



**Recovery, Transformation,
Acceleration and Implementation**



VNR LABS HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM

Summaries of the 2023 VNR Labs at the High-Level Political Forum



10-19 July 2023



United Nations

**Department of
Economic and
Social Affairs**



Introduction

For the sixth 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 2023 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 bilateral partners. They were held throughout the duration of the HLPF from 10 to 19 July 2023 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 2023 VNR Labs was “*Recovery, Transformation, Acceleration and Implementation.*” 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.

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 2023 VNR Labs from the link below.

<https://hlpf.un.org/2023/vnr-labs>

Cooperatives for Accelerated Sustainable Development

The International Day of Cooperatives was officially proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1995 and is celebrated annually. The aim of the International Day of Cooperatives (#CoopsDay) is to increase awareness of cooperatives. The event underscores the contributions of the cooperative movement to resolving the major problems addressed by the United Nations and to strengthening and extending the partnerships between the international cooperative movement and other actors.

DESA Division for Inclusive Social Development, in collaboration with the Permanent Mission of Mongolia to the United Nations and the Committee for the Promotion and Advancement of Cooperatives (COPAC); organized a VNR-Lab on July 11th titled *Cooperatives for Accelerated Sustainable Development*. Speakers from countries presenting their Voluntary Nations Reviews at the HLPF this year shared experience on the role of Cooperatives in their development plans.

The Lab was organized as a hybrid event with about 20 participants attending in person and more than 200 participating online; and was part of the annual celebration of the International Day of Cooperatives, which is an occasion to showcase the cooperative way of working and the support it provides for the Sustainable Development.

Mongolia discussed the high importance the government of Mongolia attaches to the cooperative sector and a new initiative to establish Model Cooperatives in the agricultural sector as part of the country's plan to achieve food security.

Kenya stated that cooperatives are central to their development plans and efforts to achieve the sustainable development goals as they empower people, particularly marginalized members of the community, to become economically active and fight poverty, which is the overarching goal of sustainable development.

The European Union made a presentation on the EU-wide Social Economy Action Plan that includes a central role for cooperatives. The main objective of the Plan is to improve the conditions for the social economy across Europe, including improved visibility and recognition by policymakers and improved access to affordable finance and markets.

The presentations led to a lively debate by cooperatives and other stakeholders outlining the plans and actions by cooperatives to support national governments in achieving sustainable development; and outlining the support measures that will help cooperatives achieve their aims.

Participants acknowledged the huge potential that cooperatives have to achieve sustainable development in the social, economic and environmental pillars. Participants also noted that cooperatives are not achieving their potential in many countries due to the lack of knowledge about this form of business organization, lack of access to affordable credit, and limited support from governments and other private sector organizations. One main conclusion is the need for more public education and the promotion of cooperatives.

Multi-level governance for SDG implementation: the role of VNRs and VLRs

The VNR/VLR Lab on multilevel governance and localizing SDGs jointly organized by UNDESA and UN Habitat explored the growing relationship between Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) and Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs); the session examined how coordination between nation and subnational government can enhance multilevel governance to accelerate SDG implementation at all levels.

The session brought together 50 in-person participants and was webcast, with reports and video recording available here: <https://sdgs.un.org/events/vnr-lab-2023-multi-level-governance-sdg-implementation-role-vnrs-and-vlrs-52754>. Panellists included representatives of national governments, local governments, and other entities including Finland, Japan, Mexico, Toyota Motor Company, and University of Basle, Switzerland.

Speakers emphasized that local action is essential to achieving the 2030 Agenda; tailoring policies to address local communities' needs and priorities is key to effecting change and ensuring that no one is left behind. Mexico, for example, was the first country in Latin America and the Caribbean to include VLR findings in its VNR and used this opportunity to discuss the needs and priorities of indigenous populations. However, local and regional governments (LRGs) are involved in less than 20% of frameworks due to numerous challenges, including lack of multilevel coordination mechanisms and inadequate resources at the local level.

Speakers agreed that there is an urgent need to increase coordination between different levels of government and establish systems for continuous dialogue and feedback loops that can endure changes in administration. Improving coordination between national and subnational government, as well as associations can help harmonize SDG strategies for greater combined impact. In Finland, for example, the national government coordinates closely with LRGs, particularly for the country's commitment to become carbon neutral by 2025. Local entities are essential to helping reduce emissions and monitor change.

Panellists suggested that SDG Localization can help strengthen public private partnerships; policy makers can leverage the private sector to tackle SDG challenges together, and companies can boost their competitiveness by helping their local communities. For example, Toyota City, in partnership with the Toyota Motor Company, strives to increase the use of green vehicles to decarbonize transport and increase quality of life.

Speakers highlighted that the Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) and related tools such as the Voluntary Metropolitan Reviews (VMRs) present valuable tools for translating the global SDGs into concrete local targets that can be measured and monitored to enhance policymaking. Speakers illustrated that the VLRs help local entities form long-term, action-oriented, measurable goals to encourage ambitious and cohesive planning. The UN system supports the preparation of VLRs, including through guidance materials, technical support, and analytical research.

VNR Lab

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11 July 2023
2-3 pm

Organized by
UN Volunteers
with UNDESA

Why and How to Integrate Volunteers into National Plans and Policy Responses?

The UNV together with UNDESA organized Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) Lab at HLFP 2023 in New York (11 July 23) on importance of integrating volunteerism into national plans and Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). The VNR Lab was attended by 30 participants. Two member states: Kazakhstan and Zambia shared their experiences on the integration of volunteering in national plans and VNRs.

The Lab, moderated by Mr Neil Pierre, Acting Director of OISC, received key contributions from Ms. Anel Bakytbekkyzy, Deputy Permanent Representative of Kazakhstan to the United Nations, Ms. Prudence Kaoma, Director - Monitoring and Evaluation, Ministry of Finance and National Planning, Government of Zambia, Mr. Narendra Mishra, Team Leader and Policy Specialist, Integration, United Nations Volunteers (UNV), and Mr. Joop Theunissen, Deputy Chief, Intergovernmental Policy and Review Branch of OISC.

The VNR Lab provided valuable insights, success stories, and recommendations on integrating volunteers into national plans and policies to achieve the SDGs.

Speakers highlighted that volunteers were recognized as crucial to accelerate recovery from COVID19 in Kazakhstan's VNR 2022. She also states that the partnerships between state and volunteers helps scale up the reach of the government especially to the excluded groups.

It has been recognized that volunteers were at the forefront of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, and that integration of volunteerism into Zambia national development plan and sectoral plans such as national health strategic plan, disaster management act, helps government reach SDG targets and reduce gaps in public service delivery.

Panellists also reflected on the ways to integrate volunteerism in national development plans and Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) and highlighted the types of volunteering, their contribution in helping achieve the SDGs.

During the Q&A with participants, use of information technology by volunteers in emergency response was recognized as critical. Zambia informed of its innovation hubs where volunteers can gain digital skills that can enhance national capacities to respond to crises and emergencies.

12 July 2023
9-10 am

Organized by
DESA and the
Government of
Timor-Leste

Alternative Ways of Report Writing - the Experience of Timor-Leste

The government of Timor-Leste, in partnership with the Resident Coordinator Office and the UNCT organized a VNR Lab at the margin of the 2023 HLPF focusing on “Alternative Ways of Reporting Writing” building on a more creative and appealing format in the draft of the As a matter of fact, the report follows a narrative style where different government representatives, the President of the Republic and other stakeholders are interviewed and lead the reader through a journey that started 20 years ago with a few Timorese children writing postcards and placing them in a capsule of time.

The VNR Lab aimed at introducing the main features of the VNR and innovative narrative style and exchange ideas and solutions with other countries, UN agencies and stakeholders to make the VNRs more readable and appealing.

The Lab, moderated by Mr Riccardo Mesiano, Head of the RCO and Senior Strategic Planner in Timor-Leste, received key contributions from H.E. Karlito Nunes, Permanent Representative of Timor-Leste to the United Nations; Ms. Brigida Soares, Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation Technical Coordinator, ANAPMA, VNR coordinator of Timor-Leste; Mr. Balchinluvsan.L ,General director of Integrated policy department ,Ministry of Economy and Development of Mongolia; Mr. Pascal Byarugaba, PM&E Specialist, SDG Secretariat-Office of the Prime Minister from Uganda; Ms. Juliet Braslow, Sustainable Development Officer, Office of the Executive Secretary, ESCAP and Ms. Jyotsna Mohan, representing the CSO’s perspective. UNDESA intervention wrapped-up and concluded the event.

The speakers from Timor-Leste briefed the Lab about the narrative style used in the report. The VNR builds on postcards written by students in 2002 expressing their aspirations for the nation in 2020. Four of these postcards were retrieved in 2022, and feature at the beginning of the VNR. Timor-Leste chose a unique approach to gauge the youth's perspective on its progress towards the SDGs. This was accomplished by analysing these postcards created by young Timorese, which offered a ground-up perspective on key development issues to respond to their expectations regarding SDG implementation in the country. The VNR found that SDG 16 and SDG 17, focusing on peace, justice, strong institutions, and partnerships for the goals, were viewed by the youth as crucial underpinnings for development in Timor-Leste.

The next panelists presented the innovation adopted by Mongolia and Uganda in the 2023’s reports and the creative way introduced by ESCAP, through its “Twinning Programme” to give a different meaning to the VNRs.

The panelists discussed the benefit of using narrative approaches in the VNR report and with the precious support of the CSO, agreed that different stakeholders can play a great role in providing and introducing innovations in the VNRs.

12 July 2023
2-3 pm

Organized by
The Global SDG
Synthesis
Coalition

Using VNR Data as Part of a Synthesis of Global Evaluative Evidence on Progress Towards SDG17

The Global SDG Synthesis Coalition presented lessons from its VNR analysis, conducted as part of a larger effort to triangulate and synthesize evaluative evidence on progress towards the Partnership Pillar of the SDGs. Representatives of France, Ireland, Liechtenstein, and Lithuania shared their experiences with developing VNRs, with a focus on partnerships, and reflections on the work of the Coalition.

Key lessons from the VNR analysis component of the Partnership Pillar synthesis included that VNR reports have insufficient focus on evaluative evidence to identify what works and why in accelerating SDG-17 outcomes. The lack of information about equity in VNR about SDG-17 affects the ability of member states to prioritize attention to the most likely to be left behind. While data science and artificial intelligence can generate lessons about VNR reports, VNR reports require stronger connections with statistical data and evaluative evidence to maximize the potential of data science. Using specific terms for trade liberalization (e.g., regional trade deals), revenue generation (e.g., tariffs vs. VAT), and tech advancement (e.g., broadband vs. mobile) will enhance VNR reports' actionable recommendations for SDG-17 progress.

Country experiences highlighted the following:

- COVID-19, the war on Ukraine, the climate crisis and the cost-of-living crisis/inflation have impacted countries' abilities to prioritize international development and quantify their efforts through data and evidence.
- Second generation VNRs, such as many of those presented in 2023, have been greatly enriched through multi-stakeholder engagement and open consultations. These participatory processes have created networks working on sustainable development.
- Progress on SDG 17 is perceived as adequate; however, policy coherence remains challenging. Populations and policy makers increasingly call for tax treaties and digital strategies, for instance, beneficial to all parties.

The following reflections were shared by discussants and the general audience:

- Some countries might see SDG 17 as just a way to achieve other goals and might not report well on its measures. So, it might not be the best at showing "what works and why."
- Data from VNR syntheses needs to be triangulated and complemented by other, potentially more objective sources to better reflect gaps in progress towards SDGs.
- While statistics indicate progress on the SDGs, the specific contributions of policies have been notoriously hard to tease out. Syntheses of evaluative evidence can help achieve that.
- The lesser focus on technology in VNRs on SDG 17 needs exploration, given the growing role of AI and the private sector in development. More consultation with the private sector might be one remedy.

VNR Lab

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13 July 2023
1-2 pm

Organized by
UN Foundation

SDG Progress and Reporting in Times of Polycrisis: The Role of Civil Society in Ensuring Consistency

The UN Foundation's VNR Lab at the 2023 HLPF spotlighted both the good practices and challenges of including stakeholders in the reporting process. The session focused on the case of Chile, which presented its VNR for the third time. The VNR Lab provided a concrete example of how to engage with civil society and other stakeholders in order to ensure that all parties are included in the VNR process and encouraged all Member States to do the same.

Chile provided insights into the preparatory process of its third VNR, and experience engaging with civil society, academia and faith-based organizations in its effort to include the most marginalized populations, such as women, youth and children, particularly through online consultations. It was highlighted that engaging civil society in the VNR process helps generate new perspectives and innovative solutions, allowing thinking out of the box and addressing more complex challenges. It also promotes transparency, accountability and inclusivity - and ensures there is a sense of the citizens' ownership of the implementation process.

A researcher who contributed to the VNR preparation in Chile elaborated on several major setbacks that the civil society sector faced during the process such as the social, economic and digital divides. It was emphasized that civil society partners are agents of change that could be instrumental not only in the lead-up to the report but also in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. It was also underscored that other stakeholders, such as children and faith-based organizations, should participate not only in the VNR process but also as implementers of the SDGs. The imperative role of data was also highlighted, and Chile spotlighted the use of both quantitative and qualitative data in its VNR process.

The Lab concluded by reiterating that civil society organizations play a vital role in the reporting process not only in the lead-up to HLPF and the SDG Summit, but also in the implementation of the SDGs, as it can provide expertise and knowledge while serving as a mechanism that holds the government accountable.

Deepening the Data Analysis in VNRs: Showcasing Country Experiences

This VNR Lab was organized by the United Nations Statistics Division to enable countries to share experiences and best practices on various data-related topics such as cross-sectoral analyses, SDG progress assessments, and the use of qualitative data in the VNR.

A participating country shared details on an initiative to monitor how COVID-19 impacted the SDGs. The country's report identified specific areas where the pandemic hindered progress, particularly in health outcomes. The speakers stressed the need for improved data collection and technology to enhance data quality at national, regional, and local levels. They also highlighted the importance of engaging various stakeholders, including civil society, academia, and the private sector, in a participatory process for a comprehensive review of SDG progress. Strengthening the institutional framework for statistical management was another key area of focus.

Another country, participating in the VNR for the second time, shared experience on their efforts to improve data collection and analysis. They emphasized the utilization of the SDG Tracker tool provided by a regional commission to assess SDG progress and spoke of their cross-sectoral analysis approach. The country highlighted the significance of LNOB and the use of qualitative and quantitative data to understand challenges and to recommend solutions. They identified several obstacles during the VNR process, including the lack of metadata, the inconsistency in data between the national statistical office and line ministries, and missing methodologies for some indicators.

A third country, also in their second VNR, stressed the importance of evidence-based progress reporting for the SDGs. They have endeavoured to strengthen the SDG data ecosystem and enabling environment through technical working groups, rounds of consultation, and capacity building to produce data. The country shared their approach to utilize both national and global data sources, with a focus on qualitative data to complement quantitative indicators where necessary. They underscored the need for stakeholder engagement to improve data availability and to enhance SDG analysis.

The fourth speaker presented their country's methodology for progress assessment. He presented on recent progress since the last VNR in 2018, contextualizing data and identifying areas where certain groups were left behind. The country's progress assessment incorporated qualitative and quantitative indicators to provide a holistic understanding for effective policymaking.

A regional commission then introduced its LNOB platform that utilizes machine learning to analyse inequality in 16 indicators across 30 countries, particularly focusing on Goals 1-8 and 17. The platform used data from DHS and MICS surveys at the national and subnational levels and allowed governments to prioritize areas requiring attention and showed progress over time, offering valuable insights for VNRs.

Participants recognized the value of incorporating qualitative and quantitative data for a comprehensive assessment of progress and to ensure transparency and evidence-based decision-making. They also called for further knowledge exchange and collaborative efforts to advance SDG implementation.

Partnerships to Enhance Reporting on SDGs in Africa

The APRM-ECA-OSAA VNR Lab addressed current gaps of SDGs and Agenda 2063 progress in Africa, with special focus on SDG 6 on water and SDG 7 on energy (Aspiration one of Agenda 2063), and how partnerships can assist African countries to address challenges pertinent to both goals. The Lab brought together experts from Tanzania, Ghana, UN OSAA, and UN ECA to share experience on this subject and relevance to VNRs 2023.

Tanzania's experience in addressing water and energy challenges has been quite progressive. It was stressed that Energy Sector plays an important role in the socio-economic development of the country and hence the government adopted different efforts to improve both sectors.

The Government of Tanzania has put in place policies and programmes aimed at increasing efficiency in service delivery and creating favourable conditions for private investment and the financial sustainability of the energy sector.

Ghana's experience in addressing water and energy resources is not only merely to meet water and energy demand, but to also address other critical issues like biodiversity, climate change, poverty and inequalities, tourism and food security, just to mention a few. The critical analysis of Ghana's implementation of the SDGs through the VNRs has given a sense of the state of play of each of the goals and a better understanding of the challenges and critical factors for success. The VNRs have also foster ownership, support and new partnerships for the SDGs. The VNRs supported Ghana to identify disparities and ways to address development challenges were also identified thanks to the VNRs.

The representative of UNECA highlighted the support provided to member states on VNRs through peer-learning or technical assistance. APRM and the AU play important roles in this, to harness the peer learning and strong relationships that exist between member States.

OSAA Representative, emphasized that energy and water are two fundamental catalysers to achieve SDGs; hence OSAA's support to African countries including 1) policy frameworks; 2) mobilizing resources, investment, and financing; 3) Partnerships including triangular and south-south cooperation in addition to traditional north-south partnerships.

One speaker presented a project aiming to assist understanding Governing SDG trade-offs and synergies in East-Africa (Ethiopia- Kenya- Uganda). Last, the APRM representative concluded by noting best practices shared by APRM countries throughout the governance reviews.

Countries are urged to provide proper policy environment and partnerships for energy, water and industrialisation, to bolster regional cooperation and integration in energy and water management, to prioritize the inclusion of marginalized communities, particularly women and youth, in the decision-making processes and benefit-sharing mechanisms related to energy and water resources. Resource mobilization requires strong negotiations skills and preparedness by African countries to enhance sustainable industrialization.

Innovations & frontier technologies in support of VNR preparation and SDG implementation: Experiences from the regions

VNR Lab 9 was organized by the UN Regional Commissions Office in New York and attended by 44 participants. The Lab focused on how innovations and the application of new/ emerging technologies support participatory follow-up and review processes at the national and local levels, reinforce the principle of "leaving no one behind", and advance evidence-based tracking of SDG progress and policymaking.

Representatives both VNR and non-VNR presenting countries from the five regions, namely Chile, Egypt, Fiji, Switzerland, and Zambia, made presentations highlighting tested approaches, promising practices, and challenges in the use of technologies for VNP preparation and SDG implementation.

Participants exchanged experiences and lessons learned in the following areas:

- effective management of public sector data in Chile, including through artificial intelligence techniques to generating value for both institutions and citizens, and how it informs the preparation of VNRs.
- the need to define and agree on codes, metadata, and common methodology for each sector to ensure data comparability, including visualization and reporting.
- development of SDG implementation strategy in Chile through participatory approaches, including dialogues with children and adolescents as well as with leaders of organizations representing older people
- Egypt's "Sustainable Development Partnerships" developed to serve as an online repository of ongoing multistakeholder initiatives, mapped against the SDGs; and to enable efforts to redirect future interventions according to national developmental priorities, scale up impactful partnerships and enhance coordination of different levels of government.
- SDGs localization reporting and Localization Dashboard, and efforts in Egypt to improve data coverage and comparability
- practical examples of how the Fiji Government leveraged machine learning through the ESCAP LNOB Platform (<https://lnob.unescap.org/>) to measure inequality in the distribution of basic services and to identify the furthest behind in the same development areas. The findings helped decision and policymakers undertake granular analysis that allows for more localized and targeted interventions to address existing inequalities, foster fairness and inclusivity.
- Use of technologies to improve SDG coordination and VNR preparation in Zambia, notably digital platforms for gathering SDG data, tools to collaborate with stakeholders and social media platforms for public engagement; and how this helped reduce costs associated with data collection and travels and enhanced data quality and the inclusivity of the VNR process.
- the roll out of Zambia's new Integrated National Registration Information System and how it intends to promote an enabling environment for innovations to thrive and tackle development challenges;
- Switzerland's SDGital2030 - an online platform developed to enable a structured stocktaking exercise on SDG implementation against a comprehensive baseline information on the SDGs. The platform simplified data gathering processes, brought onboard more stakeholders, fostered collaboration in data entry and granular analysis by thematic areas/ SDG, and enhanced the overall planning, conduct and presentation of VNRs at the HLPF as well as post-HLPF follow-up.

In summary, the Lab illustrated, through numerous potentially replicable examples the transformative potential of technologies and innovations in simplifying, making VNR preparations efficient and effective, and in accelerating SDG implementation. In this regard, the Lab drew attention to several enablers, including the need to invest in digital skills and digital infrastructure and strengthen the policy, legal and regulatory framework around the areas of science, technology, and innovation to drive development.

VNR Lab

10

17 July 2023
2-3 pm

Organized by
UN DSDG with
DESA

Unleashing the Power of Collaboration: Boosting Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships and Engagement for the 2030 Agenda

UNDESA, through its Division for Sustainable Development Goals (DSDG), organized the Voluntary National Review (VNR) Lab on “Unleashing the Power of Collaboration: Boosting Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships and Engagement for the 2030 Agenda”. The objective was to discuss challenges, share lessons learned and good practices as well as report on innovative tools to strengthen and facilitate meaningful multi-stakeholder partnerships and engagement more systematically throughout the Voluntary National Review process and beyond.

The VNR Lab was opened by Ms. Lotta Tahtinen, Chief of the Outreach and Partnerships Branch of DSDG. Invited speakers were Mr. André Moz Caldas (Secretary of State for the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Portugal), Mr. Aman Khaleel (Senior Planning Analyst, Maldives), Ms. Martina Kabisama (SAHRINGON Tanzania Chapter) and Mr. Sandeep Chauhan (Fiji Commerce & Employers Federation). The panel was moderated by Mr. Pablo Fernández Marmissolle-Daguerre (Office of the Secretary General, United Cities and Local Governments, UCLG).

One speaker highlighted Portugal’s second VNR process. Throughout the process, civil society and other stakeholders were asked to share their experiences and perspectives through various methods, including townhall meetings and online consultations. Fueled by the momentum they have built, Portugal aims to establish a lasting framework for continuous discussions with stakeholders, leading to the creation of a national roadmap with measurable targets.

Another speaker described the implementation of a whole-of-government approach in the Maldives’ second VNR process and noted some crucial lessons learned, which included the importance of facilitating information exchange through effective communication channels, the significance of capacity building and the need for resource mobilization.

One speaker underscored the importance of inclusivity in the VNR process. This involves assessing who has been engaged in the VNR and its accessibility, how well it reaches and serves the people, by accounting for language barriers in rural areas.

Another speaker focused on the insufficient participation of the private sector in VNR processes, particularly the need to involve small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in decision-making; and promote public-private partnerships, decent work and literacy programs.

During Q& A, participants suggested that setting up digital consultations and establishing a national development planning framework are critical to enhance community-level involvement. Youth National Councils were proposed as avenues to promote youth participation in national policymaking. Regional coordination systems were discussed as means to identify active stakeholders from different sectors and levels. On the most effective communication of VNR outcomes to the public, all panelists and lead discussants emphasized the need for improvement in this area for future VNR processes.

17 July 2023
6-7:30 pm

Organized by
OISC/DESA
with the
Government of
Romania

Innovative Programs and Public sector Governance Mechanisms in Service of VNR Processes: The Experience of Romania

The Office of Intergovernmental Support and Coordination (OISC) / UN DESA and the Government of Romania organized the VNR Lab 11 on 17 July 2023. The Lab offered Romania the opportunity to share its best practices and inspire member states to assess whether Romania's examples possess transferable applicability, as well as leverage the information received towards building tailored national success stories.

The focus of the event was both the Romanian multi-level governance framework and mechanisms to strengthen the policy coherence for sustainable development (PCSD) in the effort of delivering the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the role of the most representative national stakeholders who contributed to the VNR drafting process.

Romania presented the following innovative bodies and powerful tools implemented nationally in support of achieving the SDGs:

- Department of Sustainable Development, a robust entity at the center of Government, national coordinator of the SDGs and PCSD implementation
- Sub-Committee for Sustainable Development of Romanian Parliament
- Interdepartmental Committee for Sustainable Development, an advisory interinstitutional body, which includes all ministers of the Government, chaired by the Prime Minister
- Consultative Council for Sustainable Development, with participation of representatives of academia, research organizations and civil society
- Coalition Sustainable Romania, a non-governmental and non-political entity, representative for segments of civil society
- Network of the Hubs for Sustainable Development set up at line ministry level
- Expert of Sustainable Development occupation in the public administration
- powerful working tools such as Romania's Sustainable Development Strategy 2030, National Action Plan, National Indicators for Sustainable Development, the Occupational Standard for Expert of Sustainable Development, the Aggregator Sustainable Romania – open data platform, the Romanian Code of Sustainability.

VNR Romania 2023 was the result of whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches, based on statistics data, policies, strategies, and good practices. Studies and reports, produced by local and national action bodies, completed the VNR Romania 2023: a subnational report for the localization of SDGs, the children's report voicing the implementation of certain SDGs relevant to them, and also a Youth Statement, through which they express their support for the 2030 Agenda.

The VNR Lab was attended by over 65 participants, such as representatives of governments and parliaments of member states, UN DESA, UNICEF, OECD, and civil society organizations, who had the opportunity to understand how Romania positioned itself as a regional hub of sustainable development expertise.

18 July 2023
8-9 am

Organized by
DPIDG/UNDESA
AU/APRM and
OECD

Principles of Effective Governance in VNRs: Enhancing Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development

Around 30 participants attended the VNR lab, co-organized by DPIDG/UNDESA, AU/APRM and OECD, to facilitate peer-to-peer learning on how to enhance policy coherence aimed at accelerating full implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Chile, Ghana, and Portugal shared concrete examples of measures undertaken to foster and track policy coherence, including related challenges and success stories as well as progress made since their last VNR presentation. Representatives from the Committee of Experts on Public Administration, AU/African Peer Review Mechanism, and from OECD also gave their insights and elaborated on good practices in promoting policy coherence at regional and continental levels.

Participants emphasized that policy coherence is crucial and now than ever given the ongoing multiple global crises that the world faced. Identifying synergies and trade-offs, and recognizing interdependencies and interactions in the 2030 Agenda, were key first steps to ensure that public policies were coherent with one another and would achieve their intended results.

Participants highlighted that while policy coherence was the subject of different SDG targets, including 17.14 and its indicator 17.14.1, the promotion of coherent policymaking was also one of the commonly used strategies to achieve sound policymaking, one of the principles of effective governance for sustainable development developed by the Committee of Experts on Public Administration. It was also the focus of the 2019 OECD Recommendation on policy coherence for sustainable development (PCSD), which provided guidance on how to implement policy coherence. Current APRM-OECD regional initiative seeks to promote policy coherence in some African countries, including Ghana.

Main challenges identified by participants included the lack of enforceability measures, the lack of incentives, the lack of awareness of the cost of inaction or of spill over effects, including for future generations, the lack of data and visibility, the prevalence of short-term thinking and silo approaches to respond to ongoing crises, and the lack of political (high-level) support and commitment. In addition, dealing with the transboundary impact of policies (e.g., related to water, climate change issues and trade) was particularly challenging.

While emphasizing that policy coherence was a political choice, participants agreed on the need for strong institutions and strategic frameworks and availability of timely and high-quality (disaggregated) data based on strong monitoring and evaluation processes and mechanisms. A call was made to activate the PCSD indicator to enable measuring progress and increase political visibility of PCSD. In addition, a long-term vision, sufficient means of implementation and a strong engagement of subnational governments, civil society and the private sector were crucial (e.g., through localization of 2030 Agenda and extended use of VLRs). This should be paired with the application of a whole-of-society and whole-of-government approach, featuring inter-ministerial collaboration and coordination (incl. the Ministry of Finance), and fostering involvement of all population groups, including the youth. Finally, the importance of aligning national development plans and policies with the 2030 Agenda (and other agendas) and of enhancing peer-to-peer learning was highlighted. These efforts could be supported by the United Nations and regional bodies, such as APRM and OECD. The UNDESA-APRM continental workshops on the application of CEPA principles in Africa, for example, were raising awareness, advocacy for and measurability of the principles of effective governance for sustainable development, including in relation to PCSD.

The Relevance of Human Rights Norms and Data to Ensuring the Effectiveness of VNRs

The event provided an opportunity for Member States, the UN, civil society and other stakeholders to discuss the contribution of integrating human rights approaches and utilizing human rights norms and data for the 2030 Agenda follow up and review, particularly when it comes to Voluntary National Reviews. VNR uptake in the 2030 Agenda is promising, yet criticized for shallow analysis, insufficiently addressing structural obstacles to SDG fulfilment, and lacking inclusive civil society consultation.

Participants noted that we are not pursuing the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs in a legal vacuum and that human rights norms are relevant to advancing sustainable development. Integrating human rights approaches into VNRs has the potential to forestall the marginalization of the most vulnerable segments of society and empower these groups to actively contribute to the identification of necessary political, legal, or other transformations essential for reversing unfavourable trends. Enhancing civil society and grassroots involvement in VNRs and the 2030 Agenda's follow-up leads to improved overall outcomes. Further strides can be taken to ensure inclusive processes, meaningful stakeholder inclusion, safe participation, and accessible channels for input. Spotlight reports serve as valuable supplementary sources of information.

UN human rights system produces a large amount of data and analysis which can inform the VNRs, and the findings of the VNRs can in turn inform human rights processes. Participants discussed the practical value of connecting VNRs with the work of Treaty Bodies, UPR, and Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council, while also noting their distinct nature and purpose. A number of examples were provided to illustrate the benefits of such an approach, as also outlined in the Human Rights and VNRs guidance note.

Participants noted that integrating human rights data, analysis, and participatory approaches in the VNRs and in national development efforts has the potential to significantly enhance policy coherence and joined up thinking, it facilitates bridging silos and divides that also act as obstacles to delivering forward looking, targeted, comprehensive and effective solutions that leave no one behind.

The role of human rights data, including equality data, is also central to promoting evidence-based monitoring and policymaking. For instance, prioritizing the situation of the most marginalized population group in a country or a region can be shown to lead to significant advances in the achievement of the SDGs overall. To this end, gathering and analysing disaggregated data is vital, as is considering the use of complementary data sources and augmenting analyses with meaningful consultations and providing feed-back loops enabling relevant inputs and information to flow to and from policymakers.

VNR Lab

14

18 July 2023
2-3 pm

Organized by
OISC / DESA

SDG Acceleration through a New Generation of VNRs?

The Office of Intergovernmental Support and Coordination for Sustainable Development (OISC) in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) on Tuesday 18 July 2023, organized a Voluntary National Review (VNR) Lab on SDG Acceleration through a New Generation of VNRs? on the margins of the 2023 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). The Lab aimed at reflecting on how reporting SDG progress through VNRs could be strengthened in order to shift away from simply reporting national initiatives to an international audience towards strengthening national ownership and accountability for progress and transformation.

The Lab, moderated by Mr Neil Pierre, Acting Director of OISC, received key contributions from Ms Marianne Beisheim, Senior Researcher the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Ms Lynn Wagner, Senior Director of the Tracking Progress program at the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) and Mr David Donoghue, former Permanent Representative of Ireland to the United Nations, who served as a co-facilitator for the UN negotiations which led to the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015.

Reflecting on how the VNR process can be improved for greater normative and institutional impact at the national level, speakers first recalled many member states insisted on a process that is led by their own governments and are not in favour of using external guidelines for reporting, as they feel these guidelines can be too rigid and overly "prescriptive". Therefore, priority actions should be directed towards addressing the lack of political will at the national level, increasing accountability to citizens through country-level constraints, and enhancing peer-learning among countries.

The SDG summit and the Summit of the Future that the UN Secretary-General has called should help to incentivize political will and create dynamics for transformative actions and new commitments by Member States. Efforts to hold nations accountable for achieving progress and driving transformation require integrating SDG implementation efforts into national oversight systems systematically, conducting more impartial assessments of national progress, and involving scientists more extensively in monitoring and evaluation. Panellists also recognized the critical role of civil society organizations in holding governments accountable and promoting inclusiveness.

Panellists stressed that peer-learning mechanisms such as the Group of Friends of voluntary national reviews, could be more effective by allowing interaction among countries at the initial stages of the preparation of their VNR. In addition, peer-learning could be regionally oriented to account for diverse and context-specific challenges that confront different regions.

Whole-of-Government and Whole-of-Society VNRs in times of transformation

The German Council for Sustainable Development (Rat für Nachhaltige Entwicklung, RNE) has organized a VNR Lab on 18 July 2023. Based on the insights of the 2019 and 2023 Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR), the event focused on the variety of approaches to integrate entry points for transformation into Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), as well as their relevance for national policymaking. The VNR Lab started with a reflection of Dr Nancy Shackell, a member of the Independent Group of Scientists for the 2023 GSDR, on how the GSDR framework can be applied. Application requires context-sensitive approaches to foster resilient societies and policymaking, that mediate trade-offs, such as between economic development and biodiversity or competing interests over land use.

Furthermore, the Lab integrated diverse concrete perspectives from Belgium, Finland, Germany, and Tanzania, debating the following key questions:

- How are the SDGs and their targets clustered into key transformation areas and what levers are essential for activating these transformations?
- What are the many facets of adapting these transformation areas to national contexts, with regard to delivering truly integrated policymaking?
- What governance mechanisms are in place and how do they support delivery of transformative policymaking at national level?
- How can national multi-stakeholder advisory bodies support in navigating complex policymaking in areas with multiple, sometimes conflicting, interests?

The discussion revealed that VNRs, as international spotlights, can impact national SDG policymaking, as well as stimulate institutionalized structures for stakeholder engagement. In the case of Tanzania, it was highlighted that integrated policymaking depends on the right alignment of long-term and short-term policy plans and that timing for coherence of various strategies is crucial for an integrated SDG implementation.

Institutionalized multi-stakeholder engagement formats hold the potential of facilitating the mediation of conflicting interests in times of transformation, by building consensus across stakeholders and developing policy plans that integrate all stakeholder through consultation processes. Vertical and horizontal integration of key stakeholders in various dialogue formats and institutionalized structures however remains challenging and crucial at the same time.

In Belgium, ownership of the SDGs in all ministries is key to success. To receive this horizontal coherence in the federal government, SDGs should either be integrated in all policy decisions or transformation areas must determine inter-ministerial task forces that develop roadmaps for their implementation. So-called transformation teams have been installed in Germany and guarantee an early involvement of the highest decision-making level in all ministries for the SDGs and aim to strengthen coherence across policy processes and strategies. In Finland, the six GSDR transformation areas were adapted to national needs and were accompanied by encompassing stakeholder dialogue formats to guarantee inclusion and participation.

The VNR Lab was also organized in the name of the Global Forum for National SDG Advisory Bodies. Among other things, the Global Forum network has conceptualized the discussion held in this VNR Lab and processed it in various studies and initiatives. More information about the Global Forum network, including its members and activities, is available here: <https://sdgglobalforum.org/>

VNR Lab

16

19 July 2023
8-9 am

Organized by
ESCAP and UN
Statistics
Division

Citizen-Generated Data to Leave No One Behind: Experiences from Asia Pacific and Beyond

On July 19, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) co-organised a VNR Lab on the use of non-traditional data sources such as citizen-generated data (CGD) for the voluntary national reviews (VNRs), as an effective way to fill data gaps and fulfil the commitment of Leave No One Behind (LNOB).

Presenting experiences by civil society, government, and national statistical office representatives of Ghana, the Maldives, Mongolia, Nepal, and the Philippines, among others, the event shed light on the role of CGD for public policy. The lab explored how non-traditional data, particularly CGD is utilized to support monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and for evidence-based reporting and to harness the power of citizens to capture and share more data for the VNRs.

Citizen-generated data refers to the engagement of citizens in multiple processes along the data value chain. Anchored on the core principles underpinning the 2030 Agenda – LNOB, inclusiveness and multi-stakeholder partnerships – CGD is data by, for and about citizens. CGD is gaining momentum – also for the VNR process – and is increasingly recognized for its unique ability to fill gaps for timely, qualitative, open, and disaggregated data required for effective follow-up and review. CGD is also a great channel for National Statistical Offices (NSOs) to engage and connect directly with citizens and further improve transparency, inclusion, and accountability.

Citizen-generated data encourages citizens to participate by sharing insights and experiences. With a clear orientation towards problem-solving, CGD complements official statistics by uplifting the voices of the most vulnerable and of those most at risk of being left at the margins. By including citizens as co-creators and agents of change, CGD leverages ownership, and contextualization and contributes to a whole-of-society approach for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Panelists shared examples of implementing CGD in areas spanning the SDGs. While CGD is not fully institutionalized and many countries lack an established mechanism to involve different stakeholders in SDG monitoring, it was emphasized that it is important to build a relationship based on trust among different actors. Effective communication was identified as a key element of a successful collaboration among NSOs, governments, and other stakeholders, where technologies and solutions are co-developed and co-owned by local people. Investing in capacity-building to benefit from the specialized knowledge of communities, human rights experts, statisticians, governments, and others was also identified as a necessary step forward to create a dynamic and inclusive data ecosystem.