LOCALIZING THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS THROUGH VOLUNTARY LOCAL REVIEWS IN THE GAMBIA

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Abstract

This paper explores the importance of Voluntary Local Reviews (VLR) in the localization and acceleration of the attainment of a powerful global blueprint to deliver a better future. The paper regard Local voluntary Reviews as accelerators and an inclusive approach for the localization of the 2030 Agenda. According to the 2030 Agenda (A/RES/70/1: Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development) encourages member states to "conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels, which are country-led and country-driven". The value of VLR in advancing SDG implementation has been increasingly recognized at national and international level. The Paper used documentary sources to gather information relevant to the thematic area. These included journal articles, books, local and regional governments reports. The researcher also examined the VLR pilot reviews in The Gambia supported by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) and other relevant partners. The Paper strongly recommends peer-to-peer learning to enrich VLR processes at local level with a view to bolster local action.

Keywords: Local Voluntary Review, Local and Regional Governments, Sustainable Development Goals

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengeksplorasi pentingnya Tinjauan Lokal Sukarela (VLR) dalam pelokalan dan percepatan pencapaian cetak biru global yang kuat untuk mewujudkan masa depan

yang lebih baik. Artikel ini menganggap Tinjauan Lokal Sukarela sebagai akselerator dan pendekatan inklusif untuk pelokalan Agenda 2030. Menurut Agenda 2030 (A/RES/70/1: Transforming Our World: Agenda 2030 untuk Pembangunan Berkelanjutan) mendorong negara-negara anggota untuk "melakukan tinjauan reguler dan inklusif terhadap kemajuan di tingkat nasional dan sub-nasional, yang dipimpin oleh negara dan digerakkan oleh negara". Nilai VLR dalam memajukan implementasi SDG semakin diakui di tingkat nasional dan internasional. Artikel ini menggunakan sumber-sumber dokumenter untuk mengumpulkan informasi yang relevan dengan area tematik. Sumber-sumber tersebut meliputi artikel jurnal, buku, laporan pemerintah lokal dan regional. Peneliti juga mengkaji tinjauan percontohan VLR di Gambia yang didukung oleh Departemen Urusan Ekonomi dan Sosial Perserikatan Bangsa-Bangsa (UN DESA) dan mitra terkait lainnya. Makalah ini sangat merekomendasikan pembelajaran antar rekan untuk memperkaya proses VLR di tingkat lokal dengan tujuan untuk meningkatkan aksi lokal.

Kata Kunci: Tinjauan Sukarela Lokal, Pemerintah Daerah dan Regional, Tujuan Pembangunan Berkelanjutan

INTRODUCTION

The Gambia actively participated in the consultation process for the Post 2015 development agenda launched in September 2012 and was among 19 African countries selected for national consultations that were conducted between March and May 2013, facilitated by a National Taskforce that included Government, United Nations (UN), agencies, private sector, and civil society representatives. The consultations were held at the grassroots and national level involving persons with disabilities, youth, women, academia and private sector through focus group discussions where the participants were tasked to identify and rank their development priorities for consideration in the Post 2015 Development Agenda (Anderson et al., 2019; Jonga & Fauzi, 2022).

The consultation findings were subjected to a national validation workshop. A consolidated report of the consultations was subsequently compiled and sent to the United Nations Development Group (UNDG) to serve as input into the development of the SDGs. The SDGs are being implemented through the current National Development Plan 2023-2027 and mainstreamed in sector and local level strategies and plans. To help in tracking progress towards the attainment of the SDGs, there are plans to establish SDG's coordination unit at the Gambia Bureau of

Statistics (GBoS) for supporting disaggregated data collection, provision of quality assurance and analysis of relevant SDG indicators at both the national and sub-national level.

To ensure that the SDGs are reflected in the medium-term plan and in the financing and budgetary frameworks, a development finance assessment was conducted to explore new and existing sources of financing for development (Fauzi et al., 2023; Su et al., 2022; van Vuuren et al., 2022). Deliberate efforts were also made by Government to effectively scrutinize multilateral and bilateral support as well as national and sub-national sector strategies, plans and submissions particularly during budget bilateral at the Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs (MoFEA) for alignment with the SDGs. While there is a need to increase awareness around the SDGs, the participation of stakeholders during the Voluntary National Review (VNR) has increased ownership of the Agenda 2030 at the local level.

The Gambia has over the years joined global efforts in the implementation of initiatives aimed at achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (Bartlett et al., 2014; Jonga & Fauzi, 2022). As part of this process, a monitoring system has been put in place to keep track of progress towards the achievement of the goals. Amongst these monitoring systems is the global reporting on the Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs,), which has helped countries track progress towards the achievement of the goals. In addition to the existing global monitoring frameworks, The Gambia has taken concrete steps to mainstream the SDGs into their national development planning frameworks notably the National Development Plans (NDP), and by extension Local Governments in the country has been encouraged to flow suit. The Gambia undertook her first VNR in the year 2020 and presented her second VNR in September 2022.

The Brikama Area Council, Kanifing Municipal Council and Kuntaur Area Council are the first three Local Governments in the Gambia to undertake a Voluntary Local Review (VLR) of the Sustainable Development Goals (Agenda 2030) in October 2022. The overall objectives of engaging the three Local Government Areas to conduct a Local Voluntary Review process are as follows:

1. To assesses the progress of the implementation of the SDGs in the selected Local Government Areas
2. Communicate local progress of the implementation of SDGs to government stakeholders, civil society organizations, residents and other local government authorities
3. To map out the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities of the selected Local Government Areas to their taxpayers, other local authorities, Government and development partners
4. To learn best practices in the implementation of SDGs from other sister councils within the sub region
5. Contribute to and complement the national level voluntary review in order to advance the implementation of the SDGs and Agenda 2063.

With support from United Nations Development programmed and United Nations Resident Coordinator's Office, The Gambia Association of Local Government Authorities (GALGA) serves as the coordinating body for the voluntary Local Review (VLR). An inception workshop was organized in January 2022 which brought together different stakeholders at regional level to develop a regional road map and adopt the methodology on how the sustainable development goals are to be reviewed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2015, are a comprehensive framework aimed at addressing the world's most pressing challenges, including poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace and justice. The SDGs consist of 17 goals and 169 interrelated targets designed to be achieved by 2030. This literature review synthesizes scholarly contributions to understanding the implementation, challenges and implications of the SDGs across sectors and regions. One of the key aspects of the SDGs is their emphasis on the role of multiple stakeholders, including governments, businesses and civil society, in achieving sustainable development. Several literature highlights the importance of measuring corporate contributions to the SDGs, suggesting that effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are critical to successful implementation (de la Casa & Caballero, 2021; Nepal et al., 2020). The other discusses the phenomenon of "SDG

washing," where companies selectively engage with certain goals without a true commitment to sustainable practices, particularly in developing countries (García et al., 2020; Hussain et al., 2020). This selective engagement can undermine the overall effectiveness of the SDGs, indicating the need for stronger accountability measures.

Integration of the SDGs into business strategy is another important theme in the literature. Several experts proposes an integrative framework for businesses to align their operations with the SDGs, emphasizing the need for a structured approach to sustainability that encompasses multiple dimensions such as education, health, and climate change (Asatani et al., 2020; Gunnarsdottir et al., 2020). Further research underscore the potential of the financial services industry to contribute to sustainable consumption, which is critical to achieving the SDGs (Hameed et al., 2024; Tok et al., 2022). This highlights the financial sector's linkages to broader sustainability goals, suggesting that financial institutions can leverage their influence to promote sustainable practices. Data availability and capacity to assess progress towards the SDGs are also important challenges identified in the literature. The

lack of reliable data hampers countries' ability to track their progress effectively, as noted by the International Journal of Media and Information Literacy ("Information Security in the Implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals," 2022). This problem is particularly pronounced in developing countries, where resources for data collection and analysis may be limited.

Furthermore, the role of education in achieving the SDGs cannot be overlooked. Some research argue that inclusive education policies are critical to meeting the SDGs, particularly in ensuring equitable access to education for marginalized groups (Rad et al., 2022; Sianes & Vela-Jiménez, 2020). This is in line with the broader goal of promoting gender equality and empowering women and girls, as highlighted in several studies (Sianes & Vela- Jiménez, 2020). The emphasis on education underscores the importance of human capital development in driving sustainable economic growth and social progress.

METHODOLOGY

Methodological approaches that utilize qualitative research and focus group discussions (FGDs) are increasingly recognized for their effectiveness in

exploring complex social phenomena (Li et al., 2020; Saptutyningsih & Setyawati Dewanti, 2021). Qualitative research is characterized by its emphasis on understanding participants' meanings and experiences, often using methods such as interviews, observations, and document analysis. According to several research, qualitative methods are particularly useful for capturing the nuances of human behavior and social interactions, allowing researchers to collect rich descriptive data (Ramadhan & Fauzi, 2023; Telino et al., 2020). Qualitative approaches are rooted in postpositivist philosophy, which emphasizes the subjective nature of reality and the importance of context in understanding social phenomena. This perspective aligns with the purpose of FGDs, which facilitate group interactions that can reveal collective views and shared experiences (Indrayani & Wasistiono, 2021; Rawal et al., 2020). FGDs, as a qualitative data collection method, involve directed discussions among a group of participants, usually led by a facilitator. This method is particularly beneficial for exploring participants' perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes regarding a particular topic. Several studies highlight the importance of purposeful sampling in qualitative research, which is critical to ensuring that participants

in FGDs are representative of the population being studied (AlKhaldi et al., 2020; Saptutyningsih & Setyawati Dewanti, 2021). The dynamic nature of FGDs allows for the emergence of themes and ideas that may not have emerged in individual interviews, thereby enriching the data collected.

Since the Voluntary Local Review was being implemented in The Gambia for the first time, inception workshops were organized for the participating LGAs to sensitize them on the VLR approach to SDG monitoring. Methodological issues were discussed during these workshops and LGAs were informed of the organizational needs for the VLR. The workshops targeted Council Officials and Stakeholders to be involved in the Voluntary Local Review process. During the inception workshops, with the guidance of the United National Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), a roadmap was developed to guide implementation of the project. The roadmap clearly identified activities to be implemented and stipulated the timelines within which each activity should be implemented. Each LGA had a session on stakeholder mapping to ensure that relevant stakeholders were mapped for involvement in the Voluntary Local Review.

Stakeholders identified for the VLR are either involved in SDG implementation or SDG monitoring within the LGA. After the inception workshop stakeholder consultation meetings were organized. Councils invited stakeholders to these meetings which were aimed at sensitizing stakeholders on the VLR process and also informing them of the need for their participation in the VLR process. Although the initial stakeholder mapping exercise only involved a few stakeholders during the inception workshop, during subsequent stakeholder consultations, the list of identified stakeholders was reviewed and in some cases additional stakeholders identified and included in the list. Identification of additional stakeholders was largely premised on the selected priority SDGs.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Rationale For Voluntary Local Review

The Voluntary Local Review has availed the Brikama Local Government Area and its Sister Local Government Authorities the opportunity to track progress made in service delivery in relation to the sustainable development goals and the African Union agenda 2063 through its current strategic development plan 2020-2024. To pilot the VLR in The Gambia, the three LGAs were encouraged to undertake the VLR to serve as a diagnostic tool on their implementation of the SDGs. An analysis of the country context informed the rationale behind the selection of the three LGAs. Kanifing Local Government Area is predominantly an urban settlement while Brikama Local Government is a semi-urban settlement, and Kuntaur Local Government Area is a predominantly rural settlement in The Gambia.

In addition, the VLR will contribute to creating awareness of the goals, and significantly contribute to the capacity of LGAs to solve urgent local issues, create partnerships and advance priorities related to equity and sustainability. They will be empowered to support local ownership of the SDGs and advance local priorities. Beyond the multiple benefits of the VLR to the LGAs, it can also enrich and contribute to the National Voluntary Review.

Broadly, countries in the sub-region can draw lesson from the Gambia's experience VLR to build capacity in enhancing monitoring and reporting of the SDGs and Agenda 2063. The Gambian experience can serve as a very important tool for transparency and accountability as a

public service delivery institutions at sub-regional level.

Institutional Mechanism

Since the pilot VLR project is being implemented in three LGAs, a consultant was hired by UNDESA to coordinate the VLR process. The consultancy is being implemented with support from the UNRCO's office. Although many sectors participate in various developments related activities within LGAs, Area Councils play a pivotal role in planning, implementation and monitoring of development initiatives within their regions. They continue to take the lead in regional planning and have led the development of recent cycle LGA Strategic Plans. It was therefore fitting that Gambia Association of Local Government Authorities assigned the Councils the responsibility of coordinating this VLR process. For effective implementation of the VLR project, Councils have mapped stakeholders with the capacity to effectively partake in the Voluntary Local Review.

When adopting the 2030 Agenda, United Nations member States committed to working closely with local and regional governments on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Since 2015, metropolises, small cities,

regions and their associations alike have been actively localizing the 2030 Agenda, bringing the SDGs closer to the people they serve and using the framework as a tool for planning and execution.

As part of its follow-up and review mechanisms, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development encourages member States to "conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels, which are country-led and country-driven" (paragraph 79). Paragraph 89 of the 2030 Agenda calls on major groups and other stakeholders, including local authorities, to report on their contribution to the implementation of the Agenda.

In this spirit, local and regional governments are increasingly engaging in such sub-national reviews of SDG implementation, also called Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs). While the VLRs hold no official status, the process of undertaking these sub-national reviews is providing multiple benefits to the entities engaging in them and to SDG implementation at large. These VLRs can also help to reinforce vertical coherence and complement and contribute to the national Voluntary National Reviews of SDG implementation.

The global movement of Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) is growing exponentially. Cities, local and regional governments worldwide are using VLRs to track and report on SDG progress. Localizing the SDGs or translating the Global Goals into relevant, actionable and attainable priorities at the local level is a vital first step in leveraging action for addressing the multiple interlinked crises and promoting sustainable urban development. Considering cities' capacity to learn, respond and innovate, cities can use the SDGs as a framework for identifying interlink ages between different sectors and identify potential points for acceleration, joint action and trade-offs.

The Asia-Pacific Regional Voluntary Local Reviews (VLR) Guidelines propose the concept of VLR-VNR integration, i.e., the vertical integration of the two processes around the follow-up and review of the SDGs (where the policy cycle is divided into planning, implementation, and follow-up and review) as a response to clear gaps between the two processes as well as demands by national and subnational governments to better understand, accommodate and utilize VLRs. Additionally, VLR-VNR integration could, for local governments in particular,

strengthen the legitimacy of subnational/local follow-up and review of the SDGs. This, in turn, could validate local government future requests for support from the national government regarding SDG implementation.

The VLR global community has been growing at an encouraging pace, passing from 37 VLRs in May 2020 to 106 in October 2021 – a 186 percent increase in less than a year and a half. A total of 87 local and regional governments from 27 countries have joined the VLR movement by producing at least one VLR. 72 percent of VLRs have been developed at city level, 16 percent at regional level, and 13 percent at state level (UN-habitat, November, 2021)

According to UN-Habitat,(United National Human Settlement Programme), Europe and the Americas are the most active regions, having published 76 percent of VLRs between the two – 80 VLRs released in total. Nevertheless, other regions are catching up: Asia-Pacific has published 18 percent of existing VLRs, while many cities in Africa and Arab States have already committed to developing a VLR in 2021-2022. Concerning the level of income, 56 percent of existing VLRs come from High-Income countries (59 VLRs from 16

countries), 37 percent from Upper-Income Countries (39 VLRs from 7 countries), while 8 percent is developed within Lower Income countries (8 VLRs from 4 countries).

During the inception workshop LGAs were requested to align their respective LGA strategic priorities with the SDGs. During this exercise LGAs derived their strategic priorities from their respective Strategic Plans which clearly defined the strategic priorities of the LGA. The process was consequently guided by LGA identified priority SDGs. With the guidance of the VLR Consultant, indicators for each of the SDG priorities were identified and potential sources of data values listed for use during the literature review. Based on the identified SDGs and priority indicators, a template was developed aligning LGA strategic priorities with the SDGs. The template created room for baseline and most recent data values for each indicator to track progress towards the achievement of the SDGs. Policy documents relevant to the identified SDGs and VLR reports from other African countries were also identified as reference documents for the literature review.

Local Government Areas were requested to constitute report writing teams comprising of up to 7 members. With the leadership of the VLR consultant, VLR report writing teams reviewed the VLR report template prepared by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. The exercise was meant to acquaint team members with the expected content of each section of the Voluntary Local Review report and also the relevant literature required for the VLR report writing. Each LGA report writing team was provided with the indicator template and all relevant literature for the exercise. They were requested to work as a team to populate the provided template. As the team expected to draft the VLR report, populating the template provided them with the opportunity to acquaint themselves with the priority SDGs and the selected indicators.

In addition, the review was done using data from national sources such as the Demographic Health Survey, Integrated Household Survey, The Gambia National Development Plan 2018- 2022 (NDP), The Gambia Social Safety Net project, the multi indicator cluster survey (MICS), the National Population and Housing Census and the Local Government Strategic Development Plans and annual reports. At the time of the review, there were not much survey documents available at local level, which indicates the inadequate availability

of data at local level. However, most of the available data sources provided disaggregated indicators which made it possible to use the data for the review.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper has highlighted the background of VLR process in the Gambia and how it relates to the Sustainable Development Goals. The findings shows that three local government area councils were involve in the process. These local governments include an urban settlement in Kanifing LGA, a semi urban settlement in Brikama LGA and a rural settlement in Kuntaur LGA. The evidence shows how the VLR process was conducted. This includes consultations that were held at the grassroots and national level involving persons with disabilities, youth, women, academia and private sector through focus group discussions where the participants were tasked to identify and rank their development priorities for consideration. The evidence also indicates about the hiring of a consultant with the support of the UNDESA. The consultant was instrumental coordinating the process and work with LGA council to realize the implementation of the VLR. The findings shows that the VLR will contribute to creating awareness of the goals, and significantly contribute to the capacity of LGAs to solve urgent local issues, create partnerships and advance priorities related to equity and sustainability.

There are a few key recommendation necessary to speed-up the localization and attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals. There is a critical need for the Local Government Authorities to maximize its traditional revenue sources as well as diversify its revenue sources. In other hand, the central government is required to adhere to its obligation to provide it 25% development budget to the Councils as stipulated under section 128 (3) of the Local Government Act, 2002.

Public and private investments in infrastructure should be strongly encouraged as such investments would to a great extent enhance the information and communications networks in the communities. Capacity building is also an integral in achieving the sustainable development goals and as such it is essential to raise awareness and to educate diverse stakeholders at regional and national level to enhance ownership of the goals.

Effective institutional frameworks and policy reforms are very important to empower local authorities in the

implementation process and thus a bottom-up development approach is highly recommended. Establishing and strengthening institutional collaboration and partnerships is inevitably central to registering concrete progress towards the achievement of the global goals with less than half a decade to go.

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