Voluntary National Reviews at the 2021 High-level political forum on sustainable development

Secretariat Background Note

Introduction

In 2021, 43 countries will present their Voluntary National Review (VNR). Eight will be presenting for the first time,[1] 25 for the second time,[2] and 10 countries will be presenting for the third time.[3] Most of the countries presenting this year are coming from Asia Pacific (14), followed by Latin America and the Caribbean (11), Africa (10), Western Europe and others (6) and Eastern Europe (2).

After July 2021, the High-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF) will have heard 248 presentations from 176 countries since 2016, when countries started presenting their voluntary national reviews (VNRs) as mandated by the General Assembly and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (resolutions 67/290 and 70/1). All countries of the Eastern European group have presented a VNR. Africa still has eight countries that have not yet prepared a VNR, followed by the Asia Pacific region with six, Latin America and the Caribbean with five, and the Western Europe and Others group with two.

With 176 out of 197 member countries of the HLPF having presented at least one VNR, the United Nations system stands ready to provide support for the remaining 21 countries, to achieve universal reporting.

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[1] Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Bolivia, Cuba, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Marshall Islands, Nicaragua, San Marino.

[2] Afghanistan, Bahamas, Bhutan, Cabo Verde, Chad, China, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Germany, Iraq, Japan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Madagascar, Malaysia, Namibia, Norway, Paraguay, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, Tunisia, Zimbabwe.

[3] Azerbaijan, Colombia, Egypt, Guatemala, Indonesia, Mexico, Niger, Qatar, Sierra Leone, Uruguay.

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Through the VNRs, achievements and progress toward the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can be measured and evaluated. The wealth of information and data contained in the database of VNRs continues to grow, aiding governments, development partners and stakeholders in identifying challenges and gaps, and drawing attention to areas where urgent assistance is needed.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, which has impacted the entire world, it is remarkable that 43 countries managed to carry out a VNR this year. They have utilized innovative policies and tools to collect data and information through online surveys, virtual platforms, and remote collaboration. Preparing and presenting a VNR has become, for many countries, an exercise that informs a more sustainable and resilient recovery from the pandemic; one that can integrate and institutionalize the principles and targets of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs into national-level planning, legislation and policy.

Although the presentation of the VNRs at the HLPF will remain in a virtual format this year, one benefit of this ongoing constraint is that virtual VNRs have expanded the global audience and raised the visibility of the work that these countries are doing. The virtual VNR sessions can enable ministerial-level visibility to a global viewership of diverse stakeholders, many of whom are also participating by providing inputs and comments, asking questions, and offering recommendations during the discussions.

The VNR presentations can assist anyone seeking to launch new projects that could be adapted and scaled up, to analyze policies and strategies for systemic change, to debate the impacts and outcomes from past practices, and to identify trends that can help to shape a positive future.

The present note aims to provide a background for the virtual VNR exchanges at the HLPF, by briefly highlighting some of the findings from the main messages submitted by the 43 countries presenting their VNR in 2021.

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This year, the Secretary-General also updated his Voluntary Common Reporting Guidelines for preparing a VNR, which include a call for strengthened or new areas of reporting in the VNR process, in four key areas:

- COVID-19 recovery plans and strategies, in connection with SDG implementation
- Continuity and comparability in second and third VNRs
- New and emerging challenges
- Possible links to sub-national reporting, including voluntary local reviews (VLRs)

COVID-19 impacts, recovery plans and strategies

The COVID-19 pandemic has heavily impacted economic and social progress across the SDGs in nearly all countries, and the VNR main messages this year are primarily focused on national plans and strategies for a sustainable and resilient recovery.

Most messages highlighted the devastating economic impacts of the pandemic, including unemployment, debt, and recession (Afghanistan, Angola, Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Cabo Verde, Cyprus, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Marshall Islands, Thailand, Tunisia). Some also emphasized impacts to the social dimension, including heath care, education, gender inequality, (Czech Republic, Indonesia, Niger, Sweden, Thailand). Related and interlinked areas such as tourism, data collection, and climate action were negatively affected, and a few countries reported setbacks in peace and security efforts (Afghanistan).

The main messages described a wide variety of response measures to the pandemic, including restructured existing national programs and aligned resources, and efforts to integrate COVID-19 response and recovery measures into their national development plans, in connection with the implementation of the SDGs (Afghanistan, Antigua and Barbuda, Colombia, Cuba, Guatemala, Indonesia, Iraq and others).

Some of the areas of focus of the COVID-19 recovery plans and strategies identified in the VNR main messages include: social protection, health care, vaccination, economic recovery,

food security, education, mental health, inclusion, employment, debt relief, disaster resilience, digitalization, and systems approaches to overcome multiple challenges.

As recovery strategies are being implemented, the vaccine rollout is still uneven in many countries, but it is encouraging that efforts are being made to improve the response. Main messages have highlighted national vaccination rates (Bhutan, Cuba), vaccination rollout efforts (Azerbaijan, Cabo Verde, Tunisia) and actions to assist other countries with provision of vaccine assistance (China, Sweden).

This year, the pandemic has also forced governments and stakeholders to adopt new and innovative approaches to preparing a VNR, as travel and in-person gatherings were severely constrained. Many countries highlighted the importance of connectivity and use of virtual meetings and tools, reporting increasing use of innovative surveys and online data collection as important in evaluating SDG implementation at the local and national levels. Such outreach was often cited as important in pursuing the principle of leaving no one behind, which is increasingly being institutionalized in many countries (Afghanistan, Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Chad, China, Colombia, Cuba, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, Germany, Guatemala, Japan, Lao PDR, Madagascar, Namibia, Nicaragua, Niger, Norway, San Marino, Paraguay, Spain, Sweden, Uruguay, Zimbabwe).

Second and subsequent VNRs

Second and subsequent VNRs have evolved, increasingly describing progress since the previous VNR, changes introduced, or how the commitments in the previous VNR have been implemented. The 10 countries returning to the VNR exercise for the third time are reflecting more deeply on progress achieved since the first VNR, reporting on how the SDGs are progressively more integrated into their national development plans and policies.

Third-time VNR countries are reporting on progress in economic reform, transparency in the use of public resources, and measuring the private sector's contribution (Colombia, Guatemala, Egypt, Qatar).

Special committees, councils, and dedicated ministries are now set up in most of these countries, to provide consistency and coherence to the implementation process, and to the VNR exercise itself. Some have been informed by independent studies carried out by representatives of civil society, the private sector, academia, the UN system and others, to provide a more diverse analysis than the government alone (Mexico). Strategic priority is sometimes given to certain SDGs as "accelerator Goals" that can advance multiple agendas and address COVID-19 recovery (Sierra Leone).

Countries reporting for the second time are developing and expanding on the baseline created by their first VNRs. There also is some good news on progress made in areas such as eradication of extreme poverty (China, Thailand).

One country recognized that conducting their second VNR has allowed them to "deepen the reflection on the challenges of sustainable development, to analyze the progress achieved, and above all to identify the opportunities and actions needed to accelerate the SDGs" (Chad).

Second time VNR countries highlighted progress on previous efforts to implement specific SDGs, and compared with previous reports. In the sixth year of VNR reporting, second and subsequent VNRs are demonstrating measurable progress in a way that is more detailed, and more inclusive.

All countries, including first-timers, referred in their main messages to steps taken to integrate the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs into national policy frameworks and national development plans. The messages reflect a variety of approaches, initiatives, institutions and measures to integrate the SDGs into national development plans, policies, and legislation.

They also referenced the integration of other international commitments and frameworks into their development plans, in connection with the SDGs, including the SAMOA Pathway (Bahamas, Cabo Verde, Marshall Islands), the Istanbul Programme of Action for Least

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Developed Countries (Angola, Bhutan, Lao PDR), and Agenda 2063 of the African Union (Chad).

New and emerging challenges

In 2021 the updated Secretary-General's Guidelines for preparing a VNR called upon reporting countries to include a section on new and emerging challenges.

From the key messages, many countries have cited the social and economic devastation wrought by the pandemic as the main emerging challenge this year. The consequences of the pandemic have impeded progress for nearly all countries, in one way or another. Even countries that rank highly in international comparisons on SDG implementation have reported an increase in economic and social inequalities (Denmark, Germany, Sweden). Discrimination and the need to ensure social justice are emerging challenges in both developed and developing countries.

While climate change is not a new challenge, the effects of rising CO_2 levels and increasingly extreme weather events are derailing progress, especially in SIDS, despite the slight reduction in emissions due to decreased travel during the pandemic. Most messages defined the challenges brought about by climate change and described measures undertaken to combat them (Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Bhutan, Cabo Verde, China, Cuba, Cyprus, Dominican Republic, Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Indonesia, Iraq, Lao PDR, Madagascar, Malaysia, Marshall Islands, Namibia, Nicaragua, Niger, Norway, Paraguay, San Marino, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, Uruguay, Zimbabwe).

Increasing digitalization and connectivity has been identified as essential for overcoming the challenges of the pandemic, in areas of employment, education and health care. Cyber security is also an emerging issue in this regard.

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Some countries have also defined measures and solutions to overcome these challenges, stressing the need for strengthened multilateralism, international cooperation and global partnership (Cuba, Dominican Republic, Germany).

Sub-national reviews

The main messages of the 2021 VNRs include a number of examples from countries who are engaged in the trend toward sub-national reporting, which has been proven to enhance and support the VNR process.

Inclusion of all relevant stakeholders is essential for implementation, and several national governments are conducting outreach at the local level in cities, districts and regions. Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) are not mandated to be conducted and linked to VNRs. But they are a natural outgrowth of the VNR exercise, helping to spread awareness about the SDGs and monitor their implementation at the local level, where accelerated actions can often have the most positive impacts.

The VNR main messages have highlighted VLRs at the city, district or regional level (Japan, Malaysia, Sweden). They also recount other local initiatives that have targeted areas such as finance, future cities, and public-private partnerships to create momentum and promote the SDGs (Japan), or describe ministerial coordination and reporting between national and sub-national levels of government (Egypt, Norway, Spain).

Ensuring ownership of the SDGs through engagement of stakeholders is reflected in many areas of the main messages, as VNRs are trending more toward inclusiveness. The preparation and presentation of the VNRs at the HLPF provide many opportunities for stakeholder engagement, peer learning, knowledge exchange, and practical advancement through facilitation of partnerships and other means of implementation.

The SDG Moment to be convened by the Secretary-General in September will provide opportunities to discuss successes, gaps and challenges identified in VNRs and countries' longer term vision for realizing the 2030 Agenda

Guiding questions for reflection

- How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the country? What are the most advanced/less advanced SDGs?
- For second and third timers, what have been the areas of greatest progress, as well as challenges and obstacles, since the previous VNR?
- What transformational changes or innovations have been realized at the national level to implement the SDGs?
- How has the work of institutions entrusted to promote and review the implementation of the 2030 Agenda evolved? Can it be improved? How far have the SDGs been incorporated in the work of the various ministries and institutions?
- Have you incorporated the SDGs in your national plans and policies, or developed a dedicated strategy, or both?
- What approaches have you taken to implement whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches to implementing the SDGs?
- What are the critical challenges you are facing in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda? Did you succeed in overcoming such a major challenge and how?
- Have the SDGs been incorporated in the budget? Do you have or will you elaborate an Integrated National Financing Framework?
- What new and emerging issues have impacted on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, besides COVID-19?
- What is being done to ensure that vulnerable groups are not being left behind?
- What are the areas where more assistance or new partnerships are needed to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and how can the HLPF help?
- What are your next steps and long-term vision for implementing the SDGs?

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- What lessons have you learned in preparing the VNR? Did you decide to adjust some policies or institutions or create new ones? What innovations have helped to overcome the challenges of COVID-19 and its restrictions for conducting your VNR? How have you used data and indicators?

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