

Virtual workshop: Implementation of the 2030 Agenda: Follow-up to the Voluntary National Reviews in the North and Central Asia region

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I am very pleased to join you for the opening of this virtual workshop on follow-up to the Voluntary National Reviews in the North and Central Asia region.

A distinguishing feature of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is its robust framework for follow-up and review. This encompasses statistical reporting on progress, thematic reviews of progress on the SDGs, which takes place at the High-level Political Forum on sustainable development, and state-led, voluntary national reviews (VNRs). The reviews are an opportunity to take stock of progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the national level, in the process identifying lessons learned and good practices that can be shared with other countries.

Encouragingly, all countries in the North and Central Asia region have conducted at least one review, with two having already completed a second VNR. This testifies to the region's commitment to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda.

The VNRs are a means to foster implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. As such, their true measure is not thoroughness of preparation or clarity of presentation, but rather their contribution to the achievement of the SDGs. If the process of review has uncovered gaps and challenges in implementation such as those cause by the COVID-19 pandemic that has morphed into an unprecedented economic and social crisis, are measures being put in place to remedy the shortcomings? If the review has identified capacity and financing deficits, are strategies being put in place to address these challenges?

The process of following up the review is of crucial importance. Overall, there is an increased interest by countries in following up on the VNRs, to realize their potential to accelerate implementation of the 2030 Agenda within the context of the Decade of Action and

delivery. This virtual workshop aims to contribute to this effort through peer learning and sharing of experiences among countries in the region.

Follow-up to the VNRs can address common, persistent problems countries are facing in striving for the SDGs. Among them are lack of high quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by various characteristics relevant in national contexts; shortcomings in the coordination between institutions, horizontally and vertically; lack of experience and institutional mechanisms for meaningful engagement with stakeholders; and the need to mobilize adequate means of implementation.

Since the 2030 Agenda cannot be achieved by governments alone, countries are also exploring new ways of enhancing North-South, South-South and triangular, regional and international cooperation as well as engaging the private sector and civil society organizations to scale up the implementation of the SDGs. It is widely recognized that there is a need to share experiences and lessons learned in developing and managing multi-stakeholder partnerships for the SDGs.

The VNRs should now be used to mobilize countries to accelerate their efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda as part of the Decade of Action and delivery launched at the SDGs Summit in September 2019.

Across the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has wrought economic damage and inflicted human suffering. It also threatens to erase precious gains made towards the achievement of the SDGs. Many countries are also reeling from the ongoing effects of climate change and disasters.

The North and Central Asia region is no exception in facing these headwinds, even before the pandemic struck. Among the challenges in the region are uneven access to quality education and universal health coverage, adequate social protection, decent employment and other public services have led to widening inequalities within and among countries. Youth unemployment remains an issue in many countries, with young people lacking opportunities to enter the workforce.

The pandemic has clearly demonstrated more clearly than ever before the importance of staying true to the goals and aspirations of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The

Decade of Action, launched by the Secretary-General in connection with the 2019 SDG Summit, is now more timely than ever.

The SDGs, with their universal scope and interlinked nature, are more essential than ever during this crisis and its aftermath. The pandemic also highlights the importance of properly designing and effectively implementing national sustainable development plans and strategies, prioritizing job creation, the provision of quality education and health care, social protection, inclusive finance, the empowerment of women and girls, and protecting the environment. Such strategies can help enhance resilience and build capacity to withstand external shocks.

There are good practices emerging—with countries implementing the 2030 Agenda through a “new” generation of plans and strategies developed through inclusive and meaningful stakeholder engagement, backed by adequate resources, robust data and diagnostics and sustained political commitment.

As governments around the world continue to tackle the unprecedented challenges unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic, we need concerted action by local, national and global partners to secure, accelerate and strengthen existing efforts to fulfil the commitments of the 2030 Agenda.

Delivering on the transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda requires strengthened capacity at all levels of government to understand and apply the integrated and interlinked nature of the SDGs. UNDESA’s Division for Sustainable Development Goals provides capacity development to countries in a range of areas, such as fostering peer learning through workshops such as this one. Another area of activity involves facilitating subnational reviews of SDG implementation, also known as the Voluntary Local Reviews.

UN Country Teams, under the guidance of the Resident Coordinator’s Office, can ensure that countries follow-up on the findings that emanated from their national VNR processes. It is therefore heartening to have several Resident Coordinators participating in today’s workshop.

We have a challenging, broad set of topics to discuss today. It is my hope that our workshop will serve as the springboard for fruitful discussions and continued cooperation.

Thank you.