



**First Global Webinar for the Voluntary National Reviews
to be presented at the 2022 United Nations High-Level Political Forum for
Sustainable Development**

**Virtually co-hosted by the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the UN
Department for Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA)**

**New York and The Hague
25 – 29 October 2021 (virtual)**

Summary

Contents

Opening and main purpose of the Webinar	2
Overview of the webinar series	3
Session 1: Lessons learned from the VNR process thus far: expectations, experiences, best practices, and challenges	3
Session 2: First, second and subsequent VNRs	5
Session 3: From local to national to regional to global	6
Session 4 – Stakeholder engagement in the VNR process.....	9
Session 5: Financing for SDGs: how it can be analyzed and enhanced through VNRs	10
Session 6: Institutional arrangements to mobilize all parts of government in VNRs and in SDG implementation	12
Session 7: How to best use data in the VNRs	14
Session 8: Roadmap for VNR preparations.....	15
Knowledge Exchange	16
Closing.....	19

Overall key messages

- Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) serve as instruments to augment the holistic and interdependent nature of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the national level.
- The VNRs have been fundamental in maintaining the 2030 Agenda as a key priority at the

national, regional and international levels especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The VNRs support the delivery of the 2030 Agenda and the pledge to leave no one behind.

- The VNRs promote open dialogue among countries and stakeholders on national implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. The VNRs can serve to promote national reviews that are *focused, evidence-based, conducive to peer learning and experience-sharing and that identify gaps and good practices and forge partnerships*.
- Outcomes of the VNR national reviews, questions and recommendations are shared in an *open manner advancing progress and actions*.
- The 2022 VNRs will allow countries to learn from their respective experiences to improve implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs, which *serve as global blueprint for sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic*.
- The 2022 VNRs will also *contribute to national sustainable recovery from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic*, while shifting to a track to realize the sustainable development goals (SDGs) during the Decade of Action and Delivery.

Opening and main purpose of the Webinar

His Excellency Mr. Tom de Bruijn, Minister of Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation of the Netherlands, opened the first global VNR workshop for the 2022 VNRs with a video message, welcoming all participants. He mentioned the importance of including stakeholders in the VNR process, the need for international cooperation and the urgency to accelerate the progress on SDG implementation. In her remarks ***Her Excellency Ms. Evelyn Wever-Croes, Prime Minister of Aruba***, highlighted the need to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and welcomed opportunities for mutual learning during the Voluntary National Reviews workshop. She highlighted the role and the participation of local communities in the preparations for the Voluntary National Reviews. ***His Excellency Mr. Jan van Zanen, Mayor of the Hague***, a co-hosting city of the Webinar, stated that multinational collaboration is required to deal with climate change, a sustainable economy, green infrastructure, sustainable transportation and other pressing topics. He emphasized the importance of reporting on progress through the VNRs and taking global action. ***His Excellency Mr. Collen Kelapile, President of ECOSOC***, underlined that the VNRs are an important opportunity for reviewing the progress on SDG implementation and the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, while also addressing other challenges that countries face and interacting with different stakeholders. ECOSOC stands ready to support the VNR workshops to allow for more informal discussions to take place. ***His Excellency Mr. Enrique Manalo, Permanent Representative of the Republic of the Philippines and Co-chair of the Group of Friends of VNRs***, suggested that

the VNR process can contribute towards the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The discussion can contribute to VNRs that are evidence-based, enhance peer learning, identify the gaps in the VNR reporting and are based on from best practices. ***His Excellency Mr. Omar Hilale, Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Morocco and Co-chair of the Group of Friends of VNRs***, pointed out the importance of engaging capitals to take necessary actions. He also stated that the VNR workshop should focus on the best practices by countries that presented a VNR previously and that countries should learn from each other's experiences. ***Ms. Maria-Francesca Spatalisano, Assistant Secretary-General for Policy Coordination and Inter-Agency Affairs, UN DESA***, stressed that the SDG achievement is threatened by the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2030 Agenda can be used as a framework for recovery. Best practices include aligning national development plans and budgets with the 2030 Agenda and using data and statistics in VNR country reports.

Overview of the webinar series

Ms. Marion Barthelemy, Director of the Office of Intergovernmental Support and Coordination for Sustainable Development (OISC), UN DESA, indicated that the Global Webinar serves to address challenges countries face in various areas and answer questions raised based on previous reports while mobilizing partnership and enhancing cooperation. She expressed hope that the workshop would contribute to the preparation of the VNRs, reflect the rising international solidarity, and mark a new beginning, as countries recover from the pandemic. She shared background knowledge, experiences, and the good practices of several countries' previous VNRs. The VNRs can give attention to the national implementation of the SDGs, especially during and after the pandemic.

Countries can note the difference of preparing their first and subsequent VNR reports and prepare their own roadmap for conducting their VNRs. Countries can interact with organizations, stakeholders, and elaborate on their methodologies. Countries can also evaluate the impact of previous policies and trends that were implemented and conduct assessment. The VNRs allow countries to review and highlight changes, enhance stakeholder participation, make use of data and indicators, identify gaps in statistics, evaluate where to mobilize resources, and elaborate financing strategies. Countries can report on all SDGs with four to five national priorities.

Session 1: Lessons learned from the VNR process thus far: expectations, experiences, best practices, and challenges

Session 1 focused on the various experiences from previous VNR countries and provided the 2022 VNR countries with information on dates and deadlines, as well as useful resources and

tools for the preparation of their report.

The session was moderated by **Mr. Joop Theunissen, OISC, UN DESA** and began with a presentation by **Ms. Tonya Vaturi, OISC, UN DESA**, who offered key messages on lessons learned from the VNR process thus far. Some of the best practices of the VNRs includes making a work plan, early consultations with stakeholders, providing institutional arrangements, early drafting arrangements, and timely preparation of the VNR presenting team. The 2022 HLPF welcomes national plans and strategies for a sustainable, resilient, and green recovery, and virtual meetings and tools, surveys and online data collection are useful for evaluating SDG implementation at the local and national levels.

While writing the VNR, it is recommended to focus on quality instead of quantity of the report and to also include a statistical annex. It has also proven to be good practice to compose analysis, detailed examples, strengths and weaknesses as well as conveying the key findings, which include good practices, challenges, and areas for support.

She indicated that there is a rising number of countries presenting a subsequent VNR since 2016, including an especially high number of African countries this year. There are different focuses of first and subsequent VNRs. For first time presenting VNR countries this means the alignment of national goals with the 2030 Agenda, and setting a framework for follow-up, making sure that actions lead towards achievable outcomes. For second and subsequent presenting VNR countries this includes the focus on continuity and comparability, highlighting actions that show progress, and reporting on the process of implementation regarding institutions, stakeholders, and baseline data.

Following the presentation three countries that had conducted a VNR in 2021 shared their experiences and lessons and learnt and offered the following key messages:

- For the recent HLPFs, countries were faced with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic which had resulted in, for example, a late start, smaller organizing teams, and the unavailability of face-to-face contact, as well as of timely data in some economical and statistical areas.
- The COVID-19 pandemic also posed a big challenge to the VNR process through the disruption of socio-economic activities, financing for SDG implementation, as well as the investment towards data systems and reporting in the public sector.
- For countries with small populations, it has shown to be a good practice to get communities involved by reaching out to groups through questionnaires, phone calls or interviews.
- A stakeholder repository was created, which included media, academia, the public, development partners, civil society organizations, international organizations, public and private sectors, etc.

- In one case, the VNR served as an occasion to update a country's medium-term development strategy.
- In another case, a country's process for their VNR submission started with including experts from a wide range of fields, e.g., the private sector, civil society organizations, academia and international organizations. Following that, different working groups held a monitoring process and raised awareness in informal interactive formats. Different ministries drafted the VNR with the input of youth groups, civil society organizations and groups of parliamentarians, and included the input of working groups in round table meetings, public comments, and meetings in the SDG Headquarters, with the last meeting being headed by the prime minister.
- Another VNR case showed a process that built on the experience and lessons learned from presenting earlier VNRs. For conducting the most recent VNR, the government-led process used an existing structure and created national ownership. In addition to using secondary data, a variety of different data collection measures were taken. A focus was put on the inclusive and participatory aspect of the draft. Stakeholder approaches have included, among others, the national parliament, supreme audit institutions, SDG-related institutions and the media.
- An important lesson learnt was having a timely start of the VNR process, as a lack of funding nearly derailed the process. Additionally, the use of existing structures proved to be very useful, and broad stakeholder engagement resulted in and enhanced national ownership.

Session 2: First, second and subsequent VNRs

Session 2 gave an overview of the VNRs presented since 2016 and focused on the approaches to VNR presentations, as well as on a reflection of the policy and implementation measures outlined in previous VNRs.

The session was moderated by **Mr. Fred Soltau, Division for Sustainable Development Goals, UN DESA** and began with a presentation by **Ms. Marion Barthelemy, OISC, UN DESA** who shared key messages on first, second and subsequent VNRs. She indicated that, to maximize the usefulness of the VNR, there is a variety of possible best practices. For example, it is important to identify progress towards SDG implementation, the existing gaps in the implementation, the impacts of COVID-19, possible data gaps, and other relevant factors.

She noted that, in 2021, 52 per cent of presenting countries included all SDGs in their VNRs and nearly all countries relied on data, with half of the presenting countries including statistical annexes. She presented several good examples from 2021, including the coordination of the VNR with national policy cycles, the inclusion of high levels of engagement

in the VNR process, the involvement of parliament and national statistical offices, and different trends in VNR reporting.

For the presentation of the report at the HLPF it is recommended to present at the highest level, to be frank and clearly highlight the overview of the national SDG situation, and to focus the presentation and adapt it to an international audience. Also, consideration should be given to including stakeholders in the presenting delegations.

Two countries that had presented their VNR during the 2021 HLPF shared their country experiences. Some issues discussed were:

- COVID-19 presented some challenges to conducting a VNR, such as the not being able to travel to certain regions in-person and meet with stakeholders and lower overall involvement through the online participation.
- It has proven useful to resourcefully anticipate the timeline and personal capacities as well as coordinate with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the country's UN mission in New York.
- The deep involvement of stakeholders, as well as the organization of public hearings with civil society and youth groups have shown to be good practices.
- The alignment of the VNR with national policies helps to make the process of reporting and implementing more attractive and improves feedback and follow up.
- There were different challenges in the conducting of each subsequent VNR relating, for example, to data, financing, governance, and a growing population. Emerging challenges in 2021 included the digital divide, the participation rates of women in the labour force and growing environmental challenges.
- One example of a participatory approach included over 20 government entities, more than 20 development partners, 30 civil society organizations and over 25 participants from the private sector. These participants all supported the VNR with data and empirical evidence and inputs relating to challenges and opportunities and different on-ground activities.
- To ensure an evidence-based background for the VNR, a background paper with UNDP was included, as well as a national statistical report for monitoring the SDGs, information from consultations with different stakeholders, and resources from different research partnerships.

Session 3: From local to national to regional to global

Session 3 focused on the different possibilities that countries have to ensure a connection between different local, national, regional and global levels of government based on some countries' experiences, as well as the link between regional commissions and the global HLPF. The session was divided into two parts.

The introduction by the moderator, **Ms. Riina Jussila, Division for the Sustainable Development Goals (DSDG), UN DESA**, highlighted that the implementation of the SDGs needs to be picked up at all levels of government, and can't be done alone by only one level. The conducting of Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) has gained momentum over the past years and is a very useful tool to monitor SDG implementation on the local level. This includes grass-root and bottom-up initiatives that are helpful to empower local governments. More and more countries are using VLRs in their VNRs as an additional tool to identify the challenges with the implementation of the SDGs, as well as geographical particularities in countries.

Part 1. Local leadership for national SDG implementation – engaging local initiatives in your VNR preparations

Three countries offered lessons learned on local leadership for national SDG implementation. Key issues and local initiatives highlighted in VNR preparations included the following:

- The different ways for local authorities to participate can include contributions to the VNR report, a partnership with United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), and the organization of a side-event during the HLPF that highlights the work that was put into the reviews at the local level.
- In one case study, the promotion, engagement, and inclusion of subnational government institutions were centralized and led to nine VLRs. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, remote dialogues were held with local authorities, stakeholders, academia, civil society organizations and others. Though the online workshop, local governments were engaged, and the country was able to include their local reports in the VNR.
- Another case highlighted the practice of a two-step engagement, which included the report, but also the ongoing process afterwards, that consisted of dialogues, discussions and sharing good practices amongst each other.
- A local case study shared a city's journey with sustainable development, which started with the local Agenda 21 that was introduced in 1998. For conducting a recent voluntary local review, the city's process started with an initiation stage, which consisted of an assessment process at the city level. As a second step, participation and analysis were prioritized, and included the engagement of key stakeholders and the setting up goals, targets, and priorities. In the last step, the local SDG action was examined, and a roadmap and model were designed. These three steps lead to the VLR, which then included connecting local needs to global goals and the set-up of formal and informal mechanisms for a continued integration of the SDGs.
- The benefits of engaging local governments in the VNR process include the gaining the commitment of cities, the initiation of local actions, the reviews from the cities, the assessment of baseline data, as well as global attention.
- Over the process of conducting a VLR, the need for collaborative mechanisms become more visible, as well as potential gaps in project continuation, silo effects or a lack of visibility.
- Local government associations can contribute to SDG implementation. In one case,

municipalities committed to become global goal municipalities and to incorporate the SDGs in their plans and budgeting. This resulted in several new initiatives and increased citizen participation, as well as data gathering and the reporting on progress.

- Through this process, the challenge of gathering local data on the SDGs becomes visible. Local measurable indicators are currently being developed. The national conducting of a yearly SDG progress report can also include a chapter on local governments.
- In some cases, guidelines are being developed on voluntary local reviews and on voluntary sub-national reviews, as well.

Part 2. Role of the UN Regional Commissions in supporting your local and national VNR process

Mr. John Sloan, Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), highlighted that next year 22 countries from Africa will present a VNR. For the VLRs, ECA has supported five VLRs up to this point and the overall number of local reviews is rising. The simultaneous conduction of VLRs and a VNR can be a very efficient win-win situation for all participants. ECA will produce regional guidelines for VLRs. ECA also offers specific support to VNR countries, such as financing, assistance with drafting and outreach, the assistance of consultants and technical support where needed.

Ms. Mareike Eberz, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) noted that there has been a gradual process of decentralization in the awareness and governance of the 2030 Agenda from the national to sub-national levels in various countries in this region. The interest in conducting a VLR has increased in recent years and in various countries sub-national councils for the 2030 Agenda have been established. The VLRs help to find synergies between existing strategies, identify policy gaps, and create partnerships with multiple stakeholders. ECLAC offers support to countries conducting VLRs and VNRs in multiple ways, for example, through a community of practice for VNR countries” or through targeted support and technical assistance to Member States that request assistance.

Ms. Monika Linn, Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), highlighted that the VLRs are a tool to complete the VNRs and that the local reviews have the potential to support the localization of SDGs. ECE has provided regional guidelines for the VLRs, and the implementation of these guidelines will start at the end of the year. ECE’s key recommendations include, among others, active participation, a future-orientation of the VLRs, a coherence between VLRs and VNRs and the connection between the local reports and projects and initiatives. During the ECE regional forum, there will also be a dedicated session on the conducting of VLRs and VNRs.

Mr. Riccardo Mesiano, Economic and Social Council for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) also highlighted the rising momentum for VLRs in cities in various countries. ESCAP is designing guidelines for VLRs in synchronization with UN DESA but already provides support to cities and regions with developing a roadmap, identifying key costs and the drafting and review process. To assist with this, an SDG tool template was developed. New tools for VNR support include specific guidelines for 2nd, 3rd, and 4th time presenters of VNRs, as well as a VNR twinning

programme, connecting countries that then work together during their respective VNR processes. Before its regional forum in March 2022, ESCAP will hold a side-event on VLRs and VNRs, which will also include space for peer-learning discussions.

Ms. Maisaa Youssef, The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) observed that no VLR has been conducted in the ESCWA region so far, but interest in the region in VLRs is increasing. Governments are developing their own methods, frameworks, and indicators. ESCWA is very committed to supporting countries and holds two regional VNR workshops in the region every year. It has also launched a programme to enhance data flow for the VNRs. She also proposed that in many countries that are struggling with conflict may find it difficult to focus on national reporting and would be able to focus on a level of subnational reporting.

Session 4 – Stakeholder engagement in the VNR process

Session 4 focused on the different ways that countries can engage with various stakeholders in order to conduct an inclusive VNR.

Session 4 was moderated by **Ms. Maame Agyeben, OISC, DESA** and featured a presentation by **Ms. Naiara Da Costa, Division for Sustainable Development Goals, DESA**. Ms. Da Costa highlighted that countries tend to report on stakeholder engagement in five key ways, namely through coordination and governance structures that support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, outreach and awareness-raising, the development of national priorities for implementation, consultations and engagements on VNRs and through partnerships with non-state actors.

She indicated that the engagement through governance structures can be realized through different coordination mechanisms, working groups, and with already established networks. The consultation processes of stakeholders should ideally consist of diverse methods, for example, online, in-person and through virtual platforms. When promoting the engagement of stakeholders in the VNR process, a clear purpose of this engagement, the means of communication, the planning process, the comprehensive mapping of stakeholders and adapted means of participation should all be considered.

The engagement of stakeholders in the drafting and reviewing process of the VNR can consist of working groups, the inclusion of annexes created by stakeholders, input to specific chapters or the inclusion of outcomes of consultations. Generally, the details of the engagement of stakeholders can be included in the VNR report as an opportunity to share improvement and experiences. UN DESA provides a number of guidelines and courses on stakeholder engagement that can be accessed by VNR countries and member States.

Country experiences were shared by three VNR countries. These presentations showed different ways that countries can engage with various stakeholders in order to conduct an inclusive VNR.

- One method of stakeholder engagement in a VNR started with the establishment of a taskforce, which consisted of multiple governmental institutions, as well as members

of the private sector, academia, CSOs/NGOs, Youth, and others. Consultations with stakeholders took place through regional and national consultations, and the final VNR was subjected to validation by all relevant stakeholders and after the presentation of the findings in the VNRs were communicated to all stakeholders.

- Another case study elaborated that, due to time and human resources constraints, no stakeholders were engaged in the country's first VNR, but in the following years multiple workshops were held on ways to include stakeholders going forward. This included questionnaires, additional workshops and the inclusion of their expertise in the VNRs and resulted in one third of the VNR being dedicated to stakeholders.
- In another case study, the main stakeholders in the VNR process consisted of political leadership, governments on different national and sub-national levels, civil society, think tanks and community organizations, the private sector, international development partners and different youth institutions. The VNR plan connects different SDGs with different stakeholders and ends with a validation workshop in March. The proposed working methodology consists of multi-stakeholder consultations, focus group discussions, the triangulation of data and the validation of the findings.

The challenges in this process are dealing with and uniting different perspectives, dealing with diverse data sources and ensuring the broadest level of stakeholder participation in face of the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Session 5: Financing for SDGs: how it can be analyzed and enhanced through VNRs

Session 5 focused on how countries can address financing challenges related to SDG implementation. This session was facilitated by **Ms. Natalja Aristizabal Mora, Financing for Sustainable Development Office (FfSDO), UN DESA**. **Mr. Yanis Konstantin Kuehn-Von Burgsdorff, FfSDO, UN DESA** made a presentation on good practices in reflecting financing issues in VNRs with an integrated approach, highlighting the integrated national financing framework for sustainable development (INFF). The framework includes building blocks on assessment and diagnostics on the complete picture of financing needs, sources, risks and constraints; financing strategy on actions to finance national development strategies and goals and to mobilise and align financing with national priorities; monitoring and review to help governments track progress and draw lessons for policy design and implementation; and governance and coordination mechanisms to guide the process and enhance coherence across government.

Mr. Kuehn-Von Burgsdorff pointed out that the key lessons from early implementation of INFFs show that it is important to ensure national ownership and sustainability with building support from the highest level of government, complemented by leadership at a senior technical level, and broad engagement of legislature, the private sector, civil society, development partners and other stakeholders. For effective implementation of INFFs and financing for SDGs, it is important to ensure national governments are in the lead throughout the process, with development

partners providing technical assistance and helping to convene stakeholders. Countries also need to take a gradual, targeted and adaptive approach to prioritize policy actions and remain responsive to changing circumstances, building on existing coordination, dialogue and reform processes.

In conclusion, Mr. Kuehn-Von Burgsdorff highlighted that in drafting VNRs, INFFs can help to consider the full range of financing sources, including the private, domestic and international sources. INFFs can guide thinking on finding solutions to close financing gaps, overcome constraints and make the most of financing opportunities. INFFs also can help identify financing policies that are risk informed and take equity, social and environmental concerns into account, addressing potential externalities and trade-offs. He introduced the INFF Knowledge Platform which provides a digital space for practitioners to access information on INFFs and connect with other stakeholders.

Two countries shared their country experiences related to the financing and the SDGs.

The first country noted that they had developed SDGs budget tracking system in 2018 to map SDGs in national budget. The central government made cost analyses, tracked budgetary allocation to the SDGs and targets at the national and subnational levels and monitored different sources of funding. The country had also adopted the Addis Ababa Action Agenda as the main framework for mobilisation of resources and has taken actions in strengthening domestic resource mobilization and enabling environment for private business and finance. Some of the challenges faced in financing for SDGs include the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic; limited data for investment decision-making and inability to quantify risk; land acquisition; infrastructure provision gaps; unwillingness of domestic funds to take first level risk; currency risk exposure; and relatively small funding requirements of small and medium enterprises.

The second country noted that they had approved national sustainable development strategy (NSDS) in 2016 as a starting point for implementation of the SDGs, focusing on localizing the SDGs and engagement with all stakeholders, including the public and civil society. This country also noted that they are working with regional entities to develop a national plan for Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD). The whole policy cycle in this country includes strategy formulation, planning, budgeting, engagement, implementation and monitoring and evaluation. It is promoting policy integration for funding NSDS and the SDGs, including enabling the connection between cohesion policy and enabling the connection between recovery resources from the COVID-19 and the NSDS. The country presentation highlighted integrated sustainable decision making and integrated management including on budgeting and funding, and the key role played by regional territories in Italy for implementing the NSDS.

Participants then had interactive discussions focusing on the role of environmental education as an enabler in achieving the SDGs at the national level, including through engaging with relevant stakeholders such as the local authorities; incentives and partnerships for encouraging the private sector financing; good experience on national institutional framework

for financing the SDGs and preparation of presentation of financing in the VNR process; and the interest of having technical online data pool available and the national statistical efforts for supporting the implementation of the SDGs.

Session 6: Institutional arrangements to mobilize all parts of government in VNRs and in SDG implementation

The session on institutional arrangements for SDG implementation and for coordinating the VNRs was facilitated by **Ms. Irena Zubcevic, OISC, UN DESA**, and featured a presentation by **Ms. Lisa Ainbinder, Division of Public Institutions and Digital Government, UN DESA**.

Ms. Ainbinder's presentation described how countries have been institutionalizing the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. Citing the [2021 World Public Sector Report on National Institutional Arrangements for Implementation of the SDGs: A five-year stocktaking](#), she shared the results of a survey of 24 VNR countries that defined various types of institutional arrangements and analyzed observations by governments on what has, and has not, worked well. She examined adjustments countries had made since 2015 in relation to SDG implementation; looked at the main policy functions (e.g. strategy and planning, monitoring and evaluation); and mapped the institutional landscape, including the structures, actors, mechanisms and processes to identify existing and potential entry points for key actors to engage with the SDGs.

Inter-ministerial arrangements are often seen, with one ministry serving as the main reporter and consults with inter-ministerial working groups that can include different levels of government as well as different types of stakeholders. Entry points into institutional processes for key stakeholders can include Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs), parliaments, non-governmental organizations, academia, and the private sector.

There is a trend of broadening and deepening of institutionalization of SDGs, but institutionalization of the SDGs takes time. National milestones may include publication of a roadmap and involvement of SAIs through proxy indicators. There is no uniformity across countries, as speed and sequences vary significantly, and changes in leadership can accelerate or scale back progress. However, there are no major differences observed between developed and developing countries. Entry points for various actors are multiplying, making institutional change more complex, and engagement increasingly accommodates more stakeholders and a varying range of actors. National coordination and advisory bodies often facilitate various forms of engagement.

Three VNR countries also gave presentations that detailed their institutional arrangements for preparing a VNR and for SDG implementation, including one second-time presenter, one third-timer, and one country presenting for the fourth time. In one country, detailed action plans are submitted by all ministries to the president for approval by a ministerial council, with collaboration and coordination among all ministries, and government policies are checked to ensure a visible and coherent narrative. Diligent monitoring and evaluation does not affect

the autonomy of ministries, but instead makes them work better and avoids the silo effect. It has also helped the government to respond to and handle emergencies and crises such as natural disasters more effectively, particularly during the pandemic, to engage responses for the most vulnerable groups and support extra ad hoc synergies to embed SDG policy, and use the VNR to facilitate a resilient recovery from the pandemic.

Other countries discussed how they are domesticating the SDGs, how they are working on global and subnational levels, and the process for institutionalizing the preparation of their VNRs. Materials and methodologies were presented for including data from national statistics institutes, creation of task forces and team leaders working on SDGs directly as well as with stakeholders. The implementation of a permanent help team for analysis of all data collected, to review drafts and validate the review before a final review by legal authorities can ensure that the process is inclusive and verified by multiple entities.

During the discussion, most countries agreed that there is a need to domesticate the SDGs in national and local strategies, to enhance capacity building for stakeholders, and to improve the tracking and monitoring of SDG progress. Most participants in the session noted their plans to engage parliaments, and highlighted coordination and coherence as the biggest challenge. Some supported the approach of building on existing mechanisms, and other described development of new mechanisms that involve focal points working across ministries, offices or institutions. They agreed that subsidiary bodies can advance coordination at the local level; that horizontal and vertical coordination is important to get the big picture, identify gaps, and bring in stakeholders; and that there is no one best way, but it is encouraging to see the many differences in forms of coordination.

Encouraging inter-ministerial coordination can help to judge effectiveness of approaches over time and anchor the VNR process. One country noted that although its recovery and resilience fund is not directly connected to the SDGs, its policies directly support dimensions of sustainability. Others highlighted increasing coherence in preparing their 2022 VNR to reflect recovery measures and noted that forward-looking development plans have helped to reform institutional structures.

Key messages from this session included the following:

- In general, there is a positive trend of countries broadening and deepening institutionalization of the 2030 Agenda.
- Each country is unique, and there is no uniformity in institutionalization.
- National coordination is often undertaken through specialized or lead government ministries, along with a combination of other types of institutions, including advisory bodies, academic councils, and stakeholder groups with various levels of involvement.

- Subsidiary bodies can advance coordination at the local level; both horizontal and vertical coordination is important to get the big picture, identify gaps and engage stakeholders.
- Coordination and coherence are considered the biggest challenges by most countries.
- It would be a useful exercise to evaluate the effectiveness of institutional arrangements for SDG implementation at the national level, to facilitate learning across among countries and across the SDGs.

Introduction of the 2021 VNR Synthesis Report

Ms. Tonya, Vaturi, OISC, UN DESA, gave a brief presentation on the recent online publication of the 2021 VNR Synthesis Report, which highlights the policies and best practices from the 2021 VNR presenting countries. As a searchable and representative document, it reviews the 42 VNRs of 2021 and can be a helpful tool for VNR preparations for 2022. It includes an overview of progress in SDG implementation and addresses other topics and issues, such as countries in special situations and monitoring and data. As the majority of the 2021 VNR countries had presented a VNR in previous years, it also highlights the progressions in VNR presentations.

Session 7: How to best use data in the VNRs

Session 7 focused on strengthening the use of data for the VNRs and for SDG implementation and provided participants with good practices and possible action plans.

Ms. Yongyi Min and Ms. Heather Page, UN Statistics Division, UN DESA, gave a presentation on the importance of data inclusion in the VNRs for tracking the progress of the SDGs and for holding all stakeholders accountable. The inclusion of timely data is especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic as it is essential for swift policy reactions. The core principles of the 2030 Agenda should be reflected in the data and every VNR should be data- and evidence-based. A strengthened dialogue between data users (policy makers) and data producers is important for communicating and understanding each other's needs and to be able to identify vulnerable and left behind groups.

The UN Stats Division highly recommended that VNR countries develop a VNR data roadmap that includes a plan for a VNR data team, stakeholder engagement, data gap assessment, data collection, a plan to fill data gaps, and results in a data-based VNR.

The identification of data gaps is highly relevant, as no country has all the data for all SDG indicators, but a data gap assessment can help identify needs for future data investment. The use of different data resources can also assist with closing data gaps in the VNR, as well as the use of innovative methods and non-traditional data resources, such as nowcasting, satellite driven data and data from NGOs, social media and the private sector. In this context it is also relevant to note that the most vulnerable groups could be excluded from data aggregation and

the identification of those groups on a national level is essential to include them in the VNR.

The UN Statistical Division presentation closed with the introduction of an SDG and COVID-19 data visualization toolkit that supports countries in visualizing their data and can be a practical guide in supporting governments.

Country experiences were shared by two countries.

A case study was presented on data monitoring and reviewing for SDG implementation and VNR preparation, where a participatory process was adopted covering 91 per cent of the SDG targets. The data monitoring is split up into an economic, social and a political focus. To assess the adoption of policies, different steps are implemented, including a review of all ministries and sectors, regional reviews, thematic reviews, macro-economic data, and data from civil society organizations, the private sector and government. After the VNR was drafted, it was technically validated by different actors and finally politically validated by a presidential council.

A second presentation was given on the digital *SDGital 2030* tool, which will be offered for other countries to be used in the future. This tool helps measure the 169 SDG targets through a digitalized aggregation of data based on a three-tier system. The evaluation of the 169 targets leads to an evaluation of progress of SDG implementation which then leads to an evidence based VNR. The first and second steps of this evaluation process will be measured by the digital tool through 10 steps and the evaluation of each target is assigned to one person of a relevant ministry of the government. The tool is also given to different stakeholders across the country, to give them the possibility to review the progress on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The progress on the evaluation of each target can be reviewed in the cockpit of the digital tool, which also allows interactive commenting to keep ministries, coordinators and stakeholders interested in the progress.

Session 8: Roadmap for VNR preparations

Session 8 was facilitated by **Ms. Tonya Vaturi and Ms. Maame Agyeben, OISC, UN DESA**. At the beginning of the session, Ms. Maame Agyeben, OISC, UN DESA presented a global roadmap for preparing VNRs for the HLPF in 2022, including the timeline of the three Global Workshops for 2022 VNR countries in October 2021, April 2022 and July 2022; Regional Forums to be held in March and April 2022; and the deadlines for submission of main messages of VNRs by 3 May 2022, written national VNR reports by 10 June 2022, and audio-visuals by 17 June 2022. She encouraged countries to populate their roadmaps for preparing VNRs around this structure. Ms. Agyeben also shared a detailed checklist from the VNR Handbook, which countries can use as a starting point on initiating VNR preparation and organization, stakeholder engagement, and presentation at the HLPF.

Five countries presented their national roadmaps with details of activities, priorities, structure and institutions, involved ministries, engagement with stakeholders and timelines on their preparations for VNRs at the HLPF 2022. Two countries also shared their national experience for preparing VNRs.

Even though countries' roadmaps, priorities and experience vary, the following common messages were highlighted by participants in preparing VNRs:

- The national plan needs to be in line with the global deadlines in preparing the national SDG progress report and the presentation at the HLPF.
- Coherence and coordination are needed among relevant Ministries, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Planning and Development, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Environment in assessment of progress of the SDGs and in preparing for VNR reports and presentations, as well as to coordinate with country's Mission to the United Nations. National government also needs to coordinate and cooperate with the local governments in the preparatory process.
- It is important to understand the indicators and methodologies for evaluating the implementation of the SDGs and targets, as well as related data collection and analyses that would be the baseline for preparing the national report. The stakeholders would be important to contribute to data collection, however the national drafting team for the report has the responsibility for quality control of data.
- The preparation of the VNR report and presentation at the HLPF should be an inclusive process to engage and consult broadly with all relevant stakeholders, including civil society, local authorities, women, youth, academia, the private sector, local communities and vulnerable groups of people, to ensure their voices are reflected in the report.
- It is important to consider the VNR as a process on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs that goes beyond the presentation at the HLPF.
- VNR countries could also organize side events in the margins of the HLPF as another opportunity to complement their VNR presentation.

Participants pointed out that the main challenges faced by countries in preparing VNRs include lack of financial and human resources, understanding the indicators and methodologies for evaluating SDGs progress and related capacity building, and difficulty with data collection and data availability. In this regard, UN DESA and the regional commissions could provide technical support to countries in their preparations of the VNRs, including to share guidelines, good examples and experiences.

Knowledge Exchange

The last meeting of the VNR webinar featured a knowledge exchange. The objectives of the exchange were to (i) create an interactive space for UN entities, international and regional organizations and stakeholders to showcase tools, methodologies and approaches that could support VNR countries in preparing the VNRs and implementing the 2030 Agenda, and (ii)

facilitate knowledge exchange and networking between VNR countries and partners on key theme of the follow-up and review process of the 2030 Agenda. The exchange was divided into three groups and moderated by **Mr. Joop Theunissen, OISC, UN DESA**.

Group 1. Stakeholder Engagement

Mr. Oli Henman, Major Groups & Other Stakeholders Coordination Mechanism, spoke of what Major Groups and Other Stakeholders (MGOS) do to support VNR countries. He described the different major groups and stated that the MGOS include a special emphasis on leaving no one behind and a human right's-based approach. They seek a collaborative process for stakeholder engagement in the VNRs. They solicit expressions of interest of stakeholders active in a VNR country, organize VNR-related webinars and promote dialogue. At the HLPF, MGOS give a brief statement containing a question to each VNR country.

Ms. Ana de Oliveira, Global Coalition of Thirteen Civil Society Organizations, indicated that the Global Coalition produces a series of reports available online on SDG implementation that examines the VNR country reports each year and any shadow reports and reviews and assesses progress and provide recommendations. Their independent reports aim to inform and track progress to improve the VNRs and strengthen accountability, raise awareness of good practices among governments and lessons learned, and inform civil society organizations of examples of parallel reporting best practices at the country level. The Coalition has some offices at the local level, and some at the global level, ready to work with governments.

Mr. Akihito Watabe, International Health Partnership for UHC2030 (UHC2030), informed that UHC2030 is a multi-stakeholder platform for universal health coverage (UHC) with a joint Secretariat of WHO, the World Bank and the OECD, and with a presence in over 90 countries. They assessed the 2016- 2021 VNRs on UHC and found that 92 per cent of country reports reviewed SDG3, 71 per cent had a type of UHC policy, but only 37 per cent included a numerical assessment. Their report "State of UNC Commitment" provides 193 country profiles and a baseline database available for use. UHC2030 is ready to support government and civil society to use this data for the VNRs.

Ms. Ainara Fernandez, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), highlighted that 65 per cent of the SDG targets can only be achieved at the local level, meaning that localization is a necessity. While localization and Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) are expanding quickly, involvement by countries' local and regional governments in the national review processes is too slow. There is also the new tool of Voluntary Sub-national Reviews (VSRs), and both VLRs and VSRs are highly valuable processes in themselves. UCLG is about to launch its first guidelines for VSRs, and VSRs have already been incorporated into previous VNRs.

Ms. Mena Leila Kilani, SDG Nederland, explained that SDG Nederland is a multi-stakeholder network for anyone wanting to advance the SDGs and connects more than 1000 organizations. They have coalitions for every SDG, a stakeholder network, local networks and interaction, and they promote ownership and engagement at all levels. This includes taking a grassroots approach to discuss SDG policies and initiatives, such as through their "SDG bus", which goes to different locales and helps to connect what people do in their daily lives with the SDGs and helps provide awareness and momentum for SDG achievement.

Group 2: Leaving no one behind

Ms. Ilze Kalnina, Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (PMNCH), stated that PMNCH advocates for women's, children's and adolescents' rights. At the 2021 HLPF they launched a policy and accountability brief "Action Brief 2021" that gives seven action areas, supplemented by tool kits, for preventing the COVID-19 pandemic to become a lasting crisis for these groups. Their call to action asks governments to make explicit commitment to women and children in policies, financing and services. They also work to engage parliamentarians and the media.

Ms. Lilei Chow, Save the Children, discussed how countries can include children as key stakeholders in the VNR process. She encouraged that children be engaged in all stages of the VNRs, both for now and for their future. Supporting children is consistent with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other instruments and agreements. Save the Children is happy to work with VNR countries and support them in the VNR process.

Mr. Miguel Caldeira, UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, reminded participants that children are victims of violence and amongst the most marginalized and left behind in society. Although no SDG targets children directly, almost all SDGs touch children's lives indirectly. The VNR represents a unique opportunity for countries to highlight the progress that is made towards protecting children. The Special Representative and his team hope to meet with 2022 VNR countries and assist them with guidance to find out how children are affected and how to ensure that no child is left behind.

Mr. Taavi Erkkola, UNAIDS, noted that there has been a lot of positive progress in tackling HIV/AIDSs in the last years and that that focus shouldn't be shifted. Many VNR presenting countries included this topic in their reports. Data and tools are made available to help monitor progress by UNAIDS, which has a law and policy partnership with Georgetown University and conducts a survey every two years to assist in the aggregation of data on HIV and AIDS in the world. He further noted that the most affected and vulnerable groups are often not visible.

Ms. Maria Ploug Petersen, the Danish Institute of Human Rights, informed that the Danish Institute provides an online tool on their website that assists countries with linking the SDGs with suitable Human Rights articles. The VNR reporting should draw on human rights, as the SDGs are also based on human rights. The SDG Human Rights Data Explorer contains an artificial intelligence to find recommendations on specific actions for individual countries, similar to their Human Rights Guide to Sustainable Recovery, which helps countries recovering from the pandemic.

Group 3: Research support and UN system support

Ms. Marcia Tavares, UNDESA, stated that the United Nations Committee for Development Policy, which is supported by UNDESA, has provided analyses of the VNRs since 2016 and of their inclusiveness and potential for improvement. She highlighted the need to include non-state actors and provide for country level follow-up after the VNR presentation at the HLPF.

Ms. Katey Pelican, University of Minnesota Sustainable Development Goals Initiative, introduced their organization's tool to support multi-sectoral stakeholders in analyzing their

own systems. This includes a stakeholder mapping exercise, an interview process, a collaborative mapping process, as well as a system analysis and the identification of opportunities and the conducting of an action plan. This has been implemented in 18 countries at national and subnational levels.

Ms. Mena Leila Kilani, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), introduced UNDP's work on the SDG 16 Survey Initiative, which analyzes all dimensions that can be helpful in identifying vulnerable groups and places of action. This can be used as a stand-alone survey and will be available in December 2021.

Ms. Saorla McCabe and Ms. Theresa Chorbacher, UNESCO, informed that UNESCO provides information on SDG targets 16.10.1 and 16.10.2, which focus on the safety of journalists and the access to information. Technical tools are provided by UNESCO to countries that are willing to reflect these topics in their VNRs. The speaker noted the application of UNESCO Journalists Safety Indicators in their reports, as well as the support of shadow reports by civil society organizations.

Ms. Laurel Jo-Ann Hansen, United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), stated that UNDRR provides VNR countries with a checklist and helpful questions for a risk-based report. The Office stands ready to support countries in their VNR process. This is especially important since the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis show that a problem in one part of the system can affect the whole system. It is therefore essential to anticipate hazards beforehand, include disaster risk reduction in all SDGs and consider forward-looking projections. This can be especially helpful for assisting countries in special situations with the preparation for hazards to which they are exposed.

Closing

During the closing, **Her Excellency Ms. Yoka Brandt, Permanent Representative of the Netherlands**, highlighted that an interesting and challenging year lies ahead. The task of finding where countries stand with the implementation of the SDGs is not an easy one, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic makes the progress on achieving the SDGs even harder. She noted that the better VNRs are those that are more inclusive, and the conducting of Voluntary Local Reviews and Voluntary Subnational Reviews also help to improve the quality of VNRs. She called on VNR countries to retain a critical eye when displaying the progress of their own country towards the 2030 Agenda and emphasized that the VNRs are more than a report, but an important process for aligning national goals with the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda.

Ms. Marion Barthelemy, Director, OISC, UN DESA, thanked the Kingdom of the Netherlands for hosting the webinar. The 2022 VNRs can contribute to embarking on a path towards a sustainable recovery. Countries can consider developing a work plan that includes consultations within the government and with stakeholders. Roadmaps can be geared at ensuring data- and evidence-based VNR. The VNR reports can include a statistical annex and analysis, lessons learned and examples. The second, third or fourth VNRs can provide updates on progress. Voluntary local reviews and voluntary sub-national reviews can be helpful, and

countries can take an integrated approach to financing issues. Countries may work with the friends of VNRs co-chaired by the Permanent Representatives of Morocco and the Philippines. DESA also stands ready to support the 2022 VNR countries.