Third Global VNR workshop

14 July 2019

Pakistan House, New York

DRAFT SUMMARY

The Third Global workshop in preparation of the Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) to be presented at the 2019 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) was hosted by the Permanent Mission of Pakistan to the United Nations in New York. The workshop brought together 47 countries to share lessons learned from their VNR experience and discuss final arrangements for the presentation of the reviews at the HLPF.

Welcoming participants to the Pakistan House, H.E. Ms. Maleeha Lodhi, Permanent Representative of Pakistan to the UN, elaborated on how Pakistan has integrated the Sustainable Development Goals into the country's national development agenda through a resolution of Parliament in 2016. A national SDG framework was launched in 2018. Seven SDG support units at federal and provincial government levels facilitate vertical and horizontal coordination. The importance of strengthening existing alliances and forging new ones, as well as mobilizing resources and technology for SDG implementation was highlighted. Ambassador Lodhi further highlighted national initiatives aimed at spurring action on poverty eradication, universal health coverage and climate action, and stressed that the VNR helped Pakistan to accelerate 2030 Agenda implementation efforts.

H.E. Ms. Inga Rhonda King, President of the Economic and Social Council, stressed that the VNRs are a treasure trove. Many lessons can be learned on the state of implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals from the combined VNR reports presented since 2016. The VNR presentation should thus be seen as a milestone in a process that needs to go beyond the 2019 HLPF. The ECOSOC President encouraged countries to think about follow-up actions to the VNR, such as incorporating the transformative actions that the VNR has helped to identify into national 2030 Agenda implementation plans.

Diego Dewar Viscarra, Permanent Mission of Mexico to the United Nations, moderated the interactive discussion, asking countries to focus their interventions on (1) transformative actions they took in implementing the 2030 Agenda, (2) one strategy, policy or lesson learned for SDG implementation that resulted from the VNR, (3) challenges that countries have encountered along the VNR process and (4) one area where further support would be required.

Transformative actions for the 2030 Agenda and lessons learned

Many participants highlighted stakeholder engagement as the most transformative element of the VNR process and stressed the need to further strengthen and institutionalize the contribution of a wide range of actors to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. A participant from Africa noted that the VNR created a good momentum to measure the temperature for SDG implementation in the country and to draw the national attention to the goal framework and its meaning for local communities. The VNR process further helped to strengthen coordination for the SDGs. The establishment of a national team to work on SDG implementation was considered as a key transformative action by a country from the Arab region.

Engaging stakeholders through workshops across the country had a direct impact on the VNR report of a European country. Similarly, a participant from the Asia-Pacific region highlighted that, for the first time, the concerns of persons with disabilities were mentioned strongly in a national report. A small island developing state highlighted that the VNR was written together with civil society organisation using focus groups since 2015. The VNR has thereby become an integral part of the national planning process. Localization of the SDGs and working with communities on local development planning was considered key for creating ownership. A second-time presenter elaborated on the country's SDG projects database which gathered 400 projects from a variety of actors.

A validation workshop on the VNR report was live streamed in an African country and provided a platform for sector specific experts to present their views. Furthermore, the country was able to mainstream the SDGs into the national strategic development plan, conducting a nationwide prioritization process. A country from the Asia-Pacific region held on- and offline consultations to engage stakeholders across the national territory. Best practices of SDG implementation were showcased in text boxes in the VNR report.

A second-time presenter noted that, compared to the first VNR, the government put in place a different mechanism to engage stakeholders throughout the preparation process of the second review. A national integrated SDG platform for civil society organizations was established in another country presenting for the second time, noting, however, that more would need to be done to strengthen outreach and communication, including reaching people in rural areas. Enhanced stakeholder engagement was also sought by a second-time presenting country from Latin America and the Caribbean, in which roundtables were organized with municipal development councils and many other actors.

An African country outlined how it moved beyond stakeholder engagement to partnerships through joint planning and implementation activities. A joint committee composed of government and civil society representatives oversees SDG coordination. Civil society produced a shadow VNR report which reflects citizens' perceptions of SDG implementation in the country.

A member of the Western European and others group shared the country's efforts to raise awareness on the SDGs and engaging stakeholders, with two-thirds of the population having heard about the 17 goals. Municipalities have started to align with the 65 priority targets identified by the government and further localization is ongoing. An Eastern European country shared its approach to put children and youth as well as cities and local authorities centre stage in the VNR report, both as future decision makers and places where these decisions will be implemented. As ownership at the local level is key, the government of an African country worked with civil society organizations to translate the SDGs into local contexts and languages.

A participant from the Asia-Pacific region highlighted the importance of considering synergies and trade-offs in implementing the SDGs and truly achieving transformation. The country focused on the causes of policy interventions, e.g. the issue of air pollution, that would need to be addressed through integrated long-term strategies rather than ad hoc policy actions. An integrated approach, or systems-thinking, requires considerable technical work, yet can prove beneficial when applied at the outset of policy planning. The VNR process also leveraged the coordination among different actors. Synergies of the 2030 Agenda and the African Union's Agenda 2063 were highlighted by African countries.

While recognizing the indivisibility of the 17 SDGs, a second-time presenter informed about the country's decision to prioritize SDG 4 on education and lifelong learning and SDG 16 on peaceful societies, access to justice and strong institutions as accelerators to achieve the 2030 Agenda. Investing

in education and providing access to justice to the less privileged through the establishment of a national justice board was highlighted in this regard.

A small island developing state noted the role of the judiciary as an enabler for the 2030 Agenda and stated that it issued a note for guiding the work of parliamentary subcommittees on the SDGs. Mobilizing resources from the private sector to finance climate action was further highlighted as a transformative action. Resilience as both a cross-cutting issue and a key message from the country's VNR was underscored.

Lessons learned from the VNR also include adopting a longer-term approach to national planning, resulting in the decision of an African country to draft a roadmap with a budget for the remaining time until 2030.

Challenges and areas where further support is required

Participants concurred that data and statistics, resource mobilization and partnerships, the effective engagement of stakeholders and the alignment of existing policies with the 2030 Agenda are main challenges that persist in many countries.

A participant from Africa stated that data collection had proven difficult for the country, which thus decided to work on a national list of indicators and a national information system that can be consulted online. A country from the Asia-Pacific region concurred that many countries would need to identify priority indicators as creating new data sources is costly. Disaggregated data and collecting data at the municipal level, was considered key. Technical support would be required to enhance statistical capacity in small island developing states. Participants also pointed to a shift from the overreliance on survey data to administrative data sources which are cheaper, more reliable and frequently collected.

While data collection proved difficult for some countries, processing the large amount of data collected and incorporating it in a concise report presented a challenge for others. Noting that consultations were held across government, with Parliament, local authorities and civil society organizations, a participant from Africa inquired about effective ways to reflect all stakeholders' contributions in the main messages of the Voluntary National Review and the report.

Several countries further expressed the need for support to either build or institutionalize a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) mechanism. Two second-time presenters partnered up to discuss SDG implementation challenges, such as policy coherence and M&E systems for the 2030 Agenda. The two countries also reached out to a third country from the European region to benefit from its lessons learned with regards to M&E for the SDGs.

The lack of data, the need to strengthen the national statistical system and domestic and international resource mobilization was further stressed as key challenges by an African country. Another participant from the African region highlighted its initiative to identify investment gaps through a SDG investment fair. The need to optimize the fiscal space to allocate resources to SDG implementation was noted. Support in the area of technology transfer would be required to accelerate implementation of the SDGs. A participant from the Arab region stressed that quality budget allocation would be as important as securing funding. Progress-based budgeting could be useful in this regard. It was further noted that more attention should be paid to the localization of the SDGs. Aligning budgets with the SDGs and helping local authorities to integrate the targets and indicators into their programmes was considered key.

A country from the Asia-Pacific region highlighted its efforts to analyse the perspectives on SDG implementation at the sub-national level. A communication platform would need to be created in each

region to bring stakeholders together. Other participants concurred that alignment of local agendas with the SDGs is critical.

It was highlighted that enhancing the understanding of the 2030 Agenda across countries and regions, creating ownership, educating people to own the agenda and contribute to its implementation constitutes a major challenge. A member of the Western European and others Group pointed to remaining difficulties with regards to a full recognition of the SDGs at the national level and the need to adopt long-term strategic thinking. Support would also be required in strengthening intergenerational collaboration.

A whole-of-society approach was considered challenging but an endeavour very worthwhile pursuing. An Eastern European country noted that the VNR helped to identify both bottlenecks and accelerators for the implementation of the SDGs. The need to establish civil society umbrella organizations and engaging them in a more systematic way was highlighted as an area where further support would be required. Similarly, the lack of a formal mechanism for stakeholder engagement was considered challenging and will be an area that the government of a European country would work on in the follow-up to the VNR. A participant from Africa noted that the country had started the VNR process very late, which resulted in a limited consultation process. Assistance from international partners was sought to hold consultations across different sectors. A second-time presenter outlined the country's 'post-VNR' strategy consisting of a series of follow-up workshops and requiring different sectors to report back on the recommendations contained in the VNR report.

A country form the Asia-Pacific region shared that the government is embarking on a "well-being approach" aiming at building a sustainable development approach into budgeting, policy development and planning. As this process ran in parallel to the VNR, the timeframe proved challenging. The country also cautioned that duplicity of processes can lead to stakeholders not engaging.

Concluding the workshop, Ms. Marion Barthélemy, Director of the Office of Intergovernmental Support and Coordination for Sustainable Development, UN DESA, stressed the importance of the VNR process to engage the whole of government and engage the whole of society. Incorporating and mainstreaming the SDGs into local and sectoral strategies would be critical in this regard. Throughout the workshop, countries showcased how they engaged different institutions along the VNR process, including national parliaments and supreme audit institutions. Challenges and areas where support is required include: designing integrated strategies, assessing outcomes and the impact of policies, institutionalizing the engagement of stakeholders and effectively raising awareness on the SDGs, capacity building within the government, financing for the SDGs as well as data collection and establishing M&E systems to monitor 2030 Agenda implementation efforts. Collaboration with Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams, where applicable, would also be key to follow-up on VNR recommendations.