

Insights on Localizing the Sustainable Development Goals

In 2015, United Nations Member States adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to guide global action on the urgent economic, social, and environmental challenges facing our planet. The SDGs, at their core, are an ambitious vision to build a more sustainable, safe, equitable, and prosperous world for all humanity by 2030.

The broad vision of the SDGs is supported by detailed sets of targets and indicators established internationally by governments at the UN to track progress over time. To be considered successful, however, we must ‘[localize the SDGs](#)’, adapting and customizing them into local development plans and strategies.

The SDGs have increasingly gained attention from city leaders as a useful common language to connect City and community efforts around shared sustainability goals. City commitments for the SDGs often explore how current actions and priorities contribute to the SDGs with an eye for gaps in planning, opportunities, and partnerships. When done well, the SDGs can be integrated into City planning with the opportunity to make local sustainability efforts more comprehensive and coordinated.

The Current Approach - Voluntary Local Reviews

The most common approach for cities to engage with the SDGs is through the creation of a Voluntary Local Review (VLR), a reporting approach that assesses local progress, challenges, and opportunities for the SDGs. [There are 249 VLRs that have been submitted to the United Nations](#) by cities around the world, with two coming from Canadian cities (Cities of Kelowna and Winnipeg, with a third VLR in Thunder Bay not submitted to the UN).

There is no standardized approach to creating a VLR. The starting point and outcomes of VLRs are shaped by a community’s priorities, access to data, and existing approaches to sustainable development.

Globally, there are two typical orientations used in creating a VLR:

- **Present-Oriented** – focused on mapping and aligning City policies, strategies, and initiatives to the SDGs to understand current performance.
- **Future-Oriented** – focused on using the SDGs as an opportunity to identify and plan new sustainable development approaches and measure progress over time.

The vast majority of VLRs globally, including those from Canada, have been present-oriented, focusing on the relevancy of SDGs targets to current city actions and identifying progress to-date. All three VLRs in Canada have been led by non-profit organizations and universities, with limited involvement from municipal governments. This is counter to global VLR trends which have predominantly been led by municipal governments themselves. This 'political buy-in' is essential for the integration of the SDGs within cities and is a contributor to the limited advancement of the SDGs in Canada.

SDGs Localization in Canada

There are eight communities in Canada that have done work on SDGs localization, whether through a VLR, inclusion in a strategic plan, or community projects. These cities include:

- City of Kelowna, BC (VLR)
- City of Winnipeg, MB (VLR)
- City of Kitchener, ON
- City of London, ON
- City of Thunder Bay, ON (VLR)
- City of Peterborough, ON
- City of Montreal, QC
- Quebec City, QC

Based on a review of the work done in these eight locations, four predominant approaches emerge for how the SDGs are showing up in cities across Canada:

1. **Mapping, aligning and progress reporting:** There have been VLRs conducted in [Kelowna](#), [Winnipeg](#), and [Thunder Bay](#). While each of the VLRs have a unique approach and different starting point, they all include dimensions of mapping policies or initiatives onto the SDGs to measure progress towards the SDGs. Some include a greater focus on identifying SDGs targets and indicators to measure progress. In each of these initiatives, the work was led by stakeholders outside of the municipal government including non-profit organizations and universities.
2. **Incorporating and aligning the SDGs with City plans:** The City of Kitchener, The City of Winnipeg and Quebec City have incorporated the SDGs into City plans, using the 17 SDGs and their principles to determine goals and vision. Both the [City of Kitchener](#) and the [City of Winnipeg's](#) strategic plans are aligned to the SDGs. Quebec City's [Sustainable Development Strategy](#) integrates the SDGs into the

plan's vision, targets, and actions. This approach to localization is uniquely led and championed by the municipal government.

3. **Animating and building awareness with community stakeholders:** The SDGs have been used a framework for bringing community stakeholders together to identify challenges in their community and take coordinated actions. [Faim Zero](#), a project in Montreal taking a multi-sectoral approach to addressing hunger, grew out of the Community Foundations' reporting on the SDGs and incorporated the principles of the SDGs in designing a response. In Peterborough, [several NGOs organized community forums to build awareness of the SDGs](#), identifying five focus areas (four on specific SDGs and one on Indigenous leadership and action) and establishing action teams to advance work in each area. Additionally, communities of practice like the [SDG Caucus](#) and [Rés ODD](#) (francophone intersectoral network for the SDGs) build an awareness of and share best practices to advance the SDGs among community stakeholders.
4. **Aligning and integrating the SDGs with local data:** One of the trends in Canadian localization work has been to identify and develop indicators to measure progress towards the SDGs. Some projects have conducted a review of the SDGs targets and indicators to [develop indicators](#) applicable to the local context, with others aligning existing data collection initiatives and community indicator frameworks to the SDGs. These initiatives include [Peg](#), Community Foundations [Vital Signs Reports](#), and Engage Nova Scotia's [Quality of Life Survey](#).

In addition to city-based work, tools and resources for SDGs localization and evaluation have been developed in Canada, including frameworks on [developing community-based SDGs indicators to eliminate poverty](#), [building evaluation capacity for assessing SDGs implementation](#), [pathways to action for local changemakers in communities](#), and [aligning local community reporting with the SDGs](#). Several of these resources have been created with support from the Government of Canada's SDGs Funding Program, a key contributor to the Canadian localization ecosystem.

Key Insights for the Canadian SDGs Localization Ecosystem

- **SDGs localization is often championed by community organizations**, including NGOs, think tanks, universities, and foundations. This work includes research projects, communities of practice, and writing the VLRs themselves. While there are a few standout examples of City governments and leaders that have championed the SDGs, it is commonly led by or done in close partnership with community organizations. While this offers the opportunity for the work to continue throughout government transitions, it also means that the SDGs may not be as well integrated into the work of the City.
- **Commitment to the SDGs is limited across all levels of government in Canada.** There is little work that has been done around the SDGs at the provincial level and there is no mandate for cities to advance the SDGs. With much of Canada's VLR work being led by community organizations, there is a lower probability of that work being integrated into City operations. Government buy-in is essential for the effective implementation of the SDGs, and there are numerous examples from around the world where strong commitments from the Mayor and Council are a driving force for advancing the SDGs.
- **Disaggregated, community-level data is crucial in measuring progress towards the SDGs and leaving no one behind.** There are significant data gaps across the country, so data accessibility determines which SDGs targets are measurable. SDGs localization has made progress in filling local data gaps by strengthening data collection mechanisms and aligning existing systems to the SDGs. Increasing access to community level data supports cities in developing evidence-based strategies to advance the SDGs.
- **The language of the SDGs framework has little traction in Canada, but the principles and issues of the SDGs resonate with communities.** The holistic vision presented in the SDGs can help communities advance a whole-of-society approach to sustainable development. In Canada, they have been used to bring multi-sectoral stakeholders together to [address specific issues](#) and used to [develop a strategy](#) for big picture changes or transformations, drawing on the intersections between the 17 SDGs. While the branding and language of the SDGs is not widely used in

communities, the vision, methodology, and principles of the SDGs are often used to help cities to build a more sustainable and equitable future.

- **Canadian VLRs have been present-oriented, with other SDGs localization work being future-oriented.** Canadian VLRs have focused on determining how the SDGs are relevant to Canadian communities and then assessing progress towards the goals. In communities that have not done a VLR, the SDGs have provided a framework to address community challenges and to develop goals, solutions, and plans for a city. Each of these approaches showcases how the SDGs can enhance sustainability planning, monitoring and evaluation, and innovation.

A Snapshot of Canadian VLRs

- **Localizing Indicators:** [Kelowna's VLR](#) identified 28 indicators, covering each of the 17 goals, that are localized and measurable, although no targets were set. After determining the indicators, the report identified local trends, progression, and challenges related to each goal and sought to incorporate the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action. The VLR was led by the British Columbia Council for International Cooperation.
- **Measuring Progress:** [Thunder Bay's VLR](#) began by identifying relevant indicators and determining if there is accessible and valid data available. They then noted if there was positive or negative change towards that goal and for some goals identified challenges, next steps, and community organizations contributing to the goal. The VLR was conducted by a team from Lakehead University's Department of Health Sciences.
- **Demonstrating Progress:** [Winnipeg's VLR](#) was driven by the data in the Peg Dashboard and included a policy review and interviews with civil society organizations. Due to the alignment of Peg to the SDGs, this VLR did not focus on localizing indicators. The VLR reports on data related to the goals and identifies activities that are being taken towards each goal rather than providing policy recommendations or determining targets. The VLR was conducted by the International Institute for Sustainable Development and United Way Winnipeg.

The Global SDGs Localization Ecosystem

Globally, there have been 249 Voluntary Local Reviews conducted and submitted to the [Department of Economic and Social Affairs](#) of the UN between 2016-2024. The Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES) publishes an annual report on the [State of Voluntary Local Reviews](#) to identify global VLR trends, highlighting:

- The majority of VLR reports globally are produced by municipal governments.
- There are typically two approaches to VLRs:
 - **Process-Oriented VLRs**, which “qualitatively present policies and strategies that are in place” to contribute to the advancement of the SDGs. This approach tends to provide a local-level overview of the SDGs and provide a good entry point into localization work.
 - **Outcome-based VLRs** “quantitatively benchmark and assess progress towards the SDGs over time,” and measure the impact of interventions. This approach focuses on results, measuring success and tracking progress.
- Often specific SDGs, rather than all 17 Goals, will be reviewed in a VLR. This can be due to the relevance of goals, the jurisdiction of a local government, or resource constraints. The tendency of local governments to review the goals that fit easily within their work can “indicate path dependency rather than a changing course due to the SDGs.” To achieve the broad objectives of the SDGs, reviewing specific Goals needs to be balanced with a holistic approach to avoid undermining the interconnected nature of the SDGs.

Global VLR Best Practice Examples

The following cities showcase best practices of future-oriented VLRs:

A. Bonn, Germany

- The VLR in Bonn took a thematic approach and translated the SDGs into the areas of action of the City’s sustainability strategy. The themes are climate protections and energy, natural resources protection and climate adaptation, sustainable mobility, lifelong learning and culture, social justice and future-proof society, housing and sustainable neighbourhoods, decent work and sustainable economy, sustainable consumption and healthy living, global responsibility and one world.



- The [2022 VLR](#) used the Sustainable Municipality reporting framework, a standardized and transparent reporting system for municipalities developed by the German Council for Sustainable Development. This approach combines qualitative reporting and quantitative indicators. The standardized approach allows for [comparison](#) between municipalities.

B. Buenos Aires, Argentina

- Buenos Aires has conducted [5 consecutive VLRs](#), that are used as a guide for the city's planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of work advancing the SDGs.
- Each of the City's areas of government are responsible for specific SDGs targets adapted to the local context, while advancing policy integration across domains. The VLR process helps ensure coherence between each of the city areas.
- There has been significant work done to [advance SDG 5: Gender Equality](#), which led to the development of a Gender Indicator System to measure gender gaps and provide the data to build a strategy to further gender equality.

C. Los Angeles, United States

- The City of Los Angeles' work around the SDGs has been completed through [academic partnerships](#) with several universities. Student teams have been integral to conducting two VLRs ([2019](#) and [2021](#)), updating the [SDGs Data Reporting Platform](#), and exploring ways the SDGs can be incorporated in city projects.
- LA is the first city to report data on the SDGs at an indicator level, using an open-source platform. Their localization methodology included 4 phases: Mapping and aligning current activities, gap analysis, adding targets and indicators, and mobilization.
- LA's 2021 VLR highlighted projects and programs advancing the SDGs that are led by the City and private-sector stakeholders. These initiatives are compiled in a public [SDG Activities Index](#).

D. Malmö, Sweden

- The 17 SDGs are considered as the “long-term orientation” of the [City of Malmö’s](#) goals, and they are integrated into the City’s steering and management systems, including the budget.
- The City’s [strategy](#) for localizing the SDGs included five development processes: (1) Integration in existing steering and management systems, (2) Sustainable Development through operational development, (3) Planned communication and participation for learning and support, (4) Increased knowledge for conscious decisions, and (5) Innovative partnerships making a difference.

E. Shimokawa, Japan

- Shimokawa’s [VLR](#) has led to future-oriented, innovative city planning. The VLR used a “backcasting approach” where they set a desired future outcome and then forecast policies and programs to connect the present state to the desired future.
- The SDG localization work led to the development of the Shimokawa Vision 2030 Plan, a municipal comprehensive plan, and a [SDG FutureCity Plan](#).
- Based on the experience of conducting the VLR in Shimokawa, IGES published [The Shimokawa Method for Voluntary Local Reviews](#). Shimokawa a strong example as they demonstrate the importance of building community ownership and conducting a VLR with a limited budget.

About Local Futures

The Local Futures project aims to drive a new wave of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) localization throughout Canada, aligning the international focus of the SDGs with local priorities in Canadian communities. Local Futures is located in the Grebel Peace Incubator on the University of Waterloo campus. Visit www.local-futures.ca to learn more about Local Futures.

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Appendix - Highlighted Resources

Brookings Institute City Playbook for advancing the SDGs

A compilation of briefs and case studies from cities implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. These practical resources share the learnings of city government officials including around Governance and Partnerships, Data and Measuring Progress, SDGS Priorities, and Budgeting and Finance.

IISD Voluntary Local Reviews of Progress of the SDGs: A Handbook for Canadian Communities

Compiles tools and resources to help Canadian communities integrate and implement the Sustainable Development Goals and conduct a Voluntary Local Review. Resources are classified into categories of Getting started, Partnerships for the Goals, Participation and Leaving No One Behind, Data and Indicators, and Leadership and Organization.

UCLG Learning Modules

A series of learning modules on SDGs Localization using a train-the-trainer methodology that support people to build awareness around the SDGs, align policies to the SDGs, evaluate localization processes and design decentralized cooperation policies.