

## **HLPF Blog: ESCAP Executive Secretary**

### **Rescuing progress: How VNRs can support countries in times of crisis and uncertainty.**

The High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) 2022 is taking place as the world faces multiple overlapping crises – most notably, the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, natural disasters, and geopolitical conflicts – with widespread socio-economic impacts on our communities, especially the most vulnerable.

As five countries from the Asia-Pacific region present their voluntary national review (VNR) this year, it is important to reflect upon how VNRs can elevate discussions on how to sustain or ‘rescue’ progress on sustainable development during shocks and crises and the need for resilient institutions.

The important question is, what does it require to undertake a VNR while responding to multiple economic and political crises? And what is the best way that we can support countries to carry out their reviews in these times of economic and political uncertainty?

The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) created an innovative VNR twinning programme to address these questions. We have found that facilitating practical peer learning among countries that are both grappling with complex situations is exactly what is needed in this difficult year.

For example, Sri Lanka and Pakistan have both encountered economic and political challenges while trying to recover from the impacts of COVID-19. In 2022, ESCAP connects these two countries as they navigate the VNR process.

Through study tours and virtual conversations, the countries were able to give frank feedback on each other’s first drafts of the reports. Recommendations included the need for more honest assessments of the problems facing the country, great use of data and evidence to support their analysis, and clearer articulation of the key reforms and practical next steps needed to address current crises.

The twinning of the VNR units of Sri Lanka and Pakistan has reinforced the importance of establishing resilient institutions for monitoring progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals that withstand political change. Despite changes in political leadership in both countries, it was clear that they both have robust institutional arrangements that not only keep sustainable development on the agenda but actually elevate its importance.

The VNR process has created a unique space for Sri Lanka to debate and review which policy adjustments or new policy responses are needed to respond to the changing landscape. Through connecting and twinning stakeholders in both countries, the VNR process has not only brought more voices, groups, and institutions to the table to try to reach a consensus on policy interventions but also to identify the key obstacles that might prevent the country from responding effectively to political and economic challenges.

Many countries are grappling with the complexity of delivering effective political and economic governance that can withstand shocks and meet the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Sri Lanka and Pakistan demonstrated that utilizing the VNR process and twinning programme to examine the right combination of policies, resources and partnerships can contribute to navigating the difficult terrain and accelerating progress.

This year's HLPF will not only be an arena to explore what is required to build back better from COVID-19 but also give important recognition to the unique role of South-South Cooperation in steering and motivating countries in their commitment to sustainable development.