

UN75 and Beyond: Inclusive Multilateralism and Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) as a Tool: 23 October 2020

On the occasion of the UN's 75th anniversary (UN75) on 24 October 2020, this virtual meeting took place under the auspices of the "Daring Cities" forum, which connects the climate emergency and urban challenges. The meeting addressed: the central role of cities in climate governance given their high energy consumption and emission levels; UN75 and inclusive multilateralism; the City of Bonn joining the Voluntary Local Review (VLR) movement; and the German experience of inclusive multilateralism.

- More specifically, event sessions focused on:
- the ICLEI Blueprint, which calls for local and regional governments to be at the heart of the "new UN," as well as a new generation of inclusive multilateralism that fosters and incorporates multilevel collaboration to strengthen collective global action;
- VLRs as a unique tool to: facilitate civic engagement in local decision-making; support mainstreaming the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in local plans and strategies; guide public investments; and facilitate connections and peer-learning with other cities and regions; and
- VLRs role in: reviewing SDG implementation; compiling examples of what has worked on the ground; supporting integrated policymaking; and increasing stakeholder engagement.

The event was organized by ICLEI and took place on 23 October 2020 in a virtual format due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Brief History

Local and Regional Governments (LRGs) debuted their high-level political engagement with the UN in the post-COVID-19 era during the 2020 High-level Political Forum for Sustainable Development, which took place from 7-16 July. Through a number of events, LRGs discussed their role, needs, and challenges during the COVID-19 crisis. They also highlighted new tools they have developed to further their contribution to implementation of the SDGs.

The first event, "United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) and UN Habitat: VLR Series Launch," marked the launch of the first volume of the Series, "Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews" (VLRs)." The VLR Series aims to provide guidance, definitions, and technical support to any LRG seeking to engage in the VLR process. This work aims to increase awareness of local and regional government co-ownership of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda). The virtual launch event highlighted that localization of the 2030 Agenda is even



Panel speakers participating in the ICLEI event

more important in light of the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure no one and no place is left behind in its aftermath.

The second event, "Local and Regional Governments Day Event: Accelerating Transformation from the Ground-up in a Post-COVID Era," presented the benefits of establishing a joint agenda between local, national and international levels to bolster local action and accelerate implementation of the 2030 Agenda. During the event, LRG representatives highlighted the need for investments that support universal access to essential public services, green recovery, and revamped multilateralism to achieve the SDGs in the post-COVID era. The event also marked the launch of the UCLG report "Towards the Localization of the SDGs."

The third event, "Third Local and Regional Governments Forum on the 2030 Agenda: The Decade of Action – Bolstering Change from the Ground-up," identified essential elements for kicking off the Decade of Action from the perspective of the LRG constituency in the post-COVID recovery phase. The Forum emphasized the importance of multilevel governance, sound local finances, decentralized cooperation, and territorial cohesion in the post-COVID era. The Decade of Action calls for accelerating sustainable solutions to the world's biggest challenges related to,

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among others, poverty, gender, climate change, inequality, and closing the finance gap.

The fourth event, “Reactions of Local and Regional Governments to the UN75 Report,” discussed, *inter alia*, the findings of two reports: “The Future We Want, The UN We Need – Update on the Work of the Office on the Commemoration of the UN’s 75th Anniversary” and the “Visioning Report UN75: The Role of Local and Regional Governments in the Future Global Governance of the International System.” The latter report was drafted by the Global Taskforce of LRGs on behalf of the constituency, as part of the global consultation organized by UN Secretary-General António Guterres on the occasion of UN75. The event considered the best ways to take the findings of the reports forward at the local, regional and global levels. It also convened LRG and high-level UN representatives to discuss priorities for “recovering better” following the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the event addressed long-term LRG priorities, and what a renewed and networked multilateral system would look like.

ICLEI contributed to the response of the Global Task Force of LRGs to the UN75 report. ICLEI committed to accelerate localization of the Decade of Action, by calling, in its Blueprint to enhance UN collaboration with LRGs, for an inclusive new generation of multilateralism that addresses the COVID-19 pandemic, responds to the climate emergency, and adopts a new deal for nature.

Report of the Meeting

Opening of the Meeting

The meeting opened with participants watching a video introducing the Daring Cities 2020 forum.

Master of Ceremony Yunus Arikan, Head of Global Policy and Advocacy, ICLEI World Secretariat, explained the vision of the Daring Cities 2020 forum, noting it connects the climate emergency and urban challenges. He added that this event, which coincides with UN Day on 24 October, held particular significance in 2020 as the UN celebrates its 75th anniversary.

In opening remarks, Christoph Heusgen, Permanent Representative of Germany to the UN, noted that the twin crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis call for stronger multilateral responses. He highlighted that cities are central actors in climate governance as they are responsible for 70% of global energy consumption and 80% of greenhouse gas emissions.

UN75 and Inclusive Multilateralism

Martin Frick, Deputy Special Envoy, 2021 UN Food Systems Summit, outlined the history of how environmental issues went from peripheral to central at the UN. He then described the one-year consultation process that will precede the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit, including the possibility for local governments to organize independent food systems dialogues. Frick outlined a five-point action agenda for the Summit: ensuring safe and nutritious food for all; shifting to responsible consumption for food systems; boosting nature-positive production; supporting equitable livelihoods; and increasing resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks and stresses.

Emilia Sáiz, Secretary General, UCLG, noted new ways of consumption will be critical in the future, including democratic access to food. Noting current inequalities, she stressed the need to redefine social interactions and think of local service provision



Yunus Arikan, Head of Global Policy and Advocacy, ICLEI World Secretariat

in terms of understanding multilateralism. Sáiz also noted the need to transform food systems, governance, and relationship to the planet and each other. She emphasized that COVID-19 has brought all inequalities to the fore.

Frank Cownie, Mayor of Des Moines, US, and ICLEI Vice President and spokesperson to the UN, highlighted extreme weather events in his city are a reminder of a changing climate that affects local governments globally. He emphasized the ICLEI Blueprint, which calls for local and regional governments to be at the heart of the “new UN,” as well as a new generation of inclusive multilateralism that fosters and incorporates multilevel collaboration to strengthen collective global action.

Cownie stressed the four cornerstones at the heart of ICLEI’s proposal for multilevel collaboration in the age of inclusive multilateralism: global engagement through annual high-level consultations with the Chief Executives of the UN System; regional engagement through increased collaboration between the UN Regional Commissions and UN Host Cities; national engagement with UN Country Coordinators through national associations; and local 2030 hubs and local engagement, by mobilizing additional resources to champion local and regional governments engaged in the work of the UN.

City of Bonn Joining the VLR Movement

Moderator Shipra Narang Suri, Chief, Urban Practices Branch, UN-Habitat, said VLRs are not only about monitoring, but they can mobilize and galvanize action as well.



Emilia Sáiz, Secretary General, UCLG

Ashok Sridharan, Mayor of Bonn, Germany, and ICLEI President, presented Bonn's VLR, which he noted connects local reporting with key objectives of the SDGs. He added the VLR is based on 46 different indicators and serves as a tool to engage and communicate with stakeholders. Sridharan recognized New York City's role in inspiring other cities to present VLRs, and pointed to Bonn's long-standing commitment to sustainability. He highlighted its role as a global sustainability hub, adding that Bonn was one of the first cities in Germany to sign the model resolution on Agenda 2030 drafted by the Association of German Cities.

Maimunah Sharif, Executive Director, UN-Habitat, said VLRs are a unique tool to: facilitate civic engagement in local decision-making; support the mainstreaming of SDGs in local plans and strategies; guide public investments; and facilitate connections and peer-learning with other cities and regions. She added that UN-Habitat provides guidance to cities on developing their VLRs, beginning with Florence, Italy, and Moscow, Russian Federation.

Marvin Rees, Mayor of Bristol, UK, noted the SDGs are essential for life on land and sea, democracy, and women's rights, and offer opportunities for local governments to engage on a global platform. Rees highlighted Bristol's VLR and its development of a Global Goal Center, which offers an immersive experience for citizens to interact with the SDGs.

Penny Abeywardena, Commissioner for International Affairs, Office of the Mayor, New York City, US, described how New York City became involved with the SDGs and set up ways to share best practices to accelerate impact. She emphasized that more than 200 cities have agreed to develop VLRs, and how that has become even more important in the face of COVID-19.

In a round of reflections from ICLEI members, Stephany Uy Tan, Councillor of Catbagan, Philippines, and ICLEI Vice President, said Catbagan mainstreamed the SDGs in all areas of local governance. She described examples of implementation efforts, such as a programme opposing violence against women and children.

Manuel de Araujo, Mayor of Quelimane, Mozambique, and Africa Representative of ICLEI's Global Executive Committee, emphasized Mozambique's vulnerability to extreme weather events and the SDGs' usefulness in streamlining "discourse and actions" on the ground. He said Quelimane was the first city in Mozambique to devise a climate adaptation plan and has since shared its experience with other cities in the country.



Penny Abeywardena, Commissioner for International Affairs, Office of the Mayor, New York City, US

Riina Jussila, Sustainable Development Officer, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), said VLRs can: function as a new means of SDG implementation; support integrated policymaking within government; serve as a catalyst for partnerships; and be used as a communications tool between levels of government.

German Experience of Inclusive Multilateralism: A Vision for National and Global Engagement

Moderator Simona Costanzo-Sow, Learning Portfolio Manager, UN System Staff College Knowledge Center for Sustainable Development, highlighted this session would examine different experiences from Germany.

Stefan Wagner, Head, International Relations and Global Sustainability, City of Bonn, noted that VLRs are a means to champion contributions of local governance. He stressed the importance of the involvement cities in multilateral fora, especially the UN.

Sabine Drees, Association of German Cities, noted the SDGs are guidelines for global cities like Bonn. She also noted the role of German associations in helping develop sub-national reports and the need to increase the visibility of sub-national movements.

Marc Oliver Pahl, German Council for Sustainable Development, noted his organization advises the German government and seconded the view that local government plays an important role in so many issues, from sustainability to environment and equality. He stressed that in Germany a true model for integrated policymaking does not exist yet, with local government and community perspectives still not fully being considered.

Peter Lange, Foreign Federal Office, Germany, said his office has appointed a dedicated staff member that is responsible for urban diplomacy in order to connect the government with the urban diplomacy network. He added that multilevel cooperation was a logical progression from multilateralism and supported establishing a VLR city network.

Costanzo-Sow said reporting and monitoring can increase collaboration on the ground, and highlighted the role of cities as laboratories for transformative change.

Closing of the Meeting

In closing, Yunus Arian stressed that the need for multilevel governance is increasingly being recognized across the UN system, and recalled the strengths of ICLEI's Blueprint to enhance UN collaboration with LRGs.



Ashok Sridharan, Mayor of Bonn, Germany, and ICLEI President