

## Third Global VNR Workshop

15 July 2018, Mission of Romania, New York

### *Summary*

The series of preparatory workshops for countries presenting Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) at the 2018 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) culminated with the third Global VNR workshop, held on Sunday, 15 July 2018, the day before the VNR presentations at the Ministerial Segment of the HLPF (16 to 18 July 2018). Delegations exchanged experiences on the national review process, focussing on three main themes: transformational measures taken at the national level for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda; challenges that countries have encountered along the VNR process and with regards to the overall implementation of the 2030 Agenda; and lessons learned on strategies that worked well to address those challenges.

The role of VNRs in facilitating peer learning but also national SDG implementation was stressed in welcoming remarks. The second part of the workshop focused on final logistical arrangements for the VNR presentations.

### *Exchange of views on the VNR process: challenges, lessons learned and best practices*

Moderating the exchange of views, the Head of Sustainable Development, Romanian Ministry of the Environment, and VNR coordinator for Romania, shared her country's VNR experience. **Romania** started its VNR process in September 2017 when the inter-ministerial committee decided that the VNR was to be conducted by the Secretariat of the Inter-Ministerial Committee, establishing a drafting open working group comprising also civil society and academia. The multi-stakeholder process allowed to learn about the various workflows in different institutions and to establish a network within these institutions. At the same time, the complex institutional framework for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda was highlighted as a challenge.

**Niger** noted that the elaboration of the VNR report coincided with the elaboration of the national development plan and was conducted by an inter-ministerial team. The draft VNR report was consulted with multiple stakeholders, including civil society actors and the private sector. The report was complemented by the information received through this participatory process which also provided opportunities to forge partnerships. The importance of linking the SDGs and national strategic documents, as well as regional plans was stressed. The disaggregation of data at the subnational and local level and the need to move towards a multi-sectoral approach were identified as challenges.

An inter-ministerial and multi-stakeholder approach was also adopted in **Mali**. Awareness raising activities were first conducted in the different regions of the country and subsequently a national workshop was convened. The priority targets for Mali were identified and a high-level coordination group was established. In addition, cross-ministerial sub-working groups were created, e.g. on themes such as "human capital", "inclusive economy and sustainable development", "environmental protection and climate change" and partnerships. The draft VNR report was shared with a steering committee in charge of the VNR. The report was also consulted with civil society, the private sector and members of Parliament. The need to review all planning documents to align them with the SDGs was noted.

**Sudan** underscored that the 2030 Agenda helps to advocate for new positive thinking and transformation at the national level. As a post-conflict country, Sudan attempted to demonstrate the interlinkages between peace and development, so as to leave no one behind from the development and the peace processes. A High-Level National Mechanism (HLNM) chaired by the Prime Minister has

been established in 2016 to provide overall leadership and guidance for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The SDG implementation is also linked to the National Parliament and the Audit Chamber. The VNR process was considered part and parcel of the SDG implementation at the national level. The need to strengthen coordination between different ministries and different governance levels, i.e. horizontal and vertical coordination, was highlighted as a challenge. Similarly, local governments as well as youth and women should be engaged more. The VNR report was endorsed by the HLNM and was also shared with the UN Country Team at the beginning of the process, but it was also felt that more focus should be placed on the national process than on the UN activities in the country. Challenges for implementing the SDGs include statistical capacity, effective partnerships and bringing the private sector on board.

**Qatar** elaborated on how the country has mainstreamed the SDGs into the national development strategy. The Minister of Development Planning and Statistics is overseeing the process of implementing both the national development strategy and the SDGs, supported by an advisory committee. The VNR report focussed on the six goals under review at the 2018 HLPF rather than on the entire global goal framework. The importance of partnerships was underscored, e.g. to modernize the national statistical system.

**Greece** highlighted that setting up an institutional mechanism for implementing the SDGs proved to be transformational as it is the first time that sustainable development is truly anchored at the highest political level and has gained visibility. The 2030 Agenda has provided the opportunity to adopt a whole-of-government approach. In December 2016, the General Secretariat of the Government (GSG) has been assigned the task of monitoring and coordinating the national implementation of the SDGs. The work of the GSG is supported by the Inter-Ministerial Coordination Network for the SDGs. Likewise, a whole-of-society approach was adopted and spurred strong stakeholder engagement to adapt the SDGs to national circumstances and provided valuable inputs through a stocktaking exercise. Challenges encountered along the VNR process and for the overall implementation of the 2030 Agenda include the economic crisis that the country has been suffering and which made it difficult to convince ministries and government units to endorse the SDGs as a priority and not as an “add on”. It also took some efforts to convince ministries to work together and use the SDGs as a tool for policy coherence across sectors. The development of a national action plan for the circular economy through an inter-ministerial scheme proved a valuable strategy to facilitate inter-ministerial collaboration. The VNR report addresses all SDGs which are grouped under eight overarching priorities.

**Sri Lanka** established a Ministry of Sustainable Development, Wildlife and Regional Development in 2016. The preparation of the VNR helped to integrate the new Ministry into the government system and to strengthen its linkages with other Ministries. A task force was created to coordinate inputs from ministries and departments and to conduct consultations and national workshops. The UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) supported the creation of a multi-stakeholder online platform to be launched soon. Moreover, the SDGs were mainstreamed into national documents and institutional plans. As access to data was identified as a challenge, a platform was created in which every ministry can input data.

The political transformation in **Armenia** in the last phase of the VNR process constituted a challenge in terms of meeting the established working timetable and activities foreseen. However, with the support from the UN system Armenia completed the report in due course. The complex and cross-cutting exercise of SDG implementation revealed several intertwined challenges: First, challenges regarding policy efforts. The review of strategies, laws and regulations pertaining to all three dimensions of sustainable development and the assessment of sector specific documents required coordination of an unprecedented scale among public authorities. Second, analysing and collecting data from various

sources and ensuring the quality of information was a considerable challenge. Third, institutional efforts and dialogue among major stakeholders, as well as the identification of possible reforms was challenging.

**Guinea** stressed that LDCs require unprecedented capacity building and financial support to implement the 2030 Agenda. Institutions, partnerships and national coordination need to be strengthened. It was suggested to have an evaluation of progress every five years rather than annually.

**Australia** identified communication and awareness raising as a major challenge for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The VNR process revealed that awareness of the SDGs remained low in the Australian public and across different levels of government. Raising awareness among officials of the importance, complexity and relevance of the 2030 Agenda proved to be challenging in some cases and remained a work in progress. It was acknowledged in this regard that success in certain areas was more likely where individuals who understood the 2030 Agenda got engaged and “championed” the work in their agency or organisation. A second challenge arose from the attempt to produce a report that spoke to various audiences - an international and domestic audience, to government and non-government entities and to those with more or less awareness of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. In terms of consultation, one approach was to engage peak bodies including the national Global Compact Network and the Australian Council for International Development to gather the views of the private sector and development NGOs respectively.

Presenting a VNR for the second time, **Egypt** highlighted that the country tried to learn from the past experience to present a more concise VNR that also linked the SDGs. An important lesson learned was to consider “Egypt Vision 2030” as a living document and strategy rather than a static document. A National Committee for Monitoring the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals headed by the Prime Minister and composed of representatives of 17 ministries and state entities was established.

The establishment of a SDGs core group comprising the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade, the Planning Institute and the national statistics office was considered a transformative action in **Jamaica**. The coordination mechanism has helped to drive the country’s achievements since 2015. Similar to other countries, a lesson learned of the process was that awareness around the SDGs at the national level was very low, also within the government.

**Spain** highlighted that convening different stakeholders constituted a major part of the VNR process, and the SDG implementation overall. NGOs active in different sectors were coming together and the national Global Compact network was used to engage the private sector. Different ministries had also to be brought together to create a multi-stakeholder strategy. This learning process triggered some major governance and institutional changes that are required for further SDG implementation and will be kept on a permanent basis. Following the VNR process, the High-Level Group (HLG) for inter-ministerial coordination put in place for the preparation of the VNR would be opened up to communities and local governments. A Sustainable Development Council will also be created. Furthermore, a High Commissioner for the 2030 Agenda was appointed who reports directly to the President of the Government. A change in government during the final phase of the VNR preparations constituted a challenge.

As sustainable development has underpinned policymaking in **Singapore** since its independence, “backward mainstreaming” the SDGs proved to be difficult and required coordination among different agencies. Moreover, communication and awareness raising for the 2030 Agenda remains patchy. Youth involvement was identified as an opportunity, as the SDGs were taught in school and workshops.

A video competition on the SDGs was launched and the winners were part of a youth delegation at the 2018 HLPF.

**Kiribati** used its national development plan as the basis for its VNR report. Building and strengthening partnerships among major stakeholders enhanced the sense of ownership and was considered critical. Challenges included data gathering due to fragmentation or lack of data, financial and technical support, and poor linkage between indicators and targets.

Also presenting a VNR for the second time, **Mexico** pointed out that the consultation process on the VNR revealed that not all indicators mean the same for all stakeholders. On SDG 6, for example, civil society focused on the quality of water rather than on access to water which led to ultimately including both government and civil society indicators. It was stressed that coordination is not only a tool but an essential element for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The multi-stakeholder process at the national level is reflected by the delegation to the 2018 HLPF comprising NGO, private sector and civil society representatives along with government officials.

In terms of logistical arrangements for the VNR presentation at the HLPF, several countries said it was difficult to meet the deadlines set by UN DESA for submitting the VNR main messages and the report (Sudan, Sri Lanka, Jamaica, Mexico). While the VNR Handbook was welcomed, one delegation expressed the wish to have even more detailed guidelines to improve the quality of the VNRs (Mexico).

The VNR workshop also addressed a number of logistical issues that went from who is presenting to seating arrangements and visuals for the presentation. All countries had a chance to meet with their respective DESA focal points in small groups and discuss specific issues related to the ensuing HLPF presentation.

### ***Concluding remarks***

Concluding remarks by the moderator and UN DESA officials pointed to the importance of VNRs as a vehicle and enabler for spurring the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The institutional changes shared by countries were commended and demonstrate the importance of the process to achieve the global goals by 2030. Being part and parcel of the latter, the lessons learned from the VNRs are critical for the further implementation of the SDGs. Ownership by all stakeholders at the national level is also key in this regard.

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