Background Paper

Connective Cities virtual Dialogue Event

"Strengthening the local implementation of SDGs through local reviews and monitoring"

In cooperation with the City of Bonn

26th, 27th and 29th April 2021

Hosted by

ZUKUNFT.
FUTURE.
AVENIR.
BONN.

Deutsche UNO-Stadt 1996 25 2021 Bonn — United Nations City in Germany

17 Goals.
One Future.

In cooperation with

UCLG
United Cities
and Local Governments

PLATFORMA
LOCAL & REGIONAL INTERNATIONAL ACTION

The purpose of this paper is to introduce the topic of the virtual dialogue event and to present the methodology used by Connective Cities to facilitate and initiate the international exchange. The first section provides a brief opening for the sub-themes, which will be discussed extensively during the virtual dialogue event and a general background to the main topic. This information forms the framework for the good practice examples and the challenges presented by participating practitioners during the event. The last section presents the methodology of Connective Cities and its different phases, from the pre-event preparation, through the thematic introduction, the exchange of good practices, the peer-to-peer consultation, to the joint project development.

Thematic introduction:
Strengthening the local implementation of SDGs through local reviews and monitoring

The Connective Cities virtual dialogue event aims to facilitate, on a practice-oriented level, the exchange of experiences, approaches and different aspects of strengthening the local implementation of SDGs through local reviews and monitoring. To this end, the virtual dialogue event will focus on three specific aspects:

- **Data availability and data collection systems:** to complement nationally collected data and bridge its gaps, cooperation with civil society, academia and businesses can support the identification of additional suitable indicators to ensure the quality and regular updating of SDG reports. E.g., by strengthening skills to better identify and use existing data.
- **Data-driven policy development and contribution to different levels of governance:** Local SDG reporting and data-driven information can help LRGs to assess status, adapt strategies and policies, and improve government capacities at all levels. E.g., identifying good practice examples from LRGs and their associations can support learning among the community of practice.
- **Quality citizen dialogue and stakeholder engagement:** Data-driven local SDG reporting can be used to improve communication with citizens and raise awareness of the SDGs among citizens, engage different urban actors, make the municipality's progress in SDG implementation more visible, and spark interest in accelerating action towards sustainable development. E.g., by defining a common language or using SDG-data in participative and stakeholder engagement processes.

Background

In recent decades, there has been growing international recognition of the importance of local and regional governments (LRGs) in sustainable development. Local actors have shown unprecedented engagement and leadership in addressing development challenges. The inclusion of SDG 11 *"Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable"* marked an important milestone in the role of LRGs towards sustainable development and has become a powerful driver of transformation for sustainable cities. LRGs play a key role not only for SDG 11, but also in contributing to the implementation

of the entire 2030 Agenda, as all SDGs have targets directly related to the responsibilities of LRGs. National governments alone cannot achieve the SDGs and, as the OECD states, *"beyond SDG 11, an estimated 65% of the 169 targets will not be reached without engagement of local and regional governments"* (OECD 2019). This makes LRGs essential partners for the achievement of the SDGs and crucial for monitoring and reporting on the progress in localising the SDGs.

UNDP defines SDG localisation as *"making the aspirations of the SDGs become real to communities, households and individuals, particularly to those who are at risk of falling behind"* and identifies accountability mechanisms, as well as inclusive planning and monitoring processes, as key drivers for the successful localisation of the 2030 Agenda (UNDP 2017). Therefore, the active involvement of LRGs in the entire process of SDG localisation strategies and priorities, from definition, implementation, to follow-up and monitoring is crucial (UCLG et al. 2020). LRGs have direct access to the needs of citizens and can play a catalytic role in improving the achievement of the SDGs. As frontline responders to their communities, LRGs have the potential to strengthen reliable and systematic, but also participatory and integrated monitoring and reporting systems (European Union 2019a).

The 2030 Agenda review mechanisms encourage Member States to *"conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels[1]"* (United Nations 2020). National governments present these reports, as agreed by the UN Economic and Social Council, on a voluntary basis at the July sessions of the UN High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (UNHLPF). While national governments may consult local actors during the elaboration of their Voluntary National Reviews (VNR), the process is country-driven and focuses on national efforts. As part of the SDG localisation process, some cities and regions have taken the lead and have become increasingly engaged in this review process by developing Voluntary Local Reviews (VLR) based on local data and localised indicators. In order to increase LRGs' awareness of their co-ownership of the 2030 Agenda and provide a platform for knowledge exchange at the local level, the Local and Regional Governments Forum has been organised under the framework of the UNHLPF since 2018. In 2019, this Forum witnessed the creation of the VLR Community of Practice and the signing of the VLR Declaration (UCLG et al. 2020)

New York City and three Japanese municipalities, Kitakyushu, Shimokawa and Toyama, were among the first to elaborate a VLR in 2018, with the aim of contributing to and complementing the information and data provided by their respective national governments to the UNHLPF (UCLG et al. 2020). Around 200 cities worldwide have joined the New York City initiative to further advance local SDG monitoring and reporting in the framework of the VLRs and, to date, almost 40 VLRs have been published. Officially, VLRs are not binding and there is still not universally agreed definition, methodology, structure or institution responsible for compiling a registry or providing legitimacy to these VLRs. Although one of the mandates of UNDESA's Sustainable Development Goals Division is to assist other stakeholders in their contributions to achieving the SDGs (UCLG et al. 2020). So far, the international community and different organisations or initiatives within and outside the UN System have collected and provided information or guidelines on SDG monitoring and reporting at the local level in order to bridge the information gap and help cities to overcome data management challenges (UCLG et al. 2020).

---

[1] Member States are required to submit at least two VNRs before 2030.

There is no official template for VLRs and, at the local level, disaggregated[2] indicators are incomplete or unavailable, or there are no clear systems for collecting information. Therefore, some LRGs have so far used some standardised guidelines provided by the UN to assist national governments with the VNRs, as well as other official indicator systems or the New Urban Agenda as a basis for their VLRs. A common practice has been to adapt, reformulate or correlate official indicators to local contexts and databases (UCLG et al. 2020). To develop the VLRs, LRGs have gone through measuring their own stand on SDG implementation in relation to their national average, as well as rethinking sustainable development from the bottom up, designing strategies to facilitate a multilevel governance dialogue and designing reporting structures (UN-HABITAT et al. 2016). VLRs, therefore reflect LRGs' commitment towards sustainable development, their diversity and their contexts in localising the SDGs (UCLG et al. 2020).

Some of the existing VLRs have been developed mainly by city hall departments or specialised offices, but others have demonstrated the key role that academia, research institutions, citizens associations and civil society initiatives can play in elaborating such reports (UCLG et al. 2020). Inclusive planning and monitoring processes involve considering local actors from setting goals, to determining implementation, to measuring and monitoring through indicators. Integrating the SDGs into local plans, as well as creating local monitoring and reporting systems represent an opportunity to strengthen decentralization and new forms of cooperative governance (UN-HABITAT et al. 2016). That said, although the VLRs are part of a voluntary process, their development represent "*a vehicle for sharing experiences, challenges and lessons learnt, as well as to open avenues for new partnerships to address any current shortcomings local and regional governments might confront*" (Koike et al. 2020).

VLRs have the potential to complement the information provided at the national level by strengthening vertical coherence, benefiting the actors involved and fostering localisation and implementation of the SDGs (United Nations 2020). According to UCLG, VLRs encourage local commitments, promote civic participation and ownership, accelerate local actions towards sustainable development and support learning among the community of practice (UCLG et al. 2020). In addition, participatory processes, and monitoring and reporting mechanisms with local indicators and disaggregated data help local governments to assess status, adapt strategies and policies, and improve government capacities at all levels (European Union 2019a). More than just a monitoring and reporting tool, VLRs allow local governments to listen to citizens' needs and reflect them in policymaking, generate self-reflection processes, enable a data-driven process that can be used for actions plans, and highlight the importance of local SDG implementation in the global debate on sustainable development (Koike et al. 2020).

Since 2015, more and more LRGs and their associations have committed in the localisation of the SDGs but lack experience in monitoring and reporting on SDG implementation. Regarding the last point, LRGs still struggle with lack of support from other levels of governance, adequate monitoring mechanisms to collect information and data, financial support and a common language to engage different stakeholders. A further challenge to overcome is the alignment and integration of local efforts into national review

---

[2] Information can be disaggregated "by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in the national context" (SDG Target 17.18).

processes (European Union 2019b). As part of the 'Decade of Action' launched by the UN to accelerate action towards achieving the SDGs and in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, UCLG and UN-HABITAT have, for example, launched a global mobilisation process for VLRs through a set of normative resources and guidance materials. In the light of these guidelines, UCLG and UN-Habitat recommend four elements for LRGs intending to develop a VLR or interested in experimenting with different approaches to consider: a) political legitimacy, which is important for a long-term strategy, b) a clear methodology and set of indicators, which are crucial for effective and replicable VLRs, c) an enabling environment for local strategy, and d) providing an analysis of SDG implementation consistent with available resources (UCLG et al. 2020).

As seen, the success of local SDG implementation has a direct impact on the success of the global achievement of the 2030 Agenda. Applying the SDGs as an integrated framework to align and engage different stakeholders in their local sustainable development agendas can consequently support public policy development, maintain a transparent process that facilitates dialogue between different stakeholders, enable all levels of governance to benefit from the results, and transfer knowledge and best practices to others (UN-HABITAT et al. 2016). Besides that, the current global crisis due to the Covid-19 pandemic has reminded us of the importance of building resilient and sustainable cities. Recovery must aim to "Build Back Better" anchored in leaving no one behind, and it is in this context that VLRs can be pivotal in transforming cities. There is a very diverse and valuable basis of experiences, benefits, challenges and lessons learnt among LRGs for monitoring and reporting on SDGs implementation. Therefore, an international exchange on this topic within the framework of Connective Cities is a relevant opportunity for promoting peer-to-peer learning and sharing of experiences and best practices across regions.

Connective Cities:
Methodology and work process

Connective Cities was launched in 2014 and since then, a highly participatory and practice-oriented strategy has been at the heart of every dialogue event. While initially the focus was on initiating an exchange of experiences between municipal actors from the global North and South to foster joint learning, the aim now is to jointly develop concrete and promising project ideas until they are ready for implementation in the respective home communities or twinning schemes. Dialogue events are geared towards international and German municipal actors, including representatives of municipalities, municipal companies, as well as representatives of civil society, academia and business. This wide range of municipal actors provides the right platform to pool experiences, discuss challenges, and generate ideas.

Already during the preparation, the participants take an active role in helping to shape the design, process, as well as the desired results of a dialogue event. The selection of topics is demand-oriented and reflects both the personal interests and the challenges faced by municipal actors. Each Connective Cities virtual dialogue event is a three-day learning process that is divided into four main, mutually supportive phases and complemented with some virtual excursions organized by the host organization. In terms of number of participants, experience has shown that a number of 20-30 participants enables an interactive approach and ensures the achievement of concrete results.

The starting point of a virtual dialogue event is an in-depth introduction to the topic with an invited expert (phase I), followed by the presentation of 'good practice examples' (phase II) from the participating cities and their challenges in implementing measures in working groups. On the second day, some of these individual challenges are discussed in depth in peer-to-peer consultation sessions (phase III) and practice-oriented solutions are elaborated jointly. On the third day, the most promising approaches for concrete implementation will be expanded in project ideas (phase IV). The joint development of ideas and proposals during this session lays the foundation for future project activities, which generate and disseminate practical solutions for sustainable urban development processes. At this point, participants agree on the next steps that will extend beyond the end of the dialogue event.

Even after a virtual dialogue event, Connective Cities continues to support the development of project ideas by establishing new networks, sending experts or delegations, organizing virtual exchanges and local project workshops, and advising on possible funding opportunities from the Service Agency in One World and other local or international sources.

Partners of Connective Cities

Commissioned by

Literature

European Union (2019a): The role of local and regional governments in monitoring and reporting progress on localizing the SDGs. Available on: https://europa.eu/regions-and-cities/programme/sessions/428_en#:~:text=Local%20and%20regional%20governments%20have%20a%20crucial%20role,will%20consequently%20support%20the%20development%20of%20public%20policies.

European Union (2019b): The SDG Voluntary Local Reviews. Methods, data, and experiences. Available on: https://europa.eu/regions-and-cities/programme/sessions/435_en

Koike, H., Ortiz-Moya, F., Fujino, J., Kataoka, Y. (2020): How can Voluntary Local Reviews contribute to the SDG Decade of Action? An Assessment of VLRs to Date. IGES. Available on:

https://www.iges.or.jp/en/publication_documents/pub/workingpaper/en/10803/State+of+the+Voluntary+Local+Review+2020+-+Final.pdf

OECD (2019): Achieving the SDGs in cities and regions. Available on: http://www.oecd.org/about/impact/achievingthesdgsincitiesandregions.htm

UCLG (2021): Localizing the SDGs. Available on: https://www.learning.uclg.org/localizing-sdgs

UCLG, UN-HABITAT (2020): Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews Vol.1: A Comparative Analysis of Existing VLRs. Barcelona. https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/07/uclg_vlrlab_guidelines_july_2020_final.pdf

UNDP (2017): Localizing the implementation of SDGs. Available on: https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/news-centre/speeches/2017/localizing-the-implementation-of-the-sustainable-development-goa.html

United Nations (2020): Department of Economic and Social Affairs – Sustainable Development: Voluntary Local Reviews. Available on: https://sdgs.un.org/topics/voluntary-local-reviews

UN-HABITAT, UNDP, GLOBAL TASKFORCE of Local and Regional Governments (2016): ROADMAP for localizing the SDGs – Implementation and monitoring at subnational level. Available on: https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/roadmap_for_localizing_the_sdgs_0.pdf

Partners of Connective Cities

Commissioned by

Deutscher Städtetag

ENGAGEMENT GLOBAL
Service für Entwicklungsinitiativen

with its
SERVICE AGENCY
COMMUNITIES IN ONE WORLD

giz Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development