

**Workshop for the 2019 Voluntary National Reviews  
at the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development  
16 – 17 October 2018  
Geneva, Switzerland**

**SUMMARY**

The First Global Workshop for the 2019 Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) at the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development was held in Geneva from 16-17 October 2018. The workshop brought together a total of 61 country representatives from 39 2019 VNR presenting countries and from twelve countries having presented in previous years. Past presenters shared their lessons learned and best practices with countries yet to embark on the process. Guidance on the VNR preparatory process was provided by UN DESA divisions and the representatives of the Regional Commissions, including on content of the report, stakeholder engagement, means of implementation, data and statistics for evidence-based VNRs, the regional dimension, as well as the principle of leaving no one behind. The workshop concluded with a Knowledge Exchange offering a platform for about 30 UN entities, other international organizations and stakeholder partners to showcase tools and methodologies available to support countries in their VNR process, and the overall implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

**Welcome & Opening**

Opening remarks were delivered respectively by representatives of the UN Economic Commission for Europe, the UN Office for Sustainable Development (UNOSD) and the Office of Intergovernmental Support and Coordination for Sustainable Development (OISC), UN DESA. It was noted that by now 102 Member States have presented their Voluntary National Reviews to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development with another 41 countries to present their first reviews in 2019 and ten countries presenting for the second time. Valuable experience has been gained throughout the process thus far.

It was noted that 2019 is a critical year, with the HLPF convening for the first time both under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in July and at the level of Heads of State and Government under the auspices of the General Assembly in September 2019. The HLPF under the auspices of ECOSOC will conclude the first cycle of reviews on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and thus provides an opportunity to build on the lessons learned thus far. The meeting should keep the momentum of the SDGs and attract participants from different walks of life. The SDG Summit in September 2019 is expected to consider the progress achieved, to identify gaps and to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda overall. It will be important to send a political signal that the HLPF can serve as a forum for the international community and to reiterate the commitment of the latter to the 2030 Agenda. Having been introduced as an innovation at the time of the negotiations on the 2030 Agenda, the VNRs have become the hallmark of the HLPF. Expressions of interest to present VNRs in 2020 have already been received by the Secretariat.

The role of the Regional Commissions in supporting countries' VNRs was highlighted, including through the regional forums on sustainable development. Regional Commissions' support to the VNR process is delivered within the broader context of ensuring effective coherent and integrated implementation, follow-up, monitoring and reporting on the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable

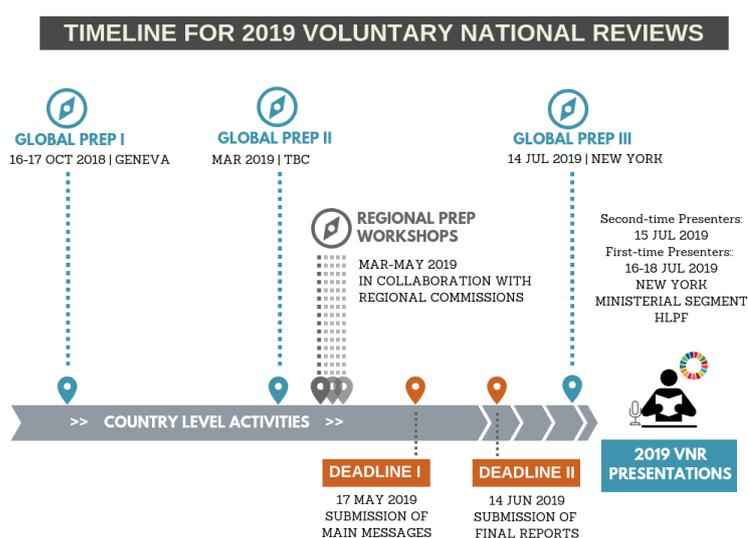
Development Goals and bridges the gap between national and global levels. Outlining its support to integrated sustainability transformation, research and training as well as partnership, UNOSD also stressed the interlinked nature of the SDGs and sustainable development as well as cross-cutting and emerging issues. UNOSD outlined the support provided by the office created in 2012, including integrated sustainability transformation, research, training and partnerships.

The Geneva VNR workshop is the first in a series of workshops to be convened throughout the VNR preparatory process, including the regional forums on sustainable development. The element of peer learning was underscored, and participants were encouraged to candidly engage in the exchange of lessons learned and best practices on a range of elements of the VNR process both during the plenary and in discussion groups.

### Starting the VNR process and working towards the report

UN DESA provided guidance on the steps countries can take towards their VNR process and the presentation of the review at the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. The *Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines for VNRs* attempt to help countries to structure their VNR reports for the presentation at the HLPF; to promote comparability and consistency. They are voluntary in nature – each country is free to decide on the scope and format of its review. In line with paragraph 74 of the 2030 Agenda<sup>1</sup>, follow-up and review processes at all levels are guided by six main principles: First, national ownership of the VNRs which are to be voluntary and country-led. Second, incorporation of the SDGs into national frameworks and plans. Third, the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development. Fourth, the principle of leaving no one behind. Fifth, making use of existing national frameworks to prepare the reports. Sixth, reflecting on cross-cutting issues, nationally but also at the regional level.

It was recalled that countries have up to 30 minutes for their individual presentations at the HLPF including Q&A, with the date of presentations being agreed by the ECOSOC Bureau with the Permanent Missions in New York and according to diplomatic rank. Ten countries presenting their second VNR in 2019 will present in two panels on Monday, 15 July 2019, whereas the countries presenting for the first time, as was the case in previous years, will do so during the Ministerial Segment from 16-18 July 2019. Main messages of the VNRs (700 words) would need to be submitted to UN DESA by **17 May 2019**; the final VNR reports are expected by **14 June 2019**. The main messages will be translated in all UN languages and will be issued



<sup>1</sup> A/RES/70/1

as an official document of the HLPF. The VNR reports will remain in the UN language in which they have been submitted and will not be translated.

Resource materials to support countries in the preparatory process include, besides the Secretary-General's voluntary common guidelines, the [VNR Handbook](#) (available in the UN languages and updated for 2019) and the website dedicated to [VNRs on the Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform](#).

Building on the introduction by UN DESA, three countries having presented a VNR in previous years shared their lessons learned on the review process and working towards the report. A European country described the VNR process as useful to map the country's baseline for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The VNR helped to identify areas in which the country is doing well such as biodiversity protection, high share of renewable energy in the heating sector, e-services and high quality and accessibility of education, as well as challenges, including developing an energy efficient economy, subsistence of persons with low income, and the gender pay gap. A gap analysis was conducted to map policy measures. The VNR process also provided an overview of the institutional set up and revealed the need to raise awareness about the 2030 Agenda. The VNR report was elaborated in cooperation with stakeholders through an inter-ministerial working group on sustainable development, the country's Sustainable Development Commission, which acts as an advisory group to the government. Lessons learned from the process include starting the VNR process early, and to involve all stakeholders and ministries as well as to the extent possible the private sector. A word of advice to 2019 presenting countries was to make use of existing networks and to, above all, make the process useful to their own countries. All SDGs are interconnected, and the same interconnectedness would be required between national stakeholders and ministries.

A past presenter from Africa noted that sustainable development is anchored in the country's Constitution. The country envisions to achieve lower middle-income status by 2025 as set out in its Vision document, including through a climate resilient green economy which helps to frame the SDGs in the national context. The importance of planning and mainstreaming the SDGs in national development plans was underscored. The country started the VNR process by reviewing existing plans and laws. Consultations on the draft VNR report were subsequently held at federal and regional levels to ensure national ownership. Lessons learned include to also hold consultations at the local level and to translate the VNR report into local languages. National pro-poor and pro-growth policies are critical to leave no one behind. Challenges highlighted include climate change induced droughts, mobilizing financing for infrastructure and instability. Data gaps regarding the SDGs are also of concern. The mobilization of all stakeholders and institutions to champion the SDGs is important. After the VNR, measures were taken to define a development plan 2020-2030, based on the finalized SDG needs assessment. In addition, a SDG gap analysis was conducted. The VNR drew on two statistical sources, the central statistical agency and data provided by sector ministries.

Sharing its VNR experience, a past presenter from the Asia-Pacific region pointed to the importance of a robust institutional set up and a whole of government approach: A National Committee for the SDGs was established by decree of the Council of Ministers and is chaired by the Prime Minister. Representatives of civil society organisations and the private sector also participated, and a website has been established. The country followed the Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting

guidelines and noted that the VNR handbook gave sufficient guidance for the process. Building on a non-centralized system of development decision-making, the country started the VNR process with awareness raising workshops for the government, the private sector and stakeholders. Workshop participants subsequently took the messages back to their respective constituencies. A questionnaire was shared covering strategies, programmes, challenges, and resources. This bottom-up approach created ownership of the process, it revealed, however, challenges related to statistics and quantitative data. An official channel between the country's civil society and the government was established and cooperation was promoted throughout the VNR process. The VNR draft report was validated by different ministries across the government. As capacities among ministries varied, the country reported at the goal level and synthesized further under the 5 Ps - People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership. Building on the first VNR, the country will be able to report on the target level in its next voluntary national review.

Participants further shared their experiences during the subsequent interactive discussion on the different government entities responsible for conducting the VNR, as well as synergies between the 2030 Agenda and other frameworks such as the African Union's Agenda 2063. Others pointed to the challenges that they are facing at the start of the VNR process, such as narrowing down the scope of the review while covering all SDGs, the institutional coordination mechanisms required as well as ways to approach the principle of leaving no one behind, such as translating the SDGs to local languages. Countries asked past presenters to share the planning tools and approaches used to make sure that the VNR is endorsed across ministries. Prompted on regional cooperation in the VNR process, countries elaborated on the VNR planning process which was supported by the Regional Commissions.

It was underscored that the VNR required a full-time commitment, engaging all relevant sectors. It was advised to prepare a comprehensive checklist and terms of reference for engaging line ministries. Several countries have used a national consultation platform for VNR consultations. One participant noted that during the HLPF, the chamber of commerce organized side events in cooperation with the government and civil society organizations. It was underscored that the VNR is not an end in itself. Countries are expected to report on all 17 SDGs, while the levels of analysis can vary across the goals. Member States that will present for the second time outlined how they had mapped the SDGs for the first VNR to define the baseline for reporting and implementation. This process has helped to identify some of the SDGs that can accelerate the achievement of other goals in the national context, such as infrastructure, increasing women's participation in the labour force, adapting curricula to the requirements of the labour market and tackling regional disparities.

### **VNR preparatory process – main elements and benefits from VNRs**

The second workshop session primarily focused on how the VNR process can benefit the national implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In the presentation by a UN DESA representative, countries were advised to look at policy coherence and trade-offs which are critical to the interlinked nature of the SDGs. The VNR should further identify areas where support from partners would be required. It can also serve as a communication tool to showcase to citizens how the SDGs are relevant to their lives, e.g. through launching the VNR at the national level before or after the HLPF. It was underscored that the 2030 Agenda required a change of mindset as illustrated by the notions of leaving no one behind, universality, accountability to citizens and integrated policies. VNRs can help identify priorities across

all 17 SDGs. To maximize the benefits of the VNR, the review should be linked to national plans and strategies. Linkages could also be created with supreme audit institutions and parliaments, especially for budgetary and costing processes. Countries are encouraged to follow-up after the VNR, including through twinning with other countries, sharing experiences or seeking policy advice.

Based on a questionnaire sent to the 46 countries that presented a VNR in 2018, a UN DESA representative presented the analysis of the responses. Main challenges encountered in the preparation of the VNRs centred around data availability and statistical capacity, cross- and inter-institutional coordination for SDG implementation, and engaging stakeholders. Completing the VNR report in time for the submission to the HLPF also proved difficult for some countries. Respondents thus unanimously stressed the importance of starting the process as early as possible, dedicating time to consultations and strategic outreach to stakeholders as well as involving the media in the process. It was also advised to establish coordination structures which are critical for conducting the VNR process, including, for example, national SDG stakeholder forums or platforms for SDG monitoring. A clear action plan should be established and a coordinator for the VNR process be appointed. Responsibilities and expectations should also be clearly established. Respondents noted that they considered creating a data portal or digital platform to facilitate the collection of data and the effective contribution of all stakeholders. The inclusion of a statistical annex to the report was considered important for an evidence-based VNR by those countries that compiled such an annex. Finally, it was stressed that the VNR reports should highlight good practices from which other countries can learn but should also acknowledge gaps and challenges, where countries would need support.

A representative of ECLAC, on behalf of the five Regional Commissions presented the support that the Commissions offer to their respective Member States in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including policy advice, capacity building services and knowledge products on a wide range of sustainable development issues. Annual regional reports cover the status of implementation, including economic and social trends, financing for development and institutional arrangements. Regional Commissions also coordinate with other entities of



the UN family and with regional actors when engaging with Member States on VNR support. As conveners, the Regional Commissions bring a wide range of stakeholders to their intergovernmental platforms and events and are institutionalizing their engagement more broadly, including through the Regional Forums on Sustainable Development. Prior to these forums, VNR workshops are being held for each region allowing for peer learning and exchange of experiences specific to the region.

Some progress and challenges identified in the regions include: In Africa, most countries that were developing their long-term visions and/or National Development Plans have integrated the SDGs into their national development frameworks and are also strengthening institutional arrangements to implement the SDGs. However, there is little ownership of the two agendas (2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063) by public institutions (e.g. parliament, constitutional courts, local and official governments) and

slow progress in adaptation and implementation of the SDGs in many African countries. It was noted that lessons learned should be shared.

In the countries covered by the Economic Commission for Europe, several countries have already presented a VNR twice, and significant progress has been made in mainstreaming the SDGs. Yet, some countries have not yet reported on their efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda. Similarly, while many countries in ECLAC have already volunteered to present a VNR for the second time, several small islands developing states and landlocked developing countries in the region have not yet presented a VNR. In ESCWA, building on the VNRs and planning post-VNR activities is a priority. In countries in conflict situations, SDG implementation and reporting thereon remains challenging. In ESCAP, consistent efforts have resulted in a multi-stakeholder mechanism in the region which can be replicated elsewhere.

While challenges across regions differ, commonalities can be identified. These include the data gap which remains the biggest challenge along with lack of data disaggregation. Enhanced methods for data collection, disaggregation and use for establishing baseline monitoring are required. Furthermore, highlighting interlinkages between the SDGs in the VNRs remains limited. Similarly, monitoring and evaluation as well as assessing policy impact is mostly absent in VNRs. The VNR can be a catalyst for collaboration between Governments and stakeholders as well as a vehicle for awareness raising, thereby accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. However, the VNR cycle is considered too short. Moreover, high-level commitment and support are required for a successful process.

Sharing their VNR experience during the subsequent interactive discussion, countries from both the African region and Europe emphasized that the latter constituted a learning process. Having conducted two VNRs, the first one in 2016 and the second one in 2018, the first report focused on processes and policies to be implemented, while, in the second VNR, progress had to be shown. A delegate from the African region noted that the launch of the country's Vision 2030 at the same time as the VNR provided a golden opportunity to showcase synergies between the national and global commitments. The VNR created momentum for SDG implementation. A national committee headed by the Prime Minister has been established. In parallel to the overarching coordination structure, sustainable development units have been created in all governmental entities and focal points were nominated within these units. Civil society and private sector focal points were also designated. Furthermore, the national UN Global Compact network was used to mobilize the private sector. A stakeholder engagement mechanism was considered useful. All 17 SDGs were reviewed to evaluate the progress made, while the goals under thematic review were analysed more in depth. Going forward, a national process for reviewing progress annually will be established. The first Global VNR workshop in 2017 helped to set the pace, to structure the report and to initiate the development of a work plan. The latter should also include deadlines for stakeholder consultations and workshops. The VNR Handbook was considered useful giving an idea of what is required, yet countries would have to do their 'homework'. The consolidation process of all the inputs received throughout the process was considered difficult and the importance of having the VNR report reviewed by all entities was stressed.

A participant from Europe noted that the country is currently drawing on the main lesson learned of its first VNR in 2017, starting the process early with preparations for a second review in 2020 to start in January 2019. In 2017, the country was preparing its national sustainable development strategy in which the SDGs were embedded to avoid establishing a separate reporting process. It was stressed

that the 2030 Agenda indeed represents a paradigm shift: Indivisibility means implementing the entire Agenda. Silo-breaking is not about re-organizing entities, but also breaking habits and the usual way of thinking. The country included a gap analysis in its first VNR and reported on indicators. However, policies and stories of how the 2030 Agenda is being implemented across the country were also discussed. The data analysis was exhaustive, whereas stories were selected according to priorities. A special chapter on youth was included. It was drafted by the national youth council which brings together youth organizations across the country. Coordination across government required flexibility as different levels of readiness had to be taken into account. Civil society was consulted at different levels of the VNR process; the Parliament was also involved. However, it was noted that engagement takes time, especially for it to be meaningful. Local communities will be involved more in the second VNR process. After the first VNR, the national sustainable development strategy is being implemented. A budget is being prepared to respond to the financing gaps that have been identified. The supreme audit institution was also eager to implement the SDGs.

Other past presenters from Latin America noted that the VNR was perceived as a possibility to enhance high-level political will. Designing a communication strategy for different levels and different stakeholders was challenging. The country included the views of civil society organizations in its 2018 VNR, pointing out that even though there is not always agreement, there is an acknowledgement that there are different views. Going forward, setting up a monitoring mechanism at the state level is envisaged.

During the interactive discussion, countries having already presented a VNR underscored the VNR process as an accelerator for national implementation. The SDG indicators were considered an important tool for coping with the challenge of implementing a set of key recommendations. Engaging the private sector was challenging, as discussing high-level policies is not attractive to most companies. Responding to a question raised on the involvement of academia and the media in the VNR process, past presenters stressed that academia was part of the process and provided important inputs in terms of analysis and assessments. In some countries, the media covered the VNR presentation. Workshops were convened for journalists to introduce them to the sustainable development concept which is not well understood.

Countries also shared their concerns of convincing all stakeholders of the need to conduct an honest self-examination. The 2030 Agenda was not so much about new issues but about doing things differently. The data challenge, for example, required new ways of evaluation, e.g. of the degree of the ownership of institutions. There should be attempts to measure process quality and to plan risk in public management. Participants encouraged past presenters to share their experiences in addressing the issue of budgeting, particularly how technical and financial resources have been allocated. One country stated that the government's new finance law requires a four-year national action plan that is adopted each year as part of the budgetary process. This would from now on be connected to the SDGs. Other countries have conducted an exercise of aligning the budget with the 2030 Agenda. On capacities for the VNR process, countries noted that it is better to dedicate someone from within the government to handle consolidation and coordination rather than outsourcing the latter to an external consultant who oftentimes is not familiar with inside government dynamics nor in a position to have a comprehensive overview. It was suggested to set up specific teams within the Regional Commissions to support individual countries conducting a VNR for the first time.

## **Substantive preparation for the VNR report: Expectations from the report**

Introducing the main expectations from VNR reports, a UN DESA representative highlighted that the process to prepare the VNRs matters more than the presentation in New York. The preparation can bring benefits for the country in several ways, including by improving policies, strengthening institutions and building ownership among governments and non-state actors.

VNRs are state-led, with a clear mandate and expected to respect several principles, as expressed in paragraph 74 of the 2030 Agenda. The Secretary-General's voluntary common guidelines and the VNR Handbook are the main tools supporting countries in undertaking VNRs. Presenters are expected to present three products as the outcome of the Voluntary National Reviews:

- 1) **Main Messages (by 17 May 2019)**, with highlights from the report.
- 2) **A full report (by 14 June 2019)**. Member States have more leeway in terms of length and style for the full report.
- 3) **Presentation** of the VNR report in New York.

In terms of audience, VNR reports are aimed at an international audience, including countries attending the HLPF, as well as at the national audience. National institutions are expected to lead the drafting of the report as it should be owned by the country. It is recommended that the institution drafting the report has some clout and convening power in order to mobilize the different sectors and stakeholders. It was also flagged that VNR reports can build on other reports that countries prepare for international bodies and the UN system.

It was stressed that VNR reports should consider all SDGs and not only those that happen to be under in-depth review by the HLPF in a given year. Special focus, however, can be placed on some SDGs, depending on national priorities. This approach allows for comparability between reports, reinforcing the integral nature of the SDGs and the commitment of countries to the whole 2030 Agenda. The recommended structure for the reports was shared, as per the UN Secretary-General's voluntary common guidelines. Countries were encouraged to use VNR reports not only to describe policies but also to give a sense of successes, lessons learned and challenges and on how the VNR process is embedded in the national implementation of the SDGs. Ideally, reports should be shared in one of the UN official languages and countries were advised to use the UN official names when referring to countries and other related aspects.

Presentations at the HLPF are usually made by a Minister or a high-level official. 15 minutes presentations are followed by 15 minutes interaction with governments and major groups and other stakeholders. Countries were encouraged to use visuals, including videos. A focal point will be identified soon by UN DESA to provide direct support to Member States.

Drawing on their VNR experience, past presenters noted that their report provided an assessment of the readiness of the country to implement the 2030 Agenda. A delegate from Africa noted that the SDGs have been integrated into the country's national development plan and are in line with its Vision 2040 and the African Union Agenda 2063. Consultations with stakeholders were carried out and inputs collected were submitted to the National SDG Task Force, which was responsible for drafting the VNR report. A validation workshop was conducted with government and stakeholder representatives. The

National Coordination Framework oversees the implementation of the SDGs through the work of several committees, including: policy and coordination; implementation; the National SDG Task Force; technical working groups; implementation coordination, monitoring and evaluation and reporting; planning and mainstreaming; resource mobilization and data. Additionally, sectorial working groups mobilize ministries and partners from central and local governments. Progress reports are submitted by the Technical working group to the National SDG Task Force. On Leaving no one behind, the country has focused on identifying vulnerable groups, especially refugees. Challenges identified in the VNR report include: coordination among government departments, sustainable financing and human resources gaps. Lessons were learned in several aspects, including on governance, good practices, coordination and multi-stakeholder strategy, partnership and collaboration; awareness raising with citizens; integration and cross-cutting issues and integration into national development plan.

A participant from Latin America noted that the country's first VNR report in 2017 focused on the adaptation of the 2030 Agenda to the national context. The National Council for the Coordination of Social Policies is tasked to monitor and report on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Ministries and collaborating entities, including the National Institute for Statistics and Census were engaged in the elaboration of the VNR report. The report was developed in three phases: 1) Design of the report, including the development of consultation materials and a roadmap of the process; 2) Drafting of the report and opening for consultations and inputs and 3) Revision and editing, presentation to the National Council on Sustainable Development prior to the HLPF in New York. Besides the VNR, the country is currently preparing national reports and working on a review of the national budget to quantify policies that are supporting the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, by linking the SDGs to policies and budget. This process is currently under review by the National Congress.

A European country noted the spirit of collaboration in which the VNR was prepared. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs coordinates SDG implementation and all line ministries are responsible for implementing and reporting on their respective areas. The country also presents an annual SDG report to the Parliament and meetings with stakeholders are held regularly. The VNR report consisted of two parts: a more detailed document, focusing on the national level and national policies and a second, more focused document, targeting the UN audience and addressing the country's support to SDG implementation abroad. The delegate recommended to report on all SDGs as this facilitates the engagement of all Ministries in the implementation and review process. Rallying stakeholders to support the SDG implementation and follow-up was further considered critical for the VNR preparation process. The national report benefited from consultations with stakeholder groups through umbrella networks and each contributed a chapter to the national report. The process has also supported self-coordination and organization within stakeholder groups. Text boxes highlighting specific examples were included in the VNR report. The latter flagged both successes and challenges; reporting on the challenges strengthened the VNR report and the next steps after the presentation in New York. A dynamic approach was reported for the presentation at the HLPF, composing a delegation that included Ministers of overseas territories and a youth delegate. The VNR process has helped engaging all government entities as well as stakeholders on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Challenges encountered in going forward relate to transforming reporting exercises into useful inputs for debate in the Parliament, and to improve data availability within the country where currently only 50% of SDG data is available.

Having presented the country's first VNR in 2018, a delegate from Africa noted that the first step was to garner the political commitment at the highest government level. Additionally, the SDGs have been institutionalized as a framework for collaboration with stakeholders. A detailed plan was set up for the preparation of the VNR, including through the establishment of an ad hoc cross-sectorial committee. Inputs were collected based on thematic contributions from Ministries and stakeholders based on SDG sectorial reviews. Sub-national consultations were held by the CSO Working Group focusing on the principle of "leaving no one behind". A process of validation has been established at the local and national level. The participant explained that, to get the maximum value, the drafting of the VNR report should be a national, participatory exercise that promotes ownership through the involvement of all actors at local and national level. Finally, creating visibility for the VNR process was also considered important, to increase public interest and engagement of citizens in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Main points raised by participants during the ensuing interactive discussion centred around the challenges encountered by Ministries of Foreign Affairs to coordinate national VNR processes, identification of CSOs and stakeholders to be part of the process, cross-ministerial and – departmental coordination and SDG prioritization. Participants noted difficulties for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to coordinate the VNR process, since it mainly focuses on political issues and does not implement national policies. In countries where the Ministry of Foreign Affairs acted as the 'omnibus broker', linking national and international work was decided after internal consultation.

On processes established for the identification of CSOs and stakeholders to be part of the VNR process, past presenters informed that non-governmental organizations were mobilized through umbrella organizations and that stakeholders received feedback on their inputs to the process. One country also collaborated with its National Centre for the Participation of Communities and a survey was shared with its members to collect inputs. The VNR presentation at the HLPF included a representative of a CSO and of the private sector. Others also worked with umbrella networks, representing different sectors, which self-organized to work with the government throughout the process. Open consultations were set up to allow for organizations and groups not associated with umbrella networks to contribute. Stakeholders have also been engaged in collecting data. One country engaged with an umbrella network, the Confederation of CSOs in Development which expressed the desire to work especially on LNOB.

Responding to the question on how to coordinate the different ministries and departments to take on responsibilities in the VNR process, past presenters noted that they set up monthly reports from ministries to the national council as a way to facilitate coordination and feedback. In other countries, Ministries were asked to identify SDG focal points and the different sectors were encouraged to participate in the HLPF, including in the thematic reviews. Others noted that the Ministry of Planning was responsible for coordinating the VNR work. On SDG prioritization, it was reiterated that the VNRs should, in principle, cover all SDGs. The VNR Handbook was noted as a useful guide in this regard.

### **Implementing the SDGs: Experiences, lessons learned and challenges: Lessons from VNRs since 2016**

The session focused on the lessons learned from the VNRs identified through two work streams of UN DESA: the synthesis report on the VNRs presented at the HLPF which is produced annually and the

analytical work on the VNRs that the Committee for Development Policy (CDP) has been conducting since 2017.

The VNR synthesis report provides a snapshot of countries' actions and thus constitutes a vast data base on policy measures. Key lessons learned include that VNRs can be a critical tool to galvanize political will and to mobilize action by all. Countries are struggling, however, in raising the level of awareness of the SDGs which remains low. The VNR synthesis report showcases how countries apply the principles of the 2030 Agenda, such as a human rights-based approach and leaving no one behind (LNOB). Some countries have included their Universal Periodic Review (UPR) findings in the VNR report, others have outlined what LNOB means for each SDG. Challenges with regards to policy coherence, trade-offs and interlinkages also persist.

Capacity needs in six main categories can be drawn from the synthesis report: data and statistics; mainstreaming the SDGs in national development plans, sub-national and sectoral plans; governance and coordination; stakeholder engagement; cost evaluations, budgeting and resource mobilization; as well as SDG specific needs. Mapping policies, plans and strategies is just the first step, adjusting policies also requires prioritizing and allocating resources. Some countries have announced that they will carry out a financing needs assessment of SDG implementation, others plan on conducting a costing exercise and a capacity assessment. Interesting examples are also available in terms of budgeting for the SDGs, e.g. through introducing SDG coding to annual programmes and budgets. However, not many cost assessments and budgeting strategies have been outlined in the VNR reports, which thus constitutes an area where exchange of best practices and lessons learned would be useful.

Analytical work on the VNRs is also being carried out by the Committee for Development Policy (CDP) as part of its policy advice to ECOSOC and to the HLPF under the auspices of the Council. The work of the CDP aims at identifying key issues in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and highlighting diverse country practices to promote mutual learning. The analysis of the VNR reports complements the CDP work on the 2030 Agenda, e.g. on leaving no one behind, and focuses on cross-cutting issues. A systematic content analysis was conducted on the way the VNRs address the principle of leaving no one behind, policy trade-offs, and the global partnership and SDG 17.

Most of the 43 VNR reports presented in 2017 mention LNOB as a principle. However, few countries present explicit strategies in this regard. Furthermore, only few countries address the commitment to reach those furthest behind. Most countries addressed women, children, persons with disabilities and the elderly as groups at risk of being left behind. Fewer countries identify ethnic/religious and indigenous groups as those at risk. Social protection is the predominant strategy to address the principle of LNOB, while few countries mention macro-economic policies, technology and participation in decision-making.

The VNR reports further highlight the importance of integrated policy, yet trade-offs receive less attention than synergies. Less than a third of the 2017 VNRs outline concrete solutions or mechanisms. The content analysis also reveals limited coverage of SDG 17. While there are many references to the global partnership, few strategies and concrete actions are being mentioned. Furthermore, the coverage of the different targets under SDG 17 varies widely with more attention being paid to domestic than to international aspects.

In the subsequent interactive discussion, countries' comments and questions centred on ways to strengthen the VNRs analytically. It was pointed out that the analytical strength of the VNR depends on the country. One way to improve the analytical dimension of the reports would be to reflect - throughout the drafting of the report - on how others could learn from the examples given and to identify policies that have worked. Countries could focus on some specific examples, while providing a comprehensive report through data coverage. Think tanks in the country could be engaged. It was also noted that the methodology of requesting inputs from ministries to the report could focus on three key elements: what is the policy, what is its impact and what are the lessons learned? Requesting inputs in this manner could provide more analytical answers. Countries should also be specific about capacity needs: what is the technology needed and how would it benefit, e.g. the country's early warning systems?

### **WORKING GROUPS – Input presentations and reporting back**

Participants broke into four working groups to discuss and share experiences on the following four key elements of the VNR preparatory process: engaging stakeholders; institutions; financing implementation; and the use of data for national implementation and VNRs.

#### **Topic A: Preparatory process – engaging stakeholders**

A UN DESA representative delivered an input presentation on stakeholder engagement as a central part of the 2030 Agenda and the VNR process. In the Agenda, countries committed to support the participation of Major Groups and other stakeholders (para. 39, 45 and 60). The principles for follow-up and review further specify that reviews should be “open, inclusive, participatory and transparent for all people”, “will support the reporting by all relevant stakeholders” and be “people-centered, gender-sensitive, respect human rights and have a particular focus on the poorest, most vulnerable and those furthest behind” (para. 74 d). Engaging stakeholders provides for a better understanding of challenges, creates space for dialogue, promotes partnerships, empowers local voices and creates ownership. Countries should consider both, how stakeholders are being engaged in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and how they participate in the VNR process.

Prior to any engagement, a mapping of stakeholders provides a good starting point for the process. A tool developed by UN ESCAP allows to identify five different levels of participation and engagement: informing, consulting, involving, collaboration and empowerment. Applied to the VNR process, this methodology identifies requesting inputs from stakeholders and organizing consultations as the basic level of engagement. A second level of involvement would be governments sharing draft VNR reports with stakeholders for their feedback and comments. Including stakeholder representatives in official delegations during the VNR presentation at the HLPF represents a third level. Finally, countries including presentations and comments from different stakeholders in their 15-minute presentation or in their official report constitutes the highest level of engagement.

Participants were advised to be clear about the inputs that they expect from stakeholders, e.g. some countries have set up a web portal through which stakeholders can showcase their SDG action. It was stressed that stakeholder engagement needs to be planned and requires time, energy and financial resources. The VNR raises expectations, it is therefore critical to clearly communicate the process that

stakeholders will be engaging in. Umbrella organizations can be invited to contribute and to reach out to their constituencies. Capacity building may be required before inputs from stakeholders can be captured and for meaningful collaboration.

Reporting back from the working groups, participants stressed leaving no one behind as the main goal and principle to guide stakeholder engagement. The importance of mapping vulnerable groups was highlighted, yet it was acknowledged that reaching those groups required efforts. Stakeholders will have different levels of awareness about the 2030 Agenda and different capacities and interests in terms of collaboration, it is thus important to engage them to contribute accordingly. Specificities and groups at the local level would also need to be taken into account. Participants stressed that science and innovation can play a key role to break silos and facilitate engagement. The mapping of stakeholders was considered a useful first step, while the principle of leaving no one behind should guide outreach activities. An entity within the government should be defined for the 2030 Agenda, including a focal point to liaise with stakeholders. This entity would be responsible for asking sectors to report and engage. Regional and sub-regional structures for stakeholder engagement could be activated, where useful. The Regional Commissions were mentioned as a good source in this regard.

Furthermore, governments can encourage stakeholders to collaborate and empower them to self-organize. Participants concurred that it is important to set up clear structures and processes to collect inputs for the review and for the use of those inputs, including through online platforms. Countries should be aware that stakeholders will have different interests and will need capacity building support to be able to contribute meaningfully. Existing structures should be used where possible, and opportunities for collaboration be created. Stakeholders should be engaged in the whole implementation of the 2030 Agenda, with the VNRs being part of the latter. The importance of advertising or using public events to communicate and raise awareness on the SDGs was noted. It was considered critical that outcomes of consultations are reflected in VNR reports as stakeholders' interest will decrease otherwise.

Main challenges identified include the different levels of capacity and interest of stakeholders; it is therefore important to build capacity and engage accordingly. Governments should take the lead in encouraging stakeholder engagement, promoting self-organization of stakeholders including by establishing umbrella organizations and focus on communication and awareness raising. Existing platforms should be used to promote meaningful engagement. Ways of promoting exchange and peer learning at regional and sub-regional level should be explored. Stakeholders should further be supported in sharing data on SDG implementation.

### **Topic B: Implementing the SDGs in the 2019 VNR countries: institutions, policies and tools**

Reporting back on topic B, participants shared different arrangements for cross-sectorial councils, committees and working groups to facilitate policy planning for and implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Avoiding an "ad hoc" process was stressed as a common element for success across these different models. Since most countries have planning institutes as the coordinating bodies, guiding them and compiling inputs and creating a comprehensive roadmap is important and can be linked to regional bodies. VNRs need to be directly linked to SDG implementation, rather than being a side-line project. Legislative and regulatory processes are critical means of institutionalizing some of these processes and supporting continuity over political cycles. In terms of qualitative and quantitative tools

that can identify priorities and make sure that progress is sustainable and can be measured, the following tools were discussed: MAPS Missions and Rapid Integrated Assessment (RIA) – useful tools for identifying inputs that could inform prioritization of policies. The Stockholm Institute tool for systemic and contextual priority setting for implementing the 2030 Agenda has also been used to support looking at cross-sectoral issues. Scenario analysis and modelling were also considered helpful to assess the long-term progress on targets. It was noted that close cooperation with Ministries of Finance and statistical offices ensures coordination.

Challenges primarily relate to policy coherence and on operationalizing plans, including keeping the different actors informed and integrating all the inputs received. In terms of policy approaches, ways need to be found to integrate and break silos so that the mindsets of the key bodies are looking in the same direction as the planning entities. This will probably require capacity building. Leaving no one behind further requires moving from a whole-of-government to a whole-of-society approach, as well as moving from institutionalization to “systematization”. Mapping of vulnerable groups was considered an important initial step for planning. There should also be a mapping of the possible indicators, with national statistical offices playing a key role.

### **Topic C: Implementing the SDGs in the 2019 VNR countries: Keeping progress under review and monitoring and financing implementation**

An input presentation was given by a UN DESA representative on means of implementation (MoI) of the 2030 Agenda. Countries were encouraged to think holistically about the VNR preparations, including on how MoI are being mobilized, which difficulties are being encountered in this regard, how partnerships are being approached to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and ways in which countries are costing and budgeting for the SDGs.

Participants addressed the question of whether SDG implementation can be linked to budgeting needs. Most of the countries have done some work in terms of mapping where they are in the national development plans against the SDGs. SDG alignment is being linked to budgets but requires more work and support. Costing of the SDGs can be an important element of the latter and some countries are developing a methodology for this. Some countries cautioned that there can be difficulties to do the costing for certain targets; in some cases, it might not be feasible with current data and based on the formulation of targets. Methodological challenges persist regarding connecting programmes to costing to its contribution to a target. Baseline data can further present a challenge to analysis. Some countries use different years across different targets and indicators, driven by data availability. The capacity for data development and mining was discussed for both data from official sources and from the informal or private sector, as well as the issue of quality-assurance for data being collected from the informal sector.

### **Topic D: Use of data for national implementation and VNRs**

In the input presentation of a UN DESA representative the critical contribution of data to achieve the SDGs was underscored. Data and statistics are essential to track performance, design policies and allocate resources, as well as to hold stakeholders accountable and better communicate the SDGs. Many countries have included statistical annexes to their VNRs yet have different levels and structures and different forms to present them. The selection of statistics also does not always reflect national

SDG or policy priorities stated elsewhere in the same VNR. This reveals the challenge of the availability of statistics and data for monitoring, especially disaggregated and alternative data.

Evidence-based VNRs should move from how to include data on where, what and who: Where is progress being made? What policies are effective, and which are not? Who are those being left behind? The role of national statistical systems in the VNR process was stressed, as were National Statistical Offices which are critical in coordinating and ensuring the quality of data. National indicators should be aligned with the SDGs, targets and indicators to the extent possible. A possible first step in this regard would be the mapping of available indicators (data availability, sources, methodology, frequency and level of disaggregation). It was noted that gaps in data and capacity are a major obstacle to measuring and achieving the SDGs. Most countries have data to measure 25-50% of the SDG targets, while important capacity constraints persist in Sub-Saharan Africa, LDCs and SIDS. The Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data should guide data investment priorities to meet the demands for the 2030 Agenda. Harnessing the data revolution for the SDGs requires innovations and synergies across data ecosystems, integrating different data sources, such as big data, citizen generated data and geospatial information. It further requires promoting data interoperability, and the establishment of national reporting and dissemination platforms as instruments for SDG implementation and review.

Reporting back from the working group, the rapporteur emphasized the importance of having past VNR countries on-hand to discuss this issue – there are a lot of challenges that can be anticipated and properly prepared for this way. It was reemphasized that countries have very different capacities for different data needs. Data is particularly challenging for developing countries. The acknowledgement by a developed country that it only had about half of the data needed to comprehensively report on the 17 Goals, puts into perspective some of the difficulties in countries with fewer resources and less expertise. There is also a need to improve the complementarities between different levels of data – global, regional and national. Data transparency was also mentioned as a challenge and priority. Some countries stated that they had to decide which indicators are implementable in their context, and which are not. The challenge is to know where and how to tap into alternative data sources where countries do not have capacity nationally. It was suggested to design a global statistical platform for the SDGs which could support countries on the data front. Other participants noted that they undertook a consultative process with academia and others to come up with different indicators that were relevant to their national context.

### **Wrap-up and next steps**

Several countries noted reporting fatigue linked to capacity constraints as a key challenge. Many statistical offices in developing countries are feeling overwhelmed by the various reporting requirements to the various agencies. This is exacerbated by a lack of coordination both nationally and within the UN. It was stressed that budgeting and finance continue to constitute a challenge. Many developing countries have not elaborated financing strategies for the SDGs. Some countries have worked with international institutions to conduct a development financing assessment which was considered a good early step to clarify the national features and how they will impact on different options. There are challenges in this respect for developing countries that are very reliant on natural resources as forecasting and strategizing on allocation can be challenging due to price fluctuations.

The expertise on SDG budgeting and financing should not just be centered in the Ministry of Finance. One participant noted that the country is trying to establish a system where donors and partners can be coordinated so that there is complementarity and strengthened evaluation and definition of short- and medium-term goals.

In concluding, participants' commitment to the SDGs and a successful VNR were commended. Many countries are already advanced on the 2019 VNRs and the commitment to engage stakeholders was clearly emphasized by the group. However, there is a need to institutionalize the stakeholder engagement and make sure the latter is systematized for SDG implementation. Linking the VNRs to budgets emerged as a key challenge. In addition, challenges related to data persist and approaches to review and monitoring processes vary among countries. It was noted that countries should build on existing reports to minimize reporting fatigue. The opportunity to further leverage the regional level in support of the VNR process was also highlighted.

### **Knowledge Exchange**

The VNR workshop concluded with a Knowledge Exchange offering a platform for about 30 UN entities, other international organizations and stakeholder partners to showcase tools and methodologies available to support countries in their VNR process, and the overall implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The wealth of tools and approaches presented on six key topics (leaving no one behind, data, modelling and knowledge products, private sector engagement, stakeholder engagement and organizing institutions and mainstreaming the SDGs into national plans) has been summarized in a Knowledge Exchange leaflet. The leaflet and additional information can be found at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/>.