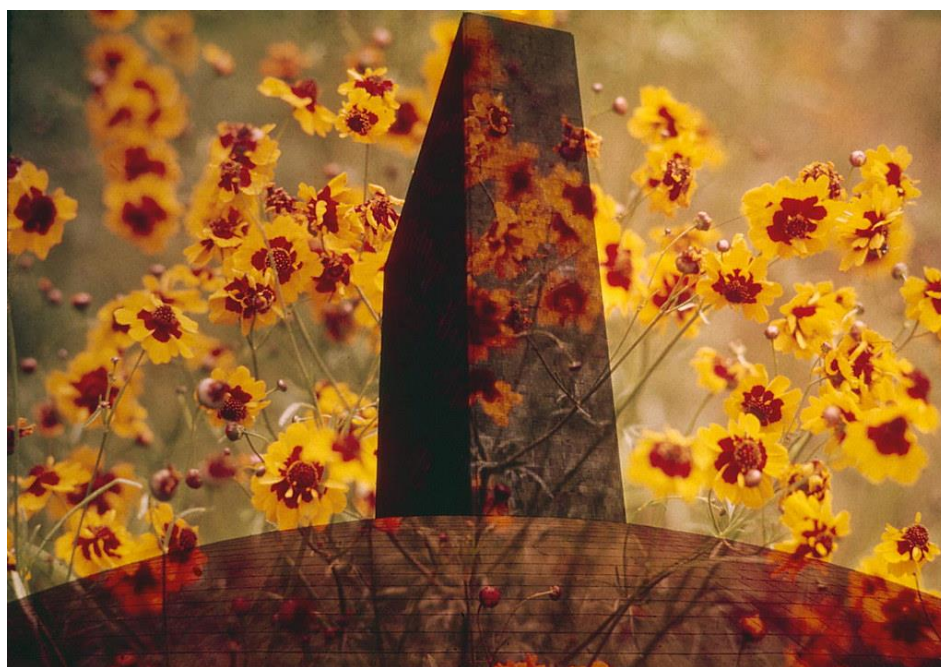# VNR LABS
HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM

Towards Sustainable, Resilient and Innovative Solutions

Summaries of the VNR Labs at the 2024 HLPF

8-16 July 2024

United Nations | Department of Economic and Social Affairs

Introduction

For the seventh 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 2024 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.

VNR Labs are held under the Chatham House rule and were organized by UN DESA Divisions, United Nations entities and other partners. They were held throughout the duration of the HLPF in July 2024. They were open to countries, the United Nations system, other organizations and representatives of Major Groups and other Stakeholders.

The common theme for the 2024 VNR Labs was "Towards Sustainable, Resilient and Innovative Solutions." Under this broad theme, representatives from countries, the UN system, 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 each of the Labs, the VNR review experience was taken into more depth to allow for sharing lessons of o the national process with peers.

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

More information on each of the 2024 VNR Labs is posted on the webpage below.
hlpf.un.org/2024/vnr-labs

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Shifting Perspectives and Leveraging Interlinkages: Integrating Assistive Technology into VNRs to Deliver a New Development Vision

Assistive technology refers to the systems and services related to the delivery of assistive products (such as wheelchairs, hearing aids, glasses, prosthetics, communication and cognitive aids) which maintain or improve an individual's functioning, wellbeing, inclusion and participation. The World Health Organization estimates that globally 2.5 billion people need assistive technology in order to live their lives and achieve their full potential. However, considerable global inequity in access exists with as few as 3% of people in some low-income countries reported (WHO-UNICEF Global report on assistive technology, 2022) to have access to the assistive products they need, in comparison to 90% in some high-income countries. This burdens the global economy with billions in lost productivity despite the availability of cost-effective solutions today. For example, unaddressed vision impairment, has a projected cost of $411 billion in annual lost productivity. However, access to affordable glasses could resolve 90% of cases of poor vision.

A shift in perspective is required to position assistive technology as multisectoral and essential to the achievement of the SDGs; and in particular in making Universal Health Coverage inclusive, reducing inequalities, strengthening communities and supporting sustainable growth. Accordingly, this VNR explored possibilities for data collection on assistive technology met and unmet need, national system preparedness, and impact of access – and how this may be integrated into Member States VNR reporting to strengthen and inform assistive technology policy decision-making and program planning across sectors and countries.

Opening remarks by Member States highlighted the relevance of improved access to assistive technology as an enabler for achievement of the SDGs for as many as 1:3 people including people of all ages, people with disabilities, and those who have been injured or have a health condition. Assistive technology was recognized as cross-cutting, with particular relevance to SDGs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 16 and 17; and yet receiving of minimal attention in SDG reporting, with only six VNRs in the past three years mentioning the topic.

WHO Assistive Technology data tools including a rapid population survey, situation analysis and national level progress indicators were presented as an available resource to support data gathering and reporting on progress in achieving population access within VNRs. Speakers from Bangladesh and Azerbaijan shared their experience in using these tools to inform national system strengthening. Global targets such as the WHO Member States endorsed global target for effective coverage of refractive error (provision of prescription glasses) were shared as potential indicators.

Participants further discussed how assistive technology could be integrated into VNRs, either as a specific section, or integrated into goal specific sections – demonstrating the impact of access on achievement of SDG goals such as Universal Health Coverage (3.8), equal access to quality education (4.5), full and effective participation of women and girls (5.5) and achieving higher levels of economic productivity (8.2).

Cooperatives Build a Better World for All

In November 2023, the UN General Assembly adopted resolution A/RES/78/175 on cooperatives in social development, proclaiming 2025 as the International Year of Cooperatives (IYC). On 19th June 2024, the UN General Assembly adopted resolution A/78/L.71, giving the modalities for the launch of IYC, to be celebrated under the theme "Cooperatives Build a Better World." The resolution recommends ways to celebrate IYC and encourages all UN Member States, the United Nations System, and relevant stakeholders to leverage this year to promote cooperatives' contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and broader social and economic development.

To kick off the celebrations, the UN Committee for the Promotion and Advancement of Cooperatives (COPAC) hosted an event for the IYC2025. It informed representatives of the UN Member States attending the HLPF about the International Year and actions that the Member States can take to support cooperatives and ensure success of the Year. It will coincide with the 2024 UN International Day of Cooperatives (IDC), celebrated under the theme "Cooperatives Build a Better Future for All."

Discussed focused to deepen the theme of IYC2025, unveil the media package and discuss the UN resolutions outlining the modalities for the IYC launch. It is also intended to encourage countries and institutions to form national and regional committees that will take the lead in organizing events and activities for commemorating and celebrating the international year. These committees, whose membership will include governments and representatives of cooperatives, will take the lead in bringing the cooperative identity to the wider public and ensuring that at the end of the year 2025, cooperatives are better known, have a more conducive environment for their operations, and are better placed to support Member States in their efforts to achieve the sustainable development goals.

Strengthening Policy Coherence Between the 2030 Agenda and Nationality Determined Contributions Through VNRs

On July 10, the five United Nations Regional Commissions (ECA, ECLAC, ESCAP, ESCWA, UNECE) in partnership with the UN Office for Sustainable Development (UNOSD, DESA) co-organised a VNR Lab on harnessing policy coherence between the 2030 Agenda and National Determined Contributions (NDCs) through voluntary national reviews (VNRs).

Presenting experiences by Government representatives of Armenia, Ecuador, Egypt, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Mexico and Uganda, as well as colleagues from the Regional Commissions and international organizations the lab explored initiatives to improve reporting frameworks to capture and share more data and progress on the NDC and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in VNRs. The event discussed ongoing efforts and challenges integrating climate action with the SDGs across various regions.

Each speaker emphasized the importance of aligning national development plans with international climate commitments to achieve both climate resilience and sustainable development. While most countries have mainstreamed the SDGs into their national development plans, these are not always aligned with climate action and NDC commitments. Knowledge gaps and the need for clear guidelines; the importance of accurate data; better coordination among ministries; integrated planning tools; and improved access to finance were common themes. Panellists shared examples of their endeavours in shifting away from a siloed approach to governance and creating coherence and synergies among policy domains.

Capacity constraints at different levels were highlighted, with financing for climate action and sustainable development being the most burning issue. The necessity to invest in both climate mitigation and adaptation measures came up strongly. Global climate finance disproportionately favours mitigation projects over adaptation, with only a small proportion of the funds allocated to adaptation. Adaptation projects are often less profitable, leading to less financial support despite their importance for vulnerable countries.

Many developing countries face severe debt crises, with some spending more on debt servicing than on essential services, such as health, and education. This financial strain limits their ability to invest in sustainable development and climate action. The challenges in accessing finance for development are multifaceted, involving structural issues in global finance distribution, bureaucratic inefficiencies, inadequate international support, and the debt burdens of developing countries. Addressing these

issues requires a concerted effort of all partners and stakeholders to improve financial mechanisms, provide clear guidelines, and enhance international cooperation.

The role of VNRs as a process that feeds into policymaking was reiterated, and the voluntary local reviews (VLRs) with their strong connection to communities and to what is happening on the ground were put forward as an effective tool to integrate the SDGs and the NDCs.

Using the VNR to advance SDG16 and its interlinkages across the 2030 Agenda

Most SDG16 targets are regressing or stagnating globally. As referenced in the 2023 Global Progress Report on SDG16, many countries are falling short of their human rights obligations; violence and conflict are pervasive across regions; equal access to justice remains elusive; social contracts have been eroded and remain under pressure; and inequalities, exclusion and discrimination fuel division and polarization. Yet, amidst this sobering backdrop, there are bright spots – political choices and policy decisions made at national and local levels to advance SDG16 and its interlinkages across the SDGs, with tangible impact on people's lives. Following last year's SDG Summit and in advance of the Summit of the Future, this year's HLPF, with SDG16 under in-depth review, provides a critical opportunity to share and apply concrete lessons learned among Member States and others in advancing more peaceful, just and inclusive societies, including through VNRs.

This Lab unpacked the VNR as an important tool to support action on SDG16. Organized by the Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, UNDP and OHCHR, and in partnership with IDLO and International IDEA and CSPPS, this VNR Lab will examine how countries and partners have used the VNR process (pre and post HLPF) to advance SDG16 at national and sub-national levels; to reinforce/scale its interlinkages across the SDGs, and to highlight its role in strengthening resilience for future crises.

The debate focused on how SDG16 and its interlinkages (goal and accelerator of the SDGs) were captured in VNRs and how it was reflected in national development plans and budgets. It also addressed processes shaping and informing the VNR, e.g., multistakeholder engagement, intragovernmental coordination, human rights-based approach to data, or leveraging complementary processes (e.g., reporting under International Human Rights Mechanisms), to support follow-up and implementation of the 2030 Agenda and SDG16 in particular.

Observations and examples of data partnerships that leverage existing data to help drive protection for civic space actors were also shared, including how SDG16-related data in the VNR to communicate progress, or challenges, with domestic constituencies.

Beyond Numbers: Strengthening VNRs with citizen engagement and qualitative insights

This VNR Lab was organized by the United Nations Statistics Division and PARIS21 to provide a platform to showcase country experiences in utilizing qualitative data and engaging citizens in the VNR data process. The VNR data lab aimed to showcase good practices in integrating qualitative data and citizen data engagement processes, highlight the utility of qualitative narratives for SDG monitoring, and foster peer learning among countries preparing VNRs.

Recognizing the critical role of reliable data in evidence-based Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), alternative data sources, such as citizen-generated data (CGD) or qualitative data can address challenges such as data gaps, timeliness, and disaggregation, which often constrain comprehensive SDG monitoring and the breadth of analysis for VNRs. By integrating perspectives and narratives of citizens and communities into VNRs, governments can enhance inclusivity and capture the nuanced experiences of stakeholders, contributing to a more holistic assessment of SDG progress. This approach not only upholds methodological rigor but also facilitates the exploration of areas where progress may have stagnated or regressed, particularly among marginalized groups.

A participating country in the Lab detailed the use of CGD in the process of developing their third VNR. The country noted that CGD is a rich source for filling data gaps and outlined the framework it has developed for quality criteria to validate CGD. As a result of the inclusive and collaborative process used for the VNR with government, civil society, the private sector, academia and youth organizations, two CGD indicators were included in the VNR. The country also outlined challenges in the use of CGD as well as steps going forward.

A civil society organization from the same participating country detailed their experience and perspective of the stakeholder process for the development of the VNR. She commented on the local and community narratives that came out of validation workshops that will enhance the VNR as well as the entire VNR process. She noted the support by the National Statistical Office to include stakeholders in the process and steps going forward to further integrate citizen narratives and engagement for SDG monitoring.

A second country detailed the process for their fourth VNR focusing on leaving no one behind, leaving no one out. The participant reviewed how the country got more than five million people out of poverty between 2018 and 2022 with examples of national experiences in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. She outlined that for this VNR, the country analyzed comprehensive quantitative and qualitative data through a process of exchanges and consultations along with in-depth interviews. They also noted lessons learned in the preparation of the VNR and next steps.

The session concluded with a quick round of questions to the panelists, most importantly focusing on lessons learned. Participants noted the importance of hearing from citizens directly in the process of developing the VNR and the inclusion of CGD and local and community narratives for the VNR and SDG monitoring in general.

Advancing integrated SDG planning and implementation: the role of VNRs and Voluntary Local Reviews

Background

In September 2023, United Nations Member States gathered at highest level at the SDG Summit in New York and committed to a series of actions to accelerate progress on SDG implementation. Recognizing the need for multilevel coordination to achieve the 2030 Agenda, the Political Declaration of the Summit includes calls to further localize the SDGs and advance integrated planning and implementation at the local level.1 Addressing these challenges will require integrated and collaborative efforts to ensure that no one is left behind in the pursuit of sustainable development.

Increasingly, voluntary reporting at both national and local levels has become a vehicle for advancing such multilevel coordination and integrated planning. Eight years into the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, national governments are increasingly utilizing Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) not only to highlight national level efforts, advances, and challenges in SDG implementation, but to also capture the efforts of local and regional governments and other local stakeholders in support of SDG implementation. At the same time, the global Voluntary Local Review (VLR) movement continues to accelerate. Since the first VLRs were presented in 2018, over 300 VLRs have been published. These reports can complement the VNRs and enrich the national story when it comes to the implementation of the 2030 by ensuring a more detailed and differentiated assessment of progress, gaps and challenges in states, provinces, cities, municipalities, towns, districts, and villages.

As with VNRs, the process of preparing VLRs provides important benefits in and of itself. These include the opportunity to evaluate the performance of existing policies, programmes, and institutional set-ups, including stakeholder engagement mechanisms; to improve data collection and analysis and assess data gaps; and to advance inclusive governance and foster participation from community members and groups among those that tend to be "most left behind." However, to be most impactful, voluntary reports at all levels must also lead to action, including in terms of strategic planning and budgeting.

From a global perspective, some progress has been made in advancing integrated SDG planning and implementation, including through the linking of national and local voluntary reporting processes. Through the connection between VLRs and VNRs, new channels of dialogue have opened, many of which resulted in better coordination and more effective national delivery of the SDGs. However, to fully

realize the SDGs and fulfil the commitments set out in the Political Declaration of the SDG Summit significant improvements in this area are required.

The present VNR/VLR Lab will included contributions from national and local governments that have prepared recent voluntary national or local reviews, as well as from key UN system, relevant stakeholders and representatives of civil society. The event provided participants the opportunity to exchange experiences and good practices regarding how VNRs and VLRs are contributing to integrated SDG planning and implementation.

Leveraging Data and Innovative Tools to Monitor Achievements and Inequalities in VNRs

Since adoption of the 2030 Agenda and its follow-up and review process in 2015, the production of VNRs has evolved considerably. As more data has become available and is being used to inform the VNRs, the importance of applying more rigorous statistical analysis and presenting results in a user-friendly manner has become equally important. Leveraging innovative approaches and utilizing aggregate and micro-data have enabled member States to track progress on SDGs over time in a consistent and transparent manner, and also facilitated an assessment on progress on the "Leave No One Behind" pledge of the Agenda 2030 by identifying inequalities in SDG achievements at national and sub-national levels.

Generating such evidence during the VNR production process encourages discussion on what works and what does not and inspires stakeholders to engage in interactive policy dialogue. It also informs policy recommendations committed in the VNR and sets a baseline for monitoring and evaluating policy actions in the next VNR.

Organized by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) in hybrid format, VNR Lab 7 brought together policymakers and practitioners from around Asia and the Pacific and provided a platform to countries presenting their VNRs in 2024, namely Armenia, Georgia and Nepal. In addition to on-site participation, the event was well attended virtually with over 100 online participants.

During the lab, VNR team leads from Armenia, Georgia and Nepal shared their experiences in respect to data issues on progress review and leaving no one behind. Each country demonstrated alternative ways in which data and empirical methodologies were leveraged to enrich the review of SDGs in their national contexts. Notably, Nepal's VNR included a substantial discussion of furthest behind groups using longitudinal analysis of SDGs with multiple rounds of Demographic and Health Surveys from 2011 to 2022. The importance of legal and institutional frameworks governing the production of official statistics was evident in all three countries as they regularly collect a wide array of surveys and make them publicly available.

Each country also shared their experiences on stakeholder consultations to validate data and analysis. VNR teams presented quantitative evidence on furthest behind groups to a variety of stakeholders including civil society. It was evident that while data availability and disaggregation is increasingly addressed in the VNRs, further

work is needed post-VNR to monitor and evaluate existing policies and inform the design and implementation of new and inclusive policies. In this context, the experience of the Maldives from its VNR in 2023 was an example of how to build capacity to collect and analyze data especially with a gender disaggregation.

VNRs and Poverty-Governance-Partnerships Nexus in Africa: Experience Sharing and Innovative Solutions"

Poverty reduction is a universal goal endorsed by the United Nations and other continental frameworks including Agenda 2063 "the Africa we want". The African continent has the highest number of Least Developed countries worldwide (LDCs) and equally most contested poverty levels in certain countries i.e., Chad, Congo, and others. Having that said, some African countries have made good strides to reduce poverty levels during the past decade. The Voluntary national reporting process has been quite significant to assist countries in tracking governance policies and the government's interventionist approach to eliminate poverty.

The assessment of the first-ten-year implementation plan of Agenda 2063: the Africa we want (2013-2023) reveals that progress towards reducing poverty rate in Africa is uneven and various African countries need to improve social protection and equality policies to address the multi-faceted poverty trends across the continent. On the same vein, the OPHI research on Africa concluded alarming findings concerning the intensity and proliferation of poverty across the continent, particularly the countries which are going through conflict/post -conflict conditions including Chad, Congo, and Sudan amongst others.

Needles to equally emphasize that public institutions and effective civil service as endorsed in SDG 16–effective institutions and peaceful societies, which meets Aspiration Three of Agenda 2063 -Africa with good governance and strong leadership, remain imperative to combat poverty through participatory policies to address most-vulnerable groups. Effective institutions can help countries to mitigate poverty, from institutional and policy perspectives, guided by "Leaving No One Behind" principle. There has been also sound evidence that progress on key aspects of SDG 16 (namely, transparency, accountability, and participation and inclusion) has enabling effects on aspects of SDG 1 (No Poverty)- which is also critical for recovery from COVID-19.

This VNR Lab highlighted the significance of the VNR process to report on poverty reduction and associated governance practices from a holistic perspective. It discussed interlinkages of SDG1, SDG 2 and SDG 16 and how partnerships (SDG 17) contribute to achieve the latter goals in Africa. It facilitated peer-to-peer learning by inviting selected African countries to share their different approaches and experiences in poverty reduction from a multi-dimensional perspective as well as the efforts endorsed by different organs in pursuant of such a goal.

Building Bridges: Engaging Stakeholders to Advance the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

UNDESA, through its Division for Sustainable Development Goals (DSDG), and the Major Groups and Other Stakeholders Coordination Mechanism (MGoS-CM) organized the VNR Lab titled "Building Bridges: Engaging Stakeholders to Advance the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" on the margins of the 2024 HLPF.

This VNR Lab aimed to discuss best practices, share lessons learned, and report on innovative tools to strengthen and facilitate meaningful multi-stakeholder partnerships and engagement throughout the Voluntary National Review (VNR) process and beyond. The lab highlighted the significance of multi-stakeholder engagement as a cornerstone for the successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

The session featured contributions from a diverse panel of speakers, including government representatives from Spain and Costa Rica and civil society representatives from Kenya and Brazil. Spain highlighted its approach to preparing its 2024 VNR, which involved a participatory process that included local and regional governments, civil society, and various other stakeholders. The role of the Sustainable Development Council and other relevant councils in providing independent opinions and contributions to the VNR was emphasized. Costa Rica discussed its adoption of a national SDG framework that actively involves stakeholders from unions to the private sector. The importance of defining national targets and ensuring active participation from diverse sectors was stressed, alongside the government's role in facilitating meaningful participation.

During the interactive discussions, participants raised questions about the tools and methods used to engage various stakeholders, including local authorities, youth, marginalized communities, and higher education institutions. Spain and Costa Rica shared their experiences, highlighting the importance of national frameworks, public policies, and training programs in reinforcing society's commitment to the 2030 Agenda. Both countries stressed the necessity of localized efforts and the government's role in facilitating and maintaining stakeholder engagement despite challenges in capacity. The discussion also covered practical aspects of stakeholder engagement, such as funding for organizations working with marginalized groups and the role of higher education in data collection and methodology development. Spain and Costa Rica highlighted their efforts to incorporate feedback and data from various sectors, ensuring a comprehensive and inclusive approach to the VNR process.

The session further explored the contributions of major groups and other stakeholders to the VNR process. The coordination process led by the MGoS CM engages independent civil society and stakeholder constituencies in the VNR process, including through the regional forums and collecting shadow/spotlight reports. In addition, the involvement of stakeholders from sub-regional and regional levels was

discussed. A representative from UNESCAP shared examples from a twinning program which promotes peer learning in connection with the VNR process.

In closing, the importance of meaningful stakeholder engagement in the VNR process and its follow-up was emphasized. The need for awareness and capacity building was highlighted, stressing that transparency and broad societal understanding are crucial for effective engagement.

Showcasing multi-stakeholder participation in a VNR - Country examples and a checklist for multi-stakeholder participation

This VNR Lab was jointly Organized by the Global Forum for National SDG Advisory Bodies and the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE). Global Forum members from Ecuador, Jamaica and Kenya reported on their specific experiences and exchanged views on the factors that determine whether the progress of the 2030 Agenda can be successfully and constructively monitored. The panelists agreed that diversity, continuity and, above all, trust are the three main ingredients for the voluntary reviews of SDG progress.

Country examples were shared. The involvement of non-state actors was essential to the success of the 2024 VNR in Kenya, as with previous VNRs. This contrasted with civil society's experience in Ecuador, who felt that civil society was not really involved in the process. They felt that short timeframe set aside for the VNR undermined participation, and stressed that the role of government is key, by being open to dialogue and through the institutionalization of a participatory process. It is a great advantage for the Kenyan SDG Forum that the platform, which has a wide diversity of stakeholders, is not just active during VNRs but all the time.

The Kenyan experience also shows that a lot of communication is needed to involve as many people as possible. For inclusive engagement it is important to bring in voices that would otherwise not be heard. It is important that local people understand why it is important to contribute to the process. In Jamaica, for example, there was a woman who is committed to ensuring clean water for her village. It was not necessary for her to know exactly what the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda are but to understand the value of reporting what she is doing. This builds trust in the participants and in the process which is essential.

Following the reports from the countries, the Secretariat of the Global Forum presented a checklist that assesses the environment for multi-stakeholder engagement. This also included a government's openness to the involvement of non-state actors in the VNR process.

Summarizing this VNR Lab, one take-away message for the representative of the German Council for Germany's next VNR in 2025, was that the SDGs can never be achieved by governments alone. Not everyone needs to know about all the SDGs, but the policies designed as part of the transformation, and how transformations link to each other, must be discussed with society.

Inclusive Reporting: Examining Multi-Stakeholder Engagement in the VNR Process

Summary

The UN Foundation's VNR Lab at the 2024 HLPF, held against the backdrop of global challenges such as COVID-19 recovery and climate change, provided a critical platform for discussing the intricacies of the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) with a focus on stakeholder engagement, particularly in the context of Kenya.

The session began with an overview of the complex global situation, emphasizing the need for reinforced implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Participants discussed the importance of inclusive and comprehensive SDG reporting, highlighting the role of multi-stakeholder engagement. The discourse centred on identifying best practices and challenges in the VNR process, drawing insights from various organizations' experiences.

One key best practice identified was the annexing of civil society organization (CSO) reports to official VNRs. This approach has been effective in ensuring that diverse perspectives are incorporated into national reports, enhancing their comprehensiveness and inclusivity. Additionally, the importance of multistakeholder partnerships was underscored. Collaborative efforts among governments, CSOs, and other stakeholders have fostered trust and improved the quality of data collected and reported. This trust-building exercise between civil society and government was particularly noted as a significant achievement in Kenya.

Another significant aspect discussed was the inclusion of marginalized groups, such as persons with disabilities, in the VNR process. Efforts to involve these groups not only enrich the data but also ensure that the voices of the most vulnerable are heard. The use of technology and innovative data collection methods, including satellite applications and mobile data, was highlighted as a means to enhance reporting. The integration of citizen-generated data was also seen as a valuable tool for increasing transparency and accountability in the VNR process.

Despite these best practices, several challenges were identified. Many organizations face capacity issues, which limit their ability to fully participate in the VNR process. This includes both human and financial resources. Additionally, there is often a lack of political will to recognize the importance of data, which can hinder effective data collection and use. Ensuring the involvement of rural communities remains a significant challenge, with more efforts needed to reach these areas and include their voices in the reporting process. The complexity of integrating intersecting issues such as poverty into the VNR process was also noted as a challenge.

The role of civil society in the VNR process was extensively discussed. Civil society organizations play a crucial role in building trust between stakeholders and

government, which is essential for effective collaboration and the successful implementation of the SDGs. They also play a key role in advocacy and accountability, providing alternative data through shadow reports that can highlight discrepancies and areas needing improvement. Ensuring continuous engagement and maintaining momentum in the VNR process were identified as ongoing challenges. Strategies to support and sustain civil society participation are essential for the effectiveness of the VNR process.

Youth engagement emerged as a vital component of the discussion. Engaging young people in the SDG process brings fresh perspectives and innovative approaches to addressing global challenges. Ensuring that data collection and reporting processes are accessible and inclusive of diverse youth experiences was emphasized as crucial for making the VNR process more reflective of the entire population.

The event concluded with a recognition of the need for continuous efforts to address the challenges identified and to leverage the strengths of multi-stakeholder partnerships. The insights shared at VNR Lab 11 underscored the importance of inclusive reporting and stakeholder engagement in achieving the SDGs. Moving forward, it is essential to build on these best practices and address the challenges to enhance the effectiveness of SDG reporting and implementation.

Against all odds: Meaningful VNRs in fragile and conflict-affected situations

Countries in fragile and conflict-affected situations face complex challenges that require them to conduct their voluntary national review (VNR) using adapted, home-grown approaches and solutions. Ongoing conflict and humanitarian crises, fragmented institutions, lack of control over parts of the territories, displacement, lack of resources, scarcity of data, and limited opportunities for broad consultation mean that applying the global VNR guidelines may not always be feasible or applicable.

The VNR Lab brought together representatives of Member States to reflect on approaches, solutions and innovations that have aided in conducting the VNR under such situations. Key messages include the following.

Political stability and sustainable peace are prerequisites for development and achieving the SDGs. In countries affected by conflict and fragility, the VNR can be an opportunity to identify and build consensus around national priorities, engage with stakeholders, and envision a pathway for moving forward post-conflict. It is also a vehicle to convey critical messages to the global community including donors and development partners and garner their support.

Tailoring the global SDG framework, including through the adoption of additional SDGs or targets, can help countries affected by conflict and fragility to monitor and address national priorities not adequately tackled in the 2030 Agenda, such as landmines and irregular migration.

Data gaps are a common challenge facing VNR development but becomes quite magnified in countries in fragile and conflict-affected situations. The VNR can incentivize and help countries affected by conflict and instability to establish data collection and validation mechanisms.

Dynamic modelling can be helpful for countries in conflict to better understand the effects of conflict and provide data- and literature-informed scenario-based forecasts of development futures where exact data may not be available.

Countries in situations of conflict and fragility can fill critical data gaps, including those relating to peace, using statistics from different sources including government agencies, the private sector, civil society, humanitarian missions and global databases.

Post-conflict efforts must include investments in developing statistical systems, capacity building of personnel, and utilizing/developing technology tools for data generation and analysis. Post-conflict efforts for rebuilding, reconstruction, and reintegration of affected communities depend on the support of donors and the international community, who play a key role in the shift from humanitarian work to sustainable development and achievement of the 2030 Agenda.

Strengthening digital government and data governance for a more agile and effective public sector in Africa

The Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government (DPIDG) of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) and the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) of the African Union co-organized this VNR Lab, which aimed to facilitate peer-to-peer learning by inviting representatives from Burkina Faso, Namibia and Sierra Leone to share different approaches and experiences in fostering digital government and data governance to render the public sector more effective and agile. In addition, a member of the Committee of Experts of Public Administration (CEPA) presented the opportunities and risks of the digitalization of government. Finally, representatives from UN DESA and APRM complemented the discussions by providing insights into related support provided to countries.

Speakers emphasized the critical need for African countries to strengthen digital government and data governance to drive sustainable development. They highlighted the importance of technology in transforming public services, improving efficiency, transparency, and accountability, and meeting the demands of citizens, including the tech-savvy youth, while addressing privacy and security concerns. Despite progress made, a multitude of challenges, such as limited internet access and availability of digital devices, as well as policy gaps, kept Africa lagging behind other regions. The advancement of artificial intelligence might widen this gap even further and was linked to potential significant risks. Speakers, therefore, emphasized the need to regulate new technologies, implement digital strategies, establish standards, protocols and frameworks for data collection, storage and sharing, and increase overall investment in digital government and data governance. Investing in digital skills and key sectors, such as health and education, through digitalization could solve many challenges, while increasing efficiency, reducing costs, and improving accessibility. Speakers presented successful examples showcasing how strategic investment, public sector reforms and policy frameworks could lead to significant progress despite limited resources. Notable digital advancements mentioned included integrated digital tax systems, e-passports, mobile money, telemedicine, e-learning, digital exams, e-policing, and digital marketplaces.

Going forward there was a need to ensure equal digital access, robust internet infrastructure, increased digital literacy as well as continued investment in digital skills and data governance to ensure the participation of African countries in the global digital economy. Ongoing dialogue and regional and international cooperation were required to harness the power of digital government and data governance for a more agile, effective, and inclusive public sector in Africa. Speakers also made an urgent call for more capacity-building, financing and technology transfer support from the United Nations and other development partners to bridge the digital divide and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. The exchange of best practices among countries was seen as being valuable and should be continued.

UN DESA and APRM expressed readiness to support African countries in their efforts to leverage digital technology to foster implementation of the 2030 Agenda. UN DESA announced the upcoming launch of the 2024 E-Government Survey in October which would focus on how digital government can drive sustainable development. The E-Government Development Index and UN DESA's UN Peace and Development Fund project aimed at enhancing digital data governance in Asia-Pacific and Africa were also presented. APRM noted that it remained committed to providing political leaders with the skills needed for technological shifts, stressing the importance of education, training, agility, and critical thinking for the future workforce, and presenting different digital governance tools and programs. APRM also highlighted that it was collaborating with CEPA and other partners to enhance public service delivery and good governance in Africa, including by fostering the implementation of the CEPA principles of effective governance for sustainable development.