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Sustainable Development Goals Voluntary Local Reviews:

measuring progress towards Sustainable Development Goals at the local level

From Key Performance Indicators for Smart Sustainable Cities to Voluntary Local Reviews

Note by the Bureau of the Committee

Summary

The United for Smart Sustainable Cities Key Performance Indicators for Smart Sustainable Cities is a global standard for measuring the Sustainable Development Goals at the local level and for assessing smartness and sustainability of cities, developed by the International Telecommunication Union and the Economic Commission for Europe in 2015 and endorsed by the Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management in 2016.

The Economic Commission for Europe secretariat carries out smart sustainable cities projects which support the review of implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) at the local level. The projects use the Key Performance Indicators for Smart Sustainable Cities that promote an evidence-based approach to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

The review of implementation of the 2030 Agenda should be based on the best available knowledge, evidence and data and promote evidence-based policymaking. Only a few Voluntary Local Reviews, for instance for Barcelona (Spain), Bristol (United Kingdom), and Helsinki (Finland), have been developed to date in the Economic Commission for Europe region. No standard approach to the development and the use of data for Voluntary Local Reviews exists.

The Committee is invited to endorse the proposal to use the United for Smart Sustainable Cities Key Performance Indicators for Smart Sustainable Cities as a backbone for the development of Voluntary Local Reviews in cities in the region and to develop guidelines for the use of the Key Performance Indicators for Smart Sustainable Cities in the preparation of Voluntary Local Reviews.

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I. Introduction

1. Cities play an important role in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Local governments are the closest to the citizens, and they are responsible for the development and provision of essential infrastructure and services for citizens. Most recently, local governments have been at the forefront of addressing the challenges posed by COVID-19.

2. The role of cities has been recognized by the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management. The secretariat to the Committee organized the Day of Cities on 8 April 2019 in Geneva (ECE/HBP/2019/3), where the mayors and deputy mayors from ECE member States presented best practices from their cities, described challenges that they encountered in trying to make their cities smarter and more sustainable, and elaborated on their vision for the future of urban sustainability in the region. Following the successful Day of Cities, the Committee agreed to dedicate one of the three days of the Committee session to discussions with participation of local authorities, in particular mayors, and to hold a forum of Mayors; and “invited the Forum to transmit its recommendations on how to address the challenges that local authorities/governments face in achieving sustainable urban development, housing and land management to the Committee in the context of assisting the Committee in its activities in the ECE region” (ECE/HBP/201, paragraph 35).

3. The 2030 Agenda encourages governments to report on progress towards the SDGs and to “conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels, which are country-led and country-driven” (2030 Agenda, paragraph 79)¹. By 2020, 95 per cent of the ECE member States (54 out of the 56 member States) have undertaken a Voluntary National Review (VNR)². However, the VNRs often focus on the achievements of a country as a whole and do not focus on the differences in the levels of development across locations. As the governments are not obliged to consult sub-national governments to develop VNRs, only 42 per cent of VNRs are based on consultation with regional and local governments.³

4. At the same time, some cities in the ECE region, such as Barcelona (Spain), Bristol (UK) and Helsinki (Finland)⁴, have documented their progress towards the SDGs by developing Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs)⁵. VLRs (i) provide a nuanced view on the progress towards SDG by highlighting differences in the levels of development across locations; (ii) increase the ownership of SDGs at the local level, to review local development goals and targets, to mobilize stakeholder support towards a collaborative implementation of the goals, and to better align the management of local finances towards SDGs; and (iii) improve the engagement of local governments in the preparation of the VNRs and other national processes of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

5. As the cities have their own unique histories and development challenges, their approach to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the development of VLRs differ. Local governments use various methodologies to collect data. Very few resources that support development of the VLRs exist. They include the United Nations Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) “Voluntary Local Review: Asia-Pacific Regional Guideline” the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) “Guidance for Voluntary Local Reviews Vol.1: A Comparative Analysis of Existing VLRs” and the

¹ Available at https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E

² Available at <https://www.unece.org/sustainable-development/sdgs-in-the-region.html>

³ United Cities and Local Governments, “Towards the Localization of the SDGs”, Local and regional government’s report to the 2019 High Level Political Forum, 3rd report.

⁴ VLRs were also developed for cities such as New York (USA), Kitakyushu and Shimokava (Japan), La Paz (Bolivia) and many others.

⁵ A Voluntary Local Review is a document (a report) that outlines the role of a city in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, especially the progress of the city towards SDGs.

European Union “European Handbook for SDG Voluntary Local Reviews”⁶. Some cities draw lessons from the guidelines available for the development of VNRs, including the “Handbook for the preparation of Voluntary National Reviews” of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA). In general, the guideline materials produced by United Nations institutions to date do not focus sufficiently on the methodologies for assessing the performance of cities against the SDGs and the standards for measuring the SDGs at the local level.

II. Evidence-based approach to the review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

6. The 2030 Agenda recognizes the growing importance of data in its review and implementation. It states that “a robust follow-up and review mechanism for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda requires a solid framework of indicators and statistical data to monitor progress, inform policy and ensure accountability of all stakeholders”⁷. Therefore, it is important to provide cities with guidance for reviewing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the local level that is based on solid a framework for measuring SDGs at the local level.

7. The ECE encourages policymakers at all levels to use evidence-based approaches to policy-making and decision-making and to make efforts to develop relevant standards and quality assurance measures. The ECE document “Guidelines on evidence-based policies and decision-making for sustainable housing and urban development” recognizes the need to promote the measuring of progress towards sustainable development at the local level and that the contributions of cities towards sustainable development is captured only partially in the official review processes, most notably in the context of SDG 11.

8. The guidelines also stress the importance of using existing global standards for the evaluation of performance of cities to improve policymaking and decision-making at all levels of governance, such as the KPIs for SSC.

III. The Key Performance Indicators for Smart Sustainable Cities

9. The KPIs for SSC is a public, free of charge standard developed by ECE and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) in the context of the United for Smart Sustainable Cities (U4SSC) initiative. The KPIs for SSC are relevant to the SDGs and consist of 91 indicators at the interface of three dimensions of sustainability (economy, environment, and society and culture) and information and communications technologies. The implementation of the KPIs for SSC is based on the “Collection Methodology for Key Performance Indicators for Smart Sustainable Cities”⁸ and the “ECE Protocol on the evaluation of City Performance against the Key Performance Indicators for Smart Sustainable Cities” (ECE/HBP/2020/5).

10. The KPIs for SSC together with these guideline materials provide cities with a consistent and standardised method to collect data and measure performance and progress towards:

- (a) Achieving the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda;
- (b) Becoming a smarter city;

⁶ <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/publication/eur-scientific-and-technical-research-reports/european-handbook-sdg-voluntary-local-reviews>

⁷ <https://undocs.org/A/RES/71/313>

⁸ Available at <https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/hlm/documents/Publications/U4SSC-CollectionMethodologyforKPIfoSSC-2017.pdf>

(c) Becoming a more sustainable city⁹.

11. The KPIs for SSC have been tested and implemented globally in over 150 cities all over the world, including Voznesensk (Ukraine), Goris (Armenia), Pully (Switzerland), Dubai (United Arab Emirates), Singapore (Singapore), Shanghai (China), Buenos Aires (Argentina), Moscow (Russia) and many others.

12. The ECE secretariat carries out projects that aim to improve the smartness and sustainability of cities, for instance the projects “Improving Sustainability of 17 Norwegian Cities” and the “Smart Sustainable Cities for the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development and the New Urban Agenda in the UNECE Region”, a project under the UNDA 12th tranche. The projects rest on the evaluation of the city’s performance against the KPIs for SSC. In the period 2019 to 2023, ECE foresees the further application of the KPIs for SSC to evaluate the smartness and sustainability of 17 Norwegian cities, Grodno (Belarus), Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan), Tbilisi (Georgia), Tirana (Albania), Podgorica (Montenegro), Almaty (Kazakhstan), Nursultan (Kazakhstan) and others.

13. The process results in a vast set of data that can be leveraged in the development of VLRs for the cities.

IV. A proposal for the use of the Key Performance Indicators for Smart Sustainable Cities for the preparation of Voluntary Local Reviews

14. The implementation of the 2030 Agenda can only be successful if it is a collaborative effort of countries and cities in the ECE region. Cities in the ECE region are interested in documenting and reviewing their progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and some of them have already produced VLRs.

15. The 2030 Agenda requires that policymakers take a robust approach to the development of data used in the review process and in evidence-based policymaking at all levels of governance. The KPIs for SSC support evidence-based policymaking at the local level and provide cities with a consistent and standardised method to collect data and measure performance and progress towards the SDGs.

16. One of the most important challenges in developing VLRs is access to reliable data about cities. The collection of this data is fundamental to the success of the VLRs.

17. The Committee is invited to endorse the proposal to use the U4SSC KPIs for SSC as a backbone for the development of VLRs in cities in the ECE region and to develop guidelines for the use of the KPIs for SSC in the preparation of the VLRs.

⁹ Available at <https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/hlm/documents/Publications/U4SSC-CollectionMethodologyforKPIfoSSC-2017.pdf>