



Transformative localization to accelerate the 2030 Agenda: Key lessons from the Voluntary Local Reviews and Voluntary National Reviews processes in Kenya, Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe

Prepared by Rogers Dhliwayo (UNDP Economics Advisor, South Africa) for presentation at the UNECA, UNDESA, UN-Habitat, United Nations Office of Special Adviser on Africa, Africa Union and APRM Preparatory regional workshop on voluntary national and local reviews: strengthening integration and reporting on the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 - in the session, "Local-level reporting to accelerate implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals: how voluntary local reviews contribute to voluntary national reviews, 22 April 2024, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (Hybrid)

The relevance of SDG localization

“ As we consider ways to make multilateral institutions more effective, and to meet the current and future challenges facing people and planet, we need the perspectives and engagement of local and regional authorities ”

UN Secretary-General, António Guterres during the opening meeting of the Secretary General's Advisory Group on Local and Regional Governments, 6 October 2023

“ Local and regional engagement, action and multi-level cooperation are vital to rescue the SDGs and contribute to topics under the Summit of the Future ”

Secretary General's Advisory Group on Local and Regional Governments

<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/personnel-appointments/2023-10-06/secretary-general%E2%80%99s-advisory-group-local-and-regional-governments-scroll-down-for-french-and-spanish-versions>



Measuring and reporting progress in the 2030 Agenda

The measurement and reporting of progress in achieving the SDGs is crucial at both local and national levels, providing insights into the effectiveness of strategies and areas needing improvement.

Local reporting focuses on the progress made within communities, cities, or regions. It is vital in understanding the specific challenges and achievements at the grassroots level, and how they contribute to the overall 2030 Agenda of Sustainable Development and SDGs.

National reporting, on the other hand, aggregates data from across the country to provide a broader picture of progress. This dual approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the SDGs' impact, ensuring that local successes and challenges are reflected in the national narrative and vice versa.

In Kenya, the Council of Governors in collaboration with State Department of Planning, and other stakeholders with support of UNDP, supported piloting county SDG reporting through Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) in Busia, Kisumu, Kwale, Marsabit, and Taita Taveta counties in 2020 as part of the Kenya 2020 Voluntary National Review (VNR) process. Several counties have engaged in VLR processes to evaluate and report on their local achievements and challenges in relation to the SDGs. Some of the counties that have conducted VLRs include among others:

- **Makueni County** - Known for its participatory governance model, Makueni County has been a leader in integrating SDG targets into its integrated development plans.
- **Nakuru County** - This county has embraced VLRs to track its progress on the SDGs.
- **Kisii County** - Engaged in the VLR process to evaluate its development strategies against the SDGs.
- **Kisumu county** - The VLR process focused on specific SDGs that are critical to the region, such as SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation) and SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities), which are particularly relevant due to local issues like water management and urban planning.
- **Mombasa** – UN-Habitat, in collaboration with the Western Indian Ocean Marine Science Association (WIOMSA) and local stakeholders implemented the Global Urban Monitoring Framework to present a snapshot of the city's performance. The initiative serves as an exemplary model for cities seeking to apply the UMF to monitor their performance and prepare VLRs.

In Mozambique, local authorities have been working on SDG localization since 2016, with the support of the National Association of Mozambican Municipalities (ANAMM) and have supported the integration of SDGs in areas such as water supply and sanitation, gender equality and urban resilience. In 2020, the ANAMM prepared Mozambique's first VLR, with contributions from 16 out of the country's 53 municipalities and the Mozambique 2020 VNR devotes a chapter on these SDG localization efforts

Table 1.1: Profiles of Mozambican Voluntary Local Review (VLR) municipalities (ANAMM 2020)

	Nampula	Chimoio	Dondo	Nhamatanda
Population	653,961	363,336	103,493	62,362
Number of neighborhoods	18	33	10	12
Year of creation	1997	1997	1997	2013
Category	City "B"	City "C"	City "D"	Town "B"
	Mandlakazi	Quelimane	Manhiça	Pemba
Population	59,714	246,915	77,592	200,529
Number of neighborhoods	15	52	21	13
Year of creation	1997	1997	1997	1997
Category	Town "B"	City "C"	Town "A"	City "B"
	Moatize	Massinga	Quissico	Maxixe
Population	64,398	49,635	25,000	129,993
Number of neighborhoods	8	14	11	17
Year of creation	1997	2008	2013	1997
Category	City "C"	Town "A"	Town "C"	City "C"
	Chokwe	Xai	Boane	Matola
Population	70,100	140,000	106,000	1,032,197
Number of neighborhoods	8	15	33	42
Year of creation	1997	1997	2013	1997
Category	City "C"	City "C"	Town "A"	City "B"

The Ministry of Economy and Finance now seeks to extend this practice to include additional local governments to strengthen SDG implementation and reporting at local levels to feed into the next VNR.

Measuring and reporting progress in the 2030 Agenda

In South Africa, the concept of VLRs is emerging, with some municipalities beginning to adopt this approach to assess and report on their progress towards the SDGs. Some examples of South African municipalities that have conducted VLRs are:

- **eThekweni Municipality (Durban)** - eThekweni was one of the first municipalities in South Africa to undertake a VLR. Their review focuses on integrating SDGs into local government planning and performance management systems.
- **Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality** - This municipality has also engaged in the VLR process, providing insights into local governance and SDG alignment.
- **City of Cape Town** – The VLR 2021 assessed the COVID-19 socio-economic response plan, alignment with the SDGs and progress towards the SDGs.

Buffalo City, eThekweni, Johannesburg, Mogale City, Mossel Bay, Rustenburg, Tshwane and uMhlathuze are being supported by UNDESA, UNDP, South Africa Association of Local Government (SALGA) and National Planning Commissions to produce VLRs which will feed into the South Africa 2024 VNR.

These municipalities use the VLR framework to identify local priorities, challenges, and achievements related to the SDGs.

In 2020, two cities in Zimbabwe, Harare and Victoria Falls, conducted pilot VLRs. The findings focus on progress and challenges on several priority SDGs (1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11) for City of Harare. Recommendations called for the City of Harare to consider developing a local SDGs monitoring and evaluation system or framework to track progress. In addition to ensuring that SDG implementation remains on track, such a local system would increase capacity for responsive, transparent, and accountable local governance.

The Government requested assistance from UNDESA and UN/DP for an expanded pilot, covering two rural local authorities and two urban local authorities, which are Bulawayo City Council, Zvishavane Town Council, Mutasa Rural District Council, and Nkayi Rural District Council to feed into the Zimbabwe 2024 VNR.

“ These countries’ experiences play a motivational role, showcasing effective strategies and innovations that can lead to significant progress in SDG achievement. These examples serve as inspiration and guidance for other regions and countries.”

These countries’ experiences build success stories and lessons that are essential for continuous and effective SDG implementation in the following areas:

1. Supporting the preparation of VLRs and reflecting key messages from VLRs in VNRs.
2. Best practices for incorporating VLRs findings into VNRs.
3. Inclusion of subnational authorities in national VNR coordinating structures.
4. Support and advice needed for local and sub-national governments.
5. Institutional frameworks promoting multilevel governance.

Meta analysis: emerging lessons from the 4 countries



Supporting the preparation of VLRs and reflecting key messages from VLRs in VNRs:

- **Integrated workshops and training:** In Kenya, workshops involving both local and national stakeholders coordinated by the State Department for Economic Planning through the SDGs Coordination Directorate, Inter-Agency Technical Working Committee (IATWC), Council of Governors, SDGs Kenya Forum and UN have proven effective in understanding the SDG framework and aligning local reviews with national reviews since 2016.
- **Consistent communication channels:** Establishing routine communication between local governments conducting VLRs and the national team responsible for the VNR has ensured that insights and data from local reviews are accurately reflected in national reports. This is one of the best practices of the Kenya VLR and VNR processes which has been institutionalized since 2019.

Best Practices for Incorporating VLR Findings into VNRs:

- **Formal integration mechanisms:** Creating formal mechanisms, such as intergovernmental committees like the IATWC in Kenya has ensured that findings from VLRs are systematically integrated into the VNRs
- **Shared platforms:** South Africa has made use of shared digital platforms where local governments can upload their VLR findings directly, making it easier for national reviewers to access and incorporate into the VNR.

Inclusion of Subnational Authorities in National VNR Coordinating Structures:

- **Structured representation:** In Zimbabwe, the national SDG coordination committee includes representatives from major cities and regions to ensure subnational inputs into the VNR process.
- **Consultative meetings:** Regular consultative meetings between national and subnational authorities have helped to maintain dialogue on local perspectives on SDGs localization as is the case in Kenya through the IATWC, Council of Governors and key government ministries departments and other stakeholders.

Meta analysis: emerging lessons from the 4 countries

Support and advice needed for local and sub-national governments:

- **Capacity building:** Training in data collection, analysis, and reporting is crucial for local authorities to effectively monitor SDGs.
- **Technical and financial support:** Many local governments require both technical and financial assistance to implement projects that align with SDG targets and to conduct thorough VLRs.

Institutional frameworks promoting multilevel Governance:

- **Legislative frameworks:** Establishing legal frameworks that mandate cooperation between different levels of government have ensured sustained collaboration such as the case in Kenya and South Africa.
- **Coordinated planning and funding:** Mechanisms to align planning and budgeting processes across government levels help in effectively addressing the SDGs and AU Agenda 2063.

Country specific examples

Kenya

- **The Council of Governors (CoG) VLR process:** The CoG VLR process actively involves local stakeholders and has been used to influence SDG localization, documenting SDG implementation best practices, countries SDGs reporting. For example, the CoG (2023) Voluntary Sub-national review (VSR) in the process of localization of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Counties, the Kenya Experience will feed directly into Kenya 2023 VNR, with the aim of highlighting county SDG localization challenges and innovations.
 - **National-local linkages:** The State Department for Planning has facilitated workshops and training sessions to build local capacity for SDG reporting and integration into national plans.
- Kenya's integration of county governments in the VLR/VNR processes, where local development plans are aligned with national strategies, showcases an effective bottom-up approach in governance.

Mozambique

- **Local engagement:** While Mozambique has focused more on VNRs, efforts are being made to initiate VLRs in cities like Maputo, where local universities and NGOs play a crucial role in gathering data and facilitating stakeholder meetings leveraging citizen generated data (citizen science).
- **Policy integration:** Efforts are ongoing to better integrate the findings from local data collection into national SDG strategies and addressing issues of leaving no one behind (LNOB).

South Africa

- **Institutional structures:** South Africa has established a robust framework for multilevel governance concerning SDG implementation, with provincial and local governments actively involved in the VNR process.
 - **Digital Platforms for VLR Integration:** South Africa has utilized digital platforms to streamline the process of integrating local reviews into the national context, enhancing data sharing and policy coherence.
- South Africa's use of provincial and municipal Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) which feed into the national SDG agenda, illustrates a robust multilevel governance framework. Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) plays a pivotal role in providing technical support to local authorities on the SDG indicator framework and sources of baseline data.

Zimbabwe

- **Inclusive coordination committees:** Zimbabwe's National SDG Coordination Committee includes members from local governments, ensuring that VLR findings are considered in the national VNR.
 - **Subnational contributions:** Cities like Harare are being encouraged to develop their own SDG-aligned strategies, which are expected to contribute to the national VNR.
- Zimbabwe's Local Government Ministry plays a pivotal role in ensuring that local priorities derived from VLRs influence national development policies and strategies.

What are the implications for transformative SDG localization?

Reflecting on the four countries and other countries experiences, the following are priority areas to advance localization by 2030, the SDGs deadline:

Progress and transcend existing processes: Current localization processes such as VNRs and VLRs are widely used for reporting progress on SDGs. These reviews are presented at forums like the UN High-Level Political Forum and are generally well-adopted, with nearly all countries participating. Despite their popularity, the impact of these reports and the success stories they highlight have not been scientifically validated. They often focus on selective achievements without critically assessing shortcomings or offering insights on how to expand and apply successful strategies more broadly. Additionally, there is a lack of follow-up action plans to address identified gaps.

However, these VNR/VLR processes have shown potential for significant impact. VNRs, for example, engage large stakeholder groups, which can help draw attention to the SDGs and coordinate efforts across various sectors and governmental levels. Looking ahead, experts and practitioners should more critically evaluate and use these opportunities for a more deliberate and ambitious transformation. This could involve using VNR and VLR processes to foster a community of advocates and change agents and encouraging regional and global institutions to support and incentivize the sharing of comprehensive transformation journeys rather than just snapshots of initiatives. There should also be a push for developing more rigorous reporting guidelines in collaboration with local actors for enhanced follow-up and analysis.

Prioritize the SDGs with greatest gains/synergies: As the scope of the SDGs is broad, effective and judicious use of time and resources through prioritization is crucial. This involves focusing on targets that are most behind or can achieve quick gains by leveraging additional resources or bridging policy gaps. Effective prioritization should also look for areas where cost-effective solutions are feasible and can provide beneficial effects across multiple targets. For example, local initiatives, like promoting household solar energy or active transport, could significantly advance goals related to energy, climate change, urban sustainability, and health.

Existing tools, frameworks, and models can aid in identifying these systemic gains and cost-effective approaches. However, there's a gap in linking these systemic approaches to actual localization processes. To make localization truly transformative, it is crucial to demonstrate how local actors can utilize these systemic prioritizations. This approach would identify key transformative opportunities and cost-effective solutions that promise substantial progress across various SDGs.

Pluralize localization to accommodate diversity: The SDG framework has unified global governments under a singular sustainable development agenda, increasing legitimacy for advocacy and the advancement of local sustainable development initiatives. However, the diversity in social values and strategic orientations makes SDG localization a complex and political task. Research shows that local governments and universities exhibit a wide range of views on the value of SDGs and strategies for achieving them.

Where transformative potential is evident, it often involves significant engagement from local actors through pluralistic, place-based leadership and collective action. Pluralizing localization means prioritizing these diverse, local approaches at the heart of the SDG agenda. This approach moves beyond merely meeting national and international SDG commitments to actively empower diverse efforts by sub-national governments, businesses, civil society, and community organizations.

Effective localization requires intensive facilitation of participatory processes, the establishment of evidence-based insights, and navigating multi-level governance frameworks. These efforts underline the necessity of accommodating diverse perspectives and strategies in the SDG localization process.

In Closing.....

Capacity building is crucial for local and global actors involved in SDG localization. Universities and scientists play a significant role by employing diverse scientific methods to assess the transformative impacts of localization efforts and their potential for systemic change. They can also be tasked with identifying context-specific pathways that accelerate SDG progress and advancing research and facilitation methods that foster plurality.

Furthermore, there is a need for education programs that prepare a workforce capable of addressing the interdisciplinary, multi-level, participatory, and place-based nature of SDG localization. This preparation is essential for handling the complexity of the SDGs and ensuring effective local action.

At the upcoming 2024 Summit of the Future, global leaders are expected to pledge significant actions to advance the SDGs, emphasizing the importance of peace, security, and good governance as foundational elements for successful localization. Such transformative localization efforts are key to increasing resilience in the face of crises such as conflicts, inequalities, and environmental disasters. The pressing global challenges underline the urgency of achieving the SDGs, highlighting the critical role of empowered local actors in driving transformative, bottom-up progress.



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