

High-Level Political Forum 2017
Presentation Belgium's Voluntary National Review

by Alexander De Croo

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Development Cooperation

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the context of the Agenda 2030, we all are developing countries and we all can learn from each other. That is why it is fitting for Belgium to share this **National Voluntary Review panel with Peru and Benin.**

These last years, we have worked intensively with Peru and Benin in the context of our international development policies. And both countries have already build up valuable experience in national reporting on globally set development agendas. It really is my pleasure to share this stage with them.

Presenting our National Voluntary Review here today is an exercise that makes me proud, but also humble.

Proud, because two years ago, at the occasion of the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals, our Prime Minister pledged that Belgium would spare no effort in working towards realizing the SDGs. Our Voluntary National Review proves that we are doing precisely that.

We really wanted to be in the **first group of countries** presenting their Voluntary National Review to show this commitment to the Agenda 2030.

And indeed, this vast report brings together a wealth of information on initiatives contributing to the SDGs, both within our Belgian borders as

abroad. It really shows that all levels of government in Belgium are fully engaged.

As you can imagine, bringing all initiatives together in one report has been quite an effort. The exercise was coordinated by a political steering committee chaired by the Prime Minister ensuring a much-needed high-level political push.

There was active involvement of representatives from all levels of government in Belgium. I would like to thank all my colleagues who have engaged in this process.

Let me share some first findings:

- The Belgian Review shows that **all 17 SDGs**, as well as a large majority of their corresponding 169 targets, are **currently being addressed** in one way or another.
- The findings also underscore Belgium's commitment to implement the **SDGs as a whole**, taking on board **key principles** such as **leaving no-one behind, adopting a rights-based approach** and **mainstreaming gender** throughout the SDGs.
- We are focusing on **all SDGs**, working through **overarching strategies and initiatives** to address interlinkages and to enhance cooperation within and between the various governments.
- The Belgian Review also indicates that we have managed to **mobilize our statistical community** to work on the establishment of a Belgian SDG-indicator framework.

Our statistical community selected **two indicators per SDG**, which they found most relevant, measurable and available, and developed the trends for those 34 in a statistical annex to the report.

The indicators.be website lists some 70 more indicators, while the job of internalizing the global indicators into the Belgian context is still ongoing.

- It is also worth noting that **civil society at large**, made an **invaluable contribution** to our Voluntary National Review. Civil society issued a number of coordinated advisory opinions on the draft review and they were also invited to report their own Agenda 2030 implementation initiatives. This approach concurs with the role of civil society as both a watchdog and a partner in realizing the Agenda 2030.
- And of course, also the **different Parliaments** are mainstreaming the SDGs into their activities. The federal parliament, for instance, was consulted on the National Review a few weeks ago.

But before diving into some of the specifics of our report, I'd like to show you a short video clip that will offer a flavor of the initiatives covered in our report. As you will notice, the clip focuses on the seven SDGs that were central to last week's HLPF.

(video clip – ca. 3')

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to take this opportunity to briefly go into some specific actions and initiatives, particularly dear to me.

- First, these last two years, pushed by the SDGs, we have initiated a **far-reaching overhaul in Belgian international development policies.**

We have left behind strictly sectoral and thematically siloed approaches.

Instead, we have tapped into the potential of **enhanced resource mobilization**, for instance through innovative financing vehicles such as impact bonds.

We are increasingly focusing on **sustainable and inclusive economic growth**, on mainstreaming **digital for development** and on bringing **the private sector on board** for further leverage.

Yet at the same time, like many other traditional donor countries, we are still figuring out how to consistently integrate the DNA of the SDGs into our work, from the measurement of results and our dialogue with partner organizations and countries to our planning and legislative processes.

While adopting a **rights-based approach** across the board in order to leave no-one behind, we also want to **reach the furthest behind countries first**, and that is why we committed to spend at least half of our ODA to least developed countries and fragile states by 2019.

- Second, Belgium also adopted a **National Sustainable Development Strategy**. An umbrella document indicating how the various authorities in Belgium should cooperate, linking their own already updated strategies in a coherent matter.

This national strategy also established a **common reporting mechanism**, twice per government term to parliament and civil society – an approach that will be a key building block for our future Voluntary National Reviews.

- Third, we are giving the **notion of partnership a central place in our Belgian efforts**. The Addis Ababa Action Agenda’s main lesson was that we needed to move beyond business as usual and build new strategic partnerships, for instance with the private sector, to mobilize the necessary funds for this trillion-dollar agenda.

That is why Belgium has set up a **Belgian SDG Charter for International Development**. More than a hundred companies and organizations have already signed up to it, committing themselves to work together to bring the SDGs to life.

Another example is our partnership with the **Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation** in the fight against sleeping sickness, one of the neglected tropical diseases referred to in SDG3.

But also in purely **for-profit ventures**, it is possible to mobilize actors beyond the traditional ones while simultaneously serving developmental and humanitarian purposes.

- In line with SDG16, **Belgium is tying up its international development efforts with defense and diplomacy**. In places where all our actors are present, such as the Sahel region, we are connecting our external policy instruments because we all know peace, security, strong institutions and development are mutually dependent.

We are actively involved in UN peace operations, most recently by offering the Force Commander, officers and air transport for MINUSMA in Mali. At the same time, we are also supporting the protection of civilians in conflict areas, in particular women and children.

Belgium is also increasingly focusing on **conflict prevention and mediation** as essential elements of contemporary conflict management. In this regard, we organized an international conference on mediation earlier this year.

Ranking 9th globally in terms of press freedom and having repeatedly pledged to uphold individual fundamental rights in the roll-out of its national counter-terror measures, Belgium is a **staunch supporter of respect for human rights and of the fight against impunity.**

And, for that matter, linking peace and security, sustainable development and human rights protection also means building bridges between the three pillars of the UN.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Drafting this Voluntary National Review has also been a **sobering exercise** – an exercise that clearly indicates where we have to invest more. The lessons in this regard are fourfold.

1. First, we need to do more **to incorporate the SDGs and targets into all our internal and external action frameworks.**

Our National Review has indicated **scale and size** seem to matter in that respect. It seems that bigger entities in our federal system have been able to cope with SDG integration in a more systemic manner.

Yet, on the other hand, **local government players** – municipalities, provinces and their associations – are acting as a **strong bottom-up force**, instructing themselves and others on how to make a difference.

It will now be important to ensure that these two approaches peacefully coexist together and reinforce each other.

2. Secondly, our National Review has allowed to identify a number of **areas where further action is needed**.

Our consultations with civil society have indicated additional attention is needed, across the board, from all relevant policy-makers, for issues such as **lifelong learning, water and air quality, energy intensity and renewable energy, greenhouse gas emissions, people at risk of poverty and the mobilization of the necessary means of implementation**.

This corresponds with findings of the OECD, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network and the Bertelsmann Foundation. Let me be very straightforward: we have heard these messages loud and clear, and we will look into ways to address them.

3. Thirdly, we need to continue working on **advocacy and awareness raising**.

If we want to SDGs to transform our world, we have to build platform. Last week, I participated in the **Global Citizen Festival** in Hamburg in the sidelines of the G20 where a crowd of 14.000 enthusiasts gathered to listen to music but also to pledge and commit to the SDGs. We need to have more of this outreach moments.

4. And finally, we need to further develop our **mechanism for follow-up and review and impact assessment**.

At this stage, we are not yet able to meticulously map all gaps in the SDG implementation, at all levels of our federal system. Yet, I am convinced that this report will help us in doing so.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Belgium's first Voluntary National Review is a starting point, not an end. It provides us with a statistical baseline, and with a benchmark to guide further action.

Our first Review will also improve our collaboration with civil society, and it will strengthen accountability towards our parliaments, civil society and the Belgian public at large.

Of course, we are proud that the SDG Index presented last week by the *Bertelsmann Foundation* and the *Sustainable Development Solutions Network* has ranked Belgium 12th worldwide. This is a good result indeed, yet a lot needs to be done.

Belgium is fully committed to the hard work that lies ahead, and we will approach this in a true spirit of partnership.

It is in the same spirit of partnership, that I now would like to give the floor to David Leysens.

David is the Executive Officer of *The Shift*, the umbrella organization that set up Belgium's SDG Charter on International Development uniting the private sector, civil society and the public sector around the SDGs.

David speaks for the civil society and will comment upon the three National Reviews presented here this morning.