



United Nations
Economic Commission for Africa

Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development

Seventh session

Brazzaville (hybrid), 26 and 27 February 2021

Preparatory workshop for African voluntary national reviews and voluntary local reviews: strengthening integration and reporting on the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063

Organized by the Economic Commission for Africa in coordination with the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the Office of the Special Adviser on Africa and the African Union

Summary of key messages

On 26 and 27 February 2021, representatives of African member States, localities, institutional and global partners, civil society and other stakeholders gathered to discuss the region's challenges and progress in accomplishing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Agenda 2063 of the African Union. The workshop focused on experiences in pursuing voluntary national reviews (VNRs) and voluntary local reviews (VLRs) of progress in sustainable development, in particular in the context of the regional and global impacts of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. The workshop aimed to share best practices from countries and localities pursuing VNRs and VLRs, assist in the finalization and presentation of these reviews leading up to the 2021 meeting of the high-level political forum on sustainable development. A number of key messages emerged from the two-day workshop:

(a) Despite challenges due to COVID-19, Africa is harnessing innovative means to continue reporting on national and local progress towards fulfilment of the two Agendas:

- African countries are in a strong position to take on board and learn from best practices in progress towards both the global 2030 Agenda and the regional Agenda 2063, to report on both Agendas and to accelerate the implementation of related initiatives.
- VNRs and VLRs provide an opportunity to identify and focus on what might be termed “accelerator Sustainable Development Goals”, to unlock achievements across all goals, directly combat COVID-19, and put the region on track towards the Goals.

(b) Diverse country experiences have revealed some lessons for reporting on sustainable development progress in the era of COVID-19:

- Countries must incorporate recent developments due to the COVID-19 pandemic in their current and future VNRs, in order to deepen and update priorities in their planning processes, and monitor and evaluate progress since previous VNRs.
- Countries must also harness VNRs to build and strengthen resilience to future shocks – whether pandemics, climate crises or others.
- Stakeholder engagement is even more crucial than ever, given the meeting and mobility restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and VNRs must redouble efforts to identify and engage with focal points from across civil society, including women and young people.
- Civil society engagement must be institutionalized and harnessed to help build awareness and ownership of the two Agendas, and also to ramp up implementation.
- VNRs need to be more extensively used to capture domestic violence, human rights and other issues exacerbated by the crisis.

(c) African localities are increasingly pursuing voluntary local reviews to localize the sustainable development landscape, bring in diverse grassroots stakeholders and forge links with broader planning and reporting processes:

- Linking of VLRs with VNRs is imperative and will benefit both sets of reviews and the ability of Africa to progress towards fulfilment of both Agendas.
- The African regional VLR guidelines will help to guide future localities in pursuing VLRs and feed into peer learning for localizing sustainable development.
- As with VNRs, localities pursuing VLRs should seek to link ongoing frameworks and plans with regional and global processes, while making the review process as participatory and inclusive as possible.
- Popularizing of VLRs, raising awareness of the reviews and their buy-in through local stakeholders are of key importance.
- An approach to peer reviewing VLRs such as that followed by the African Peer Review Mechanism should be explored, and ECA should examine the means of pursuing such a framework.

(d) Areas of support from the United Nations system:

- Support from across the United Nations system must be harnessed:
 - To continue convening workshops such as the current workshop at which member States and stakeholders can share best practices and engage in peer learning
 - To help countries in preparing their presentations at the 2021 meeting of the high-level political forum
 - To help with monitoring and evaluation activities pursuant upon previous VNRs
 - To deal with new challenges encountered by member States
 - To advocate measures for issues vital to African countries and localities, from financing to climate.
- African regional VLR guidelines finalized by ECA are eagerly anticipated by localities and member States to facilitate continued localization of the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2063.
- The United Nations and other international and regional partners should continue to assist in strengthening data collection systems at all levels to help ensure that VNRs are informed by the most rigorous and timely data.

I. Background

As signatories to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want, of the African Union, African member States are required to review, on a regular basis, the frameworks and mechanisms that they have adopted to promote implementation of the two Agendas, with a view to fostering inclusive growth and development. Member States are encouraged to conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and subnational levels that are rigorous, based on evidence and accurate data, and involve the participation of relevant stakeholders. The voluntary national reviews (VNRs) are then formally submitted by countries to the high-level political forum on sustainable development, which meets every year. Ten African countries are currently preparing VNRs for this year's meeting of the forum.

Complementary to this process, African member States and stakeholders have noted the particular benefits of conducting sustainable development reviews at the district, governorate and municipality levels. Voluntary local reviews (VLRs) have been recognized as important tools for meaningful multi-stakeholder engagement and mobilization to advance the implementation of the two Agendas. To that end, ECA has been assisting local governments in the preparation of these reviews and has been requested to formulate regional VLR guidelines.

Five years into the 2030 Agenda, this year's workshop was convened during the initial year of the United Nations decade of action for delivery on the Sustainable Development Goals, and also after one year of severe negative effects due to the global COVID-19 crisis. The convening of member States and stakeholders at the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development provides a clear opportunity, in the preparation of these reviews, to promote discussion at the regional level, to share good practices, successes and common challenges, and to help chart a way forward under the auspices of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063. For the first time, discussions on VNRs and VLRs have been combined under a consolidated two-day workshop, in order to delve into the specific issues and linkages between both levels of reviews and to bring these processes closer together.

Africa has been experiencing the negative effects of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which has impeded the region's progress towards its sustainable development visions, and the continent's countries and municipalities have been able to measure this progress through the VNR and VLR processes. This workshop therefore also provides a timely opportunity to take stock of the interaction of the pandemic with these review processes. It should be noted that the online nature of the workshop made possible the broad convening of stakeholders despite the mobility restrictions imposed all over the world, and also enabled the inclusion of voices of participants who would not normally have been able to attend an in-person workshop.

The workshop convened more than 150 representatives of a diverse range of African policymakers at various levels, civil society groups and other stakeholders, and international organizations.

II. Day 1: VNRs

A. Opening remarks

The workshop was opened with a series of welcoming remarks, as summarized below.

Collen Kelapile, Permanent Representative of Botswana to the United Nations and Vice-President of the Economic and Social Council, highlighted that, despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the continent is pushing ahead to achieve the two Agendas. He commended the large majority of African countries that had presented their VNRs to the high-level political forum and stressed that the severe impacts of COVID-19 should be considered in current and future VNRs.

Vera Songwe, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of ECA, was represented at the workshop by **Jean-Paul Adam**, Director of the Technology, Climate Change and Natural Resource Management Division at ECA. Mr. Adam noted that African countries were in an exceptional position to link reporting on both Agendas. Progress towards fulfilment of those Agendas was contingent on the close involvement of local stakeholders and ECA was committed to supporting countries in their VNRs and localities in pursuing VLRs, pursuant to the call from member States for ECA to develop regional VLR guidelines. He reaffirmed the need to link the continent's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic with an inclusive and sustainable green economy.

Francesca Spatolisano, Assistant Secretary-General, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, highlighted the critical importance of VNRs in assessing progress in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. While the COVID-19 pandemic had restricted countries in preparing VNRs, she highlighted the importance of these reviews for tracking progress and identifying solutions to current challenges. She affirmed the importance of linking national and local review and reporting processes, and noted the support provided by the United Nations system, including the regional commissions.

Jean-Pierre Elong Mbassi, Secretary-General, United Cities and Local Governments of Africa, appreciated the support provided by the United Nations to localities in preparing VLRs, which were tools for localities and citizens to take ownership of the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2063. He emphasized the need for local governments to strengthen their data collection and analysis, to enter into dialogue with national governments, to harness multilateral processes and to build their own road maps for the way ahead.

Maimunah Mohd Sharif, Executive Director, United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), noted that VNRs and VLRs were key means of localizing the Sustainable Development Goals and the New Urban Agenda, as urbanization was not only an issue of cities, but of driving growth for an improved quality of life for all. She stressed the critical importance of aligning VNRs and VLRs, with multi-level coordination and support from the international community.

Beatrice Pacunega Manano, Chief of Economic Affairs, Office of the Special Adviser on Africa, commended the technical support provided by the United Nations to member States in preparing their VNRs, noting that experiences in that area served not only the reviews but the two Agendas as a whole. She noted the severe impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the region and stressed that discussions at the workshop should put those issues front and centre, in order to redouble efforts and ensure multilateral commitment.

B. Overview of the workshop

Nassim Oulmane, Chief of the Green and Blue Economy Section at ECA, and **Tonya Vaturi**, Sustainable Development Officer at the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, walked participants through the objectives of the workshop, which included:

- Assisting countries to prepare their VNRs by discussing issues, sharing best practices and providing technical support
- Exploring and discussing the linkages and cooperation between global, regional, national and local entities and stakeholders
- Detailing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on sustainable progress and specifically on the means of measuring and reporting on that progress, and collectively identifying the means of incorporating those effects in VNR and VLR processes.

C. Linkages between VNRs, the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063

The first panel session on VNRs featured the country experiences detailed below.

Gilson Gomes Pina, National Director of Planning, Ministry of Finance of Cabo Verde, presented the linkages between his country's national development plan and the two Agendas, noting the urgency for African countries to align political will for sustainable development with the inclusive participation of all stakeholders. He observed that the forthcoming second VNR by Cabo Verde was more than a report on the Sustainable Development Goals, it was a political process and dialogue to accelerate momentum towards local, national and global development visions.

Moussa Adji Maye, Director General for International Cooperation, Ministry of Planning and National Cooperation of Chad, discussed the experiences of Chad in preparing its second VNR: the country had worked to link the two Agendas with its national development strategy and was engaged in the joint monitoring of both Agendas.

Michaël Raobison, Director of Planning, Ministry of Economy and Finance of Madagascar, explained the process by which Madagascar was preparing its second VNR, including challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, ranging from data validation to mobilization of stakeholders. Yet the VNR process had allowed for national awareness-raising on sustainable development activities. Annual national reports on progress towards the two Agendas were very helpful for the VNR process.

The discussion was facilitated by **Charles Akol**, Environmental Affairs Officer at ECA, and yielded the following key messages and recommendations:

- VNR processes can accelerate implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.
- Each country should contextualize the Sustainable Development Goals to its national strategy and plans.
- Priorities should be identified based on both COVID-19 recovery plans and pre-existing development objectives.

- To engage with stakeholders, VNRs should first identify focal points across government, private sector, civil society, women and youth, followed by wider consultations and questionnaires.
- Integrated monitoring platforms help to ensure that VNRs deal with both Agendas.
- In view of the challenges and restrictions necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, countries should focus on the so-called “accelerator Sustainable Development Goals”, and identify strategic targets.
- A second VNR offers an opportunity to address lessons learned from a first VNR, for example by including more stakeholders.

D. Accounting for shocks and disruptions in reporting on COVID-19 and how to reflect disruptions in VNRs

Sherif Dawoud, Deputy Head of the Sustainable Development Goals Unit, Ministry of Planning and Economic Development of Egypt, discussed reporting on economic and institutional reforms and their potential impacts in the country’s third VNR. He explained that issues and challenges relating to COVID-19 – which was neither the first nor the last shock to face the country – would be applied across the VNR, to focus on and ensure resilience. Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals would also be examined at the local level.

Joseph Samah, Assistant Director for Policy and Research, Ministry of Planning and Economic Development of Sierra Leone, noted that the pandemic had led to a shortfall in revenues and in support from governments and non-State entities, limiting the current VNR approach, by comparison with those in the past. Innovative approaches to stakeholder engagement were needed to overcome those challenges, help with data collection and assess realities on the ground.

Belgacem Ayed, Head of the General Committee on Sectoral and Regional Development, Ministry of Economy, Finance and Investment Support of Tunisia, revealed the many impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic had been having across the economy, which would feature in the 2021 VNR. Several studies had been undertaken and national consultations held on that issue, including through technical partnerships and by use of social media.

Simon Masanga, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare of Zimbabwe, noted that the pandemic had affected access to education, collection of data and other issues. Working with international partners, the Government had designed a phone survey to measure the socioeconomic impacts and would incorporate the results into the VNR. In all, 79 indicators to monitor the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic had been developed and applied.

Ercilia Costa, Ministry of Economy and Planning of Angola, concurred that the COVID-19 pandemic had had significant impacts on progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. One innovative means of communicating with VNR contributors had been the use of an online platform. Evidence-based approaches and training measures on VNR evaluations had created awareness and visibility, including across civil society. Data gaps posed a persistent constraint at local and national levels.

The discussion was facilitated by **Sara Tawfiq Hamouda**, Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2030 Expert at the African Peer Review Mechanism, and yielded the following key messages and recommendations:

- African countries must harness VNRs to strengthen resilience to shocks and disasters.
- Local ownership of efforts to address the pandemic are vital.
- Indicators should be reprioritized in response to the pandemic.
- The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic provide even further justification to address differences between current and previous VNRs.
- Domestic violence occurring during lockdowns is an important issue which should be addressed in VNRs.

E. Evidence-based VNRs

Zakari Lawal, Director of Monitoring and Evaluation, Ministry of Finance, Budget and National Planning of Nigeria, and **Robert Ndamobissi**, Evaluation Manager, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), highlighted the critical Sustainable Development Goals for Nigeria that the VNR was to review, namely Goals 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 16 and 17, and the methods used to generate quick evaluative evidence for those Goals. The VNR was intended to accelerate progress towards achievement of the Goals through evidence sharing, peer learning and identifying gaps and good practices.

Ian Goldman, Centres for Learning on Evaluation and Results, noted the value of VNR evaluations, in particular in the use of data to report on progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, but stressed that more extensive research and evaluation were needed to analyse the reasons for progress or a lack thereof. Some member States, such as Uganda, had made use of evidence-based VNRs. Guidelines had been provided to synthesize evaluations and for the conduct of workshops to complete VNRs even under time constraints.

Abdu Ali, Human Rights Officer, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, underscored the critical importance of human rights in the two Agendas. He explained that, accordingly, VNRs must have a human-based approach that was people-centred, non-discriminatory, participatory and accountable in order to ensure that no one was left behind. Practical tips had been provided for member States to incorporate those considerations in VNRs.

The discussion was facilitated by **Grace Chisamya**, Programme Management Officer at ECA, and yielded the following key messages and recommendations:

- As per paragraph 74 of Agenda 2030, countries must ensure that VNRs are rigorous, based on evidence, informed by country-led evaluations and data which is of high quality, accessible, timely, reliable and disaggregated.
- There is a need to shift from descriptive towards more analytical and in-depth VNRs that assess the reasons behind observed trends.
- The implementation of the two Agendas must be aligned with international human rights norms.

- Recommendations of existing human rights mechanisms such as the National Recommendations Tracking Data Base can be used to measure progress through the VNRs.
- Continuing support from ECA, the United Nations and the wider international community is needed in these endeavours.

F. Preparing VNRs for submission to the high-level political forum

Ms. Vaturi gave a presentation of the timeline for the 2021 meeting of the high-level political forum, a summary of the countries participating in 2021 and of those which had in the past, and noted the key priorities among African VNR participants at the 2021 meeting. Given that the Sustainable Development Goals were now in their sixth year of implementation and that most countries had submitted at least one VNR, more information on monitoring and evaluation was needed. She reviewed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on that year's VNRs, other challenges encountered and updates to the Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines. Lastly, she provided specific tips on presenting VNRs at the forum and suggested resources to consult.

G. Day one wrap-up

John Sloan, Economic Affairs Officer, ECA, provided summary points of the day's discussions.

III. Day 2: VLRs

A. Opening remarks

Thokozile Ruzvidzo, Director of the Gender Poverty and Social Policy Division, ECA, opened proceedings on the second day by highlighting that the onus for realization of the Sustainable Development Goals and fulfilment of Agenda 2063 rested with local and regional governments that were at the forefront of the strategic planning essential to attainment of the Goals. She stressed the importance of adopting a localized approach in responding to such crises as the COVID-19 pandemic, and pointed out that VLRs were central to that response by enabling ownership and action by local governments and citizens. In response to the requests put forward by member States at the sixth session of the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development, for ECA to develop guidelines and a template for VLRs, she assured participants that the guidelines would definitely be a key tool for building the capacity of localities and scaling up the VLR in Africa.

B. Regional voluntary local review guidelines

Edlam Abera Yemeru, Chief of the Urbanization and Development Section, ECA, facilitated the session. She confirmed that ECA, jointly with UN-Habitat and United Cities and Local Governments of Africa (UCLG Africa), had developed demand-driven regional VLR guidelines, in response to the need for a standardized VLR template for Africa, given the number of VLRs that were being conducted in the region. She opened the floor calling for feedback from

participants on how best to align the guidelines with local efforts and opportunities for their dissemination and uptake by localities.

Lusungu Kayani-Stearns, consultant at ECA, presented the African regional VLR guidelines. She highlighted the importance of local action as key to delivering on the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 and observed in that context that the VLR was a crucial tool in complementing the VNRs with a clearer picture of local realities and encouraging dialogue on accountability and transparency at local, national, regional and global levels. She highlighted the rationale for the guidelines and template: namely, to enhance coherence, facilitate peer review and assist non-urban localities in producing VLRs, given specific features of Africa such as the strong rural-urban linkages, the world's highest urbanization rate, high inequality and high vulnerability to shocks. She drew attention to another specific consideration for the region, namely, the undertaking by Africa to implement Agenda 2063 and also the unique role played by the African Peer review Mechanism in evaluating key policy areas, including both Agendas. She emphasized that the guidelines incorporated the commitment to leave no one behind, which made it imperative for localities to incorporate protection of the human rights of marginalized and vulnerable groups in the review process. In conclusion, she outlined the three key phases of the VLR process: the first phase was the preparatory work for the review; the second phase was concerned with data collection, analysis and write-up of the VLR; and the third phase dealt with integration, monitoring, follow-up and conclusions.

In the ensuing discussion, panel members shared their reactions to the guidelines.

Carol Wright, of Cape Town, South Africa, indicated that Cape Town was in the process of undertaking its VLR, which integrated a resilience strategy and metropolitan planning cycle that would guide the coming five years. She pointed out that the guidelines were very useful and represented a holistic approach. Cape Town was focusing on minorities and vulnerable groups in giving effect to the imperative that no one must be left behind. She also highlighted the importance of having a peer-review component from an African point of view.

Pascal Byarugaba, of the Uganda National Sustainable Development Goals Secretariat, indicated that the Ngora district in Uganda, as part of the pilot VLR project, had compiled a Sustainable Development Goal localization manual for other localities in the country, and that some progress had been made in establishing linkages between VLRs and VNRs. He explained that the guidelines were very important in scaling up the VLR process and, in that regard, coordination among and support of United Nations agencies was key at the technical level, to ensure that all parties owned the guideline and its implementation. He informed participants that surveys and evaluations were integrated in the national framework to monitor national and Sustainable Development Goal indicators. He recommended community engagement and the collecting of views from across society, and also suggested that common features that should be present in every VLR should be reflected in the guidelines.

Curt Garrigan, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), indicated that VLRs in the ESCAP region had started in 2019 and the Commission had developed its guidelines, including a consensus document that addressed the region's needs. ESCAP was currently piloting the guideline in eight cities. He described the VLR as both a product and process with top-down and bottom-up approaches, connecting with VNRs. He also noted that ESCAP was working on an alpha version of a website to make the guideline online and more interactive.

The discussion yielded the following key messages and recommendations:

- Regional guidelines are welcome as a holistic approach that can improve regional peer review and exchanges with a focus on minorities and vulnerable groups.
- VLRs are cross-cutting tools used to create a bridge between development strategies and resilience plans and ensure mainstreaming of the Sustainable Development Goals in the recovery process.
- Linking VLRs with national Sustainable Development Goal coordination mechanisms to connect local and national reviews is vital.
- There is a need to create an enabling environment for local and regional governments to deliver on their mandates.
- Data are needed at both the local and national level to make VLRs more informative.

C. Linkages between voluntary national and local review processes

Amson Sibanda, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, made introductory remarks and gave a presentation on global guiding elements for VLRs. He noted the growing trend of VLRs during the previous year and pointed out that, while VLRs were not part of the high-level political forum process, the ongoing reform of the forum included references to the VLRs and the linking of local, regional and global Sustainable Development Goal efforts. VLRs had been discussed during the 2020 meeting of the forum and had been highlighted in the president's summary as useful tools for enhancing local commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals. He also pointed out that the Department of Economic and Social Affairs had developed global guiding elements for VLRs, which provided a proposed structure for reports and a checklist of issues that could be reflected in the process. The guidelines had fostered dialogue between local and national reviews. He further explained that VLRs provided a fuller picture of situations at the grassroots level and served as valuable sources of data which would help national governments to assess and address geographical inequalities, thereby catering to the needs of the most marginalized groups. In conclusion, he recognized the importance of workshops such as the current one in bringing together different localities and local governments in using the Sustainable Development Goals as a common language for engaging with one another and with partners.

Shipra Narang Suri, Chief of Urban Practices, UN-Habitat, noted the growing number of VLRs, which were enabling a new type of political dialogue and serving as a tool for a new social contract and strengthened commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals. She highlighted that VLRs could showcase the leadership that local and regional governments were taking in their efforts to achieve the Goals. Where VLR-VNR linkages were concerned, she noted that the discussions on the reform of the high-level political forum were a positive sign of growing political will and evidence that the United Nations resident coordinators were making increasing efforts to include the VLRs in the VNRs. She explained that UN-Habitat had developed an urban monitoring framework with sets of comparable and contextualized indicators for local monitoring.

Following those two presentations, breakout sessions were organized to prepare three sets of key messages and recommendations, as detailed below.

1. Best ways to integrate VLRs into the VNRs process

- Awareness-raising is of key importance: in order for the VLRs to boost progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, local government officials, citizens, city employees and all relevant stakeholders need to have the requisite knowledge to fully engage in efforts to achieve the Goals and relevant tools and documents must be translated into local languages.
- Political will and commitment is needed at all levels of government and efforts must be made to identify champion cities and districts to foster a sense of ownership.
- Representatives of local governments must be engaged in the national Sustainable Development Goal coordination mechanisms so that they are informed of national activities and will also be able to feed in the findings of VLRs into the VNRs.
- VLRs are vital for grassroots community engagement at different levels.
- More regular workshops should be organized to strengthen linkages between local and national governments.
- Consideration should be given to the integration of local plans and indicators in the national development plan.
- VLRs should officially be part of the high-level political forum process, in order to accommodate the growing interest in those reviews.
- Importance of decentralization to make sure that development, VNRs and VLRs start with the people at the local level.

2. Peer review mechanism for VLRs

- The approach of the African Peer Review Mechanism must be adapted for VLRs.
- South Africa has encouraged use of the African Peer Review Mechanism reporting mode and local provinces have been carrying out local reporting and then presenting these reports at the national level.
- ECA should explore how to apply the African Peer Review Mechanism approach to the VLR context.
- Peer review is voluntary and it could be challenging to persuade member States to take part in the review; the process requires buy-in by member States.
- The right balance must be struck, to avoid the impression that the sovereignty of member States is being encroached upon and the feeling that they are being sanctioned.
- National-level VLR workshops should be organized as a way of connecting with the VNRs and influencing the peer -review process.

3. Support needed from the United Nations to strengthen the VLR process

- United Nations resident coordinators play an important role in strengthening the localization efforts through coordination with other United Nations entities.
- It is vital for the VLR process to make use of support from all development partners.

- The United Nations should focus on ensuring that the support provided is beneficial to local governments and communities. Moreover, the support should also address the integration of Agenda 2063 in local-level efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.
- The United Nations should channel its support through a clear structure and framework and strengthen the subnational groups for them to develop their own plans with clear emphasis and communication on the importance of local groups to accelerating progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

D. Voluntary local review preparation processes and post-review actions: how voluntary local reviews can inform policies to accelerate implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, and how they can be used as a basis for future reviews

Mariana Cammisa, of Buenos Aires, noted that the VLR process followed the steps of prioritization, planning, management and putting in place accountability and monitoring structures. She highlighted the need to contextualize the VLR process and to have disaggregated data for inclusiveness.

Prosper Chitambara, of Harare, indicated that the city had conducted its first VLR and the process was enlightening for city authorities and all stakeholders involved. He highlighted the importance of linking VLRs with ongoing projects, such as the city greening initiative and a project on upgrading the informal sector. For such projects to succeed, it was vital to form partnerships with the private sector and with international partners both to raise funding and to address data-related issues. He further noted that Harare city was preparing its five-year plan and that the plan would be considerably enhanced by the integration of elements of the VLR.

Priscilla Margery Asio, of Ngora district, Uganda, presented the district's VLR process, noting that the participation of multiple stakeholders had been enlisted, including political leaders, heads of institutions, private sector representatives, religious leaders, technical experts, special interest groups and grassroots committees. To link the VNR to the VLR, a coordination mechanism had been maintained between the Sustainable Development Goals secretariat responsible for VNRs and the Ngora district local government, and that mechanism had helped to feed the results of the VLR directly into the VNR. She stressed the importance of engaging the media and the need to focus on education and awareness-raising about the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2063 at the community level to ensure ownership and integration in local plans.

Brian Nyamande, of Victoria Falls, highlighted the realignment of the city plan and budget processes with the Sustainable Development Goals, with the result that the annual budget had been aligned with the aim of achieving the Goals. He also noted that the Government was rolling out the COVID-19 vaccine, which would allow them to conduct their second VLRs as life returned to normal. Victoria Falls was also conducting peer-review initiatives with sister cities to learn more about VLR processes.

Marie Solange Mbang, of Yaoundé, outlined a new project on smart cities, which included consultations on data collection, promotion of the local economy through effective tracking of the municipality's revenue, and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. Initiatives of that kind would help to enrich the VLR with more data and information. She further noted the importance of strong collaboration between local and central government and of efforts to ensure a

decentralized governance system, according more autonomy to local governments. She stressed the importance of strengthening data systems in collaboration with national statistical offices.

The session was facilitated by **Ms. Suri** and yielded the following key messages and recommendations:

- There must be alignment between the Sustainable Development Goals and local plans and budgeting.
- Local and central government partnerships are of great importance for VLRs and VNRs.
- The VLRs must be linked with ongoing city-level projects and partnerships should be forged with the private sector to this end.
- The VLR process must be more participatory and inclusive.
- Emphasis must be placed on education and awareness-raising of the local people on the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2063, to ensure ownership of those processes.
- United Nations agencies must be engaged at the country level to support the VLR process.
- Data collection must be stepped up and efforts made to track the Sustainable Development Goals disaggregated by gender and other aspects, to ensure inclusiveness.
- The VLR peer-review mechanism must be strengthened and a platform developed that brings together sister cities and localities to share good practices and lessons learned.

IV. Closing of the VNR-VLR workshop

Mr. Sloan moderated the closing of the workshop.

Mr. Adam highlighted the following key messages and recommendations that had emerged from the two days workshop:

- Resilience must be front and centre in the recovery of Africa from the COVID-19 pandemic, and in its pursuit of inclusive, diversified and sustainable growth.
- The impact of COVID-19 should be incorporated into the review process of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063.
- Support by the United Nations and partners for member States must be strengthened through the convening of experts, stakeholders and governments.
- VLRs and subnational processes are vital for the success of any plans, given that local governments are on the front line of the practical exercise of planning, implementing and financing initiatives.
- The importance of the regional guidelines as a key tool for municipalities and districts engaging in local reviews, and a holistic approach that can improve regional peer

review and exchanges and linking with national processes and regional and global agendas.

- ECA must uphold its commitment to supporting the VNR-VLR process and also strengthening their linkages with other process such as budgeting to ensure that resources reach the decentralized levels of government.

Mr. Sibanda stated in his closing remarks that Africa was off track in its pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals and that renewed and strengthened efforts were needed, including at the local level. The key question that should be addressed by the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development was how to get back on track in the implementation of both the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 at both the local and the national level, despite setbacks due to COVID-19 and other factors. In conclusion, he remarked that, while there was no official format for the VLRs, work by ECA, UN-Habitat, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and national processes had manifested certain shared elements, which could enrich peer learning and contribute to the robustness of the reviews. Lastly, he reaffirmed his commitment to working with ECA, the African Union Commission, UN-Habitat and all other partners on VNRs and VLRs.

IV. VNR-VLR stakeholder town hall

The VNR-VLR stakeholder town hall, which was held in the framework of the workshop, was opened by **Karima Bounemra Ben Soltane**, Director of the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning (IDEP). In her opening remarks, she noted that the town hall had been conceived as an innovative peer-learning mechanism, to provide a practical way forward on VNRs and VLRs and implementation of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063. Such initiatives had been rendered even more necessary by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the preparation of VNRs and VLR, for the high-level political forum. Multilateralism and the convening of stakeholders were more vital than ever given those challenges.

Mr. Samah highlighted the importance of achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and in that context, reported that Sierra Leone was conducting its third VNR – all three VNRs had been broad multi-stakeholder processes in the context of the national development plan, and built on one another. The COVID-19 pandemic had made stakeholder engagement in the current year’s VNR particularly challenging, but the country was persisting through rapid evaluations in priority areas, making use of the civil society platform and finding other ways to contact groups. The current VNR coincided with the mid-term review of the national development plan.

Judith Kaulem, Executive Director, Poverty Reduction Forum Trust, Zimbabwe, focused on the experiences of the Trust in engaging with the Zimbabwe VNR process, including the engagement of civil society organizations in the 2017 VNR and in the current processes. The Zimbabwe Civil Society Reference Group had been launched to bring diverse civil society organizations together and foster inclusivity, helping to raise awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals, VNRs and VLRs.

Winstons Muhwezi, Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment (ACODE) Uganda, highlighted that the Ugandan 2020 VNR had been a collective effort requiring extensive consultations, and had revealed that much remained to be done to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. The work of ACODE had been acknowledged in that VNR and partners such

as UNDP had provided a vital service in popularizing the Sustainable Development Goals with stakeholders beyond the government. In conclusion, he noted that VLRs were a further important step that should be scaled up.

The discussion was facilitated by **Kavita Desai**, Advisor on Sustainable Development and Global Policy at the United Nations Foundation, with a wrap-up provided by **Ms. Vaturi**, and yielded the following key messages and recommendations:

- An institutionalized civil society engagement process for the Sustainable Development Goals has proved helpful in facilitating the participation of stakeholders in VNRs.
- The involvement of more groups, with greater diversity, in the VNR coalition can help popularize the review process, increase awareness, build wider ownership and assist in data gathering.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has dictated a move to digital platforms for engagement, which also reveals a significant digital divide – innovations such as the use of WhatsApp by Zimbabwe and of social media and radio by Sierra Leone are useful means of addressing this divide and need to be scaled up.
- It is important to learn from external and internal peers throughout the VNR process, for example from the People’s Scorecard pioneered by the Global Civil Society Forum, to hold governments accountable.
- Moving from commitments to tangible action is vital and requires both direct government accountability and the involvement of civil society organizations as partners with the government.
- The localization of the Sustainable Development Goals through VLRs is a positive step.
- Institutions such as IDEP should continue training and capacity-building measures, for example on the territorialization of development planning.
- Ongoing reviews at the level of the United Nations General Assembly could include a stronger mandate for regional forums on sustainable development, VNRs and VLRs.
