Voluntary common reporting guidelines for voluntary national reviews at the high-level political forum for sustainable development (HLPF)

I.   Introduction

Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) of implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) are the cornerstone of the follow-up and review framework of the 2030 Agenda. They culminate in a country report to and presentation at the HLPF. They are most meaningful when they involve an inclusive, participatory, transparent and thorough review process at the national and sub-national levels, when they are evidence-based, produce tangible lessons and solutions, and when they are followed by concrete action and collaboration that drives SDG implementation.

The common reporting guidelines seek to support member states in conducting VNRs. They were initially prepared by the Secretary-General in December 2015.[1] They were first updated in December 2017 to reflect lessons learned during the two years that followed and were most recently updated in November 2019 taking into account experiences from the first cycle of the HLPF .[2] They provide a framework for certain common elements within reports while allowing for flexibility so countries can adapt to their own circumstances.[3]

II.   Guiding principles

In paragraph 74 of the 2030 Agenda, Member States identified a number of principles to guide the follow-up and review process at all levels. In preparing the voluntary national reviews, it is important that these principles be taken into account:

a)   The follow-up and review processes will be voluntary and country-led, will take into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and will respect policy space and priorities. As national ownership is key to achieving sustainable development, the outcome from national-level processes will be the foundation for reviews at the regional and global levels, given that the global review will be primarily based on national official data sources.

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[1] See annex to Secretary-General's Report on critical milestones towards coherent, efficient and inclusive follow-up and review at the global level, A/70/684.

[2] See para 8 of resolution 70/299 of 29 July 2016.

[3] It is important to note that the UN Development Group in 2017 released guidelines for the preparation of national SDG reports, with a view to providing coherent support by UN Country Teams in preparing a national SDG report. While they can serve to complement the present Secretary-General's voluntary guidelines, it should be noted that the VNR is different from an SDG progress report, notably due to the extensive consultation process expected at national level,
https://undg.org/wpcontent/uploads/2017/03/Guidelines-to-Support-Country-Reporting-on-SDGs-1.pdf

b) They will track progress in implementing the universal Goals and targets, including the means of implementation, in all countries in a manner which respects their universal, integrated and interrelated nature and the three dimensions of sustainable development.

c) They will maintain a longer-term orientation, identify achievements, challenges, gaps and critical success factors and support countries in making informed policy choices. They will help to mobilize the necessary means of implementation and partnerships, support the identification of solutions and best practices and promote the coordination and effectiveness of the international development system.

d) They will be open, inclusive, participatory and transparent for all people and will support reporting by all relevant stakeholders.

e) They will be people-centred, gender-sensitive, respect human rights and have a particular focus on the poorest, most vulnerable and those furthest behind.

f) They will build on existing platforms and processes, where these exist, avoid duplication and respond to national circumstances, capacities, needs and priorities. They will evolve over time, taking into account emerging issues and the development of new methodologies, and will minimize the reporting burden on national administrations.

g) They will be rigorous and based on evidence, informed by country-led evaluations and data which is high-quality, accessible, timely, reliable and disaggregated by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability and geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts.

h) They will require enhanced capacity-building support for developing countries, including the strengthening of national data systems and evaluation programmes, particularly in African countries, least developed countries, small island developing States, landlocked developing countries and middle-income countries.

i) They will benefit from the active support of the United Nations system and other multilateral institutions.

III.   Structure and content of a report for the HLPF

Countries are encouraged to structure the report along the lines highlighted below, which will give an overview of the follow-up to the 2030 Agenda and promote consistency and comparability between reports of different countries. Doing so will also help inform the process of review and generate reflections on implementation at national, regional and global level. Countries are encouraged to develop each of the proposed points in a balanced manner.

1. **Opening statement.** An opening statement by the Head of State or Government, a Minister or other high-ranking Government official could highlight the current status of SDG progress and how the Government is responding to the transformative nature of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development including through its national development plans, strategies, policies or other relevant documents, including sectoral policies and specific action and financial plans. It could highlight outcomes/results accomplished since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and indicate steps that the country intends to take to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable

Development as part of the decade of action and delivery launched at the SDG Summit in September 2019[4].

2. Highlights. A one-to-two-page synthesis highlighting:

- the core elements of the country-level review process
- the status of SDG implementation based on statistical data, using SDG indicators to the extent possible and outlining the factors of success or failure to achieve progress
- how the Government has responded to the integrated, indivisible and interlinked nature of the SDGs and whether that helped address trade-offs and accelerate implementation
- how the Government has responded to the principle of leaving no one behind;
- two or three examples of good practices and lessons learned that may be relevant for other countries, preferably with a focus on measures with a transformative potential, considering the interlinkages and synergies among the SDGs
- two or three examples of challenges encountered on which the country wishes to hear about other countries' and other stakeholders' experiences including the United Nations system
- areas where the country would need support in terms of finance, capacity-building, policy advice, data gathering and analysis, technology, partnerships, etc. It is hoped that this would lead to mobilizing support through international cooperation and continued collaboration/twinning with one or more other countries.

3. Introduction. The context and objectives of the review could be presented here. The introduction may briefly describe key features of the country context as it pertains to the 2030 Agenda, the national review cycle, and whether and how existing national reports to regional and international mechanisms have been used. It could outline how the 2030 Agenda was reflected in the national development plans and strategies and in the financing and budgetary frameworks. It could outline how the policy architecture supports the implementation of all three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental) and what policies and mechanisms have enabled this integration, . It could highlight links to other international agreements such as the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, Paris Agreement on Climate Change, Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, Samoa Pathway, Istanbul or Vienna Programme of Action etc, This could include describing how synergies among those agreements are being pursued in the national plans so as to create meet multiple objectives in an efficient manner.

4. Methodology and process for preparation of the review. This section may discuss the methodology that was adopted for the review, including its scope, depth and limitations and how the principles on follow-up and review from the 2030 Agenda, including paragraph 74, were used. Information on the process for preparation of the national review may be presented, including, for example, how different levels and sectors of Government contributed to the review and whether and how the whole-of-Government approach was used to work across sectors and institutions in the

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[4] Political declaration of the high-level political forum on sustainable development convened under the auspices of the General Assembly adopted on 15 October 2019 (https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/74/4)

implementation of the SDGs[5]; whether parliaments were engaged; whether national evaluation/oversight or human rights institutions contributed; what mechanisms have been used to meaningfully and effectively engage stakeholders from civil society, whether representatives of vulnerable groups, academia, youth and the business sector and, where applicable, whether the UN Country Teams were engaged. The section could describe how the national report to the HLPF was discussed at the national and local level and who was engaged in the discussions. The countries presenting a VNR for the second and subsequent times could explain how this report builds on previous one(s) and the most significant changes since the last review.

5. Policy and enabling environment.

(a)   Creating ownership of the Sustainable Development Goals and the VNRS. The review could outline how stakeholders, such as national and local governments; legislative bodies; national oversight/auditing, human rights or other institutions; the public, civil society and the private sector, were involved in the implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda, including goals and targets. The review could address how different groups, particularly women and youth, as well as children, persons with disabilities, people living with HIV/AIDS, older persons, indigenous peoples, refugees and internally displaced persons, migrants and other vulnerable groups have been engaged and contributed to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and how direct engagement of people has been facilitated.

(b)   Incorporation of the Sustainable Development Goals in national frameworks. The review could outline how the integration of the Goals into the country's legislation, policies, plans, budgets and programmes, including the sustainable development strategy, if there is one, has helped with successful implementation of the SDGs and targets. This would include examining policy coherence and interlinkages[6]. The countries are encouraged to be specific in identifying the main challenges and difficulties experienced in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals as a whole and how they foresee overcoming these barriers. Specifically, the country may describe how the policy makers are coordinating through national planning, budgetary, financial and investment processes, for example to bring about a deeper, faster and more ambitious response to the challenges which their economies are facing. Countries are encouraged – even in cases of incomplete data – to provide, as far as possible, an analysis of the causes of their SDG implementation challenges and possible ways forward, including how the engagement of different actors can help bridge these gaps. Countries could consider outlining how cities, local authorities and communities have been pursuing the 2030 Agenda and how they have supported their efforts. Countries could also refer to major efforts undertaken by local authorities and non-State actors to implement the Goals, the role of scientists and academia in advising the government and benefits arising from multi-stakeholder partnerships.   They are also encouraged to integrate a gender perspective across all sections of the report.

(c)   Integration of the economic, social and environmental dimensions. The review might discuss how the three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental) are being

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[5] Under this heading, countries may wish to report on the national institutional arrangements for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda as well as the extent of collaboration with governmental structures established to coordinate reporting to other international and regional bodies.

[6] In this vein, the review might discuss how analysis, guidance and recommendations from regional and international mechanisms have been incorporated in national frameworks and policies in support of SDG implementation

integrated and how sustainable development policies are being designed and implemented to reflect such integration including an analysis of the relevant interlinkages among the goals and targets. This can also include an analysis of progress and initiatives related to the high-level political forum's theme for that year.

(d) **Leaving no one behind:** The review could also assess how the principle of leaving no one behind has been mainstreamed in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. This would also address how this principle has been translated into concrete actions for tackling inequalities and discrimination, as well as efforts to ensure inclusive and effective participation in implementation efforts. In this regard, the review could detail how the people who are the furthest behind and vulnerable groups have been identified, including through improved data collection and disaggregation, as well as what policies and programmes are being implemented to address their needs and support their empowerment. Countries are encouraged to go beyond social policies and include macroeconomic policies and technology that impact on the situation of the furthest behind and provide support to the social, economic inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status. Particular attention should be placed on how national efforts seek to empower women and girls.

(e) **Institutional mechanisms**. The review could provide information on how the country has adapted its institutional framework in light of the 2030 Agenda. This could include information on how the views of different ministries, agencies, levels of government and non-governmental stakeholders, including representatives of vulnerable groups, have been mobilized around the 2030 Agenda and how their views are considered. Countries may also consider including information on the institution(s)/mechanism(s) in charge of coordination and integration for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, on their interaction with relevant national bodies, such as the national planning entities, oversight bodies or national mechanisms for reporting and follow-up. This section could also include a reflection of how the country has ensured that the institutional mechanisms supporting SDG implementation are effective, accountable, and inclusive. The review could consider highlighting how it was possible to successfully mobilize institutions around the Sustainable Development Goals, improve their functioning-making them more responsive, accountable and transparent- and promote collaboration and change to achieve policy coherence and integration across sectors. Information may also be provided on how responsibility is allocated among various levels of Government (national, subnational and local) for coherent implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda. This section could highlight what has been done to ensure that relevant data, information and analysis is systematically gathered, shared, analyzed and used across sectors and how this has helped with implementation of the SDGs. It would be useful to highlight how the country is reviewing progress in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals, including mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation of policies and measures. The review could also highlight whether and how the preparation and follow-up to VNRs is embedded in these ongoing processes. This may include the preparation of national SDG reports, supported by the UN Country Team, where applicable.

(f) **Structural issues.** Countries are encouraged to report on relevant structural issues or barriers they have faced in implementing the 2030 Agenda, including the possible external consequences of other countries' domestic policies on their economy and societies and the impact of their own policies

on other countries. Countries can highlight the transformative policies, tools, or institutional changes they have used to address these issues or barriers and avoid trade-offs among the goals.

6. Progress on Goals and targets: Countries are encouraged to provide brief information on progress and the status of all Sustainable Development Goals. It would be desirable to describe critical difficulties encountered in reaching them and how they could be addressed, referring to data provided in a statistical annex. The review could indicate whether a baseline for the Goals has been defined and, if not, what are the remaining obstacles to doing so. Countries are encouraged to review all 17 SDGs; however, some could be addressed in more depth, for instance, to illustrate innovative policies to achieve goals, or examples that could be especially interesting for peer learning in an international or regional context. The consideration of Goals could focus on trends, successes, challenges, emerging issues, and lessons learned, and describe what actions have been taken to address existing gaps and challenges. It could support the identification of gaps, solutions, best practices, synergies, trade-offs and spillovers and areas requiring advice and support from other countries or institutions. The review may examine the agreed global indicators for SDGs and related targets, but countries may also choose to refer to complementary national and regional indicators. Conclusions presented in this section should be based on said empirical evidence, in order to have concrete elements to measure progress. Countries presenting their second and subsequent voluntary national reviews could report on progress made, and specific efforts undertaken to address findings from the previous review.   Countries could identify steps that they intend to take in the near future and over the coming years to accelerate progress towards the 2030 Agenda, as a result of the Decade of Action and delivery for the SDGs launched at the SDG Summit in September 2019.

7. Means of implementation: Based on the above challenges and trends highlighted, the review may discuss how the means of implementation (financing, technology, capacity building, etc.) are mobilized, what difficulties this process faces, and what resources are needed to implement the 2030 Agenda, looking at the full range of financing sources (public/private, domestic/international) and non-financing means of implementation, such as capacity development and data needs, technology, and partnerships. Countries could elaborate on their financing strategy / integrated national financing framework where applicable, and the appropriate policies and reforms in place to finance their strategy. The review could indicate how financial systems, statistical data and resource allocations are being aligned to support the realization of the 2030 Agenda and its pledge to leave no one behind. Coverage of domestic resource mobilization could include the contribution of the private sector. Experiences with gender responsive budgeting, where applicable, should be reflected. Countries are also encouraged to cover technology, identify concrete technology and capacity development and data needs, and the contribution of multi-stakeholder partnerships. Countries could also provide an overview of the institutional set-up and coordination mechanisms (intra-government and with other stakeholders) which help implement the financing strategy. Donor countries could describe how they have reviewed their development cooperation guidance to align with the 2030 Agenda.

8.   Conclusion and next steps. Based on the outcomes of the review, the country could outline what steps are planned to enhance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, notably as part of the Decade of Action for sustainable development. It could also indicate how it is planned to keep the Goals under review at the national and sub-national levels, including dissemination of VNRs and

other national reviews and their findings. It could highlight what lessons the country has learned from the review process, how it will apply them in the continuing implementation and what support it would need in the future for preparing such reviews.

Annexes. Countries are encouraged to include an annex with data, using the global Sustainable Development Goal indicators and adding priority indicators identified at the regional and national levels where appropriate. They may highlight whether statistics, including gender statistics, were collected from the national statistical system and pinpoint major gaps in official statistics on indicators. Countries may want to include additional annexes where they would showcase best practices and/or policies and strategies that has advanced implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Countries might consider including an annex specifically on interlinkages between the goals and targets as well as the global impacts of national actions (spillover). They could also include a list of all the actors consulted in the preparation of the report. They could also include comments from stakeholders on the report in an annex. If countries so wish, they can send other reports to DESA for posting on their national page in the VNR database, including complementary reports by stakeholders.

IV.   Making presentations at the HLPF

Under the current modalities, the time provided for countries to present at the HLPF is limited. Countries may therefore wish to consider a number of options when conducting their presentations at the HLPF:

- Submit their written report well in advance of the HLPF to inform a substantive interactive debate at the HLPF
- Use focused infographics, data visualization, and meaningful focused videos, to communicate complex messages related to SDG implementation (such as VNR preparatory process, linkages, priorities, innovations, progress and challenges) in a very short period of time;
- Providing space for stakeholders such as civil society, youth and the private sector to share their contributions to and views on SDG progress in the country.
- Working informally with other presenting countries in advance to compare review processes and findings, for example voluntary twinning for peer learning.
- Making best use of the allocated time during the HLPF to allow for interactive discussions and questions and answers, which can strengthen peer learning and exchange of best practices. This may include written questions and answers.
- Consider actively using the regional sustainable development forums in the five regions as a preparatory step to share progress and challenges and best practices on the preparation of the VNRs and reflect on the follow-up to the VNRs.

The ECOSOC President has created a group of countries that are "friends of VNRs" and will prepare the discussions on specific VNRs at the HLPF.

Countries may also wish to consider how best to use the time around the formal meetings of the HLPF to further engage on the lessons emerging from the review process and seek feedback on their VNRs, including through actively participating in special events, and VNR Labs, and by co-organizing side events. Presenting countries are encouraged to make sure that their presentation panels are gender-balanced.