



# VNR LABS

## HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM

# Resilience, Recovery, Hope

Summaries of 2021 VNR Labs at the High-Level Political Forum

6-16 July 2021



**United Nations**

Department of  
Economic and  
Social Affairs



## Introduction

For the fourth year, a series of VNR Labs, short informal discussions on key aspects of the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), were convened on the margins of the 2021 High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). Since 2018, the VNR Labs have provided an informal platform for experience sharing and reflection on the Voluntary National Reviews.

As always, the Labs were held under the Chatham House rule and were organized by UN DESA Divisions, United Nations entities and for the first year, also bilateral partners. They were held throughout the duration of the HLPF from 6 to 16 July 2021 and were open to countries, the United Nations system, other organizations and representatives of Major Groups and other Stakeholders.

In view of the current global situation, the theme chosen for the 2021 VNR Labs was “Resilience, Recovery, Hope.” Under this broad theme, representatives from countries, the UN system and Major Groups and other stakeholders discussed diverse cross-cutting themes, including policy coherence, social inclusion and leaving no one behind, data and statistics, resource mobilization and partnerships, amongst others. In addition, VNR Labs 13, 16 and 17 provided three countries, Japan, Tunisia, and Uruguay, each presenting their VNRs in 2021, with the opportunity to expand on the review experience and share lessons learned on the national process with peers.

The informal summaries of the Labs have been prepared by the organizers.

For detailed concept notes and further information on individual Labs, please refer to the home page of the 2021 VNR Labs from the link below.

<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/2021#labs>

## The VNR as a Town Hall: Best Practices In Engaging All Stakeholders

The first VNR Lab of the 2021 HLPF highlighted examples of successful collaboration among countries and stakeholders in support of measuring SDG implementation and progress through Voluntary National Reviews, as well as increasing awareness on the ground as the world works to build back better for this Decade of Action. As a town hall, this session organized by the United Nations Foundation also provided space for an interactive dialogue among government officials, civil society organizations and networks, as well as a handful of UN officials, outside experts and previous VNR countries.

Many Small Island Developing States (SIDS) encountered greater setbacks in making progress on the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda due to the COVID-19 pandemic which has also intensified existing challenges. Stakeholders stressed a lack of capacity for timely and robust data to monitor related programs and initiatives was a challenge, as well as limited financing to continue ongoing programs. Civil society organizations also reported that though they may have been initially excluded from the VNR process in their countries' first reviews, they were now able to assert their work surrounding the SDGs in the review process at least in part due to the support of their UN country offices.

The importance of including youth and children in the VNR process was also highlighted. Young people desire to be seen not as beneficiaries of government programs but contributors to the development process, and they want to be involved in data collection and reporting. Furthermore, child-centred social accountability is critical to catalysing long-term institutional changes. The involvement of children as key stakeholders in the VNR process builds ownership of the SDGs for young people, promoting leadership and empowering children to keep their government accountable.

Overall, the session highlighted the need for greater synergies between the public, private, and civil sectors, and the importance of open dialogue and stakeholder engagement which creates greater cohesion in the reporting process and achievement of the SDGs. The VNR Lab also stressed that ownership creates change, especially for stakeholder engagement, and that civil society plays an essential part in the entire VNR process including within the report itself, the presentation, and its follow-up.

During the Lab's interactive segment, participants discussed ways to improve stakeholder engagement, and described the obstacles they have faced in engaging governments on the SDGs as civil society representatives. They also listed approaches to make youth feel safe and included in the process, and methods to ensure meaningful participation of children in the VNR and other governmental processes. It was also during the interactive portion of the lab that the private sector shared their experience in the VNR process, admitting that the sector of micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) was the least aware of the 2030 Agenda and, as such, a platform should be built to help MSMEs adopt sustainability roadmaps to improve on the SDGs.

VNR Lab

# 2

6 July 2021  
1-2 pm

## Leveraging interlinkages and enhancing policy coherence in SDG implementation: scope for systemic approaches in reporting

The capacity to leverage synergies and mitigate trade-offs between the SDGs has an impact on goals progress. While policy coherence is at the heart of successful SDG implementation, making strategic decisions that involve multiple interacting targets and interests is a challenging task at national as well as local levels.

How can a systemic approach improve reporting and help accelerate action on the SDGs? What are the opportunities and challenges in adopting a systemic perspective in practice?

In this VNR Lab, participants will be presented with an overview of systemic approaches for dealing with SDG interactions, and a discussion focused on lessons learned from applying them in practice. Panelists will reflect on experiences from applying SDG Synergies in different geographies and stages of implementation, including reporting. The discussion will address how a systemic approach can strengthen capacity for sustainable development, strategic and operational barriers to systemic approaches being applied in practice, capacity needs and how the scientific community can support.

The Lab "Leveraging interlinkages and enhancing policy coherence in SDG implementation: scope for systemic approaches in reporting", was organized by Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) and UNDESA, and brought researchers and policymakers together to reflect on experiences from adopting a systemic approach to the implementation and reporting of the SDGs.

The lab provided participants with an overview of approaches to SDG interactions and the SDG Synergies approach (see [www.sdgsynergies.org](http://www.sdgsynergies.org)). Lessons and experiences from applying them in practice - in different contexts, scale and time in the implementation process - was shared by Sweden, Mongolia and Colombia.

## Inclusive sustainable development: youth, sport and the 2030 Agenda

The Lab was organized by UN DESA's Division for Inclusive Social Development (DISD), which houses the substantive mandate on sport for development and peace at the United Nations. It examined how youth involvement in sport could contribute to promoting inclusive sustainable development and peace. Speakers included government representatives, athletes, para-athletes and youth.

The Lab provided a platform for different stakeholders to share their experiences about youth empowerment and supporting youth empowerment through sport programmes. Speakers highlighted the role that sport can play as an enabler and driver of sustainable development. At the same time, they stressed the importance of ensuring that sport is inclusive of vulnerable groups including women, refugees, individuals with disabilities, and individuals from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. Speakers highlighted a number of ways that sport can empower marginalized individuals, including through its ability to give voice to vulnerable groups; to provide motivation in critical times, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic; to provide work opportunities and economic stability for individuals and their families; to promote gender equality; to combat stereotypes; and to promote values such as team play and individuals' dignity.

At the same time speakers shared relevant barriers they have faced: these included the lack of sport facilities in many areas, gender and cultural stereotypes that preclude individuals and groups from being involved with sport. Finally, speakers recommended central and local governments to ensure that sport facilities are accessible to everyone; to include sport in COVID-19 recovery plans; and to integrate sport and physical activities in national strategies for development. In this process a multilateral approach and partnership between public and private sector were deemed key to ensure no one is left behind.



## How data are guiding sustainable recovery from COVID-19 for achieving the SDGs

Data and statistics are guiding countries' effort in combating COVID-19, saving lives and recovering better. Over the last year, countries have faced unprecedented disruptions in statistical operations and a spike in demand for data to monitor and mitigate the effects of the global pandemic. The Lab focused on country experiences—both successes and challenges—in planning and preparing an evidence-based and data-driven VNR in the time of COVID-19. Representatives from Colombia, Egypt and Zimbabwe, including both national statistics offices and SDG focal points, were invited to share their experiences in short presentations and a panel discussion.

When describing preparation for the VNR's, countries highlighted:

- how the SDGs have been integrated into policy making mechanisms, such as presidential Decrees and public policy tools;
- the need for statistical strengthening through the development of new indicators, improving disaggregation and strengthening subnational statistics;
- the process including developing a background paper with UNDP, the use of national statistical reports for monitoring the SDGs, including on-ground consultations with stakeholders and the establishment of research partnerships;
- the inclusion of governate reports and localization reports;
- ways to enhance evidence-based processes for the next VNR, including improved data sharing and availability and electronic platforms for monitoring and evaluation;
- new data innovations by partnering with World Bank and UNICEF for high-frequency telephone surveys and the development of a COVID-19 monitoring dashboard;
- participatory and inclusive consultations in the form of Voluntary Local Reviews.

Responding to questions on how the national statistical offices adapted to the pandemic and effects of COVID-19 on progress toward the SDGs, countries noted:

- that offices provided weekly updates on the COVID-19 situation, in particular providing necessary information to policy-makers through pulse surveys;
- additional data initiatives included an SDG tracker for the private sector, the use of small area estimation models and incorporating other sources of data and research;
- the use of a social protection and disability app to ensure food security for everyone;
- the use of a survey to measure the impacts of COVID-19 and improve data collection through an app and survey;
- the use of telephone surveys, where the results were publicized;
- the development of a portal to share SDG datasets and a dashboard incorporating the use of new data sources and technologies.

## Migration: Leveraging the potential of migration for achieving the SDGs

On 12 July, the Population Division, together with ILO, IOM and UNDP, organized a VNR Lab on migration. The Lab, held under the auspices of the UN Network on Migration, was convened in close collaboration with the Friends on migration (GoF), a group of New York-based permanent missions. The objective of the VNR Lab was to (a) assess progress made in achieving migration-related targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular those being reviewed by the 2021 HLPF, (b) identify good practices and innovative approaches in addressing migration-related issues in VNRs, and (c) explore the use of VNRs in reviewing the implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM).

At the opening, the role of labour migration and remittances in the national development in many countries was stressed, exacerbated by the devastating impact of COVID-19 on the earnings of migrant families. Speakers called for better use of data disaggregated by migratory status in order to compare outcomes for migrants with those of non-migrants. The results of the VNR Lab would help the Network to better support countries in reviewing the implementation of the GCM ahead of the first International Migration Review Forum, to be held during the first half of 2022. During the first panel, moderated by ILO, four countries (Chad, Ecuador, Guatemala and Iraq) shared their experiences and lessons learnt in including migration in their 2021 VNRs.

During the second panel, moderated by UNDP, four panellists, representing local government, the UN regional economic commissions, academia and civil society, took the floor. The panellists made valuable suggestions regarding the analysis of migration in VNRs and leveraging the VNRs in the context of the GCM. At the conclusion of the Lab the importance of using existing data in reviewing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the GCM was stressed. It was also suggested that UN Network on Migration could play an active role in encouraging governments not only to include migration narratives in their VNRs, but also to analyse quantitative indicators of progress as well as to assist countries in filling data gaps. The Global SDG Indicators Database could serve as a potential source of information to measure progress.

## Inclusiveness and innovation in the VNR process: lessons and best practices from the regions

A VNR Lab was held for the third consecutive year to exchange lessons emanated from the VNR processes in the regions. The theme chosen was “How do inclusive VNRs help accelerate implementation of the 2030 Agenda? Experience from regions”.

The discussion focused on the importance of inclusive VNR processes to ensure broad ownership of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and national development plans and the realization of the principle of leaving no one behind. Participants, who included representatives of VNR countries (first, second and third timers) and civil society, shared experiences from the regions on how inclusiveness helped deliver better results and could contribute to keep the momentum beyond the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). Regional perspectives on innovative approaches explored to respond to restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic were also discussed. How to ensure that VNR processes are inclusive and national SDG plans are broadly owned? Innovative approaches emerging in the regions.

- A VNR country developed a comprehensive repository of stakeholders (private sector, civil society, faith-based institutions, communities, academia, development partners, and the general public). Representatives were grouped into the 5 categories mirroring the 5 “Ps”: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnerships and virtual engagements were accordingly organized, subsequently feeding into the VNR report.
- A representative of civil society recommended targeted outreach and engagement with the youth and grassroots actors as these are valuable assets to support advocacy and disseminate information and data.
- Both representatives of VNR countries and civil society referred to the importance of whole of society approaches and the importance of considering the VNR as a country report, rather than a government report, and of embedding the sense of ownership and partnership in each SDG.
- One representative of civil society noted the importance of ensuring continuous engagement throughout the VNR process and beyond, from early awareness-raising and planning, to policymaking, implementation and monitoring of commitments.
- In contexts of shrinking space for civil society, shadow reports emerged as critical tools to capture civil society and stakeholder voices that merited enhanced integration in the HLPF.
- The engagement of local authorities was recognized by several participants as an increasingly effective tool to enhance ownership and impact of SDG plans.
- A representative of civil society highlighted the experience of including non-governmental organizations and the private sector as full members of the National SDGs Committee tasked with the preparation of VNR report which allowed for enhancing ownership and accountability.
- The creation of online engagement platforms to allow all stakeholders to submit contributions to the VNR report and, more generally, on SDG implementation was highlighted as an inclusive practice in countries with a high internet penetration rate.
- The potential of media engagement was also highlighted. The nomination of media anchors as SDGs Ambassadors had proved an effective way of reaching remote populations in a VNR country.

The Lab also concluded by noting the importance of regional cooperation and of exchanges of good practices in the regions. For programme and further background see:

<http://www.regionalcommissions.org/2021vnr/>



## Getting it right: Key elements of VNR preparation and reporting

This VNR Lab provided insight into what makes a “successful” Voluntary National Review (VNR) process and showcased examples of best practices across reporting. In the CDP analysis of the VNRs, a quantitative overview of the report was shared. Findings indicated a need for national strategies to incorporate a more transformative implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

It was emphasized that processes at a national level should have more space allocated to stakeholder engagement and constructive feedback in the process of VNR preparation. An increased focus on structural changes in reporting is essential across targets, particularly in the context of the principle of Leave No One Behind (LNOB) and assessing the relationship between productive capacity and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Archived videos from earlier sessions of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) were shared with participants to demonstrate practical examples of VNR presentations. Data visualization and clarity in narrative were underscored to best showcase the main messages of the VNR report. Stakeholder involvement was also stressed as being integral to the preparation process. The compilation of archived footage incorporated different national interpretations of implementing the 2030 Agenda and what “getting it right” could entail.

Key components of the VNR process, both nationally and in the HLPF, were assessed in the following panel discussion on good practices from the field. Panelists of this session included an advisor for the Costa Rican Ministry of National Planning and Economic Policy, the Deputy Permanent Representative of Iceland, and a Senior Economist for the Ministry of Finance from Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. Starting the preparation process early was advised by one of the distinguished panelists in order to improve engagement, awareness, and data collection.

The process of VNR preparation can be viewed as a learning experience as well as an opportunity for sharing. Stakeholder engagement and forming partnerships throughout the process was highlighted by all panelists as being key to presenting a solid and substantive report. Ownership and open dialogue were encouraged for VNR-presenting countries to understand the value of other national experiences and to utilize those lessons in the development of their own.

## Enhancing the dialogue between VNRs and VLRs

This VNR Lab highlighted the benefits from enhanced connections between the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) and Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) and showcased practical examples from 2021 VNR countries on such cooperation between different levels of government. It was organized jointly by DESA's Division for Sustainable Development Goals and all five United Nations Regional Commissions.

During the discussions, speakers noted that national governments are increasingly recognizing the critical role of local governments for SDG achievement. While SDG 11 is a driver for overall SDG implementation, local and regional governments can make a significant impact on all 17 goals.

VLR processes can enrich the Voluntary National Reviews in several different ways. For example, a VNR can be a great tool for sharing case studies and best practices from the local level with the global community. Aligning the review processes from the start can promote peer learning between different government levels, and local governments can contribute to the data gathering and analysis for the VNR process. Both levels of review processes are also crucial for openness and accountability.

For the national government, the VNR process can be a moment to engage with frontrunner cities that have already conducted VLRs but also to encourage new communities to start the process. Such concerted efforts can also support localities that don't have the resources to prepare a VLR on their own. VNR-VLR collaboration can ideally ensure continued follow-up that will address the challenges identified in the review processes.

Effective coordination mechanisms can build trust between national and local levels and a trusted coordinator can facilitate an open flow of information. Informal engagement and trust building is crucial for ensuring that everyone can contribute to the review effort. Robust institutions for VNRs and VLRs can also serve as institutions for implementation efforts.

The importance of champion cities cannot be overemphasized. These frontrunner VLR cities can provide positive examples for peer learning and encourage others to conduct VLR processes. At the same time, it will be important to ensure that the VLRs do not become marketing exercises of well-off capitals and large cities.

It was noted that the Regional Commissions are uniquely positioned to address regional specificities and can leverage their regional platforms for peer learning between local governments and also between different levels of government in the review processes. Many Regional Commission work in tandem with other actors such as city networks and NGOs and have great convening power in bringing together different entities for VNR-VLR support.

Regional Forums for sustainable development can serve as an effective venue for knowledge sharing and dialogue between the VNRs and VLRs and for getting the buy-in of governments for these processes. Several Regional Commissions have prepared or are preparing region-specific guidance materials for the VLRs, and many provide technical support to individual local governments.

## SDG advisory bodies and their role in national sustainable development policy cycles

In cooperation with UN DESA, the [German Council for Sustainable Development](#) (Rat für Nachhaltige Entwicklung, RNE) organized a VNR Lab on July 12, 2021. The focus of the event was on the linkage of VNRs with national policy cycles, such as national sustainable development strategies, localization processes and development plans. The debate was centered around their degree of interconnectedness for increased ambition, as well as the role of institutionalized multi-stakeholder advisory bodies in this regard. The VNR Lab addressed the questions of how VNR drafting processes are anchored in national policy frameworks, what kind of policy cycles are in place at national and local level to ensure policy coherence, and what mechanisms exist to ensure a reciprocal relationship between the government and a multi-stakeholder advisory body.

The VNR Lab discussed these issues by way of examples from partners from Benin, Germany, Namibia and Norway. Together with government representatives, speakers from national multi-stakeholder advisory bodies provided insights on how they work in constructive and reciprocal relationships with their governments to deliver on the 2030 Agenda in a cyclical and ambitious manner. The VNR Lab thereby especially emphasized, that trust between such multi-stakeholder advisory bodies and their governments is essential for successful SDG delivery.

The Global Forum for National SDG Advisory Bodies has recently conceptualized this work and its impact in two extensive studies. One study has identified different pathways for establishing and maintaining an SDG multi-stakeholder advisory body at national level, such as a councils or commission. The second study has identified the pieces of the puzzle for similar multi-stakeholder advisory bodies, in order to carve out potential pathways for continuous advice of such bodies to their respective governments. In addition to the country examples, the authors of these recently published Global Forum studies therefore complemented the event by shedding light on the variety of existing multi-stakeholder advisory bodies and their concrete role in the local implementation of the SDGs. In doing so, they especially focused on the role of these bodies as facilitators of consensual and inclusive advice on practical and socially acceptable policy pathways for sustainable development.

these studies are available from the link below:

<https://www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de/en/projects/the-global-forum-for-national-sdg-advisory-bodies/>

VNR Lab

# 10

13 July 2021  
730-9 am

## Investing in children: developing a child-sensitive VNR for an inclusive and sustainable recovery

This VNR Lab was co-organized by the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children and UNICEF. It was attended by nearly 160 participants and focused on how SDG implementation processes, including the VNR, could be made more child-sensitive.

This Lab provided an opportunity for countries to share their experiences on how they made their VNR process child-sensitive despite challenges posed by the pandemic. The Lab shared evidence-based perspectives on how public spending on strengthened social services for children is a sound, long-term investment and a foundation for a sustainable recovery from the pandemic, and is essential for accelerated progress towards implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

The programme was organized in three sections. It began with a framing of the discussion by the Executive Director of UNICEF, and testimony from two child and youth advocates. The Special Representative on Violence against Children then facilitated a section with presentations by countries on their progress, good practices, challenges, and lessons learned in implementing the 2030 Agenda. The final section was a presentation by the World Bank on how investment in children is key to sustainable economic development and crucial to an inclusive recovery from COVID-19.

The pandemic threatens to reverse hard-won progress on children's wellbeing. Speakers noted that there is a need to see spending on integrated social services and inclusive social protection as essential for an inclusive and sustainable recovery. It was stressed that public expenditure on enhanced social services for children and their protection from violence needs to be recognized as an investment in sustainable development. This transformation calls for a whole-of-government approach involving not only those working in social services but also involve planning and finance ministries, while taking a long-term perspective. Speakers also echoed the importance of meaningful and active participation of children and young people in the implementation of Agenda 2030 and its monitoring and review processes such as the High-level Political Forum and preparing and presenting the VNR.

## Anchoring the 2030 Agenda in national development plans and strategies

This Lab reviewed how VNR countries are progressively integrating the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs into national development plans and strategies. Some 80 participants heard about Ecuador's measures to integrate the SDGs through laws and guidelines, the evolution of the [German Sustainable Development Strategy](#) and how it informed the country's 2021 VNR, and the integration of the SDGs into the [planning framework of the Comoros](#). Ecuador adopted a decree declaring the 2030 Agenda public policy of the national government and giving to the national secretariat for planning responsibility for aligning planning instruments with the Agenda, in coordination with public administration and different levels of government.

Germany's Sustainable Development Strategy has been periodically updated since 2002, and it is monitored by means of 75 indicators, which are tracked by the Federal Statistical Office. In the Comoros, among the challenges that existed was the need for capacity building in programming, monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the SDGs. Another presentation summarized data gathered by the [Global Partnership Effective Development Cooperation](#) on the integration of the SDGs into national development plans and strategies. While countries have strengthened their national development planning, further integration of the SDGs into national development plans, particularly at the indicator level, is needed. During the discussion the important role of multi-stakeholder national councils was raised, including their contribution to the development of national development plans and strategies.

<https://sdgs.un.org/events/building-back-better-all-anchoring-2030-agenda-national-development-plans-and-strategies>

## Governance and policy integration in the context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The VNR Lab 12 “Governance and policy integration in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic” was organized by DESA/DPIDG. The lab provided a platform for governments to share their experiences in tackling COVID-19, considering the challenges and opportunities that the pandemic has presented in terms of multi-level governance and integrated policy-making. Speakers included representatives of national governments (Lao PDR, South Africa, Spain, Zimbabwe) and experts from research institutions (Center for Poverty Analysis and Stockholm Environment Institute).

Key messages from the presentations and ensuing discussion included the following:

- COVID-19 has exposed the significant challenge that policy coherence and integration still present for governments in different regions. While line departments need to be structured in a way that enables delivering on their mandate, governments still must strive to have an integrated approach to policy-making.
- Responses to the pandemic has shown the importance of focusing on localization and involving local authorities. It is critical to learn from relevant examples of local involvement in national responses to COVID-19 in terms of what has worked for strengthening multi-level governance and vertical integration. Greater capacity at the local level is also warranted.
- In the context of the pandemic, many people are being pushed further behind by a variety of factors that include the technological divide and environmental challenges that lead to loss of access to land and livelihoods. The Government of Zimbabwe has adopted a whole of government and a whole of society approach in addressing these challenges. A National COVID-19 Response Task Force and an Inter-Ministerial Committee were established to spearhead the national response and plan of action.
- In Spain, vertical integration has been at the heart of the policy-making process. Spain facilitated multi-level governance in the implementation and monitoring of the 2030 Agenda, and the COVID-19 crisis has reinforced this trend. In terms of horizontal integration, the role of the national statistical institution and its coordination with sectoral institutions in the context of the pandemic should be highlighted.
- In Lao PDR, horizontal and vertical policy integration were difficult in the early stages of the pandemic. Initiatives by government agencies at different levels were not always aligned with the guidance provided by the National Task Force Committee. Addressing these issues has contributed to improve government coordination over time.
- In South Africa, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed significant institutional and social challenges. Despite the existence of institutionalized medium- and long-term planning processes, breaking sector-based silos is difficult. Therefore, the Presidency and current leadership decided to establish a new centralized institutional structure to manage the pandemic. This includes a set of strategic and technical centres at the national, provincial and local levels, coordinated by the National Coronavirus Command Council (NCCC), which has proven to be effective.



## National experience of the VNR Process: Uruguay

Uruguay presented its third Voluntary National Review in July 2021 following a shift in the country's leadership and national priorities. The strategic guidelines that Uruguay has undertaken to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is structured on economic innovation, institutional transformation, social development, and the principle of leaving no one behind.

The country has made notable progress in eliminating extreme poverty, implementing a strong social welfare system, increasing energy access, and closing the gender gap, among other initiatives taken in spite of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Capacity-building and strengthened partnerships have also been critical to SDG implementation in Uruguay.

The national vision for economic growth and sustainability incorporates caring for natural resources, protecting biodiversity, and mitigating the impacts of climate change. The focus on development and on and peace are two strategic priorities highlighted to improve resource management and prosperity. Education reform and gender equality have additionally been stressed as cross-cutting issues in Uruguay's national plan as well as with the progress Uruguay has made in achieving the SDGs.

This VNR Lab explored the national vision of Uruguay and progress made toward fulfilling the 2030 Agenda. The commitment to achieve the 2030 Agenda was stressed, namely in the strategies Uruguay has put in place to satisfy that commitment. Among the priorities were job creation, accountability to citizens, the transformation of education, and policies to ensure health services for all. The presenter stressed the comprehensive reforms for sustainable development and the particular methodology behind allocating the national budget to achieve the SDGs.

With a new government, the commitment to achieve the 2030 Agenda goals is a priority point for Uruguay. Education was stated to have been one of the most important reforms taking place in Uruguay, especially as the initiative to reopen schools has begun. The success in how Uruguay has navigated the COVID-19 pandemic was highlighted, as were strong institutions and leadership. The lab closed with the hopeful message: "The Future is Calling!"

## Meaningful participation in times of crisis: Engagement of stakeholders for the preparation of VNRs

This VNR Lab was organized by UNDESA, Division for Sustainable Development Goals and Partners for Review to promote an open conversation and exchange between countries, stakeholders and partners on experiences and lessons learned on the engagement of stakeholders from different sectors in the preparation of VNRs, especially considering the impacts and adjustments needed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the discussion, speakers highlighted how meaningful and impactful engagement demands commitment, planning and resources. Some presenters reflected that some stakeholders still operate in silos, thereby limiting the potential of exchange and synergies among all actors involved. Presentations focused also on the development of clear and tailored communications as well as the need to build trust between focal points of different institutions. Meaningful stakeholder engagement should be open, transparent, and inclusive and provide all people and groups with opportunities to contribute. Partners discussed concrete examples of mobilization through self-organized networks, with better and direct connections with different groups, especially those hardest to reach.

COVID-19 brought an extra challenge to reaching other stakeholders and in particular marginalized communities. Lockdowns and physical restrictions resulted in online consultations, where informal aspects of meeting each other went missing. The adaptation of moving online, and blending online and offline participation, was challenging and the lack of technical and financial support was referred to during the discussions. A concern with communities digitally left behind was raised as they will continue to not be included if the digital gap is not properly addressed. Additionally, speakers and participants recalled that meaningful stakeholder engagement should be long-term and not a singular process and reflected on the need for enhanced efforts to review the quality of participation and to strengthen the enabling environment for participation and collaboration.

## Path to equal: New Measurement Framework on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

This lab was organized by UN Women and included speakers from ministries of three countries. Participants discussed the various good practices used by governments to integrate a gender perspective in the VNRs and develop and analyze gender statistics, including through inter-ministerial coordination, involving national gender equality mechanisms and national statistical offices, and multi-stakeholder partnerships.

Participants underscored that a gender perspective must be integrated in the implementation and monitoring of all 17 SDGs. Emerging data on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, including from rapid gender assessment surveys, show that women are disproportionately impacted by the increased unpaid care and domestic work during the pandemic, which is compounded by the lack of basic infrastructure and public services. VNRs should include the use of outcome data, such as from time use survey and other processes focused on policy responses. For example, only 1 in 5 labor market and social protection measures enacted to tackle COVID-19 were gender-sensitive. Emerging data shows that domestic violence and other types of violence, such as cyber violence, has grown globally. VNRs should reflect these trends, as well as the opportunities, policy responses, and challenges to address these issues.

Inequality in the home (e.g., uneven sharing of unpaid care work) impacts inequality outside the home, (e.g., labour force participation). Labour force statistics, which are regularly collected in most countries, should be used to portray the story of women's empowerment and the lack thereof, and should be disaggregated by sex as well as by marriage status and household composition to understand the barriers faced by women to access economic opportunities. Regarding the distribution of power, not enough is done to ensure gender parity in political participation at national and local levels.

In the preparation of VNRs, countries are encouraged to look at gender gaps throughout the life course, as inequalities start early, such as in access to education, and compound over the lifetime. VNRs should also analyze inequalities from an intersectional perspective, as disparities are often based on several factors such as location, wealth, and ethnicity. Countries should map existing data sources, create an inventory of sex-disaggregated statistics and gender-specific indicators to assess progress towards gender equality. It is important to establish baselines, monitor progress by disaggregating data beyond just sex, use both qualitative and quantitative data in policymaking, develop protocols and ensure collection of data on marginalized groups.

Strategies to address challenges in integrating a gender perspective in the VNRs include continuous capacity-building on gender statistics, integration of gender statistics in census and survey instruments, development of regulations and strategies on gender statistics, partnership to enhance resources on collection and analysis of gender statistics, integration of gender statistics in national and country planning, budgeting and monitoring frameworks, and development of guidelines on gender mainstreaming in planning and budgeting processes.

## National experience of the VNR Process: Tunisia

In line with its commitments to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Tunisia presented its second Voluntary National Report at 2021 HLPF, and reaffirmed its will and determination to implement the SDGs despite a difficult context of the pandemic of COVID. The implementation of the SDGs in Tunisia began with the adoption of the first post-revolution development plan (2016-2020), and 80% of the SDG targets were in alignment with this plan. Tunisia has made progress as a young democracy born of an open and inclusive dialogue, and organized free and transparent presidential and legislative elections at the end of 2019.

Tunisia enjoys a high level of achievement in the SDGs on health and education. Access to electrification and drinking water is almost universal throughout the country. The enrollment rate for 6-year-olds reached 99.5% for 2019-2020. The state guarantees access to health services to vulnerable populations.

Tunisia has been responsive in mitigating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. It has resorted to general containment, which has made it possible to control the pressure on its health system. It has also taken a series of actions to guarantee the continuity of basic public social services. A special fund ("18-18") was created to collect donations and strengthen the health sector. Various measures were taken to support vulnerable populations, such as vulnerable and low-income families. A 23-measure plan has been put in place to support businesses in the face of Covid-19, including the creation of two investment funds.

The impact of the COVID 19 pandemic has been severe. The national vaccination campaign only started in early March 2021. The Tunisian economy recorded a decline of 8.8% in 2020, with the direct effects of a drop in tax revenues, an increase in the budget deficit and public debt, worrying unemployment, an increase in poverty and a decrease in the investment. The fight against poverty in its various forms, unemployment and especially of young graduates, inequalities between men and women and regional disparities are challenges that Tunisia will still have to face and constitute priorities in its five-year development plan. In this context , the democratic transition of the country continues.

The VNR Lab addressed the twin challenges of addressing the negative impact of the pandemic on the Tunisian economy and society, and at the same time assuring that progress in empowering all sectors in society benefit from the ongoing transition to a full and participatory society. It presented Tunisia's national experience in its pandemic response and examine the lessons learned in the country's democratic transition. The severe impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on poverty, the health sector, and society as a whole was also examined. Compensatory measures taken by the government were explored in the speaker's presentation. Challenges to development such as climate change, scarcity of water resources, and regional disparities were also outlined.

Tunisia's democratic transition indicated a fundamental change in terms of freedoms and human rights. Programs to empower women and improve social conditions were highlighted. A strong link was identified between human rights, rule of law building, and participatory democracy in national initiatives.

VNR Lab

17

16 July 2021  
8-9 am

## National experience of the VNR Process: Japan

This VNR Lab opened with remarks on how Japan has planned to take action to promote the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Japanese efforts for achieving the SDGs were outlined in a presentation, starting with the establishment of the SDGs Promotion Headquarters that organized a round table of experts from a range of fields and covered cross-cutting issues. Some key characteristics of the 2021 VNR such as promoting the SDGs and assessing progress on all 17 goals in the post-COVID-19 era were incorporated into the content of the report.

The next steps for Japan included raising awareness, strengthening the multistakeholder approach, monitoring process, and continuing cooperation with other international partners. In the panel discussion that followed, contributions were made by representatives for the round table, stakeholder groups, the private sector, and civil society organizations. The various challenges posed to achieving the SDGs were centered in the guiding questions to the panelists. The disproportionate negative effects of COVID-19 on women were highlighted and the measures of creating spaces for solidarity and support were underlined in this regard. The urgency to achieve greater equity and systemic change was stressed. Cooperation with national governments, local governments, and other local stakeholders was encouraged to further the implementation and localization of SDGs.

Consideration of the most vulnerable groups in climate initiatives taken by Japan was urged. The importance of wider engagement and public awareness was underscored. Developing new tools was also noted as being critical to addressing the challenges of the future. Interlinkages were broadly addressed by panelists in the vision for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

In the Q&A portion of the VNR Lab, topics of discussion included bringing voices from the field into the center of government policies and amplifying the voices of NGOs and other stakeholders. The moderator expressed the need for an effective mechanism to connect the local to the national to the international level. The VNR Lab concluded with reflections of engagement, localization, and connectivity in Japan's national experience, as well as the necessity for further international cooperation and the acceleration of relevant efforts.