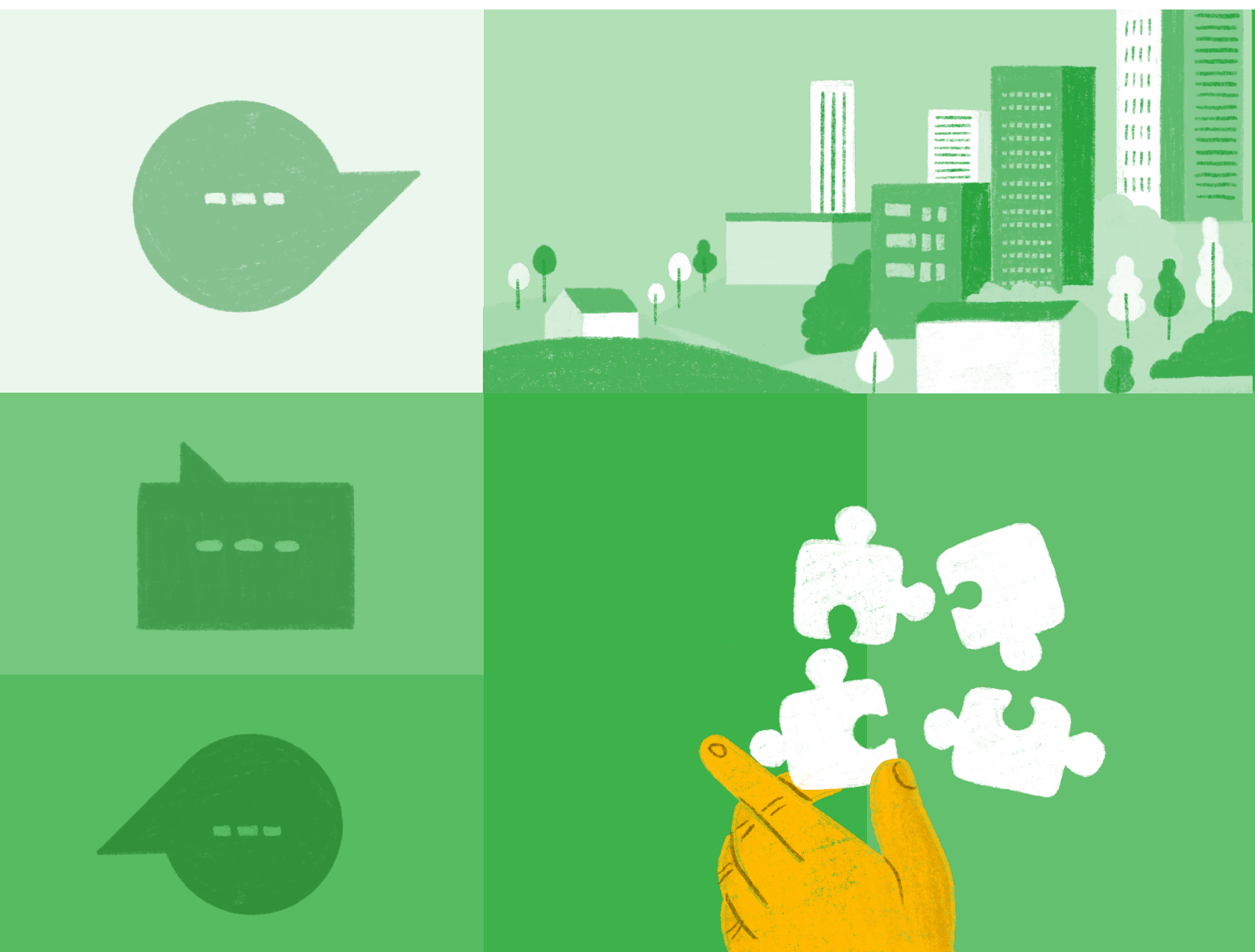


CONDUCTING VOLUNTARY LOCAL REVIEWS FOR MEASURING AND COMMUNICATING THE PROGRESS OF THE MUNICIPALITIES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SDGS



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I. Introduction

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a framework for countries and communities around the world to work towards a more sustainable and equitable future. Kosovo, although not yet a member of the UN, is committed to achieving these goals by 2030. While the SDGs are global in scope, they must be implemented at the local level, and municipalities have a critical role to play in this effort.

One way that municipalities can assess and report on their progress towards the SDGs is through Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs). VLRs provide a mechanism for municipalities to evaluate their progress, identify areas for improvement, and share their successes and challenges with other stakeholders. This policy paper outlines why and how Kosovo municipalities can conduct VLRs to support their efforts to achieve the SDGs.

In November 2022, Vushtrri became the first municipality in Kosovo to adopt the Voluntary Local Review for the SDGs. Vushtrri's experience can be replicated in other municipalities of Kosovo and the lessons learnt can be invaluable for other municipalities in Kosovo seeking to conduct their own VLRs. Vushtrri's pioneering effort has demonstrated the feasibility of conducting VLRs at the municipal level in Kosovo and has set a positive example for others to follow.

One of the key takeaways from Vushtrri's experience is the importance of stakeholder engagement in the VLR process. Vushtrri worked closely with civil society organizations, youth groups, and other stakeholders to gather input and feedback on its VLR. This collaborative approach helped to build buy-in for the VLR process and ensured that the final report reflected a wide range of perspectives and priorities.

This paper aims to build a guide for other municipalities and for policy-making on how to draft VLRs and to identify the steps for a successful drafting process and continuous monitoring. It begins with an overview of the SDGs and VLRs and their relevance to Kosovo. We then discuss the benefits of VLRs for municipalities in Kosovo, and the challenges they may face in conducting them. Next, we provide a detailed guide on how Kosovo municipalities can conduct a VLR, including key components of a VLR report and best practices for conducting a VLR. We also highlight tools and resources available to support Kosovo municipalities in this effort.

Finally, we discuss the importance of stakeholder engagement in VLRs and provide strategies for engaging stakeholders effectively. The paper concludes with a call to action for Kosovo municipalities to conduct VLRs, and a reminder of the critical role that local governments play in achieving the SDGs.

II. Understanding SDGs and VLRs for Kosovo Municipalities

Kosovo is not a member of the United Nations. Despite this, the Assembly of Kosovo has approved the Declaration for Sustainable Development by taking political commitments for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The Council for Sustainable Development was established within the framework of the Assembly, and functions as a coordinating and coordinating body in the drafting of policies.

In January 2018, the Kosovo Assembly took a significant step towards sustainable development by adopting Resolution No. 06-R-001, which committed Kosovo to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).¹ This Resolution represents an important milestone for Kosovo as it provides a framework for action towards sustainable development, encompassing social, economic, and environmental aspects.

The adoption of the SDGs reflects the commitment of the Kosovo government to the global agenda on sustainable development and highlights its recognition of the need to work towards achieving the SDGs. The Resolution also demonstrates Kosovo's recognition of the role that local governments play in achieving sustainable development and highlights the need for their engagement in the implementation of the SDGs.

By adopting the SDGs, Kosovo has made a clear commitment to sustainable development and has aligned itself with the global agenda on sustainable development. This commitment provides an opportunity for Kosovo to work towards a more sustainable future and to ensure that the benefits of sustainable development are realized by all its citizens. It is now up to the Kosovo government, municipalities, civil society, and other stakeholders to work together towards the realization of the SDGs in Kosovo.

Moreover, the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) between Kosovo and the European Union (EU) serves as a crucial instrument for promoting sustainable development in Kosovo. The agreement, which entered into force in April 2016, aims to strengthen the political and economic ties between Kosovo and the EU, and includes provisions that support sustainable development.

The SAA specifically refers to the importance of promoting sustainable development, and highlights the need for Kosovo to align its policies with the EU's environmental and social standards.² The agreement also acknowledges the importance of the SDGs and encourages Kosovo to work towards their implementation.

¹ Republic of Kosovo, Kosovo Assembly, (2018), Resolution No. 06-R-001, available at http://old.kuvendikosoves.org/common/docs/2018_01_30_Rezoluta_06_R_001.pdf (accessed in March, 2023)

² Republic of Kosovo, (2016), Law No. 05/L -069 on the Ratification of the Association and Stabilization Agreement between the Republic of Kosovo, on the one side, and the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community, on the other side, available at <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDocumentDetail.aspx?ActID=11239> (accessed in March, 2023)

Provision/Article of the Kosovo Law on Local Government	Relevant SDGs	Relevant SDG Targets	Relevant SDG Indicators
Article 4: Principles of Local Self-Government	SDG 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions	SDG 16.6: Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels	SDG 16.6.1: Primary government expenditures as a proportion of original approved budget, by sector (central, state, and local governments)
Chapter III: Competences of Municipalities	SDG 11: Sustainable cities and communities	SDG 11.3: Enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management in all countries	SDG 11.3.2: Proportion of cities with a direct participation structure of civil society in urban planning and management that operate regularly and democratically
Public Services, Articles 25 and others.	SDG 3: Good health and well-being	SDG 3.8: Achieve universal health coverage, including financial risk protection, access to quality essential health-care services and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all	SDG 3.8.1: Coverage of essential health services (defined as the average coverage of essential services based on tracer interventions that include reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health, infectious diseases, non-communicable diseases and service capacity and access, among the general and the most disadvantaged population)
Education Services, Article 17	SDG 4: Quality education	SDG 4.5: Eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations	SDG 4.5.1: Parity indices (female/male, rural/urban, bottom/top wealth quintile and others such as disability status, indigenous peoples and conflict-affected, as data become available) for all education indicators on access, participation and completion
Social Welfare Services Article 17	SDG 1: No poverty	SDG 1.3: Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable	SDG 1.3.1: Proportion of population covered by social protection floors/systems, by sex, distinguishing children, unemployed persons, older persons, persons with disabilities, pregnant women, newborns, work-injury victims and the poor and the vulnerable
Protection of environment Article 17	SDG 13: Climate action	SDG 13.1: Strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries	SDG 13.1.2: Number of countries that have communicated the strengthening of institutional, systemic and individual capacity-building to implement adaptation, mitigation and technology transfer, and development actions

Promotion of social development Article 17 and others	SDG 10: Reduced inequalities	SDG 10.2: By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status	SDG 10.2.1: Proportion of people living below 50 per cent of median income, by age, sex and persons with disabilities
Promotion of cultural and tourism development Article 17	SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth	SDG 8.9: By 2030, devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products	SDG 8.9.1: Tourism direct GDP as a proportion of total GDP and in growth rate
Promotion of agriculture, forestry and rural development Article 18	SDG 2: Zero hunger, SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth	SDG 2.3: By 2030, double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, in particular women, indigenous peoples, family farmers, pastoralists and fishers, including through secure and equal access to land, other productive resources and inputs, knowledge, financial services, markets and opportunities for value addition and non-farm employment	SDG 2.3.1: Volume of production per labour unit by classes of farming/pastoral/forestry enterprise size
Participation of women in local government Article 19	SDG 5: Gender equality	SDG 5.5: Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life	SDG 5.5.1: Proportion of seats held by women in (a) national parliament, and (b) local government
Participation of minorities in local government Article 19	SDG 10: Reduced inequalities	SDG 10.7: Facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies	SDG 10.7.1: Recruitment cost borne by employee as a proportion of monthly income earned in country of destination

Cooperation with civil society and other stakeholders Article 68	SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals	SDG 17.16: Enhance the global partnership for sustainable development, complemented by multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources, to support the achievement of the sustainable development goals in all countries, in particular developing countries	SDG 17.16.1: Number of countries reporting progress in multi-stakeholder development effectiveness monitoring frameworks that support the achievement of the sustainable development goals
Oversight of municipal administration Article 75 and others	SDG 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions	SDG 16.6: Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels	SDG 16.6.2: Proportion of population satisfied with their last experience of public services
Citizen participation in local government decision-making Article 68	SDG 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions	SDG 16.7: Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels	SDG 16.7.2: Proportion of population who believe decision-making is inclusive and responsive, by sex, age, disability and population group
Right to information Article 68	SDG 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions	SDG 16.10: Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements	SDG 16.10.2: Number of countries with national platforms providing open access to data and information

Based on the analysis conducted by the author, it is evident that a significant proportion of the SDGs, targets, and indicators are directly or partially relevant to the provisions of the Kosovo Law on Self-Government.³ Specifically, the author found that 76.47% of all relevant SDGs, 15.98% of all relevant SDG targets, and 10.82% of all relevant SDG indicators have a direct or partial link to the Law on Self-Government. In addition to the basic law for local self-government, horizontal and sectoral laws that regulate specific areas give municipalities powers. For example, based on the Energy Law, municipalities have a certain number of powers regarding water planning.

³ Republic of Kosovo, (2008), Law No. 03/L-04 on Local Self-Governance, available at <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=2530> (accessed in March, 2023)

This finding highlights the importance of aligning local policies and strategies with the SDG framework, particularly in the context of Kosovo's decentralization efforts. The Law on Self-Government grants significant competences and responsibilities to municipalities, providing them with a unique opportunity to contribute to the achievement of the SDGs at the local level. By leveraging their competences and aligning their policies with the SDG framework, municipalities in Kosovo can contribute to sustainable development and improve the well-being of their communities.

Therefore, it is crucial for municipalities to take into account the SDGs and their relevant targets and indicators when developing local policies and strategies. Additionally, it is important for the government and other stakeholders to support municipalities in this effort by providing the necessary resources and technical assistance to enable effective implementation of the SDGs at the local level.

III. How Kosovo Municipalities Can Conduct a VLR

It is crucial to localize the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to effectively implement and achieve them. Municipalities can take three key steps to achieve this goal. Firstly, they can establish a municipal VLR team, led by a high-ranking political figure and comprising of all departments within the municipality. This team will be responsible for conducting a Voluntary Local Review (VLR) of the municipality's progress towards the SDGs, highlighting areas of success and identifying challenges that require attention.

The second step involves reviewing existing policies, particularly the Municipal Development Plan (MDP), which outlines the municipality's development strategies and priorities. By integrating the SDGs into the MDP, municipalities can ensure that the SDGs are not treated as an additional set of priorities but are instead integrated into the municipality's overall development agenda.

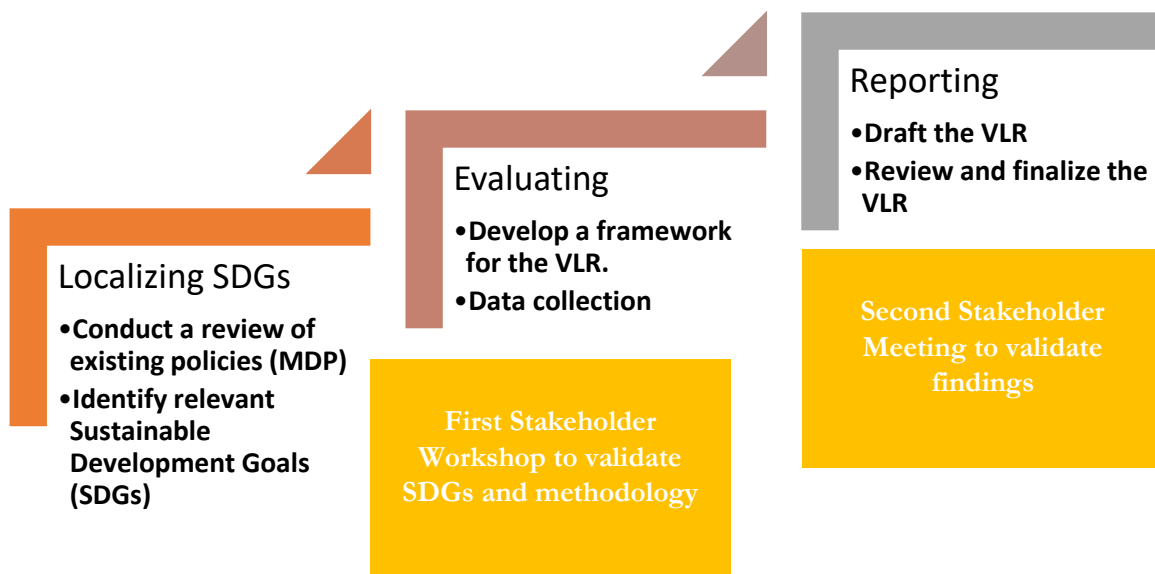
Lastly, municipalities need to identify the most relevant SDGs that align with their development priorities and context. This involves a careful analysis of the SDGs and their targets, taking into account the specific needs, challenges, and opportunities of the municipality. By identifying the most relevant SDGs, municipalities can focus their efforts and resources on areas where they can make the greatest impact and contribute to achieving the SDGs at the local level.

Localizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) requires the full commitment and support of the municipality's leadership.⁴ This is why it is important for the municipal VLR team to be led by the Mayor himself or the Deputy Mayor. The Mayor is the highest political figure in the municipality and is responsible for setting the development agenda and priorities. By leading the VLR team, the Mayor can ensure that the SDGs are integrated into the municipality's overall development strategy and that progress towards the SDGs is given the highest priority.

The example of Vushtrri, where the Deputy Mayor led the VLR team, is a good illustration of the importance of leadership in localizing the SDGs. The Deputy Mayor was able to bring together different departments and stakeholders, ensuring their active participation and engagement in the VLR process. By taking ownership of the VLR process, the Deputy Mayor was able to generate political will and momentum for SDG localization in Vushtrri.⁵ This resulted in the development of a comprehensive VLR report that provided valuable insights into the status of the SDGs in the municipality and identified priority areas for action.

⁴ United Nations, (2020), Global Guiding Elements for Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) of SDG implementation, available at https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/GlobalGuidingElementsforVLRs_FINAL.pdf (accessed in March, 2023).

⁵ Interview of INDEP with members of the Vushtrri municipal team for drafting the VLR.



STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND INCLUSIVENESS

Evaluation is another key element of the VLR process: The first step is to evaluate the current situation and identify the key areas that need to be addressed. This will involve assessing the municipality's current level of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals and identifying any gaps or challenges that need to be addressed. Once this evaluation has been completed, municipalities need to develop a framework for the VLR. This framework should outline the scope and objectives of the VLR, as well as the key performance indicators that will be used to measure progress towards the SDGs.

The next step in the VLR drafting process is data collection. This is a critical step that involves gathering and analyzing data on the municipality's progress towards the SDGs. Data collection should be comprehensive and inclusive, taking into account the needs and perspectives of all relevant stakeholders, including marginalized and vulnerable groups. Reviewing and finalizing the data is the final step. Holding consultations and validation workshops is also very important for the finalization part.

A schematic view of the steps is given in the upper part.

V. Engaging Stakeholders in VLRs in Kosovo

The importance of inclusiveness and leaving no one behind in the VLR drafting process cannot be overstated. The VLR should be a collaborative and inclusive process that engages all relevant stakeholders, including marginalized and vulnerable groups, in the municipality. Inclusiveness ensures that the VLR accurately reflects the needs, priorities, and perspectives of all members of the community, particularly those who are often excluded or marginalized. This can help to identify gaps and challenges in the implementation of the SDGs and ensure that no one is left behind in the pursuit of sustainable development.

Inclusiveness also helps to build ownership and support for the VLR process and its outcomes. When stakeholders are involved in the drafting process, they are more likely to take ownership of the VLR and its recommendations and support their implementation. This can lead to increased collaboration and partnerships among stakeholders, as well as increased accountability and transparency in the implementation of the SDGs. In addition, by leaving no one behind, municipalities can ensure that the VLR contributes to the achievement of the SDGs in a way that is equitable and sustainable for all members of the community.

A stakeholder mapping exercise is a crucial step in the Voluntary Local Review (VLR) drafting process as it helps to identify and engage with all relevant parties. Stakeholders can include community members, civil society organizations, government agencies, private sector actors, and others who have an interest in or are affected by the municipality's development agenda. By mapping out the various stakeholders and their interests, municipalities can ensure that their VLR is inclusive and representative of all voices, not just those of the government or dominant groups.

To conduct a stakeholder mapping exercise, municipalities can use a matrix that identifies stakeholders based on their level of interest and influence in the VLR process. The matrix can be divided into four quadrants, with stakeholders categorized as high interest/high influence, high interest/low influence, low interest/high influence, and low interest/low influence. This allows municipalities to prioritize engagement with stakeholders who have the highest interest and influence, while also ensuring that the voices of those with lower interest or influence are not overlooked.

Stakeholder Group	Level of Influence	Level of Interest	Contact form
National Government	High	High	
Local Government	High	High	
Civil Society Organizations	Medium	High	
Private Sector	Medium	Medium	
International Organizations	High	High	
Donor Agencies	High	High	
Academic Institutions	Low	Medium	
Media	Low	Medium	

The instrument we have presented can be used in all municipalities of Kosovo and is very important for the success of the whole process. The matrix can be completed and expanded step by step throughout the process of drafting the document.

VI. Conclusions

Kosovo Municipalities have a distinct chance to carry out Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) and integrate their strategic documents, particularly the Municipal Development Plans (MDPs) and sectorial development plans. VLRs are voluntary assessments that evaluate the progress of local governments in achieving sustainable development objectives. By participating in these reviews and incorporating their strategic documents, Kosovo Municipalities can demonstrate their steadfastness to sustainable development and highlight their advancements in realizing their objectives. This can attract investment, enhance transparency, and foster stronger partnerships between municipalities and other stakeholders.

The MDPs and sectorial development plans serve as blueprints for the development of municipalities and specific sectors within them, outlining goals, priorities, and actions to be taken to achieve sustainable development and improve the well-being of their citizens.

A significant number of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), along with their targets and indicators, are directly tied to the competencies of local-level institutions. This presents an opening for the municipalities in Kosovo to fully align their policies with the SDG framework. By doing so, these municipalities can bolster their contributions to sustainable development and enhance the well-being of their citizens. Through aligning their policies with the SDG framework, Kosovo's municipalities can create a more comprehensive approach to achieving sustainable development goals, while also gaining access to resources and support from national and international stakeholders. This also presents a unique opportunity for Kosovo's municipalities to showcase their commitment to sustainable development and position themselves as leaders in the region. In summary, aligning local policies with the SDG framework can create a path towards sustainable development and provide benefits for the municipalities and their citizens.

Kosovo municipalities possess the necessary capacities to conduct Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), as demonstrated by the Vushtrri case. This case proves that municipalities in Kosovo can successfully undertake VLRs and derive substantial benefits from them. By conducting VLRs, municipalities can assess their progress towards achieving sustainable development goals and identify areas where they need to improve. This can aid in the development of more effective policies and programs, enhancing the well-being of their citizens. The Vushtrri case has shown that VLRs can also promote transparency, accountability, and good governance at the local level. It can strengthen the engagement of local governments with their citizens and other stakeholders, leading to a more inclusive and participatory decision-making process.

One of the most significant challenges in policy evaluation is the issue of overlapping, and this remains a current concern. Kosovo, not yet being a member of the United Nations, is not obligated to report on the progress of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, municipalities are required to report on a set of performance indicators that determine their eligibility for the central-level Grant of Performance. This results in an overlap with the SDG reporting process, which can lead to confusion and additional work for municipalities. As a result, VLRs can sometimes be perceived as an unnecessary burden by municipalities.

While VLRs represent a crucial step towards the achievement of sustainable development in Kosovo, there are still challenges that need to be addressed. One of the biggest challenges is the lack of proper funding and capacities at the municipal level to collect and analyze data necessary to successfully exercise VLRs. Given the limited resources available, municipalities may struggle to implement VLRs effectively and to align their policies with the SDGs.

V. Recommendations

In order for the municipalities of Kosovo to be able to successfully draft Voluntary Local Reviews (VLR), it is important that not only them, but a range of institutions undertake reforms in order to establish an effective system of drafting VLR reports and the same reflect progress and serve as a roadmap for future decision-making.

We have divided the recommendations according to the responsible institutions and divided them into recommendations for the Government, Council for Sustainable Development and the Municipalities.

Recommendations for the Council for Sustainable Development:

- Develop and implement a comprehensive national strategy for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for the local level in Kosovo – the strategy should incorporate VLRs.
- Foster stronger partnerships between the public and private sectors to promote sustainable development and ensure a higher participation of the private sector in the VLR exercise.
- Engage with municipalities and Kosovo Association of Municipalities to enhance their capacity to align their policies with the SDG framework especially by providing framework provisions for the inclusion of VLRs in the action plans.

Recommendations for the Government:

- Based on the challenges surrounding overlapping in policy evaluation in Kosovo, it is recommended that Performance Indicators be revised to include the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and be SDG-based. By incorporating SDG indicators into Performance Indicators, municipalities can report on both targets simultaneously and reduce the burden of reporting. This will lead to a more efficient and effective approach to policy evaluation and ensure that municipalities are working towards achieving the SDGs while meeting their performance targets.
- The Government should create a separate fund to support the municipalities in drafting VLRs.
- The Government should change the Law No. 04/L-036 for Official Statistics in order to strengthen the role of municipalities. Municipalities must be able to maintain statistics offices in such a way that the process of collecting and using data for VLR is efficient and continuous.
- Increase public awareness and engagement on the importance of sustainable development and the SDGs.

Recommendations for the Municipalities:

- Conduct VLRs to assess progress towards achieving the SDGs and identify areas for improvement.

- Align policies with the SDG framework and incorporate SDG indicators into Performance Indicators to streamline reporting processes.
- Foster stronger partnerships with local stakeholders, including civil society organizations, private sector actors, and citizens, to promote sustainable development.
- Prioritize the allocation of resources towards sustainable development initiatives, particularly in areas with the greatest need.
- Establish a dedicated municipal VLR team. This team should be led by a high-level political figure, who can provide the necessary leadership and support to ensure the effective implementation of the VLR process. The VLR team should comprise of representatives from every department within the municipality, including those responsible for social, economic, and environmental issues. By involving all relevant departments, the team can ensure a holistic approach to sustainable development and create a shared sense of ownership for the VLR process.
- Fully align the MDP with the framework of SDGs so that the VLR process can be used to simultaneously evaluate the implementation of the municipal development plan. This can be done by making sure that the objectives of the MDP are framed based on the 17 objectives of the SDGs in such a way that the first part of the drafting of the VLR directly serves to convey the progress of the implementation of the MDP.
- Municipalities train high school students, on an annual basis, on the collection of data so that with their voluntary commitment, data can be collected continuously.

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