

**Policy Brief**

# **Localising NDCs with inspiration from the 2030 Agenda**

A closer look at Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs)  
and Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)





**Published by:**

Deutsche Gesellschaft für  
Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

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Bonn and Eschborn, Germany

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**Layout:**

Ahnen&Enkel, Berlin

**Photo credits/sources:**

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On behalf of the  
German Federal Ministry for the Environment,  
Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMU) as part  
of the International Climate Initiative (IKI)

GIZ is responsible for the content of this publication.

Berlin May 2021

## Summary

The implementation of two global agendas to prevent planetary collapse is lagging dangerously. Greater action is urgently needed to meet the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement. Identifying, using and enabling the potential of subnational governments can be one way to achieve this.

The global and national goals and plans of these agendas therefore need to be translated and adapted to local contexts and needs in a collaborative manner. This is what can be understood as 'localisation'.

Lessons learned from localising the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), where the concept has been used for longer and on a wider basis than with Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and the Paris

Agreement, include the need for a clear national localisation strategy and greater multi-level cooperation. The example of Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) illustrates a successful form of localisation with a clear bottom-up approach.

Localising NDCs is a three-part exercise, comprising developing and implementing the NDC and combining bottom-up and top-down aspects (multi-level collaboration) to help raise ambition in new NDCs. Among the biggest challenges to localisation processes, we identify a lack of vertical coordination, incoherent policies, and weak climate data at local level. To overcome these challenges and speed up and facilitate the localisation of NDCs, we make the following recommendations for both the national and the local level.

### Recommendations

- Incorporate the efforts of subnational governments in both developing and updating NDCs and during their implementation; many are already proving that deeper greenhouse gas emissions cuts are in fact achievable
- Develop a national strategy or framework for localisation with connected support for subnational governments
- Improve vertical coordination and cooperation between levels of government
- Address interlinkages between the SDGs and NDCs and capitalise on synergies for the effective and efficient use of resources
- Support joint efforts for data disaggregation to strengthen national and local capacities to assess potential and progress





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## Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
CBD	United Nations Convention for Biological Diversity
EUKN	European Urban Knowledge Network
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GHG	Greenhouse Gas
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
HLPF	High-Level Political Forum
IGES	Institute for Global Environmental Strategies
LDC	Locally Determined Contribution
LNOB	Leave No One Behind
LTS	Long Term Strategy
NDC	Nationally Determined Contribution
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
P4R	Partners for Review
PPP	Public Private Partnership
RLC	Regional and Local Contribution
RLDC	Regionally and Locally Determined Contribution
UCLG	United Cities and Local Governments
UN	United Nations
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
UNSG	United Nations Secretary-General
VLR	Voluntary Local Review
VNR	Voluntary National Review
VSR	Voluntary Subnational Review
WMO	World Meteorological Organization

## Introduction

In 2015, after years of consultation and negotiation, countries agreed the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Until now, implementation of both agendas is lagging dangerously, especially given the multiple direct and indirect impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on implementation efforts worldwide.

The latest edition of the UN Secretary General's annual SDG Report, which monitors the progress made towards implementation, makes clear that much work remains to be done if the SDGs are to be achieved within the 'Decade of Action'. At the beginning of a critical period to respond to the world's gravest challenges – from eliminating poverty and hunger to preserving biodiversity – this growing urgency must be met with greater ambition (UN, 2020).

However, national commitments to combat climate change are likewise not ambitious enough. Both the first round of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) – the main tool for turning the overarching goals of the Paris Agreement into action – and most of the NDCs updated in 2020/2021 (UNFCCC, 2021) are far from sufficient to avoid catastrophic global warming, leading to an average temperature increase of between 2.9 and 3.4 degrees Celsius (WMO, 2019). This temperature increase is associated with rising sea levels, dwindling ecosystems and loss of biodiversity. More extreme and slow-onset events, such as heat waves, storms and flooding, will threaten human health and livelihoods. These impacts undermine global efforts to achieve development and prosperity in both the Global South and the Global North.

Speeding up the transformation towards a sustainable and climate-neutral world requires enhanced action at all levels of government. Both the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement are global agreements negotiated by national governments, that to a large extent need to be implemented at local and regional (subnational) level. These global and national goals and plans therefore have to be translated and adapted to local contexts and needs. This is what can be understood as 'localisation'.

The concept of localisation has been used for longer and on a wider basis with the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda than with NDCs. For many municipalities, the SDGs provide a coherent framework for planning, implementing and monitoring their work towards sustainability across sectors (OECD, 2020). A specific example of localisation is the Voluntary Local Review (VLR), inspired by the official Voluntary National Review (VNR).

In this policy brief, we consider what the process of localising NDCs can learn from localisation of the SDGs, including through a closer look at the relationship between VLRs and VNRs, which is understood as a multi-level governance function. On this basis, we offer a definition of what localising NDCs as a concept capturing both top-down and bottom-up processes should ideally include. We address common barriers to localising global agendas. On this basis, we offer a definition of what localising NDCs as a concept capturing both top-down and bottom-up processes should ideally include. We address common barriers to localising global agendas and conclude with recommendations on how to speed up and facilitate the localisation of NDCs.

## Localising global agendas

The United Cities and Local Governments network describes localisation as 'the process of defining, implementing and monitoring strategies at the local level for achieving global, national, and sub-national [sustainable development] goals and targets' (UCLG, 2019).

In this process, practitioners and policymakers must deal with several co-benefits and trade-offs. While there are considerable overlaps between the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement (SDG 13 calls for urgent action on climate change, SDG 7 tackles affordable and clean energy, and SDG 12 covers responsible consumption and production), there are also instances of incoherence between individual SDGs as well as with regard to the goals of the Paris Agreement (Brand, Furness and Keijzer, 2021). For instance, promoting renewable forms of energy may counteract efforts to strengthen biodiversity (as a result of large-scale cultivation of plants to produce biofuels) or to ensure food security (by making it more profitable to grow plants for fuel than for food production).



Cities account for about 70 per cent of global energy-related CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and around two thirds of resource and energy use, caused by socially and environmentally unsustainable production and consumption patterns. However, they are also economic and innovative powerhouses, generating about 80 per cent of global GDP. Front-runner cities that take ambitious climate action provide motivation and set an example. By 2050, almost 70 per cent of the world's population will live in urban areas<sup>1</sup> (Lyden et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic underscores the crucial role subnational governments play in ensuring the general welfare of their citizens. They are first responders in the health crisis, yet the economic and social consequences of the pandemic are hitting them particularly hard. While the minimisation of social and economic activities led to a temporary reduction of emissions, the rebound effects through renewed strong economic growth have quickly increased emissions again. The pathways cities and regions choose to recover from the pandemic can either boost sustainable development or lead to carbon lock-ins. In the medium term, local strategies for sustainable and low carbon development offer ways to build back better.

Goal 5 of the 2030 Agenda is dedicated to 'Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls', while Parties to the Paris Agreement should 'respect, promote and consider ... gender equality [and] empowerment of women'. Of the first round of NDCs existing in 2016, however, only 65 of a total of 165 NDCs made any reference to gender at all and only 18 emphasised the role of women in climate change mitigation (UNDP et al., 2020). Out of all individual activities listed in these NDCs, only 1 per cent mentioned a gender equality dimension (Brandt et al., 2017). The 'Rulebook' of the Paris Agreement makes it clear that future NDCs should contain information on how they were planned in a gender-responsive manner (UNFCCC, 2018).

The prevailing unequal treatment of women and men in all countries will – unless actively mitigated – be reflected in the process of localising both the SDGs

and NDCs. Therefore, gender aspects need to be considered alongside other human rights aspects and the 'leave no one behind' (LNOB) principle. Such overarching principles can help in identifying and prioritising policies that address the most vulnerable groups (Bouyé et al., 2018).

In the localisation of global agendas, this translates into consideration of, for example, whether women and men have equal power to participate in and respond to local measures. Gender roles and gender related rights mean that women and men may have different constraints, risks, opportunities and abilities to participate in decision-making processes – to be 'agents of change' – at both the household level as well as in local and national policy-making. This can influence the design and impact of local climate measures (UNDP, 2019).

The same can be said of young people, the age group that will be most affected by climate change: by bringing the campaign for a sustainable future to the streets, they are the loudest voice in lobbying for positive change to meet the targets of the global agendas but are often excluded from decision-making processes (NDCP, 2020).

If localisation efforts are inclusive, taking into account gender and the LNOB principle, they can more effectively tap the potential of all societal actors to accelerate change. If they are further prepared to deal with likely political or technological incompatibilities, they can provide an opportunity to reduce incoherencies and amplify synergies.

## Localising SDGs

The idea that the transformation towards sustainability needs to take place in municipalities, cities and regions – close to the people – is not new. Municipalities around the globe are responsible for delivering many of the basic services, such as housing, transport and sanitation, that are also crucial areas for sustainable development. When more than 170 nations adopted Agenda 21 in Rio de Janeiro almost 30 years ago

<sup>1</sup> An alternative way of defining cities and urban areas by OECD and the European Commission results in different projections: 55 per cent of the global population is projected to live in cities in 2050, according to the 'Degree of Urbanisation' method (OECD/European Commission, 2020).

(UNCED, 1992), this sparked a wave of local Agenda 21 activities. By 2002, over 6,400 local governments in 113 countries were engaged in Local Agenda 21 activities. More than 80 per cent of these local governments were located in Europe (Rok & Kuhn, 2012).

20 years after the UN conference in Rio de Janeiro, the Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012 initiated an inclusive process to develop a set of sustainable development goals, resulting three years later in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The 2030 Agenda explicitly calls on national governments to ‘work closely on implementation with regional and local authorities, sub-regional institutions, [...] and others.’ (UN, 2015, 15) Such close cooperation is crucial, since at least 105 out of the 169 sub-targets of the SDGs cannot be achieved without the involvement of subnational governments (OECD, 2020).

Localisation of the SDGs includes the way in which subnational governments contribute to the achievement of the SDGs through local action and the way in which the SDGs are used as a framework for local development policy (Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, 2016; OECD, 2020).

There is a rich supply of guidance, tools and initiatives on localising the SDGs. Most leading UN institutions as well as local governments have joined forces behind the Local2030: Localizing the SDGs network and platform, with the aim of ‘providing a one-stop-shop on SDG localization resources and tools for stakeholders’ (Local2030, 2021). Localised SDG indicators have been developed by both the OECD, covering more than 600 regions and 600 cities (OECD, 2020), and the EU Joint Research Centre, providing 71 ready-to-use indicators (Siragusa et al., 2020). Another resource is City WORKS, developed by GIZ and aimed at making cities more resilient and liveable through capacity building. In addition to the 2030 Agenda, City WORKS also takes the Paris Agreement into account and supports integrated implementation of both global agendas (City WORKS, 2021).

In their analyses of SDG localisation, both the European Urban Knowledge Network and United Cities and Local Governments conclude that localisation is more successful where a clear national localisation strategy

## Localising the CBD

A much older global agenda that showcases localisation is the United Nations Convention for Biological Diversity (CBD), agreed together with the other Rio conventions in 1992. It includes a process in which countries develop National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs). Building on the notion of NBSAPs, subnational governments developed the term Local Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (LBSAPs). The recommendation to both national and subnational governments is to link NBSAPs and LBSAPs systematically to unlock synergies between these levels (Lydén et al., 2020).

Localising the CBD was further reinforced during the recent Edinburgh Process, a global online consultation bringing together national and subnational government representatives as well as stakeholders from civil society and the private sector. The resulting Edinburgh Declaration appeals for the greater inclusion of subnational levels. The CBD’s Subsidiary Body of Implementation (SBI) supports its recommendations and further argues that subnational governments – which are responsible for implementing up to two-thirds of the global biodiversity agenda – are a resource that has not yet been used to its fullest and must, therefore, be actively involved in the Post-2020 Biodiversity Framework (CBD, 2021).

or framework exists. A national strategy could outline specific areas of action for different stakeholders (including subnational governments). Additionally, relevant support structures should be in place along with coordinated multi-level governance (EUKN Secretariat, 2020; UCLG, 2020a). The Asian Development Bank (ADB) notes in its analysis that successful localisation of the SDGs requires strong vertical dialogue and collaboration and should ideally be both a top-down and bottom-up process. The ADB further concludes that a ‘stronger push for promoting policy coherence, multi-level governance, and the concept of localizing the SDGs is required to make progress on achieving the SDGs.’ (Oosterhof, 2018)

## National and local reviews (VNRs and VLRs)

Through the 2030 Agenda, countries commit to engaging in a systematic follow-up and review process of



their implementation progress. Ideally, countries ‘conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels’ (UN 2015, paragraph 79). Reviews are ‘voluntary and country-led’, but each UN member state is expected to submit at least two VNRs before 2030. These Voluntary National Reviews are presented at the yearly High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) meeting. Based on their VNRs, countries are sharing experiences, challenges and lessons learned ‘with a view to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.’ (UNDESA, 2021a)

*‘The VLR is about telling a local story in a global context and the process provides just as much value as the product.’*

*(Deininger et al., 2019)*

The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) provides guidance through a VNR handbook, voluntary common reporting guidelines and a VNR database. To ensure the participation of multiple stakeholders in VNR processes, the handbook recommends ‘reaching out to legislative bodies, sub national and local governments, the public, civil society and the private sector, and communicating entry points for stakeholder participation in VNR preparation and implementation of the 2030 Agenda.’ (UNDESA, 2020, 13) The most recent update of the handbook proposes addressing the questions ‘How are all sectors and levels of government (local and subnational) being engaged in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda?’ and ‘Have they prepared their own voluntary local reviews?’ (UNDESA, 2020, 17).

Two recent analyses of VNRs find that most do not systematically refer to action at local level (UNDESA, 2019, 38) and that there is only ‘weak collaboration between the national and local processes.’ (Ortiz-Moya et al., 2020). There is, however, a positive trend towards including local actors in the national review processes, and in 2020, the participation of subnational governments in VNR processes rose to 55 per cent (26 out of 47 VNRs), up from 42 per cent between 2016 and

2019 (66 out of 158 VNRs). This was measured using a survey of subnational governments around the world as well as of local government associations (UCLG, 2020b, 119).

Most early VNRs did not include subnational governments to any significant extent, which contributed to the emergence of a movement of local reviews. New York City became the first city to report its progress on implementing the SDGs using a format specifically called a Voluntary Local Review (VLR) at the HLPF in July 2018, together with the three Japanese cities Kitakyushu, Shimokawa and Toyama (Deininger et al., 2019, 9; Ortiz-Moya et al., 2020).<sup>2</sup>

Voluntary Local Reviews have no official UN status, and there is no single established definition of VLRs, so estimates of the numbers of VLRs vary. An analysis in early 2020 listed 16 VLRs by ‘frontrunner cities’ (Ortiz-Moya et al., 2020), whereas a more inclusive listing of VLRs the same year identified a total of 39 VLRs (UCLG 2020a). The repository hosted by UNDESA also lists 39 VLRs (UNDESA, 2021b), although with little overlap with the 39 VLRs listed by UCLG. Meanwhile, a substantial amount of guidance documents, such as handbooks, indicators and templates, has been developed by UNDESA (2019), other UN bodies, think tanks, and by cities and their networks.

For reviews covering more than one single local government, the term Voluntary Subnational Review (VSR) is sometimes used. It may refer to the regional or provincial governing level as well as to a review made by associations of subnational governments. Such reviews can be a good option for smaller cities that may lack the capacity to conduct their own VLR. In the case of Benin, Costa Rica, Ecuador and Kenya, VSR findings have also been mentioned in the respective VNRs (GOLD, 2021).

In this policy brief, we use Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) as a collective term for all types of local and regional reviews. We combine all sources of VLRs known to us and focus on the reviewing and monitoring aspect, leaving some of the forward-looking

<sup>2</sup> Even earlier, in 2016, the regional government of Valencia reported on its progress in localising the SDGs. In 2017, the regional governments of Wallonia in Belgium and of the Basque Country in Spain published progress reports; the city of Suwon in South Korea did so in 2018. These reports are regarded by some sources as VLRs (GOLD, 2021), although they do not refer to the VLR logic.

strategies outside our scope. This includes documents that are not formally named Voluntary Local Reviews but perform essentially the same task – making a total of 48 VLRs published by subnational governments (as at March 2021).

Although these VLRs vary substantially in terms of methodology, length, topics and targets covered, one thing they have in common is that they provide subnational governments with a common language to communicate their experiences with peers around the world as well as to national governments. This makes VLRs a means for knowledge exchange and mutual learning among local governments and their networks, disseminating good practice and creating emulation.

Subnational governments also highlight the inclusive nature of VLRs as a tool to overcome silos between departments as well as sectors (UCLG, 2020a). Likewise, a ‘strong city governance, not just city government’ (Pipa, 2019, 4) that seeks to include local businesses, civil society and other stakeholders is considered essential to underpin review processes. The process of writing VLRs can also shine a light on how inclusive policies and actions are, in particular by reviewing the progress on implementing the LNOB principle.

*‘Local and regional governments are slowly getting a seat at the VNR consultation table where they can present a first-hand account of the realities of local government.’*  
(UCLG, 2020b)

National governments are increasingly giving local governments a bigger role in VNR processes: one recent example is The Gambia, where subnational technical advisory committees have been established to provide a platform for developing VLRs, which can then feed into the VNR. In their 2020 VNRs, Morocco, Mozambique and Zambia emphasised the need for participation of subnational governments and the need to scale up the capacities of those governments (Partners for Review, 2020). Some of the 2020 VNRs

### National support for VLRs

Finland included cities in its second VNR. Sanna-Mari Jäntti, Director of Strategic Initiatives for the city of Helsinki, said that this experience ‘solidified our collaboration with the state of Finland’. At the same time, she points to cities that do not enjoy the same luxury of having their national governments supporting and demanding VLRs from their cities. In these cases, Jäntti says, the international community is needed to provide the necessary support. (Moscow Urban Forum, 2020)

explicitly acknowledge the contribution of VLRs in their respective countries (Benin, Costa Rica, Ecuador and Kenya).

The relationship between VLRs and VNRs covers a wide spectrum and is evolving rapidly. The VNRs submitted in 2020 had broad participation from line ministries (horizontal coordination), but even though subnational governments are included in a number of institutional frameworks, further strengthening of multi-level governance structures is required to improve vertical coordination (Partners for Review, 2020). The Japanese think tank IGES, which is one of the leading proponents of VLRs, proposes to integrate VLRs into the official VNR processes. According to IGES, this should ideally be supported by UN guidance giving local governments similar opportunities to those available to national governments (Ortiz-Moya et al., 2020, 10).

By contrast with the rapidly growing number of VLRs and the increasing attention given to their relationship with VNRs, and with the widespread localisation of the 2030 Agenda, there is rather little to be found under the heading ‘localising NDCs’.

### Localising NDCs

The concept of localising NDCs should be regarded as part of the bigger picture of localising the Paris Agreement, which is also more of a parallel to localising the global agenda of achieving the SDGs. The Paris Agreement recognises in its Preamble ‘the importance of the engagements of all levels of government’, although this recognition is weaker than in

the 2030 Agenda, which explicitly is calling for close cooperation with local and regional authorities. The Paris Agreement is written by and for national governments, but several parts are in fact applicable directly to subnational governments, without ‘passing’ national governments first. One example is the entire Article 2 of the Agreement, where the goals for mitigation and adaptation action, as well as ‘finance flows consistent with a pathway towards low greenhouse gas emissions and climate-resilient development’ are described without reference to ‘parties’ (national governments) (UNFCCC, 2015). It should, however, be noted that the only entities formally responsible for implementing the Paris Agreement are exclusively the parties to the agreement.

Another feature of the Paris Agreement relevant to subnational governments is the formulation of long-term strategies (LTS), ideally informing the short-term targets of NDCs with direction-setting visions for the decades to come. Ideally, national governments first set a long-term target in a LTS and then plan to implement it through their NDCs. Similarly, subnational governments often set their own long-term targets and then develop the corresponding local policy and concrete measures, which ideally can be linked to an NDC. The current trend of cities and regions committing to going carbon neutral (or net-zero, or climate neutral) by 2030-2050, is one form of localising the Paris Agreement. For instance, 826 cities and 103 regions have net-zero targets, as shown in the map below. Together, they represent around 880 million people and more than 6.5 gigatons of GHG emissions (NewClimate Institute and Data-Driven EnviroLab, 2020).

As the main tool to put the overarching goals of the Paris Agreement into action, and as each country’s ‘general plan’, the NDCs are obvious candidates for localisation. Given the insufficient commitments in most NDCs, there is an urgent need for more ambitious and more effective climate action. The efforts of subnational governments and their vast potential for emissions reductions are crucial parts of the solution. Including subnational levels in the formulation of NDCs is a major opportunity to enhance climate action (Boyd et al., 2020; Hsu et al., 2020). It also provides for concrete measures suitable for post-COVID-19 green recovery packages. During the

## Regional Climate Change Nodes

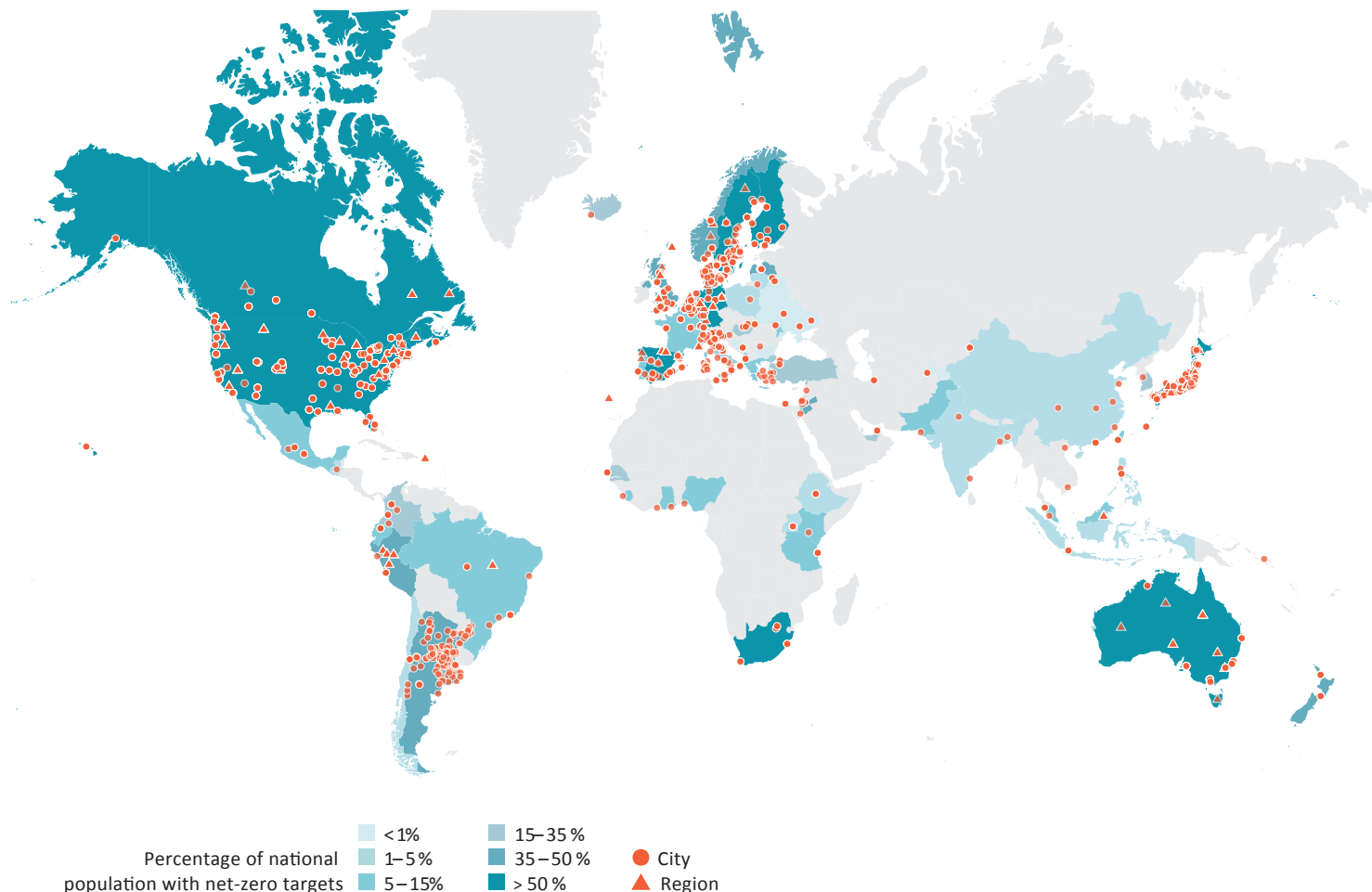
Colombia’s 2020 NDC update not only emphasises the involvement of subnational actors during both the planning and implementation of climate targets, but also lists 89 measures falling under the responsibility of local and regional entities alongside the 32 measures to be implemented at national level. It mentions the significant progress made by subnational actors as well as existing implementation and monitoring gaps.

Subnational actors in Colombia have related the NDC goals to their local contexts and defined adaptation and mitigation targets according to their capabilities (Gobierno de Colombia, 2020).

One part of the country’s comprehensive climate governance framework, Sistema Nacional de Cambio Climático (SISCLIMA), for coordinating and facilitating implementation of Colombia’s NDC at all levels are Regional Climate Change Nodes, which include representatives from municipalities, regional structures and other non-state actors (Adriázola et al., 2018). The Nodes ‘were invaluable in being able to pin-point the areas where we could reduce emissions’ (WWF Colombia, 2020) and had also led to increased territorial ownership of national strategies.

implementation of NDCs, subnational governments are likewise key actors for putting into practice many measures, from climate-neutral mobility solutions to renewable local energy systems and low-carbon buildings. This is part of – but does not constitute the full meaning of – localising NDCs.

Analogue to the localisation of the SDGs, localising NDCs means subnational governments translating and internalising (or even going beyond) NDC targets and developing and implementing relevant policies. Ideally, this is done in a collaborative manner with, and supported by, national governments (Zimmermann et al., 2020). For mitigation measures, subnational governments’ influence varies between sectors but is generally viewed as being greatest over buildings, local transport and waste. Increasing resilience and adapting to a changing climate are usually also issues that subnational governments can pursue on their own. As one of the mandates of subnational governments, spatial planning allows them to man-



Map of cities and regions pledging net-zero emissions targets  
(Source: NewClimate Institute and Data-Driven EnviroLab, 2020, 15)

age their territorial development to leverage and reinforce the positive effects of sectoral policies and measures towards achieving their climate goals. For framework conditions like energy taxes, emissions standards for vehicles, land tenure regulations and building codes, national or regional governments have the mandate and, therefore, the biggest possibility to act – but this should be carried out in cooperation with subnational governments.

### De-mystifying NDCs

In Durban, South Africa, in October 2018, participants in a peer-to-peer exchange event on contextualising South Africa's NDC emphasised 'the need to de-mystify the NDC' and to make it 'less political and more technically accessible.' The event bringing together representatives of South African cities, city networks and the South African National Treasury's Cities Support Programme also highlighted the desire of local decision-makers to know how they could contribute to achieving South Africa's NDC target (Partnership on Transparency in the Paris Agreement, 2018).

### Three parts of Localising NDCs

1. During the **development or updating of an NDC**, the inclusion of subnational governments by the national government early in the process is key to on the one hand gain knowledge of subnational potential, on the other hand include subnational views in order to lay the groundwork for effective implementation. One point is to secure buy-in from a wide range of subnational actors – not just subnational governments, but also other stakeholders with a local presence (for example, civil society and business), to increase the scope for successful implementation. Various forms of involvement can be envisaged and may vary in terms of degree of institutionalisation and timing (one-time or recurrent), depending on capacities and resources. Examples of interaction with stakeholders include:
  - a) Stakeholder dialogues
  - b) Written consultations
  - c) Inclusion in preparatory or consultative bodies
2. During the **implementation of NDCs**, a large part of the work needs to take place at subnational level. In areas such as innovative mobility solutions, access to renewable energy and others, cooperation between levels of government is indispensable for effective implementation.

#### National and regional governments can:

- a) Co-develop investment plans that address regional and/or local needs
- b) Develop project pipelines for subnational implementation
- c) Provide access to national or international finance or funding for subnational implementation
- d) Support capacity development and provide technical expertise and data

#### Local and regional governments can:

- e) Compare local/regional plans with national targets and align themselves accordingly – or even exceed these targets
  - f) Develop implementation plans at local/regional level
3. Advocacy and **positive interplay through cooperation across levels of government**. The interplay between national and subnational levels can be used to raise climate ambition in two ways:
    - a) Bottom-up: many municipalities, cities, states and regions are taking climate action on a far more ambitious level than their national governments. These subnational governments can demonstrate that deeper greenhouse gas emission cuts and equitable resilience building are possible and actually achievable, thereby both inspiring and putting pressure on the national government to raise its ambitions.
    - b) Top-down: national governments can use their power – both regulatory and financial – to incentivise subnational governments and push them into action. They can also identify and scale-up successful subnational examples across the country.

One concrete form of localising NDCs are 'RLCs' – Regional and Local Contributions – a concept currently under development by city networks and other institutions with an interest in multi-level climate governance (Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy, 2020). Also known as 'RLDCs' – Regionally and Locally Determined Contributions (Cooper, 2018), these subnational versions of NDCs can be imagined as anything from a re-labelled existing climate action plan to a meticulously scaled-down version of an NDC, following the same rules and methodologies as agreed for NDCs under the UNFCCC. It remains to be seen whether a single common definition will emerge and what it would be.

## Barriers to localising global agendas

Besides a lack of vertical coordination and financial resources, incoherent policies are among the biggest challenges to localisation processes. In the EU context, for example, some national and European laws and policies are counterproductive to both the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement, as they promote fossil fuels and continuous economic growth (Sánchez et al., 2018). The same can be said of fossil fuel subsidies in general. Inconsistencies at national level generate confusion and loss of motivation at local level and provide a justification for doing nothing.

The lack of disaggregated data at local level continues to be one of the biggest hurdles to grasp the mitigation potential of subnational actors. This also affects the scope to monitor the impact of local climate policies (Climate Chance, 2021). The lack of data is equally limiting effective adaptation measures and is even addressed in the 2030 Agenda itself (UN, 2015, 17). Given the high costs of generating local data, and without additional budgets, local governments often rely on national statistics or census data.

Another category of challenge is posed by public-private partnerships (PPPs) and other forms of outsourcing and privatisation. When utilities lie outside direct municipal influence, they can be more difficult to bring into localisation processes. For example, there is little incentive for privatised water and energy utilities to achieve savings in supply, which will decrease their profits as long as payments are based

on increased sales rather than on rewarding efficiencies (UCLG, 2019).

In the following section, we outline recommendations for successful localisation to overcome the barriers mentioned here.

## Conclusion: Lessons for localising NDCs

The Paris Agreement and the 2030 Agenda were agreed between countries (national governments) but, to a large extent, need to be implemented locally. So far, neither the SDGs nor the goals of the Paris Agreement are on track to be met. To increase both ambition and the effectiveness of efforts to avoid catastrophic climate change and to ensure sustainable development for all, there is a need to accelerate the implementation of these global agendas, and localisation can be one way to achieve this.

In the area of the 2030 Agenda, there is substantial guidance on, and tools for, localising the SDGs and plenty of subnational experience. Surprisingly little is written about the localisation of NDCs, which to some extent can be attributed to terminology, as there is certainly a discourse around subnational climate action but just not labelled 'localising NDCs'. In fact, a growing number of municipalities, cities, states and regions are taking climate action on a far more ambitious level than their respective national governments and thereby proving that deeper greenhouse gas emissions reductions are possible.

Acknowledging, supporting and, through cooperation, using the subnational level in both developing and implementing NDCs offers potential for more ambitious collaborative climate action. This is something that could be brought into the Global Stocktake under the Paris Agreement, which is scheduled to take place every fifth year in the NDC cycle, with the first stocktake timetabled for 2023.

Key components of localising any global agenda successfully are a national strategy or framework for localisation with connected support and cooperation between government levels (multi-level governance). Across the guidance available, the role of a collaborative multi-level approach is emphasised.



The Convention for Biological Diversity, under which voluntary action plans at local level complement mandatory national plans, recommends that local plans are systematically linked to national plans, a model that could also serve as inspiration for localised NDCs.

As a specific localised feature of the 2030 Agenda, VLRs are an example of the strong initiative subnational governments are showing but also how academia, the UN and other actors are joining forces to support the process through policy analysis and development, tools and guidance. The VLRs are a clear bottom-up process without unified standards or rules, and this seems to work in their favour, allowing local and regional differences to flourish. VLRs are contributing to national reviews (VNRs), adding aspects that would otherwise be missing and thereby laying the groundwork for more successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

VLRs are a new concept that is still under development, and so is their increasingly integrated connection to VNRs. Given their rapid expansion among subnational governments, the successful bottom-up approach of VLRs could serve as an example of how (not) to formalise or codify localised NDCs. Similarly, national governments' increasing interest in including VLRs in their VNRs could illustrate a successful top-down approach. Taken together, these demonstrate the benefits of a multi-level approach.

There are strong reasons to link the climate agenda, the biodiversity agenda and the 2030 Agenda, which includes SDGs relating to both. Linking the localisation

of NDCs with localising the SDGs can create synergies. It can also promote more integrated planning if national level ministries are jointly responsible for implementing actions on both sustainable development and climate change mitigation. At local level, no distinction is made between planning for low-carbon and energy-efficient buildings and for greener buildings: future city quarters will combine both to become resource-efficient, human-friendly green neighbourhoods.

The localisation of NDCs can find inspiration in the 2030 Agenda's more inclusive basis than the one of the Paris Agreement. Several national governments are organising dialogue meetings and sharing drafts of SDG implementation plans with stakeholders, an approach that could also be applied to NDCs.

The COVID-19 pandemic is having a negative impact on efforts to implement both the Paris Agreement and the 2030 Agenda, and vulnerable groups are being hit especially hard. The various initiatives often labelled as 'green recovery' or 'build back better' programmes could make use of existing NDCs, and within that process, a multi-level governance approach can help ensure that the measures proposed are inclusive and sustainable.

To speed up and facilitate the localisation of NDCs and raise climate ambition, we make the following recommendations:

## Recommendations

### At national level:

- Incorporate the efforts of subnational governments, many of whom are already showcasing that deeper greenhouse gas cuts are, in fact, achievable, in both developing or updating NDCs and in implementing them. However, subnational governments are not only implementing bodies but also cooperation partners in both phases.
- Co-design localisation strategies that create the necessary framework conditions and reduce existing incoherencies between national regulations and between sectoral policies. National climate plans need to be aligned with SDG strategies and enhance the role and responsibilities of subnational governments.
- Improve the multi-level governance architecture or create new coordination mechanisms both for climate action and for implementation of the 2030 Agenda, strengthening the participation of subnational governments in all phases. Discussing targets, strategies, instruments and indicators together creates ownership and buy-in amongst those involved.
- Expand (access to) financial support for subnational governments, which often have limited resources and limited scope for finding funding.
- Support joint efforts for monitoring and data disaggregation to strengthen national and local capacities to assess potential and progress.
- Facilitate and support peer to peer exchange and mutual learning among local governments and their networks, to disseminate good practices and create emulation.

### At local level:

- Address interlinkages between the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement and capitalise on synergies for effective and efficient use of resources. Also expect to deal with incoherencies and clashing demands. SDGs can be a reference framework in terms of integrated, horizontal and vertical sustainable development policies and planning and of stakeholder engagement.
- Use existing or create new coordination mechanisms with regional and national levels of government and with other local actors.
- Learn from and be inspired by other subnational actors. Horizontal cooperation can also positively influence international processes.
- Require contractors (for example, energy services) to perform their services in a way that is compatible with the goals of the Paris Agreement.
- Assess the likely impact of policy change in localised NDCs on both women and men, given gender roles and gender relations, their constraints and decision-making power. This could also be done for LGBTQ communities, ethnic and religious minorities, and different age groups.
- A shared regional localisation strategy can be a good way of ensuring that smaller cities (with more limited capacity) are also part of the process.

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