

Empowering Local Voices: The Role of Participatory Research in SDG Voluntary Local Reviews

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Abstract

This report analyses the use of community-based, participatory methods in producing Voluntary Local Reviews. Since 2022, the Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy has supported municipalities with policy integration of the Sustainable Development Goals. Research teams together with three of these municipalities (Bijeljina in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Emboreet and Kibaha in Tanzania) applied community-based participatory research (CBPR) to collect data, information, and collective experience from the communities within the towns. The outcome VLRs work as a laboratory for an alternative kind of review on SDG implementation, with a focus on stories, perception, and co-ownership rather than on data, measurements, and indicators. This report explores the process that led to the VLRs, the contents of the reviews, and the lessons that can be learned for other local governments to adopt and contribute to a more inclusive and participative approach from the bottom up. It showed that more participation increases the community's perception of their ownership of decision-making, and that bottom-up VLRs can constitute a mechanism for citizens to affect, change and improve the policymaking process.

Preface



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

The mission of the Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is to contribute to poverty reduction by promoting local democracy. In order to fulfil this, we promote and encourage decentralised cooperation through municipal partnerships programme; adding capacity-building through our international training programmes; and investing in relevant research and creating important research networks. ICLD documents and publishes key lessons learned from our ongoing activities, initiates and funds relevant research, engages in scholarly networks, connects relevant researchers with practitioners, and organises conferences and workshops.

We support the localization and implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, including the development of Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) to trace progress at the local level. Sustainable development is only possible if it is just and equitable. Therefore, to make the greatest possible contribution to Agenda 2030, ICLD supports VLRs conducted with specific methodologies to advance a bottom-up perspective and uplift the voices of marginalized groups. The reports – developed by researchers and local governments together – aim at simultaneously strengthening local governments' capacity to engage citizens and implement Agenda 2030, and innovate monitoring mechanisms to capture local voices.

For this report, our question was “does it work?” Ciambra has explored the VLRs, fit them in the wider VLR universe, and concludes that yes, participatory monitoring of SDGs can be a tool for democratic policy development and community empowerment.

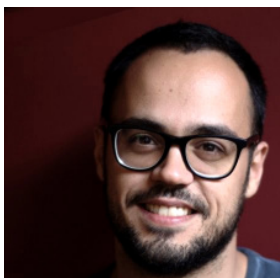
As such, the report captures ICLD's approach to research, and how research can interact with policy-making to directly improve democratic quality of local administrations.

I hope that this study can inspire others to explore participatory methods in research as well as policy-making so that more citizens in local communities are asked, listened to, and empowered to participate in shaping their reality. My genuine opinion is, to fight poverty and reach the ambitious goals set out by Agenda 2030, change must be anchored at the local level by means of equity, participation, transparency, and accountability – and leave no one behind.

Visby, Sweden

Johan Lilja,
Secretary General, ICLD
May 2024

About the author



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Executive summary

The context

Since 2016, a growing number of local governments have increasingly institutionalised their contribution to the monitoring of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their implementation through Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) — a diverse type of report where subnational governments provide evidence, data, and testimonies of the way their communities and territories are introducing the SDGs, and how these are ultimately changing and improving their policy-making processes and the lives of their citizens and residents.

By early 2024, at least 167 local reviews are publicly available and many more are being drafted and prepared by municipalities and regional governments from all over the world. International institutions have provided support via training, templates, horizontal cooperation, and mutual learning initiatives between various local governments. While the data in the VLRs has been essential to highlight the local level's contribution to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, the VLR movement has no institutional organisation behind, and many local and subnational governments still perceive the SDGs as too far from their daily work. Official indicators are based on data and information that many local governments cannot provide or manage, and this has widened the gap between local governments and the political push to fully achieve the SDGs by 2030.

For years, the International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) has supported local governments in around 15 target countries to improve local democracy by means of inclusion, participation, and policy ownership. The SDGs, with their transversal impact on so many policy dimensions — from food security to environmental protection, social fairness, gender equality, decent work, and climate change mitigation — have been a powerful tool to involve and empower even more local governments in ICLD's activities. At a time in which more local governments than ever are looking for an opportunity to publish their VLR and participate in the global monitoring process, in

2022 ICLD explored possibilities to develop VLRS where the process itself amplified democratic practices in local governance. It selected three applications by research teams affiliated with their respective municipalities — Bijeljina (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Emboreet, and Kibaha (Tanzania). Following up on a training initiative on community-based participatory research (CBPR), ICLD and the teams tested a different approach to the VLR: one in which the information is provided directly through dialogue, storytelling, surveying, and first-hand feedback from the communities and their representatives.

ICLD's participatory VLR project

Research teams collaborated with community representatives, organisations, and members of local administrations in the towns of Bijeljina, Emboreet, and Kibaha respectively for the development of their VLRs. The review was conducted based on a template that ICLD had adjusted to the characteristics of the communities and the focus on inclusion, building on the previous experience of international institutions in similar endeavours. While a town like Bijeljina had already worked — internally but also in collaboration with other Bosnian municipalities — on issues of local sustainability, gender equality, and social inclusion, Emboreet and Kibaha also wanted to use the VLR to introduce the SDGs in the policy toolkit of their administrations, creating a new channel for organised communities and associations to reach the decision-making process and contribute new priorities and needs to the public debate.

All VLR teams were invited to adopt CBPR methods in their approach to the communities. While this diverged from the main trends with VLRs — most subnational governments try and adapt the official performance indicators to their own reality and available resources — it also provided a unique, real-life laboratory to test a new approach to SDG monitoring. The outcomes were significant and ICLD hopes these can be replicated in different contexts going forward. The participatory VLRs constitute:

- **A new inclusive tool for bottom-up VLRs.** Teams met in person with the community, distributed surveys, asked questions, collected stories, first-hand accounts, requests and complaints from residents and citizens. This provided valuable information on how introducing the SDGs works at community level and new ‘qualitative’ information on how people and communities live the localisation process.
- **A tool for monitoring but also a channel to voice community needs.** On the other hand, through the public process of writing their VLR, the teams made the SDGs a tool for communities to actually affect, change, and even improve the policy-making process. By contributing to the definition of what food security, accessible education and health, gender equality, just employment or sustainable communities mean in their territory and towns, the people involved via CBPR tools also helped re-define local priorities, re-direct local investment, and make local government more accountable and transparent to their requests.

This report describes in more detail the contents of the VLRs, the relationship between communities and local government, the SDGs that were reported on, and the current state of development of localisation.

Lessons learned for community-based work on the SDGs

The work performed at Bijeljina, Emboreet, and Kibaha was ground-breaking in that it paves the way for a different, bottom-up, and inclusive approach to SDG implementation at the local level. To be replicated elsewhere, several lessons can be learned from the process that led to the three participatory VLRs:

- **Community-based work can be empowering.** The participatory VLRs provided an opportunity also to those communities that ordinarily would not have the capacity to manage data, measure performance, or evaluate policy in the way that conventional reviews or monitoring tasks require. One lesson learned vividly reported by the VLR teams was that stories, anecdotes, personal experiences, needs or requests at neighbourhood, family or household level were as meaningful and relevant units of information as the figures, data, and hard numbers that are generally collected in more quantitative monitoring. Inclusive methods can empower the individual making their contribution as necessary as the information that is usually collected at municipal, regional, or even national level.
- **Cooperation and mutual support will always be essential.** The lack of awareness on SDGs, the policy process, or the lack of human and technical resources to perform a review can often be a disincentive for local participation. Inclusive methods alone are often not enough to mobilise a community or provide purpose for participation. In this regard, all VLRs mention the relevance of community-building with other municipalities, the exchange of information among peers, the replicability of certain methods and techniques as a way to avoid shortcomings and increase the efficiency of the research process. Geography and logistics, cultural divides, the persistence of traditional (e.g., patriarchal) patterns in social organisation are extremely common obstacles that can hinder research work and demotivate participants. Imitation and complicity, comparability and co-ownership among municipalities that share background conditions, and a common purpose can be very valuable drivers of commitment.
- **Legitimacy beyond the SDGs.** Coming together for the VLR made it clear to community members that association and advocacy can be legitimate tools to shape local policy and make the process far more consistent with local needs and priorities. The SDGs and the VLR have, in other words, shown that more participation increases the community’s perception of their ownership of the decision-making process. Organised participation makes the community more responsible for the choices that are made, but also provides an access to self-determination that would not be so easily available otherwise. The transversality of the SDGs makes them the ideal framework to ‘open’ these processes to the community, and the VLR can amplify this message and help expand this movement through participation, imitation, and replication.

Introduction

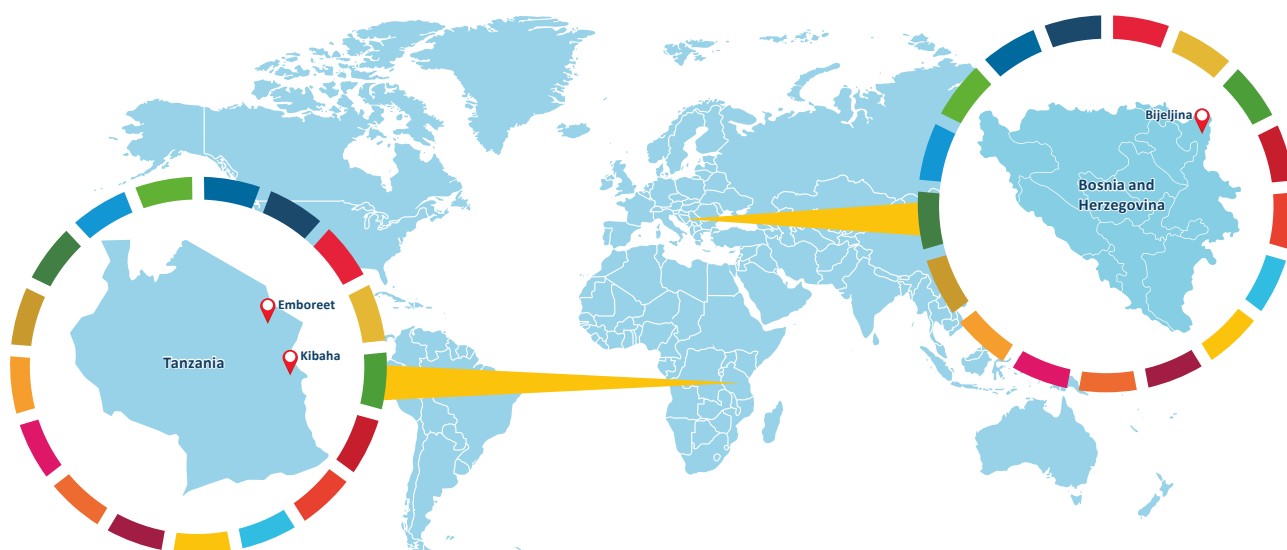
Over the past few years, a growing number of subnational governments have developed VLRs to monitor and report on the degree of implementation of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in their territory and communities (Narang Suri et al., 2021; Ortiz-Moya & Kataoka, 2022). However, ICLD suspected it was possible to make VLRs a tool of community empowerment, and better capture local voices and realities.

Following a training activity on community-based participatory research (CBPR) — co-led by ICLD and the University of Victoria CIFAL in collaboration with the University of Dar es Salaam — a call for CBPR-driven VLRs was opened: the municipalities of Bijeljina (Bosnia-i-Herzegovina) and Emboreet and Kibaha (Tanzania) were then selected for a grant to develop their VLR with the assistance of researchers.¹

This report has three main objectives: a) to review the outcomes of this process and analyse the VLRs that the three municipalities have produced; b) to assess whether VLRs carried out through more participative frameworks provide valuable information about how SDGs are being implemented locally; and c) to assess whether specific policy initiatives or activities at the community level — otherwise at risk of remaining unnoticed — are effectively contributing to SDG implementation and could be replicated in

or adapted to other local contexts. By dissecting the process that has led to the VLRs, the relationship between research teams, local administrations, and the community and grassroots organisations involved, this report aims to contribute to the development of community-based methods. Establishing a theoretical framework in which more local and regional governments can develop their own agenda and methods would be an empowering tool for researchers looking for evidence that bottom-up action is crucial for the implementation of the SDGs, and that the impact of the SDGs on the lives of communities and territories goes well beyond what can be pictured in indicators, figures, and rankings.

Section 1 provides detail on the key concepts around which the paper is built: the SDGs, the VLR and their evolution as a monitoring tool, and participative approaches to policy analysis. Section 2 reviews the contents of the three VLRs from a more technical and comparative perspective. Section 3 analyses the process of the VLRs, with specific attention paid to involved stakeholders and the effect the participative process had on the community. The conclusions, finally, provide an overview of the main findings and a few key recommendations for other local governments and international institutions willing to replicate the process and its participatory approach in different contexts.



¹ The selection process developed as follows: a call for interest among municipalities within ICLD's partner countries was followed by open applications for researchers applying in partnership with a local government from the list. Priority was given to ICLD partner countries that 1) had been part of the CBPR training, and 2) were expected to submit a Voluntary National Review in 2023, in order to coordinate the review process at different levels.

SDG localisation from the unique perspective of communities

The United Nations officially adopted the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 as the latest global framework for sustainable development policies and initiatives. Their 17 Goals and 169 policy targets cover, among others, hunger, education, health, energy, water, peace, labour, justice, and sustainable cities. The goals are designed to “leave no one behind”, a powerful principle through which the global community has vowed to address “absolute deprivations by global standards” and support groups and communities within all countries that are systematically marginalised, oppressed, or deprived of fair socio-economic opportunities (Samman et al., 2021, p. 18). The 2030 Agenda was established as an intergovernmental framework and as such adopted by UN member states. As part of their efforts to monitor the effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda, national governments have committed to submit Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) every year to the UN’s High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), reporting on progress in SDG implementation and showcasing policies and initiatives designed to fulfil the Agenda.

As early as 2016, however, local governments began to see the impact that the SDGs could have on local development, improved participation and local democracy — especially as SDG localisation became a necessary complement to their achievement. It quickly became clear for the international community that the local dimension of SDG implementation was as essential as intergovernmental commitment: “up to 65% of the SDG targets are at risk should local urban stakeholders not be assigned a clear mandate and role in the implementation process” (Cities Alliance et al., 2015, p. 13). Over the first few years of the SDG framework, the concept of localisation embodied the need for “translating the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development into local measures and impacts that contribute to the global achievement of the SDGs” (Siragusa et al., 2022, p. 7). In July 2016, the government of the Valencian Community, a region of Spain, published the earliest report on local policy adaptation to the 2030 Agenda, alongside a set of measures that the local government had planned for the integration of the

goals within the day-to-day functioning of local policy. By then, early studies had already invited global actors to “engage local thinking, knowledge and experience in connection with intergovernmental processes” (Graute, 2016, p. 1933).

Voluntary Local Reviews and their current global ‘enabling environment’

Global networks and institutions such as United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), UN-Habitat, and the UN’s regional economic commissions began supporting local governments “beyond the simple adaptation of global goals to the local level”. The concept grew to include “political will, co-creation with our communities” and “solutions at the local level for the global challenges and objectives” of the SDG era (UCLG & GTF, 2018, p. 8). It is within this enabling environment that several cities began publishing data they had available locally, often thanks to the direct input and collaboration of communities and local stakeholders. In July 2018, New York City and three Japanese municipalities officially presented their Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) during the HLPF. This is often considered the starting point of an organised ‘movement’ of local SDG action, and VLRs have been a substantial part of it since its earliest stages.

Since their inception as informal and diverse local reports on SDG implementation, the VLRs have grown into a litmus test for the health of the localisation movement. There are almost 170 VLRs currently available: considering also the three participatory VLRs of this study, 127 of these reviews have been published by 104 different municipalities. Only two early frontrunners had drafted a VLR in 2016. In 2018, a total of 13 documents had been published. By 2020, however, the movement had reached a critical mass of 86 VLRs available from municipal, provincial, and regional governments in Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin and North America. The current map (Figure 1) is a snapshot of the situation at the end of June 2023. Significant increases in VLR activity and local government participation are visible in areas such as Eastern Africa, Central America, and Southern Europe and Turkey – regions that have begun participating later, but consistently. Several of these countries fall

within the scope of ICLD's priority initiatives for partnership and dialogue on local democracy and the SDGs.

Much of the work on VLRs has been amplified by the support of several international institutions and organisations. UN-Habitat has provided technical and formal capacity-building to several communities for their VLRs, including those of Bhopal (India), Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), or Trujillo (Peru), among several others. UN-Habitat hosts what is likely the most up-to-date repository of VLRs online.² It has developed a standardised monitoring toolkit – the Global Urban Monitoring Framework – to make data-driven analysis of SDG localisation accessible even to territories and communities endowed with fewer technical resources and capacity.³ UN-Habitat has also launched, as recently as in August 2023, its SDG Localisation platform, where it is centralising the resources that the organisation has been offering to local governments to increase participation, awareness, and local commitment to the 2030 Agenda.⁴

UCLG has been a key actor in the localisation community since the inception of the SDGs. It has pioneered studies on local government engagement in SDG implementation since 2018 and has supported their participation by setting up an enabling environment within the global monitoring system.⁵ UCLG has also coordinated a series of Voluntary Sub-National Reviews (VSRs) — a hybrid form of localisation report that emphasises the role of territorial cohesion and horizontal cooperation — in close collaboration with national associations of local governments. VSRs have provided smaller municipalities, rural regions, and other underrepresented or isolated local governments an opportunity to take part in the monitoring process that otherwise would have probably remained beyond their reach.⁶

The European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC) has curated two European handbooks on VLRs and a

hub of localisation-related publications, with analysis of data-driven information and indicators in the local reports. The JRC has collaborated closely with pilot and early-adopter groups in two large projects – URBAN2030 I-II and REGIONS2020 – on SDG localisation. The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), an UN-backed non-profit, has developed a set of standardised indicators, a real-time implementation dashboard,⁷ and a range of locally based publications on the SDGs,⁸ providing what is perhaps the most up-to-date picture of national implementation available. Several other global and regional institutions have served as a platform for capacity-building or as a venue for horizontal cooperation.

Ultimately, the greatest advancement in local SDG monitoring has been a swift change in the way local governments approach the local review, and what VLRs have come to mean for communities around the world, large or small. Several analysts have noted that “over time, VLRs started to be considered a process rather than a tool” (Siragusa et al., 2022, p. 20). While the latter was certainly useful for the local government movement to “present local achievements” and give visibility to the piecemeal, constant work of local communities for the realisation of the 2030 Agenda, VLRs as co-owned and community-wide processes “enhance and expand the political and social commitment” of local stakeholders and help guide “local priorities and development planning” (Narang Suri et al., 2021, p. 726).

Seeing the VLR as a “tool for telling your local story” (UNECA et al., 2021, p. xv) has also endowed local governments with an additional tool for policy transparency and increased accountability of local decision-makers. The VLR discloses to a larger public what decisions have been made and why; what elements of the SDGs have been integrated into the local priorities or development plans.

² The full database is available at this link: <https://unhabitat.org/topics/voluntary-local-reviews>.

³ Work on the Framework is in progress. News is available at this link: <https://www.urbanagendaplatform.org/news/un-system-wide-urban-monitoring-framework-being-developed-support-local-and-regional>.

⁴ The platform is accessible online at this link: <https://sdglocalization.org/>.

⁵ A repository of UCLG's localisation reports to the HLPF is online at this link: <https://gold.uclg.org/report/localizing-sdgs-boost-monitoring-reporting#field-sub-report-tab-0>.

⁶ More details on VSRs (including the sub-national reviews of ICLD focus countries, Botswana, Kenya, Rwanda Tanzania, and Zimbabwe) are available on UCLG's local democracy observatory: <https://gold.uclg.org/report/localizing-sdgs-boost-monitoring-reporting#field-sub-report-tab-1>.

⁷ The dashboard can be accessed online at: <https://datahub.sdgtransformationcenter.org/overview>.

⁸ SDSN's online library is accessible online at: <https://sdgtransformationcenter.org/online-library>.

Figure 1. Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) published between 2016 and 2023





Untapping the participatory potential: methods and approaches to bottom-up knowledge

Integrating the SDGs into local policy can open new opportunities of influencing and guiding the policy-making process also for actors or stakeholders – such as grassroots organisations, residents, and community leaders – that would have otherwise met additional resistance.

A participatory VLR is expected to take note of what the community identifies as a priority or a necessity for its development, progress, and well-being. This kind of self-assessment on where a community stands in terms of SDG localisation, and what doors are being opened for the community to act alongside local government, have been key elements of ICLD's approach to SDGs, monitoring, and bottom-up inclusiveness.

Furthermore, a participatory VLR can help complement official data or provide first-hand information that may otherwise not fit into the more conventional approach of indicators, data, performance, and policy showcasing. The key added value, however, is that a participatory approach is inherently “more transparent”, inclusive, and respectful of the diversity of the communities that are being monitored.⁹ A participatory VLR can turn SDG implementation into an actual act of political empowerment for the underrepresented. ICLD's overall VLR project and initiatives set out to study whether the work with these three communities has been a step forward in this direction.

During the project's preparatory meetings, the authoring teams agreed that a more inclusive and participatory bottom-up process was essential to prevent VLRS from either being an “over-bureaucratic” exercise or simply providing a one-side account of the local government's decision.¹⁰ These concerns may be warranted when looking at available VLRS since the first documents were issued in 2016. There has not been a meaningful trend of VLRS in which communities and stakeholders have been directly involved in the provision of most key data and information or in the drafting of the review itself.

Simple discursive analysis shows that at least 71 VLRS mention participatory budgeting, practices, or approaches among their tools or policy good practices. There are about 6,200 mentions of ‘community’ across at least 115 VLRS. Actual participatory review work, however, has been sporadic. In 2019, for instance, a consortium of grassroots organisations and civil society groups developed and published a localisation report for the small British town of Canterbury (Canterbury SDG Forum, 2019). In several other occasions local governments have built their VLRS on a transparent and cooperative dialogue with civil society and communities, including them at various stages of the monitoring process or for the validation of the contents of the reviews. The authors of the VLR of Shimokawa (Japan) were observers in various awareness-raising workshops, initiatives, and trainings targeting students and local stakeholders. The city of São Paulo (Brazil) set up an internal SDG department that led activities in 26 of its prefectures, and engaged local stakeholders, academia, and businesses in the definition of over 390 localised indicators.

The latter examples are a testament to the degree of involvement of communities and civil society in VLR processes through time, but at the same time are also instances of top-down actions in which the initiative lay almost entirely with the local government. In other words, ‘fully’ inclusive VLRS are simply not available to such an amount that would warrant considering them as a specific type of ‘participatory VLR’.¹¹

Community-Based Participatory Research

There exists relevant literature on the impact that bottom-up engagement can have to shape informed and inclusive policy decisions taken at the local level. One key entry in this analytical framework is the experience of community-based participatory research (CBPR). For many years now, CBPR has been relevant as a “collaborative approach” in which research and practice are “driven by an equitable partnership that is formed between relevant community members, organizational representatives, and academic researchers”

9 E-meeting of the authors and ICLD staff, held on June 14, 2023.

10 E-meeting of the authors, ICLD staff, and VLR teams from Bijeljina, Emboreet, and Kibaha, held on May 9, 2023.

11 Since proving that such a review is in fact possible was one of the main expected outcomes of the ICLD project with the towns of Bijeljina, Emboreet, and Kibaha, participatory VLR is also the label adopted in this report to refer to these three reviews.

(Coughlin et al., 2017, p. 2). This formula has largely been applied in public health and environmental research (Minkler et al., 2008) and has been especially effective when engaging hard-to-reach recipients, minorities, or other communities at risk of systematic exclusion (Vaughn et al., 2017).

Among collaborative and participatory approaches, citizen science has also been particularly active in bridging the gap between the production of data and information at the level closest to the population and its impact in terms of policy decisions and guidelines. Citizen science has investigated for decades now (Irwin, 1995; Kullenberg & Kasperowski, 2016) the “point where public participation and knowledge production... meet” (Irwin, 2015, p. 29). Citizen science, however, has also developed as something more than simply resorting to locally sourced information – even if through scientifically refined methods. Consistent with the views that acknowledge the unique contribution of the local level to the achievement of global, transversal frameworks such as the SDGs, participatory approaches are recalibrating to consider “the role of citizens as stakeholders of the outcomes of research” (Haklay et al., 2021, p. 2), i.e., to study the information that the local level, its representatives, associations, residents, grassroots activists, and innovation drivers can provide when they are actively engaged in the cocreation of policy that they perceive as also their own and tailored to the needs and capacities of their communities and territories. This branch of citizen science, in other words, has been focused on how participation and involvement can empower a community if it feels that the outcomes of the process can improve the actual result of policy, and can make that policy closer to the needs expressed by the participants.

More data-oriented studies on the SDGs and citizen and community science have also emerged,¹² especially with a focus on indicators and implementation performance.

Report Methodology

The report analyses in detail the work of three municipalities – Bijeljina (Bosnia-i-Herzegovina), Emboreet and Kibaha (Tanzania) – to carry out their VLRs with the technical and institutional support of ICLD. This desk research has been supported by the provision of various previously published drafts of the VLRs, alongside internal working documents provided directly by the authoring teams involved in the review process. ICLD staff has been available throughout the drafting process to provide any support in terms of information, communication among teams, and the specifics of the VLR programme.

Information from the analysis of the documents was complemented and supported by semi-structured interviews with the three authoring teams.¹³ The three VLRs were also compared with information, structure details, and specific contents from the 166 VLRs from other local governments available at the time of writing.¹⁴

Finally, the authoring teams were asked to fill in a short survey (six questions), focusing on their appraisal of the reviewing process and recommendations for its improvement or refinement. Because of the compositions of the teams, the survey’s N of replies was relatively small (N = 6), but this was enough to include all authors in the survey and provide a reasonably reliable sample to obtain basic inferences on their perception of the VLR process. Outcomes of the survey are analysed in Annex 1.



Photo 1. Local government officials and researchers from Kenya, Tanzania and Sweden during a joint training on Community-Based Participatory Research in Dar es Salaam in 2022.

Photo: Ida Edvinsson

¹² See for instance Cabra et al., 2023; Gacutan et al., 2023; Grossberndt et al., 2023 in a dedicated special issue on Citizen Science: Theory and Practice: <https://theoryandpractice.citizenscienceassociation.org/articles/10.5334/cstp.563>.

¹³ All authors were provided a set of common questions including, among others, questions on their target community’s familiarity with the SDGs; the concrete aspects of engaging with the communities through participatory methods and techniques; follow-up on the process in terms of undertaken initiatives and local policy developments; assessment of method effectiveness; and an evaluation of the process’s key strengths and challenges.

¹⁴ This report refers to the VLR repository of UN-Habitat, available online at: <https://unhabitat.org/topics/voluntary-local-reviews>.

Community-based participatory VLRS: process, vision, and contents

The selection of Bijeljina in Bosnia-i-Herzegovina, Emboreet in Tanzania and Kibaha in Tanzania was the outcome of ICLD's open call for applications from municipalities interested in developing a VLR through participatory methods, and of researchers to lead the review process. The specific context of each municipality involved had an impact on their willingness to apply; on the information the researchers were able to collect via participatory methods and processes; and on the way this information was presented – as well, of course, as on the SDGs that were eventually included in their analysis.

Building on CBPR, selected VLRS were required to be based on collaborative and inclusive processes to value these communities' own understanding of the SDGs and their impact at the local level. CBPR was recommended as the analytical framework of reference: existing work with marginalised groups (Tobias et al., 2013; Vaughn et al., 2017) and various dimensions of environmental and social sustainability (Boyce et al., 2014; Minkler et al., 2008) shows that CBPR is a versatile tool to address diversity and complexity of policy initiatives that grow from the bottom up.

This section explores this process and how the three participatory VLRS have been eventually developed.

Recruitment process

The process set in motion by ICLD is rooted in the long-standing work that the organisation has carried out to assist local administrations and communities through improved local democracy, inclusion, and social participation. The core of ICLD is a Municipal Partnership Programme which promotes collaboration, mutual learning, and institutional support between Swedish municipalities or regions and their counterparts in a group of partner countries.

Through the programme, the Tanzanian towns of Emboreet and Kibaha already had an established part-

nership with two Swedish municipalities – Strängnäs and Gotland. When ICLD opened its call for local governments willing to develop a community-based local review, the representatives of both Emboreet and Kibaha supported the towns' case for taking part in the project. The University of Dar-es-Salaam, which had hosted the ICLD training in participatory methods attended by both municipalities, offered support as a research intermediary between the organisation and both municipalities. This kind of academic expertise was deemed essential for the preparation of a more technical document with specific requirements in terms of methods, expected results, and outreach. Two working groups were established to work with the representatives of Emboreet and Kibaha, thus guaranteeing methodological consistency and comparability across the two community-based reviews.

In Bijeljina, the initiative instead came from the research team. This showed that links to academia can play a role in the recruitment of municipalities. Skripta, the working group in Bijeljina, has a long-standing research experience with local governments, grassroots organisations, and community advocacy within Bosnia-i-Herzegovina. Skripta researchers had previously supported local efforts for intermunicipal collaboration on various sustainability and topics related to inclusion – with particular attention to the mainstreaming and institutionalisation of gender equality policy, initiatives, and inclusive culture. In Bijeljina, Skripta also collaborated with staff involved in the city's SDG localisation and integration process through previous work via the Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe (NALAS).¹⁵

One relevant aspect of local communities' recruitment in the participatory VLR process was the fact that local governments, residents, and local associations and organisations had a diverse degree of previous knowledge or contact with the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. Certain local governments had already been active towards some degree of SDG localisation, some communities had no previous knowledge of the framework. Meth-

¹⁵ The organisation, which coordinates the initiatives of 14 full members and 7 associate members in 11 countries across the Balkans, South-East Europe, and Turkey, also has previous experience providing support to SDG implementation local and regional reviews. Alongside UCLG, NALAS supported the work of the Association of Romanian Municipalities and the Association of Communes of Romania on the country's Voluntary Sub-National Review of SDG implementation (Stănescu & Bilan, 2023).

odologically, this was a significant element – different VLRs were going to be developed in different contexts endowed with a very variable familiarity with the SDGs and their vision of local future and action.

Ultimately, the relevance of the link with ICLD and its initiatives goes beyond this specific programme. The community-based VLRs are the outcome of a new, co-owned process. This is part of a larger process in which technical and institutional support by international organisations and local government networks is working as an incentive for participation and a venue for mutual learning and empowerment. Even before the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, cities and local governments have advocated for their full consideration as members of the international community, and the bearers of a unique and specific contribution to global policy and common goals and frameworks (Ljungkvist, 2014). Institutional support from organisations that embody these frameworks and support those values are “an important source of legitimacy for cities”, as they realise that their efforts are not in a vacuum or self-referential: rather, they “step into the global arena through collaborative configurations” and as “a node in a wider city network”, making it easier to reach a critical mass of like-minded communities and stakeholders (Martínez, 2022, p. 105).

The VLR cities and their SDG background

Bijeljina



In the context of Bosnia-i-Herzegovina, Bijeljina was one of the earliest front-running municipalities in the country to work on SDG localisation. City administration had been supportive of SDG implementation at the local level for at least the latest two terms. It had also institutionalised SDG localisation since the earliest stages, especially by establishing a Local Economic Development and European Integration (LED) policy unit. The LED unit has been particularly effective because of “skilled and agile... management and staff” and has been fully open to collaboration with the authors’ group in the development of the VLR (Sarajlic et al., 2023, p. 8), as well as to a consistent engagement with local stakeholders and community representatives to meet the town’s development targets.

Bijeljina’s proactiveness on sustainability, equality, and the integration of the SDGs in local policy made the town a frontrunner in the national context of Bosnia-i-Herzegovina. Due to the extremely fragmented and decentralised organisation of the country’s institutional structure, progress on the introduction of the SDGs as guiding principles of local action was severely hampered by the lack of a consistent or coordinated national framework. At the time of writing, the VLR team at Skripta was aware of at least eight municipalities currently working on SDG localisation,¹⁶ but mostly through participation in several projects that UNDP is currently managing in the country.¹⁷ The case of Bijeljina, however, was different. The municipality was the only local administration in the country that had approached the SDGs on its own: the establishment of the LED unit and the administration’s support to localisation capacity-building at community level made the town an outstanding case study for the work the authors had planned with the VLR.

Through their work with Bijeljina’s community as a valuable case-study and good practice, Skripta hopes to increase available channels of collaboration both vertically (pushing for even more commitment and policy consistency within the town’s public administration) and horizontally, with increased interest in institutionalised cooperation by the other Bosnian municipalities that have already worked on such projects.

¹⁶ E-meeting between the author, ICLD representatives, and the authoring group of the Bijeljina VLR, August 18, 2023.

¹⁷ UNDP has recently developed an SDG Accelerator programme with small and medium enterprises in Bosnia, and it is also managing SDG2BIH, a project (mostly funded by SIDA, Sweden’s international cooperation agency) that aims to build and support sufficient capacity and cross-level institutional participation for the nation-wide implementation of the Goals. UNDP also curated, in 2020, the publication of Bosnia’s framework report on the SDGs (UNDP Bosnia-Herzegovina, 2020).

Emboreet



In the case of Emboreet, the opportunity to compare the town's experience with that of other communities in diverse geographic and socio-economic contexts was an additional incentive to engage community representatives and residents, while also seeking support within the local council.¹⁸ An effective link between the ICLD VLR project and the people at the grassroots level helped set up a more effective environment for cooperation. As mentioned by the VLR authors, the possibility to refer to an insider of the community vastly increased the incentives for participation among community members, who were more trustful of the process and able to perceive a clearer cause-effect relationship between the information they were providing and a return – in terms of process ownership – for their village.

The team that worked with the village of Emboreet, at the same time, saw the VLR as an opportunity to study the characteristics of Tanzania's traditional approach to local governance – which is tendentially more bottom-up and manages to involve even the lowest levels in local decision making – as it worked to integrate the SDGs into policy. The idea behind the village's participation in the VLR project was to test whether the SDG framework was in fact trickling down to village members in a sparsely populated rural area, and what room for action the local community had and whether the SDGs had managed to affect local development plans.

Kibaha



In Kibaha, the town's community had already had an initial contact with SDG-led initiatives in the territory. A gender equality programme based on SDG 5 implementation had already been setup for the town's high and secondary schools, within the framework of their Municipal Partnership with Region Gotland in Sweden. The programme aimed at sharing knowledge and good practice for the empowerment and betterment of women's condition and quality of life in the community. It was expected to raise awareness and thus influence local policy and political balance towards more governmental commitment to such activities. Because of this background, Kibaha saw an opportunity, through the VLRS, to institutionalise the town's commitment to SDG 5 and the Goals more generally, and, at the same time, monitor what work had been done and what progress had in fact been made. This goal of increased transparency – thanks to which the local government could be held accountable for the outcome of over ten local projects and their impact on the quality of life of Kibaha's community – was an additional incentive for the town to participate in the VLR initiative. As stated in an interview with the VLR authors, finding out whether the whole process was having a positive impact “on the labour market or the budget spending” and seeing whether this was “really helping the community” were among the key drivers of participation among the city council.¹⁹

¹⁸ E-meeting between the author, ICLD representatives, and the authoring group of the Emboreet and Kibaha VLRS, August 11, 2023.

¹⁹ E-meeting between the author, ICLD representatives, and the authoring group of the Emboreet and Kibaha VLRS, August 11, 2023.

The participatory VLRs across content variables

There is not an official template for VLRs and no institution is curating an official VLR database. VLRs are a flexible tool that local governments can use compatibly with the resources and information they have available. At present, VLRs “represent an aspirational statement” besides the information they collect, and “the commitment of a community to a global endeavour” (UCLG & UN-Habitat, 2020, p. 11).

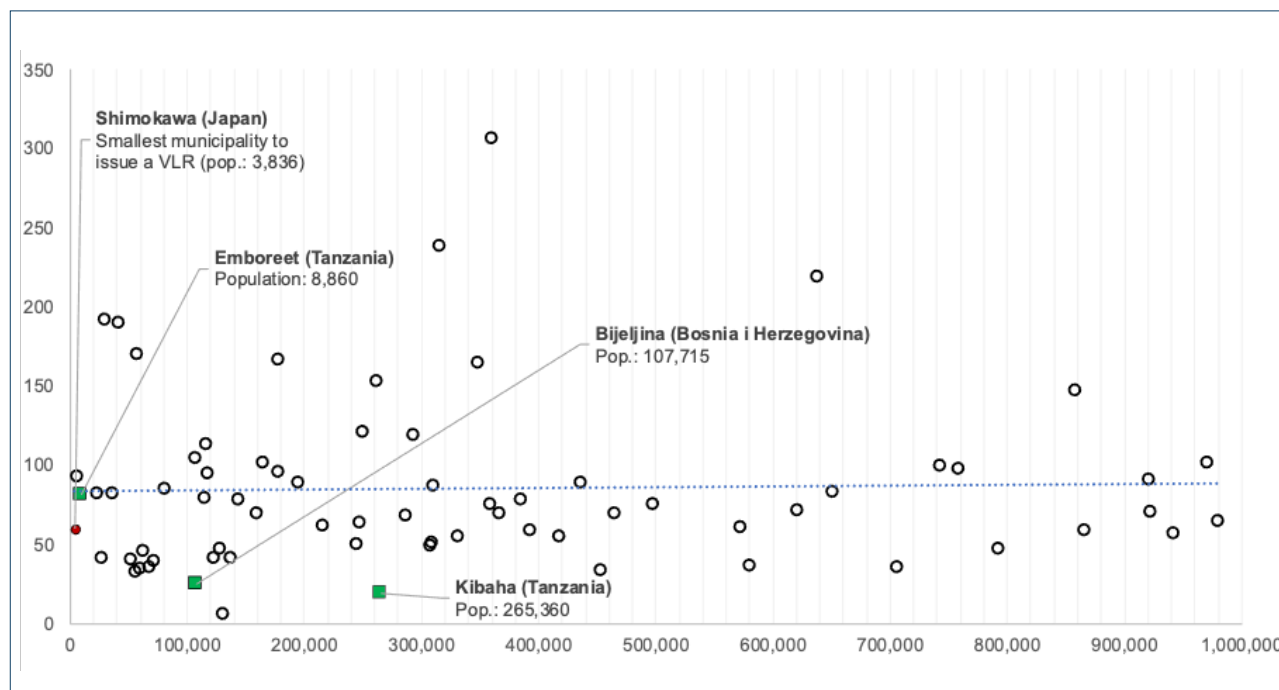
The openness of the VLR model has allowed for a great degree of flexibility in the way local governments have carried out their VLRs. Even when taking only the municipal level into account, there is significant diversity in the VLR community in terms of what kind of municipalities decide to take on a VLR and how the ultimate product looks like. Municipalities as large as Mexico City, Tokyo, and São Paulo (with a combined population of over 34

million) and as small as Shimokawa, a town of 3,800 people in northern Japan, or the village of Skiathos on a Greek island with fewer than 5,000 residents, have already issued their reviews. VLRs have been as short as a recommendation-driven 7-pager from Cauayan City in the Philippines and as lengthy as the 356-page review of Izmir (Türkiye).

Figure 2 visualises this diversity while also locating Bijeljina, Emboreet, and Kibaha in the group. The trendline for all VLRs suggests, moreover, that there is no correlation between the size of a local government (and, arguably, the resources they have available) and the size of the reviews (and the amount of information included in them). Ultimately, the participatory VLRs appear not to stray from the norm when it comes to the format of their review.

To provide guidance amidst the diversity of the VLR movement, several international organisations have given local governments technical support and validation,

Figure 2. Relation between VLR extension (Y axis, in pages) and municipality population (X axis) in the group of municipal VLRs available to date, including statistical extremes (in red) and the three community-based VLRs (in green).



Source: own elaboration.

Notes: population one million inhabitants or lower, N=71. 25 more municipalities with population between one and five million; 5 with population between five and 10 million; and 3 with population over 10 million were not included in the graph for scale and readability concerns. Mean extension for the sample in number of pages $\bar{x} = 72$.

especially by making templates and guidelines available (IGES et al., 2020; UCLG & UN-Habitat, 2020; UN-DESA, 2020; UN-ESCAP, 2020; UN-Habitat & UCLG, 2021). The shape that authors give to their VLRs has an impact on the information they contain and the message they channel. For this specific project, ICLD extensively adapted the guidelines published by UNECA, the United Nations' Economic Committee for Africa (UNECA et al., 2021), to emphasise its focus on participatory processes, bottom-up information, and more qualitative, informal methods that favoured flexible storytelling over the rigidity of conventional data metrics.

When promoting its template, UNECA has been vocal about the “contextual specificity” that the guidelines address: the relevance of “strong rural-urban linkages”, an urbanisation process still in an evolving phase, and a target audience of “non-urban localities” that are actively participating in the monitoring process (Kayani, 2022, p. 8). The guidelines themselves highlighted the challenges of “data-poor” environments, gaps in the “availability of locally disaggregated data” and varying “planning and fiscal capacities” as key issues that VLRs must consider to fully address the uniqueness and diversity of local experiences with SDGs (UNECA et al., 2021, p. 17).²⁰

The case of a rural settlement such as the village of Emboreet, with very significant geographical dispersion, for example, is a clear fit with the expected target of the guidelines. When asked about the effectiveness of the template, however, the Emboreet VLR authors pointed out that there still were gaps between what the model required of the municipality and the information that the authors were eventually able to obtain within the scope of the project when surveying the village's population. Even when adapting tools like templates or training initiatives to more inclusive work with community representatives, researchers and institutions working with local information still have to balance this more informal and less codified input with rigour, replicability, and comparability.

Even with such a small N of cases, there seems to be a perceived mismatch between available templates and the actual fieldwork that analysts can perform at the local

level. Ultimately, one of the takeaways of the ICLD-led participatory experiment is that more fluid or adaptable formats should be available, so that the specific uniqueness of local experiences when implementing the SDGs is not lost in the pursuit of performance comparability. More inclusive approaches to work with more qualitative bottom-up knowledge should be on the to-do list of the advocates of a more participatory VLR as a tool for local empowerment and co-creation.

Also because of their common template, the three participatory VLRs share several of their key components. All VLRs state their purpose and provide an overview of their community's relationship with the SDGs and their local implementation. The three VLRs present the participatory methodology they have adopted and review current progress in the achievement of specific SDGs by exploring and presenting local policy initiatives. What varies the most across the three documents is the level of community-wide familiarity with the SDGs and their potential impact on how decisions are being made in the territory. Diversity in the three communities' starting point in their approach to the SDGs has an impact on the information that the reviews can collect, and a meaningful difference in purpose. The following subsections analyse this diversity in content in detail.



²⁰ It is worth noting that, working from a standing point closer to that of a municipality like Bijeljina, the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) also developed its own guidelines for VLRs. These also stressed the importance of a “participatory process” which engages “local communities and key stakeholders” (UNECE, 2021, p. 4). This is deemed essential to create qualitative data, [raise] awareness, ownership of SDGs... and bringing minorities and vulnerable groups into the decision-making process” (UNECE, 2021, p. 14).

Horizontal cooperation: VLRS as bridges across societal actors

Out of three participatory reviews, Bijeljina's is the one that builds on a stronger institutional cooperation structure between the municipal offices and civil society. Part of the VLR is dedicated to the analysis of the institutional mechanisms that have been set up by the city, which is acknowledged to have "advanced farthest" among other Bosnia-i-Herzegovina municipalities, and to have emphasised "partnership and mutual support... as the only successful formula" for SDG-integrated policy-making (Sarajlic et al., 2023, p. 18).

Accordingly, if compared to the other participatory VLRS, Bijeljina's review relies significantly more on the outcomes of this well-established cooperation framework. Besides the establishment of the LED unit, the local government had been active in involving various stakeholders – including civil society organisations, gender equality groups, and advocates of minority rights – in several municipal initiatives. As the VLR consultations remarked, community members were "included in drafting the City Strategy" or "part of educational programs for SDGs". More generally, participants from local groups underscored that the LED unit "listen to their needs... and are open for dialogue" (Sarajlic et al., 2023, p. 20).

Ultimately, the difference in institutional readiness and familiarity with the SDGs trickle down to the conclusions too. Bijeljina's recommendations build mostly on policy achievements and innovations introduced by the LED unit and city hall since 2016. The lessons learned, in Bijeljina's case, aim at the institutionalisation of cooperation and at strengthening the venues with which the local government can strengthen its ties with local stakeholders and communities. As the conclusions point out, the process of localisation's "ownership is scattered" (Sarajlic et al., 2023, p. 31): one of the main remarks from the VLR is that part of the information is still being lost as city hall, the LED unit, and several civil society organisations are leading in various fields and actively localising certain SDGs, but with a lack of coordination and cohesive leadership.

Vertical integration: from VLR to VNR and back

As for the institutional links supporting the VLR work, Kibaha's review is also seen as the municipality's contribution to a larger effort at the national level, i.e., as a potential source of direct local information for Tanzania's Voluntary National Review (VNR). This is consistent with a trend, recorded across several VLRS from a diversity of backgrounds, of linking the work on SDG localisation and (often unique) local data and information to the bigger picture of implementation at the national level. Among other VLRS clearly mentioning this 'funneling' work of bottom-up contributions are the reviews of Amsterdam, Hamamatsu, Rome, Scotland, or Victoria Falls. Mwanza's VLR was developed in 2022 on a parallel track as the country's own VNR. This is a valuable example (especially for Tanzanian towns and communities such as Emboreet and Kibaha) of cross-level institutional collaboration and mutual exchange on SDG monitoring. Mwanza's document, furthermore, was supported by UN-Habitat and a front-running example of the agency's Urban Monitoring Framework being applied in the African context. Similarly, the VLRS that four Kenyan counties (Busia, Kwale, Marsabit, and Taita Taveta) published in 2019 were, in fact, formally embedded in the process leading to Kenya's VNR – a mechanism not dissimilar from that that linked the VLRS of Helsinki, Espoo, and Turku to Finland's 2019 and 2020 national reviews.

Institutional support through close coordination among ICLD, UN-Habitat, UCLG, and UCLG Africa has also played a significant role. Not only did it provide a platform for mutual learning and information exchange, but it also advocated actively for higher governance levels to acknowledge and support SDG localisation and local efforts to integrate the Goals even more effectively.

Community awareness on SDGs and priorities

The VLRS' contents are quite different when it comes to describing the communities' work on specific SDGs and policy fields. Kibaha's review focuses on the participants' responses and perception of key issues: a persistent gender division in managerial positions or deep-rooted gender stereotypes and lack of equal opportunity, for instance, are

highlighted as key shortcomings in the implementation of SDG 5. Issues such as socio-economic inequality in access to social and public services (SDG 10) or the availability of effective public transport (SDG 11) are perceived by the community as some of the most pressing challenges, highlighting the value of spontaneous action by civil society and residents or the limits that these issues are imposing on local development and equality. Emboreet's review builds on the outcome of the authors' dialogue and conversation with community members and partners, but it also highlights the efforts – such as Council-driven programmes for rural energy electrification or the construction of health centres and new education infrastructure – to develop policy consistent with the SDGs and the great impact of civil society organisation and grassroots mobilisation and activism in supporting these programmes while improving their transparency and accountability.

The conclusions of Kibaha's VLR move from a different perspective. Because of the level of awareness on the SDGs and the maturity of the debate on their integration in local policies and actions, Kibaha's review focuses on the need to "formulate SDG principles" accessible to all levels of population, with an acknowledgement that – however valuable the work on the VLR – "participatory and inclusive monitoring" are yet to "be developed" (Mgoba & Manara, 2023, p. 23). Emboreet's review highlights that "heightened awareness, engagement, and ownership within the community are needed" (Majid & Rubakula, 2023, p. 57). Similar to Kibaha's VLR, Emboreet's review also recommends that "a coordination mechanism among stakeholders" be established (Majid & Rubakula, 2023, p. 58).

In terms of lessons learned throughout the reviewing process, the contents and the choices of the three participatory VLRs show that more inclusive methods of SDG localisation monitoring can work in contexts with both a more mature understanding of the Goals, and their impact on policy-making, and in communities that are less familiar with or trusting of the actual potential of the SDGs to impact their day-to-day lives. Inclusive methods based on more qualitative information appear to be working as both drivers of additional and co-owned SDG integration and early-stage awareness raising.

The SDGs included in the reviews

One of the key issues for local governments, when 'scaling down' the toolkits developed at the intergovernmental level for SDG implementation and monitoring, is that finding enough data for 169 targets and 17 Goals is often beyond the reach of the human, technical, and time resources available to most local authorities. Addressing progress, conflict, and expectations on the whole spectrum of the SDGs can be a disincentive for participation and engagement, and most local governments have selected the SDGs for which more data was easily or affordably available, or the Goals about which their policy initiatives have been more relevant or effective.

To support the monitoring efforts of the communities it works with, ICLD has identified "five goals to which the organisation must make a particularly clear direct positive contribution" and that it considers "crucial to sustainable development": SDGs 5, 10, 11, 16, and 17 (International Centre for Local Democracy, 2022, p. 9). The path marked by the ICLD priority goals also highlighted potential mismatches in how public administrations can approach specific SDGs or what they can see as priorities that can steer or improve local policy-making.

In the case of Bijeljina, for instance, the team of authors working on the VLR had significant experience with promoting SDG 5 and gender equality initiatives and awareness across local communities and stakeholders. The group was specifically committed to monitoring SDG 5 progress in the municipality, also as a measure of the effectiveness of the activities that had been undertaken until then. The town's administration, on the other hand, had not identified SDG 5 as a clear priority for its approach to SDGs localisation. As the authors discussed in an interview,²¹ this mismatch was relevant for the research process that led to the review. The VLR's policy recommendations, accordingly, call for increased capacity for the local administration to improve gender equality initiatives and mainstreaming them within public administration, with intermunicipal and cross-departmental cooperation as a key next step for better SDG 5 performance.

The group's work on gender equality in Bosnia-i-Herze-

21 Ibid.

govina had led to valuable results. In collaboration with SALAR International, the group had institutionalised collaboration, training, and policy initiatives with about fifteen Bosnian municipalities. This previous experience and the positive spillover on municipal organisation and life in the community made it all the more pressing that the VLR recommended that “city authorities take a stronger lead in that direction and cooperate more closely with civil society” on gender equality (Sarajlic et al., 2023, p. 9). As mentioned above, in the case of Bijeljina, the Local Economic Development (LED) unit within the municipality has been active in making local policy-making consistent with some of the expected outcomes of SDG localisation. Accordingly, SDG mainstreaming has become “an integral part of decisions on funding civil society efforts” (Sarajlic et al., 2023, p. 31).

Bijeljina’s VLR took into consideration SDGs 10 and 17, which have clear links to essential parts of Bosnia’s current development as a country, and towards a more efficient statehood. SDG 10’s focus on equality is key in a country which has witnessed its birth in the aftermath of warfare and whose structure is intimately embedded in ethnic diversity. Minorities and marginalised groups – including women, disabled individuals, the elderly, youth, ethnic or religious minorities – have been at the core of the priorities that Bijeljina’s LED unit has identified for policy innovation and integration. City administration and civil society organisations have both cooperated through the mediation of the LED unit on an Action Plan for the Achievement of Social Inclusion that addresses these issues. The Plan attempts at making all stakeholders co-responsible and peers in the definition of solutions and policy progress – including an initiative on better transportation, dedicated infrastructure, and new venues for cooperation and dialogue. Community representatives have been vocal about the LED unit’s “transparency” in their work with civil society, and the Action Plan has been welcomed as a “systematic solution that can lead towards the improvement of the quality of life of marginalised and vulnerable groups”. The SDGs, more generally, are seen as valuable guidance for policy integration. “Localisation”, the VLR quotes, can work as a “multisectoral approach to social inclusion” (Sarajlic et al., 2023, p. 26).

This kind of ‘progressive’ or incremental outcomes of the community-based VLRS – thanks to which communities have been innovating their policy tools or intervening on public accountability and transparency – has been one of the most important lessons learned throughout the process. On the one hand, these VLRS provide evidence of different perceptions in policy priorities and drive pressure and advocacy for different approaches to systemic issues. They have been channels through which communities can mobilise and state their priorities clearly and more formally. The examples of the focus on SDG 5 in an otherwise rigidly traditional society as the rural Maasai communities in Emboreet, or the widespread commitment to socio-economic improvement perceived in the Bijeljina’s review show how ‘representative’ the VLR can be of the direction that a community is trying to take. VLRS can increase social collaboration by providing decision-makers with more and better information on the local level than what they can obtain through more ‘conventional’ monitoring tools and data.

On the other hand, the community-based VLRS were purposely ‘action-oriented’: by the simple fact of conducting the reviews and engaging with the communities, these VLRS aimed at improving social dialogue, at opening up new avenues for co-ownership of better-designed policies, and ultimately at making social democracy better – by creating engagement where there was little or none before, and by incentivising commitment and participation where communities were unprepared or unassisted before. This kind of empowerment should be a replicable tool in a myriad of local contexts, and this understanding of VLRS as a proactive tool should be a substantial part of the legacy of this community-based experiment.



Photo 2. Local government officials and researchers from Kenya, Tanzania and Sweden during a joint training on Community-Based Participatory Research in Dar es Salaam in 2022.

Photo: Ida Edvinsson

On quantitative data and qualitative methods

The template used for the VLRS was open enough to grant the research teams an opportunity to explore alternatives to more conventional ‘hard’ data and other measurements of implementation success. In a preparatory session,²² VLR authors openly mentioned the difficulty for their teams to approach target communities and groups from a more quantitative vantage point. For community-based VLRS, it was harder to obtain quantifiable data that could consistently fit the indicators that have been used in common localisation monitoring frameworks by several international institutions. While hard data accessibility has knowingly been an issue for local and regional governments in general (Klopp & Petretta, 2017; Siragusa et al., 2020), in the case of the three CBPR VLRS, authors mentioned that ‘official’ indicator-driven analysis was simply not consistent with the kind of information that partners, community representatives, and surveyed population were able to provide.

Compared to various VLRS, the three CBPR VLRS do not include quantitative analysis linked to official or alternative SDG implementation indicators. It is relevant that municipalities that choose a more participatory approach appear to favour more qualitative methods to provide different (and otherwise often underexplored) information and perspective on SDG implementation at the local level. In terms of lessons learned or replicable approaches for other local governments, the community-based VLRS arguably add to the argument that reviews with a focus on discourse, storytelling, and small-sample interviews or surveys can be as effective and contribute as much information as VLRS that build more on quantitative data, indicators, indices, and measurable performance.

The authoring teams have highlighted that discursive or informal approaches felt more consistent with the purpose of including and engaging the grassroots movement and provide a more transparent, unconstrained space to communities. The Skripta team stressed the fact that participatory methods can adapt more easily to cultural patterns. As mentioned in an interview, longer open meetings – a ‘coffee talk’ or an informal conversation after business hours – were an embedded communication habit for the interview-

ees, who felt more comfortable in that setting than in the stricter constraint of focus groups or planned interviews.

Similarly, the team in Kibaha emphasised the flexibility of participatory methods and how these can be easily adapted to specific needs or characteristics of a community. According to the authors of the VLR, the impact of these policies on the community was as hard to measure in quantified terms as it was understandable in more discursive and inclusive ways. The authors stressed the importance of “body language”, the “physical presence” of interviewer and interviewee, the common public spaces, and the possibility for residents to express themselves in the daily language of work and family routines.²³ One of the most valuable outcomes of the VLR, from their perspective, was the opportunity to find and record genuine bottom-up information that is often incompatible with or not operationalisable through conventional monitoring tools like quantitative indicators, datasets, and time-series comparisons.

Besides improved trust and openness, informal settings were also essential for authors to get a bigger picture about local policymaking and the impact of specific policy choices. They stressed that, in their experience, more formal or institutional settings or tools such as focus groups and one-size-fits-all surveys implicitly guide the respondent towards emphasising progress and positive outcomes, rather than also considering challenges and shortcomings. Conversely, the more spontaneous and unfiltered interactions of participatory methods tend to leave more room for critical opinions and allow contributors to be more impartial about initiatives on gender equality, social coexistence, or marginalisation.

When the VLR is a vehicle for this kind of first-hand information, the authors mentioned, when the local government manages to strike a good balance between policy promotion and accountability to the community, the VLR is contributing to a more “objective analysis” of the impact of SDGs on local life, policy, and coexistence. It grows into a “co-owned manifesto” of what local policy is and should be.²⁴

²² E-meeting of the authors, ICLD staff, and VLR teams from Bijeljina, Emboreet, and Kibaha, held on May 9, 2023.

²³ E-meeting between the author, ICLD representatives, and the authoring group of the Emboreet and Kibaha VLRS, August 11, 2023.

²⁴ E-meeting between the author, ICLD representatives, and the authoring group of the Bijeljina VLR, August 18, 2023.

The added value of participation: local ownership, follow-up, and lessons learned

Because of their variability and flexibility as a model, VLRS have been non-uniform in how much they approach information and the engagement of local stakeholders – other than public administration. In their analysis, for instance, the European Commission's JRC identified reviews that are “completely centralised” and developed entirely within city hall or the mayor's office; those drafted by ad hoc “SDG task forces”; those that externalise data collection, analysis, or information surveying to non-government actors to a varying degree; and a number of reviews that work as a mix of these approaches (Siragusa et al., 2022, p. 20).

This section aims to explore to what extent inclusiveness and participatory opportunities have impacted the reviewing process. Replicating this community-based model in various socio-economic and political contexts may as well add one element to the continuum that the JRC had identified so far, i.e., reviews that build extensively on input, knowledge, and experience produced at community level because of their direct involvement in the process of localisation.

The involvement of stakeholders in the community-based VLRS

One of the goals of ICLD's project was to assess not just the effectiveness of participatory and community-based approaches when reviewing SDG localisation, but also what response this opportunity elicits from the communities, stakeholders, and people who are involved in the process. There is widespread consensus in the international community that local reviews need to be more inclusive and representative of a local society's complexity and diversity. Local governments have been frequently advised to rely more on information and data that can be obtained through participatory methods, improving available “qualitative data, raising awareness, ownership of SDGs, strengthening the social contract, and bringing minorities and vulnerable groups into the decision-making process” (UNECE, 2021, p. 14). But what happens once a review puts the focus on participation and community-based information? Does the community's willingness to engage and ability to participate meet the expectations that bottom-up approaches raise? Is the

community-based model of monitoring and reviewing a viable alternative to the more common research-based or mixed approaches?

The unique contribution of participatory methods

The VLR of Bijeljina was a valuable example of how community-based approaches to monitoring can make very diverse information available to researchers from a more informal and unfiltered perspective. According to the Skripta team involved in the town's review, the experience was particularly rewarding. The process was strongly linked to the uniqueness of the Bosnian context, and the VLR itself addresses this topic extensively. The country's recent history has led to “a highly decentralised, fragmented state with weak central institutions”. During the establishment of democratic rule in the country, “competing visions of statehood... and self-determination rights” led to “unclear guarantees to institutional functionality” that undermine the cohesiveness of local government (Sarajlic et al., 2023, p. 16). The country's division, mostly along ethnic lines, into two autonomous entities – the Republic of Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia-i-Herzegovina – also poses significant constraints to horizontal dialogue, mutual learning, and the replicability of effective local policy.

The evolution of Bosnia's statehood has been supported by the international community's strong institutional presence in the country. This has also affected the promotion and development of local policy initiatives and proactiveness at the municipal level. UNDP has long supported a sustainability policy framework based on integrated development plans for local communities. It aimed to harmonise and design local priorities and initiatives consistently across the country. It was UNDP, moreover, that worked to link local plans to the SDGs, making integrated development a gateway to introduce the Goals in local policy strategies among Bosnian local governments.

As argued by Skripta following up on their work with local partnerships, external support has also been felt as enough top-down as to sometimes discourage local mobilisation or at least diminish local co-ownership of the

process and its outcomes. Because of this background, the fieldwork carried out by Skripta for Bijeljina's VLR was welcomed by the local community and residents, as mentioned in an interview with the team, with enthusiasm. **The VLR became an opportunity for both policy legitimisation and improved grassroots participation.** On the one hand, work on the VLR allowed the town's LED unit to showcase its progress in SDG localisation to streamline the town's policy priorities with the 2030 Agenda in a way which was quite unique in the Bosnian context. On the other hand, top-down processes had made the community perceive policy innovation as the effect of external decisions they could not own. Through the VLR, Bijeljina's community had an opportunity to provide information and openly discuss the SDGs and their transversal impact, while also feeling genuine ownership of what the town had achieved, by and large, on its own. This kind of committed support of the VLR and its research process made residents and local stakeholders more trusting and open to discuss about the city and its planned future.

Adapting methods to common challenges

Community-based information and methods are also very helpful to assess the challenges and difficulties that come with involving a larger audience in the reviewing process. They can also help identify and design responses and solutions that can be effectively replicated in other contexts and circumstances.

In Emboreet, the logistical and geographical context was a challenge. The village is formally an 8,800-inhabitant ward in the Simanjiro district in Tanzania, in a largely rural area of the country. While the uniqueness of a participatory approach in such a context is self-evident – just consider how difficult it normally is to collect feedback from such communities, and how underrepresented they ultimately are in current analysis – it also comes with day-to-day difficulties for a research team working on the field. As mentioned in an interview with the authoring team,²⁵ geographic dispersion was an issue throughout the VLR work: individual households or relevant public venues were often so far

away from each other that approaching them would require significant time for travel – adding to a systemic lack of adequate resources to carry out research in this kind of circumstances. The area included in the research, moreover, was also ethnically diverse and with a majority of Maasai population. This made communication, at times, complicated, since research devices like interview outlines and forms were designed in Swahili, Tanzania's official language. Translation and interpretation costs weighed on a strained budget, but also added a layer of distance and difference that affected both trust in interviewer/interviewee interactions and the reliability of translation-filtered responses and feedback.

Two social elements were also highlighted in the process of the Emboreet and Kibaha VLRS. Societal organisation within the Emboreet community, for instance, had a significant impact on the availability of feedback and the quality of the information that could be collected. The village is still rigidly organised along patriarchal lines, meaning that female population in general was not as accessible as the rest of the surveyed community. Because of enduring gender divides, as pointed out by the authoring team, a relevant part of the sampled population was often simply not accessible, either because women were not allowed to take part in the research activities, or because their opinion was not regarded as meaningful. While working in Kibaha, on the other hand, the research team met resistance from the surveyed population as the interviews and the research on SDG localisation were not perceived as relevant, interesting, or valuable for the community itself. This lack of investment and interest – combined with how difficult it was for working people in the city to find sufficient time to engage in informal conversations and interviews – made it harder for the researchers to collect extensive feedback or use replicable (and reliable) participatory methods. This apparent mismatch between the perception of the SDGs as a distant administrative or bureaucratic framework and the actual targets of the Goals – as close to any community's reality as hunger, education, health, environment, sustainability, and work can be – was a significant lesson learned on the structural challenges of the SDGs as global policy

25 E-meeting between the author, ICLD representatives, and the authoring group of the Emboreet and Kibaha VLRS, August 11, 2023.

guidance. Other subnational governments willing to implement community-based work should be aware of the additional communication and sensitisation efforts that SDG monitoring may require in specific contexts.

Some of the challenges that come with more inclusive participatory initiatives at the grassroots level affected the work on the Bijeljina VLR too. Direct engagement with the community implied additional resources were required to overcome logistics difficulties – diverse geography of the area, meeting scheduling with large pools of interviewees or participants – and community-based methods were generally seen as time-consuming. In their interviews, the staff at Skripta highlighted that community-based methods can make significant amounts of first-hand, otherwise inaccessible information available. At the same time, however, its uniqueness and specificity to the context require what the authors defined a “respectful approach” to the history, the characteristics, as well as the expectations of a given community.²⁶ Finetuning the methods with the values or the vision of the community was key to building mechanisms of trust and bond, but it also added to uncertainty and unpredictability about the outcomes of informal venues or conversations. Finally, as the Skripta staff highlighted, learning that this kind of connection and openness were available even on a technical topic such as public administration, policy, or the SDGs was a lesson learned that they hope to replicate successfully also in other communities of the Bosnian context.

After the VLR: plans for community ownership of localisation

One of the key elements when reviewing community-based VLRS – and whether their model is replicable or effective – is their approach’s ability to have a long-term impact on local policymaking. Have the VLRS affected the stance of the involved communities towards the SDGs? Have they improved participation and local co-ownership of such policy opportunities?

In the context in which they are embedded, the VLRS of Emboreet and Kibaha have been able to open a discussion on the SDGs and their potential impact on

the lives and choices of their communities and territories for the first time at community level. The VLR has been a unique way for the SDGs to reach an audience that would have not been engaged in such processes otherwise. Follow-up to the VLR, in this regard, has been about maintaining this entry channel open and effective – an effective complement to the work that research teams and local administrations had carried out on the SDGs through training activities and municipal partnerships, especially in collaboration with ICLD.

In the case of Emboreet, where a connection was established with the village’s residents even despite structural issues of communication and geographic dispersion, there are at least two key prospects for follow-up. On the one hand, the town’s experience with the Municipal Partnership Programme at ICLD and the way it favoured the participative VLR process was positive and showed a significant degree of openness and availability by the community to this kind of initiatives and contact, even with external stakeholders such as the University of Dar Es-Salaam’s research team. There is hope, therefore, that this availability can be used for additional cooperation on SDG localisation in the community and monitor progress through time, as well as engaging with the local representatives for more projects even beyond the topic of the SDGs and sustainability policy. On the other hand, the Municipal Partnership Programme was also essential to engage Emboreet in a collaborative framework with peer municipalities and communities for the first time. As the VLR authors mentioned in their interviews, it is important that the communication venues and mechanisms established through the partnership and training programmes are kept active. This would allow Emboreet to showcase its experience while, at the same time, learning by the replicable example of other cities and towns in different socio-economic and geographic contexts.

The case of Bijeljina is slightly different in that the VLR project was embedded in a context that had already and autonomously begun its own path towards localisation: the process, in other words, had not the same ‘breakthrough’ effect as in other contexts. Pre-

²⁶ E-meeting between the author, ICLD representatives, and the authoring group of the Bijeljina VLR, August 18, 2023.

existing policy venues such as the town's LED unit or the country's growing engagement with the SDGs had created an 'enabling environment' which made follow-up on the VLR relatively more straightforward for the authoring team. Skripta has already planned a series of mechanism to adequately publish and share the VLR at local, national, and international level. They have been in contact with UNDP – still the leading driver of initiatives on SDG implementation at the national level in Bosnia – for an official launch of the review. Skripta is exploring ways to make the community, residents, and local stakeholders as engaged in the follow-up process as they were in the drafting of the review, with plans to present and discuss the VLR at the grassroots level too.

As highlighted in an interview, the authoring team at Skripta also stressed the importance of the 'spill-over' effects of the VLR and the attention that has been brought on community participation and bottom-up contributions to localisation.²⁷ While city administration had already been active on SDG integration in policy-making, the very process of the VLR forced, in a way, both public officials and the community to take this experience into consideration. Once they were included in the VLR, the city's view on localisation, the initiatives that had been initiated locally, or the priorities and requests that came from the territory could not be delayed or diluted. The VLR, as the authors mentioned, sped up or at least normalised a discourse on local SDG implementation that would have otherwise been slower and perhaps, given the specificity of the country's context, even a conflictive one.

Finally, the Skripta team alluded to following up to the current version of the VLR by expanding the range of SDGs included in the analysis. The complexity of the work that the LED unit and local stakeholders have to carry out to improve SDG localisation in the Bijeljina's community would be more evident if the review could take into consideration as many of the 17 SDGs and not just three Goals. The authors underscore, however, that selecting a limited range of targets also allowed for enhanced 'spontaneousness' of the community contributions, as their input was especially invested in topics that they perceived as a shared priority.

One of the risks of a broader analysis is that purely 'insider' information on initiatives, policy choices, and local demands may be much less adequate to provide insight on all 17 SDGs or at least most of them. This recommendation or methodological warning is likely to be applicable to many local communities and could be extracted as a key lesson learned for community-based reviews, which is that better and more direct information on fewer Goals may be more valuable than diluted input on a larger selection of SDGs.

Ultimately, the main follow-up from the Bijeljina VLR process, as the authors mentioned, is that it was essential to put the issue of SDG localisation into the spotlight in a national context such as Bosnia's, where the issue had so far found mostly occasional support. The expectation is to turn the community based VLR into a set of valuable good practices that can encourage more municipalities and local stakeholders to give voice to the experiences and diversity that are constantly contributing to the making of the country and its identity.

An objective of ICLD is to indirectly support local governments by contributing to scientific understanding of local level conditions and realities on the ground, including methodologies to capture local experiences.



Photo 3. Julius Daniel, University of Dar es Salaam, and Charlotta Ozaki Macias, Ambassador of Sweden to Tanzania, during an event on Community-Based Participatory Research in 2022.

Photo: Ida Edvinsson

²⁷ E-meeting between the author, ICLD representatives, and the authoring group of the Bijeljina VLR, August 18, 2023.

Perception from the inside: a self-assessment of the participatory process

This report also explores the impact that the participatory VLRs have had not just on the communities that were involved, but also on the teams of authors that have materially drafted them. A self-assessing exercise was conducted via a few related questions in semi-structured interviews with the authors, and a short survey on their perception of the review process.

One aspect that was underscored in the interviews was how the review process gave the authors an opportunity to understand to what extent daily activities and decisions by community members were in fact contributing to policy choices and actions consistent with the SDGs. The authors of the Emboreet VLR highlighted, for instance, the mechanisms that civil society organisations and grassroots activists had developed to address the village's key challenges – including the definition of development plans or the provision of effective social services at the local level. Integrating the SDGs locally has been tightly connected to this kind of initiatives in Emboreet, to the extent that community-based actors have become “the main actors for their own development”, with the local government intervening as an “enabler” only when community decision-making is not enough to guarantee results (Majid & Rubakula, 2023, p. 19). The community's ability to implement actual change and action with their own resources and genuine bottom-up initiative was also highlighted in the case of Kibaha. Community associations and residents materially and financially contributing to the establishment of “health and education programmes” or funding the building of a ward office – imagined as a public space for collective dialogue and a venue for local decision-making – show that community actors are aware of the limitations of top-down intervention. As highlighted in the VLR, the visible results of Kibaha's community activism were a reminder to residents “development can happen if people are willing to participate voluntarily in implementing development initiatives” (Mgoba & Manara, 2023, p. 13).

Bijeljina's team was captivated by the effectiveness of community-based methods in opening opportunities of dialogue and exchange with community representatives – with access to a kind of knowledge and opinion that would otherwise be unavailable from a purely quantitative or indicator-based approach. In their interviews, the authors stressed how important it was to test such methods and techniques with a ‘technical’ subject such as the SDGs or complex matters such as policy planning and goals. This makes it even more important, in their view, to have these methods and experiences replicated in a diversity of contexts. These findings are especially consistent with one of the most studied aspects of citizen science's emergence as a policy analysis approach, i.e., the tendency to turn technical or scientific participation into a more principled commitment (Stepenuck & Green, 2015). This has been highlighted, for instance, in environmental studies, where citizen science contributions and field work have been shown to increase activism and ideological commitment to pro-environment behaviours: engagement with fellow community members towards a common goal and the responsibility that comes with being first-hand drivers of information and policy guidance “have demonstrated improvements in health and wellbeing”, but also an “enhanced perception of self-efficacy” (Wyles & Pirani Ghilardi-Lopes, 2023, p. 322).

Finally, this report delved into the impact that the participatory VLRs have had not just on the communities that were involved, but also on the teams of authors that have materially drafted them. A self-assessing exercise was conducted via a few related questions in semi-structured interviews with the authors, and a short survey on their perception of the review process. The result of this survey has interesting implications about the perceived priorities that can be inferred for the researchers and analysts directly involved in this kind of community-based monitoring processes and are extensively reported in Annex 1.

Conclusions

The participatory VLR processes have been a source of very valuable information on how communities are approaching the SDGs and adapting them to their unique characteristics. The towns of Bijeljina, Emboreet, and Kibaha, with support from ICLD, have reviewed the status of SDG implementation in their territories with an otherwise unprecedented degree of engagement, inclusion, and commitment by the communities that change, improve, and live in them. The community-based methods applied in this review work have allowed the analysts to access tacit and qualitative knowledge that adds very important detail to what can be learned via more conventional indicators, metrics, and policy studies.

All VLRs have confirmed that communities, residents, and association at the local level are constantly contributing to the implementation and development of a myriad policy items and goals that are embedded in the SDGs and their target. While more top-down attempts to study the mutual impact of SDGs on the territory and that of communities on the adaptation of SDGs to their characteristics and needs abound, ICLD's work with the three municipalities managed to perform this from the bottom-up – with meaningful effects on the relationship between communities, researchers, and local governments.

These conclusions analyse this impact to draw key guidelines and lessons learned that may inspire the work of other stakeholders and local actors in different territories, moved by their diverse histories and needs. The conclusions focus mainly on three elements: the impact of the participatory VLRs on the replicability of this work; the impact on local democracy and development alongside the localisation of the SDGs; and the impact on participatory methods, to improve these techniques and grant even more legitimacy to an inclusive and co-owned approach to the Goals.

Lessons learned for similar initiatives in a diversity of contexts

In the case of the three VLRs, community-based research has shown that a different reviewing process is possible, with initiative from the bottom-up and a course of action more consistent with the needs and priorities of involved communities. Not only has this process been empowering for the people who participated in it, but it was also an enlightening experience for the VLR authors in the first place: testing these methods in real-life controlled settings means that these techniques and objectives can be adapted and applied to a variety of contexts and legitimately opening a new path for community-based research on SDGs and global sustainability policy at large.

Participatory VLRs can also shed a different light on what the SDGs mean when implemented at the most local level that is the communities and territories with all their diversity and specificity. When disseminating the outcome of their work, for example, the teams that authored the VLRs of Emboreet and Kibaha underscored how the VLR process had allowed community members, and the younger ones in particular, to see local projects, initiatives, and priorities with the categories and terms of the SDGs. This process of growing awareness adds to the understanding that all communities are, in fact, contributing to SDG implementation all the time. Participatory VLRs can help improve the consistency of these efforts, creating new partnerships between actors that had not had the opportunity to collaborate before, or allowing local governments to rethink their local sustainability agenda more effectively.

Finally, the VLRs have been an opportunity for researchers and analysts to walk a different learning path from that usually marked by data, indicators, and a more quantitative approach to policy performance. Almost 400 individuals were involved in the studies between the three VLR processes. In their interviews, all teams have been enthusiastic about the VLRs giving them a chance to delve into the social perception of the SDGs via methods that are

hard to operationalise and quantify but, at the same time, grant access to a wealth of unique knowledge about the functioning and self-understanding of diverse communities. Storytelling about small and large initiatives that the local level can take in order to implement the SDGs, without leaving anyone behind, should be increasingly regarded as a legitimate alternative to measurement and indicators to fully understand the impact that global frameworks can have on individual lives.

SDGs, reviews, community, and local democracy

The reviews were the first opportunity for public policy participation and engagement for many of the groups involved in the research. This has had an impact on what local democracy and inclusion mean in practice when designing or implementing new policy. The VLRS made the focus on the SDGs shift from ‘homework’ carried out according to certain standards to an opportunity for political engagement and collective partnership and complicity. Communication and dissemination about these developments can be key, since replication in similar local contexts can encourage even more communities and territories to tell their SDG story from a more inclusive and participatory perspective.

Both the teams authoring the reviews and the communities involved in the process stressed how important the VLR experience has been to improve the public accountability of local government and its decisions, at least as far as the implementation of the SDGs was concerned. When engaged in the provision of information, data, and feedback on local policies, residents and organisations also became more aware of the decisional processes that affect their lives and choices. Participation in community-based monitoring, in other words, empowered them to have more control over decision-making while also making local government more conscious about local policy agendas and their potential impact on constituents. Nevertheless, there is still significant work to be done. Bijeljina’s VLR acknowledges “a

clear need for better integration of SDGs across the administration, and more focused measures aimed at raising awareness and training of staff as key preconditions” (Sarajlic et al., 2023, p. 9). If left unprepared, local administrations are at risk of not being able to act upon the recommendations and requirements of communities. This could turn into a missed opportunity to improve SDG implementation from the mere branding of local initiatives to an actual vehicle of policy innovation and a driver of committed participation.

VLR authors also reported about community-based research as a source of legitimacy for more bottom-up initiatives even outside the range of the SDGs, applying the lessons learned with the reviewing process to more specific agendas on gender equality, socioeconomic opportunity, and intergroup dialogue and collaboration. Working on the SDGs and their transversal value for a more sustainable society has, in a sense, highlighted the role of communitywide partnerships as an effective tool to identify common goals, needs, and policy priorities.

Improving methods and expectations of community-based research

The participatory VLRS also showed how effective the enabling environment around this process can be. The authoring teams and the very communities that were involved in the reviews were empowered and supported by the group that ICLD had created for the development of the VLRS. The programme served as a platform to exchange knowledge and know-how, minimising the technical costs, and expanding the research horizons of each individual review process. More generally, the participatory VLR process shows how ICLD, and several other international organisations and institutions, can play a fundamental role as brokers of resources, experience, research venues and opportunities for local governments that see the SDGs as an opportunity to improve from the grassroots and with the deliberate inclusion and participation of all.

One overall conclusion drawn from the process is that SDG implementation needs more qualitative tools that can adapt seamlessly to the uniqueness of communities. Community-based research and participation can be a tool to access this tacit knowledge and legacy that local administrations, associations, organisations, stakeholders, and community groups have built over decades of bottom-up activities. There are still substantial challenges that can affect inclusive methods: language, cultural, and ethnic cleavages can still be debilitating for comprehensive participatory work. Horizontal cooperation, institutional support from global actors, and more effective partnerships between local governments and advocacy can all be catalysts for an innovative, bottom-up approach to the SDGs and their impact for more inclusive, democratic, and open societies.

There is an inherent value in the stories told by the people that live in the communities that are coming together to lead positive change. Their ability to support their neighbourhoods, restore social partnership, improve healthcare and education resources, actively cooperate with local administration to overcome gender inequality, lack of opportunity, and insufficient capacity for local development – all experiences that the participatory VLRS include in their reports – is by itself an invaluable contribution to SDG implementation and a new, co-owned concept of local social sustainability.

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Annex 1

Self-assessment survey of involved research teams

The teams that worked on the VLRS were polled on a few specific dimensions of the process – especially those that are recurring keywords in SDG and policy training – to provide additional guidance to other teams that could be developing the same kind of work in different municipalities, contexts, and territories. Even with a limited pool of answers (N = 6, corresponding to the people that took concretely part in the drafting of the VLRS), the survey gives a valuable overview of what analysts and researchers perceive as core challenges and incentives of working in close contact with communities and their representatives.

One question asked the respondents to rate the impact that specific dimensions of the social and technical context in which they had to work eventually had on the VLRS drafting process. Figure A3 visualises the responses obtained through the survey. Geography and logistics were a relevant element, since the three VLRS towns are quite diverse in this regard, and these dimensions could matter quite differently in the making of one VLRS or another. The socio-economic background of the communities involved could be expected to have affected the responsiveness, level of trust, and availability of community representatives to participate in the process. The survey also included more technical questions on SDG familiarity, the participatory methods the groups adopted, and the link with previous work of ICLD in these territories.

The survey shows that the informality of community-based and participatory methods did not seem to affect the process: in fact, half of the respondents valued those methods as having positive impact on the work done for the VLRS. The support of local government representatives and the formal engagement of local authorities in the process has also been significantly appreciated as a valuable component: five respondents out of six considered this element to have had a positive or very positive impact on their work with the community. Concerns with the logistics of the process seem to be compatible with what the authors mentioned in the interviews about dispersed populations in extensive territories – especially

in the case of Emboreet: half of the respondents identified geography and accessibility as having a somewhat negative impact.

Only a few issues seem to have elicited a diverse response by the research teams: both the social organisation and the socio-economic background of the communities with which they engaged have been evaluated across a range that goes from somewhat negative to very positive. This kind of variability would warrant additional interviews to understand in better detail the impact that society can have on the effectiveness of participatory methods. Gender divides and inequality within the communities, finally, are the dimensions that elicited the clearest negative response from the teams: five out of six respondents think that this dimension had various degrees of a negative impact on the VLRS work. This is consistent with issues of availability, trust, and openness according to gender that several authors had highlighted in their interviews.

Overall, most analytical dimensions seem to have had a mostly positive effect on the reviewing work performed at community level. This kind of surveying allows analysts to single out the most relevant or concerning issues and can allow institutions and coordinators such as ICLD to adapt the participatory methods to specific dynamics of targeted communities.

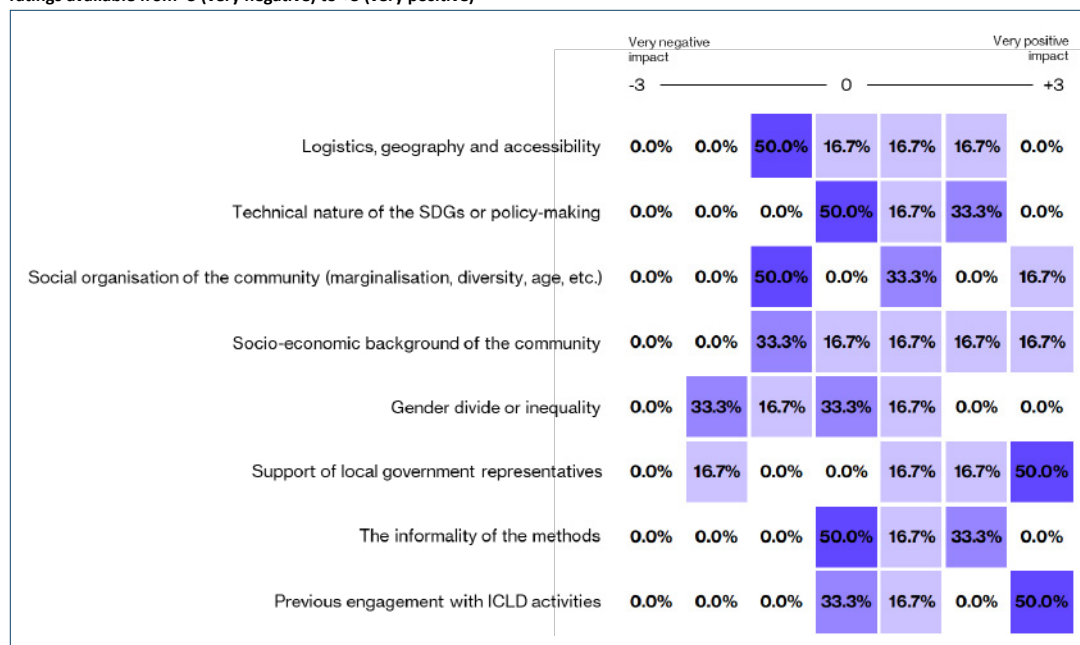
The survey also wanted to explore what the researchers thought could improve participatory monitoring processes. The respondents were asked to rate a set of potential adjustments to how the VLRS work was conducted, from the most relevant to the least. Most respondents saw “more joint research opportunities with other municipalities/entities” as a top priority to improve the process, followed by “more institutional venues” such as workshops, training activities, in-person lectures and presentations. The responses, in other words, seem to underscore a need for more opportunities to apply participatory methods, engage with even broader audiences, and test and implement specific inclusive processes in a diversity of contexts and with a larger range of partners. More time to perform research tasks such as interviews, forums, and focus groups was ranked third in a set of five potential priorities: some

of the researchers authoring the VLRS had argued that more time can be key in participatory settings, either to overcome long distances and logistical issues, or to grant participants more time to settle in the process, learn to trust the analysts, and be more available for one-on-one, time-intensive techniques.

Ranked fourth, international partnership and visibility to boost the monitoring work done at the local and

community level was not considered as a priority by the respondents. Perhaps surprisingly, obtaining more human resources through better funding was the least ranked option to update or improve the process. This statement is generally consistent with the focus on the quality of the interactions with the community – rather than on the quantity – that almost all authoring teams have underscored in their comments.

Figure A1. Responses to the question: “How did the following elements affect the work on the VLR, on a positive-negative scale?”, with ratings available from -3 (very negative) to +3 (very positive)



Source: own elaboration on survey results.

Figure A2. Responses to the question: “What is the top priority to enhance the inclusive and participatory monitoring of SDG localisation?”, with average ratings per option, from 1 (least relevant) to 5 (most relevant)



Source: own elaboration on survey results.

Annex 2: List of publicly available VLRS as of Sep 2023

#	Local Government	Country	Type	Year
1	Abruzzo, Marche, Umbria	Italy	Regional	2022
2	Accra	Ghana	Municipal	2020
3	Alhaurín de la Torre	Spain	Municipal	2019
4	Al-Madinah City	Saudi Arabia	Municipal	2023
5	Amsterdam	Netherlands	Municipal	2022
6	Asker	Norway	Municipal	2021
7	Atenas	Costa Rica	Municipal	2022
8	Avcilar	Turkey	Municipal	2022
9	Barcarena	Brazil	Municipal	2018
10	Barcelona 2019	Spain	Municipal	2019
11	Barcelona 2020	Spain	Municipal	2020
12	Barcelona 2022	Spain	Municipal	2022
13	Basque Country 2023	Spain	Regional	2023
14	Basque Country 2017	Spain	Regional	2017
15	Basque Country 2019	Spain	Regional	2019
16	Basque Country 2020	Spain	Regional	2020
17	Basque Country 2021	Spain	Regional	2021
18	Belén	Costa Rica	Municipal	2022
19	Belo Horizonte	Brazil	Municipal	2020
20	Bergen 2021	Norway	Municipal	2021
21	Bergen 2023	Norway	Municipal	2023
22	Besançon 2018	France	Municipal	2018
23	Besançon 2019	France	Municipal	2019
24	Besançon 2020	France	Municipal	2020
25	Bhopal	India	Municipal	2023
26	Bijeljina	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Municipal	2023
27	Bonn 2020	Germany	Municipal	2020

28	Bonn 2022	Germany	Municipal	2022
29	Brisbane	Australia	Municipal	2023
30	Bristol 2019	United Kingdom	Municipal	2019
31	Bristol 2022	United Kingdom	Municipal	2022
32	Buenos Aires 2023	Argentina	Municipal	2023
33	Buenos Aires 2019	Argentina	Municipal	2019
34	Buenos Aires 2020	Argentina	Municipal	2020
35	Buenos Aires 2021	Argentina	Municipal	2021
36	Buenos Aires 2022	Argentina	Municipal	2022
37	Busia	Kenya	Regional	2019
38	Canterbury	United Kingdom	Municipal	2019
39	Cape Town	South Africa	Municipal	2019
40	Cascais	Portugal	Municipal	2020
41	Castilla la Mancha	Spain	Regional	2019
42	Cauayan City	Philippines	Municipal	2017
43	Changhua County	Taiwan	Provincial	2023
44	Chimbote	Peru	Municipal	2020
45	Ciudad Valles	Mexico	Municipal	2020
46	Cochabamba	Bolivia	Municipal	2022
47	Córdoba (ARG) 2023	Argentina	Regional	2023
48	Córdoba (ARG)	Argentina	Regional	2022
49	Córdoba (ESP)	Spain	Provincial	2020
50	Corrientes	Argentina	Municipal	2022
51	Dangjin	South Korea	Municipal	2020
52	Deqing	China	Regional	2017
53	Durango	Mexico	Regional	2021
54	Düsseldorf	Germany	Municipal	2022
55	Escazú	Costa Rica	Municipal	2022

56	Espoo	Finland	Municipal	2020
57	Fatih	Turkiye	Municipal	2023
58	Florence	Italy	Municipal	2021
59	Genoa	Italy	Provincial	2022
60	Ghent 2020	Belgium	Municipal	2020
61	Ghent 2021	Belgium	Municipal	2021
62	Ghent 2022	Belgium	Municipal	2022
63	Gladsaxe 2021	Denmark	Municipal	2021
64	Gladsaxe 2022	Denmark	Municipal	2022
65	Goicoechea	Costa Rica	Municipal	2022
66	Göteborg	Sweden	Municipal	2019
67	Guadalajara	Mexico	Municipal	2021
68	Guangzhou	China	Municipal	2020
69	Hamamatsu	Japan	Municipal	2019
70	Harare	Zimbabwe	Municipal	2020
71	Hawaii 2023	United States	Regional	2023
72	Hawai'i	United States	Regional	2020
73	Helsingborg	Sweden	Municipal	2021
74	Helsinki	Finland	Municipal	2023
75	Helsinki	Finland	Municipal	2019
76	Izmir	Turkey	Municipal	2021
77	Jaén	Spain	Provincial	2019
78	Kelowna	Canada	Municipal	2021
79	Kibaha	Tanzania	Municipal	2023
80	Kiel	Germany	Municipal	2022
81	Kitakyushu	Japan	Municipal	2018
82	Kwale	Kenya	Regional	2019
83	La Paz 2018	Bolivia	Municipal	2018

84	La Paz 2022	Bolivia	Municipal	2022
85	Lazio	Italy	Regional	2022
86	Lienchiang County	China	Provincial	2023
87	Lima	Peru	Municipal	2021
88	Lincoln 2018	Argentina	Municipal	2018
89	Lincoln 2020	Argentina	Municipal	2020
90	Liverpool	United Kingdom	Municipal	2020
91	Lombardy	Italy	Regional	2022
92	London	United Kingdom	Municipal	2021
93	Los Angeles 2019	United States	Municipal	2019
94	Los Angeles 2021	United States	Municipal	2021
95	Madrid 2021	Spain	Municipal	2021
96	Madrid 2023	Spain	Municipal	2023
97	Mafra	Portugal	Municipal	2023
98	Málaga	Spain	Municipal	2018
99	Malmö	Sweden	Municipal	2021
100	Manizales	Colombia	Municipal	2022
101	Mannheim	Germany	Municipal	2019
102	Manyara	Tanzania	Regional	2023
103	Marmara	Turkey	Regional	2022
104	Marsabit	Kenya	Regional	2019
105	Melaka City	Malaysia	Municipal	2022
106	Melbourne	Australia	Municipal	2022
107	Mérida	Mexico	Municipal	2021
108	Mexico City 2017	Mexico	Municipal	2017
109	Mexico City 2021	Mexico	Municipal	2021
110	Montevideo 2023	Uruguay	Municipal	2023
111	Montevideo 2020	Uruguay	Municipal	2020

112	Agadir	Morocco	Municipal	2023
113	Mwanza	Tanzania	Municipal	2023
114	Neuquén	Argentina	Regional	2022
115	New Taipei	Taiwan	Municipal	2019
116	New York 2018	United States	Municipal	2018
117	New York 2019	United States	Municipal	2019
118	Niort	France	Municipal	2020
119	Niterói	Brazil	Municipal	2020
120	Normandie	France	Regional	2020
121	NR-Westphalia	Germany	Regional	2016
122	Oaxaca	Mexico	Regional	2019
123	Occitanie	France	Regional	2020
124	Orlando	United States	Municipal	2021
125	Pará 2020	Brazil	Regional	2020
126	Pará 2021	Brazil	Regional	2021
127	Pará 2022	Brazil	Regional	2022
128	Pays de la Loire	France	Regional	2020
129	Penang Island	Malaysia	Municipal	2022
130	Pittsburgh	United States	Municipal	2020
131	Rapa Nui	Chile	Municipal	2023
132	Reggio Calabria	Italy	Provincial	2022
133	Rio de Janeiro	Brazil	Municipal	2020
134	Río Grande	Argentina	Municipal	2022
135	Rome	Italy	Provincial	2022
136	Romsdal	Norway	Provincial	2021
137	San Justo	Argentina	Municipal	2022
138	Santa Fe (city)	Argentina	Municipal	2022
139	Santa Fe (province)	Argentina	Regional	2019

140	Santana de Parnaíba	Brazil	Municipal	2019
141	São Paulo (State)	Brazil	Regional	2019
142	São Paulo 2020	Brazil	Municipal	2020
143	São Paulo 2021	Brazil	Municipal	2020
144	Sardinia	Italy	Regional	2022
145	Scotland	United Kingdom	Regional	2020
146	Seodaemun-gu	South Korea	Municipal	2021
147	Sepang	Malaysia	Municipal	2023
148	Shah Alam	Malaysia	Municipal	2021
149	Shimokawa	Japan	Municipal	2018
150	Shinan-Gun	South Korea	Regional	2023
151	Shkodër	Albania	Municipal	2021
152	Skiathos	Greece	Municipal	2020
153	State of Mexico	Mexico	Regional	2021
154	Stockholm	Sweden	Municipal	2021
155	Stuttgart	Germany	Municipal	2020
156	Subang Jaya	Malaysia	Municipal	2021
157	Sultanbeyli	Turkey	Municipal	2021
158	Surabaya	Indonesia	Municipal	2021
159	Suwon	South Korea	Municipal	2023
160	Suwon 2018	South Korea	Municipal	2018
161	Suwon 2021	South Korea	Municipal	2021
162	Tabasco	Mexico	Regional	2021
163	Tainan City	Taiwan	Municipal	2021
164	Taipei 2019	Taiwan	Municipal	2019
165	Taipei 2020	Taiwan	Municipal	2020
166	Taipei 2021	Taiwan	Municipal	2021
167	Taita Taveta	Kenya	Regional	2019

168	Taoyuan	Taiwan	Municipal	2020
169	Thunder Bay	Canada	Municipal	2022
170	Tizacuya	Mexico	Municipal	2023
171	Tokyo 2023	Japan	Municipal	2023
172	Tokyo 2021	Japan	Municipal	2021
173	Toyama	Japan	Municipal	2018
174	Trujillo	Peru	Municipal	2020
175	Turku	Finland	Municipal	2020
176	Uppsala	Sweden	Municipal	2021
177	Valencian Country	Spain	Regional	2016
178	Vantaa 2023	Finland	Municipal	2023
179	Vantaa 2021	Finland	Municipal	2021
180	Victoria Falls	Zimbabwe	Municipal	2021
181	Viken	Norway	Provincial	2020
182	Villa María	Argentina	Municipal	2022
183	Vitoria-Gasteiz	Spain	Municipal	2022
184	Wallonia 2017	Belgium	Regional	2017
185	Wallonia 2019	Belgium	Regional	2019
186	Winnipeg 2018	Canada	Municipal	2018
187	Winnipeg 2020	Canada	Municipal	2020
188	Yaoundé	Cameroon	Municipal	2020
189	Yerba Buena	Argentina	Municipal	2022
190	Yiwu	China	Municipal	2021
191	Yokohama	Japan	Municipal	2021
192	Yucatan	Mexico	Regional	2020



THE GLOBAL GOALS

For Sustainable Development