

INSIGHT

Why Localizing SDGs Is Critical in a Post-COVID World



Data collection and monitoring are essential to scale up SDG localization in recovery efforts. Photo credit: ADB.

Scaling up SDG localization requires system-wide alignment, enhanced local governance, and multi-stakeholder and partnership collaboration.

Published: 10 November 2020

Introduction

Asia and the Pacific has reached a pivotal point in its implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Progress on the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was already deemed insufficient prior to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) crisis, and the pandemic's wide-ranging effects have set back gains. COVID-19 has led to increased poverty, hunger, and inequality, and slowed down economic growth considerably.

With only a decade left to achieve sustainability, countries must build back better and accelerate the implementation of the SDGs.

One way to fast-track progress is to mobilize subnational or local governments to pursue the sustainable goals at their level. SDG localization has been increasingly recognized as a strong driver of the 2030 Agenda.

The Need to Localize SDGs

Many of the Agenda's 169 targets rely on the contributions and responsibilities of subnational governments. As basic service providers in health, education, housing, food systems, and water and sanitation, among others, they play an important role in delivering on the SDGs. While the focus is largely on expenditure assignments, subnational governments also have an important role in local resource mobilization including through efforts, such as mobilizing property tax.

COVID-19 has made it more urgent to localize the SDGs and demonstrated the critical role of subnational governments in immediate crisis response, such as disease containment and emergency relief operations. For example, in Afghanistan, subnational governments are responsible for food and in-kind relief distribution and for promoting water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) practices to prevent the spread of COVID-19. In the Republic of Korea, local governments played an important role in monitoring the transmission of the disease and keeping the public up to date. Subnational governments are also going to be essential in managing the long-term social and economic impacts of the crisis and enabling a sustainable response to and recovery from COVID-19. Ongoing efforts to localize the SDGs are therefore more relevant now than ever.

In recent years, a growing number of countries in Asia and the Pacific have embarked on the path of localizing the SDGs. Such efforts have gained prominence in the context of the Voluntary National Review (VNR) process, which measures country progress on the SDGs. Reporting to date indicates how countries increasingly engage subnational governments in SDG institutional mechanisms, facilitate consultation processes to strengthen localization, and develop local data and monitoring approaches. Voluntary Local and Subnational Reviews were initiated in a growing number of countries, such as in Suwon, Republic of Korea; Shimokawa, Toyama, Hamamatsu, and Kitsakyusho in Japan; Taipei and New Taipei in Taipei, China; Cauayan City in the Philippines; and Deqing in the People's Republic of China. These reviews are important vehicles for cities and communities to adapt the SDGs. At the same time, they are a valuable source of feedback, information, and data for the VNR processes. How to best feed local and subnational reviews into the VNRs is still open to debate.

Barriers to Localization

Although headway is being made, there are considerable barriers to effectively localize the SDGs. Common challenges include:

- local capacity and financial resource shortages;
- a lack of policy coherence and coordination among national and local efforts;
- limited awareness of the SDGs at the subnational level; and
- challenges related to the availability of data and capacities to perform subnational monitoring.

Lifting these barriers has become more urgent with COVID-19 and requires a fresh look at how to scale up SDG localization.

Strengthening Localization as a Response to COVID-19

Which aspects should be considered in strengthening SDG localization as part of our crisis response?

One of the core lessons that COVID-19 has exposed is the need for greater coordination across government and for multi-level governance approaches. Given the pandemic's multi-dimensional impacts, a core requirement of an effective response is to ensure integrated and systemic approaches. The 2030 Agenda builds on the interdependencies among multiple sectors and levels of government to enable transformative change. In order to align recovery efforts with the 2030 Agenda, the Asian Development Bank's (ADB) regional approach to achieve the SDGs stresses among others the need for system-wide alignment, enhanced local governance as well as multi-stakeholder and partnership collaboration in moving forward.

First, to enable system-alignment through multi-level governance, decentralization and enabling environments that foster localization are needed. These can be achieved by including local institutions in national SDG-related policy and review processes; ensuring the mandates and capacities of subnational governments are in place; and tailoring local planning and budgeting systems. Local SDG data collection and monitoring are essential to scale up SDG localization in recovery efforts. These help facilitate the bottom-up and top-down approaches needed for realizing the true potential of localizing the SDGs.

Second, enhancing local governance requires investments in human, financial, technical, and other resources. As mentioned, local governance plays a critical role in responding to COVID-19 as well as in delivering on the SDGs. Subnational governments often lack the capacity to take on these responsibilities. Investments in capacities and financing modalities are essential and should allow flexibility for local responsibilities in service delivery while accommodating national priorities.

Third, the transformative aspirations of the 2030 Agenda rely to a great extent on the inclusion, contribution, and collaboration of a full range of cross-sector stakeholders, such as large businesses and small and medium-sized enterprises, the scientific community, non-profit and volunteer groups, as well as civil society organizations. All levels of government must work closely with relevant stakeholders to bring about the large-scale systemic change needed. Multi-stakeholder collaboration and partnerships are critical for the identification and management of COVID-containment strategies and for implementation and resource mobilization for the broader objective of achieving the SDGs.

Resources

Asian Development Bank (ADB). 2020. [Decentralization, Local Governance, and Localizing SDGs](#). Course.



Pytrik Dieuwke Oosterhof

Sustainable Development Consultant, O-Land Consulting

Ms. Oosterhof is an accomplished sustainable development expert with nearly 20 years of experience in managing policy and program efforts at UNHQ, the European Commission, and the IFRC. In 2019, she established O-Land Consulting, which supports governments, organizations, and businesses in applying sustainable development approaches, including through SDG localization.



Asian Development Bank (ADB)

The Asian Development Bank is committed to achieving a prosperous, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable Asia and the Pacific, while sustaining its efforts to eradicate extreme poverty. Established in 1966, it is owned by 68 members—49 from the region.

Its main instruments for helping its developing member countries are policy dialogue, loans, equity investments, guarantees, grants, and technical assistance.

Follow Asian Development Bank (ADB) on

