

Report of the Expert Group Meeting on Voluntary National Reviews for the HLPF 15-16 December 2016, United Nations Headquarters, New York

Opening session

The meeting was opened by H.E. Ms. Marie Chatardova, Permanent Representative of the Czech Republic to the United Nations and Vice President of ECOSOC. She stated that the large number of countries to undertake voluntary national reviews (VNRs) in 2017 was a testament to the strong commitment to the 2030 Agenda at the national level. In his opening remarks, Mr. Juwang Zhu, Director of the Division for Sustainable Development, UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), noted the significance of having both 2016 and 2017 participants share experiences and discuss challenges faced in the review process. Mr. Alexander Trepelkov, Director, Financing for Development Office, UNDESA, made brief remarks concerning the ECOSOC forum on financing for development, to take place in May 2017.

Preparatory process – main elements

DSD/DESA provided brief introductory presentations. The first covered the overview of the process that will lead up to the 2017 VNRs, including additional preparatory meetings and regional meetings, organized with the respective regional commissions. It was stated that the tentative deadline for the submission of main messages from the VNRs would be 19 May, and the submission of reports 16 June 2017. The second presentation introduced highlights from the draft synthesis of the 2016 VNR reports, which had been shared with participants ahead of the meeting. The report, still in draft form, examines a range of topics addressed in the VNRs, including awareness raising, the involvement of stakeholders, institutional mechanisms to implement the 2030 Agenda, incorporation of the SDGs into national frameworks, means of implementation and capacity building needs.

Panellists from two countries that conducted VNRs in 2016 (Mexico and Finland) shared their experiences and engaged in an interactive exchange with other participants. It was stated that some of the challenges identified included meeting deadlines, ensuring the involvement of multiple stakeholders, integrating information and harmonizing positions on the sustainable development strategy.

The next steps and measures the Mexican government will take to further the process for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda were also outlined, including the establishment of the National Council for the 2030 Development Agenda; the conclusion of the budget alignment exercise; the formulation of an inclusive national strategy to achieve the SDGs at the state and municipal level; and a national communication campaign.

The Finnish panellist highlighted key lessons from Finland's VNR process, including the importance of high-level political support to mobilize and coordinate public institutions and policies. It was observed that participation in the 2016 VNR process had helped spur action at the national level, that the VNR process itself was highly important, and that the HLPF contributed to generating momentum for implementation.

In the ensuing discussion, countries shared their experiences with the engagement of multiple stakeholders, including in conducting dialogues with civil society and how to coordinate different positions; engagement of parliaments in implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the VNR; reaching out to different sectors of the population; the gap analyses; and timeframes for the preparation of the report. It was noted that the Finnish government used the process of drawing up the VNR as a planning and consultation exercise that is being used in the development of Finland's national implementation plan. General reference was also made to the time-consuming nature of face-to-face coordination with stakeholders, with the suggestion that there could be greater scope for online consultation.

It was stressed that there should be a balance between the drafting of the report and the broad coordinating and consulting process; that gap analyses can be helpful to identify areas for action and require consideration on how best to conduct them and use the results of the analyses; that there was recognition of the important role of parliaments and that countries should work on their engagement; that ensuring multi-stakeholder engagement is crucial for delivering on the SDGs and requires strengthening ownership of the SDGs among a broader audience; and that innovative approaches, including the use of online tools, can be effective.

Preparatory process – Institutions

A representative from DSD/DESA provided a brief introductory presentation, noting the importance of institutions to ensure coherence in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Panellists from two countries that conducted VNRs in 2016 (Philippines and Germany), shared their experiences and engaged in an interactive exchange with other participants.

As regards the Philippines, it was noted that the VNR process benefitted from the MDG experiences, particularly regarding coordination, and that the same authority that had led the implementation and monitoring of the MDGs, was also in charge of the VNR process.

The role of the relevant institutions in Germany was outlined, including the key role of the network of State Secretaries. In both countries, a number of non-governmental actors participated in the process, and there was engagement with national legislatures.

Participants discussed the importance of engaging multiple institutions as a way to assess the interlinkages among the SDGs. Ministries' mandates are often not conducive to overcoming the thematic silos and addressing interlinkages. Multi-sectoral committees and multi-stakeholder commissions such as the Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development, among other mechanisms, were reported as having contributed to overcoming silos and ensuring integration and coordination. Ministerial focal points have worked well to ensure coordination. They should be in a position to enable dissemination of information throughout their respective ministries and administrative branches.

Referring to the experience of some countries in undertaking a gap analysis as a basis for their strategies to implement the 2030 Agenda, participants shared experiences and discussed the pros and cons of conducting this analysis internally (through the government or its specialized agencies such as the national statistics offices) as opposed to outsourcing it. Panellists stressed the importance of outreach and awareness-raising, to ensure the concerns of different sectors are heard and that policy can be improved to meet the population's needs. In this regard, participants reported on the involvement of multiple stakeholders, including local communities and civil society organizations, in data collection and gap analyses. Participants also pointed to institutional gaps and to solutions—such as regional cooperation—to overcome them.

Preparatory process – stakeholders

A representative from DSD/DESA provided a brief introductory presentation, giving an overview of the history of stakeholder involvement in intergovernmental processes on sustainable development. Panellists from two countries that conducted VNRs in 2016 (Sierra Leone, Switzerland), shared their experiences and engaged in an interactive exchange with the other participants.

There was a discussion around how parliamentary work is organized, the need to integrate the SDGs across various sectoral committees, how national development plans are incorporating the SDGs, how to establish open-ended platforms to involve diverse sectors of society in national reporting, and how

to align government budgets with the SDGs and ensure that regular assessments are tracking progress and performance.

Global indicators provide a guide to choosing the indicators at the national level that are feasible in each country. Engaging with the most effective stakeholders, it was stated, requires opening up new spaces for interaction, including through bottom-up approaches and volunteerism. Youth organizations are playing an active role in many countries. The private sector can be further engaged, and governments need to make efforts to widen the range of organizations they engage with.

Participants also addressed the role of the media and issues of accountability, transparency and cooperation. Participants noted the diversity in viewpoints within the group of civil society organizations.

Format and content of the report

A representative from DSD/DESA provided a brief introductory presentation, recalling that the VNR report is part of a process and referred to the voluntary common reporting guidelines. Panellists from two countries that conducted VNRs in 2016 (Egypt, France), shared their experiences and engaged in an interactive exchange with other participants.

The process of preparing the report was outlined, with emphasis on the challenges of time pressure, the need to undertake a gap analysis, the collection of necessary disaggregated data, and communicating the VNR process to government and parliament. France had established a mechanism to ensure civil society participation, and agreed on a report structure consisting of an executive summary, an in-depth report on all the SDGs, and a statistics chapter. The executive summary was regarded as the most challenging, due to the need to identify priorities. One recommendation related to the importance of securing political leadership and determining who should lead and draft the report early in the process.

The panellist from Egypt highlighted how Egypt's new constitution and sustainable development strategy 'Vision 2030' served as the overall framework. In order to prepare for the VNR, Egypt adopted a number of institutional measures and organized meetings and workshops on the VNR. It established an inter-ministerial committee chaired by the Prime Minister and created a Sustainable Development Unit in its national statistical agency in order to strengthen data collection efforts. The importance of the full participation of all stakeholders was stressed.

During the discussion, countries reported on difficulties in meeting the deadline for submission of executive summaries, as reports had not been finalized. The representative of the Division for Sustainable Development noted that the 2017 participants will have more time for preparation, and that the executive summary, which is to be submitted ahead of the report to enable its translation in time for the HLPF, may contain the key messages already identified.

In response to questions, panellists provided further information on the process and institutions in charge of drafting the report. Countries inquired about the elements taken into account in deciding on the format, and referred to the importance of national statistical capacity and challenges and solutions in that respect. Participants discussed how to address thematic reviews, the SDGs, means of implementation and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda.

Presentation at the HLPF

A representative of DSD/DESA provided a brief introductory presentation, recalled that the VNR report is part of a process and referred to the voluntary common reporting guidelines. Panellists from two countries that conducted VNRs in 2016 (Norway, Venezuela) shared their experiences and engaged in an interactive exchange with the other participants. It was noted that participating countries had a choice between two basic formats: moderated panels of a group of Member States with a lead discussant, or consecutive individual presentations followed by questions.

As regards Norway's experience with preparation for the 2016 presentation, it was explained that it benefited from the decision at an early stage that their Prime Minister would lead the presentation. It was also suggested that the 2017 reporting countries consider emphasizing the global relevance of the 2030 Agenda, address strategic issues and avoid details that would make the reviews too process-oriented. It was noted that Norway found it very useful to engage the civil society, the private sector, and labour unions in its VNR process. Civil society organizations helped the government reach out to the public through their networks. The need for Member States to enhance dialogues at the VNR presentations was emphasized.

On the part of Venezuela, it was highlighted that the experience of conducting VNRs in 2016 was a great opportunity for the country to push the development agenda forward. The process had benefited from the early involvement of the President, including his convening power to bring various actors on board. Regarding voluntary national presentation, it was stated that the speaking slot allocated to the moderators may have taken time away from dialogue.

In the discussion that followed, it was stressed that in order to attract ministerial participation at the HLPF it is important to ensure sufficient time for meaningful engagement and to have clarity on time availability in advance. It was highlighted that countries need to see VNRs as a safe space for peer-learning. Some countries mentioned side events as a potential space to broaden the scope of short VNR presentations, while others cautioned against the risk of distracting attention from mandated activities. Countries shared their experiences with stakeholder involvement, which included giving civil society organizations a minute of their allotted time.

On the second day of the meeting, participants were divided into two groups for discussion on two topics: "Creating ownership, awareness-raising and stakeholder participation" (morning session) and "Determining national priorities and areas of progress" (afternoon session). During the second part of each session, the groups reconvened and rapporteurs presented the main issues discussed, followed by further debate by the full group. The following refers to the sessions that assembled the full group.

Topic A (morning session): "Creating ownership, awareness-raising and stakeholder participation"

The follow were among the main issues raised in relation to this topic:

- In order to work across institutional boundaries, political will and leadership from the highest level is necessary. Inter-ministerial coordination networks, including sustainable development focal points in each ministry who have the mandate to speak on behalf of their ministry, can be a helpful way to bridge institutional boundaries.
- Developing a legal basis for sustainable development, aligning the SDGs with the budget, encouraging parliamentarian involvement, and capacity building efforts for government officials to mainstream sustainable development into their day-to-day work are also important. Parliaments can be instrumental in reaching out to their constituencies. Given the political reality of election cycles, and to overcome political realities, it is critical to ensure that the SDGs and their targets are translated and embedded into national and local realities.
- Participants noted that it is important to translate the global agenda into language that is meaningful for line ministries and other institutions pursuing their mandates. The SDGs should not be seen as a disruption but as a useful tool.
- On the question of a "whole-of-society approach to the SDGs", participants emphasized the institutional aspects of multi-stakeholder engagement and the need to raise awareness. Institutions such as national councils or commissions on sustainable development can help to engage different sectors and different groups of stakeholders, including through existing working groups, networks or associations.
- Industry associations and civil society groups can be engaged in promotion and communication of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs to society as a whole, not only through government-led

campaigns, but also through citizen platforms or awards to businesses, which could be amplified by strong social media outreach.

- Education—including integrating SDGs into school curriculums—and use of social media are also important in awareness-raising and involving youth.
- Data should be as inclusive and transparent as possible—involving everyone, bridging gaps, and using new forms of media such as electronic campaigns as a tool to overcome distance challenges. Networks, alliances, working groups, and commissions of all types that are being set up to accommodate stakeholders were widely discussed.
- Partnerships can be challenging and often include differences of opinion, and it is important for stakeholders to define how to work together. Patience, political will and communication were identified as necessary elements of a successful strategy.
- For many countries, local government engagement remains a challenge. Efforts are in place to promote SDG implementation at the local level and in some countries national associations of local governments have been good entry points. One country reported an experience in championing select municipalities in order to generate enthusiasm in others. Capacity is limited at the local level in many countries, including in producing and analyzing data.

Topic B (afternoon session): “Determining national priorities and areas of progress as well as next steps”

The following were among the main issues raised in relation to this topic:

- Several countries referred to the challenges of addressing the agenda in an integrated manner while at the same time, given their constraints, identifying priority action areas. Countries have employed different analytical tools, including gap analyses, to define priorities and goals and reflect them into national plans. The involvement of academia and other experts, as well as civil society, in establishing priorities was considered important by several participants.
- A stronger focus on data collection and monitoring was necessary and should include support to address capacity and resource constraints of countries. Data gaps were prevalent, in particular in areas of disaggregated data which was crucial to expose challenges, such as related to persons with disabilities.
- Regarding areas of early progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, participants mentioned progress on institutional arrangements, coordination frameworks, integrating the Agenda into national development plans, identifying resources, data collection and indicators, awareness raising.
- International cooperation will be crucial for implementation of the SDGs. Countries are re-framing cooperation structures, including South-South and triangular cooperation, regional and other country networks in order to orient cooperation to the achievement of the SDGs. Reference was made to the need for assistance and cooperation in preparing national development strategies and plans, including in middle income countries.
- Regional cooperation was noted as prominent in the areas related to the ocean, climate change, peace and security, and land degradation. Much work remained, e.g. in relation to the African Union Agenda 2063.
- Implementation of the Paris Agreement on climate change and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda in relation to the 2030 Agenda was also mentioned as an additional area requiring support.
- Suggestions were made for the preparation of the 2017 VNRs, including the need to invest in data gathering and analysis.
- Suggestions were made for future meetings, which could bring together countries that have specific challenges and solutions for those challenges. Experiences with bilateral peer learning were shared, which could be further explored.

Closing session

Mr. Juwang Zhu, Director of the Division for Sustainable Development, in his closing remarks, emphasized the value of exchange of experiences among countries and congratulated participants on their engagement. He stated that UNDESA looks forward to supporting volunteering countries in the run-up to the HLPF. Representatives of four UN regional commissions (ESCAP, ECE, ECLAC, ESCWA) made brief statements, regarding regional forums on sustainable development that will take place in 2017, in preparation for the HLPF: 29-31 March in Bangkok (ESCAP), 25 April in Geneva (UNECE), 26-28 April in Mexico City (ECLAC), and in the ESCWA region (date to be determined).

Feedback from a questionnaire

DSD/DESA asked participants to fill in a questionnaire about their experience of the EGM and expectations for future EGMs. Participants were overall satisfied with the organization, timing, format and interactive style of the meeting. They stated that the most useful sessions were the preparatory process (main elements and stakeholders) and discussions in the working groups. Many called for more focus on the needs of volunteering countries and avoiding generalities, as well as adding a regional and sub-regional dimension to the agenda. For the future meetings there were a number of suggestions, including as follows:

- more working group sessions with simulation exercises, e.g. on how to implement specific SDGs in a hypothetical country with emphasis on concepts and more focused topics (e.g. data-collection, statistical systems and indicators including a discussion on technical assistance on data development; cross-cutting issues; best practices in monitoring and tracking of progress (methodology and indicators); format and elements of the report; financing and resource mobilization at the national and global level; communication; developing an action plan; presentations at the HLPF; strategies for implementation of SDGs; capacity building);
- a session with the stakeholders that will participate in the report and presentations at the HLPF;
- a three-day meeting that would allow for more in depth sharing of experiences;
- more time to be allocated for panellists as well as setting 3-5 min timeslots for all participants during the working groups, thus allowing sufficient time for exchanging experiences;
- pairing countries regionally or by category (SIDS, MICs, LDCs, LLDCs);
- a stronger focus on the specific needs of countries preparing for the VNRs;
- encouraging participants to share written material regarding SDG achievements ahead of the meeting; and
- opportunities to socialize informally (reception).