



# Recognising and Reaching Marginalised Communities: Leaving No One Behind in Voluntary Local Reviews

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Local and regional governments play a critical role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): approximately 65% of the targets in the SDGs depend on delivery at the local level (Cities Alliance, 2016). Regions, cities and communities have responded to the SDGs in their planning and activities, but also in their reporting and review of the SDGs. Reflecting states' commitments to 'Voluntary National Reviews' of progress and challenges on the SDGs, a practice of 'Voluntary Local Reviews' (VLRs) has arisen as a means to assess progress against the SDGs at a local level.

This paper focuses on the place of the SDGs' pledge to '*Leave No One Behind*' in these Voluntary Local Reviews. The SDGs set out goals and targets aimed at building a more environmentally sustainable, prosperous, and inclusive world, but they also adopt a set of fundamental principles, including the commitment to "Leave No One Behind". These principles underpin implementation and review of the goals.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development also makes a commitment to a 'systematic follow-up and review of implementation' of the SDGs (UNGA, 2015). Reflecting "Leave No One Behind", the guiding principles for review stipulate that review processes at all levels should have a focus on "the poorest, most vulnerable and those furthest behind" supported by disaggregated data and undertaken in an inclusive, participatory manner (UNGA 2015, para 74).

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*'As we embark on this great collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind. Recognizing that the dignity of the human person is fundamental, we wish to see the Goals and targets met for all nations and peoples and for all segments of society. And we will endeavor to reach the furthest behind first' (UNGA, 2015).*

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VLRs are 'a fundamental instrument to monitor progresses and sustain the transformative and inclusive action of local actors towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)' (Siragusa et al, 2020: 4). By encouraging local governments to share their accomplishments and identify areas where further action is needed, VLRs enhance accountability while fostering mutual learning and exchange of best practice. Whilst many cities and regions have engaged with processes of local review, there is considerable variation in how, and to what extent, communities have tackled "Leave No One Behind" in their VLRs so far. This report focuses on the challenges that cities face in "leaving no one behind" in their SDG reviews, and makes recommendations to support cities and towns in recognising and addressing this principle in their future implementation and review of the SDGs. **Section 1** briefly makes the case for the importance of "Leave No One Behind" in VLRs and identifies key challenges for cities in this area. **Section 2** discusses the existing VLR guidelines. A final section, starting on page 6, makes **recommendations** for addressing "Leave No One Behind" in VLRs.

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## (1) The challenges of ‘Leaving No One Behind’ in Cities

Cities are important sites for “Leave No One Behind”: in addition to hosting a significant and increasing proportion of the global population - including disadvantaged and marginalised groups - cities have core responsibilities in policy areas such as housing, transport, infrastructure, drinking water and sanitation (OECD, 2020). Action within these areas is crucial in addressing disadvantage, and is especially pressing in the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Factors like housing conditions, access to infrastructure and healthcare, income level, age, ethnicity, and gender have been shown to influence the degree and nature of COVID-19 effects (UN, 2020). For instance, COVID-19 transmission is more likely to occur in poor areas with inadequate access to water and sanitation facilities, and where physical distancing cannot be easily implemented. Thus, COVID-19 is having a deeper impact on groups that were already in a situation of disadvantage, thereby exacerbating existing social, economic, and spatial inequalities (UN, 2020).

Global social movements like ‘Black Lives Matter’ reflect increasing public concern with continuing inequalities. They demand that those in power implement meaningful and transparent policies to overcome inequality issues, and that they are held accountable for their actions. The “Leave No One Behind” pledge provides cities with a powerful tool to incorporate these issues into their SDG localisation agenda.

City-level governments are uniquely placed to understand the issues affecting their residents and devise concrete solutions tailored to the needs of marginalised people. However, this task presents a number of challenges: assessing *who* is left behind, *how* and *why*, addressing data availability, and ensuring the participation of those left behind. We set these out in a bit more detail below. The final section of the paper offers **recommendations** addressing each of these challenges.

### ***1. Understanding how “Leave No One Behind” applies to cities***

“Leave No one Behind” has, to date, received limited attention in cities’ VLR reports. VLRs have mostly addressed it in conjunction with specific SDGs - notably SDG1 (Poverty), SDG4 (Education), SDG5 (Gender equality), and/or SDG10 (Inequality). Whilst the principle does indeed overlap with these goals, its transformative power goes beyond them. “Leave No One Behind” applies across *all* goals and targets, inviting cities to critically identify, assess and address disadvantage and marginalisation.

In order to translate the principle to the local level, cities must first identify *who* is left behind in their municipality, *how*, and *why*. This is not as straightforward as it seems. The 2030 Agenda specifies that review should disaggregate data by ‘income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and *other characteristics relevant in national contexts*’ (UNGA, 2015 - emphasis added), but the available guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews offer little guidance on how to do this and fail to explain how to identify which characteristics are relevant (see section 2). Perhaps as a consequence of this, most cities do not

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*Marginalisation is both a condition and a process which prevents individuals from gaining access (societal and spatial) to resources and fully participating in social life (Gurung and Kollmair, 2005). Its nature and degree are shaped by a range of economic, political, social, technological and geographical factors. As such, marginalisation and ‘left behind groups’ may vary depending on the local (as well as the national) context.*

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move beyond these standard groupings in identifying ‘left behind’ groups in VLRs. In fact, the majority of VLRs surveyed do not address all of the characteristics highlighted above, instead focusing on a selected few to showcase their commitment to “Leaving No One Behind”.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, difficulties in identifying who is ‘left behind’ in the city-context may be linked to the invisibility of some groups. While some marginalised and disadvantaged groups are visible, others systematically fall under the radar. The latter may be groups that rarely feature in public and media discourses and/or are not represented by local civil society organisations. The invisibility of these ‘left behind’ groups feeds into their marginalisation, and poses significant challenges to cities’ fulfilment of the principle in their VLRs.

## II. ***Collecting data on ‘left behind’ groups***

Data availability for reviewing progress on the SDGs has proved challenging even at the national level. Data that has been disaggregated to the local level can be even more difficult to obtain. This problem is further compounded when the boundaries for data are not consistent across different sources, or do not match the geographical area required (see e.g. Bristol’s VLR - Fox and Macleod, 2019). Some cities have their own data sources, which can usefully supplement or replace national sources. London, for example, has its own social integration dashboard of 18 indicators that address aspects of inequality, using data in part supplied by its regular polling of citizens.<sup>3</sup> However, acquiring this data requires a significant investment of resources that might only be available to relatively well-off cities.

There are considerable additional challenges for cities when engaging with the SDGs’ focus on ‘left behind’ groups. Firstly, disaggregating many national datasets both geographically and by other characteristics may require a level of technical expertise that is not readily available to many cities. Secondly, there may simply be limited availability of data on individual dimensions of marginalisation and disadvantage, such as gender or ethnicity. Indeed, SDG target 17.18 explicitly recognises this issue, in calling for capacity-building to enable countries to disaggregate data. This issue becomes rapidly more complex when multiple disadvantages are considered, as this requires data to be disaggregated in several dimensions; for example, city-level *and* by gender *and* by ethnicity, or city-level *and* by housing situation *and* by migrant status. Furthermore, there may be sub-populations whose experiences are not captured by the level of disaggregation available. For example, in the UK standard ethnicity classifications, ‘Gypsy and Irish traveller’ is a subsection of ‘White’ ethnicity; thus, the specific challenges faced by gypsies and travellers may be missing from official data when the coarser ethnicity groupings are used. In addition, even when the data granularity is such that there is the ability to disaggregate by multiple characteristics, the numbers of individuals in particular sub-categories may be very low. This can bring additional issues such as the numbers being too low for statistically meaningful interpretation, and the risk of individuals being identifiable.<sup>4</sup> While those who endure multiple and intersecting disadvantages are likely to be the furthest left behind, at the same time the more systematic, extensive, and intersecting the consideration of marginalisation, the more difficult it will be to address this through available data.

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<sup>2</sup> Buenos Aires, for example, has committed to “Leaving No One Behind” by protecting the diversity of its inhabitants and reducing inequality and discrimination on the basis of gender, sexual identity, religion and origin. The City has devised a particularly ambitious agenda for achieving gender equality that focuses on improving the physical, economic, and decision-making dimensions of women’s autonomy.

<sup>3</sup> See [Social Integration Headline Measures - London Datastore](#), and [GLA Poll Results 2021 - London Datastore](#)

<sup>4</sup> For a helpful discussion of confidentiality issues in this context, see ‘Policy on protecting confidentiality in tables of birth and death statistics’ from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) in the UK, available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/methodologytopicsandstatisticalconcepts/disclosurecontrol/policyonprotectingconfidentialityintablesofbirthanddeathstatistics>

### **III. Ensuring that marginalised groups are meaningfully involved in VLR processes**

Participation and voice are crucial elements of the 2030 Agenda. They are highlighted as an essential principle of the follow up and review process, and feature in several SDG indicators and targets (UNGA, 2015). Most notably, SDG target 16.7 aims to ‘ensure responsive, inclusive and representative decision-making at all levels’; and SDG 17.17 aims to ‘encourage and support public, public-private and civil society partnerships’. Citizen participation strengthens democracy by providing local and national governments with a better basis for policy-making, enhancing governments’ legitimacy, and improving transparency and accountability (OECD, 2001). Recognising this, several local governments have introduced mechanisms to actively engage citizens in the VLR process. The city of La Paz in Bolivia, for example, has included youth and citizen oversight representatives in the planning, design, implementation, and evaluation phases of its SDG localisation strategy (GAMLP, 2018). Other initiatives have included public consultations, debates, roundtables and workshops with citizens and civil society organisations (CSOs).

The establishment of these mechanisms signal cities’ commitment to ensuring citizen participation in the VLR process. However, they can fail to include marginalised and disadvantaged sections of society. Exclusion may be due to the issues of invisibility and representation discussed above. Invisible groups and/or groups that are not represented by CSOs are in fact the hardest to reach and involve in formal local government initiatives. Their exclusion from VLRs prevents cities from fully achieving the “Leave No One Behind” pledge, which demands the meaningful participation of ‘left behind’ groups in review and follow-up processes ‘for ensuring accountability, recourse and remedies to all’ (UN, 2019b).

## **(2) ‘Leave No One Behind’ in current guidelines for VLRs**

One standard form of support for cities in addressing the challenges described above are the guidelines and/or handbooks prepared by networks, individual cities, and ‘thought-leading’ organisations. A number of sets of guidelines have been produced both on SDG implementation for cities and more specifically on conducting VLRs. They range from those based on the experience of individual cities and towns to those produced by international bodies. However, they vary considerably in their consideration of “Leave No One Behind” with some giving it only cursory attention. Interestingly, some of the guidelines developed out of the experiences of individual cities in producing a VLR are stronger in their focus than those produced by international bodies.

For example, a Bristol-based partnership has produced a handbook for UK cities on producing a VLR, based on the city of Bristol’s experience of doing so (see Fox and MacLeod, 2019). This lists “Leaving No one Behind” as one of the *reasons* for undertaking a VLR, and discusses issues of data disaggregation at length. The Institute for Global Studies (IGES) has developed a website dedicated to VLRs.<sup>5</sup> They have also produced a set of guidelines, based on the experiences of Shimokawa - a town in northern Japan - in producing a VLR (IGES, 2018). These guidelines assert the need to include marginalised groups in stakeholder participation, in developing the SDG vision and state that a VLR should discuss how “Leave No One Behind” has been addressed.

Meanwhile, the European Commission guidelines on VLRs focus particularly on indicators for the Goals. Though some indicators do address aspects of vulnerability and marginalisation, and “Leaving No One Behind” is recognised as a “benefit” for a city in producing a VLR, the guidelines do not engage with this

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.iges.or.jp/en/projects/vlr>

principle in greater detail (see Siragusa et al, 2020). The OECD has produced a report on a territorial approach to the SDGs which includes a checklist for territorial implementation (rather than for a VLR specifically); the report refers to the SDGs as providing the ambition and framework for policies ‘striving to leave no one behind’, but again does not translate that into components of the checklist (see OECD, 2020).

Finally, the VLR guidelines from UN DESA are of particular importance as UN DESA provides the secretariat for global SDG review structures (see UNDESA, 2020). Their guidelines are currently quite brief - 8 pages - and while these do assert the importance of “Leave No One Behind” and give it prominence, it is not presented as fundamental to the SDGs to the extent it is, say, in the 2016 Global Sustainable Development Report (see UN, 2016), nor are its links to data disaggregation and participation in VLR processes fully explored.

Overall, then, the lack of focus on “Leave No One Behind” in many city VLRs is reflected in the guidelines and handbooks that have arisen alongside the growth of the VLR movement, with the principle not yet fully recognised or embedded in the guidance surrounding them. Without spurring a higher level of ambition, there can be little expectation of change in city practice in the future. Guidelines are an important resource for cities producing VLRs, as many will likely lack specialist expertise in the 2030 Agenda and “Leave No One Behind”: if the guidelines do not make this principle central, then neither will the VLRs. And VLRs may in turn drive implementation priorities. A superficial approach to “Leave No One Behind” in VLRs can mean that the most marginalised groups are not identified, and hence are not recognised in, or supported by, city policy and practices.

## Conclusion

Cities have been variable in addressing “Leave No one Behind” in their VLRs. This may be partly due to a lack of guidelines supporting the localisation of this principle. “Leave No One Behind” is also a challenging principle that involves spotlighting disadvantage. Tensions naturally arise between the desire to produce a VLR that showcases a city’s progress in addressing the SDGs and commitment, and the need to use the VLR to articulate clearly where further work needs to be done. In order to fully realise the transformative potential of the SDGs, though, the “Leave No One Behind” principle needs to be recognised as integral to both implementation and review of the SDGs. If the needs of those left behind are not addressed, then interventions designed to deliver the SDGs could ignore – and might even exacerbate - their disadvantage.

This paper, then, has suggested a significant gap in guidance and practice around “Leave No One Behind” in VLRs. The **final section** of the paper is a set of recommendations that offer first steps in responding to these challenges.

## Recommendations

### 1. Identify 'left behind' groups in the city-context, including the most left behind, by:

- a. *Mapping disadvantaged groups and collaborating with local CSOs* - In order to address "Leave No One Behind", local governments should identify *who* is left behind at the local level, *how* and *why*. An exploration of what local organisations exist to support marginalised groups is a good first step towards mapping 'left behind groups' in this context. Furthermore, consultation and cooperation with CSOs will allow local governments to gain a deeper understanding of the nature and causes of marginalisation in their cities.
- b. *Accounting for multiple and intersecting disadvantages* - In all societies, those who experience multiple and intersecting disadvantages tend to be the furthest left behind. Any city-level response to "Leave No One Behind" should therefore recognise the complex and intersectional nature of disadvantage. This becomes the basis for implementing measures that recognise reinforcing socio-economic, political, cultural and structural causes of marginalisation and disadvantage.
- c. *Proactively identifying less visible 'left behind' groups* - The furthest left behind can be hard-to-reach populations and/or groups that are not represented by local CSOs. In deciding what groups to include in their VLRs, cities must refrain from cherry-picking those that are easiest to support and engage with, and instead seek out the *most* disadvantaged sections of society. Thus, local governments should take proactive steps to identify 'left behind' people that may not feature in political and public discourses and may not be covered in routine data on individual SDG targets and indicators. CSOs can help with this: while not representing them, they may be able to provide useful information on these groups and the challenges of approaching them. Similarly, local universities carrying out research on marginalised populations can support efforts to identify and include the 'furthest left behind' in VLRs.

### 2. Review and extend local data by:

- a. *Identifying data gaps and highlighting priorities for next steps* - a lack of disaggregated data capturing the experience of left behind groups can constrain local governments' activities. In order to ensure that the "Leave No One Behind" commitment is met, cities should identify gaps in available statistics and decide what further data should be collected in the future, how this might be done, and what disaggregation could and should be prioritised.
- b. *Complement existing statistics with qualitative data* – Statistics can provide excellent information about the overall challenges marginalised groups are facing. However, to better understand people's lived experiences of marginalisation, we recommend that local governments access more narrative, qualitative data as well. This, in turn, would help them identify how policy and practice interventions can best target 'left behind' groups, and potentially guide the development of additional statistical indicators.
- c. *Working with local CSOs and universities* – CSOs and universities are well placed to assist with the collection of data on 'left behind' groups. Local CSOs have direct access to marginalised communities; having already established a relationship of trust with disadvantaged groups, they can contribute important qualitative insights to fill the gaps left by available statistics. Local universities can contribute both qualitative and quantitative data by (i) carrying out qualitative research with groups that are not represented by CSOs; and (ii) identifying appropriate local indicators and relevant data sources for such indicators.

### **3. Ensure participation of 'left behind' groups**

Local governments should ensure that 'left behind' groups are meaningfully involved in the planning, implementation, and follow-up phases of the VLR process. This can be achieved through the help of local CSOs working with marginalised communities and the introduction and strengthening of participatory mechanisms that facilitate direct citizen engagement. Particular attention should be paid to the 'furthest left behind': local governments should make every effort to understand and overcome the obstacles that have so far prevented them from having their voices heard. They should place special emphasis on the opinions and views of the most marginalised groups, and ensure that they can influence the decisions that affect their lives. Finally, local governments should give marginalised groups the opportunity to provide feedback on their policies.



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