



# THE ORIGINS AND IMPACT OF THE VOLUNTARY LOCAL REVIEW



**UN HABITAT**  
FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE

**FOREWORD:**

**Amina J. Mohammed, Deputy Secretary-General, United Nations**



A city has many definitions. But in essence, a city is an aggregate of people’s hopes and dreams and an intensification of human potential. This potential can and must be harnessed

in our common endeavour to reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. At the United Nations, we are keen to partner with cities around the world that are stepping up to the plate to carry their share of this work together with other actors.

The world is changing at an ever-faster speed. Today, most people live and work in cities, and urbanisation is accelerating all over the world. National governments cannot act alone in leveraging the opportunities or solving the complex challenges we face today, which often find their most intense expression in urban areas. Indeed, two-thirds of the SDG targets will not be reached without the engagement of local and regional governments.

For these reasons, the United Nations Secretary-General has identified SDG localization as one of the three essential areas of action for

the achievement of the Goals, and established a Task Force on the Future of Cities to consider how to better engage local authorities in the work of the United Nations. Implementation of the New Urban Agenda is also an enabler to deliver the SDGs.

The High-Level Political Forum, most recently held in July 2021, provides a platform for local authorities to present Voluntary Local Reviews (VLR) to showcase progress in translating national development priorities into local realities and foster exchange in the local implementation of the SDGs.

These Voluntary Local Reviews are an embodiment of cities’ willingness to do better when it comes to sustainability. Within the city, VLRs help us spread the word about the SDGs and increase people’s involvement in implementation efforts. They also can contribute to more integrated and evidence-based policymaking, enhanced coordination of actions and serve as a tool for better data collection. In many cases, the VLRs help to enhance communication between different levels of government and help cities forge new partnerships, including through city networks.

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**New York City's Declaration on the Voluntary Local Review and the city's pioneering example has inspired numerous other communities to embark on this journey of self-reflection and stepped up SDG action.**

The VLRs hold the potential of becoming one of the key tools for raising awareness about the SDGs and for transforming our policies towards more sustainable solutions at the local level. However, it will be crucial to ensure they do not become a marketing exercise, aimed at showcasing only the successes, masking the challenges.

The world still has a staggering 1 billion people living in slums, and the COVID-19 pandemic has further increased the number of slum dwellers<sup>1</sup>. Cities are still consuming land faster than they

grow in population, and the unbridled expansion of urban areas has profound implications for energy consumption, greenhouse gas emissions, climate change and environmental degradation. For more than two-thirds of the world's urban population, income inequality has increased since 1980.<sup>2</sup> These are challenges the VLRs must not shy away from.

At the same time, cities are our economic engines and beating hearts of human innovation. Cities have the potential to forge new solutions to our shared challenges and the VLRs can be a tool for sharing those innovations and ideas. In addressing our complex challenges that transcend all borders, we must all be willing to learn from each other. Cities around the world are showing us that their local solutions may be the key to solving our global problems.

I look forward to all stakeholders taking advantage of the Voluntary Local Reviews to bring the SDGs closer to people and galvanise action and collaboration in the Decade of Action.

**Amina J. Mohammed**  
Deputy Secretary-General,  
United Nations

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Report 2021

<sup>2</sup> UN-Habitat, World Cities Report 2020

## FOREWORD:

### Bill de Blasio, Mayor, City of New York



Fairness and equity have always been key components of my administration. Since day one, we have moved aggressively to tackle the disparities that leave far too many New Yorkers behind.

New York City is not alone in this fight. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals ratified by the United Nations in 2015 likewise seek to tackle inequality in all its forms across the globe. New York City certainly shares those values. We too believe in a better and more sustainable future for all, and we too believe that no one should be left behind.

The fight for equity is a herculean task, work that none of us can do alone. Whether it's taking on global warming, providing high quality education for every child, or ensuring equal access to health care, as a society we need to continue to come together to advance change.

As COVID-19 has made plain, we cannot work in silos – we must look

to each other to find the solutions to the existential threats we face as a global society. Created by the NYC Mayor's Office for International Affairs in 2018, the Voluntary Local Review is a process by which local governments can examine challenges in their own communities and work with other localities to find sustainable solutions. The Voluntary Local Review is also an example of the kind of innovation that is the trademark of New York City.

**As the nation's largest city, we have always felt a moral obligation to lead. That is why over the last eight years, we have taken many bold, progressive steps, ranging from divesting our pension funds from fossil fuel companies to investing in high quality education in all our public schools to creating an economy that uplifts every New Yorker.**

The fight for a better future is far from over here in New York City, across our nation and around the globe. I invite more local governments to join us in the Voluntary Local Review movement. Together, we can strive for a fairer and more just society for all.

**Bill de Blasio**  
Mayor, New York City ©



**FOREWORD:**  
**Maimunah Mohd Sharif, Under Secretary-  
General and Executive Director, UN-Habitat**



The world owes a debt to the City of New York. In addition to hosting the United Nations for 76 years, the City has continuously put into practice the values of the global body.

The Administration of Mayor Bill de Blasio is no exception. Its commitment to sustainability is unflinching, as is its ability to offer the world tools to translate policy into action.

A noteworthy example is the Voluntary Local Review. Pioneered by the City of New York in 2018, this creative mechanism allows cities to promote the sustainability agenda. It effectively utilizes the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a framework for municipal planning, contributing directly to the attainment of the global goals.

I had the privilege of witnessing the inception of the first Voluntary Local Review in 2018 when the City of New York submitted the review to Member States at the High-Level Political Forum for Sustainable Development (HLPF).

The submission of the first Voluntary Local Review by the City of New York was timely. In 2018, the Secretary-

General issued the first Quadrennial Report on the Implementation of the New Urban Agenda. It captured efforts of countries to implement the New Urban Agenda to achieve sustainable development. Simultaneously, the HLPF featured the urban goal, SDG 11, Cities and Communities. Country delegations presented progress towards the attainment of the 7 targets of the global goal as part of Voluntary National Reviews.

The Voluntary Local Review submitted by the City of New York nicely complemented these national reflections, providing a municipal perspective on the implementation of the New Urban Agenda and on the attainment of SDG 11.

The President of the UN-Habitat Governing Council, the Deputy Secretary-General and I welcomed the advent of the first local review at HLPF. We have since then actively promoted individual VLRs and numerous global and regional initiatives including the New York City Declaration on Voluntary Local Reviews.

As the VLR gains traction and takes on the status of a global movement, it will be important to strengthen the instrument to make it an effective tool for localizing sustainable development. This will involve enhancing methods of participation in the development and monitoring of the VLR, including low-income neighborhoods and their organizations, persons with disabilities and others often left behind. It will be important also to create opportunities for monitoring and analysis that will enable us to learn, share, and improve the review mechanism.

**Finally, we need to identify institutional arrangements that will enable cities to situate VLRs strategically in various intergovernmental and national planning processes. The goal will be to facilitate dialogue among national and local governments, tapping the practicality and richness of VLRs to inform and implement national policy for sustainable development.**

**Maimunah Mohd Sharif**  
Under Secretary-General and  
Executive Director, UN-Habitat

FOREWORD:

**Penny Abeywardena, Commissioner for International Affairs, City of New York**



As the largest city in the U.S., New York has felt the obligation to lead on several fronts, from climate action to immigration policy to gender equity. For the last eight years, I have humbly served as the Commissioner for the Mayor’s Office for International Affairs. And in that time, my team has prioritized not only sharing our experiences and expertise with global partners — but learning from them as well.

As the site of the United Nations headquarters, 193 Permanent Missions, 114 Consulates and more than 70 trade missions, New York City is host to the largest diplomatic community on Earth. As a result, we are privileged to be able to lean into the wealth of international expertise right in our own backyard. We also recognize that cities can and must tap into their inherent power to bring about necessary changes in our society. And while this need intensified in the era of COVID-19, it will continue long after the battle against the pandemic has been won.

My office created the Voluntary Local Review in 2018 as an opportunity for subnational voices to take part in global conversations and as a tool that would work in tandem with national efforts to achieve the Global Goals. If the Sustainable Development Goals are a roadmap for a creating a fairer society, then the Voluntary Local Review is the vehicle for moving us forward. By creating a space for subnational governments to come together and exchange ideas, we are creating room for innovation, for knowledge sharing, and for progress.

Indeed, the Sustainable Development Goals align with New York City’s sustainable development plan, OneNYC. And over the last few years, my office has worked to learn from our international community and to share the City’s progressive policies on climate, mental health, gender equity and more. The bond between Host City and the United Nations is stronger than ever.

Even as the de Blasio administration draws near an end, it is critical that the Voluntary Local Review movement lives on.

**As a society, we cannot grow complacent in the face of critical issues like global warming, income inequality and emerging new health threats. More and more, society is demanding change, and the power to change lies with local governments. Cities must continue to harness their collective power and advocate for a fairer and more sustainable future. Simply put, we are living in a moment in time that demands it.**

**Penny Abeywardena**  
Commissioner for International Affairs, City of New York

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# Introduction: A Pioneering Local Idea, A Seed For Global Change

City networks are a well-established phenomenon. Still, in recent years, city and subnational governments find themselves on the precipice of something new: the unprecedented opportunity to harness their collective power to become irrefutable global influencers.

To find the catalyst for this evolution in city diplomacy, one only needs to look at the media headlines. Increasingly national governments around the world are actively abdicating their leadership within the multilateral ecosystem as well as on issues ranging from climate action to health care to migration. And as the world battles the COVID-19 pandemic, this shirking of responsibility has led to ever-widening and glaring disparities.

Cities and subnational governments are complementing countries in advancing a sustainable urban development agenda and the pursuit of sustainability, nurturing grassroots movements, local actions and advocating for public policies that promote values of equity, inclusion, and cooperation on the global stage. When all 193 member states came together at the United Nations in New York City to formally adopt

the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on September 25, 2015, then-Secretary General Ban-Ki Moon told the world “we have reached a defining moment in human history.”

Indeed, it was a historic moment. After years of negotiations, working group discussions, consultations and surveys, nations from across the globe agreed to look beyond their borders, commit to a common agenda and pledged “to leave no one behind.”

The 17 SDGs or Global Goals represent a “blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all” by the year 2030 (also known as Agenda 2030). Collaboration between national and subnational governments are important in achieving the Global Goals.

**Increasingly there is growing acknowledgment from the highest echelons of the United Nations to the most respected scholars and think tanks that the SDGs cannot be achieved without the active engagement of local governments.**

New York and Helsinki have become leaders in localizing the Global Goals, they have also inspired other cities in the world. In 2018, through a process dubbed the Voluntary Local Review, New York City became the first in the world to report to the United Nations on its work in achieving the SDGs during the annual High Level Political Forum. Helsinki followed suit in 2019. Other cities joined in what has become a global movement to achieve SDGs at local level.

This paper seeks to document the early days of this movement and the multiple influences that gave rise to it. It also seeks to show the importance of local actors’ efforts in creating transformations for a sustainable future. These include the commitment by the City of New York, European and other cities to the SDGs and to the need to localize the Global Goals in municipal planning, programming, and monitoring processes. Also considered is the impact of the United Nations Habitat III Conference, the evolving role of cities, and the evolution and growing importance of city networks.

In addition, the paper captures the experiences of the City of Helsinki and its collaboration with the City of New York that inspired other cities to act: a partnership that ensured the first VLR in New York was not a one-off. In conclusion, the paper highlights the catalytic effect of the NYC Declaration of the Voluntary Review in many local and regional governments in the world, the opportunities of linking the VLR with the Voluntary National Review, and the driving factors giving rise to the VLR movement.



# New York City’s Experience Localizing the SDGs

For New York City, the journey began with the release of an ambitious citywide development plan. In April 2015, New York City unveiled OneNYC, a sweeping strategy for building a more sustainable and resilient city. While the New York City Council mandates the city develop

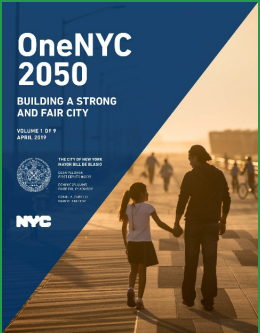
these plans every four years, the 2015 effort was especially significant. It was the first one developed after Superstorm Sandy, a deadly hurricane that Mayor Bill de Blasio often calls “New York City’s wake-up call” to the existential threat of climate change.

## SUPERSTORM SANDY/ONENYC



SuperStorm Sandy made landfall in New York City on Oct. 29, 2012. It killed 44 New Yorkers and left \$19 billion worth of destruction in its wake. More than 69,000 homes were damaged, and thousands of city residents were temporarily displaced.

The superstorm also exposed critical vulnerabilities in the city’s resiliency and sustainability strategy, especially in low-income, historically underserved neighborhoods. While New York City was already working to address the threat of climate change, it became apparent that a more robust sustainability plan was needed, one that prioritized equity.



It was through this lens of equity that the OneNYC 2015 report was developed. The plan focused on resiliency, sustainability, and economic growth.

OneNYC 2015 included a host of initiatives aimed at addressing affordable housing, pre-kindergarten education, reducing traffic fatalities, and economic development. It also sought to:

- Lift 800,000 New Yorkers out of poverty by 2025
- Reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 80 percent by 2050
- Eliminate long term displacement from homes and jobs due to shock events by 2050

OneNYC built on previous sustainability plans and laid the groundwork for the NYC Green New Deal (OneNYC 2050), which was released in 2019.

After world leaders agreed on the SDGs in 2015, the Mayor’s Office for International Affairs (IA) recognized

commonalities with the city’s strategic plan and created the Global Vision | Urban Action platform.

### GLOBAL VISION | URBAN ACTION

GLOBAL VISION | URBAN ACTION  
A City with Global Goals  
Part I

GLOBAL VISION | URBAN ACTION  
A City with Global Goals  
Part II

Global Vision | Urban Action (GV|UA) is a platform created by the NYC Mayor’s Office for International Affairs in 2015 from which local governments exchange best practices using the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs.) *A City with Global Goals*, produced under the banner of GV|UA, is a booklet that maps the connections between the Sustainable Development Goals and the visions, goals, initiatives, and targets that formed Mayor Bill de Blasio’s One New York: The Plan for a Just and Strong City.

The first part of the booklet, published in December 2015, used

NYC’s local development strategy as a point of departure. The second part, published in April 2016, switched the focus, and begins the comparison with the Sustainable Development Goals. IA chose to provide perspectives from both angles so that no matter the reader’s engagement, the synergies between the two groundbreaking plans are clear. These examples of the relationships between global and local planning, models and goals helped to start conversations about the local implementation of the Global Goals. IA also organizes thematic events and engagements to further highlight these connections.

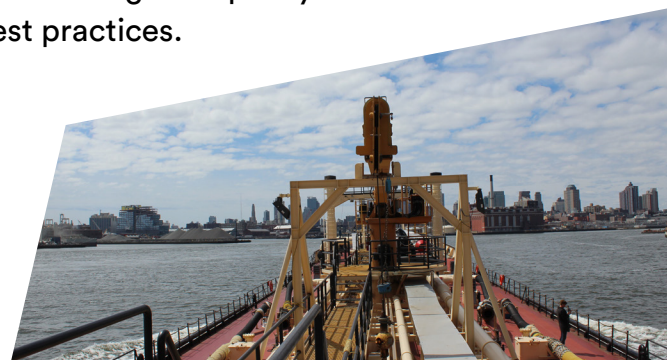


A global city like New York has a strong connection with global development agendas and very important convergence with most of the Sustainable Development Goals. This is the case with Goal 1 on the fight on poverty, Goal 3 on health and well-being, Goal 4 on education, Goal 5 on gender equality, Goal 11 with various targets at the urban level, Goal 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions and Goal 17 on partnerships and means of implementing the city agenda.

Concerning Sustainable Development Goal 16 that aims to “reduce all forms of violence and related deaths everywhere,” NYC is demonstrating the different initiatives and actions to address this Global Goal. In the spring 2019, the Mayor’s Office for International Affairs arranged for members of the UN diplomatic community to visit the Manhattan Family Justice Center. New York City’s Family Justice Centers provide a holistic set of services – from law enforcement to mental health

to social services – to survivors of domestic and gender-based violence all under one roof. There is one in each of the city’s five boroughs. At the Manhattan Family Justice Center, the staff discussed how their work is connected to SDG 16 and its natural ties into the broader global agenda. By talking about challenges using the SDGs as a common language, the UN delegation was able to learn best practices and take ideas back to their home countries.

That exchange works both ways. In September 2019, the NYC Commission on Gender Equity, the Commission on Human Rights and the Department of Consumer and Worker Protection hosted a public hearing on pay equity. The Mayor’s Office for International Affairs invited the UN’s International Labour Organization to testify about the best practices they have observed around the world, thus critically informing local policy with global best practices.



## European Experiences with Localizing the SDGs

Efforts to localize the SDGs in European countries and the US differ due to mandates of institutions, forms of governance, implementation mechanisms and political climates. Although different political systems exist across the continent, most European Union (EU) countries have until recent years shared a commitment and willingness to support the Agenda 2030 with a strong connection to regional and local authorities, considering that 75% of the EU’s population resides in cities.

The EU was a major contributor to the Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals which expired in 2015 and laid the groundwork for public awareness and political commitment to fighting poverty in the European Union, and elsewhere. The SDGs have a broader agenda as they seek to address poverty as well as the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, good governance, the rule of law, equity and peaceful societies. With this broader scope in mind, many European countries acknowledge that local implementation would be crucial for the success of the SDGs.

Many cities in Europe have embraced their role in localizing the Agenda 2030. A prominent example is the city of Amsterdam. To help raise awareness about the Global Goals, the city organized a challenge for social innovators to translate the goals into local actions.

The City of London has its own independent body to guide sustainability. The London Sustainable Development Commission (LSDC), founded in 2002, aims to compare its performance against the relevant SDGs through its Quality of Life indicator.

And the German city of Mannheim sought to combine the implementation of the SDGs with its municipal model which includes its budget plan and strategy development. For that purpose, the city organized an Urban Thinkers Campus for the second time in 2017 with the active participation of 500 citizens, global and local experts and other stakeholders.



# United Nations Habitat III Conference and the Evolving Role of Cities

The evolving nature of cities was further underscored in October 2016 during the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) in Quito, Ecuador. This convening occurs every 20 years to address the challenges of growing urbanization.

When the first Habitat convened in Vancouver in 1976, two-thirds of the world's population still lived in rural areas. However, it was evident then that the world was becoming increasingly urbanized. In fact, statistics show that by 2030, more than 60 percent of people worldwide will live in cities.

At Habitat III, more than 30,000 world leaders and policymakers gathered to debate and later adopt the New Urban Agenda, a roadmap for creating more sustainable cities. The vision laid out 175 standards in areas like housing, infrastructure, and climate change with an overarching goal of creating sustainable urban areas where “all persons are able to enjoy equal rights and opportunities.”

**“We need to go back to the basics – to the fundamentals – and understand that urbanization is not a minor question, it is not an easy process, it requires a lot of commitment,” Dr. Juan Clos, the former Executive Director of UN-Habitat said during the Habitat III Conference.**

Cities are taking a prominent role in driving the economy of countries, forging alliances and local pacts and actions. They are becoming engines of growth and development with the capacity to design innovative solutions for transformative change.

# The Evolution of City Networks

Given the growing sense of urgency that global agendas are presenting, cities have been increasingly organizing around specific issues to tackle some of the most pressing challenges of our era, such as poverty, inequality and climate change. The 21st century has seen a surge in these city networks.

For example, EUROCITIES was founded in 1986 by the mayors of Barcelona, Birmingham, Frankfurt, Lyon, Milan and Rotterdam to respond to issues affecting the day-to-day lives of Europeans and to reinforce the importance of the local governments. Local Governments for Sustainability, also known as ICLEI, formed in 1990 to take aim at chemicals depleting the ozone. United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) was created in 2004 to grow the influence of its more than 240,000 members. The following year, C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group was launched to reduce carbon emissions globally. They are currently

spearheading the “Race to Zero” in preparation for the 26th Session of the Convention of the Parties (COP26).

In 2017, the Global Task Force on Local and Regional Governments was established as a coordination and consultation mechanism that brings together the international networks of local governments to undertake joint advocacy work relating to global policy processes. It comprises of the above-mentioned organizations and 25 city and local government networks worldwide.

According to a joint study by the World Health Organization and University College London, as of 2016 there were more than 200 networks. Increasingly, the cities within these networks are finding new opportunities to use strategy and activism to flex their collective power and effect change.



# New York City and the Launch of the First Voluntary Local Review

The launch of the first Voluntary Local Review in 2018 by the City of New York emerged from its desire to harness city networks and impact global policy, to localize the SDGs,

and to leverage its unique role as the host of the United Nations.

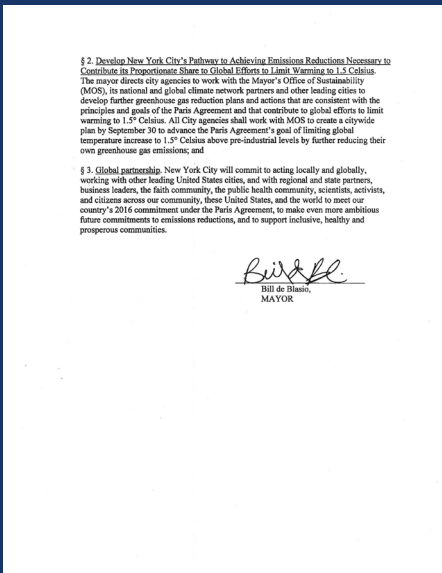
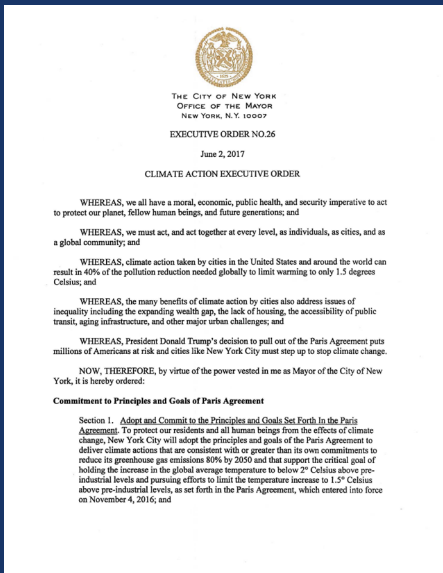
For the City of New York, the Paris Agreement was one such opportunity.

Key components of the plan include:

- Dramatically expanding the city’s organics program to accelerate the diversion of tons of organics from landfills
- Implementing advanced energy codes for new buildings in 2019 and very low energy design targets in all new buildings
- Pursuing the procurement of 100% renewable electricity for municipal operations
- Doubling the number of cyclists by the annual development of at least 50 new miles of bike lanes (including 10 miles of protected bike lanes)
- Leading the development of a global protocol for cities to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050



## EXECUTIVE ORDER 26: NYC’S COMMITMENT TO THE PRINCIPLES OF THE PARIS AGREEMENT



On June 1, 2017, former President Donald Trump announced plans to withdraw the United States from the Paris Climate Agreement, which seeks to limit the rise in global temperature to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

The following day, Mayor Bill de Blasio signed Executive Order 26, committing New York City to the principles of the Paris Agreement. With the release of “1.5°C: Aligning New York City with the Paris Climate Agreement,” New York became the first city in the world to release an action plan compatible with the Paris Accords.

New York City has also seized an opportunity to lead on the issue of global migration. When President Trump took office and unleashed his anti-immigrant agenda, New York took immediate measures to counter these actions. While local governments do not decide who comes to their cities, they are responsible for the well-being and inclusion of new arrivals, from access to education and health care, to their relationships with law enforcement. Cities have a responsibility to its newest residents to make sure they have the resources they need to thrive. In addition to taking local action, the City of New York helped bring together a coalition of 50 international cities to advocate for the inclusion of local government voices during the negotiation of the Global Compact for Migration, the United Nations-led agreement adopted in December 2018.

It has been clear to the City of New York that as the world continues to rapidly urbanize, those living in cities are increasingly the first to experience the harmful effects of climate change and be touched by poverty and migration. Therefore, when it comes to the Global Goals, cities are compelled to assert their collective will.

New York is a thriving city of more than 8.8 million people representing virtually every corner of the planet. It is also home to the largest diplomatic corps in the world which includes the United Nations’ headquarters, 193 Permanent Missions, 116 Consulates and more than 70 trade missions. This has positioned NYC to take the lead between local and global to a new level.

By law the City is required to report annually on the status of implementing the OneNYC targets. Given this mandate and the city’s



unique relationship with the diplomatic community, the Office for International Affairs approached UN leadership with the idea of the Voluntary Local Review – a mechanism by which cities could report their progress on achieving the Global Goals directly to the UN. This is modeled after the Voluntary National Review in which member states are invited to submit similar reports each July during the High-Level Political Forum at the UN.

With the endorsement of senior UN officials, the City of New York submitted its first Voluntary Local Review in the summer of 2018 becoming the first city in the world to do so.



## The Road to Helsinki

After a careful analysis of the VLR model and continuous dialogue with the NYC Mayor's Office for International Affairs, Helsinki became the first city in Europe to commit to submitting a VLR in September 2018. The aim of its VLR commitment was simple: to illustrate the successes and challenges of Helsinki's progress toward achieving the SDGs, to produce understandable and open information about the city's sustainable development, and to encourage open dialogue on sustainability within the global community.

To initiate its VLR process, Helsinki founded a cross-disciplinary research group to evaluate the city's strategy and make comparisons to the SDGs. For the second stage, the city selected indicators and focus areas by relevance. The outcome was the report, *From Agenda to Action – The Implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals in Helsinki 2019* which was submitted to the UN in July 2019. While ambitious and wide-ranging, it was an eye-opening exercise that showed that Helsinki's strategies fit well with the UN goals for sustainable development.

**The collaboration between New York and Helsinki was not only crucial in making the review process possible for Helsinki in a very tight timeframe (a matter of months), but it was also instrumental in highlighting that SDG action has a great potential for transformative change if it is implemented at the local level with important repercussions in the global context.**

Through the VLR process, for example, Helsinki was able to identify its library system and primary school system as concrete areas for SDG implementation. Following the NYC model, Helsinki will organize site visits as well as incorporate the SDGs more deeply into already existing programs to engage citizens. Behavioral change is a key to many of the SDGs' successes. Local governments are able to deliver the message in a more concrete manner that will make the connection between individual behavior and the well-being of the whole community. The more concrete the message, the more commitment it will generate at the community level.



# NYC Declaration on the Voluntary Local Review

Recognizing the importance of getting cities of all sizes and regions to collaborate and flex their collective power on the global stage, NYC worked to expand and formalize the VLR process. The goal was to create a global movement of cities that would eventually lead to a more substantial and direct engagement with the UN.

So, in September 2019, during the UN General Assembly, the City unveiled the NYC Declaration on the Voluntary Local Review. At the time, more than 20 cities, representing nearly every continent, signed on to formally commit to reporting on the SDGs through Voluntary Local Reviews.

The Declaration consists of three key commitments:



In an increasingly interconnected world, a common language and framework is needed. When it comes to achieving the SDGs, it is a fact that the actual implementation work happens to a large extent in cities and rapid urbanization will only accelerate this. In cities that are experiencing a shrink of their population, smart planning for decline is important and the SDG review at local levels is critical. For this reason, the Declaration emphasizes using existing resources to undertake the VLR process to keep the threshold for entry low and open to different circumstances and models of growth and development. That was intentional. The goal was to make the VLR process meaningful so that each city engages with it in their own time, with their own resources and their own policy processes. For Helsinki, and other cities that have since joined the effort, the VLR’s practical, holistic approach coupled with the low barrier to entry and the comparability with the Voluntary National Review format was appealing.

The VLR movement grows, as cities ranging from Kazan, Russia to Orlando, USA recognize and assess its value.

Los Angeles submitted their first VLR in 2019. As part of its effort, the city sought to add local context to the 169 targets within the 17 SDGs and figure out how to measure each one. The city also proposed new SDG targets to fit its local context. A team of graduate and undergraduate students

gathered data from public, private and non-profits across L.A., mapped the Global Goals, determined how the data correlated with City policies and proposed next steps.

The City of Bristol, United Kingdom, enlisted the University of Bristol’s Cabot Institute for the Environment to develop an independent assessment of policies to determine their progress in achieving the SDGs in submitting their VLR in 2019.

The City of Freetown, Sierra Leone, is an example of how cities in developing countries are participating in the VLR process. In January 2019, Mayor Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr released *Transform Freetown*, an 11-point development report, aimed at tackling socio-economic and environmental challenges in Sierra Leone’s largest city. Using the VLR process as a tool, the City of Freetown is undergoing the first step outlined in the Declaration by mapping the synergies between their targets and the SDGs. As Freetown moves through the VLR Declaration commitments, city leaders will be able to exchange best practices with other cities and move ever closer toward submitting their own report.

Separately, several other African local governments have completed VLRs, including Yaoundé (Cameroon), Accra (Ghana), Harare (Zimbabwe), Victoria Falls (Zimbabwe), Ngora District (Uganda), Busia, Kwale, Marsabit and Taita Taveta (Kenya).

# Linking Voluntary Local Reviews and Voluntary National Reviews

In some cases, cities have signed on to the VLR Declaration even as their national leaders hold differing views on the value of the SDGs. For example, the cities of Barcarena, Santana de Parnaíba, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro in Brazil signed the VLR Declaration even as President Jair Bolsonaro denies the basic science of global warming. These are cities at the heart of the extraordinary fires raging in the Amazon forest and their local leadership not only understands the impact of climate change, but perhaps most importantly, they know the impact to their community.

In other cases, the work to localize the SDGs is supported and welcomed by the national governments. The Japanese government was an early supporter of Agenda 2030 and established the SDGs Promotion Headquarters in May 2016 to help achieve the Global Goals at home and abroad. The Japanese cities of Fukuoka, Yokohama and Tokyo have signed the Declaration.

In most Scandinavian and Northern European countries, many of the SDG-related targets are city level targets as well, making the cities' role crucial in the delivery of the national commitments.

Early on in Helsinki's VLR process, the Permanent Mission of Finland to the United Nations expressed support of the Helsinki review process. The international launch of the Helsinki VLR was hosted by the Mission, and Helsinki was part of the official national delegation of Finland at the UN's General Assembly in July 2019.

In Finland, the nation's first Voluntary National Review did not include specific references to the work done in cities – although the emphasis on civil society and the ecosystem contribution was well-addressed. The next VNR by Finland is on its way and the national government has included cities in the working group and recognized the VLR as a valuable resource for the national review process.

In general, this approach illustrates the close ties between the national government and municipalities and cities in Finland.

# Towards a VLR Movement

To glean the most value out of the VLR process, each city must look at their own data and determine progress or areas where more work needs to be done, and also where comparative advantages are to be explored. The VLR is also a tool that cities can use to identify ways to improve their service delivery and become more efficient for the benefit of their citizens.

In this way, the VLR has become a movement that activates and empowers subnational governments, which often best represent the voices of their people and have the capacity to forge new local alliances. By using the SDGs as a common framework, small cities have the opportunity to contribute just as much as their larger counterparts.

Issues like climate, migration and sustainability transcend borders and so cities must also have a voice at the table where agendas are being set – not just at the implementation phase. And there is growing recognition that cities can be important allies in national and global efforts to create a more sustainable future.

During the 2019 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, world leaders called for a decade of action to achieve the SDGs by 2030 and the summit resulted in the adoption of a Political Declaration that acknowledged

the need for collaboration.

“We commit to empower and support cities, local authorities and communities in pursuing the 2030 Agenda. We recognize their critical role in implementing and realizing the Sustainable Development Goals,” reads A/RES/74/4, adopted by the General Assembly on Oct. 15, 2019.

VLRs not only create a local/global lens through which cities can evaluate their own implementation success and strategy alignment, it also creates a system by which cities can support each other in practical terms. Since many cities require national or structural funding for their implementation work, a global VLR movement will help them create a better case for that funding by positioning local achievements in global contexts.

To date, the VLR movement has gained more than 330 cities and states that are exchanging best practices. And with new leadership in Washington, D.C. local action across the U.S. has gained a formidable ally in the Biden Administration. Indeed, the time has come to uphold the values of inclusion and to march unflinchingly into a future that is sustainable and resilient, one that leaves no one behind.

# List of VLR Signatories

Updated 9.29.2021

- **Acapulco de Juarez, Mexico** – February 2020
- **Accra, Ghana** – September 2019
- **Afogados de Ingazeira, Brazil** – January 2020
- **Amman, Jordan** – September 2019
- **Asker, Norway** – February 2020
- **Barcarena, Brazil** – September 2019
- **Barcelona, Spain** – September 2019
- **Barranquilla, Colombia** – May 2021
- **Basque Country, Spain** – February 2021
- **Bauang, Philippines** – February 2020
- **Betio, Kiribati** – February 2020
- **Bonn, Germany** – June 2020
- **Bratislava, Slovak Republic** – July 2020
- **Bristol, England** – September 2019
- **Brussels-Capital Region (19 municipalities), Belgium** – February 2020
- **Buenos Aires, Argentina** – September 2019
- **Cape Town, South Africa** – September 2019
- **Cascais, Portugal** – July 2021
- **City of Sipalay, Philippines** – February 2020
- **Dhankuta, Nepal** – February 2020
- **Esplugues de Llobregat, Spain** – February 2020
- **Espoo, Finland** – January 2020
- **Freetown, Sierra Leone** – September 2019
- **Fukuoka, Japan** – October 2019
- **Geneva, Switzerland** – May 2021
- **Georgetown, Guyana** – September 2019
- **Ghent, Belgium** – December 2020
- **Guangzhou, China** – July 2020
- **Helsingborg, Sweden** – May 2021
- **Helsinki, Finland** – September 2019
- **Honiara City, Solomon Islands** – March 2020
- **Kabul City, Afghanistan** – March 2020
- **Kazan, Russia** – September 2019

- **Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia** – February 2020
- **Lira City, Uganda** – February 2020
- **Liverpool, England** – September 2020
- **Los Angeles, United States of America** – September 2019
- **Malmo, Sweden** – September 2019
- **Manizales, Colombia** – June 2021
- **Mannheim, Germany** – September 2019
- **Melbourne, Australia** – April 2021
- **Montevideo, Uruguay** – September 2019
- **New Taipei City, Taiwan** – April 2020
- **Orlando, United States of America** – September 2019
- **Rabat, Morocco** – February 2020
- **Rio de Janeiro, Brazil** – March 2021
- **Rochester Hills, United States of America** – September 2020
- **Rostov-on-don, Russia** – February 2020
- **San Justo, Argentina** – February 2020
- **Santa Ana, Costa Rica** – September 2019
- **Santa Fe, Argentina** – September 2019
- **Santana de Parnaíba, Brazil** – September 2019
- **São Paulo, Brazil** – May 2020
- **Seberang Perai, Malaysia** – February 2020
- **State of Yucatan, Mexico (106 municipalities)** – June 2021
- **Stockholm, Sweden** – September 2019
- **Tandil, Argentina** – February 2020
- **Taquari, Brazil** – January 2020
- **Tawau, Malaysia** – February 2020
- **The State of Pará (144 municipalities), Brazil** – April 2020
- **Tokyo, Japan** – July 2021
- **Turkestan, Kazakhstan** – February 2020
- **Turku, Finland** – January 2020
- **Uppsala, Sweden** – February 2021
- **Vantaa, Finland** – June 2021
- **Yiwu, China** – July 2020
- **Yokohama, Japan** – September 2019



# Map of VLR Signatories



REFLECTIONS

City of Freetown, Sierre Leone



Severe disasters as a result of a changing climate in developing and developed countries alike and the global COVID-19 pandemic show once more that we need to act as a whole and change does not occur

in isolation. I believe that local and regional governments worldwide have a clear role to play and are critical, not only to ensure a green and just recovery from the pandemic and to uplift efforts to address climate change, but more broadly for the successful delivery of the Agenda 2030 and its seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

I see the subnational level critical to accelerate change where it is most impactful – in our cities and with our residents. Hence, in September 2019, I, as the Mayor of Freetown, was delighted to be at the forefront of the Voluntary Local Review movement initiated by the city of New York. Such a movement represents for me an innovative and collaborative effort to improve the world we are living in and to leave no one behind.

At Freetown City Council (FCC), we have experienced the value of and rely heavily on innovative and collaborative solutions. The Transform Freetown

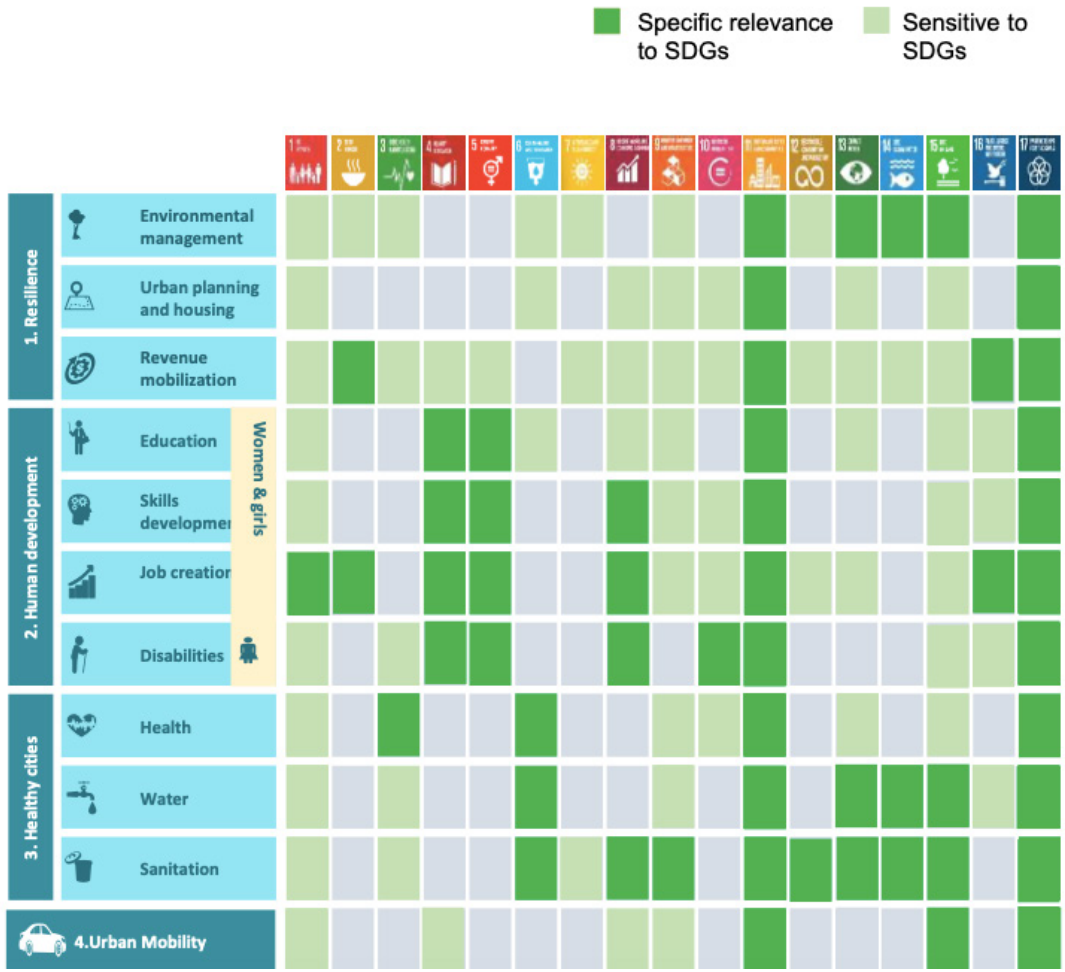
Agenda, is the first of its kind for the city of Freetown and a reflection of our mindset to inspire change. The Transform Freetown priority sectors are grouped within four clusters – Resilience, Human Development, Healthy City and Urban Mobility – all of which tie neatly to one of the seventeen SDGs (Figure 1).

Innovation and collaboration at the local level in Freetown do not only come into play at the level of strategic planning and monitoring, but also in our day-to-day business – when delivering on the SDGs. For example, the #FreetownTheTreeTown campaign is one of our flagship projects, aiming at planting and growing 1 million trees in the urban space as well as in the neighbouring district council on the Western Peninsula. Planting and growing 1 million trees enables us to contribute to SDG 11 “Sustainable Cities and Communities” by addressing land slide susceptibility through planting in upper catchment areas along the hillsides of Freetown; SDG 13 “Climate Action” by increasing tree canopy coverage and thereby carbon take up; SDG 14 “Life below Water” by not only focussing on green, but also blue infrastructure and preserving and protecting precious mangrove area; SDG 15 “Life on Land” by enhancing

reforestation and hence preserving the Peninsula’s pristine biodiversity; and SDG 17 “Partnerships for the Goals” by cooperating with the national government, the neighbouring district council, civil society and most importantly our communities, who serve as tree stewards.

Connecting local, national and global is key for a future which leaves no one behind and I encourage other local and regional governments to join this innovative and collaborative movement and to commit to our global agenda.

Figure 1 Overlaying the Transform Freetown Agenda with the SDGs

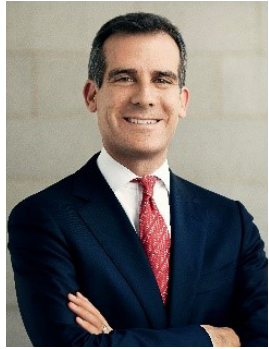


*Yvonne Aki-Sawyer*

Yvonne Aki-Sawyer  
Mayor, City of Freetown

## REFLECTIONS

### City of Los Angeles, United States



In the City of Los Angeles, our efforts to realize the Sustainable Development Goals began in 2017. As a global city in a region of more than 18 million people, Los Angeles has been translating

this shared global agenda into local action ever since. We were proud to be among the first signatories to New York City's Voluntary Local Review (VLR) declaration and to be a part of a movement that has brought cities and regions together to learn from each other. In 2019, we published our first VLR.

**In L.A., we organize our SDG actions in three ways: we measure progress through data reporting; we mobilize new projects and build capacity for the Goals; and we connect with partners, while centering our commitment to leave no one behind.**

Measuring and reporting on the SDG indicators through our open source [SDG Data Reporting Platform](#), particularly when data is disaggregated, has been essential to developing a better understanding of whether progress is distributed equitably across our city. We have begun to add hyperlocal data sets and new indicators, which helps to contextualize how Los Angeles is moving toward the Goals. Incorporating the lived experience of our residents provides another lens through which we can identify opportunities to improve policies and programs -- and deliver on the promise of the Global Goals. By creating a "hub" for SDG activity in Los Angeles, our hope is that members of our community can more easily find one another, and build connections to amplify their reach and impact. This is the intent behind the [SDG Activities Index](#), a living crowd-sourced, open encyclopedia of more than 160 projects and initiatives underway across the L.A. region.

All of these efforts are made possible through strong partnerships: SDG 17 in action. With academic institutions including Occidental

College, the University of Southern California, Arizona State University's Thunderbird School of Global Management, University of California Los Angeles, and the Claremont Colleges, we've completed over 25 SDG "task forces" that bring together students, academic experts, and city practitioners to solve local challenges. These teams have led efforts that range from measuring L.A.'s rich biodiversity (SDG 15) to defining a just transition from a fossil fuel economy (SDG 8, 13). More detail on these student-led research projects can be found on our website at [sdg.lamayor.org/projects](https://sdg.lamayor.org/projects).

In Los Angeles, we know that we cannot accomplish any of these Global Goals if we are acting alone. True sustainable development depends on the community-based partnerships that enable lasting and positive change. The common language of the SDGs gives us a means of sharing that change with the world. And as our global community grows, the VLR movement will continue to be our platform for engaging with one another to advance our shared goals around a better future that leaves no one behind.

**Eric Garcetti**  
Mayor of Los Angeles

*Photo Credit: City of Los Angeles Office of the Mayor*

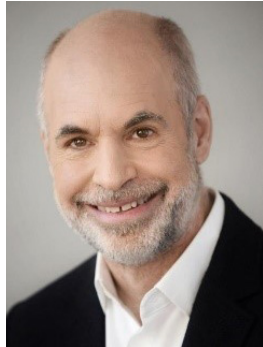


**LOS ANGELES**



## REFLECTIONS

### City of Buenos Aires, Argentina



In 2016, we adhered to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and, since then, we have been working on localizing the Global Goals to achieve a more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient

Buenos Aires. Throughout these years, we aligned our planning to the SDGs, defined indicators to follow our progress and stress the areas where we need to do better, and set clear mid and long-term goals.

In this sense, reporting and monitoring became an essential process to reach our targets. Through the New York City VLR Declaration, Buenos Aires committed to submit its Voluntary Local Review annually and, currently, we are one of the pioneer cities in the world with three VLRs submitted. For us, engaging in the VLR development meant strengthening our commitment to good governance, evidence-

based policies, public access to information, and accountability.

While the current scenario calls for a new analysis of government priorities for the social and economic reconstruction of the future, in Buenos Aires City our horizon and goals for 2030 remain the same: a sustainable, resilient, inclusive, and diverse city that promotes talent and creativity and offers the best quality of life to its inhabitants.

While the current scenario calls for a new analysis of government priorities for the social and economic reconstruction of the future, in Buenos Aires City our horizon and goals for 2030 remain the same: a sustainable, resilient, inclusive, and diverse city that promotes talent and creativity and offers the best quality of life to its inhabitants.

To achieve this vision and build our agenda for the future, we established three main priorities: the comprehensive well-being of our 3 million inhabitants and the 3 million people that visit the city every day; the need to approach labor and education from a holistic perspective to boost the social and economic development of Buenos Aires; and, the city transformation both digital



and urban, especially following the 15 minutes city model.

Likewise, good governance and collective intelligence are key allies to accomplish the SDGs in the city. We seek to enhance the attributes of good governance by establishing government priorities, clear objectives and measurable goals, through permanent accountability processes.

Our 2050 Climate Action Plan and Climate Action BA platform, both aligned to the SDGs and the Paris Agreement, are clear examples of how we plan to transform our city by working alongside a variety of stakeholders. Their formulation and design involved the generation of climate data for robust, coherent, and transparent analyses that would allow the inclusion of evidence-based public policies.

BA Climate Action, like all of our data platforms, was designed with

an open-source format so it can be replicated anywhere in the world. I truly believe that cooperation and coordination between cities are essential to face the challenges we have ahead. And, the VLR movement is a clear example of how we can work together and constantly improve our efforts to achieve the SDGs.

As always, both my team and I are available to continue cooperating with international and local actors in the exchange of lessons learned and best management practices that will help us to leave no one behind.

**Horacio Rodríguez Larreta**  
Mayor, Chief of Government,  
City of Buenos Aires

*Photo credit for all photos:  
Buenos Aires City Government*





## REFLECTIONS

### City of Melbourne, Australia



The City of Melbourne is committed to building an inclusive, sustainable and resilient future for all people and the planet. We know that global progress requires local action.

With this in mind, we are proud to be the first Australian city to make a Voluntary Local Review Declaration – a pledge to play our part and report our progress towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

As a major capital city, we know we have a key role to play in making global SDGs meaningful for our city and its community.

We are dedicated to addressing the issues identified in the SDGs to improve the quality of life for those who live, work and play in Melbourne and to developing a prosperous city for many generations to come.

Sustainable development is not a new concept for the City of Melbourne. In 2017, we launched our ground-breaking Melbourne Renewable Energy Project.

This was the first time in Australia that a group of local governments, cultural institutions, universities and corporations collectively purchased renewable energy from a purpose-built facility.

The windfarm now supplies energy to power town halls, bank branches, universities and street lights across Melbourne, ensuring our operations are powered by 100 per cent renewable energy.

Furthermore, we have partnered with the University of Melbourne to develop a best-practice framework for localising and embedding the SDGs in our long-term strategic planning processes.

With more than half the global population now living in cities, urbanisation has presented some of the world's greatest development challenges, but also tremendous opportunities for advancing sustainable development.

The SDGs provide a roadmap for more balanced and equitable development in cities across the world. They ensure that each step we take is a step in the right direction and help us measure progress, share our strengths and learn from other cities.

It is my sincere hope that the Voluntary Local Review movement will spur us all on to make informed decisions on where to prioritise our efforts and investments.

The City of Melbourne has already made great strides in this direction. A preliminary assessment of our own city's performance has informed priorities for the City of Melbourne Council Plan 2021–2025, including the climate and biodiversity emergency, access and affordability, safety and

wellbeing and deep consultation with our Aboriginal community in the management, planning and development of city land.

We are committed to adapting the 17 global SDG targets to Melbourne's context and identifying relevant global and local indicators to track our performance.

I commend the more than 300 signatories who are part of the ambitious Voluntary Local Review Declaration.

I look forward to learning from each other as we progress sustainable development and make meaningful and lasting progress for our shared future.

**Sally Capp**  
Lord Mayor, City of Melbourne

*Photo credit: Images supplied by City of Melbourne*





## REFLECTIONS

# City of Bristol, United Kingdom



Bristol was the first UK city to conduct a Voluntary Local Review measuring progress against the SDGs. Our VLR, developed in collaboration with the University of Bristol's Cabot Institute, was

launched in 2019. Today, the SDGs are an integral part of our One City Approach, which brings together a wide range of public, private and third sector partners within Bristol to collaborate on our common long-term vision.



Photo credit:

Top right: Wayne Reid

Bottom left: Bristol Global Goals Centre

Through our One City Plan we are working with city partners to agree on what we want to achieve in Bristol by 2050. The VLR provided a baseline for the [One City Plan](#) and delivering the SDGs are key milestones on that journey towards our 2050 vision. The SDGs are also embedded within the One City [Climate](#), [Ecological Emergency](#), and [Economic Recovery and Renewal](#) Strategies. In this way the VLR became an important tool to ensure we are transparent and the City Office is now developing a dashboard with updated SDG indicators and data sources.

Developing the VLR was an opportunity to reflect on citywide activity in delivering the SDGs. It is only through this model of city governance that we will be able to achieve these 17 goals for everyone in Bristol. To us, the VLR was a process more than a product.

Finally, the VLR allowed us to communicate our best practice and work on the SDGs nationally and internationally. We produced a [handbook](#) to help other cities and local authorities undertake the same process but the VLR also highlights the activities of over 90 organisations, demonstrating best practice locally and globally. It is



through this interconnected collaborative partnership working that Bristol has begun to take rapid action on the SDGs.

## Local Delivery

Some of the practical actions Bristol is undertaking include:

- [The Global Goals Centre](#): an interactive education centre that is working with schools, communities and businesses to increase awareness of the SDGs. The [Bristol 17](#) campaign highlights the activities of 17 heroes who are delivering different SDGs in Bristol.
- Two interactive exhibits on [climate migration](#) and [fast fashion](#) launching in October 2021.
- Work with Towards2030 on 17 SDG street art murals highlighting the challenges faced towards each goal in Bristol's communities.

- Activities to address [Period Poverty](#) and change policy both locally and nationally. Supported by businesses Burges Salmon, Hargreaves Lansdown and Jacobs, we have a network of boxes providing free sanitary products.
- Bristol has become a Gold Food Sustainable city and a Living Wage city in recognition of its pioneering work on food equality & sustainability and fair pay.

## A Global Conversation

It is vital that cities continue to work together to share experiences and approaches as well as ensure their voices are heard nationally and internationally.

Cities are leading the fight in tackling the world's largest challenges and must be involved in the discussions about how they should be tackled. The leadership of the VLR movement demonstrates the role cities can take in supporting the delivery of the SDGs and engaging with complex national and international challenges. Its continued growth and success will undoubtedly help cities everywhere.



**Marvin Rees**  
Mayor, City of Bristol

Photo credit:

Left: Bristol Global Goals Centre



## REFLECTIONS

### City of Yokohama, Japan

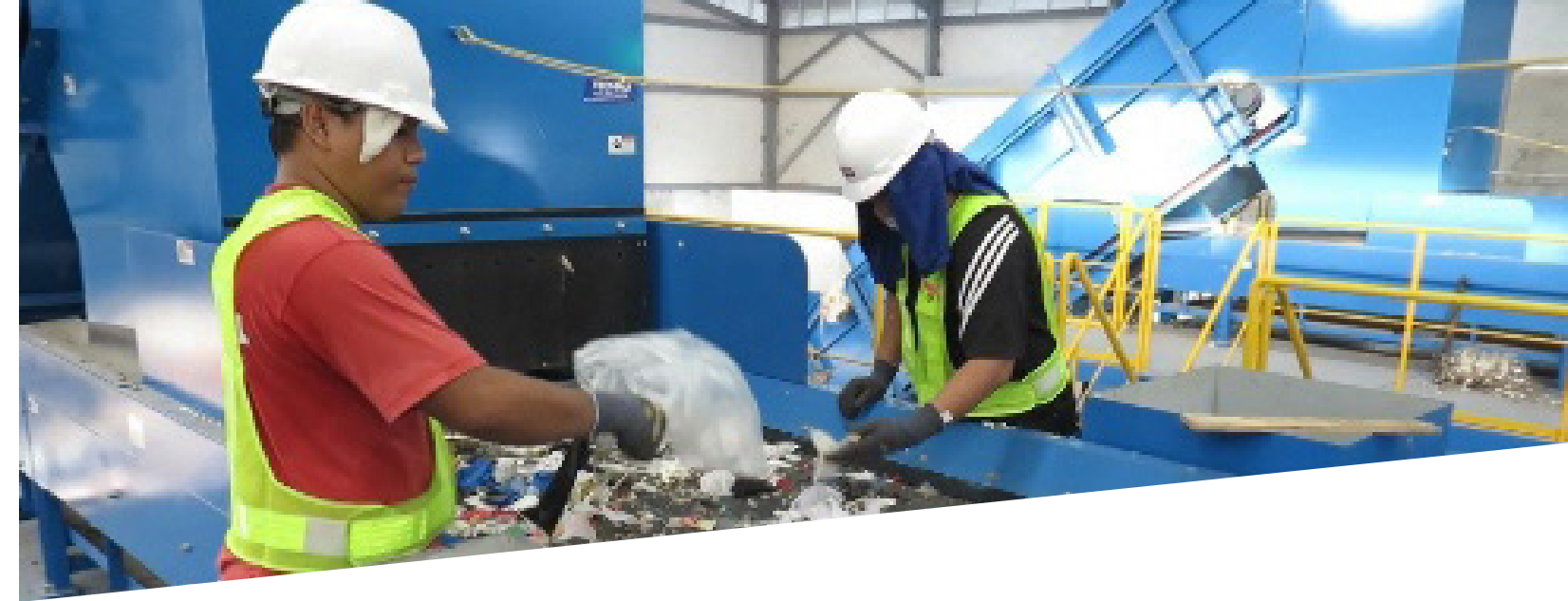


Yokohama is committed to the promotion of initiatives in each field with an emphasis on the philosophy behind the SDGs. While the SDGs were originally set as a collection of goals for national governments, the City of Yokohama included this acknowledgement of the crucial role of cities in helping achieving them in its overarching plan to guide ongoing policies, the 2018 Yokohama Medium-Term 4-Year Plan. The document connected each of our medium and long-term plans with the SDGs, which must be localized to be achieved. New York set an example in tying SDGs into its OneNYC Plan and in submitting the first subnational VLR, and as a fellow founding member of the SDG Leadership Cities Network, we gladly accepted their invitation to join the Voluntary Local Review Declaration.

The establishment of the Yokohama SDGs Design Center is one of our major initiatives related to localizing the SDGs. The center coordinates with a diverse range of stakeholders on numerous SDGs activities and projects. Looking ahead, we are working to create a Yokohama-style

“metropolitan model” cities could follow to develop integrated solutions to environmental, economic, and social issues. Through the “Zero Carbon Yokohama” vision, Yokohama is also working to achieve carbon neutrality by expanding the use of renewable energy across the city. Since 2020, our city hall has derived 100% of its energy from renewable sources. Eventually all city offices will follow suit, and these and other measures will help reduce our carbon emissions to a net zero by 2050.

In addition, Yokohama also seeks to help other cities in emerging Asian economies achieve sustainable urban development. In the latter half of the 20th century, Yokohama experienced a surge in population growth, even while infrastructure and city services remained inadequate. The Yokohama Partnership of Resources and Technologies, or Y-PORT Program, leverages Yokohama’s own experiences overcoming those challenges and exports the technical expertise and know-how of local firms to cities facing similar crises around the world. Y-PORT helps co-create sustainable solutions to specific issues as well as helping local Yokohama businesses expand overseas. To date, Y-PORT has realized 16 projects in



sectors such as waste management, energy saving, and renewable energy that have helped contribute to resolving real urban issues.

Yokohama’s VLR is currently still in development. We hope, however, that a VLR from Yokohama will lend momentum to the movement among more cities in Japan and Asia, and bring us closer to reaching the goals by 2030.

*Toru Hashimoto*

**Toru Hashimoto**  
Director General, International Affairs,  
City of Yokohama



**YOKOHAMA**



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Office of the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, Amina J. Mohammed	City of Los Angeles, United States of America
	City of Melbourne, Australia
City of Helsinki, Finland	City of Bristol, United Kingdom
City of Freetown, Sierra Leone	City of Yokohama, Japan
City of Buenos Aires, Argentina	



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