Provocation Piece | October 2025

Localising the Sustainable Development Goals, Beyond Reporting

Which interventions improve lives? Who benefits from social grants, energy projects, or public transport improvements? If you're not measuring it, you can't manage it.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) localisation risks being framed as translation – the adjustment of global indicators to national and sub-national contexts. But if used well, SDG reporting is about ownership: a framework to see local spaces clearly, collectively, and in real time. For municipalities, the SDGs and New Urban Agenda (NUA) provide a holistic lens to understand municipalities and cities, track what works, and clarify responsibilities.

A recurring challenge raised in the session was that while everyone collects data (communities, departments, civil society, business), most of it moves in parallel lines. Municipalities struggle to access data, communities don't always trust it, and national systems rarely feed it back down in usable forms. Localising the SDGs should therefore focus on joining up existing data to generate insight for faster, more coordinated action.

> **Globally, it is estimated that over 65% of the SDG targets are dependent on local government actions (UNDP, 2024). SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) is then a "gateway" SDG and localising it helps advance several others.**

From reporting to responsiveness

Local governments are not always able to effectively reflect the extent of their work because data systems tend to tell stories upward, not outward. SDG reporting offers a way to change that, by measuring what's working locally, making results visible, and rebuilding trust through transparency.

By framing local spaces holistically, SDG reporting makes clear that sustainable development is shared work. Municipalities lead, but they cannot deliver alone.

> *"Municipalities often struggle to show the full scope of their work. Even when good things are happening, it's not always easy to make that visible. And municipalities are also blamed for issues manifesting in local spaces that fall outside of their mandate."*
>
> – Session Participant (Municipal Planner)

Used strategically, SDG and NUA indicators can help municipalities:

- Measure tangible, evidence-based impacts.
- Break down silos and align departments and stakeholders.
- Clarify roles and responsibilities across spheres.
- Link indicators to programmes like indigent support and social services to show results.
- Demonstrate contribution towards broader frameworks such as the NDP and MTDP.

Localisation through indicators

As part of South Africa's *New Urban Agenda: Country Progress Report (2026)*, the South African Cities Network (SACN) uses the available data to report on NUA indicators, to help cities track progress, guide interventions, and align with national and local priorities.

Examples include:

- Access to reliable public transport.
- Proportion of informal settlements with essential services.
- Green space per capita.
- Renewable energy generation capacity.

In eThekwini, localisation meant unpacking indicators like "number of social grants" into locally relevant categories such as child support, care dependency, and older persons, revealing who's being reached and who's falling through.

The 2024 Voluntary National Review (VNR) and emerging Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) encourage data to serve planning and accountability. Combining official statistics, citizen-generated data, and private sector inputs enables municipalities to identify challenges such as informal livelihoods, food insecurity, or energy transitions, and detect gaps between national policy and local reality.

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Voluntary Local Reviews as mirrors

Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) are local government-led assessments of SDG progress, translating global targets into local actions and insights for planning and accountability. The South African Local Government Association (SALGA) supports municipalities in developing their VLRs. To date, 14 Cities have been supported, 10 submitted VLRs, and SALGA has submitted a Voluntary Subnational Review (VSR). SALGA's target is to support South Africa in submitting 30 VLRs in 2026, promoting SDG 11 as a lever for achieving multiple interconnected goals, and systemic development.

Buffalo City and eThekwini participants involved in their metros' VLRs noted that applying an SDG lens exposed siloed reporting that hid linkages between line departments' interventions: waste initiatives tied to job creation, indigent support overlaps with urban food gardens and circular economies. SDG alignment, when used well, becomes a coordination mechanism rather than a compliance exercise.

VLRs are often treated as mini–Voluntary National Reviews: dense reports for global audiences. But their real value lies closer to home. A well-designed VLR gives a city a mirror - a structured reflection of performance and priorities, asking: *What's working? What's missing? Who's being left out?*

Take Mpumalanga's energy transition as an example - tracking the local effects of Eskom's coal plant closures on livelihoods and energy access (SDGs 7 & 13) can help inform context-sensitive planning.

The next step could be to make VLRs *living*. Shared, dynamic spaces where departments and communities can see themselves in the same data story.

Citizen–generated data: not parallel, but plural

Citizen Data refers to data originating from initiatives in which citizens are engaged at various stages of the data value chain; from collection to analysis to use. It reminds us that not all evidence comes from official systems.

South Africa's People's Report on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, coordinated by African Monitor, offers an independent civil society view of progress on the 2030 Agenda, surfacing realities that national systems often miss around themes such as care work, climate displacement, and women-led enterprises.

Integrating such data into VLRs gives texture and legitimacy to local planning. In eThekwini, for example, residents helped map informal food distribution networks, aligning municipal and NGO initiatives with SDG 2 (Zero Hunger).

Citizen-generated data can:

- Reveal issues invisible to municipal departments.
- Create opportunities for communities to co-produce solutions.
- Complement official and private data for a more grounded picture of urban realities.

The engagement gap

Another recurring session theme was that Municipalities don't only need better data, but better conversations. Engagements between line departments, between spheres of government, and with ward councillors and communities remain inefficient, often duplicative, and disconnected from data.

"If departments working in the same areas can't share plans or datasets, how do we expect citizens to engage meaningfully?"

– Session Participant (Municipal Planner)

The private sector is already localising SDGs

The private sector is already advancing various SDGs, often without this being recognised in local government reporting or planning processes. Companies represent investments (in jobs, infrastructure like water access, roads, and electricity) that directly support municipal IDP priorities and SDG targets, such as those related to decent work (SDG 8) and sustainable infrastructure (SDG 9).

Combining private sector data and initiatives with municipal SDG reporting can reveal hidden contributions, strengthen partnerships, and build a fuller, evidence-based picture of progress.

Key takeaways for municipalities

1. **SDG and NUA indicators are tools, not reports:** Use them to inform planning; prioritise interventions; coordinate action; and measure progress and performance.

2. **VLRs make impact visible:** Link municipal actions to SDG progress and accountability.

3. **Integration matters:** SDG frameworks show where local and national programmes intersect, and where responsibilities lie.

4. **Citizen data amplifies inclusion:** Participatory mapping and surveys ground goals in lived realities.

5. **Recognise corporate and civil society investments:** Mapping these adds efficiency and scale to municipal action.

6. **Make VLRs living reflections:** Connect citizen data, municipal planning, and private sector inputs for a whole-city view.

Municipalities are uniquely positioned to measure progress on the ground, connecting citizens, departments, and partners. The challenge is to identify practical indicators that can inform decisions and action.

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Session Links

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SDG Localisation and the Voluntary Local Reviews 〉

Localising the New Urban Agenda: South Africa Discussion Document 2018 〉

Progress Report on Implementation of the New Urban Agenda 2022 〉

Toolkit for a People's Scorecard: Independent Civil Society Assessment of National Delivery of the 2030 Agenda (2025 Ed.) 〉

The People's Report on the 2030 Agenda 〉

eThekwini's Sustainable Development Goals 〉

eThekwini SDG comic book: Sinethemba and the 17 Symbols 〉

Voluntary Subnational Review (VSR) 〉

Videos

SDGs at a Glance 〉

eThekwini: Community Gardens Project 〉

eThekwini: Warick Waste Project 〉

eThekwini: Sisonke Garden Project 〉

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📅 Tuesday 4 November 2025

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