



VNR LABS

HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM

SDG Acceleration through a New Generation of VNRs?

United Nations Headquarters, Conference Room 11

Tuesday, 18 July 2023, 2-3 pm

Background

As the world is reaching the midway point towards 2030, achieving the Sustainable Development Goals has become increasingly challenging. The special edition of the *SDG Progress Report*, released in May in preparation for the SDG Summit later this year, lays out a set of key recommendations to “rescue” the SDGs and to help achieve the key transformations necessary to meet the vision of the 2030 Agenda.¹

The VNRs, presented annually at the HLPF, have become the prime tool for effective national follow up to SDG commitments. They report progress, identify global, regional and national challenges, and in many cases, have helped to define inclusive national visions for sustainable development. By July of this year, 188 countries, including many countries doing so for a second or third time, will have reported their national progress at the HLPF.

Over time, countries have improved the preparation of the VNRs, engaging stakeholders more systematically and combining multiple tools of analysis. Voluntary local reviews have taken off as an additional positive tool to integrate the SDGs into policies and government priorities.

At the same time, a recent meta-study on the political impact of the SDGs, quoted in the SDG Progress Report, demonstrates a more mixed picture.² While the study observes positive *discursive* effects, or changes in policies that make them more aligned with the SDGs, there were much smaller normative and institutional effects of the SDGs at the national level. A more vigorous voluntary national reporting process could thus contribute to a bigger and more fundamental impact.

¹ Report by the Secretary-General. Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals: Towards a Rescue Plan for People and Planet (Special Edition). Advance unedited version. May 2023. Document number to issued. Accessible at https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/SDG%20Progress%20Report%20Special%20Edition_1.pdf . Paras 52 and 58.

² Frank Biermann et al. *Scientific evidence on the political impact of the Sustainable Development Goals*. In *Nature Sustainability*, 5, pp. 795–800 (2022). Accessible at <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41893-022-00909-5>.

The SDG Summit, and the forthcoming review of the HLPF in 2024, provide good opportunities to take SDG follow-up through the VNRs to the next level. Making a shift away from reporting national action to an international audience to strengthening national accountability for progress and transformation would be a logical step forward as part of the “fundamental rethink” that has been called for in the SDG Progress Report.

This VNR Lab aims to make initial contributions to the groundwork for such a process of reconsideration. It could provide some new ideas on how reporting SDG progress through VNRs could be strengthened, and could eventually spearhead the fundamental transformations needed. Discussions could further be deepened in preparation for the SDG Summit and the policy guidance to be provided by Member States during the planned review of the HLPF in 2024.

Guiding questions

- How can the VNR process be improved for greater normative and institutional impact at the national level?
- What aspects of the VNRs should be revisited to enhance follow-up and review?
- To what extent do the VNRs reflect the progress, challenges, and lessons learned in achieving the SDGs on the ground?
- How can the VNRs contribute more effectively to national transformation towards the SDGs?

Invited speakers

Moderator:

- Mr Neil Pierre, Acting Director, Office for Intergovernmental Support and Coordination, DESA

Speakers:

- Ms Marianne Beisheim, Senior Associate, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP)
- Ms Lynn Wagner, Senior Director of the Tracking Progress program at the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD)
- Mr Javier Surasky, Programme Officer, Governance and Financing for Sustainable Development, Research Director, (CEPEI)
- H.E. Mr David Donaghue, former Permanent Representative of Ireland to the United Nations
