Reporting on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in Sweden:

VLRs and their implications for local democracy

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Contents

Abstract

In 2021, four Swedish municipalities – Helsingborg, Malmö, Stockholm, and Uppsala – published their first Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), a report on the status of local implementation of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). VLRs have become a common instrument for subnational governments to show progress in the achievement of the goals. While more than 110 VLRs have already been published, the case of the Swedish cities is interesting for several reasons: a long-standing tradition of reporting on local sustainability policies; mutual learning and knowledge exchange initiatives, nationally and abroad; and a close relationship with Sweden's national government, which published its national review (VNR) at the same time as the four local documents.

This report studies the process that led to the four Swedish VLRs, emphasising the role that social engagement and local democracy had on the outcome. The Swedish experience is analysed in relation to other cases of VLRs in different countries worldwide. The aim of this report is to provide insights and inspiration to other municipalities that plan to publish a VLR regarding how to use the elements of local democracy in that process.

Preface

By Johan Lilja, Secretary General, Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy -ICLD

The mandate of the Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is to contribute to poverty reduction by promoting local democracy in low- and middle-income countries. In order to fulfil this mandate, we promote and encourage decentralised cooperation through our municipal partnership programme; capacity-building through our international training programmes; and research through our knowledge Centre. ICLD documents and publishes key lessons learned from our ongoing activities, initiates and funds relevant research, engages in scholarly networks, connects relevant researchers with practitioners, and organises conferences and workshops. We also maintain a publications series. 'Reporting on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in Sweden: VLRs and their implications for local democracy' is the 17th report to be published in ICLD's Research Reports series.

It is no secret that we currently are far from achieving the SDGs, and that further action globally is urgently needed. If local governments are to make strategies for the future, it is necessary to have a good sense of what the current status of progress is. Voluntary Local Reviews (VLR) conducted by local governments can be a catalyst for such progress. They provide a concrete tool to collect information and facts about the status of progress towards the goals as a starting point for further development. The four Swedish cities that have conducted the VLRs that are examined is this report are part of a bigger global family of VLR-cities that can engage in peer-to-peer learning and exchanges on the SDGs. I believe that VLRs can spur local governments to improve their activities, benchmark

with others and find ways to take action to reach the goals quicker and better. Yet benchmarking should not only be done on the progress towards the goals, but also on the development of the VLRs themselves. That's why the ICLD in collaboration with UN Habitat and United Cities and Local Governments has commissioned this report: to compare successes and critically examine areas of potential improvement with a focus on local democracy. I believe that the SDGs can only be achieved if citizens are involved, by means of transparency, participation and accountability. Let this report inspire local governments to continue the hard and challenging work to make the world a better place by reporting local progress on the Sustainable Development Goals.

By Emilia Saiz, Secretary General, United Cities and Local Governments - UCLG

United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) pioneered the localisation of global agendas by putting it at the centre of its global strategy. Since then, local and regional governments' efforts to localise the SDGs have expanded in all world regions. Swedish VLRs and Voluntary Subnational Review (VSR) are inspiring the world. It is powerful to see how countries with a long democratic and decentralisation tradition see the benefits in implementing the SDGs. The SDGs contribute to breaking down silos local policymaking, to strengthening multi-level cooperation and to promoting a much-needed new bottom-up approach to sustainability. The Swedish cities that have produced VLRs have demonstrated how subnational SDG reporting can also be a vehicle for solidarity, paving the way for new partnerships and consolidating existing ones, as was galvanised in the VSR developed by the Swedish Association of Local Governments (SALAR). The Swedish approach to subnational reporting brings a spotlight on values that are central to our global movement.

By Shipra Narang Suri, Chief, Urban Practices Branch, UN-Habitat

Cities are the arena where the battle for a more sustainable, equitable and green world will be won or lost. Driven by their local governments and local communities, cities are hubs of innovation and engines of transformative change. Their leadership is critical to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

Sweden is undoubtedly leading the way in the global effort to localise the SDGs. Several municipalities in Sweden have committed to the achievement of the SDGs in their territories. On the occasion of the second Swedish Voluntary National Review, four municipalities – Helsingborg, Malmö, Stockholm, Uppsala – developed their Voluntary Local Reviews, emphasising the important local–national link.

UN-Habitat, drawing on the principles of the New Urban Agenda, supports local governments and communities, in partnership with national governments and other stakeholders, to achieve the SDGs. Our partnership with the Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) – key players in advancing the localisation of the SDGs worldwide – is central to these efforts. We hope that this timely publication will provide local authorities in Sweden and around the world with ideas and inspiration to strengthen their efforts towards achieving the SDGs and implementing the New Urban Agenda. UN-Habitat, ICLD and UCLG stand ready to support local authorities in their endeavours.

About the Authors
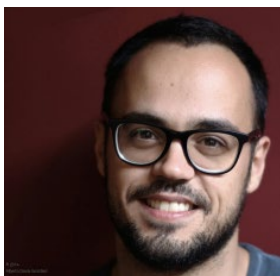
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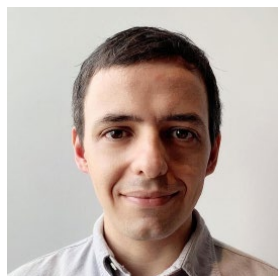
Ricardo Martinez is an expert on international development and urban governance. Previously a policy officer, Ricardo has worked for more than 10 at the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG). He is currently a researcher at the Asia Research Institute of the National University of Singapore, working on city diplomacy and the localisation of the UN global agendas. He has previously researched on the urban age, policy learning, and decentralised cooperation. At the end of 2021 Ricardo defended his doctoral thesis in political science at Heidelberg University (Germany) with a dissertation on cities as rising actors of global governance.
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Executive summary

- **National and international networks of local governments have inspired peer-learning, innovation and broader commitment to the SDGs**

Mutual learning, the exchange of knowledge, and the establishment of a VLR community supported by international organisations and global networks of cities and regions have been key tools for many local governments to consider, plan, and eventually develop their own Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs).

- **The principle of 'leave no one behind' provides a key link to the principles of local democracy**

The principle of 'leaving no one behind' – the idea of an overarching set of commitments thought to help the most marginalised, the least represented, and the most vulnerable to major challenges such as climate change, inequality and intolerance – has been perhaps one of the most representative of the long-term vision embodied by the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. This principle is essentially linked to the principles of local democracy: equity, participation, transparency and accountability.

- **Creating a culture of sustainability**

In the case of Sweden it was significantly easier to mainstream the SDGs since a large group of community members – from the civil servant to the older citizen, the education system, the welfare mechanisms, the national government's priorities, or the visions held by those that organise from the grassroots – already share a set of values, a mindset, a view of the world which clearly resonate with the steps that must be taken for the future to be really sustainable and just.

- **There is a potential for local democracy enhancement in the VLRs**

Despite universal ambitions, the mechanisms that have been put in place to monitor and review the implementation of the SDGs have been far less effective in engaging social stakeholders, communities, citizens, the grassroots, and many other elements of social complexity. To be sure, several VLRs acknowledge the inclusion of civil society and larger mechanisms of (often direct) consultation of residents and stakeholders as a key added value of SDG localisation (Section 3.2 offers various examples of this approach). However, in many other cases, a risk exists that VLRs may be no more than bureaucratic exercises or a tick-box checklist of what sustainable municipalities are expected to do.

- **Some local governments that have used the VLRs for 'external participation', broader consultation and community engagement; and others use the VLRs as a catalyst for 'internal participation', administrative streamlining and breaking down silos (the Swedish case).**

The Swedish experience seems to support the hypothesis that the current landscape of VLRs is still somehow divided into two not mutually exclusive categories: local governments that have used the VLR opportunity for broader consultation and community engagement; and local governments that think of the VLR as a catalyst for administrative streamlining and breaking down silos. The Swedish municipalities' approach to local reviews may have favoured the latter, with small citizen engagement, but also shows a strong desire for the opportunity to engage more with communities aligning policy with their needs and guidance. More generally, the process of preparing the VLR, coordinating with the national government and the other municipalities, being exposed to good practices and other examples from different contexts and administrative cultures, has had a noticeable and empowering impact on their work with the SDGs.

- **Connecting local governments with global challenges**

The VLR experience provided Swedish municipalities with a clearer idea about the 'bigger picture' of the global politics of sustainable development today. Even though these cities had a long-standing tradition and expertise in social and environmental sustainability in their territories and communities, the SDGs brought about a better understanding of the global scale of the challenges that urban and rural settlements face.

RESEARCH REPORT | REPORTING ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN SWEDEN:
VLRS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL DEMOCRACY

NO 17

• **VLRs can become an opportunity for co-owned policy-making and more transparent, participatory and accountable local democracy**

The need to make the process more open and inclusive, and the opportunity to use a local review as a laboratory for a more co-owned policy-making system and a more transparent and responsive relationship between citizens and local government have been core lessons learned by the Swedish municipalities that took part in this task – and a guiding principle for future action in Sweden as elsewhere.

• **Facilitate the access to data not for the sake of data, but to create accountable co-owned policies with citizens**

One of the lessons learned surely is that an enabling environment for impactful reporting and implementation is not just one that merges VNRs and VLRs together, or one that empowers cooperation via ad hoc roundtables, committees or shared events. It is also an environment that eases the burden on local governments, facilitates access to data, shares knowledge across all stakeholders, and creates the opportunities to turn this information into accountable, co-owned policy decisions that are validated and supported by committed communities and informed citizens.

• **An important potential for ICLD to support knowledge exchange on the VLRs**

Since peer-to-peer learning has been important in the Swedish experience of VLRs, as well as for many other local governments, ICLD can make an important contribution with its programmes to the monitoring and implementation of the SDGs. According to a survey among ICLD participants in training and partnerships, 85.9 percent of respondents defined their knowledge of the SDGs as average or above, and 31.8 percent affirmed being 'fully familiar' with the framework.

However, when it comes to SDG implementation monitoring and reviewing, the situation in the municipalities of the ICLD partner countries is not yet encouraging. Only Kenya, Uganda, South Africa and Indonesia have very few examples of local governments that are monitoring the SDGs and writing their VLRs.

Introduction

A Voluntary Local Review (VLR) is a versatile concept that includes various documents, studies and reports about the implementation at local level of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which the United Nations (UN) officially adopted in 2015. VLRs have been developed by subnational governments since 2016. As of December 2021, at least 110 VLRs or similar reviewing documents have been published by local governments from more than 30 countries. About 20 more reviews are in the process of being finalised. Their political value has grown significantly over the past few years. Why are they so relevant for sustainable development policy worldwide?

Even though the SDGs were conceived as an intergovernmental framework, the importance of local action has become enormously significant for the achievement of the goals. So many of the Agenda's objectives are only achievable with full commitment of local level governments and communities. Already in 2015, at the beginning of the SDG era, Cities Alliance warned, in what was to become one of the most quoted statements about the localisation of the 2030 Agenda, that 'up to 65 percent of the SDGs are at risk if local urban stakeholders are not involved'.[1]

VLRs have also been the statement from local governments' about how essential sustainability policy can be at territorial, urban and social levels. Many reviews have worked as a blueprint for policy strategies and more innovative and community-based priorities. VLRs have been incentives for horizontal and vertical cooperation: they have pushed local governments to seek replicable and relatable initiatives in other contexts and have spurred entrepreneurship and participation in both local administration and citizenship as a whole.

VLRs are also equalising the policy-making process

in sustainability and resilience across various levels of government. The information they provide complements the data and experiences that national governments include in the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) they submit to the UN. VLRs, moreover, have also cemented the reputation of local governments as 'living policy laboratories', contributing to global and national strategic frameworks that are more diverse and inclusive.

In the early years of the 2030 Agenda, however, despite the work of some early front-runners, reviewing the implementation and effectiveness of the SDGs was almost always a prerogative of national governments. In 2018, three Japanese cities developed their VLRs with a more systematic approach: they had a template, unique local data and the support of local government and stakeholders.[2] In July 2018, at the yearly UN High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), New York City presented its own VLR. The shockwaves of these pioneering reviews set off a 'movement' of like-minded local governments that were aware of how essential local action was going to be for the 2030 Agenda to become a reality. The support of international organisations and global networks of subnational governments has also been a catalyst for collaboration, mutual learning and information exchange. The localisation of the SDGs is, today, a central piece of this debate, and local governments are increasingly acknowledged as peers in a process in which global goals, national resources and local implementation are expected to work seamlessly together.

Against this backdrop, this report aims to explore the process that led four Swedish municipalities – Helsingborg, Malmö, Stockholm, Uppsala – to publish their Voluntary Local Reviews. The four VLRs were issued almost at the same time in the first half of 2021. In the same year, the national government of Sweden presented its VNR to the UN. The two pro-

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1 Climate Finance Leadership Alliance, 2015. 'Localizing Climate Finance: Mapping Gaps and Opportunities, Designing Solutions', 13.
2 IGES and City of Kitakyushu, 2018. 'Kitakyushu City: The Sustainable Development Goals Report. Fostering a Trusted Green Growth City with True Wealth and Prosperity, Contributing to the World'. Kitakyushu; IGES and Town of Shimokawa, 2018. 'Shimokawa Town: The Sustainable Development Goals Report. The Shimokawa Challenge: Connecting People and Nature with the Future'. Shimokawa.; IGES and City of Toyama, 2018. 'Toyama City: The Sustainable Development Goals Report. Compact City Planning Based on Polycentric Transport Networks'. Toyama; IGES, 2020. 'The Shimokawa Method for Voluntary Local Review (VLR)', eds H. Koike et al. Kanagawa: Institute for Global Environmental Strategies; Ortiz-Moya, F. et al., 2020. 'State of the Voluntary Local Reviews 2020: Local Action for Global Impact in Achieving the SDGs', IGES Working Papers, Kanagawa: Institute for Global Environmental Strategies; IGES, 2021. 'State of the Voluntary Local Reviews 2021: From Reporting to Action', eds F. Ortiz-Moya et al., Kanagawa: Institute for Global Environmental Strategies.

cesses of review were tightly interlinked and enabled effective cooperation mechanisms across different levels of governance. The report explored how this relationship has worked and whether this experience provides insight for other municipalities that may embark on the journey of making their own VLRs. How did the Swedish VLR cities work on their local reviews? To what extent has reporting on the SDGs been a collaborative process? Was social mobilisation an added value? What can local governments, civil society organisations, and community stakeholders learn from the four Swedish reviews at the core of this study?

The Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) works with a wide range of countries, as well as their communities and municipalities, and supports them to enhance local democracy and achieve the SDGs. Their experience has contributed to the establishment of a solid network of cooperation, mutual learning and international training. This report aims to add to the knowledge that this network can use to increase awareness, design new initiatives and engage in cross-border cooperation.

The work of ICLD with its partner countries focuses expressly on raising awareness and sharing knowledge about the more inclusive and empowering effects that a process like a VLR can have, not just on local government or public administration, but on society as a whole. For this reason – perhaps unorthodoxly – this introduction also contains some preliminary findings, or 'anticipated conclusions', about the impact that the VLRs have had on the relationship between local government and citizens, on public participation in the reviewing process, and on the shortcomings of VLRs as an additional tool for transparency and accountability in the Swedish case.

Section 2, then, explores the process that led to the decision to draft the VLRs, with specific focus on both the horizontal mechanisms of cooperation among Swedish municipalities and the quite unique multi-level dialogue and city-to-city learning processes that the VLRs enabled. Section 3 highlights specific features of the reviews that the Swedish local govern-

ments have published: structure and contents, means of implementation, and the relevance of data and indicators. Section 4, finally, introduces the insight and outcomes of the survey that ICLD has distributed across its membership: findings and lessons learned of the Swedish VLR process that can provide best practices and answers to the doubts and expectations of subnational governments from around the world.

Figure 1. Map of VLRs and other relevant local reviewing documents published at the time of writing (November 2021)

North America:

New York (2018, 2019)
Winnipeg (2018, 2020)
Los Angeles (2019, 2021)
Hawai'i (2020)
Pittsburgh (2020)
Kelowna (2021)
Orlando (2021)

Latin America:

Mexico City (2017, 2021)
Barcarena (2017)
La Paz (2017)
Lincoln (2018, 2020)
Buenos Aires (2019,2020, 2021)
Oaxaca (2019)
Santa Fe (2019)
Santana de Parnaíba(2019)
State of São Paulo (2019)
Belo Horizonte (2020)
Chimbote (2020)
Ciudad Valles (2020)
Montevideo (2020)

Niterói (2020)
Pará (2020, 2021)
Rio de Janeiro (2020)
City of São Paulo (2020)
Trujillo (2020)
Yucatan (2020)
Durango (2021)
Guadalajara (2021)
Lima (2021)
Mérida (2021)
State of Mexico (2021)
Tabasco (2021)

Source: VLR repositories at UCLG, UN-Habitat, UNDESA, and the European Commission's JRC.

Europe

NR-Westphalia (2016)	Mannheim (2019)	Asker (2021)
Valencian Country (2016)	Bonn (2020)	Bergen (2021)
Basque Country (2017, 2019, 2020)	Córdoba (2020)	Florence (2021)
Wallonia (2017, 2019)	Espoo (2020)	Gladsaxe (2021)
Besançon (2018, 2019)	Ghent (2020)	Helsingborg (2021)
Málaga	Liverpool (2020)	Madrid (2021)
Barcelona (2019, 2020)	Niort (2020)	Malmö (2021)
Bristol (2019)	Scotland (2020)	Romsdal (2021)
Canterbury (2019)	Skiathos (2020)	Shkodër (2021)
Gothenburg (2019)	Stuttgart (2020)	Stockholm (2021)
Helsinki (2019, 2021)	Turku (2020)	Uppsala (2021)
Jaén (2019)	Viken (2020)	Vantaa (2021)

Middle East and Western Asia:

Izmir (2021)

Sultanbeyli (2021)

Asia-Pacific:

Cauayan City (2017)

Deqing (2018)

Kitakyushu (2018)

Shimokawa (2018)

Suwon (2018)

Toyama (2018)

Hamamatsu (2019)

New Taipei (2019)

Taipei (2019, 2020, 2021)

Dangjin (2020)

Guangzhou (2020)

Taoyuan (2020)

Shah Alam (2021)

Subang Jaya (2021)

Surabaya (2021)

Tokyo (2021)

Yiwu (2021)

Yokohama (2021)

Africa:

Busia (2019)

Cape Town (2019)

Kwale (2019)

Marsabit (2019)

Taita Taveta (2019)

Harare (2020)

Victoria Falls (2021)

Methodology

This report adopts a mixed methodology which uses semi-structured interviews, desk research, and a structured survey.

Interviews were conducted between July and October 2021 and explored three themes in particular: the process that led to the decision to develop a VLR; the relationship with the other VLR cities, the national government and political dialogue more generally; and the technical stages of the realisation of the review. When possible, additional insight on the use of data and indicators was also provided. Interviews included virtual meetings with representatives and officials from the municipalities of Helsingborg, Malmö, Stockholm and Uppsala; the office of the Swedish Government's national coordinator for the 2030 Agenda; representatives from the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR); and representatives from the United Nations Association of Sweden.

Desk research was based primarily on the analysis of the four Voluntary Local Reviews that Swedish municipalities published in 2021, the core object of this research. SALAR's Voluntary Subnational Review, developed in partnership with United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), was also a key background document for research. Other essential sources of knowledge and data for this research were several civil society contributions and publications, as well as the whole wealth of analysis and research on VLRs and SDG localisation developed and promoted by international organisations and global networks of local governments – UN-Habitat, UCLG, UNDESA, UNESCAP, among several others.

In collaboration with the research team, ICLD developed an eight-question survey which explored specific dimensions of the relationship between SDG localisation and monitoring and the municipalities and subnational governments of the partner countries in which ICLD has been active with training, partnership and funding programmes. When the report was finalised, the survey had received 85 responses from 15 different countries. About 55 percent of the replies were received from African municipalities and institutions. Twenty responses came from Europe, 16 of which from Swedish municipalities other than the four that have already published a VLR – a testament to the interest that VLRs are raising in the country even outside the largest urban areas.

RESEARCH REPORT │ REPORTING ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN SWEDEN:
                            VLRS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL DEMOCRACY

NO 17

Voluntary Local Reviews in Sweden

The year 2021 has been crucial for the VLR movement worldwide. Despite the difficulties imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic – which affected the ability of local and regional governments to focus on sustainable development and SDG localisation – municipalities, provinces and regions from all over the world produced an unprecedented number of local reviews, almost doubling the figures of one year prior. This wave of commitment to local reviewing and participation from the local level was felt in Sweden too. The four VLRs of the cities of Helsingborg, Malmö, Stockholm and Uppsala were published in 2021,[3] the same year in which the Swedish national government had committed to submit to the HLPF its second VNR. These interlinkages show how important coordination has been for the fulfilment of these achievements.

The Swedish VLR cities

One of the most relevant strengths of the 'VLR movement' has been the ability to empower local governments in the development of new models of SDG localisation.

This has also incentivised the participation of like-minded local governments elsewhere. Mutual learning, the exchange of knowledge and the establishment of a VLR community supported by international organisations and global networks of cities and regions have been key tools for many local governments to consider, plan and eventually develop their own reviews. The outcome is a diverse group of cities and regions that share a commitment to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. How do Sweden's VLR municipalities compare to the larger group of about 100 local governments that have published a VLR or are about to do so?

Local governments that have embarked on a VLR process, however, have been incredibly diverse in terms of population size. They range from more than 45 million people in São Paulo (Brazil),[4] which published an SDG localisation report in 2019, to the town of Shimokawa (Japan) with 'only' 3,800 people, which managed to engage its population – older people, youth, families, institutions – in a path-breaking VLR in 2018.

Table 1. Swedish municipalities that have issued or are in the process of publishing a VLR

Local government	Population	Unemployed (% of 18–64yr)	Median net income	Foreign-born (% of 18–64yr)	Latest local turnout (%)
Gothenburg	583,056	6.4	24,874.40 €	33.4	81.0
Helsingborg	149,280	8.9	23,790.76 €	32.9	81.7
Malmö	347,949	10.6	21,800.81 €	41.8	78.6
Stockholm	975,551	5.7	28,253.37 €	31.1	83.5
Uppsala	233,839	5.0	24,716.78 €	27.0	86.4

Source: Kolada.se. Latest data available: 2020

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3 The city of Gothenburg had already published a report on SDG localisation in the city in 2019, as part of a research project led by Mistra Urban Project, a multi-platform research consortium that engaged several local institutions to advance knowledge and improve local policy-making on social, political and environmental sustainability. The platform created by Mistra Urban Futures (an initiative of Mistra, the Swedish Foundation for Strategic Environmental Research) involved Gothenburg, Malmö and five more cities – both mid-sized intermediary cities and larger metropolitan areas – from various countries. See: S. C. Valencia, 2019. 'Localisation of the 2030 Agenda and Its Sustainable Development Goals in Gothenburg, Sweden', available at: https://www.mistraurbanfutures.org/en/publication/localisation-2030-agenda-and-its-sustainable-development-goals-gothenburg-sweden. Because of its structure and its reference to key components of SDG localisation such as indicators, policy processes and bottom-up participation, the report was already considered among published 'VLRs' or comparable documents in UN-Habitat and UCLG's 'Guidelines for VLRs', published in 2020 and 2021. More information about the project, see: https://www.mistraurbanfutures.org/en. For the Guidelines: UCLG and UN-Habitat, 2020. 'Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews. Vol. 1: A Comparative Analysis of Existing VLRs'; UCLG and UN-Habitat; UN-Habitat and UCLG, 2021. 'Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews. Vol. 2: Exploring the Local-National Link', Nairobi: UN-Habitat and UCLG.
4 Governo do Estado de São Paulo, SEADE, and FAPESP, 2019. 'ODS SP No PPA 2016-2019. 1° Relatorio de Acompanhamento Dos Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável Do Estado de São Paulo'. São Paulo.

RESEARCH REPORT | REPORTING ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN SWEDEN:
VLRS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL DEMOCRACY

NO 17

Figure 2. Population size of a sample of 35 metropolitan areas and municipalities in OECD countries that either have published or are preparing a VLR
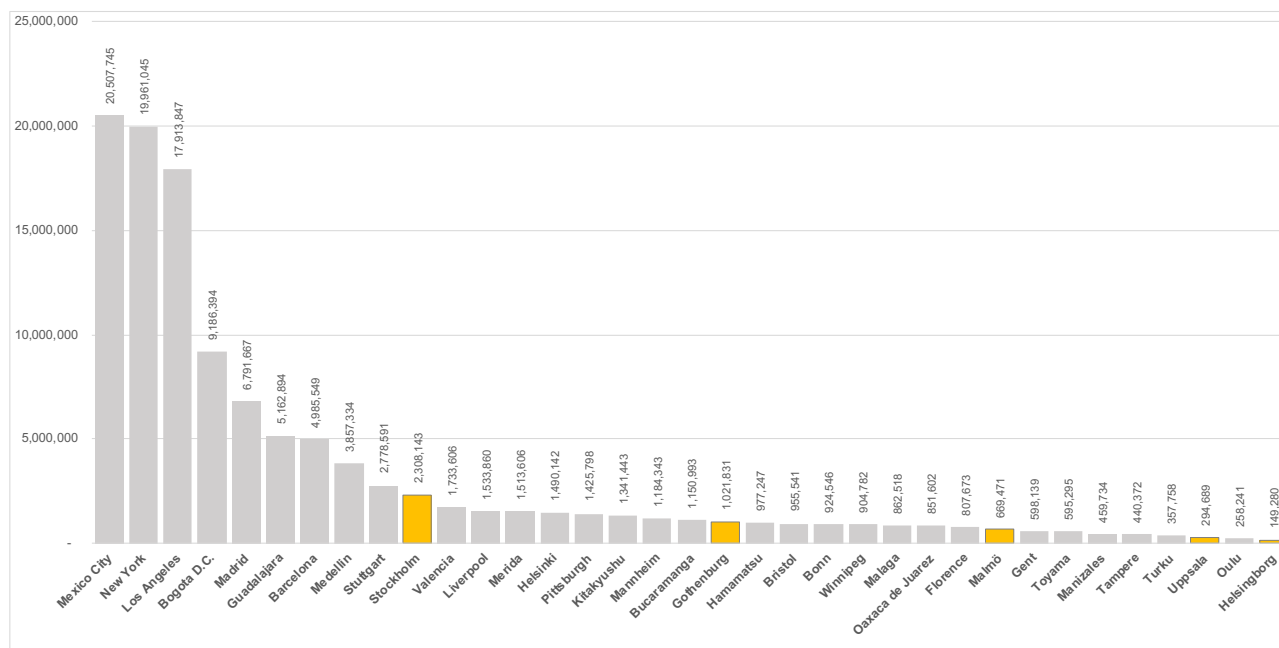
Source: OECD.Stat, Metropolitan Areas: https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=CITIES#. Data refer to a municipality's metropolitan area, hence the difference between Kolada's figures in Table 1 and the data in Figure 2.

The Swedish cities that have undertaken a local reviewing process fit this pattern of diversity too. The capital, Stockholm, is the country's largest metropolitan area. Gothenburg and Malmö are both large intermediary cities that play a crucial role in the interlinkage of their territories. Uppsala and Helsingborg are smaller intermediary cities that managed to develop as, respectively, an academic and knowledge-driven industrial hub and a sustainability-oriented growing urban community.

While it can be easily argued that larger metropolitan areas normally have more technical, human and financial resources for an effective local review of SDG implementation, local governments in less favourable situations have also found innovative solutions to engage their communities and local stakeholders; promote and improve horizontal coordination with other cities; and invest on transnational cooperation and the support of the global community.

The impact of multi-level dialogue

Sweden's national government has been able to work fruitfully on SDG implementation with the country's local governments. Multi-level cooperation drove the four VLR cities to commit even more to their localisation strategies and established, through international dialogue and cross-border cooperation, an enabling environment which offered mutual learning, global visibility and institutional support to Swedish municipalities.

The government's resolution to present their second VNR at the 2021 HLPF was a key catalyst of the process that led to the four VLRs being published in the same year.

Malmö by
Pontus Ohlsson on Unsplash

The Swedish VNR-VLR link and the multi-level reviewing process

Sweden's national government set out to establish contact with the Swedish municipalities that had shown interest in joining the process while improving, at the same time, their own SDG localisation track record. Cities like Helsingborg, Malmö, Stockholm and Uppsala were building on a long-standing tradition of local sustainability policy commitment and stakeholder mobilisation (see also Section 2.3). Malmö, for instance, had been working on the localisation of the 2030 Agenda – at least as far as the policy dimensions more immediately related to environmental protection and climate change were concerned – since 2015. Malmö and Helsingborg had been among the first signatory parties of the New York Declaration in 2018.[5] Since its participation in the 2020 HLPF, Uppsala had been inspired by the Finnish experience and the possibility to integrate a local review into national plans. Joining the cooperation framework that the national government was proposing was an obvious choice for the cities that volunteered to issue their VLRs.

Representatives of local and national levels met every three or four weeks. These meetings were opportunities for the exchange of good practices, local experiences, peer-to-peer learning and information on the development process of the national review and the definition of local contributions to the VNR. The meetings were topic-oriented and often included keynote speakers from local and national departments, as well as from civil society, the private sector and several other stakeholders.

A few representatives from the Swedish VLR municipalities related that they felt there was only limited room for guidance or an impact on the actual contents of the national review.

They also stressed, however, the impact of multi-level cooperation on local mobilisation and how national data and experiences could be complemented by local practices and knowledge. **Several interviewees wished that the semi-institutionalised mechanisms of consultations that were set up for this process would outlast a specific VNR or VLR and become a standard for multi-level relations in Sweden.**

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5 The NYC Declaration on the Voluntary Local Review was launched by New York City's administration during the United Nations General Assembly in 2019. The Declaration was designed as subnational governments' formal commitment to sharing progress and good practices of SDG implementation with the UN. At the time of launch, 22 subnational governments had already signed the Declaration, and the document had more than 220 signatories committed to the localisation of the 2030 Agenda already by mid-2021. The Declaration is engaging local governments on three main achievements, including data and strategy mapping on SDG localisation, the establishment of an authoritative forum for stakeholders interested in the SDGs as a policy framework, and a joint effort to facilitate the presentation of VLRs at the HLPF. The Declaration is available online: https://www1.nyc.gov/site/international/programs/voluntary-local-review-declaration.page.

Most cities were satisfied with the impact that local-national cooperation had in the reviewing process and were glad to have contributed to a more inclusive process. They were also aware of the technical constraints imposed by the VNR guidelines and blueprints that Sweden's review had to follow; of the inherent difficulty in coordinating output from the multitude of ministries, departments and institutions within its own organisation; and, finally, of the very limited time available to the national government to establish a venue for effective multi-level dialogue.

Finally, because of the hard deadlines imposed by the HLPF schedule, all the stakeholders involved in the VNR and VLRs had to come to terms with issues of timing and self-organisation constraints. **Compact 'one-pagers' edited by the cities themselves with a digest of the main results of local reviews became, eventually, the only option available.**

The four Swedish municipalities too only had a few months for the development of a full VLR. Some cities focused on efficiency, as they could build on their extensive tradition of local reporting on sustainable development.

A piece in the multi-level pattern: SALAR, smaller towns and rural territories

In a few interviews with municipal and national officials, time constraints were also often cited as one of the main reasons for the VNRs' and VLRs' relatively underwhelming involvement of a broader range of institutional stakeholders. This was especially notable in the case of the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR).[6]

As recounted by SALAR officials in an interview for this report, the association had a very positive experience with multi-level cooperation in the process that led to the publication of the first Swedish VNR in 2017, and the association and the city of Malmö were part of the delegation that accompanied the Swedish government at the 2017 HLPF presentation.

The enabling environment that had been developed around the Swedish VNR-VLR link was also a catalyst for SALAR's decision to develop a 'Voluntary Subnational Review' (VSR), in close cooperation with United Cities and Local Governments – a process that several other national associations of local authorities had undertaken in the previous months.[7]

While at the beginning of the process SALAR was engaged to provide specific information on SDG localisation in Sweden in the broader framework of UCLG's research work, it soon became clear that the knowledge that the association had available could provide enough insight on the Swedish case to be a stand-alone report.

The VSR soon became a cathartic process for the association to re-think its relationship with Sweden's multi-level system. **The VSR raised awareness of the fact that local governments in Sweden can work as 'democracy actors, builders of society, producers of welfare services and employers', and emphasised just how crucial the work of territories and communities, at the level closest to citizens, can be to 'create opportunities to address complex social challenges'.**

The VSR – with its examples of effective case studies and localisation good practices – made it clear that 'collaboration between different actors… based on a high degree of trust' is at the core of the effective, truly co-owned partnerships and policy responsibility that the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda are fostering.[8] UCLG's approach left SALAR with significant room for manoeuvre in the organisation of the report,

6 The association represents the interests of Sweden's 290 municipalities and 21 regions, as well as the 46,000 elected officials in representative posts at both the municipal and regional levels, and the nearly 1 million workers who are currently employed by public administration at the subnational level throughout the country.
7 Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, 2021. 'Voluntary Subnational Review. Localising the SDGs in Sweden', Stockholm: Sveriges Kommuner och Regioner. VSRs are a hybrid model that UCLG has been promoting since late 2019, a monitoring and reviewing process which engages primarily with local government associations as key representatives and advocates of the interests and perspectives of most local governments in their respective national governments, as well as the bearers of more minute, atomised, but also extremely local information and data that would otherwise remain inaccessible – especially when produced by smaller towns and rural or dispersed communities.
8 Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, 31.

which soon became more 'co-owned' by the association and its membership. Presenting the VSRs at the HLPF was an opportunity to show how diverse the Swedish approach to the SDGs could be, rewarding the establishment not only of fruitful vertical multi-level cooperation, but also of a horizontal bond across local authorities, be they municipal or regional, large or small.

According to the association's takeaways from the VSR process, the centrality of the SDGs and sustainability issues in the current public debate make them an attractive policy innovation tool for small or intermediary cities, regardless of how historically distant they may have been from global decisions. Foreseeing the future of the movement, however, is a harder task: cities and towns keener on international cooperation have certainly used localisation as an opportunity, but other local authorities, especially regional governments or smaller, less connected municipalities and territories, may be needing additional incentives besides the visibility granted by an HLPF session or a joint report. Engaging these actors in a mechanism of validation and update of the information reported by a VNR, a VSR or a VLR may be a way to give a local 'reporting community' a shared sense of purpose for the longer term.

The relevance of cross-city learning and community-building

Vertical multi-level cooperation was crucial to establish the effective enabling environment that ultimately shaped Sweden's 2021 VNR and the four cities' local reviews. However, the four municipalities' commitment to mutual learning and horizontal cooperation also played a very important role in the process. There are several structural, almost essential dimensions that catalysed this process in the Swedish context.

Sustainable development as a matter of local government

Several interviewees stressed that in the Swedish context the idea of sustainable development[9] has often been a strategic priority of local government. In her interview, even the national 2030 Agenda coordinator explained that the VNR process at the national level could not be developed without building on the underpinning work that Swedish municipalities were carrying out with their communities.

When interviewed for this report, the representative from Helsingborg highlighted quite powerfully that 'the paths are shorter and the walls are lower for the government of a city [like Helsingborg]' when trying to include voices and contributions from diverse groups within the city. A municipality, a network of cities, a subnational government like a province or a region have both a vested interest and a technical advantage when making policy more inclusive – an issue that is even more relevant with the SDGs, a framework which is designed to address all the dimensions of society in its complexity.

Raised to work together: dialogue as local identity

Swedish local governments have historically been keen to meet, discuss, share and cooperate on a variety of policy issues, initiatives and strategic priorities. This approach to horizontal cooperation pre-dates the SDGs, but the localisation of the 2030 Agenda has certainly helped. While discussing the VNR-VLR link and how the process developed through time, several interviewees underscored how valuable the opportunity was to have specialised meetings; these provided insight on more specific issues related to the drafting of the VLR but, at the same time, allowed Swedish cities to compare proposals, ideas and solutions on certain long-standing policy challenges for the first time. This cooperative posture has been at the core of Swedish municipalities' approach to SDG localisation and monitoring and reviewing. The city of Helsingborg, for instance, had already showed interest in and

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9 That is, development achieved through the harmonisation of economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection, without compromising future generations' needs and sustenance.

RESEARCH REPORT | REPORTING ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN SWEDEN:
VLRS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL DEMOCRACY

NO 17

Helsingborg photo by Melvin on Unsplash

established contact with the Finnish city of Turku and its VLR strategy, in search of a valuable model and template for its own work on sustainability reporting – even before Helsingborg was contacted by Sweden's national government to take part in the VNR-VLR link and join the other VLR cities.

Sustainability reports as a training ground for the VLR

Swedish municipalities and territories have a long-standing tradition in monitoring policy performance as well as strategising with sustainability, inclusion and transparency principles as key guidance for local initiatives and institutional action. They share 'a long tradition and extensive experience of local responsibility

and decision-making'.[10] The city of Malmö had been designing local policy frameworks on sustainability, resilience and inclusion since at least 2010. Malmö has also been publishing local sustainability reports (Hållbarhetsrapporter) since 2015.[11]

> **Helsingborg's H22 international fair and the city's SDG-driven external outlook**
>
> Within Helsingborg's all-encompassing Quality of Life Programme policy framework, the city will be hosting H22, an international policy fair which for 35 days will put Helsingborg in the spotlight of policy research, social initiatives and grassroots action for smarter and more sustainable cities. The H22 event will revolve around three key themes: welfare and urban development; quality of life; and reinventing city governance. The city is funding and promoting more than 30 projects on the fair's main themes, and several institutions, organisations, private sector entities and other stakeholders are transforming into 'test beds' and living laboratories to begin implementing the strategy's core ideas. The commonalities between the programme's vision, the scope of the H22 events, and the principles heralded by the 2030 Agenda made the SDGs and their localisation essential to fulfil the programme's ambitions and, more generally, Helsingborg's growth into a fully sustainable city.

Uppsala and Stockholm, finally, are both city administrations with a significant track-record in internal monitoring on sustainability performance. As explained by Uppsala's officials, this implied that once the cities engaged with the VLR process, 'indicators and concepts' normally used in local reporting were fully 'compatible' with the requirements or the methods of reviewing the implementation of the SDGs at the local level.

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10 Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, 7.
11 The reports are available online: https://malmo.se/Redovisningar/Hallbarhetsrapport/Tidigare-ars-hallbarhetsrapporter.html.

RESEARCH REPORT | REPORTING ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN SWEDEN:
| VLRS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL DEMOCRACY

NO 17

Stockholm by
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Whereas strategies and sustainability reports set a city's political vision and public narrative on crucial concepts such as resilience, equality and justice, the VLR has provided a technical tool to prove that initiatives have been taken, that change has been spurred, and that cities are finally growing – as they promised – into their future selves. They are owning this progress, and the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs are there to empower and enable them.

City to city learning and breaking down silos

Cooperation and dialogue among Swedish cities was an important part of the VLR process. When interviewed, city officials from Malmö, for instance, showed an interest in horizontal cooperation frameworks that may increase the connection between communities and stakeholders, which this time around felt constrained by the tight schedule of the VLR process. The experts in charge of Uppsala's VLR, moreover, hoped that the new enabling environment – the frequent meetings, the ability to share on specific policy issues, and opening to the input of stakeholders and citizens – facilitated by the VLR experience could outlast the reviewing process and stay as a venue for more knowledge and institutional 'growth' and a replicable good practice for committed local governments everywhere.

VLRs and the Nordic exchange

The VNR that Finland presented at the 2020 HLPF stood out for the interlinkages between the national and local levels. Besides Helsinki, several Finnish cities had been encouraged to undertake their own local review. By the time the VNR was presented at the Forum, the VLRs of Espoo and Turku – the second and sixth largest municipalities of the country, respectively – had been published. The VNR featured insight boxes on each Finnish VLR, and Finland's local authorities had been extensively involved to report relevant good practices, local data and first-hand information on the policy processes that were driving localisation at the local level. At least three more cities (Tampere, Vantaa and Oulu) are scheduled to publish their own local reviews in the coming months. The national local government association has been involved in various stages of the process that led to the VNR and has been providing counsel to the VLR cities. Its diffused localised impact is a testament to how effective multi-level cooperation has been in mobilising the local government community in the country, setting a valuable example for other territories to follow.

RESEARCH REPORT | REPORTING ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN SWEDEN:
VLRS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL DEMOCRACY

NO 17

Uppsala by
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Learning by exploring: the stories that inspired the Swedish VLRs

Representatives from various countries, including Sweden, were particularly impressed by the effectiveness of the Finnish example as it was presented at the HLPF. The relationship between the Ministries for Foreign Affairs (MFAs) helped to establish first contact. Representatives from both countries agreed to arrange a field study to the Finnish municipalities that had been involved in the reporting process. Some cities found it useful to know how the actual VLR drafting process had been carried out in Finnish cities: Uppsala, for instance, was inspired by the way – less conventional, more interactive – in which **Helsinki has reinterpreted access to and the dissemination of its second VLR into a web-based, reader-friendly form.** The Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on the other hand, saw how innovative the multi-level approach of the Finnish government to shared co-ownership with the local level had been, and how it had impacted local participation and commitment to a joint, cross-level SDG agenda. The VNR granted Finnish municipalities an opportunity to have their own local reporting efforts highlighted as a crucial contribution to a transparent account of how SDGs are faring in the country. This process was seen as an inclusive opening in a mechanism that had traditionally remained quite watertight to local contributions – in Nordic countries as elsewhere.

Global Utmaning (Global Challenge),[12] a Swedish non-profit with long-standing expertise on sustainability, international cooperation and an extensive agenda on issues of climate change, inclusiveness and equality, contributed to the field trip with two knowledge-exchange and peer-learning workshops. These involved representatives from both ministries and national governments and the Swedish and Finnish VLR cities. Global Utmaning issued a short summary of the proceedings of the two sessions, which provides several interesting points on the 'lessons learned' by the participants as they openly debated the method and process that led the VNR-VLR linkage in both countries.[13]

Finally, Swedish institutions were particularly inspired by Finland's intention to integrate VNRs and VLRs in terms of process as well as of contents. Finnish municipalities, for instance, have been recommended to continue collecting relevant data and indicators as well as good practices of grassroots implementation as frequently as possible and at least yearly – even if perhaps at a smaller scale and with lower technical

12 More information is available online: https://www.globalutmaning.se/ (in Swedish).
13 The blog post is available online, in English: https://www.globalutmaning.se/global-utmanings-virtual-study-trip-to-finland/.

complexity. The national government would then use these frequent periodic assessments of local initiatives and results to feed a less frequent, more comprehensive national review every few years. This mutually constructive approach to the relationship between VNR and VLR processes has been adopted or considered in other national contexts – e.g., the Basque Country or the Belgian city of Ghent – and is also part of the current debate about the streamlining of the local-national link when reporting on and improving the SDG localisation process.

A link of trust: transnational dialogue in northern Europe

Many interviewees in the preparation of this report underscored the role that the Nordic Council played in supporting inter-institutional cooperation on the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda among Nordic governments and local authorities. The Nordic Council – a political inter-parliamentary institution among northern European countries established in 1953 – has long acknowledged sustainable development as one of its key strategic areas.[14] As recently as late May 2021, moreover, the Nordic Council sponsored a workshop on VNRs and VLRs and the national-local link in SDG localisation, jointly organised by Finland's Ministry of the Environment and the Prime Minister's Office. The workshop involved national government representatives from several Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Norway – as well as city officials from Finnish, Norwegian and Swedish municipalities that had already approached the VLR as a policy innovation and reporting tool: Uppsala was among the cities that presented its case study.

In 2019, moreover, the Nordic Council published a declaration on 'Our Vision 2030' and has recently approved an Action Plan to help the Nordic countries put the 'Vision' and its commitments into practice.[15] The Plan highlights the relevance of policy follow-up, improved integrated governance and monitoring, in pursuit of its 12 key objectives – including carbon-neutrality research and development, biodiversity, sustainable use of the Nordic region's nature and seas, sustainable and competitive production, international climate and environmental cooperation – all the while preserving the Nordic region's 'community with an emphasis on culture, democracy, equality, inclusion, non-discrimination, and freedom of expression'.[16] In its 2019 VNR, Iceland described its commitment to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda as built on 'its strong tradition towards democracy, human rights, gender equality and sustainable use of natural resources'.[17] In its 2021 VNR, Denmark vowed for more strategic policy innovation guided by its 'strong tradition of developing long-term sustainable solutions'.[18] Finland's plan to implement the 2030 Agenda will build, according to its 2020 VNR, on 'Finland's long-term tradition to involve and engage societal actors in the implementation of sustainable development'.[19] Nordic cooperation, and the institutions that enable it, tries to respond to these countries' shared commitment to a sustainable future, which at its core embodies the simple principle of people's happiness in a sustainable relationship with their environment. Ultimately, Sweden's and the other Nordic countries' ability to acknowledge their cultural commonalities and establish a dialogue to effectively convert them into a sustainable policy vision is a very relevant good practice that, hopefully, can be easily replicated in different contexts – especially whenever proximity is not simply geographic, but really encompasses a society's worldview and expectations.

14 The Nordic Council was convened in 1952 and officially inaugurated in February 1953. Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden are founding members. Finland joined in 1955. Two self-governing regions, Åland (Finland) and the Faroes (Denmark) were granted representation in 1970. Another Danish self-governing region, Greenland, was granted representation in 1984. Since the Helsinki Treaty of 1971, the Nordic Council of Ministers was established to provide a platform for intergovernmental cooperation among the members of the organisation. Not unlike the Council of the European Union, the Nordic Council of Ministers can convene the specialised ministers of each member's national government on specific matters (including sustainable growth and environment). Ordinary administration of the Nordic Council of Ministers is run by the Ministers for Nordic Cooperation, a post which each member of the Nordic Council is expected to appoint and that is often associated with the tasks of the ministries for foreign affairs. The Nordic Council's website provides a wealth of information on the organisation's work and agenda: https://www.norden.org/en.
15 Nordic Council of Ministers, 2021. 'The Nordic Region – towards Being the Most Sustainable and Integrated Region in the World. Action Plan for 2021 to 2024'. Copenhagen: Nordic Council.
16 Nordic Council of Ministers, 19.
17 Government of Iceland, 2019. 'Iceland's Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Voluntary National Review'. Reykjavik: Prime Minister's Office, 111.
18 Government of Denmark, 2021. 'Voluntary National Review 2021. Denmark'. Copenhagen: Ministry of Finance of the Kingdom of Denmark, 78.
19 Government of Finland, 2020. 'Report on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'. Helsinki: Publications of the Prime Minister's Office, 52.

The contents of Swedish VLRs: an analysis

This section is expected to provide more technical information about the contents of the four VLRs. The main variables of this analysis are loosely based on those used in the latest volume of the VLR Guidelines issued by UN-Habitat and UCLG. Accordingly, the outcomes of this analysis could be more easily compared to the baseline references and experiences addressed in the Guidelines, helping locate the Swedish approach in the larger map of the current forms of local SDG localisation reporting worldwide.

Structure, contents and relevant trends in local reporting

When approaching the 'VLR movement' or the strategic decision to draft a local review, especially from the vantage point of a local authority, it is essential to clarify that – unlike with Voluntary National Reviews – there is currently no official or formally recommended template or blueprint for VLRs. No institutions, in other words, centralise the local reviewing process and there is no formal toolkit for those local governments willing to review their performance in SDG localisation and sustainable development more generally.
As they lacked a framework of reference or an official blueprint, most early VLRs were extremely diverse in structure and contents. There were a few common trends. The VLRs of New York City, Kitakyushu, Toyama and Shimokawa in Japan, published in 2018, made a breakthrough at that year's HLPF and contributed dramatically to the popularity and visibility of the VLR as a policy innovation tool. Accordingly, they also had an impact as a replicable, effective method to approach the local review. Their structure loosely followed the UN guidelines for national governments. Picked up by several later VLRs – e.g., Helsinki, Buenos Aires – this model was also a statement by local governments that they could take on the same reviewing standards as national governments, and complement these with local information, data and examples the information that countries around the world were providing with their VNRs.

The lack of official templates and models has also prompted several international institutions to provide guidance to local governments that are willing to contribute to local monitoring of SDG implementation. UCLG and UN-Habitat presented Volume 1 of their 'Guidelines for VLRs' at the 2020 HLPF: the document reviewed structure and contents of existing VLRs (about 40 reviews at the time the publication was edited), highlighting best practices and replicable examples in methods and process.[20] Volume 2 of the series was presented at the 2021 HLPF with a more thematic focus on the relationship between local and national reviews, and on how relevant fruitful and constructive collaboration across various levels of governance can be for VLRs to become a catalyst of policy innovation and systemic change.[21] UN-Habitat manages, today, one of the most valuable knowledge hubs about VLRs,[22] with state-of-the-art data and information on local reviews around the world. UCLG's Global Observatory on Local Democracy and Democratisation (GOLD) hosts an up-to-date collection of all published VLRs available online.[23] UCLG, moreover, has also supported several national local government associations in the drafting and publication of their Voluntary Subnational Reviews (VSRs). Through the VSRs, a significant number of local governments have been able to provide information, data, insight and good practices to their national associations, which in turn – with the support of UCLG – have managed to create subnational reports that go beyond the individual experience of single municipalities or regions, but also provide a truly territorial, collective and shared perspective on what localisation has meant in certain contexts. The experience of the VSRs has been empowering for local governments, especially in those contexts in which – be it for the lack of the resources required by the effort of a stand-alone VLR or the competences that they are constitutionally granted – they have had fewer incentives to monitor, report and share their experiences with the SDGs. Since 2020, UCLG has supported 15 VSRs from 14 countries around the world.[24] Two Nordic countries – Sweden

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20 UCLG and UN-Habitat, 'Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews. Vol. 1: A Comparative Analysis of Existing VLRs'.
21 UN-Habitat and UCLG, 'Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews. Vol. 2: Exploring the Local-National Link'.
22 UN-Habitat's VLR portal is online at this link: https://unhabitat.org/topics/voluntary-local-reviews.
23 The repository is accessible online: https://gold.uclg.org/report/localizing-sdgs-boost-monitoring-reporting#field-sub-report-tab-3.
24 UCLG has published nine VSRs in 2021 (Cape Verde, Ecuador, Germany, Indonesia, Mexico, Norway, Sweden, Tunisia, and Zimbabwe) and six in 2020 (Benin, Costa Rica, Ecua-

and Norway – have already published one.

In the past few years, several agencies and bodies in the UN system have helped and advised local governments that are willing to undertake the VLR process. UNDESA has increasingly acknowledged the centrality of local reviews and has issued a short guidance document – similar to earlier VNR recommendations – to provide basic support to the diverse array of local governments that approach this tool.[25] Many UN regional commissions too have mobilised to give support to local governments in their regions: the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) published, in 2020, their Asia-Pacific Regional Guidelines on VLRs, and the UN Economic Commission for Africa is currently working on their own regional guidelines too.[26] The Institute for Global Environmental Strategies IGES, which actively supported the development of the four Japanese VLRs,

also developed its Online Voluntary Local Review (VLR) Lab and turned it into a knowledge hub: the lab collects VLRs and sustainability reports (especially from the Asia-Pacific region) as they are published and issues guidance documents,[27] research papers and an annual 'State of VLRs' report.

To date, the ultimate feature of the VLR has been its diversity. Several VLRs go as far as to provide extensive statistical annexes in support of their data analysis. Many VLRs do not use indicators at all. VLRs often reported only on the SDGs that were being explored at a given year's HLPF, while others managed to review policy and implementation of all 17 SDGs.

The fact that four of the five VLRs published by Swedish local governments have been designed and drafted within a joint process, tightly linked to the national review, means that there is limited variation among them.

Table 2. Swedish municipalities that have issued or are in the process of publishing a VLR

Local government	Population[a]	Publication year	Pages	Indicators	Statistical annex	Metadata[b]	# SDGs covered
Gothenburg	583,056	2019	37	Y	N	Y	1[c]
Helsingborg	149,280	2021	80	Y	N	Y	17
Malmö	347,949	2021	76	N	N	–	9
Stockholm	975,551	2021	65	Y	N	Y	17
Uppsala	233,839	2021	96	Y	N	Y	12

Notes: (a) Source: Kolada.se; (b) stating at least the source of the data used for a given indicator is considered as metadata; (c) Gothenburg's VLR focuses specifically on the implementation of SDG 11, even though information, data and references to other SDGs are used throughout the report.

dor, Kenya, Mozambique, and Nepal). They are all accessible on the website of UCLG's research and intelligence unit, the GOLD Observatory: https://gold.uclg.org/report/localizing-sdgs-boost-monitoring-reporting.
25 UNDESA, 2020. 'Global Guiding Elements for Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) of SDG Implementation'. New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.
26 The research team in charge of the Guidelines presented the latest updates on the process at the African Regional Forum on Sustainable Development in February 2021: https://is.gd/GsEeN5.
27 The experience of the village of Shimokawa, in northern Hokkaido, has been especially outstanding in terms of awareness-raising, social mobilisation and local–global partnership-building. With 3,000 residents, the village is a small but relevant wood-processing hub, located within a large, mostly uninhabited woodland extending for over 640 square kilometres. The locality had to cope with geographical dispersion, depopulation, ageing and post-industrial re-development. The community embraced these challenges through policy alignment with the SDGs and stood out as a successful good practice for smaller towns, with limited population, competences and resources, around the world. IGES curated a guidance document on the 'Shimokawa method', hoping to support and lead other towns willing to approach the SDGs as a policy innovation tool: IGES, 'The Shimokawa Method for Voluntary Local Review (VLR)'.

On the one hand, these similarities and the overall consistency among these documents would support the hypothesis of the cooperative national-local link of VNR-VLRs to SDG implementation and review. However, as one scrapes the surface, more differences emerge among the four 2021 VLRs. There are aspects about the engagement of civil society and other stakeholders, the VLRs' impact on the very functioning of the municipal administration that worked on them, and the use of data and indicators that reveal interesting details about how diverse the approach of the four Swedish municipalities has been.

The Swedish VLR process and local participation: a push for local democracy?

The principle of 'leaving no one behind' – the idea of an overarching set of commitments thought to help the most marginalised, the least represented, and the most vulnerable to climate change, inequality, intolerance and any other major challenges of the 21st century – has been perhaps one of the most representative of the long-term vision embodied by the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

Inspiring examples

In Hawai'i – where the Hawai'i Green Growth Local2030 Hub, a coalition of 'public, private and civil society partners',[28] led the work on a VLR in 2020 – local government has built an extensive alliance with civil society and a complex network of sustainability and environmental conservation stakeholders since the 1970s. A strong cultural element, a diffused mindset 'overwhelmingly committed to nature, sustainability and the preservation of Hawaiian society', something that the VLR itself defines as a 'spiritual bond — the very concept of aloha that the review summons',[29] have been essential to make localisation a policy priority, considering how compatible the 2030 Agenda is with the sustainability and strategy tradition of the islands. Local participation has been crucial in several other cases.

The German city of Mannheim, for instance, engaged residents and local associations in the definition of the strategic SDG implementation plan: policy-makers met routinely with groups of citizens, representatives from districts and neighbourhoods, and other local

Canterbury   Manheim

Hawaii

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28 Hawai'i Green Growth Local2030 Hub, 2020. 'Aloha+ Challenge 2020 Benchmark Report. Hawai'i's Voluntary Local Review of Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals'. Hawai'i Green Growth, 6.
29 UN-Habitat and UCLG, 'Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews. Vol. 2: Exploring the Local-National Link', 42.

stakeholders. The process was ultimately validated by putting the final VLR draft to vote in the City Council.

The VLR of Canterbury, in the United Kingdom, is an especially sui generis document, since it was drafted by an alliance of local stakeholders, grassroots organisations and civil society associations, working together as the city's 'SDG Forum': far from being a showcase of successful policies and good practices, Canterbury's review uses the SDGs to plan a collaborative map of the actions to be undertaken and a collective strategy for the future of the town. The VLR became, in the end, a leverage tool for civil society to establish dialogue with the local government on the alignment of local policy with the 2030 Agenda and, more generally, a demand for a more sustainable, resilient and inclusive community.

The latest volume of the 'Guidelines for VLRs' published by UN-Habitat and UCLG devotes specific attention to similar valuable examples. The Guidelines engaged the local governments that had been more vocal about bottom-up empowerment in insightful conversations. The inclusive value of VLRs and their ability to improve participation and challenge the long-standing narrative of VLRs being essentially bureaucratic or technical exercises was one of the most intriguing takeaways of that analysis.[30]

Society, participation and the Swedish approach to VLRs

In the case of the Swedish VLRs, the issue of social participation and bottom-up engagement has added an element of complexity to the big picture. The schedule for the drafting and publication of the VLRs was so tight that – even when aware of the relevance that direct validation and engagement of the public could have had for its contents – city officials did not prioritise the opportunity to establish a dialogue with local stakeholders and the diverse communities of their urban environment. But there also was a common strategic understanding of the VLR as more of a technical document if com-

pared, for instance, to the sustainability reports and action plans that several local administrations have issued for years, and that already count on a significant contribution from civil society, residents and the communities that are holding local government accountable on these goals.

Stockholm was more explicit in defining the VLR as a tool for internal development, breaking down silos and streamlining the public administration's approach to the SDGs: namely, shared priorities, cooperative work, easier communication among departments. In this sense, the VLR, especially when working as a 'checklist' or a tool to monitor performance and accomplishment, was a harder sell for the general public. Helsingborg's officials acknowledged how relevant the 2030 Agenda, the SDGs, plus the very inclusive and egalitarian approach that these invoke have all been for Swedish citizens and urban communities across the countries.

Despite the constraints that Swedish municipalities have encountered, the impact that the VLRs have had on the way that sustainable development policy is made – in Sweden as elsewhere – is undeniable. As powerfully evoked by Uppsala's city officials, the VLRs can be a concrete example of the 'leaving no one behind' principle in action: **VLRs should not 'seek social legitimacy just for the sake of it', but they should provide information and data so that they are representative of the needs, initiatives and demands of those who are the least protected and supported and those whose voice is not commonly heard.** In the city's quest for the most comprehensive possible look at its complex reality, the representative from Helsingborg stated that it is 'unlikely that Helsingborg goes through a VLR process again' without consulting its communities extensively. The representatives from SALAR were unequivocal on this matter: VLRs are 'having an impact', creating new methods, new opportunities for cooperation; they are feeding fresh information from the local to the national level. They are finally 'raising awareness on the centrality of the local level'

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30 UN-Habitat and UCLG, 40–44.

in policy-making and strategising. The remainder of this section explores how these VLRs were made, and what conditions made them a very valuable tool to (re-)define cross-level relationships and create a unique Swedish approach to local SDG reviews.

Means of implementation

The Swedish VLRs make hardly any mention of means of implementation. This is not surprising. The very concept of means of implementation in SDG monitoring and review has been, to a certain extent, controversial since the outset of the 2030 Agenda. It is identified as a key issue in the guidelines that the UN has developed for national governments as outlines of their national reviews and, as such, it has sometimes 'trickled down' into the structure and contents of those VLRs that followed those blueprints more closely.

Means of implementation were more generally defined as a review of 'what difficulties [the reviewing process] faces, and what additional resources are needed to implement the 2030 Agenda, including in terms of financing, capacity development needs, including for data and statistics knowledge-sharing, technology and partnerships'.[31]

Means of implementation, in other words, hint at a kind of analysis of internal structures and mechanisms that is somehow specific to the functioning of national governments: what resources are needed for a full-scale adaptation of policy to a global framework like the SDGs – and where to find these resources as part of an overall re-thinking of budget, responsibilities, task distribution and accountability. This sort of analysis is not necessarily available to or straightforward for all national contexts. Consequently, 'means of implementation' has proven to be one of the most challenging issues for national governments to address in their VNRs.

The current situation has only worsened national and local governments' ability to identify the resources, financial capacity and governance mechanisms required to fulfil the 2030 Agenda. Before the COVID-19 outbreak UN-Habitat[32] already quantified the necessary financial effort required to successfully approach the SDGs' implementation at an 'estimated USD 5.6 trillion investment';[33] given that, the economic and social costs of the global pandemic have massively aggravated the capability of all levels of government to allocate funds for the SDGs, and even more, their willingness to fund localisation and the initiatives that local government sets out in the framework of the 2030 Agenda.

It is therefore challenging for a local government to address issues related to means of implementation in a way which is accountable and fully responsible, considering how the gap in SDG-related investment and the lack of funding for local initiatives and agendas is hindering the implementation process. It is not surprising that less than 12 percent of the VLRs that were consulted and analysed in UN-Habitat and UCLG's VLR Guidelines even mention the issue.[34] The Guidelines highlight, accordingly, good practices such as the coordination work among territorial authorities in Brazil to consolidate specific multi-level, multi-stakeholder platforms to address this issue. Similarly highlighted is the dialogue that international organisations, city and territorial networks, and national local governments associations are trying to foster as a vehicle for more awareness about the resources, investment and financial commitment that localisation is requiring now that the Decade of Action has begun and the 2030 deadline approaches.[35]

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31 United Nations General Assembly, 2016. 'Critical Milestones towards Coherent, Efficient and Inclusive Follow-up and Review at the Global Level. Report of the Secretary-General'. New York: United Nations General Assembly, 27.
32 UN-Habitat, 2020. 'The Sustainable Investment Gap and How to Close It. Cities, Infrastructure and SDG Investment Gap', eds M. Kamiya and H. Berggren, Discussion Paper. Nairobi: UN-Habitat.
33 Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments and UCLG, 2021. 'Towards the Localization of the SDGs. Sustainable and Resilient Recovery Driven by Cities and Territories'. Barcelona: United Cities and Local Governments, 116.
34 UN-Habitat and UCLG, 'Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews. Vol. 2: Exploring the Local-National Link', 45.
35 For the case of Brazil, see also São Paulo City Hall, 'Report of Localization of Sustainable Development Goals in São Paulo'. São Paulo: Cidade de São Paulo. For more details on the VLR approach to the issue of means of implementation, see Section 3.4 of UN-Habitat and UCLG, 'Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews. Vol. 2: Exploring the Local-National Link'.

Breaking down silos to implement the agenda

In the case of Sweden's VLR environment, one of the most significant and durable impacts of the localisation process was perhaps the way it kindled more and more mechanisms of horizontal cooperation within local governments and their relevant institutions and bodies. This has engendered conscious and systematic processes of breaking down silos across departments or specialised offices and desks that are conventionally separated by technical or organisational barriers. This internal distance can often, in the long term, hinder or compromise dialogue and policy efficiency, making it harder for local stakeholders to embrace all relevant dimensions of socio-economic and environmental development in a local community and its territory.

While the process of drafting a VLR – which is generally tasked to a single team or department – may not in itself be a catalyst for breaking down administrative silos, the review can still help a local administration to identify potential bottlenecks as more data, more information, and more details about good practices and effective policy choices are required from all over the institution. At the same time, as representatives from Malmö highlighted in an interview, the whole framework of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs has served as a new shared toolkit, a cross-cutting resource that now all departments and personnel must take into consideration before even making a policy choice. The SDGs have, to a certain extent, turned into a common standard which expects a holistic and all-encompassing approach to substantial, relevant policy issues that affect the many realities of a local community and the day-to-day management of a local government.

Thanks to the 2030 Agenda and its increasing localisation, it is easier today for an environmental department, for example, a legal desk, or an anti-discrimination office to act only after having taken into consideration a variety of dimensions – e.g., social, financial, gender, age, planning, territorial, infrastructural, just to name

a few – that would have normally been neglected or undervalued because of a significantly more fragmented policy-making process.

The officials from Helsingborg, in their interview, recounted that the publication of the VLR elicited a very quick response and reaction from a number of city hall departments – which felt that the information, the data and the 'big picture' that the VLR had portrayed were, in fact, about them too. In Helsingborg's context, certain 'budget silos' and the inevitable competition among areas for their part of a limited amount of resources still persist, but there are clear signs of increased cooperation and the emergence of 'networks' across public administration: as explained by the people in charge of the review, 'the community is everywhere' and city hall is big enough to make an impact but also small enough to work fast and address issues more flexibly.

There is still a significant untapped potential in this regard: the kind of awareness that the SDGs are promoting could be more pervasive across public administration, as several of them are increasingly welcoming coordination tools and strategies to improve local 'holistic' approaches to sustainable development and inclusive policy innovation. As the representatives of Uppsala explained, the kind of information required by the VLR and the tight schedule imposed to 'learn more about the resources available within city hall' was also an opportunity for a holistic approach. **Stockholm's officials too mentioned the 'increase in awareness among civil servants and city institutions' and the opportunity that the VLR had offered to 'educate' the local administration about the benefits and impact of successful policy alignment with the SDGs.** Even when the conditions were not ripe for the VLR to foster inclusion at a more grassroots or community-driven level, the information that its drafting required and the horizontal exchange of practices and knowledge that it supported still had a very valuable impact on how public administrations are understanding, aligning with, and contributing to the 2030 Agenda.

RESEARCH REPORT | REPORTING ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN SWEDEN:
VLRS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL DEMOCRACY

NO 17

Data and indicators

The SDGs, as a framework of 17 Goals containing 169 targets, were developed with a parallel process of definition of adequate indicators, metrics and metadata that could provide quantifiable, replicable and comparable information about progress towards achieving the Goals. One UN body, the Inter-Agency Expert Group on the SDGs (IAEG-SDGs), was assigned the task to deliver a set of viable and tendentially universal indicators that all national governments could use for their monitoring tasks and to establish a working 'real-time' assessment mechanism. There have been substantial issues with this mechanism. The group meets regularly to recommend amendments and improvements to the current set of indicators (which to date includes 231 unique indicators). However, even six years into the SDG era, data for 97 indicators are still not consistently collected or managed by national governments.[36]

Many metrics are inadequate for the local level, and many local governments have faced significant challenges to meet the indicators' requirements or find reliable disaggregated local data that could fit with the official SDG indicators.

As an outcome, many local governments have had to look for alternatives. Some have only addressed indicators for which they know local data exists that they are able to collect, manage and analyse. Others have been meticulous in adapting international indicators to local reality: they have changed the terminology, adapted the time-series brackets, updated the sources in order to make localised data part of the information that can be collected through the SDG indicators (examples such as Los Angeles, São Paulo, or Bristol belong to this group). Other local governments have invested significant resources in re-defining the indicators completely and come up with localised metrics that respond more immediately to the needs and information of their communities (e.g., Barcelona). In many cases, local governments with an established track record in sustainability monitoring and reporting have made the leap and updated their toolkits to the specifics of the 2030 Agenda. Finally, there has been a great contribution from those international networks and organisations, such as the **UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) initiative,[37] that have worked on specific indicator sets for local governments.** This work has established a sort of standard that has been attractive for many subnational governments, since it allowed them to collect, use and share localised data on a collaborative platform with diverse partners, without having to invest the technical resources required by either adapting to the IAEG-SDGs set or designing their own indicators from scratch.

The Guidelines for VLRs extensively address the issue of SDG indicators in monitoring and reporting. In 2020, **the European Commission's Joint Research Centre developed a 'European Handbook' with a proposal for a new standard of localised SDG indicators, available in particular for those local governments willing to start working on their VLRs.[38]** Their work was supported by a series of research papers that focused on the use of indicators in European VLRs,[39] regional indicators,[40] and the impact of multi-level governance on the development of reliable metrics.[41] Building on the concepts of this 'starting pack' of research, this section provides more details on indicators and data in Swedish VLRs.

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36 The IAEG-SDGs divides SDG indicators by tiers (Tier I, II, and III) according to their degree of methodological refinement and availability. As of December 2020, there are no more Tier III indicators, i.e., at least a standard methodology has been agreed for all the unique indicators included in the framework. Only 130 indicators, however, are classified as Tier I, i.e., with an established international methodology and standards, and for which at least 50 percent of relevant countries are able to produce regular data. More information is available online at this link: https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/indicators-list/.

37 SDSN has developed an SDG Index and Monitoring programme, which has a wealth of information and resources available (including various monitoring publications on various regions of the world) online on their portal: https://www.unsdsn.org/sdg-index-and-monitoring.

38 Siragusa, A. et al., 2020. 'European Handbook for SDG Voluntary Local Reviews'. Luxembourg.

39 Ciambra, A., 2021. 'European SDG Voluntary Local Reviews: A Comparative Analysis of Local Indicators and Data', eds A. Siragusa and P. Proietti. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

40 Gea Aranoa, A., 2021. 'Regional Indicators for the Sustainable Development Goals. An Analysis Based on the Cases of the Basque Country, Navarre and Flanders', eds A. Siragusa and P. Proietti. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, forthcoming.

41 Hidalgo Simón, A., 2021. 'SDG Localisation and Multi-Level Governance: Lessons from the Basque Country', eds A. Siragusa and P. Proietti. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, forthcoming, https://doi.org/10.2760/20519.

RESEARCH REPORT | REPORTING ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN SWEDEN:
VLRS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL DEMOCRACY

NO 17

A Swedish approach to indicators? Data and figures in Swedish VLRs

Table 3 and Figure 3 below show the distribution of indicators across the 17 SDGs in the VLRs of Swedish municipalities. Swedish VLRs include a total of 191 indicators throughout the four documents that do use metrics in their analysis.

The municipalities' approach to data and indicators was certainly made easier by the existing national infrastructure on local data management. The work of Sweden's national statistics office (Statistics Sweden, Statistiska centralbyrån, SCB) and the information that is constantly collected, updated and analysed in the Kolada system have served as an 'enabling environment' for the VLR municipalities.[42]

Table 3. Swedish VLRs and available indicators

Local government	No. of indicators	SDG 1	SDG 2	SDG 3	SDG 4	SDG 5	SDG 6	SDG 7	SDG 8	SDG 9	SDG 10	SDG 11	SDG 12	SDG 13	SDG 14	SDG 15	SDG 16	SDG 17
Total UN indicators	*248*	*13*	*14*	*28*	*12*	*14*	*11*	*6*	*16*	*12*	*14*	*14*	*13*	*9*	*10*	*14*	*24*	*24*
Gothenburg	65	2	2	5	4	4	4	3	3	3	4	19	3	4	0	1	4	0
Helsingborg	61	2	3	4	5	5	4	4	4	4	2	3	7	4	3	4	3	0
Malmö	21	2	2	3	0	0	0	0	3	0	1	0	3	4	0	0	3	0
Stockholm	17	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Uppsala	27	1	0	3	6	3	0	1	1	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	9	0
Total	**191**	**8**	**8**	**16**	**16**	**13**	**9**	**9**	**12**	**8**	**8**	**25**	**14**	**14**	**4**	**6**	**20**	**1**

Notes: (a) Gothenburg (2019) data are included in the analysis alongside the 2021 VLR municipalities considering the information it provides to the study of the Swedish approach to data and indicators; (b) each SDG in the Stockholm VLR features one selected indicator, more developed and with metadata, plus a simpler indicator, usually needed to illustrate an example, with less information and analysis (not included in this recount).
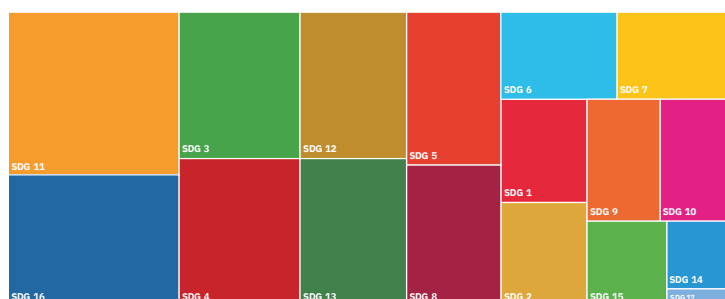

Figure 3. Distribution of indicators in Swedish VLRs per SDG
Source: Authors' own elaboration

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42 Kolada is a data and indicator database developed by the Council for the Promotion of Municipal Analysis (Rådet för framjände av kommunala analyser, RKA) – a non-profit organisation established in January 2006 by the Swedish government and SALAR. The RKA's purpose is to monitor activity and policy at the municipal and local level, offering data and policy support and training, as well as systematising this knowledge in indicator-based analyses in support of local governments' decision-making and strategic planning. Kolada has been the organisation's main mechanisms for storing, compiling and making available the data that local governments are producing. The portal is freely accessible online at this link: https://kolada.se/ and was recently adapted to organise municipal and regional data to reflect the 2030 Agenda and SDGs' targets and indicators. The Agenda and the SDGs are one of the key categories in which the database has organised its data. Kolada currently analyses 56 indicators that are proximate to specific 'official' indicators in the UN system, allowing for immediate comparison of performance on these metrics with data for 281 municipalities (i.e., 97 percent of all Swedish municipalities) and all of Sweden's 21 regions.

Gothenburg's document was conceptually designed as a review of performance on SDG 11 specifically: that is why almost one-third of all the indicators included in the review concern the urban sustainability Goal. Stockholm's VLR purposely includes one core indicator which the review chooses as a representative metric to approach each SDG's key issues – even though the analysis introduces several more minor indicators, with a lower degree of methodological precision and with no metadata, in support of specific examples or policy overviews.

With such a limited number of indicators and VLRs, it is hard to infer and generalise about trends or a data-driven tendency in Swedish municipalities' reviews. There are, however, a few figures that are worth exploring more in detail. **SDG 11 is still prominent in terms of data available in the VLRs, even though it would not stand out so much if it were not for the particular emphasis that Gothenburg's VLR puts on the urban SDG. Some of the more relevant SDGs in terms of indicators and data analysis in the VLRs are SDGs 3 and 4, on the right to education, and healthcare and wellbeing.** This pattern is consistent with a general trend, both worldwide and in European VLRs more specifically, according to which both SDGs refer to competences that are often devolved to the local level, or about which local governments can easily access relevant databases and reliable data often disaggregated by diverse variables – such as, social security lists, access to healthcare, pupils, and other registers throughout the educational system.

Data on SDG 16 are also often included in the VLR analysis: the Swedish reviews share a specific focus on the perception of safety and the community's bond of trust on the one hand, and political participation (e.g., voter turnout at local elections) on the other.

Figure 4, finally, compares indicator distribution for each SDG between Swedish VLRs, the other 15 local reviews issued by other European local governments from 2016 to early 2021 that adopted any kind of

indicator or data-driven metric,[43] and the original indicator distribution in the 'official' set of the UN. The comparison is interesting in that it shows an overall consistency between the focus of the five Swedish VLRs and the indicators and metrics that tend to be used the most in European local reviews. There are a few exceptions that stand out. The Swedish approach's focus on social ties and high quality of life are demonstrated by the relatively more frequent references to SDG 16 (+2 percent). **Likewise, the specific focus of Swedish reviews on issues of gender equality and inclusiveness (+2.4 percent indicators on SDG 5) is consistent with the work that local authorities and civil society institutions have been doing in the region for a long time.** Compared with the overall distribution in the UN set of indicators, the Swedish VLRs confirm a few trends in local governments' approach to existing SDG metrics: a) UN indicators are generally more evenly distributed across SDGs; b) local reviews tend to emphasise significantly the focus on 'more localised' SDGs (e.g., SDGs 11 and 12) and pay less attention to more 'nation-wide' or systemic metrics (e.g., SDGs 16 and 17).

Lessons learned on a replicable data approach

Even in a relatively more comfortable environment as Sweden, where comparable data on long time-series are systematically supported at the national and local level, using data and indicators in VLRs is not a given or an easy task for local governments.

More generally, there are a few conceptual issues that may affect the relationship between local governments and data, and the use that they can give to quantitative information in their policy-making and strategising. This was addressed, in her interview for this report, by the 2030 Agenda national coordinator for Sweden. It may be harder for local governments than it is for the national level to find a 'measurement' or a valid data on some of the Agenda's most relevant but also intangible principles: 'how do you measure leaving no one behind? Statistics, in other words, can become "political", a degree of responsibility and a tool for leverage

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43 For a thorough analysis of data sources, data management and indicator design in European VLRs, see A. Siragusa et al., 'European Handbook for SDG Voluntary Local Reviews'; A. Ciambra, 'European SDG Voluntary Local Reviews: A Comparative Analysis of Local Indicators and Data'.

Figure 4. Variation in indicator distribution per SDG between the official UN IAEG-SDGs indicator set (left column, dotted), other European VLRs (middle column, shaded), and Swedish VLRs (right column, solid)
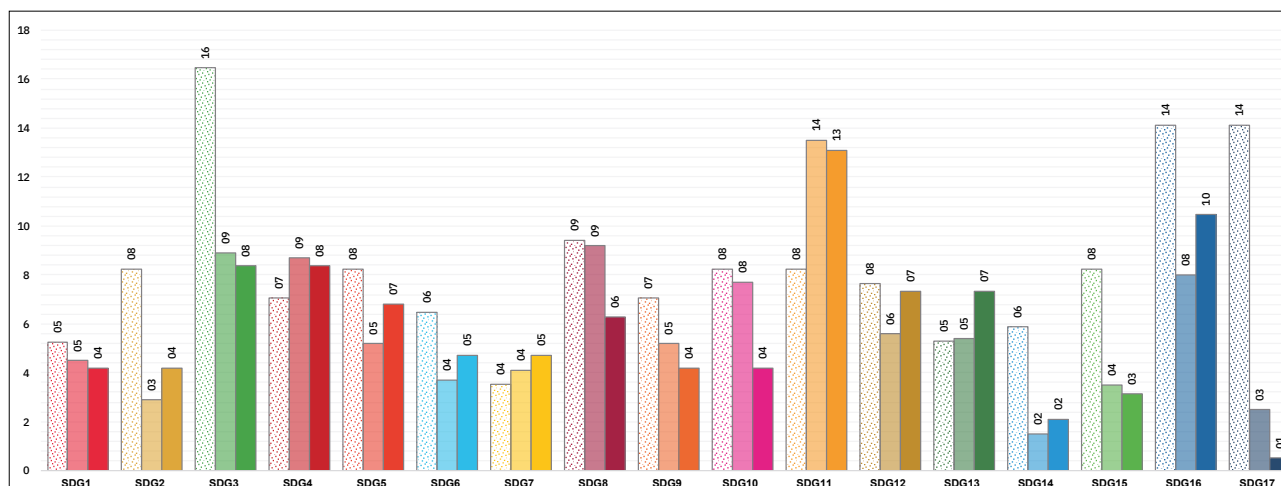

Source: for Sweden (N = 4), own elaboration, this group includes Gothenburg; for the rest of European VLRs (N = 15), data from Ciambra, A., 2021. 'European SDG Voluntary Local Reviews: A Comparative Analysis of Local Indicators and Data'. eds A. Siragusa and P. Proietti. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

with which not all local governments are comfortable or prepared to deal'.

Peer-to-peer learning, new venues for municipalities, statistics offices, technical departments at all levels of public administration are just some of the tools that can enable better horizontal communication and the exchange of successful practices. These forums for cooperation and dialogue should address all sorts of outstanding issues in the relationship between local reviewing and the use of data and indicators. Such issues range from the technical and detailed – for instance, what was unique in São Paulo's engagement dynamics? How many people did materially take part in Los Angeles' district meeting with residents to 're-think' the SDG indicators? – to the more political and conceptual. Some of these questions were asked by the officials in charge of the Swedish VLRs. Is it an added value for a smaller town to invest the resources needed for a brand-new set of indicators? How much can my town learn from previous local monitoring experiences with sustainability, culture, healthcare, integration and inequality? **How can I help my national statistics office to improve their analysis of local matters and policies?** These questions and many more ought to be the roadmap for a very inclusive conversation among local governments everywhere, the quest for an effective mix of local

technical knowledge, measurable achievements and the intangible input of committed social participation. In this regard, the Swedish approach is, to a certain extent, unique. The informal but effective mechanism established through the Kolada data environment and Statistics Sweden's work for the VNR process can have a resounding effect on local governments' use of data. Access to reliable indicators and measurements can guide policy-making and make it easier for local authorities to align their decisions with a vision that is both consistent with the 2030 Agenda and replicable elsewhere. One of the lessons learned surely is that an enabling environment for impactful reporting and implementation is not just one that merges VNRs and VLRs together, or one that empowers cooperation via ad hoc roundtables, committees or shared events. **It is also an environment that eases the burden on local governments, facilitates access to data, shares knowledge across all stakeholders, and creates the opportunities to turn this information into accountable, co-owned policy decisions that are validated and supported by committed communities and informed citizens.**

Insight from the ICLD impact countries
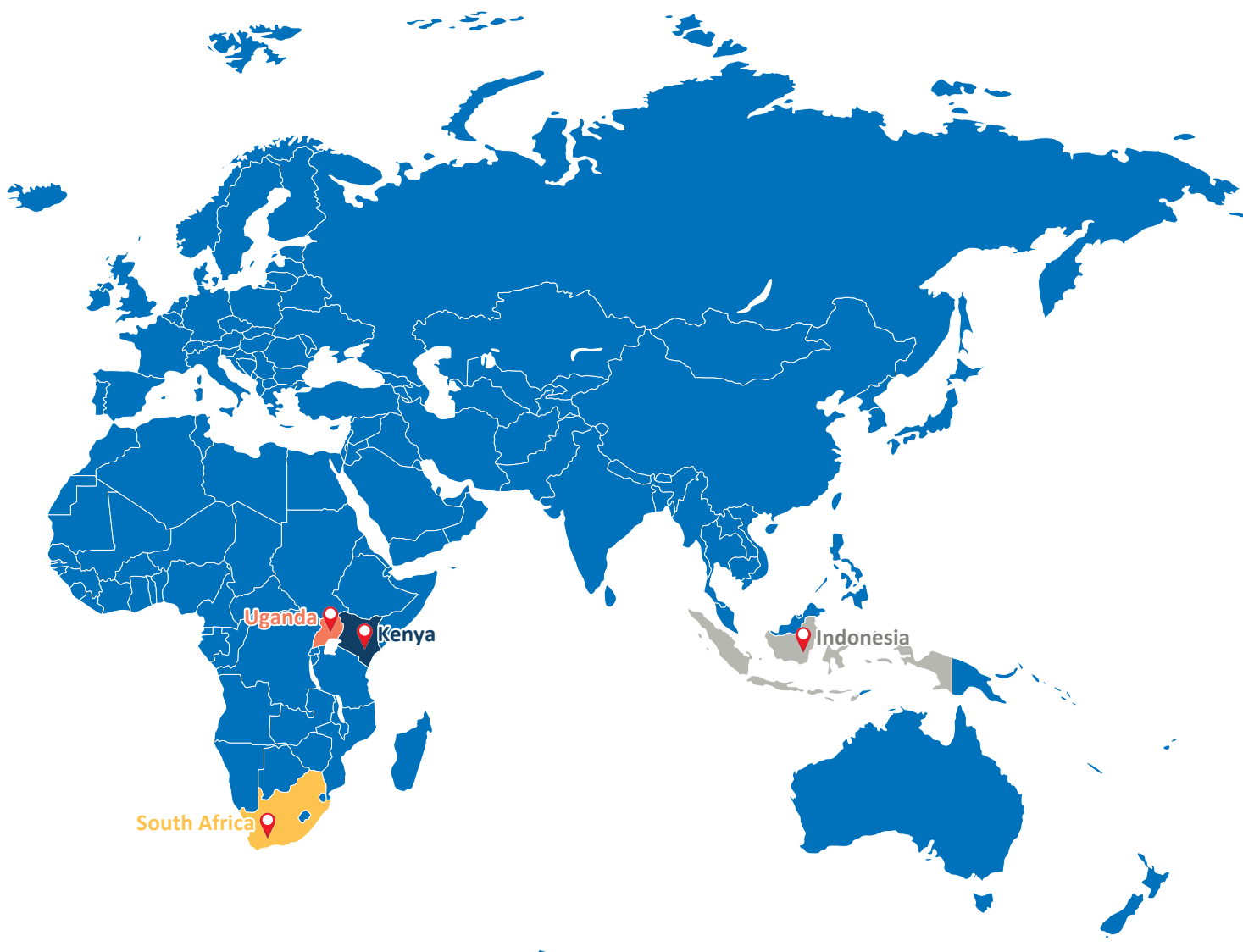
Peer-to-peer learning, knowledge exchange and international training could be an asset for ICLD's network. When it comes to SDG implementation monitoring and reviewing, the situation in the municipalities of the ICLD partner countries is not yet encouraging. Table 4 sums up the current distribution of VNRs that these countries have submitted to the UN HLPF, and how many VLRs subnational governments in this group have published. Only entities in just one-third of the ICLD partner countries have drafted a VLR to date. Even counting the prospective VLRs that are currently in progress and scheduled to be published in the coming months, the partner countries would account for just 15 VLRs. In theory, the VLR movement should be able to count on about 140 local reviews being published by the end of 2022.

Kenya

Certianly, countries in central and eastern Africa have been active in local reviewing of the SDGs. Earlier examples include the work that Kenya's Council of County Governors (CoG) carried out in collaboration with the national government: before submitting its 2020 VNR, the national government asked the CoG to develop local reviews at county level in support of the national review, so that the document could include insight, data and recommendations from the subnational level. Four counties participated in this effort, the first path-breaking examples of VLRs in the African continent.[44]

South Africa

A policy research team in Cape Town city hall, in collaboration with the University of Cape Town, Mistra Urban Future and the African Centre for Cities (ACC), published in 2019 a preparatory report on the city's progress with SDG localisation and the effectiveness of the multi-level mechanisms that the city had put into place – a co-creation cooperative effort not unlike the one that led to Gothenburg's localisation report in Sweden.[45] The work was meant to establish a pattern for a full-fledged VLR, which the city planned to publish in 2021.

Uganda

Even though they were not publicly available at the time of this report, at least two Ugandan provinces have stated to have been working on a VLR (the districts of Ngora and Kitagwenda). Uganda plans to have at least six more VLRs drafted and published over the next few months and years.

Indonesia

Finally, in 2021, the Indonesian city of Surabaya was the first one in the country to issue a VLR:[46] the document, which carries a wealth of information on city policy and recovery prospects in the face of the COVID-19 crisis, was developed in close collaboration with the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia-Pacific (UNESCAP) and the Asia-Pacific branch of UCLG, UCLG-ASPAC.

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44 Busia County Government, 2019. 'Busia County Voluntary Reporting on SDGs'. Busia; Kwale County Government, 2019. 'Kwale County Voluntary Reporting on SDGs. Continuing Kwale's Transformation Together'. Kwale; County Government of Marsabit, 2019. 'Marsabit County SDGs Voluntary County Reporting'. Marsabit; County Government of Taita Taveta, 2019. 'County Sustainable Development Goals Implementation Voluntary Report 2019'. Mwatate.
45 Croese, S., 2019. 'Localisation of the 2030 Agenda and Its Sustainable Development Goals in Cape Town'. Cape Town.
46 Government of Surabaya City, UN-ESCAP, and UCLG-ASPAC, 2021. 'Surabaya City's Voluntary Local Review 2021'. Surabaya: Government of Surabaya City.

Table 4. Current distribution of VNRs and VLRs in the partner countries involved in ICLD's cooperation initiatives (includes data on the ICLD Survey distributed for the realisation of this report)

		VNRs	VLRs	In-progress VLRs	Survey responses!	% of total responses
Botswana	Africa	2			1	1,2
Indonesia	Asia-Pacific	3	1		4	4,7
Kenya	Africa	2	4		13	15,3
Kosovo	Europe	–			0	0,0
Rwanda	Africa	1			0	0,0
Serbia	Europe	1			1	1,2
South Africa"	Africa	1	1	1	12	14,1
Tanzania	Africa	1			4	4,7
Uganda	Africa	2	2	6	8	9,4
Ukraine	Europe	1			0	0,0
Vietnam	Asia-Pacific	1			5	5,9
Zambia	Africa	1			8	9,4
Totals		**16**	**8**	**7**	**56**	**65,9**

Notes: (a) total survey responses, N = 85; (b) both South Africa's VLR figures refer to the city of Cape Town, one VLR-like preparatory report published in 2019, and a full-fledged VLR that city hall planned to publish in 2021.
Sources: for VNRs, UN-DESA Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform;[47] for VLRs, data courtesy of UCLG's Global Observatory on Local Democracy and Democratisation (GOLD).[48]

In many areas around the world SDG localisation has not been a political priority and has met technical and systemic obstacles that hinder its impact on local policy. Under certain conditions, national and territorial contexts are sometimes unable to foster an adequate 'enabling' environment for local governments to act and organise for alignment with the 2030 Agenda. Especially in these cases, it may be helpful to learn about how local authorities think of the SDG framework and how they approach the opportunity to innovate their policy-making, improve collaboration within public administration, and engage their residents and communities even more in the decisions they make and the strategies they plan.

This is the rationale of the survey that ICLD ran through its membership and network between September and December 2021. The survey aimed at approaching municipalities and subnational governments which, while aware of the 2030 Agenda and interested in localisation, have not yet commenced a monitoring and reviewing process within their administration. This kind of recipient was essential to identify key incentives, deterrents and the most common or recurring expectations and doubts of local governments that consider approaching this process and opportunity. A detailed methodology of the survey, which obtained responses from more than 80 subnational governments in four continents, is available in Section 1.1.

The survey asked about knowledge and awareness of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda, the main interest that local governments have in localisation, and the understanding that they have of the resources that a VLR requires, the key stakeholders that ought to be involved, and the main challenges that they anticipate.

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47 Available online at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/#VNRDatabase.
48 For more information, visit: https://gold.uclg.org/.

There are several takeaways that can be drawn from the responses that the questionnaire received. This section explores three of them in particular: incentives and deterrents about the VLR construction process; the challenges – e.g., resources, capacity, data – that subnational governments expect to meet; and local governments' needs when approaching localisation, and what help an integrated, cooperative VLR community or 'movement' could provide.

The concepts: what do local governments think of SDG reviewing, and who is it for?

A few of the questions posed to the local governments in the ICLD network aimed to explore how this constituency is 'perceiving' the VLR process. All the countries of the surveyed local governments had already published a VNR. In some of these countries, local authorities had been somewhat consulted during the national reviewing process, which translated into some degree of acquaintance with what is expected from a review, the type and amount of information that the process would require, and the overall distribution of tasks and responsibilities.

Figure 5. Distribution of answers (N=85) to the survey question, 'How relevant do you think monitoring and reviewing should be for the following institutions?'

	1 - Low	2	3	4	5 - High
National governments	0,0	1,2	4,7	29,4	64,7
International organisations	0,0	2,4	7,2	37,3	53,0
Local governments	0,0	0,0	7,1	29,8	63,1
Regional governments	0,0	3,7	13,4	35,4	47,6
Civil society	0,0	4,8	9,6	28,9	56,6
Academia and research institutions	0,0	1,2	13,4	41,5	43,9
Business and corporate organisations	0,0	4,8	22,9	37,3	34,9

Note: responses ranked from 1, 'not relevant at all' to 5, 'extremely relevant'.

In some of these countries, moreover, other subnational governments were already at some stage of their own VLR process – e.g., Kenya, Indonesia, South Africa, and of course Sweden – which implied a certain exposure to concepts, horizontal dialogue and incentives to replicate these experiences.

Most respondents to the survey were familiar with the 2030 Agenda and the SDG framework. Among the respondents, 85.9 percent defined their knowledge of the SDGs as average or above, and 31.8 percent affirmed to be 'fully familiar' with the framework.[49]

Besides being generally acquainted with the global goals, surveyed local authorities were also particularly confident in the commitment of their respective communities: 87 percent of respondents thought that their community of reference – be it a country, a subnational government, a district, or even a private business – would engage with localisation (and a meaningful 14.1 percent affirmed that it would 'commit naturally' to the scope of the SDGs). This kind of insight is helpful to test hypotheses about the 'starting conditions' of a typical VLR city or region: how important is public, bottom-up support for SDG alignment to make a VLR an appealing opportunity? In a context in which there exists evidence of local governments undertaking the VLR process almost independently from public participation and/or support, how common is the prospect of a purely 'administrative' review among those considering the possibility of a VLR?

These insights also have significant implications on the 'who?' questions about the agency of VLRs and SDG implementation: **what institutions should undertake a VLR? For what kind of stakeholder is reviewing performance, effective policy, and compliance with global targets important? What level of government? Public institutions? Private stakeholders?**

Both the sense of taking part in an all-encompassing effort and the widespread commitment to the 2030

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49 With a similar N of responses, Africa and Europe have a similar average (≈3.7 in a range from 0 to 5). Georgian local governments declare the highest familiarity with the SDGs (μ = 4.13) and Asian-Pacific local governments the lowest (μ = 3.44). Swedish municipalities self-assess at a higher average than Europe's (3.94).

Agenda among respondents implied that the perceived degree of relevance of the SDGs was quite high for all kinds of institutions and governance that responded to the survey. But some differences were noticeable too. SDGs are still generally perceived as a matter for government and the public sphere, across all levels. While such a survey clearly underscores the role of local governments,[50] the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs are still perceived as relating to the core of national policy and some respondents (64.7 percent) thought that national governments should be responsible, to some extent, for monitoring SDG implementation. There is an element of path-dependency too: national governments have submitted VNRs and local governments have drafted VLRs since 2016; they are inevitably perceived as the lead actors in this arena.

The exceptions, on the other hand, raise interesting concerns. **International organisations and global networks of subnational governments are perceived to be relatively[51] less concerned by issues of monitoring and performance review.** There are at least two reasonable explanations. First, international organisations may have fully embraced the 2030 Agenda and championed the implementation of the SDGs on a global scale, but there is hardly anything they can do to concretely achieve the goals through policy: they certainly have soft power as agenda-setters and advocates but cannot properly be 'in charge of' SDG-aligned policy. Second, an international organisation like the United Nations is effectively the origin of the 2030 Agenda framework: the global level has designed the concepts, the tools and the 'mission', but the implementation work is a task and responsibility of government. These elements, however, tend to underestimate the impact on reviewing from the systematisation of the SDG indicator sets by the UN's IAEG-SDGs, or the support that UN-Habitat and the UN's regional commissions have provided to several local governments in diverse contexts to create their own VLRs; or the path-breaking work that UCLG has performed in collaboration with national local governments associations from various continents to produce the 15 Voluntary Subnational Reviews (VSRs) available to date.

Regional governments too are perceived as somehow less involved in issues of monitoring of SDG implementation and policy performance: only about 47 percent of respondents consider reviewing to be of great importance for the regional level. However, the two very first reviewing documents that can be considered as local 'reviews' – published by the German federated state of North Rhein-Westphalia and the autonomous region of Valencia, in Spain, both in 2016 – were drafted by regional governments, and regional VLRs account for about 21.5 percent of total reviews published to date. Reviews are considered even less relevant for the private sector and business in general (more than a quarter of respondents considered them not relevant) and academia. Whether this is because these stakeholders are still perceived as being by and large not impactful in policy-making is an interesting matter for debate with local and national governments. Fitting them into the larger conversation on localisation could help to drive these actors' participation and commitment – at a time in which sustainable development studies are increasingly relying on SDG analysis and businesses of all sizes are embracing the SDG narrative as a new iteration of corporate social responsibility.

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50 63.1 percent of respondents believe that it is 'really important' that local government performs monitoring and reviewing of implementation at their level, but it must be considered that 82.3 percent of all respondents are affiliated to or work with local governments or associations.
51 53 percent of the respondents think that monitoring the SDGs should be relevant for international organisations: a score about 10 percent below that of national and local governments.

RESEARCH REPORT | REPORTING ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN SWEDEN:
VLRS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL DEMOCRACY

NO 17

The challenges: what is preventing some local governments from acting

For a local government that has not been adequately exposed to SDG implementation reviewing and the positive impacts that it can have – on streamlined administrative processes, social and community-driven inclusion and commitment, and improved cross-level dialogue – it can be difficult to plan for a VLR or even consider it as a viable and valuable opportunity. The recipients of the ICLD survey showed, however, a significant awareness of the SDGs and a familiarity with the reviewing process at various levels of governance. Respondents, in many cases, were based in countries where other subnational governments had already published implementation reporting of some kind. It was all the more interesting, therefore, to learn about what obstacles, challenges and difficulties these local governments were perceiving about the VLR and that, in some cases, may be preventing them from undertaking the review.

In the analysis above, this report showed that even for Swedish municipalities – which can rely on a thriving enabling environment and a significant empowerment of local policy-making – means of implementation and, more generally, the resources and capacity required for a VLR and the localisation of the SDGs can be a significant challenge and a deterrent to local initiatives. Most responses in the ICLD survey concur with this approach. **Asked about their main concern about carrying out a local review, most respondents point to the lack of adequate financial resources to dedicate to such effort.** More than 40 percent of surveyed individuals and institutions consider financial viability a very pressing challenge. On the other hand, administrative and technical capacity – i.e., the know-how and human resources necessary to compose and draft a publishable review – is generally seen as less relevant when approaching a local review: only 18.6 percent of respondents consider it very challenging.

Figure 6. Distribution of answers (N=85) to the survey question, 'If you as a local institution or organisation were to begin working on a VLR or a similar report on SDG localisation, how challenging do you think the following dimensions would be?'

	1 - Low	2	3	4	5 - High
Adequate financial resources	3,5	7,1	21,2	28,2	40,0
Adequate human and technical resources	4,7	11,8	31,8	32,9	18,8
Participation of citizens and social commitment to the process	11,8	11,8	36,5	23,5	16,5
Indicators and data collection	8,2	15,3	28,2	24,7	23,5
Dialogue and cooperation with other cities	9,4	17,6	30,6	23,5	18,8
Dialogue and cooperation with the national government	9,4	18,8	28,2	18,8	24,7

Note: responses ranked from 1, 'not challenging at all' to 5, 'significantly challenging'.

Data and indicators appear to be less 'worrying' for subnational governments (23.5 percent of respondents considered them not or just slightly challenging) than one would normally expect considering the technical challenges, the lack of competence, or sometimes the lack of available, localised and disaggregated information that some local authorities have had to face in certain contexts when designing their review. On the one hand, it is possible that some local governments still perceive issues of data collection and management as essentially national, relying on the competences and resources available to national statistics offices and centralised databases. Eight Swedish municipalities, for instance, among the respondents to the survey ranked data and indicators as slightly challenging. This is in a national context in which Statistics Sweden provides significant analysis of data disaggregated down to all regions and municipalities and the Kolada database makes this data even more comparable and aligned to the SDGs. On the other hand, some local authorities in more review-prone contexts may be more aware than others about the various tools, strategies and techniques that other local governments have successfully put in place to either design their own indicators or adapt 'official' SDG metrics to their local contexts. They may know, in other words, that some degree of 'data localisation' is possible and may be willing to learn from and replicate the experience and practices of others.

One of the most interesting insights of the perceived challenges of the reviewing process in the municipalities and institutions of the ICLD network, however, is the way that **mobilising public participation and the commitment of local communities is considered as an ordinary challenge, not among the most worrying.** It is understandable that local authorities that perceive that their own residents and communities would easily embrace the 2030 Agenda and its vision may be optimistic as regards their ability to engage with their citizens. However, as explored in Section 2, especially when working under time constraints and with limited resources, the experience of the four **Swedish municipalities and their 2021 VLRs has showed that social commitment and the participation of the public at large is often taken too much for granted.** Advertising the VLR as a tool for innovative policy and the public good is not necessarily straightforward, and there is widespread evidence of the VLR and the SDGs being perceived, in certain contexts, as still too distant or too technical. With the results of the survey in mind, in other words, a conversation between the subnational governments that are now approaching local reviews and those that have already experienced some of these issues may be an extremely helpful element of mutual learning and replicability.

More generally, many of the insights of the survey can be easily translated into questions that may shed even more light on some basic issues: how important is competence and resource distribution across levels to incentivise participation in the 2030 Agenda and the SDG frameworks? How relevant can a good, enabling synergy between the national and local levels be, for both levels to share the burden of data collection and management, breaking down administrative silos, and improved multi-level dialogue mechanisms? The answers to these questions, coming from diverse subnational governments embedded in a variety of national contexts, can provide great insight on what localisation means for local governments as the decisive Decade of Action begins and 2030 approaches even closer.

Needs: what local governments are looking for in cooperation and mutual learning

Some of the most relevant and studied examples of effective 'enabling environments' for the implementation of the SDGs and the empowerment of local authorities in their adaptation to the 2030 Agenda have in common a significant reliance on mutual learning. When able to learn from other subnational governments' experiences, municipalities and regions can replicate good practices and adapt techniques and ideas to their own local context. In the case of Sweden, for instance, as explored above, the long-standing tradition of horizontal cooperation among municipalities was an added value in the ability of the four VLR cities to coordinate for their reviews despite the rigid time constraints. Many of the representatives from all levels of government in Sweden, moreover, highlighted how important it was for them to learn about the VNR-VLR link in the Finnish context and about the dialogue mechanisms that national and local stakeholders had established. The Finnish national government, in turn, had 'tested' their latest VNR with feedback from the governments of Mozambique and Switzerland in the framework of international peer-learning activities. The Swedish government attended VNR workshops with representatives of Colombia and Spain. In order to know more about what local governments 'need' to engage with VLRs and the SDGs, the ICLD survey asked explicitly what local governments would be eager to learn from other institutions that have already undertaken a review process.

A need for wide-spectrum mutual learning opportunities is by and large corroborated by the replies that the survey received. Basically all dimensions for desirable collaboration with other local governments and institutions are outstandingly supported. There is specific demand for two of the more debated issues among the local governments and stakeholders that are approaching a VLR: the issue of the actual contents and structure that a VLR must have (88.2 percent consider this very or extremely interesting for mutual learning); and the issue of collecting and managing data to adequately measure implementation performance (91.7 percent).

RESEARCH REPORT | REPORTING ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN SWEDEN:
VLRS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL DEMOCRACY

NO 17

Figure 7. Distribution of answers (N=85) to the survey question, 'How interested would you be in learning about the following elements in other VLR examples and experiences?'

	1 - Low	2	3	4	5 - High
Structure and contents of a VLR	0,0	1,2	10,6	29,4	58,8
Processes and mechanisms of multi-stakeholder engagement	0,0	3,5	7,1	34,1	55,3
Coordination with national reviews and policies	0,0	1,2	11,8	40,0	47,1
Methods and techniques of data collection and indicator design	1,2	1,2	5,9	32,9	58,8
The VLR 'movement' and new platforms for global cooperation	0,0	0,0	17,6	30,6	51,8
Peer-learning activities with local authorities that have already published a VLR	1,2	2,4	12,9	25,9	57,6

Note: responses ranked from 1, 'not interested at all' to 5, 'extremely interested'.

This is consistent with how many subnational governments are seeking help and support, especially from international organisations, global networks of cities, and national local government associations so as to be provided with the basic concepts, tools and required skillsets to address what they perceive being fundamental issues before even undertaking a reviewing process.

The consensus on the need for more horizontal cooperation is even stronger if one looks at specific policy areas or platforms and enabling environments that local governments would love to see develop within the framework of the SDGs (Figure 8b). The success of the current international movement of VLR local governments, as designed and supported by UN-Habitat, UCLG, UNDESA, the European Commission, the OECD, and the several other key global players in sustainable development, shows how pressing these issues have become for local authorities that are willing to join and contribute. In fact, 93 percent and 95.3 percent of respondents consider global data and indicators databases and a healthy and inclusive global VLR network respectively as very important outcomes of the current global movement for more SDG localisation. The diffusion of UN-Habitat and UCLG's VLR Guidelines, the up-and-coming success of UCLG's Voluntary Subnational Reviews, or the reference work that global networks such as Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) or the Bertelsmann Foundation have carried out for the localisation of SDG indicators, metrics and data management in diverse contexts around the world are, in a way, a real-life materialisation of these expectations.

These figures are a testament to the importance of guidance materials – including this very report – that build on shared experiences, replicable practices, and peer-to-peer 'learning by doing'. Such materials are crucial for the inclusion of an ever-growing number of local governments in the VLR community, each one bringing to the table its own unique and complex experience with the implementation of the SDGs as a framework for sustainable, just and inclusive growth.

Figures 8a, 8b. Distribution of answers (N=85) to the survey questions, 'How interested would you be in learning about the following policy areas from the VLRs developed by other municipalities?' (8a, left graph), and 'How interested would you be in the following opportunities for cooperation' (8b, right graph).

	1 - Low	2	3	4	5 - High
Citizen engagement and co-creation	0,0	1,2	5,9	23,5	69,4
Equality	0,0	1,2	7,1	30,6	61,2
Local democracy	0,0	1,2	4,7	28,2	65,9
Transparency and accountability	0,0	1,2	5,9	27,1	65,9
Follow-up and process evaluation	0,0	1,2	3,5	25,9	69,4

	1 - Low	2	3	4	5 - High
A global database of local data and indicators	0,0	1,2	5,9	23,5	69,4
A platform for mutual peer learning with other local governments	0,0	1,2	7,1	30,6	61,2
A platform for improved collaboration with the national government	0,0	1,2	4,7	28,2	65,9
A platform for more direct collaboration with international institutions	0,0	1,2	5,9	27,1	65,9
A global community or network of VLR cities	0,0	1,2	3,5	25,9	69,4

Note: responses ranked from 1, 'not interested at all' to 5, 'extremely interested'.

Conclusions and lessons learned

The aim of this report is to draw some insightful conclusions from the process that, in 2021, led four Swedish municipalities to publish a Voluntary Local Review (VLR). This outcome has been particularly outstanding. The four municipalities – Helsingborg, Malmö, Stockholm, Uppsala – have managed to undertake a significant process of self-assessment of how local policy-making was working. They explored how the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs had affected (and streamlined) the way their administration worked. They also found new opportunities and new value in cooperating with a community of local governments and stakeholders (in Sweden and abroad), all the while working shoulder-to-shoulder with the national government in fulfilment of its strategic commitments to sustainable development.

Because of how insightful this process has been, there are several elements, good and poor practices, solvable setbacks, valuable innovations and inspiring experiences that can surely be used in other contexts.

These conclusions address three main elements that have been specifically relevant to the 'approach' developed by the municipalities studied: **the impact of the SDGs on the functioning of local governments and the way policy is made locally; the major role played by institutional cooperation at all levels; and the value of a pre-existing 'cultural' resonance with the concept of sustainability. However, there are some challenges that need to be considered including the use of VLRs as part of local democratic processes that allow for the participation and involvement of citizens in creating avenues for accountability.**

Holistic and administration without silos: the SDG way to local effectiveness

Conversations with the representatives in charge of the VLRs in Swedish municipalities and the findings of previous studies on local reporting provide some meaningful evidence of the fact that in several contexts the VLR is often (still) perceived as an administrative tool. On the one hand, this perception may

underestimate the actual impact that reviews can have on local policy-making and the lives of the people involved. On the other hand, **even a VLR conceived as an administrative tool can have many desirable consequences on a local government's approach to the 2030 Agenda.**

Many local governments report an **increase in effectiveness and interdepartmental dialogue** whenever, thanks to the transversal application of the SDGs as baseline and guidance for policy-making, local administrations are actually able to 'breaking down silos' in their operations, breaking down barriers and increasing the co-ownership of SDG-driven policy initiatives. Even more importantly, studying internal processes and functioning through the lenses of SDGs, many sectors of public administration suddenly began sharing a vision, an understanding of viable and sustainable future policy, and a common strategy: this is perhaps as close as a local government can get to the realisation of the 'holistic' and transversal approach that the 2030 Agenda is championing.

Bound to re-think themselves before the generational challenges of sustainable urban development, climate change, and social inequality and marginalisation, some local governments have used the SDGs to strategise in a different, comprehensive way. This has affected not just the way they work internally, but also the kind of alliances and strength they seek in their own communities. This process, however, is not necessarily straightforward. **When seen as an administrative tool, VLRs may struggle to generate interest and public commitment.** While **there are a few outstanding examples around the world in which VLRs have been the product of a multi-stakeholder stable alliance and inclusive process (e.g., Hawai'i, Los Angeles, Bristol, Mannheim, to name a few), grassroots engagement can be challenging even in a context such as Sweden's inclusive and diverse society.** A more 'technocratic' approach to VLRs has been apparent in several cases, and an explanation of this trend could be the object of further research.

- **Lesson learned:** even when considered as an internal, administrative decision, **the VLR can be a very powerful policy innovation tool.** With sustainable development as the key strategic guidance for local action, departments can coordinate more easily, and local plans can harmonise with the initiatives and results of other local governments elsewhere. The VLR can also become the natural evolution of a community's policy and reporting efforts on sustainability, environmental protection, and social equality and inclusiveness. However, it is important that **the VLR rests on the collaboration of the largest possible spectrum of stakeholders**: civil society, academia, the private sector. Their expertise is essential to complete the information that the VLR can provide, and **their contributions can mobilise society at large**: in many cases, **shared co-ownership** of the local review has been a game-changer, an incentive for mutual learning and diffused commitment to the 2030 Agenda.

Multi-level cooperation as a key enabling environment

Many city representatives underlined how important it was that Sweden enjoyed already a pre-existing 'enabling environment' made of constructive, long-standing relationships across different levels of government. Some of the elements of the Swedish example that could appear as outstanding to an external observer are in fact deeply embedded in the multi-level organisation of the country. It was only reasonable for the national government to seek information and data on valuable localisation practices when it undertook its own national reviewing process. Local governments had, in turn, a legitimate expectation that their own contribution could be part of the larger effort to make national policy more aligned and consistent with the SDGs.

In the Swedish case, there is also a significant tradition of horizontal cooperation among subnational governments. The municipalities that undertook the VLR process, as well as many others across the country, have an established track record of local cooperation and exchange of knowledge and data. Several institutional venues and mechanisms have been platforms for

enhanced dialogue. SALAR, the national local government association, has historically played a meaningful role as a broker of information and a catalyst of local participation, especially for smaller communities or less connected territories. Even beyond Sweden's national context, local governments in the country have a history of collaboration and peer-to-peer exchange with other countries, especially in the Nordic region. This has made the process of joining a global 'movement' such as the VLRs more natural and, to a certain extent, more co-owned.

- **Lesson learned:** the VLR can be a **powerful tool to improve localisation internally** and breaking down silos in decision-making. However, an external and systemic dialogue and reliable, **institutionalised mechanisms of collaboration and exchange can have an immensely positive impact** (be it a committee or a multi-stakeholder task force or, as it happened in certain national contexts, just a chat group on a phone). It is important that these spaces and platforms address both the **technical and non-technical aspects** of localisation and reviewing. It may be as important to share and learn how to draft a reliable VLR, as it is to engage a civil society organisation, a union, a school's staff, or a valuable but polluting local enterprise by simply explaining how their own actions and choices can **affect the wellbeing and resilience of their community** and territory.

Sustainability as an element of shared social culture

One of the most unique components of the 'Swedish approach' to VLRs and the SDGs, as often highlighted by city representatives themselves, is the understanding that sustainable development is inevitably intertwined with the decisions that are made at the local level. Sustainability in all its dimensions – social, environmental, economic and cultural – can only be achieved through commitment and political determination of the local level, its communities and its people.

Combined with a strong territorial awareness – the rational use of natural resources, an identity bond with

the geography and the richness of the country – the 'Swedish approach' has been ultimately based on the ability to look at policy, planning, the future of local communities, either urban or rural, through the lenses of local actions consistent with the 2030 Agenda.

It is thanks to localisation that local governments can plan the most resilient use of their territories and resources; how to re-think their urban and public space sustainably; how to re-define and re-imagine the identity of a whole city (e.g., Malmö and its genuinely co-owned process of post-industrial transformation); how to expand a city's policy horizons, while being loyal to the values that have defined local governance in the country (e.g., Helsingborg's H22 initiative and its new location in the map of sustainability-driven cities). The galleries of outstanding good practices and replicable role models that are collected in the 140-plus VLRs published around the world to date show that cities and regions can be powerful catalysts of policy change and set the pace of innovation whenever their planning, their budgets, their social engagement, their global profile and participation are consistent with the 2030 Agenda. As in the case of Sweden, this is significantly easier when a large group of community members – from the civil servant to the older citizen, the education system, the welfare mechanisms, the national government's priorities, or the visions held by those that organise from the grassroots – already share a set of values, a mindset, a view of the world which clearly resonate with the steps that must be taken for the future to be really sustainable and just.

• **Lesson learned:** a society which is already t**rained to think of the future through the lenses of sustainability** can be a fundamental asset for effective localisation. Simplifying a very complex idea, it may have been easier for Swedish cities to embrace the SDGs, to commit to localisation, and to self-assess their achievements because their values and understanding of the world at large are just so consistent with the Goals: environmental awareness, openness to inclusive values, and the fight against marginalisation and discrimination simply made SDG alignment and implementation easier, and certainly have made the VLR process more seamless.

But what can we learn from the experience of Swedish municipalities in those contexts where this value-driven awareness simply does not exist? There surely is a lesson in the value of cooperating, participating, sharing, learning and teaching one another. The 'Swedish approach' cannot be exported, but some of its fundamental values can be replicated and adapted elsewhere. A healthy multi-level relationship with an empowering national level to gain more competences but also more responsibilities; a quest for social inclusion and improved horizontal dialogue and collaboration; active participation in global networks and overt support for peer-to-peer learning and training; transparent and accountable local policy-making for the common good. ICLD's work to promote these examples, to learn from diverse experiences and stories, to multiply the opportunities for dialogue and co-ownership are a substantial part of what organisations, individuals and governments can do to turn the 2030 Agenda into a reality. The Swedish case can be a small step in this direction, and a powerful example to mobilise those local governments that are looking for resources, partnership and an opportunity to grow and act.

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