[7] both of SNGs inside and outside the Asia-Pacific region, and other synthesis reports produced by organizations supporting cities, the following section provides practical, but not prescriptive, recommendations on how to prepare and organize the VLR report. The following recommendations are also aimed at maximizing the role of the VLR as a peer-learning tool for other SNGs striving to accelerate SDG implementation and to support the VNR process.

Regardless of the wide variety of formats, the majority of the examined reports share the same essential building blocks. First, an introduction to the city and its history and characteristics, framing SDG implementation into the wider socio-economic context. Second, a methodology describing the VLR process and data sources. Third, the particularities of the SDG localization process, covering the alignment of local policies with the 2030 Agenda. Finally, they review the progress towards all or some particular SDGs – usually those prioritized by the SNG itself or those under review at the HLPF of any given year. They conclude the report with recommendations for future work and the main challenges to be confronted. Underlying these building blocks are the notions of leaving no-one behind and of integrated action to deliver the 2030 Agenda.

Remember…

Sharing of challenges, needs, opportunities and issues that cannot be addressed by a city alone require a common framework of language. Using a similar format for VLR reports allows for better readability, comparability and accountability (IGES, 2020).

For a VLR report to be more effective, especially in becoming a tool for peer-learning, it is of paramount importance to ensure transparency. The VLR should detail the manner in which the process happened, the data sources and any weak points that will be addressed in future VLRs. In telling about their experiences in the localization of the SDGs, it is equally important to share not only stories of successes and accomplishments but also those aspects that did not turn out as planned or did not yield the expected results. VLR reports should also be transparent with regard to their data gathering process, sources, limitations and gaps. These recommendations will lead to a better final report that will become a reference for others as they initiate their VLR journey.

Keeping in mind the objective of facilitating integration between the VLR and VNR processes, the VLR report should comprise two main parts. The first is the introductory part, which presents the SNG itself and the VLR process, including the methodology followed and other steps that could help national or local Governments in replicating similar efforts. The second part comprises the building blocks of the VLR. It should contain aspects such as the localization process and the review of SDGs.

[7] The authors reviewed the following VLR reports when preparing this section. VLR reports presented in 2018: Kitakyushu, Japan; New York (2018 edition), United States of America; Shimokawa, Japan; and Toyama, Japan. VLR reports presented in 2019: Bristol, the United Kingdom; Buenos Aires, Argentina; Hamamatsu, Japan; Helsinki, Finland; La Paz, Bolivia; Los Angeles, United States of America; New Taipei, Taiwan Province of China; New York (2019 edition), United States of America; Santana de Parnaíba, Brazil; and Taipei, Taiwan Province of China. VLR reports presented in 2020 (as of April 2020): Manheim, Germany; and Oaxaca, Mexico.

Following this structure, the table of contents of the VLR should include the following sections:[8]

1. Opening statement.

2. Highlights.

3. Introduction.

4. Methodology of the process of preparation for the review.

5. Policy and enabling environment:
   (a) Engagement with the national government on SDG implementation;
   (b) Creating ownership of the Sustainable Development Goals and the VLRs;
   (c) Incorporation of the Sustainable Development Goals in local and regional frameworks;
   (d) Leaving no one behind;
   (e) Institutional mechanisms;
   (f) Structural issues.

6. Progress on goals and targets.

7. Means of implementation:
   (a) Finance;
   (b) Technology and innovation;
   (c) Capacity-building;
   (d) Policy and institutional coherence;
   (e) Multi-stakeholder partnerships;
   (f) Data and monitoring;

8. Conclusions and next steps.

9. Annexes (when necessary).

This structure is similar to that of many existing VLRs as well as the one recommended by IGES (2020b) and the draft guidelines currently being developed by UNDESA to support the reporting efforts of national Governments. Although the emphasis should be on the VLR process itself rather than on the outcome, following this structure eases the integration with the VNR process and peer-learning opportunities.

Remember…

Although not necessary, a visually attractive report goes a long way in terms of capturing the reader's attention and conveying key messages in a professional yet user-friendly manner. Whenever possible, SNGs should utilize innovative data visualization techniques to highlight gaps and challenges, solutions, and best practices.

4.2. Following up on the VLR

The VLR is a journey, and the preparation of the report is certainly not the end of it. The VLR should be seen as a process by which SNGs can take stock of, and assess, their progress and shortcomings in the implementation of the goals and targets through an inclusive process engaging all relevant actors. It is, therefore, crucial to embed the process and its findings into existing implementation efforts and to plan for effective follow-up.

The checklist in table 8 provides some options that SNGs may wish to follow upon completion of their VLR report, to share their experiences and lessons learnt from the process.

[8] For a detailed description of what should be included under each heading, refer to existing resources such as the VLR handbook produced by Carnegie Mellon University (Deininger, Lu, Griess and Santamaria, 2019), IGES's publication on the Shimokawa method (IGES, 2020b) or the first volume of the VLR guidelines published by UCLG and UN-Habitat (2020).

Table 8. VLR follow-up actions

○	Organize a dedicated debriefing meeting with staff and stakeholders involved in the process.
○	Develop a plan for following up on lessons learnt and recommendations emerging from the VLR report.
○	Share the VLR report with relevant national Government authorities to discuss ways to address gaps and challenges.
○	Institutionalize stakeholder engagement mechanisms that have worked well.
○	Develop a communications strategy around the main messages of the VLR report and engage local media.
○	Participate in peer review exercises with other SNGs/NSNGA.
○	Participate in national urban forums, the regional sustainable development forums, and other related events to share the VLR experience and lessons learnt from the process.

Assessing how everything went and which changes must be made to the process in order to continue monitoring the SDGs at the local level is an essential follow-up action. SNGs should take stock of whether required information was met by the selected indicators or not, whether any particularly vulnerable groups were excluded from the consultations or not, whether the key messages were adequately communicated or not etc. Having a robust follow-plan conveys commitment – both internally within the administration and externally to the public.

SNGs should be swift in sharing the findings and main messages from the VLR report with relevant national Government counterparts to ensure that the VLR is embedded within the VNR process. This will also allow SNGs to open new channels of communication to highlight gaps and challenges that require support from the national level. Transparently highlighting gaps and challenges in the current progress could also build trust among the various stakeholder groups engaged, and lead to new partnerships that are issue-specific and action-oriented. It is possible that while conducting a VLR, SNGs will employ a variety of mechanisms to engage stakeholders. It is crucial to identify those that have worked well and to take steps to institutionalize them for continued support for the implementation and follow-up of the SDGs.

Media engagement following the preparation of the VLR report would allow SNGs to sustain the momentum built around awareness-raising activities conducted as part of the VLR process. A critical mass of stakeholders who are aware of the goals and targets can be immensely helpful in helping SNGs implement and follow-up on the SDGs in the future.

Using VLRs as the basis for a peer-review exercise with counterparts would help SNGs maximize the opportunity for learning that the common language of the SDGs promises. A peer-review process could also provide a healthy platform for SNGs to be candid about their challenges, avoiding the pitfalls that the VNR process has experienced, with countries criticized for being overly positive about their prospects for reading the SDGs (Pipa and Bouchet, 2020). Peer-learning exercises can be facilitated either within city/regional networks or bilaterally through twinning arrangements. Participation in national urban forums or the regional sustainable development forum (APFSD) would allow for the same while also enabling SNGs to import innovations and best practices from counterparts across the Asia-Pacific region.

Remember…

SNGs can always approach the United Nations system for support regarding their VLRs. ESCAP, in addition to organizing the APFSD, supports member States by facilitating regional dialogue and promoting sustainable inclusive urban development through its programme of work. United Nations Country Teams (UNCTs), due to their close proximity and nature of work with national Governments, can also assist cities and regions to conduct VLRs and integrate them within the VNR process.

5. Conclusion

Even before the COVID-19 outbreak, cities across Asia and the Pacific were struggling with a multitude of issues. The pandemic has reversed decades of progress on poverty, health care, and education. Only the continued pursuit of the SDGs can keep Governments focused on growth inclusion, equity and sustainability.

The VLR can act as a unifying exercise around the SDGs that can form the basis for catalysing new models of governance, institutionalize and sustain long-term development efforts, enable local accountability and articulate a comprehensive vision for sustainable development. By drawing on a growing list of existing resources and situating them in the context of the Asia-Pacific region, these guidelines are aimed at being helpful without being overly prescriptive. The initial work of assessing and reporting a city's progress on the SDGs is an investment that compounds with time, beginning a process that participating cities have noted soon takes on a momentum of its own. These guidelines are a resource for taking those first steps.

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Annex

Subregions in Asia and the Pacific / Stage of SDG localization	East and North-East Asia	South-East Asia	The Pacific	South and South-West Asia	Central Asia
Raising awareness and building ownership	**Republic of Korea** - Knowledge and information sharing platform to better integrate the SDGs into policies and programmes of Local Agenda 21 network members; - Training courses and research projects on the SDGs by the Korean Institute Centre for Sustainable Development	**Cambodia** - Inclusion of SDGs in the five-year strategic plan of the National League of Communes **Indonesia** - Development of training programmes for local government officials and other stakeholders and dissemination of SDG toolkits by the Association of Indonesian Municipalities and Indonesian Regencies Government Association **Malaysia** - Connecting local governments with international activities linked to the SDG framework via the Malaysian Association of Local Authorities **Philippines** - Organization of seminars, information sharing, conferences and workshops by the League of Cities and the League of Municipalities. - Pilot projects to promote integration of SDGs into local activities by League of Cities	**Australia** - The Western Australia Local Government Association and the Council of Capital City Lord Mayors working with the federal Government to contribute to the SDG reporting process and gathering experiences at the local level **Fiji** - In-depth training on stakeholder engagement secured the interest of a wide multi-stakeholder coalition in collaborating to identify (and jointly develop a good and effective strategy of waste management that minimize cost and other associated negatives impacts and generates income **Kiribati** - SDG information dissemination through monthly newsletters, radio, forums, and workshops by the Kiribati local government association	**Bangladesh** - Conferences and workshops organized with support of international agencies and national Government **Nepal** - SDG information dissemination by the Association of District Development Committee of Nepal, the Municipal Association of Nepal and the National Association of Rural Municipalities in Nepal **Pakistan** - Local Government Summit organized by local authorities from all provinces **Sri Lanka** - Awareness raising workshops and pilots organized by the Federation of Sri Lankan Local Government Authorities to integrate SDGs into local plans and budgets in selected provinces	**Kazakhstan** - The city of Almaty is active in promoting sustainable urban development solutions and the city established a Smart City Lab to manage smart city projects at the City Government **Mongolia** - Ulaanbaatar is developing visual outreach material such as short educational videos and teaser promoting sustainable urban forest management

		Thailand - Nadee broadcasted the first local Strategic Planning Workshop under the ESCAP and UN-Habitat project "Integrating the Sustainable Development Goals into local action in support of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Asia and the Pacific" through the provincial state broadcaster	**New Zealand** - Reporting team to 2019 HLPF comprised of local government representatives. - Toolbox developed by Local Governments New Zealand to assist local authorities to meet the challenges of seal level rises and extreme weather events; - National set of indicators that align closely to the SDGs developed and disseminated to councils by the Society of Local Government Managers		
Aligning local strategies and plans	**China** - Subnational governments are elaborating their own five-year development plans in line with the national Government's 13th Five-Year Plan which is aligned with the SDGs **Japan** - More than 30 cities and towns are involved in the implementation of the SDGs, with the support of the national Government through the 'Future City Initiative'	**Indonesia** - 19 out of 34 provinces have developed and formalized their SDG local action plans with 15 more in the process of doing so **The Philippines** - In partnership with ESCAP and UN-Habitat, Naga City has developed an SDG indicator aligned city-wide household survey that will be institutionalized in the biannual Community-Based Monitoring Survey. The results will provide statistical evidence on progress towards SDG achievement at the local level	**Australia** - Sydney, Melbourne and the Eastern Metropolitan Regional Council in Perth among the first councils to integrate the SDGs in their plans and strategies; - More than 100 local government areas have joined the Climate Council's Cities Power Partnership that inspires and accelerates local initiatives in emissions reductions and clean energy	**India** - States and union territories have prepared or are in the process of preparing their own Action Plans or Vision 2030 documents but participation of district administrations, rural and urban local governments is trailing **Pakistan** - Local governments are not associated with the SDG coordination units at the provincial level - Weak mechanism to track the progress of SDG implementation due to lack of data availability Sri Lanka	

	Republic of Korea - Local governments revising their strategies to include SDGs as a core value and establish local SDG implementation systems; Local governments established local council for sustainable development involving civil society and the private sector	- Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG), in partnership with the League of Cities, the Local Government Academy and several international agencies has been promoting the SDGs in over 34 cities. However, the current political context and existing mechanisms mean local governments face difficulties in contributing to the SDGs **Viet Nam** - 22 provinces have issued their provincial actions plans for implementing the 2030 Agenda	**New Zealand** - SDGs publicized to member councils to support the preparation of VNR by Local Government New Zealand; - Local Government Leaders' Climate Change Declaration launched by local leaders to support initiatives to reduce greenhouse gases and respond to climate change		
Implementing the SDGs through local actions	**China** - Xiangyang city is testing technologies for recycling sludge from wastewater treatment into energy and recovering resources through an innovative cost-effective green treatment process - Wuhan received the Guangzhou International Award for Innovation for transforming one of the largest landfills in Asia into a recreational park and ecological garden - All of Shenzhen's bus fleet replaced with electric buses in 2017 leading to a reduction in the city's CO_2 emissions by 1.35 million tons each year	Almost 70 sub-national governments in South-East Asia made commitments to the Global Covenant of Mayors on Climate Change and Energy to develop mitigation and adaptation policies The 'Making Cities Sustainable and Resilient Campaign' of UNDRR and UN-Habitat which aims to build the capacity of local governments, establishing resilience across institutions **Cambodia** - Battambang City featured as case study under SDG 11 in Cambodia's Voluntary National Review presented at the High-Level Political Forum in July 2019	**Australia** - Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney have implemented climate change initiatives - Melbourne's Victorian Water Corporation has used SDG 6 and other targets to develop its own 2030 Management Strategy in consultation with multi-stakeholder groups - Logan City Council in Queensland has introduced a Safe City Strategy and Action Plan 2016-2020 **New Zealand** - Climate Change Strategy and Implementation Plan launched by the Greater Wellington Regional Council	The 'Making Cities Sustainable and Resilient Campaign' of UNDRR and UN-Habitat which aims to build the capacity of local governments, establishing resilience across institutions **India** - Surat city has developed an End-to-End Early Warning System - Rajkot developed a decentralized wastewater treatment system that saves electricity and reduced CO_2 emissions	**Kazakhstan** - Supported by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), the city of Almaty is piloting a project on innovative financing of a mostly low-income residential district "Zhastar"

	Japan - Tokyo city's Climate Change Strategy attempting to reduce energy consumption and CO_2 emissions - Kanazawa has fostered synergies between local artisans and other creative areas, combining tradition, innovation and new technologies **Republic of Korea** - 2020 Environmental Capital initiative has planted millions of trees, reduced air pollution, urban noise and average summer temperatures by 3-7 degrees Celsius - Seoul has reduced the waste sent to Sudokwon Landfill, created four resource recovery centers, and increased the rate of household waste recycling - The Seoul Type Housing Voucher Programme provides a subsidy for low-income citizens as well as other options through their Public Lease Housing Policy	**Indonesia** - Adoption of Disaster Management Plans - Surabaya developed an e-3Rs and created a waste bank where residents are paid in return for recycling plastic bottles and cups - Bandung city's Low Carbon Plan (2014) includes reduce waste going to landfill and promoting the 3Rs and waste-to-energy schemes - Bandung city launched its Better Urban Mobility 2031 plan to develop public transport, including a seven-line Light Rail Transit system as well as low-emission vehicles - Jakarta has been providing bicycle sharing stations since 2018 - The Regency of Wonosobo and Palu City have created city human rights commissions to protect religious diversity, minority groups and develop awareness-raising programmes **Philippines** - Local and regional governments incorporated disaster risk reduction strategies into their local plans, though implementation capacity is limited	- Rotorua city has developed an ecosystem re-entry mechanism to support the principle that water is intrinsic to life and needs to sustain life and be life-sustaining - The Kapiti Coast near Wellington KCDC redistributes waste levy fees paid by waste disposal operators to community groups, businesses, Maori and other community organizations in the form of Waste Minimization Grants	- Coimbatore is currently working on a concept for intelligent water management to develop innovative water supply and wastewater disposal technologies - Two municipalities in Chennai have signed a plastic waste recovery agreement with a cement plant to recover plastic waste sorted by residents to limit the amount of waste sent to landfills. Residents are also asked to sort organic waste and adopt vermi-composting - Kochi city has commissioned the development of a new metro in 2017 and inaugurated a bike sharing scheme in 2019 with stations located at the foot of the metro being built - Bhopal has improved transport access and safety for women **Pakistan** - The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province planted more than 1 billion trees and triggered a national reforestation campaign	

	- Seoul's Crime Prevention through Environmental Design Project targets troubled neighborhoods involving multiple stakeholders to seek innovative ways to reduce crime - The province of Jeju has committed to preserving the custom of women divers as an eco-friendly sustainable fishing practice, rooted in traditional knowledge - Gwangju has carried out memorial and human rights education programmes with a view to promoting peace, culture and human rights in both the city and its regions	- Iloilo Local Housing Board has facilitated coordination between local government and the urban poor federation to participate in the city's formal planning process, disaster rehabilitation and relocation strategies that opera at the city-wide scale - The Grassroots Participatory Budget programme in the mid-2010s succeeded in expanding to almost all local government units **Thailand** - Bangkok initiated a solid waste separation programme at the community level and built a waste-to-energy plant - Bangkok Metropolitan Region is working to decarbonize the transport sector, underground train network and extending the city's first bicycle-sharing programme -The Baan Mankong programme, which institutionalized participation of informal communities in the development of the urban fabric, has provided secure land and housing to two thirds of the country's urban poor over the past decade		**Sri Lanka** - Metro Colombo Urban Development Project which aims to reduce the physical and socio-economic impacts of flooding and strengthen strategic planning processes	

		Viet Nam - Hanoi has been operating a Bus Rapid Transport since 2016 and the city's 'Masterplan for 2030 with a vision to 2050' envisions eight urban rail corridors, eight BRTs and several monorail corridors			

Legend

Typology of engagement	Joint national-local engagement	Bottom-up engagement	Engagement in transitionary environments	Top-down engagement		Engagement in uncertain and difficult institutional environments	
Sectoral focus	Climate change	Resilient cities	Water and sanitation	Solid waste management	Transport and mobility	Affordable housing	Safe and creative cities

The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) serves as the United Nations' regional hub promoting cooperation among countries to achieve inclusive and sustainable development. The largest regional intergovernmental platform with 53 Member States and 9 associate members, ESCAP has emerged as a strong regional think-tank offering countries sound analytical products that shed insight into the evolving economic, social and environmental dynamics of the region. The Commission's strategic focus is to deliver on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which is reinforced and deepened by promoting regional cooperation and integration to advance responses to shared vulnerabilities, connectivity, financial cooperation and market integration. ESCAP's research and analysis coupled with its policy advisory services, capacity building and technical assistance to governments aims to support countries' sustainable and inclusive development ambitions.

The Penang Platform for Sustainable Urbanization is a regional partnerships platform legacy of the 7th Asia-Pacific Urban Forum, hosted by ESCAP and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme. Members of the PPSU include: Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, City Council of Penang Island, CityNet, Commonwealth Local Government Forum, Eastern Regional Organisation for Planning and Housing, Global Resilient Cities Network, Huairou Commission, ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability, Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, International Urban Cooperation Programme of the European Union, The Rockefeller Foundation, United Cities and Local Governments in Asia-Pacific, the United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, United Nations Human Settlements Programme and Urbanice Malaysia.