Libraries in Voluntary Local Reviews

3 May 2021

A key feature of the United Nations 2030 Agenda is the emphasis on monitoring efforts made to implement its goals.

Perhaps the highest profile examples are Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), of which over 200 have taken place since 2015. These see governments compile information about their own efforts, as well as challenges and plans. In preparing these, they are invited to engage all relevant stakeholders.

IFLA has already carried out analysis of those VNRs which have already been published[1], demonstrating that in about a quarter of cases, governments mention the role of libraries. These references are, in general, focused on education, with some welcome commitments to support the development of school libraries. Clearly, there is room for improvement here, although welcome evidence that recent years have seen recognition of libraries become more common.

However, VNRs are not the only such exercise. Recognising not only the duty of governments at all levels to contribute to delivering on the SDGs, but also on their particular strengths in doing so, we have seen 'Voluntary Local Reviews' (VLRs) emerge.

These take place in different ways, with different handbooks available. United Cities and Local Governments, working with UN HABITAT, has produced guidelines for carrying out VLRs[2].
Others are available via the Local2030 initiative on localising the SDGs, drawing on inputs from academic sources[3]. There is also a handbook for voluntary local reviews in Europe[4], and one even just at the level of the United Kingdom[5].

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[1] IFLA (2020), *References to Libraries in UN SDG Voluntary National Reviews:* *https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/93510*
[2] UCLG (2020), *Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews*, https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/uclg_vlrlab_guidelines_2020_volume_i.pdf
[3] https://www.local2030.org/library/tools/monitoring-and-evaluation
[4] Siragusa, A., Vizcaino, M.P., Proietti, P. and Lavalle, C., European Handbook for SDG Voluntary Local Reviews (2020), *European Handbook for SDG Voluntary Local Reviews*, https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/publication/eur-scientific-and-technical-research-reports/european-handbook-sdg-voluntary-local-reviews
[5] Fox, Sean and Macleod, Allan (2019) *Voluntary local reviews: a Handbook for UK Cities, building on the Bristol experience* https://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/cabot-institute-2018/documents/uk-cities-voluntary-local-review-handbook.pdf

However, as a common thread – and similarly to VNRs – VLRs (including all of reviews of cities, regions, and of sub-national government in general) aim to consider contributions to delivery of each of the SDGs, and how each authority is mobilising resources and partners. They encourage a joined-up approach, reflecting the interrelationships between progress on different goals.

Given the close relationship of public and community libraries in particular to local governments, this report therefore looks across available VLRs to build a sense of how often libraries appear in these, and in what ways. It also includes a brief consideration of the relationship between libraries in VLRs and libraries in VNRs. To do this, all of the VLRs available on the UCLG Global Observatory of Localisation and Democracy (GOLD), as of March 2021[6], have been analysed for references to libraries. We are grateful to the work of UCLG in putting together this collection.

How often do libraries feature in VLRs?

In total 70 reports are included on the GOLD page, from 26 different countries. These include 54 reviews of SDG implementation in cities, 10 of implementation in regions, and 6 wider sub-national reviews.
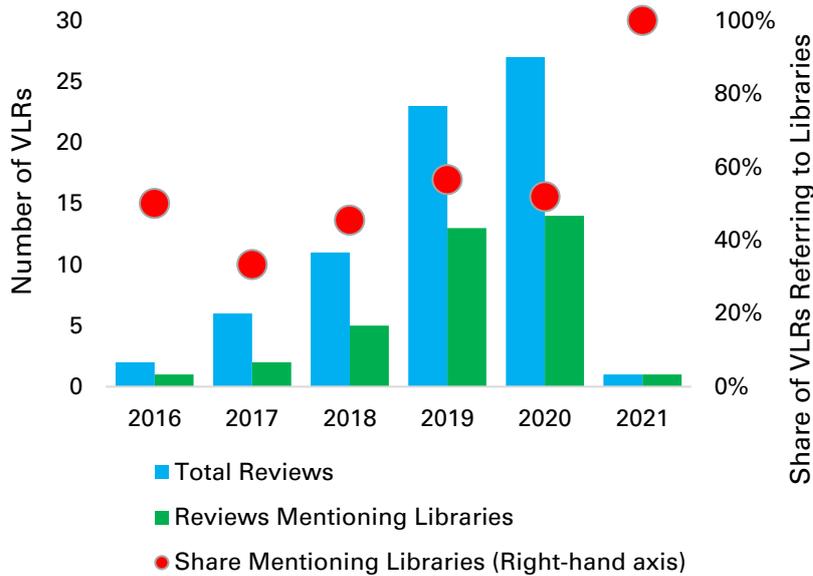
Of these, 22 are from Europe, 22 from Latin America and the Caribbean, 14 from Asia-Pacific, 8 from Sub-Saharan Africa, and 6 from North America. There are none from the Middle East and North Africa Region.

Online in the cases of Barcelona, Buenos Aires, Deqing, New York, Sao Paolo and Taipei has there been more than one report from a single city.

Across all reports, libraries are referenced in 36 out of the 70 produced, a share of just of 50% of the total.

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[6] https://www.gold.uclg.org/report/localizing-sdgs-boost-monitoring-reporting
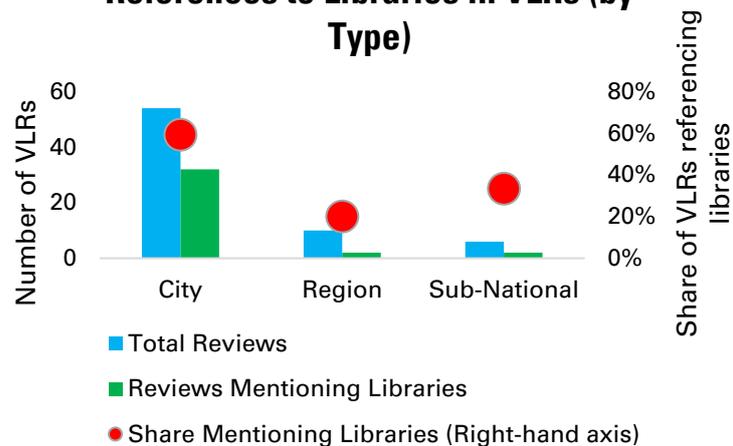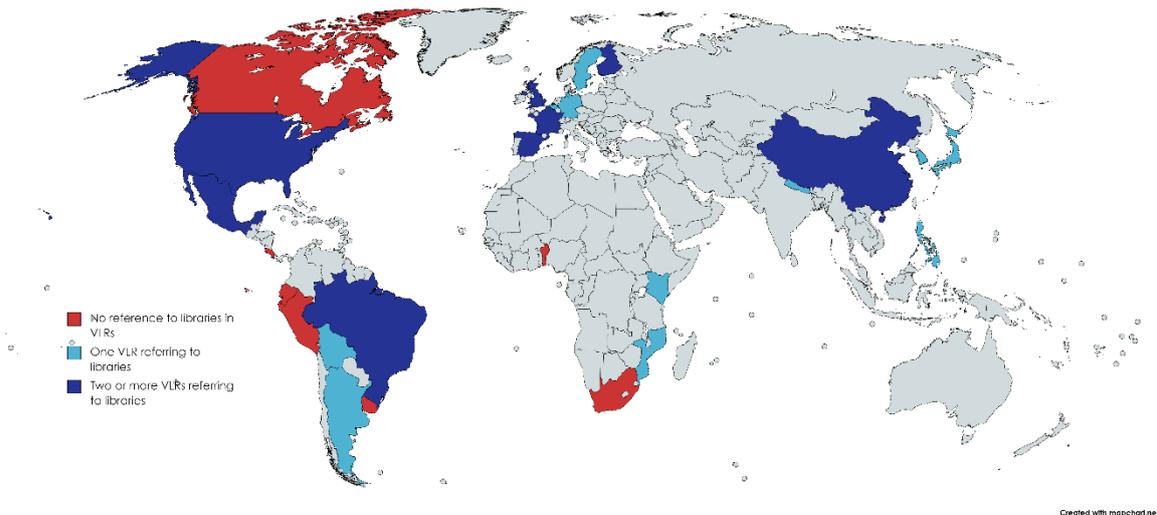
References to Libraries in VLRs (by year)

Breaking things down by year, we can see a gently rising trend over time, discounting 2016 year (where only two reviews took place) and 2021 (where only one report is available so far. This echoes the finding in the analysis of Voluntary National Reviews that there have tended to be more references to libraries in reports over time.

We can also look at the degree to which the different types of voluntary local review refer to libraries.

This shows that references to libraries are strongly concentrated on VLRs of cities, as opposed to those of regions or sub-national government in general. This could be explained by the

References to Libraries in VLRs (by Type)

fact that primary responsibility for public libraries is often left up to city and other local governments, rather than to mid-level governments such as those working at the regional level.

Looking around the world, it can be seen that there are examples of libraries in VLRs in all regions where these have taken place at all. In eight countries, there are indeed two or more cities referring to libraries – while in another ten, there is at least one city or region which does so.

Comparing this to our earlier analysis of Voluntary National Reviews, we can see that it is at the local level that the role of libraries is better recognised, including in Bolivia, Ecuador, the Republic of Korea, Mozambique, the Philippines and Sweden. In the US, which has yet to undertake a voluntary national review, 80% of VLRs have referred to libraries.

In what ways do VLRs refer to libraries?

The 36 VLRs which do refer to libraries include recognition of the role of libraries in supporting SDG delivery across the board. In this section, this report will draw on just some of the examples provided in the reports. In some cases, VLRs are organised explicitly by SDG, while in others, it is the judgement of the author to which SDG a reference is most closely attached.

 SDG1 (No Poverty): the role of libraries in reaching out to those facing poverty or otherwise without the resources to realise their potential is explicit in the reviews of Los Angeles and Taipei. Los Angeles notes the work of its libraries to support people facing homelessness, while Taipei recognises how libraries can help those who are facing poverty. Interestingly, Barcelona takes this a step further by using the difference in levels of libraries by the population as a whole and those on lower incomes. This is a valuable way of understanding whether public services are reaching the people who need them most.

SDG2 (Zero Hunger): libraries' potential contribution to supporting food security is noted in the VLR of Los Angeles, which notes the urban libraries that many institutions host. As well as providing a calm, green space, these also offer an opportunity to learn about how to grow food for themselves.

SDG3 (Good Health and Wellbeing): The VLR of Canterbury in the UK underlines the role of libraries not just as places where activities are carried out to boost wellbeing, but also in delivering information and support to promote healthy eating and wider health issues.

SDG4 (Quality Education): there are plenty of references to the role of libraires in supporting local and regional initiatives around education. These include simply counting libraries as part of the education infrastructure (Cauayan City, Santa Fe, Sao Paolo, and in Nepal's Sub-National Review), as well as underlining their value for different age groups, from pre-school children (Pittsburgh) to school age children (especially during COVID) (Buenos Aires) to adults engaged in lifelong learning (Mexico City, Santana de Parnaíba, Suwon).

The contribution of libraries to wider social goals, through education, also comes through, for example as concerns democratic engagement and sustainable behaviours (Espoo), the development of digital and other future-orientated skills (Helsinki), building a culture of peace (Sao Paolo), and gender inclusion (Yucatan).
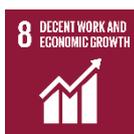
In some cases, libraries even feature in SDG4 indicators, with Besançon using numbers of people with library cards as a metric for personal development policies, and satisfaction with libraries as places for lifelong learning used in Hamamatsu, Japan.

SDG5 (Gender Equality): as highlighted above, the voluntary regional review of Yucatan underlines the role of libraries, in particular, in supporting programmes that help women with education, employment, reading and cultural participation.

SDG7 (Energy): New York's 2018 Voluntary Local Review emphasises the role that libraries can play at times of disaster, and the importance, therefore, of ensuring that they have back-up energy sources. These, in turn, can help ensure that wider communities are not deprived of electricity when this is needed most. Sydney, in turn, notes how, in hosting technologies such as solar panels, libraries can become exemplars for the communities they serve in adopting renewable energy.

SDG8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth): In addition to the examples already highlighted above about the contribution of libraries to lifelong learning (SDG4) and gender economic inclusion (SDG5), Los Angeles' VLR notes how libraries are supporting financial literacy and money management for all. Helsinki's review, it is worth repeating, highlights the connection between the skills libraries are offering today, and the jobs and life of the future.

SDG9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure): a core function of libraries related to SDG9, as recognised by both Helsinki and Liverpool, is around digital inclusion. Libraries can be a key place to access the internet (including through hardware), as well as building the confidence and skills to make the most of it.

SDG10 (Reduced Inequalities): further to the examples already given under SDG1, the cities and regions undertaking VLRs also underline the wider value of libraries as places which, through their universality, can be actors for inclusion (Ciudad Valles, Espoo, Sao Paolo, Turku), as well as providing specific services to those with fewer resources (Taipei). The ability of libraries to reach target groups is highlighted, for example, in Besançon, where engagement of young people in projects is defined as an indicator of success, or in Barcelona, where the participation of people with lower socio-economic status is a chosen metric.

SDG11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities): closely linked to points above about inclusion, the role of libraries in building community cohesion is recognised in a large number of VLRs. Espoo notes the role of libraries as neighbourhood anchor institutions, Gothenburg sees them as being important if intensification of cities continues, and New York describes them as key spaces for civic life and engagement. Sao Paolo sees libraries as contributing to a culture of peace, while Sydney underlines their role as public spaces accessible to the population.

SDG11 also underlines the importance of safeguarding cultural heritage (arguably including contemporary creativity), a point made in the VLRs for Ghent, Guangzhou, La Paz, Mannheim, Suwon, and Taita Taveta. La Paz in particular underlines the status of libraries as the most common form of cultural infrastructure, as does Suwon. In Mozambique's sub-national review, libraries are broadly categorised as actors involved in delivering SDG11.

SDG12 (Sustainable Consumption and Production): as public spaces focused on information, libraries can be key partners in efforts to help people change their behaviours. The VLR of Espoo underlines this role, as does Sao Paolo in citing the example of a library specifically set up to inform people about environmental issues. As highlighted above, libraries can be

convenient community venues and exemplars, for example for renewable energy, and other approaches (food recycling in New York), green rooves and walls (in Sydney).

SDG13 (Climate Action): in addition to the examples already given under SDG12, Buenos Aires' highlights the decision to incorporate a library into a new green lung area of the city, in order both to engage the community in a sustainable way in the new plans.

SDG15 (Life on Land): as highlighted under SDGs 12 and 13, libraries promote more sustainable approaches to resource use, be part of efforts to encourage more green in cities, and provide a space to engage the public and make behaviours evolve.
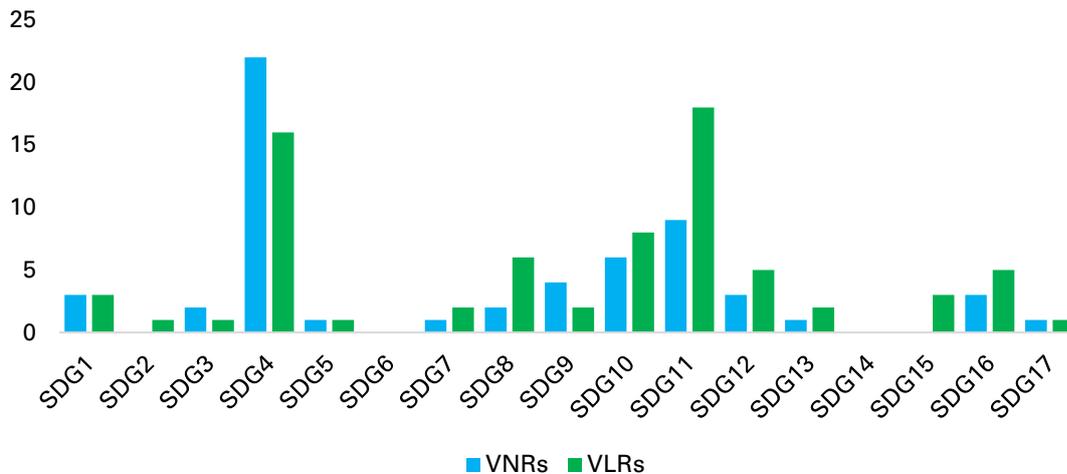
SDG16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions): closely linked to work associated with SDG11 to create community cohesion, libraries can also complement open government strategies by building interest, understanding, and skills. For example, Espoo notes the role of libraries as places to talk about democracy, while New York highlights in particular how libraries are helping to make use of the city's open data portal (including through training), while Suwon mentions how our institutions support access to public information in general. In a more direct fashion, Helsinki notes how libraries can be consultation venues for governments, while Sao Paolo goes broader, and underlines a role in promoting a culture of peace in general.

SDG17 (Partnerships for the Goals): among the issues covered by SDG17 is the ability to make use of digital tools. This is important, among other things of course, for engagement in eGovernment and wider life. Barcelona indeed underlines this point, showing how libraries can support the effectiveness of wider policy.

A final interesting exercise is to compare the spread of references to libraries under specific SDGs in VNRs and VLRs. The below does this (noting that there have been many more VNRs than VLRs).

References to Libraries per SDG (VNRs and VLRs)

The graph shows us that it is only under SDGs 4 (education) and 9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure) that more VNRs than VLRs referred to libraries. In the case of SDG9, this is perhaps logical, given that much research and innovation policy tends to be nationally orientated (even is there is also usually support locally). As concerns the references to SDG4, the disproportionate emphasis on education may reflect a traditional view of libraries at the national level, with less reflection about all of the other ways in which they are supporting the 2030 Agenda.

Meanwhile, references to libraries are just as, or more, common on all other SDGs in VLRs as compared to VNRs. This also means that there is a wider spread of recognised library SDG contributions in VLRs, again emphasising a greater awareness at the local library of the versatility of libraries.

Conclusion

Voluntary Local Reviews represent an increasingly important part of the infrastructure in place to monitor the implementation of the SDGs. They are also, as this report has shown, a potentially stronger source of examples of recognition of the key contributions of libraries to achieving the UN's 2030 Agenda; over half refer to our institutions.

These examples can, we hope, serve as both a reference for libraries and library associations looking to engage in their own reviews, as well as a tool in broader advocacy in favour of our institutions.

ANNEX: Voluntary Local Reviews Referring to Libraries

CITY	COUNTRY	City/ Region/ Sub-National ?	Year	Long Report
n/a	Mozambique	Sub-National	2020	https://gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/mozambique_2020_portuguese.pdf
n/a	Nepal	Sub-National	2020	https://gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/nepal_2020.pdf
Barcelona	Spain	City	2020	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/barcelona_2020.pdf
Besançon	France	City	2018	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/Besanc%CC%A7on%20(2018)_0.pdf
Besançon	France	City	2019	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/besancon_2019.pdf
Buenos Aires	Argentina	City	2019	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/Buenos%20Aires%20(2019)_0.pdf
Buenos Aires	Argentina	City	2020	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/buenos_aires_2020.pdf
Canterbury	United Kingdom	City	2019	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/Canterbury%20(2019)_0.pdf
Cauayan City	Philippines	City	2017	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/Cauayan%20City%20(2017)_0.pdf
Ciudad Valles	Mexico	City	2020	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/ciudad_valles_2020_esp.pdf
Espoo	Finland	City	2020	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/espoo_2020_0.pdf
Ghent	Belgium	City	2020	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/ghent_2020.pdf
Gothenberg	Sweden	City	2019	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/Gothenburg%20(2019).pdf
Guangzhou	China	City	2021	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/guangzhou_2021.pdf
Hamamatsu	Japan	City	2019	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/Hamamatsu%20(2019).pdf
Helsinki	Finland	City	2019	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/Helsinki%20(2019).pdf
La Paz	Bolivia	City	2018	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/La%20Paz%20(2018)_0.pdf
Liverpool	UK	City	2020	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/liverpool_2020.pdf

Los Angeles	USA	City	2019	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/Los%20Angeles%20(2019)_0.pdf
Mannheim	Germany	City	2019	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/Mannheim%20(2019)_0.pdf
Mexico City	Mexico	City	2017	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/Mexico%20City%20(2017)_0.pdf
New York	USA	City	2018	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/New%20York%20(2018)_0.pdf
New York	USA	City	2019	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/New%20York%20(2019)_0.pdf
Niteroi	Brazil	City	2020	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/niteroi_2020.pdf
Pittsburgh	USA	City	2020	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/pittsburgh_2020.pdf
Santa Fe	Mexico	City	2019	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/Santa%20Fe%20(2019)_0.pdf
Santana de Parnaíba	Brazil	City	2019	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/Santana%20de%20Parnai%CC%81ba%20(2019)_0.pdf
Sao Paolo	Brazil	City	2019	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/Sao%20Paulo%20(2019)_0.pdf
Sao Paolo	Brazil	City	2020	https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/English_Report%20of%20Localization%20of%20the%20Sustainable%20Development%20Goals.pdf
Suwon	Korea	City	2018	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/Suwon%20(2018).pdf
Sydney	Australia	City	2018	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/Sydney%20(2018).pdf
Taipei	Taiwan, China	City	2020	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/taipei_city_2020.pdf
Taita Taveta County	Kenya	Region	2019	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/Taita%20Taveta%20County%20(2019).pdf
Turku	Finland	City	2020	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/turku_2020.pdf
Valencia	Spain	City	2016	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/Valencia%20Region%20(2016).pdf
Yucatan	Mexico	Region	2020	https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/yucatan_2020.pdf