VOLUNTARY LOCAL REVIEW

A BRIDGE BETWEEN GLOBAL GOALS AND LOCAL REALITY

EXPERIENCES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF THE VOLUNTARY LOCAL REVIEW PROCESS IN THE BALTIC SEA REIGON AND THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES

MAY 2022

VOLUNTARY LOCAL REVIEW

- a bridge between Global Goals and Local Reality

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Foreword

During the covid-19 pandemic it was called for actions to build back better once our societies returned to a post-covid reality. The time has arrived where we must put those words into practice and ask ourselves: what does building back better mean and what steps can be taken to ensure a more sustainable future?

For us, this means taking the urgency of creating resilient, sustainable and inclusive cities and societies seriously. A more sustainable future is only possible if our cities and municipalities lead the way and are recognized for the important work they are doing to create improved living conditions for their citizens.

The sub-national level, and its rural and urban areas, are the very space where sustainability is put into practice and the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are turned into action. It is widely known, but nevertheless important to remind oneself, that the fast-growing cities of our planet are home to more than half of the world's population and responsible for 70 percent of the energy consumption and the GDP generated, globally. To realize the implementation of the SDGs cities, municipalities and regions worldwide therefore need visionary and brave leadership

To build capacity among sub-national authorities on how to ensure this visionary and brave approach to build back better, this report focuses on the process of reviewing sustainability work on sub-national levels to identify challenges and achievements and support more integrated and holistic approaches to SDG implementation.

This process is called Voluntary Local Review (VLR), and is a city-led process that was first initiated by New York in 2018 to ensure that sub-national perspectives had an opportunity to be heard in the United Nations and influence the global policy dialogue on sustainable development. The VLR process provides tools to track and compare progress: it helps identifying challenges, opportunities and needs going forward, and offers a practical way for taking part in the macroregional and European movement towards sustainable development. VLRs are instruments of political coherence, with the potential to stimulate participatory planning, while also fostering partnerships and investment towards the achievement of the SDGs.

Since 2018, more than 80 Local and Regional Governments (LRGs) have joined the VLR movement. While the process holds no official status in the UN, the process of undertaking reviews is providing multiple benefits to the entities engaging in them and to SDG implementation at large. There is a growing interest among cities worldwide to conduct VLRs, but there is still a general lack of knowledge about the process, its methods and potential benefits.

However, many cities and municipalities have made great advancements in the process of implementing the SDGs. In this report, good examples from the Baltic Sea and Eastern Partnership regions are highlighted to inspire and support other cities that are about to conduct their first VLR.

This report sets out to take stock of, and share, existing experiences of conducting VLRs in the Baltic Sea Region and in the Eastern Partnership countries. We believe that the VLR is a powerful catalyst to build back better as well as ensure sustainable and resilient cities and communities.

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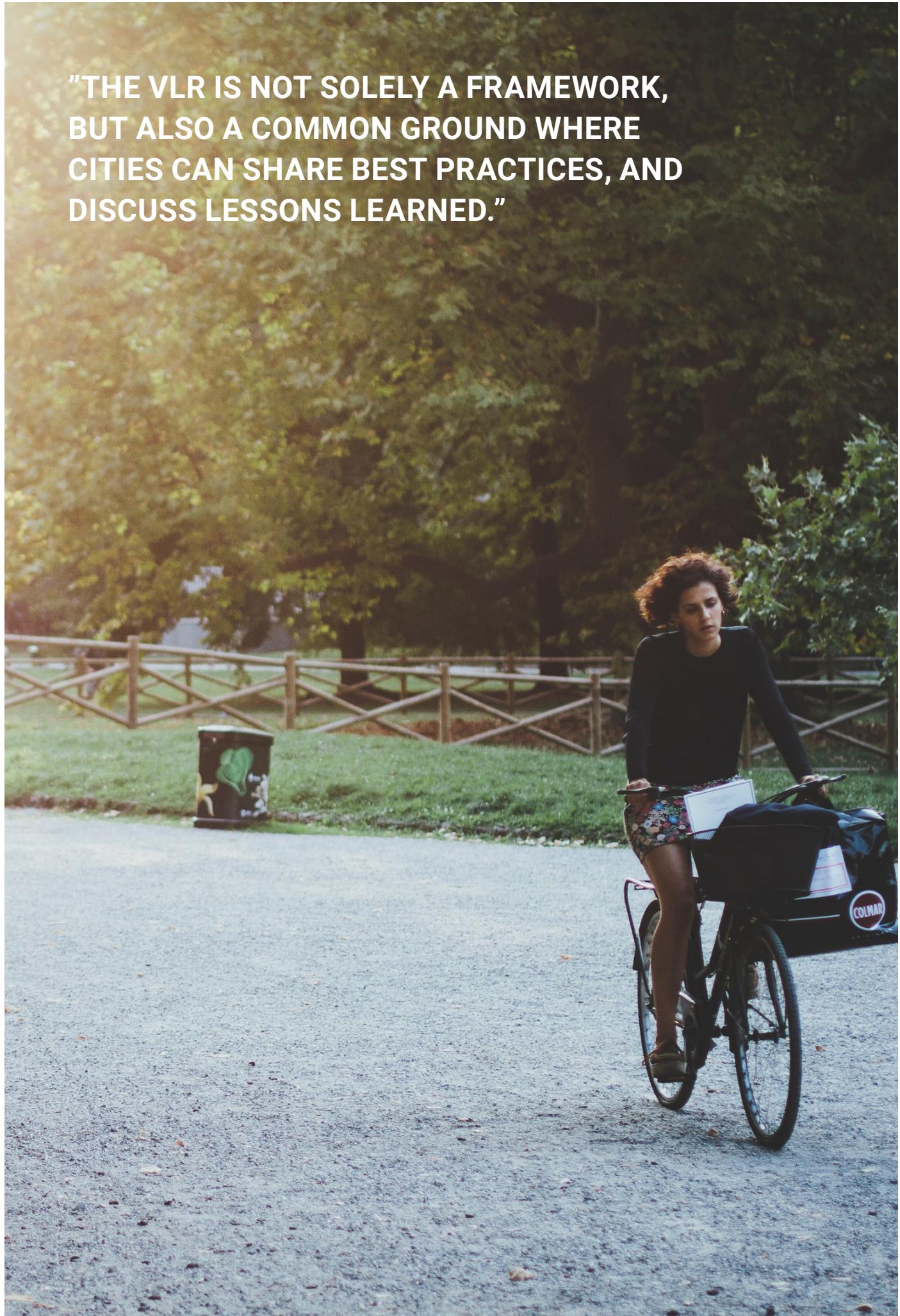
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"THE VLR IS NOT SOLELY A FRAMEWORK, BUT ALSO A COMMON GROUND WHERE CITIES CAN SHARE BEST PRACTICES, AND DISCUSS LESSONS LEARNED."

Introduction

A local agenda

Despite the global scope of the 2030 Agenda, the implementation of the sustainability goals occurs predominantly at the local level. This blurs the line between local and global sustainable development – and highlights the fact that sustainable development cannot be achieved within any single city or country. As more and more Local and Regional Governments (LRGs) worldwide take steps to align their strategic development with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it has been made clear that the translation of global goals into local priorities requires an integrated approach to sustainable development where environments for cross-sectoral and cross-border cooperation are fostered. As such, a successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda on the local level requires an inclusion of all societal stakeholders – citizens, civil society, local businesses, academia as well as local, regional and national authorities – in the process.

Contrary to the responsibility of nations to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda – as defined in the Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development[1], a resolution adopted unanimously by the UN General Assembly in 2015 – LRGs have no defined role nor clear mandates to guide their SDG work. While the number of LRGs that actively work with the 2030 Agenda is increasing, and so too the body of literature, guides and tools, LRGs still face many challenges when translating the SDGs into local priorities. In this report, we move beyond merely explaining experiences of working with the SDGs on the local and regional level[2] and focus on the *Voluntary Local Review* process and its potential as a tool to advance the translation of SDGs into local priorities.

WHAT IS A VLR?

The Voluntary Local Review (VLR) is an evaluation of the SDG implementation in a specific local context in which local authorities identify context specific priorities. It started as an initiative from cities that wished to complement the Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) and report on their progress on the 2030 Agenda. In 2018, New York and three Japanese municipalities were among the first to conduct a VLR.

As opposed to the VNR (where the UN Member States are expected to submit VNRs to the UN High-Level Political Forum), the VLR process has no formal connection to the UN system of reporting. Hence, there are no strict mandates, guidelines or process for how to conduct and report the VLR.

Today, more than 80 cities and regional authorities have published VLRs.

Increasing interest

Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) have been gaining interest among frontrunner LRGs worldwide and have been identified as a valuable vehicle to advance local action for sustainability. A VLR can assist local authorities in benchmarking their sustainability work and, by doing so, help them to identify strengths, weaknesses and focus areas in the transition process towards more sustainable societies. A VLR is therefore a powerful tool to map current – and plan future – sustainability work at the local level.

This report aims to take stock of existing experiences of conducting a VLR in the Baltic Sea Region (BSR) and in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries and, in so doing, provide an overview of challenges and opportunities associated with the process and provide inspiration to LRGs and other sub-national stakeholder who are interested in using the VLR as a tool to advance their SDG work.

The region investigated in this report is diverse in terms of socio economic and political institutional contexts, and the cities within it are at different stages in the sustainable development process. While there are some municipalities that have acted as frontrunners and conducted VLRs, most LRGs in the region have not. However, a growing interest in the VLR process is characteristic for the whole region and many LRGs have expressed an interest in pursuing the process in order to advance their SDG work.

The mapping is part of the project The Sustainability Lab[3] which has received seed funding from the Swedish Institute. The outcome of this report will build the foundation of a project proposal for the Sustainability Lab. The lab will serve as a shared knowledge transfer platform between BSR and EaP stakeholders that will rely on inter-regional peer-to-peer learning as means to bolster local and sub-national actors to use VLRs as a framework to review and improve their strategic planning as well as sustainability and climate work.

This mapping has grown out from two Swedish Institute funded sustainability leadership programmes, implemented by Global Utmaning (Baltic 2030 Leadership Programme and EaP Sustainability Leadership Programme[4]) wherein the lack of knowledge and know-how about VLRs have been documented.

BALTIC SEA REGION:

The Baltic Sea Region (BSR) covers the basin of the Baltic Sea including the hinterland. It involves eight EU member states: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden. The EU strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) was the first macro regional strategy in Europe. It is both the largest as well as the most diverse macro regional strategy in the EU.

The overall goal of the strategy is to strengthen territorial cohesion and cooperation to work for a sustainable and innovative Baltic Sea Region. It is divided into three objectives which reflect the key challenges of the region; saving the sea, connecting the region and increasing prosperity.

This report contains details on experiences and opportunities of implementing a VLR process based on interviews with local and regional authorities in the regions conducted during the spring of 2022. There are several guides and handbooks on how to conduct a VLR. These guides play a crucial role in the city's ability to conduct a VLR. However, we believe that these guidelines need to be complemented with more practical peer-to-peer learning, best practices and lessons learned from frontrunner cities to inspire and support other cities that are about to conduct their first VLR.

EASTERN PARTNERSHIP:

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) was initiated by Sweden and Poland. Since its launch in 2009, the EaP has served to strengthen the strategic relationship between Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine and the EU and its Member States. In the EaP summit in Brussels in 2017, the '20 deliverables for 2020' with its four key areas (stronger economy, stronger governance, stronger connectivity and stronger society) and three cross-cutting deliverables (engagement with civil society, gender equality and non-discrimination, strategic communication and independent media) were endorsed by the EU Member States. It was also stressed that the EaP also supports delivery on key global policy goals set by the United Nations 2030 Agenda Sustainable Development Goals.

The Joint Communication "Eastern Partnership Policy beyond 2020: Reinforcing Resilience – an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all" (March 2020), Council Conclusions (May 2020) and the EU Joint Staff Working Document "Recovery, resilience and reform: post 2020 Eastern Partnership priorities" (July 2021) set out a new vision for the future of the EaP and indicate five related long-term policy objectives: economy and connectivity; good governance and the rule of law; environmental and climate resilience; support to digital transformation; fair and inclusive societies.

Why Voluntary Local Review?

The VLR process is an important monitoring element for target setting and monitoring process. However, the VLR has proven to be more than merely a reporting tool – it increases transparency between the city administration and its citizens which contributes to a rebuilding of the social contract. By increasing awareness, transparency and institutional trust, local authorities are more likely to bring about viable political change.

Conducting a VLR provides opportunities for a city to evaluate its strategic objectives and identify in what way(s) the city is already working with the SDGs. Some cities have experienced confusion and pressure in their local work with the SDGs because they do not know where to begin.

Rather than to develop new frameworks and implementation mechanisms to address the SDGs, the first step when implementing the SDGs on the local level is to understand how existing sustainability work and challenges are linked to the SDGs – to translate the SDGs into local contextual priorities and goals.

Reviewing the work done at the local level and connecting this to the SDG framework also helps a city to identify the interlinkages between the different sectors, areas that are in need of more support and stakeholders that should be involved in the co-creation process. As such, a VLR supports cities and regions to adopt innovative integrated urban strategies that correspond to the local challenges and priorities, and help decision makers to focus on the areas in most need of effort. The VLR, thus, works as a roadmap for new strategies and policies.

Although VLR has no official status, the process of conducting these sub-national reviews provides several benefits to the entities participating in them and the SDG implementation in general. Evaluating the SDG implementation using VLR creates both a benchmark from which to track future progress, and since it is a shared framework and language it also simplifies learning exchanges between LRG both within and between countries. By conducting VLRs and presenting these in reports, best practices on how to contribute to the localization of the SDGs can be captured and shared to cities globally. The VLR can also contribute to strengthening collaborations as well as complementing and contributing to the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs).

As will be evident in the good examples presented in this report, the process of conducting a VLR is not uniform nor universal. The lack of defined methods or guidelines have made the VLR process more organic and contextual, wherein LRGs have developed their own methodologies, monitoring systems and thematic focuses. Some cities and municipalities have taken ambitious steps to evaluate their work on all SDGs, while others have chosen to evaluate only a few, or even chosen not to reference single SDGs but rather broad thematics. In short, in this report we consider VLR the process of evaluating the implementation of the SDGs on sub-national levels, measuring progress and identifying challenges in that process.

In current debates, the organic nature of the VLR is highlighted as a strength of the process, as it makes it inclusive to the diverse nature of LRGs where cities and municipalities, independent of pre-conditions such as resources and skills, can design a VLR process that works for them.

However, this lack of defined concepts and methods also have the opposite effect of creating confusion and making the process less approachable to LRGs seeking guides and support. In this report, we try to balance between those positions, we do not seek to provide any definitions or universal methods, instead we believe in the power of peer-to-peer learning by which we provide good examples and lessons learned from cities and municipalities who have conducted VLRs in order to support and inspire others.

Method

This report is the result of a mapping of challenges and opportunities of conducting VLRs in the BSR and EaP countries. The mapping was conducted in the spring of 2022.

The purpose of the mapping is to identify local needs as well as *common denominators* of the cities to find *common ways forward*. This report is divided into four parts: experiences from the BSR and EaP; opportunities with the VLR; presentation of existing guidelines; and priorities moving forward. We hope that this report will spread awareness about the VLR process and inspire more cities to use this process to support their sustainability work.

Since 2017, the independent think tank Global Utmaning has worked on projects that aims to enhance the localization of the SDGs in the BSR as well as in the EaP. These years have provided us with networks within the regions in which we have disseminated surveys to investigate the experiences of localizing the SDGs as well as conducting VLRs.

The mapping includes three surveys and 16 in-depth interviews with the purpose to identify challenges, opportunities and ways forward to accelerate the localization of SDGs as well as inspire and support LRGs to advance the implementation of VLRs. The experiences identified and summarized in the report are based on two surveys with 63 respondents and 17 respondents respectively. These surveys were disseminated as a part of our leadership programme for local actors in countries within the Eastern Partnership in 2020-2021. A third survey was conducted during the spring of 2022 which aimed to identify priorities needed to support LRGs in conducting VLRs. This survey was disseminated in the two regions with a total of 32 respondents.

During the spring of 2022, Global Utmaning conducted 16 in-depth interviews with local, regional and national actors in the Baltic Sea Region and the Eastern Partnership countries. Among the interviewees, there are representatives from cities and municipalities that have conducted, or are interested in conducting, a VLR. In order to get a holistic perspective on experiences and opportunities of the VLR process, Global Utmaning also conducted interviews with stakeholders at national and international level. These frontrunners are presented as good examples in the report which we hope will inspire and motivate more cities to conduct their first VLR.

The selection of interviewees were based on UN-Habitat's list of cities that have conducted a VLR as well as networks established during Global Utmaning's previous leadership programmes. Many of the interviewees have also introduced us to relevant local and regional actors from their own networks, which have been included in our report through interviews or as respondents in the survey.

Structure of report

The report is divided into four parts: Experiences, Opportunities, VLR Guides, and lastly Conclusion. In the first part, experiences from cities and municipalities in the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Partnership countries regarding conducting a Voluntary Local Review is illuminated. This part highlights challenges that these authorities have experienced when trying to monitor their progress of the SDGs. Part two focuses on what opportunities a VLR presents to a city's or municipality's sustainability work. In the third part, short descriptions on guides and handbooks about how to conduct a VLR are presented. This can offer support and encourage cities to accelerate their localization of the SDGs and begin the process of conducting their first VLR. Finally, focus is directed to the priorities moving forward regarding what kind of support the local and regional actors in the BSR and EaP countries are in need of in order to advance the VLR process.

Parallel to the above structure, the local, regional and national authorities that have been interviewed for this report are presented as good examples of how to successfully conduct a Voluntary Local Review and work with the SDGs at the local level. The purpose of this is to give inspiration and ideas of how to conduct a VLR as well as how to overcome common challenges in the localization of SDGs.

DO IT LIKE

TURKU
FINLAND

VOLUNTARY LOCAL REVIEW

The City of Turku conducted its first VLR in 2020. For the review, Turku chose to incorporate all 17 SDGs and the targets that were relevant for the local level. However, they focused on four goals: clean water and sanitation; reduced inequality; climate action; and partnerships for the goals. The goals were chosen based on the premise that Turku has great knowledge about and experience working with such issues as well as strong indicators for measuring them.

In the VLR, Turku's strategy document, Turku 2029 City Strategy, as well as city projects and activities that implemented the strategy are analyzed. The report also analyzed a few central activities that had been implemented in each of the five city departments and strategic units. The VLR was constructed together with officials and experts from different departments within the city organization: they were invited to participate in workshops and interviews, as well as answer survey questions on how they are working with the SDGs.

Turku identified the VLR as an instrument to communicate the city's sustainability work with the citizens. They also saw the review as a way to inspire Finnish cities as well as cities outside the country on how to work systematically with the SDGs, by presenting good examples from their own experiences.

The City of Turku is in the process of developing their second VLR, which will be submitted in the summer of 2022.

SIX CITY STRATEGY

The need for collaboration between cities in issues concerning sustainable development has made the City of Turku join national platforms for cooperation - one of them being the Six City Strategy. The network consists of the six largest cities in Finland: in addition to Turku, the members are Helsinki, Espoo, Tampere, Vantaa and Oulu. The Six City Strategy is a joint strategy for the cities, with the purpose of working together to overcome the challenges with sustainable development in urban settings. The cities cooperate on a strategic as well as operational level.

Within the network, activities and projects are organized with the common goal of accelerating the achievement of the SDGs. The six cities share the objective of being carbon neutral. One of the many projects that has been organized to achieve this is the establishment of a national network for circular economy hubs.

Within the network, the cities have had the opportunity to share experiences on working with the SDGs and discuss how cities could and should work to achieve the goals. The network proved to be an important forum for the City of Turku, because it offered a way to discuss mutual goals and challenges with the 2030 Agenda framework.
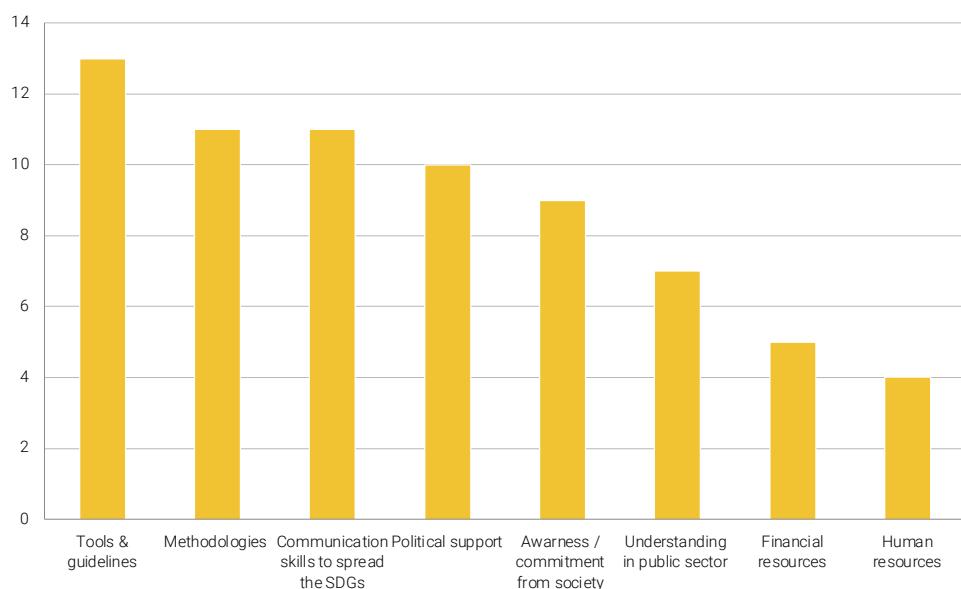
"A CHALLENGE FOR CITIES IS THAT DEPARTMENTS WORK IN SILOS. HOWEVER, THE 2030 AGENDA HAS AN INTERCONNECTING FUNCTION AND THE VLR CAN SERVE AS A TOOL FOR MUTUAL DIALOGUE AND PRIORITIES BETWEEN THOSE SILOS."

Experiences

In this part of the report, experiences from cities and regions regarding their Voluntary Local Review (VLR) process is presented. The chapter is categorized into three themes: Guidance, Language, and Setting up a monitoring system and indicators.
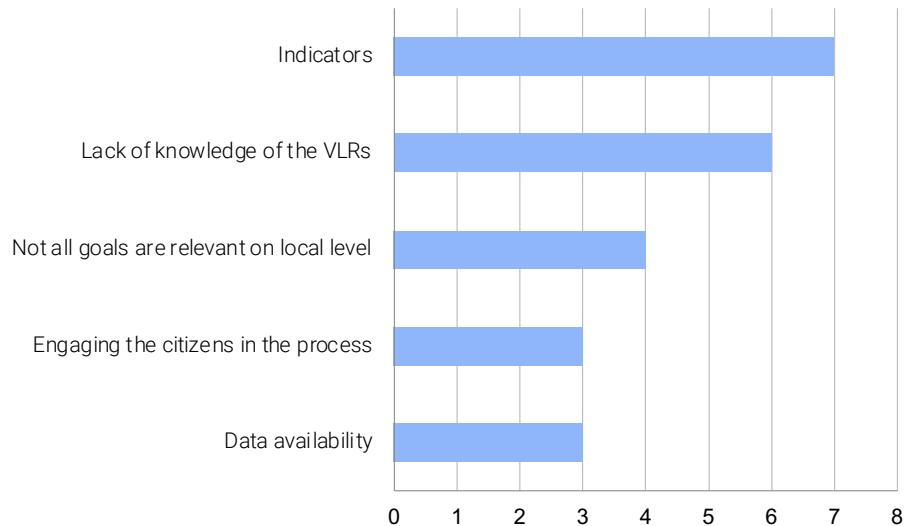
Despite the fact that the 2030 Agenda begins from the national level, a transformation towards sustainable societies will not take place without the commitment from local and regional authorities. However, sub-national actors find difficulties in translating the global goals to the local level. In the Baltic Sea Region (BSR) and Easter Partnership (EaP) countries, this can partly be related to the fact that citizens and society at large might not be as aware of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as the authorities initially expect. In some cities, there has been an increase of the general knowledge regarding the 2030 Agenda, but a low level of knowledge when it comes to specific targets and indicators. A growing interest and knowledge about sustainability has been identified, but the region still faces challenges in spreading awareness about the 2030 Agenda, and its related targets, to society at large.

CHALLENGES OF LOCALIZING THE SDGs

This graph is based on data from surveys conducted during Global Utmaning's leadership programme for stakeholders in Estern Partnership countries. The surveys were disseminated in 2020 - 2021. The respondents were asked to identify what was missing in their local context in the localization of the SDGs.

CHALLENGES OF CONDUCTING A VOLUNTARY LOCAL REVIEW

Based on interviews with cities and municipalities in the BSR and EaP during the spring of 2022.

Guidance

The challenges faced by cities and municipalities in their work to localize the SDGs are often related to the gap between global and national policies, and the local reality. This can be related to local authorities sensing a lack of support from the national government or a confusion regarding who bears the main responsibility when it comes to the sustainability work. Therefore, it is particularly important to create local ownership and responsibility and to connect sustainability work of the cities and regions with national policies that contribute to the transformation towards sustainable societies. Highlighting different cities that have worked successfully with the 2030 Agenda and VLRs is thus important to spread best practices on how to work with global goals on the local level. This can contribute to an awareness that implementing the global goals on the local level is both possible and effective. It is also a way to influence the national level by bringing attention to conditions of working sub-nationally with the SDGs. Spreading initiatives for sustainable development from the local level puts pressure on the national authorities to act.

LRGs have expressed the need for national support in order to successfully conduct a VLR. Some national governments have acknowledged this by, for example, offering guidelines and creating national platforms for peer-to-peer learning. When the City of Uppsala in Sweden was given the task to conduct a VLR, there was confusion within the organization regarding what such a review should entail and how it could be structured. In order to resond to this, the Government Offices offered ideas on how cities and municipalities could approach the VLR process. They also arranged for joint meetings between Swedish cities and municipalities that were in the process of conducting a VLR. In a similar way, the government in Finland facilitated meetings between the Finnish cities that were to submit a VLR. This network for exchange is valuable in the Finnish cities' sustainability work and monitoring.

DO IT LIKE

TAMPERE

FINLAND

VOLUNTARY LOCAL REVIEW

The City of Tampere will submit their first VLR in the summer of 2022. While in the process of conducting it, they have had close cooperation with the six largest cities in Finland, including the four that have published a VLR.

Tampere's first VLR is aimed for the internal organization: the purpose is to make the SDGs more accessible to the city employees and identify what the most important perspectives are for the City of Tampere. They are analyzing the city's main steering documents and the city strategy, and connect them to the SDGs by using the same key indicators as in the strategy. The purpose of the VLR is to serve as a guidebook for further discussion on the 2030 Agenda framework and the SDGs locally and internally.

AWARENESS OF SUSTAINABILITY ISSUES

Tampere's development programme for 2017-2021, Smart Tampere, highlighted and boosted smart and sustainable urban development in Tampere. The programme consisted of three parts: Digitalization programme, Ecosystem programme and Sustainable Tampere Programme. The Sustainable Tampere Programme focused on the city's goal to be carbon-neutral by 2030. Within the programme, Tampere established initiatives and projects that in different ways approached sustainable development in a more accessible way and incorporated all of the city.

One of these initiatives was the Climate Partnership, which had the purpose of involving companies, associations and communities in achieving carbon-neutrality. The societal stakeholders that took part in the initiative were tasked to identify their key emissions and thereafter develop a plan for how to reduce them. The partnership offered both visibility for the stakeholders' climate work, as well as guidance in their continued work.

The Sustainable Tampere Programme also brought sustainability closer to the citizens and raised awareness of climate issues, by - among other things - releasing Tampere's own version of the mobile game My2050. The My2050 game approaches climate change in an informative yet entertaining way. It takes the player on an adventure within Tampere's city walls: the player explores the city and can collect coins from solving tasks. The game is similar to geocaching and escape rooms, and presents facts of the current climate crisis and possible future scenarios. Beside Tampere, the mobile game has been released in Espoo, Helsinki, Vantaa and Turku.

In the new city strategy, City of Action, Tampere has reinforced its commitment to work towards a sustainable future by incorporating the SDGs. Through the strategy, the 2030 Agenda framework has been brought into light and will be guiding the continued work with sustainability issues in the city.

When conducting a VLR, it is important to make the goals relevant and applicable to the local level by translating the global goals so that these match the local priorities. For example, the City of Lviv in Ukraine, has approached the goals as different thematic areas. In the process of conducting its first VLR, Lviv could review their progress connected to these thematic areas. This shifts focus from specific and detailed targets, and makes it possible to customize the VLR so that it is applicable to the context of the city. Seeing the 2030 Agenda as a checklist for areas that need to be included in a city's sustainability work as well as a flexible framework, is a way to overcome the challenges of making sense of the relevance of the SDGs to the local level. The VLR does not follow any strict guides or processes which makes it easy to adjust to the local priorities.

Lately, the EU, the UN, and other international organizations have shown an increased interest in the VLR process and have begun to systemize its implementation by developing toolkits and methods to support VLR processes. To this date, several guiding documents with reference to the VLR process have been produced. These guides provide detailed explanations and step-by-step instructions on what to do when conducting a VLR – but these guidelines do not explain how to do it. These guidelines are very important in terms of inspiration, but these alone are not enough to bolster the interest and capacity among local authorities to use VLRs. Local contexts are complex and there is no "one size fits all" method that could be applied. For the VLR to be valuable in the long-term, it is essential that the review is adapted to the local context and is connected to the local priority setting and monitoring system.

As the existing handbooks and guidelines are not fully in unison, LRGs may find difficulties in deciding what guide to follow. A shared approach to the development of VLR handbooks would make it easier for interested parties to analyze and learn from multiple cities' and regions' experiences. The VLRs conducted by LRGs may differ in structure compared to their counterparts. However, these guides can be used as checklists for a thorough, critical and honest analysis of policies and actions, and thus play a primary role in the implementation of VLRs cities globally. The role of the handbooks' should be understood as inspirational frameworks for cities conducting a VLR. It is positive in the sense that cities maintain ownership over the VLR and allows space for a new forum for civic engagement and initiative.

LRGs reveal that the major challenge beginning the VLR process is the lack of expertise, experience and good practices of using the SDG framework in a way that helps optimize local planning and development. Therefore, they stress the importance of knowledge exchange with peers in the localization of SDGs, and the process of conducting a VLR. Usually, this exchange begins with a phone call where one local authority calls another authority that has come far in the process to ask for help. Exchanging lessons learned and best practices helps authorities to be creative in finding solutions to different challenges.

Language

Cities and municipalities in the region express difficulties in how to raise awareness about sustainable development within the city administration and to engage the citizens and different stakeholders to the VLR process. This can partly be explained by challenges related to the level of proficiency in English. In some national contexts, the 2030 Agenda is translated to the native language while in other national contexts, it is not.

FINLAND: NATIONAL SUPPORT FOR LOCAL ACTORS

As of now, four cities in Finland have produced at least one Voluntary Local Review: the City of Espoo, the City of Helsinki, the City of Turku and the City of Vantaa. The City of Tampere will submit its first VLR in the summer of 2022. While in the process of conducting the VLR, the cities have received support from the National Government of Finland. The government has organized meetings with the local administrations on follow-up and monitoring of the implementation of the SDGs. The cities were also invited to joint meetings, in order for them to discuss experiences and get inspired and support each other in the process. During these meetings, the government shared their own experiences of preparing a Voluntary National Review (VNR) with the aim of inspiring the cities when it comes to methods and tools for monitoring the SDGs. The Government of Finland has formulated a national indicator set, which proved to be very useful for some of the cities in their VLR processes.

Beyond supporting cities' VLR process, the National Government of Finland has established structures that serve to connect the national level with the local level when it comes to sustainability work in general. One of those initiatives is the Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development. The purpose of the Commission is to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and facilitate dialogue between different societal stakeholders. Finnish cities and municipalities are represented in the Commission.

The role of municipalities and cities in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda has also been acknowledged through different cooperations between the national and the local level. One of them being the Ministry of the Environment's project the Sustainable City Programme, which runs from 2019 until 2023. The programme promotes cities and municipalities in their quest to sustainable development through practical urban development and strategic management.

City authorities find it challenging to translate the sometimes complex language in the 2030 Agenda and make it relevant to the local level. To overcome these barriers, a UN glossary could be useful when beginning the VLR process. Because of the difficulties in understanding the UN language, the City of Uppsala decided early on in their VLR process, to translate the terms and acronyms that were used in guides. This was identified as an important step in order for them to understand what it meant for them in a Swedish, municipal context.

In addition, some city authorities have experienced how the English language complicates the possibility to include all of society in the localization of the SDGs and hence, the VLR process. When the City of Mannheim invited citizens to participate in workshops to discuss the content of their VLR with local, national and international stakeholders, they noticed how using English as the working language limited the citizens ability to speak freely on issues that were important to them. Mannheim's first VLR was exclusively in English, but in order to make it accessible to a wider audience, they have decided to publish their second VLR in German as well.

To include local stakeholders – i.e. local businesses, civil society, the academia, citizens – early on in the VLR process, is a way to create a sense of ownership and inclusion which can bridge the gap between citizens and professionals. To avoid language barriers, it is thus important not only to communicate the goals to the citizens, but rather communicate the content of the goals. Developing an inclusive language in the VLR process to make it accessible to all and make sure that no one is left behind is crucial. For example, avoiding acronyms is one simple measure to make the agenda accessible to a wider audience. As a way to bring the VLR closer to the people, the City of Mannheim is in the process of translating the report into an easier language. In addition, several cities and municipalities are investigating the possibilities to make the reports available to citizens that have hearing or visual disabilities.

Naturally, the sometimes complex language in the 2030 Agenda can generate difficulties for LRGs to translate the SDGs so that it is understandable also for children. As the overarching principle of the 2030 Agenda is to leave no one behind, authorities must find ways to include citizens of all ages in the VLR process. Making sense of the SDGs does not necessarily need to be done in words, but can be done visually too. For example, to include children in these processes, the Latvian Association of Local and Regional Governments, arranged seminars for children where they used cartoons, puzzles, painting, singing, short sketches as well as music and arts videos as tools to make the SDGs accessible to kids. Through integrating the SDGs in creative activities and art, the Latvian government could conduct a VNR in a more inclusive manner.
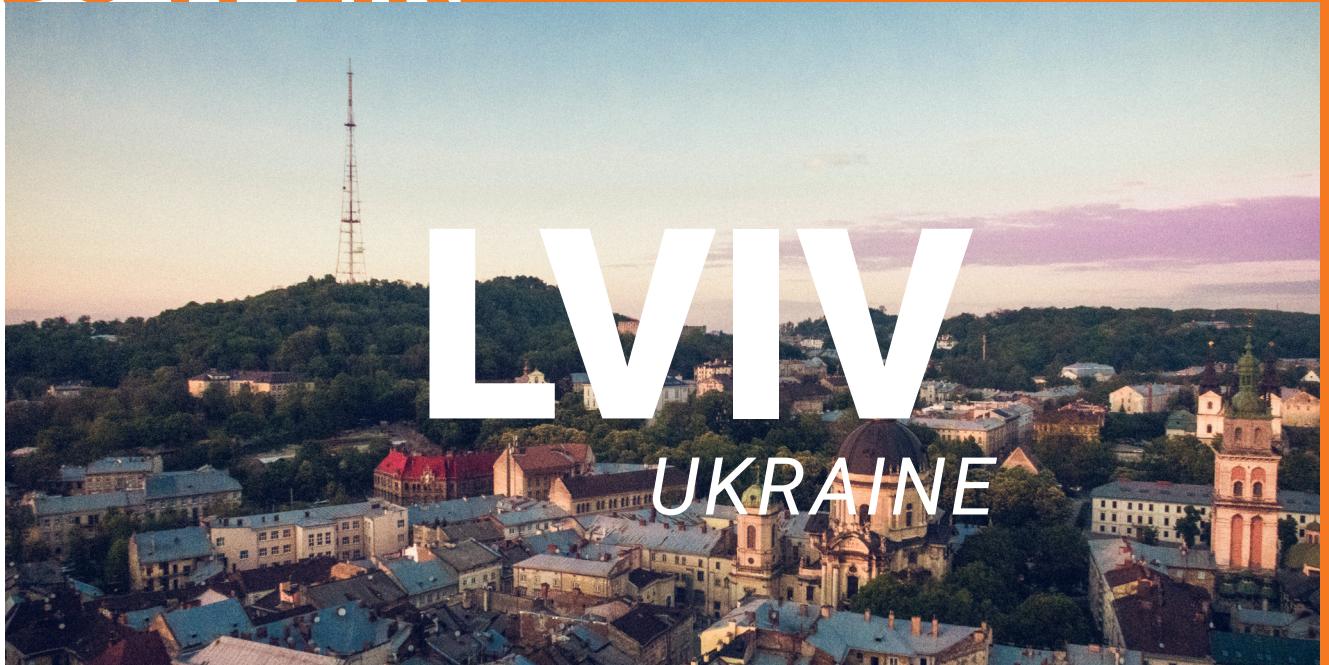
In order to be able to engage all stakeholders in the society in the VLR process, it is necessary to use a language that is easy to understand and available to a broader audience. The 2030 Agenda does not need to be followed so strictly, but it is more useful to think about the goals as topics. Translating the goals so that it suits the local priorities makes it easier to communicate the goals to the society at large. For example, providing the different departments within the city council with information about the topics surrounding the goals is a way to explain how the goals are connected to their work, and thus helpful to start being creative around the goals.

Setting up a monitoring system and indicators

Among the interviewees, there is a consensus that targets and indicators are crucial in the localization and assessing the progress on achieving the SDGs. Indicators should be adjustable and suitable for a variety of local contexts as well as be in line with strategic priorities and actions of the respective city or municipality. The Municipality of Gladsaxe in Denmark approached the complex task of identifying indicators by getting inspiration from experts.

They incorporated a book about sustainable development, in which Danish experts, researchers and politicians have written articles about sustainability from different perspectives. The book described how the global goals could be translated to the Danish national context – and by doing that, the Municipality of Gladsaxe got equipped with ideas on how the goals could be interpreted in their local context.

DO IT LIKE

LVIV
UKRAINE

VOLUNTARY LOCAL REVIEW

The City of Lviv started the process of conducting its first Voluntary Local Review in 2021, and planned to submit it in March 2022. However, due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this process has been delayed. Despite the war, the process of finalizing its first VLR continues.

The City of Lviv identified that a first challenge in the process of conducting a VLR was how to raise awareness about sustainable development within the city administration. Based on discussions with other cities, where methods and ideas were exchanged for how to bring the SDGs closer to the city administration, the City of Lviv developed a City Booklet to respond to this challenge.

In a second step, the City of Lviv developed a roadmap for how to conduct the VLR. To bring the SDGs closer to the city administration, they decided to translate the SDGs and categorize them into different topics to make them relevant to the local context. Thereafter, the City of Lviv conducted interviews with city officials to investigate how the different departments' work responded to the SDGs. The City of Lviv collected information on the departments' strategies, goals and principles. These were then compiled and presented in a table where the strategies were connected to different SDGs to evaluate which goals they deliver on as well as where they need to improve.

THE CITY BOOKLET

The lack of knowledge about the SDGs in general and the VLR in particular within city departments made the City of Lviv develop a booklet to bring the 2030 Agenda closer to the city administration. The booklet explains all the 17 SDGs and the 169 targets, and presents examples of how localized goals have been incorporated into VLRs as well as good practices from VLR processes.

The City Booklet was spread to all city departments. It was followed up with interviews with 30 city officials, where they were asked about each SDG and what their department is doing in terms of achieving that specific goal. This proved to be a good way to acknowledge in what ways the different departments were already contributing to the achievement of the SDGs. It also acted as an educational tool for the officials, because they were equipped with more knowledge about the SDGs.

Using the City Booklet as a tool to facilitate the dialogue about sustainable development within the city administration, and illustrating how the different departments are working with the 2030 Agenda, the colleagues within the city administration could better understand how their work is interconnected and how they are all working to achieve the global goals.

To be able to approach the VLR process in an honest way, the local governments need to understand the overall added value of the VLR in their monitoring system and whether and how the VLR is used in their strategic planning, decision-making and co-creation processes. To fully utilize the SDGs in strategic and tactical urban planning, there is a need for a strategic sensemaking process. Beginning the process by reflecting on what in the VLR process that can be valuable to the city is a way to navigate and measure progress in an honest manner. The City of Espoo in Finland has developed a SDG sensemaking tool – a step-by-step procedure which addresses the knowledge and practice gaps in localizing the SDGs – providing a good example on how to create commitment to the implementation of the VLR process.

In the initial phase of the VLR, the city needs to choose targets and key performance indicators that are in line with their strategic development objectives and are suitable to their local context. When defining what indicators to use, the city should also make sure how to measure them and whether the qualitative or quantitative data and statistics related to each of the selected indicators are available and, if not, how to collect them. There is no point in using indicators if there are no relevant statistics or other data available.

When choosing indicators, LRGs do not only need to take into consideration what is applicable in their own local context – but they also need to decide on what kind of indicators to include. The cities and municipalities that have been interviewed for this report, have identified a need for both quantitative and qualitative indicators. The quantitative indicators are beneficial in that they are easier for the people to understand, and are more tangible. However, for some goals it is challenging to identify such indicators. Climate related goals often have clear quantitative indicators, while goals that concern social sustainability do not have such an obvious connection to quantitative measures. Furthermore, quantitative data can be enhanced by including examples of best practice. The City of Stuttgart is now in the process of developing qualitative indicators as well as making the indicator process co-creational with neighborhoods. The qualitative indicators can also be used as a way to enhance the quantitative data: the City of Stuttgart complemented their VLR with more than 50 qualitative best-practice examples.

Using only quantitative indicators can result in that the monitoring leaves out important aspects that should be considered when evaluating the progress of sustainable development. Unlike the quantitative indicators, the qualitative indicators capture the quality and not the amount. This is important when, for example, measuring goals that concerns participation. In addition to monitoring the amount of participatory processes or the level of participation in the city, it is also relevant to evaluate the effect of participation – has participation resulted in the citizens having higher trust for the city institutions? One way to measure this is by asking the citizens themselves via opinion polls – a method that was applied by the City of Mannheim during their first VLR process.

Another tip from the frontrunner cities highlighted in this report is that you do not need to use the indicators too strictly, but adjust the indicators so that these suit the local context. Engaging the relevant stakeholders in the designing of indicators is an efficient way to make them actually use these indicators. At the end of the day, stakeholders need indicators that are uncomplicated, understandable and applicable to the local context.

DO IT LIKE

ESPOO
FINLAND

VOLUNTARY LOCAL REVIEW

Espoo published its first Voluntary Local Review in 2020. The VLR takes the entire Sustainable Development Goals framework into account and is organized into three parts based on what dimension of sustainability it addresses. The first part, Leave no one behind, deals with social and cultural sustainability, and focuses on how to develop a city that is inclusive and engages all citizens. The second part, Let's do it together, focuses on economic sustainability. It addresses the city's goal to reach the SDGs by co-development and innovative management that has a positive impact on sustainability. The third part, Accelerated action, focuses on ecological sustainability and describes how Espoo is improving areas in built infrastructure and living environment to be more sustainable.

Espoo approached the VLR process through a phenomenon-based principle: they analyzed the work of the city organization based on the city's strategy, the Espoo Story – and how it connected to the SDGs. Espoo invited different sectors of society to take part in that process: sustainability experts as well as citizens were encouraged to share insights on how city projects could be represented in the VLR. Each unit in the city office was also asked to identify projects and activities that helped to implement the Espoo Story. The relevance of the project and activity was assessed by SDG-experts based on three aspects: relevance related to the SDGs, future potential and handprint potential. Depending on the relevance, the project or activity was included in the review.

SENSEMAKING THE GLOBAL GOALS

The lack of methods and tools on how to meaningfully relate the SDGs to local priorities made the City of Espoo together with the six largest cities in Finland develop the SDG Sensemaking Tool (SST). The SST offers ways to explain what the SDGs mean in the local setting: it is meant to clearly link a city's own strategic, tactical and operative goals with the SDGs. The tool is a step by step iterative procedure to identify how particular conditions in a local setting can be interpreted and related to ecologic, social and economic sustainability.

The purpose of the SST is manifold: it can be used by the city administration to identify areas in need of support as well as to measure and fuel action in the city's sustainability work. The SST can also be used when trying to identify local indicators. Through its context-driven approach, the SST enables stakeholders to identify what should be done in a specific urban setting.

When developing the SST, the City of Espoo facilitated workshops and meetings with sustainability experts from different parts of the city. The SST has been tested by other cities in Finland and globally – and has proved to be a valuable tool for local and regional stakeholders in their sensemaking process. Their ambition is to develop the tool into a software that can be scaled globally.
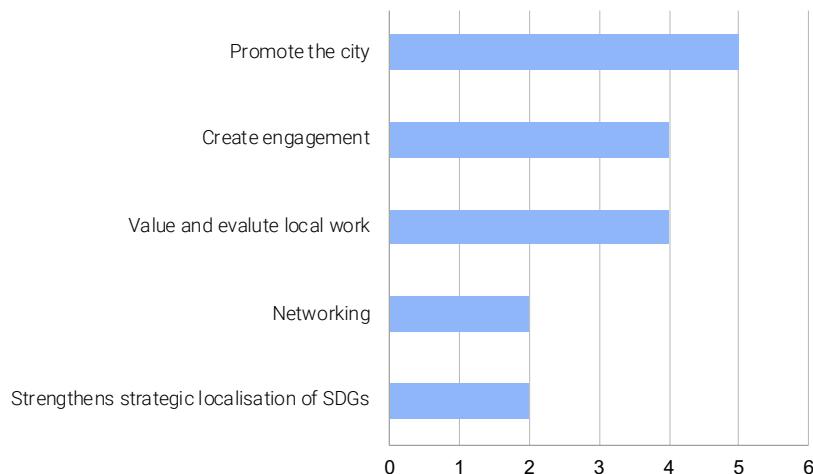
"THE OUTCOME IS IMPORTANT, BUT THE LEARNING IS MOST IMPORTANT. LEARNING IS WHAT MAKES US MORE RESILIENT TO FUTURE CHALLENGES."

Opportunities

In this part of the report, opportunities of conducting a Voluntary Local Review are presented. Based on experiences from the frontrunner cities, the opportunities have been categorized into three categories: Engagement, Partnership and collaboration, and License to act.

The VLR process is a monitoring tool which helps a city translate the global goals to local priorities. The holistic character of the VLR encourages all parts of the local government as well as the local community to understand and engage in the localization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Despite that the VLR process has no formal connection to the UN system, the VLR fills an important function in reporting on the progress on local level which supports the UN in achieving a holistic picture of how the world is doing on the SDGs and the transformation towards sustainable societies.

OPPORTUNITIES OF CONDUCTING A VOLUNTARY LOCAL REVIEW

Based on interviews with cities and municipalities from the BSR and EaP during the spring of 2022.

Engagement

An integrated approach to sustainable development requires environments for cross-sectoral and cross-border cooperation in the translation of global goals into local priorities. As such, a successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda on the local level requires an inclusion of all societal stakeholders – citizens, civil society, local businesses, academia as well as local, regional and national authorities – in the process.

However, working with the SDGs on subnational levels, authorities experience difficulties in how to meaningfully engage society at large. Several cities in the regions have a firm participatory foundation, but face difficulties in the institutionalization of this process, and especially in developing an administrative culture that values participatory processes. Here, the VLR can play an important role by broadening the participation of the local community through engaging a variety of stakeholders and raising awareness of the SDGs in the community. The city representatives interviewed for this report, emphasize the importance of the participatory aspect of the VLR process as it establishes a shared ownership of the VLR. This also divides the workload as well as allows cities to make full use of the knowledge and tools it provides.

Conducting a VLR requires co-development and that all departments of the municipality as well as society at large are engaged in the process. Gathering stakeholders from different sectors and areas of expertise increases the level of responsibility and ownership regarding the city's sustainability work within the society. Involving and engaging society at large in the VLR leads to a more proactive sustainable development process. The local authorities must lead the way and actively work to include the society at large in the process through participatory practice to make the community understand that if we are to succeed with a transformation towards sustainable societies, we need all hands on deck. The participatory character of the VLR bolsters a unified vision to promote sustainable development at the local level. For example, the City of Mannheim engaged the citizens already in the earliest debates of the VLR process. Through different initiatives, the city administration has engaged citizens in the development of its city strategy as well as arranged conferences where citizens meet with international experts to discuss how the SDGs can be implemented and incorporated in the city.

The VLR also provides a good opportunity to get a shared insight on what the SDGs are and what they can do for the city. The VLR encourages a city to think about where the city is today and where it would like to be – and gathers stakeholders around a joint vision of the city's future. This is a useful process for any city – to come together and assess what is important and why. The VLR process can generate a benchmark from which to track future progress.

City authorities sometimes find difficulties in including all the departments in city council as well as other local stakeholders in the localization of the SDGs. There are often clear dividing lines between the different departments within the city organizations, which hinders a successful implementation and localization of the SDGs.

The holistic approach of the VLR process facilitates the dialogue between the departments of the public administration which breaks silos and enhances cooperation across departments. A VLR can be the bridge between departments encouraging dialogue, collaboration and exchange within the local government. 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. It is a way to engage the whole city organization around the mutual quest of a sustainable city. The City of Helsinki established a working group with the task of identifying indicators. This group was composed of city employees from different departments - and in that sense the organization as a whole was included and represented in the process.

DO IT LIKE

BONN
GERMANY

VOLUNTARY LOCAL REVIEW

The City of Bonn published its first Voluntary Local Review in 2020. Its structure is based on Bonn's municipal Sustainability Strategy and focuses on six fields of action: Mobility, Climate and Energy, Natural Resources and the Environment, Labor and Business, Social Participation and Gender, and Global Responsibility and One World. Within the fields of action, several indicators have been identified and illustrate the development in those areas.

Bonn identifies the VLR as an important tool to spread information and education on the 2030 Agenda framework as a whole. The purpose of the VLR is to make the SDGs more accessible, and encourage a discussion about them between different societal stakeholders. Such a review can highlight and demonstrate the connections between the individual activities and projects that are organized by the city and the SDGs. Bonn's VLR is meant to be read by local and national citizens as well as the international community. The City of Bonn is in the process of conducting their second VLR, which will be published in June 2022.

INVOLVING THE CITIZENS

The City of Bonn has identified how the VLR can act as a tool to engage a dialogue with the citizens. The VLR presents a description of how the city is working with the SDGs by connecting them with the city's fields of action.

In that way, the VLR provides the residents of Bonn with necessary information and invites them to a substantiated discussion of the SDGs. However, the lack of knowledge about the SDGs makes it difficult for citizens to participate in their own cities' localization of the global goals. The City of Bonn has tried to counteract this lack of awareness and knowledge by organizing events that puts the 2030 Agenda and sustainable development at the center of the discussion. Once a year, Bonn has the so-called SDG Days, during which they organize events that relate to the SDGs. The events bring the goals closer to the people by making them more comprehensible. The purpose is not so much to make the citizens understand the 2030 Agenda in general, but rather the idea behind it.

The SDG Days is a way to achieve the city's goal of spreading awareness regarding sustainability issues. During these days, parts of the city are decorated with bright colors in the spirit of the 2030 Agenda visual. Since the start of the programme in 2018, the events have always included a SDG wheel, on which the 17 goals are illustrated and explained; and the citizens have had the opportunity to engage in discussions about how the SDGs impact their daily lives and to calculate their individual CO2 footprint. The events that are organized by the city are accompanied by other organization's initiatives that also relate to the sustainability framework, and shops on the main street participate by decorating their windows and arrange events.

In a similar way, the City of Tampere wishes to use their VLR as a handbook to engage employees from all departments: it will act as a tool to illustrate how they are all working towards the same goal, but in different ways.

Partnership and collaboration

Partnership is a reward per se, but also provides solutions to challenges faced in the local sustainability work. When beginning the process of conducting a VLR, several cities struggle in understanding how to start the process. Here, guidelines and handbooks play an important role as motivators and source of inspiration. The existing guides can to some extent provide solutions and help the city overcome challenges, but often these guides cannot give the exact answer to a city's need. This is where partnership becomes so crucial – sharing lessons learned with other cities that are conducting or have conducted a VLR to understand what is possible to do is of utmost importance to be able to overcome different challenges. This need was recognized by the City of Turku, who took part in a collaboration with other Finnish cities that had conducted or were in the process of conducting a VLR. The collaboration was beneficial in order to exchange experiences and get inspired in how to tackle the VLR process.

The international scope of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs enables an international collaboration – providing opportunities for partnership beyond national borders. The VLRs play an important role as they become an international arena for mutual learning where cities can get inspiration and support in their localization of the SDGs. The knowledge sharing that comes with a VLR has a positive effect on cities irrespective of socio economic context, but importantly, it plays a particularly crucial role for less resourced cities. When a city documents and reviews the local sustainable development in reports, less advantaged cities can adopt these strategies to their local contexts. Copying methods and models used in another city, enables a time effective and resource efficient process. Close cooperation between cities can open up for further collaboration initiatives in the future and create long lasting partnerships for localizing the SDGs. Through partnership, and changing experiences as well as lessons learned, effective indicators can be identified, models for participatory processes can be established and more advantaged cities can help less advantaged cities to succeed with the VLR.

The collaborative aspect of the VLR is evident in the case of Lviv: they worked closely with the City of Espoo to get support in how to adopt the VLR process to the local context, and with the City of Bonn which shared experiences and recommendations for how to conduct a VLR. The City of Lviv used the City of Liverpool as a good example by using existing material on their website. Sharing methods, experiences and best practices support cities and is a way to use what has already proved to be successful. VLR provides opportunities for international collaboration by gathering best practices from isolated cases and making them available to all.

The international network Global Goals for Cities has recognized the importance of partnerships regarding cities' local work with the SDGs. Global Goals for Cities is a network compiled with 19 cities from Europe, whose knowledge and experiences of working with the SDGs differ. The network is important for developing methods and ideas on how to approach the SDGs on the local level.

DO IT LIKE

MANNHEIM

GERMANY

VOLUNTARY LOCAL REVIEW

The City of Mannheim published its first VLR in 2019. It is based on the city strategy, Mannheim 2030 Mission Statement. In the Mission Statement, the SDGs have been localized into seven overarching strategic goals that relate to the SDGs. The structure of the VLR is based on those strategic goals, and describes which SDGs the strategic goal relates to. For each strategic goal, the VLR presents guidance for how Mannheim has worked – and will continue working – to achieve the goals. Key milestones for the strategic goals as well as specifically important aspects of that goal are also highlighted.

With its VLR, Mannheim wishes to demonstrate how a city can, in an inclusive manner, incorporate the SDGs in their daily work. The citizens were able to meet with sustainability experts and city employees in order to take part in the debates on the SDGs in general and the development of the VLR in particular. The City of Mannheim is in the process of conducting their second VLR, which will be submitted in the summer of 2022.

PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES

As a way to include all parts of society in the process of localizing the SDGs, Mannheim developed its strategy together with the civil society in a broad participation process.

The participatory process spanned from 2017 until 2019 and resulted in 1500 proposals for the new Mission Statement. The proposals that were submitted were based on the question: "Taking into account the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals, what do we want life in our city to be like in 2030?"

More than 2500 citizens participated actively when developing the Mission Statement. The City of Mannheim organized a so-called Urban Thinkers Campus, where 500 residents, together with international experts, discussed how the SDGs could be implemented and incorporated in the city. They facilitated workshops where citizens of Mannheim had the opportunity to discuss the SDGs and what was important to them with the mayor. An additional 10 000 citizens were involved through opinion polls and bigger events. The City of Mannheim disseminated surveys in order to collect ideas on how to implement the SDGs in the city. They used mass events like the May Fair as a way to reach the people: they requested input from the citizens on the SDGs. Furthermore, the City of Mannheim engaged the community by putting out a photo box where they could get photographed with different SDGs and publish it on social media. With these events, Mannheim were able to communicate the SDGs to a wider audience.

GLOBAL GOALS FOR CITIES (URBACT)

The pilot network Global Goals for Cities has been developed to support cities in their localization of the SDGs. One challenge that the partner cities have identified concerns the internal steering: they have highlighted the need for support in areas of indicators, connecting the SDGs to the city budget as well as a need to improve the coordination mechanism within and between the municipal departments, and with national and sub-national levels of government. Challenges when it comes to engaging stakeholders and communicating the SDGs to the wider audience have also been highlighted. The network is a strategic partnership and aims to support cities in these challenges through peer learning and the development of an integrated action plan for how to work systematically with the 2030 Agenda framework.

Global Goals for Cities consists of 19 cities from the EU, and Tallinn in Estonia is the lead partner. The network includes partner cities of diverse nature and varying experience when it comes to localizing the SDGs. During recurring network meetings, the member cities have the opportunity to compare and share experiences and practices from their local work with the SDGs. They are also offered to go on bilateral visits to inspire and get inspired. Cities with more experience and knowledge about the SDGs that have incorporated the goals in previous strategies and plans can use the support from the network to conduct a VLR.

When the project is finalized, every member city will have developed an integrated action plan. It is developed together with a so-called URBACT Local Group - a multi-stakeholder group with members from all sectors of society: civil society, private sector, universities, research centers, neighboring municipalities and regional and national stakeholders. The purpose is to encourage engagement within the broader community and make more people feel ownership of the local SDG work.

Global Goals for Cities began its work in March 2021 and will run through the end of 2022. The network is funded through the European Regional Development Fund's URBACT III European Territorial Cooperation program, and has been developed in partnership with the Council of European Municipalities and Regions.

However, the partner cities have also highlighted that such a cooperation is valuable in itself because of the fact that they gather around the common goal of achieving sustainable development.

There are valuable international collaboration opportunities that come with a VLR, but it is also a facilitator for enhancing collaboration within a country, and the national and local level.

City representatives point at the unclarity in the division of responsibility between the local and national governments when it comes to a country's sustainable development. Cities all over the world have a leading role in the achievement of sustainable development. However, many countries in the BSR have a system of strong municipal self-governance. Because of this, cities differ in their commitment to sustainability. The VLR process can facilitate the dialogue between the national and the local level.

Reporting on challenges and opportunities at the local level to the national government provides local authorities with the opportunity to send local input for the national voluntary reviews – and ensures policy coherence. The reports can act as a tool to inspire other cities and by that raise awareness of how to work with the SDGs on a local level.

Furthermore, the VLR can act as a tool to raise awareness of cities' role in the transition to sustainable societies. It is a way to illustrate the importance of the local level when it comes to the implementation of the SDGs by demonstrating what cities are doing to achieve sustainable development. A VLR can also function as a way to promote individual cities that are working actively with the 2030 Agenda framework. Frontrunner cities have the opportunity to spread their local sustainability work and through that receive recognition at the national and international level. The exposure internationally is beneficial in the sense that it opens new doors for collaboration: by highlighting cities that are working with the same issues, cities can connect and establish partnerships.

License to act

A Voluntary Local Review is an efficient way to communicate the priorities to all departments of the city council as well as society at large. The transparent characteristics of a VLR provides clarity on a city's challenges, opportunities and priorities – and communicates these to the local community. This transparency can build trust between the local government and the society at large – and encourage a sense of ownership and co-responsibility among the local community.

The VLR process accelerates the city's sustainability work in the sense that it presents guidelines for how the city as a whole will work with sustainability issues going forward. By signing an international charter like the 2030 Agenda, authorities ensure that they will work to achieve the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. However, LRGs have identified challenges regarding how they should approach the global framework. By conducting a VLR, the city administration can demonstrate how they have worked with the SDGs as well as how they will continue working with them. A VLR constitutes a common framework that spans across all departments in the city administration, and presents solutions to bridge the gaps within a city's organization where the different departments often work in silos. In that sense, a VLR is a license to act: it enables the whole organization to come together in a mutual quest to accelerate the development towards sustainable cities by defining how the different departments can work together.Before deciding that they were to submit a VLR, the City of Malmö identified how their local work with the SDGs had slowed down. They recognized that the VLR could act as a tool to fuel their work once again and bring it closer to the city.

The Municipality of Gladsaxe has experienced that incorporating the SDGs in the city strategy and reporting on their work in a VLR has made their work reach beyond the city administration, and the importance of sustainability issues are highlighted by political and administrative leaders. Gladsaxe demonstrates how a VLR can act as a tool to invite the public into the city's work: to make them, as well as the public officials, know about how the city or municipality is working to reach the sustainability goals.

Finally, as no superior power possesses the mandate to decide a general VLR design to follow, the VLR is a flexible process and the design of it is determined by the one that conducts it. Even though sub-national actors initially may be confused on how to achieve the VLR in practice, the adaptable characteristics of the VLR is what make it possible to make the global goals relevant to the local context.

As most of a city's planned development is defined in the city strategy, LRGs reveal that they find it difficult to find time to engage in development activities outside the city strategy. For a city that is aiming to conduct its first VLR, it is thus useful to start with the city strategy and connect the goals in the strategy to goals of the 2030 Agenda. Importantly, it is not the length of the VLR report that matters, but the level of increased knowledge about how your city is doing in terms of sustainable development. For cities that struggle to find ways to enhance their local sustainability work, the VLR is a catalyst to start this process. Conducting a VLR, a city should strive to learn more about the SDGs, communicate sustainable development to the citizens and engage with the international community. Making those the primary goal for the process, a VLR can be a powerful accelerator for SDG localization as well as a tool for intensifying policy coherence for development.

DO IT LIKE

MALMÖ
SWEDEN

VOLUNTARY LOCAL REVIEW

The City of Malmö conducted its first Voluntary Local Review in 2021. The review focuses on how the city's steering and management system connects to the SDGs. The review comprises an evaluation and analysis of a selection of the city's steering documents, as well as an analysis of how the principle of Leave No One Behind is incorporated through development programs for the city. In addition to evaluating the city's progress through steering documents, a survey was disseminated to the city administration and Malmö owned corporations. The city organization arranged several workshops to discuss the results.
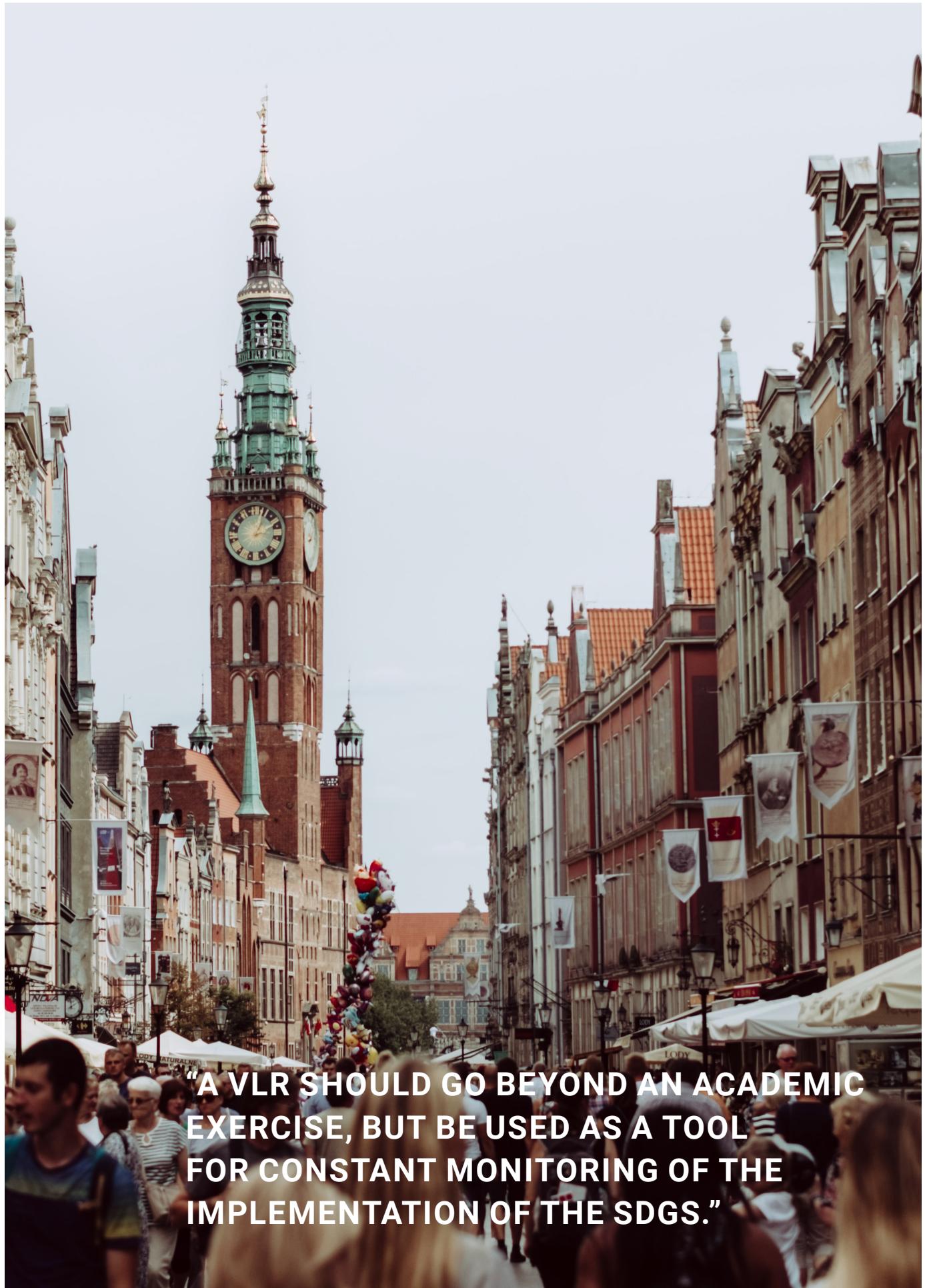
The review had three purposes: the first one was to identify how the city's strategy relates to the SDGs; the second one concerned how the principle of Leave No One Behind was made visible in the city's work for equal rights and opportunities; and the third one was to report on the progress towards the SDGs on the local level. The goal was to identify how the existing city strategies, programmes, goals and other processes steer towards the SDGs. In accordance with recommendations in guidelines, the City of Malmö analyzed the same nine goals that were highlighted at the 2021 High Level Political Forum. These goals were also especially suitable for Malmö's local context: a majority of them concerned the social dimension of sustainability, and based on earlier evaluations of the city's sustainable development, Malmö has identified social sustainability as an especially pressing challenge for the city. The analysis of how the City of Malmö is working with the SDGs is based on nationally identified indicators.

It has also been complemented with data taken from city departments as well as regional and national authorities.

STRUCTURE

The VLR is voluntary in every sense of the word: it is voluntary in its implementation as well as its content and structure. The fact that the target groups for the VLR were city officials and of Malmö owned companies had an effect on the structure and content of the review. Since they focused on the internal steering and reported on how it connected to the SDGs, the target groups for participation in the process of developing the VLR, as well as who it was designed for, were employees within the city organization. The reason why the report targeted the city officials was because Malmö had experienced that their SDG work had lost some of its power - and they therefore identified the VLR as a tool to fuel their sustainability work. It gave them the opportunity to reflect over earlier efforts and their effectiveness, as well as develop a common guidance on how they would continue working with the SDGs.

Malmö demonstrates the importance of constructing a VLR that is suited to the city's own context. The goals that are analyzed are within an area that the city experiences especially challenging, which is also why there is a need to examine what has been effective and not in order to identify how to proceed. Therefore, the VLR does not have to include all 17 SDGs and the sub-objectives in order to be successful. Rather, a successful VLR is one that supports the city in its continued work with the SDGs - which Malmö identified in their own VLR process.

"A VLR SHOULD GO BEYOND AN ACADEMIC EXERCISE, BUT BE USED AS A TOOL FOR CONSTANT MONITORING OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SDGS."

VLR Guides

As a way to support cities and regions to conduct Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), guides have been developed at both the UN and the EU level. In this section, some of those guides are presented.

The guides take, to some extent, different approaches to the VLR process, however, some thematic areas are recurring in all the guides: the importance of including the principle of leaving no one behind, to identify key strategic areas and start from the city strategy, to involve stakeholders and actors early on in the process, and to ease the administrative burden by using existing platforms and processes.

UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE (UNECE): GUIDELINES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF VOLUNTARY LOCAL REVIEWS IN THE ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE REGION

Based on the discussion in a pre-meeting to the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the UNECE region in 2020, this report was established as a result of several participants highlighting the need of guidelines for the preparation of conducting a VLR. The guidelines were prepared by the UNECE Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management with the purpose to support LRGs in the UNECE region promoting shared values for sustainable development.

The guideline stresses the importance of focusing the VLR on sustainable and inclusive "shared value" creation, and to analyze and bolster the connection between social and economic development. The participatory perspective is also crucial according to the guideline as well as enhancing the VLR as a forward-looking instrument which should be connected to national strategies. Furthermore, the guideline recommends that cities promote the use of indicators and metrics to monitor and track progress on the SDG implementation. Finally, it is highlighted that the VLR should be utilized as a tool to support the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

EUROPEAN HANDBOOK FOR SDG VOLUNTARY LOCAL REVIEWS

This handbook serves to be an inspirational framework for how to set up the VLR specifically targeting European cities. It provides key examples of official and experimental indicators fruitful for establishing an effective SDG local monitoring system. For every goal, good examples are illustrated so that local actors can find inspiration from other cities as well as identify and evaluate their specific needs and challenges.

The handbook stresses the importance of maintaining a long-term orientation and to analyze accomplishments, challenges, gaps as well as support countries in making informed policy decisions. It is also recommended to use the VNR as an inspirational source and support as well as arranging exchange activities between the national and the local level.

UNITED NATIONS DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS (UN DESA): GLOBAL GUIDING ELEMENTS FOR VOLUNTARY LOCAL REVIEWS (VLRS) OF SDG IMPLEMENTATION

This document is a short guide which provides a starting point for LRGs considering producing a VLR. The purpose of the guide is to present an overview of useful focus areas for the process. The guide does not provide details on data collection or best practices for institutional arrangements, but simply illustrate areas that could be of interest in a VLR process.

The guiding document highlights that national and regional authorities should ensure that they have a meeting place and platform at the local level to meet to exchange experiences of working with VLR processes. The platform should also include other actors at the local level such as actors from the civil society, local companies, etc.

UNITED NATIONS HUMAN SETTLEMENTS PROGRAMME (UN-HABITAT) AND UNITED CITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS (UCLG): GUIDELINES FOR VOLUNTARY LOCAL REVIEWS VOLUME 1 & 2

These guides use the UN DESA model as a starting point. The purpose of the guidelines are to emphasize the intrinsic value of VLRs as a political process that can enhance coordination between different spheres of government and to serve as inspiration and support to LRGs around the world. This document provides guidance, definitions and technical support to conduct VLRs.

The guidelines emphasize that the VLR should be as strict, efficient and replicable as possible. It is highlighted that the selection of indicators as well as choice of focus are both the most demanding and the most difficult part of the VLR process. As such, it is recommended that these decisions are made in the beginning of the VLR work, and that it is important to be consistent throughout the process. The guidelines also illustrate the importance of data – the more data, the more detailed and useful VLR.

The guidelines also focus on the importance of deciding which funds to use in the implementation of localization strategies. That is, deciding what resources (i.e. money, people, technology) that are to be used, what institutional mechanisms and political initiatives that are needed to be able to implement the SDGs at the local level. The exchange of knowledge as well as using other cities' VLR reports as inspiration are also highlighted as useful in the guidelines.

DO IT LIKE

HELSINKI
FINLAND

VOLUNTARY LOCAL REVIEW

The City of Helsinki has identified the Voluntary Local Review as an important step on the way to successfully implement the SDGs on the local level. Helsinki was the second city in the world to conduct a VLR: by the time they submitted their first VLR in 2019, only the City of New York had published one. The first VLR described the Helsinki City Strategy and how it connected to the SDGs, as well as how the city was working to promote and monitor the implementation of the global goals. The projects highlighted in the first VLR were chosen based on their importance for the realization of the City Strategy. Helsinki chose to focus on five of the SDGs in their VLR. The purpose of the review was to produce information about the city's SDG work in an accessible way and act as a strategic tool for the city administration.

The City of Helsinki published its second Voluntary Local Review in 2021. In contrast to Helsinki's first VLR, their second one was more comprehensive: it incorporated all SDGs and went beyond analyzing the strategy to instead cover the entire organization. The purpose of this review was to review progress through indicators as well as present qualitative descriptions of the city's activities. A new city strategy was adopted after the second VLR had been published. In the strategy, Helsinki highlighted their work with evaluating the SDGs and confirmed their commitment to continue to monitor the development in the city.

INDICATORS

In order to decide on what indicators to include in the VLR, the City of Helsinki established a working group with the purpose of creating an indicator set for the city's monitoring. The working group consisted of officials from different departments of the city organization. They started with hundreds of indicators, and ended up choosing 50 of them - including a selection of key indicators that were based on the Helsinki City Strategy. Helsinki realized during the process of identifying indicators that it was important not to exclude too many: it may be easier to have a smaller indicator set - however, it does not do reality justice since it may result in that important aspects are excluded.

The progress of the indicators are highlighted and discussed in the VLR. In addition to that, the indicators are also presented on an electronic dashboard on a website where anyone who would like can follow the sustainable development in Helsinki. The indicators are presented in three main categories based on what dimension of sustainable development they address: social, ecological or economic sustainability. The indicators are updated continuously.

SWEDISH INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR LOCAL DEMOCRACY (ICLD): VOLUNTARY LOCAL REVIEWS, VLRS TOOLBOX

The purpose of this toolbox is to support LRGs that are interested in monitoring and reporting on the local implementation of the SDGs through VLRs and contribute to the local democracy. The toolbox has been developed based on four Swedish good examples that have conducted VLRs: Helsingborg, Malmö, Stockholm and Uppsala.

The report, in which the toolbox is presented, begins with an introduction to the VLR process focusing on the instrumental role it can play for a city. Based on findings from the Swedish cases, it is highlighted that a VLR can be a catalyst for institutional collaboration and political commitment, has a holistic approach to sustainability and provides opportunities for peer learning with an international outlook.

International inspirational examples are highlighted in the report, presenting cities that have succeeded in, for example, institutional collaboration and political commitment, identifying SDG-aligned local projects, community's shared vision and co-ownership etc.

The toolbox provides a checklist to start the VLR process, based on lessons learned from Sweden and highlights that using participation, transparency and accountability in the VLR is particularly important.

It also provides suggestions on how to make the VLR more democratic through a short step by step guide.

DO IT LIKE

UPPSALA
SWEDEN

VOLUNTARY LOCAL REVIEW

The City of Uppsala submitted its first Voluntary Local Review in 2021. The purpose of the review was to illustrate in what ways the 2030 Agenda had been incorporated into the city governance. In the VLR, Uppsala demonstrated how they had incorporated the 2030 Agenda in the city's work since they took on a new city strategy in 2016. The VLR focused on the organizational structure and the internal steering towards the Global Goals.

The City of Uppsala structured its VLR based on nine internal goals that are all meant to support the implementation of the SDGs. In the review, each goal is explained and defines what SDGs it is related to. This is followed by a description of what the City of Uppsala could do in order to accelerate the achievement of that city target - and by that also the related SDGs. Uppsala described what is specifically relevant to them in each goal, and also highlighted some of the SDG targets and explained in what way(s) Uppsala's work supports the achievement of that target. Each chapter ends with a description of lessons learned and ways forward in their sustainability work. Throughout the review, city areas are compared in order to identify differences in progress. This was done as a way to identify how the city is working to incorporate the principle of Leave No One Behind.

With the VLR, Uppsala wanted to share the stories that the politicians found especially relevant within each goal. They identified that qualitative examples were equally important as quantitative data - it was a way to show the city organization that they do work to achieve the SDGs even though they don't always define their work as "sustainability work".

EFFECTIVE VLR PROCESS

Submitting a VLR can be a time consuming process - but the City of Uppsala conducted a comprehensive and detailed VLR within three months. The decision to conduct a VLR was made in December 2020 with the deadline in March the year after. The short timeframe affected the structure of the VLR process as a whole, as well as the review itself. In order to successfully conduct a VLR despite the approaching deadline, Uppsala analyzed already existing data. They did not make it into a participatory process, but rather saw the review as a tool for the internal management of the city: it was a way to identify what had been successful and what had been less successful in their work, and thereby create a foundation for learning.

"THE LOCALIZATION OF THE SDGS IS A PROCESS OF CO-CREATION - AND FOR THAT YOU NEED CITIZENS. THE VISION HAS TO BE DEVELOPED IN PARTNERSHIP TO CREATE A FEELING OF OWNERSHIP."

Conclusions

Cities and municipalities in the region need support to continue the important work to localize the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) have proven to be a catalyst for improving this work. However, local governments need the right tools to be able to engage in this process in an efficient manner. Based on the surveys and interviews conducted for this mapping, this part of the report will focus on what cities need moving forward.

The local governments that participated in this mapping were asked to list what priorities and support they found necessary to enhance their VLR processes. Based on the interviews and surveys, two priorities have been identified as particularly important.

Cooperation between cities
Sharing methods transnationally is important to be able to overcome common challenges and identify shared opportunities of working with the VLR. It's imperative for sub-national actors to learn from other examples and share their successes as they develop their VLRs. In the case of the Baltic Sea Region (BSR) and Eastern Partnership countries (EaP), transnational cooperation can empower less advantaged cities by allowing them to cooperate with frontrunners.

There is no one fixed formula for the VLR, but methods for this have been developed in different local contexts. Partnerships between peers have to be created wherein experiences and challenges can be discussed, and wherein existing tools and methods can be tested and developed to meet the needs and conditions of Local and Regional Governments (LRG) in the BSR and EaP.

It has been highlighted in the mapping that there is a need for a platform to support the sharing of successful methods for conducting VLRs, as well as localizing the SDGs. Such platforms could also support and facilitate partnerships and peer-to-peer exchanges and ultimately, support capacity building and help cities that wish to conduct VLRs.

*Monitoring systems and measuring the SDG progress*
The global scope of the 2030 Agenda presents challenges for cities to monitor and evaluate progress on the SDGs. There is a need for monitoring and evaluating processes that are applicable to the sub-national context. As has been highlighted in this report, the main challenge that many cities and municipalities face when localizing the SDGs and evaluating its progress with the VLR is defining measurable targets and indicators that are relevant to the global SDG framework, yet locally tailored.
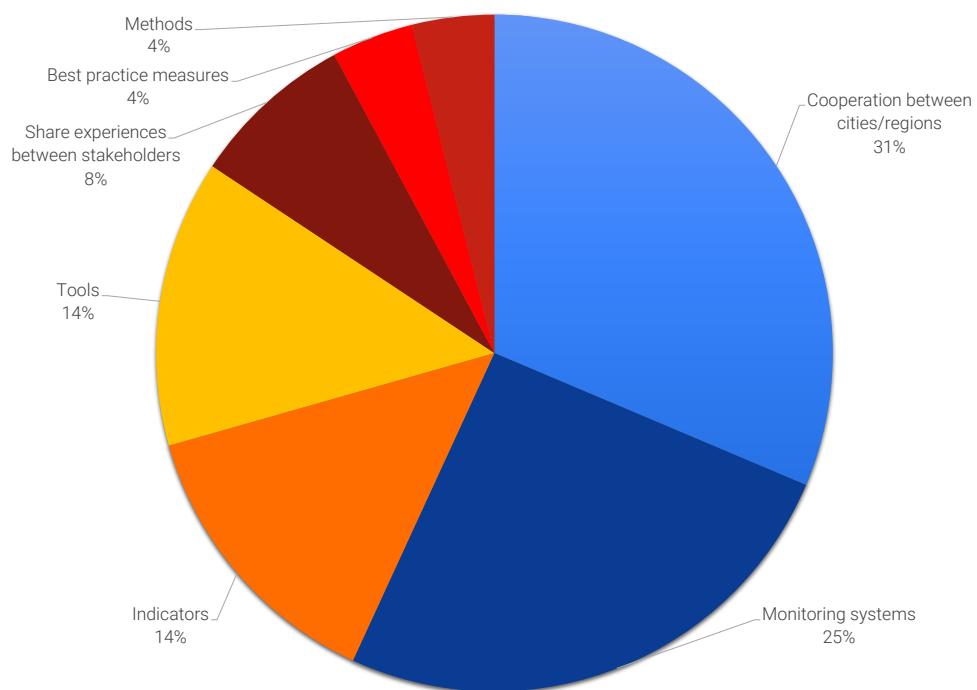
To develop localized monitoring frameworks that are aligned with the SDGs, though relevant at the local level, is a priority for stakeholders interviewed in this report. Here, statistics on a sub-national level play an important role, and investments in capacities to fill data gaps are needed. Standardized monitoring systems that could be used in different local contexts would add value to the cities.

The lack of indicators relates to the need for standardized monitoring systems. In some countries in the region, targets from strategic documents have no indicators for one or several of the SDGs. Naturally, this makes it difficult to monitor SDG progress also on the local level. Indicators should be able to capture the local context as well as be adjustable and suitable for a variety of local contexts. Moving forward, consensus on goals and indicators between local and national authorities need to be ensured.

The availability and quantity of data is of utmost importance in the selection of indicators. As such, there is a need to fill the data gaps so that quantitative measures can be applied to the progress on the SDGs. However, there is also a need for better qualitative measures. Some of the goals, particularly those connected to the social dimension of sustainable development, are difficult to measure with numbers. Here, the UN plays a primary role which can support the development of indicators that can capture the social progress made in cities, and standardize these.

Methods
4%

Best practice measures
4%

Share experiences
between stakeholders
8%

Tools
14%

Indicators
14%

Monitoring systems
25%

Cooperation between
cities/regions
31%

This graph is based on a survey disseminated in the spring 2022. The respondents were asked to list what priorities they found necessary to enhance their work to localize the SDGs and conduct a VLR.

DO IT LIKE

STUTTGART

GERMANY

VOLUNTARY LOCAL REVIEW

The City of Stuttgart submitted their first Voluntary Local Review in 2020. The review was based on the Association of German Cities and Towns' model resolution 2030 Agenda, which Stuttgart joined in 2018 as a step towards starting to work actively to implement the SDGs in the city. Stuttgart's VLR was developed in collaboration with the Bertelsmann Foundation and the German Institute of Urban Studies.

The VLR was developed in a participatory manner: different departments of the city organization were invited to take part in the process. The review contains a description of the Association of German Cities and Towns' project. This is followed by a presentation of the indicators, a description of how the City of Stuttgart decided on what indicators to include, as well as recommendations on how to develop indicators. With their first VLR, Stuttgart aimed to describe the city's progress in social, ecological and economic sustainability - and by that also identify what areas were in need of further support. They also wanted to contribute with methods on how to develop indicators that are suitable - and valuable - in a local setting. The VLR contains an analysis of the sustainable development over time, and connects the SDGs to the city of Stuttgart through both quantitative data and qualitative best-practice examples.

The City of Stuttgart is in the process of conducting their second VLR, which will be submitted in July 2022 which will be available in English.

TRANSLATING THE INDICATORS

In 2017, seven German organizations initiated the project SDG Indicators for Municipalities. The project aimed to facilitate the quantitative monitoring of the SDGs at the local level by identifying how the goals could be interpreted in a German local setting. The City of Stuttgart, as one of the first in Germany, joined the project in 2018 and began pilot-testing the indicators that had been identified in the project the same year.

When testing the indicators, cross-departmental discussions about the SDG indicators were held within the city organization, in order to expand the general indicator set to incorporate new ones that were relevant for Stuttgart's specific context - as well as to modify some of the already identified indicators. When deciding which indicators to incorporate, they took into account the relevance for Stuttgart, the coverage and explanatory value, and available data. It was also important that the indicator set was not too large and in that way not manageable - and they therefore chose indicators that covered several of the SDGs.

Based on the SDG indicators that were chosen within the framework of the project, Stuttgart developed a cross-sectoral instrument for a structured monitoring of the connections between the social, ecological and economic sustainability. This will serve as a tool to support the further implementation of the SDGs in Stuttgart.

Key takeaways

As highlighted in this report, cities and municipalities face difficulties in making the global goals relevant to the local level. VLRs may be that bridge between the ambitious global goals for sustainable development, and local realities. Referring to experiences from the cities and municipalities in the BSR and the EaP highlighted in this report, the unclarity in how to use global frameworks at the local level is what seems to be the most difficult part in localizing the SDGs. At first sight, the lack of official templates on how to conduct a VLR may be perceived as challenging. However, the flexible character of the process is also what makes it applicable to the local context.

Cities and municipalities have highlighted a concern that Voluntary Local (as well as Sub-national and National) Reviews risk becoming a symbolic one-time occurance. However, for less resourced and less advantaged cities, this report has illustrated that the VLR can be a necessary first step to begin working with the SDGs on the local level. Introducing cities to a simple and flexible framework that does not necessarily require great quantities of resources is a way to encourage cities to begin their reporting – leaving no city behind.

For LRGs that already have an ongoing SDG work, the VLR process can function as an important tool to reinvigorate the sustainability work and to benchmark the SDG implementation process, track progress and create environments for cross-sectorial partnerships.

As mentioned in the introduction, the regions investigated in this report are diverse in terms of socio economic and political institutional contexts as well as in terms of sustainable development. Hence, there is a need for flexible tools and frameworks to evaluate and report on how far they have come in their sustainable development. Based on the good examples highlighted in this report, conducting a VLR which includes an exchange of experiences and knowledge as part of the process is a recipe for success. Sharing practical tips between cities in the region for how to conduct the VLR, cities can find inspiration and concrete inputs despite socio economic and political institutional contexts.

As highlighted in this report, cities and municipalities that have conducted VLRs explain that they started the process by calling other cities that had already begun the process. They therefore highlight the need for a systematized method for this knowledge exchange and peer learning. Hence, moving forward, there is a need for platforms for collaboration and sharing experience and knowledge as well as practical methods. Promoting interregional learning will assist local and sub-national actors – municipalities, regions and cities – in using VLR to improve their strategic planning as well as their sustainability and climate work.

A key element shared by the different cities and municipalities interviewed for this report is to base the VLR on the global principle of "leave no one behind". This principle is the central, transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its SDGs. Working together with citizens, civil society, businesses and academia is necessary in order to ensure that no one is left behind in the local implementation of the SDGs. As such, there is a need for best practices on how to engage the society in the VLR process. There are ad hoc solutions in some sub-national settings, but a lack of a holistic understanding of how to implement methods systematically.

DO IT LIKE

GLADSAXE
DENMARK

VOLUNTARY LOCAL REVIEW

The Municipality of Gladsaxe submitted its first Voluntary Local Review in 2021. The purpose of their VLR was to describe their main approach to the SDGs and present examples of how they have worked towards achieving the global goals within the city administration. Gladsaxe conducts a review of the municipality's goals and targets every year. The VLR acted as a summary of important aspects and conclusions - with both quantitative and qualitative examples - from the two most recent municipal reviews.

The VLR is structured so that the first part covers the municipality's strategic approach to the SDGs and the progress within sustainable development in Gladsaxe. In the subsequent part, guidance on their continued work with the 2030 Agenda framework is presented. Lastly, the municipal strategy is incorporated as well as the municipal goals and targets.

The Municipality of Gladsaxe is now in the process of conducting their second VLR and are planning to submit it in the summer of 2022.

A TOOL TO FUEL

Gladsaxe has used the 2030 Agenda framework to fuel their sustainability work. By incorporating the SDGs into the city strategy and other steering documents, they have raised the bar in their work towards achieving sustainable development.

The SDGs and the strategy have provided a shared frame of reference for initiatives and actions in practice within the city organization, as well as a platform for ideas and initiatives in the local environment through partnerships and action at all levels. The cases and the development in Gladsaxe more generally shows a strategy growing within the organization and beyond as the mutual ambition of the city council and across the organization. Both political and administrative leaders highlight the importance of working together to achieve sustainable development.Gladsaxe has identified how the SDGs constitute a source of inspiration to leaders as well as employees in Gladsaxe:: they get new ideas on activities and projects - and they offer incentives to work together with other local actors in a bottom-up approach.

Because of the fact that the SDGs offer new ideas on how to work with sustainable development in a systematic way, the Municipality of Gladsaxe is ready to incorporate more of the goals in the city strategy. The VLR presents opportunities to evaluate these ideas and activities and Gladsaxe aims to make it into a part of their follow-up for the city.

Hence, there is a need to gather methods and models for successful participatory practices and make them available to cities globally. Making best practices available to a broader audience requires mapping, systematizing, packaging and spreading of methods for how to engage stakeholders in the VLR process. Developing a platform of methods that will support LRGs in the BSR and EaP to use participatory approaches in the VLR process could be one potential catalyst for inclusive sustainable development.

There is also a need for methods for communication between the local and the national level. Although the SDGs are implemented at the regional and local level, a holistic approach also requires that we understand the link between regional and national processes. The national work with SDG implementation and the level of autonomy of the region will create certain frameworks for local actions. Well-informed citizens and an active civil society are essential in this regard, to join their local governments in the transformation and contribute to achieving long-term goals. Importantly, the VLR process has shown to be an essential complement to the Voluntary National Review (VNR) reports to establish local review mechanisms to improve transparency and public ownership of the transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies.

The Sustainability Lab

Despite the increasing targeted action taken at the national level, how cities and regions should contribute to the SDGs and how it can be measured and assessed, it is still challenging in the BSR and countries in the EaP. Only a few BSR and EaP cities and regions have conducted VLRs. At the same time, as this report has illuminated, there is a growing interest among the BSR and the EaP cities and municipalities in using the VLR as an opportunity to boost the local sustainability, climate and environmental actions, while at the same time, capitalizing on the SDGs inherent potential to induce change.

Based on the results of the mapping, Global Utmaning has identified a lack of knowledge and know-how about VLRs. However, as we have shown in this report, there are several frontrunner cities that successfully have conducted VLRs. To capture this experience and make it available to other cities, there is a need for a platform for shared knowledge transfer between the BSR and EaP stakeholders that relies on inter-regional peer-to peer learning as means to bolster local and sub-national actors to use VLRs as a framework to review and improve their strategic planning, sustainability and climate work.

In the autumn of 2021, Global Utmaning received seed funding from the Swedish Institute to develop a project plan and design for an inter-regional platform. This seed funded project has addressed the need for improved knowledge for how to use the VLR process to improve the local implementation of the SDGs in the BSR and the EaP countries, with special attention to its potential as means to improve sustainability governance structures. With help from relevant stakeholders in the region which have been identified in the mapping, Global Utmaning will develop a proposal for a Sustainability Lab – a platform which will build capacity among the local, regional and NGO key stakeholders for how to use the VLR process to deliver concrete actions that will bring tangible progress in the areas of the SDGs.

The aim of the lab will be to improve the institutional capacity and competencies of cities and municipalities in the BSR and in the EaP countries to work with the 2030 Agenda through the VLR process and to provide tailored guidance to mainstream an SDG lens at the territorial planning, strategy setting and approach to sustainability and well-being.

As the results of this mapping shows, collaboration with and between cities and regions across the BSR and EaP is showcasing positive results in the development of urban policies. Municipalities, regions and cities have often more in common with each other than with the states they belong to. Even if the BSR and EaP countries are diverse in terms of SDG implementation and socio economic contexts, the experiences of LRGs working with sustainability is shared transnationally. Working on the 2030 Agenda and engaging in the VLR process opens up a door, inviting cities and sub-regions to share experiences at the international level.

Through networking, learning from one another's experiences, identifying good practices, taking a participatory approach to policy-making, our proposed platform "Sustainability Lab" aims to bring together cities from the BSR and EaP countries, and its neighboring countries, build their capacities and better equip them to work on the localization of the SDGs and and contribute to sustainable development and the creation of resilient and sustainable societies.

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