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MADRID

UCLG
United Cities
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COMMUNIQUÉ

On Voluntary Local Reviews

DECADE
OF
ACTION

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IMPLEMENTING
THE NEW
URBAN AGENDA

The institutions and partners gathered at the Expert Group Meeting *Towards a New Generation of VLRs*: *Connecting VLRs and VNRs held on February 23 and 24 2021* recognize that:

1.1. **The Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) global community has been growing at an encouraging pace**. When it was published, in July 2020, the first volume of the UCLG-UN-Habitat Guidelines analysed just 37 VLRs available, while the second volume lists 64 full-fledged documents— this is rapid progress, in the span of just a few months, demonstrating that cities and local governments had both the willingness, the capacity, and significant progress worth reporting.

1.2. **VLRs are powerful tool to advance the localization of the SDGs.** The past years of experience have demonstrated how VLRs have been stimulating and driving local action to implement the SDGs. The VLR process strengthens coordination, accountability, transparency, cooperation (horizontal and vertical), participation and awareness of the Goals, significantly contributing to boost local effortsto solve urgent local issues, create partnerships, and advance priorities related to equity and sustainability.

1.3. **VLRs are drivers of innovation.** No standardized review process exists, and implementation is not enforced by any agency. VLRs are an innovation by and for the cities to advance progress on their local priorities. Cities, local governments and local actors are pushing the boundaries of their VLRs to maximize their potential as a basis for behaviour change and new policy applications.

1.4. **VLRs provide first-hand information on how local and regional governments are leading the way in the implementation and innovation of the SDGs**. VLRs tell the stories of how local institutions have re-designed themselves and aligned their policymaking to the vision and directions of the 2030 Agenda. They describe how residents and territories have mobilized for policy initiatives, community-building, and advocacy that aims to bring the Goals to every doorstep, every institution every company. VLRs also inform a community of practice to learn from the examples featured.The VLRs mine and work with data that is only available at the local level, this generating a wealth of information and nuanced analysis that can help national governments and the international community make their 2030 commitments a reality.

1.5. **Local reviews are changing the local-national dynamic through VNR-VLR linkages**. The VLR movement and the proactiveness of the frontrunner cities have increased the demand for institutional intermediation between the local and national level. Several countries have established inter-institutional and cross-level mechanisms (committees and high-level commissions, as well as more informal and bottom-up venues) that work as new high-legitimacy spaces for different levels of government to work together, exchange data, practices, and techniques on the way to the implementation of the SDGs.

1.6. **The emergence of VLRs and the information they provide is changing the approach to the national review**. National governments are increasingly aware of the relevance of VLRs and
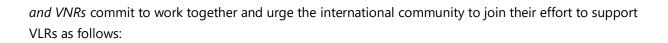
committing to utilize this information and analysis. Many governments mention or include these data and insights in their national reviews. This articulation can happen in different ways, and with different degrees of integration: VLRs could be attached to VNRs, or mentioned in focus boxes, or in some cases the information from VLRs could directly feed into the development of the VNR itself. Significant cooperation is happening at the level of SDG indicators, with national statistical offices collaborating directly with cities to incorporate and disaggregate locally-derived data.

1.7. **Local reviews have changed the way we think of SDG localization.** While VLRs help local governments share their experiences and practices with the outside world, they also have an important internal impact. Through VLRs, local and regional governments can engage with their communities in a much more transparent and accountable way, while advancing the mainstreaming of the SDGs in their functions and service delivery to meet resident's needs and leave no one behind. The VLR process has also demanded more cross-departmental collaboration and "delivering as one" at the local level.

1.8. **There is deep knowledge in the numbers.** VLRs show the progresses made by local governments and local actors in the generation and treatment of data for understanding their SDGs advancements, and innovating ways to use that data to inform action. VLRs have and pushed for indicator adaptation and the sourcing of relevant, locally owned data on all dimensions of SDG localization, with special focus on how data can be disaggregated and made actionable at the local level. Indeed, while city averages mask inequities, the VLRs have the potential to bring out the intra city/urban disparities through better disaggregation of data and analysis.

1.9. **VLRs offer new means of participation.** VLRs have helped with mobilization and enhanced political engagement of residents in governance processes - many cities experimented with community workshops and platforms, local polls, local council certifications, and many other ways to increase the co-ownership of both the SDG agenda and the local review effort. VLRs also allows local governments to add issues or emphasis on vulnerable population groups, bringing attention to and mainstreaming of the SDGs in a hyperlocal shared ecosystem of action.

1.10. **VLRs are strengthening the link between SDGs and COVID-19 recovery.** Achieving the SDGs and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic is not either a choice – they are two sides of the same coin. Local governments' current priority is to provide a solid response to the socio-economic challenges that COVID-19 crisis is generating. VLRs have been used as a tool to interlock the advances on localizing the SDGs and the effort to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, providing solid evidence to inform recovery plans – at all levels.

However, much work still needs to be done to give local and regional governments and local stakeholders the resources they need and acknowledge the role they play in the SDG review process. The institutions and partners gathered at the Expert Group Meeting *Towards a New Generation of VLRs*: *Connecting VLRs*

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and VNRs commit to work together and urge the international community to join their effort to support VLRs as follows:

2.1. **More bridges, more dialogue.** VLRs are thriving in several cities, but more can be done to uplift best practices and build a shared knowledge platform. It is important that these examples are widely shared and the global community is invested in building bridges horizontally, so that more local and regional governments can learn from each other and join the VLR movement, while allowing room for local innovation. This should be accompanied by strengthen multilevel governance, so that more dialogue between the grassroots communities, local governments and national governments can establish a virtuous decision-making cycle.

2.2. **A truly enabling and constructive reporting ecosystem** is one based on multilevel and multisector partnerships in which all sources — local and national — come together, with SDG implementation as the common goal of this process. We need to clearly identify how VLRs and VNRs can add value to one another, creating co-ownership by local authorities and stakeholders of national reporting, and vice versa.

2.3. **Support to data and indicators.** Adapted indicators and common statistical resources are essential so that cross-level obstacles are overcome, and data is used to tailor sustainable policies to the needs, potential, and commitment of local communities. The use of non-conventional and qualitative sources of data is also key and should be strengthened. The Global Urban Monitoring Framework will be the cornerstone of this process and will allow for a common baseline for cities as well as a benchmark across cities.

2.4. **Local-national connections.** Better institutional cooperation between all levels of government, including shared data and information and a robust enabling environment, are key to lasting progress on the Goals. The imperative is to create an ecosystem in which decision-making, strategic planning, the sustainable development of our communities and territories is a fully co-owned, multi-level, and multi-stakeholder process.