



VNR LABS

HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM

Keeping the Compass on the SDGs

Summaries of 2022 VNR Labs at the High-Level Political Forum

5-15 July 2022



United Nations

Department of
Economic and
Social Affairs



Introduction

For the fifth year, a series of VNR Labs, short informal discussions on key aspects of the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), were convened on the margins of the 2022 High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). Since 2018, the VNR Labs have provided an informal platform for experience sharing and reflection on the Voluntary National Reviews.

As always, the Labs were held under the Chatham House rule and were organized by UN DESA Divisions, United Nations entities and for the first year, also bilateral partners. They were held throughout the duration of the HLPF from 5 to 15 July 2022 and were open to countries, the United Nations system, other organizations and representatives of Major Groups and other Stakeholders.

In view of the current global situation, the theme chosen for the 2022 VNR Labs was “Keeping the Compass on the SDGs.” Under this broad theme, representatives from countries, the UN system and Major Groups and other stakeholders discussed diverse cross-cutting themes, including policy coherence, social inclusion and leaving no one behind, data and statistics, resource mobilization and partnerships, amongst others. In addition, VNR Labs 10 and 13 provided two countries, Ghana, and Switzerland, each presenting their VNRs in 2022, with the opportunity to expand on the review experience and share lessons learned on the national process with peers.

The informal summaries of the Labs have been prepared by the organizers.

For detailed concept notes and further information on individual Labs, please refer to the home page of the 2022 VNR Labs from the link below.

<https://hlpf.un.org/2022/vnr-labs>

On the cover: Gift from Brazil, located on the east wall of the delegates lobby on the ground floor in the General Assembly Building. Mural by Candido Portinari. © [UN Photo](#).

What are the VNRs (not) telling us?

As a subsidiary body of ECOSOC, the Committee for Development Policy (CDP) has been analyzing the VNRs presented at the HLFP every year since 2017. The Committee's reports provide points for consideration by governments and other stakeholders participating in the VNRs. The CDP analysis is an assessment of the VNRs and the VNR process, not a review of progress on achievement of development goals. It is a study of how the VNRs presented each year have considered, or failed to consider, selected cross-cutting principles, goals or targets.

This year's VNR lab provided an opportunity for CDP members to share their findings from the analysis of the VNRs submitted in 2021. Following the opening remarks by Mr. Liu Zhenmin, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), the vice-Chair of the CDP stressed that we are not on course for reaching the SDGs as evidenced by the failure to meet the climate crisis, the unequal distribution of vaccines during the COVID pandemic, the increase in income inequality, the current food and energy crises and continued denial of basic human rights.

After the overview given on the CDP's findings as well as on leaving no one behind, and Covid-19 preparedness, CDP members presented the findings of the Committee on reducing income inequality, gender inequality, the environment and 'orphan targets' in VNRs, and reflected on recommendations for how the VNRs can be enhanced to serve as more effective instruments in accelerating SDG implementation.

Following the presentations by the Committee Members, the meeting heard reflections from the Head of Sector, Sustainable Development Goals, Directorate-General for International Partnerships, of the European Commission and a Senior Policy Analyst, Global Policy Forum, followed by a discussion of questions from the floor.

6 July 2022
7:30-9 am

Organized by
UNICEF

Avoiding a Generational Catastrophe: Catching up on Learning Loss to Rewrite the Future

This VNR Lab entitled “Avoiding a generational catastrophe: Catching up on learning loss to rewrite the future” was organized by UNICEF and attended by nearly 100 participants. With SDG 4: Quality Education under review at the 2022 High-Level Political Forum, this Lab provided a valuable opportunity for Member States to showcase how they are tackling specific indicators and targets related to learning and foundational skills. More specifically, the Lab provided a platform for sharing experiences and approaches that bring a focus on learning and foundational skills within the VNR process while also highlighting the importance of public financing/spending on education as a sound long-term investment for a sustainable recovery from the pandemic.

The programme was organized in three sections. It began with a framing of the discussion by the Executive Director of UNICEF [recorded message], UNICEF’s Global Director of Education and Adolescent Development at UNICEF, and powerful testimony from two child and youth advocates. He then facilitated a section with presentations by Member States on their progress, good practices, challenges and lessons learned in tackling the current learning crisis and implementing the 2030 Agenda.

While the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the learning crisis, it existed long before. Results based on latest available data implies that the pandemic has likely caused a sharp increase in global learning poverty to an estimated 70 per cent. Now, nearly two-thirds of 10-year-olds globally are estimated to be in learning poverty. The final segment of the VNR included statements from four teachers working on the frontlines of the learning crisis in remote areas of different parts of the world. They all shared valuable insights based on their first-hand experience of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic and reminding the audience of the key role teachers can, and have played, in fighting the learning crisis.

Overall, the Lab highlighted the importance of basic reading and maths skills as the building blocks for future learning and the fact that continued investment in education is fundamental for social mobility, increasing gender equity, eliminating poverty and essential if we are to rescue SDG 4.

11 July 2022
2-3 pm

Organized by
UN Foundation

VNR as a Town Hall – Sustaining Momentum for Achieving the SDGs by Engaging All

The UN Foundation's VNR Lab at the 2022 HLPF spotlighted both the good practices and challenges of assessing and benchmarking the implementation of the SDGs. It provided a space for lesson-sharing between VNR countries and external partners, discussing how the UN can support Member States in their VNR preparation process. Participants explored how innovative tools can enhance whole-of-society partnerships and capacity building initiatives.

The Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS) underscored that the development of diverse task forces and working groups had the twofold benefit of providing technical leadership and guidance to the VNR process while also identifying stakeholders invested in the advancement of the SDGs. Creating these multi-stakeholder coalitions forced Member States to be intentional in the knowledge-sharing process and to ensure accountability and transparency. Several panelists emphasized that young people must be incorporated as partners in the VNR process in order to attain impactful outcomes.

Several major setbacks in the VNR preparation process were identified by the LDCs and SIDS: a lack of capacity to collect timely and robust data when planning, evaluation and reporting systems are insufficient; challenges in involving all stakeholders due to limitations of in-person meetings and interconnectivity issues, and limited financing with restricted program-based budgeting. A consistent gap between the establishment of policies and their implementation remains as well. It was stressed that civil society must be offered the opportunity to engage in the SDG implementation process at the national level.

The 2023 Global Sustainable Development Report was also highlighted - the report will demonstrate a high level of stakeholder engagement through both a call for inputs from experts in specific issue areas and regional stakeholder consultations to be held between September 2022 and January 2023.

The Lab concluded by reiterating that ownership creates change, especially for stakeholder engagement, and that civil society plays an essential part in the VNR process including within the report itself, the presentation, and its follow-up through implementation of the SDGs.

7 July 2022
8-9 am

Organized by
DESA/DISD

The Role of Cooperatives in Accelerating Progress to Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

The Division for Inclusive Social Development of the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs; in collaboration with the Permanent Mission of Mongolia to the United Nations and the Committee for the Promotion and Advancement of Cooperatives (COPAC) ; celebrated the International Day of Cooperatives 2022 on Thursday 7th July as part of the UNDESA VNR-Lab.

The event was held in a hybrid format with about 30 in-person participants and over 200 participants online. The theme of the celebration was: “Cooperatives Build a Better World.” The theme recognizes that the current predominant economic model will not achieve the sustainable development goals.

In her opening remarks, director of DISD/DESA remarked on the cooperative principles that support people and planet without prioritizing profits. She noted that in a world facing multiple crises, the cooperative principles of solidarity are indispensable and charting a sustainable path for humanity.

In his keynote address, the Permanent Representative of Mongolia to the United Nations, noted the importance of Member States to placing cooperatives at the center of their national voluntary reviews; and the importance for cooperatives to participate and fully appreciate their role they play in sustainable development. He stated that Mongolia, as the main sponsor of the resolution on Cooperatives in Social Development, seeks to encourage other governments to create policies and programmes that leverage the cooperative business model in their efforts to build back better from the COVID-19 pandemic. He stated that 2022 has been declared the Year of Cooperatives by the government of Mongolia. The cooperative laws in Mongolia has been modified and there has been a big increase in registration of new cooperatives during the year. He concluded by referencing the United Nations secretary general’s call for a new social contract to build back better from the pre-pandemic era.

Representatives from Japan, Togo, Spain – all countries that presented their voluntary national reviews and included cooperatives in their consultations in preparing those reviews, made presentations on the key role of cooperatives in supporting their sustainable development policies and actions.

Director general of the International Cooperative Alliance urged more governments to systematically include cooperatives in their voluntary national reviews.

Many cooperatives, their representative bodies and other civil society organisations also participated in the event. This year’s commemoration also coincides with the 100th anniversary of the International Day of Cooperatives, and the 10th anniversary of the UN International Year of Cooperatives.

Human Rights and Voluntary National Reviews

The UN development system on the ground, under the leadership of the Resident Coordinators (RCs), plays a pivotal role in supporting Governments in preparation of the VNRs. The VNR lab provided insights on the nature of UN support offered to VNRs and the value addition of the same in ensuring an inclusive process towards high quality VNRs. Representatives from Government, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and UN Resident Coordinators (RCs) from Botswana, Cote d'Ivoire, Jamaica, Kazakhstan and Sri Lanka shared their experiences on the theme based on their recent VNR development process.

The coordination role played by the UN Resident Coordinator Offices (RCOs) helps to minimize the significant transaction costs for the Government in having to seek out support of each UN entity separately for the VNRs. RC's have been leading the political dialogue with the Government in identifying their needs acting as an interlocutor between the UN system and the Government, while following up on these dialogues by organizing the UN system to deliver on the required technical support to the VNRs. RCOs act as the 'one-stop-shop' for the Governments in gathering information on the VNR process, global guidelines and on the nature of technical and strategic support that the UN system can offer for VNRs. Further, RCOs are facilitating the access of expertise of non-resident UN entities for the VNRs.

Overall, the lab discussed the following five broad areas of support to VNRs offered by UN system

- Technical support and quality review: UN country teams formed thematic technical teams to produce background documents to strengthen the thematic focus of VNRs. The UN system further provided quality review of VNRs against global guidelines and made suggestions to improve the overall quality.
- SDG Data support: UN teams supported Governments in ensuring that most updated data on SDG indicators were used for the VNR.
- Multistakeholder consultations: UN system supported Governments to organize multistakeholder consultations, especially ensuring meaningful engagement of CSOs and other major groups.
- Cross-country peer exchange: UN system has also facilitated cross-country exchange of best practices on VNRs through regional, global platforms and twinning programmes.
- VNR follow-up and dissemination: The UN system continues to support Governments in ensuring follow-up of VNR findings and wider dissemination of VNR findings within countries.

For the UN system, VNRs form a great resource in formulation of UN Common Country Analysis and UN sustainable development cooperation frameworks (UNSDCF). The lab highlighted the need for data-driven, whole-of-society and systems-perspective on VNRs and urgent follow-up to the VNR findings. Continued strong collaboration between the UN system, Governments and key stakeholders are critical in achieving these recommendations.

VNR Lab

6

11 July 2022
8-9 pm

Organized by UN
Regional
Commissions
Office, New York

Increased Policy Coherence and Accelerated Implementation of the 2030 Agenda: The Role of Voluntary Local Reviews in Complementing the VNR Process. Experiences from the Regions

The VNR Lab 6 was organized by the UN Regional Commissions Office based in New York and focused on Voluntary Local Reviews and other sub-national follow-up and review processes that serve as powerful mechanisms to promote the localization of the SDGs and improve the identification of gaps and priorities to accelerate progress towards the 2030 Agenda.

The Lab facilitated cross-regional learning of experiences on the integration of VLRs and other sub-national inputs in the VNR processes and demonstrated how comprehensive and systematic follow-up and reporting at the local and subnational levels can support policy coherence and effective national planning and reinforce the principle of LNOB. It specifically aimed at sharing experiences of subnational and local level engagement in SDG follow-up and review through the preparation of VLRs and other mechanisms, especially to showcase how such engagement has led to increased collaboration and policy coherence and to strengthened VNRs. Moreover, it identified lessons learned on the use of Voluntary Local Review Guidelines and their role in future VLRs and review cycles. In addition, it presented best practices on the territorialization of the 2030 Agenda from the respecting regions, including valuable lessons learned from the exchange between Governments within the Community of Practice for VNR countries and identified examples of how the momentum for collaboration between the local and national levels of government was continued after the VNR and HLPF.

Representatives of VNR participating countries (first timers as well as returning VNR countries), regional organizations, and other stakeholders were invited to exchange experiences and best practices. In doing so, they illustrated how efforts to bring countries together at the regional level have been useful and continue to be relevant as we approach the mid-term review of the 2030 Agenda. Speakers from the following regions contributed to the discussion: Africa, Arab, Asia and the Pacific, UNECE, and Latin America and the Caribbean. For background information on the different regions, please find [here](#) a background note of the VNR Lab.

11 July 2022
5-6 pm

Organized by
DSDG/DESA

Advancing the 2030 Agenda and regional frameworks through effective and integrated national planning

This VNR lab explored countries' experiences and lessons learned with the integration and mainstreaming of the 2030 Agenda in the preparation of VNRs, as well as the role of regional frameworks. A scene-setting presentation highlighted that national development planning was not simply a mechanical exercise, and as much as planning cannot guarantee implementation, its absence leads to failure. While leadership is critical to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, it needs to be underpinned by "institutional infrastructure" to achieve growth and sustainable development. In this context, reference was made to the Committee of Experts on Public Administration's (CEPA) principles of effective governance for sustainable development, which enable a structured integration of the SDGs into national policy frameworks.

The role of the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) was also outlined. It functions as a tool for sharing experiences, reinforcing best practices, identifying deficiencies, and assessing capacity-building needs to foster policies, standards and practices that lead to political stability, high economic growth, sustainable development and accelerated sub-regional and continental economic integration. Thematic areas covered in the reviews are democracy and political governance; corporate governance; economic governance and management; and resilience and disaster risk reduction. A country example canvassed good practices in moving beyond alignment of plans and the SDGs towards fundamental integration. Among the good practices singled out were sustained stakeholder engagement and putting the people at the centre of planning and VNR processes and sustaining and institutionalizing VNR processes should be sustained, allowing them to become invaluable instruments to strengthen legitimacy of local, national and global planning and delivery processes. A second country example explained the practical mechanisms for alignment between the long-term development plan and the SDGs, which occurred through successive three-year medium-term development frameworks. It was noted that the development plan enjoys bi-partisan support and is underpinned by high levels of stakeholder involvement and engagement. One of the issues addressed during the question-and-answer session were the respective merits of a separating or combining the finance and planning functions in one ministry. One presenter noted that in his context, when the two functions were combined under one ministry things were "topsy turvy", and that the situation improved when a separation brought with it a clearer allocation of responsibilities. Other topics touched in included the integration of traditional leadership structures (chiefs), the degree to which civil society organizations participating in consultation exercises were independent of government, and the information sharing as a means to combat illicit financial flows.

The Role of Multi-stakeholder Advisory Bodies in VNR Processes and their Potential to Accelerate SDG Delivery

The [German Council for Sustainable Development](#) (Rat für Nachhaltige Entwicklung, RNE) has organized a VNR Lab on 12 July 2022. The focus of the event was on the role of various national stakeholder engagement formats for delivering the 2030 Agenda and contributing to VNR drafting processes with society as a whole. The debate centered on the potential of institutionalized multi-stakeholder advisory bodies with regards to supporting the navigation of complex challenges in times of multiple crises. The VNR Lab addressed the following questions:

- How can VNR stakeholder engagement processes be translated into permanent national multi-stakeholder institutions and vice versa?
- What prerequisites are needed for permanent and inclusive multi-stakeholder engagement formats?
- How can established stakeholder structures support the acceleration of SDG delivery, by e.g., creating momentum for national SDG strategies and progress in their implementation?

Institutionalized multi-stakeholder engagement formats, in one form or another, hold the potential of facilitating the mediation of conflicting interests, building consensus across stakeholders to achieve joint positions, and thereby developing solutions accepted by society as a whole. During the VNR Lab, these assumptions and questions were discussed based on insights from Ghana's, Jamaica's, and Senegal's 2022 VNR stakeholder engagement processes. As VNR Labs at the HLPF are a lively space for open debates and interaction on concrete observations around VNR drafting processes, the countries shared their insights in a dialogic format between government and civil society. Together, they provided insights on how they work in constructive, trustful, and reciprocal relationships to deliver the 2030 Agenda in a cyclical and ambitious manner. An effective organization, an inclusive dialogue process and a trusted relationship across stakeholders were thereby highlighted as key elements to secure meaningful engagement.

The discussion revealed that VNRs, as international spotlights, can impact national SDG policymaking, as well as stimulate institutionalized structures for stakeholder engagement. Considering that in many cases the VNR process created a momentum for concerted and coordinated action, VNR processes could be used as steppingstones to organize and create effective and institutionalized multi-stakeholder engagement for sustainable development.

The VNR Lab was organized in the name of the Global Forum for National SDG Advisory Bodies, a network for and by national multi-stakeholder advisory bodies. The network has conceptualized the discussions held in the VNR Lab in recent years and processed them in three extensive studies. The first study has identified different pathways for establishing and maintaining an SDG multi-stakeholder advisory body at national level, such as a council or commission. The second and third study have identified necessary preconditions for similar multi-stakeholder advisory bodies, in order to carve out potential pathways for continuous advice of such bodies to their respective governments. These studies are available [here](#).

12 July 2022
1-2 pm

Organized by
UN Evaluation
Group

5-Star VNRs: How Country-led Evaluations can Deliver the Evidence-based VNRs Intended for the SDGs

As part of the 2022 session of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), WFP together with UNICEF, UN Women, EvalPartners and IDEAS hosted a Voluntary National Review Lab (VNR Lab), on 12 July on the topic 5-star VNRs: How country-led evaluations can deliver the evidence-based VNRs intended for the SDGs. Opening remarks were provided by Ms Andrea Cook, WFP Director of Evaluation and EvalPartners co-chair, noting that in the language of the 2030 Agenda, the SDGs' follow up and review must be "rigorous and based on evidence, informed by country-led evaluations". The opening remarks raised two points:

1. That evidence – and specifically evidence from country-led evaluations – can contribute to informing countries' national recovery policies, by tracking progress, reallocating resources, enabling mid-course corrections, and fostering learning. For this to happen, countries require robust national evaluation systems, policies and, above all, capacities to put them in the driver seat of their development agendas.
2. That evidence generated through evaluations at the national level, could enrich and strengthen the Voluntary National Review process by providing deeper analyses of what is working, what is not, and why.

The Independent Evaluation Consultant & Former evaluator at the South Africa Department of Performance, Monitoring & Evaluation (DPME) delivered a keynote presentation. The presentation identified four pathways in which the evidence from country-led evaluation of the SDGs can feed into the VNRs, noting the scope can include all 17 SDGs or a strategic selection of SDGs. They can be primary evaluations or syntheses of evidence from past evaluations of relevant national policies, strategies programmes and projects. Drawing on lessons from a guide on Embedding Evaluation in Voluntary National Reviews, the presentation concluded with 'how to' steps including:

- Develop a theory of change for key programmes and check that the designs and indicators are appropriate
- Undertake rapid evaluations where there are gaps
- Commission synthesis work on key gaps
- Meet with national M&E champions and discuss how country-led evaluations can be undertaken going forward
- Identify national/regional support partners who can support in the journey, including Voluntary Organisations for Professional Evaluation (VOPEs)
- Discuss with the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) and other partners the possibility of support

Led by the session moderator, the co-chair of EVALSDGs, speakers from participating countries that have used evaluative evidence in their VNRs provided practical examples why and how this can be done and shared lessons from the process. The Member State panellists included:

- Senior Technical Advisor to the Office of the President of the Sustainable Development Goals in Nigeria
- Advisor to the Ministry of Planning and Economic Policy in Costa Rica
- Chief Economist of the Population & Sustainable Development Coordination Section in the Ministry of Finance in Botswana:

The Vice Chair from the United Nations Evaluation Group stated how UNEG can provide practical support to countries while the session concluded with closing remarks from the Permanent Mission of Nigeria to the United Nations highlighting why a new Resolution on Country-led Evaluation of the SDGs could provide new impetus to the initiative.

Further guidance on embedding evaluation in the VNRs can be found in this resource sheet.

12 July 2022
2-3 pm

Organized by
Government of
Switzerland
and DESA

National experience of the VNR process of Switzerland: Using digital innovation and the VNR process to create sustainable momentum for the SDGs

The VNR Lab on Switzerland's national experience of its VNR process added a focus on data and digital innovation.

First, the Swiss VNR process was presented. Switzerland chose to digitalize the process using the tool "SDGital2030", which allows for a more decentralized approach in the gathering of information for a comprehensive stocktaking regarding the state of implementation of the 2030 Agenda. It creates a database of general assessments on SDG and target implementation, the measures taken, as well as the progress and remaining challenges. This information is collected from the line ministries of the federal administration, the subnational level, as well as stakeholders from academia, the private sector and civil society. The database serves as a basis for the Swiss VNR; additionally it is fully published on a new website called www.SDGital2030.ch. The Federal Statistical Office complemented this qualitative information with quantitative "data clusters" based on different indicators and additional statistical data, which show a comprehensive picture of the implementation of the SDGs.

After this presentation, a panel of both government and stakeholder representatives discussed the Swiss VNR process, the current implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Switzerland and the way forward. In an open exchange, civil society and government representatives reflected on the forms of inclusion in the VNR process, with civil society appreciating the opportunity to be included in the stocktaking, while asking to be more included the analysis of the collected data as well as future policy planning. The representatives of local government discussed the challenge of implementing a global agenda on a local level and brought some concrete examples on how municipalities overcome this and work as incubators for innovative ideas. The private sector representative brought up important reflections on the way ahead, especially on how the economy needs to be incentivised further to include the full cost of their impact – economic, social and environmental – into their cost-returns analysis.

Finally, Austria and Mexico shared some reflections from the peer dialogue held in June 2022 on the Swiss VNR. The VNR Lab was a successful event with enriching discussions on both the VNR process and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda from a national and international perspective.

13 July 2022
7:30-9 am

Organized by
UN ESCAP

Peer-to-peer feedback & South-South Cooperation: The benefits of Twinning for VNR preparations

On July 13, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) organised a VNR Lab on the benefits of peer-to-peer feedback for VNR preparation and how twinning can strengthen the report. The event shed light on the ESCAP VNR Twinning Programme that has been running since 2020, with current and past Twinning countries sharing their experiences and lessons from the exercise. It also provided space for 2023 VNR countries to reflect on how Twinning might be beneficial for their forthcoming VNR. The lab explored what impact the Twinning exercise has had on the VNR process and beyond, and how this form of South-South cooperation can strengthen follow-up and review and forge partnerships for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) beyond the VNR preparation.

The event highlighted how the VNR Twinning Programme has been instrumental in providing candid and constructive peer-to-peer feedback. It helped countries to learn about new reforms and approaches being adopted by the twinning country and identify areas for improvement. Through study tours and regular exchange and dialogue on practicalities and methodologies, the Twinning Programme became an element of their VNR work plans and twinned countries benefitted from the expertise that was shared by both countries.

It was emphasized that the success of the Twinning initiative is linked to its experiential and hands-on nature. Twinning has supported creating new partnerships and setting-up individual relations among a broad array of stakeholders, such as Civil Society Organisations, private sector, and Parliamentarians rather than merely connecting VNR teams and government units. The event highlighted that the countries, through the Twinning Programme, were able to observe how different stakeholders were involved in the VNR process and SDG monitoring, and then seek to strengthen their own stakeholder engagement.

Countries remain enthusiastic and supportive of the Twinning Programme, and how this can lead to greater South-South cooperation. South-South cooperation and learning from each other's reforms are critical to accelerate SDG implementation and promote SDG leadership. However, it needs to go beyond ad-hoc arrangements, with more systemic interventions to take the cooperation to scale. Dialogues should continue after the VNR reports and they can promote broader collaboration through knowledge-exchange.

Main elements of success of the Twinning Programme were identified as:

- a) having equal partnerships, with same level of commitment and high trust among Twinning partners; elements such cultural and language issues need to be taken into account;
- b) adopting a strategic approach, identifying areas of mutual cooperation, right from inception. This can be helpful to pinpoint the right stakeholders to be part of the programme and to be sure the Twinning is beneficial to both countries. Thematic connections on specific issues should also be explored;
- c) leadership vs mentoring - one size does not fit all: different countries, while happy to connect and twin, may want to play different roles and require different levels of support;
- d) facilitation, communication and logistical support is needed. Twinning requires significant coordination efforts to get the Twinning Programme up and running. Having designated focal points and meeting regularly (whether online or through study tours) improves the quality of the connection and elevates trust among partners;
- e) study tours are invaluable, providing a great platform for cross-learning, developing relationships, and comparative analyses.

For further reflection on the benefits of Twinning, see: <https://hlpf.un.org/2022/blog/ms-armida-salsiah-alisjahbana-executive-secretary-of-the-united-nations-economic-and>

Localizing SDGs: Integrating Voluntary Local Reviews into Voluntary National Review Processes

The 13 July 2022 VNR/VLR Lab on Localizing SDGs jointly organized by UN-DESA, OECD and UCLG explored the growing relationship between Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) and Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) and Voluntary Sub-national Reviews (VSRs), as well as coordination between national and local Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) implementation efforts.

The lab brought together over 60 in-person and virtual participants and its panelists included representatives of national and local governments from Japan, Paraguay, Netherlands, Zimbabwe, Italy, and from the Office of the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Executive Secretary.

The discussion highlighted the value of VLR and VSR processes, as well as their contributions to preparation of VNRs and national level SDG implementation. Several panelists noted that multiple VLRs/VSRs have been completed or are underway in their countries.

National governments are increasingly recognizing the critical role of local governments for SDGs achievement, including within national development frameworks. The process for integrating VLRs/VSRs in Voluntary National Reviews can help to strengthen multi-level governance and to link national and local government actions for sustainability and align priorities in a particular country, beyond the review/report itself. Participants also emphasized the importance of connecting both VNRs and VLRs/VSRs with policy making processes within each country or city/region, as relevant. Capacity-building for SDGs localization for local governments is critical and increased attention is needed to identify innovative financing mechanisms for addressing the financing gaps at local governments for localizing SDGs. It was further noted that developing granular data for evidence based VLRs and VNRs that can help to document territorial disparities within and across territories.

For both national and local governments, the process of preparing voluntary reviews offers an important opportunity to increase stakeholder engagement in the implementation of SDGs, as well as to increase awareness of the SDGs at the local level. The importance of collaborating with private partners, including through Public-Private Partnerships, and working to improve their capacity to independently develop projects aligned with the 2030 Agenda at local level, was also emphasized.

The UN system is supporting the preparation of VLRs, including through the publication of guidance materials, including UNDESA's Global Guiding Elements for VLRs of SDG Implementation; OECD's guidelines on a Territorial Approach to the Sustainable Development Goals; UN Habitat and UCLG's Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews; and UNECE's Guidelines for the Development of Voluntary Local Reviews in the ECE Region, as well as guidelines prepared by the Economic Commission for Africa and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

13 July 2022
2-3 pm

Organized by
Government of
Ghana and
OISC/DESA

Sharing the experience of preparing the Ghana VNR Report - key findings and lessons learned

Ghana in partnership with the AU African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) on Wednesday 13th July 2022, organized a Voluntary National Review (VNR) Lab on the sides of the HLPF to facilitate experience sharing from the 2022 VNR process. The Lab provided a platform for a peerlearning and dialogue among countries, stakeholders and development partners on best practices, lessons learnt, challenges as well as innovations in the preparation of VNR Report.

The Lab received key presentations from the Deputy Minister for Education, Ghana; Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Ghana to the United Nations, New York; and the Resident Coordinator of the UN System, Ghana. The discussants were: Director-General, National Development Planning Commission (NDPC), Ghana; Director, Resource Mobilisation and Economic Relations, Ministry of Finance, Ghana; Deputy Minister for Economic Management, Liberia; and the African Union- APRM Continental Secretariat, Agenda 2063 Expert.

The panelists from Ghana highlighted the key findings from the country's 2nd VNR Report which was presented on Tuesday 12 July, 2022. They emphasized the expansion of school feeding programme and the implementation of the Free Senior High School as flagship interventions to ensure no child is left behind in accessing education service. The 100 billion Ghana Cedis post COVID-19 programme highlighted is to stabilize, revitalize and transform Ghana's economy to create jobs and prosperity over a three and half year period. Strong partnership and innovative financing were considered to be critical to addressing the estimated \$43 billion annual financing gap of the SDGs in Ghana. The country's VNR process benefited from improved data particularly from the 2021 population and housing census which leveraged on technology to ensure real data records.

The APRM underscored the need to strengthen the localization of SDGs and preparation of Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) in tandem with Agenda 2063. Ghana was commended for conducting VLR for the city of Accra in 2020 which has become a model for other countries to emulate. Further, Ghana adopted innovative tools to enhance multi-stakeholder approach and inclusion of civil society organisations in the VNR process and overall implementation of SDGs especially SDG 16. However, it was highly recommended for Ghana, through strong partnership, to extend this best practice to the remaining 260 districts across the country. Liberia also shared its experiences on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic and the measures put in place to address them.

In conclusion, the Head of Ghana's delegation and Chairman of NDPC, underscored the need to strengthen partnerships to meet the SDGs financing gap. More collaboration efforts are deemed critical in the areas of environment, social infrastructure and housing. He seized the opportunity to officially launch Ghana's VNR Virtual Reality Experience which is accessible on <https://www.dobiison.com/ndpcsdgs/index.html> and <https://hlpf.un.org/2022/exhibit>.

Data innovations for evidence-based VNRs

Data and statistics are the backbone of meaningful and evidence-based follow-up and review of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Despite facing unprecedented disruptions in statistical operations and a spike in demand for data for policy making during the COVID-pandemic, many countries have stepped up to the challenges in supporting building back better and fulfilling the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda. The VNR lab (programme) focused on country experiences with data innovations and tools for SDG monitoring used to prepare their evidence-based and data-driven 2022 VNRs. The VNR lab also identified challenges, opportunities and possible recommendations that countries can use going forward in order to keep data at the center of building back and recovering better. Representatives from Somalia, Pakistan, Switzerland and Eritrea, including national statistics offices and SDG coordination bodies tasked to develop the VNR, were invited to share their experiences in short presentations and a panel discussion.

When describing SDG monitoring innovations and tools used for preparing the 2022 VNR, countries highlighted:

- The importance of assessing data availability and identifying data gaps for SDG Monitoring, such as The Goal Tracker;
- The need to have disaggregated data to allow policy makers to identify low-performing areas that need investment;
- The coordination mechanism, including the Federal SDG Unit serving as the conduit between the ministries, provinces, UN partners, donors and development agencies for coordinating and strengthening collaborative partnerships;
- The inclusive partnerships with a broad group of key stakeholders to strengthen data ecosystems;
- The use of operational data and geospatial mapping for SDG monitoring purposes;
- How the SDGs have been integrated into national policies, plans and strategies, such as the interlinkages between National Development Plans and the SDGs;
- The connectivity between the VNR and the digitalized SDG online data portal, such as SDGital2030;
- The advantages of a decentralized approach to building the SDG database including more ownership over the 2030 Agenda within the sectoral offices and accessible and digestible modularity to allow the general public to conduct in-depth analyses;
- Countries highlighted the use of digitized surveys to identify the priorities of youth on closing the SDG performance gaps and ensuring leaving no one behind.

During the panel discussion on lessons learned and addressing data challenges and future plans for data collection, countries noted:

- For indicators without national data or lacking time series data, international estimates/data were used, such as UNICEF, WHO, UNESCO, UNSD, etc.;
- The use of sub-national level databases for the preparation of the VNR if national level database is suboptimal;
- The use of national estimates in the current VNR when discrepancies between national and global estimates were observed, a series of consultation meetings are conducted with international organizations;
- The establishment of the platform to reconcile any discrepancies among different sectors for the same indicators;
- The hurdles in the process of developing a digital SDG portal and solutions including communication between different stakeholders, implementation of the Agile concept throughout the process and the explanation and demonstration of the need for the new innovative tool;
- Lessons learned during the preparation of the VNR, including inclusive and participatory consultations with relevant stakeholders, the compilation of data and reports from a wide range of stakeholders and validation of data from different stakeholders;
- Future plans for improving data collection and monitoring of the SDGs, including strengthening the cooperation between the NSO and other data providers to bridge data gaps and developing a data portal to involve more disaggregated data.

SIDS LAB: Preparing VNR Reports in Small Island Development States

Context and Objective. At the 2022 High-level Political Forum (HLPF), out of the 44 countries that carried out their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), 6 are SIDS (Dominica, Grenada, Guinea-Bissau, Jamaica*, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Tuvalu and 3 are Islands that are Members of the Regional Commissions (Aruba, Curacao and Sint Maarten). Jamaica was the only SIDS amid the above-mentioned 6 that presented its VNR for the second time. Considering the unique development challenges shared by SIDS, the 2022 SIDS VNR Lab (in-person) as an opportunity to share best practices and lessons learned in a spirit of SIDS-SIDS peer learning and cooperation. In essence, the session was used as a platform to hear and learn from SIDS country-level experience on VNR preparation processes and certain aspects of respective National Reports. The event was organized and facilitated by the SIDS Unit of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA).

Modalities and Participation. The session took the form of a moderated panel discussion guided by (i) 6 questions prepared based on the 2022 VNRs from Dominica and Jamaica and posed to the Panelists, and by (ii) an interactive dialogue with the audience based on the responses provided by the Panelists. The Panelists were from the Caribbean region:

- Minister for Planning, Economic Development, Climate Resilience, Sustainable Development and Renewable Energy, of Dominica.
- Senior Technical Adviser to the Director-General in the Planning Institute of Jamaica. Also, the Prime Minister of Sint Marteen joined the second half of the discussion and the Director General, Planning Institute of Jamaica, and the Special Advisor to the Government of Aruba were part of the audience participated to the discussion.

The opening and closing remarks were respectively delivered by:

- Acting High Representative, Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States.
- Executive Director of the Global Island Partnership.

Discussion and Key messages. The core of the discussion can be summarized around the following 4 key messages:

1/ The VNR process contributed to underline the need for and strengthen (i) risk-informed and data-driven decision-making frameworks and (ii) inclusive participation/consultations through whole-of-government and society approaches to “make development better”.

2/ SIDS are leading by example despite their unique structural vulnerabilities and development challenges. Indeed, while experiencing short-term intervals between disasters and large financial gaps in both recovery and resilience, SIDS have turned some of their challenges into opportunities by building new institutions and tools to still aim to meet their national sustainable development prospects. Necessity being the mother of innovation, Jamaica highlighted for example the recent establishment of the Catastrophe Bond Facility aiming at bridging the financial gap and Dominica mentioned the Climate resilient Executive Facility contributing to its ambition to “become the first climate-resilient nation by 2030”.

3/ Further assistance for SIDS and middle-income countries would be strategically needed by international partners in e.g. (i) greening the financial sector, (ii) reducing dependence on fossil fuels, and developing renewable energies, (iii) support for risk-informed decision making and investment in resilience, prevention to reduce as much as possible unaffordable post-disaster recovery costs.

4/ Thematic areas for SIDS-SIDS cooperation and peer-learning around VNR preparation have been emerging such as:

- Communication and VNR outreach – Best practices to make sure local population understands the importance of the VNR process and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda? “Dialogue for Development” campaigns organized at country level have been discussed as avenues that have worked and could be replicated.
- Institutional arrangements for VNR preparation and consultation that follow an integrated and inclusive approach have been outlined and some good practices (SDG Core Group) have been identified for possible replication in other countries interested.

15 July 2022
8-9 am

Organized by
DPIDG/DESA

Looking forward: Recent innovations in institutional arrangements for SDG implementation

About 60 participants joined the VNR Lab entitled “Looking forward: Recent innovations in institutional arrangements”, which took place on the margins of the 2022 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. The event, organized by the Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government of UNDESA, took stock of recent innovations in institutional arrangements for SDG implementation. The lab invited selected countries to share information on changes made to their institutional arrangements since their last VNRs and during the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance in relation to policy coordination and integration as well as SDG planning, implementation, and monitoring. They were also invited to share their experiences and lessons learned about the effectiveness of those changes. Government representatives from Italy, Jamaica, the Philippines, Tuvalu, and two experts from the Committee of Experts on Public Administration interacted during the session.

Participants emphasized the crucial role of political will and strong, resilient, inclusive, coherent, effective and agile institutions for the achievement of the SDGs, as also illustrated in the World Public Sector Report 2021. Innovations in institutional arrangements were particularly important considering the ongoing global crises, such as climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, which were putting even more pressure on public institutions. There was an urgent need to act now, while taking stock of and scaling up successful innovations. One major challenge was that ministries were working in silos with separate budgets and plans, making it difficult to act coherently and to effectively monitor and evaluate government progress. Breaking silos, localizing the SDGs and offering (mandatory) training on the SDGs to public servants at all levels were important next steps.

Governments should also strive to engage all stakeholders, including the private sector and vulnerable groups, by designing spaces for consultation, collaboration, and partnerships, including regarding VNR preparation and data collection, to enhance ownership and commitment. In this regard, institutionalized mechanisms could be considered, taking into account national culture and tradition. Informing citizens about the importance of the 2030 Agenda was seen as crucial, including by making use of social media while also fighting misinformation. Long-term (sub-) national development plans and strategies, shorter term action plans as well as national budgets were to be aligned with the 2030 Agenda and supported by the highest level of policymaking. One suggested innovation was to make action plans on a rolling basis to reconcile short- and medium-term aspirations. Monitoring, (quantitative and qualitative) evaluation and reporting, as done during the VNR process, remained crucial and could include the use of regulatory impact assessments. There is a need to continue and enhance regional and international cooperation, peer to peer learning and the sharing of information, experiences, and data.

Selected innovations mentioned during the lab:

- Dedicated SDG stakeholder chambers created to enhance stakeholder engagement (The Philippines)
- SDG unit within Ministry of Finance created to be able to better monitor and report on SDG progress and make recommendations to Government advisory committee; national SDG steering committee to link SDGs to workplans of ministries (Tuvalu)
- SDG core group and national oversight committee created, which includes parliamentary opposition; Roadmap for SDG implementation developed; cost estimation framework developed to better identify priorities and funding gaps regarding SDGs (Jamaica)
- Laboratories created for Italy's National Action Plan for Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD) (Italy)
- Regulatory impact assessments and peer-to-peer workshops (EU) – see also [report](#)

VNR Lab

17

15 July 2022
1-2 pm

Organized by
UNDRR

Applying the Sendai Framework to fast-track the 2030 Agenda through a risk-informed approach

Organized by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), this VNR Lab drew attention to the importance of ensuring that efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda are risk-informed and in alignment with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030. Risk-blind development is driving disaster risk creation, and the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) can be a process for reflection on current and future integration of disaster risk reduction into national development policy, planning and financing frameworks. In a world of increasing systemic risks, the impacts of which cascade across times, sectors, and geographies, it has become crucial to integrate disaster risk reduction strategies as part of risk-informed policies and programmes, and to build coherence across all sectors for achieving national development priorities and ultimately the 2030 Agenda. Speakers from Dominica, Malawi and Switzerland conveyed the results of their VNRs with a specific focus on reducing disaster and climate risk and building resilience, through (i) strengthened integrated institutional mechanisms, policies, and programmes, (ii) community-driven disaster risk reduction, (iii) integration of disaster risk reduction in legislation, and (iv) advancing the multi-hazard approach enshrined in the Sendai Framework.

Dominica showcased its National Resilience Development Strategy, Climate Resilience and Recovery Plan, and Disaster Risk Financing Strategy as a roadmap to the 2030 Agenda. Implemented together, they enhance policy coherence and accelerate the achievement of the SDGs, towards their ambition to build the world's first climate resilient country. Malawi highlighted the government's efforts to mainstream and implement disaster risk reduction strategies, guided by the Sendai Framework by all local councils and the promotion and enhancement of digitized early warning systems that integrate indigenous knowledge as good practices in DRR to achieve the 2030 Agenda. Switzerland discussed the progressive digitization of its VNR process by the creation of one common platform, and its effectiveness with respect to providing inputs and tracking progress towards the disaster risk reduction aspects of the 2030 Agenda. Good practices were shared in relation to legislation for disaster risk reduction and advancing risk science specifically on concurrent and cascading hazards.

As outlined in the Guiding Principles of the Sendai Framework, an all-of-society engagement and partnership is required for its implementation. The value of stakeholder contributions was emphasized including through efforts to develop and implement local disaster risk reduction strategies. Looking forward, the lab highlighted opportunities for integration of the outcomes into the voluntary national reporting process of the Midterm Review of the Sendai Framework in 2023 and provided insights for countries undertaking VNRs in 2023 and beyond to enhance coherence between the Sendai Framework and the 2030 Agenda.

UN system's coordinated support to VNRs facilitated by the Resident Coordinator System

The UN development system on the ground, under the leadership of the Resident Coordinators (RCs), plays a pivotal role in supporting Governments in preparation of the VNRs. The VNR lab provided insights on the nature of UN support offered to VNRs and the value addition of the same in ensuring an inclusive process towards high quality VNRs. Representatives from Government, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and UN Resident Coordinators (RCs) from Botswana, Cote d'Ivoire, Jamaica, Kazakhstan and Sri Lanka shared their experiences on the theme based on their recent VNR development process.

The coordination role played by the UN Resident Coordinator Offices (RCOs) helps to minimize the significant transaction costs for the Government in having to seek out support of each UN entity separately for the VNRs. RC's have been leading the political dialogue with the Government in identifying their needs acting as an interlocutor between the UN system and the Government, while following up on these dialogues by organizing the UN system to deliver on the required technical support to the VNRs. RCOs act as the 'one-stop-shop' for the Governments in gathering information on the VNR process, global guidelines and on the nature of technical and strategic support that the UN system can offer for VNRs. Further, RCOs are facilitating the access of expertise of non-resident UN entities for the VNRs.

Overall, the lab discussed the following five broad areas of support to VNRs offered by UN system

- Technical support and quality review: UN country teams formed thematic technical teams to produce background documents to strengthen the thematic focus of VNRs. The UN system further provided quality review of VNRs against global guidelines and made suggestions to improve the overall quality.
- SDG Data support: UN teams supported Governments in ensuring that most updated data on SDG indicators were used for the VNR.
- Multistakeholder consultations: UN system supported Governments to organize multistakeholder consultations, especially ensuring meaningful engagement of CSOs and other major groups.
- Cross-country peer exchange: UN system has also facilitated cross-country exchange of best practices on VNRs through regional, global platforms and twinning programmes.
- VNR follow-up and dissemination: The UN system continues to support Governments in ensuring follow-up of VNR findings and wider dissemination of VNR findings within countries.

For the UN system, VNRs form a great resource in formulation of UN Common Country Analysis and UN sustainable development cooperation frameworks (UNSDCF). The lab highlighted the need for data-driven, whole-of-society and systems-perspective on VNRs and urgent follow-up to the VNR findings. Continued strong collaboration between the UN system, Governments and key stakeholders are critical in achieving these recommendations.