



**Second Global Workshop for countries conducting a Voluntary National Review
at the July 2019 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development**

**UN Campus Bonn, Germany
19 – 20 February 2019**

Summary

The Second Global VNR Workshop for countries presenting a Voluntary National Review at the July 2019 High-level Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) was held at the UN Campus in Bonn, Germany on 19 and 20 February 2019. The workshop was organized by UN DESA in close collaboration with the UN System Staff College (UNSSC) and with the support of the Government of Germany. The two-day peer learning event focused on taking stock of the VNR preparations thus far and provided guidance on the scope of the VNR report as well as on the presentation of the review at the July 2019 HLPF. The workshop brought together 65 participants, including notably the President of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), 47 government officials from VNR countries, representatives of the UN Regional Commissions and Resident Coordinators from some VNR countries. The workshop programme included plenary sessions and discussions in working groups to foster peer learning.

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Welcome and main purpose of the workshop

Opening remarks were delivered by the President of the Economic and Social Council, representatives of the German Government, the UN System Staff College and UN DESA respectively.

The ECOSOC President stressed that the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) are a key element in the follow-up to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The VNR's ultimate objective is to promote the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The HLPF provides a global platform for countries to share their experience and expertise, learn from each other, and launch partnerships. It gathers a high number of participants from all walks of life and has become an important forum for sustainable development decision makers and advocates. The HLPF thus provides an opportunity to engage with the international community and to mobilize support for implementing the SDGs. The ECOSOC President stressed that the VNRs are, however, not conducted for the HLPF or the international community, but for the countries' own benefit. The reviews provide the opportunity to accelerate progress towards the SDGs at the national level and to further identify and communicate countries' development priorities. The VNRs allow to develop a roadmap of actions to move closer to reaching national sustainable development goals and the SDGs. The reviews can also further national coordination efforts - between branches and levels of government, and with non-state actors. To maximize the benefit of the Voluntary National Review, the ECOSOC President encouraged participants to put in place a coordinated follow-up process to build on the lessons learned during the preparation and presentation of the VNR at the HLPF.



Other speakers echoed that the VNR presentation is indeed an important milestone to advance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the national level. While the VNRs are state-led and owned, the 2030 Agenda cannot be implemented by governments on their own. In the process of preparing the VNRs, there is a need to strengthen whole-of-society efforts to ensure inclusive SDG implementation. Yet, it was highlighted that the 2030 Agenda is more than a set of 17 goals, it is a holistic agenda with the objective to foster development in five critical areas: people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership. The 2030 Agenda was compared to a Rubik's cube, where one must look at all parts at once to foster an approach that is mindful of all dimensions of sustainable development at the same time. The VNRs thus represent an opportunity to revisit planning and implementation processes of the 2030 Agenda and to connect the dots in monitoring and reporting processes. Speakers invited participants to embrace the workshop as a platform for exchange and peer learning. Achieving the 2030 Agenda was considered at the same time a path and a destination to which every country needs to find its route along the way. Reporting on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda is an opportunity to take a step forward. The VNRs to be presented in July 2019 are an important input to the global stock-taking exercise to be undertaken at the September 2019 SDG Summit on where the international community stands four years after the adoption of the ambitious plan of action for people, planet and prosperity.

Where do we stand in the preparations?

UN DESA presented the results of a questionnaire that had been sent to solicit views of VNR countries in advance of the workshop. Challenges signaled in the process of preparing the VNR predominately pertain to data collection and statistical analysis. Difficulties were also encountered with regards to

gathering and analyzing information from a wide range of stakeholders and hence, relate to ways to engage stakeholders meaningfully. An integrated approach and cross-sectoral coordination as well as the scope of the VNR report remain challenging for some countries. These issues helped to frame the programme of the workshop.



VNR focal points exchanged with each other on a set of questions pertaining to the VNR process design, challenges encountered thus far and the institutional set-up for implementing the 2030 Agenda at the national level. Four main challenges emerged from the discussions: data availability, verification and customization; stakeholder engagement; institutional arrangements and coordination; and aligning budgets with the SDGs.

First, data availability and collection were highlighted as a major challenge by a number of countries across regions. A participant from Africa stressed that data and statistics remain a critical challenge, particularly compared to the MDGs. A European country explained the difficulty of cooperation on data between various levels of governments, particularly as some municipalities still barely know about the SDGs. It was stressed that the VNRs are a critical stage in identifying gaps in data collection. Adopting international indicators was mentioned as a solution to close gaps in the set of national indicators for the SDGs. However, participants also pointed out that for some indicators there is no exact methodology. The UN Secretariat clarified that national indicators calculated with a different methodology than the international indicators can be used in the VNRs if information for international indicators is not available. One participant shared that the country created an online portal with the available data on SDGs, which allows users to track the progress on SDG implementation from 2015 to 2018.

Second, several countries described how they engage various institutions and stakeholders. In a country in the Asia-Pacific region, provinces developed their own sub-national SDG implementation plans, complementary to the national plan. A country from the Arab States region gave each stakeholder organization the ownership for the implementation and data collection of a specific goal, while the highest level of government coordinates the VNR process. One participant from Europe was challenged by the large number of registered civil society organizations with the presence of only one or two umbrella organizations. The country stated it was trying to organize an online platform to give these civil society organizations the opportunity to comment on the first draft of the VNR, while municipalities will be contacted directly to approve the first draft of the report. Private sector engagement remains a challenge that one country seeks to address by posting information on public-private partnerships online, fostering public consultation with civil society actors and private sector representatives.

Several participants stressed that the value of the VNR does not lie in the report as a product, but in the process of engaging all stakeholders and bringing everyone engaged in the implementation of the SDGs together around a common understanding. Two countries characterized the VNR as an action plan to further the implementation of the SDGs. Countries should thus engage stakeholders in the implementation of recommendations received during the VNR process.

Third, the need for coordination through institutional arrangements that clearly define mandates and roles of different actors involved in the implementation of the SDGs and the drafting of the VNR was



illustrated by several countries. Examples of such institutional arrangements vary across countries and include national committees that encompass all governmental bodies, parliament, and civil society, planning agencies as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs taking the lead on SDGs and VNRs. The importance of fostering SDG ownership of line ministries, including on engaging stakeholders on specific SDG priority areas, was stressed.

Finally, participants also discussed the importance of aligning national budgets with SDG implementation and the VNRs. It is critical that planning agencies coordinate with the Ministry of Finance for effective planning of implementation activities. One country of the ECE region stated that it is running a pilot project on a medium-term budgetary forecast which is trying to link budget plans covering the period of four to five years with the SDGs. Another country in the Asia-Pacific region is in the process of preparing a medium-term expenditure plan, which is not yet aligned with the SDGs. The close link between budgeting and data was also stressed. The importance of private sector contribution to the financing of SDG implementation was highlighted.

Has progress been made in ensuring ownership of the VNR and coherent engagement by the government and public institutions?

In an input presentation, the Secretariat highlighted that ownership is key in achieving sustainable development. Awareness raising about the SDGs within government, parliaments and among stakeholders as well as keeping the goals under constant national review are important in order to create a sense of national ownership of the 17 goals. Engagement of public institutions can be ensured through a three tier-approach: The first tier provides a broad vision and strategic policy direction, national priorities, and the integration of global commitments and frameworks. The second tier carries out coordination among line ministries and government agencies and strengthens their capacity to implement the SDGs. The third tier coordinates technical work. It is important to engage local governments as vertical integration and decentralization facilitate the implementation of the SDGs at sub-national levels. Parliaments can be involved through committees on the 2030 Agenda. Furthermore, supreme audit institutions - both at the national and international level - and stakeholders should be engaged. The main challenges in this process are ensuring policy coherence and multi-sectoral coordination, monitoring of impacts of changes in institutions, and creating mechanisms for stakeholder engagement. Questions were raised on how to integrate the report of a UNDP MAPS mission into the VNR process while, at the same time, maintaining ownership at the country level.

Most countries reported that they have a coordination mechanism in charge of SDG implementation and the VNR. These coordination mechanisms are often set up as multi-stakeholder bodies and, in many cases, operate under the supervision of the presidency or the head of government. Sometimes a new structure has been established, such as a set of working groups on the political and/or the operational level (one country established three working groups on the VNR, on framing the SDG process, and on statistics; another country created nine groups according to thematic area indicators). In other cases, one ministry, e.g. the Ministry for Economy coordinates all other ministries involved. It was highlighted that political leadership is of critical importance. Many countries try to engage all line

ministries, all public institutions in general and the statistical office, as well as the private sector, including accounting/auditing companies. In most cases, competing interests and trade-offs are addressed through coordination mechanisms. Challenges in addressing trade-offs mostly remain below the ministerial level.

Most countries integrated the SDGs into national policies and development plans using different approaches. One country gave the example of creating a medium-term expenditure framework to identify SDG implementation gaps and financing needs from the private sector. A participant from Africa recommended a public investment plan as a vehicle for implementing the SDGs. Furthermore, an SDG investment plan can be an organizing tool for technical assistance provided to other countries. One country mapped its programmes against specific SDGs.

Some countries have very clear processes for involving the parliament, whereas others still discuss different options. Holding a half-day workshop to share information about the SDGs and the VNRs with parliamentarians while focussing on national priorities was suggested as a possible best practice. Another best practice put forward was to include parliamentarians into working groups for the implementation of the SDGs. A further option would be engaging parliamentarians from different countries together to facilitate an exchange on SDGs. One country also engaged the country's Supreme Court in the implementation of SDG 16.

It was inquired how to include best practices in the VNRs. Possible solutions shared by participants included sending out questionnaires to stakeholders or holding consultations with a wide range of actors. The need to define criteria on how to choose best practices was stressed.

What are the scope and content of the VNR report?

The Secretariat briefed participants on the scope and the content of the VNR report. The VNR should address all SDGs, while goals that constitute a national priority could be addressed in more depth. The report should paint a realistic and honest picture of the implementation of the SDGs and share challenges and gaps along with accomplishments and success stories. It was emphasized that the 2030 Agenda is about achieving the SDGs together and making a difference in the lives of people.

Three countries from East Asia, Africa and Europe presented the scope and content of their VNR report.

A participant from East Asia shared the country's progress in mainstreaming the SDGs and linking its development perspective with the VNR and the goal framework. Rather than being a mere SDG report, the VNR is expected to come up with specific policy recommendations and assign responsibilities to entities that would be carrying these recommendations out after the HLPF. A national consultation was held in October 2018 to identify the scope of the VNR report. As there are a wide range of issues and possible solutions, it was decided to look at policy coherence and interlinkages across SDGs by applying a matrix-based tool to prioritize. The national multi-stakeholder working group on the VNR led by the government finalized the table of content and the scope of the report in December 2018. Subsequently, tightly schedule activities were organized to reach out to stakeholders. The outreach process is led by the National Development Agency. The private sector was engaged through the Chamber of Commerce. A civil society representative is part of the multi-stakeholder government working group. Furthermore, a civil society organization representative was selected as Head of an

advocacy team that engages with all CSOs in the country. A second national consultation will be organized in March 2019 to discuss the second draft of the VNR report.

Challenges remain with regards to the principle of leaving no one behind and the concept of vulnerable groups at risk of being left behind for which concrete methods are required. The SDGs under review at the 2019 HLPF are being grouped as a cluster. Furthermore, a thematic approach to the VNR was chosen to look at the implementation of the 2030 Agenda through the lens of air pollution which constitutes a major challenge in the country. It was noted that the VNR process is a learning experience for all and that the parallel process of setting targets and indicators at the national level is important. To achieve both the SDGs and the national Sustainable Development Vision it is critical to ensure the alignment of long-, medium- and short-term development policy documents. Strengthening national institutional frameworks for development planning will be key as well as aligning budgeting mechanisms with policy planning in line with the SDGs. The Government introduced guidelines to assess policy coherence and target setting as to ultimately ensure interlinkages between policy documents.

A VNR country from Africa collected inputs from all ministries through a questionnaire. Based on the information gathered, a common thread was identified resulting in the country's 'VNR story'. Specific SDGs were allocated to line ministries and focused discussions were held on each goal. In addition, focus meetings were held on specific issues such as partnerships and inclusion of the private sector. The process thus far has helped to understand where challenges lie and where good projects are in place. It was noted that ministries very often do not have a system for assessing their own policies and for examining the extent to which the latter are implemented. The Secretary-General's common voluntary reporting guidelines were mentioned as a useful tool for guiding the VNR process.

A European country established an inter-ministerial working group led by the Prime Minister to implement the SDGs, including members of all ministries, the statistical office and the association of local authorities. Working methods were synchronized across ministries to follow-up on SDG implementation, thereby setting up a process for an annual review of SDG implementation. A SDG working group was established in every ministry and templates are being used to report progress. An advisory group, including communication officers, was formed to draft a status report on national SDG implementation. The VNR report will contain a section on the principle of leaving no one behind, which will also feature in each chapter on the goals. It will further have a special focus on children and youth, in line with the 30th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 2019. The report will also include a message from the recently established national Youth Forum for the SDGs.

Furthermore, the country has integrated the SDGs in the national budgetary process. The goals have also been linked to a new education policy and to the country's international development cooperation. A new climate action plan was launched in September 2018. Within the country, a survey on public awareness about the SDGs was conducted. While a first survey commissioned in January 2018 revealed that 46,6% of the population knew or had heard about the SDGs, the percentage rose to 57,4% following an awareness raising campaign. An online information platform was created based on the examples of other countries. The country can measure 67 out of the 232 global SDG indicators and will produce a statistical annex to the VNR. The report will be published online in April 2019 and will be open for comments. The latter will either be considered in the report or may be included in an annex.

What would the 'best' VNR report look like?

A participant from the Arab region reported that the group discussed different methodologies but ultimately reverted to the checklist in the VNR Handbook. Key elements would include reporting on SDG achievements, alignment of national plans with the SDGs, best practices and initiatives as well as a section on leaving no one behind. With regards to the latter, a European country specified that the country's report would focus on persons with disabilities, the Roma population and women in rural areas. A small island developing state stressed the importance of asking key questions that make stakeholder engagement meaningful. While there is engagement, it may not always be possible to reflect stakeholder comments in the final report as it will have to go through a high-level clearing process. It was recommended to draw examples for SDG implementation from the local level where communities are leading the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. A participant from Africa noted that the Secretary-General's common voluntary reporting guidelines should be seen within the country context. Furthermore, identifying best practices to align planning and budgeting was considered key.

How can data be used best for national implementation of the SDGs and for the VNRs?

The Secretariat explained that data gaps and lack of capacity are major obstacles to measuring and achieving the SDGs. Filling data gaps requires more statistical capacity in national statistical offices and national statistical systems. The Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data (2017) constituted a major milestone in the realm of data for the SDGs. The Cape Town Global Action Plan fed into the Dubai Declaration (2018).

It was acknowledged that data gaps are significant. No country has available data for all 232 global indicators. Countries can and should prioritize indicators based on national priorities and situations on global indicators that are most relevant to their situation. While countries should try to use the global indicators, national indicators and proxies can be used in the interim to fill data gaps. The UN Statistical Commission has developed a list of some global and national proxies that can be used for SDG monitoring.

There are strong linkages between national and other reporting, with National Statistical Offices (NSOs) playing a strong coordinating role. Data flows are linking NSOs and national ministries, responsible for preparing the VNR. The role of national statistical offices in SDG monitoring includes coordination and quality assurance within a complex data ecosystem. The implementation of national monitoring for the 2030 Agenda starts with the development of SDG indicator frameworks, followed by an assessment of capacity of national statistical systems and a gap/priority analysis. Countries subsequently develop stories and plans to strengthen national statistical systems and finally implement those strategies and plans.

There are several ongoing UN DESA projects and activities to increase data availability and dissemination for the SDGs. These include, first, a pilot project of the Statistics Division (UNSD) to support SDG monitoring which aims to conduct capacity gap assessments and develop implementation plans. There are currently six target countries in Africa and Asia. Second, the UNSD-DFID Project on SDG Monitoring encompasses 20 countries. Third, the Development Account Programme on Data and Statistics aims to strengthen capacity in key statistical areas. Additional activities related to SDG

monitoring include the [E-Handbook on SDG indicators](#) and the [SDG Monitoring and Reporting toolkit for UN country teams](#).

There are five main streams of dissemination for SDGs at the global level, including the SDG Report 2018, the Secretary-General's Progress Report and its statistical annex, the SDG Story Maps as well as the [Global SDG Database](#) and [Metadata Repository](#).

It was emphasized that communicating effectively using data is critical and involves answering three key questions: Who is the target audience? What is the context in which you are communicating? And, what message do you want to communicate?

Examples from [Statistics Norway](#) and the [Economic Commission for Europe](#) were mentioned as useful resources for presenting statistics. Good practices in presenting data include clear titles, sources, clear messages, maps (where relevant), and careful use of correlation versus causality. When presenting data and statistics in tables, one should pay attention to a consistent use of decimal points and the use of numbers. As for descriptions and explanatory text, participants were advised to link the data to national policies, goals and issues that people understand. Technical jargon should not be used, if possible. Distinguishing absolute and relative measures is critical. Explanatory text should include additional information, otherwise text or table only suffices.



During the discussion, disaggregated data was identified by several countries as a critical component of statistics for the VNRs. The requesting authority needs to be empowered to reliably receive data from partners. The use of open data sources can be a useful approach to ensure high-quality data. National statistical offices are often underfunded and require further capacity building support.

Several countries highlighted national approaches and challenges. A participant from the Asia-Pacific region stressed the difficulty of data collection from non-state actors. Data collection for the VNR would be different from data collected for the SDGs, as there are different levels of buy-in. Administrative data was mentioned as useful source of data for the VNRs.

A participant from Africa stressed that best practices are required to go beyond numbers and to enrich the VNRs substantively. It is critical to strengthen the interface between policy and statistics. Data from statistical offices alone will not suffice. Leaving no one behind will require the use of all data that should be synthesized to provide a concise picture. He also underlined the importance of sufficient financing and capacity building as surveys and data collection are costly.

Leaving no one behind was highlighted by several countries as a key priority. A small island developing state has used technology to allow for a mapping exercise to ensure disaster relief for vulnerable groups. Indicators related to vulnerable groups need to be defined to ensure that vulnerable people are covered. At the subnational level, basic data needs to be collected from geographical areas that are remote and where people are at risk of being left behind. Building adequate capacity is critical in this regard.

Prioritization was also mentioned as a matter of concern for statistics in the VNR context. At the global level, no indicators can be prioritized due to the indivisible nature of the SDGs. At the regional and national levels, there are core priority data sets. In Africa, for instance, SDG statistics were aligned with

the Agenda 2063 to put together a core set of indicators. In the Asia Pacific region, priority statistics were also identified to measure SDG progress.

How can the VNRs help in mobilizing resources for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs?

One country explained that it will host a national SDG investment workshop. This plan was included in the previous VNR submitted by the country and it has worked to strengthen domestic resource mobilization and to improve government spending efficiency.

Building on the introductory remarks, UN DESA briefed participants on how the voluntary national reviews can help to mobilize resources. The VNR Handbook contains two specific recommendations for reflecting means of implementation (MoI) which are key to achieving all 17 SDGs in the review: First, countries should highlight two to three areas of MoI where support is needed and that have been prioritized in light of the review. Second, the VNRs should contain a more in-depth section of analysis of MoI.

While previous VNR countries have used different approaches to incorporate information about financing and means of implementation in their reports, there are ways in which all stakeholders can engage in financing together. Several initiatives were mentioned in this regard, including the SDG investment fair – which brought countries together with investors and where investors showed a great deal of interest in the SDGs – and the annual analysis and report of the Inter-Agency Task Force on Financing for Sustainable Development. The next SDG Investment Fair will take place on 15-17 April 2019 in New York and national SDG Investment Workshops are also being held in preparation.

Key takeaways include the importance to think in a holistic manner about VNR preparations and the opportunities the VNR provides to dive deeper and exchange options around specific topics. It is critical to strategize on how the review process can engage more actors to advance effective partnerships for the 2030 Agenda. Participants were encouraged to consider how the 2030 Agenda and its MoI are supported by other international agreements. It was suggested to use the guiding questions in the VNR Handbook to focus key messages to be communicated on financing and MoI in the VNR and to rally action for addressing bottlenecks.

F Participants discussed some of the key ways in which financing can be included in the VNR process and some of the challenges related to financing for the SDGs.

Many countries stated that while they have successfully aligned the SDGs with their national development plans and strategies, i.e. budgets are aligned with the SDGs, they have not identified any separate revenues or funds for the SDGs. Participants highlighted issues related with coordination, especially as it applies to the process of applying for funding. Outside funding, such as ODA, is still needed in many developing countries.

While there is some interest from the private sector in SDG finance, it is difficult to turn this into reality. Countries expressed concern that the private sector is generally interested in making a profit and find it hard to understand how the need to profit can be reconciled with helping countries to achieve the SDGs.

Some African countries also underlined that at times a large percentage of the national budget is used to ensure security in the country and stressed a spillover effect of the security situation that can influence neighbouring countries or countries in the same region and subregion. Peacebuilding was therefore emphasized as an important part in achieving the 2030 Agenda, as a more stable situation will also allow to create a better enabling environment for implementation.

Participants indicated that the VNRs can help countries to partner with other stakeholders in support of the SDGs, and that the UN should play a key role in this process as well. Finally, several countries, and particularly representatives from small island developing states (SIDS), asked if when we talk about financing, we are referring to new money or better allocating existing resources. Representatives from SIDS highlighted that they do not have access to additional domestic resource mobilization due to small populations and the need to respond to natural disasters; this makes it difficult to fund the SDGs.

UN DESA stressed that the VNR can be a starting point. Countries should think about how their VNRs can blossom into something bigger moving forward. For example, many countries that presented their VNRs in 2018 are now presenting at the SDG investment fair in April 2019.

How are non-state actors being engaged in the VNR and what are the emerging successes and challenges?

The input presentation given by UN DESA focused on two questions: who are stakeholders and how do they participate in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda? Put simply, stakeholders are everyone who is not part of the central government, e.g. women groups, children groups, youth groups, UN System, other intergovernmental organizations, and trade unions, amongst others. There are five different levels of stakeholder engagement: first, stakeholders can be informed, second, stakeholders can be consulted, i.e. asked for feedback; third, stakeholders can be involved in the creation of implementation plans for the 2030 Agenda; fourth, stakeholders can collaborate with governments and decide together on such implementation plans; and, fifth, stakeholders can be empowered to make the final decision on implementation plans for the 2030 Agenda.

What has been achieved so far?

Participants discussed in smaller working groups how stakeholders have been engaged in the SDG implementation and the VNR thus far, plans to engage stakeholders in the run up to the HLPF and whether and how stakeholders will be part of the presentation of the review at the HLPF.

In some countries, umbrella organizations provide a platform where NGOs can be engaged. In other countries, stakeholders are engaged in working groups, high-level task forces, through online platforms or workshops. Stakeholders also provide inputs on targets, best practices, and next steps for the VNRs. In most cases, stakeholders are being informed and consulted on the VNR report. In some instances, civil society groups have organized workshops on their own without government engagement.

Challenges encountered by countries in engaging stakeholders include the multiplicity of civil society organizations and umbrella organizations that are often not representative of the variety of

stakeholders. Making data on SDGs available to all stakeholders, as well as adopting an inclusive communication and stakeholder engagement strategy constitute further challenges. The need for capacity building has been identified and the provision of a training programme for civil society engagement for the VNRs by the UN would be appreciated. For the African region, the participation of private sector and human rights associations in the VNR process remains challenging.

A participant from the Asia-Pacific region shared a possible solution to the challenge of creating a mechanism for stakeholder engagement, particularly when there is a wide range of civil society organizations: civil society organizations are invited to group themselves under the four pillars of social, environmental, economic, and government affairs. Workshops with stakeholders are planned, and some countries would appreciate assistance in this process. It was suggested that networks such as the Global Compact could facilitate private sector engagement.

Advocacy and Communication

The importance of communicating the 2030 Agenda and the VNR better was recognized as few countries have a dedicated communications strategy. In this regard, assistance would be highly appreciated, e.g. sharing best practices through the UN System on how to tailor communication to different constituencies. Other ideas included selecting a youth SDG ambassador and using youth organizations focussing on sustainable development to improve the communication on the SDGs and engagement of youth. It was highlighted that an effective communication strategy would turn stakeholders into SDG advocates. This, in turn, would provide the government with leverage, since



these advocates will create support for the 17 goals in the public at large and consequently for the government’s efforts towards their implementation. Furthermore, it was suggested to engage academia in research on the SDGs. Results of such research could be published to receive comments from the public, which could also be included in the VNRs.

What can be expected in July?

Some countries plan to consult stakeholders for the preparation of the final presentation of the VNR at the HLPF. Other countries plan to include a stakeholder representative in the delegation presenting at the HLPF. Such stakeholder representatives are either self-selected or nominated by the government (in some cases with the help of umbrella organizations). Stakeholders can also be engaged through side events.

The importance of building trust between governments and stakeholders was highlighted. Different measures were identified to this end: being transparent in drafting the VNR, reflecting stakeholders’ views in the VNR reports, providing technical and financial support to stakeholders, not limiting the engagement of civil society organizations, emphasizing the principle of leaving no one behind, as well as organizing workshops with participation of both government and civil society representatives.

It was further noted that expectations of stakeholders will rise with time and growing awareness of the SDGs. Stakeholders’ expectations towards the VNRs include that the review should accurately

reflect the reality of national constraints and challenges in implementing the 2030 Agenda. Stakeholders also expect to be meaningfully engaged in the VNR process, so that the VNR is not only a government but a national report.



Participants were informed that the Secretariat will organize a webinar between VNR countries and Major Groups and other stakeholders in the weeks ahead. Some stakeholders might also prepare parallel reports, which might be published by civil society organizations independently from the UN on the [Action for Sustainable Development website](#).

Regional Perspective

Providing a regional perspective on VNR preparations, a representative of the UN Regional Commissions highlighted the role that the latter play in the implementation and follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda. As intergovernmental bodies, the Regional Commissions are mandated to foster regional integration and cooperation. Regional Commissions are also think tanks, supporting data collection and evidence-based policy making and regional standards and norms setting. They are also conveners of platforms for peer-learning and knowledge exchange, which supports North-South, South-South and triangular cooperation. Regional Commissions also provide services to strengthen the capacity of Member States in areas related to sustainable development, statistics, and planning among many other topics.

The Commissions are advocating an integrated approach to sustainable development, in line with the indivisible nature of the 2030 Agenda. Regional Commissions are seeking to align their work with Member States' needs, including by providing enhanced support to national statistical agencies and by generating and disseminating innovative research on transboundary issues. The regional fora convened by Regional Commissions for sustainable development provide spaces for peer learning, and hence are a critical opportunity for countries preparing VNRs. Regional Commissions also bring together the United Nations Development System at the regional level, as well as regional partners and stakeholders.

It was noted that the VNR process is a 'process of self-discovery', providing the opportunity to explore where more efforts are needed and to identify the means of implementation that would be required to this end. VNRs are also instruments for mutual learning. Examples of initiatives by Regional Commissions in the realm of the VNRs include the joint UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and UN DESA [regional workshop](#) for VNR countries from Africa and ECA's strategic plan for follow-up to VNRs supports Member States in integrating sustainable development strategies with the Agenda 2063. The UN Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) convenes the [Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the UNECE Region](#), while the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) hosts the annual [Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development](#) to support countries in their VNR preparation. The [Arab Forum for Sustainable Development](#) organized by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) provides a dedicated space for countries to reflect on the VNR's role in development planning and multi-stakeholder engagement. Similarly, the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) organizes an annual [Forum of the Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on Sustainable Development](#), which will place emphasis on what happens after the VNR, and on the experience of countries that have reported more than once.

How will the VNRs be presented and discussed at the HLPF?



The ECOSOC President stressed her commitment to and her vision for making the July 2019 HLPF “the most successful HLPF to date”. The July 2019 HLPF is the last Forum in the first cycle of review of the 2030 Agenda, and the last before the HLPF at summit level in September this year.

The value of the VNR lies in large part in its preparatory process. While the time for the presentation of the VNR at the HLPF is very limited, the presentation and discussion aim to help countries accelerate progress towards the SDGs. The President informed participants about her initiative of a ‘Group of Friends on VNRs’ to foster engagement and peer learning at the HLPF. While there is no reporting on the discussion of individual VNRs at the HLPF, the main lessons from the combined VNRs will be captured in general terms in the thematic summary of the HLPF which the President is mandated to prepare after the forum. The President concluded by stressing the inspiration that the 2030 Agenda has sparked across the world and encouraged participants to think about the actions that they could take to ensure the investment on preparing a VNR keeps paying back long after the 2019 July HLPF.

Practical arrangements for the VNR presentations

The Secretariat briefed participants on the practical arrangements for the VNR presentations at the July High-level Political Forum. It was stressed that the VNR process is as important as the final report. The VNR is a global communal effort. Important deadlines in the run up to July 2019 include

- the submission of the questionnaire on the format and level of representation by **15 March 2019**
- the submission of main messages of the VNR report to the Secretariat by **17 May 2019**. The main messages are translated into all UN official languages.
- the submission of the report by **14 June 2019**. The report will not be translated but will be posted in the [VNR database](#)

In the months ahead, the regional VNR workshops being held back-to-back with the Regional Sustainable Development Forums organized by the Regional Commissions provide further opportunities for exchange. The Third Global Workshop for countries presenting a voluntary national review will be held in New York on 14 July 2019.

It was reiterated that countries should avoid presenting the rosy picture only and go beyond describing policies. The presentation of the VNR should give a sense of the successes, the lessons learned, the challenges and transformative actions. Countries should demonstrate how the VNR has been embedded in the national implementation of the SDGs and identify opportunities for partnerships moving forward. It was recommended that the VNR is being presented by a high-level government official and could include stakeholder representatives in the delegation. Focal points from the Secretariat will be assigned shortly to assist countries with the practical arrangements for the presentation of the VNR at the HLPF.

Participants were further encouraged to use the HLPF as a networking platform. Besides the official VNR presentation, VNR Labs, side events and special events provide additional opportunities to engage at the HLPF. Applications for side events will open mid-March on the [HLPF website](#). VNR Labs aim at piloting different approaches to the VNRs and allowing for in-depth discussions on specific VNR related topics and peer learning in an informal setting. The schedule will also be available on the [HLPF website](#).

Wrap-up and next steps

Reflecting on the two days of peer learning, the Chair reiterated some of the key takeaways of the workshop. It was noted that countries should choose two to three best practices to send a strong message during their VNR presentation. Challenges should be acknowledged and shared, such as engagement of stakeholders, data collection and addressing the principle of leaving no one behind.

Closing remarks were delivered by representatives of the UN System Staff College, UN DESA and the President of ECOSOC. UNSSC encouraged participants to use the entirety of the agenda for enhanced stakeholder engagement. It was acknowledged that the scope of the 2030 Agenda requires sharpening strategies and provides many possibilities for reflection, exchange and discussion at the global level.

Next steps

UN DESA announced that once the HLPF schedule is published, focal points will be appointed to assist countries with the practical arrangements of the presentation at the HLPF. The regional VNR workshops that will be convened in conjunction with the Regional Sustainable Development Forums will provide an additional opportunity for countries to prepare for the presentation of the reviews at the global level. The Third Global VNR workshop will be convened in New York on 14 July, the day prior to the VNR presentations at the HLPF. As expressed by the majority of respondents to the questionnaire shared by UN DESA ahead of the workshop, the Secretariat will look into the possibility of a monthly VNR newsletter as well as the possibility to hold webinars on specific elements of the VNR process.

Closing

The ECOSOC President characterized the two-day workshop as “intense but very informative”. She encouraged participants to take the lessons learned back to capital. In preparing the VNR, countries should bear in mind that the 2030 Agenda is a plan for action. It is indeed critical to accelerate action towards achieving the SDGs and the VNRs play an important role in this endeavor. Main messages from the workshop include that the VNRs are an important milestone to advance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the national level. The value of the VNR is the process of preparing the review and making use of the recommendations received during the presentation at the HLPF to spur SDG implementation. To this end, most countries have established coordination mechanisms that will continue their work beyond the VNR presentation in July. It is critical that these mechanisms also coordinate with the ministries of finance and that budgets are aligned with the SDGs to ensure that planned activities are implemented.

It was highlighted that stakeholder engagement is critical for the VNR being a national exercise and, more broadly, to build the trust that no one will be left behind on the road to 2030. Strategic communication and awareness raising for the VNR were mentioned as areas where more efforts would be required and that could be promoted further in the run up to the HLPF. In terms of data collection and analysis, best practices are required to go beyond numbers and enrich the VNR substantively. It is also critical to strengthen the interface between statistics and policy.

The ECOSOC President concluded by encouraging participants to join hands to work towards “the best HLPF ever” and, in this process, to not lose sight of why countries have embarked on the journey towards a sustainable future.