First Global Workshop for the Voluntary National Reviews to be presented at the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2020

19-20 November 2019
Oslo, Norway

The First Global Workshop for countries presenting a Voluntary National Review at the 2020 HLPF was held in Oslo, Norway from the 19-20 November 2019. The workshop was organized by UN DESA with the support of the Government of Norway and brought together 45 participants from 35 VNR countries. The two-day peer learning event focused on exchanging views amongst 2020 VNR countries on progress and challenges encountered in conducting their VNRs. The workshop sought to clarify the expectations and process for the VNRs and assist the VNR countries in identifying the necessary steps, policies and institutions for national implementation of the SDGs. Participants also drew on the experiences and lessons learnt from returning VNR presenters. The workshop also featured a Knowledge Exchange where 22 entities, including UN agencies, international organizations and other stakeholders presented tools and approaches that could support VNR countries in their preparatory process.

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Opening and main purpose of the workshop

The workshop opened with a video message from H.E. Ms. Erna Solberg, Prime Minister of Norway and an SDG Advocate. Prime Minister Solberg stressed that the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development is an agenda for all countries and for all sectors of society. She noted the interlinked nature of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and highlighted the SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions as a key enabler for progress.

Another video message was received from H.E. Ms. Mona Juul, President of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). She stressed that the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) allow countries to share experiences, learn from each other and to launch new partnerships in order to accelerate progress towards the SDGs. In this regard, the VNR process is not only about reporting to other countries on progress but should be seen as an opportunity to start a discussion on a shared vision with all of society.

In his opening remarks, Mr. Jens Frølich Holte, State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway highlighted three issues: Firstly, that unchecked climate change will reverse development gains achieved through SDG implementation and encouraged countries to showcase linkages between their SDG implementation plans and their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) in their VNRs. Secondly, he highlighted the need to engage youth in SDG implementation and thirdly, he stressed the importance of a strong political commitment to help the delivery of policies we need for sustainable development. Mr. Holte also referred to the review of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). He stressed that the HLPF should build awareness on interlinkages, express the urgency of SDG implementation and encourage sharing of both success stories and challenges.

Ms. Marion Barthelemy, Director of the Office of Intergovernmental Support and Coordination for Sustainable Development (OISC) from UN DESA stressed that the VNRs are one of the great successes of the HLPF with 142 countries having done a review so far. The 2020 HLPF will be held from 7 to 16 July, with the VNRs taking place from 13 to 16 July. Ms. Barthelemy referred to the September 2019 SDG Summit which reviewed the overall implementation of the 2030 Agenda and launched the decade of action and delivery. She encouraged countries to use this decade of action as an inspiration in their VNRs. Ms. Barthelemy also highlighted that a VNR is not a report but a process which allows the Government and the whole of society to take stock of national SDG implementation together. Done in this way, the VNR brings multiple benefits such as enhanced cooperation, strengthened linkages to statistics and data, and raised awareness of the SDGs nationally.

Session 1: Lessons learned from the VNR process thus far: experiences, best practices and challenges

Session 1 outlined the lessons learnt from the VNR the process and shared some of the best practices and challenges faced by VNR countries. The session highlighted that the VNRs should be evidence-based and state-led but inclusive of civil society and other stakeholders. Furthermore, speakers also

emphasized the benefits of the domestic process of preparing the VNRs as well as peer learning opportunities during the HLPF.

UN DESA gave a short presentation of some of the key findings of the 2019 VNR synthesis report and of the responses to a questionnaire that had been circulated to the 2019 VNR countries. Based on the responses, some of the shared main challenges of the VNR process include that the time is always too short for the preparation of a VNR; need for innovative solutions for stakeholder engagement; difficulties with SDG mainstreaming and integration in the development plans; lack of baseline data and disaggregated data; insufficient coordination; lack of institutional capacity for analysis; and lack of strong internal structures. Countries emerging from conflict also reported specific challenges related to their situation. Based on this, some of the recommendations for future reviews from 2019 countries included the need to start the process early on; to engage the national Missions to the United Nations at every stage; to determine the drafting team as well as the presenting team early; and to ensure a dedicated budget for the VNR preparations. The session also highlighted some recommendations for SDG implementation, such as linking the VNRs to reporting to other review mechanisms and conventions, strengthening parliamentary and audit institutions' oversight, and enhancing national ownership of SDG implementation through capacity building and whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches.

At the global level, questionnaire responses asked at the 2019 HLPF also noted that the Q&A session at the HLPF could be strengthened through more time and that recommendations could be given to VNR countries. HLPF could also be further utilized as a broker for partnerships. Countries also reported that the quality and comparability of reports could be enhanced through better utilization of the Secretary-General's common voluntary reporting guidelines for VNRs.

Session 1 included reflections from two countries that had previously presented a VNR. The past presenters encouraged the participants to include a variety of stakeholders in their VNR process to ensure that the report is not seen as merely a Government report. Participants were also prompted to make their reports policy-oriented and detailed, presenting not only activities but actions and their results. One past presenter stated that their country had developed national SDG indicators which had been embedded into the national mid-term plan in order to better monitor annual progress towards the SDGs. Another past presenter encouraged countries to make honest assessments of their progress and not just to talk about progress. Furthermore, the representative noted that their country had developed a gap analysis in order to assess where the country was falling short in SDG implementation and areas where the goals would not be reached with business as usual approach. The presenter also shared that the country's auditor general was assessing the national SDG implementation as part of a project of the International Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions (INTOSAI).

Session 2: The VNR preparatory process

Session 2 focused on the VNR preparatory process and during the session it was emphasized that the presentation of the VNRs should be an exercise of transparency and accountability at the national level. Furthermore, the VNR should articulate the work of different actors and establish the basis for future action in support of the national implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

UN DESA presented key elements and milestones of the VNR preparatory process, highlighting that a successful process required a change of mind-set and the breaking down of silos. The presentation included information on the VNR workshops; available options for individual support to presenting countries; resources to VNR countries, such as Handbook for 2020 VNR countries, 2019 VNR Synthesis report and updated SG guidelines; and the preparation of the synthesis of main messages. The importance of cooperation at the regional level to support countries in a synergistic manner was noted. The timeline of the VNR roadmap process was also presented, especially noting the hard deadline of 21 April for the main messages and the deadline of 12 June 2020 for the VNR report, a month before presentation of reports at the HLPF.

Representatives of the Regional Commissions presented regional perspectives and lessons learned on the VNR preparatory process in their respective regions. ECA presented its support to the VNR preparatory process in African countries as part of the broader strategic objectives of accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the Agenda 2063: the Africa We Want. Experience emerging from the African region pointed towards the following areas of improvement: the alignment of national frameworks with the 2030 Agenda and the Agenda 2063; the need to strengthen the engagement of subnational governments and actors; and the importance of adopting an evaluative thinking to the VNRs. The Regional Commissions New York Office, on behalf of ECE, presented the regional trends on SDG achievement in the UNECE region, noting the high engagement of the region in the VNR process (with 95% of its Member States having gone or planning to go through the VNR process). Peer learning would continue to be at the core of the UNECE Regional Forum, which would also test innovative formats to leverage the diversity and wealth of experiences in the UNECE region. ECLAC noted the commitment of the Latin American and the Caribbean region to the VNR process and 2030 Agenda implementation. The evolving context presented additional challenges to implementation and as such the VNR process and the Regional Forum are an essential tool to identify "game-changing actions". A similar reflection was shared by the representative of ESCAP, who noted that the Regional Forum was a key platform to define and shape regional priorities for the Decade of Action on the SDGs. The VNR process at the regional level was a useful learning opportunity that had helped identify emerging needs such as mainstreaming SDGs in national planning and budgeting processes, capacity building, including with twinning arrangements. The representative of ESCWA spoke of the diversity of challenges facing the Arab region and the conditions that made the VNR process an opportunity for accelerated implementation, noting the importance of clarity on the governance framework, the need to access to resources and capacity and the importance of having a roadmap.

The session also featured country experiences from two countries that would be presenting VNRs for the second time. Both presenters reflected that the second review would build on the first VNR and seek to be more comprehensive in scope, aligned to national priorities and use established SDG indicators. One presenter informed the workshop that the review and consultation process would utilize established institutional arrangements, such as an inter-ministerial working group and a commission for the participation of stakeholders to ensure a more inclusive process.

In the ensuing discussions in the Working Groups, participants discussed key elements of a successful VNR process, which included establishing an institutional framework, setting up VNR road maps based on national priorities, and engaging stakeholders including CSOs, private sector and development partners. These factors were also important to mobilise support for follow-up to the VNRs and

implementation of the SDGs in general. Some second-time participants noted inadequate involvement of the private sector in the previous VNRs, a shortcoming that would be rectified during the second review.

On the support provided to VNRs through regional processes, it was highlighted that the regional forums for sustainable development provided platforms for multi-stakeholder input to the VNRs and peer learning during which countries exchanged good practices and lessons learned in conducting VNRs.

Participants also discussed practical aspects of the preparatory process and the presentation, such as timely consultation within governments and with stakeholders, and the use of a variety of formats during the presentations at the HLPF, including interactive and joint formats with other countries, particularly for second timers.

Session 3: Substantive preparation for the VNR report - Expectations for the report

Session 3 focused on the substantive preparation of the VNR report and the discussions touched on the following elements: scope of the report; content of the report; tools and methods for conducting the analysis; stakeholder engagement in the drafting process; how to report on leaving no one behind; and how to produce main messages.

In relation to the scope of the VNR reports, many countries indicated that they plan to include all SDGs in their VNR. Whilst some countries indicated that they would focus on their national priority SDGs, or on priority targets under each SDG. This notwithstanding, there was a shared perception that SDGs are interlinked, and that progress needs to be reported in an integrated manner. Some countries highlighted the importance of reflecting development assistance in the report.

Several countries, especially those with a federal system, informed the workshop that they planned to reflect reviews at different sub-national levels, with some mentioning the increasing popularity of sub-national and local voluntary reviews. Others mentioned the importance of looking at relevant trans-boundary issues in VNR reports, to inform discussions at the regional and global levels.

In the discussions related to the content of the report, it was felt that the VNR report should present the progress being made, based on evidence (both qualitative and quantitative), and also highlight what is working and what is not working. VNR reports could focus on themes to highlight change and use stories to tell progress, especially in cases where there is lack of or limited data and statistics. The VNR should also show how the gaps are being addressed. Participants noted that it was important to avoid presenting a "rosy picture" and only report on successes, but to also highlight challenges. They also noted that challenges could be communicated in report not as problems, but as future steps which the country would like to address and where it needs additional support.

Many countries reporting for the second time mentioned that they would use the first review as a starting point; some said that they would review progress made on items that were included as "next steps" in the previous review.

Participants pointed out that the VNR should be evidence-based and therefore needs a strong statistical base; and demonstrate connections between short-, medium- and long-term development

strategies. Some countries have had national sustainable development indicators for several decades, and some produce annual progress reports based on those indicators, which will inform the VNR report. Many countries have designated lead agencies for collecting the data needed for the VNR (see other sections in this summary).

The group discussions provided an opportunity for the countries to consider types of tools and methodologies to be used in the VNR reports. The participants identified various methods such as baseline assessments, data gap analysis, and identification of implementation challenges of all SDGs. Data gap analysis was highlighted as a critical tool that can be used to show areas of progress and challenges. Several delegations noted the use of tools such as UNDP's Rapid Integrated Assessment Tool to assess alignment of their national development plans with the SDGs, and to help them achieve this alignment.

During the discussions on stakeholder engagement, participants shared experiences in reaching out to different groups, regions, and marginalized groups. Countries have adopted different mechanisms for engaging stakeholders, including civil society, the private sector, vulnerable groups, women and youth, and others. Many countries presenting reviews for the second time have put in place elaborated systems for collecting inputs from different groups and different levels of government. Some countries indicated that they would include civil society inputs as part of the main report.

The discussions highlighted different approaches that can be followed to address the 2030 Agenda principle to leave no one behind in the VNR report. Those approaches include featuring a separate chapter on leaving no one behind or an overview on the situation of vulnerable groups, and engaging vulnerable groups throughout the VNR process. Lack of disaggregated data and statistics as well as legislation that limits the collection of data on vulnerable groups were mentioned as impediments in this regard by some countries. Participants noted the usefulness of using data collected by government entities directly working with those groups.

The participants discussed how to formulate the main messages of the VNR report. It was noted that those will reflect each country's main priorities. In some countries, leading government agencies on each SDG have already started to think about what the main messages should be about.

Session 4: Topic A - Use of data for national implementation and VNRs

Session 4 focused on how to best use data and statistics for national implementation of the SDGs and VNRs. The session touched on data gaps and challenges in the preparation of the VNRs and how countries may seek to address these in order to effectively monitor the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

In the opening plenary discussion, UN DESA and country presenters shared good practices for the use of data for national implementation of the SDGs and in the VNRs. The presenters recommended that countries show baseline data and development of indicators over time, which serves to highlight both results accomplished and remaining challenges. Main results would be presented as part of the narrative report, in the form of tables and graphs, while more detailed statistics could be included in the statistical annex. To address data gaps, participants were informed of global support and action through the Cape Town Global Action Plan for sustainable development data, which addresses

capacity, resources, partnerships for data. The participants were also informed that an innovative funding mechanism to implement this action plan was currently under discussion.

The plenary and breakout groups then discussed how to address typical challenges in this area, such as data gaps, disaggregation of data, and use of national indicators.

Countries were encouraged to focus on indicators most relevant to them. The use of global indicators was advantageous, in particular to facilitate global comparisons, but in many cases, the use of national or localized indicators was useful and encouraged. Countries discussed their respective choices, which often included a combination of global and national indicators.

In terms of data collection, national statistical offices should be at the centre of efforts, and should provide data and metadata for VNRs, in coordination with line ministries. Only statistical offices can carry out quality assurance and can validate that data is reliable and trustworthy. Indeed, data gaps remain a key challenge in many countries, including data from sub-national and local levels, and disaggregated data, particularly for vulnerable groups. Online platforms to collect all relevant public data are used successfully in some countries to help address this challenge. Government reporting to other processes (e.g. reporting on human rights issues or multilateral environmental conventions) can be a very useful source of information. Other data sources may also be useful, including big data, but comparability with official data can be a problem. Such sources can thus not replace but only complement official data.

The discussion also noted that while frequency and timeliness, accessibility and reliability, and disaggregation were difficult challenges in many countries, the VNR process could be an opportunity to make progress in these areas. This is particularly the case if SDG data is linked to national priorities. By using existing processes and systems, countries can avoid duplication of efforts and maximize the positive impact of the VNR process on national statistical systems.

Addressing data challenges also requires political support, which is necessary to mobilize necessary financial and other resources. This political support is easier to build if data is translated into digestible analysis, which can help generate demand.

Session 5: Dedicated moment on Leveraging data to achieve the SDGs

Session 5 of the workshop featured a dedicated moment on *Leveraging data to achieve the SDGs* which focused on how policymakers can best utilize data to effectively monitor progress on the implementation of the SDGs and develop evidence-based VNRs. The session provided information regarding UN Statistics and UK Department for International Development (DFID) project on SDG Monitoring, which is currently underway in 20 Asian and African countries to develop SDG monitoring baseline reports and national dissemination platforms. The session also gave information on a UN DESA project working to strengthen national statistical systems for the follow-up and review of the Sustainable Development Goals and address specific data gaps.

The session also provided practical guidance to countries on the how to communicate effectively using data. The presentation by UN DESA highlighted that communicating statistics involved 3 key questions: Who is the target audience? What is the context in which you are communicating? What

message do want to communicate? The session also outlined some best practices for presenting data and statistics in charts and graphs, which include ensuring the title includes information on what, where and when; specifying the source; keeping the graphs simple; specifying the source; choosing the appropriate graph for the data and message and assessing correlation and causality. The presenter also shared best practices in relations to presenting data and statistics in a table.

The presentation provided guidance related to descriptions and explanatory text in the report and the participants were advised that they can make the text interesting by linking the data to national policies, goals and issues that people understand.

In relation to the use and presentation of data and statistics in their VNRs the participants were asked to consider the following issues: how they are planning to communicate data in the VNR; whether they were planning to prepare the statistical annex for the VNR; and if they could identify some good practices and successful experiences in using data platforms and IT tools to communicate insights from SDG data and statistics? The participants were asked about their working relations with the national statistical offices and to identify some the challenges as well as the some of the opportunities and good experiences of working with NSOs.

Session 6: Topic B - Governance and institutional arrangements for the SDGs

Session 6 focused on matters related to governance and institutional arrangements for SDG implementation. The session considered what had worked in different countries and what adjustments could be made by countries for SDG implementation. Participants were reminded that institutional landscape or arrangements differ from country to country.

UN DESA provided an input presentation which raised three key questions for the participants' consideration. Firstly, how have national institutions integrated the SDGs? This could, for example, be through incorporation into National Sustainable Development Strategies, National Development Plans as well as sectoral strategies and plans. Awareness raising, and training of civil servants was considered as method of ensuring the SDGs are integrated into national institutions. Secondly, how have the national institutional frameworks been adapted to implement the SDGs? The session considered ways in which planning, budgeting, monitoring and reporting systems could be adapted as well as the merits of high-level coordination mechanisms for SDG implementation. Thirdly, what has been attempted to make institutions work better for delivering the SDGs? The session also considered issues of horizontal integration of the SDGs (across government), vertical integration (across different levels of government) and the engagement of various stakeholders. The session emphasized operationalizing the institutional principles of SDG 16 in public institutions, namely: accountability, transparency, participation, non-discrimination and anti-corruption.

The session also featured presentations from representatives of two countries that had previously presented a VNR. Both presenters stated that their governments had formed a high-level commission or council to provide oversight to SDG implementation. Furthermore, the two countries had also created technical expert-level working groups to support the nationalization and implementation of the SDGs. Whilst both countries noted the data gaps as a big challenge, countries had also developed measures which sought to address this, including an electronic SDG monitoring system and trackers. One of the presenters stated their country had defined a national framework of 97 indicator related

to 67 SDG targets and aligned these with the national planning system. Furthermore, the country was implementing a pilot programme with 25 public institutions to link the national plans with the budgets.

Countries discussed how institutions are being mobilized for the VNR preparation. Some countries noted they were using existing coordination mechanisms for the VNR process and seeking to improve these mechanisms for more effective coordination. In other countries, new coordination offices or divisions for SDG implementation had been established. It was noted that while highest possible political commitment is important for effective implementation, it is also crucial to ensure that the SDGs do not become only one party's project in order to ensure sustainability of efforts through election cycles. It was also highlighted that many non-state actors have started to organize themselves around the SDGs and these new coordination mechanisms can also be utilized for the VNRs.

During the discussion, several countries indicated that they have incorporated the SDGs into their national development strategies or are in the process of doing so. It was noted that embedding the SDG indicators into the national plan has allowed for more effective, simultaneous monitoring of SDG implementation. One representative informed that through Prime Minister-led consultations their government had mapped the SDGs and assigned a lead ministry responsible for the implementation of each of the Goals. The country had also included a module of the SDGs in the basic training for all new civil servants and there were also training programmes on the SDGs in each of the ministries. Another delegate shared that the sustainable development was at the core of the government's new programme and the 2020 VNR report would be presented to the parliament. Yet another representative highlighted that the country's budget circulars require ministries to link spending with the SDGs, which contributes to raising awareness of the SDGs in all government departments.

The session highlighted that it is very important for all stakeholders, including government entities, to understand the value of engaging in the VNR process. This value needs to be communicated to them effectively.

Session 7: Topic C – VNR preparatory process – engaging stakeholders

Session 7 focused on the issue of stakeholder engagement in the preparation of the VNRs. The session considered who the relevant stakeholders for the VNR process might be as well as different strategies and modalities of engagement.

UN DESA gave an input presentation which highlighted the potential ways in which stakeholders could be engaged in the VNR process, such as providing inputs; reviewing drafts; drafting the report together; including comments; and writing supplementary reports. Participants were asked to consider how they might institutionalize engagement with stakeholders, perhaps through a VNR stakeholder engagement strategy or a stakeholder engagement policy more broadly. The presentation provided some consideration for countries in promoting stakeholder engagement, such as the need for clear objectives and methodologies, well defined processes with clear entry points, timely communication with stakeholders, comprehensive mapping of the stakeholders as well as the capacity building and adapting to the means of participation. The session also considered what engagement would mean, providing definitions and country examples of different levels of engagement from informing to consulting, to involving and to collaborating.

The session also featured two presentations from second time VNR presenters. One of the countries noted that they were considering integrating their stakeholders' shadow report into their VNR report. Furthermore, the representative also noted that the government was considering ways of representing the views of the indigenous peoples, noting the importance of indigenous peoples contributing their own voice in the VNRs. Another country presenter noted that the country had established a commission which has a governance mechanism for inclusion of civil society.

The group discussions highlighted some challenges to effective stakeholder engagement, such as identifying proper representation or entry point to engage different stakeholders; lack of capacity and trust; lack or limited awareness of SDGs. The other challenge was determining the role of or contribution of different stakeholders (whether to consult or be actively involved in specific activities). There was a general consensus that these challenges could be addressed through a well-defined stakeholder engagement strategy that contains among other elements, clearly defined milestones for stakeholder engagement in the VNRs.

Some second time presenters indicated that they would build on the experience from the first VNR and expand the consultations to include various stakeholders as well as establish relevant committees and working groups. One representative stated that the country had found it useful to involve its parliament to bring all political parties onboard and this has also aided in the passing of new legislation. Some countries also noted that they had found it useful to involved private sector and civil society stakeholders in their delegation to the HLPF to raise awareness, enhance ownership and build the capacity of the stakeholders. Another delegate said that a legal framework can be used to enhance stakeholder engagement. One second time presenter advised countries to do their consultations by sectors and devise flexible strategies to ensure that stakeholders, even those with limited capacity, are able to engage.

One challenge raised was how to find the right balance between limiting the number of actors to have meaningful dialogue and yet remain inclusive. The use of umbrella groups and networks was mentioned as one possible solution in this regard. Some participants also highlighted the difficulty in scheduling consultations for stakeholders. In this regard some participants stated that they were utilizing existing national meetings and expanding participation to other stakeholders. A number of countries also highlighted that they were considering other mechanisms to engage stakeholders such as surveys and online consultations. One participant noted that they had initial one-on-one consultations with key stakeholders such as CSOs, private sector, provincial governments and others, followed by a broader multi-stakeholder meeting to bring them all together.

Session 8: Topic D – Keeping progress under review: monitoring and financing implementation

Session 8 focused on matters related to monitoring and financing of the SDGs. The discussions covered the following themes: the role of VNRs in mobilizing resources for the SDGs; the status of elaboration

of national financing strategies for the SDGs; and the linkages between national budget processes and the SDGs.

The session highlighted that there are still limited linkages between the SDGs and national sustainable development strategies and plans, and the budget process, in both developed and developing countries. Mostly, national budget systems do not allow for precise tracking of expenditures on SDGs or linking the SDGs with medium-term expenditure frameworks.

There was a general consensus that there should be no separate budget for the SDGs, as the SDGs relate to all areas of government intervention. Rather, the more critical issue is to reflect the SDGs in national budgets. This has been done in different ways. Many participants mentioned that the budget was linked to national programmes and plans, which in turn have been mapped (or directly reflect) SDGs. This enables a broad overview of public resources going to various SDGs. Some countries present the budget (e.g. to the Parliament) through broad themes that can be linked back to the SDGs. Others reported that the SDGs are mainstreamed and included in the budget of each government agency. Still others reported that budget circulars sent to government agencies request those to frame their budget requests around SDGs. Finally, some countries have developed digital platforms to track government and donor interventions across all sectors and budget activities.

For many participants, the VNR process highlights the challenge of monitoring financial flows for the SDGs beyond public resources. Several participants mentioned that they had conducted costing exercises for the SDGs, using economic modelling and costing tools.

National sustainable development financing strategies reflecting the priorities highlighted in national sustainable development strategies and/or plans were identified as an important tool for countries. Such financing strategies allow governments to match priority areas with potential sources of finance, beyond the national budget. The VNR process, due to its comprehensive scope and engagement of all parts of government, was mentioned as a means to accelerate the production of such financing strategies.

The issue of coherence among various sources of financing was mentioned by several participants, and especially the alignment between resources from the national budget and official development assistance. It was mentioned that direct engagement of donors (traditional and non-traditional) with line Ministries added difficulty to the tracking process. Participants noted the persistent trade-off between moving away from direct budget support and the challenges of coordinating and monitoring of flows. Some participants noted the challenges of reallocating public resources across SDG areas when under IMF programmes. Some participants underlined limited availability of official development assistance.

Private sector engagement in SDG implementation was still considered a challenging area, where top-down incentives and supportive legal frameworks were key to attract financial flows. Some participants mentioned a high level of private sector involvement in SDG implementation, done through CSR activities or public commitments (some countries have put in place platforms to collect such commitments). It was mentioned that large companies have found it easier to engage with the

SDGs than small and medium enterprises (SMEs). However, tracking private sector financing on the SDGs remains a challenge.

The discussions also considered the role of the VNRs in mobilizing resources for the SDGs. VNRs were mentioned as an opportunity to send a message to decision makers on budgeting and financing, by highlighting financing needs and gaps and a potential for reallocating budget across SDG areas. The involvement of the ministry in charge of the budget was perceived as critical in this respect.

Participants also highlighted the VNR process, the report and the presentation at the HLPF as useful tools for "financial diplomacy", including dialogue with traditional and non-traditional donors. It was mentioned that the HLPF and the Financing for Development (FfD) Forum follow-up process could be used as matchmaking opportunities.

Session 9: Reporting Back

Session 9 provided the participants an opportunity to report back and share key lessons, challenges, and questions arising from the group discussions from topics A-D, on data and statistics, governance and institutional arrangements, stakeholder engagement, and financing.

On data and statistics, participants highlighted the value of working with national statistical offices to realign statistical systems with the SDGs, which ensures that data will be available on an annual basis going forward. The discussion also underlined that while information on global indicators was desirable, the indicators should ultimately reflect national priorities, and that the use of national indicators could be helpful in this regard.

On the issue of governance and institutional arrangements, countries reported on how they either use existing institutions or create new arrangements to oversee SDG implementation and the VNR process. Institutional arrangements differ from country to country, leading to a wide diversity of solutions, but several common themes emerged. Participants noted the importance of political leadership, involvement of all line ministries and the cabinet as a whole, and stakeholder participation. They also underlined that integration of SDGs into national plans and planning systems was critical for implementation. Lastly, raising awareness remained a challenge, but several possible solutions exist, including training programmes, networks for 2030 Agenda issues, budget circulars and others.

Stakeholder engagement was widely seen as critical to SDG implementation and a successful VNR process, as it helps put all actors on the same page, can provide continuity through political cycles, and facilitates joint implementation. Nonetheless, challenges exist, including identifying the right representatives, lack of capacity to engage particularly among marginalized groups, lack of trust and awareness. Participants also noted the need to strike a balance between extensive outreach and consultation fatigue. A long-term strategy for stakeholder engagement can mitigate this risk.

On financing, participants stressed the need for better data on global financial flows, which would also help countries in their planning efforts. They noted how costing exercises can help identify transparent resource mobilization targets, and how these can help identify financing policy priorities, including asks from development partners, which can be shared in global fora such as the HLPF and the FfD

Forum. The discussion also revealed that some countries are very advanced in incorporating the SDGs into their national budgets, which allows to track resource allocation to SDG priorities.

Session 10: Wrap-up and next steps

In the final session, UN DESA introduced participants to tools and resources available on the VNR website and encouraged them to make use of this space both to find support measures and to share outcomes of the national VNR processes, including reports and other relevant materials.

Panellists also provided a summary of main takeaways from the workshop. VNRs were primarily a tool for national action – to help countries better understand where they stand on implementation, to shape their strategies and plans, and to create momentum for implementation domestically. In this context, the panellists expressed hope that the workshop would inspire all participants to be bold and ambitious in their VNRs, and to make the most of the opportunities it presents. They also underlined that the workshop was a great opportunity to learn from efforts of other countries and draw inspiration from the many positive examples of progress.

The workshop confirmed that a lot of progress has been made in integrating the SDGs into national priorities and plans; and that the use of existing institutions and networks facilitated follow-up, review, budgeting and implementation.

Data availability, particularly for disaggregated and high-quality data, remains a major challenge for many countries. At the same time, a lot of progress has been made in stakeholder engagement, and the workshop elicited many good examples of how to include them in SDG implementation and the VNR process. Questions were raised about role of non-state actors during the HLPF, and DESA noted that there will be opportunities to discuss this issue in upcoming workshops and webinars.

The VNRs also present an opportunity to mobilize financial resources from all sources, including international support. They can also be a tool to develop more integrated approaches to financing. Finally, several participants expressed concerns over timelines, particularly with regard to the key messages document due in April. UN DESA emphasized that translation into six languages meant that there was no flexibility on this date but encouraged countries to take advantage of this translation to disseminate key messages widely before the HLPF.

Knowledge Exchange

The workshop concluded with a Knowledge Exchange offering a platform for 22 UN entities, other international organizations and stakeholder partners to showcase tools and methodologies available to support countries in their VNR process, and the overall implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The wealth of tools and approaches presented on six key topics (leaving no one behind; data, monitoring and evaluation; stakeholder engagement; integration and strengthening institutions; and means of implementation) has been summarized in a Knowledge Exchange leaflet. The leaflet and additional information can be found at https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/.