

What's in a Voluntary Local Review?

Developing meaningful indicators to measure local Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) progress in the Nordics

POLICY BRIEF 2022:2



Nordregio



Introduction

Establishing meaningful indicators that correspond with local sustainability strategies towards 2030 requires considerable technical and operational resources on the part of Nordic municipalities. Therefore, implementing SDGs at the local level, in addition to determining how to report on SDG progress, remains a challenge. Nevertheless, several places across the Nordic Region have come a long way since localising efforts began after Agenda 2030 was launched by the UN in 2015. In recent years, there has been momentum around Voluntary Local Reviews (see Box 1). These reports have proven valuable as a holistic process and documentation to track SDG progress and governance.

This policy brief is based on the second of three webinars on Localising Agenda 2030 in the Nordics. It aims to highlight the shared experiences between Nordic municipalities and inspire local and national decision-makers to invest in and build capacity for measuring and reporting on SDG localisation. During the session, the cities of Espoo, Finland, and Helsingborg, Sweden, offered their best practices on developing and applying local indicator sets and shared how they went about conducting their respective VLRs. Panel experts from the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS) and the Icelandic Association of Local Authorities (Samband) also joined the discussion. The challenges of developing comprehensive methodologies suited to the local context, working across departments, and coordinating with fellow Nordic municipalities to report on common targets were among the topics addressed during the session.

What is a Voluntary Local Review?

Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) are, according to UCLG and UN-Habitat (2020), reports published by local authorities to assess and present how the fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda is developing from a local standpoint. VLRs have been identified as a potential vehicle to advance local action and foster holistic cooperation across public administration departments. VLRs have contributed to engagement and innovation on data production and management at the local level. Through participatory processes, a VLR may also help communities to make decisions and communicate a strong narrative while increasing the relevance of local governments as key actors to deliver results towards the global sustainability goals. Conducting a VLR can act as self-auditing tool for municipalities to analyse local progress, successes, or barriers to implementing sustainable development according to the 17 SDGs. For many cities, VLRs have helped mobilise multi-level dialogues and have made national governments more aware of localisation efforts through connections with Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) or Voluntary Subnational Reviews (VSRs).

There is currently no fixed format for developing a VLR, but several templates and instructive reports have been created to help generate ideas and provide an outline for municipalities interested in conducting their own review. All VLRs which have been submitted to the UN are publicly accessible online.

As of 2021, 14 VLRs have come from Nordic municipalities or counties. Many published their first reports in 2021, which speaks to the growing interest among local and regional authorities to use VLRs in SDG work. Mainly larger cities have published VLRs in the Nordic Region, reflecting a need for arenas where more actors can share lessons learned, experiences, and practicalities on how to evaluate work with localising Agenda 2030. Submitting a VLR can be part of this effort, but there are also other ways to monitor and review local SDG work if submitting a VLR is beyond a municipality's capacity at present.

Overview of Nordic Voluntary Local, Subnational, and National Reviews:

	<i>Norway</i>	<i>Sweden</i>	<i>Finland</i>	<i>Denmark</i>	<i>Iceland</i>
VLR	Asker, 2021 Viken County, 2021	Malmö, 2021 Stockholm, 2021 Helsingborg, 2021 Uppsala, 2021	Helsinki, 2019; 2021 Vantaa, 2020 Espoo, 2020 Turku, 2020	Gladsaxe, 2021	
VSR	The Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS)*, 2021 *VLRs in VSR reported include Trondheim, Oslo, Bergen, Møre and Romsdal Regional Authority	The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR), 2021			
VNR	Norway, 2016; 2021	Sweden, 2021	Finland, 2020	Denmark, 2021 2019	Iceland, 2019

Key Take-aways

Below are important tips for municipalities and regions looking to develop indicators relevant to the local context, track sustainability progress, or learn more about how a VLR can support Agenda 2030 governance, mainstreaming, and reporting.

- **It is not about the size of your city or municipality;**
any small, medium-sized, or large city can get started. As Helsingborg emphasised, SDG progress reporting could be even more comprehensible in a smaller city because the processes of choosing indicators and/or drafting a VLR might require less coordination. Do not let resources and capacity be a hindrance to kickstarting the work. Leaders from Asker Municipality also concur that the size of the municipality is not of great importance for implementing SDGs.
- **VLRs can support horizontal and vertical SDG action.**
The 'horizontal' VLR process enables municipalities to share experiences, knowledge, and lessons learned from their local sustainability work among on another or with other stakeholders, which can foster partnerships and investment towards the achievement of the SDGs across the Nordics. When it comes to vertical SDG action—national to regional to local knowledge exchange—increasing alignment between a country's VLRs, VSRs, and VNRs could help strengthen policy cohesion around Agenda 2030 and beyond.
- **Determining the right indicators is a multi-step process, but it will be key to measuring progress.**
Indicators with high-quality data to measure SDG progress exist at the national level in the Nordic countries, but these may not always correspond to local needs and targets. Adopting existing indicator systems as well as learning from municipalities who have well-developed systems and data collection methods may be useful when starting out. In 2021, for instance, Statistics Norway and KS developed a Norwegian taxonomy for the classification of any indicator relevant for the SDGs. The taxonomy identifies 469 relevant indicators, but not all will or need to apply to every municipality. Developing the right indicators may therefore involve some trial and error. The Nordic municipal and regional associations are resources to which local leaders can reach out for assistance.
- **Consider SDG sensemaking.**^[1]
What does it mean for a city to be committed to SDGs and their measurement? As Espoo suggested in their 'sensemaking' process, indicators need to work for the local context. Therefore, a strategic process for choosing relevant indicators should include a participatory process involving both citizens and stakeholders. Data protection may pose restrictions on the possibility to apply information from national to municipal level. Another challenge is that it can be difficult to ensure comparability between local indicators and national or international indicators. Where local data is not available, there may be some qualitative methods—through community surveys, local stakeholder group discussions, or other social engagement methods—for at least gaining an idea about what is successful, what is lacking, and what to prioritise.
- **New sustainability processes need not require duplicated efforts.**
Working toward the 2030 targets means optimising and continuing the good work already occurring through, for example, climate goals or strategies for improving quality of life. Where possible, municipalities can align indicator systems rather than creating distinct processes running parallel to one another.
- **Learn from Nordic frontrunners.**
Several Nordic cities and municipalities have been front-runners in localising the SDGs for years, and several are catching up. The cities and municipalities that have submitted VLRs or developed relevant local indicators could serve as models for many places seeking to do the same. Enhancing collaboration and communication across the Nordics could increase potential and overall added value.

1. See Taajamaa, V., Joensuu, M., Karanian, B., and Bettencourt, L. (2022). Seven Steps to Strategic SDG Sensemaking for Cities. *Administrative Sciences* 12: 33. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci 12010033>



Good Nordic practices

Why Espoo and Helsingborg?

These two Nordic municipalities have been able to catalyse their SDG localisation processes, making them front-runners in this work. With their respective approaches, Espoo and Helsingborg have made sense of how to measure progress and have both conducted comprehensive VLRs along the way. Emphasising quality of life with sustainability in daily practice reflects the language of Agenda 2030 as not just an action plan, but also an applied mindset for people and the planet. By adequately documenting, reporting, and disseminating SDG work, Espoo and Helsingborg can share valuable learnings, institutionalise knowledge from the bottom-up, and influence long-term decisions at both the local and national level.

Espoo

- **Finding a local story with global links.** Espoo sees contemporary challenges and balancing global developments (technological advancement, digitalisation, population growth) in a local context, which has motivated Espoo to adapt a place-based integration of the SDGs. With their well-established local story, Espoo was able to develop their first VLR, which was published in 2020 and presented in 2021 at the UN High Level Political Forum. Importantly, the municipality states that concretising goals and indicators of the Espoo Story is key to sustainable development work.
- **Mainstreaming strategy implementation.** “Why is it worth having a VLR and a city strategy side by side?” The city strategy sets the guidelines for a 4-year period, while a VLR provides a review of the strategy and provides the foundation for the next city strategy. The two should not be considered as separate documents but interrelated processes; interconnection increases the chance for comprehensive VLR outcomes. With this perspective, conducting a VLR or tracking SDG targets, is not some kind of test or checklist but a holistic journey for the municipality to navigate together.
- **Moving forward together.** As part of their SDG sensemaking process, Espoo considered each of the SDGs separately through a community-based, multistakeholder process. The joint discussions served as an evaluation process for the city. Once stakeholders identify which SDGs are relevant to focus on, the next questions are: Are we moving in the right direction? How far away are we from meeting this goal?
- **Identifying the obstacles is part of the ongoing process.** Despite the momentum to mainstream Agenda 2030 goals into strategies, Espoo still experiences challenges primarily due to the lack of time and other priorities such as solving economic difficulties. Espoo’s sensemaking process revealed that interpretations of Agenda 2030 can vary considerably among groups, and consistency needs to occur among involved parties.

- **Strong collaboration with other (Finnish) cities is crucial.** This is evident in the ways cities have used indicator frameworks and developed their steering processes to align city strategies, sustainability targets, and VLR reports. For example, Helsinki, one of the first cities in the world to produce a VLR, provided support to Espoo in developing their VLR

Helsingborg

- **Taking a holistic approach to sustainability work.** "In Helsingborg, we often say that social sustainability is the goal, economic sustainability is the means, and environmental sustainability is the condition required to achieve this." Long known for their climate adaptation and mitigation efforts, Helsingborg presented their VLR in 2021 as a means of effectively communicating their sustainability work and inviting mutual learning both within their own municipality and with other cities around the world. The VLR has analysed what is working well and identifies aspects of city life in Helsingborg which need improvement.
- **Helsingborg's Quality of Life Programme is the basis for SDG localisation.** The programme (updated in 2021) merges two aims: providing residents with high quality of life whilst encouraging residents to have a low environmental impact. It has been important in this process to elaborate on the connections between the programme and Agenda 2030, to understand the current situation, to find the biggest challenges, and to understand the interrelations between the local SDG context and the city region's impact on other regions' opportunities and sustainability developments.
- **Development of local indicators.** In their 2021 VLR, Helsingborg reports on nearly 60 quantifiable indicators using the Swedish national monitoring framework supplemented with their own indicators. Helsingborg is now in collaboration with RISE Swedish research institute developing a method to measure the preconditions of the city's quality of life. The method will be used in further assessments of sustainable development in Helsingborg with the aim to replicate this in other cities.
- **Reducing inequality and solving identified challenges is a key priority for the city.** Every goal in Helsingborg's VLR report was analysed through the lens of the 'leave no one behind' principle and the pandemic's impact. Taking an original approach, Helsingborg has also developed an Open Innovation Database displaying test-bed projects for sustainable solutions. Linked to the database, the city also has an overview of 15 selected challenges related to issues such as health, learning, and integration, and it welcomes external suggestions for solving such challenges.
- **Dedication to collaboration and deconstructing municipal silos.** The city has been able to involve different parties with knowledge about the SDGs and their meaning for the city as well as how to harness the right competencies to find new solutions for local sustainability progress.
- **Participatory processes in city development.** Like Espoo, Helsingborg has made citizens' inputs central in projects and initiatives. For example, the city has prioritised students' viewpoints in the revision of the sustainable development programme. In 2022, Helsingborg will host the youth fair, Utopia Lab, bringing together over 250 young people and 150 adults with the focus of inviting young people to the forefront of developing local solutions.

Further reading and resources

- [City of Espoo VLR](#) (2021): Using the Espoo Story as its foundation, this report reviews the various phenomena, projects, and actions of Espoo in accordance with Agenda 2030, developed through the cooperation of multiple units in the municipal government. See also [the Seven Steps to Strategic SDG Sensemaking for Cities](#).
- [City of Helsingborg VLR](#) (2021): This report analyses the city's progress towards each of the 17 SDGs in partnership with RISE Research Institute. See also the [Quality of Life Programme](#).
- [City of Asker VLR](#) (2021): Asker's first VLR uses the Bold City Vision framework (developed by Trondheim Kommune) and the U4SSC KPI methodology to review the municipality's work thus far as well as prepare a clear way forward in the coming years with a focus on strategic planning, budgeting, and management.
- [KS Voluntary Subnational Review-Norway](#) (2021): A report conducted by the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS) to review how all 356 Norwegian municipalities and 11 regions are working towards SDG implementation in their respective contexts as a way to connect municipal work and also link this work to Norway's 2021 Voluntary National Review.
- [Statistics Norway and KS: Taxonomy for indicators related to the Sustainable Development Goals](#) (2021): A classification system to assess indicators for the monitoring of SDGs, with a particular emphasis on implementation at the sub-national level.
- [Kolada database](#). Sweden's SALAR together with non-profit association RKA has developed and update a portal for all municipalities in the country to review and analyse SDG performance based on national statistics.
- [European Handbook for SDG Voluntary Local Reviews](#) (2020) by the Joint Research Commission (JRC) offers a framework for the selected indicators in a VLRs, and for these to be, as far as possible, comparable among European cities, as well as being tailored to the local context and issues.
- [Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews Volume 1: A Comparative Analysis of Existing VLRs](#) (2020) by UCLG designed to provide local and regional governments globally with key information developing a VLR.
- [Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews Volume 2: Towards a New Generation of VLRs](#) by UCLG Exploring (2021) explores the local-national links by emphasising VLRs and VNRs.

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About this Policy brief

This policy brief is part of the Nordic Council of Minister's Localising Agenda 2030 in the Nordics initiative. It builds on a series of webinars produced by Nordregio since 2020 to foster dialogue and strengthen knowledge exchange among municipal and regional representatives, research institutions, and civil society networks working with the SDGs.

The three-part webinar series focused on the topics of steering and local leadership for SDG integration, developments of Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) and indicator systems, and how to use public procurement to multiply sustainability efforts.

For more Agenda 2030 inspiration, visit: <https://nordregio.org/agenda2030local/>

See webinar recording for Policy Brief #2: <https://nordregio.org/events/reporting-on-sdgs/>

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