TELLING THE STORY:
VSRs in first person

An Insights Note of the incremental impacts of VSRs as told by the associations who produced them

With only six years left until 2030, it has been increasingly recognized that the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) unequivocally hinges on local action and leadership. Local and regional governments (LRGs), by localizing the SDGs, have unmistakably showcased their commitment to playing a pivotal role in this collective endeavor. Nevertheless, intensified efforts, characterized by innovation and robust partnerships, are imperative if we are to rescue and achieve the 17 SDGs by the end of the decade.

Voluntary Subnational Reviews (VSRs) have emerged as critical processes in this pursuit, demanding increased focus and dedication. VSRs are bottom-up reporting efforts led by local government associations (LGAs) from around the world. Since their appearance in 2020, they have **significantly transformed reporting practices around the SDGs** across all levels, including Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). As such, they have been recognized by the United Nations, together with Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), as "an essential tool to show progress and foster exchange on local implementation" on SDGs. VSRs have contributed to escalating the critical role of SDG localization in regional and international processes.

This Insights Note illustrates the impacts that local government associations report the VSRs to have had both externally: helping them consolidate whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches to sustainable development; **and internally:** how they as an organizational exercise in relation to the SDGs striving to break institutional and policy siloes. Showing how VSRs not only strengthen but also extend the ongoing trajectory towards SDG attainment, **emerging as pivotal tools and processes for research, learning and advocacy.**

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I. Enhancing local-national interlocution for sustainable development

The VSRs catalyze multilevel governance

VSRs have streamlined direct and sustained multilevel conversations: propelling locally-centered policy dialogue around accelerating SDG localization with national governments and other stakeholders at the local, national and international level. As a reporting instrument, the VSRs have brought to the attention of the national authorities the challenges and needs experienced by LRGs and their communities that require action at the national level and from the bottom-up. They have also encouraged the involvement of LGAs in national and international institutional mechanisms created to implement and monitor SDG implementation, a key strategy to accelerate the localization of the SDGs.

- In Cambodia, the National League of Local Councils (NLC) reached not only the national sustainable development officials but a wide range of departments: the report was disseminated to several national authorities at a validation event and submitted to several government ministries, such as those of Women's Affairs, the Interior, Planning, and Economy and Finance.

- In Sri Lanka, the Federation of Sri Lankan Local Government Authorities (FSLGA) took the VSR process as a starting point for improving the conversations with the national SDG Council.

- In Rwanda, the Rwanda Association of Local Government Authorities (RALGA) has used the VSR to deepen its advocacy work towards the SDGs.

- In Costa Rica, the VSR allowed the National Union of Local Governments of Costa Rica (UNGL) to strengthen the national SDG localization strategy and the relationship with the members of the High-Level SDG Consultative Committee, led by the national government. As a result, the cantons were invited to participate in the Costa Rican SDG Promoters Network allowing to implement new projects in the territory.

> *"In Kenya, the VSR we produced with the County Assemblies Forum (CAF) was key to ensuring our partaking in the national coordination of SDG implementation through the Inter Agency Working Group as well as the Inter Agency Technical Working Committee. This allowed us to be involved in the production of the 2020 and upcoming 2024 VNRs."*
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> Ken Oluoch, CoG Senior Program Officer

The VSRs foster decentralization efforts and local funding

The VSR processes' richness has demonstrated the vast amount of SDG targets that require local action along with the readiness of LRGs to strive for just, inclusive and sustainable territories. As a consequence, they have often revitalized decentralization processes that were losing ground and sparked national commitments to increasing the financial resources allocated to local governments. VSRs have likewise contributed to placing on the map the localization efforts of all kinds of subnational governments, some of which are often disregarded as critical actors.

- In Botswana, the VSR produced by the Botswana Association of Local Authorities (BALA) has accelerated the national government's efforts in the decentralization process that is taking place since 2016: since its adoption, 15 LRGs have been established to localize decision making.

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- In Pakistan, the Federal SDGs Support Unit of the national government participated actively in the VSR process since the beginning, which led to the strengthening of a communicative relationship with the LGAs, fostering trust and cooperation as well as a seamless flow of information. As a consequence, the VSR and its requests for enhanced decentralization processes were acknowledged in the 2022 VNR. The Federal SDGs Unit committed to institutionalizing through new legislation the engagement of LRGs in SDG reporting.

- In Sri Lanka, FSLGA took the VSR process as an opportunity to discuss with the Finance Commission and the Ministry of Finance on how to align local budgets with the SDGs and receive increased national funds for sustainability projects.

- In Kenya, with the results from the VSR, the Council of Governors (CoG) has been engaging in policy dialogue with the national government for increased financing of devolved functions, including amongst others health, agriculture, early childhood education and trade.

- In Romania, the Association of Communes of Romania (ACoR) and the Romanian Municipalities Association (AMR) demonstrated that rural areas cannot be left behind.

- In Flanders, the Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (VVSG) and the Association of Flemish Provinces (VVP)'s VSR helped place the role of provinces on the map with regard to local sustainability action.

The VSRs secure the local perspective in the VNRs

The VSRs have become a great ally of the VNRs inasmuch as they ensure the inclusion of a localized viewpoint of sustainable development. When negotiations between the LGAs and the national governments started early in the process of producing the VSR, both VSR and VNR processes benefitted from mutual feedback, cooperation and enhanced political buy-in.

- In Romania, the VSR was acknowledged in the 2023 VNR, being an important step forward for ACoR and AMR, as well as a reason for pride.

- In Iceland, the Icelandic Association of Local Authorities (IALA) was invited to produce the chapter of the 2023 VNR on SDG localization, and was able to work on it and the VSR simultaneously. Local efforts are is recognized as a key component of the country's efforts.

- In Norway, the VSR has been a major boost for the relationship between the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS) and the national government. It became a whole chapter in the VNR that KS were able to write themselves, and the comments made by the LGA in other VNR chapters were likewise accepted by the national government. This cocreation process scaled up the importance of the local sphere in SDG implementation, which was made evident in different ways: KS has been invited to partake in the national delegation to the HLPF since 2021 and a political agreement was signed on innovation and SDGs between KS and the national government, amongst others.

"The adoption of a proactive approach and the start of the process well in advance of the VNR allowed us to include a separate chapter on SDG localization in it. The chapter has been praised for its quality and balance by federal and regional governments and its advisory bodies."

Hanne Albers, VVSG Policy Officer for SDGs and International Cooperation, and Vicky de Backer, SDGs Policy Officer

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II. Strengthening local government associations' approaches to sustainability

The VSRs strengthen LGAs' commitment to the 2030 Agenda

LGAs that embarked on the VSR journey, whether big or small, have experienced the strengthening of their own institutions' priorities, structures, knowledge and processes. The buy-in by the political leadership of all LGAs involved in producing a VSR has placed these processes and sustainable development in a strategic place for the organizations. The development of VSRs has also raised awareness within LGAs on the 2030 Agenda and achievement of the SDGs.

· In Ecuador, the production of yearly reports has led to not only the increasing awareness, commitment and knowledge of CONGOPE's staff but, more importantly, the leadership of the political authorities. Understanding the SDGs as a global, multidimensional and inclusive agenda with a common goal, the different departments have joined forces and broken silos for enhanced alignment, planning, policy-making and data generation, collection and analysis.

· In Flanders, the VSR contributes to emphasizing VVSG's and VVP's lingering engagement with sustainable development in their manifestos for the upcoming 2024 regional, federal and European elections. In the case of VVSG, there is explicit reference on how their demands contribute to realizing the challenges mentioned in the Belgian VNR.

· In Cambodia, staff members of NLC became more aware and involved in supporting SDG localization, and the focal point (a Planning Officer) became more supportive to the members in this regard.

· In Kenya, the VSR process started off with an elaborate sensitization for the Council of Governors' staff.

· In Romania, the information collected by ACoR and AMR concerning the actions carried out by their members made the LGAs and the LRGs realize the important contributions that had already been made to sustainable development from the bottom-up.

The VSRs generate and collect vast evidence on local achievements and challenges

Tracking progress through localized monitoring systems is a challenge for most LRGs around the world; the VSRs have represented a first step to collect systematic data on SDG localization in a country-wide manner. In other cases, VSRs have contributed to strengthening existing data-related tools.

· In Kenya, the two VSRs produced to date provided sound data as an indication on the progress made so far across the various targeted SDG indicators. Due to the limited availability of such data, the CoG has taken the opportunity to enter an agreement with the National Bureau of Statistics and the Kenya Institute of Public Policy Research and Analysis to strengthen monitoring at county level, with some counties already involved in the process.

· In Flanders, the production of the VSR involved all departments within VVSG and a small working group of municipal officials, a good opportunity to refine the existing data. The VSR thus serves as an excellent document describing general trends around multiple local governance dimensions in Flanders that can be useful when local governments monitor the realization of the SDGs and produce the compulsory municipal context analyses. Based on the dataset of the VSR, detailed information and graphs are available for each of the 300 municipalities. This information is intensively used by the VVSG and by the municipalities themselves.

· In Romania, the VSR represented an important first step in the process of collecting data for sustainable development.

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"The VSR process made obvious the lack of good data. As a result, we launched a big research project with Statistics Norway to facilitate better indicators for localization, tools and methods."

Gunn Marit Helgesen, KS President

The VSRs foster increased SDG alignment, planning and policy-making

The key data, findings and recommendations of the VSRs have become the solid ground upon which to build new policies and practices aligned with the SDGs.

·   In Sri Lanka, FSLGA leveraged the VSR process to explore in the local acts and ordinances how LRGs can better align the priority areas to the SDGs, and how local budgets can be adapted to this end.

·   In Flanders, the VSR process, amongst other initiatives, led the VVP to increase the allocation of time and means to SDG localization.

·   In Norway, ensuring that no territory was left behind through the comprehensive and balanced representation of all regions in KS's VSR process, together with the alignment with other strategic processes underway, contributed to better findings and subsequent policymaking.

The VSRs facilitate a holistic approach to sustainable development

The VSR production process has likewise brought about new governance arrangements that facilitate cross-sectoral approaches to SDG implementation.

·   In Kenya, the appointment of one SDG focal point per CoG department in the framework of the VSR process has contributed to identifying the multidimensionality of the SDGs in the various frameworks and processes with local implications, and mainstreaming the SDGs in the different work plans.

·   In Cambodia, the VSR process allowed for improved coordination between NLC staff members.

·   In Norway, a project group consisting of the different KS departments was created to produce the VSR, helping them to be more collaborative, analytical and concrete in their work.

·   In Romania, real teamwork was required to produce the VSR, thus fostering stable horizontal coordination within and between ACoR and AMR.

·   In Botswana, the VSR has contributed to BALA addressing silo operation mentalities in order to approach the cross-cutting dimensions of the 2030 Agenda.

III. Fostering stronger ties with and amongst the associations' members

The VSRs increase the commitment of LGAs' members with the SDGs

VSRs have proved to be an eye opener that increases awareness and commitment of LGAs' members and streamlined multiple-way communication around the SDGs and the needs and priorities of the parties. These processes involved the collection of vital data from the respective territories and the formulation of collaborative plans for the future.

·   In Iceland, where local elections took place in 2022 with over 50% turnover of councilors, the VSR (and the survey used to collect data) was used to raise awareness and ensure LRGs' interest in working on the SDGs.

·   In Flanders, using the VSR as a starting point and framing of a policy exchange has proved to spark new processes, e.g. the use of the VSR by the province of West-Flanders to carry out an internal comparison of the VSR findings with their own provincial policies. Also, the extensive data analysis in the VSR provides local governments with a solid starting position for SDG monitoring. Many local governments work with the SDG dataset used in the VSR.

·   In Cambodia, the VSR was the starting point for more NLC training to local councilors, who became more aware of sustainability.

·   In Botswana, the VSR has increased the level of knowledge among duty bearers as to what SDGs and targets need to be prioritized in their planning processes and projects, thus improving local level planning and data management.

·   In Pakistan, the VSR process contributed to building capacities, consequently empowering local governments around SDG localization and reporting, as well as contributing to national strategies and initiatives.

The VSRs are the ultimate localization ownership exercise

Importantly, very often the VSRs are a critical means through which to document the already existing comprehensive set of activities around SDG localization, carried out by both the LGAs and the LRGs, which are often left unseen. The participatory processes led by the different LGAs to produce their VSR, which amongst others included the documentation of best practices in the report, sparked a crucial sense of belonging and ownership, forging unity among the LGAs and their constituents.

·   In Kenya, the VSR process stimulated interactions and cross-learning amongst the different counties, together with an increased knowledge and engagement of the counties' SDG Champions. The role of these Champions is critical in the SDG localization process, as they are in charge of supporting the tracking, data collection and reporting on the progress as well as coordinating local stakeholders' engagement.

·   In Flanders, the Agenda 2030 is deliberately used as a framework for policy making and evaluation, beyond the specific focus on the 17 SDGs as such.

The VSRs propel synergies with the VLRs

Bringing together various subnational reporting efforts, such as VSRs and VLRs, has multiple benefits: from fostering symbiotic exchanges of information and data to report on to joining forces for stronger advocacy towards the national government and other stakeholders and to implementing new initiatives based on the VSR findings.

· In Flanders, the city of Ghent will use the VSR's SDG dataset to update its 2020 VLR and produce its second VLR in 2024 with a stronger focus on data.

"At CONGOPE we are committed to making visible the work of our provinces around SDG localization. For this reason, our four VSRs have been produced jointly with them and based on UCLG's Guidelines for VSRs. In 2024, the VSR has benefitted from an enhanced methodology based on the expertise and the innovative information system of the Manabí province. At the same time, based on our previous work, Manabí has decided to institutionalize their contribution to localizing the 2030 Agenda and, more particularly, produce yearly VLRs, the first one in 2023. We both aim for this collaboration to become a roadmap for other provinces."

Paola Pabón, CONGOPE President, together with Leonardo Orlando, Manabí Prefect

IV. Ensuring a whole-of-society approach from the ground up

The VSRs foster multistakeholder alliances for more transparent and accountable action

The invitation of a wide range of local partners to be part of the VSR process has strengthened their relationship on the basis of mutual trust and willingness to continue fostering stronger, more inclusive and innovative partnerships for sustainability.

· In Botswana, enhanced stakeholder engagement has been realized as a result of the VSR.

"We disseminated both online and hard copy versions of our VSR amongst our partners. Since then, many of them have been more engaged in discussing sustainability issues. We have also increased our transparency and accountability standards thanks to the VSR."

Pok Sokundara, NLC Secretary General

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The VSRs increase local governments' and associations' visibility

Many LGAs have understood that VSRs also have a broad impact in the international arena, as part of the increasingly consolidated calls for ensuring that the achievement of the SDGs is a global, multipartite effort that requires the involvement of the subnational sphere. Bringing their VSRs at global events such as the High-Level Political Forum for Sustainable Development and other venues and processes has thus conferred them a prized visibility as well as renewed sense of purpose that has allowed them to double down their actions and those of their partners.

- In Romania, the participation of the Mayor of District 6 of Bucharest and the Mayor of Otelec, ACoR Vice-President, in the 2023 HLPF allowed to gain more visibility, establish new connections and exchange local experiences at both the national and the international level.

- In Kenya, as a result of the country's first VSR and subsequent SDG mainstreaming efforts at the county level, the CoG has been an active member of UN-led discussions. Amongst others, they co-organized a side event during the UN General Assembly on primary health care, as well as a side event during the 2023 HLPF on SDG accelerated implementation amidst the disaster crises through the SDGs Kenya Forum.

- In Ecuador, the VSRs have not only led to the internationalization, and thus credibility and reliability, of the LGA's efforts, but that of its provinces as well. Manabí has been recognized as a UCLG Local4Action Hub in the field of collaborative innovation for sustainable development.

The VSRs attract international alliances and support

VSRs are often produced in the framework of valuable international alliances. The manifold collaborations have in turn been strengthened along the process, giving place to new and stronger initiatives and alliances. The documentation of the VSR process and lessons learnt in different formats has also helped other LGAs in their own VSR processes.

- In the Nordic countries, the positive experiences of Norway's, Sweden's and Iceland's VSRs led the associations of these countries and others to produce a Nordic VSR for the 2024 HLPF, with the intent of touting the horn for the vital role of subnational governments to make progress towards a more sustainable world. A core component of the Nordic VSR is a very strong knowledge-sharing objective, which has already proven to inspire more local action worldwide by sharing and showcasing their lessons learnt.

- In Flanders, the adaptation of the whole VSR to different audiences (the national one and the international one) has allowed it to respond to the different purposes of the LGAs, as did the production of several complementary materials such as infographics and syntheses.

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As illustrated by this Insights Note, VSRs have so far contributed to revamping local-national relations for sustainable development; strengthening local government associations' approaches to sustainability; fostering stronger ties with and amongst the associations' members, and ensuring a whole-of-society approach from the ground up. Given this, it is clear that they are much more than a reporting tool: **VSRs are a policy tool**.

As more LGAs and LRGs continue to advance bottom-up reporting efforts like VSRs and VLRs, the collective strength of the SDG localization movement will increase. The LRG constituency will continue to contribute to achieving the SDGs and to ensure its voice is heard within the HLPF through the Local and Regional Governments Forum, presenting the findings of VSRs and VLRs for the benefit of all stakeholders and member states. To this end, it is the hope and ambition of the constituency that **these policy and reporting tools be given an official status within these processes**.

This will in turn contribute to overcoming persisting challenges to achieving the 2030 Agenda, which the renewed multilateral system is likewise committed to improving in light of the UN Summit of the Future. In this summit, a **more networked and inclusive multilateral system** will be conceived, which we expect will contribute to bridging the current gaps regarding the lack of sound decentralization schemes and multilevel governance, human and financial resources, and localized indicators and data systems for accelerating action towards achieving the SDGs.

Other LGAs having produced VSRs come from: Argentina, Benin, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Chile, Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, France, Germany, Indonesia, Italy, Mexico, Mozambique, Nepal, the Netherlands, the Philippines, Sweden, Tanzania, Tunisia, Uruguay and Zimbabwe.

For more information, visit our Guidelines for the elaboration of VSRs and our MOOC on Voluntary Subnational Reviews.