PROGRESSING NATIONAL SDGS IMPLEMENTATION:

2022 Policy Brief

Localising the SDGs

Key Findings

- While the ambition to localise the SDGs has been widely discussed in recent years, **the VNRs in 2022 contained fewer references to localisation** and less information on the linkages between national and local authorities.
- **In 2022, the proportion of countries that provided some level of information on their efforts to localise the SDGs decreased slightly to 77%, compared to 83% in 2021**. A lower proportion of countries (36%) referred to integrating the 2030 Agenda into local plans and policies, although this represents a modest increase compared to the proportion of countries that did so in 2021 (31%).
- **Coordination between national government institutions and local governments was explicitly noted by sixteen countries (or 36%) reporting in 2022**, similar to the 38% of VNRs reporting in 2021.
- Regarding Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), in 2022, **only 3 out of the 44 reporting countries (or 7%) mentioned VLRs**, which is lower than the 15 countries reporting on VLRs in 2021 (or 36%).

1. Introduction: Localising the SDGs

The localisation of the SDGs is a crucial step in ensuring that the goals are implemented in a way that is relevant to the unique needs and circumstances of different countries and communities. This process involves engaging with local actors, such as government officials, civil society organisations, private sector actors, and community members, to identify the specific challenges and opportunities that exist in a

particular context. It also involves working with these stakeholders to develop a shared vision and plan of action for achieving the SDGs, and subsequently implementing and monitoring progress towards those goals.

Localisation ensures that the SDGs are owned and driven by local actors, and that the process is both inclusive and participatory, but also transparent and accountable. Additionally, localisation should involve a comprehensive and holistic approach to sustainable development and should take into account the interdependence and interconnectedness of the SDGs. Localisation of the goals pertains to how they can provide the framework for implementing policies for sustainable development, while simultaneously being a conduit for localities and regions to inform practice and policy from the ground, up – with sufficient coordination and reporting – and thus leading to the successful achievement of the SDG targets.

Efforts to localise the SDGs have been gathering steam in the last few years while the world recognizes that the success of the 2030 Agenda relies heavily on its implementation at the regional and local levels, as well as effective collaboration horizontally across the different stakeholders and vertically throughout governments and communities at different levels. Despite the fact that the SDGs are a global framework, the tangible effects are most directly felt at the local level.

International cooperation efforts aimed at promoting locally-led development and home-grown initiatives should be considered in the larger context of decolonization, with the ultimate goal of seeing local ownership in decision-making. While efforts to shift power in the relationship between donor and recipient countries are ongoing – and slowly progressing towards the Grand Bargain commitments[1] – the focus of localisation of the SDGs are about local and sub-national governments taking ownership of the implementation of Agenda2030 in relation to national governments and the global framework.

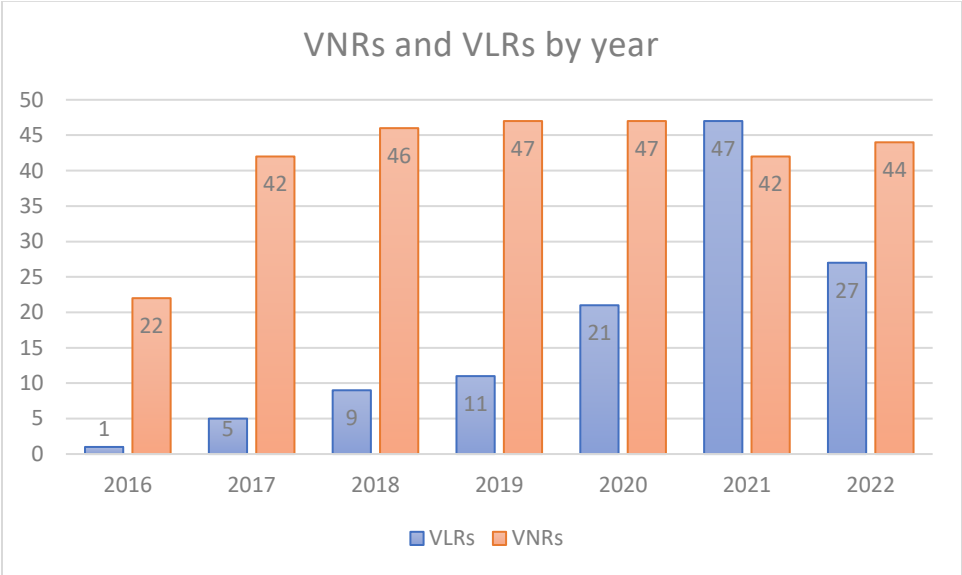## 2. The Experience of Voluntary Local Reviews and Voluntary Subnational Reviews

Similar to the VNRs, the Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) and Voluntary Sub-national Reviews (VSRs) provide an opportunity to highlight the role of local and subnational governments in the implementation of the SDGs, share their best practices, identify challenges and opportunities, and engage with the international community. Furthermore, as an instrument of localisation, these sub-national reports facilitate the establishment of accountability mechanisms at that level. It is worth noting that the VSRs are a relatively new mechanism, and their implementation is still in the early stages. Therefore, the number of sub-national governments that have participated in VSRs so far is limited and the process is still being refined.

VLRs have experienced a notable upsurge, particularly after the release of the second volume of the Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews during the 2021 HLPF. Although a limited number of countries

---

acknowledged VLRs in their 2022 reports, a substantial number of regions and municipalities have conducted reviews without being recognized at the national level. There were a total of 27 VLRs submitted to the UN in 2022. This is down from 2021, when 47 local reports were submitted, surpassing the number of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) submitted that year.

VNRs and VLRs by year

Year	VLRs	VNRs
2016	1	22
2017	5	42
2018	9	46
2019	11	47
2020	21	47
2021	47	42
2022	27	44

Source: UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development & the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Sustainable Development

Although not necessarily formal reports, many 2022 VNRs mention VLR initiatives. In **Côte d'Ivoire**, the central government organised a series of workshops in the country's 14 districts for local actors to learn about the tools and principles of VLRs. In **Latvia**, although there aren't any VLRs to speak of, the VNR provided a venue for different Latvian cities -as well as the Latvian Association of Local and Regional Governments- to share their vision of sustainable development challenges and some of their actions and priorities fostering SDG implementation. In **Jordan**, a process for formulating local development plans is projected. In **Pakistan**, provincial and area governments submitted their local reports to the central government in order to inform the VNR. In the **Philippines**, the VLR of Naga City is highlighted – which includes provisions for participatory budgeting and policymaking, enhancing data-driven monitoring processes, as well as the formulation of a Sustainable Urban Development Plan. **Sudan**'s VNR highlights prevailing gaps in coordination and information flows between the central, sub-national and local levels. In the **UAE**, the VNR notes that each local government and emirate has autonomy for choosing its own pathways, under the guidance of the national long-term vision. In terms of **the Netherlands**, the Dutch territories of Aruba, Curaçao and Sint Maarten all provided sub-national reviews; moreover, Amsterdam is also preparing a VLR.

3. Localisation in the 2022 Voluntary National Reviews

In 2022, 34 out of 44 (or 77%) of VNRs provided some type of information on their efforts to localise the SDGs, which showed a slight decrease compared to 83% of countries in 2021.[2] As had been the case in previous years, the VNR reports continue to show wide variance in terms of the approach of Member States and their local governments with regards to efforts at the local level (or localisation). Consistent reporting helps to assess the status of such efforts overall.

In 2022, **Pakistan** and **Latvia** were the only countries to showcase a dedicated section on localisation (in the case of Latvia, in conjunction with academic institutions). Others, like the **Philippines**, devoted special boxes to highlight initiatives by local governments throughout their reports. Conversely, other countries either provided more limited space in their VNR reports to the local efforts/localisation topic, or information was unclear or not sufficiently detailed, such as in the cases of the **Djibouti, El Salvador, Eritrea, Grenada, Jamaica, Somalia, Sudan, Suriname** and the Dutch territory of **Aruba**. Beyond references to local government engagement in the VNR process or national governance arrangements, VNR reports provided some insights on the status of efforts at the local level (or localisation). In 2022, 16 countries (36%) referred to integrating the 2030 Agenda into local plans and policies, showing a small increase in relation to 2021 (31%).[3]

Reference to local initiatives was made available by only 10 countries (or 23%), a decrease in relation to 2021 (55%). This figure remains low and many challenges to localising the SDGs were identified in the 2022 VNRs. Some of the obstacles mentioned are particularly linked to localisation initiatives, whereas others are faced by many different stakeholders in the SDG implementation process. Using some examples in the box below, we can see that coordination, capacity development, financing, and data collection and monitoring are most often mentioned as challenges.

Coordination between national government institutions and local governments was explicitly noted by only 16 countries (or 36%) reporting in 2022, similar to the 38% that did so in 2021. 7 countries (or 16%) referred to local institutional mechanisms (e.g. local councils or bodies supporting 2030 Agenda implementation), versus 8 countries (or 19%) in 2021. 8 countries (or 18%) noted having integrated local governments into monitoring and evaluation systems[4], and 10 countries (or 23%) referred to capacity

---

[2] Information on efforts at the local level (or localisation) was mentioned by the same 83% of countries in 2020, versus 75% of the countries reporting in 2019, 65% of countries in 2018, and 73% of countries in 2017.

[3] On the integration of the 2030 Agenda into local plans and policies, percentages were 43% of countries reporting in 2020, 38% of countries reporting in 2019, and 35% of countries reporting in 2018.

[4] Monitoring and evaluation regarding efforts at the local level (or localisation) was referred to by 7 countries (18%) in 2021, by 3 countries in 2020 (or 6%), and 5 countries in 2019 (11%).

development or awareness-raising efforts aimed at local governments.[5] Finally only 3 countries (or 7%) specifically referenced the VLRs in their context.

4. Case Studies in Good Practice

- **Coordinating policies in Argentina:** The process of involving the provinces in implementing the 2030 Agenda starts with a partnership agreement between the National Council for Coordination of Social Policies and the highest authority in the province. This agreement includes raising awareness among officials and providing technical support in setting goals and measuring progress for the SDGs that are prioritized by the province. The focus is on modernizing and coordinating efforts, as well as providing training to improve the capabilities of the government. (Excerpt adapted from Argentina's VNR, p.31)
- **Cameroon's locally-led SDGs:** Awareness-raising of local elected officials on the SDGs has been carried out both at the level of the Regions and the Communes. Within this framework, the mayors were equipped with the prerequisites for a better appropriation and consideration of the cross-cutting dimensions and the SDGs in the local development policies and plans. The training of these actors, carried out by officials from government structures, with the support of UNDP and some CSOs, focused on tools for better identifying and integrating the SDGs into development activities at the local level, and facilitating the establishment of consultation frameworks for monitoring these objectives. In addition, this appropriation of the SDGs by local actors was marked by the updating in 2019 of the methodological guide for communal planning, integrating, among other things, the approach for taking the SDGs into account in the Communal Development Plans (CDPs). In addition, a practical manual for integrating the SDGs into the CDPs, aimed at better informing and sensitising local actors on the need to take into account concerns related to sustainable development was developed. (Excerpt adapted from Cameroon's VNR, p.6)
- **Provincial development strategies in Italy:** The National Sustainable Development Strategy (NSDS) of Italy aims to promote the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at various territorial levels, in line with national regulations. The strategy requires regions and autonomous provinces to approve their own sustainable development strategies and monitor progress towards sustainability goals within six months of its approval. This approach not only connects the regional and local levels to the international level, but also provides scope for action and visibility through the VNR process in 2022, highlighting the achievements made in the territories in recent years towards the strategic sustainability objectives. (Excerpt adapted from Italy's VNR, p.27)
- **Malawi's power-shift and ownership goals:** Malawi's localisation of the SDGs is two-fold. On the one hand, all three levels of jurisdiction aim to implement the SDGs and integrate the framework

---

[5] Capacity development related to efforts at the local level (or localisation) was referred to by 4 countries (10%) in 2021, 4 countries in 2020 (or 9%), and 12 countries in 2019 (or 26%).

into their policies, taking into consideration the needs, wants and realities of each level (SDGs 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14 and 17 are less prioritised at the local level). With the aim to increase participation and ownership, the SDGs were translated into local languages and distributed to local councils, Area Development Committees and Village Development Committees. The process to integrate the SDGs into the national framework was a bottom-up approach, starting with the local villages and communities. On the other hand, Malawi's VNR states that the ultimate goal is to achieve "inclusive wealth creation and self reliance for economic independence"[6] and place the power and the ability to achieve their development objectives into their control. (Adapted from Malawi's VNR, p.8)

- **Vertical linkages for increased coordination in Pakistan:** Pakistan identified an issue that required attention to properly implement the SDGs at the local level and moved to adjust. They strengthened the vertical linkages from federal to provincial and local government through standard operating procedures and continuous engagement. The National Economic Council sub-committee on SDGs was established in August 2020 with the goal of contributing strategic guidance, quick decision making and oversight the SDGs' performance. By providing representation and input from all three levels of government, it has also had the effect bolstering reciprocal coordination mechanisms and technical support delivery, essentially solving common implementation problems, and removing some bottlenecks. One way Pakistan is developing institutional capacity at multiple governmental levels is by making use of technology, in turn increasing efficiency, transparency and help in the accountability of the institutions. (Adapted from Pakistan's VNR, page 24).

5. Challenges in Localisation

- Coordination
    - o **Cameroon:** It was noted that there appears to be lackluster coordination between the central government and the sub-national levels when implementing Priority Investment Projects (PIP).
    - o **Ghana**: It was highlighted that there remains a significant disconnect between the planning and institutional processes and the extent to which approved policies and plans guide actions at the local government level, despite the country's decentralised planning system.
    - o **Sri Lanka**: It was recognised that although policies aligning with SDG targets have been created at the higher national level, they have not effectively been implemented at lower levels of government, resulting from a lack of coordination in achieving the SDGs. This

---

[6]https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/Malawi%202022%20Voluntary%20National%20Review%20%28VNR%29%20Report.pdf

emphasizes the urgent need for clear guidance and means for local governments to clearly develop policies for planning, implementing, and monitoring progress towards the SDGs. (VNR, p. 162)

- Capacity Development
    - o **Ghana:** It was noted that there is a need to increase collaboration between local and international research institutions and implementers at all levels by enhancing research capabilities, particularly at the local level. (VNR, p.132)
    - o **Guinea-Bissau**: It was suggested that there is a lack of capacity of local authorities to adapt the SDGs into local action using inclusive and participatory planning and financing. (VNR, p. 145)

- Financing:
    - o **Eswatini:** The VNR includes an indication of a lack of capacity for revenue mobilisation, especially local domestic mobilisation. (VNR, p. 108)

- Data Collection and Monitoring:
    - o **Netherlands (Aruba):** It was highlighted that data is not broken down at a micro level, making it difficult to determine how foreign direct investment and local private investment support innovative projects that promote sustainability. This poses a challenge for mobilising private capital through financial instruments in this direction. (Netherlands VNR, p.64)

6. Recommendations

1. **Prioritise the needs and perspectives of marginalised and vulnerable communities in local planning, implementation, monitoring and reporting of SDG strategies.**
   - o To ensure that the SDGs are inclusive and equitable, it is crucial to prioritise the needs and perspectives of local underrepresented communities throughout the SDG process. This includes involving these communities in the decision-making process, ensuring that their voices are heard, and that their specific needs and challenges are taken into account. In order to truly leave no one behind, it is important use differentiated approaches to ensure that the SDGs are adapted to the specific context and challenges of each community and that interventions are designed to address the needs of marginalised and vulnerable groups, as pointed out in the [Good Practice in 2030 Agenda Implementation Series](.).

2. **Strengthen data collection and monitoring systems to track progress and identify areas for improvement at the local level.**
   - o To effectively track progress and identify areas for improvement, it is essential to strengthen data collection and monitoring systems at the local level. This includes investing in building capacity in statistical systems, establishing clear lines of accountability and communication between national and local levels, and involving local stakeholders in the monitoring and evaluation process.

3. **Encourage the local private sector to invest in sustainable development projects and initiatives, particularly in low and middle-income countries. Governments at all levels must ensure that the proper infrastructure is there to facilitate this.**
   - o Mobilising private capital and encouraging the local private sector to invest in sustainable development projects and initiatives is a step towards locally driven implementation. Governments at all levels must ensure that the proper infrastructure is in place to facilitate public-private partnerships and create an enabling environment, including policies and regulations that support sustainable development and investment.

4. **Include efforts at the local level (or localisation) as part of 2030 Agenda implementation strategies, strengthen coordination with local governments and local institutional structures, capacities and resources.**
   - o Support should be built in a two-way direction where dialogue flows through established coordination mechanisms from the local to the national level and vice versa. This way, knowledge and information-sharing, as well as technical support where needed, can be

shared in a timely and adequate manner.

5. **Support the translation of the SDGs into local plans, programs and monitoring efforts and ensure local priorities inform local level actions, as well as broader national plans.**
    o   Engage more deeply with communities and leaders at the local level, using when possible traditional, indigenous and local knowledge, in the design and implementation of SDG-related policies and programmes to ensure buy-in and ownership. Adequate support in the areas of information sharing and technical assistance should be provided so that communities have the proper tools for success.

6. **Advocate for the inclusion and acknowledgement of local and regional reporting tools (e.g. Voluntary Local Reviews and Voluntary Subnational Reviews) at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF).**
    o   The inclusion of local and regional reporting tools paints a more comprehensive and localised picture of the progress and challenges toward the achievement of the SDGs. It will also lend more legitimacy to VLRs and VSRs on the international stage, leading to them becoming a more useful tool. If the international community truly believes that implementation at the local level is crucial to the success of the SDGs, then local and regional reporting tools must be included in the HLPF to demonstrate that it is a priority.

7. **Leverage technology to achieve many of the recommendations outlined, including data collection, reporting and monitoring, coordination and increased citizen engagement for local ownership.**