



VNR LABS

HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM

2019 series of VNR Labs

New York, 9-18 July 2019

Informal summary

The series of 17 VNR Labs was convened in the margins of the 2019 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) to provide an informal platform for experience sharing and reflection on key aspects of the Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) and 2030 Agenda implementation. Representatives from Member States, the UN system and Major Groups and other stakeholders discussed cross-cutting themes, including policy coherence, the principle of leaving no one behind, data and statistics, resource mobilization and partnerships, amongst others. In addition, VNR Labs 13 and 17 provided two countries, United Kingdom and Mauritius, presenting their VNRs in 2019 with the opportunity to expand on the review experience and share lessons learned on the national process with peers. The informal reflection sessions held under the Chatham House rule¹ were organized by UN DESA divisions and partners throughout the HLPF from 9 to 18 July 2019.

For the concept notes and further information on individual Labs, please see: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/2019#labs>

¹ The Chatham House rule reads as follows: “When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.”

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VNR Lab 1: “Achieving policy integration”

The inaugural session of the 2019 VNR Labs discussed and analyzed the role of policy coherence for accelerating progress on the SDGs. The lab facilitated sharing of country experiences with policy integration from LDCs, LLDCs, and SIDs. At the opening session, speakers stressed that the SDGs demand an integrated approach at all levels, given the inter-linkages and inter-dependence among domestic, regional and global policies. LDCs, LLDCs, and SIDs remain the most vulnerable to global challenges, such as climate change, that require an integrated and holistic policy approach. While there is no one size fits all model, it is crucial to rethink and redesign policies to optimize synergies among various policy objectives, processes and outcomes.

Policy interlinkages and achievements

A number of participants shared country-wide efforts for policy integration, highlighting how the SDGs have been mainstreamed into national and local development plans. A participant from Timor-Leste for example, noted the establishment of independent SDG inter-ministerial taskforces, to strengthen monitoring and reporting progress on SDGs. Lesotho underscored its efforts to embed medium and long-term development priorities in national development plans, while others underlined that they have linked specific sectoral goals with long-term development priorities. A Canadian participant informed that it requires projects to incorporate and execute gender-based budgets. Several countries noted that they involved civil society, the media, the private sector, and faith-based organizations in SDG working groups during the VNR process and have worked to devolve development planning to local levels. Representatives from Pacific island nations noted that they have worked to incorporate regional issues and priorities into national and local development policy objectives.

Remaining challenges

LDCs, LLDCs, and SIDs participants noted challenges related to policy integration and coherence, especially with regards to lack of financing to bridge persistent urban-rural divides and to ensure that no one was left behind in the development processes. Several countries, including Timor-Leste and Zambia, stressed that garnering investment from non-government actors such as the private sector and development partners for infrastructure projects remains difficult. Several participants, especially SIDS, also highlighted limited capacities to gather disaggregated data from geographically disperse regions and resource constraints in strengthening statistical capacities remain a challenge. However, countries across the development spectrum, including Tonga and Canada, stated that they have used small area estimation as a tool to collect disaggregated data, such as on disability status, for those in geographically isolated regions. Siloed approaches at all levels and within the UN system were also noted as continuing hurdles to policy integration.

The participants stressed that SDGs should be more localized and made relevant at the grassroots level to overcome data constraints and ensure ownership of development processes. The need for more effective engagements and outreach with civil society, municipalities, and media outlets was highlighted. It was also stressed that opportunities for regional peer-to-peer learning, such as in Asia-Pacific, or among Latin American countries, should be further pursued. The Lab concluded, stressing that broad-based participation, effective communication of incentives for various stakeholders,

transparency and accountability mechanisms and more importantly, a change of mindsets at all levels, were imperatives for strengthening policy integration and accelerating SDG progress.

VNR Lab 2: “Making progress visible - SDG data visualization platform”

VNR reporting has become a key element in reviewing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the national level. At the end of the July 2019 HLPF, no fewer than 142 countries have conducted voluntary national reviews, some more than once, for a total of 158 VNR reports. Over thirty additional countries have already announced their intention to submit a VNR report to the July 2020 HLPF. The Lab discussed a number of online platforms that are aiming to encapsulate both in visual and interactive ways.

Discussed first was sdgreports.org, an online tool developed by UNDP and DESA. The platform is based on natural language processing and machine learning to allow for a more refined search of VNR reports as well as available SDG country reports. Also discussed was a new online platform on the basis of SDG data reporting, such as the [SDG Indicators Global Database](https://data.un.org/Data.aspx?ds=SDG), featuring downloadable data series on each of the SDGs at the target and indicator level

The Lab brought together HLPF participants engaged in the VNR reporting process and in developing their own national statistical capacity to track SDG progress, as well as practitioners from DESA, UNDP and other UN agencies involved in data collection and knowledge building. After an introduction of the various online platforms by DESA and UNDP staff, a brief informal discussion was held building on participants’ own experiences.

VNR Lab 3: “Leaving no one behind: Inclusive implementation and reporting”

This lab was organized by DESA/DISD, DESA/EAPD and DESA/DPIDG, in collaboration with OHCHR, UN Women and the Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies. Representative of Member States (2019 VNR countries: Ghana, Iceland and Turkey) and experts from academia, United Nations entities, and civil society shared their experience, including existing gaps, good practices and new initiatives on inclusive processes to ensure that no one is left behind. The discussion reflected on: 1) what institutional mechanisms and processes exist to involve those who are left behind in the implementation and monitoring of SDGs, and/or VNR preparatory and reporting processes; and 2) the role of national governments, civil society and international organizations to ensure that no one is left behind.



In the absence of Prof. Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, Ms. Makiko Tagashira (DESA/DISD) moderated the Lab, and Mr. Matthias Bruckner presented key findings of the analysis of the 2018 VNR reports conducted by the Committee for Development Policy (CDP), outlining key findings on how countries addressed three key issues: leaving no one behind; pursuing global partnership as means of implementation (SDG17); and quality education (SDG4). While the VNRs contain many interesting examples for mutual learning and sharing of good practices, the need for more systematic attention to these issues and

more explicit and frank discussions on strategies for their implementation, in particular on macroeconomic and other systemic issues, was highlighted.

Key messages centered around the following major issues:

Policies and strategies should not only ensure that no one is left behind, but also not to push people further behind. Those who are left behind varies from country to country, and include children, girls and women, older persons, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, migrants, refugees, people living in rural and remote areas, people living in homelessness, those who are unemployed, with low levels of education, confined in prisons, and without access to justice. Three participating countries have established inclusive processes in the VNR process, while the inclusion of those left behind, in general, remain challenging and requires renewed commitment. Rigorous investment in data, including disaggregated data, is indispensable to capture the characteristics of those left behind.

The VNR process should be more effectively used as inclusive mechanisms at the national and local levels. Partnerships with disadvantaged groups need to be created based on rights and mutual respect. Without incorporating the specific culture and circumstances of indigenous peoples, targeted interventions can be counterproductive. Structural issues (e.g. inequalities, violation of human rights, land and resource grabbing) should be more explicitly addressed to enhance the engagement of disadvantaged group, as people, especially women, are often left behind intentionally/systematically. Enhancing physical accessibility and the availability of information is essential to enable older persons' participation in SDG monitoring and VNR preparation processes. LNOB principles need to be mainstreamed into all policies and sectors, as policy targeting certain issue or group do not necessarily address other areas/groups.

A rights-based approach and access to justice are fundamental to reach those being left the furthest behind, including people without identity documents. Further efforts should be made to reduce violence; promote people-centred justice system; strengthen capacity to create inclusive institutions; and reduce inequality.

Localizing the implementation of SDGs is key. While many SDG indicators have significant relevance at the local level, local governments are not necessarily fully aware of SDGs in many countries. Translating SDGs in local languages and creating a multi-stakeholder partnership, by mobilizing all stakeholders, in particular, parliamentary members, local governments, media, farmers, fishermen, the private sector, is critical to accelerate the implementation of SDGs.

The engagement of a wider segment of the population will not only accelerate the implementation of SDGs, but also help ensure the accountability/transparency and identify good policies and practices, existing gaps and innovative approaches at all levels across regions. Civil society and international organizations have an important role in raising awareness of the SDGs and LNOB. Further investment in SDG knowledge/information sharing is necessary, including through using and improving existing tools that are found effective.

LNOB principles should also be mainstreamed into all policies and activities of the international organizations working/monitoring the SDGs. "LNOB: A UNSDG Operational Guide for UN Country Team", step-by-step guide to integrate the LNOB concept into the UN system to assist Member States, will be completed by the end of 2019, after field-testing.

Finally, there is a call to register a voluntary SDG Acceleration Action for the SDG Summit.

VNR Lab 4: “From presentation to implementation: Regional support to the follow-up on the VNR process”

The Regional VNR Lab took stock of the first cycle of reviews and discussed how to turn the focus of the VNR process from presentation of plans to accelerating implementation towards achievement of the SDGs. Chaired by the Director of the Regional Commissions New York Office (RCNYO), Mr. Amr Nour, the Lab had speakers representing the five regions and diverse stakeholders including Ms. Luz Keila Virginia Gramajo Vilchez, Secretaría de Planificación y Programación de la Presidencia -Segeplán-Guatemala, Ms. Sara Hamouda, African Peer Review Mechanism; ; H.E. Yacov HADAS-HANDELSMAN, Special Envoy for Sustainability and Climate Change, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Israel; Mr. Roy Trivedy, UN Resident Coordinator Timor Leste; and Ms. Karima El-Korri, Chief, 2030 Agenda Unit, ESCWA.

During the discussion, all participants recognized the contribution and support received in the context of the Regional Forums for Sustainable Development (RFSDs), now consolidated as the regional “one-stop shop” for peer learning and exchange of knowledge and best practices on the 2030 Agenda. In this context, participants underlined the role of regional cooperation and the RFSDs as platforms where peer pressure between countries acts as motivator for action. Furthermore, participants emphasized how the regional level and the RFSDs in particular provided spaces to address sustainable development challenges in an integrated manner and with a focus on solutions tailored to the needs of regions and the sub-regional and country levels. These aspects, along with addressing challenges such as data gaps and ensuring inclusiveness in the reviews, were identified as areas for continued action at the regional level in next cycles of review.

VNR Lab 5: “How can science, technology and innovation advance national implementation?”

This VNR lab discussed the experiences and lessons learned from feeding scientific input into policy processes. It featured inputs from the Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) 2019, presented by one of the members of the Independent Group of Scientists (IGS) working on the report, and the Science, Technology and Innovations (STI) roadmaps guidebook, presented by the World Bank as one of the co-leads in the process of preparing the draft guidebook.

The Lab concluded that a strong call to action is required in the six entry points determined by the GSDR² as well as taking advantage of Science for Sustainability. Speakers noted that science (natural, social, human and other science) and technology should be enhanced so that we can use already-existing knowledge, indigenous knowledge, and also continue to enhance human capabilities, Research and Development, etc., in both developed and developing countries in order to better achieve sustainable development. At the same time, it was noted that building capacity for STI is a long-term process. Awareness raising and political escalation on utility of STI is required as opposed

² These entry points are the following: 1) Strengthening human well-being and capabilities; 2) Sustainable and just economies; 3) Food and nutrition; 4) Energy decarbonization and access; 5) Urban and peri-urban development; and 6) Securing the global (environmental) commons (biodiversity, land, atmosphere, and oceans)

to only dealing with typical problems of Science and Technology Ministries facing budgetary and all other limits. Finally, participants noted there is a need to foster agile policy learning, evidence-based and practice-/foresight-informed, given the rapid pace of technological changes and raising concerns on negative impacts (e.g. jobs, inequity, societal trust, market power concentration).

VNR Lab 6: “Follow-up to the VNRs: Accelerating Implementation”

In the VNR Lab on Follow-up to the VNRs: Accelerating Implementation, organized by Partners for Review and the Division for Sustainable Development Goals in DESA, countries discussed how they could best identify and translate the gaps, challenges and recommendations identified in the context of the VNRs into actionable and effective solutions for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

The speakers presented briefly on various types of follow-up actions taken in their countries. Germany described the cyclical process that they had used in both the preparation and follow-up of their VNRs. This included revision of Germany’s national sustainable development strategy (NSDS) in line with the SDGs, followed by three annual international reviews, to inform Germany’s second VNR in 2021. Other countries such as Finland also adopted external review for SDG implementation, and models for such reviews also exist at the European Union level.



During the discussion, countries pointed out that the VNR draws from the issues in NSDS but were not limited to them. Denmark pointed out that while there is no national tradition of the development of NSDS, other mechanisms such as the European Semester, a multi-annual exchange between the European Commission and Member States to achieve Europe’s 2020 Strategy, is a useful tool.

Discussion focused on structures that exist to implement the 2030 Agenda; peer learning and the adoption of good practices in countries. Participants agreed that while this was important, no one model exists and that countries should adopt policies which are specifically tailored and worked well in national circumstances. The VNR process helped to move things forward at the national level – and countries should build on that momentum.

A representative from the State of Oaxaca gave an outline of the ways in which they have taken ownership of the SDGs after Mexico’s first VNR in 2016, including through the Oaxaca State Council for implementation of the 2030 Agenda and a Voluntary State Review (VSR). In that context, municipalities were encouraged to adapt their own individual development plans and strategies for participation. A number of challenges were listed, including knowledge of the SDGs, meaningful indicators, and involvement of stakeholders.

In Indonesia, an alliance of journalists effectively utilized the VNR process to lobby for SDG 16.10 (access to information). The government took up the topic in their VNR and will continue the collaborative work after the VNR by setting up a national working group. Invitations for government

to engage with civil society also stemmed from VNR processes, giving civil society a stronger voice in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda – also after the VNRs.

Electoral cycles may impede the effective implementation of the SDGs, with a suggestion that NSDS and institutional mechanisms may help to keep the process going across those cycles. Guidelines for second and third- time presenters; further developing the Secretary General’s guidelines for VNRs; and whether voluntary sub-national reports could be heard in the HLPF were raised.

VNR Lab 7: “Peacebuilding and sustaining peace through the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”

The Lab brought together speakers with different backgrounds and affiliations including from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sierra Leone, two countries presenting their VNRs at the 2019 High-level Political Forum. The Lab highlighted the need for VNR processes to embrace a ‘whole-of-society approach’, the opportunity to draw on good practices at the local level and the importance of regional and international partnerships to successfully implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in conflict-affected countries. Participants had the opportunity to share experiences and lessons learned on peacebuilding and sustaining peace, complementing national development policies and VNR processes.

Key measures to target groups that are left behind

The discussion focused on key measures to improve the condition of the poorest and most vulnerable sectors of the population in fragile and conflict affected contexts as a means to “leave no one behind” and build peaceful, inclusive and just societies. Ending violence in childhood was considered to be the foundation of stable societies and a critical element for future sustainable growth. Tackling the challenges of rapid urbanization, including through better environmental management, urban planning and housing, revenue mobilization, enhanced urban mobility, and improved health, water and sanitation services, was also seen as imperative to enhance sustainable development for all. In addition, participants highlighted the need to promote good governance and strong institutions to make significant advances towards leaving no one behind.

Challenges

Participants reflected on common challenges in policy making, data collection, mobilizing resources, building partnerships and accelerating implementation that seem to be exacerbated in conflict settings. Participants also noted the challenges on the ground of working across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus and the importance of ensuring better coordination and programming among humanitarian, development, and peace actors, as well as of more predictable and flexible funding to address short, medium and long-term needs.

Key elements to sustain peace and achieve the SDGs in fragile and conflict affected countries

During the discussion, the following points emerged as key elements to sustain peace and achieve Sustainable Development Goals in fragile and conflict affected countries:

- When the challenges of data availability, policy implementation and measuring impact persist at the national level, good practices and success stories can be found at the local and community levels;
- The importance of embracing a whole-of-society approach to peacebuilding and sustainable development. To create national and local ownership, policy makers need to consult local communities on their priorities and draw on local knowledge for their implementation;
- The need for better coordination, better programming more flexible funding and a more coherent engagement by the international community in support of national development agendas and peacebuilding plans;
- Support local and national actors with capacity building initiatives for policy formulation to leave no one behind, data collection, community engagement and reporting.

VNR Lab 8: “Strengthening national contributions from VNRs and other sources towards the thematic reviews during the next cycle”

VNR Lab 8 examined good practices in coordinating national contributions to thematic reviews of SDG implementation in VNRs as well as discussed recommendations on how to strengthen the interlinkages between the global thematic review undertaken at the HLPF, including its preparatory work, and SDG review undertaken within VNRs.

During the session the representative from the UAE reported on examples of successful policies in implementation of SDG 4 and partnerships at national and local levels that could be replicated or scaled up. It was suggested that local VNR reviews as well as starting VNR process earlier and planning ahead can be of benefit to the whole process. Participants discussed data challenges, in particular the need for integration of data from different sources, such as making connections between data from unofficial and official sources, filling the gaps, collecting data from those left behind, sharing and strengthening local data. Representative from the UNWomen from Timor Leste reported on the need of strengthening institutional arrangements for exploiting synergies for SDG 5, focusing on rural and indigenous women. Finally, participants highlighted that the whole preparation process to the HLPF, including preparing VNRs, organizing expert group meetings (EGMs), thematic reviews and background papers, may require more time and may need to start earlier in order to be more efficient and to bring more benefits to all stakeholders.

VNR Lab 9: “Mobilizing resources and empowering people through inclusive finance”

VNR Lab 9 provided the opportunity for peer learning on mobilizing resources and empowering people through inclusive finance in the context of implementing the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. Representatives from the private sector and Member States discussed implementation of inclusive finance strategies and challenges they have faced.

Stakeholders agreed that there are many benefits of increased access to financial services, which can have positive effects on progress on numerous SDGs, while highlighting that gaps persist in financial inclusion, despite improvements. While some countries have seen vastly increased participation in the financial sector with technology and innovations like digital banking and mobile money, progress is

uneven from country to country. In some Member States, large portions of the population remain without access to bank accounts and other financial products.

Governments have taken a variety of steps to address the lack of financial access, such as promoting broad use of electronic platforms, promoting electronic payments for public services or direct transfers, and revisiting legal and regulatory frameworks. Access to credit for MSMEs is a key challenge; participants discussed regulatory changes and incentives implemented to encourage banks to increase microlending and inclusive financial services, as willingness to provide inclusive financial service is still lacking among many banks and other private sector entities. Several speakers mentioned the need to consider inclusive finance in the context of a holistic or ecosystem approach that includes infrastructure development, as many people with the least access to financial services face other impediments to use technological tools, such as lack of electricity and network connectivity. Additional challenges, like the lack of a digital identity, have hampered adoption of digital finance.

Participants also recognized the importance of ensuring that strategies meant to broaden financial inclusion did not create unintended consequences (e.g., rapid expansion of credit to populations that might not be creditworthy; increased consumer exposure to risk). Such consequences can increase mistrust in the financial sector. Speakers discussed the need to include marginalized populations in the inclusive finance discussion, particularly women, including female entrepreneurs and widows as well as migrants and persons with disabilities. Some participants pointed to a need to go beyond digital and mobile financial services to increase financial inclusion, for example through financial education and/or adapting local and indigenous models.

VNR Lab 10: “Engaging all parts and levels of government”

Organized by DPIDG/DESA, Lab 10 brought together participants from past, present and future VNR presenting countries as well as civil society organizations and major groups. Presentations by Member States and interactive discussions zeroed in on government engagement modalities. The Lab provided an opportunity for peer-to-peer learning on engaging all parts and levels of government towards the realization of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Policy coherence, quality public services and communication plans that go beyond awareness raising can stimulate engagement towards achieving the SDGs and leaving no one behind. Discussions revealed three patterns of engagement: (i) SDG-centred engagement policy design and prioritization; (ii) multilevel and multi-stakeholder SDG implementation, monitoring and evaluation; and (iii) consolidation of coherent, collaborative and integrated SDG policies.

The first pattern of SDG-centred engagement policy design showed that countries may follow two main paths. They can prioritize some SDGs and strengthen engagement based on the interlinkages amongst them and with national development plans or they can build on existing partnerships to detect which SDG areas government agencies and other stakeholders have already been working in, and further strengthen engagement in these areas through incentives, awareness raising and communication.

The second pattern of multilevel and multi-stakeholder SDG implementation, monitoring and evaluation may follow two approaches: a top-down approach whereby various governmental and non-governmental actors are mobilized at different levels or a bottom-up approach whereby

ownership at subnational levels is emphasized based on grassroots' ownership of SDGs. In the top-down approach, stakeholder councils, inter-ministerial / interdepartmental committees, commissions of coordination of policies or sustainable development can guide processes, policies and strategies of inclusion. In the bottom-up approach, instead of starting with an overall strategy, an inclusive process of continuous learning and progress harvesting can be followed. For instance, students and universities, among others, can be active agents of this organic learning process on SDG implementation and monitoring.

The third pattern of consolidation of coherent, collaborative and integrated SDG policy-making focuses on outcomes, which in turn calls for reliable data and indicators. It also necessitates enabling technology platforms, knowledge hubs, one data framework for all ministries that is resistant to electoral cycles and government turnover and deliberative forums that include civil society, private sector, academia and other stakeholders. Consolidation also revolves around readiness assessments, gap analyses, public mobilization through effective communication and the adoption of an intergenerational approach with an emphasis on youth.

The strategies and ways of engaging governments and other stakeholders are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. For instance, top-down and bottom-up engagement approaches can be combined by involving cities with different capacities in SDG processes, and national dialogues can be replicated at municipal and community levels and in different sectors, thereby acting as reality checks. Integration of SDGs into national and subnational budgets can be critical in reinforcing ownership and engagement. Finally, regional and intergovernmental organizations such as the European Union can play a role in strengthening coordination, collaboration and engagement.

The Lab emphasized the significance of national statistical offices, national audit offices and economic and social councils in promoting engagement. It also stressed the importance of connecting the daily work of government and equitable resource allocation with parliamentary engagement. It concluded that the implementation of the 2030 Agenda is part of a dynamic learning process. The main question of SDG engagement is more than just how many people are aware of SDGs. It is about how to motivate and sustain commitment for the next eleven years.



VNR Lab 11: “Innovative formats to review national implementation”

VNR Lab 11 featured innovative ways of harnessing peer learning to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, ranging from peer reviews to informal peer learning exercises as a practical way for knowledge sharing. Vanuatu was the first country in the region covered by the Pacific Islands Forum to invite other countries of the region to review the preparatory process of its Voluntary National Review (VNR) presented at the 2019 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. Drawing on its experience of facilitating peer reviews in the region in the past, the Pacific Islands Forum supported the peer review of Vanuatu’s VNR. The recommendations of the peer review team, comprised of representatives of Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Australia and of the Fiji Council for Social Services, were considered as an opportunity to strengthen Vanuatu’s VNR process and its follow-up, particularly with regards to data sharing, strengthening interlinkages between financing and planning processes, and domestic resource mobilization. There was consensus that the exercise was a ‘win-win practice’ for all partners involved rather than an intrusive process. Countries that were part of the review team and will present their first VNR in 2020 considered their participation as an opportunity to better understand the VNR process, the challenges that may need to be addressed and the support that is available from various partners in this regard. The peer review exercise thus provided the opportunity to learn from others, and supported peer learning and knowledge sharing within the region. The scope for synergies between the different processes and the importance of the convening role of regional forums was underscored.

The second part of the VNR Lab focused on a peer learning exercise across regions, between Colombia and Finland. The idea was informally launched in 2015 on the margins of the negotiations on the 2030 Agenda and developed into a mutual peer learning exercise at expert level as the two countries were preparing their first VNRs in 2016. Activities



reached from organizing joint side events at the UN to workshops held in both countries, focusing on sharing good practices in the areas of data, and the engagement of stakeholders and the private sector. The informal peer learning was driven by the willingness to learn from each other and did not involve formal structures.

Drawing on its experience in bringing together like-minded countries, the “Partners for Review” initiative elaborated on some of the peer learning formats that the multi-stakeholder network has tested over the past three years. The success of different peer learning formats – deep expert exchanges, sectoral exchanges, formal and informal formats – depend on the size of the group and the level of expertise of participants. Generally, such exercises need to be carefully prepared and the time that it takes to learn from each other should not be underestimated. Participants further stressed the importance of documenting which activities have worked, and which have not.

During the interactive discussion, it was highlighted that peer learning exercises could focus on thematic areas which countries find the most challenging, such as the use of data, the localization of the 2030 Agenda and stakeholder engagement. The latter was considered critical for a people-centred approach to the VNR process. Questions raised regarding stakeholder engagement focused on identifying all relevant stakeholders, the mechanisms to engage them in a meaningful way and to reflect the multitude of inputs in the VNR report, as well as ways to mitigate the different levels of

awareness about the SDGs. Good practices from past VNR experiences include making inputs by stakeholders to the VNR visible in text boxes in the report and including civil society representatives in the VNR presentation at the HLPF. Online consultation mechanisms and workshops at the local level were highlighted as possible ways to strengthen trust between the government and citizens. The importance of translating the SDGs into the respective national context and to embed the VNRs in the national implementation process of the 2030 Agenda was further highlighted in this regard.

VNR Lab 12: “Storytelling and Communication Strategies for the SDGs”

The 2030 Agenda presents communication opportunities and challenges for all stakeholders. The Storytelling and Communications Strategies for the SDGs VNR Lab brought together a cross-sectoral panel representing government, the private sector and civil society to discuss communicating the SDGs, including best practices and common roadblocks.

The media was identified by many governments as a key stakeholder after the 2030 Agenda was adopted, as only through educating the public can citizens take ownership and be empowered to act. During the Lab data was acknowledged as the key to ensuring every country has a context-specific strategy to achieve the 2030 Agenda. However, making data accessible and digestible is a challenge faced by all sectors. Understanding data, specifically baselines, provides a roadmap towards the end goals and allows for better resource allocation.



Within the private sector the SDGs can be used to create shared values both when reporting to shareholders and connecting to more socially conscious consumers. Elevating local stories of SDGs implementation throughout a global organization allows employees to shine and inspires others within the company. Combining local stories with evidence-based reporting avoids “SDG-washing” and can demonstrate tangible results.

Socializing the SDGs at the local grassroots level is critical to implementation and improves monitoring. Civil society organizations working on the ground know their communities and the specific challenges faced in implementation. Linking work on the ground to the 2030 Agenda gives local actors the tools and language to connect at the global level and hold their leaders accountable.

A common challenge that was identified is creating meaningful public ownership of the SDGs, especially in moving beyond the icons and awareness campaigns and connecting with individuals and existing movements. Storytelling can increase understanding by connecting to the local context, for example translating the Agenda into a local dialect through a partnership with schools. Though these initiatives, usually short campaigns, are effective, longevity, resources and localization remain the greatest barriers to public ownership. Across all sectors, the common challenges of building partnerships and balancing demand at the global, national and local levels remain. Positively, there is a lot of energy around supporting the SDGs and many creative initiatives aimed at engaging different audiences were raised.

The Lab closed with an interactive presentation of the #IamSDGs campaign, presented by the UN SDGs Action Campaign.

VNR Lab 13: “United Kingdom – national experience of the VNR process”

VNR Lab 13 focused on the Voluntary National Review (VNR) experience of the United Kingdom, particularly the vital role of data in achieving the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well as the commitment to leave no one behind. Participants highlighted data-related challenges for evidence-based reviews and discussed how innovative data solutions can improve data disaggregation while ensuring the quality of data collected from unofficial sources and respecting privacy concerns, for example, through code of conducts. It was stressed that VNRs have a critical role in stimulating cooperation in the area of statistics.

The United Kingdom has a long-established statistical system. However, the country is currently able to collect data for only 74% of the SDG global indicators, of which 70% have data for at least one disaggregation, while only two indicators are fully disaggregated. Disaggregated data was considered critical as it reveals inequalities and, hence, would allow to address them. There was agreement that partnerships are key to build statistical capacity and to close SDG data gaps drawing on different data sources, bearing in mind their respective advantages and limitations as well as their complementarity. Participants concurred that data gaps still hamper the reporting process with reliance on sometimes outdated data. More timely and better data would be required to close these gaps. The integration of new or complementary sources of data such as satellite data, mobile data and citizen-generated-data remains a challenge. Data interoperability of different reporting platforms at the national, regional and global levels should be strengthened.

Coordinated support for data is promoted through various coordination bodies such as Paris 21 and the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data. At the national level, the UK’s Open SDG Platform provides a reporting platform that can be reused by any country or organisation. Replicating the UK Open SDG Platform, Ghana has established the “Ghana Indicators for the SDGs Platform” to provide a VNR that is fully data driven. Drawing on the country’s VNR experience, challenges in three priority areas were noted: filling data gaps, encouraging data use and strengthening data ecosystems. In addition, data disaggregation remains difficult. Ghana developed a metadata template to guide data



collection for the platform. The importance of disaggregation down to the district level was stressed. Going forward, Ghana is planning to link the national reporting platform with the SDG budget system for monitoring and reporting which, in turn, is expected to support the Parliament’s oversight function.

Participants pointed to the challenge of sharing information from the VNRs back home, including within government. The mobilization of diverse stakeholders and institutions to draw linkages to SDG implementation and to contribute to the VNR is critical to get a comprehensive picture of SDG progress, yet remains challenging. It was emphasized that the UK’s first VNR has established a baseline and methodologies will now be explored to build on that, to support an assessment of progress. Moreover, the VNR has helped to break out of silos and to enhance collaboration across government.

VNR Lab 14: “Strengthening the use of data for evidence-based VNRs”

The VNR Lab focused on specific practices and approaches that countries have used to increase the use of data in their VNRs. Representatives from national statistics offices and external stakeholders representing marginalized groups, development partners, and data advocacy group engaged in vibrant discussion on how data use can be strengthened in the VNRs.

The meeting consisted of two panels, one representing national statistical systems, and the second consisting of external stakeholders.

Panel one

In this panel, representatives of national statistical offices discussed the following as key factors in engaging the national statistical system in the VNR process and to strengthen the use of data in the VNRs:

- Support of the political leadership is essential to ensure that data for SDGs is taken seriously across various government and non-government entities. Countries provided examples buy-in from the political leadership was crucial for national statistical offices to be involved in the VNR process. As a result, the VNRs incorporated data and evidence well and managed to collaborate with line ministries that collect data.
- NSOs also engaged with various stakeholder groups such as media and journalists to improve the awareness of SDGs and how data is important for monitoring of the SDGs. This improved the SDG’s visibility and allowed the national statistical offices to understand the needs of their users. This is crucial to deliver results that aligned with data users’ needs.
- Institutional structures that are created to support the VNR process are important in determining the role data plays in the VNR. Countries shared the experience how having NSOs institutionally integrated into bodies/working groups that prepared the VNRs helped provide data perspectives into the VNR. It allowed for fact checking and making sure that data was used correctly in the report.
- Panelists discussed how having the national context incorporated in SDG monitoring—for instance through national SDG frameworks—facilitated use of existing data and reporting structure for the monitoring of SDGs.
- Panelists emphasized the need for national statisticians to leave their comfort zone of working with data and technical aspects surrounding data and reach out to other communities such as NGOs and the private sector for potential partnerships.

Panel two

The second panel consisting of external stakeholders discussed in detail how they could collaborate better with the national statistical system to strengthen the VNRs. Key points from the panel were:

- There are various tools available from OECD on monitoring the SDGs, collecting data and on results frameworks.
- Open data principles of accountability, transparency and accessibility is aligned well with the VNR principles. Discussions focused that these principles should apply to both developing and developed countries.

- More methods on incorporating data from community and qualitative data is required to allow civil society to effectively contribute to the data that is used in the VNRs. In addition, counting the most marginalized is important to leave no one behind. It is important to find ways to bring CSOs and entities within the NSS
- Integrating different data sources is important. It is also important to make data more relevant.

VNR Lab 15: “Localizing the SDGs and VNRs: reporting on progress, challenges and opportunities”

This VNR Lab was organized by UNDESA (Division for the Sustainable Development Goals/DSDG and Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government/DPIDG) in collaboration with Local 2030, United Nations Development Programme, UN-Habitat and the Global Taskforce of local and regional governments. The objective was to examine how VNRs can support the localization of SDGs by engaging local governments and local stakeholders in the process, as well as discuss how national governments are capturing sub-national perspectives in their VNRs, including through integration of local data. The programme included speakers from national governments (Colombia, India); local and regional governments (Dortmund/Germany, Karlstadt/Sweden and All-India Institute for Local Self-Government (AIISG) and Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES).



Examples of regional consultations, workshops, awareness raising campaigns and training modules for local and regional governments to better understand and engage in VNR processes were presented. Several expressed the need to share best practices and enhance cross-sectoral approaches to track SDG implementation and called for more multi-stakeholder cooperation between governments at all levels. It was recognized that systematic feedback from local and regional governments helped to identify key needs, tailor programmes and allocate resources focusing on leaving no one behind. Strategies to mobilize local governments for mainstreaming of the SDGs into regional and sub-national plans were shared. Participants called for more opportunities of knowledge exchange and learning to strengthen the capacity of local and regional governments to engage and contribute to VNRs.

VNR Lab 16: “Catalyzing partnerships for SDG implementation”

To accelerate the gathering momentum of SDG partnerships at national level this VNR Lab brought together partnership experts, VNR countries, those engaged in specific partnership mechanisms at country level, and other actors, to facilitate a deep-dive discussion on partnerships. Discussants noted that working together with stakeholders was one of the success stories of the SDGs, i.e. the whole-of-society approach. Participants shared their experiences on establishing multi-stakeholder SDG partnership platforms and underlined key principles for successful multi-stakeholder partnerships such as a joint vision and mission and the governance structure. The importance of having a strategy – what to do and how to do it – was underlined. It was also noted that the focus of the partnership should be context-specific and not too broad.

Lessons learned from existing partnerships, such as the SIDS Partnership Framework and country platforms such as Chile's *compromiso país*, were presented. These included the importance of building the capacity of stakeholders to partner, in particular smaller organizations, as well as engaging with the most vulnerable populations. Participants also discussed how the private sector could contribute to a country's VNR process and SDG implementation, for example through the coordination of the UN Global Compact Local Network. Questions to the panellists included how to balance the current focus on short-term results with the need for long-term partnerships, how to keep partnerships accountable, and to what level partnerships are allowed to fail. Similarly, to private sector, one has to be allowed to fail to achieve results.

VNR Lab 17: "Mauritius – national experience of the VNR process"

VNR Lab 17 focused on Mauritius' experience of the Voluntary National Review process and its benefits for the national implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The Lab discussed the country's people-centred approach and focus on inclusiveness to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including through a strong welfare system, free education and healthcare services and an array of social protection schemes, especially for the most vulnerable. Referring to the need to provide opportunities for all, participants pointed to youth employment as a major challenge in Mauritius and across Africa in general. It was stressed that the SDGs were considered enablers in achieving national priorities, including the reduction of poverty, strengthening the educational system by making it more inclusive, increasing the country's resilience in the face of the adverse effects of climate change and ensuring sustainable management and exploitation of oceans, amongst others.

It was stressed that the interlinkages between the SDGs have prompted countries to look at sustainability from a different angle. Streamlining the SDGs and bringing on board partners was considered critical. Mauritius' national "Vision 2030" integrates the SDGs into the country's political agenda. The VNR process provided the opportunity to assess where the country is doing well and to identify policy gaps as well as possibilities to further strengthen the national structure for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Participants inquired about best practices to create ownership of the SDGs across government and ensuring that everyone is engaged in the process. It was acknowledged that explaining the interlinkages between the SDGs and engaging the whole-of-government in the VNR process was challenging. However, the SDGs created momentum for strengthening inter- and cross-ministerial cooperation on which the country could capitalize. Political leadership and commitment as well as independent and strong public institutions were highlighted as elements that lead to success.



Mauritius' VNR process was considered transparent and an opportunity to learn from others. An online SDG portal was created onto which every chapter of the VNR report was uploaded. The posting was advertised through the media to encourage citizens to provide their feedback. However, it was acknowledged that more could be done to engage Parliament in a structural manner to establish a regular reporting process. Reporting to Parliament every six months was considered to add meaning and value to the localization of the SDGs. The discussion further focused on the interrelationships and

coherence between the 2030 Agenda and the African Union's Agenda 2063 as well as the SAMOA Pathway. The toolkit developed by The Commonwealth for prioritizing, implementing and monitoring the SDGs and other agreements was considered useful in this regard.

Looking ahead

Across the 17 Labs, discussions were rich and encouraged genuine exchanges on best practices and lessons learned on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the catalysing role of Voluntary National Reviews in this regard. The Labs further provided an opportunity to share challenges and possible ways to overcome them. It was highlighted that heightened efforts towards the localization of the SDGs and the engagement of stakeholders, particularly vulnerable groups are still needed. The Labs also noted the importance of data in implementing the SDGs, stating the need for better integration of data sources and data collection on the situation of those left behind.