Voluntary National Reviews at the 2020 High-level political forum on sustainable development

Secretariat Background Note

Introduction

In July 2020, the High-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF) will have heard 205 presentations from 168 countries since 2016, when countries started presenting their voluntary national reviews (VNRs) as mandated by the General Assembly (resolutions [67/290](#) and [70/1),](#).

In 2020, 47 countries will present. Twenty-five will be presenting for the first time, twenty-one for the second time, and one country will be presenting for the third time. Most of the countries presenting this year are coming from Africa (16), followed by Asia Pacific (11), Europe (11) and Latin America and the Caribbean (9).

All countries of the Eastern European group will have presented a VNR after the 2020 HLPF. Africa still has nine countries that have not presented, followed by the Asia Pacific region with eight, Latin America and the Caribbean with nine, and the Western Europe and Others group with three. It is a major accomplishment of the HLPF that more than two thirds of countries members of the HLPF have presented their VNRs.

Over the years, the VNRs have become a valuable source of information on where countries stand on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They highlight the progress accomplished, but also a range of challenges and areas where more needs to be done or where assistance is needed.

The presentation of the VNRs at the HLPF is an important moment for peer learning, exchanging experiences and lessons learned. For countries and stakeholders participating in VNR sessions, it is important to learn how a policy or strategy has worked, what the impact was and how it could be possibly adapted to their own circumstances. Providing comments, asking questions and hearing replies is thus a vital part of the VNR presentations at the HLPF.

The present note aims to provide a background for such exchanges. It looks at the following areas which have been identified by VNR countries as most important: integration of the SDGs into national policy frameworks, including

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financing and budgets, institutional frameworks, data capacity building needs and impact of COVID19; leaving no one behind; engagement of stakeholders. It also compares the first and second VNRs for countries conducting their second VNR. The note synthesizes findings from the 46 main messages that were submitted by the countries presenting VNRs at the 2020 HLPF.

Integration of the SDGs into national policy frameworks

Countries highlight that the VNR provided an opportunity to review their strategies, policies and institutional mechanisms, and identify implementation gaps.

Most countries referred in their main messages to steps taken to integrate the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs into national policy frameworks and national development plans. Some countries also stated that efforts were underway at the sub-national level to mainstream the SDGs into policies and plans (Benin, Burundi, Estonia, Honduras, India, Kenya, Malawi, Nepal, Peru, Uzbekistan).

Most countries noted that their national development plan or strategy was the main instrument for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. A few countries indicated that the SDGs are also being mainstreamed at the sectoral level, with ministries charged with integrating the SDGs in their sectoral strategies and programmes (Argentina, Austria, Russian Federation). One country stated that the SDGs were being linked with the national plan of action on human rights (Argentina).

Countries also referred to the integration of international commitments under the SAMOA Pathway, the Istanbul Programme of Action for Least Developed Countries (Solomon Islands) as well as Agenda 2063 of the African Union (Comoros, Kenya, Liberia, Zambia) and other relevant international and regional frameworks.

The messages reflect various approaches to the integration of the SDGs into national policies and plans. Some countries noted that the focus on the three dimensions of sustainable development highlighted the consistency between their national plans and the SDGs (Liberia, Nigeria, Solomon Islands). A number of countries stated that their development plans were the product of consultative processes (Seychelles, Uganda). Reference was also made to the use of integrated modelling tools in the development of national plans (Nigeria, Uganda). Some countries provided details about the degree of alignment between plans and policies and the SDGs, noting linkages between plans and SDG indicators (Costa Rica, Georgia). Describing the integration process, one country stated that each SDG has been aligned with the objectives, policies, and goals of the national development plan, thus identifying responsible actors and prioritizing and targeting resources (Ecuador). Another country reported on the development of SDGs Localization Guidelines that spell out baselines, targets and implementation and financing strategies for each SDG. (Nepal)

A number of countries highlighted the importance of integrating the SDGs into planning at the sub-national level. One country stated that following the prioritization of the SDG targets and their integration into the national planning framework, outlined in its previous VNR, activities had continued with the decentralization of the targets, with priority targets identified for each municipality in the country (Benin). Some countries reported that some sub-national governments had developed local voluntary reports on the SDGs (Finland, Kenya, Uganda).

Financing and budgets

Several countries noted that the VNR process has revealed the financing gaps for SDG implementation (Brunei Darussalam, Burundi, Costa Rica, Nepal, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Seychelles, Zambia)

Countries stated that measures were being taken to incorporate the SDGs into operational and budgeting frameworks (Finland, Honduras, Kenya, Papua New Guinea, Samoa). One country explained that, with respect to budgeting, specific SDGs codes are assigned for all national development programmes through the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework (Nepal). Some countries noted that an SDG Financing Strategy outlining the financing needs had been adopted in their country (Bangladesh, Nepal, Uganda). One country noted their effort to align their financing strategy with the Addis Ababa Action Agenda framework (Uganda). In addition, several countries noted that they were exploring innovative financing instruments for sustainable development, such as green procurement (Slovenia); eco-social tax reform (Austria); using sustainability assessments in budgeting cycles (Finland); Public Investment Plans for the SDGs (Honduras); public-private alliances (Ecuador); and the World's First Sovereign Blue Bond for sustainable fisheries and safeguarding oceans. (Seychelles)

 It was also noted by a few countries that the fiscal shocks due to COVID-19 will pose a challenge to SDG implementation and resource mobilization (Barbados, Gambia, Morocco).

Institutional frameworks

Many countries reported on institutional frameworks for the implementation, follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda at the national level. These institutions commonly carry out tasks related to coordination of SDG implementation and monitoring and evaluation (Armenia, Argentina, Austria, Bulgaria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gambia, Kenya, Micronesia, Morocco, Ukraine). Generally following an inter-agency template, some institutional structures are established under the aegis of the head of government or similar figures (Armenia, Morocco, Uganda), while others take the form of inter-ministerial commissions or working groups (Argentina,

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Austria, Kenya, Micronesia). For instance, to coordinate the SDGs and ensure monitoring and evaluation, in one country, the head of government has established a national commission for sustainable development, with participation of various ministerial departments, the high commission for planning, and the national statistics office (Morocco).

Some countries referred to the participation of stakeholders in their institutional arrangements (Armenia, Democratic Republic of Congo). One country noted that a multi-stakeholder inter-agency technical committee established and previously chaired by the government was now co-chaired by the government and civil society and the private sector (Kenya). Another stated that the multi-stakeholder VNR coordinating committee would be maintained and transformed for overall SDG coordination mechanism (Gambia).

Data

Countries noted that data limitations continue to be a constraint on SDG monitoring and evidence-based planning (Gambia, Malawi, Nigeria, Zambia). Countries referred to measures taken to overcome data deficits, including development of national strategies for the development of statistics and strategic plans for the national statistical system (Gambia, Malawi). Some countries are also re-aligning their statistical systems with the requirements of the SDG indicators (Nigeria). Countries reported on the establishment of data portals and platforms to track progress on the SDG and national indicators (Bangladesh, Bulgaria, Estonia, Uzbekistan).

Challenges/Capacity building needs

Countries identified a range of challenges in achieving the SDGs. Those related to quality education, social inequalities, unsustainable consumption and production patterns, climate action, biodiversity, overfishing and vulnerability to natural disasters, among others. Several countries highlighted gender equality as a challenge, noting the persistence of gender-based violence and slow progress in addressing labour market disparities (Malawi, Micronesia, Samoa). At the same time, progress made in school enrolment of girls and the representation of women in decision-making positions was noted (Mozambique, Nepal, Niger, Solomon Islands). One country noted that its public finance management legislation provides for gender and equity responsive budgeting (Uganda).

In the context of policymaking for the implementation of the SDGs, countries identified several factors hampering progress. Ineffective monitoring and evaluation systems for accountability were mentioned, along with limited technical and financial capacities, and lack of coordination (Malawi, PNG, Solomon Islands). It was

recognized that policy coherence and trade-offs pose a significant challenge; trade-offs are often very difficult to reconcile even when identified (Finland).

Some countries highlighted actions to advance digitalization notably for the improvement of government services (Austria, Comoros). Other countries noted the need for greater cooperation in technology transfer to seize the opportunities created by the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution (Bangladesh). One country underlined the importance of South-South Cooperation for realizing the 2030 Agenda (India).

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

Out of 46 VNR countries whose main messages have been submitted, 39 countries mention the impact of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. It appears that small, vulnerable, highly-indebted, and tourism-dependent states are among the hardest hit.

Countries, however described the impact in different ways. Many expressed their concern that the pandemic will adversely impact progress in implementation of SDGs and disrupt development efforts. Some emphasized the overall impact of the pandemic and how already existing structural obstacles will be further negatively aggravated (Armenia, Bangladesh, Estonia, Liberia). Some countries described health measures undertaken to combat the pandemic such as strengthening public health systems, establishing quarantine centers, building modular hospitals or new virology laboratories (India, Qatar).

Many underlined the socio-economic impact of the pandemic and measures undertaken in this regard, such as assistance or stimulus packages, direct cash transfer to the most vulnerable, providing additional support to retirees, increasing unemployment benefits, reducing taxes for some economic sectors especially impacted by the pandemic, deferring payment of loans, and giving loans to SMEs (Armenia, Argentina, India). Some described impacts on specific sectors such as tourism, agriculture, transportation (Gambia, Samoa).

Others described the establishment of new mechanisms, such as national committees, to combat the pandemic (Kenya). Many also stressed the need for a coordinated approach and cooperation by all stakeholders in the society. A few countries raised the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic for their VNR related stakeholder engagement. In Armenia, for example, planned meetings and workshops were replaced with online tools. The important role of technology for stakeholder engagement was also highlighted. (Bulgaria, Malawi, St. Vincent and the Grenadines). Some emphasized that the pandemic also provided an opportunity to rethink how governments and other stakeholders have been approaching such shocks and instigated reforms to strengthen economic, social and environmental resilience.

Leaving no one behind

Countries continue to pay close attention to the principle of "Leaving no one behind". Out of 46 countries for which VNR messages were available, 15 devoted an entire section or paragraph to the principle, while an additional 14 mentioned it explicitly in their messages. This may reflect the success of the 2030 Agenda in bringing the principle to leave no one behind to the forefront of the policy discourse, not only at the international, but also at national levels.

The key messages from the VNRs show that social protection policies are seen as the main instrument to implement the principle, with nine countries referring to such policies. Only one country refers to fiscal policy instruments such as gender and equity responsive budgeting as tool for leaving no one behind (Uganda). Seychelles links the principle to leave no one behind to all three dimensions of sustainable development, social, economic and environmental.

Six countries (Argentina, Bangladesh, Benin, Liberia, Malawi, Panama) highlight the role of data in implementing the principle to leave no one behind, by disaggregating indicators, utilizing aggregate indices as well as incorporating the principle into localized indicators.

In terms of groups at risks of being left behind, women, children and youth, disabled and the elderly find most attention in the VNR messages, with five to six references each. Refugees, migrants, indigenous groups, minorities, rural populations, precarious workers, people living in insecure areas are also mentioned as vulnerable groups.

Engagement of stakeholders

Numerous countries highlighted in their main messages the ways in which different national stakeholders have engaged in the VNR process, in coordination and review mechanisms and in SDG implementation at large, with several countries stressing the need for a whole-of-society approach in implementing the 2030 Agenda.

Regarding the VNR development process, several countries highlighted the participatory process used to carry out their reviews (Bangladesh, Brunei Darussalam Estonia, Finland, Kyrgyzstan, Libya, North Macedonia, Samoa, Slovenia, Solomon Islands, Uzbekistan, and Zambia), with only a few not elaborating on this dimension in their main messages. Some countries explained the different ways in which national stakeholders are included in the institutional arrangements for SDG implementation, such as dedicated coordination and monitoring mechanisms (Armenia, Comoros, Gambia, Honduras and Kenya). In some cases, multi-stakeholder

mechanisms provide support to the national coordination mechanisms for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, while others complement coordination mechanisms with thematic stakeholder groups (Liberia, Malawi, Russian Federation).

Regarding stakeholder engagement outside the VNR processes and coordination mechanisms, countries reported on collaboration throughout the implementation cycle. The continued need to raise awareness of the SDGs among all stakeholders was also raised (Bulgaria, Gambia, Seychelles). Some stressed the need to promote the engagement of young people in particular in SDG implementation (Austria, Seychelles, St. Vincent and the Grenadines) and two countries have established dedicated SDG youth groups (Finland and Kenya).

Several countries reported on dedicated efforts to engage and coordinate with the subnational level and local authorities in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. They noted the value added of sub-national reviews of the implementation of the Agenda, or the so-called voluntary local reviews (Bangladesh, Benin, Democratic Republic of the Congo, India, Libya, Malawi, Micronesia, Nepal, Zambia).

Differences between first and second and subsequent VNRs

In 2020, less than 20 per cent of countries conducting their second VNR directly mention their first review in their main messages. In most cases, the reference to the first VNR highlights the initiatives taken since the review (Bangladesh, Samoa). Those include efforts to engage stakeholders, elaborate financing strategies and planning processes as well as localize the SDGs and monitor their implementation. Some countries underscore the change of focus between their first and second VNR, with the first one concentrating more on building an enabling policy environment for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, while the second VNR aims at tracking the progress of selected SDGs identified as national development priorities; or more generally the progress achieved between the two reviews (Finland, Nigeria). These countries also report similar challenges from the first to the second review such as gender inequality or climate vulnerability. They report similar approaches to leaving no one behind, strengthening transparent stakeholder engagement and building strong leadership and effective policy-making institutions (Finland, Samoa).

Other countries highlight that recent changes have had a major impact on the drafting process between the first and the second VNR, be it changes at national level (change of government priorities, new socioeconomic vulnerabilities, increase of national debt, etc.) or at global level, notably with the spread of the COVID-19 disease (Argentina).

Half of the countries conducting their second VNR mention their first review only indirectly or very briefly, either to highlight a shift of paradigm in the second VNR (India) or to cite major achievements since the year

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of their review's presentation: from economic growth to the increase of enrolments in the schooling systems and the establishment of national frameworks for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda or adapting local indicators to fit the SDG requirements (Armenia, Benin, Estonia, Georgia, Nepal, Peru, Slovenia). Finally, a third of second generation VNR countries do not refer to the first VNR in their key messages. References may however be made in the forthcoming full reports of the VNRs.

Guiding questions for reflection

- For the first timers, what have been some of the challenges in organizing VNR preparations and implementing whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches to the review?

- For second and third timers, what have been the areas of greatest progress, as well as challenges and obstacles, since the previous VNR? What was different in the conduct of the second VNR?

- Did innovations in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda come to light during the preparation of the VNRs?

- Have any transformational changes been implemented due to the VNR process?

- How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the country and on the conduct of its VNR?

- What are challenges related to implementing national development plans once they have been aligned with the 2030 Agenda?

- What are some of the policies that can be used to reach those that are not always included in the vulnerable groups such as internally displaced persons, migrants and refugees?

- What are the areas where more assistance is needed and how can the HLPF help?

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