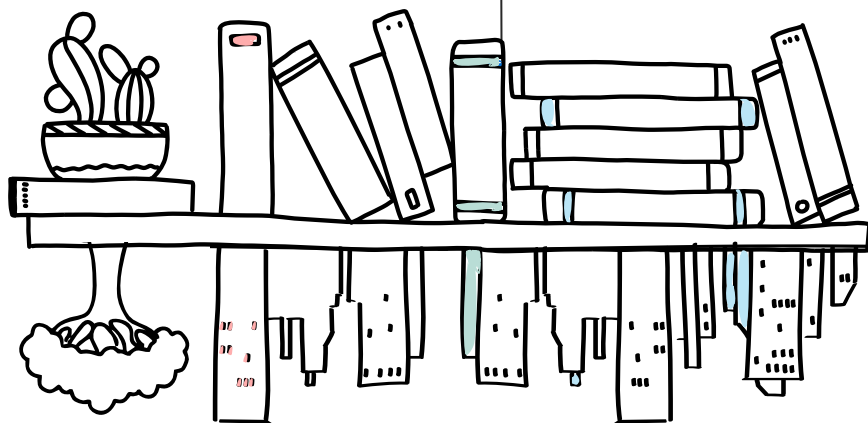# Action-Oriented Voluntary Local Reviews.

A METHODOLOGY FOR THE PARTNERS OF UN-HABITAT

LOCALIZING THE SDGs

UN-HABITAT

Action-Oriented Voluntary Local Reviews.

A METHODOLOGY FOR THE PARTNERS OF UN-HABITAT

Disclaimer

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Acknowledgements

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Abbreviations

CSO - Civil Society Organization

HLPF - High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

LRG - Local and Regional Government[1]

LRGA - Local and Regional Government Association

LRGN - Local and Regional Government Network

MLG - Multilevel Governance

NGO - Non-Governmental Organization

NUA - New Urban Agenda

SDG - Sustainable Development Goal

UCLG - United Cities and Local Governments

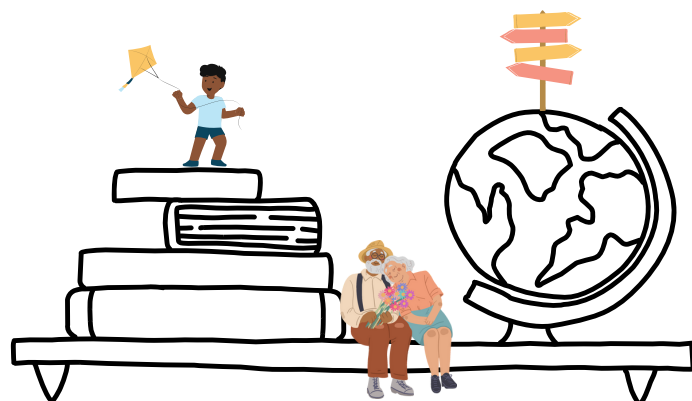UMF - Global Urban Monitoring Framework

UN - United Nations

UNDESA - United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs

VLR - Voluntary Local Review

VNR - Voluntary National Review

VSR - Voluntary Subnational Review

1. Local and Regional Government acts as a commonly used umbrella term to describe all governments at the subnational level including municipal, metropolitan and regional governments

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the global community has grappled with a succession of crises, confronting an evolving and demanding landscape. While certain challenges were inevitable, others were precipitated by our decisions and our inability to respond promptly and fulfil our obligations with due diligence. A harsh reality unfolds as approximately one-third of all food produced for human consumption is wasted or lost annually. Simultaneously, global hunger has surged in levels not seen since 2005, and 2.2 billion people still lack access to safe drinking water. The emergence of 165 million new slum dwellers over two decades, culminating in a total of 1 billion in 2020, adds another layer to the pressing concerns we face[1].

It is not a surprise that the latest report on SDG progress paints a pessimistic picture, with only approximately 12% of the SDGs being on track to meet their targets by 2030, leaving more than half the world behind [2]. The 2023 Global Sustainability Report further underscores this disconcerting trend, revealing a deterioration across many Goals from 2020 to 2023 [3].

These trends emphasize the importance of immediate action in addressing emergencies and aiding long-term recovery and development. Prioritizing proximity-based actions ensures the fundamental principle of not leaving anyone behind.

In this regard, the recognition and significance of SDG Localization, along with the pivotal role played by Local and Regional Governments (LRGs) in achieving the 2030 Agenda, have been steadily gaining traction.

Recent declarations and resolutions underscore a growing momentum and commitment toward SDG Localization. For instance, Brazil championed a Resolution on the Localization of the Sustainable Development Goals (HSP/HA.2/Res6) during the second session of the United Nations Habitat Assembly, co-sponsored by twelve other countries. Additionally, the 2023 political declaration of the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), convened under the auspices of the General Assembly (SDG Summit), highlighted Member States' eagerness to "further localize the SDGs and advance integrated planning and implementation at the local level" (A/HLPF/2023/L.1). In October 2023, the Secretary-General launched its Advisory Group on Local and Regional Governments which will work over one year to provide insights on the dimensions of local and regional governments for consideration in the preparatory processes leading to the Summit of the Future.

In this context, Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) have surfaced as an innovative process created by and for subnational constituencies. 'Local' refers to the territorial contexts related to regions, metropolitan areas, cities, as well as islands or even neighborhoods. VLRs are a self-assessment and reporting mechanism undertaken at the sub-national level to evaluate and advance on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals within their specific community or region. They play a vital role in showcasing the essential position of local and regional

1. Rescuing SDG 11 for a Resilient Urban Planet, UN-Habitat, 2023
2. The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023, UNDESA, 2023
3. Times of Crisis, Times of Change, GSDR 2023, UNDESA, 2023

governments and local initiatives in fulfilling national agendas and driving progress on the SDGs.

Since 2018, the global VLR movement has skyrocketed with more than 260 VLRs developed as of February 2024 – representing the lived realities of over 460 million people. The number of VLRs has increased exponentially from 2 to 62 reviews per annum between 2018 and 2023. VLRs have proven to be a powerful accelerator of SDG Localization, strengthening overall national delivery capacities of the SDGs and putting the lived realities of the population at the centre of reporting and planning. Since 2020, VLRs have been complemented by Voluntary Subnational Reviews (VSRs): country-wide, bottom-up subnational reporting processes providing comprehensive and in-depth analyzes of the corresponding national environments for SDG Localization, led by the national associations of local and regional governments.

UN-Habitat, in cooperation with local and regional governments and partners, has supported the global VLR movement since its very beginning by developing research and guidelines; providing technical support; and pursuing capacity building, advocacy and visibility.

In the earlier years, VLRs were often limited to a review of the existing conditions in a given city, metropolitan area, or region. However, there has recently been an increased awareness that VLRs have the potential of being more than just a stocktaking exercise to understand where cities are. If VLR findings are build upon with strategic

recommendations that plug into existing policy environments, VLRs have the potential to act as a roadmap for change that drive action with specific, evidence-based suggestions to guide planning, financing, and future initiatives.

This new generation of Action-Oriented VLRs are powerful accelerators of sustainable development and the 2030 Agenda. By connecting the evidence to action, these VLRs ensure meaningful next steps are taken in the pursuit of a more sustainable, equitable, and prosperous future for all, where no one is left behind. This includes tailored approaches to address urban and regional challenges, capacity building to strengthen local skills, the development of data environments at sub-national levels, and the establishment of long-lasting partnerships with different spheres of government and non-governmental stakeholders such as academia, the private sector, or the community.

The methodology outlines the process for conducting impactful, Action-Oriented VLRs, sharing valuable lessons learned and available support. The methodology is developed by UN-Habitat in partnership with United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) and in close coordination with a wide a variety of international partners. In preparation for the methodology, UN-Habitat has engaged the expertise of ARCO to conduct a global research initiative including a thorough comparative review of the existing VLR guidelines and methodologies to identify commonalities, distinctions, and opportunities for global guidance [4].

4. A comparative review of existing VLR guidelines, ARCO, 2024

PURPOSE

The Action-Oriented VLR methodology aims to strengthen the anchoring of VLRs within SDG Localization and local decision-making processes as well as to the UN's overall support at country level.

The methodology outlines UN-Habitat's corporate approach to VLRs and responds to two specific questions: "How is an Action-Oriented VLR developed?" and "What's after a VLR?".

Building on the experiences of over 200 local and regional governments, the existing VLR guidelines, and on the lessons learned of UN-Habitat's support to VLRs over the past years, the methodology provides a practical roadmap for VLR development, including key phases, tracks, specific steps, and tools. More importantly, it guides users on how to transform VLRs into instruments for action, connecting SDG monitoring and reporting to all dimensions of SDG Localization. As such, this document includes specific sections on how to create impactful recommendations linking VLR findings to concrete initiatives or further investigations.

The Action-Oriented VLR methodology is primarily directed to local and regional governments wanting to explore the VLR process and to UN and UN-Habitat's Offices providing direct support to partners across the globe. Through this methodology, local partners have a tool to kickstart their VLR journey and gain information on available support and possible collaborations with UN-Habitat and the UN. The methodology works in harmony with the existing global and regional guidelines that include a wealth of context-specific insights and practices. It is designed to be flexible to suit different national and territorial contexts, considering potential resource and data constraints, or complementary national frameworks. Readers are encouraged to adapt this methodology as needed and to take ownership of the VLR process for a successful implementation that is relevant to their needs and circumstances.

BENEFITS OF ACTION-ORIENTED VLRS

Incorporating the Sustainable Development Goals into the processes and tasks of local and regional governments may initially be perceived as an added responsibility. However, the journey towards SDG Localization, particularly through the creation of Action-Oriented VLRs, paves a transformative process presenting several notable benefits that seamlessly align with many of the already existing aspirations of local and regional governments.

While the prospect of additional responsibilities may therefore provoke contemplation, the array of benefits associated with embracing VLRs underscores that the process transcends mere task management but it is about establishing legacy and cultivating impactful, sustainable improvements. It serves as a cornerstone for constructing a resilient governance structure that not only addresses the immediate needs of communities but also lays the groundwork for substantial and enduring enhancements. Through this perspective, Action-Oriented VLRs emerge as a catalyst for positive change, ensuring that today's endeavors yield a legacy of sustainable governance for generations to come.

Strategic Planning and Policy Coherence

The VLR acts as a reporting and diagnostic tool that helps governments to identify development gaps and priorities at the local level. By analysing a wide range of evidence and linking it to the goals of the 2030 Agenda, planning and policy-making - at both the local and the national level- can follow a cohesive, complementary, and strategic approach.
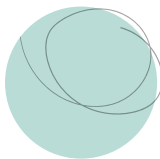
Enhanced Data Environments

VLRs can help to identify, improve, and create local data systems. With data being the foundation of any analysis, a key step of VLRs is investigating which data are needed, which data are available, and who holds the relevant data. Subsequent improvements of the data environment and access are beneficial for reporting and monitoring beyond the VLR process and can lead to more efficient use of resources as well as evidence-based action.

Stakeholders Engagement and Community Participation

The VLR process is rooted in the principle of leaving no one behind and the collaboration among stakeholders at all levels. It provides an opportunity to harness local knowledge and put communities at the centre of sustainable decision-making. Thereby, the VLR helps to raise awareness of the SDGs and strengthens the social contract between government and population creating trust, ownership, and community-backed policy development.
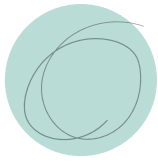
Increased Transparency and Accountability

VLRs provide an opportunity for open and transparent processes in local and regional policy making and reporting. By conducting a VLR, local governments take commendable, measurable steps towards achieving the SDGs and offer an opportunity to be held accountable to their commitments.
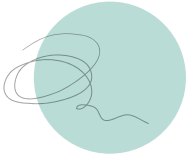
Multilevel Governance

The VLR process enables political dialogue, knowledge sharing, and cooperation across governance spheres. It builds stronger intergovernmental relationships and complements VSR and VNR processes, offering opportunities for the alignment of national and local development strategies, policies, and initiatives. As such, a VLR helps to reinforce the cohesion of the council as well as the comprehensiveness and transversality of actions. Developing an Action-Oriented VLR enhances overall local-to-national delivering capacities for sustainable development, particularly if the VLR is carried out with leadership from the highest level such as the mayor or president.

International Positioning and Recognition

VLRs are frequently showcased during global events such as the HLPS, World Urban Forum, or Regional Forums on Sustainable Development. These platforms offer a tremendous opportunity for international collaboration and peer-to-peer learning. VLRs can elevate the position of cities and local governments on the global stage, recognizing them as essential and pro-active drivers of sustainable development

Common Framework

Embracing VLRs as a common framework for monitoring provides cities and local governments with a standardized approach, fostering comparability and coherence across various regions and jurisdictions. This consistency enables effective benchmarking of progress, peer-to-peer learning, and facilitation of meaningful comparisons both within and between different locales. Moreover, as VLRs evolve with future editions, this uniformity ensures reliable and sustained assessment, empowering communities to track their development journeys with clarity and precision.
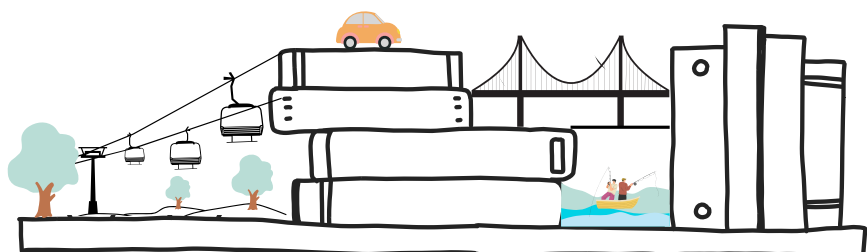
Unlock your potential with Action-Oriented Voluntary Local Reviews

Action-Oriented VLRs take local-level SDG reporting off the shelf, providing evidence-based recommendations to drive change from the bottom-up. They accelerate targeted, meaningful SDG action, providing a solid basis to strengthen data environments, build the capacities and inclusion of local governments and stakeholders, while strengthening overall multilevel alignment and coordination across government spheres.

COORDINATION AND PARTNERSHIP

Many VLRs are planned, coordinated and overseen by a team of partners providing specialized knowledge and management expertise. These partners supervise the process and connect the VLR to their respective networks and knowledge bases, ensuring its successful implementation.

Aa Action-Oriented Voluntary Local Reviews plan for meaningful impact by plugging into existing policy environments and decision-making processes, it is beneficial to connect and collaborate with relevant partners and stakeholders that can provide specialized knowledge and experience. This can include knowledge on the political system and relevant stakeholders for policy implementation, technical expertise in project management and multilevel governance (MLG), or experience in conducting a VLR, VSR, or VNR. Besides their invaluable guidance in coordinating and overseeing the implementation of a VLR, partners are able to connect the VLR process to their networks and processes, bolstering awareness and impact. Partners that have proven relevant in overseeing and coordinating a VLR are listed below.

- **National Government (Ministries / Departments)** can provide the political insights and support to the VLR process at the country level. They are able to connect the VLR process and results to national SDG reporting through the VNRs, lead the national SDG review, and contribute to the long-term development of VLRs in the country.
- **National Local and Regional Government Associations (LRGA)** foster collaboration among their members and provide a platform for construction of a joint political agenda around the SDGs. Additionally, they facilitate the exchange of best practices, overall progress, setbacks, opportunities, and challenges associated with achieving SDG Localization in a given country. As such, the associations and UCLG have led the work on VSRs, which provide a broad overview of SDG Localization in a country.
- **Local and Regional Government Networks (LRGN)** advocate for the interest of local governments on global sustainability agendas and foster collaborative networks among member cities and regions at the regional and global level. They are at the forefront of driving meaningful change as experts on existing policy frameworks necessary for successful VLR implementation and central promoters of creating knowledge-sharing and coalition-building platforms.

- **Academia and research institutions** offer unique access and insights to data, research excellence, and community engagement. They are able to provide guidance on the analysis and challenges in the territory. Their existing connections to community and interest groups can bolster public involvement and ensure local needs are reflected in VLRs. Additionally, partnership with academia provides an opportunity to strengthen the link between academic knowledge and public administrations.
- **The private sector** is able to provide guidance on innovative solutions and expertise in sustainable practices. Additionally, they can assist in gaining access to additional resources and data, as well as provide capacity building and marketing opportunities.
- **Civil society**, including the youth, older people, and non-governmental organizations, play a pivotal role in offering nuanced, real-life perspectives on the VLR process, ensuring that no one is left behind.
- **The UN System** including UN Agencies, UN Regional Economic Commissions, and the UN Country Teams can be pivotal contributors, bringing forth a wealth of resources, technical experience, and context-relevant guidance. They are key for aligning VLR initiatives with global sustainable development objectives, and empowering local governments through their networks.

Together, this diverse coalition of potential partners can amplify the reach and effectiveness of VLRs, driving local sustainable development efforts forward with collaborative strength and multifaceted expertise. By harnessing the full range of opportunities and capacities, a collaborative partnership supports the VLR journey and ensures informed and impactful outcomes.

A PROPOSED WORK PLAN

The proposed work plan outlines a possible roadmap for the creation of a VLR that can be used by any LRG or partner interested in starting or enhancing its VLR journey.

The suggested VLR development process comprises five phases that act as a guiding timeline. Each phase encompasses several work steps, which are organized into different tracks. Three main tracks are identified: (i) data track; (ii) stakeholder engagement track; and (iii) strategic action track. The methodology also identifies cross-cutting elements that influence all work steps and should be incorporated throughout the production of an Action-Oriented VLR. These include: multilevel governance, capacity building, and advocacy.

In this methodology, the VLR process is presented to follow a concrete order. It is important to note, however, that in practice, phases may overlap and that the boundaries between work steps can be blurred. Additionally, each VLR process is conditioned by unique contextual elements that influence its development and timeline. As such, the VLR process is largely context-specific, and can be adapted to the means and needs of partaking cities or regions. It is highly recommended to outline a project-specific strategic approach and work plan for the VLR with specific completion timelines and deliverables similarly to one presented here.

	Months 1-3	Months 3-6	Months 7-8	Month 9	Months 10+
PHASES	PHASE **01** INCEPTION	PHASE **02** SITUATION ANALYSIS	PHASE **03** REVIEW AND STRATEGY	PHASE **04** FINALIZATION	PHASE **05** BEYOND THE VLR

TRACKS

- DATA TRACK
- STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT TRACK
- STRATEGIC ACTION TRACK

CROSS-CUTTING

- MULTILEVEL GOVERNANCE TRACK
- CAPACITY BUILDING TRACK
- ADVOCACY AND VISIBILITY TRACK
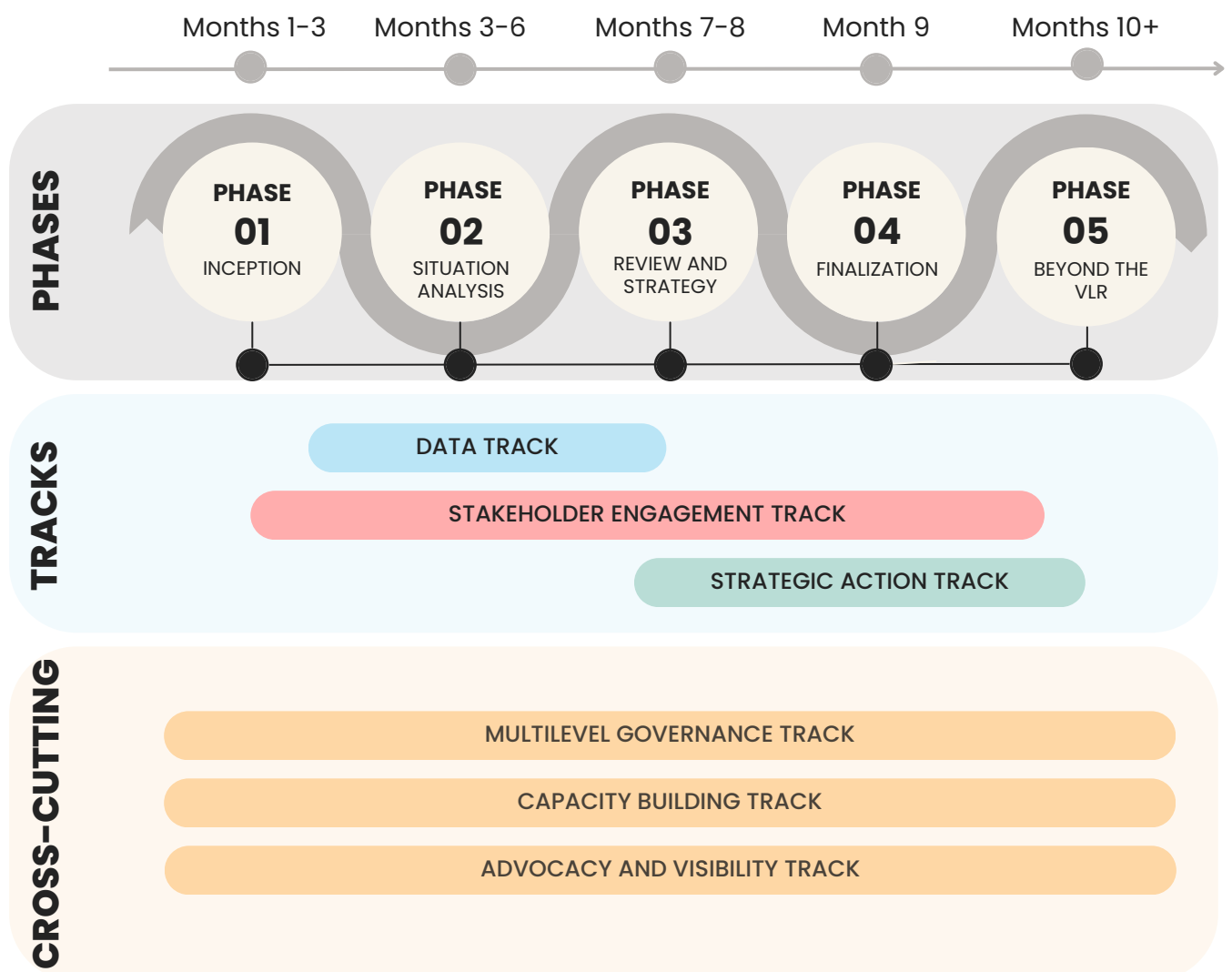
OVERVIEW OF PROPOSED VLR WORK STEPS

Expression of Interest

Setting the Foundation

Alignment with National Level

Work Plan and Deliverables

Formalization of Working Group

Enabling Assessment

Stakeholder Mapping

Stocktaking

Alignment

Prioritization and Selection of Indicators

Data Availability

Gap Analysis

Data Collection

Data Cleaning

Data Review

Data Analysis

Map-based Analysis

Review and Discussion of the Data

Comprehensive Review and Analysis

Review of Existing Policies and Initiatives

Visioning

Strategic Recommendations

Submission of Draft

Consolidation of Comments from Stakeholders

Validation of advanced Draft

Layout and Graphics

Launch

Dissemination

Advocacy

Feedback

Integration

Implementation

Monitoring and Evaluation

Enhance Institutional Effectiveness

Second VLR

STRUCTURE

This section presents the VLR work plan, including its different phases, steps, tracks, and cross-cutting elements. Next follows a deep dive into the different work steps of each phase and detailed guidance notes for each track offering additional information and resources. Supporting tools and links to aligned initiatives are included at each step. The fourth and final section concludes with an example structure for a VLR including a proposed chapter order and a comprehensive list of resources.

Document Key

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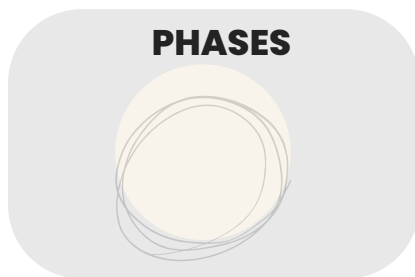
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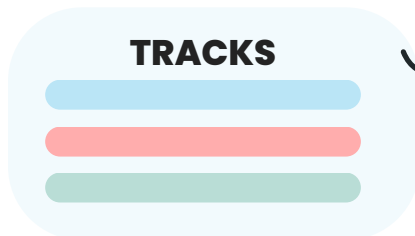
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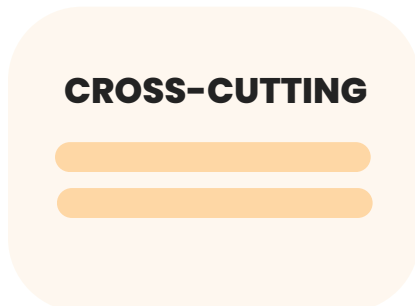
CROSS-CUTTING

WORK STEPS

Work steps coloured in:

Blue are part of the Data Track

Pink are part of the Stakeholder Engagement Track

Green are part of the Strategic Action Track

Steps that are multicoloured can involve two tracks simultaneously.

PHASES

Months 1-3	Months 3-6	Months 7-8	Month 9	Months 10+
PHASE 01 INCEPTION	**PHASE 02** SITUATION ANALYSIS	**PHASE 03** REVIEW AND STRATEGY	**PHASE 04** FINALIZATION	**PHASE 05** BEYOND THE VLR

TRACKS

- DATA TRACK
- STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT TRACK
- STRATEGIC ACTION TRACK

CROSS-CUTTING

- MULTILEVEL GOVERNANCE TRACK
- CAPACITY BUILDING TRACK
- ADVOCACY AND VISIBILITY TRACK

This is your roadmap to the document.

INCEPTION

The first inception phase of the VLR is central for setting the foundation for the work ahead and enabling assessment. One of the key elements of Phase 1 is the creation of a VLR working group and the agreement on the deliverables and financing possibilities. UN-Habitat's budgeting tool helps to establish an overview of the costs to anticipate. In preparation for the next phase, a technical workshop should be held towards the end of the inception phase to discuss the plan for the VLR development and the cooperation across the local working group.

KEY WORK STEPS

Expression of Interest
Interest in conducting a VLR is expressed. This can be driven by the local or regional government directly, but also the national government. If UN-Habitat is involved in coordinating the VLR, this stage may include the signature of a Letter of Intent.

Setting the Foundation
Familiarization with VLR guidance materials. Connection to possible collaborating partners.
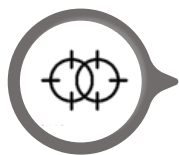
Alignment with National Level
Alignment with national level and the VNR (e.g. by contacting relevant ministries and informing them of the intent to produce a VLR), as well as the LRGA that may produce a VSR based on the local SDG progress. Open a channel of communication and explore options for cooperation.

Work Plan and Deliverables
Agreement on the time plan, deliverables, and financing possibilities.

Formalization of Working Group
Creation of a VLR working group. The exact formation and size of the working group depends on the capacities and needs of a municipality. This step also encompasses the identification of relevant city departments to support the VLR process.

Enabling Assessment
A technical workshop with the partners and local VLR working group to discuss the goals of the VLR, planned stakeholder engagement, possible tools, existing indicator frameworks, advocacy opportunities, and ways to build upon the VLR findings. Possibility to invite other VLR localities (if present in the country) for peer-to-peer exchange.
Assessment of capacities and training needs, and subsequent planning of teaching.

PHASES

THE VLR WORKING GROUP

The VLR working group consists of the key individuals involved in the VLR process. Depending on existing government structures, experience, and resources, the exact roles and size of the working group may vary. In some circumstances, one individual may take on multiple roles, in other cases, roles may be expanded to multiple individuals. For example, it is possible to have multiple data experts in the group if the planned analysis is very extensive and includes specialised spatial analysis. In some occasions, VLRs are produced with one key individual taking on most of the executing roles and the UN-Habitat focal point providing guidance as the project manager.

DRAFTING OFFICER

The key role of the drafting officer is to compile the evidence and write up a coherent, well-structured VLR report. Strong report writing experience and previous publications are of advantage for this role.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT OFFICER

The stakeholder engagement officer is in charge of establishing, managing, and maintaining the relations to relevant stakeholders. They organize the stakeholder engagement forums and represent the voices of stakeholders to the group.

DATA OFFICER

The data officer leads the collection, cleaning and analysis of all evidence. This role should be taken on by someone with strong data management and analysis skills, and experience in working with different data sources

VLR MANAGER

The VLR manager leads the VLR working group and ensures that the production of the VLR and the collaboration between the different partners progresses satisfactorily. They should have a close watch over established deadlines and available funding to ensure compliance.

LOCAL REPRESENTATIVE

The local representative is an expert on the local government structures, existing policy plans, and possible data sources. They should have good connections across governmental departments as well as to stakeholders outside of the government, and understand the local needs and challenges.

NATIONAL REPRESENTATIVE

The national representative represents the priorities of the national level and ensures a successful integration between the VLR and VNR. They are critical to ensure effective communication between the government spheres and can assist with sources of funding, peer-learning, and data access.
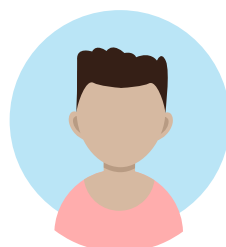
UN-HABITAT FOCAL POINT

The UN-Habitat focal Point should have experience in SDG Localization and the production of VLRs. They act as a specialist on the methodology and ensure effective communication between UN entities, such as regional and country offices, and the working group.

ADVISOR

Advisors may have specialised knowledge about a certain aspect of the VLR process or experience in conducting a VLR in a similar context. Their advice may fill knowledge or experience gaps within the VLR working group. It is possible that the advisor is one of the partnering collaborators.

SITUATION ANALYSIS

The second phase is dedicated to indicator selection, data collection, and analysis. It requires an initial study of existing national and local plans and documents that include measurement or thematic priorities of an area. These will be matched and enriched with the indicators of the SDGs and other available indicator frameworks such as the Global Urban Monitoring Framework (UMF). Subsequently, available data sources are identified, and data are collected and analysed. The Situation Analysis is also an opportunity to involve stakeholders to collect insights on measurement priorities and complement existing data gaps. The Situation Analysis is finalized with a data report, outlining the raw findings or the analysis (sometimes referred to as the SDG papers or the UMF Report depending on which indicators it is structured by).

KEY WORK STEPS

Stakeholder Mapping
Identification of all relevant stakeholders, as well as their influence and interests, and the moments during the participatory process they should be involved in. Development of a strategy/action plan to encourage their participation and input, including what type of data they hold.

Stocktaking
Stocktaking of relevant national/local/strategic or other existing plans or documents that include indicators that the area is already measuring or has shown interest in measuring.

Alignment
Alignment of indicators with the SDGs and the Global Urban Monitoring Framework (UMF).

Prioritization and Selection of Indicators
Selection of indicators to include in the VLR (based on e.g. city objectives, strategic goals, a representation of UMF domains) Possibility for prioritization and selection of relevant indicators by stakeholders.

Data Availability
Identification of data sources, including checks for accessibility, quality, and availability over time. At this step, it is also helpful to understand how data are disaggregated across space and population subgroups. Where data are currently unavailable, indicators can be highlighted for potential exploration through stakeholder and/or community engagement.

PHASES

PHASE 02

PHASES
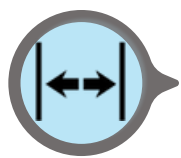
Gap Analysis
Assessment of the current selection in terms of their coverage of the SDGs and UMF domains. If certain topic areas are only sparsely covered by the current selection of indicators but appear important for the VLR, initiate another review of possible indicators and their data availability.

Data Collection
Collection of data in cooperation with relevant government departments and institutions.
Stakeholder and/or community engagement for collecting currently unavailable data or enhancing existing data.
Opportunity to collaborate with or get guidance from other initiatives with special research focuses (See: "Analysis Approaches").

Data Cleaning
Data cleaning and checks to ensure a sufficiently large and diverse number of indicators is assessed. Potential to initiate another round of data collection where necessary.

Data Review
Review of the collected data with opportunity for stakeholders to reflect on needs for further evidence and suggestions for additional or different data.

Data Analysis
Analysis of the data, including assessments of whether indicators are 'on track' with local or national objectives / SDG target values. Possibility to include hard benchmarks for UMF Indicators based of global minimum and maximum values.

Map-based Analysis
Possibility for spatial analysis and the creation of analytical maps showing the spatial variations in strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the territory.

Review and Discussion of the Data
Possibility to present and discuss data, including the spatial analysis, with stakeholders. Capture issues that stakeholders perceive to be of high priority as well as suggestions for improvements.

PHASE 02
SELECTION OF INDICATORS

At its core, VLRs measure progress towards the 2030 Agenda based on the Sustainable Development Goals. For this purpose, the SDG indicators, which were formulated for national-level application, need to be reviewed, adapted, substituted to meet the unique challenges and dynamics of local communities. This can be a complex and intricate process, commonly involving the integration of additional indicators that already exist within the policy framework of a city or region, including those found in existing local, national, or strategic plans. Another valuable resource for city-relevant indicators is the Global Urban Monitoring Framework (UMF), designed explicitly to compile and harmonize indices to measure urban SDGs. The UMF not only offers a comprehensive methodology and guidance for measuring indicators but also provides global benchmarks for tracking progress. Furthermore, the UMF introduces its own dimensions and objectives, offering an additional perspective on a city's development alongside the SDGs. If other indicator frameworks are available, they can also be incorporated and leveraged. The key is to organize and align all these indicators under the overarching framework of the SDGs, ensuring that the VLR serves its purpose of reporting on progress towards the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda. Some VLRs report on all the SDGs, others only on a sub-set.

To navigate the wide array of indicators and facilitate their alignment and selection, UN-Habitat has created a Data Tool that aligns all SDG indicators with those of the UMF and the New Urban Agenda, and facilitates adding measures from existing local, national, or strategic plans into a harmonised and comprehensive indicator framework.

Note that the selection of indicators can change the focus and weight of specific SDGs within the VLR. This can be an interesting opportunity to spotlight certain topics of particular relevance and, for example, for creating a more climate-centred VLR, but should be done purposefully and without neglecting other key topics. Overall, the selection of indicators should be transparent, unbiased and justified. If the VLR does not include all the SDGs or all the indicators per SDG, it is good practice to include stakeholders or partners in the selection process.

Sometimes the selection of indicators is data-driven and informed by the availability of information. This is a logical limitation though it is encouraged to consider whether the collection of own data could fill existing data vacuums and allow the inclusion of topics that are relevant but currently weakly underpinned with official data.

ANALYSIS APPROACHES

Measuring and analysing the data that informs a Voluntary Local Review is a multifaceted process. Typically, the core analysis involves evaluating a time trend to gauge whether a city or region is 'on track' to achieve a specific target or goal. Establishing these trends necessitates the use of target values or cut-off points, which can be challenging to set. Sometimes target values can be drawn from the SDGs themselves, other times it is possible to use local or national targets from existing plans. The UMF is another important tool that provides global minimum and maximum values for its urban indicators that can be used to scale and evaluate local data findings. It is also important to disaggregate data and apply an intersectional lens to the analysis to pick up patterns and possible inequalities within the population.

Depending on the indicator, it may also be appropriate to engage in alternative or additional analyzes. Importantly, there has been a growing emphasis on incorporating qualitative data to contextualise and correctly interpret quantitative values.

Spatial analysis can also be of great importance to ensure the VLR analysis is more granular and precise, providing insights that will then guide recommendations and actions tailored to the specificities of each territory.

How complex a VLR analysis is largely depends on the objectives of the review, as well as available capacities and resources. If there is an interest in specific analysis focuses or more extensive research methodology, numerous initiatives of UN-Habitat and partners, such as UCLG, can provide additional support and guidance. A few noteworthy examples of initiatives that can be integrated into the VLR process are introduced below.

Related initiatives specializing on specific data collection or analysis efforts:

Click for more information
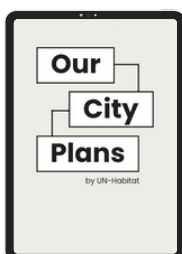
OUR CITY PLANS

Our City Plans is a global toolbox developed by UN-Habitat that guides and supports local governments and urban actors to better understand and develop inclusive and integrated urban planning processes. The flexible and modular methodology is structured in 4 phases, 12 blocks and 58 step-by-step activities that can be adapted according to the needs and local context. It offers more than 60 tools and templates to guide municipalities on diverse thematic areas such as participation, urban finance, climate action, and socio-spatial inclusion, including data collection and analysis with an important focus on stakeholder engagement.

METROPOLIS

The Metropolis Observatory (METROPOLIS), through the use of data, indicators and knowledge generation, promotes the implementation of global agendas in metropolitan areas. Led by the Barcelona Metropolitan Area, the observatory is organized into a set of issue papers and metropolitan indicators.

UN-HABITAT URBAN LAB

The UN-Habitat Urban Lab is a vital component of UN-Habitat's mission to advancing sustainable urban development in collaboration with national and local governments. It achieves this through the Integrated Urban Planning process, which is underpinned by the spatial evidence production process, providing essential technical support for decision-making and aligning urban development with Sustainable Development Goal 11 and the New Urban Agenda (NUA). By translating SDGs and the NUA into practical planning objectives, curating comprehensive datasets, incorporating spatial considerations, and facilitating monitoring, the UN-Habitat Urban Lab empowers governments to make informed choices, harmonize with global agendas, allocate resources efficiently, and monitor progress in the pursuit of sustainable development.

GLOBAL OBSERVATORY OF SUSTAINABLE PROXIMITIES

The Global Observatory of Sustainable Proximities, initiated by Chair ETI, UCLG, C40, and UN-Habitat, aims to address the pressing challenges of environmental crisis, socio-spatial inequalities, and political tensions by promoting the concept of urban proximities. Inspired by the "15-minute city" concept, this initiative centers on creating sustainable urban models that prioritize human well-being, equitable access to essential functions, and climate resilience. The Global Observatory of Sustainable Proximities serves as a knowledge-sharing and capacity-building platform, uniting global urban actors to drive transformative change in urban strategies and enhance the quality of life in cities worldwide through a proximity-focused approach. The program will develop universally applicable proximity concepts, official measures and indicators, a global knowledge-sharing center, and a network to support cities in implementation, ultimately contributing to the Voluntary Local Reviews.

CITY-WIDE PUBLIC SPACE ASSESSMENT TOOL

The City-Wide Public Space Assessment tool offers a comprehensive understanding of spatial distribution, accessibility, network connectivity, quantity, and quality of public spaces at the city level. The tool assists local/national governments and partners in gathering accurate data about public spaces, identifying areas for creation or rehabilitation of such spaces, and developing future plans and strategies. Moreover, the results of the city-wide public space assessment not only provide the basis for strategy and action plan development but also define the necessary resources for their effective implementation.

UNITAC HAMBURG

UNITAC Hamburg, the United Nations Innovation Technology Accelerator for Cities, is a collaborative initiative involving UN-Habitat, UN Office for Information and Communication Technology, and HafenCity University. It is a pivotal component of the "People-Centred Smart Cities" Flagship and assists national and local governments in their digital transformation journey, fostering ethical and inclusive use of digital technologies. UNITAC's threefold approach encompasses strategy, digital tools, and capacity building, emphasizing evidence-based planning and active citizen and stakeholder involvement in decision-making processes. The programme's projects and tools aim to particularly accelerate progress towards SDG 11.

UN-HABITAT'S QUALITY OF LIFE INITIATIVE

UN-Habitat's global Quality of Life Initiative provides an opportunity to refocus on what matters to people and gives value to their life and, as such, add a human-centred dimension to the measurement of progress in cities and towns. The Initiative presents a strategic opportunity to contribute to the action agenda outlined in the Secretary General's Our Common Agenda report. By putting people at the centre of the definition of quality of life, looking at advanced measures related to well-being and life-satisfaction, the Initiative provides a unique perspective that goes beyond GDP, that is tailored to the local level and adjustable to various contexts.
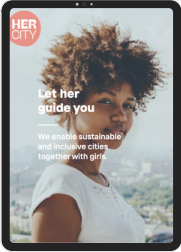
HER CITY

Her City is a collaborative urban development initiative by UN-Habitat and the Shared City Foundation, supported by Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), Swedish Innovation Agency (Vinnova), and Global Utmaning. This programme aims to provide cities with the tools and methods to enhance girls' participation in urban planning and offers municipal professionals and urban decision-makers the means to mainstream youth, gender, and socioeconomic perspectives in urban planning, fostering inclusive and sustainable cities for all. Her City has developed a unique toolbox comprising 9 building blocks for girl-centred urban planning. Since its launch in 2021, the programme has engaged 1,200 users from 430 cities and initiated 350 projects in 120 countries. Her City's next phase, Her City 2030, focuses on capacity building, establishing a global network, and promoting gender-transformative cities. It contributes to various Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and is actively developing indicators to support Voluntary Local Reviews.

KNOW YOUR CITY

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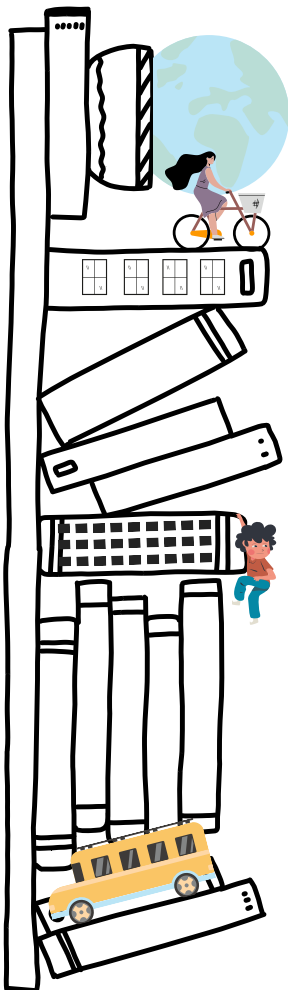
REVIEW AND STRATEGY

The third phase dives into the review of the data and how to build upon the evidence with strategic next steps. It includes an analysis of existing policies and initiatives that have contributed to the current status in a given territory and subsequent suggestion for what to keep, strengthen, improve, or abolish. Typically, the recommendations for next steps are guided by a 'vision' that can be drawn from previous documents or developed as part of the VLR process.

KEY WORK STEPS

Comprehensive Review and Analysis
Complete review and analysis of all collected data and their relationship to the SDGs (and the UMF domains). Production of the so-called 'SDG Discussion Papers' which comprise the findings per each SDGs including the data and narrative around them.

Review of Existing Policies and Initiatives
Identification and review of current projects and/or policies that have influenced the SDG context and help to explain (to a certain degree) the status of the city or region. Highlight successes, gaps, and potential for improvements. This may include the inputs from stakeholders.
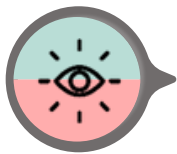
Visioning
Development of a vision for the territory and community, with the collected evidence and current local/ regional/ national/strategic plans in mind. Strong recommendation to co-develop the vision with stakeholders and generate possible policy recommendations and actions for implementation collectively.

Strategic Recommendations
Consolidation of a list of policy recommendations to strategically enhance progress on the SDGs, bridge existing shortcomings, and work towards the developed vision. The recommendations should include specific actions and pathways for implementation.

PHASES

WHAT MAKES A RECOMMENDATION ACTIONABLE?

Action-Oriented VLRs intend to build upon the comprehensive data collection and analysis with meaningful next steps and concrete, strategic recommendations that drive action. But what makes a recommendation truly actionable? Several key considerations can help to transform recommendations from well-intended summaries to powerful accelerators of change. In summary, action-oriented recommendations are those that are practical, well-defined, and have a clear plan for execution and implementation.

Relevance - The recommendation is closely aligned with the context, objectives, and needs of the situation or problem at hand. In other words, it addresses the most important gaps and challenges that have been highlighted in the VLR analysis.

Knowledge - The recommendation suggests a solution or way forward that is informed by evidence and based on successful examples of implementation. If there are no suitable examples, it considers carefully which actions could be a suitable fit for the challenge at hand.

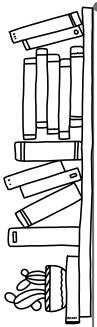**Specificity** - The recommendation provides clear and precise guidance on what needs to be done, leaving no room for interpretation or confusion. Where possible, it designates responsible parties or entities who will ensure its implementation and outcome, as well as a timeline for the action to be initiated and completed.

Feasibility - The recommendation is realistically attainable within the given constraints. It might refer to available resources and time. It also considers synergies with current strategic objectives and existing plans. Necessary resources, such as financial, human, or technological, should be identified or made available to facilitate implementation.

Stakeholder Involvement - The recommendation considers the inputs stakeholders have shared throughout the VLR process to prioritize action items as well as develop suitable solutions. The 'Visioning' step can be a meaningful opportunity to get valuable insights and co-develop recommendations in line with stakeholders' views. This also promotes their commitment to the proposed action.

Measurability - The recommendation includes criteria for success and performance metrics, allowing for a successful monitoring and evaluation of progress. Ideally, it should be specified who and how often progress is evaluated.

Flexibility - The recommendation allows for adjustments or revisions as circumstances change or new information emerges.

PHASE 04

PHASES

FINALIZATION

During the fourth phase, the VLR is validated and launched. It refers to the submission and review of a first (and advanced) draft, including the consolidation of comments from stakeholders and partners. The final document is completed with layout and graphics. Given both the local and international value of the VLR document, partners may decide to translate the VLR into different local languages, while also considering the dissemination of findings for groups with varying accessibility needs. Phase 4 concludes with the launch of the VLR.

KEY WORK STEPS

Submission Draft
Submission of the first/advanced draft for review to the VLR working group and collaborating partners.

Consolidation of Comments
Integration of comments and suggestions. Possibility to present the advanced draft to stakeholders and review the draft collaboratively.

Validation of Advanced Draft
Validation by the LRG and related entities. Possibility to share with the national level for review.

Layout and Graphics
Finalization of VLR completed with layout, design, and graphics.

Launch
The VLR is launched. This can be at a dedicated launch event or integrated into an international and UN event on SDG Localization such as the annual High Level Political Forum (HLPF). Possibility to collaborate with neighbouring municipalities or regional organizations in joint launches or resource sharing to overcome resource constraints and increase visibility.

BEYOND THE VLR

The VLR should be viewed as a continuous process through which local and regional governments can evaluate their achievements and shortcomings in the pursuit of the SDGs, learn from them, share their experiences in continuous process of engagement with relevant actors. The fifth phase of the VLR encompasses the months after the VLR has been published. It entails the dissemination of the VLR, related activities in advocacy and outreach, as well as the sharing of experiences and lessons learned. This phase is also important to kickstart implementation of the action-oriented recommendations and monitor the progress on proposed actions. Lastly, it suggests steps for the preparation of the next VLR to ensure consistent and continuous reporting.

KEY WORK STEPS

Dissemination
Dissemination of the final VLR. Sharing with relevant national and regional government authorities, partners, and stakeholders, as well as UN-Habitat. Distribution of the VLR (findings) with the public, ensuring that they are understood and socialized.

Advocacy
Development of a communications strategy on the main messages of the VLR. Possibility to highlight the VLR as a best practice for other territories in the region (and beyond) through local and/or regional government associations and networks. Connect the VLR with international and UN events on SDG Localization. Option to contact UN-Habitat to be featured on social media as part of the "VLR of the Week" Series.

Feedback
Debrief with working group members and stakeholders to collect feedback and summarize lessons for the future.

Integration
Utilization of the VLR and its findings to inform VNR and VSRs. Establishment of a communication mechanism with the national level to report and incorporate findings, recommendations, and good practices.

Implementation
Implementation of the outlined recommendations through, for example, proposals for policy or projects.

Monitoring and Evaluation
Monitoring the progress on the VLRs recommendations. Thorough assessment of implemented actions and their usefulness to address the context-specific challenges as well as SDG achievement more general. This can include conclusions on cost-effectiveness and impacts on e.g. social equity. Findings should be shared to inform future policies and to improve effectiveness of current interventions.

PHASES

Enhance Institutional Effectiveness
Adaptation and institutionalization of stakeholder engagement mechanisms that have worked well. Multilevel governance networks and stakeholder/community connections are used to enhance institutional effectiveness and support participatory, evidence-based action moving forward.

Second VLR
Development of a tentative time frame for the next VLR in accordance with the policy cycle and context-specific needs. Recommendation to prepare for the next VLR by establishing regular monitoring of indicators or data that were collected for the current VLR.

THE WAY FORWARD

The VLR is a vital tool for LRGs to guide their development strategies and engagement in programmes and initiatives. VLRs serve as a detailed assessment of ongoing challenges and barriers to sustainable development, with concrete proposals for improvements. As such, they provide a roadmap for action that, to harness its full potential, should be linked to VNRs and VSRs. In line, the VLR can be used to design and support project proposals and bids for funding to implement corresponding plans. The VLR also identifies areas in need of further investigation before action can be taken.

To support the implementation of a VLR's recommendations and further expand its potential, UN-Habitat promotes the linkage to other partners, such as SDG Cities, or Our City Plans. Further initiatives provide the opportunity to focus on specific challenges through dedicated Accountability Labs, or the engagement of the community for creative planning, such as the Block-by-Block project. Several other examples are outlined earlier in the 'Analysis Approaches' section.

The key is to ensure that the VLR's findings and recommendations are actively utilized in shaping policies, projects, and partnerships, thereby fostering holistic and sustainable local development in line with the 2030 Agenda.

The VLR is not the end of the journey but a meaningful entry point for more targeted, follow-up analysis and engagement.

END OF PHASES
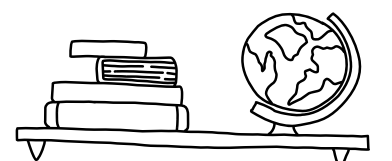
TRACK GUIDANCE NOTES

The Track Guidance Notes offer comprehensive insights into the individual components and practical nuances of each track. They provide detailed guidance on the specific work steps, encompassing valuable information on expected outcomes and supplementary resources. While the preceding overview of the phases provides a broad outline and a concise VLR roadmap, the Guidance Notes delve into the intricacies of executing specific steps, illuminating potential pitfalls and points of caution. They are a complementary, in-depth perspective on the VLR process. This detailed, track-specific lens becomes particularly valuable once the VLR process is under way as it provides practical assistance and tips for the hands-on work of the VLR journey.

	Months 1-3	Months 3-6	Months 7-8	Month 9	Months 10+

PHASES

PHASE 01 INCEPTION

PHASE 02 SITUATION ANALYSIS

PHASE 03 REVIEW AND STRATEGY

PHASE 04 FINALIZATION

PHASE 05 BEYOND THE VLR

TRACKS

DATA TRACK

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT TRACK

STRATEGIC ACTION TRACK

CROSS-CUTTING

MULTILEVEL GOVERNANCE TRACK

CAPACITY BUILDING TRACK

ADVOCACY AND VISIBILITY TRACK
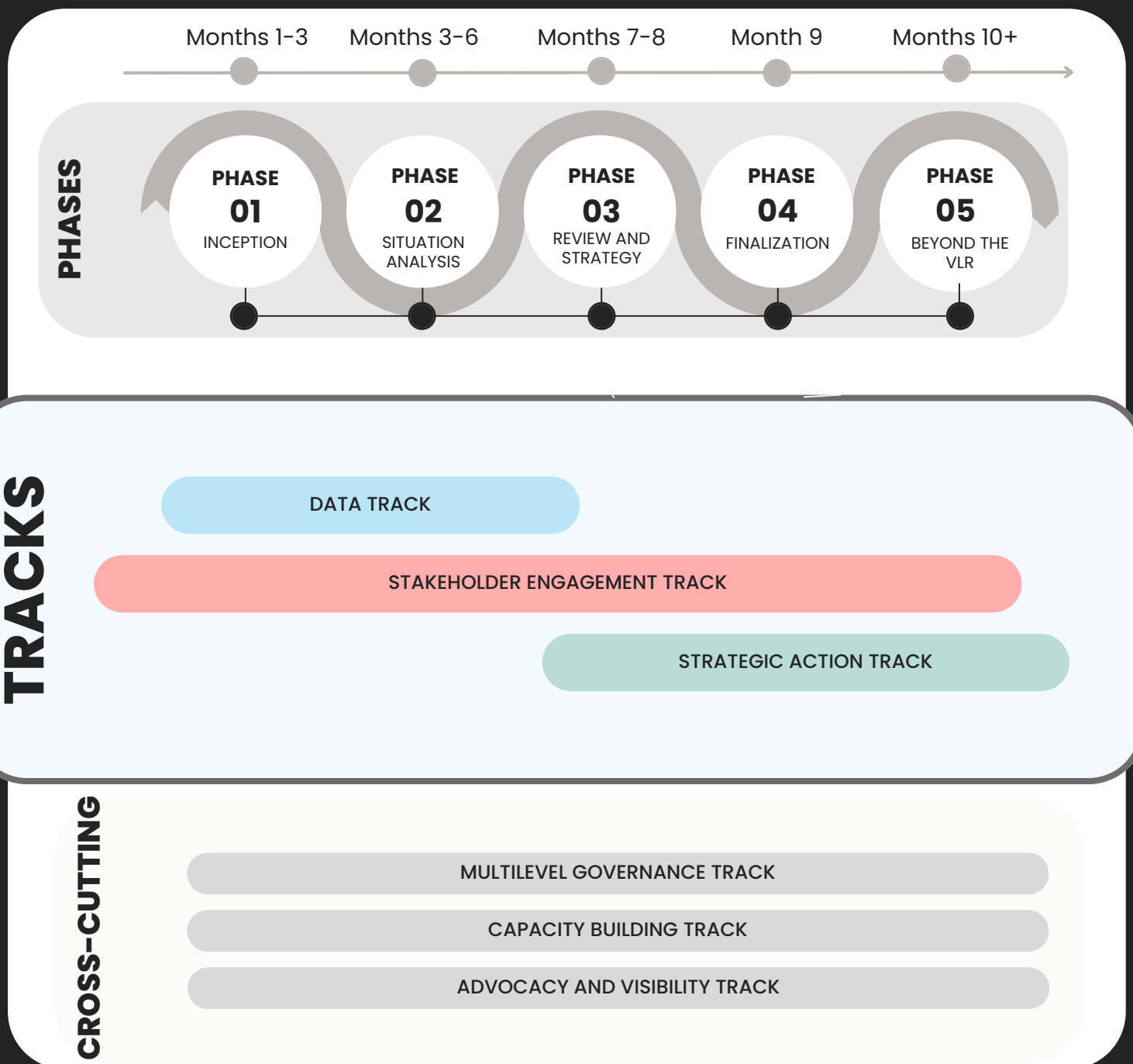
DATA TRACK

The Data Track spans across three VLR Phases: Inception, Situation Analysis, and Review and Strategy. It is critical for supporting the VLR with reliable and relevant evidence, and strategically connecting it to the SDGs, the UMF and the municipality's own development plans.

STATS

SUGGESTED TIME

1-4 months

LEAD ACTOR

Data Expert

MATERIALS NEEDED

Current local/regional/ national/strategic plans or other materials outlining possible indicators.

The Global Urban Monitoring Framework (UMF).

Overview of SDG Targets and Indicators

Overview of possible Data Sources and Repositories

OUTPUTS

- List of indicators for the VLR cross-referenced with the SDGs, UMF and other relevant plans.
- List of indicators for which additional data are required.
- Overview of the SDGs and UMF domains that are covered by the selected indicators (foundation for gap analysis/ justification for a well-rounded selection).
- SDG Reports, which are summaries of all analyzed data for each SDG under investigation.

TOOL

The **Data Tool** supports the first seven steps of the Data Track and produces a comprehensive list of indicators for the VLR that are automatically aligned with the SDGs, the UMF, and existing national/ local/ strategic plans. It streamlines the selection process and assists the pairing of indicators with appropriate data sources.

TRACKS

KEY WORK STEPS

Stocktaking

1. Familiarize with existing local/national/strategic plans that cover the municipality.

    a. Identify strategic priorities that should be integrated and highlighted in the VLR.

    b. Identify local/national/strategic targets and indicators that are currently being measured and are aimed to be measured in the future.

Alignment

2. Familiarize with the SDG targets and indicators as well as the UMF indicators.

    a. Ideally identify synergies and where SDGs and UMF targets overlap to emphasizes these links and the importance of such indicators for the VLR.

3. Match the local/national/strategic targets and indicators with the SDGs and the UMF.

    b. Identify whether certain local targets are equivalent to SDG and/or UMF targets and highlight these for the inclusion in the VLR.

Prioritization and Selection of Indicators

4. Make an initial selection of indicators to include in the VLR based on e.g. city objectives, strategic goals, a representation of UMF domains, or existing measurement priorities.

5. Possibility for prioritization and selection of relevant indicators by stakeholders.

Data Availability

6. Review the selected indicators and assess data availability, timeliness, and spatial scale.

    a. Indicators which were selected to be included and have data available either fully or partly (easy to collect, acquire or compute) should be included in the VLR. Indicators which were selected to be included but for which data are not currently available should be highlighted for the possibility to collect data with stakeholders.
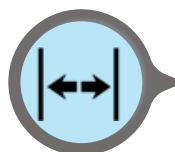
Gap Analysis

7. Assess the coverage of the SDGs and UMF domains.

    a. If certain topic areas are only sparsely covered by the current selection of indicators but appear important for the VLR, initiate another review of possible indicators and their data availability.

STRATEGIC ACTION TRACK

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT TRACK

DATA TRACK

TRACKS

Data Collection

8. Desk Study: Collect data on the selected indicators. This should primarily be a desk study of already available data as identified in step 5. Ideally, data are available for subsequent time points to allow an evaluation of trends over time. Where multiple data sources provide data on the same indicator, both should be noted as a mean to triangulate and validate the evidence.

9. Own Data Gathering/Stakeholder Engagement: Indicators which were selected to be included and for which data are not currently available can be measured through additional, perhaps more unconventional data sources. Often this will include the engagement of stakeholder and community members, which can be integrated in the stakeholder forums that are outlined in the Stakeholder Engagement Track Guidance Note. At this stage, it is important to review the indicators and gather ideas on how to collect the necessary data.

a. More recently, there has been a growing emphasis on incorporating qualitative data, which can be derived from own engagement with stakeholders and the community, previous case studies, or even the internet (though this might raise some challenges regarding misinformation and ownership).

Data Cleaning

10. Identify and correct errors, inconsistencies, and inaccuracies in the collected data. This involves handling missing values, resolving duplicates, standardizing formats, dealing with outliers, and validating data integrity. The goal of data cleaning is to ensure that the dataset is accurate and complete, ready for analysis and sensible interpretation.

Data Analysis

11. Systematically examine the data to reveal trends and patterns, and create a cohesive overview of the SDG under investigation. The analysis will likely involve various techniques, depending on the type of indicator, ranging from statistical analysis, to qualitative analysis, and visualization. For some indicators, it may be appropriate to engage in additional analyzes, such as a spatial analysis. Qualitative data can be seamlessly integrated in various ways, such as by incorporating quotes or creating case study boxes.

TRACKS

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT TRACK

The Stakeholder Engagement Track spans across all five VLR phases. It has two main functions: 1. Data Collection for the VLR; 2. Review of VLR content and visioning. Sound stakeholder engagement is key for integrating different actors, including the community, into the VLR process to capture the lived realities of the population - It is imperative to fulfil the principle of 'leaving no one behind'.

STATS

SUGGESTED TIME

6-8 months

LEAD ACTOR

Stakeholder Engagement Officer

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Overview of possible stakeholders
- Overview of viable tools to engage stakeholders

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- SDG Partnership Guidebook
- Participatory Urban Decision Making
- Our City Plans
- Her City
- Collection of Games for Cities
- Linking UN-Habitat and universities

OUTPUTS

- List of viable stakeholders and their contact information
- Stakeholder Engagement Plan
- Stakeholder Forum Agenda
- E.g. Additional data on the SDGs; Data on stakeholder visions and recommendations; or feedback on the stakeholder engagement process

TOOL

The **Stakeholder Engagement Tool** supports the stakeholder mapping by providing an easy to follow, virtual platform to map stakeholders and plan their effective engagement. In addition, Survey Templates provide an exemplary catalogue of questions to use during the Stakeholder Forums for gathering additional data on the SDGs or deriving strategic recommendations based on the collected evidence. The templates also include questions for feedback and suggestions on the engagement process.

TRACKS

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT TRACK

KEY WORK STEPS

Stakeholder Mapping

1. Identify possible stakeholders (organizations, groups, and individuals) across different sectors, detailing their interest and possible contribution.

a. Stakeholders should represent a broad range of backgrounds not only institutionally but also in terms of gender, age, ethnicity and other personal characteristics.

2. Outlines methods for generating and sustaining stakeholder interest throughout the process, strategies for addressing conflicts of interest or tensions, and expectations regarding stakeholder contributions.

a. Possibility to map stakeholders' interest versus their influence. Ideal partners will have both a strong influence over and high interest in the objectives of the partnership. However, it is rarely so clear cut. By classifying stakeholders in this way, one can determine cases where:

i. Significant awareness-raising is required to turn a highly-influential but low-interest stakeholder into an interested potential partner, or

ii. Significant capacity development is required to turn a stakeholder with high interest but low influence into a stronger partner.
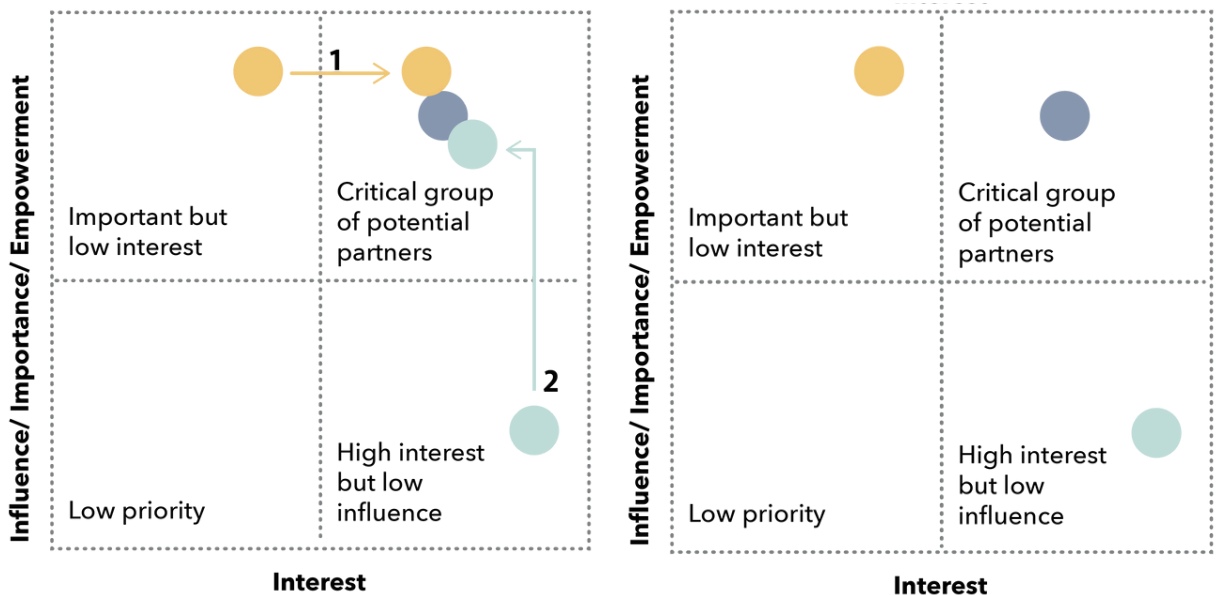
Source: Adapted from the 'The SDG Partnership Guidebook, Darian Stibbe and Dave Prescott, The Partnering Initiative and UNDESA, 2020

TRACKS

KEY WORK STEPS

The engagement

3. Stakeholders can be engaged and involved throughout the various stages of the VLR process, including:

Prioritization and selection of indicators

Data collection

Review and discussion of the data

Visioning

Consolidation of comments on the VLR draft

> With limited resources it may only be feasible to involve stakeholders for some of the outlined stages or combine multiple purposes into one outreach event. Note, that it is always recommended to engage stakeholders at the earliest stages of the process to allow their contributions to shape the subsequent steps.

4. Develop a Stakeholder Engagement Strategy that outlines how you will involve stakeholders at the relevant points. Typically, this will be in the form of a workshop or meeting, here called a 'stakeholder forum'. These can be held either in person or online. It is also possible to arrange bilateral meetings with research institutes or CSOs to help with defining and/or gathering data on specific indicators.

   a. If multiple stakeholder forums are hosted, outline the purpose of each forum. Keep in mind that during an initial meeting, it might be most useful to collect data on indicators, whereas at a later stage, the stakeholder forum could be used to present the collected data and discuss recommendations and visions with the stakeholders.

5. Plan the stakeholder engagement forum

   a. Depending on the purpose of the forum, develop a catalogue of questions that can facilitate dialogue and capture the desired inputs. Consider how the answers will contribute to the VLR (yes/no questions may be most easily converted into quantitive data versus. open-ended questions may take longer to analyse but could provide deeper background on community experiences).

   b. Choose a way to deliver the questions to the stakeholders, this could be in the form of interviews, a survey, a round table discussion, or a mix of the above. There are also a range of more unconventional data collection tools, such as games (https://gamesforcities.com/database/).

KEY WORK STEPS

    c. Consider whether the participants will be compensated for their participation (for example, a letter of participation, transport allowance, or the availability of refreshments).

    d. It is a good practice to integrate feedback and suggestion opportunities into the forums to allow stakeholders to share their opinions and contribute to improvements in enegagement moving forward.

6. Develop an agenda for the stakeholder forum

    a. Clarify where and when you wish to host the forum and any anticipated costs. Ensure that relevant stakeholders are available and have enough notice.

    b. Account for stakeholders with special needs in terms of access or ability to partake in the activities.

    c. Outline all forum elements and activities, including anticipated time frames and lead facilitators.

    d. Allow sufficient time for breaks and questions.

7. Share invitations

    a. Make sure to include the objective of the project, why participation is important, a brief overview of the planned activities, including duration and time of engagement, the expected responsibilities for both parties, and the norms and ethic of the project, such as identifying game rules and formal procedures. You may also include a consent form, giving you and your team permission to document the process.

    b. Send an official invitation by email, social media or other channels. In order to reach out and engage a more diverse group of participants, also consider the possibility to use snowballing sampling, or communicate using alternative information formats, such as sign-language, closed captioning or tactile models.

8. Host the Stakeholder Engagement Forum

9. Organize and consolidate the information collected

    a. Plug in the data into the relevant sections of the VLR (e.g. data on the SDGs is used to complement the data analysis; visioning and next steps are used to inform the strategic recommendations).

10. Reflect on the Engagement

    a. Review what went well during the engagement and what can be improved moving forward. It is possible to collect feedback from the stakeholders themselves for this exercise.

    b. It is good practice to thank participants after the engagement and provide a follow-up as the VLR is finalized to show how ideas have informed and influenced the VLR.

STRATEGIC ACTION TRACK

DATA TRACK

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT TRACK

The Opportunities of Different Stakeholders

Government

- Democratic legitimacy
- Mandate for long-term development planning
- Public budget
- Data
- Ability to operate at scale and institutionalize approaches
- Experts on policy

Industry

- Technical innovation
- Data
- Financial and in-kind contributions
- Brand, marketing and communication expertise
- Infrastructure

National Local Government Associations

- Knowledge and capacity
- Technical assistance
- Political connections and influence

Civil Society/NGOs/ indigenous groups

- Capacity to mobilize and engage
- Local knowledge and experience
- Integration of marginalized populations and voices
- Legitimacy of intervention
- Data

Academia

- Research
- Data
- Capacity-Building
- Evidence-based policy advice
- Strong and global networks
- Direct access to youth and younger adults

Media

- Communication expert
- Dissemination network
- Audience for additional data collection

Youth

- Knowledge and experience
- Integration of marginalized populations and voices
- Legitimacy of intervention

United Nations

- Technical support
- Knowledge and capacity
- Global network
- Convening power
- Funding (in certain cases)

STRATEGIC ACTION TRACK

STRATEGIC ACTION TRACK

The Strategic Action Track spans across three VLR Phases: Review and Strategy; Finalization; and Beyond the VLR. It is critical for building upon the collected data with strategic, and actionable next steps. This includes the development of action-oriented recommendations and a vision with strategic objectives. All items are developed in close consideration of existing projects and/or policies, and the inputs from stakeholders.

STATS

SUGGESTED TIME

5+ months

MATERIALS NEEDED

Current local, national, and/or strategic plans

LEAD ACTORS

Drafting Officer and Stakeholder Engagement Officer, in collaboration with the implementing government departments

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- The SDG Actions Platform
- SDG Good Practices (First and Second Edition)
- UN-Habitat's Evaluation Manual
- UNDAF Companion Guide: Theory of Change
- Act for Our Common Future

OUTPUTS

- A list of policy recommendations encompassing specific action items, as well as propositions for who will lead each action, an anticipated time-frame, a proposed funding source, connections to existing national/regional/local/strategic plans, as well as the priority of the action.
- A vision for the municipalities with strategic objectives and action items .

TOOL

The action-oriented Recommendation Tool supports steps 3-6 of the Strategic Action Track and produces a comprehensive table of a policy recommendations with specific actions sorted by SDGs. Each action is assigned a proposed action-taker(s), funding source, timeline, and priority. Additionally, connections to existing plans are highlighted to strengthen policy coherence.

TRACKS

KEY WORK STEPS

Review of Existing Policies and Initiatives

1. The comprehensive data analysis should have revealed detailed strengths and weaknesses for each SDG. Next, investigate projects and/or policies of the past and present that have influenced the SDG context and help to explain (to a certain degree) the status of the municipality. This can also include governance structures and other factors that may support or hinder achievement of indicator targets, such as political buy-in or social support.

    a. Highlight successes, gaps, and potential for improvements among the current policies and actions.
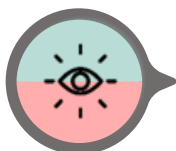
Visioning

2. With current local/regional/national/strategic plans as well as the inputs from the stakeholder engagement in mind, develop a vision for the municipality. What are the main objectives and aims? Which gaps are the most urgent to address? Are there specific SDGs that should be highlighted? The vision can be closely aligned to the achievement of 2030 Agenda or more context-specific.

    a. If possible, this would be a great opportunity to involve stakeholders.

Strategic Recommendations

3. Propose policy recommendations to reach the vision and goals outlined in step 2, and build upon the gaps and opportunities for improvements from step 1.

4. Define specific actions to implement the policy recommendations. It is possible/likely that multiple actions are needed to support one policy recommendation.

    a. This process can benefit from the review of best practices and successful examples from other municipalities.

5. Once actions are defined, think about who could lead this action, a reasonable time frame for its implementation, and a proposed funding source. If the action aligns with an objective or target of an existing local/regional/national/strategic plan, highlight this as well. Additionally, note which SDG(s) the action supports.

6. Assess the priority of all actions (e.g. by ranking them from least to most important).

Implementation

7. As the VLR is being finalized and launched, it should be used as a strategic planning instrument that guides policy and planning decisions by municipal departments.

    a. The impact of VLRs can be strengthened through advocacy and engagement with other governmental spheres (including the cooperation with VNR).

Monitoring and Evaluation

8. To support policy action after the VLR launch and in preparation for the next VLR, progress on the VLR action plan and its recommendations should be monitored. The more precise the actions from step 3 are, the easier the evaluation of successes or opportunities for improvement will be.
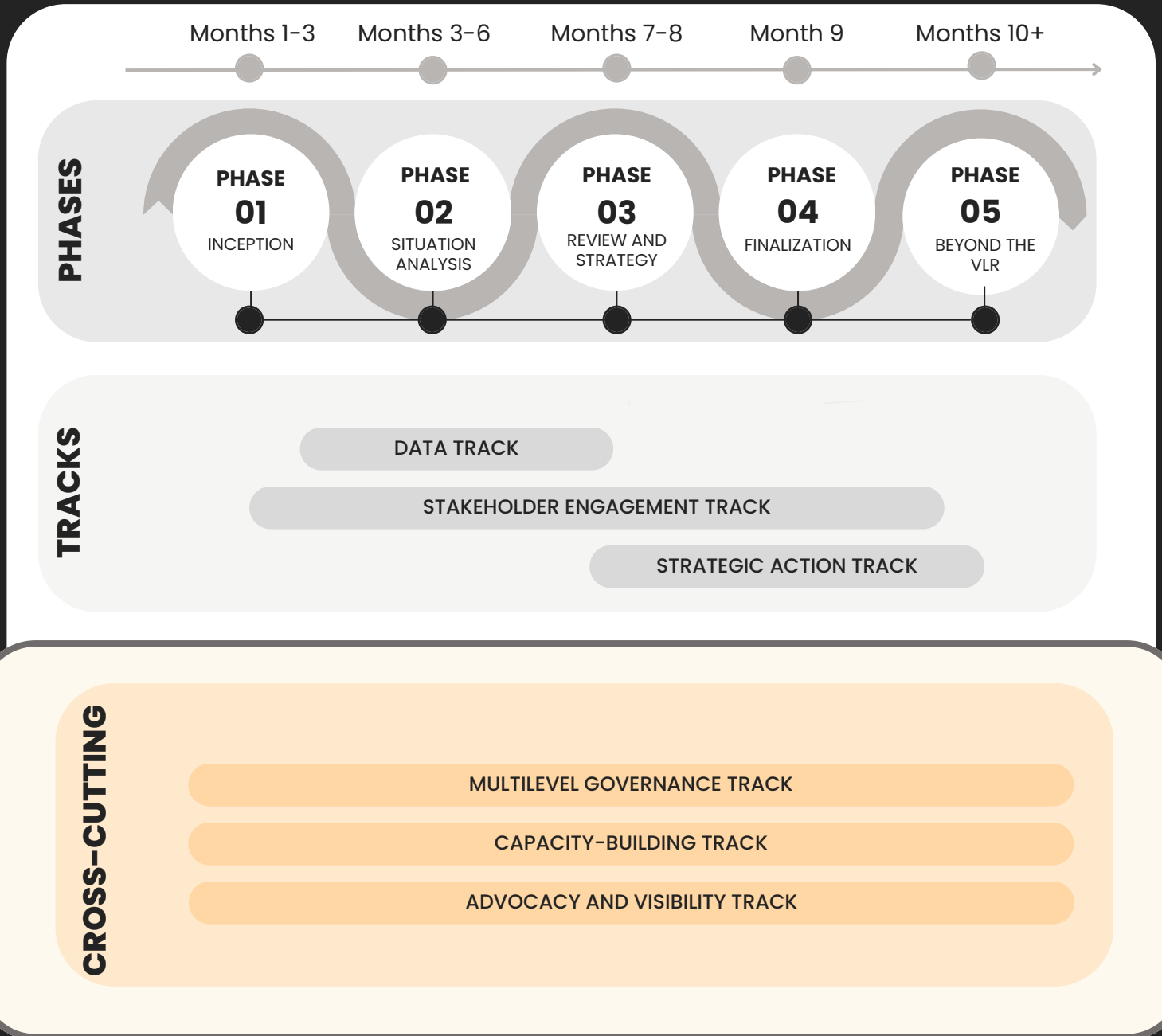
STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT TRACK

DATA TRACK

STRATEGIC ACTION TRACK

TRACKS

CROSS-CUTTING ELEMENTS

Months 1-3	Months 3-6	Months 7-8	Month 9	Months 10+

PHASES

PHASE 01 INCEPTION

PHASE 02 SITUATION ANALYSIS

PHASE 03 REVIEW AND STRATEGY

PHASE 04 FINALIZATION

PHASE 05 BEYOND THE VLR

TRACKS

DATA TRACK

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT TRACK

STRATEGIC ACTION TRACK

CROSS-CUTTING

MULTILEVEL GOVERNANCE TRACK

CAPACITY-BUILDING TRACK

ADVOCACY AND VISIBILITY TRACK

MULTILEVEL GOVERNANCE

Multilevel governance (MLG) serves as a fundamental approach underpinning and intertwining with VLRs. MLG recognizes the intricate web connecting different spheres of government and champions the need for seamless cooperation. Anchoring VLRs to a multilevel governance approach paves the way for inclusivity, empowerment, and collaboration among all stakeholders, from national to local governments, to vital non-state stakeholders, such as CSOs, academia and private entities. MLG amplifies the impact and efficacy of VLRs, ultimately contributing to policy coherence and to enhancing overall national delivering capacities for sustainable development.

> *VLRs can be seen as an outstanding good practice in bridging local/subnational review processes with (as triggers of) enhanced policy coherence and integration mechanisms, paving the way for the enhancement of effective MLG systems for SDG Localization.*
>
> **Multilevel Governance for SDG Localization**

MLG and VLRs act as enablers, allowing local and regional governments to actively engage in the planning, implementation, monitoring, and reporting of the SDGs. VLRs empower local and regional governments to take centre stage and actively participate in the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. This translates into greater influence over policy decisions directly impacting their communities on the basis of locally produced evidence. It reinforces vertical coherence to complement SDG implementation at the national level, while ensuring that the journey towards sustainable development is conducted with transparency and accountability. Effective MLG is the backbone of this empowerment, as it equips local and regional governments (LRGs) with the connections and skills to navigate the complex landscape of sustainable development.

In addition to their participatory role, MLG and VLR act as catalysts for capacity-building and institution-strengthening at the grass-roots level. This entails the provision of technical support, training, and various forms of assistance to LRGs, as well as the fostering of knowledge-sharing and peer-to-peer learning platforms. MLG advances an environment where LRGs can refine their governance structures, improve service delivery, and engage with a broader range of stakeholders effectively. The VLR benefits from these improvements immensely, while at the same time being an instrument to highlight where the improvements are most needed.

The VLR process provides a platform LRGs to showcase their achievements, voice their concerns, and share their unique insights, effectively elevating their profiles on the global stage. Thus, VLRs play a pivotal role in garnering international support and recognition for these governments' commitment to the SDGs and their capacity to drive change at the grass-roots level. This recognition, in turn, opens doors to partnerships, funding opportunities, and technical assistance, further enhancing the MLG and LRGs' abilities to address local challenges in alignment with global sustainability objectives. Additionally, VLRs are an important advocacy tool for SDG Localization itself, including broader decentralization efforts at the national level, and genuine support and reform for driving change at the subnational level.

In essence, the synergy between VLRs and MLG is about facilitating efficient reporting, policy alignment and decision-making on the SDGs. It is about equipping LRGs with the knowledge, resources, and visibility they need to play an active role in shaping their communities' futures. As VLRs thrive on and contribute to the success of effective multilevel governance, they in turn stand as potent instruments for the assessment, establishment, and fortification of multi-level governance.

CROSS-CUTTING
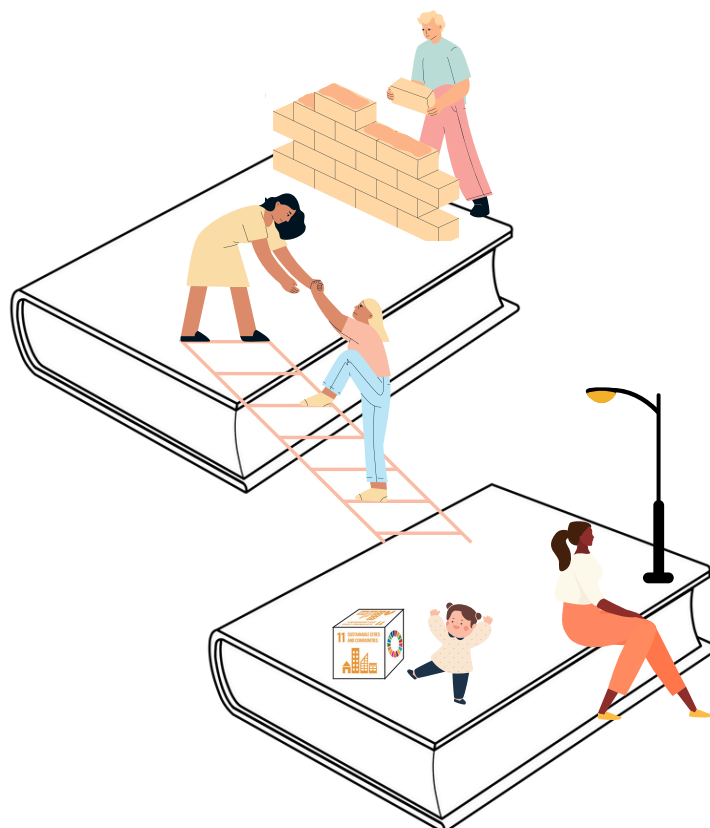
CAPACITY-BUILDING

Throughout the VLR process, knowledge, skills, and capabilities of LRGs, members of the VLR working group, stakeholders, and communities are strengthened. Additionally, the VLR can help to develop data collection and analysis skills, participatory, dialogue and coordination capacities. By investing in capacity building, VLRs empower local actors to meaningfully engage in the SDG process, to generate accurate and reliable data, and utilize the findings to inform evidence-based decision-making and actions for sustainable development at the local level.

Courses*

VLR: Online course (MOOC)

Online course:
Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs)

SDG Localization Online Training

Introduction:
Localizing the SDGs

Localizing the SDGs Modules

LOCAL ACTION
FOR GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT
TOWARDS A NEW URBAN AGENDA

WHAT LOCAL GOVERNMENTS NEED T

Guidelines*

Voluntary Local Reviews

Voluntary Local Reviews

Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews Volume 1: A Comparative Analysis of Existing VLRs:

Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews Volume 2: Towards a New Generation of VLRs, Exploring the local-national link

UN-Habitat's VLR Platform

https://unhabitat.org/topics/voluntary-local-reviews

*Developed in partnership with UCLG

UN-Habitat's SDG Localization and Local Governments team can provide custom trainings on any of the materials above as well as the entire Action-Oriented VLR methodology. Project-specific or thematic trainings can also be delivered according to partners' needs – i.e. how to create a youth-led VLR or navigate data collection in contexts with little official data.
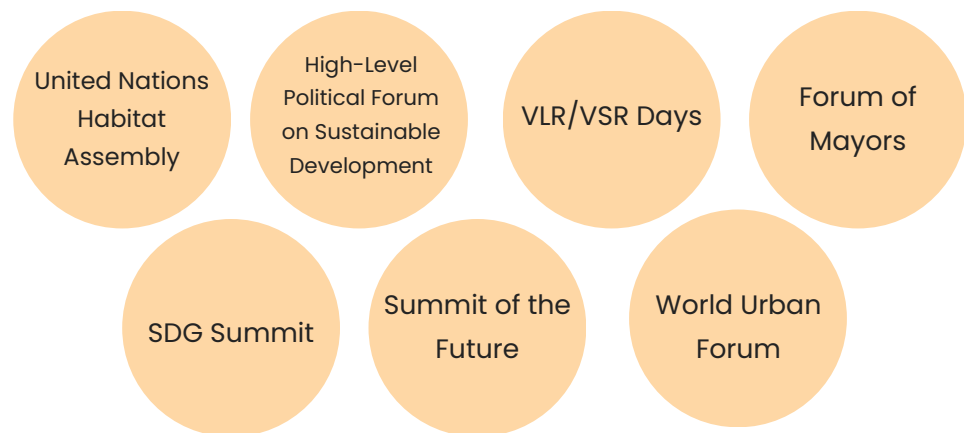
ADVOCACY AND VISIBILITY

Advocacy and Visibility play an important role in communicating the findings of the VLR and connecting the review to the global dialogue on SDG Localization. This involves raising awareness of the VLR and the SDGs, promoting the importance of local sustainable development, and advocating for the integration of VLRs into policy agendas. The development of a communications strategy around the main messages of the VLR and the dissemination to relevant national, regional, or local government authorities plays a crucial part in this.

If the national government is producing a VNR, or the national LRG Association is foreseeing or producing a VSR, it is critical to share findings and suggestions. Besides inspiring other local governments inside the country, the "local message" can become a "national" message if it is voiced by the association in charge of national advocacy.

Another key aspect is the participation in events and forums, such as national urban forums, regional sustainable development forums, as well as key events such as:

United Nations Habitat Assembly

High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

VLR/VSR Days

Forum of Mayors

SDG Summit

Summit of the Future

World Urban Forum

Such events are a great opportunity to share VLR good practices and lessons learned, create knowledge exchange between cities, advocate for more enabling environments for SDG Localization and connect with potential partners, funders, or implementors. For LRGs to attend and participate in these events, there are two main entry points: through their national delegation and through the local and regional governments constituency. The Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments facilitated by UCLG acts as the mechanism through which the local and regional governments constituency deliberate and agree upon its political voice in the international agenda.

By leveraging advocacy and visibility, VLRs can drive increased recognition, support, and commitment towards local sustainable development, facilitating the translation of VLR outcomes into concrete actions and policy changes.

CROSS-CUTTING

VLR STRUCTURE AND CHAPTER PROPOSAL

To date, VLRs around the world have followed a wide range of formats, approaches and styles. There is no defined structure of a VLR as its scope should be determined by the goals and scope of the review. Nevertheless, there are some similarities and practical recommendations that can be derived from existing examples and the regional VLR guidelines. This section highlights some key components of VLRs and outlines a logical progression through the different chapters that tells a coherent and transparent story.

Following a preliminary section with opening statements and relevant forewords, a VLR will typically start with an introduction to the city or region, including its history, characteristics, and engagement with the 2030 Agenda. It can include information on previous or coinciding VLRs and VNRs.

Next, a methodology chapter should describe the VLR process, data sources, and any stakeholder engagement. To ensure the effectiveness of the VLR, particularly as a peer-learning tool, transparency is paramount. Therefore, the review should provide a clear account of all the data collection and analysis steps, including the indicators (and SDG) selection. Transparency regarding the data collection process, sources, limitations, and gaps is also crucial to facilitate seamless integration into the VNR process. It can be of added value to include an additional chapter on the SDG Localization process, including the alignment of local policies with the 2030 Agenda.

The main body of the VLR then consists of the review of progress towards all selected SDGs. Each SDG is briefly introduced, key messages and highlights are summarized, and then the different indicators and targets are discussed. Each SDG section should conclude with reflections on strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities, as well as links to current policies and initiatives that have affected the current SDG status, as well as strategic recommendations for next steps.

A key aspect of an Action-Oriented VLR is that it concludes with meaningful recommendations for next steps and specific action items to address the challenges and gaps that were highlighted in the previous chapter. It is encouraged to include specific examples and link recommendations to existing policies and plans.

A final conclusion chapter, briefly summarizes the main findings and key take-away messages.

EXAMPLE STRUCTURE

PRELIMINARY SECTIONS
Opening statement
Foreword(s)
Acknowledgements
Highlights (no more than two pages)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION
Background
Links to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
and the Localization of the SDGs
Reasons for the Action-Oriented VLR
Aims and Objectives

CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY
Indicator Selection
Data Collection
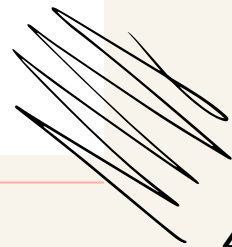Stakeholder Engagement
Addressing Data Challenges/Gaps

CHAPTER THREE: SDG REPORT
For each SDG:
Introduction
Highlights
Target 1
Indicator 1
Indicator 2
...
Target 2
...
Implications for Policy and Practice

CHAPTER FOUR: STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS
Summary of Main Challenges
Outline of Vision
Recommendations
Means of Implementation

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Resources

VLR TOOLS AND TEMPLATES

UN-Habitat has developed specific VLR tools and templates to aid with elements of the action-oriented VLR development. Among others, these include a Budgeting Tool outlining key expenses of the VLR process, a Data Tool that neatly aligns existing indicators with the SDGs, the UMF, and relevant local or national indicators, as well as templates to build actionable recommendations.

- VLR Budgeting Tool
- VLR Data Tool
- Indicator Master Sheet (a cross-reference of all indicators from the SDGs, UMF, NUA, and more)
- Stakeholder Mapping Tool
- Stakeholder Forum Agenda Template
- Stakeholder Forum Question Catalogue
- Action-Oriented Recommendations Builder
- Multilevel Governance Assessment Questionnaire

VLR GLOBAL GUIDELINES

The VLR Guidelines provide extensive information on the VLR approach and its benefits for local, regional and national governments. Both volumes have been co-developed with UCLG and include extensive background information and justifications for conducting VLRs. Volume 1 explores the purpose, structure, key points, and output of existing VLRs; Volume 2 adds how the process can and should be linked to the national level. We also include the Global Guiding Elements for Voluntary Local Reviews of SDG Implementation by UNDESA.

● Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews Volume 1: A Comparative Analysis of Existing VLRs
● Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews Volume 2: Towards a New Generation of VLRs: Exploring the local-national link
● The Global Guiding Elements for Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) of SDG Implementation

VLR REGIONAL GUIDELINES

The Regional VLR Guidelines serve as an invaluable resource, offering context-specific information and tailored guidance for cities and regions in different global sections. These guidelines cater to the unique needs of various locales, providing insightful direction and region-specific information crucial for the development and implementation of VLRs.

Resources

VLR GUIDELINES
● Europe: https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/UNECE%20VLR%20guidelines%20ENG.pdf
● Asia-Pacific: https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Asia-Pacific Regional Guidelines on VLRs_0.pdf
● Africa: https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2022/06/africavoluntarylocalreviewguidelines_2022_en.pdf
● Arab States: Upcoming

A COMPARATIVE REVIEW OF EXISTING VLR GUIDELINES
Together with ARCO, UN-Habitat has recently conducted a review of the regional guidelines and provides a comprehensive report exploring commonalities, differences, and noteworthy directions: Upcoming

VLR REPOSITORIES
Studying existing VLRs in specific regions or cities of comparable circumstances serves as a crucial asset in crafting a VLR. The VLR repositories by Un-Habitat, UCLG, and UNDESA present a comprehensive compilation of all published VLRs, offering insights, solutions to challenges, and exemplary practices, readily accessible for inspiration.

● UN-Habitat: https://unhabitat.org/topics/voluntary-local-reviews
● UCLG: https://www.gold.uclg.org/report/localizing-sdgs-boost-monitoring-reporting
● UNDESA: https://sdgs.un.org/topics/voluntary-local-reviews
● The Institute for Global Environmental Strategies: https://www.iges.or.jp/en/projects/vlr

VOLUNTARY SUBNATIONAL REVIEWS
Voluntary Subnational Reviews (VSRs) are processes with which local and regional governments' associations can report on their overall progress, setbacks, opportunities and challenges associated with the SDG Localization process in a given country. While they are different from VLRs, these two processes have proved to complement each other considerably as they both offer critical contributions around local, bottom-up efforts to localize the SDGs. These guidelines for Voluntary Subnational Reviews developed by UCLG provide a lot more detail on the VSR process, including the interconnection of the VNR, VSR, and VLR.

● Guidelines for Voluntary Subnational Reviews

Resources

MULTILEVEL GOVERNANCE FOR SDG LOCALIZATION

To understand the intricacies of SDG Localization at multiple spheres of Governance, this publication UN-Habitat and ARCO outlines how the universal, integrated, and transformative nature of the 2030 Agenda and the 17 SDGs requires governments to work across policy domains and governance levels, and to cooperate with a wide variety of stakeholders

● Multilevel Governance for SDG Localization

LEARNING MATERIALS FOR LOCAL AND REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS

Three resources are highlighted. First, a course designed to provide Local and Regional Governments interested in developing their Voluntary Local Reviews with key information and a few directions and recommendations. Second, the Training of Trainers modules developed to guide trainings on the SDG Localization process in all its dimensions. Third, a crash course on the New Urban Agenda.

● Online Course on Voluntary Local Reviews
● Localizing the SDGs Modules
● New Urban Agenda Crash Course (currently under maintenance)
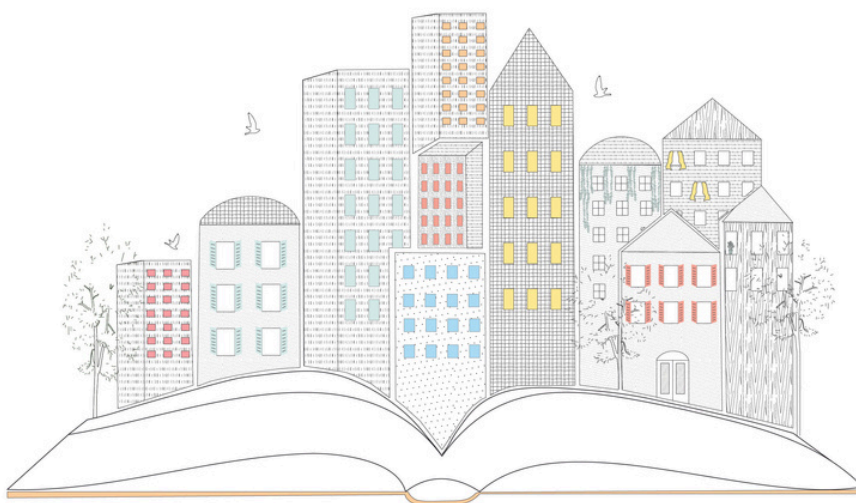
Appendix: VLR Glossary

Multilevel Governance Multilevel governance is the dispersion of authority within and beyond national states. It concerns the vertical and horizontal integration of governance systems, necessary to enable efficient policy making, service delivery, and cohesive leadership by and among all spheres of governance.

Partner A key individual or organization involved in the strategic planning, coordinating and overseeing of the VLR, often alongside a team of other partners. Partners provide specialized knowledge and expertise, and connect the VLR to their respective networks and knowledge bases, ensuring its successful implementation.

SDG Paper A summary of the data findings and analysis under a specific SDG. Typically, the main body of the VLR will consist of multiple SDG papers

Stakeholder An individual with local knowledge and expertise that is influenced by the VLR. This can be members of the community holding information on the lived realities on the ground, or members of the local government, academia, private sector, etc. holding more specialized knowledge about a specific section of the local region.

Stakeholder Forum An event that brings stakeholders together to contribute to the VLR. These can be either in person or online. Contributions can be for different purposes such as defining the focus and goal of the VLR, collecting additional data on the SDGs, or reviewing the initial findings and developing recommendations and next steps.

UMF The Global Urban Monitoring Framework, commonly referred to as the UMF, is a comprehensive indicator framework designed to assess and measure the urban environment, providing a standardized methodology for monitoring progress and ensuring sustainable urbanization.

UMF Report A preliminary or additional report summarizing the findings of the VLR through the UMF lens, meaning that it is structured by the UMF domains rather than the SDGs, and may focus only or predominantly on UMF indicators.

Working Group The key individuals involved in the VLR creation. Depending on existing government structures, experience, and resources the exact roles and size of the working group may vary. In some circumstances one individual may take on multiple roles, in other roles may be expanded to multiple individuals.

UN-Habitat's VLR
Platform
www.unhabitat.org/topic
s/voluntary-local-
reviews

UN-Habitat's SDG
Localization Platform
www.sdglocalization.
org

Action-Oriented Voluntary Local Reviews.

A METHODOLOGY FOR THE PARTNERS OF UN-HABITAT

LOCALIZING THE SDGs

UN-HABITAT