UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE

Guidelines for the Development of Voluntary Local Reviews in the ECE Region

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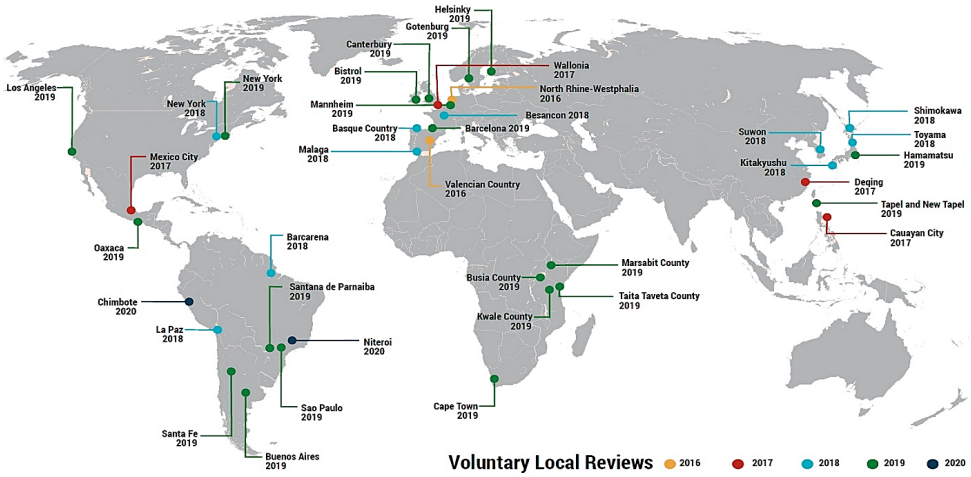
I. Introduction

Following the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development[1], national governments are developing Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)[2] to assess their progress in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In the short-term, regions and cities urgently need to address the socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in communities and among the most vulnerable groups, but VNRs are tools to create long-term strategies for sustainable development. Increasingly, governments are employing diverse stakeholders in preparing VNRs, including local and regional governments. The latter's growing role in implementation of the 2030 Agenda has led to increased global attention on localizing SDGs and preparing Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs). These enable review of SDG implementation at a local level. VLRs complement VNRs, ensuring a more detailed and nuanced assessment of progress toward implementing the 2030 Agenda at a country level. It should be stressed that VLRs have the potential to substantially accelerate localization of SDGs.

II. VLRs globally and in the UNECE region

VLRs have been undertaken in all parts of the world, with different rates of progress. Progress is most noticeable in the ECE region, especially in Northern and Western Europe (Figure 1). By 2020, in the ECE region, over twenty VLRs were developed and published; a regularly updated list is available at the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) web page.[3] VLRs were developed and published for the following cities and subregions in the ECE region[4]: Barcelona, Spain (2019); Basque local government, Spain (2018); Besancon, France (2018); Niort, France (2020); Bonn, Germany (2020); Stuttgart, Germany (2019); Bristol, United Kingdom (2019); Canterbury, United Kingdom(2019); Gothenburg, Sweden (2019); Helsinki, Finland (2019); Turku, Finland (2020); Espoo, Finland (2020); Los Angeles, United States (2019); Malaga, Spain (2020); Mannheim, Germany (2019); New York, United States (2019); North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany (2016); Valencia county, Spain (2016); and Wallonia region, Belgium (2017) (UN-Habitat, 2021).

Figure 1
Voluntary Local Reviews prepared and published by local and regional governments globally in 2016-2020



Source: UN-Habitat World Cities Report 2020[5]

[1] United Nations Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015 (A/RES/70/1). Available at https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_70_1_E.pdf.
[2] UNDESA "Voluntary National Reviews Database." More information available at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/.
[3] UNDESA "Voluntary Local Reviews. Reports from local Authorities". Available at https://sdgs.un.org/topics/voluntary-local-reviews.
[4] This is not a complete list.
[5] UN-Habitat 'World Cities Report 2020: The Value of Sustainable Urbanization.' Nairobi, 2020. Available at https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/10/wcr_2020_report.pdf

According to the Institute for Global Environmental Studies (2020), cities used different methods to develop their VLRs, so there is no one standard approach.[6] Several global, regional and subregional guidance documents have been developed by international organizations and city networks. Annex 1 provides a list with short descriptions of key international guideline which have been, or are being, developed.

Most of the listed guidelines relevant to the ECE region were presented and discussed at the online webinar "Local Governments: The role of SDG Voluntary Local Reviews" on 11 March 2021. The webinar was organized by ECE, UN DESA and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), with the support of the ECE Centre of Excellence in Norway on Smart Sustainable Cities and the City Government of Helsingborg in Sweden. It was a pre-meeting to the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the UNECE Region.[7]

Based on the discussions, participants considered it important to develop regional guidelines and formulated the following recommendations for the preparation of VLRs in the ECE region:

(a) **Focus VLRs on sustainable and inclusive "shared value" creation[8] for local communities**. The concept of "shared value" focuses on identifying and expanding the connections between social and economic progress.[9] This concept can be applied to any human settlement to emphasize the economic and social dimensions of sustainable development along with the need to engage different stakeholders. Key stakeholders include the private sector as well as local inhabitants. Understanding the needs of local communities is a first critical step for cities intending to develop their VLRs

(b) **Ensure a participatory process for the development of VLRs.** The participatory approach for developing VLRs is particularly important. VLRs should be developed by engaging local communities and key stakeholders, including the private sector and academia, and by enabling cross-sectoral collaboration within local and regional governments. This includes partnerships between small, medium and large cities within countries to ensure the VLR process also engages small and medium-size cities and human settlements

(c) **Enhance VLRs as a forward-looking instrument (in lieu of a mere reporting mechanism on past work) by linking them to national plans, including VNRs**. It is important to improve coherence between VLRs and VNRs, including by establishing links with national level planning and cooperation with key national players

(d) **Connect VLRs with concrete projects centred on the achievement of SDGs and enhancing urban resilience while mobilizing financing.** Financing is vital to implementing VLR recommendations. Therefore, cities need to explore innovative financing mechanisms to expand their budgets, and scale up or replicate successful projects and programmes

(e) **Promote the use of indicators and metrics to measure progress in achieving SDGs and foster intersectoral cooperation**. Cities often lack the metrics and tools required to measure their progress in achieving SDGs. Anchoring VLRs to internationally-recognized metrics provides an opportunity for an inclusive and cooperative impact. Meticulous data collection and analysis further helps connect projects with national and international sources of finance. Wherever possible, VLR development should be accompanied by digital tools and open-source data

(f) **Utilize VLRs as a tool to support economic and social recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic**. The COVID-19 pandemic was an impetus for world governments at all levels to rethink approaches to management

[6] Institute for Global Environmental Strategies. State of the Voluntary Local Reviews 2020 —Local Action for Global Impact in Achieving the SDGs. Available at https://www.iges.or.jp/en/publication_documents/pub/workingpaper/en/10803/State+of+the+Voluntary+Local+Review+2020+-+Final.pdf.

[7] The Regional Forum on Sustainable Development (RFSD) for the UNECE Region was held under the title "Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and action and delivery on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the UNECE Region". Available at: https://unece.org/rfsd2021. A report from the pre-meeting was delivered to the RFSD by Mr. Peter Danielsson, Mayor of Helsingborg, Sweden, available in Annex I to the document.

[8] Shared value is a concept formulated by Professor Michael E. Porter of Harvard Business School and Mark Kramer who defined shared value as "policies and operating practices that enhance the competitiveness of a company while simultaneously advancing the economic and social conditions in the communities in which it operates". A video on the definition of shared value creation by Prof. Michael Potter "Shared Value: A New Global Agenda" is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cf7SFdeSGbY.

[9] Shared Value Initiative web page for more information is available at https://www.sharedvalue.org/about/what-is-shared-value/.

and planning of human settlements. Cities and local governments have been at the forefront of addressing the challenges. VLRs should therefore reflect changes in the global context and integrate COVID-19 recovery strategies into their plans for long-term resilience. This would help cities "recover better" and guide sustainable economic development and shared value creation for all local communities. It would also allow a particular focus on vulnerable groups, leaving no one behind.

A. About these Guidelines

These Guidelines were developed at the request of the ECE Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management at its eighty-first session in October 2020 (ECE/HBP/206[10], para. 36). They were based on discussions at the online webinar "Local Governments: The role of SDG Voluntary Local Reviews" on 11 March 2021. At its eighty-second session, the Committee endorsed these Guidelines (ECE/HBP/208).
These Guidelines aim to support local and regional governments in the ECE region in promoting shared value creation for cities and other human settlements.

The Guidelines support the implementation of the Geneva Declaration of Mayors agreed at the first United Nations Forum of Mayors in October 2020. The Mayors who attended the Forum committed themselves to overcoming the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the Declaration, the Mayors of the ECE region stressed that they wish to use current momentum *"to rebuild the cities into places where all of us can thrive. Quality of life is the guiding principle, nature and biodiversity are an integral part of urban planning, sustainable economies generate wealth for all, solidarity among city-dwellers prevails, and inequalities are actively narrowed"*.

B. Applying evidence-based approach to the development of VLRs

These VLR Guidelines further build on the ECE/UN-Habitat Guidelines on evidence-based policies and decision-making for sustainable housing and urban development (2020). These aim to assist cities in implementing evidence-based approaches at a local level.

Box 1
UNECE/UN-Habitat Guidelines on evidence-based policies and decision-making for sustainable housing and urban development[11]

The ECE/UN-Habitat Guidelines on evidence-based policies and decision-making for sustainable housing and urban development aim to support governments in the ECE region to improve evidence-based policymaking for sustainable urban development and housing. In recognition of the growing importance of data in policymaking, and to improve the review and implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the ECE region, the Guidelines document:

(i) Outlines selected challenges and opportunities for evidence-based policymaking in the ECE region.

(ii) Provides examples of ongoing activities to inform the review and implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the ECE region.

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