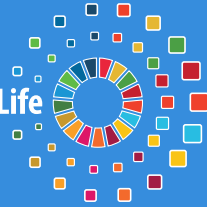




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Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia

Practical guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews in the Arab region



United Nations
Beirut

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Foreword

The collaboration between the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, the United Nations Human Settlement Programme, the United Cities and Local Governments Middle East and West Asia Section and various stakeholders in the Arab region has been instrumental in formulating this document. With the trajectory that commenced in 2016, cities across the globe have been localizing and making monitoring advancements in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs). This momentum, now more than ever, is accentuated by the imperative to face the multiple crises in the region. Arab cities stand at the forefront of addressing pressing challenges that range from environmental and health crises to economic inequalities and armed conflicts.

In light of the pivotal role of cities in the achievement of the SDGs, this document represents a milestone in our collective journey. Serving as a guiding framework for local policymakers, the guidelines are not only instrumental in assessing local advancements vis-à-vis the SDGs but also in the localization of the goals. They advocate for local-national policy coherence ensuring that local efforts align with and inform national strategies. This supports local initiatives with broader objectives, showcasing the robust potential of local governments in catalysing and expediting progress.

This document emphasizes the critical significance of multi-level and multi-sectoral cooperation. In an increasingly interconnected

world, the power of collaboration cannot be overstated. Partnerships between local and national governments, the private sector and civil society, pool resources, expertise and innovative solutions to address complex challenges. Knowledge-sharing platforms ensure that valuable experiences, good practices and lessons learned are disseminated widely, avoiding the repetition of past mistakes and accelerating progress. The guidelines serve as a roadmap for what is possible through joint efforts. By leveraging the insights and strategies detailed herein, the Arab region has the opportunity to mainstream the development of VLRs that are instrumental for evidence-based decision-making. Drawing inspiration from numerous resources, the guidelines proffer pragmatic tools, checklists and templates, enabling a synergistic process in tandem with Voluntary National Review (VNR) reporting.

The document is expected to inform local governments in the Arab region in the process of developing VLRs, while empowering multi-level governance and stakeholder engagement. By focusing on each of the different phases of this process and suggesting actionable and evidence-based tools, this document serves as a hands-on framework for local and national stakeholders interested in developing meaningful reporting practices towards the SDGs.

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Key messages

Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) are a self-assessment and reporting mechanism that local governments can undertake to voluntarily share their progress in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the New Urban Agenda and other sustainability initiatives. This self-assessment helps align the efforts of local authorities with global frameworks.



VLRs encourage forward thinking and provide a platform for local governments to showcase their commitment to fostering sustainable development by voluntarily disclosing their progress on development initiatives highlighting their strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for growth.



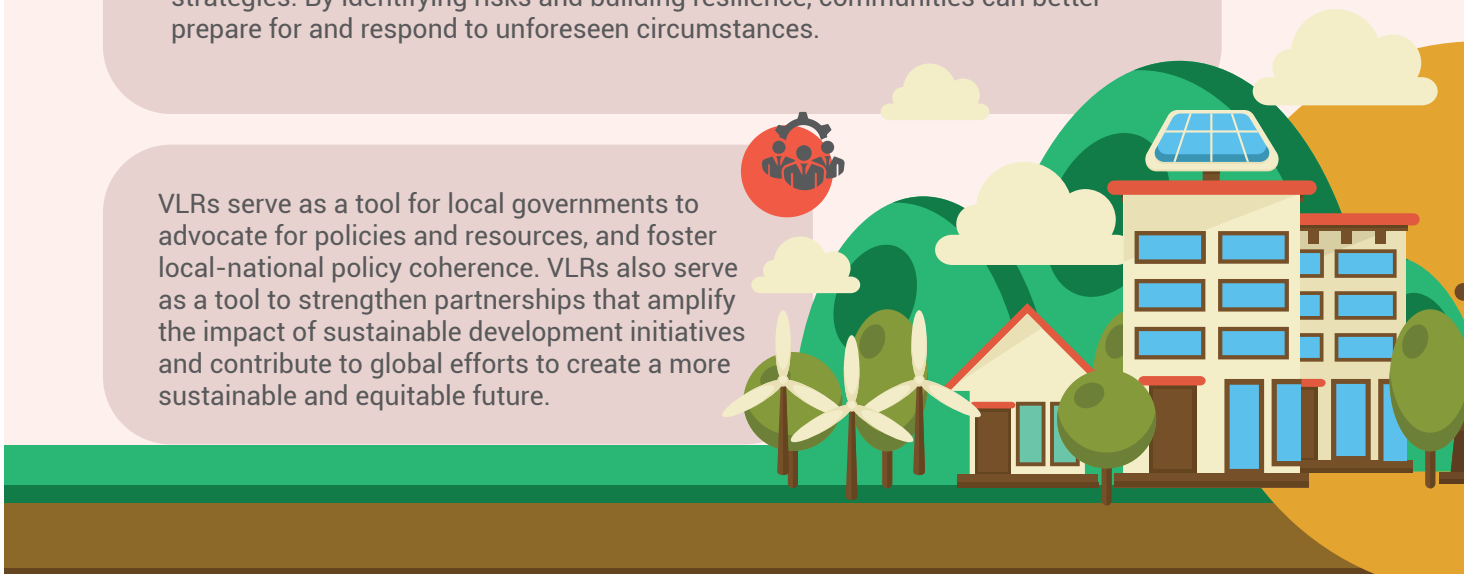
Localization allows for the customization of policies, programmes and initiatives to address the specific needs and challenges that vary across different communities and regions. Localizing the SDGs plays a critical role in addressing regional challenges and developing tailored solutions to ensure effective and inclusive decision-making.



VLRs can help localities assess their vulnerabilities and develop related strategies. By identifying risks and building resilience, communities can better prepare for and respond to unforeseen circumstances.



VLRs serve as a tool for local governments to advocate for policies and resources, and foster local-national policy coherence. VLRs also serve as a tool to strengthen partnerships that amplify the impact of sustainable development initiatives and contribute to global efforts to create a more sustainable and equitable future.





VLRs encourage the collection and analysis of data related to sustainable development, promoting a culture of evidence-based decision-making and helping to identify gaps, assess the effectiveness of existing programmes and prioritize areas for improvement.



The VLR process provides an opportunity for localities to gain recognition and support from international organizations, endorsing a sense of belonging to a global community committed to sustainable development.



VLRs can help localities assess their vulnerabilities and develop related strategies. By identifying risks and building resilience, communities can better prepare for and respond to unforeseen circumstances.



VLRs must follow a participatory, evidence-based and actionable process, ensuring no one and no place are left behind.



Multi-level governance is vital to sustainable urban development. This practical guide highlights the importance of cooperation between different levels of government. It stresses the need for knowledge-sharing platforms and collaboration to address complex challenges effectively, while creating bi-directional communication channels between local and national governments.

Executive summary

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) address global challenges, including those related to poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace and justice. Recognizing the critical role of the SDGs in the Arab region, localization is vital as it allows for tailored solutions that address specific challenges ensuring a more effective and inclusive approach to decision-making.

This document presents a strategic framework to empower local governments in developing and implementing Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) as a comprehensive follow-up and evaluation mechanism in pursuit of the SDGs. It offers state-of-the-art practical guidelines for the development of VLRs based on international, regional and local on-the-ground experience, enhancing multi-level governance and stakeholder engagement while serving as an opportunity for local governments to articulate strategic

priorities with global agendas and engage in the international arena.

The approach is designed to facilitate knowledge-sharing across the region, promoting a process that is participatory, evidence-based and actionable. The suggested methodology ensures that VLRs are not mere analytical tools but an opportunity to bridge data collection and analysis to tangible actions thereby ensuring that no one is left behind.

The document explores each phase, stage and key action in the VLR process from its inception and situation analysis to its finalization and ongoing monitoring. It supports a meaningful and impactful VLR development process that results in a legacy for local governments thereby influencing advancement of the SDGs.

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List of acronyms

HLPF	High-level Political Forum
IMD	Institute for Management Development
KPIs	key performance indicators
LRG	Local and regional government
MLG	multilevel governance
RCO	Resident Coordinator Office
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SMART	specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound
SSCs	smart sustainable cities
U4SSC	United for Smart Sustainable Cities
UCLG	United Cities and Local Governments
UCLG-MEWA	United Cities and Local Governments Middle East and West Asia
UMF	Urban Monitoring Framework
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNECA	United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
UNECE	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
UNESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
ESCWA	Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia
UN-Habitat	United Nations Human Settlements Programme
UNITAR	United Nations Institute for Training and Research
VLR	Voluntary Local Reviews
VNRs	Voluntary National Reviews
VSRs	Voluntary Subnational Reviews

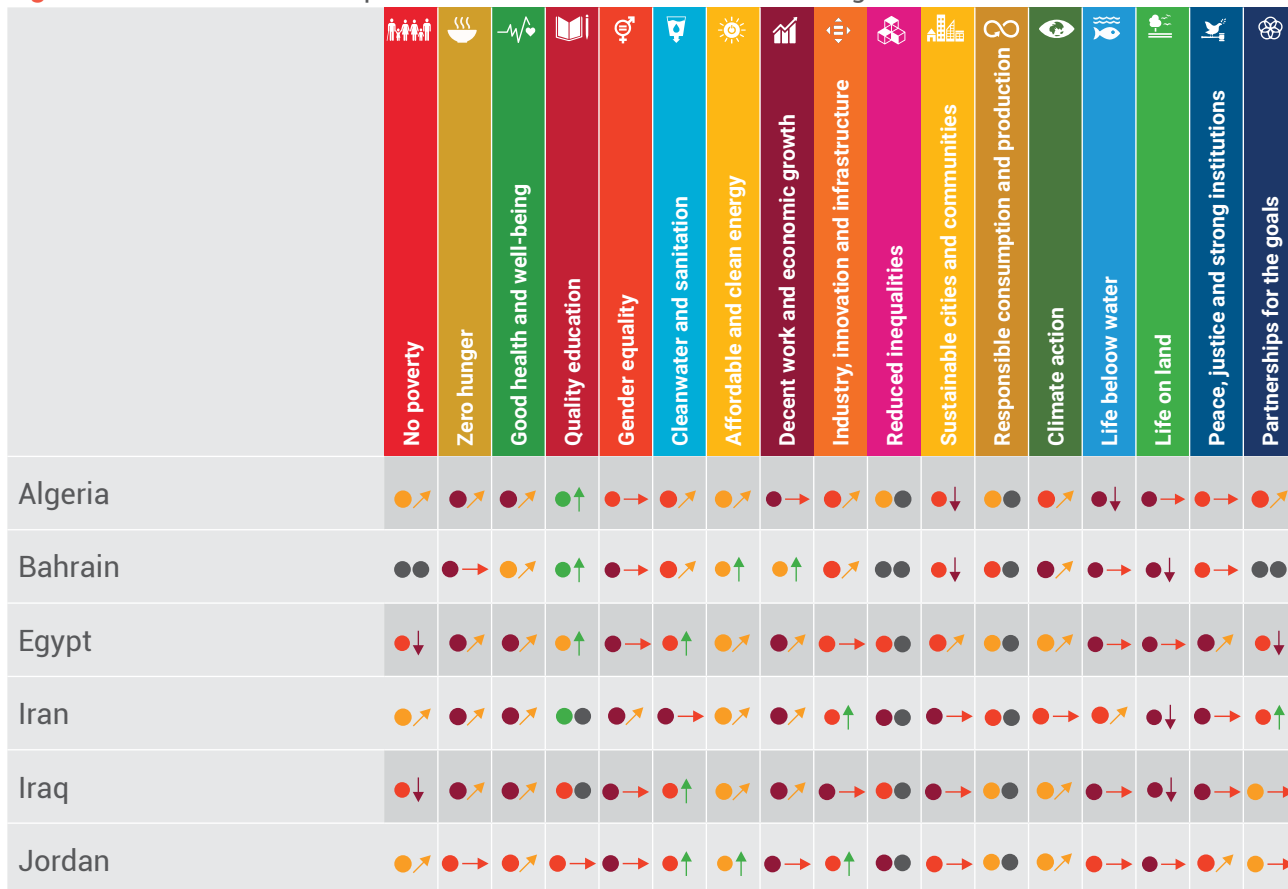
Introduction

Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development¹ and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by all United Nations Member States in 2015, local governments across the world have made considerable efforts to translate and align the global SDGs with local contexts (also known as SDG localization), reinforcing policy coherence for sustainable development, leaving no one and no place behind. They have supported national governments in formulating and implementing SDG-led initiatives while

delivering sustainable urban infrastructure and services for all (figure 1).

The role of local governments in meeting the global SDGs and national development objectives has been highlighted in the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), which discuss a country's progress towards achieving the SDGs in line with the requirements of the 2030 Agenda on SDG monitoring and reporting. Currently, it is estimated that at least 65 per cent of the 169 SDG targets cannot be achieved without the involvement of local governments.²

Figure 1. Sustainable Development Goals dashboard for the Arab region





Source: SDG localization in the Arab States, UNDP (2022).

Over the last five years, the international community has seen increasing interest from local governments in developing Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs). VLRs assess a city's progress towards achieving the SDGs and explore local development challenges and the ways to address them. Since 2016, over 250 VLRs have been generated worldwide³ representing 38

countries and 350 million people.⁴ These include the first VLR from Amman and the second VNR from Jordan, devised between 2021 and 2022 and presented at the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) in New York in 2022. An integral role in developing both VLRs and VNRs has been played by the United Nations institutions and agencies delivering technical assistance to the VLR

projects. Many VLRs have been produced in parallel to VNRs.

Developing VLRs can bring about a range of advantages such as: (i) improving the uptake of the 2030 Agenda at all levels of governance by increasing the exposure of local policymakers and other groups of stakeholders to its goals, values and review mechanisms; (ii) mainstreaming the SDGs through connecting SDG targets to local policy initiatives across sectors and levels of governance, facilitating multi-level cooperation and breaking administrative silos; (iii) refining the evidence-based policy process and decision-making through collecting high-quality urban data and development of recommendations that allow better formulation, monitoring, review and implementation of policy initiatives; (iv) reinforcing relationships between local governments and their partners such as national or regional governments and the national statistics offices; (v) providing a capacity-building platform for the stakeholders involved in the VLR development process; and (vi) supporting financing mobilization through existing mechanisms and innovative SDG localization initiatives.

The VLR process is also synergic with other strategic initiatives since it has inbuilt tools for stakeholder engagement. Recent experiences showcase the role of developing VLRs in enhancing local response to the COVID-19 pandemic, natural disasters and economic shocks through reorienting local development processes

on the issues relating to sustainability and building long-term resilience.

With growing interest in VLRs, relevant guideline materials have been made available by local governments, international institutions and organizations and city networks. Some existing guidelines and emerging VLR practices indicate that developing VLRs is intrinsically a unique, context-dependent process. It defines the objectives, content, format and impact of VLRs such as local development goals and access to high-quality urban data to guide selection of the SDGs. They also highlight common regional challenges facing governments when developing VLRs and in the broader context of the 2030 Agenda implementation, setting the ground for defining a “regional approach” to VLRs.

The objective of the guidelines on VLRs in the Arab region is to:

Provide evidence-based instructions and advice to governments in the Arab countries on developing VLRs to reinforce implementation of the 2030 Agenda and accelerate progress towards the SDGs in each country and the region facilitating collaboration, knowledge-sharing, transparency and the mainstreaming of good practices.

This document is based on four guiding principles:

- **Evidence-based:** developing VLRs requires the access and availability of

high-quality urban data, produced at regular intervals and disaggregated by various dimensions which can be effectively used to inform localized SDG indicators.

- **Participatory:** elevating the role of shared processes in developing VLRs. There are multiple ways in which these processes can be organized depending on the stage, objective and stakeholders involved.
- **Meaningful:** providing insights into the strategies deployed to understand and reconcile various perspectives on local development challenges and how to address them, making VLRs more reflective.
- **Actionable:** ensuring that VLRs are achievable, emphasizing the importance of connecting data and action, and providing examples of how VLRs can be operationalized for decision-making in countries and cities.

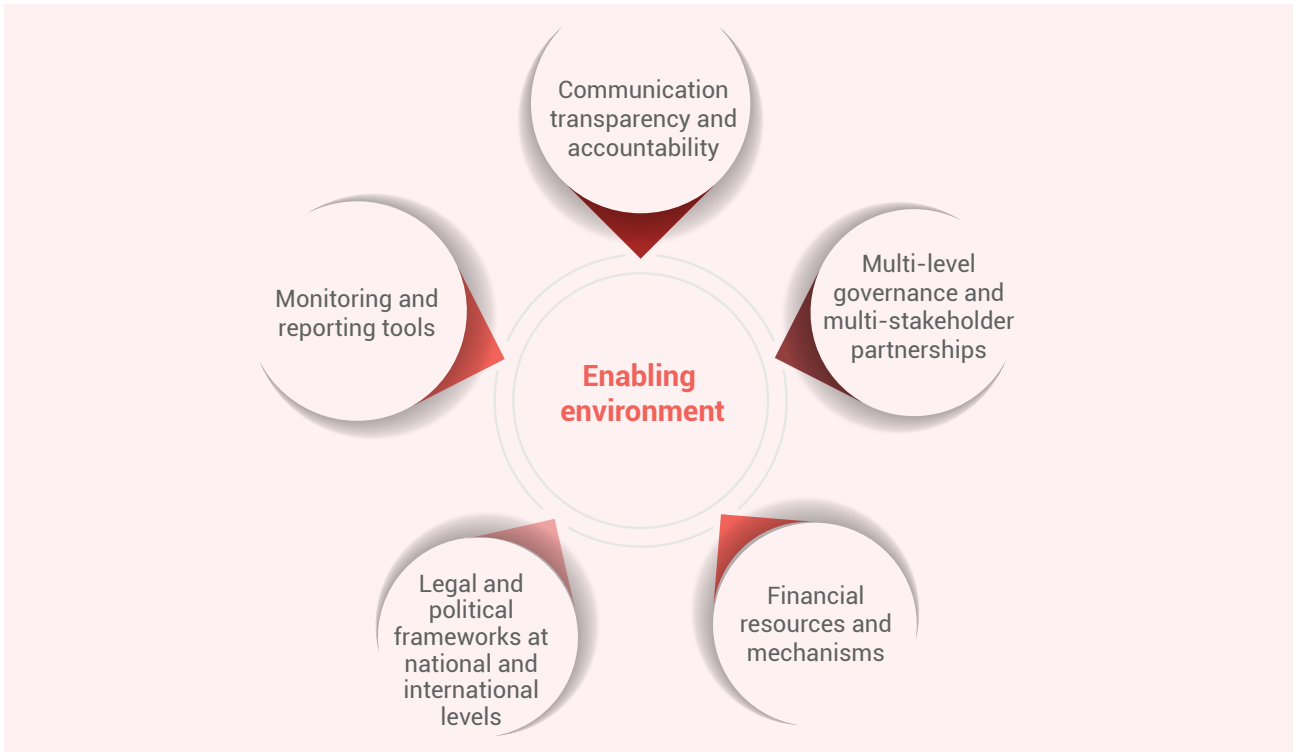
The VLR process thrives in an enabling environment that maximizes its potential (figure 2). Such an environment is characterized by solid political buy-in (e.g. endorsement by the mayor and other relevant political leaders), data availability (e.g. quantitative and qualitative, reliable and disaggregated data) and institutional support (e.g. activating participatory processes and involving different stakeholders). Other important factors are human and financial resources, legal and political frameworks, and transparent operational mechanisms. Therefore, beyond local governments, this document is recommended for stakeholders

such as national and/or regional governments and national statistics offices, among others, to ensure smooth preparation and organization of the VLR process.

Local governments are often confronted with an unfavourable environment to start the VLR process. In these cases it is important to raise awareness and promote communication, activating outreach campaigns through different media channels targeting multiple local stakeholders and outlining the transformative potential provided by the VLR process. Awareness-raising campaigns also play an important role and can be promoted through training activities such as workshops, online courses and webinars with decision makers from different government levels. It is fundamental to involve non-governmental stakeholders, such as the private sector, civil society and academia, to engage in open conversations and seek ownership of the VLR process.

The Arab region faces multiple challenges in achieving the SDGs by 2030; however, the region is also equipped with powerful opportunities to accelerate its progress. It is vital that decision makers in the region interested in developing VLRs have a common framework for action learning from each other, identifying cooperation opportunities, securing funding and including different groups in the process. These practical guidelines provide a clear and structured approach, helping to ensure the quality and reliability of the data and information used ensuring inclusiveness and participation, and promoting the sharing of information and knowledge among actors.

Figure 2. Enabling environment for the localization of the Sustainable Development Goals



Source: Guidelines for Voluntary Subnational Reviews, UCLG (2021).

1

Methodological building blocks



1. Methodological building blocks

An extensive literature review and examination of case studies at the global, international, regional, national and local scale was made for this document to develop actionable recommendations for the development of VLRs in the Arab region. This builds upon the knowledge provided by key documents for SDGs localization, such as global agendas, international guidelines, international frameworks, regional guidelines, regional reports and VLRs from Arab cities.

This document adheres to the 2030 Agenda⁵ and the New Urban Agenda⁶ incorporating the SDGs and the HLPF guidelines for VNRs⁷ as a standardized reporting structure for national governments. International guidelines including the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA),⁸ and UCLG and the United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UN-Habitat)'s framework for VLRs⁹ are crucial in establishing a common vocabulary and structure for local governments' reporting. These guidelines assist in consolidating shared challenges and opportunities, facilitating coherence and comparability among VLRs.

In addition, frameworks such as UN-Habitat's Global Urban Monitoring Framework (UMF)¹⁰ and United for Smart Sustainable Cities (U4SSC)'s key performance indicators (KPIs)¹¹ provide essential data collection and analysis methods. These contribute to harmonizing urban indicators and offering actionable tools for assessing urban governance thereby empowering initiatives related to integration and stakeholder engagement.¹²

Regional VLR guidelines such as those developed by the United Nations Economic

Commission for Europe (UNECE),¹³ the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP)¹⁴ and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA),¹⁵ are integral to understanding regional challenges and opportunities as observed in the Arab region through reports by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP),¹⁶ the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)¹⁷ and the VLRs developed in Amman, Jordan,¹⁸ Agadir, Morocco¹⁹ and Madinah, Saudi Arabia.²⁰ These regional insights and on-the-ground experiences have informed the guidelines providing valuable lessons and inspiration for sustainable development in the Arab region.

The regional guidelines activate the knowledge in the afore-mentioned documents, relating global agendas and international frameworks with contextualized regional insights, avoiding duplicating work and focusing on action-oriented recommendations. They aim to facilitate the development of VLRs in the Arab region, supporting advancement towards the SDGs through a methodology that is based on transparency and traceability.

In addition to literature review and case studies, this document considers first-hand insights gained by documentary analysis and comparative studies of all VNRs produced in the Arab region. The goal of this exercise was to identify gaps and opportunities, gaining a refined understanding on regional trends in the engagement with the SDGs. This overview also provides contextualized information to empower meaningful VLR development processes.

2

Voluntary Local Review development phases, stages and key actions



2. Voluntary Local Review development phases, stages and key actions

Table 1. VLR development phases

Inception phase	Situational analysis phase	Strategic planning	Finalization phase	Monitoring and follow-up phase
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Governance and institutional ownership Vision and stakeholder engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contextual assessment Calibration exercise Policy coherence Data collection 	Data analysis into action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Report writing Financial framework Validation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitoring strategy Follow-up guidelines

Source: Author.

The VLR development process comprises different phases from inception and situation analysis to finalization and follow-up. Each phase branches into multiple stages, such as contextual assessment, data collection and report writing. Each stage presents the need for key actions driven by specific procedural frameworks (e.g. standardized data collection methods, participatory exercises, and vertical and horizontal alignment) and the need to tackle common challenges (e.g. data availability, stakeholders' buy-in and strategic multilevel cooperation). This document provides a common framework that covers each phase, strengthening local governments' capabilities to leverage

the VLR process as a coordination and collaboration platform (table 1).

In this document, the VLR process is organized in a specific order, but it is important to note that phases often overlap during implementation, blurring the boundaries between stages and activities, especially when depending on financial resources and technical capabilities. Each VLR process is conditioned by unique contextual elements that influence its development, results and timeline. It is crucial to have a strategic approach to the process, aiming for specific completion timelines while being capable of constantly

adapting to emerging complications, updating initial presuppositions and calibrating practices. This iterative process empowers and refines stakeholders' capabilities in the localization of the SDGs.

The following sections explore the different phases, stages and key actions in the VLR process. The inception phase comprises governance structures, institutional ownership, vision and stakeholder engagement. It highlights the importance of political ownership, coordination mechanisms and good practices related to institutional arrangements driving the VLR process. This document explores mechanisms to engage with relevant stakeholders and the broader public, primarily through participatory processes focused on leaving no one behind. This phase is central to constructing a shared vision that legitimizes and drives critical decisions in the VLR process.

The situation analysis phase is composed of contextualization, calibration, policy coherence and data collection topics. These stages stress the need for a mixed-methods examination of the local conjuncture in different dimensions (e.g. social, political and cultural), developing a comprehensive list of relevant data (e.g. demographic, legal and fiscal) and supporting a diagnosis exercise. Calibration exercises are also considered aimed at identifying local limitations and opportunities, and prioritizing the SDGs. A policy coherence study is also important, analysing vertical and horizontal integration opportunities and empowering multilevel governance (MLG) frameworks.

Next, data collection is explored, suggesting an evidence-based approach

to decision-making. VLRs must activate a common approach to quantitative and qualitative data collection, striving for transparency, traceability and accountability, leveraging consolidated frameworks such as the UN-Habitat Global UMF, maximizing its efficiency and potential for knowledge-sharing.

The strategic planning phase explores robust frameworks for connecting data analysis and action, leading to achievable initiatives and collaboration at the local, sub-national, national and regional levels. It can be argued that it is crucial to turn evidence-based insights into concrete action, triangulating different data sources and producing in-depth working papers on selected SDGs.

In the finalization phase it is necessary to promote a deliberate and coherent structure to report writing. This structure facilitates cooperation and knowledge-sharing, especially when aligned to international guidelines for VNRs and VLRs. Additionally, different approaches to efficient resource allocation are examined considering significant barriers and opportunities, and supporting local governments' development of enabling financial frameworks.

Finally, for the monitoring and follow-up phases, a clear framework is provided for turning the VLR experience into a legacy for the city. In all these phases, good practices are explored to showcase different approaches and lessons learned worldwide, while suggesting approaches to support the Arab region in making the most out of VLRs.

A. Inception phase

1. Governance and institutional ownership

In the inception phase, it is important to build a coherent approach to the governance and institutional ownership of the VLR process, developing an expression of interest and workplans for the different stages of the project. The VLR main objectives, expected outcomes and partners must be outlined from the beginning, using tools for initial strategic alignment such as the creation of a steering committee,²¹ the dissemination of an inception questionnaire, the establishment of a VLR task force and SDG focused task force, and the organization of stakeholder forums in key moments of the VLR process.

Most published VLRs to date are driven by local government, often through cross-departmental collaboration. That being said, there are interesting examples of VLRs being jointly developed by academic consortiums²² or with strong inputs from civil society.²³ In any case, it is vital that local governments are proactively engaging with varied internal and external actors in different sectors to develop a VLR capable of translating high-level aspirations and granular on-the-ground insights into concrete actions. Local governments have the responsibility to identify the right department or actors responsible for undertaking technical activities (e.g. data management), engagement activities (e.g. participatory exercises) and institutional activities (e.g. communicating and reporting).

National governments are responsible for supporting local governments and

empowering their governance structure. This can be done by providing adequate, timely and predictable resources, enhancing local governments' capabilities of raising revenue and supporting expenditure management through financial, accounting and budgeting systems. Local governments have to be strategic in connecting the VLR process with the already existing institutional arrangements of the national and regional governments.

The Arab region is composed of a diverse collection of countries with different approaches to governance – some trends can be observed in relation to centralization, mandates and administrative structures. Most countries in the region have adopted a centralized system of governance, though Arab nations are increasingly embracing decentralization as a means of improving governance and fostering growth. In Morocco, for example, King Mohammed VI proposed a decentralization blueprint in the early 2000s, and the 2011 constitutional change established a solid foundation for a decentralized system. While the ideas appear to be promising – and other nations such as Tunisia are attempting to replicate them – implementation remains a challenge.

Local governments must approach the interlinked nature of the SDGs as an opportunity to include different actors in the process, strengthening and institutionalizing participation mechanisms and overcoming siloed practices. The VLR process requires on-the-ground leadership capable of communicating concrete local challenges and opportunities to other levels of governance.

Conducting a Stakeholder Analysis and Capacity Assessment provides a diagnosis of the governance context, identifying gaps and opportunities for the development of VLRs (table 2).

The mapping exercise results in the identification of relevant stakeholders, their type of involvement, capacity assets, gaps, desired outcomes and incentives.

Table 2. Assessment example

	Type and level of involvement in the project	Capacity assets	Capacity gaps	Desired future outcomes	Incentives
National government	High	Planning and drafting of VNRs	Low levels of coordination across sphere of governance	Dialogue with local and regional governments is structurally improved	Participation in key international and regional events
Subnational governments	N A (no regional or metropolitan government)	N A	N A	N A	N A
Local communities	Medium	Information of reality of local contexts	Low level of involvement in planning and decision-making	Communities, minorities and vulnerable groups are structurally included in decision-making processes at local level	Reflection of the priorities in recovery and development processes, including budgeting
Academia and research	Medium	Analysis capacities	Limited connection between research and policy development	Academia and research institutions are systematically included in policy making and in national arrangements for SDG implementation and recovery	Access to information and case studies
Private sector	Low	Capacity mobilizing partners and resources	Limited participation in official decision-making processes	Representative small and medium businesses are included in planning and monitoring of development at local level	Opportunities to strengthen public private partnerships and to mobilize resources, and to influence strategic planning and decision-making, including allocation of budget

Source: Author.

Box 1. Bonn, Germany

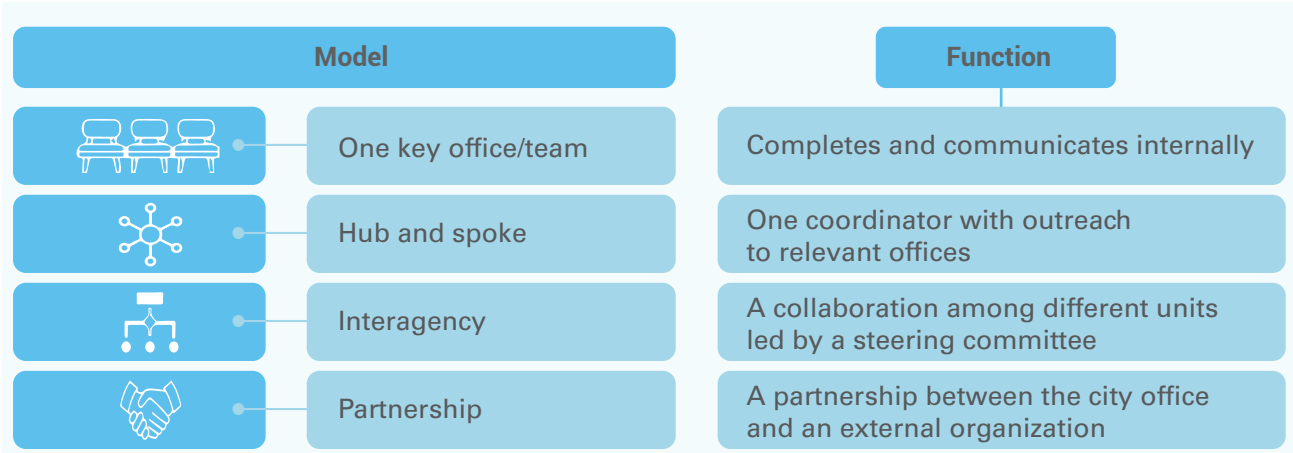
In 2022, the city of Bonn launched its second VLR, demonstrating its commitment to mainstreaming the SDGs into urban policymaking. This VLR process is notable for fostering an innovative interdepartmental partnership within the municipal administration bringing together departments, such as business development, planning, environment, social affairs and more. Coordinators managed this collaborative effort, highlighting the significance of well-trained professionals who can effectively oversee complex multi-department arrangements. Techniques such as internal questionnaires and standardized spreadsheets were employed to maximize the potential of the collaborative platform. The VLR process was reported to have catalysed cross-departmental collaboration, leading to new synergies and opportunities. This case exemplifies how VLRs are not just a one-time project but a continuous process that drives stakeholder engagement and policy coherence.

Box 2. Cape Town, South Africa – Voluntary Local Review

Cape Town demonstrated the significance of collaboration with external partners and alignment with international agendas in maximizing the impact and quality of its SDG localization initiatives during its 2021 VLR.^a The city proactively established relationships and partnerships with various stakeholders, including national and local departments, to enhance engagement, share knowledge and raise awareness. These efforts resulted in valuable support and resources from international development agencies such as UNDESA, UN-Habitat and UCLG as well as access to expert knowledge and decision-making tools. This approach strengthened Cape Town's position in the international arena and allowed the city to participate in city networks and capitalize on emerging collaboration opportunities. The city's experience attests to the importance of engaging with external partners to identify shared goals, utilizing international networks and partnerships, ensuring that local SDG initiatives are aligned with international agendas and maintaining open lines of communication with external partners.

^a Voluntary Local Review 2021 City of Cape Town: A review of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, City of Cape Town (2021).

Figure 3. Examples of operational models in Voluntary Local Reviews



Source: Anthony F. Pipa and Max Bouchet (2020): Next generation urban planning. Enabling sustainable development at the local level through voluntary local reviews (VLRs), Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution.

Ultimately, the success of the preparatory process for VLRs will depend on a combination of factors including political support, public engagement and institutional support. It requires a sustained effort from all stakeholders, including government, civil society, the private sector and local communities, to make the most out of the VLR process.

It is important to magnify VLR visibility, creating scope for interagency collaboration, ensuring coordination and efficient resource allocation. Visibility also creates essential possibilities for dialogue and knowledge sharing. International conferences, meetings and forums are significant opportunities to share local experiences and good practices, engage in discussions with other political leaders and strengthen city networks committed to achieving the SDGs.

At this stage it is essential to identify the VLR purpose from the onset, ensuring transparency, alignment and managing expectations. This exercise should consider questions such as will VLRs be used: to harmonize local-national policies? To present to donors to fundraise for development projects? To develop partnerships with civil society, the private sector and/or other stakeholders? How will this VLR be actionable?

There are different ways of approaching the VLR institutional arrangement. UNESCAP suggests that different models generate a collaborative process based on the balance between centralization and co-ownership through partnerships and interagency arrangements²⁴ (figure 3). More collaborative models present advantages to stakeholder engagement, legitimacy, capillarity and igniting action. Conversely,

collaborative processes also result in more complex coordination platforms and the amount of human and financial resources needed.

Cities can benefit greatly from implementing e-governance mechanisms, improving citizen engagement, streamlining government processes, enhancing data management, promoting digital inclusion, and building a culture of innovation and accessibility.²⁵ It is important for cities to have a clear strategy for integrating technology, improving data management and building capacity within the government. To successfully implement e-governance mechanisms, cities should also embrace change management, and provide support and training to government employees as they adjust to new technologies and processes. Regular evaluations can help identify improvement areas and gauge progress towards goals, ensuring that the initiative remains on track and delivers the results wanted.

Gender mainstreaming is a crucial aspect of the VLR process which should be addressed in the inception phase. Gender dynamics must be included at every stage of VLR development and its implementation from coordination, conceptual and analytical perspectives. In the coordination of VLRs, the gender perspective should be of focus in the planning, team meetings, task force and expert groups, influencing all strategic decisions. In the conceptual development of priorities, challenges and opportunities, the gender perspective plays an important role in refining the VLR process. Gender should also be mainstreamed in the analytical stages of the VLR connecting research, data collection, data analysis and policy recommendations with the gender perspective.

VLR is a flexible process that can be adapted to a city or region's specific needs and circumstances, considering municipal competencies. However, it is important that local governments ensure that the VLR process is well-defined, transparent and inclusive, and that all relevant stakeholders are engaged. It is also paramount to foster partnerships and interagency arrangements to ensure that the VLR process is collaborative and that all stakeholders work together towards common goals. This approach must put forward a methodology that focuses on outcomes and results, ensuring that the VLR process is integrated into local development plans and initiatives, one that is continuously evaluated and adapted to ensure that it remains relevant, effective and responsive to the needs and circumstances of the city or region.

2. Shared vision and stakeholder engagement

At this stage, it is important to collaboratively develop a shared vision for VLRs, engaging with different stakeholders and maximizing buy-in. Every stage of VLR is an opportunity to foster participation using different engagement mechanisms to achieve specific goals. It is essential to approach the construction of a shared vision as a collaborative exercise. The main objective is maximizing the potential of diverse perspectives. Localization of the SDGs must be propelled by the commitment and ownership of as wide a range of actors as possible.

The 2030 Agenda and the New Urban Agenda play an important role in this process by providing a common language for interaction and a collaborative

framework for action. A shared vision, in the framework of the positive agenda of the SDGs,²⁶ guides goal setting, decision-making, prioritization and implementation. The New Urban Agenda Illustrated Handbook (p.91)²⁷ suggests that the resulting visions developed by these exercises should be mainstreamed into planning instruments as a set of steering principles that guide action. The interlinked nature of the 17 SDGs coupled with their ability to reach different sectors, communities and social groups translates into a fertile field for constructing a shared vision for sustainable urban development where no one is left behind.

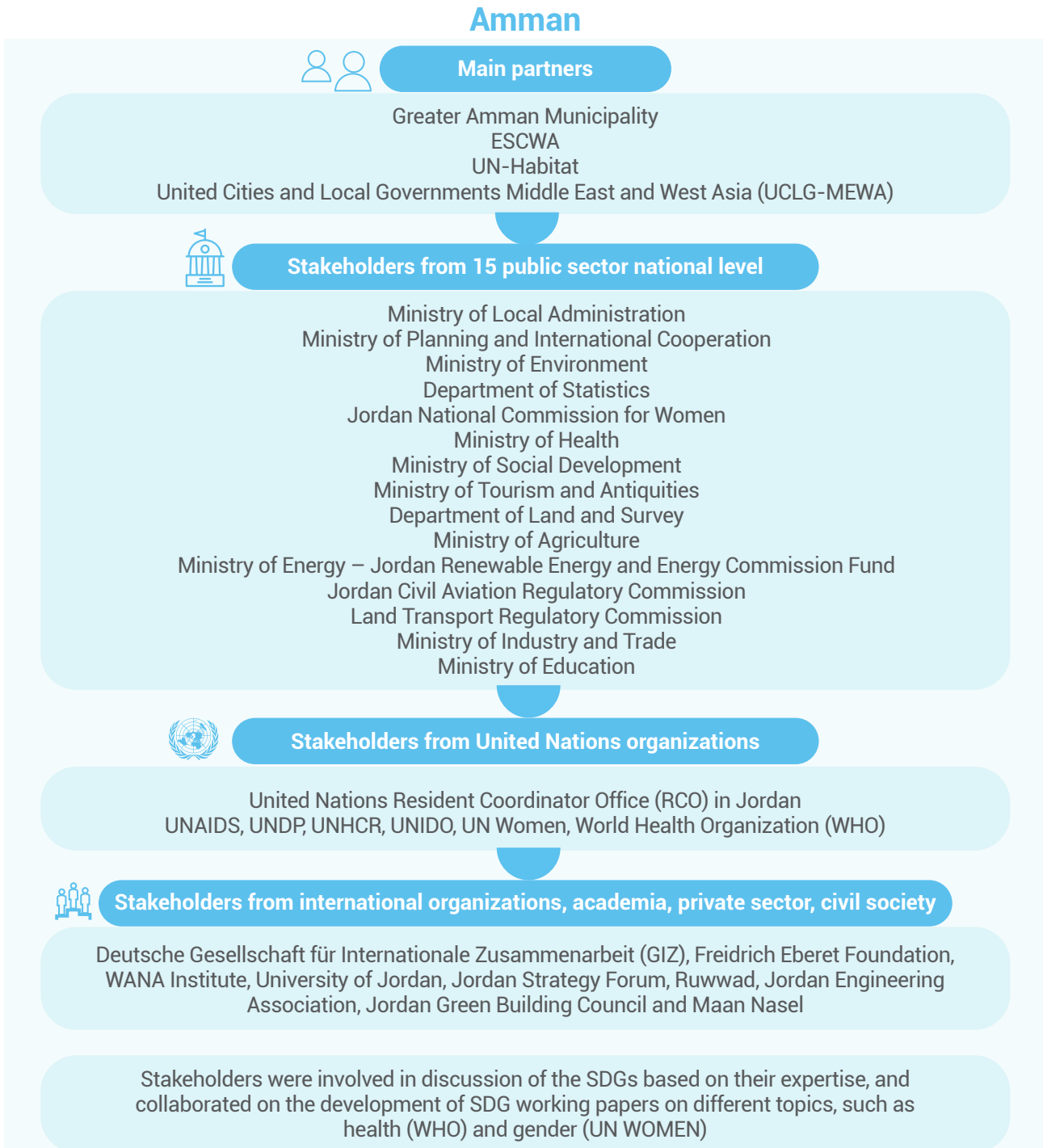
Vision and mission statements are often used to establish the groundwork for collaborative action. In the case of VLRs, it is important to highlight the alignment and implementation of the SDGs with a city's vision. In the Arab region, Amman, Jordan's VLR emphasizes Greater Amman Municipality's vision of being a smart, modern, sustainable and resilient city. In the case of Agadir, Morocco's VLR, its vision builds on a smart, sustainable and inclusive city, and Madinah, Saudi Arabia's VLR highlights the local development's authority of having a people-centred smart sustainable city.

Some Arab countries have included stakeholder engagement mechanisms in their VNR process. Lebanon, Oman and the United Arab Emirates, for example, have established cross-sector initiatives, and Morocco, the Sudan and Tunisia involve parliaments, youth and local governments in their VNRs. Qatar's 2021 VNR also involved a multi-stakeholder approach where different stakeholders from national government, academia, the public sector and the private sector were involved. In their

VLRs, Amman, Jordan and Agadir, Morocco have followed a strategic approach to involve and collaborate with various stakeholders

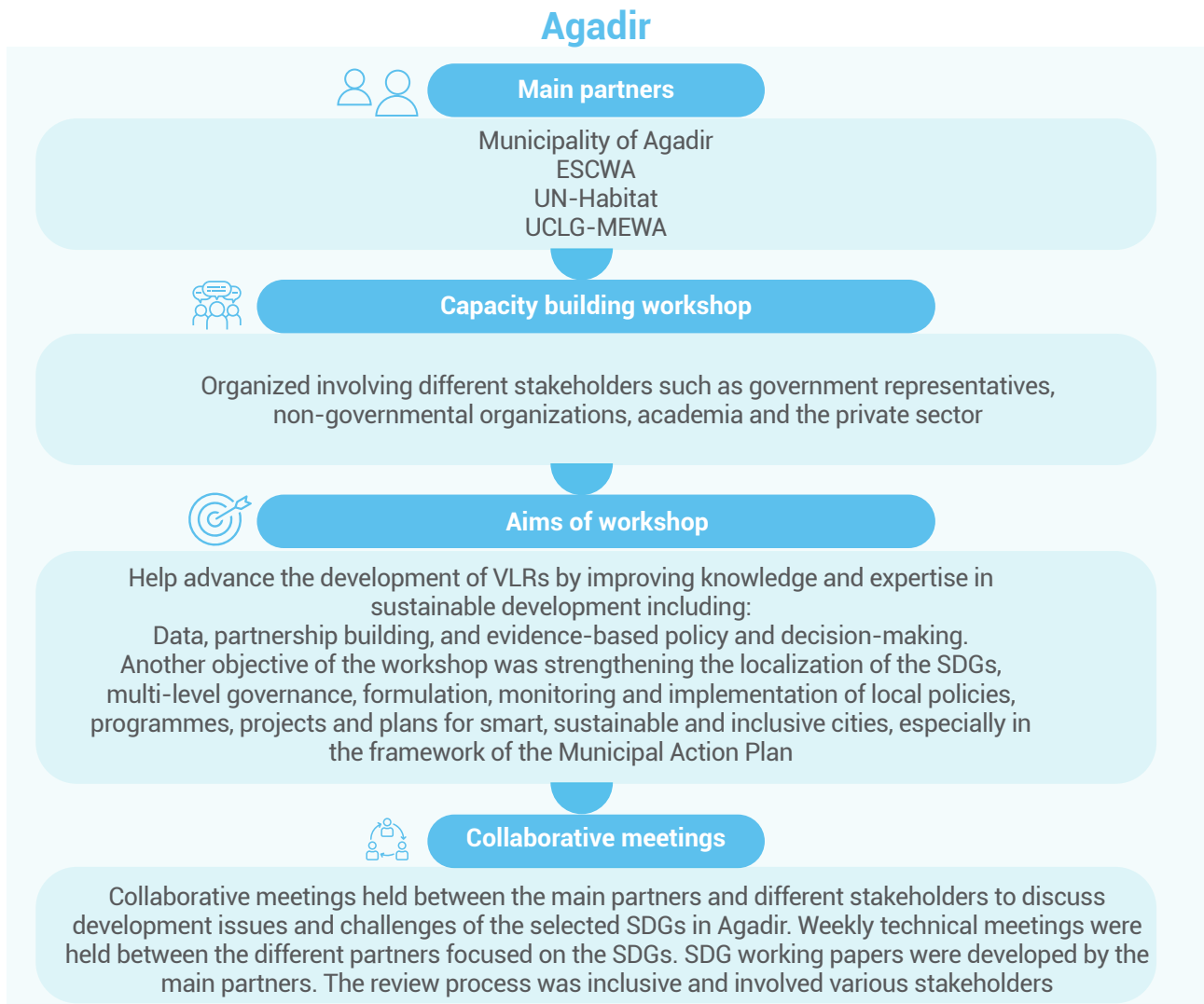
to ensure ownership, commitment and inclusivity throughout the development process of the review (figures 4 and 5).

Figure 4. Amman, Jordan Voluntary Local Review stakeholder engagement process



Source: Author.

Figure 5. Agadir, Morocco's Voluntary Local Review stakeholder engagement process



Source: Author.

A deliberate and strategic approach to this stage of VLR is essential. It is therefore important to develop a stakeholder engagement plan that explores important issues such as the definition of which, how and when stakeholders are engaged.²⁸ These decisions will depend on the VLR stage and the specificities of the different groups and actors. Additionally, the engagement plan is a crucial instrument to prepare for potential challenges, such as resource limitations, lack of technical skills needed to conduct engagement activities

and barriers to mobilizing key actors or identifying and reaching vulnerable actors.

Next, it is crucial to develop a mapping exercise, identifying key actors and communities. The resulting database can be frequently updated and used in diverse stages of VLRs. In addition to contact details, position and organization, the mapping exercise can include information about the expected impact the VLR will have on a person or group and the estimated capacity to engage in the participatory activities.²⁹

It is also vital to infuse this exercise with the leave no one behind principle, involving a diverse set of actors and oversampling vulnerable groups. UNECA proposes that participatory exercises identify, assess and partner with different vulnerable groups and incorporate their insights into VLR development (table 3).³⁰

Stakeholder engagement can be realized at different quality levels (figure 6). UNDESA

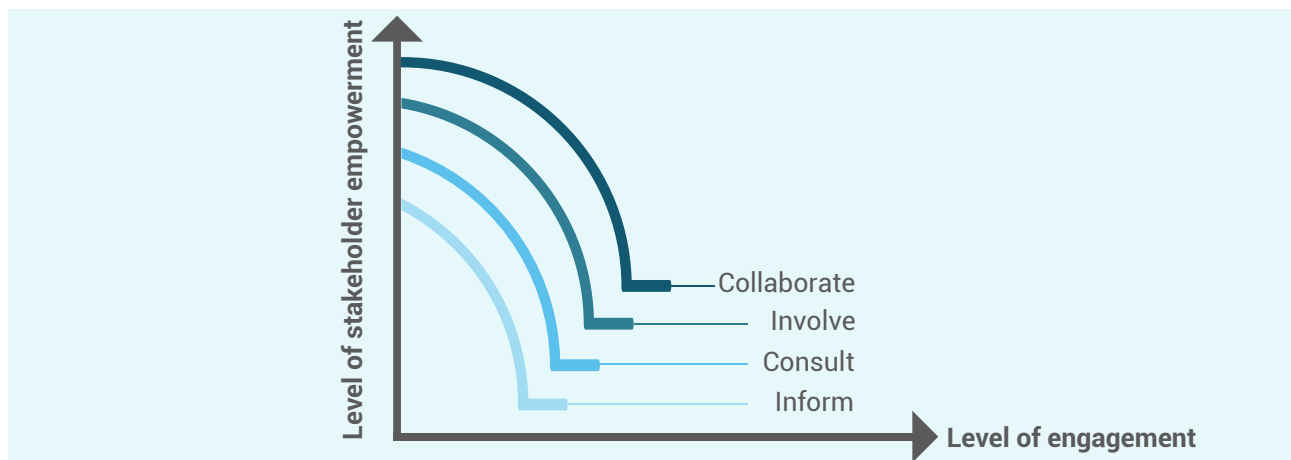
and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR)³¹ indicate that engagement should be purposeful, inclusive, transformative and proactive, and engagement quality is usually translated into the potential for impact on decision-making. While lower levels of engagement focus on informing and consulting, higher levels of engagement produce involvement and collaboration.³²

Table 3. Leave no one behind: process of engagement

Identify	Assess	Partner
Left behind and disadvantaged groups	Data gaps	Left behind and disadvantaged groups
Less visible “left behind” groups	Intersecting disadvantages	Civil society organizations and universities
Map	Determine	Engage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is left behind? • Which groups are the hardest to reach those not represented by civil society organizations? • Why are they left behind? • How are they left behind? • Why are they excluded from public discourse or regular data collection on the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2063 targets, indicators and goals? • Which local organizations support marginalized groups? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the available statistics? • What further data should be collected: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will data be collected? • How will data be disaggregated? • How can existing statistics be complemented with qualitative data: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To capture challenges faced by marginalized groups? • Are groups facing multiple disadvantages: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the disadvantages? • Are there any intersecting or overlapping disadvantages? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can civil society organizations and universities help: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To identify and access groups not represented by these organizations? • To conduct qualitative research? • To identify appropriate indicators and relevant data sources? • To ensure participation of groups left behind in planning, implementation and follow up phases of VLR?

Source: Africa Voluntary Local Review Guidelines, UNECA (2022).

Figure 6. Engagement quality levels



Source: Stakeholder Engagement and the 2030 Agenda: A Practical Guide, UNDESA and UNITAR (2020).

Table 4. Examples of strategic engagement objectives

Inform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The process is beginning and there is deeper participation to come. - Stakeholders have a low level of understanding of the VLR process.
Consult	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Clear plans exist, and there are limited options for change. - Local governments want to improve their existing plans and are able to use the feedback to do so. - Stakeholders can understand and relate to the plans and options. - Local governments are committed to providing feedback to stakeholders on how their input influences the outcome.
Involve	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Local governments need the expertise and contacts of stakeholders in order to effectively implement decisions. - Local governments are committed to incorporating inputs received into their decisions and to providing feedback to stakeholders. - Stakeholders have an active desire and demonstrate the capacity to be engaged in the VLR implementation and review process.
Collaborate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It is essential that stakeholders feel ownership of the process of implementation and review of VLRs. - There is an identifiable extra benefit to all parties from acting together. - There is enough time and resources to make the collaboration meaningful. - Local governments and stakeholders demonstrate the political will, desire and commitment to developing a meaningful partnership around the implementation and review of VLRs. - Local governments recognize the need for stakeholders' advice and innovation to create solutions, and are committed to shared decision-making processes.

Source: Adapted from Stakeholder Engagement and the 2030 Agenda: A Practical Guide, UNDESA and UNITAR (2020).

Table 5. Examples of engagement contexts

 Inform	Providing regular information to stakeholders about the implementation plans and the review process.
 Consult	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Consultation with specific groups around specific proposals.- Online public consultations or surveys on specific proposals for SDG implementation.- Townhall meeting to discuss specific proposals.- Considering existing research.
 Involve	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Local consultations on SDG implementation where new proposals are welcomed.- Parallel stakeholder reviews, which are treated as meaningful inputs into the review process.- Local consultations or dialogue during the review process where new proposals are welcomed.- Includes stakeholders in the formulation of subnational-level SDG indicators and the collection of data.- Work with stakeholders as service delivery partners for VLRs.
 Collaborate	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Sub-national SDG Coordination Committees/Sub-national Commissions on Sustainable Development with long-term, meaningful participation of stakeholders.- Government supported multi-stakeholder alliances/thematic working groups around specific SDGs.- Engaging stakeholders in a sub-national development strategy process which aligns with the SDGs.- Town hall meetings.

Source: Adapted from Stakeholder Engagement and the 2030 Agenda: A Practical Guide, UNDESA and UNITAR (2020).

The strategic purpose of each engagement activity must be clearly defined. For example, informative exercises focus on communicating key information to the VLR process, while consultation often explores specific issues and defines action pathways (table 4). Involvement exercises are also central to facilitating the emergence of innovative proposals and including different actors in data collection and analysis. Collaborative practices are also

useful for involving key stakeholders and consolidating partnerships.

Multiple sorts of engagement can be instrumental in different stages of VLRs depending on the context and available resources. Informative exercises are often valuable instruments in the early stages of VLRs or when the actors involved need an improved grasp of VLRs and other related agendas, such as the 2030 Agenda and the





New Urban Agenda. Consultation exercises are instrumental when technical feedback or diverse insights are needed to improve specific mechanisms. Involvement practices are powerful in contexts of decision-making and revision. Finally, collaborative exercises are essential for consolidating commitment and ownership from different stakeholders and situations where innovative solutions are needed (table 5).

It is important to notice that different tools for participation should be undertaken in various stages of the development cycle of VLRs, depending on its objectives. For example, in a particular stage, the goal might be to discuss priorities and strategic

drivers of VLRs. In other stages, the goal might be to acquire technical data collection and analysis insights. Additionally, unexpected sectoral complexities may arise, calling for engagement with a specific community. Using multiple participatory tools is encouraged since it has the potential to cover various social groups that interact using other mediums (table 6).

It is important to have a transparent methodology for collecting and analysing the data emerging from these exercises. In summary, these participatory processes must be activated throughout VLRs, considering their strategic goals, actors involved, methodologies, tools, resources and timeline.

Table 6. Examples of engagement tools

 Inform	 Consult	 Involve	 Collaborate
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fact sheets - Open houses - Newsletters, bulletins, circulars - Websites - Webinars - Radio - Newspapers and official media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focus groups - Surveys - Internal and/or public meetings - Webinars - Social media chats - Web-based platforms for discussion and inputs - Radio 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Deliberative polling - Solicitation of recommendations and proposals - Workshops - Forums - Provision of data - Webinars - Social media chats - Web-based platforms for discussion and inputs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Guiding or advisory bodies - Working groups - Joint planning and shared projects - Standing or ad-hoc committees - Facilitated consensus building and decision-making forums - Training and capacity building to support joint action

Source: Adapted from: Stakeholder Engagement and the 2030 Agenda: A Practical Guide. UNDESA and UNITAR (2020).

Box 3. Innovative activities

In many cases, off-the-shelf tools will not fit contextual particularities. Outside-the-box participatory processes can play a significant role in reaching and making the most out of bottom-up knowledge and insights.

One example is the South Africa City Futures: Visualising the Futures of our Neighbourhoods project. It connects everyday life narratives and experiences to the planning process, combining stories, urban form and scientific data to consolidate a shared vision of the city collaboratively. The project engaged local people in various activities such as workshops, excursions, mapping sessions and brainstorming using art and music. This approach is also a powerful way of bridging expert knowledge with grassroots knowledge, involving residents in decisions around strategic priorities for the city.

Having surpassed 250 published VLRs worldwide (from which only three are from the Arab region), interesting examples of stakeholder engagement and participatory activities arise. New York’s 2019 VLR,³³ for example, includes a variety of engagement platforms, such as a survey reaching around 14,000 inhabitants, focused events involving approximately 2,400 participants from different neighbourhoods, the institution of an advisory board and the activation of regional collaboration channels.

Stakeholder engagement is critical to creating more inclusive, transparent and effective local governance. Additionally, it empowers subsequent stages of the VLR process (e.g. vertical and horizontal integration) and informs key technical activities related to data collection and analysis. In conclusion, stakeholder engagement is a central element in every stage of VLRs, potentializing the value of the reporting process and enriching the resulting decision-making.

B. Situation analysis phase

1. Contextual assessment

Current global challenges potentialize the importance of contextualization since their impacts unequally affect urban areas worldwide. Climate change impact, for example, is not uniform globally and local context-specificities such as geography, demographics and infrastructure must be considered to develop effective and sustainable solutions. Similarly, the drivers and impact of migration can vary significantly across countries and urban areas. The COVID-19 pandemic highlights

the need for context-specific responses since the effect of lockdowns and economic disruptions can be substantially different in areas with varying levels of development.

Cities in the Arab region face a variety of urban development challenges including rapid population growth, urban sprawl, informal settlements, ageing infrastructure, lack of affordable housing, limited access to public services and transportation, and environmental degradation.³⁴ Understanding the specific context of each city and its unique challenges is crucial to address these issues effectively.

Table 7. Indicator examples by data dimension

Data dimension	Indicator examples			
Demographic	Political size	Population growth	Population density	Age structure
Economic	Employment rate	Poverty rate	Medium household income	Business activity
Fiscal	Revenue	Expenditure	Accountability	Debt
Social	Safety	Transport	Education	Healthcare
Political	Participation	Public opinion	–	–

Source: Author.

Note: These are orientative dimensions, local authorities might have different categorizations for data collection.

By considering local specificities, policies and programmes can be more effective, efficient and equitable in addressing these global challenges. Contextualization helps ensure that interventions are tailored to each location’s unique needs and circumstances, leading to better outcomes.

At the contextualization stage of the VLR development process, local governments must focus on producing a clear picture of the current context of a city by exploring different dimensions of urban development and using data to gain refined insights. This stage involves a study of the city’s relevant social, cultural, economic, political, institutional and legal dynamics. In this sense, a spatial strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats (SWOT) analysis³⁵ can be a powerful tool to gain insights on local capabilities to achieve the goals set in the shared vision of VLRs.

It is essential to provide an overview of pertinent data, such as demographic data (e.g. population size and age),

economic data (e.g. employment and business activity), fiscal data (e.g. revenue, expenditure and accountability), social data (e.g. crime rates, access to transport, education and healthcare), political data (e.g. public opinion and participation) and environmental data (e.g. pollution and green space), among others (table 7).

Consecutively, this study must identify key regulations and policies (e.g. zoning regulations and building codes), budget cycles and the technical capacity relevant to VLRs. This information can then be used to inform policy and planning decisions, and prioritize investments in areas where they are needed the most.³⁶ A clear understanding of the existing regulations and policies that impact areas of action in VLRs is crucial in ensuring that new policies align with and support existing ones. Legal regulations and policies set the framework for action, resulting in potential barriers and opportunities to SDG localization. It is important that decision makers are up-to-date on these elements, minimizing

any risks for legal challenges, ensuring compliance with national and international laws and agreements, and securing the long-term sustainability of new initiatives.

Identifying budget cycles can also help cities plan and allocate resources more effectively towards sustainable development initiatives. However, budget cycles are not just a local issue – MLG structures often influence them. It is essential for cities to understand how their budget cycles fit into the larger national budgeting process and to identify opportunities for alignment and collaboration with other levels of government. This can be especially important for cities with little control over their budgets who may depend on national allocations and transfers. In such cases, cities need to understand the allocation process, the criteria used to distribute funds and the role of the national government in the budget cycle.

In addition, assessing technical capacities helps cities to understand the skills and expertise required to implement action. This information can be used to identify gaps in capacity, and to develop training and capacity-building programmes to address these gaps. Local authorities must prioritize resource allocation, and technical capacity is a significant factor in developing efficient and cost-effective initiatives.

A one-size-fits-all approach to urban development is unlikely to succeed in the Arab region given the diversity of local circumstances and challenges. Contextualization is, therefore, crucial to ensure that urban development programmes are tailored to the specific needs of each city and are more likely to be effective and sustainable in the long term. This evidence-

based exercise is central to gaining insight into trends and priority areas that will guide the VLR development process. Additionally, a refined grasp of local peculiarities paves the way to empowering multilateral policy coherence.

This stage of VLRs must be understood as an exercise to refine local government's grasp of the local context, especially in relation to key topics for sustainable development. This knowledge will inform subsequent stages of the VLR development when further calibration and prioritization of the SDGs and actions will be undertaken. The data collected at this stage will also be used to support analysis in later stages of the process.

2. Calibration stage

With the contextualization in place, it is important to make strategic decisions and select key areas for action. The calibration stage serves as a compass for decision-making, supporting the prioritization of initiatives in each location, connecting the VLR construction process to specific needs, challenges and opportunities.

Firstly, cities must engage in mapping projects and initiatives related to the SDGs (table 8). It is vital to provide an overview of the direct and indirect involvement with SDG localization initiatives (e.g. prior VLRs and VNRs in the region, participation in forums, membership in city networks, specific strategies and action plans, capacity building projects, etc.). This mapping provides a better understanding of the already existing initiatives in motion, exposing synergies and opportunities for collaboration.

Table 8. Initiative mapping tool

	Short description	Resources mobilized	Related SDGs	Alignment with strategic vision
Related initiatives				
Related documents and plans				
Engaged actors				
Participation in forums				
Involvement in networks				

Source: Author.

The VLR process is a significant opportunity to mainstream international agendas' vocabulary in local policymaking, facilitating the articulation between the SDGs and local initiatives. It is crucial, therefore, to map already existing efforts with the different targets emanating from the SDGs.

UNECA's Rapid Integrated Assessment Tool³⁷ provides a structured approach to this challenge, connecting local policies and strategic documents with the different SDGs and targets (table 9). This visualization provides a clear picture of synergy potentials, gaps and opportunities.

Table 9. Rapid Integrated Assessment Tool example

Policy areas/ strategic pillar	Goal 1: Poverty						Goal 2: Food security								
	1.1	1.2	1.3	1.4	1.5	1a	1b	2.1	2.2	2.3	2.4	2.5	2a	2b	2c
Health strategy	X				X										
Water sector policy	X														
National biodiversity strategy												X	X		
Land policy act	X				X										
National smallholder policy					X		X		X	X					
Justice system reforms programme					X	X									

Source: Adapted from Rapid Integrated Assessment Tool: Mapping SDGS to local policies and strategies, UNECA, (2022, p. 39).

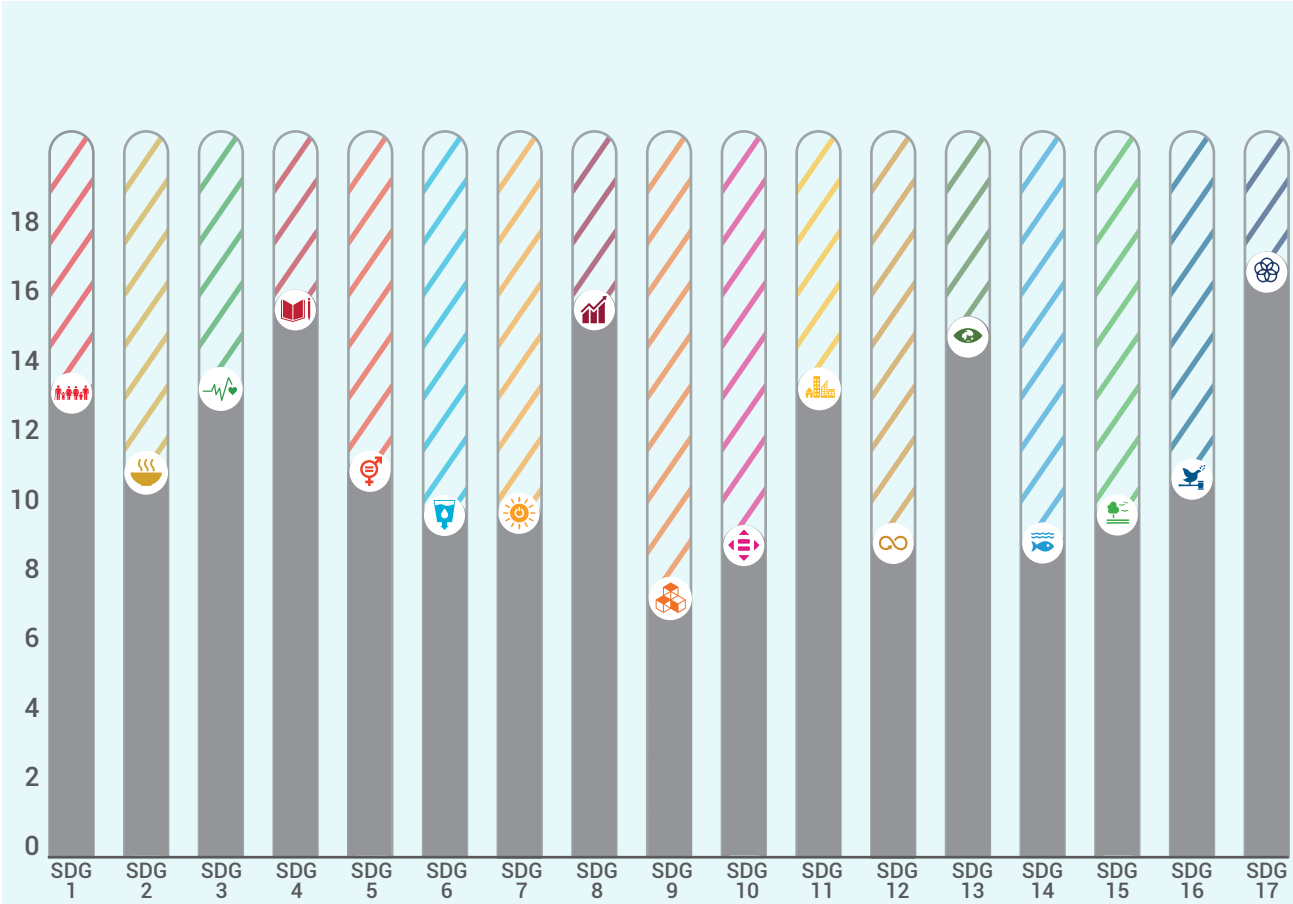
Box 4. Good practice, Mexico City

Mexico City's 2021 VLR develops a study of its priority areas by linking local initiatives with the SDGs, targets and international agendas. This approach connects already existing actions to priority areas, mapping relevant stakeholders working in similar areas, empowering cooperation and serving as an ever-evolving database for SDG-related action.

At the national level, countries have been engaging with the prioritization of the SDGs in VNRs. Documentary analysis of 20 VNRs in the Arab region³⁸ indicate some trends in national priorities. Figure 7 illustrates the SDGs being assessed in VNRs which usually translate into an analysis of the progress made in SDG implementation, challenges and related

projects, programmes and initiatives. Although countries in the Arab region are diverse and their national priorities depend on different factors, qualitative analysis of these documents show that SDGs 1, 3, 4, 8, 11, 13 and 17 are often highlighted as the main priority, even in comparison to other SDGs examined in the same document.

Figure 7. Sustainable Development Goals examined in Voluntary National Reviews from the Arab region



Source: Author.

Local governments must also engage with a similar process. The next step in the calibration stage is prioritizing resource allocation. Cities often do not have the resources to effectively collect and analyse data and follow up with concrete actions for all 17 SDGs. Therefore, SDG prioritization must be undertaken, maximizing action potential through a transparent, evidence-based process (table 10). Important parameters to prioritize SDGs are:

- The goals and targets are selected based on their affinity with local development priorities.
- The goals and targets are selected based on data access and availability.

- The goals and targets are selected based on insights gained in the contextualization process, prioritizing the ones with a disproportionate impact for the acceleration of SDG localization.
- The goals and targets are selected based on potential synergies with existing initiatives (city-wide, sectoral and technical projects, documents and initiatives).
- The goals and targets are selected based on their potential to reach different sectors and social segments.
- The goals and targets are selected based on their relevance to related governance mandates.

Table 10. Prioritization matrix

SDG	Data availability	Strategic affinity	Concrete synergies	Reach potential	Contextualization insights
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
7					
8					
9					
10					
11					
12					
13					
14					
15					
16					
17					

Source: Author.

Box 5. Example

SDG 11: Target 11.1: By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services, and upgrade slums.

During the contextualization phase, the demographic discussion and data about population size, population growth, migration flows and population density are often brought up, as well as municipal budgeting and financial capabilities. These elements are central to making sense of the data related to target 11.1.

SDG 17: Target 17.6: Enhance North-South, South-South and triangular regional and international cooperation.

During the contextualization phase, the examination of the city's engagement with other scales of governance as well as the international community, for example through city networks, will be undertaken. These elements are crucial to create indicators related to target 17.6.

Locations should strive for a balance between selecting enough of the SDGs to have a representative approach to VLRs but not too many so as to gain action-oriented focus in its implementation.

In addition to prioritizing a subset of the 17 SDGs, all cities should consider including SDGs 11 and 17 in their VLRs. SDG 11 focuses explicitly on developing cities and human settlements, making it highly relevant for local government. This goal provides a comprehensive framework for cities to work towards making their communities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. It tends to be the most common selection for cities worldwide engaging with VLRs (around 80 per cent of published VLRs to date examine SDG 11). Therefore, by prioritizing SDG 11, cities can guarantee robust knowledge-sharing potential and compare their progress to other cities globally.

Using SDG 17 (Strengthening the means of implementation and revitalizing the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development) to assess progress is also recommended because it provides a framework for aligning and mobilizing resources and partnerships.

By using this framework, local governments can ensure that they are collaborating effectively with other levels of government, the private sector and civil society to achieve sustainable development outcomes. Additionally, utilizing the SDG 17 framework can help local governments identify gaps in funding and resources which is a crucial step in enabling SDG localization.

SDGs 11 and 17 also have practical advantages when selected as part of the VLR exercise. The VLR process should, in any case, engage in a contextualization stage and the data collected is often naturally turned into indicators for SDGs 11 and 17. Therefore, selecting these two SDGs as starting points for prioritization provides the VLR process with an efficient flow of one phase naturally building up to the next.






It is crucial to adopt a human rights-based approach in the assessment of all the SDGs. This inclusive approach must guide the construction of policy recommendations emanating from VLRs. In the case of gender mainstreaming, for example, linkages can be identified in all goals and targets: women and poverty; types of employment

and conditions of the labour market; the disproportionate distribution of unpaid care work; women's control over their bodies; women's control over household income and resources; the impact of armed conflicts on the situation of women and girls; and other issues. Some of these factors are interlinked with more than one of the SDGs, thus, no one goal out of the 17 SDGs can be completely implemented without dealing with gender discrimination in different fields (economic, social and

political) and at different levels (legislative, institutional and social) (table 11).

It is also important to engage with HLPF yearly priority areas concerning the SDGs. The momentum created by these priority cycles has the potential to maximize coordination and implementation of SDG related initiatives. Some cities have chosen to prioritize the SDGs being examined at the related HLPF yearly cycle, making the most of the international activities.

Table 11. Entries by theme linking the Sustainable Development Goals to women's rights issues

	Goal	Entries by theme linking the Sustainable Development Goals to women's rights issues
	End poverty in all its forms everywhere	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender discrimination in economic resource allocation • Discriminatory legislations • Gender-based disparities in the labour market • Cultural standards
	Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biological differences • Control over resources from a gender perspective • Burden of unpaid domestic work • Power relations inside the household • Gender-based violence
	Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The cost of economic slowdown and the impact on individuals from a gender perspective • Empowerment through paid work • Gender-based relations in the labour market
	Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The impact of industrial progress, economic transformation and export industry growth on the work of women • The impact of sectoral transformations to nonformal markets within the service sector
	Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role of women and their ability to access basic services, infrastructure (transportation) and waste treatment services • Right of women to safe urban spaces (issues of harassment in public spaces)

Source: Mainstreaming gender in voluntary national reviews, e-course, ESCWA.

At this stage, by developing a common vision and stakeholder engagement plan, and activating contextualization and calibration exercises, local governments should have a refined grasp of their main challenges, opportunities and cooperation potentials. The resulting strategic prioritization facilitates efficient resource allocation and builds up momentum for the subsequent stages of VLRs.

3. Policy coherence

It is essential to articulate the VLR development process with multilevel and cross-sectoral governance, striving for policy coherence.³⁹ It is also crucial to articulate the VLR process with existing initiatives and strategic documents at local, national and regional scales, triggering collaborative governance schemes and aligning budget cycles (more in chapter 3.4.2 on the VLR financial framework).

Developing VLRs is a collaborative process by design, involving actors from different scales and sectors. Global normative frameworks, provided by internationally adopted agendas such as the 2030 Agenda and the New Urban Agenda, have a clearing house function in providing a common language and facilitating cooperation. Regional and national governments are also directly engaging with these principles and must be strategically informed by the knowledge nurtured by local governments implementing VLRs. Additionally, it is necessary to involve key stakeholders in the VLR development process (e.g. civil society, academia, public and private sector), ensuring an inclusive approach to policy coherence. It is also important

to connect this process with grass-roots knowledge using participatory techniques to gain bottom-up insights that are fundamental for developing impactful and just initiatives.

Horizontal integration is particularly important in the Arab region where complex development challenges require correlated efforts across different sectors. It strives for coordinated policies across sectors, within and among institutions, to address sustainable development cohesively. Cross-sectoral integration ensures, for example, that economic development policies are aligned with environmental protection policies, avoiding conflicts and promoting a more sustainable development path. Horizontal integration also calls for organizational restructuring, breaking silos and promoting strategic action. In this process, the role of capacity building is central, creating a common framework for the different actors involved in collaborative projects. It is paramount that the local government identifies sectors and stakeholders involved in implementing the SDGs, looking for synergies and exposing gaps and inconsistencies.

Vertical integration promotes systems and processes for coordinating and aligning multilevel strategies, policies, legal and regulatory instruments, resources and mandates. Local governments must identify relevant actors in different levels of governance (e.g. regional, national, sub-national and local) currently involved in initiatives related to implementing the SDGs, looking for alignment on policies, plans and programmes. In this regard, it is pivotal to align the VLR process with National Urban Policies⁴⁰ whenever possible.

Table 12. Performance assessment tool

Principles	Dimensions	Contextual factors	Practices			Outputs	Outcomes
			Political commitment and institutional arrangements	Planning	Implementation		
	Vertical integration						
	Horizontal integration						
	Stakeholder engagement						

Source: Adapted from UN-Habitat (2022, p. 29).

UN-Habitat⁴¹ provides a framework for local authorities developing their VLRs to assess their MLG capabilities. This framework articulates SDG localization and MLG while delivering a performance assessment tool that explores vertical integration, horizontal integration and stakeholder engagement (table 12). It also stresses the importance of MLG in all phases of the policy cycles (i.e. political commitment and institutional arrangements, planning, implementation, and monitoring and reporting).

By connecting vertical and horizontal integration with stakeholder engagement, this framework provides local authorities with a starting point to plan and monitor multilevel projects and initiatives, aiming for strategic policy coherence. This framework also serves as a review and retrospective tool by identifying outputs (e.g. mechanisms and structures) and outcomes (e.g. functionalities). It is central to formalizing and institutionalizing policy coherence instruments that successfully emerge from the VLR development process.

The VLR process is also crucial for temporal alignment since it usually encompasses a set of goals and initiatives that are not contained in single political mandates. Therefore, VLRs play an important role in providing coherence beyond political cycles, consolidating a vision and institutionalizing successful operational mechanisms, resulting in a long-term legacy for a city.⁴²

While developing VLRs is still an emerging trend in the region, 20 Arab countries have already launched VNRs. This scenario creates an opportunity for local actors to articulate their efforts with the existing guidelines, information, data sources and initiatives developed by VNRs. Additionally, the advancement towards the SDGs is a transcalar process, where MLG and cooperation are needed. For local governments developing VLRs, integration of the VNR experience in this process is also vital for gaining national support, and facilitating political and financial backing in the implementation phase.

VLR-VNR linkage has the potential to create virtuous cycles of data collection, resource allocation and implementation that are mutually beneficial and efficient. Additionally, it supports knowledge-sharing and dissemination of good practices. Linking VLR and VNR processes accelerates implementation and facilitates vertical and horizontal integration as well as stakeholder engagement, overcoming siloed practices and promoting participation. It is a key factor in consolidating formal mechanisms to maximize the VLR-VNR integration potential. This alignment should also occur in the substantial aspect, leveraging the knowledge produced in these reports to advance local and national understanding of their progress towards the SDGs.

VNRs and VLRS mobilize a future-oriented narrative that is often a result of a shared vision emanating from participatory processes and stakeholder engagement. VLR-VNR linkage potentializes the legitimacy of these shared visions and propels stakeholder buy-in. This mutually empowered shared vision is also more effective in securing the principle of leaving no one behind because it usually involves triangulating multiple consultation processes at the national (VNR) and local (VLR) levels.

Engagement between different levels of governments can also vary in quality and depth, producing more or less integration towards the mainstreaming of the SDGs. Interactions can vary from limited dialogue to high levels of co-production (figure 8).

Figure 8. Examples of interaction quality and mechanisms



Source: Sustainable Cities Dialogue, Urban Governance at the Core of the Implementation of SDG 11, GTF, UCLG and UN-Habitat (May 2018).

Box 6. Aligning policy cycles and multi-level governance – the case of Amman

Published in 2022, Amman's VLR^a was the first in the Arab region, paving the way for other local governments to develop SDG localization initiatives. Amman's VLR strategically leveraged the national policy cycle, being developed simultaneously with Jordan's second VNR, creating collaboration opportunities in different phases of the VLR implementation process. This case exemplifies a synergic engagement between the local and national levels in discussions on prioritizing the SDGs, challenges and ways forward to sustainable development. The complementarity between Amman's VLR and Jordan's VNR showcases good practices in MLG, creating platforms for building capacities and optimizing resource allocation.

a Voluntary Local Review – The City of Amman, Jordan. ESCWA, UN-HABITAT and UCLG-MEWA (2022).

Fundamentally, this integration would consolidate and leverage an empowered framework for MLG where mechanisms are developed to involve sub-national actors in the decision-making and responsibility process. Several mechanisms can be used to articulate local and national governments in decision-making processes. These mechanisms could involve seeking the views of local governments on national policies and plans that impact local communities, involving local governments in the development and implementation of initiatives, and co-producing policies and plans with local governments to ensure that they are aligned with local priorities and needs.

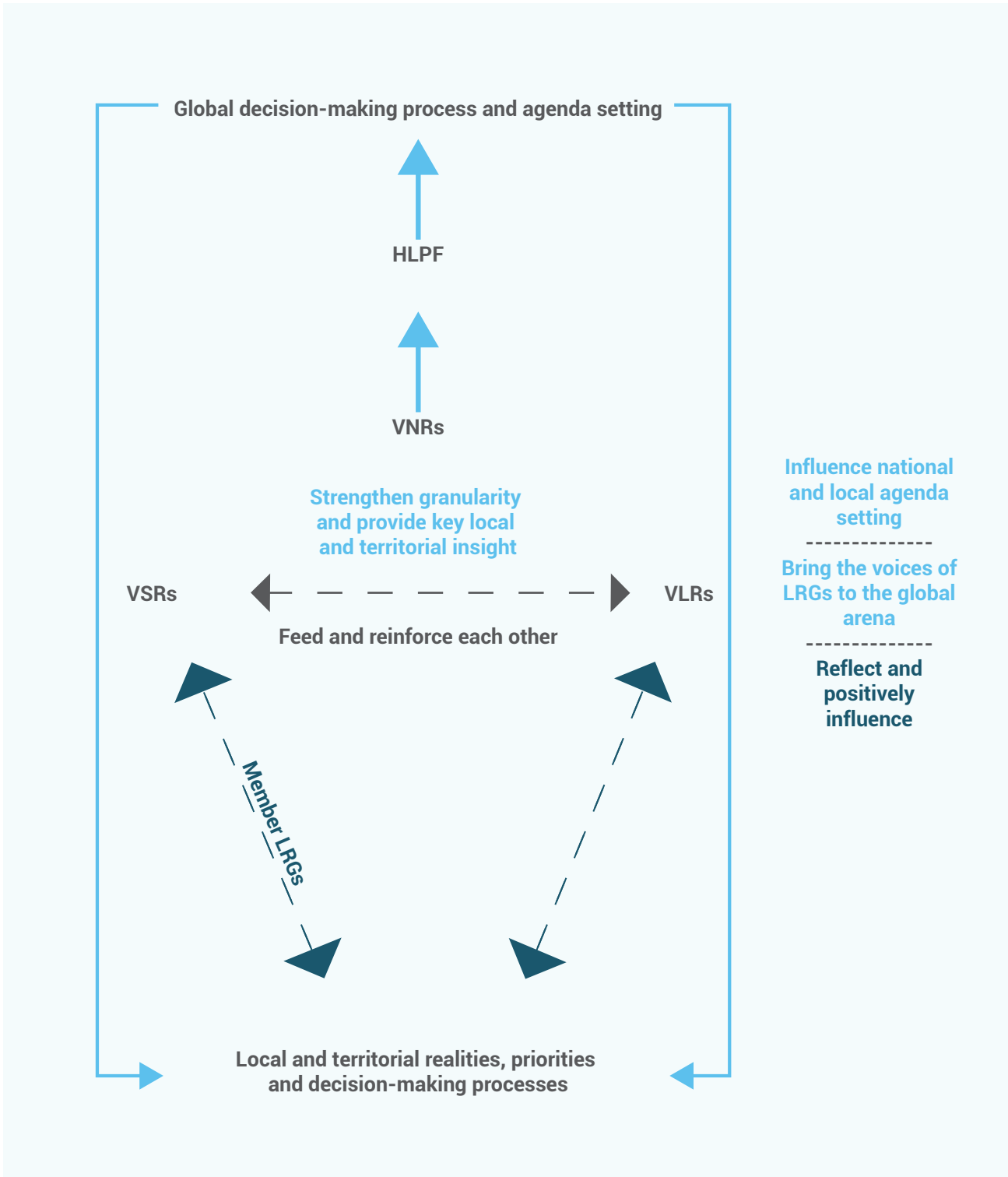
In such an environment, insights from VNR and VLR implementation processes can inform the subsequent development cycles through top-down and bottom-up knowledge-sharing practices. This integration must be deliberate and strategically mainstreamed in the planning, inception, execution and monitoring phases of policymaking.

In general, VNRs in the Arab region showcase common priority areas such as data collection, financing and partnership

building. Gender mainstreaming and women's engagement in many sectors are also top priorities in several countries, such as Egypt, Jordan, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. However, depending on the country, the focus placed on specific topics varies. Jordan, for example, stresses climate mainstreaming and digitization, whereas Somalia prioritizes access to water and equal access to education. Meanwhile, the United Arab Emirates emphasizes sustainable development through green economic projects, renewable energy and the development of urban KPIs, while Saudi Arabia emphasizes the need for partnerships and cooperation.

VLRs are also key elements in the constitution of successful Voluntary Subnational Reviews (VSRs).⁴³ VSRs are bottom-up country-wide comparative tools that examine cities and excavate trends, gaps and opportunities. This exercise is only possible by aligning cities' efforts towards the localization of the SDGs, standardizing data collection and homogenizing data analysis. VSRs potential is unlocked by the regional capabilities of replicating high-quality VLRs in multiple urban areas, creating a substantial sample size and comparison parameters (figure 9).

Figure 9. Voluntary National Review, Voluntary Subnational Review and Voluntary Local Review linkages



Source: Guidelines for Voluntary Subnational Reviews, UCLG (2021).

The VLR process should also consider the Urban Functional Areas in which several cities are included. Urban Functional Areas attest to the complex urbanization processes where urban dynamics, operational landscapes, flows of people, information and commodities are not limited to legal jurisdictions.⁴⁴ It is important that local and metropolitan actors deliberately and strategically approach these processes to empower cooperation related to data management and the development of urban policies attuned to unequal urbanization processes.

When attuned to different actors and sectors, the VLR process empowers MLG and maximizes policy coherence. In this case, the resulting VLR has the potential to inform the operationalization of joint initiatives, contributing to decision-making at national and regional levels. On the one hand, cities must face their responsibility in localizing the SDGs, and on the other hand, local governments must be included in the decision-making process with other scales of governance.

4. Data collection and standardization

The VLR process must be an evidence-based process, activating key indicators to assess the current situation and project pathways for action. Data availability at the urban level is crucial. In VLRs, the data collection's main objective is to provide contextualized indicators to assess a city's progress towards the SDGs. Data collection also aims at gaining insights to guide the discussion over priority topics, policy design and implementation.

There are different ways to approach data collection, therefore, it is necessary to develop a robust approach for SDG assessment standardization and data harmonization. It is also crucial that the VLR process considers

different kinds of quantitative and qualitative data, triangulating results and gaining refined insights.

ESCWA's 2021 Report *Between Now and 2030*⁴⁵ demonstrates that the availability of data at the national level is a significant challenge in the Arab region, with around 50 per cent of indicators lacking information. Insufficient data poses an important limitation for effective decision-making and exposes the importance of improving investments, planning and legislation related to statistical practices. Data availability for local governments is often even more problematic than at the national level. For local governments, data is central to developing efficient and impactful policies, therefore, the governance of data collection should be carried out in close collaboration with the municipality and other data providers, such as national statistics offices and urban data centres.

Challenges related to data accessibility, availability and quality may occur due to governance factors (e.g. competencies across various levels of government and its impact for production of data), coordination factors (e.g. lack of a structured data collection processes) and resource-related factors (e.g. limited access and availability of financial and human resources to plan and conduct data collection and processing at regular intervals), among others.

Data quality is a central factor in data collection and analysis, directly impacting the usefulness of the related insights and their translation into policymaking and concrete actions. Having granular and disaggregated data allows cities to create targeted and effective policies, programmes and interventions that address the specific needs of different groups within a city. It also allows for more accurate monitoring and evaluation of progress towards the SDGs.

Granular data refers to data that is collected at a very detailed and specific level, such as data on a specific neighbourhood or demographic group. This type of data can provide a more detailed and accurate understanding of the specific challenges and opportunities facing different groups within the city, such as poverty level, access to education or health services, or the state of the environment in a specific area.

Disaggregated data is broken down by specific characteristics such as age, gender, race or income level. This type of data can provide insight into how different groups within the city are affected by specific challenges or opportunities, such as how access to education or health services varies by gender or race. Disaggregated data can also help cities identify and address inequalities and disparities within the population, and make more inclusive and equitable decisions.

Local capacity is also an important challenge to be considered when developing VLRs. In many instances, the local office may not be familiar with the SDGs. To overcome this hurdle and gather the necessary data and background information, it is important to foster a collaborative environment to discuss and address queries and concerns, and appoint expert groups for each selected SDG, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the local context and identifying any information gaps.

Sub-national governments can employ various cutting-edge methods for collecting data that can aid in their efforts to achieve the SDGs. UNESCAP⁴⁶ indicates that one such method is the utilization of geospatial observations in conjunction with micro survey data and machine learning. The leave no location behind initiative, developed by ESCWA's Geo-Statistical Laboratory,⁴⁷ includes geo-referencing as a central

approach to data collection and analysis, providing decision makers with high-quality geographical data. It is crucial for sub-national governments to factor in the time element when collecting data as this enables them to monitor their progress and make the necessary adjustments to achieve their goals.⁴⁸

There are multiple alternatives for data collection and analysis related to urban indicators. Initiatives such as the International Institute for Management Development (IMD) World Competitiveness Center⁴⁹ and the Smart City Observatory,⁵⁰ and indexes such as the Urban Health Index⁵¹ and the Multi-dimensional Poverty Index,⁵² which provide cities with general and sectorial options to data analysis. The United Nations has provided different approaches in past years, such as the UN-Habitat City Prosperity Index⁵³ and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network Global Monitoring Indicators.⁵⁴ Other international initiatives related to data collection at the local level include the World Council on City Data work in developing a certification for city data collection and management⁵⁵ and the Common Reporting Framework being put forward by the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy,⁵⁶ among others.

A common framework is essential for cities to better align their VLRs with international standards using a holistic and integrated approach, focusing on the most critical issues, improving the quality and comparability of data and enhancing the participation of stakeholders. It is essential that this framework provides clear data collection guidance, facilitating comparability and monitoring.

The Global UMF⁵⁷ is a powerful tool developed to monitor and track the progress of the SDGs that aims to provide a comprehensive and standardized approach

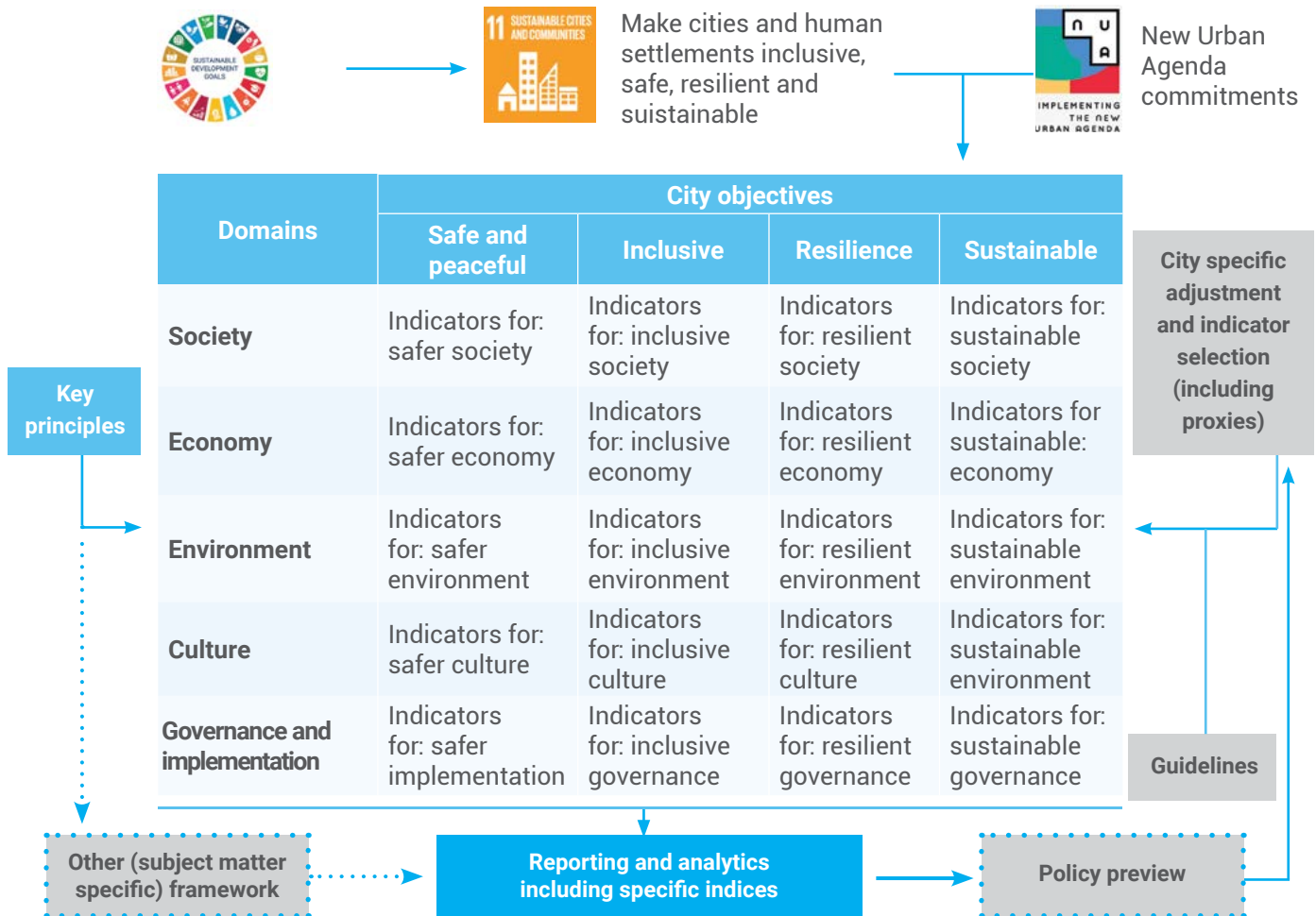
to assessing and reporting on the state of urban areas around the world. The framework includes a set of indicators

and data collection methods that can be used to evaluate the performance of cities (figure 10).

Box 7. Data collection, but where is the data?

In the Arab region, one of the main challenges faced in VLR processes is related to data. This should not discourage local governments from pursuing VLRS as they are a great tool to mature the debate and advocate for better practices. In the case of major limitations related to available data, it is important to have a transparent and structured approach to face the challenge. A data committee, composed of experts and government representatives, is important to produce a clear account of the current state of data collection, identifying challenges and the way forward. This exercise is fundamental, not only to come up with a plan for collecting data from scratch, but also to tackle current limitations calling attention to the importance of solving them (e.g. advocating for better resource allocation and training). In cases of collecting data from scratch, it is recommended to follow international guidelines (such as UMF) and ensure appropriate standards. Data collected should be verifiable, traceable and comparable in future editions of VLRS.

Figure 10. Urban Monitoring Framework structure



Source: The Global Urban Monitoring Framework, UN-Habitat (2022).

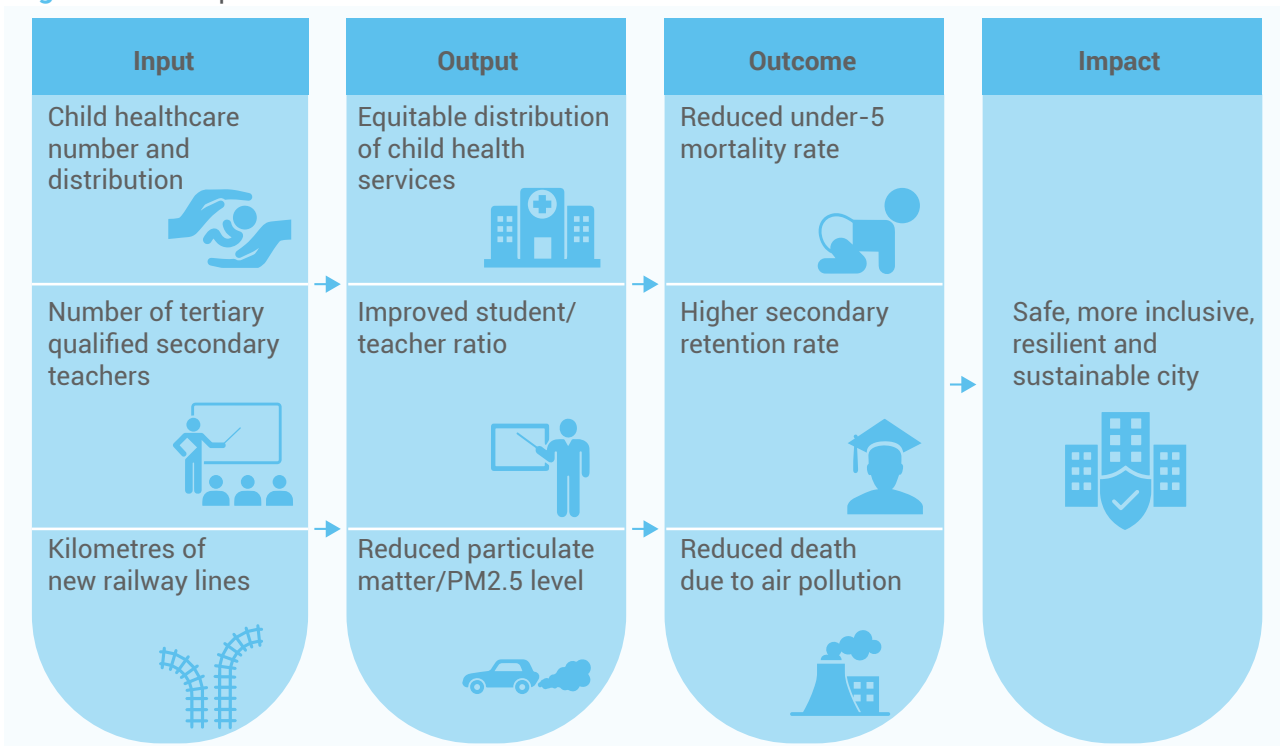
UMF aims to be efficient (i.e. alleviating the burden on cities), effective (i.e. providing cities with action-oriented insights) and harmonized (i.e. generating comparable data and standardizing definitions). UMF also proposes a methodological approach characterized by built-in flexibility, enabling cities to select specific dimensions and areas of the indicators, and adjust them based on their realities. UMF's approach – including its conceptual definitions, methodological framework, data collection and analysis, and indicators construction practices – results in a legacy to the city for it can be operationalized for different topics in the future as priorities shift.

It is important to consider that UMF also mainstreams central principles in the indicators' creation process. Focusing on a complementary framework, using other available resources from existing indexes,

for example, maximizes the contribution potential between other SDG reporting initiatives. This, in turn, develops important opportunities in connecting VNR and VLR data collection processes in a mutually beneficial way, optimizing MLG and policy coherence.

UMF indicators are also people-centred, incorporating good practices in relation to its focus on outcomes related to people's life, activating the central principle of leaving no one behind. This is mainly done by prioritizing granular data to assess inequalities and expose important social gaps. Another crucial element guiding the UMF data collection and analysis process is its focus on being relevant and action-oriented (figure 11). This is undertaken by selecting indicators available at the urban level and primarily influenced by urban actors.

Figure 11. Example of a result chain



Source: The Global Urban Monitoring Framework, UN-Habitat (2022).

UMF provides cities with a common language in approaching international standards of data collection and analysis, facilitating knowledge-sharing and benchmarking. UMF is synergic with the guidelines provided in this document since it provides a clear and actionable pathway for local governments while being flexible enough to account for their specificities, and facilitates an ongoing process of monitoring and incremental iterations able to face the task of assessing current fast-paced global challenges.

U4SSC⁵⁸ is another synergic approach for data collection and analysis. In 2021, U4SSC launched a set of KPIs resulting in 91 indicators that serve as metrics to assess cities' progress in the Smart Sustainable Cities (SSC) framework. KPIs provide an international standard for data collection and evaluation in dimensions such as economy, environment, society and culture, focusing on elements directly related to smart cities, sustainability and progress towards the SDGs. Depending on the city's context, SSC KPIs can be a powerful complement to the UMF framework.

At this moment, it is important to notice that qualitative data collection also requires a

coherent methodology. Different methods for qualitative data analysis include focus groups, interviews and desk-research. UNECE⁵⁹ suggests that collecting qualitative data through participatory processes is crucial for a more comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand while promoting participation and inclusion in the decision-making process. By involving diverse stakeholders, including minorities and vulnerable groups, cities can raise awareness about the SDGs and foster a sense of ownership among community members. This can lead to more effective and sustainable solutions. Additionally, participatory data collection can help ensure that marginalized groups' perspectives and needs are taken into account in developing and implementing policies and programmes related to the SDGs.

In conclusion, there are various approaches for data collection, but it is vital to develop a transparent methodology that encompasses multiple data sources. It is important that previous contextualization and calibration exercises discussed in this document are also considered for strategic decision-making in data collection. Every context is different and specific frameworks can be more appropriate in each case.

C. Strategic planning phase

Data analysis into action

Translating data into action is pivotal to ensuring that the insights derived from VLRs are not just passive observations but catalysts for meaningful change. This document suggests a structured approach to link data analysis to concrete actions, addressing different actors, scales of

governance and time frames. Providing actionable recommendations based on data is a central aspect of assessing progress towards the SDGs. It is necessary to empower the insights gained from data analysis by translating them into actionable recommendations and mainstreaming the SDGs framework into local policymaking.

Actionable recommendations, infused with evidence-based insights, provide a clear path for addressing contextualized issues and constructing an action plan. They are also crucial to providing a strategic focus on what is most important, prioritizing challenges and initiatives. This process significantly boosts decision-making and resource allocation.

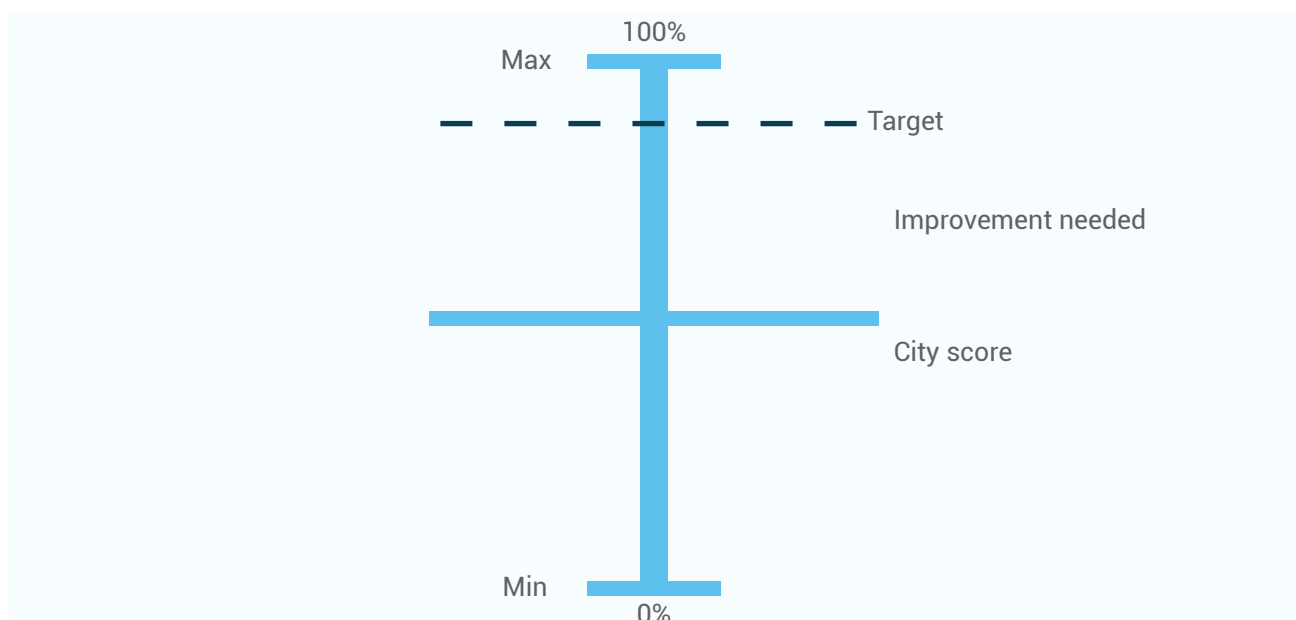
These recommendations are central in facilitating strategic collaboration among different actors, such as local government, civil society, the private sector and academia. Additionally, this leads to better alignment with different levels of governance, such as national, regional and local, ensuring that diverse perspectives and needs are taken into account and that actions are coordinated and effective.

Connecting data analysis and action empowers temporal alignment, optimizing the allocation of actions into different time frames, such as short-, medium- and

long-term. A strategic approach capable of articulating time frames, actors, resources and priorities is central to ensuring a sustainable system for action. Turning data into action is essential because it bridges the gap between data and implementation, focuses on what is most important, engages different actors and levels of governance, and aligns with varying time frames. This process dramatically improves the chances of achieving the SDGs.

Different systems of data analysis are put forward in published VLRs. Firstly, assessing the city's performance scores in each SDG indicator is central. This document proposes that a coherent framework such as UMF is used for indicator creation, providing a technically sound tool for harmonization, standardization and evaluation. The resulting indicators will provide powerful insights by contrasting the city score in each SDG against the target score and calculating its distance, if any, to "completion" (figure 12).

Figure 12. Example of indicator visualization, including thresholds



Source: Author.

VLR implementation processes can also build on data collection procedures and complement off-the-shelf frameworks, such as UMF and SSC KPIs, with tailor-made indicators that contemplate peculiar local phenomena. For an efficient analytical framework, UNECA suggests developing adapted indicators relevant to the local context, potentially influenced by local policies and measurable through accessible data.⁶⁰ Governments are also encouraged to provide a transparent approach to data collection and to develop a data collection system that closes gaps and improves practices, especially related to granular data.

At this stage, it is important to have a coherent approach to data processing (i.e. data translation, organization, filtering, validation and analysis). Regarding data translation, qualitative VLR data can be presented in various languages and may require translation into an agreed language. Concerning data organization, a large volume of data is produced/collected in the context of VLRs, which requires careful categorization based on specific parameters. On data filtering, it is necessary to understand which data (and data sources) pertain to the SDGs and the SDG targets reviewed in VLRs and which do not. VLR data also requires validation with the objective to ensure data quality and reliability (to determine which data can be taken through to the analysis).

City performance data provided by the indicators must be triangulated with other sources of information resulting in a contextualized understanding of local urban dynamics. As discussed in the previous section, important contrasting data can emerge from workshops, interviews,

contextual analysis and case studies, among others. UN-Habitat and UCLG⁶¹ (2021) indicate that when analysing VLRs from cities like Bristol in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Sao Paulo in Brazil and Los Angeles in the United States of America, participatory processes were crucial to contrast official data, refining the insights gained by the indicators and resulting in more efficient follow-up actions.

Good practices emerging from published VLRs in different regions provide insightful approaches to data triangulation methods. In this report, we propose an approach that articulates documentary data analysis, stakeholder consultations and interviews, and surveys resulting in contextualized insights that serve to critically ponder quantitative data results.

Amman's VLR⁶² approaches triangulation by using surveys, interviews, documentary data analysis and stakeholder consultations. This allows for a highly refined understanding of local trends related to life quality and SDG-related actions while being capable of identifying and considering vulnerable groups, empowering the principle of leaving no one behind. These exercises are also central for identifying challenges such as data gaps or other contextual barriers to progress the SDGs.

In the United States of America, Los Angeles's VLR⁶³ puts forward ambitious initiatives for hyperlocalized insights by excavating qualitative narrative data. This sort of data provides policymakers with an in-depth understanding of local dynamics at the street level by learning from people's experiences in the city. Additionally, Los Angeles showcases an interesting data collection approach to consolidating

action repositories by developing the SDG Activities Index. This ever-evolving platform empowers the local community involved in SDG-related initiatives, facilitating communication and coordination.

These examples showcase the potential of combining different sources of data to assess advancement towards the SDGs. Being creative and resourceful in data collection can be especially important in contexts with severe gaps in quantitative data availability.

The experience of developing VLRs in the Arab region, although limited, already provides a powerful approach to data analysis. The VLRs from Amman and Agadir both put forward Working Papers (also referred to as “Discussion Papers”), activating an in-depth analysis of each of the selected SDGs, contextualizing the indicator’s results and providing refined recommendations for concrete actions to be taken in each dimension.

The Working Papers approach starts with prioritizing the SDGs in VLRs, selecting relevant SDGs for the local reality (see the “calibration” section for an in-depth approach to prioritization). Consecutively, it connects each SDG with a consultation responsible, namely the “chair”. In the case of Amman, for example, SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) is chaired by the World Health Organization, a globally reputable organization with in-depth knowledge on the topic. In the same vein, SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) is chaired by UN-Habitat and SDG 13 (Climate Action) by UNDP.

Next, the Working Papers system focuses on stakeholder consultation (another practice synergic with the contextualization section

of this document). Focused bilateral and multi-stakeholder meetings with experts are carried out focusing on specific SDGs, and interviews are conducted with governmental representatives for further contextual insights. Additionally, targeted surveys are used for SDG 17 (Partnership for the Goals).

This approach results in comprehensive case studies for each selected SDG, triangulating different data sources and engaging with relevant stakeholders for a refined understanding of the main processes, limitations and opportunities. The approach grounds data analysis and connects it with multi-dimensional findings that provide action-oriented recommendations. This movement illustrates a change in paradigm from simply showcasing indicators’ scores for each SDG to a calibrated and contextualized dialogue between quantitative and qualitative data, participatory processes, stakeholder engagement and policy coherence.

Transparency in data analysis means that any limitations or challenges in collecting and analysing data must be openly and clearly disclosed. This could include issues such as incomplete data sets, lack of funding, inefficient allocation of resources, duplicated efforts and limited capacity in certain areas in terms of human resources. By acknowledging and exposing these limitations, the analysis can provide a more honest and accurate representation of the data, and highlight areas where improvement is needed.

In the case of the development of subsequent editions of VLRs (i.e. not the first one) it is important to consider its different nature in relation to a previous VLR. A second VLR, for example, needs to

show the progress made, focusing on what changes have occurred at national, regional and local levels.

At this stage, actionable recommendations are crucial for a successful VLR. To bridge the gap between data analysis and action, it is important to establish a systematic method for formulating recommendations based on the validated and triangulated data. This process should involve identifying the key findings from the data analysis and then translating these findings into actionable steps that can be taken by the relevant stakeholders to address the identified challenges and opportunities. The recommendations should be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound (SMART), and they should be directly linked to the corresponding findings from the data analysis. Furthermore, the recommendations should be categorized based on the relevant actors, scales of governance and time frames, ensuring that

they are tailored to the specific needs and capacities of the different stakeholders involved in the VLR process.

In conclusion, evidence-based actionable recommendations are crucial for prioritizing challenges, improving decision-making and resource allocation, and facilitating collaboration among different actors, levels of governance and time frames. By using the UMF framework for indicator creation and triangulating data with other sources, local governments can acquire a contextualized understanding of what the city needs to advance towards the SDGs. The Working Papers system used in the Amman and Agadir VLRs is an excellent example of an approach that results in action-oriented recommendations by triangulating data and engaging with relevant stakeholders. Finally, a strategic approach to turning evidence-based insights into action is central to mainstreaming the SDGs in policymaking.

D. Finalization phase

1. Report writing

VLR results presented in a public document should communicate all the insights gained in the process in a clear and structured way. One of the central aims of the VLR process is to engage with local communities and key stakeholders. Therefore, an accessible and coherent report is crucial to building trust, promoting accountability and transparency, and encouraging feedback and further collaboration.

In the case of VNRs, the Arab region showcases some trends in the structure of published documents. For instance, all

reports begin with an opening statement or introduction which highlights its national context along with key priorities, including national strategies and visions which VNRs may build upon. In addition, most VNRs develop sections showcasing stakeholders and partnerships, methods of obtaining data, engagement mechanisms and the work alignment between government/public institutions, private institutions and civil society. A crucial element of VNRs is exploring the country's progress on selected SDGs, while also providing the challenges and obstacles restricting the progress of the respective SDG.

This document has approached the VLR process by suggesting a linear order of exercises and activities, such as defining a governance framework, consolidating a shared vision, undertaking contextualization and calibration exercises, engaging with policy coherence and MLG, and approaching data collection and analysis. Even if the resulting document should reflect all insights gained in this process, the order and structure in which these insights are presented can vary.

The structure of the VLR document should contain some key elements to encourage readers' engagement, facilitate collaboration with sub-national and national reviews, and enable comparison and knowledge exchange with other VLR experiences. A well-structured VLR typically includes several key sections that provide a comprehensive overview of a local government's progress towards the SDGs. While the specific structure of VLRs can vary depending on local context and priorities, some common elements are typically included in most VLRs.

Broadly, it is often the case that the first parts of VLRs focus on laying out the

governance structure and stakeholders involved in the VLR process. They also provide the reader with local contextualization, exploring local trends and specificities, stressing challenges, opportunities and priorities, and showcasing already existing efforts related to the SDGs. Consecutively, VLRs dive into reporting progress towards the 17 SDGs or a subset of SDGs, examining them one by one, discussing insights gained by quantitative and qualitative data, and indicating ways forward through targeted policies and initiatives. Finally, VLRs assess the lessons learned in the reporting process, the main challenges and the strategic vision to reach SDG targets, including recommendations for future action and monitoring tools.

Some efforts to standardize VLR structure have already been made to provide a clear direction for report writing. UNDESA has developed a set of guidelines based on good practices and lessons learned from existing VLRs which are designed to promote consistency, transparency and accountability in SDG implementation.⁶⁴ These guidelines suggest a specific structure to the document (table 13).

Table 13. Voluntary Local Review structure proposal, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs

Section	Title	Brief description
1	Opening statement	Explore the city's vision for progressing towards the SDGs, and also to showcase the support of important political leaders, indicating a commitment to the implementation of VLRs.
2	Highlights	Showcase key messages, accomplishments and best practices in the region. It should also indicate the main challenges and pathways for implementation.

Section	Title	Brief description
3	Introduction	Explore local particularities and important trends, contextualizing VLRs. It is also an important moment to describe SDG-related initiatives already in place, past experiences with VLRs and other synergic projects at the national or regional levels.
4	Methodology and process for preparation of the review	This section indicates the parameters guiding the VLR process, the teams involved and the steps that will be taken in the different implementation stages. It is also a moment to be transparent about key decisions made in the data collection and analysis process, such as prioritizing a sub-set of SDGs, focusing on specific initiatives and stakeholder engagement selection.
5	Policy and enabling environment	In this section, specific elements are discussed: (a) Engagement with the national government on SDG implementation; (b) Creating ownership of the SDGs and VLRs; (c) Incorporation of the SDGs in local and regional frameworks; (d) Leaving no one behind; (e) Institutional mechanisms; (f) Structural issues.
6	Progress on SDGs and targets	In this section, a deep dive into each SDG is undertaken using quantitative and qualitative data to assess the progress towards specific goals and targets. Cases where data is lacking are also discussed, providing a diagnosis and ways forward to face these challenges.
7	Means of implementation	At this moment, a strategic approach to implementation should be described going over the main limitations, barriers and success conditions. These can be related to financial resources, technical capabilities, timelines, data, etc.
8	Conclusion and next steps	In this section, the lessons learned and the next steps are fleshed out. Discussions around synergy potentials, multilevel cooperation and policymaking are encouraged. This section should call for ongoing collaboration towards the mainstreaming of the SDG in local action.
9	Annexes	A statistical annex is fundamental for transparency and traceability. These can be done by focusing on each one of the SDGs, presenting indicators and providing monitoring options. The methodology for data collection is also important here, indicating important decisions in topics such as disaggregation and granularity.

Source: Adapted from UNDESA, 2020 (Global Guiding Elements for Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) of SDG implementation).

By following a consistent structure, readers can more easily identify similarities and differences in approaches to implementing the SDGs, draw insights from successful strategies or identify areas that need improvement. This information can be used to share knowledge, promote collaboration and identify opportunities for scaling up successful initiatives.

At this stage, translation, editing, formatting and graphic design play an important role in preparing VLRs for publication. The majority of VLRs are published in one or two languages, typically English and an official language of the country (e.g. the 2022 VLR of Amman was published in English and Arabic, and the 2023 VLR of Agadir was published in English and French). It is recommended that the text is edited by a professional copy-editor and laid out by a professional graphic designer (where resources permit) to ensure it meets a high standard. VLRs should be presented in an attractive format accompanied by figures such as infographics, images and maps, as well as tables, to make it easy to read and understand.

2. Financial framework

The New Urban Agenda recognizes that financing is critical to implementing sustainable urban development and acknowledges that cities and municipalities face significant financial challenges.⁶⁵ It calls for the creation of an enabling environment and a transparent financing framework capable of mobilizing

resources (e.g. fiscal decentralization and intergovernmental transfers), both from public and private sources, and the development of innovative financial mechanisms (e.g. legal borrowing frameworks and expenditure control mechanisms) to support urban investment.

In this sense, VLRs provide a comprehensive evaluation of a local government's financial capacity and performance which allows them to assess their current financial situation. This evaluation includes an analysis of the local government's revenue generation capacity, expenditure patterns and financial management practices, as well as an assessment of the adequacy and sustainability of their financial resources. VLRs also provide an opportunity for local governments to assess the impact of their financial policies on the broader community including marginalized groups. UNECE's report⁶⁶ highlights the renewed importance of SDG budgeting due to COVID-19 severe economic impacts.

The VLR process in itself should also be included in budgeting since its development generates new expenses. UNESCAP⁶⁷ provides a structure for expected resource commitments related to the VLR process including costs associated with capacity building, meetings, workshops, travel, translation, data collection and analysis, editing and communication (figure 13). UNESCAP suggests that local governments must be aware of opportunities to reduce costs by collaborating with other planned initiatives related to SDG localization.

Figure 13. Resource commitments necessary to conduct a successful Voluntary Local Review



Institutional ownership and arrangement

- Meeting/workshop costs
- Local travel (for staff)



Linking priorities and structuring delivery

Consultant fees (if applicable)



Stakeholder engagement

- Meeting/workshop costs (e.g. meeting room rent, online/offline consultations, stakeholder travel etc.)
- Local travel (for staff)
- Translation costs (for inclusivity)
- Consultant fees (if applicable)



Data collection and analysis

- New data collection (through surveys, focused group discussions – can also be merged with stakeholder engagement costs)
- Data analysis and visualization
- Software fees (if applicable)
- Consultant fees (if applicable)
- Local travel (staff)



Vertical integration

- Meeting/workshop costs
- Local travel (for staff)



Report writing

- Editing and printing
- Consultant fees (if applicable)



Follow-up

- Meeting costs
- Communication/media engagement
- Local/international travel, e.g., participation in APFSD/HLPF (if applicable)

Source: Asia-Pacific Regional Guidelines on Voluntary Local Reviews, UNESCAP (2020).

VLRs can help with municipal finance by providing a platform for local governments to showcase their efforts to implement the New Urban Agenda and SDG localization initiatives, and to share their experiences, challenges and good practices in improving their financial sustainability. This exercise is central to securing funding from various sources including international organizations, foundations and the private sector. It also serves as a valuable resource for other cities and municipalities facing similar challenges.

Additionally, VLRs allow local government to engage with a range of stakeholders, including civil society organizations, the private sector and the general public, to gain a broader perspective on their financial situation. This engagement can help local governments to identify new opportunities for revenue generation, improve financial management practices and develop new partnerships that can support their efforts to improve their financial sustainability.

VLRs can help local governments track their progress in improving financial sustainability and to identify areas where further action is needed. By monitoring progress, cities can assess the impact of their efforts, receive feedback from stakeholders and identify areas where further action is required. Regular monitoring and reporting can help local governments to ensure that they are on track to achieving financial sustainability goals and to make necessary adjustments to their strategies and policies as needed.

By conducting VLRs, local governments can identify the sources of financing currently

being used to implement the SDGs in the city, assess the adequacy of the current level of funding concerning the city's SDG goals, identify any gaps or weaknesses in the current level of financing, and develop a plan to mobilize additional funding for the city's SDG implementation. This process may include options such as public-private partnerships, impact investing or innovative financing mechanisms, and can help local governments to secure the resources needed to achieve their SDG goals and improve their overall financial sustainability. By taking these steps, local governments can help to ensure that their efforts to implement the SDGs are well-funded and well-supported, allowing them to build more sustainable and equitable cities for all.

In conclusion, securing sufficient financing is crucial for successfully implementing the SDGs in cities. VLRs are potent tools to evaluate the current financial situation including the sources of financing being used for SDG implementation. They assess the adequacy of these resources with their goals. VLRs can also highlight any gaps or weaknesses in current financing and aid in developing a plan to mobilize additional resources, such as through public-private partnerships, impact investing or innovative financing mechanisms. These actions will help ensure that the local government has the necessary funding to achieve SDG localization and improve its financial sustainability.

3. Validation

Validation is a crucial stage for the VLR process, imbuing the final document

with legitimacy providing insights, identifying blind spots and refining the text. In each phase of VLR development, validation is critical. In the inception phase, the institutional ownership and vision are stages for robust validation exercises. Similarly, validation is central in the data collection and analysis stages, and discussion papers (usually focused on single SDGs). Finally, once the document is ready for revision, a final validation cycle is essential to provide legitimacy to its public launch.

The partners selected for involvement in the revision should have expertise and competencies in the areas addressed in VLRs. Reviewers can include various departments of the municipality, its partners of local governments (data producers, service providers), and others such as international organizations, non-governmental organizations, academia and business associations. Reviewers should be provided with guidelines (e.g. establishing a timeline and emphasizing the need to provide supporting evidence where needed) to ensure the efficiency of the review process.

It is essential to incorporate validation as an ongoing effort throughout the

VLR development process and not as a final discrete stage aimed at reviewing the document's final draft. Approaching validation as an iterative process is central to refining VLRs by identifying areas requiring further clarification or additional information, and ensuring the document is comprehensive, clear and impactful. This approach efficiently incorporates different perspectives and feedback that can identify blind spots and highlight opportunities, minimizing the risk of structural flaws in the process later.

Continuous engagement towards VLR validation is also central to build trust and buy-in. Engaging with stakeholders throughout VLR development makes them more likely to feel invested in the final product.

Validation should start in the inception phase by developing a Validation Plan responsible for ensuring sustained stakeholder engagement and constant feedback loops informing the development of VLRs. The Validation Plan should outline the strategies, mechanisms and actors involved in the validation process. It should also be reviewed and updated throughout the VLR development process to ensure the validation exercise remains relevant and practical (table 14).

Table 14. Key elements in the Validation Plan

Validation objectives

The validation objectives should be clearly defined and aligned with the goals of VLRs. They should outline the key questions that the validation exercise aims to answer, such as whether VLRs reflect the local context, whether they are based on credible data and whether they provide practical recommendations for action.

Validation stakeholders	The stakeholders involved in the validation exercise should be identified and engaged in the process. Their engagement is crucial to ensure that VLRs reflect the needs and perspectives of all stakeholders.
Validation mechanisms	The mechanisms for validation should be selected based on the objectives of the exercise and the stakeholders involved.

Source: Author.

It is crucial to include different stakeholders in the validation process. Actors involved in validation include local and national government representatives, civil society, statistical offices and urban observatories, academia and experts, and United Nations agencies. Each stakeholder group brings a unique perspective and expertise that can inform and improve VLRs. For example, local government representatives can provide insights into the local context and help ensure that VLRs are relevant to local priorities. Civil society organizations can provide insights into the needs and perspectives of marginalized groups and help ensure that VLRs are inclusive.

It is important to employ a participatory approach to validation since it brings diverse perspectives to the discussion, including traditional and indigenous knowledge, ensuring that VLRs consider different needs and leave no one behind. It also gives a more nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities in a particular context. Additionally, involving various stakeholders ensures legitimacy and validation by different groups and actors, empowering VLRs' potential to inform policy and concrete initiatives.

In some cases, developing capacity-building mechanisms targeting validation may be useful, ensuring that stakeholders involved have the necessary skills and recourses to participate effectively. Therefore, the need for training and technical support can be identified in the Validation Plan and strategically approached during the VLR process.

Different mechanisms, platforms and tools can be activated in the validation process. It is vital to have a strategic approach to validation where diverse mechanisms are selected based on the objectives of the exercise and the stakeholders involved. Mechanisms should also be flexible and adaptable to ensure the validation exercise remains relevant and practical throughout the VLR development process. Mechanisms can include presentations and meetings, workshops and panels, social media campaigns and document revision. For example, presentations and meetings can be used to gather feedback on VLRs from key stakeholders, while workshops and panels can be used to facilitate discussions on specific topics. Document revision can be used to incorporate feedback and ensure that VLRs are accurate and relevant.

Additionally, emerging technologies can also be incorporated to support and refine the validation process. For example, new technologies related to artificial intelligence and machine learning can be used to develop user-friendly tools to make validation more accessible and transparent to different stakeholders. Also, participatory data visualization exercises and leveraging visualization tools can support stakeholders in making sense of complex data, identifying trends and patterns, and making the most out of their contributions in the validation process.

In conclusion, validation is a crucial stage in the VLR development process and should be incorporated as an ongoing effort. The Validation Plan should be established in the inception phase and reviewed and updated throughout the VLR development process, involving different stakeholders and selecting appropriate mechanisms for validation. A strategic approach to validation is central to ensuring legitimacy and ownership, empowering VLRs' potential to translate into concrete actions and policymaking.

E. Monitoring and follow-up phase

The VLR process is crucial to promoting transparency, accountability and commitment towards sustainable development. VLRs provide a platform for local authorities to review their progress towards the SDGs and report on the initiatives and challenges faced in implementing the goals. When the reporting exercise is complete, however, it is just half of the picture. The monitoring and follow-up phases of VLRs are critical to ensuring the process is successful.

It is essential to have a monitoring strategy designed from the document's inception. High-quality monitoring tools can only be effective if correctly integrated into other phases of the VLR development process, such as data collection and analysis. Well-integrated monitoring tools turn the VLR process into a legacy for the city, mainstreaming revision and adaptation processes, and maximizing the efficiency of related policymaking.

Follow-up actions are also crucial to this process. One of the objectives of VLRs is to turn a city into a living laboratory for knowledge exchange, facilitating new collaborations and international partnerships, and potentializing resource attraction in the city. Important activities emanating from this process include debriefings, communication outreach, the institutionalization of engagement mechanisms, review exercises, participating in forums and organizing events.

Monitoring and follow-up guidelines:

- Develop a comprehensive and integrated monitoring and follow-up strategy designed from the document's inception, including regular data collection and analysis, monitoring and reporting, and follow-up actions.
- Indicate SMART goals for the city for each analytical category being monitored.

- Ensure high-quality monitoring tools are correctly integrated into data collection and analysis. This includes ensuring that data is collected and analysed in a consistent and standardized manner, and that it is relevant to the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda, and comparable across different departments.
- Encourage the participation of different actors in the monitoring and follow-up process, including local government, civil society, the private sector and academia.
- Regularly review and update the monitoring and follow-up strategy to ensure that it remains relevant and effective.

A strategic approach to monitoring and follow-up actions enables local governments to make the most of VLRs as a governance tool. It promotes transparency, commitment and accountability mechanisms, develops collaboration platforms with the VNR process, builds trust and generates partnerships, ignites media engagement and turns the process into a legacy based on peer-review processes.

The monitoring and follow-up phases provide a mechanism to track progress and ensure the fulfilment of commitments made in VLRs. This approach creates transparency and accountability, allowing for constructive engagement between local authorities, stakeholders and the broader community. The monitoring and follow-up phases are crucial in building trust among stakeholders and empowering partnerships, leading to the institutionalization of good practices and strengthening local governance. Technology has an important role to

play in this process. By leveraging innovative solutions to automatize and calendarize the monitoring process, cities can maximize monitoring and follow-up efficiency.

The VLR process must also strategically converse with the VNR process, creating channels for collaboration and enabling the sharing of good practices and experiences. Multilevel collaboration enhances the effectiveness of VLRs and supports the advancement of the SDGs at the national level. The monitoring and follow-up phases are central to turning the VLR process into a peer-review exercise. This process enables local authorities to participate in city networks, forums and bilateral partnerships, promoting knowledge-sharing and collaboration between cities and regions. Additionally, media engagement is essential in leveraging the traction of VLRs and consolidating impactful initiatives, raising awareness and increasing the visibility of the VLR process and its outcomes.

In summary, the monitoring and follow-up phases of VLRs are especially important for cities in the Arab region as they provide a platform for local authorities to demonstrate their commitment to sustainable development, collaborate with stakeholders and participate in a peer-review process. This phase is crucial to paving the way to developing and implementing new VLRs in the region, expanding the community of local authorities committed to sustainable development and creating positive regional momentum towards 2030.

Box 8. Barcelona, Spain – 2030 Agenda online

Barcelona published its first VLR in 2021 and launched an online platform that tracks and monitors the city-level indicators for each SDG providing easy-to-use visualization and downloadable microdata datasets backed by official open sources. The Barcelona online 2030 Agenda is a powerful tool capable of communicating results in a transparent fashion and performing ongoing updates. It also uses time-series data, providing findings that contemplate the historical progress in each target and indicator of the SDGs. Microdata availability, in this case, is also a powerful tool to leverage disaggregated data with the ability to view indicators in geographical segments (e.g. neighbourhoods and districts) and social segments (e.g. gender, income and age). This initiative is a powerful example of leveraging technology in the VLR process, turning the monitoring and follow-up phases into a legacy for the city.

3

Conclusion



3. Conclusion

The Arab region faces significant economic, social and political challenges, such as political instability, conflict and economic inequality. The COVID-19 pandemic and other geopolitical and natural events have exacerbated the urgent need to tackle vulnerabilities, build back better and leave no one behind. Despite significant challenges, the Arab region shows fertile ground for resilience and innovation with a growing recognition of the importance of local action in driving sustainable development. In this context, VLRs pose a crucial opportunity to mature institutional frameworks and governance platforms that promote the mainstreaming of the SDGs and elevate the role of cities in the international arena.

VLRs have the potential to play a central role in providing an evidence-based, **participatory**, meaningful and actionable framework, monitoring and knowledge-sharing. This document provides guidelines for structuring VLRs as a tool that supports the consolidation of transparent ownership structures, multi-level governance schemes and synergic financial mechanisms.

The topics explored in the document focus on equipping decision makers with a **strategic approach** to the VLR process, nurturing a shared vision for sustainable urban development through a participatory process, leveraging sound protocols for data collection and analysis, and actionable implementation recommendations.

Capacity building is an essential part of VLRs. Accordingly, a conceptual and actionable approach that mainstreams

constant learning in the VLR process through mechanisms based on transparency, traceability and accountability is provided. A transparent process is vital for consolidating stakeholders' buy-in and the general public's trust and engagement in the project.

The document indicates the importance of turning the VLR process into a **legacy for a city** through monitoring tools and follow-up mechanisms, turning the experience into an open lab for knowledge-sharing that surpasses political mandates. Empowered VLR experiences have the potential to elevate the role of cities in the international arena, nurturing the dissemination of good practices.

The Arab region has a central role in tackling shared global challenges with the potential to showcase innovative and powerful experiences related to localization of the SDGs. Therefore, this document focuses on providing guidelines for the facilitation of the emergence of new VLRs in the region, empowering the role of local governments, leveraging on-the-ground experience and providing contextualized knowledge to key debates worldwide.

In conclusion, these practical guidelines are envisioned as a dynamic and evolving resource designed to assist local authorities in effectively following up on and reviewing development initiatives at the local level. As the number of VLRs grows and the wealth of experience expands, it is anticipated that these guidelines will be updated periodically to reflect new insights, strategies and good practices. This iterative approach ensures

that the guide remains a calibrated tool offering local governments the latest and most relevant guidance for implementing the SDGs. The guidelines aim to be an indispensable resource for local authorities,

helping them navigate the complexities of sustainable development and enabling them to make impactful, informed decisions that resonate both locally and globally.

Annex 1. Checklists

Inception phase checklist

- Have you identified the key individuals and departments responsible for VLR development?
- Is there a designated project manager or coordinator for VLR?
- Have you identified and mapped the key stakeholders involved in the VLR process?
- Do you have a Stakeholder Engagement Plan that outlines engagement goals and timelines?
- Have you ensured the inclusion of marginalized groups in the participatory processes?
- Is there a defined governance model and clear roles for various stakeholders in the VLR process?
- Have you raised awareness about the VLR process among local stakeholders through communication and outreach activities?
- Have you organized training activities to engage different stakeholders in the VLR process?
- Are you applying the guiding principles of being evidence-based, participatory, meaningful and actionable throughout the VLR process?
- Have you secured political commitment and created an enabling environment for VLR?
- Have you identified funding challenges and opportunities for the VLR process?
- Is there a sustainable financial framework in place for VLR?

Situation analysis phase checklist

- Have you conducted a SWOT analysis and risk assessments to identify contextual opportunities and challenges?
- Have you collected and analysed relevant data for VLR?
- Are the SDGs prioritized based on their relevance, local influence and vulnerability?
- Have you created a matrix connecting the SDGs and local initiatives during the calibration exercise?
- Is there a mechanism for promoting policy coherence, both horizontally and vertically, within and between government levels?
- Is VLR aligned with national and global agendas?
- Have you considered mechanisms to institutionalize successful policy coherence instruments that emerge in the VLR process?
- Have you selected relevant data sources and addressed data gaps?
- Did you engage local stakeholders in the data collection process?

Strategic planning phase checklist

- Are you using an appropriate data analysis framework (e.g. Global UMF) for the VLR data analysis?
- Have you triangulated data from multiple sources to validate findings?
- Have you translated data analysis into actionable insights that can inform decision-making?

Finalization phase checklist

- Is the VLR document structured coherently, following a proposed framework for the report structure?
- Have you identified sustainable funding sources for VLR?
- Is there a Validation Plan in place that specifies goals, stakeholders and mechanisms for validation?
- Have you established collaborative platforms (e.g. Stakeholders Forum) for review and validation of VLR?

Monitoring and follow-up phase checklist

- Have you created a monitoring framework to track progress towards VLR objectives and the impact of SDG-related initiatives?
- Are mechanisms for accountability in place for reporting and reviewing progress?
- Are local stakeholders engaged in the monitoring process?
- Are platforms for ongoing collaboration with stakeholders maintained and leveraged?
- Have you institutionalized the VLR process to ensure long-term impact?

Annex 2. Voluntary Local Review survey template for different stakeholders

Academia

- What is your field of expertise?
- How would you rate the city's progress towards achieving the SDGs in your field of expertise?
- How would you rate the city's progress towards achieving the New Urban Agenda in your field of expertise?
- What are the main challenges facing the city in terms of achieving the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda in your field of expertise?
- What are the main opportunities facing the city in terms of achieving the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda in your field of expertise?
- How satisfied are you with the level of engagement between academia and the city government in addressing the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda?
- What are your suggestions for improving collaboration between academia and the city government in addressing the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda?
- Is there any other information you would like to provide?

Government

- What is your department/agency?
- How would you rate your department/agency's progress towards achieving the SDGs?
- How would you rate your department/agency's progress towards achieving the New Urban Agenda?
- What are the main challenges facing your department/agency in terms of achieving the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda?
- What are the main opportunities facing your department/agency in terms of achieving the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda?
- How satisfied are you with the level of stakeholder engagement in the VLR process within your department/agency?
- What are your suggestions for improving the monitoring and follow-up process for the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda within your department/agency?
- Is there any other information you would like to provide?

Private sector

- What is your company's field of activity?
- How would you rate your company's progress towards achieving the SDGs in your field of activity?

- How would you rate your company's progress towards achieving the New Urban Agenda in your field of activity?
- What are the main challenges facing your company in terms of achieving the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda in your field of activity?
- What are the main opportunities facing your company in terms of achieving the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda in your field of activity?
- How satisfied are you with the level of engagement between your company and the city government in addressing the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda?
- What are your suggestions for improving collaboration between the private sector and the city government in addressing the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda?
- Is there any other information you would like to provide?

Endnotes

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Practical guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews in the Arab region provides a comprehensive framework for local governments to engage effectively with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It emphasizes the importance of localizing these goals to meet regional challenges and offers a structured approach for developing and implementing Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs). The document advocates for participatory, inclusive, evidence-based processes, ensuring that VLRs reflect diverse community needs and perspectives.

The guidelines offer practical, actionable advice, integrating international and regional experiences to enhance governance and stakeholder engagement. They explore the phases of the VLR process from inception to monitoring and evaluation, and stress the significance of multi-level and multi-sectoral cooperation. The document constitutes a crucial tool for empowering local governments in the Arab region, providing them with the necessary resources and knowledge to contribute meaningfully to advancing sustainable urban development.

