



HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Four years of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs): What have we learned on implementing the SDGs?

Monday, 15 July 2019, 3:00-5:00 PM, Conference Room 4

Background Note

1. Since 2016, 111 VNRs have been presented at the HLPF, with some countries presenting for the second and third time. A further 47 reports are due to be presented in July 2019. VNRs of the last three years contain a wealth of information on implementing the sustainable development goals (SDGs).
2. One lesson from the VNRs is that it will not be possible for countries to achieve the sustainable development goals without ensuring that the principles in the 2030 Agenda are fulfilled, including having in place participatory processes inclusive of all stakeholders, inclusive institutional structures, and efforts to incorporate the 2030 Agenda into national plans and strategies.
3. A recurring theme throughout the VNRs in the past years was how meaningful engagement with stakeholders and ownership of the 2030 Agenda can lead to more effective implementation of the SDGs. Countries have engaged with all stakeholders including members of parliament, regional and local governments, members of human rights bodies, civil society and private sector. Several forms of engagement of multiple stakeholders are evident in the reports. Overall, the 2018 VNRs suggest that government collaboration with non-state actors has improved drastically in the past two years, and in many cases a whole-of-society approach has been sought.
4. The 2030 Agenda recognizes that the integrated and indivisible nature of the SDGs are of crucial importance and highlights the need for effective, inclusive and transparent institutions to achieve the SDGs. Countries have reported that institutional frameworks seek to harmonize different workstreams, bridge siloes to address the inter-related nature of the SDGs and involve all agencies in cross-cutting efforts. Most countries reported on new or strengthened existing institutions, including inter-ministerial coordinating offices, committees or commissions.





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5. A growing trend since 2016 has been the establishment of mechanisms at the highest level of Government, such as in the office of the Prime Minister or President, giving it stronger convening and decision-making powers and allowing it to coordinate implementation by specific ministries. Countries have increasingly highlighted that regional and local governments are at the frontline of implementation of the SDGs. In Jamaica, Local Sustainable Development Plans (LSDPs) provide an important mechanism for localizing the SDGs.
6. Reports by Jamaica, Paraguay and Sri Lanka highlighted contributions by Supreme Audit Institutions to assess implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including those established by the International Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions (INTOSAI).
7. With varying degrees of formality, almost every VNR in the last three years gives a description of steps taken to incorporate the 2030 Agenda into national plans, strategies and budgets. Countries carried out a range of mapping exercises to match the SDGs with their own national development plans, determining how well national frameworks were aligned with the SDGs and determining critical gaps. For some countries, planning documents explicitly mention the 2030 Agenda and enshrine the SDGs- or some of them- as a blueprint for development, while for others the alignment is more implicit.
8. Increasingly, incorporation is taking place in ways which allow countries to take complementary action in the social, economic and environmental spheres and recognize and mitigate trade-offs. However, very few countries so far in their VNRs provide details or costing of how the SDGs are to be financed, and very few had carried out costing and identified specific sources of finance or financing policies.
9. The reports demonstrate that countries are going further to analyze factors behind successful implementation, as well as targeting the challenges and conditions hampering progress in implementation of the goals and targets. The VNRs show a marked improvement in terms of reporting on all SDGs in 2018 over the previous two years. Some countries continued to include a set of goals of their own choice based on their own national priorities, but in 2018 far fewer countries





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limited their reporting to the goals under review at the HLPF than the previous two years.

10. In the last three cycles, countries reported increasingly on the interlinkages between goals. For example, several reports highlighted poverty from a multi-dimensional perspective and its inextricable linkages with other goals and leaving no-one behind. Many VNRs acknowledged that much more needs to be done to ensure access to healthcare, eradication of malnutrition, empowerment of women and girls, education, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, decent work, environmental sustainability and other services. Poverty eradication can only be achieved when all these factors are simultaneously addressed through cross-cutting, coherent and fully implemented laws, policies and programmes, in line with the commitment to leave no-one behind. Food security was examined in several reports in conjunction with poverty eradication, good health and wellbeing, women's empowerment, job creation and the reduction of inequalities.
11. In many reports, poverty and hunger are tied to reducing inequalities in goal 10 and to the leave-no-one behind principle. Countries reported on measures taken to reduce poverty and inequality within and among countries. This includes a wide range of initiatives, including the use of social protection policies and social security systems, relocation strategies, means-tested welfare benefits, and direct transfers of cash to pre-designated households deemed impoverished. Employment assistance and minimum wages subsidized public housing, social safety nets, government sponsored medical-funds, public rental schemes and agricultural transformation initiatives were also highlighted.
12. SDG 3 on health has been consistently defined as a priority area in national development plans and public health as a national asset in many countries. Many countries have achieved universal healthcare coverage, although it remains a major challenge for least developed countries. Many countries stressed the importance of health equity for the 2030 Agenda and noted efforts made to address rural/urban differences, to improve the healthcare of marginalized and vulnerable groups such as the elderly, migrants and refugees, and persons with disabilities; again, a link with the principle to leave no-one-behind.





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13. Ensuring quality education continues to be a central development priority for many countries. Countries highlighted the link between vocational training and access and return to the labor market. Challenges referred to included financing of public education, inclusion of specific vulnerable groups, and raising education standards. Australia highlighted its Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) which builds bridges between university and high school for indigenous peoples living in rural areas, to ensure higher educational attainment rates for indigenous students through academic tutoring and special programmes.
14. Gender equality, SDG 5, was tackled in most reports, with a large number of countries pointing out that this was a cross-cutting prerequisite to attaining the SDGs. Countries reported on varied issues such as gender action plans for women suffering multiple forms of discrimination and innovative initiatives to increase the number of women in legislatures and on boards. Violence against women and girls remains one of the main challenges noted, and a large number of countries reported on measures in place to address the issue. For example, Costa Rica reported that an important step forward had been the establishment of the "local committees for the immediate attention of high-risk cases for violence against women" in parts of the country, which had representatives of the Judiciary, the Ministry of Public Security and INAMU (the National Institute for Women).
15. Countries also reported on their initiatives to provide safe drinking water, highlighting advances in waste-water management and treatment. Competing demands for water, together with impacts of climate change, natural disasters and excessive groundwater consumption, cause challenges. Countries are taking steps to diversify their sources of drinking water. Singapore noted that changing behavior patterns and practices in the industrial sector is key, because non-domestic use is expected to be the primary cause behind the increase in future water demand.
16. Reporting on access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all, countries elaborated on measures taken such as diversifying energy sources, developing renewable energy sources, improving energy efficiency, awareness-raising activities for the public on sustainable energy consumption, and connecting more households to the energy grid in rural areas. The Bahamas noted



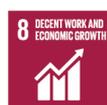


HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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that they had eliminated tariffs on solar equipment and Canada extended tax provisions that allow companies to accelerate the depreciation on assets that are more energy efficient.

17. The VNRs reported Government commitment to fostering a strong economy that incorporates people in decent work. New opportunities, such as those offered by technology, were stressed in the reviews, while ensuring that traditional strengths are maintained. Several reviews emphasized the important role of the Government in supporting micro, small and medium enterprises, while some addressed the risks inherent in an economy when much of the work is in the informal sector, as well as policy options to address these risks.
18. Governments described the initiatives they took in response to pressure from rapid population growth and urbanization on public services, infrastructure and the environment. The reviews indicate that progress on achieving responsible consumption and production is difficult, with population growth and increased consumption spurred by economic growth eroding gains achieved, and initiatives to ensure behavioral change in individuals including through awareness-raising and access to information were highlighted.
19. One of the most common challenges to the VNR countries in the past three cycles has been climate change. Nearly all the countries in 2018 reported on their initiatives to tackle the challenge, with the majority providing information on the development of national climate policies, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and improving energy efficiency and renewable energy. Many countries reported that as a result of economic growth, emissions are increasing across all sectors and listed efforts to mitigate and adapt, including the need to increase and maintain carbon stored in forests, soil and wetlands. Several countries noted the potential of carbon pricing for mitigation, and the economic benefits that can be derived from transitioning towards low-carbon or no-carbon societies.
20. Also reported were actions towards enhancing blue economies, deriving benefits, such as economic growth, food and nutrition, and transport, employment and tourism opportunities, from oceans and seas. Countries also reported on management of key commercial fish stocks and establishment of new marine





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protected areas. The most common threats to healthy ecosystems raised by countries in their reports on SDG 15 are increasing urbanization and population growth, causing competing pressures and demands on land use. Other threats are climate change, habitat fragmentation, and invasive alien species. Togo is aiming at enhancing its soil fertility with farmer field schools and the use of a technique consisting of the use of a mushroom-based biological product associated with compost, which has led to a clear improvement in soil structure and water retention capacity.

21. SDG 16 was underlined as a vital enabling goal for the entire sustainable development agenda. Countries elaborated on measures to promote good governance, implementation of human rights, and the eradication of violence. Several countries highlighted the importance of upholding the rule of law, ensuring universal access to justice, and enabling access to information.
22. A critical condition for implementation of the SDGs is the availability and effective and efficient use of financial and other resources. More countries provided information on the means of implementation in 2018 than in 2017. International public finance, including ODA and south-south cooperation, is an important contributor to sustainable development efforts, and reporting on this category improved in 2018. International public finance provides an indication of how development partners perceive their responsibilities to support developing countries on implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The use of partnerships was also highlighted in the reports, including regional institutional partnerships.
23. Some conclusions:
 - The reviews contain many very effective and informative examples of implementation of the SDGs, incorporating accessible and meaningful use of statistics and graphics. Evident is the trend towards moving to evaluation and analysis of the initiatives taken, with less reliance on simply summarizing the policies, strategies and laws in place. Improvements are also evident in reports moving from the description of challenges encountered and progress achieved, examining causes, recommendations and next steps for implementation; and providing data and information on progress achieved.





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- In the past three years, more countries have explicitly analyzed their efforts in leaving no one behind (LNOB), but reporting on it is still limited. Some countries have chosen to continue to integrate their discussion of LNOB throughout their VNR, while some countries cover it through a separate section. Disaggregated data provides necessary information on how measures affect different people in different ways and provides a basis for well-founded decisions. One big challenge in countries across the world is availability of this data, and countries should produce information on the status of data collection or plans to improve data availability.
- Capacity development needs are still not clearly articulated in the reports. Countries could provide more information on their capacity needs in areas such as integrated policy making, operationalizing SDG-based plans; mainstreaming a 'leave no one behind' approach; multi-sector partnerships; streamlining of data collection and strengthening analytical VNR reporting.
- In second, third and subsequent VNRs, countries could report further on areas in which they would like to learn from others, and their lessons learned and best practices. Good practice reporting has improved, and it can provide a basis for follow up among countries that may want to collaborate with others and engage in peer learning. Countries could also continue in providing lessons learned in VNRs which support peer learning.

Guiding questions for the discussion

- Which challenges or areas where more efforts are required to implement the SDGs have VNRs helped to identify? What have the VNRs told us about the key challenges to implement the SDGs and ways to address them?
- What are successful policies to implement the SDGs, based on the VNRs? What transformative actions or cross-cutting initiatives resulted from the VNRs for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda? Have these actions been incorporated into plans and roadmaps to accelerate progress across all SDGs at the national level?

