



HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

VNR LABs
16-18 July 2018, New York

Informal Summary

The series of eight *VNR Labs* was convened for the first time in the margins of the 2018 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) to provide an informal platform for experience sharing and reflection on the Voluntary National Review (VNR) process thus far.

Representatives from Member States, the UN system and Major Groups and other stakeholders discussed six cross-cutting themes ([leveraging interlinkages](#), [leaving no one behind](#), [data for evidence-based VNRs](#), [mobilizing and organizing institutions](#), [mobilizing resources](#), [reflecting on the VNRs and moving ahead](#)) in varying formats. In addition, [VNR Lab 7](#) and [Lab 8](#) provided two countries (Jamaica and Switzerland) presenting their VNRs in 2018 with the opportunity to expand on the review experience and share lessons learned on the national process with peers. The informal reflection sessions held under the Chatham House rule¹ were organized by UN DESA divisions during the ministerial segment of the HLPF from 16 to 18 July 2018.

VNR Lab 1 “Leveraging interlinkages”

The inaugural session of the VNR Labs featured country experiences from Finland and Cabo Verde, having presented a VNR in 2016 and 2018 respectively. The opening remarks underscored that the eight innovative VNR Labs provided additional space and time to continue the discussion on the VNRs. For many countries the VNR process itself has allowed to review existing institutional mechanisms for coordination and to update the latter, as well as to engage more fully with national stakeholders. Referring to the key findings of a recent analysis of VNR reports conducted by the Committee for Development Policy (CDP)², it was highlighted that trade-offs are not explicitly addressed in most VNR reports and countries were encouraged to be more explicit about these.

¹ The Chatham House rule reads as follows: “When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.”

² CDP Subgroup on Voluntary National Reviews, 2018, Voluntary National Review Reports – What do they report?: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/publication/voluntary-national-review-reports-what-do-they-report/>

The moderated dialogue between the two country experts built on these conclusions and showcased examples of integrated policies and policy coherence at the national level. The speakers shared best practices on organizing institutions and using plans and budgets to promote integrated approaches. Furthermore, specific trade-offs and synergies between policy objectives that their respective countries are addressing were discussed. Key messages centered around two major themes:

Interlinkages and priority setting

It was noted that the issue of interlinkages was informing policy discussions, with growing awareness that a sound sectoral policy did not necessarily amount to a good sustainable development policy. In this regard, Cabo Verde is working on an integrated policy towards achieving sustainable tourism, with a focus on youth employment and an approach that boosts the economy, while preserving the environment. As showcased through the Finnish experience, integration can also be pursued through the budgeting process, including under the theme of “carbon-neutrality”, which includes consideration of environmental and consumption taxes, as well as environmentally and socially harmful subsidies. A central challenge in Cabo Verde, water scarcity, is being addressed with an integrated approach, exploring different solutions such as desalination. The trade-offs are currently studied from an economic perspective, while social and environmental aspects are also taken into account.

Institutional mechanisms

Even in countries with a long history of formalized dialogue, the VNR process helped realize that more interlinked thinking and discussions among all stakeholders are needed, departing from consultations organized around sectors. One example is integrated budgeting, which is being used to have all ministries report on national sustainability goals in Finland. While the concrete results are still to be seen, this more integrated and participatory process itself is already seen as very inspiring. Given that it is an archipelagic island state, Cabo Verde established a decentralized approach to identify key priorities by island, not only at national level. It was stressed that it is a prerequisite for all ministries that no single goal is “owned” by a specific sectoral ministry to break with silo thinking and encourage true interlinked working.

VNR Lab 2 “Leaving no one behind (LNOB)”

The Lab addressed measures taken at national level in selected countries to improve the condition of the poorest and most vulnerable people. Key findings of the recent analysis of the VNR reports

conducted by the Committee for Development Policy (CDP)³ were presented, outlining which groups are among those furthest left behind. The discussion reflected on how countries have mainstreamed the national concerns of leaving no one behind and reducing inequality into their national SDG policies. Government and civil society experts from Bhutan, Kenya, India, Lebanon, Sri Lanka and the UK and discussed challenges and solutions on how to ensure that no one is left behind. Key messages centered around two major themes:

Identifying those who are being left behind

Some participants called for a clearer definition of LNOB and guidelines (i.e., reaching the most vulnerable and creating an inclusive and participatory process), while others reminded that “no one size fits all”, as every country has to identify who is being left behind in its national context. Others proposed “guiding indicators” to be considered at the national level for LNOB. Furthermore, good practices of LNOB should be documented and widely shared. Action for Sustainable Development has documented national platforms for LNOB for 30 countries that have presented their VNRs up to now. There is also a need for engaging local level actors in VNRs to identify who is left behind.

In order to correctly identify those left behind, official data systems should comply with the objective of LNOB, and produce disaggregated data. Data needs to be collected at the local level – national level data is not sufficient. It was highlighted that, worldwide, the heavy burden of carrying water is most often placed on women. Those left behind, in particular persons with disabilities, often lack access to water – an essential, but often neglected issue.

Specific measures and policies to target groups that are left behind

Participants shared specific measures and policies that have been put in place to target groups that are left behind. These measures include making the empowerment of women a priority and establishing a Minister post for gender affairs. Yet, controversial topics remain, such as the age of marriage. Another country recognized the linkage between land and poverty and established a programme on targeting landless households. It was highlighted that there often is enough data available, yet it in many cases it is not being regarded as “valid data” by the authorities. A whole of society approach is necessary to achieve the SDGs. It was proposed to open up to academia and CSOs/big data to enhance the availability of data. Tapping into existing information produced by Human Rights Treaty Bodies should be considered to enhance data/information on those who are left behind.

³ CDP Subgroup on Voluntary National Reviews, 2018, Voluntary National Review Reports – What do they report?: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/publication/voluntary-national-review-reports-what-do-they-report/>

Participation mechanisms

Participation mechanisms should build trust and allow genuine engagement of all stakeholder groups. However, it was noted that the agenda is often set *before* the stakeholder process starts. A good example of a national consultation process, involving civil society organizations in all areas to reach the most vulnerable, was reported. A national committee for SDGs that includes the Director Generals of all ministries, as well as representatives of civil society, including the private sector, was established in one country as an official mechanism to hear all these voices to be reflected in the VNR. It was highlighted that the VNR is not merely a document, but a platform for the Government to engage with civil society and, therefore, should serve as an accountability mechanism. A parallel civil society reporting mechanism was proposed. One suggestion was to create a Voluntary Peoples Review (VPR) in parallel to (and not “in the shadow” of) the VNRs. Another suggestion was to feature all VNR shadow reports on the official website of the HLPF/VNRs.

Challenges

Official data management systems do not collect all the data critical to address the needs of vulnerable groups. Or, data exists, but is not being shared. National statistical offices lack coordination and access to statistics is limited. Capacity and resources should be enhanced to build inclusive national statistical systems. From the government side it was pointed out that resource constraints and resource mobilization were the biggest challenge to produce official statistics. Moreover, it was noted that tolerated stereotypes and discriminatory behaviors based on gender, age, disability etc. continue to reinforce inequalities – connecting LNOB to the very vulnerable groups and population who are left behind is critical. Policy incoherence was identified as a bottle neck. Thinking in silos focusing on either themes or population groups – gender, peace, climate, children, youth etc. result in competition for space and resources for population groups and issues. An integrated multi-sectoral approach is crucial to LNOB. Specific needs of LDCs and LLDCs, facing geographical barriers, should be addressed. It was noted that consultations and stakeholder engagement has been difficult for LDCs.

Recommendations on the VNR Process

It was noted that the regional forums on sustainable development should feed more directly into the HLPF in order to create real value added. The VNR process should also be improved to ensure the quality of outcomes which currently suffered from a short timeframe, lack of finance and lack of a comprehensive stakeholder engagement. Some participants asked for clearer guidelines and an accountability mechanism to be established. The global VNR process should also be linked to local processes. The VNR process, in particular the consultation/participation/engagement process, should be heavily decentralized to the local level (county and community level). Lack of

access by vulnerable groups to the VNR process (due to time constraints, limited space or lack of universal accessibility, or in some cases, unwillingness to hear criticism) was pointed out by participants. Furthermore, ministries or units responsible for vulnerable groups are often not involved in the national VNR process. Some participants proposed to create an obligation to take a bottom-up approach in designing the VNR process. The awareness of SDGs and VNR processes should be enhanced among vulnerable groups themselves. A systematic and substantive evaluation of the VNR process should be conducted. For example, some countries reported very little awareness of the concerns of Indigenous Peoples.

VNR Lab 3 “Leveraging Data for Evidence-Based VNRs”

VNR Lab 3 aimed at focusing on how data can be used to effectively report progress by providing critical information for evidence-based VNRs. It discussed the challenges that countries face in making full use of quality, accessible, timely and disaggregated data, and identified possible solutions to those challenges. Speakers comprised representatives of national statistical offices and international agencies and development partners working in statistical capacity building. Representatives from major stakeholder groups, Member States and UN agencies participated in the discussions to identify challenges and solutions in fully leveraging data for the VNR process and for policy making in general.

Challenges identified

Lack of coordination among various entities within the national statistical system was identified as one of the main challenges by the speakers and the audience. This seemed to be particularly true in cases where lack of legislation and concrete mechanisms for coordination hindered a coherent approach among entities within the national statistical systems (for example: some agencies want to sell data, some want to provide it for free). Lack of coordination also prevents the usage of existing data for the VNRs. Furthermore, lack of funding to strengthen statistical capacity was identified as another problem. Addressing data gaps requires investment in statistics, and mobilizing resources to meet this need is a key challenge.

There is also a lack of engagement between National Statistical Offices (NSO) and policy makers, resulting in a situation where policy makers were not aware of what data exists, and more importantly, were not able to appreciate the importance of high-quality data. In many countries, NSOs are not consulted during the VNR process, and as a result reports lack the strong evidence-base even when data exists. In addition, policy makers think about political cycle rather than a long-term view that is more in line with the required sustained investments in statistics. Statistical

literacy of policy makers and other users of statistics was identified as a challenge that made it difficult for statisticians to communicate the value of statistics. While statisticians do an excellent job within their domains, they are often not able to communicate effectively to their audiences, making them less visible—and hence disadvantaged—in broader policy discussions. This leads to data not being a priority. Moreover, human capital remains a challenge in many places. Countries lack well trained statisticians to meet current needs (for example a staffing structure that was geared more towards paper-based, non-digital work), and in some countries competent staff were either retiring or leaving to work somewhere else. That has resulted in sudden disappearance of institutional capacity of NSOs.

High-quality disaggregated data is not always available. Disaggregated data on people with disabilities, indigenous communities, and young people are hard to find. Even countries with advanced statistical systems struggle with these challenges. Unless high-quality disaggregated data is available, people will be left behind. Furthermore, knowledge of SDGs and its alignment with national plans needs to be improved. Many people still do not know what the SDGs are, and the Goals are not always aligned with national plans. This makes it harder for NSOs to ‘sell’ the need for data to effectively monitor SDGs. Technology also remains a challenge, as some countries still have old systems of data collection and dissemination. This is especially the case for administrative data systems, which makes it harder to integrate them into official statistics.

The following possible solutions were proposed to address the above challenges:

NSO engagement with policy makers and other stakeholders

It is essential that the statistical community is much more engaged with policy makers and other stakeholders within the data ecosystem to address many of the challenges identified. Such engagement is crucial to demonstrate why data is important, and get buy-in from stakeholders whose support is paramount to strengthen statistical capacity and advance statistics in the 2030 era.

Many of the problems facing NSOs—for instance, lack of funding, not being consulted on policy decisions—are problems of visibility. Engaging with the private sector, civil society organizations, and other groups, to really demonstrate the value of statistics and assess needs, will help build a robust foundation of support for statistics, which can then translate into support from politicians and policy makers. When people want data, there will be funding for data and the issue will be visible to decision makers. NSOs need to identify a data champion who will advocate the benefit and value of data.

Engagement with a wide group of stakeholders also improves trust in statistics. Engagement with universities and youth groups, for instance can help address gaps in human capital, and train future statisticians that can meet needs of NSOs. Engaging with young talent in form of hackathons have brought much-needed solutions in some countries.

Effective communication of statistics and their importance

Statistical offices should communicate in a strategic, targeted way. Not all statistical users have the same skill-sets and needs, and communication requires a tailored approach for each set of users to ensure that their needs are met and that they understand how high-quality statistics can add value. National data platforms based on open source solutions are an important tool for this purpose—it brings data from different sources into a space which is available for all stakeholders to see. Communication should also take into consideration the need for improving statistical literacy. Visualization/infographics and other visual elements can support this endeavour.

Moreover, coordination mechanisms, both for entities within and outside the statistical system are required to address many challenges identified. Effective mechanisms ensure that NSOs are in the center stage as it pertains to data, and different entities in the NSS are on the same page. Given the resource constrained environment that NSOs operate in, NSOs' focus should first be on production of core statistics such as good quality census and vital registration data. Furthermore, what NSOs do should be of relevance for its stakeholders, and their activities should be demand driven. Data should be relevant for policy makers, politicians and other stakeholders. This can help close the disconnect between policy makers and statisticians. There is an opportunity to push the SDGs as the policy link to data.

VNR Lab 4 “Mobilising and organizing institutions”

VNR Lab 4 followed an informal, interactive format to encourage dialogue and mutual learning about concrete challenges and needs of governments in mobilizing and organizing institutions for implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

The meeting addressed three aspects of institution-building: (i) national-level arrangements for SDG implementation; (ii) engagement of parliaments; and, (iii) involvement of sub-national governments.

With regard to national arrangements, participants emphasized the challenges related to communication for outreach and awareness-raising, and the integration of SDGs into national development programmes and policies. The first part of the meeting focused on the financial and

human resources needs associated with institution-building. Among the proposed solutions were high-level commitment to the 2030 Agenda, including by the Head of Government as well as finance ministries. Also recommended were peer-review mechanisms and networks, participatory and gender budgeting, and consultations by the central government with sub-national levels.

The role of parliaments in ensuring policy coordination, monitoring and enhancing stakeholder engagement was stressed. Three challenges were outlined: the complexity of integration of SDGs into laws and regulations; the difficulty of reconciling the cross-cutting nature of the SDGs with issue-focused parliamentary committees; and sometimes limited collaboration among parliamentary bodies. SDG-performance based budgets and parliamentary mechanisms for self- and SDG-impact assessment were suggested as possible solutions. The use of toolkits to assess parliamentary engagement in SDGs and to interlink the workings of parliamentary committees was also suggested.

Lack of awareness, skills and resources with weak vertical integration were among the cited difficulties at the subnational level. A number of approaches were highlighted including collaborative engagement platforms, municipal SDG planning programme, and local government's voluntary SDG review. They comprised the use of multi-actor platforms for policy coordination and peer-learning activities with voluntary reporting and data-sharing. Participants suggested that larger cities could assist smaller cities and noted the merit, in building skills and competencies of local government, of not outsourcing the difficult work on SDG implementation.

In general, a solid institutional environment is conducive to SDG implementation while institutions are seldom enough by themselves for sustainable development to materialize. Impact assessment, open access to data and genuine stakeholder involvement including volunteerism and empowerment of marginalized groups are necessary. The recently adopted principles of effective governance for sustainable development prepared by the Committee of Experts on Public Administration could provide helpful guidance with actual practices implemented in collaboration with local actors, taking into account local contexts and conditions.

In conclusion, three sets of actionable ideas were proposed:

- At the level of the Executive: develop action plans to accompany strategic plans; pursue peer-to-peer interaction in the form of innovation labs, platforms and networks; engage civil society and private sector actors as technical communities (such as statisticians); ensure high-level political commitment, including in both finance ministries and line ministries; and, strengthen communication.

- At the level of parliaments: establish cross-cutting thematic committees reflecting the integrated nature of the SDGs; present and debate VNRs in parliamentary committees and in plenary; reform budgets to incorporate SDG-performance criteria; use SDG impact-assessment; and undertake a self-assessment of parliamentary engagement in SDGs and how parliaments from different realities can coordinate their work.
- At the subnational level: develop territorial strategies to promote dialogue with subnational actors; involve volunteers, schools and universities, and groups that may be left behind including the poorest and most vulnerable and those subject to discrimination; organize peer learning activities among local governments; promote 'voluntary city reviews' by cities or clusters of cities; and align and integrate national with local strategies and actions.

VNR Lab 5 “Mobilizing Resources”

Attempting to dig deeper into a specific aspect of countries’ experiences implementing the SDGs, VNR Lab 5 focused on how countries were faring in mobilizing resources and investment for the SDGs - a daunting task given the ambitious nature of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the resources needed for its achievement.

To learn from experience, the VNR Lab 5 convened three developing countries that have undertaken - or plan to undertake - VNRs and invited them to present their progress in mobilizing the required financing and resources, including through integrated planning frameworks and investment plans. Three development partners representing the private sector and UN system served as discussants, and a moderator facilitated a highly interactive and frank discussion among the nearly 40 participants from key stakeholder groups. The discussion generated numerous key messages and recommendations that could be reflected upon by future VNR participants, and integrated into the UN’s analytical, normative and operational work in support of the SDGs.

An over-arching message from the discussion related to the central importance of efforts to mobilize long-term investment, both domestic and international, in order to achieve the SDGs. In this regard, the necessity of being able to mobilize adequate levels of private investment for sustainable development was also emphasized

Key messages and recommendations

Improving synergies between implementation and the means of implementation for the 2030 Agenda is a priority at all stages, including planning, implementation, follow-up and review. One indication of the lack of progress in the area that was noted was the overall limited country

coverage of the targets on SDG-17 within the VNRs. As the global hub for the SDGs and financing for sustainable development, DESA—working with UN system partners—could devote efforts to improving these linkages. For example, the outcome of the ECOSOC Forum on Financing for Development follow-up (FfD Forum), and related analysis, could better inform the discussions and Ministerial Declaration of the HLPF.

Amidst a rapidly evolving development landscape, the resurgent interest among countries in integrated planning should be encouraged and supported by development partners, looking across national development plans, sustainable development strategies, financing frameworks and investment plans. Governments reported on successful experiences of doing SDG-related needs assessments, resource gap analysis and budgeting as part of an overall implementation strategy, but there are complexities that merit further attention. Looking to 2019, enhanced analysis and cooperation to identify the building blocks of national financing strategies, strengthening the necessary governance and coordination mechanisms and mapping the available support measures from across the international community could be considered.

The 2030 Agenda and Addis Ababa Action Agenda provide a roadmap for development partners to align objectives, build trust and collaborate for resource mobilization. The discussion made clear that there is still important work to be done in addressing the different perspectives and potential misperceptions among potential partners needed for resource mobilization. Governments welcomed business engagement on the SDGs, but expressed concern regarding the sector's willingness to transition from short-term profit cycles to long-term, sustainable investment. Investors noted the growing interest in sustainable investment, but highlighted the dearth of good-quality information on specific opportunities, such as in countries' VNRs. Civil society pushed for a more holistic approach to resource mobilization, including all potential resources beyond investment. Given the complexity of the SDGs and related financing needs, the SDG Investment Fair, organized by DESA, offers an important platform/opportunity to bring together the various actors, provide clarity, financial transparency and accountability and facilitate the matching of diverse sources of capital with opportunities for SDG investment.

Domestic policies and actions are essential pre-requisites for unlocking existing and new resources, based on strong political commitment and a whole-of-society approach. The consensus among participants was that policymaking and appropriate legal and tax frameworks could contribute to a virtuous circle of resource mobilization from domestic and international sources. Governments reported on a diverse range of measures for domestic resource mobilization (e.g., enhanced tax administration; revenue strategies; improved domestic saving) and improving the enabling environment for investment (e.g., creation of special economic zones; increased market opportunities; ease of doing business; etc.), which they have put at the centre of national efforts

to support SDG achievement. Financial inclusion can also ensure that a country's full range of human and other resources are fully mobilized towards sustainable development.

Investors that neglect to integrate sustainability concerns into their investment horizons are missing significant opportunities to advance social and private goals. Participants spoke about the need to harness the growing interest in impact investment, as numerous, large institutional investors gear up for sustainable development. To channel this investment as a complement to domestic resource mobilization and ODA, new innovations in finance (e.g., "SDG bonds" in certain sectors, functioning similarly to green bonds) could help take it to scale. A good, initial first step to benefit from this growing interest could be for financial professionals to ask investors and beneficiaries for their sustainability preferences, in the same vein as other "know your customer" requirements. Considering all factors that could impact on returns - such as environmental, social and governance (ESG) indicators - could improve long-term performance of investments. There is already some evidence in support of this, but the relationship between ESG investing and returns merits further analysis.

Better-quality and disaggregated data can enhance the quality and quantity of resources for the SDGs. They allow policy makers to make more informed decisions, improve policy implementation and ensure the measurability of results. They also help to attract private resources as investors will be able to more clearly gauge investment impact and returns. National development strategies should clearly articulate their needs, costs and potential sources of funding, in order to attract new capital. Undertaking data gap analysis and incorporating measurement into programmes at the earliest possible stage is critical.

VNR Lab 6 "Reflecting on the VNRs and Moving ahead"

VNR Lab 6 discussed the experience with the Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) thus far, and reflected on how they can be improved as an instrument for exchanging experiences, building partnerships and accelerating implementation. Experts provided views on different review mechanisms, including the Voluntary National Reviews, the OECD DAC Peer Review and the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM).

While each review mechanism was created in a different context, best practices on peer learning, stakeholder engagement and methodologies for evidence-based reviews can be drawn from both the African Peer Review Mechanism, established in 2003, and the OECD DAC Peer Review created in 1962. The element of twinning and matching of countries around peer learning processes has proven successful in the context of the OECD DAC. Lessons learned from the APRM include its voluntary nature, inclusiveness and broad-based participation. The latter is

considered one of the APRM's successes and, at the same time, one of its main challenges. Striking the balance between openness and transparency of the review process on the one hand, and providing 'safe spaces' for governments to share their challenges on the other hand, is a key challenge. Creating ownership for the review process and maintaining the sense of ownership after its completion was considered critical. The importance of an evidence-based review process was underscored, as well as the resources and capacities required to support a comprehensive review process through a dedicated secretariat.

Reflecting on experiences from the Voluntary National Reviews, and the options for improving the latter, participants identified the following challenges and potential solutions:

Making VNRs analytically robust & strengthening peer learning

The VNR process was intended as a peer learning and review process. However, many VNR reports do not allow to identify specific challenges as they are too broad. Furthermore, best practices highlighted in the reports are often not showcased in the presentations, nor addressed during the interactive dialogue. Many countries focus on the annual set of SDGs under review rather than on the challenges they are facing at the national level regarding the implementation of the 2030 Agenda as a whole, and the action plans in place to address those challenges. It was stressed that all stakeholders should move from integration and alignment to the 2030 Agenda towards evidence-based analysis of progress. The need to find ways to make the analysis of national progress against the SDGs robust and communicating it to constituencies was highlighted. Peer learning could be facilitated by identifying two themes ahead of time around which best practices and challenges would be shared. This would allow for a meaningful conversation and matchmaking among peers. The entire UN system should contribute to such an analysis, including the identification of cross-cutting challenges and areas where the UN could add value and to which it could direct resources.

Forming a "virtuous cycle" of national and global level VNRs

The distinction between the national level VNRs and the presentations of the VNR at the global level was highlighted. The national level VNRs must be the basis for the VNRs presented at the HLPF. The latter should not be a "beauty contest" at UN Headquarters but measure real progress. Therefore, VNR reports should not be drafted by consultants or UN agencies, but be anchored in a genuine national multi-stakeholder process. While reporting at the global level is important, the SDGs need to be a domestic agenda to be reported against at the national level. However, only few countries have submitted their VNR report to Parliament before presenting at the HLPF. A benchmark could be introduced that every country would need to report every other year at the

national level before presenting at the HLPF. These two-level reviews could form a virtuous cycle in providing inspiration and improving the quality of institutions at the national level. It was noted that the Secretary-General's voluntary guidelines and the VNR Handbook developed by UN DESA are useful and identify good practices. However, there is a need for more systematic integrated assessments to move from reports to genuine reviews that identify entry points for dealing with root causes.

Creating synergies

Countries were encouraged to build on reviews undertaken in the OECD or APRM frameworks for the preparation of their VNRs. It was also suggested to focus on the synergies between the UNDAF process and the VNRs, which only few countries have linked so far. Furthermore, the 2030 Agenda and the African Union's Agenda 2063 should not be treated as two different standalone programmes but synergies should be created, also in terms of follow-up and review.

Constructive engagement of all stakeholders

Constructively engaging all stakeholders to be partners in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its follow-up and review process was identified as an area for improvement. Multi-stakeholder processes are in place in many countries, however they are not yet used sufficiently. Creating a 'safe space' for governments to talk about the challenges they face and, at the same time, engaging in a constructive dialogue with civil society is a major challenge. While this does not avoid tensions, a lesson to be drawn from the APRM is that the methodology for stakeholder engagement is clear. As for the 2030 Agenda, the UN Secretariat facilitated stakeholder participation in the post-2015 negotiations and should continue to do so in terms of the VNRs. It was underscored that once civil society is part of the VNR process there is ownership: if civil society is involved in the elaboration of the national VNR report, the latter is less likely to be contested when it is presented at the global level.

Suggestions for improving VNRs at the HLPF

The global level reviews at the HLPF should provide political guidance and leadership. Looking ahead, two scenarios were considered possible:

If the current VNR format is to be continued, improvements could be made along the lines of "less is more" and "analysis first". Reports would need to be submitted earlier so that HLPF participants can use them in their preparations for the meeting and can contribute substantively to the interactive discussion following the VNR presentation. Presentations should focus more on aspects that are relevant to the audience, such as successful policies and measures taken, lessons

learned, and integrated policy advice. There should be a thorough analysis on which the presentation is based, and/or countries could highlight areas in which they would need specific support from development partners so that the HLPF can be used as a platform for “match-making”. The interactive dialogue following the presentations could be used in a better way, e.g. VNR countries could either reach out to others to prepare questions, or a mix of countries could be pre-identified to prepare feedback on the VNR report. A better follow-up after the VNR presentations would also be required. This could include a “match-making” process with investment funds and development partners, as well as twinning and policy dialogue among Member States based on the needs identified in the VNR reports.

An upgraded format of the VNRs could include more meeting dates, revamping the voluntary guidelines and drawing lessons from other existing review mechanisms. However, concerns were raised that there are neither the required resources nor the political will to go further than the VNR provisions outlined in the 2030 Agenda.

VNR Lab 7 “Continuing the Dialogue - Switzerland”

In VNR Labs 7 and 8, two 2018 VNR presenting countries, Switzerland and Jamaica, elaborated respectively on their experiences of the VNR process and the challenges they identified for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Challenges for SDG implementation

The 2018 VNR report provides a synthesis of the status of the domestic implementation of the 2030 Agenda. A comprehensive baseline assessment of existing policies, strategies, laws and other instruments was conducted against every target to determine where action would be required and as a starting point for measuring progress in the years ahead. Furthermore, some of the targets were translated to the national context, such as curbing relative instead of extreme poverty. Similarly, the national indicator and monitoring system was expanded to track progress against the SDGs. Challenges remain across the set of goals, including the gender pay gap, domestic violence, inequalities and vulnerable groups, enhancing climate action and efforts to reverse biodiversity loss, policy coherence for sustainable development and ODA contribution. Despite strategies and measures in place, SDG 12 was highlighted as an area where further and more coordinated action would be required. Sustainable consumption and production patterns will therefore be one of the priorities in the next iteration of the national sustainable development strategy. The 2018 VNR serves as a mid-term report on which the next sustainable development strategy and action plan with specific measures starting 2020 will be based.

VNR process

Switzerland launched an interdepartmental process to implement the 2030 Agenda at the end of 2015 based on the mandate given by the federal government to elaborate a broad baseline assessment and to present a VNR report in 2018. During the transition phase of about two years, a coordinating National 2030 Agenda Working Group was set up and led jointly by the Federal Office for Spatial Development and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. A whole-of-government approach involved more than 40 offices within the administration. A detailed analysis on a target basis was conducted to translate the targets into the Swiss context and to identify existing policies and indicators. While the thorough baseline assessment was a long and challenging process, it was critical to lay the ground for comprehensive reporting and discussion in the context of the VNR. This foundational work also allowed to get to know most of the players involved in the domestic implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and will provide the basis for developing the next iteration of the national sustainable development strategy. The national report was elaborated and approved by Parliament as the basis for the VNR presentation at the 2018 HLPF.

The elaboration of the VNR was also informed by a national consultation process. The stakeholder engagement dates back to 2012 when consultations were launched on the Swiss negotiating position on the, at the time, post-2015 development agenda. Following the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the '2030 Dialogue for Sustainable Development' was established, combining the national and international participatory processes for sustainable development. Stakeholders were also engaged through a multi-stakeholder advisory group and online consultations. While the tradition of open dialogue with stakeholders was welcomed, it was pointed out that many of the inputs gathered through the transparent bottom-up approach ultimately do not find their place in a report which is signed off at the highest political level. In 2017, 40 Swiss NGOs created a civil society platform for the 2030 Agenda and produced a VNR shadow report.

Lessons learned

The baseline assessment and the VNR process revealed the challenge of communicating the universal nature of the 2030 Agenda and mobilizing stakeholders around the SDGs within the country. While the media has picked up the 2030 Agenda, the latter still needs to be taken to the 'heart of politics'. To this end, the sub-national level and the Parliament would need to be engaged more. Integrating and aligning the daily political business with the SDGs would help to make the goals part and parcel of the legislative process and ensure a longer-term commitment beyond the current four-year policy planning and budgeting cycle. As an important lobby group, awareness raising with the private sector and business associations would also be critical. Securing the ownership of the federal offices, cantons and communes is key as implementation primarily happens at the local level. The example of a city-level VNR was considered interesting in this

regard. Moreover, it was pointed out that the domestic implementation of the 2030 Agenda would benefit from a central unit in the government to oversee the implementation efforts.

Participants underscored that the transformational potential of the 2030 Agenda lies in the interlinkages between the SDGs and its requirement to foster policy coherence. Data disaggregation is also key for measuring progress for all groups of society. Looking ahead, it was suggested to focus more on cross-cutting themes and their spill-over effects, such as leaving no one behind, gender and youth, which could further spur the achievement of the 2030 Agenda.

VNR Lab 8 “Continuing the Dialogue – Jamaica”

VNR Lab 8 on “Continuing the Dialogue – Jamaica” focused on the multi-tiered institutional arrangements put in place for SDG implementation, including a SDG Core Group comprising the Planning Institute of Jamaica, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade and the national statistics office. The VNR process coincided with the formulation of the country’s fourth successive Medium Term Socio-Economic Policy Framework (MTF) for the period 2018-2021.

Challenges for SDG implementation

Participants elaborated on the main challenges for the overall implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the barriers encountered and approaches to overcome these barriers. For each of the SDGs, the report identifies the specific challenges that are being faced. Persons with disabilities, youth, particularly unattached youth, women, informal settlers, rural communities and vulnerable communities with high levels of crime were identified as groups most at risk of being left behind. Efforts to address these challenges are constrained by the limited financial resources for climate action and for data disaggregation, e.g. to carry out community level surveys. Perceptions or stigma are a major concern for identifying persons with disabilities. Resettling people from natural disaster-prone areas often faces resistance to change. Funding and partnerships were proposed as approaches to reach marginalized groups.

VNR process

The VNR report was elaborated through a multi-stakeholder process, including youth parliamentarians and community based organizations. The national library network was used for VNR consultations in conjunction with a public education campaign. The Medium Term Socio-Economic Policy Framework for the period 2018-2021 and the VNR were prepared in parallel and thus synergies were created in a series of meetings with stakeholder partners and thematic working groups. The VNR report was drafted in a first step and then consulted with civil society organizations. The main VNR report covers all 17 SDGs and the development results for the period 2015-2018. In addition, a statistical annex on all SDG indicators that the country is

able to monitor was produced; those indicators which currently cannot be produced were identified. The comprehensive set of reports also includes an annex on the contribution of Jamaica's International Development Partners to the financing and implementation of the SDGs, a report on climate change as well as climate change statistics.

The statistical assessment for the overall implementation of the 2030 Agenda started in March 2016 through thematic, multi-stakeholder working groups. As the indicator system is decentralized, three thematic consultations were launched to identify indicators that the country could produce but currently is not; other indicators which are relevant from a national perspective; and data gaps. Following the consultations there was a verification of the information provided, and lead agencies were assigned for each indicator. The consultations revealed a considerable gap in terms of environmental indicators. Furthermore, surveys on violence against women and child labour were launched to fill certain data gaps and to develop new indicators. Support was provided by UN agencies on data quality, and in specific areas such as water. The data collection started in April 2017, the newer indicators also required some reassignment of responsibilities. Currently, Jamaica is able to produce 49 per cent of the global SDG indicators. Challenges identified include the communication of and about data, the digitization of data and the way data is delivered, as well as updating and making existing data more relevant.

Lessons learned

The VNR process demonstrated that integration, coordination and coherence for the 2030 Agenda require a dedicated team. Ownership at all levels is key as the success of the SDGs depends on the awareness of all stakeholders that everyone can and has a role to play in the achievement of the goals. Vertical and horizontal coordination would need to be strengthened to create synergies across the goals, e.g. action in electricity can contribute to decent work and poverty eradication. Financing would need to be improved in all areas of SDG delivery. It was noted that the High-level Political Forum is a useful platform to learn about the tools and technical support available within the UN system and from development partners. At the national level, localizing the SDGs and awareness raising from the early childhood level was considered critical to achieve a whole-of-society approach, including through innovative approaches such as a SDG roadshow and a SDG soccer competition.

Looking ahead

The VNR Labs provided a "safe space" to share experiences, learn from each other and network. Discussions were rich and candid in pointing to the challenges that countries face in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and the solutions being developed in response to these

challenges. Across the eight Labs, it was highlighted that it takes dedicated individuals within administrations, civil society and the private sector who understand the transformative potential of the 2030 Agenda and steward the change of mindset towards comprehensive and long-term policy planning that leaves no one behind.
