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Sustainable Development Goals Voluntary Local Reviews: measuring progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals at the local level

Updated Guidelines for the Development of Voluntary Local Reviews in the ECE Region

Note by the secretariat

Summary

At its eighty-second session, the Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management (CUDHLM) endorsed the *Guidelines for the development of Voluntary Local Reviews in the ECE Region* (ECE/HBP/2021/4) and invited the secretariat to update the Guidelines based on the outcomes of their testing in pilot cities and on feedback from relevant stakeholders and United Nations agencies (ECE/HBP/208).

Given the experience gained from the ECE *Smart Sustainable City Profiles* and the Forum of Mayors as well as the feedback received from United Nations agencies, the secretariat carried out a thorough review of the Guidelines. This document contains the revised Guidelines, which the Committee is invited to endorse.



I. Introduction

1. Against a background of rising inequalities and worsening climate crisis, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) was adopted in 2015¹ to succeed the Millennium Development Goals² (MDGs). It sets a new frontier in international development in that it goes beyond addressing the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of development to cover institutional aspects and applies to developed and developing countries alike.

2. The level of ambition of the 2030 Agenda is reflected in the broader range of forward-looking global goals, targets, and indicators. Whereas the MDGs featured eight goals, 21 targets and 60 indicators, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) comprises 17 goals, 169 targets and 231 indicators.³ The indicators were developed by the United Nations Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators⁴ (IAEG- SDGs), following broad consultations that brought together statisticians and development experts from across the globe.

3. The consultations spanned over two years, as experts sought to address the twin challenge of defining the minimum required disaggregation⁵ for each indicator to enable timely and robust policy decisions that address the three pillars of sustainability. The difficulties in establishing the indicators stemmed from the fact that the SDG targets were well ahead of available statistics, with several involving new concepts that needed to be defined.⁶

4. These challenges are reflected in the IAEG-SDGs classification system, which divides the SDG indicators into three tiers based on the level of methodological development and the availability of data at the global level.⁷ As shown below, for tiers I and II, countries can create their own classification systems because available data at the national level might not necessarily align with the global tier classification.

- Tier I - the indicator is conceptually clear, has an internationally established methodology, standards are available, and data are regularly produced by countries for at least 50 per cent of countries and of the population in every region where the indicator is relevant.
- Tier II - the indicator is conceptually clear, has an internationally established methodology, standards are available, but data are not regularly produced by countries.

¹ UN General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution A/RES/70/1 of 25 September 2015. Available at https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_70_1_E.pdf.

² See UNGA 55/2 of 18 September 2000 (<https://undocs.org/A/RES/55/2>).

³ The 2030 Agenda global framework comprises 231 unique indicators (i.e., excluding those appearing under more than one target). The number of indicators increases to 247 if those appearing under more than one target are included. A complete list of SDG indicators is available at <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata/>. The indicators are reviewed and refined annually by the UN Statistical Commission. Further details on this are available at <https://local2030.org/library/tools/monitoring-and-evaluation>

⁴ Detailed information on the mandate and work of the IAEG- SDGs is available at <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/iaeg-sdgs/>.

⁵ As established under GA Resolution 68/261 on the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, where relevant, SDG indicators should be disaggregated by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability and geographic location, or other characteristics.

⁶ A major factor complicating MDG implementation was the lack of sufficient data for supporting timely decision-making processes at the national and global levels. See, for example, Report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda. Available at <http://www.post2015hlp.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/UN-Report.pdf>. For a discussion of the challenges that surrounded the development of the SDGs' targets and indicators, see, for example, Kanbur, R., Patel, E. and Stiglitz, J. (2016) Sustainable Development Goals and Measurement of Economic and Social Progress. Available at http://policydialogue.org/files/events/Ravi_Kanbur.pdf.

⁷ The IAEG-SDG publishes regular updates of the SDG indicators at <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/iaeg-sdgs/tier-classification/>.

- Tier III - no internationally established methodology or standards are yet available for the indicator, but methodology/standards are being (or will be) developed or tested (As of July 2022, the global indicator framework does not contain any tier III indicators).⁸

5. The onus is, therefore, on the governments to establish supplementary indicators (i.e., in addition to the global SDG indicators) for reflecting national priorities as they report on progress toward the SDGs through the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). Some countries have already established such indicators, many of which are disaggregated by, among others, gender and income levels.⁹

6. However, reflecting local priorities in the VNRs has proven to be challenging, despite the involvement of local and regional governments (LRGs) in the preparation of these reviews. The difficulties stem from the range of interlinked factors bearing on urban development, which are often city or region specific and do not lend themselves to easy quantification. The endeavour to reflect such factors gave rise to the Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs),¹⁰ which have become an important tool for providing a more detailed and nuanced assessment for complementing the VNRs and for knowledge sharing among LRGs.

7. A review of VLRs shows LRGs as using various evaluation methods.¹¹ The VLRs also varied in terms of the SDGs reviewed, with some focusing on SDGs prioritised by the United Nations High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) in a particular year while others focusing on their own priority goals.¹² To enable a consistent and standardized evaluation method in the region, ECE developed *Guidelines for the Development of VLRs in the ECE Region* to complement existing global, regional and subregional guidance documents on VLRs (see annex).

8. The Guidelines provide an evidence-based framework for tracking progress toward the SDGs, using the ECE Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for Smart Sustainable Cities (SSC)¹³, developed jointly with the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the ECE Centre of Excellence on Smart Sustainable Cities and Sustainable Urban Development at the University of Geneva, Switzerland and the ECE Centre of Excellence on Sustainable Development Goal City Transition in Trondheim, Norway, following extensive consultations that involved United Nations agencies as well as international experts. The focus on SSCs is in line with urban development priorities of ECE LRGs. These priorities have come to feature an increased focus on using information and communication technology (ICT) as a tool for addressing the multitude of challenges resulting from rapid

⁸ <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/iaeg-sdgs/tier-classification/>.

⁹ Most notable among the ECE countries is Canada which established a national framework of additional indicators for reflecting and tracking progress in achieving national priorities. The framework is available at <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/agenda-2030/moving-forward.html#h2.23>.

¹⁰ Up-to-date lists of VLRs by LRGs across the globe are available at the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) website (<https://sdgs.un.org/topics/voluntary-local-reviews>) and at the online VLR platform of UN-Habitat (<https://unhabitat.org/topics/voluntary-local-reviews>).

¹¹ See, for example, the model set of additional indicators used by the German municipalities. Available at <https://sdg-portal.de/de>. See also the Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities that developed a set of local SDG indicators. Available at <https://local2030.org/library/view/619>. The indicators are accompanied by a user manual. Available at <https://local2030.org/library/view/620>.

¹² Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (2020) State of the Voluntary Local Reviews 2020 — Local Action for Global Impact in Achieving the SDGs. Available at https://www.iges.or.jp/en/publication_documents/pub/workingpaper/en/10803/State+of+the+Voluntary+Local+Review+2020++Final.pdf.

¹³ The KPIs for SSC were endorsed by the UNECE Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management in 2016 (ECE/HBP/2016/4) to form the basis for the United for Smart Sustainable Cities (U4SSC) initiative. The U4SSC brings together 16 United Nations agencies and supports the evaluation of the performance of cities using the KPIs for SSC and the implementation of SSC solutions through the development of guidelines, studies, city action plans, and capacity-building events (<https://u4ssc.itu.int/>). The KPIs are outlined in the Collection Methodology for Key Performance Indicators for Smart Sustainable Cities. Available at <https://unece.org/housing-and-land-management/publications/collection-methodology-key-performance-indicators-smart>.

urbanization, climate change and, in some cities, the slow structural transformation toward increased specialization in knowledge-based activities with high value added.

9. The KPIs were implemented globally in over 150 cities¹⁴ following the approach outlined in the ECE Guidelines on evidence-based policies and decision-making for sustainable housing and urban development (ECE/HBP/203)¹⁵, developed jointly with the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat). The experience gained from implementing the KPIs for SSC formed the basis for developing the Guidelines. The secretariat also drew on experience gained from evaluating the performance of ECE cities against the KPIs for SSC as part of the Smart Sustainable City Profiles¹⁶ and from helping cities establish post-COVID-19 recovery plans¹⁷.

10. The Guidelines were endorsed by CUDHLM in 2021, and member States requested the secretariat to update them based on the results of pilot testing in ECE cities and feedback from stakeholders and United Nations agencies. Given the lack of funding for pilot testing, the secretariat used the Smart Sustainable City Profiles as a means for updating the Guidelines. The new profiles¹⁸ (contained in documents ECE/HBP/2022/Inf. 7, 8 and 9 feature a more detailed analysis) capture, among other things, the extent of alignment between local and national development efforts, the interplay between urban development and regional cooperation arrangements and the difficulties facing cities in addressing global challenges, particularly climate change.

11. Further, the revised Guidelines draw on the outcomes of the ECE workshops on VLRs, which were conducted over the course of 2021 (ECE/HBP/2022/5). They also build on the experience of the secretariat in supporting cooperation among ECE cities as well as assisting them in integrating their strategic plans, actions and joint initiatives for addressing regional and global challenges, including SDG implementation, in the ECE intergovernmental processes and the global level within the context of the Forum of Mayors (see box 1). The revised Guidelines have also benefited from the views of UN-Habitat, the UN DESA, and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), all of which provided written comments on the earlier version (ECE/HBP/2021/4).

Box 1

The Forum of Mayors

A catalyser for realizing the shared vision and common aspirations of ECE mayors

Raison d'être

The Forum of Mayors was launched in 2019, with a view to contribute to the realization of the vision of the United Nations Secretary-General of “a stronger, more networked and inclusive multilateral system, anchored within the United Nations”¹⁹. The Forum brings together mayors from across the ECE region to realize a shared, forward-looking vision and common aspirations set out in the Geneva Declaration of Mayors.²⁰ The Declaration contains the voluntary, self-enforced commitments of mayors to promote creative, people-centred approaches through sharing successful local solutions that enabled cities to

¹⁴ ITU maintains an up-to-date list of cities where the KPIs for SSC were implemented. The list is available at <https://u4ssc.itu.int/u4ssc-kpi/>.

¹⁵ https://unece.org/DAM/hlm/documents/Publications/2020_Guidelines_on_evidence-based_policies.pdf.

¹⁶ As of 2021, ECE has developed Smart Sustainable City Profiles in nine cities: Goris (Armenia), Grodno (Belarus), Nur-Sultan (Kazakhstan), Voznesensk (Ukraine) and the Norwegian cities of Aalesund, Asker, Bærum, Rana, and Trondheim. The profiles are available at <https://unece.org/housing/sustainable-smart-cities>.

¹⁷ From 2021 to 2022, ECE supported three pilot cities: Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan), Kharkiv (Ukraine) and Tirana (Albania). The plans are available at <https://unece.org/housing/cudhlm-session83>.

¹⁸ In 2022, the ECE developed Smart, Sustainable City Profiles in Podgorica (Montenegro), Tbilisi (Georgia) and San Marino and preparations were underway for developing similar profiles for Almaty (Kazakhstan) and Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan).

¹⁹ *Our Common Agenda – Report of the Secretary-General* (United Nations publication, 2021). Available at <https://unfoundation.org/our-common-agenda>.

²⁰ <https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/Mayors%20declaration%20booklet%20-%20ver.4.pdf>.

<p>simultaneously meet the needs and aspirations of their citizens, hedge against disasters and rise to the climate change challenge in a manner that ensures the successful implementation of the SDGs. This commitment to mutual learning is coupled with a determination to maximize impact through joint action and spreading the word, including through joining urban networks and initiatives. The Forum is open to all ECE cities, including those that have not formally adopted the Declaration.</p>
<p>The vision of the Geneva Declaration of Mayor</p>
<p>We, the Mayors of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) region, want to rebuild our cities into places where all of us can thrive, quality of life is the guiding principle, nature and biodiversity are an integral part of urban planning, sustainable economies generate wealth for all, solidarity among city dwellers prevails, and inequalities are actively narrowed. We align ourselves with the initiative of the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres to “build back better” and turn the recovery into a real opportunity for shaping a healthy and resilient future. SDG 11 calls for action to work towards inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities – it is now in our hands to place the SDGs at the centre of our recovery efforts and create new urban realities for the benefit of all.</p>
<p>The common aspirations of ECE cities contained in the Geneva Declaration of Mayors</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen the resilience of our cities • Take ambitious climate action • Make our cities greener • Accelerate the transition to sustainable energy • Ensure urban transport is sustainable • Ensure housing is affordable, healthy and adequate • Make cities more equitable and inclusive • Turn these aspirations into reality.
<p>Second Forum of Mayors (4-5 April 2022)</p>
<p>Mayors and vice mayors from 44 cities shared their experiences in finding people-centred solutions, which simultaneously meet the needs and aspirations of their citizens, hedge against disasters and rise to the challenges of climate change in a manner that ensures the successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda (ECE/HBP/2022/3). These experiences were shared during the four thematic sessions of the Forum, and the outcomes were presented to the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development on 6 April 2022. The thematic sessions focused on global challenges identified in the Geneva Declaration of Mayors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Session 1: Sustainable urban transport, shared mobility and safer roads • Session 2: Vibrant public spaces, greener cities and nature-based solutions • Session 3: Resilient, healthy and climate-neutral buildings and affordable and adequate housing • Session 4: Sustainable urban planning, the 15-minute city and smart urban development solutions.

II. Objectives

- (a) *Provide an evidence-based tool for tracking progress toward the SDGs.* The Guidelines provide LRGs with a suit of additional indicators, the KPIs for SSC, for ensuring an integrated, indivisible and balanced treatment of the SDGs. In so doing, the KPIs complement national and regional indicators (e.g., the European Commission indicators for sustainable cities²¹) as well as the Global Urban Monitoring Framework (UMF), which was developed by UN-Habitat²² for tracking progress toward SDG 11 and the implementation of the New Urban Agenda (NUA) and endorsed by the United Nations Statistical

²¹https://ec.europa.eu/environment/integration/research/newsalert/pdf/indicators_for_sustainable_cities_IR12_en.pdf.

²² In 2022, the UMF is being pilot tested in at least five cities. See, UN-Habitat at <https://data.unhabitat.org/pages/urban-monitoring-framework>.

Commission in March 2022 as part of the “harmonized global urban United Nations system-wide strategy”²³.

- (b) **Support LRGs in their efforts to localize SDGs**, starting from the identification of indicators for capturing local contexts and priorities to developing local actions for accelerating the achievement of the SDGs. Specifically, the guidelines ground the KPIs for SCC in a coherent approach for helping LRGs arrive at agreed-upon integrated, people-centred solutions, which are aligned with national priorities, complement national development efforts. In this sense, the Guidelines are meant to serve as an extension to the urban planning and decision-making processes of LRGs. They are also meant to provide input to VNRs. In this connection, countries that have signed up to undertake VNRs are encouraged to refer to, or include, information from the VLRs.
- (c) By grounding the indicators in a coherent approach, the Guidelines help LRGs **ensure policy coherence and leave no one behind**.

III. Principles

- (a) **Ensure broad-based consultations**. The preparation of the VLRs should involve broad-based consultations, aimed at soliciting the views of citizens, the different parts of LRGs, representatives of the academia, market support institutions (e.g., sectoral associations, enterprise support institutions and financing institutions), women’s organizations and other civil society organizations.
- (b) **Gear the VLRs toward bridging local, national and global priorities**. Specifically, focus on aligning local priorities and development efforts with national ones as well as on striking a balance between local priorities and the imperative of addressing the global challenges facing the world today, particularly climate change.
- (c) **Proceed from a forward-looking perspective aimed at ensuring policy coherence and leaving no one behind**. The emphasis needs to be on establishing tangible solutions for addressing immediate and long-term priorities, following the 2030 Agenda principle of policy coherence with a special emphasis on leaving no one behind (Box 2). In this sense, past achievements are to be examined with an eye to drawing lessons from successful experiences and identifying implementation gaps.

Box 2

2030 Agenda principle of policy coherence

Established under SDG target 17.14 “Enhance policy coherence for sustainable development”, the principle of policy coherence brings to the fore the imperative of an integrated treatment of the indivisible economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.²⁴ It aims to overcome fragmented or siloed policy actions through a strategic, proactive focus on:

- Fostering synergies and minimizing trade-offs across sectors
- Reconciling domestic policy objectives with internationally agreed objectives
- Addressing transboundary and long-term policy impacts.

Policy coherence requires increasing capacities to manage the critical linkages between SDGs and address their implications by adopting a whole-of-government approach.²⁵ A

²³ See United Nations Statistical Commission, Report on the fifty-third session (28 February–2 and 4 March 2022). Available at <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/53rd-session/documents/2022-41-FinalReport-E.pdf>.

²⁴ For a detailed discussion of the principle of policy coherence of the 2030 Agenda, see, for example, OECD publications - *Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development 2018: Towards Sustainable and Resilient Societies*; *Better Policies for Sustainable Development 2016: A New Framework for Policy Coherence*.

²⁵ A review of the national arrangements for implementing the 2030 Agenda highlights the whole-of-government approach as a critical requisite for ensuring policy coherence. UN DESA (2018) Compendium of National Institutional Arrangements for implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/22008UNPAN99132.pdf>.

whole-of-government approach involves creating coordinating mechanisms across the different parts of the government to facilitate knowledge sharing, arriving at common solutions and create horizontal and vertical synergies.²⁶ The European Union (EU) defines this approach as involving “collaboration between the different public bodies that extend beyond their respective fields of competence with a view to providing the public with a combined response from a single body”²⁷.

- (d) ***Adopt an evidence-based approach.*** Use indicators for capturing local priorities and measuring progress toward the SDGs. The emphasis should be on identifying relevant indicators for capturing local priorities and the specific local issues associated with addressing global challenges. Where needed, combine the indicators with sector-focused and/or issue-focused qualitative surveys to identify underlying factors impeding progress.
- (e) ***Integrate disaster risk management as a key element of the VLRs.*** If there is one lesson to draw from the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased conflicts, it would be the urgent need to build local resilience, something which requires integrating risk adaptation and mitigation as a key element in local and regional development planning. This imperative is all the more pertinent in light of climate change that is making droughts, floods and extreme heat more frequent, severe, and pervasive. Thus, the indicators should feature a special emphasis on measuring socio, economic and environmental vulnerability to negative shocks and changes.
- (f) ***Focus on facilitating resource mobilisation for financing urban development.*** The VLRs should contain concrete, action-oriented solutions for addressing the factors undermining the cities’ ability to realize their full potential and achieve the SDGs as well as a well-defined approach for mobilizing the required resources for financing implementation.

IV. A coherent approach for using the Key Performance Indicators for Smart Sustainable Cities

12. The KPIs are meant to support the LRGs in the ECE region in their efforts to transition to smart sustainable cities in a manner that is consistent with the imperatives of achieving the 2030 SDGs, with the concept of a “smart sustainable city” understood following the ECE/ITU definition to refer to “an innovative city that uses information and communication technology and other means to improve quality of life, efficiency of urban operation and services, and competitiveness, while ensuring that it meets the needs of present and future generations with respect to economic, social, environmental as well as cultural aspects”²⁸.

13. This forward-looking conceptualisation espouses moving away from a preoccupation with enlarging urban infrastructure facilities to making them more intimate to individuals, households and enterprises. The focus is on ensuring not only the availability of such facilities but also on ensuring their affordability and responsiveness to the different segments of the population from all age groups and across neighbourhoods and economic activities.

14. The KPIs for SSC provide an evidence-based framework that aggregates diverse official statistics into standardized indicators that are linked to the three pillars of the 2030 Agenda, thereby ensuring an integrated, indivisible and balanced treatment of the SDGs. The framework consists of 91 indicators, which are spread across the economic, social and

²⁶ Based on OECD (2011) Public Governance Reviews: Estonia-Towards a Single Government Approach. Available at https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/estonia-towards-a-single-government-approach/promoting-a-whole-of-government-approach_9789264104860-6-en#page1.

²⁷ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52016AE2741&qid=1629977279870>.

²⁸ <https://unece.org/housing/sustainable-smart-cities>.

environmental dimensions of the 2030 Agenda with ICT serving as a cross-cutting “means of implementation”.²⁹

15. As shown in table 1, each dimension is divided into policy-specific categories with corresponding indicators to complement the SDG indicators. In this sense, the KPIs help reflect national priorities and providing a more detailed and nuanced assessment of the cities’ transition toward small sustainable cities, with each KPI assigned a distinct benchmark for evaluating progress toward the associated global SDG indicator. By capturing how the three sustainability pillars are linked, the KPIs for SSC framework provides LRGs with a holistic view of their cities’ stage of urban development and the resulting contribution to the achievement of the SDGs, while equipping them with a consistent and standardised method for collecting data; improving collaboration and knowledge sharing; measuring the city’s performance; and assessing progress toward (i) transforming into smart cities; (ii) becoming more sustainable; and (iii) achieving the SDGs.

Table 1

The KPIs for SSC as a tool for measuring and assessing progress toward the SDGs

<i>Economy</i>	<i>Environment</i>	<i>Society and culture</i>
<p>Categories</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spatial and urban planning • Urban infrastructure (transport and basic utility services) • e-Government • Economic diversification • Innovation • Enterprise productivity • Job creation 	<p>Categories</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Air quality • Water and sanitation • Waste management • Exposure to noise • Public spaces and nature • Energy 	<p>Categories</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education • Health • Culture • Housing • Income equality • Social protection • Food security
<p>Associated SDGs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal 5 (Gender Equality) • Goal 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) • Goal 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy) • Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) 	<p>Associated SDGs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) • Goal 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy) • Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) • Goal 13 (Climate Action) • Goal 14 (Life Below Water) • Goal 15 (Life on Land) 	<p>Associated SDGs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal 2 (Zero Hunger) • Goal 3 (Good Health and Well Being) • Goal 4 (Quality Education) • Goal 5 (Gender Equality) • Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth)

²⁹ Established under SDG 17 “Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development”, “means of implementation” is to be understood as “the interdependent mix of financial resources, technology development and transfer, capacity-building, inclusive and equitable globalization and trade, regional integration, as well as the creation of a national enabling environment required to implement the new sustainable development agenda, particularly in developing countries”. For further details, see UN DESA, Technical Support Team brief. Available at https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2079Issues%20Brief%20Means%20of%20Implementation%20Final_TST_141013.pdf.

<i>Economy</i>	<i>Environment</i>	<i>Society and culture</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) • Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) • Goal 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) • Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong institutions) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities) • Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) • Goal 13 (Climate Action) • Goal 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong institutions)
<i>ICT: A cross-cutting “means of implementation”</i>		

16. As previously mentioned, the KPIs can be used in combination with other indicators. At issue, therefore, is how best to use the city’s evaluation against the selected indicators as a way for accelerating the achievement of SDGs, following the principles outlined in the previous section. Below are the key elements of a coherent approach for achieving this:

- (a) *Anchor the city’s evaluation against the KPIs for SSC and other indicators in a whole-of-government perspective*

17. The evaluation of the cities against the KPIs needs be anchored in city planning, the main tool used by LRGs for conceptualizing and realizing their vision and development initiatives. By virtue of focusing on the design and regulation of the use of urban space, including the location and physical attributes of social, economic and cultural activities as well as their environmental and other impacts, city planning constitutes a powerful tool for broad-based consultations. It provides a practical process for bridging the knowledge gap between policymakers, experts, practitioners (e.g., engineers and architects) and civil society, whose inputs are required at different stages of the planning process.

18. This is one of the lessons learnt from developing the ECE Smart Sustainable City Profiles and the Forum of Mayors. The Profiles show that in some cities, transitioning to SSC is complicated by the lack of proper urban planning. This problem was echoed by the ECE city leaders who participated in the second Forum of Mayors, who lamented the harmful environmental consequences of pursuing car-centric urban plans (ECE/HBP/2022/2). Others noted their pre-occupation with dealing with dated, poor-quality physical infrastructure and buildings, something that requires meticulous planning and huge investments in ICT solutions (e.g., fitting, where possible, old buildings with sensors for tracking greenhouse emissions; fitting dated bridges with sensors to identify parts that are at or beyond their design life; and collecting traffic data so that new bridges are tuned with the citizens’ mobility needs).

19. As some local priorities may fall outside of the KPIs for SSC and given that some urban development-related policies fall under the competence of national Governments, it is important to consolidate city planning with a whole-of-government approach, which brings all relevant LRG departments together with national authorities and specialized agencies.

- (b) *Involve data collecting agencies throughout the VLR development*

20. The KPIs for SCC rely on official data by national statistical offices as well as data compiled in the administrative records of relevant local, regional and national authorities involved in urban development and in overseeing basic utility services. These agencies

should be involved throughout the process of the VLR development, starting from the planning phase to the analysis and VLR conclusion. Their views and input should be sought for assessing the robustness of available data and for ensuring due diligence in evaluating the cities against the KPIs and other indicators, including through the implementation of targeted qualitative surveys, if needed. The involvement of these agencies is important for: (i) incorporating existing standardised national indicators for addressing the city's remaining sustainability needs not covered by the KPIs for SSC; and (ii) aligning the set of indicators used in the VLRs with regional indicators and UMF. To ensure proper capturing of the most vulnerable segments of the population, LRGs could consider adopting a gender-sensitive and human rights-based approach to data collection.³⁰

(c) *Focus on identifying capacity needs as well as policy and legislative requirements for achieving the SDGs*

21. Adopting a forward-looking perspective means that the VLR development should take the form of a gap analysis, whereby the focus is not only on recording progress to date, but also on identifying capacity, policy and legislative gaps undermining the city's ability to achieve the SDGs under review. Thus, a low performance against a certain indicator should lead to a discussion of, and an agreement over, the key factors undermining progress.

22. Evidence from the ECE Smart Sustainable City Profiles as well experience in helping cities build urban economic resilience post-COVID-19 (ECE/HBP/2022/Inf. 6) and supporting the Forum of Mayors show that many cities belonging to countries with economies in transition are held back by capacity shortfalls at the planning level, including urban planning, and the macro level of national policy-making; the meso level of implementation, including within LRGs and national State agencies as well as market support institutions, the academia, women's organizations and other civil society organizations; and the micro level of enterprises and utility service providers.

23. Table 2 provides a broad-brush analysis of how these shortfalls combine to undermine the achievement of SDGs. The impact of these shortfalls is felt by households in the form of high vulnerability to negative external shocks and changes. To better capture households' vulnerability, it is important to ground the analysis in a gender-sensitive and human rights-based approach.³¹

³⁰ <https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/universal-values/human-rights-based-approach>

³¹ <https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/universal-values/human-rights-based-approach>

Table 2
Capacity shortfalls undermining sustainable urban development

<i>Capacity shortfalls</i>	<i>Immediate effect</i>	<i>Consequences</i>
Urban planning and the macro level of national policymaking and legislative reforms		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public-private consultations are often <i>ad hoc</i> and insufficiently serviced • Inadequate inter-agency coordination mechanisms between LRGs as well as between LRRs and national State agencies • Lack of modern ICT management systems (continued reliance on paper-based administrative procedures and management systems) • Lack of expertise skills in subject areas and in decision making in both LRGs and national State agencies (often due to recurrent government restructuring and/or low salary scales that render it difficult to attract experts) • Slow national legislative process (often due to recurrent government restructuring) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Policy fragmentation and compartmentalization – Limited synergies between urban development efforts and national reforms and associated development initiatives – Lack of coherence between planning and implementation – Lack of capitalization on reform achievements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Inconsistencies and conflicting objectives unresolved – Striking a balance between conflicting objectives at the local level as well as between local/national and local/global levels remains unresolved – Synergies between urban development initiatives and other policies are not created – Legislative and policy gaps (e.g., lack of policies for social housing)
Meso level of implementation and support systems		
<p>Weak implementation capacities at both the local and national levels</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of modern ICT management systems (continued reliance on paper-based management systems) • Lack of expertise and skills <p>Weak market support institutions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lacking skills and funds (with many heavily dependent on donor funds) <p>Weak women’s organizations and civil society organizations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lacking skills and funds (with many heavily dependent on donor funds) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Lack of adequate health, education and social protection services – Lack of adequate urban infrastructure – Available infrastructure is either of limited coverage or/and of poor quality – Lack of adequate systems for ensuring the quality, safety and climate resilience of buildings and urban infrastructure – Insufficient market and civil society support services – Limited outreach (i.e., services do not cover all communities and neighbourhoods) and a narrow range of services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – High financial costs – High maintenance costs of urban infrastructure and poor-quality buildings – Environmental impacts of economic and social activities are exacerbated – Weak enterprises (see below) – Households’ quality of life is undermined (see below)

<i>Capacity shortfalls</i>	<i>Immediate effect</i>	<i>Consequences</i>
Micro level of enterprises and utility service providers		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shortfalls at the macro and meso levels have rendered a situation whereby enterprises and service providers continue to be held back by: • Weak negotiating position, so that they are unable to enter into partnerships with external counterparts or are unable to obtain terms that address their interests • Lack of skills and limited resources to finance expansion plans • Lack of clarity over new quality, safety and environmental conservation regulatory requirements, particularly, in terms of their implications for production and service provision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Weak technological capabilities; that is, their ability and scope for efficient specialization in technological activities, for extending and deepening these activities, and for drawing selectively on other technologies to complement existing capabilities.³² 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Structural transformation towards increased specialization in products with high value-added is undermined – Poor quality housing, lack of adequate housing and poor quality of urban infrastructure – Environmental impacts of economic activities are exacerbated

Source: UNECE

(d) *Develop integrated solutions*

24. Keeping with the forward-looking perspective, the VLRs should provide people-centred, action-oriented solutions that address the identified capacity gaps with a view to ensuring that no one is left behind. The emphasis should be on establishing integrated solutions, enabled by cohesive institutional mechanisms and modern ITC systems for unleashing the sustainable development potential of cities and improving the livelihood opportunities for the most vulnerable segments of the population.

25. To capture the impacts of the integrated solutions, create synergies and manage trade-offs (i.e., avoid or minimize negative spill-overs of the integrated solutions), LRGs could use the International Council for Science “typology on SDG interactions”.³³ The typology involves a three-point system for assessing the critical linkages between SDG-related policies against seven possible types of interactions, from the most positive (score of +3) to the most negative (score of -3).

26. An example of a solution with the highest score (+3) is one that aims at eradicating all forms of discrimination against women (SDG 5.1), as it supports the achievement of all the Goals. In contrast, doubling agricultural productivity (SDG 2.3), while important for job creation (SDG 8.3), among others, may be at the expense of ensuring adequate water resources for other purposes, for example, drinking water (SDG 6.1) and/or preservation of eco-systems (SDG 15.1) as a result of converting rainforest to agriculture.

³² For a concise discussion of this concept, see, for example, Lall, S. (1992) “Technological Capabilities and Industrialization”, *World Development*, vol. 20, No. 2: 165-186.

³³ International Council for Science (2017) A Guide to SDG interactions: from science to implementation. Available at <https://council.science/publications/a-guide-to-sdg-interactions-from-science-to-implementation/>.

V. Recommended process for preparing the Voluntary Local Reviews

(a) Undertake broad-based consultations with citizens

27. Developing people-centred solutions means that the views and aspirations of local communities should form the starting point for informing the VLRs. It is understood that LRGs undertake broad-based public engagements as part of preparing urban development strategies and plans, so as to establish the needs of the different communities and gain an understanding of how they would like their cities/regions to evolve. In cases where the SDGs under review were not sufficiently covered during previous public engagements, it is advisable to launch a city-wide online survey to solicit the views and aspirations of local communities and conduct townhall meetings with communities underrepresented in the online survey.

(b) Establish a coordination mechanism for the whole-of-government approach

28. The adoption of the whole-of-government approach requires creating a coordination mechanism for facilitating the development of integrated solutions, and for ensuring their incorporation into the plans and actions of all relevant LRGs and national government authorities and specialized agencies. The creation of such a mechanism should, to the extent possible, involve consolidating existing institutionalized coordination structures. In this sense, the SDG coordination mechanism should be seen as a way for creating new dynamics for collaboration throughout policy cycles, across policy areas and between all levels of government. Such an approach is advisable to ensure continuity beyond the VLR process, as new coordination structures tend to create additional layers of bureaucracy with cost implications for the LRGs' budgets.

29. Box 3 provides examples of local coordination mechanisms for implementing a whole-of-government approach. These examples show a preference for anchoring the coordination mechanisms in existing structures, with some led by the mayor's office. Membership in the coordination mechanisms varies between LRGs. While some featured representatives from academia, the business community and civil society organizations, others comprised solely of government representatives.

Box 3

Examples of local coordination mechanisms for implementing the 2030 Agenda

There is no single **model** for establishing the required coordination mechanisms for supporting a whole-of-government approach. Successful experiences show that the main coordinating body is usually assigned to agencies that have the required capacities, financial resources and political will. Since VLR development requires extensive knowledge of international relations and development policies, it is common to involve international relations departments in the VLR process. Similarly, given the financial implications, the planning and finance departments play a central role in VLR development. In most cases, rather than assuming the lead role, these departments assume the role of facilitators and help solicit feedback from and the involvement of the different departments of LRGs. For instance, in **Helsinki** (Finland), the City Executive Office carried out the VLR by collecting views and data from different divisions – Urban Environment; Education; Culture and Leisure; and Social Services and Health Care.

A review of VLRs also reveals a range of coordination mechanisms with academia, the business community civil society organizations and the public. In **Bristol** (United Kingdom), the VLR was jointly implemented and co-founded by the City Council, Cabot Institute for the Environment at the University of Bristol, and the Bristol SDG Alliance (an informal network that includes individuals from the city's anchor institutions, including universities, City Council officials, major businesses, and voluntary organizations). In the case of **Espoo** (Finland), the Mayor's office launched a call for articles to validate and enrich the quantitative analysis as well as case studies to demonstrate how the city is collaboratively achieving the SDGs. The call was open to Espoo's units, the city's corporate units, and partners from industry and other sectors of

society. In **Barcelona**, after the publication of the 2019 VLR which was coordinated by the Technical Board for Strategic Planning, a commissioner for the 2030 Agenda was nominated by the City Council. The commissioner, who supported the development of the city's 2020 VLR, was tasked with fostering cross-sector coordination between siloed public departments as well as strengthening alliances with citizens, academic stakeholders, the private sector, and the public.

Source: UN-Habitat

30. As LRGs proceed to establish a coordinating mechanism, it would be useful to carry out a rapid assessment of their capacity using the *United Nations Readiness Assessment on Institutional Arrangements for Policy Coherence to Implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*.³⁴ This tool features a self-assessment questionnaire, composed of nine building blocks, which together give an indication as to whether as well as the extent to which a government agency has in place mechanisms that effectively enhance coordination for policy coherence.

(c) *Data collection*

31. As previously mentioned, using the KPIs for SSC for tracking progress toward the achievement of the SDGs requires engaging a range of agencies, including the national statistical offices, relevant local, regional and national authorities involved in urban development and overseeing basic utility services. While many of the KPIs are based on existing published information, the data is scattered across different agencies. It is, therefore, essential to identify all data sources during the early stages of VLR development, and then verify the accuracy of the data collected by submitting it to all the agencies for a second round of review.

32. The data collection for the KPIs encountered several challenges stemming from the lack of data for some of the indicators, something which cannot be understood in isolation of the lack of expertise and financial sources, particularly within national statistical offices. Moreover, indicators by the national statistical offices are not always disaggregated by city and many of the indicators are not disaggregated by income, sex, age, disability and other characteristics. As the national statistical offices and State agencies proceed to discuss issues surrounding the generation of data for KPIs and other SDG indicators, they can draw on the UNECE Roadmap on Statistics for Sustainable Development Goals³⁵. Cities could also draw on successful experiences in developing robust systems for generating statistical indicators for the SDGs (see box 4).

Box 4

**Establishing robust systems for generating statistical indicators for the SDGs
Good practice guidelines and successful experiences**

ECE Road Map on Statistics for Sustainable Development Goals

The ECE Road Map on Statistics for SDGs, released as a second edition in 2022, provides guidance to members of national statistical systems and other stakeholders on how to best navigate the complex task of measuring the achievement of the goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda. By doing so, it strives to strengthen reliable data-based national information systems and support efforts to achieve the Goals. The Road Map covers different aspects related to the work, such as national coordination, reporting on global SDG indicators, tracking progress at various levels, quality assurance, leaving no one behind, communication, VNRs and capacity development. Frequently Asked Questions and a glossary aim to explain in an easily understandable way the issues and terms used. Many examples of how countries are implementing the Road Map are provided on a dedicated website³⁶ to inspire and help learn from experiences.

³⁴ <https://unpan.un.org/capacity-development/otc/self-assessment-tools/self-assessment-questionnaire/>.

³⁵ https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/Road_Map_2_E_web.pdf.

³⁶ <https://unece.org/statistics/rm-country-case-studies>.

The Road Map can be used in communications with other stakeholders involved in implementing the SDGs, like policymakers, academia, civil society, the private sector and media, to explain the issues related to statistics for SDGs and the critical role of official statistics.

The city of Los Angeles, United States of America

Los Angeles maintains a user-friendly SDG platform featuring datasets for monitoring progress toward all the 17 Goals.³⁷ The platform compiles data from different sources with metadata that can be easily downloaded and features published VLRs as well as guidelines for other cities on how to create their own SDG platforms by adapting that of the city of Los Angeles to their local context.

The city of Malaga, Spain

Malaga created a user-friendly SDG platform, *opendata.malaga.eu*³⁸, that compiles over 770 data sets from different sources. The data sets, which can be easily downloaded, are organized into nine thematic clusters, covering key aspects of the city's everyday life, including mobility, culture, public finance, land planning and housing, job creation, the economy, environmental sustainability, security and social protection.

(d) Preparation of the VLRs

33. The preparation of the VLRs should commence with evaluating the city's performance against the 2030 Agenda indicators, with the KPI for SSC and other indicators used as additional indicators to provide further insights into the city's progress. The results of the evaluation should lead to an examination of the capacity shortfalls undermining the city's performance at the urban planning and macro level of national policies and legislation; the meso level of implementation and the micro level of enterprises and basic utility service providers, following the coherent approach outlined in the previous section. The analysis should also reflect on the impact of capacity, policy and legislative gaps on the households' vulnerability. It is important to provide a detailed account of the shortfalls and their implications for the most vulnerable groups of the population, in order to develop action-oriented integrated solutions for the consideration of local, regional and national authorities. As they proceed to prepare the VLR, LRGs are advised to leverage their capacity by partnering with universities and well-established research institutions.

(e) Validation of the VLRs

34. The findings and recommendations emerging from the VLRs should be validated through a stakeholder meeting, which brings together representatives from relevant local and national government agencies, the national statistical office, the academia, business community, market support institutions, women's organizations and other civil society organizations. The emphasis should be on obtaining feedback as to the responsiveness of the integrated solutions as well as their feasibility and priority level (high, intermediate, and low). This means that the validation workshop should also aim at creating a consensus around an action plan, which sequences implementation of the agreed-upon integrated solutions by priority along a well-defined timeframe that spans from short-term (0-2 years) to medium (2-5 years) to long-term (>5 years).

(f) Arriving at an agreement for financing the implementation of the agreed-upon solutions

35. As the integrated solutions involve different parts of the local and national governments, it is important to use the coordination mechanism to consolidate solutions into specific programmes, initiatives and projects. The emphasis should be on arriving at a rough cost estimation, with a view to establishing the extent to which implementation can

³⁷ <https://sdg.lamayor.org/our-work/data-reporting-platform>.

³⁸ <https://datosabiertos.malaga.eu>.

be financed from the public purse. This means ensuring that SDGs are properly mainstreamed into national and local budgets and identifying innovative financing mechanisms for raising additional resources for covering the funding gaps, including public-private partnerships; emission trading schemes, such as the one launched by the European Union; and certified emission reduction (CER) credit.³⁹

VI. Recommended outline for structuring the Voluntary Local Reviews

- **Foreword**

A statement by the mayor detailing the city's strategic vision

- **Chapter 1. Introduction**

The introduction should provide a brief description of how the VLR is linked to local and national priorities along with a summary of the VLR's chapters.

- **Chapter 2. Methodology and approach**

This chapter should provide a brief description of the indicators used and the VLR development process.

- **Chapter 3. General overview of the city**

This chapter should start by highlighting the key challenges stemming from the city's geographic location, topology and hydrography, as these affect urban land use and cover, biodiversity and vulnerability to extreme weather. This should be followed by a description of the city's governance structure, with a special focus on the existing system of local governance and the extent of decentralization to LRGs. The chapter should then provide an overview of the city's spatial plan and strategic urban development strategy, with a focus on highlighting the main objectives forming the focus of LRGs.

- **Chapter 4. Review of the priority goals**

This chapter should provide a brief overview of progress toward each of the goals under review. The review should deliver into progress made under each associated target and provide a clear description of the key challenges and capacity shortfalls undermining the realization of the goals. The review of each goal should feature:

- A summary of local and national policies of relevance to the goal under review, focusing also on the extent to which national policies are aligned with local priorities. In this connection, cities are encouraged to consider referring to, or including information from existing VNRs.⁴⁰
- A brief evaluation of the city's progress toward each SDG, with a more detailed description of progress made under each associated global SDG indicator. In this regard, LRGs could use the KPIs for SCC and other national, regional and/or global indicators as additional indicators for providing a more nuanced assessment of progress toward the SDG under review.
- A summary of capacity gaps and major challenges undermining progress toward the goal, with capacity gaps divided into three areas: (i) urban planning and macro level of national policy-making and legislative reforms; (ii) the meso level of implementation (both the national and local levels); and (iii) the micro level of enterprises and utility service providers.

³⁹ CER credits are issued as part of the Clean Development Mechanism. See the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change website at <https://cdm.unfccc.int/about/index.html#:~:text=The%20CDM%20allows%20emission%2Dreduction,tar%20under%20the%20Kyoto%20Protocol>.

⁴⁰ ECE maintains an up-to-date inventory of VNRs undertaken by national governments in the region.

- Reflection on the impact of the capacity gaps on the most vulnerable segments of the population.
- A summary of the integrated, action-oriented solutions sequences by priority across a well-defined time framework.

- **Chapter 5. Mechanisms for financing the SDGs**

This chapter should provide a brief overview of the available financing mechanisms, including traditional (funds from the national government and official development assistance) and innovative mechanisms. The chapter should highlight the funding gap, requirements for proper mainstreaming of SDGs into local and national budgets, and the requirements for using the identified innovative financing mechanisms of choice.

- **Chapter 6. Conclusion and next steps**

This chapter should list the city's main commitments and highlight the steps that the city intends to take to leverage the required financial resources for delivering on these commitments.

- **Annex – The city's action plan for accelerating the achievement of the SDGs**

Annex

Key International Guidelines and Handbooks for Voluntary Local Reviews

<i>Publication and institution</i>	<i>New contributions to support local governments</i>
United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), 2020 The Global Guiding Elements for Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) of SDG Implementation	Provides general recommendations for structuring VLR reports.
UN-Habitat and UCLG, 2020 Guidance for Voluntary Local Reviews (Vol. 1). A Comparative Analysis of Existing VLRs.	Analyses the structure, content and methods of the 37 VLRs published as of June 2020 and highlights the intrinsic value of VLRs as a political process for enhancing coordination between different government spheres.
UN-Habitat and United Cities Local Governance (UCLG), June 2021 Guidance for Voluntary Local Reviews, (Vol. 2). Towards a New Generation of VLRs: Exploring the local-national link.	Highlights how linkages between VNRs and VLRs are playing out. This Volume explores the extent to which the localization of the SDGs and the untapped potential of local action are acknowledged in national reviews.
United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), 2020 Asia-Pacific Regional Guidelines on Voluntary Local Reviews. Reviewing local progress to accelerate actions for the Sustainable Development Goals	Provide practical tools, checklists and templates that local governments and other stakeholders can use for developing VLRs. These Guidelines are used by the Penang Platform for Sustainable Urbanization (PPSU), a multi-stakeholder partnership for leveraging cities' strengths and supporting local, regional and national governments in achieving the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda in Asia and the Pacific.
United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)	ECA, in partnership with UN-Habitat and UCLG Africa, launched Regional Guidelines for VLRs in Africa during the 2021 edition of the High-Level Political Forum. While connecting the 2030 Agenda and the Agenda 2063, the Guidelines provide a step-by-step template for the development of VLRs.
United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)	The date for the release of the ECLAC Guidance for Voluntary Local Reviews is to be determined.
United Nations Economic Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)	ESCWA, in partnership with UN-Habitat, is currently supporting cities in the MENA region to develop their VLRs, including Greater Amman Municipality (Jordan) and Agadir (Morocco). The Regional Guidelines of ESCWA will be developed according to the outcomes and lessons learned from primary VLR experiences in the region.

<i>Publication and institution</i>	<i>New contributions to support local governments</i>
European Commission, 2020 European Handbook for SDG Voluntary Local Reviews	The European Handbook for SDG Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) provides guidance to policymakers, researchers and practitioners for developing VLRs.
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2020 A Territorial Approach to the Sustainable Development Goals	Using a common set of indicators, the report helps cities and regions measure progress toward the SDGs and compare their performance to national averages and the averages of other cities.
Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, 2020 Roadmap for Localizing the SDGs: Implementation and Monitoring at Subnational Level	The Roadmap for Localizing the SDGs is one of the very first efforts of the Global Task Force, UCLG, UN-Habitat and UNDP to provide concrete support to local and regional governments in localizing the SDGs. As part of this alliance, the institutions created a series of learning modules on SDG localization .
