



DOCUMENTATION

# Action planning for sustainability reporting

DOCUMENTATION OF THE CONNECTIVE CITIES DIALOGUE EVENT  
2 - 4 DECEMBER 2024 IN BERLIN



37 Experts



from 25 institutions



from 15 countries

Partners of Connective Cities

# Introduction

## BACKGROUND

The member states of the United Nations (UN) committed to work closely with **local and regional governments to implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**.

Since 2015, cities, regions and their associations have become increasingly involved in localizing the SDGs on the ground in order to overcome social and ecological challenges. They report their implementation status of the SDGs through the **Voluntary Local Reviews (VLR)** at a municipality level and through the **Voluntary Sub-National Reviews (VSR)** at regional level.

These reporting documents serve to communicate the progress both to the external, local community and internally within the city administration. They reveal also the strengths and weaknesses of a municipality and they highlight available resources that can be deployed in a more targeted manner to accelerate the implementation of the SDGs.

In addition, the local and sub-national reportings supplement the **Voluntary National Reviews (VNR)** and help align local plans with governmental strategies. The Voluntary Local and Sub-National Reviews are also presented together with the VNRs at the High-level Political Forum (HLPF), the central United Nations platform for the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

*„I see a great commitment from the participants who were here to continue working on their own strategies for localizing the SDGs and also to contribute to this global movement, to reach more local and regional governments and partners“*

*Anna Calvete Moreno, UCLG, Barcelona, Spanien*

## THE DIALOGUE EVENT

From 2 to 4 December 2024, Connective Cities organized in collaboration with the Association of German Cities a Dialogue Event in Berlin, in which **37 practitioners from 25 institutions and 15 countries met in order to exchange their experiences in the field of the Voluntary Local and Sub-National Review**.

The focus of the dialogue event was on exchanging experiences and providing mutual peer-to-peer advice. The regional diversity, with perspectives and practical examples from South America, Sub-Saharan Africa, Germany, Southeast Europe and Asia, invigorated the discussion and contributed to the success of the event.

### Day 1

The exchange of experiences began with the presentation of **20 good practices from the participating municipalities and associations**.

Experts from the organizations **UN-Habitat** and **United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG)** enriched the meeting with the international perspective on the global implementation status of VLR/VSR, their potential and support services.

In addition, the **South African Local Government Association (SALGA)** provided an example of how ten South African municipalities implemented a VSR.

### Day 2

On the second day, the participants advised themselves in various formats of **peer-to-peer consulting**. The main question was how municipalities and municipal associations can best **work together to implement sustainability reporting and to localize the SDGs and harmonize VLRs and VSRs**.

### Day 3

On day three, the participants devoted themselves to **action planning**, which resulted in five project ideas (page 5). These action plans reflect the desire of the participants to continue the exchange of experiences within the framework of a specialist network.

# Keynotes

## THE UN-HABITAT APPROACH TO THE SDG LOCALIZATION

Sophie Heuser and Telman Maharramov, SDG Localization and Local Governments Team, UN-Habitat, Nairobi, Kenya

**The 100 largest cities in the world** produce 35 % of the global gross domestic product. Cities occupy only 3 % of the earth's land area, but **are responsible for 60 to 80 % of the energy consumption and 75 % of carbon emissions**. This shows the pivotal role of cities in tackling the climate challenge and work on their sustainable development. However, there is often a lack of financial resources for improving living conditions in local communities. One way of maximizing scarce resources is to set priorities through the Voluntary Local Review.

UN-Habitat aims to improve the lives of at least one billion people by promoting SDG localization processes in at least 50 countries and 1,000 cities. To this end, **UN-Habitat has developed** two support services: the **"SDG Cities Global Initiative"** and the **"Partnership Platform on Localizing the SDGs"**.

In addition, UN-Habitat has developed a **manual for the methodology „action-oriented VLR"**, which makes the Voluntary Review a more comprehensive management tool for future-oriented planning and implementation.

## FROM LOCAL ACTION TO GLOBAL ADVOCACY: THE SUPPORT OF THE UCLG FOR IMPROVED MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Anna Calvete Moreno Head of Research, UCLG; Barcelona, Spain

The organization United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) acts as an umbrella organization for 25 global and regional networks, representing them at the global level, for example at the HLPF.

According to the UCLG, **the Voluntary Sub-National Review should be used as a lever to create Voluntary Local Reviews**. VSRs can take up the local perspective of the VLRs, make them more visible and act as a link between the local and national levels.

## BUILDING THE BRIDGE AND SHAPING THE FUTURE BY 2030: HOW VLRS AND VSRS CAN ACCELERATE THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SDGS

Martin Tebogo Matlou, International Project Manager, South African Local Government Association (SALGA), South Africa

SALGA is helping local governments in South Africa to align their development efforts with the SDGs and to adapt the global goals to local conditions. In just eight months, it succeeded in encouraging **ten municipalities to develop VLRs**. SALGA provided support in the form of mobilized funding, advice, training, networking opportunities and public relations work. Challenges such as insufficient data, scarce financial and human resources, and low awareness of SDGs had to be overcome.

**"It is important for us to work together to strengthen partnerships and accelerate the VLR process. It is becoming clear that we need a platform for everyone to get people involved who can contribute to ensuring that we are able to make a difference in society."**

Martin Tebogo Matlou, SALGA South Africa



## Case studies

During the first day of the event, each organization presented its experience, highlighting success stories and present challenges. Here are some case studies examples:

### SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGIES AND CHALLENGES IN CITIES

Since 2005, the city of **Bonn** (Germany) has been conducting comprehensive sustainability reporting, which served as the basis for the preparation of two VLRs (2020 and 2022). Bonn is currently working on digitizing the reports in the form of a dashboard. The main challenges are the selection of suitable indicators and how to link these indicators to existing administration processes.

The hanseatic city of **Hamburg** (Germany) published its first VLR in 2023 with 107 indicators on SDG achievement and developed a digital dashboard. As for Bonn, the main challenges were to collect data and integrate them with the engagement of the civil society and into the political decisional process.

The case study of the city of **Lviv** (Ukraine) was of particular interest: the city developed a VLR despite the challenges of war. The experts focused on social innovation and localization of the SDGs and faced some critical challenges like the data collection during war, the stakeholder engagement and some uncertainties in the goal-setting.

The City of **Niš** was a pioneer in its region, since it was the first city in Serbia that created a VLR and gave also the input to the national government to create a Voluntary National Report.

While still recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic and the lingering shock it had caused to social and economic life, the city of **Amman** decided to create the first VLR in the Arab region in 2021. The pandemic had strengthened the commitment of citizens and the local government to find innovative solutions to environmental and social challenges. This was also an opportune moment, as the national government had started writing its second Voluntary National Review (VNR) at the same time.

Also the city of **Cape Coast** (Ghana) assessed its SDG implementation with support from national and international partners, under the „VLR Go Ghana Project“. The review highlighted high municipal service access, but also multidimensional poverty (12.9%), environmental threats, and underemployment concerns. Challenges included data gaps, inconsistent timelines, and weak institutional coordination

**Cuenca** (Ecuador) in partnership with UNDP, conducted its first Voluntary Local Review, assessing SDG progress for 2022-2023. The report focuses on SDGs 5, 6, 8, and 11, highlighting achievements and challenges, including data quality, stakeholder engagement, technical capacity, policy alignment, and financial constraints in sustainable development efforts.

**La Paz** (Bolivia) is among the first cities to apply the Urban Monitoring Framework (UMF) to assess prosperity and sustainability across five domains. The Voluntary Local Review (VLR) supports municipal planning, monitors SDG indicators, seeks external financing, aims for UN-Habitat's Platinum Certification, and develops the Urban Inclusion Marker initiative.



## THE ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATIONS

**Local Government Associations** (LGAs) play a crucial role in the development of Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) by **providing support, coordination, and advocacy**.

LGAs help municipalities **develop expertise in data collection, analysis, and reporting**, ensuring alignment with SDG frameworks. They often **provide training, tools, and guidelines to facilitate the VLR process**.

They also **connect municipalities with national governments, international partners (e.g., UN-Habitat, UCLG), private sector, academia, and civil society**, fostering shared learning and ensuring that cities' SDG efforts align with national policies and international commitments.

One of the pivotal roles of LGAs is also to **ensure smaller and under-resourced municipalities have a voice in SDG discussions**, preventing urban-rural disparities and promoting equity in sustainable development efforts. By strengthening institutional capacity, coordination, and advocacy, LGAs make VLRs more effective, inclusive, and impactful in driving local sustainable development.

During the dialogue event in Berlin, some LGAs presented some inspiring best practices. For instance, the **National Association of Mayors in Brazil** promotes VLRs to localize the SDGs and strengthen subnational initiatives. Their main challenges consist in training civil servants, raising political awareness and financing the the projects.

In **Albania**, the Institute for Albanian Municipalities started a project aimed at increasing knowledge and awareness among Albanian municipalities on their important role in reaching objectives of the Agenda 2030. Experts developed tools to take stock of the SDGs implementation that brought the municipality of Shkodra to conduct the first VLR in Albania.

The **South African Local Government Association** (SALGA) went a step forward: together with 10 municipalities, South Africa created ten Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) in just eight months to implement the SDGs locally. Through training, citizen participation and digital tools, administrative capacities were strengthened, transparency promoted and innovative solutions developed. The multi-stakeholder approach accelerated the process and promoted sustainable development.

## FIVE ACTION PLANS FOR SUSTAINABILITY REPORTING

During day 3, the participants developed five project ideas on which the city and the local government associations want to work together:

1. **Establishing a network to accelerate and implement VSR/VLR**
2. **Establishment of an SDG information center in Niš, Lviv, Cape Coast, Amman, uMhlathuze, Mityana and in Albania**
3. **Inclusion of the VLR in the medium-term development plan - APEKSI / Adaptation of the medium-term plan to the SDGs**
4. **Creation of a first VSR in Germany**
5. **Creating a first VLR in Lusaka, Zambia**

Connective Cities is supporting the implementation of the project ideas and supporting the actors with a range of services.

### Key takeaways

- The status quo of reporting and the experiences gained with it vary from municipality to municipality, but the challenges are similar in every country: challenging data availability, insufficient awareness of the topic in politics and administration, lack of adequate (IT) structures for efficient data collection.
- The international exchange of experiences is important to improve local processes.
- A first VLR is not an end point, but the beginning of action-oriented reporting to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs.

## IMPRINT

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## Connective Cities –

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More information on [www.connective-cities.net](http://www.connective-cities.net)

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